

## **He Whanaunga tērā: The Politics and Practice of an Indigenous and Intercultural Approach to Ecological Well-being**

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*We are really sorry for you people. We cry for you because you haven't got meaning of culture in this country. We have a gift we want to give you. We keep getting blocked from giving you that gift. We get blocked by politics and politicians. We get blocked by media, by process of the law. All we want to do is to come out from under all of this and to give you this gift. And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself (David Mowalijarlai in Grieves 2009:7).<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

It's time to build bridges—the ecological imperatives of our times demand it. They require us to listen well, especially across our differences, particularly to the voices that echo what many of us have forgotten—our own indigeneity; our inherent capacity to be deeply, empathically resonant with the earth and life itself. Then and only then, can we direct this knowing, this re-knowing of deep interconnectedness into our actions for ecological well-being. This is not, however, an individual pursuit. No nation, no species, no peoples can act alone. This *is* a collective project—the recursive nature of our global ecological reality is one that challenges us as individuals, and as cultural communities, to find our unique expressions of the common good.

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<sup>1</sup> David Mowalijarlai, Senior Lawman of the Ngarinyin people of the West Kimberley, addressing a gathering of white people in his country. .

## Chapter 20 in Radical Human Ecology: Intercultural and Indigenous Approaches.

The task of coming into an indigenous way of being, which I simply refer to as ‘Indigenous Being’<sup>2</sup> (the unification of the self with the worlds of nature and of spirit), occurs in a wounded world; an ecosystem ravaged by materialist addictions, fraught with enormous disparities, and underpinned by diverse social, cultural, and political histories. It occurs in a traumatized world that as Eimear O’Neill points out elsewhere in this volume, is multi-local and multi-levelled, manifesting at the personal and community levels, across peoples and across species—a trauma that is also grounded in place, literal and visceral within the land itself.

To date, responses to our ecological predicament have been many and varied, ranging from technological adaptation to human rights and environmental campaigns to indigenous people’s decolonization movements throughout the world (Addison Posey 1999, UNDP 2007). These initiatives, however, tend to address the issues in a compartmentalized fashion, failing to make the connection to what may be one of the most fundamental root causes of our ecological crisis: the human psychic condition and related modes of perception and being. We are, indeed at a juncture in history when our separatisms<sup>3</sup> will no longer suffice.

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<sup>2</sup>This simply refers to the innate capacity of humans to re-develop the capacity for empathic resonance or deep interconnectedness with the world of nature (including other humans) and the metaphysical reality that underpins this. This term is distinct from Indigenous Peoples which refers to those who have been colonized within their own territories and at this juncture of history are the major guardians of ecological knowledge. Indigenous Peoples or peoples who are indigenous to a specific location have over countless generations developed an intimate dialog with the life of a place.

<sup>3</sup> Forms of separatism have and will continue to be a valid form of development for those cultural communities—indigenous and other ethnic minority groups, women, queer communities (including two-spirited peoples) and members of differently-abled or disabled communities etc—whose well-being is compromised through their marginalization. However, through standing in the margins, these groups also bring knowledge, perspectives and experiences that are seriously needed to heal our crisis of ecological relationship. Rapid response to our ecological situation is essential;

This chapter introduces the work of the Koru International Network (KIN) of which I am the founder. KIN is a growing international community of practice (Wheatley 2008) that seeks to operationalize global forms of indigeneity as these are uniquely expressed from culture to culture. We name this goal as human cultural diversity in support of bio-diversity through the revitalization of indigenous worldviews or literacies within all peoples. Alternatively this could be expressed as what the Native American-born scholar Gretory Cajete (2008) has referred to as the re-indigenization of peoples to the earth as a living being. To date, KIN's work has occurred in and been shaped by the socio-cultural histories of three nations: Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Australia. Each of these countries is influenced by similar colonial heritages that have pushed their respective Indigenous Peoples to the margins. The Indigenous populations within each are to varying extents engaging in a number of de-colonization initiatives alongside migrant groups who are also, to different degrees, dissociated or engaged with their own indigenous heritages.

The work of KIN may be located as part of a growing and global social innovation<sup>4</sup> movement that recognizes the necessity of making the links between social and ecological resilience as part of affecting broader change within our communities, social systems, and institutions (Etmanski 2010, Goldenberg et al 2009, Westley 2008). Such approaches argue that socio-ecological resilience for society at large is intimately linked to forms of re-engagement with disenfranchised populations (economically, culturally, and politically) in ways that position these groups as active participants (Westley 2008); an approach which has been advocated by Indigenous Peoples for sometime (Addison Posey 1999, Arabena 2006, Nelson 2008). I agree with this approach *and* suggest (in the case of KIN's work) that not only does this require engaging with the agency of Indigenous actors and communities who often stand so powerfully in the margins, *but* a corresponding re-engagement with 'White-

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simultaneous healing of ourselves and the planet requires a critical mass willing and able to work across 'difference'.

<sup>4</sup> Here Social Innovation broadly refers to 'any initiative, product or process or program that profoundly changes the basic routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of any social system' (Westley 2008: 1).

stream'<sup>5</sup> society regarding the indigenous aspect of self that this cultural collective is so often tragically disconnected from. Both facets of human agency are I argue later in this chapter, two different sides of the same coin—our ability to innovate towards ecological resilience is strongly contingent on our ability to locate and galvanise the 'fault lines' (Anderson 2004) of human agency and potential as these are uniquely located in these seemingly disparate populations<sup>6</sup>. As has been argued in my previous chapter, these fault lines or psycho-spiritual wounds that may be apparent in individuals are often indicative of psycho-spiritual forms of transformation or healing that are also deeply necessary in the culture at large.

As a concept, 'resilience' remains contested (Williams et al. 2008a). In recent years, resilience discourse has generally shifted from individualist conceptualizations to considerations of community, organizational, and systems resilience, including notions such as cultural connectedness (Williams et al. 2008a) and 'coherence of identity amidst sudden changes' (Westley 2008). However, few have questioned the epistemological underpinnings of the concept itself. This chapter, therefore, is not so much concerned with organizational resilience as frequently discussed within the context of 'scaling up' social innovations, but rather a deeper epistemological resilience as this concerns an emerging community of practice. KIN's position is that the ecological resilience needed to innovate towards planetary well-being must be underpinned by an epistemological solidarity that enables a knowing of the deep interconnectedness we share with our Life-World; however uniquely this may be nested in various cultural communities. This form of resilience is distinct from the implicitly Cartesian-influenced conceptualisations of resiliency which so often imply the ability of individuals or communities to 'bounce or spring back' from particular experiences (Williams et al. 2008a). As such, it represents a radical departure from

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<sup>5</sup> Please see my earlier chapter for the meaning of this term.

<sup>6</sup>Please note the seemingly different forms of disenfranchisement afflicting these populations do not stand as binary opposites. Indigenous Peoples whilst on the whole closer to their indigenous roots are often disenfranchised from these, as the epidemiology of these populations indicates (Stephens et al. 2006). White-stream society, whilst on the whole further removed from the indigenous aspect of self, also has sectors whom are closely connected to their indigeneity.

many Westernized notions of the concept of 'man against the world'. Rather, this ontological recognition of the embedded relationship we share with our Life-World necessarily decentres the primacy of human need. The form of resilience articulated here is about making the links between human cultural diversity and bio-diversity in ways that acknowledge the need for a multiplicity of ways of knowing, re-centring those cultural and spiritual values, often indigenous worldviews, that emphasise developing a caring and intimate dialog with place (Addison Posey 1999, Nelson 2008).

In this sense, our ability to be resilient in these times hinges on our capacity to forge a new type of universal citizenship, underpinned by a 'global indigeneness' (Arabena 2006) in service of our ecological well-being. This must be one that simultaneously acknowledges the leadership role of the many Indigenous Peoples, who retain the knowing of what it is to be indigenous, along with those who wish to re-find the unique expression of indigeneity within their own cultural communities. Such intercultural work aimed at the reconstruction of global but unique expressions of indigeneity in a world traumatized by the colonization of lands and their peoples must inevitably not only pay attention to the 'paradox of agency' (Westley 2008), the idea that human agency becomes captive to the very social systems and institutions we have invented to support human well-being, but to the specific ways in which dynamics of power and culture mediate these processes (Williams 2001 2007, Williams and Labonte 2007). In summary, the work requires us to 'listen across the hierarchies' (Razack 2001: 49) of difference; particularly race, class, and gender.

In essence the work of KIN is knitting communities together. It is about intercultural dialog for ecological well-being; sharing from our different cultural and psycho-spiritual histories what we know about indigenous ways of being (based on the Life-World perspective offered in my earlier chapter in this volume) and how we might combine these with other ways of knowing to address our ecological ills. Essentially it is concerns healing our relational as well as our epistemological crisis. As such, the balance of focus in this second essay necessarily shifts from the sphere of agency referred to in my earlier chapter as the terrain of Empathic Resonance (the more receptive sphere of human being) to the Discursive sphere, one more nuanced and shaped by the cultural power-relations of place and people. Theoretically speaking, the fundamental epistemological underpinnings of KIN's work are

grounded in an indigenous Life-World perspective of interconnectedness<sup>7</sup>. As various scholars have shown, however—Foucault with his seminal work on *Power/Knowledge*, and *Surveillance and Normalization* (Foucault 1980, O'Brien and Pena 1998), and Harbermas in his work on the colonization of the Life-World (1981)—the Discursive Sphere as the lynch pin between our potentially Deeper Life-World and our human-made material reality (the world of public policy, institutions, and our everyday lived reality) is inevitably problematic.

This chapter offers an exploration of these issues as they are expressed in the work of KIN to date. It focuses on results emerging from Phase One of an international Participatory Action Research project that underpins the development of KIN. It is fore-grounded with a discussion regarding the relative positionings<sup>8</sup> of different peoples within Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and Canada as these positionings concern their relationship to their own indigeneity, various cultural, political, and economic issues shaping each context, and some epidemiological indicators of ecological well-being. Following a brief articulation of the key theoretical concepts, Participatory Action Research Methodology, and the work of KIN to date, emerging key themes are briefly analysed in terms of the various subject positions (worldviews and ways of being based on cultural identities, psycho-spiritual histories, and access to various forms of power) brought to the work by respective populations. The implications of these results in terms of future methodology pertaining to KIN-related activities, as these seek to operationalize a global form of indigenous (Arabena 2006), are then discussed.

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to argue that there is one unitary body of indigenous knowledge. While indigenous worldviews are particular to places and peoples, they do however share some similarly onto-epistemological roots and principles. See Stewart-Harawira (2005).

<sup>8</sup> The term 'positioning' refers to the ways in which people are viewed and treated by both self and others. This is affected by various discourses, norms and conventions which are inevitably structured by particular power relations shaped by race, class, gender and a number of other socially constructed attributes. To varying extents, people are active subjects who take up positions from which they can exercise power within a particular social practice, or are subjected to the definition of others (Weedon, 1987 in Williams 2001).

