

Attending to Environment as Kin Studies

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We don't *have* land
We *are* the land
We don't *have* the ocean
We *are* the ocean
We don't *have* relationship
We *are* relationship
Rooted
Connected
Fixed yet fluid in bonds of
Being in Areness¹

Environmental kin studies are about the cultivation of, and attendance to, relations.² Relationships are connections and interactions between people, environments and beings through time and space that are lived through the body and the senses. Relationships, as we approach them through kin studies, are foundational to how we understand ourselves as belonging to, and always entirely entangled with, the earth. We are relations. To be in relation is an agreement of, and a commitment to, care. It is an intention of reciprocity.

What does it mean to be in relation with the earth, with the air, the wind, the sea?³ At this time, when so much attention is given to global collapse, it is easy to forget the everyday ways we all live within our surroundings. We live on land that has endured and thrived for timescales beyond our conception. Below our feet are arrangements of roots and soil and heat more complex and fecund than we can imagine. Above us are skies that we can never grasp, stars we can never reach. Recently, we have noticed a deep discomfort with what may be deceptively simple questions about these relationships. We have noticed that, when asked about what it means to live together, many who benefit from the structures of empire, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capital and colonialism turn away.

Western academia, the arts and sciences, the culture industries are desperately seeking escape routes. What Black and Indigenous people have always known, having survived through mass dispossession, theft and genocide, is now becoming clearer to those who have never experienced such catastrophe, who have, indeed, wrought and benefited from their violent spoils. For those who now are becoming aware of the ways in which this violence has manifested, there is a desire to quickly distance oneself from the damage and to fix what is unjust. But this cannot happen without an understanding of how we got where we are. It is not enough to decolonize the curriculum, to diversify, to form committees, to “listen and learn.” Nothing we can imagine in this moment to redeem the institution is adequate to the centuries of destruction that are finally being acceded. Good intentions last only as long as egos desire.

There is no outside, as the Sloughsayers remind us.⁴ There is no outside where we find ourselves. In kin studies, we begin where we are. With the fact of having nowhere else to be. We are where we breathe. We are situated and sited. We are on land. We are on and in terrains where land, water and air co-constitute existence, together. We are, most likely, on stolen land, or land belonging to those who steal. There is, we know, a difficulty in understanding how and why it is important to truly, truly be with this fact. Not just to acknowledge it and move on, but to stay with it. This is not a ‘troublesome’ staying-with. Because, in kin studies, we cannot opt in or out, it is not a problem we

¹ Upolu Lumā Vaai, “We are Because We Don’t Have,” in Vaai, Upolu Lumā and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (eds.) *The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific*. (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press. 283-285, 2017), 283.

² AM Kanngieser and Zoe Todd, “From environmental case study to environmental kin study,” *History and Theory* 59(3): 385-393; Enrique Salmón. “Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship.” *Ecological Applications*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (Oct 2000), pp. 1327-1332. <https://www.fws.gov/nativeameri-can/pdf/tek-salmon-2000.pdf>.

³ Konai Helu Thaman, “A Pacific Island Perspective of Collective Human Rights,” in *Collective Human Rights of Pacific Peoples*, ed. Nin Tomas (Auckland: International Research Unit for Maori and Indigenous Education, 1998), 4; Katerina Teaiwa, “Saltwater Feet: The Flow of Dance in Oceania,” in *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion and Water*, ed. Sylvie Shaw and Andrew Francis, (London: Equinox, 2008), 108.

⁴ The Sloughsayers (forthcoming), *Orion Magazine*.

might dissociate ourselves from. Words like trouble infer that staying-with is optional, but where else is there but this earth? There is no outside to flee to anyway.⁵

So how do we stay, where we are? What are institutions to do? For us, we play with what gives the illusion of being simple, because the simple questions are those that have been asked since long before we can remember. These are the questions that have enabled people to thrive, regardless. Through environmental kin studies, we ground ourselves in relationality and reciprocity — concepts that drive and underpin Indigenous cosmologies and legal orders since time immemorial in the homelands we both write from in North America and so-called Australia. We ask: What do we take from the earth and what do we give? How do we build good relationships? How do we attend to what we have, and what sustains and holds us? Who and what are we responsible to? How do we move with care?

We can be guided by Indigenous conceptions of land. The Mohawk scholar Sandra Styres explains that land:

...as an Indigenous philosophical construct is both space (abstract) and place/land (concrete); it is also conceptual, experiential, relational and embodied. Placefulness is not something independent from Land but exists *within* the nuanced contexts of Land. Land reaches boundaries of place by embodying the principles, philosophies, and ontologies that transcend the material geography of land and the making of place or placefulness. Land *is* spiritual, emotional and relational; Land is experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land *is* consciousness - Land *is* sentient.⁶

Environmental kin studies attend to all that surrounds us, land in the sense brought by Styres, which echoes what so many others have also said.⁷ In environmental kin studies, we contend with the concrete and tangible ways that we are all implicated, in one way or another, in the co-constitution of existence. By beginning here, we unfold into all human and non-human worlds. This is an approach that comes from within. It both emerges from each of us and also, always, is far greater than any one of us alone. But it calls to each of us in ways that only we can discern, and these callings change all the time. For us to open up to these callings, we listen.

Listening in kin studies is not done with the ears, it is not only aurality. It is disposition toward sensing, attuning and ‘noticing.’⁸ What is called forth when Cree and Métis legal orders center reciprocal responsibilities to all relations, be they human or more-than-human.⁹ Attunement means to tune into, to find relationships and intersections of harmonization across difference, without forcing assimilation. Listening is the cultivation of an attentiveness; it is a responsiveness to what is there, what is here, right now. Listening, in kin studies, is not a final thing: it is not the well-meaning, liberal cry of “I listened” as though listening is enough. It does not stand in for something else and does not pretend to be what it is not. Listening is a starting point that allows for a suspension of what we think we know. It is a pause that might intervene in the rush to conclusion, expertise and action.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sandra Styres, “Literacies of Land: Decolonizing narratives, storying and literature,” in Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang (eds.) *Indigenizing and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2019): 24–38, 27.

⁷ Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); Erica Violet Lee. “In Defense of the Wastelands.” *GUTS Magazine*, November 2016; Leroy Little Bear. “Big Thinking - Leroy Little Bear: Blackfoot metaphysics ‘waiting in the wings.’” 2016. Accessed July 20, 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_txPA8CiA4&ab_channel=IdeasIdees; Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2006), 81; Vanessa Watts. “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst humans and non-humans: First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2 (1): 20–34, 2019; Kyle Powys Whyte, “Too late for indigenous climate justice: Ecological and relational tipping points,” *WIREs Climate Change* 11(1): e603 (2019).

⁸ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17; Don Hill, “Listening to Stones: Learning in Leroy Little Bear’s Laboratory: Dialogue in the World Outside,” *Alberta Views Magazine*, September 1, 2008, <https://albertaviews.ca/listening-to-stones/>.

⁹ Harold Cardinal. 2007. “Nation-Building as Process: Reflections of a Nihiyow [Cree],” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 34, no. 1, (2007): 65–77; Patti Laboucane-Benson. 2009. “Reconciliation, Repatriation and Reconnection: A Framework for Building Resilience in Canadian Indigenous Families.” Unpublished doctoral thesis. Edmonton: University of Alberta; Brenda MacDougall. *One of the Family: Metis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

In environmental kin studies, to listen and to be present to where attunement might arise is a way for us to respect the land and those who inhabit it. It is very easy to assume that we know. We are well-versed in discourses and languages that name and possess, universalize and reduce to quantifiable parts and, in doing so, take away the expanse of what is incommensurable and unimaginable. The scale of ecocide and the loss of people and ecologies to capitalist brutalities exceed what we can comprehend. But so do the myriad and insuppressible flourishings and alliances, being otherwise, being otherways. Listening, in kin studies, asks us to tune into the gaps and silences and soundings that run through everything, that connect the earth. To become curious about where things resonate. To respect the autonomy and the integrity of life. To understand that we do not know, and we cannot know more than is ours. And it is this point from which relationships can be negotiated.

There is no prescription or one way to listen. Our capacity to listen and, crucially, our desire to be open to what might be heard changes all the time. Listening is a practice of interplay. The stakes we bring are different, the responsibilities we bear as well. It can be hard to sit with what we hear.

We are compelled to offer solutions and we want our solutions to undo the damage we have caused or that has been done to us. It is counterintuitive to pause. But in the pause, we might feel out where our own relationships hum, and how we hum with them. We might be able to better ground ourselves in our lineages, in what we carry with us and what we bring to others. Listening gives us time to feel the environments we have created. In this pause, we might reflect on what we have underwatered and let thirst. We can see what we never nourished, and what we did not prune back enough. We can dig out where the rot lies.

Attending to one's relationships is ongoing, unspectacular work. It is not the work of money or fame or applause. Good relationships do not last where we step over the bodies of others who have been sacrificed. Care is tending to those around you, reciprocity is creating ways to honor and strengthen collective interdependencies and needs. It is using the power that you have to dismantle the asphyxiating structures of the colonizers' world. Environmental kin studies, then, resonate with what has been said before, what has always been known and practiced. It is understanding our lives as utterly conditional on, and constituted by, the earth. It is holding each other sacred and without coercion, cutting away what must be done with and trying to repair what we want to salvage. Kin studies means accepting that our survival is bound together, and that any system that kills the most so that the least can live is liberatory to none.