

***Jami Chadiba Nahin* (We Will Not Leave this Land): Materiality and Imagination in Indigenous Land Ethics**

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Abstract

This is a reflective essay on materiality and imagination of Indigenous land ethics as expressed in global Indigenous writing. I explore Adivasi land ethics, particularly from the contexts of Odisha and Jharkhand, placing them alongside North American First Nations writings. The paper traces a range of resonances to inform queries on land ethics; in this, it begins from particular sites to global spaces to articulate broader questions for Environmental Studies. This is in the hope that the questions might enlighten and reify contemporary concerns in these respective geographical and intellectual locations, complicating the site and probing the intellectual divide between the Global North and the Global South in area studies, to see how Indigenous concerns globally are aligned in the face of a global climate crisis, as they are disproportionately affected due to historical injustices of empire, settler colonial enterprise, caste orders and religious nationalisms. While I draw from American Environmental Studies to situate the materiality of Indigenous philosophies, the essay affirms the enabling mindfulness of metaphors and how they can inform and strengthen material claims in the negotiation for Indigenous political rights in India, and elsewhere, by resisting co-options of Indigeneity that accompany pitfalls of literality. In this, the essay attempts to connect the generative iterations and expressions of 'imagination' as written by Indigenous writers who envision collective futures through Indigenous 'humanisms' that account the impact of colonial histories of dispossession, and affirm ethical responsibility towards the human and non-human world.

Introduction

When I started pursuing research in 2013, I began by listening to the songs of Kondh Adivasi leaders. These songs had served as travelling pamphlets in the numerous movements against industrial occupation in my home state of Odisha, east India since the 1990s. Later, as part of my PhD, I attempted to foreground Adivasi literatures alongside the learnings and methods from Native American and Australian First Nations literatures and theory. My introduction into Environmental American Studies was through the writings of Indigenous writers such as Simon Ortiz, Zoe Todd, Kyle Powys Whyte, among others whose ideas inform this essay, who have consistently connected colonialism and industrial capitalism to talk about the long and intertwined histories of environmental devastation and the long-unfolding history of climate crisis. With comparative literary geographies that span three distinct and heterogenous traditions within India, North America and Australia, what I attempt is perhaps an echo, to see how literary methods inform contemporary concerns in Environmental American and New Area Studies.

In the summer of 2022, I revisited Kashipur, a block in south Odisha, India, land of the Indigenous Adivasi peoples, a majority of whom belong to Kondh, Paraja and Jhodia communities. The hills around Kashipur and Niyamgiri in the Rayagada district have been the centre-stage of a three-decade long struggle against bauxite mining by Utkal Alumina, Aditya Birla, Vedanta, and Adani. These are some of the largest multinational mining corporations that have steadily invaded Adivasi land since the 1990s, claiming and settling, with the state's support under the guise of development. After my return, having completed my doctoral thesis in the previous year, the final drafts of which were written in the time-fog and acute isolation of the pandemic in the U.K., I was both relieved and overwhelmed on a usual day in the village of Kucheipadar. I had several conversations and impromptu sit-downs to a bowl of *mandia pej* (millet gruel) or rice with many elders, strangers and my friends and collaborators from the village with whom I was visiting. Among them was a long chat with Bhagban Majhi, one of the prominent leaders and singers of the Kashipur movement. I discussed about the comparative section of my thesis where I had examined his famous song *Jami Chadiba Nahin* ('We Will Not Leave this Land') and

his songs about the Maikanch firing that martyred three and injured many in 2000, alongside the poetry of Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz. I had discussed how Ortiz and he both connected the plight of the Indigenous worker in mining sites following dispossession from land, how they both named and remembered sites and peoples. He asked me whether I had Ortiz's poetry with me. I did not. 'There are some in this thesis', I said, handing a hardcopy of my thesis in English. And there is this, I said, handing something I had specifically made photocopies of with Bhagban in mind. This was Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday's collection of essays *The Man Made of Words*. Bhagban took both copies curiously and turned the pages. 'It's in English'. It was a declaration rather than a question. He laughed and said, 'I have no use of this'. Then he added in afterthought, 'But maybe my children might'.

I was a bit peeved at my assumptions of the poetic sensibility of this exchange. Language as a means and barrier is not an exception in any Indian context; it is a colonial legacy as continued hierarchy, yes, but also vernacular multilingualism in South Asia, the existence of another possible dialect at the next bus stop, is bound to make one complacent. So instead of apprehension with bi- or tri-lingual sensibilities that I have seen while navigating in the west, there is often a tendency to brush it off as a manageable problem, because someone close by might know that language. The peoples who were part of Indigenous movements in South Odisha, including Bhagban, had an avid linguistic engagement ranging from Kui to Desia to Oriya to English and Hindi. Therefore, his reaction seemed to express a mix of fatigue and casual shrug at having another material in English, without discounting its potential readability. I apologized for the writings in English, and we talked about the non-existence of Kondh poetry and thought in English, and global Indigenous thought in anything other than English for Adivasi communities based in India.

'What's in it?', he asked pointing to Momaday's volume. I wanted to sum up why I had thought of him and his songs, while I read Momaday's and Ortiz's essays and poetry. But I could not land on an Oriya word for the commonality that I thought I saw between their philosophies: *land ethics*. It's not that the word does not exist in Oriya, but in thoroughly different ways, and disparate histories, Oriya as English, was a colonial language for both Bhagban and I. For Bhagban, these were the languages

of settler imposition on Kondh land and knowledge in south Odisha, specifically since the influx of upper-caste Hindu settlers since the nineteenth century along with British colonialism. For me, Oriya posed a linguistic difference: born and raised between Sambalpur and Sonapur, in west Odisha, from a caste-privileged background, I speak a dialect of Oriya, called Sambalpuri. I am from a town with an older industrial legacy; the neighbourhoods I grew up in were mostly the lands of Munda communities, later bought by upper castes in the early twentieth century. This continued well into the 1940s around the same time when Jawaharlal Nehru's modern temples, the dams that built modern India, created new and forced migrations in west Odisha through the Hirakud Dam reservoir project. The waters of the dam submerged more than three hundred villages and small towns for its reservoir area, displacing among others, many Adivasi and Dalit communities whose numbers remain largely unaccounted. My maternal grandmother's family were also among those displaced for Hirakud and rehabilitated in Sambalpur, leaving several generations of histories connected to what was called *bhata handi* or rice pot of west Odisha, for its rich agricultural plains. When the summer scorches the reservoir waters, these submerged villages and their trees and temple tops emerge like ghostly remains of their past lives. My connection to this once rice pot of east India, is one of disconnection; a disconnection born of solastalgia made acute by the steadily invading ash and dust brought in by powerful mining conglomerates like Vedanta, Adani, Dalmia, L&T, Tata, in the towns of west Odisha. Therefore, in our own acclimatised dialects of Oriya, we spoke about land ethics without really using the term. For Bhagban, it was an embodied understanding and as I will narrate later in this essay, was rooted in a grounded sense of working *with* the land and *alongside* the land as worker. For me, it was more a learnt term in a large sense through conversations and learnings from Indigenous literatures and knowledges, which by conversing with him, attempted to ground the learning in the worlds of the text and his 'remembered earth'.¹

This essay is an extended reflection on land ethics as the materiality of place and 'an act of imagination'² drawing from global Indigenous writing. My desire is to reflect on the expressions of Adivasi land ethics and present some unresolved questions I

¹ N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*, St. Martin's Press, 1997, 45.

² Ibid, 47.

often ponder on while reading and teaching about place-based philosophies in two diverse national contexts (India and UK). I take this opportunity to express the need to bring back the metaphor alongside the materiality of land, drawing from Indigenous literatures. Metaphors safeguard in the abstract, the core of ideas; critical practices that work with metaphors are necessary discerning tools when Indigenous knowledge is being co-opted and assimilated into a dominant tradition. At the same time, a reflective piece that brings together textual strands from diverse (and highly specific) traditions of thought, can risk, to some extent, an abstraction from specificity. This piece hopes to traverse this conversation keeping these tensions activated, to point at those live intersections vulnerable to dominant discourse and institutional 'extraction' of critical modes specific to Indigenous Studies. I think with and alongside Indigenous scholarship, informed by my place(s) of engagement, as discussed previously in this section. I pose these sets of enquiries as ongoing, and open-ended to learning.

Reading Land Ethics

Contemporary Indigenous writers revisit American landscape and environmental writing from the eighteenth century onwards to highlight absences, and erasures, of Indigenous peoples and their voices, questioning a tradition of American writing that places settler man's self-discovery in isolated nature. Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks re-reads Thoreau's presence through the lens of Native American literary history by foregrounding the knowledge of place names and Indigenous mapping of Abenaki 'companions' or the 'guides' who are represented in Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*.³ About her poem 'Exceeding Beringia', Inupiaq poet Joan Naviyuk Kane writes how she attempts to centre Inupiaq anthropologist Herbert Anungazuk's philosophy to speak of Alaskan geography that has been primarily storied by the writings of John Muir.⁴ This re-reading has been extended to American writer and conservationist Aldo Leopold, whose conservation ethics has influenced much of the writing and work on American environmentalism of the twentieth century. The first reference from a

³ Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 247-251, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁴ Joan Naviyuk Kane, 'Exceeding Beringia', accessed 16 December 2024, <https://poets.org/poem/exceeding-beringia>.

simple search on 'land ethics' as a term is attributed to Leopold. In *A Sand County Almanac*, first published in 1949, he writes, 'land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and respect for the community as such'.⁵ Discussion on his work has figured in recent articles on Indigenous land ethics following the publication of a sprawling study across continents and diverse belief systems in Baird Calicott's *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics*. In this book, Calicott uses Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic' as a universal lens through which to think about global articulations of land ethics. This has been the subject of critique in recent articles that are engaged in articulating the specificities of Indigenous ethics.⁶ In his paper 'How Similar are Indigenous North American and Leopoldian Environmental Ethics?', Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte frames the discussion as a question, offering key expositions on Native American land ethics in his readings of Jimmie Mitchell, Deborah McGregor in particular, as well as readings of Dan Shilling, Baird Calicott and Michael Nelson to present the problems of universalising Aldo Leopold's land ethics.

Whyte frames his discussion with a historical outset that Indigenous peoples were not included in environmentalist movements of the twentieth century; Indigenous land ethics and care for the non-human world may not be squarely aligned with twentieth century conservation rhetoric or concern. More importantly, he points out the absence of relationality in Leopold's writing, and an emphasis on sequential development in which humans are supposed to arrive at 'land ethics' post-industrialisation, hence marginalising the long practices of land ethics already in place in North America. For Whyte:

⁵ Aldo Leopold, 'The Land Ethic', *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*, (Penguin random House, 2020), 157.

⁶ Kyle Whyte, 'How Similar are Indigenous North American and Leopoldian Environmental Ethics?' in *Revisiting Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic: Emerging Cultures of Sustainability*, ed. William Forbes, (Nacogdoches, Tex.: Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2020); Brian Burkhart, 'The Groundedness of Normativity or Indigenous Normativity through the Land,' in *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality*, ed. Colin Marshall, (Routledge, 2020); Anna Cook and Bonnie Sheehey, 'Metaphorical and Literal Groundings: Unsettling Groundless Normativity in Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics* 42, no. 4, (2020): 335-352.

[This] sequence does not necessarily include many Indigenous peoples within it. Many Indigenous peoples would view their current ethics as inherited from the practices of their ancestors. Their ancestors were likely even more dependent on subsistence lifestyles, and lived lives that had ethics fully inclusive of many living and non-living beings and interdependent collectives. Many Indigenous people would see the colonialisms of the last 500 years as introducing ethics that were less inclusive of non-human entities and collectives.⁷

Whyte does not disregard theoretical commonalities of land ethics existing between Aldo Leopold and Indigenous ethics. There is a similar conception of a citizen as part of a 'biotic community'⁸ and Indigenous ideas of kin. He valuably points out the assumptions we have while venturing on comparative readings that include Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, especially on the topic of land ethics, that stops us from a 'deeper dialogue on the possible similarities of ethical orientations'.⁹ While he specifically talks about the dialogues in the American context, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmentalists influenced by Leopold, I think his advice is beneficial to consider while reading across land ethics in global Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinking, to discuss the materiality of Indigenous land ethics. For him, it is essential to acknowledge differences and move 'beyond linking abstract ideas as the primary basis of comparison'.¹⁰ Drawing from Whyte, Cook and Sheehey argue between 'literal' groundings of Indigenous land ethics as opposed to the impositions of a settler Western theory's deployment of metaphor that features in the way Aldo Leopold theorises land ethics.¹¹ Their reading brings in Patrick Wolfe to read the settler nation's form of 'guardianship' embedded in settler colonialism's specific purpose of 'territoriality' and of 'the logic of elimination' of Indigenous land and life. Furthermore, they contend that 'settler philosophical guardianship' attempts

⁷ Whyte, 'How Similar Are', 13.

⁸ Leopold, *A Sand County*, 157.

⁹ Whyte, 'How Similar Are', 2.

¹⁰ Ibid, 15.

¹¹ Cook and Sheehey, 'Metaphorical and literal', 335.

to assimilate and translate Indigenous land ethics into legible forms adhering to Western secular standards in philosophy.¹²

This discussion in environmental ethics is similar to those contentions voiced by literary critics. Concerns of rendering land purely as a 'motif' distanced from the materiality of land claims and its articulations is connected to how Indigenous presence in the humanities itself rests on anthropological constructions. From the context of Australian Indigenous studies, Bundjalung writer Evelyn Araluen claims that literary theory (even within postcolonial studies), has served a 'binary of applicability: either it is unconcerned with our material realities and processes of cultural production, or it has seized upon our creations for its tropes and metaphors'.¹³ Santhal writer and publisher Ruby Hembrom similarly writes on the need to recover Adivasi knowledge productions from colonial anthropological stereotypes of Adivasis as well as the 'textualized' presence of Adivasis in the writings by upper-caste writers in India which has marginalised and erased Adivasi voice.¹⁴

Ironically in literary disciplines and departments that centres the reading of metaphors, the introduction of a much-needed materiality of Indigenous literatures, has followed wide reading of the much-acclaimed essay by Unangax scholar, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang 'Decolonisation is not a Metaphor'.¹⁵ Teaching in the UK, where decolonisation has become a by-word in an increasingly neoliberal academia, for me the text has been key to unsettle the use of 'decolonisation' in institutions within the UK as well as introduce historical and continued linkages of British imperialism and settler colonial nations. Tuck and Yang examine the problematic of the institutional reading of land especially in the context of settler colonial states, where the settler is present and part of the narrative on land. They emphasise that 'decolonisation is not

¹² Ibid, 343.

¹³ Evelyn Araluen Corr, 'The Limits of Literary Theory and the Possibilities of Storywork for Aboriginal Literature in Australia', in *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, ed. Jo-Ann Archibald, Jenny Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo (ZED Books, 2019), 189.

¹⁴ Ruby Hembrom, 'Cohabiting a textualized world: Elbow room and Adivasi resurgence', *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 5, (2022): 1464-1488. doi:10.1017/S0026749X22000117.

¹⁵ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1, (2012): 1-40.

a metaphor', meaning that land, materially, is the irreducible basis of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism operates by a 'mode of total appropriation of Indigenous life and land, rather than the selective expropriation of profit-producing fragments'¹⁶ which occurs in the case of internal colonialisms within nation-states.

Tuck and Yang's discussion also includes the violence to Indigenous epistemology and cosmologies resulting from the disruptions to Indigenous relationships to land, one that has bearings on how land ethics survives practice, and how they inform criticism within literary departments. They underline that the nature of settler colonialism as 'structure',¹⁷ where land is defined by the settler-owner in terms of ownership (resource and capital), renders Indigenous ethical relationships to land as 'premodern and backward'.¹⁸ The materialism of land rights cannot be studied separately from Indigenous place-based knowledge, present in composite forms of the Indigenous literary. A materialist reading of Indigenous land-based literatures, hence, needs to be sceptical of a tendency to impose a universal secular that can overlook Indigenous evidence and particularity of voice in conceiving radically different relationships to land embedded within forms that integrate the literary, and historical. While critique of Indigenous representation in settler discourse imbued with 'mysticism' to preserve a pre-modern idea of Indigeneity is essential, the critique needs to recover philosophical conceptions that may exist in categories that are universally considered religious, for instance, origin stories and cosmologies. In some instances, these literary imaginations of land in mythologies can also be categorised as mystical within institutions that have privileged Euro-American theory; it is illustrative of a fundamental dissonance arising from reading a literary mode through the lens of divergent categories, especially those arising from the colonial metropole. Land, in Indigenous literary traditions, has radically different modes of literary production and theory; furthermore, given that the histories and knowledge systems that shaped them are distinctive, using tools and genres provided by the Euro-American theory often generates the appearance of phantom gaps while studying Indigenous texts.

¹⁶ Ibid, 5.

¹⁷ Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4, (2006):. 388.

¹⁸ Tuck and Yang, 'Decolonization', 5.

The necessary materialism of land ethics is crucial in the context of the U.K., as well as in India, where postcolonial enquiry has not centered Indigenous queries or knowledge. As I discuss in the following sections, however, even these learnings operate differently in different contexts. In India, there is continued essentialism of Adivasi peoples and literatures within folklore and ethnography as well as co-options of political claims of Indigeneity by the Hindu far-right which claims origin and nationhood based on selective or literal readings of Hindu mythology, and assimilates Adivasi stories and cultures. In a national context which already privileges dominant modes of religious codes as established institutional practice, and assimilates Indigenous knowledge, there needs to be more complex forms of materialist readings drawing from Indigenous literatures. Perhaps, examples of India might throw other contexts including North America into relief, to make similar evaluations. In the next section, I read articulations of land ethics present in Native American literatures to connect it to the resonances in Adivasi land ethics.

Indigenous and Adivasi Land Ethics

Momaday reflects on an American land ethic in two essays. In 'A First American Views his Land' he reflects on the 'peculiarly native'¹⁹ kinship of a Native American person to the American soil. The long 'tenure' of habitation on American earth, a span of nearly 'thirty-thousand years' has needed a specific commitment to the landscape. And this commitment is based on a code of 'trust' that is 'sacred'.²⁰ He frames this code of trust that is learnt from stories and community elders, as a moral imperative that is inescapable for survival. In 'An American Land Ethic', he writes, 'There is no alternative, I believe, if we are to realize and maintain our humanity, for our humanity must consist in part in the ethical as well as in the practical ideal of preservation.'²¹ Characteristically, in Momaday's writings, and perhaps true of most place-based Indigenous work, a theoretical idea is embedded in storytelling. A reader, then, must glean a large part through critical reading and an intuitive act of

¹⁹ Bill Mckibben, *American Earth: Environmental Writing since Thoreau*, (Literary Classics, 2008), 574.

²⁰ Mckibben, 579.

²¹ N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*, (St. Martin's Press, 1997), 47.

imagination. This act of reading is akin to what Momaday defines as a land ethic, as 'an act of imagination'.²²

In one reading, land ethics, as described by Momaday, has two essential cornerstones: an ethical imperative for humans to think about the land they live in for it is the basis of what makes one human. For him, the longevity of habitation has allowed a certain basis to this kinship between land and the human, especially for Native American communities. He describes land ethics as something to be cultivated and imagined, overcoming thus any essentialisms that can be ascribed to a people. The act of intuiting this kinship is present in other writings that describe a 'code' of Indigenous land ethics. Inupiaq anthropologist and writer Herbert O. Anungazuk wrote of an 'unwritten law' that binds the ecology of the Arctic, the sea ice to the Inupiaq peoples. He wrote of this code as an 'alliance': 'We have an alliance with the earth. Each one of us does, and some of us as a people have continued to grasp this alliance and have anchored it into our minds and our souls.'²³ Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes about the relational philosophy of the Nishnaabeg people to the land or Aki, that this 'ancient code of ethics'²⁴ passed through stories is drawn from the earth. She quotes John Borrows, an Anishnaabe scholar, who writes, 'Aki: noomaage. "Aki" means earth and "noomaage" means to point towards and take direction from. As we draw analogies from our surroundings, and appropriately apply or distinguish what we see, we learn about how to love, and how we should live in our lands'.²⁵ The 'code' or here, the pedagogical understanding of relationality with non-humans, is through 'analogies' between remembered stories and observing the world, where one aspect cannot operate without the other.

There is a proximate articulation of Adivasi land ethics in an essay by celebrated late Oraon scholar Abhay Xaxa. He defined land ethics as 'a philosophy of ecological

²² Ibid.

²³ Herbert O. Anungazuk, 'An Unwritten Law of the Sea', *Words of the Real People: Alaska Native Literature in Translation*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 189.

²⁴ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 23.

²⁵ John Borrows qtd. in Simpson, *As we have*, 160-161.

ethnicism' that has been 'collectively articulated and carried forward by different Adivasi communities'.²⁶ He wrote that through a set of everyday practices and community rituals modern Adivasi communities continue to carry a 'conservation wisdom' and 'codes to environmentally sustainable living'.²⁷ He provided a reading of the growing significance of the Karam Parab (festival of the *karam* tree) as a space for a common Adivasi identity. Karam Parab which was mainly celebrated as a harvest festival by the Oraon community has now 'melted the ethnic, geopolitical, and religious boundaries to bring forth ecological wisdom of Adivasis'. These intricate and embodied practices of land ethics that combine a philosophy of ecological interdependence, religion, and literary tradition, have often evaded colonial classifications. Many of the central Indian Adivasi communities were, therefore, classified as generally 'animist', or assimilated along with caste Hindus. Koitur scholar Akash Poyam writes how Verrier Elwin, a British ethnographer and advisor to the government of India in 1941, classified the Madia (Gond) community as Hindus, as their practice resembled Shaivism, a form of worship of the Hindu god Shiva.²⁸ Similarly, Oriya novelist Gopinath Mohanty documented an interaction during a census collection in 1941 in Odisha when an official was baffled with the religious system of the Kondhs. On being asked about religion, the Kondh person replied: 'Mountains'.²⁹ These classifications into animist groups in colonial census collections was similarly built on a presupposed Adivasi 'primitivity' and intellectual inferiority, but also the absence of long cultivated practices of land ethics.

²⁶ First published in youthkiawaaz.com in 2019; Abhay Xaxa. 'Karam Parab and the Rise of "Adivasi Ecological Ethnicism"', *Adivasi Lives Matter*, March 2021, accessed 2 January 2024, <https://www.adivasilivesmatter.com/post/karam-parab-and-the-rise-of-adivasi-ecological-ethnicism>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Akash Poyam qtd. in Markam, Santoshi, 'Why Adivasis are demanding Recognition for their Religions', *The Wire*, 2 Apr 2019, <https://thewire.in/rights/adivasi-religion-recognition-census>.

²⁹ Samarendra Das and Felix Padel, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*, (Orient Blackswan, 2010), 58.

In south Odisha, mountains are believed to be legal entities, gods, and kin narrated in stories and practices.³⁰ In the Dongria Kondh community, Niyamgiri, is considered as the 'Mountain of Law', where Darmuraja resides and when invoked, imparts the knowledge of seeds. These practices of conserving seed varieties forms part of a ritual tour of villages by Dongria Kondh women. During the Niyamgiri movement against bauxite mining by London-based multinational Vedanta, stories about Darmuraja or Niyamraja formed part of the evidence of why the ethical practices by the people was crucial for the longevity of the mountains. In Kashipur, the *malis* (hill ranges) and *dongars* (mountains) are the non-humans around which several Adivasi communities like the Kondh, Paraja and Jhodia Paraja peoples are organised. The resident communities, 'landless Dalits, fisherfolk, Adivasis, small and marginal peasants'³¹ depend on tilling the hill slopes: the *dongar* provides and working on the *dongar* is essential for survival. Therefore, even for the landless, being part of the community ensures their rights to the land (although there are attending hierarchies in this system too that needs critical acknowledgment). In 1992, after Utkal Alumina Refinery Limited (UAIL) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Odisha state government, companies like Aditya Birla and Vedanta steadily invaded to lay claim on the bauxite-rich hills of Doraguda, Ramibeda, Baphlimali, Kondingamali, and several other hills near Kashipur. After displacing Indigenous communities and changing the community dynamic in the last three decades, a private entity Maitreyi, that functions as a facilitating company for global names like Vedanta, continues as a bidder at the Odisha state's auctioning of remaining hills. Vedanta made a comeback to invade Sijimali and Tijmali, while Adani secured Kutrumali, and Larsen & Turbo acquired Manjimali.³² In the monsoons of 2023, twenty-seven Adivasi and Dalit

³⁰ Baplamali and Palangamali, for instance, are characters in one of the Kondh mythologies of the region. The two sisters played in moonlit-drenched water and turned into *malis* (hills) as they ignored the warning cries of a bat, bat meaning *bapla* in Kui (Das and Padel 71).

³¹ Ranjana, Padhi and Nigamananda Sadangi, *Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 12.

³² Syed Affran, 'In Odisha's Sijimali, Adivasis resist Vedanta mining despite crackdown', Maktoobmedia, 8 December 2024, <https://maktoobmedia.com/features/in-odishas-sijimali-adivasis-resist-vedanta-mining-despite-crack-down/>

activists were arrested for protesting these companies which is seen as anti-development. The protests continue by the Maa, Maati, Maali Surakshya Manch.³³

Bhagban Majhi, who was one of the leaders and organisers of the Kashipur movement that began in the 1990s, catalogued and sang of these hills in his songs that transmitted to other languages and Indigenous movements around India. He meticulously names hills, 'Baphlimali, Kurtumali, Shiji dongar' and 'Ramibeda, doraguda, *pani jharana*', that were threatened by UAIL and Aditya Birla, and are now currently under threat from Maitri, Vedanta and Adani, and have become sites of ongoing protests since summer 2023.³⁴ Bhagban's oral pamphlets were chanted during the Kashipur movement to remember the land and the crops, and the martyrs. His songs carry a language of 'working the land' entwined with the ecological conceptions of the community: the *dongars* provide space to grow mandia (millets), kandula (indigenous varieties of lentils) and maize, and labour belonged to the land for sustenance, rather than a private enterprise for economic profit, which was an abstraction. The speeches and interviews by Bhagban, Bulka Miniaka, Ambai Majhi, Salu Majhi (Kashipur), and Lado Sikaka (Niyamgiri) reveal there is an acknowledgment of labour by the land (and *dongars*) and of the ancestors, that have worked to maintain the intricate functioning of ecology.³⁵ As part of the movement against mining, Bhagban Majhi had demanded: 'We ask one fundamental question: How can we survive if our lands are taken away from us? [...] We are earthworms. [...] What we need is stable development. We won't allow our billions of years old water and land to go to ruin just to pander to the greed of some officers'.³⁶ This conception, a solidarity between human and non-human labour, can be read as part of Kondh land ethics. Initial negotiations with Adivasi communities failed because the state was unable to comprehend such a conception of 'development' through land ethics. Companies such as Larsen & Turbo, Hindalco, and later Birla and Vedanta arrived promising 'development' and economic benefits, with a conception of labour

³³ Prashant Rahi, 'Digging in their hills to protect Tij Raja's abode in Vedanta's next mining venture in Odisha', The Polis Project, 6 December 2024, <https://www.thepolisproject.com/read/protect-tij-raja-abode-against-vedantas-next-bauxite-mining-odisha/>

³⁴ Bhagban Majhi in *Prakrutika Sampada Surakhya Parishadara Ghosanapatra*, Prakrutika Samapada Surakhya Parishada, 2002, 23.

³⁵ Padhi and Sadangi, *Resisting*, 23;209;210; Lada Sikaka, 'An interview with NSS leader Lada Sikaka', *Youtube*, uploaded by Samadrusti, 10 Mar 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4keO1lcf8T4>.

³⁶ Majhi qtd. in Das and Padel, *Out of this Earth*, 394-395.

that was unequal and monetised. After displacement, when many community members of the neighbouring villages in Kashipur became workers in the mining company, there was a clear disjunction when they found labour devoid of land ethics. Industrial labour was an exploitative form of extraction, through the underpayment of Indigenous workers.

In a telephonic communication in 2021, Bhagban Majhi narrated that from the surrounding districts comprising Kashipur, Rayagada, among others where the companies have displaced communities, many Adivasi people work in the factories. To his knowledge all of them are chiefly unskilled labour. He said, 'It is true there has been no development for the displaced, more importantly there is none of the sovereignty or self-dependence that we fought for'.³⁷ For those who had lost their land to the company even after a sustained struggle, the sense of precarity no longer afforded them power to unionise. More importantly, they were left alone in the struggle, and part of a community physically and epistemologically fragmented by the invasive idea of land as a for-profit resource. Bhagban's description of the Kondh community is one forewarned by the poetry of Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz. In his collection of poems, *Fight Back: For the Sake of the Land, for the Sake of the People*, through poems on the aftermath of uranium mining in Grants Mining Belt, where he himself worked as a miner, Ortiz warns about the global Indigenous worker as a captive of the industrial complex following land dispossession. Does the practice of land ethics end after the separation from the land following mining, and because the Indigenous worker is compelled to mine the same land? The rights of Adivasi workers in a mine or factory, cannot be separated from land rights, a conception of land ethics that envisions rights of the human and non-human through labour. Ortiz, an environmental humanist, imbues ravaged industrial terrains through the invocatory poetics of land ethics, and inspires to find the material clues in metaphors sustaining these principles.

Land and Words

³⁷ Bhagban Majhi, Telephonic Communication by author, 19 January 2021. Last confirmed 1 October 2024.

Much like Tuck and Yang, the material demand for land rights ('land') is alongside a restoration of Adivasi epistemology ('words') in contemporary writings by Tribal and Adivasi scholars.³⁸ Like Hembrom's stress on the epistemic violence on Adivasi land and knowledge, other Tribal writers place the recovery of 'land' and 'words' for Adivasi resurgence in India. Bodhi S.R. and Raile R. Ziipao write, 'For us, epistemology is where tribal life pulsates. One who comprehends a tribe's epistemology understands the tribe(s). For those who know, even the contradiction between colonial/caste and tribal/non-caste societies is a contradiction of epistemology.'³⁹ For the writers, 'deeply embedded asymmetrical epistemological processes' effect Adivasi epistemology through 'isolation', 'distortion' or 'disintegration', which are often hidden 'from the gaze of the dominant, both academic and non-academic, until one seeks deeper truth(s)'.⁴⁰ And hence, they suggest to 'visibilise' epistemology in theory, the 'words' and 'land' from different contexts, or 'alternative centers' to situate how *land* forms the 'foundational base' for forms of inseparable living in different communities.

Specific sites and epistemologies (through words) have an intricate kinship in diverse knowledge systems. In Adivasi epistemologies, this connection is strengthened by a repetitious orality that has sustained remembrance. During our conversations with Kondh bard Salu Majhi in 2023, Arna Majhi and Rabishankar Pradhan, my co-translators and I transcribed pages of names of goddesses and hills that the old singer remembered, names that formed part of knowing the non-humans in ecology. Given the sheer diversity of these conceptions across languages, where 'land' and 'words' co-exist, the common slogan *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forest, land) in its multilingual forms has served a strategic purpose. The slogan unifies a common understanding of

³⁸ Here I use both terms to point the distinction between political terms adopted by Tribal and Adivasi scholars, as varied definitions to claim Indigeneity in diverse political and geographical contexts of India and its attending diversity of seeking self-determination, historical migrations and forced displacements, along with the contentions of the word 'Indigenous' in the Indian context, see Virginius Xaxa, 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 51, (1999): 3589–95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4408738>.

³⁹ Bodhi S.R. and Raile R. Ziipao ed. *Land, Words and the Resilient Cultures: The Ontological Basis of Tribal Identity*, (Tribal Intellectual Collective, 2019), 11-12.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 12.

material ecology and provides a holistic basis to 'sacred' philosophies present in Adivasi knowledge systems. *Jal, jangal, jameen* organises a political consciousness, because it is tied to a common understanding of ecology, a material and 'sacred' organisation of non-humans around which diverse Adivasi communities, their living and knowledge systems orient. For their longevity in sustaining unified ideas of land ethics over more than a century, *jai, jangal, jameen* can also be read as 'climate vocabularies', given they contain early Adivasi evidence in having voiced against the combined forms of meteorological and man-made impacts on east India's climate history. It works as a democratic idea because they encompass an ecological whole to accommodate 'all our relations', while being particular to specific non-humans in the locality that form essential basis to particular Adivasi religions and knowledge. Poyam discusses how in Adivasi 'social structures, there's an obligation to protect and take care of non-humans. Claims to rights are based on the protection of 'sacred groves' and 'village spirits'.⁴¹ Munda communities are organised around the *jahara (jaher)* or the sacred grove, and Santhal communities worship the *sarna sthal*, while Oraon communities offer prayers to the resident god of the Karam tree, Dharmes, the god of crop fertility. Marang Buru (the great mountain) and Sinbonga (the sun god), hold sacred relevance as providence or uniting principles, rather than as deities. Sarna, Aadi Dharm, Koya Punem, and other amalgamations of Adivasi religions are centred around non-humans that refer to interpretations of the 'sacred', and organised cosmologies archived in literary traditions.⁴² Eugene Soreng writes how the Khadiya identity is organised around *jai-jivan-jangal-jameen* meaning water-life-forest-land, integrating the presence of living forms; Khadiya political identity articulated here as

⁴¹ Akash Poyam, M.Yuvan, Archana Soreng and Raile R. Ziipao, panellists. 'ISDG: Climate Change, Infrastructure and Adivasi Knowledge.' *Youtube*, uploaded by Indigenous Studies Research Group, 25 Nov 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wz4WjLGVzo>.

⁴² For the distinction made between Sarna and Aadi dharma, and for a collated summary of the histories of these religious movements, see Marie Fritsch, 'Negotiating Adivasi Agency: The Sarna Dharm Code in Jharkhand, India', *South Asia Chronicle*, (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2024), <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/28824/SAC-2023-09-Forum-Fritsch.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; Nandini Tank, Upendar Gundala & Seemita Mohanty, 'Tribal mobilization for religious identity and political space: ongoing demand for inclusion of Sarna-Tribal religion in the census of India', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, (2024): 7, 10.1080/14649373.2024.2389722.

the 'collective Khadiya spirit' is inextricably bound with non-humans.⁴³ Again, as I write this, I keep in mind the multiplicity of stories and relationalities across geographies in eastern India, and the diversity of expressions of Adivasi identity within communities as well, and the intersections of gender, location, among others that informs them, without making any community a monolith.

In several Adivasi communities, the ancestral stone as a physical object carried by the ancestor of the community to the present site, signifies the establishment of the village and community. The stone, as material and symbol, was powerfully harnessed during the Pathalgadi movement; *Pathal-gadi*, meaning the erection of stones, was an act of assertion on land that spread from village to village from Jharkhand to other eastern and central states of India. The movement began in 2016 in Khunti village of Jharkhand, demanding collective rights on *jal, jungle, jameen* and the restatement of Adivasi rights as mentioned in the Indian Constitution for Schedule V and VI areas. This was in clear continuity with the older struggle of Birsa Munda which emerged in the same site in 1899 against British colonial systems of oppression, for Adivasi sovereignty on their land and forests.⁴⁴ Adivasi activist and writer Gladson Dungdung wrote, 'Pathalgadi movement was a declaration of non-cooperation with the Indian state. Villages issued identity cards, opened their own schools with their own syllabus, established their own banks and traditional health care systems. They also deployed guards, dressed traditionally and armed with bows and arrows, whose duty was to prevent outsiders from entering villages without prior permission.'⁴⁵ In a powerful politics of 'refusal', that resounds similarities with the Kahnawa'kehró:non refusal to the settler state's authority and occupation, and their everyday refusal based on a strict membership code of the community,⁴⁶ Pathalgadi movement is an example

⁴³ Eugene Soreng, 'The Khadiyas: Language, Meaning-making and Cultural Expressions', in *Land, Words and Resilient Cultures*, ed. Bodhi S.R. and Raile R. Ziipao, 113.

⁴⁴ Gladson Dungdung, Felix Padel & Vineeta Damodaran, 'And red flows the Koina river: Adivasi resistance to the "loot" of their land and resources in eastern India, 1980–2020', *Modern Asian Studies* 56, (2022): 1663, doi:10.1017/S0026749X22000099.

⁴⁵ Dungdung, 'The Pathalgadi Movement for Adivasi Autonomy', accessed 2 Jan 2025, <https://www.india-seminar.com/2022/751/751-GLADSON%20DUNGUNG.htm>

⁴⁶ Audra Simpson, 'Ethnographic Refusal: Anthropological Need', *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, (Duke University Press, 2014), 95-114.

where Adivasi land ethics states a re-assertion of land rights, given the failures of multiple governments to uphold the promises of the constitution and rights of Adivasi citizens. That this land ethics, as including Adivasi self-determination, is at odds with the ideology of the nation-state was evident in the way the movement was met with armed repression with cases of sedition filed against community members, a quick dismissal of Adivasi rights practised in any anti-mining movement in the Indian state.

47

Land Ethics as a Religious Code

In 2020, a resolution was passed by the Jharkhand State Assembly for Sarna to be accepted as a religious code which would include several Adivasi religions (of Munda, Oraon, Santhali communities, in particular) under its fold. This has followed decades of campaigning by different Adivasi organisations and forums across India. Tank et. al write, '[The] central concept of Sarna Dharam (Sarna religion) is the worship of nature, reflecting the animistic base of Jharkhand's tribal communities'.⁴⁸ They also attest to the organisation's growing demand rooted in 'grievances [...] against the state', following the state's tacit support in providing greater access to mining industries on Adivasi-owned land, circumventing protective laws.⁴⁹ The Chief Minister of the Adivasi-led government in Jharkhand, Hemant Soren, claimed: 'Adivasis were never Hindus, neither they will ever be.' He added, 'Adivasis are nature worshipers, their culture, religious rituals, and lifestyle is entirely different than Hindus'.⁵⁰ It was claimed that the acceptance of Sarna as a separate religious group by the Indian government, would also regulate 'resource politics' (perhaps, in favour of the Adivasis), given that the religious identity of Adivasis is founded on the 'natural

⁴⁷ Virginius Xaxa, 'Is the Pathalgadi Movement in Tribal Areas Anti-Constitutional?', *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no.1, (2019), <https://www.epw.in/journal/2019/1/alternative-standpoint/pathalgadi-movement-tribal-areas-anti.html?destination=/journal/2019/1/alternative-standpoint/pathalgadi-movement-tribal-areas-anti.html>

⁴⁸ Tank et. al, 'Tribal Mobilization', 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁰ Hemant Soren qtd. in Abhishek Angad, 'Adivasis were never Hindus', *The Indian Express*, 22 Feb 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/adivasis-were-never-hindus-they-never-will-be-jharkhand-cm-7199096/>.

resources' of *jal, jangal, jameen*.⁵¹ Some Adivasi bodies uniting the demands of people moved to appeal the central government to accept the Sarna Dharam as a separate religious column in the census for Adivasi communities, to affirm their difference from listed dominant religions and contest the unspecified option of the 'other' if they were to identify under their Adivasi religion.⁵² This appeal is made to the current President, the first Indigenous woman president of India, Droupadi Murmu. It is demanded that the basis of such a religious code is the inherent land ethic based on the protection of *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forest, land), and a kinship towards all non-humans which in diverse communities are regarded as law-making entities, godheads, animate spirits, or part of the extended human community.

In one sense, organising a land ethic through a religious code seems to me similar to a potential vision of the future of critical Indigenous studies articulated by Brendan Hokowhitu (via a constitutional reform in the Indian context). This vision, as part of *Critical Indigenous Studies*, as the collection suggests, is written from the context of first world locations. Hokowhitu first identifies the dualities imposed upon Indigenous existence within discourse: first, as dehumanised peoples in Euroamerican history, and second, to counter this, Indigenous criticism must rely on secular terms to produce the 'legible' Indigenous citizen, as in postcolonial discourse. Both need to rely on western taxonomies. For Indigenous materialisms to break free from this double bind, Hokowhitu calls for the insurrection of knowledge that are 'unintelligible' to the Western academy – he calls for an assertion of metaphysical genealogies, a 're-appropriation' of Indigenous 'myth' and to recode it so that there is no genealogical distance between nature, body and knowledge.⁵³ Like Hokowhitu's ideas, and similar to Audra Simpson's work on ethnographic refusal, the above cases are instances in Adivasi politics that affirm refusal and the 'unintelligible' to establish Adivasi sovereignty. Embodied religious practises legible only to members of a community

⁵¹ Mahtab Alam, 'Why the Sarna Code will have a long-term impact on Jharkhand's tribes', *The Wire*, 27 Nov 2020, <https://thewire.in/government/jharkhand-sarna-code-tribal-communities-separate-religious-category-long-term-impact>.

⁵² Poyam, 'Faith in Numbers'.

⁵³ Brendan Hokowhitu, 'Monster: Post-Indigenous Studies' in Aileen Moreton Robinson ed. *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*, (University of Arizona Press, 2016), 98.

often have always been simultaneous within wider protests during land rights movements.

In the ongoing protests in South Odisha to protect the hills of Sijimali and Kutrumali against mining companies Maitreyi and Vedanta, a delegation of Adivasi people assembled in Bhubaneswar to protest *against* the outcome of public hearings of the Odisha State Pollution Board.⁵⁴ Public hearings, which have previously served as democratic spaces of direct communication between the people and a court of law (to success in Niyamgiri, for instance), are increasingly taken over by state-protected company representatives, standing on behalf of the people's voices to coercively pass a 'yes' vote in favour of the project. This is while bringing a violent clampdown on people's peaceful movements and protests, oppressing and arresting community members, and activists not just in Odisha, but also in the case of Jharkhand's Pathalgadi. Given this takeover of judicial spaces, Sarna's acceptance by the central government of India can indeed bolster Adivasi voices in land rights movements, presenting a diversity of safeguarding tools, of a land-based religious code in addition to existing land-ownership laws, which are frequently circumvented or downright disregarded for industrial invasions. It can also safeguard the interests of distinct religious identities of diverse Adivasi communities, in the face of steady and virulent assimilation into the Hindu caste system, led by the quasi-state far-right organisation RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). RSS, and the Sangh Parivar's schools, residential hostels, and welfare organisations, particularly the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams has worked in predominantly Adivasi geographies leading to a slow conversion and assimilation of Adivasi belief systems into dominant modes of Hinduism.⁵⁵ In Kashipur, for example, this has taken the form of an entry of the Hindu pantheon of gods into Adivasi religious practice; an erasure of particular rituals during ceremonies like naming, birth and death, to invite a Brahmin priest to conduct the rituals in Sanskrit. However, assimilation has older forms. What might perhaps have been the Indigenous earth goddess *Samlei/Sambalei* of my hometown Sambalpur,

⁵⁴ 'Public Meetings at Talaampadar Against Bauxite Mining in Sijimali Hills', *Groundxero*, 31 October 2023, <https://www.groundxero.in/2023/10/31/public-meeting-at-talaampadar-against-bauxite-mining-in-sijimali-hills/>

⁵⁵ Arkotong Longkumar, 'Arboreal Nation', *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*, (Stanford University Press, 2021), 1-48.

worshipped by communities residing beside the river basin on Mahanadi, has become Samleshwari, the main goddess of resident caste Hindus, whose temple combines Brahminical rituals with animist ones, gate-kept by a Hindu priest. Similarly, the three renowned godheads of Jaganath, Bhalabhadra and Subhadra in east Odisha are widely believed to have been Indigenous totem poles who have been assimilated into narratives of the dominant Hindu mythology. Particularly, the iconography of Subhadra that resembles a *pathal*, or in Odisha known as a *khumba*, a pole.⁵⁶ These stories of older assimilations serve politically when historicised alongside the history of Adivasi dispossession since the nineteenth century, and in the contemporary, or remain a metaphorized decolonial claim alone that the far-right awaits for reductive comparisons.

Given that the reigning government in the Indian nation as well as its states adheres to the ideology of the Hindu far-right and the Sangh Parivar, in its exact or concurrent forms, this has meant a steady outpouring of funds to enable the construction of enclosures or small temples around Adivasi sacred sites and earth goddesses.⁵⁷ One can read these sudden occurrences of safeguarded sacred sites to narrowly appease Adivasi religious beliefs or the Hindu co-option of Indigenous politics and histories. In fact, one of the successful people's movements in Odisha against BALCO (Bharat Aluminium Company), to protect the hills of Gandhamardhan, and which subsequently influenced later Adivasi songs and movements in Kashipur, rested its eventual success on religious claims by dominant communities. The Gandhamardhan movement in Odisha heralded the beginning of environmental movements in eastern India after similar movements in Uttarakhand (Chipko) and Kerala. Located between two Hindu religious shrines, Harishankar and Narsingnath, the Gandhamardhan hill ranges, worshipped as *Dongar Mahapuru* (Mountain God), contained 22 perennial streams and were also rich in medical herbs.⁵⁸ Student participation and an Adivasi, Dalit and peasant's struggles' grassroots alliance from Sambalpur University, Padampur and Bargarh initiated the movement. However, it was the organising

⁵⁶ Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi, 'Hinduization of Tribal Deities in Orissa', *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, (Manohar, 1978), 79-98.

⁵⁷ In Odisha, Rabi Shankar Pradhan, Personal interview, 4 November 2023; On 'converting Sarna Sthals into temples', see Tank et al., 'Tribal mobilization', 7.

⁵⁸ Das and Padel, *Out of This Earth*, 93.

around Hindu shrines (yet again built around Indigenous motifs) that propelled the discourse. Activist and poet Saroj Mohanty said in an interview that the religiosity of the space was a necessity for the success of the movement, given that it mobilized the non-Adivasis from Sambalpur and Bargarh.⁵⁹ Associations with myths from the Ramayana were widely used to lend the movement a Hindu religious fervour. The mountain, whose peripheral villages largely consisted of Dalit and Adivasi populations, was equated with the mountain of herbs that heals Laxman, the brother of Hindu god Ram.⁶⁰

While this resisted industrial invasion, what's more worrying is that the nation-state has many examples in its own use of monolithic religion for settler occupation. Whether in the demolition of Babri Masjid claiming it as the birthplace of the Hindu mythological god Ram, or in the abrogation of Article 370 to remove Kashmir's special status, the nation-state uses a dominant religious majoritarianism in material occupation of land. This is similar to the settler occupation of Palestine, where the logic of the state of Israel, often rests on the Zionist invocation of the myth of a promised land.⁶¹ While engaging in the 'secular' discourse from first-world locations, we also tend to accept the inherent secularity of western nations such as France, the UK or the United States of America. The U.K. and European countries, in their imposition of the secular, continue to codify increasingly Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant regulations, which has a large demographic of peoples practising different religions. Whereas North America in its settler history, and continued policies of anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-immigration and pro-life laws, demonstrates a largely Christian theocratic society vehemently claiming democratic principles.

I reiterate the assimilatory and violent structures of the Hindu caste order, as well as the growing atrocities on minorities in the political landscape of the Indian nation-state. Myth and the sacred (through organised religion) are not only the impositions of a contemporary Hindu nationalist state, but also the history that has accompanied

⁵⁹ Saroj Mohanty, Personal Interview by author, 23 August 2014. Last confirmed 1 Jan 2025.

⁶⁰ Ranjana Padhi and Nigamananda Sadangi, '*Jai Gandhamardhan*', *Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 95-122.

⁶¹ Zionist writer Theodor Herzl and architect Julius Posner qtd. in Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', 388-390.

India's birth as a 'secular' republic: through a bloody partition in 1947, and later in 1971, and pogroms and continued violence against religious minorities. Religious identity invoked for protective measures from the position of minority religions has served as a strategical tool to safeguard Indigenous religious practices and support ongoing Adivasi political movements. However, for self-determination on land, the contexts in India have called for a far more multifaceted negotiation than religious identities and epistemologies becoming the dominant arbiter of land ethics. In Indigenous studies from India and the UK, material readings of land ethics and sovereignty must be cautious of framing it as a 'literal grounding' of Indigenous philosophy as articulated by Cook and Sheehy, which would mean a 'literal grounding' of cosmologies, for such interpretations are on uneven terrain and instrumentalised by the Hindu settler. Here, the metaphor needs to be employed, and the material basis of ethical philosophy rather seek to consistently bring back land-based practice and the political reclamation of land based on historical injustices.

The current political order has undermined the institutions that safeguard Adivasi rights to land, sovereignty, and their religions. This is in the context of widespread conversion and assimilation into the Hindu caste order ongoing in India and given that the Indian state precisely relies on an ahistorical and depoliticised idea of 'indigeneity' to claim a Hindu nation, assimilating into its fold Adivasi communities. Even for religious sovereignty, for instance, the codification of Sarna has to rely on secular institutions. Much of the political histories and attending questions and issues of fighting for recognition of Adivasi religions as self-assertion on land since the past century has been articulated by scholars.⁶² Some of the accompanying challenges are to anticipate what happens to articulations of land ethics when national institutions are guided by the dominant ideology of the far-right Hindu order in what are presently Adivasi-led state governments?⁶³ The organisation around Sarna grew into a strategic demand for a separate census category for 'tribal religion' across India to

⁶² Virginius Xaxa, 'Voiceless in Jharkhand: Freedom of Religion Act, 2017,' *Economic & Political Weekly* 52, no. 40, (2017), 23-26; Poyam, 'Faith in numbers': The history behind Adivasi demands for a 'tribal religion' category in the next census', *The Caravan*, 1 April 2020.

⁶³ Albeit the leadership belong to different parties with separate political ideologies; Odisha's chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi belongs to the majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Jharkhand is led by Hemant Soren from Jharkhand Mukti Morcha that passed the resolution.

become inclusive of India's Adivasi communities and their religions.⁶⁴ What are the similarities or negotiated differences that are brought about in community-specific land ethics between Adivasi communities under the ambit of tribal religions and the same communities converted into Christianity, or those who survive with strategic assimilations against the violence of Hindu caste orders while each continues to build Indigenous political identity to safeguard against historical and contemporary injustice on land rights and epistemology?

Indeed, while trying to navigate this complexity to reinstate the material basis of Indigenous land ethics, the redemptive power of the metaphor and imagination endures. Here is an escape from the easy imposition of monoliths and literality and perhaps a conversation between diverse iterations, where land ethics as embodied understandings and as a material claim can be discussed together keeping in mind the gap in inequalities owing to locale and politics. Imagination has allowed for very diverse Indigenous communities to organise the political basis of Indigenous identity on specific land claims based on specific historical injustices, as well as the sustenance of land ethics uniting the concerns of the human and non-human world. In the following section, I discuss the purposes of metaphor to re-imagine a future emancipatory politics, and how Indigenous writers situate 'imagination' as key to humanise previously dehumanised communities, and as the basis of solidarity expressed in Indigenous 'humanisms' that includes the non-human.

The Materiality of 'Imagination'

Recently, I have been co-writing on the poetry of Australian First Nations poet Lionel Fogarty. His latest collection titled *Harvest Lingo* (2022) has a dedicated section on 'India Poems' that builds outward in solidarity with Dalit and Adivasi writers. Fogarty's poems are based on his conversations and collaborations with Indigenous writers from India, illuminating their struggles and including it in his global vision of Indigenous sovereignty through language. In his characteristic style, his poems 'Dalit Writes Fee Histories', or 'Moody Mr Modi', experiment with language and 'word orders' in a way which, as we read, challenges fascistic co-option of essential

⁶⁴ Poyam, 'Faith in Numbers'.

emancipatory language and political identities.⁶⁵ Poetry enables this resistance because of the tools it necessarily employs; material claims in critical writing too can be strengthened working with the enabling mindfulness of metaphors.

In this section, I discuss how a materialist reading of land ethics needs imagination. Imagination is expressed via the metaphor, and reading metaphors necessarily requires an 'act of imagination'. Here, I remember the capital 'I' of Indigenous political identity reiterated by Chadwick Allen and Daniel Heath Justice, as it 'affirms a distinct political status of peoplehood'.⁶⁶ Allen writes that a set of 'discursive practices' has been adopted by Indigenous writers 'within the context of a deep and enduring settler colonization'.⁶⁷ I read metaphors here as within these strategic use and range of 'discursive practices' that has been needed in the imagination of a political peoplehood. As much as metaphors help us to challenge and enable acts of recovery, they also bring in the much-needed critical apparatuses in reading and organising around the literary text, that sidesteps slippages into literality. Such a form of materialism and imagination is abundant in Indigenous literatures. Indigenous writers stress on 'imagination' to theorise forms of reciprocity, and the ethical relationships between human communities globally, as well as articulating ways of being and collective futures between humans and non-human worlds. However, like much specificity needed in reading any Indigenous text, the way 'imagination' is expressed too is particular and not how we generally use the term, and frames the critical particularity needed to situate Indigenous 'humanisms'.

In literary departments, part of research and teaching relies on parsing metaphors and other literary devices. In introducing Indigenous studies in the UK and in the Global South with legacy-colonial institutions, there has been more than ever an interdisciplinary reading in the classrooms, given the interdisciplinary modes of Indigenous enquiry. Without collaborative pedagogy, institutions in the UK do not

⁶⁵ Louis Klee and Ananya Mishra, 'Common Worlds and Common Words in Lionel Fogarty's Indian Poems', in *Lionel Fogarty in Poetry and Politics*, ed. Dashiell Moore and Philip Morrissey, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 128-154.

⁶⁶ Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 6.

⁶⁷ Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts*, (Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

always present an embodied space of learning for research and teaching, nor always in conversation with Indigenous community members present; non-Indigenous researchers must then think deeply about ways of reading that make this form of interdisciplinarity conversant. In teaching Indigenous literatures, it requires not making material concerns merely a motif, but historicising the literature in its specific context. The materiality of Indigenous decolonial claims to debunk the 'abstractions' of settler metaphors of western theory that Tuck and Yang, and Whyte, rightly point out is in fact learnt quite readily by students and is a hopeful sign for future understanding for justice. They can connect the material claims of decolonisation to historical injustices that informs Indigenous writers. It is attending to metaphors that poses a problem; indeed, it is difficult practice to sit with the intricate work of language. Indigenous use of metaphors that are instrumental in formulating political identity get restrained in analysis.

Like much of Indigenous thought, theories of Indigenous land ethics have existed in the composite forms of literature, history, and philosophy, that requires our reading practices and methods to be mindful of these complexities to see how they interact, and what specificities they share, or do not share outside the community. This is not simply an exercise in reading how land has been rendered as metaphor in settler literature, erasing histories of invasion and genocide. Or how the representations and anthropological constructs in colonial literatures (whether fiction or poetry) and the humanities have had material implications, which influences the way in which Indigenous peoples continue to be known and stereotyped as 'absent', 'noble savage', or 'primitive'. Working with metaphors is also to foreground those Indigenous histories and voices that have existed in Indigenous literary forms, whether these are texts, artforms or songs not just in Indigenous voices, but their voices archived through transcription and translations as part of ethnography. Literatures or forms of narrativizing strengthen the building of Indigeneity, and Indigenous claims to land. Elsewhere, I have discussed how a literary reading of metaphors help in unearthing the materialist histories that suggest evidence of Indigenous communities voicing forms of the climate crisis (meteorological and anthropogenic) in early twentieth century archives of oral songs and myths in India. In the epistemic erasure and ethnographic constructions by colonial and upper-caste communities, early Adivasi

voice in accounts and archives exists, in conveyed translations that needs an act of 'reading into' to recover.⁶⁸ At the same time, this 'reading into' avoids slippages into narrow co-relations, as well as co-options by dominant groups, as I noted in the previous section. This is not to suggest an either/or between materiality and metaphor, but rather an 'and also' that reckons with an amalgamated form of thinking.⁶⁹ Here, I refer to similar work ongoing in the work of Critical Race Studies scholars to inform my queries. In *Dear Science and other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick emphasises the problems of making Black lives motifs and tropes without their attending material realities. At the same time, she suggests, 'rather than disregard metaphor, we sit with the metaphor'⁷⁰ to reckon with the 'materiality of metaphor'.⁷¹ She writes, also referencing the novelist Toni Morrison, 'We need metaphors! Metaphors offer an (entwined material and imagined) future that has not arrived and the future we live and have already lived through'.⁷²

Perhaps the most expressive writing that explains this fine grammar of materiality and imagination, is in the works of Leanne Simpson and Potawatomi writer and plant scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer. In her chapter 'Land as Pedagogy', Simpson talks about the embodied context within which Nishnaabeg theory is learnt and practised. For the community member, learning theory through Nishnaabeg stories and learning the method to decipher these stories is 'generated and regenerated' in context of the land and community, not as academic pursuit.⁷³ When she writes about this learning for younger generations, she acknowledges the time taken to learn, beginning from literal associations to then conceptual and metaphorical ones, to connect the stories to the larger oral tradition and its layered knowledge. With this learning, stories such as that where Nanabush engages in exploitative practices that don't help him until he

⁶⁸ Mishra, 'The Crisis in Metaphors: Climate Vocabularies in Adivasi Literatures', *Transmotion* 8, no.1, (2022): 129-175. <https://doi.org/10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.983>

⁶⁹ Shelley Angelie Saggat argues for both the material and metaphorical aims of decolonization reading Indigenous narratives relating to the museum, see Saggat, *Narrating the Museum: Contestations, Reclamations, and Refusals in Contemporary Native North American and Māori Literature and Film*. University of Kent, PhD dissertation, (2024): 300-306.

⁷⁰ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, (Duke University Press, 2021), 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 11.

⁷² *Ibid*, 11.

⁷³ Simpson, *As we have*, 151.

learns, in all its metaphors, is read as a story and evidence of existing anti-capitalist knowledge and practise that can inform the community.⁷⁴

For Kimmerer, the arrival at relational understanding between the human and non-human world is aided by what she calls a 'grammar of animacy'.⁷⁵ She writes that along with being a plant scientist, she is a poet: 'the world speaks to me in metaphor'.⁷⁶ Neither the non-human world, nor the literary text, is in an already-given state; neither do they lend themselves to easy resolutions or decipherability. Land ethics is cultivated and arrived at through this mutual understanding of working with the material, the land and the story, similar to the pedagogical understanding conveyed by Simpson, and the observational one by Anungazuk. In an online conversation during the pandemic (2020), Kimmerer read to a global audience and responded to questions by British writer Robert Macfarlane, which took the form of a reciprocal conversation from diverse geographical locations and histories, on the specific relationships with the 'remembered earth' of each member of the audience. The conversation featured a thinking through and with the medicinal work of dandelions for humans and the land. Kimmerer suggested a possibility of a transnational ethic expressed through 'dandelions as global citizens'. Another possibility of a constant remembering of land through language was suggested by adding the pronoun of 'ki' from the Anishinaabe word for land, 'Aki', to talk about the 'being-ness' of things. On imagining collective futures, and the role of the writer, Kimmerer offered an understanding shared by her Mohawk colleague Dan Longboat, to define what imagination means, and I quote from the audio below:

[In] western thinking, we often think that imagination is in our heads, that it's a fantasy bounded by our own skulls or psyches. But Dan says that in the Haudenosaunee way of thinking about imagination is that imagination is the collective understanding of all beings, and that when we are imagining is when we are connecting to that collective understanding. On the other side of this

⁷⁴ Simpson, *As we have*, 78-79.

⁷⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the teachings of Plants*, (Penguin Books, 2013), 55.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 29.

experience, writers who help us tap that imagination of which we are a part, that is a particular gift.⁷⁷

Imagination as 'collective understanding of all beings' articulated by Dan Longboat suggests the forms of land ethics that are part of practice and remembrance, and a subject of deep thinking and care in Indigenous literatures as well. Simon Ortiz taps into this 'imagination' as one that is the purpose of Native American literary criticism. When asked about how Native American criticism has developed and its future, he identifies 'critical thinking – deep thoughts and ideas about ourselves and our relationship to others' as central to Indigenous literary criticism in an interview in 2010. He writes, 'Indigenous peoples are concerned – worried, in other words – about the human condition (society and culture), theirs as well as that of others, especially because their condition overlaps and intersects with the larger society and culture they are a part of. [...] critical thinking [...] is crucial to the human condition now more than ever. [...] Indigenous peoples of the Americas who were and are the original human culture and society of this part of the world are deeply concerned.'⁷⁸ Bringing Indigenous reflections on the 'human condition', like Ortiz's, and by other writers discussed in this section, under the umbrella term of Indigenous 'humanisms', raises concerns that the material claims of Indigenous identity can become liberal articulations of the term. Humanism remains a much-contested word that still privileges the humanity of certain populations alone. While framing it from the U.K., it has attending uncertainties with its starkly opposing relation to Enlightenment Humanism (with a capital H), co-options within Eurocentric understandings of Humanism that is dominant in educational institutions and discourse in general. Further, humanisms' misappropriation within far-right definitions of Indigeneity can also have a precarious fallback on the 'all lives matter' discussion, where indeed a humanist 'all' has been hijacked to connote the protected few with militarized power at the expense of the Global Majority. This is where Indigenous articulations of imagination alongside its necessary material context need repetition.

⁷⁷ Kimmerer, 'Robin Wall Kimmerer in Conversation with Robert Macfarlane', *Emergence Magazine podcast*, 8 June 2020, 47 min, 16 sec, <https://lithub.com/dandelions-as-global-citizens-robin-wall-kimmerer-in-conversation-with-robert-macfarlane/>.

⁷⁸ Simon Ortiz and Janet McAdams, 'A Conversation with Simon Ortiz', *The Kenyon Review* 32, no.1, (2010): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40600250>.

The collective knowledge of Indigenous humanisms is crucial to imagine ethical living needed following a global pandemic and, in a world in crisis that began with colonialism. Among many writers who have articulated the long history of the climate crisis as connected to histories of Indigenous erasure, Waanyi writer Alexis Wright as well as Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter have emphasised 'storytelling' for human futurity rooted in the material contexts of the past and present. Wright conceptualises a sovereignty of the imagination as paramount for the self-determination of Australian First Nations peoples. It is a 'sovereignty of the mind and spirit'⁷⁹ on *country* governed by the stories of ancestors. For her as a writer, sovereignty of the imagination is analogous to re-imagining a sovereign and 'responsible' form of literary fiction. This literary form is one that is rooted in the 'powerful, ancient cultural landscape of this country'.⁸⁰ Referring to palaeontologist Juan Luis Arsuaga, Sylvia Wynter calls humans a 'storytelling species'.⁸¹ Wynter's conceptions here, creatively work alongside Indigenous conceptions of humanisms central to diverse practices of land ethics. The critique of Enlightenment Humanism in the work of several Indigenous scholars is the basis of decolonising discourse. Sylvia Wynter, herself a critic of humanism, conveys through her writing a hope towards envisioning those marginalised humanisms from the position of black and Indigenous peoples, 'gazing from below', a resurgence of anti-colonial and emancipatory humanist philosophies to challenge the history of 'man' and a 'monohumanism' that began with the Spanish Conquest of 1492.⁸² Heather Davis and Zoe Todd also suggest dating the Anthropocene from the beginning of colonial history after Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin's dating of the Orbis Spike to the Columbian exchange in 1610, that accounts for the drastic impact on human and non-human populations between 1492 and 1650

⁷⁹ Wright, 'A Self-Governing Literature', *Meanjin*, 2020, <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/a-self-governing-literature/>.

⁸⁰ Wright, 'The Ancient Library and a Self-Governing Literature', *Sydney Review of Books*, 28 June 2019, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/the-ancient-library-and-a-self-governing-literature/>

⁸¹ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species: Or to Give Humanness a Different Future, Conversations', *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, (Duke University Press, 2015), 25.

⁸² Wynter and McKittrick, *On Being Human*, 11.

following colonialism.⁸³ A future imagination for humanisms begins after the acknowledgement of modern history as not the history of the 'human', but rather a project that dehumanised Indigenous and Black populations, and subjected peoples and land as 'non-human' resource.⁸⁴ Modern history erased and made the idea of humanisms from different geographical and political standpoints 'unthinkable', given black and Indigenous communities were not considered 'human' in the first place.⁸⁵ Given the history of Enlightenment thinking widened the gap between the human and non-human world, kinship and relationality with non-humans, an entangled existence too was 'unthinkable', or relegated to the 'primitive'. 'Storytelling' or imagination entails establishing the humanity of communities deemed as not human, as well as communicating forms of humanisms based on kinship with the non-human worlds where the human exists in equation and does not occupy the centre.

Writing about land ethics includes Indigenous humanisms or more-than humanisms as one where the human condition is entangled with the responsibility to land and the planet. So here the word humanism is to read into those concerns about the human condition and visions for its planetary future articulated from Indigenous standpoints. As Daniel Heath Justice explains, there needs to be 'complexity' about how the human is framed; complexity of humanism, through multiple stories, 'challenges manipulation'.⁸⁶ When reframed and reasoned through Indigenous discourse, it expands the way we think of the human condition. 'An act of imagination', that Momaday writes about in relation to land ethics, allows to think across differences. Difference and accommodation of difference is at the heart of several articulations of Indigenous humanisms in literature. Difference not just between communities, nations and political standpoints, but difference within 'all our relations'. Justice's

⁸³ Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, 'On the Importance of Date or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', *ACME: An International e-Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4, (2017): 762-766.

⁸⁴ David Scott, 'The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter', *Small Axe* 8, (2000): 119-207, <https://serendipstudio.org/oneworld/system/files/WynterInterview.pdf>; Kathryn Yussoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

⁸⁵ I work with the ideas of 'unthinkability' as termed by Trouillot in relation to the Haitian revolution as 'unthinkable' given racist narratives of the enslaved population as not human in the first place, to have the human agency to resist. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event', *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History*, (Beacon Press, 1995).

⁸⁶ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 37.

Why Indigenous Literatures Matter (2018) is a work that incisively theorises Indigenous humanisms from the Native American standpoint, where we learn the guiding principles or directions of Indigenous land ethics. In questions posed and theorised as chapters, 'How do we learn to be human?', 'How do we behave as good relatives?' and 'How do we become good ancestors?', he offers an expansive understanding of humanism through readings of Native American stories. It is an understanding that does not 'limit the category of person solely to the human'.⁸⁷ Justice writes about ideas of 'kinship' with the non-human world and networks of relations. 'Multiplicity is inherent in kinship; good relations require acknowledgement and, importantly, mindful accommodation of difference.'⁸⁸ The idea is not of 'human exclusivity' or centrality, but of human responsibility. This articulation speaks to how Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) and Leanne Simpson frame responsibility as a form of 'deep reciprocity' that 'teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitative manner'.⁸⁹

Conclusion

What are the pedagogical approaches in the classroom through which we engage with context & practice-based land ethics while reading these texts? Part of pedagogy in the UK is not just to correct asymmetries of knowledge within our institutions which are implicated in histories of colonialism, but to let students think of land rights in different contexts outside the UK. In my correspondence to learn about 'land-based pedagogy' that grounds itself in context and practise, I asked Leanne Simpson, whether one could learn a form of solidarity that was not appropriative. She spoke of reciprocity as a practice of 'building solidarity – a thinking through together'.⁹⁰ Although, she expressed wariness against appropriations by white settler populations. What is the 'thinking through together' that this exercise demands? Our work on

⁸⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson, 'Grounded Normativity/ Place-based Solidarity', *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2, (2016), 254. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0038>.

⁹⁰ Leanne Simpson, 'Re: Grounded Normativity', Email conversation by author, 7 January 2021. Last confirmed 30 December 2024.

Indigenous literature is not simply textual in a sense. Like the literary material, our work in literary criticism attempts to be earthbound, ocean-deep, mountain-owned, desert-led or misled, glacier-paced, forest-hearted. In order to learn about the specificity of land ethics of a particular place, we do indeed need to ponder on the 'remembered earth' of the Indigenous writer in a way that is reciprocal and political. Coming from eastern India, my geography of the plains too is farther from the *dongars* and the *malis* of Kondh Adivasi songscapes. In my literary readings of ice of Inupiaq poetry or of country of Australian fiction, my critical writing lacks certain referential anchors, given I have not visited specific contexts. This is to some extent true of any literary reading. What are the ways in which literary readings from our contexts here become more enlivened by the geography of the writer and our own?

This complexity is not limited to a complexity of language but needs to reflect the transpiring geopolitical complexity of the present and that of the human future. In her article titled 'A Self-Governing Literature' (2020), Alexis Wright recognises the fundamental query of what she terms as the 'emergency century' as one where humans address 'what the Earth needs'. Her world of *The Swan Book* (2013) overturns geopolitical boundaries.⁹¹ Similarly, her way of imagining human reliance to think about the climate crisis pushes to question the economic and philosophical divides as between 'the Global North and South' and to think of intersections of class as well as Indigeneity within these locales, especially Australia and its Global South neighbours. Hers is an imagination that has already accounted the climate refugee crisis that is on foot. Whether in eastern India and Bangladesh, Pakistan or in the Arctic, the particularity of relationship to the 'remembered earth' that Momaday writes about, is becoming untenable. Forced displacement that began with colonialisms and continues as part of the crisis is not the only disorientation to contemporary Indigenous communities; they also face absences, fast disappearing trails of salmon and minnows, or seed and millet varieties; they also are witnesses of a dislocation of the elemental co-ordinates of what was previously a landmass, or ice or a mountain. Wright's questions demand the dual work of a thinking together about ethical engagement with the land and planet globally, and the political affirmation of Indigenous peoples and laws of country. To frame planetary questions that are cognisant of existing social,

⁹¹ Wright, 'A Self-Governing Literature'.

political, and economic disparities, is for her the responsibility of contemporary writers. She does not limit this responsibility to Indigenous writers but links affinities and resonances with global writers and literatures, from Latin America, Palestine, the U.K. and India, and like Daniel Heath Justice, asks, 'What makes a good ancestor?'. This question was resonated, in a different way perhaps, by Bhagban Majhi in another conversation in 2017. He said that to think ecologically, and against the culture of 'loot' is not just for the Adivasi's self-interest, but a universal responsibility.⁹² To take this back to the initial impetus of this reflection, of how land ethics as articulated by N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz and other North American First Nations writers finds common ground with Adivasi, and Indigenous writers elsewhere, perhaps this question opens the possibility of a collectively imagined Indigenous futurity. Can the question, 'Who makes a good ancestor?' become a link then to seek further affinities to build comparative genealogies of land ethics? The knowledge from the place and perspectives of Indigenous writers to see how they imagine, practice and continue to inform ethical responsibilities to land will be the guiding referential systems in the era of a global climate crisis, and hence imperative to the conversations in Area Studies and Environmental American Studies.

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⁹² Bhagban Majhi, Personal Interview by author, 6 December 2017. Last confirmed 1 October 2024.



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