

Edmonton in situ

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Department of English and Film Studies
University of Alberta

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ABSTRACT:

Edmonton in situ is a multimedia project containing letters, poetry, images, WhatsApp threads, and *essais*. My aim is to explore the City of Edmonton/amiskwaciwâskahikan as a site of connective tissues between humans and non- or other-than-human beings. The work is necessarily convoluted and unorthodox for it engages with formal issues of how I might scripturally or visually represent the concepts of relationality and enmeshment while asking questions of how I might engage with my surroundings “in a good way.” *Edmonton in situ* concretizes two year’s worth of efforts to explore my personal relationship to the city in light of new, challenging ideas about subjectivity and place, including Joe Sheridan and Roronhiakewen “He Clears the Sky” Dan Longboat’s evocative suggestion that “Where one *is* has everything to do with *who one is*.”

As a white settler and descendant of European immigrants, my understanding of what it means to live on this land is something that needs to be challenged. A great deal of this challenge comes from my reading and processing of the work of Indigenous scholars including Vanessa Watts, Harold Johnson, Dwayne Donald, and Vine Deloria Jr. who each in their own way seek to (re-)evaluate the gravity and significance of treaty, critique European iterations of “the human,” and call upon settlers to re-examine their relationship to land. In my letters and *essais*, I also engage extensively with the work of Walter Benjamin, Sylvia Wynter, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and others whose work offers powerful critiques of (and alternatives to) Western conceptual apparatuses and understandings of what it means to be a human in relation to other humans and non-human beings.

In the end, *Edmonton in situ* represents a process rather than a “product” because the work of locating and sustaining relationships is always ongoing. My goal is not to “solve” issues of relationality or present my work as an authoritative document on the issues I chose to take on, but rather to explore ways of conducting creative research that emphasizes fragmentary impressions, ideas, and emotions as a pathway toward thinking “otherwise” in relation to place—or, as da Silva puts it, “[releasing] thinking from the grip of certainty and [embracing] the imagination’s power to create with unclear and confused, or uncertain impressions.”

Special thanks to...

my thesis supervisor, Christine Stewart

& the supervisory committee, Dwayne Donald and Keavy Martin

& C.J. Bogle
who read and read and listened and listened

&

&

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&

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&

Note to readers:

This thesis will come across as multidirectional, distracted, and complex. I've come to see this as a necessary formal obstacle arising from the subject matter I've taken on, in fits and starts, over the past two years of my academic and personal life. The questions raised within—touching on my identity as a European settler, my relationship to land, and the workings of connective tissues between humans and non-humans in the place we call Edmonton—don't lend themselves to simple answers or structural arguments. Rather, I would suggest, the issues presented here demand a crosscurrent of dialogues and positions that occasionally, but don't always, converge in a way that is “legible” to those working in the Western institution.

Additionally, some of my primary influences, such as the ideas of Walter Benjamin, Objectivist poetics, and place-based research practices, pull together languages that aren't easily synthesizable. There is *always*, I've learned, another question that can be asked, another connection or claim that can be made, but I've tried to resist the academic impulse to present myself as any kind of authority over and above my subjects. What interests me, rather, are the silences, fragments, and frayed edges that appear when things cease to become “consumable” either by me as a Western subject or by Western thought systems in general. As a poet, I'm drawn to the domains that lay outside of what is easily understood. To paraphrase Susan Howe, poetry is often impelled to begin where philosophy and other practices of knowledge production end. For me, the poetry of Edmonton rests in the debris, the underbridges, the shopping carts, and the graffiti. These things speak for themselves. What I present here in the form of words and images on a digital canvas can only be introspective in nature or, at best, communal in the quick, ephemeral way that most things are in a Western/ized city.

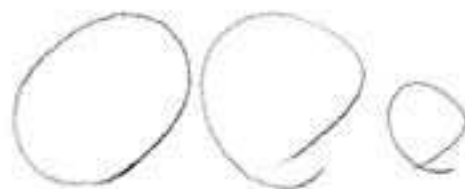
You may have other concerns while reviewing this work, such as my misreading of source texts or my digressiveness that detracts from discussions that are more pertinent or interesting to you. These are my mistakes. Eventually, perhaps, I may acquire the intellectual tools to develop a more cohesive “form” for presenting the tensions and traumas I uncovered over the course of my research. For the time being, I'm content to frame my work as a conversational “essai,” a series of attempts and failures that exposes a process rather than a product. (For an example of a precedent for this kind of research creation, there is Fred Moten and Wu Tsang's dialogic text *Who touched me?*)

All this is to say that the thesis you are about to read is simply *tiring*. In recent discussions with my supervisor, it became apparent that my work veers toward what might be called a “poetics of exhaustion.” Indeed, time did bounce and convulse while I was living through this research. Each day brought new perspectives, revelations, anxieties, and moments of being overwhelmed. When presented sequentially, such as in the form of an M.A. thesis, these moments can seem mountainous. That said, it is common, if not inevitable, for the neoliberal university and its underpaid, marginal, futureless workers to become exhausted. And Edmonton, as I see it, is an exhausted ground: I refer here to poverty and public health epidemics, capitalism, colonialism, the petroleum climate, and so on. Likewise, thinking about community and survival is taxing work, no matter how necessary it is as the present moment. Finally, I will mention that the coronavirus arrived shortly before I began preparing my work for submission, and some of what I've included (especially after page 154 or so) directly responds to the stressors and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. New voices enter the text, new ideas, and new discussions. Much of the world was (and still is, I believe) struggling to know who to listen to. *Exhaustion, exhaustion, exhaustion...*

So in an effort to assuage the sense of fatigue you may feel in the ensuing pages, I invite you to take in this work a pace that is sustainable to you. Begin your reading at any section that seems most comfortable. Feel free to skim pages, doodle in the margins, discard paragraphs, or strike out sentences that now ring dissonant. If your eyes grow tired, put my work aside or return to a section where you felt more connected. I ask you to rest on the images or surround yourself with blank spaces.

What follows is not a delight. It is not fun. And it never “arrives.” With any luck, it too will soon be buried beneath the rubble.

Sincerely,
Kevin
June 5, 2020



“Where one *is* has everything to do with *who one is*”

—Joe Sheridan and Roronhiakewen “He Clears the Sky” Dan Longboat, “The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred, 369

“Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs [...] speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig”

—Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle,” 9

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Collections # 1

The Edmonton Psychogeographical Society was founded in the summer of 2019 by CJ Bogle and myself. We were the organization's sole members. Our practice centered on a version of the *dérive*, a term coined by Guy Debord to refer to a practice of study that involves "rapid passage through varied ambiances," often on foot and with attention placed on a city's "psychogeographical contours," currents, vortices, and affective zones (n.p.). The *dérive* has been employed by countless academics and artists since the 1960s. The Edmonton Psychogeographical Society adopted the practice in order to expose points of relational contact between ourselves and the city of Edmonton, to find momentary languages (or a silences) that reflect the ways we move through our world and our world moves through us.

At the height of its activities, the Society conducted a total of three semi-directed *dérives*: the first, in late-May, began and ended near the Mandolin Café in Highlands and passed through water plants, accidental beaches, and colonial mansions; the second, in mid-June, began at the University of Alberta and ended at St. Anne Street in City of St. Albert; the third, in early August, began in the heart of McKernan, proceeded through the recently rain-wetted paths of the river valley in search of herons and other large birds, and ended at Bourbon Street in West Edmonton Mall. None of these *dérives* were recorded except in the anonymity of footprints. (In September of 2019, I also attended the World Congress of Psychogeography in Huddersfield, England, where I befriended a couple named Rachel and Ian and took some time to explore the arcades in Leeds.)

The Society was founded with the intention of collecting impressions of the City of Edmonton and its environs. We searched for the sprawl, the colonial erasures, the spectacular grids, the silences between the buildings. Our psychogeography is about thinking with "things": litter, animals, the news, loved ones, ghosts, books. The result was not a message or attempt at legibility, but a quest to *find things...lose them...and find them...again and again and again*. Due to academic and personal constraints, the society "formally" disbanded in the spring of 2020, but our activities are ongoing and may carry on forever.

April

You, I, the squirrel

In the roof

*

The nudes of

One

Word-

Wet

World.

Time's a letter—

Mid-day mugging—

Bottles, breath—

Circle talk—

Ums.

&

Memento mori. City's a

Brief flick.

This morning

A current wore my eye.

I fell off the bridge.

An

Other gasp in the common

Voice. It's all there is.

—Only this, this
morning.

May

The brush is ambient.
You, barren,
Are ambient.
By water: I may drown.

“...the beginning is still *here*”¹

My children’s
Children regressed...
& the form of any god’s lasting
Shrug.

*

Plants, plants.
I was told, *Trees here are*
Young growth. Younger
Than they look.

Spiderwebs.
Architecture.
I think “Us” a while
Then always.
We gathered before
What?

—*Water.*

And were born
To flocs, so brittle, you held
To my hair.

1. Joe Sheridan and Rononiakewen “He Clears the Sky” Dan Longboat, “The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred, 371

[amiskwacyi]
(I never heard)
The sun, I mean
At first.

Science

“a single [...] statement”²

Everywhere. All times.

Magpies, nuthatches, bees.

Water.

Trees, skulls, cheeks.

Scenery.

A body under Groat

Folded

As a calendar:

London—Jerusalem—Edmonton.

All machines.

All wealth.

“Everyone.”

“ . ”

2. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, 23

“...your ancestors lie in this ground”¹³

European prayers—
The land did offer,
And the words became
My wonders: “One,”
“An other,” “Once again,”
And my grandparents
Grew raspberries.

Bomb plot, 191X

The bridge and us:
What will be-
come, first sun?

*

Blockades, or
Work for cops & cages.
Inconvenient *breath*.

June

Cone on moss on swamp:
Rubber on stone on mud:
Skin on stone on glass:
Metal on moss on stone:
Stone on mud on bone:
Bone and stones in water:
Dust and moss and more days,
Days to come.

Pedestrian

Graffiti, the

asemia.

24-hours.

He's.

Shit.

Oh.

In one giving-receiving

Of poetries: *this bluff*

overlooking the North Saskatchewan was

envisioned /

as brick-works / smoke stacks and glass mills⁴

The act of wondering-me to that

Smoke? "Hm" shall mean

"I'm listening."

Friend

I paused

From Highlands

To Capilano.

It's that narrow footbridge

again.

4. Marilyn Dumont, "Brown Names," *League of Canadian Poets*, <http://poets.ca/2019/06/24/brown-names-by-marilyn-dumont/>

McKernan

Another dead.

Shadow of a bus.

—“*You* must take yourself alive.

Like the morning’s moon.

And what you inflict,

See it on every bridge.”

Like morning.

July

Aphid.

—Seasonal rabbit.

Mice tails. Bison, once.

& muddy muskets.

*

Where’re the antique

Faces of Christ? Awake

To the water by which he’d

Weep. A river cannot bleed

Or listen, but speak

And feed.

124 Street

Canvas in the peripheral
Apartments of losers.
Mary and son, Pollock
And the labour of needing affection—
A chestnut. Life.
Cracked but not fully.

Paul Kane, 18XX

Shadow-green, exact.
A god-image held, now,
A little like sand. How long, that mild summer,
Did you measure the hill
With your thumb
For accuracy?

August

On hazy days
The parallel lines
Of river lots are
Still in the
Streets
Streets askew
Are still
Blue as day
And burnt
Are the banks
Under
Smoke of the mills

From high,
A siren
Speaks emptiness—
You can be ignored,
Not things.

Because
Telegraphs
Leduc No.1
Refinery row
Q.E.2 N.W.T.C.
C.P.R. G.T.P.R.
Whyte Walter
Rutherford Gretzky
Coal Groat Henday
Because “You
Were born here.”

Tipton Park

Throbs, public hedges, with
The elderly—the same parade of lines
Was a body—that was *last* Sunday.
 No one’s reading here, no papers,
 Cigarettes, or tools.

“As he feared death, so do we”⁵

Where narrative isn’t—

But so life must sometimes be.

Sometimes trees. \$1

steel rivets—

Plaster, war

—

Split white

Fibres.

To erect a cross

You need a little soil.

Hammers.

September

—Ax and ox

—Thesis, total

—Four-lanes

—Cement-mixers, nails

—Paint, paint pails

*

The clockwork

Of sloping dusk

On the malls

19XX

“Here the colony’ll light

The

Sky.”

Wood.

Cathedral.

Sight.

Engineers: “Something’s here.”

Up.

October

—The bridge’s closed, the cops are there.

—I’d asked about the stairs,

 Though, the stairs up the hill.

6 p.m. light

Is the largest still-

Waiting thing.

Suicide ineffable

Uncle had no legs. He would say, I'm told,
"The sun over Touchdown Park is my wife."
And, as it goes,
Signed a contract with the sun.

Break lights on/off behind High Level railings.

I played, between all thoughts, a life.

Jasper

Paper

Cuttings, phlegm, tobacco-
Clogged station restrooms
Around dusk. Tracks, haunted
Veins.

November (after D.D.'s riverwalk)

Downstream the Quesnell.

Amisk (𐓄𐓇𐓈) carries—

The muskrat.

Between them: mallard,

Mice.

Chitter of things.

—The flowering, beetle-leg ice

Cracking banks.

& world between

Animal ones—

*

Theology

A leaf passes—

A twig, in mouth, remains.

*

Amisk, I can't swim

& if you leave

All's empire dust.

My emotion.

*

The deep stones, flat,

Ebbing below—

“Don't fall.”

Ex nihilo

C.P.R.'s

bridge on

river brows properties

mr McDonalds, Garneau(s)...

ground, \$500/

adjoining lot

*

everyone wishes to know

when C.P.R. will get to work

on em piers

1910 the river

1913 rivet

river

b'low silver

dust dripping grease

cans n

control flame

*

& so it

takes em east—

faces

plump with cold

water

again

*

infrastructures.

hands, pumps,

dry, working horses

men + donkey powder

*

em pier's

“that which happened.” the

depths planes XX—

edmonton—strathcona—jersusalem

Completely United

*

curved paths interrupted by

us e—

tiny aberrations in “known

thought”

by the way it was

1913. 24

dynamite buried, these parts.

german conspiracy, yet

*

—16 C.P.R.

trains. some ballast!

—1980: water

fall spectacular \$3

million

crisis

rail. 2016. o lights

December

Still, minor body.

Moons of flesh

Cycle by.

*

In a garage,

Impersonal to a world who keeps

Her cold, but full of blood

& breath. Dawn must

Mourn snow-deaf

& departed.

Limbs conjoined in not-ness.

We grieved Him, you loved Him & didn't

Your dad.

*

There was a child who came to life

In the sand and ruins of Spain—by water, horizon

*

“For a while,”

Is what I heard,

“No, *most* of my life

I've wanted to die. Don't know why.”

*

Constellation: spoon.

This bed is tidy.

Every body interred.

And I loved us exactly as we were: anorexic,

Full with cold.

January

Alpha & omega of

The fact:

Cold, cold...

*

To self:

Breathe, if you can. Onto ice.

Breathe:

the world

begins

coldly

*

Words against ice

Become ice

Until spring.

—Who recalls

A speaker?

Friends

Sage wrapped in tissue

Lit with hotel matches

Musky from the drawer

Smoke in the awning

Trapped with cones

im sorry he had to

Naaman

Took two satchels of soil
From Israel
To worship wherever
Whenever, whomsoever,
Any which way.

*

Opa planted raspberries,
Forgot the papaya, Dutch Indochina—
But first the nettle roots:
He pulled them all out
Gently, as was his way.

February

these geese
come early
know how why
to lose

Edmonton

In situ Unerring

violence

Magpies / bread

Bags

The bridge.

The men.

A new machine.

The stars who spoke

 One to another

 Didn't

 quickly.

Constantine.

“History?”—

I, a coin, let go

Into your glance

 Echo.



Collections # 2

Walking west on 118th Avenue, the Edmonton Psychogeographical Society stopped to consider a shopping cart tipped onto patch of poisoned dandelions. A car pulled up beside us in a service road. The driver explained that people she knows use shopping carts to bring groceries home because they've lost their license or can't afford transportation. Carts from Walmart, Superstore, H-Mart, and Save-On-Foods abound across this urban landscape.

*

Heatmaps show the city in reds, oranges, blues. The hues indicate relative levels of wealth and power. I've been "collecting" snapshots of shopping carts for a year because I'm interested in the way *images* may push against these reductive representations and help me reconsider the forms of life sanctioned by wealth disparity and the forms of life that are pushed, perhaps literally, into the perimeters, the "debris fields."

*

May shopping carts be allegorical? They are always in trajectory to or away from the imposed orders of capitalist geographies. As they are pushed, battered, abandoned, recollected, and salvaged, they oscillate between a world of convenience and abundance and a world of obstacle and trauma. What might a consideration of these anonymous, wandering objects reveal about collective wounds at the heart of the city's very material presence?























































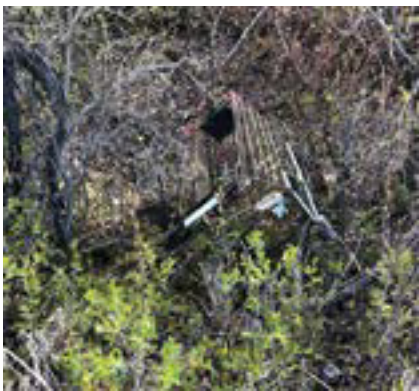


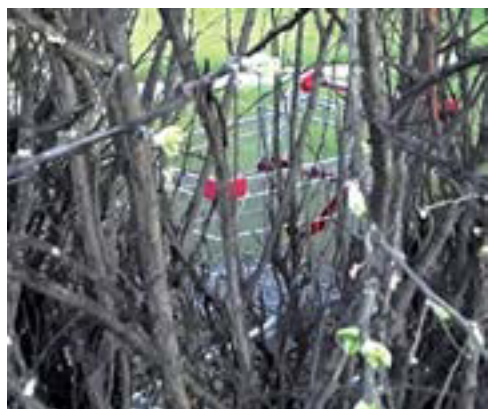












A dawn on the river alone

My considerations of the broader questions raised in this thesis began earnestly in the fall of 2018 when a poet friend and I commenced a year-long place-based study in conjunction with the Treaty Poetics course co-instructed by Christine Stewart and Reuben Quinn. Our project involved visiting the riverside once a week and writing frequent letters to one another to document our experiences living and studying on this land. Our discussions ranged from our struggles to engage with nehiyaw teachings to wider considerations of the themes of enmeshment, reciprocity, interconnectedness, and tradition. That earlier collaborative project laid the groundwork for the conversations and considerations contained in the present work.

Yet an issue I experienced early on was how to transition from a clearly communal approach to study to the ostensibly individualized one required by the neoliberal institution without abandoning the communal and “open” aspect of my work. This became a struggle to find a language—or lack thereof—that is somehow “appropriate” to the sensations of enmeshment with humans/non-humans that I continually lost and found on my solitary visits to the river.

MMXVIII we began moving through the city with questions. how worldviews
 views can co-exist in space. the symbol and intent of the Two Row Wampum Belt.
 Ermine's "ethical space" where Indigenous and Western worldviews can meet? or
 strangers can stand. or wars-commerce. we questioned the ways knowledges can be
 place-based and how "coming to know" within a particular place bespeaks of that
 place and forgot and forgot all the names of the animals again. how a plurality of
 worldviews-so obvious disturbs European concepts inherited i e the universal ~~the~~
 ideal God the Father text. what's true here is not true there. what's in a name here
 is not in a name there - just looking *for a smoke* can't hear can't speak i t the gaz
 station's always open ~~or bright~~

are powerplants soccer
 elds bridal/urial grounds
 baseβαλλ

studium government
 buildings water
 processing plant3 manicu

lawns abattoirs movie
 theatres universitias gulf
 courses σλασπεσ

joggers animals
 all for the same place
 !!!
 you brutale

QUESTION the
 tevoion the economic
 juridical violences
 w

prairie ATO ΠΙΑ
 our:

of course we digressed. we thought about death father work and rest. o ur letters became a therapy for me an opportunity to feel caring and cared-for thinking and thought -of at a time when depression and anxiety ere desaturating m y li fe. Linda Goyette describes Edmonton as “a conversation with a river running through it” (xiii) . i loved and worried about this line & how do we become part of this conversation that is at once textual biological angelic traumatic. conversations are always fragments they happen at bus stops and umm or not in lecture halls. conversations involve more than words but worlds but the exchange of life. what conversing is involved in surviving an INCOMMENSURABLE planet? (the risk of I walkin.)



re ~~ster~~ are the στερες stee
 ets teQt large family
 ad body where is tl

id? where is the end
 some
 rusting trusses
 must wonder if they really a

.. \
 re z penumbra the

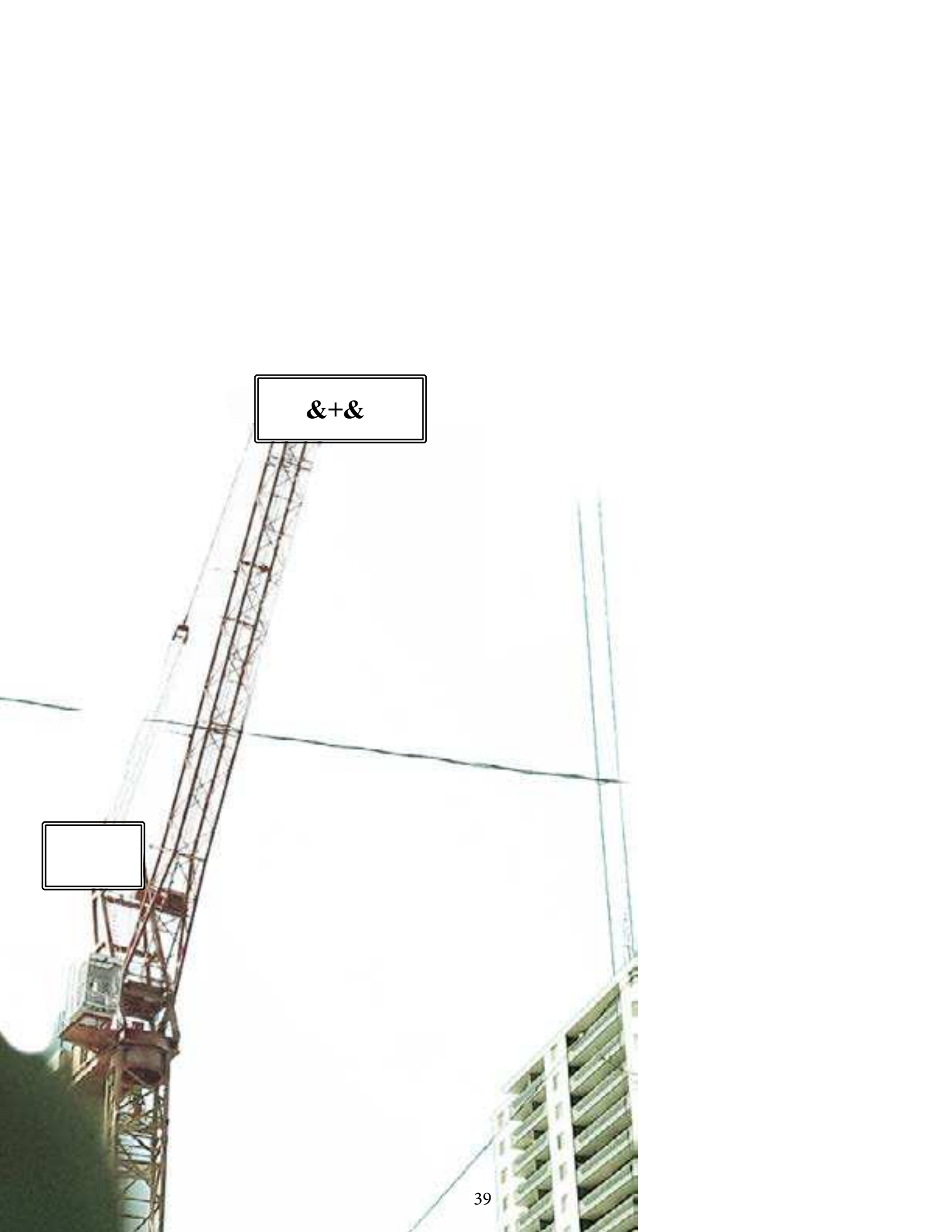
with draw life but
 stinately alive permanentl
 wn freezing

deep
 χολδ how er
 enisweep history into hislc

i understand Cree-speakers have referred to Rosedale Flats and its environment in particular as pehonan or “gathering place”/ “waiting place” signalling its importance as a site of trade celebration ceremony since time immemorial (Cardinal 2) . . . n cross n subterranean grave 5 a m the flock of cranes n seagulls pulled through eating what floats. Forfgtot it in my blur soul . .



like snapes amiskwaciwâskahikan
edmonton, edmonton, edmonton
fort de edmonton, edmonton, edmonton
edmonton, edmonton, edmonton
here's here's here's
eter erd sunlight
strollers radios blonde
.



&+&

Over/under/bridges

“Underbridges” surely offer a kind of “ground” for conversation. But it is an exhausted, imperial ground like the ground under any other underbridge in North America. The watershed is involuted, and the bridge—for all its “historical value” and touristic charm—is at the same time an allegory of dispossession and duress, even, or especially, when these things are discursively entertained through generic headline abstractions: a “crisis,” a “tent city,” a “suicide epidemic.”

*

This is an exercise in seeing. From above or from below. From the perspective of engineers or from the perspective of pedestrians. From the “safety” of sanctioned Eurocentric historical narratives or from the perspective of the silent alternatives still swimming in the shadow of empire.

“[The High Level Bridge] had been three
 years old at a cost of about \$1 million.
 Three men had been killed by falling
 from the bridge and another had been
 killed or a save in the bridge was said to
 be about fifty two yards short of half a mile
 in length, and was the only one of its kind
 in the world. Having a road and a double
 street car track on the upper level, and a
 road and a couple of sidewalks on the lower. The
 length of the upper structure was 2,500 feet,
 the width eight to the top of piers 100
 feet, while from the level to base of rails
 it was 57 feet. The southern end of the bridge
 was 0.34 mile higher than the northern end.”
 (The Chicago Advertiser, Chicago, 1901)
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 bridges
 bridges
 bridges
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 you're
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 you're
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 always
 always
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...The high level bridge had taken three years to build at a cost of about \$1 a foot. Innoo mon had lost their lives by falling from the bridge; while another had been killed in a cave in. The bridge was said to be the longest and widest in the world, having a railroad and a double street car track on the upper level, and a roadway and four sidewalks on the lower. The length of the superstructure was 2,500 feet; the clear height to the top of piers 100 feet, while from the level to base of piers it was 137 feet. The south end of the bridge was 100 feet higher than the north end.

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"...[the High Level Bridge] had taken three years to build at a cost of about \$1 a rivet. Three men had lost their lives by falling from the bridge, while another had been killed in a cave-in. The bridge was said to be about fifty-two yards short of half a mile in length, and was the only one of its kind in the world, having a railroad and a double street car track on the upper level, and a roadway and dual sidewalks on the lower. The length of the superstructure was 2,555 feet, the title height to the top of piers 100 feet, while from ice level to base of rails it was 157 feet. The south end of the bridge was 10.34 feet higher than the north end" (MacGregor, *Edmonton: a history*, 201)

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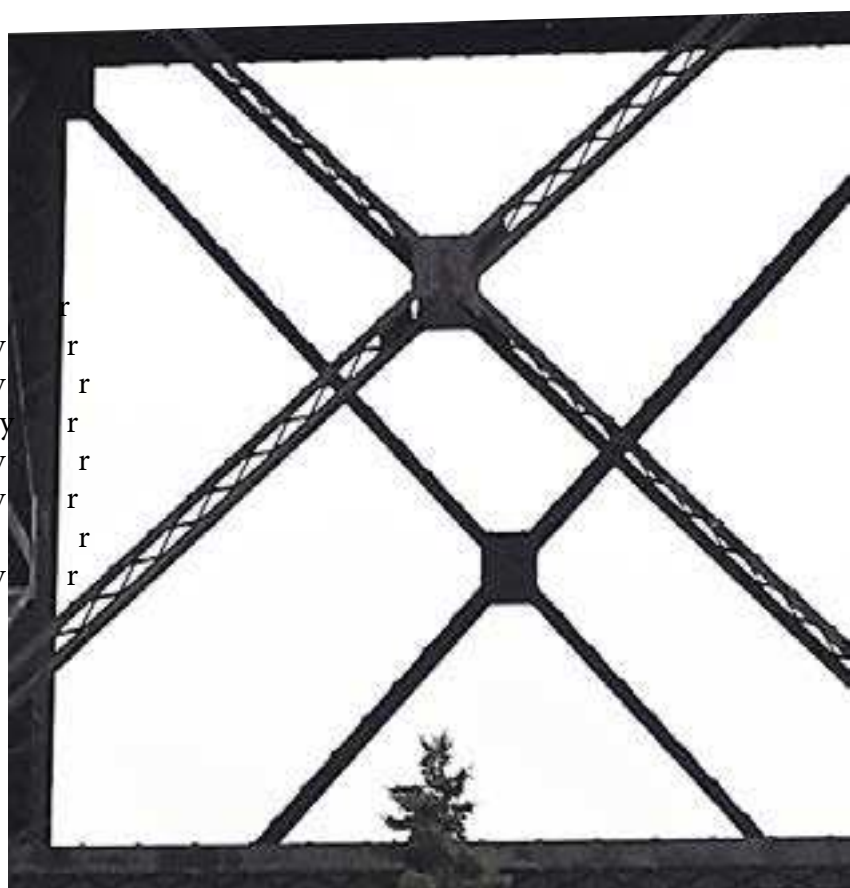
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first time it was cold

*second time he looked out
the window a few seconds*



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Correspondences

What follows is about one year's worth of correspondences between myself and an assortment of friends and intellectual collaborators. These include emails sent to my supervisor and others, a series of WhatsApp threads with members of the Edmonton Psychogeographical Society, and a handful of self-addressed letters I put together as something of therapy exercise. The topics explored within are numerous—ghosts, magic, philosophy, religion, materials—but always return to central concerns of what it means (for me) to be here. The letters appear in chronological order.

Writing in an “epistolary mode” began as a way for me to process ideas, texts, and events passing through my life at the time. Eventually, encouraged by my discussion partners, I settled on pursuing letters as my primary form for this thesis. Unlike an “essay,” letters (like poems and images) allow room to ask questions without requiring answers. They allow one to test languages, to appear vulnerable, and to adapt their ideas and feelings to the concerns of the moment.

Likewise, the lives and spaces I encountered over the course of writing this thesis made it increasingly clear to me that the only voice with which I can sincerely approach matters of land and reciprocity is my own, with all its insecurities and blindspots. Approaching these topics in a personal voice, I hope, helps address issues of “authority,” and of what I am and am not entitled to say out of respect and attentiveness to where/who I am.

In total, these correspondences capture a process, one replete with many fits and starts. In preparing these pieces for submission, I did my best to preserve the messiness, anxiety, and awkwardness that were far and away the most memorable experiences I had while putting this work together. What became clear to me as the letters progressed is how ongoing participation in an enmeshed yet irreconcilable world must be messy - at times revelatory, at times dangerous, almost always partial.

Hi [REDACTED],

Last night I was walking home from downtown and found that the High Level was closed. Someone was on the edge, so the police blocked off the area, and I walked around to the Walterdale instead. I found this all very overwhelming. If thinking is praying, I imagined the city could think together for a second. And the land. And the bridge. As you mentioned once, the idea that the land thinks us and we it - it makes complete sense, if only in flashes. I don't know why. But it's an idea I needed yesterday, for what that's worth.

I'd been downtown visiting a therapist. On the subject of things causing me anxiety, I mentioned my thesis project and my struggle to make any kind of pronouncement on anything whatsoever. Since April, I've been trying to synthesize ideas in a proper academic fashion, but it's been a stunted effort - not for lack of interest, but lack of position, lack of perspective.

I suppose therapists can discern the themes of our lives. One of mine is relations: relationships, relationality, relatedness. I'd been questioning this through religion, music, communism, self-help, therapy, Levinas. "What is this relationship you're trying to understand with your thesis?" she asked me. I said something like: "I don't know what, but I know that it's keeping me alive."

Take care

WARNING
AREA UNDER
24 HOUR
VIDEO SURVEILLANCE

Hi [REDACTED],

I'm just letting you know that I've begun working on the constraint exercise you recommended. This is absolutely something I would like to do, and I believe it will draw in a deeper consideration of form and influence.

I've been through a few waves of reading quite heavily, but rarely do I remember the "argument." Revisiting some of those articles now - esp. "Ecologies of the Sacred" and some of Vanessa Watts' work on place-thought - suddenly makes more sense than it did even a few months ago. But still there's no argument - only guidelines, witherings, half-translated counsel.

Everywhere I turn, I encounter nuances to what might be Benjamin's "anguish": the witherings, the decay, the distances. But at the same time, I seek to feel in the Now (the moment of recognition) something worth caring for in modernity. I think this is what Benjamin didn't have the opportunity to find. Yet this is on my mind even as I read something like the Invisible Committee or Tiqqun, which I want to appreciate but cannot, because there is no space in the "blockade" to love the bridge the way I do, and because I don't know what it means for the world to end, whether it even wants to or can.



Re: Our discussion on what it means to have a citational practice

Dear [REDACTED],

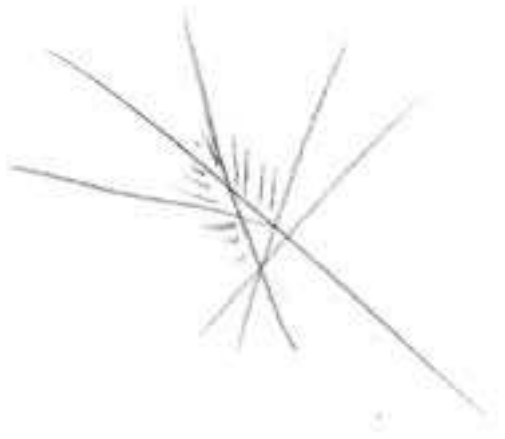
[REDACTED] The concept of “citation” is difficult for me today. As essential as it is to the project-at-hand, I can’t say what it means for me to recontextualize another’s words. I’m concerned with what it means for me to become contextualized amidst others’ words. Maybe these things are one and the same. I don’t intend to agree, disagree, or appeal. What happens to the practice of “citation” when assimilation, sublimation, contestation, and all the other words emerging from aesthetic and literary theory to describe what’s occurring between the “read object” and the “reader,” are denied or deemed undesirable?

[REDACTED] I must consider the dangers and pitfalls of citation. I’m thinking here of Michel de Certeau, who in his analysis of “scriptural economies” addresses the relationship between “quotation” and “the page.” For de Certeau, “writing,” as it developed in the West, is a practice of transfiguring the complete world to adhere to the new, divided medium of the page. Writing transforms the page into a space free of the ambiguities and “erotics” of the so-called hors-text of voice, bodies, and tradition. Upon the page, the “external” world is transformed, transfigured, re-purposed, fossilized (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 131-153). The external becomes workable substance for the internal one.

[REDACTED] This particular place....In light of de Certeau’s understanding of the page, it can’t be overlooked how much the practice of “citing” others’ words/voices resembles the settler colonial practice of turning everything (including knowledge) into a resource that can be extracted and accumulated.

[REDACTED] What’s lost in my writing is always context: space itself, ecology. I’m also concerned with the ways a broad practice “citation” might contribute to a “settler move to innocence,” as Tuck and Yang describe it (10). (Land acknowledgements [the “citing” of the land?] can—and in certain settler contexts, probably does—fall into this category.)

[REDACTED] So for the time being, I hold others’ words at a distance, and the distance, too, becomes a principle influence. Every day of my life has become a meditation on distance.



█ (Yet the institutional pressure to “produce” is always there. Can we “produce” without re-inscribing the material?) (Just as importantly—why produce, if the material itself is always-already creating itself and other things? Why cite, if the others are already speaking for themselves?)

█ It’s fascinating to me that the late medieval definition of “cite” (c.1300) was this: “to move, set in motion, stir, rouse, call, invite” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). Recalling the intention of the Two Row Wampum—or Willie Ermine’s “ethical space”—it seems impossible that I might in good faith “cite” another in the conventional academic sense, at least at this time. But in the medieval sense, maybe. Calling into presence, stirring, beckoning over. To cite in good faith, perhaps, I must invite. I must seek presence and counsel rather than answers or workable material. I aim not to assimilate knowledge, but to contemplate its surfaces, to walk beside or beneath it, to welcome citations into my life as a kind of haunting—at times voiceless, disorienting, overpowering, epiphanic, mute. Always transient.

█ According to Glen Aikenhead, the Cree concept that captures this is *yipwakawatisiwin*, or “wisdom in action” (2). The closest parallel in Western languages is Aristotle’s *phronesis*, which refers to a mode of knowing wherein thought and action are “dialogically related” (2). Maybe what I’m trying to do (or actively doing, as I visit the river daily) is *phronetic*. *Phronesis* makes action-in-thought desirable. It replaces “acquiring” (assimilation, sublimating, etc.) with walking, crafting, condensing. Any *ars poetica*. Can *phronesis* re-direct the/my “fragmentary self” of European modernity by asking it to participate in “relentless remembering and reminding” (Tuck & Ree 642) rather than seeking for it a safe position in the finality of “innocence and reconciliation”?

Benjamin's citational method in *The Arcades Project*, which is "related to montage," disrupts the context of his materials by forcing them into close, though disturbed, relationships with other materials (458). But it's precisely the original context and the feelings of in-betweenness or the presence of distance that I'm interested in. Not the "flash" that brings things together, but the long dawns and dusks wherein things occasionally, haphazardly, cross paths. Not the archives, but the traces of memory in grass, walls, water.

I want to find a poetic practice appropriate to what might be called Edmonton *in situ*—Edmonton as it is, as I am within in. Edmonton *in situ*: colonial ruins birthed from "empire's original violence...law's creation myth" (Tuck & Ree 654). But it is also everywhere, the ground we are on, the *materia prima*. Insisting on context (myself with others in space) is, I believe, one way to motivate a "poetics of citation." But rather than the citation of "words" as they appear in documents, I'm drawn to a sympathetic but always-incomplete citation of ideas and things. Calling them up, seeing what happens when we're together. What I lift from Benjamin, though, is the conviction that fragments will always find a way to connect. Not through dialectics, which forces each component forward, but through constellations, which are generous, invisible, and accommodating of every thing *in situ*. Not lost but continuously found. The underlying "idea" of any day or night is beyond the craft of writing, and certainly beyond the event of "seeing something." But what's outside right now?

An effort to (re)encounter a place by noticing context has something in common with the *dérive* as originally put forth by Debord. Moving-in-context renders the "spatial field" more-or-less "delimited or vague, depending on whether the goal is to understand a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself" ("Theory of the *Dérive*" n.p.). These dual movements—understanding and disorientation—are, to Debord, necessarily inseparable. So the result can never be "understanding" in the empirical sense (the word is poorly chosen). And the product can never be a political movement, but the generation of positions adapted to a place. Maybe what's happening as I encounter Edmonton is, rather, what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls "reflection as a kind of study," which she considers "the play of the imagination without the constraints of understanding" ("In the Raw" n.p.) In this way, "imagination" doesn't provide answers but raises questions; it may be considered as an "unthinking" of the world and what the world is to the "I."

(To da Silva, “unthinking” is ideal. “Unthinking” is a path to the world’s end, the “world” that is/allows for the affectable subject of colonization and extraction.) (To the question “Why produce?” da Silva might respond: Because in writing about the world, you are actually re-thinking yourself in the world, disintegrating the “form” of you into the “matter” of you. Production is actually taking apart.)

“Citation” implies a willing. What happens when presences, questions, aporia, other lives, enter *our* lives against our will—subconscious, undetected? Tuck and Ree offer the word “haunting.” Does “haunting” capture the reality of seeing and knowing in a prairie colonial setting? It feels appropriate. There is no reason to believe all hauntings are malign, that the agent is “deceased,” or that the person haunted is “innocent.” This is a Western conceit, as Tuck and Ree point out, and in American horror films, hauntings are always depicted as “undeserved, and the innocent hero must destroy the monster to get the world in balance again” (641). But in Japanese horror films, “the depth of injustice that begat the monster or ghost is acknowledged, the hero does not think herself to be innocent, or try to achieve reconciliation or healing, **only mercy**” (641). I’m testing the theory that haunting isn’t a genre, but an encompassing description of all unexplainable “presences” in modern life. “Haunting” can describe our relation to the labourer who made our products as well as the history of our institutions, our houses. What haunts me might not haunt you, and may not haunt either of us completely. Are labourers on the other side of the world haunted by us consumers? I tend to think they are.

“Haunting” as a process allows the “ghost” to retain agency and self-definition. Avery Gordon expands on this idea: If haunting describes how that which appears to not be there is often a seething presence... the ghost is just the sign... that tells you a haunting is taking place... The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course (8)

Is “to cite” a way of calling for the presence of the un-apparent? Is it a request to be haunted? **Can citations be ghosts?** [H]aunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of a feeling of reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition (8)

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I've been reflecting more on your advice vis-a-vis developing a citational practice. As usual, I can't begin doing anything without weeks of contradictory, constellatory, occasionally concrete thoughts.

However, I have been reading. Reading for counsel, I would say. I learned that this isn't the same as reading for advice or ideas. This is the difference Benjamin tries to make between "wisdom" and information - the former being related to craft, to work, to boredom, and to usefulness. If I were to explain my draw toward Benjamin at this time, in this place, it would be that he is the one writer I can think of who is always on the cusp of "what is vanishing" (from culture, from history, from one's own mind) but whose every sentence advocates retaining it, even as it becomes something quite unrecognizable through the metaphysical and cognitive optics of Western modernity. [Things are speaking, he would write, even explaining "how to live," but what they say is always just beyond one's tongue.]

Harold Johnson's *Two Families: Treaties and Government* is one book I've gone to for counsel. It was important for me to hear this, especially because I don't understand it: "You will never understand water until you experience thirst. You will never understand food until you experience hunger. You will never understand 'All my relations' until you experience yourself."

So reading and listening is more manageable than writing. Today, any writing feels insincere if it's in any way confident or legible, just like thinking does.

Kevin

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All lines are
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Support Network
Edmonton
EDMONTON POLICE
SERVICES

You and I have different ways of being on the earth. Your perspective springs, in part, from Genesis 1:28, where God blessed Adam and Eve and told them to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ The word “dominion” may not be an accurate translation from the Hebrew. It might be better translated as “caretaker” or “steward,” which would be closer to my understanding of our relationship with the earth.

—Harold Johnson, *Two Families: Treaties and Government*, 9

2019-10-16, 11:49 a.m. - Kevin: Have you heard of this issue with translation before? I learned this years ago when looking into “ecothology,” but here it is again in Harold Johnson’s book.

2019-10-16, 12:24 p.m. - CJ: Not really no? Wow I like this. Which book is this? Is Christianity your culture?

2019-10-16, 12:40 p.m. - Kevin: An incredible book called by Harold Johnson, novelist and lawyer! Just read it in one sitting.

2019-10-16, 12:40 p.m. - CJ: Wow.

2019-10-16, 12:42 p.m. - Kevin: And yes, I’ve always suspected Christianity is my culture - the Christianity after/in modernity, after Nietzsche

2019-10-16, 12:42 p.m. - CJ: Now you have to read some Sylvia Wynter to learn to deal with that lol

Kiciwamanawak, we need to find balance. Some of my family have been hypnotized by your flames and have become like you; they have become consumers. Some of your family can see the earth and try to be like my family. They are humans with the gift of choice. Some of my family have chosen to be like yours and some of your family have chosen to be like mine. Neither way is the only way or the correct way for everyone.

—Harold Johnson, *Two Families: Treaties and Government*, 67

2019-10-16, 12:49 p.m. - Kevin: What is your immediate response to this?

2019-10-16, 12:49 p.m. - Kevin: I need to know

2019-10-16, 12:50 p.m. - CJ: It's truth, hard truth. And I think Wynter amplifies this part: "neither way is the only way or the correct way for everyone"

2019-10-16, 12:51 p.m. - Kevin: That is exactly the part I'm trying to understand. Vine Deloria Jr has an interesting idea in a book called *Power and Place*, calling for recognition of what he calls a "personal universe"

2019-10-16, 12:52 p.m. - CJ: Wynter will help. Ontology and epistemology as narrative and her way of teaching that helps. Read Wynter. Lol. She talks about how we have the cosmogony we have. How we got to be Human. She is an influence on Da Silva

2019-10-16, 12:54 p.m. - Kevin: Is Wynter a Nietzschean?

2019-10-16, 12:55 p.m. - CJ: No. I don't think Wynter is anything lol. She's perhaps the first to bring original thought to theory in our times

2019-10-16, 12:55 p.m. - Kevin: <3 <3

2019-10-16, 12:59 p.m. - Kevin: It reminds me of something Oppen said in a letter - that the tragedy of modernity is that we are individuals who cannot live without the concept of "humanity," even though concepts are mute to our individuality



██████,

I folded up a book and looked out the rain-wet window, I felt something like movement within my mental being, an organ waking up. I'm not unfamiliar with experiences like this, but this one was unique for that it seemed to happen in joyous confluence with other minds. Pedestrians walking in and out, fumbling with umbrellas. The guy across the room whose face I know from someplace. I suppose, they were called into that particular context, that composition of lights and souls under a kind of glass. I "knew," for a flash, that the rain droplets and soft streetlights were aware of me and the others. How could it be otherwise? Also there—on the radio, that is—was Sia's 2013 hit "Elastic Heart." It became pyramids in me. I was full.

I explained this experience to my partner a few nights later. By then, I'd had time to process it. I explained it was like having a still, ethereal body living in perfect tandem with your own. But for years it had been asleep. Then, suddenly, seized by the call from a distant object, the other body begins to wiggle its digits, inviting blood into new places. But this disappeared within a few hours. My partner, understanding what I meant, let me cry and cry for hours. Was it mourning or celebration?

Love

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My friend,

I want to share with you two passages - one of Benjamin and another by a commentator on Benjamin - because they speak to a conversation we had one time about Da Silva and Levinas. The issue of separability and differentiation. One of the issues of my life.

Today, I've been trying to understand the ecologies of the sacred through an investigation of "aura," which is a "a unique phenomenon of a distance" ("Work of Art" 220) and a crystalized moment of relationality between one's self and non-selves. In Ben's writings, "aura" is self-contradictory: it is both a cognitive act (we invest in other objects the ability to see us in return) and something that reveals our utter passivity and vulnerability under the returned gaze of "things." This ability of things to look at us in return is what Benjamin attributes to the "cultic" function of artifacts, which has also been translated as "sacred."

If the sacredness of objects is their ability to see, contemplate, and dissolve humans, then Benjamin actually advocated for mechanical technology that would abolish such sacred objects. This is strange, no? But from what I understand, he saw the continued power of "cultic" images as at least partially responsible for the rise of fascism. This is a difficult thing to chew through. But, as is often overlooked, Benjamin also saw the "aura" in natural objects (things that don't have any particular "design" on us). And his treatment of them is very different: they seem to touch, sporadically, something "unconscious," or at least deeper, and potentially eternal in the sense of not being rooted in a particular moment.

But Benjamin's paradox of finding himself to be essentially a subject with agency *and* the object of another thing's agency seems to be resolved in this passage from "A Berlin Chronicle."

I feel this is important:

...moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we are beside ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday life is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as in a little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images (56-57)

Benjaminian scholar Miriam Hansen explains this passage as such:

In such formulations, the term shock acquires a valence quite different from...its more familiar sense of effecting, in the relentless proliferation in industrialist-capitalist labor and living, a defensive numbing of human sense perception. This alternative sense of shock...relates to the idea of an involuntary confrontation of the subject with an external, alien image of the self (347)

In light of these thoughts of the sacred - and perhaps destructive - moment of self-loss, the parallels between the following passages are fascinating and profoundly troubling to me:

Longboat and Sheridan:

Cruikshank's (2005) book can...be read as a demonstration of the rigidity of colonial environmental conceptions that deny the acuity of Indigenous environmental perception and their transgenerational witness of the sentience of glaciers. These long-resident cultures know that glaciers possess the ability to listen and see, declaring, with a reciprocity on which their very survival depends, "If you're lookin' at us, we're lookin' at you." ("Walking Back Into Creation" 310)

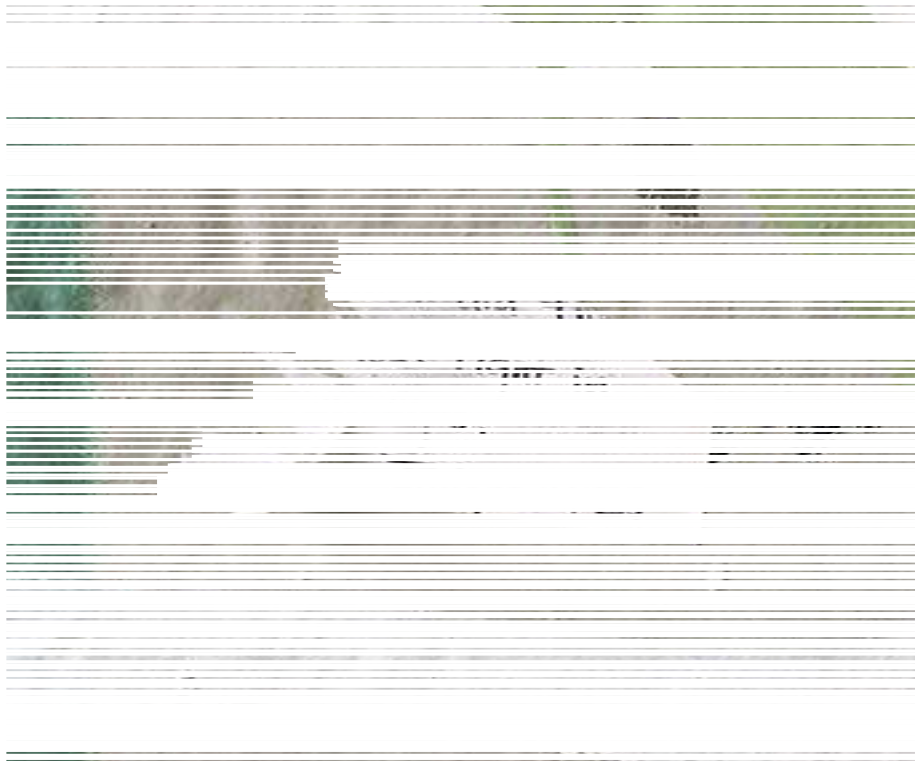
Lacan:

This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the Gospel, they have eyes that they might not see. That they might not see what? Precisely that things are looking at them. ("Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis")

Love,



qtd. in Conty 473



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Hi [REDACTED],

I've been looking for Da Silva's "On Difference Without Separability" in PDF form for a long time and finally found it. I believe there is some strong correspondence between this and the Sheridan and Longboat essays. I'm not sure if you've seen this before, or if you're interested, but I thought I'd send it your way.

Da Silva:

[O]nly the end of the world as we know it, I am convinced, can dissolve cultural differences' production of human collectives as 'strangers' with fixed and un-reconcilable moral attributes. This requires that we release thinking from the grip of certainty and embrace the imagination's power to create with unclear and confused or uncertain impressions, which Kant postulated are inferior to what is produced by the formal tools of the Understanding. A figuring of The World nourished by the imagination would inspire us to rethink sociality without the abstract fixities produced by the Understanding and the partial and total violence they authorize (59)

She metaphorizes the concept of "nonlocality" found in quantum physics. This is apparently the paradoxical phenomena wherein a particle is affected by another particle with which it shares no locality in space-time, and which effectively operates outside of Kant's categories. The particles of Earth being pulled by the gravity of particles in a galaxy millions of light years away is an example. So she says:

For, as nonlocality assumes, beyond the surfaces onto which the prevailing notion of difference is inscribed, everything in the universe co-exists in the manner Leibniz describes, that is, as a singular expression of everything else in the universe...[W]hen the social reflects The Entangled World, sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existents, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existent (65)

Also interesting is this short essay by Da Silva: <https://canadianart.ca/features/on-heat/>.

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This piece helped me understand what Da Silva means by the “imagination” and its relation to what she calls “unthinking.” Unthinking is conceptualized as, it seems, a mode of cognizing and creating that is outside (or before, or incompatible with) Enlightenment categories of Understanding and the racist-colonial symptoms of Universal time (Hegel). To Da Silva, attending to heat can reveal the ways human activity (“history”) amounts to a material change in state rather than a function of spatial movement through time. Heat reveals all material to be a decomposition and recomposition of what she elsewhere calls “materia prima.” Global warming isn’t a “result” of “progress,” but a change in state (materials into gasses) that is inextricable from colonial capitalism. So, nothing enters or exits a system. Nothing disappears. Da Silva also extends this into the realm of the virtual. (Expressed in Heideggerian terms, we might say existents cannot exit the field of being, they can only be hidden [alethia] and disclosed to different humans in different circumstances.)

So Da Silva forwards the idea of “history” as an ever-present reformation of elements. This notion has roots in the pre-Socratics, but I think it can be found elsewhere, too. (Maybe this is what Longboat and Sheridan mean when they say “deep time” is not forgotten because it has never gone away...maybe that’s why they are so focused on Arthurian legends as a parable of humans forgetting their relation to the land rather than the disappearance of their relation to the land.)

Anyway, very exciting stuff. That a Canadian city might be a re/de-composition of matter in the infinite buzz of Entangled occurrences, and humans and non-humans links in a monist chain of thought and material, sounds like a variation on that glorious and terrifying system Spinoza wrote about.

Kevin



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██████████,

I witnessed the aftermath of two suicide attempts in my area, the first at an LRT station and the second on the High Level Bridge. On both days, traffic and trains were blocked, pedestrians gathered around in stoic, impromptu congregations, and there was a funereal stiffness to the surrounding air—bits of conversations, even those many blocks from the scenes of the suicides, were hushed and muddled by ineffectual prayer. I’m led to believe that people who live anywhere between Oliver and McKernan are becoming progressively used to seeing sirens, rescue teams, and vested officers with whistles, but this doesn’t stop people from feeling both mysteriously implicated and, as a result, undeniably hopeless.

Last year, during a severe cold snap, someone broke into our garage every couple of nights and was sleeping on a spare mattress. One day, a roommate went into the garage and found some objects—an empty bag and a few diapers—that told us that may not be an individual at all, but a parent and child. When I learned this, I bought a collection of sweaters, blankets, sleeping bags, and winter wear and left it in the garage with a note asking our visitors to take what they need. I checked the following month to find everything was still there—nothing was touched, but the mattress was pushed back against the wall.

Around the time of these two incidents, I was with a friend discussing the increasingly fraught concept of “community” in regards to ethics and leftist organizing and other things. My friend asked me, “How do you know who you’re responsible to? Who is your community?” I was reading Levinas at the time, so my immediate reaction was to think that it is the encounter with the face of “the Other” that summons us to ethical responsibility, and so to a kind of spontaneous community. But the question, of course, is “So what?” What do we do with this “responsibility”? What gestures are available to us at the moment of encounter? *What is an “encounter”?* What actions are possible during such pressing, momentary relations? Is it all simply a function of “distance”—you are only “in relations” with those in physical or “felt” proximity to you—or is there something more challenging going on? Was the man on the edge of the High Level Bridge, or the individuals staying in our garage, part of my community—and if so, what could “community engagement” *possibly look like?*

Maybe there can be no universally appropriate answers to any of these questions. But when it comes to matters of suicide and abject poverty, I can't shake the feeling that they illustrate something important, and highly disturbing, about the horizon of possible relations that can emerge within urban spaces—spaces that, even at the best of times, are anonymous particle clouds of faces, relentless sensory agitation, chartered streets, and bodies victim to incessant corporate puppeteering. It's commonly known nowadays that, globally, more people die by suicide each year than in all conflicts related to war—it's a number that, in North America, disproportionately affects Indigenous people, people suffering with depression and addictions, LGBTQIA+ youth, veterans, and many other group. Increasingly, things like suicide and poverty are etched into the very surfaces of things—but they are without a subject, without a context. They simply are. It's striking that, in Edmonton, the majority of suicides happen around the university, in the downtown core, and in the north/north-east (Edmonton Suicide Prevention Advisory Committee 26) to the extent that it's difficult, on some days, to not see these parts of Edmonton as a kind of warzone. It is impossible to walk across the High Level Bridge and see the awkward, imposing rails without being aware of the all-pervasiveness of suicide. It is impossible to walk below the bridge, among the notes of despair etched into tree bark or painted on concrete, without being aware of the all-pervasiveness of poverty.

A shopping cart tipped in a bush: a sign can rarely be so clear and so unknown.

I'm going forward with the troubling idea that such things as suicide and poverty are among those that demand the most attention while simultaneously eluding the acts and efforts that our attention can provide, as long as "attention" is understood as a cognitive-intellectual event, or a game. As I lay in bed, failing to sleep while a parent and child suffered on a freezing mattress only meters from my window, I couldn't stop thinking of us in terms of relations. It was a relation—however fraught and difficult the analogy is—between the human and its shadow.

Central Edmonton contains, in all the creases of its brutal visage, some of the most horrifying shadows of "our" (Western) humanness, that part of us that incessantly defines and divides itself, drawing larger or small circles around what it contains, the limits of what it is morally and politically responsible for. From some angles, or at night, the shadow is visible.

Kevin



Hi [REDACTED],

Recently I was reading Benjamin's short but powerful (and also powerless) essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man." Do we believe language comprises a plane of immediation wherein the mental beings of all things meet to communicate with one another in their infiniteness? Maybe.

"Young" Benjamin thinks humans are elevated above all other things because of our ability to "name," but I'm convinced nowadays that non-human beings can communicate with each other in ways that we don't understand, which are just as amazing as naming. Did you ever notice how dogs cannot recognize their own reflection, but they can recognize their own smell from a mile away? Humans have privileged sight to place above other animals, and in modernity we started privileging our ability to "name." But dogs can probably name things in the language of scent.

And the aura - perhaps "aura" names the moments of cerebral and bodily understanding of what the branch or the mountain or the dog is communicating to us with its branch-y, mountain-y, dog-y language. All of this makes me think of Gertrude Stein, and what happens to our God-granted ability to name when there is no such "name" but only connection...

In any case, I also returned to Bracken's book today and came across the chapter where he discusses Eden Robinson. Because this speaks directly to what we talked about a few days ago, I thought I'd pass it your way. This is from the chapter "Allegories of the Sun." Bracken is interested in the relationship between "conjuring" (a "discursive" act that "causes" "non-discursive" events) and citation:

> "To conjure is always, in a sense, to cite. Derrida suggests it is a kind of originary citation, an event that happens for the first time by happening again. Yet it is precisely by repeating itself that it makes itself effective. In repetition, there is a potential for the "effectivity" of the ineffective..." (176)

> "The event of citation happens not just in time but to time. Its "effectivity" depends on its capacity to fold back over the original until it precedes it. An event cannot precede itself unless it is always already divided from itself. Yet the citation does not have to be fully present to be effective. Indeed the force of citation depends on its ability to break with the context of its occurrence, whether past, present, or future" (176)

> "[Eden] Robinson gives the name "Indian time" to the present that folds back over the past to interrupt the arrival of the future. Her novel [Monkey Beach] suggests that the "Indian" emerges on the surface of discourse today as a citation of what was said about savage philosophers in discourses past...Robinson summons up the ghosts of discourse past not to endorse what they say but to affirm a mode of being that, hovering in between appearance and reality, hinges on being repeated" (177)

Benjamin's extremely broad understanding of language is refreshing. It's not a new idea to me, exactly, but it's interesting in light of the Sheridan/Longboat pieces. Can we, and do we want to, find the resonances between a sentient landscape and Benjamin's idea that all things at all times partake in language?

"There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake in language," Benjamin writes. And he knows this because, at all times, we feel ourselves impressed upon by the communicable "mental" (or "spiritual" / *geistig*) contents of things. The language of "lamps" and "foxes" (these are his examples) *are* what we know of lamps and foxes. The "expressible" quality of the lamp's mental being is the phenomenal lamp; but by naming it "lamp" we enact our "mimetic faculty." Benjamin's contribution to this theory (a unique one, as far as I can tell) is his insistence that the lamp communicates to humans in a way it doesn't communicate to other lamps - it communicates to humans *so that we can* mimetically "name" it. And because we are not naming the lamp for the sake of the lamp, he argues, we are naming the lamp for the sake of God, with an ability instilled in us by God, according to Genesis. (He throws out Saussure's idea that linguistic signs are instrumental and arbitrary - this is "bourgeois.")

Interestingly, Benjamin's theory doesn't foreclose the possibility that lamps and foxes are communicating *to God*, only that humans are able to understand this communication. Lamps and foxes communicating to/in God may be a modal rearrangement of what Sheridan and Longboat call a "living ontology." I'm not sure.

In any case, a condition of the Fall, Ben thinks, especially after Babel, is that humans have "overnamed" things. And I think that in Benjamin's time, in his Europe, this was clear. The state of the pre-Lapsarian world, though, is present in the "immediation" of the language of things, which have only one name in the original "archive of pure language." The name is non-linguistic, presumably - that's why "in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth."

In my thesis work, I'm trying to avoid simply locating points of contact and resonance between writers. This is important, but it feels unnecessary to me, and I don't think this is where my contribution lies. In an ideal world, I would fill 80 pages with things like grass and shopping carts and friends, thinly described, cascading down and through one another, and within all that silent noise, I know some reflection of the "self" will find a place to know itself. A friend of mine said jokingly that all avant garde painting must have an invisible book behind it. And maybe that's what will end up happening.

* * * * *

What do we make of the moments when things “click,” even if it hardly lasts? Every couple of days, the world falls into place by falling apart. Sometimes experiences are meaningless until I pry them open, and then they overpower me for days.

I’m convinced there’s an incredible relation between context, language, and this feeling of being passively overpowered (erased, elevated, analyzed by a room, played like Coleridge’s Aeolian harp). I’m wondering, then, if such moments contribute to knowledge-formation, as in phronesis, as in a “way of living.”

Maybe, then, Benjamin’s “aura” can be a knowledge device - it appears at moments where the individual is communicated to in a deep, non-linguistic way. The person experiencing “aura” is passive to what the branch “says.” The very perseverance of “aura” in modern theory suggests these experiences have never *not* been important to Western knowledges, but too often the term is taken up abstractly, which is exactly what it is not supposed to be. The “aura” of a thing is, Ben says somewhere, that thing’s “unique presence in time and space.”

So exploring, through memory, the moments of passive “auratic perception” may reveal something about Edmonton and what it’s “things” are all talking about...

* * * * *

Thinking about the difference between “citation” and “conjunction,” I’m wondering if it’s a matter of intensity. But, as far as I understand it, “conjunctions” don’t need to be apparent, although I think they can be. They can be virtual, and maybe this is more powerful. If you can sense a ghost, you can turn away from it, or analyze it away. But if you can’t sense a ghost, it seems to stay with you for a long time.

Sincerely,



2019-12-03, 4:50 p.m. - CJ: I was re-reading denise da Silva's in the raw, and I know you've read it before (I think) but it's always so worthy of re reading because it opens up itself more and more each time. I'm also interested in how you can think of it now in relation to Wynter. As well as, how might you think of matter in relation to literature and language

2019-12-03, 4:58 p.m. - Kevin: Whoa. I am thinking these things all the time. I would really love it if u read Benjamin's "On language as such and on the language of man" in relation to da Silva' In the Raw and tell me of you think there is a parallel between them

2019-12-03, 4:59 p.m. - CJ: Okay! I will

2019-12-03, 5:00 p.m. - Kevin: Ben explodes what "language" means, but I think in a way that is more in line with da silva and others who speak of materiality

2019-12-03, 5:01 p.m. - CJ: Interested to see how Ben and Denise co-mingle

2019-12-03, 5:01 p.m. - Kevin: Definitely. She does write about Ben someplace

2019-12-03, 5:02 p.m. - CJ: In poethics

2019-12-03, 5:02 p.m. - CJ: She borrows imaging

2019-12-03, 5:02 p.m. - Kevin: Yes!!!

2019-12-03, 5:02 p.m. - Kevin: Imaging

2019-12-03, 5:02 p.m. - Kevin: Instead of imagining

2019-12-03, 5:02 p.m. - Kevin: Is very Ben

2019-12-03, 5:03 p.m. - CJ: LOL i loved it when I saw it

2019-12-03, 5:12 p.m. - Kevin: I still have no idea what it means though hahah

2019-12-03, 5:13 p.m. - CJ: Neither do I, but I think that's the point



Who is thinking/speaking
Who is thinking/speaking
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Hi [REDACTED],

I have reservations about the things I've been working on recently. But the [poetry circle] yesterday gave me more faith in myself. Circles is what I've been lacking. And, in particular, [REDACTED]'s call for a "new poetry" pushed me to recognize the correspondence among conversations I've been having with you, Sylvia Wynter, Benjamin, old theologians, and [REDACTED] (who is working on material for a new album, and for once our vocabularies ["the open," "the dusk"] are overlapping).

Some of what's going on here surfaced in a few reflective paragraphs I wrote after the last week's tête-à-tête on "research creation." You don't have to read this, but I thought I'd paste it here anyway!

* * * * *

I left halfway through the tête-à-tête between Abel and Krotz and returned to my office. A while later, one of my office partners came in and summarized the rest of the discussion by saying "research creation," whatever it is, already appears to be flourishing in a grey zone between epistemes, and the fact that people doing "research creation" even have questions about their own existence makes this a place of ripe "openings."

The problem that we can't define or articulate the utility of "creative research" is exactly why many people are drawn to it, in my view. That said, the notion that the university and its financial mandates are the ones that can steer "society" through the questions it has about its own knowledges seems to uphold a false alliance between a "benevolent" institution and a confused human species. As my officemate reminded me, the Buddha didn't achieve Enlightenment by simply walking out of the palace gates; he did so *unintentionally* by seeking to experience the same things as before, but outside the bounds of the palace's prescriptions. (Does the "palace" represent the institution of knowledge...or vice versa?)



(cont.)

Sylvia Wynter reminded me recently that Foucault's view of history has to do with the mutation of epistemes—the current episteme being a heterotopia of “fields” derived from biology, economics and philology, wherein success is measured (and can't be “imagined” without) a principle of *efficiency* derived from the “religion of economics.” But as Wynter point out: “The Renaissance humanist mutation and resulting disappearance of the theo-Scholastic order of knowledge reveal that our purely secular and purely biocentric order of knowledge can also cease to exist” (“Unparalleled Catastrophe” 16). The next episteme, Wynter speculates, will have to move beyond this humanism, and hence away from the self-replicating categories of thought that literally profit from their own replication (via imperialism, extraction, etc.). In the next episteme, she thinks, it may be possible to speak of “economics” ecumenically—say, as a “science of all genre-specific human modes of material provisioning” rather than a set of texts, codes, and concepts that only seek to reify (by rearticulating or by protesting) the present material ordering of the world. Likewise, something like “geography” will no longer be geography “*in-itself*” but “part of the study of our planet's overall self-organizing environmental-ecological system.” This is a new science, in Césaire's sense of a “Science of the Word,” where poetry, which has since the Enlightenment existed in the “silence” of science, will finally emerge to expose the erotic human relation to genre.

I feel like I would (and have) thrown my weight (and “poetry”) behind Wynter's hypothetical new episteme because, in my own life, I've challenged the atomization of disciplinary questions—because, for example, to “solve” something like depression by offering descriptive statements from neuroscience can only serve to stigmatize people within this neo-Darwinian ideology of fitness-as-the-capacity-to-work as well as entirely depoliticize the issue of rising rates of depression.

What I also gathered from the tête-à-tête is that there's a sense within our department that there's a helpful distinction between “disciplinary” and “interdisciplinary” work, and that this helpfulness depends on the notion that there's something “effective” about this divide, just like there was once something “effective” about the divide between the knowledge of the clergy and the knowledge of the lay person. Nowadays, I can't see how there's anything effective about this. [As a recent article of CommuneMag asks: “Who owns the future?” The answer, invariably, is a bunch of assholes, so long as the measurement for what is “successful” remains the same (Walington n.p.). The UCP is a case and point.]

So I'm inclined to agree with my office partner who suggests that the very notion of disciplinary “expertise” in the university is “Brahminic” (in his words; “bourgeois” in ours) and cleverly hides the ideological impulses that give rise to that concept in the first place. So what if “effectiveness” were divorced from disciplinary “expertise” and conciled with something like “craftsmanship” (this is my Dad the cabinetmaker wearing off on me, as well as Benjamin) or even “willingness to inquire” (in the tradition of Freire)?

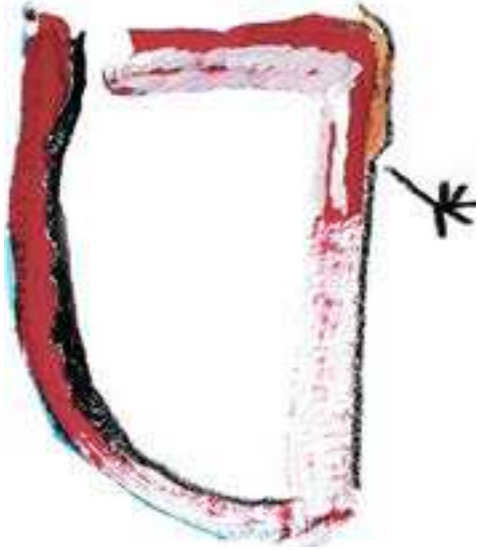
It's in this light that I'm drawn to Sylvia Wynter's work, which, though rooted mostly in the discourses of "humanism" and Caribbean thought, offers itself to many otherwise fledgling or halted attempts to articulate knowledge systems. One of Wynter's favourite things to quote is from the introduction to a book called *Autopoiesis and Cognition* by Maturana and Varela, which lays out her concern directly: "if we are to 'understand a newer and still evolving world; if we are to educate people to live in that world; if we are to abandon categories and institutions that belong to a vanished world as it is well nigh desperate that we should...then knowledge must be rewritten" (Beer 65-66).

With this imperative in mind, I've also begun to see the project(s) of Walter Benjamin in a new light. On the heels the tête-à-tête, my office partner and I also had a great discussion about Benjamin who, after all, was rejected from the university several times for doing something that we might nowadays call "research creation." We speculated that a properly committed "study" of his work would require something like a "Walter Benjamin University," which would have to unhinge the idea of the university from any particular topos—not the least the topos of "efficiency" or "effectiveness" or "progress," and perhaps the concrete topos of the campus—and, if it takes on old texts, does so under new definitions. It would demand a whole new attention to the "form" of reading, reintegrating a kind of somatic "sensation" into sense-making, which seems to me to be a goal of literary ecologies. "Everything one is thinking at a specific moment," Benjamin wrote when composing *The Arcades Project*, "must at all costs be incorporated into the project then at hand" (456). This includes the library, the skylight, etc. Benjamin's stated aim here doesn't seem out-of-step with Wynter's prediction of an upcoming "science of all genre-specific human modes," nor even Sina Queyras's proposition in their manifesto on lyrical conceptualism that the poet need not have an allegiance to definitions ("palaces" in their own way) but should instead anchor in and out of them as needed.

With all this in mind, my epic question now—and I think this is similar to Benjamin's questions when he wrote *The Arcades Project*, and may even be by the question of modernism in general—is What does literature/art/poetry have to do with relations, survival, and hopefulness in the event of loss of the present organizations of life and knowledge - and of the world?

When it comes to poetry and education, I have one hypothesis. It has something to do with an insistent openness.

George Oppen advised poets not to consider their work as simply "heightened rhetoric," but to use language to see the world for what it "really" is/was. Whether or not this still holds, I think it's on the right track to uncovering what Wynter's says new knowledge should do, which is educating people how to "see" in order to live, and hopefully flourish, in the new world as well as the one that is vanishing, as well as the open betweenness. Is the relationship between poetry and knowledge to be found somewhere in this collision of "ways of knowing"? To take poetry as "counsel" (as Benjamin does) or insist that it is in some way "utopic" (as Lisa Robertson seems to do) may be akin to saying it offers tactics to survive in a world that hasn't yet been disclosed, at least in our lifetime. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on this someday.



CJ: Provoking words on the tete-a-tete. I'll share this in response:

“Too few scholars risk thinking critically and imaginatively ... too few of us are willing to articulate or imagine worlds other than those we have experienced the desire to dream and reflect new contexts for human possibilities has fallen entirely on the intellectual shoulders of artists, we would argue. Or at least the ethical pause to make us think differently about our present and future now lies with artists.”

—Rinaldo Walcott and Idil Abdillahi, *BlackLife: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Freedom* 29

How can we make an “ethical pause” possible?

Kevin: “...the ethical pause to make us think differently about our present and future now lies with artists.” What an extraordinary thing to say. I absolutely must read more R. Walcott. My immediate response to your question - “How can we make an ‘ethical pause’ possible?” - was to wonder whether there aren’t ethical pauses happening all the time. May this be what Esther Perel suggests when she says we must work to *get around* the “concept”?

I recall an interesting remark Wynter made about Judith Butler, saying that the idea that gender is entirely performative is incomplete because it doesn’t see gender as a “becoming” that occurs with a genre of autopoietic eusocial kin-recognizing humanity (“gender” and “genre” have the same root). But when the borders upon which “difference” is defined are projected outward into a nearly *ineffable* “genre,” I begin to be suspicious about Da Silva’s suggestion that once Western humanism is stripped away, there remains the *impossibility* of separability.

Really, I mean this: How can we be “inseparable” if “where we are” is related to the genre that autopoietically creates us, and we it?

Western humanism is part of place.

The arcades were a place.

What happens to “place” during the “pause”?

As much as I don't like referring to Heidegger, it seems to me that the issue of "ground" is still pressing. "Ground" being the thing (history, space, ultimate concern) that makes it possible for a human or "the social" to find and know themselves. I think this is what Oppen means when he says that the self is not an issue, the issue is that there's something for us to stand on.

So the ethical pause. How do we make sense of the pause, the things around us when we pause, and how can this pause be "ethical" without a mutual ground? I wonder if the answer to the question "How can we make an 'ethical pause' possible?" is that we need to establish or locate grounds - mutuals, topoi, masks

CJ: Want to sit with what you've said here a bit longer but my immediate response is the Trinidadian writer CLR James on Hegel. He ends his essay "The Doctrine of Essence" with:

“Essence is a movement. It is the analysis of Ground which tells us exactly what that movement is: Our abstract little spirit who didn't know what he was by his futile becomings was by degrees establishing some Ground. If you want more Ground, there it is.”

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■,

I'm coming to understand what it means that most of my friends, family, and allies are considered "failures": anarchists and communists who know the opportunity for revolution is over, men without homes walking from city to city in Adidas, people with abusive bosses they can't escape, chain-smoking stargazers, anxious couples afraid to bring kids into the Anthropocene, skeletal poets left out of exclusionary MFA culture, families whose houses are under threat of seizure, hermits who recoil at the touch of anyone but their dogs, fathers rung dry by Amway, artists too afraid to leave their apartments, adopted children forced to sleep in unheated basements, dissociated minimum wagers, depressed scholars with no faith in the benchmarks of "success" offered by the academy, bulimics oppressed by internalized shame, people who can't wake up, people who can't sleep, immigrants who deeply miss their homes of origin, ageing punk rockers, people on an endless hitchhiking circuit across the continent, folk living in basements with a growing list of addictions, and even the seemingly well-to-do who—despite their apparent luck—claim to be perpetually "checked-out" of living.

For all my own privilege, I've begun to count myself among the already-mostly-dead, futureless, rather than the ones who can confidently claim they have a fulfilling position waiting for them in the world to come. The peace to come? As Oppen pointed out in the 60s, we should know by now what the next world, the peaceful world, really means—more walls, more weapons.

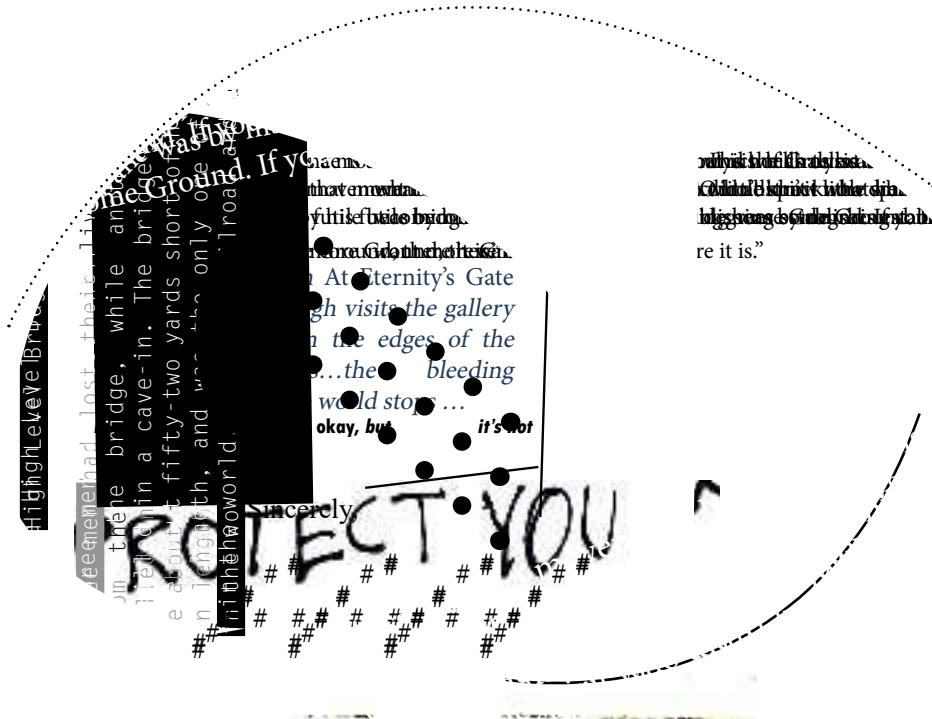
All throughout 2019, what I heard was variations of one disturbing line: "I didn't expect to live this long." Faced with these words, I began to wonder, as I'm sure so many of us have: *Would things be different if we had a commune? If we spoke on the phone more often? If we played in more bands? If the NDP were re-elected? If we were more loveable, attractive? If it was the 90s again? If we read more radical lit, or read our lit more radically? If the internet was unregulated? If a creative life was counted among our rights? If we could all live outside? If we had more time to meditate? If we all "got" Marx? If nation states were abolished? If rent was cheaper? If we moved to Norway? If fracking was outlawed? If talk therapy was covered by our health care? If we could speak telepathically?*

One might envision an apartment of loners who, despite the weight of their own despairs and lack of common language or intention, all recognize themselves as exposed souls on the brink of a dying world, cradling at night the possibility that everything that *is* could instantly be otherwise if only, if only, if only. If this faint hope in an “otherwise,” an “elsewhere,” is what stops the apartment from collapsing at once, then at least we have the “otherwise” in common—the problem is that the “otherwise” has no language, it is undefined, system-less, and treacherous. So long as the conditions that control us are outside of our control, I can only wonder, what is the point of our camaraderie, however passive, vague, and hesitant it is? What’s the point of greeting you in the hallway? Upon admitting all the things that are beyond our control, where do we go from here? Why do we wake up?

Maybe it works like this: we (whoever “we” are) desire new forms of relating. We need something else, and this “something else” is what I find in the works of the writers, artists, and scholars I adore most. Yet none of it aligns—there is disagreement, in-fighting, occasional brawls, disputes over ideology, structure, religion. I’ve heard rumours that, despite our messages of love, we actually hate each other even more than society hates us. So there are swarms of question I ask myself: are these “forms to be” unprecedented or resurrected? Are they erotic or already available through more creative applications of the tools we already have? Are they in the cosmos or in the unconscious? Do they forebode the end of “man” or hail the beginnings of a new science? Are they “forms” at all, or do they require an analytic that disposes of the trodden distinction between form and content all together? Of course, the answer to all of these things can only be “Maybe,” “Who can say?” What’s clear, through, is that these questions are being asked, that we’re living in a time and place where the issue of how we relate to one another in what I’ll call “everyday encounters” has become a widespread concern—rather than, say, how we relate to abstract society, to the commune, to the syndicate, to the party.

But none of work this can be a neutral venture because nothing under capitalism is neutral. Even if these attempts at engaging with the world by “interrogating” it can be defended as ends in themselves—knowledge for the sake of knowledge—then they are ends in which it is increasingly difficult to have any sincere faith. As Sylvia Wynter pointed out as early as the 1990s, the contributions that the most “knowledgeable” make to society manage only to enounce and re-enounce the world as it is—racist, full of inequities, pushed toward ecological despair (“No Humans Involved”). It’s precisely the “best and brightest,” the ones whose engagement with the world is done with the tools most available in the modern episteme, that formalize the grammar by which this world can be thought of at all—it is never the confused ones, the uncertain ones, the castaways, or the failures. Where is the “expert” of saying “I have nothing to add to this”?

I love I love I love you



Hi [REDACTED],

I've been sorting through some thoughts I've had in light of recent encounters. I've gone back to the topics we discussed in Transcend, too. When I started hammering in some details, a lot of words appeared, which was exciting - it provides a wider position to stand on as I proceed with my thesis. (I also started reading some mystical, marvellous Simone Weil. Whoa!)

I put some thoughts down before the sweat today, but I think the experience only solidified many of the ideas I started to explore here...As before, please don't feel obliged to read any of this. If I don't send it to you, I'd be sending it to myself.

Finally, thanks again for convincing (not pressuring) me to attend the sweat. It was a very, very important experience at this time. I am beyond amazed at the kindness and joy expressed and felt in that place. There are only a handful of moments I've experienced where I thought "These few minutes could be blown up to the size of a year and no one would complain." Sharing food in the lodge was kind of like that. If only it were so easy. Benjamin writes somewhere that memory is the theatre of the past - this is one memory where the theatre feels full and happy, not empty and hollow like many.

Okay, here is my letter:

Our last conversation at Transcend had me thinking all about form—again.

What's been difficult for me in this project hasn't necessarily been finding a "topic" or direction, because I think my concerns—attentiveness to "things," modernism, the implications of being in Edmonton, the irreconcilable thoughts that have emerged throughout my time in your poetry classes and the Poetics of Treaty course—have been consistent. The difficulty has been finding a form that is permeable to the concerns over difference and irreconcilability, without taking difference and irreconcilability as their "theme."

This "form" I'm looking for is certainly not "the essay," and I knew this early. Some days I'm not convinced this form is "poetry" either, or even written language. Maybe the "form" is the bridge. Maybe—as Da Silva suggests—speaking of "form" at all is not what's needed, and we should return to questions of material.

I'll note here that the questions I have about the world are often more satisfied in the images of surfaces—or real surfaces—than the word “surface.” Many days I'd like to contemplate chairs rather than read Benjamin. This isn't to say that “chairs” or, say, the sunlight striking a chair in the kitchen, can always and entirely matter—but I disagree with Kenneth Goldsmith if he's the one who said sunlight never matters.

What strikes me most about Oppen's essay “The Mind's Own Place” is not that he performs the final coup de grâce against the self-confident Romantic lyric poet for whom sunlight and mist encapsulates a slow, numinous life force, but that he expressly *doesn't* abandon this task. In fact, in my reading, Oppen leaves space for surface, sunlight, and the numinous in poetry, but only under conditions that they account for the “things we live among,” the world as it really is at a given place and time.

The final paragraph of that essay is important in this regard. On the subject of the poet's relation to politics, Oppen writes that “the political thing we must have [is] a peace. And peace is made by a peace treaty. And we have seen peace treaties before; we know what they are.” Needless to say, Oppen is not optimistic about peace treaties—they don't make “peace,” as we have witnessed time and again. But then why do we need one? He doesn't say. Instead, he leaves the reader with the question of, once the brutal treaty is signed (and the “treaty” he's referring to has been signed in 1980), “where is the poet who will write that she opened her front door, having sent the children to school, and felt the fresh authentic air in her face and wanted—that?” There is something cleverly ambiguous about Oppen's question. I don't read it as rhetorical (he denounces “rhetoric” earlier in the same paragraph), but rather as a very real issue future poets like us will need to work through.

If political poetry is stripped of “heightened rhetoric,” as Oppen says it should be, and also of its responsibility to “politics” as commonly understood—then what is political about it? What is social about it?

Oppen doesn’t make the connection exactly, but isn’t the “that”—the air, the child, the moment of affection—precisely the “thing” that makes the world inhabitable? So without getting into the Frankfurt School’s debate around art and commitment, it seems safe to say—as I tried to get at in my last email—that if poetry is about language, and language is always relational, then the job of poetry is furnishing our terms of relations. This isn’t necessarily an issue of knowledge, of relating through “knowing,” but that’s the topos which the Objectivists, and I believe Lisa Robertson, inhabit in their relational projects, and one that interests me the most.

But perhaps this is to misunderstand what poetry does or can do. I admit that there’s plenty of poetry I can only skim through—but there’s enough that I don’t, or can’t, and I’ve long wondered why. I read Oppen again and again but not Levertov. I will never read Milton or Shakespeare again, but I go back to Niedecker every month. Lisa and Fred Moten and Anne Boyer and Susan Howe (and even Keats) continue to disturb me in the best possible way.

It’s with these poets in mind that I encountered a line by Simone Weil that’s worth mulling over.

Weil writes: “It is impossible for an order which is higher and therefore infinitely above another to be represented in it except by something infinitely small. A grain of mustard seed, an instant mirroring eternity, etc.” (*Gravity and Grace* 150)

Of course, language is infinitely referential and dependent, even when it isn’t. A word alone is sometimes heavier, more vertical, than a complete and confident sentence, as the Language poets understood. And who has not felt something like an instant mirroring eternity? Or been possessed by a line? Or been witness to a floating can in a river that sees us back? Or found the auratic trace within the branch or the mountain? Maybe, maybe, some poetry works for me because it refuses to be “all,” it refuses to answer. It doesn’t ask “Why” or offer itself to “understanding” in the interest of structuring thoughts. Instead, it encourages a self-emptying needed to find the speck of ground through a forest of ideals, imaginaries, and differences—and in this moment, as Weil suggests, it reflects some kind of enormous, spiraling completion.

This line by Weil opens a sequence of *Gravity and Grace* called “Social Harmony,” and I think this is significant. Weil seems to be suggesting that social harmony (and this was written in the 1930s/40s) is a matter of turning away from an eternity that is “out there.” If we turn, rather, toward the mustard seed, we can begin to find the very ground that lets “us” (we alienated humans and other-than humans) pause and be together in all our vulnerability and need. Weil’s mysticism comes across as a very practical quest for ground, which makes her a pivotal modernist, in my view, and a potent remedy for the pessimistic Sartres and Heideggers on the scene. I also think it’s a needed poetics in our time.

And I think Weil’s “seed” is close to what Oppen means by the “that.” It’s not the “sunlight” and the “air,” the Romantic tropes, but the sunlight and the air, the things that sustain, things that are outside the human repertoire of “names.” And it’s worth mentioning that Weil’s understanding of the function of language is as straightforward as can be: it is “to express the relationship between things.” Thus, language does not create the relationships, per se, but brings them forward, makes them louder.

So, as we spoke about in *Transcend*, it seems appropriate to abandon the ontological cliché of “things” being like binary code—either open or closed, hidden or uncovered—and more like a field of tones that increase and decrease in volume the closer we are to them. I like to believe that this field of tones is a space where we can move about and experience all kinds of harmony and dissonance in the mind and body—but our task can only be to endure (like Césaire’s tree), to experience, and not to resolve or agree. You can’t agree or disagree with tone. So this field of tones might very well be “the open.”

So here I’m looking for a form that hovers in that field, just listening.

From here, with renewed confidence in the purposeful smallness of poetry, the concern I have is what to do with the mustard seed? Or, what to do during the moment of reflection on a ceremony to which I have no ties? What to do in a moment of grieving, or as a witness to violence? What is the implication of a moment? How do we language this “What” in order to channel it from confusion and angst—or worse, disruption—into something like peace? Because, of course, “eternity”—which Levinas identifies as existing between faces—is the cause of all kinds of violence toward one’s self and others whenever it’s projected “out there.” Likewise, “eternity” can become horrible or fundamentalist when it’s seized and contained. So how do we let something impossibly expansive simply sit in the room with us? I truly believe this is a question for our times.

Part of my piecemeal solution to this question comes from my interpretation of this passage from Benjamin, which we read at *Transcend*:

I sat at night in violent pain on a bench. Opposite me on another, two girls sat down. They seemed to want to discuss something in confidence and began to whisper. Nobody except me was nearby, and I would not have understood their Italian however loud it had been. But now I could not resist the feeling, in the face of this unmotivated whispering in a language inaccessible to me, that a cool dressing was being applied to a painful place (*One-Way Street* 83)

Benjamin doesn't disclose the source or meaning of his "pain," but if I had to guess, it is something like the confusion over the "instant mirroring eternity," or, as the author of Ecclesiastes puts it, "vanity and vexation" "under the sun"—or, the sense that there is an "out there," a "world" above or beyond the limits of the sun, which cannot find a name within the moment, the bench, or the seed.

I think it was you who told me that everything Benjamin wrote was written in a state of anguish. I think that's clear throughout some sections *One-Way Street* and downright obvious in his later works. What's most appealing in this vignette, though, is that Benjamin is alone (he cannot voice his anguish and find therapeutic comfort) but nonetheless finds immense relief in the impossibility of sense-making and certainty. As simple as this seems, it is incredibly hard to do in real life.

So I don't think this "cool dressing" was a regular sensation for Benjamin. I also don't think he was simply being humble in the gaze of the unknown. He was rarely humble. Rather, I think he's making a pressing claim about relationality—specifically, he prescribes the pause as a passage to a kind of "good" relationality. Rather than using the moment to produce knowledge, he acquires a different orientation (a yogic one?) toward the unknown, however transient this orientation is. It's also worth noting that when Benjamin says "language inaccessible to me," he is certainly referring as well to the "language of the fox" and the "language of the lamp" that he speculates over in "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." But here, instead of falling back on Genesis to theorize the possibility of a divine language (a kind of "order"), he buckles into the experience, foregoing any concept.

This returns to the idea that ██████ expressed in the hall a few weeks ago, echoing existential psychotherapist Esther Perel (who certainly did read Weil and Levinas), that the goal of therapy should be to locate the experience beneath, or in spite of, the concept.

Perel's advice to her patients is the same as the counsel I've gleaned from the poets and philosophers I've returned to the most, which is that we should only stand on concepts if they contribute to human flourishing, eudemonia, whatever that looks like.

But I think this goes further than relationships between humans. If I've learned anything from my joint readings of Benjamin and Longboat and Sheridan, it's that this eudemonia has something to do with ecology, with things, with animals, with place. Benjamin's ecology was in Paris, in Berlin, in Moscow; ours is in Edmonton, on Turtle Island...



So the task that's been impressed on me has to do with finding my position in "the open"—a notion which, not insignificantly, comes out of Agamben's writings on the "space" between humans and animals. Finding this space is, perhaps, related to what Da Silva says to do in her essay "In the Raw," which is forgetting about the "Why?" and returning to the "What?" (n.p.). Or, like Oppen said early in his career, going to the window to see what is "really going on" (*New Collected Poems* 5). Asking "What" may mean returning our thoughts to the company of other things, sensing the continuity of all experiences, rather than wielding "knowledge" in a Cartesian mode and forcing a separation between one's self and one's world.

There are also political reasons for asking "What?" instead of "Why?" Feminist critiques of epistemology have often gravitated around the formula of "I know why/how _____" rather than "I know that _____." This is because the why/how formula is bound to narratives subject to the limitations and reinforcements of the dominant episteme.

But this goes further. For example, it's not hard to see the link between the quest for "certainty" and European imperialism. Someone I was reading recently—I think it was Vine Deloria in *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*—makes this link directly. Upkeeping "certainty" means maintaining control. This is also what Nietzsche is talking about, I think, when he critiques the "will to truth" of the Neo-Platonists (and the Christians). So if "truth" is formal, if it's teleological and sublime, which it seems to be (even to the many people deny this), it leads me to become disinterested in the postmodern solution of "truth(s)" and very interested in the space between teleologies, possibilities, and so on.

Sylvia Wynter is helpful here, as she introduces the idea that truth, like anything, is contained in a genre. We may speak then of genre-fied “truth-fors.” She’s clear that, today, genre is nearly synonymous with “culture.” So we can speak of cultural “truth-fors.” What is “true”—what is existentially enacted (not just posited) as ultimate concern—for one individual or group at any particular place or time is not the same as what is accepted as ultimate concern for another. But if one’s ultimate concern is for peaceful, ecological eudemonia, then the only praxis I can see that works for me is expanding the open and stepping inside without becoming neurotic.

So my goal here, in my thesis, must be to locate a healing praxis of inhabiting “the open,” a praxis that does not become lost or meaningless upon repetition. Of course, “the open,” like “the rose” can become useless when it becomes cliché (or branded, claimed, capitalized). I would like to see a poetry that continues to estrange us from “the open” so that we might be healed in it rather than attempt to resolve it.

But what does this look like?

The idea of “the open,” at this point in our discussions, has drifted away from the orbits Agamben reserved for it. Agamben talks about “the open” in relation to a “nonknowledge,” which is a “zone” and a purely philosophical conundrum. But it isn’t purely philosophical. At least in my life, it’s often an overwhelming concern. I have, since I was a teenager, been absorbed by questions like “What is *really* the difference between Christianity and Islam, if any?” Certainly, many Christians and Muslims—but not all—believe there is a fundamental difference, but I haven’t come to that conclusion. Maybe I shouldn’t come to any conclusion. This is Wynter’s advice, anyway, when she suggests we aim for “ecumenicism” not unity.

So where to go from here—what’s the metaphor that works?

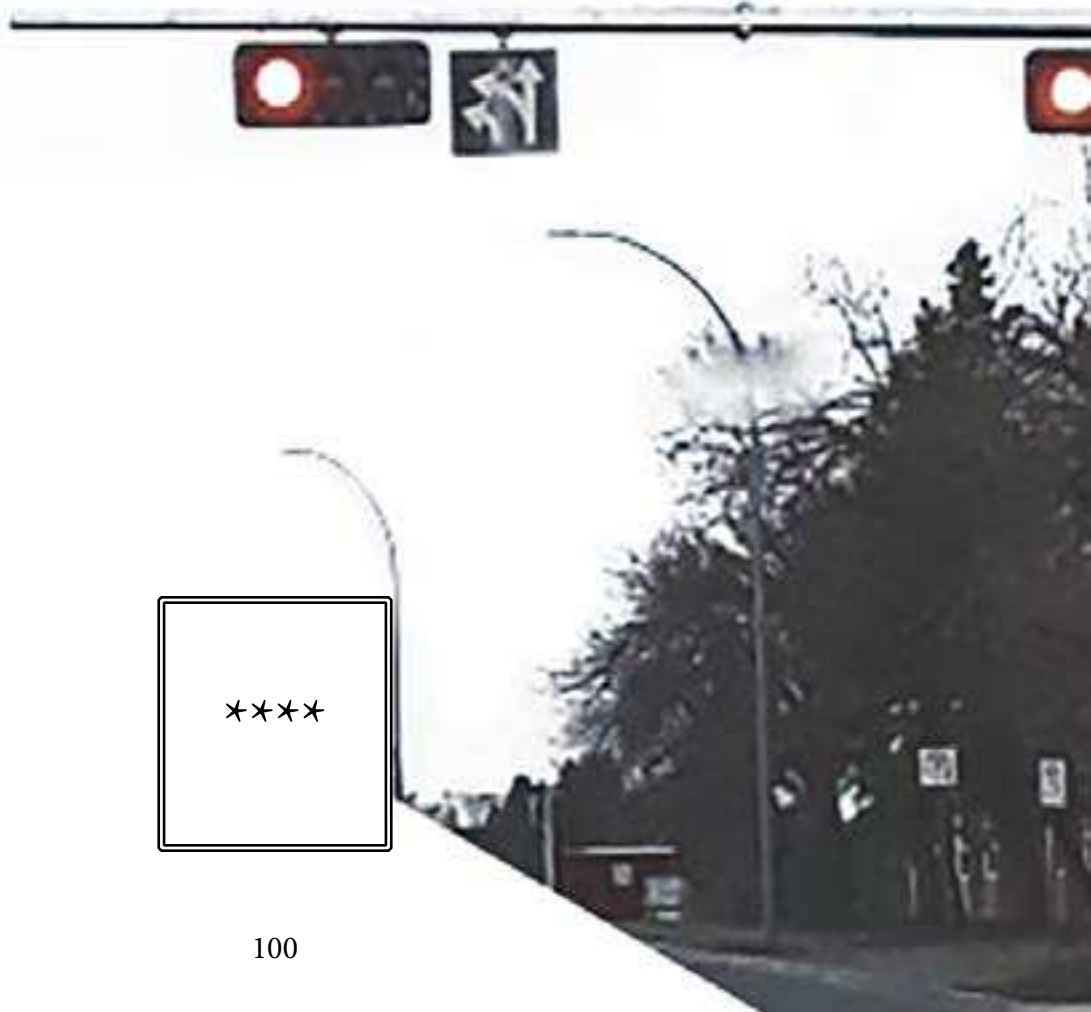
Something I’ve noticed is that it’s difficult to express the idea of “the open” or even “uncertainty” in anything other than spatial terms. Agamben’s “nonknowledge” is a “zone.” The Situationists (especially Chtcheglov and Vaneigem) sought to resurface the “mythical” through random experimentation within the localized space of the city. Levinas, whose ideas emerged from his experiences in wartime, talks about the space between the faces of oppressor and oppressed. Lisa Robertson consistently encounters Lucretius and other muses of relational nonknowledge in hotel rooms, tables, and fields. Willie Ermine recommends that we dwell in the “ethical space” that exists between worldviews.

In all these cases, what emerges is an ethical responsibility and a demand to work, to do things in a way that we don't ordinarily do them. Maybe talking about "the open" in a concrete way is important because it has been substantial (in Spinoza's sense) all along as a point of contact between idea(1)s or bodies. Maybe this is also what the Poetics of Treaty course is all about?

Treaties, too are - almost by definition - signed in the open. And maybe the labour we've been undertaking recently is to do treaty "otherwise"?

Using the expression "the open" in spatial terms also accounts for my interest in my own room and my own yard. Or, the conference room, the office, the kitchen, swimming pools, the mall, the valley: how to turn any of these places, with all their colonial wounds, late-capitalist pretenses, and bourgeois origins, into spaces where one might find the "cool dressing" they need before going on with their lives?

Kevin



Re: things that come up in therapy...like, what is uncertainty?

Years ago, I was hiking alone in a foreign country and got lost in the woods. My body was overcome with panic. My GPS failed and the trail seemed to have vanished. I couldn't tell where I'd come from or which way was south, toward the treeline, toward my destination. I sat on a log. Light broke against high branches and littered me with beams. I love trees, but now they became villainous, chaotic, and I felt horrified by them. So I fled the scene. I ran in any which direction.

Eventually I burst into a small meadow full of white flowers, in the middle of which was a single deer, looking so stunned that I could only assume she feared me in the same way I feared the trees. I was relieved to be out of the woods, but I know the feeling of simple relief, and this was something different. The deer, the way she gazed at me, felt too familiar. I would compare it to the feeling of seeing your friend at the arrival gate of a crowded airport. It was not the feeling of being loved, but of expecting a gesture of love, an embrace, a smile. This never came. There was no resolution, and the deer ran away...

Because it's easy to represent any life as a long, rusting chain of impressions—none in resounding harmony with those that came before or after, none that can confidently hold the entirety together—it would be easy to accept the deer as a sign of grace, an angel, an agent with some intention toward me, either of her own accord or by invisible command. But, personally, I can't interpret the deer or the forest—and for this, they've become repositories of all kinds of estrangement.

The modern city, or the library, is similar to this forest—it is filled mostly with answers, ways of knowing, ways of saying “this.” I suppose that the options available are either to live beneath one tree for shelter, or wander between them in search of a temporary belonging. But the forest is vast and this wandering will go on forever. The meadow, in this allegory, is “open.” And the deer is probably a deer. Gazing at the deer, and being gazed at, can be lovely until the deer runs away...

Kevin

Dear [REDACTED],

I am always enormously grateful that you encourage students to believe that such place as an “ethical space” is possible, especially when it doesn’t arrive. This is a lesson I take with me - have taken with me for years - even if the matter of the moment changes or is downright impenetrable. Like Fred Moten writes somewhere, we need to believe hard in our world precisely because we believe in a different world, and we want to live in that one.

But I’m convinced now that one doesn’t “believe” in a place like the “ethical space” or “the open” by choice - but maybe this belief arrives because of ruptures and pressures of history, or as Weil likes to conceptualize it, an impossible and disruptive “grace” occurring amidst the immutable regulations of “gravity” (or Benjamin, for whom history is always already shot-through with the shattered pieces of “otherwise,” which he called “messianic,” maybe off-puttingly, only because he had to).

Something I was thinking about last night is how to go on having a practice without over-determining the importance of working in the open, or the ethical space. Nowhere does Agamben say “the open” is necessarily safe or desirable. Probably much violence has been done because the world was wide open, and this is a scary thought. There’s in fact an entire branch of existential psychotherapy called Terror Management Theory, which aims to build “barriers” (like symbolic orders) between individuals and the unknown to protect them from violence. I don’t think this is always a good idea, especially because one way of building orders will inevitably overpower others. We’ve seen lots of this.

So one could probably argue that working with broken parameters (“membranes” or “culture,” Wynter likes to say) is a privilege, but as these parameters seem to be breaking apart in any case, floundering about in confusion and the whims of “otherwise” seems to be the only “responsible” thing to do...

Kevin

the disruptive grace that occurs...
the open stay οπεν and this

create orders that can overpower.

terrible vulnerability

██████████,

I really appreciate your thoughts on the sweat teaching. Those words spoken during the ceremony: “I know nothing, I am nothing.”

Yes, I am happy with your suggestion that protocol may circumscribe the open. Interestingly, when Janet Rogers was still here, she gave a talk to Marilyn’s class where she strongly advised all students to find their protocol. She suggested we, as writers or students or humans, should learn more about why it is we do what we routinely do. I didn’t know what to make of this at the time. It’s a little clearer now.

I feel like our “terribly vulnerability” was humming loudly in the sweat lodge. And I wonder if the darkness is a way to provide comfort to those whose vulnerability is scary to them, or who haven’t had the opportunity and luck to be *safely* vulnerable in their daily lives. Honestly, I was moved to start crying in the lodge, in the dark, and somehow this felt acceptable and encouraged. I wonder if anyone else felt this way. With all the moisture, it was as though the whole space was already crying, and so there was a sense of unity there, emotionally...a unity with the water and the walls.

Kevin



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Dear [REDACTED],

Sometimes I can imagine drawing a circle around a moment of brief harmony, cut out of the neutral flow of time. Here strangers with invisible intentions and motivations are together in a room and no one is speaking. It is rare, and it is rarely recorded, but it happens—it happens in temples and synagogues and meditation halls. Perhaps, perhaps, artists know it better than the rest of us. But it also happens, in a fragile way, on the banks of North S river, between the lone walker and the nonhuman beings—nuthatches, magpies, mosquitos, stones

There are moments, it seems to me, when the world disassembles. From there, it either stays disassembled, or it reassembles, suddenly or gradually, as something unlike what it was before. So lapses occur in the “everyday world.” I would like a formula for occupying them. To observe something like this from afar, it would seem like nothing much has happened. A few lines have been drawn across an individual’s face. This person speaks with a different lilt. They look up instead of down. Then again, maybe not.

I have conversations with a friend in the evening under the dim light of a drafty McKernan kitchen. The space makes it feel appropriate for us to both drift into melancholy, to feel solipsistic and demotivated. I’ve begun to wonder if there isn’t something ethical about this drifting. Because of it, something else is allowed to happen. Our souls tilt sideways like robins and I can begin to intuit where he’s coming from. I don’t need to know his “undercurrents” in order to adjust my gesture and language to accommodate them. We become attuned to one another. We don’t agree or disagree. We are spontaneous. We don’t need the clarity of names.

How do we do these kinds of conversations, inhabit these spaces, if we can? This seems to be the question underpinning Mary Oliver’s seemingly impossible invitation to “let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves” (n.p.). This animal that we might, once stripped of our language and society, actually *be* cannot exist anywhere other than where it is—yet, as though by a force like grace, it can speak of its despair while it listens to others’ despairs.



■,

“Lapse,” according to dictionaries, means a temporary failure of judgement, memory, or concentration. We must ask: “failure” according to whom? Of course, the prospect of a lapse is more comforting than an irrevocable disintegration—a good therapist can reasonably tell their patients: “You are just tired. Everyone makes mistakes when they’re tired.”

But when the eye atop the Stantec Tower—or of a politician, an economist, an abusive parent, the *Edmonton Sun*—sees people asking for cash, people standing still, people pulling their hair out, it all looks like a failure to maintain the “judgement” or “concentration” always expected of us.

Someone with severe depression, someone unemployable, or a closet revolutionary may attest to how a lapse can swell up to the size of a life—and so the formula is inverted, and a lapse becomes a brief cessation of the simmering violence of modern life—and within this lapse, things fall apart, but we can sometimes light a candle of healing. Of course, homo economicus, like a good general, never lapses, but we are not him.

In a city with money in it, candles are lit where no one can see them. In these moments of lapse, followed by dimness of our own judgements and memories, we can look at the sky and see our names written, we can forget the Julian calendar, we can love (or at least like) our neighbours—these lapses are temporary, but without them, what’s left?



2019-12-23, 11:22 p.m. - CJ: “we can say a lot about how the world is and how we live and yet it’s not about that, as we can never say exactly how it is. We have one practice: we read. We do the poethical readings. There are obviously other practices. There is not one map for how exactly one should live. There is one stance that is important to the readings we do: to pay attention and stay there without trying to name and to fix, which is what the subject has done.”

2019-12-23, 11:26 p.m. -CJ: “Read- ing is a practice. It is actually a praxis: there is a view of how to live that is tied to it (which is a kind of knowing) and also it is something that you do (a kind of doing) – so reading could be a way to recall (or actualize) the connection. When we do it, when we image or read and approach a crisis/question without meaning to gather knowledge to fix things, this other way of living together takes place. So, it is something that can be part of how we as people organise our lives, but it can’t completely organize our lives because we live in political economic struc- tures that presume the subject. So, this is again why we need to remember that it is about an ethics with/out the subject.”

2019-12-24, 4:04 p.m. - Kevin: Ahhh yesssss

2019-12-24, 4:04 p.m. - Kevin: That’s perfect

2019-12-24, 4:05 p.m. - Kevin: I think that is what Agamben is trying to say, and maybe failing.

2019-12-24, 4:05 p.m. - Kevin: Image something without intending to gather it

2019-12-24, 4:05 p.m. - CJ: Yes yes

2019-12-24, 4:06 p.m. - Kevin: May offer glimpses of an ethics without the subject

2019-12-29, 3:26 p.m. - CJ: Da Silva actually has a new essay (if you can call it that) that just came today

2019-12-29, 3:26 p.m. - Kevin: Whoa

2019-12-29, 3:26 p.m. - Kevin: What is it called?

2019-12-29, 3:26 p.m. - CJ: I haven’t full read it yet. But I can send it to you

2019-12-29, 3:27 p.m. - Kevin: Please !!

2019-12-29, 3:27 p.m. - CJ: In true da Silva form it’s called How

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/105/305515/how/>

2019-12-29, 3:56 p.m. - CJ: I just read it... maybe I do need to read Kant

2019-12-29, 4:20 p.m. - CJ: Interestingly when I read Da Silva more and more I feel less inclined that she is asking for me to make critique but more so for me to make art

2019-12-29, 5:08 p.m. - Kevin: !!!!!

2019-12-29, 5:08 p.m. - Kevin: That is a really astute comment

2019-12-29, 5:08 p.m. - Kevin: I love it

2019-12-29, 5:08 p.m. - Kevin: Maybe just maybe

2019-12-29, 5:08 p.m. - Kevin: A re-enchantment of the human and a re-enchantment of art go hand in hand

2019-12-30, 9:15 a.m. - Kevin: Also, the more I think about it

2019-12-30, 9:16 a.m. - Kevin: DFdS seems to spend less time determining or over-determining the Kantian subject than the snowball of European-philosophical subjecthood as a whole - not because it is bad in itself, but because it is built on the disavowal of other, coexisting, praxes of human

2019-12-30, 9:18 a.m. - Kevin: But ALL of this depends on the “if” of “if humanness is determined by knowledge,”

2019-12-30, 9:18 a.m. - CJ: Yes, which is why I think Difference without Separability gets at the core of her work the most

2019-12-30, 9:18 a.m. - Kevin: Interesting

2019-12-30, 9:19 a.m. - CJ: Difference without separability lays out the ethics of such a thought that there are numerous praxes of human

2019-12-30, 9:20 a.m. - Kevin: And I think, then, Christine is right when she focuses on the idea of “imagining” - imagining other modes of being human is like a plinko machine of European descriptive statements

2019-12-30, 9:20 a.m. - Kevin: “Imaging” is about spontaneous moments of cognition

2019-12-30, 9:23 a.m. - Kevin: Yes - and dif w/o seperability must be about an ethics of thinking. An open, responsive ethics, too, because of the workings of the anthropogenic “machine” that would continue to disavow other genres of being.



2019-12-30, 9:38 a.m. - CJ: To think in da Silva's terms, the American notion of "separate but equal" is not the same as "difference without separability" because equal is Man. Which is what I think indigenous thought gets at best and why it's confounding for westerners. Because indigenous thought isn't about equality but relationality. No one is ever equal to the other because that would mean that they are the same (even as they are made to be separate under the law). Relationality on the other hand does no work of assigning total value to the human, nor is it extractive, it is what is given. This might be what is meant after all by "here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities," who you are is not to be categorized and thus made extractable. Difference without separability ensures that something is always given, but also that that something is always assured of their sovereignty over self, which is not individualism (the separate in the separate but equal)

If we define the terms that da Silva uses, the meaning becomes even clearer

Difference: a point or way in which people or things are not the same

Without: in the absence of (or more archaic meaning: outside)

Separability: capable of being separated, parted, or dissociated.

What da Silva is posing is an ethics than considers/images the world from a point of: matter not being the same, yet outside of the conditions for parting/ categorization

What would such a hermeneutics look like from the point of that ethics?

2019-12-30, 9:41 a.m. - Kevin: Fascinating!!!!!!

2019-12-30, 9:41 a.m. - Kevin: There is one inkling of this in Moten & Tsang

2019-12-30, 9:44 a.m. - Kevin: This their take on the question you just asked- I think

2019-12-30, 9:44 a.m. - Kevin: A surrendering of intentionality to some extent - or at least an internally generated intentionality

2019-12-30, 9:45 a.m. - Kevin: Imagining is entirely nonreal/symbolic

2019-12-30, 9:46 a.m. - CJ: Yes

2019-12-30, 9:46 a.m. - Kevin: Imaging or image-making as a grounding for an ethics of difference means that the result, the statement, the ordering of things, is always different depending on the exteriorities of the humans involved. Because it depends on the fluidity of the actual and virtual, away from the abstracted Man2 or Da Vinci's man. Or homo economicus. Etc.

2019-12-30, 9:47 a.m. - Kevin: It depends on difference, even

2019-12-30, 9:47 a.m. - CJ: Which is why Wynter will go to have the call in one of her essays to say "No Humans Involved"

2019-12-30, 9:48 a.m. - Kevin: No humans involved ...

2019-12-30, 9:50 a.m. - Kevin: Yes - that is why Wynter doesn't engage with materialisms or marxian thought, I think, because she takes it as a given that something "nonhuman" determines the episto-ontological structures, and that thing isn't the mode of production. It pre-exists production

2019-12-30, 9:50 a.m. - CJ: She writes this from the perspective of the LAPD referred to black people. They used it to describe black and brown people they deemed as violent, but also ironically (a tragic irony) to describe the deaths of black people whose deaths were not deemed worth investigating

2019-12-30, 9:51 a.m. - Kevin: Hmm...

2019-12-30, 9:52 a.m. - CJ: So again, it raises a question nonetheless of: **what _is_ the state of affairs WHEN humans ARE involved?**

2019-12-30, 9:52 a.m. - Kevin: Right

2019-12-30, 9:53 a.m. - Kevin: An enforcement of the biocentric racial code within judicial and disciplinary script

2019-12-30, 9:53 a.m. - Kevin: That is Wynter

2019-12-30, 9:53 a.m. - Kevin: But that's also what da Silva refutes

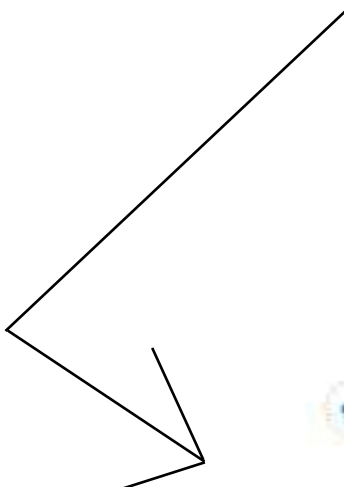
2019-12-30, 9:54 a.m. - CJ: IMG-20191230-WA0004.jpg (file attached)

2019-12-30, 9:54 a.m. - Kevin: Interesting

2019-12-30, 9:54 a.m. - Kevin: Exactly

2019-12-30, 9:54 a.m. - Kevin: Very important definition

2019-12-30, 9:55 a.m. - Kevin: Da Silva says we shouldn't ask questions like this, but instead investigate how we come up with answers



in·volve
/ɪn ˈvɒlv/

verb

(of a situation or event) include (something) as a necessary part or result.
"his transfer to another school would involve a lengthy assessment procedure"

Similar: require, necessitate, demand, call for, entail, mean, imply

• cause (a person or group) to experience or participate in an activity or situation
"what kind of organizations will be involved in setting up these projects?"

Similar: include, count in, take in, bring in, draw in, take into account

• be engaged in an emotional or personal relationship.
"Angela told me she was involved with someone else"

2019-12-30, 9:56 a.m. - Kevin: But yeah - there is something upsetting about that

2019-12-30, 9:58 a.m. - Kevin: I think maybe that's why she and Valentina Desideri are doing something important in their dialogues. It's also a kind of intellectual therapy. Or feels this way.

2019-12-30, 9:59 a.m. - CJ: It's starting at the answers and tracing back to the ways in which we come to know, and then from there to think about other ways of possibly knowing. And it isn't poststructuralist in derridean terms, because Derrida's play of language is always a play of man's ability to play with language.

2019-12-30, 10:02 a.m. - Kevin: good point ab poststructuralism

2019-12-30, 10:03 a.m. - Kevin: Maybe this takes us back to the effectiveness of silence - not the absence of expression and communication, but a loving image of non-linguistic expression- one that just can't play around

2019-12-30, 10:06 a.m. - CJ: Yes! I agree entirely



Over xmas break, I did much thinking about the thesis. As you know, I'm still looking for a form that would allow me to incorporate the diverse threads that I've been invested in since I began thinking about this project—"the open," Benjamin, da Silva and Wynter and "practices of being human," the meaning of imagination, psychogeography, Edmonton, and so on.

All the conversations and emails we've been sharing have played a big role in my life this past year, as they always have. But I'm still thinking of our last conversation at Transcend (where I am right now, incidentally.) What excites me about our topics—"the open," silence, the "cloud of unknowing"—is that I'm starting to get a clearer picture of the kind of "language" I've been looking for all along, even in therapy, in personal relationships, and in my innermost understanding of my place in the world, which must begin with recognizing what we conveniently call "the world" is "vast and uncertain," as Hejinian puts it.

So I actually did go out and read *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It was a bit of a let down in terms of content, but I absolutely love the tone these medieval religious writers had toward their readers. They're so pedantic and distant and condescending, but also full of invitations to join them on "journeys" and pilgrimages. It brought me back to a night I spent at a Franciscan friary in Canterbury, and how happy the friars were to send me on my way with a word of "good luck" and "may the spirit be with you"—I imagine they would have said the same things if I was being sent to be executed. Is this what it means to live, write, and sing songs in the cloud of unknowing? Does it mean denying the boundary between being and non-being, knowing and non-knowing?

In any case, I can't see how attitudes like this can possibly work for us, here, on Turtle Island, right now. I don't know what it would mean for someone to say "may the spirit be with you" on this land. And maybe this confusion is where I need to be, and will always be for the rest of my life...

For this reason, I'm drawn to the attitude Benjamin expressed in many of his letters, which is that the "confidence" he shows in his writing is a strict performance. Once, when drilled on the matter of whether communism is really the "best system" for humanity, Benjamin wrote to say—in effect—that there's obviously no way of knowing that, and that it's "stupid" to think there is such a thing as a "best system" at all. But communism was, for him, the best collection of ideas available at the time if he wanted to wake up each morning with a sense that he has truly rested. I suppose that anarchist, theological, or surrealist ideas kept him up at night in a bad way, or simply didn't feel nourishing. I can relate. I certainly don't think communism makes me feel more rested, but sometimes "the open" does that.

In an essay called “Experience and Poverty,” Benjamin advised that the only ones who can weather modernity are the ones who have utmost commitment to the present, free of illusions, including the illusion that there’s a predictable end or purpose to history at all. This may mean, in a word, that anyone who lives on a “shard” of messianic time, on a slice of existence that is always, somehow, not part of “empty homogenous time” (linear time) at all. Like so many others, I’m frequently haunted—actually disturbed—by Benjamin’s image of the Angel of History, whose presence in our lives screams that the linearity of time is destructive and that saving the future actually means saving the past (this is also somehow messianic in the sense the messianic “arrival” would, as far as I understand it, cause the “present” to engulf all of time—the future will be nothing and the dead will be resurrected).

It’s on this point that so many of the ideas I’ve had in the past year collide together in an unmanageable mess. I see no point in untangling it. I just thought I’d express it here and give you an idea of why I feel my thesis work has to move in the direction that it is. It grows out of a place of confusion, too many emotions, and being overwhelmed. Part of deciding on the direction I have is about needing to focus only on ideas that provide some rest from Benjamin, from capitalism, and from my own head, so that I can buckle down and brace for the world to come.

Have a wonderful January



Hi [REDACTED],

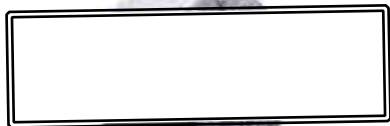
Re: Faith & the unknown

Reuben once said in the Treaty Poetics class that there is a Cree word that signifies something “like” Freud’s unconscious. I wonder if there’s a word that signifies something “like” faith. Faith is, in any case, a word that I’ve struggled with a lot - I think because I’ve always been trying to “find it,” as though it were something I could acquire, or explicitly go out and do. This problem comes from Kierkegaard, who insists on the “leap of faith,” a giving-up of our “rational”/“objective” faculties - but other Protestant theologians, like Paul Tillich, have said faith is something everyone has for it only names “a state of ultimate concern” (concern for life, for earth, for others) and religion is only a blobby/symbolic extension of what completely concerns us.

Lately I’ve come to see faith in a different way - one that, I suppose, marries it to the unknown indefinitely. Sufjan Stevens sings about this kind of faith a lot: “The only thing that keeps me from cutting my arm / Cross hath, warm bath, Holiday Inn after dark: / Signs and wonders, water stain riding the wall.” How can we possibly die when “G-d,” or the “world,” or even the “Other” is speaking to us? Do we even need to understand. Is hearing enough? Are “signs and wonders” enough? I feel that, for me, they have been.

So I think I understand why Oppen calls his famous poem about deer chewing grass a “Psalm.” “That they are there!”

Take good care,
Kevin



you need whole worlds
to make this
liveable.



Hi [REDACTED],

I really identify with this sentiment: “I realized the other day that I most often love temples and churches and sweets and shrines and all holy places when I cannot exactly understand what is going on in them. That is when they make the most sense to me.”

When I was working at a hostel in Istanbul, there was a minaret right outside my window that would do the call to prayer at 5:30 a.m. every day and wake everyone up. But it was an old minaret and the speaker (I think it was a speaker) wasn't working so well, so it mostly came out as static. Also, I don't understand Turkish at all. So it was just a big mess of noise. But when it happened, lots of people on the street would stop what they're doing and go to their knees to pray. I saw the same thing happen in Sarajevo. There it was a more widespread custom - people would literally stall their cars and drop their bags to pray. I always thought this was a very beautiful thing. But I don't understand it. Not one bit. But those streets felt sacred to me because of the way they were being used, because they became a place where people would pause and cease their individual “lives” for the purpose of something else. I felt this meant something very particular in Sarajevo because, not long ago, these were not peaceful or sacred streets at all. I learned a lot about the shaky marriage between peace and prayer from Sarajevo.

Re: can we reconcile the critical life with the lived life or the holy life?

I'm not sure if it's possible to reconcile the critical life with the “lived life.” I like Benjamin for trying, but I don't think he succeeded. I read a 700-page biography about Benjamin over the holidays that was actually called “Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life.” But Benjamin, in my understanding, had to constantly place himself at odds with the practical/humanly demands of food, health, and love in order to do what he did.

Recently I was talking to CJ about Denise da Silva, and he said something pretty profound along the lines of: “The more I read da Silva, the less I feel that she's asking me to be a critic, and the more I feel she's asking me to be an artist.” I can identify with this, too. Da Silva often follows Sylvia Wynter - and when I read Wynter, I want to be a scientist or a psychologist who constantly reminds people how small Westerners are, how difficult it is to admit that, but how essential it is that we do. As far as I'm concerned (these days), Wynter is the last true “philosopher” who has anything important to say, because hers is a philosophy of always calling itself unfinished, of refusing to let any thought or any body be unaccounted for, but still acknowledging irreconcilable differences between us. So I see what CJ means when he says critics aren't needed, but artists are. Rinaldo Walcott also says this in his book *BlackLife*: that academics have failed, so artists are perhaps the last ones who can bring about an “ethical pause,” to make us do the world differently, to approach “others” differently.

“...And if the critical life
is irreconcilable
with the ~~“holy life”~~ is a holy life
also . . .



2020-01-11, 8:03 a.m. - Kevin: I was thinking more about why I'm inclined to call Benjamin's thought "survival"-oriented. This impression came to me when I was reading Wynter, who writes that the 1960s made "other ways of being human" "available" to thinking - she points to the anti colonial "gaze from below." I suppose we could also point to stuff like anti capital "gazes from without." Or whatever. But what Benjamin seems to be doing with "the arcades" is pointing to a literal, concrete, and symbolic manifestation of European Man's inability to see itself from outside of itself. For Ben there is no exit from the arcades, even if the "literal" arcades themselves no longer exist.

But because life must continue, he incessantly sought to destroy the arcades from within - which is why, perhaps, he was so interested in radical citation practices that use the "vanquished" "debris" of history (that which falls under dust in the arcades, what cannot be progressively historicized) to reveal new constellations that implode the idea of history itself - at least, the idea that it maps cleanly onto "empty" linear time...Maybe Benjamin's "gaze" isn't a gaze, but a sort of blind assault, one that takes the elimination of conditions as the precondition for thinking about conditions.



██████████,

I finally put together a series of notes/reflections/unfoldings regarding the readings and conversations I've been engaged in recently. When I was in Marilyn Dumont's class, I did a project on M. NourbeSe Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue* where I arranged my "essay" as a series of journal entries exploring my response to the work, how this response evolved or changed from day to day. Marilyn liked this form and said I should do it again. So I did something like that in the reflections I'm sending to you now.

Hopefully this comes close to something that "works" for the purposes of the thesis.

(the document's called "Touching worlds")

 See page 173

Re: What does Wynter mean by "ecumenical"?

Hi [REDACTED],

I was on a bit of a role musing over what Wynter might mean when she writes of the "ecumenical human." Apologies - this is quite long and perhaps not helpful. You don't need to read this, but I'll paste it here (and attach it) regardless:

I've also been wondering why Wynter insists on the word "ecumenical," especially because the word comes out of historical discussions about the universal church, inter-Christian dialogue, and the like. But, according to some dictionaries, the word can also mean "general," "universal," "worldwide."

I've come to see that, for Wynter, the colonial-capitalist matrix is not a result of Christianity (that would be too easy), but rather the *mode of human* that emerged in the 15th century and permitted Christianity to legitimate (or, made it so Christianity could *only* serve to legitimate) a world order founded on A) a belief in the homogeneity of humans as possible inductees into the "flock" of Christianity, and B) an steady dissolve of homogeneity into differences based first on the binaries of habitable/uninhabitable earth, then Christian/idolater, then rational/irrational and white/non-white—or, in the terms of the later "origin story" and chartered cosmogony of Darwinism, selected/dysselected.

Wynter argues that Columbus's landing in the Americas in 1492 pulled the entire world into an image of "human" that was universal *and* universally hegemonic. "Universalism" as a world order started, as Wynter suggests, with the formulation of monotheism by captives in ancient Babylon—but it was still somehow geographically localized, even within ancient and medieval Christendom, which held parts of the globe to be "habitable" and others "uninhabitable" and so, in a sense, there was "order," which God could see, and "chaos," which was outside of the purview of creation. (Interestingly, Dante put Odysseus in hell simply because he once sailed beyond the Straits of Gibraltar). So previous to 15-16th century Europe's "discovery" of *global* universalism (and thus *the world*, *The World*), Wynter argues, it was simply a given that all human "forms of life" on earth were uniquely cosmogonically chartered, self-replicating symbolic systems that were incompatible with one another (and also didn't need to be compatible because there was not a colonial-capitalist matrix that could irrevocably bound the fates of all *homo sapiens sapiens* together in a tabulated hegemony).

For me, getting a grip on what Wynter means by “ecumenical” means understanding why she doesn’t just say “universal” or “common.” It means emphasizing and elucidating the differences between humans and accepting her wager that the “origins” of any *referent*—we are cosmogonic (part of *logos*) and not purely biological/determinative, as they are for secular evolutionists, or purely material/economic, as they are for Marx and Marxists. I think, then, that Wynter would toss out all of contemporary rhetoric around “we’re all one species,” “we’re all in this together,” or “the Anthropocene is a human problem” because all of this is purely a description of *bios*, of “ontogeny” as Fanon would say, and not of *logos* or “sociogeny.” Wynter sums all this up by explaining: “we are co-identified only with those with whom our origin narratives and their systems of symbolic representations, or cultural programs, have socialized us to be symbolic cospecifics of, and thereby to display altruistic behaviours toward those who constitute the *nos* on whose behalf we collectively act.”

But an equally important observation Wynter makes is that “subjective understandings” (*subjectivities* and their fruits, which are rooted to cosmogonies and *referent*-wes) are “*impervious to philosophical attack*” as well as to “empirical counterevidence” (31). The failure of Darwin’s theory of evolution or the global genome project to usurp “European Man” and lead to a global, universal referent—we may be an example of the latter; the fact that modern hardline Democrats and Republicans have *never*, under any circumstance, convinced the other to agree with their side, yet both nonetheless appear willing to die for the maintenance of their brand of liberalism, may be an example of the former.

So, in my reading of Wynter, the need to be “ecumenical” arises because we are all “universal” in the sense that we (the human species) are, through colonialism/capitalism, bound to a universal “mode of the subject” (liberal monohumanism, “Man,” *homo economicus*, etc.) that has universal aspirations and a “truth,” but a “truth” which is actually working to the immense detriment of humans as a species. Ecumenicism is, in my understanding, the *only* word that denotes something like the sustained, deliberate enmeshment of *deep* irresolvable differences: differences in what is “true,” differences in what determines the legitimacy of one ethics over another, etc.

A truly ecumenical moment is, for me, something like what Willie Ermine is calling for in the maintenance of “ethical spaces” when he asks all entrants—whether a student, a rabbi, a politician—to remove their shoes and momentarily drop their “allegiances.” However, there is a lot packed into that word “allegiances” that, as Wynter shows, can’t simply be cognitively renounced and done away with. A friend of mine recently argued that genuinely *dropping your allegiances*, removing your shoes, is almost impossible in today’s world, especially if we’re tuned into the ways late-capitalism severely traumatizes and alienates all humans and, in a way, make us *depend* more and more *on our allegiances*, our symbolic codes, simply to make any sense of our lives.

Part of what illuminated my thinking in this regard is a relatively underground school of contemporary psychology called Terror Management Theory (TMT). TMT holds that symbolic systems are a buffer against thoughts of death, that “beliefs” are things that help us cope with the otherwise meaninglessness of our lives. TMT suggests that any affront against one’s symbolic world (their “subjective understanding,” or their “truth”) is a major cause of neurosis, depression, and despair, and can even induce violent behaviour toward one’s self and others. For example, attacking someone’s religious beliefs or political allegiances—no matter “philosophically sound” or “empirical” those attacks are—almost never leads to “ecumenicism,” and almost always serves to break down that individual’s *logos* and, indeed, frightens them with the reality of their own absurdity and frailty under capitalism. On the flip side, confronting someone with thoughts of death, or threatening their lives or the lives of their “referent-we,” can make them hold ever-tighter to their symbolic systems. Psychologists have studied this and have (apparently) concluded that talking to someone about the end of the world, or about their own death, or the death of their family, can make them not only more passionately religious, but more patriotic, more intense about sports, more in love with a particular band, more dependent on whatever mode of masculinity, etc.

What interests me is that a lot of modern acts of violence have been interpreted through the framework of TMT—it makes sense to me that if someone’s entire symbolic world is attached to an institution that is frequently under attack by anonymous strangers, then that person can behave in a way that are physically/symbolically violently or simply unpredictable. This is because if their *world* is attacked, they are, in a way, confronted with their own death (or, at least, the loss of their symbolic code of life/death that helps them cope with their own existence, even if this code is attached to an institution like a church, a state, or a profession). TMT is still a flawed theory, but, to me, it helps understand why Wynter’s concern is about finding *ecumenicism* amongst “forms of life” rather than attacking some and adopting others. Maybe, with the word “ecumenicism,” Wynter pointing to a “third way” that doesn’t depend on a binaristic discourse of attack, but also doesn’t insist on (or believe in) unity.

But when I think of ecumenicism in the original sense of inter-Christian dialogue, the issue that comes to my mind is that, if Christian (esp. Catholic magisterial) claims are taken at face value, there can “reasonably” be no such thing as inter-faith dialogue, even between Christians, because they are beginning at different “origins” and ending at different “ultimate truths.” Eternal damnation, eternal salvation—these are, by definition, ultimate and universal. Another way to put this may be: every “we” that has acted collectively since humans have been hybridly bios-logos (i.e. all of human history except the last 600 years) has lived in a geographically localized world whose “laws” operated *only then and there*, so cooperation and cospecificity between “forms of life” was possible if their “truths” (such as the importance in the maintenance of their mutual well-being and the well-being of the ecosystem) could be aligned. But Wynter argues that 1492 changed all this. Now “truths” can’t be aligned because all truths other than the truth of Europe are delegitimated, labelled with an “alterity” or an “otherness” which is self-replicating and sociogenic, as Fanon has shown.

So, as Fred Moten puts it in a scathing critique of Levinas's reliance on Western scripture as a foundation of ethics: "it is [...] clear that the whole world that constitutes and is constituted by these texts in and as their openness is Europe. The whole world is Europe and Europe is the Bible and the Greeks. Europe is the world of the ones who are capable of the world" (*The Universal Machine* 12). That last sentence is, I think, aligned with Wynter's discussion of how universality becoming a global, nonlocalized trajectory is bound to modern racism's manifestation as rich/poor, north/south, etc. The question is always: *according to whom?* And the answer is always: the universalized Europe of the Bible and the Greeks. The matter is always about gaining access to *that* (European) world, abstractly if not literally/geographically. (The implication here is that modern European Man *can't* be ecumenical, and perhaps we must let him die if the human species is to survive).

This idea plays out in interesting ways in Martin Scorsese's theological movie *Silence*, which follows two 16th century Jesuit missionaries to Japan, where, at the time, Christians were being imprisoned and executed in large numbers. There's a tense scene in the movie where one missionary (played by Andrew Garfield) is interrogated by a Japanese official. The official says something like "Portuguese colonialists are wasting their time because Christian ideas cannot take root in Japan. Japan is a swamp." To this, Garfield says something like, "I'm not here for Portugal, I'm here for the truth—because if Christianity isn't true in Japan, it isn't true anywhere." I think Wynter would have a lot to say about this scene: in a sense, Garfield, who is extremely fervent in his faith, can *only be a missionary* because this is how he is cosmogonically chartered—the same way Columbus could *only* try to convert the Indigenous peoples to Christianity and to extract resources to achieve what he believed (could *only* believe) to be the fulfillment of his humanity (a civic, political humanity). The reason Garfield is illegible to the Japanese official is, perhaps, because Garfield is speaking (can only speak) universally and the official is not (and cannot) speak universally. As far as I can see (though I can't see very far), there is no way for universalism to speak to the absence of universalism, nor is there a way for universalisms to speak to one another. Hence the movie's theme of "silence." The universal voice—personified in the voice of God—in fact *does not speak*. When we ask God a question, we hear wind and crickets.

There is, however, the fact that Garfield and the Japanese official *are* sitting in the same room—they have incompatible cosmogonies, but they nonetheless share a presence, even in their mutual fear and hatred. If the rules and origins of any "form of life" are truly "impervious to philosophical attack," and if universalisms and the "we-recognizing kinships structures" they enounce in the world are entirely incompatible, then the present room is all there is. Here, again, I think of Denise Ferreira da Silva's idea of "difference without separability"—separability would say that the "present room" doesn't exist, when we all know it does, and we are in it. This also echoes something ██████ said a few months ago in the Rudy Wiebe room when he was reflecting on Dwayne Donald's river walk to the beaver dam alongside his recent trip to London: you can hold the amisk in one side of your head and Buckingham Palace in the other. You can't resolve them, you can only hold them together.

An image came to my mind recently that, I think, captures this idea of things held together. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, theologians spoke of God as a great machinist, how God set in motion the laws and forces of the universe. This would be metaphorized as a series of interlocking gears that together, and only together, could move the “great machine,” which was Nature, or Being, or God itself. Now, I think what philosophers like Sylvia Wynter (and others) are saying is that there is no universal “machine,” there may only be countless gears. The job of each gear is only to move adjacent gears. That is all the gears do. Faraway gears are still affecting each other, but they can’t know it. Put otherwise, the job of a dancer is to engage in a motion with dancers around them, not to perform for an audience. If there is a “machine,” or an audience, it is silent—it squeaks, maybe, in the rubbing between gears and dancers, but it isn’t the reason why they rub.

So when Wynter writes in 2018 that her project is one that aims to “replace the ends of the *referent-we* of liberal monohuman[ism] with the ecumenically human ends of the *referent-we in the horizon of humanity*,” I take this as nearly synonymous with her call in 1992 to “bring into being a new poetics of the *propter nos*” that “takes as its reference subject (in place of our present referent of the bourgeois mode of the subject and its *conception* of the individual), that of the *concrete individual human subject*.”

.....

But what does a poetics of “us” that takes the *concrete individual* as its reference actually look like?

For Wynter (like for Ermine, perhaps) it means that “well-being” must be measured only by the well-being of each individual subject, rather than the representation or concept of that subject within the current dominant model of the referent-we of “Man” (*homo economicus*, etc.). Wynter even points to examples of this *kind* of poetics taking place: the Black, Indigenous, feminist, and queer radicalisms of the 1960s as well as the way these traditions continue in the present.

Wynter also points to Gandhi, who called this “concrete individual human subject” that must form the reference of ecumenical humanity the “last man.” Simone Weil, in her own way, speaks of the “concrete individual human subject” as the thing that is *behind* “personality,” a thing that is somehow *impersonal* and anonymous. This anonymous, impersonal thing is, for Weil, the total measure of the human, the human-as-such. It is also this aspect of us that is susceptible to anguish. So the “total measure” of an individual is eternally symbolized, for Weil, by Christ’s passion, wherein we see the subject speaking the words “Why are you hurting me?” This part of us that can ask this question—who, in a sense, has forgotten God, who cannot hear or talk to God—is the part of us that is sacred, according to Weil, because it is not “I,” but “us.”

.....

However, I've also come to believe that the “total measures” of humans—gears—moving one another is not *exactly* what Wynter means by “ecumenical.” This implies a stasis. But, of course, Wynter is concerned with history. She is concerned with how an ecumenical human can *move* toward the horizon, beyond which lies a “new world” that accounts for the interrelations of all humans and non-human beings at this time in history.

How to do this without positing another “universal machine”?

On this point, I'd like to mention, because it's been haunting me, the sermon that Fred Moten delivered this year on Martin Luther King Day. With the idea of a “new world” and ecumenicism in mind, I was dumbfounded by what Moten had to say about MLK's famous “Promised Land” quote. What MLK said shortly before his death in 1968 is this:

And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land

What Fred Moten suggests is that there may be a “larger philosophical formulation” within MLK's statement that “I” may not get to the Promised Land.

What if, Moten asks, the “Promised Land” is “by necessity communal”? That is to say, “I”—whoever is speaking and acting for themselves—can *never* get to the Promised Land. “This vision of an alternative world [...] is of necessity communal [...] it's not something ‘I’ can ever get to, it's only something that ‘we’ can get to.”

On the heels of Wynter, and of Moten's criticism of Levinas, I, as a reader, might wish to conclude that things like scripture and religion need to be abandoned because of the master's world/s they create and allow. But that is emphatically *not* what Moten is advocating for. I'm not sure what he is advocating for, exactly, but the reason I find his sermon so thrilling is that, in a purely intuitive way, the possibility of “we” reaching the Promised Land affirms so much of what many of us are already doing when we gather. Maybe Moten here is referring to an ecumenical practice.

See: <https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/video/dr-fred-moten-guest-preacher>

Kevin



Re: Agamben and nonknowledge in light of it all

██████████,

It is more appropriate to say that *zones of nonknowledge*—although we can go seeking them—are more frequently hauntings that *come to us*, throwing our world into disorder and confusion, for better or worse. We experience their influence on our behaviour—as we stutter, clutch our fists, cry, become flushed, and so on—but, like Orpheus guiding Persephone out of the underworld, our invisible contents vanish when we turn to face the chasms in which they are supposedly located or attempt to bring them to light by putting them into language. Our language, of course, cannot reach so far or hold so tightly. The word “trauma,” even, cannot name or represent the enormous diversity of traumas that everyone, every Edmonton, is haunted by in their way.



2020-03-03, 1:22 p.m. - Kevin: I was reading something lovely recently about the early Church fathers and the doctrine of the Trinity - the writer making the argument that “theological” multiplicity was something that could only, at the time, have been formulated in the Nile basin because of the motions of life happening there at the time. Land itself, that land by the Nile, is actually where the opening to multiplicity began to become languaged - and was languaged, was in fact working, until the Roman Empire’s universal imperial theology eclipsed it in 700CE



Hi [REDACTED],

Today I went researching for ways to overcome the obstacles I encountered in Scorcese's film *Silence*. Especially the idea of universality. I'm thinking of the film's portrayal (or reluctance to portray) missionary work as paving the way, or otherwise inseparable, from colonization of humans and land. Indeed, does the "truth" of Christianity depend on its truthfulness universally, that is, around the world? Is monotheism inseparable from colonization?

The reason I haven't given up this question and thrown my weight behind the idea that Christianity *is* colonization (as many people do) are because of things like Fred Moten's sermon, or liberation theology, or queer theology. I think these things might "save" Christianity from its whitewashing and deep relationship to violence and recover what the essay I'm sending you calls the "originary pluralism from which Christian theology properly begins."

The issue for me is the idea of "universal," which in monotheism comes out of the logic that grows - must grow - from a particular nonlocalized logic of unity, of Oneness.

But then I read this essay by Laurel C. Schneider. She interrogates what she calls the binaric logic of One-Many. As in, for there to be a "One" (epitomized in "truth," as in when Garfield says he came to Japan to bring "truth," not to bring Portugal; or when Columbus arrived in the Americas to "save" the Indigenous peoples from the coming apocalypse, not to bring Portugal, etc.) then there needs to be a "not one," as in the fallen world, the array of beings, lands, ecologies, or the multitudes.

But she insists that One and multitudes are not incompatible, that "we" (or someone) can keep Christianity without needing to keep and valorize the universal.

I'd love to hear what you think of this paper. If you skim it. I think this theologian is very close to landing at da Silva's "difference without separability," but casting it in a theological frame

Kevin

Kevin,

I've been wondering how to respond to you, and I'm going to respond to you by asking you to read a letter M. NourbeSe Phillip wrote to Kamau Brathwaite, the visionary poet who just passed away.

Nourbese wrote this letter in response to an event in 2005 regarding Kamau in Barbados:

In 1998 the Barbadian poet Kamau Braithwaite bought a piece of land in Christ Church Barbados. Shortly after purchasing the land the Barbadian government informed him that he couldn't build or extend the premises – a small 3 bedroom w/its old slave outhouse – because it was near the airport in a No Fly zone.

I will let him tell it in his own words.

His intention was to use the property to house his archives many of which had become scattered as a consequence of Hurricane Gilbert in Jamiaca. He also wanted to use the premises as a place of return if you will where artists could visit and work an oumfo-palénque as he describes it Bussa Centre is his name for it. After that reason was disallowed in court another objection was put forward—that the land was needed to build a road to the airport. The Barbados government has sent in bulldozers to raze the land and fill in the pond on the premises.. To date the matter has still been unresolved.

Towards the end of this, NourbeSe describes what it might mean to be connected to the land, to know its truth, and that its truth is our imagination.

“I felt a presence on that land, Kamau. It had a patient, serene, windswept quality to it. As if it was waiting for something. I saw the pond, or what is left of it, the lone bearded fig tree. It did feel magical. Was it my imagination?—there goes my Western-trained mind. For if it were my imagination—all the better. For that is what we will need to do—imagine worlds that defy the capitalist nightmare that presently holds the world hostage. Simone Weil, the French philosopher, once suggested that hunger presupposes the existence of bread. So too I think our hunger for worlds in which we can recuperate the erased memories of another time, presupposes the existence of those worlds. Worlds that Cow Pastor signals (and I use that word in more than one sense). What we need is time—the right time, that is. When our past becomes us and we become our past.”

Here's the link to the full thing:

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/mirrors/tomraworth.com/nourbeSe.html>

Love,

Dear CJ,

I can't tell you how much I treasure your willingness to reach out to me with quotes, stories, fragments of this wider planet. I think what we do here - the giving and taking, or breathing together, if you will - is close to what Wynter means when she writes of enouncing an ecumenical human. I can't explain why. But I also don't believe Wynter would theorize something frustratingly impracticable, as many philosophers do. I like to believe she had something like us in mind.

This particular topos, the point where land meets (or doesn't meet) faith, has become, in many ways, the overarching theme of my days, and in retrospect a throughline of my life. I recently read Laurel Schneider's book *Beyond Monotheism* where she explains in greater detail many of the ideas found in the theo-poetics essay I sent you. One thing that grips me is her argument that "monotheism" itself is cemented to/in what she calls the "logic of One" underscoring global European imperialism. Pre-Roman Abrahamic belief systems, Schneider says, are better understood as "monologous" than monotheist: Moses's commandments say that the Israelites shall worship no God before JHWH, not that there are no other gods or, better, ways of being with (a) god. The Book of Psalms even praises "God" as one among many real (but not ultimate) gods.

So just as "polytheism" (with all its modern associations) is a word the British invented and wove into their atlases and discourses in order to "make sense" (or impose sense) on all they intended to subjugate in India and elsewhere, "monotheism" became a universal foil to all that was not enfoldable within Europe's vision of itself as the leader and light of the world. So, monotheism, the "theory of everything" (Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, etc.), universalism, European humanism, globalization, empire - these things form something of a united front against the other-than-colonized world, which has - according to Schneider - always preferred multiplicity to the One.

Okay, so in this light Wynter's "cosmogony" (a coming-into-being of a way of imagining, of being, of moving through time and space) starts to be more palpable to me. The connection of land and narrative starts to make sense. Sheridan and Longboat insisting that Euro-Canadians need to remember that England, too, used to be the "skin of a dragon" starts to make sense. That Christ, when he/it came to the British Isles, arrived as a knight, and Mary a fair maiden, starts to make sense. And the fact that it was Teurtillian - an African church father and theologian - who formulated the original doctrine of the Trinity (God as a paradox, always in tension with itself, a multiplicity) makes sense. According to Schneider, Teurtillian's introduction of plurality into Christian ontology couldn't have been possible had he not lived in the Nile basin, where so many people, so many irreconcilable cosmogonies, including those of sub-Saharan Africa, were always passing through.

But One, as a logic or posture, is a dangerous thing in the hands of colonialism-capitalism. Whether this started with Constantine or Columbus is no matter. Today it is everywhere. All times, all wealth. It's consuming all history. It's obliterating all other modalities of time and making "impossible" all other kinds of world. From this standpoint, Benjamin's vision (barely formulated) that saving the future means saving the past feels especially urgent. How do we save the past without simply recounting "history," that cornerstone to European domination? How do we allow the "vanquished" to speak? How do we raise the dead? Does M. NourbeSe Philip do this?:

"our hunger for worlds in which we can recuperate the erased memories of another time, presupposes the existence of those worlds."

A question I'm tempted to pull out of Wynter's framework for interpreting humanisms is: "What do you mean by God?" Why do so few people ask this? Indeed, something that struck me in my travels throughout poly-religious places (the Balkans, for example) is that there is no shyness of asking "What religion are you?" because it is understood, on some implicit level, that "you" are the subject of this question and not your religion.

So it seems to me that the classic Protestant question of "Are all religions superficially different manifestations of the Same, or are they superficially similar manifestations of Difference?" doesn't matter all that much. Both sameness and difference are competing - sometimes paradoxical, sometimes harmonized - postures and logics. However they are arranged, enounced, or enacted, the issue is less about the ontology of difference and more about the praxis of "difference." What do we do with difference?

If land (whether Teurtillian's basin, Braithwaite's plot, or Beaver Hills) is the nexus of entanglements, if it forms the "we," then maybe it is ecological-ontological multiplier of all that is possible/impossible.

Much love,

Kevin



“our hunger for worlds in which we can recuperate the erased memories of another time, presupposes the existence of those worlds.”
& Cry & Cry & Cry &



LAND BACK

Hey [REDACTED],

I hope you're well. I'm here to report a few developments.

First, I finally sat down to reflect on the sweat ceremony. I will send you that document. It's pure *essai*.

I find it interesting that, in French, this verb "essayer" can translate easily into "to try," but it also holds connotations of ardour and hardship. In Middle French, apparently, the word meant "trial," from which we get the English word "assay." So I suppose the "essai/assay" opposed to the "essay," is a more appropriate form for subjects that are too difficult to be "resolved," or which only become more useless the more we try to make them "legible."

I've forgotten, by this point, why/how anyone could produce an "essay" at all. Was it Wittgenstein who said that "naming" an experience only serves to squish out everything except the name itself? (I'm sure it wasn't him - but regardless...). I'm always going to be drawn to that residue, those dregs, the darkness that shies away as soon as we cast a light on it.

But the *essai*, I think, avoids the quest to find an accurate "name" or a suitable "concept." In the *essai* (and I think of most of Benjamin's essays as *essais*, more obviously so as he neared the end of his life) there is always some hint of lifting, heaving, breaking stones, backtracking, and breathlessness.

This is probably true of what I'm sending you. But I can't think of any other way of addressing these topics.

In any case, I had an extended lunch with [REDACTED] today, who was all ears when it came to my thesis, and extremely supportive when I explained to her what/who my thesis is for. [REDACTED] put it best: "the *thesis is the correspondence*." Yes. The relations, the friendships. The thesis is not for the university, but for you, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], my partner, myself, etc. And I've come to confidently resist - and with good reason, I think - the idea that my writing should be legible, that what the "reader" needs is "information," that my terms should be defined, or that the text should be dialectic.

Second, I had an interesting thought as I was writing my *essais* on the sweat ceremony regarding the idea of "anxiety." As far as I know, very few philosophers or theorists have approached this concept since Kierkegaard associated it with angst and Heidegger made it a fundamental component of his Dasein.

But a few weeks ago, a doctor prescribed me escitalopram after I told her about my nervous breakdowns when I was a child, how those kinds of feelings have never quite gone away, and have, in the past couple years, reached all new heights.

Whoa. I had no idea how clear the world could be! I feel like all my thoughts have been divided by two. The thesis no longer seems like a mountain road, but a well-groomed trail. I walk it with friends. I can hear them again.

But now that I have some distance from the blender-mind sensation of anxiety, I've started to wonder whether it has in fact proved somewhat helpful along the way. Anxiety may be the thing that always says that one is not enough, you need *and and and and and and*. I don't think Wynter and Benjamin would have made nearly as much sense to me if I didn't always seek the urgency of the "*and*."

Best,

**FUTURE
REDEVELOPMENT
SITE**



BUILDING FOR TOMORROW

Kevin,

From Jane Bryce's *Chameleon and Other Stories*, pp. 106-108

...

“Luis fought for Castro in the Congo and Angola. He had lived the revolution, and was living it still, cheerfully tragic in its contradictions. Juan, who had gone on, leaving me with Luis, now came back and asked me to go upstairs. I stayed up there for some time, eating, and looking at school books. As I came back down, I paused once again at the open door, and Luis was waiting for me. He called me to come in. He was holding something, and explained he wanted to make me a gift. On the paper he gave me was the picture of a rose, and on the back, the place and the date of our meeting, and the words: ‘My modest given to you, for remember me. God blest you. Luis.’ I held the paper in my hand and felt for a response. The apartment was as empty as a prison cell. My eye fell on the Yorùbá grammar, and by some trick of association I saw the grove, and the lazy brown water of the stream. ‘Òsun is my goddess,’ I said, ‘and she would like me to give you this.’ I knew as I put the note in his hand that it was nothing, but like him I had nothing else to give. But it wasn’t the money that excited him. At the mention of Òsun, his eyes caught fire, and he turned his chair around and led me to a cupboard at the back of the room. Flinging open the door, he revealed two small shelves of paraphernalia, which at first I could make no sense of. It looked to my eyes like old bits of junk, dirty and worn -- bits of iron, a clay pot, other objects of indeterminate status. Luis was watching me closely. ‘For the worship of Òsun,’ he said, and pointed, ‘for Sàngó, for Elegbara.’ His voice was husky, and I looked again at the ritual objects. I did not understand their purpose, while for him they were infused with meaning. But now I understood something else, which before had been lacking. Luis did not inhabit his prison cell. He was elsewhere, seated in the shrine at the centre of the grove, throwing cowries to divine the future. He had not been surprised to see me. The children of Òsun will always find each other, brought together by the currents that flow around the earth.

It was time to leave. ‘*Esé gaan, bàbá,*’ I murmured, ‘thank you.’ I could tell from his response that he wasn’t used to hearing Yorùbá spoken. Its meaning is in the music, which he couldn’t hear. He had, after all, only the book to teach him, and silence where the music should have been. I left Luis in La Lisa, and returned to central Havana. The air was thick with an indefinable smell, a miasma born of effluent and the noxious exhaust of a million cars, choking the city. As I neared my hotel, a faint breeze blew across my face, bearing the smell of the sea.”

Dear CJ,

“The children of Òsun will always find each other, brought together by the currents that flow around the earth.”

I’ve been thinking a little bit about this passage from Wittgenstein:

One could almost say that **man is a ceremonial animal**. This is probably partly false, partly nonsensical, but there is also some truth to it.

In other words, one could begin a book on anthropology in this way: when one observes the life and behavior of humans all over the earth, one sees that [...] humans [...] carry out actions that bear a peculiar character, and might be called ritual actions. But then again it is nonsense to go on and say that the characteristic feature of these actions is that they spring from erroneous notions about the physics of things. (As Frazer does when he says that magic is really false physics, or as the case may be, false medicine, technology, etc.)

Rather, what is characteristic of ritual action is not at all any view, opinion, be it right or wrong, although an opinion—a belief—can itself be of ritual nature, or belong to a rite (42)

I’ve been thinking about this in relation to Sylvia Wynter’s calls for a “new ceremony” or a “ceremony found,” especially because what Wittgenstein identifies negatively as “not at all any view, opinion, be it right or wrong” may very well be the “cosmogenic” principle, the mythos, or the logos, which Wynter consistently argues is overlooked by “modern” enonciations of the human.

And I’ve been thinking about ceremony in relation to the government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis that requires all humans limit contact with other humans. Is this effectively a thwarting of the possibility of *any* ceremony *except* the kind practiced here by Luis?

“Now I am in prison.”



In a recent series of blogs, Agamben tries to affirm his theory that the state powers have progressively habituated us to a “state of exception” such that shifting from “old normal” to the “new normal” of intense regulation, restriction, and punishment happens *almost* seamlessly (relatively speaking):

It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything - the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions - to the danger of getting sick. Bare life - and the danger of losing it - is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other humans beings [...] are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs. (“Clarifications” n.p.)

Something of this portrait is terrifying, but it’s obviously overblown, even by Agamben’s standards. I think some fear is well-directed, that there *is* indeed something to be frightened of when it comes to social distancing and the willingness with which people are deriding and insulting others for their failure to conform to these distancing efforts. You see it everywhere. (Ex. “Those people are f**king selfish for going to play soccer right now - they’re going to kill their grandparents” or “That a**hole sneezed while I was going through check-out.”) So I think Agamben is on to something, that the way the coronavirus became languaged - a language of crisis and all-hands-on-deck - inevitably reduced the *public* to a kind of bare life. At least partially.

Although we must all agree that distancing is a necessary measure at this time, I can’t quite tell if the tactics by which these measures are imposed as effective. Shaming, attacking, hoarding? So Zizek actually chimed in on this discussion and replied directly to Agamben:

This are much more ambiguous [than Agamben claims]: it [the virus] DOES also unite them - to maintain a corporeal distance is to show respect to the other because I also may be a virus bearer. My sons avoid me now because they are afraid that they will contaminate me (what is to them a passing illness can be deadly for me) (n.p.)

So the picture Zizek is making - a very uncharacteristic one - seems more like a radical ethic of care. He elsewhere raises flags when it comes to the “vitalist” logic that is fueling healthcare efforts and advocations in some parts of the world right now (maybe in Italy, but also in some now not-so-fringe corners of the media) that propose that elderly and compromised individuals are being turned away from the hospital so that they young and healthy can live. This, according to Zizek, is terrifyingly close to a fascist way of thinking. However, we don’t need to look far to see the same kind of thinking operating in Canada, and especially in the USA. All those myopic media pundits saying “Look at the numbers - everything will be fine - for most of us it’ll be a mild flu, that’s all” are obviously not addressing the ones who have always been most at risk from this and any virus in the first place. I mean, those who are physically or mentally unwell, those who can’t work, isolated rural communities, those with addictions, those who are unhoused, etc. etc. etc.

So what Zizek calls for is something like a revived/invented spiritual orientation - a *ceremony*, if you will - that honours life across current political signifiers (race, nationality, and now apparently *age* and *health*). I'm reminded at this point that, in the essays of Sylvia Wynter, the idea of "ceremony" emerges, among other things, to denote the practices/rituals that take place within a referent-we in order to supply an answer to the question of "What are we?" I think Zizek is calling for something similar, an answer to "What are we?" that *says* (through practice/ritual, though probably not in words) "We are this *and* that *and* that *and* that..." But Zizek doesn't provide any roadmap for how to *do* this. Of course, he cannot.

CJ, I want to live, as I've always wanted to live, in a place where the elderly, sick, and dispossessed are helped first, where mere gross inequality is itself a crisis that demands all-hands-on-deck. As much as I appreciate Dr. Hinshaw reassuring the public that social distancing and closing of public spaces is the "new normal," I can't help but be suspicious of the implication that there was ever an "old normal" or that we will ever proceed into a "*new new normal*." To be "normal" is to be ideological, obviously, but it's also to have claimed a stable answer to "What are we?" But what is "normal" to some has always been hell for others. If we enter "normal" again, then we enter a new hell. I believe Marx's suggestion that the realm of freedom (abolition? emancipation? communism?) begins, or a can only start beginning, when the realm of necessity is left behind. But everything now is dissolving into necessity. When the necessities aren't there, how can we provide any "answer" at all. Language at this moment feels like a luxury.

So I do find some solace in those lines you sent me:

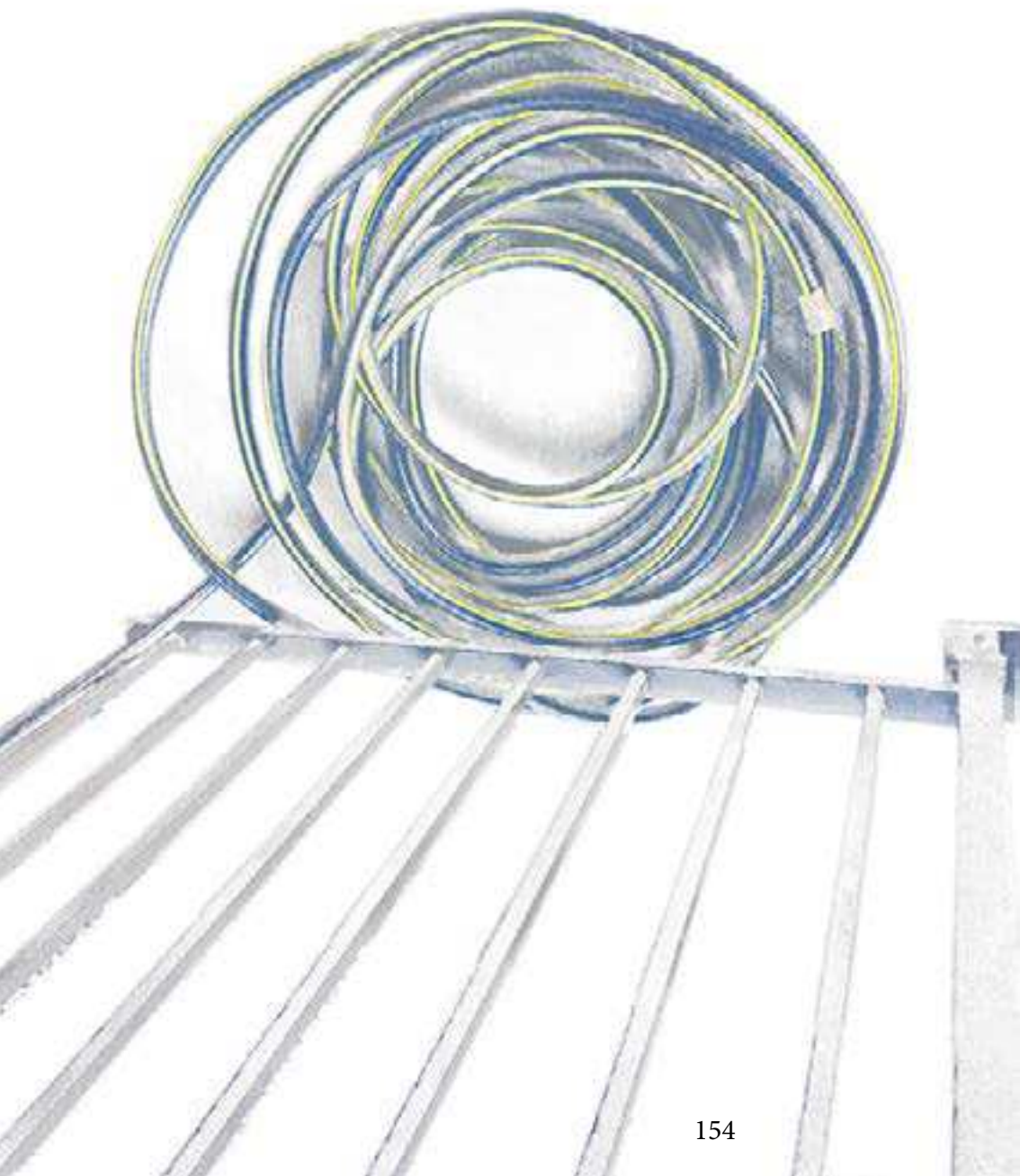
"The children of Òsun will always find each other, brought together by the currents that flow around the earth."

I don't know why. I don't know anything about this tradition. But it bespeaks of something like the ethics of care, one that accommodates the self-sacrifice of isolation that we are all being asked to undertake. It speaks of a ceremony that can happen, will always continue to happen, *despite ourselves*. To care for others is now *literally* the same as caring for one's self. Sitting in silence has become a kind of other-oriented practice. As long as currents flow around the earth, people will continue to find each other, even if they don't. That's when we're "out," maybe, or magic.

Much love



2020-03-16, 11:32 p.m. - CJ: A friend just sent me a message that I'll pass on to you: "I am thinking of a Gregorian chant I went to in an old stone church in Vancouver. The female rector waved some incense around and then said "The end of the day has come. What has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done. Let it be." I found these words very comforting then, and they returned to me last night when I came home from a solo walk." Maybe they will bring some peace to you, too. Sending love your way! And talk soon tomorrow. Breathe easy my friend.



Re: COVID-19

Hi [REDACTED],

I will try to continue work as planned - specifically, compiling all the correspondences and reflections from over the course of the past year or so.

I'm not entirely sure what this will look like in the end, though. Much of what I've been thinking about feels more relevant than ever, but the gusto behind it has either inflated beyond comprehension or deflated under the demands of "social distancing." There is so much to say but little way of saying it. Lorine Niedecker, who thought a lot about isolation, I'm sure, often used the idea of "warmth" to signal something like the satisfaction of a mute desire for interconnection. And to *give* warmth, she wrote somewhere, is within the ability of every human being. But this doesn't seem to be the case right now. I think a lot of my thesis-related thinking was propelled by warmth - but now our own *bodies* aren't satisfactory givers of warmth because to give warmth is also to put others at risk. In Germany, the government limited social gatherings to a total of two people, under threat of punishment! Then the health minister of Canada told us that visiting friends and family at all is "not social distancing." And across social media, people are actually *deriding* each other for seeking the warmth of crowds, while Justin Trudeau subtly threatens to pull out the War Measures Act if people in Vancouver don't stop going to the beach.

This is all because warmth now comes intermingled with sickness. But the possibility of finding solace in non-human beings is also being affected. It seems to me that even *other objects* (surfaces, appearances) are viewed with suspicion as potential carriers of the invisible, soundless, faceless virus. You can't touch things and then touch your face. You can't run your hand along railings or fiddle around objects on the table. We are advised to not even pet unknown dogs because their fur could be infected. So "social distancing" runs a lot deeper than an imperative to keep a few meters apart from other humans, I think. If we believe that context matters, that *where* one is relates to *who* one is, then the enforced (necessary?) fear around surfaces of any kind may have far wider consequences, which I can't even begin to wrap my head around.

A handwritten signature consisting of two horizontal, slightly curved lines, one above the other, in dark ink.

(cont.)

Work is also unable to supply comfort, if it ever did. In a WhatsApp group with other members of my cohort, it's acknowledged that the weight of COVID-19 has rendered us and our work rather irrelevant. Or, at least, we are too distracted to continue. Every day we inherit a new stockpile of facts and figures that no one, really, has the know-how to interpret and understand. Meanwhile, there are calls for collective action happening all over the internet but very little *counsel* as to how to live through it, how to make these calls a praxis - perhaps because the calls are not for "us" but for people with real political power who, at least in places like the US and the UK, appear eager to gamble with the lives of the sick and the elderly and the dispossessed. Meanwhile, those very same people are prevented from organizing. So I agree with Žižek to some extent when he suggests that a lot of the news is offering a bizarre doublespeak - *stay calm, stay calm*, followed by a flood of information that suggests that there is very little reason to be calm at all. Heck, even the news that Bernie Sanders lost his position as the frontrunner of the race felt like a disaster.

And it's not just in the US: the other day, Jason Kenney told us all that we should be prepared for a new "Great Depression," and a few days later suggested that people facing eviction should *still be evicted* because most of them are apparently "criminals" and "vandals." Why do such politicians suddenly acquire new godly platforms during a crisis?

In the face of all this, I've started reflecting again on the movements of silence and nonknowledge that I've been considering over the course of the term (the "cloud of unknowing" and beyond) and wondering whether they can take on a new mission in the world to come.

The idea of "nonknowledge" has been formulated by Agamben as "not only a question of lack or deficit" but "maintaining oneself in the right relationship with ignorance" (*Nudities* 114). Now, it seems to me, ignorance is no longer a thing in the present, but is the defining quality of the future. Agamben goes on to suggest that we should be "allowing an absence of knowledge to guide and accompany our gestures, letting a stubborn silence respond clearly for our words." But whereas, before COVID-19, I took "gestures" here to mean something like a ceremony, a dance, a ritual - now I'm starting to see it as something else. Because we're all isolated, these gestures of nonknowing are also part of privacy. For me, it's pacing back and forth in my room. It's taking long, long, stupid drives through the city with no one to see and no one to talk to. It's curling up and watching hours of video lectures about the plague...

During the Black Death in Europe, I understand that many towns in Germany and elsewhere engaged in massive dancing parties - according to scholars, people did this either because they thought it would ward off death, or because they thought they were going to die anyway and so wanted to make the most of the time they had left. I like to think that these parties were actually just a response to something they couldn't understand. Their imaginations were "released from the constraint of understanding," as it were.

Elsewhere in Europe, at the same time, people marched through town with whips and flagellated themselves in order to atone for sins, not only for themselves but for the collective. They whipped themselves to save the world and made a mass public spectacle out of it. As distant as most medieval logic seems to us, I think both of these responses to the plague were entirely “reasonable” (Wynter might say “lawlikely”) gestures of nonknowledge given the “form of life” and cosmogony that they had no option but acting within. They were “lawlikey” acts of carnival or heresy, an inversion of history, an attempt to spontaneously found a “new world” given that the “old world” was falling to ruin all around them.

What we have right now is nothing like the Black Death, of course - but now the virus comes coupled with ecological disasters (parts of the world are still being hit by forest fires, hurricanes, earthquakes), and neoliberalism, and colonialism. I can only wonder what kinds of “gestures” will emerge from the world now. Unlike before, the differences between us are so vast that I’m not even sure a dance party *can* occur, not even a “virtual” dance party. And, besides, health officials have advised us that the *opposite* of dance parties is what needs to occur if we want to protect the sick and elderly. We need to be still and not touch.

We all need to be cold for a while, then, surrounded by a zone of nonknowledge. I hope that, as I wrote about in my last series of reflections on ceremony, the kinds of “gestures” we find in our isolation will go some way toward enacting the *and, and, and* of Wynter’s “ceremony found” or da Silva’s “difference without separability.” Perhaps we need rituals based on the protection of those made-vulnerable (or “wasted life” of modernity, as Zygmunt Bauman would say) - something which I *think*, based on my very limited knowledge of these things, many Indigenous writer-educators have been advocating for a long time. But this is, in the Western framework, an “idea,” and it’s one thing to have an idea and another thing to realize/actualize/set-in-motion this idea...

A related question that arises from all this is whether the “facts” that are being thrust upon us daily result in a *more* pronounced political grammar of *otherness* (i.e. if race and gender were political signifiers, now age and *health* are increasingly so), or will the “gestures” we develop in our isolation find any kind of outlet in the public world once it is opened up to us again? Or, as Natasha Lennard, a writer for *Communemag*, puts it:

If it is *because* we see our potential for interconnectedness that we stay home, what will we do with that same potential, in plain sight now, when this virus has peaked and passed? Will we remember to fixate, as we do now, on the sites where we risk finding each other and spreading something together: the subway, the classroom, the workplace, the protest? (n.p)

It *is* a risk to find each other. I’m beginning to see that. It was before and it is more so now. It’ll get riskier every day for the foreseeable future. So I’m looking for ways of taking those risks, when the time comes.

Kevin



Hi [REDACTED],

I've been thinking about this word "interconnectedness" and whether it's possible to "achieve" or "realize" it at this time. If I recall, Walter Benjamin made the argument late in his life that the "revolution" forecasted by Marxists was misguided if they believed it could come about through "progress," a word English/Scottish Enlightenment thinkers foisted upon the world (or Europe) a couple hundred years earlier. Benjamin preferred to think in terms of "realization" or "actualization," in that a "revolution" shouldn't be something we *wait for* but something we experience, something which indeed *breaks* history, indicating a "messianic" incision into "linear" time. But it was this word "experience" that had been attacked by modernity. So I was thinking, might "interconnectedness" be thought of in a similar way? Judith Butler made this point in an interview recently: that "interconnection" may be thought of not an *idea* but an *ideal*. To have a "politics" (or even a "practice") founded on *interconnection* might mean *never* really "having" interconnection, but always looking for it. After all, "ideal," in the Kantian sense, means an "endless task." (This is the way Benjamin thought of "revolution" as well.)

If interconnection is an *ideal* in this way, then what we're experiencing right now with the COVID-19 lockdown might be less than an impetus to "be more interconnected," but rather one of what Benjamin calls the "shards" (of messianism, of radical interruption) that are scattered throughout history (or throughout *the world*, because we are now in a "spatial" era rather than a "temporal" era, according to Foucault). In other words, we may just be at a moment when the experience of being interconnected matters more because we *can* experience it. Confined to a room, to a house, interconnectedness is more apparent, perhaps. When it's under threat, we have no choice but to experience it...

But the problem remains - as Wynter points out over and over again - is that there is no "language" (and by proxy, no *episteme*) available through which "we" (all of us, the human species) can articulate and come to "know" humans and non-human beings as interconnected; that is, there is no language that operates ecumenically, taking the "human species" rather than a particular "referent-we" as its "subject." But my interest with Wynter at this point is how her idea of "language" (*logos*, *mythos*) might be understood as localized, or related to "sites" or to "land." On this point, I think an amazing dialogue could occur between Wynter and Benjamin - esp. the Benjamin who wrote *The Arcades Project*, who consciously attempted to incorporate surroundings/context into the project-at-hand by excavating the "vanquished" voices and locales of past experiences, the "mythoi" sealed in the walls of 19th C Paris.

Maybe someone will set that dialogue in motion someday.

(If I had to guess...I'd guess that the "language" that speaks to the "logos" of ecumenism is not a human language at all, but something of the expressiveness in which "all things participate," as Benjamin puts it. The language of trees, animals. The "ecological" language of mushrooms and water, etc.)

Thank you for everything.

Stay safe, healthy, and happy,

Kevin



Re: Solitude, entanglement, existentialism

Hi [REDACTED],

Sorry for taking so much time to get back to you. Things here have felt a little strange, with people close to me really struggling with things. I've learned a lot about the labour of care in the past two years, and if we want to call the precondition for that "entanglement," then the world makes a little more sense to me. I have also not experienced solitude in the sense Sartre and friends talk about it. Thanks for putting it this way. This was also my issue with Nietzsche. There's a certain kind of stereotype that has been reinforced by psychology in the past few decades, which concerns attachment styles and behaviour. The idea seems to go that male individuals with attachment wounds are more frequently socialized to be self-dependant or "avoidant" whereas female individuals with attachment wounds are more frequently socialized to be dependant or "anxious." I think a lot of horrible gendered stereotypes grew out of this. Speaking for myself - as a male - I still feel pangs of guilt or embarrassment asking for help, or asking for someone to listen to me. For others this can obviously be far worse, I think - with "self-dependance" easily slipping into self-harm or harm of others...I wouldn't be surprised if Sartre and Nietzsche and those guys had a role to play in the way "maleness" gets internalized. I prefer to believe that they were both wounded, and the "self" who emerged from their brains was wounded like them....

Entanglement is also something I feel here in McKernan. I'm not sure if I told you, but a few months ago, we found a porcupine in our tree, about 6 feet off the ground. Did you know that porcupines can climb trees? I had no idea. We also have an explosive bush full of sparrows just outside the kitchen window. A few skunks have also been seen in the yard. Oh, and our little plot is apparently the breeding ground for a kind of large black beetle, about 1.5 inches long, that feeds on leaves that were buried under the snow. Last year, the whole yard was crackling with their tiny legs - and I swear there were thousands of them. The carpet of wet leaves really looked like it was alive with all the beetles moving underneath it. Well, I think those beetles are back! We've been waiting for them.

Talk to you soon.

Take care. Stay healthy,

Kevin

“...[]

\$

“Where one *is* has everything to do with *who one is*”

The river is a beginning, an ending and an in-between.

“our hunger for worlds”...[the High Level Bridge] had taken three
in which “...[the High Level Bridge] had taken three

It
in
'sc
in
It is
...imp
the
ess
...sm
mir

Dear,
Much love,
Sincerely,
Thanks,
Hi!

\$

“...[]

May (MacGregor, *Edmonton: a history*, 2011)

The river (whoever “we” are) is only a few yards from the heart of half a mile

... only the end of the world as we know it, etc.
... only the end of the world as we know it.

Hi [REDACTED],

I agree that all my work is rather interior and private. I wonder if this is coming from the fact that I'm putting this together under lockdown measures – then again, what I've approached and experienced the past year has felt quiet and intensely introspective at the time. I do know what you mean by the work needing more breathing room as well as needing some formal conceptualization to make it more approachable for the readers.

In terms of conceptualizing: I was having a conversation recently where I tried to explain to someone what I was doing with the thesis. It was hard to explain it at the time, too. But since I first started visualizing this project, I've had a fair idea of how it was all supposed to "fit." I still think it all fits in a way that tends to the "lack of clarity." Edmonton is always like that for me - unstable, unstructured.

(I think) it's a symptom of the violence we/it all represent/s on this land. And I think that internal tension between violence and entanglement is what's animating a lot of my thoughts throughout, something that becomes most apparent (to me) in the urban debris. Entanglement is an incredible idea, but events recently (in the news as well as in my life) have led me to feel that entanglement and violence must go hand-in-hand. Maybe that's where all the Benjamin and Weil fit in. They thought this way too, I think.

In the clear light of day, or the complete darkness of night, it is almost horrifying to think of entanglement and the ethical onus of it. But the dawns/dusks – the time when the "lack of clarity," or the "the open" as I understand it, becomes *possible*, even necessary - these are the times when entanglement is to be found. Then the left-behind objects, muted histories, and unaddressed/unaddressable traumas start to speak. This is something I've come to "understand" in recent months, and hence my fascination with those images and the overall messiness of this project.

* * * * *

I might approach the issue of form in another way, in a much more personal way.

Almost all of the people nearest to me in my life right now are in extreme pain. I'm living around individuals reckoning with the traumas and violence in their lives and their families. Addictions and depression...and a sense of futurelessness...is all around me. I'll never forget how difficult it is to speak at this time. And for most of us, there will never be a recovery. What it means to live amongst trauma is making more sense to me every day. Yet, at the same time, I've never felt so needed and so deeply enmeshed as I do now. What's more, I've been having an intense recurring thought that what's around me right now is somehow *all there is* in the world. There is nothing more, no gains to be had, no place to be saved, no prayers to be heard. This place is simply hurting - and hour after hour, it needs to be listened to. Do you ever think that the "one" listening to our prayers is just the room we're in? Why can this not be enough?

We live in a ramshackle house in McKernan. This is a strange neighbourhood because old rickety houses are tucked shoulder-to-shoulder with prefabs and showcase homes. Right next door to us is a happy nuclear family that lives in something that looks like a log cabin. They've got two professional parents, two happy little kids, a BBQ, a hot tub, a piano. We've got a cabinet that smells like rotten potatoes, a floor full of empty liquor bottles and cigarette packs, a yard full of litter and giant beetles. The other family has shiny new bicycles. We have three dusty copies of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. They sit around watching Pixar movies. We watch *Paris, Texas* and spend the rest of the night talking about the nightmare of the American dream. Yet I know, today, that *this is my house*. Not the other one. Not any other house in the world. Those kids beyond the fence will grow up and feel safe and secure in their own psyches and walls. But over here, our walls are always deteriorating. The other family owns a chiropractic practice. Here, we play lousy guitars and curl up in bed until 3 pm because we want to pretend the world doesn't exist. Over there, they bake cookies and talk about how you need to be a good Samaritan even if you're not Christian. Over here, we lose our faith over and over again, only to find it over again in perverse, disturbing forms, more engulfing and less livable every time. Their lawn has a basketball hoop. We sleep below the largest evergreen on the block, and it bends, threatening to kill us in our dreams.

I wrote something like this down yesterday: "If I have another 50 years on this earth (and that's probably a generous estimate), and every single day was spent right here, talking about these exact same pains, I will have lived my best life." I am really truly happy.

So all of this...This is where I'm coming from in my reflections of place, as well as Edmonton, as well as "things." This is why I'm interested in the "debris" on the park benches or the graffiti I don't understand. Trying to find the form that is appropriate to all of this has been extraordinarily difficult. In my mind, there is almost no form. Or, perhaps, every *topos* demands its own form. Maybe this is also why Benjamin never really "completed" *The Arcades Project*. When he tried to "conceptualize" it (which he did extensively in *Convolute N*), he wrote things very close to incomprehensible and sometimes outright contradicted himself. So *The Arcades Project* couldn't be "finished." It could just grow and grow and grow until death.

I hope all this makes sense.

* * * * *

I was watching a documentary the other day about the abstract painter Agnes Martin, whose career was built on painting minimalist grids patterns in muted colours. Martin described it like this: there are more things in the world that we can't represent than those we can, and the grids are the closest she's come to expressing some of *those* things that matter most to her.

Similarly, I think all my thesis work could be summarized a single image, a single poem, a single punctuation mark. But that's not what a "thesis" demands. I suppose, at the end of the day, a graduate thesis is not the right place to be addressing any of this! That's one delicious irony that has kept me going! So I'm almost positive I will toss all of these letters/essais away as soon as I'm finished and never look at them again. These days, other things seems more pressing.. I can't seem to pull myself away from the demands of the house. Patching the walls. Fixing the table. Locating our pains...

Take good good good care,

Kevin

the letters are over



“The end of the day has come. What has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done.”

Touching worlds

unfoldings: space & relations & —

This is a series of "essais" I put together in order to document and sort through the ideas, objects, and events I had encountered in the course of preparing this thesis. The purpose and intent of the essays is explained within.



I. amiskwaciwâskahikan over and over

Months ago, I sat in a café and read nêhiyaw lawyer Harold Johnson's *Two Families: Treaties and Government* cover to cover. It is a short book written for settler audiences to help us better understand our present situations and obligations: how we all got here, on what grounds we are permitted to live on this land, and how we might fulfill our treaty responsibilities and abide by the laws and customs of Turtle Island that we have been adopted into through treaty. Throughout, Johnson emphasizes the fact that Indigenous law and ceremony, which are provided by the Creator/Creation,¹ differ substantially from European law and ceremony, which are historically dictated by state, church, the Crown, and other institutions. The Creator's law Johnson writes about is "primarily concerned with the maintenance of harmonious relations" (27). These laws, he emphasizes, are the laws settlers are obliged to follow—this is our responsibility as adopted members of Turtle Island.

I'm not personally involved in government policy, pedagogy, or any administrative system, and my sphere of interaction is limited the daily engagements with friends, family, and strangers, so for years I've had a difficult time envisioning how I might work toward the realization of my treaty responsibilities in the sense that Johnson describes. But Johnson affirms—or perhaps challenges us to see—that the law of this land "does not adapt to abstractions. It is the law of every day, of every human" and, consequently, "[there] is no Canada," no HBC, no corporations, and no schools—there are only "people inhabiting a portion of Creation," and the responsibility to maintain *balance* (between past and future, between families, between sexes, between humans and non-human nations) falls on each inhabitant of Turtle Island and permeates every element of their lives and experiences (46-48). Regarding the corporate, political, legal, and historical forces that work to pull us apart and promote violence and anomie, Johnson holds that it is not abstract structures but *individual people* who must be healed and regain their sense of harmony, even if (and this is key) *there is no universally correct way to do this*, just as there is no monopoly on ways of seeing and understanding the world (74). "Some of my family have chosen to be like yours," Johnson writes, "and some of your family have chosen to be like mine. Neither way is the only way or the correct way for everyone" (67).

1. Johnson uses the word "Creator," but Sharon Venne has suggested that, according to Elders, the word "Creation" is more reflective of an Indigenous worldview, as it moves away from the notion of a "single being" or "single 'god,'" and captures the idea that women and men are "jointly responsible for [...] all life." See: Sharon H. Venne, "Treaties Made in Good Faith" 14.

Overall, Johnson's book reaffirms many ideas I've encountered in my ongoing study of treaty and Indigenous-settler relations. But something about Johnson's approach to delivering these messages—it isn't admonishment, nor an olive branch, but a gesture of familial solidarity, a recognition of common concern for peace, life, and all this is *shared* (throughout the text, he refers to the reader, the Euro-Canadian settler, as "kikiwamanawak," or "cousin")—felt to me like handfuls of grace. I left the café and meandered aimlessly through Strathcona, feeling comforted even in my confusion and, for this, entirely welcomed into Johnson's field of concern. *Two Families* is call to action, to be sure, but today I felt less encouraged to "understand" or "resolve" the seemingly irreconcilable differences between worlds, between peoples, between notion of the divine, or between ideas of governance and sovereignty, and more encouraged to explore how my eternal sense of confusion might lead me to a practice of engaging with my web of relations in a way that is appropriate to *balance* and *harmony*—a web that, I will say, becomes simultaneously more estranged and more dear to me with every interaction I have with persons or texts that challenge my sense of who/where I am.

As I consider what *happens* as I meet Johnson's words, or reflect on Rueben Quinn's lessons in the "Treaty Poetics" course, or learn more of the buried and erased histories that created this city, or listen to the "beaver bundle" story shared to us by Dwayne Donald on the banks of kisiskâciwanisîpiy—as I consider all of this, a word that often comes to mind is "encounter." This word came to me by way of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and the poet Carolyn Forché. "Encounter," in the sense employed by these writers, captures something of the quality of (my) everyday life when it is infused with confusion, when I feel personally called upon to restore *balance* but also recognize myself as profoundly *out of balance* with my relations, peers, and *polis*. For Levinas, the "encounter" is epitomized by what he calls the "face-to-face": a concretized, actual, wholly singular moment wherein a "self" is faced with a particular "Other" (*l'autrui*) and is pressed upon by their ethical obligations to that "Other"—obligations to care, attend, and be hospitable (Morgan 59). The encounter involves a complete or partial estrangement from one's sense of self and self-continuity—it momentarily eclipses "decency," "civility," "norms," and the otherwise unimpeded chain of quotidian experiences. Carolyn Forché has focused Levinas's ideas into a reading practice appropriate to poems/ideas/objects that challenge us by bringing us to the limits of our own experiences and ways of knowing. Forché is drawn to poets whose work deals with a "condition of extremity (war, suffering, struggle)," and are thus simply "*in relation*" to these things "and cannot remove him or herself," just as one cannot remove themselves from trauma or memories ("Reading the Living Archive" n.p.)—and the reader of such a poet/poem is forced to see that they, too, have entered a world of fluctuating immediacies, broken proximities, unclear responsibilities. In short, there can emerge, through reading, a twilight of relations and distances, of responsibility for others and feelings of helplessness. This twilight is the appropriate state when reading, for example, of deep trauma, war, or other things that, almost by nature, obliterate the possibility of understanding either the "Other" or one's self vis-à-vis that "Other." The "poem," as a site of encounter, doesn't necessarily *offer* something to the reader—rather, it forces the reader into the position of a witness, as an onlooker: a position that is eternally discomfiting and inconsolable.

This idea of “encounter” has often helped me grapple with the kind of relational obligations discussed by writers like Johnson, whose work throws me, as a settler, into an enmeshment of unclear, often un-addressable, un-languageable concerns and responsibilities. Therefore, I’ve found, at times, that “encounter” describes my relationship with the city of amiskwaciwâskahikan. If I think of the city as a “long poem,” to borrow a favourite metaphor of Michel de Certeau—a poem that, as we walk through it, comes to life in our minds and bodies and “creates shadows and ambiguities” (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 99)—then I start to wonder what kinds of relations can possibly arise out of such shadows, such ambiguities. Faces on the street, silhouettes in the alleys, bodies in the trees—what is my relationship to them? The idea behind “encounter,” in my understanding, is that these relationships are always paradoxical: nearness meets distance, care meets fear. This, in turn, has led me to see everyday life in the city as constituting a language-based practice—a poethics, say—that comprises an impossible search for a word, a gesture, or a sign appropriate to engaging the kinds of responsibilities I feel toward other beings and toward land.

But there is no magic sign—at least, not for me, not now. But silence, too, feels insufficient. Standing by the river below the High Level Bridge, I cannot sort through the wall of noise—traffic, chickadees, trains, moaning ice. The language of Edmonton is full of poethic pressures: the dreams of oil, the “utopias” of malls, the celestials of cranes. Like Benjamin’s “dialectical images”—epitomized in the glass and iron construction of the arcades—Edmonton is an always-approaching-never-quite-arriving *tabula rasa*. And we in the *polis* are consistently out-prayed by Epcor and Stantec.

So achieving “clarity”—in the academic sense—cannot possibly be the/my goal. As Dwayne Donald says, the land here doesn’t understand English as well as it understands Cree,² and I can only suspect that, in many ways, the obstacle is mutual, that European settlers cannot easily (or at all) understand the language and intentions of this land, either—all it gives to us, all it does for us. There’s something to be said for the fact that English, as a tool of colonization and the *lingua franca* of the global marketplace, is particularly inappropriate to this place, as it is for any place other than the transcendental kingdom of capital. Here, the bond between the English language and “things” (plants, animals, persons) is, I imagine, weak if not entirely broken.

So I’ve found, in my daily life, that there are times when the river, the birds, and even the streetlights appear strange, as though they’ve recently flashed over long, arduous channels of history to arrive at this encounter, only to freeze wide-eyed as though it were, in fact, I who had suddenly appeared like a solidier from another planet, and all things await to see if I come for peace or for harm. At times, then, the very presence of things is miraculous, disturbing, and, for all this, outside of language—or, as George Oppen might exclaim, “That they are there!” (*New Collected Poems* 99). Is there anything more to say?

2. Paraphrase from the documentary ôtênaw by Conor McNally

But there is no magic sign—at least, not for me, not now. But silence, too, feels insufficient. Standing by the river below the High Level Bridge, I cannot sort through the wall of noise—traffic, chickadees, trains, moaning ice. The language of Edmonton is full of poethic pressures: the dreams of oil, the “utopias” of malls, the celestials of cranes. Like Benjamin’s “dialectical images”—epitomized in the glass and iron construction of the arcades—Edmonton is an always-approaching-never-quite-arriving tabula rasa. And we in the polis are consistently out-prayed by Epcor and Stantec.

Yet, however intensely I focus on the issues of presence and language that characterize my current relationship with amiskwacîwâskahikan, I’m also aware, on an intellectual level, that my pervasive sense of alienation (one I’ve inherited from Marx and existentialism, no doubt) may not be entirely appropriate to the kinds of practices required by the laws of Turtle Island. Eve Tuck and Maria McKenzie write that, from an Indigenous perspective, the word “land” generally carries a series of significances that it doesn’t have in the mouths of European settlers: land is not a resource, a coordinate, or mere physical matter, but rather a nexus of human and other-than-human relations, something agential and sentient that “constitutes the life of a collective” (56). It is distinguished from “place,” which is a geographical, social, economic coordinate constructed and defined by humans. “Land” is, they explain, entirely free of the romantic or rugged overtones the word has in the European imagination: “In Indigenous worldviews [...] it might be more accurate to say that [relationships to land] are familiar, and if sacred, sacred because they are familiar” (51). What I take from such descriptions is a sense that land—which doesn’t preclude the urban (58)—is profoundly and intensely communal, but it is so in a way that I, as a secularized Western subject, may not ever be able to understand, just as I cannot, in good faith, claim to understand what is “sacred” to about the Koran or the Bible.

I only wander across a city, like I would wander across a psalm, in an interrupted search for shared poetry—“I hear you”—“Do you hear me?”

In these pages, I’m interested in exploring the relationship between individual and community, between self and other, between alienated and communal subjectivities—but to do so in terms that I feel are appropriate to this particular place—that is, to write with an awareness of my responsibility to find collective balance in the sense Johnson describes in *Two Families*. But my goal in these “unfoldings” is not to cleanly reconcile the isolated, alienating mood that currently characterizes my relationship with amiskwacîwâskahikan to the communality that the law of the Creator/Creation requires, but only, by addressing these questions, to find a pathway out of isolation—or, at the very least, to proceed slowly to collective plains—I will walk in the glow of the filaments lit by my encounters with other beings in amiskwacîwâskahikan.

II. The counsel of “All My Relations”

I’ve found it essential to abandon the “culture of criticism” traditionally valued by the Western institution. Although *Two Families* is ripe with historical and political insight, I’m not interested in looking for “information” that I can then assimilate and write about, but for something like *counsel*, a word whose import I learned from Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller.”

Benjamin describes counsel as “less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding” (“The Storyteller” 86). Benjamin suggests that, when woven into the “fabric of real life,” counsel becomes “wisdom” (86-87), which he distinguishes from instrumental or “bourgeois” kinds of communication like “data,” “news”—all kinds of “information,” which is “understandable in itself” (89). Benjamin wrote this essay while living alone on the Spanish island of Ibiza during the interwar period—a time of intense cultural instability, violently competitive notions of truth and power, and technological changes that threatened to wipe out all but the most “modern” modes of living and communicating. Ibiza was, for Benjamin, a kind of refuge, and in my reading of this essay, Benjamin finds another kind of refuge from his context in the figure of “the storyteller,” someone whose words and gestures offer an approach to knowledge that is *otherwise*. Specifically, the storyteller offers something “useful” to the hearer, often in the form of advice, morals, or proverbs.

Although the flesh-and-blood figure of the storyteller had vanished from Europe (if ever it truly existed), the rare sense of hope Benjamin seems to espouse in this essay (which, to be sure, is not characteristic of his writing in general) rests in the possibility that something *like* counsel can still be found elsewhere—such as in stories, in poetry, in art—but the work of finding and applying it has become more difficult. In Benjamin’s time, counsel, like the senses of “tradition” and “experience” (*Erfahrung*) it is supposed to carry, always appears to be “in decay,” moving away from human concern—something I assume is even truer of the contemporary West/westernized parts of the globe than it had been in Benjamin’s Europe.

Thus, I was rather surprised to discover in *Two Families* something eminently “useful,” in Benjamin’s sense of being practical and “woven” into the “fabric of real life,” and so I read the book carefully, not so that I might understand it and write about it, but so that I can live my days alongside it and begin to rethink (or *unthink*) what it means for me to be on Turtle Island and form relations here. I’ve been especially drawn to one short passage from Johnson’s book, which has followed me around for months, arising in my waking thoughts and entering my encounters with the emotional and textual landscapes I’ve recently been wandering through. The passage is this:

You will never understand water until you experience thirst. You will never understand food until you experience hunger. You will never understand 'All My Relations' until you experience yourself (76)

"All My Relations" is a loose translation of an expression that appears in many Indigenous languages. Johnson explains that it is often spoken at the end of a prayer, and also whenever humans take something from nature—but he explains, too, that this expression stems from the law of the Creator/Creation, so there is no human, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, who can entirely understand its significance (19). Johnson writes that, among Cree persons following these laws, it is accepted that the more one understands of such expressions, the more they realize how *little* they understand of the immensity of the laws of the Creator/Creation, which leads them to humility (20).

As a settler, then, I can't possibly claim to grasp what Johnson means when he writes "All My Relations." I can't claim to grasp the significance this phrase has for Indigenous peoples, what it says about human relations to the land and to other-than-human beings, or even what it means for Johnson to call upon settlers to understand their relations through experiencing *themselves*. But if I read "All My Relations" as a piece of counsel, I'm led to believe that "grasping" it is far from the point.

Benjamin suggests that listening to a storyteller's counsel requires the hearer to enter a state like "boredom"—he points to the work of weaving and spinning, the slow, repetitive labours that required humans to sit together, to forget themselves and enter a "state of relaxation" that would allow the storyteller's words to permeate their lives ("The Storyteller" 91). This "gift of listening," Benjamin suggested almost a hundred years ago, is lost in the cities and perhaps in rural areas, too (91). At the time, more and more of the world Benjamin saw was becoming structured by capital and technology, which demanded speed, intensity, and alienation, turning all experiences into short-term experiences (*Erlebnis*), which are fragmented, incomplete, noncontinuous. And this constitutes, in a way, the decay of experience in Western cities that Benjamin spent much of his life struggling with. How, then, do we "listen" to counsel in an age determined by the demands of global capital—or, for that matter, of settler colonialism?

About a year and half ago, a friend and I would frequently walk to the riverbank. We wanted to explore, by experiencing the water and trees, what it might mean for us to find balance here—for all our actual and virtual dimensions, our pasts and our futures, our desires and fears to take root (or not) in this land called amiskwaciy. There are many layers to such explorations (historical, racial, economic) but little of what goes by "theory" was especially helpful, or even present, in the face of questions like "How do we thank the land?" Is it a cognitive act (uttering "Thanks")? Is it prayer? Does it require offerings and libations? It may be that someday in the future we will be offered a protocol that is appropriate the questions we ask on the banks of kisiskâciwanisîpiy—in the meantime, it seems we are gliding across a portion of Creation that from our vantage point is too vast for English, too wide for our worlds. Its laws are not our laws to interpret. We can only listen.

“What’s the name of this plant?” my friend asked. It was a plant we liked. By clutching its robust branches, we could safely lower ourselves to the bank and dip our hands in the current.

III. Tiny planets, tiny worlds, tiny “Is”

Lately, I’ve been reflecting on a regional proverb once shared with me by an Italian friend: “For every person, there is a tiny planet.” This, alongside Wittgenstein’s famous maxim—“I am my world”—have, over the past year, led me to wonder what becomes of ideas like *harmony*, *balance*, and even *collectivity* when the very blocks these things are founded on, such as “the world” and “the self,” are revealed to be anything but universal. There are many subsidiaries to this concern: How can it be that a more-than-human law operates on one continent but not on others? How can it be that the non-human agents I am dependant on, which shape who I am and how I relate to others, are themselves *localized*? How can it be that an “I” here is different from an “I” *there*, the same way that an “I” *now* is different that an “I” *then*? Do “we” exist *in truth* or *in spite of truth* if what is “True” on one land differs from what is true on other lands?³ Today, in light of my reflections on treaty, I find these concerns most pressing—my very presence on this land, and the attainment of harmony within my own web of relations, seem to depend on them.

Vine Deloria, in his classic text *God is Red*, argues that the essential difference between Indigenous and Western/European worldviews is that the former “[hold] their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind,” while the latter “review the movements of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light” (62). For Deloria, the sense of the world being “historical,” defined by “time,” has proven to be a dangerous way of thinking—one that produced the Crusades just as it fuelled colonialism and led to the creation of modern North America (62). The effects of a Western understanding of “history” (structured through teleology, eschatology, progress, etc.) are also, as Leslie Marmon Silko beautifully suggests in her novel *Ceremony*, related to past and upcoming global catastrophes: nuclear war, environmental degradation, extinction. Recently, themes of the incommensurable differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews (and the inevitable violence of the latter) have been explored in more nuanced detail by several contemporary Indigenous theorists working in “the space that is Canada,”⁴ who have pointed out the West’s Cartesianism and its “epistemological-ontological divide” that privileges the “human” above all other beings,⁵ Western institutions’ tendency to erase the ideas, cosmologies, and contributions of non-European thinkers,⁶ or post-Enlightenment conceptualizations that transform of the earth into a “resource” to be owned rather than a site of relations and obligations (Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* 61).

5. See: Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)”

6. See: Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism”

All in all, challenges like this have led me to wonder whether it's possible for an individual to maintain their own "tiny planet" if these planets are incommensurable with the tiny planets of others with whom they are in relations, or even *keep* their tiny planets while simultaneously maintaining harmony with one another and with the land? Surely there are, in the West, very few examples of harmony with the land, and fewer instances where relational harmony between humans and non-humans was achieved or even desired. I wonder, is it really a matter of white settlers taking "land" as their "reference point" rather than time? Is this even possible, especially when "our" lives are—as existentialists have argued since the beginning of the 20th century—so entrenched in modes of time. Time, as Heidegger argued, is the horizon of being—*Dasein* is in time.

If *land* as a relational nexus, the ground of communality, is the thing that must be saved for humans and our other-than-human relations to survive in harmony, then I'm concerned over whether we inhabitants of Turtle Island are, or even *can*, mean the same thing when we talk about "land," when we talk about "here," when we talk about "place." Do we even mean the same thing when we speak of "communality"? Perhaps not. But this inability to communicate isn't, I believe, exclusively for reasons of ignorance or unwillingness, but rather—to give credit to the immense, wrenching powers of capital and the ways history, ideology, and fear determine who "we" are and can be—because the tasks of bridging "worlds," of achieving genuine collective subjecthood or interconnectedness, requires more than individual acts of will. It may indeed require a different collective *way of being*, one that somehow makes the fact of "difference" thinkable through non-hegemonic relationships *even within* the context of a global colonial-capitalist matrix. But, for all this, I take comfort in the idea—captured well in an interview between Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel—that approaching place-based relationships as "incommensurable" does not necessarily mean they are "incompatible" ("Unsettling settler colonialism" 3).

IV. How/where, "We"?

It seems to me that if there are profound and pressing ethical dimensions to the question "Where are we?" then one way of getting to them is by asking "*Where is 'we'?*"—that is, the "we" who is always mutating, always historical, always contingent on a position, always dependant on a law, and always caught in a struggle—a "we" that is presumably made up of "Is" who are always, as Marx once put it, "plaything[s] of alien forces"

In the 1960s, George Oppen voices these concerns in a poem called “World, World—,” a poem ostensibly written in response to contemporary efforts—drug culture, possibly, or some strains of leftist politics—to “lose oneself in the self.” To this, Oppen responds:

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on
(*New Collected Poems* 159)

Oppen, for whom the issue of how the individual relates to the collective was a lifelong concern, is here pointing to the frame of this issue, the *givenness* that us/we is contingent upon. In Oppen’s work, there is a simple and material *factualness* to collectivity, to commonness, to being-with. When we stand beside a stone, we are with that stone. Sometimes that’s all there is to say. So in my reading of this short but loaded line, Oppen is suggesting that this factualness comprises something like the backdrop to human communality. I may read this line as a suggestion that the self is nothing (not a “thing” in the world) without *other* selves, *other* things. The “something [...] to stand on” may, indeed, pre-exist and pre-determine the “self,” and only because there *is* a “something” can the “self” have its own place, its own tiny planet. Perhaps the “something” is like the gravity, or the subatomic forces, that hold all existing things to one another regardless of proximity or mass.



For years, I’ve been considering the “mystery” “we” “stand on”—whether we call it ground, land, language, history, cosmos, or commons—and seeking it across wide fields of life and text. Is there really a *thing* that makes possible all that we/I do and the relations we/I can have? How could it be that “All My Relations”—the thing “I” am always enmeshed in, but which elides my fields of vision and knowledge—can be understood through “myself”? Johnson writes: “I do not say that I own this land; rather, the land owns me” (13). How can I, Kevin Holowack, come to understand myself as a possession of land without experiencing this as a kind of alienation? When I encounter “Others” (including people, animals, or the land itself), do I contain them, or do they contain me? Or are we forever divided, as Levinas and Forché might suggest, by a chasm of history? Is all of this simply a paradox? I’d like to believe that the “mystery” or bare *givenness* that Oppen points to as being the basis of connection between “selves” is synonymous with “land.” But maybe it isn’t. This is not something I’m in a position to understand.

Upon reading *Two Families*, these kinds of concerns that entered my life again in abundance. But this time, my questions sparked an intellectual journey that eventually led me to Sylvia Wynter who, I believe, provides a philosophical framework that is productive and useful without instating the theoretical-ontological closures and “certainties” that frequently befall Western models of the space, ethics, and relations. For me, Wynter’s thought is helpful because it offers some much-needed refinement to the ideas of “human” (or “self”) and, in a way, of “world”—it offers an explanation of how *difference* is produced and, hopefully, can gesture toward a position that would allow me/us to experience a way of collective being that factors in difference without requiring difference to mean incompatibility or separation.

Wynter’s poly-disciplinary archaeology of various genres of “the human” from the European Renaissance to the present day has led her to affirm that, insofar as human beings (*homo sapiens sapiens*) are “fictively kin-recognizing” and “eusocial,” we remain (to some extent) “subordinated to our humanly invented, cosmogonically chartered, sociogenic replicator codes of symbolic life/death” (“The Ceremony Found” 220) as well as the “law of cognitive and aesthetic (i.e. psycho-affective) closure defining all forms of living beings” (221). Put otherwise: if humans are, as Wynter argues, hybrids of word and flesh, *bios* and *mythoi*, neurochemicals and language, then our ways of being and knowing are determined by the genres (or world/s) we have, over thousands of years, created for ourselves. For many, the very opiate systems in our brains are irrevocably bound to the (neo)liberal capitalism and a specific Western/bourgeois answer to *What is human?* or *What is “we”?* along with the invisible but nonetheless affective disciplinary laws that enforce and are replicated by that answer.

In sum, Wynter suggests, “we” (that is, Wynter’s readers: Western or westernized academics) can only experience our “selves” and “others” from *inside* the world we have created and which has created us, even if we desire more than anything to do away with this world (222). And our world (or “model,” or “genre”), like any self-replicating/autopoietic system, has a kind of “membrane”—it depends on a physical and semantic closure: laws, customs, state borders, regulated migration, and the expulsion of alternatives, erotics, and uncertainty.

[the arcades]

Wynter’s theories have immediate political and ethical consequences. If we begin speaking of “worlds” rather than “the world,” or “selves” rather than “the self,” of “Wes” rather than “We,” of “genres of human” rather than “humans in general,” then terms like “Anthropocene” appear fundamentally misguided, for the impending catastrophe may not be said to be caused by “human beings,” but rather by the specifically Western/bourgeois genre of human—*homo economicus*, most recently. This is the model of human who replicates his own forms of knowing and material provisioning by defining the earth as a “resource,” who is over-represented in politics, who controls academia and the media, and so on (240). *Homo economicus*, of course, is a model—he has no features, and no one really is him, but society, culture, and institutions are nonetheless designed for him, and possibly only him, to succeed.

Wynter's work leads me to the belief that, so long as I am who/what I am (an organism responsive to the name "Kevin," a unit in the global economy, a Western subject, a body and mind encoded as sites of privilege and power), I should remain skeptical about whether I can "abandon" my world for another, just as I cannot recode my brain or step outside the sociogenic processes that I am part of and benefit from.

I might reflect here on something Claudia Rankine said a recent interview with Krista Tippett, referring to a conversation she once had with a white man on an airplane who told her she doesn't "see colour." "If you don't see color," Rankine told this man, "you're not seeing me. And if you can't see me, you can't see racism. And I want you to be able to see those things."⁷ I've thought much about this exchange. Perhaps Rankine is saying that we/I must be able to see and claim our/my "self," for if we/I don't, then we are also denying other people, other selves, and other worlds. Of course, this doesn't prevent Rankine and her interlocutor from continuing their conversation. But perhaps what happened, by insisting on the continuation of the conversation, is that the encounter between Rankine and the white man drifted from one that (re)enounces a cosmogenic code based on the biocentric (purely *bios*) origin story of evolution that makes-thinkable the myth of "colour-blindness" or "sameness" toward a *different* conversation that enounces the hybrid human (as *bios* and *mythoi*, or biological and social/narrativized, ontogenic and sociogenic), which at this historical moment is one founded on "difference"—different notions of human, self, and so on. But because the conversation continues, the differences are nonetheless made (more) ecumenical, and this (more) ecumenical mode of the human remains alive, at least in the chronotopic space of the airplane.

So, if I am reading and applying Wynter correctly, I might conclude that the task at hand is not the utopian one of cleanly and immediately abandoning our/my world/s (we are unable to, however horrid and divisive they are) but rather to participate in the slow, ongoing work of enacting the human *otherwise*, of creating conditions, contexts, and rooms where *other* worlds and *other* selves can be experienced as genuinely "ecumenical"—these enactments Wynter calls "ceremony."⁸

There is, of course, another ceremony we/I have experienced, and are trying, at least in some pockets of the English department, to (re)enounce: the ceremony of adoption, which is called "treaty" (*Two Families* 27).

7. See: <https://onbeing.org/programs/claudia-rankine-how-can-i-say-this-so-we-can-stay-in-this-car-together-jan2019/>

8. See: Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition"

V. Groundedness and openness

I've recently been returning to the idea of "incommensurability" with Wynter's philosophy in mind. If our gaze is on "the human," and if the human is taken to be a thing that is generified, or *in-a-world* that replicates autopoietically, it's easy to see that the abstract world/s of the West have almost always been incommensurable with the abstract world/s of others—in a sense, Europe *invented* the very notion of incommensurable. It is often said that Europe's discovering of the/its "self" occurred parallel to its discovery of its "other," and the West's circle of ethical concern (its universalized determination of what "life" is and what forms of life matter) was established, and mutated within, an essential division between "us" and "not-us"—a division that became a global order starting in 1492. As Walter D. Mignolo puts it: "Human and Humanity were created as the enunciated that *projects and propels to universality the local image* of the enunciator. The enunciator assumes [...] that his concept of Human and Humanity is valid for every human being on the planet" ("Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to be Human?" 109).

Agamben argues throughout his book *The Open* that what emerged in European natural sciences since the Middle Ages was an assemblage of definitions and divisions, ontologies and epistemologies, founded on the riddles of difference and separation: first the separation between humans and animals, and later between humans and other humans.⁹ Although European systems of knowledge adapted to new "discoveries" in science and ethnology, there was consistency in the sense that Europe's worldview (one might say the very *idea* of a "worldview" at all) is built upon a "ground" of differences that are incommensurable *and* incompatible. Europe took on the task of qualifying these differences through various ethical, legal, and social languages. This "ground" of incommensurable/incompatible differences is, if I read writers like Wynter and Johnson correctly, the very thing that must be *unthought*. What Agamben puts a name to—in my understanding—is a state of groundlessness that exists between, say, a human and an animal, once the work of establishing onto-epistemological differences is abandoned or reaches its limit.

The name for this space of (ethical, epistemological, poetic) possibility where the human can be done *otherwise* is "the open."

If Wynter's philosophy offers one answer to the question of "What is 'we'?" then a challenge that remains is finding a language that can approach the question of "*Where* is 'we'?" Put otherwise: how can "we" be *localized*? How are the "I" and the "we" that I recognize myself to be a part of specifically rooted to other "Is" and other "Wes" (human and non-human) with whom I share a space?

9. See: Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*

Let's return to Oppen. His "mystery" that we "stand on," in my interpretation, sits in a kind of no-place of open grammars, open syntax, and *openness* as a principle. What remains in the openness of this mystery is, for Oppen, only the amorphous desire for union and the undefined possibility of action:

We want to be here.
The act of being, the act of being

More than oneself
(*New Collected Poems* 159)

These words, to me, gesture toward a certain immensity of communal life—immense because it thrives *even in the open*, before/beyond knowledge, aside from politics, and outside "historical" (Western temporal) forms of life. But it is not "community." Oppen prefers neutral words like "populace" because what he's interested in, in my interpretation, is not "community" (a word that is, for all its currency in the mouths of politicians, devoid of meaning, like "love") but a/n (other) ground on which we can language ourselves as "ecumenically" human, alongside things and animals, in a world that is genuinely *shared*, not just organized, regulated, or "peaceful" (which, Oppen points out elsewhere, has only ever meant between wars).¹⁰

But if *shared ground* is "open," it is, in a sense, *no ground*. Oppen seems to suggest that what is shared are those moments of conviction that punctuate communal praxis, that "act of being / More than oneself." Ground is not inside a "world," but outside of worlds, projected onto the *silent* but interruptive dash in the poem's title: *World, world—*

So without stepping out of the West/westernized world that I create and which create me, I find myself in a position of desiring something like a "ceremony" that can enact, however temporarily and tenuously, a praxis of being communally (openly) human, being the dash, being more than oneself—not a human who is *part of* a community (although this may be part of it) but a human who walks safely with others across the very mystery of what "[we] stand on." This desire is more emotional and spiritual than critical and intellectual—it requires more counsel than concept.

10. See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69407/the-minds-own-place>

VI. Open thoughts

What might this work look like, here on Turtle Island?

I find one answer to this question in the work of Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer. As a botanist, Kimmerer has insight into the ways the matters of existence and relationality circulate beyond the thought world/s of humans and human societies. She urges settlers of this land not to all become deliberately *more* commensurable to Indigenous worldviews (something Tuck and Yang might call a “settler move to innocence,”¹¹ and which at the very least can lead to forms appropriation), nor even to relinquish their ideas, desires, and allegiances, but rather to strive toward “naturalization,” a movement Kimmerer illustrates using examples from the world of plants. Kimmerer points to a strand of plantain, native to Europe and Asia, that came to be known as “White Man’s Footsteps” after it was imported and began to spread across Turtle Island. Some plants, Kimmerer points out, are invasive—they choke out other species and throw ecosystems out of balance—but others, like White Man’s Footsteps, have become “naturalized,” integrated alongside native plants and even valued for their medicinal properties. Kimmerer suggests that for settlers to continue to live here in a good way may require that they/we become “naturalized to place,” which is to “live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 214-215).

I’ve long been taken by the beauty of Kimmerer’s ideas. But her call for settlers to become naturalized—which echoes Johnson’s call for settlers to adhere to the laws of the Creator/Creation which are “like ecology, in which everything is related to everything else” (*Two Families* 91)—is still challenging for me, not because it’s difficult to conceptualize, but because it is, in a sense, only conceptual. I cannot, in daily life and “encounters” in this urban environment, locate examples of naturalization being enacted, at least not for long, and not in the sprawling greyness of amiskwacîwâskahikan. I have an especially difficult time seeing how naturalizing might occur in the rivers of traffic, in the malls, on the downtown streets, amidst the corporate buzz, or within neighbourhoods deeply wounded poverty. The very notion of becoming “naturalized” is, perhaps, also outside of the “world” of separations and difference—the world that *I*, as a Western subject, know, recognize, and, at times, even care deeply about.

Within my thoughts—Arendt’s “silent dialogue between me and myself”—I lack a language to enact myself otherwise. So how may “I” be *opened* before land and water, so that I might drop my allegiances (however briefly) and marry (however precariously) my thoughts to the flora?

11. See: Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor”

VII. (with/in/for) the world

The questions I have reading Johnson, Kimmerer, Wynter, and other have led me to desire a tangible practice of nonknowing that grapples with snaking arcades of Western modernity, the existential-epistemological problems of Western cities. I find something like this in the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva. The point of correspondence between all the writers I've turned to in these unfoldings is, for me, epitomized by da Silva's brilliant assertion that "thinking (with/in/for) the world" *without* Western categories of knowledge, forms of representation, and subjecthood would consist in a "play of the imagination *without the constraints of understanding*" ("In the Raw" n.p.; my emphasis)—for da Silva, this may indeed amount to "unthinking" the world "as we know it" (n.p.). This kind of imagining (or "imaging" as she often puts it) is—like Benjamin's counsel—more a matter of raising questions, or participating in an unfolding, than of providing answers (n.p.). Such a practice, for da Silva, takes many forms, including applying black feminist poethical readings to art works, (re)interpreting climate change through the functions of heat and energy instead of "Universal time" ("On Heat" n.p.) and engaging in philosophical-archaeological criticism of Kant, Descartes, and others.

But what I'm drawn to today is the work of da Silva and her frequent collaborator Valentina Desideri, who together model a communal practice around the poethics of tarot, Reiki, and astrology. Their intent, as far as I understand it, is to intuit, through these traditions, other praxes of being human available to them/us and to address the question of "How to image an ethics with/out the subject?" (Desideri & da Silva, "A Conversation" 3). Their experiments, in my reading, have also been an attempt to loosen their/our dependence on *forms of relating* that are based on a presumed self-possession, self-authorship, infinite capacity for rationalization, and other "descriptive statements" of "the human" inherited from the post-Enlightenment West. As I read their work, I'm particularly drawn to their emphasis on a practice founded on "intuition" rather than theory.¹² It's an approach that helps me work through the apparent reality that—even if we can't *name* them or if we lack the language to address of them—there are indeed ways of finding, inhabiting, or spinning into being *other* relational webs: sites of healing, refuges from the poisonous relations dictated to us as global economic subjects ("public relations," "consumer relations," "international relations"), or, perhaps, sites whereupon we can practice the forms of relations (loving relations, ecological relations) that have been stolen by empire, which is always trying to kill us in body and soul, sublimely or subliminally. I nod here to Fred Moten's interpretation of the political aims of Fred Hampton's rainbow coalition: "The coalition emerges out of the 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 just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly" (Moten & Harney, *The Undercommons* 140-141).

12. See: <https://www.theshowroom.org/events/poethical-readings-intuiting-the-political-with-denise-ferreira-da-silva-and-valentina-desideri>

I'm not sure if anyone alive today has taken part in a rainbow coalition the way Hampton imagined—but, perhaps, many of us have done so by *imaging*.

The word “image”—a rough contraction of “imagined”—seems to have no time, or luxury, to engage in the long work of erecting ontologies or elaborating aesthetic critiques. It doesn't discount this labour, but it prefers immediacy, relevance. The word seems, to me, to be interested in what's available, at any moment, to a practitioner of life who would like to do things *otherwise*, or must do things *otherwise* in order to survive at all. “Image” signals the stark but temporary presence of things, things that can be heard, handled, loved, and lost.

Benjamin was also said to have thought in images. In his work, the noun “image” is not about pictures, or about representation, but about “instantaneous cognition (*Erkenntnis*) or insight (*Einsicht*)”—thinking-in-images promotes a way-of-doing that “favors simultaneity and constellation over continuity, similitude over representation or sign, and the detail or fractionary (*Bruchstück*) over the whole” (Weigel, “The Flash of Knowledge” 344). By verbing “image,” da Silva's writing seems, to me, to capture the ongoing and deliberate movement of drawing constellations across an otherwise fragmented plane of being—flashing together pieces of creation, seaming together isolated worlds—or, as George Oppen likes to say, *choosing* to be “numerous” despite living amidst the bewildering “shipwreck[s] / Of the singular” (166).

Da Silva and Desideri's work on poethics and tarot has led me to this conclusion: that focusing on the “imaging” of *ex tempore* gatherings outside the “binary scripts”¹³ that we/I in the West are fluent in (us/them, you/me, individual/collective, self/other), leads me/us to recognize the downright *obviousness* of *other ways of being*: of being numerous, of being plenum. These ways are not rare, they are everywhere: temples, churches, forests, lodges, kitchens. We/I can feel our way into them through images, through instantaneous cognitions and emotions, which becomes like a hike through the broken hills of what life *is* and *could also be*. I'm thinking here of practices like protesting, walking with friends, praying with strangers, playing music, building tables. To return to Johnson: No way “is the only way or the correct way for everyone.”

13. “My heart sings riot against the binary script” – Doreen, “Courtship Culture.”
See: <https://doreenconjures.bandcamp.com/album/ruthless-severance>

But the “ways of being [ecumenically] human” and generated through the practices of tarot, Reiki, music, or prayer can never be “finished” in the sense of being part of a “whole” that is conceptually stable and systematic. I/we don’t even need to believe in them all the time. As the theologian Paul Tillich once argued, doubt and faith are two sides to the same thing, but the aporias in the world nonetheless demand collective response.¹⁴ Ecstatic union may be “ideal,” but there is no “ideal practitioner” of tarot, just as there is no longer an “ideal reader” of texts. What I finally take away from the poethical experiments of da Silva and Desideri is that, if we/I liquidate the idea that we/I will ever see our collectives *actualized* in our/my world as-is, we see that there are, nonetheless, attempts being made by individuals who relate to one another *otherwise*—that *otherwise* is right over there.

VIII. The seasonal world/s of “I”

We all have—however we feel about it—an “I.” But if, to Sartre, being an “I” surrounded by other “Is” is hell, then to da Silva and Desideri, “I” may simply be a way of not getting lost within the conflicting forces always operating on us—configuring our emotions and coding our neurochemicals—even if we don’t believe in “I,” even if we have no faith in what it says and does (“A Conversation” 7). If, when we close our eyes, we suddenly feel enmeshed, or part a collective subject, then if we open them, we may very well feel alone and self-reliant as before. This is, I suppose, what da Silva and Desideri mean when they say they are in pursuit of an “ethics without the subject”—it is an ethics, a way of assuring wellbeing and harmony, that necessarily depends on the independent historical subject or existential “I” that came to us out of European modernity and emphatically *doesn’t* depend on it. By imaging, we/I can, perhaps, be both “with” and “out (of)” our selves and our allegiances—we/I can go off-course *while* remaining in the language grids of Western modernity. Retallack calls the *otherwise*—whether willed, accidental, regular, or chaotic—“clinamen,” after Epicures, who was interested in the way atoms veered off-course in a supposedly deterministic universe (*The Poethical Wager* 2). Intuiting things as they go off-course and still arrive at their collective waters helps remind me of the fact that there is no “complete” and self-regulating “world/s” at all: there are, perhaps, only *homo sapiens sapiens* spinning worlds across a map of countless oppressive, revolutionary, and neutral potentialities within the confines of the modern repertoire of human-ness.

14. See: Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (it’s in there somewhere)

But a lesson I've learned (or rather, am continuing to learn) from Johnson—"You will never understand 'All My Relations' until you understand yourself"—is that the "self" ("myself"), and the "I" that enounces it into my and other worlds, is not *merely* an idea. It is something on which human beings (in our present genre) found our experiences, something that rests firmly and totally within the soul of every *homo sapien sapien* who came into existence in the West/westernized world(s). The "self" is not something that can be easily disposed of, even if that's what we desire, but it *can* be experienced differently, exposed as naked, married and divorced from the cosmos, re-evaluated again and again.

Simone Weil believed that, when we really focus on the fragility of life, and the ever-present possibility of our own death, we realize that "[we] possess nothing in the world [...] except the power to say 'I'" (*Gravity and Grace* 23). And with this power comes the potential to experience this "I" in many ways: we orient it toward wealth, we can give it to God, we can attempt to sacrifice it or die for a cause, we can give it to others in marriage and friendship, we can graft it to a plenum, we can meditate our way above it. None of this is conceptual. But perhaps, most importantly, the very fact that we can "image" the "self" *otherwise* at all implies that the things called *Self/self* or *Human/human*—despite the efforts of the West to uphold the universal model of a democratic consumer, the self-authoring "man," etc.—are prone to incredible lapses. At times, it seems, the self/human gives out, it falls to ashes, it fails to be reliable, and it picks itself up and tries again. The thing we take to be our vehicle in the world, our autopoietic, membraned mess of organs and seat of cognition—this thing, I've come to accept, is always seasonal.

IX. “Know thyself”?

As I’ve reflected on what giving up the “constraints of understanding” might look like in light of the particular concerns I have about relationality on Turtle Island in general and amiskwacîwâskahikan in particular, I’ve begun to wonder whether Johnson’s words—“You will never understand ‘All My Relations’ until you understand yourself”—come to me as counsel rather than “information” precisely because they cannot be assimilated according to Western categories of knowledge. Johnson’s words, like poetry, cannot easily be made instrumental or “actionable” in ways appropriate to the market or other Western institutions. Perhaps they require a loss of understanding in order to be read at all. I might, then, interpret Johnson’s advice as the *opposite* of the Socratic principle that a worthwhile life consists of the “I” coming to “know” itself through *praxis* in its relations with the *polis*—in my reading of Johnson, the inverse is true: that the thinking-*polis* (or the collective, or plenum, or “All My Relations”) comes to “know” *itself* through the experiences and desires of individuals. “All My Relations,” I speculate, is the background to the experiences of the self *here*: it grounds “I,” it is not something that exists in spite of “I.”

X. Touching worlds

It seems to me that there are moments when worlds touch—whether for a few seconds, a few years, or hundreds of years. Around the time I write this, worlds are touching as protesters confront police in Wet’suwet’en territory, Hong Kong, Santiago, and Beirut; worlds are touching when a billionaire president stands before a rally of poor citizens in Florida; worlds are touching as a family in an SUV is approached by a man asking for change on a boulevard in North Edmonton; worlds are touching when department administrators decide that the Humanities Centre requires imposing chain-link barriers in the stairwell and students tape quotes on them: Sara Ahmed next to Ezra Pound. A key point I learned from Willie Ermine’s writings on the “ethical space of engagement,” however, is that the spaces *between* worlds are brittle.¹⁵ What is “ethical” about them in Ermine’s sense (the recognition of invisible “undercurrents,” the assurance of mutual wellbeing between parties) can vanish before it appears, if it was ever possible to begin with. If the modern news cycle teaches us anything, it’s that, in most cases, when two or more worlds enter the same orbit, they leave mostly as rubble—the “ethical spaces” between worlds are like red giants, swelling quickly but immediately collapsing under the demands of “civility,” hegemony, and the pyramidal organization of capital and statehood, wherein everything appears coherent, but isn’t, unless you’re a winner. I take Lauren Berlant’s point that, in today’s world, “organized” and “disorganized” amount to the much of the same thing (*Cruel Optimism* 8). Protestors are jailed. Wars are won and lost. Peace treaties are signed and forgotten. Sara Ahmed quotes are torn down day after day after day.

15. See: Willie Ermine, “The Ethical Space of Engagement”

XI. Liveable entanglement

The more I meditate on what it means for worlds to touch, the more I find solace in da Silva's maxim of "difference without separability." Opposed to the Euro-American ideal of "separate but equal," I've begun read da Silva's formulation as something like a declaration for a new community that is decidedly "*not* separate but *not* equal." By offering alternatives to the most fundamental concepts and outcomes that academic/intellectuals depend on for the operation and sustenance of their worlds (i.e. imagination, certainty, production) and encouraging her readers to rather "embrace the imagination's power to create, with unclear and confused impressions" ("On Difference Without Separability" 2), da Silva's work presents to me, at this moment, something eminently *liveable* in a way North America is not, and never has been, and never will be. In a sense, she allows the reader to do what they are always already doing, but encourages them to stop expelling misunderstandings, eroticisms, and *other worlds* from their own world. Upon these words—"difference without separability"—da Silva provides a tool to turn any space into a heterotopia that can survive in-and-against the Western-bourgeois games of competition, consumption, and state-building—a place where "sociality becomes [...] the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existent" (9)—*even if* this entangled "place" is prone to disappear soon after as we enter it. We/I must go searching for it again in streets, forests, lodges, temples, offices.



XII. Anew

Much of the work I engage with on a daily basis is in some way framed as a radical critique of the West—often in ways that are theoretically incompatible. But amidst the wash of ideals, radicalisms, (e)utopias, manifestos, reactionaries, futurities, (anti-)traditionalisms, and collective agendas that currently populate the academic scene in Canada and elsewhere, I struggle to see any clear pathway to harmony between humans or between humans and non-humans. I wonder, indeed, whether harmony and ecology, like “peace” and “love,” are destined to be recuperated as another of the West’s utopias, which it can project safely outside of itself, away from the “practical concerns” of production and consumption. My studies would tell me that, if harmony can exist, it would require a shift in collective being, a new “ceremony” in the sense that Wynter proposes, a change in our/my very “descriptive statement” of who/what we are, a *clinamen* toward something that is unforeseeable and beyond the control of any one individual. But I’m also obliged to refuse, in the face of such a mystery, to merely lapse into pessimism—pessimism simply isn’t possible, not when so many people around me are still full of passion, creativity, and hope. And still Oppen’s open “mystery” remains: the fact that, despite (or, da Silva might say, *because of*) our differences, “there is something” (a *no ground*) “for us to stand on.”

I wonder if, to some extent, Benjamin experienced a similar feeling in the 1930s. Around the same time as he was finding temporary refuge in the (hypothetical) figure of the “the storyteller” and their golden “counsel,” he was also writing of the “oppressive wealth of ideas” that accompanied the spread of technology over Europe—none of which offered any relief from the monopolization of power by the few, the impending economic crisis, “the shadow of the approaching war,” or the persecution that he was beginning to experience in full force. So, instead, Benjamin chose to admire the artists of his time (Klee, Brecht, Kafka, and others) who, he thought, were able to stand on the threshold of dying world and constantly “begin anew”¹⁶—who can start at *zero*, fully open, again and again and again.

16. See: Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” http://www.panoramah.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Benjamin_ExperienceAndPoverty.pdf

Although I'm hesitant to make these kinds of comparisons, I do find that studying Benjamin, Wynter, da Silva's projects to (re)enact/(re)enounce the human and its world/s helps me realize the significance of a practice that Reuben Quinn offers to his students in the "Treaty Poetics" course. It is a practice he calls "nêhiyaw yoga," which requires the practitioner to be attentive to the phases of lunar phases and, on the night of each full moon, to stand outside and say a prayer asking the celestial body to cleanse us of the month's troubles and tribulations. Is this about beginning anew? About starting at zero again and again? About opening the "self" to the mysteries that seem to lay outside its thoughts, but which are nonetheless its very condition of being? Perhaps it is all of these things, perhaps it is none of these things. What I do know, though, is that participation in such practices helps me reframe my ongoing encounters with the world, with amiskwacîwâskahikan, as less anxious and more open.

These days, below the moon, beside the river, under a midnight streetlamp, I sometimes *do* feel open. Not infinite, not happy, not religious, not even hopeful, but part of the silent "something"—and for this reason, anew. Over and over—







Citations

**[callings,
or hauntings]**

in love, fear, gratitude, bewilderment,
or all

This house / Joe Sheridan and Roronhiakewen “He Clears the Sky” Dan Longboat, “The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred” / Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle” / The Edmonton Psychogeographical Society / Squirrels / Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations” / Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass / Marilyn Dumont, “Brown Names” / Rabbits / Aphids / A friend who lives downtown / Irvin Yalom, Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death / Beaver (Amisk) & the muskrat, mice, ducks / Geese / Magpies / Chickadees / Nuthatches / Emperor Constantine / Linda Goyette, Edmonton in Our Own Words / Lewis Cardinal, “Spirit of Edmonton: Reclaiming Monto, a Collective Vision Connecting the River and Its People” / Dwayne Donald, “Edmonton Pentimento: Re-Reading History in the Case of the Papaschase Cree” / Christine Stewart, Treaty 6 Deixis / Zoe Todd, “From Classroom to River’s Edge: Tending to Reciprocal Duties Beyond the Academy” / James Grierson MacGregor, Edmonton: a history / At Eternity’s Gate, directed by Julian Schnabel / Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)” / Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life / Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor” / Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/> / Glen S. Aikenhead, “Objectivity – the Opiate of the Academic?” / Benjamin, The Arcades Project / Eve Tuck and C. Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting” / Guy Debord, “Theory of the Dérive,” <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html> / Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability” / Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters / Harold Johnson, Two Treaties: Families and Government / Sia, “Elastic Heart” / Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” / Mirian Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura” / Longboat and Sheridan, “Walking Back Into Creation: Environmental Apartheid and the Eternal— Initiating an Indigenous Mind Claim” / Ariane Conty, “They Have Eyes that They Might Not See: Walter Benjamin’s Aura and the Optical Unconscious” / Da Silva, “On Heat,” <https://canadianart.ca/features/on-heat/> / Martin Scorsese’s Silence / Some Spinoza / Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” / Sarah Krotz and Jordan Abel (tête-à-tête) / My office partners / Chloe Walington, “Who Owns Tomorrow?” in Communemag, <https://communemag.com/who-owns-tomorrow/> / Deer / Rinaldo Walcott and Idil Abdillahi, BlackLife: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Greedom / Esther Perel’s podcast Where Should We Begin? / Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues” / Oppen, “The Mind’s Own Place,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69407/the-minds-own-place> / Anne Boyer, A Handbook of Disappointed Fate / A northside Starbucks / Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace / Benjamin, One-Way Street / Transcend Coffee / Da Silva, “In the Raw,” <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/> / Vine Deloria, The Metaphysics of Modern Existence / Willie Ermine, “The Ethical Space of Engagement” / Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life / Attendees of the sweat ceremony / Online Cree Dictionary, <http://www.creedictionary.com/> / Cold McKernan kitchen / Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_wildgeese.html / The Cloud of Unknowing / Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith / Sufjan Stevens, Carrie & Lowell / Kierkegaard? / Foucault, The Order of Things / Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, “Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life” / Carolyn Forché, “Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69680/reading-the-living-archives-the-witness-of-literary-art> / The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas / Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, Place and Power / Tuck and McKenzie, Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods / ôtênaw, directed by Conor McNally, <https://www.cfmdc.org/film/4436/> / George Oppen, New Collected Poems (cont.)

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