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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Case for a Radically Relational (Non-Anthropocentric) Democracy

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Abstract
While the election of authoritarian-style regimes in the West shocks those with liberal-democratic sensibilities, the authors argue it is not unexpected in a system that was founded upon the same colonial rationalities that produced the capitalist global order. The Cartesian logics that produce the liberal-democratic, autonomous-human subject also enable the emergence of the conquering (*ego conquiro*) and genocidal (*ego extermino*) subject – whether through White ignorance, White supremacy, ecocide, or other structures of violence. The authors argue, however, that this moment of shock represents a critical opportunity for us to radically (from the roots) transform our liberal democracies. Turning to multiple, extant Indigenous, alternative, and emancipatory democratic traditions, they call for the composting of liberal democracy's hyper-individualism through a transformative politics of radical, non-anthropocentric relational democracy.

Keywords: decolonial cosmopolitan localism; global white ignorance; modernity/coloniality; radical relational theory; reflexive politics; structural agency; sympoiesis

Introduction

In recent days and years, core tenets, institutions, and practices that have come to define Western liberal democracies have increasingly been attacked and eroded by democratically elected regimes. This erosion is occurring both physically, through highly systematized, everyday violence inequitably enacted on certain bodies and populations, and institutionally, where the blows to democratic institutions, processes, and civic practices locally and globally have been swifter and potentially more fatal than many thought possible. The move to oppose and reverse these erosions at the local, national, and international levels is life-saving—both immediately and for future generations. However, within this moment of overwhelm lies an equally profound opportunity not to be missed: the opportunity to radically (from the roots) transform our Western democracies through re-situating them on relational grounds.

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The urgency of the moment tempts us toward a politics of return, characterized by democratic nostalgia or even romanticism. However, this politics relies on a paucity of imagination wholly insufficient for the challenges ahead. It dangerously obscures and prevents a deeper reflection into the ways that Western liberal democratic institutions and logics have themselves contributed to the grounds upon which authoritarianism might thrive. Such a politics of return is quintessential to Churchillian and Thatcherite democratic logics, which argue that no viable, better alternatives to Western liberal democracies exist. Repeating a colonial erasure of the countless existing Indigenous governance systems that have long practiced radically relational forms of democracy, such thinking generates tyrannies of the present that are notable for their delimitation of social imaginaries and suggestion that transformative change toward something better will always be idealistic and/or out of reach.

In contrast, we call for a politics of transformation through which we might re-situate our contemporary democracies on radically relational—and explicitly non-anthropocentric—grounds. This politics is necessarily characterized by both democratic humility and vision. Rooted in relational conceptualizations of the world, we posit that relational democracies constitute radically distinct forms of democracy from those reflected and enacted in mainstream, contemporary Western liberal democracies. Given that the term "radical" etymologically refers to that which is of—or goes to—the roots, relational democracies are inherently radical insofar as they are rooted in a distinct ontology, worldview, or understanding of reality than that upon which liberal democracies are founded. Honouring ancestral knowledges, radical relationism advances that relations (vs. autonomous individuals)—dynamic, fluid entanglements—are what *everything* is made of. Indigenous governance systems are a key example of living and ancestral democracies that are not organized around the individual or the human, but around the interconnected relationships and inherent reciprocity between all beings, including the land and the more-than-human. Animated by living practices of rooted (Mills 2018) and complex relationalities (Starblanket 2018), relational accountability (Wilson 2008), and gift-reciprocity (Kimmerer 2013) among others, these governance systems inspire a democratic vision not just for what else is possible within Western democracies, but for what already is (Simpson 2017).

To establish the case for a "radically relational democracy," we first step into a practice of democratic humility, through which we consider the anthropocentric and individualistic logics of disconnect around which contemporary Western liberal democracies are organized. The call for democratic humility is for a self-reflexive consideration of how the Cartesian *ego cogito*, or liberal-democratic autonomous-human subject, disconnects itself from the ways it actively participates in and/or perpetuates oppression and othering. To us, individualistic Cartesian logics of disconnect represent a non-relational or substantialist way of thinking (Emirbayer 1997), or what Karen Barad (2007) refers to as "Cartesian habits of mind" that think of reality in mechanistic and anthropocentric terms. In citing such logics, we are not presenting Cartesian philosophical disquisition, but pointing to the substantialist and non-relational structures of thought upon which liberal democracy relies. Within these structures, the concept of the individual human person is abstracted from its inherent relationships, assumed to be self-contained and autonomous, —as exemplified by "I think therefore

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I am." We explore how these logics both foster and legitimize the grounds for authoritarian, colonial, and White supremacist impulses and practices that are laughably at odds with the values professed under liberal democratic conceptions of liberty, freedom, and equality. From human exceptionalism's anthropocentrism, to nation-state citizenship categories, to the privileging of individual human (vs. community) rights, hyper-individualist, Cartesian ways of thinking and being persist everywhere within our democracies (Nelems 2022).

In this paper, we argue that it is the naturalization of individualistic, Cartesian logics of disconnect within mainstream democratic sensibilities—however innocuous they may appear—that itself paves the way for violent, authoritarian, and genocidal ways of being to emerge and even thrive. The democratic election of an authoritarian movement is, for many, an unexpected (and certainly unwelcome) shock. Phenomenologically, however, this shock tells us as much about the rationalities underpinning it as it does the threat itself. Drawing on the lessons of radical relational theory, this moment should not be a call for liberal democrats to batten down hatches and expel the invading Other, but rather a call to radically (at the roots) consider how authoritarian movements may have been actively bred and advanced from within (Gane 2012). Why was the 2025 proposal by the US administration to make it a 51st state shocking within the nation of Canada, which was founded through imposing its sovereignty over hundreds of Indigenous nations? Such moments expose and render blatant the myth that authoritarianism is an outside terrorist threatening to destroy the walls of democracy. It has long been a domestic resident within Western liberal-democratic logics.

We explain this through decolonial concepts such as the compounded modernity/coloniality (Dussel 1993; Mignolo 2021; Quijano 2000), where modernity is seen as inextricably entwined with a colonial logic that is often hidden, yet ongoing. We briefly discuss philosopher Mills' (2023) notion of "Global White Ignorance" as a culture of Whiteness that denies its oppressive aspects to remain innocent. The concept of "slow emergencies" (Anderson et al. 2020) supports our argument that there is no place of innocence, whereby the colonial, genocidal violence upon which global capitalism was built entailed the explicit denial of emergencies for the marginalized for the purposes of exploitation, dispossession, and extractivism—realities that continue in late global capitalism as supported by Western liberal democracies.

Nevertheless, the Western liberal democratic subject's egoic identification with the values of emancipation, freedom, and equality can be leveraged as they have substantial precedent through multiple emancipatory and anti-oppression leaders and movements who have advanced eco-social justice by democratic means. These actors have made significant headway in the name of these values in the world. From women's suffrage, civil rights, anti-war, Indigenous resurgence, 2SLGBTQI+, anti-racist, anti-colonial, Black Lives Matter, workers' rights, immigrants' rights, climate, and countless other justice movements, people have transformed and continue to radically transform our society through leveraging these democratic values and mechanisms across time and place. While these values exist within the liberal democratic system, the structure of the liberal, individualistic disconnection in late global capitalism has significantly impeded their structural impact.

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At the end of this paper, we turn to relational concepts and theories that thwart and disrupt Cartesian individualistic logics of separation. We resort to and/or adjust these relational concepts and theories to include the more-than-human and an awareness of deep (radical) relationality with all that is, as well as foreground Indigenous voices and theories of kinship and complex relationalities (Starblanket 2018). We will discuss and adapt a series of radically relational, compound concepts, including structural agency (la paperson 2017), sympoiesis (Haraway 2016), decolonial cosmopolitan localism (Mignolo 2021), and our radical relational version of reflexive politics (Christodoulidis 2006). According to the latter, the revisability of the political is endemic to democratic politics, which ought to remain supple and flexible to fulfill the political needs of the *demos* or "the people." We propose that to radicalize reflexive politics, the notion of the *demos* itself ought to be open to the more-than-human. We propose that these concepts introduce radically relational democratic sensibilities to offer preliminary pathways by which we might renew and transform our democratic institutions and ways of being. On these grounds, we seek to advance a radically relational democracy that might be truer to its stated goals of freedom and equality, when also infused with the relationally accountable lenses of justice and decolonization for all.

Individualistic logics of disconnect in Western liberal democracies

A pause to reflect upon the contemporary moment of surprise, horror, and/or shock marked by centrist and left-leaning media, as well as the social media pages of many liberal democrats, is helpful at this point. For example, the 2024 presidential election in the US was democratically won based on xenophobic and authoritarian campaign promises that the administration went on to dutifully fulfil, such as its immigration policies, use of the military, and weaponization of the judicial system. This has been received with shock by those with liberal-democratic proclivities all over the world. The trends toward othering, domination, and violence inspired by or at the hands of democratically elected authoritarian leaders—and the seemingly growing, explicit popular acceptance of it amongst citizens in Western liberal democracies—are unquestionably horrific. This trend is evident not only in the United States, but also in other European democracies, such as Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, as well as in Argentina, India, Israel, and El Salvador. The expression of this horror is a most welcome reflection amongst the citizenry whose values align with the kind of radically relational democracy of which we write. However, we must also pay attention to the shock and surprise that accompany this horror. Just like the expression of horror indicates certain underlying beliefs and values, responses of shock or surprise belie another implicit structure of thought—namely, an implicit or pre-cognitive (Machado de Oliveira 2021) belief that Western liberal democracies (at least contemporary ones) are or have been innocent of such forms of othering, domination, and violence. As any Indigenous person across Turtle Island can attest, these liberal democracies have been no strangers to practices of othering, domination, and violence (Whyte 2018).

A useful concept to show how Western liberal democracies are not innocent of such forms of othering is Quijano's (2000) Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP),

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which denounces modernity/coloniality and individualist disconnected thinking. In his framework, modernity was created and sustained through colonial violence within his dual concept, where modernity and coloniality are like two sides of the same coin. As Machado de Oliveira (2021) notes, Quijano's concept "underscore[s] the fact that violence and unsustainability are necessary for modernity to exist" (p. 18). In other words, modernity and its expansion as currently developed under global capitalism were only possible through systematic practices of exploitation, dispossession, and extractivism. Within modernity/coloniality, Machado de Oliveira (2021) specifies how conquest has been a driving force in this modernity: "the colonial desires to "discover," to conquer, occupy, own, rule, and control propel modernity forward" (p. 19). Dussel (1993) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) refer to this as the "I conquer, therefore I am" or *ego conquiro* that complements the traditional Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" or *ego cogito*. Thus, whilst the "modernity" side is sustained and enacted through/by the *ego cogito* or the knowing self, the "coloniality" side is sustained and enacted through/by the *ego conquiro* (Dussel 1993; Maldonado-Torres 2007), or the conquering self.

Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) goes further to propose that the *ego cogito/conquiro* duality has been historically, culturally, and structurally "glued" together by the *ego extermino* ("I exterminate, therefore I am"), or the self who exterminates by naturalizing genocidal practices, especially against racialized people. The products of *ego extermino* are genocides and inter-related *epistemicides*, "that is, the extermination of knowledge and ways of knowing"—a notion put forth by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (cit. by Grosfoguel 2013, p. 74). The "glue" that binds the *ego cogito* with the *ego conquiro*, according to Grosfoguel, emerged in the extermination events during what Braudel calls the "long 16th century" from 1450 to 1650, when the European capitalist world-economy began to form. Grosfoguel (2013) speaks of four genocidal/epistemicidal campaigns, 1) against Muslims and Jews in Al-Andalus or Andalucia in Spain, 2) against Indigenous peoples whose lands were stolen, 3) against African peoples whose bodies were also stolen and exploited in slavery (and their lands also stolen), 4) and against women burned alive, seen as witches because they used ancestral knowledge in Europe.

An everyday example of how today's democratic societies enact the dual concept of modernity/coloniality is the contemporary conception and governance of "emergencies." In their article "Slow emergencies: Temporality and the racialized biopolitics of emergency governance," Anderson et al. (2020) draw on human geography and political theory to show how emergencies are implicitly defined within liberal democracies as spectacular events that disrupt the conveniences of modern life for the individualistic and disconnected self of anthropocentric, Cartesian logics. Anderson *et al.* mobilize concepts such as "slow violence" (Rob Nixon), "crisis ordinariness" (Lauren Berlant), "structural violence" (Galtung), "necropolitics" (Mbembe), and studies of "environmental racism" (Pulido, Bullard) to theorize the concept of "slow emergencies" that puts into relief the multiple forms of harm and suffering that do not fit the event-based understanding of "emergency" within Western liberal democracies. They argue that the latter fails to consider the ongoing and often invisible crises endured by marginalized and racialized people. Anderson et al. (2020) call traditional emergency governance "liberal biopolitics," where emergency governance is shown to blur the line between the everyday and the exceptional, which includes mundane techniques of governance,

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such as preparedness, exercises, scenarios, as well as the legal/juridical exceptional "state of emergency." They use these concepts to show that the liberal anticipation of an open-ended, improvable future of a sudden emergency is available to (rich and White) individualistic liberal subjects, yet depends historically and materially on the ongoing death and negation of Black and Indigenous lives embedded in repetitive temporalities characterized by stagnation, decline, and a continual re-living of past violences. Anderson et al. (2020) define "slow emergencies" as situations marked by four key features: 1) "attritional lethality" that refers to ongoing, incremental harm and deterioration for the marginalized (e.g., chronic illness from environmental contamination or ongoing dispossession). 2) "Imperceptibility" of slow emergencies because they do not fit the spectacular model of the emergencies of liberal societies and do not happen to White individualistic and disconnected bodies. 3) "Foreclosure of the capacity to become otherwise" refers to claims of incapacity to do anything about the ongoing disasters that marginalized relational selves have endured since colonial times. 4) "Dismissal or indifference of emergency claims" that marginalized activists and artists face from authorities as they demand urgent recognition and action. In other words, liberal emergency governance requires clear distinctions between everyday life and emergency—temporal distinctions that are made possible by the ongoing subjugation, disposability, and suffering of racialized others. With respect to Western democracies, Anderson et al. (2020) draw on theorists like Agamben to say that legal and political declarations of emergency in liberal societies that are intended to restore order or protect the population can easily tip governance toward authoritarianism—a phenomenon also visible today under the current US administration through the fabrication of made-up emergencies.

In contrast, "slow emergencies" expose the racialized and colonial foundations—and we add, anthropocentrism—of the democratic rationalities underpinning liberal biopolitics. We add to Anderson et al.'s (2020) work that this culture of emergency within liberal democracies also normalizes the violent, ecocidal destruction of ecosystems and the more-than-human as collateral damage amidst governance responses seeking to address more important crises for more important beings (humans embodied in Whiteness). "Slow emergencies" then are an invitation to engage critically with the governance of crises that affect the most vulnerable relational selves—and to help us see that the normalcy of liberal societies depends upon reproducing the slow emergencies that have been imposed on marginalized populations and the relational selves that capitalism does not see as selves (as in mountains, rivers, oceans) since the time of brutal violence in the long sixteenth century.

Going back to the notion of liberal individuality as a colonial concept, which, as has been said, can be exemplified by the Cartesian habits of mind and individualistic logics of disconnect, the abstract individual self who thinks establishes the measure of who is not human and who is less than human. The liberal biopolitics of emergency governance represents a continuum with such a notion of valued "human being" in its selective recognition of what counts as an emergency and is acted upon, which tends to privilege the lives and futures of populations who typically embody the "valued life" of the liberal individualistic subject who is embodied in Whiteness—while ignoring or dismissing claims from marginalized, racialized, or colonized populations. The concept

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of "slow emergencies" shows the racialized exclusions embedded in the liberal democratic order and challenges the universalism of liberal democracy that operates under the colonial assumption of universal protection and value. Charles Mills (2023) refers to the cancelling of such racialized exclusions as "Global White Ignorance," which is congenial with the findings of decolonial scholars in their studies of the occlusion of coloniality in their compounded concept of modernity/coloniality.

Mills (2023) tells us that he speaks about a White ignorance that is global but not uniform because "the boundaries of whiteness will not always be drawn in the same way in different countries, nor does the designation of whiteness rule out internal 'racial' heterogeneities and hierarchies within the white population itself" (p. 37). So, Whiteness can be seen as a culture rather than as a phenotype (although everyone in the world can see race). Mills discusses how Whiteness has engaged in an erasure of racism as a central modern ideology that presents clear "moves to innocence" (Tuck and Yang 2012) that seek to see racism as a deviation from the norm that Western liberal democracies embrace. Decolonial scholars insist that naturalizing race is essential to othering in coloniality—as well as gender, ability, sexuality—but race is paradigmatic of coloniality and helps visualize that modernity is sustained in cultures of Whiteness, White supremacy, and cis-hetero-patriarchy. As we have seen, Western liberal democracies have internalized oppressive practices in direct association with coloniality through racialization (Quijano 2000), but also in many othering practices through the binomial superior/inferior of colonial thinking. So, Western liberal democracies are also colonial in the way modern nation-states were founded on slow emergencies for racialized peoples and othered minorities. With the notion of global White ignorance, we want to stress the hierarchical order embedded in late global capitalism, where individualistic logics of disconnection keep working to estrange abstract individuality from its collusion with processes of power in Western liberal democracies. This system is programmed to conquer for exploitation and/or to exterminate the other (in a racialized body or not) for extractivism. White ignorance is essentially the reason that citizens who hold liberal-democratic values dear experience shock and horror when witnessing current trends of democratic electoral wins of right-wing and autocratic leaders.

The rational, liberal, individual subject is essentially constructed as autonomous and free because of this disconnect, its ignorance of its reliance on occluded structures of power in place since colonialism, and its ongoing coloniality. Insofar as the rational, liberal, individual human subject remains the core unit around which contemporary Western democracies are organized (anthropocentrism), White ignorance is reproduced and an awareness of deep or radical, fluid, embedded, embodied, and entangled relationality remains elusive.

The individualistic order of liberal democracy stands in stark contrast to radically relational orders such as Indigenous governance and knowledge systems. As outlined in the next section, radically relational democratic systems of governance that center the relational as the core unit of existence and governance and de-center the individual (superior) human subject are not just possible, they are actual, and have been around for millennia (Simpson 2017). The push for mainstream Western democracies to reconceptualize and reclaim democracy from its individualistic, anthropocentric expression toward radically relationality can thus look to ancient precedent. A politics of return to liberal democratic values doubles down on the erasure of multiple

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Indigenous governance systems that have democratically existed and still persist today through radically relational ways of being (Mills 2018; Simpson 2017). Traditional liberal-democratic politics thus myopically generate a one-dimensional (Marcuse 1964) understanding and experience of democracy, which are also leveraged to generate colonial and individualist logics of disconnect and separation. As Gane (2012) notes, we are mistaken to consider the emergence of anti-democratic systems, such as neoliberalism, as a roll-back of democratic government; it has instead been rolled out through democratic means. Indigenous people across the world can tell you there is nothing shocking or surprising in a Western democratic government's move to usurp another nation's sovereignty or question another people's right to exist. Canada and the US founded themselves on this very play that built their liberal democracies by creating continuing and moldering slow emergencies for the Indigenous peoples of the land, a land that was stolen for the "productive" purposes of colonialism-then-capitalism, and continues with exploitation and extractivism in the White ignorance of late global capitalism. We propose that for us to be able to conceive of democracy as radically relational, the way we think about political participation and the structure of the *demos* ought to transform to seeing humans and the more-than-human as radically entangled, in line with Indigenous knowledge traditions and legal orders.

Indigenous kinship land systems vs Western (colonial) anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is a liberal democratic structure in line with individualistic Cartesian logics of disconnect, whereby only humans are recognized as rights-bearing citizens. At a basic level, the dismissal of the notion that the more-than-human might have rights or status within a democratic governance system on their own terms merely lacks imagination. While some Western democratic theorists reference this core divide (e.g., Tully 2018), too much democratic theory ignores this obvious individualist structure inherent to the very foundations of Western liberal democracies, choosing instead to work within the anthropocentric logics within which democracy established itself. The latter logics erase the more-than-human (just as it denied citizenship to women, Indigenous, Blacks, etc.) through the suggestion of it being illogical and impractical. "How would nature vote?," some conjecture with an unveiled tone of dismissal.

A more critical view might propose this dismissal as ignorance, given that at least two liberal democracies *have constitutionally extended democratic rights to the more-than-human*, as in the cases of Ecuador and Aotearoa (New Zealand) (Espinosa 2019; Margil 2010). However, this again acknowledges relationalities when integrated within a liberal democratic system while blatantly disregarding, in an act of cognitive imperialism (Simpson 2011), the countless relational democratic systems of Indigenous governance across the world, within which the personhood of the more-than-human is fully recognized (Mills 2018; Kimmerer 2013). While the title of this article posits that we make "the case" for a radically relational democracy within the halls of global democratic theorizing, it is critical to acknowledge that this case has long been made, not only by multiple Indigenous theorists, scholars, and leaders, but through legal and democratic precedent. Another kind of democracy is not only possible, it is actual (Pérez Piñán et al. 2021). For these reasons, we turn to Indigenous

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conceptions of relationality as those that show the radically transformative ways of being and thinking by which more democracies might find more relational pathways.

Indeed, it is the ongoing persistence of such radically relational governance systems (Simpson 2017) that puts into the sharpest relief the profound shortcomings of Western contemporary democracies: that the earth and all the more-than-human beings that sustain and enable human existence are both silently and blatantly outcast as non-citizens who are unworthy of representation, voice, and rights. Scholarship on legal and constitutional developments in Ecuador (Espinosa 2019; Margil 2010) outlines how their constitution, passed through democratic means by democratically elected actors, gives rights not in the name of "Nature," but *Pachamama*, the Quichua name for *the force behind all life*—a testament to local Indigenous nations. Democratic arguments were used to establish the foundation for extending rights to nature in the case of Ecuador, with reference to the inherent structural violence of excluding nature from our democracies: "we cannot protect nature so long as we continue to treat it as property, much like we could not protect slaves so long as we treated them as property" (Margil 2010, p. 9).

Understanding the links between slavery and anthropocentrism (among other structures) becomes central to re-envisioning our Western liberal democracies in radically relational ways:

> Nature – through theology, philosophy, and even the use of science – is considered inferior to humankind. Much like science was used to "prove" that those of African descent were intellectually inferior to whites, we continue today to question whether non-human animals are capable of feeling, communication, and intelligence. Doing so allows us to consider and behave as though nature is inferior (Margil 2010, pp. 3–4).

Whyte (2018) notes that "at least for some Anishinaabe persons historically and today, it is not necessarily true that such an identity as 'the human' as a distinct or uniquely rational or knowledgeable type of being even exists" (p. 127). Mills (2018) describes Anishinaabe constitutional orders as being rooted in the inherent kinship and indivisible, reciprocal relations between humans and the more-than-human, while Utiaj Paati of the Shuar Nation views the "nonhuman" as a "Western construct" (Deshoulliere and Paati 2019). Moreover, Whyte (2018) explains that some humans living in rooted relationships with the more-than-human in fact might consider themselves more dependent on the latter's knowledges than their own. This includes an intra-subjective understanding of their own identity as entwined with their environment that manifests in reciprocal care and responsibility for it in their shared lifeworld:

> There is also no privileging of humans as unique in having agency or intelligence, so one's identity and caretaking responsibility as a human includes the philosophy that nonhumans have their own agency, spirituality, knowledge, and intelligence. Potawatomi people, in daily speech, often say that nonhumans have the capacity for knowledge but humans really do not (Kimmerer 2013). Thus, humans ought to take responsibility to be respectful of nonhuman ways of knowing (Whyte 2018, p. 127).

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Whyte (2018) cites Heidi Bohaker, who discusses *nindoodemag* (clan identities) to describe them as "kinship networks" that govern many aspects of their lives, and where people see themselves as having kin obligations to those in their clan, at the same time as related to the more-than-human through such entangled relations. Because of the entwinement and reciprocal care of humans in their environment and in those networks, human identity takes the form of nonhuman identities, as in Anishinaabe clan identities.

Radical relationality disrupts not only the divide and disconnection between humans and more-than-humans; it also disrupts the very notion of the separate rights-bearing individual around which contemporary Western liberal democracies are organized. As Wilson (2008) clarifies, we are not in relationship; we *are* our relationships. From this vantage point, democracies cannot indeed stand for equality unless they acknowledge the inherent equality of the more-than-human in policies, practices, and institutions that secure this equality. They advance logics of supremacy, dominance, and violence as long as the more-than-human is relegated to a status of non-citizenship. Once the fundamentally supremacist and exploitative roots of modern Western liberal democracies is rendered visible, one can see that climate change is not a by-product of other systems beyond the control of democracies; it is one of numerous violent outcomes that is engineered through the very explicit design of democracy as anthropocentric or only pertaining to humans.

As some may try to argue that the grouping of a democratic nation denotes a social or indeed even a relational one, it is important to note that relational ontologies cannot sustain anthropocentric, Cartesian, individualistic, us/them logics. Tully's (2018) work shows how in order to install an individual as a modern citizen within such institutions, they are first disembedded from prior relationships, including kinship relationships they have with the more-than-human, through processes of "…ongoing dispossession and alienation of human communities from their participatory ways of being in the living earth as plain members and responsible citizens, and the discrediting of the participatory ways of knowing that go along with them" (Tully 2018, p. 108). Calling this the "great dis-embedding," Tully (2018) references Polanyi to document the processes by which modern civil citizenship then re-embeds humans "…in abstract and competitive economic, political, and legal relationships that depend on yet destroy the underlying interdependent ecological and social relationships" (p. 104). Uprooted from these relationships (Mills 2018), these systems enact anthropocentric logics of separation and disconnection such that they become common sense and naturalized.

There is now more mainstream awareness of the ways in which democratically elected leaders might leverage or use democratic policies and precedents to enact authoritarian policies and outcomes that are seemingly out of step with the oft-pronounced ideals of liberal democracy: liberty, freedom, and equality. The anthropocentric Cartesian logics of disconnect that have long been rolled out (Gane 2012) by democratic means are rendered more blatant when authoritarian movements inspire and model hatred, violence toward others, and othering along multiple lines. From the cancellation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives to the funding of genocides, authoritarian regimes have unabashedly been leveraging democracy to advance the opposite (i.e., inequalities, injustices, and the advancement of liberty for

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only some). In other words, these regimes are using the coding of the machine to re-make (and in many people's minds, *un-make*) the machine itself (la paperson 2017).

Concepts toward a radically relational democracy

Liberal individualism, and its anthropocentric logic of disconnect, is based on seeing entities and substances, where radical relationism sees only relations in complex exchange, mutual co-construction, entanglement, and dynamic fluidity. Radical relationism is based on the premises that all that is and exists is engaged in the co-creation of reality, while at the same time every being is made up only of relations. We can identify "autonomous" entities for analytical purposes, but we can never separate them from their relations—whether social, human, or more-than-human. The radical relational concepts we propose strive to offer codes by which democratic systems and values might be reclaimed, reorganized, and transformed to radically relational effect. This entails taking Western liberal democracies' principles of emancipation, freedom, equality, justice, and radically relationalizing them to embrace the more-than-human in terms congenial with these liberal principles and concerns. In 1979, Lorde (1984) famously spoke the words: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). However, she knew there were "no new ideas" (p. 39), and no real "outside" of the house, so to speak. As such, she masterfully proposed that the tools, if reclaimed and used to generate radically distinct grounds of life together—"a world in which we can all flourish" (p. 112)—would no longer be the masters' tools, nor construct the same house. The teachings of multiple anti-racist, decolonial, and Indigenous theorists showcase that this trickster undoing and remaking of worlds has always been a practice by those on the Left—and is responsible for so many radical, progressive advancements toward justice in the world. Institutions and systems are more porous and less concrete (Ahmed 2012) than the Thatcherite logics, which have infiltrated anthropocentric conceptions and systems of liberal democracies, would have us believe. Simply "acting otherwise" (Tully 2008) is a means by which existing democratic structures can be leveraged and changed by agents within them, rather than accepted as imposed givens.

However, if Althusser (1969) shows us how structures determine and delimit us, and Foucault (1982) shows how we also always have agency even within the oppression of these systems (i.e., they are never fully closed, as in *sympoiesis*), countless anti-racist scholars (e.g., la paperson 2017; Ahmed 2012) Gaia democracy theorists (e.g., Tully 2008), Indigenous thinkers (e.g., Borrows 2018) and Indigenous resurgence movements show us that we have agency not just in spite of these structures, but also because of them through what la paperson (2017) calls "structural agency". But what are the specific processes by which this can be done, within the very real, material realities that these systems generate? If Western democracies are taken simply as the air we breathe, the logics of disconnect by which they have been constructed are hidden through their normalization as the settled foundations of multiple democratic institutions. While contesting the normalization of these liberal, individualistic, anthropocentric, Cartesian foundations does not destroy them, nor the material realities they generate, it points to their inherent constructedness and parochiality (Tully 2016), putting their claims to sovereignty into question.

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Ahmed's (2012) assertion that institutions are less concrete and immovable than they present themselves to be is corroborated by the swiftness with which authoritarian regimes re-cast and re-constitute democratic institutions in their own names. The processes by which transformative change toward radical relationality might also be enacted are not dissimilar. Institutions thus might be better conceived of as blueprints than as edifices—which are enacted every day through the habitualized practices (Ahmed 2012) of everyday people in everyday systems. la paperson (2017) argues that people are the "sculptors" (p. 64) of the institutional assemblages of which they are a part; insofar as they are agents enacting a system, their "agential capacity extends beyond" their own into the system itself—what they name "structural agency" (p. 61). In this way, la paperson (2017) argues, they might be "the decolonizing ghost[s] in the colonizing machine" (p. xxiv)—"disloyal" (p. 55) to colonialism or other structures of dominance: "The agency of the scyborg is precisely that it is a reorganizer of institutional machinery; it subverts machinery against the master code of its makers; it rewires machinery to its own intentions" (p. 55). This concept of structural agency shows how democratic structures are limiting and structuring our experiences and lives, but also always there at our disposal insofar as we are part of them, available to leverage them in new ways to achieve radically different ends. In the context of *sympoiesis*, we might consider that structure is always open through agency that is always in entangled relation to it. It is in this spirit that we sketch below a few ideas on how to radically relationalize familiar and dear concepts in liberal democracies.

As has been discussed, the logic of the dominant universalist human (individualistic and anthropocentric) entails colonial and exploitative assumptions. Instead, a decolonial radically relational democracy requires an openness to a pluriverse of ways of knowing and being, where "human beings" ought to be seen as relational selves, entwined in their socio-political-economic/natural environment. Escobar et al. (2022) cite the Zapatistas as the group who came up with the notion of the pluriverse, or "a world where many worlds fit" (p.109). In this radical relational perspective, we propose to think of such pluriversal possibilities and about human beings as embodied organisms, embedded, and entangled in their relations that include a constant engagement in their biological auto- and sympoiesis, and the temporal horizon for this process is the present moment of simultaneity. The crucial conceptual move here is to see people as radically relational selves, or as clusters of relations that entail their dependence not only on one another but also on the more-than-human. The decolonial concept of "cosmopolitan decolonial localism" (Mignolo 2021) embraces the pluriverse of diverse ways of knowing and being that requires reflexive, creative, and inclusive adaptation to locally grounded issues. Radical relationality amounts to a change in paradigm from "human" as knower, conqueror, and exterminator of worlds, to human as organism and teller of tales. In the latter, we accept the understanding of persons as relationally embedded in their environment, entangled in relationships with each other and with their environment, living their stories in embodied enaction within those tales and stories (see Sánchez-Flores 2005, 2026). The possible diversity of tales discloses a pluriverse where narratives—cultures, cosmologies, and worldviews—populated with human and nonhuman selves multiply as the notion of "universal human" is left behind. In this case, the idea that humanity can be personified by the anthropocentric

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Cartesian individual who is powerful, knows, and has rights ought to be seen together with this same individual's colonial impulse to conquer and exterminate, which then becomes one more of those tales with cautionary lessons. The tale of a universal human (rational and free) is an organizing principle, rule, or doxa of contemporary Western liberal democracies, but it stops being the assumed, implicit, and settled narrative of governance. These changes in the universal stories are a regular occurrence. For example, Wynter (2003) discusses her notions of Man 1 and Man 2; at the beginning of the colonial European endeavor, Christianity presented the believer as the universal narrative (Man 1), then eventually this "man who knows" (Man 2) embraced the civilizing mission based on "universal knowledge" in the form of science and the Newtonian mechanistic universe.

The above is necessary to open the doors of pluriversality versus the single story or meta-narrative that Mignolo (2021) calls "universal global designs" and refers to this colonial impulse of liberal societies to impose a single, universal framework globally. Mignolo (2021) says that when such universal and colonial "global designs" stop being the basis for how we see humans in the world, then the aim would be to "live together convivially instead of competitively, the will to cooperate displaces the will to dominate" (p.188). He proposes, in broad strokes, a decolonial option that he calls "decolonial cosmopolitan localism," that can handle the pluriverse and whose localism is rooted in land. Land as a broader container of life—akin to the modern notion of nature, but also more than this notion, as it includes all organic matter (so this includes human bodies), as well as the spiritual, mystical, magical dimensions that are possible in deep relationality and interconnectedness. What we propose is that this pragmatic approach to locality be seen as rooted in the land, the specific ecosystem, and its human geography as lived by the local relational selves (both human and more-than-human) embedded in the specific locality in question and in ancestral knowledge based on land. We also propose the metaphor of "composting" the emancipatory and social justice impulses of modernity to shed its anthropocentrism, individualistic pretensions, and coloniality. Decolonial cosmopolitan localism integrates this metaphor: the decolonial part is an invitation to compost modernity/coloniality, while the cosmopolitan part is a simple invitation to consider that our shared humanity (all human bodies as organic matter, wired in a similar way) can see and value the pluriverse of human ways of knowing and being, in turn opening up the possibility of honoring ways of knowing and being that are more-than-human. Localism is essential as it prioritizes the land or the local space and place where this seeing, valuing, and honoring happens, where Indigenous epistemologies and ancestral knowledge show us the way for radically relational governance.

The concept of "reflexive politics" (Christodoulidis 2006) keeps the revisability of political meanings open and contested, and our reformulation of this notion is relationally based on a radically inclusive notion of the *demos* to pertain also to the more-than-human. Following Christodoulidis (2006), the constituent power of this inclusive demos is located in simultaneity; its temporality is the present moment. A radically inclusive demos considers all the relational selves living in the locality where the democratic decisions are to be made, and these selves are again human and more-than-human. In considering this radically inclusive demos as the source of decision-making in the present moment and in its locality, again, land and Indigenous

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ancestral knowledge would be the basis to develop the governing and decision-making processes in decolonial localism. According to Christodoulidis (2006), reflexive politics requires leaving behind a rigid conception of politics in the relationship between participatory democracy and the rule of law. In a rigid conception of politics, a notion of who participates in the democratic dialogic deliberation is limited to those with citizenship and political rights, but in reflexive politics, the idea of a "people" who constitute the demos that participates in the democratic decision-making ought to be open and flexible—and we propose that in a radically relational democracy such openness goes beyond humans and that the democratic decision-making needs to embrace consensus-based and ancestral processes, rather than simple democratic electoral processes. Christodoulidis (2006) proposes this notion of reflexive politics as related to political meanings and how they are reproduced, however, we believe that theories of abstract meaning align with colonial notions of universal Human. When we center a pluriversal experience in diverse cosmologies and experiences of reality, we realize that abstract meaning can only be conveyed through a diversity of languages (in the plural) that individualistic Cartesian logics cannot see due to its universalist colonial impulses.

Mixe linguist Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (2014) in her essay, "The linguistic is political," points at how the nation-state within which Western liberal democracies are housed, tends to make official only one or two mostly European languages (in "multicultural" societies), while it has pushed for the disappearance of a multitude of languages that have engaged in a struggle for their survival since colonialism. Many liberal democratic nation-states have strongly invested in homogeneity by forbidding linguistic diversity through a host of genocidal practices, as we have seen in the slow emergencies created for Indigenous peoples whose traditional territories and/or ancestral lands are now occupied by modern nation-states, and their liberal democratic impulses are oblivious to this coloniality due to global White ignorance. Aguilar Gil (2014) references the loss of Indigenous languages as a form of ongoing violence against speakers of those languages and constant violations of their human rights. For this reason, linguistic revitalization is a political act, for example, as could be done in Canada, enshrining the 200 Indigenous languages as official languages or preserving this multitude of Indigenous languages that the Canadian state toiled for over a century to extinguish (TRC, 2015). Aguilar Gil shares a reflection on her own experience and use of her Indigenous language—Mixe—and how language use influences the way actual embodied people perceive the world, which we contend is entwined with a pluriversality of cosmologies and world views—ways of knowing and being—or the diverse meanings that such languages sustain:

> The internal flow of my thinking is also influenced by the political evaluation of the languages involved and the experience I've had with them. If I think in Spanish when I do mathematical operations, it's because I was taught to do them in that language, and not the one I spoke. If reflections on the past and moods occur in Mixe, it's because of the experiences that associated them with that language. I wonder about the internal discourse of some children who can now take classes in the language they speak and who can read a book on nanoscience

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and nanotechnology in Mixe. For me, thinking about these topics in Mixe still requires considerable effort (Aguilar Gil 2014).

We propose that one must start with the various languages that human beings speak throughout the world and that convey pluriversality, and not with the more abstract notion of meaning, which we contend can express itself differently depending on the language used (e.g., English in this paper). Languages and "languaging" (Maturana 1988) are by-products of human biology that are coupled to embodiment and the specific human biology that allows them to emerge (see Sánchez-Flores 2020 for a detailed discussion). Social processes become established (yet constantly changing) in symbols that live among humans. Saying that symbols "live" among humans is meant in a literal sense, in the sense of that old trope that "languages are alive." Theories of communication and meaning in the social sciences bypass the question of language, what it is, how humans "language" and how, in doing so, resort to various living languages (as well as to gestures and non-verbal communication). Human biology allows for collective production and reproduction of living languages that exist in the relationality of people and not in our heads (Maturana 1988)—and this is placed in the relationality of humans with the more-than-human. So, languages are also autopoietically and structurally coupled to living human beings' nervous systems and closed within themselves—although this closure is only semantic and is constantly crossed by humans handling various languages and engaging in translation of codes and symbols. Languages are the tools that humans use to communicate with one another and are the vehicles for the social construction of meaning in radical relationality with all that exists. Languages' particular grammar and linguistics matter in approaching the reality that human beings "bring forth" or perceive as living organisms.

Theorizing meaning as structurally and materially coupled to living languages (in which democratic deliberation is done) that are structurally and materially coupled to human living bodies, helps us couple democratic deliberation to locality in a specific time, space, and place—and embodiment in the present moment. Further, autopoiesis has evolved into what is now referred to as sympoiesis, or making-with, because although the "auto" part of autopoiesis is meant to refer to the organizational closure of organisms and their intelligent involvement on the production of themselves, this self-production is never done in isolation—in fact living organisms depend on their coupling or entanglement in relationality to be alive at all. The simultaneity of what Maturana and Varela (1987) call organizational closure with structural coupling is essential to understand that autopoiesis does not mean to state some kind of disconnected autonomy for organisms, but to point to the engagement of living organisms in their own production, while at the same time they are coupled to their relations—without which they disintegrate. Organizational closure makes it possible for organisms to be organized in a stable way, while simultaneous structural coupling makes it possible for organisms to be alive at all in co-constitution of themselves and their environment in sympoiesis, where humans and all other organisms are entangled with each other and the more-than-human, and indeed may include as holobionts a host of other organisms within their biology (Haraway 2016).

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Concluding remarks: democratically entangling toward radical relationality

The conclusion of this article might be no more than the acknowledgment that, within relational ways of thinking and being, there are no moments of conclusion, only ongoing processes emergence and transformation through relational entanglements. Within this radically relational lens, no version of democracy will ever exist in static or idealistic form. Insofar as democracy as a system is a multidimensional human construct, its multiplicity of currently enacted liberal forms in the Western world has emerged through distinct entanglements of both coloniality *and* modernity, both authoritarian impulses of disconnection, othering, and violence, *and* anti-oppressive impulses to achieve greater eco-social justice and equality for all, including the more-than-human. Just as the term autopoiesis has evolved over time to often now be referred to as sympoiesis in recognition that no living system is ever fully closed, a re-conceptualized, radically relational democracy can shift the etymology of democracy away from its anthropocentric, Cartesian roots and requirements of seeing humans as individual, autonomous, and disconnected entities. Žukauskaitė (2020) writes: "By fusing different components, sympoiesis creates more complex life forms and gives rise to new emergent properties." We propose that by re-rooting our liberal democracies in the inherent sympoietic relationality of all that is (including the more-than-human), we can give rise to new, emergent institutions and practices that might transform and compost the logics and effects of modernity/coloniality. Sympoiesis assumes that all that is, is necessarily and existentially kin, as Indigenous governance and knowledge systems teach. It is thus in sympoiesis that efforts in translating liberal democratic sensibilities and possibilities toward justice for all, including the more-than-human, can occur.

In this article, we have sought to trace how the words liberty, freedom, and equality, around which so many liberal democratic subjects and movements have built their identities, have also been used as banners under which destructive, violent, and authoritarian impulses have been enacted and justified. While the latter may come as an unwelcomed shock, we propose that this is an opportunity to leverage this outrage—not to strive to protect, "hang onto," return to, or bolster the democratic systems and institutions we think we have or had. Instead, we view it as the opportunity to open up an uncomfortable practice of critically reflecting on how these same systems have also given rise to authoritarian violence. As such, we propose that it is a moment not of return, but of shedding and transformation, within which we might find new ways forward, entangled together as radically relational beings. By composting the anthropocentric, Cartesian, and individualistic ways of disconnected thinking and being that continue to permeate our democratic systems, institutions, and processes, how might we co-enact radically relational ways of being that honor the sacredness, dignity, and indivisible kinship of all of life?

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Note

1. Rebeccah Nelems currently lives on the ancestral, unceded lands of the lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) Peoples, today also known as the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, in Metulia, colonially known today as the city of Victoria, British Columbia (BC), Canada. She is a White, 6th generation descendent of Irish/Scottish/British settlers on Coast Salish lands. Mónica Sánchez-Flores currently lives in Tk̓emlúps te Secwépemc ne Secwepemcúl̓ecw, stolen lands by colonizers and renamed as Kamloops, BC, Canada. She is a Brown woman of mixed ancestry who grew up in the ancestral land of the Nahua peoples, today known as Mexico City.

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