

# Conclusion: Indigenous Efflorescence

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In this book we have sought to introduce the concept of Indigenous efflorescence both as a descriptive label for a real-world process, and as an analytical frame for thinking about that process. Descriptively, Indigenous efflorescence refers to the demographic surge in Indigenous populations, coupled with their increasing political empowerment, economic success and cultural flourishing, all of which have gathered pace over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. As an analytical framework, Indigenous efflorescence involves a commitment to explore these phenomena in a way that is process oriented (rather than product oriented) and future (rather than past) oriented, and, finally, is also positively engaged in supporting Indigenous peoples to deepen and spread Indigenous efflorescence.

In order to provide a rich account and exploration of this process of efflorescence, the contributions to this volume were organised around the themes of *contexts* and *practices* of efflorescence. In looking at the contexts of efflorescence, we drew attention to the economic and political developments that have enabled Indigenous efflorescence, and at how social movements, technological developments, and access to and control over land underpin Indigenous efflorescence. Meanwhile, in looking at practices of efflorescence, we examined how ongoing structures of colonialism continue to condition not only what can viably be *done* by Indigenous people, but also how it *feels* to participate in efflorescence.

In the conclusion to this volume, I aim to create a foundation for future work in Indigenous efflorescence by discussing, first of all, what it means for anthropological theory and practice, and second, how Indigenous

efflorescence might continue to spread and grow amongst Indigenous people around the world in the future, and thus how anthropologists working in different contexts might engage with and support Indigenous efflorescence.

## Extending the anthropological engagement with Indigenous efflorescence

What are the implications of the concept of Indigenous efflorescence for anthropological theory and praxis? Perhaps the most important issue anthropologists need to consider is whether or not studying Indigenous efflorescence in any way demeans the deep loss that so many Indigenous peoples have experienced. Here, I am not only referring to the subjective sense of loss and grief, but to the real substantive losses—of land, livelihood, political control, language and culture. The loss of lives. Is it responsible for anthropologists to study and promote efflorescence while the structures that created these catastrophic losses still remain in place? Can it be anything but Pollyanna-ish myopia to focus on positive developments while so much about the Indigenous predicament remains negative? What are the ethical entailments of highlighting Indigenous efflorescence?

I think a starting point must be that an ethical discussion of Indigenous efflorescence must always be framed in terms of the ongoing nature of colonisation and settler academics' complicity within it. Echoing William Faulkner's dictum that 'The past is never dead. It isn't even past', Patrick Wolfe (2006: 388) has famously described colonisation as 'a structure, not an event'. Colonisation is not simply something that happened in the past and is now finished, nor is colonialism a debunked and interred ideology that no longer impacts on policy or daily life. Dispossession from land, the persistence of colonial systems of defining and classifying Indigenous peoples, and the corrosive intergenerational impacts of trauma (Atkinson 2002), among other factors, persist as contemporary realities that maintain colonial structures and ideologies. Acknowledging ongoing colonisation as a constraining context to Indigenous efflorescence is essential to understanding it, and the subjectivities it produces. Furthermore, for those of us who are settler academics, situating ourselves as beneficiaries of colonisation is essential to an ethical approach to Indigenous efflorescence.

A second issue that needs to be highlighted in future work on Indigenous efflorescence is the paradoxical role that the enabling political and economic factors play in its continuation. Whilst greater recognition and the cessation of aggressive assimilatory policies have created opportunities for Indigenous peoples, numerous scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which contemporary practices of recognition also result in the consolidation and legitimation of state power, whilst also subjecting Indigenous peoples to regimes of discipline, definition, classification and regulation that are not only fundamentally disempowering, but also divisive, exclusionary, and reifying (Povinelli 2002; Fraser 2003; Coulthard 2014; Vincent 2017). Meanwhile, although authors such as James Clifford (2013) have argued that the economic conditions of late capitalism have provided opportunities for Indigenous efflorescence, it is also clear that neoliberalism exposes Indigenous people to various forms of violent capitalist exploitation that destroy not only social ties between Indigenous people, but also between people and land. Furthermore, as Glen Coulthard (2014: 171) observes, without ‘a massive transformation in the political economy of contemporary settler-colonialism, any efforts to rebuild our nations will remain parasitic on capitalism, and thus on the perpetual exploitation of our lands and labor’. Therefore, although political and economic changes have clearly enabled Indigenous efflorescence to some extent, they are also domains in which both inertia and innovation work towards the continuing domination and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. These tensions need closer scrutiny by anthropologists working on Indigenous efflorescence.

A final issue that anthropologists need to examine in relation to Indigenous efflorescence is the discipline’s well-developed tradition of critical engagement with structures of domination, which has become particularly central to the discipline since the 1980s (Ortner 2016). What are the implications for critical anthropology suggested by a focus on efflorescence? I think it is possible, first of all, to find precedents to the concept of Indigenous efflorescence within the framework of the ‘anthropology of the good’ (Robbins 2013) or ‘positive anthropology’ (Fischer 2014), an incipient turn in anthropology that seeks to problematise the discipline’s voyeuristic fascination with ‘the suffering subject ... living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression’ (Robbins 2013: 448). Rather than continuing anthropology’s obsession with the powerless (Kulick 2006), and portraying Indigenous people simply as victims, a focus on Indigenous efflorescence provokes

us to look at ‘the way people understand the good and define its proper pursuit’, and thus contribute to a broader project of understanding ‘the cultural construction of the good’ as something that ‘must be imaginatively conceived’ (Robbins 2013: 457). One potentially productive field of inquiry along these lines is the theorisation of the sentiment of hope that underlies Indigenous efflorescence, such as the ‘radical hope’ of the Crow elder Plenty Coups described by Jonathan Lear (2008)—a hope for cultural revival in the face of an apocalyptic ‘breakdown of the field in which occurrences occur’ (34). We can thus investigate Indigenous efflorescence as a project that entails the cultivation of productive sentiments, quotidian practices, moral and political theory, the creation, maintenance and evolution of social movements, and arenas of conflict around the pursuit of the good.

Such a focus on ‘the good’ is not incompatible with a critical outlook, especially when the object of critique is shifted to the anthropologist and our complicity in continuing colonisation. Marshall Sahlins (1993: 7), for example, has noted how the anthropological obsession with colonial agency and native passivity effectively achieves ‘in theory just what imperialism attempts in practice’. In a similar manner, Joshua Fishman (1985), one of the founders of the study of language revitalisation, examined how tropes of the death and demise of languages—he referred specifically to Yiddish—are often more prescriptive than descriptive, expressing desires more than prediction. For Fishman, to speak of death was to wish it, and he considered one of the roles of scholars in relation to suppressed and endangered languages was to support those languages and their speakers, at the very least by avoiding such laden terminology and misleading, negative imagery.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, artist and activist, gives an insight into the subjective experience of scholarly focus on colonial domination and the need to draw attention to the achievements of Indigenous people, saying, ‘It’s crucial to see all the good work that’s going on, because colonialism [works] to obfuscate that, and to keep us in this place where we perpetually feel like we’re drowning’ (Simpson 2013). As Marcia Langton (2013: 135) reminds us, ‘Counting the successes ... sometimes results in a small measure of hope in a landscape of obstacles, bureaucratic monsters and traps’. The concept of efflorescence, then, in drawing attention to Indigenous agency, entails a strategic and critical intervention, and a refusal to participate in the feedback between the actual and theoretical hegemony of colonialism.

It involves a commitment to work towards the production of hope (Hage 2002) and its distribution to those most denied it: anthropology *as* hope, rather than simply the anthropology *of* hope.

## Globalising Indigenous efflorescences

The anthropological study of efflorescence in different parts of the world will necessarily be entangled with the complex ways that efflorescence emerges from broad political and economic developments. Therefore, we must also pay attention to the ways in which those developments are unevenly spread throughout the globe, and how the conditions that enable efflorescence are thus also unevenly distributed. Here, I focus on how uneven political developments, in particular, impact the globalisation of efflorescence, starting with a discussion of Indigenism.

Indigenism refers to the transnational movement to promote the political interests of Indigenous people, including promotion of the universal applicability of the categories ‘Indigenous peoples’ and ‘indigeneity’ (Niezen 2003; Clifford 2013). Although originating primarily in the CANZUS (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US) countries, and now vigorously supported by the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden and Norway), this movement has since taken on global dimensions (Merlan 2009), including the creation of legal norms and international agreements that have developed in the constant feedback between local movements and global networks (Johnson 2016).

The uptake of Indigenism, and contribution to the movement, have, however, been globally uneven. One reason for this is the historical legacy of the so-called ‘salt water’ or ‘blue water’ thesis, which emerged as part of post-World War II decolonisation regimes in the United Nations (UN), and suggests that colonialism (and therefore indigeneity) only exist in contexts where overseas, noncontiguous territories are dominated by a colonial power (Lightfoot 2016). A result of the promotion of this idea within international forums such as the UN, is that the uptake of Indigenism has been somewhat limited in certain parts of the world. Within Asia, for example, Ian Baird (2016) notes that while in countries such as Japan, Nepal and Cambodia, Indigenism has gained some credence, it is more generally absent from Asian states (Kingsbury 1998). Adherence to the blue water thesis has had some paradoxical outcomes, such as presented by the case of China, which supported such a measure as the UN Declaration

on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, precisely because it claims to have no Indigenous peoples, instead recognising its population to consist of nominally isomorphic ‘nationalities’, without any having the precedence of indigeneity (Elliot 2015). Nonetheless, although the Chinese state does not support domestic indigeneity, it has, in some cases, turned a blind eye to the growth of Indigenist discourses in certain restricted domains, for example, in association with environmental campaigns focusing on traditional ecological knowledge (Hathaway 2016).

The case of China is indicative of the complex terrain that Indigenism and Indigenous efflorescence navigate in their global spread. This complexity is not only shaped by differing political regimes and their relation to the liberal democratic politics of the CANZUS bloc, but it also varies in response to different aspects of efflorescence, as can be seen in regards to language, through a discussion of how discourses of language endangerment and language revitalisation (and associated practices) have been taken up differently in different contexts.

The concept of language endangerment was first promoted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and framed specifically as a call to action.<sup>1</sup> The term ‘endangered language’ was selected to mirror the concept of ‘endangered species’, and thus draw both methodological tools and moral legitimacy from the global environmental movement. The endangered language movement has sought to raise public awareness of the global scale of language endangerment and loss, and to mobilise resources in defence of linguistic diversity. This program has not only initiated a new field of linguistic research (Austin and Sallabank 2011; Thomason 2015), but has also consolidated into a reasonably well-resourced field of activity backed by large nongovernmental organisations including UNESCO. The achievements of this movement include the description of global patterns

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1 At the XIVth International Congress of Linguists, in 1987, it was decided that the XVth Congress would take endangered languages as one of its main themes (Wurm 1996). In 1991, in preparation for the XVth congress, a series of articles on language endangerment were published in *Diogenes*, the journal of the International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (Wurm 1991; Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer 1991; Zepeda and Hill 1991; Kibrik 1991). Some of these articles were also published in an edited volume, published in the same year, titled *Endangered Languages* (Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991). In the same year, Ken Hale, from Harvard, organised a panel at the Linguistic Society of America Conference, on endangered languages, and this was published the following year as a special issue of the journal *Language* (Hale et al. 1992). Also in 1992, a meeting was held with UNESCO to discuss the establishment of a *Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. Later that year, at a meeting in Harare, moves were made to establish an International Clearing House for Endangered Languages, which was opened in Tokyo in 1994. The period from 1991 to 1994 was thus crucial for launching the global endangered language movement.

of linguistic diversity and endangerment (Loh and Harmon 2005; Maffi 2005; Nettle 2009; Anderson 2011; Gorenflo et al. 2012; Axelsen and Manrubia 2014), the creation of systems to assess linguistic vitality (e.g. UNESCO 2003, 2011), the global surge in language documentation, the training of linguists and the creation of digital archives to house recordings of linguistic materials. The movement has been successful in internationalising concern over language endangerment, resulting in the global spread of ‘discourses of endangerment’ (Duchêne and Heller 2008), including to China (Xu 2003), where a centralised initiative to document and archive endangered language has been promoted by the central government since at least 2016, with other, less centralised, efforts going back at least a decade beforehand.

In contrast to this effort to map and record global linguistic diversity, language revitalisation has taken an active approach in fostering linguistic diversity. This involves collaborating with communities to maintain languages that are losing speakers, and also to regain additional speakers, even in situations when the language has ceased to be spoken and exists only in archival records. Language revitalisation as a field of theory and practice essentially combines the call to action of language endangerment with the political vision of Indigenism, focusing on self-determination, empowerment, and service to and collaboration with, rather than the study of, Indigenous communities. As with Indigenism more broadly, language revitalisation has emerged and continues to be based primarily in the CANZUS states and Nordic countries, and is thus entangled with the politics of liberal democracies, decolonisation and human rights (Roche 2018). The political underpinnings of language revitalisation have, to some extent, limited the uptake of its theories and practices globally, in comparison to discourses of language endangerment, which have spread further afield. For example, what we see in China is that whilst discourses of language endangerment, and practices of documenting and archiving languages, are sanctioned at the highest levels, language revitalisation projects typically take place ‘off-stage’, in the grey space of an amorphous civil society which is neither officially forbidden nor publicly sanctioned.

This book has argued that Indigenous efflorescence is entangled with liberal democracy and late capitalism, and that its uptake and expression vary according to domain (the revitalisation of languages, for example, differs considerably from how control and access to land are reestablished and expanded). In reflecting on this, it seems reasonable to suggest that

we should be alert to the possibility of multiple efflorescences,<sup>2</sup> taking place in radically different political and economic contexts, playing out differently in different domains. And, given our focus on the future, we should also be alert to the possibilities of unfolding, becoming, not-yet-occurring efflorescences, waiting to happen in contexts where conditions are at present inimical. We need to reflect on what we can do to support those communities whose time for demographic rebound, greater political enfranchisement, economic enrichment and cultural flourishing is yet to come.

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2 This suggestion mirrors Francesca Merlan's (2009), that we need to be alert to the possibility of multiple indigeneities.

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