**Unnatural Natives: Beyond Indigenous Idealism and Fundamentalism**

["Unnatural Natives: Beyond Native Fundamentalism and Indigenous Idealism." 2024. Art History and Visual Arts Graduate Symposium, University of British Columbia, Feb. 30. This is an abridged version of the original talk.]

## Axioms

Native people and their land are interconnected. We have all heard this. The very definitions of the words 'Native' and 'Indigenous' bind bodies to specific places. Every First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Elder, Knowledge Carrier, and academic that I have read, listened to, and talked with about this subject not only agree, but recognize this as an essential truth. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Glen Coultard, for example, describe this web of reciprocal relations associated with a specific place as grounded normativity.[i] This indivisible material, spiritual, and social ecosystem is the way things were for Native Peoples before invasion and capitalism. It is a relationship the best of us maintains and is a requirement for sustainable futures. The claim that Native people and land are one is an axiom; a foundational statement so obvious that it goes unchallenged. An axiom is a seed from which subsequent ideas and institutions emerge.

*The Declaration of Independence*'s "All men are created equal," for example, is an axiom that shaped the United States differently from nations predicated on other beliefs. Axioms are not absolute truths. If they were, competing claims would be unthinkable or, if thought, always mistaken. While drafting the *Declaration*, Thomas Jefferson was perfectly aware that Britain did not agree with American independance. Jefferson wrote "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…." "We *hold*," rather than 'these truths *are* self-evident'. The sentence acknowledges the existence of competing claims. "*We* hold" acknowledges that others do not. Social axioms are not facts. They are one group's aspirations posited as universal truths and backed by force. Social axioms are conceptual seeds planted in the hopes that their growth will spread and choke out competitors.

Did the signers of *The Declaration of Independence* believe their own axiom? Forty-one of the fifty-six owned slaves. Jefferson owned more than 600 human beings.[ii] Perhaps the signers understood "men" to mean white, property-owning adult males, such as themselves. Property, then, included people. More optimistically, perhaps their logic, compassion, or intuition led them to make this declaration and strive to later embody it, or hope, at least, that succeeding generations would. My stepfather, a former American, and former Jesuit priest, believed this. With teary eye, he testified to adolescent me that the Holy Spirit inspired *The Declaration*. God infused the text with universal truths that exceeded the fallen and interested state of its signers. This feels like a retrospective projection illuminated by confirmation bias.

Stanford historian Jack Rakove explains that "Jefferson did not intend 'men' to suggest individual equality. Rather…that American colonists as a *people*, had the same rights to self-government as other nations."[iii] The original Constitution, he adds, "recognized the legal status of slavery" and the federal government's role in maintaining "a slaveholders' republic." It was decades before anyone read the *Declaration* as a demand for *individual* rights. It took 85 years, a

civil war, 620,000 deaths, dramatic amendments to the Constitution, and another century, and "the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s," to generate the degrees of freedom currently enjoyed.

Jefferson did not sew the seeds of human rights into *The Declaration of Independence*. They are rooted in the rhizome of Black oppression, Black intellection, activism, and resistance, the abolitionist and the suffragist movements, and in blood. Suffragists expanded the *Declaration*'s sense of "men" beyond its author's intentions and imagination. If 'men', they argued, in addition to a group and to individual males, is a gender-neutral equivalent to 'persons,' then, women are entitled to equal rights. It says so in *The Declaration of Independence*! Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech, "Ain't I a Woman,"[iv] flowers this logic closer to the light. These folks planted a seed of humanity in the masters' words; they did not find it there.

To most, unprecedented being is unbearable. Traditional societies and identities require precedence, to be preceded, to have seeds in the past that prove their contemporary existence and cohesion as an inevitable and rooted fact. New movements, societies, and identities also look for precursors to legitimate themselves and their mission. Traditional legitimation requires contemporary selves and practices to prove that they are heir to a source in an approved past. New movements, societies, and identities may play along, but the ancestors they root for are not necessarily those sanctioned by the dominant culture or are aspects of acceptable ancestors the dominant supress. Sojourner Truth recalls a minister saying that women cannot have the same rights as men, "Cause Christ wasn't a woman." Her response, "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him."

Historical revisioning is a surprising, ironic, often hilarious, and disruptive tool. However, if we are to pry loose from the weight of rotten ancestors and narratives, our tool belt must also include non-historical legitimation. That is, agreement among allies in the embodied moment rather than an accord with an ancient authorizing source. Sojourner Truth gave her "Ain't I a Woman" speech at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio. Her physical presence and wit offered the demonstrable fact of her humanity. I don't think she went there for confirmation, for legitimation, but sought solidarity with other women as the basis for change.

Fifteen years ago, Losang Samten, a former Tibetan monk, came to the University of Regina to build a sand mandala. We chatted at an informal gathering. He had just spent the day with Elders at a nearby reserve. I asked why he went to Piapot. His answer continues to shape me: "It is our practice that in a new place we visit the wise people who belong to that land. We compare notes. If we agree about something, we know it is true. If we disagree, it is culture."

Samten describes two types of knowledge, here: universal truth and cultural knowledge. At first listen, it may appear that he ranks them. I think he is only distinguishing them. Universal truths are propositions agreed upon by strangers. That is, propositions are universally true if they find agreement not only at the site of their production, but by wise people everywhere. Both truth and cultural knowledge arise from specific sites, but while universal truth must be tested everywhere, the veracity of cultural knowledge is best tested at home. That is where it has its greatest meaning, value, and utility. That a culture's knowledge is appreciated elsewhere is lovely, but that is not the test of its value. Universal truths are axioms. Cultural knowledge is their rooting and flowering in specific locations.

Twenty years ago, SaskCulture, the provinces' culture funders, recognized a gap between how bureaucrats and Native communities understood the concept 'culture'. Wanting to forge agreement for their central axiom, they held a gathering. My memory is of about fifty of us in a large room. Elders and knowledge Carriers from all over the province sat in a circle. We ringed them. They talked and talked. We listened and listened. Then they talked among themselves. At the end of the second day, an Elder, Gordon Keewatin, I think, stood. "We have come to a definition. What we do in our community; that is our culture." Pointing to another leader, "What they do over there; that is their culture."

For me, the most thrilling aspect of Samten's teaching is its hint of the Native dialogic, knowledge as inquiry, as well as recitation. In an effort to Indigenize, universities increasingly invite Native Elders to tell stories, share personal and collective histories, describe their beliefs. The custom on the Plains, is to listen not question Elders. Elders represent, they do not debate. Samten, however, describes a meeting of equals who not only share their understandings but also test their nature and value through dialogue: "we compare notes." Cultural knowledge is how things are, and protocol is how we do things, *here*.

I picture Losang Samten sitting with Elder and legal scholar Leroy Little Bear at a campfire. They consider the Blackfoot philosophy of flux. How everything is neither chaotic nor stable. The universe has patterns, rhythms that feel steady when you occupy them, or they you, but are in perpetual motion, changing. Does this rhyme with Tibetan Buddhism's understanding that the cause of suffering is our desire for fixed states in a changing world. Samten's sand mandala is a maze of intricate particulars standing between the viewer and enlightenment. Sure, jump ahead, read the conclusion, memorize the Four Nobel Truths, remain physically and affectively ignorant. Real life is wading through a messy world to embody these truths in motion, to be deceived, to trick oneself, to, for example, feel elation in stasis and mistake it for transcendence. Truths are only guides until embodied in cultural practice.

Native connection to land is not generic. Folks are not at home in every land. Rather, each First Nations, Inuit, and Métis person is bound to a territory. This foundational concept has a dramatic effect on knowledge production. Elder Louis Bird explains that traditional Native knowledge(s) are plural and site specific: "we found a systematic way to survive in the area where we live."[v] Traditional people do not share 'Indigenous knowledge'. They share local knowledge. Before imparting it in prose, song, or dance, folks on the Plains describe who they are, who and where there knowledge comes from. Protocols guide keeping, learning and sharing. This is not just citation, acknowledging your sources, it is a form of responsibility and humility. It is also a display of limits. Bird explains his knowledge has four modes: what he learned from others, learned from trial and error, is speculation, or came as an insight from the land, dreams, and visions. Because they have different ontologies and histories, each source must be cited differently.

Bird does not teach Indigenous knowledge, but Cree knowledge—more specifically, he shares Omushkego knowledge, which arises from and serves the land and beings of the Lowlands of the southwest coast of Hudson's and James Bay. He contrasts this mode with a western one:

> Christianity is a teaching that can be used…for thousands…even millions of people…..Christianity is made for universal use, for any kind of people—not necessarily only one nation, but many nations….But our Cree ancestors did not develop such things…. They didn't have a church; they did not have a universal theory for them to practice.[vi]

This is a profound distinction. Christianity, Neo-Platonism, and Enlightenment thought all aspire to universality. 'Colonial' is a better descriptor than 'universal.' 'Universal' implies naturalness, a metaphysical essence, a truth beyond human agreement. Bird, however, recognizes Christianity as something "made." It is a construction designed to describe and subdue the universe. Truth-seeking inspires motion. Samten, too, roams the Earth, but he seeks concordance and difference, not converts. Collective forms of knowledge are colonial when embodied—literally, carried by armed agents—who are dispersed to find fertile ground to seize, plow, and seed with axioms. Less propelled by perpetual inquiry than by a desire to apply their local comprehensions on everyone and everywhere else, colonists endeavour to reshape the world according to their settled conclusions. From a traditional Plains perspective, the imposition of cultural ways of knowing and being that arose from one place (Europe) on to other, at the very least, lacks humility. Humility is not a low estimation of one's knowledge, ability, or self; it is the feeling you have when you recognize your boundaries.

As you may have noticed, perhaps with annoyance, I use 'Native' rather than 'Indigenous'. This is an awkward attempt to differentiate First Peoples from the new identities that 'Indigenous' announces. The problem, probably unavoidable, is the violence collective nouns do to those they attempt to corral.

In *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson, recalls a conversation with an unnamed Nigerian-born playwright who exclaimed:

> There are no black people in Africa…. Africans are not black. They are Igbo and Yoruba, Ewe, Akan, Ndebele. They are not black. They are just themselves. They are humans on the land. That is how they see themselves, and that is who they are…. They don't become black until they go to America or come to the UK."[vii]

When I write 'Native', I hope you can see through that word veil to Onondaga, Wendat, Mi'kmaq, and so on. When you see 'Indigenous', perhaps you will picture an array of veils. One covers a being available to touch but not quite to sight. Another veils a collection of beings you can only see when pressed close. A third is only veil.

I frequently write about 'Indigenous'—not only as the less freighted term replacing 'Aboriginal', which faded 'Indian', which displaced worse—but as a word that indicates new modes of Native being. Indigenous people are what Native people from around the world become when they recognize they have qualities in common due to their similar relationships to their home territories, and their common formation and deformation under colonization. This recognition has led to global alliances, knowledge production, and world building. I am particularly interested in the emergence of the Indigenous artworld as an entwined but separate entity from

the dominant one. While I would like to elaborate these developments, I feel drawn, today, to the darker aspects of the Indigenous. I feel an urgency to consider the Indigenous in the academy.

Indigenization follows two broad styles. First, is making space: the accommodation of Native ways of knowing, being and doing as its own separate thing. Local First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Elders and Knowledge Carriers share their teachings, and some (well-ventilated) ceremony, with interested folks. Or we do our thing in our own spaces on campus for ourselves. Both are local, embodied, sovereign, irreconcilable spaces of Indigeneity. The other way is to teach the Indigenous as content. That is, Indigenous and non-Native professors teach histories, facts, methods, and fragments culled from numerous Nations. This form of the Indigenous is information: translatable, portable, teachable by anyone. However, whatever it is, it must not be mistaken for the knowledge that arises from and is inseparable from the home language, bodies, protocols, and ecosystem of a particular territory—knowledge that includes not just the frozen, but the thawed, and the fluid: the understood, the recovered, and mutable adaptations to the present reality.

Indigenous is the name of the superstructure that has emerged from the base of individual Native persons and Nations. It consists of any person, group, teaching, or methodology that is not *necessarily* grounded and resident in a specific Native community but finds itself in the home of another. Or, more fruitfully, as in the case of the Indigenous art world, or Indigenous academic world, these bodies, teachings and methodologies home a third space, a sovereign Indigenous territory that engages Settler institutions *and* Native home communities but does not entirely reside in either.

When the Indigenous and Natives are in reciprocal relation, the arrangement is mutually beneficial. Both have access to resources they could not secure on their own and can produce new knowledge, meanings, tools, and beauty. However, when First Nations, Inuit, and Métis folks find themselves housed in Settler institutions, rather than homed in Native or Indigenous ones, they must work very hard to maintain sovereignty. In these places, we can become more image than substance, more rhetorical, performative, than grounded, and more likely to meet colonial needs than Native ones. The Indigenous most often produced in the academy, in some books, and by some degreed Elders and Knowledge Carriers has two strains that need identifying and challenging.

Indigenous idealism is the construction of Nativeness that prioritizes axioms before bodies. That is, it begins with abstract truths agreed upon by most Native peoples, and contrasts it with Western whatever. This is rhetorical useful, but, if you take it too seriously, you soon find yourself creating lists: one of bad habits, called Western, and admirable traits called Indigenous. Before you know it, Euro-Americans are soulless, logical imperialists, and Natives are spiritual, intuitive homebodies. Binarism creates monstrous fictions on either side of its unnatural divide. This one cannot picture Irish witches, Virgin Mary-worshipping Italian Catholics, Anishinabek mathematicians, Blackfoot entrepreneurs, Dene tourists, and so on. Try creating lists for gender binaries and see how absurd the exercise gets.

**The Limits of Indigenization**

Indigenous idealism starts with these first principles and then scouts for the bodies and practices to populate them. Indigenous idealism claims to be able to identify Native ways of knowing and being prior to colonization, and center them in the contemporary moment. However, this streamlined version censors facts at odds with the socialist and feminist ideals that currently shape it. No one on campus explains, for example, how war culture, the center of most pre-invasion Native societies, accords with the seven grandfather teachings. How slavery, raiding, and ritual torture practiced by many Native Nations, fits into tipi teachings or the medicine wheel. Native histories and contemporary being are messy and not completely knowable by such a system. Indigenous idealism is an aspirational identity. It describes the world less as it is than as it could be. Its identities resemble very few actual Native people.

Some welcome Indigenous idealism as a corrective to the anthropological and lack-based narratives of previous generations. However, reanimating the noble savage is a related distortion. Indigenous idealism is an essentialism that assumes Native folks have a genetic pipeline to the source of all Nativeness. In blunt practice, this often means Settler institutions look for an Indigenous appearing anyone rather than attend to quality.

February is Indigenous storyteller's month in Saskatchewan. Last year, CBC radio interviewed a storyteller about her upcoming library event. When asked, "Where do you get your stories?" she responded, "the library." There are tragic reasons for this to be so. Folks cut off from their culture need to start somewhere. Shame rests not only with the storyteller but the institution that engaged her appearance rather than her substance. When someone talks about Indigenous knowledge, rather than, say, Stolo, Tahltan, or Abenaki knowledge, it is likely that they are about to engage either agreed upon truths that arise from many locations and find agreement in dialogue, or those darker aspects of Indigenous idealism previously called Pan-Indianism that often closely resembles it.

The Medicine Wheel is the most popular tool for teaching Indigenous philosophy. By Medicine Wheel, I do not mean the sacred stone circles found on the Plains, but the familiar pie illustration divided into four quadrants of black, white, red, and yellow. I self-consciously write "Indigenous philosophy" because, while many Native folks use it, no specific community claims it. It is likely not Native, but an amalgam of tribal teachings collected by Settlers, forged into this drawing, then taught to Native (now Indigenized) folks who adopted and adapted it.

Among other things, The Wheel is used to teach about balancing the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our lives. In the right hands, it can be helpful. Harmless, aside from the racism. I first encountered it as a teen, in Hyemeyohsts Storm's 1972 *Seven Arrows*.[viii] The book was highly influential (among a certain set). While the author claims his knowledge is Cheyenne, Cheyenne consider the book "blasphemous, exploitative, disrespectful, stereotypical, and racist."[ix] Though he describes himself as Cheyenne, Sioux, Crow, and Métis, none claim him. Hyemeyohsts Storm, aka Charles Storm is German American.

I have seen numerous Indigenous folks hold this thing up and explain to children how the colours represent races, and how each race has specific gifts and limitations. Ever wonder how Storm, or Native people got the idea Natives were red, or Asians yellow? You can start with Canada's 1901 census where citizens had to register according to colour. "White (for Caucasians), Red (for

North American Indians), Black (for persons of African descent) or Yellow (for Chinese and Japanese persons). Persons of mixed race were designated according to their non-white parent."[x]

Social axioms are beliefs; they do not describe facts. No one concludes, "All men are created equal," by observing how we actually treat each other. No one tests the veracity of, "Native people and territory are interconnected," by investigating how First Nations, Inuit, and Métis actually live our lives. You can find utopia in Native communities only by ignoring everything else going on there.

Indigenous fundamentalism positions Natives as both rooted to territory and as star children. We are not only who we are in this moment but also always in relation to an absent center in the past, the future, and elsewhere. Some find this comforting. Others, stressful. It can be an intoxicant. One that imagines you above the present world while enduring it. It is a disposition that may encourage withdrawal from struggling to change social conditions. Like all fundamentalisms, it is premised on the notion that things were once better and now we are fallen—we are now less than we were. Cree academic Blair Stonechild, for example, figures pre-invasion Turtle Island as "Eden," and the fall, the "Indigenous Apocalypse."[xi] However, judgment is coming. A great cleansing. The world will be reset to zero. I have heard these teachings from many Elders on the Plains and West Coast. After the fall, population and technology will be dramatically reduced. Fundamental teachings and social order restored and enjoyed by the faithful, obedient, elect, and appropriately educated. We need not work for change. It will come on its own. While it is possible that Indigenous fundamentalism is Native, that it arose from home territories, it feels like an import. Its echoes the neo-Platonic essentialism of Catholicism and eschatological, end-times oriented strains of other Christianity sects.

Indigenous idealism and Native fundamentalism share the belief that First Peoples have an essential relationship to the land, and that this relationship has a special quality not found in non-Indigenous folks. Why does the academy choose to highlight this quality above others? For traditional folks this aspect is inseparable from spirituality and so much else unpalatable to the academy. This is the axiomatic divide between universities and traditional Native ways of knowing, being, and doing. Traditional Native worldviews center metaphysics. Secular universities try not to, and their satellite religious colleges prefer their own spirituality. What the Indigenization of Native knowledge leaves out is everything a secular humanist university cannot digest and remain itself. Universities are pleased to study aspects of Native life and thought as content and are increasingly delighted to accommodate Native spirituality in separatist spheres. However, because secular universities are founded on rational skepticism and a suspicion of organized metaphysics, they can study and accommodate extra-rational modes but cannot live and center them and maintain their axiomatic core.

This is Indigenization's limits, for both parties. The result, in the academy, is an idealized Indigenous shorn of its indigestible, messy, and complex living aspects. The lead figure to emerge from this verge and convergence is what Shepard Kresch III calls "The Ecological Indian"?[xii] Why? Because it is the archetype we need right now. The ecological Indian is the answer to the climate catastrophe. If only we could be more like the pre-invasion Native, in sustainable relation with the natural world. While this is admirable image for non-Natives to employ, it is an untenable distortion for actual Native people.

There is no doubt that people on Northern Turtle Island once lived in harmony with nature. Go back far enough and that is true of all Peoples. Beginning in the late 1700s, industrialization improved food production, which led to a dramatic increase in population in Europe. Steam-powered trains and ships distributed that food and those people more quickly and further. Unable to sustain their population ecologies, waves of Europeans migrated to less full places. Traditional Indigenous sustainability occurred not only due to natural law, but because small populations occupied vast territories. Now that our territories are filling, we must adapt.

Here are some more Native axiomatic claims. Prior to European invasion, everyone on Turtle Island spoke a Native language. Speaking Inuktut, for example was an essential characteristic of being Inuit. Today, only 13% of Northern Turtle Island Natives speak their home language. Speaking a Native language is no longer axiomatic of Native identity. Prior to invasion, everyone here lived on the land. Now, 60% of First Nations, Inuit and Métis live in urban centers. Clearly, few of us are as connected to the land as our ancestors were. Prior to invasion, everyone followed Native ways of knowing and being, including ceremony. Today, 47% of us identify as Christians. (Down from 63% 13 years ago, pre-TRC!) Only 4% say they follow a traditional Native spirituality. If connection to the land is no longer about a sustained, daily intimate co-survival relationship, if only 13% of us speak our language, and only 4% consider themselves traditional, what is axiomatic to Native identity?

Wittgenstein explains that things are often thought to be related to each other because they share a common metaphysical essence when, in fact, what connects them is a set of material qualities. He explains that, rather than being tethered by an invisible thread, we share family resemblances, a set of describable qualities. Unlike Indigenous fundamentalism, where the qualities and connections are present but hidden and need revealing, Indigenous materialism understands that we learn and gather what makes us related. Better still, the set 'Métis,' for example, while it has a few aspects—such as Métis lineage, self-identification, and recognition from a historical Métis community—that are necessary for membership in the set, other aspects—such as speaking Mitchif, being a Catholic, living in a Métis community are optional.

I have friends who hate camping, love rap, are atheists, and yet identify as Native.[xiii] How many signifiers in the set 'Native' do you need to maintain status? It depends. In Northern Saskatchewan, a light-skinned, blue-eyed, short-haired, English-only speaking, agnostic urbanite who won't eat moose, let alone hunt one, *may* be accepted as Indigenous but they will not be regarded a good Dene. In universities where non-Natives administer Indigeneity, the set may, unconscionably, consist only of 'self-declared'. Kinship, language, and traditional cultural competency are less important there than is agreement with the discourse of academic Indigeneity—a socialist, feminist, anti-racist project with an eco-activist twist, and dash of hesitant spirituality.

Picture a self-taught, under-classed, dark-skinned, female Tahltan artist eking a living from beading in her remote community for the bottom of the tourist trade; and now an MFAed, internationally travelling and exhibiting, light-skinned, male installation artist born, raised, and living a middle-class life in Vancouver. We call both 'Indigenous' and 'artist', but it would be disingenuous to claim that they participate in the same life way. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis

face racism unequally. Oppression has a hierarchy based on skin tone, gender, class, location, and degree of assimilation. In significant respects, urban Indigenous artists have more in common with their non- Indigenous artist neighbours than with their reserve relatives.

Earlier, I described two dominant modes of academic Indigenization: 1) irreconcilable spaces of Indigeneity—Native folks representing on campus without interrogation, and stuff we do with and for ourselves; 2) Indigenous and non-Indigenous people teaching abstracted content. There is not enough time to talk about, other paths, including land-based learning. However, I want to conclude by considering the Native dialogic hinted at by both Samten and Bird.

The most thrilling intellectual social experiences I have had has been when Elders and Knowledge Carriers (very rare), and scholars (more frequent) open themselves, their knowledge, and methods to dialogue. When they go beyond the re-presentational mode and toward the interrogative. There is no doubt that the Medicine Wheel's racist teachings would not survive the respectful interrogation of an all-Native talking circle—folks not just listening and wrestling in their minds, but openly considering a teaching's veracity and deficits in conversation.

It is appropriate to listen and not question, if that is the protocol. However, if universities are sites of critical thinking rather than the perpetuation of beliefs, or their exclusion, then Native claims need to be engaged critically, like any other ideas that come through the door—but with special conditions. This is not an invitation to be disrespectful. It is a return to that other Native methodology, knowledge as social inquiry.

Both Samten and the SaskCulture meetings were non-public events bookended and suffused by ceremony, protocol, and respect, but they were also interrogative. Elders met privately to work through histories, relations, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and intuitions. What we need at universities is an educational third space: talking circles; regular gatherings of the engaged but not adversarial, the learned and the learning sharing in a non-hierarchical exchange, engaged in an interrogative, embodied, oral, critical investigation of Native and Indigenous knowledge(s).

Some circles are irreconcilable spaces of Indigeneity. Musquem only, Coast Salish only, Turtle Island Natives only, Indigenous only, Black and Indigenous only; and so on as needed. They are Indigenous in the sense of being respectful of, but not over-determined by, the protocols of home communities or universities. They are interstitial sites of identity and knowledge formation. This is different from the work of classrooms yoked by teacher-student, text-based, and grading regimes. There are no outcomes other than what is embodied in the participants and what they do beyond the circle.

In contrast to Christianity, and Idealist teachings that assume Native social cohesion, Elder Bird emphasizes the individualistic nature of traditional Omushkego Cree thought. Omushkego did not follow a common belief system: "we did not have a church;" each "individual guided his own belief and practiced it through their lifetime."[xiv] I have heard numerous stories on the Plains about how difficult it was to organize a polis, get people together to do anything. Even annual events like Bison hunts took weeks to organize. Extraordinary collective actions, such as war parties, required not only many meetings but also the election of new chiefs for the occasion. It was difficult to corral individuals to common agreement required for collective action.

I have been asking you to consider the nature and consequences of two types of Indigenous essentialism, and to reimagine traditional Native societies less as socialist utopias than as groups of individuals free to think as they like and collectivize only as needed. An alternative to essentialism is Wittgenstein's set theory. Membership in a set does not require having all the qualities of the set. The set's contents, its family resemblances, are relative, so to speak. They are dependant on local agreement. If we apply this to Indigeneity, not as a natural or essential identity, but as a collective agreement, then you can imagine members meeting in circles over time and determining not only the contents of the set but also the relative weights of each quality at any given time and location. I imagine that most in such a circle would agree with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Glen Coultard that the web of reciprocal relations associated with a specific place, grounded normativity, is an indivisible material, spiritual, and social ecosystem is a requirement for sustainable futures. We don't need to recourse to essentialism or idealism to think and do this right thing.

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[i] Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2016. "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity." *American Quarterly*, Volume 68, Number 2, June 2016, pp. 249-255. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/622080/pdf

[ii] William Cohen. 1969. "Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery." *Journal of American History*, Volume 56, Issue 3, December 1969, pages 503–526. https://doi.org/10.2307/1904203

[iii] Jack Rakove cited in Melissa De Witte. 2020. "When Thomas Jefferson penned 'all men are created equal,' he did not mean individual equality, says Stanford scholar." *Stanford Report*. July 1. https://news.stanford.edu/press-releases/2020/07/01/meaning-declaratnce-changed-time/

[iv] https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp

[v] Louis Bird. 2005. Telling Our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Paul W. DePasquale, editors. University of Toronto Press. 75.

[vi] Bird 69.

[vii] Isabel Wilkerson. 2020. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents.* Random House. 52-3.

[viii] Hyemeyohsts Storm. *Seven Arrows*. 1972. Ballantine Books.

[ix] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pretendian

[x] https://hcmc.uvic.ca/~taprhist/content/census/1901/census1901.php?page=enumcats

[xi] Blair Stonechild. Challenge to Civilization: Indigenous Wisdom and the Future. 2024. University of Regina Press.

[xii] Shepard Kresch III. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. 2000. W.W. Norton.

[xiii] These two paragraphs are adapted from an unpublished keynote talk: David Garneau. "Indigenous Contemporary Memorials: Art as Social Medicine." 2018. *The Aboriginal Memorial 30 years On*, The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Oct. 10-12.

[xiv] Bird 69.