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# (What) Can Aboriginal Peoples Teach us about Survival in Times of Climate Change?

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**Claire Omhovère (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) : « (What) Can Aboriginal Peoples Teach us about Survival in Times of Climate Change? Problems and Perspectives » PP1**

**PP2** Résumé : Cette intervention prendra pour point de départ le cliché de l'« Indien écologique », stéréotype remis au goût du jour dans certains secteurs des humanités où « s'inspirer des peuples premiers » s'affirme parfois comme une stratégie pour faire face à l'accélération du dérèglement climatique au sein même des sciences humaines et de leur enseignement. Il s'agira de montrer, quelques exemples à l'appui, comment l'ontologie relationnelle des peuples autochtones génère aujourd'hui toute une série de représentations et de discours notamment dans les sociétés contemporaines des anciennes colonies de peuplement (*settler-invader colonies*) que sont le Canada, l'Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande. Des questions telles que l'appropriation culturelle, la colonialité des pollutions mais aussi celle des savoirs pourront être discutées en lien avec nos pratiques pédagogiques, dans l'enseignement secondaire et à l'université.

The "ecological Indian" in my abstract, **PP 3** is a contemporary avatar of the better-known figure of "noble savage" of the C18. The stereotype has been revived in certain sectors of the humanities, where "drawing inspiration from Aboriginal peoples" is seen by some as a strategy for dealing with the shattering consequences of the acceleration of climate change. For instance, a new optional module "Humanités écologiques" was introduced in 2022 in our undergraduate programs in which we encourage students to consider alternatives to the Western reliance on energy-voracious consumption models. The module was set up in response to an incentive of the French board of higher education that encouraged universities to raise an ecological awareness among undergraduates, to sensitize mindsets to the challenges of the environmental transition, but ALSO to address mental health issues in relation to climate change & global heating. **PP4/Ex**, particularly the disorder known as *solastalgia*, the distress caused by environmental change. It is no small irony that the researchers who invented the concept in 2005 should have been using medical data pertaining to the mental disorders of Navajo people to define and coin the new concept adaptable to Australians beset by wild fires and biblical floods.<sup>1</sup> Compare with the axis "sauver la planète / penser les futurs possible" familiar to secondary school teachers.

Questions: what kind of pedagogy is apt to address this type of distress? What remedies can we give our students? And narrowing the questioning down to the purview of my own discipline, can literature and art bring relief to people suffering from *solastalgia*? Will relief at some point translate into action? And if so, what kind of action? Another subsidiary question which is rarely evoked is what can literature actually *do* in terms of cure, relief, consolation? The underlying assumption being here that art/literature has an efficacy of its own. Its persuasion works in ways that differ from the verbal strategies deployed in journalistic surveys or IPCC<sup>2</sup> reports => how? this interrogation would certainly deserve a workshop. As Canadian poet Stan Dragland used to say **PP5**: "Only a fool prefers facts to full fathom five" (*The New Quarterly: New Directions in Canadian Writing* 18:1 (Spring 1998): 101)

The role of art in general, and of literature in particular has been taken very seriously by sociologists and philosophers like Bruno Latour, or Timothy Morton when reflecting on

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<sup>1</sup> Neologism combining Latin roots *solacium* (comfort) + *algia* (pain) = aching for comfort. First formulated by Glenn Albrecht *et al* in their article "Solastalgia, the Distress caused by Environmental Change." *PAN* 3 (2005): 41-55.

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

adequate responses to the climate crisis and the anxieties it unleashes. Both have written bestselling essays AND travelled the world with drama or circus companies to popularize their ideas. They've put up or acted in theatre performances (PP6 théâtre de la Vignette Sept 28-29 2024 / directed by Frédérique Touati) in sustained efforts to bring the healing (cathartic) properties of the theatre to contemporary audiences suffering from *solastalgia*. It would also be interesting to ask UPV scholars outside the field of English studies what drama studies may have to say about *solastalgia*. I briefly mentioned Latour's and Morton's work. I could also have spoken of art historian PP7 Nicolas Bourriaud and his writings on the Capitalocene in *Inclusions* (PP). But perhaps the most influential thinking in the field of the Environmental Humanities today is to be found where the money is, namely in US departments of anthropology that are also very much connected to the art scene and "research-creation" endeavours. This should call attention to the current gamification of the economy and culture + the emergence of "ICC" (industries culturelles et creatives, 640 000 jobs et 91 billion € euros according to stats of the Ministère de la Culture). Ex/PP8. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) & Anna Tsing (2015). All of these public intellectuals have expressed the greatest doubts regarding the very idea of "saving the planet" on account of the externality, the distance, the remoteness the phrase encapsulates, not to mention the heroic posture of the "white savior" in which we, Westerners, have historically liked to cast ourselves with dubious consequences on the planet and its Indigenous populations, from Kipling's "White Man's Burden" to humanitarian aid and international organizations such as the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), the World Bank etc. cf. Nobel Prize winner, Armatya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*.

Question: A recurring question in the field of the environmental humanities is **where** to seek alternatives to the Western model of economic growth, development and progress (even the plural in "alternatives" poses a pbs); **how to** reconnect with a natural world which Western philosophers and scientists have patiently pulled apart and segmented into intelligible units, from the C17 onwards, deepening the divide between nature/culture we now hold responsible for our present disarray? (PP9 Michel Foucault's archeology of the birth of human sciences in *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), Philippe Descola, *Par delà Nature et Culture* (2005)

**Nota Bene 1.** Now let me briefly pause to acknowledge that **we've been here before**. The outbreak of the Industrial revolution caused a profound crisis in Northern Europe that led to the birth of Romanticism, its re-invention of nature, the invention of "nature writing" (viz. Thoreau), the creation of natural parks but also of "Indian reservations." Cf. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans. A Narrative of 1757*.

As Margaret Atwood put it, in one of her peerless, pithy aphorisms PP10:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the age of the colonial wars receded, motifs of revenge and warfare gave way to themes of nostalgia; and as the age of the explorers receded as well, **living like the Natives in order to survive in the wilderness was translated into living like the Natives in the wilderness in order to survive**. Survive what? The advancing decadence, greed and rapacious cruelty of white civilization, that's what.

Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things, The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) p. 44.

**Nota Bene 2.** When I say that "we've been here before," the use of the inclusive pronoun "we" is perhaps debatable. It would be more accurate to say "they've been here before." We're waiting with baited breath for the apocalypse, we're publishing reams of post-apocalyptic

fiction, but Aboriginal people have already been through the worst of it. PP11 see, for instance, Kent Monkman's *Casualties of Modernity* (2015), a film in which Monkman pays homage to the Aboriginal populations colonized by incoming waves of European explorers, traders, missionaries, settlers – the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the French and more recently the English. European colonization brought the world of pre-contact to a brutal end. Indigenous people all over the world have been through species extinction (the American bison), mass-killing pandemics (flu, small pox, TB) and, last but not least, an unprecedented ecocide that began 600 years ago. And against all odds, they have not vanished; they've made it into the C21. PP12: Lisando Alonso's triptych *Eureka* (2023). And they should be admired for this. Now should the admiration justify further extraction in terms of knowledge, "medicine," healing and various forms of cultural appropriation? = this is a burning issue right now in the field of postcolonial and decolonial studies (cf. "Ethics of Discomfort" HAL).

Ex/PP13: Linda Tuhiwai Smith: "The term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" cited p. 497 by Marie Battiste in "Research Ethics for Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage. Institutional and Researcher Responsibilities." *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Ed. N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln & L. T. Smith. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, 2008. 497-510.

Conclusion: PP14 The relational ontology of Indigenous peoples is currently generating a whole range of representations and discourses, particularly in the contemporary societies of the former settler-invader colonies of the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand that spent considerable energy "killing the Indian in the Indian" = scandal of residential schools + complicity of institutions entrusted with the care of vulnerable populations, children, women. Issues such as cultural appropriation, colonialism as pollution, and knowledge extraction deserve to be discussed in relation to our own pedagogical practices in secondary schools and universities.

PP15: graphic novel by Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land* (2020) + bibliography on Carnets Hypothèses.

PP16: B. Morizot

PP17: HAL