

Andreas Weber



# Sharing Life

Animism as Ecopolitical Practice



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**Sharing Life**  
*Animism as Ecopolitical  
Practice*

Andreas Weber



*“Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature—however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be—is never truly alone.”*

**Richard Nelson**

*“Whoever told people that ‘mind’ means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles and grasses.”*

**Dōgen**

*“There is no community unless you are willing to be wounded.”*

**Bayo Akomolafe**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1 - 09

On Writing Animism. Undoing Western Logic from Within

## CHAPTER 2 - 12

Mutuality and the Ecological Good

## CHAPTER 3 - 20

What is Animism?

## CHAPTER 4 - 33

Unbraining: Towards Self-Decolonialisation

## CHAPTER 5 - 43

The Rules of Aliveness

## CHAPTER 6 - 60

Kinship: An Ethics of Increase

## CHAPTER 7 - 73

Ecopolitics: Renouncing Immortality

## CHAPTER 8 - 83

Rules for Behaving well in the Society of Being

## Literature - 90





# 1 On Writing Animism. Undoing Western Logic from Within

*"If 'cutting trees into parts' epitomises the modernist epistemology, 'talking with trees,' I argue, epitomises ... animistic epistemology... To 'talk with a tree'—rather than 'cut it down'—is to perceive what it does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility."*

Nurit Bird-Davis, 1999, p. S77

The animistic worldviews of indigenous peoples contain practices and knowledge that can be most precious for the multiple crises of your current time which has been named the Anthropocene<sup>1</sup>. These particularly concern the crises of nature and of social participation, or equality. Where western thinking tends to be antagonistic and resource-oriented, animistic thinking tends to be inclusive and community-oriented. It does not create the split into actors and environment, which haunts western culture and the treatment of non-human domains of reality.

Adopting this stance, or at least reviewing its usefulness for a shift of the occidental approach to reality, could be a major breakthrough for social and ecological sustainability strategies. It could lay the groundwork for those "unprecedented" changes in society and economy, which have been called forward in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 report.

Obviously, there are many indigenous people, and equally many animistic cosmologies. Here, I follow others (Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2016) in suggesting that there is nonetheless a common ground of indigenous thinking and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this text I will use the terms "animistic" and "indigenous" interchangeably.

acting, which stands in opposition to western thought, and that from a western perspective it is helpful to look at these divergences, and to adopt a more animistic point of view.

For half a century, a part of the western model of enlightening non-western peoples was to teach them their idea of what later was to be called “sustainability”. This meant to give the trees, the rivers, the other living beings a status of things and then proceed to their protection – often bluntly against the living relationships of humans with these beings, and non-human people. This essay is an attempt to turn the inquiry around: It assumes that the idea of treating the living planet as an assortment of objects and then try to protect the more precious of them (who decides?) does not work.

Sustainability cannot cure the “health” of biomes without the livelihoods of the humans – and the ways, and thoughts, and desires of the non-human beings cannot be omitted, if the whole of a given community-in-country, humans and otherwise, is meant to thrive. Therefore, it is worthwhile to turn around and look into a direction the western worldview has deliberately avoided for at least the last 500 years. It is the perspective that the world is alive. It is the perspective that the world is animated.

There is an intrinsic contradiction in the circumstance that a white biologist and philosopher from the North (me)<sup>2</sup> is writing an essay about the need of western thinking to undo itself and rediscover the animistic reality of living in relationships within a collective of life. The contradiction lies in the fact that the philosopher is trained in the machinery of western thinking. And this – the discursive argument, which is usually laid out in essays or books – is what brought animistic world-making down.

Western thinking is based on the assumption that there is a sphere of reason – be it semiotic or mathematical – which is the only serious vantage point from which to sort the threads of the fabric of our cosmos. Everything in the mind of a thinker applying western style arguments hence becomes part of this hege-

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2 In the following I will use the terms “from the North”, “western”, “occidental” interchangeably. They all refer to a heritage of thought and argument – and, more broadly, a metaphysics, which the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) has labeled the “Western Cognitive Empire”. Who adheres to the according set of beliefs is called a “westerner” in the following discussion. Obviously we cannot ascribe a clear identity – “westerner”, “adherent to the cognitive empire” – in this way, but rather we are all to a bigger or lesser degree influenced by the according concepts. For the ease of reading, however, I have decided to use the terms in a rather blunt way. The way I am using these attributions will become clear in the text.

mony, so the warning goes, or is rendered invisible by it. A worldview, or better a host of different worldviews, which thrive through direct communication and felt exchange with the non-human persons, can ipso facto not be described in terms of western scientific discourse.

And, even more dangerous: If somebody deeply anchored in this discourse does try to trace this other cosmos, will it not inevitably be sucked into the western model – a world split into (western human) subjects, and the remainder of mere objects – and hence be invalidated, and, worse still, colonised? These are extremely necessary cautions. And still, in order to step out of the trap of the western cognitive model (western – human – subjects here, mere objects there), western thinking needs to be opened up to what it is not. And the best way to do this is to start a (painful, and painfully slow) journey of unlearning of what the cognitive hegemony is about.

This is a two-way-process, consisting of a radical self-questioning of western thinking, and of an invitation to those who are not trapped inside the western discourse to assume the role of mentors. I wish this essay to be understood in that way: As an attempt of a western mind to question himself. As an open query, and a request for mentoring. As an attempt of self-decolonialisation, in need of guidance. We know, as in any healing processes, that the goal which is dreamed up ahead is never wholly reached. But healing is the process itself, not the end of it.

So I want to invite all who are living in worlds, which are shared between human und non-human persons, to chime in, take my hand, and lead me, the author, and us, the western readers, under a tree, where relations are not analysed, but felt, and made. Please take this piece of writing as a question, not as an answer. I have written it as one loop in an unending process of learning and unlearning, a process that is intrinsically shared and thus dependent on transformation.

## 2 Mutuality and the Ecological Good

*"Interaction is more fundamental than perception."*

Adrian Harris in Harvey 2013, p. 405

In March 2020 during the global pandemics women and men in most parts of the world stopped moving. The busy global economy came to a halt – with consequences, which cannot yet be foreseen.

What stopped are some of the most prominent activities of the western way of interacting with the world: Extensive travelling, most of the world's air traffic, incessant trade and consumption, and a host of personal pursuits. Near to no planes in the skies above industrial centres, few cars on the streets, silence and an unusual clean air, in which city dwellers hear the vocalisations of wild animals with whom they cohabit, of birds and insects, for the first time in years.

Humans were asked to stop their activities in the name of something, which had not been much in the focus of western – and global – policy in the last decades: Community. Lockdown was not done in order to push the economy through individual competition, but to protect others. And in the ensuing silence the wider community was felt: The silence of the stars at night, the buzzing bumblebees, the indian myna's calls.

This was not a romantic moment, however. For millions in poorer countries, the stay-at-home-orders are an existential threat of misery and even of starvation. Many poor people and migrant workers do not even have a home where to stay. Humans, forced to sit and wait in an enclosed space with others are suffering from depression and "camp fever", violence in families has surged.

The lockdown shines a light on the very social nature of humans. It reminds of a fact neoliberalism continuously veils: The individual can only live if the collective, which she constitutes with all others, is able to thrive. The virus managed to have humans do what they were not able to do on their own: Sit down, be quiet, and behave so that others in the community are protected. We did not chose to do so, that's admitted, and we hope to get back to normalcy as soon as we can.

There is a danger that the readiness of humans to stop pursuing their private goals – and even stop securing their livelihoods through work – can be exploited by totalitarian regimes. But this does not change the observation that humans act not from purely ego-centrical standpoint. They act from the experience of connection, from the experience that each and any represents the collective.

The virus has temporarily changed human ecology. Instead of devouring everything that moves, we are slowed down, we grant others space (quite literally, queuing at a street kitchen in safe distances), we sit and listen. The majority of the world population thus responds to what is the most important, though often unacknowledged, problem of global western societies – namely how to relate to those who are weaker, who are more vulnerable, and, from an ecological viewpoint, even those who are not even human at all, but other living beings.

Without paying much attention the central principle of our neoliberal world society has been put aside. Under an existential threat, something deeper emerges, a sort of an agreement about how to behave in order to protect life. We do not only protect ourselves, but the web of living relationships in which we are embedded. This is a very far-reaching gesture. It is an answer to the dilemma of how treating the vulnerable other, which we could not give from the standpoint of a purely economical view of how to act.

Some months deeper into lockdown, and partially emerging from it (and re-entering into it elsewhere), it has become even more visible that the pandemic revolves around the subject of "community". It exposes to what degree community has been perverted and neglected in modern societies. We see that the poorest members of the world's societies bear the brunt of the pandemics, and that minorities, which are already discriminated against, are disproportionately affected by damage from novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). We see that racism – which is daily business in most nations – is literally deadly. We see that the

lockdown has actually exposed how much societies are divided into classes (the one who can afford the lockdown and to stay inside and those who can not afford it). In India, we also see how the decision makers have used the lockdown to rampage over nature even more than before, since some long pending contracts were signed for exploitation of resources in biodiversity sensitive areas.

The coronavirus shows that the destruction and neglect of social and ecological mutuality – the foundation of life on earth – is the biggest problem we face, and the biggest threat to survival. So we can observe that the tragedy of community is not only social fact, but more: An ecological disaster.

Lockdown has not only been a political, but rather an ecological answer to a sudden menace to life, to individual life, which springs from living together. Ecology has taken over the conceptual space. It turns out that we are inextricably linked to a living community. If push comes to shove, we protect it, accepting even huge damages elsewhere. And if the community is unable to protect its weaker individuals (in case of social “minorities”), those are exposed to death and suffering.

### COVID-19 as an ecological stress test

The COVID-19 outbreak shows us another thing: The community we are dependent on is bigger than the collective of humans. It includes the whole living earth. The community our social collective belongs to is the collective of life. Our individual existence is granted by partaking in this collective, by taking from and contributing to the mutuality it is built upon.

Humanity’s global reaction to COVID-19 is an ecological event. The outbreak is not only an ecological happening in itself, it has also an ecological source. The fact that every human is (or was) personally menaced by this catastrophe should not seduce us into thinking that the disease concerns only public health and therefore is a human-only problem. To the contrary. The outbreak needs to be understood as an ecological disaster.

There is little doubt that novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is an animal virus that crossed over into humans. Crossovers of this kind happen because humans are in too close contact to animals – predominantly to rare and wild ones, hunted

and sold as bushmeat. Another hotbed of emerging viruses is factory farming. The coronavirus outbreak is a consequence of the destruction of habitats, of the mass consumption of animals from rare species, of the human encroachment on what is not human. Ecological destruction is the opposite of granting other beings and species space. Its main driver is habitat exploitation and industrial agriculture. Ecological destruction is the contrary of reciprocity. It is, therefore, the opposite of what human society is forced to prioritise in the coronavirus pandemics: Stepping back and caring for the others.

The COVID-19 outbreak can be seen as a consequence of our global society's refusal to grant others (humans and non-human living beings) reciprocity and space. It is a symptom of a stance built into the objectifying, globalist ways of thinking: That granting space is not needed, as those others are just things, and things can be rearranged most efficiently by the forces of the market.

The coronavirus pandemics prove this view wrong. It shows that reciprocity is a key ecological quality, and it shows that reciprocity – granting the others space to live in order to keep our own – is asked of us as a key ecological contribution.

COVID-19 shows us that reciprocity is a necessity that rules our lives: We can only exist in ecological mutuality. We are part of the ecosphere. We are nourished by it, and we perish through its viruses. Human beings do not stand apart from non-human beings, but are part and parcel of ecological exchange. The virus reminds us of a simple truth that has been ignored. It tells us that we are part of the collective of life, and that we are, as all living beings, mortal – partaking in a cycle of birth and death that provides life with fecundity.

### Microbial deconstruction of the Western Cognitive Empire

Granting others life as a key command of organising one's own existence, and of building society, was never a concern of market thinking. To the contrary, it is deemed a hindrance. Reality here is construed as a dog-eats-dog world (according to the "natural state", described by Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*). Reciprocity with the living world in this thinking is denounced as a naïve dream.

In the dominant tradition of socio-economic thinking, the social contract was supposed to secure stable livelihoods for individual humans (by surrendering

to the power of the state). This stability, therefore, was not achieved “naturally” through a human competence of granting others their space for life. The social contract played rather out as allowing for material exchange through unmitigated competition of individuals seeking personal profits.

In this picture there are two domains: A world composed of dead things – nature –, and a human society, built upon of a treaty to fight nature in order to pursue individual goods – to detach human lives from material reality. By this the classical dualistic split is achieved, which still deeply informs the ways of western thinking: The separation of culture from nature and a re-definition of non-human beings into “things”.

The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) has termed this setting the “Western Cognitive Empire”. The French sociologist Bruno Latour (2011) has described one of the main occupations of this empire as the creation of “monsters”. Monsters are born when we split the living world (which by its own creates life by being offered reciprocity) into two incommensurable and hostile domains, nature and society. Despite the claim to do so, however, those domains can never be truly separated. The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example for this. In the outbreak, the material processes change culture and society – and these feed back on the material course of the pandemics. Nature – a virus from wild animals – dictates how society behaves.

The coronavirus destroys the idea that society can treat “things out there” as it wishes. It even destroys the idea that by sustainable actions – with a more efficient society, by creating larger preserves and buffer zones between society and “nature” we can handle the problems created by humanity. Sustainable actions still treat the non-human parts of reality – the non-human beings and the proliferating elements of the earth system – as things. We now learn that this domain is not made of objects, but of others, who need to be treated with the right amount of reciprocity.

The Anthropocene is not, differently to what many may have expected, the extension of the western rational regime into a stewardship over all of “nature”. Rather, the advent of the Anthropocene marks the end of the western cognitive dominion. The Anthropocene is the age in which societies experience that they do not stand above “nature”, and that, even more important, standing within



“nature” (standing inside life) has a set of rules, which, if society does not comply, will stop our partaking in this very life. The RNA-based actor coronavirus is the paradigmatic anthropocenic agent.

A growing number of natural disasters make us understand that we are part of one interconnected whole (think bushfires in Australia, or disturbed monsoon patterns, cyclones, drought in many parts of the world). But none of them are so directly threatening to you and me as is COVID-19. Through this, the virus offers a community ethics. The pandemic shows us how to behave in the right way.

This right way – granting the other the space of life – is summarised in the famous Kisuaheli term “Ubuntu”, meaning “You are, therefore I am”. It is the thinking of reciprocity, the thinking that we participate in a collective creating life, that we are collectively responsible for life, not only for ours, but also for that of the others, and for the fecundity of life as such.

### The family of being(s)

The thinking underlying Ubuntu is animism. Animism is the idea that the remainder of the world is not made of mute objects, but of persons. Persons have interests, and needs. They are agents. An animistic approach believes that we need to establish reciprocity with these persons. We need to share with them in order to be granted our place and, even more important, in order to allow this place to bring forth life in continuity. In the pandemics, the world is stirring, and we keep still, and what emerges in front of our eyes, through our motionless state, is the need to share this world’s aliveness with all other persons, human and non-human, of which it consists.

Animism, the cosmology of indigenous peoples, is the most radical form to think and to enact reciprocity among beings – human and non-human persons. Animism has been misrepresented for centuries within the western cognitive empire. The idea that naïve “native” humans live in a state of nature, adulating spirits and demons in trees, rivers and mountains is a false myth. This misrepresentation stems from projecting the western cognitive mindset on what the so-called “primitive people” are doing, when they e.g. ritually give thanks to a tree-being.

Through regarding colonial knowledge as supreme we have unlearned what ecological knowledges and alternative worldviews entail. A central principle of this knowledge is that it is not actually about knowing in a western sense, but about sharing a world. Animism accepts that all beings co-create a world that is continuously producing life, and takes responsibility to keep this cosmic fecundity going. It understands the cosmos not as made up of things, but of agents, which all resemble humans in the fact that they, like us, crave for life, express their needs, and are required to interact with one another.

In a cosmos of relationships, reciprocity is required in order to thrive, and it is required from all sides. In a world of relationships we are not atomistic individuals set against one another, but on a deep level we collectively create one coherent process of life. The collective is as important as the individual. This collective is not only human, but made of every being and every force of reality.

Ecologically, the social definition of an attitude required to produce life is accurate. If we look from a structural point of view, an ecosystem is the embodiment of reciprocity. It consists of a multitude of beings related in endless ways. Ecological life is always lived in relationships with others. An ecosystem is a commons, shared and brought forth by all its participants. It is not an assemblage of egoistic agents. For a long time, Darwinian economics of nature have overstressed competition (the “natural state”) and not paid due attention to the host of dependencies within competitions play out. (For a deeper discussion see Weber 2013 & 2019).

So a view to substitute the crumbling western cognitive empire could be already at hand. It is the etiquette of reciprocity we can find unconsciously executed in ecosystems – and culturally instituted in societies, which have managed to live in mutuality with those ecosystems for a long time. To explore this view, the west will need to step out of its intrinsic supposition that “western rationality” after all is the way the world works – and everything else are mild or severe superstitions. Scientific anthropology has started to attempt this humble position, asking, with Edoardo Kohn (2013) “How Forests Think”, instead of “what indigenous people think about forests”.

The animistic attitude, attempting to share the productivity of the cosmos among its participants, contrasts the basic principles of the western cognitive

model. Animism is not about material objects being possessed by spirits. It is about constructing a culture on principles which enable reciprocity, and from a cosmology which integrates the experience of being part of a fecund collective. These principles play out in different key fields, which all are crucial areas of conflict in the Anthropocene. It turns out that most conflicts of the Anthropocene boil down to difficulties in maintaining good relations through sharing the cosmos

## 3 What is Animism?

*“Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.”*

Harvey 2005, p. xiii

Occidental thinking to this day is profoundly dualistic. It separates nature and society (“material objects” and “human culture”) into two different areas that cannot be mapped on one another. Animistic thinking addresses these two realms as one. The world is homogeneous. It has two primordial traits that we as beings of this world both continually experience – namely that it is material and embodied, and that it is personal and subjective. Animistic thinking perceives these dimensions not as exclusive or contradictory, but as co-present. Therefore, indigenous thought takes the world – humans, plants, animals, rivers, rocks, rain, and spirits, as a society of “persons”, which are in a constant becoming. The human role is to facilitate this becoming through participating in it in a benevolent way, to make the world (as a society of subjects) fecund, able to give life. Existence is increase; all deeds are valued in their capacity to give life.

Indigenous worldviews, however, are not assortments of theoretical knowledge over facts. They are neither conceptual, nor only ethical, but always performative. They enact world by being a part of it. In indigenous thinking, you are a worldview, you represent cosmos, so you behave as such. You are kin to all beings, and all beings (organisms, rivers, mountains) are persons. Indigenous cosmologies evade those rifts in western thinking that in the present day lead to the current ecological and social dilemmas and their various combinations (how the commons of the atmosphere should be distributed between its different participants, for instance).

Indigenous worldviews and practices hold inspirations to imagine in a different light the very problems occidental mainstream thinking and acting has run into. At the same time, indigenous cosmologies suggest these new vistas not as theoretical knowledge, or epistemological frame (and ensuing prohibitions to think otherwise), but as practices of collective action. For the cognitive culture of the west, opening up to animistic practices of worldmaking and world-understanding, suggests to be the starting point into a profound – and urgently needed – transformation.

### Why animistic thinking in the Anthropocene?

The Anthropocene is marked by a critical shift in the status of “nature”. This shift manifests itself not only conceptually, but also physically as climate and biodiversity emergency. The earth system is in a transition to a different state, thereby probably losing many of its current lifeforms. In occidental thinking, the defining feature of this catastrophic shift is the fact that human traces can be found everywhere in the biogeosphere – hence the term “Anthropocene”.

Through this, human civilisation discovers itself as entangled with everything else in the earth system (Horn 2019). It discovers that there is no inside or outside, only a huge mutual network of reciprocal production. The findings of the Anthropocene help correct a century old dualistic misconception of the cosmos as split into “nature” and “culture”, into subjects (humans) and mere objects (all the rest). Instead, today the earth-system as a whole is perceived as an actor, as “Gaia” (Latour 2018). Even matter is re-evaluated as “vibrant” and agential (Barad 2013, Bennett 2015). In the emerging new view, the cosmos has basically become alive – and human culture seems to be but one of the factors contributing to this aliveness.

For western mainstream thinking, this is a new, and often startling, situation. The neat separation line between agents (humans) and things (matter, nature, objects) has dissolved. Even the demarcation between practice and theory has blurred: Theoretical assumptions do produce physical changes, as they change the way civilisation deals with the physical environment. The human impact on the earth system has been so massive that it has empirically refuted the working hypothesis of western technical civilisation, namely, that humans are the only

agents in a universe consisting of only things.

A painful vacuum has developed: Obviously, the earth system's situation contradicts the traditional western worldview. I argue here that this is the due occasion where the cornucopia of indigenous cosmologies needs to be put at the centre stage and need to be considered with the seriousness they deserve. Their cosmologies in many respect enact an Anthropocene *avant la lettre*, as they have been holding for tens or even hundreds of millenia that there is no split in the world between "nature" and "culture", that theory is already practice, that the world is full of agents, and humans are only some of them, that the world is a profoundly relational and hence social phenomenon, that imagination does have a physical impact, that everything is alive, that life comes about only through cooperation, that fecundity is created by collective action. The Anthropocene, therefore, in truth has discovered a very old way of thinking/ acting. The good news is that this old way has kept the biosphere fertile for the last million years, since hominins similar to modern humans first emerged.

So an application of Anthropocene insights calls for what indigenous cultures have been exploring for millenia. But exploring indigenous cosmologies cannot be undertaken as another wave of appropriation, feeding western actions from the repertoire of indigenous societies, but as a humble act of decolonialising western practices from their underlying assumptions of the few (human, particularly western actors) dominating the many (non-western humans, women, children, other beings, the living earth, forests and streams, matter). The approach to indigenous cosmologies hence should be undertaken in the way westerner should have approached all other beings: In asking to be received, in accepting to know less, rather than more.

If we want to correct western ways through indigenous worldmaking, we better hurry up. Indigenous ways are dwindling. Indigenous people are those suffering most directly from eco-collapse, climate breakdown, and predominantly from the political terror, which is the precursor of more serious earth system failures.

## Areas of animistic thought

Every culture is different from all others. Still, we can discern a certain basic orientation in indigenous worldmaking, which often is recognised by indigenous actors themselves as “typically indigenous” or “animistic” vs. western (Chimère Diaw, pers. communication, 2019). We can therefore compile a short list of areas in which indigenous thinking particularly differs from Western ideas and practices.

Generally speaking, the principles of indigenous thinking circle around a cosmos, which is fundamentally alive, because everyone is gifted with life and is in turn required to participate in creating life. Western thinking, however, is built on the assumption that the world is different from human experience in that it is dead and therefore hostile, requiring individuals to compete against one another in order to survive (see Table 1).

In indigenous thinking, the cosmos is alive and all beings are essential to create fecundity and increase life, so that everyone can be part of this cosmos forever. In western thinking the cosmos is dead and all beings fight against each other in order to not become part of that dead cosmos (see Table 1).

TABLE 1  
*Core Beliefs of Western versus Indigenous Cultures*

| Five Core Beliefs of Western Culture                      | Five Core Beliefs of Indigenous Thinking                  |
|---|---|
| We are each other's enemy: “I am because you are not”.    | We are required to work together: “I am because you are”. |
| Capitalism lies at the heart of our being.                | Everything is based on reciprocity.                       |
| Reality is not alive.                                     | Everything has inwardness.                                |
| We can understand reality only by counting and measuring. | We can understand reality through feeling participation.  |
| We need to avoid our individual death.                    | We need to keep the world fecund.                         |

In indigenous societies, these beliefs play out in different areas of reality. They all follow the idea that the cosmos is a process providing for everyone and requiring cooperation by everyone. They all assume that there is no split into “nature” and “culture” (Descola 2013), so that a cooperation is not only required between humans, but between all beings. Non-human persons provide humans with food; humans are needed to provide other human beings with the space to flourish.

From this, we can discern some important areas of animistic cosmology/ worldmaking practice:

***Everything is first person. The cosmos as society of beings***

Not only humans are persons, but spirits, animals, plants, rivers, mountains and watersheds, too. These have individuality, agency, and can be accessed by communication (particularly through shamans whose work comprise for a big part in keeping open the communication with other beings/ spirits). In order to live a fecund life, human actions need to be in balance with the wills and the needs of these other beings. Intricate ways of understanding what these needs are belong to most indigenous cultural practices.

***Feeling is primordial***

As the cosmos is alive, and its elements are persons with needs and interests, feeling – by which I understand the perceptive faculties, which are not thing-ing, e.g. sensation, emotion and intuition (see Harding 2004) – it is a predominant tool for orientation and communication. In contrast to western thinking, which is suspicious about feeling and views it at best as something secondary, illusionary and strictly individualistic, the indigenous mindset accepts feelings as a primary way through which the collective of beings is approached, understood, and addressed. Contact to other beings, and to other humans, is primarily established through feeling. In social circumstances, newcomers often are welcomed by “simply sit and feel connected”. In the western worldview, matter is the most



basic category. It is believed to be shared by all participants of the cosmos (in this view, stones, ferns, mice and humans have bodies made from matter, but only humans, and maybe mice to some degree feel). In the indigenous cosmos the fundamental category is feeling (spirits, mountains, mice, stones and men have feelings, except spirits have no bodies; see Viveiros de Castro 2016). But feeling is not set against the remainder of the material world; rather all bodies potentially feel, and feeling persons tend to manifest as bodies.

### ***Egalitarianism: Cooperation presupposes equality***

Indigenous cosmologies are predominantly egalitarian, as are their ways of organising social life. They are egalitarian, but not undifferentiated, however; each individual (as each species) follows a certain set of rules required by their roles in the mutuality of continuous creation of life. Contrary to western beliefs and popular myths, in indigenous societies there rarely is a “chief”, but a committee of chosen elders giving guidance in social life.

### ***Rejecting narcissism***

Individual narcissism in the west is a useful tool for social ascent. Though the goals of Western institutions try to limit narcissistic behaviour by imposing laws based on morals, narcissism is a practice, which serves the western goal of “winning against the others” well. Indigenous societies culturally block narcissism through a host of intricate mechanisms denying overarching power or even social hubris to individuals (Suzman 2017). The strict rules regarding decency of personal behaviour and the organisation of kinship put a limit to individual ascent to power and fame. This is in line with the biological observation that narcissism is an “ecological deadly sin”: Every participant in an ecosystem is fed by it and most ultimately feed its body back into it. Humans in indigenous cultures often consider themselves as the “youngest sibling” of other species, thus acknowledging the fact that we need to learn and culturally imagine how to live in mutual beneficent exchange with all others, where those already (biologically) “know” and humans have to learn the right way of life.

### ***Ethics as morals of reciprocity***

In order to keep the world fecund and the cosmos functioning, humans need not only take, but also give. We are fed by a world, which assumes this task within its continuous creation. But in order to keep this creation going, humans need to give back to the world, too. This exchange is not viewed and practised as barter, but as the mutual giving of gifts. The gift is the primal reality that makes life possible; only when it is returned and renewed life can flourish (Hyde 1986). An according culture of the gift is based on the perception of the world as unconditionally welcoming. We are not required to earn our lives, but we are required to give back what is given, in order to keep creation alive. The morals from an ethics of a gift are different from an ethics of individual perfection, which is commons in the West. They call for obligations toward the others, modesty, and the rejection of ego-centredness.

### ***Mutual cooperation and the commons***

Because reality is organised in the form of as society of beings, lifemaking can only happen within and in accordance to this society. The individual must act in harmony with other actors. Individual behaviour is measured as to what degree it joins into this cooperative worldmaking. Exchange and the distribution of material goods are not conceived of as a reaction to scarcity, but as enabling everyone to participate. As the cosmos consists of what the western mind calls things as well as of what our worldview accepts as persons (humans), the “cosmic” commons consists of everything and everyone. In contrast to the western idea of economy, in which rational agents (humans) distribute things, the indigenous view sees agents (humans, animals, plants, rivers) cooperating with other agents. This is what the philosophy of commons economy (Bollier & Helfrich 2019) has observed: A commons is not a resource, but a set of relationships. The commoners ARE the commons by enacting these relationships. Policy means to enable a fair participation (through giving and taking) in these commons. A turn towards practising exchange as mutual gift-giving recently has been claimed as a necessary “Ontoshift” by commons theorists (Bollier & Helfrich 2019).

***Invocation as ecological practice***

It is important to stress that every practice in indigenous worldmaking stands in relation to the cosmos. It is needed to enrich the cosmic fertility, and if done wrong (missing out on reciprocity) it can decrease that fertility. The world is ongoing creation, establishing the first principles anew at every moment, and therefore sacred. Human interactions with in the world are sacred, too. This sacredness is enacted at various articulating points of human daily practice, and particularly taken account of at the occasion of major decisions. (The question of damming a river, which is a “person” in indigenous beliefs, can present such an occasion).

As the existential nexus is sacred, and it is sacred precisely because every being (animals, plants, stones, trees, water...) participates in it, communication is needed to invoke the sacredness of our interaction with other beings. The sacredness of the nexus of reality requires and enables humans to speak to the forces of creation directly. To address the “spirit of a river” therefore means to refer to its individuality as part of a process, which is aiming at continued creation. Invoking a non-human member of creation is possible in animistic cosmologies, because all beings (in the sense of the cosmos as a society of beings) share the same substance as members of the society of beings. As beings we can address one another. Done humbly, as a question, and with the fact in mind that humans are the most inexperienced of those beings, we can access this community directly, through our participation in it as embodied persons.

***Embodied aliveness, no abstract theory******(Local/ place and story/ experience-based knowing)***

Indigenous thinking is situated as a process inside a universe of persons, and hence unfolds in relation to others, refers to them, gives them individual roles in narratives, which are existential, need to be remembered the way they happened, and are linked to particular features of a geographic place. Because the universe is a society of persons, orienting in it always refers to *this* particular story

in *that* particular place, in the same way as our personal experiences always refer to us having them at particular occasions. Abstract and generalised knowledge does not make much sense in this frame, as it is disembodied and out of touch with the world. Instead of applying abstract rules, people acting with an animistic mindset need to connect with the local actors (again, human and non-human) and let a story of mutual exchange unfold. Ecological practices, in this perspective, can never be the application of general rules, but must always be local, reciprocal, felt, and experiential.

### ***Unified actions and embodied aliveness***

From these points it becomes clear that the western approach to separate reality into theory/ practice (or knowledge/ skills) and particularly to cancel out subjective experience from both empirical knowledge and practical actions is not applicable to indigenous worldmaking. From this vantage point, we might refrain from mere theoretical, academic assessments of practical reality without at the same time enacting this reality. One of the strongest benefits and correcting forces from indigenous worldmaking is that it truly requires to live through theoretical ideas, to enact getting-in-connection, to honestly ask the others.

### ***Feeling whole as our natural state***

The social, economic, ritual, and cosmological practices described above are not only formal. They are always experiences. And experiences are not neutral, they are emotional, and as such they have existential experiential values. Indigenous practices are intended to make the participants feel whole. Indeed, as various surveys show, members of indigenous societies on average show a remarkable satisfaction with their lives. The state of estrangement from the world and the ensuing existential angst, which is so predominant in western societies are relatively unknown in animistic societies.

To be allowed to be alive in ecological balance makes humans feel whole – although it requires some tough cuts on individual freedom of self-realisation and choice (due to the frequent cultural practices to restrict egocentric behaviour). All meaningful behaviour intends increase – and because increase is no abstract

category (as “growth” in western thinking), but a relational term, it must be an experience. There is no rightful action in the indigenous cosmos which is disruptive on the level of the own self — or viceversa. This explicitly does not exclude personal hardships, which are ecologically necessary (necessary for the fertile whole to function). But it excludes the trauma of separation and of shutting down individual experiences in order to align with a world which has to function according to abstract principles.

Support of the “New Animism” by current empirical research and ecological practices (new anthropology, nonhuman turn, plant and animal personality research, organisational development practices, commons research and activism, embodied forms of artistic activities)

I have already pointed to the fact that the new mindset of the Anthropocene as entanglement converges with indigenous ideas and practices. But there is more convergence at hand. Right at the moment, there is much new empirical research coming in from a variety of disciplines proving that the indigenous way of conceiving of the world (and nourishing this world) as a collective of persons is not simply another valid cultural variety, but very much in touch with the reality of other beings. My stance on realism is here that reality is always the reality of the others. If a tree falls in the forest and hurts another plant-person, fox-person, or boar person, or leaves a mark in the soil-person, its fall does make a difference.

### ***“Forests Think”***

In anthropology, the work of the “new anthropologists” is not only taking the worldviews of indigenous peoples seriously, but also explicitly invites our society to learn from animistic worldviews (Kohn 2013, Descola 2013, de Castro 2016). In this, new anthropologists sometimes openly take a panpsychist position, which reformulates the idea of a living and feeling cosmos in western philosophical terms (Danowski & de Castro 2015). Anthropology therefore takes a step away from the purely technical perspective of “just observing” other peoples and openly embraces what from the beginning is inevitable (and which, in an entangled world, should be inevitable): Meeting other cultures means to be transformed by them (Wagner 2016).

### ***Organisms are subjects and kin***

In ecology, and in biology, evidence for the status of other beings as person has massively accumulated in recent years. From bees suffering from depression or enjoying euphoria, to fruit flies undergoing chronic pain after an injury, organisms, which until these days have been viewed as mere machines, are witnessed as exhibiting subjectivity and feeling. The current revolution of “plant communications” shows that also botanical organisms are capable of communication, choice, mutual aide, and hence, exhibit the qualities connected with a biological self. Biology reforms around notions of subjectivity as primary feature of life (Damasio 1999, Deacon 2011, Weber 2016, 2019).

One emerging framework to understand relationships to other beings in a living world is the practice of relating to other beings as kin. “Kinship” is becoming a focus to reconceive our interactions with one another and with the living world as relational, and centred around a common interest, which is the flourishing of the life supporting our kin and through this, us (Weber in Van Horn, Kimmerer & Hausdoerffer, forthcoming; Van Horn 2019).

### ***We are all commoners***

In economy, the theory and practice of the commons has been gaining traction in the last decade (Bollier & Helfrich 2019, Bollier 2014, Felber 2015, Weber 2013, Hopkins 2013). In a commons economy, agents are not considered as consumers of resources, but as subjects sharing their livelihoods with other subjects (human or non-human). Commons have emerged as a major focus in relation to sharing of cultural resources (computer commons like wikipedia) and making visible the “care work” devoted to family (hence, kin), which is not “seen” by the current neoliberalist worldview.

### ***Convergence of Indigenous Thinking and Current Ecological Research in the First Person***

While the Anthropocene suddenly shows reality with a face, which the indigenous mind has always responded too, cutting-edge ecological research is developing its own first-person approaches of ecological participation. At the moment, there is much movement in the field exploring new mindsets for transformative change. Here, ecological behaviour and transformation is not only theoretically framed and technocratically argued for, as in classical approaches following the Brundtland paradigm. Rather, ecological existence is enacted through the situated, concrete and collectively experienced forming of relations. Ecological transformation thus becomes relationship work (Bhandari & Martin 2019, Sacks & Kurt 2016, Weber 2019).

Practices, which can be counted in to the upcoming paradigm of “transformation of the ecological self”, draw on the body of artistic performance (particularly Social Sculpture in the sense of Joseph Beuys), awareness practices, and therapeutic interactions. There is a growing body of workshops dealing directly with a relational paradigm, before confronting topics in the classic agent-object sense. The underlying idea is that as ecology means the partial – and problematic – identity of the agent and the system, making relationships between the agents more fecund is as important as improving the system on a technical ground – and in many cases it is even required as precondition for further technical or theoretical work. Ecologists are experimenting with “ecological constellation work” where the participants embody elements of ecosystems, as they are embodied by them.

We can note that in an approach of artistic performance in order to set ecological creation forces into motion, western thinking and acting already comes very close to the indigenous conception of re-enacting the creative forces of the cosmos. Indigenous ritual objects are active energies, which emit the forming power that brings the universe into being. Modern art since the early 1900s to this day has formulated a variety of very similar concepts. Transformational ecological practices combine this into active relationship work. They tap into the forces of collective emotional presence and the collective unconscious in order to formulate solutions to ecological and social dilemmas (Kurt 2016, Jordan et. al. 2004).

### *Invoking wholeness*

It is important to stress that engaging in indigenous practices is not purely theoretic endeavour and is not possible by a theoretical approach alone. Indigenous world practices have to be enacted and embodied. The spirits of rivers and mountains, which are entangled with our own lives, have to be invoked and asked for their participation. The overview intended by this essay therefore needs to be complemented by practice, which enacts the theoretical findings – and through this corrects them, contradicts them, and ultimately makes them unnecessary.

The Anthropocene implies an animistic worldview. In order to engage with the world in an indigenous way we have to feel it, to love it, to call it, to gather at the bank of a river, at a fire, we have to sing and dance, to embrace one another, be ecstatic, and to listen.



## 4 Unbraining: Towards Self-Decolonialisation

*"It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions', and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. It is Hobbes' 'bellum omnium contra omnes'... in Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society."*

Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 1862. Quoted after Stuckey in Harvey 2013, p. 195

Any embrace of animism by westerners presupposes one general attitude: Humbleness. It might be somewhat unexpected to mention this requirement in an essay, which is reviewing our (the westerners' and also those intrinsically influenced by western thinking/ schooling/ theorising) attitude towards the living world and deals with a critique of current concepts of "nature", insofar they are relevant for the practice and theory of sustainability. One might expect a more discursive, textbook-style approach. But this is exactly the paradigm that needs to be turned around: The idea that anything serious can only start with a description (an observation or an objective measurement), and not an attitude.

With this essay I make the attempt to open up an animistic cosmology for all – as an escape strategy for what de Sousa Santos has called the "Western Cognitive Empire". This opening, however, is not intended as a takeover: I do not propose the integration of animism into the discursive realm. If the problem consisted only of finding the adequate rational paradigm for the ecological crisis, society would long have found it. But what is at stake is beyond the common western approach of sorting out the objects to talk about, and do it clearly, or to sort out what is talked about, and then do that cleanly. It is not to do with talking in the first place, but with providing kindness in a collective of mutual interdependence. Kindness desired, kindness provided, that is the first requirement.

I do not propose this turning away from “understanding” to “attitude” as an idiosyncratic quirk, but as an important principle. My proposal should not be misunderstood as commodification of an important remaining “resource” – namely the connection to other living beings, and the connection to everyone’s own aliveness. If we rightly understand aliveness and what it entails, it always requires an attitude. And the right attitude starts with oneself. We understand that in order to discover the ecological genius inherent in animistic cosmologies, we cannot pick their methods and incorporate them into the Eurocentric sustainability toolbox. This would be deadening – for the cultures the insights are taken from, but also for our own culture. What at first sight looks as a promising new world-view reveals itself as the necessity to start from square one. The west – anyone inside of western culture – needs to attempt a process of self-decolonisation.

To this day, progress in ecological matters, but also in developmental policy, was supposed to follow the same presupposition: It needed an increase in emancipation (of individual and societal liberties in the case of humans, of the rights of species to be protected in the case of “nature”). In both cases the subject to protect was deemed to be pulled “upwards” to the status of the western emancipated (male, white) citizen. The move to attain this status was “development”.

Development in terms of nature protection is often connected with the creation of preserves and off-limit-zones. In the case of non-western societies this often leads to a deepened separation of traditional landowners from the land which provides their physical and spiritual identity; in the west this frequently leads to a deepened alienation from nature as “fragile”, better not to be touched, and alien to human culture. Though species might be protected, the outcome reinforces the systemic problem of an antagonism between humans and other beings, and, in case of traditional societies, creates a hostile situation towards traditional landownership.

### We need something else

The aim of this essay is to turn this process around: Instead of “helping” non-western others (human and non-human) to emancipate, to rise the height of the western subject immanent in the western cognitive empire, and consequently striving to fulfil personal self-realisation, mainly through the acquisition of com-

modities (objects), the experience of animism points to the form of emancipation needed by the western rational subject. It is the emancipation from a cognitive agent to an embodied living individual, ecologically dependent on the web of life, and emotionally dependent on the exchange with other living beings. It is the emancipation from a thinking actor to a feeling participant. It is also the emancipation from a separate entity to somebody who is part of the collective.

In this respect, the direction of the gaze is turned around: Instead of teaching others (non-western individuals and collectives, human and otherwise) how to act rationally and efficiently, westerners need to learn how to behave as individuals within the larger context of the collective of life. Protecting life therefore is not derived from an enlargement of conceptual models about the world, but from granting ourselves the aliveness – and the ensuing requirements to allow aliveness for others – which the western cognitive empire denies as a valuable understanding and practice to interact with life.

In terms of politics, we could call this need the primacy of self-decolonisation. It comes before offering colonial “help” to peoples suffering from the effects of colonialism. In terms of sustainability, we can name this attitude the necessity of allowing ourselves our own aliveness and all its expressions and feeling experiences, before we start planning how we should protect life. So we are dealing with an emancipation requirement here, but it is not the emancipation to the western status of fully mature or autonomous subject, but rather the emancipation away from it – not back into the state of dependent serf (or oppressed women), but forward into the expression of mature individuality as expression of the fact that all live is given from others, and all existence is shared.

I have called this move “Enlivenment” (Weber 2013, 2019), in an attempt to stress the necessity to overcome the heritage of enlightenment thinking and to proceed towards the participation in life. Enlivenment – and the push to goals of individual emancipation – has been, and still is the underlying framework for the western cognitivist model. “Enlivenment”, however, emphasises a second emancipatory move that was missing in the original enlightenment and its focus on the “rational actor” working for his individual growth in a world full of objects. Enlivenment calls for the emancipation from the confinement in rational concepts, as those rational concepts ipso facto take reality as composed of mere things, or, more extreme still, as pure imagination happening through signs in

the sphere of culture.

It is clearly visible that with the Anthropocene the scene has become more fluid and that the enlightenment confrontation between the (linguistic) rational-actor model and a position that experiences the world as inherently meaningful and meaning-generating has somewhat abated. It has given way to the “material turn”, which posits that, in philosopher Karen Barad’s (2003) words, also “matter matters”, that, in Jane Bennett’s (2010) terms, matter has agency, too, that we are part of, in Timothy Morton’s (2017) words, the “Symbiotic Real”, and that, finally, in Bruno Latour’s (2018) expression, we need to acknowledge Gaia as a political actor.

All this lends us a lifeline in order to revert the western cognitive empire. But on the other hand, all this – a host of positions developed in terms of innovations and minor revolutions of western discursive thinking – still follows the predominant norm of talking about structures of reality (particularly according to the norm of an academic setting) instead of participating in them in a mutual and fecund way. So the bulk of the emancipation work has still to be done. And it has to be done in a much more deeply self-critical way as is available through current “Anthropocene critical theory”. It has to be done through practical identification with and attending to the needs of the collective of life.

This might seem a respect-less claim for some, and a truism for others. Anyway, it is rather hard to be achieved. There is a whole body of post-colonial literature and an emerging body of post-feminist writing, which grapples with the fact that those who fight the Eurocentric white male paradigm often repeat it unconsciously and thus perpetuate it endlessly, as Frantz Fanon (1961) has so acutely observed (see also Salami 2020: 19).

The post-colony – the post-emancipatory state – is even defined as the pathology of unconsciously mirroring that and those, which are to be rejected, of re-enacting the cruelties of those who have oppressed living participation in reality. A talk about the entanglement of culture and the earth system in the terms of the Anthropocene, which still keeps a detached eye, which still does not proceed to embed this talk in embodied acts of reconciliation, of direct communication with non-humans, and with putting feeling back into the centre, perpetuates colonialism. We the adherents, and we the oppressed of the western cognitive

empire need something else.

### Narcissism as symptom of being colonised

So the change required does not only extend to epistemological grounds alone. This is why the west needs the help – in the sense of life-saving help, not of compliant assistance – of non-western cosmologies and ways of being with one another. The change required is a profound shift away from the objectifying perspective to a practice of engagement as shared knowledge. It is a change away from making the world, and the way to behave in and with it, a problem of description alone. It has to be done by adhering to a world, not only theoretically debate it. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the Brazilian Anthropologist, who has done more than many to allow animistic cosmologies to enter the stage in terms of equals, observes that the “massive conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones is the hallmark of modernist philosophy” (Bird-Davis 1999: 579; Viveiros de Castro on Bird-Davis 1999: 579).

In the still dominating “episteme”, the organisation of knowledge about reality, caring about how the world is is forbidden; the only relevant scientific debate is possible about how people think the world is. (In order to emphasise the relevance of ontological realism, Edoardo Kohn (2013), another important anthropologist of the “animistic turn”, has called his book “How Forests Think”, and not “How People Think about Forests”). In the cognitive empire, still everyone – and every culture – who and which insists on getting in touch with how the world is, is excluded from this setting. This excludes nonhuman being from the get-go. A scientific perspective in the tradition of western cognitive rules forbids to see the subjective inner lives of non-human beings, as these lives cannot be measured or proven. Science hence ipso facto cuts the traces that connect us to the remainder of being, and this to us.

These barriers are the hallmarks of colonialism – excluding those not adhering to the club from participation on reasons of assumed inferiority (in this case, intellectual), and not refraining from “ad homines”-attack – denying any personal, embodied, feeling experience of how the world is, of having ontological relevance because of the fact of being part of the world. The epistemological empire denies participation in the world in the same way an apartheid regime

denies access to institutional rights. “Ontological questions” in the sense of the above-cited Castro are about the individual experience of how the world is, and how the individual is related to this world. They include the whole of one’s own lived reality and the whole of possible relations to other actors in the biosphere and touch a profound, vital level of existence. Denying their validity denies this existence.

This is the core defect of western metaphysics. It is not only a worldview, it makes assumptions about which worldview is valid and excludes all perspectives, which deviate from this standard from further discourse. This standard discourse is the only one, which really counts, because the global society is based on scientifically informed knowledge (at least where it has not degraded into neo-strongman politics or scapegoat and conspiracy fantasies, which make the underlying problem, described here, even worse).

De Sousa Santos (2018: 6, 38) observes: “There is no social justice without cognitive justice [...] From the standpoint of the epistemologies of the south, the epistemologies of the north have contributed crucially to converting the scientific knowledge developed in the global north into the hegemonic way of representing the world as one’s own and of transforming it according to one’s own needs and aspirations [...] modern epistemological arrogance is the other side of the arrogance of modern colonial conquest.”

It is important to see that the colonisation mechanism of the western cognitive model works not by opposing diverging cosmologies, but by positioning its own standard as the only relevant structure of reality. Any being or any culture is supposed to rise up to this standard, otherwise it is excluded. It is therefore impossible to base the healing of life (that of non-western cultures and that of non-human beings, and that of the colonised-colonisers, the westerners themselves) on a standard that denies in principle the ontological reality of those. This will always reproduce the typical deadlock of colonialism and in the worst case turn saviours into destroyers. This is one of the reasons the mainstream vision and application sustainability has so few true successes.

Because every human – even westerners – is a living being, the colonising effect of the western cognitive empire does not only extend to the oppressed (non-humans/ humans), but damages also the oppressor. Also this situation has

been observed by the post-colonial pioneer philosopher Franz Fanon. He found: Trauma is damaging, to the injured and to the injurer. What is oppressed is something, which yearns for vital life in the oppressor. True decolonisation therefore must start from the opposite point of what is normally assumed: It needs to set forth from the self-liberation of those who exercise violence. It needs to interrupt the trauma cycle, in which the oppressor, through his/ her own oppression, causes more violence. The pioneer in post-colonialism, Frantz Fanon (1961), has first underlined this crucial turnaround, which shows that it is not enough “to fight against” an oppressor, as this fight might easily turn you into a coloniser, too.

By this perspective, decolonisation becomes not only an ontological project and a political struggle, but also a psychological healing journey. The narcissist who hurts others will not be stopped by these others acquiring narcissistic treats and fighting back. The end of violence is in sight only if she looks at what she has been missing, what unfulfilled needs make her act out. She has to feel who she really is. This is where self-decolonisation starts.

For the anthropologist Castro (2017: pos604), “Western metaphysics is truly the fons et origo of every colonialism.” It is western metaphysics that causes experiences that equal symptoms of mental illness: In a world in which only epistemological excellence counts, we are denied our feeling of being alive, our confidence in our perceptions and sensations, our competence to communicate with a vast range of other beings, our compliance to work for a common good, our readiness to share, our capability to create beauty by nourishing the family of being. Western metaphysics is narcissistic in the degree in which it does not accept other forms of knowledge, and as it bases this decision on an absolute, structural preference for the own position. You cannot reason with a narcissist.

Castro originally pondered to give the book, which now goes by “Cannibal Metaphysics”, the title “Anti-Narciss”. This is a word game with the title of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s famous book “Anti-Oedipus” from 1972. Anti-Oedipus famously claimed that capitalism – the epitome of splitting the world into (non-human) objects and a (human) culture about these objects – is a manifestation (and legitimation) of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia even translates as splitting. For Castro, the dualistic division of the world by western metaphysics is a

pathology, which causes ensuing symptoms. These symptoms then mask the pathology: They make it immune against deeper enquiry (which would be “unscientific”). “Splitting” in a personality disorder like narcissism is (unconsciously) used by the narcissist in order to project his own feelings of insufficiency onto others who are held to be inferior. It is applied to mask the problem.

### Capitalism as colonisation

There is a close relationship between a dualistic approach to the world as an object, and the idea that the adequate treatment of this object-world (referring to everyone and everything not adhering to the societal contract) is to exploit it as a commodity. As I have argued in “Enlivenment” (2013, 2019), treating everything outside the contractual society as a potential good denies its own life – and the role it plays in ours. This attitude changes reality into a dead zone. It introduces “metaphysics of death” – as anything important has only to do with the re-arrangement of material building blocks devoid of personal relation. We – material beings – stick to the waist in this dead zone; we are crazily afraid to drown further (and die), and hence we drag others under (“better them than us”).

The liberal economy, with its antagonism between resources (which are traded) and subjects (who trade or need to be supplied with things), is one of the many manifestations of this dualism. Dualism entails a capitalistic economy, because dualism is about reducing persons to things, and capitalism does the same. If we separate ourselves from the remainder of the world, all things become means, and we become means, too. If we sort the world in two boxes, inside and outside, the damage is already done. Positing a subject here and an object there inevitably leads to the destruction of both. Subject and resource, agents and goods – that is the working formula of capitalism.

Things there, actors here, this is also the ideology of war. As is colonialism: A sort of mostly slow-burning war against the colonised. The western episteme is waging a war against every (human and non-human) person not included in the club. From this perspective, there is no difference between enclosure, commodification, colonisation and warfare. All of those not only attack living systems, they also damage psychological and emotional identities connected to life and its dependency on other lives. They are all attacks on “aliveness” itself – a



capacity of life that is unavailable and incomprehensible to the dualistic mind. Therefore, they are also attacks on reality. For the Italian philosopher Ugo Mattei, consequently, already the opposition of subject and object is a commodification. In this vein, political scientist David Johns (2014:42) observes, “Colonialism is nowhere more apparent and thriving than in the relationship between humanity and the rest of the earth.”

If we are colonising life, it follows that we also colonise – and oppress – ourselves, because life is part of us. What are denied by western metaphysics are the healthy capacities of embodied human beings to live productive lives in mutuality with a world rife with creativity and creation. Those qualities are explicitly denied to some humans in colonial systems, and they are denied to nearly all other living beings by mainstream science. Through the western cognitive mindset, we deny them for all – including ourselves. The proponents of the cognitive schism, which is the hallmark of the empire, are deemed to be slaveholders, but they are also slaves themselves.

The argument I make here is evidently itself prone to fall through the epistemological sieve – as it draws on experiences not within the framework of a science. But it is high time that we move outside our shell and call the others for rescue. As the philosopher Val Plumwood (2013:441) asserts, “We need a thorough and open rethink, which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives.”

This request is a double-sided move: It means to ask for being taught in the matter of cosmologies which we have forsaken long ago – and it is at the same time the confidence that the capacity to participate in those cosmologies is part of our own being. It is part of the “*Pensée Sauvage*”, as Lévi-Strauss called it, the savage mind, our own ability to adhere to the “compact of being” as the poet and ecophilosopher Gary Snyder (1990) says, the rules and ecstasies of the ecological mutuality of life.

The savage mind is the antidote to what the post-colonial thinker Achille Mbembe (2016) calls the “abstract universalism” of the cognitivist mindset. The savage mind does not entail wildness in the sense of the western, Hobbesian cliché, but a reliance on one’s own existence as productive participation in an ongoing creative process bringing forth diversity and meaning, and providing life

in an unlimited way, if it is taken care of. The savage mind is the way indigenous cultures understand their way to participate in a live-giving cosmos. The savage mind is what sleeps inside of each of us, when we stop in our tracks, startled by the beauty of a rose, by the movements of leaves in a breeze.

The savage mind is our way to not longer adhere to what is expected from us by the cognitive enclosures of the west. Wild is not devoid of rules, to the contrary. The rules it grows from are not those of usurpation, but reciprocity. "Wild" has been denigrated as "red in tooth and claw" or touted as "unlimited personal freedom", but it is none of this. Wild is simply the capacity to follow the rules in order to be alive.

It is important to retain that we have a sensory capacity for what these rules to produce life are. In ecological respect, self-decolonialisation means to allow our whole embodied self to have a say. It means to admit that feeling, intuition, and the experience of connection are integral ecological capacities, which we share. Self-decolonialisation means to allow ourselves our own feelings. We can trust them when we keep in mind that feelings are a living being's ways of keeping track with the community of others, how she is faring in it, and how they are (Weber 2017).

# 5

## The Rule of Aliveness

*"The earth has power and culture within it."*  
Deborah Bird Rose in Harvey, ed., 2013, p. 139

The discussion of this essay is framed inside several paradigm shifts going on, pushing the focus of our experiences away from the dualistic mainstream, which determined at least the last 400 years of western understanding. These emerging engagements go by the names of "New Materialism" or "Non-Human-Turn". Although those share many findings with animistic cosmologies, and their proponents sometimes openly express their sympathies towards them (Danowski & Castro 2017), for westerners, true animism frequently remains dubious – something with the stigma of "primitive", "weird", "irrational" or "uncivilised".

This is a profound problem, because it creates a block to a possible kinship, which could serve all. It has also to do with the (rightful) caution against a possible takeover of animistic cosmologies through western colonisation (I already discussed that above). And it is related to a deep-seated bias in westerners to subconsciously privilege forms of knowledge and practical rituals, which keep the world – the co-creating aliveness of other persons – at a distance by observing them as objects.

The thrust of this essay is that in order to rescue sustainability practices from having only minor beneficial consequences, or, even worse, transposing the mistakes that have caused damage to another level and have them cause more, and different damage, engagement in terms of sustainability needs to fully embrace an animistic attitude. The expected outcome is that this will set the self of the acting subjects on the right path (of connection with self, and others), and that from there working for life will become much more coherent, and fruitful. So it is

crucial to know what we are talking about when we say “animism”.

As we know, no indigenous community describes itself as “animist” – at least outside of the need to adopt a western vocabulary. Referring to themselves, people use much more concrete identifiers, which can obscure an adequate conceptualisation in terms of western philosophy. People e.g. speak of the “collective” (Luz Hualpa Garcia 2019, personal communication). With this, they refer to all beings that are part of the “society of being”, including non-organic entities that normally would not be accounted for as “living”, like rivers and mountains.

If required to refer to the character of their cosmology, indigenous people prefer to talk in terms of “the law” – the powerful life-giving principles of the cosmos that are totally non-exclusive and apply to all, and do not form a hierarchical topography as in western discourse, with (white) man on top, as he allegedly has the highest capacities of understanding, communication, and connection. It is important to see that only a truly animistic approach of assuming that we share with all aliveness, need, and individuality, enables us to communicate to others from a non-condescending vantage point.

When, in holistic western science, authors talk about natural realities as displaying mind (as e.g. Bateson 1972), they mostly do this in a highly metaphorical way (and often latently referring to the Christian-platonic concept as the “one mind” who has created the visible world as manifestation of “his” transcendent nature). In this respect, visible life becomes the downgraded concretion of a higher, mental, level, and only insofar displays mind. But animistic thought meets other minds all the time in the world, and it meets them through their bodies, or effects on the own body. It does not need a “theory of mind” in order to recognise and address them. It needs to have an experience of aliveness in order to know that this experience cannot be but shared. Rationality from an animistic perspective is not the logic of the world’s building plan (which can be grasped only be the rational western mind), but is established through distributed acts of self care of an endless number of beings, who need to manage to live together.

It becomes understandable from this juxtaposition of western and indigenous attitudes towards reality, why anthropologists for a very long time got animism wrong. They basically found what they expected – folks standing on a less developed rung of the cultural ladder and projecting their ignorance and

fears onto the world, hence assuming a host of benevolent or malevolent spirits (aka demons) in everything. Animism was coined as a more systematic term for superstition. The influential Victorian ethnologist Edward Tylor held that the primitive “endow[s] all things, even inanimate ones, with a nature analogous to his own” (quoted after Bird-Davis 1999: S69). This nature, however, for Tylor could only be the dualistic western idea of a spirit (mind) in a body (machine). For the Victorian anthropologist, the animistic world must have seemed a cosmos beset with demons.

While Tylor blamed “the primitives” to project their personal experience on the non-human world, in truth he was himself projecting his idea of a person (as a mind entrapped in an object, a body) on the experiences, which indigenous people were (are) making. As the anthropologist Val Plumwood observes: “Our concepts of rationality have misunderstood and misrepresented indigenous animism in our own dualistic terms. Colonial ethnocentrism saw ‘animism’ as holding that humanoid (often demonic) spirits inhabit and inanimate material objects as separate drivers, which could be welcomed, influenced or evicted. This ploy enabled them to read our own dualisms back into other cultures, and thus to present this major alternative to reductionism as primitive and anti-rational” (Plumwood in Harvey 2013:449).

Plumwood’s colleague Nurit Bird-Davis (1999) shares this view. She sees in animism two fundamental challenges to mainstream western thought, which go in parallel and can be explained from one another: For animistic thinking, a person is not split into mind and body, and the earth is not split into humans and environment. To the great astonishment of anthropologists, indigenous people do not discriminate between “nature” and “culture” (Descola 2013). Instead, they feel themselves part of the great society of life. Reality is social – but “social” does not mean a contrast to “embodied”. Social means that all being takes place in relationships.

The “ego”, each own’s individuality, can only be understood and only be achieved through honouring this profound primacy of relationship. And relationships can be honoured in the first place because we all are cut from the same cloth, because it builds on a primordial relatedness. Through the animistic lens, we are all part of the family of life. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) asserts that “the irreducibility of the individual is a peculiarly modernist notion”

(Bird-Davis 1999: 572). For Strathern, it would be more adequate to call the animist conception of an agent a “dividual”.

### Animism is practical holistic science

So cultures, which we connect to animism, have nothing to do with superstition and childish fear, nor with naiveté or wrong but useful perceptual proxies. They are not naive, or primitive, but instead are adopting some perspectives, which only very recently started to gain ground in western mainstream science.

What are the most important principles of animistic cosmologies? There are probably two, which are interrelated: 1. All beings are persons with the whole spectrum of qualities we attribute to a person, namely a body, a will, desires, feelings, rational thinking, perception and a voice to make herself heard). And 2. All those persons come about only through relationships by which the world is shared between all participants. So we have a very strong, idiosyncratic individuality, which is widely distributed and completely barrier-free (all communicate, can be heard and addressed), and we have at the same time a prevalence of the collective over this very individual, as the individual in truth is a “dividual” (Strathern) co-created by the collective of life.

Put together in a handy table we can compare those basic traits of how life is distributed in animistic cosmologies to the attitude of the west.(Table 2)

The table depicts mainstream science, but some newer positions of western science (quantum physics, biosemiotics, some flavours of cultural science and critique) do not map on the classical paradigm of the cognitive empire anymore. Those are still exceptions to the mainstream, however. If we have a deeper look at them in synopsis, an astonishing picture emerges, in which many newer intellectual paradigms are tacitly adopting animistic positions. These, for example, claim that:

- Each individual is the product of a shared activity – linguistic discourse (Derrida), prevalence of the power dispositif in shaping desire (Foucault), individuality as rhizome (Deleuze)

- Relationship is the underlying nature of reality – physics, (Bohr, Schrödinger, Heisenberg)
- All living beings strive and desire, all are feeling subjects – biosemiotics (Uexküll, Hoffmeyer, Weber. For the importance of biosemiotics for an animistic cosmology see the discussion below in this section).
- There are no distinct domains of culture and nature (Anthropocene)
- Reality is a co-creation, or, “reciprocal specification” – cognitive science, psychology (Watzlawick, Varela, Thompson, Clarke)
- Matter is agential – new materialism (Bennett, Barad, Morton)
- The whole of the biosphere (Gaia) is an actor needing political representation (Lovelock, Margulis, Latour, Stengers)

TABLE 2  
*Aliveness in the Western and in the Animistic Cosmos*

| Western Cognitive Empire  | Animistic Cosmos   |
|---|--|
| All elements of life are objects.   | All participants of life are persons.  |
| An object in its depth consists of other, smaller objects; it is static and self-identical.                 | A person in its depth consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.  |
| The building blocks which make up an object are unrelated single entities.                                  | The process of relating which creates persons at the same time establishes community.  |
| Objects do not communicate but just are; any perceived communication is a projection of the human observer. | Persons communicate on all levels about their needs and desires, this communication IS the relational process which creates more persons and provides fecundity for the place. |
| Objects have no inner life.   | All persons have feelings, desires, needs.   |
| Objects need to be addressed by physical manipulation.  | Persons need to be addressed in a way that takes into account their desire to satisfy those needs.   |
| The world is silent. Connection and communication are impossible. We are cut off from life.                 | If a person communicates well she is provided by her place in the collective of life forever.  |

If we look closely, we can even read in Bruno Latour's (1993) suggestion that "we have never been modern" as an early appeal to the animistic ground where every life experience is anchored in and where matter is intimately connected to meaning and relation. According to Latour, any attempt to get outside of this tangle of those various dimensions creates "monsters", as I already mentioned above. The attempt of western science – the aim of modernity – to purify the world and sort everything neatly into the according sphere (objects into the box with the label "things", meaning into the crate named "culture") creates hybrid entities, things which are neither dead nor alive, and which span various meanings and bodies at once (like "the climate", which is a technical term and at the same time something that behaves as if it has agency. Timothy Morton (2013) calls some of those monsters "hyperobjects", others "spectres".

Latour (1993) suggested that instead of senselessly trying to purify, we should embrace full-front the finding that every body also has agency. We should proceed by opening a "parliament of things" in order to negotiate the terms between these hybrid entities – and us as one of them among them. From the perspective of animism, Latour in his suggestion came close to describing an aboriginal elders' council which represents the voices of the local totemic group by protecting the hunt of the totem animal (say, an emu) and hence represents the will of non-human beings. Animists used the parliament of "things" already for a very long time.

There is, however, one huge difference between western Avantgarde thinking and indigenous cultures: The conclusions even of the latest scientific movements, which call for a dissolution of dualism, are mostly taken in the typical western-observer-stance as "scientific findings", which do not have any guidance for life. In this respect, they still respect the ideal of objectivity. By this attitude, however, the avantgardes of science become self-contradictory, and through this, toxic. They "preach wine and drink water". More is needed, and this more needs us to take it serious that while we are breathing in this world we are in intimate contact with an infinity of other, mostly non-human, persons.

Let us get back at the overarching notion of animistic cosmologies: All participants are persons. The religious scholar Graham Harvey, author of a standard textbook (2017) and reference-level edited volume (2013) on animism, makes this very clear (see also the motto quote above section 3). Harvey (2017: xiii) says:



"Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others [...] In reality, there are no individuals. There are only relatives and acts of relating [...] Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken with. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken about. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings [...]" Person comes first, the differentiation in a specific kind of person – or species – comes later. And Harvey's colleague, anthropologist Nurit Bird-Davis, observes: "The Ojibwa conceives of 'person' as an overarching category within which 'human person,' 'animal person,' 'wind person,' etc., are subcategories." (Bird Davies 1999: S71).

This is the true gulf distinguishing westerners admitting plurality in a theoretical description of the world and animists who cannot help living what they feel is the world like. Harvey observes: "People become animists by learning how to recognise persons and, far more important, how to relate appropriately with them." Animists "use words like relative and relation to replace some uses of person". In Harvey's (2017: xiv) "understanding these terms are synonymous". A person is always related. A subject is always dependent on other subjects. A subject is always intersubjective. Subject means already to be "inter" – to be a relational process itself. We'll see below how this plays out from a biological point of view.

In any case, according to Harvey, the defining point of animism entails a radical change in our way to communicate with the world and in the scope of our participation in it: "If every 'thing' we humans encounter might in fact be a living person the implications and ramifications are immense" (Harvey 2017: xx). "Intelligence, rationality, consciousness, volition, agency, intentionality, language and desire are not human characteristics that might be mistakenly projected onto "non-humans", but are shared by humans with all other kinds of persons." (Harvey 2017: xxiv).

This observation reminds of the hope of writers, philosophers and artists of the romantic epoch to show that the world is animated, and not a mere thing. At the same time animism reframes this hope, shifting the focus from the idea of animation in a western sense (the transcendence of the divine) to a view on animation as the presence of other participants with whom we need to share food and breath, place and shelter.

## Biosemiotics: Towards an animated biology

The western complacency historically (and still today) not only belittles non-western humans, but also the remainder of being. The state of nature is extended from non-human beings to the supposedly primitive humans living in close connection to them, allegedly too ignorant to understand that they are forever separated from other beings. But not only the understanding of the “savage mind” has been flawed until today, also the idea of animal and plant minds has been. But finally, the mainstream conviction that the overwhelming majority of non-human species is not capable of inner experiences is being revised.

For a long time, biology has been based on the assumption that in order to explain the functions of life, those must be “reduced” to chemical and physical processes. This approach has led to the breathtaking success of biological sciences, namely the discovery of the nature of genetic information, and the ability to extract it, decode it and at least partially tailor it. In ecology, the biological stance of the last decades has been to understand the structure of natural systems based on the idea of distribution of resources through competition. This view applies without any consideration of an “inner life” of organisms. Ecology paints a picture of organisms as inanimate biomachines (plants, animals and other organisms) in incessant competition.

Mainstream biological sciences are thus explicitly anti-animistic: There is no “anima” in nature. Biology has been a stronghold of the conviction that to treat life (not to speak of whole ecosystems, like mountains and rivers) as animated is a fantasy without base in reality. Ecology – a biological discipline – mirrors this attitude: Ecologists speak of systems, disturbances and balances, and they do so from the vantage point of understanding flows of particles (objects). They do not consider that imagining an ecosystem is a way of taking part in it – and that taking part in it always is done through the subjective perspective of existential concern, hence in the first person. Applied ecology – in order to protect natural ecosystems – strives to maintain resilience of habitats and natural landscapes. It cannot, however, say anything about why humans should care about keeping as many species as possible in their company – apart from the human-centred idea that biodiversity maintains biospherical resilience, and this is a good thing for man. Ecological science has been treating other beings just as much objects as economical science has. In both cases, they are resources for the human world –

in one case as parts of the biotic “life support system”, in the other as goods and commodities. (For a discussion of the idea that ecology and economy are parts of the same “bioliberal” science of distribution of objects see Weber 2013, 2019).

In recent years, this view has been challenged from within biology. Change comes from two fronts: From behavioural science and neuroethology, where moods and subjective states of other animals, but lately also of plants, are researched, and from cognitive science, particularly from the research field of “biosemiotics” (Uexküll 1980, Hoffmeyer 1996, Emmeche & Kull 2011, Weber 2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2019). The findings of both fields have lead to a veritable revolution in biological thinking (which is still fully under way). I will for the sake of the argument only shortly touch on the main findings here, which are the subjects of several works of mine mentioned above.

Animals, and even plants, so the hardening evidence, do have subjective experiences. And those experiences are common throughout different species and not confined to the small group of (mostly mammalian) organisms closely related to humans, as biology was ready to admit before. To give just a couple of examples: We know now that not only apes and dolphins, but also cats, dogs, crows and even pilot fishes and octopuses can recognise their own self (e.g. in a mirror or through sniffing), potentially enlarging the experience of self to non-mammalian species and even invertebrates (it is improbable that only one mollusc species, namely octopus, has developed self-consciousness, and all others have not). We know that bees can feel euphoria and depression, and we know that fruitflies suffer chronic pain throughout their lives when they have been injured early on (do not ask how researchers tested this). We know by now that plants perceive and communicate, cooperate and have social lives, just as animals (us), only in their different, slower, sedentary fashion, plant style.

These findings are accompanied by biological theories that seek to understand organisms as subjects. In biosemiotics, even cells are no longer viewed as plain, albeit complicated, things, as biomachines, which react according to programmed information and physical laws. Rather, the phenomenon of life, the maintenance of a cell, is understood as the creation of an embodied self with an according inner perspective. Cells – and all organisms – are, according to this research field, subjects with an interest in their own existence, and in others with whom this existence is shared. There is a “meaning dimension”, an “imaginary

dimension” and an intrinsic teleology (Varela 1997, Weber & Varela 2003) to all life, even to the simplest forms of it. The inner experience of being alive is for all organisms very much similar to ours. It may be different in degree, but it is not much different in kind.

In my essay “Enlivenment” I have summarised the most striking features of this view on organisms: “For the emerging new biological paradigm aliveness is a notion and an experience, which governs the perceptions of biological agents [...] In the emerging new picture, organisms are no longer viewed as genetic machines, but basically as materially embodied processes that bring forth themselves (Weber & Varela 2003, Weber 2010). They are matter, organisation, but also meaning, existential experience, and poetic expression. Each single cell is a ‘process of creation of an identity’ (Varela 1997). Already the simplest organism must be understood as being a material system displaying the desire to keep itself intact, to grow, to unfold, and to produce a fuller scope of life for itself. A cell is a process that produces the components necessary to allow for these developments—while the materials of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, silicon flow through it.

Let me sum up the traits of this new framework for conceptualising in a synoptic way the principles that guide a living being.

- It acts according to its own autonomy, and therefore is not completely determined by external factors. It creates its identity by transforming matter into the stuff of self.
- It produces itself and thereby manifests the desire to grow, avoid disturbances, and actively search for positive inputs such as food, shelter, and the presence of mates.
- It shows behavior that is constantly evaluating influences from the external (and also its own, internal) world.
- It follows goals.
- It acts out of concern and from the experience of meaning.
- It is an agent or a subject with an intentional point of view. We can call this way of meaning-guided world-making ‘feeling’.
- It shows or expresses the conditions under which its life process takes place. A living being transparently exhibits its conditions. (Weber 2019:81)

The emerging biology corroborates the main points of animism in a breathtaking way. This is summarised in the chart below, which opposes the new findings of biological science to the traditional scientific biological paradigm and compares them to the principles on which animism is based (see Table 2 above).

TABLE 3  
*Biological Views of Western Science and Animism*

| Mainstream Science   | Biosemitotics  | Animism  |
|--|--|--|
| All elements of life are objects.  | All participants of life are subjects.   | All participants of life are persons.  |
| An object in its depth consists of other, smaller objects; it is static and self-identical.                | A subject in its depth consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.   | A person in its depth consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.  |
| The building blocks which make up an object are unrelated single entities.                                 | The process of relating which creates subjects at the same time establishes the ecosystem.   | The process of relating which creates persons at the same time establishes community.  |
| Objects don't communicate but just are; any perceived communication is a projection of the human observer. | Subjects act according to their needs and desires, these actions are the ecological exchange processes (assimilation, feeding, breakdown) which create more subjects and provide fecundity for the system. | Persons communicate on all levels about their needs and desires, this communication IS the relational process which creates more persons and provides fecundity for the place. |
| Objects have no inner life.  | All subjects have feelings, desires, needs.  | All persons have feelings, desires, needs.   |
| Objects need to be addressed by physical manipulation.   | Subjects can and must be addressed through a first-person-scientific approach.   | Persons need to be addressed in a way that takes into account their desire to satisfy those needs.   |
| The world is silent. Connection and communication are impossible. We are cut off from life.                | The world is profuse with meaning, we can understand non-human beings through our embodied imagination..   | If a person communicates well she is provided by her place in the collective of life forever.  |

The biological self is not a substance, but arises as a relation based on necessary sharing – and exactly through this creates subjectivity. It is noteworthy that self – as a centre of action and as an experience of concern – and the system that nurtures it are connected through a process through which this self arises in a relational way. Already the smallest building block of living beings – the cell – is not a static object, but a process, an activity, which is concerned with transforming what is outside of it (light, nutrients, benign or dangerous situations and actions from others) into a coherent embodied identity. In order to build up a self – as body and as meaningful experience – it is necessary to relate and share.

Embodied selves come into being through other selves. They depend on cooperation and “interbeing”. A self is not possible in isolation and through the struggle of all against all. Rather, it is dependent on “other”—in the form of food, shelter, collaborators. So self is always self-through-other. In this respect, the biosphere is paradoxically cooperative: Symbiotic relationships arise from antagonistic, incompatible processes: Matter/ form, genetic code/ soma, individual ego/ other. An individual comes into being because it negotiates several incompatible layers of worldmaking. A living system is a partially self-contradictory “meshwork of selfless selves” (Varela 1991). A living system therefore is, with the anthropologist Edoardo Kohn (2013), a forest who thinks.

### Nature is culture

The animistic intuition that the world is peopled by persons with whom we share a basic level of embodied experience (actually much more than what we do not share) is supported by biological research and theory. So also here, as before in physics, the indigenous cosmology proves to be more accurate than the modern western view, not less so. Today, we can observe an exciting shift away from the ingrained dualism. Only one major area of institutional knowledge barges itself against the insight, that individual flourishing is a function of the collective, and that is economy.

But it is not only the Avantgarde of western science, which astonishingly overlaps with indigenous perspectives and practices. It also happens in the most important resource of everyday experience, as we continue to be embedded in the mutuality of bodies whom we eat, bodies who eat us after our lives end, of breath

of others that we breathe (the air exhaled by the green plants) and of others who we feed with our breath (again the plants). These are elements of an existential nexus, and they are contained in all experiences that we make of the world on a daily basis (a passing gaze at the sky lets us peek into the vast “commonwealth of breath” (Abram 2010), which we all share.

Harvey (2017:229) observes: “Even if the effort to be modern has involved trying to ignore human kinship with all other beings (and with constitutive matter), we remain involved participants in complex webs of predation, consumption and recycling.” These existential relations play out in our reality in symbolic form and become the basic elements of culture (Weber 2016). Culture is a way of expressively and creatively managing our existential needs. As such it is not entirely different from the ways other, non-human beings manage these needs. They have cultures, because they have needs, which reflect the world from a meaningful perspective. They have cultures, because they are persons. Gary Snyder speaks of “etiquette” of the wild world, in the way the mutuality of ecological relations play out. As ways of managing existential needs they are all cultures, even though they may not be so prone to arbitrary “cultural” change (but to what degree is ours, really?)

So what the westerner sees as “only nature” (the beaver building his dam, the lyrebird doing his dance, the smoke-like column, which bats form while flying out of their cave in dusk in the Ghanaen rainforest, the striped pattern of a giant wasp building her nest under the roof of a tiny shelter in the bush), the animistic mind sees as communications about the respective cultures. It sees them as impressions of an inside, of a somebody, with whom one can relate precisely through these appearances. These appearances have a meaning for us humans, because they are meaningful for the animal person.

If you are about to jump up and shout “that’s so naïve”, wait a minute. All these semiotic characters are indeed signs of the specific life of the respective species, and they do tell a lot of how they live, what they need, how we can help them to thrive, and how they can help us to feed on them. The hunter knowledge of indigenous peoples is remarkable, and it is so, because they stand with other persons (which we call their prey) on an equal footing and can read their culture.

This is where the great doyen of anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, went

wrong. It was dear to him to save the long standing distinction between “nature” and “society”, which marks French anthropology and philosophy at least since the work of Emile Durkheim. Whereas earlier anthropologists had sorted the “primitive” peoples to the nature side (“savages”), Lévi-Strauss “elevated” them to the culture side. They have cultures just as we have, only that their cultures are obsessed with plants and animals. Lévi-Strauss understood the special role that other beings play in animistic societies by the idea that on an early cultural stage “animals are good to think”. Nature becomes a proxy for society. This was the “savage mind” in Lévi-Strauss’ view: A mind that uses the others as analogies to organise the complexities of human society. In this respect, and as it was “en vogue” for nearly a century of French theory, non-human beings lost all their reality in their own right. They became something worse than the disordered and evil realm of nature, “red in tooth and claw”. They changed into mere projections of the human mind. Lévi-Strauss’ proposal rests on the assumption that other beings are empty planes of projection, and have no subjectivity of their own.

The real “savage mind” laughs at this artful dead end. She understands that nature truly is a society, because it is peopled by (non-human) persons. It really has culture, because these (non-human) persons have desires that need to be negotiated in systematic and permanent ways. In indigenous cultures, human society is not formed after the society of other beings, but with them. It is so, because these non-human beings are our kin, and we need to respect their ways, allow them to prosper, and cannot deviate much from the principles of life, which are the principles of creation and rejuvenation. Permanent life as society must be ecological, and we can learn how to be ecological if we let ourselves be inspired by the ecology. This ecology is a society in which the needs of embodied subjects are distributed, negotiated, and eternally transformed into new life.

In order to appreciate this attitude, we must not bypass the testimony of our living body. It is important to see that both go hand in hand: Allowing ourselves to see the other beings as persons with needs, and allowing our own being to be a person with needs, not only with abstract cognition. If we accept ourselves as feeling, yearning, knowing being, we cannot stop from accepting the others in this new experience.

This becomes clear when we walk into the outdoors in order to fulfil our emotional need to be in touch with other beings (and not only to observe and classify



them). The others start to speak. The others start to gain a voice. They start to be meaningful, to assume unexpected presences, to move to tears. Those experiences are facilitated by the practices of nature mentoring in the setting of our western societies. But they are something, which comes to us naturally (hence the talk of self-decolonialisation). From the opposite direction the process of opening up to a more embodied level of knowing yields a comparable result: If we decide to treat other beings as persons, we will have a completely different experience of them.

We need to retain this as a lesson for a different sustainability practice, based on not only theoretically grasping (and teaching) the principles of animism, but engaging in the most profound of its principles, which is sharing the world with others on an equal footing. We are all – humans and non-humans – persons with needs, emotions, and a social intuition. We cannot forsake these capacities in order to be “scientific” and only take some neutral samples. As we are surrounded by persons who all expect from us that we behave in an adequate way, there can never be such neutrality. Rather, it is an insult, as it pretends that those others, who exist as persons like we are, are only things.

Not only does observation grant access to reality, but also feeling and intuition. In his book “Animate Earth” the ecologist Stephan Harding (2004) names four ways of getting into connection with the living cosmos: Through thinking, perceiving, feeling and intuition. The living cosmos informs us in a direct way, because we and all in it are sensitive bodies, which emotionally experience themselves as persons – as concerned by other’s doings and as acting on others.

Animism from the vantage point of shared experience is not longer a naïve projection of one’s own humanity onto a mute and dead nature. The world of bodies and the world of meaning, of habits, of customs, of language and of the social order necessarily arise from one another. They are all worlds of relations in which meanings unfold that real individuals with true feelings experience from the inside and integrate into their worlds in a creative manner. Life produces its creative expression, is aesthetical, has codes, rites, practices of behaviour, pheromone-mediated warning signals, forms of parlance, poems, rock paintings. Nothing is separated into two worlds. There is only one.

For this reason, Castro (2016:250) says: “Culture is the nature of the subject”.

Because all beings in reality are subjects, their life worlds are always cultures. "Bodies are souls [...] as souls and spirits are bodies because both are bundles of affects and sites of perspective." (Castro 1998:481; "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism"). And Deborah Bird Rose (2013:139), an Australian anthropologist, adds: "In country [the Australian term for the living landscape which has brought me forth, derived from the use of English by the original owners of the land] there is no nature/ culture divide; one could say that it is all culture, but that misses the more fundamental point that country is primarily a system of pattern, connection, and action."

So the western dualism dissolves. From the inside, from the inner experience of biological subjects, being nature is society, and its means are culture and metaphor. From the outside it is body, and its means are hunting and gathering, touching and feeding. In one's own body both collapse into one. Within my body I can experience how hunting and feeding do crucial relationship work: When a jaguar eats a peccary, he incorporates the energy of the prey and enlarges the reach of his power. Feeding and hunting are cultural acts from the inside, and material changes from the outside. The wisdom of indigenous people consists in realising this from the start. Their genius is to have built cosmologies on that insight, allowing to construe a balanced exchange with the material world for millenia.

Different from what the west still believes, there are no autonomous natural facts. Everything, which is seen from one perspective, the outside, as nature, proves to be culture from the other (inner) viewpoint. Then matter becomes existential, personal concern. The western tradition has cut off humans from this second half of themselves by the big "severing" (Morton 2017), when our culture gave up its part in the wisdom of being-indigenous-in-the-world, which is millions of years old. Retaining the conviction that all nature is also inward, meaningful, cultured, has consequences which at first, for a westerner, seem strange (accounting for the "picturesque" and fairy-tale impression indigenous cultures made to the colonisers).

From the other beings' perspective (be they animals or spirits), everything encountered is part of the respective species' culture. What to us seem neutral objects, for the other beings is charged with meaning in a similar way as objects from our own culture are, and is accordingly loaded with pleasure or disgust.

From this we can understand, as Castro (2015:251) observes, that in the Amazon rainforest blood presents itself to the jaguar as corn beer – it is a drink he sips with enjoyment. What to us is soaked manioc, the spirits perceive as rotting corpses, and gladly accept as an offer. The world has no other objective character but to be suffered and enjoyed from any possible perspective. This attitude the ecophilosopher and poet Gary Snyder finds already in the Zen master Dōgen. Dōgen writes: “Dragons see water as a palace or a pavilion”. (Snyder 1990: 115).

To experience nature from the inside is an emotional process. It means that own feelings are also part of the ecosystem. The world can be understood as the desire to be connected – and this understanding happens right in myself. Feeling is no private affair, but an organ of perception, through which the relational character of the cosmos becomes manifest. It is a reality, which we create continuously (the “dreamtime” of ongoing creation) and in togetherness (the “ubuntu” of the primacy of the other). How could the experiences of all those natural subjects appear other than through feeling?

We can see here that the rationale of animistic thinking is very different from what guides western mainstream ecological attitudes. Animism builds on something (the “animation” of all life) as a primary moving force that the west has forbidden to refer to for a very long time. Both paradigms are antagonistic to one another, while one of them (the western cognitive empire) claims intellectual superiority and ontological validity over the other. A lot of decolonialisation work is still necessary. As Graham Harvey (2017:172) observes: “The West’s individual is thus a fiction whose well-being must be doubtful as long as it is sought in the maintenance of separation.”

## 6 Kinship: An Ethics of Increase

*"There is balance in the world but no cause."*  
George Tinker, quoted after Graham 2017, 126.

We have seen that animism is not the naïve belief of demons inhabiting trees. It is rather a metaphysically sophisticated and astutely realistic way of understanding how persons come about through continuous processes of relation. Animism is confident that our inner experiences are a key to share this realm of relations in a live-giving way. If we put the central philosophical problem of the west as the question of how the experiencing "I" is related to the infinity of the world (or, as Immanuel Kant asked, "how is inner experience possible?"), we have to accept that the animistic answer covers a lot.

At the same time animism offers an epistemological framework, it entails a collective ethics. If the cosmos is able to create individuality by sharing the total, and manifold, then the human ethical challenge is how to perpetuate this creation. This is the practical ethics, which animism proposes. As with everything animistic, practical means just that: The pledge of keeping the cosmos fecund must be lived rather than argued for. It is not an abstract attitude, but rather a – often even wordless – practice. To state it again in terms of western philosophy: In animism, ontology and ethics cannot be separated. Every detail of the cosmos has a value, because it is part of the personal culture of another species, and meaningful from that.

Western ecological thinking and sustainability philosophy, however, explicitly attempt to separate existence and value. Existence is taken as objective fact (the material existence of things without interest), and value is always personal

and private, be it meaning or monetary worth. As we will see in the course of this section, these are the reasons sustainability politics so often collides with indigenous practices. These are also the reasons why indigenous peoples for long periods have been able to manage ecosystems without destruction, and why western-minded sustainability projects are often less successful at that.

It is notable that a lot of research notwithstanding, western mainstream philosophical discourse has not come up with a widely shared framework for an ecological ethics (for an overview see Holmes Rolston III, 1986). The relatively few proposals on how to frame ethics together with the land, with non-human species, and for a more-than-human community, which have arisen in the west, are mostly critical about the western philosophical tradition and base their foundations on the deep ecology movement with its romantic roots and its Buddhist inspirations. The most influential positions of those “unorthodox” environmental ethics here are those by Joanna Macy, Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold and Gary Snyder.

All of those, although from different backgrounds, propose normative approaches that set out an ethics not for individual (human) subjects, as is common in the west, but for a community. Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethics” is probably the most known among those. Its rationale goes: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1949). We need to note that Leopold developed these thoughts in the US, standing on land that had harboured – and nourished – its original owners only few decades ago. Their maxims probably had not looked very different. Leopold comes to his insight on a common ground – but does not quote (and might not be aware of) any direct inspiration by the American indigenous ways.

Gary Snyder (1990:163), the beat poet and Buddhist disciple, points to the closeness of early Buddhist teachings and an indigenous background. In fact, he says, the “structure of the original Buddhist order was inspired by the tribal governance of the Shakya (‘Oak tree’) nation – a tiny republic somewhat like the League of the Iroquois – with democratic rules of voting [...] Gautama the Buddha was born a Shakya – hence his appellation Shakyamuni, ‘sage of the Shakyas’. The Buddhist sangha is thus modelled on the political forms of a neolithic derived community”. Snyder here brings several threads to a close. He continues:

“So our models for practice, training, and dedication [...] can also look to original communities with their traditions of work and sharing.” Romanticism can, from this vantage point, be seen as a search for an original animistic cosmology and ethics.

In the previous section, we have seen that for the indigenous perspective the world is not static, but populated with persons. A person is somebody with whom we can (and even must) share. Sharing goes before the category of individual. The relation comes first; it gives birth to the individuality. This is already an ethical guideline. As Nurit Bird-Davies (1999: 572f) observes in the Nayaka people: “A Nayaka was normatively expected to share with everybody as and when present, especially (but not only) large game, irrespective of pre-existing social ties, criteria, and entitlement. Sharing with anyone present was as important as if not more important than effecting a distribution of things among people... the Nayaka sense of the person appears generally to engage not the modernist subject/ object split or the objectivist concern with substances but the above-mentioned sense of kinship [...] The person is sensed as ‘one whom we share with’ [...] Their composite personhood is constitutive of sharing relationships not only with fellow Nayaka but with members of other species in the vicinity.”

### “Kincentric Ecology”

In animism, sharing is key. Sharing is key to community, and sharing is key to self. I already mentioned, although only in passing, the African concept of “Ubuntu”, translating with “You are, therefore I am”. The anthropologist Enrique Salmón (2000:1331) observes in his seminal paper on “Kincentric Ecology”: “Indigenous people believe that they live interdependently with all forms of life. Their spiritual, physical, social, and mental health depends on the ability to live harmoniously with the natural world. Indigenous identity, language, land base, beliefs, and history are personifications of culture that regulate and manifest the health of the human as well as the natural world. It is understood that a person who harms the natural world also harms himself.”

The idea of community is based on two notions: That there is some powerful force equally accessible to all of its members, and that all members are responsible to replenish this force. This gives another spin to the notion of society, which

we have used as a common denominator for the collective of all persons (human and non-human). The term “society” does not entirely grasp what is at stake, as it still carries a western-flavoured connotation of an institution constructed by conscious actors. But the society of being is not only institutional, but physical relatedness. It is family. We cannot choose to not pertain to it – we can only rebel against it, or poison it with toxic behaviour. The human relationship to all other beings is that of kin.

Some readers will feel slightly uncomfortable when reading these words. “Family”, and worse, “family obligations” do not sound pretty to many in our society, in which family has often become the playing field of narcissistic spleens and disrespectful acting out – and consequently is often fled. But in particular, the aspect of the combination of “kin” and “obligations” pretty much englobes what the rules of behavior in animistic societies are about. You are part of the collective, and you need to nourish the collective. It is good to know here that many original societies are (again, against the cultural myth of the “indian chief”) rather democratic in organisation (as was the tribe Gautama Buddha stems from, see above).

We need to admit once again that the original peoples had a sharp intuition: From a biological standpoint, in the light of evolution, humans and all other beings are indeed kin. Other animals are our ancestors. Our cells stem from the first living organisms in direct lineage. Each of us is the end of a single, uninterrupted line reaching back to when life began, which only ends with the death of each individual. Even the minerals are our kin, the earth’s water and air, as we find all these substances in our bodies, making ourselves up. Water and stone and air, the elements, from this point are truly our flesh and blood.

Humans care for nature not because they take an advantage if they “think with animals” in order to better understand their own ideas. They even do not see nature as society only because they experience it filled with persons. They see it as kin – and therefore it must be society. The original peoples take the obvious similarities in the living world at face value and construct from them a motivation to keep the cosmos alive. Western metaphysics takes the differences and constructs from those a motivation to enslave the cosmos. That’s a pretty important distinction.

Being kin to non-human beings is an experience. It is not just a concept. It is a numinous and rare experience that nonetheless is part of our normal spectrum of experiences, the experience of mystical awe and enigmatic wholeness most people have made a couple of times in their lives. These mystical and normal experiences are an important part of animistic culture. Usually, anthropologists have been very bad translators of those concepts, as apart from Christian rapture there was not really a place for them in western culture. Anthropologists ended up with misleading terms for the acute experience of cosmic kinship – as for instance “medicine” in case of the indigenous peoples of the USA, or “dream-time” in case of the Australian aborigines. All those terms signify something that might be translated as “mystical potency”. The Rarámuri, the people described by Salmón (2000:1328), use the word “iwigara” for it. “Iwigara expresses the belief that all life shares the same breath. We are all related to, and play a role in, the complexity of life. Iwigara most closely resembles the concept of kincentric ecology,” writes Salmón.

Kinship is shared breath. Breath is what transforms the air of the atmosphere in plant flesh (when the plant breathes in during photosynthesis), and what transforms plant flesh back in the air of the atmosphere (during the animal metabolism). Breath is what transforms bodies into one another, lets the carbon atoms from the plant’s body settle as muscle in the animal’s flesh, and then travels on into the blue vault over our heads, englobing us all within the atmosphere. Kin then is fluid, it is what I can be, or have been. It is truly a shared body. It is truly participation in the same flow of blood.

The mystical potency in sharing breath is an experience, and it is a necessity. If you relate to kin, you have no choice but to be obliged, because it is kin who nourishes you, which brings you forth. So again we see what cruel projection of their own superstitions the colonialisers cast on the original peoples they encountered, when they assumed that those were worshipping demons in animal and plant bodies. Rituals are done in order to nourish community. Rituals are not done in order to subdue to some demon or goddess.

Rituals – song, dance, painting (on sand, rock and bodies), sculpturing – are done to give back the nourishment that is provided by kin. If people sing songs in a ritual, they ask “that the land be nourished and that the land will nourish the people. The land is nourished by the results of the ceremony, which brings



rain. As the songs are performed, the iwi [the force of fertility] continues to turn" (Salmón 2000:1328). The word "iwi [...]" translates roughly into the idea of binding with a lasso. But it also means to unite, to join, to connect. Another meaning of iwi is to breathe, inhale/ exhale, or respire" (Salmón 2000:1328).

What colonists and the early anthropologists often have taken as superstition in truth is the practice to nurture life. This practice has not only a magical, ritualist side, but a lot of practical aspects. For the Raramuri, these practical aspects include work such as planting edible corn and bean fields. Through this, the vegetables become available for the people and, in return, the whole of vegetation alongside the corn and beans grows more abundant through the cultivation process with its caretaking and irrigation (Salmón 2000:1329).

From this detail, it becomes clear that the frequently alleged societal threshold between hunter-gatherer communities and agrarian peoples is artificial. The indigenous cosmology contains the necessity to nurture kin, so the step to do this nurturing in a garden, and from there move to a plot of land is small, and in some respect inevitable. It is probable that the original human cosmologies all build around the idea of nurturing what has given from life. This attitude might even be discussed as a defining criterion of the human species (which has been called "biophilic" by some authors, as e.g. Wilson (1984), Shephard (1998). The true difference therefore, might not be found between agrarian societies and hunter-gatherer tribes, but between land-users who treat country as kin, and those who treat it as matter and resource only. (It cannot be further discussed here that there might be a relation between this primary tendency to nurture kin and the tendency of "natural giving" some psychologist observes in healthy human behaviour (Rosenberg 2000).

Salmón (2000:1330) concludes: "Raramuri land management represents a tradition of conservation that relies on a reciprocal relationship with nature in which the idea of *iwigara* becomes an affirmation of caretaking responsibilities and an assurance of sustainable subsistence and harvesting. It is a realisation that the Sierra Madres is a place of nurturing, full of relatives with whom all breath is shared."

## Ethics as practical care

This ethics does not rely on notions of what is needed in order to be an ethical human subject only. It is neither connected to the demands of a transcendent god expecting obedience from his creatures. It has nothing to do with “the moral good”, or, in a Kantian sense with moral obligations (although, interestingly, Kant’s “categorical imperative” – the obligation to only do those things of which you can wish that they become ethical law – retains a flavour of the idea of reciprocity). Animistic ethics is not even called an ethics by the original peoples. They often simply call it “law”. The law is concerned with what is necessary in order to give life. In this respect, there is no problem with the question, which, in regard to non-human beings, has western ethics stopped short in its tracks: How can we extend moral values to non-human subjects, when “subject” is a term reserved for humans (and, in depth, only for those who subscribe to the societal contract)?

It is nearly impossible to include non-human persons into moral considerations within a western mindset – although we already act in an ethically relevant way towards them. We constantly take from those persons, we live together with them in intimate proximity (think of the symbionts in your body), and human civilisation inflicts mass pain and death to such persons. The impossibility to include those persons into an ethical reasoning is a profound problem in western moral thinking. We need to ask if western ethics is not only unable to heal antagonisms, but creates them in the first place.

The anthropologist Priscilla Stuckey (2013:192) criticises the “western conviction that nature, including human nature, is individualist, acquisitive, and competitive, so that what is considered animal becomes opposed to what is regarded as social”. He argues that the “conflict between individual and society rests on a dualism of body and mind, with the body coded as selfish and instinctive, while only the mind or soul is able to connect with the larger collective” (Stuckey 2013:193). Traditional western ethical systems more or less explicitly rely on this dualism and for this reason privilege the mind of a (human) ethical subject over the body, hence excluding the remainder of the living world from ethical participation. In practical life, however, the proto-ethical matrix of biotic relationships, relations are mediated between bodies, not between rational subjects.

Freya Mathews, an Australian philosopher, sees the ability to think and act in

terms of what gives fertility to the whole of the biotic community as a hallmark of a possible (and necessary) ecological civilisation. Her idea follows the equivalent attitude, which we find in animist cultures, that the aims of the individual and the collective of beings are not truly in opposition, but very much align: “In our modern societies we have entirely forgotten about desiring only what Earth-others need us to desire – and, so far, we have gotten away with this” (Mathews, 2020:52). A fair community with life would follow “a proto-moral principle of adaptative accommodation to the needs of the rest of Earth-life”. This “broadly equates not only to *wu wei*, in ancient Daoist tradition, but to the normative principle, or Law, that is core to Australian Aboriginal cultures and that Aboriginal people read from land itself” (Mathews, 2020:52).

Ethics, therefore, can be conceived from the standpoint of what is necessary to contribute to the fecundity of a system or process of relationships developing in a given place or part of “country”. The resulting moral rules can be called a distributed ethics or a commons ethics, which privilege not the moral (human) subject, but the unfolding intersubject of shared life. The ethical principle then is care for this shared life.

### Power is relationship

Many ecologists think (at least silently) that “humans” are detrimental to “nature”. They design nature preserves as exclusion zones for humans, often causing great distress to local populations, frequently the traditional “owners” of the land. The US Wilderness Act from 1964 defined wilderness as “land untrammelled by man”, and from there found its way into many similar legal texts all over the planet. Wild is understood as unspoilt, hence as the absence of man. This definition follows the old rules of the colonised mind, where the domains of “man” and of “nature” are forever separate. Only that in the version provided by environmentalism (and by many more of the romantic tradition), “nature” is not the root of all evil, but the harbour of all good. This stream of thought has its own lineage down deeply into enlightenment thinking, this time represented by the French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Where “wild” means “evil” in the Hobbesian tradition, it means “good” in the Rousseauian heritage.

Asking truly “wild” peoples – peoples living in an explicit necessary epistemo-

logical and physiological exchange with the more-than-human world – we get a different answer. We learn that “wild” means to be in relationship, and to fulfil your part of the relationship in a way that the collective of life does not unravel. Being wild means being involved in nurturing others – as those wild others also nurture us. Wildness is the drive of the world to generate persons and experiences through mutual nurturing. Where wilderness to the western mindset is life-taking, to the animist it is life-giving. This merits another table for comparison:

TABLE 4  
*Two different grounds for an “Ethics of the Wild”*

| “Wild” in the Western imagination | “Wild” in Indigenous Practices                          |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Without rules                     | Based on rules  |
| Egoistic                          | Devoted to mutuality                                    |
| Threatening with death            | Life-giving   |
| Opposed to man                    | Including man   |
| Emotionally detached              | Profuse with feeling                                    |
| Sublime                           | Nourishing  |
| Stranger                          | Kin   |
| Opaque to human understanding     | Transparent to thinking, sensing, feeling and intuition |
| Better off without man            | In need of man  |
| Requiring control                 | Requiring gratitude                                     |

When I talk of the “savage mind” here, I refer to these qualities. By this, I give the term coined by Lévi-Strauss (discussed in the last section) a slight twist. The “savage mind” in my understanding does not use nature categories in order to grasp cultural realities. The “savage mind” understands that the real itself is “savage”, hence fecund. It brings forth every being including man, who therefore is not distant, or detached, or different, but just what all other beings and species are: Persons with their specific cultures, their idiosyncratic playfulness and their own special knack for creating. The savage mind is us.

The savage mind understands that humans play a central role in granting a balance to the powers of creation. The Australian anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2013:139) observes: “Human groups hold the view that they are an extremely important part of the life of their country.” It is their duty to make increase possible. Is this allegedly central role a discouraging sign of human arrogance? Or is it an insight into our power, because we have the freedom to say no to our responsibility for nurturance, as the western/ global civilisation currently does? Humans play a central role in the ecosystem, we could say, because it will be spoiled without our compliance.

The idea of humans being responsible for increase paints a picture of stewardship that is very different from the term used by some Anthropocene thinkers, and by which they frequently address human mastery and control about a damaged nature. Although in the anthropocene discourse agency is often asserted to non-human beings and even to matter, yet the ethics of such agency is not followed through, and the mindset remains in the western episteme. An ethics of totally distributed agency, of a world shared with persons, would require the simple, but far-reaching gesture of “the other first”.

Deborah Bird Rose has collected some impressive insights into the practice of ethics in animistic cultures. In Australia, the “totemic” system of different kin groups to which humans adhere, functions in the same way as a tie between different human individuals social groups, and the non-human beings of country, as the set of existential relationships (prey/ predator, parasite/ host, niche-builder/ niche) functions in an ecosystem. The totemic links bind humans to the ecosystem, not in an analogous and purely “symbolic” fashion, but through various layers of obligations, as Rose (2013:140) describes: “Totemic relationships traced through three lines of descent, in systems of exogamy, ensure that people will

have numerous non-human kin, and will, in effect, be members of several overlapping, but not identical kin groups”.

Members of the dingo kin group for example “are responsible for the flourishing of dingoes in the world, and this means as well that they are responsible for their own flourishing (as dingo people)” (ibid.). This articulation process of finding one’s own identity in the presence of others leads, as Rose observes, to an enhanced vulnerability of the human members: If dingo, or emu, kin suffer, the humans adhering to the respective kin group inevitably suffer, too. But at the same time through one’s own “distributedness” into the ecosystem the own forces are much enhanced. Rose (2013:141) summarises: “Kin responsibilities distribute interest and care across species and countries such that one’s individual interests are embedded within, and realised most fully in the nurturance of, the interests of those with whom one shares one’s being [...] The process of living powerfully in the world is thus based on nurturing the relationships in which one’s life indwells. Nurturance is neither infinitely obligatory, nor is it diffused and undifferentiated.”

Indigenous humans engaged in increase rituals are therefore not acting superstitiously in their own interest, but rendering other beings a necessary (and often tiresome) service: “Increase rituals... [are] performed by members of a kin group with the explicit intention of singing up abundance within a species”, observes Rose (2013:142). The idea accompanying this is not just “magic” – but primarily the conviction that we can direct our attention to other beings and that this has an effect.

Rose’s colleague Matthew Hall (2013:392) states: “At the basis of most good relationships is communication. In order to construct relationships with plant persons it is necessary to communicate with them, and recognise their presence... In Yanyuwa country, when the humans address songs directly to the cycad trees, they are not ‘worshipping’ them, they are singing in order to keep the trees healthy.” Such rituals are only a part of a wider set of work intended to make other beings flourish. Others are concrete rules of what can be consumed and at what times: “When an emu person [a human pertaining to the emus kin group] dies, nobody eats emu until the emu people tell them they can, and the first emu to be killed is treated with special ritual.” Rose (2013:142).

There is another interesting aspect emerging here, which we cannot fully discuss at this place: When we look at this discussion with attention, we can see that although the aboriginal cultures Rose has studied would by no means qualify as matriarchical, yet there are many qualities present in their cosmology and the ensuing principles for action that can be related to the field identified in the west with “the feminine” – nurturing, taking care of, making connections, being responsible, feeding. Is it possible that we see here a proto-gender way of being part in a community that nourishes life? Is this kind of understanding and doing the true character of the “age of the great mother”, assumed by some to be a phase in European prehistory? Was it matriarchal in the sense that the “feminine” qualities of relating, caring and nurturing were supported by all, men and women alike?

### Can we become animists again?

A reserve against my approach to talk of “animism” as a cultural domain could be that indeed there all societies are different, and that this sort of classification again is the typical western colonising regard: Classifying from the outside instead of asking and communicating. This caution remains valid. Still, it is a remarkable fact that so many different societies outside urban/ hierarchical societies, and particularly outside the European/ global western sphere of influence retain basic similarities in regard to their cosmologies and the principles of interaction between humans and non-humans (co-creative nurturing of the cosmos) and between humans (egalitarian cooperation).

It is imaginable that animistic cosmologies were the standard way of human organisation from the deep time of early-modern humans on. If we compare modern ritualistic artifacts (rock art, sculpture) to historic ones, we can indeed constitute a host of similarities. Gleaming from insights into current ritualistic practice helps understand the meaning and rationale of prehistoric art, particularly the enigma why the most spectacular of this art was done in the dark depths of caves like Altamira or Lascaux. As Robert Wallis observes, “Thinking animically, this hidden art may have been produced for consumption by other-than-human-persons, and was only ever to be seen and actively engaged with by them. In this way, engagements between human-persons and stone-persons may be seen

as two-way and relational rather than involving a one-way inscription of human meaning.” (Wallis 2013:322).

So I’d like to keep open the possibility that animism characterises a deep-seated human way of understanding the nature of reality and to align the own existence with it. We have seen above to what astonishing degree animistic cosmologies anticipated insights, which science has taken centuries to reach, after it diverted from the original animistic setup at least 2000 years ago. If we put together the state-of-the-art-knowledge at the beginning of the Anthropocene, we can say that animistic awareness and indigenous practices are corroborated by many of the more important newer intellectual developments. Isn’t that amazing? We should not dwell at this amazement, however, or only write lengthy academic treatises about them. We should start taking it seriously by acting animistically.



## 7 Ecopolitics: Renouncing Immortality

*“Any inner-outer-dichotomy, with the human skin as boundary, is psychologically irrelevant.”*

A. Irving Hallowell, 1955, quoted according to Ingold in Harvey 2013:224

The totemic system is a guarantee that the human interests and obligations cannot be uncoupled from a specific place. They are related to where the proper kin species dwell. For this reason, indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to habitat destruction and species loss – those are part of their human identity. Stuck (2013:204) observes that “a relational ontology requires a local focus, to preserve the face to face care and nurturance shared with others”. It requires a local focus in order to be fair and just in both directions. This is an important lesson for a western ecological approach, where obligations to sustain other species are built upon rather abstract systemic properties of habitats (a species’ place in the foodchain, or in a symbiosis).

We cannot imagine a politics of equality without the acute and active necessities to share with the non-human family members, which are represented only through a specific place in its material nature, in the food and water it offers, in the breath we share with it. This connection to the world of other living beings might seem negligible to a westerner’s eyes. But it is of utter importance, as apart from a specific place relations become abstract, even those between humans, as they are incomplete without being embedded in the wider context of mutual care with non-human persons. True egalitarianism cannot work if non-human persons are excluded. True democracy requires the participation of all beings, not in a parliament of things, but in a collective of shared breath. This is a point that poses a challenge for sustainability practices, which want to engage with

indigenous ways. It cannot be done without entering physically into the web of relationships, which keep one another mutually alive.

### A family of equals

There is another point why letting the concrete place and its ecosystem have a say in one's own existence preserves equality between humans. Being "of" a place does not mean to own this place. For this reason, the expression "traditional owners of the land" in contexts where before "aboriginals" or "tribespeople" was used, is less than appropriate. "Traditional custodians of the land" is better, but sounds much weaker. It does sound so because of the higher quality of relation, which is implied. A custodian does not have property rights. And it is exactly this lack, which grants equality among all members of a biotic community. Nobody has a right to possess.

When western debates about preserving nature meet indigenous struggles for keeping country intact, two totally different worldviews meet: The idea of property rights confronts the necessity of accommodating kin. According to what I have said about the ontological difference of the animistic cosmos, it should be clear that the indigenous view cannot be directly mapped on western legal structures. Our legal system very much relies on a concept of property, and property is about things – the very concept of property is dualistic. It is part of the traumatising heritage of the split world – humans here, things there; and humans with a lot of things on top, and those with less things below.

It is therefore doubtful if moves such as granting a river a legal status as a person, or even its own property rights (as has recently happened to the Whanganui river in New Zealand, Lurgio 2019) profoundly changes the fact that other beings in western thinking are things, and therefore can be means to personal enrichment. Property as such is not really doable from an animistic perspective. And it directly destroys relationship – if I own you, you are not free to relate to me. The idea of private property is the seed from which the western narcissism grows. In its most pathological form as a mental disturbance narcissism is about possessing other people. But every form of ownership of what – rather who – is a free participant in the cosmic exchange process keeps some traits of narcissism.

## Narcissism is the deadly sin of ecology

Whereas in western civilisation one can be tempted to conclude that narcissism is a prerequisite for any success, and that hence the most narcissistic individuals obtain the most socially responsible positions, indigenous cultures frequently actively work against “making egos big”. They know that humans have the tendency to use others and bully them, and have invented a set of rules to break that temptation. Arguably, initiation rituals serve this purpose (by showing, that individuality is a temporary and fragile thing). But there are many more. A pretty interesting custom can be found with the Ju/ 'hoansi in Southern Africa. They call it “insulting the prey” (Suzman 2017).

When a hunter comes back to the village, the prey must be shared among all inhabitants. If the hunter was particularly successful, and brings a huge prey (or even needs to call for help as he cannot carry it alone), he is not applauded, but mocked. People ridicule his catch, the more the bigger (and hence helpful) it is. Comments like “it wasn’t worth the effort even to walk out if you come back with prey tiny as a fly” when in truth he has killed an eland are rather scolds than compliments. The reason, explained one Ju/ 'hoansi to the anthropologists, is simply to keep personal narcissism in check.

Suzman (2017) quotes an elder telling his anthropologist colleague Richard B. Lee: “When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man – and thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can’t accept this ... so we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way, we cool his heart and make him gentle.” This is a socially imposed negative feedback loop: A very good hunter will be discouraged disproportionately. Those most liable to become proud, to become arrogant, and, worse, to assume personal leadership, are held back. This is probably rather painful for the individual hunter, who would like to see his efforts and his success be acknowledged. But it effectively blocks any temptation to become the local strongman.

Who reaches up is made small. In order to maintain equal rights and equal access for all, rules have been established, which seem nearly brutal to us. Those rules could have been widely distributed among the the cultures of the neolithic earth – many of them had no formal government and no “chiefs” and relied on egalitarian self-governance. The static cosmos of the original peoples about

which the philosopher shakes her head ("I want to live in a world in which improvement is possible!") rely on the humiliation of the overblown ego. If this world, as it is, offers eternal fecundity, if it births individuality (including our own) in order to steward and to nurture this fecundity, what can be improved in it?

Again and again it is said: Man is the animal, which knows that it will die. Presumably the other beings know this as well in different grades (all try to avoid their deaths). But they manage to live with this knowledge (that they are mortal) and accept that death exists. This is their greatness and their placidity, even if they have immense teeth. Man, however, is the animal, which searches an escape from being mortal. He attempts to flee from mutuality, whose deepest expression is the complementarity of life and death. To do this, he controls his environment as hard as possible. Man refuses to be mortal. More exactly: He refuses to be edible. He refuses the ultimate sharing. This is his ecological distinction. And it is his ecological bestiality.

Western culture is grounded on obstructing of the mutual transformation, which is enabled by death, and which is the core process of ecosystems. There is nothing more unecologic than immortality. Nothing is less egalitarian in a world of mortals, which gains its strength because it is edible and by this can birth itself every day anew. To put the own ego in the first place means claiming immortality. This is the deadly sin of ecology.

We see that, also in this respect, animistic societies show that an egalitarian approach to other species goes hand in hand with a fundamental equality among humans. One cannot be separated from the other.

### Acephalous societies

The colonisers did not wholly grasp what they found when they discovered the different societies of traditional Africa and tropical South America. The communities did not have leaders, there were no tribal chiefs, but councils of elders (in Ghana those are called the "committee"). In South America, the conquistadores were consternated: The Indians did not know power, they did not know sin and they did not know hell, the first missionaries wrote back to Spain in horror.

Technically such societies are called “acephalous”. They have no-one in charge and are thus “headless” (cephalos in Greek means head). We can see the pejorative element in that term: A headless body is pretty savage, like that of a jellyfish. For the western colonists, all of them underlings of more or less authoritarian regimes, rule was in order. Who does not subordinate to authorities, goes the prejudice, stands on a lower cultural step, close to what Hobbes had called the “Leviathan”, the all-devouring nature.

Mistranslations distorted the reality of social organisation further. In the territory of today’s Ghana, for example, the (temporary) speaker of the committee was addressed as “chief” (and is still today). The colonial power, organised hierarchically, was not able to make better sense of this social role. So the “tribal chief” that plays such a central role in western literature from Cooper’s “The Leatherstocking Tales” over the German writer Karl May and his “Winnetou” – series of novels to Pocahontas, was by far in the minority, and, going back in history, must be seen as a more recent development than acephalous groups. The “tribal chief” as a general phenomenon exists as little as the original capitalism by barter and the natural state of pitiless war against one another. The chieftain pageantry, his state and absurd ostentation are mainly reflexes of a European disease: The idea that we need to surrender to an authority, which is cut off from other humans and non-humans and from country and its creatures.

Who looks more deeply into the culture of, for example, traditional Africa learns that its communities are not controlled by a chief, but governed by an elder who is supported by a council of other members of the community. These are often chosen by consensus among all members. What we find there is a form of basal democracy, where no one obtains a position that is intrinsically more powerful than others, or that cannot in principle be held by any other. Power is not hereditary, but a distinction for a limited time. It is as fluid and distributed as it is in an ecosystem.

The British colonists modified this structure by giving the elder the status of a dependent, local or regional king, and all others the role of his subservient objects. A regent was created and the tribe could be managed. But by this the common participation in the flows and transformations of the cosmos for all had become impossible.

## Commons as politics of kinship

Animistic societies are the models for what the idea of the commons means: To participate in a collective that gives its members the rights to use and the obligations to nurture at the same time; to be part of a collective that is not conceptually different from the place it acts on ("country"), and which, correspondingly, embraces everyone and everything (in western parlance) of a given locality. Being part of a commons means: Everybody can use, everybody must contribute; everybody receives, everybody provides something. There is no "inside" and no "outside". There is no privileged user and no private property. Within a commons no resource is extracted, but a process of relationships is nurtured. A fundamental mutuality creates the individuals and the overarching whole to which they belong. The participants in the commons are not its operators, but its elements, as are all other entities and beings who are participating in the process of reciprocity, i.e. country and its inhabitants. Nothing belongs to one person alone, but all belong to one another. The best description for a commons is "Fecundity in reciprocity".

We can stress five general points here (which I have all extensively discussed elsewhere, so I will only briefly summarise their import for the process of self-decolonisation. See Weber 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2019):

- 1. Commons are truly egalitarian in a trans-species and trans-category way.
- 2. Commons are not only structural organisations, but also dimensions of inner experience, which are constitutional and cannot be separated.
- 3. Commons are the way how each ecosystem, and hence the whole earth-system (or "Gaia") organises itself, so that life itself can be seen as commons.
- 4. All exchange is understood as a gift, with the original gift being the cosmic creation.
- 5. All reciprocity is based on rules, which organise giving and receiving.

Seen from the viewpoint of these claims, the existential practice of animism is the pivot, which articulates natural processes and the human social reaction to them; the way we best cope with reality. It is astonishing that in commons research and activism (which is a very quickly developing field today) the awareness how deeply indigenous societies are embedded in the commons paradigm,

and therefore how profoundly the way of the commons is entangled with our past as a species and as a history of cultures, still needs to be developed further

This slight neglect – there is much engagement from indigenous sides in the common movement, so the nexus is present, and the neglect I am talking about is more one from the official academic side – is probably due to the fact that the lived commons of animistic communities are basically not only technical, but ritualistic. In order to live a commons, we need to include all species, and the spirits. That's a thing hard to swallow for mainstream activist discourse, be it as advanced as it is.

Animistic societies can give us insights into many of the conundrums of commoning and their possible solutions (as much as the society of other beings, the biosphere, can give us insights into this). One insight can be that we need to understand commons as the economies and politics of kinship. This is not meant in the sense of nepotism, evidently, but in the sense that exchange builds on the notion of being necessarily and profoundly related, and that any exchange can only go along these lines of relation, creating them and recreating them, unless it becomes destructive.

The commons once had been widely distributed in the occident (being the only form of allocation and distribution in prehistory). But when thinking shifted to separate reality into subject and object – or consumer and commodity – those in power transformed the commons into their private property (Weber 2012). This process became possible because the other participants of reality were more and more conceived of as separate things. In Europe, the destruction of the commons was in its bloom when Thomas Hobbes wrote his "Leviathan" against the "natural state". The importance of "objective science" rose steeply, denying other forms of knowledge and perception. The enclosure of the commons became an enclosure of the soul, which censored the inner relationship to a shared aliveness, and which contributed to the "coloniser's mind" the westerner has developed. The enclosure of the commons was a process of colonialisation, and like all of those processes, it enacted the unequally distributed power and actually worsened the overall quality of relationship, but did so in the name of a better episteme.

Also the colonialisation of the indigenous world is a destruction of the com-

mons – from a material, cosmological and psychological side. The European newcomers attacked the three main pillars of the commons, its social aspect (the egalitarian reciprocity), its animate aspect (the identity of the humans, which is the identity of country in reciprocity with its non-human inhabitants) and its ecological aspect (the nurturing of country through a careful culture in mutuality and through ritual gifts). In a way, the colonisers destroyed everything that they had lost themselves long ago, leaving behind desperate and hungry souls in danger of forgetting what they had been.

This colonisation is far from over. Today, it goes by the name of “landgrabbing”. Multinational corporations take away the country from the remaining subsistence cultures in the tropical zones of the earth, predominantly in Africa, and prevent the original custodians from access, as they do not have an official property title. The inhabitants are unable to defend themselves, just as they were at the times of the first huge waves of colonisation. Private property destroys the fundamental reciprocity indigenous people need to live. Historically, it was incredibly easy to take land from the original people: They gave it away themselves. The aboriginal elder Margaret Kemarre Turner (2010:133) recounts that when the white man arrived, the aborigines gave him the right to use the land whose stewards they had been. For, they knew that the land is a gift to all.

Humans who belong to a culture of sharing are doomed in a world, which does not share but distributes, which separates and does not continuously renew connections. This viewpoint helps us to better grasp the misery of the post-colonial world. Crushed between the interfaces of traditional human existence, which is devoted to renew the collective, which englobes not only people, but all beings, and a world, which uses all beings as objects in order to build a secured fortress for the powerful, life bleeds away.

Indigenous people do not survive colonisation – and capitalism, which is part of the package colonisation comes with – because capitalism eats up unreserved mutuality. Capitalism feeds on unconditionality. Capitalism devours life, and it eats those, who do not think of other but to be of service of this life, who nurture life, who celebrate life-giving relationships. Capitalism feeds on what has been standing at the centre of animistic practice for hundreds of thousands of years.



## Ecology of the gift

The importance of mutuality manifests in the passion of indigenous humans to offer gifts. The central role of the gift shows in many small things, like the rituals of gratitude through which indigenous people show that they have received as gifts what they need for a living, and that they take responsibility for not wasting it. In some communities, meat is distributed such that the successful hunter gives all his prey away and then is gifted back just the amount he needs for himself. The central point of such an “economy of the gift” is that private property does not play a role in it. Everyone who needs something is cared for by the community.

“Generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative”, says the US-American nature writer and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:381) about her own culture. She is a member of the Potowatomi people and therefore is familiar with both perspectives: the imperial dogma of the west and the indigenous traditions of “Turtle Island”. Kimmerer observes: “Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away [...] In a culture of reciprocity, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again.” To give therefore does not follow a personal, but a cosmic reckoning.

“The economy of the gift” is frequently being discussed as theory in western debates about new economic models. Indigenous people live inside of it. It is the deep economy of our species, and has been so for hundreds of thousands of years. The choice of words is not entirely correct, however: It is not about economy, but about ecology, the household of relations, in which every participant plays a vital role for another. Everyone gives something to the others – and gets something back from someone else. The sun, water, food, the language in which one grows up, all this quenches existential desires. Neither in the natural world, nor in the indigenous cosmos, are those gifts something that must be earned. They are the gifts given to anyone in need.

Kimmerer (2013:3ff) has examined how deeply this culture of the gift has marked the worldview of indigenous America. She recounts her people’s creation history, starting with the mythical ancestor of the human race, Skywoman. At the beginning, Skywoman sank down to earth from the sky, in slow spirals, like a maple seed. And then she was down here, alone, in need of help. She was dependent on the help of the animals who saved her, and they heeded her need,

and in order to save her, one of the animals gave his life for her. So the creation story of Kimmerer's people, the Potowatomi, starts with two gifts: With Skywoman who falls from the sky, like the sunlight, and the animal, who gives himself away in order to donate life to her.

For Kimmerer (2013:28) the gift is essential in order to create mutuality. "The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity." In a world of giving the relationships count, not the height of the barriers, which everyone has erected against the others by heaping up things around him.

## 8 Rules for Behaving Well in the Society of Being

*"Animism is about what it means to be alive in the world"*  
Tim Ingold in Harvey 2013

In this chapter I will make some practical suggestions about how to interact with the persons that constitute an ecosystem – a local commons of reality. This essay has started as an attempt to show how important animistic practices and beliefs are for a practice of sustainability that says goodbye to the traumatic heritage it stems from. The essay then has unfolded into an argument for self-decolonialisation. I propose this – the path to self-decolonialisation – as the first requisite to understand those cultures that have never truly stepped out of the experience that the cosmos is a vast collective engaged in nurturing aliveness. I hold that nurturing aliveness – one's own and that of the others, which, if done with the innocent intent of providing nourishment, is indistinguishable (Weber 2017) – is the most important step towards a different ecological practice.

This step is not technical. It is not about learning the right skills from indigenous societies (albeit those skills often require a particular attitude, and hence acquiring them can lead to nurturing one's aliveness). I think that what we need in order to nurture life (the own and that of others) is animistic practice. I say this with the same emphasis as the Buddhist who does not worship, but practice. And as the Buddhist teacher Dōgen reminds us: "When you find your place where you are, practice occurs" (quoted according to Snyder 1990:27). It is nice and surely helpful if we understand the technology implicated in the management of indigenous commons, but alone it will never get to the point. In the hands of the westerner, this knowledge will become just another technical means, a tool in

treating the world as an object. But the first step is stopping to treat the world as an object, and to approach it as a thou instead – with gratitude and the pledge for reciprocity.

I remember attending a several-days workshop on the ontologies of the commons recently. The experts invited were international, and there was even a small minority stemming from indigenous backgrounds, or at least from countries in which this is part of the everyday experience. There was nothing ontological present in the way the conference unfolded, though. The participants talked and tried to be right – to trump the other’s arguments.

A change only came when one group decided to hold a session in the presence of the local river, a beautiful, suffering body of water, who flowed in sight of the workshop venue, but whom nobody had greeted before. The simple act of asking to be received, and of promising to provide fecundity, and the water at our feet murmuring a continuous answer of invitation, did everything to change the course of the talk. It was then that I understood that in order to be truly helpful to the non-human persons with whom we share our breath, we do not need to struggle over better theory (and over who wins). We need to ask for permission to enter into the commons of mutual nurturing again, and we need to pledge to give back. And we need to truly do this, with our voice, and our skin.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:183) has given a remarkable account of the attitude, which is needed in order to achieve this reconnection. It is not about technique, or skills, or the right requisites. It is about real care, care on the heart level, of truly seeing the (non-human) others with whom we share. It is about taking reciprocity seriously, as Kimmerer suggests: “Know the ways of the ones who take care of you so that you can take care of them.” Kimmerer calls the attitude to approach others in order to ask them to share their world with us the “Honorable Harvest”. She has developed the according set of rules particularly for the situation of humans “taking” from the natural world, for food or for clothing. But the “Honorable Harvest” is a guide to any form of relationship with non-human (and human!) others. Its “ancient rule is not just to take only what you need, but to take only that which is given” (Kimmerer 2013:184). The principles of the “Honorable Harvest” are

*Introduce yourself.*

*Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.*

*Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer*

*Never take the first. Never take the last.*

*Take only what you need.*

*Take only that which is given.*

*Never take more than half. Leave some for others.*

*Harvest in a way that minimises harm.*

*Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.*

*Give thanks for what you have been given.*

*Give a gift in reciprocity for what you have taken.*

*Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.*

*(Kimmerer 2013:183)*

These principles, and this is the animistic requirement, are to be taken seriously. We need to comply to them literally. “Introduce yourself” means “say the truth about who you are”. Say it. Speak. Communicate. Talk in front of a tree. A twig full of cherries. “Be accountable” means “really do grasp that you are in a relationship in which your actions affect a sentient person”. And so on down on the list.

For the western mind, and particularly for academic thought, this is a near-to impossible task. (At least in a professional setting. It may happen everyday with one’s pet animal or within the own garden). This is also so, because the practice of reciprocity as taught by Kimmerer very much relies on our embodied experience sensing the reality of other, human and non-human, persons. The attitude of the “Honorable Harvest” presupposes that we are indeed able to communicate as part of the wider collective of life, and that we need to do so in order to nurture it. This communication comes first. It is more important than a sophisticated plan

what to do, or a technical manual, and it is vastly better than a programme that you want to teach to others.

If we build on the biosemiotic insights of modern biology, if we trace the connection lines, which link us psychologically and physiologically into a meshwork of other bodies with whom we share one life, my insistence on the performative needs of truly communicating with other beings does not need to seem so exceptional anymore. Philosophically, or rather in the terminology of western philosophy, the attitude, which underlies a relating in this way, is called “Panpsychism” (Mathews 2003, 2009). It is the theory that says every material reality, process and instance is at the same time, from a different perspective, a subjective experience. Panpsychism – albeit hotly debated as to which form it should take – is on the rise in our days after it had a hard time in the last two centuries of a mainstream science denying any ontological subjectivity, and determined to do away with feeling.

Hence, as debating is the according practice for a dualistic metaphysical approach (talking about), feeling is the necessary means for a panpsychistic worldview (feeling with). Allowing ourselves to feel is the prime requisite for communication with non-human persons – for listening to them and asking to be heard by them – and it is at the same time precisely what needs to be achieved through our self-decolonisation. Again: These are not skills of magic out of reach for an ordinary western human. To the contrary: We are practising this kind of feeling all the time, as we are alive and cannot help to be it.

Standing in the presence of a flowering rose and feeling – even inexplicably – drawn towards it, feeling compelled to become active and productive in the presence of its beauty – is already a deep communication. So observes nature educator Barry Patterson (2005:136): “A communication with a tree is first and foremost a feeling in your body.” Many of our western practices in the minor sciences of art and poetic understanding are communications with the collective of the other-than-human world. For a member of an indigenous society the experience of awe and beauty in the presence of “nature” certainly is communication. The others speak to us through our feelings.

So there is a lot of exchange with other persons already going on. We only need to make it explicit, and we need to elevate this experience from the neglect

of being “private anecdotes” or from the estrangement of admitting in them only “aesthetic perceptions”, re-enactments of memes from cultural history. If the others are kin, being welcomed by them instills in us the feeling of being nurtured by family. What the west calls the experience of beauty hence in depth might be the realisation to be kin. It might be the experience to be looked at, to be called, the invitation by this kin to partake, and to nurture back with one’s own capacity to give life (Weber in Van Horn & Kimmerer, forthcoming). We should never underestimate the degree to which an other look at us while we observe her/ him. We should never confuse a sensuous contact with otherness on a place with a purely causal event of “having a sensory perception”.

The other persons being present in the collective of life communicate their presence, and they give back our gaze, or even return it before we have started to properly watch. If the meshwork of bodies who share one breath is, as animsim holds and human basic experience corroborates, a domain, which lives through inner experience and encounter of other’s inner experiences as much as it does through material exchange, then everything we encounter on the material plane is also a communication on the animate plain. Every sensuous happenstance is as well a dialogue between beings. This dialogue happens very much on a bodily level, as for example the dialogue between our liver and our red blood cells. But it is nonetheless not machine-like and “purely physiological”, to the contrary.

As the liver-erythrocyte-dialogue is providing us with life, and any disturbance in their communication is potentially life-threatening, their body-talk is present to us as our inner experience, and mood. It is expressed in a language that is difficult to translate in words. But it is nonetheless expressed in an idiom that we understand, because it is the conversation that we ourselves are, that brings us forth and connects us to all other persons, which are equally linked to physiologies and matters of exchange (add the water cycle, or carbon, or rock withering). We converse in a language that is not unknown to us, only unknown to our awareness, which privileges thinking over perceiving. But all is said, although we might need a moment to translate.

Take a moment and look into the trees with their branches moving slowly, and then more quickly with the wind. And then imagine that everything outward is an expression of the collective of being that nurtures us, and that needs to be nurtured back, every whisper of the leaves brings its inwardness with it, every

gust of wind is from a world, which does not differentiate between mind (us) and body (them), but is both always. And then maybe for a short moment you can perceive that the wind is the breath of someone, and that it meets you as another someone. Imagine that the trees swaying in the breeze, the foliage moving stronger here, only slightly there, then stirring in a soft wave, and then calming down again, are actually one being moving and breathing, and expressing her presence.

The cultural anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram has developed this experience into a theory of the ubiquitous animistic spirits as the “Invisibles”, as the sensuous excitement we feel when in touch with the collective of other life. Abram (2013:132) says: “The spirits are not intangible; they are not of another world. They are the way the local earth speaks when we step back inside this world.” Then it is less difficult to know that we are addressed, although it remains difficult to discern the meaning of it. Abram goes on: “By speaking of the invisibles not as random ephemera, nor as determinate forces, but as mysterious and efficacious powers that are sometimes felt in our vicinity, we loosen our capacity for intuition and empathetic discernment.” This is the sort of experience, which lays the track for a proper communication with the other beings present in the local collective of life.

Here is not the place for a presentation of different practices of communication with those “Invisibles”, with the persons populating the “more-than-human-world” (Abram 1996). Two things are important to mention, though:

First, reconnecting to the living world can be done by everyone. It does not require expert knowledge, as it builds on our own inborn practical capabilities to be alive and to nurture life-giving relationships, and to feel if those relationships are providing nourishment. It builds on our capacity to be true to ourselves, and true to others, and to really wish to provide for reciprocity. In the worlds of sustainability activist and mentor Elizabeth Ferguson “so much of it is simply knowing the world to be alive and feeling and to experience great gratitude and relationship to it” (Elizabeth Ferguson, personal communication). The heart leads, not the adherence to any techniques or schools.

Second, westerners need the guidance by indigenous people here. Westerners need to be humble. They need to be willing to learn and to unlearn. They



need to be willing to truly do the work of transformation in order to work away the traumas. They need to accept that what is necessary is the readiness to not prevail as a protected ego, but to allow this to die. It is for this reason that I think that in the encounter between the western empire and animistic ways the latter must enjoy precedence. We need to bear our mistakes. The other first.

Here is a proposal of what can be done before any activity takes place at any given location. It is simple, but if taken seriously, can establish a basic openness for communication. Everything else will come from there.

*Arrive. Don't get busy immediately. Don't cater to your needs first. Go ask what is the need here.*

*Walk around without aim. Let yourself be drawn by your intuition to where you are called.*

*Be attentive. Where is North, where is South? Where is the wind coming from? What birds are singing? What sounds are around?*

*Listen for the spirit of the place. Try to sense its mood – the atmosphere of the location. Try to feel what it needs.*

*At the place where you feel called to (where you feel best, actually), rest, and ask for reception. Use simple words and speak in a normal way.*

*Pledge to work in favour of fecundity. Pledge reciprocity. Pledge that your work here will be a gift to this place and to all its beings.*

*Breathe. Perceive. Sense. Listen to answers with all senses and all of your capacities to receive: Think, Perceive, feel and intuit.*

*Take only what is given.*

*Think of what you can offer. Tell what you can offer ("Spontaneity. Precision. Perseverance. Grace". Or what is your strength, and your love?)*

*Leave a gift.*

*Start your work.*

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