

Abolition's Ecologies:
Political Theology Beyond Property, Territory, and Sovereignty

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And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars
to escape writing the worst thing of all—
not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough
so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem
mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves?
- Adrienne Rich, "Twenty-One Love Poems"

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Property	28
Chapter Two: Territory	95
Chapter Three: Sovereignty	162
Chapter Four: Abolition.....	229
Conclusion	297
Bibliography	305

Acknowledgements

“Since we are ineluctably actors in what is happening, nothing can be present to us to which we are not present. Of course we can still know, more than ever, what is going on. But then we always could, more or less. What we do not now know is what there is to acknowledge, what it is I am to make present, what I am to make myself present to. I know there is inexplicable pain and death everywhere, and now if I ask myself why I do nothing the answer must be, I choose not to.”

- Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*”

It has been an immense privilege of a very privileged life to be afforded years of time to read, discuss, write about, and present on the subjects contained in this dissertation: Christian theology, environmental thought, critical theory, literature. But this time has not been cheap or without sacrifice. I have been immensely lucky to have the support of my spouse’s second income but while I have been at the University of Virginia I have seen many MA and Ph.D students living paycheck to paycheck, being asked to do additional labor for little or no pay, graduate workers compensation being issued late or incorrectly, and on top of these injustices a university that is constantly in a crisis that somehow cannot pay graduate workers a living wage (or cover dental insurance!) while breaking ground on millions of dollars of new buildings, expanding its overcompensated administration, and investing in spurious “academic” projects. All of this has taken place while the career prospects of graduate students are in a death spiral and the most common career advice we hear is to take up podcasting. I have spent much of my time at UVa working alongside my colleagues in the Religious Studies Graduate Organization (RSGO) and the United Campus Workers of Virginia (CWA local 2265) attempting to understand what is happening to workers in higher education and to change these things. I am grateful to those comrades in the struggle to make research, teaching, and participation in

academic community a site not just for imagining a more just world but building one.

While I read books, taught classes, spent hours thinking and writing and avoiding writing, the world kept turning. During the course of my Ph.D. studies we witnessed a pandemic, a national anti-racist uprising, a shooting at my university, too many national tragedies to count, and a genocide carried out in Gaza supported by my country (followed by students protesting this madness being brutalized by my university's administrators). I want to acknowledge the faculty, staff, and students who stuck their necks out not only to protest the university's use of force against peaceful protestors (the low bar) but primarily I am grateful to those who have continued to use their power to not let the plight of the Palestinian people go unacknowledged by our academic community. I will always remember the courage of many and I will not forget the cowardice of so many more.

While institutions too often fail us, I must acknowledge the support of so many people who have been there for me, not only on the journey of completing a Ph.D. but on the circuitous path that led me here.

When I went back to finish my undergraduate degree at Eastern Mennonite University, I had a terrible academic record and little to no knowledge of the Mennonite world. Luckily it took very little convincing for faculty there not only to take me seriously as someone interested in scholarship but also as someone with genuine interest in learning about Anabaptist ways of thinking and living. Christian Early taught me to take philosophy seriously (but not too seriously!). Ted Grimsrud made me see biblical theology not as a fundamentalist but as motivated by genuine concern for the word and the world. Nancy Heisey made me take history seriously (very seriously!) but also showed me what a life dedicated to scholarship and service could yield. Peter Dula told me to never stop reading, whether theology and philosophy or novels

or poetry; he also showed me both as my professor and later as a colleague how to be part of an academic community. I think I've only ignored his advice once: he told me that I could read whatever I wanted if I didn't get married till I turned forty. Sorry, Pete, but things turned out alright anyway.

In no small part due to the guidance I received at EMU, I made my way to Duke Divinity School to complete my Master of Theological Studies. My time there shaped me in more ways than I can name. I am deeply grateful for being educated and befriended by amazing scholars during my time there. Even though he had just retired, Stanley Hauerwas kept his office door open and was willing to offer advice and counsel. Toril Moi took me seriously as a thinker about ordinary language philosophy and her work directing Duke Philosophy, Arts, and Literature (PAL) always ensured there was an interesting lecture or workshop to attend and good food and wine to eat and drink. Sarah Beckwith took me under her wing though she was busy chairing the English department and helped me understand that though literature, philosophy, and theology were often asking the same questions, it would not do to simply have literature be fodder for theologizing; inspired by our shared philosophical inspiration Stanley Cavell, Sarah taught me to read literature, philosophy, and theology well on their own terms. Lastly, Willie Jennings transformed my simplistic, overly dogmatic theological musings into complex, grounded inquiries about how we live in deeply racialized and colonized places that are nevertheless God's good creation.

I then made my way from Durham, North Carolina to Charlottesville. UVa has been my home since 2016, first for another master's degree and now for my doctorate. Over the last nine years, I have had the chance to work with some incredible researchers, educators, and artists. I have been lucky to have my dissertation co-advised by Paul Dafydd Jones and Willis Jenkins.

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Beyond my committee UVa has been a source of abundant intellectual formation and community. Within Religious Studies, I have been lucky to have had the chance to study with Larry Bouchard (a legend in my book), Jennifer Geddes, Karl Shuve, and Kai Parker. Thanks to Oludamini Ogunnaike for reading a comprehensive exam for me. Beyond my home department, I've been deeply formed by courses with Tony Perry (now of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History), Charlotte Rogers, and Mary Kuhn. Through the Environmental

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One piece of advice I got early on was that in grad school you learn the most from your fellow students, so choose your community wisely! To that end I have been so fortunate to have had incredibly good company on this rather long journey. Michelle Bostic is perhaps my favorite person to argue with, probably because we think so similarly yet with plenty of room for healthy disagreement. Anderson Moss reminds me to read things other than theory and theology, especially poetry and novels; I will long think of our conversations whether in the Nau Hall carrels or in Cape Town! Eliot Davenport has become one of my closest friends; I am grateful to have learned from them and to have witnessed their anxious courage time and time again. My time at UVa has also been made better by Erin Burke, Chris Choi, Creighton Coleman, Alex Daley, Sarah Denne, Matt Drew, Adam Dyer, Ashleigh Elser, Jason Evans, BrieAnna Frank, Charlie Gillespie, Jake Green, Hunter Hollins, Luke Beck Kreider, Rebekah Latour, Joe Lenow, Adam Liddle, Elizabeth McKenney, Elliott Niblock, Kris Norris, Mel Pace, Josh Parks, Shelly Penton, Christopher Rowe, Haseena Sahib, Evan Sandsmark, Jeannie Sellick, Nicholas Shrum, Victoria Slabinski, Amna Tarar, Katherine Tarrant, Blaine Werner, and Devin Zuckerman. Truly an embarrassment of riches when it comes to colleagues and friends!

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found most of my words (rightly) unintelligible but her spirit has left an indelible mark on my writing and thinking about what it means to have faith. An other-than-human, my dog Louise, joined my home right as I was starting my Ph.D.; I am grateful for her attunement to the sights, smells, and sounds of the world around us, even when they sometimes make us anxious.

Iris Murdoch writes that “Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.” No one has taught me what love looks like better than my partner Elizabeth. She has opened up new realities to me that I never knew existed. Her love for people and for the other-than-human world are astounding. Her practice as a mental health therapist but also as a painter and gardener is filled with a graciousness that feels alien to my own disposition, yet also reminds me that even the most gruff, stubborn of souls is merely the accretion of our failures of acknowledgment and so may be softened by even the smallest gestures of care. I have seen this on full display as we welcomed our first child, Alma Marion Cobb-Wilner, into the world in December of 2024. No matter how sleep-deprived, or sad, or confused, Elizabeth’s care for our daughter seems so natural it’s like she’s been practicing it for her whole life, probably because she has.

This dissertation is dedicated to Alma and Elizabeth. Another world is possible because y’all are in it.

Introduction

Beginning at *The End*

“We’re drowning in light.” This is the last line of Joshua Oppenheimer’s 2024 post-apocalyptic musical, *The End*.¹ Or, at least this is one option for a last line. Father and Son—standing blurred in the background of the shot—sing this line while Mother and Girl stand in focus in the foreground and simultaneously sing “We trusted no one.” The music ends and the viewer is now behind Mother and Girl as they silently stare out at the abandoned salt mine where the family has made their home. They live a subterranean life, accompanied by a small staff who occupy a relational space somewhere between found (hired?) family and the help because environmental collapse has rendered the Earth’s surface uninhabitable. The shot slowly fades to a darkness punctuated with light. At first the light seems to be stars or galaxies, but as the image becomes clearer the source of the luminescence is microscopic creatures floating in a sea of darkness. As the organisms come into focus, a minimal orchestral score slowly builds before cutting to black.

The End is a story of a family who made their fortune from oil—euphemistically referred to as “the energy sector”—and used it to secure a future for themselves beyond a calamity that came for everybody else. It has been twenty years since they went underground and also twenty years since the birth of Son, who has only known life in the family’s compound. After two decades of living as a family of three and a staff of three, Girl, a young Black woman, shows up. Having somehow survived in a clearly inhospitable outside world, she has discovered entry into

¹ *The End*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer (2024; New York: Neon, 2024), Digital Stream.

the bunker and into the family's life together, such as it is. Girl grapples with the survivor's guilt of making it to safety while her family is out there, presumably dead. Mother, Father, and Son live their lives: they decorate their abode with their private art collection; they enjoy meals with fine wines, swim in their indoor pool, grow their own food, and Son helps Father with his memoir. Girl threatens to destabilize their idyllic existence. How does she do this? She remembers her experiences. She feels things. She tells the truth. This causes Mother to question her own actions; she wonders about the world she cut herself off from, especially her relationship to her sister Mary (the only named character in the film). But honesty is unsustainable in these conditions.

When the final two lines of the film are sung it has been some time after Girl showed up. The Family celebrate the birthday of Son and Girl's child. Mother tries to sing a celebratory song, but cannot quite get started. Dad steps in to sing "What a wonderful gift you have given us, a grandchild / See we were right all along / And all we have been through together / Makes us family and that can't be wrong." The Son agrees and declares "Look at us, better than ever" and "So to us, our future is bright." Mother questions, "Am I home at last / Safe and sound / with everyone I love?" She answers her own question, singing these lines again, only now in the affirmative. Girl has clearly acquiesced to her situation, though her tone reveals the most uncertainty: "At last I am home / Right where I belong / Together with everyone I love / Their love keeps me strong." Mother and Girl sing their lines with a bittersweetness, affection tinged with doubt. Father and Son croon with a self-assured confidence.

"We're drowning in light." "We trusted no one." The pairing of these two lines strikes me as perfect encapsulations of the microcosm depicted in *The End*. While Son and Father express a gratitude for the world they have made for themselves, the lightness, both literal and figurative,

of their home is artificial; they never see the sun; any levity is surely short lived to be replaced with the weight of it all. Even the birth of a child only displaces the terminal nature of their situation. To be drowned in light does not strike me as desirable. We might, for a time, desire a sun-drenched place, but not one that suffocates us with unyielding exposure. The women sing a line that gestures to both the protection their enclave offers from the outside world and also a failure of sociality. Mother and Girl have allowed themselves to acknowledge, at least partially, the brokenness of the relationships they left behind. Worse still, their escape into the faux domesticity of the bunker has trapped them with dishonest people. How could you have faith in someone who can live like this?

In Oppenheimer's film, the character's lives are built on denial; they refuse to consider the possibility that they had any other choice with regard to who to save and who to abandon. Only a sense of inevitability gives them solace. So, they disown their own agency and thus their responsibility. Whatever harm the material basis for their lives has caused, whatever relationships they severed in choosing to save themselves, those things are all in the past now. All that is left to Mother, Father, Son, and Girl is to tell themselves a story they can live with, a story that exonerates them or at least offers a form of self-forgiveness that of course can only be superficial given the absence of those harmed. In the end, the only way for them to go on is to live a lie.

As with the family in *The End*, the stories we tell ourselves have immense power. In her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks writes that "We are born and have our being in a place of memory." But with memory there is always the "risk of evoking a nostalgia that simply looks back with longing and idealizes."² It is understandable why we might revise our memories.

² bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4-5.

Perhaps they contain something too terrible to remember honestly. If we were to hold ourselves responsible for giving a truthful account, perhaps no one would forgive us for what we have done.

In this dissertation, I argue that ecological thinking in the context of North America is distorted and constrained by particular narrations of how and why our relationships with people and land take the shape they do. The stories we tell ourselves are ecological, political, and theological justifications for the present order of things. While there are many such stories that have given rise to the world we live in, I examine three concepts, each with their own intertwined political, ecological, and religious legacies: property, territory, and sovereignty. I argue that these ideas have become naturalized arrangements of power that ground visions of political, economic, and racial order. Sure, there are intellectual histories of these formations, but our quotidian relationships to these ideas are often embedded within a political economy that treats them as inevitable, commonsense, and absolute. The immutability associated with property, territory, and sovereignty gives rise not just to certain arrangements of power, but also to a sense that other social and political imaginaries are foreclosed, made unimaginable or unrealizable by the strictures enacted by the present terms of order.

What I am calling naturalization here might be another way of naming the process of forgetting. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that property, territory, and sovereignty function to mediate our memories of how things came to be as they are in North America. Like the family in *The End*, these mis-rememberings are how we continue to go on, how we justify ourselves to ourselves. But also like that family, if we cannot remember correctly, if we cannot allow for the possibility of genuine self-reflection and self-criticism, there may be no meaningful future. In the rest of this introduction, I will offer some prefatory remarks on how and why I

focus on this constellation of concepts. I will also discuss why I think political theology offers helpful tools for denaturalizing political, theological, and ecological formations. Finally, I offer a roadmap of the chapters.

Conceptual Ordering: Property, Territory, and Sovereignty

In his 1969 essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser asserts two theses. First, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”³ Second, “Ideology has a material existence.”⁴ By “imaginary” Althusser indicates the illusory nature of ideology and the way it distances the holder of the ideology from the *real* material relations that undergird their life, but imaginaries have *real* consequences and really do structure mundane material existence. A materialist account of ideology cannot dispense with or replace ideology without understanding how it is embedded within processes of its own material production and reproduction. Interestingly, Althusser turns to Blaise Pascal to image this process. Pascal writes “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe.” Rather than beliefs giving rise to action, Pascal and Althusser turn the order on its head, emphasizing the bodily nature of ideological formation. Althusser argues that for the individual “the existence of the ideas of his beliefs is material in that *his ideas and his material actions are inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of the subject.*”⁵

This account of material, embodied practice provides both the impetus for and rough

³ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014), 256.

⁴ Ibid., 258.

⁵ Ibid., 260; emphasis in original.

methodology of my examination of property, territory, and sovereignty. These concepts, I argue, are not delivered fully formed from on high, but rather emerge within particular material arrangements. So, when homeowners resist changes to zoning codes because they threaten their property values or when coverage of a protest emphasizes the “violence” of protestors resulting in property damage but not the force deployed by police, we are not seeing just a firm belief in the inviolability of property, we are, in fact, witnessing the production and reproduction of that belief happening on the ground.⁶ The same could be said of territory, especially with an emphasis on borders and undocumented immigration. How is it possible, we may want to ask, for immigration and the protection of territorial boundaries to be major issues for the average citizen?⁷ We might easily understand why political leaders are invested in notions of sovereignty, but why do we see so many individuals sporting Gadsden Flag “Don’t tread on me” apparel and license plates?⁸ Why do we see trends like the Sovereign Citizen movement or attempts by radical libertarians to gain access to public lands through claims to sovereignty?⁹

⁶ This I think is helpfully argued by Vicky Osterweil in her book *In Defense of Looting*, especially chapter one, “The Racial Roots of Property. Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020); see also: Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Sharply More Americans Want to Curb Immigration to U.S.,” Gallup.com, July 12, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/647123/sharply-americans-curb-immigration.aspx>.

⁸ Anne M. Platoff and Steven A. Knowlton, “Old Flags, New Meanings,” *Proceedings of the 26th International Congress of Vexillology*, March 1, 2022, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75v7n8h2>; Skylar Tallal, “Iowa House Passes Bill to Allow Gadsden Flag License Plates to Fund 2nd Amendment Training,” KGAN, March 6, 2024, <https://cbs2iowa.com/news/local/iowa-house-passes-bill-to-allow-gadsden-flag-license-plates-to-fund-2nd-amendment-training>.

⁹ Edwin Hodge, “The Sovereign Ascendant: Financial Collapse, Status Anxiety, and the Rebirth of the Sovereign Citizen Movement,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 4 (November 26, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00076>; Justin Crowe, “Political Radicalism and Pocket Constitutionalism: The Bundys and Beyond,” *American Political Thought* 10, no. 1 (January 2021): 51–85.

These are reactionary examples of how property, territory, and sovereignty arise from and shape quotidian material realities. But when we consider how these concepts ground our relationships with the other-than-human landscape, what becomes clear is that their perniciousness cuts across political affiliation, class status, and even racial lines. Embodiment—whether considered in the context of race, class, gender, or sexuality (among other frameworks in which ideology works on and through human flesh)—is not only the site of ideological production but also the goal. It works to ensure, in Althusser’s terms, “the reproduction of the relations of production of a mode of production threatened in its existence by the world class struggle.”¹⁰ So, the ideologies of property, territory, and sovereignty do not just work on the fringes, but perhaps are most effective in the ways they shape and channel those relations with self and others (and, I would add, the land) that often go unnoticed and unremarked upon.

Also at stake in examining these concepts is expanding what exactly counts as the political. In his recent book *Remapping Sovereignty*, the political theorist David Temin notes that “in Western political thought...what is genuinely worthy of reflection as part of ‘the political’ are only those processes of meaning making and institutional inscription involved in the creation of (e.g.) property, territory, and sovereignty—certainly not the land itself.”¹¹ Recent decades have seen many attempts to reassert the political status and even agency of the other-than-human world.¹² These efforts are often admirable and are most relevant to my project when they

¹⁰ Althusser, 253.

¹¹ David Myer Temin, *Remapping Sovereignty: Decolonization and Self-Determination in North American Indigenous Political Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 102.; finding Temin’s reference to the centrality of these three concepts together two years after I proposed this dissertation came as a relief to know that I was not the only one thinking in this direction.

¹² For example, see: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature:*

historicize how land moves from being an active entity in broader social webs to being viewed as inert, passive, or dead. What is more difficult, however, is to see how these accounts, ones capacious enough to include the other-than-human within the sphere of politics, coalesce into an on-the-ground activity that helps us to break out of the ideological oscillation between the conceptual and material processes that have left us in the warming world we now occupy. Put another way, even if we recognize the proliferation of agency throughout the human and other-than-human world, this does not change the responsibility certain human communities bear for both causing and responding to ecological problems.

Deeply critical of the theorists of post-human or “after nature” politics, Andreas Malm’s most important criticism of this crowd might be their distance from the crises they describe. He writes, “For someone safely ensconced in a life and material position under no immediate threat from climate change, such as the average Western academic, the only way to stay conscious of the urgency of the problem is to subject oneself regularly, weekly, or daily, to news from the frontiers of this warming world.”¹³ A great deal of academic research in the environmental humanities has rightly drawn attention to the vulnerability of much of the Global South to ecological catastrophe. But this all too often only allows for something like a vicarious panic; those insulated from immediate harm by their race, class, or nationality can only look on the majority world as victims. “How tragic,” we all say to each other as we turn our attention to the next horrible thing that pops up on our social media feeds.

It strikes me as a missed opportunity for climate change and other environmental issues to

How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹³ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2018), 224.

not be seized upon in truly panic-inducing ways. Just in recent memory, we can see that climate change fueled catastrophes have taken place not only on the periphery but also in the metropole with fires in Los Angeles and flooding in Western North Carolina and Kentucky. But what has changed? In the 2024 U.S. presidential election, climate change barely even registered as an issue for voters.¹⁴ Though Kamala Harris pointed to the Biden administration's climate measures in the Inflation Reduction Act, she also committed herself to fossil fuel extraction, including claiming that she would not seek to ban fracking.¹⁵ In this way, the purportedly "left" political party in the United States is led by climate change deniers. To be sure, they are not to the same degree as the political right, but in a warming world half-truths and mealy-mouthed commitments to decarbonization amount to the same thing. If you fail to adequately scare people with climate change, you are not offering a truthful picture of our world. Perhaps we should, as Malm suggests, "Dare to feel the panic. Then choose between the two main options: commit to the most militant and unwavering opposition to this system, or sit watching as it all goes down the drain."¹⁶ Those with forms of power that insulates them from the immediate effects of environmental degradation, however, need not create their own forms of opposition; for many communities, fighting against the threat of environmental harm is not something one voluntarily opts into but is part of their survival.

In North America, perhaps the most fruitful ecological politics of the late twentieth and early

¹⁴ In October of 2024, Gallup reported that only 21 percent of voters rated climate change as "extremely important" and 29 percent ranked it as "very important." Megan Brennan, "Economy Most Important Issue to 2024 Presidential Vote," Gallup.com, October 9, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651719/economy-important-issue-2024-presidential-vote.aspx>.

¹⁵ Emma Bowman, "Harris Says She Won't Ban Fracking. What to Know about the Controversial Topic," *NPR*, August 30, 2024, sec. Energy, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/30/nx-s1-5096107/what-is-fracking-explained>.

¹⁶ Malm, 226.

twenty-first centuries has been the environmental justice movement and its concept of environmental racism. This movement has its roots in the United States in the 1982 protests in which a predominantly Black community in Warren County, North Carolina unsuccessfully attempted to prevent soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls from being dumped in a landfill in their backyards. Environmental justice scholars like Robert D. Bullard connect ecological degradation to different forms of inequity and map out specific grassroots based plans for resisting these injustices. But this movement tends to focus on incremental changes to existing systems and structures, seeking to protect “communities that have the least economic means” who “have become the victims of the toxic wars.”¹⁷ While environmental justice scholars and activists often take contextual, grassroots approaches to ecological problems, these projects often end up with reformist recommendations rather than calling for radical change.¹⁸ That is not to say that reform is never necessary or good work, but it has its limits, especially for uncovering ideological productions that constrain political possibilities.¹⁹ What is necessary, then, is to join an environmental justice organizing model with more radical theories and praxis.

This is precisely the sort of approach that geographers Laura Pulido and Juan De Lara suggest in their effort to bring environmental justice movements into conversation with the Black Radical Tradition and Latinx decolonial border thinking. They insist that a focus on “social movements” is central to radical responses to racial capitalism because “they can serve as spaces

¹⁷ Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 159.

¹⁸ For instance, I have great admiration for many of the essays in the 2021 edited volume *Lessons in Environmental Justice: From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter and Idle No More*, but the application of most of the essays are decidedly reformist. See: Michael Mascarenhas, ed., *Lessons in Environmental Justice: From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter and Idle No More* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2021).

¹⁹ Here my discussion of reformist and non-reformist reforms is relevant. See: chapter 4 of this dissertation pp. 259-262.

of convergence and epistemic communities.” Unlike some of the “after nature” crowd who may only look to subaltern communities to show examples of harm or of destructive ecological politics, Pulido and De Lara emphasize the ‘from below’ nature of the Black and Latinx traditions that seek to move beyond “rights-based strategies that seek recognition and redress from the liberal state.” These strategies only end up justifying “the underlying injustice of racial capitalism and colonialism.”²⁰ These are communities for whom recognition and reform represent attempts to fix systems that are fundamentally oriented against their welfare. Or to put it more directly, these are systems that depend upon the subjugation and brutalization of communities of color, of immigrants, and of Indigenous peoples. As I will argue in the proceeding chapters, the deleterious effects of property, territory and sovereignty for Black, migrant, and Indigenous communities are not a bug but a feature of these ideologies. Liberal politics centered on recognition and the marriage of liberal individualism and market capitalism—my rough-and-ready definition of neoliberalism—have always been structured to operate *for* white, U.S. citizens and *against* Black, immigrant, and Indigenous life.

If our environmental politics cannot help us break free from these ideologies and the systems they are embedded in, not only are we allowing harm to continue for subaltern communities (those who are most acutely vulnerable to ecological crises) but we are demonstrating a fundamental incapacity to address the crises themselves. Amitav Ghosh suggests that there is an irony that with ecological crises “the very factors that are considered advantages in coping with extreme weather—education, wealth, and a high degree of social organization—may actually become vulnerabilities.” He points to Western food systems and the power grid as examples of

²⁰ Laura Pulido and Juan De Lara, “Reimagining ‘Justice’ in Environmental Justice: Radical Ecologies, Decolonial Thought, and the Black Radical Tradition,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (March 1, 2018): 92.

systems that are deeply enmeshed within the fossil fuel economy. He suggests that it is not just the systems that lack resilience and flexibility but also the populations of the Global North, especially when compared to their Global South counterparts: “In many parts of the global south, breakdowns are a way of life, and everybody is used to improvisations and work-arounds.”²¹

In this dissertation, I follow Ghosh in not only analyzing how property, territory, and sovereignty structure ecological relations mediated through racial logics, but also in seeking to learn from those communities who have developed improvisations and work arounds for living in a world that is founded upon their vulnerability or elimination. So in my core chapters, I do not simply examine the histories and theories of these concepts as they develop in North America but I also look for sites where subaltern groups—maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples—are able to identify and tear at the threadbare parts of these ideologies with the purpose of embodying political forms of life that move beyond them. The approach I take in examining these concepts and those peoples that refuse them is political theology. I discuss my approach to this form of religious and political thinking as well as the context of this project in present landscape of theology and ecology in the next section.

Political Theology

In this dissertation my primary approach to thinking about property, territory, and sovereignty is political theology. In this section I will briefly offer my understanding of political theology and I will offer my reasons for drawing on this particular theological method for considering issues at the intersection of politics, religion, and ecology.

²¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 147.

In *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout lays out the purpose of political theology for Christian theologians. In a pluralistic world filled not only with a variety of religious beliefs and practices but also various forms of politics, Stout thinks that Christian political theology need not reject the politics of even a “secularized political community” but, insofar as claims about the authority of God are universal, “The central task of contemporary Christian political theology is to discern how Christ’s rulership of such communities manifests itself.”²² With this comment Stout is responding to John Milbank and radical orthodoxy’s refusal to grant legitimacy to secular political orders on the grounds that they “lack true piety” and thus refuse to participate “in the gracious outpouring of divine love in the church.”²³ Stout, rightly I think, finds such a refusal not only politically problematic but also insufficient on theological grounds. He asks, “if the plenitude of God’s triune inner life shines forth in all of creation, cannot theology discern some such light in democratic political community?”²⁴ Both Stout and Milbank assume that the purpose of political theology is to figure out the alignment between divine and state authority. For Milbank the lack of the proper metaphysics undergirding a political society removes the possibility of Christians treating it as authoritative.²⁵ For Stout, ever the pragmatist, surely authority can be granted to many (though perhaps not all) political arrangements, even lacking this theological foundation.

I wonder if this is even the right question to be asking of political theology in our present moment. In the gospels, when John the Baptist is trying to discern whether or not he has placed

²² Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 103.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁵ This is a very brief distillation of the argument of a text like John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Hoboken, NY: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2014).

his faith in the proper messianic authority, Jesus answers him not with a theological or metaphysical justification but rather points him to the work he has been doing: "...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:5 NRSV). This, it seems to me, is a different sort of political theology. Jesus does not appeal to principles but to actions; his answer is not philosophical but material. In fact, it is Jesus' opponents who attempt to undermine his work through a metaphysical attack: "By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons" (Matthew 9:34). No wonder, then, that Jesus blesses "anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matthew 11:6). To be scandalized by good works is not to have rejected a philosophical argument but to have chosen sides in a political, economic, and spiritual struggle.

This line of thinking about authority can be connected with what the political theologian Adam Kotsko sees as the theodicy tradition of the Hebrew Bible. This "problem of evil is not a question of metaphysical speculation" but rather focuses on "the question of legitimacy."²⁶ Multiple traditions in the Hebrew Bible are attempting to show why the suffering of the people of Israel does not impugn the character of their God. The answer to Israel's suffering is not metaphysical logic but the history of God's covenant faithfulness. Kotsko insists that politico-theological conflation of the authority of God with earthly political authority is "precisely the possibility that the Hebrew biblical tradition is at pains to avoid. If there is any theological parallel to the earthly ruler within any of the paradigms we have examined, it is not God but his cosmic rival, the devil."²⁷ Similarly, one of the signature forms of theological analysis Jesus deploys in the synoptic gospels is to see opposition to his ministry—especially as it comes from

²⁶ Adam Kotsko, *The Prince of This World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

political leaders whether they be his Jewish kin or Roman occupiers—as having Satanic backing.²⁸ Or perhaps more precisely, his opposition refuses to see his work as evidence of God’s kingdom, instead associating Jesus himself with the destructive power of the demonic. As Juan Luis Segundo writes, “What is not pardonable is using theology to turn real human liberation into something odious. The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognize, with ‘theological’ joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one’s very eyes.”²⁹ To see liberation and call it evil is not simply ignorance but a rebellion against the divine will, the sort of contrariness that is associated with the devil. It is concerning oneself with legitimacy at the expense of liberation.

The task of political theology, then, is not to ask whether or how divine authority is correlated with earthly political authority, especially the power of the state. This, it seems to me, would be an extreme truncation of the political. Political theology’s purpose should be instead to open up new or heretofore occluded visions of the political. As with Jesus’ opponents who can only see exorcisms, healings, and even resurrections through a semiotics of the demonic, contemporary political structures function to baptize the status quo while rendering novelty or change into at best idealistic dreams or at worst dangers to be avoided at all costs.³⁰ For radical change to be possible, what is needed is something like ideology critique, or what Terry Eagleton

²⁸ e.g., Matthew 4:10, 12:27-28, 16:23.

²⁹ Juan Luis Segundo, “Capitalism Versus Socialism: Crux Theologia,” in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, ed. Rosino Gibellini, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 254.

³⁰ I think there is a case to be made that Jesus’ break with the religious powers of his day was less the creation of something new as it was a form of immanent critique. Framing his life and ministry this way would, I think, help to avoid the supersessionism or even anti-Jewishness that many readings of Jesus criticisms of the scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees have too often allowed for. For more on this see: Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity Within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

calls “that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from inside, in order to elicit those ‘valid’ features of that experience which point beyond the subject’s present condition.” This is possible, says Eagleton, for “nobody is ever *wholly* mystified” because “those subject to oppression experience *even now* hopes and desires which could only be realistically fulfilled by a transformation of their material conditions.”³¹ Perhaps I have a more pessimistic view of the human capacity for complete mystification, but I think critique’s internal occupation of subjectivity needs something *more* to make it possible for those not only mystified by but also deeply invested in the status quo to move out from their ideological entrenchment. But what is that more?

For the purposes of this project, that *more* represents an encounter with those subjects whose investment in the present order of things is undermined by their not being fully attached to, included in, or recognized by that order. In this dissertation, I think with maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples because they are not outside of the world made through racial slavery, border imperialism, and genocide but nor are they fully subsumed within it. Unlike wooden readings of Gustavo Gutierrez’s liberation theology, the preferential option for the poor is not a valorization of the oppressed as such. Rather what Gutierrez makes clear—drawing on the work of Paulo Freire—is that the insight of the poor person is valuable insofar as he or she “perceives—and modifies—[his or her] relationship with the world and with other people.” Their newfound perception and relation to the world is not simply an individual coming-to-consciousness: “the oppressed person rejects the oppression consciousness which dwells in him [sic], becomes aware of his situation, and finds his own language. He becomes, by himself, less

³¹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991), xiv; emphasis in original.

dependent and free, as he commits himself to the transformation and building up of society.”³²

Rather than seeing the oppressed as outsiders to systems of domination, we might see them as being inside yet not fully metabolized by the ideological structures of their oppressors.

This encounter with those subaltern peoples struggling against the present order should not make them a *resource* for political or theological thought. They do not represent a new epistemology or ontology for the decolonizing of political theology.³³ They are not a disruption or intervention to be momentarily paid attention to before resuming whatever task we were engaged in prior to the encounter. This is a problematic tendency with many projects that operate at the intersection of politics, ecology, and theology. Even when eco-political theologies attempt to listen to subaltern voices (and there are many more projects that do not even attempt this much!), the oppressed are permitted to speak only insofar as they enable the discourse to go on in a decolonized, liberated, or at least pacified manner.³⁴ Sometimes the encounter with the subaltern creates a new, purportedly more universal subject.³⁵ This, I think, is misguided. First,

³² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 91.

³³ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 8, 2012).

³⁴ It is probably not surprising that a text like Peter Scott’s *A Political Theology of Nature* does not deal with the legacies of colonialism or turn to subaltern voices given the text’s indebtedness to Radical Orthodoxy. Less clear to me is why texts like Michael S. Northcott’s *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, Ryan LaMothe’s *A Radical Political Theology for the Anthropocene Age*, or Stephen Bede Scharper’s *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment* principally look at Black, migrant, or indigenous peoples as victims of environmental degradation rather than as being the frontline resistance. For Scott the goal is to recover long-ignored aspects of doctrine toward reintegrating the human and other-than human worlds. For Northcott, LaMothe, and Scharper, problematic aspects of the Christian tradition may need to be removed (e.g., certain understandings of sovereignty) but this generally remains in service to a project of immanent critique.

³⁵ Catherine Keller writes, “The labor of amorous agonism exemplifies the noncompetitive assemblage of a planetary public heading into trumped futures. Meaning to fail better, its theology does not except itself from its own context: Christian now only as ever more mindfully entangled in Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and indigenous wisdom and imbricated in the

because it seems as though struggles for liberation require the theologians stamp of approval for them to be deemed legitimate. Secondly, while ecological crises may have global relevance, the effects will be distributed unevenly, coursing through preexisting channels of inequity and underdevelopment mediated through racialized, gendered, classed, and nationalized distinctions. Whether or not geologists deem our moment in history the Anthropocene, we should, with Kathryn Yusoff, acknowledge that even our geologic epochs cannot escape a world made by colonialism's racial categories.³⁶ We should not, then, be trying to fit responses to this uneven distribution into a larger, universal project.

A recent project like Andrew R.H. Thompson's *Reconsider the Lillies: Challenging Christian Environmentalism's Colonial Legacy* demonstrates the enormous difficulty of both attending and responding to the sort of subaltern ideology critique I have been describing. Thompson's book draws on many voices that my project also seeks to center, but, after this period of listening, the new task for theology is "forming the eco-political body of Christ—of first imagining and then gathering an ecological public across boundaries of race, gender, species, animacy."³⁷ For Thompson, this vision of gathering into one body is the opposite of a whiteness that "operates by establishing divisions and hierarchies."³⁸ But does not whiteness also universalize? As Willie Jennings suggests, in the colonial encounter "[w]hiteness transcended all

seculareligious translations that will let us coalesce. Us the new public of this ancient earth. All in all." Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 157.

³⁶ Yusoff writes, "I want to suggest that race, following Silva (2007), might be considered as foundational to the production of Global-World-Space and geologic regimes of governance that become manifest in the practices of White Geology (or the Anthropocene)." Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 21.

³⁷ Andrew R.H. Thompson, *Reconsider the Lillies: Challenging Christian Environmentalism's Colonial Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), 115.

³⁸ Ibid., 145.

peoples because it was a means of seeing all peoples at the very moment it realized itself. Whiteness was a global vision of Europeans and Africans but, more than that, a way of organizing by proximity to an approximation of white bodies.”³⁹ I am not necessarily suggesting that Thompson’s eco-political body of Christ is white or that the dissertation you are reading will be able to completely eschew the tendency to center even an unacknowledged whiteness in its political, theological, and ecological thinking. But given Christianity’s hegemonic role in shaping the world, I am unsure about this desire to reassemble the world into a Christian idiom.

Whereas Thompson’s book regathers the political community back within a Christian ecclesial setting, I intend no such recapitulation. Indeed, the presumption that it is up to Christians or Christian theology to provide the legitimacy of a revolutionary community is one I remain deeply skeptical of. If the form of ideology critique I have in mind for political theology is to be radical, this will necessarily preclude overdetermining the theological or political upshot of an encounter with the subaltern. Even *if* I am successful in preventing theology from dictating the ramifications of ideology critique, I think it is important to recognize the limitations of this academic project. First, there is the constraint of drawing on something called ‘the subaltern’ in the first place. There is certainly, as Spivak notes, the constant risk of falling into the role of “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves.”⁴⁰ Second, and relatedly, my texts are not—generally speaking—voices from below. While I do sometimes incorporate directly the words of maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous activists or artists, these are often typically mediated through scholarly discourses:

³⁹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 59.

⁴⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Routledge, 2013), 87.

Black studies; border and migrant studies; Indigenous scholars of politics, culture, and religion. I do not have a ready defense for these very real and, no doubt, quite limiting factors. I might suggest that this work serves as something of a prolegomenon for ecological political theology; I am trying to demonstrate the necessity of de-centering theology and following the lead of radical movements. This does not protect my project from accusations of being overly theoretical, detached from the grassroots, or yet another academic trying to find life in the ruins of a world that it helped to create. I can only say that this is my, perhaps feeble, attempt to put the tools at my disposal—theology, the environmental humanities, critical theory—to a better use, even if that use ultimately means setting them aside for something other than the master’s tools.⁴¹

Whereas high medieval theology assumed the role of the queen of the sciences and a secularized (Hegelian?) Christianity in the form of progressive liberalism assumes the place of the end of history, political theology of the sort I propose here might anticipate only that critique will cut to the core of who we have been made to be in a world made by property, territory, and sovereignty. This might be akin to Hanna Reichel’s confidence that “[t]he renunciation of method for method’s sake...then, articulates positive theological insights, even as it proceeds by way of critique and negation.”⁴² For me, the sort of ideological critique I have in mind *might* yield liberative theologies, but it also may demonstrate the limited nature of theologizing as a mode of knowledge production. This is simply a risk we must take.

Making political theology vulnerable to subaltern ideology critique is risky, but perhaps no

⁴¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore has recently noted that “the most important thing in print when you read the master’s tools is the apostrophe between the r and the s. The tools that belong to the master.” Quoted in: Vincent Southerland, “The Master’s Tools and a Mission: Using Community Control and Oversight Laws to Resist and Abolish Police Surveillance Technologies,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, March 2, 2022), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4048371>.

⁴² Hanna Reichel, *After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 252.

more so than opening oneself up to divine alterity in the first place. In his *Epistle to the Romans*, Karl Barth repeatedly uses the image of an exploding shell to describe God's self-disclosure in Christ. For Barth, the role of the "Christian community" in response to that explosion is simply to be the crater made by the shell's impact. This community is "no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself." The people formed by this destructive force are those who "know that no sacred word or work or thing exists in its own right: they know only those words and works and things which by their negation are sign-posts to the Holy One." It strikes me that this is a sort of radical apophaticism, not simply making negative declarations about what God is not but chiefly by pointing to one's own absence and insufficiency in response to the event of God. But the church has attempted to be more than mere absence, inserting its own power in the place that is to be filled by divine presence. Barth describes this as "substituting for a void, convex for concave, positive for negative, and the characteristic marks of Christianity would be possession and self-sufficiency rather than deprivation and hope."⁴³ You can be sure, says Barth, that this futile attempt to be something more means that "Christianity would have lost all relation to the power of God."⁴⁴

For Barth, the explosion of divine alterity that excavates a community around it is mediated through an encounter with scripture. If we do not try to make scripture about *us*, says Barth, what we discover is that "There is a new world in the Bible, the world of God."⁴⁵ When I open the Bible, the world of God appears to me to be one that belongs to the weak, the vulnerable, the outcasts, and the despised. The world of God is one where the nations of the earth will be judged

⁴³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, "The New World in the Bible, 1917," in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 19.

for how they relate to the hungry, the thirsty, the alien, the naked, the sick, and those in prison (Matthew 25:31-46). This judgment is carried out on behalf of society's victims not because they are to be pitied or because they are completely lacking in power but rather because God identifies with them. To suggest that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the "poor in spirit" or that the meek "will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:3, 5) is not a displacement of justice to some other time or place, but is a statement about how things are now. An eschatological *already* in the midst of a world doing everything in its power to say, "Not yet!"

Abolition's Ecologies takes as its task the opening up of new ways of thinking politically, theologically and ecologically. This is done not through integrating the practices of others into a pre-existing agenda for Christian political theology but through paying careful attention to places where people have found ways of living beyond the dominating logics of property, territory, and sovereignty. In a time when it seems that politics and theologies are stymied by the sort of calcification that happens to thought when it clings too tightly to the status quo, what is necessary is to be painfully reminded that alternatives always exist and these possibilities need not be politicized or theologized for them to be valid or effective. Rather than acting as the arbiter of what counts as proper political thought or action, political theology might assume its crater-like position, pointing not to its own criteria for liberation or justice but pointing beyond itself to the events of liberation, even or especially those it cannot adequately describe. What I want to offer here is not a new agenda for theology—this cannot be determined in advance of the encounter—but only a new disposition. Rather than offering justification for the dominant terms of order, political theology should make itself open and vulnerable to the liberation that is breaking out well ahead of where politico-theological discourses and categories are willing to go.

It is for this reason that I have titled this project *Abolition's Ecologies*. In my effort to pay

attention to those peoples who have struggled against property, territory, and sovereignty, what has become clear is that their creativity and desire for another world are indicative of an abolitionist impulse. I draw on the tradition of abolition-democracy first espoused by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the movement to establish political and economic institutions to ensure that the formerly enslaved would not be returned again to bondage and second-class status. I connect this thinking to contemporary scholars and activists who see their work fighting for prison and police abolition as a continuation of Du Bois' idea. Abolition for these thinkers, is not simply an end to something but requires the planning and implementation of something new. Similarly, I want to push political theology beyond its tendency to justify current arrangements of power not in an effort to reduce it to a discourse of critique (understood in a negative sense here). Rather, I hope that in making itself vulnerable, in taking a different position vis-à-vis subaltern perspectives, political theology might become a servant for liberation. As I have suggested, this would not be an effort to synthesize or sublimate other perspectives into its tradition but rather pointing to the perhaps unexpected places where God has seen fit to work in power for the liberation of the world.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter, "Property," considers conceptions of self-proprietty and self-possession in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. The chapter first begins with an examination of Frederick Douglass' attempts to understand how his relationship with other-than-humans on the plantation is grounded in a certain understanding of self-ownership. While contemporary scholars have attempted to use Douglass' writings to find an ethic for human and non-human animal relations, what becomes clear is that Douglass cannot eschew how property shapes the

ecology of the plantation even in ways that shape his thinking after he is emancipated from slavery. I move from Douglass to John Locke's account of property founded on having property in one's person. I argue that a Lockean understanding of property, rooted in what C.B. Macpherson has called "possessive individualism," shaped not only understandings of what it meant to own property in other persons but also constrained attempts to theorize abolition as the emancipation of the self-possessed individual. I connect this to contemporary critical theory around possession and dispossession in an effort to show how even having dispossession as one's goal for subjectivity and agency keeps one firmly rooted within the broader logics of the property regime. To show the perniciousness of this account of the self as either possessed or dispossessed, I consider the idea of fungibility in the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Tiffany Lethabo King, in order to show how (dis)possession renders the person open to transformation and use by others. Finally, I turn to marronage—the phenomenon of enslaved peoples escaping into the bush and establishing alternative ways of living apart from slaveholding society—to imagine freedom as a practice of exorcizing the property economy.

Chapter two, "Territory," thinks about territoriality in the context of the westward expansion of the United States and the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border. I theorize the border as a site that draws on the other-than-human landscape in order to produce the identities of "illegal" alien and citizen; the desert landscape of the border is not only conscripted into a war of citizens against aliens but is used to naturalize these categories. I then conceptualize territory not primarily as a spatial category but as a form of temporality. Examining the history and rhetoric of U.S. expansion, I argue that territory is about securing a future for white U.S. American citizens while excluding racialized others who belong to the past. In contrast to this racial temporality based upon exclusion, I then turn to histories, ethnographies, and theories of border

crossers to think about how those peoples who move across the border “respatialize” the land; through their movement across border spaces, they do not simply relocate but make connections between sending and receiving communities as well as between those peoples they encounter along the journey. As these border crossers flout territoriality’s rigidity, they enact new ways of imagining borderlands as spaces for continuity, connection, and care. Finally, I theorize how this struggle to respatialize territory—to recover space from the abstracting force of territorial futurity—might be thought of as offering an eschatological imaginary that reveals both the violent operations of border militarism as well as new possibilities embodied by those who not only endure but resist the annihilation of space by time.

Chapter three, “Sovereignty,” draws a contrast between the political theology of sovereignty offered by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt and Indigenous North American conceptions of sovereignty. I place Schmitt’s understanding of sovereignty that is grounded in the decision on the exception, in a broader consideration of his political theology that includes not only ideas like his friend-enemy distinction but also his narration of the struggle between sovereign states to colonize the so-called New World. While I do not argue that Schmitt’s account of sovereignty is the most dominant or influential in Western politics, I try to show how the logic of the exception emerges as a framework that can be seen especially clearly in the interaction between settler colonizer nations and Indigenous peoples. I then turn to Indigenous scholars and activists, especially the work of Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, to show how Indigenous sovereignty is not simply a claim to rival nation status but represents a distinct form of politics altogether, especially as it is predicated upon certain relations with land. Connecting Schmitt’s idea that the exception is analogous to the miracle in theology, I consider how Indigenous sovereignty offers a distinct account of the miraculous that does not put sovereign

power in competition with the order of the created world; rather than seeing sovereignty as the power to upend normal creaturely relations, Indigenous thinkers argue that power and politics are instead about taking responsibility for one's interrelated world. I close the chapter by offering a reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony* in order to think through what the Indigenous struggle against the settler-colonial sovereign exception means for facing a world where human and other-than-human relations face global threats of destruction.

Chapter four, "Abolition," argues that the forms of resistance represented by maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples require radical alternatives to the present political economy. I argue that moving beyond property, territory, and sovereignty entails not just the negation of these hegemonic concepts but requires the capacity to imagine what might replace them. To that end I connect contemporary movements fighting for Black liberation, migrant justice, and Indigenous sovereignty to the struggle for prison and police abolition, because abolitionist thinking offers a way of understanding and responding to a world that depends upon prisons, police, border walls, and militarism to protect property, territory, and sovereignty. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, movements that have sought to integrate ecological concerns with struggles for racial justice have often found their primary opposition comes in the form of the intertwined forces of the Prison Industrial Complex and the national security state. I argue for abolition as a tool for unmasking forms of oppression and for imagining a world beyond them. I close this chapter by considering abolition's import for Christian political theology. Political theology has often functioned to justify alignments of the religious, political, and natural. Or, even when theology is deployed to unmask and critique power operations, it too often seeks to subsume movements for liberation into its logic. Instead of trying to formulate an abolitionist theology, I gesture toward a different disposition. Rather than seeking to make itself

the guiding hand of liberation, theology might seek to join and follow those fighting for abolition. Political theology, then, might become a tool for joining in the fight for a new world, just not one of its own making.

Chapter One: Property

Introduction

In *12 Million Black Voices*, a 1941 photodocumentary book containing Farm Security Administration photographs of Black sharecroppers from the Great Depression, Richard Wright describes Black life in the American south as a collective effort to “pool our labor to wrest subsistence from the stubborn soil.” This struggle for survival—one which Wright likens to a primordial human existence—is not without a discernible culture: “So, living by folk tradition, possessing but a few rights which others respect, we are unable to establish our family groups upon a basis of property ownership.” Families, then, are not bound by patrimony but by affect and exertion—“love, sympathy, pity, and the goading knowledge that we must work together to make a crop.”¹ Acknowledging this struggle leads Wright into a description of mirth and music. Singing and laughing are not pastimes or ways to ignore the struggle. No, “black folk laugh and sing when we are alone together” because “[t]here is nothing—no ownership or lust for power—that stands between us and our kin.”

Wright sees Black familial care as rooted in blood relations, but it is a form of relationality he contrasts to the dominant political economy of a sharecropping society. Wright sees this epitomized in the “black mother who stands in the sagging door of her gingerbread shack” whose love for her children is characterized by “an irreducibly human feeling that stands above the claims of law or property.” This, for Wright, is indicative of a sociality that transcends not only squalor and struggle, but moves beyond the systems, structures, and standards that are its

¹ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 1941), 60.

preconditions: “Our scale of values differs from that of the world from which we have been excluded; our shame is not its shame, and our love is not its love.”² Robin D.G. Kelley describes Wright’s project as a portrayal of “the long nightmare that is black life in America.” But, for Wright, the point of examining those living through hell was to learn from them a new way of life. Kelley sees in Wright’s book a desire to show his readers “the possibility of a new dream, one rooted in African-American folk values which he attributes to the absurd and impoverished life black people have had to endure.”³

When I read *12 Million Black Voices*, I cannot help but see the ubiquity and perniciousness of property. Property makes Black-occupied buildings into temporary residences with the ever-present threat of having one’s home sold out from under them.⁴ Black people are said to lower the property values of neighborhoods⁵ and yet are charged higher rents than white tenants.⁶ They are barred from purchasing property—prohibited not only through lack of wealth and credit but also through the formation of “property-owner associations” enacted to prevent a “black ‘invasion.’”⁷ Racial covenants are justified by a legal system that insists that equality means that Black communities, if they so choose, can practice the same sorts of discrimination against white people when and if they acquire their own property.⁸ It is easy to see, then, why Wright views property not simply as a possession but as a force shaping human desires and relationships. The exclusion of most Black people from the property regime, no doubt, immiserates those who are

² Ibid., 61.

³ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 184.

⁴ Wright, 102.

⁵ Ibid., 103.

⁶ Ibid., 103, 104.

⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁸ Ibid., 113.

forced to struggle for shelter and wealth accumulation, the effects of which are still felt today.⁹ But Wright insists that this exclusion represents not simply a deprivation, but a site from which another form of life—a distinct “scale of values”—might grow. I find this suggestion provocative because Black life in the United States went from *being* property to being excluded from property. This is surely why Wright calls Black sharecroppers in the South the “Inheritors of Slavery.”¹⁰

In this chapter I examine how property shapes relationships with land by attending to the history of slavery and its afterlives. The chapter will proceed in four parts. Part one, “The Ecology of Property on the Plantation,” considers how slavery and the plantation economy blurred the distinction between humans and land on the basis of ownership. This section focuses not only on the policies and practices of slaveholding society, which made it possible to treat certain human beings as property, but also on how the enslaved viewed and responded to this economy. What does it mean for slavery to be bound up with the other-than-human world, while whiteness meant that one was unable to be owned as property by another?

Part two, “Property and Self-Possession,” contextualizes the property regime of slavery within conceptions of property rooted in self-possession and a certain view of land. This section considers John Locke’s account of property in his *Second Treatise on Government*, attending especially to his understanding that human freedom is grounded in having property in oneself. Not being owned by another, then, sets the white, property-owning, male apart from Black and Indigenous persons, who not only lack self-ownership but become the property of others in the

⁹ Ellora Derenoncourt et al., “Wealth of Two Nations: The U.S. Racial Wealth Gap, 1860-2020,” Working Paper (National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w30101>.

¹⁰ Wright, 29.

same manner as land. But attempts to universalize self-ownership to formerly enslaved and disenfranchised peoples do not ameliorate the way property is founded on the mastery of humans and other-than-humans. This section ends by looking at critiques of self-possession that attempt to wrest the self from liberal accounts grounded in what C.B. MacPherson has called “possessive individualism.”

Part three, “Fungibility,” examines an issue that arises in attempts to move beyond or redress the violence of property as a foundation for the free subject. Drawing on theorists like Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and Tiffany Lethabo King, I argue that property renders humans and other-than-humans fungible. It transforms human and other-than-human alike into “an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values.”¹¹ This discussion of fungible bodies and fungible land opens up a central question of this chapter: How do we understand freedom in a way that moves beyond both the ownership of others and the ownership of ourselves? Where is freedom to be found if it is not to be conceptualized as either a self-possessed individual immune from being shaped by others or as the fully fungible subject fully at the mercy of others’ desires and actions?

The final part, “Marronage,” attempts to answer this question by drawing on the historical, theoretical, and literary imagination of marronage, that phenomenon of enslaved persons liberating themselves and enacting forms of life beyond the property regime through occupying spaces inaccessible to plantation society. But is this turn to maroons simply another back-to-the-land ethic that retreats to the wild margins in order to escape from hegemonic forms of life rooted in capitalism, state violence, and other forms of domination? I argue that it is not simply

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 28.

marginality which made marronage successful but rather its ability to connect the provision grounds—small scale subsistence agriculture practiced by enslaved peoples on the plantation—with wild, inaccessible land. In order to think with marronage today, we need to think about how these practices may help us navigate the ubiquity of the neoliberal property regime. To do this I turn to Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in order to expand marronage beyond the jungles on the periphery of a plantation-based society. I argue that Jacobs’ seven-year long flight from slavery in a tiny attic in her grandmother’s home signals a way to think marronage in the belly of the beast that is the property regime.

1. The Ecology of Property on the Plantation

They’ve taken thee out of the simple soil,
Where the warm sun made mellow thy tones
And voices plaintive from eternal toil,
Thy music spoke in liquid lyric moans;
They’ve stolen thee out of the brooding wood,
Where scenting bloodhounds caught thy whispered note,
And birds and flowers only understood
The sorrow sobbing from a choking throat
- Claude McKay, “Negro Spiritual”¹²

At the heart of the plantation’s property regime was a question: How can the enslaved person be simultaneously person and property? Liberal reckonings with this apparent push and pull between humanity and property trouble defenders of freedom that seek to ground the self in notions of autonomy and self-determination. In this section I explore this tension through a consideration of the writings of Frederick Douglass—focusing especially on his autobiographies and his 1873 address to the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association—to

¹² Claude McKay, *Complete Poems*, ed. William J. Maxwell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

show how the practice of owning human property shaped relations with the other-than-human world. I draw on recent projects that see in Douglass' writings the potential for an ethic that can serve the welfare of both human and non-human animals. I then turn to Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's reading of Douglass in order to show the limitations of his uses of animality, especially focusing on how his project is rooted in and constrained by the liberal accounts of freedom of his time. I conclude the section by suggesting how slavery's ecology of property transformed not only human-animal relations but relationships with the broader other-than-human landscape.

In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass uses his relationship with birds to depict the perspectival change he underwent in relations to the cruelty and degradation of slavery. An early chapter describes the plantation grounds as "a most strikingly interesting place, full of life, activity and spirit."¹³ From his young, and possibly naïve perspective, the whole arrangement of the plantation can seem "Eden-like" to Douglass. He offers vivid descriptions of the flora, fauna, and built-environment, culminating in an avian flourish: "The tops of the stately poplars were often covered with the red-winged black-birds, making all nature vocal with the joyous life and beauty of their wild, warbling notes. These all belonged to me, as well as to Col. Edward Lloyd [the owner of the plantation], and for a time I greatly enjoyed them."¹⁴ This sense of ownership and enjoyment is short lived.

The violence and brutality he comes to see as integral to life on the plantation—Douglass describes Mr. Plummer, a vicious overseer as "little better than a human brute"—rids him of any illusions that the place belongs to him in any meaningful sense. By only eight or nine years old, he comes to have a sense of his own "wretchedness" that dramatically transforms his relationship

¹³ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

with the parts of nature that seemed joyous and beautiful to him before: “I used to contrast my condition with the black-birds, in whose wild and sweet songs I fancied them so happy! Their apparent joy only deepened the shades of my sorrow.”¹⁵ Blackbirds that were once a source of pleasure now almost taunt him with their freedom. Elsewhere in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass claims “I often wished myself a beast, or a bird—anything, rather than a slave.”¹⁶ This transformed relationship to birds signals a recognition of slavery’s transformation of humans into animals. Animality is not simply a marker of one’s being less-than-human, but of the possibility of being owned. Even Douglass’ early appreciation of the plantation environment epitomized by sonorous blackbirds, is indexed to the property regime: “These all belonged to me.”

The scholar, poet, and performance artist Joshua Bennett notices a similar motif in Douglass’ first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. This time the animal to which Douglass relates himself is a horse: “By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.”¹⁷ Bennett argues that, for Douglass, “The horse is a creature that likewise has no narrative of origin—no chronological orientation outside of its relationship to the slaver’s clock—and is thus also constantly moving between the realm of the organism and machine, between occupying a space of self-determination and being configured as a *living commodity*.” Douglass’ rhetorical strategy of connecting enslaved life with non-human animals, signals for Bennett a strategy of “getting out of animality *by going through it*.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 15.

¹⁸ Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 2; emphasis in original.

Animality, then, need not be an indicator of flesh's availability for domination, exploitation, and violence, but can serve as a place from which to build an affective ecology of solidarity and care.

To show these connections, Bennett points to an 1873 address Douglass delivers to the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association. In his speech, Douglass insists that slavery produces...

...coarseness and brutality in the treatment and management of domestic animals, especially those most useful to agricultural industry. Not only the slave, but the horse, the ox, and the mule shared the general feeling of indifference to rights naturally engendered by the state of slavery. The master blamed the overseer; the overseer the slave, and the slave the horses, oxen, and mules; and violence and brutality fell upon the animals as a consequence.¹⁹

Here we can see how violence circulates through the plantation ecology. But it would seem that slavery is not so much causing the bestialization of humans—the livestock are not the source of the violence!—but rather it is the commodification that leads to the tendency to abuse. Marx insists that commodities “have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value,” and it is this second, abstract form value (i.e., exchange-value) that is the true sign that commodification has occurred. Marx also insists that exchange-value represents a flight from the material: “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values.” The exchange-value of a commodity, then, is a purely social production.²⁰ It is this social production of animal property—both human and other-than-human—that Douglass sees as the root of this violent human-animal relation. Bennett sees Douglass as calling upon his listeners “to consider animals their co-laborers, friends, partners in the field, to resist the whims

¹⁹ Frederick Douglass, “Agriculture and Black Progress: An Address Delivered in Nashville, Tennessee, on September 18, 1873,” The Frederick Douglass Papers Project, accessed March 18, 2024, <https://frederickdouglasspapersproject.com/s/digitaledition/item/17769>.

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1990), 138-39.

of a social order predicated on their confinement and instead embrace another, more radical form of sociality, one grounded in the desire for a world without cages or chains.”²¹

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson insists that Douglass’ animal writings and speeches draw on “sentimentality and religio-scientific hierarchy” which are bound up with the “liberal humanist rhetorical modes and affective registers” of his day.²² Jackson reads Douglass insistence that enslaved human beings are ranked lower than animals as an attempt to “provoke moral persuasion and/or Christian outrage over a system of ‘unnatural’ ordering that was discordant with God’s law.”²³ Douglass’ writes, “We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding rank in the scale of being.”²⁴ Jackson connects descriptions like this to “the philosophy of natural rights and its hierarchies of being—human superiority and uniqueness” which “were cornerstones of the rhetorical arsenal for abolitionists like [William Lloyd] Garrison.” But this, argues Jackson, fails to “provide a stable place for black people to argue for symmetrical, liberal humanist recognition, much less redress, since the enslaved were merely a rung away from animals or possibly even conjoined with their animal neighbors as ‘animal humans’ on what was a *continuous* scale.”²⁵ In other words, Douglass’ argument for recognizing the full humanity of the enslaved by pointing to their animalization is not successful because it falls inside of the terms of order of the humanism that allowed for slavery to exist in the first place.

²¹ Joshua Bennett, 3.

²² Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁴ Douglass, *Narrative*, 55.

²⁵ Jackson, 49; emphasis in original.

I think Jackson is correct in insisting that Douglass' rhetoric—hinging upon the idea that human beings are being degraded to the status of (or even below) animals—fails to see how racial slavery does not rest upon a clean distinction between human and animal. "Slave labor" on Jackson's account, is not simply "forced, unwaged, labor exploitation" but is "an essential enabling condition of the modern grammar of the Subject, a peculiar grammar of kind or logic of species."²⁶ The slaveowner is not failing to notice a common humanity shared with the enslaved. As Stanley Cavell puts it:

But if this man sees certain human beings as slaves, isn't he seeing something special, not missing something (he doubtless thinks I am missing something)? What he is missing is not something about slaves exactly, and not exactly about human beings. He is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak. When he wants to be served at table by a black hand, he would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw. When he rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy...He does not go to great lengths either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human—his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments...²⁷

This unsettling inhabitation of the slave owner's perspective gets at Saidiya Hartman's crucial insight that "the figuration of the humane in slavery was totally consonant with the domination of the enslaved."²⁸ It is from this point that Jackson can turn to discuss the role of sentimentality in Douglass' human-animal thinking.

Again drawing from Hartman, Jackson argues that "sentiment routinely regulated and preserved the institution [of slavery] rather than effected a reversal of its relations."²⁹ In his 1873

²⁶ Ibid., 50.

²⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 376

²⁸ Hartman, *Scenes*, 163.

²⁹ Jackson, 55.

address connecting the brutality of slavery to the mistreatment of animals, Douglass exhorts his listeners to “make his horse his companion and friend, and to do this, there is but one rule, and that is, uniform sympathy and kindness...A horse is in many respects like a man. He has the five senses, and has memory, affection and reason to a limited degree.”³⁰ This leads Jackson to ask “what if the rhetoric of sentimentality and empathetic identification itself reintroduces hierarchies of feeling and capacity engendered by slavery rather than remedies them as his ‘to a limited degree’ might suggest?”³¹ Jackson is clearly tapping into a tension in Douglass’ thought. In a mirror image of Cavell’s slaveowner who cannot fully live out a conviction that the enslaved lacks (full) humanity, Douglass is stuck within a rhetorical strategy and philosophical structure that is constrained by (Jackson calls it “conscripted”) hierarchical scales of being and a sentimental ethics that prescribes affection for those on a lower rung of the scale than oneself.

Hartman argues that what she calls “the slave mode of production” uses the notion of humane treatment in order to hold together the “dual existence of the slave as person and property.”³² She argues that the law simultaneously sought to reign in violence done to slaves and at the same time it “continued to decriminalize the violence thought necessary to the preservation of the institution and the submission and obedience of the slave.” Recognizing the enslaved as a subject was not a contradiction to their status as property. Hartman argues that this sort of recognition “served to explicate the meaning of dominion. To be subject in this manner was no less brutalizing than being an object of property.”³³ Perhaps no place demonstrates this interplay between subjection and property more clearly than the slave market.

³⁰ Douglass, “Agriculture and Black Progress.”

³¹ Jackson, 54.

³² Hartman, *Scenes*, 157-58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 164.

Walter Johnson describes the slave market as having “a contradiction and a contest” at its heart: “The contradiction was this: the abstract value that underwrote the southern economy could only be made material in human shape—frail, sentient, and resistant. And thus the contradiction was daily played out in a contest over meaning.”³⁴ The struggle over the significance of the slave market—in which slaveholders held most of the power, even while the enslaved produced strategies of resistance—unveils the instability at the heart of slavery’s property system:

Were slave sales, as so many slaveholders insisted, the unfortunate results of untimely deaths, unavoidable debts, unforeseeable circumstance, and understandable punishments, or were they, as so many slaves felt, the natural, inevitable, and predictable result of a system that treated people as property? Was a slave sale an untimely rupture of the generally benign character of the relation between masters and slave or hard evidence of the hidden structure of that relation, a part of slavery that revealed the malign character of the whole?³⁵

Johnson’s study of the slave market suggests that this struggle over the slave trade’s meaning was carried out at multiple levels: micro- and macro-economic, political, familial, libidinal. The trade in human property represented dreams and desires for social and economic mobility, respectability, and even virtue. The brutality of it, then, either needed to be rationalized, justified, or ignored. This effort to integrate both the keeping and selling of slaves into one’s self-understanding was not only the task of individuals or families, but also that of a nation. Johnson notes that the institution of

an always-already-broken-down distinction between ‘slaveholding’ and ‘slave trading,’ the [laws prohibiting the importation of slaves]...represented the efforts of a new nation to align the limits of its economy with its polity. It forwarded an emergent idea of the ‘nation’ as the container of its own economy, over and against the insatiable logic of an

³⁴ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

economy that could commodify anything—even a tiny child.³⁶

As Jackson and Hartman suggest, this struggle that Johnson describes between understanding slavery as an institution either characterized as humane or brutal is unresolvable precisely because it was both.

In “The Nature of Slavery,” part of a lecture delivered in 1850 in Rochester, New York, Douglass defines a master as “one...whom claims and exercises a right of property in the person of a fellow-man.” If property is central to what it means to be a master, then to be a slave is its mirror image: “In law, the slave has no wife, no children, no country, and no home. He can own nothing, possess nothing, acquire nothing, but what must belong to another. To eat the fruit of his own toil, to clothe his person with the work of his own hands, is considered stealing. He toils that another may reap the fruit.”³⁷ The literary scholar Michael Bennett sees this understanding of the master-slave relationship played out on the landscape in Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative*. In a particularly telling scene, Douglass describes a fruit garden on Captain Lloyd’s plantation. According to Douglass, the summer fruits were such objects of temptations for enslaved persons on the plantation, that Lloyd resorts to “tarring his fence all around; after which, if a slave was caught with any tar upon his person, it was deemed sufficient proof that he had either been into the garden, or had tried to get in.”³⁸ Bennett reads this scene as an evocation of the Garden of Eden. He connects it to the consumption of forbidden fruit and he sees the tar-stained body as a reference to the mark of Cain, a racial biblical hermeneutic that understood skin pigment as a sign of God’s judgment of the “darker races” of humanity.³⁹

³⁶ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 27.

³⁷ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 355.

³⁸ Douglass, *Narrative*, 28-29.

³⁹ Michael Bennett, “Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery,” in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster and

Bennett's sees the expulsion of enslaved life from the fruit garden of the plantation as part of Douglass' rejection of the pastoral landscape of the plantation. Bennett argues that Douglass cannot "have a positive relationship with the southern landscape since he is legally a part of that landscape."⁴⁰ But there is something else to notice about property's function on the plantation: namely, that the misuse of the property was seen as a direct threat to the landowner. Willie Jennings argues that the colonial moment ushered in a world where "private property became a matter of theological anthropology." Property ownership was, and is, not simply about what one does with one's wealth but about an ontology through which one extends oneself into the world. Jennings writes, "The body of the landowner was tied to the land as an extension of the body's vulnerability. This, of course, meant that the land had to be secured and protected from incursion."⁴¹ If the land becomes something of a prosthetic of its owner, then the way to shore up the body's security was through seeking "order above all else."⁴²

Bennett argues that the order of the plantation could be established in totality because these sites were remote, "far removed from the eyes of white witnesses." This removal from societal norms is supposed to have posed an increased threat to enslaved persons because their "masters were cut off from any social pressures to regulate their conduct."⁴³ Douglass recalls that his being moved off the plantation to the city of Baltimore represented a radical transformation of his condition that opened up new possibilities for him: "Going to live in Baltimore laid the foundation and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity."⁴⁴ In Baltimore Douglass

Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 200.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 200.

⁴¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 235.

⁴² Ibid., 236.

⁴³ Michael Bennett, 201.

⁴⁴ Douglass, *Narrative*, 42.

receives rudimentary lessons in reading, and it is from there he begins to imagine a new future for himself apart from slavery. It is also from this city that Douglass will eventually escape from his bondage and flee north to New Bedford, Massachusetts. For our purposes, what is not clear is whether this move radically transforms Douglass' relationship with the plantation's property regime.

More recent scholarship on Douglass' suggests that the order of the plantation, once it is expunged of the blight of slavery, retains an aesthetic allure for Douglass. In 1877, Douglass purchases his own estate, Cedar Hill, in then rural Anacostia, Washington, D.C. Scott Hess argues that Douglass' ownership, cultivation, and appreciation of a "literary landscape" at Cedar Hill "naturalized both his legal and symbolic possession over the landscape and his full participation in the forms of elite culture associated with such landscapes."⁴⁵ Hess connects Douglass' ownership of Cedar Hill with his return trip to the Lloyd plantation in 1881 that he records in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, his third and final autobiography. There Douglass describes the garden as "still kept in fine condition, but not as in the days of the elder Lloyd, for then it was tended constantly by Mr. McDermot, a scientific gardener, and four experienced hands, and formed, perhaps, the most beautiful feature of the place...with its broad walks, hedged with box and adorned with fruits trees and flowers of almost every variety. A more tranquil and tranquilizing scene I have seldom met in this or any other country."⁴⁶ Hess argues that though Douglass attempted to use Cedar hill to "identify himself with nature in the prevailing terms of white nineteenth-century high culture in order to claim full membership and rights in that culture," this is ultimately "self-defeating, for once marked by race Cedar Hill no

⁴⁵ Scott Hess, "Cedar Hill: Frederick Douglass's Literary Landscape and the Racial Construction of Nature," *American Literature* 93, no. 4 (December 1, 2021): 574.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Hess, 589.

longer counted, in the white symbolic imagination, as nature at all.”⁴⁷ The property around Cedar Hill would eventually be developed, and, due in no small part to its neighborhood being predominantly Black, “its significance as a literary landscape and site of nature has generally been forgotten.”⁴⁸

I do not include this brief foray into Douglass’ own estate to undermine the validity of his abolitionist efforts, but rather to suggest the difficulty or perhaps impossibility of extracting oneself from the plantation’s ecology of property. In much the same way that Douglass’ use of animals cannot wholly escape from the philosophical and political milieu which allowed enslaved persons to be viewed as simultaneously human and property, so Douglass’ performance of estate ownership is enmeshed within an aesthetic and affective matrix overdetermined by the political ecology of the plantation rooted in property. If we return to Douglass’ invocation of red-wing black-birds in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, we might notice that his enjoyment of them fits into a larger, quite *orderly* description of Lloyd’s plantation, one that Douglass himself remarks upon with some aesthetic appreciation. This is due, in no small part, to the fact that “[c]ivilization is shut out, but nature cannot be.”⁴⁹ Douglass’ early appreciation of the “Eden-like” plantation finally succumbs to slavery’s violent and unnatural ordering. Yet there is something about this connection with these birds that exceeds this system. After Douglass comes to understand the brutality of slavery, it is the *wild* blackbirds—whose earlier songs seemed to be integrated into the plantation ecosystem as part of the property—that are contrasted with the “wretchedness” of slavery.⁵⁰ If there is a liberatory ecological potential in Douglass’ relationship

⁴⁷ Ibid., 593.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 594.

⁴⁹ Douglass, *My Bondage*, 54.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 108.

with the landscape, it might be with these small members of the other-than-human world. This possibility for freedom is not to be found in their animality per se, but rather in the fact that they exceed the property regime. Their “wild and sweet songs” may be small, but their diminutive music signals a larger theme.

2. Property and Self-Possession

Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession...that represents the real danger.

- Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*⁵¹

In this section, I situate the ownership of persons within the framework of self-ownership. First, I look at John Locke’s account of property as rooted in self-proprietorship and labor. Land becomes property when one mixes one’s labor with it. But this then creates a society in which there is a class distinction between the propertied and unpropertied, the landed and the landless. Following C.B. Macpherson’s reading of Locke, I argue that the distinction between those who own property and those who must sell their capacity to labor mirrors Locke’s distinction between human and other-than-human creatures. Second, I turn to accounts of the self that attempt to think about agency and subjectivity through dispossession. If self-possession is bound up with the property regime, perhaps dispossession presents the opportunity to conceive of the self and its web of relations in ways not centered on ownership.

John Locke’s well-known account of property from his *Second Treatise of Government* is a foundational site for understanding what C.B. Macpherson has called “possessive individualism” or the idea that “the individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing

⁵¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 17.

nothing to society for them.”⁵² Indeed, Locke contrasts the commons from the person: “Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*: This no Body has any right to but himself. The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his.” Owning property in one’s labor and the work of one’s hands, for Locke, is crucial for thinking about property more broadly because it is through mixing one’s labor with land that transforms land into property: “It being by him removed from the common State Nature placed it in, it hath by this *Labour* something annexed to it, that excludes the common Right of other Men.”⁵³ In a sense, what Locke describes as the power of labor to “[fix] my *Property* in” land or natural resources might best be understood as mixing oneself into that which one seeks to appropriate.⁵⁴

With this focus on labor, Locke devalues uncultivated land. His logic is at once theological and financial. Humans are commanded by God “to subdue the Earth, *i.e.* improve it for the Benefit of Life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his Labour.”⁵⁵ Failure to improve the land is a violation of God’s command and a form of negligence by not extracting a maximum value. Land is inert, idle, perhaps even anthropomorphized as lazy: “And the ground which produces the Materials, is scarce to be reckon’d in, as any, or at most but a very small part” of the “*value* of things we enjoy in this World.”⁵⁶ Beyond his ignorance of so-called “ecosystem services,” there is a notable parallel between idle land and idle people in Locke’s thought. Indigenous Americans, for Locke, are “rich in Land, and poor in all the Comforts of

⁵² Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

⁵³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government: And, a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Mark Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15; emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16; emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18; emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23; emphasis in original.

Life.” The land of the Americas “has materials of Plenty...yet for *want of improving it by Labour*, [the Indigenous peoples] have not one hundredth part of the Conveniences we enjoy.”⁵⁷

For Locke, the distinct agricultural practices of the English and Indigenous Americans are tied to a hierarchy of cultures. Never assuming that there may be something about Indigenous life ways that he is ignorant of, he insists “God gave the World to Men in common; but since he gave it them for their Benefit, and the greatest conveniencies of Life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational, (and *Labour* was to be *his Title* to it;).”⁵⁸ So, laboring on land to make it one’s rightful property, then, is indexed to industriousness and rationality. Just as Locke contrasts the fecundity of cultivated land with the “wastes,” so also productive humanity is superior to its indolent counterpart.

Macpherson sees this aspect of Locke’s thought as creating a class distinction between those who own property and those who must sell their labor for a wage. The difference is not simply in how one makes a living, but in the use of one’s rationality; if you are selling your labor, you are submitting in obedience to the will of another, namely an employer. Macpherson notes that Locke sees Christianity as offering a method for disciplining the wage laboring class: “His repeated emphasis on the necessity of the labouring class being brought to obedience by believing in divine rewards and punishments leaves no doubt about his main concern. The implication is plain: the labouring class, beyond all others, is incapable of living a rational life.”⁵⁹ As Phillip Hansen points out, “Locke’s ‘state of perfect freedom’ combines the ability and right of individuals to ‘order their actions,’ that is, act autonomously, with the disposition of their

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22; emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18; emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ Macpherson, 226.

possessions and persons.”⁶⁰ But this freedom is alienable, especially when the necessity of selling one’s labor is brought about because of inequalities of property ownership. As Macpherson explains, “those without property are, Locke recognizes, dependent for their very livelihood on those with property, and are unable to alter their circumstances...To put it another way, the man without property in things loses that full proprietorship of his own person which was the basis of his equal natural rights.”⁶¹

What I find quite striking in all this is that the class distinction between the propertied and unpropertied mirrors the distinction between humans and the land. Just as land is passive and accumulated through human rationality and industriousness (i.e., through human labor), so the laboring class’ lack of full human rationality makes them idle but able to be put to productive use by having their capacities harnessed by an employer. The difference, in Locke’s mind, is that the landless laborer *chooses* to alienate his capacities in working for another. For Locke, the unpropertied wage laborer is still acting freely even though what compels them to sell their capacities is their lack of property, which is itself the result of their lack of rationality and industry. So, for Locke the distinction between humans and land centers on ownership: the land is there for humans to use and own, but the individual human belongs to no-one but herself. But insofar as humans can alienate their capacities and sell their labor for a wage, they become less fully human and more like the land.

This also means that the propertied class can use the labor of others not only to work their land but to accumulate more property. Macpherson points out that we now see a different relationship between labor and property accumulation than the one on which Locke founds

⁶⁰ Phillip Hansen, *Reconsidering C.B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 44.

⁶¹ Macpherson, 231.

property relations: “Whereas in the first stage labouring and appropriating implied each other, and together comprised rational behavior, in the second stage labouring no longer implied appropriating, though appropriating implied (someone’s) labouring.”⁶² In other words, whereas property was initially acquired through mixing one’s own labor with the land to improve it, now the property owner—through the use of the wage—is able to harness another’s work toward his goal of enlarging his property. But the work of the wage laborer—who is undeniably still mixing her work with the land—no longer produces property (at least not for the wage laborer herself). Wage-labor, according to Locke’s own account of property, is more akin to being put to use by the property owner in the same manner as an oxen or a horse is used to plow a field. Work is being accomplished, but it is no longer tied to accumulation for the laborer.⁶³

Macpherson argues that this class distinction undermines the foundations of liberal democracy because insofar as the purpose of both civil society and the state is to protect the institution of property, the laboring class “are not in fact full members of the body politic and have no claim to be so.”⁶⁴ That the wage laborer class lacks full political membership is not simply the result of their lacking external property, but also because, “the man without property in things loses that full proprietorship of his own person which was the basis of his equal natural right.”⁶⁵ Hugh Breakey contests Macpherson’s readings of Locke, specifically focusing on the

⁶² Ibid., 234.

⁶³ The obvious difference here is that the human laborer is earning a wage. For Locke “the use of Money” allows an exchange of perishable goods for an unperishable currency that is grounded on “mutual Consent.” My point here is that the exchange of money for “the truly useful, but perishable supports of Life” does not accumulate property for the laborer. If perhaps it does—currency being exchangeable for property in food, drink, raiment, or other subsistence properties—it is not accumulating productive property in the same manner that mixing one’s laborer with the land was supposed to accomplish according to Locke’s scheme. See: Locke, 25.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 231; Niklas Angebauer argues that self-ownership was first popularized by the seventeenth century Levellers, who sought to make self-proprietty a ground for self-governance

issues of being a proprietor of one's person and labor, and the laboring class lacking full rationality.⁶⁶ But though Breakey disagrees with Macpherson's exegesis, he still admits, "the fact remains that possessive individualists did eventually appear."⁶⁷ This, for Breakey, is warrant enough of the relevance of Macpherson's possessive individualism thesis, even if he disagrees with it as an interpretation of Locke's oeuvre. For Breakey, possessive individualism fully appears in the nineteenth century's "rise of an even more aggressive individualism, a more absolute libertarianism, and the chilling association of laissez-faire economics with newfound ideas of competitive struggle and natural selection."⁶⁸

Possessive individualism even appears in abolitionist literature. The historian Laura Brace examines how abolitionists in Britain "chose not only sentiment but the Lockean language of the state of nature and of improvement" to demonstrate the unnaturalness of slavery. This language helped them not only to explain the violation of the natural right of self-ownership but also allowed them to narrate how Africans were not "permanently condemned to the condition of nature, but they were figured as lacking in industry, leaving their capacity for property in the state of nature."⁶⁹ But rather than being allowed to progress and form civil society and governments, enslaved Africans have been subjected to the slave trade, understood to be a form

and democratic rights." See: Niklas Angebauer, "Property and Capital in the Person: Lockean and Neoliberal Self-ownership," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 27, no. 1 (March 2020): 52.

⁶⁶ See: Hugh Breakey, "Parsing Macpherson: The Last Rites of Locke the Possessive Individualist," *Theoria* 80, no. 1 (2014): 62–83.

⁶⁷ Hugh Breakey, "C. B. Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke," in *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Jacob T. Levy (Oxford University Press), accessed April 3, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198717133.013.42>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Laura Brace, "Inhuman Commerce: Anti-Slavery and the Ownership of Freedom.," *European Journal of Political Theory* 12, no. 4 (October 1, 2013), 471.

of theft.⁷⁰ Brace sees possessive individualism as a problematic rhetoric for envisioning emancipation and freedom precisely because this “discourse bound itself to the social contract, and so to a worldview that relied on the division between the industrious and the ‘no-where industrious.’”⁷¹ In other words, the very discourse that argued for ending slavery still envisioned human freedom in terms indexed not only to property but to a properly human form of industriousness.

Another historian of abolition, Amy Dru Stanley argues that, for abolitionists, “emancipation would convert freedmen alone into sovereign, self-owning individuals” but it was still the prerogative of enslaved and formerly-enslaved women to make the case for their own self-possession.⁷² Stanley shows how writers like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper insisted upon equality with men precisely through “equating personal freedom with proprietary rights.”⁷³ Similarly, Stanley interprets Harriet Jacobs’ narrative as framing the sexual violation of enslaved women through the framework of self-possession.⁷⁴ Stanley acknowledges how self-propriety hems in possibilities for freedom even while it was largely the only option enslaved women had to make their case for emancipation and equality. Says Stanley, “But to lose sight of the contradictory moral implications of the ideal of possessive individualism is to render its hegemony inexplicable. If the ideal of self-ownership had not carried such emancipatory power, it could not have disguised the existing coercions of free society.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Ibid., 473.

⁷¹ Ibid., 478.

⁷² Amy Dru Stanley, “‘The Right to Possess All the Faculties That God Has Given’: Possessive Individualism, Slave Women, and Abolitionist Thought,” in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 131; emphasis mine.

⁷³ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 143.

As Brace and Stanley show, possessive individualism formed a basis for some abolitionists' cases against slavery, even while it constrained conceptions of human freedom within a political economy oriented around a certain vision of rationality, industriousness, and property ownership. This, of course, was not the only line of critique and praxis deployed by liberation movements against slavery (more on this to come in sections three and four of this chapter). But the intractability of the property economy, giving rise to a notion of freedom grounded in possessive individualism, channels even would-be emancipatory politics into political and economic cul-de-sacs. If individual self-proprietorship actualized through the accumulation of property forms the ground of political agency, then those who lack property and are forced to sell their labor for a wage are not full members of the polity. Moreover, as I have tried to suggest, a Lockean account of property—grounded in a notion of land as inert—characterizes the unpropertied class in such a manner that makes them bear resemblances to uncultivated land. Unproductive land and idle people are both alienable, at least as far as their productive capacity is concerned.

In contemporary critical theory, the self-possessing individual has received a great deal of attention, especially for how this understanding of the self seems to be at the heart of contemporary political economy. As the sociologist David Lane puts it, "Possessive individualism is the bedrock of neoliberalism." For Lane, this is due precisely to the fact that neoliberalism is purported to be about "free choice" that is "limited by an individual's stock of economic, social, and political assets."⁷⁶ These assets or properties are determinative for one's ability to act freely in a market society. The role of the state is not in ensuring any fairness of distribution, or protecting the individual's ability to "achieve self-realization and social

⁷⁶ David Lane, *Global Neoliberal Capitalism and the Alternatives: From Social Democracy to State Capitalism* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023), 51-52.

protection.” Indeed, the state itself is subjected to the “marketising of operations” both in the sense of making government function like a business and in the sense of collapsing the role of the state into the bolstering of the economy.⁷⁷

As with Locke’s understanding of property, for neoliberalism one’s failure to succeed in the marketplace is the fault of the individual. For Adam Kotsko, neoliberalism’s “demonization” of the individual is achieved as “[i]ts atomistic individualism attempts to cover up the existence of systemic forces beyond any individual’s control. Its *naturalization* of the invisible hand of the market and rejection of the meddling influence of the state combine to obscure the fact that the economy is not a realm of unrestrained freedom but of governance and control.”⁷⁸ Kotsko’s point helps to underscore a troubling aspect of Locke’s account of property. Locke insists that the system through which property is accumulated through labor is a natural ordering: “This Partage of things in an inequality of private Possessions, Men have made practicable out of the bounds of Society, and without Compact.”⁷⁹ But as Macpherson points out, though Locke’s account of property is supposed to be rooted in the state of nature, the very difference which distinguishes the propertied from the unpropertied is not a natural human propensity but is firmly rooted in the “ability or willingness to order their lives according to the bourgeois moral code.”⁸⁰

This failure to acquiesce to the bourgeois moral code is, for Locke, already racialized in the form of Indigenous peoples, whose lack of rationality and industriousness leads him to describe their territories as “vacant places of *America*.”⁸¹ But this is not just a rationale for the settler-

⁷⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁸ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 95; emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ Locke, 26.

⁸⁰ Macpherson, 245.

⁸¹ Locke, 19; emphasis in original.

colonial appropriation of their land, but for calling into question their full humanity. As Brenna Bhandar points out, “Property laws and racial subjectivity developed in relation to one another.” She calls this formation “racial regimes of ownership” which “retained their disciplinary power in organizing territory and producing racial subjects through a hierarchy of value constituted across the domains of culture, science, economy, and philosophy.”⁸² Property accumulation, then, is not as Locke saw it: a phenomenon of the state of nature upon which contract-based politics can be encoded juristically. No, as Bhandar argues, “modern property laws emerged along with and through colonial modes of appropriation.”⁸³ This operation was not confined to the political or economic realms, but proliferates through virtually every area of modern life, especially as it formed the basis upon which modern conceptions of subjectivity and agency would be built.

As Ananya Roy, a scholar of development and urbanism, asks in the context of thinking about evictions: “If certain subjects are always necessarily dispossessed, or constituted as property owned by others, how do they claim property? Do such claims also rework claims to personhood?”⁸⁴ As we saw above with abolitionist deployments of possessive individualism, even would-be emancipatory claims to self-possession are limited by the property regime. If Bhandar is correct in her narration of the consubstantial relation between property and race, then certain subjects can never achieve full recognition so long as they participate in a class of humanity that is always already deficient. To be racialized, then, is to be already vulnerable to dispossession. Following Locke’s logic, the dispossession takes place first in one’s person—in a

⁸² Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁴ Ananya Roy, “Dis/Possessive Collectivism: Property and Personhood at City’s End,” *Geoforum* 80 (March 1, 2017): A3.

lack of rationality and industriousness—and then in one’s relationship with land. But how is this dispossession to be resisted? How can one assert one’s full humanity outside the terms of order that have been “naturalized” through the property regime?

This is exactly the issue that Athena Athanasiou raises in a book-length dialogue with Judith Butler on dispossession. For Athanasiou, it is “important to think about dispossession as a condition that is not simply countered by appropriation, a term that re-establishes possession and property as the primary prerogatives of self-authoring personhood.”⁸⁵ To react to the theft of land, the enslavement of people, or the alienation of one’s labor, while still remaining inside the “logic of possession” is to remain firmly entrenched within what Athanasiou calls “the exclusionary calculus of proprietariness in late liberal forms of power.”⁸⁶ To assert self-possession in the face of the property regime is not a rejection of that regime but is a form of admitting our powerlessness against it. Athanasiou sees this as creating what she calls...

a central aporia of body politics: we lay claim to our bodies as our own, even as we recognize that we cannot ever own our bodies. Our bodies are beyond themselves. Through our bodies we are implicated in thick and intense social processes of relatedness and interdependence; we are exposed, dismembered, given over to others, and undone by the norms that regulate desire, sexual alliance, kinship relations, and conditions of humanness.⁸⁷

If we are to acknowledge this relationality—a mode of intersubjectivity foreclosed by possessive individualism—then the way out of the property regime is through *dispossession*. Judith Butler offers an account of this always already occurring dispossession by drawing on Levinas, whose account of being impinged upon by others does not give us “any choice at the

⁸⁵ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 6.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

beginning about what will impress itself upon us, or about how that impression will be registered and translated. These are domains of radical impressibility and receptivity that are prior to all choice and deliberation.” Our being formed by our relations is a lifelong occurrence that is part of what Butler calls “a not fully articulate sensibility.” They insist, however, that even this sensibility “is neither mine nor yours. It is not a possession, but a way of being comported toward another, already in the hands of the other, and so a mode of dispossession.” Whether we are aware that this is taking place or not is not the crucial matter. What matters is that this is a “constitutive relation to a sensuous outside, one without which none of us can survive.”⁸⁸

I find this line of thought about dispossession convincing because it narrates (however partially) an account of the self that is not predicated upon ownership, but draws lines of connections to the broader ecology out of which we arise.⁸⁹ But translating this dispossession into an actionable politics raises some potential concerns. For example, in her largely helpful book on *Unthinking Mastery*, Julietta Singh wants to build on Butler’s notion of “vulnerability,” or in Singh’s phrasing “a state of reckoning with one’s own unease and reliance while accepting without ‘regret’ or defensiveness the state of being in this position.”⁹⁰ Her account of vulnerability comes in the context of a discussion of the Antiguan-American novelist, essayist, and gardener Jamaica Kincaid’s book *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalayas*. Singh observes

⁸⁸ Ibid., 95. For a more protracted discussion of this line of thought, see: Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁸⁹ Indeed, I found Judith Butler so convincing on this matter that I once tried to ground a theological ethics of environmental responsibility in it. See: Blair Wilner, “We Belong to Each Other: Responsibility for Oneself as Responsibility to Place,” *The Other Journal*, no. 28 (October 26, 2017), <https://theotherjournal.com/2017/10/belong-responsibility-oneself-responsibility-place/>.

⁹⁰ Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 167. For more on this notion of vulnerability see: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

how Kincaid's narrative fails to name nearly all of "the Nepalese people who made possible her journey," an erasure which is explained as the result of a sense of insecurity. Singh uses this as a possible confirmation of Fanon's concern that the "postcolonial bourgeois subject would in turn come to reproduce the material disparities of the colonial moment if during decolonization a full proletariat revolution did not occur." Is the self-possessed, bourgeois postcolonial subject doomed to repeat the erasure and violence of the colonial encounter with the other? Singh hopes that it's possible to "stay with this vulnerability" as a way of forestalling the violence that occurs through one's sense of lacking full ownership of the self.⁹¹ She sees potential in the "ambivalence" Kincaid feels in her repeated failures to exert full mastery over her own garden as an affective resource that might help us "uproot our masterful subjectivities, dwelling within our devastated landscapes alongside other dynamic agencies that are making up the future with us."⁹²

There is something quite underdetermined here about Singh's constructive use of vulnerability. Where Kincaid fails to accept her vulnerability in relation to Nepalese otherness, she gets close to success in response to an other-than-human alterity in the context of her garden. Have these examples truly moved us to the precipice of dispossession, or is a property economy still structuring the possibilities here? I cannot speak for Singh or Kincaid, but try as I might to accept "unexpected visitors and 'willful' species" to my garden, they still represent undesirable others that can frustrate *my* intentions for *my* garden plot. Or, perhaps I deal with my vermin-based frustrations with my therapist and I can remain tranquil even though rabbits eat my pea shoots and squash borers come between me and my *fiore di zucca*—what is making this acceptance possible? I suspect there are two factors at play here.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 170.

First, I surmise that the low stakes have something to do with it. The ease at which I can make peace with dispossession is founded on the fact that my garden is for pleasure, not subsistence. The stakes of dispossession are weighed differently when survival is on the line. When the impingement of others on me threatens my life, dispossession appears less a measured acceptance of relationality than a passive acquiescence to one's own death. Second, I think there is a latent property relation that exists in accepting one's vulnerability to non-human otherness. If Locke's conception of property is centered on labor—specifically the cultivation of land—then perhaps the openness to other-than-human “dynamic agencies” is merely a way of accepting uncultivated land for what it is. This does not necessarily mean that I have moved outside of the property regime, only that I have made my peace with unproductive land while still allowing the distinction between cultivated and uncultivated spaces to remain meaningful for my sense of property and self-possession.

What is more, I find Singh's analysis of Kincaid's relating to human and other-than-human alterities to signal the ambivalence of the vulnerability of dispossession that we see in theorists like Butler and Athanasiou. For Singh, Kincaid's omitting the names of Nepalese guides counts as a failure of dispossession—an inability to remain open to others' impingement and even unmaking of my self. The fact that this erasure of otherness is a result not of the attempt at mastery but of Kincaid's own “‘anxiety,’ ‘unease,’ ‘ennui,’ and ‘personal fragility,’”⁹³ points to the reality that dispossession might not always make us capacious and hospitable; decentered selves might also respond with violence, defensiveness, or resignation. What makes for constructive responses to dispossession? What allows for the destabilization of the self-possessed subject to result in an opening up of the self rather than its closing off? To get at what makes this

⁹³ Ibid., 167.

difference is the task of the next section on fungibility.

3. Fungibility

Dispossession gestures to the possibility of moving beyond the property regime. But the relational, dispossessed self is not a given. Or put another way, the fact of dispossession does not necessarily lead to a form of agency that avoids the domination—of myself and of others—entailed in the property economy. Beyond just the ethical question of how a form of agency becomes possible beyond notions of self-propriety, there are also historical questions. Chief among them is the fact that while the dispossession described by Athanasiou and Butler may represent a novel possibility for the white, male, heterosexual, bourgeois liberal subject, for subaltern classes dispossession has typically represented not a choice but rather a form of domination foisted upon them. In this section, I discuss fungibility, in order to show the liabilities of dispossession for thinking about possibilities that exceed the property regime. I do this first by tracing the contours of fungibility in the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Tiffany Lethabo King in order to show how the exchangeability and interchangeability of Black bodies was central to the political economy of property. I then think about the connections between fungibility, malleability, and plasticity, to name the perils and promises of a non-possessive self. Finally, I think about connections between fungible bodies and fungible land in order to consider liberatory possibilities for humans and other-than-humans that exceed the property regime.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers uses spatial terms to think about the human form made fungible. The theft of Africans in conquest and the slave trade makes for a condition where “the female body and the male body become a

territory of cultural and political maneuver.”⁹⁴ The acquisition of human territory here operates in a similar manner as settler-colonial designations of land as *tabula rasa*. Bodies typically receive meaning at the convergence of “biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes.” But Black bodies are denied the right of self-understanding and self-formation. Others instead put onto the body “externally imposed meanings and uses.” This transformation of human bodies into sites of multiple, externally-imposed meanings is critical not only for turning humans into property, but rendering that property into a matrix of power that can contain multiple, seemingly-contradictory ascriptions: “Sensuality,” thingness, “a physical and biological expression of ‘otherness,’” and a “sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerlessness.’”⁹⁵ The body, it would seem, should not be able to indicate all of these significations simultaneously. This is one of racialized fungibility’s almost magical powers: it allowed for certain bodies to take on paradoxical meanings.

One way fungibility comes out in Spillers’ essay is through her discussion of the allotment of space in the slave ship *Brookes*, where allowances were differentiated based on the age and gender of the enslaved person. It is not that fungibility always means quantification or commodification, as it does in the financial and spatial calculus used for slave ship packing. What is critical here is that the fungibility of Black life means that human socio-cultural categories simply cannot mean for Black bodies what they mean for white ones. This, for Spillers, means that even when the Black captive body is ascribed maleness or femaleness, these terms do not take on the same meanings in this context. For Spillers, gender is made meaningful within the language game of the domestic: “Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a

⁹⁴ Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those subjects that it covers in a particular place... The human cargo of a slave vessel—in the effacement and remission of African family and proper names—contravenes notions of the domestic.”⁹⁶ So, Spillers objects to interpreting spatial allotments based on sex and age as gender: “Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as *quantities*.”⁹⁷ There may be a resemblance between a quantity of human passengers and a quantity of enslaved cargo, but there remains a large gap between these ways of knowing bodies.

Saidiya Hartman sets up a similar separation that delineates white and Black through the use of incongruous categories: “The antagonistic production of abstract equality and black subjugation rested upon contending and incompatible predications of the freed as sovereign, indivisible, and self-possessed, and as fungible and individuated subjects whose capacities could be extracted, quantified, exchanged, and alienated.”⁹⁸ So here freedom and enslavement—self-possession as opposed to possession-by-another—lead to different ways of knowing and relating to bodies. In her preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman calls this problem of how meaning comes to be ascribed to bodies as a “category crisis of human flesh and sentient commodity.” This crisis is not only an effect of racial slavery but continues in the afterlives of slavery: “this predicament of value and fungibility would shape their descendants, the blackened and the dispossessed.”⁹⁹ In Hartman’s narration, this is not simply a unilateral epistemic crisis about who or what counts as the human from a white standpoint. The

⁹⁶ Ibid., 214.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 215; emphasis in original.

⁹⁸ Hartman, *Scenes*, 205.

⁹⁹ Ibid., xxix

Black body's semiotic potential became the site or sign where a whole array of concepts—including for our purposes here whiteness, property, and self-possession—were made intelligible.

For Hartman, the property regime did not render Blackness fungible. Rather the fungible Black body became a tool through which to understand, use, and reap the benefits of property: “In the economy of racial slavery, the enjoyment of property was predicated on the figurative capacities of blackness—the ability to be an object or animal or not-quite-human or guilty agent.” Blackness became valuable because of what Hartman calls its “metaphorical aptitude” which could entail the literal “fungibility of the commodity” or “the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.”¹⁰⁰ This latter capacity to be the site for the self-understanding and self-actualization of another is not disconnected from the former capacity to have a price attached to one's person. Walter Johnson describes this interconnection by observing how the buying of slaves empowered purchasers to imagine “who they could be by thinking about whom they could buy.”¹⁰¹ It should not come as a surprise that the accumulation of property should be bound up with self-formation. This, it seems to me, is what is compelling for so many about the Lockean imaginary of property: you put yourself into the world in order to acquire it. The very idea of increasing one's largesse through owning property is made most literal through the ownership of another person. As Hartman puts it, “as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.”¹⁰²

The story of possessive individualism that I analyzed in the previous section suggests that

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 78.

¹⁰² Hartman, *Scenes*, 28.

there is a racialized way of understanding primitive accumulation and resultant inequalities in property ownership. For Locke, lack of rationality and industriousness is perhaps best exemplified by Indigenous Americans who let the land remain as *waste*. Likewise, racial slavery—even as understood by many of its opponents—is due to a lack of self-possession. If we follow Spillers and Hartman’s account of fungibility, capitalism and its notions of property act as a technology through which the capitalist can extend their (self-)mastery over others.

I think, for Hartman, the fungible Black body enables the enjoyment of property qua property because, in a regime based upon self-propriety, the human other is the ultimate obstacle that serves as a limit upon one’s ability to own others outside of oneself. While the removal of this limit enables the productive capacities of the enslaved to serve the mastery of another, labor is not the ultimate logic at play here. For Hartman, it is a larger economy of knowledge and pleasure that finds its grounding in blackness’ fungibility: “[T]he figurative capacities of blackness and the fungibility of the commodity are directly linked. The abstractness and immateriality of the commodity, the ease with which it circulates and changes states, shifting from one incarnation of value to another, extends to the black body or blackface mask enabling it to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment.”¹⁰³ Hartman shows how the commodity form and blackness are bound together by fungibility, a form of malleable significations of meaning and value that one can use, enjoy, inhabit, dispose of, or abuse without the risk of violation. The malleability of this form is critical, but what makes it powerful is the unilateral imposition of the multiplicity of meanings and shapes that the form can take. The white man can fix or alter the meaning of the Black body, but never the other way around.

¹⁰³ Hartman, *Scenes*, 36-37.

We might also see here a parallel between the racialized human body and the other-than-human world. The white property owner mixes himself—through his labor—with the idle land to make it his property, a form of rendering oneself in the fungible landscape. In the same manner, the Black body becomes the embodied space where the political, economic, libidinal, and discursive labor of the white property owner is made manifest. As Tiffany Lethabo King argues, the porosity of Black bodies to the other-than-human world is worked upon in order to build what she calls “liberal geographies of humanity.” Blackness’ openness and ability to be transformed by the landscape makes for a form of spatiality that is incompatible with the self-possessed, white, liberal landowner: “Black spatiality is imagined as both outside of (ejected from living within) human space and necessary (in its negation) for the production of human places.”¹⁰⁴ King’s account of Blackness’ fungibility helps to move accounts of racial slavery outside of the bounds of thinking about the enslaved person as primarily a laborer. In Lockean terms, labor is a mechanism for accumulating property or receiving a wage. Moving beyond the figure of the laborer helps King to widen the scope of the spatial logics at work that result in racial slavery.

King narrates parallels between the “volatile landscape” and the porosity and fungibility of racialized bodies. Both must have meaning and order imposed on them from without before they can be made knowable and productive. This not only allows us to see how the meaning imposed onto Blackness through slavery goes beyond labor, but also the broader history of fungibility necessary to control, develop, and make productive the human and other-than-humans that are fed into the property regime. King does this through her reading of Julie Dash’s 1991 film

¹⁰⁴ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 121.

Daughters of the Dust, where indigo cultivation and production becomes a site from which to think fungibility and porosity. King works backwards from Dash's decision to have the character Nana Peazant's hands be stained blue in order to represent the "scars of slavery":

For Nana Peazant's hands to become scarred blue, indigo had to bleed into her cuticles and pores. Before that the indigo plant had to be broken down...Before that, Indigo plants had to be domesticated and harvested on the plantation-settlement plot. The plantation plot had to be fenced off. And preceding these acts, the land had to be cleared. Before the land could be cleared, the settler had to kill and remove the remaining Yamasee/Cherokee Nation residing there.¹⁰⁵

This moving backward through time from the film's present to the founding dispossession and genocide on which settler-colonialism and slavery is built, helps to flesh out what fungibility looks like in practice. Fungibility does not simply exist in the imaginaries of the settler-colonialist or the slaveowner. It transforms the landscape. It destroys, relocates, and (dis)figures human flesh. For King this stands in stark contrast to the modern, liberal, enlightenment body that is "stable, autonomous, bounded, and separate from nature."¹⁰⁶

One possible point of contention here. Contrary to King's notion of the white, enlightenment subject being associated with stability, there is a sense in which racialized notions of self-possession rely on distinction between how bodies are able and open to change. Kyla Schuller and Jules Gill-Peterson argue one of the modes through which biopolitics interfaces with human plasticity and malleability is through race. Whiteness is thus indexed to "organic plasticity" that is "equated with brimming potential and is protected and nurtured by the state." This radical potentiality is opposed to racialized bodies which are viewed as "rigid, inflexible, overly reactive, and insufficiently absorptive, contagions to the potential growth of the population."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 129.

This would, at first glance, seem to move in the opposite direction of Spillers, Hartman, and King's ways of thinking fungibility with respect to blackness. But I think the key site of connection has to do with agency. Schuller and Gill-Peterson explain that "In the dominant Western racial imaginary, Blackness occupies the opposite pole of whiteness and is characterized by a quality of stolidity that at best can be pressed into a new shape, but never can self-transform."¹⁰⁷ Plasticity and malleability, then, are self-directed potentialities for certain subjects and externally-imposed for others.

We might think of traditions like the German conception of *Bildung* as an example that fits within this narration of white, liberal subject formation predicated on the malleable self. The *Bildung* tradition exhibits this racialized notion of malleability, especially in the way the formation of selves is tied to socio-cultural contexts that are themselves embedded in a larger history of human development that is racialized. As Theodore Vial points out, for a *Bildung* thinker like Johann Gottfried Herder, even an appreciation of diversity, "leads him to rank, as nearer the end of history (more advanced) those cultures that possess the characteristics needed for full cultural difference to flourish."¹⁰⁸ Herder himself can denounce colonialism and European despotism over the world but this arc of history, and its cultural rankings, remain. For Vial, this teleological view of cultural development—in which different cultures find themselves located closer or further away from history's goal—leaves little choice but to "eventually theorize difference as a more or a less."¹⁰⁹

So in order to think about this differential approach to human changeability we need to think

¹⁰⁷ Kyla Schuller and Jules Gill-Peterson, "Introduction: Race, the State, and the Malleable Body," *Social Text* 38, no. 2 (143) (June 1, 2020): 2.

¹⁰⁸ Theodore M. Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 144.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

about the use of history. White, European, liberal understandings of change or development over time placed the European Christian self and culture within a larger historical trajectory that was at once theological, political, philosophical, and economic. Racialized others like Africans and Indigenous peoples were either viewed as without history or as possessors of an inaccessible history.¹¹⁰ Even an acknowledgement of a culture or race's history as existing-yet-inaccessible, however, was treated as a problem—one usually resolved through rendering them transparent. As Charles Long observes,

Specific empirical languages are not transparent; they are opaque. Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had as much difficulty accepting this notion as we do today. When opacity (the specific meaning and value of another culture and/or language) is denied, the meaning of that culture as a human value is denied. By not dealing with this opacity, one is able to divorce oneself from the messy, confusing welter of detail that characterizes a particular society at a particular time and to move to the cool realm of abstract principles symbolized by the metaphorical transparency of knowledge.¹¹¹

The intersection of opaque bodies and opaque land for the settler-colonial here represents a racializing *Weltanschauung*. Willie Jennings calls this “the bequeathed trajectory of Enlightenment cultural chauvinism that would never treat colonialized societies on their own terms.” For Jennings this refusal is “due to the reconfiguration of space and time in relation to bodies.”¹¹² This reconfiguration signaled a denial of history to the landscape, or rather the land could only be the background, setting, and context of a human history. Insofar as human identities and cultures were too intimately related to the land, the actuality of their status as a

¹¹⁰ Cedric Robinson argues that in nineteenth century historiography, “the African was represented as chattel in their economic image, as slaves in their political and social image, as brutish and therefore inaccessible to further development, and finally as Negro, that is without history.” Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 187.

¹¹¹ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1999), 117.

¹¹² Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 47.

historical culture was called into question. As Vine Deloria, Jr. has argued, for Indigenous peoples one aspect of the sacredness of certain landscapes is precisely the result of an other-than-human occurrence taking place there that renders the landscape historically significant, though not in the sense that would count to a liberal European perspective.¹¹³

While up to this point fungibility has signaled a violent forcing of meaning onto flesh, perhaps the porosity of bodies and land—their ability to be entangled into an assemblage of meaning—signals a form of relationality that exceeds Enlightenment, liberal, settler-colonial, and racial logics. King suggests that, “All bodies, though not equally, are hybrid assemblages and cumulative effects of multispecies entanglements.” The forcing of this intimacy between Black bodies and landscapes, though carried out violently within the crucible of slavery’s property regime, reveals a connection that was there all along, even though obscured by a settler-colonial anthropology. Fungibility then is parasitic on an always already existing reality that “Black bodies also have the capacity for unexpected and unanticipated movements that upend proprietors’ or slave owners’ claims to them as property.”¹¹⁴

I think we can tie King’s conception of “unexpected and unanticipated movements” to Hartman’s notion of redress that “does not or cannot restore or remedy loss,” but nevertheless provides a way to move through and beyond the violence of fungibility. Hartman outlines three facets of redress. First, it entails a “re-membering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity, and enslavement.” Second, it requires the acknowledgement that redress is necessarily “a limited form of action aimed at relieving the broken body through alternative configurations of the self or self-abandonment, and the

¹¹³ Vine Deloria Jr, *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria Jr. Reader*, ed. Samuel Scinta, Kristen Foehner, and Barbara Deloria (New York: Fulcrum Publishing, 2011), 329.

¹¹⁴ King, 140.

redemption of the body as human flesh.” Thirdly, it “concerns the articulation of needs and desires and the endeavor to meet them.”¹¹⁵ Redress then is not predicated upon the full removal of the conditions of domination. This would make redress impossible. As Eyo Ewara puts it, redress allows for the creation of “space...in which pain can be recognized and articulate and new potential opened up in response.”¹¹⁶ For Hartman, no final healing is possible. Perhaps this is because the wound caused by fungibility retains remnants of foreign substances. So, any attempt to completely heal the wound would lead to the formation of a granuloma; the foreign matter—the meanings written into the body through its being made fungible—would remain present and potentially meaningful or malignant.

Perhaps this is why Fred Moten describes Hartman’s redress as “a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded.”¹¹⁷ Moten can only see redress as leaving the wound open, perhaps even making it worse through an incessant itching or cutting at any scab that might form. But as Ewara points out, this is precisely Hartman’s point. Redress returns to the wound but not with the same wounding force as the initial violence. Rather it “returns to and re-enacts an unfinished and unsettled scene, an ongoing constitution, that disturbs the dead and strains the living. It does so in the hope that—in repeating the cut, *but with a difference*—something else might break out not instead of, but alongside, pain.”¹¹⁸ A refusal to respond without attending to and acknowledging the pain. The pain is not gone! To attempt redress without acknowledging this persistence would be to miss the point.

¹¹⁵ Hartman, *Scenes*, 129-130.

¹¹⁶ Eyo Ewara, “Attempting Redress: Fungibility, Ethics, and Redressive Practice in the Work of Saidiya Hartman,” *Theory & Event* 25, no. 2 (2022): 372.

¹¹⁷ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), ix.

¹¹⁸ Ewara, 373; emphasis in original.

What might it look like, then, to align King's "unexpected and unanticipated movements" with Hartman's mode of redress? Ewara insists that "practices of redress are undertaken with the acknowledgement that conditions will most likely remain the same."¹¹⁹ We might see in this a sort of realism. A response conditioned upon the total overthrow of the conditions that make for Black fungibility would mean that any actions that take place in the lead up to complete revolution are rendered insignificant. Freedom would only be possible on the other side of that revolution. But Ewara sees in redress a possibility for freedom now, even as the conditions of racial capitalism, property, and the afterlives of slavery persist: "freedom is a *way* of being in response to one's conditions."¹²⁰ Ewara connects this to Hartman's conception of waywardness. For Hartman, "Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of *what might be*; it is an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive."¹²¹

To move through and beyond fungibility, then, is a form of practicing freedom even in the confines of conditions of domination. But as we have seen, it requires speaking the pain of fungibility's parasitic use of human malleability even while attempting to do something new. But we should not lose sight of the connection between bodies and land. With King, we can see how speaking the pain of fungibility's wound might make us keenly aware of the porosity between bodies and land. What does it look like to hold dominated bodies and dominated places together

¹¹⁹ Ewara, 378.

¹²⁰ Ewara, 381; emphasis in original.

¹²¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 228; emphasis.

even in the effort of freeing oneself from that very domination? In the next section I will argue that it looks like marronage.

4. Marronage

being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
that's why i can talk
about environment.
what wants to be a tree,
ought to be he can be it.
same for other things.
same for men.

- Lucille Clifton, "being property once myself"¹²²

I ended the last section with a glimpse of freedom that is possible through and beyond fungibility. This is a form of freedom that is not predicated on the total destruction of the conditions of domination. Instead, this freedom acts in response to conditions but in ways not fully dictated or constrained by them. So, it might seem a bit odd to turn to maroons, those enslaved persons who escaped to wild places like swamps, mountains, jungles, and forests to make a life for themselves apart from the plantation. Sylviane Diouf describes maroon's philosophy like this: "Autonomy was at the heart of their project and exile the means to realize it."¹²³ If by autonomy we mean complete independence from external conditions, then the language does not quite fit either the form of freedom that I develop with Hartman and King at the end of the last section or, I think, the lived reality of marronage. Far from exhibiting total independence, the maroon necessarily developed skills for living in response to a very particular

¹²² Lucille Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*, ed. Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2012), 78.

¹²³ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

set of conditions that impinged upon her. In this section I will consider marronage in its historical and theoretical imaginaries in order to trace out the topography of its practice of freedom from the plantation and the property regime.

The study of marronage is having a resurgence in a wide variety of fields. Marxist thinkers like Andreas Malm and Daniel Sayers see it as a paradigm for re-envisioning proletarian struggle against capital.¹²⁴ J. Kameron Carter calls marronage an “antepolitical alternative” and Matthew Elia looks to marronage as a useful framework for responding to climate apartheid.¹²⁵ Geographers like Celeste Winston and Willie Jamaal Wright point to the phenomenon’s history and usefulness for thinking about police abolition and other possibilities.¹²⁶ I find all of these studies inspiring and useful, even while I also wonder if, in fact, marronage can be all these things simultaneously.

Let me narrow how I am thinking about marronage. First, I will consider marronage as a back-to-the-land movement. A central concern for many, if not all, considerations of marronage is its use of other-than-human, “wild” landscapes. I want to complicate this way of thinking about marronage by attending to both its use of wild and cultivated land, especially its building upon the dynamic relationship between the “provision grounds” and the bush. Second, I will

¹²⁴ Andreas Malm, “In Wildness Is the Liberation of the World: On Maroon Ecology and Partisan Nature,” *Historical Materialism* 26, no. 3 (September 25, 2018): 3–37; Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2014).

¹²⁵ J. Kameron Carter, *The Anarchy of Black Religion: A Mystic Song* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 20; Matthew Elia, “Climate Apartheid, Race, and the Future of Solidarity: Three Frameworks of Response (Anthropocene, Mestizaje, Cimarronaje),” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 51, no. 4 (2023): 572–610.

¹²⁶ Celeste Winston, *How to Lose the Hounds: Maroon Geographies and a World Beyond Policing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023); Willie Jamaal Wright, “The Morphology of Marronage,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110, no. 4 (July 3, 2020): 1134–49.

focus on marronage's relationship to the property regime. The different relationship with land fostered in marronage necessarily transforms a Lockean conception of property, both with regard to self-propriety and the ownership of land. Building upon these first two lines of inquiry, I want to think about marronage as an exorcism of possession. If property names a form of self-possession that extends out to the world, and dispossession indicates not simply a rejection of self-possession but also the vulnerability to domination that makes bodies and land fungible, then perhaps marronage can gesture toward the form of redress or freedom that holds the potential to act from within a world structured by those conditions even while it enacts forms of life that open up possibilities outside of the possession/dispossession dichotomy.

In her study of maroons in the colonial and ante-bellum North American mainland, Sylvianne Diouf develops two spatial categories of marronage: borderland and hinterland. Borderland maroons occupied “the wild land that bordered the farms and plantations and the cities and towns,” while hinterland maroons built community in more inaccessible locales. It should be noted that she categorizes them as in the hinterland, “not primarily because of distance but because of the difficulty of the terrain.”¹²⁷ Both of these groups drew on the other-than-human landscapes—especially uncultivated or wild spaces—in order to insulate themselves from the plantation regime. Walter Johnson writes about how the horse became a particularly important technology for slaveholders and slave patrols as they sought to gain advantage over would-be maroons. The horse was, in Johnson's memorable phrasing, “a tool that converted grain into policing,” and allowed the rider to travel “several feet above ‘eye level’ vastly [expanding] the immediate field of slaveholding power.”¹²⁸ The maroon, then, needed to move through and

¹²⁷ Diouf, 5.

¹²⁸ Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 222.

reside in places in which the surveillance of the landscape was obscured and broken up. Diouf insists that the maroon's landscape, then, was "a dynamic site of empowerment, migrations, encounters, communication, exchange, solidarity, resistance, and entangled stories. It was also, of course, a contested terrain that slaveholders, overseers, drivers, slave hunters, dogs, militias, and patrollers strove to control and frequently invaded."¹²⁹ Far from representing a pastoral vision or anything of that idyllic nature, we can see marronage as a back to the land movement only insofar as that land was wild, inhospitable, inaccessible, and threatening.

In his 1939 essay, "Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States," Herbert Aptheker described maroons occupying "[t]he mountainous, forested, or swampy regions of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama...the favorite haunts for these black Robin Hoods."¹³⁰ Maroons not only occupied the landscape, but they also were seared into the minds of white writers like Joshua R. Giddings, Frederick Olmstead, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.¹³¹ Diouf notes how anti-maroon laws and measures paint a portrait of "the evolving—real, potential, rumored, and fabricated—threat they posed and, concurrently, white anxiety."¹³² Maroons occupying inhospitable and inaccessible landscapes were not simply escaped property. While the etymological roots of marronage can be traced back to the Spanish term "*cimarrón* developed on the island of Hispaniola in reference initially to Spanish colonialists' feral cattle, which fled to the hills," the threat posed to white

¹²⁹ Diouf, 11.

¹³⁰ Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," *The Journal of Negro History* 24, no. 2 (April 1939): 167.

¹³¹ Joshua R. Giddings, *The Exiles of Florida: Or, the Crimes Committed by Our Government Against the Maroons, Who Fled From South Carolina and the Other Slave States, Seeking Protection Under Spanish Laws* (Columbus, OH: Follett, Foster, 1858); Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1860); Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Co, 1856).

¹³² Diouf, 17.

society was categorically distinct.¹³³ Escaped men and women living on the land were not simply stealing themselves away to the bush, they were undermining the political economy of property. When escape was linked with armed resistance, white society responded with force. As Diouf notes, “Prevention and repression were then inscribed into slave codes to address the issue. Over the years, reflecting an increasing black population and fear of black people, repressive and punitive measures became more ferocious, with barbaric sentences written into law or simply administered.”¹³⁴

In the broader Americas, marronage came to occupy a central place in the imaginaries of the enslaved. Diouf argues that “the maroons’ very existence exposed the limitations of the slave regime.”¹³⁵ Writing about the proliferation of maroon communities across the antebellum United States, the Caribbean, and South America, Cedric Robinson describes how “Maroon communities continued to be a vibrant alternative for the slaves, frequently providing inspiration and support for nearby revolts.”¹³⁶ I want to think about how and why maroons had the capacity to inspire both fear and imitation. Occupying inhospitable landscapes is hardly an enviable position, even in the face of enslavement. So how did this existence come to represent a viable alternative to the plantation regime? How did it come to be seen as a threat to that institution and to the broader institution of slavery? I think the answer to this lies in the interplay between the provision grounds and the bush, between cultivated and wild landscapes.

The provision grounds were originally an accommodation of the plantation system made to the enslaved for the purpose of growing their own subsistence crops. Elizabeth DeLoughrey

¹³³ Roberts, 5.

¹³⁴ Diouf, 37.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 303.

¹³⁶ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Movements in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39.

notes that the provision grounds of Jamaica were often a place with “diverse intercropping of indigenous and African cultivates...yams, cassava, and sweet potatoes that represent edible staples and the economically viable roots of the internal markets.”¹³⁷ Provision grounds were originally a way for planters to displace the costs of feeding enslaved workers onto the enslaved themselves, but these spaces became plots through which limited freedom and material autonomy could be practiced. Sylvia Wynter describes the contrast between the plot and the plantation as a struggle between “the structure of values which each represents.”¹³⁸ Wynter sees this contrast in Marxist terms as a contrast between the use-value of the provision ground plot as opposed to the exchange-value of the plantation, but the plot also represented a broader socio-cultural meaning: “Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, he [sic] created on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years.”¹³⁹ This form of agriculture that was adjacent but not fully contained within the plantation regime was not simply a form of material and cultural survival within slavery. Some saw it as a foundation for resistance.

The eighteenth century British-Jamaican abolitionist Robert Wedderburn was born to an enslaved mother and a Scottish sugar-planter father. Although born free, he witnessed the horrors of slavery, including having his mother sold away from him. Later in life, he would publish an abolitionist periodical entitled *Axe Laid to the Root* aimed at working-class readers in England. As Katey Castellano notes, Wedderburn used the six issues of *Axe* to disseminate a “vision for a transatlantic alliance between the radicals of England’s lower classes and enslaved people in the West Indies.” The titular axe was not simply aimed at slavery but “an axe to the root of private

¹³⁷ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Yam, Roots, and Rot: Allegories of the Provision Grounds,” *Small Axe* 15, no. 1 (2011): 58.

¹³⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou* 5, no. 1 (1971): 99.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

property in land.”¹⁴⁰ Wedderburn was influenced by the anti-enclosure work of Thomas Spence and the movement which took his name, but in *Axe* it is Caribbean provision grounds which contain radical political potential, not the Spencean effort to protect the English commons. In the first issue of *Axe*, Wedderburn writes, “Above all, mind and keep possession of the land you now possess as slaves; for without that, freedom is not worth possessing; for if you once give up the possession of your lands, your oppressors will have power to starve you to death.” Wedderburn linked dispossession of lands in Europe to starvation and full prisons.¹⁴¹ We should not miss the radical nature of this line of argument. As Castellano puts it, “Wedderburn is not integrating or accommodating black resistance to slavery...rather, he is championing black thought and practices as *models* for the English lower classes.”¹⁴²

After arguing for the provision grounds as a site of freedom and food sovereignty, Wedderburn links this practice with marronage: “Their weapons are their bill-hooks; their store of provision is every where [sic] in abundance; you know they can live upon sugar canes, and a vast variety of herbs and fruits,—yea, even upon the buds of trees. You cannot cut off their supplies. They will be victorious in their flight, slaying all before them; they want no turnpike roads.”¹⁴³ Castellano observes that Wedderburn’s descriptions of marronage are not as agricultural as the provision grounds, but this is perhaps because the rhetoric affects a reversal of the plantation industrial farming. Local ecological knowledge enables survival in flight, the plantation commodity of sugarcane “fuels resistance,” and “Wedderburn further reverses

¹⁴⁰ Katey Castellano, “Provision Grounds Against the Plantation: Robert Wedderburn’s *Axe* Laid to the Root,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 25, no. 1 (64) (March 1, 2021): 16.

¹⁴¹ Robert Wedderburn, *Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. Iain McCalman (New York: Marcus Wiener, 1991), 82.

¹⁴² Castellano, 19; emphasis in original.

¹⁴³ Wedderburn, 86.

imagery associated with the biblical millennium: swords are not turned into plowshares and pruning hooks; pruning hooks, the tools of the enslaved on commodity plantations, are weaponized against their enslavers.¹⁴⁴ Wedderburn may not be reversing the peaceful imagery of Isaiah and Micah but may instead be drawing on the language of Joel: “Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior’” (Joel 3:10 NRSV).¹⁴⁵ Between the provision ground and the bush, we can start to see how marronage might be construed as a different sort of back-to-the-land movement. This movement would not be rooted in a romanticized pastoralism but in freedom from enslavement.

In his history of revolutionary Haiti, Johnhenry Gonzalez argues that this interplay between the provision ground and the bush played a central role in the effort of Haitian peasants to avoid being conscripted into plantation labor. Gonzalez calls Haiti a “maroon nation...a place in which the maroon phenomenon came to characterize the entire country.”¹⁴⁶ Following the throwing off of the French and the universal emancipation of the enslaved, revolutionary Haiti attempted to restore its role in the world market as a producer of plantation commodities. This, however, required efforts to return the newly emancipated Haitians back to work: “The regimes changed, but the logic of state-supervised forced labor remained the same.”¹⁴⁷ This was not, evidently, the form of life that most Haitians envisioned for themselves. Instead of returning to the plantation, “the masses of Saint-Domingue were interested primarily in cultivating their own subsistence gardens.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Castellano 21.

¹⁴⁵ Thanks to my friend and Hebrew Bible scholar Mari Joerstad for pointing this out to me.

¹⁴⁶ Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 12.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

This mode of life was enable by “Haiti’s overgrown roads and hidden hillside farms” which were “the willful creations of an independent-minded people who historically took advantage of an impenetrable and fiscally illegible landscape in order to flee forced labor, predatory taxation, and state repression.”¹⁴⁹ But the wildness of landscapes—Haitians often purposefully allowed roads and infrastructure to return to states of ruination—was made to work in concert with subsistence agriculture: “Outsiders walking into a conuco [small farm or garden] might not even realize they had left the jungle and entered the farmer’s field...In a Haitian hillside conuco, manioc, sugarcane, coconut, taro, sweet potato, yams, plantain, and mango might all vie for sunlight against the wild shrubs and grasses that provide forage for goats, or the jungle tree that the farmer might cut down to make charcoal.”¹⁵⁰

In his Heideggerian reflection on forests, Robert Pogue Harrison argues that “Just as agriculture domesticated the law of vegetation, so did it also domesticate those who lived by it.” For Harrison, the turn to mechanized agriculture leads to a lack of dwelling and belonging that make for a sort of placelessness that becomes the (post)modern condition.¹⁵¹ I am not sure what Heidegger or Harrison would make of maroon agriculture in the jungles of Haiti, but to my mind it lacks the domesticity of Martin Heidegger’s Black Forest hut or Wendell Berry’s Kentucky farm.¹⁵² While Heidegger’s conception of dwelling and Berry’s staying-put reflect particular resistances to modernity’s domination of nature, marronage enacts a different sort of land-based subject formation. It is the porosity between the plot and the jungle that makes the difference

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 235.

¹⁵¹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 198.

¹⁵² For a wonderful “biography” of Heidegger’s Todtnauberg hut, see: Adam Sharr, *Heidegger’s Hut* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

here. While marronage is not purely passive with regard to the other than human landscape, it draws on the land with an openness precisely to its wildness and inaccessibility. Unlike the European colonial gaze which balks at opacity, maroons draw on and become a part of the opaque landscape.

Édouard Glissant points to exactly this aspect of marronage as he contrasts the bush from the plantation: “The forest of the maroon was thus the first obstacle the slaved opposed to the *transparency* of the planter. There is no clear path, no *way forward*, in this density.”¹⁵³ One can see in Glissant a mirroring taking place between the opaque landscape and the opacity of intersubjective encounter. For Glissant, the opaqueness names “that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.” This encounter with the opacity of otherness is understood in non-possessive terms. He contrasts opacity not only with transparency but also with a knowledge that takes the form of “grasping”: “the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation.”¹⁵⁴ Glissant here helps us see how marronage acts as a refusal of the property regime, especially in its Lockean deployment. Maroon ecology reverses the logic of accumulation; mixing one’s labor with the landscape does not transform it into property. A transformation does take place through the encounter, but it almost seems to move in the opposite direction of what Locke intended. The land is not a waste awaiting human labor to make it valuable; rather the land transforms and disrupts human systems of valuing, enabling subsistence and offering protection from domination.

¹⁵³ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, ed. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 83; emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 191-192; emphasis in original.

It should be noted that marronage should not be romanticized as a completely propertyless society. Gonzalez records that Haitian farmers' philosophy of ownership was often expressed through the saying "sak nan min ou, e sa ki propriete ou" or "that which is in your hands is that which is your property."¹⁵⁵ Likewise the cultural anthropologist Werner Zips points to systems of collective ownership and family "control" of parcels of land practice in extant maroon communities in Jamaica, but neither are not rooted in "the capitalist terminology of individual absolute property."¹⁵⁶ My examination of maroon ecology here is not aimed at lifting up marronage as a perfect moral, political, or ecological exemplar. Rather, I think that maroons represent an expansion of the eco-political horizon beyond how human and other-than-human relations are thought within the property regime. The dialectic between the provision grounds—a cultivating and culture-making landscape with roots in and beyond the plantation—and the jungle, forest, mountain, or swamp yields a new relationality between humans and other-than-humans. Land is not reducible to would-be property; human labor on land is not completely antithetical to the wildness of uncultivated spaces. The nature-culture divide is made porous, but perhaps not obliterated altogether. But where they meet new forms of life emerge.

Antonio Gramsci remarks in his *Prison Notebooks*, that modernity's crisis of authority is one where "the ruling class has lost consensus" and "the great masses have become detached from traditional ideologies." Gramsci explains that "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass."¹⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek famously renders the last clause of the quote as "now

¹⁵⁵ Gonzalez, 175.

¹⁵⁶ Werner Zips, "We Are Landowners - Territorial Autonomy and Land Tenure in the Jamaican Maroon Community of Accompong," *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 40 (January 1, 1998), 109.

¹⁵⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia

is the time of monsters.”¹⁵⁸ Without getting into the particular translation issues here, I want to think with the concept of the monstrous for a moment. We might see maroons as representing something of this interregnum that Gramsci describes. In an effort to emancipate themselves from the property regime which would have them enslaved, they move to land that is not yet property in the Lockean sense: unworked, uncultivated, and thus valueless land. Not only unoccupied and unworked, the land maroons occupy is dangerous, inhospitable, and inaccessible. With Bruno Latour, we might see maroons as occupying monstrous space. For Latour monsters are hybridities that bridge the nature-culture divide—a division which he sees as constitutive of modernity. Latour explains that “The [modern] Constitution explained everything, but only by leaving out what was in the middle.”¹⁵⁹ Perhaps marronage occupies just the middle ground between the great divorce between nature and culture. Or more accurately, maroons refuse to be mapped onto this division and through this refusal they emancipate themselves from the property regime. They occupied monstrous, liminal land, perhaps becoming monstrous themselves.

Monstrous lands and peoples—understood as those places and people refusing to adhere to fixed boundaries—were a source of anxiety for settler-colonialist Christians. Willie Jennings argues that the demonic represented a theological epistemology deployed in the colonial moment against Indigenous peoples and landscapes. He notes how for a Spanish theologian like José de Acosta, “Andean religious practices reflected two realities, innate inferiority and demonic

University Press, 1996), 32-33.

¹⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “A Permanent Economic Emergency,” *New Left Review*, no. 64 (August 1, 2010): 95.

¹⁵⁹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 47.

agency.”¹⁶⁰ Demons were at work precisely in the mode of identity-formation and meaning-making that was too intimately tied to the landscape. Indeed, such demonology was a common motif in the colonial moment. As the historian Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra points out, settler-colonialists understood their settlement and commodity agriculture not simply as an economic mission in the so-called New World but also as “well-tended gardens in the hostile environment that was the satanic wilderness.”¹⁶¹ The property regime sought to exorcize the landscape of devils, but before it could do so it had to demonize the land in the first place.

Perhaps we can connect the demonized landscape with Katherine McKittrick’s conception of “demonic grounds” that she describes (building on Sylvia Wynter) as “an unfinished and therefore transformative human geography story.”¹⁶² For Wynter, the demonic represents a way of knowing and thinking that is apart from and external to the “always non-arbitrary pre-prescribed.” For McKittrick this dense phrasing shows how “subaltern lives are not marginal/other to regulatory classificatory systems, but instead are integral to them.”¹⁶³ The demonic “makes possible a different unfolding, one that does not *replace* or override or remain subordinate to the vantage point of ‘Man’ but instead parallels his constitution and his master narratives of humanness.”¹⁶⁴ Marronage occupies demonic grounds in that it exists in the world made by slavery, the plantation, and the property regime, but it is not fully dictated by these

¹⁶⁰ Jennings, 95.

¹⁶¹ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “The Devil in the New World: A Transnational Perspective,” in *The Atlantic in Global History*, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 34.

¹⁶² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxvi.

¹⁶³ Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/Silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s Women,” in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990), 365.

¹⁶⁴ McKittrick, xxv.

forces. As David Scott suggests in his interview with Wynter, the provision grounds show “there was always something *else* besides the dominant cultural logic going on...So that the plot is not simply a sociodemographic location but the site both of a form of life and of possible critical intervention.”¹⁶⁵ As the maroons move the provision grounds into the bush, we might see the space becoming both demonic and demonized; maroons made ways of life that were not only deemed inferior and unassimilable to “proper” human living, but were occupying lands where devils supposedly lived.

What if we flipped this whole structure on its head? Perhaps property itself represents a form of ownership akin to demonic possession. Richard Horsley interprets synoptic accounts of demonic possessions as portraying a world in which “God’s kingdom is involved in a struggle for domination of human life, of history, with the opposing demonic forces of Satan.” This, says Horsley, “was one of the principal ways that Galilean peasants as well as Qumran scribes had of explaining how they could be suffering such subjection and even violent oppression, when supposedly God was the ruler of history.”¹⁶⁶ Forms of political and economic domination, then, were the result of a broader spiritual oppression which could be seen both collectively (i.e., through Rome’s occupation of Palestine) and individually where “alien demonic forces had taken control, driving people into self-destructive behavior.” As Horsley notes, it was under the pressure of both the Roman occupation and demonic possession that “fundamental social forms of daily and village community were disintegrating.”¹⁶⁷ Christ’s power to liberate people from demonic possession, then, should be interpreted as a sign that he had the power to throw off

¹⁶⁵ David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe* 8 (2000): 164; emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁶ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 101.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

oppressors: physical and spiritual. Ernst Käsemann says of the exorcism ministry in Mark's gospel, "Jesus is the great conqueror of demons, wherever he goes, he rids the earth of them."¹⁶⁸

I want to suggest that property—understood as a form of self-possession that can be extended out over the world—might be thought of as a form of demonic possession. Those possessed by this power are not simply individuals but whole societies. The signs of this possession include breaking down forms of social and cultural life, especially those rooted in the land. Property as self-possession might be seen as a form of possession by possession. Lockean self-possessive individualism offers the potential for the ownership of oneself and ownership of human and other-than-human creatures, but this is undergirded by a deeper possession. Perhaps we could call this demon *homo economicus*. As Adam Kotsko points out, one of the operations of neoliberalism is to demonize us, "to set someone up to fall, providing them with just the barest sliver of agency necessary to render them blame-worthy."¹⁶⁹ As we have seen, the property regime specifically does this to racialized others, especially to those who are unable or unwilling to transform the other-than-human world into mere property.

Robert Nichols narrates a similar pattern in his account of how property possession and dispossession operate in settler-colonial regimes. He narrates how the British conquest of New Zealand established a property regime that purportedly was founded on Maori agreement, but offered only one option: acquiescing to the dispossession of one's land. Nichols writes, "In effect, the British constructed a set of legal, political, and economic institutions in which the Maori literally could not refuse to alienate their rights. Consent was legible only as assent to this

¹⁶⁸ Ernst Käsemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*, trans. Frank Clarke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 55.

¹⁶⁹ Kotsko, 84.

system of self-extinguishment.”¹⁷⁰ For Nichols, this process enacts and enables a form of settler-colonial (dis)possession which is repeated throughout the world. Settler-colonial dispossession “combines two processes typically thought distinct: it transforms nonproprietary relations into proprietary ones while, at the same time, systematically transferring control and title of this (newly formed) property. In this way, dispossession merges commodification (or, perhaps more accurately, ‘propertization’) and theft into one moment.”¹⁷¹ Property here follows Kotsko’s logic of demonization. It establishes a form of blameworthiness in which indigenous peoples are always already responsible for their own loss of land, which only was seen as “theirs” in the exact moment it was being taken from them.

How, then, might this demon be cast out? To think with the history and theory of marronage we have seen in this section, I think we need to enact a reversal of language. Whereas Wynter and McKittrick envision demonic lands as spaces that rebel against and exceed the material and discursive control of a colonial regime, perhaps we need only think about this disorderly and tumultuous landscapes as demonized by the property regime but not demonic. These are spaces of wildness, novelty, and fecundity that are not easily hemmed in by property’s efforts at enclosure and accumulation. So, it makes sense that these spaces—spaces not yet transformed into property—become sites for marronage. But marronage is not simply inhabiting so-called “wild” spaces, but also is a form of community, including communal practices of agriculture. But maroon farming is not like its plantation counterpart. As we saw with Gonzalez’s description of Haitian small-scale agronomy, there is an intermixing between cultivated and uncultivated, between “domesticated” and “wild” (it would seem that these categories start to become fuzzier).

¹⁷⁰ Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property!: Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 50.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

This, I would propose is also a new form of community-making, a new form of life in which one's relationship to land exceeds Lockean self-proprietty because the untamed landscape is equally as vital for one's survival as the provision ground which the maroon brings into the bush.

In his commentary on Acts, Willie Jennings notes multiple instances in which ownership and property clash with discipleship. He writes, "Ownership aligned with discipleship is possible" but "only under the conditions of life being drawn irrevocably by the Spirit into the new reality of intimacy and community."¹⁷² Marronage, however, must exorcize our notions of ownership and community of their associations with property. Even our notions of communal life can be overtaken by the property regime. Think of the language of belonging. We might be tempted to think of others as belonging to *us*; they can be a part of *our* community, *our* family, *our* nation, perhaps even *our* world, or not. Such belonging, then, might be founded on a conception of the self in which relationships with external others are predicated on the extension of myself out into the world. But now we are back on Locke's terrain. What we want, I think, is a form of belonging, a form of being spoken for and claimed by another, but not in the mode of (dis)possession that would possess us like the thief who "comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10).

Marronage signals that to do this we need to find a space apart from the property regime, a place beyond the demonic possession of possession. For the maroon who escaped from the plantation and slave society the bush represented this space of liberatory possibility. But where is there to run to in the world of neoliberalism? Where can one escape from racial capitalism's omnipresence? I see a hint of an answer to this question in Ashon Crawley's imagery of

¹⁷² Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 162.

“maroons *secreting away into*.”¹⁷³ He borrows this verbiage from Timothy James Lockley’s history of maroons in South Carolina, but Crawley asks us to think about the multiple meanings of “secreting.” We may think of hiding oneself in the bush. But we also might think of secretion—and here Crawley is inspired by Samuel Delany—as “that which is discharged or released, something has been, in Heideggerian terms, ‘let’ out, something that lets itself appear, something that presences.”¹⁷⁴ This suggests to me that marronage might be thought of as an act of exorcizing, of being released or releasing others of their being possessed. For Crawley, the secretion of marronage means being “released and let out *into*, interrogating notions of directionality.”¹⁷⁵ So, the question of marronage in a neoliberal world is not simply a concern about which direction to escape (understood as moving out from one place to another). Marronage is not only a question of *where* but also of *how*.

Perhaps no one enfleshes marronage’s possibilities of secretion better than Harriet Jacobs. In her 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself*, Jacobs (under the pseudonym Linda Brent) describes her escape from enslavement in the home and plantation of Dr. James Norcom (called Dr. Flint in the narrative) in Edenton, North Carolina. Jacobs flees first to what she calls “Snaky Swamp,” a hiding place so dense that it has to be reached by cutting “a path through bamboos and briers of all description.”¹⁷⁶ This swamp provides Jacobs concealment for a short time but it is a most unpleasant experience: “for the heart of the swamp, the mosquitos, and the constant terror of snakes, had brought on a burning fever.”¹⁷⁷ It is important to

¹⁷³ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 90; emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁷⁶ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). 144.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

understand this time in the swamp in the context of the marronage that was taking place around the time of Jacobs' flight. Sean Gerrity notes that the local newspaper in Edenton recorded stories of maroons being caught by slave patrols: "a party of men, in scoring...Cabarrus's Pocosin [the swamp where Jacobs hid], came across a Negro Camp, which contained 5 runaway Negros, 2 wenches and 3 fellows, who were armed."¹⁷⁸ This context signals that hiding in swamps was an established practice of marronage in this area—a strategy that Jacobs herself acknowledges: "Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of [slave patrols'] way."¹⁷⁹ This entails not simply a knowledge of an area for escape, but the practices which would enable such a concealment to be successful: navigation, communication networks, and even first-aid skills are all necessary for Jacobs to make it into and out of the swamp.

The Snaky Swamp, however, will not be Jacobs' long-term site of marronage. Upon being retrieved from the swamp by her comrades she is informed that she will be concealed at her grandmother's house. In a chapter entitled "The Loophole of Retreat" Jacobs describes the attic, or more accurately crawlspace, above her grandmother's home: "The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high...There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Phillip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap-door, which communicated with the storeroom."¹⁸⁰ She would reside in this cramped space for seven years.

Spillers, following Valerie Smith, sees in Jacobs' "garreting" a suggestion that "female gender for captive women's community is the tale writ between the lines and in the not-quite

¹⁷⁸ Sean Gerrity, "Harriet Jacobs, Marronage, and Alternative Freedoms in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 38, no. 1 (2021): 72.

¹⁷⁹ Jacobs, 83.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

spaces of American domesticity.”¹⁸¹ McKittrick follows Spillers language of not-quiteness by insisting that these are “unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, stereotype, and sociospatial marginalization: erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable.”¹⁸² That these not-quite spaces like Jacobs’ loophole of retreat are unintelligible to a wider white supremacist and misogynistic society, however, opens up a mode of redress. Or as McKittrick reads Spillers, “Black women’s geographies still rest on those ‘not-quite’ spaces and the ‘different stories’ of displacement—but this is a workable and ‘insurgent’ geography, which is produced in tandem with practices of domination.”¹⁸³ Here again we see marronage opening up possibilities that extend beyond the larger “societies structured in dominance” in which they exist.¹⁸⁴ For McKittrick, the power of the loophole of retreat is that it was, in Jacobs’ words, “the last place they thought of.”¹⁸⁵ But it is only the last place for “the logic of white and patriarchal maps.” For Black women, McKittrick insists, such spaces “are *central* to how we know and understand space and place: black women’s geographies are workable and lived subaltern spatialities, which tell a different geographic story.”¹⁸⁶

As we move with Jacobs from the plantation to the Snaky Swamp, and finally to the garret, it may seem as though we have lost marronage’s back-to-the-land character, that dialectical give-and-take between the provision ground and the bush. There are two points to make in response to

¹⁸¹ Spillers, 223.

¹⁸² McKittrick, 61.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸⁴ I draw the language of “societies structured in dominance” from Stuart Hall. See: Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley, vol. 1, Stuart Hall, Selected Writings (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 172–221.

¹⁸⁵ Jacobs, 150.

¹⁸⁶ McKittrick, 62.

this.

First, I think marronage as an eco-political imaginary should not fall into a wider trend in the environmental humanities, which all too often ignores the human-built environment. Jacobs' garret above her grandmother's home provided much the same opaqueness as the swamp or forest, and it did so in the heart of the slaveholding society from which she escaped. As I pointed out with regard to Diouf's borderland versus hinterland categories, the hinterland was not a measure of distance but a description of a space's inaccessibility. If marronage is about secretion, then perhaps we need to pay closer attention to the spaces within our human and other-than-human ecologies which prove inaccessible to domination. It is possible that marronage as a strategy requires building "last places" from which to secrete modes of life in resistance to the property regime.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, through my discussions of the monstrous and the demonic I have tried to show that the unworkability of maroon spaces for the property regime are not about the categories of "humanness" or "naturalness." To insist that marronage must rely on purely "wild" nature is to reinstate Latour's modern constitution. We need not ascribe to ideologies of wilderness in order to think with marronage. In fact, following William Cronon, we should resist ideologies of wilderness attached to the notion of "the sublime and the frontier," dependent as they are on European conceptions of civilization, settler colonialism, and racism.¹⁸⁷ Beyond this, we should also remember Jacobs' role as a maroon in the garret. Gerrity points out that, in fact, nature is present in the garret in the form of tiny, red, biting insects and seasonal temperature changes that affect her comfort in the stuffy crawlspace.¹⁸⁸ But I think that there is

¹⁸⁷ See: William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 7–28.

¹⁸⁸ Gerrity, 81.

also another form of nature present in the loophole of retreat: Harriet Jacobs herself. In resisting her enslavement—in refusing to be property—she is nature refusing enclosure. This of course is a risky line of thought. As we have seen, the property regime has the tendency to racialize those who fail to properly transcend the natural world through working it and possessing it. Racial logics have long depended upon insisting that non-white races were bestial, subhuman, and simply a part of the landscape. I think, however, that marronage makes identification with the other-than-human a risk out of which possibilities for resisting property might arise.

I see in marronage a possibility of resisting the property regime. A form of redress not predicated upon the full abolition of property *now*, but on the insistence that there exist, in the words of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “potential modes of worlding that are more advantageous to life writ large.”¹⁸⁹ Marronage offers the possibility of exorcizing the possession of possession, of inhabiting demonized spaces that refuse the dictates of the ubiquitous, neoliberal property economy. As Kathryn Tanner notes, the present economy “considers one’s very self, one’s very person to be a kind of economic property whose value is to be maximized by highly efficient employment, by increasing productivity in one’s labor on it.”¹⁹⁰ To resist this form of possession which fits us—and indeed asks us to fit ourselves—into the workings of capital must begin with a refusal. Or perhaps, in the terminology of Saidiya Hartman, it is a redress. Such redress entails responding to the conditions in which one finds oneself, though without allowing them to have the final say. So, redressing possession might align with Harriet Jacob’s resentment toward the cash payment which afforded her release from slavery: “I thank you for your kind expressions in regard to my freedom: but the freedom I had before the money was paid was dearer to me. God

¹⁸⁹ Jackson, 34.

¹⁹⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 74.

gave me *that* freedom; but man put God's image in the scales with the paltry sum of three hundred dollars."¹⁹¹

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that an account of property grounded in self-possession is not simply an economic arrangement, but represents a form of domination from which we cannot easily escape. I have shown this by attending to the history and afterlives of slavery, by thinking with abolitionist thinkers like Frederick Douglass, theoreticians of political economy like John Locke and C.B. Macpherson, critical theorists like Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, Black studies scholars like Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Tiffany Lethabo King, and finally by attending to the history and literature of marronage. Part of property's insidiousness is the way it is able to constrain even emancipatory efforts like dispossession within its framing of the world. Perhaps this is best demonstrated through the ways property shapes humanity's understanding of and relationship with the other-than-human world. As I have shown, the attempts to disentangle oneself from property often have the result of rendering oneself as closer to land (i.e., to property *in potentia*). The world of property is one where resistance seems futile because refusal or dispossession often does not make oneself more free, but instead leads to one being made into property oneself.

It is in the midst of this struggle that I point our attention to marronage. Escaping from slavery and living in the bush is not simply an act of refusal, but signals a form of redress, in the sense elucidated by Hartman: the pain of the violence remains even as one responds to it through new forms of life. We can see this when the provision ground, originally an innovation of the

¹⁹¹ Jacobs, 263.

plantation regime, is brought into the bush. Subsistence agriculture is brought into the midst of wild landscapes. I argue that this dynamic relationality between the provision ground and the bush signals the possibility of exorcizing the demonic hold which property has over us. This happens not through simply escaping from property's conditions of domination but specifically responding to them in refusing their terms of order. I have suggested that marronage as an expansion of our eco-political horizon is useful even in our own neoliberal times, where capitalism seems omnipresent. By attending to Harriet Jacob's form of marronage, I have shown how it is not the distance (i.e., between oneself and the property regime) that matters, nor the reliance on "wild" landscapes. Rather, there is a wildness that might be taken into oneself, a resistance to property that comes through making oneself unavailable for its logics.

Even while I argue this, I am also acutely aware of my own subject position. I am a cisgendered, heterosexual, middle-class, white man. Moreover, throughout this chapter I am sure that I exhibit the tendency to want to universalize, to take the struggle of enslaved persons and maroons, and make them *useful* for a larger worldwide project of struggle. In her recent indictment of such moves, the Caribbean scholar Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo rightfully condemns projects that seek to envision generativity at the site of Black death. She rightly insists that those who attempt to build ecological projects on Black suffering "cannot metaphorize their way out of genocidal logics."¹⁹² I think this is exactly right. So, I try to take marronage literally, or rather I try to take marronage seriously on its own terms. Insofar as I find it useful to think with, it is not because maroons are a metaphor for what I am trying to say. In fact, marronage stands as a continual indictment of my own participation within and even my attempting to think beyond the

¹⁹² Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative*, Cambridge Elements (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 60.

property regime. My hope, then, for marronage's significance for resisting property rests not in my own intellectual or academic genius, but in lifting up marronage as an example of what Saidiya Hartman calls "the revolutionary ideals that animated ordinary lives."¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, xv.

Chapter Two: Territory

This is the year that those
who swim the border's undertow
and shiver in boxcars
are greeted with trumpets and drums
at the first railroad crossing
on the other side

- Martín Espada, "Imagine the Angels of Bread"

Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks).

- Gloria Anzaldúa, Foreword to the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*

Introduction

Gloria Anzaldúa calls the United States border with Mexico a "1,950 mile-long open wound." She contrasts this lacerated body with the earth: "But the skin of the earth is seamless / The sea cannot be fenced, / *el mar* does not stop at borders."¹ For Anzaldúa, there is no hard-and-fast divide between socio-political formations and the other-than-human environment. But human machinations of power can go against the grain of the landscape. When this happens, the land is not a passive victim but resists: "To show the white man what she thought of his arrogance, / *Yemaya* blew that wire fence down."²

In this chapter, I want to think about territory as a force that shapes our relationships to the environment. I will do this by thinking from the border, this site of wounding and resistance.

Theorists of territory like David Delaney describe territoriality not as a natural fact but as

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 2-3; emphasis in original.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

“implicating and being implicated in ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world — ways of world-making informed by beliefs, desires, and culturally and historically contingent ways of knowing.”³ In this chapter, I foreground the contingency of U.S. American conceptions of territory by beginning with the material, embodied effects of these conceptions before considering the political, ecological, and theological structures that have brought about these contingent conditions. This chapter will proceed in four sections.

The first section, “Producing Citizen and Alien at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” looks at how the United States government uses the desert landscape of the borderlands as a punitive implement designed to harm border crossers. I argue that the weaponization of the topography and climate against migrants is significant both because of its brutality and because it produces and reproduces a particular vision of citizenship. The border is used to construct and maintain a citizen-alien distinction that naturalizes the violent deaths of “illegal” aliens along the borderlands while also naturalizing a sense of what it means to rightly occupy and protect territory.

Section two, “Territory and Temporality,” digs deeper into this alien-citizen conception of territory to show how U.S. American territoriality is driven more by a specific temporality than spatiality. To demonstrate this, I look at the history and rhetoric of U.S. westward expansion and the implementation of what we now know as the U.S.-Mexico border. The righteousness of U.S. imperialism is justified through appeals to history and futurity. White U.S. Americans had a right and a duty to expand west and protect their borders because they were the inheritors of history and the true bearers of the future. In this section, I argue that the temporal understanding of U.S. American territoriality is deeply racialized, especially as it binds racialized others to the past.

³ David Delaney, *Territory: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 12.

Section three, “Border Crossers Respatializing the Landscape,” focuses on the agency and subjectivity of border crossers as they participate in what I call “respatialization,” or processes through which humans and other-than-humans bind together peoples and places that have been severed through the violence of U.S. American territoriality. I attend to the lives of border crossers primarily through works of ethnography, history, and theory that focus on how migrants journey to, across, and beyond the border. These sojourns—and the strategies migrants use before, during, and after them—demonstrate creative and flexible spatialities that flout the border’s rigidity and enact an alternative understanding of what it might mean to relate to space.

The final section of this chapter, “An Apocalyptic Eschatology of Space,” theorizes the struggle between U.S. American territoriality and the respatialization performed by border crossers as a battle between competing eschatologies. If U.S. territoriality is chiefly about temporality—enacting and protecting a certain futurity for citizens while restricting access to those deemed “illegal”—then we might think of this as an imperial eschatology, one made all the more desperate and violent by the “threat multipliers” of climate change.⁴ Eschatological imaginaries that privilege temporality at the expense of spatiality can only be founded upon violence because they seek to enforce an untenable status quo for humans and other-than-humans alike. In contrast, border crossers’ ways of moving through the world require a more capacious and flexible attunement to the continuity of the spaces they move through. Without romanticizing the real dangers and hardships suffered by border crossers, I argue that their

⁴ According to immigration scholar and journalist, Todd Miller, the term “threat multiplier” first appears in a 2004 United Nations report but does not enter widespread use in the security community until 2007 when it becomes a common idiom for describing not only climate change but the political, social, and economic instability that it is bringing about. Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2017), 67.

spatial existence challenges the forms of territoriality of modern nation-states and holds eschatological promise for humans and other-than-humans in a warming world.

1. Producing Citizen and Alien at the US-Mexico Border

Since 1994, the U.S. Border strategy known as “Prevention Through Deterrence” (PTD) has attempted to instrumentalize the climate and topography of the US-Mexico border to prevent unauthorized crossings by driving migrants away from established ports of entry and into more remote and dangerous landscapes. The Border Patrol’s documents acknowledge that “the absolute sealing of the border is unrealistic” but nevertheless maintain that there is “legitimate reason to believe that the border can be brought under control.”⁵ Their thinking aims to take advantage of the range of environments along the border, noting that “illegal entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border can find themselves in mortal danger.”⁶ PTD’s strategy is to disrupt “traditional entry and smuggling routes,” such that “illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement.” The Border Patrol frames this strategy as an effort to “increase the ‘cost’ to illegal entrants to the point of deterring repeated attempts.”⁷ The former commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Doris Meissner, described PTD as an effort to exert robust control over the main entry points along the border, letting “geography...do the rest.”⁸

⁵ U.S. Border Patrol, “Border Patrol Strategic Plan: 1994 and Beyond, National Strategy,” July 1994, 1.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Quoted in Wayne A. Cornelius, “Controlling ‘Unwanted’ Immigration: Lessons from the United States, 1993–2004,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31, no. 4 (July 1, 2005): 779.

The oblique language the state and its agents use to describe what happens to people while crossing through dangerous terrain obscures the human toll of the policy. From 2000 to 2016, the Border Patrol documented 6,023 deaths in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas.⁹ In fiscal year 2022, the Border Patrol reported more than 800 deaths border-wide, making it the deadliest year ever for migrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.¹⁰ The numbers alone fail to represent the suffering border crossers experience as a result of this policy.

Humanitarian groups like Tucson Samaritans and *No Más Muertes* (No More Deaths) report how the terrain and climate afflict migrants with injuries and illnesses ranging from minor annoyances to life-threatening sufferings. Broken bones, cuts, bruises, bites from snakes, scorpions, and centipedes, “cerebral stroke, heart attacks, insulin shock, dysentery from drinking contaminated water, and heat stroke” are commonly witnessed conditions among migrants.¹¹

While the United States acknowledges that the explicit aim of PTD is to use the landscape to inflict “costs” on border crossers, it simultaneously attempts to represent itself as merely a passive witness—and sometimes even as a benevolent rescuer—of migrants suffering in the desert. The environments of the borderlands come to serve as what the political theorist Roxanne Doty calls “a *moral alibi* for any responsibility on the part of the United States for the deaths of

⁹ Manny Fernandez, “A Path to America, Marked by More and More Bodies,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2017, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/04/us/texas-border-migrants-dead-bodies.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/04/us/texas-border-migrants-dead-bodies.html>.

¹⁰ Joel Rose and Marisa Peñaloza, “Migrant Deaths at the U.S.-Mexico Border Hit a Record High, in Part Due to Drownings,” *NPR*, September 29, 2022, sec. National, <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/29/1125638107/migrant-deaths-us-mexico-border-record-drownings>.

¹¹ Raymond Michalowski, “Border Militarization and Migrant Suffering: A Case of Transnational Social Injury,” *Social Justice* Vol. 34, No. 2 (108), *Beyond Transnational Crime* (2007), 65-66.

undocumented migrants.”¹² The proliferation of press releases about the actions of the Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue team (BORSTAR) makes clear that it is the landscape—and not the U.S. immigration policy—that is responsible for migrant injuries and deaths. One press release emphasizes that BORSTAR “agents continue to act swiftly with compassion and dedication to prevent *needless tragedy*.”¹³ What is taking place through this rhetoric is the simultaneous weaponizing and scapegoating of the other-than-human environment along the border. Doty describes this as the state’s deployment of “the raw physicality of some natural environments...which can be put to use and can function to mask the workings of social and political power.”¹⁴ A border enforcement strategy in which the U.S. Border Patrol executed captured migrants would not be legally or socially acceptable.¹⁵ Allowing the other-than-human environment to injure and kill migrants is only permissible because the landscape is doing the dirty work.

To theorize how the environment can mask or obfuscate U.S. responsibility for migrant deaths, the anthropologist Jason De León draws on Michel Callon and John Law’s theory of the “*hybrid collectif*,” which posits that agency is an emergent property created by the interaction of many heterogeneous components known as *actants*, sources of action that may be human or nonhuman.”¹⁶ According to this line of thought, the agency behind the deaths of border crossers

¹² Roxanne Lynn Doty, “Bare Life: Border-Crossing Deaths and Spaces of Moral Alibi,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 4 (August 1, 2011): 600; emphasis in original.

¹³ “Border Patrol Rescues Continue,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, August 14, 2021, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/local-media-release/border-patrol-rescues-continue>; emphasis added.

¹⁴ Doty, 607.

¹⁵ Although Florida governor and presidential candidate Ron Desantis has threatened this. Likewise, the governor of Texas has added razor wire to

¹⁶ Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 39; emphasis in original.

is the result of humans and other-than-humans working in concert. De León's work engages with new materialist thought that seeks to extend conceptions of agency beyond the intentionality of humans to include other-than-human agents.¹⁷ He insists that to understand how migrants suffer and die in the desert, it is critical to see how "in the Arizona desert nonhumans are major players without which this system of boundary enforcement could not exist." But understanding this brutal work carried out by the topography and climate does not, for De León, "decenter or disconnect human agency from the brutal boundary enforcement strategies currently in place."¹⁸ The decentering of human agency is precisely what the Border Patrol seeks to do with PTD. This shows a potential danger in new materialism's project of distributing agency "across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts."¹⁹ In the case of Prevention Through Deterrence, would we want to describe the landscape as acting as an agent of the state? Clearly no. As Andreas Malm points out concerning new materialism, "Not only is the notion of unintended consequences, but that of responsibility...toned down or turned off."²⁰

Doty and De León clarify how the other-than-human environment serves a double function in the PTD strategy. First, the desert is a punitive implement of a system designed to hurt and kill migrants. Second, it serves to obfuscate the socio-political operations of border enforcement,

¹⁷ I use the term new materialism to include works such as: Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010). While he does not deploy the new materialist label, much of this area is in conversation with the "Actor-Network Theory" of Bruno Latour. See: *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ De León, 61.

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

²⁰ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2018), 111.

namely rendering undocumented migrants killable. Many treatments of the U.S-Mexico border draw on Giorgio Agamben's conception of "bare life"—that life that "may be killed and yet not sacrificed"—to describe how the border renders migrants vulnerable to death.²¹ For Agamben, the concentration camp represents a paradigm for the modern political operation of making bare life: humans are stripped of political acknowledgment and are made killable without consequence. Agamben argues that in the concentration camp of the modern nation-state, "*The state of exception thus ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with the juridical rule itself.*"²² In other words, rather than using the state of exception as a "temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger," the camp represents "a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order."²³

I want to suggest that the border operates in much the same way in U.S. immigration policy. While undocumented border crossers may be committing a crime according to U.S. immigration laws (typically a civil offense or misdemeanor), such crimes are not capital offenses. Only the means of killing (i.e., death caused by environmental factors) allows the United States to reduce unauthorized border crossers to bare life, with the land itself being drawn on to create the space of exception. This helps to make sense of the video compilation circulated in 2018 by *No Mas*

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8. For studies that draw on Agamben's work to theorize the border, see: Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Bare Life: Border-Crossing Deaths and Spaces of Moral Alibi," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 4 (August 1, 2011): 599–612; Samuel Norton Chambers, "The Spatiotemporal Forming of a State of Exception: Repurposing Hot-Spot Analysis to Map Bare-Life in Southern Arizona's Borderlands," *GeoJournal* 85, no. 5 (October 2020): 1373–84; Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 27-29.

²² Agamben, 168; emphasis in original.

²³ Ibid., 169.

Muertes that shows Border Patrol agents destroying water supplies left along migrant routes.²⁴

These water caches are destroyed precisely so that the weaponized desert is more effective in doing its job: causing the suffering and deaths of migrants.

This dual function of the landscape in U.S. border enforcement allows for a situation wherein extrajudicial punishment and the rendering of people into bare life can happen in public view. De León's study of bodily decomposition in the desert demonstrates how "with enough time, persons left to rot on the ground can disappear completely."²⁵ But even with the desert's capacity to disappear the corpses of migrants, PTD's weaponization of the border landscape is not primarily about making the violence invisible. Politicians and the media constantly draw U.S. Americans' attention to the borderlands. Often, the media highlights the purported dangerous conditions for Border Patrol agents or for those who live near the border, as with Fox News headlines that read "2 US border agents shot, 1 killed, near major drug corridor in Arizona" or "Arizona Rancher's Killing Sparks Calls to Beef Up Border Security."²⁶ Increasingly, both conservative and liberal news media have drawn attention to the dangers that border crossers face.²⁷ In April of 2021, the Border Patrol itself released footage of a dramatic rescue of two

²⁴ Rory Carroll, "US Border Patrol Routinely Sabotages Water Left for Migrants, Report Says," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2018, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/17/us-border-patrol-sabotage-aid-migrants-mexico-arizona>. Similar instances of Border Patrol agents destroying food and water supplies left for migrants were reported again in 2023: Gustavo Solis, "Border Agents Destroy Water and Food Left for People Crossing Border Illegally," KPBS Public Media, April 21, 2023, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/border-immigration/2023/04/21/border-agents-destroy-water-food-people-crossing-border-illegally>.

²⁵ De León, 81.

²⁶ "2 US Border Agents Shot, 1 Killed, near Major Drug Corridor in Arizona," Text.Article, Fox News (Fox News, March 26, 2015), <https://www.foxnews.com/us/2-us-border-agents-shot-1-killed-near-major-drug-corridor-in-arizona>; "Arizona Rancher's Killing Sparks Calls to Beef Up Border Security," Text.Article, Fox News (Fox News, March 27, 2015), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/arizona-ranchers-killing-sparks-calls-to-beef-up-border-security>.

²⁷ Associated Press, "Guatemalan Boy's Death Highlight's Danger of Border Crossings," Fox

Honduran children, ages seven and thirteen, from the Rio Grande.²⁸ But what exactly is the function of these border images for U.S. immigration enforcement?

Nicholas de Genova describes the visibility of U.S. immigration enforcement as a “Border Spectacle” in which “the spectacle of ‘enforcement’ at the U.S.-Mexico border...renders a racialized migrant ‘illegality’ visible and lends it the commonsensical air of a ‘natural’ fact.”²⁹ For De Genova, it is the act of border and immigration enforcement that “activates the spectacle of ‘violations’ that lend ‘illegality’ its fetishistic objectivity, and thereby severs the substantive social interrelation of migrants and the legal regime of the destination state.”³⁰ The state’s investment of resources into fortifying borders is not a reaction to a threat; enforcement produces the external menace to which political, juridical, economic, and discursive systems are then arrayed in response. Moreover, as we see with U.S. American immigration enforcement, the media seeks to produce an affective sense of a crisis that is to be felt even at the level of individuals, even or especially those citizens whose everyday lives are far removed from the borderlands. The ethnographers K. Jill Fleuriet and Mari Castellano argue that the language of “the border” acts as a “concept-metaphor” that is “a product of place-making through media and political actors rather than reflections of the realities of living in a complex, changing, and

News, March 20, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/guatemalan-boys-death-highlights-danger-of-border-crossings>; Reynaldo Leños, Jr., “As More Migrants Cross Rio Grande, Border Patrol Rescues Surge,” NPR.org, June 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/08/730915557/as-more-migrants-cross-rio-grande-border-patrol-rescues-surge>.

²⁸ Geneva Sands, “Video Captures Border Patrol Rescue of Two Migrant Children in Rio Grande,” CNN, April 20, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/20/politics/border-patrol-video-rescue/index.html>.

²⁹ Nicholas P. De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (October 1, 2002), 436.

³⁰ Nicholas De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (July 1, 2013): 1183.

binational space.”³¹ Through her fieldwork, Fleuriet highlights how the concept-metaphor of the border comes to signify a space that is “unmanageable, corrupt, and dangerous,” even as that portrayal diverges from the lived experiences of the people who occupy the borderlands.³²

I argued above that one aspect of Prevention Through Deterrence is to shift the blame for migrant deaths onto the landscape and that this scheme shows how new materialism’s proliferation of agency beyond the human could be deployed to obscure human culpability for violence. Now, with de Genova’s idea of the border spectacle and Fleuriet and Castellano’s understanding of the border as a concept-metaphor, I want to show how Prevention Through Deterrence—and the larger border enforcement effort of which it is part—operates by using the landscape to naturalize both the suffering and deaths of border crossers and the very existence of the border itself. Rather than seeing migrants’ sufferings and deaths in the desert as being the result of certain immigration and border enforcement policies, the spectacle becomes the justification of these violent policy decisions. The spectacle naturalizes the border in two senses. First, it removes human responsibility for the violence inflicted upon border crossers. Second, it turns the border into a natural (i.e., merely given) boundary rather than a political construction in the minds of U.S. citizens. We have already seen how the first sort of naturalization happens. But how does the border spectacle accomplish the naturalization of the border itself? And how does this shape conceptions of citizenship and “illegality”?

To theorize how the border functions as a spectacle, De Genova draws on Guy Debord’s now classic *The Society of the Spectacle* to articulate how immigration enforcement operates in the

³¹ K. Jill Fleuriet and Mari Castellano, “Media, Place-Making, and Concept-Metaphors: The US-Mexico Border during the Rise of Donald Trump,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 6 (September 1, 2020): 881.

³² *Ibid.*, 891.

context of transnational labor and capital flows. For Debord, “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people mediated by images.”³³ I follow Debord’s intuition to suggest that the spectacle of border enforcement mediates at least three relationships: those between citizens and “illegal” aliens, citizens and the border landscape, and between citizens and the state. In all three cases, the spectacle is meant to make citizens identify themselves with the nation-state and the purported necessity of border enforcement. In the U.S. American context, this formation of citizenship operates through *both* conservative and liberal politics. One of the most pernicious distortions of how the border spectacle is interpreted in our present moment is how the election of Donald Trump to the presidency managed to paper over the bi-partisan nature of draconian immigration enforcement in the minds of many citizens. The Clinton and Obama administrations have their own brutal histories with immigration enforcement, including the 1994 origin of the Prevention Through Deterrence policy that has led to so many migrant deaths in the desert.³⁴

While liberal politicians and pundits do not deploy overtly racist or xenophobic tropes in the same manner as many of their conservative counterparts, they nevertheless participate in producing and reproducing the border spectacle. They do this, first, by implementing or continuing many of the same enforcement policies as Republicans, insisting that they are also a party that cares about proper, legal immigration. Then, they assume a moral high ground through what Harsha Walia calls “the shallow politics of humanitarianism” and “liberal

³³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), §4.

³⁴ For an overview of democratic policymakers’ role in creating and implementing border enforcement, see: Lynn Stephen, “Creating Preemptive Suspects: National Security, Border Defense, and Immigration Policy, 1980–Present,” *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 7–25; Tanya Golash-Boza, “President Obama’s Legacy as ‘Deporter in Chief,’” in *Immigration Policy in the Age of Punishment*, ed. David C. Brotherton and Philip Kretsedemas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 37–56.

multiculturalism.” For Walia, while these forms of liberalism “may challenge negative stereotypes attributed to the ‘stranger,’” they do so only superficially.³⁵ Reactionary immigration rhetoric portrays “illegal” immigration as a threat through racial, cultural, and national-security logics. Liberals depict the threat as undermining bureaucratic procedures and norms put in place by neoliberal policies. As Walia puts it, “Liberal lawmakers and their supporters may critique the overt, racist treatment of migrants under Trump's reign, but they too naturalize the border's existence and uphold the state's right to exclude migrants through border rule.”³⁶ It is this naturalization of the border and of the illegal immigrant that is of particular importance to my argument here. Whether through conservative or liberal rhetoric, the result of the spectacle of border enforcement is to turn the border—and the concomitant concepts of “illegal” alien and citizen—into natural facts. This obscures what borders truly are: historically contingent political productions.

What is most alarming about the spectacle of border enforcement is the relative ease with which U.S. citizens accept and identify with its necessity. Debord says, “The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence.”³⁷ But rather than recoil at the brutality of this image of power, citizens' relationship with the state is mediated through the spectacle of the border so that they accept the necessity—either triumphant or tragic—of enforcement. The citizen, then, need not have animus or feelings of superiority toward the “illegal” alien at all. What matters is not *why* there is a difference between citizen and alien, only that the difference exists. Étienne Balibar describes the task of

³⁵ Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁷ Debord, §24.

contemporary borders as not only serving to give “individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights, such as the freedom of circulation and freedom of enterprise, but actively to *differentiate* between individuals in terms of social class.”³⁸ What, then, is the content of this differentiation between the social classes of aliens and citizens? Simply the designation of who can and cannot occupy certain territory. Political ideologies will build superstructures on top of this distinction through discursive formations such as nationalism, economics, public health, the drug war, race, religion, and civilization. Ultimately, the distinction that matters is between *us* and *them*.

This, for Balibar, is the most troubling aspect of borders: their simultaneous contingency and symbolically-charged meaningfulness. Borders such as the one between the United States and Mexico are historically contingent productions, but once imbued with deeper significance, they are often internalized by the citizenry. For conservatives, the border has become a deeply important, perhaps sacred, marker of national identity; as Trump insists, “...if we don’t have a border, we don’t have a country. Remember that.”³⁹ For liberals, there may be no deeply held conviction about why borders exist. They are merely there and must be honored. So, Kamala Harris can dispassionately say to the people of Guatemala, “Do not come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our borders.”⁴⁰ Whether conservative or liberal, the result is the same: an arbitrary line is made unquestionable, in law and in the worldview of citizens. The border spectacle—composed of out-of-control migration and dangerous landscapes—takes the arbitrary line in the desert and transforms it into a natural

³⁸ Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (New York: Verso, 2002), 81-82.

³⁹ Quoted in Fleuriet and Castellano, 887.

⁴⁰ “Kamala Harris Tells Guatemala Migrants: ‘Do Not Come to US,’” *BBC News*, June 7, 2021, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57387350>.

necessity. “Illegal” people and inhospitable landscapes coalesce to form a threat to individual citizens and to the very idea of citizenship itself.

Perhaps it is the ever-increasing awareness of the unstable grounds of citizenship that makes the border spectacle so compelling. Legal theorists like Richard Falk have argued that the forces of economic globalization are “eroding, if not altogether undermining, the foundations of traditional citizenship.” The undermining of territorially bound conceptions of citizenship by global flows of capital and labor, however, has not brought about the widespread emergence of the new “global citizen” or “global village” that some predicted.⁴¹ Instead, political movements, especially those from the right, have sought to put territory and citizenship at the center of their agendas. In her prescient reflection on border walls and state sovereignty—appearing five years before Trump descended the escalator to announce his candidacy for president—Wendy Brown argued that “the new walls can be seen to issue from certain pressures on nations and states exerted by the process of globalization.”⁴² The border spectacle, then, is efficacious precisely because citizenship seems precarious in the face of a globalized world that can feel as though it is spinning out of control.

The U.S.-Mexico borderlands function effectively as a spectacle because they offer images that politicians and citizens alike can point to to justify their sense that citizenship is under threat. The cruel irony is that the migrants crossing the desert are the very people whose lives have been most destabilized by globalization. As Josue David Cisneros puts it, “Ours is a world that celebrates the free flow of capital and goods and that valorizes the entrepreneurial individual and yet criminalizes the movement of people and exploits the hard work of a whole class based on

⁴¹ Richard Falk, “The Decline of Citizenship in an Era of Globalization,” *Citizenship Studies* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 6.

⁴² Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 27.

the circumstance of their movement.”⁴³ Cisneros is surely right to point out this juxtaposition, but the policing of migration is not an example of neoliberalism’s hypocrisy. Political structures that venerate free trade and the mobility of capital are not being inconsistent when they then militarize their borders and heavily police migrants. This tension is a feature of the system, not a bug.

A similar dissonance can be seen when border enforcement advocates use rhetoric that simultaneously treats the figure of the migrant as a threat and a victim. Indeed, since the election of Joseph Biden to the U.S. presidency, conservative pundits, including former director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Tom Homan, have changed their rhetoric to argue that stricter immigration enforcement is needed to prevent migrants from dying along the borderlands.⁴⁴ For Homan, it is the *failure* to secure the border that creates a dangerous situation for migrants. According to this logic, a fortified border and policies such as “Remain in Mexico” are the real humane approach to immigration. The situation at the border can be viewed as a “human tragedy” to be blamed on the dangerous landscape or criminal organizations who ferry people across it.⁴⁵ What can never be part of the discussion is the violent effects of the U.S. immigration enforcement strategies or the role of U.S. foreign policies in immiserating so many of the countries from which migrants are fleeing. To acknowledge these histories and ongoing

⁴³ Josue David Cisneros, *The Border Crossed Us: Rhetorics of Borders, Citizenship, and Latina/o Identity*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 135.

⁴⁴ “Tom Homan: Biden-Harris Policies Will Result in ‘open Borders,’ More Migrant Deaths,” Text Article, Fox News (Fox News, March 30, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/tom-homan-biden-migrant-surge-obama>.

⁴⁵ Ray Walser and Jessica Zuckerman, “The Human Tragedy of Illegal Immigration: Greater Efforts Needed to Combat Smuggling and Violence” (The Heritage Foundation, June 22, 2011), <https://www.heritage.org/immigration/report/the-human-tragedy-illegal-immigration-greater-efforts-needed-combat-smuggling>.

realities would pull on the string that unravels the fabric of the citizen-alien dichotomy that borders are meant to produce and protect.

I argued above that the spectacle of border enforcement blames the landscape for migrant deaths, and it turns the border itself into a “natural” (and therefore necessary) reality. To these two functions, I add a third: it diverts attention *away* from the instability of the form of U.S. territoriality that produces citizens and aliens *toward* the purported threat of “illegal immigrants.” In doing so, it prevents one from seeing the contingency of this entire arrangement even as it also asks for the gratitude and allegiance of citizens to the regime. Put another way, the spectacle of border enforcement is attuned to transformations taking place through globalization and the experiences of citizens wrought by those changes. In response, it constructs a threat—the “illegal” alien—through the act of enforcement, which then is supposed to prove the necessity and the justness of the whole system of territoriality. For U.S. citizens, the spectacle is not just an exoneration of U.S. immigration policies and agencies while migrants die in the borderlands; in the face of the so-called “immigration crisis,” it is meant to reassure us of our faith in the promise of citizenship. If the evidence is supposed to be seen in the border spectacle, what is the substance of this thing called citizenship we are meant to hope for?

In his classic text, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson connects the dawn of nationalism with “the dusk of religious modes of thought.” He argues that religious thinking and believing do not disappear with the rise of secular accounts of politics. Instead, those ideas transmogrify: “With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required

was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.”⁴⁶ Anderson argues that it is the idea of the nation that takes on the weight of these religious longings. Being a citizen of a nation is meant to hold together this desire for continuity and meaning. But in the context of U.S. American territoriality, what is the content of this continuity and meaning? It is to this question that I turn in the next section.

2. Territory and Temporality

In 1839, John O’Sullivan wrote in the pages of his *Democratic Review*:

[O]ur national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity.⁴⁷

O’Sullivan penned these words six years before he would go on to coin the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” but already in this essay, appropriately titled “The Great Nation of Futurity,” he begins to develop a connection between the United State’s providentially-ordained expansion across North America and a particular vision of temporality. This is a supersessionist vision of time, one in which the future represents a clean break with the past.⁴⁸ The foundational principle of this new moment, for O’Sullivan, is equality, which he primarily defines negatively against “the monarchies and aristocracies of antiquity” from which there are no lessons to be drawn except

⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 11.

⁴⁷ John L. O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (1839): 426; emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Here, I use the term supersessionist following Vincent Lloyd, who describes “supersessionist logic” as “overturning one world and replacing it with another.” See: Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem With Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

for “avoidance of nearly all their examples.”⁴⁹

In this essay, the future is envisioned topologically, or perhaps better, as a topos cleared of any and all obstructions to the assertion of U.S. American glory: “The expansive future is our avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space.” This topological vision of the future is also theological:

In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an [sic] Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God’s natural and moral law of equality.⁵⁰

Here, I think it is fair to say that a supersessionist philosophy of history takes on a full-blown Christian supersessionism in which the church that supersedes the people of Israel is represented—and perhaps even superseded again—by the United States. Expansive territorial thinking here sneaks in—“[i]ts floor shall be a hemisphere”—but the proper domain of this elect nation is not a place but a time, not a where but a when.

For O’Sullivan, the worst tendency of the United States is its “imitativeness” or the propensity he sees among certain professional and literary classes to emulate “foreign nations.”⁵¹ To break out of this, he argues that there is potential, especially for American literature, to seek out inspiration in “the magnificent scenery of our own world” in which they can “imbibe the fresh enthusiasm of a new heaven and a new earth.”⁵² While the landscape emerges as a possible site from which to break with the stultifying past, this is not a proper topography; we are still in

⁴⁹ O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” 427.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 427-28.

⁵² Ibid., 428-29.

the realm of the temporal, even eschatological, not a particular relationship with space or place. This seems a bit odd because the classes of U.S. Americans among whom O'Sullivan locate the greatest hopefulness are those of "the mechanical and agricultural population," those who figuratively and literally are "propagating and extending, through the present and the future, the powerful purpose of the soul, which, in the seventeenth century, sought a refuge among savages, and reared in the wilderness the sacred altars of intellectual freedom." But, quite importantly, these farmers and settlers of wild landscapes are not people *of* the land: "American patriotism is not of the soil; we are not aborigines, nor of ancestry, for we are of all nations." The true marker of these patriots is not a relationship to place, but "personal enfranchisement."⁵³

"The Great Nation of Futurity" provides an important context for understanding O'Sullivan's more widely known contribution to U.S. American conceptions of territoriality. First appearing in his 1845 essay, "Annexation," O'Sullivan coins the phrase "manifest destiny" in describing the United States' God-given duty to "overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."⁵⁴ Writing in support of the annexation of Texas—a process in motion that would go into effect around seven months after the essay was published—O'Sullivan argues that the dispute over the U.S. incorporation of the Republic of Texas should always have been seen as inevitable: "Texas is now ours...She is no longer to us a mere geographic space...She comes within the dear and sacred designation of Our Country."⁵⁵ Texas' inclusion is a geographic fact and a continuation of providence. For Texas to join the United States is not merely a contingency of history but part of the movement of progress across

⁵³ Ibid., 429.

⁵⁴ John L O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no. 1 (1845): 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

the continent that represents, for O’Sullivan, the divine mission of his nation.

As such, O’Sullivan stresses the means of annexation be commensurate with the ends. Because of his democratic values of “personal enfranchisement,” O’Sullivan felt it necessary to show that the United States’ annexation of Texas was not part of some vulgar “territorial aggrandizement” unfairly or unjustly carried out against Mexico. Rather, he argues that Mexico had been unjust in its treatment of Mexican Texas, and so the formation of the Republic of Texas was not an undemocratic seizure of territory by means of force.⁵⁶ O’Sullivan grounds the justness of annexation by appealing to the racial inferiority of Mexicans. Defending annexation from the claim that it was being carried out to bolster the slave-holding southern United States, he argues that, in fact, Texas’ inclusion in the union will only help the “eventual voluntary abolition of slavery” and that “[t]he Spanish-Indian-American populations of Mexico, Central America and South America afford the only receptacle capable of absorbing that [Black] race whenever we shall be prepared to slough it off—to emancipate it from slavery, and (simultaneously necessary) to remove it from the midst of our own.” This, to O’Sullivan, makes sense according to his racial logic because Mexicans and Central and South Americans are “themselves already of mixed and confused blood.”⁵⁷ He also ties the racial inferiority of Mexicans to an inability to govern properly: “Imbecile and distracted, Mexico can never exert any real governmental authority over such a country.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9. In an 1846 essay, O’Sullivan will offer a progressive or evolutionary account of the Mexican race: “The Mexican people are unaccustomed to the duties of self-government, and for years to come must travel up through numberless processes of political emancipation before they can dispense with the restraints which the Saxon family threw off more than three hundred years ago.” John L O’Sullivan, “Territorial Aggrandizement,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no. 88 (1845): 243–47.

In contrast to Mexico, O'Sullivan insists that the inevitable wave of white American progress is already poised to seize the future: "Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon [the borderlands], armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting houses."⁵⁹ Here again, we see O'Sullivan's hope in agriculture and industry to expand the United States' territory and power. But then O'Sullivan reveals manifest destiny's racialized foundation. For all his talk of the virtue of U.S. American equality, the rightness of Anglo-Saxon expansion is really grounded upon force: "Their right to independence will be the natural right of self-government belonging to any community strong enough to maintain it."⁶⁰ Herein lies a contradiction within O'Sullivan's vision of futurity and manifest destiny: History is moving toward an American world of universal equality ruled through democracy, except for when it comes to external or internal others, especially those deemed racially inferior, who must be dealt with through coercion or force.

The political scientist Adam Gomez sees in O'Sullivan's thought a political theology of sin. Gomez thinks that for O'Sullivan, sin is principally "that which violates the "high and holy democratic principle." So, "the United States is born sinless due to its radical break with world history, and it remains so by virtue of its providential mission."⁶¹ This faith in democracy, however, is not the gift of unconditional election but is volitional and subjective: faith in democracy must be held for it to be salvific. Gomez argues that this allows O'Sullivan to exclude from democracy "persons who are nominally within the geographic boundaries of the United

⁵⁹ O'Sullivan, "Annexation," 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Adam Gomez, "Deus Vult: John L. O'Sullivan, Manifest Destiny, and American Democratic Messianism," *American Political Thought* 1, no. 2 (September 2012): 240.

States but who remain ‘unbelievers,’ specifically, African slaves, Native Americans, and Mexicans...Unable to embrace the democratic principle, they are neither regarded as democratic equals nor entitled to democratic government.”⁶² I find Gomez’s argument useful for thinking about this aspect of O’Sullivan’s vision of divinely ordained white American supremacy, this vision of futurity founded on “equality” that nevertheless leaves so many violently excluded from, or even subjugated by, democracy. However, I am not fully convinced that sin is the theological lodestone holding this contradiction together for O’Sullivan.

The temporal emphasis of U.S. American futurity and manifest destiny explicitly points to a conception of providence undergirding O’Sullivan’s thought. What is especially striking about O’Sullivan’s deployment of providence is that his god grants the United States the land, but history belongs to the nation of futurity: “...*our* manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of *our* yearly multiplying millions.”⁶³ The deity has gifted over the raw material, but it is U.S. territoriality that gives it meaning. J.G.A. Pocock famously wrote that for medieval Christianity, “History...acquired meaning through subordination to eschatology.”⁶⁴ Here, however, eschatology—the end of history as it has been previously known—is not in the hands of the divine but in the United States, and it is this eschaton that determines the meaning of all history. Perhaps this, then, is the inevitable telos of Christian supersessionism: through superseding Israel as the elect people of God, it was only a matter of time before Christians would also supersede God.

This extended discussion of temporality in O’Sullivan’s writings is not, in itself, proof

⁶² Ibid., 241.

⁶³ O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” 5; emphasis mine.

⁶⁴ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 32.

positive that contemporary conceptions or deployments of U.S. territoriality function as an essentially temporal category. Work like that of Adam Gomez and John D. Wilsey seeks to connect these elements of O’Sullivan’s thought to the rise of U.S. American exceptionalism and Christian nationalism.⁶⁵ I agree that these connections are there and warrant further investigation. For present purposes, however, it is necessary to look at other instances of this temporal vision of territory to see how this understanding of American futurity functions in relationship to the account of borders, citizens, and aliens I offered in the previous section.

In his book on the emergence of U.S. nationalism and temporality, Thomas M. Allen argues that in their understandings of history, thinkers like John O’Sullivan and Thomas Jefferson are grappling with time precisely because the spatial expansion of the United States threatens to undermine their conception of America’s status as a republic. As we have already seen, O’Sullivan’s apologetics for the righteousness of the United States’ acquisition of Texas and other territories of North America are symptomatic of this dichotomy between republics and empires. Allen notes that though Thomas Jefferson himself would refer to the U.S. as an “[e]mpire of liberty,” this was not an empire of old precisely because “one principle more deeply rooted than any other in the mind of every American...is that we should have nothing to do with conquest.”⁶⁶ For Jefferson and O’Sullivan, the westward expansion of the United States is not chiefly about spatial expansion or defeating America’s enemies but about a nationalism firmly

⁶⁵ See Gomez, “Deus Volt,” and John D. Wilsey, “‘Our Country Is Destined to Be the Great Nation of Futurity’: John L. O’Sullivan’s Manifest Destiny and Christian Nationalism, 1837–1846,” *Religions* 8, no. 4 (April 2017): 68.

⁶⁶ Thomas M. Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 23. This mode of defending the “rightful” acquisition of land is also central to John Locke, who writes that conquest “often makes way for a new frame of a common-wealth, by destroying the former; but, without the consent of the people, can never erect a new one.” John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), §175.

grounded in futurity. This, for them, represented a break with the empires of old that lacked the principles of democracy and equality; the acquisition of territory was not primarily about force but was about drawing space into the future represented by the United States.

Allen also connects this focus on the temporal to Thomas Malthus' 1798 *Essay on Population*. For Malthus, the future would "be characterized by a series of inevitable catastrophes" due to the tendency of human population growth—especially among the lower classes—to exhaust finite natural resources. Allen sees in Jefferson and O'Sullivan a vision of "western expansion as a way of ameliorating the Malthusian problem, relieving the pressure of population growth upon resources and hence facilitating continued national development into future time...Space was important, but its importance lay in its capacity to enable unlimited expansion through time."⁶⁷ The spatiality of U.S. territory, then, was subordinated to temporality; for U.S. nationalism, the land it occupied and acquired became merely the vehicle for history. Allen argues that this leads to a vision of American development where "there would be no essential connection between the people and their land." The principles of democracy and equality were portable, able to be established anywhere, independent of the landscape. Indeed, it was time that could be "rich and variegated" while the landscape needed to be made "blank, undifferentiated, fungible," something Jefferson would enact through his Cartesian land survey system.⁶⁸

We might see the versions of territorial nationalism envisioned by thinkers like Jefferson and O'Sullivan as offering a continuation of John Locke's suggestion that "in the beginning all the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 40. Amir Alexander offers an excellent overview of Jefferson's land survey system and its outworkings in his "The Estrangement of the American Landscape," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2018): 323–50.

world was America.”⁶⁹ The land of the Americas was once lying purely in the state of nature—literally pre-historical land—and so the acquisition of territory and the transformation of territory into property is the work of moving this place out of pre-history and antiquity and into the future. In the U.S. American context, territory is about a certain relationship with time, one in which the events of history are not embedded within a particular locale but transcend the context precisely as they turn the raw materials of nature into history. This, again, is a racialized account of history and territory, especially insofar as it binds non-white races to the past and to nature. The lack of a modern concept of property among Indigenous peoples for Locke, O’Sullivan’s insistence upon the impurity of Mexican blood and the attending inability to self-govern, and Jefferson’s assessment of Black people as “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind,” are all outworkings of their racist anthropologies as well as conceptions of history rooted in ideas of progressive development and futurity.⁷⁰

To return to the U.S.-Mexico border, it is easy to see this temporal vision of territoriality at work as the United States annexes Texas and the rest of the southwest and turns its attention to policing the newly made border. In his study of “borderland hermeneutics,” Gregory Cuéllar surveys nineteenth-century Texas literature that helped to produce and maintain the racial distinction between Mexicans—including those who found themselves north of the newly demarcated border—and Anglo-Americans. The rhetoric continued O’Sullivan’s project of demonstrating Mexican inferiority by disparaging them for their “mental capacities,” “moral and

⁶⁹ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), §49.

⁷⁰ This phrase from Jefferson is quoted in Nicholas E. Magnis, “Thomas Jefferson and Slavery: An Analysis of His Racist Thinking as Revealed by His Writings and Political Behavior,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (1999): 491.

religious depravity,” and lack of “capability for self-government.”⁷¹ Cuéllar also shows how white Americans linked these supposed deficiencies of intellect and character to produce the threat of Mexicans as “the host of migrating disease.”⁷² The result of these rhetorical strategies of dehumanization is both to produce an inferior racialized figure in the minds of Anglo-Americans and to transform that figure into an impediment and threat to American progress.

This strategy of dehumanization is obviously not confined to the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. In examining the anti-immigration movements of the 1990s, Leo Chavez points to narratives of Mexican “backwardness” that were depicted both as a hindrance to progress and as an active conspiracy against the United States. “Illegal aliens, with no commitment to the country and no respect for its common principles,” in the words of the conservative pundit Georgie Anne Geyer, were actually moving the United States “...backwards in time and backwards in development.”⁷³ It is not terribly surprising that these reactionary perspectives, from O’Sullivan to the present day, use racial logics to highlight the futurity of American exceptionalism and the regressive threat of racialized alien others, but I have argued above that liberal approaches to immigration were just as tied to the spectacle of enforcement at the border. So, what role do they play in producing U.S. territory as a temporality? What is the liberal heir of manifest destiny in our contemporary context?

Anders Stephanson points to Herbert Croly, the political philosopher and co-founder of *The New Republic*, as the great transformer of manifest destiny into a properly liberal and secular American self-understanding. Stephanson argues that, for Croly, America’s destiny would need

⁷¹ Gregory L. Cuéllar, *Resacralizing the Other at the US-Mexico Border: A Borderland Hermeneutic* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 32.

⁷² Ibid., 35.

⁷³ Quoted in Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 35.

“to be determined through human agency on rational grounds. The future, time itself, was open but predictable, subject to instrumental control: manifest destiny, history as revealed in the utopian space of America, would be managed destiny.”⁷⁴ In Croly’s 1909 book, *The Promise of American Life*, he casts a progressive, liberal vision of America’s future, and he imagines the attractiveness and demands of this vision:

From the point of view of an immigrant this Promise may consist of anticipation of a better future, which he can share merely by taking up residence on American soil; but once he has become an American, the Promise can no longer remain merely an anticipation. It becomes in that case a responsibility, which requires for its fulfillment a certain kind of behavior on the part of himself and his fellow-Americans.⁷⁵

We can see here a liberal vision of American futurity, one which extends to immigrants a vision of the American dream grounded in democracy and equality as well as individual responsibility. While Croly himself was critical of the effects of laissez-faire capitalism on liberal democratic practices, it is quite easy to see the potential for this liberal and progressive vision of American futurity to be integrated into the marriage of liberal individualism and free-market thinking many refer to as neoliberalism.⁷⁶

Indeed, Leo Chavez argues that while conservative politicians and pundits racialize immigrants in their rhetoric and policies, the liberal response is to argue for including

⁷⁴ Stephanson, 110.

⁷⁵ Herbert David Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, The John Harvard Library (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 4.

⁷⁶ Claudio Katz has convincingly argued that Croly’s vision of democracy extended beyond the state and into the workplace. Claudio J. Katz, “Syndicalist Liberalism: The Normative Economics of Herbert Croly,” *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 4 (2001): 669–702; my understanding of the term neoliberalism is especially informed by works like: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

immigrants in an American vision of “personal responsibility as the key to individual freedom and economic competitiveness.”⁷⁷ This, for Chavez, does not lead to substantive action or material support to help migrants, especially undocumented workers, expand their rights or forge pathways to legal residence or citizenship. No, what is important about this U.S. American promise is its ability to form the migrant into a neoliberal subject, a subjectivity in which migrants become those “who work on themselves in the name of individual and collective life or health.”⁷⁸ Chavez sees this as a particularly frightening mode of subject formation because migrants can so easily internalize this worldview and even integrate it into their campaigns for inclusion into U.S. American society as they assert “their positive economic contributions to society despite a lack of government support and often vociferous anti-immigrant sentiment.”⁷⁹

We might think of the liberal vision, then, as conceptualizing U.S. American territory as a futurity, one in which migrants, especially undocumented migrants, may contribute but never truly belong. They can be formed by it and even internalize it, but it nevertheless remains a dream deferred, as alien to them as they are to the United States. Perhaps this is why the only immigration policy that has gained any traction among U.S. Democratic politicians in recent decades is called the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, first proposed in 2001. The bill, which has never received a majority in either the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives, proposes to create a process through which undocumented students who arrived before they turned sixteen and reside in the United States for at least five years “would qualify for conditional permanent resident status if they met any of three criteria: (1)

⁷⁷ Chavez, 179.

⁷⁸ Chavez, 180; he is quoting from Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, “Biopower Today,” *BioSocieties* 1, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 195.

⁷⁹ Chavez, 180.

graduated from a two-year college or a vocational college or studied for at least two years toward a bachelor's or higher degree; (2) served in the U.S. armed forces for at least two years; or (3) performed at least 910 hours of volunteer community service.”⁸⁰ Unlike the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) put in place by the Obama administration in 2012, the DREAM Act at least included a path to citizenship. While the unpassed—and unpassable given the current state of the United States Congress—legislation is held up by liberal democrats as the gold standard of immigration reform, its dream of inclusion into U.S. American futurity is, in the words of Adalberto Aguirre, Jr. and Jennifer Simmers, “part of the neoliberal agenda, which seeks to blend immigrant youth into a model that promotes social stability.”⁸¹

The DREAM Act and the American Dream itself are held out for undocumented youth like the unreachable carrot dangled in front of them. J. David Cisneros sees the strategy of imagining the right sort of immigrant according to neoliberal logic exemplified in Barack Obama's immigration messaging. In a 2011 speech given in El Paso, Obama defined his ideal immigrant: “What matters is that you believe in the ideals on which we were founded...In embracing America, you can become American.” Cisneros points out that the rhetoric contrasted with both the Obama administration's actual record on immigration enforcement and Obama's own language around the need for immigration laws, according to which “the presence of 11 million ‘illegal immigrants’ puts American workers at a disadvantage, costs the country ‘billions in tax revenue,’ and ‘makes a mockery of all those who are going through the process of immigrating legally.’”⁸² As I suggested in the previous section, contemporary liberalism's simultaneous

⁸⁰ Ibid., 185-86.

⁸¹ Adalberto Aguirre and Jennifer K. Simmers, “The DREAM Act and Neoliberal Practice: Retrofitting Hispanic Immigrant Youth in U.S. Society,” *Social Justice* 38, no. 3 (125) (2011): 13.

⁸² J. David Cisneros, “A Nation of Immigrants and a Nation of Laws: Race, Multiculturalism,

embrace of multiculturalism, belief in free trade and the free flow of goods across borders, and the implementation of strict immigration policies is not a contradiction in its worldview. For Cisnero this is a rhetorical strategy that makes immigrant “populations visible and legible, subject(ify)ing them to technologies of governance.”⁸³ I agree. I would only add that insofar as citizens and immigrants internalize the neoliberal worldview, they both are subjected to this form of governmentality and also help to reproduce it.

This neoliberal quagmire of an American future purportedly open to those who believe in it and strict immigration enforcement at the border is predicated on a certain temporality and it also produces disparate temporalities that are enacted by borders. Even within the territory of a particular nation-state like the U.S., different temporalities exist between people based on all sorts of markers like citizenship, race, class, gender, and one’s relationship to the criminal punishment system. Monish Bhatia and Victoria Canning point out that for migrants there is no “universal or even culturally specific experience that is inherent to human existence, migrant time is regularly governed by policy, law and legislation, by militarised interference and patrols at national and international borders.”⁸⁴ Time for migrants can be slowed down by waiting for asylum claims, work permits, or other bureaucratic processes; incarcerations can seem to freeze it, and deportations can even set the clock back. Bhatia and Canning argue that this work of borders amounts to “stealing time.” This is not just the theft of days, months, or years from the lives of those who find themselves outside of a particular territorial boundary but also a theft of

and Neoliberal Exception in Barack Obama’s Immigration Discourse,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8, no. 3 (September 2015): 362.

⁸³ Ibid., 371.

⁸⁴ Monish Bhatia and Victoria Canning, eds., “Introduction: Contested Temporalities, Time and State Violence,” in *Stealing Time: Migration, Temporalities and State Violence* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), xvi.

temporal agency (e.g., making plans, imagining a future, creating the next generation): “In short, migrant time is governed and human autonomy thus reduced.”⁸⁵

That these distinct temporalities can operate simultaneously within and across borders demonstrates how the border is not just a static location. Of course, borders may be enacted along a certain path in a specific place or arrangement of places, but the breadth of their effects creates a sense in which borders become ubiquitous. Balibar sees borders appearing “wherever selective controls are to be found.”⁸⁶ In its campaign against undocumented immigrants, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has made border enforcement almost literally omnipresent. This takes place through their transformation of ordinary spaces—schools, workplaces, hospitals, and homes—into potential sites of enforcement. Border Patrol, ICE, and other law enforcement and bureaucratic arms of the state are not the only parties that target border crossers. Insofar as anti-immigration sentiment is produced among a broad population of U.S. Americans, the day-to-day existence of migrants comes to be marked by the border. In the words of the Mexican-American fiction writer and literary critic Helena María Viramontes, “When you’re treated a certain way, no matter where you go, no matter who you are, you’re going to believe that this is the way it has to be. *You carry the border with you*. You don’t have to be near the borderlands to understand that transgression, that violence, in terms of the mind, the heart, and the imagination.”⁸⁷ To carry the border on one’s body and in one’s mind is precisely the work of the border spectacle and the futurity of U.S. territoriality. It is a work that

⁸⁵ Ibid., xvi.

⁸⁶ Balibar, 84.

⁸⁷ Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, Nancy Sullivan, and Helena María Viramontes, “You Carry the Border With You: Conversation with Helena María Viramontes,” in *Conversations With Mexican American Writers: Languages and Literatures in the Borderlands* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 85.

is carried out on everyone, citizen and alien alike.

Before turning to a discussion of how border crossers push back on this temporally enacted vision of territory, it is important to frame why futurity and temporality are crucial for understanding relationships with space, place, and land. I have drawn our attention to the territory and the border enforcement because they represent sites of violence and this territoriality shapes how we relate to the environment. If I might repurpose some language from Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*, the U.S. American territory of futurity enacts "the annihilation of space by time." Marx uses this phrase to describe how capital draws on the developments in transportation and communication technologies in order to expand "beyond every spatial barrier."⁸⁸ David Harvey observes that this so-called "time-space compression" is essential to the operation of capital, especially as it seeks to confront crises of overaccumulation. Harvey describes this practice as "[t]he absorption of surpluses of capital (and sometimes labor) through geographical expansion into new territories and through the construction of a completely new set of space relations and of the global space economy."⁸⁹ I find capitalism's drive to move beyond spatial boundaries—to annihilate space through time—to be paralleled by U.S. American territoriality in two ways.

First, as we have seen in this section, the drive to acquire new territory was envisioned by a thinker like O'Sullivan as vital to the future of the nation. The promise of the Great Nation of Futurity would lose its market valuation if it did not acquire more territory on which to practice its "freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits,

⁸⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 524.

⁸⁹ David Harvey, "Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80, no. 3 (September 1, 1990), 425; Harvey elsewhere refers to this as the "spatial fix." See: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990), 183.

universality of freedom and equality.”⁹⁰ Too much individual freedom without enough territory is what overaccumulation looks like for a growing nation-state.

The second parallel has to do with the notion of American futurity, whether in the guise of Manifest Destiny, *The Promise of American Life*, or the American Dream. If the future is itself a form of capital, then the U.S. has moved beyond the spatial boundaries of its own borders in order to ensure that investment in its future continues to increase in value. This has largely been accomplished through the violent extraction of the material and labor resources of the Global South while broadcasting the value of the American future abroad. The territorial arrangement resulting from these forms of annihilating space through time is, accordingly, the free flow of capital and the militarization of its borders. The American future must always be as expansive in vision as it is exclusionary in practice.

This way of understanding the annihilation of space by time—the concurrent free flows of resources, capital, and commodities and the development of militarized borders—might help us to think about how a conception of history shapes our relations with the land. The Standing Rock Sioux scholar and activist Vine Deloria, Jr., argues that a Christian linear conception of history—extending from creation to eschaton—has deeply hampered the way Christians and their liberal-secular heirs relate to the other-than-human world. In fact, Deloria argues that it is the separation of meaning-making from land that produces a fixation on securing the meaning of history.⁹¹ What is lost is the ability of the land to be a participant in meaning-making; Christianity, as Deloria sees it, is incapable of understanding the interrelationship between events in time and

⁹⁰ O’Sullivan, “Great Nation of Futurity,” 430.

⁹¹ Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 120.

land that results in a “sacred geography.”⁹² But it is not just a lack of capacity to relate to land that Deloria sees in Christianity and its Western cultural and political offspring. There is also an unwillingness.

Conceptions of world history and the sort of U.S. American notion of futurity that we have looked at in this section depend on exceptionalism: the assertion that Western or American civilization represents not *an* option but *the* option for the meaning of history. Deloria asserts that “world history as presently conceived in the Christian nations is the story of the West's conquest of the remainder of the world and the subsequent rise to technological sophistication.”⁹³ The technological sophistication Deloria mentions is not an advancement in technological tools per se; it is the human transcendence of nature, specifically in its ability to control the other-than-human world. This too, for Deloria is a temporal problem. The technological worldview Deloria critiques is one that sees civilizational advancement as predicated on the transcendence and control of nature. So Deloria explains:

A variant of manifest destiny is the propensity to judge a society or civilization by its technology and to see in society's effort to subdue and control nature as the fulfillment of divine intent. This interpretation merely adopts the secular doctrine of cultural evolution and attaches it to theological language. If we factor in the environmental damage created by technology the argument falls flat. In less than two and a half centuries American whites have virtually destroyed a whole continent and large areas of the United States are now almost uninhabitable—even so we seek to “sacrifice” large rural areas to toxic waste dumps. The idea of defining religious reality along temporal lines, therefore, is to adopt the pretense that the earth simply does not matter, that human affairs alone are important.⁹⁴

Now, we might see the catastrophe of the annihilation of space by time in full. Territory as temporality enacts a vision of the world—of humans and other-than-humans—in which the

⁹² Ibid., 121.

⁹³ Ibid., 107.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 68.

future belongs to those who have properly transcended “nature.” Seeing certain peoples as improperly bound to land—having relationships to it characterized by reciprocity rather than control—becomes the justification both for excluding those peoples from the future and for disrupting their relationships with land. These disruptions—resource extraction, removal, territorial seizure, environmental degradation, and genocide—are our history: past, present, and future.

3. Border Crossers Re-Spatializing the Landscape

The futurity produced and reproduced through U.S. territoriality transforms borders—and the concomitant concepts of citizen and “illegal” alien—from historical contingencies to natural categories. The naturalization of U.S. American temporality renders land into territory, a space protected so that certain occupants of it may have a future. While this process attempts to secure a future for those who deem themselves the proper subjects of history and the proper occupiers of territory, it simultaneously produces multiple temporalities. There are those to whom the future is supposed to belong and those who are excluded from it even as they contribute to it through their labor, the material resources of their land, or even through their displacement.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre theorizes how capitalism produces abstract space that “tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities.”⁹⁵ For Lefebvre, this abstract spatiality is not produced simply through emptying specific spaces, say of nature or of cultural tradition, but rather it operates through the negation of “that which perceives and underpins it,” especially “historical and religio-political spheres” and the possibility of difference that it carries within itself, what Lefebvre calls “differential

⁹⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 52.

space-time.”⁹⁶ The process of abstraction fails in its attempt at totalization, and that which exceeds this totalizing represents “the seeds of a new kind of space.”⁹⁷ What is essential about Lefebvre’s concept of abstract space, as the political geographer Japhy Wilson helpfully explains, is that it “both contains and obstructs the possibility of a differential space.”⁹⁸ Abstraction is always trying to flatten particularity and concreteness, and in its failure to do so, it gives rise to the potential for new forms of differentiability.

I see in Lefebvre’s analysis a dialectical lens through which we might understand and move beyond the struggle taking place in U.S. American territoriality. Through its use of space, U.S. territory attempts to impose and ensure the abstraction of American futurity, but in doing so, it also creates difference. Territory enacts futurity for citizens, but it does so through the means of those who do not or cannot belong to the same temporality, namely the alien other. This category, “alien,” is not a given reality but is produced through the spectacle of border enforcement, which, as we have previously seen, takes place through producing a perceived threat through intersecting deployments of rugged landscapes and racialized others. Even as territory’s abstract operation of producing citizens and aliens gains ground, it cannot fully metabolize all the particularities through which it works. Those persons who exceed abstraction are my interest in this section.

To consider those differential lives that exceed the operations of territory, I turn now to works of ethnography, history, and theory that focus on border crossers, especially those undocumented migrants victimized by U.S. Border enforcement strategies like Prevention

⁹⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 52

⁹⁸ Japhy Wilson, “‘The Devastating Conquest of the Lived by the Conceived’: The Concept of Abstract Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre,” *Space and Culture* 16, no. 3 (August 1, 2013): 369.

Through Deterrence. What is crucial about turning our attention to the re-spatializing work of border crossers is that it allows us to see the agency and subjectivity of migrants in ways foreclosed to us through reactionary and neoliberal framings of border enforcement. Rather than seeing them as dehumanized threats or passive victims, border crossers enact differential modes of relating to space and place that must grapple with the implementation of U.S. American territoriality while not allowing border enforcement to fully dictate the terms of their agency, subjectivity, humanity, or relationship to land.

As we saw in the previous section, the border is not a static line but is ubiquitous; it is a performance of enforcement that the migrant is forced to carry with them on their body. Rather than serving as a constraint to migrant agency, the seemingly omnipresent nature of the border might actually provide a site for resistance. In her ethnographic work that follows migrants' journeys across Mexico to the U.S-Mexico border, Wendy Vogt argues that structural analyses of the violence inflicted upon migrants helps us to see both the ways migrants are made objects of exploitation and the "strategies and social relationships" they use "to cope with the precarity of their situations."⁹⁹ Vogt's study theorizes how the militarization of the U.S. Mexico border has transformed Mexico's interior into an "arterial border." Rather than seeing the border as a particular line or buffer zone, an arterial border proliferates across many spaces as it is "performed by officials, politicians, migrants, smugglers, criminals, local residents, and activists constructing, engaging in, evading, and contesting a dynamic mix of everyday practices, material infrastructures, discourses, and encounters."¹⁰⁰ Understanding the border in this way allows Vogt to notice the massive levels of violence that migrants, especially women, suffer throughout their

⁹⁹ Wendy A. Vogt, *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 54-55; emphasis in original.

journeys and she can take seriously the forms of sociality that arise in response. One of Vogt's informants, Doña Alicia, who works at a migrant shelter in Palenque, Mexico near the border with Guatemala, insists that "you cannot understand violence without also understanding hope. They are two sides of the same thing. You have to see what we are doing here."¹⁰¹

Doña Alicia's insistence on seeing violence and hope as bound together is a reminder that migrants are more than victims of border enforcement and other coercive processes that attend borderscapes; she also aims our attention to the creativity of migrants, toward practices of solidarity and care that happen at the local level.¹⁰² It is important to remember that local practices represent strategies for survival and care in the face of "larger structural processes of inequality and violence."¹⁰³ Put another way, modes of care, solidarity, protection, and intimacy that migrants develop through their journeys are not ad hoc responses to systems and structures of violence. They represent forms of sociality that threaten the very existence of the border regime and its concomitant concepts of citizen and "illegal" alien.

Abby C. Wheatley and Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz see these migrant practices as forms of "collective agency" that enable migrants to survive and continue on their journeys while also presenting "a challenge to border enforcement policies designed to impede migration by making crossing deadly."¹⁰⁴ Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz see practices like migrants training one another to use compasses as examples of migrants' efforts to elude border enforcement and as a form of organized resistance to the very state sovereignty that requires border militarization.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 187-88.

¹⁰² Ibid., 188.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁴ Abby C. Wheatley and Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, "Keep Moving: Collective Agency along the Migrant Trail," in *Building Citizenship from Below: Preacity, Migration, and Agency*, ed. Marcel Paret and Shannon Gleeson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 121.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 120, 124.

The state uses strategies like Prevention Through Deterrence to weaponize the border landscape, forming a space of exception through which migrants are made killable. In response, migrants' draw on their collective agency to survive state violence and insist upon their socio-political agency. This agency extends relations of care, concern, and belonging across territorial boundaries that, as I have been arguing, are meant to divide not primarily space but futurities.

Migrant practices of extending care across the border, I want to argue, reject this sort of insider-outsider futurity. Migrant relations of care and belonging extend across militarized borders for many reasons. The reality of the matter is that the border has always been porous and migrants have always maintained relations and connections that transgress territorial boundaries.¹⁰⁶ The historian Ana Raquel Minian points to the continuity of practices like circular migration both before and after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that counter the trope of "Mexican migrants as forever desirous of living permanently in the United States."¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Minian argues that between 1965 and 1986 most migrants from Mexico moved continuously between the United States and their hometowns across the border, following seasonal work and wages available in the United States but unavailable in the towns they came from.¹⁰⁸ This is a significant phenomenon both because it was made difficult or nearly impossible with the militarization of the border and also because "circular migration reconfigured the ways in which many Mexicans organized their everyday lives and relationships.

¹⁰⁶ This is an important point which Mae Ngai develops in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, especially as she attempts to push back on scholarship of globalization which see mobility as a new phenomenon. See: Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), xxii.

¹⁰⁷ Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

Love and intimacy began to take place across the borders. Parental advice was handled via letters. Friendships thrived in an alien society. Translocal attachments and dependencies developed. Remittances allowed people to improve their homes.”¹⁰⁹ Minian observes that these practices of movement and labor required what she calls “*partial belonging* in their local communities on both sides of the border.”¹¹⁰ Migrant improvisations on forms of belonging, says Minian, “redefined the very meaning of ‘family’ and ‘community.’”¹¹¹

Circular migration, however, was not the only practice of cross-border relations. Individual financial remittances became popular modes of connection between migrants and their sending communities, but Minian also points to the development of what she terms an “extraterritorial welfare state” that developed between migrant communities in the United States and their hometowns in Mexico.¹¹² The formation of “*clubes de oriundos*” or hometown associations among migrant communities in the United States, drew on pooled financial resources to support their communities in Mexico.¹¹³ This mutual-aid work between migrants in the U.S. and their home communities is not reducible to philanthropy, but, Minian insists it represents an attempt on the part of migrants “to transform the structural socioeconomic problems they saw as the true roots of Mexico’s difficulties—problems the Mexican government was ignoring.”¹¹⁴ Far from representing individualist, libertarian, or anti-statist views of national identity, Minian argues that these clubs helped migrants see themselves as the bearers of Mexicanness and the true heirs of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., emphasis mine.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹¹² Ibid., 126.

¹¹³ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 136. For a case study that considers the Mexican state’s policies toward its diaspora—including the *clubes de oriundos*—see: María R. García-Acevedo, “The [Re]Construction of Diasporic Policies in Mexico in the Era of Globalization and Democracy: The Case of the Clubes de Oriundos,” *Politics & Policy* 36, no. 6 (2008): 1066–92.

the Mexican revolution even as the state failed to support its own people. This, then, is a peculiar form of national identity because it transcends borders and fills gaps left by the state's abdication of responsibility for its most vulnerable members. Migrants, then, were not breaking ties with their hometowns by leaving, but were instead those who took responsibility for themselves and their neighbors precisely in and through the act of migrating.¹¹⁵

Migrant collective agency does more than just connect sending and receiving communities (i.e., where migrants leave from and where they take up residence). The migrant journey itself is also an important site from which new forms of agency emerge in response to the violences that result from territoriality. Indeed, the border's extension across Mexico and proliferation into U.S. territory mean that the process of the journey is just as important as the leave-taking and arriving. While the ability to reside or belong to a particular place is important for the concept of respatialization that I will develop later in this section, the movement of migrants is equally as vital. As political theorist Sandro Mezzadra points out, "A politics of freedom of movement must take seriously the proliferation of borders beyond territorial demarcations."¹¹⁶ So, what sorts of en route forms of agency do migrants practice?

One stark reality of migration is the fact that not all attempts at border crossing are successful. Ethnographers like Jason de León point out that migrants attempting to traverse the U.S.-Mexico border often experience multiple unsuccessful attempts, either because they are physically unable to complete the journey or because they are apprehended by border enforcement.¹¹⁷ But failure itself does not necessarily stifle migrant agency or practices of care.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 138-141.

¹¹⁶ Sandro Mezzadra, "Abolitionist Vistas of the Human. Border Struggles, Migration and Freedom of Movement," *Citizenship Studies* 24, no. 4 (May 18, 2020): 14.

¹¹⁷ De León actually includes a section of his ethnography devoted to how his informants handle failed attempts. *The Land of Open Graves*, 163-164.

One of Vogt's informants, who she calls Mayra, was severely maimed by *La Bestia*, the train many migrants surreptitiously ride from its origins near the Mexico-Guatemala border as they journey north. Mayra's left leg had to be amputated below the knee, making her migration north impossible until she is able to obtain a prosthesis. In the meantime, Mayra was connected with a shelter where she worked in the kitchen helping to prepare meals for other migrants who stay at the refuge as part of their journey. Mayra reports to Vogt, "I was on the verge of losing my life, but *gracias a Dios*, that did not happen. I believe things happen for a reason, and for me, even with all I have suffered, my purpose now is to help others."¹¹⁸

Repeated failures can also lead to new spiritualities of cross-border care. In her ethnography of migrant religious and spiritual practices, Jacqueline Maria Hagan records the story of Rocío from Guanajuato, whose experience of getting lost in the desert for four days and multiple failed attempts to enter the U.S. caused her to return to her faith and join "the Guadalupanas (Society of Guadalupe)." Through this society she works and prays "for those who have less than me and those who are coming to the United States."¹¹⁹ In this case, Rocío's struggles to cross the border led her to a return to religious devotion with an emphasis on practices of spiritual and material solidarity with migrants.¹²⁰ The cases of Mayra and Rocío certainly do not suggest that *all*

¹¹⁸ Vogt, 106.

¹¹⁹ Jacqueline Maria Hagan, *Migration Miracle: Faith, Hope, and the Undocumented Journey* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 137.

¹²⁰ The connection between Guadalupean devotion and care for migrants is well-established. In his study of Guadalupean theologies, Timothy Matovina notes that John Paul II specifically "charged Guadalupe devotees to show preferential concern for marginal persons in the same way Guadalupe takes such persons under her maternal care: young people, children, the unborn, the poor, the indigenous, peoples of African heritage, workers, immigrants, refugees and the elderly." See: Timothy Matovina, *Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Era of Conquest to Pope Francis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Along these lines, Nichole Flores has also shown how in New York, "Guadalupanos show how their devotion to Guadalupe inspires their work for immigration justice. Their aesthetic practices—from daily devotions to feast day processions to the international Guadalupe torch run—show their community as simultaneously

sufferings experienced by migrants are necessarily transformed into practices of solidarity and care. My point in highlighting their cases is to show that experiences of personal and structural violence experienced by migrants need not lead to alienation and isolation. Violence can turn us against others—and even against ourselves—but it can also make us more keenly aware of our shared vulnerability and cause us to mitigate further harm.

One especially sensitive form of collective agency arises in response to the gender-based violence that is pervasive throughout the migrant trail.¹²¹ The vulnerability of women and LGBTQ+ migrants is often highlighted in border scholarship, but Vogt worries that this “sensationalized discourse around violence against women” effectually normalizes the violence: “Women being raped was the status quo.”¹²² Vogt insists that rather than continuing “to reproduce statistics and spectacles of violence,” border scholars need to “focus on deeper, more critical analyses of the underlying conditions that produce gendered violence.”¹²³ This, for Vogt, allows us to see systems and structures that undergird such violence. For example, Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz point out how the “U.S. Border Patrol ‘repatriate’ women alone through Nogales, Sonora, while holding their male family members in detention or repatriating them laterally through the Texas-Chihuahua or California-Baja borders.”¹²⁴ Whether or not this

prayerful and political in nature.” Nichole M. Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 144.

¹²¹ For consideration of these forms of violence see: Maria Cristina Morales and Cynthia Bejarano, “Transnational Sexual and Gendered Violence: An Application of Border Sexual Conquest at a Mexico—US Border,” *Global Networks* 9, no. 3 (2009): 420–39; Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Theologizing in an Insurgent Key: Violence, Women, Salvation*, Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2022); Melissa W. Wright, “Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 3 (March 2011): 707–31;

¹²² Vogt, 17.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²⁴ Wheatley and Romberg, 127.

represents a purposeful strategy on behalf of the state, the effect is to isolate women caught attempting to cross the border, thus rendering them especially vulnerable to violence. Analyzing the underlying structures opens up the possibility of seeing how women and LGBTQ+ migrants resist both individual instantiations of gender and sexuality-based violences and also create their own forms of collective agency arrayed against the structures that render them vulnerable.

Vogt highlights the practice of migrants forming “protective pairings” as a mode of resisting gender and sexuality based violence. She writes,

In such scenarios, male and female migrants simulate kin relations, generally spousal relations, as a migration tactic. Male migrants exchange security and protection for female carework such as procuring food, washing clothes, tending wounds, and in some cases, sexual acts. Both partners perform intimate labors in processes of exchange and reciprocity that go beyond the realm of straightforward financial transactions. In this way, such intimate labor, even that involving sex, differs significantly from traditional constructions of sex work, smuggling, or exploitation.¹²⁵

We should clearly not romanticize or idealize these forms of sociality and collective agency. The reason I think these practices warrant our attention is precisely because they turn a structural vulnerability into a strategy for survival in ways that destabilize our conceptions of labor, mobility, and—perhaps most significantly—family. Anti-immigrant discourses around so-called “anchor babies” and unaccompanied minors reveal that certain patterns of migrant kinship and familial relations are perceived as threats to U.S. American understandings of citizenship and the nuclear family.¹²⁶ But migrant practices of pairing, kinship, intimacy, care, and childrearing *are*

¹²⁵ Vogt, 137.

¹²⁶ Priscilla Huang helpfully describes how the rhetoric of the demographic threat posed by U.S. born children of undocumented immigrants or the supposed high child birth rates of immigrants is linked to anxieties around environmental crises and the scarcity of natural resources. See: Priscilla Huang, “Anchor Babies, Over-Breeders, and the Population Bomb: The Reemergence of Nativism and Population Control in Anti-Immigration Policies,” *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 2, no. 2 (2008): 385–406.

threats to hegemonic understandings of our social and familial relations, just not in the ways that U.S. American reactionaries or neoliberals imagine them to be.

If territory enacts a vision of futurity, and the border dictates who or who does not belong to that future, then the question of “For whom should I care?” is central and the answer to this question is often channelled through bio-genetic pathways. Indeed, biological reproduction, as Lee Edelman observes, is a concern that is used to continually constrain and police possibilities for relationality: “We encounter this image [of the ‘innocent’ child] on every side as the lives, the speech, and the freedoms of adults face constant threat of legal curtailment out of deference to the imaginary Children whose futures...are construed as endangered by the social disease as which queer sexualities register.”¹²⁷ I want to be careful not to conflate queer sexualities with forms of kinship, intimacy, and care practiced by migrants (though there certainly is overlap), but what I want to suggest is that the threat posed to the nation-state is taken to be of a similar kind precisely because it has to do with who does or does not belong to the future. Edelman’s queer antipathy toward the future should not be reduced to pessimism but rather represents the realist assessment of “the societal lie that endlessly looks toward a future whose promise is always a day away.”¹²⁸ Insofar as migrants move toward a futurity whose borders are demarcated by something called “the American Dream” or “Manifest Destiny,” prospects are no less dismal.

The practices of care, solidarity, and relationality that take place both during and after the border-crossing journeys that I have considered above deserve our attention precisely in the ways

¹²⁷ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 19. For a booklength discussion of how borders enforcement and migration structures police sexuality, see: Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹²⁸ Lee Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive,” *Narrative* 6, no. 1 (1998): 29.

they respond to and move beyond the futurity enacted by U.S. territoriality. I think of these practices as forms of respatialization, or perhaps we might say, to once again riff on the language of Marx that I drew from earlier, the recovery of space from time. This recovery or reconstruction of spatiality takes place as border-crossers refuse the terms established through the existence and enforcement of borders. Refusal, however, is more than just ignorance of or noncompliance with territoriality. Migrants who seek to cross borders are those people who understand, negotiate, and acknowledge the reality of borders most acutely even while they seek to avoid, subvert, or find ways of moving beyond them.

I see migrant practices of collective agency such as circular migration, remittances, hometown associations, transforming failure into solidarity, and reconfigurations of care-relations such as “protective pairings” as respatializations because they respond to and undermine U.S. territoriality. They emphasize the continuity of space across boundaries in a manner that refuses the demarcating futurity of the United States that dictates who does or does not belong, who is or is not owed our care, and who does or does not have a future *here*. Further, they represent what Lefebvre refers to as “differential space-time” or “the seeds of a new kind of space” because they are not ideal or utopic practices, but are particular forms of life which the abstracting processes of territoriality are unable to flatten. Perhaps somewhat ironically, it is border crossers—those who have unmoored themselves from the purportedly spatial concepts of citizen, alien, and territoriality—who have retained the ability to navigate spatially even in the face of a U.S. American futurity that is foreclosed to them.

Here I see a family resemblance between the respatializing practices of border crossers and

Chela Sandoval's study of the "postmodern resistance" of "U.S. third world feminism."¹²⁹ Sandoval builds on Fredric Jameson's account of the conditions of postmodernity in which denizens of the first world have "become immobilized by 'spatial as well as social confusion.'"¹³⁰ Postmodernity makes navigation of the socio-political and cultural landscape difficult, if not impossible, because "the formerly centered and legitimated bourgeois citizen-subject of the first world (once anchored in a secure haven of self) is set adrift under the imperatives of late-capitalist cultural conditions." The first world postmodern subject becomes "incapable of mapping their relative positions inside multinational capitalism, lost in the reverberating endings of colonial expansion." What Sandoval finds so useful about Jameson's spatial logic of postmodernism, is that it locates the first world citizen-subject as entering "the kind of psychic terrain formerly inhabited by the historically decentered citizen-subject: the colonized, the outsider, the queer, the subaltern, the marginalized."¹³¹ In other words, the positionality of becoming lost in space is not a new one, it is only novel for the first world subject to find themselves there.

Sandoval then turns to the U.S. third world feminism movement as "a model for oppositional political activity and consciousness in the postmodern world."¹³² Colonized subjects—especially insofar as their marginalizations represent intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality—have already been subjected to spatial disorientations and

¹²⁹ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 42.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 27; here Sandoval is quoting Jameson. I find the sentence following the quote instructive: "The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as spatial scale." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 54.

¹³¹ Ibid., 27.

¹³² Ibid. 43.

immobilizations. Nevertheless, they must develop practices and strategies for way-finding. Sandoval sees these innovations embodied in the thought of thinkers like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa. It is specifically Anzaldúa's "new mestizaje" that interests Sandoval because of her ability to navigate cultures that refuse her a place. Or more precisely, Anzaldúa makes an improvisational move through which she is able to make a space for herself. For Anzaldúa, "The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in their universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, El Mundo Zurdo. I belong to myself and not to any one people."¹³³ Sandoval sees this as an enactment of oppositional consciousness that is not so much about self-authorship as it is about recognizing how the third world feminist subject is not and cannot be reduced to any one socio-cultural or political identity without remainder. I find this immensely useful in thinking about migrant border-crossing practices insofar as migrants claim a form a relationality and belonging that is not confinable to the boundaries laid out through U.S. territoriality. But this does not mean ceding one's positionality or mobility to placelessness.

Anzaldúa describes the writings of feminists of color collected in *Making Face, Making Souls/Hacienda Caras* using spatial metaphors: "These pieces are not only *about* survival strategies, they *are* survival strategies—maps, blueprints, guidebooks that we need to exchange in order to feel sane, in order to make sense of our lives."¹³⁴ The challenge of feeling sane or making sense of one's life is an existential problem that is socially and politically produced. For

¹³³ Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th edition (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 209.

¹³⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), xviii; emphasis in original.

Anzaldúa the interstitial nature of life in the borderlands is marked by a feeling of stuckness: “Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.”¹³⁵ But this does not necessarily result in a refusal to locate oneself or an abnegation of one’s relationship with the land. Quite the opposite. For Anzaldúa, what is required is “responsibility.” But this responsibility is not dictated by the terms of dominant cultures. How could it be? Those are the socialities and politics that produce the inability to navigate through their flattening of the landscape in the first place.

For Anzaldúa, responding to life in the borderlands requires navigating between one’s individuality and the socio-political resources that provide maps, blueprints, and guidebooks for spatial existence. She writes, “My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance.”¹³⁶ But this is not just a strategy of recovery or *resourcement* but of learning from and improvising on the multiple identities and histories that form the self. For Anzaldua this means not identifying fully with “*mexicanismo*,” especially given the problematic ideals of gender and sexual relations embedded within her community. Instead she has to perform an act of separation: “To separate myself from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back.”¹³⁷

While this strategy might seem individualistic, Anzaldúa’s later writings make clear that neither the new mestiza nor her use of the term *Nepantla* (i.e., in-betweenness or middleness) are

¹³⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 20.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

forms of either individualism or self-authorship.¹³⁸ In a posthumously published piece, “Geographies of the Self—Reimagining Identity,” Anzaldúa moves away from more reductive accounts of the self to “a more expansive identity interconnected with its surroundings.” Thinking with something like a rhizomatic metaphor, she writes “I see in my mind’s eye trees with interconnected roots (subterranean webs).”¹³⁹ Anzaldúa draws on biological and ecological analogies to insist that “we are responsible participants in the ecosystems (complete set of interrelationships between a network of living organisms and their physical habitats) in whose web we’re individual strands.”¹⁴⁰ This dynamic and relational account of the self is not without its struggles. Indeed, your ability to see and experience the self as relationally produced is contingent upon coming to terms with the wounds and traumas that have formed the self—especially as those are the result from racist, sexist, homophobic, or nationalist forms of identity that wound precisely because they divide *us* from *them*. Letting go of identities—even or especially harmful ones—is a process: “If you name, acknowledge, mourn, and grieve your losses and violations instead of trying to retain what you’ve lost through a nostalgic attempt at preservation, you learn not just to survive but to imbue that survival with new meaning.”¹⁴¹

Anzaldúa’s geography of the self, then, offers a theoretical account—itsself shaped by experiences of the borderlands—of what I have called the respatialization performed by border crossers. That is not to suggest that border crossers are necessarily informed by this theory or are

¹³⁸ Anzaldúa describes “nepantilism” as “an Aztec word meaning torn between ways.” Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 78.

¹³⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). 66.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 67. Being shaped by one’s relationships does not, for Anzaldúa, rest on any sort of nature-culture divide. Indeed writes, “How do we survive these wounds and struggles? The path of knowledge requires that we apply what we learn to all our daily activities, to our relationships with ourselves, with others, with the environment, with nature.” *Light in the Dark*, 91.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

migrating for purposes that align with Anzaldua's account of agency, subjectivity, or politics. Yet, I would insist that border crossers' refusals of territoriality participate in precisely this sort of survival and healing work that Anzaldúa describes. Border crossers can show us a "nepantla perspective" or "a view from the cracks."¹⁴² The cracks, for Anzaldúa, "show the flaws in our culture, the faults in our pictures of reality."¹⁴³ I want to suggest that border crossers offer us a view from the cracks: cracks between national borders, which as I have been arguing amount to views of time and space. But coming to grips with *what* the cracks reveal to us is no simple matter. To that difficulty we turn in the next section.

4. An Apocalyptic Eschatology of Space

when the earth split in two
i was i, you were you
i run for you, run for me, too
when the wall rose and fell
and the oceans all swell
i run for you, run for me, too
- St. Vincent, "Fear the Future"

U.S. territoriality is about a future, one in which citizens can find hope amidst the anxieties of our contemporary globalized world. But territory and borders do not seem to be producing hopefulness or optimism, quite the opposite; the spectacle of the border primarily produces fear. In this final section, I want to consider how futurity and fear intermingle to produce a territorial eschatological imagination.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, reactionary and neoliberal modes of addressing

¹⁴² Ibid., 82. Anzaldúa gets the image of the cracks from the Leonard Cohen song "Anthem" which contains the refrain, "There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in." *Light in the Dark*, 84.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 84.

the border use different rhetorics but they both agree that the border is in “crisis.” This crisis is being seen as significant for voting decisions. A November 2023 NBC News Poll shows immigration ranked only behind democracy and abortion as voters’ top issues and a September 2023 poll shows that “the GOP now holds an 18-point lead when it comes to handling immigration.”¹⁴⁴ This suggests to me that the border spectacle is functioning to reproduce the crisis, a crisis that if the framing used by the media coverage and political leadership of both parties is to be believed, is most negatively impacting U.S. citizens. I suggested in the first section of this chapter that one function of the spectacle is to draw attention away from the true crisis: the instability of our territorial boundaries and of the conceptions of citizen and alien that they produce and protect. But just because our attention is diverted elsewhere, namely to the border, does not mean that we are able to deal with or ameliorate the uncertainty that undermines our lives as citizens in a world of global capitalism and militarized borders. Some thinkers point to the return of the repressed in their theorizations of borders and anti-immigration psyches.¹⁴⁵ In no small part because I am a theologian and not a Freudian, I see this as the return of a repressed eschatology: U.S. American territorial futurity.

In his study of U.S. American eschatologies, Michael Northcott insists that “American Apocalyptic lives off fear: fear of the outsider, fear of the slave who became a citizen, fear of communists, fear of corporations and military, fear of aliens, fear of criminals, fear of the federal

¹⁴⁴ Peter Nicholas, Mike Memoli, and Julia Ainsley, “No Good Answers for Biden as Voters Recoil over Border Crossings,” *NBC News*, December 2, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/joe-biden/biden-immigration-border-plan-voters-senate-negotiations-rcna125151>.

¹⁴⁵ For example see chapter 4, “Desiring Walls,” in Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Nasia Anam makes a similar move in “The Migrant as Colonist,” 656.

government.”¹⁴⁶ Northcott sees the roots of this fear factory as residing within an “American Apocalypse,” one which views the spread of white, Protestant, American liberalism and individualism as taking on the role of “the New Israel” endowed with redemptive purpose.¹⁴⁷ The United States is an apocalypse precisely because, as we saw with O’Sullivan’s “Great Nation of Futurity,” it fashions itself as a break with the past, an end of the world and history as it has been previously known. Northcott’s text, published in 2004 during the unfolding War on Terror and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, attempts to provide an apocalyptic (i.e., unveiling) reading of the United States. What appears is not so much Jefferson’s “empire of liberty,” but global, militarized, capitalist empire: “The State’s only truly legitimate role in Neo-liberal perspective is to prevent criminal activity and promote ‘security,’ and especially to protect property and the wealth of private citizens or American corporations, whether at home or abroad.”¹⁴⁸ Northcott’s attention, quite rightly for 2004, turns to the fear produced by the “War on Terror” and by anxieties created by phenomena like Wahhabism that play into old tropes of the Christian West versus the Islamic East.

In her study of contemporary novels about mass migration, Nasia Anam argues that the “War on Terror” and the so-called “migrant crisis” being experienced and discussed in Western Europe, North America, and Australia are bound to a longer history of European fears of Islamic hegemony.¹⁴⁹ What Anam finds particularly notable in contemporary discourses and novelizations about migration, is the idea of Middle Eastern, African, or South Asian migrants

¹⁴⁶ Michael S. Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 10.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹⁴⁹ Nasia Anam, “The Migrant as Colonist: Dystopia and Apocalypse in the Literature of Mass Migration,” *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 3 (2018): 656.

performing a reverse colonization on the metropole. She sees the framework of the migrant-as-colonizer producing an apocalyptic imaginary. She notes that in the context of Francophone novels like Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* or Boulem Sansal's *2084. La fin du monde*, the concerns around migration do not yield discussions of typical migratory themes: "Nowhere do issues of integration, citizenship, identity, hybridity, or multiculturalism arise." Anam argues that this is because these themes are central questions of national belonging, but in these novelizations of migrant takeovers of Europe "the entire concept of the modern nation-state is presumed to have failed."¹⁵⁰ Anam argues that seeing a Islamized Europe is particularly troubling to the French conception of *laïcité* (secularism) that is integral to their understanding of the nation-state, but is also a product of what she refers to as "a baseline presumption of European (racial and civilizational) superiority."¹⁵¹

A similar motif, of apocalyptic civilizational struggle, takes place in immigration discourse on the other side of the Atlantic. Headlines read: "Migrant crisis is apocalypse now — and only worsening — but Illinois leadership ignores the only solution. Why?"¹⁵² and "Apocalyptic Scenes Abound in Darien Gap as Migrants Smash Record in Race to the US Border."¹⁵³ These two examples, one focussing on Illinois and the other on the region at the border of Panama and Colombia, show just how ubiquitous the "border" and migrant crisis has become in the U.S.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 670.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 658.

¹⁵² Mark Glennon, "Migrant Crisis Is Apocalypse Now – and Worsening – but Illinois Leadership Ignores the Only Solution. Why? – Wirepoints | Wirepoints," *WirePoints* (blog), September 11, 2023, <https://wirepoints.org/migrant-crisis-is-apocalypse-now-and-worsening-but-illinois-leadership-ignores-the-only-solution-wirepoints/>.

¹⁵³ Chuck Holton, "Apocalyptic Scenes Abound in Darien Gap as Migrants Smash Record in Race to US Border," *CBN* (blog), September 21, 2023, <https://www2.cbn.com/news/us/apocalyptic-scenes-abound-darien-gap-migrants-smash-record-race-us-border>.

American zeitgeist. Not confined to the desert borderlands between the United States and Mexico, the crisis has become virtually omnipresent, with its battlegrounds taking place in New York City¹⁵⁴ and Chicago¹⁵⁵ and the other four cities that Texas Governor Greg Abbott sent the 75,500 migrants he has bussed out of his state since April of 2022.¹⁵⁶ As I write this, Donald Trump, in his 2024 campaign, has ramped up his anti-immigration rhetoric by insisting that the “15, 16 million” undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are “poisoning the blood of our country.”¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the Biden administration has expressed a willingness to compromise with Republicans on immigration measures—specifically indicating “that it would support a new, far-reaching authority to allow U.S. border officials to summarily expel migrants without processing their asylum claims” and reviving “the Trump-era Title 42 pandemic order and allow officials to pause U.S. asylum law, without a public health justification”—in trade for funding aid for the Ukraine.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Hurubie Meko, “What to Know About the Migrant Crisis in New York City,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2023, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/nyc-migrant-crisis-explained.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Nell Salzman, “What to Know about Chicago’s Migrant Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/immigration/ct-what-to-know-migrant-crisis-20231026-hhhvu5hcvnfdlc7twe3mnw2aza-story.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Natasha Korecki, “How Texas Gov. Greg Abbott Divided Democrats on Immigration with Migrant Busing,” *NBC News*, December 17, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/texas-gov-greg-abbott-divided-democrats-immigration-migrant-busing-rcna128815>; “Operation Lone Star Engineers Install New Strategic Border Barrier,” Office of the Texas Governor, December 8, 2023, <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/operation-lone-star-engineers-install-new-strategic-border-barrier>.

¹⁵⁷ Ginger Gibson, “Trump Says Immigrants Are ‘Poisoning the Blood of Our Country.’ Biden Campaign Likens Comments to Hitler,” *NBC News*, December 17, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-says-immigrants-are-poisoning-blood-country-biden-campaign-liken-rcna130141>.

¹⁵⁸ Camilo Montoya-Galvez, “White House Open to New Border Expulsion Law, Mandatory Detention and Increased Deportations in Talks with Congress - CBS News,” *CBS News*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/immigration-white-house-congress-border-security-detention-deportation/>.

Reactionaries—politicians, pundits, and private citizens—indulge in “clash of civilization”¹⁵⁹ narratives that draw on conspiracy theories like the “Great Replacement” that have offered ideological fuel for violence witnessed in the 2019 El Paso shooting.¹⁶⁰ Neoliberal responses to the border, depict no less significant a crisis, but use border enforcement as a bargaining chip they can deploy whenever they need to demonstrate that Democrats are tough on crime and national security. Regardless of which political party takes up the issue of migration and the U.S.-Mexico border, U.S. American futurity is supposed to be at stake. Border crossers either imperil the nation or America is a nation of immigrants that nevertheless must ratchet up border enforcement: “People come to America for a whole lot of different reasons... They chase their own American Dream in the greatest nation in the world.”¹⁶¹ With Northcott and Anam, I see U.S. territorial futurity as operating apocalyptically. American exceptionalism functions as an “end of history,” even while “threats” from outside its territory represent an apocalypse that must be staved off through increasing border security.

Whereas Anam hopes we can “escape the desire to view contemporary mass migration through the lens of apocalyptic narrative,”¹⁶² I am more inclined to follow Northcott in his desire to turn the tools of Christian apocalyptic against the American apocalypse that “becomes an ideology that masks the truth of imperial oppression both at home and abroad.”¹⁶³ As I have been

¹⁵⁹ For a helpful account of Samuel P. Huntington’s original “clash of civilizations” thesis and its contemporary enduring relevance, see: Jeffrey Haynes, *From Huntington to Trump: Thirty Years of the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Lexington Books, 2021).

¹⁶⁰ Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 79-80.

¹⁶¹ “Remarks by President Biden on Border Security and Enforcement,” The White House, January 5, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/01/05/remarks-by-president-biden-on-border-security-and-enforcement/>.

¹⁶² Anam, 675.

¹⁶³ Northcott, 75.

suggesting throughout this chapter, the spectacle of border enforcement is meant to cover up or divert attention away from the instability in our ways of conceiving of and living with territory, citizenship, and “illegal” aliens. Our individual and collective relationships with territory are made increasingly untenable as globalization’s free flow of goods and capital is combined with hypermobility for certain classes and militarized borders for others.¹⁶⁴ I am not convinced, however, that simply the recovery of a properly Christian apocalyptic theology, pace Northcott, will be adequate for addressing and undermining U.S. territorial futurity. While territorial concepts such as Manifest Destiny have drawn on Christian theological resources to fund their conceptions of futurity, it is not clear to me that attempts to purge Christian theology of its obéissance to the modern nation-state or globalization offer practicable ways forward for those peoples whose lives and places have been so upended by the very forces they are supposed to reject on Christian grounds.¹⁶⁵

So, rather than attempt a Christian theological correction to the eschatology on offer from U.S. American futurity, I want to take seriously why border crossers pose such an apocalyptic threat to territoriality. I will use the conceptual resources of Christian apocalyptic theology to think about these questions: What do border crossers *reveal* about territory and futurity? And

¹⁶⁴ I first encountered the use of the term “hypermobile” in Eve Bantman-Masum, “Lifestyle Transmigration: Understanding a Hypermobile Minority in Mérida, Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 14, no. 1 (2015): 101–17.

¹⁶⁵ Here I think of a project like William Cavanaugh’s *Theopolitical Imagination* in its rejection of the soteriology of the nation-state and of the catholicity of globalization. I agree that these false theologies should be rejected, but I am less convinced that properly (radically?) orthodox theologies offer true alternatives. Put another way, I do not think that having the right theology in place is sufficient for resisting the two most influential forces that shape our quotidian existence—the nation-state and global capital—especially since many of those most involved in the functioning of these forces use the conceptual resources of Christian theology as justifications for why the state and capital not only should but must exist. William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003).

what forms of relating to space—especially the borderlands—might border crossers *unveil*, if we only had the eyes to see?

In section three of this chapter, I argued that border crossers respatialize landscapes bifurcated by borders. Rather than accepting one future for the U.S. and one for Mexico (or more accurately, one future for the U.S. and one for the rest of the world) dictated by a ubiquitous border, border crossers bind the landscape back together through practices of care, intimacy, and solidarity. To get clear on the promise of these practices, we might think apophatically. Respatialization is *not* a return to an origin; it is *not* a recovery of a deeper meaning of national identity. Nor does border crossing offer a clean break with history, with culture, or with ties that bind people together across borders. The move of rupture—and associations with uniqueness, exceptionalism, and novelty—is part of the U.S. American eschatology. But this sort of supersessionism need not be part of apocalyptic thinking or acting.

Daniel Colucciello Barber describes a Christian apocalyptic that can reject the logic of rupture: “Against the irruption of transcendence, it must be affirmed that the world opposed by Christian declaration is not the being of the world, but the forms of identity that happen to govern the world.”¹⁶⁶ But even this opposition to hegemonic forms of identity—for example, citizenship in a nation-state—does not congeal into a new static form of identity, say into some static identity called Christian. No, for Barber, if Christianity “poses a problem for the given forms of the world, it can only do so insofar as it problematizes its own form. Consequently, as soon as it undergoes a process of auto-sedimentation, whereby it gives itself a stable—which is

¹⁶⁶ Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 42.

to say unproblematic—form of identity, it ceases to pose a problem to the given world.”¹⁶⁷

Barber’s account of apocalyptic theology gives us a way to think about the dynamism of border crossing and the mobile practices of identity formation we see in theorists like Sandoval and Anzaldúa. On the one hand, carrying the border with you wherever you go, to draw on Helena María Viramontes’ language, is to suffer violence precisely because it is a restriction, and therefore impairs one’s ability to make connections between peoples and places. On the other hand, to follow Anzaldúa’s other-than-human form of identity making—“I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back”¹⁶⁸—offers an “intrinsically discontinuous”¹⁶⁹ account of identity formation that might resist how borders are used to naturalize the existence and meaning of the systems and structures they produce and police.

The apocalypse which border crossers represent, then, might be understood as revealing the indeterminacy or contingency of political and economic arrangements that depend upon being seen as natural, continuous, and unassailable. This apocalyptic task resonates with Ernst Käsemann’s insistence that “It is not enough to demythologize texts with Bultmann. Before doing such, the world and human beings need to be demythologized, in say, their self-mastery, their ideology, and the religious superstition to which they have surrendered.”¹⁷⁰ This

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 21.

¹⁶⁹ Barber calls for Christianity to see itself as “intrinsically discontinuous” because “It is the very character of Christianity, the content of its declaration, that is discontinuous; discontinuity emerges not as the interval between Christianity and its others, but rather as an intrinsically Christian task. This means that, for Christianity, discontinuity and integrity are not opposed, nor are they deployed in separate modalities—as is the case when discontinuity between Christianity and its others derives from Christianity’s desire to preserve its integrity against the threat posed by these others. Affirmation of declaration means affirmation of an existence that is discontinuous without reserve.” Barber, *On Diaspora*, 42.

¹⁷⁰ Ernst Käsemann, *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene: Unpublished Lectures and Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010), xiii.

demythologizing is not primarily about making the cosmology¹⁷¹ of New Testament Christianity legible to a scientific world, but rather focusses on uncovering the entrenched institutions and systems whose inevitability and fixedness appear god-like to us. Indeed, Käsemann sees these powers as taking aim against the very possibility of apocalypse: “For this reason an apocalyptic that actually conjures up such visions is branded by protectors of public order as a frivolous and dangerous alarmist tactic. The argument reads that where anxieties are aroused, economic growth, political serenity, and the citizen’s mental balance are disturbed.”¹⁷² For Käsemann, apocalyptic pronouncements only feel anxiety producing insofar as one is invested in the status quo. A properly Christian apocalyptic, rather, “is a theology of liberation and salvation, not of anxiety.”¹⁷³ As ever, your relationship to power will transform how you interpret the signs: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18 NRSV).

It is precisely how one’s perspective can be sublimated into acceptance of the necessity of borders that requires demythologization. Or put another way, that border crossers represent a threat to *me* as citizen is the product of a mythology of the self as citizen and of national borders as given and natural. The problem is that one cannot just theologize one’s way out of this confusion. As Käsemann puts it, “It is not theology, not even the best, but rather discipleship that makes clear what faith and superstition are.”¹⁷⁴ Discipleship, for him, entails “living from and

¹⁷¹ This is the task Rudolf Bultmann sets out for himself in a text like, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Myth*, ed. Robert A. Segal, vol. 3 (New York: Routledge, 1996), 29–72.

¹⁷² Käsemann, *On Being a Disciple*, 4.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷⁴ Ernst Käsemann, *Church Conflicts: The Cross, Apocalyptic, and Political Resistance*, ed. Ry O. Siggelkow (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 78.

under the cross.”¹⁷⁵ But far from seeing the cross as a symbol that upholds submission and self-denial in the face of earthly authorities, for Käsemann the cross is liberatory: “nothing is more necessary today than finally to live and learn that freedom is the most important fruit of the cross and its most convincing expression... The fact that the disciple becomes willing and able to carry the cross after Jesus on earth marks the disciple as a witness to the risen Lord, who even now gives the disciple a share in his royal freedom and in the life of the future world.”¹⁷⁶ This is also a form of destabilizing the self—“Disciples become free over against themselves”—such that we can be freed from the anxiety of needing to be in full control but “can turn all our power toward becoming truly human and guardians of all that is human.”¹⁷⁷ Apocalyptic discipleship, then, does not transform the human into something higher—say in our individual or national identity—but returns humanity from its god-like aspirations back to its ordinary creatureliness. But does Käsemann’s account of apocalyptic theology, with its insistence on the in-breaking of God’s future into our present, necessarily draw us into an overemphasis on time at the expense of space? How might we think apocalyptically about border crossers recovering space from time?

Barber puts the question like this: “How... does one inhabit space if one’s inhabitation takes its cues from apocalyptic?”¹⁷⁸ This requires Barber to tackle the concept of territory head-on. He writes, “Translated into terms of space, the rejection of identitarian forms means the repudiation of invariant territories, while the construction of differential forms means the composition of deterritorialized relations.”¹⁷⁹ For Barber, this means that a Christian apocalyptic

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Barber, 50.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 53.

of spatiality must always be diasporic: "...there is no integrated discourse to be served; integrity resides not prior to but within diasporic disintegration (or within the differential forms produced in diaspora)."¹⁸⁰ What Barber suggests about apocalyptic's temporal insistence on discontinuity goes for diaspora's practice of deterritorialization; where apocalyptic refuses the assertion that there is only one possible future, diaspora insists upon the multiplicity, yet continuity, of spaces. Opening the space of diaspora, for Barber, should lead us into practices he calls "fabulation." These practices are about constructing meanings out of space and time, but not in the way we saw with the annihilation of space by time. Instead, "Fabulation, like history-telling, seeks to compose consistencies out of the contingent; unlike history-telling, it does not recognize what it produces as a necessity. This is to say that fabulation understands itself as stemming from the very contingent potential that history-telling, in its production of necessity, forecloses."¹⁸¹

I do not think it is a stretch, then, to call border crossers' practices or Anzaldúa's geographically-formed self, fabulations. These realities must learn from history without letting it become deterministic. They must grapple with the existence of borders without giving them undue deference or ontological weight. They must constantly deal with difference, but not in order to eliminate it or sublimate it, but to figure out how to go on living in a world formed by it. In Barber's words, "To diasporically compose differential forms, then, is to fabulate relations. These relations do not correspond to already established meanings, for they are new, but this not to say that they come from nothing."¹⁸² What is not clear, at least from Barber's diasporic apocalyptic, is how eschatology can become spatially significant for the other-than-human landscape. I see this question as vital because the political technologies of territory and

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 131-32.

¹⁸² Ibid., 132.

militarized borders are being deployed in response to the climate crisis and especially because border regimes weaponize environments like the U.S.-Mexico border or the Mediterranean Sea to hurt and kill border crossers. What eschatological hope might diasporic apocalyptic practice hold for the landscapes that have been conscripted into these forces of death?

This question is at the heart of Vítor Westhelle's writings on the spatial significance of eschatology. Westhelle's work as a theologian and pastor working with the Ecumenical Pastoral Land Commission in Brazil led him to the realization that "the struggle for land is not only a particular struggle for social transformation...but for the liberation of space in terms of places where one belongs."¹⁸³ But Westhelle's notion of belonging to a place itself calls for an apocalyptic understanding of space. Westhelle develops what he calls—building on Lefebvre's notion of differential space I discussed earlier in this chapter—"tangential spaces." These spaces are those places "that *touch* the circles of power at the point that intersects with its stability opening up unexpected otherness."¹⁸⁴ Taking a hint from the literal meaning of the term *eschaton*, tangential spaces are *last* places. Tangential spaces are sites integrally connected to, yet perhaps out of the mind of those with power. For Westhelle, the power of these spaces lies in their potential to become—and here he borrows from Foucault—"heterotopias, spaces insinuating themselves as difference that lies at hidden margins."¹⁸⁵ The U.S.-Mexico borderlands, then, contain this heterotopic potential, and this possibility perhaps explains why

¹⁸³ Vítor Westhelle, "Os Sinais dos Lugares: as Dimensões Esquecidas," in *Peregrinação: estudos em homenagem a Joachim Herbert Fischer pela passagem de seu 60 aniversário*, ed. Martin Norberto Dreher (São Leopoldo: Editora Sinodal, 1990), 256, quoted in Rudolf Von Sinner, "Eschatology, Space and Public Theology," in *Space and Place as A Topic for Public Theologies*, ed. Thomas Wabel, Katharina Eberlein-Braun, and Torben Stamer (New York: LIT Verlag, 2022), 229.

¹⁸⁴ Vítor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 20.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

they garner so much attention. These landscapes, even as rugged and inhospitable as they can be, show the continuity of space that persists across borders; they show that other-than-human landscapes can connect us rather than divide us; they demonstrate that territorial markers and weaponized borderscapes are contingent, human-made delineations, and that they can be otherwise.

To desire heterotopia, according to Kenneth Surin, “is to desire to remove all the conditions that sustain this actual world and serve in the end only to ensure that the heterotopian world is kept at bay.”¹⁸⁶ To learn to desire tangential spaces like the U.S.-Mexico borderlands—ripe with the heterotopic potential but also rife with the state violence that is required to prevent potentiality from becoming actualized—requires seeing with border crossers the potentiality of the borderlands to be a space of connection, care, and intimacy even as the United States works hard for the land to serve the opposite ends. Using land as punitive implement or weapon transforms terra into terror.¹⁸⁷ Westhelle thinks of this sort of land conquering as an attempt to “keep the eschaton at bay.”¹⁸⁸ But *eschata*, or the last places, need not appear to us only as obstructive wastelands. We might well see them, with the eyes of border crossers, as passages in which “It is the going through that counts.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Kenneth Surin, *Freedom Not Yet: Liberation and the Next World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 284.

¹⁸⁷ Stuart Elden shows that one etymology of the term territory is from the Old French for frighten, so to deter means “to frighten from.” Stuart Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxiii, xxix.

¹⁸⁸ Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 139.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have woven together analyses of the weaponization of land at the U.S.-Mexico border, notions of American futurity that ground conceptions of territoriality, the respatializing practices of border crossers, and an apocalyptic approach to thinking about relations with space that challenges the forms of identity produced and protected by militarized borders. My goal has been to attend carefully to ideologies, practices, and technologies of border enforcement even while trying to privilege the perspectives of those who resist U.S. territoriality. In doing so, my aim has been to make four points. First, that the U.S.-Mexico border is not a natural or given reality, but a political production aimed at shaping both migrant and citizen subjectivities. Second, that these subjectivities are dependent not upon a spatial conception of territory, but rather on a notion of futurity which borders both produce and protect. Third, that border crossers have historically rejected and continue to reject the inviolability of borders and the exceptional futurity of U.S. territory that ensure one future for citizens and a different future (or perhaps a lack of a future) for everyone alien to that territory. Fourth, beyond the threats to U.S. territoriality that border crossers pose in the rhetoric of reactionaries and neoliberals, they do, in fact, present an apocalyptic challenge to our relationships with space.

As with the other chapters in this dissertation that deal with property and sovereignty, my methodology and my goal is to do political theology—to follow the traffic back and forth of concepts as they move, sometimes in unexpected ways, between the theological and political realms. My approach to thinking about territory, then, is not necessarily to show its compatibility or incompatibility with Christianity, but to demonstrate how the commingling of theological and political concepts are deployed for violent ends. In the United States, Sullivan's great nation of futurity, the continual strengthening of militarized borders inflicts violence both on desperate

migrants encountering the maw of the state in the borderlands and also on our relationships with land and mobility in a world facing climate crisis. My apocalyptic reading of border crossers is more than an expression of my desire for a counter-hegemonic political theology that can confront border regimes in a warming world. I also want to suggest that the apocalypse—the unveiling of the violence of border regimes but also of a new relationship with space beyond the confines of territory—is already unfolding.

Chapter Three: Sovereignty

Introduction

We are measured
by vastness beyond ourselves
Dark is light.
Stone is rising.

- Simon J. Ortiz, “Culture and the Universe”¹

In the preceding two chapters we have considered how property and territory shape ecological, political, and theological imaginaries in North America. I have argued that property functions as a form of self-possession that one extends outside of oneself. Possession and its inverse, dispossession, give rise to both an account of the self and of an understanding of that self’s relationship to what is outside of it. If property is primarily concerned with a spatiality—inside and outside, the self and the other—territory views this relationship between self and other temporally. U.S. American territoriality draws upon space in order to secure the future; borders do not protect a particular relationship with land but instead divide it in order to ensure temporal dominance for some while stealing time from others. In this chapter I turn to a conception of power on which the operations of property and territory are predicated: sovereignty.

My examination of property turned to slavery and those maroons who resisted its political economy. Then I considered territory by thinking from the weaponized U.S.-Mexico borderlands and those who cross them. In this chapter I place modern conceptions of political sovereignty within the context of settler colonialism and I draw on Indigenous thinkers who enact a different

¹ Simon J. Ortiz, *Out There Somewhere* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 104.

understanding of power in the face of removal and genocide.²

This chapter proceeds in four parts. Part one, “The Sovereign Exception” considers the political theology of sovereignty put forward by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt. I contextualize Schmitt’s account alongside thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in order to show how liberal accounts of sovereignty offer a vision of politics purportedly founded on rationality and persuasion, but are actually grounded upon force. Schmitt’s political theology is based in the sovereign decision on the exception; sovereignty requires the power to determine who or what counts as a situation of “extreme peril” for the state where extraordinary (i.e., extralegal) measures can be used in response.³ Related to this account of political power is Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction which for him is the central contrast at the heart of the political. After examining these concepts, I place the work of Schmitt’s account of sovereignty within a particular locale, specifically the colonial struggle to dominate the New World. I close this section by offering a Schmittian reading of the 1823 Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. McIntosh*, to show how a Schmittian understanding of sovereignty undergirds even would-be liberal theories of power when they are forced to deal with sovereignty over lands occupied by

² Throughout this chapter I use the term indigenous (capitalized when referring to a people or peoples) to refer broadly to communities of people who are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the Americas. While the term can also be used to refer to peoples outside of the context of the Americas, I use the term here as a way to remain consistent in language. Some of my interlocutors throughout this chapter refer to themselves as Native American, First Nations, American Indian, or just by the name of their specific people. The categorization or naming of groups often has specific legal meanings (e.g., in Canada, the Inuit are considered Aboriginal Canadians but not included in the designation First Nations). The goal of referring to Indigenous peoples throughout the chapter is not to offer a blanket definition of sovereignty that applies to any and all Indigenous peoples, but working from particular thinkers and writers to understand how what *they* mean by sovereignty differs from the post-Westphalian political tradition of nation-state sovereignty.

³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.

Indigenous peoples.

Part two, “Indigenous Sovereignty,” considers contemporary accounts of sovereignty that seek to enact claims of self-determinacy and self-governance in the face of settler colonialism. This section engages thinkers who suggest that indigenous claims to sovereignty are not simply about making rival nationalist claims to settler colonial politics but represent altogether distinct visions of what political life entails. In particular, I focus on the writings of Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard and the Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson to show how conceptions of indigenous sovereignty refuse settler colonialism’s terms of order and enact a different vision for politics grounded on mutual relations with the land. Indigenous sovereignty is not just about claiming equal political standing with modern nation states, but necessitates a form of relationality that settler colonialism is fundamentally opposed to. I unpack Simpson’s notion that the continued presence of Indigenous peoples on the land is a miracle, to suggest that indigenous sovereignty is not about a move backward to a pre-colonial past but builds new forms of solidarity with the land and with other communities that seek to resist the deleterious effects of settler colonial sovereignty.

Building off this idea of sovereignty as miracle, part three, “Miracle without Exception,” attempts to flesh out the political implications of grounding sovereignty in an account of the miracle of indigenous survival on the land. One problem with a form of settler colonial sovereignty like we see with Schmitt is that the political significance of the exception— analogized to the miracle—is founded upon a deficient theology that sees the miraculous as the suspension of the created order or natural law. Miracle is thus about the free (i.e., arbitrary) act of the sovereign to disrupt creation, rather than a divine act that is concordant with God’s providential ordering of creation. To correct this error, I draw on Franz Rosenzweig’s account of

the miracle which seeks to reintegrate creation, revelation, and redemption such that the miracle is not an exception. The miracle, for Rosenzweig, is a revelation of God's work in and on behalf of the creation. This offers a corrective to an account of sovereignty based upon Schmitt's miraculous exception, but I argue that Indigenous sovereignty adds to this account of the miracle by granting participation not only to the human community which responds to the miracle but also to the other-than-human creation. Schmitt's exception is often thought to be about the power to determine who is or is not included in political consideration; Indigenous sovereignty not only reverses the act of exclusion but expands the relations that sovereignty makes one responsible for.

In the final section of the chapter, I offer a close reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony*. Silko's text offers a site to think through the stakes of sovereignty, and it offers a historically grounded vision of what settler colonial sovereignty has wrought and how an Indigenous form of political power might respond. Silko's text helps to show how settler colonial accounts of subjectivity are grounded not simply on the individual sovereign decision on the exception, but on a form of life that is fundamentally destructive of relations. Centered on a mixed-race Laguna World War II veteran named Tayo, Silko's novel offers not simply an Indigenous response to settler colonial sovereignty but a re-narration of both the world as it has been created and the possibility of fostering practices that can form the kinds of relations required to enact another story.

more significant as he attempts to historicize the struggle for sovereignty in the context of Europe's scramble to colonize the 'New World.' I close this section by offering a Schmittian reading of the Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. McIntosh* to show how even accounts of sovereignty which attempt to ground politics in rationality and consent, find their ultimate ground in force when it comes to territorial accumulation in settler colonialism.

I think it is important to say a word about why Schmitt's account is useful for thinking about sovereignty. I focus on Schmitt in this section because he represents a particularly extreme case of political theology. I mean two things by extreme here. First, Schmitt is extreme because he offers a very strong account for the intertwined nature of theology and politics. Second, he is extreme because he saw fit for his political theology to, at least for a time, bolster the case for Nazism. Perhaps it seems inappropriate to think about sovereignty from the extreme case here, but if Schmitt's theo-politics and Nazism represent anything, they must at the very least demonstrate the dire stakes of political theology in the aftermath of the Third Reich. We should not allow Nazism to represent a *sui generis* phenomenon. Aimé Césaire observed that Nazism predated the Third Reich. But since it existed only in the colonies, the nations of the West "tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on *them*...they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied *only to non-European peoples*."⁶ Césaire saw in the West's reaction to fascism, not a genuine rejection of "*the humiliation of man as such*" but only a reaction to the idea that the Third Reich was willing to subject white Europeans to the same "colonialist procedures which had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India, and the 'niggers' of Africa."⁷ Césaire's insistence that we not

⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36; emphasis mine.

⁷ Ibid., emphasis in original.

isolate Hitler and the Nazi party from our thinking about the legacies of European colonialism is critical for understanding the uses political sovereignty has been put to, especially as it was imposed upon colonized peoples the world over.

Schmitt's approach to political theology is grounded in his assertion that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development...but also because of their systematic structure."⁸ For Schmitt the sovereignty of the state is derivative of the sovereignty of God, but as the concept moves from the theological to the political, it undergoes a transformation. In Schmitt's view, both the theological and political undergo change in this movement of concepts. For example, Schmitt insists that "[t]he exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology." But this, for Schmitt, must be seen in the context of a "modern constitutional state" that arose with "deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world." Politics and theology here commingle leading to both a world without exception to the laws of nature and a political order that denies "the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order."⁹ For Schmitt, this weakening of the sovereign—both the divine and the state—is a problem, one that he saw having undesirable effects in the Weimar Republic. The political theorist Saul Newman argues that, for Schmitt, a lack of a strong sovereign failed to provide "a stable order in society, something that could only be achieved through a coherent political form or idea."¹⁰ Newman argues that this necessity for stability through a clear picture of a strong sovereign leads Schmitt to republish his *Political Theology* in 1934, making clear not only his political but also his

⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁰ Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), 24.

philosophical support for Nazism, which he took to be a fulfillment of his political theology.¹¹

Schmitt thought that political theology as a discourse was necessary to establish the legitimacy of power; a form of justification that was lost with Protestantism and secularism. Adam Kotsko calls Schmitt's project an "attempt to find some principle of legitimacy for modernity by reestablishing a connection with the theological heritage of the West."¹² This effort to legitimize power is not simply a procedural proof for why a certain person or persons have power over others. Rather, the whole range of power relations require a robust accounting for. As Kotsko notes, when Schmitt claims that political and theological concepts share a "systematic structure," he means that "both seek to render a consistent and total account of their respective fields. A theory of politics must ideally encompass the full range of human activities, relationships, and institutions, just as a theological or metaphysical doctrine aspires to a similarly complete reckoning of everything that exists."¹³ Political theology, then, offers a justification not only for arrangements of power in our immanent relations, but for the transcendent status we grant to the sovereign, the one who stands above and beyond the field of power relations inhabited by mere subjects.

This is precisely where Schmitt's definition of sovereignty comes in: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."¹⁴ For Schmitt, it is not merely the exception but the *decision* for the exception that makes for sovereignty: "Because a general norm...can never encompass a total exception, the decision that a real exception exists cannot therefore be entirely derived from this

¹¹ Ibid., 177n3.

¹² Adam Kotsko, *What Is Theology?: Christian Thought and Contemporary Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 21.

¹³ Adam Kotsko, *The Prince of This World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 12.

¹⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

norm.”¹⁵ Like his God, Schmitt’s sovereign is not an abstract principle, not a machine, not reducible to a set of laws that can operate autonomously. This sovereign is, instead, free, able to decide when and where the law is applied, and where it is not. Schmitt thinks that regardless of where one thinks sovereignty rests—with a deity, an emperor, a prince, or the people—one cannot escape from this decisionist account of power. For Schmitt, “the question is always aimed at the subject of sovereignty, at the application of the concept to a concrete situation.”¹⁶ As noted above, Schmitt sees the exception in politics as analogous to the miracle in which the deity freely chooses when and where to suspend the laws of nature, to interrupt the otherwise normal status quo. But to what end are miracles performed? What does the exception *do* politically and theologically?

In her 2005 foreword to *Political Theology*, Tracy B. Strong connects Schmitt’s account of the exception/miracle to Thomas Hobbes’ understanding of miracles in his *Leviathan*. For Hobbes, “A Miracle, is a work of God (besides his operation by the way of Nature, ordained in the Creation) done, for the making manifest to his elect, the mission of an extraordinary Minister for their salvation.” It is important to note here that, for Hobbes, the miracle is connected to divine election: “because the end of their Miracles, was to adde [sic] to the Church (not all men, but) such as should be saved; that is to say, such as God had elected.”¹⁷ The sovereignty revealed in the miracle or the exception, is a revelation to the elect, but might very well seem meaningless, irrelevant, or even preposterous to the reprobate. Put another way, to the chosen the miracle reveals God’s character, what Strong calls “*the occasion for and of the revelation of the*

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 303.

true nature of sovereignty.”¹⁸ We can make sense of this sort of exception-making power revealed to be at the heart of sovereignty as a justification for why the sovereign has power here but not there, why the subject yields their allegiance to this sovereign as opposed to some other candidate power.

All of this is another way of saying that the power to decide on the exception is not only about revealing the power of the sovereign, but about the constitution and justification of a political community around the sovereign. For Schmitt, sovereignty is necessary not in the quotidian but in the case in which norms and even the law are found to be inadequate. The exception, then, is about “unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order.” But this, for Schmitt, is not about a sovereign decision to upend the state: “In such a situation it is clear that the state remains, whereas law recedes. Because the exception is different from anarchy and chaos, order in the juristic sense still prevails even if it is not of the ordinary kind.”¹⁹ This sort of absolutism that can, when necessary, suspend norms and laws is tantamount to the miraculous, in the Hobbesian sense, not only because it interrupts what is typically expected but because, when it does so, the real essence of its power comes into full view. But the only ones who can witness this power and find it reassuring are the elect, those within the sovereign’s jurisdiction. To those outside, or perhaps those formerly inside but deemed alien through the state of exception, what is revealed is surely monstrous.

I use this term monstrous purposefully. The exception, Schmitt’s political miracle, does not reveal a merciful or gracious God. No, the exception pulls back the curtain to reveal what Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, calls “the monstrous, yet seemingly

¹⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, xx.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being ‘lawless,’ it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation.”²⁰ Arendt’s insight is both Hobbesian and Schmittian. Hobbes insists that law’s foundation is in the sovereign, because “when the Sovereign [sic] Power ceaseth, Crime also ceaseth: for where there is no such Power, there is no protection to be had from the Law.”²¹ For Schmitt, it is competence that determines what he calls “pivotal authority,” but he insists that the question of competence cannot be “answered from the content of the legal quality of a maxim.” So, Schmitt can approvingly cite Hobbes, “*autoritas, non veritas facit legem*”: authority, not truth makes the law.²² But if this protective authority reveals its power in moments where even the law is suspended, who exactly is the subject being protected from? This question cuts to the core of Schmitt’s vision of politics.

Schmitt writes that “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”²³ As a political distinction, friends and enemies are not designated by other discourses. An enemy is not identified as such according to moral, aesthetic, or any other criteria. Rather, the enemy just is the enemy: “he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible.”²⁴ It is also important, for Schmitt, that there is no objective or independent categorization of another as one’s enemy: “Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict.”²⁵ That this

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 461.

²¹ Hobbes, 202.

²² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 33.

²³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

friend-enemy distinction is at the bedrock of Schmitt's conception of the political does not change based upon the form of government. For Schmitt, even democracy is not above the friend-enemy distinction. In fact, democracies depend upon it: "Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity."²⁶ Taken together, Schmitt's idea of sovereignty and the friend-enemy distinction makes for a form of politics based upon what Andrew Norris calls "a homogeneous form of identity that both allows for the transcendence of private, physical life and opens the possibility of a particular form of violent conflict."²⁷ Obedience to the sovereign is the transcendence of the particular into the whole of the political community, while the exception names the violent conflict in which norms are suspended to protect the community from the enemy.

This does not mean, however, that politics and therefore sovereignty, is essentially a state of war. Schmitt insists that "War is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics." He does claim, however, that "as an ever present possibility [war] is the leading presupposition which determines in a characteristic way human action and thinking and thereby creates a specifically political behavior."²⁸ War may not be the essence of politics, but it is a potentiality that shapes how humans act and think politically. In this way, we might say that Schmitt actually modifies and rehabilitates Hobbes account of the state of nature. As Leo Strauss notes, the state of nature is "[f]or Hobbes...the state of war of individuals; for Schmitt, it is the

²⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 9.

²⁷ Andrew Norris, "Carl Schmitt on Friends, Enemies and the Political," *Telos*, no. 112 (Summer 1998): 77.

²⁸ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 34.

state of war of groups (especially of nations).”²⁹ But whereas Hobbes sees the state of nature as something to be transcended through social contract, for Schmitt the war of peoples against all other peoples just *is* politics. As Strauss puts it, “the political that Schmitt brings to bear as fundamental is the ‘state of nature’ that underlies every culture; Schmitt restores the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature to a place of honor.”³⁰ Any attempt to get beyond this fundamental antagonism represents a denial of the kind of creatures human beings are.

Always seeking to avoid abstraction, Schmitt insists that this antagonistic politics of the state of nature takes place somewhere particular. In commenting on Hobbes’ use of the state of nature, Schmitt insists that the state of nature is not “a spaceless utopia” but rather is “a *no man’s land*.” This location is taking place somewhere. Schmitt writes, “Hobbes locates it, among other places, in the New World.”³¹ But how exactly is the state of nature located in the New World? Schmitt here does not seem to be suggesting that Indigenous peoples occupy the state of nature, though he does refer to them as “wild peoples” in other parts of his *The Nomos of the Earth*.³² It seems more accurate to say that, for Schmitt, Indigenous peoples are not *in* the state of nature but rather they *are* nature. In his discussions of European “discoveries” of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Schmitt insists that “The Indians lacked the scientific power of Christian-European rationality.”³³ Jochen von Bernstorff argues that this claim, for Schmitt, indicates the reality that “Indigenous populations simply had no property rights, let alone any form of jurisdiction in their own land.”³⁴ If the state of nature means collectives warring against each other in the absence of

²⁹ Ibid., 106.

³⁰ Ibid., 105.

³¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006), 96; emphasis in original.

³² Ibid., 142.

³³ Ibid., 132.

³⁴ Jochen von Bernstorff, “Governing Hegemonic Spaces in Carl Schmitt: Colonialism, Anti-

some mediating power, then Indigenous peoples failed to be political enough to be considered as an enemy at all.

In the next section we will consider critiques of sovereignty that address this tendency to view Indigenous peoples as lacking sovereignty, but for the moment it is important to see how a Schmittian conception of sovereignty—based as it is on a friend-enemy politics and the decision on the state of exception—is premised not simply on a Christian political theology, but, I would offer, a specifically *colonialist* European Christianity. Indeed, Andreas Kalyvas has argued that, for Schmitt, “the centrality of the colony thus operates both in the making and unmaking of international public law, from its beginning to its downfall.”³⁵ If Schmitt is correct and Hobbes saw the so-called New World as the state of nature, Schmitt saw something else in the European scramble to colonize the planet: the future of politics. Indeed, Schmitt says as much himself: “The sense and core of Christian-European law of peoples, its fundamental order, lay in the partition of the new earth... This side of historical development is so important that one can equally well, and perhaps more rightly, call the Age of Discoveries the Age of European land-appropriation.”³⁶

For Schmitt, sovereignty is about who decides the state of exception, a miracle-like decision that reveals the power of the sovereign to the elect. This is an intelligible form of power when the territorial confines of sovereignty are clear, but the rush of European nations to colonize the globe muddies the waters. Who would adjudicate territorial disputes where lines of demarcation

Imperialism and the Großraum Theory,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 14, no. 3 (2023): 372.

³⁵ Andreas Kalyvas, “Carl Schmitt’s Postcolonial Imagination,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 35.

³⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation*, ed. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2015), 64.

are not agreed upon? After Protestantism, the disputes of colonial modernity cannot be settled by a third party like a pope. This, for Schmitt, seems to make the stakes of political theology more, not less, important. Indeed, John D. Blanco and Ivonne del Valle argue that “it is not difficult to see how Schmitt’s ‘discrepant’ counter-history of Western modernity ends up (re-) universalizing Eurocentric international law in the same breath that he eulogizes its passing.”³⁷ The struggle to establish colonies may lead to irremediable conflict, but this, for Schmitt, only brings us back to the nature of politics itself. In the face of a world marked by all-out-war for territory, a robust political theology becomes all the more important for the purposes of keeping subjects in lock-step under the sovereign.

Schmitt felt that this chaotic modern *mêlée* was indicative of what he called the “internal political nihilism of traditional European international law.”³⁸ Removed from a robust Christian political theology, there was nothing to appeal to in order to hold back the chaos of world colonial domination and its aftermath. To be clear, it was not colonialism or imperialism that concerned Schmitt but the lack of some transcendent force to hold back chaos: “It was consistent with the Christian concept of the world, which saw the empire as a restrainer (*katechon*) of the Antichrist...In 1492, when a ‘new world’ actually emerged, the structure of all traditional concepts of the *center* and *age* of the earth had to change. European princes and nations now saw a vast, formerly unknown, non-European space arise beside them.”³⁹

According to Schmitt, it was empire’s function hold back the anarchy and chaos—
theologically personified as the figure of the Antichrist. But an all-powerful restrainer becomes

³⁷ John D. Blanco and Ivonne del Valle, “Reorienting Schmitt’s Nomos: Political Theology, and Colonial (and Other) Exceptions in the Creation of Modern and Global Worlds [1],” *Política Común* 5 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0005.001>.

³⁸ Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 300.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87; emphasis in original.

harder, perhaps impossible, to identify in the modern world. As Giuseppe Fornari puts it, for Schmitt “in the present age the very notion of restraint seems to be nullified by the limitless opening up of spaces for expansion and dominion.” In modernity, who could act with enough strength—with the power to decide on the exception—to keep the chaos at bay? As Fornari notes, “Schmitt clung obstinately to what was left by way of a political project in the contemporary age...His support for the Nazi regime when it first came to power appears to have been motivated by a fundamental desperation.”⁴⁰ For Schmitt, Nazism could be the vehicle for the type of strong sovereignty he felt was necessary for holding back chaos and anarchy; it offered the possibility of transcendence in a modern world whose metaphysics, religion, and politics had foreclosed it.

Schmitt’s account of sovereignty tells us as much about his theology as it does his political theory. For him, the sovereign represents a God-in-miniature, transcendent above both subjects and law. The sovereign protects the subjects from their enemies, including, through the state of exception, the possibility of enemies within the polity. In much the same way that God can disrupt nature through miracles, the sovereign decides on the exception. What is notable, however, is that Schmitt’s postlapsarian state of nature offers no possible transcendence beyond violence. Rather than seeing the war of all-against-all as a breakdown of the political, for Schmitt this is the heart of politics over which the sovereign asserts itself and offers protection. This is not only distinct from Hobbes’ individualistic state of nature, but especially from a social-contract theorist like John Locke for whom even the state of nature “has a Law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one: And Reason, which that Law, teaches all Mankind, who will

⁴⁰ Giuseppe Fornari, “Figures of Antichrist: The Apocalypse and Its Restraints in Contemporary Political Thought,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2010): 65.

but consult it, that being all *equal* and *independent*, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty or Possessions.”⁴¹ For a thinker like Locke, politics is a solution to the insecurity of the state of nature (though his state of nature is certainly a less bleak picture than Hobbes’ account). The formation of the commonwealth based upon mutual agreement, for Locke, allows for a more efficient way of dealing with conflicts, rather than allowing every dispute to expand into war.⁴² For Schmitt, the only law that can govern the state of nature is one backed up by sovereignty, itself established by force.

Schmitt offers a vision of politics that does not transcend a violent world but grounds its conception of power in this very struggle. Even as the sovereign brings a political community into existence, this polity is not grounded on non-coercive relations but upon the power and authority to rescind the protections that supposedly gather the community around the sovereign in the first place. Perhaps even more troubling is how even the uncertainty surrounding sovereignty—witnessed by Schmitt’s narration of colonial struggles to dominate the ‘New World’—creates something of a feedback loop for this political theology; lack of clarity around territorial sovereignty does not lead to a reevaluation of this vision of political existence but rather causes Schmitt to double down on the need for a strong sovereign. It is important to notice those entities who are excluded from political considerations, namely Indigenous peoples and the-other-than-human world. As noted above, Indigenous communities for Schmitt are not properly rational and political, an assertion that is predicated on the availability of the land in the

⁴¹ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government: And, a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Mark Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5; emphasis in original.

⁴² This is especially the case, for Locke, with regard to the protection of one’s property: “To avoid these Inconveniencies, which disorder Mens Properties in the state of Nature, Men unite into Societies, that they may have the united strength of the whole Society to secure and defend their Properties, and may have *standing Rules* to bound it, by which every one may know, what is his.” Locke, *Second Treatise*, 69.

‘New World’ for colonial accumulation. Instead of seeing this account of sovereignty simply as Schmitt’s theoretical musings, we might consider how this logic is exhibited in the case law that established the territorial sovereignty of the United States over indigenous lands.

The 1823 Supreme Court decision, *Johnson v. McIntosh*, established that “the whole theory of their [i.e., European nations’] titles to lands in America, rests upon the hypothesis, that the Indians had no right of soil as sovereign, independent states.” According to Chief Justice John Marshall, “Discovery is the foundation of title, in European nations, and this overlooks all proprietary rights in the natives.”⁴³ Marshall’s argument, one of a series of judicial decisions that established the relevance of the so-called “Doctrine of Discovery” for federal law, hinges upon the idea that Indigenous peoples did not represent sovereign nations.⁴⁴ But the decision broadens this argument by claiming that “Even if it should be admitted that the Indians were originally an independent people, they have ceased to be so. A nation that has passed under the domination of another, is no longer a sovereign state.”⁴⁵ Later in the decision, Marshall puts the matter to rest in no uncertain terms: “discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish Indian title of occupancy,

⁴³ *Johnson & Graham’s Lessee v. McIntosh*, 21 U.S. 567.

⁴⁴ Robert Miller points out that there are some scholars who trace the roots of the Doctrine of Discovery back to the fifth century CE, as “popes began establishing the idea of a worldwide papal jurisdiction that placed responsibility on the Church to work for a universal Christian commonwealth.” Robert J. Miller et al., *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9. The Doctrine of Discovery’s early modern roots can be traced to the fifteenth century papal bulls like *Dum Diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* that dealt with Christian dealings with conquered Muslim polities, while later decrees like (1455) *Inter caetera divinai* (1493) and *Inter caetera II* (1493) offered the Vatican’s policies for Spanish and Portuguese interactions with the inhabitants of the Americas. In the twenty-first century, the Vatican has denounced the doctrine of discovery and declared it “not part of the teaching of the Catholic Church.” See: “Joint Statement of the Dicastries for Culture and Education and for Promoting Integral Human Development on the ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’” *Holy See Press Office*, March 30, 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/03/30/230330b.html>.

⁴⁵ *Johnson & Graham’s Lessee v. McIntosh*, 21 U.S. 568.

either by purchase or by conquest.”⁴⁶ There is, I think, something of a hybrid argument at work here. Marshall’s argument attempts to portray sovereignty as a transcendent form of power not wholly dependent upon violence (say through treaty making or purchase agreements). This would be more akin to Locke’s politics which imagine rationality (i.e., civilized white society) as rising above the violence of the state of nature (i.e., “uncivilized” Indigenous peoples). But *Johnson v. McIntosh* also maintains a Schmittian option: even if one grants that Indigenous peoples represent sovereign nations, one can always appeal to the historical reality of conquest. As for Hobbes and Schmitt, so for the U.S. Supreme Court: *autoritas, non veritas facit legem*.

This twofold way of narrating sovereignty puts indigenous claims to sovereignty in something of a double bind. If they accept the Lockean account of sovereignty and attempt to demonstrate their fitness for politics, they nevertheless remain conquered peoples. Or, as the legacy of the so-called Indian Wars has demonstrated, they can accept that politics simply is armed struggle, which is then used as evidence to demonstrate their unwillingness or inability to act politically.⁴⁷ In the next section, we consider indigenous critiques and responses to the political problem posed by sovereignty.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 587.

⁴⁷ The political scientist Michael Paul Rogin argues that the liberal rhetoric around the Indian Wars was based upon a distinction between competition and violence: “Americans believed that peaceful competitiveness kept them in touch with one another and provided social cement. They thought that Indians, lacking social order, were devoted to war.” Michael Paul Rogin, “Liberal Society and the Indian Question,” *Politics & Society* 1, no. 3 (June 1, 1971): 270; more recently, Stefan Aune’s *Indian Wars Everywhere* observes that “The figure of the violent, elusive Indian that struck from the shadows proliferated in early American culture” to such an extent that it became “a common image, a tool to critique the tactics and behaviors of enemy soldiers.” Stefan Aune, *Indian Wars Everywhere: Colonial Violence and the Shadow Doctrines of Empire* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023), 37.

2. Indigenous Sovereignty

I don't know
if humankind understands
culture: the act
of being human
is not easy knowledge.

- Simon J. Ortiz, "Culture and the Universe"⁴⁸

I ended the last section by suggesting that the discourse of sovereignty evident in a decision like *Johnson v. McIntosh* puts Indigenous peoples in a double bind. One option is to accept that politics is about persuasion and consent. But this option is answered with the claim that Indigenous communities lack the sovereignty exclusive to modern nation states and so cannot participate politically on equal standing with them. A second option is to follow Schmitt's account of sovereignty and view politics as violent struggle. But this option only results in having their use of force thrown back at them as proof of their lack of ability to act politically (i.e., nonviolently). This, I offer, is a problem inherent in the traditions of political sovereignty seen in thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Schmitt: the sovereign nation-state holds up the ideals of persuasion and consent, even while it reserves for itself the right to use force to guarantee its political existence.

The Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred insists that the difficulty with sovereignty is that it rests upon "an exclusively European discourse." For Alfred, claims to sovereignty over 'New World' territories were assertions "made strictly vis-à-vis other European powers, and did not impinge upon or necessarily even affect in law or politics the rights and status of Indigenous nations."⁴⁹ For Alfred, the problem is not simply that the European political tradition differed conceptually

⁴⁸ Simon J. Ortiz, *Out There Somewhere* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 104.

⁴⁹ Taiaiake Alfred, "Sovereignty," in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 34.

from indigenous traditions, but that Indigenous peoples had this alien concept imposed upon them through “governing structures that embedded the false notion of European superiority in indigenous community life.”⁵⁰ For Alfred, to acquiesce to sovereignty, then, was to accept that Indigenous peoples were politically inferior to European settler-colonizers. In this section, I unpack thinkers who examine this structural inequality embedded in sovereignty. Rather than seeing sovereignty as a form of political self-determination that Indigenous peoples might aspire to, we might, instead, see it as a way of imagining political life premised upon the reality of indigenous dispossession.

Even critics of sovereignty like Alfred note that using what he calls “the sovereignty paradigm” has allowed Indigenous peoples to make “significant legal and political gains toward reconstructing the autonomous aspects of their individual, collective, and social identities.” But, says Alfred, not only have these gains been limited, but the persistence of “social ills that do continue suggest that external focused assertion of sovereign power vis-à-vis the state is neither complete nor in and of itself a solution.” Sovereignty might allow for incremental changes, but ultimately it is not the proper tool for the job of indigenous self-determination because it is based on a willingness to “abandon autonomy to enter the state’s legal and political framework.”⁵¹ The Lenape scholar, Joanne Barker, writing in the same edited volume as Alfred, insists that the “historically contingent” nature of sovereignty means that it can be given new meaning by Indigenous peoples. For Barker this takes place as Indigenous communities “rearticulate” sovereignty to indicate “self-determination and self-government” in order to insist “on the recognition of inherent rights to respect for political affiliations that are historical and located

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁵¹ Ibid., 39.

and for the unique cultural identities that continue to find meaning in those histories and relations.”⁵² Without wading too deep into debates around the use of the word sovereignty by Indigenous peoples, I think the commonality between Barker and Alfred is the acknowledgment of the situated nature of sovereignty as a historically contingent political concept.

Just because some Indigenous thinkers use the language of sovereignty to describe their understandings of self-determination, autonomy, and relationship to land does not mean they have necessarily acquiesced to a settler-colonial vision of politics. If we follow Ludwig Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “for a *large* class of cases...the meaning of a word is its use in the language,” I see no reason why the deployment of the term sovereignty should necessarily undermine the radically distinct nature of indigenous understandings of power.⁵³ It is important, then, to see how the use of sovereignty to describe indigenous politics might fall victim to what the Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard calls “the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to ‘reconcile’ Indigenous assertions of nationhood with settler-state sovereignty.”⁵⁴ For Coulthard, pursuing recognition from the nation-state through claims of indigenous nationhood and sovereignty is not only mistaken because it draws upon political concepts alien to Indigenous communal life but also because these strategies of reconciliation and recognition are founded upon a faulty understanding of the modern-nation state. Coulthard insists that settler colonial states have responded to indigenous sovereignty claims by drawing on “a seemingly conciliatory set of discourses and institutional

⁵² Joanne Barker, “For Whom Sovereignty Matters,” in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 26.

⁵³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Third edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), §43; emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

practices that emphasize our [i.e., Indigenous] *recognition* and *accommodation*.” The problem is that these discursive shifts are mostly cosmetic. For Coulthard, “the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state has remained *colonial* to its foundation.”⁵⁵

Coulthard describes settler-colonialism as “a relationship of power...structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.”⁵⁶ It is important to notice in this account of settler-colonialism how indigenous conceptions of power and relationships to land are central to the conflict. As the late scholar of settler-colonialism, Patrick Wolfe, put it, “So far as Indigenous people are concerned, where they are *is* who they are, and not only by their own reckoning...Whatever settlers may say...the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory.”⁵⁷ We have already seen this impulse in a theorist of sovereignty like Schmitt, with his suggestion that we should “call the Age of Discoveries the Age of European land-appropriation.”⁵⁸ So, if sovereignty as understood by settler-colonial states is inextricably tied to land accumulation, how do indigenous conceptions of politics counter this territoriality based upon acquisitiveness? As Robert Nichols has observed this is a crucial issue because settler-colonial states have often accused Indigenous peoples of “putting forward a contradictory set of claims, namely, that they are the original and natural owners of the land that has been stolen from them, *and* that the earth is not something in which any one person or group of people can have exclusive proprietary

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6; emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 6-7; emphasis in original.

⁵⁷ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 388; emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation*, ed. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2015), 64.

rights.”⁵⁹ To offer, then, an indigenous understanding of sovereignty—or perhaps we may say an indigenous vision of counter-sovereignty—requires establishing a politics of relationships with land not premised on the forms of accumulation and ownership witnessed in settler-colonial sovereignty.

For Coulthard, relationship with land is central to resisting the forms of recognition-based politics offered to Indigenous peoples by the state. He argues that “Indigenous struggles against capitalist imperialism are best understood as struggles oriented around the question of *land*—struggles not only *for* land, but also deeply *informed* by what the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship...ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, non dominating and nonexploitative way.”⁶⁰ Here, I think, is the heart of an indigenous critique of settler-colonial sovereignty. Whereas modern European nation states only seek to accumulate, possess, and fortify territory, indigenous political life is founded on reciprocity with particular places. In a co-authored article, Coulthard and the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argue for what they call “grounded normativity” or “the ethical frameworks provided by...Indigenous placed-based practices and associated forms of knowledge.” Coulthard and Simpson maintain that grounded normativity is not only a set of practices aimed toward human relationship with the other-than-human environment, but is a form of normativity that is derived from that connection to particular places: “Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which *we practice solidarity*.”⁶¹ Coulthard and

⁵⁹ Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property!: Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 6.

⁶⁰ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 60.

⁶¹ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2016): 254; emphasis in original.

Simpson argue that Indigenous communities' reciprocal relations to land represent the foundation for an understanding of the political. Moreover, they insist that Indigenous life as such cannot persist without these forms of grounded normativity and place-based sovereignty: "To willfully abandon them would amount to a form of auto-genocide."⁶²

To resist genocide and auto-genocide requires that Indigenous communities not only recover knowledges and practices that allow for reciprocity with the other-than-human world, but Simpson argues that it also requires "re-creating the conditions within which this learning occurred, not merely the content of the practice itself."⁶³ She offers as an example, the traditional Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg narrative of Kwezens, the story of a young girl who is taught how to harvest maple sugar by Ajidamoo, a red squirrel; Kwezens then teaches her community what she has learned. For Simpson, the story of Kwezens illustrates a distinct mode of relationality: "She learned how to interact with the spirit of the maple. She learned both *from* the land and *with* the land. She learned what it felt like to be recognized, seen and appreciated by her community. She *comes to know* maple sugar with the support of her family and Elders. She comes to know maple sugar in the context of love."⁶⁴ This, she suggests, is what settlers miss when they appropriate indigenous practices and put them to use "within the context of capitalism, when they make commercial maple syrup...they completely miss the wisdom that underlies the entire process because they deterritorialize the mechanics of maple syrup production from Nishnaabeg intelligence and from aki [earth]."⁶⁵

Aki or earth, for Simpson, is not just the foundation or setting in which politics takes place; it

⁶² Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 9.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 7; emphasis in original.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

does not just have human politics imposed onto it. Earth itself is a politics: “Aki is also liberation and freedom — my freedom to establish and maintain relationships of deep reciprocity within a pristine homeland that my ancestors handed down to me. Aki is encompassed by freedom, a freedom that is protected by sovereignty and actualized by self-determination.”⁶⁶ Whatever Simpson means by sovereignty here, it can hardly indicate the vision of power of Lockean liberalism predicated on rising above the state of nature. Neither can she mean Schmitt’s sovereign who descends into the state of nature—the war of all against all represented by the friend-enemy distinction—and maintains the power to decide on the exception. Instead, Simpson hints at a form of power that refuses to see agonistic relations at its core, even as it recognizes the necessity of confronting forces of domination. Simpson’s vision of resisting settler-colonialism is not simply about a movement back to the land or an attempt to recover a pre-Columbian existence where 1492 never happened. Instead, she uses the language of resurgence, or “the rebuilding of indigenous nations according to our own political, intellectual and cultural traditions.”⁶⁷ Resurgence has to happen from the experience of “land as pedagogy.” The land does not only teach ways of the past or forms of life that existed before the settler-colonial encounter; it also provides the learning necessary for “coming face-to-face with settler colonial authority, surveillance and violence because, in practice, it places Indigenous bodies between settlers and their money.”⁶⁸

The sort of resurgence that Simpson requires aligning means and ends. She is not, I think, offering a tautology when she suggests that *aki* is freedom and that this freedom is protected by her Nishnaabeg understanding of freedom and self-determination. Earth is the one who grants

⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 19.

freedom, even as it also requires being protected by the practice of freedom. This seems to fly in the face of settler colonial sovereignty, which the political theorist David Myer Temin helpfully summarizes as “the rightful capacity to exercise power and outright violence over subordinated and other-defined groups, including the coercive seizure of land and resources.”⁶⁹ Counter to this, the type of Indigenous political life described by Simpson and Coulthard represents a refusal to dominate one’s relations. The Osage theologian George Tinker describes the Lakota and Dakota phrase *mitakuye oyasin* that appears throughout their prayers,

At the same time, the phrase includes all human beings, all two-legged as relatives of one another, and the ever-expanding circle does not stop there. Every Lakota who prays this prayer knows that our relatives necessarily include the four-leggeds, the wingeds, and all the living-moving things on Mother Earth. One Lakota teacher has suggested that a better translation of *mitakuye oyasin* would read: “For all the above me and below me and around me things: that is, for all my relations.”⁷⁰

I think it is important to notice that Tinker’s point about *mitakuye oyasin* is not what Willis Jenkins has called a “cosmological temptation” or the tendency of “ethicists to dwell in moral cosmology, proposing foundational metaphors and symbols by which agents could better interpret the world of human responsibility.” For Jenkins, this tendency overemphasizes belief and he worries that it “draws ethical attention away from concrete problems, scientific learning, pluralist negotiations, and the dynamics of cultural change.”⁷¹ But for Tinker and Simpson respectively, *all my relations* and *land as pedagogy* are not simply cosmological beliefs. They are practices of learning from, living with, and caring for a world that is itself always already an

⁶⁹ David Myer Temin, *Remapping Sovereignty: Decolonization and Self-Determination in North American Indigenous Political Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 10.

⁷⁰ George E. Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 49.

⁷¹ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 5.

ethical and political community.

Tinker emphasizes American Indian sovereignty and self-determination not only for the purpose of preventing “the loss of the particularity of these peoples,” as though indigenous nationhood were an end in itself. But rather he insists that the loss of Indigenous peoples and ways of life “today threatens the survivability of us all...we must commit to the struggle for the just and moral survival of Indian peoples as the peoples of the earth, and that this struggle is for the sake of the earth and of the sustaining of all of life.”⁷² It may be a risk to index Indigenous survival to a project of universal significance; we should not instrumentalize indigenous ways of life into a technology for dealing with ecological crises. But this tendency to join the fate of particular indigenous ways of life to other struggles for justice is characteristic of many contemporary visions of indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Simpson says that Indigenous nationhood represents “a radical and complete overturning of the nation-state’s political formation” and she joins this reimagining of the political to the goal of creating “networks of reciprocal resurgent movements with other humans and nonhumans radically imagining their ways out of domination, who are not afraid to let those imaginings destroy the pillars of settler colonialism.”⁷³ So, for both Simpson and Tinker, sovereignty requires a focused attention on particular Indigenous communities—including specific epistemologies, practices, and visions of the political distinct to a people and place—but sovereignty is precisely not about cordoning off the welfare of other communities or an arbitrary friend-enemy distinction. That is not to say that this picture of power might not identify enemies, but this distinction is not fundamental to politics the way it is for a thinker like Schmitt.

⁷² Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*, 83.

⁷³ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 10.

Simpson offers an account of solidarity that is based on the grounded normativity derived from the particularity of Indigenous tribal experience: “I’m interested in thinking about who we are seeking solidarity from within the context of grounded normativity. Who should we be in constellation with?” She pushes back on the tendency for Indigenous and other minority communities to seek solidarity primarily from white people. She writes, “Whiteness is not centered in resurgence. If we recognize settler colonialism to be dispossession, capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy, that recognition points us to our allies: not liberal white Canadians who uphold all four of these pillars but Black and brown individuals and communities on Turtle Island that are struggling in their own localities against these same forces, building movements that contain the alternatives.”⁷⁴ The line between allies and enemies is not drawn on account of nationality or really even based upon race; what matters is one’s orientation toward the forces that are destroying the earth as well as Black, brown, and Indigenous life. As Simpson points out, “when we put our energy into building constellations of coresistance within grounded normativity that refuse to center whiteness, our real white allies show up in solidarity anyway.”⁷⁵ I might suggest that for Simpson solidarity based upon grounded normativity shows up when people struggling against settler colonial sovereignty assert their power. Rather than gathering people around the sovereign’s power to decide on the exception—Schmitt’s political miracle—Simpson offers a vision of Indigenous political community that gathers around the decision for justice.

There is, however, an interesting way that the idea of the miracle shows up in Simpson’s work. In multiple places throughout her writings, she uses the language of the miraculous to

⁷⁴ Ibid., 228-229.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 231.

describe the fact of her and her people's continued existence: "The fact that I am here today is a miracle, because it means my family, like every Indigenous family, did whatever they could to ensure that I survived the past four hundred years of violence."⁷⁶ Similarly, in a panel conversation with the Black Studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott she claims, "So, I think a lot about what my ancestors, family, community, and nation did to ensure that I survive, so that I could be here today at all. That seems like a miracle to me. A tremendous amount of brilliance, mobilization, organization, and resistance went into having any brown, black, or red bodies on the land right now at all."⁷⁷ In her co-written book with the Black Studies scholar Robyn Maynard, Simpson explicitly connects this idea with Cedric Robinson's account of the Black Radical Tradition: "My point is that, as Cedric Robinson points out in *Black Marxism*, the fact that Black people exist today is not a miracle but rather a product of the collective intelligence developed over five centuries of struggle. The same could be said of Indigenous resistance."⁷⁸ What I find provocative here is the way Simpson makes the idea of the miraculous immanent. Far from being the suspension of the law or of the normal terms of order, as it is for Schmitt, for Simpson the miracle is the persistence of community in the midst of oppression, the survival of relations—especially those with the land—despite overwhelming forces of domination.

Her invocation of Cedric Robinson also tells us something about how she sees Indigenous survival as miracle. Not miracle as in something passively witnessed, but as a tradition fostered, improvised with, and kept alive despite attempts at erasure. For Robinson the Black Radical Tradition kept alive modes of life which the transatlantic slave trade and its subsequent

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁷ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Rinaldo Walcott, and Glen Coulthard, "Idle No More and Black Lives Matter: An Exchange," *Studies in Social Justice* 12, no. 1 (2018): 75–89.

⁷⁸ Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 96.

historiographical defense sought to erase. Not only was Africa not without history, but those who kept a Black Radical Tradition alive through the Middle Passage brought precisely that historical consciousness to bear not just on the hegemonic discourses of their times but also as a corrective to would-be radical discourses that attempted “to construct an adequate manifestation of proletarian power” not inclusive of Blackness.⁷⁹ Robinson does not invoke the language of miracle to describe the continued existence of the Black Radical Tradition, but he does identify a similar spirit to what Simpson calls miraculous. Robinson calls this “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”⁸⁰

We might read Robinson’s “ontological totality” through what the Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte calls “collective continuance,” or the idea of “existence as emanating from relationships between humans and nonhumans that are in constant motion, embracing of diversity and constituted by reciprocal responsibilities.”⁸¹ This, for Whyte, is a social ontology that is nimble and diverse, even while it is also rooted and trenchant. Whyte thinks that settler colonial states like the U.S. also work toward collective continuance, but they do so in ways “based on extraction (e.g., of natural resources) and fixity (i.e., of property ownership), lack commitment to reciprocity, and privilege exclusion and discrimination.”⁸² This, of course, not only produces different ontologies and epistemologies of relating to the world, but insofar as it is based upon the dispossession of Indigenous lands, it seeks to foreclose Indigenous collective

⁷⁹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 170.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁸¹ Kyle Powys Whyte, “Collective Continuance,” in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 53.

⁸² Ibid., 57.

continuance. Whyte insists that Indigenous communities, though imperiled, do maintain collective continuance, but that future is far from guaranteed. Ecologically and politically the problem is not just an impending climate crisis and further settler colonial states' encroachment on Indigenous lives and lands; what is also at stake are kinship relations with land that make Indigenous collective continuance possible. The situation is dire. It might take a miracle.

3. Miracle without Exception

We are given permission
by the responsibility we accept
and carry out. Nothing more,
nothing less.

People are not born.
They are made when they become
human beings within ritual,
tradition, purpose, responsibility.
- Simon J. Ortiz, "Becoming Human"⁸³

Perhaps the immanence of Simpson's miracle gets at something about the tradition of miracles in Jewish and Christian thought that political theologies like those of Hobbes and Schmitt overlook. They imagine the miracle as a break with the order of nature, the status quo over which the divine is sovereign and can thus make the choice to disrupt. Simpson's miracle is also about a sort of power and strength, but one that is not identifiable with that of the strong sovereign state. Her vision of the miraculous seems to intersect with that of the womanist theologian Delores Williams, who wrote that "Faith has taught me to see the miraculous in everyday life: the miracle of ordinary black women resisting and rising above evil forces in society, where forces work to destroy and subvert the creative power and energy my mother and

⁸³ Simon J. Ortiz, *After and Before the Lightning* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 64.

grandmother taught me God gave black women.”⁸⁴ For Simpson and Williams, the miracle is not a break with a natural order but with an unjust human ordering of our social lives. If the miracle is an exception, it is not a deviation from creation but from the status quo of oppression.

If we follow Giorgio Agamben and understand Indigenous and Black existence in settler colonial and anti-Black societies as having been rendered into bare life—those that “may be killed and yet not sacrificed”—we might think of Simpson’s understanding of the miracle as an undoing of the Schmittian exception.⁸⁵ Agamben insists that, “Bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion.”⁸⁶ Simpson might respond that the real miracle—the exception not to the natural order but to the structures of death and destruction—is not the sovereign decision to exclude but is the continual decision of Indigenous peoples to refuse the terms of order of settler colonial sovereignty. Through solidarity with other struggles, the miracle of indigenous survival opens up toward an inclusive horizon. Even while Simpson identifies *whiteness* as having no part to play in resurgence, she holds onto the possibility that some white people might prove themselves allies.

Simpson’s miracle of survival seems to rhyme with an account of the miraculous found in a thinker like Franz Rosenzweig, for whom the miracle should not be understood as a “magical intervention in the created Creation.”⁸⁷ For Rosenzweig, the attempt to enact a miracle as a disruptive force in natural or legal order is actually the work of sorcery: “The magician actively

⁸⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁸⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 120.

intervenes against the course of the world...He attack's God's Providence and wants to snatch, bully and force from it, by trickery or by force, that which is unforeseen and unforeseeable of it, that which is willed by its own will."⁸⁸ The work of the magician bears a striking resemblance to Schmitt's sovereign who decides of his own volition on the exception. For Rosenzweig, the miracle is itself embedded in God's creation of and desire for the world: "it is entirely sign, entirely a making visible and becoming audible of the Providence originally hidden in the mute night of Creation, entirely—Revelation. Revelation is therefore always new only because it is immemorially old."⁸⁹ The miracle, as sign, demands to be read. This is, to be sure, not totally dissimilar to the Hobbesian and Schmittian miracle that is intelligible only to the community of the elect gathered around the sovereign. But for Rosenzweig, the power of the miracle does not hold sway over the elect through the presence or absence of protective force. Rather, the miracle is readable because it describes a creation of which one is part: "[Revelation] renews the immemorial Creation into the ever newly created present because that immemorial Creation itself is already nothing other than the sealed prediction that God renews from day to day the work of the beginning."⁹⁰

This revelatory power of the miracle, however, does not make its witnesses into passive watchers. Rosenzweig connects the miracle to prophecy. The prophet "unveils by foreseeing that which is willed by Providence; by telling the sign—and even that which would be sorcery in the hands of the magician would be sign in the mouth of the prophet—he demonstrates the hand of

⁸⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁹⁰ Ibid; one might notice a resemblance to an account of the miracle like that of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In §47 of his *Christian Faith*, he insists on the impossibility of what he calls an absolute miracle, or "the suspension of the interrelatedness of nature by miracles." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 180.

Providence, which the magician denies.”⁹¹ Prophecy’s relationship to miracle is not simply to explain or offer evidence of the miracle, but rather serves as what the political theorist Bonnie Honig calls “predictive prophecy” that “makes providence manifest (behold!).” For Honig, however, this sort of prophecy which demonstrates the providential nature of the miracle is also connected to what she calls “remonstrating prophecy” that “calls the people to repent lest they be punished for their sins (or else!).”⁹² So, both the prophet and the people have interpretive work to do in response to the miracle. They must be able to both read the sign as providential and respond appropriately. But the people’s active response to the miracle—their testifying to both the historical and personal meaning of it—is also embedded within the miraculous providential ordering of creation: “The word of man is symbol: at every moment it is newly created in the mouth of the one who speaks, yet only because it is from the very beginning and already bears within its womb each speaker who one day brings about the miracle of renewal in it.”⁹³ So the response, the speech of the speaker in the wake of the miracle, is not an interruption of the divine’s relation with creation, but neither is it the response of an automaton. It is the response of a co-participant with the divine in the unfolding of creation and providence.

There are, I think, some limitations in trying to fully harmonize Rosenzweig’s account of the miracle with what Simpson is suggesting about the miracle of Black, brown, and Indigenous survival on the land. For example, there is the fact that Rosenzweig associates sorcery and magic with the idea of the pagan. Paganism is played off against revelation and providence: “And unlimited Providence is precisely this, the fact that really, without God’s will, not a hair falls

⁹¹ Ibid., 105.

⁹² Bonnie Honig, “The Miracle of Metaphor: Rethinking the State of Exception with Rosenzweig and Schmitt,” *Diacritics* 37, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2007): 94.

⁹³ Rosenzweig, 121.

from man's head, is the new concept of God that Revelation brings; the concept establishes God's relationship to world and man with a unequivocalness and unconditionality totally foreign to paganism."⁹⁴ For Rosenzweig, the gods of the pagans are removed from the day-to-day creaturely world.⁹⁵ It would seem that, for him, the distance of the pagan gods is what allows the magician to manipulate and disrupt the normal flow of the world. What Rosenzweig seems to have in mind, however, is the pagan polytheism of Greek antiquity rather than, say, Indigenous North American spiritual beliefs and practices.⁹⁶

In fact, one of Rosenzweig's chief concerns is to reassert creation's place within theological concern. Creation is not just about origins, but about God's self-disclosure and purposes for the world: "So it is a matter of giving back to Creation its full weight of objectivity by putting it back on the level of the experience of Revelation; and still more: it is a matter of re-inserting into the concept of Creation Revelation itself with its bond and origin that connects it to the firm hope in the coming of the ethical kingdom of the ultimate Redemption."⁹⁷ It seems to me that it is not pagans—at least not if one is talking about indigenous beliefs and practices—who have let

⁹⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁵ "For, relieving him of any need and refusing to establish his creative work in his essence, it threatens to free God from any necessary connection to the world; but by doing this, God's creative self-emergence is made into a mere unessential factuality for him, and God's essence is thrust into a height that is foreign to the world, raised above the world—but isn't this what the pagans teach?" Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 125.

⁹⁶ Eric Santner suggests that "Greek antiquity formed the paradigm for Rosenzweig's understanding of the world in the form of the third person)." Santner is making a slightly different point but I think it still holds true that Rosenzweig is to particular interested in religious or spiritual practices of non-Western peoples, but rather is chiefly concerned with the ancient near eastern worldviews out of which Judaism and Christianity arise and from which they attempt to make themselves distinct. See: Eric L. Santner, "Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor," in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 117.

⁹⁷ Rosenzweig, 113.

creation fall out of theological relevance, but precisely the modern iterations of religions that emphasize revelation. So, perhaps critiques of paganism do not point to the actual beliefs of some particular non-Jewish or non-Christian tradition but rather represent a way for Rosenzweig to call out a deficiency closer to his own traditional home.

I want to suggest that this intimacy between creation, revelation, and redemption is more evident in Simpson's understanding of the miraculous than it is in many Jewish and Christian traditions, especially with regard to the status of the other-than-human beings present in creation. While Rosenzweig wants to reconnect creation to revelation and redemption, it would seem that the other-than-human creation merely stands as a cipher for God's self-disclosure to humans, not a genuine participant in God's work in the world.⁹⁸ Counter to viewing the other-than-human world as passive, Simpson suggests that crucial to Nishinaabeg resurgence is the necessity of having "people engaged with land as curriculum and engaged in our languages for decades, not weeks."⁹⁹ Might we see this, then, as people being inculcated into interpreting the persistence of Nishinaabeg people on the land as a miracle? Moreover, the time-intensive process of learning on, from, and with the land is not simply about adopting the right cosmology or metaphysics, but is, as we have seen a properly ethical, political, and, I would add, theological practice. In describing Indigenous practices related to the sacredness of particular places, Vine Deloria, Jr.

⁹⁸ Virginia Burrus sees Rosenzweig as recovering for modern theology a deeply Augustinian sensibility that creation itself represent the chief miracle. But, in typically Augustinian fashion, the end of this vision of the miraculous results in a semiotics whereby creation can only signify beyond itself. Through an incarnational logic, human creatures receive some extra measure of significance, but this is all in the service of perceiving "God *fully embodied in creation*...from the vantage point of one's own embeddedness in creation." See: Virginia Burrus, "Augustine, Rosenzweig, and the Possibility of Experiencing Miracle," in *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, ed. Gregory C. Stallings, Manuel Asensi, and Carl Good (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 108; emphasis in original.

⁹⁹ Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 23.

writes,

Yet the ceremonies have very little to do with individual or tribal prosperity. Their underlying theme is one of gratitude expressed by human beings on behalf of all forms of life. They act to complete and renew the entire and complete cycle of life, ultimately including the whole cosmos present in its specific realizations, so that in the last analysis one might describe ceremonials as the cosmos becoming thankfully aware of itself.¹⁰⁰

This strikes me as a way of narrating what Rosenzweig means by a miracle. It is an attunement and response to places whose sacredness communicates not a break with the normal order of creation but rather reveals creation's place in the divine purpose for the cosmos.

Being able to witness the miracle, for Deloria, is not simply about looking backwards at past occurrences, but requires that one "always be ready to experience new revelations at new locations. If this possibility did not exist, all deities and spirits would be dead." The living reality of the divine, then, necessitates that the community "always look forward to the revelation of new sacred places and ceremonies." It is precisely this openness to new revelations that Deloria sees foreclosed by "federal courts, scholars, and state and federal agencies" who enforce the criterion that a sacred place must have "*always* been central to the beliefs and practices of an Indian tribe."¹⁰¹ We might interpret this tendency as an example of what the cultural geographer Nicholas Howe calls the "secular suspicion of territorial religiosity."¹⁰² For Howe, this suspicion is aimed at all religiosity, even while its underlying assumptions makes it easier for white Christians to put monuments on public land than for Indigenous peoples to have land protected as sacred. Deloria, however, sees this prohibition on new sacred landscapes as letting "secular

¹⁰⁰ Vine Deloria, Jr., "Sacred Places and Moral Responsibility," in *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, ed. Samuel Scinta, Kristen Foehner, and Barbara Deloria (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 332.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 333; emphasis in original.

¹⁰² Nicolas C. Howe, *Landscapes of the Secular: Law, Religion, and American Sacred Space* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 87.

institutions rule on the substance of religious belief and practice.”¹⁰³ To use the Schmittian political theology of sovereignty, I might suggest that one way settler colonial states draw on the exception is to decide when and for whom territorial religiosity can be acknowledged and protected. As Mark Rifkin puts it, “The performative citation of sovereignty by the United States depends on the creation of a state of exception for Native peoples.” But this exception is not just about undermining indigenous claims to self-determination, but is principally about treating “Native peoples as having constrained, diminished, political control over themselves *and their lands*.”¹⁰⁴ Whereas settler colonial sovereignty undermines indigenous “control” over their lands, for thinkers like Coulthard, Simpson, Tinker, and Deloria, indigenous sovereignty is not about control over the other-than-human landscape but rather about relations of reciprocity.

Perhaps ironically, reciprocity is what the politics of recognition is supposed to be able to bring about between the state and Indigenous peoples. But as Coulthard notes, “rather than leading to a condition of reciprocity the dialectic either breaks down with explicit *non*recognition of the equal status of the colonized population, or with the strategic ‘domestication’ of the terms of recognition leaving the foundation of the colonial relationship relatively undisturbed.”¹⁰⁵ I see in Coulthard’s analysis a parallel between how the state relates to Indigenous peoples and how settler colonial societies relate to the other-than-human world. Other-than-humans cannot be granted recognition under regimes of settler colonial sovereignty and so either are subjected to domination or domestication. For Indigenous societies to treat other-than-human relations as co-participants in political community is not just a distinct mode of relationality, but is in fact a

¹⁰³ Deloria, “Sacred Places,” 333.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Rifkin, “Indigenizing Agamben: Rethinking Sovereignty in Light of the ‘Peculiar’ Status of Native Peoples,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 73 (Fall 2009): 97.

¹⁰⁵ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 40.

threat to settler colonial sovereignty itself.

I think this is why Coulthard finds instructive Fanon's insistence that "those struggling against colonialism must 'turn away' from the colonial state and society and instead find in their own *decolonial praxis* the source of their liberation." For Coulthard, this means not simply a full recovery of Indigenous practices and modes of life of the past, but rather "some form of critical individual and collective *self*-recognition on the part of Indigenous societies...with the understanding that our cultural practices have much to offer regarding the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world built on the principles of reciprocity and respectful coexistence."¹⁰⁶ Put another way, reciprocal relations with the land are not simply a recovery of a form of life stolen through settler colonial sovereignty; it is a vision of the political that refuses and moves beyond a vision of sovereignty built on the exception. This is because the exception of Indigenous peoples from settler colonial politics is built upon a larger exception: the exclusion of the land itself from participation in political life.

Indigenous sovereignty eschews not only the decision on the exception but also avoids what we might call the decision for inclusion. Indigenous visions of political life are not arguing that their community should be the ultimate arbiter of whether land should or should not be a part of the political community. The land just is a relational entity, one whose way of being in the world requires knowledge and interpretation. It is not the case, however, that Indigenous peoples possess inherent capacities for reciprocal relations with land. These ways of life must be learned. As we have seen, Simpson suggests that what is really necessary for land as pedagogy to take place is time, perhaps decades. Deloria agrees and he worries that with the acceleration of ecological crises "[t]here is probably not sufficient time for the non-Indian population to

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 48; emphasis in original.

understand the meanings of sacred lands and incorporate the idea into their lives and practices.”¹⁰⁷ So, the freedom of Indigenous peoples to live in reciprocal relations with land is crucial because non-Indigenous peoples need to follow the lead of those communities more experienced and practiced in these modes of living.

David Temin calls this form of politics “earthmaking” precisely because it “affirms the realization of human freedom as interdependence...with the land itself, which anthropocentric sovereign formations must continually deny in crafting ever-more perfected modes of territorial domination that disavow interdependence with the other-than-human.”¹⁰⁸ I find this narration clarifying, but I might quibble just a bit with the terminology. ‘Earthmaking’ sounds, at least to me, like a constructivist account of indigenous relations with the land, that could be interpreted as underemphasizing the other-than-human agency at work in this decolonial effort. Indigenous thinkers like Deloria, Simpson and Coulthard would surely agree that human work is necessary for recovering and continuing new forms of relations with the land, but the mutuality of those relationships is, I think, the point. Resisting settler colonial sovereignty requires not only the realization that the *earth* can be made otherwise, but also the equally important revelation that the earth can make *you* otherwise as well. If the sovereign exception is to be resisted with a creation-based account of the miracle, then it is of critical importance that the land is not simply acted upon but can also act. Simpson’s language of the miraculous persistence of Indigenous peoples *on the land* should not turn other-than-humans into merely an environment, a habitat, or a backdrop. No, peoples being on the land is a form of relationality, a mode of life together, not just a location.

¹⁰⁷ Deloria, “Sacred Places and Moral Responsibility,” 337.

¹⁰⁸ Temin, 16-17.

To ground an account of indigenous sovereignty in miracle represents not only a different starting point but also a different ending point for political theology. Rather than trying to model sovereignty on divine transcendence, indigenous sovereignty requires a radical sort of immanence. It is not the case that for Indigenous peoples there are no spiritual entities or divinities. But one's relationship with these beings is not about escaping from or rising above the rest of creation. As Deloria argues regarding sacred places, "[t]hey properly inform us that we are not larger than nature and that we have responsibilities to the rest of the natural world that transcend our own personal desires and wishes."¹⁰⁹ If the power of sovereignty can be analogized to the miracle, it is not a miracle that narrows the scope of one's responsibility—as with Schmitt's exception—but widens it. Power is not about foreclosing care for certain relations but is about demonstrating that there is no end to the care we are responsible for.

Leanne Simpson illustrates this responsibility for care and its relevance to sovereignty in describing a relationship with a canoe made out of "birch, spruce, cedar, and ironwood":

In my home space, I share both time and space with these four trees and many others, as living sovereign beings. I am ethically required to seek out their consent and engage in reciprocity with these trees as a way of living in this world. I am required to nurture and maintain a meaningful relationship with them—from harvesting and using their medicine, to protecting their access to the things they need to live, to defending their habitat from life-ending forces, to engaging in conversation prayer with their spirits...in short, in order to harvest these trees, I am required to engage in an ongoing intimate relationship with each of these living beings. Put another way, I am required to carry the responsibilities for these relationships throughout the entire time I'm in relation to the canoe. When the canoe can no longer fulfill its purpose, I'm also required to return it to the earth, so that life can break it down into its constituents and make more life anew. If I can no longer fulfill my responsibilities to the canoe, I must find someone else who can.¹¹⁰

This passage is worth quoting at length because it offers an exhaustive picture of what care for

¹⁰⁹ Deloria, "Sacred Places and Moral Responsibility," 337.

¹¹⁰ Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, 142.

relations entails. This is a vision of what we might call miracle without exception. The miracle of indigenous persistence on the land opens up relations. It calls for both broader awareness and deeper perception of the ways that one's life is embedded within the world. Sovereignty, then, is not about asserting oneself over and above others, but about one's ability to live within "a cascading, ever-expanding series of relationships, of attachments, of belongings, that generate meaning from connectivity."¹¹¹ Making this connectivity the starting point for an understanding of power means that there is no isolated self or collectivity through which one might decide on the exception. Living responsibly in such a world means that no exception is truly possible. There is no way to except oneself or other beings from the world in which we are all enmeshed.

This, of course, presents a multitude of problems for modern political and theological thought. The political theorist and scholar of international relations Jens Bartelson argues that "sovereignty and knowledge implicate each other logically and produce each other historically."¹¹² So, the problem is not just that we have to learn a new way of understanding sovereignty and with it new underlying concepts like Simpson's account of the miraculous. This is, of course, true. But we also must reckon with the ways that we have been shaped by settler colonial sovereignty, even, perhaps mostly, unknowingly. It is no small task to change one's relationship to an object as seemingly small as a canoe or an intertwining web of relations as immense as the landscape on which we each find ourselves. We can, of course, accept—intellectually at least—that we are or have relations. Simply acknowledging this reality, however, does very little to teach us how to behave responsively and responsibly in the world. I am reminded of Stanley Cavell's discussion of our separateness from one another. For Cavell,

¹¹¹ Ibid., 143.

¹¹² Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 5.

we are separate, language-using creatures, “but not necessarily separated (by something).” To be separate, to be in need of language as way of relating ourselves to others, means that, “If something separates us, comes between us, that can only be a particular aspect or stance of the mind itself, a particular way in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another—our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another. Call this our history. It is our present.”¹¹³ To deal with the particular ways we relate and are related would seem to require cataloguing the structures and concepts that mediate our relations. But the difficulty, of course, is putting those mediations where we can see them, making visible and recognizable both the personal and systematic forms of sovereignty through which we make sense of and live out our lives.

To that end, the next section turns to a literary site from which we might see our entanglement in settler colonial sovereignty and imagine our way out of it. I turn to Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1977 novel *Ceremony* in order to put in front of us a vision of a world (un)made by settler colonial sovereignty as well as the possibility that it might be otherwise.

4. Ceremony

Lean into me.
The universe
sings in quiet meditation.
- Simon J. Ortiz, “Culture and the Universe”¹¹⁴

In her 1977 debut novel *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko—who is of Laguna Pueblo, white, and Mexican descent—tells the story of Tayo, a mixed-race Laguna man who is attempting to

¹¹³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 369.

¹¹⁴ Simon J. Ortiz, *Out There Somewhere* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 104; emphasis in original.

make sense of his world after returning home to New Mexico from serving in the Pacific during World War II. I turn to Silko's text to provide a site from which to think the stakes of sovereignty—both settler colonial and Indigenous—which she so clearly depicted nearly fifty years ago. Silko's text provides a helpful place from which to think about how settler colonial sovereignty has built the world we reside in. She draws on Laguna story and song to enact a curative process for both Tayo and for the world. She weaves Tayo's journey—and presumably that of her reader—into a larger narrative in which all beings are part. She does this through showing how indigenous understandings of power are dependent upon the interconnected nature of the world. A world where the welfare of human and other-than-human beings is bound together is also one where that connection can be exploited by destructive forces. I read *Ceremony*, then, as offering both a vision of the destruction and healing of that capacity for relationality that grounds indigenous sovereignty.

We first encounter Tayo as he restlessly dreams in a California veterans' hospital about his experience in the Philippines. He fixates upon the experience of seeing a captive Japanese soldier being gunned down, an experience made all the more disturbing by his conviction that the unarmed man was, in reality, his uncle Josiah back in New Mexico who stood in as a paternal figure in the absence of his biological father. Tayo's cousin Rocky—Josiah's son and the closest thing Tayo has to a sibling—was deployed in the same unit and tried to convince him that not only was this not his uncle but that the killing of this captured man was part of being an American soldier: "Hey, I know you're homesick. But, Tayo, we're *supposed* to be here. This is what we're supposed to do."¹¹⁵ But Tayo is unable to integrate this trauma. He knows—however illogical it seems—that the Japanese man shot to death in the jungle was his uncle.

¹¹⁵ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 8; emphasis in original.

The world-destroying significance of his experience at war is driven home for Tayo when his cousin Rocky is killed after they are captured and forced to participate in the Bataan Death March. During his time in the jungle, and especially during his captivity, Tayo had been praying for the incessant rains to stop. This becomes especially pertinent as Rocky is succumbing to combat injuries and Tayo worries that he will not survive the trek: “Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching or the Japanese grenade that was killing Rocky. He would blame the rain if the Japs saw how the corporal staggered; if they saw how weak Rocky had become, and came to crush his head with the butt of the rifle, then it would be the rain and the green all around that killed him.”¹¹⁶ Rocky does eventually perish. But Tayo’s attempts to make the rain stop persists even after his cousin’s passing. In the jungle Tayo “damned the rain until the words were a chant,”¹¹⁷ but the effects of these incantations are only realized upon his return to New Mexico: “So he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry; the grass turned yellow and it did not grow. Wherever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying.”¹¹⁸

It is significant for our present purposes to see how settler colonial sovereignty shapes Tayo’s experience. His memory of his time at war highlights two examples of the sort of sovereignty which we saw with a thinker like Schmitt. First, we see the sovereign decision on the exception with the killing of captured Japanese soldiers. Even preceding the Geneva Conventions that came in the aftermath of World War II, the 1907 Hague Conventions protected captured enemy soldiers from mistreatment and execution.¹¹⁹ For Tayo’s unit to decide to kill unarmed Japanese

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁹ Erazak Tileubergenova et al., “Defining the Regulations of War in the Hague Convention of 1907,” *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2016, 251.

men is a decision on the exception from the laws of war. Second, Tayo's attempts at speaking away the rain represent the sort of miracle that Schmitt analogizes to sovereignty and Rosenzweig calls sorcery; he is attempting—and believes himself to have accomplished—an exception to the natural order of things brought about through his own act of will. Tayo's experience fighting the Japanese represents both a sin of omission and a sin of commission; he failed to save his uncle Josiah and cousin Rocky in the Philippine jungle and he believes himself to have caused a drought through his chastisement of the rain. This latter act was something his uncle had warned him against: "But the wind and the dust, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky. You don't swear at them. It's people, see. They're the ones. The old people used to say that droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave."¹²⁰

After returning home, Tayo understands himself as personally culpable for the death of the Japanese soldiers, for not being able to save Rocky from the rain, and now for inadvertently bringing drought upon his Laguna homeland. In the hospital Tayo, speaking in third person, tells the doctor why he is so upset: "He cries because they are dead and everything is dying."¹²¹ The Veterans Affairs physicians are unable to help him deal with what he has and continues to experience, this pervasive sense of loss; U.S. government medicine leaves Tayo feeling "invisible," without identity. He was "white smoke" that "had no consciousness of itself."¹²² Upon being discharged from the hospital, Tayo encounters a Japanese family at the train station; believing Japanese people to still be in internment camps, Tayo experiences this as a shock and he once again sees his own kin in one of their faces: "He could still see the face of the little boy, looking back at him, smiling, and he tried to vomit that image from his head because it was

¹²⁰ Silko, *Ceremony*, 46.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 14.

Rocky's smiling face from a long time before, when they were little kids together...the little face was still there, so he cried at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place."¹²³ What, at first glance, appears to be a suggestion of Tayo's racism toward the Japanese he had fought in the war, opens up to a sense of worldlessness. People failing to be in their places is not a segregationist attitude, but a sense of loss. People, for Tayo, are supposed to belong to their places.

Even returning back to his family's home, Tayo does not feel at ease. With his uncle Josiah gone—we are never told specifics about his death, but Tayo continues to feel that he died in the jungle because of his inaction—the home where his remaining extended family reside feels only like a place of loss. The homemaker known as Auntie (Josiah's younger sister) has long been the source of Tayo's sense of alienation from the family. Tayo's mother was a prostitute; all we know of Tayo's father is that he was white. Tayo's mother left him with Auntie and Josiah to care for before she departed and eventually died. Auntie often remarks upon Tayo's mixed-blood status and sees this as a source of problems. Even a homecoming offers Tayo little solace or comfort: "He cried because he had to wake up to what was left: the dim room, empty beds [i.e., those of Josiah and Rocky], and a March dust storm rattling on the tin roof. He lay there with the feeling that there was no place left for him."¹²⁴ Both the human and other-than-human environments signal his sense of unease and the distance from the place. His family realize there is something wrong, but they have different diagnoses.

Tayo's grandmother believes that Tayo needs to see a medicine man. Auntie, a devout Christian who herself is skeptical of older indigenous ways, reiterates that the military hospital's

¹²³ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 32.

instructions were, “No Indian Medicine.”¹²⁵ Later in the novel Tayo reveals that the differences between Indigenous medicine men and the white doctors were not simply about scientific or technological sophistication. Tayo is told that the type of healing he needs can only come through personal responsibility: “he had to think only of himself and not about the others...he would never get well as long as he used words like ‘we’ and ‘us’.”¹²⁶ Despite Auntie’s protests, Tayo’s grandmother makes arrangements for him to see Ku’oosh, a medicine man who frames Tayo’s suffering within a broader problem affecting the world around them. He suggests that Tayo should have been taught more about the Laguna way of knowing the world before he went off “to the white people’s big war.” Specifically, Tayo needs to know that “this world is fragile.”¹²⁷ Ku’oosh believes that what Tayo is struggling with is not simply his alone to bear but has wider significance. Ku’oosh performs a ceremony but acknowledges that it may be of limited use. He says, “There are some things we can’t cure like we used to...not since the white people came...I’m afraid of what will happen to all of us if you and the others don’t get well.”¹²⁸

Ku’oosh’s way of interpreting Tayo’s sufferings are precisely the opposite of the white doctors. What ails Tayo is not an individual pathology but represents a larger trend that affects other Indigenous men who have returned from war, and, he fears, has wider consequences. The literary scholar Karen Piper argues that this distinction between white and Laguna medicine is grounded in particular forms of subject formation: “The constitution of the white subject, therefore, is equated with the erasure of context or relation. The Laguna subject...reads place, reads specificity, reads itself as a territorial subject.”¹²⁹ So, subject formation is found not just in

¹²⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 125.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹²⁹ Karen Piper, “Police Zones: Territory and Identity in Leslie Marmon Silko’s ‘Ceremony,’”

the stories we are told about ourselves, but in the ways that we read ourselves into or out of certain narratives. For Tayo, Ku'oosh's diagnosis confirms something he had previously learned in "old stories," specifically that "[i]t only took one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web."¹³⁰

Tayo is still thinking about his individual responsibility, but around him is a community of Indigenous men who returned from the fighting. These men allow him see the broader problem of which his individual experience is a symptom. He spends much of his time drinking with fellow Laguna veterans Harley and Leroy. These men see their status as veterans as affording them some recognition by white society, not to mention the "[c]ash from disability checks earned with shrapnel in the neck at Wake Island or shell shock on Iwo Jima."¹³¹ Another particularly violent Laguna veteran named Emo combines an internalized militaristic machismo with a deep hatred and resentment for white people: "What we need is what they got. I'll take San Diego...We fought their war for them...But they've got *everything*. And we don't got shit, do we?"¹³² Emo is something of a storyteller, and his preferred subjects are his sexual conquests of white women and his violent dehumanization of Japanese captives; he carries around a bag of human teeth taken from soldiers he tortured during the war. He is especially callous about the United States' use of nuclear weapons: "We should've dropped bombs on all the rest and blown them off the face of the earth."¹³³ As Katja Sarkowsky observes, "Where Tayo recognizes the Japanese soldiers as distant relatives...Emo hates and seeks to destroy what he perceives as

American Indian Quarterly 21, no. 3 (July 1, 1997): 489.

¹³⁰ Silko, *Ceremony*, 38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 55.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 61.

different.”¹³⁴

Tayo sees his fellow veterans as having donned the uniform and flag of the United States in an effort to be recognized by that nation. He tries to tell his friends the story of what happened when they joined the military: “They got the same medals for bravery, the same flag over the coffin.”¹³⁵ But with the end of the war that recognition faded and they went back to being second-class racialized Indians. Life on the Laguna reservation, funded by government checks and fueled by binges, was an attempt “to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war. They blamed themselves for losing the new feeling; they never talked about it, but they blamed themselves just like they blamed themselves for losing the land the white people took. They never thought to blame white people for any of it; they wanted white people for their friends.”¹³⁶ Tayo develops the ability, however inchoate, to see their situation; he begins to see past the individualized responsibility taught by white people and see the connection between a loss of status as a veteran and the loss of land. He also sees the options available to him: the inebriated resignation of Harley and Leroy, or else the envious and violent bitterness of Emo. Tayo realizes that both options were themselves becoming a new Laguna ceremony: “Tayo knew what they had been trying to do. They repeated stories about good times in Oakland and San Diego; they reported them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding the counter tops like drums.”¹³⁷

Recognizing his inability to help these Laguna veterans and their fragile world, Ku’oosh

¹³⁴ Katja Sarkowsky, “Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977),” in *Handbook of the American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. Timo Müller, vol. 4 (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2017), 344.

¹³⁵ Silko, *Ceremony*, 42.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

sends Tayo to the town of Gallup where another medicine man named Betonie resides. Even Auntie thinks it odd for a medicine man to live in Gallup, a town known for its ceremonial—a performance of Indian dances organized by white people for the tourism business—and for the impoverished Indigenous people who live in its shantytown. Betonie lives in the foothills above the town and he tells Tayo that he remains in the place because “I want to keep track of the people.” Gallup is segregated with Indians living next to the river and the town garbage dump, but Betonie insists that the white people “don’t understand. We know these hills, and we are comfortable here.” Tayo understands Betonie to mean “not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the pace of being with these hills.”¹³⁸ That Betonie can speak of his connection to place in the midst of so much squalor signals to Tayo that this is not a typical medicine man. Rather than avoiding what seems to be the breakdown of indigenous ways of life and the victory of white political and economic power, Betonie stays close to it; he wants to be near enough to understand exactly what is going on.

Betonie insists that his home predates the town: “this hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man.”¹³⁹ From his home and also while traveling around the country by train Betonie has been performing a reconnaissance of a sort. He collects telephone books from big cities and boxes full of newspapers, but also more typical medicine man accoutrement like roots and sage and mountain tobacco. In his hogan these collections are arranged in a pattern, but he insists that Tayo not “try to see everything all at once.”¹⁴⁰ Tayo is not completely sure about Betonie or his idiosyncratic medicine man customs. But Tayo senses a power to this man and a feeling that he

¹³⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 120.

understands his predicament. Betonie lays out Tayo's options. Tayo can return to the reservation and die a slow death like the Indians in the shantytown: "sleeping in the mud, vomiting cheap wine, rolling over women." Or perhaps worse, he could return to the Veteran's Affairs way of "healing": "In that hospital they don't bury the dead, they keep them in rooms and talk to them."¹⁴¹ This seems to convince Tayo to open up to Betonie.

He recounts the story of watching Josiah die in the Philippines and of Rocky's death. Far from seeing Tayo as crazy, Betonie affirms that he actually had a proper vision that caused him to see Josiah and Rocky in the faces of the Japanese: "You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world."¹⁴² Literary critics have divergent views on exactly what constitutes the "witchery" Betonie invokes here and which plays the role of the central antagonistic force throughout the novel. David A. Rice points to "the culture of urbanized Euramerica and all the ecological and social ills it breeds."¹⁴³ While I agree that white people's disconnection of themselves and other peoples from relations with the land is clearly a central symptom of the witchery, it is important to recognize that Betonie tells Tayo that "white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates." In fact, white people themselves are actually the products of "Indian witchery."¹⁴⁴ The prose poetry of the novel communicates a fuller picture of how this happened:

Long time ago
in the beginning
there were no white people in this world

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁴² Ibid., 124.

¹⁴³ David A. Rice, "Witchery, Indigenous Resistance, and Urban Space in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 117.

¹⁴⁴ Silko, *Ceremony*, 132.

there was nothing European.
And this world might have gone on like that
except for one thing:
witchery.¹⁴⁵

This primordial world is not a world without differences in peoples. The poem tells us that the origin of whiteness—understood as a way of using difference to divide people by race—is the result of all sorts of people practicing witchery: “Some had slanty eyes / others had black skin. / They all got together for a contest...except this was a contest / in dark things.”¹⁴⁶ One of the participants in this contest attempts to show off, and tells the story of the worst thing they can image, but the power of this story lies with the fact in the telling of it “*it will begin to happen.*”

The story is a tale of disconnection:

*Then they will grow away from the earth
Then they will grow away from the sun
then they will grow away from the plants and animals.
They see no life
When they look
they see only objects.*¹⁴⁷

This story that the witch unleashes leads to widespread fear, ecological devastation, violence, and diseases. It culminates with a discovery, one which the poem locates in the New Mexico geography:

*Up here
in these hills
they will find the rocks,
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks
They will lay it across the world
And explode everything.*¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 132-33.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.; emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 137; emphasis in original.

I read this narrative of broken relationships that culminates with the explosion of the world as signaling the core of witchery. Witchery at its heart is about broken relations, but this damage will not stay contained. It unleashes a seemingly unstoppable force. In fact, the other witches who hear the story are so troubled by it that they want the teller to “Call that story back,” but they are told “*It is already turned loose. / It’s already coming. / It can’t be called back.*”¹⁴⁹ This unstoppable force, this destruction, is parasitic on relationality. As the religion and ecology scholar Mark Cladis puts it, “The witchery had exploited that very interconnection in order to bring about catastrophic harm.”¹⁵⁰ The interconnectedness of all things, when turned against itself, becomes the conduit for genocide, ecocide, and ultimately something we might think of as cosmocide.

In *Ceremony*, witchery is always bound up with partition, with separatedness. Witchery’s impulse—affecting everyone, regardless of culture or location—is, I think, the impulse toward settler colonial sovereignty. It is the inclination to decide on the exception, to demarcate which part of the world not only is not part of *us*, but which part does not deserve to exist at all. Perhaps, the problem with sovereignty is not that we have the power to decide on the exception, but actually we do not have enough power to make that decision effective. As Wendell Berry put it in “The Body and the Earth,”

For no matter the distinctions we draw between body and soul, body and earth, ourselves and others—the connections, the dependencies, the identities remain. And so we fail to contain or control our violence. It gets loose. Though there are categories of violence, or so we think, there are no categories of victims. Violence against one is ultimately violence against all.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 138; emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁰ Mark Cladis, “Leslie Silko: Nuclear Landscapes, Environmental Catastrophe, and the Power of Indigenous Storytelling,” *Ecokritike* 1, no. 1 (2023): 8.

¹⁵¹ Wendell Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 81, no. 1 (Spring 1994):

But then what is to be done about this witchery? How does one resist, let alone heal, a force which feeds off of the very power of relation? Betonie suggests that for Tayo what is necessary is a ceremony. But this ceremony will not be like Ku'oosh's one-off healing ritual and it will not simply be one of the old Laguna practices. The whole point of Betonie diligently keeping track of the goings on in the wider white world is to be ready to improvise. The old ceremonies were sufficient to their times, "[b]ut after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies...The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong."¹⁵²

For Tayo, Betonie outlines not the exact procedure of the ceremony he must carry out but only a handful of signs that he must look for. He tells him of a certain pattern of stars that are connected with some other important figures Tayo should be ready to encounter: "I've seen the spotted cattle; I've seen a mountain and I've seen a woman."¹⁵³ The spotted cattle refer to a breed of Mexican cattle that Tayo's uncle Josiah had been raising but that had been stolen. These cattle were different than most raised by white people; they were accustomed to the desert, more hearty and able to survive off the land. Josiah had purchased them against the wishes of his family who thought the animals a poor investment. The Mexican cattle had been Tayo and Josiah's work together, and with Tayo deployed to the Pacific he had been unable to help his uncle search for them. Tayo has dreams about the cows and his inability to recover them.

Tayo understands Betonie's vision to mean that his ceremony involves recovering the stolen cows. He sets off onto the nearby mountain and encounters a woman, Ts'eh. But Ts'eh is not just any woman. She identifies herself as a Montaña—apparently a known family in the area but also

134.

¹⁵² Silko, *Ceremony*, 126.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 152.

the Spanish term for mountain—but interpreters of *Ceremony* have typically understood her to be an incarnation of Ts'its'tsi'nako, also known as Spider Woman or Thought Woman, an important figure in Laguna cosmology and the stories of other Indigenous peoples of the American southwest.¹⁵⁴ *Ceremony* opens with poetry about her: “Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, / is sitting in her room / and whatever she thinks about / appears.”¹⁵⁵ When Tayo encounters Ts'eh for the first time, he tells her that he is looking for the spotted cattle. She replies that “[S]omebody sent you.” She extends hospitality to Tayo and his horse, and after spending an evening with her she points him to the night's clear sky only for him to see the constellation of stars Betonie had told him to look for. Tayo spends the summer with Ts'eh and they become lovers.

During his time living on the mountain with Ts'eh, Tayo searches and eventually locates the stolen cattle, fenced in with a heavy-duty fence by ranchers: “a thousand dollars a mile to keep Indians and Mexicans out; a thousand dollars a mile to lock the mountain in steel wire, to make the land his.” The fence, put in by a white rancher named Floyd Lee, is built in such a manner that it not only keeps the Mexican cattle contained but also “was buried underground so animals could not crawl or dig under it.”¹⁵⁶ Tayo cuts the fence and herds the spotted cows out of the opening, but he is discovered by the ranch hands. In his attempt to escape, Tayo falls from his horse and, while he is waiting to be found by the ranchers, a mountain lion appears nearby. Tayo acknowledges the lion, “‘Mountain lion,’ he whispered, ‘becoming what you are with each breath, your substance changing with the earth and sky.’” In a moment of recognition, the

¹⁵⁴ Hailey David E., “The Visual Elegance of Ts'its'tsi'nako and the Other Invisible Characters in ‘Ceremony,’” *Wicazo Sa Review* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 5; Sarkowsky, 22.

¹⁵⁵ Silko, *Ceremony*, 1.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

mountain lion sees Tayo and then proceeds on its way into the trees. Tayo follows a practice he had learned from his uncle Josiah and sprinkles yellow pollen that he carried with him into the paw prints left by the animal.¹⁵⁷

The ranchers eventually catch Tayo and plan to take him into custody, but while one of them goes off to fetch their truck they notice the mountain lion tracks and decide that killing a mountain lion is a more worthy use of their time than bringing in yet another Indigenous trespasser. So, they leave Tayo claiming to have already taught him a lesson, “These goddamn Indians got to learn whose property this is!”¹⁵⁸ The ranch hands do not, however, realize that Tayo has cut the fence and released the stolen cattle. The encounter with the ranchers leaves Tayo fuming, but this anger toward the ranchers “for what they did to the earth with their machines, and to the animals with their packs of dogs and their guns” serves as a clarifying moment. He sees clearly that indigenous jealousy for “white things” is indicative of the work of witchery:

The people had been taught to despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers. But they were wrong. It was the white people who had nothing; it was the white people who were suffering as thieves do, never able to forget that their pride was wrapped in something stolen, something that had never been, and could never be, theirs....only a few people knew that the lie was destroying the white people faster than it was destroying Indian people.¹⁵⁹

Tayo sees white people’s theft as stifling their spirits. Their ability to know and understand the world collapses into unfeelingness. He uses an agricultural analogy to describe them: “And what little remained to white people was shriveled like a seed hoarded too long, shrunken past its time,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 197.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 202.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 204.

and split open now, to expose a fragile, pale leaf stem, perfectly formed and dead.”¹⁶⁰ I take death here not as a reference to a natural process inherent in the existence of finite creatureliness, but as the lack of fecundity and connection witnessed in this dry seed. What is smothered or perhaps fenced in is the capacity for connection, for relationship, for growth, for newness. This, Tayo sees, is not just a form of negligence but is part of the violent, destructive work of witchery. But simply recovering the cattle and gaining this insight is not the end of his ceremony.

Tayo eventually returns the cattle to his uncle’s ranch. They have been injured and mistreated by the ranchers, but with Ts’eh’s help they are able to return them to health and allow them to move through the land as is their nature. Tayo eventually continues to spend time with Ts’eh and they reside with the cattle out in the backcountry. Ts’eh educates Tayo in the use of wild plants and asks him to collect some seeds for her so that they can complete the ceremony. After some time, Robert (Auntie’s husband) searches out the cattle in order to bring Tayo home. He warns him that Emo has been telling everyone that Tayo is crazy for living out on the land. Tayo does not return and Ts’eh tells him that he can avoid being taken back to the white hospital by staying in the backcountry long enough, but Emo is the main threat: “The only reason [the white doctors] come is because Emo called them.” It is Emo’s love of violence, not the white world, that is the primary impediment to Tayo finishing the ceremony.¹⁶¹

Ts’eh has to leave Tayo and he keeps moving through the land until he encounters Harley and Leroy. They pick him up in their truck. He briefly doubts himself and the ceremony but comes to realize that his “friends” have turned against him and are taking him to Emo. They take him to a place that makes him lose the “feeling Ts’eh had given him” and causes him to lose

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 232.

faith in the ceremony: “this was their place, and he was vulnerable.”¹⁶²

He flees from Harley and Leroy, and hides just out of site from them as they wait for Emo. The place they have arrived at is a uranium mine. Tayo realizes this is the site where the culmination of the witchery’s ceremony took place. The place with rocks laid in a pattern that will explode everything. This is the “point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid.” The threat of nuclear weapons, though, also revealed the interconnectedness of everything, the relations upon which the witchery’s destruction was parasitic: “From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.”¹⁶³ Piper notes that the immense power of nuclear weapons acts as a sort of antithesis of Laguna cosmology wherein “all cultures arrive from the same emergence place before they migrate to different locales.” So, “nuclear holocaust symbolizes [the world’s] union in death. The bomb in *Ceremony* forces the world to speak one language again.”¹⁶⁴ This scene, then, depicts two competing ceremonies and two irreconcilable aims; both ceremonies draw on the web of life, one orienting it toward death and the other toward healing.

In these two ceremonies we can see two competing visions of sovereignty. The ceremony resulting in nuclear weapons suspends what Schmitt calls “all normative ties.” Not just using but even the choice to make nuclear weapons becomes an “absolute” decision. As Schmitt

¹⁶² Ibid., 243.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 246.

¹⁶⁴ Piper, 494.

hauntingly puts it, “the norm is destroyed in the exception.”¹⁶⁵ For Schmitt this is fine because norms are grounded in a “normal situation” and it is the sovereign who decides when and where this exists.¹⁶⁶ Tayo’s ceremony, one that refuses to use interconnectedness for destructive ends, appeals to norms that extend beyond even sovereignty’s power. For thinkers like Coulthard and Simpson, Indigenous sovereignty does not rule over relationality but receives its power from it. This is why settler colonialism is so persistent in denying Indigenous peoples access to their lands. As Simpson puts it, “They work to destroy the fabric of Indigenous nationhoods by attempting to destroy our relationality by making it difficult to form sustainable, strong relationships with each other.”¹⁶⁷

Tayo understands the stakes of this confrontation taking place that night, in that place where world-destroying power was discovered and extracted. Emo arrives and builds a fire, being observed by Tayo who hides behind some rocks. Tayo sees that the witchery was working to use Indigenous people like Emo “so that the people would see only the losses—the land and the lives lost—since the whites came; the witchery would work so that the people would be fooled into blaming only the whites and not the witchery.” This impulse would cause them to “cling to ritual without making new ceremonies as they always had before.”¹⁶⁸ Like all of life, the ceremonies too need to change and grow. Otherwise, they would be no different from the dry seed held onto for too long, “perfectly formed and dead.” Tayo is unsure of how to respond to Emo. He wants to attack him, a desire made all the more compelling when he sees that Emo is torturing Harley, presumably for failing to deliver Tayo. Tayo considers his options about whether to confront

¹⁶⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 93.

¹⁶⁸ Silko, *Ceremony*, 249.

Emo directly; he has a screwdriver on him and he imagines it “jammed into Emo’s skull.” But this, he feels, would be to give into what the witchery desires.

The culmination of *his* ceremony would not be more bloodshed. To kill Emo would make himself “another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud.” White people would see proof of their superiority and of the failure of Indigenous people to make it in the world. Perhaps more troubling to Tayo, his own people would internalize guilt for the violence, “reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of themselves they could not save.”¹⁶⁹ He waits for Emo and the others to leave, and he vows to plant Ts’eh’s seeds and complete the ceremony. What Tayo takes from this is not as dramatic as the slaying of an enemy; Emo is not defeated in battle. But Tayo gains or perhaps regains an affective capacity. This ability to sense the world properly is what the ceremony’s healing looks like, not only for Tayo but for all his people: “The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs: we came out of this land and we are hers.”¹⁷⁰

Though I end this chapter with a protracted reading of *Ceremony*, there is a sense in which the novel provides the argument, or perhaps the materialization of the argument I have been making about sovereignty throughout this chapter. The fingerprints of settler colonial sovereignty—the power to decide on the exception—can be seen all through the novel: war crimes, white medicine based upon individualism, segregated Gallup with its Indian shantytown, the desire to use veteran status as a way to transcend the racial hierarchy, and even practices like the reinforced fencing used to contain the stolen spotted cattle. Settler colonial sovereignty of the exception refuses the ways we are implicated in the lives of each other and in the life of the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 253.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 255.

world, even as it works parasitically upon that very reality.

It is not surprising, then, that Silko saw the threat of nuclear weapons as the apotheosis of the witchery's work in the world. As seen in the United States' bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the concluding event's of Tayo's war—the atom bomb expands the power of the exception to an almost unimaginable scale. With the threat of nuclear holocaust, the scope of the exception becomes almost planetary. But we should note that Silko places the climax of *Ceremony* not at the Trinity site where the first bomb was tested (though its proximity is noted) but at an abandoned mine. These sites that litter the American southwest represent what Traci Lynne Voyles, in her study of uranium mining in Navajo lands, calls “wastelands.” These spaces “are (representationally but not empirically) hermetically sealed as place-bound containers of waste and contamination...They purport to keep the very real, material byproducts of the treadmill of production contained against spillage by lining the wasteland's borders with discourses of difference.” Voyles insists that the toxic legacy of these places refuses to honor human-constructed social and political boundaries.¹⁷¹ As I have suggested above, violence, fast or slow, whether done to human or other-than-human beings, uses systems and structures of connection. It uses relations against themselves.

Tayo's ceremony, then, cannot respond in kind to the threat of the witchery. It cannot seek to contain the destructive forces unleashed against the world through shutting down connections or denying our relations. This would only double down on settler colonial sovereignty's objective: to decide on who and where can be excluded from our political consideration. This mirrors the literary critic Sharon Holm's worries about people who offer depoliticized readings of *Ceremony*

¹⁷¹ Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 217.

precisely because the land stands as the primary source of sociality in the novel, as though the land were not a political entity in and of itself.¹⁷² Tayo's work in completing his ceremony is to refuse the temptation of the witchery while recovering the very sort of relationships it feeds on. But these relations must be informed by an affective capacity for care. This ability is itself learned from the land. Relationality as such is not sufficient. What is necessary is for Tayo to remember not just his affection for the land, but the land's care for him: "They had always been loved. He thought of [Ts'eh] then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there." This is the miracle of Indigenous people remaining on the land, not just a unilateral attachment to place, not just the ability to read and understand the story, but also the acknowledgement that the land cares for its people.

Conclusion

It's not humankind after all
nor is it culture
that limits us.
It is the vastness
we do not enter.
It is the stars
we do not let own us.

- Simon J. Ortiz, "Culture and the Universe"¹⁷³

I must confess to finding it a bit strange the way I have theorized sovereignty by connecting a Nazi jurist, Indigenous scholars and activists, an early twentieth century Jewish philosopher and theologian, and a late twentieth century novel, to name but a few of my interlocutors found throughout this chapter. But perhaps this strangeness belies the extent to which the subject matter

¹⁷² Sharon Holm, "The 'Lie' of the Land: Native Sovereignty, Indian Literary Nationalism, and Early Indigenism in Leslie Marmon Silko's 'Ceremony,'" *American Indian Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 243–74.

¹⁷³ Simon J. Ortiz, *Out There Somewhere* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 104.

of sovereignty has so deeply shaped (some might say irreversibly misshaped) our world to the point where the Third Reich, indigenous genocide, and environmental degradation can all appear as morbid symptoms of sovereignty's work on the world. What I have tried to show about sovereignty—settler colonial and indigenous—is that the politico-theological underpinnings, especially the notion of the miracle, depend very much on the stories we tell ourselves. Schmitt's story is one of friends and enemies, of the need to decide on who, what, or where the exception lies, and ultimately of a world where political life really just is war. I would not necessarily suggest that Schmitt's poor politics are the result primarily of a bad narration of what miracles mean in Christian thought. But I find his idea of the sovereign's ability to suspend the natural or political law difficult to square with a vision of a God whose covenants commit godself to fidelity to God's people and God's creation. If theologically this is bad, it is matched by historically materializing forms of settler colonial sovereignty that forecloses good-faith political engagement with Indigenous peoples and an inability to see land as anything other than territory or property. This, I have argued, is a form of deciding on the exception producing the political miracle of terra nullius, empty land that is there for the taking.

I have suggested that Indigenous thinkers' assertions of sovereignty not only refuse the settler colonial concepts that have led to indigenous dispossession, but ground their views of political life in their particular communities' ways of knowing and relating to the land. This is not something that can be universalized, but is a form of life contingent upon longstanding and often hard-fought knowledges of particular places. But though indigenous sovereignty cannot be essentialized, the various forms that reciprocal relations with land take clearly critique both settler colonial sovereignty and its theopolitics. Through my engagement with thinkers like Coulthard, Simpson, Deloria, and Silko, I have tried to suggest that indigenous sovereignty does

not simply make claims on Indigenous peoples but also on those whose lives are made possible by settler colonialism. I have also suggested that Indigenous peoples and their knowledges should not be seen as a technology for saving settlers from the myriad crises we face today. Just as indigenous knowledges and practices are the result of longstanding relationships with land, so anything non-indigenous people have to learn from them must be the result of good-faith, longstanding relationships based upon, at the very least, consent.¹⁷⁴

I see this chapter not as an attempt to learn from Indigenous people a better way to think about political sovereignty. I would imagine that any attempt by settlers to implement indigenous sovereignty in their own lives would be futile, if not indicative of the same sort of acquisitiveness that settler colonizers have always shown to things that belong to those peoples who were there first. If it is anything, I hope this chapter represents a politico-theological case for following Indigenous peoples in their efforts to resist and dismantling settler colonial sovereignty. What this will look like cannot be determined a priori, but it must, I would think, start not with land acknowledgments in this sense of knowing something. But acknowledgement in the form of asking the right questions: Whose land am I on? And, most importantly, what do they hope for this land, as kin, as relation, to be? These open-ended questions will likely feel inadequate for settlers because their answers will likely not empower with the questioner. Who wants to join in a movement which disempowers them?

The advocacy group The Red Nation initiated *The Red Deal* in 2019 in an effort to think about the interconnected struggles for “Indigenous treaty rights, land restoration, sovereignty,

¹⁷⁴ For a helpful discussion of the importance of consent in indigenous relations with non-indigenous peoples, see: Kyle Powys Whyte, “On Resilient Parasitisms, or Why I’m Skeptical of Indigenous/Settler Reconciliation,” in *Reconciliation, Transitional and Indigenous Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 155–67.

self-determination, decolonization, and liberation.”¹⁷⁵ They offer this radical political agenda not only in service of Indigenous sovereignty but also with the goal of “uniting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in a common struggle to save the Earth.”¹⁷⁶ Their politics do not seek to put Indigenous peoples or traditions in service of a larger liberation project. Rather they make the bold claim that there can be no liberated world without Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous peoples are not a technology to be plugged into a network of existing power relations understood on settler terms. Their ways of being with land represent a distinct politics, one inextricably bound up with particular places. The fight for “land back,” then, is rooted in Indigenous conceptions of power grounded in relations with the world. If there is work to be done by non-Indigenous peoples, it certainly must move beyond acknowledging Indigenous peoples and land. It will require following Indigenous peoples in their continual struggle to be with their lands. Only then will it be possible for them to become “the embodiment and affirmation of a coming Indigenous future, a future in which many worlds fit.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth* (Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions, 2021), 8.

¹⁷⁶ Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth* (Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions, 2021), 30.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

Chapter Four: Abolition

Introduction

In my chapters on property, territory, and sovereignty, I have tried to think about the ways these concepts shape our political, theological, and ecological imaginations. Property is not about possessing, but about being possessed. Territory asserts not a way of relating to space but to a future that belongs to those who the state produces and protects as citizens; in this arrangement, land is only a weapon, a bludgeon used to secure a future *for* insiders and *from* outsiders. Sovereignty is a form of political power that exists parasitically on creaturely relations. The sovereign asserts that politics is not about fostering those relationships but about deciding upon which relations count as significant, which ones matter and which ones do not. To think less abstractly, I have tied these concepts to particular histories and communities: the legacy of slavery and marronage, the westward territorial expansion of the United States and the concomitant formation of ideas of citizen and alien, and the conflicting understandings of political sovereignty as conceptualized and practiced by settler-colonizers and Indigenous peoples.

Thinking about political theology with maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous scholars, activists, and artists risks turning them into a ‘standing reserve’ for my own ecological, political, and theological reflection.¹ As a white cisgendered, male, heterosexual, citizen, settler, there is always the risk I might fall into long established patterns of transforming maroons, border

¹ I use the term “standing reserve” here following Heidegger’s use of the term *Bestand* in his “The Question Concerning Technology.” See: Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 17.

crossers, and indigenous scholar/activist/artists into a technology that allows *me* to deal with the problems that *I* think are most pressing. I think this danger is even more acute for Christian theologians who draw on subaltern sources. Marcella Althaus-Reid pointed out that liberation theology in Latin America operated colonially because their concern was “with authorship and the authorisation/disauthorisation of the Grand(iose) religio-political discourses of authority in Latin America.”² For Althaus-Reid, liberation theology may have been organized intellectually against certain historical forms of domination and oppression, but it still sought to be a theology of decency—a theology whose task remained designating who or what should remain covered-up so that social structures and economic markets may continue to function. But this, for Althaus-Reid is precisely to miss the point of liberation: “Discourses of liberation have a value which comes not from their textual force, but from the realm of human activity, that is, from the rebellious people.”³ Indecent theology, on Althaus-Reid’s account, allows rebellious people to interrupt structures, markets, hierarchies, and, perhaps above all, “sexual categories and heterosexual binary systems.”⁴

Taking Althaus-Reid’s challenge seriously necessarily begs a question for this project: Am I just trying to plug maroons, border crossers, and indigenous thinkers into my own *decent* eco-political theological system? It would be easy to simply deny that this is what I am doing and gesture toward my antipathy toward racial capitalism, border imperialism, and indigenous genocide. But this is not how the world works. A change in my personal views and individual actions will not necessarily disentangle me from the systems and structures that oppress certain

² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

communities and the other-than-human world. My quotidian existence is obviously enmeshed within destructive material flows from which I cannot easily extract myself. And even my intellectual strivings implicate me in institutional attempts to greenwash or diversify or “decolonize.”⁵ The political options on the table in an election year like 2024 exhibit bipartisan support for fossil fuel extraction, the brutalization of immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, a genocide being carried out in Gaza, and the continual disempowerment of on-the-ground movements that are attempting to stop all of these things from happening.

What is necessary, then, is to acknowledge that so much of what has made my life possible is deemed fundamentally decent according to prevailing norms, standards, and theologies. If racial capitalism, border imperialism, and indigenous genocide are necessary to undergird a decent society, then we should abolish decency. Not as an act of rebellion, *per se*, but as an assertion in the spirit of G.K. Chesterton, who once wrote, “The word ‘rebel’ understates our cause. It is much too mild; it lets our enemies off much too easily—By all working and orthodox standards of sanity, Capitalism is insane. I should not say to Mr. Rockefeller, ‘I am a rebel.’ I should say ‘I am a respectable man [sic] and you are not.’”⁶ Unfortunately, it is not as simple as Chesterton would have it because the call is coming from inside the house. I am not wholly respectable due to my participation—either passive or active—in decency.

What I need, then, is to figure out how to come alongside those in the struggle against decency. What would it look like for me to join, to be in a coalition with those for whom the regime of decency results in their being made vulnerable but at the same time also keenly aware of how to respond to a world founded on their oppression? Fred Moten says, “The coalition

⁵ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 8, 2012).

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Utopia of Usurers* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2002), 53.

emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?"⁷ But recognizing the deadly shit we are in is only part of the struggle. We also need to get rid of it before it kills us all.

To that end, in this chapter I trace out some ideas about how we might think and respond to the world built on the backs and blood of Black people, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples. My previous three chapters have shown that the work of moving beyond property, territory, and sovereignty has already been started. This work has been carried out in the past, it is being (re)worked in the present, and, God-willing, it will continue in the future. Countless groups throughout history have struggled: they formed new communities and new relationships with land to undo their being possessed as property; they crossed rivers, climbed walls, and formed transnational communities to reject territory's foreclosure on their future; they also struggled, made treaties, had those treaties broken by duplicitous nation-states, and so they continue to struggle, all the while imagining the possibility that—beyond the devastation of genocide and land removal—their people might be with the land again. I have not rehearsed their stories to provide fodder for my own theorization and theologizing. Rather, I have hoped to draw attention to those in the fight in an effort to do what Robin D.G. Kelley calls “[tapping into] the well of our own collective imaginations,” so that we can “do what earlier generations have done: dream.”⁸ Or, perhaps it would be better to say that those of us who are not the primary targets of

⁷ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 140.

⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xii.

racial capitalism, border imperialism, and indigenous genocide should learn to attend to the dreams of those that are.

Christian theology has a very fraught history of attending to the dreams of others. As Willie James Jennings and J. Kameron Carter have argued, Christianity's long history of supersessionism has had disastrous consequences for the Jewish people and for other groups for whom Christians' assumption of the status of the chosen people of God has led to violence, subjugation, and elimination.⁹ Christians have not learned to dream the dream of Israel and Israel's God, but rather have stolen that dream and transformed it into a nightmare. As Jennings puts it, "Rather than a vision of a Creator arising through the hearing of Israel's story bound to Jesus who enables peoples to discern the ways their cultural practices and stories both echo and contradict the divine claim on their lives, the vision born of colonialism articulated a Creator bent on eradicating peoples' ways of life and turning the creation into private property."¹⁰ In his recent work, Jennings articulates the necessity for what he terms a "pedagogy of joining" wherein Gentile Christians learn how to responsibly enter the story of Israel and their God; this will be necessary, thinks Jennings, if Christians are going to be able to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and the formation of the modern racial world, with the goal of articulating a non-supersessionist, non-colonial doctrine of creation.¹¹

While my concerns are less doctrinal than those of Jennings, I nevertheless agree on his insistence on the necessity of joining. To articulate a political theology beyond property,

⁹ See: Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 292.

¹¹ Willie James Jennings, "Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation.," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 1, 2019): 394.

territory, and sovereignty, I think we need to join with those who seek their abolition. The problem is that—as has hopefully been clear throughout my last three chapters—Christians and Christian theologies are deeply implicated within these eco-political concepts that have so profoundly transformed our world. So, a politics that seeks to move beyond property, territory, and sovereignty, will, at least in some sense, have to seek to abolish ideas, systems, and structures in which Christianity is deeply and perhaps inescapably entangled. In this chapter, I will consider what this joining might require given that the very things we need to abolish are not only the grounds for our political economy but often represent the predicates of Christian life and practice as we have known them. In this chapter, I draw on contemporary abolitionist writings in order to think through what it might mean to do political theology through a pedagogy of joining even when that very joining risks abolishing the conditions of possibility of Christianity and Christian theology as we have known it.

The first part of the chapter, “Why Abolition?” considers abolition as a framework for responding to the world made by property, territory, and sovereignty. I begin by thinking with W.E.B. Du Bois’ conception of abolition-democracy. For Du Bois, reconstruction could only be successful in abolishing slavery if it could create sustainable institutions to ensure both the rights and economic security of the formerly enslaved. True abolition, for Du Bois, was not the absence of slavery but the establishment of new politics and economics that could ensure freedom for Black people in the postbellum United States. Though abolition-democracy failed during the period of reconstruction, it has influenced political thinkers imagining how to respond to deep-seated injustices in U.S. American life. I then turn to the work of Lawrie Balfour and Olúfẹmi Táíwò who pose reparations as a potential framework for thinking with and beyond Du Bois’ abolition-democracy. I argue that while reparations have some usefulness, it might be limited

because of its association with the idea of repair; if the institutions of the political economy are fundamentally broken, then perhaps not repair but replacement is necessary. I end this section by drawing on Angela Davis' deployment of abolition-democracy as a framework for responding not only to the legacy of racial slavery—namely, policing and prisons—but also to the wider national security state which is now being turned against Black, migrant, and Indigenous peoples who are fighting for a different world.

Part two, "How Abolitionists Think," turns to the writings of abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore to analyze the rise of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) in the United States. Focusing on the history of mass incarceration in California, the proliferation of prisons and the concomitant expansion of policing are understood not as responses to increases of crime, but rather is the result of a changing economy that produces surpluses of capital, land, and people. Gilmore's analysis of the PIC intersects with the transformation of politics by neoliberalism and the creation of what she terms the anti-state state. This reimagining of the political envisions the state as serving only a coercive function while all other services are either privatized or eliminated altogether. This political economy does not shrink state budgets or decrease the size of government but instead aims at the management of certain populations that cannot be integrated into the formal economy. This way of understanding the function of prisons and policing also necessitates a new way of thinking about the racial formation of the United States, and subsequently abolitionist planning and strategy for how to dismantle it and replacing it with a just and equitable politics. This requires not only an account of how unjust systems and structures have come to be as they are but also demands a poetic sensibility necessary for imagining a world beyond the status quo.

Part three, "Abolition Theology," considers the idea of hope for the possibility of another

world within theological frameworks. Political theology has long been a discourse that considers the justification of the present order of things but often struggles to articulate what another world might look like and how it might be achieved. This difficulty is exacerbated by ecological instability precisely because one strategy of political theology is to imagine a cohesion between the theological, political, and natural. Indeed, as we have seen in the chapters on property, territory, and sovereignty, the ruling logics of slaveholding society, border imperialism, and settler colonialism often depend upon naturalizing the relations that undergird the political economy. Christian theologies can offer more radical visions that seek to critique and uproot the status quo—often using the language of apocalyptic—but this tendency presents another problem, namely that of supersessionism. So, those struggling for abolition using theological resources may end up repeating the same supersessionist patterns that led to settler colonialism, racial slavery, and modern nationalism (and the environmental degradation that has attended these phenomena). Given this, I attempt to turn abolition thinking back onto theology, the goal being not a pacified Christianity or a Christian abolitionism, but a different posture for Christians and Christian theology in relation to the struggle for abolition.

1. Why Abolition?

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong.
Inflicted and endured.

- Sophocles, *The Cure at Troy*, translated by Seamus Heaney

The final truth in this matter seems to be that revolution—the long revolution against human alienation—produces, in real historical circumstances, its own new kinds of alienation, which it must struggle to understand and which it must overcome, if it is to remain revolutionary.

- Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*¹²

It may not be immediately obvious why a project focused on the intersection of political, ecological, and theological imaginaries should culminate in a turn to contemporary abolitionist thought. After chapters on maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous thinkers, why add an additional framework that risks moving us away from the particularity of Black, migrant, and Indigenous vulnerability and resistance? Is it necessary to add a broader theoretical overlay onto these forms of resistance that already possess an intelligibility and validity in and of themselves? In this section, I hope to show why abolition represents a logical next step to thinking with maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous thinkers. Each of these communities I have discussed in my earlier chapters find themselves in a peculiar situation of being caught in-between two worlds.

Maroons form ways of living apart from the property regime, even while that same regime continues operating; slaveholding society continues to regard certain humans as property, even or especially the very maroons who have emancipated themselves. Border crossers occupy both sides of the boundaries they move across; they are in the United States, participating in the

¹² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (New York: Verso, 1979), 107.

economy, relating to the place they inhabit, but they are regarded as belonging to somewhere else and are thus always potentially removable, deportable. Indigenous peoples in North America often reside in places that were not their original homelands, but through treaties (typically broken ones) they may find themselves in a place reserved for them; they reside—either in allotted places or elsewhere—but without fully belonging since they are, in Mahmood Mamdani’s words, “permanently excluded from the political community.”¹³ All of these communities, however, are not simply victimized by their lack of integration into self-possession, citizenship, and sovereignty, but draw on their lack of belonging to the hegemonic world and use that position to move beyond the structures that exclude them. These communities are not simply victims of property, territory, and (colonial) sovereignty, but refuse the material and discursive terms of order of these concepts.

These refusals can hardly be called utopian or escapist—at least in the sense of opting out of present conditions and establishing an alternative in another place that somehow is outside of the reaches of racial capitalism, border imperialism, and indigenous genocide. No places matching this description exist. So, these attempts to move beyond a status quo founded upon both quotidian and spectacular forms of violence require having ones feet in two worlds: the world made by property, territory, and sovereignty, and another world that seeks their undoing.

One might, with W.E.B. Du Bois, want to describe this as a form of double consciousness, or what he calls “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” For Du Bois, Black people in the United States experience a “two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls,

¹³ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 42.

two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹⁴ For Du Bois, the point was to hold onto both one’s Americanness and one’s Blackness, but to be able to do so “without being cursed and spit upon by his [sic] fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”¹⁵ This early Du Bois writing in *The Souls of Black Folk* is possibly him at his most meritocratic and as such might present a problem for anyone who is uncertain about the possibility of putting Americanness—and perhaps any identification with the modern nation-state—to a fruitful or liberatory use. As we have seen with our examinations of property, territory, and sovereignty, citizenship or national belonging is not an unalloyed good for Black, migrant, and Indigenous peoples. Indeed, even as the United States has held out the possibility of welcoming its racialized, naturalized, and “domestic dependent nations”¹⁶ into the fold, this has all too often been an offer made in bad faith.

We might, however, see Du Bois’ doubling of Blackness and Americanness, not as having to do with a willing identification with something called the United States of America, but rather as a reckoning with the situation in which Black people found themselves. This, then, is why Du Bois can also call this doubleness a “second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets himself see himself through the revelation of the other world.”¹⁷ The political theorist Lawrie Balfour describes this vision as “the vantage of the

¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ This is the status granted to indigenous nations but the U.S. department of justice. See: Janet Reno, “Memorandum on Indian Sovereignty,” U.S. Department of Justice, June 1, 1995, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/ag/attorney-general-june-1-1995-memorandum-indian-sovereignty>.

¹⁷ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk.*, 8.

marginal” that “affords possibilities for recognizing injustice and distortion that may not be readily available to the privileged.”¹⁸ But this affordance is not a guarantee. Just being a member of an oppressed group does not necessarily yield insight or ensure that one will take up the cause of justice. Indeed, Du Bois recognized that without some form of self-actualization, double consciousness might only be corrosive to the soul. As Balfour puts it, “For ordinary men and women, such inner turmoil can destroy their motivation to seek better lives, and it can lead to a variety of social ills.”¹⁹ A productive use for double consciousness, then, is the result of struggle. Even for Du Bois, the transformation of double vision from a liability into an asset is “hard-won.”²⁰

One can see the persistence of double consciousness in Du Bois’ later writings, but, I think, especially in *Black Reconstruction in America* where he reckons with both what happened and what *might* have happened in the reconstruction of the union after emancipation and the end of the American Civil War. Not only does Du Bois not see history as an inexorable unfolding of events, but he sees potentiality for alternative historical pathways as unfolding from below. The ideas, desires, and activities of workers, organizers, and ordinary people suggest, for him, that reconstruction could have been otherwise. Du Bois uses the term “abolition-democracy” to designate one of the projects of reconstruction that went unrealized. For Du Bois, emancipation without economic empowerment was insufficient for protecting the formerly enslaved’s freedom and citizenship: “Abolition-democracy demands for Negroes physical freedom, civil rights, economic opportunity and education and the right to vote, as a matter of sheer human justice and

¹⁸ Laurie Balfour, *Democracy’s Reconstruction: Thinking Politically With W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

right.”²¹ For Du Bois, this positive sense of abolition—the establishment and protection of “votes, land, and education for blacks”—was necessary not just for the uplift of Blacks but “as the only fulfillment of the American democratic ideals.” But it is precisely this positive project that was never adequately realized: “most Americans used the Negro to defend their own economic interests and, refusing him adequate land and real education and even common justice, deserted him shamelessly as soon as their selfish interests were safe.”²²

Du Bois’ vision of abolition-democracy was stymied by a white American unwillingness to replace the “slave economy” with “an industry primarily for the profit of the workers.”²³ He diagnoses this obstinacy as being caused both by an anti-Black racial animus and with what he calls “the counter-revolution of property,” or how industry “delivered the land into the hands of an organized monarchy of finance while it overthrew the attempt at a dictatorship of labor in the South.”²⁴ For Du Bois, racism and the political economy could not be understood apart from one another, and so they must also be redressed together. This was true during Reconstruction and remains true today. Indeed, Du Bois suggests that Americans, at the time of his writing *Black Reconstruction*, are paying the price for the failure of abolition-democracy.

The failure of abolition-democracy is not an indication of its inadequacy as a political vision. Du Bois recognized that it failed, but he called it “a splendid failure.” It was not abolition-democracy that was in error, but the world. Those who sought abolition were, says, Du Bois,

²¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 267.

²² Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 311. It should be noted that one area where Du Bois notes the limited success of abolition democracy is in the field of education. Indeed, he suggests that the establishment of public schools and teachers colleges “saved the Negro from being entirely reenslaved or exterminated in an equal and cowardly renewal of war.” 311.

²³ Ibid., 267.

²⁴ Ibid., 476.

“fighting the battle of all the oppressed and despised humanity of every race and color, against the massed hirelings of Religion, Science, Education, Law, and brute force.”²⁵ This position of recognizing that the odds are stacked against you while at the same time holding to the justice of your cause—even if it is merely the rejection of your dehumanization—is witnessed in the struggles of maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples. Vijay Phulwani sees in Du Bois’ “splendid failure” a tragic sensibility, one that maintains an odd sort of hopefulness, “not to be found in the belief that our ideals will eventually be realized but in the conviction that, if we think and act carefully, we have it in ourselves to go on fighting for those ideals indefinitely.”²⁶ But it is not always ideals that motivate struggle. Or put another way, perhaps it is not ideals that stave off hopelessness, but some pre-ideological desire for survival and rejection of the conditions that make survival difficult or impossible.

I think this is what Raymond Williams means when he writes that “We have to recognise this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and *not cover it with names*. But we follow the whole action: not only the evil, but the men [sic] who have fought against evil; not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it.” I take Williams to be suggesting that we do not necessarily need an ideology or system of thought to motivate our continued struggle against oppression. Our response to tragedy, for Williams, seems to be anthropological: “[B]ecause we acknowledge others as men [sic] and any such acknowledgement is the beginning of struggle, as the continuing reality of our lives.”²⁷

We might, with Delores Williams, see this acknowledgment of and struggle against

²⁵ Ibid., 580.

²⁶ Vijay Phulwani, “A Splendid Failure? Black Reconstruction and Du Bois’s Tragic Vision of Politics,” in *A Political Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Nick Bromell (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 298.

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 108; emphasis mine.

oppression as what she calls “survival intelligence,” or a way of navigating oppressive systems and structures that required recognizing the political situation, developing a knowledge of the land for survival, and developing a form of spirituality that could preserve one psychologically and emotionally through suffering.²⁸ Williams saw in Black women’s stories evidence of “survival intelligence” working to create “modes of resistance, sustenance and resurrection from despair.”²⁹ This survival intelligence is paired with a “visionary capacity.” For Williams, Black women needed to be permitted to survive rather than continually be subjected to ideals of surrogacy and self-sacrifice, but survival was not an end in itself. Womanist strategy necessarily dealt with what she calls “difficult life-situations and death-dealing circumstances,” but these contingencies did not dictate the world Black women ultimately wanted to live in. This is why Williams wants to move the paradigm for Black theology from “black experience” to a “wilderness experience” patterned on God’s care for Hagar in the book of Genesis. She felt this was a way of including Black women’s experience in theological reflection, but survival in the wilderness itself did not become the telos of womanist struggle. Instead, she insisted that “the biblical wilderness tradition” contained both survival *and* “the work of building a peoplehood and a community.”³⁰

Thinking with Du Bois, Raymond Williams, and Delores Williams suggests that liberation struggle within oppressive systems, structures, and nations requires both a form of realism and a rejection of what is. Their realism is not of the Niebuhrian sort whose starting point for ethical and political action is an account of sinful human nature.³¹ To simply discuss sin as such, is to

²⁸ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

³¹ I am thinking here both of Reinhold Niebuhr’s theological anthropology developed in his

fail to historicize the type of domination, oppression, or alienation that one struggles against. To say that slavery, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and Indigenous genocide are the results of something called human nature does not explain anything. At best one is left with a sense of the inevitability of these forms of violence, the good life being nothing but a continual struggle against an unintelligible enemy. Or perhaps worse, these forms of dehumanization are deemed universally accessible; given the right conditions anyone might occupy the role of racist, xenophobe, or settler-colonizer, the maladies themselves universalized into meaninglessness. Counter to this, a proper realism will take specific account of a situation, seeking to understand the specific causes behind both individual actions and systemic or structural harms.

This accounting for the causes and effects of harm, then, lays the groundwork for imagining and organizing for a world in which these harms are ameliorated. This, of course, is not to suggest the possibility of utopia. Human fallibility is still acknowledged (even if it is not accepted as an adequate explanation for oppression) and thus utopia is off limits because one cannot foresee or forestall all possible forms of alienation. What one can do is trace out the contours of particular harmful structures and work to create a world in which this harm is not the most likely outcome of the way our politics and economics are organized. Analysis and organizing are not foolproof. But this form of realism can, like Du Bois with the “splendid failure” of reconstruction, take stock of successes and frustrations, keep working, and try to do better.

This is, I think, why Balfour finds in Du Bois a resource for thinking about the necessity of

Gifford lectures: Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1964); for a helpful critique of the narrowness of this realist account of human nature see: Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 100–112.

reparations for the legacy of slavery. She insists that though “[t]he promise of reparations is not a promise of easy redemption,” turning to Du Bois’ account of the failure of reconstruction might “suggest how a public commitment to reparations could call attention to Americans’ halting, limited, and perpetually unfulfilled democratic aspirations.”³² Balfour sees one of the strengths of a Du Bois inspired account of reparations is its demand “that Americans examine the collective injustice at the core of the nation.”³³ But if slavery—and we could add anti-immigrant xenophobia and indigenous elimination—lies at the core of the nation, is reparation the right paradigm for responding to this deep-seated system of harm? Is what we want to make amends or to help those afflicted gain an equitable position in the world made by property, territory, and sovereignty? If the problem is at the core, at the nation’s very heart, do we want to repair this system or replace it with something else?

These questions are at the center of Olúfẹmi Táíwò’s “constructive view of reparations” that centers not only compensation or making amends, but rather on “building the just world.”³⁴ Táíwò draws on Adom Getachew’s conception of “worldmaking” to suggest that reparations for slavery will mean making a different world than the one built by the transatlantic slave trade.³⁵ If, at present, the “global and economic system distributes risk and vulnerability according to the patterns left by the history of global racial empire,” then a constructive reparations must build systems to distribute risk and vulnerability equitably on a global scale.³⁶ The construction must be done on the same scale as the harm, so this will necessarily entail not just making up for the

³² Lawrie Balfour, “Unreconstructed Democracy: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Case for Reparations,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁴ Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, Philosophy of Race, Oxford Scholarship Online (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 3-4.

³⁵ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

harms of the past but also accounting for how those harms extend into the present and the future, commingling with new harms such as climate change. This makes the case for constructive worldmaking reparations even more daunting. The inputs feeding into anthropogenic climate change are a complex web of global political and economic networks, so staving off disaster really would require a global, coordinated transformation. Oddly, this is not where Táíwò ends his book.

He rather suggests that “we should resist all-or-nothing thinking about the struggle for justice.”³⁷ Instead, he proposes that we try to become good ancestors, because making a “commitment to the continuity of the lives of past people...is a powerful framework for thinking about our place in the moral world.”³⁸ Being a good ancestor means recognizing that just as we follow in the footsteps of ancestors who came before us in the struggle, so too we “join our actions up across time and space—even with those we have never met and may never know of.”³⁹ The ancestor framework, Táíwò thinks, will allow us to have both “revolutionary patience” while also “rejecting complacency.” He argues that this takes the full responsibility for worldmaking off of our backs: “We might not have to completely dismantle global racial empire to prevent climate change from rolling back the progress our ancestors fought for: we might just have to lower the concentration of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere.”⁴⁰ Such an approach, he argues, makes possible “a relationship of intergenerational mutual responsibility.”⁴¹

While I find Táíwò’s book largely compelling, I find his means and ends somewhat incommensurate. If reparations means making a just world that undoes the unequal distribution

³⁷ Ibid., 199.

³⁸ Ibid., 202.

³⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 204.

⁴¹ Ibid., 206.

of risk and vulnerability—an arrangement with its roots in the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade—then how does this piecemeal approach to justice work to accomplish this? It seems possible, even likely, that the world might lower the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and leave vulnerability and risk distributed as unjustly (perhaps more unjustly!) as it was in the world made by global racial empire. It might look something like what Jedidiah Purdy has called the “neoliberal Anthropocene” in which “scarcity and environmental disruption tighten” resulting in “a man-made unequal landscape, a dispersed and interconnected version of a feudal manor or an occupied territory, but one constructed out of market materials: free agreements back by wealth.”⁴² That is not to say that if our choice is between leaving global racial empire intact and lowering greenhouse gas emissions that perhaps we should not choose the latter, and live to fight another day. But perhaps what counts as realism for the reparations model is itself constrained by the pernicious neoliberal logic that it opposes.

What is needed, then, is not realism but more thorough critique and the development of a capacity to see beyond *what is*. As Patricia Stuelke puts it in her book on the role of repair in literary and political responses to neoliberal empire, “There is a difference between wanting to repair the world such that one’s current desires can flourish, and remaining open to the possibility that making a different world might mean that one’s current desires might have no place, that in such a new world, one might, in fact, want something else.”⁴³ I think Balfour and Táíwò’s politics are certainly open to the possibility that our investment in something new or different will require risking ourselves, but perhaps the logic of repair and reparations is more of

⁴² Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 48.

⁴³ Patricia Rachael Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn From Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 35.

a constraint than it is an aid for such a radical transformation. One of the problems with what Táíwò calls global racial empire is that it is so pervasive that we may be unaware of how it shapes our desires and relationships, even one's relation to oneself. Perhaps the reason we believe that the current order is invulnerable to change is because we cannot even imagine that *we* could change, especially in the face of the coercion and repression necessary to prop up the status quo.

This is why something like Du Bois' abolition-democracy makes more sense in our current moment than an attempt to redefine reparations as worldmaking. If, as Táíwò wants to say, reparations is about making a just world, we need to be able to imagine the possibility that we could, even or especially in the face of repressive forces, build a different world ourselves. This is why Angela Davis sees in Du Bois the beginning of an abolition-democracy tradition that is not just "a negative process of tearing down, but...also about building up, about creating new institutions."⁴⁴ Following in Du Bois' footsteps, Davis sees prison abolition is the inheritance of abolition-democracy precisely because the failure of reconstruction allowed for new forms of racial slavery to emerge: "from debt peonage and the conceit lease system to segregated and second-class education. The prison system continues to carry out this terrible legacy."⁴⁵ What is more, this legacy is not simply born by Black people but now afflicts "poor Latino, Native American, Asians, and white prisoners" as prisons are used as "a receptacle for people who are deemed the detritus of society." For Davis, writing in 2005, still the early years of the so-called "War on Terror," prison abolition was not simply an important domestic cause within the United States. She saw the movement as bound up with the broader struggles for "the abolition of the

⁴⁴ Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

instruments of war, the abolition of racism, and, of course, the abolition of the social circumstances that lead poor men and women to look toward the military as their only avenue of escape from poverty, homelessness, and a lack of opportunity.”⁴⁶ Davis saw the tendrils of prison society extending everywhere and so abolition needed to extend its breadth to meet the threat.

We might also add the warming world to Davis’ list. Christian Parenti notes that the Pentagon sees climate change as a “threat multiplier,” a worldwide force that is inflaming and escalating “existing social conflicts.”⁴⁷ Climate change, then, presents an opportunity not just for the expansion of prisons but for the expansion of the national security state of which prisons are just a part. Robert Marzec argues that while anthropogenic climate change continues to be bickered over by political parties, the national security state has already accepted its existence and integrated this reality into its operational logic. He calls the integration of climate change into the national security apparatus “environmentality” or a focus on “[n]atural security and the rallying cry of adaptation.” It is “environmentalism turned into a policing action.”⁴⁸ But while the national security state prepares for climate induced threats, it also has turned its attention toward grassroots movements working for environmental justice. The last decade has witnessed police responses to the #NoDAPL movements protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline and to the interrelated Stop Cop City and Defend the Atlanta Forest movements that have not only criminalized environmental protest but drawn on state apparatuses developed in the “war on

⁴⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁷ Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), 9.

⁴⁸ Robert P Marzec, *Militarizing the Environment: Climate Change and the Security State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4; for more on the military and national security state’s awareness of and response to climate instability see the essays collected in Alexander Dunlap and Andrea Brock, eds., *Enforcing Ecocide: Power, Policing & Planetary Militarization* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

terror” to transform nonviolent, civil disobedience into terrorism.⁴⁹

This policing strategy is chiefly aligned against the intersection between environmental protest movements and the movements for Black lives, migrant justice, and Indigenous claims to sovereignty.⁵⁰ While the movement to abolish policing and prisons is often seen as utopian or idealist, understood in the context of the ecological crises and the state’s racialized policing of Black, migrant, and indigenous life, abolition appears nothing short of a necessity for survival. Racialized communities are almost literally caught “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” At this point, it is well-established in the environmental science and policy literature that “[r]acism, xenophobia, and discrimination interact with climate change to worsen existing harm to health and widen inequities for minoritised people both within and between the Global North and Global South.”⁵¹ But when those communities, especially those in North America, try to resist being subjected to the “slow violence” of ecological degradation, they are met with the punitive force of the state.

The next section turns to contemporary abolitionist thought, focusing on the work of Ruth

⁴⁹ See: Amna A. Akbar, “The Fight Against Cop City,” *Dissent* 70, no. 2 (2023): 62–70; Simon Granovsky-Larsen and Larissa Santos, “From the War on Terror to a War on Territory: Corporate Counterinsurgency at the Escobal Mine and the Dakota Access Pipeline,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 121–45; Jessica Fu, “Caught in the Climate War,” *The Nation*, November 13, 2023; Tadhg Larabee and Eva Rosenfeld, “The Criminalization of Solidarity: The Stop Cop City Prosecutions,” *Dissent* (0012-3846) 71, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 82–92.

⁵⁰ See: Joanne Barker, *Red Scare: The State’s Indigenous Terrorist* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021); Anna Di Ronco, *Policing Environmental Protest: Power and Resistance in Pandemic Times* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023); Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2017).

⁵¹ Thilagawathi Abi Deivanayagam et al., “Envisioning Environmental Equity: Climate Change, Health, and Racial Justice,” *The Lancet* 402, no. 10395 (July 1, 2023): 64; see also: Alique G. Berberian, David J. X. Gonzalez, and Lara J. Cushing, “Racial Disparities in Climate Change-Related Health Effects in the United States,” *Current Environmental Health Reports* 9, no. 3 (2022): 451–64.

Wilson Gilmore, to consider abolition's narration of *what* the problem of the prison industrial complex is and *how* communities are fighting to dismantle it.

2. How Abolitionists Think

History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

- Sophocles, *The Cure at Troy*, translated by Seamus Heaney

Writing in *The Nation* magazine in 1995, the late Marxist historian Mike Davis coined the phrase “prison-industrial complex,” (hereafter PIC) to describe the rise of the California penal system. California’s rapidly growing correctional system then represented the largest prison system in the world, only ranked behind China and the rest of the United States.⁵² While Davis’ article outlined the moral crisis of mass incarceration in the Golden State, he notes that the state’s prognosis of the problem was decidedly fiscal. He quotes a spokesperson for then Governor Pete Wilson regarding the need to adjust the state budget in order to make up for the money spent on the carceral system: “If these additional costs have to be absorbed, I guess we’ll have to reduce other services. We’ll have to change our priorities.”⁵³ This narration of the PIC, especially the shifting of state resources toward prisons and away from higher education and other government services, is indicative of the sort of political and economic crises that mass incarceration was meant to solve. These were not crises of rising crime rates or of overpopulated prisons, but of surpluses of capital, labor, and land.

⁵² Mike Davis, “Hell Factories In the Field: A Prison-Industrial Complex,” *The Nation*, February 20, 1995, 229.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 234.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore draws on Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz to explain the crisis that created the PIC: “Crises occur when the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the preexisting system of social relations.”⁵⁴ California in the mid-to-late twentieth century witnessed such crisis-inducing shifts as the so-called “golden age of U.S. capitalism” was closing around the same time that the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was integrating critiques of Jim Crow with broader structural issues of economics. While this movement is most remembered for actions such as the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—now largely sanitized by U.S. American mythologies of “equality”—it was events like the 1965 Watts Rebellion that became convenient justifications for changes to policing and imprisonment. Gilmore argues, however, that we must understand an event like Watts within the economic context in which it occurred. She reads Watts as “a conscious enactment of opposition...to inequality in Los Angeles.”⁵⁵ The same can be said of more organized militancy such as the formation of the Black Panther Party in Oakland and other related movements. Such mobilizations took place not only on behalf of communities marginalized from U.S. American economic expansion, but those made even more vulnerable as the U.S. economy transformed.

Gilmore argues that this transformation creates four surpluses: finance capital, land, relative population, and state capacity.⁵⁶ The serving of California’s state debt became a less stable and productive source for private finance.⁵⁷ With capital refusing to finance public projects, state

⁵⁴ Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, “State and Society, 1880-1930” in Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 96, quoted in Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 54.

⁵⁵ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 58-85.

⁵⁷ As Gilmore puts it, “In the ‘revolutionary’ times of the late 1970s and 1980s, elected officials at both state and local levels became increasingly unwilling to ask, much less able to persuade, voters, to commit to long-term debt, even for previously popular improvements such as parks...In

coffers for infrastructure and social spending became vulnerable. As changes related to the climate (e.g., drought) and economic depressions affected towns in rural California, surplus land appeared; for Gilmore, it is critical to remember that “[s]urplus land is not empty land,” as both agricultural and developed spaces can become unproductive to an economy.⁵⁸ Surplus land became the sites for new prisons, an attempt to transform one surplus (i.e., labor) into purported economic opportunity for rural areas through another surplus (i.e., land). The restructuring of California’s economy from the 1970s onward coincided with simultaneous population growth and transformation of the workforce that caused job insecurity for millions. Gilmore notes that these shifts created the “widely held—if incorrect—perception that the state’s public and private resources were too scarce to support the growing population, and that some people therefore had to go.”⁵⁹ The narration of and response to these three crises, however, did not lead to changes in state governance to ameliorate the sources of these problems. No, they instead resulted in tax struggles over, “who gets to keep the value that produces profit.”⁶⁰ As capital focussed governance on the priority of keeping larger and larger shares of their profits, this was accompanied by the demonization of state programs that could be used to address issues of surplus land and population. The state did not lose power per se, but rather “what withered was the state’s legitimacy to act *as* the Keynesian state. The state’s crisis, then, was also a crisis for people whose protections against calamity, or opportunities for advancement, would be made surplus by the state, into which their hard-fought incorporation was only ever partial and

this context, the crisis for finance capital specializing in public debt centered on remedying the new political difficulty of directing surplus, via municipal bonds, into the nation’s largest state economy.” *Golden Gulag*, 62.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 80.

therefore contingent.”⁶¹

Gilmore’s focus on the late twentieth century history of California intersects with the broader trend of neoliberalization, or what David Harvey has called “the shift from government (state power on its own) to governance (a broader configuration of state and key elements in civil society).” It is critical to recognize that neoliberalism is not the complete erasure of the state in favor of privatization. Neoliberals neither desire nor work for the total destruction of state capacity. Instead they use the state’s capacity for “coercive legislation and policing tactics...to disperse or repress collective forms of opposition to corporate power.”⁶² Gilmore sees in neoliberalization the rise of what she terms “the anti-state state” or “people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power.”⁶³ For Gilmore, anti-state statism is bi-partisan and actually joins together neoliberal and neoconservative governance: “While neoconservatives and neoliberals diverge in their political ideals, they share certain convictions about the narrow legitimacy of the public sector in the conduct of everyday life...For them, wide-scale protections from calamity and opportunities for advancement should not be a public good centrally organized to benefit everyone who is eligible.” Both liberal and conservative versions of anti-state statism, contend that far from expanding precarity and immiseration, the removal of the social safety net will actually “enhance rather than destroy the lives of those abandoned.”⁶⁴

It is important to recognize that anti-state statism does *not* lead to a reduction of state funding or bureaucracy. Rather, funds and resources are simply transferred away from the traditional

⁶¹ Ibid., 84.

⁶² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

⁶³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (New York: Verso, 2022), 228.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 229.

functions of the welfare state and toward the protection of markets and the expansion of government coercive apparatuses. Indeed, as Quinn Slobodian argues, the founders of neoliberalism such as the Mont Pelerin Society were not really interested in truly “free,” uninhibited markets, but were focussed on finding “the right institutions to sustain the often strained balance between the economic world and the political world.” With the spread of decolonization in the twentieth century, what became critical to these thinkers was not simply spreading capitalism and defeating communism, but establishing systems and structures to ensure that markets behaved the way economists envisioned them: “More than making markets, these neoliberals have concentrated on making market enforcers.”⁶⁵ For Gilmore, neoliberalism’s need of the anti-state state is seen in “[t]he rise of security work” which is itself “the natural outcome of the renovation and deepening of uneven development throughout the world.”⁶⁶ The anti-state state is a response to uneven development, and to the precarity and vulnerability that accompany it, but it is always a reaction to the morbid symptoms and never to the underlying causes.

This explains why both Republicans and Democratic politicians can demonize the supposed largesses of the welfare state while also increasing budgets and resources for public safety and national security. Ronald Reagan could say that the “nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”⁶⁷ And in his 1996 State of the Union, Bill Clinton declared that “The era of big government is over.” Neither of these presidents however, would turn tighten the belts of police or military spending. In the same State

⁶⁵ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 11.

⁶⁶ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 35.

⁶⁷ “The President’s News Conference | Ronald Reagan,” accessed November 14, 2024, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/presidents-news-conference-23>.

of the Union, Clinton would insist that “We must not be the world’s policeman. But we can and should be the world’s very best peacemaker. By keeping our military strong, by using diplomacy where we can and force where we must...America is making a difference for people here and around the world.”⁶⁸ In the anti-state state, the coercive work of the government is unquestionably necessary and is always in need of maintenance or expansion, while both those offering and receiving state welfare are demonized as profligate.

It might be tempting, then, to view the PIC through the same framing as Eisenhower’s military-industrial complex that he warned Americans about in the early 1960s. Gilmore insists, however, that what worried the former general and president about the expansion of the military and the industries that both needed and supported it was that it potentially threatened “free enterprise.” He was concerned that “the combination of the welfare state and the Pentagon would kill the entrepreneurial spirit that he thought made America great. He worried that our society and economy would become dependent upon these huge amounts of government and military spending.”⁶⁹ In Gilmore’s narration, Eisenhower’s concern was a good capitalist one; the base of the economy should not be founded on the nexus of defense spending and weapons manufacturing but on the free market spirit of the U.S. American people. As a strategy of the anti-state state, the PIC is not so much the foundation of the U.S. economy as it is a release valve for the surpluses produced by a shift from “military Keynesianism to post-Keynesian militarism.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ “President Clinton’s 1996 State of the Union Address as Delivered,” accessed November 14, 2024, <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/New/other/sotu.html>.

⁶⁹ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 318-319.

⁷⁰ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 360; for an account of the relationship between what Eisenhower called the military industrial complex and what has become known as “military Keynesianism,” see: James M. Cypher, “The Origins and Evolution of Military Keynesianism in the United States,” *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 38, no. 3 (October 3, 2015): 449–76.

Eisenhower's fears about the centrality of the military-industrial complex to the U.S. political economy coalesced into what became known as military Keynesianism or "the 'warfare-welfare' state."⁷¹ Toward the end of the 1960s, the confluence of a declining rate of profit and the agitation of Black and other minorities for political and economic rights and power, spelled the end of military Keynesianism as capital launched "successful tax revolts, fought out in federal and state legislatures."⁷² Unlike the military-industrial complex, the PIC represented a response by the anti-state state to the surpluses created as capital was over accumulated and resources among those most vulnerable in the U.S. dwindled. The anti-state state, then, made mass incarceration not primarily a new source of profit but a way to manage those populations who were not integrated into the newly refigured political economy. These populations subjected to the PIC, however, were not made vulnerable through individual or social ineptitude, but rather were subjected to what Gilmore calls "organized abandonment."⁷³

Organized abandonment of certain groups was, to be sure, linked to historical trends of racial governance. But with the restructuring of the economy by the anti-state state, Black and brown communities were subjected not primarily to extralegal racial violence but to the leeching of resources and the imposing of legal sources of coercion (i.e., increased policing and incarceration). The crisis of impoverished communities of color was not a "natural" event, but was rather the result of policies that produced crises. These crises, says Gilmore, were "organized abandonment's condition of existence." Even as economies like that of California grow through series of booms and busts, the political economy was organized to enrich capital while removing resources from the already vulnerable: "Every bust destroyed jobs—shaking up

⁷¹ Ibid., 207

⁷² Ibid., 208.

⁷³ Ibid., 128.

households, communities, and productive regions and dropping more and more people into poverty. Every boom deepened inequality while padding the ranks of the very rich.”⁷⁴

Gilmore’s political and economic account of the rise of the PIC and the anti-state state, offers a materialist account of what Michelle Alexander has called “the New Jim Crow.” Alexander’s work focuses primarily on the presence of “racial bias” in a justice system thought to be have been made colorblind. But racial bias is a perspective which virtually no one *admits* to having and thus the possibilities for confronting racially biased systems and people become ambiguous.⁷⁵ Gilmore helps us to understand racism not through an intersubjective lens but through a materialist analysis of how the political economy is organized. She defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁷⁶ Unlike racial bias or animus—which, to be sure, still plays a significant role in U.S. American society—Gilmore’s definition of racism does not necessarily entail a subjective or volitional component. One does not need to desire that systems and structures produce and exploit communities demarcated racially for one to be a participant in a racist political economy. A response to being implicated in this racist society, then, does not primarily call for a transformation of racist attitudes (though this may also be necessary) but rather in attempting what Angela Davis calls disarticulation. This requires not just breaking open the connection between “crime and punishment, race and punishment, class and punishment, and

⁷⁴ Ibid., 305.

⁷⁵ For example, Alexander writes, “Some discrimination would be conscious and deliberate, as many honestly and consciously would believe that black men deserve extra scrutiny and harsher treatment. Much racial bias, though, would operate unconsciously and automatically—even among law enforcement officials genuinely committed to equal treatment under the law.” Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 105.

⁷⁶ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.

gender and punishment,” but also demands that we turn our attention to “all the social relations that support the permanence of the prison.”⁷⁷ This, I think, is what Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s account of the anti-state state allows us to do. To advocate for police or prison abolition, then, cannot simply be about demolishing these forms of government coercion. What is to be done is to build another political economy to replace the current one that depends upon police and prisons to deal with the surpluses it creates.

Of course, building another political economy—one that does not produce surpluses in the same way as neoliberal capitalism—is easier said than done. Though ecological and economic crises *do* need large-scale solutions, Gilmore does not envision a new world being established in one fell swoop. The groups she points to as examples of doing abolition work practice what she calls, borrowing from André Gorz, non-reformist reforms. In his 1968 *Strategy for Labor*, Gorz made the distinction between reformist reforms and “not necessarily reformist” reforms in order to ask whether it is possible to “impose anti-capitalist solutions which will not immediately be incorporated into and subordinated into the system?”⁷⁸ For Gorz, “reformist reform is one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy.” Reforms of this sort attempt to prop up or preserve the status quo. Non-reformist reforms, then, are “conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands.”⁷⁹

For Gilmore this distinction is useful not only for taking action, but also for understanding who and what continues to support the structures of the PIC. What keeps the PIC in place are not

⁷⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 112.

⁷⁸ André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal*, Beacon (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

necessarily bad actors, but rather “all sorts of people and places that are tied in, or want to be tied in, to that complex.” There are also people who depend upon, either voluntarily or involuntarily, its continued existence. These people and places are not simply the builders, suppliers, managers, and employees of prisons, but also “the intellectuals...who make a living off it, most of whom want to make it either bigger or better. Most want to make it better, these are the reformists. There are people who are politically dependent on its growth.”⁸⁰ But this tendency toward reform is not simply the concern of policymakers and captains of industry. For Gilmore, it’s important to recognize that while the roots of the PIC are grounded in the political economy, it has also achieved something of a hegemonic cultural status. The “commonsense” of how to understand and respond to social problems has been absorbed into the prison and policing complex. The result is a society that has “completely normalized extreme punishment through tortuous circumstances, which is what putting people in cages is.”⁸¹ But even when the reality of incarceration is seen (or more likely represented through literature, film, or television) by those outside the walls and barbed wire, the tendency is still toward reformist reforms.

Prominent texts on mass incarceration tend to focus on either the violence of the PIC (e.g., poor conditions within jails and prisons, excessive use of solitary confinement, the immoral status of capital punishment, etc.) or on the system’s breadth (e.g., the scale of the PIC, its tendency to wrongfully convict innocent people, the disproportionate policing/incarceration of people of color, etc.).⁸² For Gilmore, the problem with reformist reform is not simply that it

⁸⁰ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 323.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 323-24.

⁸² An example of a text that focuses on the harshness of the PIC is Sylvia A. Harvey, *The Shadow System: Mass Incarceration and the American Family* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020); Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1993); other examples in popular culture might include popular television series like HBO’s *Oz* (1997-2003). The tendency to focus on *who* the

cannot imagine a world without prisons, but that it is a failure to put the violence and breadth of the PIC within a history of the U.S. American political economy. Seen correctly, the PIC is not an aberration within an otherwise just ordering of society. No, insists Gilmore, “The violence of torture and official murder, toward the end of stealing labor, land, and reproductive capacity, has driven the history of the United States. If reform within that history is the pattern for change, it can only result in a ‘changing same.’”⁸³ Reformist reforms are untenable not simply because it allows prisons to remain in existence but because they perpetuate the violent political economy which has given birth to them in the first place.

If reformist reforms hem in one’s thinking about prisons, policing, and the broader political economy, non-reformist reforms have something of the opposite effect. Gilmore insists that abolitionist energy directed toward “the folds of the state’s institutions” have used non-reformist reforms to “redirect social capacity and thereby social wealth.” When changes are made in order to limit or contract the PIC (as opposed to preserving or expanding it in the name of reform), the shift of energy “enlarges the scope of activity through which our everyday existences might be reconfigured.”⁸⁴ In other words, non-reformist reforms can highlight alternatives to the PIC that reformist reforms preempt. Gilmore insists that would be non-reformist reformers need to recognize that the state is “a contradictory set of institutions able to act with some autonomy and some impunity.” The state does not have one central aim or one univocal purpose, and therefore how the state is understood is always being contested. This, for Gilmore, is a question of the state’s “legitimacy,” the sense of which “need not be coherent or, even if coherent, demonstrable,

system incarcerates can be seen in texts such as: James Forman, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).

⁸³ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 323.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

but...needs to exist.”⁸⁵ For Gilmore, this struggle over legitimacy is where non-reformist reforms may begin to tear at the frayed edges, ultimately seeking to unravel the whole even if they have to start with individual threads.

Presently the state’s legitimacy is chiefly derived from its “promises to deliver protection.” But the protection on offer does not decrease the number of individuals deemed threatening by the state. On the contrary, threatening people are proliferating at the same time as the state is purportedly becoming more adept at policing and less discriminatory. Gilmore argues that this has resulted in racism being freed

...from both state definition (as in Jim Crow laws) and state disapproval (civil rights laws, which have become so narrowly adjudicated as to be nearly unenforceable), as a result of which the proliferation of certain kinds of laws that do not specify “race” has resulted in the most enormous roundup of people of color in the history of the United States, and many more white people have been caught at the margins.⁸⁶

Non-reformist reforms, then, should focus on these contradictions in order to undermine this “protection racket” which highlight threats from which society must be defended. As Gilmore points out, if those threats do not exist, they must be invented.⁸⁷ Non-reformist reforms, then, should seek to demystify or denaturalize this scheme of protection through which the PIC and its attendant state apparatuses are justified.

For Gilmore, the method is not just an accretion of non-reformist reforms until a world that no longer locks people into cages arrives. Abolition, for Gilmore is not just about ideas or policy. Abolition is spatial. It is geographic. For Gilmore, a geographer by training, both the legitimacy

⁸⁵ Ibid., 265-67.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 279.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 280; this is precisely the point of a text like *Policing the Crisis* by Stuart Hall et al. Threats or crises are not self-evident, but require interpretations and narrations that themselves are always oriented toward specific ends. Stuart M. Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

of the PIC that must be undermined and the justification of a new world to be built must be understood and enacted as spatial arrangements. What she terms “abolition geography” is nothing less than “how and to what end people make freedom provisionally, imperatively, as they imagine *home* against the disintegrating grind of partition and repartition through which racial capitalism perpetuates the means of its own valorization.”⁸⁸ If the PIC was formed spatially—through the overpolicing and disinvestment of the state of the surplus populations of certain areas and the transformation of surplus land into sites for their incarceration—it will have to be abolished spatially.

Gilmore bookends *Golden Gulag* by thinking about bus rides that connect the geography of California. The first bus trip in the prologue consists of mothers leaving South Central Los Angeles on a trip to the state capitol in Sacramento in order to lobby state lawmakers “to amend California’s ‘three strikes and you’re out’ law.”⁸⁹ This advocacy bus trip across California is compared to other buses that depart from “courts and jails” heading to “old or new prisons—those that cluster along Highway 99 and make it a prison alley and others further afield...nine hundred miles of prisons: an archipelago of concrete and steel cages, thirty three major prisons plus fifty-seven smaller prisons and camps, forty-three of the total built since 1984.”⁹⁰ Another bus trip in the epilogue also departs from South Central Los Angeles but this one is headed for a meeting called “Joining Forces: The Fight for Environmental Justice and against Prisons, a conference that brought “together rural people trying to stop the building of prisons and urban activists trying to stop the production of prisoners.”⁹¹ Both of these bus trips, for Gilmore,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 491; emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁹¹ Ibid., 249.

represent ways of reaching “across social and spatial divides...to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state.”⁹² Abolition, then, is not just a way of connecting the dots to diagnose the political, economic, and social ills that coalesce into the PIC. It is also a mode of developing “innovative social and spatial relations and capacities for action.”⁹³ For Gilmore, these social and spatial relations start first with people who are directly effected by the PIC—mothers whose children have been swept up into prisons, organizers trying to keep new prisons from being built in their backyards—but the movement is also in need of growth and therefore of more participants.

Part of joining the abolition movement is coming to an understanding “that prison is not a building ‘over there’ but is a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere.”⁹⁴ But awareness is perhaps only a first step toward coalition building and solidarity. The abolitionist scholar and activist Mariame Kaba rejects the idea of “allyship.” She instead claims, “I believe in co-strugglers, and I believe in co-workers, and I believe in solidarity. I believe we need more people all the time in all our work, in all our movements, in all of our struggles.” This leads Kaba to thinking about how people might bring their knowledge, talent, and ideas into the struggle while also recognizing their need to learn from those experienced in the work. This requires not simply the loaning of talent or expertise, but an openness “to [being] transformed in the service of the work.”⁹⁵ I think this is difficult for two interrelated reasons. The first is that thinking like an abolitionist causes you to become painfully aware of how your life is entangled in the PIC. Understanding the pervasiveness of a political

⁹² Ibid., 246.

⁹³ Ibid., 242.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 191-92.

economy that both produces and relies upon prisons is not necessarily sufficient for creating the desire to open oneself up to change, especially radical change. It may, in fact, produce the opposite. You might be inclined to let yourself off the hook for how fucked up everything is. Or you might realize that you yourself are implicated in this death-dealing system but not see any way out of it.

This is why Mariame Kaba insists that hope is necessary for abolition. She recognizes that “in the world we live in, it’s easy to feel a sense of hopelessness, that everything is all bad all the time, that nothing is going to change ever, that people are evil and bad at the bottom.” Against this resignation, Kaba insists that “hope is a discipline” one that “we have to practice...every single day.”⁹⁶ Kaba claims that she learned this view from a nun who insisted that the discipline of hope was necessary to make “sure we were of the world and in the world.” Counterposed to escapist ideas of an afterlife or the displacement of hope onto some other place or time, Kaba argues for a vision of “grounded hope.”⁹⁷ She says this groundedness comes from being a child of “African returned migrants.” This, she thinks, makes her see the world differently than many people in the United States, she has other frameworks to resist the ones on offer in a neoliberal capitalist society that causes so many people to turn inward, to focus on themselves, and to think of wellness, optimism, and reflection through consumeristic models.⁹⁸ In her co-authored book with the Menominee writer, organizer, and photographer Kelly Hayes, they write of the need to “create practice space for hope.” If hope is a discipline and discipline requires practice, then it only makes sense that there need to be spaces where this can happen. Hayes and Kaba imagine these spaces as necessary for everything “[f]rom group dialogues to artistic exercises and direct

⁹⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 26-27.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 28.

actions, we must create space for renewal and recommitment.”⁹⁹

One particular form of art they emphasize is poetry. For them, poetry is not an indulgence but “like prayer, can provide a space for communion—a joint hope, plea, or promise projected onto the world.” Poetry, they observe, is already a part of various movements and it serves the purpose of keeping open what oppressive systems and structures seek to foreclose. Poetry, one might say, can keep us from backsliding into reformist reforms. Hayes and Kaba write that “The system we are raging against erodes our compassion and confines our imaginations. In the face of such violence, poetry is a fitting weapon. We should wield it often.”¹⁰⁰

Poetry might seem like a strange place to end this section that has focused on abolitionist thinking. What does practicing the discipline of hope through poetry have to do with a materialist analysis of the prison industrial complex? For Hayes and Kaba, poetry is an opening. Poetry can make space for the new in the midst of the old, the stifling, the oppressive. Ruth Wilson Gilmore says something similar about drama. She received her bachelor’s degree from the Yale School of Drama and dropped out of a doctoral program there. She writes that “In a way, the obsessions that drove me into and then rapidly away from drama were those most beautifully summarized in a few thoughts of Marx: by mixing our labor with the earth, we change the external world and thereby change our nature. That’s what drama is; that’s what geography is: making history, making worlds.”¹⁰¹

I think that Hayes and Kaba’s understanding of poetry rhymes with Gilmore’s account of drama. Both art forms provide the opportunity for the new to arrive; not a new world imposed on

⁹⁹ Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 178.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰¹ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 28.

us without our involvement or consent, but a newness of our own making. In an interview the poet Seamus Heaney once claimed, speaking about the dissident Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, “But the pure poetry only comes at the moment of political refusal.”¹⁰² As with poetry’s refusal of the literal, of the mundaneness of language (or of the temptation to treat ordinary language as only mundane), so abolitionists refuse the unbending prose of a world founded on the prison industrial complex and compose the world they want in verse. I do not want here to overemphasize a distinction between *logos* and *poiesis*, or to say that thinking prose or poetry will necessarily transform one’s thinking from reformist to abolitionist. But I think that abolition, for Gilmore, Kaba, and Hayes, requires the nimbleness of a poetic imagination to be able to rightly see how and why the world is structured as it is and to be able to imagine it otherwise.

Imagination, though, makes it sound like abolitionists are facing off against the PIC with nothing but dreams, whims, and poetry. There is often a temptation to look at the aesthetic or spiritual productions of oppressed people while either ignoring or assuming the absence of real political and economic skills. Gilmore refuses this by insisting that “people who lack resources...do not necessarily lack ‘resourcefulness.’”¹⁰³ The urban planner and historian Clyde Wood makes a similar claim when he points to what he calls “blues epistemology” or “the working-class African American community-centered tradition of development thought and practice and its critique of the plantation bloc, its political economy, and its tradition of social explanation.”¹⁰⁴ For Woods, the development schemes imposed upon the Mississippi Delta after the Civil War were rearrangements of the plantation economy. There was, however, a blues

¹⁰² Francey Oscherwitz, “Politics and Poetry: My Hour with Seamus Heaney,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 57, no. 1 (December 1, 2018), 50.

¹⁰³ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 414.

¹⁰⁴ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 2017), 247.

tradition that developed after the failure of reconstruction, through which Black people were able to create “an intellectual and social space in which they could discuss, plan, and organize this new world.”¹⁰⁵ The blues, for Woods, represents not simply a form of artistic expression but a whole way of knowing and thinking about the world—both the one that currently exists and another one dreamed of and enacted by people who refuse the terms of order of the present. The blues, according to Woods, is able to reject the “[t]he civilizing, even imperial, thrust of certain middle-class segments toward Black working-class thoughts and practices.” Rejecting the idea that Black culture is insufficient Woods asserted it as “a powerful world culture held together, and expanded, by repeated blues movements.”¹⁰⁶ In her introduction to Woods’ *Development Arrested*, Gilmore insists that his blues epistemology gives a historical material embodiment “of the entire worlds that also travelled in slave ships-via captives’ consciousness and culture-and the subsequent forms of being made palpable in otherwise unendurable situations.”¹⁰⁷ The blues, then, is one enfleshment of what Cedric Robinson called “the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”¹⁰⁸

With Gilmore, Kaba, Hayes, and Woods, and their respective ideas about drama, poetry, and the blues, we might, then, think about abolition not as a *wholly* new replacing something old, but instead see it as a form of *ressourcement* of subaltern traditions—traditions that continue even as they are suppressed by a hegemonic political economy—to imagine and plan and implement a world that does not need policing and prisons.¹⁰⁹ But, as I alluded to in the introduction of this

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁰⁷ Woods, *Development Arrested*, xii.

¹⁰⁸ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 171.

¹⁰⁹ I use the term *ressourcement* here in the sense that Robert Louis Wilken espouses it in his foreword to Henri de Lubac’s *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1: “De Lubac’s book is a work of retrieval

chapter, *ressourcement* might easily fall into extractivism; subaltern knowledges might be used by those occupying hegemonic positions further alienating people not only from their land but from their ways of knowing and living that have been subjugated. In the next section, “Abolition Theology,” I turn abolitionist thought toward Christian political theology. Political theologies often either seek to legitimize a present order or to suggest that replacement of unjust arrangements with a new, redeemed political life. But how do we deal with Christianity’s complicity with present ordering of things? Is a Christian vision of replacing the old with the new adequate for moving beyond a world that is largely made by and for white settler colonial Christians?

3. Abolition Theology

If there’s fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.

- Sophocles, *The Cure at Troy*, translated by Seamus Heaney

In the previous section, I examined the abolitionist thought of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, focusing on her account of the political economy of the Prison Industrial Complex and her proposals for how and where non-reformist reforms might work to undermine the legitimacy of

and renewal, of *ressourcement*, of drawing anew from the living spring of Christian learning, wisdom, and experience.” The forces that made necessary the recovery and renewal of the creativity of the Christian tradition were not necessarily the same as those that subjugated the traditions of subaltern peoples through settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, what I like about *ressourcement* is that it is not *just* retrieval or just renewal, but a dialectic between old and new, between past, present, and future. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. Mark Sebanc, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), xii.

the anti-state state. I also considered how abolition might require a poetic sensibility, one capable of doing imaginative work that breaks out of the confines of the status quo. In this section, I take the question of the legitimacy in a theological direction, turning to political theologies that either seek to justify the present order of things or reveal and replace a world held captive to oppressive forces.

The political theologian Adam Kotsko suggests that “every political theological paradigm is founded on a claim of the legitimacy of the current order, a claim that the political-theological system reflects the way that the world ought to be.” Kotsko argues that when things operate normally, most people are inclined to go along with this arrangement. But, given the vicissitudes of the world, “[a]n unforeseen disaster that catches the system unawares or—even worse—an unanticipated and seemingly perverse result of the system’s own internal logic can shatter the system’s legitimacy, opening the way for its reform or replacement.”¹¹⁰ For political theologies that defend the status quo, one strategy has been to suggest a coherence between theological, political, and natural orders of things. This often entails appealing to a created order that aligns with present theo-political systems and structures.

The historical theologian, Susan Schreiner, argues that for an early modern theologian like John Calvin, “the wonders of nature must lead the believer to trust that God governs human history with the same power and wisdom evident in creation.”¹¹¹ When the crooked timbre of human history calls the beneficence of God into doubt, Calvin thinks we can look to the other-than-human creation. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin associates faith in and

¹¹⁰ Adam Kotsko, *What Is Theology?: Christian Thought and Contemporary Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 4.

¹¹¹ Susan E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?: Calvin’s Exegesis of Job From Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 146.

understanding of God with the ability to discern in creation “those conspicuous powers which God shows forth in his creatures.”¹¹² So identifiable was God’s power with the created order, for Calvin, that he insists that “it can be said reverently, provided that it proceeds from a reverent mind, that nature is God.” Calvin quickly retracts this, worrying that people will confuse God in godself with “the inferior course of his [sic] works,” but the point still stands: God’s creation is a testament to God’s power and goodness.¹¹³

Calvin’s theology of creation feels downright nimble and nuanced when compared to the views of thinkers like Gottfried Wilhem Leibniz or Alexander Pope. Relevant here is not just Leibniz’s oft-quoted idea that “God not only decrees to create a universe, but decrees also to create the best of all.”¹¹⁴ For Leibniz, the machine-like nature of creation is the result of the fact “that God came to decree those laws observed in nature through considerations of wisdom and reasons of order.”¹¹⁵ Leibniz’s order in nature becomes the pattern for political order: “Natural law is that which preserves or promotes natural societies.”¹¹⁶ This philosophical ordering finds its poetic assertion in Alexander Pope’s claim that “Whatever IS, is RIGHT.” This line from Pope’s *An Essay on Man*, is framed as a proper, holistic view of nature. Pope claims that “All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee; / All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see; All Discord, Harmony, not understood; / All partial Evil, universal Good.” Like Leibniz, Pope’s

¹¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 181.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007), §196.

¹¹⁵ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “On Nature Itself,” in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 157.

¹¹⁶ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “On Natural Law,” in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed. Patrick Riley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 77.

conception of nature has a political upshot: “Submit — in This, or any other sphere.”¹¹⁷

A world of suffering—especially when it emerges from the natural order—makes Leibniz and Pope’s assurances that this world is how it is supposed to be untenable at best. Theodor Adorno claims that “The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz.” On Adorno’s account, this is because “Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.”¹¹⁸ It strikes me, though, that Voltaire is not chiefly worried about the metaphysics of the philosophers but rather concerns himself with how their conclusions become part of the *Zeitgeist*, the way these trite sayings become our commonsense. Perhaps this is why it is Pope (though Leibniz does get named as well) who takes the brunt of Voltaire’s ire.¹¹⁹ Like Plato banishing the poets from his republic for their falsities, Voltaire thinks that perhaps Alexander Pope does not believe his own words: “With *faltering voice you cry*, ‘What is, is right.’”¹²⁰ What is so offensive, perhaps, is not simply the wrongness of such an assertion but the superficiality of a viewpoint that has become the basis for a theodicy. Later in the poem Voltaire will reformulate Pope’s claim into “what is, ought to be.”¹²¹ Here the naturalistic fallacy between *is* and *ought* becomes unthinkable for Voltaire precisely because nature is vulnerable to

¹¹⁷ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. Tom Jones (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), Epistle I: X. The editor, Tom Jones, says that this submission is to providence, but later in the essay Pope makes clear that to submit to divine providence is to submit to the Great chain of being that derives from God and is the source of “Faith, Law, Morals” (Epistle IV: VII, 340).

¹¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 361-362.

¹¹⁹ The subtitle to Voltaire’s poem is: “An Inquiry into the Maxim, ‘Whatever is, is Right.’” Voltaire, “The Lisbon Earthquake,” trans. William F. Fleming, *New England Review* 26, no. 3 (2005): 186.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 189; emphasis mine.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

destruction and humanity's embodied lives are so frail.¹²² In a world of this much suffering and pain, why call good what seems so plainly broken?

Kotsko suggests that “the theological problem of evil...is a version of the political problem of legitimacy.”¹²³ What is often overlooked is the congruent problem of nature's legitimacy that can be mapped onto the same structure. Voltaire's theodicy (or perhaps anti-theodicy), written in response to a natural disaster like an earthquake, calls into question the continuity between a benevolent divine sovereign and a capricious, unpredictable created order. If the natural world is not a source of reassurance and stability, what does this say about its Creator? The rise of modernity, it would seem, should quell these concerns. If the world is machine-like and operates independently of a direct divine will, then one must simply learn to live in an unfeeling cosmos, ever subject to the feeling of flux induced by natural processes. This tendency represented by something like deism, seems to resemble what Bruno Latour has called “the modern constitution” that “invents a separation between scientific power charged with representing things and the political power charged with representing subjects.”¹²⁴ The problem, as Latour insists, is that science and politics, or nature and culture, refuse to stay separate. Instead of ensuring their separation, “*the modern Constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies.*”¹²⁵ One such hybrid Latour points to, writing as he is in 1991, is the hole in the ozone layer, but we might also think about both complex ecological threats like climate change or more localized issues: the expansion of

¹²² “Look round this sublunary world, you'll find / That nature to destruction is consigned. / Our system weak which nerves and bone compose.” Ibid.

¹²³ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 30.

¹²⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 29.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 34; emphasis in original.

homebuilding into wildfire corridors, the switching of Flint, Michigan's water to an acidic source that corroded lead pipes, or the enormous energy and water needs of AI data centers. The point is that the natural/scientific and cultural/political are always intertwined; modernity does not end this hybridization but only attempts to blind us to it.

So, we might say that the problem of evil/legitimacy is always already theological, political, and natural. To separate accounts of "natural evil" from "human evil" is an artificial divide, one that obscures the porosity between these discourses. We can see this in theoretical approaches to suffering in the natural world like that of Holmes Rolston or Christopher Southgate who attempt to offer philosophical or theological framings of pain and death in nature.¹²⁶ But our concern here is not primarily with suffering in nature but with the theo-political discourses that use nature in their effort to justify the order of things. Or perhaps, more specifically, what we need to attend to is the presumed alignment between the theological, political, and natural. We can see this strategy in a text like *Laudato Si'* where Francis connects "human ecology" with "the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment." Nature (both human and other-than-human), politics (or at least ethics), and theology intersect here to enforce the gender binary. Francis insists, "Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in encounter

¹²⁶ Holmes Rolston III, "Divine Presence—Causal, Cybernetic, Caring, Cruciform: From Information to Incarnation," in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 255–87; Christopher Southgate, "Does God's Care Make Any Difference?: Theological Reflection on the Suffering of God's Creatures," in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie et al. (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 97–114.

with someone who is different.”¹²⁷ Francis argues that a refusal to accept gender norms rooted in biological sex is a rejection of an aligned ecological, political, and theological reality.

Oddly enough this sort of legitimizing eco-political theology is even being used by someone like Richard Dawkins in his criticism of transgenderism. In a co-written piece with Alan Sokal in the *Boston Globe*, Dawkins rejects the language of “sex assigned at birth” on the grounds that it rejects the “objective biological reality” that “is determined at conception and is then observed at birth.”¹²⁸ This coincides with other transphobic statements he has made, rejecting the reality of transgender people (especially trans women) on the grounds of science.¹²⁹ There is an interesting connection to be made between Dawkins’s insistence on the objective reality of science and his recent adoption of the identity of “cultural Christian” and his feeling “at home in the Christian ethos.”¹³⁰ It would seem that even a prominent atheist and critic of religion like Dawkins prefers

¹²⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), §155.

¹²⁸ Alan Sokal and Richard Dawkins, “Sex and Gender: The Medical Establishment’s Reluctance to Speak Honestly about Biological Reality - The Boston Globe,” *BostonGlobe.Com*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/04/08/opinion/sex-gender-medical-terms/>.

¹²⁹ Richard Dawkins [@RichardDawkins], “Please Sign the Declaration on Women’s Sex-Based Rights. I Have Just Done so. <https://t.co/QmJ1uzNY3k>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 29, 2021, <https://x.com/RichardDawkins/status/1465324057277173772>; Richard Dawkins [@RichardDawkins], “Kathleen Stock Is a Brave Hero of Reason. Chapter in Material Girls on Total Immersion in Fiction & Need to Keep Hold of Reality Is Truly Excellent. You Can Feel Genuine, Heartfelt, Deep Sympathy for Ophelia, but You Snap Back to Reality When You Need to Find the Theatre Loo.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, December 3, 2021, <https://x.com/RichardDawkins/status/1466753162673598466>; Richard Dawkins [@RichardDawkins], “There’s Only One Way of Knowing: Science. And Polynesians Must Have Used It or They’d Never Have Reached NZ in the First Place. Don’t Insult Them by Teaching Maori Creation Myths as ‘Ways of Knowing’ – as Though They Were No Better than Readers of Tea-Leaves & Tarot Cards.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, December 15, 2021, <https://x.com/RichardDawkins/status/1471101687444160520>.

¹³⁰ LBC [@LBC], “‘If I Had to Choose between Christianity and Islam, I’d Choose Christianity Every Single Time.’ Self-Proclaimed ‘Cultural Christian’, @RichardDawkins, Tells @RachelSJohnson He’s ‘slightly Horrified’ to Hear Ramadan Lights Were Hung on Oxford Street Rather than Easter Lights. <https://t.co/ZY2ePfpms1>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 31, 2024, <https://x.com/LBC/status/1774510715975368778>.

for his nature, politics, and secularized-religion to align. Or perhaps more accurately, Dawkins sees the power of demythologized or de-godded Christianity to ensure the cultural homogeneity needed for his atheistic, scientific politics. As Kathryn Lofton puts it, “religion and anti-religion remain in a codependent tango, each reifying the power of the other through attentive dislike.”¹³¹ Locked in this theo-political dance, a staunch political and theological conservative like R.R. Reno interprets Dawkins as having secured his place on “Team Christian.”¹³²

Dawkins and Reno in agreement is perhaps not what Latour meant by his “proliferation of hybrids,” but this does reflect the reality of problems that refuse the neat division of labor between science and politics, and, I would suggest we should add, religion. Pope Francis and Richard Dawkins represent contemporary attempts to justify an ordering through a harmonizing of religion, politics, and nature, but this logic has its roots in the premodern and early modern world. Sylvia Wynter sees this logic as an extension of theological and scientific ways of ordering the universe that came together in the colonial moment. She observes how previous appeals to a theologically grounded natural law gave way to “bio-evolutionary Natural selection” that would “now function at the level of the new bourgeois social order as a de facto new Argument-from-Design—one in which one’s selected or dysselected [sic] status could not be known in advance, it would come to be verified by one’s (or one’s group’s) success or failure in life.”¹³³ Wynter argues that whereas theological legitimacy had to deal with theodicy, a scientific worldview demands a “biodicy,” as “*Evolution and Natural Selection* in the re-occupied locus of

¹³¹ Kathryn Lofton, “Pulpit of Performative Reason,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 1, 2022): 445.

¹³² R.R. Reno, “Fellow Travelers,” *First Things*, October 2024, 64.

¹³³ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 310.

Christian theodicy's Divine Creator, enables these bio-agencies to serve as the now de-supernaturalized Source of Legitimacy."¹³⁴ For Wynter, the colonial logic of indigenous genocide and racial slavery have always been about bringing religion, nature, and politics into agreement about the legitimacy of the regime.

In our present ecological moment—the proposed but officially rejected geological epoch of the Anthropocene—the stakes for eco-political theologies of legitimacy become even greater.¹³⁵ The self-described “Ecomodernists” proclaim their “conviction that knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great. Anthropocene.”¹³⁶ Insisting upon the improvement of human flourishing over the last two centuries, the Ecomodernists propose “decoupling” the human economy from negative impacts on the other-than-human environment: “Humans should seek to liberate the environment from the economy.”¹³⁷ The authors of the manifesto defines modernization as “the long-term evolution of social, economic, political, and technological arrangements inhuman societies.”¹³⁸ There is, however, no detailed schematic for how this will be achieved other than a continual emphasis on “[a]ccelerated technological progress.”¹³⁹ In fact, advancement in technology appears to be the overarching theme and it is

¹³⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project,” in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (New York: Routledge, 2015), 132; emphasis in original.

¹³⁵ Alexandra Witze, “Geologists Reject the Anthropocene as Earth's New Epoch — after 15 Years of Debate,” *Nature* 627, no. 8003 (March 6, 2024): 249–50, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-00675-8>.

¹³⁶ John Asafu-Adjaye et al., “AN ECOMODERNIST MANIFESTO,” 2015, <http://www.ecomodernism.org>, 6.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

indexed to an anthropology of improvement.¹⁴⁰ Its politics remain vague as the document espouses only an underdeveloped commitment to the “liberal principles of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism” as “keys to Achieving a *great* Anthropocene.”¹⁴¹

Even as the Ecomodernists argue for a bifurcation between human economy and environmental impacts, there is still an eco-political theology of legitimation at work. A new order is being proposed, one that will need to be justified insofar as it imagines a world that will not be free from sacrifice, suffering, and political choices. Clive Hamilton argues that “[t]he ‘good Anthropocene’ argument is founded on a belief in the ultimate benevolence of the whole, the order of things, a goodness that in the end transcends and defeats the structural obstacles, sufferings and moral lapses that seem to threaten it.” The climate crisis, for the Ecomodernists, “is viewed as a treatable side effect of the modernization process—a growing pain that the growth process itself will resolve.”¹⁴² A similar argument is being made today about the use of so-called “Artificial Intelligence”: it may require exponentially more energy consumption in the short-term but over the *longue durée* it will help to solve the very climate crisis it is contributing to.¹⁴³ Hamilton argues that these rhetorics take the shape of a “Hegelian theodicy”: “evil, here read as ecological damage, is construed as a contradiction essential to driving history forward

¹⁴⁰ The examples of this in the document are too numerous to list in full here. The writers insist that “early human populations with much less advanced technologies had far larger individual land footprints than societies have today” (16). Modernization is said to liberate “women from traditional gender roles, increasing their control of their fertility” and it frees “historically large numbers of human” from “insecurity, penury, and servitude” (8-9). Even agriculture is something modernization has “liberated” humans from, freeing them “up for other endeavors” (13).

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 31; emphasis in original.

¹⁴² Clive Hamilton, “The Theodicy of the ‘Good Anthropocene,’” *Environmental Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2016): 234.

¹⁴³ Clare Duffy and Rachel Ramirez, “How AI Could Power the Climate Breakthrough the World Needs | CNN Business,” *CNN*, November 27, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/26/tech/ai-climate-solutions/index.html>.

towards the realization of the Absolute, here read as unstoppable progress towards universal prosperity.”¹⁴⁴ While the Ecomodernists emphasize scientific and technological progress as the telos of their worldview, I think what they want to achieve is the sublimation of the natural and the political into the technological.

Jacques Ellul identifies technique as the ideology behind the cult of technology. Technique is at once “that which enables us to do things” but in doing so becomes “absolute necessity.”¹⁴⁵ To my mind, the amalgamation of universal possibility and absolute necessity is another way of naming God. Ecomodernists, then, absorb both politics and nature into the god of technology. The ecomodernist imaginary might be appealing because the promise of technology seems merely emergent, perhaps even inevitable. So, the evangelists of technology—be it the Silicon Valley led turn to A.I. or the longstanding fossil fuel proselytizers—insist that there is no alternative, and that any resistance will inevitably be overcome. But as the philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann writes, “If through superior technological power I am able to force my will on my opponents regardless of their protests, the consequent arrangement rests on an inevitable residue of resentment, on a hidden source of contamination that may destroy the present order. If my opponents are equals more or less and I deal with them through a technique of domination and manipulation, I have lost them as persons in the fullness of their being.”¹⁴⁶ While some look to technological religionists suggesting that AI might require “changes to the social contract,”¹⁴⁷ I think we need look no further than the prison industrial complex and the

¹⁴⁴ Hamilton, “The Theodicy of the Good Anthropocene,” 235.

¹⁴⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 218.

¹⁴⁶ Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003). 89.

¹⁴⁷ TFTC [@TFTC21], “Sam Altman: Advancing AI May Require ‘Changes to the Social Contract.’ ‘The Entire Structure of Society Will Be up for Debate and Reconfiguration.’ <https://t.co/VQLdBMFy5Y>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, January 23, 2025,

anti-state state for evidence of this transformation. The neoliberal reduction of the state to a protector of markets and a coercive apparatus to control surpluses is a technological project, one backed up by a thoroughly naturalized, “commonsense” legitimizing political theology.

Throughout this project, I have argued that property, territory, and sovereignty are products of eco-political theologies that arrange humanity’s relationship with land in particular ways. The logic of those in power is always naturalizing the status quo. So, enslaved men and women are not human beings wrongfully identified as chattel but were viewed as idle nature made productive through the property regime. Border crossers are not victims of a political regime but die in the desert due to natural forces. Settler colonial sovereignty views the interconnection of all creatures not as the ground for relations, but as the power to decide on the exception: who or what is politically insignificant and therefore expendable. Each of these eco-political theologies, I have suggested, will not be undone simply by their refusal but requires better, more-life giving stories to be told in their place. I have subtitled this dissertation *Political Theology Beyond Property, Territory, and Sovereignty*, precisely to suggest that maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous sovereignty represent not just rejections of these hegemonic concepts but ways through and beyond them. To do political theology with these communities would require refusing to legitimate the present ordering of things, suggesting, through concrete modes of living, new possibilities.

I think, though, that I should have pluralized political theology in my title. If there is to be an abolition political theology it will most certainly not speak univocally. What is needed is not one new theology to delegitimize the eco-political theology of property, territory, and sovereignty, but many non-reformist reforms working at the edges of the current order, unveiling its

contradictions and working toward something new. Political theologies, then, might follow Dorothee Soelle's suggestion that "Our problem today is no longer the undisguised but the hidden forms of exploitation, which conceal themselves among apparent freedoms, for example, the freedom to consume whenever, wherever, and in whatever quantity possible. The exploitation concealed there challenges the function of the gospel to unconceal and to accuse (*apocalypstein*)."¹⁴⁸ Too often apocalyptic is only thought to reveal the end of something. If there is to be an abolition theology, at least in the spirit of Du Bois, Davis, and Gilmore's abolition that seeks not only to destroy but to plan anew—apocalyptic must also be able to imagine and to build. But before any construction project breaks ground, we need to deal with some of theology's baggage.

As I suggest in the introduction to this chapter, Christian theology has widely been held captive by a supersessionist logic through which Gentile Christians have replaced the people of Israel as God's elect. Indeed, the colonial moment with the arrival of European Christians into the so-called "new world" could be read apocalyptically. A historian like Gerald Horne uses the term apocalypse to designate a catastrophe, especially for Indigenous and African peoples.¹⁴⁹ But we could also suggest that the European Christian colonizers practiced the same sort of apocalyptic revealing as we see described by Soelle. Indeed, Willie Jennings' narration of colonial theologies of supersessionism certainly suggests that European Christians saw themselves as erasing Indigenous ways of life to replace them with a properly Christian way of being indexed to whiteness. In doing so, they also replaced Indigenous relations with land. As

¹⁴⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 69.

¹⁴⁹ Gerald Horne, *The Dawning of the Apocalypse: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, Settler Colonialism, and Capitalism in the Long Sixteenth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

Jennings puts its, “*Racial identity is an imagined enclosure materialized through the transformation of the world into a non-communicative and inanimate reality enacted through its fragmentation and commodification.*”¹⁵⁰ Colonial Christianity’s ontological razing of the landscape, then, might be seen as enacting its own sort of revealing. Christians claimed to see the world of Indigenous peoples with x-ray-like vision, insisting that the other-than-human world was semiotically mute; any reciprocity or communication with the environment was rendered either the mistake of underdeveloped intellects or else the result of demonic possession.

Like any other theological methodology, the apocalyptic mode is not immune from misuse or from being coopted by the powerful. Indeed, although apocalyptic literature—especially in its Hebrew Bible and New Testament origins—is often thought of as being written on behalf of the weak in opposition to empire, Bernard McGinn points to its use in late antique and early medieval Christianity to defend the Christianization of empire.¹⁵¹ McGinn insists that apocalyptic should not be reduced to either revolutionary or imperial. Both weak and strong alike can hold “the conviction...that time is related to eternity, that the history of man [sic] has a discernible structure and meaning in relation to its End, and that this End is the product not of chance, but of divine plan.”¹⁵² This has led some religious and political thinkers to suggest the need for an “apocalypse from below” to pacify this way of thinking.¹⁵³ But insisting on

¹⁵⁰ Jennings, “Reframing the World,” 390-391; emphasis in original.

¹⁵¹ “The positive evaluation given the empire since the time of Constantine made it easy to identify her enemies as the enemies of God, at times even to make use of apocalyptic rhetoric in describing them.” Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 33.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 3

¹⁵³ See: Joe P. L. Davidson, “The Apocalypse from Below: The Dangerous Idea of the End of the World, the Politics of the Oppressed, and Anti-Anti-Apocalypticism,” *American Political Science Review* 119, no. 1 (February 2025): 479–91; Joshua Robert Gold, “Jacob Taubes: ‘Apocalypse From Below.’,” *Telos*, no. 134 (2006): 140–56.

apocalyptic as a genre of the powerless has its own risks. Willis Jenkins observes that a risk of the apocalyptic for ecological thinking is that “the excess of its imagination beyond practical participation can work against meaningful moral agency.” If the apocalyptic unveils a situation in which a climatic empire rules over us, says Jenkins, “then taking real responsibility for [the present situation] seems superfluous.”¹⁵⁴

Apocalyptic, then, might leave us in a similar situation as what Walter Benjamin called “left-wing melancholy.” Wendy Brown describes this affliction as a “name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen in the heart of the putative leftist.”¹⁵⁵ This is clearly a risk of apocalyptic theology which can often include restorationist motifs. It is also a potential pathway for a project grappling with the legacies of slavery, border imperialism, and Indigenous genocide. Perhaps we need to go backward, back to a time before colonialism, before enclosure, a return to some idyllic landscape where humans and other-than-humans lived in harmony together. This, of course, is plainly impossible, even undesirable. No time or place like this ever existed. To imagine it did exist is to fall into the trope of the ecological Indian, the tribal African, or a world where everyone had a home without alienation, all peoples in the places to which they belonged.¹⁵⁶ It is to imagine—in relation to my earlier discussion of efforts to justify the present order through aligning religion, nature, and politics—a universal ordering (even if particularized in historical instantiations).

¹⁵⁴ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 50.

¹⁵⁵ Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 22.

¹⁵⁶ Shepard III Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999); Donald R. Wright, “‘What Do You Mean There Were No Tribes in Africa?’: Thoughts on Boundaries: And Related Matters: In Precolonial Africa,” *History in Africa* 26 (1991): 409–26.

This is not, I think, what apocalyptic or abolitionist thinkers should desire. Utopias that exist in the past or in the future will not only disappoint but harbor in them another sort of supersessionism, one that imagines the superseding of the real by the perfect. Or perhaps we might think of it as the replacement of the anti-state state with the utopia. If the anti-state state views the role of the state as chiefly coercive, the utopia might be said to overcorrect to a frictionless world, a society without alienation or struggle. This, it seems to me, is another form of eschewing the political: the anti-state state does it through violence while the utopian state achieves this not through peace but through quietism. I think this is why the political theologian Vincent Lloyd calls “love as opposed to law” the “quintessential image of supersessionism.”¹⁵⁷ For Lloyd, supersessionism is seen in the replacement of law with love in political theologies of grace, efforts to “make the world either rigid and rational or fluid and faithful.” But these theologies ignore the world as it is: “textured, messy, viscous, difficult.” The problem is not just that these theologies are dissatisfied with the world as it is or that they desire something new or better. For Lloyd, what starts as love never ends lovingly: “It is to focus on the world we might wish for, not the one we have—and so to authorize violence against the world.”¹⁵⁸ So, the utopian state ends the same way as the anti-state state, with the need for politics to fundamentally rest on coercion.

Even in Lloyd’s thought, I think there is a bit of confusion as to what counts as “the world.”¹⁵⁹ If abolitionists desire a world without prisons are they negating the world as such or

¹⁵⁷ Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem With Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 29.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵⁹ I detect this same confusion in the so-called “Civic Augustinians” who conflate creation with present political arrangements. So, they suggest that those who want to, in Luke Bretherton’s words, “overturn a political system in the name of an ideological blueprint or set of abstract principles will be inherently destructive as they are an attempt to step outside of history or

are they negating only the world constructed on top of a good creation? It seems to me that if anyone is rejecting a world that is textured, messy, viscous, and difficult, it is not those who desire abolition but those who would tolerate or perpetuate the anti-state state. To use prisons and policing as the primary legitimate means of politics is to flatten particularity. This requires not only the incarceration of the surplus populations that neoliberal capitalism creates but also the policing of anyone who questions the regime or suggests that there might be alternatives to it. The legitimization and naturalization of the status quo, then, is what needs to be abolished. The apocalyptic and abolitionist imagination, then, envisions not the end of *the* world, only the end of *a* world: the one dependent on prison and policing, the one that has so brutalized Black people, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples. This is also the world that has produced so much environmental degradation. Apocalyptic and abolition imaginaries do not envision a return to some primordial creation or the resumption of a natural state of affairs; they are not imagining an end to politics or struggle through appealing to some non-political order. They want to build something new.

Where I think abolition provides a way forward—perhaps even beyond apocalyptic—is that it necessitates joining with those people and places who have been dominated and yet have learned to live in the world made by the PIC. This means that there will be some continuity between the old and the new. Apocalyptic theology tends to stress discontinuity.¹⁶⁰ As Philip

circumvent historical conditions and thereby deny the goodness and limits of creation reaffirmed in the Incarnation and falsely realize the eschaton by sinful means.” cLuke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 85-86; see also: Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁰ Though note a self-described apocalyptic theologian, we can see this tendency in a text like Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* when he writes, “We are concerned with the new creation,

Ziegler writes approvingly of the Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde, “the salutary character of the eschatological is in its discontinuity: it is from this discontinuity that eschatology draws its significance and power to move events.”¹⁶¹ While I understand the apocalyptic urge to have a clean break with the old world, I wonder if again the idea of the end of “the world” is causing some confusion. It makes it sound as if God creates a world, the world is corrupted by sin, and so God replaces the old world with a new one. I do think, however, that Ziegler—following J. Louis Martyn—might be on the right track in saying,

...theological ethics will, I suggest, quite properly despair of the presumption that a permanent and perspicacious moral order of creation lies before us, available for rational discernment. Rather, it will acknowledge that the history of the twice-invaded cosmos makes our world what it is: a world marked by what Martyn calls “startling and uncompromising discontinuity” between creation and “this world” and, all the more, between “this world” and the new creation that is the ripening fruit of the cross.¹⁶²

While I appreciate the idea that creation is not transparent to our understanding, I worry that the discontinuity between creation, “this world,” and the new creation might be unhelpful for understanding, in historical terms, what is broken about our world. Would Jesus’ apocalyptic critiques be just as denunciatory of a first century Jewish subsistence farmer living under imperial occupation as they would be of Herod or Pontius Pilate? Is an apocalyptic unveiling of the injustice of slavery, border imperialism, or Indigenous removal bringing enslaved Africans, vulnerable migrants, and Indigenous peoples under the same judgment as their oppressors?

Apocalyptic theology may not be definitionally done “from below,” but I think it will need to

and not with the sequence of cause and effect.” Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 364.

¹⁶¹ Philip G Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 9.

¹⁶² Ibid., 135; Ziegler is quoting Martyn, J. Louis. “Paul and his Jewish Christian Interpreters.” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 42 (1988): 1-16.

be able to incorporate analyses of power into its theologizing. Apocalyptic theology, rightly I think, emphasizes an underlying spiritual oppression that undergirds historical, material injustices. But can it make sense of those communities who have suffered under and developed strategies in resistance to those injustices? An apocalyptic theologian like Ziegler (and here he is quoting Ernst Käsemann) wants to see salvation as God “[wresting] the earth out from ‘our egoism and our deep-seated indolence and hypocrisy,’ and that god does so by freeing us from the tyrannical powers that enslave us.”¹⁶³ But who is the *our* and the *us* here? Or put another way, is it possible that the salvation envisioned by theologians like Ziegler and Käsemann is one that oppressed peoples are active participants in creating?

This plainly seems to be the suggestion of a liberation theologian like Gustavo Gutierrez who saw the liberationist church’s task as “[turning] to the oppressed, declaring their solidarity with them and their desire to join with them in their struggle.”¹⁶⁴ But what if a declaration of solidarity and a desire for joining is insufficient? Or perhaps even more problematic, given Christianity’s role in creating the world we have now, what if the revolutionary work of subaltern peoples necessitates the abolition of Christianity as we have known it? Simply shifting from a political theology of legitimization to an apocalyptic theology does not necessarily free us from complicity with the legacies of racial slavery, border imperialism, and settler colonialism.

We may see the world apocalyptically but feel unable to resist its destructive trajectory. Or, as the Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior warns, even those promulgating liberation theologies may end up drawing on biblical and theological motifs such as conquest narratives that have

¹⁶³ Ibid., 61; here Ziegler is quoting from Ernst Käsemann, “What I Have Unlearned in 50 Years as a German Theologian,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15, no. 4 (1988): 334.

¹⁶⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 29.

fueled settler colonial and apartheid regimes in the United States, South Africa, and Israel.

Warrior suggests that rather than a Native American liberation theology, what is necessary is for Native Americans to “listen to ourselves” relying on their own spiritual resources for grounding their resistance.¹⁶⁵ But Warrior also has a task for Christians as well: “learn how to participate in the struggle without making their story the whole story.” He suggests that this might make it possible for those who have faith in the God who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt to create what they have not been able to make before: “a society of people delivered from oppression who are not so afraid of becoming victims again that they become oppressors themselves, a society where the original inhabitants can become something other than subjects to be converted to a better way of life or adversaries who provide cannon fodder for a nation’s militaristic pride.”¹⁶⁶

Willie Jennings suggests that what is necessary for Christian theology to resist making their story the whole story is “a pedagogy of joining” wherein gentile Christians can learn to enter the story of Israel and their God.¹⁶⁷ But if this joining is to take Warrior’s challenge seriously, it would seem that Jennings’ account of joining requires further critique, especially insofar as he imagines the possibility that “Christian life” might be “a way forward for *the world*.”¹⁶⁸ It seems to me that to follow Warrior’s suggestions, to imagine a Christianity that can allow itself to be one story but not *the* story, would require not simply an abolitionist theology but the abolition of

¹⁶⁵ For a discussion of this possibility, see my discussion of Glenn Coulthard’s conception of “grounded normativity” and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s idea of “land as pedagogy” in chapter three of this dissertation.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today,” in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99-100.

¹⁶⁷ Jennings, “Reframing the World,” 394.

¹⁶⁸ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 294; emphasis mine.

theology.¹⁶⁹ For this one might be tempted to turn to a theologian like Karl Barth who imagines God's self-disclosure in Christ as the "sublimation" of the Christian religion in §17 from his *Church Dogmatics*.¹⁷⁰ But even Barth's radical critique of religion ends up centering a sublimated Christian religion as the central story. Barth analogizes the revelation of Christ to the sun shining on the earth: "But the sun shines, and its light does not remain something remote and alien to the earth; rather without ceasing to be the sun's light, it becomes the earth's, the light illumining the earth, which, in itself lightless, now becomes, not a second sun but yet the bearer of the reflected sunlight and thus an enlightened earth."¹⁷¹ Barth, no doubt, would insist that this is how the incarnation remains christocentric without collapsing into anthropology; revelation properly belongs to the Christian community yet without becoming its property.

Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer was unimpressed with this account. Writing of a "religionless Christianity," Bonhoeffer argues that Barth was "the only one to have started along this line of thought, did not carry it to completion, but arrived at a positivism of revelation, which in the last analysis is essentially a restoration."¹⁷² Bonhoeffer wondered what it might be like to have a religionless Christianity, one whose members (nonmembers?) are "called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?"¹⁷³ This is not yet another project suggesting that this or that German-speaking

¹⁶⁹ Brandy Daniels suggests a similar direction for theology through her engagement with Michel Foucault. I share the same spirit as Daniels, though I use different theological and conceptual tools. Brandy Daniels, "Abolition Theology?: Or, the Abolition of Theology? Towards a Negative Theology of Practice," *Religions* 10, no. 3 (January 1, 2019).

¹⁷⁰ I am drawing here on Garret Green's recent translation of §17 which retranslates "abolition" to sublimation." Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 161.

¹⁷² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), 280.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 281.

theologian holds the answer to our theological problems. I want to suggest not that Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity represents the abolition of theology but rather that even theological geniuses like Barth and Bonhoeffer found it difficult to imagine how something might come next that could continue on a tradition but do so in a way beyond supersessionism, colonialism, or as J. Kameron Carter has been arguing in a multitude of conference papers for years, a Eurocentrism that shaped Bonhoeffer's account of religionless Christianity.¹⁷⁴

Perhaps Barth and Bonhoeffer—and we could add Jennings to their company of theological giants—struggled with their respective Christian religions because they assumed that Christian theology needed to have something to say. God's self-disclosure in Christ may disrupt a human-centered religious understanding of the world, but they hoped that, in the end, Christians would still be in a place to say something. But what if we changed the goal of theology? What if instead of needing to declare something coherent to the world, in place of trying to make the world comprehensible to itself, we insisted on its incomprehensibility to us and, therefore, our need of others: human others, other-than-humans, and the divine other. Christians might need to learn from others not in order to extract knowledges of the world from them, but rather because it is only through relationality that we learn to bear with incomprehensibility. This need not be a superficial emphasis on doubt or the deconstruction of faith. In fact, it might be fully theological. As Kathryn Tanner suggests, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity “[makes] us like that [divine] image by uniting human nature thereby with the very incomprehensibility of divine

¹⁷⁴ J. Kameron Carter, “Response to Reggie Williams’ Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance,” in *Theology and Religious Reflection Section and Black Theology Group and Bonhoeffer: Theology Social Analysis Group and Christian Theological Research Fellowship* (Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GA, 2015); J. Kameron Carter, “Response to Ted Vial’s Modern Religion, Modern Race,” in *Nineteenth Century Theology Unit* (Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, 2017).

life.” Refusing to clarify our existence or God’s—refusing to coercively construct a new system in need of legitimizing—Christians might accept that “It is by being bound to the incomprehensible in and through Christ...that one comes to live a boundlessly full and good life.”¹⁷⁵ But this theological insight needs to be fleshed out in a politics.

Here I think Jennings is right on track in suggesting that “to give way to...divine desire means to attune our minds and bodies to the joy of learning and living with other peoples precisely within the contexts of histories and social matrices that have made and yet press us to be enemies.”¹⁷⁶ This has been my ambitious yet humbling goal in *Abolition’s Ecologies*, to learn habits through which Christians might decenter themselves. To learn from other communities, especially those made most vulnerable in a world full of private property, border walls, settler colonizers, prisons, riot cops, and, perhaps most importantly, a rapidly warming climate. To learn with maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples will mean refusing to neatly integrate them neatly into our political, theological, and ecological orderings. To learn abolition from them will require becoming vulnerable: intellectually, emotionally, and materially.

To learn abolition from others is not to sacrifice oneself, or at least it does not require one to do so without hope. Peter Dula explains that “friendship is the dispossession of the self in hopeful anticipation in the face of risk.”¹⁷⁷ I do not think he has in mind here the sort of dispossession I critiqued in chapter one. This is not a universal call for dispossession predicated upon a prior possession—of the self, of political and economic power, or of property. This is

¹⁷⁵ Kathryn Tanner, “In the Image of the Invisible,” in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 134.

¹⁷⁶ Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 157.

¹⁷⁷ Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 220.

instead a call for those who have previously enjoyed power to realize that only a certain relinquishment offers us “a chance,” as Judith Butler movingly puts it, “to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession.”¹⁷⁸ We need abolition because the world of property, territory, and sovereignty is structured so that we can only be enemies: of each other, of the earth, and, if we are enemies of each other and the earth, then surely we are enemies of God.

If political theology is to be thought of not as an espousal of a new doctrine or theory but as a renunciation of the center, we should not seek to move too quickly toward theologies of reconciliation. Writing of the problematic use of reconciliation as the goal of race relations, James Cone wrote that “If whites are truly converted to our struggle, they know that reconciliation is a gift that excludes boasting. It is God’s gift of blackness made possible through the presence of the divine in the social context of black existence. With the gift comes a radical change in life-style wherein one’s value system is now defined by the oppressed engaged in the liberation struggle.”¹⁷⁹ This, of course, is no easy task. For political theology to undergo this abolition will, no doubt, feel like laying down one’s political and theological arms. Perhaps what is necessary then is to recognize that this new disposition, the acknowledgment of one’s powerlessness, is one that the world of property, territory, and sovereignty has forced upon others for centuries.

In attempting to show the roots of the Black Radical Tradition, Cedric Robinson remarks that to see it one need look no further than “the absence of mass violence.” He insists that quite to the

¹⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 136.

¹⁷⁹ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 222.

shock of their oppressors, “Blacks have seldom employed the level of violence that they (the Westerners) understood the situation required.”¹⁸⁰ Robinson thinks this is possible because the tradition represents “a revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people and not merely from the social formations of capitalist slavery or the relations of production of colonialism.”¹⁸¹ If political theology is to recognize both its power and powerlessness, it must become capable of a similar way of delinking itself from the violent world-making it has been part of up to the present. This will not be accomplished through seeking to exculpate itself but through accepting its own marginality. Christian political theologies have been tempted to impose marginality through the coercion of the sovereign, whether it be the omnipotent divine or the virtually omnipotent state. But this is not how God has revealed godself in history.

Rowan Williams insists on the primacy of the encounter at the cross when he remarks that “the saving presence of God is always to be sought and found with the victim.” For Christians this means that “[c]onversion is always turning to my victim.”¹⁸² But the crucified Christ is not a passive sacrificial victim. He is the one who told his followers to take up their own crosses (Mark 8:34). As Ched Myers notes, “the turn of phrase [take up your cross] could have no other meaning except as an invitation to share the consequences of facing those who dared challenge the ultimate hegemony of imperial Rome.”¹⁸³ Perhaps it is in the dialectic of these two phenomenologies of the cross that political theology may find a way to decenter itself and

¹⁸⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁸² Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2002), 10.

¹⁸³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 246.

become useful for those movements engaged in abolitionist struggle. One must recognize one's role as participant in systems of violence, but this recognition leads not simply to the cessation of violence but in joining in the struggling to dismantle unjust systems, even or especially taking upon oneself the consequences of resistance.

Writing this in the season of Lent, anticipating the good news of resurrection, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that history's victims are not all dead. This is, of course, because there are people still struggling for abolition. But also because, as Robinson reminds us, radical traditions make their mark on the world today in their refusal to allow colonialism's violence to set the terms of their response to the world. That there are Black, migrant, and Indigenous people struggling to create a world without prisons and policing means that they are imagining a world beyond the violence they have endured. For political theology to join them will mean encountering its own living victims in order "to learn the truth of [its] collusion with the violence which destroyed Jesus." This would require learning "that before they can preach to others they must themselves repent and turn." Williams calls this acknowledging the "identity of failure."¹⁸⁴ But the point is not to keep failing anymore than Du Bois meant for the "splendid failure" of abolition-democracy to remain an end in itself. The purpose of acknowledging theology's failure is not, however, to repackage it in abolitionist garb, attempting to pacify or reconstruct those ideological structures that so easily fit into systems that upheld racial slavery, border imperialism, and settler colonialism.

What is needed instead is to acknowledge those harmed by this failure, to take seriously their demands, and to put oneself a position to follow them in abolitionist struggle. Only then will something like solidarity be possible. Only then will political theology find its place in a broader

¹⁸⁴ Williams, *Resurrection*, 32.

struggle. Whatever this place will be, it will not be an attempt to re-occupy the center of the world. The story of what comes next is not up to Christian theology to tell. We need to listen. In his speech at the signing of the Medicine Creek Treaty in Washington Territory in 1854, Chief Seattle remarked:

Tribe follows tribe, nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and talked with him as friend with friend, cannot be exempted from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.¹⁸⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for abolition as a framework for responding to the world made by property, territory, and sovereignty. First, I argued for Du Bois' "abolition-democracy" as a proper way of thinking historically about struggles against the legacies of racial slavery and showed its continued relevance in a world that responds to grassroots movement for environmental and social justice with the tools of policing and prisons. Then, I analyzed the thought of Ruth Wilson Gilmore to show how and why prisons have become the key tool of the anti-state state. With Gilmore and other abolitionist thinkers, I argue that abolition allows for a poetic sensibility able to see through and beyond the present political economy. Finally, I considered what an abolition theology might look like given the ubiquity of legitimizing political theologies of the status quo and the apocalyptic option that is not quite able to surmount the legacies of Christianity's place in the racial, settler colonial, and ecocidal world. I concluded that section by suggesting not an abolitionist theology but the abolition of theology as we have

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in: Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 100.

known it. Abolition is about building a new world to replace the one built on prisons and policing, but I think it is not up to Christianity or Christian theology to make that world.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx wrote that “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”¹⁸⁶ This I think contains something of the spirit of abolition. Abolition is not constructing the world from scratch, nor is it just a continuation of the same. To abolish prisons and policing—and with them the world of property, territory, and sovereignty—will require the recovery of traditions. The legacies of maroons, border crossers, and Indigenous peoples will need to be given a place of privilege in sorting out a new world. Christian theology will need to assume the role of learner. These happenings would be monumental. We shall see.

¹⁸⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 10.

Conclusion

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.

- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

When I first proposed this project, the central question I asked was, “What does it mean to do Christian ecological theology from the blood-soaked soil of North America?” I figured that if Christian theology was going to have something to contribute to thinking about environmental questions, we must necessarily reckon with the ecological and political legacies of racial slavery, border imperialism, and Indigenous genocide. If these crimes are taken seriously, surely there must be ramifications for our doctrine and ethics, not to mention our ecclesial and academic institutions. But the more I considered the intricacies of these injustices—the more I thought about how racialized violence frames our relationships with the human and other-than-human world—the less I found myself worried about formulating a response in a Christian theological idiom. The more I tried to think about what an adequate response would sound like the less confident I became in the language of theology and ethics that I have spent the better part of my adult life studying. Stanley Hauerwas has famously compared the task of Christian theology to the learning of a language, but he also remarks that “if Christian theological claims are no longer doing any work, they are best given up, for it is far better to abandon such futile endeavors than subject them to a resurfacing operation (a ‘face lift’) that tries to show that they really mean

something else.”¹ This project is not quite an abandonment but neither is it an attempt to translate, reimagine, or restore a Christian theological grammar; if we have not fully understood the problems that make our words inadequate for the moment then we are not in a place to correct them.

In this dissertation I have tried to put theology, specifically political theology, in a different position than it has been accustomed to. Rather than understanding itself as the narrator or prophetic critic offering prescriptions for our ecological and political woes, I have tried to position theology as something like an attendant to modes of liberation that emerge from conditions of desperation. Attending to others requires habits of attention. Iris Murdoch reminds us that attention is a form of ethical behavior that requires understanding a thing or person in their place. She insists, “we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot.)”² This, I think, is where theologizing often goes astray. Even when we give some attention to others, when we decenter ourselves long enough to acknowledge their complaints and their desires, we become impatient and move too quickly back to what we were doing before. We think, “Now that I am aware of this person’s pain or this or that injustice in the world, *I* must be ready to respond.” But as Murdoch makes clear, if we cannot share in their context, if we cannot join our lives with them in ways that the other recognizes and authorizes, we fail to understand them and thus fail to respond properly.

This explains why it is so difficult to think beyond a world structured by property, territory, and sovereignty. We too quickly accept these terms of order, imagining a “free” world as being full of self-possessed, citizens participating in forms of individual and national self-

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (London: SCM, 2001), 3.

² Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 31.

determination. What other choice do we have? In a world of private property, national borders, and wars to preserve the sovereignty of nation-states, it is not surprising that these become the structuring concepts through which we make sense of our individual and collective lives. What is worse is that even when we try to respond to the injustice, our very responses are conditioned and constrained by these terms. In reacting to the afterlives of slavery, to the xenophobic rhetoric of border walls, and to the removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands, we end up framing our responses through the very concepts of a world that made those injustices possible. Wendell Berry was right:

The once-enslaved, the once-oppressed were now free
to sell themselves to the highest bidder
and to enter the best-paying prisons
in pursuit of the objective, which was the destruction of all
enemies,
which was the destruction of all obstacles, which was the
destruction of all objects,
which was to clear the way to victory, which was to clear the
way to promotion, to salvation, to progress
to the completed sale, to the signature
on the contract, which was to clear the way
to self-realization, to self-creation, from which nobody who
ever wanted to go home
would ever get there now, for every remembered place
had been displaced; the signposts had been bent to the
ground and covered over.³

It strikes me as exactly correct that Berry depicts the form of freedom oriented around “the objective” as making spatial navigation impossible. While property, territory, and sovereignty are all enacted materially, it strikes me that their aims are largely abstract. Grounded ways of knowing particular places must be bulldozed so that we can all participate equally in systems that

³ Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 209.

promise universality even as they produce unequal distributions of power. Particular landscapes must be flattened, portioned out, and made quantifiable so that they can be conquered and then bought and sold.

As Berry and others have been telling us for decades now, you cannot understand yourself without a connection to the earth, and not just the earth as such but your particular place in it. The self-possessed individual is necessarily distanced from nature because human self-propriety is about the accomplishment of labor in contrast to the wastefulness of uncultivated land. Territorial boundaries and their concomitant identities of citizen and alien do not help you relate to the place where you happen to find yourself, but only secures for you a certain futurity as your welfare is inextricably bound to your place in a world marred by wounds we call borders. Likewise, your sovereignty—the core of the amorphous thing we value as freedom—consists mostly of deciding for whom you are not responsible and to whom you are not accountable. Rather than drawing on the power of connection and relation, the sovereign self is predicated upon the ability to decide who or what can be cut off from the body politic; power then moves from being an invitation to participate in the life of the world to its refusal.

Of course, those are not the only ways of understanding our eco-political lives. Maroons signal the possibility of imagining freedom beyond possession and dispossession. They reject property's distancing of the self from the other-than-human and transform plantation practices like the provision grounds in the midst of the bush, thus drawing on the intermingling of cultivated and wild landscapes to produce freedom. Border crossers transgress weaponized landscapes produced by territorial boundaries and they signal the continuity of the earth in allowing for movement. The freedom of mobility is not, however, the freedom to buy into a different future for oneself through selling one's labor for wages. Border crossers point to

something beyond the annihilation of space by time, opening up hope for borderlands to be the places where care, connection, and survival can take place. Rejecting the politics of the exception, Indigenous sovereignty finds power in and through relations, especially those connections that communities learn from and with particular lands. Power, then, is not about a decision on who or what does or does not count as a relation but emerges through the ongoing miracle of Indigenous peoples remaining with their lands and their lands being with them.

Recognizing that other ways of life exist beyond property, territory, and sovereignty breaks open what we might have assumed was closed off, predetermined, and static. Ashon Crawley writes that “Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities. Or, otherwise possibilities exist and the register of imagination, the epistemology through which sensual detection occurs—that is, the way we think the world—has to be altered in order to get at what’s there.”⁴ This strikes me as a good way of thinking about abolition. Abolition is not simply a process of tearing down but requires the interlaced work of understanding the already and planning for the not yet. This requires, as we have seen, an awareness of the very real systems and structures of state repression that forestall struggles for racial and environmental justice. Abolition demands a real accounting of how the political economy has used prisons and policing to deal with the internal contradictions of a capitalist economy. Moreover, abolition requires that we create and foster spaces for imagination, for the care of the soul necessary for remaining open to the new. Poetry, drama, and the blues name three modes for keeping oneself nimble, for attenuating the tendency to close oneself off from the world.

⁴ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2.

Rowan Williams suggests that “To be a friend of God is to learn to be a friend of my own frailty, accepting and affirming it, entrusting it to God.”⁵ This lesson is one that theology—as a mode of knowledge production and therefore as a form of politics—has been reluctant to learn and so it is difficult, if not impossible, to formulate an abolition theology. Political theology often either seeks to justify the ordering of religion, politics, and nature. Or it might assume an apocalyptic mode that reveals the brokenness of the old and replaces it with an in-breaking of the new. What is lost, of course, is what Murdoch calls the sharing of context. Theology too often assumes a position apart from others; its very insularity is thought to grant it authority and legitimacy. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for it to join in abolitionist struggle, precisely because the point is that a world made by prisons and policing is one in which no one is innocent and no one is safe. Reformist reforms of the Prison Industrial Complex seek to make punishment more humane and protect the innocent from being caught up in the system unjustly. But as Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out, “Human sacrifice rather than innocence is the central problem that organizes the carceral geographies of the prison industrial complex.”⁶ To seek to protect one’s innocence rather than to seek the end of a system that produces criminalization, is not only to reject one’s frailty but to prolong one’s involvement in a system of sacrifice.

If the form of political theology I gesture toward throughout this dissertation is to be realized, it will require assuming a different disposition toward struggles for liberation. Christian theology has often found it difficult to foster the desire to join others without also seeking to assimilate them into itself. I have suggested that perhaps this means that theology needs new desires.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 35.

⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (New York: Verso, 2022), 488.

Perhaps political theology could instill a desire to follow others in abolitionist struggle, not for the purpose of systematizing or evangelizing them, but for the ends of learning, intimacy, and solidarity. To do so would, no doubt, require a great deal of patience, a virtue that our world is clearly lacking. Policing and incarceration are signs of the radical impatience of the anti-state state. When some person or community cannot be easily metabolized by the political economy, they are deemed simultaneously threatening and expendable. When landscapes prove obstacles for our goals, they must be destroyed for the sake of the objective.

To counter the impatient logic that is willing to sacrifice vulnerable peoples and vulnerable lands, we must look to those who embody the fact that another world is possible. Political theology might learn to glimpse this world in the struggles of people who have used their own plight to fight for a broader justice. Recently I have found inspiration in the words of Mahmoud Khalil, who was disappeared by U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement only after having been made vulnerable by his own university. Mahmoud was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria and his family fled to Lebanon after the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. While pursuing graduate studies at Columbia University, he served as a negotiator and spokesperson for Columbia University Apartheid Divest and was active in the encampments for justice in Palestine. In an interview in 2024 he said, “As a Palestinian student, I believe that the liberation of the Palestinian people and the Jewish people are intertwined and go hand-by-hand and you cannot achieve one without the other.”⁷ His understanding of liberation does not simply connect Jews and Palestinians. In his letter written from a Louisiana detention facility, after he had been detained and separated from his pregnant wife, he writes, “I have always believed that my duty is

⁷ Chelsea Bailey, “Who Is Mahmoud Khalil? A Look at the Columbia University Protestor Detained by ICE,” CNN, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/11/us/mahmoud-khalil-columbia-ice-green-card-hnk/index.html>.

not only to liberate myself from the oppressor, but also to liberate my oppressors from their hatred and fear.”⁸

What kind of ecology makes it possible to extend liberation even to one’s oppressors? Or put another way, how might such a vision of liberation engender new ecological relations that we are not yet capable of imagining? Those in the struggle like Khalil do not need political theology to answer these questions for them. But theology needs an eco-politics radical enough to learn from those who have been able to sustain their frailty, even through decades or centuries of oppression, to such an extent that they are not willing to sacrifice anyone, even their enemies.

⁸ Mahmoud Khalil, “I Am a Palestinian Political Prisoner in the US. I Am Being Targeted for My Activism,” *The Guardian*, March 19, 2025, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/19/mahmoud-khalil-statement>.

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