THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Love and Theft; or, Provincializing the Anthropocene

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The overdetermined and undertheorized status of Indigeneity in Anthropocene discourse reflects a long-standing tendency of Euro-Western environmentalism, and its various iterations in the academy, to use Indigenous thought without fair attribution or sufficient understanding. Like environmentalism as it has been imagined in the Global North, the Anthropocene idea functions as a call to action and as a profound criticism of capitalism and colonialism that centers White or settler-migrant communities. The Anthropocene story is simple: we (i.e., Euromoderns[1]) ruined the planet and are faced with the destructive enormity of our power as never before. Thus, we must learn "how to die" as a civilization, in Roy Scranton's memorable phrase; innovate our way into an even more highly technologized modernity; or, as some posthumanist and multispecies theorists attest, become metaphorically Indigenous, shrinking humanist subjectivities and recasting ourselves in reciprocal relationships with more-than-human beings. Vanessa Watts (Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe) calls out the "abstracted engagement" with Indigenous ontologies by White theorists who intend to correct "the imperialistic tendencies of Euro-Western knowledge production" with a tool kit of decontextualized Indigenous concepts (28).[2] In *The Marrow Thieves*, the Métis writer Cherie Dimaline characterizes White North America's Anthropocene affliction as the loss of our ability to dream—a loss remedied by extracting bone marrow from Indigenous Americans who have survived the apocalypse of their worlds through strong dreaming, collective storying that resides in their marrow. "The dreamless ones," Dimaline's designation for present-day Whites, scramble to consume Indigenous imagination in order to outlive a wrecked modernity (14). Dimaline's novel is

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not an allegory of the status of literary and cultural studies in the Euro-American academy. But it might serve as a warning to settler scholars who wish to engage Indigeneity for the sake of our own resilience, a warning about the incommensurability of Indigenous knowledges with fields like the environmental humanities.

The love and theft that Eric Lott attributed to nineteenth-century White minstrels in blackface aptly characterizes Euro-Westerners' longtime extractive passion for Indigenous practices and thought. Writing of North American environmentalism as cultural appropriation in the 1990s, Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) recognizes ecological thinking in the United States in the mid to late twentieth century as an iteration of colonial dispossession:

> This is a time of what I call the reanimation of the natural world by white men, as they are newly discovering an old understanding, that everything on earth is alive and that the relationship between all these lives makes for the whole living planet. While native people have been ridiculed for these views, James Lovelock has been hailed as a genius for his return to old Indian ways of thinking and knowing, for originating what he has called the Gaia hypothesis. (166)

The Métis scholar Zoe Todd, responding recently to the so-called ontological turn—theoretical movements that assert the agency of matter, such as object-oriented ontology, the new materialisms, and Actor-Network-Theory—noted that "'ontology' is just another word for colonialism" ("An Indigenous Feminist's Take"). "Theories can act as gentrifiers in their own right," Todd explains in her discussion of the ways in which posthumanisms and multispecies studies impose on Indigenous ontologies ("Indigenizing the Anthropocene" 244). As Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) reminds us, "claiming entitlement to all people's knowledge is, after all, just one of the many expropriating features of settler colonial violence" (25).

As a White scholar who, like it or not, benefits from the dispossession of Indigenous Americans, I see the challenge of Indigenizing the Anthropocene as an opening to consider the intellectual gifts of the incommensurable, of the resistant and antimetaphoric. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang assert that decolonization is not a metaphor and must be recognized as a socioeconomic project with significant material consequences, like the repatriation of Indigenous lands. For Euromoderns who have cultivated largely unconscious habits of appropriation and self-augmentation, the incommensurability of decolonization is hard to think with—and therefore worth the trouble. As a founder of the interdisciplinary academic field known as the environmental humanities, I recognize the incommensurability of Indigenous resurgence in and beyond the academy with my own intellectual projects as an occasion for insight into the limits of Euromodern ideas and social movements, like the Anthropocene and environmentalism. Such movements and their scholarly complements are provincial, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's sense of reflecting the histories and intellectual traditions of colonizing cultures (*Provincializing Europe*).

Settler scholars in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, including Joni Adamson, Rob Nixon, and Julie Sze, have staged important, generative conversations between Indigenous thinkers and environmental justice activists, while a subset of contemporary Indigenous scholars, notably Kyle P. Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi) and Leanne Betasomasake Simpson (Anishinaabe), are widely quoted in the environmental humanities. Much good has come from even the limited engagement among these fields of thought, in terms of counterfactual imagining in a time of change that is not unprecedented for Indigenous peoples but is still damaging to them, to more-than-human beings, and to those of us who are primarily responsible for destroying Holocene climate. Still, the radicalism for settler scholars of Indigenous thinking—with its many variances across the world's tribal nations, its ontological incommensurability, and its imbrication in sovereignties unassimilable to our own nation-states—is not often the topic of settler discourse that takes Indigeneity as a foil to Anthropocene malaise. Exceptions to this limitation in Anthropocene scholarship—including works by Kathryn Yusoff and Salma Monani—often come from scholars of color. Is it possible for us settlers

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to think alongside Indigenous scholars and writers, or merely to listen, without enacting theft in the form of translation and misuse?

This is a question I face often and continually fail to resolve, to the extent that failure has become its own answer, though not a comfortable one. In the following meditation I reflect on incommensurability as generative of intellectual health. Moreover, I consider what I, as a White scholar, experience as incommensurable aspects of Indigenous (as opposed to Anthropocenic) thought, aspects that prove transformative for me because I cannot readily make use of them.

Discordant Temporalities

In his now classic *God Is Red*, Vine Deloria, Jr., writes that "the world . . . is not a global village so much as a series of non-homogenous pockets of identity that must eventually come into conflict because they represent different historical arrangements of emotional energy" (64). Deloria uses "thinking in time and space" as a rubric through which to consider the fundamental, incommensurable differences between Indigenous North Americans, for whom intellectual genealogies begin in sacred landscapes, and settler Americans, whose mobility causes us to use time, rather than place, as our horizon of meaning (61). Euromodern peoples' recasting of the time of our own experiences into the authoritative category of "history," a delimiting concept more or less equivalent to "reality," contributes to our Anthropocenic despair. As Chakrabarty points out, climate change represents for us an overthrow of history by geology and therefore a dismantling of humanist ideals such as justice and freedom, which legitimate our progressive notions of history ("Climate of History" 208). The Anthropocene calls attention to the inability of Euromoderns to recognize where we actually stand in time, on a scale moved by inhuman forces that —ironically—our own actions have intensified. The Anthropocene names a geologic epoch that centers Euromodern humanity and, because it is an epoch, foregrounds temporality. Yet it weakens history as a frame of knowledge. In the Anthropocene idea, we Euromoderns see ourselves diminished but still in control of what is narratable, placing an emphasis on how time moves us and defines our storying. The Anthropocene is provincial in its primary reference to Euromodern experiences, even if we see these experiences now as geologic and planetary.

In the Anthropocene idea, we still largely ignore or erase Indigenous presence. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin's argument for dating the start of the Anthropocene epoch to 1610 and European arrivals in the Americas offers an exceptional, scientific account of the atmospheric effects of Indigenous mass death caused by introduced diseases and "a little bit of genocide" (Maslin). Native peoples remain largely a past tense in their theory, sensitive as it is to colonial violence. "Native peoples do not so much exist within the flow of time as erupt from it as an anomaly," writes Mark Rifkin, noting how settler scholars often refer to Indigenous peoples as existing only in the past or as troubling remnants persisting in the modern present (iv). Rifkin (himself a settler scholar) recognizes that temporal categories that might seem like neutral frames for settlers, like "history" or "the present," do not name universal realities with which Indigenous peoples necessarily identify or in which they wish to be recognized. Inclusion in settler time, like inclusion in the liberal multicultural nation, represents an invitation to trade Indigenous sovereignties for whatever partial citizenship might be on offer from the settler state. In differentiating settler and Indigenous timescapes, Rifkin explains, "I am suggesting the presence of discrepant temporalities that can be understood as affecting each other, as all open to change, and yet as not equivalent or mergeable into a neutral, common frame" (3). Native scholars like Nick Estes (Lower Broule Sioux), Whyte, and Simpson make strong statements for essentially the same Indigenous "temporal sovereignty" that Rifkin names. For Estes, Native time is iterative and persistently imposed on by settler colonialists: "Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and by our ancestors. There is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of the past. Our history is the future" (14–15). Therefore, a

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contemporary event like the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline is not a contemporary event per se—though it may appear as such to settlers who join the protest. "What happened at Standing Rock was the most recent iteration of an Indian War that never ends," Estes remarks (10). Paraphrasing Whyte, I'll add that Indigenous temporalities implicate settler activists in the actions of ancestors who may have dreamed of a moment just like the one we are protesting, when Indigenous communities who function as water protectors are vastly reduced in numbers by the colonialist policies, violence, and microbial cultures of the settler ancestors.[3]

The intergenerational mode of Indigenous time, what Whyte calls "spiraling time" (228), calls up deep responsibilities and relationships that might not be comfortable for settler scholars and activists for whom Euromodern histories have promised progress and (implicitly) redemption, such that by learning our histories we hope to free ourselves from them, to start anew. The discomfort that comes from thinking of myself in the present and in the presence of ancestors whose dreams—of Indigenous genocide—I still benefit from is what incommensurability feels like. It provokes humility. It also makes clear that the Indigenous radical alternative present that Simpson imagines, for instance—a land-based way of living within Indigenous ontologies—is not a present in which I belong or that I even should visit. The "No Trespassing" sign that I feel in my mind as I read Simpson's powerful *As We Have Always Done* is, again, what I think incommensurability feels like in what is also an intellectual conversation, insofar as I am reading and therefore underlining, interpreting, and synthesizing. It poses the problem of what thinking alongside Indigenous scholars and writers can or should be for the White settler scholar,[4] of how to read and acknowledge without theft.

Site Specificity Is Not a Metaphor

The Waanyi author Alexis Wright begins her novel *The Swan Book* with a series of glosses on the world's White peoples, from the perspective of a chorus of Indigenous Australians who live in a swampy strip of their traditional homeland. Climate change has abetted the fall of modern nation-states, and White peoples vividly assume the status of predatory migrants:

> *Wanymarri* white woman was from one of those nationalities on Earth lost to climate change wars. The new gypsies of the world, but swamp people said that as far as they were concerned, even though she was a white lady, they were luckier than her. They had a home. Yes, that was true enough. Black people like themselves had somewhere, whereas everywhere else, probably millions of white people were drifting among the other countless stateless millions of sea gypsies. . . . (20)

The drought-ridden spinifex that frames Indigenous Australian lives in *Swan Book* does not signify a resurgent ecology, and the novel ends in lyrical keening for homelands lost: "this spirit-broken place . . . their old homes scattered to kingdom come . . . the Army owned everything, every inch of their traditional land" (301).

But the contrast between White migrancy and Indigeneity, made stark by climate collapse, persists, as it does in Wright's earlier novel, the epic *Carpentaria*. In that novel, mining works its slow violence against Aboriginal peoples and lands, while a group of spiritual warriors drive in caravan through the country to enact the Dreaming, "the Laaaw," their ancestral knowledges (405). They set fire to an international mining company named Gurfurritt (phonetically, "go for it")—one of Wright's many witty, punning names. Both novels engage multiple aspects of colonial violence, global modernity, and Indigenous Australian resistance, and salient in both is the irreducible spiritual ownership of the land by the Indigenous. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Quandamooka) writes, "Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relationship to land, marks a radical, incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous" (11).

Recalling that "all migrants share the benefits of our dispossession," Moreton-Robinson—like many Indigenous writers and scholars—flags an ongoing condition of colonial war ("our dispossession")

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and establishes the "radical, incommensurable, difference" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in "our ontological relationship to land" (17). As Dian Million (Athabascan) specifies, "The meaning of Indigenous as it is defined by all those who identify themselves as such has always been in their relationship to a 'land,' that place they were in a relationship to without anthropocentric bias, relationships that disciplined action and cohered Indigenous persons and societies" (116). These conditions of continuing conflict and of ontological incommensurability in relation to land raise questions in my mind for how I might attempt to think with Indigenous scholars and writers about, let's say, an ethics of care or a revolutionary economics that might supplant the colonial-capitalist values, and structures, that brought about what I experience as Anthropocenic collapse.

In the environmental humanities, we have embraced Indigenous phrasing—for example, in Donna Haraway's Indigenous-inspired "taking care of unexpected country"—and Indigenous philosophy—for example, Deborah Bird Rose's also Indigenous-inspired "ecological existentialism" (42; see 43–44).[5] Yet our attempts to mitigate the damage we've done to the Earth through outreach to Indigenous thought may skirt the incommensurabilities of that thought, insofar as it intends to support Indigenous sovereignties and to point out wars with us, which are unresolved. In terms of our structures of feeling, we Whites of settler cultures in the United States, Australia, and Canada are often caught up in affects and attachments that accompany colonialist ideologies of conquest, even when we explicitly desire to dismantle them. Patrick Wolfe reminds us that settler colonialism is a violent "structure not an event" and that its aim is to ease the erasure of Indigenous peoples and their replacement by the settlers (388). Of course, for settlers to feel at home in the place of the (still present but wishfully disappeared) Indigenous, certain structures of feeling had to be cultivated in the process of settler-colonial inhabitation. I'd venture that it is precisely these feelings of being settled or at home that are undermined by the fires, floods, plagues, and kleptocrats of the Anthropocene.

For example, White Anthropocene ecoanxiety —or, more explicitly, climate change affective disorder—reflects the implosion of the idea of nature and its accompanying emotional atmosphere.[6] The spiritual identification and ownership of the land that we settlers developed by materializing the concept of nature in practical projects, such as the establishment of national parks, are now faltering for us, as is dependable, seasonal weather. Among its many functions in the history of ideas, nature has staged a counterclaim to Indigenous ontological relationships to land, and it has attempted to supplant Indigenous ontologies. In settler nations where the Indigenous have been recast symbolically as nature, their actual presence is objectified, then transferred (spiritually) to us, the would-be inheritors. Thus, Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay) offers the deeply ironic *Nature Poem*, whose premise is, "You can't be an NDN person in today's world / and write a nature poem," or "I can't write a nature poem / because it's fodder for the noble savage / narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face . . ." (67, 2). Getting anywhere near the nature concept casts Pico as the settler colonialist's iconic crying Indian, last of his race. Yet Pico's poem expresses love: of places and bodies; of shattering modernities in Brooklyn and in Portland, Oregon; of unworthy sex partners; and of the dry hills of Pico's ancestors' homeland in what is now San Diego County. I see *Nature Poem* as a modern-Indigenous expression of exuberant place-relationships haunted by now dying colonialist hegemonies. Nature is a Euromodern concept that in settler cultures could be used to suppress Indigenous love, and it is losing that power. Yet, faltering modernities tied to economic globalization, digital communications, labor and climate migrations, and fossil fuel infrastructures press on most planetary lives. These contemporary infrastructures inflect Pico's voice by way of the clipped language of texting ("NDN," "wd slap a tree") and social media.

The subheading of this section of my essay is "Site Specificity Is Not a Metaphor," by which I intend a warning to scholars of the environmental humanities like me who have touted site specificity in our thought and work as a remedy to the academic abstractions that complement antisocial,

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contractual values. Site-specific research in the environmental humanities has evolved from an earlier phenomenological phase that emphasized "lived bodily experience" and "the contingencies of . . . context" toward interrogations of spatial injustice (Kwon 12)—for example, the perils of being Black in the American outdoors (Finney). My own recent collaborations regarding North American public lands have been with scholars and practitioners—oral historians, geographers—who ground my thought in sites both material and social. This subheading is a note to self that such site-specific practice will never be Indigenous. Yet, as Mishuana Goeman (Seneca) explains, sometimes site specificity might be in some sense metaphoric for Indigenous peoples too, in addition to being an incommensurable ontological relationship to land. Native peoples like Goeman's father, a Seneca ironworker, also are mobile, urban, or cosmopolitan, inhabiting Indigenous geographies that "sit alongside" and "engage" the "dominant constructions of space and time" (15). Goeman's call to resist "pathologizing mobile Native bodies" while celebrating romanticized notions of Indigenous geographic stasis also asserts that Native "images, ideas, and imaginings" might be bearers of an ontological relationship to land that both affirm traditional knowledges and open new possibilities (12, 4).

Justice makes a complementary claim for story and for what he calls Indigenous "art for life's sake." He writes, "Rather than the wholly individualist expression of the artist's singular, often self-absorbed vision, art is explicitly, generously engaged with a larger network of relations, influences, and experiences, always with some measure of commitment to articulating Indigenous presence in the world" (21). Simpson takes this commitment to experiential imagination one step farther, as I see it, into what I'll call the lived counterfactuality of her radical alternative present. Simpson's assertion of "doing" as "theory" (18) develops through her decolonial practice of "grounded normativity" (22). The term "grounded normativity" originates with Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), who describes it as "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13). Simpson explains—to implied Indigenous readers and Black allies—that "we need to continue expanding and rooting the practice of our lives in our homelands and within our intelligence systems in the ways that our diverse and unique Indigenous thought systems inspire us to do, as the primary mechanism for our decolonial present . . ." (21). In its commitments to Indigenous temporalities and ontological relationships to land, this radical alternative present is incommensurable, and beautiful. As a settler scholar with long-term investments in both cultural geography and para-academic modes of practice, I admire Simpson's elaboration of "Nishnaabeg grounded normativity" as a politics, a pedagogy, and a mode of worlding. "Our ethical intelligence is ongoing," Simpson writes, "it is not a series of teachings or laws or protocols; it is a series of practices that are adaptable and to some degree fluid" (24). The grounded normativity that Simpson describes carries with it pasts and futures, relationships and responsibilities, storying and practice intended for Indigenous peoples and in active conflict with the faltering settler state that I dissent from but still depend on for (diminishing) social security. "Colonialism has strangulated grounded normativity," she reminds us (24). Like it or not, my own ancestral memories live within settler-colonialist histories, in immigration from France, Ireland, and Germany, in farming the Midwestern plains, in halting assimilation among a nation of White immigrants. Hardship and violence. Love and theft.

On Listening and Letting Go

In conclusion, I want to keep questioning how love—by which I mean, in this context, intellectual engagement and admiration—might coexist with respect for the incommensurable. A consequence of this thought experiment is the letting go of allyship as a primary aspiration for me as a settler scholar. Whyte cautions that Indigenous peoples have every reason to distrust self-styled allies, given the various forms of violence perpetrated by so-called

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friends of the Indian. He exposes "forms of allyship [that] ignore the reality that some allies themselves may be unwilling to give up the underlying conditions of domination that disempower Indigenous peoples" (237). Genuine allyship cannot be sought, I suspect, although it might be earned. From my position in the environmental humanities, a field adjacent to Indigenous studies but wholly enmeshed in Euromodern timescapes and assumptions—as the terms *environment* and *humanities* attest—I will not dictate how to prepare for the possibility of allyship, other than to invite more rigorous attempts on the part of people like me to "give up the underlying conditions of [our] domination." Could the Anthropocene act as a spur to restructuring? The apocalypse of Euromodernity and of settler normativity called the Anthropocene is not an Indigenous problem, even as the physical manifestations of the Anthropocene idea harm Indigenous peoples, and also many nonhuman beings.

To the degree that Anthropocene stories have become Indigenous stories, too, Indigenous authors have profoundly resisted "apocalypse" as a narrative frame. Settler scholars, notably April Anson, and Indigenous scholars like Whyte (234) have underlined this point. In the novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow*—conceived of as climate fiction or "cli fi" by some of my colleagues in the environmental humanities—Waubgeshig Rice (Anishinaabe) riffs on the irrelevance, if not idiocy, of applying apocalyptic framing to present-day Nishnaabe lives:

> Our world isn't ending. It already ended. It ended when the *Zhaagnaash* came into our original home down south on that bay and took it from us. That was our world. When the *Zhaagnaash* cut down all the trees and fished all the fish and forced us out of there, that's when our world ended. They made us come all the way up here. This is not our homeland! But we had to adapt and luckily we already knew how to hunt and live on the land. (148)

Adaptation has been a concept that we Euromoderns readily prescribe to the world's Indigenous but not often enough to ourselves. For the sake of thought, I wish to open the door to diverse forms of scholarly and parascholarly adaptation and to follow those scholars—and doers—of antiracism and decolonization who recognize in the Anthropocene an opportunity for transition—socially, economically, even spiritually. These hopes do not proffer a solution to the Euromodern problem of love and theft. Moreover, transitions fall on many of us like accident, terrifying and unforeseen. It could be a form of preparation in these precarious times to try to listen across "nonhomogenous pockets of identity," to note the incommensurable and to respect its irrelevance to oneself, as a gift (Deloria 64). Eyes to the ground, who among us senses change, as it comes?

Notes

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1. I use the term *Euromodern* throughout as a marker for the European-descended people (often but not always White) who live within the techno-social conditions of modernity, given its histories of colonialism and global capitalism and its reliance on fossil fuels.

2. I was led to Watts's essay by Todd's "Indigenizing the Anthropocene."

3. I'm thinking of the following passage: "Many of the ancestors of today's allies designed the worlds we live in today to fulfill their fantasies of the future. Today's worlds, such as those of US settler colonialism in North America, were constructed to provide privileges to their descendants. They were gifts of a troubling sort" (Whyte 237).

4. I specify "White settler scholars," though this too is an imprecise category, because distinct settler identities carry different histories and relationships to Indigenous dispossession.

5. I'm referring to two resonant concepts in the work of these major feminist scholars, both of whom have influenced my own work and thought. Haraway notes her debt to Indigenous Australian concepts of "country," and Rose was an anthropologist who amply cites her Indigenous Australian interlocutors. My point is not to criticize these scholars for citational injustices or bad faith, only to note the limits of how Indigenous concepts can be used.

6. Hulme writes of the Anthropocene as the end of climate as a steadying concept meant to forge relationships between human

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communities and weather events that have never been predictable (146).

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