Theories and Methodologies

Still Thinking

MATT HOOLEY

[I]

My thinking about the possibility and stakes of the disciplinary relation between Indigenous literature and the Anthropocene is organized around two sets of questions. First, for students and scholars in the humanities generally, what kind of idea is the Anthropocene? Is it a theory? A methodology? What practices of thinking does it organize? For me, these questions are prompted by the persistent deployment of the concept on behalf of projects of liberal disciplinary consolidation, despite clear challenges from Indigenous and Black studies scholars who observe that the term participates in the appropriation and erasure of decolonial critical traditions and the specific histories of struggle and invention that animate them. The second set of questions is about the relation between the environmental humanities, in particular, and Indigenous and Black texts, theory, and methods. Is the environmental humanities a discipline that only includes, absorbs, or appropriates Indigenous and Black knowledge? Given the field's origins in primarily white, settler, and liberal institutional formations, how does it theorize its relation to Indigenous and Black theoretical and political organizing in and beyond the academy? How does the field reconcile its investment in the Anthropocene's stabilization of colonial taxonomies of land and life with its interest in joining with critical traditions in which questions of power, ontology, and aesthetics are not premised on such taxonomies? This second set of questions is less about the Anthropocene than about what the environmental humanities, as a discipline, is for and what kinds of thinking it can center if we set aside the Anthropocene and attendant practices of what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call "colonial equivocation" that take the place of

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PMLA 136.1 (2021), doi:10.1632/S0030812920000115

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812920000115 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intra- and extradisciplinary organizing toward decolonization and the politics of abolition (17–19).

To address the first set of questions, I argue that, in the humanities, the Anthropocene is a repackaging of political urgency as an interdisciplinary brand. At best, the Anthropocene could be an occasion to rethink colonial ontology and temporality. Some new materialist work in the environmental humanities and the proliferation of *-cene* concepts aspires to this. But even these consolidate the fantasy that critiques of and alternatives to colonialism do not already exist and have long histories. The Anthropocene positions Indigenous and Black decolonial thought as a response to world-ending violence, when in fact that thought precedes colonialism and its critique. Black and Indigenous thought is what the Anthropocene—as an occasion, a vehicle, and an object of critique—erases.

To address the second set of questions, I turn to contemporary Indigenous poetry that extends and adapts tribal theories of ontology and temporality amid the ecological and social catastrophes wrought by more than five centuries of colonialism. Here, Indigenous poetry is not a tradition that counters pro- or antienvironmental colonial politics but is the continuation of world- and art-making practices that have never been defined by the ontological or temporal presuppositions on which geology, humanities, and justice in the United States and Europe depend. In particular, I observe how Sherwin Bitsui's unsparing, generous, and inventive poem "Dissolve" tracks how practices and categories of perception are undone alongside living systems under duress. "Dissolve" is a poem uninterested in colonial rescue or disciplinary recomposure; rather, it asks how to stay and think with a dissolving world. The poem also prompts us to ask if, or how, the environmental humanities can foster a disciplinary relation with Indigenous art that is not appropriative or equivocating. Although the practices of observation and imagination in "Dissolve" are specifically Diné, what they model is the intensification of attention by slowing or abrading the disciplinary inclination toward easier or bigger conceptualizations of climate change.

"Dissolve" is paradigmatic of contemporary Indigenous poetics that insist that form is material, what the world makes and is made of. Like the work of other writers influenced by their collaboration at the Institute of American Indian Arts, including Joan Naviyuk Kane, Santee Frazier, Layli Long Soldier, Abigail Chabitnoy, d. g. nanouk okpik, Jakes Skeets, and Orlando White, Bitsui's poetry uses description as a mode of direct action, a practice of opening language to and with the force of the living earth systems. As a poetics and an extension of Indigenous practices of art and science, Bitsui's work is already doing what the Anthropocene as a political discourse purports to inspire: the rethinking of ontology and temporality in the light of the catastrophic ecological effects of centuries of colonial domination. The difference is that this rethinking is, in "Dissolve," a method rather than an outcome, a way of keeping and keeping thinking with a changing world.

[II]

The Anthropocene is an epoch, and an epoch is a way of organizing time using the rules of geology. Epochs are measured in rock and begin or end when an event leaves a trace, or signature, legible and significant to geologists. Events that do not leave signatures do not define epochs. Epochs occur in progressive chronological order and give shape to a singular concept of earth's history. The earth's most recent epochs have been defined by changes of temperature, but the event that defines the Anthropocene is understood to be a change in the power of human beings. Within geology, the Anthropocene might be a theory, which is to say an explanation whose testing produces knowledge. But beyond geology, it might more plausibly be described as an obstacle to theory. The Anthropocene makes rules out of questions that are usually the conditions for theory: for instance, What is history? What is the relation between time and event and being? What is a sign or a trace? What is human? What is power? And insofar as the Anthropocene is more than a metric specific to geology—a symbol, for instance, of political and ecological crisis—it makes crisis the condition in which theory is possible only on its own unbearably constrained terms. Like other articulations of

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812920000115 Published online by Cambridge University Press

crisis in colonial capitalism, the Anthropocene has not changed but has reproduced structures of power—in this case, disciplinary power. Its impact on the humanities has been thematic: not a new way to organize through study, but the imposition of a premise that produces minor revisions, oppositions, or defenses in the same generic forms.

Although the Anthropocene is a relatively new term, there is nothing new about how it erases histories of Indigenous life and thought by organizing academic work around colonial concepts of humanity, earth, history, and crisis. In fact, the robust traditions of Indigenous, Black, and decolonial challenges to precisely this colonial disciplinary practice mean that critiques of the Anthropocene are older than the term itself. I want to challenge the disciplinary primacy of colonial ontology in two ways: first, by refusing the erasure the Anthropocene normalizes, and, second, by positioning my reading of Bitsui's work as an extension of existing Indigenous critical traditions rather than as a counterpoint to the Anthropocene in particular.

Mark Minch-de Leon—whose work critiques the coloniality of the concept of the human, particularly as it informs discourses of revitalization—points to the writing of Vine Deloria, Jr., and George Tinker, for whom questions of ontology are minor aspects of broader modalities of relation: relation not only as a living matrix of connection but also as an interpretive methodology (206). Taking the statement "'We are all relatives' . . . as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge," Deloria writes, "means that we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it. That is to say, everything in the natural world has relationships with each other and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it." This approach means that it is "not necessary to postulate the existence of an ideal world of perfect forms . . . or to suggest that space, time, and matter were inherent and absolute qualities of the physical world, which, when properly described in mathematical terms, could accurately explain the universe" (34). As a consequence, theorizing ontological difference is already included in practices of making and understanding the world broadly, and in practices of reading the earth and earth histories specifically. Deloria writes, "Thus Indians knew that stones were the perfect beings because they were self-contained entities that had resolved their social relationships and possessed great knowledge about how every other entity, and every species should live" (38). Here, ontological difference has little meaning outside relation as a matter of social, political, and epistemic complementarity. Interpretation of that difference occurs in the past, present, and future and implies no interpretive preference for a position of social activity and does not associate stones' social withdrawal with accessibility or obvious legibility. To the contrary, as Tinker writes, the "consciousness and intelligence of rocks" is primary and precursive: "once the consciousness of rocks is understood, the mystery of human consciousness will be a relatively simple matter to unlock" (122).

From this perspective, the Anthropocene's concept of a humanity thinkable as separate from, or as having unilateral impact on, the earth or its histories might most generously be understood as a kind of self-diagnosis of ontological fetishization as bad relationality. Humanity conceived as such demonstrates primarily its poor explanatory power. Such a reading of the ontological presuppositions that subtend the Anthropocene dovetails with Black studies' critiques of the anti-Blackness of universal constructions of humanity. For instance, Demetrius Eudell observes that the Anthropocene "seems to minimize an understanding in which . . . [humankind's] imprint can be seen to have only been possible by the emergence of a distinctly new conception of Being Human," one that presumes an ontological separateness not only from the earth but also from racialized "Human Others" (195–96). Eudell applies to his analysis of the Anthropocene what Sylvia Wynter famously terms "the overrepresentation of Man"—that is, "Man" as what always already depends on the production and classification of "Human Other[s]": "the savage Other, the fossil Other, the abnormal Other, the timeless ethnographic Other, [and] the Black Other of sub-Saharan Africans (and their Diaspora descendants)" (267). Wynter shows that "Man" is an effect and engine of colonial

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812920000115 Published online by Cambridge University Press

violence and that it is disciplinarily productive: a way of organizing knowledge systems around taxonomies of "Human Others." In the context of the Anthropocene, this same disciplinary productiveness informs new materialism's appropriation and erasure of Indigenous knowledge. As Zoe Todd argues, colonial constructions of universal humanity directly inform further disciplinary expansions of political ontology in which the changing climate is figured as an "*aer nullius*," a politically unclaimed theater of common "cosmopolitical concern" for all beings (8). Not only do such disciplinary developments fail to engage with Indigenous theories of being, they also—through the ruse of universal vulnerability—obscure analyses that would situate colonialism as the ongoing cause of climate catastrophe.

The Anthropocene's ontological equivocation, its abstraction of being from relation, also transforms time into a tool for erasing Indigenous experiences and theories of history. The explanatory power of the epoch as a unit of time depends on linking the ontological difference between human and earth with a universal, progressive concept of time. Proposed Anthropocene boundary points like 1611 (the year of an atmospheric carbon dip associated with the extermination of fifty million Indigenous and enslaved people in the Americas) and 1945 (the Trinity Test's inauguration of nuclear modernity) render Indigenous histories and materialisms legible as absence (Lewis and Maslin; Zalasiewicz et al.).[1] As a consequence, Indigenous human relations with land are fossilized as colonial history while nonabstract and nonlinear Indigenous theories of history are explicitly excluded from the politically urgent present. This is not only colonial erasure in the guise of disciplinary refinement, it is also a marginalization of the tools Indigenous people derive from theories of history unconstrained by teleology. As Kyle Powys Whyte observes, such theories are specifically relevant to the question of surviving climate catastrophe, including the ability to draw together trajectories of knowledge and power from multiple generations toward a practice of recommitting to and renewing life-sustaining relations with an always changing world.

[III]

Midway through "Dissolve," in a comparatively straightforward moment in the poem, Bitsui writes:

> Benches face *before*.
>
> I push into a coin slot:
> the sound of pills pebbling
> an emergency room floor.
>
> My thinking *stills*.
>
> A new oxygen fills my reasons for stalling.
>
> (34)

It is a quiet and expansive scene and one in which Bitsui names a layered threshold of miserable dematerialization, one emptied of witnesses and organizing concept. But, in the echoes of spilling pills, the moment holds out against resolution and instead makes room for stillness. Here "still" echoes too: as absence, as withholding, as remainder, as foreclosure, as softening, as clarification. The engines of violence in this part of the poem (progressive history, capital, biopolitics) are suggested but never resolve to the stable or explanatory posture of antagonist. Instead, the poem becomes an occasion to listen to the ricochet and blend of language coming apart along with the narrative composition of the scene. Perhaps this is an odd moment to center in order to think about environmental humanities' methods, but what happens here seems utterly more urgent, to me, than any new concept of crisis or any attempt to make colonial analytics more inclusive. This is a moment about attending to the discomposure of ordinary relations in which language and thinking are more sensitive when they *still*. I take the title of this essay from "Dissolve" as a way of asking how the environmental humanities might become a medium, as language is in this poem, for drawing out and slowing down attention to what remains, what withdraws, what sounds differently or more clearly amid a world catastrophically changing —a suggestion that would put at risk any implication that the discipline needs to move forward faster or grow bigger to hold together.

While ecological catastrophe poses hard questions about the relevance of the humanities, the Anthropocene

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812920000115 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is a framework that achieves disciplinary consolidation by erasing Indigenous thinking. In many ways the environmental humanities is the paradigm for this kind of violent disciplinary reinvention. As I turn to Bitsui's "Dissolve," I want to ask if, in setting aside concepts like the Anthropocene, this field in particular might be able to imagine relations with Indigenous and Black creative and critical texts that mobilize students and scholars toward decolonization and the politics of abolition. Here, "still thinking" indexes a methodological interest in work that is slow and that brings clarifying attention to matters of relation in opposition to disciplinary mandates for expansion and self-preservation. This is a methodological shift that Indigenous and Black feminist scholars have already begun to theorize. For instance, Tiffany King, in *The Black Shoals*, uses the material and historical figure of the shoal "as a form of chafing and rubbing up against the normative flows of Western thought [to] interrupt and slow the momentum of [sanctioned] modes and itineraries for theorizing New World violence" (2). Further, and underscoring the sense of stillness as continuation and resoluteness, Mishuana Goeman theorizes "a Native feminist praxis" in which "disrupting" colonial political and epistemic frameworks is an active "dismantl[ing of] the narrative that colonization, or conquest is complete." Drawing on Linda Hogan's novel *Solar Storms*, Goeman insists that "the temporality of the everyday provides a new chance for creation because 'creation is not yet over'" (117). Rather than intensify its collaboration with methods defined by colonial epistemologies and political aspirations, can the environmental humanities commit to chafing, undoing, and re-creating its own theoretical precepts toward decolonization and the politics of abolition?

Bitsui's "Dissolve" is an inspiring and challenging touchstone for such a project. It is a poem organized by method rather than concept, context, or formalisms recognizable from within canonical poetry studies in the United States. What is recognizable, however, is that its method is intensely materialist in the sense that it investigates changing material (specifically, human and ecological) relations through the proposition that language itself is inextricable from those changing material relations. He writes:

> I replace what I saw
> with what I heard,
>
> pull out a letter
> sent from *ourself* to my *selves*
>
> —and for a second
> the flattened field is chandeliered
> by desert animal constellations.
>
> (14)

Like the rest of the nearly sixty-page poem, this moment is defined not by transparent referents of voice, form, or situation but rather by an interest in the material and epistemic generativity of its deconstruction of colonial phenomenology, subjectivity, and world. The poem opens up around a shift it does not disclose but marks "—and for a second."[2] To read these lines is to fill up the pause the poem makes with the work of connecting its stunning re-creation of "field" (at once on and beyond the page) with the phenomenological and ontological transformations it begins with.

Elsewhere, Bitsui applies this method to more specific material transformations, including the histories of uranium mining, nuclear testing, livestock reduction, colonial land seizure, water appropriation, and militarized surveillance whose impact on Diné and other Indigenous peoples in the Southwest is nothing short of world-ending:

> A hovering smear
> trailing desert washes
> fenced in with a murder of mirrors
> illumines the eating groaning over us.
>
> Nibbling blades of winter light:
> the goat's bleating leased downwind
> pastures among foals dripping out
> of hollowed-out dictionaries.
>
> Jeweled with houseflies,
> leather rattles, foil wrapped,
> ferment in beaked masks
> on the shores of evaporating lakes.
>
> This plot, now a hotel garden,
> its fountain gushing forth—
> the slashed wrists of the Colorado.
>
> (21)

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812920000115 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As a method for thinking about social and ecological catastrophe, this moment models a rigorous cotheorization of ontology, temporality, violence, and knowledge—all of which change in relation with and *as* catastrophe. In one sense, the insight these lines offer students and scholars in the environmental humanities has to do with how the text's unruly kinetics slow down or still thinking, which is to say that they restrain customary explanations about what environmental violence is, who and what it affects, and what it leaves behind. At the same time, the language of the poem opens itself with extraordinary sensitivity to what it means for vital desert ecosystems to be stilled—that is, exhausted, ruined, and desiccated by colonial extraction. The poem is unwilling to express that violence through simplistic and specious ontological binaries, and so it makes language itself the medium through which its complexity is registered.

Reading and writing about "Dissolve" as a way of rethinking theories and methods of interpretation in the context of climate catastrophe is not easy; and that, to an extent, is the point. Whereas the Anthropocene has hardened colonial binarizations of ontology and history and has reproduced structures of disciplinary power, "Dissolve" invites readers to change their relation to language, being, and history along with a changing world. What that change amounts to is not something reducible to a single line or passage. The poem works rather more like a shifting palimpsest through which new and recurring patterns shimmer in and beyond attention. However, one especially powerful pattern is a sequence of participles Bitsui marks in italics but spreads out across different parts of the poem:

> This mountain stands near us: *mountaining*
> (16)
>
> Under them—a hush returns,
> *sistering* everybody's blood clots to each other.
> (51)
>
> Falling from their cut hair:
> hearth sounds *sunlighting*
> the hallway back to then.
> (58)
>
> What lies beneath *naming*: they curl outward with wool scent.
> (63)

Language bends at each moment in the sequence with changing conditions of sociality and knowledge. Being and relation are inextricable and inexorably moving. To me, the sequence underscores a methodological commitment—one that disciplinary formations like the environmental humanities need in order to move toward decolonization—to attend to systems and histories of relation that are still thinking, organizing, and recreating themselves, despite and even under conditions of extreme duress.

Notes

1. While the way Lewis and Maslin's Orbis Hypothesis—which attributes the dip in atmospheric carbon in 1611 to the mass death of Indigenous and enslaved people—reduces Indigenous life and land to a signature of absence is relatively apparent, the 1945 boundary point identified by Zalasiewicz and his colleagues trades the visibility of atmospheric radioactivity for that of the Indigenous land obliterated by thousands of nuclear tests and the thousands of Indigenous lives destroyed by exposure to radiation in the aftermath of largely unregulated uranium mining.

2. The dash (as well as the ellipsis and hyphen) as gesture of suggestion, refusal, and enactment is an explicit and sustained interest of the poem (see pp. 5, 12, 20, 28, 31, 43, 55).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812920000115 Published online by Cambridge University Press