

Indigenous Perspectives of North America:  
A Collection of Studies

Edited by

Enikő Sepsi, Judit Nagy,  
Miklós Vassányi and János Kenyeres

With the assistance of  
James W. Oberly and József Fülöp

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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# BETWEEN RELATIVISM AND ROMANTICISM: TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

NATHAN KOWALSKY

## Abstract

“Traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK) is an important aspect of Canadian conservation management, but the very notion of TEK is controversial. It can be seen as conflicting with empirically-validated conservation science; its incorporation into environmental assessment can be seen as colonialist; some argue that TEK perpetuates the myth of the ecological Indian; others argue that identifying “authenticity” with “tradition” denies Indigenous peoples access to modernity. The philosophical issues here are myriad. Does TEK necessarily essentialize Indigenous peoples by requiring their identities to be static and rooted in the past? Does viewing Indigenous peoples as a counterpart to Western civilization paradoxically denigrate and venerate them as “the Other” and assume a dichotomous framework ignorant of how they actually live? Critics continue to analyze Indigeneity in terms of purity and degradation, as if the logic of virginity was not itself an historical and contingent construction of colonialism.

I argue that this fashionable skepticism is as mistaken as the “myths” it seeks to desecrate. Debate rages as to how TEK should or should not be critiqued, but how TEK might critique mainstream Canadian culture is conveniently neglected. Indigenous perspectives are thus in a bind: scholars criticize them or defend them from criticism, and yet neutralize their ability to criticize the status quo. The uncritical result is tacitly affirmative “hybridity,” social acquiescence to modernity as a *fait accompli*. Skeptics thus presuppose that there can be no norms to which cultures are beholden, meanwhile contradicting their own relativism when interpreting tradition through the lens of Enlightenment progressivism.

By contrast, a model is needed for understanding how *appropriating Indigenous knowledge can be appropriate*. Though it is usually summarily dismissed, I suggest the radical environmental philosophy known as “primitivism” to this end: the use of contemporary, historic and pre-historic hunting-gathering as grounds for criticism of contemporary Canadian life. The paradoxes of TEK are manufactured by the agrarian logics which primitivism calls into question. Understanding TEK as social critique may illumine not only the failings of so-called civilization, but also many of the struggles faced by Aboriginals in Canada.

The intersection between anthropology, native studies, and conservation biology is strewn with many a pitfall, and the intrusion of a philosopher into the fray might come as unwelcome. Yet this nexus of interdisciplinarity is replete with competing philosophical commitments and assumptions, ranging from Donna Haraway's theory of hybridity to the epistemic and social status of science. The notion of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) exists within this contested space, affected by both socially-scientific cultural relativism and objectivist anti-romanticism about traditional cultures. What concerns is me that, all too often, these strands of theory either curtail or abolish the ability of TEK to critique the dominant social structures within which we find ourselves. My proposal is modest and tentative: I want to suggest a middle way between the two poles of relativism and romanticism which does not undermine our capacity to criticise the status quo. At the same time, my thesis is controversial: the most straightforward term for this middle way is 'primitivism,' which inevitably evokes discredited notions like the noble savage or nostalgia. Nevertheless, I will argue that a careful, contextual and critical engagement with non-urban and non-agricultural lifeways will, in principle, allow many Aboriginal traditions to stand in value-laden yet grounded contrast to the dominant culture. I will proceed by first criticizing the hybridity analysis of certain works of contemporary North American Aboriginal art, and then by analysing some basic debates in the literature of traditional ecological knowledge. Finally, by making recourse to Christopher Lasch's work on tradition, I will open the possibility that explicitly primitivist theory provides the conceptual framework by which Aboriginal people(s) can re-appropriate their traditions as grounds for critically engaging present challenges.

## 1. Hybridity

In 2008, the Art Gallery of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada, showcased a number of contemporary Aboriginal artists. The overarching theme of the exhibition, entitled "Face the Nation," was the encounter and contested blending of Aboriginal and European culture in post-contact Canada. Many striking images juxtaposed concepts of the 'traditional' First Nations archetype against the backdrop of contemporary Canadian society, especially urban life. Maria Hupfield's "Scout" (2006) evokes the Sacajawea trope of the Indian guide by showing an Aboriginal woman surveying the horizon while standing alongside a canoe, but the canoe and canoeist both find themselves out of place because they are on a paved sidewalk in the middle of Toronto. Terrance Houle's "Urban Indian"

(2007) series depicts an Aboriginal man dressed in his pow-wow dancing regalia going through the motions of a white-collar workday: taking the train to work, talking on the phone while doing paperwork in the office, shopping for groceries after work, and relaxing in the bathtub at the end of the day. Dana Claxton's "The Mustang Suite" (2008) plays on the images of the horse and the Aboriginal, showing an Aboriginal boy on a pinto horse wearing Adidas athletic pants, for example, or an Aboriginal man wearing both facepaint and a business suit in front of a classic Ford Mustang car. KC Adams' extensive "Cyborg Hybrid" series presents glamour portraits of people of mixed-blood Aboriginal ancestry, each of whom is wearing a white T-shirt bearing a stereotypical and often offensive slogan embroidered in white beads: e.g., "I EAT RAW MEAT" (2008), "NOBLE SAVAGE" (2006), "I CLUB BABY SEALS" (2008).

Adams' series explicitly references Donna Haraway's theory of hybridity, as did the museum commentary on these artworks (Rice 2008). The general idea behind hybridity theory is to "explicitly embrac[e] the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self" (Haraway 1991, 174), such as 'primitive' and 'civilised.' We moderns no longer experience ourselves as one thing and not another; as cyborgs, we ought to welcome our new identity as mixtures between the various polar opposites we once kept separate, both in our conceptual frameworks and our actual lives. Applied to the aforementioned works of art, the idea is that one's identity as a person of Aboriginal descent is not defined by the traditional representations thereof. Those representations of Aboriginality no longer apply to the contemporary cultural context, and indeed they may never have applied, having often being staged or falsely constructed to reflect Euro-Canadian presuppositions of what an Aboriginal person was supposed to be.<sup>1</sup>

Hybridity's position on the inapplicability of the past reflects a larger anti-essentialist trend, which is opposed to seeing the identity of anything in terms of an unchanging essence or Platonic ideal. Essences are not supposed to mutate; they are not fuzzy around the edges. They are unaffected by time, and they can conveniently be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. To be Aboriginal, so essentialism

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Edward Curtis, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographer, documented what he considered the "vanishing race" of the North American Indian, but he misrepresented his subjects "by editing, erasing and ignoring any signs of modernity and Western influence from his images." His intent to portray "First Peoples as beautiful and tragic subjects frozen in time...[rendered invisible] the visual testimony of contact, oppression and enforced assimilation" (Rice 2008, 21).

goes, will mean the same thing now as it always did. Therefore, if an Aboriginal person does not embody the Aboriginal essence, then that person is not really Aboriginal after all. All too often, of course, these conditions are reduced to a Halloween costume, a historically inaccurate stereotype projected onto the subject by someone other than the subject. Hybridity thus rejects the idea that there can be an essence, some ideal that exists independently of oneself and which one must satisfy if one's identity is to be authentic.

While hybridity rejects this discourse of authenticity or fidelity to pre-existing standards of categorisation, it also holds that one's identity is not to be understood by simply assimilating to the present context. Aboriginals do not have to choose between 'vanishing' as traditional Indians into the dustbin of history, on the one hand, and becoming indistinguishable elements of the American melting pot, on the other. Hybridity affirms *mixture*, not the conquest of one binary by the other. Therefore, the works of art mentioned above suggest that being Aboriginal lies somewhere in-between those essentialised stereotypes rooted in the past, and simply being generic members of mainstream mass society. Contemporary Aboriginal persons are both fully enmeshed in the contemporary world, and yet they are unique actors within it, different from other actors in many ways.

However, hybridity applies to *everyone* in post-modern society, Aboriginal or not. Euro-Canadians are hybrids just as much as anybody else in the culture. But that, I submit, is the entire point of hybridity discourse: its affirmation of mixture serves to make difference otiose. The point of showing the incongruity between scouts and sidewalks, or pow-wows and office cubicles, or facepaint and sports cars, or seal hunting and glamour, seems to be that old-fashioned stuff is irrelevant. The juxtaposition of the traditional against the modern will more readily suggest (to the contemporary mind) that the traditional *doesn't fit* with the modern, rather than the modern being out of sync with the traditional. Implicitly, then, fitness is one's ability to co-exist with modernity. Ethnic background notwithstanding, Aboriginal people aren't all that different from anybody else. Urban Aboriginals are supposed to face the same sort of challenges that non-Aboriginals face in navigating industrial hyper-capitalist society. When there are differences—e.g., the racism faced by many urban Aboriginals, or the unique challenges posed by life on a reservation—they indicate realities that must be solved, overcome, even effaced. Though my next-door neighbour is a Cree lady, her Cree background shouldn't have any more effect on our relationship than my German-Polish-Lithuanian background. The substantive issues are those

we all face, and should be able to face together as equals. Aboriginal or not, we are all members of the same neighbourhoods, cities, countries, social classes etc.

And so in spite of hybridity's protestations to the contrary, it appears ill-equipped to resist assimilationism. It tells us that we are cyborgs, hybrids, mixtures of backgrounds and foregrounds, and that we are defined by neither in isolation. But when push comes to shove, foreground wins. Our backgrounds are ultimately irrelevant, and our task is to face the facts of the contemporary situation:

if we learn how to read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions. There is no way to read the following list from a standpoint of 'identification,' of a unitary self. The issue is dispersion. The task is to survive in the diaspora. (Haraway 1991, 170)

Haraway is saying there is no way to determine how we ought to hybridise ourselves, how we should navigate the mixture of our backgrounds and the foreground. All we can hope for is *new* combinations, or even "illegitimate fusions" and "'technological' pollution" (Haraway 1991, 174, 176). Dispersion is a fact; our job is to survive it by valorising degradation. Hybridity is therefore *indiscriminate* with respect to the combinations that emerge from the breakdown of classical dichotomies, and *acquiescent* with respect to the context which facilitates and environs this breakdown. There is no sense in asking questions like 'which social order is preferable?' or 'how ought we to live?', nor is there any sense to asking whether the present situation which mandates our cyborg hybridity is one which we ought to accept. Rather, the polymorphous context within which we find ourselves *just is*. It is the undisputed, and (ironically) the new good. Our task is to adapt and affirm, nothing more. There is no option other than to cyborgise ourselves with the culture that mandates cyborgism.

Therefore, because it takes the status quo for granted, hybridity theory reverts to a default assimilationism, in spite of its own attempts to avoid that result. Ultimately, resistance is futile because background is irrelevant. The only thing we can do is choose for ourselves what kind of cyborg we will be. Because traditional culture is no better or worse than modern culture (even though we're inescapably stuck with the latter), First Nations people can choose whichever combination of the two aspects they like (so long as those combinations can be made to fit within modern culture). That is, hybridity affirms the autonomous right of the individual to assert their own power over identity creation. So long as our hybridisation with modernity is our own, all will be well. The solution to

directionless cultural relativism, therefore, is self-assertion over raw, heteronomous material (i.e., what we've inherited from the past, or from 'nature') within the bounds of the untouchable status quo. In this respect, hybridity is no different than the classical model of modern science: politically unobtrusive knowledge that will give "man" the power to make nature as malleable as "soft wax...which he we will be able to cast into whatever form he chooses" (Pokrovskiy 1931; in Passmore 1980, 25).

## 2. Traditional Ecological Knowledge

In summary, because there is no Aboriginal essence, it is impossible to make recourse to an 'authentic past.' Cultural background is irrelevant (each one is as good or bad as any other), and so the only important thing is to fit into the current cultural context. The way to do this is to assert one's own autonomy, to create one's own identity out of whatever material one desires. Hybridity theory embodies a cultural relativism analogous to that often found in the social sciences (Benedict, 1934), and is socially acquiescent to boot. It may be right to reject essentialism, but hybridity introduces no new resources to prevent assimilationism. Nevertheless, contemporary anthropology, native studies, and conservation biology have attempted to be more accommodating with respect to Aboriginality. Canadian resource management has found it increasingly necessary to take culturally diverse values into consideration, specifically "traditional ecological knowledge" (TEK)—roughly defined as the land-value systems of Aboriginal peoples as distinct from colonial land-value systems. This includes practical knowledge of how to flourish (or just survive) in the local area, traditional landscape management tools and practices, the larger cultural context of First Nations social structures within which these practices exist, and finally the conceptual framework or worldview within which these practices make sense (Berkes 1999). However, incorporating TEK into existing formats of calculative natural resource management can be problematic, because the two often clash and may be incommensurate. TEK may actually be *resistant to hybridisation*.

The controversy over TEK in conservation management can be schematised as a theory-based conflict between natural scientists, on the one hand, and social scientists on the other. With regard to the former, the extreme formulation of scientific objectivism holds that *there is no such thing* as TEK (Widdowson and Howard 2006). As early as 1953, Gordon Day was arguing that the primarily agricultural tribes of the northeastern United States had "created sizeable clearings for their villages and fields," increased those clearings because they "foraged incessantly for firewood,"

and set fire to much of the region “to improve travelling and visibility; to drive or enclose game; and to destroy ‘vermin’” (Day 1953, 342). This forestry, hunting, and agricultural activity, he argues, altered so-called “natural succession” such that “it is certain that their activities destroyed much of the forest in some places and...modified it over much larger areas” (Day 1953, 343). This is only an early example of a prominent literature which argues that empirical fact dispels the romantic fiction that First Nations people possess(ed) traditional knowledge which could positively contribute to contemporary landscape management policy. Rather, the only thing which can positively contribute to conservation management is conservation science itself.

More recently, Charles Kay argues that conservation biologists no less than anthropologists “seldom consider the impact prehistoric human populations had on their resource base or how aboriginal activities may have structured entire ecosystems” (1994, 384). He argues that the primarily non-agricultural tribes of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains kept ungulate populations (like elk and deer) very low by what he calls “overkill.” He claims his empirical data shows that

Native Americans had no practices that were specifically designed to conserve ungulates. All native hunters are essentially opportunistic and tend to take high-ranking ungulates regardless of the size of the prey populations or the likelihood of their becoming extinct. Native Americans had no concept of maximum sustained yield and did not manage ungulate populations to produce the greatest offtake (Kay 1994, 379).

Aboriginal traditions, rather than possessing valuable ecological knowledge, actually represent “the exact opposite of any predicted conservation strategy” (Kay 1994, 359). Frankly put, therefore, the very notion of TEK presupposes the discredited idea of the ecologically noble savage.

This scientific skepticism about TEK strikingly parallels the relativism and anti-essentialism of hybridity theory: Aboriginals never were ecological, because there is no such thing as the pure, the virgin, or the undefiled: all environments are already modified by humans, all environments are already hybrids of the organic and human artifice. (And this is supposed to be equally true of traditional Aboriginal cultures as it is of colonial European cultures.) There is no ecological essence to Aboriginality any more than there is an essence to nature as it is in itself (Buege 1996). Aboriginal tradition is irrelevant, because it is no better than contemporary society: both kinds of culture greatly modified the environment, so there’s nothing special about either one. The lesson, therefore, is that Aboriginals were no different—no better, no worse—than

colonial peoples. We are all in the same boat, and regardless of our backgrounds, we all must face the facts of our common foreground. The status quo is off the hook, the white man's ecological burden is lifted. Debunking the noble savage thus serves to exonerate the contemporary mainstream; Aboriginal or not, we are forced to adapt to and affirm the present without making any substantive recourse to the past.

On the other hand, social scientists more attuned to the social construction of scientific knowledge are equally critical of the ecologically noble savage, although their arguments tend to be based on cultural relativism and conceptual incommensurability rather than the purported objectivity of natural science. For example, Paul Nadasdy (2005) argues that what contemporary environmentalists mean by 'conservation' or 'environmentalism' is very different from what contemporary Aboriginal peoples mean when they use those terms. Based on his ethnographic work in Canada's Yukon Territory, Nadasdy claims that the Aboriginal peoples there choose to live in particular landscape locations for utilitarian rather than aesthetic reasons—which is supposed to illustrate a profound difference with environmental activists, who ostensibly eschew utilitarian considerations and prioritise the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Furthermore, Nadasdy's ethnographic subjects take pains to avoid calling themselves 'environmentalists' because they associate that term with the anti-fur movement. Third, he claims that these Aboriginals do not believe that nature has 'intrinsic value,' and indeed claim to respect animals as sacred while at the same time hunting and killing them (they go so far as to say that killing animals is itself a form of respect). Finally, Nadasdy sees the Kluane as having an "adversarial" view of the relationship between humanity and nature, because they say that if you do not respect nature, then nature will kill you (2005, 304).

None of these Aboriginal ideas fit what Nadasdy calls "Euro-American" concepts of conservation. He concludes, therefore, that "the people of the Kluane First Nation cannot be placed anywhere on the environmentalist spectrum" (Nadasdy 2005, 301).

Yukon First Nation peoples' beliefs, values, social relations and practices simply cannot be categorised as environmentalist or conservationist. Nor can they be categorised as nonenvironmentalist. (311)

Traditional ecological knowledge is thus conceptually incommensurate with mainstream North American conservationism or environmentalism; each is irrelevant to the other. Nadasdy thus ends as a relativist as well:

One could make a compelling case that the people of Kluane First

Nation—and Yukon First Nation people in general—are ‘environmentalists.’ One could make an equally compelling case that they are not. It depends entirely on one’s perspective; there is ample ‘evidence’ available to support either claim (301).

Although we are supposed to believe that Nadasdy’s own evidence and argumentation is not entirely dependent on perspective and should be more compelling than the cases made by his opponents, the irony is that according to his own logic, there is no way to tell which perspective is closer to the truth, not even his! And thus, like Haraway, his only recourse is to the assertion of autonomous power. When he laments how “the discourse and practice of conservation have undermined Yup’ik goos hunters’ claims to decision-making power,” he cannot be claiming that Yup’ik goose hunters actually know something that the discourse and practice of conservation does not. In the absence of any way to reasonably adjudicate between different perspectives, the only thing that *should* happen is that Aboriginals be permitted to make their own decisions on their own terms. Neither science nor environmentalism should be allowed to tell them what or what not to do.

For this reason, the attempt to incorporate TEK into resource management science is sometimes viewed as a form of colonialism. Nadasdy argues that the concepts of ‘environmentalism,’ ‘conservation’ or ‘ecological nobility’ (which he treats as equivalent) are themselves Euro-American concepts. These foreign concepts are then applied to Aboriginal people who, it is found, do not measure up to them. Therefore, Aboriginals are viewed badly for not having lived up to a set of ideals forced upon them from the outside: non-Aboriginal North Americans “retain an imperialist perspective insofar as they continue to evaluate indigenous people’s actions according to a Euro-American ideal...” (Nadasdy 2005, 293). Consequently, all persons must refrain entirely from using environmental or conservationist concepts “to evaluate indigenous people’s actions” and instead focus on their particular and culturally relative relations and assumptions (Nadasdy 2005, 295). In a similar vein, Arun Agrawal argues that incorporating TEK into the discourse of sustainable development strips the former of its contextual richness and unique character, because only those elements of TEK which science or development finds “useful” will be incorporated. TEK is thus abstracted and boiled down into something that will fit the dominant framework of Western science, discarding whatever is unique about Aboriginal land-value systems. This process thus serves the power interests of the colonial status quo: Indigenous knowledge is converted “into an instrument of scientific progress, development, and the institutions that claim to control both

development and the knowledge needed to develop” (Agrawal 2002, 295).

However, Agrawal also argues that there is no “pure state” of TEK which has not been contaminated by Western scientific categories (2002, 295). The contemporary context is already a hybrid context, and so it is naive to expect traditional knowledge to offer a clear alternative to the status quo. Thus, when Aboriginal people pursue their own power interests (what else could they pursue?), they cannot rely exclusively on TEK but must also hybridise themselves with non-traditional and non-Aboriginal political strategies. In summary, therefore, both the relativistic social scientific approach and the objectivist natural scientific approach towards TEK are profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, there may be no such thing as TEK: there is no ecologically noble ‘essence’ to Aboriginal identity, and thinking so is a romantic delusion. Because profoundly altering (even ‘overkilling’) the environment is just the way things are, non-Aboriginals and Aboriginals are in the same environmental basket. On the other hand, even if there is such thing as TEK, its incorporation into environmental concern is problematic if not impossible: either it is conceptually incommensurate with Western notions about natural value, or its incorporation therein turns TEK into a tool to be used to justify the status quo rather than serve Aboriginal interests. In either case, therefore, juxtaposing the traditional and the modern has little to no critical potential—no more than the hybrid cyborg interpretations of Aboriginal art which showed the lack-of-fit between traditional concepts of Aboriginality and the modern world. Both relativism and anti-romanticism appear functionally equivalent: Aboriginal tradition may not have anything to say with respect to the contemporary context.

### 3. Tradition

This ambivalence towards Aboriginal tradition is characteristic of a larger ambivalence and indeed antipathy in modern Western thought towards tradition in general. Modern science was explicitly defined in opposition to the traditions that preceded it: both René Descartes and Francis Bacon saw tradition as an entirely impotent source of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> For conservation science to accept TEK as in some sense legitimate would entail the repudiation of a longstanding and defining prejudice of science and indeed the modern mind. Hybridity theory associates tradition with the

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<sup>2</sup> That is not to say Descartes did not build on the ideas of his predecessors, but rather that his own project explicitly repudiated tradition in the first two sentences of his First Meditation.

essentialised organic unities it rejects in favour of mixtures and transgressions, as if tradition can only be understood in terms of stasis, purity and uniformity. We have seen both scientific objectivism and postmodern relativism reject appeals to tradition as nostalgic—i.e., the naive assumption that the past is uncontaminated by and thus an intellectual alternative to the present—and as incoherent, because tradition is incapable of being translated or understood in the familiar terms of the present. Tradition is thus caught in a Catch-22: either it is repudiated because it is purist and essentialist, or it is repudiated because it fails to provide any examples of a pure state or essentialised identity. In both cases, it is ‘out-of-date,’ incapable of providing any meaningful service towards understanding the present.

Of course, many anthropologists and other scientists *are* deeply concerned about traditional lifeways and peoples, and indeed they advocate for those cultural groups as best they can. Agrawal notes how “indigenous knowledge has come to occupy a privileged position in discussions about how development can best be brought about so that finally, it really is in the interest of the poor and marginalised,” and moreover that

this shift in the fortunes of indigenous knowledge is to be welcomed. It comes after long decades, perhaps centuries, of easy dismissals of the indigenous and what it signified (2002, 287).

Like hybridity, however, the good intentions here outstrip the author’s theoretical resources. Agrawal cannot say why these fortunes are improved or whether those fortunes have improved for well-grounded reasons, except by offering up the Foucauldian and Nietzschean ‘just so’ explanation that the assertion of Aboriginal power has prevailed over other assertions of power. Nadasdy, meanwhile, thinks that we should not “invalidate indigenous people’s claims that (at least some of) their beliefs and practices are more ecologically sound than those of Euro-North Americans” (2005, 315), although if we accept his earlier argument about conceptual incommensurability, then his current claim about ecological soundness cannot possibly make sense. Moreover, as a relativist, Nadasdy cannot say *why* we should not invalidate Indigenous people’s claims about their (occasional) ecological soundness, or *how* we ought to evaluate such claims, because all such considerations (as he has said) are entirely dependent on perspective and could justifiably go either way.

What this activism needs, therefore, is a better justification for privileging Aboriginal perspectives than the relativism and self-assertion currently on offer. In Christopher Lasch’s words, we need to make more

“intelligent use of the past” (1991, 82). Both postmodern relativists and scientific objectivists seem to think that the only way to make use of the past is by romanticising it, falsely idealising it and then holding it up as an essential reality in contrast to the less-than-ideal status quo. And because romanticism is spurious, the only remaining options are to forge ahead with objective science as our absolute guide, or to view any cultural context—past or present—as equivalent with any other, and hope that the ‘right kind’ of self-assertion (as if there was one) will prevail in the melee of competing power interests. But why should we think it is impossible to make use of the past without romanticising, idealising or essentialising it? Remember that the Catch-22 tradition faces involves it being criticised both for being pure and for not being pure. If anti-essentialism is correct (I think it is), then the sensible thing to do is to celebrate the ‘impurity’ of non-hybridised tradition.

What I mean to suggest is that tradition is should not be conceptualised in terms of purity at all; it should not be treated as an essence, a static and inviolate reality which ceases to be tradition at all once it is changed by contact with modernity. This is, however, how anti-romanticism sees it; as an antipode of the present, tradition loses its virginal status and becomes polluted—hybridised, cyborgised—whenever it comes into contact with the present. But this misunderstands the nature of tradition. Neither time nor other traditions are the automatic enemy of a tradition per se, because as legal scholar H. Patrick Glenn (2010) points out, the very nature of tradition is its *critical appropriation of the present*. Conceptualising tradition as an essence only makes sense on a logocentric basis, a view of stability and order modelled after the timeless abstraction of the written word, but because tradition is oral (in the main), it is by nature flexible, continually changing, and adapting to new situations and information. This very fluidity is why traditions tend to appear insubstantial and uncritical from an essentialist perspective, but that judgement blinds us to how tradition’s adaptive engagement with the novel facts of the present attempt to do justice to the larger body of tradition which is itself viewed as living, not static or timeless. Therefore, Glenn argues that tradition

is unable to define itself in such a way as to preclude entry of non-chthonic<sup>3</sup> information. It is true that the tradition is defined in terms of chthonic information, as transmitted by chthonic people, but this is simply what a tradition is. ... Spontaneous syncretism is everywhere the order of the day. A “middle ground” is created—a “place in between,” though there is constant danger of discontinuity in the tradition of the oral tradition. Yet

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<sup>3</sup> “Chthonic” is Glenn’s technical term for the adjective “traditional.”

the continuing existence of chthonic tradition indicates that openness and vulnerability are not the dominant criteria in the ongoing life of a tradition. Much more would appear to depend on what the tradition says. (Glenn 2010, 85)

So while traditions are intrinsically open to the challenges of the present, they are resilient enough to push back as well. Living traditions do not simply acquiesce to the status quo; rather, they determine whether some elements of the present may be amenable to incorporation into the tradition, whether those elements need to be modified first or outright rejected. Rather than being a romantic essence frozen in the past and subject to automatic contamination or defilement by mere contact with the present, the precise format of tradition is active engagement with the present, which is itself as malleable and contingent as the past (otherwise tradition could not selectively engage with it). Tradition is a finitely flexible standard of evaluation which, as part of a hermeneutic spiral, both modifies and may be modified by that which it encounters. Neither tradition nor modernity need be understood as unchangeable unities; neither can be essentialised, because the present is capable of critical appropriation by the past. *Tradition rejects the notion that the present (and future) must inevitably be modern.*

Of course, the Western mind is very reticent to admit this, because modernity's own self-justification is grounded in repudiating tradition any way it can. Anti-romanticism can more easily dismiss the past if it can be seen as irrelevant *by definition* (i.e., by essence) to the present. Lasch argues convincingly that *nostalgia* is an artifact of Enlightenment progressivism, a pejorative category invented for the express purpose of rhetorically discrediting any resistance to the upward march of modern 'reason's' conquest of 'nature.' *All* appeals to tradition become lumped together, all equally assumed to be romantic and thus false. Progressivism and modernity are defined by the notion that the past cannot be a moral competitor with the present-becoming-future, and so any appeals to tradition are dismissed as automatically incoherent.

But nostalgia itself is a false category:

Nostalgic representations of the past evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason timeless and unchanging. Strictly speaking, nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealises stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection. (Lasch 1991, 83)

Nostalgia sees the distinction between past and present to be unbridgeable rather than continuous, which is why it wistfully pines for the past's

unattainable delights. If the past is to be understood accurately (i.e., as within time), it must be understood as neither static (i.e., outside time) nor disconnected to the present. For tradition to be understood correctly, it must be understood as relevant, neither relativised into meaninglessness nor romanticised into falsehood.

#### 4. Primitivism

With that we sail into unfamiliar waters. Up to this point the idea that tradition is an embarrassment was intelligible (even if we did not want to agree), but there are not many resources to explain why that shame might be illegitimate. What theory of culture will result if the past is not viewed as incommensurate with the present, or if Aboriginal tradition is not viewed as irrelevant to contemporary culture? It is almost sheer reflex to assume that such a theory will be nothing more than the noble savage trope so effectively debunked by modern scholarship. To call this theory ‘primitivism,’ as I will, only reinforces that impression. One can hardly utter the word in English without feeling an unbidden revulsion based on hundreds of years of Enlightenment progressivism and European ethnocentrism, or invoking thousands of years of urban bias against the rural or civilised bias against the barbaric and the savage. These ingrained pejoratives dominate our subconscious *Weltanschauung* in spite of the positive semantic range of etymologically-related terms such as ‘primary,’ ‘premier’ and ‘Prime Minister.’ But we will not get very far towards a non-nostalgic use the past if any such framework is summarily dismissed by way of unexamined lexical reflex.<sup>4</sup> Let us then dare to speak of primitivist theory, and see what approach it may offer to traditional ecological knowledge.

What we have seen so far, with respect to TEK, is that underneath the controversies examined by natural and social scientists lie problematic theoretical frameworks, irrespective of the empirical data that might be presented. Before one even gets to the issue of particular TEK claims about the environment, the theories operating in the examples examined above assume either 1) ‘the Indian’ as an essence, 2) the ideal state of nature as ‘pristine’ or lacking any human engagement whatsoever, 3) definitions of ‘conservation’ based in modern economic calculative rationality, 4) environmentalism essentialised as respectful, non-lethal, and non-contact ‘intrinsic valuing’ based in aesthetic disinterest, or 5) Western science as an essence that contaminates tradition. With these assumptions

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<sup>4</sup> For an example of such dismissal, see Adams (1998).

in play, TEK is bound to be controversial, if not intractably so, because these frameworks cannot but conceptualise tradition nostalgically—as an irretrievable past, an unattainable essence incommensurate with the essence of the modern present. We have also seen that the postmodern solution to this impasse is the assertion of power over against other, supposedly delegitimated powers, but as is the problem with the Nietzschean project generally, this self-assertion and delegitimizing is itself groundless, lacking any resources for its own legitimacy (Desmond 2008). These TEK controversies, therefore, are in the market for a non-romantic (non-nostalgic and non-essentialist) and non-relativist (grounded and critical) theoretical framework.

There are (at least) three reasons why a primitivist framework avoids both romanticism and relativism. First, primitivism asserts *that the past is not irrelevant or irretrievable, because it is continuous with the present*. Perhaps the clearest entry point into this continuity is via human evolution: anatomically modern humans appear in the evolutionary record roughly 200,000 years ago with the human genome remaining relatively stable since that point, but the development of agriculture roughly 10,000 years ago introduced profound changes to human social organisation. Evolutionary psychology therefore uses this pre-agricultural period—approximately 95% of our species' chronology—to establish relatively stable conventions for human psychological capacities and behavioural patterns. This is not essentialism about human identity, but—in concert with current research in the philosophy of biology—should rather be understood as homeostatic property clustering: biological species are in flux, of course (this is what makes evolution possible), but that flux does not mean species are not stable groupings. So in spite of dynamism, relatively stable baselines can be experienced on the basis of *typicality*, not definitiveness, and *relationality*, not simply internal constitution. Homeostatic property clusters provide non-arbitrary explanatory integrity of observable stability without assuming metaphysical identity, thus incorporating contextuality, indeterminacy and variation (Wilson, Barker, and Brigandt, 2007; Brigandt 2009). The evolutionary constitution of human beings can thus provide a baseline for both evolutionary psychology (as above) and even more ambitious projects, like academically grounding Rawls' primary goods in human nature (Corning 2011). Even something as trivial as the expectation of an eight-hour sleep can be criticised as from a primitivist perspective; recent sleep research suggests that “waking up during the night is part of normal human physiology” because that is the way we evolved to sleep (Hegarty 2012). What these examples show, moreover, is that primitivism in no way requires us to ‘go

back to the Stone Age,' for the simple reason that "we never left" (Shepard 1973, 260).<sup>5</sup>

Primitivism thus grounds its evaluation of the contingent, cultural present in terms of fidelity (or the lack thereof) to the human evolutionary baseline, the conditions under which "our minds and cultures evolved" (Gowdy 1999, 397); it derives a regulative ideal from the evolutionary continuity of past and present, against which contingent social reality is assessed. Second, primitivism claims that *hunter-gatherer (or forager) cultures homeostatically cluster together with the overwhelming majority of our species' chronology* (foraging, not prostitution, is the world's oldest occupation; Ryan 2008), and thus are highly suggestive of what fidelity to that baseline actually looks like. Anthropologist and economist John Gowdy points out that

most of the lives of hunter-gatherers are not spent at a workplace away from friends and family but in talking, resting, sharing, and celebrating; in short, in being human. This is an ideal of modern Western society, expressed in the major religions and in popular culture, but it is largely unrealised (1999, 393).

Human ecologist Paul Shepard, trying to "encapsulate what can be sifted from an enormous body of scientific literature," offers the following evaluative summary of the hunter-gatherer lifeway:

It is not only, or even mainly a matter of how nature is perceived, but of the whole of personal existence, from birth through death, among what history arrogantly calls "pre-agricultural" peoples. In the bosom of family and society, the life cycle is punctuated by formal, social recognition with its metaphors in the terrain and the plant and animal life. Group size is ideal for human relationships, including vernacular roles for men and women without sexual exploitation. The esteem gained in sharing and giving outweighs the advantages of hoarding. Health is good in terms of diet as well as social relationships. Interpenetration with the non-human world is an extraordinary achievement of tools, intellectual sophistication, philosophy, and tradition. There is a quality of mind, a sort of venatic phenomenology.... Custom firmly and in mutual council modulates human frailty and crime. Organised war and the hounding of nature do not exist.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Shepard is the most scholarly writer who self-identifies as a primitivist. Most other primitivist writers do not practice in academia, residing either in popular literature (e.g., Derrick Jensen and Daniel Quinn) or the activist literature of political radicalism (e.g., John Zerzan, David Watson and Bob Black). Of course, a great many academic scholars whose work is congenial to primitivism do not self-identify as such.

Ecological affinities are stable and non-polluting. Humankind is in the humble position of being small in number, sensitive to the seasons, comfortable as one species in many, with an admirable humility towards the universe. No hunter on record has bragged that he was captain of his soul. Hunting, both in an evolutionary sense and individually, is “the source of those saving instincts that tell us we have a responsibility towards the living world.” (1992, 53)

Thus Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore remark that

many of us were led to live and work among the hunters because of a feeling that the human condition was likely to be more clearly drawn here than among other kinds of societies (1968, ix; in Barnard 1999, 381).

Inversely, this means that primitivism is critical of agricultural forms social organization (which means virtually all present forms of social organization, foraging having been almost completely wiped out over the past 10,000 years). Because primitivism is not genetically determinist, it views the relation between culture and human nature as *regulative*: culture is relatively free to depart from the baseline, but only within limits, limits that they exceed to their peril (Wilson 1998). Consequently, there is potential for profound clashes between the human evolutionary constitution and certain forms of cultural organisation: “The theocratic agricultural states, from the early centralised forms in ancient Sumer onward [i.e., most agriculture of the past five millennia], have been enslaving rather than liberating. Even where the small scale seems to prevail, [Jeffersonian] conviviality is not typical in medieval or modern peasant life with its drudgery, meanness, and the suffering at the hands of exploitive classes above it” (Shepard 1992, 59). Recent empirical research by Samuel Bowles (2011) suggests that agriculture was not adopted because it was more effective at providing food than foraging (it wasn’t), but rather that its requisite sedentism—which allowed for higher population densities (reduced mobility makes child rearing less costly), a wealth-storage culture (granaries and livestock enclosures), and required military prowess to defend (itself facilitated by higher population densities)—gave agrarian societies the power to conquer forager societies.

Rather than agriculture being necessary to human progress, therefore, primitivists will interpret this research as showing how agriculture was preferred because of a will to power. Indeed, this focus on the social and demographic aspects of farming reflects the archaeologist Jacques Cauvin’s conclusions that the birth and spread of agriculture was due to “an internal dynamism” within a particular kind of culture, characterised

by: 1) the heroic virility of the religion of the bull, 2) a “love-affair with weapons,” 3) the pursuit of animal domestication in the interests of human “domination over the animal kingdom” rather than obtaining food-stuffs, 4) rectangular architecture symbolising the projection of anthropic order onto nature, and 5) the anthropomorphisation of deities (Cauvin 2000, 121–134). Cauvin sees this as indicative of a new conceptualisation of nature, one which sees nature as intrinsically adversarial and humans as being divinely called to exert mastery and control over it. The third major aspect of primitivism, then, is that *human subsistence patterns have crucial social and intellectual effects*, in addition to the obvious ecological effects of subsistence. The philosopher T. R. Kover (2009) argues that agriculture creates the belief that humans transcend and are exceptions to the natural order (and as such, the belief that we ought not to be morally beholden to any natural baseline), in large part because soil tillage requires an ecological and phenomenological distinction between the life-giving and anthropogenic order of cultivated nature on the one hand, and the weeds and vermin which emerge from the unmastered ‘wilderness’ to steal the fruits of the agrarian’s hard-won labour on the other.

All three of these elements come together in the primitivist critique of civilisation, which refers specifically to the highly-dense and sedentary populations of agriculturally-based urban cultures (the etymology of “civilisation” explicitly references cities, from *civitas*). Desmond Morris suggests that “as a species we were not biologically equipped to cope with a mass of strangers masquerading as members of our tribe” (1969, 18). Shepard argues that the “evidence is good that our fellow creatures individually and collectively show distorted behaviour when their numbers go beyond a norm for the species” (1982, 94), and we ought to expect the same of ourselves—unless we believe our species to be miraculously free from the same kind of bio-social limits that affect every other life form on this planet. There is a somewhat popular literature on the deleterious effects of exclusively synthetic landscapes on children (viz., a lack of playful contact with nature leading to estrangement from nature later in life; Louv 2005; Nabhan and Trimble 1994), as well as a growing academic literature on the therapeutic benefits, both psychologically and physiologically, of contact with nature (cf. Haluza-DeLay, Kowalsky and Parkins 2009, 124–129). The popular writer Derrick Jensen veritably defines ‘civilisation’ as environmentally unsustainable: cities entail “people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require the routine importation of food and other necessities of life,” “funneling...resources towards these centers (in order to sustain them and cause them to grow),” and so result in “an increasing region of

unsustainability [the city itself] surrounded by an increasingly exploited countryside” (2006, 17, 18). This logic, he notes, parallels that of globally-scaled European colonialism.

As a rule, therefore, primitivist theory views hunter-gatherer cultures as optimally suited to our evolutionary inheritance, while viewing ‘civilisation’ (at the extreme) and agriculture (to a somewhat lesser extent) as lacking sufficient fidelity to the demands of the human constitution. In Gowdy’s frank words, the human evolutionary baseline runs counter to “the possessive individualism of world capitalism” (1999, 397). In spite of this trenchant criticism of the status quo, it is important to remember that primitivism does not envision a miraculous or apocalyptic return to hunter-gatherer subsistence, but rather uses that evolutionary baseline as a regulative ideal for critically assessing and hopefully reforming the social and political arrangements of the present (this is why the theory is often prefixed with qualifiers like “post-historic,” “future,” “neo,” “anarcho” or “eco”). Foraging and our evolutionary constitution constitute an interpretive schema with which to critically re-examine claims about the socio-political necessity of modernity as it currently stands. Because primitivism grounds its cultural evaluations on a relatively stable baseline, it is not a theory given over to relativism. While critics will predictably accuse it of romanticism, primitivism relies on the authority of a best-practices (i.e., non-dogmatic and non-relativist) understanding of anthropological, archaeological and evolutionary research (i.e., primitivism is based on, rather than dismissive of, scientific data). In other words, its appeal to human nature is structural, not essentialist:

The...argument is not that indigenous peoples are somehow inherently (genetically?) prone to deal wisely with their environment, but that the social condition and mindframe of pre-modern existence contains elements which may be more conducive to wise management than the modern mindframe. (Hornborg 1998, 4)

The task of this paper is not to assess the validity of primitivism’s interpretation of this data, but rather to consider whether or not such theory can help provide traction on the role of traditional ecological knowledge in the contemporary world.

## 5. Juxtaposition as Critique

Because primitivist critique evaluates cultural realities in terms of their fidelity to (non-essentialised) human nature, it inverts the hidden

asymmetry of hybridity: rather than claiming that modern society is ‘the facts’ with which we must assimilate ourselves, primitivism evaluates the modern context in light of ‘the facts’ of human psychology and biology as indicated by approximately 190,000 years of our specific evolutionary and anthropological history. Therefore, whereas hybridity theory sees the juxtaposition of tradition against the status quo as indicating the irrelevance of the former, primitivist theory will likely interpret the juxtaposition as indicating the inadequacy of the latter. That is, primitivism critiques modernity, whereas hybridity critiques tradition.

So how might primitivism frame traditional ecological knowledge? Because primitivism carefully attends to different forms of social arrangement in light of human evolution, there can be no simple correlation between tradition and fidelity to human nature, or between hunter-gatherer and Aboriginal. The connection between primitivist theory and Aboriginal tradition is complex, for while many Aboriginal cultures were (if no longer) hunter-gatherer cultures, few Aboriginal cultures were urban civilisations (Mesoamerican and Andean cultures being prominent exceptions). That is, there may be a strong case—albeit without an unequivocal, necessary connection—for a positive primitivist evaluation of many if not most traditional North American Aboriginal cultures. Though primitivism does not essentialise Aboriginality as ‘optimally human,’ it will predict homeostatic clustering between non-urban and especially non-agricultural Aboriginal traditions and healthy, flourishing human societies. Therefore, insofar as 1) primitivism grounds criticism of, rather than acquiescence to, the status quo, 2) primitivism is profoundly skeptical of urbanism and agriculture, and 3) TEK is non-urban and especially non-agricultural, then 4) primitivism will view TEK as standing in grounded and critical contrast to relevant features of mainstream Western society. If TEK is conceived as irrelevant to, incommensurate with, or otherwise out-of-place in contemporary culture, primitivism will say that this is likely because *something is wrong with contemporary culture*.

Thus if Aboriginal artists emphasise the lack of fit between (non-essentialised) traditional identities and (non-essentialised) mainstream Western culture, primitivism will resist hybridity theory’s interpretation that such work indicates a need for Aboriginals to combine themselves with mainstream Western culture. Those artistic expressions will be rather interpreted as at least implicit criticisms of the status quo. If Aboriginal communities tend to see themselves as marginalised and their condition as sub-optimal, primitivist theory will first investigate the dominant culture as a possible and primary cause. For example, when historian David Rich

Lewis (1995) surveys the environmental issues facing contemporary Native Americans, he uncovers a correlation between Western industrial economics and the destruction of Aboriginal communities. Indeed, the often explicit rationale for Aboriginal reservations was the forced agriculturalisation and urbanisation of non-urban or non-agricultural peoples (Dempsey 1997), just as the civilising of savages was often the explicit rationale for residential schools. Primitivism would suggest that Western industrial economics and forced agriculturalisation / urbanisation / civilisation are *bad ideas* because those cultural contexts fail to do sufficient justice to the way human beings really are. What was wrong about efforts to ‘integrate’ Aboriginals into Eurocentric society was not simply that they violated the autonomy of Aboriginal cultures and individuals (which, of course, they did), but also that Eurocentric society (among others) is not something that people (Aboriginal or not) should be integrated into. Rather, all cultures—but especially highly dense, hierarchical, militaristic, and imperialist ones—should be subjected to profound and penetrating critical assessment if and when humans are expected to acquiesce to them.

It is, of course, the task of another work to systematically defend the notion that Western (and Eastern, and wherever else) civilisation is a maladaptive cultural system. What we are looking for here is rather a theoretical framework which situates TEK in critical contrast to the status quo. Unlike hybridity, scientific absolutism, or cultural relativism, the very structure of primitivist theory positions (non-essentialised) Aboriginal traditions in value-laden contradistinction to the (non-essentialised) industrial hyper-capitalist present. Generally speaking, primitivism will predict that TEK will tend towards fidelity with the human evolutionary baseline moreso than modernity will. By viewing TEK as a source of social criticism grounded in the primitivist reading of archaeological, anthropological and evolutionary data, TEK neither becomes the mere expression of nostalgic desire nor relegated to the quaint irrelevance of ‘à chacun son goût.’ It is rather a stronger way of saying “Native peoples have much to teach the rest of the industrialised world about living with the land” (Lewis 1995, 439). Controversy will undoubtedly swirl as a result of this positioning, but let it not be said that TEK is functionally otiose.

In particular, how would primitivism respond to the controversies raised earlier by conservation biologists and postmodern anthropologists? First, it is important to recognise that this primitivist situating of TEK does not reject Western science, but is rather predicated upon it. TEK is in-principle legitimated insofar as it exists in synchronicity with the kinds of

evolutionary beings we are—science being a good (if not the only) way to articulate this baseline. TEK and Western science are therefore not necessarily opposed to each other. There is no in-principle reason why contemporary Aboriginals cannot use Western conservation science or technology to manage their tribal lands (Lewis 1995). Nadasdy fears that if TEK is understood in the sense of ‘authentic’ tradition, something pure and unaltered by contact with colonial culture, that will allow “Euro-Americans...to judge them harshly, as guilty of betraying their own cultural beliefs and values” whenever Aboriginals utilise Western science or culture for themselves (2005, 293). But because we have seen that tradition is better understood as a living engagement of the past with the present, it is not something that ever was ‘pure’ which would be ‘contaminated’ by mere contact with modern science. Authenticity is beside the point; tradition is not static or timeless, and it can therefore critically appropriate other conceptual resources insofar as they do not undermine the character or gestalt of the tradition itself. Tradition rather *is* the critical assessment and, where appropriate, reception of the present by the past!<sup>6</sup> What matters is the character of Western logics and how they effect communities, not the simple fact that they are Western.

Because the grounding primitivism offers TEK is structural and not essentialist, TEK will incorporate non-traditional elements into itself when those elements augment the tradition’s ability to execute wise management, whereas TEK will challenge the legitimacy of non-traditional elements when they undermine the tradition’s ability to execute wise management. Conversely, when the tradition itself is not conducive to wise management, then its own legitimacy will be challenged. So, for example, rather than simply considering ‘the Indian’ as an ecological factor in the Northeastern American forest (Day 1953), an investigation framed by primitivism would consider particular cultural systems (such as sedentary agrarianism) as an ecological factor in forests. If the Northeastern American forests were negatively affected by agricultural Aboriginal cultures (e.g., ‘clearing’ the land, socially constructing ‘vermin’ outside the boundary of cultivation), one might rather want to know what those forests would look like had they been inhabited and managed by foragers. Perhaps agrarian TEK is less optimal than forager TEK? On the other hand, primitivism would be open to the possibility that agrarian TEK is preferable to advanced industrial obliteration of forest ecosystems.

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<sup>6</sup> “We do this by working with those strands of tradition we have at our disposal to produce and reproduce the idea that the world is still continuous, and we go on to create those continuities, often by weeding out the really incongruent portions” (Cruikshank 1998, 114).

Moreover, primitivism would be open to the inverse possibility that Western conservation science can be superior to certain (and especially agrarian) TEK claims. These questions remain open, but they wouldn't even be asked were we operating within the theoretical frameworks examined earlier. Primitivist theory opens up a new horizon for critical engagement between Aboriginal land use practices and Western conservation science that neither hybridity, scientific absolutism nor postmodern relativism can entertain.

However, and second, the very notion of "wise management" is theory-laden; Western science cannot provide the absolute definition of what that is, because Western science's own interpretive paradigms are contingent social constructions that may very well be inadequate at some level or another. Indeed, because Western science is as much a socio-cultural product as traditional ecological knowledge, it ought not to be absolutised or essentialised any more than Aboriginal identity should be. It too may be open to criticism and revision, and indeed TEK may be one vehicle for delivering precisely that criticism—particularly when Western science's own intellectual categories are derived from deeply entrenched agrarian cosmologies. For example, Kay (1994) argues that pre-contact North American foragers 'overkilled' ungulates, a highly-charged though undefined concept which the author uses in the same semantic range as 'damage' and the opposite of 'conservation.' But his mountains of evidence serve only to illustrate the fairly obvious point that "systems with native peoples are entirely different from those without Aboriginal populations" (Kay 1994, 385). But why should the fact that 1) Aboriginal hunting has *an effect* on prey populations, and 2) its effect is *different* than the effects of wolf, cougar and bear predation, lead us to the conclusion that 3) Aboriginals were *not conservationists*? That conclusion follows only if we supply a missing premise which says that a 'conserved' ecosystem exhibits no evidence of human occupation or activity whatsoever. Kay readily asserts that the "modern concept of wilderness, as areas without human influence, is a myth" (1994, 385), but that 'myth' of the transcendent human is built right into his 'scientific' conception of conservation. If we really were to decouple conservation from the idea of 'leave no trace,' then it would become an open question as to whether Aboriginal hunting constituted 'overkill.' Because it isn't an open question for Kay, he hasn't decoupled it after all. His supposedly scientific objectivity castigates Aboriginal peoples for failing to live up to a discredited notion of conservation. The double-standard here is fatal.

As with tradition, primitivism also refuses to operate on the assumption that nature's ideal state is pristine or virginal, uncontaminated

by contact with humans who are supposed to be exceptions to the natural order anyway. Agrarian cosmologies rather create the impression that nature has a pure state that is inimical to human beings, and that humans ought to remain outside it. By contrast, because TEK may tend to cluster alongside subsistence foraging, it is also likely to view human beings as embedded in the natural system, part of a “broad view of community that involves reciprocal relationships of care between family members” (Wawatie and Pyne 2010, 93), in which case TEK offers a corrective to the human-free conceptualisation of conservation presupposed by Kay’s science. On primitivism, it is theoretically possible for TEK to possess its own legitimate models of conservation, ones which ought to prompt a reconsideration of those assumed by Western scientists.

On the other hand, Nadasdy (2005) has trouble viewing the contrast between TEK and Western ideas of conservation or environmentalism as potentially corrective, emphasizing their incommensurability instead. He thinks it is mistaken to even attempt to place Aboriginal thought or practice on “the spectrum of environmentalism”—ranging from non-environmentalists at one end, reformist or mainstream environmentalists in the middle, and radical environmentalists at the other end—because that spectrum itself is an imposition of Western intellectual categories:

it constrains how we can think about indigenous people and their relationship with the environment. Since the spectrum is itself a cultural construction, any approach that it takes for granted remains rooted in Euro-American assumptions about the range of possible relationships between humans and the environment (Nadasdy 2005, 300).

The notion of wise management thus becomes *so* theory-laden that it is literally “meaningless” to apply it to Aboriginal people (Nadasdy 2005, 301). Nadasdy sees killing the sacred, respecting nature’s fearsome power, and choosing materially productive sites for settlement as “solely... anthropocentric and utilitarian,” in opposition to the environmentalist view that “nature might have inherent value” (2005, 305).

So while Nadasdy recognises that “most Yukon First Nation people... do feel that some of their beliefs and practices are more appropriate and environmentally benign than those of Euro-North Americans” (2005, 313–314), he cannot identify this sentiment as ‘environmentalist’ or ‘conservationist’ because his spectrum of environmentalism *will not allow him to*. His spectrum of Western concepts is essentialised, incapable of being altered by consideration of TEK. But if the Western mind is de-essentialised alongside the de-essentialisation of Aboriginality, then there’s no reason why TEK could not help reconstitute what is meant by

environmentalism: perhaps Westerners ought to realise that killing and respect are not mutually exclusive, any more than instrumental and intrinsic valuing are. Indeed, if primitivism is correct, then hands-off environmentalism ought to be subverted by TEK (Kowalsky 2007; Kowalsky, 2014). Likewise, when Agrawal argues that scientific databases actually falsify TEK by categorizing it according to technological utility, empirical validation and abstraction, and universalisability, we need not merely draw the conclusion that TEK should be allowed to exist in a context which more fully represents its power interests. Rather, so long as we do not essentialise the character of Western science, TEK's resistance to "scientisation" (Agrawal 2002, 291) can be interpreted as evidence for the inadequacy of default scientific decontextualisation. Science itself should be an object of our critical reassessment, and its encounter with other modes of thought can be mutually modifying without necessarily denying the epistemic warrant of one or the other (Kowalsky 2012).

Insofar as TEK is a living tradition, therefore, it can critically appropriate aspects of Western or other cultures that can at least potentially modify it for the better. Insofar as TEK is a more faithful expression of human evolutionary constitution and practice, it can critically respond to (rather than assimilate with) aspects of the cultural status quo that may be less than optimal, be they scientific, conceptual, or societal. This function of critique does not accrue to TEK because it is one autonomous power interest among many, but because primitivism can in-principle situate TEK outside both romanticism and relativism. The point is not that primitivism appropriates TEK for its own criticism of contemporary social reality, but rather that primitivism unleashes TEK from certain theoretical barriers that otherwise prevent it from engaging in grounded, critical assessment of contemporary social reality. Primitivism prioritises tradition in terms of its fidelity to who we are as a species.

## 6. Conclusion

The British graffiti artist known as Banksy has produced a number of images that also juxtapose notions of the traditional against the modern. In one piece, he portrays a stereotypical 'cave-man' holding a bone in one hand, and a tray of fast food (burger, fries, and a milkshake) on a tray in the other hand. Because the audience already knows that such food is considerably out of synch with our constitution—i.e., it is largely unhealthy—it is easy to see this image as primitivist critique of modernity. In another work that was surreptitiously installed in the British Museum (remaining undetected for several days), the artist uses a petroglyph style

to show a human pushing a shopping cart alongside a bison pierced with several spears. In a more naturalistic style, Banksy also portrays several Cro-Magnon hunters with spears and clubs in a savannah environment pursuing prey which, in this case, happen to be shopping carts. Here again, the juxtaposition evokes a sense of the ridiculous, and the viewer wonders if something is wrong with modern grocery shopping.

This is the kind of critical thinking encouraged by the very structure of primitivism. In a short video entitled “Indian Taxi” by Abraham Cote and Kevin Papatie (2011), a First Nations man paddles a canoe through an animated streetscape and highway full of noisy automobiles. In this homegrown work of Aboriginal art (facilitated by Québécoise filmmaker Manon Barbeau’s Wapikoni Mobile project), we again encounter a juxtaposition between traditional and contemporary mainstream culture. But there is more: the canoeist wears a red T-shirt featuring a photograph of Geronimo and other Apache warriors, bearing the caption “Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism Since 1492.” As he paddles his way past buildings and noisy cars, the man appears bewildered or even disoriented by the concrete jungle. In an almost imperceptible shift of movement at the end of the video, he starts to paddle *in reverse*. Unlike hybridity theory, this artwork does not fall into assimilationism passed off as mutual interpenetration. It seems to pose a question: when we encounter a lack of fit between ourselves and the dominant cultural context, “what might [our] symptoms say about the world we live in” (Wiebe 2011, 26)? That evaluative shift in questioning moves from the stifling of dissent to the possibility of social change.

There may be socially constructed limits within the present framework of our industrial economy to cooperating, reducing consumption, and in general living sustainably; but knowing that for almost all of human history these limits did not exist, it is impossible to conclude that there is something ‘natural’ about them. (Gowdy 1999)

I have proposed that the primitivist schematic can provide Aboriginal communities with robust theoretical and indeed philosophical grounding for articulating and asserting the non-romanticist importance of many aspects of their traditional lifeways, moreso than the bald self-assertion of autonomy characteristic of (post)modern will to power. If First Nations peoples believe their traditional ecological knowledge is, as Nadasdy said above, more appropriate and environmentally benign than contemporary North American beliefs and behaviour, primitivist theory will look to justify that belief in terms of the bio-social realities characteristic of 95% of human history. Moreover, this resource is not restricted to Aboriginals

but, as suggested by Banksy's art, accessible to all human beings—although the living memory of non-urban and non-agricultural tradition may be closer at hand in certain Aboriginal contexts than they are in most non-Aboriginal contexts. This continuity between our past, present and future—the encounter with heteronomy in the formation of our identity—is, I think, the justification behind the claim of Athapaskan and inland Tlingit elders who say that “oral tradition does not simply tell us about the past; it continues to provide guidelines for the present and to lay a foundation for thinking about the future” (Cruikshank 1998, 103). Tradition is a living source of action in the present and for the future. The resulting details, which cannot be prescribed beforehand, will have to be worked out in a spirit of grounded hope.

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