

Lessons for Ecomusicology from the Upper Snake River Tribes Foundation

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Abstract. Ecomusicologists can be called upon to help contextualize ecological science, such as in the case of an after-school program being designed by the Upper Snake River Tribes Foundation (USRT) to teach Native Youth in Idaho, Eastern Oregon, and Nevada about climate vulnerability. In this essay, we examine projects such as the USRT curriculum, applying the writing of prominent Indigenous Ecological Philosopher, Dr. Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi). We argue that even though Whyte's writings don't provide suggestions directly relevant to improving the cultural relevance of the USRT eco-science curriculum, they do push us to reject the underlying assumptions that a long history of colonial dispossession and climate science can be separated. And because ecomusicology is implicated in "cultural relevance" programming, we argue that his writing also contains critiques of current ecomusicological agendas. We urge that these critiques be widely heeded within the field and in our collaborations with ecological non-profits and activist organizations.

Introduction

How can music be used in an ecology-based after-school program to teach Native youth about climate change? This question sparked our interest in the work of the Upper Snake River Tribes Foundation (USRT), a non-profit ecological coalition based in Boise, Idaho, because it seemed so profoundly ecomusicological. Like other ecomusicologists might, we wondered how to extend the praxis-based ethos of this field to partner with a nonprofit, using our knowledge of Native American expressive culture to increase ecological literacy. And yet, after becoming familiar with the work of Indigenous ecological philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi), we realized the need to rethink the original question entirely, with broad implications for activist ecomusicology.

USRT is a non-profit tribal coalition formed and funded by four tribes from Eastern Oregon, Northern Nevada, and Southern Idaho, and headquartered in Boise, Idaho. While officially advocating on behalf of compacting tribes, USRT's current director and staff are non-Native, and further employ non-Native (and non-local) third party contractors to assist in projects such as conducting a climate change vulnerability assessment and developing after-school outreach curriculum. We found that despite the best intentions of USRT staff, and the official support of compacting tribes, the organization continually

struggled with tribal community buy-in. The incorporation of local expressive culture (music, dance, storytelling) was designed to increase interest in the program, and we were drawn to this advocacy work as ecomusicologists.

Like the ecological movement more broadly, ecomusicology itself has occasionally drawn upon the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge-keepers for insight. And yet, while prominent scholars like Anthony Seeger (2016) and Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier (2016) have pushed us to think broadly through Indigenous ontologies about the assumed separation between nature/culture and music/sound, we found that ecomusicology has drawn little from the writing of Indigenous ecological scholars and activists themselves.

In this essay, we apply the writing of prominent Indigenous ecological philosophers to the problems encountered in the creation of the Upper Snake River Tribes Foundation after-school program. In particular, we draw upon the writings of Kyle Powys Whyte, environmental activist and George Willis Pack Professor of Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan. In recent articles, Whyte lays out a series of critiques of the ecological movement. These writings include *Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crisis* (2018), *Too Late for Indigenous Climate Justice* (2019), and *Way Beyond the Lifeboat* (2019). We foreground Whyte and this handful of articles in particular not because they speak for all Indigenous ecological philosophy (something no one individual could possibly do given the diversity of distinct Indigenous nations and the variety of their responses to climate changes over hundreds of years). Rather we recognize Whyte as a leading voice within an interconnected and inter-tribal contemporary Indigenous intellectual ecological network. His writing is informed by dialogue and advocacy with a variety of Indigenous communities across the Upper Midwest, Northwest, New Zealand, and globally through his involvement with the Climate and Traditional Knowledges Workgroup for the US Department of the Interior and his current position as a member of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Further, we highlight these three articles specifically not because they are exhaustive, but because they are a manageable set of readings that are good for any interested ecomusicologist or ecologically-inclined music scholar or student “to think with” (Levi-Strauss 1963:89).

In what follows, we argue that Whyte’s writings don’t really provide suggestions relevant to improving the cultural relevance of the USRT after-school program. Rather, they push us to reject the underlying assumptions of the program entirely: that a long history of colonial dispossession and climate science can be separated. And because ecomusicology itself is implicated in “cultural relevance” programming, we engage a more thorough reading of the extant ecomusicological literature than would typically appear in a research article. Ultimately, we argue that Whyte’s writing also contains critiques of current ecomusicological agendas. We urge that these critiques be widely heeded within the field and in our collaborations with ecological non-profits and activist organizations.

Whyte’s writing contains three main critiques of relevance to both the after-school outreach of USRT and to ecomusicology more broadly. These critiques include a foregrounding of the “ecological crisis,” focusing on climate science as a separate domain from culture, and underestimating the importance of relationality as the answer to climate injustice. Until these concerns are adequately addressed, ecological advocacy like USRT’s will continue to perpetuate Indigenous ecological precarity, and ecomusicology will continue to serve at the margins of ecological advocacy.

The Upper Snake River Tribes

The Upper Snake River Tribes Foundation was founded in 1998 as a way to coordinate the ecological advocacy of the historically related tribes in and around Southern Idaho. It is modeled on two other tribal consortiums in the Northwest, one around Portland, Oregon and another around Spokane, Washington. USRT is a 501C3 non-profit that aims to serve the Shoshone-Paiute, Shoshone-Bannock, Fort McDermitt, and Burns Paiute peoples in ensuring “the protection, enhancement, and restoration of

natural and cultural resources, activities, and rights of the Compacting Tribes" through treaties and other legal agreements (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/>). Even though Boise itself is not on contemporary tribal land, it was selected as USRT's headquarters because it encompasses the state capitol (for access to state officials) and the region's main airport (for access to federal officials). Moreover, it acts as a central and neutral meeting point to coordinate action among the compacting tribes (Hauser interview 8/8/2019).

Tribal rights for which USRT advocates include but are not limited to "hunting, fishing, gathering, and subsistence uses" of the Upper Snake River basin (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/about/>). This basin stretches from Boise across southern Idaho and into the mountains on the eastern border of the state. Salmon used to swim abundantly in these rivers, but dams between the Upper Snake and the Pacific Ocean (along the Lower Snake and the Columbia) have blocked their passage. Because of the traditional importance of salmon to the people of the Upper Snake, USRT's charter makes explicit the organization's goal to "Restore the Snake River Basin to a natural condition" (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/>).

The organization has tackled this challenge with various programs including a study of rangeland management, a fisheries management plan, contracting with a third party to conduct a vulnerability assessment, and conducting tribal outreach – including working groups to address these vulnerabilities and an after-school program based upon this assessment (Hauser interview 8/8/2019). However, rather than the wider lens of factors impacting climate challenges facing the tribes (including climate injustice), the focus of the after-school curriculum outreach was driven only by the third-party vulnerability assessment, which itself was focused primarily on at-risk species.

Fieldwork with USRT

Driven by a Bureau of Indian Affairs Climate Resilience Grant, the main project USRT undertook during the Summer of 2019 was creating and implementing a curriculum for a tribal after-school program. The curriculum incorporated information and data gained from the above-mentioned climate change vulnerability assessment. The assessment includes science-based predictions regarding how climate change would affect specific species that tribes had identified as culturally important.

For the months of June and July, DeAngeli worked as a part-time intern with USRT. The research project created was her own after consulting with the executive director, Scott Hauser, about what might be most helpful for the organization. Her primary goals were to identify best practices for after-school programs, to assist the curriculum builders (another third-party consulting organization), and to assist in the hiring of an after-school coordinator. DeAngeli's work included collecting relevant information from peer-reviewed articles and books, as well as nonprofits with similar programs for Indigenous youth. At the end of July, she helped to facilitate a two-day workshop for educators within each tribe to learn the curriculum they would be implementing in the after-school program for the upcoming semester. The workshop both taught a standard ecological science curriculum and sought to tailor it to incorporate local culture in ways that the youth would understand and appreciate.

In addition to DeAngeli's experience in USRT as an intern, Marshall conducted ethnographic research on USRT, including participant observation at public events, informal interviews with tribal members, and a formal interview with the USRT director. Because DeAngeli's relationship with USRT was primarily as an intern, not as a researcher, all information about the after-school/community outreach education program is taken from publicly available sources (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/projects/climate-community-outreach-education/>). Of particular interest to us is the way in which expressive cultural forms (music, dance, stories) were explicitly sought out in the development of the after-school programming in an attempt to make the eco-science curriculum more relevant and interesting to Native youth.

Ecological Crisis

Despite the fact that USRT was ostensibly formed to advocate for *both* natural and cultural resources, activities, and rights (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/>), the focus of USRT's programming has been on ecological crisis. From advocating against the lease renewal of the Idaho Power dams to the reestablishment of ceremonial fish harvesting in the Upper Snake tributaries (via artificially seeded streams), the focus of the organization is in promoting resilience in the face of climate threats. This focus is clear within the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment (CCVA) and the related after-school program. And because of this singular focus on climate science and climate-science funding, a sense of urgency drove both the research of the CCVA and the development of the subsequent after-school curriculum.

Funded by a BIA Climate Resilience Grant, the 2019 CCVA sought to detail the potential vulnerabilities that may result from climate change in the Upper Snake River Basin in the coming years. The steps employed in conducting the research include looking at recent temperature patterns in the region, identifying shared concerns about threatened species with the tribes, determining the relative vulnerability rankings for these species, and holding workshops to check the report with the tribes. The CCVA final report summarizes what changes to the climate will likely happen in the coming years in relation to its effects on the species identified as culturally important. USRT focused the current grant on research and education about the most vulnerable of the identified species. But the report makes clear that more research is needed, premised upon “an *urgent* need to assess the climate change vulnerability” of the species that were omitted by the first CCVA (https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/app/uploads/2016/10/USRT.CCVA_.pdf, emphasis added).

A related sense of urgency is evident in the outreach products of the CCVA, due to the grant-funding cycle which required rapid concrete outcomes from the CCVA. The concern about producing these outcomes as evidence for upcoming grant cycles drove USRT to rapidly contract a different non-local third-party contractor to develop curriculum based upon the CCVA. The curriculum development started in May 2019, was taught to tribal after-school facilitators in late July 2019, and was deployed into schools in Fall 2019.

An overriding sense of urgency is evident in both of these related activities. The premise of the CCVA was to observe the effect of climate change on species important to the Native people of the region, ahead of assumed catastrophic change, by ordering research priorities based upon the most vulnerable species. And yet, “vulnerability,” it seems, had only one dimension here: based upon rapid climate shift, rather than broader social and political/economic factors. Equipping Native youth with “climate-based knowledge” seemed paramount to the USRT strategy. But at its core, this strategy was premised on the idea that the risk needing to be reduced was primarily due to “extreme weather events” and also to “harmful environmental trends” (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/projects/climate-community-outreach-education/>), which are also increasing due to global warming.

Indigenous Philosophers on “Crisis”

When we read Indigenous climate philosophers, however, we find a certain amount of ambivalence about “crisis” as the first axiom of climate change. Through both the writing of Indigenous science fiction writers (Whyte 2018) and the words of Indigenous leaders (Whyte 2019b), Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte illustrates that Indigenous People often experience climate change differently: not as a dramatic “tipping point,” but as yet another long-term and systematic manifestation of colonialism. In an interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*, for example, Inuit activist and author Sheila Watt-Cloutier is quoted as saying:

Climate change is yet another rapid assault on our way of life. It cannot be separated from the first waves of changes and assaults at the very core of the human spirit that has come our way. (Robb 2015)

While Whyte does not deny the existence of climate change or downplay the harm that it introduces to the planet, he highlights that Indigenous peoples do not have the same “tipping point” mind-set that drives the crisis narratives of non-Native ecological activism. To put it another way, Indigenous people often aren’t motivated by the threat that we must act to protect the planet before it is too late because they recognize that crisis has already happened, and is continuing to happen. Drawing upon the writings of other Indigenous intellectuals (like Daniel Wildcat) and researchers working closely with Indigenous collaborators (such as Candis Callison), as well as his own expertise, Whyte says:

Writing from a Potawatomi, North American perspective, I see Indigenous peoples as often perceiving the burdens of climate-related risks through their experiences of already having been deeply harmed by the economic, industrial, and military drivers behind anthropogenic climate change (Callison 2014; Wildcat 2009; Houser et al. 2001). (Whyte 2019b, 12)

Whyte sees this same shift in perspective as woven through the work of Indigenous fiction writers, as well. While non-Native science fiction writers depict humans struggling in nuclear wastelands or marauding about in leather and trench coats, Mad-Max style, on a dusty landscape, Whyte claims that Indigenous science fiction reveals a different apocalyptic timeline (Whyte 2017; 2018, 226). Largely, he argues, this shift in the apocalyptic imaginary among Indigenous writers is shaped by the shared understanding that Indigenous people already see themselves as living through ongoing crisis or “dystopian future” (Whyte 2018, 227). Whyte urges us to be cautious of the crisis mindset is because, he argues, while the “urgency” may or may not avert crisis, it will almost certainly sharpen existing structural inequalities. Powerful actors (motivated by crisis to act quickly) will continue to make decisions on behalf of Indigenous people without any attempts to more fully understand what they want or need (Whyte 2019a, 3) as they confront anthropogenic climate change.

Crisis in Ecomusicology

Ecomusicologists can learn caution around the concept of “crisis” as well. Since its recent inception, ecomusicology has been a field with crisis at its core. Climate crisis has been prominently featured in the prefaces of many recent collections of ecomusicological writing, as it provides a compelling answer to the “why now?” and “so what?” questions of scholarly relevance (Allen and Dawe 2016, 12). But the reliance on discourses of crisis is much more embedded in the field than this; crisis has actually framed ecomusicology itself through its prevalence in foundational work (see: Titon 2013, 8; Pedelty 2012, 13-48). Aaron Allen has long argued that ecomusicology is a field most influenced by musicology and eco-criticism (Allen 2011), an approach that Edwards calls, “an endeavor born of crisis” (2016, 153). And Jeff Titon has written authoritatively of the field as “the study of music, culture, sound and nature in a period of environmental crisis” (2013, 8). So through definitional frameworks themselves, we can see that a crisis-mindset has shaped our understanding of what ecomusicology is and why we are engaged in it.

Another way in which the underlying crisis-mindset of ecomusicology appears is in the praxis-based tendencies of the field. This is an ethnomusicological specialization that is founded around the idea that the *crisis* is too grave to sit idly by in an ivory tower as the world burns (Allen and Dawe 2016, 10), and urges scholars to *do something*. As Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier has pointed out, this concern for action is not atheoretical; it is fundamentally grounded in a “sense of crisis” (2016, 114), a *praxis* which rests upon the urgency generated by the image of a dying world (Rehding 2011, 410). Clearly, these definitional frameworks are the energy behind certain kinds of praxis-based projects, from Titon’s *Music and Sustainability* blog <http://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com> to Pedelty’s <https://www.ecosong.band/>. These and other ecomusicological projects foreground scholarly activism based upon the assumption of

a need for innovative solutions to meet an unprecedented ecological crisis. As Allen himself has argued, “Academic discourse avoiding the climate crisis can only enable denialism” (2019a, 35). And in many ways this praxis amplifies larger attempts to use an activist stance to help decolonize ethnomusicology as a discipline, including in Indigenous music studies (see, for example Levine and Robinson’s 2019 collection *Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America*).

However, just as with the “culturally-sensitive” after-school programming of USRT, ecomusicologists should be cautious about taking *crisis* as an axiomatic assumption, set as opposed to climate denialism. The present authors, and our reading of Whyte, asks us simply to check our positionality and our blinders. Rather than focusing on the impending catastrophe of climate change, ecomusicologists could perhaps take a moment to broaden our field of vision and consider the question “catastrophe for whom?” As Whyte points out, “While many people are concerned about crossing the ecological tipping point, the relational tipping point got crossed long ago thanks to systems of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization” (2019a, 3). By shifting our mindset from preventing catastrophe to addressing an ongoing dystopian reality, we are much more likely to look for long-term solutions to underlying causes: to the greater benefit of all stakeholders.

Climate Science

Another challenge presented by Indigenous ecological philosophers is a critique of the primacy of climate science over other ways of mapping total vulnerability. This bias is certainly evident within USRT programming. According to the USRT community outreach program page, one of the “greatest challenges” facing tribal resource managers is in trying to get buy-in to climate initiatives from tribal leaders and members who “generally lack technical scientific backgrounds” (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/projects/climate-community-outreach-education/>). This lack of “climate science literacy” was identified as a major challenge by the USRT Director, Scott Hauser, as well. In contrast to the other tribal consortiums in the Northwest who can, according to Hauser, “deal with the Western science, but also retain the cultural,” the tribal leaders of the Upper Snake “don’t understand the science... so it all goes to the culture” (Hauser 8/8/2019). The lack of a shared paradigm leads to practical situations where federal/state officials and tribal officials are completely talking past one another. The design of USRT’s after-school outreach, then, is in part to create a group of Native youth with “climate-based knowledge in order to help build support for “climate literacy and resilience” across their tribes (<https://uppersnakerivertribes.org/projects/climate-community-outreach-education/>). These statements make clear that USRT has identified climate change as a major risk to the tribes, and seeks to mitigate this risk and build resilience by ensuring tribal citizens understand climate science.

In order to achieve this goal, the after-school outreach program aimed to teach Western climate science to Native youth. The curriculum built in standard lessons and activities for teaching climate science literacy to children and teens, such as demonstrations of the effect of snow pack on snow melt or how climate change affects river flow, a board game to teach relative vulnerability of species, and doing observational drawing of flora and fauna. The curriculum paired with the Vulnerability Assessment in that it easily showed the impact of different warming scenarios on tribally-important species. It was not designed to ask *why* tribes are facing these vulnerabilities.

After establishing the baseline curriculum, the curriculum designers held a two-day workshop for the tribal after-school facilitators at the end of July 2019. The primary goal of the workshop was to train the teachers on the curriculum they would be facilitating. However, the workshop was simultaneously used to brainstorm with local tribal facilitators ways in which the curriculum could be tailored to the Native youth through the addition of song, dance, storytelling, and other locally-important expressive forms. The curriculum designers deliberately sought out information of these types of expressive culture in order to make the curriculum more engaging and “locally relevant.” But

other local concerns (such as persistent poverty, racism, systematic economic dispossession and generational trauma) were not addressed in either the core curriculum or the “tailoring” feedback.

Even USRT recognized that the division between the “science” and the “culture” was creating barriers for Indigenous participation. And yet, the non-Native staff seemed unable to imagine how the project might proceed differently. Indeed, when interviewing USRT Director Scott Hauser, he described the disconnection between climate science and culture as one of his main challenges. He said:

As the tribes say... Everything is cultural to them. You know? And so we're very good at like science and technical stuff. ...Like Hells Canyon. We look at it as... there's licensing, and there's mercury issues, and there's fish issues, and there's dissolved oxygen issues, ...and disconnected flood plains, you know? But they look at it as... tribal leaders look at it as this cultural thing. And so we... we can not, as White people... we are unable to connect the science with the culture. Like, we understand it. In theory I understand it. But we can't bring it together in some meaningful way. (Hauser interview 8/8/2019)

Indigenous Ecological Philosophers on the Primacy of Climate Science

According to Indigenous ecological philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, the path to bringing knowledge together in a meaningful way is to destabilize the primacy of scientific measurements over addressing persistent patterns of colonialism and racism in the ordering of knowledge. He insists that a fact-based scientific epistemology cannot be separated from other realms of social life and other ways of knowing the world, and is not naturally superior. Indigenous intellectuals like Whyte remind us that science, despite its claims to objectivity, is culturally positioned, and in the case of human-caused climate change may indeed also be badly short-sighted. Whyte’s writing repeatedly insists that the root social causes of climate change must first be addressed. For instance, Whyte reflects that he occasionally hears criticism from (non-Native) climate activists that he isn’t really working on climate change but is just using it as another excuse to bring up justice problems like colonialism. But for him, they are the same problem (Whyte 2019a, 4).

Foregrounding persistent social structures of inequality, however, gives Indigenous philosophers like Whyte a wide-lens and holistic view that allows him to raise valid critiques of science-based solutions. For example, drawing on the work of Beymer-Grassis and Bassett (2012) and Cooke et al. (2017), Whyte points out that even “clean” solutions like hydropower and forest conservation “still involve the displacement of Indigenous peoples” (Whyte 2019b, 14), and therefore fail to mitigate the vulnerability of Indigenous peoples. Foregrounding Native sovereignty, similarly, allows Whyte (drawing on Cameron 2012 and Belfer, Ford and Maillet 2017) to focus on the ways in which public discourse of even Indigenous allies “including climate scientists and journalists” can continue to portray Indigenous people as vulnerable to climate change “without reference to the larger struggles with colonialism and capitalism” (Whyte 2019b, 14) – as if their vulnerability is a result of their own bad choices or lack of preparation, rather than a product of a legacy of colonialism.

Ecomusicology and Science

To a certain extent, ecomusicology has clearly recognized that a separation of ecological threats from social processes like structural inequality and colonialism is a false construction, and it has fervently argued against this division. Recent examples of calls for musical engagement with climate *justice* include Angela Impey’s book *Song Walking: Women, Music, and Environmental Justice in an African Borderland* (2018), Michael Silvers’ (2018) study of the Brazilian *forró*, and Mark Pedyty’s profile of Indigenous Canadian *Idle No More* activists (2016, 249). Like those activists, Whyte insists that continuing to focus on the science of climate change without simultaneously resisting “the nexus of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization” (Whyte 2019b, 20) will fundamentally undermine any lasting ecological change. What all of these recent studies maintain is that neither the significance of the

endangered wildlife of southern Africa nor the drought-parched lands of the Brazilian *sertao* nor the oilfields of Canada can be understood by science alone. By focusing on music, these and other ecomusicological studies insist that the most urgent ecological problems are rooted in persistent social, economic, and political causes, and thus “their solutions lie far beyond the reach of scientific or technical knowledge” (Conway, Keniston and Marx 1999, 3). Music provides scholars like Impey and Silvers and Pedelty with a method of illustrating the cross-penetration of all of these realms.

And yet, within the field of ecomusicology, while we have shining examples of music scholarship focused on projects of ecological justice, we are often less good at challenging the superiority of scientific models in our own thinking about our work. In this critique of the extant ecomusicological literature, we are spurred by the work of Whyte to examine the ways scientific epistemologies are promoted over social ones through the dominant ecomusicological conversations about “ecosystems” and “sustainability.” The problem with foregrounding scientific epistemologies, we argue, is that they purport to neutrality in domains that cannot ever be neutral, and thus continue to perpetuate the types of intellectual structures of inequality we as ecomusicologists often purport to challenge with our work.

The idea of regarding musical cultures as “ecosystems” rose from the influential work of Jeff Todd Titon (2019, xiv). Titon wrote into his widely-used Ethnomusicology textbook *Worlds of Music* that music functions like an ecological system: a source of energy, and a resource that can be “improved or polluted, used wisely or wasted” (Titon 2008, 31). In the face of criticism of this model (Keogh 2013; Keogh and Collinson 2016), Titon has insisted that he does not see musical ecosystems as characterized by the “equilibrium” and “instrumental consciousness” that plagued the structural-functionalists, but is thinking in terms of resilience and adaptive management (Titon 2016b). Nor does he aim to revisit the excesses of the cultural ecologists in presuming a power-neutral field in which people can freely choose what music they “produce” and “consume” (Titon 2019a, xiv). Since Titon’s widespread introduction of ecosystems thinking into musical scholarship, many scholars have put this concept to use as a *metaphor* for the ways in which musical cultures interrelate (Shippers and Grant 2016). Allen (2018) emphasized that metaphorical readings of ecology are quite common in musical scholarship: listing, for example, the 2010 Society for Ethnomusicology conference theme of “Sound Ecologies,” where ‘ecology’ was typically read through the metaphorical lens of “connection.” But Titon himself has pointed out that metaphorical readings of ecosystems tend to over-emphasize an outmoded “balance-of-nature” idealism that current ecological science rejects (Titon 2018, 260). Titon further argues that he does not see ecosystems as simply metaphors for musical life, but as actual ecosystems bound together by sound, which he argues is a type of energy that “flows to connect, integrate, and disconnect and disintegrate various dynamic components within a music culture” (Titon 2019a, xiv).

The dynamic social effects of making music together are certainly worth contemplating, but viewed through Whyte’s Indigenous ecological philosophy, it seems to us that the most valuable insight in Titon’s work on ecosystems (one that he has begun to emphasize more in recent work) is the interconnected nature of ecosystems. This interconnection and interdependence is what Titon calls “ecology’s foundational tenet” (2009). And yet, there are many interconnected and interdependent models in our world. Take, for example, the family. If ecosystems are “useful ideas” (Pedelty 2016, 236) because of their interdependence, why do we favor this scientific model of interdependence over a more social one, especially given the problems of science-based models?

Which leads to the second science-based metaphor driving our field: sustainability. While recognizing that sustainability was introduced into ecomusicology as a way of promoting dynamic, rather than static, interaction within musical ecosystems, we still argue that its dominance is problematic.

Sustainability entered the conversation in ecomusicology as a way of framing how public music scholarship within ethnomusicology could work. Rooted in ecological ideas about interdependent energy systems, Titon’s early concept of musical ecosystems was rooted in his public-scholar drive to do

more than “conserve” music and culture, and to therefore facilitate “cultural management” rather than “heritage management” (Titon 2009). There have been various productive directions in which conversations about the relevance of sustainability as a model have gone within ecomusicology (see Cooley et al. 2019). However, the application of sustainability in music cultures often slips the boundaries of Titon’s original framing (see DeWitt 2019, Guy 2019, and Post 2019).

Furthermore, as Aaron Allen astutely identifies, there are many problems with relying on a sustainability model since the connotations of the word can easily imply a kind of equilibrium or stasis (Allen 2019b). Allen advocates for a rejection of what he calls “sustainability-maintain” in favor of “sustainability-change”: a sustainability rooted in ecological concepts like resilience, adaptive management, and process-based learning (see also Turner 2019, 33; Titon 2008, 31; Allen 2019b, 44). As Allen points out, we may not want to sustain all cultural practices, especially those that perpetuate structural inequalities like colonialism.

Drawing upon the writing of Whyte, we would push this even further. Rather than sustainability, we challenge ecomusicologists to call for change. To do less may be to perpetuate systematic inequalities at the root of ecological vulnerability. In some of his most stinging critiques of ecological “allies,” Whyte calls attention to the fact that even those allies who work for the healing of the planet cannot deny that they are “actually living in what their ancestors would have seen as fantasy times” (Whyte 2018, 237). In this challenge, Whyte asks us to consider the ways in which even allies may be unwilling to renounce underlying conditions and frameworks that continue to disempower Indigenous peoples (Whyte 2018, 237). Scientific analogies for social processes (whether loosely metaphorical or concretely mapped) evidence these kinds of colonial intellectual frameworks. Sustainability does not guarantee anti-colonialism, and it does not guarantee anti-racism. So why do we continue to rely upon the sustainability model?

In our estimation, the concept of interdependence is at the heart of what is valuable about frameworks of ecosystems or sustainability when it comes to musical cultures. But we resist the vision of this interconnection as one of organisms living in relation to other organisms and the environment, linked through cultural (even musical) processes (Heise 2017). We wonder why a natural-science based ecological model for interconnection between humans and the environment is even needed at all, when Indigenous philosophers already have a perfectly good model to describe this interdependence: relationality.

Relationships for Lasting Change

Alternately known as relationality, interdependence, and kin-centricity, the idea of interconnection is at the heart of much contemporary Indigenous ecological philosophy. Relationality rises from the understanding that relationships are the basic blueprint for social life, and its power lies in the wisdom that family (a reliable and interdependent social bond) does not simply exist. Rather, family is *made* through acts of what Whyte classifies as “consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity” (2019a, 2). A deep appreciation for the transformative potential of relationality can fundamentally change ecological activism for the better. And ecomusicologists, armed with a special knowledge of the relationship-building power of making music together, are uniquely poised to contribute to this direction.

The leadership at USRT already recognizes that the organization has a problem connecting to their compacting tribes. USRT is located in Boise, which is at least 150 miles away from compacting tribes in any direction. The largest of the compacting tribes (the Shoshone-Bannock) is over 230 miles away- a three-and-a-half hour drive each way. The distance between USRT and area tribes means that it is difficult to build meaningful Native/Non-Native partnerships. Meetings between stakeholders happen only once a month, and only half of those are face-to-face. In either format, they are not typically well-attended. USRT cannot build any meaningful relationality in this context; tribal members are barely given the opportunity to know staff members and vice versa.

While the staff at USRT is certainly doing the best they can with what they know, they underestimate the scope of the relationality problem for all of their other work. It is not common knowledge in Boise that, in 1863, Territorial Governor Caleb Lyons forced the Natives of the Boise Valley to sign a treaty agreeing to what turned out to be an ill-planned removal. The treaty they signed was never ratified by the U.S. Government, and no payment was ever made to them for the land. Despite this, in 1869 they were marched to the reservation at Fort Hall. Along the way families who could escape took shelter with relatives in Eastern Oregon and Northern Nevada, contributing to a great scattering of the bands. All of this is to say that the difficulty experienced by USRT in building sustained relationships with compacting tribes is a *direct* outcome of the colonial process: a *deliberate* scattering of people across the Upper Snake River plain. Until that underlying insult to justice is addressed, no amount of powwow songs or jingle dances will make climate-based curriculum relevant to tribal members. The challenge for us as ecomusicologists, then, is to expand the scope of our work to public-facing education of all kinds, some of which might not have very much to do with music. (For an example of how the current project is progressing, see this article: [The Pendleton Incident in Boise's New Eagle Rock Park](#)).

Relationality is a re-prioritization of ecological work, affirming that the processes needed for social justice and ecological health are the same, and they are rooted in the deeply social work of healing relationships: with one another, with the non-human life around us, and with the earth itself. According to Whyte, these processes spring from, “relationships of mutual responsibilities, infused with appropriate qualities like consent and reciprocity,” and they are therefore often called “kin relationships” (2019a, 4). He further emphasizes that kin-centricty has always been at the root of Indigenous climate activism in North America, drawing examples from the 1998 Native Peoples/Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop, which led to the Albuquerque Declaration as well as the 2001 chapter on Indigenous climate change issues in the first US National Climate Assessment. At its core, this work by Indigenous ecological scholars and activists has always insisted that “climate-related dangers are inseparable from the absence of respect for relational qualities” (Whyte 2019a, 3). This suggests to us that as ecomusicological scholars, we neglect the importance of relationality at our own peril.

...and for Ecomusicology

As mentioned above, there is a healthy tradition within ecomusicology of deep concern with interconnection: between humans and other-than-humans, between culture and nature, and between music and sound. What we aim to do in this section is point these scholars toward the conversations already happening within Indigenous ecological philosophy that recognize these interconnections and argue for a durable, long-tested social model for understanding these interdependencies.

Kin-centricty may not appear as theoretically sophisticated as ‘perspectivism’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004), ‘acoustic multinaturalism’ (Ochoa Gaudier 2016), or ‘sentient ecology’ (Anderson 2000) within ecomusicology, but it is an eminently practical way of reframing the priorities of the discussion. It is directly translatable into concrete action both on the part of ecological activists and on the part of ecomusicological scholars. From the perspective of relationality, the human/non-human or nature/culture debates seem less relevant, because the question is not what something is called or how it is classified; the question is how you behave. Do you act like kin to other humans and non-humans, with mutual concern for each-other’s well-being and reciprocal relations? Then you are kin. The making and sustaining of kin (of all kinds) is the fundamental act of interconnection.

We are not the first within ecomusicology to highlight the importance of reciprocal relationships to the ecomusicological project (see Simonett 2016, Turner 2019, Kisliuk 2019). As stated above, every ecomusicologist who has adopted Titon’s ecosystems or sustainability models connecting humans and non-human life on this planet through music already appreciates the importance of these interrelationships. But most have failed to engage with the Indigenous ecological philosophers and activists who have been arguing for kin-centric models for decades.

And yet, it is encouraging to read that Titon's most recent work has moved to name interconnection as relationality (2013, 2016). Titon has begun to emphasize a sound ecology that is not just rooted in the environment, but that is also dedicated to social justice and is critical of the exploitative economics of late capitalism (Allen 2019b, 50). In his forward to *Cultural Sustainabilities* Titon explicitly ties both his work in sustainability and sound ecology to relationality. "A sound ecology," he says, "teaches that all beings, human and otherwise, are interconnected. If so, then all beings are related. All beings are our relatives. A sound ecology points us toward an ethic of responsibility toward all beings, the common good, the commonwealth of nature and culture, and the sustainability of life itself" (Titon 2019a, xviii). And his recent writings on ecojustice encourage this movement to account for the relatedness of *all* beings (Titon 2019b). Relationality – both making and being good kin – is certainly good to think with.

So while the conversations of ecomusicologists are circling close to the concept of relationality, what we have emphasized here is that robust conversations about relationality and the relevance of this concept for addressing both systematic social inequalities as well as threats to climate health are already happening within Indigenous ecological philosophy. We encourage everyone to read and learn more, starting with the three Whyte articles we have highlighted, and direct them to Whyte's collected resources on Indigenous peoples and climate justice: <https://kylewhyte.seas.umich.edu/climate-justice/>.

Then, instead of using Ingold's ecological philosophy to argue that the social relations of humans are a subset of ecological relations (2011, 5), perhaps we can follow the advice of Indigenous ecological philosophers and use *kincentricity* to understand ecological relations as one subset of human social relations. And perhaps we can finally understand how decolonizing social relationships is the most important ecological work that we can do. As Whyte himself states, whether or not the ecological "tipping point" has been crossed, "relational qualities must be established or repaired for justice-oriented coordinated action to be possible" (Whyte 2019a, 3).

Conclusion

Indigenous activists ask us to focus on the primacy of relationality before all other things, and this is good news for ecomusicologists. As musicians we know the power of making music together for the building of robust social relationships: focusing on that social role of music is one of the hallmarks of ethnomusicology. And yet it is striking that the social bonding power of music making wasn't mentioned in the responses to the 2018 SEM President's Roundtable "Humanities' Responses to the Anthropocene," which asked the question, "What skill sets do musicians, music scholars, and ethnographers have that might be used to ameliorate humans' destructive impact on our planet's ecosystems?" (Cooley 2020, 301). Aaron Allen might be right: ethnomusicologists may not be particularly equipped to study and interpret ecosystems (Allen 2020, 306). But after reading Indigenous ecological philosophers like Kyle Powys Whyte, we are convinced that ethnomusicologists do have the tools to help ameliorate the relational imbalances that undergird the ecological ones: we know the power of building consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity through making music together.

Lest this pronouncement sound too Panglossian, two examples from the ecomusicological literature illustrate our point. Tim Cooley (2019) discusses the role of music making in the Polynesian Voyaging Society, a group of Indigenous activists from Hawaii who traveled around the world using the outrigger canoes of their ancestors. Cooley reports that while they had an explicitly ecological mission, their method of approaching climate change was to gather with Indigenous people when they came to new ports to "exchange of food, stories, songs, and dances between" (Cooley 2019, 303). Cooley focuses on the utility of this method for building an inter-connected Indigenous network worldwide, but the potential for musical reciprocity is much greater. If the focus of "world music" courses wasn't to "study others," but rather to build relationships based on reciprocal exchange, ethnomusicology could be a transformational field.

The other example of how well suited ecomusicology is to foreground relationality is Andrew Mark's research on music making among permanent residents of British Columbia's Hornby Island. Mark found that music making is a way in which Islanders "develop collective and cooperative skills and social bonds" that they can then use when facing both social and environmental challenges on the Island (Mark 2016, 123). As musicians, ecomusicologists know that the majority of our time is spent in rehearsal. A perfectly in-synch performance may be transcendent, but the real relationships are forged during the hard process of working things out at rehearsal. And the utility of this relationship-building for ecological action is not lost on Mark. As he states, "In short: Musicking helps with sociality, which in turn can help the environment" (Mark 2016, 123). Making music together is a social act, one that builds the kinds of robust relationships necessary to coordinate action on climate change.

All of which brings both Marshall and DeAngeli back to the original challenge that got us interested in the work of USRT in the first place. Whyte's writings highlight our complicity in a project that attempted to use music and culture to teach ecological science in a "culturally relevant" way. They have challenged us to think about the ways in which making music (*any kind of music*) could instead be used to build the kinds of healthy, reciprocal relationships needed to make all other work possible. And they have galvanized us to call for a type of ecomusicological advocacy work that fundamentally refuses the logics of cultural display and the relegation of expressive culture as window dressing to the "serious" work of climate science. As we move forward in our consultations with USRT, we will be suggesting that the best use of after-school program time may not be in teaching Native youth to measure water tables or to document the habitat loss of culturally-relevant species. Rather, we will be engaging in decidedly non-musical activism like introducing Whyte's articles and resources to USRT staff and offering our time to discuss with them the real challenges presented by working for sustained relationality in a context of deliberate removal and erasure. And finally, we will trust in the wisdom of relational interdependence as the precondition for ecological justice, and suggest that instead focusing on powwow music, USRT should start, and participate in, some after-school country music or heavy metal bands with Native youth. The music that USRT staff and Native youth make together may not be good enough to mitigate the vulnerability presented by anthropogenic climate warming. But the relationships they make together just might be.

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