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# Reorientations; or, An Indigenous Feminist Reflection on the Anthropocene

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Destruction of homelands. Loss of kinship species. Exposure to deadly contaminants. Mass extinction. Transformed lifeways. In the face of these radical changes, a question lingers: *How long will life be possible?* Recently the academy has also felt the urgency of these environmental problems and proposed to address them under the framework of the term “the Anthropocene.” These discussions often center around discussions of shared vulnerability, a framework that I want to problematize here using an indigenous feminist lens.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous studies has posited various responses to the term Anthropocene, some arguing that it has utility in framing the violence of colonialism<sup>2</sup> and others critiquing the limitations and assumptions behind the “anthropos” in Anthropocene.<sup>3</sup> Since contact, indigenous peoples of the Americas have dealt with the forces of environmental change and the subsequent ways their ability to live has been challenged. Indigenous scholarship has shown that the Anthropocene can be used to bring attention to the violence indigenous people have and continue to resist, but it can also be used to erase this violence under the language of shared vulnerability. Narratives can conceal other narratives. It is the work of scholars to be attentive to this. The Anthropocene has the potential to be read as an indexical mark on the planet that makes the violence of (settler)imperial projects visible. The environmental, economic, spiritual, and social challenges that indigenous people face is a re-articulation of the violence of living in a capitalist settler state.

To pursue answers to the Anthropocene from a position that does not account for the violence of empire is a continuation of the system of settler-colonialism that erases indigenous peoples so the settler nation can be imagined as empty and occupiable. What indigenous feminisms ask is that responses to the Anthropocene do not re-inscribe the violence of empire, taking as their starting point the intersections of empire, industrial capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. In this essay, I will explain how starting at these intersections requires a radical

reorientation to three key concepts: kinship, time, and contamination. I will theorize these reorientations alongside the work of Navajo artists Will Wilson. Indigenous scholarship asks us to refuse the settler-state as a basis for relationality, government, and justice, forcing us to imagine solutions to the Anthropocene “outside of the models of governance and community that settler nations-states are founded on.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to avoid these problems, media studies scholarship must also consider these intersections as a starting point for its engagements with the Anthropocene.

### **Kinship**

The term “Anthropocene” implies a kind of kinship that I want to problematize. While the Anthropocene marks a shift in global vulnerability, the distinct vulnerabilities many beings have faced up to this point cannot be effaced. Remember that the subject position of the human has only been made available to certain kinds of bodies at certain times. Indigenous peoples have been offered access to the position of the human only through disavowing their kinship connections. Often, this loss of kinship connection entailed a fundamental shift in how indigenous peoples conceptualized and were able to enact kinship, particularly with non-human others such as land. In the United States, indigenous peoples were forcibly entered into the system of private land ownership through the Dawes Act. While they were then recognized as humans -although in many cases still not entirely- this subjectivity was achievable only by routing their previous kinship with land and place through the legal processes of exploitative capitalist ownership. Gaining one kin means losing another. In Canada after the enactment of the Indian Act, indigenous peoples could only gain access to human rights by rejecting their status as Indians. Indigenous women who married settler men automatically lost their status, and in some cases, their ability to live on reserve land with their family. Gaining one kin means losing

another. Time and time again, the human has functioned as a tool of settler-colonial assimilation, often disguising itself as a kinship-making project

Because of this history of assimilation, many indigenous scholars are justifiably skeptical of the unifying humanist call of the Anthropocene. To engage in a future-oriented project under the framework of the human is to conceal the ways the project of the human has been used to deny many people their own vision of the future. Further, to declare the human race as mutually vulnerable to climate change erases how climate change, and the violence that precedes it, has disproportionately affected many communities who fall outside of the discourse of the human – the black, the disabled, the queer, the indigenous, the colonized. Equally absent from discourses of the human are the essential forms of kinship indigenous people maintain between non-human animals and the earth.

To begin from an indigenous feminist position means to be skeptical of the human and the forms of kinship it offers. Indigenous feminist scholars know how their bodies have been placed outside of the purview of the human and how the violence enacted upon their bodies is a method through which the human establishes itself relationally.<sup>5</sup> To reorient oneself in kinship relations means that this violence that sits at the core of the human cannot be easily forsaken or forgiven. For indigenous peoples, kinship is not simply a short-hand for family or peers, it is an entire system that structures how one moves through the world. This means that other forms of life have gone on outside the purview of the human and that these kin and kinship systems cannot not be forsaken

## **Time**

It has long been argued that indigenous peoples have different orientations towards time. These theorizations of alternative time, although they are varied and many, require scholars to

rethink the scale of climate change and its effects on the environment. Scholars such as Kim Tallbear, Grace Dillon, and Kyle Powys White, have argued that indigenous peoples are already post-apocalyptic. By this, they mean that indigenous peoples have already faced catastrophic violence, loss of relationships, and have had to fundamentally alter their ways of life in order to survive in spaces that are physically, emotionally, and spiritually toxic.

One way to understand the post-apocalyptic status of indigenous peoples is through the lens of the “Orbis spike” hypothesis. To briefly summarize: geological data shows increased carbon uptake due the population of the Americas being reduced from around 60 million to 6 million people because of colonial war, famine, disease, and enslavement. – a loss of life that can hardly be described in terms other than the apocalyptic. The Orbis spike is an indexical mark of colonial violence upon the earth itself, showing that a colossal loss of human life can result in significant shifts in the environment. These shifts in the environment that are now visible in the geological strata, according to this hypothesis.

What a reorientation to time requires is an expansion of the scale of time combined with a new understanding about how violence is enacted over/through time.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it points particularly to the way European anthropocentric projects imagine their past and future, a system which erases indigenous histories and communities in the same processes it uses to construct and guarantee settler futurity.

These temporal concerns are made visible by Navajo visual artist Will Wilson in a series of short films connected to his larger project *Auto-Immune Response*. The larger project deals specifically with the apocalyptic conditions of the indigenous present. In Wilson’s multimedia project, a Diné man (played by Wilson) records himself as he hikes the four mountains marking the territory of the Diné peoples. The short films are a mix between documentary and

speculative fiction. They are both literal and allegorical. The setting is an uncertain post-apocalyptic future, a time when the environment has become totally unlivable for humans. His film is a clear commentary: uranium mining on the Navajo reservation has irradiated water, animals, plants, and people living there, creating an unlivable present environment. Wilson describes the project as “the quixotic relationship between a post-apocalyptic Diné (Navajo) man and the devastatingly beautiful, but toxic environment he inhabits.”<sup>7</sup> It is “an allegorical investigation of the extraordinarily rapid transformation of Indigenous lifeways, the dis-ease it has caused, and strategies of *response* that enable cultural survival.”<sup>8</sup> The *AIR* project’s alternative approach to temporality reveals the faults in a Western, teleological understanding of history and temporality. Wilson’s *AIR* project reveals how, as Kyle Powys Whyte argues, indigenous people can conceptualize the Anthropocene as living in their ancestors’ dystopia.<sup>9</sup>

### **Contamination**

Indigenous racial formation, in terms of the purity enshrined by blood quantum, is one of assimilation and inevitable destruction via contamination. This logic of assimilation keeps indigenous peoples in the past with their “pure-blooded” relations, while laws requiring specific levels of quantum divide indigenous peoples along tribal lines as they attempt to secure necessary access to resources. Indigenous peoples still have their histories, cultures, and relationships violated through this anthropologically-driven obsession with purity. From a post-apocalyptic indigenous perspective, purity can never be an end-goal. In turn, the narrative of the Anthropocene should not be one of utopic nostalgia. Indigenous peoples know this story well: The logic of assimilation has rendered indigenous people a figure of the past, meaning that there are no *real Indians* left, and those *real Indians* only existed in 1492, 1776, 1879, or 1934 depending on the style of settler-colonialism one invests in. *Indians* were created in a way such

that they would eventually become so contaminated that they would disappear.<sup>10</sup> A continued, unproblematized investment in discourses of purity enables the erasure of indigenous people.

To turn again to Will Wilson's work, contamination under the Anthropocene is not only physical, but spiritual and ontological. Indigenous scholarship on the Anthropocene rethinks contamination and how to respond to toxic environments. The way Wilson makes this contamination visible is not by marking the environment, but instead by marking his own body. This move theorizes an alternative response to environmental catastrophe. The gas mask he wears in his videos is the only sign that marks the environment as deadly and unlivable. This move argues something different than purity – making life livable in contaminated spaces requires adaptation and recognition of the changed material conditions, not simply a nostalgic wish for the pure and the unmarked. Deadly chemicals found in water, soil, and air have already mingled disastrously, and now is not the time to turn back and try to reconstruct nature in an idealized, arbitrary “pure” state. From an indigenous perspective, these discussions about purifying nature seem suspiciously familiar to the logics of purity that work to place “authentic” indigenous peoples in an irretrievable past. These arguments are a trap that require authenticity be framed through the problematic purity discourse that indigeneity is trying to deconstruct.

As Robert Warrior has argued, indigenous methodologies are no purer than any other, and to demand such from indigenous knowledges and practices is to miss the point entirely: “To understand what the ‘real meaning’ of traditional revitalization is, then, American Indians must realize that the power of those traditions is not in their formal superiority but in their adaptability to new challenges.”<sup>11</sup> From a post-apocalyptic indigenous perspective, purity can never be an end-goal. Indigenous minds, bodies, relations, and cultures are deeply entangled in the material

conditions of this toxic world. In the post-apocalypse, a key reorientation involves a turn away from purity and toward survival.

I posit these reorientations as a response to the question *How much longer will life be possible?* The questions then proliferate: *How is life imagined? What kind of life was possible to begin with?* If scholars of the Anthropocene hope to answer these questions thoroughly, I argue that they must engage with indigenous knowledges and ontologies. The reorientations I offer require attentiveness to whose future gets envisioned and guaranteed. Indigenous media makers, like Wilson, are already imagining responses to the Anthropocene, theorizing through indigenous methodologies and ontologies. The Anthropocene has the ability to reveal the violence of the settler state, but it also has the capability of normalizing and erasing this history of violence. If media and film studies are an examination of how vision is mediated, or, more simply, if it is an interrogation of what and how we see, then scholars must be attentive to what lives are privileged by the narrative of the Anthropocene.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For examples of this discourse see Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). While Haraway usefully offers that we “stay with the trouble,” her moves to make kin fail to fully enact kinship in a way that centers indigenous voices and track the way different bodies have been subject to different articulations of environmental violence through history.

<sup>2</sup>See Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761-780. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene” *Nature* 519, (2015): 171-180. Audra Mitchell. "Decolonizing the Anthropocene" last modified March 17, 2015. <https://worldlyir.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/decolonising-the-anthropocene/>.

<sup>3</sup>See Jessica L. Horton, “Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene” *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 48-69

Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” *Art in the Anthropocene*, edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2013): 241-254.

<sup>4</sup>Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill. “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy.” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 16. I am deeply indebted to this work not only for its intervention into feminist studies, but also for inspiring and guiding this response.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Wehayliye. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Wehayliye's work is particularly useful in thinking through how the human is a relational subject position that requires the rejection of certain forms of life.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). This work argues that we must rethink the temporal scales we work through so that ecological violence can become more visible.

<sup>7</sup> "About," *Will Wilson*, accessed December 6, 2017. <https://willwilson.photoshelter.com/about>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kyle Powys Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene," in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (New York: Routledge, 2017), 271-273.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the logic of contamination, absorption, and blood quantum, see: Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*.  
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 94.