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City of London Festival Lecture

**Culture and Resistance:**

**Indigenous Responses to a Globalised World**

Michael Walling

Good evening everybody – how lovely to see so many of you this beautiful summer evening. I’d like to start by thanking Gresham College and the City of London Festival for the opportunity to give this lecture. As many of you know, the Origins Festival of First Nations is working closely with the City of London Festival this year, because of our shared interest in the Pacific region, and particularly in the indigenous cultures of Australia, Polynesia and Aotearoa (New Zealand). Our Festival was opened yesterday, and those of you who were present at Rich Mix for that event will have heard the wonderful Maori poet Robert Sullivan reading some of his work.

I want to begin this evening by thinking about one of the poems Robert read / did not read last night, a very short piece from towards the end of his book *Voice Carried my Family*. The poem is called *The Crackling Page* – and it’s all of two lines long:

my poetry is a fire –

if I close my mouth I will die.

There’s a lot to be said about two short lines. It’s important, I think, that the speaker’s mouth is open by default: he doesn’t say “If I don’t open my mouth I will die”, or even “If I open my mouth, I will live”: he says “if I close my mouth, I will die”. He is talking about the fire of articulacy being the norm, as if (assuming we equate the “I” of the poem with Robert the poet) it is a necessary part of his identity as a contemporary Maori poet, a contemporary indigenous, or First Nations artist, to speak and to speak in a way that ignites his surroundings, potentially enlightening, and potentially destroying them. That’s what fire can do. Fire is an intensely powerful metaphor for the culture of indigenous resistance, which is the subject of this lecture and one of the key themes of this year’s Origins Festival.

Festivals happen around fires. The festivals held by First Nations- in Australia, the Americas and Polynesia – take place under the stars around camp fires with songsters and storytellers: and today’s festivals happen on brightly illuminated stages in darkened rooms, or even under the Olympic flame. So in a lecture which is part of two festivals, both of which pay tribute to their indigenous ancestry and global links, the fire of First Nations resistance is the obvious topic.

I’ve called the lecture *Culture and Resistance: Indigenous Responses to a Globalised World –* and I’d like for a moment to think about what that really means, both historically and in terms of the present moment. When we talk about indigenous resistance, we inevitably head into the territory of resistance to imperialism and colonisation. 21st century people tend to think of the colonial period as being over – there’s a lot of talk in academic circles about “post-colonial studies”, and global politics does its best to present itself in terms of a “community of nations”. But when you look at the position of indigenous people in the parts of the world represented in Origins 2011, then you start to wonder. After all, there are ongoing and sustained land disputes between Maori and pakeha in Aotearoa / New Zealand – and that’s the country which actually has a Treaty with the indigenous people, and the Waitangi commission to deal with that treaty and the disputes over its implementation. Elsewhere there has never been a Treaty between the indigenous populations and the colonising powers, and so the European or Euro-American populations which remain as the dominant cultures in these states after the official end of the colonial period occupy an ambiguous position which they have inherited from the time of European (often British) imperialism, in that they are both post-colonial subjects but also the beneficiaries of colonisation. And so, they could be understood as part of an ongoing and unfinished colonisation process. It’s obvious, but should probably be re-stated as a starting point for these discussions, that the white populations of countries like Australia, Canada and the USA are among the wealthiest in the world, while the indigenous populations of those same countries have very low average incomes, very low life expectancy, very low educational achievement, and very high rates of preventable disease, child mortality, alcoholism and substance abuse. The wound of colonialism is anything but healed. In fact, in some parts of the world, there is still overt colonialism, with the ongoing displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands. At last night’s launch event, Benny Wenda of the Free West Papua movement spoke very movingly and very disturbingly about the illegal occupation of his country by Indonesia, and the tragedy which this presents in terms of environment, culture and human rights. Later in the festival, on Sunday, we are screening an award-winning film called *El Problema*, which looks at the colonisation of the Western Sahara by Morocco – another illegal occupation, which has forced huge numbers of indigenous Saharawis into refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria. So let’s not pretend that we live in a nicely ordered, egalitarian, post-colonial world in which the problems of the past can easily be forgotten. Our colonial history, much of which flowed from and colossally enriched this very Square Mile of the City of London – that history has shaped the present, and continues to be re-visited and re-enacted in the present. And that is why, alongside the ongoing colonialism and neo-colonialism, there is an ongoing story of indigenous resistance, of which many of the artists we present in Origins form a part.

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I said in particular tonight that I would talk about indigenous resistance to globalisation – and I think we have to understand globalisation as being a direct result of the colonial period. If it wasn’t for the fact that the City of London funded huge colonial expeditions to Australia in the 19th century – expeditions which were responsible for hunting Aboriginal people like wild animals – then there wouldn’t now be massively wealthy Anglo-Australian mining corporations which continue to bring huge amounts of the wealth extracted from the land in Australia into this Square Mile. It was Europe’s colonial rapacity which brought about the conditions in which the globalisation of the capitalist system we know today became possible.

But globalisation is not just about economics – though they are important, and I’ll come back to them later. Where the market leads, culture has a depressing tendency to follow. One of the aspects of the 21st century that is most disturbing for First Nations people around the world is the blanding out of difference which is encouraged by the global monoculture. Because global capital is so far-reaching and all-embracing, people are being asked to eat McDonalds burgers and drink Starbucks coffee in every corner of the planet; and children play with Barbie dolls from Mexico to Melanesia. There is a huge danger that everybody will end up being pretty much the same – that culture, which is what defines and identifies us, will essentially disappear into the bland morass of marketing. And that, if you ask me, might as well be the end of the human race.

I don’t want to live in a world without difference. I think it would be the most boring place imaginable. I want to live in a world where people are diverse in the fullest sense – where they have different ways of thinking and being, related to where they come from, the space in which they operate. So if we are to find a way of operating globally – and frankly, we’re stuck with that – then we have to emphasise the power of the local, and the importance of difference. We have to acknowledge that difference is not the same as conflict, but is in fact an enriching and empowering aspect of humanity, which permits dialogue and dynamism, exchange and growth. We have to allow the local to flourish within the global – and that means the encouragement and nurturing of the indigenous.

Take, for example, the question of language. One of the most obvious effects of globalisation is the massive global dominance of English – or at least, a form of English. Like many aspects of globalisation, this is something I feel a bit ambiguous about. It’s undoubtedly a big plus that I can talk tonight in English and be understood by a Navajo person, Maori and Polynesian people, Inuit people, Aboriginal Australians, Papuans and Saami. It’s an even bigger plus that they can come back at the end of the lecture and give their own viewpoint, here in the City of London, at one of the beating pulses of global power, in a language they are comfortable to speak, and be understood by everybody in the room. The whole of our two international festivals are based on this good fortune. And yet – we need to be very wary. If, as a global cultural community, we come to rely solely on minority cultures and indigenous cultures expressing themselves through the language of the dominant culture, then we are in danger of those cultures losing what is most valuable about them – their specificity, their way of seeing the world, their way of filtering what they see through language, poetry, performance and art. Because a language isn’t just a code. A language contains within it your cultural wealth – oral traditions, mythologies, identities. It gives you your own particular perspective on the world.

Let me give you an example. There’s a very important theatre, community and language project which has been running for a while in Central Australia, with the Pitjantjatjara people. The project is called *Ngapartji Ngapartji* – and the closest translation of that title is “I give something to you, you give something to me”. Now hang on a minute… the word *Ngapartji* is simply repeated, in order for the sentence to convey something which we (who think in English) would regard as two very different ideas – perhaps even opposite ideas. For somebody who speaks Pitjantjatjara as a first language, the idea that “you give something to me” is inherently identical to that of “I give something to you”. In other words, the principle of reciprocity, and the equality which that implies, is so basic to the culture that it doesn’t have to be talked about. It’s there, in the language.

Or let me give you another example. In Cree, a language of a First Nations people in Canada, there are no genders. There’s no way directly to translate “he / she”, “him / her”, “le / la” into Cree. And the result of this (or, who knows, even perhaps the cause of it?), is that Cree people do not think in gendered terms, or that they embrace very readily the fluidity of gender, which can be such a source of concern, prejudice, even pain, in cultures which insist on a very strict gender division in their language. There’s a playwright called Tomson Highway, whose mother tongue is Cree, and his work has been really influenced by this idea. The first really well-known play he wrote was called *The Rez Sisters*, and it’s about a group of women, living on a reservation, and their trip to a huge bingo game in Toronto. This apparently realistic surface is punctured and made very theatrical and very spiritual by the presence of a character called Nanabush, who is the Trickster spirit in Cree culture. And Nanabush, (who becomes amongst other things the flamboyant bingo caller, a white seagull and a black nighthawk), is played by the only male performer in the cast. Tomson then went on to write a play called *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, in which the whole cast is male, except for one female actor, who plays (you’ve guessed it) Nanabush. At the climax of this play, the female Nanabush appears as a wild parody of the Christian God the Father –the archetypally male spirit figure - in white wig and beard but women’s shoes, seated on the lavatory. It’s a very funny, outrageous, coruscating attack on the sexism which Tomson sees as being inherent in European cultures, and a re-assertion of the artistic Trickster spirit’s subversion of that gender division. And its basis is the language.

This is why it’s so important that indigenous languages should not only be protected, but positively encouraged, so that they are able to take their place in the conference of nations, and lend a genuine diversity of viewpoints which empowers dynamic and democratic exchange. There are good signs, and there are bad signs. Among the bad signs is the fact that Australia, once the home to more than 300 indigenous languages, now has only 145, of which 110 are critically endangered (which means that there are only a few remaining speakers and no intergenerational transition of the language). The Ngapartji project amongst the Pitjantjatjara has been important in ensuring the creation of an Australian government policy on indigenous languages, and let’s hope that is successful. Among the good signs is the extremely impressive resilience of Te Reo Maori – many of you heard the language spoken last night, and many more will hear it again on Sunday when we hold a powhiri on Hampstead Heath: the Maori language is able to express concepts around community and hospitality which are simply not present in global English. Closer to home, we can see in Europe the resurgence of Catalan and Basque, and the very important initiatives around Welsh and Scots Gaelic, including the work of the London Gaelic Choir and the film *Seachd* which is in the Origins programme.

When you hear people speak these languages, and perhaps even more when you hear people sing these languages, you understand instinctively that there is something more being brought into the world by their way of seeing it. Global English isn’t really the language rich in metaphor that inspired Shakespeare and Milton – that was a very malleable language that was growing all the time, while modern English, global English is actually contracting – it’s losing words as fast as the world is losing other languages. English has become primarily a language of commerce – so it’s very good at naming objects and at quantifying them – it’s very good at the tangible. What First Nations languages focus on is the intangible – on the spiritual and the metaphorical, which are areas you really have to work at in English but which are just there in First Nations languages. At a Maori powhiri, whenever somebody speaks, what they say is immediately followed by waiata – by song. So that the language of welcome shifts into the emotional and metaphorical space in which it can make something happen – in which it can bind people together.

You know - it actually is possible to revive a dead language. It happened very recently in the United States, with a young woman of the Wampanoag people, called Jessie Little Doe. Wampanoag was a very important language before the European invasion of America, but it died out towards the end of the 19th century. Jessie Little Doe, working with the linguist Ken Hale, was able to use what had been written down of the language and a complex process of comparisons with other indigenous languages, and eventually reconstructed what Wampanoag probably was. And she learnt it. And now she has a young daughter, and that little girl is the first native speaker of Wampanoag for over a century.

That’s a story about one young woman and her daughter – and the hope is, of course, that it will in time become a story which involves many more people and many more generations. It’s one small-scale example of indigenous resistance to a global monoculture occurring in the precise place where it can be most effective and far-reaching – woven into the everyday lives of people across the planet.

Language is one example of the power of the open mouth that Robert Sullivan talks about in his poem – and there’s another side to the open mouth which is also a site for indigenous resistance. Language comes out of the open mouth, and food goes in. So the Origins Festival is also looking at the place of food in First Nations cultures, and its relationship to environmentalism, just as the City of London Festival is exploring the environmental challenge. One of the big goals for the world in the 21st century is getting the culture back into agriculture, and indigenous peoples, whose relationship to land is a very intimate one, are proving really important in meeting this. In some ways the food question is very similar to the language question: the need for biodiversity and locally sourced, healthy food is just like the need for cultural diversity, and for the encouragement of healthy local languages and cultural expression. They both make the world a healthier place because the world is an ecosystem and ecosystems depend on diversity. And globalisation is threatening biodiversity and food production in much the same way as it is threatening cultural diversity and language.

During our evolution, human beings have eaten more than 80,000 different species of plant. More than 3,000 of these have been eaten consistently. Today, there are just eight crops which provide 75% of the world’s food. With genetic engineering, this is reducing even further, so that globalised agriculture is leading us towards a dependence on just three: maize, soya and canola (or rapeseed).

First Nations cultures are very important in the resistance to this drive towards the monocrop. One of the reasons for this is that a lot of the production is happening on their lands. In the Amazon, multi-national food companies, like Cargill and ADM, are burning millions of acres of rainforest in order to plant soya for export. This means that the global climate system is being very very seriously disrupted – you can imagine how much photosynthesis goes on in the Amazon – and it also means that huge numbers of indigenous people are being displaced from their lands and, with a hideous irony, are actually going hungry because they were dependent on those lands for their own food cultivation and their livings in agriculture.

In Aotearoa (New Zealand) there is an ongoing Maori resistance to genetic modification in agriculture, which Maori activists have termed “biopiracy”. There’s also a related movement of resistance to the privatization of water infrastructure: it’s pretty strange for anybody to think they can own water (or land, for that matter), and Maori culture has a sacred relationship with water that would be undermined by any commodification. Particularly interesting in terms of our food theme is the resurgence of Maori community gardens, which represent a return to traditional agricultural methods, including the creation of seed banks which are shared within and across different iwi (tribes), allowing Maori to produce their traditional foods in an affordable and sustainable way.

In the United States, there is an ongoing fight by the Ojibwe people to maintain the integrity of wild rice – the only naturally occurring grain in North America. One of the key figures in that fight is Winona LaDuke, who has written a piece in our Origins programme book, and has also been the Green Party’s Vice-Presidential candidate. One of Winona’s main points in her defence of traditional First Nations agriculture against fast food culture is that it encourages a different way of thinking about our relationship to food and the environment, which allows human beings to understand their position within the environment, our relationship to land and to nature. One of the great problems of the contemporary Western world is that we have moved so far away from producing our own food that we don’t really understand how things grow, how growth requires time and care and cultivation and interaction. And if we don’t understand these things in relation to something like food – something so close to us that we put it inside our bodies, something that literally becomes ourselves – then what chance have we got in relation to more complex and removed things, like people and societies? Globalised food production encourages us all towards thinking of food as something to be produced and consumed quickly, probably sitting in a car which we have just fuelled, fuelling ourselves as if were also machines. First Nations food production and consumption makes you think in a slower rhythm and in a longer-term perspective. So food is not just something to grab and go – food is something which is recognised as precious and significant, as something to be savoured, as something which requires a social and cultural context for its consumption. And when you think of it in those terms, when you think of it with those values – then it doesn’t just have to be something cheap and simple – it becomes something that is worth paying a just price for. Because it’s agriculture which includes culture.

Under globalisation, those of us who are part of the 10% of the world that consumes 85% of its resources don’t know where most of those resources come from. We don’t know the history attached to what we eat, what we wear, or the silicone chip in our mobile phones. We are implicated in that history, but we do not know that history. In a First Nations tradition, by way of contrast, people know the history of what goes into and what touches their bodies. They see the rice grow through the year before they harvest it. If they are going to kill a buffalo to eat its meat and to wear its hide, then they are aware that the animal is going to die for them. And so there will be a ritual, and the ritual acknowledges that there is a sacrifice involved, that life is given in order for us to eat, in order for us to be here, to go on living. And that ritual, that art, that festival, is crucial. Because once you acknowledge what it means to take life in the world, then you become much more aware of the sacrifices that have been made to bring you to where you are, to allow you this very precious life that you have, and to ask yourself what you can offer to the world in return.

And so there’s a very intimate connection between the sorts of basic life issues we’ve been talking about and the way First Nations artists and cultural workers express themselves and their cultures as a force in the contemporary world. It’s to do with that same awareness of a living history – of what has been gone through to bring us to the present moment, and how that leads to a sense of responsibility to the past, to the present and to the future. Time and again over the last few years that I’ve been working closely with indigenous artists from around the world, I’ve been deeply inspired by their awareness of standing in a much longer continuum than people from the short-termist, globalised, dominant culture. Ours is, after all, a culture of perpetual distraction, and all the time we’re looking at the Blackberry, or shifting our eyes to the billboard, or flicking channels, or zipping between windows on the computer screen. And, as a result, our gaze is very short – both literally (we’re always looking about six inches in front of our faces) and metaphorically (we find it difficult to think beyond the next mortgage payment). Compare this with, say, indigenous Australian culture, and there’s a real shock. Because indigenous Australians remain aware of 50,000 years of pretty much continuous culture, passed on from one generation of elders to the next – of an accumulated wisdom which operates in the long term. And that means that the gaze, the vision, goes very deep inside the cultural soul, so that when it comes out into the world, it’s a gaze that goes very far into the distance. And this is both literal (their eyes look across the landscape with an awareness of living in something much larger than the self) and metaphorical (they are able to think in terms of what present actions might mean for people in five or ten generations’ time).

This kind of awareness of history, of the need to acknowledge the past in order to understand the present, is central to much of the art – theatre, film, music, visual art, literature – being created by First Nations people today. And that agenda is also a very real form of resistance to globalisation – because globalisation requires the denial of history, although it will sometimes embrace “heritage”. The globalised heritage industry is about making things attractive so that you can sell them. It regards culture, and particularly indigenous culture, as a magnet for tourism. It exploits culture for its superficial, aesthetic qualities, while ignoring meaning.

This commercial approach creates a particularly strange tension in relation to indigenous Australian art, where traditionally the surface dots on a painting actually exist with the purpose of concealing something more profound, sometimes something secret, hidden beneath the surface. There’s a very lucrative global market in Aboriginal dot paintings (though the artists don’t see much of the cash), which has turned these images into decoration and ignores the cultural meanings they contain – decontextualising and sanitising them. But this tension has actually left indigenous Australian artists well-placed to use their art as an art of resistance. Because they have a tradition of meaning being in some way concealed, they have the power to subvert from within.

Let me give you an example of this. There’s a wonderful indigenous Australian artist called Fiona Foley, who I have never met, but I believe she is in the room right now and would love to talk to her afterwards! In 2004, Fiona was commissioned to create a sculpture as part of the development of Brisbane Magistrates’ Court, financed by the government of Queensland. A public work of art. The process was quite fraught, with the authorities suggesting alterations along the way. They said that a linear pattern she was proposing in the paving was problematic, because it was “reminiscent of the shape of handcuffs”. The fact that the design included a list of place names was also a concern because it “creates a memorial effect”. The client explained that its aim in commissioning art was “to promote Queensland”.

Well – that’s globalisation all over. Everything must be positive, everything must be surface, everything must have a promotional, marketing function. Perish the thought that a sculpture outside a courtroom should remind anybody of handcuffs. They might just stop to think what happens inside. And that would never do.

So, in December 2004, the sculpture was finally unveiled with the usual speeches and networking receptions. It was a circle of cast bronze lilies, emerging out of a suspended mist, with several ash-coloured columns set at the edges of a paved space – and in the paved space there were white and grey tiles engraved with place names. Fiona’s statement at the opening suggested that the work, called *Witnessing to Silence*, was a response to natural elements in the Australian landscape – fires, floods and fogs. The 94 place names were the sites of natural disasters.

Well, clearly nobody in the Queensland government bothered to go and look up the place names. A full three months later, in March 2005, in an article for *The Australian* newspaper, Fiona revealed that this surface meaning was just that – a surface – and that she had concealed another, much more powerful meaning within the work. The 94 place names were not in fact the sites of natural disasters, but the 94 places within the state of Queensland for which there is documented proof of indigenous people being massacred by settlers. The columns of ash are a reminder of the mass cremations of their bodies, and the mist and lilies memorialise those whose corpses were simply thrown into lagoons.

So this is a work of indigenous art which serves to subvert the constantly positive, sunshine-driven narrative that globalisation demands, and which instead places the hidden history of the indigenous people and their suffering right at the heart of the state’s public spaces and apparatus. You would think it would be a cause célèbre, wouldn’t you? Not a bit of it. There has been no governmental reaction to Fiona’s revelation of the piece’s true meaning that I can discover – just, as she put it in an email to me recently, “more silence”. But the sculpture is still there – it’s a permanent structure and it won’t go. And the more silence there is, the more this monument will serve to witness it.

Sometimes subversions of this kind happen through indigenous artists engaging in a dialogue with existing work from the dominant culture – appropriating or hybridising it to reveal unexpected meanings, and to stamp the indigenous presence on the global stage. Shakespeare is often a good target for this sort of treatment, because he’s become so establishment that we actually have something called a Royal Shakespeare Company in this country, and yet in fact Shakespeare was himself a bit of a Fiona Foley – he wrote for a company called the King’s Men, but the plays are incredibly subversive. This was, after all, the man who gave the most beautiful poetry in his final play, *The Tempest*, to the indigenous, colonised and enslaved figure of Caliban, who screams across the centuries that “this island’s mine”, and who tells his colonial mater that the profit of learning his language is that he knows how to curse.

Another of Shakespeare’s magical comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, has proved to be a powerful site for indigenous resistance. Noel Tovey, who is presenting his solo performance *Little Black Bastard* at Origins later this week, directed an indigenous production of the play for the Sydney Cultural Olympiad, and Kelvin Mockingbird, our Navajo flute player, worked with me on the play a couple of years ago at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival, on the border between Nevada and California. Both of these productions saw the relationship between the spirituality and the land as absolutely central, and so drew out the environmental ideas in the play, as well as its Trickster element. It’s actually a play which makes a lot more sense when there’s an indigenous world for the fairies to inhabit – Puck is an indigenous spirit to these islands, but everybody has forgotten about him, so an indigenous actor is needed to bridge the gap.

But for me, what was particularly inspiring about working on this play in the open air theatre at Lake Tahoe was the way it allowed us to form links with the Washoe people, the traditional custodians of those lands, to whom the lake is sacred. In particular, we got to know Art George, who is an elder and an activist among the Washoe. It was Art who gave me this stone, which comes from the lake, and the hole in it is natural. He told me he had kept it for a long time, but wanted me to have it because if I was working with the spirit of that place, I needed to carry something of the land with me. And so I wear it whenever I am working with indigenous cultures, and it has served me well.

The play, as you may know, ends with the fairies coming into the house of Theseus (which is also the theatre) to bless the three newly-wed couples and the place itself. In our production, this became what is called a smudging ceremony, using smoke from sage and sweetgrass to cleanse the theatre itself and the people there. Puck spoke his Epilogue, Kelvin played his flute, and then Art himself spoke from the stage, in the Washoe language, pronouncing a traditional blessing on the audience and the land. It wasn’t until after the first performance that he told me this was the first time those sacred words had been spoken on the sacred lands of the Washoe nation in more than a hundred years. And then he smiled at me and said: “You see – we are coming back”.

Land, the spirit of place, the specific relationship between human beings and their environment is very basic to indigenous cultures all across the world. It’s because this relationship is so deep, so enduring, so fundamental, that colonialism – the dispossession from the land - left such a deep wound, that the need for healing is so intense. And in the 21st century, we have an opportunity to engage with that healing process, because there are examples of Truth and Reconciliation operating across the world, whether that’s in formal surroundings like the commissions in South Africa and Northern Ireland, or in the meetings that can be engendered through cultural activity, like the productions I’ve been discussing, or indeed these festivals here in London. There have been deeply significant public statements of atonement, perhaps most importantly Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology for the crimes against the Stolen Generation.

And yet… and yet….

However much genuine desire there may be for reconciliation with the First Peoples of the planet, and however much cultural work goes on to facilitate that, the relentless drive of economic imperialism and global capital continues to appropriate their lands, to pillage those lands of their resources, and to damage irrevocably the ecosystems of which they rightly regard themselves as the custodians.

The globalised economy is insanely hungry to consume resources, and the sacred lands of indigenous peoples are very wealthy. West Papua, for example, boasts the Freeport mining operation, which is the world’s second largest copper mine, and the world’s largest known gold deposit. The region around this mine is closed off to outsiders, and last year there was a spate of shootings there, believed by many to be linked with the Indonesian military’s suppression of the independence struggle. The vast waste deposits of the mine are making river water toxic, destroying fertile lands to the extent that the Komoro people have been forced to stop consuming sago, their staple food.

In North America, the Anishinaabe (or Ojibwe) people are fighting to defend their sacred site at Eagle Rock on the shores on Lake Superior against planned blasting in pursuit of nickel and copper. In Western Sahara there is mining for phosphates, which means that multinational companies have a stake in maintaining the illegal occupation; and in the Arctic the melting of the ice-cap means that there is a run of prospecting for oil, gas and mineral deposits, directly affecting the lives of the people who live there and the health of their environment.

All of these examples – and many, many more – are directly linked to London as a financial centre. The examples I have given all involve the Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, which has its headquarters here, either directly – it’s Rio Tinto which wants to blast at Eagle Rock – or indirectly, for example through its huge holding in the Freeport mine. I don’t want to deny that Rio Tinto has actually been involved in some very important and positive initiatives in recent years – it has an Aboriginal fund which has contributed to important cultural projects like the Dreaming Festival, and to community regeneration projects in the Kimberleys. Prof. Marcia Langton, an Aboriginal academic for whom I have huge respect, and who has written the key essay in our programme book, has sat on the board of that fund – and Rio Tinto has sponsored the current, very good, exhibition of Australian history and culture at the British Museum… so there are definitely two sides to the question…. But it seems to me that the Public Relations initiatives of a corporation, however valid in themselves, lose credibility if they do not reflect the wider culture of that corporation, and that is what’s happening here. The way in which First Nations are being treated by the multinationals in the mining and food sectors is morally indefensible – they take positive actions on the surface, so as to present a good image to the world, while simultaneously continuing the processes of dispossession, violent repression, and wanton environmental destruction.

Well, tonight we are in the City of London, and this talk is part of the City of London Festival, so there is the possibility that somebody could be listening who really is in a position to do something about this, and if you are, then you must. The City needs to understand the moral obligations towards First Nations which arise from its history – from the very source of its enormous wealth. It needs to understand its responsibility towards the future, which First Nations people constantly emphasise in their stress on the need to care for the environment. It needs to disinvest from corporations which are involved with the destruction of the environment, the displacement of indigenous peoples, the support of illegal and repressive neo-colonial regimes, and the contamination of the global food supply.

Until the dominant global culture of which we are a part meets those obligations which the past, the present and the future all place upon us, then there will continue to be a need for the indigenous voice to be a voice of protest – because that protest is necessary for the very highest stakes: the survival of the First Nations of the planet, and indeed the survival of the human race itself.

my poetry is a fire –

if I close my mouth I will die.

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About the Speaker

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(28 June – 9 July 2011).  He has directed theatre and opera all over the world; most recently *Re-Orientations*, in London, China and Sweden.  Michael is also Visiting Professor at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance.