



Hysterical, Auto-cannibalist Culture versus Trans-temporal Interwoven Identities

Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew

This paper proposes a duality between cultures informed by animism and those in pursuit of a contemporary global colonialism, explores some opportunities and constraints each presents for establishing identity, presents a brief and provisional contemporary legacy of global colonialism, and attempts to draw out an elementary animist speculation on outcomes.

Animism is the belief that all natural phenomena have spiritual essences that are subject to very little human intervention and, in most cases, beyond much more than a very limited and contingent understanding by humans. Human spirits are only a small part of this spiritual community, participating in a wide variety of relationships, alliances, conflicts, and temporal frameworks within it. Human beings, as with most natural phenomena, are themselves inhabited and influenced now-and-then by many spiritual forces including those of their families and communities. In animist cultures these beliefs are pervasive and are often reflected intrinsically in the cultural bedrock of language.

In Cree¹ for example, nouns and their accompanying pronoun forms are categorized by linguists as having a language gender of either animate or inanimate according to the large percentage of vocabulary and grammar that conforms to a scientific materialist version of the 'reality' of things. But animals, stones, feathers, the sun, moon, stars and many other aspects of the world are expressed in animate form in Cree speech, and some of these expressions confound a materialist categorization. Even to speak of certain things in Cree could be considered a Christian blasphemy—certainly a scientific one.

For speakers of Cree as a first language though, just as for those within other animist cultures, their contemporary world-view is a very complex, profound and troubled one. Great care is taken and deep respect given to spiritual forces that resonate throughout the animistic world, especially in relation to the natural environment through which spirits reveal their presence and make evident their strength and influence. In relation to the length of the prehistory of oral animistic cultures (the time before writing and its attendant agrarian crises) these troubles are very recent. They are however, known to have extreme consequences by those who believe that the natural world is a rich and powerful spiritual ecology—necessary to, but not necessarily tolerant toward human survival, culture and identity.

Global colonialism has gone through a number of manifestations from its early beginnings but it has always had a reductionist formula at its heart. From an established power base, colonizers raised armies of their own starving and dispossessed people to wage war. They overtook other nations for the purpose of re-ascribing their lands and resources to the ownership and for the benefit of the colonial elite. The colonizers developed new occupation cultures based on racist precepts of the colonizers' ethnic, spiritual, cultural and political superiority. It was an often-repeated example of colonizers reducing their own people to dehumanized instruments of the merchant state. Colonial occupation forces were offered an opportunity for validation, status and resources in foreign lands in exchange for their

deployment in outrages against human justice—outrages that made the colonial presence possible, and outrages they as colonial subordinates were often recent refugees from. In typical neurotic fashion, the contradictory, insupportable and disassociated justifications for these acts could only be internalized through a form of cultural psychic repression and historic amnesia. This reductive manipulation of human identity has continued to develop to the levels we find ourselves in with today's multinational mega-corporations. Evidence of the devastating and irretrievable environmental and human costs of contemporary global colonialism mount by the minute. In darkly foreshadowing contradiction however, mass feelings of displacement, isolation and overwhelming urbanized market stimulation prevent effective individual or communal action toward prevention or redress.

Agrarian colonizers with a spirituality supporting the concept of human superiority over nature have always had a major problem with the barbarian hordes of animist savages—Greece being an early and apparently golden example. Successfully dealing with (eliminating) these problem people and their dangerous and unproductive objects of worship has always been a point of pride for civilized people looking back on their own progenitors. These problems however, were secondary to the one that continues to be a major irritant and stimulus of the colonizing urge among the agrarian human-worshipping peoples. It was and is their habit of unsustainable over-development and consumption. They leach their own environments and imagine various forms of divine right to justify new acquisitions through spurious and violent means. 'Divine' now equals corporate ability to provide profit to shareholders. To do this competitively requires that resources be fully and unsustainably consumed and turned over quickly before moving on to the next. Through the systemic necessity present in this system, over-consumption increases geometrically. Cultures tied to these resources are swept away without regard.

Instead, global colonization is ensuring that unsustainable over-consumption is becoming the norm through a continual reduction and manipulation of individual and communal identities in order to realign them toward increasingly efficient consumption for corporate profit. Western society is determined, articulated and constrained by the economics of mass production, distribution, consumption, and statistical modeling. The global economy is unable to sustain its core of urban population centres without these systems.

Mass communications and information management systems are essential to contemporary large scale social organization and they reveal and define social structures. Society is now imaged and celebrated as a Knowledge Economy actualized through extensive and pervasive networks of databases. The world-wide stock-in-trade and cultural legacy of the Knowledge Economy are statistical models based on abstracted fragments of individual financial activity. These models provide detailed surveillance of individuals and communities as well as being the essential guide to global colonial economic activity. Physical modes of communication between individuals and within communities have been rendered ineffectual by the mass-scale decision-making processes of the Knowledge Economy. Instead, highly mediated, profit-driven and statistically trackable forms of cyber-communities are offered in their place. Contested, filtered and overpopulated, these cyber-communities limit communication activity of what-ever sort to simplified fragments. In order to participate, to be read/seen/heard, individual and communal expression must be composed through micro-fragments and sound bites. Human experience is expressed through emoticons, and histories are degraded to the scale and vocabulary of ads in Personal columns.

In this congested environment, perception and creative expression in dominant culture is filtered and constrained by demographic profilers for marketing, criminology, education, and resource use policy development. Individuals are coerced to develop continually re-

adjustable "lifelong learner" corporate skill sets, identities, and personal traits. Survival as atomized, isolated individuals requires people to commodify and re-commodify the self according to changing corporate interests as resources become depleted, investment is refocused, and new marketing strategies are formulated.

Even the intensely personal interior experience of illicit drugs—with its seemingly radical, aggressive and destructive rejection of social norms—is only made possible by mass-production/distribution, corporate management, and models of consumption stimulation strategies similar to many other contemporary industries. The experience of illicit drugs parallels that intended by the mass entertainment special-effects industry. They both target the same human void with experiential ephemera that promise but shatter a satisfaction that can only be achieved by an enduring sense of meaningfulness, interconnection, and creative control. Human needs for a rich suite of opportunities for self-expression as individuals and communities, based on histories equally as rich and accessible, are impossible to satisfy in the new civilization of brand image, over-consumption, empty stimulation/simulation, and environmental and cultural degradation.

In terms of what an animist perspective can bring to this examination, it makes little sense to discuss the implications of the vast destruction of distant wilderness and oceanic ecologies or the extinction of wild animals and fish—let alone the human costs these atrocities also represent. They only appear on the dominant cultural radar as commodified, mediated images—bit players doing backgrounds for product placement and lifestyle accessories. But these same implications threaten the western urban ecology and the internal flora and fauna of individuals—factors that compete much more favorably for tightly circumscribed attention spans. Western urban ecology is composed of a large number of intricately woven factors, many of which originate at great distances from urban geography itself, but weather remains one of the most directly influential.

Animist peoples have many conceptions of the spiritual strengths of weather—its beneficence, malevolence, and unpredictability—that are crucial factors in animist conceptions of survival. Densely populated cities, reliant on large scale services and resource management systems, rely on consistent weather cycles within ranges that have occurred over the history of any particular city's development. These large scale urban support systems cannot be quickly re-engineered, some not within decades. They offer their citizens little or nothing in terms of tools to deal with unprecedented meteorological extremity—even evacuation is often impossible. The western scientific community has acknowledged and clearly warned that the human modification of the atmosphere is bringing much more energy into the system. Despite this, these changes can not be stopped and can only be modestly reduced over decades due to the global scale of the industrial systems involved and the intensive dependency on them. The warnings concur that these massive amounts of new energy in the atmosphere will cause major geographic shifts and intensification in weather systems. Many cities and densely populated regions will not survive in their present locations. These transformations in weather systems are of great significance to animist peoples as they can be seen to represent the response of the spiritual world to human disturbances of this scale.

Agriculture, the gift of agrarian cultures that made cities possible, has covered much of the arable land of the earth with single-species monoculture farming under multinational corporate ownership. Agricultural waste and the intensive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides results in poisoned and infected water systems and genetically mutated organisms that are proving more and more widespread and fatal.

Illness has always had a major place in animist spirituality. Increasing confrontations with previously unknown deadly viruses and bacteria and recently mutated, previously low-risk but now highly dangerous infectious agents signals another aspect of rage and disturbance in the spiritual world.

New forms of tuberculosis have appeared because access to the consistent supply of drugs required for a full course of treatment can not be maintained in many communities in Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. The treatment can be started but then, for lack of finances for these drugs, is stopped before completion—allowing the disease organisms to mutate into forms resistant to conventional treatment.

The complex treatment regimens for the Human Immuno-deficiency Virus that allow for many additional years of life for those infected also require a consistent, and lifelong supply for efficacy. New forms of treatment-resistant HIV have appeared because the African underground market in these drugs (often the only source on that continent) dries up at a whim. The virus, at undetectable levels during treatment, returns in resistant and devastating new mutations.

Treatment-resistant tuberculosis and HIV have entered the developed world and have been identified in North American cities. Western hospitals themselves have developed their own forms of deadly infections mutated from easily treatable forms. While genetic science expostulates the ultimate DNA map and bio-science corporate shares climb in value, new forms of viruses and other infectious agents increase. For contemporary animism, the development of new forms of life in the internal wilderness of flora and fauna inhabiting the human body are amplifications of spiritual forces responding from a complex global net of tortured environments.

The outcomes of atmospheric and environmental degradation and biological mutation are bound up with the devastation caused by global colonialism. The debasement of human identity, disconnection from community and disengagement from creative control may also seem an irrelevance—irreconcilable with the worldwide over-saturated cultural fragment storm we've in the midst of. But the consequences of this massive and very recent experiment with the human spirit are equally as threatening to those who are complacent about and complicit in it.

Much of the contemporary world's political instability occurs in the old footsteps of the colonizers. While they may have relinquished political control (often thankfully due to its expense and conflicts) colonizers still exercise economic control for their own profit and to the detriment of local subsistence economies and vulnerable environments. The legacies of colonialism include new and complex forms of corruption, sanctioned social violence, genocide and war. They arise through outside instigation, and over old delayed rivalries, competition for meager resources, reactionary religious and nationalist fundamentalism, and hatred for the developed world's attempts to control, homogenize, and consume diverse cultures and resources through military and economic means. This extensive destabilization is causing wide-spread panic, hopelessness, paranoia and hysteria—social affects that are easily manipulable by fanatical jingoists, extreme fundamentalist spiritual leaders, and dictators. Holy war Jihads, escalating civil wars armed with weapons of mass destruction, and international terrorism (both from within and outside of western societies) are well supported and on the rise.

In many of the racially defined inner cities of North America survival is continually in negotiation and physical danger is often the only constant. Survival becomes culture.

Gangs, drugs, prostitution, violence, theft and prison constitute the most widely available choices in many communities. Intensified police action is much more popular with conservative governments than social and economic development.

It seems global colonialism has made for itself a virulent spiritual infection springing from many pores. Bad spirits invading diseased and weakened hosts trying to fight off their own cannibal spirits—themselves blind, sickened and empty—but cackling at shadows while fouling their nests. The roots of all this were planted long before being brought to Turtle Island² and, If healing can occur, it will be painfully gradual and punctuated with cataclysmic and epidemic events. But it is only a blink for the ancestors.

People who spend a long time with nature, who nestled their souls on it in childhood, who know its heartbeat and powerful secret voices all grieve for the worse times yet to come but know this life-out-of-balance firestorm will consume itself. We can only pray for favour in the outcome while understanding that the human spirit is merely one of many voices.

There are many communities at risk—refugees, children, and cultural nomads seeking to regain a lost sense of being; survivors who have successfully navigated the liminal interstitial zones in order to protect their cultural resources; or distant watchers who fear discovery but already feel the coldly analytic global gaze hungering to tear away sacred lands. We can look to the spirits of the natural world that we live among today for guidance in our survival as self-determined communities. A useful teaching for effective guerilla-culture praxis might be that of the ability to opportunistically mutate into new and more virulently resistant cultural infections at undetectable levels or in apparently benign camouflage—continually just below and beyond the cultural-DNA mapping surveillance. But to reach out and support each other, stories of and by these communities must be told and preserved, new art works made and seen, and our dynamic in this great storm described in every way possible. If we are favoured to survive it, future generations may have some of our stories to help them understand reverence, learning and the cycles of generations that originate beyond scientific materialism—that support and seek guidance from self-determined natural ecologies.

1. The Cree language is spoken in many communities across north-central Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and in northern Ontario and Quebec, and they form a majority in the population of much of this area. The Cree language is one of the most widely used North American Native languages.

2. Turtle Island is a term used by some First Nations in North America to denote their concept that the North American continent rides on a turtles back.