

Foreword: Democratic Self-and-Other-Determination and the More-than-Human World

John Borrows

Democracies thrive on mutual participation of one and all here and now. They are marked by a commitment to coordination and cooperation across various fields. Despite their strengths, democracies could more effectively connect with our more-than-human relatives. A universal theory or view is not required to take such action. Nonviolence, pluralism, and agonistic engagement with the natural world could further expand democracies' futures.

Throughout this book, you will read that interdependence and mutual engagement with those who are different is a key to joint action. This contrasts with politics built on force, coercion, and noncooperation, where power is concentrated in competing "us and them" camps. This book explains how democracies thrive when they move beyond assessments of "what is good for me" and inquire into what is good for "all of us together." In this light, human concerns should not monopolize political judgment; democracies should also revolve around what is good for the entire biosphere.

We must learn politics from our ancestors. Plants, insects, birds, and animals have much to teach us. We are their descendants and they are our elders. We would not exist without them. They came first and they continue to sustain us. Our evolutionary lineage and biophysical dependence points to this fact.

I am *nigig indoodem*, from the Otter clan of the Anishinaabe. Our legal order flows from a creation story wherein animals counseled together to bring dirt from the depths of a flooded world. A giant otter participated in this council. They dove with other animals who sought substance for further growth. The muskrat, the smallest diver, brought a paw full of earth from deep below the surface. The animals celebrated his efforts by seeding this soil as they danced along a giant turtle's back. In the process, the animals combined elements necessary for life's subsequent generation. When the giant otter died, the first person of my clan emerged from their carcass. Long after the council's actions spread life across Turtle Island's back, other clans formed in similar ways. Humans are the earth's literal offspring. We have much to learn from our genesis.

Countless stories from many societies narrate similar themes: we are born from the earth. In Hebrew, the biblical name for the first human is *adamah*, which means “the ground” or “earth.” The Quran says that “among His signs is that He created you from the dust” (ar-Rum 30:20). Scientific accounts of life’s origins circulate this truth. Proof of natural selection drawn from the elements around us is vast, varied, and magnificent. Evolution conveys essential facts about the nature of our physical existence. Our relatedness to the earth holds great political salience. Our constitutional genealogies spring from the elements found in the natural world.

We sever ourselves from what sustains us if we separate politics from the air, water, rocks, plants, insects, birds, animals, and other such kin. Our political lives depend on respectfully nurturing that which nurtures us, which includes our natural environments. The living world provides the very conditions from which all other activities flow. We cannot be reconciled with others unless we first reconcile ourselves with the living earth.

Democracies must look backwards to life’s sources to narrate any political momentum forward. Human words do not precede us; they arrived much later than the winds, waves, pulses, vibrations, drones, barks, whines, growls, calls, and songs of our first teachers. Human politics, including democratic politics, is not *the* precondition to healthy living. Something primordial, beyond words, precedes us.

The question is, how can we better incorporate lessons from the natural world into democracies’ futures? How might we listen to those we do not conventionally hear? How can we incorporate these politics into our everyday lives?

Let me suggest that lessons course through waters and winds. Listening to the natural world requires a literacy that is hard to convey through language. The earth is an archive that we must learn to read: scientifically, socially, culturally, legally, spiritually, and politically. Anishinaabe people have long taught that we can hear and read beyond words if we regard the earth as our relative and teacher. For us, earth-bound politics must be experiential and phenomenological. This requires listening with our bodies (alongside other bodies and life forms) to those whose forms may be very different from our own. This is a key to civility.

Our teachers may have wings, fins, tails, and antennae. They might be fossilized, dressed in leaves, or fall from the sky in small drops. Anishinaabe elder Basil Johnston taught me that we learn governance in context, which includes these more-than-human frameworks. He said we must attune ourselves to frequencies that emanate from fields, forests, and seas to better regulate our affairs and resolve our disputes. We must understand how the world is different from us, even as we find ourselves within them. He said, “until you can look at a squirrel and see yourself as no more or less than her, you will not understand humility,” which is a key to effective living.

Anishinaabe practitioners of these forms of democracy realize that their own views of the earth are partial. The natural world is simply too vast, beautiful, precarious, and mysterious to capture in human terms. Thus, they must find ways to concede, cooperate, conciliate, and negotiate with those in the natural world whom they cannot fully understand. They recognize that democracy must give at least some space to our more-than-human fellow citizens to follow their own patterns for growth and development. We must allow them to be themselves. An oak must be given space to grow with other species in spontaneous and interactive ways. An old-growth forest might not be as economically profitable as a tree plantation, but if old-growth forests cease to exist, humans will never gain an enlarged and even-handed view of how we might better live.

Indigenous self-and-other codetermination sees the natural world as a key participatory space for engagement. Humans can learn how to be better relatives in these spaces. We must “go outside” more frequently when we talk with one another and make decisions – and listen to other ways of being.

This is why some Anishinaabe elders take their grandchildren outdoors when asked for guidance. This is why some Indigenous law professors take their students to their traditional territories to learn. It is easier to hear “more than human” contributions to political life if we get outside our courts, legislatures, classrooms, labs, conference rooms, books, and computer-mediated conversations. When we leave familiar human structures and political fora, it is easier to listen to the water, plants, insects, birds, and animals, and their voices. Learning from the natural world in all democracies requires direct experience. Ultimately, effective listening requires immersion in settings where humans are not at the center of every thought and interaction.

As Jim Tully reminds us in this book, judgment is perspectival. I am suggesting that we must see our politics through our neighbors’ eyes, like those of the butterflies, frogs, geese, and otters. Their habitats, habits, and health must be viewed in ways that respect their intrinsic worth. We must participate with them, within environments ordered differently from how humans construct them. Contrasting and comparing others’ needs with our own allows us to see our own assumptions and preoccupations more clearly. This is why we must become students of the oaks, salamanders, owls, and sturgeon. We must do more to learn from those who know them. We must work to support this kind of resurgence and regeneration if we hope for an effective reconciliation with the earth.

A commitment to democratic reciprocity means that human political communities must be more than self-determining. Self-determination is not enough to sustain our political goals. Too much focus on self can lead to insular, closed, and selfish activities, which can cause us to build walls that contain, divide, confine, prevent, repel, and deter interactions that are necessary to healthy living. Placing too much attention on the “self” can cause us to ignore the vital place of air, water, and rocks as participants in our politics. Thus, in

addition to advancing self-determination, democratic communities must also recognize and affirm other-determination as a genuine political reality. I am advocating for *Indigenous-other-determination*, alongside *self-determination*, as an important democratic goal.

Recognizing democratic other-determination does not mean we should determine other's choices. People should be free to take as much responsibility for their actions as they possibly can. Moreover, I am not advocating for colonialism, imperialism, authoritarianism, or other forms of governance where so-called governors determine other peoples' fate without their involvement, participation, or consent. I am merely suggesting that self-determination is a necessary yet insufficient condition for democracies' futures. Freedom, as taught to me by Basil Johnston, is a practice realized by being responsible for our own relationships.

Democratic other-determination (alongside self-determination) merely accepts that we never exist in isolation. What others determine has an impact on us, and what we determine influences them. Our thoughts, our actions, and their consequences are never fully a product of self-determination. We always find ourselves entangled with others. Determination is never contained in any version of a self. Forces we will never recognize influence our own governance, for good and ill, and accounting for this truth is a deep democratic insight.

Since governance is never fully within any society's control, we must learn to see how we are mutually determined, including by the more-than-human world. We must learn to appreciate biosphere-wide differences in classification and conjugation to have any hope of hearing and appropriately responding to others. Along with learning how different histories, cultures, economies, and peoples coordinate their affairs, and tracing these impacts on our own organizational forms, we must see how the natural world also determines how we live.

Democratic self-and-other-determination is evolutionary. It encourages apprenticeship. In addition to its other strengths, studying diverse kinds of democracies here and now urges us to learn how to better listen, compare, and contrast our needs with the natural world to develop better political judgment. These are our clan responsibilities as humans. Stronger civic engagement with the plants, insects, fish, birds, and animals can help us identify significant insights on how they (and, by extension, we) experience the natural world. In this light, *Democratic Multiplicity* can better help us develop governance relationships with other living societies who also share this world.

Our political choices have consequences for those who were here first. Our democracies will not have bright futures unless we understand and act on this insight. This is "being democratic" with all affected fellow citizens of the living earth here and now in self-and-other codetermining ways: *dabagewagendan wiidokodaadidiwin gidakiiminan omaa noongom*.

John Borrows, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Law, University of Victoria Law School