Reflections on Indigenous Cosmopolitics—Poetics

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Abstract: This article is intended as an exploration into what I call indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, in the metaphysical sense of the politics of the cosmos, and as an attempt to draw a parallel between these cosmopolitics and recent anthropological work on "relational ontology." Among the expressions of contemporary indigenous cosmopolitics, I explore: the notion of the person as "dividual" and of the self as "relational"; the concept of ancestrality; and translocal networks of ritual exchanges and gatherings. To explore these avenues, I draw from my work and experiences with two indigenous groups, namely the Kukatja (Australian Western Desert) and the Atikamekw (North-Central Quebec).

Keywords: Indigenous cosmopolitics, ontology, Australian Aborigines, Amerindians (Canada)

Résumé : Cet article propose une exploration de ce que j'appelle les cosmopolitiques–poétiques autochtones, dans le sens métaphysique des politiques du cosmos, ainsi qu'une tentative d'établir un parallèle entre ces cosmopolitiques et des travaux anthropologiques récents sur « l'ontologie relationnelle ». Parmi les expressions contemporaines des cosmopolitiques autochtones, j'explore les avenues suivantes: la notion « dividuelle » de la personne et celle du soi « relationnel »; le concept d'ancestralité; et les réseaux translocaux d'échanges et de rassemblements rituels. Pour ce faire, je m'appuie sur mes travaux et mes expériences avec deux groupes autochtones, soit les Kukatja (désert occidental australien) et les Atikamekw (Centre Nord du Québec).

Mots-clés : Cosmopolitiques autochtones, ontologie, Aborigènes d'Australie, Amérindiens (Canada)

This article is intended as an exploration into what I call indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, and as an attempt to draw a parallel between these cosmopolitics and recent anthropological work on "relational ontology." One of its aims is also to continue a reflection initiated in a book Eric Schwimmer, John Clammer and myself co-edited under the title *Figured Worlds, Ontological Obstacles in Intercultural Relations* (2004). In that book we consider ontologies as an object for anthropology and explore avenues for the negotiation of ontologies and the political recognition of multiple ontologies. These aspects are rarely addressed in discussions of indigenous claims to and struggles toward self-determination and the recognition of differences, or when looking at what Eric Schwimmer (2003) has aptly called *negotiated coexistence* between the state (and the dominant society) and indigenous groups and nations. More often than not, relations and negotiations between states and indigenous groups are strongly shaped, impregnated and dominated by the master words and values of the State—such as "development," "property," "market," "sovereignty," and many more—leaving very little or no room for the expression and thus recognition of indigenous master words and values, which are generally grounded in differing ontological principles. To explore these avenues, I draw from a growing literature in anthropology on what has come to be called "relational ontology."[1] I draw also from my work and experiences with two indigenous groups, namely the Kukatja (Australian Western Desert) and the Atikamekw (North-Central Quebec), and my understandings of them.

In order to reflect on indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics and a relational ontology, two statements serve as my guiding thread. The first is from Tim Ingold and reads as follows: "The relational model *renders difference not as diversity but as positionality*" (2000:149). The second is from Bruno Latour's discussions of non-modern,[2] non-Western cultures. In his book, *Politiques de la nature*, he writes:

> les autres cultures, parce qu'elles n'ont justement jamais vécu dans la nature, *ont conservé pour* nous les institutions conceptuelles, les réflexes, les routines, dont nous avons besoin, nous les Occidentaux, pour nous désintoxiquer de l'idée de nature....ces cultures nous offrent des alternatives indispensables à l'opposition nature/politique en nous proposant des manières de collecter les associations d'humains et de non-humains qui utilisent un seul collectif, clairement identifié comme politique. [1999:64]

I consider indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics and "relational ontology" to be among these "alternatives." Furthermore, to be able to better comprehend (and eventually translate) the epistemological and ontological premises and principles of these "alternatives," we, as ethnographers and anthropologists, need a fair dose of reflexivity (and humility). We must accept a position as apprentice and recognize the authority of our indigenous teachers in the domain.[3]

Cosmopolitics–poetics?

Why use the concept of cosmopolitics? What is meant by it? Drawing from two philosophers of science, Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, I use the concept of cosmopolitics not in the sense of cosmopolitan and multinational, but in the metaphysical sense of the politics of the cosmos. In their respective works, Isabelle Stengers (2003) and Bruno Latour (1997, 1999) search for alternatives to the modernist constitution and its epistemological and ontological division between nature and society, between objects and subjects. They explore avenues for rethinking the associations (or collectives) of humans and non-humans, for considering anew the multiple connections between them. Through this rethinking, non-humans may become agencies rather than mere objects that lie outside the society of humans; they become co-present, co-actors in our common world (cosmos). This is their understanding of cosmopolitics, a cosmos (and a sociality and historicity) that is inclusive of non-humans and a world where different cultures and different ontologies and epistemologies can co-exist. I understand "co-existence" to be one of the key words in their concept of cosmopolitics. This explains why they have both been inspired by the writings of anthropologists working with non-modern and non-Western cultures, with peoples who have always been engaged in social, dynamic, and multifaceted relations and negotiations with non-human constituents of their worlds. The cosmologies, socialities and historicities of such peoples include non-human agencies (and persons). In other words, their worlds are predominated by an ethos of inclusiveness and co-existence (where positionality and negotiation prevail), as opposed to the ethos of exclusiveness characteristic of the modern constitution and ontology (where relativism and hegemony prevail). From an indigenous perspective, non-humans refer to ancestors, deceased relatives and spirits of various kinds, as well as to places, animals, plants, rocks, winds, water, meteorological phenomena and any other beings, entities or objects that are bestowed with agency—that is, consciousness and intentionality. Another term used to express these indigenous ways of being in and relating to the world is cosmocentric, as opposed to sociocentric (or anthropocentric). In a cosmocentric way of being-in-the-world, humans understand their humanity (and thus their difference and positionality) not by creating an ontological divide between nature and culture, but by engaging in manifold relations and negotiation with non-human agencies; not by reducing the field of the social to humans only, but by including non-humans in their sociality.

Now, what about the concept of cosmopoetics? In indigenous socialities, politics and poetics (aesthetics) are intertwined; they cannot be disentangled. In these non-modern traditions, the political acts of producing and reproducing the diverse relations between humans and non-humans—as political acts of alliance and exchange, of communication and negotiation—always imply forms of art and creativity in the sense that they involve aesthetic and performative aspects. Examples of this might include shamanistic practices, dream practices and narratives, spirit performances, storytelling, oratory art, and a broad range of ritual practices, performances and experiences, all of which are very sophisticated expressions of such political and poetic acts of negotiation and co-existence between humans and non-humans.[4] Furthermore, non-human beings and agencies often express themselves in languages that are not directly accessible to humans, hence the importance of mediating practices and performances, and of very complex, flexible and polysemic sign systems and modes of deciphering and interpreting them, which are always creative acts. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia,[5] "which insures the primacy of context over text" (Bakhtin 1981:428) could be relevant here. Heteroglossia "permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized) (Bakhtin 1981:263). Stressing the political and poetic dimensions of acts of communication and negotiation between humans and non-humans is also a way to underline the dialectical and dialogical aspects of such a relational ontology. It is these realities that are reflected in Ingold's concept of the "poetics of dwelling" (2000), which was inspired by Hallowell's work among the Ojibwa. It refers to a creative engagement with and dia-

logue between the various constituents of their dwelt-in world, both human and non-human. What I want to stress here is the politics and poetics of co-existence and relationality. Adding the word "poetics" to cosmopolitics is also an attempt to move beyond the harsh reality of politics by taking into account cultural sensibilities, imagination and creativity. As I learned with the Australian Aborigines, a political act or pact—for example an alliance or exchange with a neighbouring group or a land claims negotiation in today's context—necessarily implies ritual performances as well as creative gestures.[6] These are also occasions when ancestors and the spirits of deceased relatives are convened, when dream experiences and narratives are shared, adding depth and texture (and perhaps mystery, even secrecy) to the aesthetic, performative and experiential dimension of such political events.

These considerations lead me to another aspect of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics that has been neglected by most anthropologists: that is, "play" in the sense of both "drama" and "game."[7] Engaging in communication and negotiation with ancestors and spirits of various kinds in order to ensure the renewal of exchanges and the reproduction of the sociocosmic environment, particularly in ritual contexts, is a serious matter that requires particular skills and knowledge. However, I believe that we should not downplay the fact that from an indigenous perspective such (ritual) engagement and negotiation are perceived and experienced as forms of play with the cosmic order.[8] To my knowledge, Hamayon (1995) is one of the few anthropologists who has given serious consideration to the concept of play, mostly in shamanistic and ritual practices and performances in Siberia. She questions in passing the fact that the history of Christianity and of the West is marked by a systematic devaluation and discrediting of play.[9]

Thus understood, in the metaphysical and experiential sense of the politics and poetics of the cosmos (as collectives and associations of humans and non-humans), the concept of indigenous cosmopolitics is closely connected to the concepts of "relational ontology," "relational cosmology" and "relational epistemology" that have been put forward lately by a number of anthropologists working with indigenous peoples. Along with "co-existence," relations and a rationale of relatedness are key terms. In speaking of relations, I refer not only to the dimensions objectified in local categories, in local thought and in metaphoric systems, but also to their experiential dimensions. With respect to the nature of these relations, two points need to be emphasized. In a relational ontology, relations (between humans and between human and non-human agencies) are an intrinsic and dynamic part of local ways of being in the world. Relations are embodied to the extent that they are constitutive of one's self (of one's corporeality, bodily-self) and identity. The second aspect that warrants serious consideration, and that follows logically from the first, is that in indigenous understandings and experiences of the world, the agency of non-humans is a fact of life; it is a real and true phenomenon. The various relations between humans and non-humans are therefore truly reciprocal and negotiated.

Further Thoughts on Relational Ontologies

In *Figured Worlds*, mentioned earlier, we propose and explore a new field of inquiry that we call "ontological anthropology." It must be stressed here that "ontologies are not just metaphysical and theoretical, but also have practical implications" (Clammer et al. 2004:16). Thus,

> no ontology is simply a system of knowledge; it is equally, as the term itself implies, an account of a way of being in the world and a definition through practice (and not only through cognition) of what that world is and how it is constituted. If ontologies are basic to the construction of culture, then it is reasonable to assume that differing conceptions of being-in-the-world necessarily enter into conflicts between systems (societies or cultures) based on different ontological premises. [Clammer et al. 2004:4]

Consequently, ontologies are political in the broadest sense. As I wrote regarding Kukatja ontology, "ontologies are not only thought out, they are also lived out. They open on to different forms of knowledge and practice, indeed to varieties of "true" experiences" (Poirier 2004a: 59). Taking ontologies and "relational ontologies" as our guiding threads, we explore avenues for the negotiation of ontologies, in other words, paths towards the political legitimacy of multiple ontologies in today's context. In my view, such explorations should be an intrinsic dimension and concern of any postcolonial project.

As moderns and Westerners, we need to learn how to rethink, reweave and embody "relations." Being used to an absolute dichotomy between things of the world (objects and subjects, nature and culture, mind and body, emotion and reason), and being used to the sovereign self and an ethos of exclusiveness, we (Westerners and moderns) have difficulties in establishing relations and in thinking and feeling in terms of an intrinsic relationality, not only as political and aesthetic acts, but also as embodied and experiential realities. Here we are reminded of Bateson's idea that the modernist neglect of a sense of a unifying aesthetic (between mind and nature) is an epis-

temological mistake (1984:27). I would add that it is an ontological one as well, considering that from indigenous and non-modern perspectives knowing and being coalesce; they are two sides of the same coin, and knowledge cannot possibly be disembodied.

In this reflection on relational ontology and a rationale of relatedness, as they are expressed in indigenous and non-modern worlds, what is at stake is naturalism and the ontological nature/culture divide in the modern West.[10] In naturalism, the "natural" environment is objectified as an autonomous sphere devoid of spirit, subjectivity and consciousness. Through various ethnographic encounters and analyses in different indigenous and non-modern worlds, anthropologists have come to realize that the way the modern West imagines nature is the least widely shared thing in the world (Descola 2005:56). The relevance of Latour's potent statement cited at the beginning of this paper makes it worth quoting again: "those other cultures, because they have never lived in nature, have *preserved for us* the conceptual institutions, reflexes and routines that we Westerners need for a detoxification of the idea of nature" (1999:64, my translation). I read this as an invitation to explore alternatives to naturalism.

It is some of these "conceptual institutions and reflexes" that I wish to discuss now in order to deepen this exploration of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics and relational ontology. Among the expressions of contemporary indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics I will explore: the notion of the person as "dividual" and of the self as "relational"; the concept of ancestrality; and, the concepts of exchange, circulation and reciprocity, examined here through translocal networks of ritual exchanges and gatherings.

The Person as "Dividual"; the Self as "Relational"

The notion of person (and of self) is key in understanding any ontology or cosmology. I wish to draw attention here to the notion of the person as "dividual"[11] (as opposed to "individual"), and to the concept of the "relational self." In a dividual and relational mode, a person is conceived in terms of their relationships to other humans and to non-human agencies (and persons). These networks of social relations are intrinsic to one's sense of self and composite identities, rather than extrinsic (as in an individualistic notion of the person) (Poirier 2005:13). The distinction between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" is crucial here. In Western terms, Marilyn Strathern notes, it would be a paradox if relationships were not mapped as external connections among a plurality of individuals. In a dividual mode, however, the singularity of the person is conceptualized as a (dividual) figure that encompasses plurality (Strathern 1992:96-97). The notion of the person as "dividual" is thus understood as a nexus of social, dynamic and manifold relationships both between humans, and between humans and non-human persons and agencies (be they places, animals, plants, ancestors or otherwise). Such relations between human and non-human constituents of the dwelt-in world are not extrinsic to one's identity and being. They are embodied, an intrinsic and integral dimension of one's bodily-self (hence the expression "relational self") that connects one meaningfully to the surrounding socio-cosmic environment. Each person is thus a node within networks of agencies, social (but also political and ritual) relations, rights and responsibilities. It is important to point out here that as a rule, in indigenous cosmopolitics, rights to places, objects or particular knowledge cannot be dissociated from responsibilities towards them. The rights that one inherits or acquires could not possibly be recognized and validated by the community if one does not demonstrate a clear sense of responsibility (and thus caring and nurturing) towards the object of one's rights.

Such networks of multifaceted relations are not necessarily fixed or given, but are (re)composed, (re)validated, negotiated or transformed, according to needs, contexts and one's life itinerary. Knowing and acknowledging these networks, and acting responsibly within them, account for one's autonomy and sense of reciprocity. It is this aspect of relationships that makes sociality and the domain of kinship also inclusive of non-humans, be they animals, plants or places on the land.

In such a dividual and relational mode, one's action is conceived and experienced as interaction, one's subjectivity (agency) as intersubjectivity (or interagency), and an experience is always and necessarily an intersubjective experience. Intersubjectivity, rather than subjectivity, informs, orients and animates one's experience and understanding of the world. In Aboriginal Australia, for example, even a dream is understood as an intersubjective experience; it is never one's own production or expression. The dreamer's self is permeable to surrounding presences, feelings and motivations. The dreamer is thus a messenger, a mediator, and the dream an act of communication between different agencies, be they human or non-human.[12]

In indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, the human and non-human person and agency are by definition relational. In these worlds, the notion of person, as it embodies multiplicity, is to some extent the opposite of the sovereign subject, in the sense of a centred subject and self (and a disembodied Cartesian ego) that is exclusive rather than inclusive. It is with the logic of the dividual and relational

mode in mind, and its encounter (and co-existence) with the modern subject, that anthropologists and other social scientists are currently trying to better comprehend indigenous postcolonial selves and "positional identities" (Schwimmer 2003, 2004).

In order to undo the legacies of colonialism and as an alternative to the sovereign nation-state, Iris Young explores some principles of postcolonial governance. Among these is what she calls the theory of a "relational self" in which

> freedom or autonomy does not consist in separation and independence from others, or complete control over a self-regarding sphere of activity in which others have no rights to interfere. Instead, a subject is autonomous if it has effective control over its own sphere of action, and influence over the determination of the conditions of its actions, either individually or with others in collective decision-making processes. [2000:253]

This strikes me as reflecting the way the Kukatja and the Atikamekw would have conceived of self-governance and autonomy before colonial times; an autonomy and a self-determination that they are struggling to regain today through their political and territorial negotiations with sovereign states. I would also add that in indigenous cosmopolitics, and considering the reality of the relational self, the concept of autonomy is intimately linked to that of reciprocity. Being autonomous also implies engaging in relations of reciprocity with human and non-human kin, neighbours or "others."

I wish to briefly discuss the Atikamekw concept of the "human person" or "human inhabitant." There are two words for it—*iriniw* and *nehirowisiw*—and both are relational concepts. The word iriniw designates a human person, but it is seldom used by itself. It is generally attached to a place on the ancestral territory, or more recently to a community, to give it its full meaning: *Wemotaci iriniw*, *Manawan iriniw*, *Opitciwan iriniw*. Very seldom would the elders I have met over the years use the word Atikamekw as a self-identifying label. Instead they use the word nehirowisiw, which means a "human inhabitant," one who is autonomous on the land. This autonomy is grounded in an intimate, knowledgeable and responsible engagement and relationship with the land and its sentient constituents (be they animals, trees, plants, wind, places, or otherwise) as sharing partners, as co-present and co-existing with humans. More globally, nehirowisiw is someone who has developed intimate and knowledgeable relations with his or her dwelt-in world, whether in a traditional or contemporary context. Nehirowisiw establishes responsible and reciprocal relations with "neighbouring others" (Bird-David's expression). It is on the basis of such social relationships, within an ethos of sharing between human and non-human dwellers and agencies, that one acquires autonomy and self-determination. Nehirowisiw therefore implies a relational self. The plenitude of a nehirowisiw is further accomplished in the act of reproducing and transmitting knowledge of the land and of how to care for it; as one passes down knowledge of the land, so also one teaches how to be self-reliant on the land. This act of transmission is also an extension of one's own being-in-the-world, one that was drastically limited during the colonial period. The concept of nehirowisiw echoes a non-modernist understanding of the human person, but one that is at pains to reproduce itself in the contemporary postcolonial world (Poirier 2000, 2001, 2004b).

Ancestrality

Ancestrality is obviously a key reality and expression of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, of their ontology, sociality and historicity. Ancestrality is not to be understood here solely as a reference to the past, a mythical past or a genealogy, but rather as the ongoing expression of agencies and persons who were here before and who left something behind (substances, signs, powers or memories) that continue to participate in the unfolding of the world. In indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, ancestors and spirits of deceased relatives are social agencies and take an active part in human affairs. While they were living, through their actions, thoughts, desires and emotions, the ancestors left something of themselves not only with the people, but also in the land and in the places with which they were identified. In some traditions, their deaths are understood not so much as a definite separation from the living, but as a process of metamorphosis.[13] Their spirits (in the forms of substances, signs, powers or memories) are in many respects still living. They are often embodied in particular places in the landscape and are sensitive to human presence.[14] Not only are their spirits co-present, but their substances have impregnated the land and particular places, and whenever they choose they can make their presence known to living persons. However, they are most likely to present themselves or to be encountered in dreams and ritual settings. This means that ancestors are coeval and at times consubstantial to the living. Expressions of ancestrality are constantly being (re) embodied, actualised or (re)enacted. Ancestrality has an immanent quality to it; more often than not the quality and tenor of the relations of ancestors with the living involve caring, nurturing and transmitting. One's ancestral (intimate) connections intrinsic to the relational self

are acquired through conception, inheritance, rituals or dream revelations, depending on local tradition.

In comparing relational and genealogical models, Ingold's statement is helpful: "grand-fathers are ancestors because they were there before you, and because they guide you through the world. In that sense you follow them. But you are not descended from them" (2000:141). Numerous examples could be taken to demonstrate the co-presence of ancestors or the fact that, in the words of Hirini Moko Mead, a Maori anthropologist, "the ancestors are a real part of the present world" (Schwimmer 2003:169).[15] Among the Atikamekw, to take just one example, spirits of deceased grandparents are frequently encountered or referred to during hunting and fishing activities. Furthermore, the stones used for the sweat lodge ceremonies are called "grandfathers," as a generic term and a way to pay tribute to those who went before. The stones play an active part in the ceremony as manifestations of ancestral agencies, as sentient agencies and as witnesses of things past. Ancestors and deceased relatives are not only guides; they can also be the source of new knowledge. In some indigenous traditions, such as the Kukatja, they are the source of all knowledge. In indigenous worlds, ancestrality is thus an ontological and epistemological premise and principle. Ancestral agencies can embody different forms, leave signs or signal their presence in various ways. It is up to the living to interpret their presence and messages and to learn from them in a given time and place. In indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, ancestrality is not a genealogy; it is an unfolding, regenerative, relational and creative process.

Translocal Networks of Ritual Exchanges and Gatherings

The third aspect of indigenous cosmopolitics I wish to explore is that of exchange and circulation of rituals and ritual elements. I will look at translocal networks of ritual exchanges and gatherings, which I consider to be major traditional and contemporary expressions of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics. In Aboriginal Australia, as among First Nations in North America, regional and translocal networks of ritual exchanges and alliances have always existed, and in some cases they have been well documented by anthropologists. It goes without saying that the forms, contents, symbolic configurations and objectives (structures and functions) of these networks of ritual exchanges were considerably transformed during the colonial period. In today's context, however, they maintain some of their main objectives: networking, sharing and exchange, circulation, and reciprocity, in the respect of local differences and diversities. They can also be portrayed as networks of solidarity. While the many issues of identity politics and the construction of Aboriginality in the current postcolonial context (among indigenous groups, and between them and the settler society) are no doubt relevant here, my intent is to examine these networks from the point of view of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics and underlying ontology. What motivations and challenges are there for indigenous groups and individuals involved in the production, reproduction and transformation of such networks, and of these ritual forms and performances?

The Kukatja (Australian Western Desert)

The circulation and exchange of rituals are essential features of Aboriginal socialities and cosmopolitics–poetics (Poirier 1992, 2005:215-230). The exchange of mytho-ritual complexes between neighbouring groups has been a continuous practice in Aboriginal Australia, and seems to be a necessary one in promulgating the universality of the ancestral Law (better known as the Dreaming), and in maintaining interconnections between groups of different cultures and territorial areas. This is done without denying local variations and interpretations; in fact, such ritual exchanges and gatherings tend to promote and stimulate them, as well as encourage individual creativity.

In the Western Desert, during the period of forced settlement (from 1900 to the 1960's), ritual activities, including initiation and mourning ceremonies and ritual exchanges, did continue but not without some disruption. Traditional networks of ritual exchanges, alliances and gatherings (between Western Desert groups and beyond) were partially and temporarily disrupted. On the other hand, throughout the 20th century new networks and exchange routes were created out of the new living conditions in settled communities, which reflected older and more contemporary alliances. New ritual corpuses were also created and began circulating along these new exchange routes. In the 1970s and 1980s, many national and regional factors stimulated an increase in ritual activities, including the circulation and exchange of rituals between groups over a wide area. Among these factors was a greater availability of motorized vehicles for Aborigines living in remote areas and the ability to travel greater distances and to visit relatives in distant communities (a strong expression of contemporary nomadism). National policies of self-determination for indigenous peoples and the land claims processes also stimulated a renewal of ritual activities, as well as the opening of such ritual (and sacred) performances to non-indigenous audiences. Aborigines felt the imperative to rethread networks of ritual gatherings and exchanges between different

groups, and at the same time to revitalize the circulation of ritual and ancestral knowledge, substances and powers as major expressions of their cosmopolitics–poetics, and of their ancestral Law.

Today, in northwestern and central Australia, including the Kimberley area, there are various types of translocal and transregional ritual gatherings, I will mention four. The first is the initiation ceremonies that are held in different communities every year between November and March, and which sometimes gather together several hundred people over many days. The second is the mortuary rituals and mourning ceremonies that are held whenever a death occurs (irrespective of the age of the deceased) at the deceased's community, and which last for days, sometimes weeks, involving hundreds of people.[16] The third is the exchange of rituals that takes place when one group visits another in order to teach a particular ritual to the group and give it to them. This also gives the receiving group the right to perform the ritual and eventually to teach it to another group. In exchange, their hosts may give them a ritual or they may pay for it in a variety of ways. Whatever the type of ritual gathering, since dozens or even hundreds of people gather together for several days, the ancestors and deceased relatives are also convened. They are active participants, and may appear in dreams, reveal new ritual knowledge, or make their presence known in various other ways.

A fourth type of ritual gathering is more recent, beginning in the late1980s under the auspice and initiative of regional pan-Aboriginal organizations. These are called Law and Culture meetings and are usually organized every few years. They last for several days, gather together hundreds of people from different communities, and are the site of intense ritual performances where each group stages its own rituals. Among other things, these Law and Culture meetings help create and reinforce a pan-Aboriginal identity among groups that are often far removed from each other.[17] It is interesting to note that these gatherings are more a women's affair (a point I will not address here); men participate, but to a lesser extent. In today's context, these meetings have become an important venue for the reproduction and transmission of ritual knowledge. The presence of non-indigenous people at such meetings is allowed, but particularly in recent years it has been a source of discomfort and debate among Aborigines. Previous experiences in other settings (in the context of land claims or of artistic and cultural happenings), where they staged ritual performances in front of white audiences, have made them realize that whites are not very sensitive to the political, aesthetic and ancestral power of the ritual performances (Dussart 2004), hence their reluctance to allow whites at the Law and Culture meetings.

The Atikamekw (North-Central Quebec)

As far as traditional ritual knowledge and activities are concerned, the situation among the Atikamekw is quite different. Gradually, from the end of the 19th century through the early part of the 20th century, as missionaries condemned Atikamekw practices and the Atikamekw converted to Catholicism, Atikamekw ritual practices became so clandestine as to be virtually non-existent.[18] However, over the last twenty years, in the context of the cultural and political reaffirmation of indigenous nations throughout North America, Atikamekw "traditional" ritual knowledge and practices seem to be rising from their ashes. In this process of ritual renewal, the Atikamekw have benefited from exchanges with and teachings from neighbouring groups, mostly the Cree and Ojibwa who have always been traditional ritual partners. The exchanges and circulation of ritual elements and knowledge between these groups have always existed as networks of solidarity. While they were greatly diminished during the colonial period, they are gaining new momentum in the postcolonial context, taking on new forms and responding to different needs.

The ritual renewal, while not shared by all members of the Atikamekw Nation,[19] nevertheless represents a local initiative and strategy to foster Atikamekw self-esteem and healing, and to create spaces of identity, autonomy, resistance and self-determination. It is a very exciting aspect of their recent history. In terms of ritual renewal (and all that is implied by it, socially, politically and aesthetically), the Atikamekw have been very active and creative in the last twenty years at a local and translocal level.

At the local level, which refers to the three Atikamekw communities (Wemotaci, Manawan and Opitciwan), the Atikamekw men and women involved in the process of ritual re-appropriation and reconstruction have benefited as much from the knowledge of local elders[20] as from the knowledge of elders of neighbouring groups, mostly the Cree and Ojibwa. The creative and interpretative processes involved in this entailed outstanding engagement from these men and women. Among the ceremonies, rituals and practices thus (re)appropriated (and some of which are now practised on a regular basis) are the newborn ceremony, the first step ceremony, the sweat lodge and drum playing. On a more sacred-secret level, and involving only a handful of initiated individuals, are the moon ceremony and the rain dance. It should be noted here that differences exist between the three Atikamekw

communities regarding the extent to which some of these rituals have been collectively recognized and endorsed, or are collectively performed, a question I will not address here. Likewise, there are differences in the forms that these rituals and practices take on in the three Atikamekw communities. These local differences testify to the vitality of the renewal itself.

An ethnographic study of these rituals and practices would situate them within a relational ontology and cosmology. In their contemporary expressions, they are a reworking of the animist ideologies and values of formerly nomadic hunters (see also Tanner 2004). In the case of the first step ceremony, the Atikamekw have benefitted from the teachings of Cree elders, in addition to the knowledge and memories of local elders. The moon ceremony, a ritual exclusively involving women, was first shown to a Wemotaci woman by Ojibwa women in the early 1990s. The rain dance is also from an Ojibwa teaching. The point I wish to stress here is that these creative and translocal processes of (re)appropriation, (re)interpretation and (re)construction—which are also intimate processes of teaching and exchanging—are contemporary expressions of Atikamekw cosmopolitics–poetics. From the moment these different rituals and practices are passed on, that is, once they are taken over and performed by the following generation, they become part of local Atikamekw tradition and identity. And like any tradition, each generation will bring to it the transformations and reinterpretations they judge necessary.

At the transregional level, quite a few Atikamekw, both men and women, young and old, spiritual leaders and lay persons have been participating in wider networks of ritual gatherings and shared experiences. At times the Atikamekw communities also host these events. Whatever form they may take, powwows or spiritual gatherings (as they are called, and of which there are different types) are contemporary expressions not only of indigenous identity politics, but also of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics. These inter-tribal and inter-group events stimulate networking, exchange and a sharing of intimate ontological, ritual and experiential affinities. At the same time, they help reinforce a pan-indigenous identity and solidarity, in the respect of local affiliations and differences. They are arenas in which "to negotiate, to perform and to exchange ideas about contemporary Aboriginality...and to forge relationships of reciprocity" (Buddle 2004:30, 32; see also Adelson 2001 and Tanner 2004).

There are interesting parallels to be drawn between these networks of ritual exchanges and gatherings among the Kukatja and the Atikamekw, even on the basis of their brief description here. One of these, from my understanding, is the feeling that these networks must be kept alive and dynamic. In the postcolonial context, they are expressions of changing indigenous political and ritual imagination. After the sufferings, dispossessions and losses engendered by colonial ideology and the policies of assimilation, these networks and gatherings represent meaningful local, translocal and transregional practices of empowerment, as well as strategies for reweaving indigenous social and cultural orders. Another parallel is that in many respects, these networks of solidarity stem from indigenous initiatives, and therefore are being created outside the state's control, which reinforces their potential for affirmation and empowerment. Another point of comparison concerns the politics of sacred and ritual knowledge. In any ritual tradition, the modalities for exhibiting and passing on rituals are always key issues that can at times be the object of heated debates, disagreements and negotiations between ritual leaders, and sometimes also lay people. Since these ritual gatherings attract non-indigenous audiences, one of the questions that is being addressed by Aborigines and Amerindians is the extent to which they should open their sacred and intimate knowledge and practices to non-indigenous people (including anthropologists). Obviously, there are multifaceted answers to this question and indigenous people have long been aware that this is a dimension of their "negotiated co-existence" with non-indigenous people. In their sphere of ritual practices, however, they are the ones who can decide how far they want to "accommodate" these other "players."

A Few Concluding Comments

This reflection on indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics is far from having exhausted the subject. My intention here was to discuss some of the non-modern, non-Western "conceptual institutions and reflexes" alluded to in Latour's statement at the beginning of this paper. Other aspects and expressions, some of them major, have barely been touched on, though they have been suggested throughout. Among these are the fact that the land (and ancestral territories) is perceived not as a mere surface to occupy, possess and exploit, but as networks of sentient and meaningful places, the seat of knowledge, experiences and transmission, and thus of autonomy and self-determination. In indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics, places are indeed an intimate and integral dimension of one's identity; they are intrinsic to the dividual person, to one's networks of relations. Indigenous people are usually very sensitive to the myriad signs and moods of places. Referring to the Aboriginal context, Rose's statement is appropriate here: "country is the matrix for the structured reproduction of subjectivities" (1999:180).

Dreams and dreaming, as a sphere of true experiences and encounters and as a source of knowledge, are also major dimensions and expressions of indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics. The dimension of "play" and the principle of multiplicity also orient indigenous ways of being in and relating to the world. All these aspects testify to the absence of ontological frontiers between humans and non-humans. It goes without saying that the various aspects and expressions of indigenous cosmopolitics that have been portrayed here may take on different forms and meanings and initiate different practices, depending on each local tradition.

Indigenous cosmopolitics–poetics again raises the question of difference and the right to difference in modern Western nation-states. In their co-existence with the dominant society and in dealings with the state—for example, in the lengthy and arduous processes of political and territorial claims and negotiations—indigenous peoples have learned to conceal those aspects that are considered, from the point of view of modernist (and Cartesian) ontology and epistemology, as a radical alterity, those that are not taken seriously and at face value. The immanence and co-presence of the ancestors, the agency of non-humans, dreams and dreaming are among the indigenous realities that generally have no place in intercultural relations, or, for example, at the negotiation table where the ontological principles of modernity and the politics and rituals of bureaucracy predominate. Such concealment is a form of symbolic violence that is imposed on indigenous people. I see it as another expression of what Povinelli has called "the cunning of recognition" (2002). Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that indigenous peoples are "players" with tremendous patience.[21] Neo-colonialism, rather than postcolonialism, orients the current relations between indigenous peoples and the state (and settler society). A genuine postcolonial project would mean working towards the political negotiation and legitimacy of multiple ontologies.

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Notes

1 This term, alongside those of "relational epistemology" and "relational cosmology," grew out of various attempts to revisit animistic traditions in their own right and stripped of any evolutionist stance, as well as various critiques of Western naturalism and the nature/culture divide (see, among others, Bird-David 1999, Descola 2005, Descola and Palsson 1996, Viveiros de Castro 1998). Bird-David's statement "I relate therefore I am" (1999:S78), which was inspired by her work among the Nayaka, in many ways represents the core of a "relational ontology."

2 The term "non-modern" must be distinguished from "pre-modern." The term "pre-modern" stems from a colonial ideology and advocates an evolutionist perspective that considers "modernity" and its components as the ultimate goal for all societies. The term "non-modern" refers to contemporary societies and cultures who have not surrendered to the values and ideologies of modernity (Poirier 2000). In other words, all that is contemporary is not necessarily "modern" and contemporaneity should not be conflated with modernity. For a discussion on modernity as a historical and social construct, see Friedman 2002.

3 Eric Schwimmer was always very sensitive to these dimensions of ethnographic work and relations. See, among others, Schwimmer 1983.

4 On these aspects in Schwimmer's work, see, among others, Schwimmer 1986, Schwimmer and Iteanu 1996.

5 By heteroglossia I mean the co-existence of different language forms (of different worlds) and sign systems that require interpretive skills and acts of decoding.

6 See, among others, Dussart's work (2000, 2004) on the importance of ritual staging in the context of land claims among the Warlpiri (Central Desert, Australia).

7 The French word *jeu* conveys both meanings.

8 From a hermeneutic perspective, Gadamer has explored "play" as a mode of being, considering that "play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness" (1975:91). I have briefly discussed this aspect for the Kukatja way of relating to and being in the world (2005:247-249).

9 This "sense of play" is further reflected in a distinct sense of humour that those of us who have worked with Amerindians, Australian Aborigines or other indigenous groups have come to appreciate.

10 Marilyn Strathern (1980) was among the first anthropologists to seriously question the nature/culture ontological divide as a universal category of thought.

11 I borrow the concept of "dividual" from Marriott (1976) and Strathern (1988, 1992). See also Bird-David 1999.

12 I have dealt elsewhere with this aspect (Poirier 2003, 2005).

13 For further discussions on metamorphosis, see Ingold (2000:89-110), Descola (2005:183-202), and Poirier (2005).

14 A good example of this is given by Povinelli (1995) for Aboriginal Australia where rocks (and places), as the abode of ancestral spirits, are sensitive to the by-products of human actions like sweat and speech.

15 See also Goulet (2004) for a stimulating discussion of the role and place of ancestors and their encounters in dreams, in today's research protocols and ethical principles.

16 Indigenous intimate relationships with the spirits of deceased relatives and the great significance usually given to mourning and funerary rituals are also major dimensions and expressions of their cosmopolitics–poetics.

17 See Dussart 2004 for a thorough analysis of some of these meetings.

18 During that period, some individuals and families did however continue to perform hunting and shamanistic rituals in the intimacy of their forest lands.

19 It must be noted here that among the Atikamekw, as among other First Nations, the ritual renewal is at times the topic of heated debates between groups of different "religious" allegiances.

20 This was true for those who did not see it as a betrayal of their Catholic faith, who did not see a contradiction between the two practices, or who did not fear the threats and wrath of the Catholic priests.

21 Discussing indigenous life projects, Blaser suggests, rather than "a politics of patience," "a politics and epistemology of resilience that assume relations, flows and openendedness as their ontological ground" (Blaser 2004:38).

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