

Robert Geroux

Introduction to the Special Issue: Decolonizing Animal Studies

Indigenous people have long recognized the consciousness of the natural order. In fact, since the beginning of our time. The fundamental premise of *Niitsitapi* ways of knowing is that all forms of creation possess consciousness. The non-separation of nature and humans is one of the demarcations between Eurocentered and Indigenous philosophy. (Bastien, 80)

Is it too easy a comparison to say that Western thinkers are finally getting on board with something that is closer to an American Indian metaphysic? -- Kim Tall Bear.

For those of us engaged in various projects under the horizon of critical indigeneity the “encounter” with non-humanity should not provoke articulations of the so-called animal question: in this space, there’s no Heideggerian poverty-in-world to elaborate on, no Derridean human/animal abyss to deconstruct. If the work of theory begins from the ground of encounter, then that particular abyss has its punctuality in another event (1492/1620): a specific history that unfolds and structures everything that follows. That structure operates according to a logic of extirpation; in North America it finds its motive power by an equally specific ideology: liberalism. As settler colonialism marches forward both conceptually and territorially, it places indigeneity on one side of a culture/nature binary; the binary is of course harmful and toxic, and is itself a distinctively Occidental artifact, but (at least) at the heart of its ideological artifice is an acknowledgment and recognition of an unbroken humanimal bond.¹ An important aspect of decolonizing work is in seizing or really *taking back* the conceptualization of that bond, in reoccupying and deploying it in terms that continue to reject all settler binaries (for example in avoiding a discussion of something like the “re-enchantment” of a world that was never made instrumental and essentially empty in the first place). This is the kind of work I had in mind when I proposed a special issue of *Humanimalia* devoted to questions of decolonizing Human-Animal Studies.

A second aspect must be in emphasizing the uninterrupted continuity of this work, in recognizing the radical power of subversion even in the face of overwhelming civilizational projects;² there is continuity from the deep past into our own time, in other

words, even when the predations of settlers and governmental powers threaten to eradicate traditional knowledge. This past of sometimes obscure “hidden transcripts” of resistance and subtle inversions and subversions, and most especially humanimal survivance, now becomes part of an increasingly widespread and interdisciplinary effort at several things: preservation (the land itself is a knowledge archive which is threatened by profoundly alien terraforming), description, and prescription.³ Animals and ancestors (the two terms overlap) force us to challenge not only the North American liberal consensus, but also the “progressive”-left discourse of respect within a civil rights framework. This will be apparent in any discussion of “rights” (human or animal) in what follows here, for example.

It may also be useful to address and interrogate a third concept: sovereignty. The term gets used frequently, and its common importance is clearly in limning modern territory and controlling nation-state populations. The political questions raised here address concerns over collective composition and autonomy, and of course land (decolonization can never be separated from questions of repatriation), but just as importantly they emphasize that the communities in question always already not only *include* other-than-human beings, they are framed and founded by those beings. To appropriate and redeploy settler language, non-human animals and others are Founders. Questions of intention and agency — *their* other-than-human agency — aren’t tangential or secondary debates to be addressed after the so-called essence of human nature is conceptually confined. The priority or polarity is reversed: Indigenous ontologies tend to emphasize instead that common survival in the world depends on an expansive and generous attitude of radical other-than-human charity. That attitude and those actions are in settler/liberal terms the original “social contract,” which are cyclically recovered and revered in various ways: informally through daily life processes, more formally in and through ceremony. In all of this, *through* all of this, it is clear that the usual constituent components of the modern Hobbesian sovereign must be different; as a result, critical indigeneity offers the opportunity to break the mimetic process by which native communities are encouraged to appeal to both nation-state and international powers for recognition.⁴ Traditional knowledge in particular helps us see that the truth-procedures attached to such appeals properly flow not from governmental authorities but in an inverted fashion from the non-human actors who gifted human communities with the various skills to continue to live. In other words, if the world prior to the existence of the nation-state was (and in the international community continues to be) a “state of nature,” then we have non-human actors (and not Hobbesian sovereigns) to thank for the passage out of the originary condition of human vulnerability and weakness. We still carry that weakness, and yet the artifice of modernity alienates us

from it. For this reason, I think of our various understandings as deployments of *counter-sovereignty*; in this sense they represent a kind of desecularization of Hobbes's artificial animal in the monstrous Leviathan. We don't need a mythical sovereign order like that monstrous animal, because we abjure the very separation of the human/animal break that necessitates this (quintessentially "human" or artificial) creation. It's not just that the orders we envision aren't an embodiment of artifice: again, they suspend the very nature/culture divide in reference (and deference) to a single, immanent sacred space. Norms, rules, and laws flow from numinous concentrations in that space.

So, to radically distill our vision without simplification, decolonizing praxis in what follows here means enacting powerfully subversive understandings of a) humanimal survivance over time, and b) countersovereign control over territory in space.⁵ Each vector as it operates represents a frontal challenge to existing circulations of power, even (and perhaps especially) in Indigenous communities: the settler-colonial order not only moved forward in time by means of a civilizational project that ideologically conceals and reifies a will-to-extirpation, it mobilized and continues to mobilize an imaginary of nature that stands on the side of the (so-called) "civilized," even as it continually invokes the danger of new savagisms. Similarly, the humanitarian appeal of liberal governmental control over space means the imposition of an ideological grid whereby outliers — subjects and collectives who don't "fit" by various refusals to make appeals to rights discourse or identitarian pluralism — are viewed in Schmittian terms as enemies of the sovereign, and by extension enemies of humanity. And we know that such enemies for liberals — following Locke, among many others — are wild beings, dangerous to domesticated, settled space. With this repressive horizon in mind, and with special sensitivity to the neo-Jacksonian turn represented by Trump/Pence, the essays collected here pay special attention to projects that mostly attend to local, particular, complex, but embodied humanimal questions: the Northern Tribes Buffalo Treaty (Taschereau Mamers), the "sacred domesticity" of human beings and horses as part of Diné practice (John), decolonial performance art becoming-bison (Kozak), Creek ceremony embodying bird nations (Koons), and the practical applications of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (Fix et al.). I now turn to a brief discussion of each essay, before concluding with some parting comments.

We open the issue with a profound examination of species loss and potential recovery. Danielle Taschereau Mamers engages in precisely the kind of work we have in mind: theorizing that elevates and foregrounds Indigenous traditions in their relation to non-human animals, and which itself emphasizes the centrality of non-human agents in

restoring a healthy and vital balance to a world that is properly common to all of us. Like all of the other essays contained in this volume, *Taschereau Mamers* begins by paying respect to generations of Indigenous thinkers engaged in decolonizing praxis before and among us: Leroy Little Bear, Vine DeLoria Jr., Kim TallBear, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and Zoe Todd are some leading figures that come to mind. It bears repeating that our work would not be possible without them. She then reiterates and deeply grounds the claim made here in these introductory comments, about animal agency in processes of both colonialism and decolonization. To take this claim seriously, she correctly notes, “requires shifting analyses of both colonization itself and possibilities of repair” (x). In a sense incorporating the comment made by Kim Tall Bear above — it really does appear that Western science and social science are “catching up” with what DeLoria called an American Indian metaphysics! — *Taschereau Mamers* deftly combines narratives of bison extermination, interweaving Indigenous accounts with more standard western “scientific” histories. All of this serves as important groundwork for the revolutionary Buffalo Treaty, where, as she says “*Conservation becomes a multispecies endeavor with decolonial possibilities*” (x, her emphasis).

Diné scholar Kelsey Dayle John echoes many of these themes in her essay, which examines what might be called the aberrations of Agamben’s anthropological machine, embedded as they are in settler-colonial space. What I mean by this is the determined and extended application of governmental power in the name of both human genocide (the extermination of a specific *gens* or people) and what might be called *zoocide*, or the intentional erasure of a specific configuration of animal life. As John reminds us, Indigenous resistance to these processes is as old as encounter; as she puts it, such “interventions are never new” (x). And yet at the same time, our work in these pages springs from an equally powerful awareness that the force of those vectors of humanimal alliance and action have for the most part been marginalized in the academy. John carefully addresses that marginalization (as well as situating her work in the context of existing critiques), while never losing sight of her focus: in her words, the “horse-human-land connection” in the highly specific context of Diné resistance to animal colonialism. As in the *Taschereau Mamers* essay, animal agency grounds a politics of shared history and common future. Both essays are incredibly specific, moreover, about the politics of land management and Indigenous counter-sovereign ecologies.

Similarly oriented in rhetorics of resistance and recovery is Kozak’s piece on representation of bison in the work of Adrian Stimson and Dana Claxton. Here

questions of settler agency, humanimal representation, response, and contemporary responsibility are raised and remain open. Native artists speak for themselves and for their work, and when they do, they frontally challenge what might be called “typical” positions on questions of animal rights. This is, of course, an important debate, and one which extends well outside the confines of this issue. And yet, even the term “debate” gets things wrong, insofar as it implies the kind of free space for discussion and deliberation imagined by liberal academics. These issues aren’t purely philosophical problems but expressions of food sovereignty and more; they represent an ontological orientation that Metis scholar Zoe Todd discusses in a parallel context, “fish pluralities.” We can begin with the awareness that such practices require the mobilization of the Agambenian category of life that may be killed, and yet part of the fluidity of the “pluralities” that Todd and others discuss is the reciprocal nature of that existential decision. Blackfoot elder and scholar Leroy Little Bear emphasizes this, for example, when he invokes the *Niitsitapi* (nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy) traditional teaching that bison once ate human beings, just as we now eat bison.⁶ The order over time in this sense begins to resemble the immanent space of animality discussed by George Bataille, in the opening passages of his work *Theory of Religion*.⁷ For these reasons engaging in either the kind of “hedonistic calculus” associated with the utilitarianism of Peter Singer, or some Rawlsian rights-based approach takes us too far from the ground truth of kinship and what Blackfoot scholar Betty Bastien calls “natural alliances.” In the work of Both Stimson and Claxton we see represented animal bodies, but here when bones and corpses are rendered they refer in a primary sense not to the abattoir or factory farming (both very real problems in their context!), but to the existential disaster of encounter that I mentioned above (1492/1620).

Such questions of response and responsibility are central once more to the next essay, which also continues an elaboration of Vizenor’s “aesthetics of survivance.” Here, duration in time ramifies outward beyond humanity, even as it reflects back recursively in questions of the Anthropocene. Ryan Koons begins with questions of conceptualization, interrogating contemporary uses of the term Anthropocene, and in the process undermining the implicit assumption that the “Anthropos” at the heart of global climate change is each of us, equally responsible and in some sense culpable for the actual (in this case the Sixth Extinction). “Capitalocene” is better, he correctly suggests, which at least empowers us by implying a kind of margin or “shatter zone” for thinking, acting, and even *dancing* against the trends of our perilous times. His focus on a Creek band and its bird dances helps us see that “becoming-animal” in its various deployments doesn’t mean an abdication of human responsibility. Becoming-avian isn’t an escape from being human. Like the artists in Kozak’s essay, ritual enactments of

animal life work instead in the opposite direction, concentrating our focus on non-human culture and history as a model for human conduct. Koons's detailed account helps us see how this is true, even when clear political aims seem evasive: ritually enacting a humanimal present returns our focus to the hyperlocal, the situated, and the embodied, eschewing sometimes unhelpful abstractions ("Anthropos," "global climate" and so on).

Our final essay rejoins many of the discussions and debates raised above in a unique way: not only in terms of the various anthropocentrism subverted by TallBear's somewhat sardonic use of Deloria's "American Indian metaphysic," but with a focus on disciplinary and even institutional questions about knowledge composition and what might be called epistemic politics. The Haudenosaunee "Words Before All Else" opens the discussion with a reminder that we are obligated: to express gratitude, but also to engage contemporary configurations and concentrations of power. As Adam Fix points out, the difference between the critical visions proffered here and various mainstream approaches to humanimal questions is "not in knowledge but power relations." We can begin with the awareness that non-human animals are kin, co-founders of communities and revolutionary agents, but where do we find an institutional home for various deployments of the knowledge at the heart of our various projects? Put differently, the very contours of land and the lives of its inhabitants are a living archive; part of our obligation is in preserving that archive, but where? I would suggest that one important focus is in projects and policy centers affiliated with tribal colleges. Such institutions remain closer in many ways to elders, knowledge holders, and practices of decolonization as ground truth.⁸ A second and related source for hope is in departments of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in research universities and other more "mainstream" sites of knowledge production and dissemination. Fix, Burnham, and Gutteriez engage in autoethnography to highlight the opportunities represented by TEK, as well as the problems that occur when traditional knowledge is removed from its home.⁹

This issue of *Humanimalia* would not be possible without the truly revolutionary research carried out by decolonizing scholars before us and among us. I remain profoundly indebted to their intellectual and political labors. Restating what Hugh Burnham says in the final essay of this issue, I too am an "avid learner," and a relative beginner to the intellectual and political labor of decolonization. The work gathered

here gives me hope. We have differences, but in a constellated fashion we strive for the full and unconditional sovereignty of both human and non-human nations.

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Notes

1. On the issue of the intolerable “intimacy with nature,” and the paternalistic response at the heart of liberalism, see Michael Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*.

2. This is the point of Gerald Vizenor’s “survivance,” a portmanteau (survival/endurance) that glances back at Derrida, while decolonizing and deploying deconstruction in pursuit of native sovereignty. See Gerald Vizenor, “The Aesthetics of Survivance” in *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. See also the ancillary concept “continuance,” defined here: “‘Continuance’ here refers to Indigenous survival and flourishing in the face of change, including change stemming from oppression” (Whyte, et al. 153).

3. “Archives” may refer to the oral tradition or to actual formations in ecosystems, such as formations in the landscape created by plant and animal ancestors that can be used to reconstruct lessons from their time about how to live well” (Whyte et al., 156).

4. On the flawed logics of reconciliation and mimesis, see Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

5. My neologism “counter-sovereignty” here can be seen as an amplification of Kevin Bruyneel’s understanding of the “third space of sovereignty.” See Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*.

6. This comment comes from the podcast *The Native Seed Pod* (June 14, 2018), “The Re-emergence of the Buffalo.” Online. Accessed 2 February 2019.

7. “The immanence of the animal with respect to its milieu is given in a precise situation, the importance of which is fundamental. I will not speak of it continually, but I will not be able to

lose sight of it; the very conclusion of my statements will return to this starting point: the situation is given when one animal eats another” (Bataille, 17 [his italics]).

8. Two such examples include the Diné Policy Institute (DPI) affiliated with Diné College, and the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) housed at the College of Menominee Nation (CMN).

9. Such questions also arise in the context of museum collections. For an especially poignant and powerful rendering of the repatriation of sacred bundles from the Glenbow Museum in Alberta to the nations of the *Niitsitapi* (Blackfoot Confederacy), see Gerald Conaty, *We Are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence*.

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