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Superpositioning the 'magic Real' and the magic *Real*:

Western empiricism, Native American subjectivity, *yuuyaraq*, and the burden of awareness

[Martin, C. L. (1999). *The way of the human being*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.]

I've come to the conclusion my view of reality is too limited. With this conclusion comes a tendency to seek and uncover an impetus, something definite, an "aha!" moment – yet, this statement seems only to punctuate the limits of my reality. Does this conclusion truly require causation, something determinate, measured? Can't it be, rather, something in and of itself, without constraint, neither central nor peripheral, but *plenipotential*? For instance, in his book *The Way of the Human Being*, Martin describes the concept of the plenipotential as something (emphasis on *something*) “full of potential for being a number of things at once ... In fact, it *is* a number of things at once” (p. 78). Reality, Martin argues, becomes neither this nor that, but a *something of many things*. For a person possessing a limited view of reality, one accustomed to Western binaries and cognitions, this new mode of reality becomes both beautiful and terrifying, a new mode of perception and knowledge wherein the Universe “(enfolds) us in its own immense imagination” (p. 194). This is the Native American perception of reality.

My response to these disparate realities brings to bear three self-reflective points of discussion. These include: (1) uninterrogated cultural assumptions held prior to reading Martin's book; (2) accompanying worldview reflections and learnings; and (3) applied critical and theoretical integrations. This process will require much more than analysis, however, but also the ability to creatively extrapolate a number of emotional flashpoints discovered throughout Martin's book. Such as it is, and in order to explore the Western 'Real'/Native American *Real*

dialectic, as I here refer it, this present response will therefore require honesty and, most importantly, an open and plenipotential worldview.

Interrogating and unpacking the 'Real'. I have had (at least) two cultural assumptions disclosed to me by Martin's book. Furthermore, these presuppositions have remained utterly free of interrogation throughout my life. I believe merely acknowledging these assumptions, however, even generalizing them, help to delineate those undergirding Western discourses that continue at present to collectively subjugate, marginalize, and Otherize non-Western worldviews. Native American subjectivity therefore becomes a particularly important context, given its poignant history beginning with the *Santa Maria's* arrival to the New World's green shores. By this same note, then, my self-reflexive acknowledgement becomes itself a discovery of many counter-discursive concepts, those hidden material and psychic intellections, perpetually and experimentally sustained, that explicate for us the *Real* way of the human being, not the 'Real' way of the modern man. However, it's important to first visit these assumptions, in order to better learn.

The first assumption I wish to illuminate concerns *reciprocity*, a term here related to concepts of gift-giving, respect, gratitude, and accountability. Previously, the Native American practice of reciprocation had seemed to me a novelty, a whimsical, superstitious gesture, exemplified quotidian acts of goodness, not exactly "rational". I have learned this is not so. Gift-giving becomes something more than charity, something above what any common act of courtesy can attain. Rather, reciprocation is as much to do with *sustainability*, sustainability for the human, the long river beside her, the mountains whose heights this long river is born, the thaw of winter sliding playfully over edges of the world, Sun aloft, stars ablaze, light and matter, the common singularity. This accountability may be the Native American's most eminent

display of respect. Westerners routinely take this respect for granted, the cold positivist's denunciation of magic as "magic". Westerners ignore this mutual respect between earth and her indigenous human communities, forget (or dismiss) early Paleolithic and pre-Columbian ontologies, the sustainability of all life, and so the Westerner never discovers this mythic ecology arrives solely from *reciprocation*. Thus great hunters bring home plenteous game – not from skill, but from *respect*. For instance, Martin writes: “In the Seal Village the lad learns that a truly great hunter is someone who behaves courteously ... who understands and performs the proper protocols" (p. 39). Through reciprocation, accountability, respect, all physical and mythic aspects of the Universe become integrated (see Berry, 1988) – it becomes *plenipotential*.

A second assumption concerns the European importation of what Martin describes as the *ontology of fear*. For instance, early Native Americans were not the timid deer-like people such as I had previously regarded them. On the contrary, I find now this misplaced perception is the consequence of a type of fear exclusively European, one refracted violently upon the Native American, not the other way around. Martin describes the debilitating influence of this ontology, of private property and avarice, papal doctrines and execution, and, worse yet, evil incarnate : "Let us not forget that it was the Christians who imported the personification of terror, Satan himself" (p. 171). I discovered the Native American was *not* hopelessly shy of the Europeans pulling toward shore. I discovered the opposite was true. In fact, I discovered early post-Columbian Native Americans wanted to adopt, literally integrate, the Europeans into their tribes, share alike the magical expressions of a Universe exemplified by the divine sustainability and cosmic integrations of earth's natural life communities (again...see Berry).

I must acknowledge my complicity in this virus, acknowledge that I benefit from the importation of this ontology of fear. Additionally, my Christian upbringing must painfully be called into question, as well as the subsumed acquiescence to fear, to the devil, to abstractions utterly

detached, even violently wrenched from the integrity of humanity. Even one of the West's greatest calamities against the Native American, alcohol, becomes now more than a narcotic, but a horrific cultural strychnine, leeching, jaundiced. Contemporary U.S. society continues to witness, with little reaction, the decimation of the Native American populace via repeated patterns of despiritualization, epidemic alcoholism and low literacy rates, and, of course, oppressive Western assimilation regimes.

Learnings, affirmations, and expansions of the *Real*. At its heart, Martin's book is about "[t]wo incommensurate worlds, two different stories, two utterly different ways of measuring reality" (p. 119). To explain this seemingly terrifying dialectic, describe how "reality is the illusion of daylight – the light of our particular day" (p. 163), that a *story knife* carves out, as a mode of process, our participatory universe, draws in the winter dirt a reality within realities – well, this is beyond the scope of my present response. However, Martin provides this explanation for us through two profound applications. Additionally, these applications represent a set of impactful learnings gained from Martin's book: the quantum phenomenon known as *superposition*, as well as the concept of the story knife, of which I further adopt as a metaphysical referent to position this concept beyond its more traditional storytelling aspects.

First, one particular insight gained from Martin's theoretical applications of Native American subjectivity is the idea of the nebulous reality, to borrow from Martin's expression of the term. This is also referred to as *superposition*. For instance, Martin cites from Haida poetry that "the animals take off their feather cloaks or skins. There they appear to one another, and converse with one another, just as we do among ourselves. They too, in other words, are people" (p. 40). Therefore, one may see how the aforementioned narrative of the boy from Seal Village becomes significant here both as signpost and flashpoint. The seal hunter lad visits the seals, views the world as a seal, literally *superpositions* his reality, the seal's reality, coalesces them into an immeasurable, unquantifiable, subjective dimension of the plenipotential, nonlocalized,

one devoid of observance but fulfilled utterly, expressed violently by the embraced, circumscribed participation of the entire Universe. This is a shamanic vision, to be sure, but *Real*. And so the seal hunter lad becomes a seal himself, not a phenomenon but a *something*, a human *and* seal, a seal-person among seal-people from the frozen North. This ancient dialectic, both quantum and galactic, narrated and sung within the majesty of Native American mythic stories, seems to me more real than anything our present discourses of modernity has brought to bear up until now.

Second, the Yup'ik story knife becomes now a multi-faceted agency. It is not a mere tool in which to physically draw a story, but a surgical instrument in which to incise and remove, if I can, the ontology of fear culturally-codified, etched obscenely onto the fabric of my reality. That polluted gangrene, the false philosophy, the abscesses of human supremacy, cosmic expansion, perpetual gain, and undisputed individualism, can now be purged. Also, this story knife becomes a moment of learning, a diviner, locating for me a set of affirmations. These include the grandiosity of nature, the power of storytelling and affective description (of which the story knife is a material apparatus), and, of course, the ills of Westernization described earlier. Additionally, the story knife becomes a light-guide to the uroboric, dark matter regions of human consciousness, those dusty chambers seemingly locked for lifetimes by the gaoler of empiricism, the iron bars of industry. The story knife gestures now as a different ontological bough, one photosynthesized by an alternative epistemology, itself embedded within a completely new axiological tendril, climbing to the sun, to pure energy. Shameless embellishment aside, this metaphor foregrounds an important distinction in the expansion and merger of “[t]wo opposite realities – two stories, really – playing themselves out on this continent” (p. 3). These learnings and affirmations become fulfilled, reality becomes more nebulous, more *Real*.

Integrating and experiencing the *Real*. My response has been largely guided by a number of outside scholars, particularly Thomas Berry (1988) and Stuart Hall (1992, 1997). Additional applications are also pulled from works by Derrick Jensen (2016) and David Abram (1996). Specifically, one may see in my response Hall's systems of representations underpinning those Western normativities that Orientalize, or Otherize, the Native American into "noble/ignoble savage" binaries. Furthermore, the logic of human supremacy that is colorfully denounced and deconstructed by Derrick Jensen underscores these patterns of symbolic annihilation. Last, Abram provides for my response a theoretical and linguistic framework positioned against affective-conceptual storytelling practices. Here one may then notice the significance of the Yup'ik story knife as both a proxemic apparatus and mythic caliper.

In sum, my overall emotional response to Martin's *The Way of the Human Being* can certainly be described as a combination of heightened reverence and empathy, and, most poignantly, a deepening yearning for a much more self-sustaining and mythic-aural human community that is and has been exemplified by endangered North (and South) American indigenous peoples for millennia. Further learnings and flashpoints throughout Martin's book include cited works by Henry David Thoreau, Loren Eiseley, and John Muir – men no doubt afflicted by their own white fears, but who have nonetheless set a model for reconciliation through artistic expressions not dissimilar to Native American perceptions. Additionally, Martin's book encourages intense critical self-reflection, which I found to be as challenging as it was rewarding – though at the same time also dispiriting. This is not an indictment; rather, this emotion reiterates and emphasizes my sense of yearning. Yet, Martin's book is also disorienting, and so it should be for any privileged, fetishized, commodified Westerner suddenly thrust into a plenipotential realm of skin-changing, membrane-shifting, superpositioned reality defined within

my response as Native American reality, the *yuuyaraq*, the Yup'ik "way of the human being" (p. x), the magic *Real* that defies the "magic Real". Thus the price to bear to experience such a profoundly ecological, mythical, Universe-oriented ontology, one celebrated by a culture that has systemically suffered genocide, assimilation, smallpox, displacement, and indescribable fear.

Conclusive integrations aside, however, I find it necessary to end my response to Martin's *The Way of the Human Being* with one more flashpoint, one that, I think, may augment my response further. This flashpoint is also relevant to culture theory as a whole, and beautifully explicates the mythic embrace of the global human community. In his book, Martin describes the Yup'ik *langellemni*, our "earliest remembered experiences of self-awareness and an individuated personality" (p. 140). Martin is careful to note this "individuated personality" is "not an autonomous, separate personality that dawns upon one at a certain age; it is awareness of the wholeself" (p. 140). Analogous to nature itself, the human being blossoms from the earliest memory of awareness, a person of star-dust, fully expressed by the Universe itself, a experiment nearly 15 billion years in the making, born from the moment of moments embedded behind the great rupture, the explosion of space, time, and life, the absolute singularity. By reading Martin's book, I was overwhelmed, disoriented, even nauseated, by an ascending burden of awareness, much like one feels at the crest of a towering roller coaster. A reflux of some kind frequently occurred, a kind of mental purgation, perhaps, the exhilarating consequence of confronting such profound insights – and being challenged by them. My yearning is agitated, more melancholy even, but the fear subsides. What *should have been otherwise* becomes *what can become*. My reality therefore becomes more affective, more Universal, and certainly less limited. I, therefore, see more clearly before me the way of the human being, the *yuuyaraq*, the magic *Real*.

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