
Nature(s) Revisited

Identities and Indigenous Peoples

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Introduction

Rra Kesedile, an indigenous *Bayei*, sat on his donkey cart bumping along the sandy track toward his hut. He had gone to *Shorobe*, a larger village at the entrance to the mighty Okavango Delta, to pick up his monthly supplies of candles, mayonnaise, rice, and sugar. As the largest inland delta on the planet *Rra Kesedile's* life world has become the main tourist attraction of his country. The delta with its 'pristine wildlife', 'raw nature' and 'authentic cultures' lures tourists from around the world, thereby ensuring a steady economic base for Botswana.

I had just appeared behind him in a Toyota Landcruiser with Dr. Johnathan Habarad, a Berkley-educated anthropologist and founder of the non-governmental organization, People and Nature Trust (PNT). We had come to discuss an ecotourism project that the *Bayei*, in collaboration with PNT, wished to undertake. When we caught up with him he turned around, smiling at us, with a blade of grass in his mouth. After we had exchanged greetings, which in our shared language *Setswana*, was an extended and elaborate process, we agreed to wait for him at his hut another few kilometers down the sparsely-used track. *Rra Kesedile* had never left the Delta, his home, and the

furthest he had traveled was to *Maun*, approximately forty kilometers on a tar road. He didn't like it *there*; it was noisy, smelly and the young people had, he decried, lost their way. In contrast I was a young *Sekgoa*, a white man, still keen to learn from him how to build fishing traps, dig up roots and listen to his stories of a past that no longer was. We were *tsalas*, friends in a multicultural setting.

Instead of depicting a romanticized African development story, our friendship was in reality often contradictory. Curiosity and misunderstanding were equally present. While I brought 'development skills' and 'environmental awareness' he hoped to improve his dire livelihood while sharing *Bayei* knowledge that is in decline. *Rra Kesedile* cannot escape the encroachment of modernity and the forces of globalization. Dr. Habarad and I were there to even out the transition, by attempting to connect tourists with the *Bayei*: their culture and nature. We were as much part of the solution as we were part of the problem *Rra Kesedile* hoped to overcome.

This encounter, here and elsewhere, brings into sharp relief questions of culture and nature; the latter, in my view, remains ambiguous and "unresolved in any modern epistemological order."¹ This paper is concerned with the particular relationship between indigenous identities and nature. The invocation of indigenous peoples as 'stewards of nature' has become "one of the most powerful frames" through which they assert their distinctiveness and recognition vis-à-vis the dominant society.² Although indigenous peoples differ considerably with respect to their specific practices, belief systems, and relationships with their own habitats, "it is safe to say that...[their] culture overlaps with nature."³ Thus, for the study of identity politics, an understanding of the nexus of nature and indigenous peoples seems crucial. However, as Escobar reminds us, a political theory of nature "has yet to be built."⁴ This paper, though less ambitious due to confines of space, critiques the concept of nature in relation to the formation of indigenous identities. It conceptualizes nature as a constructed and, moreover, Western category.

I contend, building on Escobar, that there is not one but multiple 'natures', as there are identities. Moreover, I argue that

nature regimes are interwoven, not as essential or independent domains but often situated in “strategies of hybrid natures.”⁵ Indigenous identities are faced with the challenge, in their interaction with capitalist modes of production, to tactically negotiate among these strategies. As such the identity creation of indigenous peoples as ‘stewards of nature’ is a socio-political tactic, or arena of struggle, and is, as I will argue, in danger of becoming a Catch-22 position.⁶ It can relegate indigeneity to a position of ‘romanticized authenticity’ deemed to be harmonious with nature, thereby foreclosing the possibility of affirming a more eclectic choice of identities - not only vis-à-vis different environments but, equally importantly, in engaging the broader social, political and economic plane of dominant society. Instead of totalizing or universalizing a nature, this paper argues, indigenous identities are to be understood in a multitude of natures. Thus the struggle for recognition of indigenous identities is specified and the perceived ‘crisis of nature’ in the ‘First World’ is simultaneously problematized. Indigenous identities, articulated from the vantage point of multiple natures, are equipped to express their own visions of an ecologically sound society⁷ further enabling them to partake in decisions not only affecting their own lives but in support of sustainable relationships of human societies with their environments more generally.

The Invention of Nature from Within and Without Culture

The modern discourse on nature has been depicted as an ‘either/or’ dichotomy, within two intrinsically related scholastic traditions. First, the anthropomorphic thesis revolves around the notion of human emancipation from, and “domination of nature.”⁸ This gave rise to the second tradition, characterized by an objective to scientifically investigate nature in order to understand, and utilize the natural environment as an object of knowledge. This paper traces these two approaches historically. It navigates between these in order “to incorporate a greater awareness of what their respective discourses on ‘nature’ may be ignoring and politically repressing.”⁹ It balances these positions by recalling the ‘constructed-ness’ of nature within human contexts, because what is referred to as ‘natural’ is

indeed also a product of culture, yet it concurrently acknowledges “the existence of an independent order of nature, including a biological body.”¹⁰ The following analysis thus underscores the notion that individuals and collectivities can hold various ‘natures’ in tension, which in turn impact their identities in a given socio-political setting.

Arguments favoring the ‘domination,’ ‘mastery’ or ‘humanization’ of nature can be traced back to the hubris of the Enlightenment, rooted in a Judeo-Christian doctrine of domination. Descartes proposed that the “general good of all mankind” is best pursued by the attainment of “knowledge that is useful in life” so as to “render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature.”¹¹ In a similar vein Spinoza argued that humans “consider all natural things as means for their own advantage” in inferring that they were legitimate rulers over nature.¹² Thus the anthropomorphic conception “of a goal-directed God” provided the “theological justification” for humanity’s domination over nature.¹³ As such, nature was not seen as an essential principle - an “independent domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity”¹⁴ - but instead was to serve humanity, the new gods on earth, exclusively as a means for self-preservation.

This particular understanding of humanity as dominating nature can be best understood in the “twin Enlightenment ideals of *human emancipation* and *self-realization*.”¹⁵ The idea of emancipation was based on a variety of issues including “problems of material wants and needs, physical, biological, and social insecurities,” that had to be overcome by turning away from “supposedly irrational beliefs” such as ‘superstition,’ ‘false consciousness’ and ‘organized religion.’ Self-realization - an “even vaguer proposition” - called for the “release of the creative and imaginative powers” with which humans are endowed, thereby opening “vistas for individual human development.”¹⁶ As such, it was, as Taylor argues, a “massive subjective turn” of a “voice of nature within us,” separating individuals from the hostile and god-ordained environment they inhabited, which provides the ‘enlightened’ impetus for action and understanding.¹⁷

This separation was seen as crucial in order to uncover the

'secrets of nature' and gave rise to modern scientific enquiry. It divorced 'human nature,' with its "primary impulses and sense as foundation of his rationality and experience," from 'external nature' as an "existential environment" in which humanity forms society in a struggle with nature. In this way, the modern sciences were made possible.¹⁸ Francis Bacon, celebrated as a founding father of modern scientific research methodologies, and an innovator of inductive reasoning declared that:

I mean in this great plea to examine Nature herself and the arts upon interrogatories. For like as a man's disposition is never well known till he be crossed, nor Proteus ever changed shape till he was straitened and held fast, so Nature exhibits herself more clearly under the trials and vexations of art (mechanical devices) than when left to herself. [sic]

Nature, in Bacon's view, thus had to be "bound into service" and "made a slave," "put in constraint" and "modeled by the mechanical arts."¹⁹ This anthropocentric prejudice granted the 'science of nature' a "strong scientific status," making way for an instrumentalized and functionalized conception of a progressive appropriation of the world toward progress that masters the world.²⁰ Thus the theological critique of the Enlightenment itself created a teleological outlook to progress in which humanity chose the attainment of its societal goals in utilizing nature as an object (of knowledge) for its realization.

It should be noted at this point that both views, while holding human and external nature distinct, point toward "both the social and the biological" as central, "albeit not essential," in Western conceptions of nature.²¹ Moreover, in these manifestations, "nature is a historical entity" in which humans encounter nature as transformed by society, "subjected to a specific rationality, which became, to an ever increasing extent, technological, instrumentalist rationality, bent to the requirements of capitalism" and western civilization.²² And as Masulli adds that "far from having any adverse effect, the naturalistic objectivism of the "new science" and the repositing of the subject-object dualism in knowledge"²³ reproduced an anthropocentric culture even more forcefully as the formation of

the capitalist system began to gather strength.

However, this invention of holding nature and culture distinct, proved to be uneven. The 'romantic reaction' to this separation was increasingly put forward as the dual construction was believed to construe human relations with its environment, rendering "conflictual the relationship between an ideology of domination on the one hand and politics of emancipation and self-realization on the other."²⁴ The notion began to emerge that there was a profound, even spiritual, link between humanity and nature, in which the social and natural are connected. Marx and Engels, for instance, wrote in 1844 that:

Nature is man's inorganic body – that is, in so far as it is not itself a human body. Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature.²⁵ [*sic*]

It follows from this position that culture and society cannot be studied in isolation from nature, and "social and natural science must therefore be combined."²⁶ Yet, as Harvey contends, this reformulation of self-realization and emancipation "could not be held as stable trajectories based on an essentialist reading of human wants, needs, capacities and powers." Indeed the whole idea of "alienation from nature" becomes suspect.²⁷ Materialist conceptions, such as Marxism, in actuality did little to change these conceptual shortcomings, but subsumed the "cosmic question of the relation to nature into a technical discourse concerning the proper allocation of scarce resources (including those in nature) for the benefit of human welfare."²⁸ In short, the notion of domination over nature held sway in both the natural as well as the human sciences, and arguably continues to do so today.

This paper cannot, due to confines of space, provide a more in-depth analysis of the invention of dominant capitalist culture within and without nature. The above analysis

nevertheless highlights the notion of multiple natures that are in tension within 'western conceptualizations.' Moreover, nature is manifested in an ethnocentric subjectivity, and as such "the idea seems inseparable from teleology" and as an "object per se fitted all too well into the universe" of capitalist accumulation.²⁹ A universal *Nature* as such is a particular western category based in 'capitalist culture' that gave rise to its material appropriation and ideological subjugation.

The above conceptualizations help to anchor the argument of this paper. The strategies of hybrid natures invoked earlier are in large part found in an ethnocentric and capitalist domination of the natural environment. Indigenous peoples today are faced with this reality of global capital forces. And as the introductory example of an indigenous *Bayei* has highlighted the symbols and realities of capitalism have entered the lives of indigenous peoples. The *Bayei* of Northern Botswana, like many other indigenous peoples, consume and reproduce this reality. The ecotourism project instigated by the PNT and *Rra Kesedile's* supply trip to the 'Supermarket' in *Shorobe* provide clear evidence of this intricate engagement. Within this capitalist nature, indigenous identities are recodified and the ecotourism project highlights how indigenous peoples have indeed begun to 'value' the economic order of the era. Thus indigenous identities are no longer 'untouched' or 'outside' of the appropriation of nature in the broader capitalist mode of production. Therefore the power relations created for indigenous people by the capitalist culture must be considered as a part of the strategies of hybrid natures. The livelihoods of indigenous peoples, such as the *Bayei*, are at the periphery of such an appropriated nature; however, the resulting impacts of this link are often grave. As such, it is an uneasy and contradictory relationship. *Rra Kesedile* speaks of the youth having lost their way, while they would contend that he is a stubborn old man holding on to a *Bayei* way of life, which no longer exists. The repercussions for *Bayei* identity are far-reaching and highly ambivalent.

The Critique of Domination

The above section reflects a broader polarized debate that is described today, by some scholars, as a "paradigm war."³⁰

Indigenous peoples, in adopting a social and political tactic, are depicted to be “stewards of nature” intrinsically linked to their natural surroundings.³¹ Environmental stewardship has, in turn, become one of the most powerful frames of contemporary indigenous activism on which many assert their diversity and identity vis-à-vis dominant capitalist models. The United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues (UNFPII) states:

As stewards and custodians of the world’s biodiversity, cultural diversity, and traditional ecological knowledge, indigenous peoples can contribute meaningfully to the design and implementation of more appropriate and sustainable mitigation and adaptation measures.³²

However, as Tsing argues, this “stereotype” of indigenous peoples as “close to nature” is not without problems. Instead it is “northern activists” that created and drive an alliance of indigenous peoples with “the environmental movement.”³³ In addition, as the United Nations acknowledges “injustices to indigenous peoples have been and continue to be caused in the name of conservation of nature and natural resources.”³⁴ Moreover, as indigenous peoples “broaden their economic activities and technologies for survival in changing circumstances” they can be “caught in a conservation Catch-22”, as this is taken as evidence that they have lost, or been co-opted into a non-indigenous identity.³⁵

This section analyses this tension. It situates the perception of a ‘crisis of nature’ in a primarily western genesis highlighting that the critique of domination of nature is a “distorting mirror”³⁶ created by northern environmentalists; this leaves them open “to charges of romanticism and colonial discourse.”³⁷ As such, the ‘crisis of nature’ is constructed as a power to be reckoned with, while concurrently creating a need to defend, and fend for (and where possible with), indigenous peoples that remain helpless to modern predicaments and its consequences. Such a self-reflexive critique of modernity by environmental activists, that drives a discourse in which indigenous peoples are detrimentally affected but not yet fully

contaminated, clearly demarcates inside/out boundaries painting a picture of *an* indigenous identity as genuinely attached to the sacred environment and nature, and adverse to a capitalist world order in a struggle to maintain a subsistence level of survival. In this way a romanticized view of indigenous peoples is furthered that is largely based on a western conception of the ‘crisis of nature.’

Albeit, the critique of domination over nature by modern environmentalists and their indigenous counterparts is in opposition to the core ideas of the Enlightenment and can be traced back to “plenty of currents of thought”.³⁸ I begin here, however, given the space constraints, with the ‘frontal assault’ by the Frankfurt School, which has been kept very much alive and redefined by eco-feminist as well as deep-ecologists. Jay highlights how the Frankfurt School’s analysis emphasized, instead of class struggle as the motor of history, the far larger conflict “between man and nature both without and within.” [sic]³⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno dialectically analyzed the struggle of “man and nature” [sic] as the internal relations in which nature was both “something external” as well as an “internal reality.”⁴⁰ Domination of the externalized “other” would inevitably be internalized by humanity in making “a tool of that same nature which he subjugates.” [sic]⁴¹ More simply stated the mastery over nature inevitably turns into mastery over humanity itself. It is not the purpose of this paper to undertake any deep elaboration of the Frankfurt School’s nexus of society and nature, but I want to distill some key features of their critique.

First, it aimed to recapture and reform, as they saw it, the wrongheadedness of the science of nature. In an effort of “re-enchantment,” depicted as overcoming the “alienation from nature”, these scholars aimed at constructing an alternative science attuned with the natural world. Second, and “tightly coupled with consideration of rationality/irrationality,” they sought to “give a deeper sense of meaning to life, to recuperate a sensuous and open dialogical relation” amongst humanity and external nature.⁴² Adorno and Horkheimer asserted that:

Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase in their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way their “in itself” becomes a “for him.” In this transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substratum of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature. [sic]⁴³

Thus, for these early critics, modernity was wrongfully dominated, and indeed culminated in what Heidegger has called the creation of ‘a world picture’ in which nature is encapsulated as a resource for humanity to use as it sees fit. This was problematized in the belief that it would ‘boomerang’ back to humanity and ultimately result in a crisis affecting both humanity and their environment.

In the early 1970s *ecofeminsim* brought renewed attention to such backfiring. It aimed in particular at women’s potential to bring about an ecological revolution in the ‘crisis of nature.’ Francoise d’Eaubonne and her followers picked up the Frankfurt School’s central theme, and the archaic yet apt usage of ‘men’ throughout Adorno and Horkheimer’s work perhaps gave it further impetus. D’Eaubonne sought to describe the epic violence inflicted on women and nature as a result of male domination.⁴⁴ As Warren notes, ecological feminism takes the position “that there are important connections – historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical – between the domination of women and the domination of nature.”⁴⁵ Merchant concludes in her seminal work, *The Death of Nature*, that “the conjunction of conservation and ecology movements with women’s rights and liberation has moved in the direction of reversing both the subjugation of nature and women.”⁴⁶ What is of particular importance, for the purpose of this paper, is that eco-feminism was an early attempt to refocus an understanding of nature in taking “seriously the voice of women and other oppressed persons” in the construction of nature and its domination.⁴⁷

Furthermore, as a revision of nature it “denies abstract individualism” and treats the natural world as constitutive of “what it means to be human.”⁴⁸ As an anti-essentialist model, it brings into conversation a multiplicity of voices and identities that collectively and in solidarity aim to bring ‘nature back.’ And as Warren ensures, in recalling a story of a “Sioux elder,” it is open to the narrative, context, and relational value systems that indigenous peoples hold and share with oppressed women in a patriarchal dominated world.⁴⁹ Therefore, eco-feminism seeks out alliances across gender, class and races in an attempt to recapture a relationship with nature, and in extension indigenous peoples are called to join the cause.

Similarly proponents of deep-ecology perceive a ‘crisis of nature’ and attempt a “deeper, more spiritual approach to Nature.” When Arne Naess coined the term in 1973 he aimed to move beyond the ‘objective science’ of nature “to the level of self and Earth wisdom.”⁵⁰ In contrast to the anthropocentric ideals of the Enlightenment in which humanity took center stage, deep ecology holds a radical bio-centric view in which “all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization with the larger Self-realization.”⁵¹ Deep ecologists draw no line between humanity and nature as everything is interrelated. In this view, human subjectivity “pales into insignificance” in light of the more appropriate view, as they argue, of the self as a ‘juncture in a relational system.’ They imply that value norms arise relationally with respect to the broader ‘biotic community’ of which humanity is only a part. This is not the place to critique this view in great detail, but I concur with Harvey, that deep ecologists, even in claiming to move beyond humanity in their ‘holistic’ view are deeply entrenched in a ‘Leibnizian conceit’ where a “monadic self internalizes natural values.”⁵² As it was already noted, culture and concepts of ‘natures’ are linked; deep ecologists want to escape scientific objectivity, which for them lies at the heart of the ‘crisis of nature,’ but they cannot, I argue, escape their ‘specific subjectivity’ nested in a Western culture.

There are countless other ecological accounts that aim to ‘emancipate’ humanity out of the ‘crisis of nature.’ This paper

can only account for some of them. Nevertheless the above discussion suggests that the critique of the domination of nature is a concern of 'northern environmentalists' that indigenous peoples may or may not share. The alliance of indigenous peoples with ecologically minded activists is moreover a distorting mirror in which the West sees indigenous peoples to hold a truth, an authenticity they themselves believe to have lost and want to regain. This tension confirms that concepts of a universal nature and ecology – 'deep,' 'feminist,' or otherwise – are in fact totalizing. They are, if not adopted reflexively, in danger of subsuming indigenous peoples and their identities with the environment in a form of blinded romanticism, and instead of overcoming oppression and liberation in fact continue hierarchical power relations they aim to overcome. I am sympathetic with environmentalists on many accounts; I disagree however, that indigenous peoples necessarily share, nor that they should, a view that is similar to our own. The 'crisis of nature' I have discussed thus far is, in my opinion, real and should not be underestimated. Whether we adopt an anthropocentric or bio-centric view largely depends on the subjectivity; which vantage point to nature is adopted by individuals and societies. Important now is to note that bio-centric constructions of nature are another 'strategy of hybrid natures' indigenous peoples are engaged through the environmental movement of the West.

To Be or Not to Be Stewards of Nature(s)

The argument presented up to this point has shown that nature, as a constructed concept, can be understood as a discourse that surrounds an antagonism of multiple natures. Anthropocentric views to appropriate the natural world and bio-centric views commenting on its consequences as epitomized in the perception of a 'crisis of nature,' I have argued, are such categories of multiple natures. Indigenous peoples cannot escape an engagement with these opposing western discourses and its realities. Moreover, as I have thus far focused on these dominating categories I now turn to conceptualizations of the natural world indigenous peoples hold themselves. This raises conceptual difficulties; not only are indigenous peoples

culturally stratified but furthermore their relationship with both anthropocentric and bio-centric views of nature have, apart from their own diverse understandings, resulted in changing, complex, and often nebulous realities.

The category of indigenous peoples today describes, according to some statistics, more than 7,000 distinct societies and 500 million people worldwide.⁵³ As such indigenous peoples cannot be meaningfully categorized to have a universal understanding of nature. Indeed, indigenous peoples around the world “have long been engaged in the *commodification* of nature: extracting, processing, and trading a diversity of products from a broad spectrum of natural environments.”⁵⁴ Notwithstanding, many indigenous peoples have developed “ways of life remarkably attuned” to their natural world. These environments “are less modified and degraded” since indigenous peoples are traditionally oriented toward “self-sufficiency, and only secondary to the generation of surplus and trade.”⁵⁵ Crucially, many indigenous peoples see clearly that their “long-term survival” depends on them caring for the environment they inhabit.⁵⁶ Moreover, a combination of both “past association” and a commitment to “remaining there in the future” can be judged to constitute a more interrelated relationship of many indigenous peoples with their specific life world.⁵⁷ Indigenous cultures have been grounded in, and integrated with their surroundings, and often are based in cosmologies in which a “proper relations between people, including past and present, generations” is traditionally articulated.⁵⁸

It is, however, erroneous to equate these views with the notion that all indigenous peoples live in ‘balance’ and ‘conformity with nature.’ And the ‘paradigm war’ discussed earlier, in which the world of today is viewed as “two systems, two different irreconcilable ways of life” in which the indigenous world is collective, communal, wise, humane, and respectful of nature while the western world is “greedy, destructive, individualist, and enemy of nature” is indeed an idealized and romantic figure of an “ecologically noble savage” that does not exist.⁵⁹ The perception that indigenous peoples are ‘of nature’ – ‘wild, primitive and innocent’ however fits all too well into the

bio-centric conceptions that were outlined earlier. This view, I contend, not only continues a colonial discourse but also in fact denies indigenous peoples both agency and rationality. Berkes, for instance, argues: "Traditional systems tend to have a large moral and ethical context; there is no separation between nature and culture."⁶⁰ Berkes, I would argue, conflates his own understanding of the nature/culture dichotomy without considering that perhaps there is a separation, or an interrelation that is different from his own.

Indeed some indigenous peoples have adopted a primarily anthropocentric view themselves. For instance, as Pasquaretta shows, "Las Vegas-style gambling casinos have cropped up across North America."⁶¹ North-American tribes such as the *Akwesasne* and *Mashantucket* have illustrated, how gambling has dramatically affected the Native American community and their relationship with nature. Insofar as casino gambling "fosters materialism, acquisitiveness, and self-interest divested of group interest," it might also represent the last phase in the "complete assimilation of indigenous North American peoples."⁶² The Iroquois in contrast, in a more bio-centric view, show how the "Sacred Bowl Game ... when played during the four-day Midwinter, is not only meant to maintain a balance of nature but also to amuse life-giving forces; to please the plant and animal world; and to make the Creator laugh."⁶³

This is not to say that indigenous worldviews of nature are not diverse. Callicott for example has shown that the "implicit overall metaphysic of American Indian cultures locates human beings in a larger *social*, as well as physical, environment." Many indigenous peoples as such perceive themselves to belong not only to a human community, rather to a community within a larger life world, both living and non-living. Callicott maintains that indigenous positions toward nature provide the basis for ethical restraint in relation to non-human nature. In other words, their worldviews can include "principles of an environmental ethic."⁶⁴

In general, these cosmologies perhaps go back to the "dominant pantheistic tradition before the rise of monotheistic religions."⁶⁵ Indigenous peoples with such belief systems hold that the "entire phenomenal world contains godlike attributes"

in which humanity is part of a world that is sacramental. These traditions, generally, follow that actions of peoples in nature can affect their own fate, have consequences, which are immediate and relevant to life and afterlife. In this relationship there is “no non-nature category – nor is there either romanticism or sentimentality.”⁶⁶ Indigenous peoples invoking relations with the ‘Creator,’ ‘Mother Earth,’ ‘Pachamama,’ or ‘Dream Time’ can be said to follow pantheistic cosmologies. Nature, as a category or discourse, understood in such a way perhaps does not exist altogether. It is difficult to fully grasp these complex relationships from my own subjective standpoint, however.

I want to nevertheless consider an encounter I had in September 2008. As part of an independent research I was invited by an indigenous *Mapuche* to participate in a cleansing ritual referred to as *Machiton*. The peoples (*che*) of the earth (*mapu*) in the Andean mountains near Temuco in southern-central Chile perceive themselves as caretakers of the land they inhabit. During my participation in the *Machiton* I understood the ritual as a means of cleansing its participants and their surrounding of, what I would refer to as, evil. I also realized that in the joy of peoples, including my own, after the eighteen hour-long proceeding, ‘good’ had returned to their dwelling. Therefore, I believe to be able to detect a dualism in *Mapuche* cosmology of good and evil, somehow mediated by the *machi* (Shaman) and legitimated by, a gate to the forefathers,’ which further points to a celestial family that connects life on *Mapu* with a higher spirit. As such, the *Mapuche*, like other indigenous peoples I was privileged to meet, seem to consider themselves to be stewards of nature.

Whether indigenous peoples are ‘stewards of nature’ depends on their specific connection with their environment. Again, these contexts can be understood in taking account of the strategies they have adopted in light of multiple natures. In some instances, stewardship has become a lost value, in others it is mitigated by anthropocentric or bio-centric adaptations and in some cases it is perhaps permissible to speak of stewardship at least in relation to dominant society.

In fact the relationship with dominant capitalist society, and its anthropocentric as well as bio-centric explanations, has

perhaps spurred indigenous activists to adopt an overarching identity as 'stewards of nature.' Redford and Stearman, for instance, argue that indigenous peoples portray this view "only because they recognize the power of this concept in rallying support in their struggle for land rights."⁶⁷ While, given my own experiences, I disagree with such essentializing arguments; the reality that many indigenous peoples are no longer free to articulate their identities and are in a process of negotiating with other concepts of nature, nevertheless, seems to support this view partially. The example of the ecotourism project of PNT, in which land claims were central, with the Bayei highlights such a process. Furthermore, the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) states that:

"Land and related resource rights are of fundamental importance to indigenous peoples since they constitute the basis of their economic livelihood and are the source of their spiritual, cultural and social identity. Dispossession of traditional lands and territories is one of the major problems faced by indigenous peoples all over the world. In many African and Asian countries, for example, dominating development paradigms, perceive the modes of production of indigenous peoples - such as pastoralism, hunting/gathering and rotational slash and burn agriculture - as primitive, non-productive and not in line with the modernization aspirations of present day states. This paradigm also applies in other regions of the world."⁶⁸

Indeed the nexus between cultural identity, land and preservation of the environment are central in the arguments of indigenous peoples in international forums. These claims are often couched in demands to the right to self-determination. The United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples further states in Article 3: "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."⁶⁹

Such a right is put into question when we consider the

preceding argument. Whether it is feasible to have an abstract right to self-determination, that aims to provide a space for indigenous identities is questioned by the way traditional understandings of nature have been appropriated, reconfigured or even lost. A revision of the concept of nature, as a social construction, and its relationship to identities of indigenous peoples in dominant society therefore underscores that the discourse of stewardship is value-laden and imbued with ethnocentric misconceptions or idealizations. The arena of struggle, as this paper proposes, can thus be contextualized from the vantage point of multiple natures. Furthermore a universal adaptation of indigenous peoples as 'stewards of nature' cannot be supported to correspond with indigenous realities everywhere. Instead, as the examples in this section have illustrated a universal claim of indigenous peoples to be closer to nature does actually not constitute a general indigenous identity. With these remarks in mind this paper will provide a summary of the findings below.

Concluding Remarks

This paper set out to revisit the concept of nature in order to explore its relationship with indigenous identities. It has traveled some distance to show that the concept of nature is not universal and resolved but instead plural and ambiguous. Moreover, nature as a category finds its origins in western Enlightenment thought and capitalist materialism. This paper has reviewed anthropocentric and bio-centric notions that have come to dominate, while ideas such as pantheism constitute more diverse, yet marginal understandings of nature(s). It has moreover illustrated that cultural identities (both indigenous and non-indigenous) can be analyzed through the lens of adopted strategies of hybrid natures. Moreover, the framing of indigenous peoples as 'steward of nature' has been shown to be problematic. As such it can be understood to be both a response to the 'crisis of nature' as well, a challenge as it depicts indigenous peoples as quintessential 'guardians of nature.' In response, indigenous peoples have found alliances with the environmental movement that in return drive and maintain a bio-centric view that often romanticizes indigenous identities.

Here, the paper calls upon 'northern activists' to revisit their prejudices and rethink their idealized reasoning in engaging indigenous peoples dialogically. Indigenous peoples, moreover, have begun to adapt to the forces of globalization that can be ascribed to anthropocentric appropriations as well as biocentric attempts to align their livelihoods. These have constrained indigenous identities not only because it idealizes indigenous lives - thereby foreclosing alternative identity articulations - but in addition hence indigenous peoples have been subsumed into the larger capitalist system without their prior consent. All of the above issues have far-reaching consequences for indigenous peoples around the world, but in highlighting contradictions and misunderstandings, I hope some of its conceptual shortcomings can be redressed.

Rra Kesedile and the *Bayei* of Botswana today run an ecotourism project; they have taken ownership of their lives and the environment in which they are situated. And in sharing it with tourists traveling from afar they have begun a conversation with non-indigenous peoples. The project when it was envisaged raised many sensitive issue and not all of them were, in my view, adequately resolved. Paternalism and patronizing ideas floated as much around our often heated deliberations with the *Bayei* as there were moments of shared understanding and equal partnership. Given these I am mindful that the reality of a globalizing world cannot simply be wished away, but in self-reflexive and open engagement of peoples around the world its repercussions can, I suggest here, at minimum be addressed.

Notes

¹ Arturo Escobar, "After Nature - Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology," *Current Anthropology* 40:1 (February 1999) pp. 1-30, Page 1

² Emily T. Yeh, "*Tibetan Indigeneity: Translations, Resemblances, and Uptake*" in *Indigenous Experience Today* edited by Marisol de la Cadena, Orin Starn (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2007) Page 72

³ Dennis Martinez, "*Protected Areas, Indigenous Peoples, and the Western Idea of Nature*" in *People, Places and Parks* edited by David Harmon (Hancock,

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- Michigan: The George Wright Society, 2006) Page 216
- ⁴ Ibid., Escobar, Page 3
- ⁵ Ibid., Escobar, Page 1
- ⁶ I adopt this phrase from Flora Lu Holt, "The Catch-22 of Conservation: Indigenous Peoples, Biologists, and Cultural Change," *Human Ecology*, 33:2 (April 2005) pp. 199-255 She uses the term to argue that indigenous peoples are caught in a "conservation Catch-22" in their encounter with the West.
- ⁷ Paul Nadasdy, "Transcending the Debate over the Ecologically Nobel Indian: Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalism," *Ethnohistory* 52:2 (Spring 2005), pp. 291-331, Page 292
- ⁸ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). Page 121
- ⁹ Kate Soper, "Nature/'nature'" in *FutureNatural* by George Robertson et. al. (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1996) Page 22
- ¹⁰ Ibid., Escobar, Page 3
- ¹¹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method - for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637) accessed online on the 15th of March 2009 at <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/descartes/descartes1.htm>
- ¹² Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. And trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), Page 26
- ¹³ Michael Mack, "Toward a Redefinition of Europe's Political Identity: Spinoza's Non-hierarchical Vision" *Telos* 145 (Winter 2008) pp. 67-86, Page 73
- ¹⁴ Ibid., Soper, Page 22
- ¹⁵ Ibid., Harvey, Page 121
- ¹⁶ Ibid., Harvey, Page 122
- ¹⁷ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism* by Amy Gutman (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) Page 29
- ¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Page 59
- ¹⁹ Cited in Carolyn Merchant, *The death of Nature* (London: Wildwood, 1982) Page 69-99
- ²⁰ Ignazio Masulli, *Nature and History - The evolutionary Approach for Social Scientists* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1990) Page 56

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- ²¹ Ibid., Escobar, Page 3
- ²² Ibid., Marcuse, Page 60
- ²³ Ibid., Masulli, Page 57
- ²⁴ Ibid., Harvey, Page 128
- ²⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 276 cited by T. Benton, *Marxism and natural limits: an ecological critique and reconstruction*, *New Left Review*, 178: 51-86, Page 54
- ²⁶ Adrian Franklin, *Nature and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2002). Page 42
- ²⁷ Ibid., Harvey, Page 130
- ²⁸ Ibid., Harvey, Page 131
- ²⁹ Ibid., Marcuse, Page 66
- ³⁰ *International Forum on Globalization, Paradigm Wars - Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization*, ed. Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006). p. 4
- ³¹ A. Durning, *Guardians of the land: indigenous peoples and the health of the earth*. (Washington, D.C.: Worldwatch Institute, 1992) Page 62
- ³² UNFPII, *Climate Change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges* accessed online on the 11th of March 2009
- ³³ Anna Tsing, *Indigenous Voice* in *Indigenous Experience Today* edited by Marisol de la Cadena, Orin Starn (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2007) Page 48
- ³⁴ United Nations, *Implementing the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Rights* accessed online on the 11th of March 2009 at <http://colonos.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/unpfii-report-on-climate-change.pdf>; http://209.85.173.132/search?q=cache:ptAT06NafaMJ:intranet.iucn.org/webfiles/doc/IUCNPolicy/Resolutions/2008_WCC_4/English/RES/Res_4_052_Implementing_the_UN_Decl.pdf+indigenous+peoples+nature+united+nations&cd=5&hl=de&ct=clnk&client=firefox-a Page 4
- ³⁵ Ibid., Holt, Page 209
- ³⁶ Adam Kuper (1988). *The invention of Primitive Society* (London: Routledge) Page 5
- ³⁷ Ibid., Tsing, Page 48

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- ³⁸ Ibid., Harvey, Page 133 For instance romanticism, organicism, Darwinian biology, Nietsyschian philosophy, to name a few.
- ³⁹ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination - A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*. (Canada: Little Brown and Company, 1973). Page 256
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., Jay, Page 267
- ⁴¹ Ibid., Harvey, Page 134
- ⁴² Ibid., Harvey, Page 135
- ⁴³ Authors translation from Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969). Page 12
- ⁴⁴ Francoise d'Eaubonne, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974), pp. 213-52
- ⁴⁵ Karen J. Warren, *The power and the promise of ecological feminism in Environmental Ethics - What really matters, what really works* by David Schmitz and Elizabeth Willott (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Page 234
- ⁴⁶ Carolyn Merchant, *The death of nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980). Page 146
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., Warren, Page 246
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., Warren, Page 247
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., Warren, Page 246
- ⁵⁰ Bill Devall, George Sessions, *Deep Ecology in Environmental Ethics - What really matters, what really works* by David Schmitz and Elizabeth Willott (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Page 120
- ⁵¹ Ibid., Page 122
- ⁵² Ibid., Harvey, Page 168 Note: Gottfried Leibniz fought against the Cartesian dualist system in his *Monadology* in which a monad is an irreducible force, which makes it possible for the bodies to have the characteristics of inertia and impenetrability, and which contains in itself the source of all its actions. Monads are the first elements of every composed thing. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz „The *Monadology*“ trans. Robert Latta accessed online on the 18th of March 2009 at <http://www.rbjones.com/rbjpub/philos/classics/leibniz/monad.htm>

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- ⁵³ Hughes Lotte, *The no-nonsense guide to Indigenous Peoples*. (London: Verso, 2003). Page 20
- ⁵⁴ Charles Zerner, *People, Plants, and Justice: The Politics of Nature Conservation* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2000). Page 3
- ⁵⁵ Krishna Ghimire, Michel P. Pimbert, *Social Change and Conservation* (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) accessed online on the 11th of March 2009 at http://books.google.com/books?hl=de&lr=&id=UvcymNuf08AC&oi=fnd&pg=PA97&dq=indigenous+peoples+nature&ots=Npt2iy6Mcr&sig=KCLF_ypUqwNXfAS_mOfbntsuaawg#PPA112,M1 Page 112
- ⁵⁶ Victor T. King, *The peoples of Borneo*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) Page 167
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Ghimire, Page 112
- ⁵⁸ Janis B. Alcorn, "Indigenous Peoples and Conservation" *Conservation Biology* 7:2 (June 1993), pp. 424-426, Page 424
- ⁵⁹ Kent H. Redford, *The Ecologically Noble Savage*, *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 15:1 (Spring 1991) No Pages, accessed online on 11th of March 2009 at <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/the-ecologically-noble-savage>
- ⁶⁰ Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1999). Page 9
- ⁶¹ Paul Pasquaretta, "On the "Indianness" of Bingo: Gambling and the Native American Community" *Critical Inquiry*, 20: 4 (Summer, 1994), pp. 694-714. Page 696
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, Pasquaretta, Page 700
- ⁶³ Trudie Lamb, "Games of Chance and Their Religious Significance among Native Americans," *Artifacts* 8 (Spring 1980): 10-11. Note: The Sacred Bowl Game is one of the Four Sacred Rituals of Midwinter and symbolizes the struggle of the Twin Boys to win control over the earth. The Midwinter is a time of praying and awaiting the rebirth, a renewal of life. It is a time of giving thanks to the spirit forces and to the Creator.
- ⁶⁴ J. Baird Callicott, "Traditional American and Western European attitudes toward nature: An overview." *Environmental Ethics* 4: 1982. 298-318.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Berkes, Page 92
- ⁶⁶ Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), Page 68

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- ⁶⁷ K. H. Redford, A. M. Stearman, "Forest-dwelling native Amazonians and the conservation of biodiversity" *Conservation Biology* 7:2 (1993) pp. 248-255
- ⁶⁸ IWGIA, "Indigenous Peoples and Land Rights - Dispossession of lands and territories is a major problem for indigenous peoples" accessed online 10th of March 2009 at <http://www.iwgia.org/sw231.asp>
- ⁶⁹ United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples accessed online on the 12th of March 2009 at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf Page 4

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