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COMMENTARY

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Coloniality and Indigenous ways of knowing at the edges: Emplacing Earth kin in conservation communities

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Abstract

Participation of Indigenous peoples and local communities is encouraged in calls for sustainable transitions and transformations. The term 'community' is widely used yet nebulously defined. Conservation that removes people from their communities of land invokes epistemological authority and displaced relationships. We relate our work to the articles in this special issue to rethink the relationship between humans and nature in conservation. We propose expanding the term 'local communities' to include more than just humans. By decentring the human subject, we rethink what it means to participate in community and place-making, further unpacking the ethical motivations of emplacement.

KEYWORDS

emplacement, indigenous knowledge, more-than-human, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

Demarcating the Anthropocene has heightened awareness of just how vastly and deeply human practices affect the flow of materials on Earth, contributing to climate change, land conversion and species extinction. In their proposal of a new epoch called the Anthropocene, Steffen et al. (2011, p.749) suggest that as 'the first generation with the power and the responsibility to change our relationship with the planet', we must move from an exploitative relationship to one they call 'stewardship of the Earth system' (Steffen et al., 2011, p. 746). They suggest stewardship may warrant extensive actions such as geoengineering, aiming to optimise Earth's conditions for the mission of human progress. We take from this point that earth system stewardship comes in many forms, and that it is not value-free.

Conservation practices in much of the 20th century were premised on a sort of stewardship that removed people from nature to protect it (Nash, 1990). This so-called fortress conservation was premised on a Western epistemology of the mid-19th century that, like much of the normative rhetoric of the Anthropocene, focused on the many ways in which humans harmed nature (Nash, 1990), thus requiring a fortress for protection. While acknowledging the positive impacts on certain species populations, this approach often came at the expense of Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLC), whose lifeways continue to be threatened, criminalised and lost where this model is applied (Weldemichel, 2022).

In the late 20th century, the Western value system that motivated fortress conservation was interrogated and found to be problematic biophysically and socioculturally (MacDonald, 2010). Ecologically, nature does not function in isolation (i.e., as a fortress) and wild species do not 'respect' boundaries, which causes all sorts of issues for large mammal management in parks,

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for example. Socially, IPLC lands continue to be 'made grabbable' in the name of conservation (Weldemichel, 2022), and through structural marginalisation and the creation of scarcity using population biology metrics. In sum, by eliminating traditional lifeways from the land, many beings suffer, not least through decline in abundance and distribution.

There are alternative conservation strategies that step away from separation, domination and control. Alongside similar strategies of co-management and participatory management, community-based management (CBM) has attempted to emplace human communities in conservation. Ideally, CBM recognises the value of different ways of knowing and interacting with varied animals, plants, fungi, and land, making space for diverse value systems in decision-making. In some instances, CBM has led to successful community recovery and sustainable use of wild species, while in other cases, it has operated as a slight variant of conservation-as-usual (Brosius & Russell, 2003). In parallel to changing styles of conservation management, political movements to include IPLC in international policy spaces have also evolved. One of the places in which these dialogues are increasingly distinguished is Aotearoa New Zealand, the main empirical site for this special issue.

As geographers engaging with the Anthropocene, we are invited to rethink our key conceptual devices, looking for entry points to reframe human-nature relationships with the expressed aim of living in a flourishing world. We are writing from Tråanten or Trondheim, in the Norwegian area of Sàpmi. We live in this antipode of Aotearoa New Zealand, yet we come from the United States, bringing perspectives from another nation-state which is also questioning and working to reconcile violent coloniality. We do not claim Indigeneity, and we wrestle with the contentions tied to our settler ancestries and their implications in our current and former homes. Speaking from their specific location in Aotearoa New Zealand, many authors of this issue name the ethical responsibilities they adopt towards more-than-human communities and IPLC. These practices of declaring positionality, place and communities opens doors for structural and practical changes in place. With these concerns in mind, we see this special issue as a step past CBM, as it has been practiced and theorised thus far, towards a deeper integration of diverse ontologies of human-nature relationships informing conservation and related care work for the living world.

In this commentary, we reflect on the turn towards being in community with Earth kin variously represented in these papers and in our own work. We also reflect on how place and history impact our work, both within our shared academic community and our distinct communities-in-place. Issues of community and place-making intertwine with those of colonial domination of peoples and landscapes, environmental governance, multiple ontologies and values of nature and questions about how to move forward in these precarious times. To generate space for reflecting on these issues, we offer a rethinking of community as co-constituted with humans, more-than-humans and place. We reflect on how national political discourses on colonialism and indigeneity may unexpectedly shape academic scholarship on more-than-human communities in which we engage, especially in terms of openings for praxis outside our academic communities. We observe that Indigenous peoples and ontologies are recognised and engaged with differently across Aotearoa New Zealand and Sàpmi Norway, with direct impacts on diverse communities.

2 | CONCEPTUALISING COMMUNITIES OF MORE THAN JUST HUMANS

The concepts of 'community' and 'local' are fundamental in geography, yet malleable in linguistic practices inside and outside of the discipline. They convey spatiality, but without clear borders; they imply intimacy, but amongst whom? We draw on the politics of language, as mobilised by Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020), to understand 'community' and 'local' as relational terms. We consider the agency of place to co-constitute local places and communities with diverse animals, plants, fungi, microbes and ecosystems (Larsen & Johnson, 2016). Acknowledging that non-human beings are alive, that they matter and that they have agency is key for framing them as community members.

Key linguistic mechanisms, including renaming, recast nature as neighbour. Scholars use diverse names for these potential community members, which may include anyone from animals, plants and microbes to rivers, mountains and the land. We consider this range of nomenclature in the literature as a sort of 'term soup', with animated names for groups including 'more-than-humans', 'non-humans', 'other-than-humans', 'Earth others', 'Earth kin', 'the biota', 'landscape', and 'Country'. Relationships among these groups, as well as the sum of beings and interconnections, are variously called 'ecology', 'interspecies relations', 'intra-actions', 'multispecies communities', '(relational) ecologies', 'entanglements', 'assemblages', 'multibeings', 'multiworlds', and 'interdependencies'. Each of these terms has strengths and weaknesses in various situations, as Price and Chao (2023) begin to explore. We use several of these terms, thoughtfully.

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When we create links among people, species and landscapes, we pull those entities into closer community with us and simultaneously expand the human community. Most authors of this special issue rename their non-human subjects and relationships to show agency. Buttle et al. (2023) refer to work on contaminants as 'more-than-living' agents, citing Romero et al. (2017). Siimes (2023) even gives a human name and quality to his central subject, calling the fungal species *Brettanomyces* 'awkward Brett'. Yee and Sharp (2023) resist separating humans from non-humans entirely, instead writing of 'human-insect assemblages'. These (re)naming practices blur the lines drawn around humans, pulling certain Earth kin into community and simultaneously expanding community lines to encircle others.

Another key mechanism of animated language involves action and interaction. The authors in this special issue recognise the agency of rivers, microbes, plants, insects, and chemicals by giving them action verbs in their written texts. Awkward Brett 'destroys everything' but also 'questions binaries and 'resists pacification' (Siimes, 2023). Bodies of water 'contest, create and rework' (Samuelson et al., 2023), as insects 'work' and do 'labour' in bioeconomies (Yee & Sharp, 2023). As Virens (2023) shows, weeds are hated community members by some and are pulled into caring relationships by others. Indeed, not all members of a more-than-human community are likable nor favourable to a majority of community members. Still, they can persist ubiquitously, as Buttle et al. (2023) show with 'forever chemicals'. Of course, not every being in a community is loved and loving, but naming them as community members renders them visible and recognisable.

Deploying a politics of (re)naming does not on its own create community; community is made and remade through interactions that form relationships in places over time, and which have ethical implications (Barron et al., 2020). It is when continuously performed relationships affect ethical imperatives that we see the communities expanding, pulling in more than just humans. Understanding that close relationships can form between humans and awkward Brett, Siimes (2023) describes Brett's effects on people through wine, and how noses trained for detecting Brett are used as tools in Brett's eradication. Siimes invites the reader to reassess the killing of Brett as violence, suggesting that instead of eradicating Brett, wine lovers could learn tolerance. Likewise, Virens (2023) draws connections between colonialism and conceiving weeds as plants out of place, which should be eradicated. In her view, those who appreciate weeds perform an act of resistance to colonial mindsets and the politics of belonging; caring for weeds serves as an ethical response to an injustice. Samuelson et al. (2023) refer to working *with* rivers, not *on* them. Yee and Sharp (2023) imply that treating insects as agents in a multispecies world will require changes in company practices, policies, and legal frameworks for insect welfare. It is when continuously performed relationships affect ethical imperatives that we see the communities expanding, pulling in more than just humans.

Across broader more-than-human literatures, non-human beings are pulled into relationships with humans to various degrees. We refer to these new configurations collectively as 'communities of Earth kin'. Extractivistas in Brazil practice earthcare labour and are willing to die to save the forests they live off, in and with (Barca, 2020). Our Earth kin have direct and indirect working relationships with humans; for example, a cork tree grows its bark for itself and for people who harvest it and care for the trees in return (Barron & Hess, 2020). Several ant species live mutualistically with trees, where they farm fungi, which benefits the tree's nutrient exchange and which humans also harvest (Barron & Hess, 2020). Some argue that plants and lands shape how humans work, as the lifecycle of grapes determines the seasons in which winemakers work and rest (Brice, 2014). The living world can be understood as a co-creator of our shared livelihoods by regulating the air, water, soil and materials of our common habitat building (Miller, 2019). In the Yolŋu ontology of co-becoming, every 'thing' is knowledgeable, and knowledge comes from the land herself (Bawaka Country et al., 2016b). As such, Bawaka Country, this land herself, is cited as the first author in a string of academic papers. Through a politics of authorship, the human authors trace the origin of their knowledges back to a relationship with land and with place, giving credit to the land for the resulting writings (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; Bawaka Country et al., 2015; Bawaka Country et al., 2016a). The authors suggest that conservation-as-usual has something to learn from this way of knowing, being and caring.

3 | COMMUNITIES OF EARTH KIN AND THEIR COLONIAL HISTORIES

Aotearoa New Zealand and Sàpmi Norway are both relatively small countries on the antipodal edges of conservation and indigeneity politics. Both have a population just over 5 million, and both are known for their lush nature and nature-loving cultures. However, their Indigenous and colonial histories are quite different. Accounts from Aotearoa are considered, including by Indigenous scholars, in this journal (Yates, 2021), in this special issue (McSherry & McLellan, 2023), and in Aotearoa's literature (e.g., Jones & Hoskins, 2016; O'Malley & Kidman, 2017).

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Here, we will speak of Norway and Sápmi, the Sàmi homelands.

Sàpmi spans the modern nation-states of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, with around 10 living Sámi languages. Five Sámi languages are alive within the Norwegian border (Knutsen Duolljà et al., 2023). Norwegians have their own history of subjectification by neighbouring superpowers, Denmark and then Sweden; complete independence for Norway came in 1905. As Lehtola (2015) suggests for Finns, some Norwegians see themselves as representatives of democracy and tolerance because they understand what it means to be colonised.

The Norwegian state and crown have made some attempts to acknowledge mistreatment of Sámi peoples. Under Norwegianization policies of the state that began in the 1850s, culture and language of Indigenous peoples and cultural minorities were forcibly replaced by the language and culture of the ethnic Norwegian majority. Until the 1960s, national policies overtly targeted Sámi and other minorities. A Norwegian Sámi Council was established in 1964, which eventually became the Sámi Parliament after the passage of the Sámi Act in 1987 (Berg-Nordlie, 2022). In 1997, King Harald V of Norway presented a formal apology at the opening of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament. In 2004, the Norwegian state presented its formal apology, following the publication of a report on the effects of the Norwegianization policy (Lehtola, 2015).

Perhaps because of these apologies and related efforts, there is a sentiment amongst Norwegians that Norwegian colonialisation of Sàpmi was time-bounded and is now an event of the past. However, on 1 June 2023, a report by the Truth and Reconciliations Commission was delivered to the Norwegian Parliament that shows otherwise (Høybråten et al., 2023). A result of a 5-year project by 12 appointed experts, the report shows that the Norwegianisation policies are still harming Sàmi. They write that fostering linguistic, cultural and identity equality will take broad mobilisation across society. Indeed, many argue that coloniality in Norway is operating through the patterned strategies of marginalisation, generating scarcity of resources and declaring land 'empty' and thus open for development (Joks et al., 2020; Normann, 2021; Østmo & Law, 2018). These practices render Sàpmi vulnerable to land grabbing in the name of 'sustainable development', an act of green colonialism.

As a case in point, the state of Norway is currently navigating an abuse against South Sámi peoples' right to livelihoods and cultural practices. In 2020, large windmill powerplants began operation under Fosen Vind, which held a permit from the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate. The powerplants are located in the winter grazing area of Sámi reindeer herders, and disturb reindeer and thus traditional herding practices. In 2021, the highest court ruled that the permit to build the windmills was not valid, as it violated Article 27 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the rights of minorities to enjoy their own culture, religion and language. However, the windmills still stand and no such plan for removal (or restitution) has been announced. In February 2023, protestors occupied the entrance of the Ministry of Oil and Energy to protest (Senel et al., 2023, February), and were forcibly removed by police after over 3 days, which led to further demonstrations and civil disobedience. This high-profile action illustrates where Norway stands in their process of addressing and reconciling their own colonial history and their attachment to authority.

From our reading of the articles in this special issue, relational values emanating from Indigenous ways of knowing are being taken up as forms of communal environmental care. If employed on multiple levels of politics, this work could defend and renew connections to landscape and Earth kin. The direct connection between more-than-human geographies and Indigenous ways of knowing is still growing in scholarship empirically based in Norway. There are a few examples that expand past human relationships with other beings (Edwards et al., 2022; Qvenild et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2021), with a focus on animals (Asdal et al., 2016; Bjørkdahl & Druglitrø, 2016; Brown et al., 2019). The Fosen case and recent scholarship on coloniality show ongoing exclusion of Sámi peoples from environmental management (Normann, 2021; Østmo & Law, 2018). Some argue that the use of Sàmi ways of knowing is often reduced to mistranslations of terminology to fit the Norwegian state's management strategies (Joks et al., 2020; Østmo & Law, 2018). More generally there is, at times, a deafness to other ways of knowing and attempts to disempower and erase 'Others' in the Norwegian state (Svendsen, 2014). Extending past the time-bounded 'event' of settler colonisation and formal Norwegianisation policies, these scholars argue that coloniality as a process continues to be performed, more subtly but still pervasively. Thus, bridging more-than-human scholarship and Indigenous ways of knowing in Norway may require the deconstruction of worldviews underlying existing conservation models premised on science-policy. At the same time, we must construct practices of community-engaged management that not only acknowledge but meaningfully create space for Sàmi ways of caring for beings and place.

4 | CONCLUSION

Davies (2016) suggests that like doulas easing the transition from womb to world, environmentalists can steward

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the birth of an ethical Anthropocene. Scholars can do so by breathing ecological ethics into our lines of work, fostering 'ecological pluralism and complexity in the face of the simplifying tendencies' (Davies, 2016, p. 6). Leaning into this complexity and pluralism, scholars and others might consider how extending our communities to include our Earth kin can open up plural understandings of sustainability and diverse possibilities for conservation.

We propose opening the idea of community to include Earth kin because it decentres the human subject, allowing us to rethink what it means to participate in place-making. Emplaced sustainability (Barron et al., 2020) involves choosing who to be in community with and why. Awareness of this choice creates opportunities to choose otherwise, to include our Earth kin in communal decision-making and actions. A broadened sense of community can open questions of collective survival, consumption and surplus, unpacking what non-human labour, transactions and care look like (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Learning to be affected becomes learning to be emplaced in community, where communities are sites and places of active engagement amongst re-imagined kin. The articles in this special edition take ontological steps in this direction, each in their own empirical context.

How and why IPLC are constituted has direct impacts on the social and environmental politics of place. Communities are built on trust, shared experiences, social capital and shared values. If scholars, activists and maybe even policy-makers see communities as more-than-only-human, it enables different forms of engage with insects, weeds and rivers. This means learning and developing languages for communication, rooted in place, which the authors in this special issue are working towards. It means building legitimacy for other ways of knowing, being, living and practicing, which are actionable. Underneath these choices are animated worldviews that respect the needs of animal, plant, fungi, microbes and landscapes as community members. In the Anthropocene, it is our ethical imperative to learn from these ways of knowing and being in our geographic and political work.

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