

Why the Future Lies in Non-Western Perspectives

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"What does it mean to have a reciprocal discourse on catastrophic end times and apocalyptic environmental change in a place where, over the last 500 years, Indigenous peoples faced (and face) the end of the worlds with the violent incursion of colonial ideologies and actions? What does it mean to hold, in simultaneous tension, stories of the Anthropocene in the past, present, and future?"¹

The Elusiveness of Representation.

Nowadays, we are inundated by calls for justice and representation. An endless barrage of platitudes and buzzwords overwhelm us; diversity, inclusion, equity, equality, visibility. While this shift is welcome, it is pointless if it lacks substance. Problematically, this dominant discourse clouds our thinking. It yields an illusory spectacle where it seems that everything possible is being done. If it's spoken about so much then surely change is happening? Appearing progressive is easy and fashionable, but real change is hard, unpopular and to the detriment of the global elite. Those with disproportionate power often do not really want to undermine the status quo that benefits them. Indigenous Dene scholar Glen Coulthard would term this the 'colonial politics of recognition'. More than ever, the need for non-Western perspectives is stressed and acknowledged, and yet exploitation continues. Alternate voices are recognised but on the terms of the west, through their frameworks and understandings, thereby merely rearticulating unequal, exploitative coloniser-colonised relations. For example, Canada often proclaims to acknowledge its problematic relationship with indigenous peoples through systems like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which aimed to address the legacy

of residential schools. However, it similarly continues to approve projects like the Coastal GasLink Pipeline on the Wet'suwet'en peoples' land without informing them. This piece reiterates the longstanding call for less performance and more action.

The Future Lies in the Past.

We irrefutably live in an era of climate apartheid, a tragic state of affairs where those least to blame have the most to lose. They will disproportionately bear the burden through no fault of their own. Movements to 'decolonise' and embrace alternatives are not metaphors, abstract discussions, or weak progressive calls for equality. This is fundamentally about life and death: who lives and who dies. The West is responsible, and thus has an ethical imperative to provide active redress. Moreover, this era requires more than finding solutions, developing new technologies, or agreeing on net zero plans; it demands a transformation of our underlying thinking. Climate change is a global issue, but it is often narrated by the West: one story is told, and so the western story becomes 'universal'. However, the world is a diverse tapestry reflecting all kinds of people and places that experience climate change differently. There *is* no single, 'universal' story. Rather, we must search for and highlight the stories of those who have been silenced. We must listen with empathy, compassion, and care. As Todd highlights, for many indigenous and non-Western peoples, this is not an unprecedented crisis, but merely an intensified repetition, another episode in the ongoing apocalypse that began with western colonialism. Therefore, we must open up the difficult histories that the Western narrative attempts to relegate to the past to protect its self-generated image as the harbinger of peace, defender of human rights and leader of the world. It may seem counter-intuitive to advocate for long-term action, but short-termism may be utilised to entrench unequal, exploitative relations, and will not address the underlying logics that have led to our current

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¹ Todd, Zoe. "Relationships." *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights*, Jan. 2016, p. 1.

predicament. Overall, to think with those who have already, and will continue to be, impacted the most is where real transformative change will emerge from. To quote Audre Lorde: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".²

Academic, Institutional Limits.

My own background, geography, is often heralded as ostensibly progressive. However, despite the posturing it may present, my exposure to indigenous, de-colonial frameworks was minimal, with occasional and sparse engagements reflecting more of a tick box exercise rather than aiming to centre and truly understand the perspectives of others. I was left to uncover them for myself, rather than being explicitly taught. It often felt like I was uncovering histories, theories, knowledges that were hidden away. When we did explore them, it was primarily by white staff, to white students. As one of the few people of colour in the room, it was an isolating experience. After spending a year studying in Vancouver, Canada at the University of British Columbia, the comparative ethe were shocking. While it was not perfect, there was an overt focus put on engaging with others. Land acknowledgements were made at the start of lectures; I was taught by scholars of colour and / or of indigenous descent; reading lists embraced diverse thinkers. In a revelatory paper Todd, an indigenous Metis scholar, describes her experiences in the British Academy, terming it a "white public space" that has a "continued, collective reticence to address its own racist and colonial roots, and debt to Indigenous thinkers in a meaningful and structural way".³ If our knowledge communities are structured this way, then how can we expect their research, solutions and ideas to fully attend to the diversity of the world's geographies? We must understand peoples on their own terms, in their own ways,

rather than half-heartedly engaging and imposing our Western interpretive systems onto them.

Conclusion.

In Britain, we are detached from many horrifying spells of our history, and the peoples we exploited are often forgotten, silenced, and thus erased. However, they have not forgotten us. They still live with its legacies, while we continue to have lives of immense privilege. This is not a simplistic story of the West versus the rest. It is a wider call to acknowledge these histories and try to repair our relationships with other humans, as well as nature and more-than-humans in the process. I find Dwayne Donald's notion of ethical relationality poignant here. Donald urges us to meaningfully engage with each other; not to deny our differences, but to understand how we are differently positioned in relation to one another. He envisages humans as inter-connected, "rooted in reciprocal, ongoing, and dynamic relationships" with each other and nature, from which truly radical, alternative, ethical sustainable futures can be built.⁴ Despite the horrors experienced by indigenous and colonised peoples, they are still here, persisting, insisting, and resisting in their post-apocalypse. Perhaps it's time to learn from them as we now face the end of our worlds.

² Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Penguin Books, 1984, at p. 112.

³ Todd, Zoe. "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism." *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 1, Mar. 2016, pp. 4-22, at 10.

⁴ Donald, Dwayne Trevor. "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations in Educational Contexts." *First Nations Perspectives*, 2009, pp. 1-24, at 6.