Belonging to (Not “in”) Land as Performed at Indigenous Cultural Events

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on research at two Indigenous festivals – Riddu Riđđu and the ORIGINS Festival of First Nations – this article considers ways in which Indigenous performers present their belonging to (not in) places. They are globally mobile but affirm reciprocal responsibilities with homelands. These two festivals bring together participants from across the world and provide an opportunity to consider further the dynamics of trans-Indigenous creativity. Enthused by performers at these festivals, and inspired by the critical reflections of Chadwick Allen (2012) and Robert Jahnke (2006), I reflect on some of the ways in which Indigenous performers – musicians, artists, artisans, authors, film-producers, poets and others – entertain, educate, and inspire their audiences. The following sections introduce the two festivals and they expand on Allen and Jahnke’s key terms. A selected performance at each of the festivals will then be used to exemplify and highlight the mobility of Indigenous people, traditions, and activities.

Keywords: Indigenizing, Trans-Indigenous, festivals, customs, innovation, belonging
Introduction

Indigeneity is globally mobile. Intercultural and/or performance festivals bring Indigenous performers together to share culture, knowledge, and entertainment with one another and with increasingly large audiences of Indigenous and/or other-than-Indigenous people. Indigenous scholars present at international conferences, contributing not only to Indigenous Studies (and precursors and inflections such as Native American Studies and Maori Studies) but also to the full range of scholarly disciplines. Indeed, some of the most fruitful academic debates are propelled forward by Indigenous challenges to dominant approaches and perspectives. (Certainly more could be achieved if Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders were heeded. See, for example, Zoe Todd’s 2016 critique of the “ontological turn”.)

Indigenous workers are mobile in a wide range of employments and careers. Indigenous authors publish in genres that reach worldwide Indigenous and other-than-Indigenous readerships. There is nothing particularly new about Indigenous mobility: trade, sociality, and conflict were common long before European expansionism changed the world (see, e.g. Hau’ofa 1994).

However, despite these and other evidences of the normality of mobility, Indigeneity is too often theorized or represented as boxed in by fixities of place and time. This is despite programmatic objections such as those of Epeli Hau’ofa (1975) and Mary Douglas (1975, 73-82), alongside clarity about theorizing Indigeneity as “becoming” processes (Clifford 2013) and of a dynamic continuum between “indigenizing” and “extending” Indigenous cultural activities and ideas (Johnson 2002). Obsessions with “pre-contact” purity and primitivism continue to shape some scholarly and popular perceptions and polemics (Olupona 2003). This is not to say that belonging to place (land, country, home) and/or inherited obligation-bearing relationships with(in) larger-than-human place-communities are not core elements of Indigenous identities, discourses, and lifeways. Rather, it is to insist that deep relationality (i.e. kinships that continuously shape fluid and dynamic interactions) and responsibility to/for place-communities are not – and never have been – constrained by engagement with the wider world. Like other engagements, these wider ones can be generative and even enlivening. In short, Indigenous people are not defined by fixity in impermeable geographic or temporal borders but by affective and interactive relationships to ancestral places, communities and kin.

In this article, I draw on research at two Indigenous festivals – Riddu Riddu¹ and the ORIGINS Festival of First Nations² – to consider ways in which Indigenous performers present their belonging to (not in) places. They are globally mobile but affirm reciprocal responsibilities with homelands. These two festivals bring together participants from across the world and provide an opportunity to consider further the dynamics of trans-Indigenous creativity. Enthused by performers at these festivals (and
other performance events beyond the scope of this article), and inspired by the critical reflections of Chadwick Allen (2012) and Robert Jahnke (2006), I reflect on some of the ways in which Indigenous performers – musicians, artists, artisans, authors, film-producers, poets and others – entertain, educate, and inspire their audiences. The following sections introduce the two festivals and they expand on Allen and Jahnke’s key terms. A selected performance at each of the festivals will then be used to exemplify and highlight the mobility of Indigenous people, traditions, and activities.

**Short Introductions to the Festivals**

Riddu Riđđu is an annual Indigenous cultural festival organized by a coastal Sámi community in an area simultaneously known as western Sápmi and Arctic Norway. It is hosted in Olmmáivággi (Manndalen in Norwegian) in the municipality of Kåfjord in July each year since 1991. The festival’s name means “small storm at the coast.” It was initiated in the wake of the Sámi cultural revival — or perhaps the revival of pride in being Sámi which preceded that cultural revival. The festival’s website is updated each year, but always includes a summary of the history of the festival. The current page (Riddu Riđđu 2020) usefully sets out the festival’s evolution from youthful conversations at a barbeque in 1991 to a cultural event of considerable international significance (see Kraft 2009, Hilder 2014, and Harvey 2020). Participants from around the world gather to perform from a main and subsidiary stage, in various permanent and temporary structures (including a cultural center and marquees) and in organized and impromptu events. Local and regional Sámi performers, artists and speakers often collaborate with visitors from other Indigenous communities. Celebration, education, and activism fuse in a wide range of contributions to the festival (Figure 1).

The ORIGINS Festival of First Nations has been hosted biennially in London, UK, since 2009. Organized by the Border Crossings Company, it brings Indigenous musicians, theater-makers, visual artists, filmmakers, and cooks from all parts of the world, to exhibit and explain, to perform and inform, to debate and celebrate. Put more boldly, “ORIGINS creates a unique opportunity to engage with Indigenous artists and activists at the cutting edge of cultural resistance, environmentalism and spiritual tradition” (Border Crossings 2019). Venues across London host diverse events including (but not limited to) dances and musical recitals in the British Museum, films and gallery tours in the National Maritime Museum, comedy and talks at Rich Mix, theater in Shakespeare’s Globe, ritual/spectacle in public parks, art in the Baldwin Gallery and in embassy galleries, lessons in schools, and walking tours to encounter sites of Imperial and Indigenous engagement. A short film, “Indigenous in London” (Open University 2016), accessible on YouTube, not only introduces ORIGINS but also presents some of the festival performers addressing themes discussed in this article.
While ORIGINS is organized by a UK based inter-cultural theater company, it is significantly shaped by Indigenous protocols and interests.

**Trans-Indigeneity and Trans-Customary Juxtapositions**

Riddu Riddu and ORIGINS illustrate and expand the possibilities of Chadwick Allen’s term “trans-Indigenous” (2012) and its intersection with Robert Jahnke’s “trans-customary” (2006). In both cases the prefix *trans-* enriches and enables productive scholarship by attending to processes of juxtaposition, movement, crossing, unequal and/or uneven encounter, change and, most powerfully, transformation. At Riddu Riddu and ORIGINS Indigenous performers, artists and culture teachers meet each other, participate in the co-creation of transformative events and inspire enjoyment of and respect for Indigenous arts, cultures, and lives. The festivals and performances are assertions of Indigenous global presence, contemporaneity, and cultural vitality – rich with the complexities of similarities, differences, diplomacy, and conversation. They resist and contest the colonial project’s oppressive and suppressive efforts to define Indigeneity as fixed in (past) time and (distant) space. Assertions about authenticity and purity are contested by more-or-less transitory co-locations and cross-fertilizations as people share with and learn among others.

Tensions do arise around these issues – e.g. some performers dislike the accompaniment of vocal traditions (such as Sámi...
yoiking) by musical instruments, especially electronic ones. Others express disquiet about the display of some ancestral objects and acts to unrelated audiences. However, as Anna Tsing (2004) insists, friction is necessary to physical, intellectual and all kinds of movement: wheels propel vehicles forward only in friction with surfaces. The fact that these tensions are expressed by participants (rather than only by people who keep away) is indicative of a willingness to engage, debate, reflect, and move on. In these and other ways, trans-Indigeneity and trans-customary arts have important implications for understanding Indigeneity and its mobility.

Much of this is encapsulated in Allen's summary of and expansion from Jahnke's work. As Allen writes,

Māori artist and art scholar Robert Jahnke has developed a conceptual model for contemporary Māori visual art that imagines a continuum running between the pole 'customary' (art created by Māori that maintains 'a visual correspondence with historical models') and its opposite pole, 'non-customary' (art created by Māori in which 'visual correspondence and empathy with historical models [is] absent'). Much of contemporary Māori art is produced in the vast middle space between these poles, Jahnke argues, and it is neither 'hybrid' nor caught 'between' but 'trans-customary': art that establishes not a strict correspondence with customary forms but rather a 'visual empathy with customary practice' through the use of 'pattern, form, medium and technique' (Allen 2012, 153, citing Jahnke 2006, 48-50).

In other words, ancestors handed on behavioral, performative and relational patterns, protocols or processes that served well as their descendants adapted to situations in their time. Thus, ancestors established a “customary pole” to which further generations could resort and then improvise from.

**Improvising Customary Greetings**

In her several appearances at Riddu Riddu, Moana Maniapoto (lead singer of Moana and the Tribe, see Maniapoto 2020) has opened her band’s set by calling out “From our mountains to your mountains, from our rivers to your rivers.” This translates one element of traditional Māori greetings (particularly in guest-making *powhiri* ceremonies) to achieve various purposes. Moana self-identities as Indigenous to a place by acknowledging the mountains and rivers of significance to her relations and commitments. Even in Māori-to-Māori encounters this would be among the first things said by way of introduction. Knowing (about) the mountains and rivers would allow each side to place themselves in relation to place and ancestry. As a greeting to other Indigenous people, the phrase also offers respect to the place Moana, having travelled from her homeland, now stands in – the place-community of others’ Indigeneity. This establishes and shares awareness of the ideological and physical common
ground on which Indigenous people meet each other while paying respect to both homeland and the current host community (a larger-than-human polity). Moana’s innovation from customary Māori speech-making also makes her a diplomat. She deploys words from guest-making rituals (i.e. ceremonies that transform strangers into guests on Māori land and in Māori communities) to bring a message from distant mountains and rivers to the mountains and rivers surrounding the festival site. This is more than a reference to scenery and not only a rhetorical device in which “mountains and rivers” refers to the entire place and community. Rather, it acknowledges mountains and rivers as full and active participants in the larger-than-human communities implicated in Indigenous gatherings and relationships.

Although spoken in less than ten seconds, Moana’s greetings achieved, enacted, or performed much of what Riddu Riđđu is about. Just as it identifies Moana, her band, and her local hosts as persons who honor place and celebrate its generative role in Indigeneity, it also foregrounds Indigenous mobility. The distance between Moana’s home mountains and rivers does not negate her Indigenous belonging nor the “customary” tradition of her performance. Her greeting mediates both present and distant locations and relations. In “pattern, form, medium and technique” it improvises an “empathy with customary practice” (to echo Jahnke and Allen again) to acknowledge the juxtaposition and creative potential of differently Indigenous persons.

Moana and the Tribe’s performance following such introductory greetings are replete with further mobilities. The spectacle of their performance includes sounds and movements that demonstrate facility with both global and local arts. Some of these come from the long-established norms of Māori culture, some from encounters with other Oceanic and European strangers (initially potential guests or enemies). As is often the case at Riddu Riđđu, the band also invited Sámi performers to join them on stage and to weave their own trans-customary sonic, gestural, and costumed practices into an even more mobile trans-Indigenous performance. While pleasing the audience such inclusions also flow from Māori and other Indigenous protocols of giving priority to and elevating the prestige of hosts. Without mobility, clearly, there would be no such encounters. Indigeneity, then, is never about stasis but always about dynamic relationality – about celebrating kinship with places and communities while also being shaped by meeting, sharing with, learning from and sometimes resisting other people and communities.

**Masking Resistance**

For their contribution to the intercultural events of the 2015 ORIGINS festival, the Zugubal Dancers from Badu Island, Zenadh-Kes (or Torres Strait) brought their mask dances to the British Museum, London. Some years before, the dance group’s director, Alick Tipoti, had seen *Mawa* masks in the museum’s

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collection and told them he would return to dance for them. He gathered and trained a group and made fiberglass replicas of ancestral masks which could be taken abroad and displayed to uninitiated and non-Indigenous audiences. But there is a tension here: a “replica” of a “representation” of an ancestor (as these masks could be described) can also be the real thing (see Altieri 2000, Harvey 2016; also see Whitehead 2013). The mask copies turned out to be as real as the originals. They too are ancestor masks. Thus, at the British Museum, the Zugubal Dancers followed cultural protocols (e.g. not smiling while wearing their masks and costumes) both in their public performance and in their private audience with the older masks in the museum’s collection. (Some of the public performance can be seen in the ‘Indigenous in London’ film, Open University 2016.) For Tipoti and his colleagues, the ancestors have not gone into a distant time or place but are present in the dance, the dancing, and the dancers. The masks are “spiritual beings” (Tipoti’s translation of Zugubal) and “spiritual ancestors” (or Muruygal). They become contemporary, apparent and interactive as the masks move before and among their audiences so that performance events potentially transform participants (Figure 2).

FIG 2
Zugubal Shark Dancer at the British Museum, 2015 (photo by John Cobb).
Mobile transformations proliferate here. Ancestors have become masks (again) – in turtle shell and fiberglass. Replicas authentically present the presence of ancestors (not all of them human). Dancers dance as ancestors and are danced by ancestor masks. The activities of ancestors are enriched as the acting ability of masks is enlivened in a new context. Kinship relations are renewed as these specific Indigenous dancers move among, with, and as their ancestors in diverse forms. Audiences are (potentially at least) transformed by meeting these ancestors and dancers. They may be transformed by meeting new (to them) cultural communities and new (to them) knowledges. They are invited if not obligated to become learners. Indigenous knowledges (shared in these events) actively contest the inanimacy of materiality, the mere symbolism of masks and the absence of those who have died – all key features of the long and continuing effort to construct Modernity’s ontology and make it seem natural and universal (Ingold 2007, 2011; Latour 1993; Todd 2016; Escobar 2020). The British Museum is transformed as the alterities of empire and colonies are contested. The museum collection and its curators are juxtaposed with Indigenous vitality and creativity. The museum becomes a stage for resistance to the displayed ideological and educative ambitions and practices of European Modernity (to use Bruno Latour’s capitalization, indicative of an ongoing and contested world-making project). If the dancers do not achieve the return of cultural heritage or patrimony, they effect a richer transformation by bringing yet more ancestors into the encounter. Various “pasts” (especially those of colonial encounters with Indigeneity) are laid out in front of all who are present so there can be no mistaking the change that claims this space and time. In short, this festival act demonstrates how an international cultural festival becomes the site of new possibilities as performers, curators, directors, artists and audiences move and are moved by trans-customary material and performative practices. Whether audiences are transformed into strong(er) contesters of primitivism, settler supremacy and other elements of colonialism or whether they reaffirm commitments to Modernity’s ontology deserves further research. It is, most certainly, the ambition of the festival organisers and facilitators, as well as of performers, that more just, respectful and equitable relations and understandings should be reached.

Climates Change
Both Riddu Riddu and ORIGINS provide evidence of changing cultural and political climates but they are also involved with the issues of climate and mass extinction disasters. Cultural change is relatively simple to trace. The increasing size of audiences indicate more than a growing interest in Indigenous matters, and (as people I interviewed said) arise from a willingness or even celebration of challenges to the power dynamics inherited from colonialism. Similarly, multiple conversations with audience members strongly signal that people “get” that something
distinctive and important is being shared when Indigenous artists present their work. Both festivals are venues in which Indigenous audience members (as well as performers) refuse marginality and assert the vitality and value of evolving cultures. For some settler or metropolitan audience members there are still issues of romanticism, primitivism, appropriation and other expressions of colonialism to be worked through or worked against when encountering Indigeneity and its performance. Similarly, exoticism can lead to expectations that Indigenous people will heroically or messianically solve the ills of colonialism and Modernity. They remain models of communitarianism and “close to nature” virtue for many observers – and (as questions addressed to Indigenous presenters in discussion forums reveal) some audience members can be disappointed when confronted with the realities of Indigenous innovation and mobility. However, by and large, the majority of those I have interviewed are thoroughly engaged by the complexities of Indigenous lives and responsive to encouragements provided in the festivals to learn and to transform relationships. Both the discovery that “other worlds are possible” (e.g., those lived in by both traditionalist and disposed peoples) and that other possible, more just worlds require significant reparative effort (as Arturo Escobar 2020, proposes) are presented to festival audiences and contribute to the changes required to make such possibilities real. In short, the entertainment value of cultural events does not bury their educative potential.

In terms of political change: as in other venues, both festivals highlight the role of Indigenous participants as ambassadors of their communities. While some are funded by larger (settler dominated) Nation States (through their embassies, cultural missions or arts councils), the majority explicitly assert their belonging to or citizenship in Indigenous sovereign nations and their celebration of customary inspirations. I witnessed an exception on only one occasion at Riddu Riđđu. A musician began her set by saying “Hello Norway!” (rather than evoking any more Indigenous location) and gave no indication in any part of her act that she understood that she had been booked because of her Indigeneity or even that the festival was not the same as other events in her international tour. The response of the audience was noticeable. Although the performance was enjoyed it was far from celebrated. Conversations later around the campsites indicated amusement, at least, by the disjunction between the flavor of the whole event and this one act.

More typically, Riddu Riđđu and ORIGINS are braided into the ongoing resurgence of Indigenous cultural pride and political sovereignty. Rather than summarizing ways in which the festivals illustrate the kind of processes normatively assumed to be “political” more widely (e.g. links between Riddu Riđđu and the Sámi parliament), I reflect on “climate change” related conversations as demonstrations of a wider, more Indigenous project of democratization – i.e. rooted in Indigenous understandings of a larger-than-human polity or demos (see Harvey 2020).
At Riddu Riddu in 2014 I was watching the river that flows closely around three sides of the main festival site. The unusually high water flow (resulting from higher than normal temperatures in the arctic) was submerging rock outcrops on which ravens often sit. I was wondering if there was an imminent danger of flooding, especially of the cultural center and display area of the site (Figure 3).

A local Sámi man joined me, coincidentally. He told me, “This isn’t good for us, but it’s a disaster for the trout and even more so the salmon.” He explained that the fish were currently out in the fjord waiting to swim up the river to spawn. He said that they too have their homelands, their Indigeneity. The abnormal flow and near ice-cold temperature of the water prevented their movement. The man asserted that the trout might just find another river. But, he said, the salmon would only return to the river of their birth. If the melt-water flow kept them away, there would be no more salmon in this river. I might have misremembered whether it

FIG 3
The river near the cultural center, Riddu Riddu 2014 (photo by Graham Harvey).
was trout or salmon that are most particular about their rivers. Equally, the man might have been misinformed. My point in summarizing the conversation is that this man appeared to be sharing other local people's concerns. While the threat to fish has clear dangers to coastal Sámi livelihoods (and thus perhaps to aspects of the cultural renaissance Riddu Riddu is encouraging) it was absolutely clear that concern for the well-being, lifeways and cultural customs of the fish and other river beings was the major issue. Climate change may be global but at that moment particular fish in a particular river concerned a particular man and his community. His concern arose from thoroughly Indigenous cultural emphases on inter-species relationality or kinship. (For discussion of a wider context of fish-human relations in a threatened world, see the work of Todd, especially Todd 2018.) (Figure 4).

FIG 4
More briefly, I note that during the 2015 ORIGINS Festival the Voladores de Papantla (a Totonac performance group from the Gulf coast of what is now Mexico) performed their spectacular “flight” down from a tall pole in a park in West London. Part of this is included in the YouTube film “Indigenous in London” (Open University 2016). The Voladores have adapted a ritual into a public performance but continue to follow traditional protocols, including preparatory fasting, before, and during their act. They re-enact a ceremony rooted in a narrative that is about solving the problem of drought relationally and dramatically. Facing disastrous drought in the ancient past, a group of men climbed a pole (made from a selected forest tree) into the skies in search of the deity who controlled the weather. Because their return was delayed the pole they had climbed up had been removed, thus necessitating their flight to the ground, and initiating a ceremony of continuing importance to Totonac and neighboring Indigenous communities in contemporary Mexico. This is one of many ceremonies and narratives that encapsulate Indigenous experiences of climate change and provide communities with resources for facing the current global emergency. Its adaptability into a performance with which to entertain global audiences is also key to its transformation into a means of establishing the continuing presence and vitality of Indigenous people and cultures in contexts where these lessons might be challenging.

**Conclusion: Revising “Tradition”**

While Indigenous mobility is not a new phenomenon, the contemporary era provides more causes (chosen or imposed, desired or compelled) for movement. There are increasing opportunities for Indigenous people to meet other Indigenous people at festivals and other cultural events. But there are also more urgent reasons for gathering than entertainment. If the colonial climate has changed it is far too early to declare a successful transition into a fully postcolonial or egalitarian era – indeed, several Indigenous people have spoken to me about “most-colonialism” (also see Smith 1999; Todd 2016). For example, Amazonian Indigenous nations are facing threats to their lands from settler politicians and invasive extractivists (e.g. miners, loggers, and farmers) both of which groups negate Indigenous sovereignty and destroy multi-species communities. In this context, belonging to places is reasserted by mobile Indigenous activists and diplomats like Davi Kopenawa Yanomami (see Kopenawa and Albert 2013), especially as they travel to address global politicians and forums. Meanwhile, at both Riddu Riddu and the ORIGINS Festival, similar high-profile Indigenous leaders join with performers to encourage resilience and inspire resistance.

“Tradition” is, in all these situations, a mobile and creative force. It is demonstrably relevant to contemporary situations
as people improvise to address contemporary needs and desires. Within the “customary pole” of trans-Indigenous arts, there is a rooted belonging to places that is not negated but emphasized by mobility. There are certainly rituals and narratives that are not mobile, not transferable to other locations, and not presentable to other-than-local communities. There are etiquettes that are specific to local relationships. Typically these are expressive of respect for specific locations or communities. However, these often provide inspirational foundations for the performances which are considered appropriate for observation and participation by larger audiences (see Kelley 2015). Indeed, the fertile friction between homeland and “elsewhere” is a large part of what shapes Indigeneity today. An insistence on specific and located relations is part of what makes someone – and some activity – Indigenous. But, equally, meeting people in gatherings like Riddu Riddu and ORIGINS – and in political forums like the United Nations – forcefully expresses the global significance of Indigeneity. These strategically establish platforms for contesting the dis-placed and mis-placed Modernity visible as colonial settler states and consumerist individualism. The simple but profound insistence that location is not a mere accident but a relational mesh carrying obligations overrides any impression that Indigenous politics is about claiming privileges rooted in victimry.

Jim Cox insists that Indigenous religions should be defined as being “bound to a location” (Cox 2007, 69). But this, like other “minimum definitions,” is never the whole story. Traditions are never static (until they are obsolete or dead) and something “bound” to one place is often generative far beyond that place. This is the case with many Indigenous ceremonies, narratives, knowledges, peoples and projects. Johnson’s (2002) proposal of a continuum between “indigenizing,” and “extending” processes among Indigenous peoples, along with the Allen’s (2012) generative notion of “trans-Indigeneity” and Janke’s (2006) “trans-customary” provide powerful lenses for revising scholarly assessments of “tradition” and Indigenous mobility. Interactions at Riddu Riddu and ORIGINS demonstrate that friction – as Tsing might say – between commitment to homelands (emplacement, belonging) and commitment to trans-Indigenous and global sharing generates the excitement and effective authority of contemporary Indigeneity.
notes and references

1Support from the “Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource” (REDO) project enabled me to attend the festival four times between 2011 and 2015 and to establish friendships so that I can continue discussing developments.

2Support from the Open University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences has enabled me to participate in the festival since 2011 and to collaborate with the festival director and team in various events.


