

FORUM: DECOLONIZING HISTORIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

3.

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL CASE STUDY
TO ENVIRONMENTAL KIN STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationships among place, knowing, and being in environmental histories. Grounding ourselves in the work of Indigenous scholars from North America and the Pacific, we propose a method of listening and attuning that can attend to the dislocation and abstraction often found in work addressing ecocide and environmental violence. Against the ubiquity of the case-study approach, we propose a method we call “kin study,” which invites more embedded, expansive, material, and respectful relations to people and lands. This article frames the issues and then proposes, through a dialogue, how kin studies may be constituted and applied in studying environmental histories of the Pacific and Western Canada.

Keywords: listening, kin study, case study, environment, Indigenous Studies, place

Attention to place and land is vital to careful and reparative historical practices. In this article, we develop the concept of “kin study” to think through a different kind of historical environmental inquiry into place.¹ Kin study attends to the separations that case studies insert between place, thought, and relations. Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts incisively negates Western preoccupations with separating ontology from epistemology, knowing from being, and place from story. As a person from the Great Lakes region of North America, she unfolds an Indigenous conception of onto-epistemology:

[H]abitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies from an Indigenous point of view; meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand and implement. Non-human beings are active members of society. Not only are they active, they also directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society. . . . Human thought and action are therefore derived from a literal expression of particular places and historical events in Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies.²

1. Zoe Todd, “From Case-Study to Kin-Study: A Citational Politics for Studying Environmental Violence” (lecture, Postcolonial Tensions: Sciences, Histories, Indigenous Knowledges Workshop, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 12–13, 2019).

2. Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!),” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013), 23.

Similarly, Mohawk scholar Sandra Styres understands place and Land as cor-relational but notes that the denotation of Land moves far beyond what Western thought attributes to place. She explains:

Place refers to physical geographic space and is defined by everything that is included in that space—also referred to as landscape, ecology, and/or environment—and is denoted as land (lower case “l”). Connected but distinct, Land (capital “L”) is more than physical geographic space. Land expresses a duality that refers not only to place as a physical geographic space but also to the underlying conceptual principles, philosophies, and ontologies of that space. This duality is not to be construed as dichotomous, oppositional, or binarial but rather expresses the ways Land embodies two simultaneously interconnected and interdependent conceptualizations. Land as an Indigenous philosophical construct is both space (abstract) and place/land (concrete); it is also conceptual, experiential, relational, and embodied. Placefulness is not something independent from Land but exists *within* the nuanced contexts of Land. . . . Land is more than the diaphanousness of inhabited memories; Land *is* spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land is experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land *is* consciousness—Land *is* sentient.³

Drawing on these examples, it is crucial to reflect on Land and place as sets of relationships between human and nonhuman beings, co-constituting one another. Acknowledging this requires historians studying environmental issues to address the importance of maintaining ethical and reciprocal relationships with Land and place (and all the co-constituents thereof). Anishinaabe scholar Nicholas J. Reo thus articulates what he calls a “kincentric” environmental studies praxis,⁴ drawing on the work of Enrique Salmón⁵:

When researchers focus their attention on building and maintaining relationships, the connection between ontology and epistemology in ethnobiology becomes more clear. Rather than pondering what plant ontologies might look like, we can speak to plants. Whether or not as individual researchers we are ready to speak and listen to plants (or animals) directly in our work, we can set up our research collaborations, professional meetings, and classes in ways that make room for and value Indigeneity.⁶

Such conceptualizations help us critique the way that specific places in Canada and the Pacific have become talking points and data-sheds for scholars in the Global North and colonial academe as they seek to investigate global climate and environmental crises through the past and into the present. Watts, Reo, and Styres demonstrate the need to recognize and respect relationships imbricated through human interactions with specific places. Place, a nonhuman being, is sentient and active. One place cannot stand in for another, as each place is formed through ongoing reciprocal relations. In contrast, Western scholars render places like the Tar Sands in Alberta or the Marshall Islands in the central Pacific Ocean as “case types of the Anthropocene,” which are instrumentalized as metaphors for larger processes and dislocated from their peoples and cultures.

3. Sandra Styres, “Literacies of Land: Decolonizing Narratives, Storying, and Literature,” in *Indigenizing and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View*, ed. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang (New York: Routledge, 2019), 27.

4. Nicholas J. Reo, “*Inawendiwin* and Relational Accountability in Anishnaabeg Studies: The Crux of the Biscuit,” *Journal of Ethnobiology* 39, no. 1 (2019), 66.

5. Enrique Salmón, “Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship,” *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000), 1327-1332.

6. Reo, “*Inawendiwin* and Relational Accountability,” 68.

The case study as used in historical inquiry is predicated on disassociation of place from thought, as Watts suggests. There may be strategic uses of case studies, as in Indigenous mobilizations of Aboriginal case law in Canada and elsewhere to further Indigenous rights, but we want to flag dangers in the environmental case study as employed in historical and contemporary ecodisaster narratives.⁷ The case study in Western society is designed to travel—to be applied in future litigation, policy, and debate in contexts far removed from the initial incident. This alienation gives rise to universalization, which does not engage with the specificity and dynamism of place.

In response to this, we are thinking through practices and ideas of attunement that are foundational to what Zoe Todd calls an environmental “kin study,” drawing on the work of Kim TallBear, Robert Alexander Innes, Brenda MacDougall, Reo, and Donna Haraway.⁸ Attunement is predicated on cultivating a close and generous attention. Through our thinking we ask how kin studies enables us to reposition or *re-place* case studies. What knowledges might we draw on to define environmental kin studies in a transregional perspective? What do environmental kin studies need from us as researchers? If we admit that our presence, whether local or through invocation over distance, changes the sites we are speaking about, then how can we orientate ourselves ethically when we invoke place in environmental histories?

The shift from case studies to kin studies requires those writing histories of place to consider the ongoing, co-constitutive, rooted, and flexible nature of place and our relationships to it.⁹ Transregional environmental kin studies are formed through protocols of attention, listening, and noticing at many interconnected scales. Through dialogue we offer some initial proposals on how kin studies may be constituted and applied in studying histories of earth violence in the Pacific and Western Canada.

PART 1: PLACE

AK: How we talk about place and our relations to it depends on who we are and the legacies we carry with us. In the Pacific spaces that I’ve been invited to

7. For an example of the strategic use of case studies in Indigenous case law to further Indigenous rights, see John J. Borrows and Leonard I. Rotman, *Aboriginal Legal Issues: Cases, Materials and Commentary*, 5th ed. (Toronto: LexisNexis Canada, 2018).

8. For more on formulations of Indigenous environmental kin-relationships in Canada and the United States, see Todd, “From Case-Study to Kin-Study.” See also Kim TallBear, “Failed Settler Kinship, Truth and Reconciliation, and Science,” *Indigenous Science, Technology, Society*, March 16, 2016, <http://indigenousts.com/failed-settler-kinship-truth-and-reconciliation-and-science/>; Robert Alexander Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People: Contemporary Kinship and Cowessess First Nation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), chapter 5; Brenda MacDougall, *One of the Family: Metis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 1-28; Brenda MacDougall, “The Method of Genealogy: Only a First Step in Understanding Metis Kinscapes,” Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research, September 9, 2019, Facebook Live video, 1:14:53, <https://www.facebook.com/342894772481204/videos/743486272739155/>; Reo, “*Inawendiwin* and Relational Accountability”; and Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 58-103.

9. Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought”; Styres, “Literacies of Land”; Reo, “*Inawendiwin* and Relational Accountability.”

move through, I'm recognized firstly as a white Australian researcher. As time goes on, I am also known as being of German heritage. I'm many other things, too, but these aspects are how I am often initially encountered. Both Germany and Australia have ongoing violent imperial and colonial ties to the Pacific. In Nauru and Papua New Guinea, German words and pronunciations have shaped dialects postoccupation. You can *hear* the territorialization that these material processes undertake. The question of place, and how to be in and with a place that is haunted by the actions and words of ancestral peoples, is crucial. In both Oceania and Canada, non-Indigenous researchers must be aware of how we occupy and move through unceded sovereign lands if we are to mitigate some of the harm that our history-making does; as Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, we need to recognize "imperialism as a discursive field of knowledge."¹⁰

From what I have been told of Pacific cultures, it is impossible to separate land from oceans, people, plants, animals and spiritual worlds. Konai Helu Thaman, a poet and scholar from Nuku'alofa, Tonga, states that "Pacific notions of identity tend to emphasise the 'environment' in its totality, a concept for which the English term 'land' is grossly inadequate."¹¹ Unaisi Nabobo-Baba explains that in Indigenous Fijian languages the word *vanua* denotes "land as well as place . . . everything on it and in it . . . all flora and fauna as well as waterways, oceans, mountains and forests. . . . Land is of physical, social and spiritual significance to people."¹² Within Pacific conceptions of environment, writes Banaban, I-Kiribati, and African American anthropologist Katerina Teaiwa, the ocean is a "corporeal and psychic relational vehicle,"¹³ and land serves to teach "about the 'spatiality' of life in contrast to or in concert with the sea."¹⁴ When non-Pacific and non-Indigenous scholars generalize any relation to land, they erase these formative knowledges. Universal discourses in Western environmental histories are inadequate if they do not recognize that place and land are shaped by relationships that are not interchangeable. When Land is understood in this way, kin studies might proceed.

ZT: The examples you share here resonate strongly with histories of land, relationship, and responsibility in the Northern Plains and boreal forest regions I grew up in as a Métis (*otipemisiw*/Michif) person in Western Canada. Métis historian Brenda MacDougall has explored the past of our families, alongside Cree and Métis kin, in the community of Sakitawak. She argues that a guiding ethos that shapes the relations between humans and their kin in this specific temporal and

10. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 22.

11. Konai Helu Thaman, "A Pacific Island Perspective of Collective Human Rights," in *Collective Human Rights of Pacific Peoples*, ed. Nin Tomas (Auckland: International Research Unit for Maori and Indigenous Education, 1998), 4.

12. Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2006), 81.

13. Katerina Teaiwa, "Saltwater Feet: The Flow of Dance in Oceania," in *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion and Water*, ed. Sylvie Shaw and Andrew Francis, (London: Equinox, 2008), 108.

14. *Ibid.*, 111.

spatial entanglement is the Cree ethic of *wahkohtowin* (also spelled as *wahkootowin*):

The Métis family structure that emerged in the northwest and at Sakitawak was rooted in the history and culture of Cree and Dene progenitors, and therefore in a worldview that privileged relatedness to land, people (living, ancestral, and those to come), the spirit world, and creatures inhabiting the space. In short, this worldview, *wahkootowin*, is predicated upon a specific Aboriginal notion and definition of family as a broadly conceived sense of relatedness of all beings, human and non-human, living and dead, physical and spiritual.¹⁵

Drawing on this example of Métis philosophy and legal tradition, it is clear that lands, waters, and atmospheres in what is currently known as Canada and North America are agential beings understood through complex forms of interrelatedness and kinship with humans; they have histories that extend far beyond human existence. Lands, waters, and atmospheres co-constitute human knowledge and being. Therefore, when we mobilize place, land, water, atmospheres, and other nonhuman beings in our histories, we must be mindful of all the relations and reciprocal responsibilities that we are invoking.¹⁶

If we take seriously the relationality of the world and ourselves, how might we proceed? There is no single mode of engagement; nor is there any desire on our part to prescribe one, or even to suggest definite parameters. In attempting to practice kin studies in various ways, we can offer up some of our own experiments as points of departure and extension.

PART 2: LISTENING

ZT: This piece really started from conversations you and I were having regarding the ways that place is mobilized in history and humanities discourses around the Anthropocene, climate change, and crisis narratives. We both felt that a closer attendance to what American anthropologists Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Donna J. Haraway call for in Tsing's "arts of noticing"¹⁷ and Haraway's "staying with the trouble."¹⁸ Both principles require us to live these relations, to know what comprises these relations and what they entail, and to manifest kinship and reciprocity every day. In my mind, these precepts correlate with Indigenous scholars' advocacy for "ethical relationality,"¹⁹ Watts's concept of "Indigenous Place-Thought" (announced in her essay's title), and MacDougall's notion of reciprocity through kinship (for example, through *wahkohtowin*). One thing that you helped me to understand is the need to open up our ways of knowing beyond the usual senses and modes applied in traditional histories and other

15. MacDougall, *One of the Family*, xxix.

16. For analyses of how to engage thoughtfully human responsibilities to nonhuman beings in Indigenous cosmologies in North America, see Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought," 27-28; Reo, "Inawendiwin and Relational Accountability," 70-72.

17. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17.

18. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

19. Dwayne Trevor Donald, "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations," *First Nations Perspectives* 2, no. 1 (2009), 6.

scholarship. When I reflect on the need to learn from Indigenous thought about our responsibilities to human and nonhuman relatives, your work on attunement comes to mind.

AK: For me, listening is critical. More than just an aural hearing, listening is a practice of sensing, attunement, and noticing. Attunement means to bring into tune, to find resonances or moments of intersection. It is a laborious, humbling, and self-reflexive process. In her work on Indigenous Fijian knowledge systems, Nabobo-Baba says that silence and listening allow for a “pedagogy of deep engagement.”²⁰ During a conversation in 2018, i-Kiribati poet Teweiariki Teaero said to me, “Two ears, one mouth, don’t talk too much. Learn to listen more. Not only to hear, but to be able to develop another thing and that is to be able to interpret. These things are different, they occur at different levels. The hearing and the interpretation of the sound . . . it’s very much part of our world.”²¹ Listening means attending to multiple registers. American ethnomusicologist Steven Feld noted in his work on the soundscapes of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, the ways that Kaluli people orientate themselves in their environments through sound.²² Hearing is always in interplay with other sensory registers, and the concomitance of the senses is key to interpretation. Listening requires the listener to become aware of their own limitations and assumptions about place and land. On my arrival in Nauru I was surprised, for instance, to see heavily mined rocky land covered in trees and plants. I was told the endemic reed warbler was active in the area, so I sat every twilight for a week waiting for a dusk chorus of birds to unfold. What I heard were mosquitos, wind, and the ocean breaking against the shore. Confused, I asked several Nauruans where the birds were. They told me that there had been a series of bird die-offs that had gone largely unreported. Listening to where land is, when you are there, is key to undoing a narrative of place untrue to the moment. When I’m listening, I can’t escape my body, my breath, my discomfort or disposition. I’m acutely aware that my presence is *doing something* to where I am. Listening with protocols of engagement, like the Pacific Research Protocols, sensitizes me to the ways my body may be unwanted or disturbing.²³ I know that my attention brings with it a history that formulates particular kinds of interpretation and representation. Developing attunement means reckoning with this and with being a guest, a trespasser, and a colonizer. Historians are not taught how to encounter thresholds, how to move into unknown spaces without territorializing them through our bodies, thoughts, arguments, presuppositions. Listening teaches me that there are many ways to ask permission, and that permission needs to be sought again and again of places as well as of people. Attunement makes me aware of when *to give thanks and leave, which is one of the most crucial lessons a researcher can learn.*

ZT: In an interview with journalist Don Hill in 2008, Leroy Little Bear explains that in Blackfoot ontology, it is possible to listen in ways that far exceed

20. Nabobo-Baba, *Knowing and Learning*, 94.

21. Teweiariki Teaero, interview by Anja Kanngieser, Temaiku, Kiribati, February 27, 2018.

22. Steven Feld, “Waterfalls of Sound: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea,” in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91-135.

23. Massey University, *Pacific Research Guidelines and Protocols* (Manawatū: Pacific Research and Policy Centre, 2017).

how we are taught to listen in an Anglo-European sense: “He tells me to think of the human brain as a station on the radio dial; parked in one spot, it is deaf to all the other stations, he says; the animals, rocks, trees, simultaneously broadcasting across the whole spectrum of sentience.”²⁴ I have been thinking about that interview as I consider how to attune myself further to the places I grew up in and to listen to places I move through in central Canada, where I currently live. And since I work with fish, I’ve been thinking long and hard about the ways I’ve grown up learning to listen to fish and the work I still have to do to relate to the fish.

PART 3: PRACTICE

ZT: Tsing says that “there is a rift between what experts tell us about economic growth, on the one hand, and stories about life and livelihood, on the other. This is not helpful. It is time to reimagine our understanding of the economy with arts of noticing.”²⁵ As I work across terrains, I struggle with how to mobilize my knowledge of the human and nonhuman relations animating Alberta (the home of the Tar Sands) without turning them into case studies—especially the sort of case studies that are consumed and reproduced carelessly by those with no lived relations with the lands, waters, and atmospheres that they are mobilizing in their own scholarship on the Anthropocene, late liberalism, extinction, and other forces of ecological destruction. We must remain attentive to place and its stories, employing Tsing’s “arts of noticing” with commitment to honoring Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy in territories across Canada that are under attack from corporate and settler colonial exploitation. While the case study operates to sever place and people from their intimate entanglements, the kin study repositions those stories, making both writer and consumer of such histories attentive to the complexities of place. What we need are careful, plural, *hyperlocal* histories to counter the overwhelmingly white, Eurocentric understandings of global warming that erase the devastation facing minoritized communities.

By tending to environmental challenges at a multiscale level—thinking through the local as much as the global implications of resource extraction, pollution, and other environmental violence—we are committing to work with place as kin rather than as a substrate from which we take ideas.²⁶ As Reo argues: “Animals can become our teachers and rivers can be our collaborators and co-authors.”²⁷ This is the basis of my efforts to oppose the way resource extraction in my home province has become one of the “case types of the Anthropocene.” In response to contemporary environmental struggles, Leroy Little Bear tells

24. Don Hill, “Listening to Stones: Learning in Leroy Little Bear’s Laboratory: Dialogue in the World Outside,” *Alberta Views Magazine*, September 1, 2008, <https://albertaviews.ca/listening-to-stones/>.

25. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 132.

26. For more on land as agential being rather than substrate, see Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought,” 30-32.

27. Reo, “*Inawendiwin* and Relational Accountability,” 72.

us that “*we should ask the fish, they’ve survived.*”²⁸ This requires us to adopt a kin-based understanding of environment and history that builds on the work of Watts, Styres, and Reo. In order to ask the fish, we must use all of the approaches we describe above: listening, attunement, and making ourselves “sensible” to our environments. In our histories, we must follow Reo in citing place and non-human beings as sentient and agential forces that have the capacity to consent to or refuse collaboration with us.

AK: I really appreciate the way you frame hyperlocal ethnography as a basis for kin studies and as a challenge to what constitutes historical knowledge. Keguro Macharia, an independent scholar and writer from Nairobi, Kenya, comments that “so much knowledge exists as songs and dances, as gossip and rumor, as barely decipherable markings on trees and stone floors, as disturbed earth and invasive plants but, yes, keep insisting knowledge is only credible as peer-reviewed articles and monographs.”²⁹ Kanaka Maoli scholar and educator Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua emphasizes “Land-centered literacies,” which “include the ways Kanaka ‘Oiwi developed practices of reading the stars and other celestial bodies and events; offering chants in our own human language and then observing and finding meaning in the responses of winds, rains, birds, waves, or stones; and writing ourselves into the landscape by drawing water through irrigation ditches to lo’i kalo and then back to streams.”³⁰ Whether we work from on the land or from afar, as non-Indigenous historians we need to reflect on how we can be good kin over distance—how can we respect “Land-centered literacies.” Although as non-Indigenous people these are not our literacies, we can work in conjunction with them by starting with what we don’t know. Kin study is a practice of amplifying self-determination and self-representation, ways of being and knowing that often go unacknowledged by historical narration. That means turning to other forms of writing, reading songs and poems and conversations, listening to the earth, and taking these as seriously as archives, articles, and books. It is a practice of accepting what you don’t know and attending to what you are invited to know in more sensitive ways.

In order to bring kin studies into our histories, we need a different sensibility of, and in, scale and place. Kinship can be formed virtually, from a distance. Good kinship can be practiced through archives and online platforms, social media and audio-visual documents. As the legacies of colonial anthropology and geography show, physical presence on land is not in itself constitutive of reciprocal relations. Attunement in kin studies centers Indigenous voices, claims, and practices (recognizing the complexities of the category of “Indigenous” and the need to be capacious in thinking through the meetings of Black and Indigenous struggles); it centers Indigenous cosmologies and knowledges of Land and Country; it listens to stories and narratives, searching

28. Leroy Little Bear, “Big Thinking—Leroy Little Bear: Blackfoot Metaphysics ‘Waiting in the Wings,’” Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, uploaded June 1, 2016, YouTube video, 1:03:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_txPA8CiA4.

29. Keguro Macharia (@keguro_), Twitter, August 25, 2019, https://twitter.com/keguro_/status/1165504631356760065.

30. Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 34.

out recordings and songs, poetry, and calls for solidarity. For me, being attuned means being accountable to the places I inhabit and knowing my place and how to comport myself.³¹

MORE A BEGINNING THAN A CONCLUSION

Thinking with and from place is critical in speaking of historical and contemporary ecocide. This requires moving toward an ethics that recognizes onto-epistemologies as co-constitutive; that acknowledges the importance of laboring *with* and *in* place through lasting reciprocal relationships.³² While this brief text prefigures ongoing conceptualizations, we hope that it can already encourage historians and others to think more expansively about how to approach case studies, to move away from modular and abstracted analyses that dispossess people and cultures, and to instead move toward ways of attuning that are more appropriate to the places and environments with which they engage.

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31. For more on reciprocity to place and nonhuman beings, and how this shapes kinship responsibilities in specific Indigenous cosmologies in North America, see Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People*, chapters 1, 4, and 5; MacDougall, *One of the Family*, xxviii-63; Reo, "Inawendiwin and Relational Accountability," 70-73.

32. For more on reciprocal responsibilities to nonhuman beings and place in specific North American Indigenous contexts, see Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought," 27-28; Reo, "Inawendiwin and Relational Accountability," 70-73.