

“Non-Indigenous Culture”: Implications of a Historical Anomaly

Modern westerners often see indigenous people as weird or exotic. A look at history shows why they're not the strange ones.

by [Derek Rasmussen](#)



Tribal members gather for an Idle No More event in Sacramento, Calif., in January of 2013. Photo by [Daniela Kantorova / Flickr](#).

July 9 marked the twentieth anniversary of the largest indigenous land claim in the world, the Nunavut Claims Land Agreement between the Inuit and Canada. Covering one-fifth of Canada, if the Nunavut territory were a country it would be the twelfth largest in the world. I expect much will be written this week about the failure of Nunavut, the eclipse of Inuit culture, and the demise of the Inuktitut language.

Can we relearn how to recognize the wise women and men among us as well as among our indigenous neighbors?

But what Nunavut's anniversary ought to throw into question is not the decline of an indigenous civilization. It's the rise of the first non-indigenous one.

Let me show you what I mean with one simple question:

"Where do you want to be buried?"

Pause for a moment and think about it.

Every indigenous civilization can answer that question.

When I asked an Ottawa University class this question, only one student could answer. "My traditional territory," replied the woman from the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation. The non-indigenous students sat silent. Just as I did.

Here's another most of us probably can't answer:

"Where will your grandchildren be buried? And their grandchildren?"

That's only going six generations out.

Representatives of almost all indigenous civilizations that I've come across say they have a variation of the axiom that says one must consider one's actions "unto the seventh generation."

We can't even tell you where our third generations will be living.

Non-indigenous studies?

Mature indigenous civilizations are with us and around us now. They are not weird or exotic. The only reason they feel that way to us is because we see so little familiar in their way of life. And that's not because *they* are aberrant, it's because *we* are.

We non-indigenous are the weird and exotic ones. It's shocking to realize that although we study indigenous societies to death—"you're always putting us under the microscope" says my Inuk friend Tommy Akulukjuk—we don't have a single university department or textbook looking into this weird new invention: non-indigenous societies.

Thanks to fossil fuels and our ideology of possessive individualism (en masse you might call it "capitalism"), we are the first civilization not enmeshed within networks of communities and relations with the land. The West's 200 year-old industrial civilization is the first to try to split itself off. This is a "stunning innovation in human affairs, the sociological equivalent of the splitting of the atom," according to anthropologist Wade Davis. "Ours is a new and original culture that celebrates the individual at the expense of family and community."

There has never been a non-indigenous civilization on planet Earth before.

It's even a bit of false flattery to call ourselves "settlers"—we don't actually *settle* anywhere. The numbers may be slightly better in the United States, but the average Canadian moves once every six years—we have to in order to find work. As Jack Turner writes in *The Abstract Wild*:

We no longer have a home except in a brute commercial sense: home is where the bills come. To seriously help homeless humans and animals will require a sense of home that is not commercial. The Eskimo, the Aranda, the Sioux—all belonged to a place. Where is our habitat? Where do I belong?...

We know that the historical move from community to society proceeded by destroying unique local structures—religion, economy, food patterns, custom, possessions, families, traditions—and replac-

ing these with national, or international, structures that created the modern "individual" and integrated him into society. Modern man lost his home; in the process everything else did too.

Every civilization throughout human history has been indigenous. Some inhabitants of the Americas prior to the arrival of Europeans continually occupied parts of the continent for over 13,000 years. Ethnologist and poet Gary Snyder describes these long dug-in communities as similar to climax ecosystems. Rooted. Responding to and belonging to a particular water and landscape.

And those who are embedded tend to look after a place; those who are disembedded do not. A non-indigenous civilization is a complete rupture with the entire arc of human history. By the way, that doesn't mean all indigenous civilizations were saintly or nice. It just means they were rooted. They may have uprooted others, enslaved peoples, created empires, but every human civilization—Inuit, Roman, Egyptian, Mayan, Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabeg, and so on—has had a homeland somewhere. Every civilization has had a particular place on earth that generation upon generation felt beholden to.

Until now.

Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg leaders sometimes refer to my people as having arrived here with Jacques Cartier and Samuel de Champlain in the 15th and 16th centuries, but that is being overly generous. We Euro-Canadians and Americans tend to falsify our ancestry, bandying about the "400 or 500 years" that we've been here. Actually, most of us cannot trace our arrival further back than four generations. According to historian Gabriel Kolko, the vast majority, 50 million of our ancestors, migrated to Canada, the U.S., and Australia after being uprooted from Europe between 1821 and 1932, a period ending less than 100 years ago. Fifty million in 111 years makes our ancestors the largest concentration of "displaced persons" in history.

It would be bad enough if this was just existential angst, but this has practical social and environmental consequences. "He who is uprooted uproots others," warned French philosopher [Simone Weil](#). "The white man carries this disease with him wherever he goes."

We are not just non-indigenous, we are de-indigenizing everyone we meet because we want to take the stuff under their feet. Our placeless civilization needs more resources than a rooted one. In 1992, representatives of indigenous groups from around the world signed the Kari-Oca declaration, which reads in part: "We must never use the term 'land claim'... It is non-indigenous people who are making claims to our lands. We are not making claims to our lands."

A system with no brakes

What happens if you create a non-indigenous civilization, and let it parasitize the land and cultures of all the rooted indigenous civilizations?

War, climate upheaval, environmental destruction. An "American Holocaust," according to historian David Stannard.

We are passengers on a soaring de-indigenized jet plane burning up the accumulated linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity of the planet. The mature cultures look on at us in horror. To them

our civilization looks like a lumbering juvenile delinquent on a binge. Arrogant, violent, and ignorant, we've stolen their wallet full of accumulated natural and cultural capital and we're spending like drunken sailors.

Only now we're beginning to realize: our plane has no landing gear.

And no parachute.

This system was only made to go up.

We can plead all we like with the sweaty bloated captains of industry, but they don't know how to land the plane. Most of our "best and brightest" only know how to go faster and burn more. We have more B.A.s, B.Sc.s, L.L.B.s, M.B.A.s, and Ph.D.s than ever before in history; and yet the planet hasn't seen this many plant and animal extinctions since the last ice age. As Gary Snyder has written:

The last eighty years have been like an explosion. Several billion barrels of oil have been burned up. The rate of population growth, resource extraction, destruction of species, is unparalleled. We live in a totally anomalous time. It's actually quite impossible to make generalizations about history, the past or the future, human nature, or anything else, on the basis of our present experience. It stands outside the mainstream. It's an anomaly. People say, "We've got to be realistic, we have to talk about the way things *are*." But the way things for now *are* aren't real. It's a temporary situation. (Emphasis in the original.)

Fossil fuels and this new value system of possessive individualism allowed this one-time-only experiment: an entirely uprooted civilization with no loyalty to the land and no commitment to the seventh generation. The first civilization where the majority of people don't know where their children will reside, and whose citizens are not psychologically and socially connected to local lands and waters.

We're such an unnatural phenomenon you'd think every university would have a department of de-indigenized studies.

Have any of your teachers ever asked you where you will be buried, or what you are doing to protect the seventh generation?

Mine never did. But I do remember reading how the poet Gary Snyder said we should look after the environment. His answer was two words long: "Stay put."

That's the shortest, most unadorned answer. And it explains why more and more environmentally concerned ordinary Canadians are aligning themselves with indigenous folks. Not because we want to "be" Inuit or Cree, or insult First Nations by mimicking some imagined caricature of them. But because we're beginning to realize that we have no landing gear. A de-indigenized civilization is not designed to land. It's designed to crash.

Landing will mean asking questions about the earth. Questions like: what makes a people indigenous? I believe that the answer is: a non-indigenous people believe land belongs to them; an indigenous people believe they belong to the land.

To what land do *we* owe allegiance? To what plants and animals do we owe a duty—and not just the two-legged ones?

Can we commit to a place and to each other? Let's hope so, because our current civilization is a one-time-only experiment. Once it has failed, we are all going to have to re-braid ourselves back into webs of "all our relations"—plant, animal, human. If there are future civilizations, they will be indigenous.

Here are three ways we can get our civilization back on track with indigenous values:

1. Respect native lands

If we're going to ally with our indigenous neighbors, we're going to have to quit this business of stealing their land and fouling their backyards. "Cease to do evil, then learn to do good," said the Buddha 2,500 years ago. He was on to something: the order is important. As de-indigenized people, we tend to think we have some divine right to rush around rescuing the indigenous, without noticing that we were usually the ones who pushed them overboard to start with.

The latest attack is Bill C-45 in Canada, which allows a sell-off of indigenous reserve lands, and guts protections for 2.6 million rivers and lakes down to just 87. Idle No More [initially sprang up](#) as an outcry against this law allowing the selling and soiling of indigenous land and water. Since non-indigenous government is showing no regard for future generations, "The First Nations are the last best hope that Canadians have for protecting land for food and clean water for the future," says Mi'kmaq professor Pamela Palmetier, in the [January 9 issue of YES](#). "Not just for our people but for Canadians as well. So this country falls or survives on whether they acknowledge or recognize and implement those aboriginal and treaty rights. So they need to stand with us and protect what is essential."

2. Recognize and respect elders

If we're going to stand with our indigenous neighbors, we'll have to start asking questions about whose land we're standing on. How many of us know that Canada's capital, Ottawa, sits on unceded Algonquin territory?

If we're finally going to ask permission to make this place home, then we're going to have to seek out the elders, earn their trust, give respect, and seek their advice. The non-indigenous no longer have any formal role for elders. Can we relearn how to recognize the wise women and men among us as well as among our indigenous neighbors?

When the Buddha was asked what the highest blessing was, he listed "nirvana" at ninth place. His first answer was: "Not to associate with fools; to associate with the wise; and to honor those worthy of honor." Honor gets a bad rap these days, but perhaps that's because we've been honoring fools instead of the wise.

3. Build embodied and authentic cultures

One of our honorable elders was psychiatrist James Hillman. He said, "Nature dies because culture dies."

Or as my friend Tommy Akulukjuk puts it: "You guys don't have a culture, not a real living culture that's in your bones, in your customs and practices, in your elders, in your language." Tough words, but can you see what he means? A culture is not made of commodities. Culture is not a bunch of static things to buy and sell. We invest a huge amount of time and faith in context-free knowledge frozen into paper and data. But we have almost no experience of the intergenerational wisdom and the oral traditions that have been the mainstay of rooted cultures.

Why First Nations Movement Is Our Best Chance for Clean Land and Water

When Canadian government surveyors first ran across Gitskan people in their traditional territory, the Gitskan asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Surveying our land," answered the surveyors.

Incredulous, the Gitksan responded: "If this is your land, where are your stories?"

If you ask Anishinaabeg elder Al Hunter what has sustained indigenous people over the centuries, he answers: "Language. Music. Stories."

"That's what has sustained us. It has not been NGOs. It has not been organizations."

Can we non-indigenous replace our plastic-purchase culture with stories, songs, and dances that weave us into environments? Can we join with our indigenous neighbours to build embodied and embedded living cultures?

In addition to overturning racist laws that steal or destroy indigenous lands, maybe the most important response to myriad environmental crises lies in reversing James Hillman's advice, and saying:

Nature thrives if culture thrives.

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