

# ***What said the way? (Qué dice el camino?) Broadening the concept of education through experiences in opposing ontologies while walking to Santiago***

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**Abstract:** This paper asks the question, is the state of being experienced on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela – «Camino-being» – related to or in some ways compatible with an Indigenous/Autochthonous state of being? At first glance, the two states might appear to share a connection through their focus on the natural environment: the relatively wild spaces of certain arcs of the Camino would certainly seem to link this kind of journey with the ecologically-oriented state of being of Indigeneity/Authochthony. Connection with the natural world is a significant aspect of the pilgrimage for many on the Camino, who perceive that without this spiritual progress could not have occurred. This study uses a hermeneutic approach to investigate these ideas as encountered in pilgrimage on the Camino. The central question also leads to some related, and more directly educational ones: Despite the apparent or actual relatedness, does the circumstance of being in wild places influence the learning that occurs therein, and how might a consideration around such learning influence educational practice?

**Keywords:** Camino; Indigeneity; Authochthony; wilderness; education; ontology.

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## **1. Introduction**

In preparing an earlier presentation for a symposium on educative changes after the Second Vatican Council and their relationship to Indigeneity, I had an idea. This came about partly because of the location of the conference, in San Sebastian (Donosti), only a few meters from one of the great pilgrimage routes in Spain: The

Northern Camino (el Camino del Norte)<sup>1</sup>. The Camino del Norte runs from points east to join the last sections of The Camino Frances, en route to Santiago de Compostela and finally to Finisterre. The idea came from the observation that, while there appeared to be great differences between spiritual practices of Catholics and many Indigenous people with whom I had worked, Christianity (and all other great religions) had a tradition of pilgrimages. For the duration of the pilgrimage, Catholic pilgrims had walked through mostly wild places, often experiencing hardships, while relying on the generosity of others to make their way. Thus, there was a perhaps unanticipated parallel between the spiritual practice of, for example, a vision quest, common to many Aboriginal traditions from Turtle Island<sup>2</sup> and the pilgrimage, a part of the great spiritual traditions of Europe and the Middle East. I am not speaking here solely of the self-evident *intention*, which in both cases tends to be toward deepening spiritual understanding. I am speaking of the actual lived parameters within which the quest or pilgrimage occurs: relatively wilder places, such that these have some impact on the outcome of the spiritual journey.

This led to other thoughts: The first was that despite the evident differences, there might be more connection between the spiritual practices of Aboriginal<sup>3</sup> or Indigenous people and those people of the great religions whose adherents walked on pilgrimage. The second was that there might be a hidden inclination on the part of Catholic pilgrims to find the spiritual in nature that, of its own volition, as it were, has something to offer the Catholic church, and that this inclination might have the capacity to cause a change of attitude and direction of the Church, itself. The third was that learning associated with these spiritual traditions might be deepened through similar means – the simple action of moving, self-propelled, through relatively wilder places. To the extent possible within the parameters of this paper, I touch on parts of all of these ideas.

In response to these hunches and questions, I decided to walk as much of this ancient route as I could, in order to better understand how such a pilgrimage might connect with the practices of spiritual journeys in wild places with which I was much more familiar. I wanted to know, not what the many books on the subject said, but whether the experience of *being* while on pilgrimage was similar or related to the condition of being that I have alluded to here and have explored in detail in earlier work<sup>4</sup>, which is that of a perceiver within – and interdependent with – a more-than-

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<sup>1</sup> El Camino Frances is the major pilgrimage route today. It avoids the often hillier and more tempestuous El Camino del Norte coastal route. It is often said that there is no beginning to this Camino. Pilgrims begin anywhere (in Europe) then funnel through Saint Jean Pied-de-Port, in France to cross the Pyrenees.

<sup>2</sup> Turtle Island is a name used by many First Nations in Canada to describe territories that go back «to the beginning», in creation stories. It corresponds roughly to what modernity has called North America. A vision quest is a solo fasting retreat that may enable practitioners to better encounter the spirit world.

<sup>3</sup> In Canada, the term Aboriginal includes First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples. Now, the term Indigenous is increasingly used. Indigenous is also used for first peoples in other parts of the world. In the context of this paper, the terminology can be confusing. In general in this paper, I have used the term Aboriginal to describe cultural and ethnic identity, and have reserved Indigenous for an ontological descriptor.

<sup>4</sup> Please see Beeman, 2006, 2013.

human world, with comparatively less focus on what has nowadays become the «normal» isolated business of human activity that characterizes life in the global, modern West<sup>5</sup>. So as not to unduly mislead you, I feel obliged to mention at the start that my hopes for some contiguity of ontological – *being related* – positions were disappointed. But looking for possible connections led to greater understanding of reasons for their difference.

This paper will proceed roughly as follows: after some preliminary theoretical notes, I will invite you to look at some of the ideas in broad circulation in my wanderings on the Camino, in April and May of 2015. I will compare these with some of the ideas shared by Aboriginal elders of my acquaintance, as they discuss the importance of special spiritual places in the more-than-human world. I will consider these views while contemplating the overall idea of learning in relatively wilder places and the being states experienced in both circumstances. Then I will question whether the apparent similarity holds: i.e., are the perspectives as close as they appear to be at first blush? I will then suggest that while there are some similarities, the ontological position of the *peregrinos*<sup>6</sup> differs from that of Indigeneity: that, in fact, the two are possibly in some ways opposed. My conclusion will be that while I think there is ultimately no clear compatibility between the ontological positions of *peregrinos* and those elders I work with who enact, materially, an interconnection with the more-than-human world as a part of their lives, learning in wild places may offer a place of theoretical common ground that may enable the possibility of better mutual comprehension between these positions. A caution: this is not a study that is dependent on gathered data for its worth. It is a philosophical investigation into ideas that emerged while on the Camino. Its purpose is not to gather quantifiable data; its purpose is to extend the realm of possible understandings through contemplation on an experience.

## 2. Methodology

In my research, information usually comes in the form of conversations and the writings of other thinkers. This is combined with my experiences in wilder places. I keep coming back to some of the seminal conversations I have had with elders, and these have, in consequence of repeated revisits, gained some historical aspects. But the process I use, which is partly due to Aboriginal history, identity, and shaping political influences, tends to be one of building relationships, talking with, interpreting, writing, checking with elders and my own experience, and talking and writing again. This is not the process I used in writing this paper, except for the earlier work with elders. I did not intend to do «research» when I walked. But while walking on the Camino, ideas inevitably emerged and circulated, and these were prompts to my own thinking and reflection.

I employ narrative and discursive interpretive tools. Auto-ethnography is sometimes used as a framing device, and this emerges in this paper. The

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<sup>5</sup> Some sections of this paper explore the state of being of attentive receptivity. For a more detailed account of the emergence and identification of this state of being, please see Beeman, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Peregrinos are pilgrims.

interpretive philosophical work I do is rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, and this is also the case in this paper. When I have spoken with elders, part of the purpose of conversations – beside our common interest in sustaining valued relationships – is not «to gather quantifiable data», for this would be to misconstrue both the valuable ideas and relationships, but to understand the ideas at play out as I try to make sense of my own experience of differing states of being in wilder places. And when I conversed with the *peregrinos* in my «Camino family»<sup>7</sup> just as in my work with elders, the purpose of the conversations was not to gather data to justify reliable conclusions, but to get a broad sense of the ideas that walked beside me, and to use these ideas as jumping off points for the deeper examination of emergent ideas. In this project, I conceived of my role as moving between the walkers and their ideas – or between walking and thinking - and finding hitherto unnoticed points of correlation.

I am not approaching this research from a Christian perspective. Many Aboriginal people are members of Christian congregations and some are Catholic. But my long-term research is primarily not with those who espouse a particular religion, but those who live in the world in particular ways. These ways are characterized by an interaction with the world such that, in each moment, interdependence between «person» and the more-than-human world are enacted and known. In these moments of interdependent interaction, the distinction between self and world is changed, such that a self-world emerges. I have called this moment *attentive receptivity*. This term coincides with the state of being of Autochthony and, in the words of some elders, this is also what is meant by Indigeneity, when used as an ontological descriptor rather than as an ethnic one. This self-world becomes a new identity that is neither person nor place. I believe that the implications for learning of this being state are profound. It remains to be seen in the subsequent sections of this paper whether similar listening states were encountered on the Camino.

### 3. Pilgrimages and commensurabilities

To return, for a moment, to the introductory story, the actual place that our symposium would occur was in San Sebastian, at the crucial and strategic North-eastern *coin* (*Fr*) and *conjunctio* (*Sp*) where the Iberian Peninsula meets the base of the South of France and the rest of Western Europe. In San Sebastian, we were only a few meters from the walking route of many pilgrims. This was the Camino del Norte, one of the many tributary routes leading ultimately to the final legs of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela – the Way of Saint James – that ancient pilgrimage linking many parts of Western Europe with the third most important pilgrimage destination for Roman Catholics, after Jerusalem and Rome. This pilgrimage route has been followed since the Middle Ages by Christians intending to visit the location of the purported remains of St. James the Apostle - and some

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<sup>7</sup> On the Camino, those peregrinos who prefer to travel third-class often find themselves in informal families: pilgrims with similar interests and pace of walking who end up often at the same *Albergues*, or hostels, most nights.

say cousin – of Jesus of Nazareth, in Santiago de Compostela, Spain<sup>8</sup>. Tradition holds that the remains of St. James miraculously appeared – according to the Bishop of that area – in Galicia, in the eighth century. Nowadays, the Camino is walked by anyone: *alguin que busca algo* – anyone seeking anything – as Robert Ward puts it in his *All the good pilgrims* (2007).

All of the great religions have pilgrimages of one kind or another. These have always involved, to a greater or lesser extent, the giving up of certain of the regular comforts in life. Pilgrimages tend to involve travel in relatively wilder places, are normally self-propelled, and by removing the pilgrim from the context of their usual, comfortable and ‘civilized’ lives, necessitate a simplification of the everyday. The pilgrim is reliant on the good will of others for their sustenance. One intent of pilgrimage is that this experience, which removes one from the common distractions of life, and which creates an awareness of the interdependence of oneself with the wider world, may lead to another position, which may lead to new understandings, while increasing humility. The tradition is a long one: Jesus of Nazareth didn’t so much *set* the example with his forty days and nights spent in the desert, he *followed* the example of older prophets<sup>9</sup>. And here is the point: if the ontological difference that I wish to highlight in this paper is properly addressed, then the difference that I conceive of, one that limits full understanding and therefore learning between one mode of being and another, must be able to make sense of this unexpected apparent overlapping of ontologies. That is to say, the inclination, at some point or another, for a Catholic religion, which is based on a super-worldly God, to find meaning in the natural world – the very world with which the apparently opposed other world view and state of being that I mention – is predicated.

#### 4. What said the Way?

On the Camino, one of my goals was to understand, through my own experience of it, not just reasons for going on pilgrimage, but how the journey itself allowed us pilgrims to know ourselves better. With this came the question, what characterizes the kind of learning encountered here? I also wanted to feel the *state* of pilgrimage in myself. Was it possible to experience something like an *ontos* of attentive receptivity, which I had encountered earlier in wild places and which I explore later in this paper, in the context of more frequent interactions with people? Or, perhaps, did the relatively recent (in terms of human history) pilgrimage create a moment in which the *ontos* of attentive receptivity may be invoked into a contemporary human world?

With these questions in mind, we walked. Often we walked in pairs or small groups. We shared our ideas freely, and they changed in the same ways our bodies did – imperceptibly in each moment, but ultimately distinctly. One common theme we

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<sup>8</sup> An alternative thesis suggests that, with some irony, it is actually the remains of a heretic – Prisciliano – who is buried here. This thesis is forwarded in Tracy Saunders’ 2007 work, *Pilgrimage to Heresy: Don’t believe everything they tell you*.

<sup>9</sup> And the examples of spiritual leaders from other great religions. Five hundred years earlier, Gotama Buddha spent an almost identical length of time near Bodhgaya en route to his own enlightenment.

touched on was why we walked on this route, the more remote Northern Camino. To get in tune with nature, yes. And sometimes the theme was a more religiously focussed one, such as the wish to connect with a godly figure like Jesus. How were the two connected? Sometimes they were understood as the same thing. The human-created world, on this journey, could be set aside momentarily. It was not simply that the distractions of the modern world could be temporarily put on hold, and that balance could be attained, but rather that the presence of a greater spirit could be felt. As a non-Christian, I wondered what this had to do with me.

Perhaps I could find some connection. A friend and colleague said, prior to this walk, that the reason we go on pilgrimages is to get back to the essentials. Everything is so simple when you walk. You need to carry your belongings on your back, and thus can interact with the world more on the basis of real life-needs. *Sere, reduced, diminished* and *exalted*, are words that came to mind on this pilgrimage. In fact, most pilgrims encountered a different state on the Camino. I call it «Camino-being»<sup>10</sup>. This state is characterized by the response to life as being relatively simple: once basic needs are met, there is only the daily, albeit sometimes difficult, work of walking. For some *peregrinos*, there appeared to be something significant about the relatively wilder spaces found on this particular route we travelled – the Camino del Norte and Camino Primitivo – that not simply appealed, but that was essential to approaching a spiritual centre, and God. What was commonly called a greater spirit was more noticeably present in the natural world that surrounded us, than in the «man-made» construct of the city<sup>11</sup>. This view finds kinship in no less a philosopher than Baruch Spinoza, whose work equates God with Nature<sup>12</sup> (Shirley, 2006).

Initially, upon beginning peregrinations, I had, perhaps too reductively, conceived of the position of *homo mobilis*<sup>13</sup> as separate from the world, in direct opposition to the understanding of human personhood in Indigenous understandings. Catholicism's history and theology has both helped to create such a separated human, and, once it was created, to reinforce this position – this division of mind and matter; the person with Godly thought and the world which contains her. This can itself be viewed as a much larger project of the modern global West – one which conveniently wrests meaning-making from embodied interactions with the world (Varela, Thomson & Rosch, 1991; Harmon, 2002) and places it squarely – or roundly – into the spherical structure of our brains (Descartes, 1998). Sequestered *mind* and *being* are left somewhere in the realm of mere theory.

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<sup>10</sup> As is the case with so many ideas encountered on the Camino, I think it is I who call it this. But who knows where the idea emerged from? Perhaps I heard it as I walked? In any case, it was in common currency in the group I walked with by the time I finished my Camino, many weeks later.

<sup>11</sup> William Cronon(1995) would probably disagree with this statement. Cronon's position would be that the entire world shows marks of human intervention. But this would be to miss the main point: that there are places of lesser intervention, and that these are not just *created* by word-based imaginative acts; they, separately existing are also perceived in human experience.

<sup>12</sup> The limitations of space in this paper prevent more than a very brief view of some ideas shared amongst *peregrinos*. In other work (2006, 2013) I have looked at the cosmology of Spinoza to give explanation to the enacted lives of elders.

<sup>13</sup> *Homo mobilis*: the being-state enacted by participants in contemporary cultures of the globally dominant North and West.

Apparently incommensurable with this is the mode of being of attentive receptivity that some of the elders I work with know, and which I have experienced, always in relatively wilder places. But if these being states are as separate as I had thought, how could the historical reliance on walking through wild places, not just for the purpose of reaching a religiously significant destination, but presumably, for the journey itself, or at least its edifying effects, be explained? If such a journey is, indeed, edifying, then what kind of building (*edificio*) are we making while walking it? Is this building as mobile as our peregrinations? Can we walk with this newly constructed edifice on our backs? Would such an edifice add to the weight of our carefully reduced set of belongings? Or does it ease the walk? Are we building a bridge (Heidegger, 1993) between one way of being and another?

It seemed to me that there was something of significance in the reliance of the experience of travel through relatively wilder places to deepen, perhaps repeatedly over the course of one's life, a spiritual or religious practice. Or perhaps this spiritual practice may lead to – through the magic of the journey itself – a different kind of life altogether. There is something about a pilgrimage – perhaps because one tends to carry one's own load – that strips the pilgrim to their essentials. An expression I heard more than once was, «Las cosas importantes no son cosas» («The important things are not things»). And this was very clear on the Camino: the lighter the load, the less arduous each step. And the more one carried, the more one asked if what was carried was really worthwhile. There is something about journeying through wild places that not only permits but encourages this paring-down to occur<sup>14</sup>. Periods of pilgrimage in wilder places may be thought of as markers of phases in a larger journey, which permit the life of the pilgrim to take on different aspects, and for the life to, at these moments, alter direction. A page is turned in pilgrimage, as it were, a new chapter in the life of being unfolds; the book is written only as it is walked.

So, here again, what I want to call ontological – «state of being-related» – ideas may emerge as a pilgrim walks through wild places, and so defines themselves and, presumably, their relationship with God. It is also apparent that a different kind of learning may emerge than that which is normally found in what we think of as being educational circumstances: A kind of learning that transforms the being of the person through immersion in different circumstances is one way to describe it.

David Le Breton, in his recent work, *Disparaitre de soi* (2015) has something to say about this in his exploration of the concept of *la blancheur*, Le Breton examines a contemporary phenomenon of the disappearance of the self. That is to say, the wish, on the part of participants in the culture of globally dominant contemporary West, to disappear, if only temporarily, to gain some respite from themselves. These

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky's recent essay, *De la Légèreté*, (2015) is relevant, although its message is not quite the same. Lipovetsky focuses on the cult of lightness, even an economy that is light in its composition and direction. Certainly in the globally dominant West, lightness of being and thought rest on an economy of ideas and consumer products, rather than the heavy residue of an industrial age. «Avec le culte du bien-être, du divertissement, du bonheur ici et maintenant, c'est un idéal de vie léger, hédoniste, ludique qui triomphe».(27) Too often this lightness leans toward frivolity. But the lightness achieved in Camino-being is one of the deliberate removal of frivolity, which relies on the absence of things. Perhaps in some irony, as the pilgrimage gains in seriousness (or at least in length) the pilgrim usually loses both weight and load. A physical lightening is coincident with a moral gravity.

are selves that are incessantly connected with and defined by a human-constructed world. And the ambiguity in the French title works to advantage. It is never quite clear whether it is a disappearance *from* or *of* the self. Le Breton writes: «...I will call whiteness [blankness] this state of absence of self more or less pronounced, the fact of taking leave of oneself in one form or another because of ...the difficulty in being oneself» (9). He also writes: «It is a deliberate search for scarcity in the social context of a profusion of objects; a passion for absence in a universe marked by an unbridled quest for sensation and appearance» (11)<sup>15</sup>. There was a sense, on the Camino, that pilgrims were intentionally making a break from their everyday lives. They were very literally walking away from their former selves, and in doing so leaving most of their belongings behind, in order to encounter these selves, renewed.

A commonly heard reason for going on pilgrimage was to heal from illness. By walking on the Camino, one was able to leave illness behind, as it were, and walk away with enough strength that illness could not keep up. Both an illness, and a phase of life, can be left behind in this way. And, if my impression is correct, pilgrims emphatically do not *run* from the past; they make peace with it in the contemplation of the walk. But the contemplation gains in perspective by the physical distance put between the realness of the current steps and the memory of illness. In spending time with a difficult phase of one's life in this way, one may be able to release attachment to it and leave that phase behind. It is as though, by engaging in a journey, the negative aspects of a past, with attendant attachments, is able to be overcome: when considered in the context of the act of journey, the power of the past over current life may be circumscribed at the edge of the journey, itself. I had the impression that certain places that we walked through were able to act for us by holding the parts of our lives that we wished to leave behind. The kind of learning that emerged from walking on the Camino was a capacity, not to accumulate knowledge – according to the standard «transmission» model (Freire, 1999) – but what might be considered the opposite: a leaving behind<sup>16</sup>. For those of us who sought it, our call was to leave in the land through which we learned and journeyed the parts of ourselves that we no longer needed. In this view, learning might be considered a paring down, rather than a gathering.

Compare this with this the Western Apache tradition, as reported by Keith Basso (1996) of allowing parts of a landscape the capacity to hold important stories, and, indeed, ethical teachings. Reporting on the traditions in the communities with which he worked, Basso finds that places become the repositories of teachings. And because teaching stories are linked to landscape, knowledge of how to move through the world ethically is registered in surrounding land and consequently remembered frequently. In both this case, and that of many pilgrims, land supports the capacity for learning and for transformative change to occur. The difference is perhaps to be found in the predominant agency. In Basso's study, the land itself gained in agency.

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<sup>15</sup> Pagination is approximate: quotations are derived from a Web-accessed source that did not include all page numbers. I have preferred in some cases to refer to *la blancheur* as «blankness». The English language's almost exclusive use of «whiteness», when applied to people, to describe skin colour, makes its use confusing.

<sup>16</sup> Note that this is not the kind of opposite that Freire discerns, which is that of educative practice: the dialectic.

Another common theme was the sense of walking through oneself, without expectation of a reward at journey's end. But the movement forward was significant. Many of us felt that we could not move through ourselves, as it were, if we were not also walking through a physical world. Many of us felt that there was something about being in less human-controlled spaces that made this possible. The intermediate «destination» of a town and its accompanying facilities was often in mind, but the relative simplicity of the everyday moments of a walk in wilder places was preferred.

This thought suggests that movement through space, on the Camino, can be a movement through the self. The idea persists that there is a kind of interplay between the pilgrim and the space she walks through. Many pilgrims also conceive of the world as coming to, in some way, overlap us. We walk through ourselves as we walk on the pilgrimage journey. But I do not think this is only the walking through, let us say, the thoughts we inevitable have about our lives. There is a resonance between this description and those of several elders I work with: some of us pilgrims appeared to begin to experience the extending of ourselves into the world around us.

This is a common notion for many of the elders with whom I work: that the human self does not stop at the border of the skin: that, in other words, the strict delineation between beings that is a common presupposition in the modern global West and North, might be malleable (Beeman, 2006, 2013). In *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) David Abram also addresses this view. So, too, does Neil Evernden in *The Natural Alien* (1985).

## 5. Ontos<sup>17</sup>

In very recent years ontology has emerged as a significant and suddenly hip new area through the work of the object-oriented ontologists<sup>18</sup>. However, generally ontology – the study of Being – has lurked in the background of Western philosophy, because Being defies ready explanation. After all, at the heart of Heidegger's early project was the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Husserl's early criticism, that, as soon as the *Dasein* –the being for whom Being is a question (i.e. humans) - was introduced, Heidegger's project changed from an ontological one to an anthropological one, highlights some of the difficulties in even approaching Being: there is never any way to know what the parameters of the discussion are. And, even in philosophical circles, this is not the kind of problem that one generally sorts out before breakfast – even a Continental one.

In this section, I look at the ontological difference between those living Autochthonously<sup>19</sup> and those not, that my work for the past decade has highlighted – a difference encapsulated in the term *attentive receptivity* – and how this suggests

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<sup>17</sup> In recent work I have begun to use the Greek word *ontos* to refer to what ontologists would call Being. The purpose is to reserve ontology for the study of being. English has only one word to do both. I will use *ontos* to refer to Being in this paper.

<sup>18</sup> See Graham Harman (2003) and others.

<sup>19</sup> While I find the term «living Indigenously» useful, I am concerned about the possible colonization of yet another idea relating to Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples. I have begun to introduce Autochthonously, or Autochthony, which are rarely used in this context in English, as a possible alternative. *Autochthony*, *Indigeneity*, *attentive receptivity* and «ways of being» are all used roughly interchangeably.

an incompatibility with Christian spirituality. This is because attentive receptivity is a way of being in the world which sustains the life of the human participant and the health of the ecosystem, and which expresses, in moment-by-moment awareness, the ecocentric interdependence of all being. In other words, one lives this mode of being, rather than thinks it, though one also has an awareness of it<sup>20</sup>. Attentive receptivity – Indigeneity – Autochthony - because it is a state of being and not an idea about being, is lived, not conceived. It is not characterized by beliefs, stories or cosmologies; it is simply enacted, although explanations and descriptions may also apply. That this being-related difference was neither understood nor taken into account is, I believe, at the root of the failure of religiously-based (and most other) educative practices to meet the needs and to accommodate the difference of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This also accounts for why, as I will later try to show, learning from this position may require different kinds of educative responses.

This work derives from earlier research suggesting that there is a difference between the ways of being enacted in Autochthony or Indigeneity and the ways of being enacted through the being of *homo mobilis*, the name I give to participants in the modern global West and North. In earlier work I have also tried to make a distinction between the ethnic condition of Aboriginality and what I posit to be an ontological condition of Autochthony/Indigeneity (Beeman, 2013). In other words, I think it theoretically useful to be able to see the ontologies of Indigeneity as divergent from the ontologies of *homo mobilis*. And while, in practice, a higher proportion of Aboriginal people (an ethnic distinction, historically devised to control, assimilate, and limit First Peoples by Canadian and other governments) may enact an *ontos* of attentive receptivity, some non-Aboriginal people do too. This is one of the virtues of attentive receptivity as an ontological condition: it bridges ethnic divides, making possible ways-of-being alliances that may accommodate and speak to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In so doing, the existence of attentive receptivity challenges the dominance of the modern global West on grounds other than it is normally challenged. These grounds are not simply the colonization in ethnic terms of non-white (in the case of Canada, historically predominantly Aboriginal (FNMI) peoples: they are a further colonization of ways of being in the world. In my understanding and experience, this state of being is open to all in possibility and is rarely enacted.

I will also need to look at some criticisms of how I make use of an ontological argument, in particular, the tendency for this argument to appear to oversimplify and delineate differences between ontologies, to limit the possibility of accident and crossover between ontological positions, and, in short, to find impediments to the possibility of communication between ontologies.

In the course of my research, experience really did precede theory in reporting ontological difference, just as being precedes its description. I know that what is written here may be uncomfortably un-post-modern for many readers, but the barriers to communication between ontologies appear to me to be very real. It may

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<sup>20</sup> Thus described, it is clear that while attentive receptivity may in practice be enacted much more commonly in some groups of people than others, it is not an ethnic condition. I.e.: It is not the same as «having Aboriginal ancestry». In philosophical terms, this allows much more work to be done by the idea. It permits also a bridging across identities, as commonly construed, and provides other means for critiquing the *ontos* of the modern, global West.

be possible, in ways I have not yet experienced, that they may be bridged. I will also later argue (un-popularly again) that state of being, while influenced by the words and stories around it and thus never wholly independent of these, ultimately does in practice, and ought to, in interpretation, take precedence over descriptions and analysis of it. In other words, when it comes to the ontos of attentive receptivity, language is not a precondition for its experience, even though I may use language to (obliquely) refer to it.

In the move that I propose, some have lamented the separation of *ontos* from *logos*, and hence, the separation of being from the words which relate to it<sup>21</sup>. I acknowledge that the ideas about *being* described in this paper are shaped in some part by the words of both the elders I have worked with and their stories and ideas. Thus, words are shaping influences in understanding the being state to which I refer. There is no doubt that *logos* has influenced *ontos* in the research I have done: the words of elders, for example, permitted another kind of examination of my own lived way of being than it had been examined before and thus showing the possibility of accident and movement influencing *ontos*<sup>22</sup>.

Add to this that *ontos* is not static. It interacts with the world, and with, I would argue, the only other predominant state of being which I occupy in writing papers like this one and in engaging in most of what I do in everyday life. This is the being-state of *homo mobilis*. The two are capable of being aware of the other, at least for some elders with whom I work. This having been said, the problem with a post-structural stance in which the description or words around the being state would predominate, is problematic in at least two ways. First, it represents the situation confusingly: the mode of communication about the ontological state is given dominance over the thing in itself. Despite that the post-structural response to this argument – that there is no ‘thing itself’ without language – I can only say that while the mode of communication that uses words works for the state of being of *homo mobilis*, the natural form of communication for attentive receptivity is otherwise. When Alex Mathias, for example, speaks of learning from a spirit place, he says,

to see that place  
and to feel it  
and the messages people can get there  
...people getting answers  
maybe not by hearing voices  
but in their mind  
*the answers coming to them* (Beeman, 2006)

And leaving aside for the moment the obvious critique from a post-structural stance, I can only argue phenomenologically here: there appears to be such a thing

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<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to William Pinar for this observation.

<sup>22</sup> Intriguingly, Iain McGilchrist’s *The master and his emissary* (2009) provides a nuanced analysis of recent brain-based research suggesting why this phenomenological perception may have reasons well-rooted in neuro-science. In particular, the being state I call attentive receptivity, phenomenologically described, is strikingly similar to the overall way of being of the right hemisphere.

as reported by elders and while it may be influenced in some small part by words around it, it can exist independently of these, no matter how attractive may appear the (word-oriented) contrary.

Secondly, words, like the words on this page, are the predominant representation of *homo mobilis*' reason. Yet, by giving primacy to them, the being state of attentive receptivity is overshadowed and diminished in importance. By virtue of its global dominance, *homo mobilis* can afford to ignore those *ontos* that are not encountered there – in the world of words. Again, if this view is accurate, it has unexpected support in recent neuro-science (McGilchrist, 2009)<sup>23</sup>. In other words – words – it is very difficult, using these, to access even the slightest nuance of attentive receptivity.

A fair question is, if the two being states described are so different, how is communication at all possible between them? How are they capable of talking with each other? How can the two even be conceived? I came to use the term ontology, and eventually *ontos*, because of the lack of availability of other terms. Suppose that self is opened so that the skin of the human body is no longer the limit of the human being. Suppose that the self is comprised of the world insofar as the world is interacted with to meet living needs. Viewed this way, the circumstance is not that there are two *ontos* that do not understand each other; there is a way of being which, when described phenomenologically, enacts events not understood within the *ontos* of the dominant system. So, another *ontos* is opened in the void produced by the question: Communication of some form is possible, though it is not easy. The birds that swirl around my head as I write now, in the sunset open-air evening of a local park, may be described (perceived) as individual lines of rapidly-moving gold, or as a mass with a certain shape and character. To hold these two competing ideas simultaneously may be impossible.

But the proposed removal of *logos* when discussing ways of being does another thing: it permits a focus on the being-state, which is the primary phenomenological event that emerges in my work with elders. It also points to the primacy of the being-state, and perhaps permits reconsideration of the thinking or *wording* or study about it. I know that this perspective is unpopular now. I can only say that I am attempting to accurately describe a phenomenon *qua* phenomenon, which, perhaps inconveniently, may not accommodate or conform to current popular ways of describing it.

A wish for intellectual accuracy compelled me, in research during the past decade, to describe what I had initially thought were simply very different ideas expressed by the elders with whom I worked, as being ontologically different, rather than simply, say, culturally, spiritually, or cosmologically different. By this I mean that they could not be explained with consistency as simply deriving from another perspective, point of view, cultural stance, linguistic situation, or any other kind of the standard ideas around difference such as gender issues, ethnicity, cultural, religious or spiritual positions, normally recognized in Western discourses around ideas like diversity. They could only be understood as deriving from a very different way of

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<sup>23</sup> McGilchrist's work suggests that the conveniently though not-too-accurately named «left-hemispheric» modes of being that comfortably use words to analyse, have, by virtue of their undeniable utility, come to trump other thinking modes. I need hardly mention that for the current work to be reduced only to cognitive or neural function would be to irrevocably distort it.

being in the world – one so utterly foreign to the way of being lived by those of us, in the now globally dominant, modern West as to be unrecognizable as exiting at all<sup>24</sup>.

Does the state of being of a pilgrim parallel this? In a profound sense, for many of us, learning of a transformative kind occurred on the Camino. What I describe here does not reduce in any way this learning, or the state of Camino-being. However, despite the walking through relatively wilder places and a more immediate dependence on the nearby world for living needs to be met, for most of us, a *peregrino's* journey was circumscribed by external factors: we did not live in this way for long and we lived with the knowledge of the finiteness of the journey. We knew that it had a beginning and end, both in space and time. It was limited, and this limitedness was an inherent part of its nature. And, Camino walkers were there to walk through a physical world en route to encountering their spirit. This latter detail suggests that the *ontos* of pilgrimage is very different from the environmentally-integrated *ontos* of attentive receptivity. Taken in this way, it appears that, despite some similarities between positions of *peregrinos* and those who live Autochthonously, underlying *ontos* were probably quite different. The learning that would take place in such a life would be also different for the enacted *ontos* of Autochthony. In the next section, I offer a story of education within such a life that illustrates that difference.

## 6. Experiential learning and ontological position

There is a story that Alex Mathias told me that gives an example of this kind of teaching. When Alex was about ten or twelve, his father, who had a physical disability, and was sometimes unable to do certain tasks, asked him to go out alone to check on the beaver traps. Alex was curious about this. At the time his father asked him to go, it was almost mid-day. It was early winter at the time, so he thought it might take too long for him to get back before dark. He questioned his father's request. Nevertheless, his father insisted, so off he went.

By the time he was finished checking the traps, he had six or seven beavers, and these all required skinning. He did this. It was now so dark and he was so tired, that he had to camp many miles from his family's home. Soon after making camp, he began to be aware that wolves were all around his camp, attracted by the scent of fresh meat. He spend the entire night keeping a large fire going to discourage the wolves, living his fear, as it were.

By the time morning came, he was on his way, traveling with the beaver pelts back to his family's home. When he arrived, he confronted his father, told him of the events of the night before, and asked him for an explanation. Why had he made Alex go out so late in the day, alone, to do dangerous work? His father replied calmly, «Because when I was your age, my father did the same for me».

The point I wish to make about this story is simply this: If Alex had been told he was about to have a coming of age event, it would have changed the event. His father, by this account, was a master of experiential learning. His father had judged

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<sup>24</sup> To return to the analogy of the flight of a flock of birds as lines of flight or changing shape, the instant one image is held, the other almost always disappears. At least, this is true in the being state of *homo mobilis*.

the precise moment at which «growth» (in a Deweyan sense) could best occur, within the continuity of Alex's life. He enabled Alex's particular growth as a whole person, not by imparting information, but by enabling Alex to rally the learning he had already gained, and in so doing, to feel his own capacity and self-sufficiency in challenging and dangerous circumstances. This kind of learning is likely to lead to confidence, pride, and a capacity for discernment. I would also like to pose the question: is the kind of learning, the kind of *education* that appears above, not simply *coincident* with the *ontos* of Autochthony, but does it have something inherently linked to it?

I have reason to believe that it does. In this case, the learning that occurs is linked to the very activities that keep Alex and his family alive. Especially at the time the story occurred, the meat that came from the beavers would have been useful for food, and while some of the beavers' fur might have been sold, others were used by his family for clothing and household use. Thus, his commitment to protecting what was necessary for this family to survive in the direct sense of eating one's own labour, put him in a position in which he needed to act in a certain way. That is to say, he needed to act to protect his family's livelihood from the predations of other animals, rather than just to ensure his own safety. Perhaps this was at the core of his father's answer to him: that growing up meant an element of sacrifice for the good of the whole, however that community was construed. Again, had Alex not had to act in a certain way, such learning would probably not have occurred, and it would certainly not have occurred experientially.

In comparison, consider the kind of learning that *peregrinos* experience. The learning may be just as valuable, but the state of being is not so closely linked to the context of learning. For example, many pilgrims want to be in relatively wilder spaces in order to feel closer to God. This may or may not be felt by another pilgrim. Commonly heard expressions of a religious nature may have resonated with me, but I cannot deny that they relied on certain beliefs about the world. In contrast, Alex's experience was entirely linked to the world through the actions that occurred during the learning experience that originated with his father: there was no postulation of spirit: there was only the actual lived connection to a greater ecological whole that was expressed in his actions to protect what his family needed to live.

## 7. Thoughts ambling forward

One colleague suggested that a way to find compatibilities between Camino-being and an Autochthony was not to look for ontological explanations, but rather to the simplified, enacted lives as they played out on the Camino. These could be joined by the common elements of movement, physical effort, sacrifice, pain, and an openness to the possibility of connection to something greater<sup>25</sup> («God», or perhaps «Nature»). These might, more reasonably, be points of correlation, rather than the more difficult-to-prove ontological ones. While I agree with this critique, it has been through considering *ontos* that the differences emerged.

What has been written thus far in this paper would tend to suggest that there is no compatibility between the *ontos* of Camino-being and the *ontos* of Autochthony, noted above. What is in question for future work is whether the learning that is

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Sean Blenkinsop for this insight.

generated from the life-interactions with place in Autochthony may have pedagogical parallels in other, apparently like contexts. My research suggests that while learning on the Camino may be deep and life-altering, it may not occupy the same kind of space as learning in a shifted ontological context. Within attentive receptivity, there is nothing like eating one's own labour to understand the sacredness of place.

Despite this, I repeatedly met with ideas from Christians whose force and commitment to learning from natural settings surprised me. Some pilgrims appeared to encounter God in nature and not in other ways, so that an experience of walking in wild places was necessary for their faith. God could only be encountered in this way. This causes me to ask, is there something in Christian faith that is operative, but not taken account of by those responsible for organizing the ideas of the church?

I am beginning to wonder if some aspects of Autochthony perhaps infuse hidden parts of Christianity, not through theory, but through practice. I do think that something unrecognized in the magisterium lurks in the wilder places of pilgrimage. The emergence of Camino-being is perhaps pointing to this. And while it does not appear to be the same *ontos* as that of attentive receptivity, which I have experienced in long solo journeys in wild places, the two being states rely on wild places for learning to occur. This might suggest that there is a connection as yet obfuscated, hidden or covered over which may, in some future time, connect the super worldly God of Christianity with an enacted *ontos* of Autochthony. And this is the subject of a future work.

## 8. Acknowledgements

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<sup>26</sup> Elders are people recognized within First Nations, Metis and Inuit cultures as being both keepers of important traditional knowledge and as having attained a significant degree of self-knowledge, allowing them to act in responsible ways, for the benefit of their communities.

various Caminos on which I walked. All of these places and persons form a web of relationships that helped to shape the orientation and ideas of this paper: without them, the paper would not take the form it does. I recognize both places and people with the traditional acknowledgement: All my relations.

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