Journal of **INDIGENOUS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Volume 9, Issue 3 (2020)
https://ucalgary.ca/journals/jisd
E-ISSN 2164-9170
pp. 4-12

When humanity fails: A hopeful reminder[1]

Elizabeth Sumida Huaman
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Keywords: nature • Indigenous peoples • decoloniality

Abstract
This essay offers a reflection on the cultural significance of breath for Indigenous peoples and the ways in which breath serves not only as a biophysical process, but also as an Indigenous metaphor for the gift, presence, and power of life. The link between humanity and breath of life imbued in all living creatures—animal, plant, and other species—reconfigures notions of hierarchy that threaten interspecies harmony and sustainability. Drawing from cultural stories, scholarly research, and poetry, the essay presents readers with consideration of institutional and policy failures in relation to Indigenous struggles and triumphs in order to reclaim decolonial notions of individual and collective agency.

The Call for Alliances

When did the breath of life start to kill?

As Quechua people, we are taught about the power of breath. The fresh Andean air is a gift that we have been given to live in this world and a reminder that with our aliveness comes a responsibility to do good with each thought and physical movement fueled by this breath. Our breath is powerful because it holds the ability to offer thanks, express reverence and awe, to transfer strength and healing, and to carry the words that we ask to make change through prayer. Individually, as a child, I remember my mother, as her mother did for her, sucking in air around my head space to remove the jumpiness that resulted from trauma. Collectively, when we make offerings to the mountains, we blow our breath on the offerings towards their directions. This is cultural protocol that reflects the way in which we honor the spirits of beings and our humble obligation to care for each other. Other Indigenous people also observe the power of breath—I have been moved by Kanaka Maoli and Māori friends who breathe deeply with a counterpart upon

[1] This article is adapted from an online blog written by the author for *Agitate! Unsettling Knowledges* (https://agitatejournal.org) on March 30, 2020.

introduction, or Pueblo friends in New Mexico who breathe their gratitude in receipt of the small gifts I bring to their homes from my own community.

As I write today, the novel coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic has crossed oceans and lands, carried by human breath. We are asked to exercise physical distancing, to avoid the danger of being breathed on and breathing on others. The very exchange that we as Indigenous peoples have observed since we were first offered the breath of life has been transformed into the threat of death.

It is not hard to see how we have arrived at this point. We are not the only beings who were gifted breath of life. The earth's creatures also breathe and live. Like us, they give, they receive, they are conscious of the gift, and they have their own protocols. However, there is a relentless drive towards development and mass voracious consumption that characterizes what we can name as empire. This is ambition that hurts destroys: Land is only valued for what can be developed upon it or what can be extracted from it; animals are unintelligent beings seen only to exist for human survival or pleasure; and people's worth is based on their ability to labor and build economies. This is not breath for life.

The beloved Yupiaq scholar, Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, wrote,

> The Yupiat say "Yuluni pitalkertugluni," "Living a life that feels just right." One has to be in constant communication with each of the processes to know that one is in balance. If the feeling is that something is wrong then one must be able to check to see what might be the cause for unease or disease…In the Yupiat thought world, everything of Mother Earth possesses a spirit. This spirit is consciousness, an awareness. So the wind, river, rabbit, amoeba, star, lily, and so forth possess a spirit. Thus, if all possess a spirit or soul, then all possess consciousness and the power that it gives to its physical counterpart. (1998, p. 5)

Angayuqaq asked us to examine our lifestyles and technology, including mass urbanization projects, the complex network of modernity that he referred to as "disjointed" and "given to fragmentation," and to explore the disconnectedness that causes sickness not unlike what we are facing now. As a young scholar learning from him two decades ago, he inspired me to understand that technology is only a word to which we give meaning through our experiences and create purpose through our desires. Thus, if my purpose is to be excellent in order to show gratitude and to live kindly with the earth and her beings, then my science, technology, and modernity will reflect those values.

Angayuqaq also challenged us to consider our local understandings of ecology in order to better comprehend the earth's ecosystem toward her sustainability and the health of her beings. He

knew that alliances are required for this work—between humans and the earth's creatures, between materialistic desires and Indigenous sustainabilities, and between Western science and Indigenous knowledges that underscore morality and ethics towards life loving and giving approaches of/as *being* in this world. He also knew that these alliances required a shift in our thinking—"They await the time when the global societies evolve from consumerism and materialism to an orientation toward conservation and regeneration" (1999, p. 6).

When will we be ready? Many of us have been kept in the darkness, unaware of our own participation in the psychopathic dynamic of domination over earth, desire to have more, build more, do more, be more. Yet, no one life is above another, Angayuqaq explained (1997), because all of the earth's creatures are the best at being who they are. Can we say this of humanity? The question does not refer to how we are responding as individuals and collectives to the current health, policy, and morality crisis brought about by the pandemic but rather is in direct reference to what brought us to this point at this time. In more explicit terms—what would we lose if we remembered and observed local natural laws, re-considered the human-nature hierarchy, and studied, as did our ancestors for millennia and as do our scientists today, how the earth's ecosystem requires balance. What would it be like if we left the ukuku (bear[2]), the urpi (dove[3]), the bats, and the pangolins[4] alone? Who stands to gain from our shirking of these questions and our ignorance of this knowledge?

Something to Give

We live within a state of conditions created by coloniality (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). Coloniality refers to a system of desire and material aspiration linked with a global project of modernity through capital gain; these have shaped the domains within which we struggle and are defined by our relationship with empires—economic, institutional, normative, and knowledge systems that crush diverse ways of thinking and being in favor of a singular approach to human advancement (Quijano, 2007; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009). That nature has been violated, that our roles as caretakers of the land and her creatures have been denigrated, and that the very risk

---

[2] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/s/spectacled-bear/.
[3] https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/11/16/564597936/why-did-the-passenger-pigeon-go-extinct-the-answer-might-lie-in-their-toes.
[4] Please see this link to learn more about endangered wildlife and current human community efforts to address this threat: https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/the-fight-to-stop-pangolin-extinction.

factors (Benyshek et al., 2001) that make our peoples vulnerable to the virus—the result of colonial policies of land stealing, cultural loss and language genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), food system disruption (Weerasekara et al., 2018), Indigenous governance dismantling (Native Nations Institute, 2008; Wilkins & Stark, 2017)—are *historical processes* of which Indigenous peoples must be aware. Scientists from various fields have also been witnessing, studying, and advocating (Garlick et al., 2011) for us to rethink our roles in this world (Diaz et al., 2018) as they advance proposals for identifying major challenges (Norton-Smith et al., 2016) and understanding our interconnectedness through empirical research (Hinchliff, 2015). But interconnectedness is complicated and personal. These days banners like "we are in this together" and "we will get through this together" appear on social media and are widely uttered, from news personalities to work colleagues. While such mantras are uplifting and may spur some action, their universalism is not realistic with regard to our current and daily realities. Furthermore, what is our long-term plan for sustaining interconnectivity?

Popular media warns that the virus attacks all—young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural. As a social scientist, I question each of these categories for their connotations and the real policy implications behind them, not to mention the ways in which we translate through our own sociocultural lenses the economic, political, and social ripple effects of the spread of the virus (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020). For example, what value is placed in association with all of the ways in which we describe the virus, and does this language impact how we implicitly understand or prioritize each other? While I understand that the intent behind messages of togetherness constitutes appeals to think about individual and collective responsibility, we now know more than we did at the humanly visible onset of the pandemic that certain factors make people more susceptible to complications emerging from the virus—the elderly, those with compromised immune systems, and those with "underlying health" issues that manage to imply the absence of healthfulness and run the risk of categorizing people as weaker or more vulnerable in ways that relinquish control of how they are seen to others.

Behind each label is a life with their own fingerprint, their own pathway. When I hear words like "the elderly," I see my great aunts and the elder Quechua women with whom I still farm—many of them survivors of domestic and sexual violence. I see my disabled uncle who survived polio as a child and who is a respected person holding knowledge about our Andean ecology. These people are my teachers to whom I am not yet done giving through my listening

and work. When I hear "compromised immune systems," I see my family and community members who are survivors of cancers and those currently struggling through radiation treatments. When I hear "underlying health issues" immediately followed by heart disease, diabetes, and obesity, I see family members and friends with whom I work across Indigenous communities, including where I live in Dakota and Ojibwe country. I think of the remaining elder language speakers who care for their grandchildren and who show up for other people's kids every day to pass on the language. In some moments, my impulse is to push aside tragedy, to deny the possibility of our Indigenous worlds changing in unthinkable ways.[5] In these moments, I reach out to other close Indigenous researcher friends and family. Our default is not to console each other that everything will "get back to normal" because as the descendants of Indigenous people who suffered through great losses, we are still trying to figure out what normal is. In our talks, we are sometimes quiet, sometimes we laugh, and other times yet we are defiant—assuring each other that this is not how it ends, that our peoples *get to live*.

The big and small ways that we cope counter what Nelson Maldonado-Torres called the coloniality of being, which is "a process whereby the forgetfulness of ethics as a transcendental moment that founds subjectivity turns into the production of a world in which exceptions to ethical relationships become the norm," resulting in "giving birth to a world in which lordship and supremacy rather than generous interaction define social dynamics in society" (2007, p. 259). From our current vantage point, we can see that what has brought us to this point *and* how we respond reflect human internalization of coloniality as a state of being. Violation of nature is the norm. Choosing who gets an N95 respirator, a Covid-19 test, and maybe even a vaccine when available define the norm. Moreover, the virus is referred to as an enemy, part of a larger discourse of war so proudly touted by dominant political leaders (Okazawa-Rey, 2020).

What is the opposite of this kind of thinking and being? Postcolonial and anti-colonial scholars have long argued that those of us dehumanized, the subjects of colonial dominion, the so-called damned (Fanon, 2005) are the ones who must drive transformation of the world. Maldonado-Torres wrote that the damned are made because "what she or he has been taken from them…a subject from whom the capacity to have and to give has been taken away," which

[5] For information on how Amazonian tribes are being impacted, see: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/06/disaster-looms-indigenous-amazon-tribes-covid-19-cases-multiply/.

eliminates gift-giving and generous reception, a "fundamental character of being in the world" (2007, p. 258).

I do not think the postcolonialists are wrong, especially if we take a deep and difficult dive into the ongoing threats to Indigenous self-determination (Corntassel, 2012), which is not just about what is done to us and what has been taken, but also how we participate or resist.[6] *And*, there are important stories—Indigenous community members,[7] activist-scholars,[8] health researchers,[9] teachers,[10] ordinary people doing what they can for others every day, now amplifying their efforts.[11]

We the damned still have something to give—that is, our breath towards life, our animation towards honoring the spirits of other beings. It is not too late for us.

To those who teach

Give me the snowy mountains and the yellow daisies,
the blue-green lakes,
the wallata and the hummingbird.
They are all interested in conversation.

Give me the darkest soil, a seed, and the water
that rushes from Huarisca.
The old man who can no longer walk,
nods approvingly when I ask about the Moon—
Will she help us with the crop this year?

Give me the cracked faces of the elder walmikuna,
with their full skirts and aprons, mouths full of coca leaves,
Together, we sift our bare feet through the earth.
This is my classroom.

Give me the female alpaca with her pierced ears,

---

[6] See the work of how Indigenous communities and leaders resisting through FENAMAD: https://www.fenamad.com.pe/.
[7] For an example of Indigenous community members reclaiming schooling, see: https://kusikawsay.org/.
[8] See the work of Citizen Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte here: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312040136_The_Dakota_Access_Pipeline_Environmental_Injustice_and_US_Colonialism.
[9] See the work of AAIHB in protecting Indigenous health research here: http://www.aaihb.org/.
[10] Open access the work of decolonizing educators Flori Boj Lopez and Sandy Grande here: https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol3/iss1/9/.
[11] This refers to the relief efforts of Diné and Hopi community members in the Covid-19 crisis: https://www.gofundme.com/f/NHFC19Relief?utm_source=customer-andr&utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&utm_medium=email.

who does not judge as I make my steep pilgrimage to the Apu,
Or the healer who passes me on the road,
walking briskly to make the most of the night.

These are my teachers—the dusty road, the boulders, the wind,
the sheep who wear necklaces made of flowers,
and the dog who walks me to school and lays across my feet.

I do not need an exam—written in a far-away office,
in a language that bites,
or a house made of concrete, four stories high,
with a tiled floor and a refrigerator—
to tell me that I have made it.

I am somebody.
Because I talk to the Sun while I wash my hair in the river.
I caress the plants and always have a kind word for the butterfly.
My teachers taught me that we are made of love.

Is there any other way to be? (Elizabeth Sumida Huaman, 2020)

Take a moment. Sit still. Do you feel the sound of your own breath? Where governments fail, you will not. You still have something to give your loved ones and the world in each breath of life. For those whose breath is leaving them through no fault of their own, offer them your hopeful breath from where you are. With each inhalation, remember our shared humanity and the love that brought you here, and with each exhalation accept the responsibility that comes with the gift. Never stop asking—*What will I do with this breath?*

References

Benyshek, D.C., Martin, J.F. & Johnston, C.S. (2001). A reconsideration of the origins of type 2 diabetes epidemic among Native Americans and the implications for intervention policy. Medical Anthropology, Vol. 20(1), 25-64. doi: 10.1080/01459740.2001.9966186

Corntassel, J. (2012). Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 86-101. https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18627

Diaz, S., Pascual, U., Stenseke, M., Martín-López, B., Watson, R., Molnár, Z., Hill, R., Chan, K., Baste, I., Brauman, K., Polasky, S., Church, A., Lonsdale, M., Larigauderie, A., Leadley, P., van Oudenhoven, A., Plaat, F., Schröter, M., Lavorel, S.,…& Shirayama, Yoshihisa.

(2018). Assessing nature's contributions to people. *Science, 359*(6373), 270-272. https://doi.10.1126/science.aap8826

Fanon, F. (2005). *The Wretched of the Earth.* Grove Press.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2020). *Seguridad alimentaria bajo la pandemia de Covid-19. [Food security under the Covid-19 pandemic]* http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/rlc/docs/covid19/Boletin-FAO-CELAC.pdf

Garlick, S. Matthews, J. & Carter, J. (2011). Countering brutality to wildlife, relationism, and ethics: Conservation, welfare and the 'Ecoversity.' *Animals, 1*(1), 161-175. https://doi. 10.3390/ani1010161

Hinchliff, S. (2015). More than one world, more than one health: Reconfiguring interspecies health. *Social Science & Medicine, 129*, 28-35. https://doi.10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.07.007.

Kawagley, A.O. (1997). Active Reality Research, Part I. *Sharing Our Pathways, 2*(3), 6-7.

Kawagley, A.O. (1998). An Alliance between humans and creatures, Part I. *Sharing Our Pathways, 3*(5), 4-5.

Kawagley, A.O. (1999). An Alliance between humans and creatures, Part II. *Sharing Our Pathways, 4*(1), 6.

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(2-3), 240-270. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548

Native Nations Institute. (2008). *David Wilkins: Indigenous Governance Systems: Diversity, Colonization, Adaptation, and Resurgence* [Video]. https://nnigovernance.arizona.edu/david-wilkins-indigenous-governance-systems-diversity-colonization-adaptation-and-resurgence

Norton-Smith, K., Lynn, K., Chief, K., Cozzetto, K., Donatuto, J., Redsteer, M., Kruger, L., Maldonado, J., Viles, C. & Whyte, Kyle. (2016). *Climate change and indigenous peoples: a synthesis of current impacts and experiences*. United States Department of Agriculture. https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr944.pdf

Okazawa-Rey, M. (2020). The most lethal virus is not Covid-19. Agitate! Unsettling Knowledges. Retrieved October 19, 2020, from, https://agitatejournal.org/the-most-lethal-virus-is-not-covid-19/

Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies, 21*(2-3), 168-178.

Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2010). *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores [Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A reflection on decolonizing practices and discourses].* Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón Ediciones.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tlostanova, M.V. & Mignolo, W.D. (2009). Global coloniality and the decolonial option. *Kult 6, Special Issue,* 130-147.

Weerasekara, P.C., Withanachchi, C.R., Ginigaddara, G.A.S. & Ploeger, A. (2018). Nutrition transition and traditional food cultural changes in Sri Lanka during colonization and post-colonization. *Foods, 7*(7), 1-18. https:// doi: 10.3390/foods7070111

Wilkins, D.E. & Stark, H.K. (2017). *American Indian politics and the American political system, Fourth Edition*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Author Note

Elizabeth Sumida Huaman
Comparative and International Development Education
Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Email: eshuaman@umn.edu