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(an answer)

January 27, 2020

Written by: zoetodd (<https://anthrodendum.org/author/zoetodd/>)



It's dangerous to write and post when you have the flu. But I have been housebound since Friday and although my physical body is nowhere near ready to strike out into the world, my brain is ready to do more than just watch Parks and Recreation on repeat. So here we are.

In May 2018 I asked "should I stay or should I go? (<https://anthrodendum.org/2018/05/12/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go/>)" with respect to the discipline of anthropology. By that point I had been working in the field for 8 years, including 3 years as a lecturer/prof. And those 8 years had nearly destroyed me. I was still puzzling through how to ethically occupy the space of being an Indigenous woman (I am a Métis woman with Métis, Cree, Scottish, Irish, British, and Norwegian ancestors, through my Métis dad and my white settler mom). I am trying to be in good relation with the territories I currently occupy, trying to honour my obligations to lands/waters/atmospheres back home, and trying to teach next generations of students to work reciprocally and thoughtfully through their positions in the world.

Back in 2018 I wrote:

“All jokes aside, though, the work of embodying the discipline, of disciplining myself into the structures of not only the academy, but the specificities of anthro itself, wear and tear at my Indigenous body. I paused the other day to ask myself if any of the last 8 years in anthro have brought me joy.

I cannot say that they have.”

Well, things did not exactly get better after I wrote that post. The experience of flying into San Jose to attend the American Anthropological Association annual meetings during the November 2018 forest fires was physically, spiritually jarring. The land was suffering and I could feel it with my whole being. The smoke was speaking to us. It literally infiltrated every corner of the convention centre, making itself known. After the #HauTalk panel on the final Saturday, I was so exhausted by the energy of the space and the discipline that I nearly collapsed in the hallway and my friend had to look after me until we could return to the hotel we were staying at. I spent the rest of the trip resting, recuperating, mourning. And when I flew back to New York the next day I vowed never to fly again unless it was absolutely necessary. I felt hot shame for thinking my work was important enough to necessitate flying into the scene of a crime to present a 12 minute paper (at that moment, we were descending upon the scenes of both the ongoing crime of genocide against Indigenous peoples in what is currently known as California and the explicit crimes of capitalist corporations violating life and meaning in those lands). Nothing I do as a scholar is important enough to ask me to violate my ongoing reciprocal obligations to lands, waters, atmospheres in order to perform my credentials or knowledge in american (or canadian or british or or or) academic imperialist organizations. Or disciplines.

Put simply, doing (north atlantic) anthropology in still predominantly white, colonial institutions as an Indigenous person in Canada repeatedly makes me a bad relation to those I love. It asks me to forego the most foundational teachings of my Métis and Cree ancestors regarding how to be in the world. As I have learned from Indigenous scholars including Dr. Patti Laboucane-Benson, one of the first laws in Cree legal orders is love. I did not fly to San Jose out of love. I flew out of ego, the desire to prove my worth and my intelligence to a fellow group of scholars.

I suppose that was the true end. That conference. The fire and smoke. The realization that western academia currently takes itself far too seriously and is currently far too conservative in its configurations and imagination to really understand how it is imbricated in the disasters (Sharpe 2016). How can we think outside the systems when they demand so much of us, require fealty to such toxic and harmful structures and configurations?

For me, what I keep coming back to is a desire to honour my obligations to lands, waters,

atmospheres and to work towards just living more reciprocally with my human and non-human relations. This is not easy work, and it is fraught and complicated when the spaces we are told we can occupy are so constricting and conservative and suspicious of real, deep, expansive change.

But I want to be a good relation.

During my PhD work in the early 2010s, I was struggling to frame the experiences my friends and interlocutors in the Northwest Territories in what is currently known as northern Canada were articulating within the constricting and often fetishizing frameworks anthropology had to offer to understandings of Indigenous environmental knowledges in Canada or the US. To be fair there was some great work – I drew heavily on people like Julie Cruikshank and Ann Fienup-Riordan, who have worked extensively and thoughtfully with Indigenous knowledge keepers in the Yukon and Alaska, respectively. I quickly started to get a feel for how thoughtfully an anthropologist considered their ongoing responsibilities to Indigenous knowledge keepers. I gravitated towards work that showed a scholar really understood the stakes of their position, that stepped aside to let people tell their own stories. And I was drawn to work that explicitly demonstrated the reciprocity and ethics of the work – it was clear from the work of both Dr. Cruikshank and Dr. Fienup-Riordan that the people they worked with had a say in how their knowledge was presented, and that in their work careful attention is paid to honouring Indigenous self-determination.

Other work sometimes struck me as extractive or even smug. I found it difficult to take seriously anything that gave a whiff of the anthropologist knowing better than the people they were speaking with. There's more of this type of anthro than we probably realize. Supranthropology. (noun: the anthropology of superiority – carried out when folks lose sight of whose stories they are sharing, and results when a scholar forgets the consequences of speaking of/for/about people rather than focusing on our responsibilities, always and everywhere, to build relationships with time, place, stories, people. Every anthropologist is at risk of becoming a supranthropologist).

But even with some solid, ethical, accountable anthropological literature to draw on, things still were not clicking. People I was working with were articulating their self-determination, sovereignty, and knowledges in relation to their lands and waters and atmospheres, and in relation to nonhuman beings like fish, in ways that went beyond what most arctic or environmental anthropology could offer. These were more than stories, more than knowledge. There was a dimension I was missing.

It wasn't until I was introduced to work on Indigenous legal orders in Canada that things really clicked for me.

As an Indigenous woman, it had never occurred to me that we have law. Colonizers work fastidiously and emphatically to deny Indigenous people have any kind of legal authority, sovereignty, or claims here in the lands that Canada occupies. I had never thought to consider the stories and teachings my dad and other Indigenous relatives shared with me as having any kind of legal dimension because

colonial bodies in Canada work so hard to convince us law must look like western/imperial/colonial /white supremacist/capitalist forms of 'law'. As legal scholar Val Napoleon demonstrates (http://www.fngovernance.org/ncfng_research/val_napoleon.pdf):

“As Indigenous peoples, we have gained much of our current understanding of law from our experiences with the western legal system in Canada. We know the western legal system through its courts, legislation, and enforcement, and by its treatment of our peoples, lands, and resources. Given this, many Indigenous peoples have come to associate “law” with power, punishment, hierarchy, and bureaucracy. In the case of my student, “real” law is clearly associated with formal, central, and deliberate processes of determining what law is and how to apply it.” (Napoleon 2007: 1)

But of course we have law. And always have had laws. It's just that until I started learning from Indigenous legal scholars in Canada, including Val Napoleon, Tracey Lindberg, John Borrows, Joseph Paul Murdoch-Flowers and others, it had never occurred to me to consider the stories and knowledges my friends and interlocutors had shared with me were in fact law. In all the anthropology texts I'd read throughout my minor in anthropology in my undergrad, and throughout all the arctic and environmental anthropology texts I'd read in my doctoral work up until that point, western anthropologists were not discussing Indigenous people's laws or legal orders. Ontologies? (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/johs.12124>) Yes (*contact me for access). Stories? Yes. Rules, even? Yes. But Laws? Not so much.

This is because anthropology has itself been one of the bodies that works very hard to convince us that, to riff off of Colin Scott's important piece on James Bay Cree knowledge keepers (<https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/1533/chapter-abstract/172751/Science-for-the-West-Myth-for-the-Rest-The-Case-of?redirectedFrom=fulltext>) — law is for the west, culture is for the rest. This is because, as Audra Simpson illustrates in her work, US/Canadian anthropology does not take Indigenous sovereignty seriously, even as it operates in lands stolen from Indigenous people through legal maneuvers that had to contend with, and vigorously erase, Indigenous sovereignty (Barker 2005, 1-31). As Simpson points out:

“in its theoretical and analytic guises “culture” is defined in anthropological terms most consistently by its proximity to difference, not its sovereignty, its right to govern, to own, or to labor. And that difference was to be defined against the sameness and omniscience of a stable ontological core, an unquestioned “self” that defined that difference (and thus “culture”) for a readership, one that corresponded to a metropole and to a colony, a self, and an other (Cooper and Stoler 1997, 1-56).” (location 2091 of 5974)

Simpson also points out that:

“To speak of Indigeneity is to speak of colonialism and anthropology, as these are the means through which Indigenous people have been known and sometimes are still known (Pagden 1982). In different moments, anthropology has imagined itself to be a voice, and in some disciplinary iterations, *the voice of the colonized* (Said 1989; Paine 1990).” (Simpson 2014, location 1963 of 5794).

In the decade that I’ve worked in anthropology as a doctoral student and later, professor, I have not seen convincing evidence that dominant assertions of anthropology in Canada or the US are actually ready to give up their role as ‘the voice of the colonized’ as Simpson references above. This is because, as Simpson demonstrates in her work, (dominant or north atlantic) anthropology does not take seriously the sovereignty and politics of Indigenous peoples in the US or Canada. And it does not honour Indigenous legal orders. Just imagine if an anthropology department in stolen Indigenous lands in Canada or the US had to operate according to the legal orders of the Indigenous nations it occupies. It is curious that a discipline that studies diverse and plural cultures is still governed so firmly in Canada, the US, the UK and elsewhere under white western euro-american universalist academic logics, structures, norms, and conventions.

Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows stated in 2013:

“Law is us. And it’s the animals, and it’s our dreams, and it’s our stories, and it’s our relationships. It’s the way we talk with one another and try to persuade one another, and that persuasion of course involves many different traditions now. But that persuasion is a part of our law, and it’s not just for the parliaments and it’s not just for the courts. We have a role in taking that kind of action.”

Anthropology gets in the way of this persuasion for me as an Indigenous person. It demands I backtrack through dead white men and women to make my arguments. It expects me to cite Hallowell on Anishinaabeg knowing, but rarely cites brilliant Anishinaabeg theorists alongside these old white men and their obsessions. It fails to understand who my nation, the Red River Métis, really are (a post for another day!). It still thinks it is a neutral voice in the relations between Indigenous people and the state here in Canada and the US. Anthropology, in its dominant configurations, is really really bad at reflecting upon itself and its actions. Even with the whole dang reflexive turn.

This year, after skying into the joint CASCA/AAA conference in Vancouver, I had a migraine that pierced through my brain. Despite an invigorating experience interlocuting with three brilliant Indigenous scholars on a panel that was squished into a too small room late at night, I realized I was really truly done.

A family friend and a relative reached out to me this autumn with concerns with how the anthropology organizations (both Canadian and American) were treating local knowledge keepers in Vancouver in the lead up to the AAAs. In good faith, I reached out and tried to figure out what had gone wrong. But after weeks of runaround and sometimes pat responses from various organizers who kept assuring all of us that *of course they honour Indigenous people*, it finally occurred to me. Western disciplines will never honour Indigenous law here. They will never honour Indigenous sovereignty. They're still too busy speaking for and about us. And, though they will not say it to our faces, they perpetually believe themselves to know us better than we know ourselves. Postmodernism did *not* break anthropology of its ardent belief in the 'objectivity' of the outside gaze. It just gave it more florid and obscure (and sometimes dishonest) ways to articulate its supranthropologisms.

In that final panel I skyped into, organized by CASTAC (https://twitter.com/CASTAC_AAA/status/1196438702320472064), Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte described anthropology with Indigenous nations in the US as 'watered down Indigenous philosophy'. And that was really it. If I am to honour the laws and philosophies and cosmologies of the nations I owe my thinking and work to, I can more effectively and ethically do this through Indigenous approaches and beyond disciplinarity. As an Indigenous person working in Canada, the only real and true answer for me is to leave anthropology. Cut out the middle-person, as it were. Why would I practice Perrier Indigenous philosophy when I could work directly with Indigenous knowledge keepers and work to honour Indigenous legal orders using diverse epistemic tools that cut across western disciplinary divides and beyond.

So I did it. I formally notified my chair the following Monday that I could no longer work in the discipline. And I moved to a different program.

For me, this was a relief. There are a great many people I adore in anthropology. And I do think that it has its uses, values, importance in certain contexts. Anthropology divorced from all the intrigue, ego, and extractivism of western academe could be a very interesting thing. I hope that folks working within it can keep striving to dismantle the structures of extraction, dishonesty, and other ills that all too often shape what knowledge production looks like in the euro-american-canadian academic context. (I of course cannot and do not speak beyond the contexts I live and work in, and hope that others can speak to their own experiences in the spaces they tend to). But as an Indigenous person working in spaces that are actively colonized by white settlers (or to cite Tiffany Lethabo King's (2019) work: conquistadors) in Canada, it is ethically untenable for me to route my knowledge, labour, love, and care through a discipline that is still so intent on fashioning itself through paradigms of expertise, individualist academic achievement, and hierarchical knowledge transfers shaped by long and painful histories of white euro-american colonial capitalist extraction.

We have to be able to dream beyond the structures that are imposed by crumbling hierarchies. We have to be able to dream beyond tenure and peer review and the structures that have been imposed

in these lands by white supremacist colonial capitalism. There's a much bigger, more expansive set of possibilities out there. And for me, it means dreaming beyond the worlds anthropology imagines for Indigenous people in this place.

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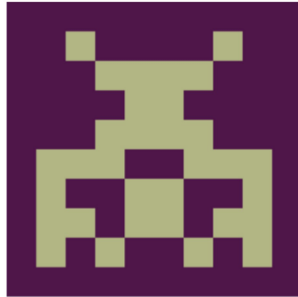
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3 Replies to “(an answer)”



Claire says:

January 28, 2020 at 2:06 pm

(<https://anthrodendum.org/2020/01/27/an-answer/#comment-3707>)

I was really moved by your work – which I studied on the advice of Olga Ulturgaseva as I studied for an MA in anthropology at Manchester University in the UK. And I'm even more moved and weirdly excited by this post. I don't know why it excites me, I think it's the honesty, morality and trust in yourself and your knowledge, which as someone who works with academics now (I'm not one myself) seems to be sadly – devastatingly – lacking in the university system. I don't really know why I'm leaving a comment except to say thanks for your work, and congratulations on this decision. I hope the migraines clear up now!



a former undergrad says:

January 28, 2020 at 9:04 pm

(<https://anthrodendum.org/2020/01/27/an-answer/#comment-3708>)

I am glad you are on the recovery end of the flu! Never a fun journey.

When you first published “should I stay or should I go?” I was an undergrad, and commented on how deeply your writing resonated with me. I was feeling lost, and your words made an indelible impact on me. I have since left anthropology myself, and always wondered if you'd come to an answer, or even to the beginnings of one.

Two-ish years ago, after I'd commented, you responded, “thank you for your bravery and your integrity. I know that you're making an impact, and whether you stay or go, you are going to carry your stories with you into really meaningful engagements, work, forms of community.” And I just want to echo this back to you. To live so deeply by one's morals and ethics takes great courage and commitment to oneself and one's communities, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for showing one way this can be done. This is another piece I will read and re-read, with citations from more authors whose work I will gladly take up and work to understand. I hope you find fulfillment and ease in your decision, and send a heart full of love to you and yours. Happy lunar new year (gung hay fat choy)!



Patricio Davila says:

January 29, 2020 at 7:27 am

(<https://anthrodendum.org/2020/01/27/an-answer/#comment-3709>)

Thanks for sharing this and showing me the power of no. I wish you strength and love in your new academic home.

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