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All rights reserved. ISSN: 1718-0918  
doi: 10.5840/envirophil201642634  
Online First: April 27, 2016

# On Becoming Human in *Lingít Aaní*: Encountering Levinas through Indigenous Inspirations

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**Abstract:** Calls for taking up wisdom in its place risk re-inscribing coloniality at the level of signification if attempts to resituate intelligibility in the specificity of place are not enacted through a careful translation of experience between victims and perpetrators of colonial violence. At some level, decolonization ought to be conceived as a kind of translation. Emmanuel Levinas' project to "translate" Judaism into Greek is one way of staging such decolonial translation by providing us an internal critique of coloniality while remaining receptive to indigenous inspirations that enrich eco-phenomenological ways of encountering place. In the final instance, however, this paper calls for encountering place through the indigenous languages that make place ethically legible.

How much  
for your grief  
your father's sisters are revealing their faces.

...

Yes  
how much it is  
as if they're revealing their faces is how I'm thinking about them,  
your sisters-in-law.

Yes,  
They are revealing their faces.

—Jessie Dalton, "Speech for the Removal of Grief"

[Responsibility] is an openness of which respiration is a modality  
or a foretaste, or, more exactly, of which it retains the aftertaste.  
Outside of any mysticism, in this respiration, the possibility of every  
sacrifice for the other, activity and passivity coincide.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*

I do not know your language though I hear the breaking of  
waves through the vowels.

—Joy Harjo, “Protocol” (from *How We Became Human*)

## PROLOGUE: WHEN SPEAKING HEALING WORDS IS NOT ENOUGH

In *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, Gabriele Schwab asks, “How does one think about cultural belonging from the perspective of the victims of colonization, on the one hand, and of the descendants of perpetrator nations, on the other hand?” (98). Contending with transgenerational transmission of trauma born of genocide and colonial violences—in their myriad cultural, linguistic, psychological, and somatic dimensions—Schwab argues, “We have arrived at a place in history where we can no longer afford to deal with the histories of victims and perpetrators in isolation” (82). The question for Schwab, which she shares with Simon Ortiz, is how can such a dialogue occur? Under what conditions would it be possible for descendants of victims and perpetrators of such violence to “translate” their experiences, especially when the circumstances of such “translation” are irrevocably conditioned by centuries of moral, aesthetic, and cultural colonialism? Indeed, as Eric Cheyfitz’s work emphatically reminds us, the very word “translation” (*trans latio*, “across the oceans”) bears within it a colonial prejudice. “Speaking healing words” by itself, then, is not a solution—for, as Schwab notes, it might “obscure real political processing” even as it contributes to socio-psychic health. As such, it is precisely because of such dangers that we must address historical and traumatic violences across the cultural and ethnic boundaries that divide perpetrators and victims.

Concerned here with resituating the emergence of intelligibility in the specificity of place, of encountering wisdom in its place, this paper takes up Schwab’s question in the concrete localities of *Lingít Aaní*, Tlingít ancestral land, in Southeast Alaska where the main campus of the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) is located. As UAS assumes an increasingly connected role in intensifying Lingít language revitalization, the hope to sustain (indeed, *revitalize*) such discursive affirmation demands that decolonizing efforts must not only “reorient” philosophical reasoning but also must contribute to an open *politics of acknowledgement* of the violent histories of colonialism in *Lingít Aaní* and their contemporary expressions. As Schwab notes, without attending

to the “psychosocial deformation of the culture at large” under which such violence is still perpetrated, efforts to speak healing words risk further contributing to a politics of silence and denial (84). Thus, decolonizing efforts must occur at least on two registers: at the level of colonialism and at the level of coloniality, which survives colonialism in more invidious and subtle cultural expressions.

As Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes, developing a term coined by Walter Dignolo, *coloniality*, different from colonialism, “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (243). Like a song that plays on long after the instrument is gone, coloniality is “maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience” (243). Using a vocabulary that will be important to these critical meditations, Maldonado-Torres notes that, in a way, “as modern subjects we *breathe* coloniality all the time and everyday” (243). While Cheyfitz and others have noted that there is nothing “post” about colonialism in the United States, rooting out the persistent sorrows of coloniality is the more difficult task at hand. With such difficulties and dangers in mind, this paper attempts to make one significant gesture toward “translating” experience between victims and perpetrators of historical violence on *Lingít Aaní* by borrowing from Emmanuel Levinas’s own “translation” attempts between “Judaism” and “Greek.” In terms of “reorienting philosophical reasoning,” I advocate for developing an “inspired” eco-phenomenology—one that works through an internal critique of the cultural logics and political economies that adumbrate the historical shapes of coloniality while, at the same time, remaining open to a decolonizing effort that restores “the logics of the gift through a decolonial politics of receptive generosity” (Maldonado-Torres, 261).

For Levinas, the first movement of phenomenology is neither intentionality nor apprehension—but *inspiration*. Moreover, in *Otherwise Than Being* and elsewhere, Levinas links inspiration to *revelation*, the revelation of the face of the other, which opens an altogether different modality of time—a diachrony attuned to a “fundamental historicity,” one expressed in the “transcendence of words” (story) that is, like ancestry, *embodied* but not reducible to flesh. Such an “inspired” eco-phenomenology accords well with “*Lingít tundataani*” (Tlingit thinking), which is born of this transcendence of words. The word “*lingít*” means “human”; however, *Lingít tundataani* requires more than a simple existing. It requires this “fundamental historicity” (diachrony as ancestry) and a “hearing the land speak,” which is always already storied and ecological in ways that cultures of usurpation are historically tone deaf toward. Only with *Lingít tundataani* does one “truly” become human, ex-

pressed by the phrase, “*Kunáx Lingít haa wustee*” (We really have become human beings). The guiding political assumption here is that if reparation or restitution between (descendants of) victims and perpetrators of historical violences is ever to be effectuated, it will have to occur in accord with *Lingít tundataani*, with a politics and a pedagogy attuned to such discursive affirmation, which a Levinasian “inspired” eco-phenomenology is uniquely suited to attend to as it poses an internal critique and unconditioning of the very colonality of being that perpetuates and gives alibi to genocidal indifference and cultural unresponsiveness.

This paper proceeds in a series of two meditations that overlap and build upon each other like aphorisms. In accord with Levinas’s thinking of inspiration in terms of the literalness of respiration, they are composed with the cadence of breath and attuned to the systole and diastole of the heart. Moreover, following the work of Martin Matušík, I describe these meditations as “postsecular”—which is to say that they adopt a quality of the literary, of story, that is historically abjected from philosophical projects still too beholden to spheres of intelligibility dominated, as Levinas writes in “Diachrony and Representation,” by vision, knowledge, and presence—of a thinking that embraces and perceives all alterity “under its thematizing gaze” (159). If “postsecular meditations” is a developing genre of philosophical or theoretical inquiry, then this paper aligns itself with such expression. For Matušík, the term “postsecular” does not indicate a thinking “after” secularism; rather, it attends to the coincidence of various religious and secular phenomenon. It is a descriptive term open to “diverse phenomena” that includes those edifying and often uncanny sources of inspiration for social justice as well as the “myriad phenomena of willed human destruction” (Matušík, 10). In its more edifying expressions, the term postsecular indicates a sensibility for what Robert Bringham describes as the “polyhistorical mind.” In its more invidious expressions of willed human destruction, it attests to the genocidal sorrow and transgenerational trauma that persists beyond our capacities for representation and memory. Postsecular meditations, then, already demand a kind of translation of experience as the modality of decolonial justice, which the task of encountering “wisdom in its place” requires.

### **MEDITATION ONE: TRANSLATION AND DECOLONIAL JUSTICE**

Situated on Tlingít ancestral territory, the University of Alaska Southeast remains modeled on a colonial model of education that reproduces the sorrows of colonality at the personal, interpersonal, structural and institutional levels. As increasing attention is given to the task of decolonizing education and attending to the exigencies of restitution in response to the deeply entrenched historical violence, the university emerges as a site of instruction on which decoloniza-

tion, as a translation of experience, might occur. But the task of translation must be accounted for in critically nuanced ways so as not to smuggle within its work a greater, less visible, form of cultural despair. Toward this end, I identify four horizons of translation that must be attended to in order to effectuate decolonial justice and encounter Tlingít intellectual authority in the specificity of place on its own terms.

The first concern for translation is that already identified by Eric Cheyfitz in *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*—that notion of translation from *trans latio* (across the ocean), which bears within it a colonial-anthropological impulse. This notion of translation is historically and literarily tone deaf to the qualities of indigenous inspiration and intellectual authority. It takes its expression through what Michel Foucault calls an “ontology of truth”—that privileging of the ontological that Levinas critically exposes and that is derived from a consciousness of *seeing*, shaped by a private ontology of self, as opposed to a “consciousness termed hearing” that is irreducibly relational, performative, and storied (Levinas, “Transcendence of Words,” 147). This anthropological translation, derived from what Enrique Dussel calls a “North Atlantic ontology,” indexes the irreducibly rich kinship structures of indigenous oral literatures to structures of truth determined in advance by “partisan chronologies and hierarchies” (Bringhurst, 28). This notion of translation is largely the one we are accustomed to, historically, in the university. It is a notion of translation that confuses the “universality” of the “university” with a more rich sense of what Bringhurst calls the “polyhistorical mind.” Translation, as such, is still too beholden to a sense of consciousness as an “aiming of thought” (Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” 160). Translation, in this sense, only exploits and abuses indigenous oral literary traditions.

A second notion of translation comes from Emmanuel Levinas, who describes his own project as one of “translating” Judaism into Greek, or Jerusalem into Athens. Annette Aronowicz, in her “Translator’s Introduction” to Levinas’s *Nine Talmudic Readings*, offers a description of Levinas’s thinking on the relation between the Jewish and the European, or “Greek,” traditions: “For Levinas, the rethinking of the relation of Jewish to ‘Greek’ sources would have to include the vision of *universality*, of *one* humanity in which all related as equals and in which all participated responsibly. . . . The difference now was that in order for this one humanity to come into being, Western sources of spirituality, Western wisdom, would no longer suffice. In order for a genuine human community to emerge, it was *Jewish* wisdom, the *Jewish* vision of the human being, which must be understood and made available to everyone else” (xii–xiii). In terms of thinking concretely about the university as a space of translation, the University of Alaska Southeast, as an example, must also think through to the limits of Western epistemological, scientific, and philosophical traditions and replace these limitations with Tlingít cultural, linguistic, and ethical resources. As Levinas

works to translate Judaism into Greek, so too must the “universality” of the university be translated into a polyhistorical perspective grounded in indigenous inspirations. Such translation necessarily decolonizes.

A third perspective on translation can be culled from Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor’s descriptions of a “trickster hermeneutics” from *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Here, Vizenor describes the trickster as a “translator of creation”:

The trickster is reason and mediation in stories, the original translator of tribal encounters; the name is an intimation of transformation, men to women, animal to birds, and more than mere causal representation in names. Tricksters are the translation of creation; the trickster creates the tribe in stories, and pronounces the moment of remembrance as the trace of liberation. The animals laughed, birds cried, and there were worried hearts over the everlasting humor that would liberate the human mind in trickster stories. Trickster stories are the translation of liberation, and the shimmer of imagination is the liberation of the last trickster stories. (*Manifest Manners*, 15)

Importantly, Vizenor opposes “trickster hermeneutics”—as a translation of experience, creation, and liberation—to the Aristotelian sacralization of the tragic over comic literary modalities. Trickster hermeneutics, not unlike Gerald Brun’s notion of “allegory” and “midrash,” deals not merely with tropes (trickster as trope) but arises from its own economy of signification—one that liberates the imagination as a *general economy* of signification. If we are to think about decolonization as a kind of translation, one that—not unlike Levinas—works to translate European forms of knowledge into indigenous inspirations and intellectual authority, we can replace the philosophical (i.e., “Aristotelian”) sacralization of the tragic with a “trickster hermeneutics” that liberates the imagination and translates this liberation through comic modalities that are not derived from the tragic. Quoting Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, Vizenor notes that, “While [Aristotelian] tragedy does indeed focus on what can go wrong in the actions of the best of men, its ethical lessons are not primarily about *the place* of accident and fortune in the unfolding of a human life” (16, emphasis added). In contrast, a “trickster hermeneutics,” as translation of creation and liberation, arises from indigenous “sources of natural reason and tribal consciousness” rather than “nostalgia or liberal melancholy” (Vizenor, 14). Although encountering indigenous wisdom in its place necessarily occurs in the wake of unspeakable historical violence, Vizenor still insists, “the stories that turn the tribes tragic are not their own stories” (16). To think of translation and decolonial justice, then, means that proximity to indigenous cultures brings uncanny *inspiration* to the other side of historical and traumatic *exhaustion*.



Finally, Sandor Goodhart describes another concern for translation when he warns of a “translation” that becomes a “transmuting.” In “Back to the Garden: Jewish Hermeneutics, Biblical Reading, PaRDeS, and the Four-Fold”—an essay that focuses on Levinas, René Girard, and the historical development of midrash and allegory from the late medieval and early modern periods—Goodhart draws our attention to economies of signification that smuggle within them economies of abjection and thus make possible and give alibi to approaches to reading that contribute to the staging of what Martin Matušík will describe, in *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, as “historical shapes of human abjection.” In this essay, Goodhart quotes a preface to the original King James Version of the Bible (KJV), “The Translators to the Readers,” in which the translators make ostensibly cordial invitations to the reader by describing the work of translation in decidedly hospitable terms: “Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.” (37). As Goodhart notes, “The words are richly hospitable. They speak of opening windows, letting in light to shine upon the darkness, breaking open the shell so that the kernel may be accessed, stripping away the curtain so that the holiest of holies may be revealed” (38). However, toward the end of the KJV preface, these gestures of hospitality attributed to translation are marked by a profound exclusionary gesture whereby the translators exclude “wicked Jewes” from the salvation promised to its “gentle readers”: “Ye are brought unto fountains of living water which ye digged not; do not cast earth into them with the Philistines, *neither prefer broken pits before them with the wicked Jewes*. . . . If light be come into the world, love not darkness more than light” (38). The “hospitality” promised of translation in the early part of the preface becomes an act of exclusion. “In this instance,” Goodhart observes, the “translators” have become “transmuters”—“*altering* at once the language (or letter) in which that exclusionary strategy is deployed (from Hebrew, Greek, and Latin to English), and as well its life-giving breath (or spirit)—‘muting’ its profoundly sacrificial strategy in the name of countering that strategy” (39).

From Goodhart’s reading of the KJV translator’s preface, I cull four key concerns: First, we can hold out for the possibility of a translation that enacts hospitality, gift-giving, and generous receptivity. Second, what we come away with, however, is too frequently a sacrificial strategy that reproduces exactly what it claims to counter. Third, this act of exclusion, this sacrificial enactment, transforms translation into transmuting because its economies of signification are already predicated on economies of abjection and exclusion. Thus, the very language—indeed, our very relation to the letter of the language—is itself altered (transmuted). The “life-giving breath” or “spirit”—which we can link to *inspiration* and the literalness of *respiration* as Levinas does—is altered at the very level of signification. Fourth, the exclusionary gesture that transmutes our

very relation to the letter of the language is itself obscured, or muted. Not only does translation transmute our relation to the language through the pressures of abjection, but it also obscures, mystifies, and mutes the very enabling of that abjection.

If we are to reflect on wisdom in its places, it is imperative to decolonize the terms and conditions of that reflection lest we reinscribe the colonialism of translation that Cheyfitz warns us about. Translation both requires and enables decolonial justice as colonial projects of translation, carried across the latitudes through a “North Atlantic ontology,” smuggle within their work a sacrificial cultural logic on which genocide and “historical shapes of human abjection” are predicated. As such, it also alters (transmutes) our very relation to language itself. Most frequently, this colonial description of language and translation is tied to a “representational” way of thinking—as opposed to the “prophetic” way of thinking that Goodhart has written extensively about or the “diachrony” of a *saying* (*le dire*) that Levinas describes—and so it occasions an especially invidious kind of coloniality because it simultaneously “mutes” the very transmuting of our relation to language.

Here, we can look to the extensive use of boarding schools in Indian Country and *Lingít Aaní* as an example. In terms of colonialism, Native children were forced to leave their homes, villages, and culture to attend boarding school where they were physically and mentally abused for using their language. The common dictum that gave moral justification to these colonial institutions of genocide was, “Kill the Indian. Save the Child.” The use of boarding schools is clearly an instance of colonialism, but the more subtle and persistent expressions of coloniality—as a cultural disturbance that affects our very relation to the letter of language—are less explicit. X’unei Lance Twitchell, a professor of Tlingít language and culture at the University of Alaska Southeast, regularly notes in conversation that, in these boarding schools, “they beat our language out of us and replaced it with a language that hates us.” It is remarkable to describe English as a language “that hates us.” These are, indeed, heavy words. They testify to that quality of transmuting that subtly reterritorializes self along the contours of a language spoken carelessly, harboring abjection, and they speak to all the sorrows of colonial translation when not attended to in their existential, political, cultural, and intersubjective relations. Under such conditions, that which is transmuted through abjection, along with the very transmuting itself, remains muted, mystified, and pervasive. Revitalizing wisdom in its place and concretely making room for indigenous intellectual inspirations and authority must contend with the demands and concrete exigencies of translating experience, creation, and liberation. Otherwise, such encounters will only ever remain, resolutely, an extension of colonial enterprise.



To reiterate, in order to encounter indigenous wisdom in its place—or to resituate the emergence of intelligibility in the specificity of place—a translation of sorts, not unlike the one that characterizes Levinas’s work, must occur. Decolonial translation must (1) work to demystify with sober vigilance the economies of abjection smuggled into economies of signification; (2) uncondition knowledge from what Levinas describes as a consciousness of seeing and reorient it toward what he calls a “consciousness termed hearing”; and (3) recover the polyhistorical mind of a “trickster hermeneutics”—as a translation of creation and liberation—that enables a rich encounter with story and the deep, abiding kinship it supports. In terms of enacting that translation in the critical interest of decolonial justice, Levinas offers us a significant starting point when he insists, for example, that the starting point of phenomenology is neither intentionality nor apprehension but *inspiration*. Indigenous inspirations, I argue, are better registered within an “inspired” phenomenology attuned not to a consciousness of *seeing*, indexed to an ontology of truth and reducible to the *ratio* of rationality, but to a consciousness of *hearing*, inspired by an ontology of story and occasioned through revelation, face, and an intuition for what “all my relations” invokes.

Tlingít elder, Jessie Dalton, T’akdeintaan clan mother, explains in her speech for the removal of grief cited in an epigraph for this paper: “Yes, They are revealing their faces.”

## MEDITATION TWO: TOWARD AN INSPIRED ECO-PHENOMENOLOGY

In *Being and Place Among the Tlingít*, Thomas Thornton offers one approach to reading Jessie Dalton’s “Speech for the Removal of Grief” that helps us take up a Levinasian “inspired eco-phenomenology” while attending to the difficulties and exigencies of translation in the service of decolonization. In what follows, I make two brief gestures before addressing what I consider to be a history of an error in reading Levinas in an eco-phenomenological context. The first gesture examines Jessie Dalton’s speech as an example of translation as hospitality and respect; the second gesture reads this hospitality in terms of Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s notion of decolonization as a gift, as a restoration of “the logics of the gift through a decolonial politics of receptive generosity” (261).

### Translation as Hospitality Otherwise than Transmuting

In *Being and Place Among the Tlingít*, Tom Thornton quotes Richard and Nora Dauenhauer’s *Haa Tuwunáagu Yis, for Healing Our Spirit* at length, which is worth including here:

An orator such as Jessie Dalton is selected to speak because of his or her sensitivity, and the orator is compared in Tlingít to someone who brings a very long pole into a house. In handling words, as in handling a pole, a speaker

must be careful not to strike or hit anyone's face, or to break anything by accident. Referring to oratory during an interview, her own words were, "It is difficult to speak to someone who is respected. It is very difficult." Delivered carelessly, words can be dangerous and detrimental. But when delivered carefully, oratory can be a soothing medicine, a healing power and balm to one who is in pain. It can give spiritual strength. In Tlingít one says, *kaa toowú kei altseench*, "people gain spiritual strength from it," or *toowú latseen kaa jeex atee*, "it gives strength to the spirit." The effect of words in a good speech is described as *yándeí kdusyaa yáx yatee du yoo x'atángi*, "his words were like cloth being gently spread out on a flat service." (180)

Thornton quotes the Dauenhauers here in a chapter on "Ritual as Emplacement," which speaks to the need for encountering wisdom in its place with careful attention to the qualities of language born of an ontology of story, one that demystifies sacrificial gestures smuggled within economies of signification predicated on abjection.

It is worth highlighting, then, three qualities of Jessie Dalton's speech that are important to articulating translation as a decolonial practice that helps stage an encounter with Levinas through what I am describing as "indigenous inspirations": (1) It is expressly concerned not to occasion the kind of exclusionary gesture we witness in the translator's preface to the KJV; (2) by ritually remaining vigilant to such concerns—which is to say, by preserving hospitality and respect as the very relation to the language (against transmuting)—it also preserves what Goodhart describes as the "life-giving breath (or spirit)" of the language; and (3) it stages what I will call an "inspired" relation to language that, in turn, occasions justice inspired by what Maldonado-Torres will call a "decolonial love" (260). Importantly, Jessie Dalton's speech not only delivers profound content of healing words that address grief, but they also deliver within that content the very structure of the relations upon which such wisdom is articulated. As Goodhart's appeal to the topology of the Möbius strip in literary imaginations attests, the content (contained) is carried by the structure, but it is also the case that the structure (container) is borne by and within the content (contained). Here, I appeal to postsecular sensibilities for staging a translation beyond transmuting. Levinas will invoke a "difficult freedom" in ways not unlike Jessie Dalton who invokes a "difficult speech" before the respected elders: "It is difficult to speak to someone who is respected. It is very difficult." In this sense, we might speak of decolonial translation as a "difficult translation."

### Decolonization as Gift

Nelson Maldonado-Torres's essay, "On the Coloniality of Being"—which articulates the staging ground upon which his book *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* is built—offers a sustained meditation on the contribu-

tions of Levinas toward decolonial justice, which requires and enacts the kind of decolonial translation of experience I've adumbrated here. In the essay, Maldonado-Torres invokes Fanon's *damné* as "the subject that emerges in a world marked by the colonality of Being" (257). The figure of the *damné* is both "concrete being" and "a transcendental concept," which Maldonado-Torres describes by appeal to Emile Benveniste who shows "that the term *damné* is etymologically related to the concept of *donner*, which means, to give" (258). In the context of colonality, the *damné* "is a subject from whom the capacity to have and to give have been taken away" (258). What Maldonado-Torres calls "the colonality of being," which is one dimension of colonality entwined with the colonality of knowledge and the colonality of power, is that dynamic "that aims to obliterate—in its literal sense of doing away completely so as to leave *no trace*—gift-giving and generous reception as a fundamental character of being-in-the-world" (258), which for Levinas are requisite to the constitution of the self. In a colonial context, the gift-giving capacity of indigenous intellectual authority is both transmuted and muted. Not only are indigenous voices silenced or marginalized, but such silencing radically deforms the cultures of usurpation. On *Lingít Aaní*, decolonial justice must begin by encountering wisdom in its place, but the cultures of usurpation and domination must find corrective in the receptivity of that historically muted gift-giving capacity of indigenous culture and language. Decolonization is a gift not so much for the victims of colonality but for its perpetrators. What Maldonado-Torres calls "generous reception" requires a two-fold staging: It must occur with and through the process of decolonial translation—which, in turn, occasions uncanny inspirations for recuperative justice.

Returning, again, to Jessie Dalton's "Speech for the Removal of Grief," we can witness such gift-giving capacity in both content and structure. Tom Thornton notes that, "[b]ecause of the profound feelings of sadness they evoke, [such] songs are typically only voiced on 'heavy' occasions, such as a funeral or memorial potlatch. When they are sung, their geographic context is always emphasized" (109). He cites Amy Marvin—clan mother (*Naa Tláa*) of the Chookaneidí, who observes that "the sorrowful songs are also a source of strength—a gift." Thornton continues: "In this way, the ancestor's trails of inhabitation, suffering, and fortitude and the continuing presence of their spirits on the land serve to orient and *inspire* (literally to breathe spirit into) contemporary Tlingíts" (109). Encountering wisdom in its place requires decolonial translation as hospitality and a receptivity to the gift-giving capacity of indigenous inspirations muted by a persistent colonality—a colonality entrenched not only in the conspicuous vestiges of colonialism but also in the very relation to the letter of language itself.

### Levinas and Eco-Phenomenology: From Intentionality to Inspiration

With regard to the concern for resituating the emergence of intelligibility in the specificity of place, I have first argued that we need to decolonize an entrenched coloniality by adopting a concern for decolonization as a kind of translation. From this point of view, we see that cultures of usurpation cannot effect this translation on its own and that it must discover a generous receptivity to the historically muted gift-giving capacities of colonized indigenous peoples. In this section, I want to account for ethical resources available within European forms of philosophy insofar as they have already been translated by Levinas. In other words, in this section, I want to assess Levinasian contributions to an internal critique of coloniality by examining the limits of Levinas's early reception in eco-phenomenology. At least in its early articulations, Levinas did not receive a warm welcome to eco-phenomenology, which is surprising. Without resorting to polemical exegesis, I would like to address the persistence of what I consider an error in thinking about Levinasian contributions to eco-phenomenology as an intrigue for decolonial justice.

For Emmanuel Levinas, the first movement of phenomenology is neither intentionality nor apprehension—but *inspiration*. Inspiration is linked to the literalness of *respiration*, whereby, as Levinas writes in *Otherwise Than Being*, the body is “the distinctive in-oneself of the contraction of ipseity and its breakup.” He writes: “This contraction [of respiration] is not an impossibility to forget oneself, to detach oneself from oneself, in the concern for oneself. It is a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other, a duty overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquility, still quite relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest” (109). In his “translator’s preface” to *Otherwise Than Being*, Alphonso Lingis distinguishes this “openness upon the air” of Levinas’s inspiration against Heidegger’s thinking of existence as being in an openness. To find oneself in the openness of a clearing in the forest is to find oneself already in the space of light, seeking *illumination* as the primary model of thinking—and thus of sociality. For Levinas, there is always something prior to the contours of openness marked out by illumination. Prior to space filled with light, there is space filled with air.

To the extent that Heidegger’s thinking of openness, in the phenomenological dimensions of *building dwelling thinking*, establishes an historically and philosophically important starting point for much eco-phenomenology, Levinas’s description of inspiration qua respiration invokes, within the lived corporeality of the phenomenological, an ethical experience contrary to that established on the basis of “intentionality, representational activity, freedom and will” (53). As James Hatley and others have noted, Levinas refuses to establish a transcendental foundation for ethical experience derived from my own intentionality, interiority, freedom, or will. Rather, I am taught the significance

of the ethical through *the saying* (*le dire*) of the other individual—which is to say, through the mouth, through a hearing and an exposure to the other for which “no slipping away is possible.” A Levinasian re-evaluation of the starting point of eco-phenomenology thus opens an intrigue for recuperative justice that, like the movement of ipseity linked to the literalness of respiration, provokes a mode of *revelation* as a “for-the-other” “despite oneself,” which expresses the deep relationality of a lived corporeality situated by a “fundamental historicity” (as diachrony or ancestry). Nevertheless, Levinas’s influence on eco-phenomenology remains undeveloped insofar as persistence for intentional consciousness still seems to organize many eco-phenomenological approaches. Following Levinas, I argue that an inspired eco-phenomenology restores an ethical gravity of the other-than-human in ways beyond what intentional consciousness can anticipate.

### **The Persistence of Intentionality in Eco-Phenomenology**

Let’s begin with a cursory look at David Wood’s essay—“What is Eco-Phenomenology?”—that concludes the *Eco-Phenomenology* reader edited by Charles Brown and Ted Toadvine. In his essay, Wood opens by expressing phenomenology’s “need for a rapprochement with Naturalism.” Noting that Husserl started phenomenology as a project to “[save] humanity from the threat of a *purely naturalistic* view of things, which ultimately treats everything—including humans—as reducible to the operation of causal laws” (211), Wood ultimately argues that Husserl’s phenomenological project is one that critiques *naïve* naturalism, predicated on naïve sense of causality, but that a rapprochement between phenomenology and naturalism can occur by invigorating and expanding phenomenology’s descriptive techniques in order to address “how living creatures have acquired the functionally integrated and environmentally responsive bodies that they do indeed possess, and perhaps explain how it is that multiple complex individual living beings developed in the first place, for example, through the incorporation into a single ‘body’ of what began as a group of simpler symbiotically related organisms” (212). Wood describes this kind of naturalism as “evolutionary naturalism,” which—by phenomenologically inquiring at this level of “deep causality”—becomes the ground upon which we can, as he writes, “facilitate an engagement between phenomenology and naturalism” (212).

Presumably, Wood’s project attempts not so much to restore but to *recover* a quality of relating that Husserl brackets in, for instance, *Cartesian Meditations* where the possibility of intersubjective relations is put at risk by the positing of monadic subjectivity. Developing such an engagement between naturalism and phenomenology, as such, transforms not only our understanding of naturalism, but the possibilities of phenomenology itself. As Wood notes,



If an eco-phenomenology could give us better access to nature than that represented by the naturalism which phenomenology was created to resist, by supplementing intentionality structurally with non- or preintentional characteristics of nature, would not eco-phenomenology be the future of a phenomenology, one which has purged itself of its opposition to nature? (212)

He goes on to argue that “[recovering] an engagement with the *Sache selbst* [the things themselves] is not at all to return to some pure presence, it is rather to return to a world in which the relation between present experience and the complexity of what is being experienced has always been deeply complex and stratified. *Eco-phenomenology is the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures*” (213, emphasis added). Accordingly, then, phenomenology is transformed into eco-phenomenology as the concept of “intentionality” is invigorated *beyond* the bracketing of naïve naturalism and attunes itself with *evolutionary naturalism* in order to bring us “into intimate sensuous relation with the complex things of this world” (211).

The problem with Wood’s staging of the phenomenological within eco-phenomenology, as I see it, is that it is still too beholden to the structures of intentionality that Levinas critiques. Is it not the case that Wood recreates the move from Husserl to Heidegger but somehow misses out on the concerns of totality that Levinas opens? In the attempt to stage eco-phenomenology as the “pursuit of relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures”—a project adapted by other eco-phenomenological texts, all of which respectfully seek non-hierarchical relational status between the human and the other-than-human—Wood reverts to the structures of intentionality that gather the other-than-human into, precisely, the relation of sameness that Levinas exposes. Noting that “intentionality” is a “key concept in phenomenology”—Wood describes the actions of intentionality as structured reflections, noting that it “*fills out* what is specific about perceptual consciousness, rather than *interrupting* or contesting the intentional stance.” Such language is the inverse of a Levinasian phenomenology for which *inspiration precedes intentionality* in a way that does, in fact, interrupt the intentional stance. Uninterrupted intentionality not only “*fills out*” what is specific about perceptual consciousness, but it also seizes, grasps, and subjugates even as it ostensibly orients itself with care.

The purpose of this critical exposition of David Wood’s starting point is not necessarily to engage in polemics but to identify a tendency within phenomenology that does not sufficiently account for the persistence of intentionality that Levinas exposes as an aiming of thought—of the recuperation of the other into the sameness of intentional consciousness. For one, such phenomenological projects are still too beholden to vision, of seeing, as the

horizon of inquiry—a point that Levinas subverts by calling attention to a *hearing that precedes vision*, which discovers inspiration *before and beyond* Husserlian intentionality or Heideggerian apprehension. Second, there is a *modality of time* that one misses, or is altogether tone deaf to, when beginning from intentionality—viz., what Levinas calls *revelation*. To be sure, Wood's essay gestures towards these concerns: For example, in his descriptions of the (com)plexity of time, he identifies four strands—the invisibility of time, the celebration of finitude, the coordination of rhythms, and the interruption and breakdown of temporal horizons—as ways that enrich temporal experience. And, of course, by emphasizing “the invisibility of time” and “the interruption of temporal horizons,” Wood guards against collapsing into what he calls a “premature holism, an over-enthusiastic drive to integration” (what Levinas calls *totality*). Nevertheless, despite these safeguards, privileging an invisible at the heart of the visible still prioritizes models of in/visibility as the governing modality behind a phenomenology of perception. The question, then, is whether or not the continued privileging of the visible betrays the concern against totality, or premature holism, that Wood himself hopes to disrupt. Indeed, Wood notes that his account “occupies what I have called a middle ground *overlapping* the space of intentionality” (217, emphasis added). The interruption of temporal horizons, it turns out, not only preserves intentional structure but also secures it against its own interruption. Insofar as intentionality is preserved in its privileged sense—an intentionality secured by the guarantee of visibility—the very phenomenological attempt to *apprehend* “the relations of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures,” encumbers such relation in the very totality that it hopes to abandon.

### Phenomenology Beyond the Philosophical

Following this cursory reading of Wood's starting point of intentionality, I would like also to look to a critique of Levinas delivered by Ted Toadvine in an essay titled “In Wildness is the Refusal of the World,” which he delivered in 1998 at SPEP as a commentary on Gerald Bruns's book, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*. In this presentation, Toadvine, reiterating Bruns, suggests that a break occurred between Blanchot and Levinas, arguing that Blanchot moves beyond philosophy while Levinas—“despite [his] proximity” to Blanchot—“remains a philosopher.” This is a problematic claim that one can only make by neglecting a full half of Levinas's authorship, which includes his Talmudic readings. Despite whatever differences developed between Blanchot and Levinas—and, certainly, Blanchot worked in a way otherwise than philosophy—it is less accurate to say that Levinas “remains a philosopher” than to say that he persists in philosophy, in part because that was his announced project: to translate Judaism into Greek. But we cannot overlook the persistent *otherwise than philosophizing* at the heart of Levinas's own work, which bears a profound

literary, storied (midrashic) dimension that much of modern philosophy is tone deaf to. Both Blanchot and Levinas, together, deliver persistent critiques of the limits of the philosophical and thus of ontological phenomenology. This is important to note in advance because I will return to a problematic claim that Toadvine makes about Levinas's relation with the "sounds of nature"—or, as he notes quoting Celan, "the language of 'stones and stars'" (Toadvine, 9).

For both Blanchot and Levinas, if philosophy—broadly speaking—prioritizes visibility and the field of sight, the literary prioritizes a hearing (a noise) that interrupts the stability of the visible—a hearing that comes before and goes beyond the privilege of sight. For Blanchot, philosophy is the language of vision, of concept (*Begriff*), and Levinas shares Blanchot's critique of the panoramic of existence. When, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas famously describes ethics as "an optics," he qualifies optics in terms of a *hearing*—in terms of *exteriority* and *language*—rather than as a seeing: "[E]thics is an optics," he writes, "[b]ut it is a 'vision' *without* image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality *of a wholly different type*" (23, see also 29). Gerald Bruns, writing on Blanchot, reiterates this point, noting emphatically, "Philosophy has no place for sound. Sound is foreign. It is always outside the world, threatening to invade it, like anarchy" (*Refusal* 107).

Nowhere is this relation of sound scandalizing the synoptic and totalizing virtues of vision more emphatically expressed than in Levinas's essay, "The Transcendence of Words." It is also the essay that Toadvine cites to stage his critique of Levinas, which requires us to examine the offending passage. Exploiting the notion of an emphatic "break" between Blanchot and Levinas with regard to the origins of responsibility, Toadvine—who rightfully notes that "Levinas rejects the 'impersonal neutrality' of the *Il y a* as a possible basis for responsibility"—insists, "While Blanchot, following Celan, may listen for the language 'of stones and stars,' to the ears of Levinas '[t]he sounds and noise of nature are failed words. To really hear a sound we need to hear a word. Pure sound is the word." From this passage, originally quoted by Bruns, Toadvine draws a hasty conclusion—viz., that, for Levinas, "Nature does not speak, but is rather a theme of speech." He further emphasizes, "Here we find Levinas's characteristic hierarchization of ethical (i.e., human) language over the language of things, as well as the inevitable turn toward the intelligible, i.e., philosophy. Unsettled by the sound of the *Il y a*, Levinas 'cannot abandon philosophy, that is, cannot give up the discourse of concepts and definition'" (Toadvine, 114). This is a serious critique, but it's entirely premature if not carefully qualified. In my concern for encountering Levinas through indigenous inspirations, as a way of translating experience in a decolonial enterprise, I will turn briefly to the charge that Levinas characteristically hierarchizes ethical—specifically *human*—language over the language of things, or the other-than-human.

It is worth noting, with special attention to translation, that Toadvine—in following Bruns—takes up Seán Hand’s translation of “The Transcendence of Words” in which we read, “The sounds and noises of nature are *failed words*” (148). A better translation of this passage comes from Michael B. Smith, who translates the sentence as, “The sounds and noises of nature are *words that disappoint us*” (148). Here is Smith’s translation of the passage in its entirety:

There is in fact in sound—and in consciousness understood as hearing—a shattering of the always complete world of vision and art. Sound is all repercussion, outburst, scandal. While in vision a form espouses a content and soothes it, sound is like the sensible quality overflowing its limits, the incapacity of form to hold its content—a true rent in the fabric of the world—that by which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension inconvertible into vision. It is thus that the sound is symbol *par excellence*—a reaching beyond the given. If, however, sound can appear as a phenomenon, as *here*, it is because its function of transcendence only asserts itself in the verbal sound. The sounds and noises of nature are words that disappoint us. To really hear a sound is to hear a word. Pure sound is the word. (147–148)

What does this mean? I want to suggest that we must read this passage in the context of Levinas’s insistence on inspiration as the starting point for phenomenology—linked to the literalness of respiration for which “the body” is not just “an image or a figure here.” Rather, the literalness of respiration is to be “in one’s skin”:

The expression “in one’s skin” is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the meanwhile which separates inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating dully against the walls of one’s skin. The body is not only an image or figure here; it is the distinctive in-oneness of the contraction of ipseity and its breakup. This contraction is not an impossibility to forget oneself, to detach oneself from oneself, in the concern for oneself. It is a recurrence to oneself out of an irreducible exigency of the other, a duty overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquility, still quite relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest” (*Otherwise Than Being* 109).

For Levinas, the “sounds and noises of nature” disappoint because they are soundings of this tranquility, this inertia and materiality of things at rest. They are not “failed words,” as Hand translates, but “words that disappoint,” as Smith translates, because this tranquility is *not passive enough*—which is to say, they do not undergo the radical passivity of revelation, which Levinas links to inspiration. Such revelation, as Levinas is fond of describing, is born of a *radical passivity*—a passivity more passive than the opposite of action.

For Levinas, in “The Transcendence of Words,” our lived relations with the world, our embodiment, our proximity with the other is always already storied—even before the tranquility of the “sounds and noises of nature.” But the transcendence of words also means this: “[I]n social relations the real presence of the other is important; but above all it means that this presence, far from signifying pure and simple coexistence with me, or expressing itself through the romantic metaphor of ‘living presence,’ is fulfilled in the act of hearing” (148). This is radical, and Bruns picks up on what is unique here to Levinas: *It’s not that sound is the medium of utterances; it’s that utterances become the medium of sound itself* (107). The sounds and noises of nature disappoint when they are not heard from the point of view of the utterance, when they remain mired in the tranquility and materiality of things at rest, registered only in the medium of sound with all its aesthetic self-sufficiency. In contrast, it is the *social relation*—the irreducible kinship relation expressed by “all my relations”—*the utterance itself of ancestry* and place by which the noise and sounds of nature are at last heard through an inspired eco-phenomenology. This does not mean that Levinas characteristically hierarchizes “ethical (i.e., human) language over the language of things” as Toadvine claims, nor does it mean that the sounds of nature are mere “themes” of human speech. Rather, it means that “becoming human” requires this inspiration, this revelation of responsiveness to the transcendence of words that is neither entirely reducible to flesh—and thus, as Levinas writes, “assures a presence among us” (148)—nor to the aesthetic self-sufficiency of the inertia and materiality of things at rest.

In other words, I am not convinced that we ought to conflate “the ethical” with “the human” in the way that Toadvine suggests Levinas does. Nor is it guaranteed that a thinking of the human and other-than-human relation from the point of view of what it means to become human entails that this relationship will be one of hierarchy and domination as opposed to hospitality and respect. Still, if we are to encounter Levinas through indigenous inspirations in working toward decolonial justice, this deliberation occasions an opportunity for thinking about Levinas’s contributions to eco-phenomenology in nuanced ways. Here, for example, I am thinking about Joy Harjo’s poem, “Protocol,” from *How We Became Human*. In this poem she writes,

I do not know your language though I hear the breaking of waves through  
the vowels. (169)

Is this not exactly what Levinas seems to articulate—“as if utterances were the medium of sound” (Bruns, 107)? And this is doubly striking: To encounter Tlingit wisdom in this place, one cannot do it apart from the language. At some point, the translation remains impossible. One must learn the language. X’unei Lance Twitchell repeatedly reminds us that if one is fluent in Tlingit, one can always survive on the land because the language is born of the land. But



decolonial justice nevertheless requires of us a kind of translation of sorts—like the one that characterizes Levinas’s own project, or the trickster hermeneutics of Vizenor. “I do not know your language though I hear the breaking of waves through the vowels.” It is this rich source of inspiration attending to the “transcendence of words” that first struck me as I started learning Tlingít because the first thing you learn when studying Tlingít, at least at the university, are the eight vowels. The sounds and noises of nature, on *Lingít Aaní*, in this rich coastal rainforest, necessarily disappoint when they are reduced only to the medium of sound without a respect and responsiveness to the utterances of ancestry that make that sound legible.

I suspect that the impatience with which Levinas has been attended to while thinking through his contributions to eco-phenomenology is due to the persistence of intentionality in eco-phenomenology. Unfortunately, the notion that Levinas cannot account for the ethical gravity of the other-than-human stubbornly endures even in the works of those who enthusiastically take him up for eco-phenomenology. For example, there is an interview with Levinas to which many eco-phenomenologists appeal in which Levinas is asked, “Does a snake have a face?” And Levinas responds, “I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question.” Responses to Levinas’s lack of a response vary: Some eco-phenomenologists cite Levinas’s lack of response as evidence that he hierarchizes the human over the other-than-human, refusing to grant the other-than-human an “ethical gravity.” Others, like Christian Diehm in the *Eco-Phenomenology* reader, attempt to justify Levinas’s lack of response by noting that, at least, he does not reply in the negative. These responses, I want to suggest (as varied as they are) miss something crucial about Levinas’s notion of inspiration and the priority he gives to the transcendence of words.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, as well as in some of his non-philosophical texts, Levinas links inspiration to revelation. The transcendence of words, as revelation, opens an altogether different modality of time that even David Wood, in his emphasis on the four strands of time, fails to account for. It is the diachronic. It is “fundamental historicity.” It is revelation, teaching. We can even say, it is *ancestry*. The revelation of the face of the other individual is expressed in the transcendence of words that is embodied but not reducible to flesh. How is this possible? Because the transcendence of words, revelation, more exterior than any exteriority of being, “does not come to pass save through the subject that confesses or contests it” (156). Here, Levinas writes, “there is an inversion of order: the revelation is made by him that receives it, by the inspired subject whose inspiration, alterity in the same, is the subjectivity or psyche of the subject” (156). In other words, my subjectivity is constituted by (subjected to) my becoming inspired, by revelation, which bears with it a fundamentally different experience of time than the tranquility in the inertia and materiality of things at rest. To respond with, “I don’t know if a snake has a face”—then—is not to

hierarchize the human over the other-than-human in the reductive speciesism Levinas's critics want to attribute to him; rather, it's to say, I don't know if a snake (or even stones or streams) experiences revelation and inspiration in this way that constitutes my humanity. To become human, however, is to take up this responsiveness.

### EPILOGUE: "*KUNÁX LINGÍT HAA WUSTEE*"

In May 2012, at the University of Alaska Southeast, our student commencement speaker was a Tlingít student named Crystal Rogers. From the podium, she spoke to her peers and faculty in Tlingít. She noted, in particular, that the word "Lingít" means "human being," and she announced that she wanted to talk about "*Lingít tundataani*" (Tlingít thinking). In describing the qualities of *Lingít tundataani*, she invoked two important phrases: The first is "*Tlagu kwáanx' i yán*"—or, the "ancient ones" whose lives, she noted, "were more difficult than we can imagine, but figured out how to survive in the world because they figured out how to rely on each other, how to be responsible for each other." The second phrase she invoked is "*Wooch yax yadāal*"—which, Crystal described, "is the phrase used when talking about "speech that is heavy": She said, "It is a recognition of all the things, all the circumstances, that makes words heavy. All the things that one endures, that one's ancestors endured—the burdens carried, the hardships, and the understanding that, despite whatever endurance, we don't make it by ourselves." We are reminded of Jessie Dalton's speech for which these two qualities of *Lingít tundataani* are performed. It is these qualities of "Tlingít thinking" (*Lingít tundataani*) Crystal told us, that mark the difference between simply "being human"—which is automatic—and being "*truly human*," or, *Kunáx Lingít haa wustee* (which translates as, "We really have become human beings"). It's in this sense of "Tlingít thinking" that I want to suggest we read Levinas's relation of the human and the other-than-human—not as pushing a hierarchical superiority of human over the other-than-human, not as reducing the sounds of nature to themes of human speech, and not as denying the other-than-human an ethical gravity of its own. Rather, in our inspiration, we receive a revelation not just as gift but as the very conditions of giving. It comes to us from the transcendence of words, from the heaviness of words. It does not divorce us of our relations. Rather, it restores them in ethical complexity—invoked by "all my relations" as an infinity within the finite.

With *Lingít tundataani*, we witness a way of becoming human, truly human, in ways irreducible to experiencing human and other-than-human relations in opposition to one another. The relation is shaped by a diachrony, a fundamental historicity responsive to the words of ancestry. In this sense, adopting a Levinasian "inspired" eco-phenomenology helps us take up the task of translation

in service of decolonization. For Levinas, we find ourselves already responsible for healing the wounds of historical violence prior to our deliberation and prior to *hearing* the terms of what that responsibility entails. As he writes in “The Temptation of Temptations,” we are obligated to a *doing* prior to a *hearing*—but he qualifies this by noting, alternatively, that only in our *doing* does the radical *hearing* become possible. It’s not just that we are committed to a *doing* prior to a *hearing* but that we are committed to a *doing in order to hear*. To become human, to become Tlingít, means to take up our responsibility inspired by the voices of ancestry made legible through the language and the sounds of nature. To become human means becoming responsible in a rich kinship of human and other-than-human relations.

In the last instance, however, we will forever remain tone deaf to wisdom in its place if we do not commit ourselves to the study of indigenous languages in those places.

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