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THIS TEXT’S TERRITORY

I do theology from a seaport city whose colonial name has reinscribed (with scars) the coastlines, cedar backwoods, and laminous outcrops that comprise the stolen territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. Where I am from—and this matters—it is protocol to acknowledge territory. Borders are alien to the Coast Salish peoples. When paths cross, the porosity of Indigenous territory is worked out in responsibilities to webs of relation that include human and nonhuman persons as kin, ancestors, and spirit-beings. But borders are by now routine, too. In the always-aftermath of colonial pressures, Indigenous peoples inhabit territory simultaneously as borderless networks of relation and as lands scored over by what boundary-makings come with Western intellectual and political institutions. If there is an “about” to this text that I can land on without pages of slow-going grounding, it might be to ask, how do I do theology here? Satellite questions like what is theology? and why do it? will necessarily get airtime, too. If territory can name two or more irreconcilable worlds in a singular place, then “theology” can surely specify storying practices that attend to the relentless abstractions in which Western knowledge trajectories are made to universally contour who or what can make a world, what counts as a subject or person, and what counts as an object of fidelity. Participating in territorial protocols as a trespasser on Indigenous lands opens my theological work to a snare of obligations. I am responsible to Indigenous peoples and their languages, stories, land-based technical-ceremonial practices, and systems of governance as well as to the plants, animals, waters, landforms, and other geologic and meteorologic processes co-present here.

To start from where I am, then, is not to enlist the local as an uncomplicated set of relations to think from, as if an easy “somewhere” precedes the relationships in which a place is made. Each name that concatenates where I live (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada) is a knotting of imperial mobilities, colonial occupations, political frictions, civilizing and extractive practices, and precarities that upend the vulnerable ecologies of everyday existence. Also fraught is the question, where are you from? My given and family names hold echoes of centuries of violence to Indigenous lands, only sometimes interrupted by acts of resistance and care. Acknowledging territory as a non-Indigenous theorist means mapping over and again the ways in which I am always being made and remade as capable of standing here in and through the planetwide asymmetries at play in pasts and presents of dispossession and displacement. It means putting into practice attentuinations of an always-reenabled colonial thinking, reading, and writing subject. I work at an anticolonial theory-making practice by foregrounding the work of Indigenous theorists and activists; lifting up urban and diasporic Indigenous insights; and taking notice of regenerative place-based practices that press on in the absence of territorial access.

Where I live, territory is a verb. When spoken by Indigenous peoples, colonially-imposed words like “sovereignty” or “self-determination” do not stake out exclusions. Instead, Indigenous sovereignties coalesces into forms of intellectual and political governance through story and ceremony. The retelling of ever-evolving millennia-old

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2 In institutional practices, here inevitably varies. An early version of this introduction was presented (in the shape of a conference paper) on the stolen land of the Lenape peoples who were forcibly relocated to Indian Territory in the 1860s under the Indian Removal Act. Mathew Arthur, “Path Dependence: Affect, Practice, and Indigenous Self-Determination,” (paper presented at Affectivity and Divinity: Fifteenth Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium, Madison, New Jersey, 2016).
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stories strings together (and enacts) responsibilities in lived relationships to the material and immaterial constituents of place. The storied and storying performance of ceremonies provokes human participation in the renewal of land in Earth-processes. There are examples of territorial dispute, yes, and even violence—but I want to foreground the intent of sovereignty as I understand it through the words of Indigenous theorists. Of course, saying “Indigenous sovereignties” risks collapsing the ranginess of variously-situated Indigenous multispecies diplomacies into an abstraction that meets Western demands for coherence and knowability. Something of a common thread, however, runs through critical Indigenous studies where the governance of difference is at stake. Writing from British Columbia’s public research university on Musqueam territory, Cherokee theorist Daniel Heath Justice describes sovereignty as the ongoing recognition and negotiation of kinship responsibilities among peoples: relational entanglements in which humans, animal people, plant people, spirit-beings, and elemental forces make nations together in processes of maintaining balance between heterogeneous peoples and their realities.5

Similarly, Ahousaht hereditary chief Richard Atleo’s sketch of Nuu-chah-nulth multispecies diplomacy brings together three constitutional principles: recognition, consent, and continuity.6 While sovereignties necessarily vary between peoples and places, Atleo’s rubric gets at the place-based logic that informs Indigenous governance across territories. Nuu-chah-nulth law recognizes radically interdependent processes of individuation as constitutive of reality through protocols for consensual multispecies interactions that honour the diverse needs of ever-changing forms of existence; continuity of life and nonlife is the measure of what works in a place.7 Nuu-chah-nulth sovereignty, as such, is communicated through stories that are continually tested against the principles of recognition, consent, and continuity in a set of transformative research practices which Atleo identifies as ?uusum? or “careful seeking.” A person who seeks knowledge in ?uusum? is “one who works on self.” The findings of personal work are collaboratively negotiated as good (or not) in a wider community of entangled humans and nonhumans. In Nuu-chah-nulth knowledge-acquisition practices it is considered unconstitutional for one person or form of existence to make decisions on behalf of another.8 For Nuu-chah-nulth-ah, the logic of recognition, consent, and continuity is embedded in stories and ceremonies. But what works in the complexities of one weave of relationships cannot be transposed or scaled up to an anywhere or in general. A place always being created cannot be made to stand still long enough to be known, named, or owned in perpetuity. Stories and their lessons must always be relearned and retold. What might look like ownership on the part of the hawll or hereditary chiefs of Nuu-chah-nulth is the ongoing exercise of maintaining ecological balance as a form of governance. Humans, alongside what we might call the cultural or the political, are not separate from Earth-processes.9

Indigenous sovereignties, as such, do not stake out fixed territories—whether on the land or in projects of knowing. By Western standards they are markedly nonsovereign. (Which is not to say that land claim negotiations should take territory-as-relation to be nonsovereign in the context of ongoing dispossession.)10 Sovereign or otherwise, the point I am making is that in Atleo’s constitution and other critical Indigenous takes on sovereignty, earthly territories and territories of thought are comprised of practices that fuse ontology and epistemology in relational empiricisms that arouse an ethical proposal. Broadly stated, in such alters sovereignties, the governance of difference between heterogeneous beings and knowings is not founded on abstract rights that rely on the segregating and containing concepts of Western philosophy and science like nature or the human. Instead, governance unfolds in kinship responsibilities to the co-inhabitants of place always being made together in living and nonliving processes.11 “Sovereignty,” it seems, is a word too narrow to grasp the intra-impingements of spirituality, philosophy, natural science, and

6 Ahousaht is one of fourteen Nuu-chah-nulth nations whose territory is on the coast of what is now called Vancouver Island.
10 As was the case in Supreme Court of Canada, Delgamuukw v British Columbia Supreme Court Judgments (1997); British Columbia Supreme Court, British Columbia and Delgamuukw, Reasons for Judgment of the Honourable Chief Justice Alan McEachem (Victoria: Supreme Court of British Columbia, 1991), 31.
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diplomacy in place-based, relational-empirical Indigenous practices. Learning to
encounter sovereignty as a practice of maintaining recognition, consent, and continuity in
relationships in which beings and knowings are always being co-made entails asking
whether the sovereignties reproduced in Western practices—including theology—are
good for where I am. I am not circling around jurisprudence or geopolitics. Instead, I am
acknowledging Indigenous territory as a place where otherwise worlds persist, despite the
power of theologically-inflected religious, scientific, and political sovereignties of thought
(and their institutionalizations of practice ranging from language to “laboratory life”) to
circumscribe the realm of what can be—and be known—in and as collective life.

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

In the coming into coherence of subjects and shared worlds (or peoples—including nonhumans—and their territories), theology is not easily disentangled from Christian-colonial histories of practice that reproduce segregations of humans from nature. I want to volunteer a definition of theology that catches the dilemma of which sovereignties should be made in the place where I am. As I see it, the relations held together in theological storytelling practices enact theologians and religious practitioners as subjects with shared worlds. These practices make-capable or curb response to the inhabitants of incommensurable other worlds. The trick is to say “theology” knowing that even a name can disappear worlds being made. This is a definition: theology is everything and nothing incommensurable other worlds. The trick is to say: theology specifies a mode of storytelling about what subjects and worlds are and can do. It enables, within the workings of this mode, a repertoire of ways of responding to earthly life and nonlife primed by what has been made-available to respond to.

My understanding of theology and its object as a subject- and world-making force relies on the performativity of matter and meaning: the idea that words matter—are material and configure materialities. Thinking this way swaps out questions of correspondence between stories and worlds (representationalism) in favour of attending to what is being done or practiced by humans and nonhumans. In thinking through practice, am I describing religious studies or anthropologies of religion? I refuse to etch a line between theology and religion. Instead, I locate the modern concept of religion as specific to the already theologically-informed classificatory efforts of nineteenth-century colonial expansion. As Timothy Fitzgerald asserts, the colonial invention of religion as common to all peoples in the form of non-political and often private practices allowed the otherworldly (or anything incommensurable with a Western conception of world) to be there can be no theology in general. Practices called “theology”—philosophical, contextual, political, or processual—are not immune to the doings of religion, science, or politics. Conceptual objects and methods or sensibilities (with theological pasts) are shared across knowledge spaces. Like other sciences, theology is a set of historically contingent reality-storying practices that pattern and are patterned by worldly relations.

Thology, like other sciences, is not fluent in making situated accounts of how its own practices come to be. Here, I can be rightly accused of calling for anthropologies of theology in place of theological anthropologies. As practice, theology implicates both the institutional and the everyday in habits of reading, writing, or teaching—but also sensing, lingering or turning away, and living out good, bads, and indifferences together. Which is
to say: theology specifies a mode of storytelling about what subjects and worlds are and can do. It enables, within the workings of this mode, a repertoire of ways of responding to earthly life and nonlife primed by what has been made-available to respond to.

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explained in terms of cultural difference. In this way, religion made possible a this-worldly public secularism in which nature and culture could be defined—and controlled—by Western sciences. After all, it was in relegating religion to the field of culture that colonial ethnographers were able to story Indigenous governance practices as animism and, in appeals to a singular and verifiable nature, story animist worlds as fiction. I am an uneasy theologian. I inherited the obligation of theology as a fact of standing on Indigenous territory, through what practices—collectively called Christian—enacted doctrines of discovery, manifest destinies, and their missionary endeavours, including Indian residential schools. I am stuck with theology because I inherited its permissivities and foreclosures in practice as beings built into (and excluded from) bodies of knowledge and the modes of encounter such exclusionary inclusions condition. I am forced to wrestle with theology because monotheist theologians at large (alongside other scientists) are unyielding to the idea that plants, animals, rivers, and stones might be persons, too. Meanwhile, all around me territories are caught up in extractions, extinction events, and other anthropogenic disasters. On stolen Indigenous lands, as a beneficiary of land theft, dishonoured treaties, and extractive-industrial projects, I want to ask, how can I do theology from territory in a crowd of entangled human and nonhuman witnesses? “Stolen” comes off strong, but it gains weight in attending to how material and conceptual borders have been made and are maintained in practices called “theology.”

The burden of this text, then, and what might count as its topic is to pace theology through any responsibilities that might arise by way of belonging to a place where Indigenous sovereignties have been storied as animism. For all of the work that has been done to empty ontology and epistemology of theological presence (first in poststructural Indigenous sovereignties have been storied as animism. For all of the work that has been made and are maintained in practices called “theology.”

I want to suggest that the task of theology is, unquestionably, to make space, to become small or withdraw. But its task is also to propagate better worlds populated with beings and knowings so far alien to theology. To do situated theology as a non-Indigenous theologian on Indigenous territory is to remain accountable in theological reality-storying projects; to emphasize theology’s speculative mode in practices that make accountable equivocations between humans and nonhumans across Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds; and to practice decolonization as an enabling of Indigenous futures.

What is a story other than a set of relations being made-stable or reproduced? Stories are the glue between words and worldly phenomena; between pasts, presents, places, and futures; between rememberings and fabulations, and between what relations we might call, as a shorthand, humans and nonhumans. In this text, written emphatically from a place where Christian-colonial realities are in play and being done and redone as singular and fixed, I want to hold on to Donna Haraway’s caution: “it matters what relations relate relations.” As a measure of accountability I have landed on animism. Animism is a loose classification in the anthropology of religion that labours to collapse the practices of Indigenous peoples planetwide into a belief system that perceives living and nonliving phenomena as persons. It throws light on what sets of relation have been excluded in the way Western thinkers have disincluded nonhumans when relating (and relating to) indigenely and its place-based worldings. In everyday use, the word animism carries with it more than a century of relentless infantilizing as the pretext for dispossession on every front: territories, governance practices, languages, stories, and kin and models of kinship.

Animism does not designate Indigenous belief. Rather, it serves as troubling reminder of the violence of saying once and for all what can exist and which forms of existence matter in a place. To say “animism” of Indigenous governance practices is to make a claim about the way the world really is: absent of nonhuman people who might comprise, alongside humans, the realms of culture and politics. In its most capacious sense as a conceptual object into which Indigenous lifeways might be sorted, animism also

demands that non-Western practices conform to Western categories like religion, politics, or science even as the explanatory powers of theology, philosophy, and natural and social sciences have been invoked to debunk the worlds animism fails to describe. Yes, there are better names for what animism cannot grasp. For example, Anishinaabe and Mohawk theorist Vanessa Watts describes the intimacy of ontology and epistemology in Indigenous land practices and forms of governance as “place-thought.” She describes the entanglements of place and its human and nonhuman constituents as “territory” premised on the affirmation that land is “alive and thinking.” Or, working between contemporary Western scientific understandings of matter as agential and Indigenous conceptions of matter as spirited and in “constant flux,” Niitsitapi theorist and education activist Leroy Little Bear describes the inter-impingements of spirituality, philosophy, and kin-centred politics in Indigenous practice as “native science.”

But I want to stick with animism and all its mistranslations so that I might tend to what is risked when animate worlds surface in texts through predominantly Western institutional forms or genres, economies of publishing and publicity, and citational architectures. It is not enough to recalibrate methods and metaphysics, focusing on processes or events as process, weak, or negative theologies do. Yes, these efforts affirm a more generous sense of who or what counts in making a world. But they do so without a thoroughgoing appraisal of the ways in which systematic theological ontologies of process and poststructural epistemologies (both scaffolded by Western conceptual genealogies) are deemed admissible by the institutions of colonial sovereignty—the state, the academy, the seminary—while Indigenous frameworks characterized as animism are most often ignored. I want to stay with animism, then, as a practice of what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble”: attending to the messy, sometimes violent, and probably irreparable effects of what has already been done without recourse to the erasures and escapist utopias. Staying with the trouble is a multispecies practice of keeping on together in a place while working at projects of partial recuperation in always-flawed, always-culpable translations across difference. My hope is that “animism,” a colonial word, can point toward worlds that cannot be made comprehensible by a theology (or any other science) that always has the first and last word on what shores up existence. To be an animist, theoretically, is to grasp at an otherwise without ever forgetting the violence of monotheism’s claim on the world. It is to simultaneously attend to and resist the making-singular of worlds.

I am not attempting to outline a practical, political, or public theology. All theology is located, even when done as if it were in general. Theology is necessarily political and anticipates what counts-in-common as good. Here, I want to suggest an ontological and epistemological politics of doing theology that takes seriously the ways in which even process and weak theologies and their always-refurbishing of monotheism as immanence preclude the nonsovereignty that “animism” tries to describe: Indigenous sovereignties of territory as multispecies kinship obligations in which nature and culture are continuous and everything gets to be a person. As Indigenous peoples put their bodies on the line to exercise responsibilities to beings irreducible to the immanence of vitalist philosophy or process theology and unapprehendable within the logics of Western natural and social sciences, this text is a first hack at learning how to tell better stories, where better is a practice of recognizing both interconnectedness and individuation; working at interspecies consent through empirical practices of noticing differential need; and cultivating an ethic of multispecies continuity in the place where I am. (Even if here is not as simple as what is proximate and is made-alongside bodies, knowledges, and other doings that make up a multiply-worlded planet.

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II. SOVEREIGNTIES

RISKY EXISTINGS

The year I was born, Canada’s federal government enshrined existing Indigenous rights in Section 35 of the Constitution—a document which starts in assent to the "supremacy of God." The opening line is a tell: sovereignty implicates theology. Any ontological indeterminacies that crop up in the governance of difference will have to answer to the supremacy of a colonial reality-structuring force. Accordingly, the word "existing" in the Constitution Act, 1982 has proven itself slippery, requiring new interpretive frameworks to establish which rights predate the act and calling into question whether the pre-act legislative context prevented some rights from being exercised such that they could not be recognized as preexisting at all. The question of existing rights, however, is not merely a matter of dredging up historical record and putting its accuracy (or inaccuracy) on trial. On stolen Indigenous territory, what can exist hangs on other ontologically and epistemologically loaded questions. These questions and their answerings are tethered to what agencies are impossibilized in the living out of Christian origin stories and theological anthropologies, Enlightenment-era concepts of property, and the colonial principle of terra nullius or empty land. What worlds and ways of knowing are risked when territorial sovereignty means the pursuit of individual rights and absolute right to property as awarded by a Constitution that, from its start, decided such personal and territorial border-makings?  

In a now-famous 1984 land title case, for example, the British Columbian judiciary accepted the Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en peoples’ matrilineal oral histories as evidence of existing land tenure. But as hereditary chiefs Gisday Wa and Delgam Uukw explain, adaawk and kungax—the stories that encode and enact Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en laws, jurisdictions, and house and clan histories are more than oral record. Adaawk and kungax stories in the form of songs, house poles, ceremonial objects, and regalia are tied to the relations that make up territory. Such stories demonstrate jurisdiction in the form of kinship responsibilities to an “interacting continuum” of Earth-beings including plants, fish and other animals, waters, and landforms. Despite heterogeneous material morphologies, each material expression or form belonging to the continuum—whether human or salmon—shares a common spirit and is taken to be a person and political constituent.  

In the end, the Indigenous nations’ claim to existing rights was deemed unreliable by the judiciary on the grounds that Indigenous notions of collective existence (and what existsents such collectivities include) occupy a “much lower, even primitive order.” In diagnosing Indigenous sovereignty practices as primitivism, the ruling recalls the early days of anthropology. Even as adaawk and kungax were asked to authorize land use, the court evaluated this evidence in terms of already-anthropocentric juridical forms. This mismatch makes evident the hazards of working between Western and Indigenous worlds and suggests that, where some stories and not others are called on to make sense of a world, sovereignties are at stake.  

If stories and sovereignties are entangled, what borders or porosities are our stories about earthly relations making? While the histories of practice that make up the edges of a place do not nest evenly into placeholders, I rely on a crude divvying up of stories—multiple into categories of colonial and Indigenous. There are more than two ways to think

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1 Government of Canada (Legislative Services Branch), Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada, Section 35, Part II of the Constitution Act, 1982.
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sovereignty, of course. But I want to put pressure on another set of fiercely policed borders that work together to render Indigenous territory-as-relation as belonging to an altogether impossible world. First, I interrogate the theologically-informed concept of personhood as it wrests culture from nature and segregates human from nonhuman. Second, I suggest that the quarantining of spirit from matter fixes nature as material; materiality as scientifically verifiable; and culture as the location of contestable immaterialities understood as mere belief. There are, of course, innumerable more material and conceptual borders maintained by sovereign power (real or imagined), too.

WHO GETS TO BE A PERSON?

Other than Canadian Constitutional appeals to the supremacy of God, what does doing theology have to do with Indigenous altersovereignty? My answer hangs, in part, on what worldly or otherworldly sovereignties of personhood (as exclusive of nonhumans) theological anthropologies maintain at the expense of other, more expansive, personhood-stories. Retelling a Nuu-chah-nulth creation story, for example, Richard Atleo introduces Son of Mucus, a spirit-being sent to Ahous by K'aawuuc, Owner of Reality as an agent of change. Anticipating Son of Mucus, the people began to fashion weapons in order that they might resist. Undeterred, Son of Mucus playfully reworked each person’s weapon: Deer-person’s knives became antlers, Racoon-person’s club became a tail, and so on. For Nuu-chah-nulth-ht aht who retell transformation stories and ongoingly relearn the teachings such stories provoke, perceptible material differences (between human and deer, for example) are only consequential to sovereignty insofar as they guide interspecies diplomacies according to the always-changing needs each material “form” enjoins. Because K’aawuuc is reified in the individuations of all creation, all forms of life share the same spirit and all are quu?as, persons with whom diplomacies must be practiced for better or worse. Recognition of both shared personhood and bio- and geomorphological difference forms the groundwork of a sovereignty that sees the cultivation of diplomacy practices between entangled individuations as integral to Earth’s regeneration.

In mainstream theological, philosophical, political, and legal use, however, person is inseparable from human. As sociologist-anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote only decades ago, the Western concept of personhood is “still basically the Christian one.” In its Western incarnation, personhood is inseparable from the emergence of Christianity in the context of Jewish monotheism and Greek metaphysics, heresies and orthodoxy-makings in the early church and post-Reformation, the uptake of Enlightenment-era philosophical theologies, and the imperial and colonial expansions of the Christian West and its ideas. (My use of Western throughout this text is a placeholder related to this trajectory.) In everyday use, saying “person” knots together centuries of practice. Two millennia back, Tertullian borrowed persona from its Roman juridical use (a technical term already on loan from Greek theatre, on loan from the Etruscans, and so on) in an orthodoxy-making move to distinguish the three persons of the Trinity. Despite its hitherto shifting meanings, person was now to be made-orthodox, too. Less than three centuries later Boethius, in the midst of still-ongoing trinitarian schisms, put forward what counts today as a person in mainstream Western philosophy, jurisprudence, and political and economic theory: individual substance of a rational nature. Inevitably, over a few thousand years person has been bodied with other ideas. In post-Reformation thought, the person—now capable of a one-on-one relationship with God—came to have its own individual destiny separate

7 Ahous is a Nuu-chah-nulth place-name that predates contact. Atleo, Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis, 181 n. 2.
8 Atleo, Tsawalk: A Nuu-Chah-Nulth Worldview, 25, 59-64; Atleo, Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis, xii.
11 John Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 27–49; William Edmund Bunting Ball, St. Paul and the Roman Law and Other Studies on the Origin of the Form of Doctrine (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901), 78.
12 Or, naturae rationalis individua substantia. Severinus Boethius, De Persona et Duabus Naturis, 1342, ii, iii, in P.L., LXIV.
from the relational entanglements in which persons are made. And, against the backdrop of Enlightenment anxieties around life after death, personhood took on a cognitive dimension in the work of John Locke. Locke refused the Cartesian identification of personhood with soul in favour of mind. Now, personhood (and immortality) would be the estate of a self-conscious human self. In Kant’s metaphysics, personhood hardened into an ethical category with moral status: that which is responsible for its own acts in the here and now as relates to the ever-after. (He held human immortality to be a necessary condition of articulating the good.) Then, in the Christian-colonial beginnings of modern capitalism, moral philosophy had it that any person could act as an agent of economic activity—estranged from the living and nonliving economies of Earth. Having meant many things, saying “person” in the wake of the West almost certainly centres humans and their cognitive (including linguistic) and moral capacities.

More recently, theologians heir to anthropocentric Western-theological knowledge practices have been working to rehabilitate personhood as central to a relational ontology. New trinitarian theologies begin with the social nature of God as three persons ongoingly self-emptying to make space for each other and extend this sense of interconnectedness and flux to humans and nonhumans alike. Like other process philosophies and theologies, social trinitarianism is built on the dynamic nature of being and identifies reality with change. While contemporary relational theologians stop short of calling nonhumans “persons,” their ontological wranglings jive with those of process philosophers, like Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, who venture riskier names for worldly relations. For Whitehead, whose philosophy of the organism is central to process theology, what relational collectivities are “temporal and continuous in process” can be termed “personal” (he gives dogs as an example). Deleuze allows that “all objects = x are ‘persons’” where person is defined synthetically—in the syntactic sense of gathering-up relationships—by predicates open to “different worlds and individualities.” I want to linger on Deleuze’s “predicates.” His understanding of the relationship of subjects to verbs has something to say about personhoods and sovereignty-makings that troubles the ahistoricity and rhetorical-stylistical universality of relational theologies and process and vitalist theories. Language, Deleuze writes, “merges now with that which renders it possible.” That which language arises from, then, is already conditioned by and is continuous with what has come before—including language. Language ongoingly belongs to and shapes Earth-processes.

To say human-only personhood is one way of telling a story and requires sustained conceptual work is not to ask that individuals be absorbed into some murky whole and it is not to downplay morphological or species difference. Crucially, it is not an authorization of process and vitalist theologies and theories. I suspect that even stories about processual gods, worlds, and persons maintain hierarchies (including refusals) of agency, even if only by way of what protagonists are figured over and again and in what supporting stories and histories of thought are invoked in retelling. Doubtless, the concepts and storying practices of Western process thought have enabled my own thinking, including entanglement as the

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16 Williams, The Long Revolution, 91–92.
20 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 185.
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intralocker of matter and meaning in theoretical physics; co-evolution (symbiogenesis) in biology; symbiotic-emergent “becomings” in philosophy; and process theology as an “originate engagement of physics and evolutionary biology.”22 But doubtless, too, the availability of such concepts and storytelling practices has much to do with the colonial subalternation of Indigenous knowledges. While the terms of theory and theology are often recalibrated in sovereignty-disrupting moves that unsettle self-contained individuals and singular worlds, a shift in whose beings and knowings count does not necessarily follow. In theory-making even nonsovereignties of thought enact a kind of authority in their methodological allegiance to Western language registers, writing conventions, citational practices, and conceptual objects when they gain traction in a place by outperforming the possibility of Indigenous worlds (including nonhuman persons whose workings are less abstract and theoretically proprietary than “process”). To recognize that stories of other-than-human personhood live on in spite of colonial theological-anthropological and philosophical institutions is to affirm, alongside Indigenous peoples, that radically abstract and theoretically proprietary than “process”). To recognize that stories of other-than-human personhood live on in spite of colonial theological-anthropological and philosophical institutions is to affirm, alongside Indigenous peoples, that radically interconnected Earth-processes of individuation superabound. It is to recognize that being, knowing, and doing amidst always-different difference is relentlessly political.

Other peoples’ persons are different and do not correspond to Western theological anthropology. This is not lost on contemporary anthropological theory. Marilyn Strathern, one example of many, has challenged the prevalence of person as a singular and self-contained way of thinking bodies which are, in her take, accretions of relations that are always also relationally embedded.23 It is by now commonplace in cultural anthropology to bump into other kinds of persons. Moreover, the current state of animism in anthropology can be summed up in the question, who gets to be a person?24 To Indigenous theorists and knowledge-keepers, however, concepts of nonhuman personhood are more than a way of parcelling out reality into entities that somehow enliven the incompatibility of colonial and Indigenous worlds as a site of theoretical interest for non-Indigenous anthropologists. Rather, Indigenous personhoods point to sovereignties so differently-enthroned from the makings-impenetrable of mainstream Western ontologies and ways of knowing that they remain incomprehensible to normative secular-scientific worlds. It is easy enough to say, anthropologically, that differing conceptions of personhood are in play—or even that otherwise worlds might exist. Less easy, however, is the task of responding to what existing might mean in a Constitution that affirms “existing aboriginal and treaty rights”25 in the face of a counter-sovereignty whose territory—as relationships between human and nonhuman persons—cannot be recognized as constitutive of the real. To take on sovereignty as the authority to sanction what can be known to exist is not simply to offer up a new story, a new theory or theology. It is, instead, to attend to the specificity of already-existing stories in a place and to what existings they gather up in or as sovereign territory.

SPIRITED MATTER

I was born on the stolen territory of the Syilx people, a transboundary Indigenous nation crosscut by the American-Canadian border, in Kelowna—a city once called Bay of Sand by the Oblate missionaries who settled the region in the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike their Protestant counterparts in the task of assimilating Indigenous life, the Oblates maintained the potential of any person or object to function as a site of transcendence. Despite their incarnational bent, however, the Oblates (like the Protestants) were bent on policing the borderlines of spirit and matter. They sought the elimination of animist stories that would blur material and spiritual phenomena in the attribution of personhood—

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entailing, to some degree or another, ensoulement or mentality—to bear, sockeye, bitterroot, or saskatoon berry. Writing about what it means to be called Syilx, Okanagan Syilx activist and poet Jeanette Armstrong says “everything we see is a spirit.” The ability to see or sense depends on the physical body—called sqilxʷ. And the body, Armstrong explains, depends on everything else, all the other constituents of a world that are “beyond the skin.” Body is what surface holds together capacities in human or nonhuman form. Extending the Syilx concept of body, spirit and matter are bound up in the Nsylxecn word sqilxʷ (person) which evokes a material surface wrapped around an unseen body-exceeding force. That which exceeds the body is both the lifeforce that permeates nature as a system of regenerative relations and any individual other lifeform as a “relative in a system of relatives.” All the land’s persons and their capacities to keep on in a place over time, from humans to the weathered boulders and freshwater molluscs whose worn-down sediments and shells make up a bay of sand, are individually and collectively tmixʷ or lifeforce-persons.

In Nsylxecn language and other Syilx practices, person is not conceptually rooted in beings-human or -divine. To be a person is to have spirit and inhabit material form. Having gills to extract oxygen from water does not exclude fish from being lifeforce-containing material forms as persons. Likewise, having a specific form or capacity does not set humans apart from the rest of a world’s persons. As stt̓sqilxʷ, the “ones who are torn away from the land,” humans are a new people not bound by the laws of the older lifeforce-persons—who have been meeting for much longer—and must learn always-anew how to become persons brought into the balance of life in a place (including nonlife). Lifeforce-persons are related to sovereignty as intrinsic to Syilx articulations of territory. They are implicated in boundary-making practices. But when person and place are made-distinct either philosophically or in practices of living, humans are detached from territory-as-relation such that they become n̓inaqsqilxʷtn or “consumers-of-people.” When spirit and matter are detached in religious anti-materialisms and secular-scientific realisms, how are we to make sense of a word like tmixʷulaxʷ: territory as the sum of human and nonhuman persons who share the same spirit?

I take seriously the words of Syilx knowledge-keeper John Kruger: “we are our stories.” As Armstrong explains, Syilx stories or captikwil encode ecological knowledge and reenact the interdependent interactions of natural phenomena including the doings that make human, plant, and animal persons. The continued retelling of Syilx stories provokes care for all land-animating lifeforms and nonlifeforms and iteratively participates in the land’s ongoing regeneration. Syilx stories are plastic and shapeshift forward through time as each storyteller “carries the knowledge forward to ignite a new fire.” Like captikwil, biblical and other theological stories are born of land and its inhabitants; they capture and respond to the particulars of a time and place. When storying practices are not understood to relate to Earth’s regeneration, however, the data of theology remain dangerously abstracted from the specificities of place. And while the panentheisms of process and ecotheologies are compatible with many Indigenous philosophical framings—called “animism” by Western interlocutors, I am inclined to side with Gayatri Spivak in saying, “the name of theology is alien to this thinking.” I disagree with process theologian Catherine Keller, who counters that Spivak has not looked hard enough for Christian-Indigenous syncretisms and has overlooked what animisms have been realized in North American ecotheologies. It is not enough to affirm spirit and locate it in a world stripped of the histories and politics of

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29 Ibid., 257, 323.

30 Ibid., 262.


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personhoods—multiple. To say what counts as a person and stipulate the intimacies or estrangements and inter- or intra-workings of spirit and matter is to always make an exclusion, to push one story at the expense of others. Pointing at whatever hybridities survive in the aftermath does not afford theology any clean break from the past. Whatever is being done by Indigenous peoples in the wake of Christian-colonial violence cannot be claimed as animist-theological syncretism. To story survival as such is to deny Indigenous sovereignty while misunderstanding the why and how of its porosity.

REWORKING SOVEREIGNTY

As Bruno Latour has it, sovereignty is promiscuous—it is not merely the estate of political and legal theory or brute geopolitics, but of everything. Sovereignty, he suggests, comes into play whenever any entity (whether a nation-state, organism, or atom) is defined as distinct and located as belonging to a particular “chunk of space.”36 In the West, the logic used to localize entities is impenetrability. Impenetrabilities, Latour points out, are parts that interact with other parts to make wholes. What does this have to do with sovereignty? Where there are wholes there must be someone or something assembling parts.38 At this point in Latour’s take on sovereignty, whatever antagonisms exist between theologians, scientists, and politicians start to get blurry. Sovereignty, if I am with Latour, has something to do with ontological and epistemological border-makings and who or what is making and being made in inclusions and exclusions. What Latour is describing in reworking sovereignty as a reality-storying practice is something Indigenous peoples have known for millennia: telling stories is doing sovereignties. If I am listening to Indigenous theorists, then, stories and their constituent relations (including what relationships comprise teller, hearer, space of exchange, words, or genres) are a method of practicing sovereignty.37 As method, stories are assemblages of relations and, as John Law writes, “assemblages do realities.”39 A simple idea, but one that, alongside Indigenous methodologies in which story is equivalent to theory,36 allows me to think Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge practices together (as I do below). It is good, I think, to ask of the methods of Western sovereignty with stories in mind—crucial, if subjects and worlds are at stake.

The storying practices of Western intellectual and political sovereignties that I have inherited are theologies, philosophies, and natural and social scientific theories that maintain, in repetition, the imperial-colonial authority to say what counts as being or knowing in the ongoingness of working out a common world. I am suggesting that theologies or atheologies, theories, and other reality-patterning stories are performed in institutionalized practices and the practices of everyday life. As such, they are integral to the inscription or maintenance of authority in a place as enactments of material and conceptual borders, including national boundaries, notions of the subject, and other habitual segregations of nature from culture. As Donna Haraway puts it: subjects and shared worlds are “boundary projects.”40 Whether in a text or territory, what is allowed to assemble—words, ideas, bodies, or artifacts—is constitutive of reality. In thinking storying and sovereignty together, I am indebted to the material-semiotic methods and sensibilities of science studies. Specifically, for the idea that realities are performed in human and nonhuman practices that simultaneously pattern and are patterned by materialities and meanings (even as matter and meaning co-emerge)—and that what is practiced is

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36 Ibid.
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repeated at the expense of what is not. Because practices are practiced asymmetrically, reality does not come down to a question of choice: which method, whose story? The capacity to practice is enabled or inhibited by other practices. Practices include and reproduce some relationships and exclude others.

It is by way of thinking exclusions, too, that I arrive at a performative understanding of Western sovereignty in a capacious reading of political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben counters Michel Foucault’s idea that sovereignty is no longer effected in the form of a negative relationship to life—in the power to kill. Foucault argues that the “old” sovereignty has been overthrown by biopower, a productive and intensifying relationship to the biological that qualifies, hierarchalizes, and thus regulates the conditions of living. For Agamben, there is no “old” or “new” disposition-dispensation of power. Sovereignty’s violence has always imbricated both death and life in exclusionary inclusions; power-to-kill and biopower are entangled to the extent that the “production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.”

In practices that regulate who is qualified for incorporation into the political body, sovereignty is enacted in the exclusion of what falls outside circumscriptions of the good life. At the same time, this unqualified remainder or bare life is necessarily constitutive of what ways of life count as good. However indiscernibly, lives that are determined by way of practiced exclusions to be devoid of a way of life are excluded from the political, exposed to violence, and governed nonetheless. Bare life is meant to signal, by way of the making-animal of human life, the practices of sovereignty that hinge on the distinction of biological life from political life. But here I want to stretch Agamben’s formulation. If living and nonliving nonhumans are considered as having ways of life as in Indigenous sovereignty practices, then the status of bare life is equally applicable to the nonhuman. Sovereignty is therefore a practice of enacting the categories of nature and culture, sorting beings and knowings into one or the other (by metrics like utility or agency), and ascribing—always in practices—the authority to police the edges of each to natural and social sciences.

Translating between Agamben and Atleo or Armstrong allows “sovereignty” a big ambit. It can be used to describe Canada’s constitutional context, in which the mass killing of Indigenous peoples is paradoxically referred to as “cultural genocide” despite the habit of animalizing Indigenous peoples (and their nonhuman political co-constituents) as without culture in order to expropriate lands and restrict land-based interspecies practices. It can also describe a less violent coordination of the terms of difference between nature and culture that drafts “territory” as the sum of consensual human-nonhuman inter-diplomacies. If sovereignty is the practical regulation of what forms of life and nonlife can have a way of life, then it also describes the situation of a mainstream Western science that names animal communication and experience as always-only instinct and tenders nonlife as inanimate in ways that both discredit Indigenous worlds of nonhuman people and enable extractive practices. Western sovereignty, then, is not just the business of parlaments and courtrooms, but of laboratories, classrooms, and field sites. Sovereign power takes many tacks and tactics, from the governance of land, life, and nonlife to the governmentalities of cognition or genetics. But I am most interested in the ways in which Western metaphysics-in-practice govern the overlapping territories of ontology, epistemology, and ethics by setting the terms of what entities can be encountered and the bodies of knowledge upon which the shape of such encounters depend. (Spirit-beings and nonhuman people are out, for example.) Geopolitics, biopolitics, geontopolitics,


44 Ibid., 18, 107.


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neupolitics, and genopolitics⁴⁷ offer useful renderings of power and potentials for its reconfiguration. However, in my reckoning, the conditions of being able to say what makes up land, life, and nonlife—including the givenness of cognition or genetics as workable conceptual categories—have already been patterned by knowledge practices that regulate and result from how subjects and worlds have been made in a place. As such, analytics of power (like those listed off above) are scaffolded by ideas that have been, for better and worse, constitutive of sovereignty. A non-Indigenous anticolonial analytic of power must situate itself with reference to the coloniality of any theological and theory-making practices that have inflicted the terms of its articulation.

I am not implying that theology or theory are synonyms of sovereignty. Rather, they are practices of designating and reenacting sovereignty. Western-monotheist practices (and their aftelives in what gets called the secular) have historically organized and continue to legitimate the connection between (only some) persons and territories, both material and conceptual. These colonial projects are constantly at work maintaining Western worlds at the expense of Indigenous sovereignties. Theology and theory designate and reenact what is in a world, how their “parts” should be encountered. Like theologian Laurel Schneider, I think it reasonable to hazard that monotheism has shaped the natural and social scientific ideas of what counts as real at all. Traversing practices variously called religion, politics, and science, commitments to an “as-yet not fully revealed unified system” rely on “sufficient tests of universality and sameness” in which reality is reduced to oneness.⁴⁸

For Mary Louise Pratt, something like Schneider’s logic of the One might be read as the practical metaphysics of first contact. (This should give pause to Western-theological encounters with indigenality.) In colonial-classificatory knowledge practices, as Pratt argues, forms of existence were abstracted from the “tangled threads of their life surroundings” and naturalized into “European-based patterns of global unity and order.”⁴⁹ Sameness as a measure of what counts as real was plainly the shared axiom of colonial logics that crosscut the already-blurred edges of religion, politics, and science. Sameness as axiomatic of the real set in motion forced conversions and other civilizing practices wrought by missionaries who encountered land-sustaining Indigenous ceremonial practices as animist heresy; territorial claims made by explorers who, witness to alien agricultural and land tenure practices, appraised lands as underexploited and thus uninhabited; and relentless taxonomizations of Indigenous lifeways as primitive by anthropologists who failed to detect sameness.⁵⁰ Claims to the secular, in the name of an irreligious evidence-based politics, also flag the tenacity of appeals to sameness that rely

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⁴⁹ Ibid., 79, 88.


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on the ongoing relationship of anthropocentrism to the good encoded in theological anthropologies. Having been enshrined in constitutional law, these anthropologies are enacted in contemporary jurisprudence in ways that impossibilize non-Western conceptions of personhood and differently-specified or otherwise nonhuman or even nonliving goods. If liberal democracy and modern experimental science are meant to mark a departure from religious adherence to a particular version of the way things are, we have never been secular.

Helpfully, science studies is flush with names for the ways in which the practices of Western natural and social sciences are shot through with Christian-monotheist metaphysics, however secularly effected: Donna Haraway’s “Christian figural realism,” John Law’s “one-world world,” or Annemarie Mol’s “monotheist heritage of monorealism.” As Haraway sees it, the world-shaping success of technoscience is owed in part to the performative-representational power of a “barely secularized” repertoire of tropes that harness a Christian temporality of fulfillment and damnation to contain the “heteroglossia and flux of events.” For Haraway, the maintenance of what counts as real is achieved in crossings of the literal and the figural. In realist storytelling the figure—whether God, gene, or subatomic particle—is imbued with the power to contain and fulfill the whole. Thus, salvation histories, biotechnical narratives, and otherwise historically contingent parsings-out of “natural laws” are read-backwards as history full stop. For example, inference of a shared DNA segment designated “Native American” promises genealogical fulfillment at the expense of tribal governance practices and kinship prerogatives, reservation histories, and colonial policy-making. Or, DNA test results are a forever-damnation: to cure a cancer that does not yet exist, reproductive organs are surgically removed—the immaterial is enfleshed. Realities, of course, do not cohere into determinatives and might be slippery, emergent or rebellious, and unwaveringly multiple. Here, Law’s take is incisive: if oneness is a feature of reality it is only because reality is being “done that way.” The real is performed as if it is independent of human and nonhuman actions and perceptions; as if it precedes attempts to know it; as if it is definite and therefore knowable; and as if it is singular, roughly coherent, and held-in-common.

Single reality doctrines are by now well-rehearsed in what Law calls the “large story” of the West. Hatched in the ancient Greek agora, monorealist metaphysics were taken up and reconfigured in the development of Christian monotheisms, institutionalized and made-portable in Christian-colonial practices, and violently superimposed on new worlds. Practices, though, are necessarily “uncertain and patchy.” Law insists that realities-multiple are inevitably being enacted alongside one-world worlds—an idea attributed to his collaboration with Mol. Where realities are at stake, “multiple” is not the epistemological making-plural of an otherwise singular world. If realities are made in practices, conditions of possibility (even those one might call natural or cultural) are not given and vary between practices. Worlds are participatory. Because what is in a world

55 Haraway, Modest_Wit­ness@Second_Mil­lennium.Fe­maleMan_Meets_Onco­MouseTM: Feminism and Technoscience, 10.
56 Kim Ta-Bear, Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
58 Law, “Making a Mess with Method,” 599.
60 Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?,” 135.
might be differently-enacted, ontology is political. Regulating what is practiced curbs or makes-possible realities—another definition of sovereignty. Here, I need only look to the recent past for an example of sovereignty at work enacting borders and making-same. Canada’s sixty year-long potlatch ban criminalized coastal Indigenous ceremonial practices with the goal of killing off redistributive forms of governance in favour of private property ownership. Mamalilikala hereditary chief Art Dick suggests that the now-lifted potlatch ban lives on in fishing and forestry industries’ regulatory resource management frameworks that impossibilize Indigenous interspecies protocols. Surely there is an ontological leaning effected in setting multispecies collectivities and responsibilities against human individuals (or corporations) and their rights.

With ontological politics in mind, Latour phrases Western intellectual and political sovereignty as “mononaturalism.” Mononaturalism asks that we inhabit a singular reality configured by verifiable natural laws. These laws structure sameness and difference in terms always already primed by metaphysical givens tied to Western institutions and subjectivities. Consequently, whatever is anomalous or contested in the wake of mainstream scientific articulation is said to be a difference in cultural perspective. Latour identifies this move as a multiculturalism, a way to sideline ontologies and epistemologies incommensurable with those that obtain facts. Now, let me be less abstract. Canada’s federal, provincial, and civic governments have made reconciliation the ambition of state-Indigenous relations under the ambit of multiculturalism. Meanwhile, the governance of difference continues to hang on the evidence-based approach of Canadian liberal democracy and its “great advantage of neutrality.” This evidence-based governance, meanwhile, holds the authority to maintain who or what counts as an entity, which entities count, and which knowledges authorize their accounting. So, it is no surprise that evidence is invoked to explain away the destruction of Indigenous lands in extractive natural resource projects. Only in a one-world world can scientific vision and its evidence be omniscient and its facts “lose all traces of their history as a stories.” It is easy to see how science and multiculturalism are jointly-deployed in Western liberal democracies in the ontological-epistemological claim that “reality is destiny” as a means to maintain sovereignty.

Here, I have set out the undoing of secularized and still-religious Christian-colonial sovereignties as a central task of doing theology on Indigenous territory. To say stories make and remake sovereignties is to set Indigenous story, Western natural and social scientific theory, and the -logia of theology on level ground. It is to put pressure on the ways in which their heterogeneous histories, sensibilities, warrants, meanings, and modes of encounter are performed and are thus grounded in a place, even as they tendril out beyond it. While endless work has been done to reconcile theology and science, I am invested in drawing out their already-similarities in colonial encounters. I am not alleging that all knowledge projects must be appraised in terms of truth as fiction. Rather, I have argued that stories about worlds—whether theological or scientific fact or fiction—are productive of realities and that, in repetition, this or that reality becomes authoritative. Stories land us squarely in the ethical imbrications of reality-making politics: which worlds are better?

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66 Haraway, Modest_Witinness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncMouseTM Feminism and Technoscience, 24.
67 Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?,” 135.
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EMERGENT MEANINGS

As a trespasser on Indigenous lands, how do I remain accountable in making accounts of the relations that make worlds? I start with a diagram tacked to the wall in front of my desk. It is Opaskwayak Cree educator Shawn Wilson’s sketch of an Indigenous research paradigm: research as ceremony. The terms ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology are arranged in a circle, connected with bidirectional connecting lines. These intra-connectings are meant to demonstrate that practices of knowing and evaluating occur between co-constituting relata and are equivalent to ontology. For Wilson, every set of relations threaded into research marks a world-making relationship to be accountable to.70 Research understood as ceremony is done in the specificities of a place. It is receptive in real-time to the relationships in which inquiry arises. It stays with emergent world-making effects. Throughout this text, I have foregrounded the entanglement of ontology, epistemology, and method. Here, I want to emphasize ethics. In Wilson’s take, the relationships in which knowledge projects initiate are exactly the place to start with accountability. Non-Indigenous scholars should rise up to Todd’s call to engage Indigenous scholarship as an avowedly global practice. However, they should not adopt local ceremonies to which they have no relationship. Part of staying with the trouble of animism as the ongoing colonial restorying of Indigenous altersovereignty is to challenge Western notions of intellectual and political sovereignty from within one’s own communities of practice.

As an example, I look to science studies. Vicky Singleton and John Law outline a Western approach to research as ceremony in an ethnography of cattle farming practices. Ritual, like ceremony, forges a vital link between humans, nonhumans, practices, and “macrocosmic fates.” In Singleton and Law’s drift, rituals are repetitions that reproduce heterogeneous patterns of relation. The repetition of certain relations between subjects, objects, spaces, ideas, words, and more, structures what is being done together in practice.71 And here is where accountability in storying relations comes in: words are rituals. As the repetition of patterned and patterning relationships, language is not a hard line segregating human from nonhuman. As both Law and Annemarie Mol insist, to locate ontologies-plural in practices, including language, is a necessary philosophical interference deployed to deflate abstraction.72

The encounter I am staging, here, stays with the trouble of abstractions like animism, or theology in their many accruals, shifts, and stabilizations of meaning. These terms stand in for reality-storying practices that act with and on a world always being made. Sometimes, animism names Indigenous belief in subject- or world-making forces. Sometimes it simply stitches together to lineages and modes of anthropological-ethnographic theory-making. When typed out or spoken, the word “animism” stories the world with these meanings and more. Likewise, the word “theology” works on the world with meanings-multiple. Sometimes theology speaks of God as a being; other times as the force of becoming. Sometimes it appears simply as mode of storying the world’s unfolding as linked to histories, sacred texts, and rituals. In practice, staying with the trouble means that the narrating of an animate world and the naming God should be slowed down to make room for other names and conceptual assemblages.

To borrow from science studies again: John Law and Wen-yuan Lin hold that the use of Western analytical-conceptual language works to replicate and maintain colonial intellectual asymmetries. These asymmetries reinforce disciplinary paths, corrode hybrid or syncretic modes of knowing, and shut out non-Western ideas. Science studies methods treat competing knowledge claims equally and recognize humans and nonhumans as

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actants in world-making. This symmetry at work should dodge the privileging of what is enacted as standard. Still, Law and Lin want to push symmetry further by encouraging the commonplace use of non-English ideas and mapping the analytics and politics of thinking Western and non-Western terms together. Of course, the use of non-English ideas risks exoticising Indigenous knowledges—but there is a lesson here. A syncretic, symmetrical approach to reality-storying practices might include the many other names of what makes up a world accountability without letting go of the problem of English and its violent past.

For Piikani Blackfoot theorist Betty Bastien English is a language of abstraction, capable only of contextualization within the colonizer’s philosophical orientation. Linguicide and forced assimilation, Bastien explains, have impaired Indigenous peoples’ experiential relationships with natural phenomena. Looking at the morphological qualities of English, I suspect the rest of us are likewise impaired when it comes to enabling Earth’s regeneration. We rely on modal or “defective” verbs (void of tense, aspect, or mood) to indicate capacity, consent, and belief. Can and should, for example, have no participle form. Their capacitations are universal. English has few inflectional cases, save for the genitive case. It uses only anthropospecific pronouns. To make coherences in English, we must make order, determine likelihood or permissibility, and indicate gender and ownership. In sentence-making, we order and organize individual words. In contrast, consider the meaning-bearing unit of Niitsipowahsin, spoken in the Great Plains. Unlike what we might call a morpheme, áóhtakoyi cannot be defined in isolation. It carries what Leroy Little Bear and Niitsitapi educator Ryan Heavy Head call a “relationship-dependent-meaning-emerging-trait.” Strung together, áóhtakoistsi become aanissin: a lexical utterance that registers an event with no subject and no noun-verb interaction. “He will run very fast” becomes “expected-very-fast-running.” If the event is current, it is rendered “evident-running” and if it has passed, “remembered-running.” The aanissin is assembled ad hoc to fit an event or memory. It does not hold a fixed meaning or perform an abstraction. Little Bear and Heavy Head suggest that how aanissin are built relates to Niitsitapi metaphysics. Events arise from constant flux, are registered as they appear, and fade into memory. Here, words are always already located in a particular body-being-made in a web of relations. In Niitsitapi dynamism, relationality—the meaning-bearing capacity of matter—is profoundly personal. It holds between human and nonhuman persons. In a story, a stone first teaches a Niitsitapi woman how to talk to buffalo. If we cannot learn from stone-teachers or talk to buffalo, perhaps we need to stay longer with language in all its contaminations, makings-pure, and reshapings. We might linger until our use of words like learn or talk are bodied with echoes of other earthly collaborators, with multispecies meanings that emerge in the murky interstices of worldly encounters between natural histories and our collective knowings- and tellings-of-them, in our languagings and storyings, human or otherwise.

NONHUMAN STORIES

With a rush of stories eddying around me, I hold fast for a method of storytelling that discerns the fragility of wholes in order to discompose theological monoliths like “God” or “nature” and “the human” and their legacies and creeds. I hope to hollow out fleeting hatchways for recomposing stories-in-common that engender a sense that the world is always on the move—by itself and for itself—beyond what is narrowly called “evolution” by scientists or “process” by philosophers and theologians. I want a theology that dreams off familiar paths from vehicular words and well-stuck stories to bring about multispecies thriving, a theology that is always unfinished, up for grabs, and ever-reattuned to Earth’s regeneration in a place. Like Barad’s agential realism, Wilson’s research as ceremony, and Singleton and Law’s performative take on ritual, theology as multispecies ethnography begins in the situated entanglements of bodies and places being made-together. It holds

74 Betty Bastien, Blackfoot ways of knowing: the worldview of the Sikakaitstapi (University of Calgary Press, 2004), 120.
the dual conviction that practices enact worlds into being and that practices are what is being done by all earthly constituents. A multispecies theological-ethnographic practice crafts, with religious fervour, speculative but culpable equivocations between human, nonhuman, Western, and non-Western worlds and their heterogeneous beings, knowings, and doings. If theology is the storying of subject- and world-making forces, then a multispecies theologian might be something like what Vinciane Despret calls a “good ethnologist”: a person who studies animal behaviour to tell stories of “living animals, who have lives, who do things,” and who are subjects with their own stories.77

But, like Tsing, I recognize that plant, animal, and other species are “not always the right units” for doing stories;78 for conjugating human and nonhuman worlds. I recognize, as TallBear notes, that the term “multispecies” is incapable of making room for Indigenous understandings of nonliving or immaterial nonhumans as feeling and knowing subjects.79

Multispecies is not adequate to capture unruly tidal currents or the fluid geometry of lava flows, let alone spirit-beings. However, the term centres my work around ethnographic or storying practices that make accountable accounts of human and nonhuman encounters, compatible with Indigenous sovereignties that reckon with the endurance of nonhuman others. It helps me wrestle with the colonial legacy of ethnographic methods that sort Indigenous lifeways into the category of primitive in order to justify the ongoing expropriation of lands. It underlines the intellectual, political, religious, legal, and medical exertions of colonialism that rely on border-making between species as a means to determine what constituents of place might be backgrounded as nature. In the prolongation of white and Western lives, these constituents were and are extracted from what webs of relation they inhabit and from Indigenous peoples’ life-sustaining practices.80

My understanding of multispecies has been broadened, too, by Thom van Dooren’s rethinking of species as “flight ways” or lines of movement through evolutionary time. They are lineages that give body to a particular way of life in ongoing intergenerational processes or practices.81 Multispecies ethnographies, moreover, often include nonhuman modes of “storied experience,” what van Dooren describes as the animal capacity to engage worldly happenings as significantly connected and thus meaningful. It is reasonable, I think, to affirm—alongside TallBear—that other nonliving forms of nonhuman existence or experience are similarly intergenerational and storied. How then, can we say that stones, as they aggregate minerals and mineraloids or wear down to dust in the accumulations and attenuations of time and place, do not have stories? Nonhuman stories depend on how far we want to hone or stretch our words and theory-making. They depend, too, on which worlds and ways of knowing we inhabit as we sense and intuit our way through the relations that make subjects and worlds. In Haraway’s words, it matters which “knowledges know knowledges” and which “worlds world worlds.”82 A theology as multispecies ethnography, then, might begin in a distributed understanding of cognition and language, what Alastair Pennycook calls “posthumanist applied linguistics,” wherein the multimodal and multisensory semiotic relationships of all life and nonlife are distributed across human and nonhuman entities.83

A distributed theology can be construed as constellation of bio- and geosemiotic storying practices. It can affirm that all earthly relationships are awash in the production and exchange of meaning. God talk about the force that makes worlds is not tethered to human exceptionalism. More than mere communication, earthly exchanges that broker human and nonhuman capacities in their varied multimodal and -sensory inflections and moves can be called language. A distributed God talk makes meaningful sense of a world while remaining wise to the violence wrought on Indigenous peoples who have been

78 Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins, 162.
80 Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation., 31.
82 Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, 39.
listening and talking to nonhumans all along. If language is stretched open in this way, of course, we may be mired in the awkward unanswerability of what the other is saying. But, like Despret says, we must move from the representative animal, the one who represents its species, to the ethologist as good representer. How can what ethologists and other scientists, including theologians, say about nonhumans be authorized by nonhumans? By doing things together in ongoing relationships and paying attention to that which the other needs or wants in situated encounters.

As in research as ceremony, doing things together is a question of ontology or what capacities beings-being-co-made have in the specificities of relation. It is a matter of epistemology or how capacities are known and worked across mutual encouterings. It is also a matter of ethics or the grounds on which the other authorizes what is being done or altered in encounter. And, finally, it is a matter of method, or what practices orient us toward what is ever-changing in Earth-processes. Method spirals back to questions like what can it do?; how do we know?; or what do we do about it? These are questions intimate to the storytelling practices of multispecies ethnographies and to the speculative realisms of posthumanism. They overlap with “new” materialisms that resist the power ascribed to language while recognizing that words and stories make the world alongside other mattering capacities. To be a good representer, then, is to resist the shutting-out (or normalization) of other stories and to render the conditions of storytelling explicit. Good stories, as Deborah Bird Rose and van Dooren have it, do not “slip into the hubris of claiming to tell another’s stories” and allow for multiple meanings. To write “lively ethnography,” as they call it, is to craft stories that are open to other earthly respondings-to and other ways of constituting worlds. It is to recognize that stories provoke “new connections and, with them, new accountabilities and obligations.”

Of course, something like a posthumanist linguistics and lively eth(n)ography have existed for millennia in Indigenous sciences. Indigenous ceremonial knowledge practices, Standing Rock Sioux theologian Vine Deloria, Jr. explains, background or bracket out the human. Instead, they “concentrate on representing the physical universe” by way of rehearsed attunements to a crowd of nonhuman storyings predicated on an ethics of earthly regeneration. Laguna Pueblo poet Paula Gunn Allen’s rationale for the ceremonial-ethical representation of Earth-processes echoes Deloria. She writes, “beings such as certain people and beasts, the sun, the earth, and sacred plants like corn are in a constant state of transformation, and that transformative process engenders the ritual cycle of dying, birth, growth, ripening, dying, and rebirth.” The structure of Indigenous languages and ceremonial-technical systems are tacitly informed by place, understood as the sum of relationships that make human and nonhuman forms of existence. At the same time, place informs and is formed in practices. To stay with the violence of colonial pasts and presents when storying-into a future is to imagine the thinking, reading, and writing practices of Western theology and theory as always-also ritual practices that are informed by and form place—even in their millennia-spanning abstractions. As Whitney Bauman says, Western knowledge is “yet another traditional ecological knowledge”—but a failed one.

Doing theology or any other theory as ritual means acknowledging with Ronald Grimes that repeated practices are “acts of marking-off.” These acts make cuts in the fabric of what is, stabilizing or making-coherent what always exceeds our knowing. Building on Grimes’ markings-off and Barad’s agential cuts, Frederique Apffel-Marglin argues that rituals are “radically creative,” enacting the “world in concert with its humans, nonhumans,
and other-than-humans.\textsuperscript{92} If theology can be done as multispecies ethnography, as a ritual practice of telling stories for “earthly survival,”\textsuperscript{93} then we must become good ethnographers, ethnographers, anthropologists, biologists, and geologists—observers of human and nonhuman relationships, living or not. To do this we will “play animateur.”\textsuperscript{94} As Grimes says, in paraphrase, animating the relations make subjects and worlds can only be authorized by the regeneration of such relations—not by some far-off force.\textsuperscript{95} To do theology and theory as ritual is to go slowly in our storying. It is to start from the specificities of what we are in. It is also to recognize that the work of equivocating between Western and non-Western or human and nonhuman worlds of spirited or lively matter is akin to doing animism as the deployment of a “metaphorical analytic”\textsuperscript{96} or model. This model can only ever grasp at difference as it stories the forces that make subjects and worlds—even as stories-as-equivocations make cuts and make worlds. Doing animism in this way is akin to doing monotheism, or science, or any other Western-normative appraisal of how things actually are. It is doing theology as the naming and storying of irreconcilable difference: saying what is in a world, how it can be known, and how it should be responded to.

\textsuperscript{93} Fabrizio Terranova, Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival (France: Centre National de la Cinématographie, 2016).
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Wilkinson, “Is There Such a Thing as Animism?,” 306–307.

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SPECULATING INDIGENOUS FUTURES

To wrestle the always-material citational and conceptual overwritings of theology and theory as they work at storying an emergent world is really to ask about a future. Which pasts and presents, which practiced patterning of relationships, are made capable of being imagined forward? Here is a future scene: a tribal figure is posed mid-sway at the bend of a dune. A shock of synthetic hair crowns her head to form a headdress and her face is masked in a fringe of multicolored broadcloth—salmon, neon yellow, amethyst. She is surrounded by an alien atmosphere of ochre haze falling away into a shimmering vacuum. This is not a future I have learned to imagine. Wearing “futuristic powwow” regalia, the figure is Apsáalooke sculptor Wendy Red Star. The image belongs to a series of digital composites in which she inhabits a succession of otherworldly planetscapes as means to stir up the strangeness of first contact.\textsuperscript{1} With historical knowledge of a spirited force animating human and nonhuman forms of existence, the space nomad of Indigenous speculative fiction, film, and art-making encounters the strange inhabitants of sci-fi futures as kin. Thus, the nomad impossibilizes the colonial summing-up of new worlds (real or imagined) as empty and ready for inscription. Indigenous futurisms, as Diné theorist Lou Cornum writes, “enact contact differently.”\textsuperscript{2} Dispossessed and made diasporic when encountered as an inconvenience of otherwise “empty” landscapes, Indigenous peoples earthwide have already lived through an apocalyptic first contacts. Even dislocated, Indigenous languages and stories are relation-storying practices. Using what Cornum calls “bundled time,” they braid pasts and presents together with speculative futures, to sustain and adapt ancestral place-based knowledges in ceremonial frameworks, like

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Shawn Wilson’s Indigenous research paradigm.3 From these frameworks, new attunements to the rhythms and demands of Earth’s regeneration in a place can be intuited. As Cornum says, “the creation story is a spaceship.”4 At the close of this text, I want to reframe theology as another kind of science fiction. Practices of storying the forces that make subjects and worlds are methods of terraforming: the largely speculative act of intervening in a planet’s composition to materialize a new and livable world. In terraforming, what counts as livable is tangled up in the question of who a world is for. Though I might engage a theological counterpractice in the face of dominance, I still write this text on a planet already carved out according to the conceit of some members of one species, and fast becoming unlivable. If the goal of terraforming in science fiction has been to “adapt planets to colonizing peoples,” as Chris Pak writes,5 then anticolonial projects (like Red Star’s fabulations) must always counter with the question: livable for whom? To ask who counts as a subject in world-making, cuts across ontological, epistemological, and ethical registers of practice. It gets at the heart of how a world is cleft and ordered into those entities made-capable of being earthly cohabitors and collaborators.

While terraforming in science fiction is usually carried out in alien terrain, as Pak points out, terra always circles back to Earth as paradigmatic of what livabilities might be formed.6 In making first contact, what is paradigmatic regulates what can be encountered as existing in a world at all. After all, it was in the theologically-driven storying of new worlds as uninhabited7 that the constituents of the place where I live came to be encountered, named, evaluated, and governed. Perhaps, in staging stories and sovereignties together, I am invoking a founding question of ecotheology, but louder and performatively inflected.

How do stories about creation repress or make-available entities to live with, think with, and care with?8

DOING MULTISPECIES THEOLOGY

Ecotheologian Sallie McFague anticipates what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledges” and “the corporeality of theory.”9 She suggests that, like the stories of science, theologies are productive of realities. They are always-partial, never-innocent engagements that structure the shape of earthly encounters. Thus, they regulate what relational patternings—what beings, knowings, and doings—are maintained by way of practice in a place.10 Theology at its best would be a speculative-productive endeavour that opens into an otherwise by unravelling what has been maintained in repetition. If theology were to call forth just multispecies futures that remain accountable for violent pasts and presents, as McFague urges, then speculative fictions and fabulations are crucial.11 To story our way into Indigenous futures of living and nonliving “multispecies” collaboration will require both imagination and indignation toward unjust past and present material realities. It will require what Cornum calls “bundled time” and what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble.” For Haraway, string figures are another way to think pasts, presents, and futures together. In string games like cat’s cradle or Navajo na’atl’oi’, players pass shifting material-semiotic patterns back and forth in contingent practices that “conjugate worlds in


5 Chris Pak, Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction (Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.
6 Ibid., 7.
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partial connections. These games are not the same from place-to-place, but everywhere they tangle and shift with a kindred logic. Patterns are picked up, transformed or translated in moments of contact, and passed on in the contingencies of encounter between bodies being co-made. As patterns or models, string figures are always located, in a place, at a time, and between bodies in encounter. Like Haraway says, invoking na’ałt’o’ is not an innocent move. It is a “risky proposition” knotted-up in imperial-colonial pasts and resurgent presents. If I am listening to McFague and Haraway, doing theology is not a question of landing on Western or non-Western practices, of spinning cat’s cradle or na’ałt’o’, or privileging Deleuze or Deloria. Rather, it is a question of how to conjugate altogether from where I am standing—partially, culpably, and ongoingly.

Ecotheology is a practice of telling God- and science-stories for a livable world. Doing multispecies theology, as I see it, belongs to an ecotheology that starts in Thomas Kuhn’s half-century-old challenge to the theoretical continuity of science, and by extension other Earth-storying practices. Kuhn proposes that the availability of conceptual objects, modes of knowing, tools, and techniques in any given community comprises a matrix of shared interests and commitments, common metaphysical assumptions, and abstractions or analogies. This matrix is intrinsic to group communication that fixes the horizon of phenomena, methods, and results capable of coming into coherence. Episodic disruptions to accepted “facts” result in scientific revolution. On Kuhn’s heels, Ian Barbour’s early work argues that theology involves a similar matrix of preconceptions and commitments. He demonstrates that religion and science are not dissimilar in their conditions of possibility. With the right metaphysic, in this case Whitehead’s process thought, Barbour suggests that theology and science can work together to provide a unified account of the world. Though Barbour favours process theology, paradoxically, he installs metaphysics as a “coherent set of categories for the interpretation of all experience.” However, I find in Barbour’s method a recursive logic of monotheism, always on the hunt for wholes and resolutions.

In Metaphorical Theology, McFague thinks alongside Kuhn and Barbour in the tradition of both early science studies and process theology. She recognizes that while theology is structured by common commitments and assumptions that shift over time, crucially, the degree of change in theological revolutions is slim. Theological models, she says, encode and perform an intrinsic structuring of reality. Inherited models are largely anthropocentric and authoritarian. Thus, McFague proposes that the task of theology is to provide new models based in the understanding that we exist “in networks of relationships.” She writes:

Models are necessary, then, for they give us something to think about when we do not know what to think, a way of talking when we do not know how to talk. But they are also dangerous, for they exclude other ways of thinking and talking, and in so doing they can easily become . . . identified as the one way of understanding a subject.

Call them models, metaphors, metaphorical analytics, or stories—these are not everywhere-applicable abstractions. Rather, as McFague proposes, good stories name what cannot be named in ways that can only be authorized by that with which we are relationally entangled. A multispecies theology does not begin in monotheisms; it merely stays with monotheism as a trouble to attend to. To speak concretely, when mountaintops are being sheared-off and watersheds poisoned by industrial mining and fracking maybe it is better to ask, “do rocks feel?” than to commit to the gymnastic project of refurbishing Christian monotheism. Theology must move on from insinuating a one-size-fits-all ontology—even a process or evolution ontology. It must stop forever reenacting an ethic

13 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 24.
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that hangs on universality. And it must stop producing systematics that organize bodies of teachings by making determinative claims about the capacities of earthly bodies.

I do not know yet how to do multispecies theology. But I know from what relations to start. I know that the stories of multispecies theology will be partial and flawed but authorized nonetheless by human and nonhuman others, Indigenous and otherwise. To do theology from where I am is to go back over and again to the start of this text, to acknowledge territory and to attend to the violence of saying “animism” in all its ethnographic modes. To do multispecies theology is to reckon with being always in a place with a past, present, and future, to ask of what intellectual and political sovereignties have shaped subjects and worlds, and to story-into a just future. Yes, I offer up some instruction for a multispecies theology—but as Hélène Frichot writes, user guides “do nothing by themselves.”¹⁹ Take my instructions, shake up citational and conceptual habits, spin accountable stories across Western and non-Western or human and nonhuman worlds—but always do theology anew from where you are. Be culpable.

¹⁹ Hélène Frichot, How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool (Baunach: Spurbuchverlag, 2016), 6.