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Becoming Indigenous: Future Cities as a Network of Waterholes Connected by Songlines

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According to Isaac Murdoch, an elder from the Serpent River First Nation in Canada, the process of reconciliation with First Nations people begins when we reconcile with the land.¹ This is a call for all of us to become indigenous—to find our connection to Country, to feel at home on, and to love and respect, the land upon which we live.

Yet there are many obstacles. How do we find our connection to this Country from the air-conditioned comfort of urban life? For people who have come from other parts of the world, how do they connect with this continent? What about their descendants, like myself, who feel the tension between their ancestral culture and the Australian culture? Most importantly, has the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture assimilated itself with the land upon which the idea of Australia has been constructed?

Early European colonisers brought with them their European seasons, which do not align with the actual seasonal changes on this continent. Australian Indigenous weather knowledge is far more nuanced, with different calendars in various parts of the continent, each determined by local conditions. In Nyoongar Country, in the southwest of the continent, there are six seasons. In Yirrganydji Country in the northeast, north of Cairns, there are two major seasons, Wet and Dry, divided into five minor seasons. To truly integrate with these environments, it is necessary to observe and understand the land upon which we live locally – not just with respect to the changes in weather but also how other species respond to these changes.

Political economy of Indigenous Australians

There is an abundance of evidence regarding the complex political and economic life of First Australians in the journals and diaries of the early European settlers. Bruce Pascoe synthesises much of this evidence in his 2018 work *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture*:

. . . as I read these early journals, I came across repeated references to people building dams and wells; planting, irrigating, and harvesting seed; preserving the surplus and storing it in houses, sheds, or secure vessels; and creating elaborate cemeteries and manipulating the landscape . . .²

¹ Murdoch, 2016

² Pascoe, 2018, p.1

First Australians designed this economic activity through a deep understanding of the cycles of life in their local environment, which then informed the many systems of land management and community governance. In *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, Bill Gammage describes how hundreds of different cultures and languages across the continent were bound together by a common worldview:

The Dreaming and its practices made the continent a single estate ...

There was no wilderness. The Law . . . compelled people to care for all their country . . . an uncertain climate and nature's restless cycles demanded [a] myriad practices shaped and varied by local conditions. Management was active not passive, alert to season and circumstance, committed to a balance of life.

. . . Means were local, ends were universal. Successfully managing such diverse material was an impressive achievement; making from it a single estate was a breathtaking leap of imagination.³

This is an example of plurality and diversity bound together by a common narrative. Local communities were autonomous, while also being respectful of the autonomy of their neighbours. There was no central government enforcing its views over the entire continent, but a network of societies all choosing to be responsible for their part of the country and their local community. Borders followed natural bioregional boundaries, so the law varied from one jurisdiction to another because the ecosystems in different bioregions functioned differently.

For Indigenous Australians, the land teaches people the law. Law is based on understanding and managing the land to ensure an abundance of life. To learn from the land, it is necessary for each community to align works and activities with local natural systems. Systems can vary from place to place but the objective is the same everywhere: to create abundance. Unlike capitalist objectives of endless extraction from nature and endless work for people to power endless economic growth, the objective of Indigenous communities is to create an abundance of food, minimise work and maximise play and ceremony.

A network of waterholes connected by songlines

In the arid parts of this continent, Indigenous communities navigated the landscape along songlines that connected one waterhole to the next. Uluru was a spiritual centre because it was a permanent waterhole and so provided a wide array of foods, as well as shade and shelter. It therefore became a place for teaching, learning and ceremony. The landscape was perceived as a network of waterholes connected by songlines –also called storylines or dreaming tracks. The songs referenced features in the landscape, thus acting as a system of navigation, guiding the singer through the land. Therefore, although there were hundreds of autonomous societies, they were all nevertheless connected into a network through trade and other activities.

Imagining the landscape as a network of waterholes connected by songlines offers an ideal framework upon which to build future human settlements. Rather than creating evermore

³ Gammage, 2011, p.2

congested, polluted and unaffordable cities, while simultaneously depriving rural townships of resources and infrastructure, perhaps we could let go of the coastline and distribute human settlements more evenly across the landscape. Each settlement would be a waterhole that supports a discrete community. That community would be responsible for managing the land, ecosystems and infrastructure in their locality to ensure these remain in balance and create an abundance of life.

Waterholes as integrated systems of energy, water, food and shelter

Small-scale renewable energy technology now makes the development of such new settlements possible. An energy micro-grid can power a water micro-grid, cycling water through the site via a chain of reservoirs and wetlands. This water cycle could then irrigate a diverse regenerative agricultural system. All these systems would be tailored to the geographic and climatic conditions of each locality, integrated and optimised to minimise energy demand.

Food-water-energy infrastructure ecosystems would be enmeshed around passively designed co-living and co-working spaces, allowing a discrete community to manage the systems that provide their basic needs. They would manage their shelters while harvesting, storing and distributing food, water and energy within their local catchment. The energy micro-grid could also power a fleet of shared electric vehicles, also offering the charging infrastructure for passing travellers.

Scale and complexity would be achieved through the organic networking between settlements rather than growing the population of one settlement. The virtual connectivity of the internet allows us to form a globally connected estate, with a wide diversity of cultures.

The wisdom of relational philosophy

According to academics Mary Graham – a Kombumerri person from the Gold Coast area – and Irene Watson – who belongs to the Tanganekald, Meintangk Boandik First Nations Peoples, of the Coorong in South Australia – the Indigenous worldview is fundamentally different from the Western worldview and is based on a deep appreciation of relationships. Graham⁴ suggests that there are two dimensions to this relational philosophy. The principal relationship is between people and the land, the secondary relationship is between the people themselves. This guarantees that the land is the source of the law, rather than the land being subjected to laws created by people. The pre-eminence of the land over social relationships, has broad implications for our understanding of the world around us.

Some of these implications⁵ are noted by Watson in *Raw Law: Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law*. Binaries, contradictions and competitions become opportunities to find useful relationships in the zone of conflict. When we are present in the landscape and become aware of the cycles of life, time itself becomes cyclical.⁶ The past and future diminish as our

⁴ Graham and Maloney, 2019, p.389

⁵ Watson, 2015, p.14

⁶ See also Abram, 1997, p.183

awareness of the present expands. The present becomes a point in a repeating cycle of life that clarifies the past and defines expectations for the future.

Logical thinking – with its assumptions and consequent externalities – becomes systems thinking. Hierarchical and centralised systems, become egalitarian and distributed governance systems based on community consensus. Ownership and control of the land becomes responsibility for stewardship.

New stories for navigating life and the land

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the Indigenous worldview is the acknowledgement that we navigate both the land and life with songs and stories. Our current prevailing story is that ‘Jobs and Growth’ will bring prosperity to all. This is so embedded in our cultural worldview that it is almost impossible to question it. Yet this narrative is destroying both the people it is intended to support and the ecosystems and climate upon which we all depend.

There is a need for new narratives, new songs to guide us. Perhaps the most important is the story of a transition from a linear to a circular economy – that is, from an endless growth narrative to one that acknowledges the natural cycles of growth, decay, death and regeneration. Another is the transition from an extractive to a regenerative mindset. Rather than just taking what we can, how can we give more than we take? This is the circle of life. Rather than always aspiring for more, how do we seek moderation, harmony and balance? How do we think beyond our bubbles or silos, and see the world more holistically as a system? Unaffordable housing, climate change, plastic pollution, inequality, droughts, floods, loneliness, stress, traffic congestion, food insecurity, no free time – these are all symptoms of a systemic problem. We solve all these problems together only by thinking in systems and creating a new system.

The stories we live by guide the work that we do and so shape the human settlements that we create. The transition from hierarchical social structures to egalitarian ones will be reflected in the changing pattern of human settlements from highly centralised cities that dominate the land and its people, to a distributed network of settlements. This change will also be reflected in a change in lifestyle. From being permanently settled in a home and anchored to a job, we would instead be free to travel, explore and find the place and people we connect with, who help us be our best and who value our unique contribution. We would also be free to find our own balance between the mobile, nomadic life and the settled life.

As we create the songs that guide our transition – from linear to circular, from extractive to regenerative, from silos to systems and from centralised to distributed – perhaps we might also reframe the founding Story of Western societies. Certain truths are self-evident: that we are all created equal, and that we are all endowed with certain inalienable rights and responsibilities. Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness could be understood as a responsibility to enhance the land and make it viable for an abundance of *all* life. Living amongst this abundance of life would liberate us from unnecessary work and give us all the time and space for the pursuit of Happiness.

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