

**The Human Ecologist as Alchemist:**

**An Inquiry into Ngāi Te Rangi Cosmology, Human Agency, and Well-being in a Time of Ecological Peril**

Dr Lewis Williams

Did you ever hear the call of eros?  
Like still waters, running deep  
Belying the ragged swirling  
You felt beneath your feet  
Staking her claim—*insistently, persistently, patiently...*  
*Longingly*  
And did you begin to sink...  
DEEP?  
*I did*

And did you know it was eros shaking the ground beneath your feet?  
As you dreamt of earthquakes unloosening life's hold  
And as you took in the thousand and one stars burning brightly  
Showing you the limitless constellations your life might take  
Did you tremble with awe? Did you plead for no more?

*I did*<sup>1</sup>

—Lewis Williams (2007b)

**Introduction**

*There is a language about our relationship with the world that comes from the depths of our being, unspoken, resonating.... This is crying for expression.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from 'When Eros Calls', in Williams (2007b). See page 12 for the meaning of eros in this context.

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Figure 1: Mauao (Williams, L).

Transfixed between Otānewainuku and Pūwhenua, Mauao, the esteemed *maunga* (mountain) stands guard at the entrance to the Tauranga harbour. Facing into the winds of time, he is witness to the changes that have come to his peoples, like the tides ebbing and flowing along his sides. He is the guardian of history, the keeper of stories, the provider and much-respected *Tupuna* (ancestor) for *iwi* (tribe/s) of the Tauranga Moana—Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Ranginui, and Ngāti Pukenga—and those that have gone before them. The standing and life force of Mauao are the *mana* (standing) and the *mauri* (life force) of the people; they are one and the same. His well-being is their well-being. He is the sacred ancestor who links us to the past and to the future.

In 1865, Mauao was confiscated by the Crown. This led to a long period of alienation from the *maunga* (mountain) and its surrounds for the *iwi* of the Tauranga Moana. Successive ‘legalized’ encroachments of various *iwi* (tribal) *taonga* (treasured possessions) ensured this increased as time went on. For Māori, an alienation of this nature includes but also goes well beyond a mere physical separation; rather, it represents a deeper alienation from an enduring worldview, a way of being, and ultimately the ability for a fuller experience of life, including one’s *wairua* (spirit) and *mana* (standing or presence due to a form of spiritual power or authority that is bestowed by the gods)<sup>3</sup> (Williams 2010).

This is not a story about confiscation. It *is* a story of recovery and engagement with *eros*, the spirit of life. It is both personal, in its autobiographical elements (I am of Māori origins being of the Ngāi Te Rangi tribe), and impersonal in that it speaks to the larger

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<sup>2</sup>The words of one participant at a Koru International Network *hui* held at Hoani Waititi Marae, 6 May 2010.

<sup>3</sup>Mauao, which is *waahi tapu* (sacred area), particularly to Ngāi Te Rangi and Ngāti Ranginui was only returned in 2008 to the guardianship of local *iwi*. Even now, as elders’ narratives will testify later, Mauao has yet to be properly returned. For a fuller explanation of the term ‘*mana*’ please see the later section, ‘Mauao: A Ngāi Te Rangi View of Well-being’ in this chapter.

process of humanities recovery of our Life-World,<sup>4</sup> the deeper resonance of being. In essence, this chapter represents an inquiry into cosmology, human agency, and well-being in a time of ecological peril. It is motivated by what is probably one of the most critical questions of our time—the *how* and *why* we exercise our human agency; and, more specifically, how do we do so in re-engaging with the language of life (in its fullest sense) at this critical juncture in history?

The central thesis of this chapter is that every person on this planet has the innate human capacity to be Indigenous; that is to be in intimate relationship or *resonance* with the world of spirit, the earth, and other human beings. In fact, this the ‘re-indigenization’ (Cajete, Mohawk and Valladolid Rivera 2008) of people to the earth as a living being is deeply necessary. No amount of technology alone can fix the most pressing of our ecological ills, which at their most fundamental level represent a crisis of epistemology and relationship. The larger life-world context is that the world we live in today is, for many, one of epistemological reductionism and profound dislocation. Despite the many achievements of ‘science’ in the mainstream sense, it seems the ‘flatland of Western empiricism’ has over time quashed our natural creativity (Cajete 2006, Wilber 2006); what remains for many is a life-world devoid of the subtleties of colour and texture. Those colonized within their own territories are fighting to reclaim and revision what has been taken (United Nations 2009) whether through war, climate change or economic disenfranchisement. Millions more are refugees struggling for their own sense of place in other people’s lands (Kolmannskog et al 2008); while those who have been the primary benefactors of ‘White-stream’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>‘Life-World,’ in its capitalized form, refers to an Indigenous Life-World view. In its uncapitalized form, it refers to an experience of reality that is strongly bounded or limited by the Western scientific traditions of rational empiricism and materialist notions of reality. It is this much reduced ‘life-world’ that is the predominant experience of many in contemporary westernized societies.

<sup>5</sup> White-stream consciousness refers to contemporary dominant modes of perception and consciousness, particularly in wealthier Westernised societies, emanating from the Enlightenment period in Europe and associated with Western Science (particularly rational empiricism), imperialism and global capitalist expansion. While its origins and power base are strongly associated with people of European ethnicity, these particular ways of being and perceiving now pervade many so called non-

consciousness are, for the most part, deeply alienated from people, place, and spirit (McIntosh 2008). We are, at this juncture in history profoundly challenged to reconnect.

The orientation of this chapter is based, in part, on my own positioning as a white, Indigenous (of Māori descent, born in Aotearoa New Zealand, Aotearoa New Zealand New Zealand) and migrant woman living in Canada, whose psycho-spiritual history is both colonized and colonizer. Like many of us, I have had to take time to undo the ravages of the colonization of my own Life-World—much of my earlier education and subsequent professional training in social work and public health were implicitly grounded in the reductionist Cartesian frameworks this book critiques. As someone whose career path has undergone a number of iterations, the inner thread of experience has been vitally important in shaping my ongoing efforts at ‘living life as inquiry’ (Marshall 1999). Using this approach over time, I have sought to arrive at some consensus, at least within myself, regarding the onto-epistemological foundations of our Life-World and my subsequent choices regarding the use of my own human energy for ecological well-being. Our systematic and rigorous engagement with this topic is I believe important; inevitably our actions as human beings and Human Ecologists are shaped by our beliefs about reality and our relationship to the world.

Given the almost unyielding assault on our sensibilities of modernist, rationalist discourses, I deliberately include an excerpt from the poem ‘When Eros Calls’ prior to the introduction. I do so, because as Iain Mackinnon so well articulates elsewhere in this volume, the process of decolonization can indeed be ‘violent work’—even when it is the inner voice that speaks. As such, the over-arching ‘Intuitive Inquiry’ (Anderson 2000, 2004) approach articulated in this chapter deliberately works with ruptures in everyday consciousness; weaving back and forth from the potentially life giving fault-lines of the human psyche at the individual level, to the more collective aspects of the ‘world unconsciousness’ (Aizenstat 1995). Through juxti-positioning the narratives of Ngāi Te Rangi and Cree elders with my own, this chapter argues that underpinning human language and discursive notions of human agency is a much deeper perceptual Life-World, which, in David Abrams words, is ‘a world that speaks’ (1996: 84).

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Western Societies around the globe. Some of the issues outlined by Zhang and Lovrod regarding the impacts of capitalist expansion in China on rural women in this volume are a case in point.

As will later be apparent, for my own tribe, Ngāi Te Rangi, the recovery of this Life-World is through *whakawhanaungatanga*—literally the act of relating to and caring for all of one’s kin (people and other beings who are also of the natural world—such as animals, plants, and rocks and the world of spirit, which includes ancestors). It is only through the correct observation of *tapu* (treating what is sacred as sacred) and *whakawhanaungatanga* (the act of caring for all our relations) can *mauri* (the life force) and *mana* (presence) of all beings be upheld. For Māori, this is a respectful and ethical ecology of relationship; ruptured by the inner colonization of people and place, a schism I argue extends to the collective psyche of humanity.

In the sections that immediately follow I outline an interpretive framework for understanding much of the material presented later in this chapter. In its account of an embodied and shamanic perceptual phenomenology (Abram 1995, Merleau-Ponty 1964, Metzner 2005b), this framework represents an epistemology of deep interconnectedness, perhaps the ‘epistemology of empathy’ that Alastair McIntosh refers to earlier in this volume. The alchemical nature of our universe features significantly within this chapter’s theoretical framework as it underpins and facilitates the fulfillment of human agency and potential—a continual evolution from the lower to the higher order. The chapter focuses on ‘the dreaming’ (in particular dreaming while sleeping) as a means by which a fuller human agency and potential may be facilitated. ‘The dreaming’ is a portal into the underpinning, metaphysical aspects of reality and a means by which we can make our relational participation more conscious, and therefore more agentic.

The psycho-spiritual historical narratives of both Ngāi Te Rangi and the Cree Peoples (specifically Woodland and Plains) are detailed; in part to pay tribute to my people—Ngāi Te Rangi—and because these narratives form a significant part of the psychic ecology of place and people throughout the respective periods of exile, transformation, and re-claiming articulated in this chapter. At the conclusion of this chapter, I offer a modest explanatory framework for understanding the nature of human agency within an Indigenous and shamanic Life-World perspective, which I argue is foundational to the ecology of relationship in contemporary society. By extension, this research also offers a tentative articulation of the Human Ecologist as alchemist—as an agent of transformation within a Life-World view that is Indigenous and participatory.

In its entirety, this chapter suggests a move to a more holistic form of science as Human Ecology researchers, validating our engagement with intuitive and other spiritually-based

Chapter Five in *Radical Human Ecology: Intercultural and Indigenous Approaches*.

ways of knowing alongside more traditional research methods commonly associated with the Western scientific paradigm. As the first of two companion chapters in this volume, it is primarily orientated to the inner thread, or the vertical, depth dimension in terms of our own personal understanding and relationship to the landscape of our agency as Human Ecologists. It provides the context for a second chapter in this volume that focuses on a particular ecological initiative in terms of its engagement with the wider world (the horizontal aspect of our practice) in bringing this kind of human agency or literacy to its fullest expression.