

Entangled Territorialities: Negotiating Indigenous Lands in Australia and Canada

edited by Françoise Dussart and Sylvie Poirier

xiii + 269 pp., University of Toronto Press, 2017,
ISBN: 9781487521592 (pbk), CA\$29.95

Review by Kim McCaul
Flinders University

This volume consists of 10 regionally specific contributions that explore entanglements between indigenous and non-indigenous communities from the Northern Territory in Australia (Morphy, Fache, Kubota, Vaarzon-Morel, Peterson) and from Alberta, Quebec and British Columbia in Canada (Feit, Scott, Westman, Thom, Poirier).

‘Entanglement’ provides a powerful trope to explore the interface between colonial and colonised cultures in all its complexity and messiness. The idea of ‘entanglement’ clearly transcends essentialism and also goes well beyond syncretism, inviting an understanding of the many levels at which indigenous and non-indigenous cultures articulate with each other, and above all how disparate ontologies coexist in practical terms, even in the face of continuous and relentless pressure by the dominant culture to impose its reality upon all within its domain. The editors explain that they use the concept of entanglement because:

it makes it possible to grasp the complexity of situations such as ‘relative autonomy’, ‘hybridity’, the ‘inter-cultural’, or ‘resistance’, without privileging any of them ... The concept of entanglement is opposed to ideas such as separate objects or discrete operators, and, as illustrated in each of the chapters in this volume, it is best suited to analyze ‘what is going on’, since it draws attention to imaginative possibilities and unexpected consequences of colonization, neo-colonization, and commodification. (p. 11)

While the concept of entanglement is naturally addressed in each of the contributions, there is significant variation in the foci of analysis, which include the entangled relationships indigenous people have with other land users, with the

state and its policies, with the modifications occurring in the natural environment and with anthropologists and the research process about themselves. These different domains in turn give rise to different emphases on what it is that is 'entangled'; there are entanglements in terms of practical coexistence (e.g. Poirier, Feit, Scott), communication (Peterson), environmental and resource management (e.g. Fache, Morphy, Vaarzon-Morel) or a shared understanding of the very nature of consciousness (e.g. Thom).

But underpinning all of these is an ontological entanglement in which the indigenous parties are at a significant disadvantage, in that they need to struggle to maintain their world view while understanding and engaging with that of the dominant culture, which has little pressure to adapt. As such, an important theme found throughout the contributions is how indigenous people engage with non-indigenous concepts, frameworks and initiatives by re-framing them in accordance with their own ontology. At one level, this occurs spontaneously such as with the alternative perception of the natural environment, so that, for example, what the government considers a wilderness to which it can allocate rights to non-indigenous parties at will is actually home and an organic extension of their own personhood for the Eeyouch. Morphy provides a practical example of how the Indigenous Protected Areas policy of the Commonwealth government was met with enthusiastic uptake by Aboriginal communities, because they conceived of them as avenues for their own 'Indigenous life projects' – that is, to re-establish autonomy and purpose in their lives. The much more limited bureaucratic conception of the initiative was thus coopted to meet indigenous needs and values with an immediate potential for tension between the indigenous and non-indigenous actors.

At other times, this engagement is deliberate and based on the now multi-generational initiatives of the indigenous parties to maintain not only a geographic but also an ontological space within the dominant society. Such deliberate and strategic actions are shown, for example, by Scott and Feit, who both discuss aspects of the life-experience of Canada's Eeyouch and highlight the practical adaptations and challenges to the Eeyouch relational ontology in their engagement with the state (Feit) and sports hunters (Scott).

It is tempting to interpret the notion of entanglement as a process impacting all entangled parties in some way. And there are examples of the dominant culture being influenced and altered by its encounter with the indigenous. For example, Morphy describes how the phrase 'Caring for Country' was adopted into official policy-speak, thereby acknowledging Aboriginal conceptions of country while at the same time claiming that responsibility on behalf of the whole Australian population. But even this shows a power imbalance in which the dominant culture is largely free to adopt concepts and adapt them to its needs, while the indigenous population has much less freedom to do so.

In fact, in describing the interwoven relationships of indigenous and non-indigenous life worlds, the essays inevitably document the substantial cultural changes experienced by the latter. And while it is important to point out instances where the non-indigenous is indeed altered due to its contact with the indigenous, it would be disingenuous to deny that, for all the determination and resilience mustered by indigenous peoples to maintain their culture, the entanglement is very much theirs; they need to negotiate the influences of an imposed non-indigenous presence in almost every aspect of their lives and even in the remotest parts of their traditional domains. For indigenous people to maintain their life world and take practical steps to protect it from continuous encroachment by the state and the general non-indigenous population requires continuous hard work, a sense that emerges from virtually all contributions in this volume.

As a reader unfamiliar with the Canadian context, I would have appreciated some maps to help me locate the discussions more easily, and I expect Canadian readers may feel the same way about the Australian essays. It also struck me that the case studies all addressed communities that were more remote and still strongly situated in their traditional cultural contexts, despite all the external pressures on them. I believe it would be valuable to explore the concept of entanglement in urban and rural contexts, where the indigenous communities are even more closely enmeshed with non-indigenous life worlds. As it stands, I consider that the essays in this volume provide a valuable contribution to the growing literature on ontological relations between indigenous and non-indigenous, colonised and colonisers. They provide a contemporary and practical focus on the continuous struggles of identity and survival of indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia, and it can only be hoped that policymakers and front-line staff in government and non-government bodies who engage with indigenous groups draw on the insights arising from this publication.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 42, 2018*,
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2018 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.