



RECOGNISE THAT THERE ARE PERSONS IN THE WORLD THAT ARE NOT HUMAN

The artistic research I am conducting takes as its starting point a relationship I have with a stone. It is an unassuming stone, about the size of a human curled up. Splodges of lichen cover its surface, and whenever I look at it up close, there is a teeming community of ants traversing it back and forth. The stone sits in the middle of a clearing of an old farm in Norway that I have been visiting all my life. It lies a few hours' drive from where I grew up, a place my family has been connected to for four generations. It is only in the last few years, however, that I really started noticing the stone.

No one knows if the stone was moved there or if it has been there all along. Many farms in Scandinavia have traditionally had a "special stone." We see hints towards their significance in the ornamental rune stones of the Viking age

or the sacrificial stones of Sápmi, but Southern Norwegian stone culture has largely been forgotten. Accounts suggest, however, that here, too, (some) stones were treated as more-than-human “persons.” This is a terminology I borrow from the anthropologist Graham Harvey’s definition of “new animism”:

Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human...Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable). Animism may involve learning how to recognise who is a person and what is not—because it is not always obvious and not all animists agree that everything that exists is alive or personal. However, animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons. (Harvey 2006, xii).

In other words...

DON'T GET TOO PREOCCUPIED WITH WHETHER
THE PERSON IS A PERSON OR NOT

Taking new animism as a starting point, my research asks what happens when we take our senses seriously. How can intuition and attentiveness open us up to the teachings of a place? And through this strengthen our relations—and with this our responsibilities—towards the world? Specifically, how do these questions relate to stone, a being so vastly different from us, materially and temporally?

I've previously lacked the framework for how to proceed with this question. As a Euro-descendant raised in a majority Norwegian culture that left its animist roots behind a long time ago, there have been no obvious traditions or elders to take guidance from. My general education has lacked the required ontology altogether.

Learning from those who have managed to keep a more relational and animist framework alive—often in spite of centuries of colonisation, religious persecution, and

still-encroaching incursions on their land and cultures—has been one way to find a path through this. To these colleagues the practices I describe might feel like second nature, and I thank them for making their knowledge available to those of us for whom it is not. To me, it has been a series of revelations. Revelations of a quiet reciprocal magic that keeps unfolding, through the slow unravelling of one world-view and the edging closer of another.

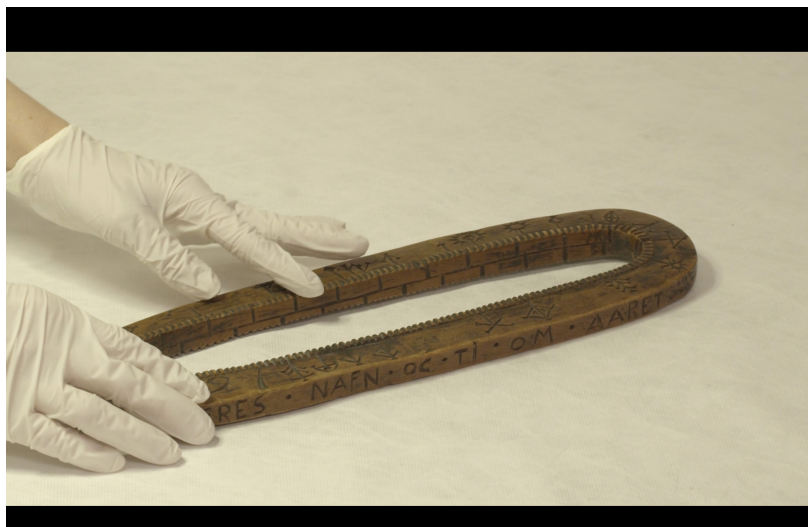
This essay contains some pointers I have arrived at so far. They are by no means instructions, rather open-ended suggestions for a practice that attempts to be-in-the-world in a more respectful way. They are informed by artistic research, which includes efforts of attentive observation (through and beyond the camera lens), deep listening (with and without field recording devices), the reanimation of animist customs (some documented, some not) and the learning of traditional craft techniques, such as wood whittling, textile dyeing with plants, and willow weaving, making use of the organic materials from the stone's surroundings.



This process of being-with this place has also included a kind of “knowledge foraging.” I have been learning the names of the local flora and fauna and experimented with

what can be eaten and drunk, tapping birch sap in the spring, making nettle soup in the summer, and picking berries for jam-making in the autumn. I have set up wildlife cameras to get to know the more elusive woodland animals and have searched archives for folk stories and songs with a local, nature-bound connection.

These actions have resulted in raw material of both the physical and informational kind that can be used for future art works. So far they are still part of a process with a yet unknown outcome. For this essay I will concentrate on two works closer to completion. The first is a film work—of which the quotes interspersed in the essay are taken from—which has been a way for me to document my thinking and process as it has developed. The second is a “primstav” I have been carving, based on the old wooden calendars one could find hanging in farms across Norway a few hundred years ago.



GIVE IT TIME

Both works have been tools for me to enter a different way of experiencing place and time. Both encourage a slow cyclicity and attentiveness rooted in the observation of seasonal changes.

The *primstav* reflects how previous generations were embedded in the natural world. Traditionally, it had a circular or sword-like form with a winter side and a summer side. Carved grooves marked each day of the year, with symbols marking special days. When making my *primstav*, I used a mix of traditional and subjective interpretations of these symbols, paired with natural observations and modern anniversaries when deciding what days and symbols to include. I was especially interested in how the older symbols often had a dual meaning. St. Columba's Day, for example, was symbolised by a salmon, as the saint was connected to a legend about fishing, but the day also landed around the time salmon would start travelling upstream to spawn. Many of the days tied to Virgin Mary were represented by a leafy tree, and happened to land on days that in the pre-Christian tradition were tied to fertility rites and the celebration of new life.

The film is a slow-moving portrait of the stone and its immediate surroundings, which zooms in and out of the landscape and the many beings that inhabit it. A voice-over shifts between the personal and anecdotal to the more informative or philosophical. The film's four sections are split into the seasons, making visible the continuously changing nature of the place. Footage of historical primstavs mark the start of each section and as it is meant to be shown on a loop, the film can be entered at any time. As such, the film's form complements the stone, whose continuous presence encourages us to think through more-than-human conceptions of time, change, and permanence. We also see more fleeting imprints of human presence, often through my body relating to the stone. This is mostly seen through gestural movements; fingers using touch to sense various textures, hands conducting offerings and small rituals.

Determining what these rites and gestures should be was an important part of the process (What does a stone wish for? Does it even care? How will I know whether it cares?), and the film has been both a tool and a method towards figuring this out. What follows are the ideas that informed the ontological shift I have gone through to initiate a relationship with the stone.

Throughout my stone journey, I have been inspired by Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson's book *Research is Ceremony* (2008). Here, Wilson defines what research might look like within an indigenous paradigm, as opposed to within the dominant western paradigm that still guides most of our principles as researchers. Wilson believes that indigenous research methods are crucial for us to re-learn how to have a respectful relationship with the earthly community.¹ As such, he has since started calling it an *indigenist* research paradigm, as he would like to see these methods available to all, including those not from an indigenous background.² It is with this in mind that I allow myself to take guidance from Wilson and others' teachings as a non-indigenous person. What Wilson arrives at in *Research in Ceremony* is that *relationality* is the basis of *everything* in indigenous traditions—relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality.

The consequences of this worldview are hard to communicate using the English language, as English is obsessed with the I/it divide, the differentiation of subject/object. In contrast, in Wilson's native Cree language, objects are defined by what relationship one has with them. As an example, more important than a pen being a pen is that we write with the pen. It is our relationship to the pen that defines it.

- 1 A concept I borrow from Achille Mbembe's *the earthly community* (V2_Publishing, 2022). He also urges us to look beyond the Western paradigm to the ancient animist notions of 'African metaphysics' as a way of mending our broken relationship with the earth and each other.
- 2 In *Ceremony at a Boundary Fire: A Story of Indigenist Knowledge* (p.20-21, Sydney eScholarship Repository, 2015), Wilson explains what has changed since he wrote *Research is Ceremony*: "I guess the biggest thing is that I've changed the way I label the research paradigm I outline there. I call it Indigenist now, instead of Indigenous. This emphasizes that it's a philosophical issue, not a claiming of ownership by one group of people. You can be a white Indigenist just like you can be a male feminist."



If we bring this notion back to the stone, it is the relationship I create with the stone and the function I recognize it as performing in my life that give the stone its ontological meaning.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF / LAND GREETING

But how to initiate that relationship in the first place? Looking again to our indigenous colleagues and tradition bearers for help, many would suggest that a land acknowledgement—or more precisely, a land greeting—is a good way to start. Just as you would introduce yourself to a new human that enters into your life, you might want to do the same to the land you enter onto.

I take inspiration from the Sámi lawyer and joiker Ánde Somby's "micro land acknowledgement," as described in a recent talk at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum.³ Whenever he stays in a new space—a hotel room for example—he makes sure to greet the room spirits upon arrival. He tells them his name, states the length of his stay, and makes sure to say that he comes in peace. Preferably in the spirits' language.

- 3 *The Butterfly Effect* | Ánde Somby | *Being A Guest: Acknowledging Indigenous Land*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCNqQltlBBQ&t=844s>. With thanks to Elin Már Øyen Vister for pointing me towards this talk.

This way he shows them respect and hopes to receive respect in return, perhaps by being granted a good night's sleep.

Halfway across the world, in a talk aimed at those planning on attending the American Association of Geography's Annual Conference in Hawai'i, Leah Hall and Kekuhi Keali'ikanakaole gifted the listeners with a land greeting, which they could use to honour the island they would be entering onto.⁴ The greeting, Mele Mo'okū, is a request for permission to enter one's energy into the energy of this new space. It is also an opportunity for visitors to introduce themselves and where they come from, to "step into the story" and think about how Hawai'i could become a part of their story and vice versa. As Hall explained, it is a means to initiate a basic behaviour of reciprocity and start to grow a deep sense of exchange with the land.

For a long time I pondered how to talk to the stone. Those who know about these things say to speak normally. But I wonder what I sound like when I do. If stone time is slower than human time, maybe it hears my voice like I've inhaled helium? As if everything is in Fast Forward? Or is it the other way round? A slow-motion movie?

When time lapse photography was invented it allowed us to observe how plants grew, the camera helping us experience plant time. But no matter how long I point my camera at the stone I don't see any signs of movement.



I don't listen to music when I'm here.

4 *Kumulipo: Hawaiian Explication of Creation*, 2024. <https://www.aag.org/webinar/kumulipo-hawaiian-explication-of-creation/>.

In his latest book *Right Story, Wrong Story*, the Aboriginal Australian scholar Tyson Yunkaporta advocates for something he calls Deep Time Diligence (Vaughan-Lee 2024, Yunkaporta 2023). Deep Time Diligence commits us to a longer mode of thinking, as can be found in indigenous cultures like his own. It is a way of extending our responsibilities to the world beyond our immediate life spans, beyond our short-term political and budgetary cycles. It is a time span that takes into consideration both our ancestors and descendants, and, of course, extends to our more-than-human kin too.

He makes the point that we need resilient storage methods for these teachings and practices, which have been tested, honed, and debated in communities such as his over thousands of years. None have proved as durable, he says, as that of story and myth. Forget the short-term storage mechanisms of Big Tech and look instead to the other TEK, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, where the technology of myth has kept ecologically sustainable knowledge alive for much longer than electronic storage methods ever will.

This has brought me to wonder what ecological knowledge might be contained in the myths and stories of my own cultural tradition, obscured perhaps by labels such as folklore and folk songs. Many of these stories and customs originate from a time when people—also here—lived in a more respectful and reciprocal way with the natural world, and as such I've been especially curious as to what such stories and customs could convey about how to think-with our more-than-human kin. Land spirits, for example, used to be a part of everyday Norwegian life, but are generally relegated to folk tales these days. Can old stories help us find a shared language with stone?

So far I have found tales and songs that encourage a particular type of temporal awareness—a constantly attentive and actively respectful approach towards the environment. Especially those about the subterranean folk—the “vetter”, or wights in English—who live underground and mirror us in what we do. Who would help us in our daily

tasks if we treated them with respect and enact revenge and mischief if we did not—and who would sometimes use stones as portals to the above-ground world.

There was also the “gardvord,” who lived in yard stones. This land spirit was the first farmer with whom the farm’s inhabitants strived to have good relations through taboos and reciprocal practices. We find references to such ancestor worship in the sagas, where burial mounds are offered food, drink, and weapons, often generations after the burial took place. Although mound-worship was outlawed by Christianity, people upheld similar traditions for *vetter* and other land spirits, such as leaving porridge in the barn on Christmas Eve or offering sticks or small stones to crossings on the way to pasture.

Every time I leave, I thank the stone for having me, trying to follow old customs. I give it an offering of butter or beer and ask it to look after the place until someone returns. But one time I forget and in my hurry to leave I can’t find an appropriate gift. I end up mumbling a “thanks” in the car home, a pitiful attempt at telepathy. I doubt it received the message, as the next time I visit all the fuses have blown, the heater has stopped working and the water pipes have frozen. This time, I tell myself, I’ll give it a proper gift. But again, it doesn’t work out. The beer I’ve put aside gets drunk and again I am in a rush to leave. I end up finding three marshmallows in the pantry, which I throw onto the stone. I hope it accepts the gesture. Is it the thought that counts?

USE YOUR IMAGINATION AS AN INTERFACE

I sometimes sit and stare at the stone at dusk, when the *vetter* were most likely to be seen. I want to find out if they’re really in there. But underground there is soil and inside the stone...well, stone. So where do they exist, in another dimension? I think back to when I visited CERN. The particle accelerator deals with other dimensions. But I don’t get far with that line of thought as I don’t know much about physics. I studied art, and in the arts, the *vetter* exist.

There *are* those from Euro-descendant cultures who still recognise land spirits. One such person is the

environmental magician Josephine McCarthy. To speak to the land, McCarthy does exactly that; she speaks out loud to the land.⁵ If you do this, she says, you might eventually get



something back. Not at first, perhaps, but that’s ok, relationships take time to develop.

Some traditions would have you be quiet and show reverence. But you can probably feel your way around which stones prefer quiet to chatter. Don’t be afraid to speak, McCarthy seems to say, make the conversation part of your lived reality. If you vocalize your intentions to the world, your breath will commingle with the animate vibrations all around you.

When people *do* get something back, they often wonder whether it’s their imagination. Yes, says McCarthy, it probably is at first. But the imagination acts as an interface. It makes it possible for us to begin this abstract and unfamiliar interaction by projecting something back to us that we can interpret.

In many cultures, we have given these projections specific forms, like the “*nisse*,” a Norwegian land spirit present in many old accounts who has survived as a well-known figure to this day. Such translations, says McCarthy, is the imagination manifesting the patterns of energy that are all around us into something we can understand.

5 *CRASSH / Magic and Ecology: Environmental Magic and Geo-mancy / Josephine McCarthy*. Cambridge, 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KThaF4gCp2c&t=1s>.



I was always aware this place was special, different from where I grew up in the city. When I was younger, my senses were often on high alert here, something I attributed to fear. Fear of the eyes that might be watching from the surrounding forest, fear of any movement in the dark void behind the houses. But in recent years I have learnt to turn this fear into attentiveness. Trusting the senses rather than distrusting them.

Composer Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening exercises have been helpful for this. They attune us to the whole sound environment and encourage us to actively *listen* rather than passively *hear*, fostering a state of receptivity. One of Oliveros' most repeated exercises reads: "Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears" (Oliveros 1974). Equally, many indigenous practices emphasize that it is important to listen beyond the aural.

In a recent conversation on Sámi listening, Liissa-Rávná Finbog called it "listening with the gut" (Finbog et al. 2024). If you enter a place and you feel uncomfortable, this should not be brushed aside. There will be a reason for this even if you can't pinpoint it yet. One should respect and act upon such feelings, she says, which of course could also be positive. Ultimately, such acts of attentiveness remind us we are never alone in the landscape.

In Old Norse the word "rune" means "hidden religious knowledge," or "secret, whispered conversation." So I guess I speak in runes when I speak to the stone. At least I lower my voice when others are present. But how deep do you have to go to understand what it answers in return? Odin hung upside down for nine days to learn what the runes meant. I have not gotten that far.

With the stone, I have found myself searching for signs of *two-way* communication. But extending listening beyond the aural encourages us to open up to communication happening in ways we might have forgotten how to recognize. Stone speech might well manifest itself in the gut rather than the ears, its resonance chthonic rather than aerial.

So what ceremonies can facilitate us in opening up to this forgotten tongue? Again, I turn to Shawn Wilson, who states that if the shared aspect of an indigenist ontology and epistemology⁶ is relationality, then the shared aspect of an indigenist methodology and axiology is *accountability to relationships*. The way to practice this is to keep extending and building on those relationships.

The purpose of any ceremony, says Wilson, is to build stronger relationships. Or in other words, bridge the distance between aspects of the cosmos and ourselves. It is the space *between relationships* that is sacred. It is ceremony because you are changing the fundamental nature of reality by trying to bridge that sacred gap. This can work in relation to people or more-than-human persons, but can also work in relation to an idea as you build a closer relationship with it.

⁶ I appreciate Wilson's commitment to explaining difficult words to the reader in *Research is Ceremony*. In short, he defines them as; ontology = one's reality; epistemology = how one knows or thinks about that reality; methodology = how one finds out more about what one thinks/knows; axiology = the ethics or morals guiding one's search for knowledge.

Even asking the question of whether a relationship is possible can be the first step towards bridging the gap Wilson speaks of. After much time spent with the stone, the gap between us is slowly diminishing (we are working in stone time, after all), although I still find myself wondering what I should be listening out for. Working my way through the film and *primstav* (also slowly) have been ways for me to stay with these questions and keep challenging learnt



anthropocentric hierarchies and I/it dualisms. Having a “goal” of making art works, and thereby making the process visible, has helped me put otherwise vague notions and hunches (i. e. intuition) into tangible forms, a snapshot in time of where the process stands at this moment.

Although I have been researching old customs for inspiration for how to relate to the stone, their lack of specifics have meant attentiveness and improvisation have been an important part of the process of making ceremony. When I interviewed Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, the creator of the Nordic Animism project, he made a point of how important this kind of “doing” is, even in the face of doubt:

“If you have a Nisse and you gave the Nisse the choice of what they would rather have, the faith or the porridge, the Nisse will definitely choose the porridge! It is not that the faith is totally irrelevant, it probably also plays a small role, but the porridge is more important for the spirit.” (Helle et al. 2022).

This, for him, is an important take-away of animism. As a public intellectual, it has been a way to remember that although he spends a lot of time theorizing, it is more important to bring those teachings into life, through eco-activism, for example. As an artist and citizen, I am constantly grappling with what I can “do” to counteract a political climate hellbent on ecological destruction.

Being with the stone, learning the names of its plant neighbours, and singing to and with its surroundings have all been important to me on a personal level. As has making offerings and recording seasonal changes in my weather diary. Whether the significance of this “doing” extends beyond myself and the stone remains to be seen when the works are shown in public. For now, navigating these relationships and constantly evaluating how my practice sits in relation to the world around me is key to my continued practice.

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List of illustrations

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