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THE RISE OF AN ECO-SPIRITUAL IMAGINARY:
ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY AS DECOLONIAL PROTEST
IN CONTEMPORARY MULTI-ETHNIC AMERICAN LITERATURE

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THE RISE OF AN ECO-SPIRITUAL IMAGINARY:
ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY AS DECOLONIAL PROTEST
IN CONTEMPORARY MULTI-ETHNIC AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the

Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in English

by

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May 14, 2022

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The Rise of an Eco-Spiritual Imaginary:
Ecology and Spirituality as Decolonial Protest
In Contemporary Multi-Ethnic Literature

Advisor: Professor Dennis Foster

Doctor of Philosophy conferred May 14, 2022

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The Rise of an Eco-Spiritual Imaginary reveals a shared ecological aesthetic among contemporary U.S. ethnic writers whose novels communicate a decolonial spiritual reverence for the earth. This shared narrative focus challenges white settler colonial mythologies of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism to instantiate new ways of imagining community across socially constructed boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species. The eco-spiritual imaginary—by which I mean a shared reverence for the ecological interconnection between all living beings—articulates a common biological origin and sacredness of all life that transcends racial difference while remaining grounded in local ethnicities and bioregions. The novelists representing this transethnic struggle co-opt postmodern narrative structures to translate indigenous and non-Eurocentric knowledges and methodologies both for each-other and for a broader audience including the descendants of the white settler colonial state.

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This is dedicated to our planet, the pale blue dot suspended in a sunbeam that continues to
nurture our species into greater consciousness.

INTRODUCTION:

The Rise of an Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

The project of decoloniality explores a problem of time, a problem of place, but also a problem of narrative. Insofar as history tells a story of nation, race, and even species, decoloniality unwinds the various human constructions that have governed social, political, and spiritual understanding of these narratives. While the verb “to decolonize” means to do away with colonial governments, institutions, and infrastructures, decoloniality is an attempt to do away with a colonial ontology, a stance that defines the being of various peoples who have historically been treated as less-than-human. For most of the colonized or formerly colonized world, the Euro-American ontologies which led to a history of brutal domination and empire have largely suppressed, or at least sought to suppress, indigenous knowledges and methodologies, to act as if they literally did not exist. The Eurocentric master narrative which led to the white settler mythology of a white master race have used the “colonial trinity” of church, government, and corporation to promote a narrative of primitivism, tribalism, and inferiority among the people they have sought to control. What’s more, this colonial narrative has also linked colonized peoples to a Eurocentric construction of nature as a domain to be conquered. The colonized peoples of North America and the Global South can, and in many situations have over the past century, overturned the institutions upholding colonial systems of control. But to undo the ontology of Euro-American colonization requires the deconstruction of the Master narratives or mythologies on which these institutions were built.

The undoing of these Master narratives presents a fundamental problem, however: if or when colonial mythologies are deconstructed, what narratives can replace them? For many post-colonial countries, the Eurocentric paradigm of nation obscures any pre-colonial identities that once existed. Consequently, the post-colonial narrative of peoples' uprising against the colonial powers cannot imply a simple return to pre-colonial identities. For colonized peoples in the United States, finding a national culture to replace the white settler nationalism of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism has been almost impossible. For Native Americans, for example, concepts of national sovereignty and self-determination, after decades of displacement and containment on reservations far from traditional homelands, seem ironically to reinforce western European notions of nation and sovereignty. For Chicana people, the concept of Aztlán helped create an imagined community during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but it did not result in the return of Anglo-settled land to Chicana people in the formerly Mexican states of the U.S. Southwest. And for African Americans searching for ties to their African past, the African nations rising up for independence in the 19th and 20th centuries often obscured the very cultures and nations from which enslaved Africans had originally been separated. This obscuring of the past can most poignantly be seen in the liminal status of diaspora as experienced by the character Nettie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Set in the early twentieth century, when Marcus Garvey's "back-to-Africa" movement was at its height, Black Americans like Nettie struggled to overcome the loss of their pre-colonial identities. Where in Africa had they been taken from, and how were they to assimilate into a national culture that had arisen after their ancestors were taken to the "New World," separated from their

pre-colonial identities in both space and time? In Walker's novel, Nettie wrestles with exactly these questions.

While national identity poses its own problems as a decolonial narrative, the question remains how or even if any narrative can, or even should attempt to bridge the gap in time and space between the precolonial and the post-colonial worlds. The world in which indigenous ontologies originally functioned has ceased to exist. Native American peoples who have made great gains in self-determination, for example, are still separated by time and space from the land and the culture that their ancestors knew and maintained. As Leslie Marmon Silko's character Tayo discovers, the process of colonization in the Americas is over, but the world it has created is not, and the world that preceded it is gone. The effects of colonization, of a practice that persisted for centuries, still structure the geopolitical, economic, and ontological constructions of our world today. Thus, while Tayo can look back to stories of a pre-colonial past, he cannot simply recreate it. And like Tayo, Rudolfo Anaya's character Tony is also stuck in a liminal space between cultures. Wrestling with the tensions between his Spanish, Mexican, and Native heritages, he finds himself divided between cultural remnants of a pre-colonial past and visions of a post-colonial future. Following Anaya, Silko and Walker, the other novelists I address in this dissertation step knowingly into this liminal narrative space.

The Rise of an Eco-Spiritual Imaginary reveals a shared decolonial aesthetic among contemporary U.S. ethnic writers, an aesthetic founded on a spiritual reverence for the earth. This shared narrative focus challenges white settlers' colonial mythologies of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism to instantiate new ways of imagining community across socially constructed boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species. The eco-spiritual imaginary—by which I mean a shared reverence for the ecological interconnection between all living beings—

articulates a common biological origin and sacredness of all life that transcends racial difference while remaining grounded in local ethnicities and bioregions. The tension between the local and the global in the novels I identify reveals a transethnic struggle against the neo-colonial forces of global capital and environmental racism which represent the ongoing effects of European colonization. The novelists representing this transethnic struggle co-opt postmodern narrative structures to translate indigenous and non-Eurocentric knowledges and methodologies both for each-other—as a form of what Lionett and Shih call “minor transnationalism”—and for a broader audience including the descendants of the white settler colonial state.¹ For this reason, while one might identify some of the tropes of this eco-spiritual imaginary in earlier colonial American nature writing, my dissertation argues for a distinct narrative movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima* were writing. Each highlighted the ways people of color had been disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and excluded from the primarily white environmental conversations of the 1960s and 1970s. Pairing these older novels with more recent ones, I trace the continuation of this movement through the 1990s and early 2000s through other such well-known writers as Junot Díaz and Barbara Kingsolver, as well as lesser-known writers such as Tommy Orange, Ana Castillo, Helena María Viramontes, Alfredo Véa, and Ruth Ozeki. Only by reading these multi-ethnic American authors as central to what some would call the U.S. literary canon, I argue, can we understand the way that they “write back” to social constructions and tensions at the heart of the U.S. colonial and imperial project.

History of Decoloniality within Post-Colonial Studies

Decoloniality is a relatively recent development within the broader post-colonial field of studies that addresses the tensions inherent in Eurocentric constructions of time, place, nation, race, and even recently species. Originating from a South American body of theory produced by Argentinian Walter D. Mignolo and Peruvian Anibal Quijano in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, decoloniality speaks to the remaining ontological and aesthetic concerns of a decolonizing or post-colonial world. Just as scholars of decoloniality have defined the difference between decolonization as a political process and decoloniality as an aesthetic or ontological process, they have also theorized the crucial difference between colonialism and what Anibal Quijano calls “coloniality”: “colonialism is over, an episode of the past, but coloniality is well and alive.”² For Quijano, coloniality refers to the Eurocentric matrix of power initiated during the colonization of the Americas but sustained post-colonization through the psychological construct of race, a construction used for control of labor/capital across the Global South.³ *Post-colonial theory* analyzes the effects of colonization and its aftermath. *Decoloniality*, on the other hand, allows formerly colonized peoples to reject their history of colonization, delink from their colonial representations and, instead, enunciate or relink themselves to identities outside the colonial matrix of power entirely.⁴ The roots of the debate over how, or to what extent, this delinking/relinking is even possible, however, can also be found in post-colonial debates since before Mignolo and Quijano entered the field.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, questions whether the formerly colonized can ever really be said to speak authentically from a pre-colonial past. In her 1988 “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak argues not only that the category of the “subaltern” or formerly colonized subject is based on the European construction of the “Other,” but also that this

category is heterogenous, not a unified voice that can speak back to colonial power. Comparing post-colonial theory to feminist theory, she writes that just as “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant,” so the ideological construction of the colonized “both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency” keeps the colonial episteme dominant.⁵ Although other post-colonial scholars such as Benita Parry critique Spivak for “diminish[ing] the earlier intervention of critics like Fanon who stood much more resolutely for the idea that de-colonization is a process of opposition to dominance,” Fanon himself acknowledged the problems of double consciousness, mimicry, and cultural hybridity produced by the European creation of the colonial subject.⁶ Thus, while Spivak and Fanon differ over the avenues for resistance available to post-colonial subjects, they both express the tension of the self through time as part of the difficulty of accessing an authentic pre-colonial narrative identity. Homi K. Bhabha extends their critique, arguing through his concept of unhomeliness that the tension of the colonial self is a basic function of place as well as time. Unhomeliness, which addresses a disjunction “between the borders of home and world,” is not about physical displacement or homelessness but “the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations or cultural relocations.”⁷ In other words, unhomeliness is the chronotopic separation of self from a pre-colonial sense of home in both space and time. If Spivak asks the question, “can the subaltern speak?” then Bhabha could be said to ask the question, “can the subaltern find a place to call home?”

While post-colonial theorists have struggled with these problems of time and place in the decolonization of post-colonial identities, they have also debated the role of post-colonial theory and literature in the decolonization process. Stephen Slemon, for example, warns against the metropolitan concentration of post-colonial theory which draws its practice and production

“increasingly and monolithically backward towards the centres of Western power.”⁸ Slemon uses the term “metropolitan” as synecdoche for the concentration of cultural power maintained by the colonial center, including the production and replication of post-colonial theory and literature itself. This concern over the Eurocentricity of post-colonial theory is shared by Mignolo who writes that “coloniality and de-coloniality introduces a fracture with both the Eurocentered project of post-modernity and a project of post-coloniality heavily dependent on post-structuralism as far as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have been acknowledged as the grounding of the post-colonial canon: Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Hommi Bhabha. De-coloniality starts from other sources.”⁹ The novelists I examine in this dissertation start from some of these “other sources.” While the novel itself began as a European art form, the eco-spiritual imaginary these novelists express through this form did not. Navigating the tensions of time, place, nation, race, and species inherent in post-colonial debates, these novelists don’t look to post-colonial theory for answers, but “write back” to the colonizing force. By co-opting the colonial art form of the novel, they translate local ecological knowledge systems, non-Western spiritualities, and minor transnationalisms that together make up what I am calling an eco-spiritual imaginary.

A Trans-Ethnic Literary Imaginary

The eco-spiritual imaginary addresses post-colonial debates and tensions by identifying shared elements within many indigenous and pre-colonial cultures that were disrupted by the Euro-centric nature/culture divide. In all of the novels I examine here, a shared spiritual reverence for the earth grounded in pre-colonial knowledges and methodologies provides an alternative trans-ethnic imaginary which nevertheless doesn’t universalize. Rather, it looks to

diverse pre-colonial spiritual understandings of human interconnection with the greater-than-human world while simultaneously acknowledging their crucial cultural, geographical, ethnic, and racial differences. For example, in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, the practice of *curanderismo* finds its roots in both Spanish and Native herbal/spiritual healing despite these cultures' differing roles as colonizer and colonized. Because the eco-spiritual imaginary identifies the nature/culture divide as the driving force behind all ecological devastation, however, it provides a shared point of reference and common political cause across these important differences. What's more, in recognizing humans as part of the ecological systems at risk from the destructive Eurocentric ideology of nature/culture division, it encourages recognition of symbiotic alliances not only across national, ethnic, and racial lines, but across species as well. Thus, in the fight against the coloniality of human-caused climate change, mass extinction, and ecological devastation, the greater-than-human world can be considered both a fellow victim of European colonization and an ally. As an ally, it is an ally to all post-colonial cultures as they look to stories in their various cultural pasts for strategies to implement in the present. Thus, while a shared eco-spiritual imaginary doesn't "solve" any of the tensions or problems in contemporary post-colonial theory, it provides a way to move forward despite these tensions through a trans-ethnic imaginary of interspecies dependence.

This shared trans-ethnic imaginary among U.S. writers is far from merely theoretical, however. Evidence exists that many of the writers I examine in this dissertation are not only aware of each other's work but have actively encouraged and promoted their fellow writers. On the front cover of Chicana writer Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God*, Euro-American author Barbara Kingsolver endorses it as "a delightful novel...Impossible to resist." Kingsolver, meanwhile, shares an interest in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* with Caribbean American

author Junot Díaz, whose character Oscar discusses Walker's novel with one of his ill-fated love interests. Perpetuating this chain of literary connections, Díaz has endorsed the back of Japanese American Ruth Ozeki's 2012 novel *A Tale for the Time Being* calling her "one of my favorite novelists ... at her absolute best." Ozeki shares an interest in Buddhism with Alfredo Véa, whose novel *the Mexican Flyboy* was published by an editorial board including famed Chicano writer Rudolpho Anaya, who, coming back full circle, has called Ana Castillo "a literary triumph" and "one of our finest Chicana novelists." Castillo and more recently published Chicana novelist Helena Maria Viramontes, meanwhile, thank each other in the acknowledgements section of almost every one of their books. On its own, this anecdotal evidence points to little more than the fact that contemporary U.S. ethnic writers are reading each other's work. Taken together with the way literary scholars have begun to categorize and analyze these same authors' work under the variously intersecting subheadings of ecocriticism, spirituality, and decoloniality, it suggests that perhaps something more focused is coalescing within the scene of U.S. ethnic writers more broadly, perhaps even something in the category of what David Shields (speaking of a different set of writers) identifies as "an artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one."¹⁰

While the definition of artistic movements almost always happens retrospectively, there has certainly been more than enough buzz in the literary world over whether post-modernism as a literary movement is over and what comes next.* I make no claims as to the demise or longevity of postmodernism, but the novels I examine do share a common form of engagement with postmodern literary forms. Not only do they, in a sense, speak back to postmodern theory through self-reflexive awareness of themselves as texts, but they also respond to postmodern

* See, for example, Andrew Hobereck's "Introduction: After Postmodernism"

skepticism of grand narratives.[†] By positing a pluriversal imaginary as an alternative to the grand narratives of white supremacy, manifest destiny, and American exceptionalism that have been driving the imperial and colonial imagination in the United States for centuries, these writers show how the universal is challenged by the particular, and how the national can be countered by both the local and the transnational. By the “pluriversal imaginary” referenced above, I mean Walter D. Mignolo’s almost utopic vision for the endgame of decoloniality, what he calls “pluriversality as a uni-versal project.”¹¹ Rather than replacing the totalizing knowledge scheme of coloniality with another totalizing narrative (even one that is decolonial), Mignolo argues for a universal movement in which every system of knowledge respects every other system, thereby allowing a plurality of narrative universes to coexist simultaneously with no hierarchical or totalizing knowledge scheme: “no human being has the right to dominate and be imposed over other human beings. It is that simple and it is so difficult.”¹² In what might be considered the ultimate postmodern move, Mignolo attempts to construct a grand narrative of distrust for grand narratives. This is why he stresses the language of the decolonial “option.”¹³ If anyone is forced into a movement, perhaps especially one that its participants consider universal, it risks becoming another form of hegemony. However, because the entire world is already interconnected within the colonial matrix of power, this decolonial option as resistance can occur

[†] While Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” Fredric Jameson adds a Marxist element, arguing that “postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order . . . , but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself.” Jameson’s view of postmodernism as the commodification of culture maps onto both the cultural movement of modernism (as a differentiation between high and low culture) and what Anibal Quijano calls “modernity.” To distinguish between modernism and modernity, Quijano locates modernity at the beginning of European colonialism/rationality. The two (colonialism/rationality) became indistinguishable as Europe “elaborated and formalized” a “universal paradigm of knowledge” which they proceeded to force on the colonized world. Modernism, as compared to this colonial episteme, refers to the cultural movement in the early twentieth century out of which postmodernism arose. Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, Theory and history of literature ; v. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xii; Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 171–72.

simultaneously within any combination of the “heterogenous historico-structural nodes, crossed by colonial and imperial difference.”¹⁴ A particularly powerful combination of historico-structural nodes is the intersection of spirituality and nature which I am calling the eco-spiritual imaginary.

An eco-spiritual imaginary is particularly effective as a decolonial/anti-racist option for both U.S. white people and people of color because it acknowledges the global while remaining rooted in the local. As a planetary construct, an eco-spiritual imaginary acknowledges the interconnection of all living beings within our biosphere while simultaneously grounding itself in the local eco-regions where it independently arises. Thus, when Mignolo describes pluriversalism as “a world in which many worlds could co-exist [which] can only be made by the shared work and common goals of those who inhabit, dwell in one of the many worlds co-existing in one world,” he could just as easily be describing the interworking of the local and the global in an ecological sense as a cultural sense.¹⁵ The writers in this “organic and as-yet-unstated” movement enunciate this decolonial challenge by creating characters who navigate a liminal space in history between the past and the future. In the past lies a history of European colonization and imperial domination that sought to erase indigenous ways of being and to utilize the plants, animals, and minerals around them to drive an economy of infinite growth. In the future lies the possibility of change, a decolonization from Western epistemologies and a re-assertion of indigenous knowledges in the face of modernity’s most pressing problems in the present—human caused climate change and its concomitant ecological devastation. The solution to these problems doesn’t arrive in these novels through romanticizing a past when indigenous people lived more aware of their effect on the ecological systems around them, but the knowledge of this past can help restore an understanding of humanity’s place within these

delicate ecological systems. This combination of decolonial knowledge and spiritual reverence for the earth as expressed through the fiction of a select group of U.S. ethnic writers is the eco-spirituality imaginary this dissertation both identifies and defines.

Defining “Eco” in the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

The term “eco” in the literary development I am calling an eco-spiritual imaginary, references both the scientific definition of ecology and the history of ecocriticism as a literary critical approach. German zoologist Ernst Haeckel first defined ecology scientifically in 1866 as “the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and its organic environment.”¹⁶ In the scientific sense, then, ecology investigates the complex webs of interdependency between any given organism and its environment. Like cultural systems, ecological systems must be understood within both local and global contexts. Local ecosystems combine to create larger biomes, which together make up the biosphere of planet earth. Examining humans as populations of organisms within these various biological systems challenges the classic humanist assumption of the self-constituted individual. Just as post-structuralism reveals how the subject is constituted by the social systems around it, ecology reveals how the human animal is constituted by the ecological systems that sustain and compose it.

Ecocriticism, or “the study of the natural environment as it appears in literary and cultural productions,”¹⁷ did not begin with this awareness of biologically mutual constituency. Rather, early ecocritics studied what came to be known as “nature writing,” a genre dominated “by white male writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Edward Abbey, and which included a few white female authors who write in a similar style, such as Annie Dillard and Terry

Tempest Williams.”¹⁸ Because these white nature writers and the critics who studied them remained rooted in a romantic tradition that viewed nature as something outside of and even morally superior to human civilization, early ecocriticism did not acknowledge Chicana and Native authors concerned with human relationship to each other and to the land as part of the nature-writing genre. Priscilla Ybarra calls this early exclusion of writers/critics of color the “first era” of ecocriticism, “emphasizing nature writing and a literal, straightforward engagement with the natural environment.”¹⁹ As the study of ecology and human-caused climate change in the scientific community coincided with the emergence of large-scale social justice movements and racial identity politics in the 1960s, ecocriticism entered what Ybarra calls the “second era.” This second era of ecocriticism “not only takes seriously the human relationship with the environment but also concerns itself with the way that human-to-human relations are negotiated via the natural environment and how the exploitation of humans as well as nature is often rationalized in overlapping ways.”²⁰ Admitting both the socially constructed nature of “nature” and the ways intersecting constructs of race, class, and gender complicate our understanding of the greater-than-human world, white critics joined critics of color to begin acknowledging writers of color previously excluded from the definition of “nature writing” in the first era. Focused on the interdependence between humans and their environment as well as the overwhelming burden of environmental degradation placed on poor and people of color communities, the novels in this dissertation engage in an environmental justice approach by redefining both what counts as environmentalism and what counts as “nature.” The term “eco” in the eco-spiritual imaginary thus references both the scientific decentering of the human species as an autonomous form of life on earth and the post-structuralist decentering of the subject as an autonomous being apart from the social systems that surround and create it.

Defining “Spiritual” in the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

In addition to the scientific and literary contributions to the study of ecology, a theological or spiritual turn has occurred in the study of ecology as well. Known as “deep ecology,” this addition of the spiritual element to the scientific study of ecology comes very close to defining the “eco-spiritual” side of what I am calling an eco-spiritual imaginary. David Barnhill and Roger Gottlieb define deep ecology as “the ethical and religious attitude of valuing nature for its own sake and seeing it as divine or spiritually vital.”²¹ Part of the spiritual move toward deep ecology, therefore lies in the change in terminology from “nature” as an object for human use to “environment” as a system of reciprocity between one subjectivity and another.²² What’s more, this system of reciprocity is “not just a collection of individual phenomena or even a community of related beings” but rather “a vast, encompassing totality that we can connect to and that has unqualified value.”²³ However, while deep ecology has helped create a shared reverence for the ecological interconnection between all living beings, it still derives from a Western ontology that originates in the human-centered category of nature as both anterior and inferior to human culture. The deep-ecological drive to hold up the greater-than-human world as an object of reverence and worship risks falling back into that human/nature binary even if it attempts to equalize the two and to show their interdependence.

In the novels that I examine, spiritual reverence for the earth derives not from deep ecological theology but from indigenous, or non-Eurocentric definitions of the sacred. As Mignolo explains, “Indigeneity and Land/Spirituality have been and continue to be strong pillars of ongoing decolonizing processes.”²⁴ Consequently, I take my working definition of the difference between religion and spirituality from Theresa Delgadillo in her book *Spiritual*

Mestizaje, where she employs “the term *religion* to refer to organized, institutionalized, traditional religions in Western thought and the term *spirituality* to refer to non-Western and non-institutional forms of relation to the sacred.”²⁵ This is not to say that Eurocentric or institutional forms of religion and spirituality are irrelevant to the eco-spiritual imaginary. Because of the necessary hybridity of both the decolonial process and the novel as an art form, many of the novels I examine seek common ground with Western institutional religious understandings of shared reverence for all living things. What’s more, the environmental justice movement owes much to the inter-denominational efforts of the Christian church to engage in social justice issues. For example, Joni Adamson et al. identify a “defining moment in the history of the U.S. environmental justice movement” in a fascinating period of religious activism. In 1987, the United Church of Christ (UCC) put together a Commission for Racial Justice. The executive director of the commission, Reverend Benjamin Chavis, defined “environmental racism” for the first time as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic wastes facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement.”²⁶ As evidenced by a 1991 international People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, this definition of environmental racism has done much to bring both Euro-centered religions and indigenous spiritualities together in recognizing the colonial origins of environmental degradation and injustice. At this summit, leaders linked colonization of Indigenous and people of color to colonization of the land, laying out seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice aimed at achieving “political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the

poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples.”²⁷ The hybrid spiritualities that result from this collaboration between Western religion and indigenous spiritualities are especially highlighted in Chapters 2 and 5 of this dissertation on the decolonization of Catholicism and American Evangelical Christianity respectively.

Defining “Imaginary” in the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

The term “imaginary” brings with it a complex history and set of meanings. On an individual level, the imaginary conjures Lacan’s mirror stage, “at which a child identifies the ‘I’ of the self in a mirror, an image is reflected back, and the subject becomes object.”²⁸ However, for the post-colonial subject, the possibilities of this imagined self are embedded within a colonial presence that attempts to hold it, like the child in the mother’s arms, forever tempered by its shadow. On a social level, the imaginary hearkens back to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities.” However, Anderson concerns himself with the imagined reality of the nation. A decolonial imaginary must seek to build something new outside of this Eurocentric political construction. In defining the eco-spiritual imaginary, then, I draw from Emma Pérez’s definition of the “decolonial imaginary” as a “time lag between the colonial and postcolonial.”²⁹ In other words, the decolonial imaginary is a narrative present that must negotiate this time lag by looking to stories of a pre-colonial past for the construction of a postcolonial future. By deconstructing the binaries of oppressed and oppressor or victim and victimizer, the decolonial imaginary negotiates “a decolonizing otherness where all identities are at work in one way or another.”³⁰ Like Mignolo’s pluriversalism, the novelists I examine help deconstruct the binary colonial identities at work in time and space around them to embrace this “decolonizing otherness” outside of colonial epistemologies. Rooted within the local ecologies and spiritualities

from which each identity has grown, this shared imaginary holds at its core an understanding of planetary interdependence and connection which binds all forms of biological life together across socially constructed boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species.

In this way, the texts I examine in this dissertation attempt to step outside a number of binaries: nature/culture, local/global, colonizer/colonized, self/other, spiritual/material. While they challenge these binaries, they also attempt to avoid a universalism that, in negating difference, merely sets up another binary of dominance. This is the challenge of the eco-spiritual imaginary. Like Derrida's network of *différance*, it acknowledges the slippage of language, and therefore identity, in both time and space. And yet, like the Buddhist concept of Indra's Net—a network of universes in which every universe is mirrored in every other universe into infinity—meaning can still be found not in the signified at the end of a chain of differences, but in the connections between the signifiers. By seeking meaning in the interconnection between the signifiers rather than in the signified itself, the spiritual refuses to find meaning at either end of these binaries. By refusing the binary between the human and the non-human, the ecological arrives at an imaginary where every part is integral to the identity of every other part. This is the work done by the eco-spiritual imaginary that this dissertation addresses.

Chapter Summary

I begin by locating the eco-spiritual imaginary in a pair of novels by Native American writers Leslie Marmon Silko and Tommy Orange. Chapter One argues that Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Orange's *There There* (2018) both write back to colonial mythologies which seek to relegate Native people, cultures, and values to the past. In response to these colonial mythologies, both texts assert the contemporary and vital relevance of Indigenous values by

reframing Euro-American panic over the human-caused climate crisis as just another ripple in a series of ecological crises initiated by European colonization. Having survived these earlier waves of ecological destruction, Native peoples tell stories that contain an acute awareness of the ideological underpinnings driving environmental crises in the present. Consequently, I argue that both novels suggest narrative itself as an answer to human-caused ecological crises as they reveal the colonial mythologies which drive them. Both writers assert their vital relevance to the present moment by looking to local Laguna and Cheyenne mythologies to express a global understanding of interconnection across time and space that predates the postmodern narrative techniques they use to construct their novels and to suggest narrative itself as a solution to human-caused ecological crisis.

Chapter Two identifies the ways that several Chicana writers incorporate Native stories about ecological destruction in the past to decolonize Catholicism by turning the terminology of “sin” against the colonizer. Different from the recent indigenous movement calling for the overthrow of the religious institution, the decolonial Catholicism in these novels seeks a more subtle reversal of the hybridization process used by the Catholic church to erase/subsume indigenous spiritualities. Recognizing the colonial role of religion to control behavior, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* (1993), and Helena Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) co-opt Catholic guilt as a tool to indict colonial white settlers for the harm inflicted on Native people, non-human species, and the earth. In Castillo and Viramontes’ novels this redefinition of sin takes on ecofeminist tones as they reveal the ways that women of color lead the environmental justice movement against coloniality and capitalism and their intersecting investment in patriarchy to establish what Priscilla Ybarra calls “Goodlife” values which predate the Anglo imperialism of the 19th century.

Chapter Three expands the eco-spiritual imaginary and fight for environmental justice to a broader Latinx coalition of writers including Dominican American writer Junot Díaz and Mexican American writer Alfredo Véa to enunciate a transpacific eco-spiritual imaginary. This transpacific imaginary in *Gods Go Begging* (1999) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) uses the Buddhist understanding of interconnection to relate U.S. imperialism abroad with coloniality at home, thereby troubling U.S. notions of the nation even as these authors write from within U.S. borders. Using non-human elements, like jade in *Gods Go Begging* or the migrant mongoose in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as both symbols of Buddhism and narrative signposts, Véa and Díaz connect authors, readers and characters across boundaries of time, space, nation, race and species to protest U.S. intervention in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic respectively.

Chapter Four examines a more overtly Buddhist transpacific imaginary in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) which speaks back to postmodern theory to reassert the ability of author and reader to connect across boundaries of space, time, race and species. Revolving around the character of Ruth, a Japanese American mixed-race woman struggling with her mother's Alzheimer's, the book traces both her mother's and her own slippage in time. When the journal of 15-year-old Nao Yasutani washes up on the shore of Ruth's Pacific-Northwest island home, she realizes her narrative entanglement with Nao through a shape-shifting crow that guides Ruth between storyworlds and through a transpacific ecological interdependency between Japan and the North American continent. This ecological interdependency is caused by environmental concerns such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and the 2011 tsunami with its resulting Fukushima nuclear meltdown that carries radioactive detritus all the way to Ruth's

Pacific-Northwest shore. Only by embracing her ecological interconnection with Nao is Ruth able to reimagine her narrative interconnection across space and time.

Chapter Five examines a transatlantic ecowomanist spirituality in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and argues that Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) contains important parallels and differences that help carve out an anti-racist/anti-colonial space for white writers within the decolonial project. While Walker looks to a pan-African conception of pre-colonial spirituality in Western Africa to express her ecowomanist conception of an immanent genderless god, Kingsolver follows a white missionary family to the Belgian Congo to show her character's gradual growth into understanding her culpability in the system of coloniality and her move toward making reparations to both the people and the earth as an active engagement in anti-racist work.

While each chapter addresses a unique set of identities held in tension across a particular span of time and space, this dissertation as a whole charts the emergence of a shared set of narrative moves. These narrative moves not only challenge the hegemony of colonial and post-colonial modes of thinking but reimagine and thereby remake the world as an interconnected space. Using postmodern narrative tropes like self-referential discourse and skepticism of meta-narratives to translate indigenous and non-western forms of knowledge for a broader U.S. audience, these novels establish an ecological imaginary that maintains a spiritual reverence for the interconnections (both physical and imagined) across boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species. In establishing these interconnections, these novels challenge the binaries that have dominated Western thought since the beginning of the modern period. This book's purpose is to expose the line of an eco-spiritual imaginary in recent U.S. fiction.

Notes:

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- ¹ Lionnet François and Shu-Mei Shih, "Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally," in *Minor Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2005).
- ² Walter Mignolo, "Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo," ed. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): 197.
- ³ Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533.
- ⁴ Walter Mignolo, "Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo," ed. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): 196–212.
- ⁵ Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1994), 28.
- ⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994), 10.
- ⁷ Homi Bhabha, "The World and the Home," *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 141, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466222>.
- ⁸ Stephen Slemon, "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism," in *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1994), 52.
- ⁹ Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (March 2007): 452, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.
- ¹⁰ Rocío G. Davis, "Fictional Transits and Ruth Ozeki's *a Tale for the Time Being*," *Biography* 38, no. 1 (2015): 89.
- ¹¹ Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (March 2007): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.
- ¹² Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, Duke University Press Books, 2011), 21.
- ¹³ Mignolo, 16.
- ¹⁴ Mignolo, 16.
- ¹⁵ Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," 499.
- ¹⁶ Michelle M. Haggerty and Mary Pearl Meuth, eds., *Texas Master Naturalist* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 183.

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- 17 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 11.
- 18 Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism*, 17.
- 19 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 13.
- 20 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 13.
- 21 David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, *Deep Ecology and World Religions : New Essays on Sacred Ground*, SUNY Series in Radical Social and Political Theory (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 1, <http://proxy.libraries.smu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=67096&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- 22 David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, 1.
- 23 David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, 77.
- 24 Walter Mignolo, "Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo," ed. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): 199.
- 25 Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham [N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
- 26 Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (Tucson, Arz.: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 4.
- 27 Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), xvi.
- 28 Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 6.
- 29 Pérez, 6.
- 30 Pérez, 7.

CHAPTER 1: The Narrative Approach to Environmental Apocalypse

Walter Mignolo writes that “Indigeneity and Land/Spirituality have been and continue to be strong pillars of ongoing decolonizing processes.”¹ While the term “indigeneity” risks flattening the diverse multitude of indigenous cultures across the globe, the Native American writers I examine in this chapter engage all three of these pillars of decoloniality—indigeneity, land, and spirituality. Through their engagement with these intersections, these writers become foundational to the decolonial environmental movement which I call an eco-spiritual imaginary as they co-opt the Euro-American art form of the novel to “writ[e] back’ to the colonizing force.”² The Native novels which compose part of this movement, this eco-spiritual imaginary, speak to the people on the land remembering who they were before European colonization and reworking a lost world. While their pre-colonial world, understood as the land as it was governed by Native peoples, has been lost, Native Americans themselves have not.

These Native writers tell a story of endurance and renewal as they look to the past for guidance on how to address problems in the present. As Kyle Powys Whyte has shown, for example, many Native people see the impending threat of human-caused climate apocalypse in a different light from their European American counterparts. For white Americans, the climate apocalypse seems a new problem, something which requires a complete reworking of modern civilization to solve. For Native people, however, this impending threat is only the latest ripple in a set of concentric waves of ecological apocalypse initiated by European colonization of the

Americas.³ As a result, contemporary Native writers access 400 years of strategies for coping with these waves of ecological apocalypse caused by Euro-American civilization and its commodification of both people and the land. What's more, Native people also look to stories from the past for a possible future. While Euro-American colonizers built an entire civilization on the construct of nature as separate from and independent of human culture, Native oral tradition recalls a time when human actions were based on an understanding of interdependence and balance. Thus, while Native cultures also cultivated the land for human benefit, they could acknowledge the way that they were changing their environment and remained watchful of the ways that they affected the ecological balance. The stories which recount this history lead the writers I examine in this chapter to posit a narrative approach to the ecological problems facing not only Native people but the American continent itself.

This approach is deeply tied not only to specific narratives about who we are as a nation but to our definitions of narrative itself. Decolonization works to undo the systems and institutions constructed since colonization. Decoloniality works to undo the cultural imaginaries that uphold those systems and institutions. If, as Jameson argues, ideology is structured within “the all-informing process of *narrative*” as “the central function or *instance* of the human mind,” then narrative is where we must look for the reproduction of those cultural imaginaries and for their undoing.⁴ It is this fact that the contemporary Native American writers I discuss here seem to grasp so well.

One reason for this heightened Native awareness of cultural reproduction in narrative fiction lies in the fact that what we have come to call Native American Literature today implies a false monolith of cultural and literary tradition. The so-called American Indian renaissance marked by N. Scott Momaday's 1968 publication of *The House Made of Dawn* followed over a

hundred years of Native novel writing, not to mention a history of sermons and other written literary forms preceded by an oral tradition thousands of years old. Thus, the development of what we call Native American literature today was only the development of narrative fiction in a sense recognizable by the Euro-American tradition. Native American novels, therefore, unlike the oral stories developed strictly by Native people for Native people, have developed entirely within the context of colonization. They developed, in other words, “with a constant emphasis upon the political implications of bearing witness to the historical ‘moment’ in order to ‘write to’, and thus actively create, an emphatically Indian ‘future.’”⁵ As a recent subgenre of the thousand-year-old tradition of Native storytelling, then, Native American novels stand out as newcomers co-opting Euro-American narrative techniques to translate indigenous knowledge and methodologies for a broader audience.

Because of this hybrid form which simultaneously looks to an indigenous oral tradition and the Euro-American novel, many contemporary Native novels comfortably draw on postmodern techniques of meta-narrative consciousness and self-referential discourse. Like a performer reciting an ancient story with variations and flourishes of their own, these novels are self-aware, so to speak, of their role as storyteller as well as their audience of both Native and Euro-American readers. Because of this mixed audience, “many Native writings can be interpreted as part of a long tradition of negotiation and mediation between cultures, and as interventions into established and implicitly racist Euro-American discourses that employ the conventions of Manifest Destiny to identify traditional Native cultures as redundant in a ‘modern’ world.”⁶ Through their awareness of the colonial discourses with which their novels negotiate, These Native writers engage in a poststructuralist undoing of these master narratives. In juxtaposing Native mythologies with the colonial mythologies at the heart of Euro-American

society, Native writers expose them as just that—mythologies which must be undone not only for the health and well-being of Native people but for the land as well. This quest for the well-being of the land which figures strongly in many Native novels exposes the ideologies inherent in Euro-American discourses about nature. To continue with Jameson’s understanding of narrative as the architecture for the political unconscious, I turn to a short literary history of the entanglement between the term “nature” and Euro-American representations of Native people. By understanding the Euro-American mythology of Natives and Nature as expressed in literature we can better understand the way Native American novelists bring a thousands-year-old oral tradition and insert it into existing conceptions of Euro-American literature to subvert these white American mythologies about the nation’s past

Transcendentalism and the Nature/Native Paradigm Shift

The rise of Transcendentalism in American culture and literature marked both a sudden increase in writing about nature and a dramatic paradigm shift in the way the term was understood. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” (published in 1832) captures the tension inherent in this moment of transition as well as providing a snapshot into both the past meaning of the term and its future use in American literature. Recounted by Hawthorne as an American origin myth set during the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the story involves a wedding between two inhabitants of Merry Mount which is disrupted by undercover Puritans masquerading as participants. While the wedding guests (and the Anglican priest performing the ceremony) are tied to trees and whipped for their idol worship, Governor John Endicott takes pity on the newly-wed couple and spares them in order to reform them: “there be qualities in the youth, which may make him valiant to fight, and sober to

toil, and pious to pray; and in the maiden, that may fit her to become a mother in our Israel, bringing up babes in better nurture than her own hath been.”⁷ This wedding story is imbued with mythological qualities from the start. Not only does the reference to Israel identify the Puritans with Israel’s own God-sanctioned genocide of the original inhabitants of their promised land, but Hawthorne further casts this struggle between the Puritans and the Indian-loving Merry Mounters as a Manichean battle between good and evil with his pronouncement that “jollity and gloom were contending for an empire”⁸ Gloom wins the day, signaling the victory of the Puritans and the dominance of their religious empire which subjugates both nature and the native inhabitants as they “proclaim bounties on the heads of wolves and the scalps of Indians.”⁹ However, the spark of Merry Mount within the hearts of the youth and maiden signals an eventual return to the joys of sublime nature—perhaps within the Transcendentalist movement itself. Endicott, in casting the wreath of roses about the married couple despite his vow to reform them, performs an act of prophecy, and the young couple, though now bound to live as Puritans, take within them “all the purest and best of their early joys.”¹⁰

The tension here between the Puritans and the Merry Mounters is symbolic of the paradigm shift occurring around the time that Hawthorne was writing. As Paul Outka explains in *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*, “immersed in the wilderness, the early settlers violently ‘restored’ an Edenic pastoral; immersed in the settled pastoral, the transcendentalists pined for the ever-retreating wild.”¹¹ Coupled with this dichotomy of nature into pastoral and wilderness, the Puritans and other early European settlers associated themselves with the pastoral and the attempt to return nature to its Biblical prelapsarian state through cultivation, meanwhile associating Native Americans with the wilderness, representing the fall of humanity and the dominion of the devil. Thus it is in

Hawthorne's mythological tale that the Puritans "compared the masques [of the Merry Mounters] to those devils and ruined souls, with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness."¹² As Ronald Takaki points out in *A Different Mirror*, the Puritans were well-known for their rhetoric of Native Americans as "devils" and "savages,"¹³ and Hawthorne later emphasizes the point in his description of the Puritans: "Their weapons were always at hand, to shoot down the straggling savage. When they met in conclave, it was never to keep up the old English mirth, but to hear sermons three hours long, or to proclaim bounties on the heads of wolves and the scalps of Indians."¹⁴ As mentioned above, the second portion of this passage reveals the way the Puritans colonized both nature as "wilderness" and indigenous people as "savages" and "devils." In their minds, the two were conflated.

Meanwhile, the Merry Mounters could be read as the spiritual/literary forebears of the transcendentalists. Outka once again explains: "The view of the wilderness shifted once the work of the original colonial eco-ideology had been accomplished—the Native Americans killed, large (nonhuman) predation eliminated, agriculture established—shifted from savage Indians to tragic ones, from a hostile nature to a loving nature, from a reflection of the devil's face to a reflection of the Spirit's."¹⁵ Both of these differences are easy to identify in the descriptions of the Merry Mounters. Rather than shooting Indians and natural predators, they dance with them. Within the ring of dancers circling their "altar" to nature are Europeans dressed in masks resembling a stag, a wolf, a bear, and a satyr. Next to the person dressed as a bear is "a real bear of the dark forest, lending each of his fore paws to the grasp of a human hand, and as ready for the dance as any in that circle."¹⁶ Also within their bacchanalian ring is someone dressed as "a nobler figure ... an Indian hunter, with feathery crest and wampum belt."¹⁷ The contrast could not be greater between the Puritan's dark wilderness inhabited by savage devils and the Merry Mounter's

shrine to nature with its roses “scattered round their feet” and a wedding wreath composed of flowers “gathered in the sunniest spots of the forest.”¹⁸ While the Puritans conquer nature and its inhabitants, the Merry Mounters celebrate the noble savage and hold hands with a bear.

Although the Transcendentalist flip between these two competing views of nature and Native Americans was largely positive, their new vision of nature as sublime had its own problems. First, it still carried with it the fundamental division between nature and culture brought to the Americas by both sets of Europeans. Evidence of this division between nature and culture even among the Transcendentalists and their symbolic stand-ins, the Merry Mounters, can be seen in Hawthorne’s story through subtle references to the bear’s “inferior nature” or the “whole acres of the forest” felled for their merry bonfires.¹⁹ Second, the vision of untouched nature as sublime bought into the same mythology of “the pull of a vacant continent” that would be articulated by the Jackson Turner thesis some thirty to sixty years later.²⁰ In reality, nature was already touched by the hands of an extensive network of indigenous people tied to both agriculture and the seasonal migrations of large animals of prey. No part of the North American continent was untouched by these civilizations, and the worship of sublime nature in large part acted to help hide the genocide that had opened these lands for European settlement.

While traces of the division between nature and culture are apparent in Hawthorne’s story, nowhere is the Transcendentalist division of nature and culture more apparent than in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s monumental essay titled “Nature.” In this essay, self-published for the pleasure of Emerson’s closest family and friends, Emerson struggles to bind humans and nature together in what he calls the Universal Spirit, but he can’t quite escape the Platonic Ideal and the belief that the human mind is separate from and establishes dominion over both the body and the natural world: “Philosophically considered,” he writes in the introduction, “the universe is

composed of Nature and the Soul.” As if this couldn’t get any clearer, he continues: “Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.”²¹ While Emerson considers his body to be part of nature which is a step closer to deep ecological interconnection, he still sees his soul as something outside of nature. And while Emerson, like Whitman, craves a kind of unmediated contact with nature, writing of “an occult relation between man and the vegetable ... they nod to me and I to them,” this mystical acknowledgement falls short of the mutual dependence understood by many Native cultures as life-sustaining for both themselves and the land.²²

As Bruno Latour explains in *We Have Never Been Modern*, the consequences of this Cartesian dualism of spirit and body, culture and nature, are serious. Writing about Robert Boyle’s early experiments with vacuums leading to the formulation of his famous gas laws, Latour explains that in order to formulate a so-called “natural law,” Boyle had to artificially induce an unnatural phenomenon—a human-produced vacuum outside of the natural vacuum of space. In other words, Boyle had to change reality in order to formulate a law regarding the reality he had thus changed. This, according to Latour, marked the beginning of a new kind of distillation between the realm of “nature” on one hand and “culture” on the other.²³ Human culture, as manipulator and creator of nature had risen above its new domain by imagining that it could alter nature with no direct consequence on human culture. Emerson, like Boyle, also believed in the human ability to manipulate nature (he gave this broad category of science, architecture, and the visual arts the designation “Art”) with no direct consequences on the world around him, saying that “[human] operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human

mind, they do not vary the result.”²⁴ This attitude that human actions do not and even cannot dramatically change the world around them has carried over into the twenty-first century in the form of human-caused climate-change denial. While Latour’s thesis (or one of them) is a disavowal of the idea that Europeans ever actually escaped from the networks of hybridity binding them to the natural world over which they flaunted mastery, and thus the title of his book—*We Have Never Been Modern*—this separation of soul and body, culture and nature, has other dire consequences as well. Emerson writes about what he calls the “commodity” of Nature. While he is not directly referring to the fungibility of nature as a commodity in the capitalist sense, his explanation does smack of a rampant human centrism that puts humanity and its needs and wants as the ultimate purpose for the existence of the earth, an ideology in stark contrast to many Native perspectives. Dividing this utility of nature into two parts, Emerson writes not only of the way nature exists to provide humans with their physical needs such as food, water, and shelter, but also that it exists for our aesthetic pleasure. While Emerson shares a respect for nature as the bountiful provider with every other culture and spiritual tradition on earth, the problem is in his human-centric formulation, in which “Nature, in its ministry to man ... incessantly work[s] ... for the profit of man.”²⁵ And again, “a nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty.”²⁶ Along with the elevation of the soul above the realm of nature, Emerson’s belief that nature existed to serve a human aesthetic craving has persisted into the white environmental movement today, leading to clashes between mainstream (read white) environmentalist activists and Native proponents for the return of stolen land.

Beginning with the conservationist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the preservation of nature for human aesthetic pleasure had its roots in both the writings of that other monumental Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, as well as the work

of U.S. president Teddy Roosevelt. While Thoreau further romanticized the untouched wilderness as a place for spiritual and aesthetic renewal, Roosevelt became the father of the American conservationist movement by setting aside over 230 million acres of land for the creation of national parks. It is no accident, however, that the man who preserved all of this land as “untouched wilderness” was also instrumental in passing the General Allotment Act (Dawes Act) of 1887 which broke tribal ownership of communal land by allotting 160 acres to every tribal member and selling the vast remainder to the federal government. Owens writes “the major effect of the allotment was to take land away from Indians so effectively that in the forty-five years following the Dawes’ Act passage 90 million acres passed from Indian ownership.”²⁷ The Euro-American conservation movement responsible for the creation of National Parks for public enjoyment of nature are thus directly tied to Native dispossession. The roots of the white conservationist movement in Native dispossession of land have grown into contemporary environmentalism, giving rise to the concept of environmental justice as an alternative perspective vital to progress in healing the nature/culture divide. Explaining the difference between Euro-American and Native perspectives on nature Joni Adamson describes the construct of “pristine” wilderness which has persisted to this day and the way that it “assumes that all human culture is exploitative.”²⁸ She writes that the goal of preserving wilderness areas as natural history museums “fails to account for the ways in which some human communities have inhabited the land in sustainable ways.”²⁹ These communities, of course, are the Native inhabitants of the Americas who shaped the land for centuries before their colonization without destroying it or depleting its resources. Native people therefore come to environmental work with a very different perspective from many people of Euro-American descent: “their ancient historical ties to the land were the indisputable vehicle available for them to argue for the

protection of the land, while other protective mechanisms used by non-Native people were based on protecting the environment itself, divorced from any aspect of connection between humans and the land.”³⁰ Native people fight not to preserve an untouched landscape into which people can escape for solitude or self-discovery, but rather to protect their right to preserve the life-giving properties of that land on which they depend. These life-giving properties include more than just food and water, but also the ability to live free from toxic waste which disproportionately affects communities of color in the United States. As Adamson explains, the term environmental racism has come to mean “the deliberate targeting of minority communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of life-threatening poisons and pollutants in those communities, and the exclusion of people of color from leadership in the environmental movement.”³¹ Environmental justice work references this disparity and reveals the ways race factors into issues of environmental destruction. Thus, while American Transcendentalism and conservationism helped to raise public consciousness about the value of nature, it remained a Euro-American movement concerned with escape into untouched nature as a cure for civilization’s woes, a view which has persisted into Euro-American environmental activist work to this day.

Continued belief in the separation of nature from culture was the first problem with the Transcendentalist vision of “untouched” nature as sublime. The second problem was the masking of the very real violence and genocide that led to these vast swathes of “untouched” nature in the first place. Outka tells the story of John Muir, celebrated Scottish-American naturalist for whom the Redwood national monument in California, Muir Woods, was named. Outka recounts a moment when Muir, standing by a lake in Yosemite (another national park he helped found), wrote in his journal of the sublime landscape around him, which, as he said, “no foot seems to

have neared.”³² Muir, however, was writing “almost on the spot where Chief Tenaya of the Yosemite Miwok people was captured by Major Savage (really) of the Mariposa Brigade [only] twenty-five years earlier.”³³ The Euro-American mythology of an untouched wilderness not only functions to cover a centuries-long campaign of genocide against Native people but factually it is blatantly false. Rather than an empty wilderness waiting to be tamed the North American continent was home to somewhere around 18 million people, and around “5 million lived in what is now the United States” when Europeans first arrived on their shores.³⁴ What’s more, early European colonists reported that the land was already heavily cultivated. Takaki reports that “Captain John Smith sailed north from Virginia to explore the New England coast, where ... he found not wild men but farmers. The ‘paradise’ of Massachusetts, he reported, was ‘all planted with corn, groves, mulberries, savage gardens.’ ‘The sea Coast as you pass shews you all along large Corne fields.’”³⁵ As the native population shrank due to European diseases and resistance to encroachment on their lands, new European colonies sprang up “on the very lands the Indians had been living on before the epidemic[s].”³⁶ By the 1830s when the Indian Removal Act forced the Cherokee nation among others west of the Mississippi and into Oklahoma, the stage was set for the Transcendentalist romanticization of the disappearing Indian, a character as noble as he was tragic and whose inevitable extinction was to be mourned as much as the disappearance of that mythologically sublime and “untouched” land on which he roamed. Louis Owens traces this “great Western myth of cultural extinction” through American literature from Cooper’s Leatherstocking saga (1827-1841) all the way to Larry McMurtry’s (1985) *Lonesome Dove*:

Cooper’s stoic savage had padded out of the eastern forests (and, as Pearce has shown, out of an already well established tradition of ‘savagism’) squarely into American romanticism, and as naturalism began to darken the glass of American literature later in that century, Cooper’s noble stoic was joined by his close relative, the even more doomed, even more rapidly vanishing Native American. ... In the twentieth century the modernists would delightedly appropriate the

Indian as the quintessential naturalistic victim, and William Faulkner would add ‘Chief Doom’ to the Vanishing American Hall of Fame.”³⁷

Against this literary tradition of the disappearing Indian along with its corollary mythology of untouched nature, Native writers exert both their presence and their close and complex connection to the land.

Native Presence and Ecological Connection in Tommy Orange’s *There There* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*

In the novels I examine in this chapter, Native American writers use their collective memory of repeated apocalypse to construct multi-leveled narratives that stack layers of history, ceremony, oral tradition, and contemporary fiction to retell a story of the Americas and to reimagine what we are as a nation. Drawing on postmodern narrative techniques including self-referential and non-chronological narrative structures, Native writers challenge the foundational mythology of Euro-American civilization rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery.* As Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah point out, the Doctrine of Discovery which has been reworked in the North American continent as manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, and global imperialism, creates a toxic narrative about America’s founding as a nation, enacting itself as coloniality by hiding a colonial national origin and erasing the presence of Native American people in the present.³⁸ The narrative of coloniality teaches that Native people are part of the past—their cultures are dead or dying, and the process of assimilation and re-education carried out by white America has succeeded in civilizing the last “savage.” Native writers resist this narrative.

* The Doctrine of Discovery originated in a series of papal bulls in the 15th century giving official sanction to Catholic European nations to claim “pagan” lands and to enslave all non-Christian inhabitants. Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 15–16.

In place of this colonial narrative, Leslie Marmon Silko and Tommy Orange enunciate a decolonial eco-spiritual narrative using postmodern narrative techniques to write a new meta-narrative about both Native presence in the Americas and about the role of narrative itself as an answer to impending apocalypse. In *Ceremony*, the most recent iteration of human-caused apocalypse comes in the form of a WW-II era uranium mine on Laguna land and the threat of global atomic destruction it represents. In *There There*, the apocalypse reveals itself as a mass shooting at a Native Powwow. Underlying these impending crises on which each narrative hinges in the present are the echoing narratives of repeated apocalypse in the past. The ecological threat of the Uranium mine recalls centuries of Native land taken and destroyed by gold mining, coal mining, and corporate agriculture, while the massacre in *There There* recalls the never-ending campaign to eliminate Native people through violence, removal, and re-education. In both novels, however, characters look to the stories of the past to survive the crises of the present, learning that a deep connection to the earth is the key both to keeping the stories of their individual cultures alive and to their own spiritual renewal.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Often marked by the awarding of the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction to Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday for his novel *House Made of Dawn*, what has now been labeled the Native American literary Renaissance was born out of burgeoning civil rights movements both within the African American and Native American populations of the United States.³⁹ The Red Power movement and the American Indian Movement (AIM) unified diverse Native nations through shared feelings of dispossession, historical displacement, and the need for cultural revival against “enduring Euro-American racism and active attempts to eradicate Native cultures through a wide

range of federal Indian policies”⁴⁰ It was into this political context of a rising Native political consciousness that Silko’s 1977 novel *Ceremony* was published. While Tommy Orange’s later novel references many of the political protests enacted by these Native movements including the occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969-1971) and the siege at Wounded Knee (1973), these events form an unspoken backdrop for Silko’s influential novel.[†]

Along with Momaday’s novel, *Ceremony* marks the early era of the Native literary renaissance that accompanied this rising political consciousness, quickly becoming one of the foundational texts for studies of contemporary Native American literature.⁴¹ For the purposes of this dissertation it can also be considered as a foundational text for the rise of an eco-spiritual imaginary in the United States alongside Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). Several factors help explain the simultaneous burgeoning of multi-ethnic literature in the United States alongside a rising environmental consciousness during this period from the early 1970s and into the 1980s. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* rocked the United States with its investigation of the way toxic human waste was moving up the food chain, decimating songbird populations and even working its way into human food products. Seven years later, Greenpeace was born as a protest movement against toxic radiation from nuclear testing—a major theme in Silko’s 1977 novel as an open Uranium mine on Laguna land becomes the embodiment of the earth-destroying evil she calls the “witchery.” At the same time that white America was beginning to wrestle with the ecological implications of its own

[†] As noted below, Silko’s novel gained success not only because of a rising Native political consciousness, but also because the publishing industry identified a market for ethnic writing. Thus, while Silko co-opts the postmodern narrative forms in vogue in the 1970s and ‘80s to translate Laguna knowledge and methodologies for a broader Euro-American audience, her now canonical status within Native American literary studies has led some critics to note the tension between her “genuinely inventive local resistance and a deeply nostalgic recodification that aligns Silko’s narratives not so much with their traditional sources of Pueblo oral cultures as with Western high modernism’s reactionary appropriation of a global mythology of sacrificial rejuvenation.” Shamoan Zamir, “Literature in a ‘National Sacrifice Area:’ Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*,” in *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 400.

toxic waste, U.S. publishers began to identify a market for writing by under-represented ethnicities. In 1971 Harper and Row established a Native American publishing program influenced by the rise of ethnic studies programs in universities across the United States.⁴² Around the same time, Quinto Sol Publications (QSP) was established at UC Berkeley marked by the inaugural issue of *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*, the first academic journal dedicated exclusively to Latinx concerns in the United States.⁴³ Establishing the Premio Quinto Sol Award for Chicana/o writers in 1970, QSP selected Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Ultima* in 1972. Upon publication, the novel quickly garnered broad acclaim with its portrayal of a hybrid Native and Catholic spirituality connected by the New Mexico landscape in which it is set. Ten years later, Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize Winner *The Color Purple* also linked landscape and spirituality using characters' deep connection to the earth in both rural Georgia and Western Africa to challenge Euro-American conceptions of both God and nature.

While *Ceremony* was born out of this cultural context of rising interest in both environmental concerns and ethnic studies/publishing, it not only spoke for the rising Native consciousness from which Silko began writing fiction, but it also established several key themes which helped define Native fiction for future writers. In addition to the sense of post-apocalyptic disaster discussed earlier, *Ceremony* inverts this history of genocidal disaster into a triumphant declaration of survival and a blatant challenge to the Euro-American trope of the disappearing Indian. As a subset of this theme, Louis Owens identifies Native fiction as “a process of deconstructing the verbal artifacts of Indian—or mixedblood—identity” as well as “a process of reconstruction, of self-discovery and cultural recovery.”⁴⁴ Silko's novel, alongside Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* established this theme of mixed-blood identity, not as something tragic but

as a path to greater self-discovery. Central to the search for identity in Silko's novel is the role of storytelling not only as a means back to a cultural center and the creation of a dynamic Native identity in a post-apocalyptic America, but also as an integral part of re-connecting with the earth. All of these themes established by Silko's novel still show up in Tommy Orange's *There There* published over 40 years later. The two themes key to the development of a specifically Native instantiation of an eco-spiritual imaginary are the way both novels directly challenge the Euro-American mythology of Indians as remnants of a dead or dying culture as well as the Euro-American ideology of the nature/culture divide.

The protagonist of Silko's novel, Tayo, is the son of a white man and a Native woman, and he is stuck between the binary opposition of these two racial identities. He also suffers from PTSD and a recurring nightmare in which he sees his Uncle Josiah's face among a company of Japanese prisoners who he was ordered to execute while he was serving in the Philippines during World War II. Unable to find relief from the white army psychologists who seek to rehabilitate him following his survival of the infamous Bataan Death March, he turns to a Laguna medicine man named Koo'oosh who performs the traditional Laguna ceremony to atone for the bloodshed committed by returning warriors. When this is ineffective, Tayo's aunt suggests a last-ditch effort to heal his trauma, referring him to an outcast hermit named Betonie. Betonie is not universally trusted by the Laguna Pueblo because, unlike Koo'oosh, he changes traditional stories, rituals and ceremonies to fit his needs. In an oral history of his own making/changing, Betonie reframes Tayo's mixed-blood dilemma away from the white/Native binary and into a more expansive construct of witchery vs. ceremony.

As Tayo and Betonie sit on the hillside outside his Hogan overlooking the white-majority city of Gallup below, Tayo begins to confess his doubt that Betonie or his ceremony can set

anything right. He thinks of Betonie's meager Hogan that "it seemed suddenly so pitiful and small compared to the world he knew the white people had—a world of comfort in the sprawling houses he'd seen in California, a world of plenty in the food he had carried from the officer's mess to dump into garbage cans. ... All Betonie owned in the world was in this room. What kind of healing power was in this?"⁴⁵ Suddenly filled with anger, Tayo thinks "this was where the white people and their promises had left the Indians." Out loud he comments to Betonie, "they took almost everything, didn't they?"⁴⁶ Beginning to deconstruct Tayo's indoctrination in the separation between nature and culture that ownership of land implies, Betonie points to Mount Taylor above them, saying "they only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. The deeds and papers don't mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain"⁴⁷ Not yet ready to understand this message, Tayo confesses his next insecurity, his own mixed heritage: "I wonder sometimes,' he said, 'because my mother went with white men.' He stopped there, unable to say any more"⁴⁸ This is where Betonie begins to shift Tayo's thinking away from the Native/white binary, responding that "nothing is that simple ... you don't write off all the white people just like you don't trust all the Indians."⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Tayo still doesn't quite understand. When Betonie looks out at the highway below them and says "there are no limits to this thing, ... when it was set loose, it ranged everywhere, from the mountains and plains to the towns and cities; rivers and oceans never stopped it," Tayo still thinks he is talking specifically about white civilization. In a stark reversal of the myth of the disappearing Indian, Betonie proclaims instead that "we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place."⁵⁰ With this strange pronouncement of Native responsibility for Euro-American existence, Betonie begins to challenge both mythologies—the disappearing Indian and the nature/culture divide.

Writing about what he identifies as another negative mythology or stereotype in representations of Native people which he calls the trope of the restless young man, Robert Dale Parker writes of Betonie's pronouncement of Native responsibility for white people that it serves to invert this stereotype by claiming Native agency even in the face of Euro-American coloniality:

Betonie's story inverts the assumptions that Indians do nothing and that doing and agency are the exclusive province of white people. In his story whites are the passive objects of Indian doing. In effect his story presents Indians the way the dominant ideology presents whites, and presents whites as soulless, uncivilized killers, gesturing toward if not directly repeating the way the dominant ideology presents Indians.⁵¹

Writing back to the colonizing force against the mythology of the disappearing Indian, Silko seems to be saying not only that Indians still exist in the contemporary world but that they have agency and power in this world. They can "deal with white people ... because we invented white people."⁵² Betonie's claim of Native responsibility for the creation of white people also directly answers Tayo's doubt in the ceremony he is about to perform by reframing his understanding of coloniality from the binary of white vs. Native to that of witchery vs. ceremony. Native Ceremony has power against white coloniality because it was Native witchery that started it in the first place. This doesn't exonerate white people. They still committed all of the evil which has ultimately led to Tayo's sickness, but "his sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything."⁵³ This something larger is centered on Tayo's reconnection to Laguna land and the exposure of the underlying ideology behind white colonization and the greediness, disconnection, and fear that arise from his indoctrination in the nature/culture divide.

In reframing Tayo's understanding in terms of witchery vs. ceremony, Betonie begins to make this underlying ideology clear, showing Tayo that while he thinks the problem with his

world is white colonization, colonization itself is a symptom of a deeper evil which is using Euro-American civilization for its ends; this deeper evil is the separation of nature from culture and the resultant greed, violence and fear that come as a consequence of the commodification of the land. Once again, this doesn't exonerate Euro-American colonizers in any sense, but it does reveal that racialized violence is the product of a deeper ideology at the root of the problem. Just as Betonie tells Tayo not to "write off all the white people just like you don't trust all the Indians," the institutionalization of race alone doesn't explain the waves of ecological apocalypse wrought by colonization or the threat of nuclear apocalypse in the future.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as Betonie explains, "we have done as much fighting as we can with the destroyers and the thieves: as much as we could do and still survive."⁵⁵ Unlike Emo who wants to "go after what they [white people] have, and take it from them" the way they took everything from Native people, Betonie realizes that more violence will only further the witchery. He explains this with a story.

Betonie begins his story with the phrase "Long time ago."⁵⁶ By type-setting this beginning to a distinctively oral story as a poem, Silko signals to her readers the shift in genre. However, like many other distinctively postmodern writers who challenge the boundaries between genre (think Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* which was published in 1977, the same year as *Ceremony*) Silko blends the oral story with Tayo's narrative in such a way that while the reader is aware of the shift in genre, it often becomes difficult to separate the oral mythology from the progression of the narrative in time.[‡] As a result, Tayo's narrative becomes imbued with the same

[‡] See also Owens: "Rather than a previously conceived metaphorical framework within which the anarchy and futility of 'real' (as opposed to mythic) existence can be ordered, as often occurs in modernist texts, mythology in *Ceremony* insists upon its actual simultaneity with and interpenetration into the events of the every-day, mundane world. Holy Persons are not metaphors used to imply a 'holistic' system of ecological values in this novel ...; they are very simply part of the reality into which Tayo is subsumed" (168).

transtemporal qualities as the oral stories, and the oral stories become part of Tayo's narrative such that ultimately, as Tillett puts it, "the text itself therefore functions as a ceremony."⁵⁷

Through this blending of oral mythology, ceremony, and fictional narrative,[§] Silko communicates traditional Laguna beliefs in the sacredness of place over time and Tayo's quest as one of centering himself on his Laguna homeland rather than progressing toward a traditional western narrative denouement "in which human existence is perceived as motion through space, which is cast as the past, present, and future."^{58**}

As Dina Gilio-Whitaker argues, "for Indigenous peoples, a spatial orientation emphasizes human linkages with place, and all the elements of that place, spanning time."⁵⁹ Because Native spirituality is rooted in place over time, the opposite of traditional Euro-American religions which progress through history toward an ultimate salvific event, Silko is able to use this postmodern blending of genre in her novel to express the pre-existing Laguna concept of place across time even though she is not necessarily concerned with a postmodern deconstruction of paradigms about time in narrative. As Louis Owens points out, Native American writers "work for the most part consciously outside the concerns of postmodern theorists" while at the same time "the postmodern insistence upon the fragmented sense of self finds its reflection in the radically deracinated mixedblood of much Indian fiction."⁶⁰ Tayo is one such mixedblood Indian whose "sense of self has collapsed into a kind of bifurcated inarticulateness that has been defined as an almost quintessentially postmodern condition."⁶¹ In the same way that Native novelists write back to political coloniality using Euro-American narrative techniques to communicate

[§] See also Owens: "Self-reflexively, the life-giving story is within the belly of the storyteller while the rituals and ceremony ... are found within the belly of the story" (Owens 170).

^{**} See also Owens: "the romantic impulse that conventionally subsumes the 'not me' into the transcendent 'me'—that evolves into the heroic quester in all his individual glory—is inverted in the culture-hero paradigm operative in Tayo's story as the 'me' is subsumed into the 'not me' and Tayo discovers that the two are one" (168).

Native perspectives to non-native audiences, they also co-opt postmodern narrative techniques for disrupting narrative expectations about time to express Native understandings of time that pre-existed postmodern narrative. Native oral stories have always had this transtemporal element to them, representing a reality rooted outside of traditional Western meta-narratives. Thus, in Silko's novel, Tayo recovers his sense of self not only by finding his place in history but by re-establishing his connection to the place where he and his people have always been—by healing his Euro-American indoctrination into the nature/culture divide.

Following Betonie's signaled shift into oral storytelling with the words "long time ago" he begins unfolding the story about witchery and its implication in the nature/culture divide. Having already stated that Native people were responsible for the creation of white people, the story picks up from that point: "in the beginning/there were no white people in this world/there was nothing European./And this world might have gone on like that/except for one thing:/witchery."⁶² Importantly, the story emphasizes that Native witchery pre-existed white people, not because the story is going to exonerate Europeans for their colonial campaign but because it is going to take agency from Euro-American civilization even for the construction of the nature/culture divide associated with witchery. As Betonie stated earlier, "white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates."⁶³ This original sin of separation from nature, to borrow the Christian terminology, pre-exists the white colonizers who were used by it because "this world was already complete/even without white people."⁶⁴ From here, the story begins explaining where this original sin came from: "then it happened."⁶⁵ What happened was a conference of witches which significantly, didn't include white people. These witches, some from "far far away," some with "slanty eyes" and some with "black skin," "all got together for a contest."⁶⁶ While most of the witches jump into animal skins or boil nasty potions with dead

babies and whorls of skin, one witch decides to outdo them by telling a story. Just as the Laguna Deity Thought-Woman, the spider, began Silko's whole narrative "thinking of a story" and thus willing it into being,⁶⁷ so this witch tells the others present "as I tell the story it will begin to happen."⁶⁸ In addition to this post-modern narrative self-reference, another example of the way Silko uses postmodern narrative techniques to question constructs of narrative that Native people never participated in to begin with, the witch is actively contending with Thought-Woman's power by demonstrating his ability to create reality through story. The witch then proceeds to speak white people into existence in "caves across the ocean/in caves of dark hills/white skin people."⁶⁹ Like the Nation of Islam which reversed the white narrative of racial dominance by telling the story of white people living in caves in Europe while ancient kingdoms in Africa flourished, Betonie's story, even while articulated by a witch, also reverses this white colonial narrative. After creating the white people with his words, the witch speaks the evil of the nature/culture divide into being: "then they [white people] grow away from the earth/then they grow away from the sun/then they grow away from the plants and animals./They see no life/When they look/they see only objects./The world is a dead thing for them/the trees and rivers are not alive/the mountains and stones are not alive./The deer and bear are objects/They see no life"⁷⁰ As Gilio-Whitaker explains, "for Indigenous people land and all its elements have agency by virtue of their very life energy in a way that they do not in Western cultures."⁷¹ Thus, while Native spirituality hinges on a deep interconnection with every living thing, Euro-American civilization is based on the commodity value of individually itemized objects—crops, livestock, even the minerals under the earth. Thus, when the witch says that the white people he has created "see only objects" he refers to this separation between people and the land as a subject/object relationship where the looker becomes the dominant species with ownership over the land.

After prophesying that “the wind will blow [these white people] across the ocean” the witch next begins to detail the various ways that their view of the earth as an object rather than a living thing will wreak ecological devastation on both the land and the people once they arrive. Repeating the formula “they will kill the things they fear” and “the people will starve,” the witch ties each level of ecological apocalypse to its ultimate result for Native people. First, he says that they will kill all the animals and the people will starve. Next they will poison the water and “spin the water away” so there will be drought and the people will starve. Once they have destroyed the animals and the water they will turn on the people themselves: “they will fear the people/They kill what they fear” and “Entire villages will be wiped out ... corpses for us/Blood for us.”⁷² In a sadistic reformulation of Manifest Destiny the witch says that “they will take this world from ocean to ocean,” not out of some noble God-given purpose of civilization but to work the witch’s evil: “set in motion now/set in motion by our witchery/set in motion/to work for us.”⁷³ However, because it is enacted by the witchery, this taking does not ultimately benefit the Euro-Americans who enact it at the witch’s command: “The stolen rivers and mountains ... will eat their hearts and jerk their mouths from the Mother.”⁷⁴ In other words, their own sense of separation from nature and superiority to her will ultimately destroy them too. This is the next turn in the story: “they will turn on each other/they will destroy each other.”⁷⁵ The way that they will destroy each other is through atomic war: “Up here/in these hills/they will find the rocks,/rocks with veins of green and yellow and black./They will lay the final pattern with these rocks/they will lay it across the world and explode everything.”⁷⁶ Betonie’s story as narrated by the witch thus traces the waves of ecological apocalypse initiated by colonization and extending all the way to the creation of the atomic bomb.

Written at the height of the Cold War, Silko's novel views the threat of nuclear apocalypse as the final ripple in a series of ecological disasters for Native people—a disaster that will finally destroy the white people who enact it as well. While this story traces the ongoing effects of coloniality up to the particular historical context in which it was written, in keeping with the transtemporal nature of the Native oral tradition, this story also becomes prophetic for continuing waves of devastation into the twenty-first century. Just as the witch predicts that the white people “swarming like larva/out of a crushed ant hill” will kill all the animals, so we find ourselves today in the midst of what evolutionary biologists have called the sixth mass extinction event or Anthropocene due to the potential loss of up to 75% of existing species as a result of human activity and predation. Already, nearly 500 species have been eradicated between 1900 and 2021 while the United Nations' 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services predicted that up to 1 million more face extinction in the next few decades without concerted effort to reduce the amount of human-caused habitat destruction and global climate change.⁷⁷ When the witch in the story reveals the next wave of ecological devastation as the poisoning of the water, Silko references the Anaconda mining company's radioactive poisoning of the Rio Paguete River, an issue that persists to this day.⁷⁸ When the witch says that the white people will “spin the water away” resulting in drought for the people, Black Mesa in New Mexico becomes a prime example. Here, Joni Adamson details the way the entire water table has fallen and natural springs dried up as the Peabody Coal company “pumps more than 1.4 billion gallons of groundwater a year, mixes it with crushed coal, then sends the mixture through a slurry pipeline to the Mohave Generating Station in Nevada,” almost literally “spinning the water away” as Betonie's witch narrator declared it would be.⁷⁹ Thus, while Betonie's story overtly

references the history of colonization and the impending threat of nuclear war, its transtemporal nature as an oral mythology retains relevance into the twenty-first century as well.

Whether prophetic or retrospective, Betonie's story finds the roots of all of these forms of ecological apocalypse in the nature/culture divide. This connection becomes clear in regard to the threat of nuclear apocalypse toward the end of the novel when Tayo crouches in a pile of uranium tailings from the open pit mine on Laguna land, secretly watching the witchery ceremony enacted by his fellow war veteran Emo. As Emo hangs Tayo's friend Harley in a tangle of barbed wire reminiscent of the crown of thorns placed on Christ's head in the Christian mythology, he cuts whorls of skin from Harley's feet and fingertips referencing the "whorls of skin/cut from fingertips" used by witches in Betonie's story for their potions. That Emo hangs Harley with arms outstretched in the shape of a cross further links colonial Christianity to the witchery itself. As Tayo crouches watching, he picks up a piece of rock with the same green and yellow streaks referenced in the witchery story—Uranium. Suddenly, he understands:

The pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time.⁸⁰

Tayo suddenly realizes that the ceremony he has been enacting is part of this metanarrative about the witchery which crosses time and space to center on this one place—Laguna land. This explains his vision of Josiah with the Japanese soldiers in the Phillipines. The Uranium from Laguna land would ultimately fall on Japan making sense of Betonie's earlier words that it wasn't surprising for him to see Josiah with the Japanese. Referencing the common understanding of shared ancestry between Native and Asian people via the Bering Strait as well as a common understanding of white racism against both Native and Japanese people, Betonie says of the Japanese: "You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not

strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world.”⁸¹ The Uranium in Tayo’s hands becomes the final connection (not unlike the Jade in *Gods Go Begging*, see Chapter 3) which shows him how the nature/culture divide has caused all of these apocalyptic events, from European conquest to the atomic bombs falling on Japan. Tayo describes the rock itself as beautiful, the yellow lines of Uranium “bright as pollen” and forming “mountain ranges and rivers across the stone.”⁸² The problem is not the Uranium itself but what the white people have done with it under the influence of the nature/culture divide: “But they had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within the earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only *they* could have dreamed.”⁸³

Emphasizing the centrality of place over time in his narrative, Tayo discovers that his story crosses socially constructed boundaries of time, race, and species to refocus his identity in his ancestral homeland. While Betonie frequently reminds him that the metanarrative in which he now takes part has been ongoing for thousands of years, he also reminds Tayo of the importance of change. Like the spotted cattle which Tayo’s uncle Josiah created, a mix of European Herefordshire and Mexican Longhorns specially suited to the local eco-system, Tayo is also a mix of ethnic and racial heritages. Like Silko herself, who had a Euro-American father and a Laguna mother, Tayo realizes that his liminal racial status doesn’t just put him on the outside of both societies but also allows him to stand back and see the bigger picture—the transhistorical triumph of the land over even the scars of the Uranium mine and the impending apocalypse it represents. As Shamoan Zamir points out, Silko effects a double resolution at the end of the novel.⁸⁴ Tayo not only fulfills his uncle Josiah’s vision by rescuing the spotted cattle from the white rancher who has stolen them and resisting the witchery’s urge to fight violence with violence by killing Emo for his torture of Harley, but he is also able to enact the end of the

ceremony by turning back to the land and to his people who represent it. He does this in two ways. First, through his love affair with Ts'eh Montañó and her metaphorical representation of the land, and second by reciting his completed story to the Laguna elders at the community's ceremonial kiva. In this way, Tayo becomes a bridge between the land and his people, enacting an eco-spiritual imaginary which heals the nature/culture divide and reasserts Laguna relevance in the face of global nuclear apocalypse.

In his love affair with Ts'eh Montañó, Tayo enters Laguna mythology, further blending his narrative with the transtemporal oral stories of his people. Tayo first meets Ts'eh under the shadow of Tse-pi'na, known today as Mount Taylor and "the home of the Keres rain deity."⁸⁵ Wearing a yellow skirt, Ts'eh is further identified with Yellow Woman, the wife of Shakok, the spirit of winter.⁸⁶ Ts'eh, identified as an ageless being by the fact that "she wasn't much older than he was, but she wore her hair long, like the old women did, pinned back in a knot," invites Tayo to stay with her on his way to find Josiah's lost cattle.⁸⁷ That night, she sleeps with him, giving him the role of Miochin or the spirit of summer who slept with Shakok's wife, leading to a bitter fight that freed the Laguna land from the icy grip of winter. In the story, Yellow Woman sleeps with Miochin while her husband is gone hunting deer. Knowing this story, Tayo is concerned when, after finding the cattle but almost freezing in the snow, a hunter carrying a deer rescues him and takes him back to Ts'eh's house. Ts'eh, however, merely laughs at his concern and sends him on his way with the words "I'll be seeing you."⁸⁸ Tayo and Ts'eh do see each other again in the spring, true to the mythology that Miochin and Yellow Woman reunite every year bringing summer. As Owens says, "A reader familiar with this 'time immemorial' story will understand why in March of the spring following his recovery of the cattle Tayo dreams of Ts'eh and 'he knew he would find her again,' and why Tayo and Ts'eh know instinctively where to

find each other at the beginning of summer.”⁸⁹ When they do meet again, Ts’eh shows Tayo a special plant associated with rain, requesting that when she leaves he gather the seeds and re-establish the plant in any place where it might naturally grow, thus giving him a role in ending the drought which he believes he has caused by cursing the rain in the Phillipines. By taking on this task of native plant restoration, Tayo turns to his local eco-system, beginning his return to the land and his cultural identity that ultimately cures his PTSD and makes him whole again.

Having identified the Uranium mine on Laguna land as the center of the witchery separating nature from culture and threatening global nuclear apocalypse, Tayo, with the help of Yellow Woman, comes to understand his role in preventing it. This doesn’t come through a quest out into the world to stop the forces of evil at work there as in many Euro-American mythologies, but rather through a return to the center, to the land and the people from which he has come. Not only is the mountain top in whose shadow he meets Ts’eh “a center—one of the mountaintop ‘earth navels’ which, according to Alfonso Ortiz, ‘gather in blessings from all around and direct them inward toward the village,’” but the second resolution of the novel returns Tayo to the ceremonial kiva at the center of Laguna political and spiritual life.⁹⁰ Here he tells his story to the elders: “it took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions about the location and the time of day; they asked about the direction she had come from and the color of her eyes.”⁹¹ Showing that the elders are satisfied at last that Tayo has been with Yellow Woman, ending the drought and taking an important role in his community, the text moves back into oral story-telling form declaring that “They started crying/the old men started crying/’A’ moo’ ooh! A’ moo’ ooh!’/You have seen her/We will be blessed/again.”⁹² Owens explains that “as a final act, the returning culture hero must deliver his new knowledge to the people, and Tayo does this when he is invited into the kiva by the elders.

The spiritual center of the pueblo, the kiva indicates that Tayo has indeed come home; no longer alienated, or schizophrenic, he can tell his story and thus articulate his fragmented self.”⁹³ Not only does Tayo’s story reveal the way he himself has been healed by the metanarrative in which he has taken part, but also when “the elders in the kiva recognize the mythic narrative that has determined Tayo’s experience, they comprehend the timeless significance of Tayo’s story for everyone.”⁹⁴ If, as Gilio-Whitaker writes in reference to human-caused climate apocalypse and Earth’s sixth mass extinction, “Indians are the United States’ miner’s canary” then Tayo, through his story as well as Silko through hers certainly take on that role, revealing that “human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers had planned for all of them, for all living things.”⁹⁵

In a complex layering of narrative and meta-narrative using Native oral mythology and the Euro-American form of the novel, both Silko and Tayo engage in an eco-spiritual imaginary through storytelling.^{††} This eco-spiritual imaginary connects readers, writers and characters across boundaries of time, space, nation and race through local discourse about the land on which the narrative takes place. In concretizing Tayo’s relationship to the land, Silko simultaneously taps into a global consciousness about the interconnection of local ecologies with the planetary eco-system at large.^{‡‡} She does this first through Tayo’s realization that the Uranium mine poisoning Laguna water also has consequences for the entire planet through the

^{††} The novel’s form is thus also mixed like both Tayo and Silko and therefore represents a similar cultural translation/navigation between traditional Native culture and the Euro-American culture in which it is now inextricably embedded.

^{‡‡} See Zamir on local and global as well as contest of narratives: “the dialectical articulation of western and oral traditions in *Ceremony* constitute a contest of stories in which narratives are competing to describe and explain a Pueblo world radically dislocated by the penetrations of a capitalist political economy. ... the context of stories in *Ceremony* can be read as a complex dramatization of the intersections of the local and global in the modern American Southwest” (397).

creation of the atomic bomb.^{§§} Second, she shows how Tayo can help solve this global ecological threat by returning his focus to his own local eco-system, healing the nature/culture divide within himself and between himself and the land. She does this by embedding Tayo's narrative within the local Laguna discourse about Yellow Woman and through his work for native plant restoration. In returning Tayo's focus to his local eco-system, Silko shows the way for others to do the same, thus turning her story once again outward to a global eco-spiritual imaginary about the interconnection of every individual place which together makes up the planetary eco-system. This particular instantiation of an eco-spiritual imaginary in *Ceremony* thus heals the nature/culture divide and combats the mythology of the disappearing Indian as “within her story of Tayo's journey toward wholeness and health, Silko—as did Momaday in *House Made of Dawn*—conducts a healing ceremony for all of us, for the world at large”⁹⁶

Tommy Orange's *There There*

Written over forty years after Silko's *Ceremony*, Orange's 2018 novel returns to many of the same motifs as Silko's foundational work. Both novels address the central theme of Native identity in the face of colonial mythologies such as the disappearing Indian and the nature/culture divide. Orange's novel, a tale of 13 interconnected characters whose fates converge in a mass shooting at an inter-tribal Powwow in Oakland, addresses both these mythologies. As Silko does in her novel, Orange undermines and resists competing Euro-American narratives by stacking layers of metanarrative discourse, narrative fiction, and oral storytelling.

^{§§} Zamir also comments on the unifying threat of atomic apocalypse which makes humans feel like “one clan” (398). Gilio-Whitaker uses the example of the sixth mass extinction event in which we find ourselves uniting “the people” and putting everyone “on the reservation” (ix).

As mentioned above, in many Native cultures, stories have the power to create the reality in which people live. As Kenneth Roemer explains, “traditional Native American word concepts move far beyond describing, communicating, and explaining to encompass generative powers of creating and interconnecting.”⁹⁷ Thus, the colonial narrative told and retold by generations of Euro-Americans and culminating most recently in former U.S. president Donald Trump’s “1776 Commission” isn’t just a story about America’s glorious past. Rather, for Native people this narrative has not only shaped the reality of their lives but it has become a psychological weapon that assaults their own stories about the past and their place and value in it. This is nowhere more clear than in the novels examined here as characters must navigate their own mixed relationship with white America to access the truth about their past. As is the case for Silko’s character Tayo, for Tommy Orange’s character Tony Loneman this colonial narrative results in a divided sense of self which must be reconciled both to heal himself as an individual and to heal his connection with the land. This can only be done by re-examining the harmful narratives which he has internalized and which have created the reality of his life in the United States.

As Sylvia Wynter argues, educational institutions in the United States have perpetuated the colonial narrative, thereby maintaining both the institutional structures of systemic racism and the cultural imaginaries which uphold them.⁹⁸ This narrative thereby serves the dual function of shoring up conscious and unconscious white supremacy and of limiting achievement by students of color as they internalize a narrative of inferiority and impossibility. While Wynter focuses on the effects of this narrative on Black students, the colonial narrative is equally as egregious to Native children, manifesting itself in stereotypes about Native people as crazy, incapable, drunk, and irrelevant to the present moment. In *There There*, Tony Loneman’s story begins on an elementary school playground where he first becomes aware of what he calls the

‘drome’—the features he retains from fetal alcohol syndrome. For Tony, the “drome” becomes visible proof of the colonial narrative he has been conditioned to believe about himself and his heritage as part of the Cheyenne nation. Not only does the drome constantly remind him that his mother was an alcoholic, incapable of raising him herself, but it causes him to go into black fits of rage of which he has no memory afterward. While Tony sees the “drome” initially as a confirmation of the colonial narrative of the crazy drunken Indian, by comparing the stories his grandmother tells him about his peoples’ past with the colonial narrative that leads to these stereotypes, he learns to decolonize this identity and tell a new story about himself and his connection to the past.

Starting with the narrative his grandmother told him as a child, “that Indians go way back with the land. That all this was once ours,” Tony initially concludes that his ancestors must not have had street smarts like him because they “let them white men come over here and take it from them like that.”⁹⁹ Tony later corrects himself, saying that “the sad part is, all those Indians probably knew but couldn’t do anything about it. They didn’t have guns. Plus the diseases. That’s what Maxine said. Killed us with their white men’s dirt and diseases, moved us off our land.”¹⁰⁰ As he begins to understand this colonial history, Tony begins to understand its connection to the present and his own life in Oakland. Not only does he begin to understand how his family ended up having to move to an urban city because the U.S. army “moved us off our land, moved us onto some shit land you can’t grow fucking shit on,” but he also makes the connection between this desperate life and his mother’s drinking, calling his congenital disorder “the way history lands on a face.”¹⁰¹

While his “drome” is a visible sign of ongoing coloniality, once Tony understands this fact, he is able to use it to deconstruct the white colonial narrative. Calling it both a “power and

curse,” the drome becomes a form of double consciousness that lets him “look past the first look people give you, find that other one, right behind it.”¹⁰² While this second sight is linked to the visibility of his congenital disorder, like DuBois’ double consciousness it allows him to see the way people look at his racial Otherness as well. As a Native American, he is subject to the same kind of embarrassed attraction as that caused by his disorder. Towards the end of the novel as he rides the BART to the Big Oakland Powwow dressed in full Cheyenne regalia, he notes the way people stare at “an Indian dressed like an Indian on the train for no apparent reason.”¹⁰³

Signaling his awareness that he is a flat character in the white colonial narrative, Tony notes that “people love to see the pretty history” and that his regalia is “the colors of a fire at night. Another image people love to think about.”¹⁰⁴ Approached by “an older white woman” who Tony understands “wants to see if the Indian speaks,” he plays into her stereotype at first by ignoring her question about which stop to get off the train and staring silently at her instead. He waits just long enough to make her uncomfortably ask, “so you’re ... a Native American?” and then eloquently invites her to the powwow, simultaneously answering her implicit question about his regalia. By using the “power” of the drome, his ability to see the colonial narrative behind the way people stare at him, Tony shifts the power dynamic away from the starrer, noting that “the woman behind him is saying something, but it can’t matter what.”¹⁰⁵ Now that Tony has challenged the colonial narrative, he is ready to begin enunciating his own narrative of interconnection with the earth.

In a prologue to the first-person narration that follows, Orange lays out a history of what he calls Urban Indians and the way that even in moving to cities, Native people have continued to resist the Euro-American nature/culture divide. In an attempt to separate Native people from both their land and their identity (which as Silko demonstrated in *Ceremony* are inextricably tied

in many Native cultures), the U.S. government pursued a series of policies and legislation designed to force assimilation into Euro-American cultural and economic life. Orange writes of the first wave of Native people in Euro-American cities: “we were not Urban Indians then. This was part of the Indian Relocation Act, which was part of the Indian Termination Policy, which was and is exactly what it sounds like. Make them look and act like us. Become us. And so disappear.”¹⁰⁶ The Indian Relocation Act of 1956 which Orange refers to here terminated reservation status for a number of Native nations and “actively encouraged Indians to move to cities.”¹⁰⁷ Like the Indian boarding schools which took Native children off their reservations to be educated by English-speaking teachers, the Indian Relocation Act was part of the broader attempt to erase Native culture and force assimilation through the over-bearing repetition of the colonial narrative, what Orange calls “histories written wrong and meant to be forgotten.”¹⁰⁸ However, like Silko’s Betonie who reclaims Native agency in the face of white domination, Orange also declares that the Native exodus to cities “wasn’t just like that. Plenty of us came by choice, to start over, to make money, or for a new experience.”¹⁰⁹ What’s more, this attempt at assimilating Native people through immigration to cities was entirely unsuccessful. While “getting us to cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign,” Orange writes that “the city made us new, and we made it ours.”¹¹⁰

Even as white Americans continued to construct the untouched wilderness as balm to a fast-paced, technologically saturated urban life, Native people who moved to big cities “didn’t get lost amid the sprawl of tall buildings, the stream of anonymous masses, the ceaseless din of traffic” which seems to separate urban white people from the rural landscape.¹¹¹ And while James H. Cox identifies seemingly modernist themes such as the naturalistic despair resulting

from the alienation of the city in Orange's novel, one significant difference remains in Native people's understanding of nature.¹¹² Not only does Orange write that Native people in cities "found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork," but part of the reason Native people "didn't get lost" in cities was because they also brought their sense of connection to the land, and as Orange explains, "the land moves with you like memory."¹¹³ In the final section of the prologue titled "Urbanity,"

Orange explains:

An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth. Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and nonliving thing from the earth. All our relations. The process that brings anything to its current form—chemical, synthetic, technological, or otherwise—doesn't make the product not a product of the living earth. Buildings, freeways, cars—are these not of the earth? Were they shipped in from Mars, the moon? Is it because they're processed, manufactured, or that we handle them? Are we so different? Were we at one time not something else entirely, *Homo sapiens*, single-celled organisms, space dust, unidentifiable pre-bang quantum theory? Cities form in the same way as galaxies. Urban Indians feel at home walking in the shadow of a downtown building. We came to know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain range, the redwoods in the Oakland hills better than any other deep wild forest. ... Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere.¹¹⁴

While this differs in many regards from Tayo's connection to place as he sleeps with Ts'eh Montaña—the mythological embodiment of a very specific mountain with a long history of cultural significance for the Laguna people—Orange nevertheless looks at the loss of land and the urbanization of much of the Native population of the United States and reminds readers that in the timeless cycles of the universe, everything is made up of stardust. While Euro-American culture sees cities as the opposite of nature, this is exactly why cities have become so polluted, unbalanced, and destructive. When cities are viewed as part of the earth, just as humans are creatures of the earth in a Native worldview, a path is opened to build cities that harmonize with the ecological balance of the planet. In other words, despite a loss of specific land in specific

places, Orange enunciates an eco-spiritual imaginary that connects him to other Native people and to the earth outside of the rural/urban dichotomy that leads to the “Urban Indian.”

Returning to the narrative about Tony Loneman later in the novel, Orange echoes his sentiment about coming to “know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain range” to show Tony’s eco-spiritual connection to the place where he was born and raised. After talking about white people forcing Native people “onto some shit land you can’t grow fucking shit on,” Tony doesn’t pine for an irretrievable past before white colonization but rather empathizes with his ancestors by exploring how he would feel if he were forced to leave the only home he knows: “I would hate it if I got moved outta Oakland, because I know it so well, from West to East to Deep East and back, on bike or bus or BART. It’s my only home. I wouldn’t make it nowhere else.”¹¹⁵ Even though Tony is Cheyenne, a nation non-native to the California coast, he thus aligns himself with Orange’s prologue which both asserts Native agency in taking up urban life and reasserts a deep sense of connection to the earth even within an urban environment. For Tony, Oakland becomes representative of his ancestral land and he claims it as his home.^{***} While some scholars find it problematic that Orange doesn’t address any Native nations indigenous to California in the novel, Tony’s relationship to Oakland clearly shows that Orange is more interested in this substitutive relationship of Native people to the land they now call home than he is in addressing the historical issue of indigenous land loss.^{116††} In showing how Tony transfers his sense of place from an unknown ancestral place in the past to the place he

^{***} Some scholars find it problematic that Orange doesn’t address any Native nations indigenous to California. This is a valid point. However, Orange is clearly more interested in this substitutive relationship of Native people to the land they now call home than he is in addressing the historical issue of indigenous land loss. In showing how Tony transfers his sense of place from his indigenous land to Oakland, he shows the resilience of Native connection to place even in the face of displacement and loss.

^{††} Matt Cohen, for example, warns against a literal reading of Orange’s statement that the “land is everywhere or nowhere” as a concession of Native land, as if universalizing the concept of “the land” means that Native people don’t want their ancestral land back (563).

has always called home, Orange demonstrates what he means in the prologue when he writes that “being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere.”¹¹⁷ The concept of “the land,” Orange explained in a 2021 round table discussion, has never had anything to do with Native people mystically staring off the edge of a mesa. This view is related to a white mythology of erasure and a mystical past. Rather, for Orange, the land is related to the concept of home. This, Orange said, is what was taken away from Native people who were displaced. Not some mystical relationship to the landscape, but their sense of home and familiarity.¹¹⁸

Tony’s ability to transfer his cultural sense of place from an ancestral home to the place that he knows as his own home is linked to a broader eco-spiritual imaginary that identifies the earth itself as home. Orange identifies this spiritual connection to the ecosphere in his prologue when he states that “an Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth. Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and nonliving thing from the earth.”¹¹⁹ He returns to this global eco-spiritual imaginary at the end of the novel. Demonstrating once again the way that Tony transfers his cultural sense of place from an ancestral homeland to the Oakland that he has always called home, Orange writes a scene that parallels the scene in *Ceremony* in which Tayo also connects to the global ecosphere by connecting to a particular location or place.^{†††} In *Ceremony*, this spot *does* hold historical significance to the Laguna Pueblo people even as it acts as a portal to a broader eco-spiritual imaginary, whereas in *There*

^{†††} In a round table discussion, Orange said that he didn’t intentionally reference *Ceremony* in this scene. This means that the eco-spiritual imaginary shared by both writers is similar enough to produce these two passages about connection to the earth even without direct reference. Tommy Orange, “SkyWords Visiting Writers Series” (Round Table Discussion, Online, March 30, 2021).

There the place where Tony connects to this eco-spiritual imaginary re-emphasizes his connection to Oakland as he lies on the turf in the Oakland Arena.

The Oakland Arena becomes the center of a narrative plotline constructed to bring all the characters together like the concentric rings of a spiderweb circling ever closer to the central event of the novel. Containing frequent references to the archetypal spider trickster character in many Native mythologies, the novel gradually pulls characters in toward the Big Oakland Powwow through a series of first and third-person narrations arranged in spiritually significant sets of four up to the interlude and then crescendoing in sections of five and twenty-five accounts respectively.¹²⁰ While the powwow becomes a meta-narrative commentary on Native history as the dance competition in which several of the characters take part becomes the scene of a massacre reminiscent of the Wounded Knee massacre, it also becomes a moment of both intergenerational bonding and eco-spiritual connection. Tony, who has been coerced into a scheme to steal the prize money for the dance, heroically disarms one of the leaders of the plot when the plan goes awry and the conspirators begin shooting at each other across the field of unarmed dancers and spectators. Getting shot first in the leg and then in the arm and stomach, Tony charges across the space of thirty feet to tackle one of the last standing shooters. He takes him down, grabs his gun, shoots him, and then “rolls onto his back and right away he’s sinking. . . . Just sinking deeper and deeper in, headed for the center of the earth, where he might join the magma or water or metal or whatever is there to stop him, hold him, keep him down there forever.”¹²¹ Echoing the “center” or “earth navel” which Owens identifies as crucial to Tayo’s near-death experience in *Ceremony*, Tony also experiences the power of the earth as physical and spiritual center.^{§§§} In Tayo’s case, he has fallen off his horse while pursued by the cowboys

^{§§§} Further emphasizing Tony’s connection to Tayo, both are four letter names sharing three of the same letters as well as the first initial.

responsible for stealing his Uncle's cattle. Lying on his back and assessing his injuries, Tayo, like Tony, feels the magnetic pull of the earth's physical center beneath him:

He was aware of the center beneath him; it soaked into his body from the ground through the torn skin on his hands, covered with powdery black dirt. The magnetism of the center spread over him smoothly like rainwater down his neck and shoulders; the vacant cool sensation glided over the pain like feather-down wings. It was pulling him back, close to the earth, where the core was cool and silent as mountain stone, and even with the noise and pain in his head he knew how it would be: a returning rather than a separation.¹²²

Like Tayo, who faces the choice whether he will "secure the thresholds with molten pain and remain; or ... let go and flow back," Tony also faces a choice. He can continue sinking and join the "thing so quiet and still inside him it feels like it's emanating out into the world, quieting down to nothing—molten silence," or he can take strength from the earth's center "where he's anchored, to the bottom of the bottom, the middle of the middle of him. The center's center" and return to the physical world around him. Both characters find a silence within themselves which echoes the silence of the earth's core and which gives them strength. While Tayo awakens to find the hunter who will lead him to Ts'eh, the embodiment of the mountain on which he is lying, Orange doesn't specify Tony's choice, and the novel ends ambiguously with a memory of his grandmother telling him to dance light on his feet "like the birds sing in the morning."¹²³ Because Tony has found his spiritual center through his sensation of anchoring to the earth's core, perhaps it doesn't actually matter which choice Tony makes. The novel ends with the words "Tony isn't going anywhere. And somewhere in there, inside him, where he is, where he'll always be, even now it is morning, and the birds, the birds are singing."¹²⁴

The birds add to the hopeful note at the end of the novel as Tony hears them not from outside, but "from where he's anchored, to the bottom of the bottom, the middle of the middle of him. The center's center. There is a bird for every hole in him. Singing. Keeping him up."¹²⁵

While Orange doesn't tell us whether Tony lives or not, earlier in the section he taps into the same sense of transtemporal connection that Tayo experiences on his "circular journey toward home and identity."¹²⁶ As with Tayo's "Laguna beliefs in a temporality that is not, as with Euro-American concepts, strictly linear," Tony's journey toward home and identity involves a conflation of time and space as he returns to his earliest memories of childhood to find his true identity at the center of his being.¹²⁷ As the third-person narration explains, Tony is "not twenty-one-year-old Tony thinking about his four-year-old self—remembering. He's just there again. ... He doesn't know that he's not there, because he's right there, in that moment which he can't remember as having happened because it's happening to him now"¹²⁸ In that transtemporal moment he asks his grandmother the crucial question of Native identity that the novel has wrestled with in various ways all along: "*What are we? Grandma, what are we?*" The narration states that "she doesn't answer."¹²⁹ Given Native perspectives on time, this ending makes it clear that whether Tony lives or dies, his anchor to the earth holds steady and helps provide the answer to this question. His eco-spiritual connection to the earth which heals the Euro-American nature/culture divide into which he had been indoctrinated most of his life becomes the central feature of his Native identity and like Tayo who finally understands "why the oldtimers could only speak of yesterday and tomorrow in terms of the present moment," Tony also finds himself transcending the historical moment in time to which coloniality has tried to pin him.¹³⁰

Tony's conflation of time and space through his eco-spiritual connection to the earth as a physical and spiritual center reveals much about the ways Orange's novel, like Silko's, plays with postmodern narrative techniques to express a Native understanding of storytelling and time that pre-existed postmodernism's challenge to Euro-American conventions of linearity and objectivity. As in many postmodern novels which blur boundaries between diagetical and extra-

diagetical narration, *There There* also plays with an uncertainty over any tangible boundary between the symbolic and the real. **** As in Silko's novel where "Thought Woman,/is sitting in her room/and whatever she thinks about/appears," so in Orange's novel the symbolic and the real become indistinguishable. Unlike Euro-American novels in which the breakdown of signification leads to a breakdown in the ability to trust meta-narrative orderings of the universe, however, Native perspectives on time and story flip this entropy in signification and push it in the opposite direction. As Ruoff explains, an "emphasis on word as symbol and the power of symbols to structure the universe is common among American Indian societies."¹³¹ If thought and symbol are delinked from a platonic stabilization of meaning, then the individual can construct their own reality through thought and symbol.

This is exactly what Tony does at the end of the novel. As time conflates and he lives his four-year-old experience watching the Transformers movie with his grandmother, he finds what Derrida would call the trace of his past and future in the narrative present where he is shot and bleeding out on the ground. Tony is then able to align the signification of this moment as constitutive with that plotline from the past. Like Optimus Prime who sacrifices himself to save the world, saying "if you get a chance to die, to save someone else, you take it. Every time," Tony has sacrificed his own life to take down the shooter. The constitutive traces which disrupt a linear narrative for Tony's life appear both before and after this moment in the narrative structure. The moment in which Tony watches the Transformers movie as a four-year-old makes sense of the narratively previous moment at which Tony charged at the shooter feeling like a

**** As Ruoff explains, an "emphasis on word as symbol and the power of symbols to structure the universe is common among American Indian societies" (6). Quoting Gary Witherspoon in *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, Ruoff quotes as an example the Navajo emergence myth which "indicates 'that in the beginning were the word and the thing, the symbol, and the object'" (6). Thus, in many Native cultures, thought or speech has a directly causal relationship to the physical world.

Transformer would, “harder than anything that might come at him, speed, heat, metal, distance, even time.” Tony’s symbolic reconstruction of what Derrida would call metaphysical history also keeps him from slipping into one of his “drome” induced blackouts, when “some part of him is trying to leave, into the dark cloud he’s only ever emerged from later. But Tony means to stay, and he does.” If his fetal alcohol syndrome represents “the way history lands on a face” then Tony has re-ordered history with himself not as the victim but as the hero. That he does this through a mainstream American movie like the *Transformers* only further reaffirms the malleability of narrative as a tool for resisting coloniality.

Referring to Choctaw critic LeAnne Howe’s notion of “tribalography,” Stephen Ross and Steven Sexton write that “by reminding us that some elements of Indigenous stories were originally non-Indigenous, tribalography helps us resist the notion that these elements need to be devoid of anything non-Native to be considered tribal.” By aligning himself with an outsider like Optimus Prime who is then beset by overwhelming evil forces, Tony writes himself as the center of a narrative of his own choosing and transforms even his death into a life-affirming agency. *There There*’s ending makes sense in light of what Stephen and Steven write that “tribalography relates to what the stories do” connecting “past, present, and future milieus” to challenge “modern Western notions of linear time,” open up “dimensions in how we tell and regard stories,” and “help all of us remember who we were, recognize who we are, and imagine who we will become.” While Tony’s journey toward recognizing who he was, is, and will be progresses chronologically throughout the novel, this metaphysical history in time conflates into a constitutive network of signification. Like Tayo in *Ceremony* for whom a linguistically “present sense of being was qualified with bare hints of yesterday or tomorrow by saying ‘I go up to the mountain yesterday or I go up to the mountain tomorrow,’” Tony ends the novel in a

transtemporal present constituted by traces of the past and future. Orange writes the final sentences of the novel stating that “Tony isn’t going anywhere. And somewhere in there, inside him, where he is, where he’ll always be, even now it is morning, and the birds, the birds are singing.”¹³² Native writers like Orange and Silko thus co-opt postmodern narrative techniques which challenge Euro-American conceptions of linear time to express indigenous beliefs about the constitutive nature of time which long pre-existed post-structuralist thinkers such as Derrida in the first place.

Like Silko’s novel, *There There* also reveals Orange’s postmodern narrative influence in the self-reflexive nature of his storytelling. This novel is a story about a kid telling a story. All the narratives in this short story cycle that come together at the end in the big Oakland Powwow are purportedly collected by Dene Oxendene as part of his project to connect Natives of Oakland by telling their stories. In a prologue and an interlude that make it clear this novel is aware of its own construction as a series of stories, author Tommy Orange also makes it clear that he is doing the same by writing this novel as his character Dene is doing by telling the stories he collects—connecting Natives across time and space with a conclusion that engages an eco-spiritual imaginary.

As the individual stories in the novel and the stories within the story which Dene collects unfold into one big story, they also interrogate the role of storytelling itself in the lives of Native people. As one of the characters named Opal explains, “the world [is] made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories.”¹³³ These meta-narrative “stories about stories” combine the individual accounts in the novel to reveal the tension between their own decolonial enunciation and the colonial meta-narrative of Euro-American history. The colonial meta-narrative insists that Indians are from the past, outdated, assimilated, stereotypes of ruin and a

savage simplicity incapable of surviving late-capitalist America. The decolonial narrative resists this colonial meta-narrative by asserting the relevance of Native people not only to themselves in the present but to the United States as a whole, revealing the necessity of understanding the apocalypses endured by Native people at the hands of Euro-American coloniality to avoid an apocalyptic future that threatens to engulf people of every race and ethnicity through a blatant disregard for human society as a constitutive part of the natural world.

In the tension between these two meta-narratives—colonial and decolonial—Native characters also wrestle with a postmodern question of representation. While the colonial meta-narrative about Natives being from the past is harmful in its stereotyping and relegating to history, Native people must wrestle with the question of change. If being Indian means only holding onto traditions of the past, then maybe they truly are irrelevant. But if being Native is something purely ethnic or ontological, then Native people are disconnected from their heritage.¹³⁴ Through his characters, Orange wrestles with this tension, ultimately showing that to be Native is more than either of these two categories. Native people have always adapted to the present while looking to the stories of their past to guide them. Through postmodern powwow music, traditional dances learned on YouTube, and acknowledgement of the non-traditional nature of things like frybread and powwows themselves as reactions to coloniality, Orange's characters are connected to their past while finding their relevance in the present.

Far from the stereotype of Native people as having “an ancient wisdom that alone can save the planet,” Silko and Orange's novels demonstrate that our ability to change our reality by changing our story is the real solution to human caused climate apocalypse even more than it is the particular story we tell.¹³⁵ As Tillett notes, “Silko turned to writing in order to portray Pueblo storytelling traditions, and understandings that stories which are told well can actively change the

world.”¹³⁶ The Euro-American nature/culture divide and its resulting selfishness is the overarching meta-narrative that must be changed, but every person and culture can do it in their own way. As the Commission for Racial Justice declared in 1991 through a document developed by the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, “we the people of color, gathered together ... do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of Mother Earth.”¹³⁷ Central to this interdependence was the commitment “to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves.”¹³⁸ In *Ceremony*, Tayo re-establishes his spiritual interdependence to the earth by reframing the history of colonization in terms of witchery vs. ceremony. For Tayo, his story built into the ceremony he performs returns him to his ecological and cultural center in Laguna Pueblo life. In *There There* Tony incorporates the story of Optimus Prime into his own personal tribalography while his centering experience with the earth at his death references Tayo’s similar centering experience as a re-establishment of planetary interdependence. Shamoan Zamir notes that “as Tayo realizes at the end, the real contest is for the ending of the story and he must ‘keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers’ if the ceremony is to be completed successfully.”¹³⁹ Like Tayo, all the characters I examine in this dissertation are fighting for the ending to their own stories while simultaneously realizing that their stories are inextricably entangled with those of everyone who shares this planet. This shared understanding of ecological entanglement is the eco-spiritual imaginary which this dissertation is about.

Notes

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CHAPTER 2: Decolonial Catholicism as a Work of Environmental Justice

If Native writing forms the foundation for an eco-spiritual imaginary in its emphasis on story as an answer to colonial meta-narratives, then recent Chicana/o novelists take the next logical step. The Chicana/o novelists I examine in this chapter combine elements of Indigenous resistance and Spanish colonialism by injecting Native spiritualities into their local forms of Catholicism to inoculate their communities against the colonial Master narratives Catholicism initially promoted. The resulting religious hybridity reveals a form of Catholicism stripped of its colonizing impulses and bound instead to localized dependence upon and reverence for the earth. Because their subjectivity bridges the Euro-American and Native worlds, Chicana/o writers engaging in this form of eco-spiritual imaginary are increasingly aware of the structural and institutional effects of environmental racism and the disproportionate impacts of the Euro-American nature/culture divide on communities of color and the poor. While the Native writers I examined in the previous chapter use stories to return to a cultural identity seeking constant balance and harmony with the earth in the face of Euro-American coloniality, the writers I examine in this chapter tell their stories not just to reclaim their colonized identities but to make their fight political. Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) lays the groundwork for the religious hybridity on which this politically charged form of storytelling rests, while Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993) and Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) reveal the ways that stories can be made to effect real environmental and political change.

Anaya and these subsequent Chicana/o writers give the eco-spiritual imaginary in novels a distinctly Catholic inflection as they take the Catholic language of “sin” and reapply it to colonization/abuse of the earth and Indigenous people. Inheriting Native conceptions of time and story, these writers challenge not only Euro-American meta-narratives of nature/culture division and manifest destiny, but also the white environmental urge for conservation, showing that the mythology of the untouched wilderness harms people of color living in sacrifice zones* outside of these wilderness sanctuaries. Moving beyond a pre-colonial/post-colonial binary, these writers are decolonial in that they don’t romanticize a past way of life, but look to practices in the past to create an ecologically sustainable future. In creating this future, the spiritual hybridity in these novels provides the catalyst for political action against the structural and institutional systems upheld by toxic white mythologies of nature/culture separation and white supremacy. The eco-spiritual imaginary I identify in this chapter thus flows naturally from both the Indigenous eco-spirituality identified in the previous chapter and from the specifically Chicana/o cultural elements identified by both Priscilla Ybarra and Theresa Delgadillo in their work.

In her book *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*, Priscilla Ybarra presents what she argues is an omnipresent if often overlooked ecological element in Chicana literature which she calls Goodlife writing. Goodlife writing, she explains, “function[s] to preserve mutually healthy relations among individuals and communities” that “implicitly integrate the natural environment as part of the community, and thus cultivate a life-

* Quoting LaDuke and Churchill, Shamoan Zamir explains that “in 1972, under the Nixon administration and ‘in conjunction with studies of US energy development need and panning undertaken by the Trilateral Commission, the feds sought to designate the Four Corners region and the impacted region of the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana as *National Sacrifice Areas*, which means areas rendered literally uninhabitable through the deliberate elimination of the water supplies for industrial purposes.” Similar sacrifice areas or zones were designated for other industrial and military purposes during the same period. Shamoan Zamir, “Literature in a ‘National Sacrifice Area:’ Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*,” in *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 399.

sustaining ecology for humans.”¹ These ecological elements in Chicana writing,[†] she argues, are often overlooked because, unlike Anglo American definitions of environmentalism which attempt to heal the nature/culture divide they brought with them to the Americas, “Mexican American and Chicana/o culture enacts values and practices that include nature all along.”² This implicit integration of the natural environment in Goodlife writing is inherently decolonial, since decoloniality acknowledges the European impact on both nature and Indigenous/Mexican populations while simultaneously recognizing that pre-modern epistemologies already engaged in what are now called ecological practices.³

In *Spiritual Mestizaje*, Theresa Delgadillo takes a contrapuntal approach, arguing that borderlands spirituality has been decolonial since the colonial/national project of defining a “border” began. Taking her title from a phrase in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Delgadillo writes: “A transculturative process, Anzaldúa’s spiritual mestizaje demands the recognition, assessment, and critique of the paradigms that, woven together, have colonized the borderlands and the Americas.”⁴ Seconding Walter D. Mignolo’s call for critical border thinking as crucial to the decolonial project, Delgadillo constructs a robust argument for the centrality of spirituality in Chicana borderlands narratives. Although she occasionally hints at the ecological imaginary underlying this spirituality, it is not central to her claim.

My own work in this chapter is situated between that done by Delgadillo and Ybarra, as I seek to explain what I see as an inextricable link between decolonial spirituality and ecological consciousness among several contemporary Chicana/o writers. Goodlife writing is, by Ybarra’s own definition, both decolonial and ecologically conscious in that it reveals an integration of

[†] The concept of Goodlife Writing reveals distinctive characteristics of ecofeminism in the Chicana/o community like the concept of eco-womanism coined by Melanie Harris reveals distinctive characteristics of ecofeminism in the African American community. I discuss eco-womanism at greater length in the chapter on Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

nature and culture from within Chicana/o culture. The Goodlife writers I examine in this chapter not only understand their physical dependence on the earth, but they also use a spiritual understanding of this connection to combat the structural forms of coloniality which inhibit unfettered access to the good life implicit in their writing.⁵ While Goodlife writing as conceived by Ybarra cannot be conflated with environmental justice work, the political impetus behind spiritual mestizaje as a “self-reflexive critique of oppression in all its manifestations” combines with Goodlife values to drive characters toward environmental justice action.⁶ In this chapter, therefore, I add to the work accomplished by Ybarra’s concept of Goodlife writing and Delgado’s concept of spiritual mestizaje by showing their constitutive dependency in the novels I examine.

While both Goodlife writing and spiritual mestizaje resist the colonial meta-narratives of the nature/culture divide and manifest destiny, it is important to note that neither they nor the eco-spiritual imaginary I identify in this dissertation seek to replace these colonial meta-narratives with their own totalizing knowledge schemes. Rather, they participate in what Mignolo calls the “pluriversal project” in which every system respects every other system, thereby allowing a plurality of imaginaries to coexist simultaneously with no hierarchical or totalizing knowledge scheme. Critical border thinking[‡] is necessary to this process, he argues, since border thinking allows this pluriversality in which one can live within multiple systems

[‡] Originally coined by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, critical border thinking critiques both the geo-political and epistemological boundaries drawn by the colonial project of modernity. Mignolo defines critical border thinking as “the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside” (Mignolo and Tlostanova 206), and argues that it serves “as a connector between different experiences of exploitation” (“Delinking” 498). Thus, he explains, “critical border thinking is the method that connects pluriversality (different colonial histories entangled with imperial modernity) into a uni-versal project of delinking from modern rationality and building other possible worlds” (“Delinking” 498). Walter D. Mignolo and Madina V. Tlostanova, “Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 206. Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (March 2007): 498.

simultaneously without privileging one or the other.⁷ Originally coined by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, critical border thinking critiques both the geo-political and epistemological boundaries drawn by the colonial project of modernity. Mignolo defines critical border thinking as “the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside,”⁸ and argues that it serves “as a connector between different experiences of exploitation.”⁹ Thus, he explains, “critical border thinking is the method that connects pluriversality (different colonial histories entangled with imperial modernity) into a uni-versal project of delinking from modern rationality and building other possible worlds.”¹⁰ It is the decolonial eco-spiritual imaginations of the characters in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* that lay the foundation for these other possible worlds to be built.

While I read the negotiation of disparate religious and ethnic traditions in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* as a form of pluriversalism, many scholars take Anaya to task for what they identify as a universalizing tendency. Most notably, Ramón Saldívar argues that Tony is able to “elude history” through a marginalization of the political in favor of the romantic elements of the religious/pastoral mythologies which he seeks to reconcile.¹¹ Undoubtedly, in idealizing the agricultural lifestyle Tony inherits from his mother’s family, Anaya does play into a pastoral mythology derived from early European colonial mythologies about nature. However, I argue alongside Ybarra that in *Bless Me, Ultima*, the novel’s “stealthy resistance” is contained within the hybrid spiritual practices that Ultima passes down to Tony.¹² As Ybarra notes: “*Bless Me, Ultima* argues on behalf of Ultima’s hybrid spirituality in the face of colonial imposition of Roman Catholicism and shows how Chicana/o everyday practice reinforces a reciprocal relation between humans and nature, even granting nature its own subjectivity and autonomy.”¹³ In acknowledging the reciprocal relationships between Chicana/o characters and nature, their

hybrid forms of spirituality not only resist the “colonial imposition of Roman Catholicism,” but also push beyond a pastoral conception of nature to show a radically renegotiated relationship between human beings, the land,[§] and other species.

This relationship to the land, which predates both Spanish and Anglo-American colonization, thereby acknowledges the very real historical disruption of ecological balance perpetrated by Europeans as part of their colonial enterprises. *Bless Me, Ultima* identifies the ecological disruption caused by these successive waves of Euro-American colonization, first through Spanish occupation of Indigenous land and then through Anglo-American occupation of Mexican land following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. These colonial disruptions thus pose a threat not only to pre-colonial relationships to the land and its native species but also to the “organic pastoral” of early twentieth century New Mexico identified by Saldívar. In acknowledging the ecological disruption caused by Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo colonization, *Bless Me, Ultima* doesn’t just eulogize a pastoral mythology. Rather through its hybrid spirituality which defines harm to both people of color and the greater-than-human world as sin, it also identifies the New Mexican pastoral as a form of decolonial resistance. This reveals the tension always inherent in decolonial efforts. Characters cannot return to a pre-colonial way of life unaffected by colonial practices, but they can look to their past, even a mythological one, to imagine a future which will disrupt the ecologically destructive forces of white colonization in the present. Read in this way, Tony’s mother’s comment that “the world would be saved if the

[§] I use the term “land” in the context of pre-colonial relationships to and political dispossession of particular geographic areas. Alternately, I use “ecoregion” in the biological sense to refer to naturally occurring and symbiotic relationships between interconnected species within a given climate. I refer to “the earth” interchangeably with “biosphere” to indicate a planetary construct that acknowledges the interdependence of all ecoregions in maintaining life as we know it on this planet. At times, the novels I read here refer to topsoil metonymically as “the earth” so that it carries both these local and global connotations.

people turned to the earth” becomes a declaration of a political path forward despite its constant entanglement and negotiation with a universalizing pastoral mythology.

The tensions between the past and the present, colonization and decolonization, universalism and pluriversalism, also appear in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*. For example, Delgadillo distinguishes between the hybrid spirituality she identifies in Castillo’s novel and the universalizing approach of colonial Catholicism that seeks to absorb Indigenous spiritualities into a totalizing system:

Although the novel offers examples of religious syncretism, which are inevitable where hybrid spirituality is possible, it does not take a syncretic view of spirituality. That is, it does not attempt to fuse divergent spiritual and religious practices into a unified whole. Instead, the novel emphasizes differing traditions and practices coexisting in the same world as aspects of the multiple subjectivities that define its characters.¹⁴

Delgadillo’s distinction between religious syncretism and hybridity informs her assessment that “the radical nature of this hybrid spirituality’s challenge to the status quo arises not from a reinterpretation of Christianity, but from its embrace of both Indigenous and Christian elements.”¹⁵ In other words, the hybrid spirituality in these novels is not the same as Spanish Catholicism’s long history of absorbing Indigenous deities and practices as a method of colonial control. Rather, characters in these novels embrace both Indigenous and Christian elements as they construct a pluriversal spiritual imaginary. To “decolonize Catholicism,” therefore, does not resolve the tension inherent in the decolonial process itself. Decoloniality cannot return the world to its pre-colonial state. Rather, it looks to Indigenous methodologies and knowledges from the pre-colonial past to imagine a future that must of necessity negotiate the forces of coloniality in the present. These colonial forces can, however, be neutered, so to speak, by understanding the function of the various cultural and institutional systems which uphold them and reframing these systems in favor of the oppressed.

Understanding the function of sin in the Catholic church to shape behavior using guilt, characters in these novels throw this guilt back on the colonizer by defining harm against people of color and the earth as sin using Catholic theological terminology.^{**} This redefinition is not an attempt to universalize Catholicism and Indigenous spirituality by making them the same, nor is it merely a tool for inciting white guilt or reshaping environmentally destructive behavior. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the ways that the communities these novels address have already reshaped local forms of Catholicism to maintain Indigenous spiritualities which connect people to the land and empower them to fight for environmental justice. This decolonial earth-centered spirituality also connects them to a larger eco-spiritual imaginary that doesn't seek a universal reconciliation of difference but a shared perspective on humanity's common origin, total inter-dependence, and spiritual bond with the earth and its regional eco-systems.^{††} At times this interconnection is accomplished through reciprocal relationships between human characters and specific non-human species such as the carp in *Bless Me, Ultima*,^{‡‡} the “non-human” animals that befriend La Loca in *So Far from God*, or the bones of dinosaurs transformed into fossil fuels in *Under the Feet of Jesus*.^{§§} Other times this interconnection is accomplished through bonds to local ecoregions more generally.

^{**} In writing these characters, Anaya, Castillo, and Viramontes “‘write back’ to the colonising force” like the Native writers I examine in chapter 1. Rebecca Tillett, *Contemporary Native American Literature*, BAAS Paperbacks (Edinburgh: University Press, 2007), 2.

^{††} Many of the characters in these novels also engage in this redefinition for themselves as they seek to resolve the “differing traditions and practices coexisting in the same world as aspects of the multiple subjectivities that define [them].” Theresa Delgadillo, “Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance in Ana Castillo’s ‘So Far from God,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 890.

^{‡‡} Much like the Jungle Crow that Ruth Ozeki associates with both Indigenous Sliammon mythology and the Zen Buddhist nun Jiko Yasutani, a Great Horned Owl becomes symbolic of Ultima’s connection to the non-human world and the power she draws from it.

^{§§} Characters in Viramontes’ novel also form a particular bond with the insects being poisoned by white landowners as both a warning system for identifying when the fruit trees have been sprayed and as an identification of shared suffering from pesticide exposure.

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*

The spiritual bond to one such local ecoregion becomes manifest in the New Mexican landscape in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. The novel reveals the interconnection between the ecological consciousness in Goodlife writing and the spiritual mestizaje which all three of the Chicana/o writers in this chapter use to combat systemic environmental racism. Growing up in rural New Mexico during World War II, nine-year-old Tony finds himself at the locus of friction between multiple cultures and religious traditions. His father's family traces its heritage back to the Spanish conquistadores, wild conquerors from the sea. The Márez family, whose name refers to their sea-going history, loves the open llano, the high desert plains of New Mexico where they have lived as *vaqueros* for generations. Tony's mother traces her heritage to the nearby Luna family which originated from the intermarriage of a Mexican Catholic priest with an Indigenous woman and their subsequent journey north into New Mexico where they have farmed their crops in harmony with the rhythms of the moon for generations. Raised as a strict Catholic by his mother, Tony is nevertheless also intrigued by the spiritual power of the *curandera*, Ultima, who moves into their house when he is seven. The townspeople are divided in their opinion of her. Some believe she is a healer with power from God and the earth; others call her a *bruja* or witch and attempt to kill her. Adding to the tension between religious and cultural differences within the small community, Tony is introduced by his friend Cico to the supposedly Indigenous mythology of the golden Carp. Invented by Anaya from "many different Indigenous creation stories," like the cult of the macaws in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, the mythology of the golden Carp prophesies a catastrophic ending to Anglo-American civilization as the lake at the center of Tony's town begins to eat away at the land surrounding it like a giant sinkhole.¹⁶ Several disparate religious/ethnic tensions are connected, nevertheless, by an

ecological unification between the people and the earth: between his father's identification with the Spanish conquistadors versus his mother's Mexican heritage; his father's vaquero roots and love for the open llano versus his mother's farming roots and love for the earth and growing things; the Catholic church versus the Indigenous mythology of the golden carp; the church versus Ultima's spiritualistic/natural powers; curanderas versus brujas.

Rather than a flattening of local traditions into a universalizing sameness, however, Tony negotiates the tension between these disparate religious and ethnic backgrounds across boundaries of time, space, race, and species through deep ecology and an acknowledgement of change as a universal element of all forms of life. As Jayson Sae-Saue notes, "Anaya's prized novel deploys local cultural values and regional cultural tongues in order to speak to a universal theme: man's alienated relationship with his environment."¹⁷ Anaya, in speaking to this theme, reveals not only the ways that humans are currently alienated from their environment, but also the path to ecological interconnection and the resulting harmony this can bring between disparate religious/cultural/ethnic traditions. As quoted earlier, Tony's mother tells him that "the world would be saved if the people turned to the earth."¹⁸ While she weds this earth-centric view to her Catholic faith, each of the characters central to Tony's own spiritual tension expresses this ecological foundation in a form embedded in their own religious/ethnic tradition throughout the novel. Not only does Tony's father explain to him the importance of admitting "his earth-tie and dependence on mother nature,"¹⁹ but Tony also realizes that "from my father and Ultima I had learned that the greater immortality is in the freedom of man, and that freedom is best nourished by the noble expanse of land and air and pure, white sky."²⁰ As Ultima expresses it, "there is a faith here ... in the reason for nature being, evolving, growing."²¹ All three representatives of Tony's inner ethnic and religious tensions (his mother, his father, and Ultima) agree on their

inherent connection to and dependence on the earth, and as Ultima points out, the earth is always changing, evolving, growing. Tony takes this lesson on change in nature and applies it to his mother's Catholicism. Speaking about the way the Catholic priest who colonized the river valley was simultaneously altered by the ecological practices of the Luna farmers, he says, "the priest had changed, so perhaps his religion could be made to change. If the old religion could no longer answer the questions of the children then perhaps it was time to change it."²² Tony, like the priest before him, thus engages in a form of spiritual mestizaje in which "spirituality is distinct from organized religion and describes both an ethics of recognizing multiple ways of knowing and a specific acceptance of a nonmaterial sacred realm present in the world."²³ While Tony opts to change the colonial Catholicism passed down through his mother by recognizing these multiple ways of knowing (the Catholic God, the Golden Carp, and curanderisma), it is important that he doesn't simply replace one religion with another. Rather, he takes a pluriversal approach, setting "the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp" on equal ontological ground, thereby creating "something new ... a new religion" that connects all three traditions through the earth.²⁴

This decolonial turn via an ecological connection to the earth progresses as Tony begins to redefine the Catholic terminology of "sin" to mean harm against the earth and against Indigenous people. The Catholic theology of sin derives from a long history of codification centered around the "seven deadly sins" of pride, greed, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth.^{***25} Within this broader classificatory scheme, sins are divided into mortal and venal,

*** Referencing the seventh deadly sin of sloth, the townspeople often accuse Narciso of doing nothing but getting drunk. However, he is instrumental in saving Ultima the first time Tenorio brings a mob to kill Ultima. He is also one of the believers in the Golden Carp and his deep connection to the earth is described as having "the magic of growth in his hands" which passes "into the earth" to make his bountiful backyard garden grow. Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley: TQS Publications, 1991), 169.

where the former refers to sins that will bar a person from heaven such as murder or rejection of God, and the latter refers to lesser sins that still must be confessed but don't result in ultimate and permanent separation from God. Central to the concept of sin is the concept of confession. If sins are not confessed, they separate a person from God.²⁶ Once sins have been confessed to a priest, the person is awarded a penance, usually in the form of prayers or acts of contrition. When this restitution has been paid, the person is able to partake once more of the Holy Communion and have God "within" them, as Tony expresses it in the novel.²⁷ In classifying systemic violence against people of color and the earth under the list of seven deadly sins commonly accepted by Catholic theologians, Anaya also retains the concepts of confession and penance as important elements of redressing these grievances. This is why Tony's father references having to "pay for our sins" of overgrazing the land, and why Ultima performs a ceremony of penance for the murder of three Apache warriors committed by Mexican colonists generations ago. *Bless Me, Ultima* abounds with these additions to the traditional codification of what counts as sin in the Catholic tradition and the penance or perhaps what might even be called reparations that characters pay for their racially motivated and environmentally destructive sins. Just as sinners who pay their penance can once again be close to God, once characters in these novels have paid their penance for harm against the earth, they can proceed with the Goodlife values they are seeking to embody.

Early in the novel, Anaya sets up a tension between the traditional Catholic sin of lust and Tony's understanding of sin as harm against the earth. When Tony and his friend Samuel are walking under the railroad bridge across the river, Samuel points to a discarded condom and tells him that "there is evil here." While Samuel refers to the Catholic association of sex with sin, Tony's innocent assessment of the condom as "a clear plastic balloon" highlights both his

childlike purity and a completely different conclusion about why it is evil, that this piece of non-biodegradable plastic litter beside the river is evil because it is out of place with the harmony of the ecosystem around it.

Maintaining the delicate harmony of Tony's unique eco-region poised between the desert llano and the river valley takes on further moral weight as Tony discusses the recent atomic tests at nearby Los Alamos with his father. While there is plenty of condemnation from the townspeople for the white scientists committing the sin of pride by seeking "to know more than God Himself," Tony's father carefully articulates the intersectionality of other forms of Euro-American colonization of the land which together upset the balance of the llano and the river valley.²⁸ Referencing both his own Spanish heritage and the Anglo-Americans who began taking land following the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, Tony's father tells him that the hot, dusty winds coming across the llano are caused by "rich rancheros" who "sucked the earth dry with their deep wells."²⁹ The drought resulting from their gluttony, another of the seven deadly sins, has caused the heavy snows in the winter and the dust storms in the spring which the townspeople blamed solely on the atomic bomb. In addition to overuse of the water, "the greedy men overgrazed their ranches, and so now the wind picks up the barren soil and throws it in their faces."³⁰ Referencing the ranchers' greed as well as gluttony, Tony's father articulates the wind's perspective: "You have used me too much, the wind says for the earth, you have sucked me dry and stripped me bare"³¹ While Tony's father doesn't own a ranch, earning his living instead as a wage worker on the highway crew building a road through Guadalupe, he nevertheless includes himself in the collective and historical responsibility for the greed that has caused this imbalance of the eco-region saying, "It is not manly to blame our mistakes on the bomb, or any other thing. It is we who misuse the earth and must pay for our sins."³² Tony's father accepts moral responsibility for

Spanish coloniality, represented by the rich rancheros, and Anglo coloniality represented by the highway which he must construct to support his family, highlighting the complex levels of coloniality at play in the novel. His Spanish ancestors who attempted to drive out the Comanche were followed by the Mexican colonizers of his wife's family, the Luna priest who settled El Puerto de la Luna, who were followed in turn by Anglo Americans who established the school where Tony is not allowed to speak Spanish and is forced to learn English instead. These waves of colonization give rise to complicated networks of moral culpability as Anaya continues to redefine "sin" as domination of one racial group/human being by another.

These colonial "sins" of the fathers are visited upon their children when the local Téllez family experiences a curse causing rocks to fall from the sky on their house and hot grease to leap from a pan, burning one of their children. Ultima identifies the ghosts who are haunting them as three Comanche warriors who were lynched by the man's grandfather and a group of other Mexican colonists after they attempted to steal some cattle. The colonists' wrathful response, another of the seven deadly sins, causes them to commit the mortal sin of murder. The local Catholic priest tries to exorcise the ghosts but as a representative of the colonizing force trying once again to drive the Comanche warriors off their land even after they are dead, he has no power. Just as the Tony in Tommy Orange's novel and Tayo in *Ceremony* had to learn the story of their past in order to decolonize the present, Ultima provides the solution to the haunting spirits by telling a story:

A long time ago ... the llano of the Agua Negra was the land of the Comanche Indians. Then the comancheros came, then the Mexican with his flocks—many years ago three Comanche Indians raided the flocks of one man, and this man was the grandfather of Téllez. Téllez gathered the other Mexicans around him and they hanged the three Indians. They left the bodies strung on a tree; they did not bury them according to their custom. Consequently, the three souls were left to wander on that ranch."³³

In staging this colonial history in story form, Ultima taps into the “imaginary” or collective understanding of the need for racial and environmental reckoning. While Téllez, the owner of the haunted house tries to blame his haunting on the devil, Ultima corrects him saying “it is the work of man.”³⁴ Once everyone understands the same version of the story which redefines this racialized murder as sin, the Téllez’ family can pay their penance by making reparations. She has Tony and Téllez construct a funeral pyre to burn effigies of the three Comanche warriors. Once their effigies have been burned and buried according to Comanche tradition, the ghosts are at rest and no longer trouble the family. By burning their bodies in effigy, Ultima thus simultaneously emphasizes the sin committed by their colonial murderers and the importance of retaining their unique ethnic traditions.

If colonial harm against Indigenous people is recast as sin within a Catholic theological framework, then inter-species harm also takes on both theological and political valence in the story of the Golden Carp. Tony first hears about the Golden Carp from his friend Samuel, who heard about it from an “Indian” who lives alone in the hills. While Anaya problematically never gives this Native person a voice of their own in the novel, Tony’s friend Cico identifies the sin of colonization as the cause for the Carp’s prophesy that the town of Guadalupe will collapse into the underground aquifer that surrounds and flows underneath it. According to the legend that forms the background for this prophesy, the Golden Carp was a god who took pity on his people when they sinned by breaking a prohibition against eating the carp in the river. The people were subsequently turned into carp themselves, and like Jesus taking on human flesh, this god took on the form of a Carp to protect and empathize with his people who only broke the prohibition because of a lengthy famine. Speaking of the fact that the land in New Mexico was once covered by a pre-historic sea, Cico proclaims the occupancy of humans as the first act of colonization,

telling Tony, “this land belonged to the fish before it belonged to us. I have no doubt about the prophecy of the golden carp. He will come to rule again!” Cico goes on to explain that after the first people were turned into carp for eating the sacred carp in the river, “many years later, a new people came to live in this valley. And they were no better than the first inhabitants, in fact they were worse. They sinned a lot, they sinned against each other, and they sinned against the legends they knew.”³⁵ If the Indigenous people were punished for failing to maintain the ecological balance by eating the sacred fish, the Spanish colonists were worse. Like Tony’s father’s critique of the rich rancheros who pulled too much water from their wells and overgrazed their pastures, the waves of colonization by Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo people involved a constant colonization of the land as well. Cico continues: “And so the golden carp sent them a prophecy. He said that the sins of the people would weigh so heavy upon the land that in the end the whole town would collapse and be swallowed by water—”³⁶ While this might seem like a fantastical apocalyptic prediction, recent analyses of cities as far flung as Mexico City, Phoenix, Tehran, and Bogota, have all shown them to be sinking at rates up to one inch per year due to excessive groundwater extraction. This provides a very real ecological connection between the rich rancheros who “sucked the earth dry with their deep wells” and Cico’s pronouncement that “the golden carp has warned us that the land cannot take the weight of the sins—the land will finally sink!”³⁷

Rooted in the nature/culture divide, Euro-American belief that human actions do not significantly affect the biosphere on which they depend leads to abuses of the physical and biological world. But Tony’s father offers a solution: “a wise man listens to the voice of the earth, Antonio. He listens because the weather the winds bring will be his salvation or his destruction. Like a young tree bends with the wind, so a man must bow to the earth— It is only

when man grows old and refuses to admit his earth-tie and dependence on mother nature that the powers of mother nature will turn upon him and destroy him.”³⁸ Just as Tony’s mother declared that “the world would be saved if the people turned to the earth,” so Tony’s father, despite his different ethnic and religious background, also promotes this eco-spiritual solution to the very real problems people in this eco-region face, including drought, desertification, and geological change. These problems were brought about by Euro-American colonization (the rich rancheros) of both the people and the land. What’s more, the burden of their ecological effects fall overwhelmingly upon the poor and people of color in their community. This disparity in ecological consequences of the nature/culture divide will be increasingly visible in the next novel I examine—Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*.

Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*

Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* shows its sensitivity to human interconnection with nature as early as its dedication: “To all the trees that gave their life to the telling of these stories.” In honoring the trees that become the paper that allows her book to go out into the world to tell her stories, Castillo doesn’t lament the fact that trees must die but shows her understanding that humans can and even must change the natural world around us of which we are an integral part. Counter to the early conservationist movement and much of the mainstream environmental movement to this day which views humans as destructive forces which must be kept out of any area which is to be preserved, Castillo places herself within the environmental justice framework from which the rest of the book will operate. Throughout her novel, characters repeatedly show not only humans’ integral relationship to the more-than-human world but also the way that poor and communities of color are often made into sacrifice zones in which multi-national

corporations and governments destroy their ability to maintain a healthy and sustainable relationship to the land while maintaining the environmental integrity of white and wealthy communities.

In the face of these injustices, Castillo's novel takes a staunchly decolonial stance, revealing, as Ybarra puts it, that "one of the most significant things that environmentalism can learn from the decolonial writings of Chicanas and Chicanos (among other peoples of color) is the fact that we never needed to become environmentalists in the first place, and we therefore have an array of strategies at our disposal for how to live well with earth."³⁹ The tension between Chicana strategies for living well with earth and the mainstream environmental movement becomes explicit in the novel as Castillo also reveals what Sarah Jaquette Ray calls an active investment in Anglo privilege within American environmentalism.⁴⁰ As Wald et al. contend, "Environmentalism in the United States is most often associated with a middle- to upper-class white demographic, working on behalf of nonhuman nature for the preservation of wilderness or the conservation of species."⁴¹ Castillo directly challenges this model of environmentalism as preservation and uses her fiction to redefine "nature" as "where we live, work, and play" and to point out the ways that mainstream environmentalism often excludes poor and people of color from this collective "we."

Definition of Environmental Racism

As Wald et al. point out, "with the possible exception of Helena María Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, perhaps no other Latinx or Chicana novel has garnered as much attention from environmental studies and ecocritical scholars as *So Far from God*."⁴² However, Castillo's novel doesn't merely validate an ecocritical approach but also challenges mainstream

environmentalism and helps define the crucial differences between the mainstream environmental movement and environmental justice. To understand the ways that Castillo's novel intervenes within both the environmental and ecocritical movements a short history of both is needed. Joni Adamson et al. identify a "defining moment in the history of the U.S. environmental justice movement" in a fascinating moment of religious activism. In 1987, the United Church of Christ (UCC) put together a Commission for Racial Justice. The executive director of the commission, Reverend Benjamin Chavis, defined "environmental racism" for the first time as "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic wastes facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement."⁴³ In 1991, an international People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (PCELS) was convened in Washington, D.C. to address this exclusion of people of color from the mainstream (read white) environmental movement. At this summit, leaders identified the roots of environmental injustice not only in institutional/systemic racism but in the history of European colonization which initiated current understandings of race and systems of racial hierarchy which persist to this day. They also linked colonization of Indigenous and people of color to colonization of the land, laying out seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice aimed at achieving "political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples."⁴⁴ Between the 1987 UCC report and the principles of the 1991 summit, the environmental justice movement has come to be defined by these intersecting concerns with race, coloniality, and the greater-than-human world. Castillo's *So Far from God*,

published in 1993 just a few years after the PCEL Summit, brings all three of these intersecting concerns together in its fictional world of Tome, New Mexico.

Castillo's novel is further important for a study of environmental justice as an essential component of a Chicana/o eco-spiritual imaginary because Rev. Chavis's definition of environmental racism in part as white exclusion of people of color from leadership in the environmental movement parallels the history of eco-criticism in that regard as well. Ecocriticism, broadly conceived, "is the study of the natural environment as it appears in literary and cultural productions."⁴⁵ However, this study of the natural environment in literature originated with what came to be known as "nature writing" dominated "by white male writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Edward Abbey, and by a few white female authors who write in a similar style, such as Annie Dillard and Terry Tempest Williams."⁴⁶ Because these white nature writers remained rooted in the nature/culture divide, a sort of Transcendentalist pastoral in which nature is something outside of and even morally superior to human civilization, writing by Chicana/o and Native authors concerned with human relationship to each other and to the land were largely excluded. As ecocriticism gained traction as a legitimate way to read literature, it developed along multiple "strands" of ecocritical writing.⁴⁷ Initially, ecocriticism stuck to what critic T.V. Reed calls Conservationist Ecocriticism—the white male pastoral movement identified above which asked the question, "what can literature and criticism do to help preserve and extend wilderness, protect endangered species, and otherwise assist in the preservation of the natural world."⁴⁸ This pragmatic and human-centric approach to eco-criticism became more complex with the increased study of ecology in the sciences and an investigation of the interrelatedness of living organisms in any given ecoregion or the ecosphere as a whole, leading to the second strand which Reed calls Ecological

Ecocriticism. Biocentric or Deep Ecological Ecocriticism forms the third strand asking the question “how can literature and criticism be used to show the limits of ‘humanism.’”⁴⁹

While Reed’s first two “strands” fit squarely within what Priscilla Ybarra calls the “first era” of eco-criticism, “emphasizing nature writing and a literal, straightforward engagement with the natural environment,” the third strand begins to bleed into what Ybarra calls the “second era” that challenges the idea of nature itself as a human construct. This second era of ecocriticism “not only takes seriously the human relationship with the environment but also concerns itself with the way that human-to-human relations are negotiated via the natural environment and how the exploitation of humans as well as nature is often rationalized in overlapping ways.”⁵⁰ By questioning both the constructed nature of “nature” in the white-dominated environmental movement and the ways intersecting constructs of race, class, and gender complicate our understanding of the greater-than-human world, some writers of color previously excluded from the definition of “nature writing” in the first era are fighting to have their work recognized as ecocritical. This in turn has led to the development of what Reed calls the final two strands of ecocriticism, Ecofeminist and Environmental Justice ecocriticism. Focused on the interdependence between humans and their environment as well as the overwhelming burden of environmental degradation placed on poor and people of color communities, Castillo’s novel engages in both a strong feminist critique and an environmental justice message while remaining wary of the white-constructed category of “environmentalism.”

While Castillo’s novel has become a touchstone within ecocritical scholarship for its clear critiques of both environmental injustice and the white-dominated environmental movement, many scholars treat the Catholicism in the text as “an extension of colonialism”⁵¹ or as “beyond the scope” of their work.⁵² I argue, however, that throughout *So Far from God*,

characters embrace Catholicism not only as part of local New Mexican culture since before the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, but also as part of their environmental justice work. While the character Doña Felicia, a curandera like Ultima, feels free to pick and choose which parts of the religion to follow, she never questions Catholicism's efficacy as part of her spiritual work. Rather than a dismissal of Catholic tradition, I argue that Castillo's novel engages in a complex spiritual mestizaje which maintains the earth-centered practices of the mestiza population despite Catholicism's origin in Spanish and Mexican colonization.

Environmental Racism in Castillo's "So Far from God"

Like the eco-spiritual imaginary enunciated by Anaya, Castillo finds a spiritual mestizaje that not only decolonizes Catholic rituals and practices but also redefines the Catholic understanding of sin to mean harm against the earth and against its people. The novel is bookended by the two deaths of La Santa Loca and her mother Sofia who live in the small unincorporated community of Tome, New Mexico, just outside Albuquerque. After bearing four daughters to compulsive gambler Domingo, Sofi finally gives her husband the boot (or is abandoned by him as the townspeople believe) when he gambles away the ten acres of land which Sofi's parents and grandparents had passed down to her. While her other three daughters (Esperanza, Fe, and Caridad) incarnate three fruits of the spirit (Hope, Faith, and Love), La Loca, who dies and is resurrected when she is three, flying to the roof of the church at her own funeral and avoiding human touch from that point on, is never named other than by her local appellation—La Loca Santa. By the end of the novel, all four daughters have died, and Sofi becomes the “founder and la first presidenta” of a worldwide organization called M.O.M.A.S., Mothers of Martyrs and Saints.⁵³ Worship of La Loca Santa becomes widespread and serves to

bring people together across race, class, religion, and species: “when she did die, young and old, poor and not-so-very-poor, Catholic or whatever, believers and non-believers alike, ‘Indian’ and ‘Spanish,’ a few gringos and some others, even non-human (since it was never no secret that all her life animals were closer to La Loca than people) came to that second funeral.”⁵⁴

Characterized by Barbara Kingsolver inside the front cover of the 1993 Norton edition as a hybrid of the telenovela and the writing of Gabriel García Márquez, the novel nevertheless weaves some blatant political preaching into the narrative, taking a strong decolonial and ecological stance which is deeply embedded in the Catholic and Indigenous spirituality of rural New Mexico. Esperanza, the oldest, is an unapologetic Chicana (fighting for a Chicana Studies program and United Farm Workers rights), who Sofi later says “always tried to tell me about how we needed to go out and fight for our rights. She always talked about things like working to change the ‘system.’”⁵⁵ Before leaving Tome as a war correspondent in Saudi Arabia, Esperanza frequently travels to Taos Pueblo with her Native boyfriend Ruben to do peyote and participate in Laguna sweats.^{†††} However, she becomes the first of Sofia’s daughters to die because of the systems of coloniality which she tries so hard to change. Upon arriving in Saudi Arabia, she is kidnapped and declared dead by the federal government in a war characterized by Sofi as unjust.⁵⁶ Despite Esperanza’s eponymous hope in the possibility of change, she ultimately dies trapped within the machinations of the global military industrial complex.

Caridad, translated into English as Charity or Love, is the second of Sofia’s daughters to die a victim to the “system” of coloniality. Prone to falling into deep and infatuating love, Caridad becomes a victim of the joint systems of patriarchy and coloniality. Following a jilting by her fiancé, Caridad becomes known for what the townspeople call loose behavior until one

^{†††} A spiritual ceremony involving prayer inside a sauna-like sweat lodge.

night as she is walking home she is sexually assaulted and disfigured by an attacking Malogra. An old Mexican folk story used to scare children into good behavior, the Malogra is a monster made of cotton that attacks and smothers its victims. In Caridad's case, however, the Malogra becomes a symbolic stand-in for patriarchy and rape culture as they are perpetuated and intersect with coloniality. Like these immaterial social systems which nevertheless cause death and suffering to their victims, the Malogra is described as "both tangible and amorphous. ... It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force."⁵⁷ Adding detail to this amorphous force, Caridad's father, Domingo, discovers that the police have no investment in looking for Caridad's attacker as "it was suggested that she had for all intents and purposes 'asked for it' when she was attacked."⁵⁸ Finding a new path despite her trauma, Caridad begins to train with her landlady Doña Felicia as a curandera using local herbs and medicinal practices many of which nevertheless correspond to those of the local Catholic doctor from the Phillipines.⁵⁹ As Doña Felicia says, "everything we need for healing is found in our natural surroundings."⁶⁰ As curanderas, Doña Felicia and Caridad value local plants, but traditional methods cross national boundaries as well since the Phillipines were also colonized by Spain. Despite her curandera training and Doña Felicia's intervention in her life, the forces of patriarchy ultimately push her to her death as she jumps off a cliff in the Taos Pueblo to get away from a male stalker.

If Esperanza is the Chicana activist fighting Euro-American coloniality and Caridad is the spiritual healer trying to heal herself from the ravages of patriarchy through her local spiritual practice as a curandera, Fe is the practical one who places her faith in the white system. However, like her sisters, Fe can't escape the systems of coloniality in which she is enmeshed

and her faith in the false promise of the American Dream is what ends up killing her.⁶¹ Like Esperanza, Fe's downfall comes in the form of the military industrial complex. Looking for higher pay to finance her house, car, and state-of-the-art home appliances, Fe quits her job at the local bank for a higher paying factory job with Acme International, a military contractor that moves near the little town of Tome. This factory, however, is poisoning the land, the animals, and the people, and within a year of taking the job, Fe dies of chemical poisoning.⁶² She gets cancer as a result of her work with these chemical cleaning agents, but she is let down by the American healthcare system as well as her treatments are not covered by her company's insurance because she supposedly had a few spots of melanoma before she took the job and it is therefore ruled as a pre-existing condition. While the FBI does begin to investigate the illegal use of chemicals, the company is quickly let off the hook.⁶³

With only Loca left out of her four daughters, Sofia makes the connection between her daughters' deaths and the systems of coloniality which are rooted in destruction of her Mexican American community to enrich the multi-national corporations preying on them. For Sofi, whose name means wisdom, environmental destruction is coupled with economic destruction as she sees the people in her community slowly losing both their land and their ability to sustain life through their connection to this land. Sofi's solution to the intersecting colonization of her community and their local eco-region fits squarely within Ybarra's observation that many Chicana feminist writers "develop the idea to transcend possession."⁶⁴ Counter to the Chicano civil rights movement in New Mexico which was largely focused on repossession of land taken by Anglo settlers since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,^{†††} Castillo's Sofi establishes a

^{†††} Ybarra argues that this distinction between Chicano and Chicana activists is embodied in the concept of Aztlán. Aztlán refers to both a cultural imaginary and a geographical area in the U.S. Southwest composed of land occupied by the Aztec empire prior to its migration south to Tenochtitlán. Invaded and occupied by Anglo settlers before and after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, this geographical region was claimed by many Chicano activists

communal system of land use and resources. Running for unofficial mayor of Tome (since the town is still unincorporated) Sofi starts a sheep-grazing wool-weaving cooperative “modeled after the one started by the group up north that had also saved its community from destitution.”⁶⁵ They resort to trade and barter of land, services, and goods, and volunteer work for the co-op becomes employment for two dozen women as co-op owners who can bring their children to work and even earn college credit for business or fine arts through an agreement with the local community college. The alternative careers in Tome, cleaning the houses of “los ricos” or waiting tables, leaves them still impoverished and without any self-determination or upward mobility. The co-op changes that and allows them to escape the serving class they were being pushed into by their land loss, allowing them to begin making a living from the remaining land they now share with each other once again. By letting go of possession, they are still able to “stay on their land, to work it as their families had for many generations.”⁶⁶ Sofi also lets go of ownership of the butcher shop she had been running to create a food co-op. The hormone-free meat and organic, non-GMO vegetables that people start growing not only allow co-op members to “live on more substantial diets than what they had previously relied on from the overpriced and sprayed produce of the huge supermarket” in town, but the excess can be sold due to the growing demand for environmentally friendly food among the white community.

Ybarra sees transcendence of possession such as Sofi achieves in Tome as a decolonial as well as feminist move. She writes:

during the Civil Rights movements of the twentieth century as stolen land. Ybarra argues, however, that the “original trauma of alienation from their homeland leads many [especially Chicana feminists] to envision transcending actual or figurative possession of land and reclaiming their own dignity as individuals and as a community” through communal land sharing techniques such as that practiced by Sofi and her neighbors. Similar to Orange’s idea that “the land is everywhere or nowhere,” viewing Aztlán as symbolic of a cultural imaginary allows Castillo’s characters to practice sustainable agricultural practices from their past without attempting to simply recreate a lost pre-colonial world. Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 21.

In order to understand and value Mexican American contributions to environmental thought, ... one needs to see the interplay of land dispossession with this culture's transcendence of the ideas of control over nature and determination to preserve dignity and respect. I call this process 'transcending possession,' as it rejects the notion of control and cultivates respect among humans and the natural environment. It also rejects the objectifying tendencies of rights- and private property-oriented modernity.⁶⁷

While land loss is certainly a major issue in the novel, Sofi's solution to this problem in communal land use not only rejects the objectification of land as property but also belies what Wald et al. call "an uneasy relationship with settler colonialism as both perpetrators of colonial violence and objects of settler-colonial dispossession" within the Latinx community.⁶⁸ Like many of Anaya's characters in *Bless Me, Ultima* who call themselves "Spanish" and hold a disdain for Native people like "Jason's Indian" but simultaneously look back to Native practices for cultivation of the earth, Castillo's characters also hold their Spanish and Native *mestizo* heritage in tension. Their Mexican ancestors actively colonized New Mexico but were in turn colonized and dispossessed by Anglo settlers after 1836. What's more, dispossession of land is far from a simple Anglo land grab. The system of white supremacy plays upon environmental factors as well as racial and political structures to gradually transfer ownership of land out of Mexican American hands. In one conversation between Sofi and a neighbor, the neighbor explains that she grew up on land granted directly to her great-great-grandparents by King Felipe II of Spain, but all that was left by the time she was growing up "was barely enough to plant a little corn, some calabesas, chiles, nomás, and graze a few goats and sheep to keep us alive."⁶⁹ The process through which this land loss happened involved both direct colonization and loss of agricultural productivity due to environmental degradation: "first the gringos took most of our land away when they took over the territory from Mexico—right after Mexico had taken it from Spain ... then, little by little, my familia had to give it up 'cause they couldn't afford it no more,

losing business on their churros and cattle.”⁷⁰ Like Anaya’s novel where desertification is due to the “rich rancheros” who “suck the earth dry with their deep wells” the loss of agricultural productivity in Castillo’s novel is due to “outsiders in the past” overusing the land for profit so that it is no longer able to support subsistence farming.⁷¹ This land overuse coupled with toxic leaching from the military contractor which hires Fe as well as higher taxes due to white gentrification combine not only to dispossess people of their land but to degrade their quality and length of life as well. Environmental destruction intersects once more with both coloniality and patriarchy as Acme International primarily hires “women who ... did not have a high school diploma” and “spoke Spanish, Tewa, Tiwa, or some other pueblo dialect as a first language.”⁷² Like Fe, these women are also victims of toxic exposure, suffering from miscarriage and ovarian cancer.⁷³ In starting the co-ops which rely on communal land use and pooling community resources, Sofi provides a safe and healthy alternative to these factory jobs and reveals what Ybarra calls “an array of strategies ... for how to live well with earth.”⁷⁴

Defining Environmental Racism as Sin

Sofi’s ability to redefine “nature” as “where we live, work, and play” in her fight against the environmental devastation wrought by multinational corporations like Acme International and the forces of coloniality and patriarchy which it represents, comes to a head in a powerful moment of spiritual hybridity which defines harm against the earth and her people as a form of sin within the Catholic tradition. Earlier in the novel, Caridad participated in a pilgrimage to Chimayo, New Mexico, as part of the Catholic Holy Week procession of the Cross. Combining Indigenous and Catholic mythology, the church in Chimayo is built on the spot where, sometime in the 18th century, a Catholic Penitente monk supposedly “ran toward a bright light coming out

of the ground not far from the river.” Digging “at the spot where the light emitted,” the monk “found a statue of Our Lord of Esquipulas.”⁷⁵ This legend, as Castillo defines it, is based on the real-world veneration of a black Christ figure in Esquipulas, Guatemala which did in fact spread to the small town of Chimayo, New Mexico. “How he got to the land of the Tewa,” Castillo writes, “is anybody’s guess! But he most certainly had a mission, which was to let people know of the healing powers of the sacred earth of Tsimayo—just like he had done in Esquipulas.”⁷⁶ Integrating a sacred Native site with this black Christ from Guatemala, “the Catholic Church endorsed as sacred what the Native peoples had known all along since the beginning of time.”⁷⁷ Following tradition, Doña Felicia and Caridad enter the church “where there is a pozito opened to the holy earth with which, since the early part of the nineteenth century, Catholics (really, it wasn’t their fault that they came so late to this knowledge, being such newcomers to these lands) have healed both their bodies and spirits.”⁷⁸

Following Fe’s death, another Holy Week procession takes a distinctly political turn. This Way of the Cross Procession does not lead to the village of Chimayo but “through the main streets of the villages and then on to the city,” commemorating the stations of the cross along the way. Underscoring the shift in purpose from healing the body with sacred earth to a protest over environmental injustice, Castillo writes:

This procession ... did not flagellate itself with horsehair whips. There were no pitos blown nor alabadas sung, neither. As a kind of main feature, however, a supposedly famous woman singer named Pastora Somebody or Other did join the procession with her guitar and sang some of her own songs; and though they were not in the least religious in nature but about workers and women strikers and things like that, the way she sang them made some people sigh and some even sob and still others sang along with their eyes to the sky.⁷⁹

Among several points that could be made about this passage, including the female leadership, the political nature of the songs, or the way the marchers still sing them as if they were religious

hymns, the most important to this argument is Castillo's clarification that this procession has nothing to do with repentance for individual sins. Unlike the procession of the cross earlier in the novel led by Doña Felicia's godson "Francisco el Penitente" playing the part of Jesus, in this procession "no brother was elected to carry a life-size cross on his naked back." Nor does anyone flagellate themselves as a sign of penance.⁸⁰ Instead, people carry "photographs of their loved ones who died due to toxic exposure hung around their necks like scapulars; and at each station along their route, the crowd stopped and prayed and people spoke on the so many things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species."⁸¹ As their loved ones take the place of icons of saints and martyrs, the stations of the cross which commemorate various stages in Jesus's suffering as he was marched through the streets of Jerusalem and executed are also transformed from a meditation on Christ's suffering for sins into a meditation on the suffering of the people and the land because of the sins of coloniality:

When Jesus was condemned to death, the spokesperson for the committee working to protest dumping radioactive waste in the sewer addressed the crowd.

Jesus bore his cross and a man declared that most of the Native and hispano families throughout the land were living below the poverty level...

Jesus fell. And people all over the land were dying from toxic exposure in factories.

Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation, and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer. ...

Jesus was helped by Simon and the number of those without jobs increased each day.

Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus' face. Livestock drank and swam in contaminated canals.

Jesus fell for the second time.

The women of Jerusalem consoled Jesus. Children also played in those open disease-ridden canals where the livestock swam and drank and died from it.

Jesus fell a third time. The air was contaminated by the pollutants coming from the factories. ...

Jesus was stripped of his garments. Nuclear power plants sat like gargantuan landmines among the people. ...

Jesus was nailed to the cross. Deadly pesticides were sprayed directly and from helicopters above on the vegetables and fruits and on the people who picked them. ...

!Ayyy! Jesus died on the cross ... and Sofi went up to the portable podium ... to talk about her eldest daughter who never returned, although she had gone [to the war in Saudi Arabia] not to fight but as a civilian, a news reporter, as part of her job, that's all.⁸²

When Jesus is laid in his tomb as the final station of the Good Friday procession, people begin returning to their homes, having transformed a traditional Catholic ritual from a meditation on Jesus's innocent suffering for their sins into a meditation on their innocent suffering for the sins of U.S. coloniality.

As Molly J. Freitas points out in regard to Helena Maria Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* which I examine in the next section, this transformation of Jesus from a savior for individual sins into a symbol of self-sacrifice for the cause of justice has strong connections to what has become known as liberation theology. In Freitas's words, "liberation theologians understand that economic and social (including ecclesiastical) structures perpetuate inequality and argue that Christianity, when properly employed, can provide a means of earthly, not merely spiritual, liberation."⁸³ Understood in this context, both Jesus's inherent innocence in the face of persecution by the Roman Empire and his emphasis on meeting people's bodily needs as a political challenge to the regime become important points of emulation for the people of Tome and the surrounding towns and villages as they follow the stations of the cross both to commemorate his execution and to protest their own oppression by an occupying empire.

Postmodern Narrative Techniques and the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

While the first Holy Week procession in the novel was led by a man dressed as Jesus and carrying a cross, the second procession is led by a woman on horseback in the style of Inez Milholland during the 1913 Women's Suffrage Procession. A seemingly unusual woman to serve as figurehead, La Santa Loca embodies many of the postmodern themes in the novel even as she represents a unification of the causes of gender, race, labor, and environmental rights. While some scholars, such as Marcial González, argue that postmodernism infused in recent Chicana/o literature "mystifies social relations and, consequently, limits rather than enhances the possibility for critical class consciousness," others disagree.⁸⁴ Delgadillo, for example, argues that in *So Far from God*, Castillo utilizes its decolonial hybrid spirituality to achieve a postmodern challenge to the Grand Narrative of manifest destiny.⁸⁵ Rosaura Sanchez also "acknowledges that certain Chicana/o literary works ... have adopted stylistic practices that borrow from postmodernist strategies of representation such as 'the fragmentation of time and space' and characterizations of individuals that are 'schizoid and asocial.'"⁸⁶ What's more, even González acknowledges that in the novels that "borrow" from postmodernism, "postmodernist theory has provided Chicana/o criticism with conceptual tools for explaining the heterogeneity of culture."⁸⁷

Riding at the head of the Holy Week Procession, La Santa Loca not only embodies the heterogeneity of cultures participating in the march but also the "characterization of individuals that are 'schizoid and asocial'" defined by Sanchez earlier as a postmodern characteristic. Playing on both the clinical definition of schizophrenia as "symptoms such as paranoia, delusions, hallucinations and the inability to connect emotions with the intellect" as well as the postmodern definition of schizophrenia as the inability to resolve multiple externally enforced subjectivities, Castillo's character Loca (meaning crazy) simultaneously embodies both.⁸⁸ The

definition of asocial (outside of her immediate family she only associates with non-human animals), Loca also frequently hallucinates, believing that she sees and converses with her deceased sister Esperanza, the mythical La Llorona, and a “Lady in Blue” who looks like a nun and appears to exist outside of time since “she didn’t smell like nothing so Loca was not sure if she was a present nun or a past nun or maybe hasta una futura subjunctive nun.”⁸⁹ While Loca fits the clinical definition of schizophrenic, she is also subject to a host of externally enforced subjectivities since her apparent resurrection at the age of three. The priest who witnesses her resurrection can’t decide if she is “the devil’s messenger or a winged angel” and most of the townspeople keep their distance after that as well, seeing her as alternately evil, miraculous, or simply, like her name implies, crazy.⁹⁰ Even after her death, when she is venerated as a local saint, “people never really could figure out who La Loca protected and oversaw as a rule, or what she was good to pray about.”⁹¹ People call her a multitude of titles including “La Patroncita de Todas las Pobres Criaturas or Patrona de la Cocina y la Comida (or, more formally, as she was referred to during Mass: Patrona do los Hambrientes, Patrona de las Enfermedades Misteriosas, and so on).⁹² And yet, despite this fractured subjectivity and “asocial and schizoid” behavior, when Sofi’s transnational organization for Mothers of Martyrs And Saints (M.O.M.A.S.) creates a Tarot deck at the end of the novel featuring the members of Loca’s family, Loca is defined as the only character truly in control of her own subjectivity:

La Loca was represented by the key 0 of the Major Arcana, the Fool. The Fool card represented one who walked without fear, aware of the choices she made in the journey of life, life itself being defined as a state of courage and wisdom and not an uncontrollable participation in society, as many people experienced their lives.”⁹³

Thus, Loca’s schizophrenic behavior in life is reformulated in direct opposition to the postmodern position as the victim of external subjectivities. Instead, her ability to step outside of

social norms becomes a valorization of her own self-constituted identity outside of external subjectivities. This is why, when Loca does deign to appear in public, she acts on behalf of the earth and her people, appearing as the figurehead in the Stations of the Cross Procession against environmental racism in her community and engaging an eco-spiritual imaginary that ignites the political transformation of a Catholic ritual of repentance into a decolonial spiritual rally. What's more, when Loca dies, the eco-spiritual imaginary she ignited during her life continues to bring people together across boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and even species, as her funeral draws "young and old, poor and not-so-very-poor, Catholic or whatever, believers and non-believers alike, 'Indian' and 'Spanish,' a few gringos and some others, even non-human (since it was never no secret that all her life animals were closer to La Loca than people)."94

While La Loca's ability to transcend external subjectivities reveals one way that Castillo engages with postmodern narrative theory, a postmodern "fragmentation of time and space" also occurs in both Castillo and Anaya's novels. Not only is Loca's funeral narrated prior to the Stations of the Cross procession in which Loca takes a leading part, but Castillo's narrator actively announces her belief in the non-linearity of time in narrative. In a moment of analepsis Castillo slips from third person omniscient narration to first person plural, writing that "this account which leads us temporarily astray from our story is about all kinds of beginnings and endings but mostly, like all accounts, about what goes on in the middle." Then, speaking to the reader, she compares this theory about her narrative to the extradiegetic world, writing that "even this existence of ours has no start and no finish but is the continuance of a journey on an endless, unpaved road."95 Theresa Delgadillo argues that this sense of non-linear time in Castillo's novel "asserts that Indigenous cosmologies and perspectives that challenge not only Western conceptions of history as linear and teleological but also Western notions of progress form an

essential component of resistance.”⁹⁶ This Indigenous challenge to Western epistemologies of linear time and progress also appears in Anaya’s novel. Here, the Native conception of timeless narrative seeps through. Activated by the “time long ago” construction that initiates all of the mythological tales in Silko’s *Ceremony*, the stories told to Tony about the Llano by Ultima and about the Golden Carp by Cico take on this timeless quality. Thus, the prophesy of the Golden Carp that “the land would sink beneath the weight of their [human’s] sins becomes not so much a declaration of a future event at a particular time as in the Judeo-Christian prophesies of the Old Testament, but rather a general warning about the consequences of un-fettered human exploitation of the earth. In all of these novels, therefore, as in the novels examined in the chapter on Native conceptions of an eco-spiritual imaginary, time and narrative are inextricably woven together with an eco-spiritual consciousness of both human dependency upon and responsibility for the earth.

Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* picks up in many ways right where Castillo’s novel ends as a young girl named Estrella begins to realize that she too bears the sins of U.S. coloniality so that white America can live in the comfortable heaven it has created for itself. Recounting a few weeks in the lives of a family of migrant farmworkers, Viramontes’s story, like Castillo’s, also describes toxic pesticides sprayed from above—this time by an airplane with a shadow that falls in the shape of a cross. Dedicated to Cesar Chavez, the story follows 13-year-old Estrella through a summer with her migrant farm-working family in California. As they follow the work north from peach orchards to vineyards, Estrella starts crushing on another young farmworker from Texas named Alejo. When Alejo is caught in a

peach orchard being sprayed with pesticides by a cropduster, he develops what the community calls “daño of the fields” and Estrella leads her family through the pitfalls of a sub-par healthcare system to get him the medical attention he needs. Compared by one reviewer to the “social realism” of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, Viramontes’s novel is rife with critique of intersecting systems of coloniality such as unfair wages and lack of access to healthcare.⁹⁷ The novel goes beyond the social commentary of novelists like Steinbeck and Sinclair, however, in its unflinching look at the ways structural racism and environmental degradation exacerbate the problems of capitalist exploitation.

While *Under the Feet of Jesus* contains none of the fantastical or folkloric elements of Castillo and Anaya’s work,^{§§§} her staunchly materialist critique of the capitalist U.S. agricultural system nevertheless engages a similar eco-spiritual imaginary through its classification of systemic and environmental racism as a form of sin.^{****} Many scholars have written on the environmental justice bent of Viramontes’s debut novel. Christa Grewe-Volpp, for example, discusses the ecofeminist contours of Viramontes’s work.⁹⁸ Ybarra specifies this form of

^{§§§} Often called magical realism, this juxtaposition of social critique with the fantastical has been defined as “a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other” (Warnes 2). While this serves well as a working definition, however, magical realism is far from a unified genre. Often traced back to Gabriel García Márquez and viewed simplistically as “the yearnings of Latin American writers for identity and cultural emancipation,” magical realism has nevertheless been identified as an international phenomenon by a number of scholars (Warnes 4). Scholars largely split into two general camps regarding this phenomenon: an anthropological approach that “seeks to interpret the magic in magical realism culturally” and an epistemological approach that views it as “a productive fictional mode of [socio-political] critique” (Warnes 6). Anaya and Castillo fall easily within both definitions as they draw heavily on distinct cultural beliefs and mythologies from within their local New Mexican communities while simultaneously privileging these mythologies as truth claims to critique layers of coloniality and structural elements of racial/gender inequity. Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Basingstoke ; Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2–6.

^{****} As in the other two novels in this chapter, Viramontes also engages postmodern theories of fractured subjectivity in her expression of this eco-spiritual imaginary even as her character Estrella learns to enunciate her own “active subjectivity” (see Ybarra’s use of this term below). Mermann-Jozwiak writes that “Viramontes’s novel provides a postmodern topography in its deconstruction of traditional concepts of spaces as static and bounded structures” even as it directly confronts theories of the nomadic postmodern subject by critiquing the material and economic limits of mobility.” Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, *Postmodern Vernaculars: Chicana Literature and Postmodern Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 53–54.

ecofeminism as Estrella's "active subjectivity," revealing the way women of color not only bear the brunt of environmental injustice but have also led the environmental justice movement from the very beginning.⁹⁹ Others have noted the novel's distinct Catholic inflection. Molly J. Freitas argues that the novel "radically reimagines Christ through the figure of Estrella" positioning her as "a messianic icon of righteous justice"¹⁰⁰ Most notably she identifies the parallel between Jesus's smashing of the moneylenders tables in the temple in Jerusalem and Estrella's smashing of the desk of the health clinic with a crowbar after the white nurse takes their only remaining money in exchange for her unhelpful prognosis that Alejo is sick and needs to go to the hospital. Freitas also reads the novel's ending when Estrella climbs to the roof of a barn as a symbolic parallel to the resurrection of Christ in the Christian gospels. I argue that in addition to this decolonial redefinition of the symbol of Christ as a young woman of color fighting environmental injustice in the novel, like Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* and Castillo's *So Far from God*, Viramontes's novel also redefines the Catholic concept of sin as harm against people of color and the earth.

Frequently throughout the novel, characters assume guilt for actions that violate traditional Catholic morals such as stealing (categorized under Envy in the seven deadly sins) and premarital sex (categorized under Lust). When misfortune befalls them, these characters initially assume that it is God's punishment for their sin while the context of the novel reveals that what they view as "punishment" is actually what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" of systemic environmental racism.¹⁰¹ The most striking example, as Freitas has also noted, comes as Alejo is stealing peaches to sell for money to pay for college in the fall. Suddenly, a biplane spraying pesticide appears directly overhead "so close ... its gray shadow crossed over him like a crucifix" and "released the shower of white pesticide."¹⁰² As Alejo clings desperately to the tree,

trying not to inhale the toxic chemicals floating over him and soaking his face and clothes he wonders “was this punishment for his thievery? He was sorry Lord, so sorry.”¹⁰³ In the surrounding passages, however, Viramontes contextualizes Alejo’s theft within the racist and capitalist systems which have forced him to commit this “sin,” revealing that the people upholding these systems of coloniality are the ones who are really at fault. Earlier, in a conversation between Estrella and Perfecto as they watch the plane flying toward the orchard in which Alejo is hiding, Estrella asks “weren’t they gonna spray the orchards next week?” Perfecto answers, “since when do they do what they say?”¹⁰⁴ Alejo’s later surprise when the plane flies overhead is thus revealed to be the result of a callous indifference to the workers’ health and safety. The fact that the managers have lied to the workers about when the orchard will be sprayed is part of the racist system that “crucifies” the innocent Alejo. The other systemic issue regards lack of a living wage. Alejo is paid so little for his labor that to strive for the American dream of an education and a future he has to steal to supplement the unlivable wages he makes legally. Viramontes thus reveals these systemic issues which lead to Alejo’s poisoning as the real transgressions.

In the next scene, Estrella’s unofficial step-father, Perfecto, also reminisces about his own past “sins” and the punishment he believes he received as a result. Perfecto thinks his lover, Mercedes’s, miscarriage years in the past was God’s punishment for violating the Catholic injunction against sex before marriage (lust). Mercedes, however, argues that she lost the child because the Catholic Church wouldn’t let her learn traditional knowledge about giving birth because she wasn’t yet married. She tells him that “the women hadn’t schooled her in the ritual of birthing because it was against *his* church; to know the ceremonies would be to know demons and heathens.” While Perfecto still wrestles with his faith and the moral guilt he feels for his

relationship with Mercedes, “she wanted no part of his God after that.”¹⁰⁵ As Perfecto stands lost in thought reminiscing about Mercedes and his lost child, the scent of the floating pesticide that has just been sprayed directly on Alejo drifts into his nostrils, bringing him back to the present moment and causing insects to drop around him as he sneezes and covers his mouth and nose with a handkerchief. As Perfecto breathes the poison in the air and remembers that Mercedes eventually died of lung cancer, the use of the toxic pesticide is implied as the ultimate cause of both Mercedes death and her miscarriage. Once again, Viramontes reveals the pesticide as the real violation of the Old Testament commandment not to kill.

Further linking the capitalist system of agriculture to the sin of murder, the novel frequently compares the systems of coloniality in which people are trapped to tar pits in which they sink and are eaten away until they are nothing but bare bones. Viramontes links this image of the bones of oppressed people to the image of the bones of dinosaurs from which fossil fuels are formed to create a powerful symbol of the intersecting forces of coloniality which simultaneously poison the earth and the bodies of the working poor. Bones and oil thus become symbols throughout the novel of both these systems of coloniality which are “legitimized by immigration laws, in the system of capital and in the abstraction of labor that supports the U.S. food production system.”¹⁰⁶ First, it is “the oil of the pavement mirrored like puddles of fresh rainwater” on the highway that threatens the family as they try to cross between the roaring traffic. While the fields in which the family works might be an image of pastoral bounty for white Americans driving past at 60 mph on the highway, Estrella’s family and the other farmworkers are forbidden from eating the fruit of their labor. Instead, they must cross the busy highway made of asphalt derived from oil for access to old and rotting produce at a gas station mini mart.¹⁰⁷ Second, Estrella thinks about oil as a symbol of the for-profit healthcare system

that excludes herself and her family. She makes this connection when the white nurse at a local health clinic dismisses Alejo's condition, takes all of their money as payment, and complains that she has to leave to pick up her children in the white suburbs far from the food and healthcare desert where she works.¹⁰⁸ Estrella connects the oil which "kept the nurse's car ... on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six" to the bones of the dinosaurs from which it comes and to the bones of her family and friends who are exploited to produce the food that the white nurse feeds her children. In this insightful realization of interconnection, Estrella makes the "everyday violence and normalized despair ignored by middle-class white Americans"¹⁰⁹ visible by connecting the imagery of her own bones sinking into the earth deployed earlier in the novel to the bones of prehistoric creatures extracted as oil to maintain the infrastructure of white, capitalist America:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her.¹¹⁰

In realizing the unequal system of exchange that devalues her work and overvalues the nurse's work, Estrella also reveals a fundamental difference between environmental justice work and the mainstream environmental movement. While an eco-critical reading from a first wave perspective might fixate on the fossil fuel industry as a factor contributing to global warming, Estrella is forced to deal with the very immediate effect of this environmentally toxic system on the system of labor that exploits her.

By viewing the fossil fuel industry as an exploitation of the exhumed remains of dinosaurs, Estrella also makes a posthuman move that recognizes the interconnection of all forms

of life in the past and the present as granting equal moral weight to every form of existence across time and space. Like Anaya, whose myth of the golden Carp acknowledges the fish of a long-ago sea as the original inhabitants of the land and Indigenous people as the first colonizers of this pre-human terrain, Viramontes acknowledges the pre-human creatures whose bodies are colonized by human beings to create gasoline. While hiding underneath a pickup truck talking and making out, Alejo explains to Estrella that “millions of years ago, the dead animals and plants fell to the bottom of the sea” to become the oil slowly dripping from the bottom of the truck. When Alejo concludes “if we don’t have oil, we don’t have gasoline,” Estrella replies “Good. We’d stay put.”¹¹¹ By connecting the gasoline to the system of migrant farm work, Estrella indicts the whole fossil fuel industry as colonial towards both human and non-human beings alike.

This posthuman gesture toward the equal value and interconnection of all things human and non-human alike becomes explicit in the following chapter where I argue that the eco-spiritual imaginary has expanded to a broader Latinx coalition of writers including Dominican writer Junot Díaz and Mexican American writer Alfredo Véa. While Viramontes uses dinosaur bones as a symbol of eco-spiritual protest against coloniality in the United States, Díaz and Véa use non-human elements like jade and a migrant mongoose as both symbols of Buddhism and narrative signposts that connect authors, readers and characters across boundaries of time, space, nation, and race to create a trans-Pacific eco-spiritual imaginary that protests U.S. intervention in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic respectively.

Notes

- ¹ Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 5.
- ² Ybarra, 7.
- ³ Ybarra, 15.
- ⁴ Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham [N.C: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.
- ⁵ Delgadillo, 1.
- ⁶ Delgadillo, 1.
- ⁷ Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," 499.
- ⁸ Mignolo and Tlostanova, "Theorizing from the Borders," 206.
- ⁹ Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," 498.
- ¹⁰ Mignolo, 498.
- ¹¹ Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 123.
- ¹² Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 106.
- ¹³ Ybarra, 106.
- ¹⁴ Theresa Delgadillo, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance in Ana Castillo's 'So Far from God,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 890.
- ¹⁵ Delgadillo, 890.
- ¹⁶ Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 110.
- ¹⁷ Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia: The Transpacific Geographies of Chicana/o Literature, Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 95.
- ¹⁸ Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley: TQS Publications, 1991), 27.
- ¹⁹ Anaya, 185.
- ²⁰ Anaya, 220.
- ²¹ Anaya, 220.

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- ²² Anaya, 236.
- ²³ Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham [N.C: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.
- ²⁴ Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*, 236.
- ²⁵ James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (London ; Continuum, 2010), 2.
- ²⁶ Evyatar Marienberg, *Catholicism Today: An Introduction to the Contemporary Catholic Church* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 27–28, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bridwell/detail.action?docID=1744171>.
- ²⁷ Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*, 211.
- ²⁸ Anaya, 183.
- ²⁹ Anaya, 184.
- ³⁰ Anaya, 184.
- ³¹ Anaya, 184.
- ³² Anaya, 185.
- ³³ Anaya, 216.
- ³⁴ Anaya, 221.
- ³⁵ Anaya, 110.
- ³⁶ Anaya, 110.
- ³⁷ Anaya, 111.
- ³⁸ Anaya, 184.
- ³⁹ Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 28.
- ⁴⁰ Sarah Jaquette Ray, “Environmental Justice and the Ecological Other in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*,” in *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*, ed. Sarah D. Wald et al. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2019), 161.
- ⁴¹ Laura Pulido, “Forward,” in *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*, ed. Sarah D. Wald et al. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2019), 148–63.
- ⁴² Sarah D. Wald et al., *Latix Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2019), 17.
- ⁴³ Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (Tucson, Arz.: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 4.
- ⁴⁴ Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), xvi.

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- 45 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 11.
- 46 Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism*, 17.
- 47 T. V. Reed, "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism," in *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (Tucson, Arz.: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 149.
- 48 Reed, 148.
- 49 Reed, 148.
- 50 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 13.
- 51 Ray, "Environmental Justice and the Ecological Other in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*," 154.
- 52 Kamala Platt, "Ecocritical Chicana Literature Ana Castillo's 'Virtual Realism,'" *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 3, no. 1 (July 1, 1996): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/3.1.67>.
- 53 Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 247.
- 54 Castillo, 232.
- 55 Castillo, 142.
- 56 Castillo, 243.
- 57 Castillo, 77.
- 58 Castillo, 83.
- 59 Castillo, 235.
- 60 Castillo, 62.
- 61 Castillo, 171.
- 62 Castillo, 172.
- 63 Castillo, 187.
- 64 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 6.
- 65 Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 146.
- 66 Castillo, 148.
- 67 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 20.
- 68 Sarah D. Wald et al., *Latix Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2019), 7.
- 69 Castillo, *So Far from God*, 217.
- 70 Castillo, 217.

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- 71 Castillo, 139.
- 72 Castillo, 179.
- 73 Castillo, 179.
- 74 Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 28.
- 75 Castillo, *So Far from God*, 73.
- 76 Castillo, 73.
- 77 Castillo, 73.
- 78 Castillo, 75.
- 79 Castillo, 241.
- 80 Castillo, 241.
- 81 Castillo, 241–42.
- 82 Castillo, 241–43.
- 83 Molly J. Freitas, “Jesu Crista: Symbol for a Just Future in Helena Maria Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 101, no. 4 (2018): 364.
- 84 Marcial González, “Postmodernism, Historical Materialism and Chicana/o Cultural Studies,” *Science & Society* 68, no. 2 (June 2004): 162.
- 85 González, 162.
- 86 González, 166.
- 87 González, 161.
- 88 González, 174.
- 89 Castillo, *So Far from God*, 244.
- 90 Castillo, 23.
- 91 Castillo, 248.
- 92 Castillo, 249.
- 93 Castillo, 250.
- 94 Castillo, 232.
- 95 Castillo, 124.
- 96 Theresa Delgado, “Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance in Ana Castillo’s ‘So Far from God,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 890.

⁹⁷ “Fiction Book Review: Under the Feet of Jesus: 2a Novel by Helene M. Viramontes, Author Dutton Books \$18.95 (192p) ISBN 978-0-525-93949-8,” PublishersWeekly.com, accessed April 21, 2021, /978-0-525-93949-8.

⁹⁸ Christa Grewe-Volpp, “‘The Oil Was Made from Their Bones’: Environmental (In)Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12, no. 1 (2005): 61–78, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/12.1.61>.

⁹⁹ Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 133.

¹⁰⁰ Molly J. Freitas, “Jesu Crista: Symbol for a Just Future in Helena Maria Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 101, no. 4 (2018): 360.

¹⁰¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁰² Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Plume, 1996), 76.

¹⁰³ Viramontes, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Viramontes, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Viramontes, 80.

¹⁰⁶ Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 103.

¹⁰⁸ Viramontes, 148.

¹⁰⁹ Freitas, “Jesu Crista: Symbol for a Just Future in Helena Maria Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus,” 373.

¹¹⁰ Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 148.

¹¹¹ Viramontes, 86.

CHAPTER 3: Buddhist Non-Duality and a Transpacific Eco-Spiritual Protest

Alfredo V́ea's *Gods Go Begging* (2000) and Junot D́az's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) might seem to have little in common. One follows a Chicano soldier from L.A. to the conflict in Vietnam and back again, while the other follows a Dominican American nerd from New Jersey to the Dominican Republic on his quest to find love and acceptance. What links these seemingly disparate novels, however, is not only the way the US simultaneously perpetuated violence in both countries by backing the Trujillo regime in the D.R. and mounting an accelerated offensive in Vietnam, but also the attention they draw to the ways US ethnic writers deploy a decidedly spiritual politics to oppose Western Imperialism across the Global South. Different from the local forms of spirituality found in the Chicana/o novels discussed in the previous chapter which are anchored in the US Southwest and its landscapes, the trans-Pacific spirituality I reveal in *Gods Go Begging* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gesture to a much broader transnational decolonial politics operating on a global scale.

Several scholars have laid the groundwork for the transpacific spiritual imaginary I identify in both of these novels. Yunte Huang has defined the "transpacific imagination" as "a host of literary and historical imaginations that have emerged under the tremendous geopolitical pressure of the Pacific encounters."¹ Jayson Sae-Saue narrows this transpacific imagination to a study of "the real and imaginary relations between Chicana/os and Asians."² While the Buddhist and Taoist spirituality represented in V́ea's novel clearly falls within these parameters, D́az

expands these “imaginary relations” with Asian characters and religions beyond “the US-Mexico border and into Latin America and the Caribbean” as well.³

In this chapter, I show how the eco-spiritual imaginary and fight for environmental justice identified in Chapter 2 has expanded to a broader Latinx coalition of writers. Although Buddhism and Taoism appear only marginally in both novels, I argue that these non-Eurocentric spiritual practices shape a transpacific eco-spiritual imaginary which uses the Buddhist understanding of interconnection to relate U.S. imperialism abroad with coloniality at home. Using non-human elements like jade in *Gods Go Begging* or the migrant mongoose in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as both symbols of Buddhism and narrative signposts, Vea and Díaz connect characters across boundaries of time, space, nation, and race to protest U.S. intervention in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic respectively.

A Decolonial Spiritual Imaginary

In *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar establish the decolonial nature of *Oscar Wao*. They write: “It is, of course, not easy to explore Díaz’s island of the Dominican Republic outside of the celebratory rhetoric of Columbus’s ‘discovery’ and the subsequent arrival of modernity in the Américas, and to fully enter into the logic of the coloniality of power that his novel rigorously unravels and deconstructs.”⁴ In fact, Díaz’s novel begins with the arrival of Columbus in the Dominican Republic, establishing what narrator Yunior calls the *fukú americanus*: “Or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims.”⁵ By linking the local Dominican spiritual tradition of *fukú*

(curse) and *zafa* (anti-curse) to the arrival of Columbus and to protagonist Oscar Wao's visions of a Buddhist mongoose respectively, the novel simultaneously references the fifteenth century transatlantic* initiation of colonialism in the Americas and what I argue is a twenty-first century transpacific spiritual decoloniality.

Scholars have also identified and theorized at length the way Vía's *Gods Go Begging* opposes the Eurocentric power structures which initiated and sustained the Vietnam War, such as patriarchy,⁶ capitalist individualism,⁷ and colonialism.⁸ As in Díaz's novel, however, Vía's novel also uses a transpacific spiritual imaginary to delink its Latinx and Southeast Asian characters from their Eurocentric religious conditioning and to re-identify them with a spirituality indigenous to subaltern ethnicities in Southeast Asia where they are sent by the US military to enforce its imperialist agenda.[†] In *Gods Go Begging*, a Buddhist narrative center is briefly identified in what I argue is the pivotal chapter. Here, a nominally Unitarian, Mexican-American, Jewish chaplain, simply identified throughout most of the novel as "Padre," has a Zen Buddhist enlightenment experience while floating down the Mekong River similar to Sherdyl Motz's experience in the anecdote recounted by Kingston.

* Christopher González contextualizes the novel in the transatlantic origin of the American trade in enslaved Africans. While Díaz writes that the *fukú* originated in Africa, I argue that the transpacific immigrant figure of the mongoose provides the *zafa*. Christopher González, *Reading Junot Diaz*, Latino and Latin American Profiles (Pittsburgh PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

† Like the mongoose, a species said by Diaz to have immigrated originally from India, Zen Buddhism also arrived in Vietnam with an Indian immigrant and Buddhist missionary in 580 C.E. While the label "indigenous" might thus not be strictly true, since Buddhism did not grow directly out of Vietnam, as Thich Tien-An writes: "the Buddhist Dharma takes different forms in accordance with circumstances and amalgamation with indigenous beliefs, an attribute which has allowed the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle to penetrate the hearts of so many culturally varied ethnic peoples." In contrast to Western Christianity which was brought alongside imperial agendas much later in the country's history, Buddhism arrived much earlier and much more peacefully in Vietnam. Thich Thiệu Ân, *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam in Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia* / (Charles E Tuttle Company, Inc., 1975).

Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging*

The narratively central chapter (chapter 9) begins as a tribute to the vehicle of Padre's experience, the Mekong River, and to the diverse religious traditions which have evolved and flourished along its banks. Speaking of the river, which winds its way from Tibet through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, finally ending in the South China Sea, the narrator writes that "it gathers its strength in southern China and becomes a wide flow as it skirts the Zadoi temple of Jingding, where celestial prayers rise up like startled larks and naked Buddhist monks and Hui Muslims go down in silent droves to bathe."⁹ Adding further to its spiritual significance, the Mekong River is described as witness to "the ancient schism between Mahayana and Theravada" Buddhism.¹⁰ In this historic split, Theravada attempted to preserve Buddhism's outward political and organizational structure, while Mahayana Buddhism sought to move away from such outward religious organization in favor of a soteriological enlightenment of the self through inter-being with all things. Zen Buddhism, which is the sect I argue helps liberate the Padre, as well as other subaltern characters in Vietnam and in the US from coloniality, is a direct descendent of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism which separated from Theravada in the third century BCE somewhere along the sacred Mekong River. As such, Mahayana (and more specifically Zen) Buddhist logic becomes a way for the novel to express a form of spiritual decoloniality which doesn't simply critique the power structures, both religious and political, of US imperialist policies, but also allows the characters to move outside of them entirely, favoring instead, a complex and healing network of empathic interconnection between all living things, or, as Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls it—*inter-being*.

Hanh, a Vietnam war refugee who helped popularize Buddhism within broader US culture, provides a link between the Vietnamese Buddhism encountered by US soldiers in

Vietnam and its particular American inflection. At one of Hanh's Buddhist retreats in America, self-identified Buddhist novelist Maxine Hong Kingston taught a writing meditation workshop to Vietnam War veterans.¹¹ In an interview with Kingston, John Whalen-Bridge mentions both Hanh and British-American writer Alan Watts whose books on Zen Buddhism and Taoism also helped spur an explosion of Asian religious ideas in America around the time of the war. This transpacific movement of spiritual ideas from Asia to the United States was not one sided. In fact, in his treatise on the Vietnam War called *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, Hanh notes what he refers to as a "renaissance of Buddhism" in Southeast Asia which he credits to the exchange of ideas between Buddhists on both sides of the Pacific helping to create the transpacific spiritual imaginary at work in the novels I examine here.^{‡12} As in Vietnam, Taoism and Zen Buddhism have been largely absorbed into one another in US popular culture.¹³ It is not surprising then, that the forms of Zen Buddhism and Taoism found in V \acute{e} a's novel—V \acute{e} a was himself a veteran of the Vietnam War—reflect this Americanized version of Asian spirituality as popularized by both Hanh and Watts.

In particular, I argue that V \acute{e} a constructs his narrative around the concept of inter-being as explained in Hanh's 1987 commentary on the Buddhist Heart Sutra. In this commentary, Hanh describes the interconnection between humans and nature and between humans on both sides of the Pacific as central to his understanding of this Buddhist text. Quoting the passage "all dharmas are ... neither defiled nor immaculate," Hanh writes to an American audience that a prostitute in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam should not feel shame for what she has been forced to do because:

[‡] In this treatise on Vietnamese religion and politics during the American invasion, Hanh counts on the exchange of ideas between Vietnam and the United States to enact a "third way" to end the war. In this option, a Vietnamese interim government representing Buddhist and Catholic groups would negotiate for a ceasefire and thereby gain support from both North and South Vietnamese people. Americans who wanted to support this effort would need to back this independent Vietnamese government rather than holding to their black and white mythology of America vs. communism (South vs. North) as the only two possible outcomes of the war. Thich Nhất Hạnh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire.*, [1st ed.] (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 81–86.

She is like this because other people are like that. ‘This is like this, because that is like that.’ ... No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim it is not our responsibility. The girl in [Ho Chi Minh City] is that way because of the way we are. Looking into the life of that young prostitute, we see the non-prostitute people. And looking at the non-prostitute people, and at the way we live our lives, we see the prostitute.¹⁴

This relationship between the imperial attitudes of Americans in the US driving the Vietnam war and the exploitation of Vietnamese women by American troops in Southeast Asia reveals one element of a deep transpacific interconnection. Hanh reveals another aspect of inter-being as the deep interconnection between humans and the non-human world. To explain the interconnection between human beings and nature, Hanh turns to a piece of paper. “If you are a poet,” he writes, “you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. ... So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*.”¹⁵ On further meditation, Hanh explains that the sun is in the paper too, as is the logger who cut down the tree, the logger’s parents, and the wheat that made the bread that fed the logger. Hanh concludes: “so we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. ... You cannot just *be* by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing.”¹⁶ When a person is able to empty themselves of ego to perceive this profound inter-being, they become “empty of a separate self, but ... filled with everything in the universe.”¹⁷ In Vía’s novel, Padre makes this journey from an ego filled with what the novel calls “slick and polished mythologies of good and evil” to an emptying of self which allows him to be filled with “everything in the universe.”¹⁸

Prior to his float down the Mekong River, Padre had attempted to approach a religious expression of something akin to inter-being by identifying himself as a Unitarian chaplain. However, even this inclusive sect of Christianity which preaches one loving God for all people regardless of creed or religion is still steeped in the Eurocentric doctrine of a single God as the

source of truth. As Mignolo points out, “missions and truth without parenthesis are necessarily totalitarian.”¹⁹ Such a totalitarian mission is exactly what Padre’s commanding officer (Colonel Urban) describes as the American rationale for the war in Vietnam. He explains that there is a difference between the “reasons” for the Vietnam War and the “rationale.” The reasons, he says, include the acquisition of oil from Vietnam; a desire to keep the communist Chinese in check; demonstrations of American weapons for buyers from Iran, the Persian Gulf, and Central America; and the opening of a market for tobacco companies to sell cigarettes in China. The rationale on the other hand, is simply democracy and God.²⁰ In enlisting the Judeo/Christian God as the rationale for this fight, Urban attempts to hide the real reasons behind the war: “Do you think them damn Jews are the only ones who can carry God in an ark at the head of their column, smiting down their enemies and leveling their lands?” he asks. “Well, we’ve got God fighting for us, too, right here in Vietnam.”²¹ Despite his own Jewish heritage, Padre questions the argument that spreading democracy and God is his purpose in Vietnam: “A lot of North Vietnamese soldiers are Catholics,” he says. “They have rosary beads wrapped around their rifles. I’ve heard them saying the Lord’s Prayer in Vietnamese.”²² Arguing that both sides believe God is fighting for them, Padre adds, “None of this hellhole adds up to democracy, and none of this means God.”²³ Padre, nevertheless, is sent back to the front lines with Colonel Urban’s final injunction—a conflation of the US imperialist mission with the promise of heaven: “ease their way into the next world. Help our boys kill the Hun.”²⁴

When the chopper carrying Padre lands on top of the embattled hill, however, Padre completely loses control of himself. Feeling guilty for his earlier abandonment of his “flock” as they lie wounded and dying, requesting their last rites from him, Padre once again deserts his post, charging down the hill past charred and decapitated bodies and off into the jungle. When a

soldier from his unit tries to restrain him, the soldier looks into Padre's eyes and sees that he "was no longer a part of anyone's army, not God's, not America's. He was no longer a part of this war. The sweet, sooty smell of burning humans had finally released his tenuous mind from this agonized plane of reality."²⁵ If Padre has lost control of himself, releasing his mind from its agony, then he has taken a crucial step on the Buddhist path to enlightenment—emptying or letting go of self. As 13th century Zen Buddhist Monk Ihei Dōgen says in "The Issue at Hand," "Studying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. Studying oneself is forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things. Being enlightened by all things is causing the body-mind of oneself and the body-mind of others to be shed."²⁶ For Padre, his interview with Urban forms the first part of this process (studying the self), as he questions the religious, racial, and national binaries on which his identity as a chaplain, a Jew, and a Mexican-American have been based. As he storms down the hill, he begins the second stage of this process, forgetting the self.

Forgetting the Self

Before Padre can reach the river and receive the new Vietnamese name which is later bestowed on him ("Vô Dahn," meaning forgetting), he must face a final vestige of his Eurocentric Christian conditioning—the belief in good and evil. Following an oblique reference to Taoism by the narrator, Padre encounters another pile of bodies. While "the bitter, cloying scent of the rotting corpses" is described as "enraging his nerve endings," Vêa writes that "it did not enter his soul."²⁷ This strange detachment is not described as madness or even trauma since Padre blesses the bodies in "a calm gesture of recognition, a gesture of acknowledgement and acceptance."²⁸ Nor, Vêa clarifies, is Padre's blessing Unitarian or Catholic.²⁹ Rather, it seems to reflect a passage from the *Tao Te Ching* referencing the Taoist concept of *Wu Wei*, or acting in

accordance with the way things are—acceptance. Acceptance of the carnage around him might not seem like the moral high ground, but it is an important step for the Padre to let go of the duality of life and death as forms of good and evil so that he can see the war for what it truly is. One particular stanza in the *Tao Te Ching* beautifully encapsulates the relationship between understanding nonduality and letting go, or *Wu Wei* as it is known in Taoist philosophy. Section 2 says:

Recognize beauty and ugliness is born.
Recognize good and evil is born.
Is and isn't produce each other
 Hard depends on easy,
 Long is tested by short,
 High is determined by low,
 Sound is harmonized by voice,
 After is followed by before.
Therefore the Sage is devoted to non-action.³⁰

This non-action or “not forcing,” as Alan Watts explains it, doesn’t mean that Taoism instructs laziness, but rather a type of going with the flow, following the course of events—acceptance.³¹

And while Padre blesses the bodies of the enemy he was sent there to fight, his acceptance of the nonduality of good and evil is not complete. He continues to struggle as he floats down the Mekong River with the knowledge that “the American Dream—the two-bedroom house with a white picket fence—had always been built on a graveyard. It had always been built at the expense of the Huron Nation, at the expense of the bison, and at the expense of the Vietnamese.”³² This is the problem with the American way of thinking, described by Vía as “brimming with slick and polished mythologies of good and evil.”³³ This dualism allows people to forget their responsibility in creating the very “evil” they are trying to fight. It allows people to forget that the comfort of their two-story homes in the United States is built on the hill of North

Vietnamese dead. While he rejects his role in US imperialism in Vietnam, Padre knows that coloniality is alive and well in the United States.

Being Enlightened by All Things

As Padre leaves behind the pile of NVA dead and his American-indoctrinated dualism of good and evil, he begins to embrace an eco-spiritual imaginary based on the Buddhist doctrine of inter-being with all things. As he lies quietly in the jungle at night in a state between dreaming and waking that easily fits as a description of Buddhist meditation, a fawn starts chewing on the salty canvas of his boots: “At that very moment the man began to believe that he was one with the wild weeds and grasses beneath him, his life gone fallow.”³⁴ As he finally plunges into the Mekong River, Padre’s visions of inter-being continue, and as the water slowly interpenetrates his body, soaking him “to his soul,” he practices his own mental interpenetration. Once he has released his sense of self, he now realizes his place in the universe. He believes that he has been chosen: “Not by a conscious mind [like God] but by the odds, by chance ... by destinies. Why was I chosen? Why me, since I am no one at all? ... I must have been chosen because I know it all from beginning to end. I am certainly not the story itself. I am only the grass that rattles on the wind.”³⁵ Having acknowledged that he is no one (having let go of himself) and yet simultaneously everything (including the grass and the wind), he is enlightened by all things and is able to participate in the vision of inter-being. The vision of this story of inter-being which he now knows from beginning to end is composed of all the individual acts of every living being in the universe, and once Padre realizes this, he is able to see a positive way forward for humanity:

He slowly began to find in the river new beliefs to believe: the sperm in the fallopian tube will defeat the loaded mortar. The hoe will surely slaughter the tank. The glance between lovers will rebuild all that radar and artillery can detect and destroy. He came to believe that someday, a legion of one-legged men will

proclaim the fields of grass to be free of land mines, their absent limbs the first step into the future. It would be armless girls who would undo the tangled nets of war. Somewhere between a tiny rope bridge and a small, isolated colony of lepers, the chaplain came to believe in all of the small people who would come out to rebuild when the machines of war were stilled.³⁶

In forgetting himself and becoming one with everything around him, Padre has finally achieved the final stage in Dōgen's progression—being enlightened by all things—and has stepped outside of the coloniality of the war. As someone later says of Padre at the end of the novel, “once his spirit was a riddle, an unbreakable code. What has changed is [Padre's] newfound ability to name the things within his soul, to give them voice. You must know that your life is empty before you can begin to fill it. Ladies and gentlemen, the first step is to give a name to the emptiness.”³⁷ For a Buddhist, that emptiness is necessarily followed by fullness: “empty of a separate self, but ... filled with everything in the universe.”³⁸

Eco-Spiritual Imaginary and Coloniality in *Gods Go Begging*

Véa's novel narrativizes a Buddhist form of inter-being by demonstrating the link between US imperialism abroad and coloniality at home. Primarily focalized through Jesse, one of Padre's Vietnam War buddies who has become a public defense attorney in L.A., *Gods Go Begging* connects US imperialism abroad to coloniality in the United States through the narratives of two hills, one in Vietnam and one in California. While the hill in Vietnam is the site of literal US imperialism, the hill in L.A. is the site of a subtler but no more deadly project of coloniality—the segregation and resultant poverty of people of color living on the hill and the false accusation of a young black man named Calvin.. The two hills, both sites of violence perpetuated by the system of coloniality, become the two focal points of decoloniality on either side of the Padre's float down the Mekong River. Following his tour in Vietnam, Padre finds

himself a homeless veteran on the hill in L.A., retroactively giving last rites to anyone who he finds a victim of this poverty and drug induced violence. Appearing at the end as the key witness who exonerates Calvin, the Padre relives his float on the Mekong River, this time slipping into the Pacific Ocean and literally embracing Thich Nhat Hanh's example of waves as a metaphor for interbeing: "A wave on the ocean has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. But ... the wave is empty. The wave is full of water, but is empty of a separate self."³⁹ Only by emptying himself can the Padre perform his decolonial work in both places and times, first on the hill in Vietnam and then on the hill in L.A.

An eco-spiritual imaginary connects these two sites of coloniality both narratively and in the minds of the characters through a piece of jade—a literal piece of the earth—intersecting the lives of all the other characters. Like the complex patterning on a piece of Jade which gave rise to its significance in Buddhism as a symbol of interconnection, the complex narrative which Jesse weaves out of the lives of the characters in Vietnam and in the United States extends throughout the entire text and is condensed in the chronotope of the two hills.⁴⁰ The novel enters this narrative of interconnection on the hill in L.A. 30 years after the Vietnam War when two women, Vietnamese Mai Adrong and African American Persephone Flyer, are murdered by an angry impoverished teenager and die in each other's arms. Working its way backwards, the narrative gradually reveals the connection between the two women. Mai's husband Trin and Persephone's husband Amos also died in each other's arms on the hill in Laos, except they died as enemies—Trin fighting for the North Vietnamese and Amos for the United States. Their joint deaths in an explosion caused by U.S. air support set in motion the trajectory of the two women's

lives as they find each other and recognize the coloniality at work in both their husbands' deaths.[§]

The womens' simultaneous deaths which parallel the simultaneous deaths of their husbands 30 years earlier on the other side of the Pacific help expose the simultaneous coloniality operating in the United States and in Vietnam. These interconnected deaths also take on a deeper significance for Jesse as his realization of this connection helps him to unlock both the murder case he has been working and his own stunted emotions frozen by PTSD from the war. The piece of jade mentioned earlier becomes the key to unlocking the narrative which in turn provides a decolonial understanding for Jesse. Jesse first finds the jade in the mouths of two North Vietnamese "soldiers" who he later identifies as unarmed women. The American mythology surrounding the jade is that the North Vietnamese use its purported properties of interconnectivity to read the minds of their enemies. To obtain this power, they slip the piece of jade under their tongues, an action which the U.S. troops misinterpret as "eating jade." While Jesse tries to access the properties of the jade multiple times, it only works, he later realizes, when someone is trying to save lives rather than to take them—as the two unarmed women on the hill must have been trying to do.⁴¹ In keeping with the Buddhist understanding that interconnection leads to compassion, the jade only works for Jesse three times: once on the hill in Vietnam, once in the courtroom at the end of Calvin's trial, and once when he is trying to overcome his PTSD to reconcile with his girlfriend, Carolina. In each of these three instances, Jesse's physical connection with this little piece of earth facilitates a deeper interconnection with

[§] This connection between the two women across boundaries of time, space, nation and race begins when a piece of paper bearing Persephone's name and address is blown out of Amos's possession and settles between the leaves of Trin's Catholic Bible at the moment of both men's death. When Trin's belongings are sent to Mai following his death, she begins the search for Persephone that ultimately brings the narrative back to its beginning when they, like their husbands, die in each other's arms on another hill across the Pacific Ocean. This connection through a piece of paper brings to mind Hanh's example of interbeing with a piece of paper cited earlier.

the people around him, leading ultimately to his own and Calvin's liberation from the forces of coloniality that surround them.

If the jade becomes a symbol for a decolonial eco-spirituality that connects characters across boundaries of time, space, nation and race, then the two hills become symbols for human violence against the earth as well. When Jesse calls Potrero Hill a "combat zone," referencing Calvin's false accusation for the murder of Mai and Persephone, he also uses the metaphor that on this hill "the earth is mined with failure."⁴² Overtly, he is referring to the police as they blast the hill in L.A. open in search of more murder victims. What is implied, however, is the coloniality of segregation and poverty which leads to these murders in the first place. Jesse is also referencing the hill in Laos that was blasted by both the U.S. and Viet Cong forces. Jesse frames the violence done to the earth itself on both hills through the history of colonization itself, arguing that since the Puritans "believed that everything earthly was necessarily evil, they believed that people close to the earth must be evil too. So it must be alright with God to take land away from evil people, to let evil heathens suffer disease and starve to death."⁴³ Later, Jesse ties this fear of "earthly" things and consequent colonization of Native people to a colonization of nature as well: "In the United States, there were many peoples who felt this same loss: the Apache and Papago felt it, as well as the great-grandchildren of slaves. Yet white America sensed only gain: the taming of the West meant gain; the defeat of the Mexican Army meant gain. The subjugations of the redwoods and the spotted owl meant progress."⁴⁴ This white progress results directly in the destruction of both hills, the hill in Laos is torn apart and burned in battle while the hill in L.A. is blasted open by the police in search of more murdered bodies. For both Jesse and the Padre, it is telling that their respective enlightenment experiences unlock compassion not only for the people trapped in both of these systems of coloniality, but for all

living beings as well. As Padre tells Mai following his float on the Mekong River, “there were young men out there—not just ground units, grunts. There were trees, stands of elephant grass and deep ravines—living things, not goddamn lines of fire and killing zones.”⁴⁵ Jesse also, in a moment symbolic of both his own decolonial enlightenment and Calvin’s, fishes a fruit fly out of his mug of coffee, carefully setting it on a napkin to dry. As he hears the news that Calvin has been exonerated, the fruit fly flies away healed. In the end, it is this compassion for all living beings that helps Jesse, Padre, Persephone, and Mai to identify and step outside of the colonial matrix of power. While many of these characters still die as result of colonial and imperial violence, their ability to see their narrative connections to both human and non-human beings around them gives them purpose in their struggle against the colonial matrix of power.

Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

For Oscar Wao, the colonial matrix of power reveals itself in his outcast status. Failing to live up to the Dominican expectations of manliness—he “had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male”—his appearance also denies him access to participation in white American culture—he “wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses ... sported an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded.”⁴⁶ Even his nerdy friends abandon him after they find girlfriends and he does not. Trapped between the colonizing US and the colonized D.R. and fitting in nowhere, halfway through the novel, Oscar decides to kill himself.

At this point, moments before jumping drunkenly from the New Brunswick train bridge, Oscar has a vision of what he calls “the Golden Mongoose,” though “even he knew that wasn’t what it was.”⁴⁷ It is described as “placid” and “very beautiful” with “Gold-limned eyes that

reached through you, not so much in judgement or reproach but for something far scarier.”⁴⁸ In the only overt reference in the novel to Buddhism, Oscar and the mongoose “stared at each other—it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief—and then the [train] whistle blew again and his eyes snapped open (or closed) and it was gone.”⁴⁹ Narrator Yuniór, indicating that the mongoose had come to help Oscar, writes that “instead of taking note of the vision and changing his ways the fuck [Oscar] just shook his swollen head” and “threw himself down into the darkness.”⁵⁰ The mongoose, however, having also appeared to Oscar’s mother, Beli, when she was beaten to within an inch of her life back in the D.R., is not so easily thwarted, since “as his mother claims, he was being watched from up on high” and Oscar lands on the soft loam of the highway divider, breaking both legs and separating his shoulder, but remaining alive and “regenerated” as he tells Yuniór later.⁵¹ Oscar later says of his suicide attempt, “it was the curse that made me do it,” referencing simultaneously the coloniality which led him to that point and the association of the mongoose with zafa, or anti-curse, who nudges him towards a decolonial perspective.

If the fukú or family curse has been passed down since the days of Columbus, and the mongoose appears as the zafa or antidote, where did this mongoose come from and what about its serenity is reminiscent of a Buddhist? More specifically, how does this mongoose promote what Hanna et al. have called the *decolonial imagination*: “a productive force through which Díaz’s characters manage, evaluate, and challenge the colonial difference”?⁵² The mongoose repeatedly appears at crucial moments in Oscar’s life and completely reorganizes his thinking, allowing him to delink from colonial representations of himself by which he has lived so miserably, and instead teaching him to enunciate himself according to a broader transpacific spiritual decoloniality through both Buddhist and Taoist understandings of reality. In a footnote

after the mongoose first appears to Beli, Yuniór identifies “The Mongoose” as “one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers.”⁵³ He identifies its origins in Africa, but writes of “a long furlough in India,” the birthplace of Buddhism, after which it “jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean.”⁵⁴ If there is any question as to the decolonial status of this migrant animal, he continues, writing that “the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies” and it is “believed to be an ally of Man.”⁵⁵ While Buddhism is certainly not native to the Dominican Republic, the mongoose is also a non-native species, highlighting its significance to Oscar’s journey. In an interview with Gregg Barrios, Díaz says, “there was something that pulled me about the image of another transplant.” He also comments on the footnote about the mongoose quoted above, saying, “It is almost as if because their [Oscar and Beli’s] life was so shitty, they are able to gain this luminous intervention from what might be an alien.”⁵⁶ Here, in a novel about transplants (Beli transplanted to the US and Oscar transplanted back to the D.R.) is a double reference to the mongoose as an outside force—first as an actual immigrant to the Island, and second as an alien power come to help Oscar. If the mongoose helps guide Oscar to a decolonial Buddhist perspective, then it is as if one transplant represents another, an animal immigrant represents an immigrant philosophy—the mongoose represents a Buddhist imaginary.

Zafa and Fukú: nonduality as Solution to the Curse

While the Buddhist Mongoose enunciates a transpacific decoloniality, Díaz sets up the fukú of the Admiral (Columbus) as the central problem in Oscar’s narrative arc. Any time Oscar faces an obstacle, either Yuniór as narrator or Oscar himself references the fukú as the ultimate cause. While the possibility of zafa, or anti-curse, is also mentioned frequently, it is not until near

the end of the novel that Oscar discovers what this means. Integral to the language of fukú and zafa are the characters of the Golden Mongoose and the Faceless Man, who also form a sort of binary, both appearing to Oscar and his mother, Beli, at crucial points in their lives. Oscar first sees the Mongoose right before he jumps off the New Brunswick Train Bridge.⁵⁷ Next, the Mongoose haunts his dreams before he goes to the Dominican Republic for the first time.⁵⁸ And finally, after he is beaten in the same cane field as his mother was years before, the mongoose is responsible for asking the question determining his life or death: “more or less,” to which he replies, “more.”⁵⁹ While it is tempting to align the man without a face with the fukú (coloniality) and the mongoose with zafa (decoloniality), the ending of the novel doesn’t bear out this simplistic one-to-one correspondence. For example, the first time the mongoose appears to Oscar on the bridge, it doesn’t actually save him from jumping. The second time the mongoose appears, it goads Oscar to return to the D.R., setting in motion the chain of events which will ultimately lead to his death. Similarly, the third time the mongoose appears it helps him choose to continue living, but it certainly doesn’t prevent any of the suffering he has experienced, or ultimately, his end at the hands of the Trujillo regime. In addition, while the mongoose always seems to appear in a time of need, the man without a face also often appears in these moments,^{**} seeming to foreshadow inevitable disaster. If the mongoose and the faceless man don’t ultimately prevent anything about Oscar’s untimely death at the hands of the Trujillo regime, what is their function? The constant reappearance of these two at significant points in Oscar’s life would seem to be problematic unless they are viewed nondualistically. The two, perhaps representations within Oscar’s own mind of fukú and zafa, good and evil, show up at the same kinds of events because they are dual manifestations of the same thing—life itself. While the mongoose is

^{**} For example, both the Mongoose and the Faceless Man appear in a bus together right before Oscar’s final beatdown (Diaz 321).

associated with zafa, it doesn't actually save him from the effects of the curse. It does, however, nudge him along the path to a Buddhist understanding of nonduality. Only once he accepts both life and death, suffering and pleasure, is he able to step outside of the duality of Western European coloniality and embrace life for what it is.

In his commentary on the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*, considered by most Buddhists as their primary sacred text, Hanh explains the relationship between a dualistic perspective and western European coloniality: "In the West you have been struggling for many years with the problem of evil," he says. "How is it possible that evil should be there? It seems difficult for the Western mind to understand. But in the light of nonduality, there is no problem: As soon as the idea of good is there, the idea of evil is there. Buddha needs Mara in order to reveal himself, and vice versa."⁶⁰ Extrapolating on this idea that the very notion of good is what creates the notion of evil, Hanh explains that in reality, everything that exists is interconnected. Naming several of the problems which Americans typically blame on the existence of evil in the world such as poverty and prostitution, Hanh explains that these things are actually caused by people who consider themselves to be good: "Let us look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the society deprived of everything inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other. "This is like this, because that is like that." Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made by non-poverty elements. . . . So we must be careful."⁶¹ Not only is poverty directly caused by wealth, says Hanh, but this causality also applies to the coloniality inherent in the relationship between the Global North and the Global South:

If the South cannot survive, then the North is going to crumble. If countries of the Third World cannot pay their debts, you are going to suffer here in the North. If you do not take care of the Third World, your well-being is not going to last, and you will not be able to continue living in the way you have been for much longer. . . . It is easy to think that we are on the good side, and that the other side is evil. But wealth is made of poverty, and poverty is made of wealth.⁶²

If the coloniality of the Global North operates on dualistic logic, as Hanh argues, then it makes sense that Oscar must let go of this dualistic framework to decolonize his mind. It is the Buddhist Mongoose who helps him take this step.

While this Buddhist nonduality may strike some poststructuralist or deconstructive chords, a deconstructive critique, like a postcolonial critique, remains reactive to the colonial matrix of power. Mignolo explains: “Coloniality and de-coloniality introduces a fracture with both the Eurocentered project of post-modernity and a project of post-coloniality heavily dependent on post-structuralism as far as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have been acknowledged as the grounding of the post-colonial canon: Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Hommi Bhabha. De-coloniality starts from other sources.”⁶³ Buddhism becomes one of these “other sources” for decoloniality in Díaz’s novel as it critiques the Eurocentered dualism of both imperialism and postcoloniality. As Mignolo points out here, poststructuralism and its corollary deconstruction engage a Eurocentric linguistic epistemology from within. Buddhism, having arisen outside of the colonial matrix of power entirely, enters the conversation from the periphery as an epistemology unconcerned with Western problems of language—thereby becoming decolonial.

As in *Gods Go Begging*, the pre-Buddhist philosophy of Taoism serves as another decolonial epistemology in Díaz’s novel. Like Buddhism, Taoism also emphasizes both letting go and nondualism. In the novel, Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, is said to have practiced “the Tao of Dictator Avoidance” which, as with Oscar, is contextualized as a form of letting go of the dualistic struggle of good versus evil.⁶⁴ Oscar, who has been both conditioned and colonized by European-American ideas, initially understands fukú and zafa, the faceless man and the mongoose, in a dualistic way. For him, fukú is the dark side, ready to consume and destroy—

something which must be battled against for good and happiness. However, as referenced earlier, the *Tao Te Ching* exposes good and evil as merely a linguistic binary. Once more connecting non-dualism to *Wu Wei*, Section 2 of the *Tao* explains that “the Sage is devoted to non-action.”⁶⁵ Thus, the crucial fact which Oscar must discover is that the fukú cannot be fought as he has been trying to do for most of his life through exercise, stalking girls, writing endless and unpublishable novels. Rather he must realize that fukú is a fact of life, the negative which allows the positive. Once he steps outside of the duality of good versus evil and just lets go, suddenly positive things start happening in his life. He must, however, be devoted to non-action. As section 2 of the *Tao Te Ching* finishes:

The sage . . .
Accomplishes without taking credit.
When no credit is taken,
Accomplishment endures.

Oscar can take no credit for his sudden change in fortune. And this is precisely what causes it. In keeping with nonduality, his good fortune is also his bad fortune, as his trysts with Ybón ultimately lead to his death.

The inextricability of good fortune with bad is explained concisely through an old Zen story recounted by Alan Watts in his book *TAO: The Watercourse Way*. A Chinese farmer experiences a series of reversals in fortune but after every event, when neighbors either congratulate for his good luck or commiserate with him on his bad luck, he simply says, “Maybe.”^{††66} He understands that good and bad come and go, but as Lola expresses it, “the curse, some of you will say. Life, is what I say. Life.”⁶⁷ With a proper understanding of *Wu Wei*,

^{††} “Maybe” is what Abelard also says when he wondering whether Trujillo has forgotten or given up on his daughters (223). Earlier, he credited a “Numinous Being” for providing him the perfect response when Trujillo asked him about Beli. When his wife asks, who, he responds “someone” just as Beli calls the mongoose that saved her “someone” in response to La Inca saying it was God.

these never-ending fortune reversals can be ridden out with joy like a kayaker in the rapids who uses the water's own power to take him down stream. This is what Oscar finally understands when he starts to "go with the flow,"⁶⁸ or when he flies back to the Dominican Republic to find Ybón, "the start of his *real* life,"⁶⁹ knowing full well that it will most likely lead to his death.

In fact, life and death, being and non-being, come together. As quoted above, "Is and isn't produce each other."⁷⁰ Or, as Ch'u Ta-cao translates it, "To be and not to be arise mutually."⁷¹ Oscar's destiny was to die, and when he stopped fighting non-being, suddenly the remainder of his life was "being" as it was meant to be. As Alan Watts says, "As we try to comprehend and control the world [as Oscar tries to do at first] it runs away from us. Instead of chaffing at this situation, a Taoist would ask what it means. What is that which always retreats when it is pursued? Answer: yourself."⁷² And again, as the *Tao Te Ching* says in section 47, "Without going out the door, know the world."⁷³ When he finally does know himself, he knows he has to die as he explains to Ybón that "he was in love with her and that he'd been hurt but now he was all right and if he could just have a week alone with her, one short week, then everything would be fine in him and he would be able to face what he had to face."⁷⁴ If martyrdom at the hands of Trujillo is what he has to face, he has finally begun to step outside the dualism of coloniality to understand the significance of that end.

The Blank Book and Buddhist Emptiness

Near the end of the novel, during his final visit to the D.R. and right before he is killed, Oscar starts to hint that he is writing a book. He tells Yunior that he "almost had it," but when Yunior asks him what he almost had, "you'll see was all he would say."⁷⁵ In a letter to Lola he explains that the book contains the answer to the fukú, the curse of the Admiral—coloniality:

“This contains everything I’ve written on this journey,” he writes. “Everything I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA).”⁷⁶ However, the book never arrives, and while Yuniors has dreams about it, in his dreams the book is always blank.

In a Buddhist context, the symbolism of a blank book takes on great significance. Referencing the 16th century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, Maxine Hong Kingston tells the story of Tripitaka Tanh and Monkey, given the task of retrieving sacred Buddhist texts from India and bringing them back to China. When they finally achieve their goal, they unroll the sacred scrolls only to find that they are blank. Hong writes, “the pilgrims went back up the Silk Road and demanded the correct scrolls. The Buddhists exchanged those blanks for scrolls that had words written on them. They laughed at the fools who had the right, empty scrolls all along.”⁷⁷ In Zen Buddhism, words are useful only as signs pointing to something beyond themselves, described in one Zen koan as a “finger pointing to the moon.”⁷⁸ To mistake the finger or even the moon itself for the *experience* of looking at the moon, would be to miss the point of Zen. In the passage cited above, the pages of the book are blank. Similarly, the Mongoose’s words are often represented only by blank lines. For example, when Oscar is beaten almost to death by two of Trujillo’s officers and the Mongoose appears to him with a choice—more or less—Oscar chooses “more” and the Mongoose replies with three unknown words: “_____”, said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him back into darkness.”⁷⁹ Like the finger pointing at the moon, the Mongoose’s words as well as the pages of the book are not actually the point. They are pointing to something else which Oscar only discovers at the end of his life, something only apparent in his smiling eyes. Before he can get there, though, he has to empty himself. Another Zen koan helps explain what it means to empty the self. A Zen Master

named Nan-in receives a visiting university professor who has come to ask for insight into Zen enlightenment. Nan-in begins to pour him a cup of tea, but when the cup is full, he wordlessly continues to pour. When the professor exclaims that the cup is already full, Nan-in replies “Like this cup ... you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”⁸⁰ Emptiness, or as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, “empty of a separate self” is the necessary pre-condition for enlightenment or being “full of everything” in the universe.⁸¹ While Oscar does eventually find himself “full of everything” with Ybón at the end of the novel, first he has to learn to empty himself.

For Oscar, emptying himself means decolonizing his mind. As a Dominican-American, he is caught between two worlds and under the curse—the *fukú* of the Admiral—the coloniality of power in the Americas. Both of his worlds operate under a system of coloniality, the US with its exclusionary system of white supremacy and colonial attitude toward the D.R., and the Dominican Republic through its brutal US-backed dictator Trujillo and his racism toward Haitians and their African ancestors. Oscar finds himself unable to succeed in either world. Following his miraculous recovery from his attempted suicide and the first appearance of the Golden Mongoose, Oscar finally begins to empty himself of everything that both cultures have conditioned him to think will bring him happiness. As mentioned earlier, Oscar “went with the flow,” embracing the Taoist doctrine of *Wu Wei*. While Oscar still struggles—“some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change”—there are some early signs of his emptying of self.⁸² For example, when he starts taking long drives at night and drifting off to sleep at the wheel, “some last alarm would sound” and he would come back to consciousness, writing later that there is “nothing more exhilarating ... than saving yourself by the simple act of waking.”⁸³ Waking is a common Buddhist euphemism for enlightenment or being “empty and

awake” as Jack Kerouac’s Buddhist character expresses it in *Dharma Bums*.⁸⁴ While Oscar still resists this empty wakefulness, this going with the flow, both his sister, Lola, and the Mongoose keep tabs on him during his early transformation, constantly nudging him in the right direction. When he writes a letter to Lola complaining about being a permanent bachelor, she replies that “there’s nothing permanent in the world,” seemingly referencing the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence.⁸⁵ Again, when he feels that he is “turning into the worst kind of human on the planet: an old bitter dork” and he “couldn’t figure his way out of it. Fukú. The Darkness,” suddenly the Mongoose turns up in his dreams again.⁸⁶ Thus, when his mother decides to return to the D.R. for the summer, Oscar, following the Mongoose and going with the flow—*Wu Wei*—decides “my elder spirits have been talking to me, Ma. I think I might accompany you.”⁸⁷ This return, in conjunction with his new perspective, becomes the beginning of his final decolonial move—his emptying of himself and being filled with everything in the universe.

Coloniality of Land and the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

As Oscar begins to empty himself and embrace the non-duality of good and evil, fukú and zafa, in his quest for “the cure to what ails us ... the Cosmo DNA” of his family’s curse, he finds himself interconnected across lines of nation, race, time and space. In a decolonial gesture toward what I am calling an eco-spiritual imaginary, the site of this interconnection between Oscar, his family’s history, coloniality in the U.S. and colonialism in the D.R. is a physical plot of land—the sugarcane fields east of Santo Domingo. Like the mongoose and Oscar’s enslaved African ancestors, sugarcane is not native to the D.R. but Santo Domingo was the first place it was grown in the so-called New World. It was brought by Spanish colonists to be cultivated by enslaved people of African and Taino descent as a cash crop in a growing European market.⁸⁸

Cane fields therefore serve as a symbol for colonization of both the people and the land across time in Caribbean literature.⁸⁹ Thus, when the U.S.-backed dictator Trujillo uses the cane fields to murder his enemies in the novel, this connection between the colonialism of the past and coloniality in the present becomes clear. Diaz writes: “One second you were deep in the twentieth century (well, the twentieth century of the Third World) and the next you’d find yourself plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane. The transition between these states was some real time-machine-type shit.”⁹⁰ In the first reference to the cane fields when Oscar’s mother Beli is beaten almost to death before she has a chance to flee to the U.S., Diaz cements the colonial symbolism of the sugarcane across time writing that “they beat her like she was a slave.”⁹¹ Like her ancestors enslaved to work the cane fields, Beli has been caught by a new cycle of oppression built on the old one. The colonized land which is still used to grow sugarcane as a cash crop thus remains a site of coloniality 180 years later under Trujillo.

While sugarcane serves as a blatant symbol of the coloniality of Trujillo’s relationship with the United States (often typified by Franklin Roosevelt’s affectionate remark that Trujillo was a son of a bitch but he was “our S.O.B.”), what ultimately kills Beli is not the beating she sustains in the D.R. but a much more subtle coloniality in the form of environmental racism in the United States.⁹² Having survived the overt coloniality of Trujillo in the D.R., Beli moves to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where she ends up dying of a cancer which she implies resulted from the pollution of industrial American capitalism. Early in the novel, Diaz establishes the association between the heavily Latinx population of Elizabeth, NJ and environmental pollution. For example, at one point Oscar and one of his early crushes are driving home: “they reached the Elizabeth exit, which is what New Jersey is *really* known for, industrial wastes on both sides of the turnpike.”⁹³ Later, Lola references a stink “like all the chemicals from all the factories in

Elizabeth.”⁹⁴ But what really clinches the connection between this pollution and the coloniality that gets Beli in the end is her mother La Inca’s description of the U.S.: “Its cities swarmed with machines and industry, as thick with sinvergüencía as Santo Domingo was with heat, a cuco shod in iron, exhaling fumes, with the glittering promise of coin deep in the cold lightless shaft of its eyes.”⁹⁵ In this brutal description of American capitalism and its disregard for the environment or the people, the United States is compared to a “cuco,” a mythology of a faceless creature like the boogeyman which was brought from Spain to the D.R. and is said to eat children. With U.S. capitalism and its accompanying coloniality compared to a cuco, this suddenly lends another layer of symbolism to the faceless man who appears when Beli is beaten in the canefield. Thus, later in this chapter when Yúnior references “the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías” which await Beli in the U.S., these factories, like the canefields where she was beaten, are already associated with the faceless man and therefore coloniality in both countries. While she may have escaped from Trujillo, the U.S. coloniality that used him as a puppet awaited her in the United States in the form of environmental racism which ultimately causes her cancer.

In addition to this connection across time and place between the Spanish colonization of the D.R. in the 16th century and U.S. coloniality in the 20th century, Oscar finds himself connected to Beli through a parallel experience in the canefields and the resultant spiritual experience which saves them both. Beli had been beaten for her illicit relationship with one of Trujillo’s top generals. Oscar is beaten for his relationship with the girlfriend of one of El Balaguer’s^{††} top officers. This happens following his return to the D.R. once he had started “going with the flow.” He finally meets a beautiful woman who returns his affection, and despite

^{††} Joaquín Balaguer, who would later be elected president of the D.R., took power as dictator for a brief time following Trujillo’s assassination.

warnings from his mother, his grandmother, his sister, his uncle, and the woman herself, he refuses to resist what he sees as his destiny. Eventually he's caught with her: "where did they take him?" Yuniór asks. "Where else. The canefields. How's that for eternal return?" Connecting with both his mother and his enslaved ancestors who were beaten in this very canefield, Yuniór writes, "and yet this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than *déjà vu*."⁹⁶ And when La Inca and Beli find him, Yuniór explains that "if they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it."⁹⁷ The similarities hinge on more than just the perpetrators of the beatings and the location—both Oscar and Beli are saved by the Buddhist Mongoose.

The Mongoose not only saves both Oscar and Beli's lives but also helps them to enunciate their new identities outside of the colonial matrix of power. Yuniór writes that "as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt."⁹⁸ Telling her to rise, the Mongoose begins to sing, leading her with a woman's voice out of the cane. If the cane is symbolic of coloniality, the Mongoose helps her to find her way out of its maze to enunciate a new self outside of the colonial matrix of power. The Mongoose "rivered into the cane, and Beli, blinking tears, realized she had no idea which way was out. As some of you know, canefields are no fucking joke, and even the cleverest of adults can get mazed in their endlessness, only to reappear months later as a cameo of bones."⁹⁹ As it leads her out, the Mongoose sings the words *sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas* which translates more literally as "dream, dream, dream how you call yourself" or in other words "dream your own name." Upon escaping the canefields, Beli departs for the United States and begins to create herself anew. Referencing the trans-Atlantic as well as trans-Pacific valence in this text, Christopher

González explains her enunciation of her new self, stating that “America provides Dominicans an opportunity to reclaim their African heritage.”¹⁰⁰ Like Beli, when Oscar is beaten nearly to death he also dreams of the Mongoose. This is the scene analyzed earlier where the Mongoose asks him “what will it be, muchacho? ... more or less?” to which Oscar eventually replies “more” and the Mongoose pronounces her three blank words and disappears. Following this vision, Oscar first dreams the blank book. In addition, the emptiness he embraces as a result of both this dream and the Mongoose’s empty words propel him into the state of Zen enlightenment in which he finishes out his life, declaring at the very end, “The beauty! The beauty!”

The beauty which Oscar finally enunciates at the end of his life only comes after a long and arduous journey guided by the eco-spiritual imaginary of the Buddhist mongoose. The canefields represent the colonialism of Spain and the colonality of a U.S.-backed dictator, and the pollution in Elizabeth, NJ, that ultimately kills Beli also represents colonality as a structural form of environmental racism. Only through their spiritual experiences with the Mongoose are both Oscar and Beli able to step outside of that colonial matrix of power to enunciate for themselves how they want to live their lives. And while they can’t avoid being martyred by the system, like the Padre in Veá’s novel they have ceased to let it control them as long as they are alive.

Conclusion

While the Chicana/o writers in the previous chapter enunciate an instantiation of the eco-spiritual imaginary rooted in the Goodlife values of their local ecoregions, both Diaz and Veá participate in a larger Latinx tradition of decolonial writing which Lionnet and Shih call “minor transnationalism” referring to “the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures

produce *within* and *across national boundaries*.”¹⁰¹ Specifically, both Vía and Díaz participate in a longstanding network between Asian and Latinx cultures, which, as Jayson Sae-Saue explains may be “hardly recognizable within any given text’s representative architecture,” especially in Díaz’s fiction, and yet which “often generates the core political values of many important [Chicana/o] texts.”¹⁰² In structuring their narratives around Buddhist doctrines of ecological and inter-personal connection, both Díaz and Vía engage in an eco-spiritual imaginary which does just such political work. In showing the common struggle of both Latinx and Southeast Asian characters against the ongoing systems of coloniality and imperialism which continue to feed the colonial matrix of power across the Global South, characters in these novels also participate in a decolonial Buddhist spirituality which for them becomes “the cure to what ails us.”

Notes

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- ² Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia: The Transpacific Geographies of Chicana/o Literature*, *Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2016), 134.
- ³ Sae-Saue, 134.
- ⁴ Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar, eds., *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2016).
- ⁵ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead, 2007), 1.
- ⁶ John Alba Cutler, “Disappeared Men: Chicana/o Authenticity and the American War in Viet Nam,” *American Literature* 81, no. 3 (2009): 583–611, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2009-027>.
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- ⁸ August Carbonella, “Structures of Fear, Spaces of Hope,” *Anthropologica* 51, no. 2 (2009): 353–61.
- ⁹ Alfredo Vea, *Gods Go Begging* (New York: Plume, 1999), 192.
- ¹⁰ Vea, 194.
- ¹¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace* /, 1st ed. (New York :, 2003), 306, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015057013768>.
- ¹² Thich Nhat Hạnh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 33.
- ¹³ Thich Nhất Hạnh,, *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 12.
- ¹⁴ Thich Nhất Hạnh and Peter Levitt, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 33.
- ¹⁵ Thich Hạnh and Levitt, 3.
- ¹⁶ Thich Hạnh and Levitt, 4.
- ¹⁷ Thich Hạnh and Levitt, 10.
- ¹⁸ Alfredo Vea, *Gods Go Begging* (New York: Plume, 1999), 193.
- ¹⁹ Mignolo, Interview, 198.
- ²⁰ Vea, *Gods Go Begging*, 127.
- ²¹ Vea, 124.
- ²² Vea, 128.

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- 24 Véa, 128.
- 25 Véa, 136.
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- 31 Alan Watts and Al Chung-liang Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), 76.
- 32 Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 197.
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- 36 Véa, 206.
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- 42 Véa, 273.
- 43 Véa, 113–14.
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- 45 Véa, 210.
- 46 Díaz, *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 20.
- 47 Díaz, *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 190.
- 48 Díaz, 190.
- 49 Díaz, 190.

50 Díaz, 190.

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52 Hanna, et al., *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, 8.

53 Díaz, *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 150.

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56 Junot Díaz, “Guest Interview: Junot Díaz,” interview by Gregg Barrios, *La Bloga*, October 21, 2007, <https://labloga.blogspot.com/2007/10/guest-interview-junot-daz.html>.

57 Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 190.

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64 Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

65 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*.

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CHAPTER 4: Buddhist Interconnection and Ecological Entanglement

The Latinx authors examined in the previous chapter engage a transpacific eco-spiritual imaginary through oblique references to Buddhist interconnection that nevertheless structure their novels across time and space. In this chapter, I continue to examine instantiations of a transpacific eco-spiritual imaginary through a self-declared Zen Buddhist author who makes this Buddhist interconnection overt. While many of the authors examined so far use postmodern skepticism of grand narratives to challenge enduring mythologies of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism, Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being* also seeks to establish faith in a new meta-narrative of subjective interconnection through Buddhism's doctrine of no-self. Arising thousands of years prior to post-structuralist deconstructions of the self, like the Native spiritualities in Chapter 1 which preceded post-structuralist and postmodern theory, the Buddhist doctrine of no-self in Ozeki's novel both interfaces with and resists the Euro-centric origins of postmodern subjective uncertainty.

Drawing on Hegel's concept of "the abyss of nothingness into which all being sinks," Friederich Nietzsche declared in 1882 that God was dead, leaving human beings on their own to construct subjective meaning out of the vast emptiness of the universe.¹ In a similar gesture, Roland Barthes declared in 1967, almost a hundred years later, that the Author was also dead, describing a similar abyss or emptiness in which subjectivity is ultimately engulfed, stating that "literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap

where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.”² At the heart of both declarations is the basic postmodern uncertainty that any genuine contact can occur across the linguistic and subjective chasm that separates one person from another. Ruth Ozeki’s novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, attempts to reestablish faith in this encounter between self and other, one subjectivity and another. As an author writing a novel about an eponymous character who is also an author and reader, Ozeki seeks to reassert the value of the relationship between author and reader, not in the old sense that Barthes was questioning (an infallible transmission of objective meaning from one human brain to another) but in a distinctively Buddhist way, as one subjective being reaching out in compassion to another across the chasms of time and space, thereby creating collective meaning which reminds both author and reader that while language might be nothing more than an infinite network of *differance*, this network of symbols which simultaneously differ and defer is also a reflexive network which, like the Buddhist metaphor of Indra’s Net,^{*} not only folds every symbol or node back upon itself but also reflects the whole.

This reflexive and collective meaning-making effort relies, however tenuously, on the fact that someone must write and someone else must read. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth asserts that “in any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader.”³ Booth’s use of the word “dialogue” to describe the writing/reading process is especially apt in Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, which makes this dialogue literal as Ruth, in the novel, appears to and speaks with the characters who she has been reading about. Not only does Ozeki cross narrative boundaries through dialogue between

* Jonathan Stalling describes Indra’s net as “a vast net of interconnections where [at] every intersection of every causal connection (figured here as horizontal and vertical threads) one finds a jewel reflecting every other jewel in the net.” Jonathan Stalling, “The Emptiness of Patterned Flux: Ernest Fenollosa’s Buddhist Essay ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,’” in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 34.

author, narrator, reader, and characters, but she also engages in dialogue with postmodern theory as well. As Judith Ryan points out in her book *The Novel after Theory*, many recent novels “know about” literary theory and speak back to it.⁴ In this chapter I argue that Ozeki uses Zen Buddhist concepts of time and subjectivity to talk back to postmodern theory. What’s more, in revealing the overlap between Zen and post-structuralist notions of identity through a deconstruction of narrative time and space, Ozeki posits an alternate conclusion to the narrative uncertainty and disconnection inherent in much postmodern fiction by engaging a distinctly Buddhist instantiation of the eco-spiritual imaginary.

This uniquely Buddhist eco-spirituality holds much in common with what has become known as deep ecology, defined by David Barnhill and Roger Gottlieb as “the ethical and religious attitude of valuing nature for its own sake and seeing it as divine or spiritually vital.”⁵ While Barnhill and Gottlieb use the term “nature” in this definition, they later specify that part of the move toward deep ecology lies in the redefinition of “nature” as an external entity to “environment” as a concept of reciprocity with human interaction.⁶ Deep ecology’s addition of the spiritual element to the scientific study of ecology comes very close to defining the “eco-spiritual” side of what I am calling an eco-spiritual imaginary, as deep ecology has been defined as the “intuitive sense of the whole of the natural world” as “not just a collection of individual phenomena or even a community of related beings” but “a vast, encompassing totality that we can connect to and that has unqualified value.”⁷ As I have shown in previous chapters, the collective story of human participation in this “encompassing totality” as it has appeared in narrative fiction of the last fifty years adds the “imaginary” element to my definition. While previous chapters have revealed distinctly Native American and Catholic instantiations of this

imaginary, John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff argue that a distinctly Buddhist imaginary has emerged in American literature.

Given Buddhism's fundamental rejection of identity as a delusion, the concept of a Buddhist imaginary is not without irony. Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff write that "the chief paradox of 'Buddhist Literature' is that it helps provide the conditions, as Benedict Anderson has argued newspapers did for modern nations, for the formation of a Buddhist imagined community, though this particular corporate identity forms itself around the idea that identity itself is a delusion."⁸ In his essay "Healing Ecology," David Loy pushes the idea of Buddhist identity as delusion further, arguing that collective identities suffer from the same delusion as individual identities—an attempt to separate ourselves whether individually or collectively into socially constructed groups of insiders and outsiders. In fact, he argues, the most harmful such separation is the one between humans as a species and the rest of the natural world—Modernity's nature/culture divide in Latour's terminology. In *The World is Made of Stories*, Loy shows how Modernity and its concurrently developed colonialism originated in the fiction that nature could become property. He argues that Buddhism challenges this colonial master-narrative of European superiority over both people of color and the land by recognizing it for what it is—a fictional imaginary. The only way to escape this colonial fiction is to open ourselves up to the subjective truths within every other story, realizing that the history of America is composed of the stories of Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latina/os, and the More-Than-Human World.⁹ Buddhism opens itself up to the telling of all stories acknowledging socially constructed differences such as race and biological differences such as species while simultaneously holding these differences to be empty of any signifying value in light of the interconnection between all things.

Paradoxical as it might seem, therefore, the Buddhist American deconstruction of both its own socially constructed imaginary and the social construction of categories of race, class and gender lends itself to a decolonial imaginary.[†] Rooted outside of the Euro-centered colonial matrix of power, “Buddhist American literature was [and is] rebellious.”¹⁰ Malcolm X perhaps most famously described the rebellious nature of this decolonial move toward Buddhism in his *Autobiography*, writing through Alex Haley that “The Africans are returning to Islam and other indigenous religions. The Asians are returning to being Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.”¹¹ While the primarily white Buddhist literary movement in the U.S. in the 1950s and ‘60s known as the Beats rebelled against the vacuousness of modern capitalism more than they did against colonialism or its ongoing effects, John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff write that this “literature itself was the avant-garde of the movement of Buddhism into America,” at least in popular culture.¹² Arguing that this Buddhist literary movement has continued to grow and diversify, they state that “many of the leading writers of color today ... have committed themselves to Buddhist practice,” including Charles Johnson, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Lan Cao.¹³ This chapter of my dissertation adds Ruth Ozeki to this list of influential Buddhist American writers of color. Ozeki’s combination of Buddhist philosophy, deep ecology, and crossing of diageic borders in her fiction embodies the definition of an eco-spiritual imaginary as characters, authors, and readers expand their understanding of the self to include not only transpacific interconnection with each other, but a deep interconnection and interdependency with the biosphere itself.

[†] Emma Pérez defines the *decolonial imaginary* “as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history. ... By fusing the words ‘decolonial’ and ‘imaginary,’ each term riddled with meaning, I locate the decolonial within that which is intangible.” In recognizing the intangible stories around which our identities and histories are based, socially conscious Buddhism operates on a similar logic. Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 6.

Other critics have also identified the way Ozeki uses narrative to construct a shared sense of meaning across time and space. Beverly Hogue focuses on garbage as a culturally differentiated category which is also therefore tied up with constructions of the self, writing that “Ozeki excavates literary landfills to recuperate trashed narratives and devalued people, proposing that the very stuff cultures reject as worthless provides compost for the growth of new meaning.”¹⁴ Referencing the quantum entanglement of Ruth and Nao’s narratives she argues that Ozeki “posits the concept of entanglement as a compelling and creative foundation for construction of community within fluid currents of space and time.”¹⁵ Taking the concept of entanglement in an overtly ecological direction, Michelle N. Huang coins the phrase “ecologies of entanglement” which describes “how material existence is constituted across geographical, temporal, and conceptual distances.”¹⁶ Huang’s argument for the entanglement of the conceptual with the geographical and temporal is echoed by Hsiu-chuan Lee who argues that *A Tale for the Time Being* “sees words as quantum particles that illuminate the plasticity and multiplicity of space and time.”¹⁷ Using the term “minor cosmopolitics” to explain this “radical global interconnectedness,” Lee explores “the world-making potentials of minoritized Individuals.”¹⁸ To these various discussions and definitions of the construction of shared meaning across space and time in the text, I add an analysis of the overtly Buddhist spirituality which I argue is central to understanding the transpacific ecological imaginary in Ozeki’s novel.

Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*

The central problem in Ozeki’s novel is the disappearance and reappearance of the words at the end of a journal from Japan, which Ruth the character finds washed up on the shore of her Northwest Canadian island home. The journal is written by sixteen-year-old Naoko Yasutani, or

Nao for short, who is forced to move back to Japan from Sunnyvale, California when her dad loses his job as a computer programmer for a military contractor. Although the Yasutani are Japanese, Nao has grown up in California, and is mercilessly bullied by her classmates upon her move back to Japan, which leads her to seriously contemplate suicide. Her now jobless father is also suicidal, and the journal abruptly ends right as Nao is at a bus stop after having bid her father and his bag of suicide supplies farewell (most likely forever). Nao is also planning her own suicide following her visit to her dying grandmother, an old Zen Buddhist nun living at an ancient temple up in the mountains. Ruth, who swears that the now blank pages at the end of the journal used to contain writing, frantically searches for the Yasutani online, only to realize that the events in the journal transpired years before she found it washed up on the shore.[‡] If Nao was going to commit suicide, she would have done it by now.

The problem of the disappearing words then becomes a problem of the disconnect between reader and author, as Nao, who plans to leave the journal somewhere where it can be found by a total stranger, addresses her unknown reader, saying “it feels like I’m reaching forward through time to touch you, and now that you’ve found [the journal], you’re reaching back to touch me!”¹⁹ Only once Ruth begins to follow 13th century Zen Master Dōgen’s directions to forget the self, however, is she able to shed her “body-mind” and realize her potential as a time being to reach back and touch Nao’s life through story. As Ozeki says of the novel in an interview in *MELUS*, “I wanted to play with ... the Buddhist understanding of self and no-self: the idea that we are all only the stories that we tell ourselves. So, you can completely buy into the ‘reality’ of that story you are telling yourself about who you are, or you can, through

[‡] The blank pages at the end of the journal recall both Junot Díaz’s blank pages in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as analyzed in the previous chapter and the blank scroll given to Monkey in the Chinese Buddhist mythology about the arrival of the Buddha’s teaching in China.

zazen, meditation, and mindfulness practices, understand the truth of no abiding self and learn to hold your story lightly.”²⁰ Ozeki thus structures the novel around Ruth’s struggle to hold her story lightly through an understanding of no-self, and only once she is able to become “empty of a separate self,” as Thich Nhat Hanh explains this Buddhist concept, is she able to become “full of everything in the cosmos,” rediscovering the words at the end of the journal and reaching back across the chasm of time and space separating herself as a reader and Nao as an author.²¹ Thus, viewed through the Buddhist concept of no-self, Hegel’s “abyss of nothingness in which all being sinks” and Barthes description of literature as “the trap where all identity is lost” don’t remain nihilistic, but rather become emptiness of a separate self—a way to reach out and touch everyone through the compassion of the bodhisattva path[§] as self and other become, as Nao’s Buddhist great grandmother Jiko would say, “not same. Not different.”²²

While “Not same, not different” embodies the classic spirit of a Zen Koan, or riddle for breaking down constructions of the self, it also helps explain Ozeki’s construction of ecological interconnection in the novel. German zoologist Ernst Haeckel first defined ecology in 1866 as “the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and its organic environment.”²³ In the scientific meaning, then, ecology investigates the complex webs of interdependency between any given organism and its landscape. Moving up through ever more complex webs of interaction, ecologists study the way populations of organisms depend on communities of other organisms which compose local ecosystems, which are contained in larger biomes, which together make up the biosphere of planet earth. Including humans as a population of organisms in these various systems challenges the classic humanist assumption of the self-

[§] A Bodhisattva is “literally, a ‘being-toward-enlightenment,’ one who is set on the path of awakening and who lives in selfless devotion for the liberation of all sentient beings.” Ruben L. F. Habito, *Healing Breath: Zen Spirituality for a Wounded Earth* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996), xiii.

constituted individual. Not only is each individual organism (human or not) entirely dependent on and shaped by the social systems around it, but it is literally composed of the other organisms it consumes. Thus, while any given Homo Sapien is not the same as any other organism, it is also not different because of its complete dependency on and composition from the landscape around it—not same, not different.

Ozeki makes this both literal and figurative in the novel's engagement with ecological concerns. While “not same, not different” also refers to the Buddhist nun Jiko's ability to shape-shift between human and crow as a narrative signpost for both Ruth and for readers, it also refers to the transpacific interdependency between Japan and the North American continent through environmental concerns such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and the 2011 tsunami with its resulting Fukujima nuclear meltdown that carries radioactive detritus all the way to Ruth's Pacific Northwest shore. This ecological interdependency also carries over into the concerns with time and author/reader relationships so central to the plot of the novel. When Ruth realizes that Nao's journal is several years old and that she is too late to save her from her plans to commit suicide, she also realizes that the tsunami which caused the nuclear meltdown has destroyed the monastery from which the Buddhist nun Jiko visited her in her dreams. The problem of the missing ending to the journal thus also becomes a problem of time, as Ruth struggles with her connection to the characters in Nao's journal who might already be dead.

Steps of Dōgen's Buddha Way

This concern with time is not surprising given that the novel's title is taken from thirteenth century Zen Master Eihei Dōgen's concept of “being-time.” Dōgen wrote** in “The

** Also quoted in the novel on page 323.

Issue at Hand” that “studying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. Studying oneself is forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things. Being enlightened by all things is causing the body-mind of oneself and the body-mind of others to be shed.”²⁴ In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth must follow all these steps before she can understand her true relationship to Nao Yasutani and reach out to her across time. That Ozeki would structure Ruth’s plotline around these steps is by no means a stretch. Beside her open acknowledgment of the centrality of no-self in her interview with Ty, Ozeki weaves passages from Dōgen’s writings all throughout the text, including the epigraphs to Sections I and II and the title itself, taken from the eleventh chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, his collected works. To understand what it means to be a “time being” is really Ruth’s mission from the moment she opens the journal and reads Nao’s opening sentence: “Hi! My name is Nao, and I am a time being.”²⁵ However, when she first searches online for Dōgen’s eleventh chapter “Being Time,” her reaction is underwhelming: “the ancient Zen master had a nuanced and complex notion of time that she found poetic but somewhat opaque.”²⁶ Only after following all three of Dōgen’s steps for studying the Buddha Way is she able to drop her “body-mind” and truly be in time.^{††}

Step 1: Studying the Self

To be a time-being is to inter-be, in the words of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Similar to an understanding of deep ecology, inter-being as described in the previous chapter of this dissertation is an intimate understanding of the mutual constituency of all living things. In Zen Buddhist philosophy this understanding of inter-being leads to a deep sense of peace and

^{††} Like Dōgen’s explanation of the concept of time being, or being time, the possibilities for word play are endless, with each combination yielding new and surprising interpretations. In this case, she can “be in time” to save Nao and her father from suicide, as explained later.

wholeness. Before this spiritual interconnection can be embraced, however, one must let go of the imaginary self. In post-structuralist theory, the first step in understanding the imaginary self is to see one's subjectivity—the external network of forces that have composed it. Similarly, in Buddhism, the first step toward enlightenment is to “understand the self.” When Ruth begins to study herself, what she finds is troubling. Ruth and her husband, Oliver, moved to Whaletown, a tiny island “locality” in British Columbia when Oliver contracted a prolonged illness and Ruth's mother began to suffer from Alzheimer's disease. The Canadian health care system and the seclusion and privacy of a wooded island in the Northern Pacific rainforest appealed to them, and while Oliver seems almost miraculously cured by the forest around them, Ruth suffers loneliness and depression after her bustling life in New York City. As a result, the two begin to fight, and Ruth's writing begins to suffer from writer's block, a problem only exacerbated by the busybodies on the island who constantly ask for updates on her recent project, a memoir of her time caring for her mother in her last years. Missing New York City, Ruth believes that she needs these external social structures to define herself: “It was only in an urban landscape, amid straight lines and architecture, that she could situate herself in human time and history.”²⁷ However, as her mother gradually begins to forget herself, losing her mind and eventually her life to Alzheimer's disease, Ruth worries that she is forgetting herself as well, as she begins to misplace things and forget words on the tip of her tongue. What she doesn't realize is the irony of the fact that Zen Master Dōgen would tell her that forgetting herself is exactly what she needs to do next.

As Ruth's external identities as a wife, a daughter, and a writer begin to falter, threatening to cast her into Barthes' “oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost,” she finds Nao's journal washed up on shore and begins to bond with her over

Nao's own struggle with identity. While Nao is ethnically Japanese, her self-identification as an American accelerates her classmates bullying. While she hates their physical abuse, things soon progress to a form of psychological bullying where her classmates no longer acknowledge her presence, eventually staging a mock funeral for her and posting it online for her to watch. As her classmates and even her substitute teacher treat her as if she is dead, she loses all sense of external identity: "I became a ghost I ate and slept, . . . but inside I knew I was dead, even if my parents didn't notice."²⁸ Having lost all external sense of identity and slipping, like Ruth, into the trap where all identity is lost, Nao turns to her great-grandmother Jiko for help. Jiko, who has taken the vows of a bodhisattva "not to become enlightened until all the other beings in this world get enlightened first," explains her vow to Nao in terms of an elevator: "it's kind of like letting everybody else get into the elevator ahead of you."²⁹ When Nao takes this metaphor further, writing in her journal that she "never asked her where that elevator is going," Ruth has a dream that very night in which Jiko appears to her and answers the elevator question in Koan form. A Koan is a riddle or play on words used by Zen masters to help their students deconstruct their binary assumptions about reality and identity. Jiko's answer to the elevator question serves a similar purpose. She writes that the elevator of enlightenment goes: "sometimes up . . . sometimes down . . . Up down, same thing. And also different, too."³⁰ Ruth's dream precedes and yet echoes Jiko's explanation of up and down later in Nao's journal. Many pages later, Nao is on the beach with her great grandmother watching surfers stand and fall as they follow the waves: "up, down, same thing," Jiko tells her. Mirroring Thich Nhat Hanh's example of waves and water as an explanation of the Buddhist mantra "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," not only are up and down the same yet different, but Jiko goes on to explain that the surfer and the wave are the same and different as well: "A wave is born from deep conditions of the ocean. . . . A

person is born from deep conditions of the world. A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again. Up, down. Person, wave.”³¹ Both Ruth and Nao struggle to understand these linguistically contradictory statements. However, having studied the social construction of themselves and begun to question their externally enforced identities, they are now ready for the second step in Dogan’s Buddha way—forgetting the self. They begin to achieve this through the practice of Zazen, or sitting meditation.

When Nao goes to stay at Jiko’s temple in the mountains, writing about her experience practicing zazen, Ruth follows her instructions in a parallel learning practice. While Ruth’s reading of the journal and Nao’s writing it are separated by years, Ruth and Nao nevertheless learn to meditate at the same time through the text of the journal, illustrating Nao’s statement that “words and stories are time beings” as they allow herself and Ruth to connect with each other across time and space. Just as Nao’s first philosophical question to her great grandmother crosses time as the words of a koan which also prompts Ruth toward the second step in the Buddha way—forgetting herself—so Nao’s early attempts to practice zazen cross time as Ruth takes up the practice simultaneously with her reading. Through the journal, they encounter the same steps in the Buddha way simultaneously. Ruth slips in time by reading Nao’s journal one entry per day, as she assumes it was written. In fact, she uses the terminology of slippage when speaking of her inability to remember that Nao’s journal has already happened in the past, writing that “it wasn’t that she’d forgotten, exactly. The problem was more a kind of slippage,” and “fiction had its own time and logic. That was its power.”³² Nao slips in time by writing as if she has a reader in the present. The text itself is what allows for this slippage of time, but instead of separating them, it brings them together. Thus, when Ruth attempts zazen unsatisfactorily for several days after reading Nao’s instructions, what she doesn’t realize is that when Nao writes,

“Jiko also says that to do zazen is to enter time completely,” she has already been taught what this feels like by the old nun herself in the form of the Jungle Crow reaching forward in time as a bodhisattva to help bring Ruth and Nao together.³³

Ruth’s dreams about the Buddhist nun are interesting in that they contain multiple possible overlapping explanations. On one hand, it feels to Ruth as if Jiko is sending her mind across time and space to communicate with her, and in fact, each of her dreams is prescient to her reading of the same information in the journal. However, as the epigraph to Part II of the novel expresses through a quote from Proust, the dreams could also be merely Ruth’s pre-construction of the journal within her own mind. Proust writes: “in reality, every reader, while he is reading, is the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument, which he offers to the reader to permit him to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself. The reader’s recognition in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its truth.”³⁴ In Derridean terms, Ruth’s dreams about the Buddhist nun which provide her with information she has not yet encountered in the journal are supplementary to the originary myth of Nao’s writing sometime in the past. As Mark Currie explains the concept of supplementarity: “the possibility of what comes later is the origin of the origin, so that the origin always contains within it the mark of what is to come. Or, to use another Derridean phrase, the fall from presence has *always already* occurred, and the idea of some undivided originary presence which precedes difference is a delusion foisted on us by narrative.”³⁵ Thus, while Ruth looks to the moment of Nao’s writing as a pure originary moment, the journal already contains within it the traces of what Ruth expects to find as manifested in her dreams. As in much of the novel, therefore, the boundary between Ruth’s mental construction of the world she encounters through the diary and Nao’s own diagenetic storyworld is intentionally blurred so that the “truth”

of the nun's incursions into Ruth's dreams becomes less relevant than the impact of these incursions on Ruth's own diegetic level.^{‡‡}

In addition to the way Ozeki talks back to post-structuralist theory through Ruth's supplementary dreams about the diary, she also uses these dreams about Jiko to echo the transpacific ecological connection between her Pacific Northwest island home and Japan.^{§§} Thus when Jiko appears as a shape-shifting Japanese Jungle Crow in Ruth's dream, an actual Japanese Jungle Crow shows up on the island, having ridden the debris from the tsunami through the Great Pacific Garbage Patch across the ocean currents. Ruth makes this transpacific ecological connection match her own reading from the journal as well as a Sliammon mythology about a grandmother crow who saves her granddaughter, just as Jiko saves Nao in the journal. In making both the physical appearance of the Japanese Crow and the Native mythology about a shapeshifting crow grandmother supplementary to the moment of Nao's writing as an originary mythology, Ruth preconditions her interpretation of her own physical reality. Whether the Jungle Crow is literally the Buddhist nun having shape-shifted across boundaries of time and space to appear to Ruth doesn't really matter because this is the narrative that makes Nao's story real to

^{‡‡} The term for characters/authors/narrators who cross diegetic levels is metalepsis. As Gérard Genette, who coined the term, describes it, metalepsis is "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse" (234–35). According to H. Porter Abbott in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, there are three levels of storyworld (or diagesis) that usually exist in any given narrative. Metalepsis is possible on any of these three levels: The world of production that contains both the storyworld and the world of narration (170). The world in which the narration takes place (169). The world in which the characters reside and the events take place (169). *A Tale for the Time Being* crosses all three of these diegetic levels as author Ruth writes footnotes into character Ruth's narration and characters Ruth and Jiko cross boundaries between Ruth's storyworld and the metanarrative storyworld of Nao's diary. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1983). H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

^{§§} In keeping with Yunte Huang's definition of the "transpacific imagination" as "a host of literary and historical imaginations that have emerged under the tremendous geopolitical pressure of the Pacific encounters," the ecological connection between Japan and the Canadian Pacific Northwest also become decolonial as Ruth compares the colonial history of "Cortes Island" where she lives to Japanese colonization of the indigenous Emishi people in Miyagi prefecture where Jiko's temple was located prior to the tsunami. Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2. Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Viking, 2013), 141.

her. The crow thus also becomes a symbol of the ecological connection between Japan and British Columbia confirming the importance and physical reality of her intersubjective connection to Nao's story through the journal which crossed the Pacific Ocean following the same path of debris which brought the crow.

Steps 2 and 3: Forgetting the Self and Becoming Enlightened by All Things

Whether real or imagined, Jiko's ability to appear to Ruth across the chasms of time and space that separate them is directly linked to Dōgen's theory on being-time. As quoted in the epigraph to Part III of the novel, Dōgen writes that “every being that exists in the entire world is linked together as moments in time, and at the same time they exist as individual moments of time. Because all moments are the time being, they are your time being.”³⁶ In bringing Nao's bodhisattva grandmother Jiko forward in time to visit Ruth the character, Ozeki the author literalizes this metaphysical connection between “every being that exists in the entire world.” Jiko, as a self-declared bodhisattva, is already capable of Dōgen's final step in enlightenment, shedding the body-mind of oneself and shedding the body-mind of others. Ozeki literalizes this through Jiko's visits to Ruth both in her dreams and in the form of the Japanese Jungle Crow that mysteriously appears out of context on the island. And while Jiko, who has claimed she is 104 for as long as Nao can remember, states that one has to be 105 to be completely enlightened, nevertheless, as Dōgen explains his concept of “practice-enlightenment,” the practice of Zazen (sitting meditation) and enlightenment itself are inseparable.³⁷ If a master monk ceases practicing because he believes he has achieved enlightenment, then he is no longer enlightened. Conversely, so tightly are practice and enlightenment intertwined that “the state of awakening is experienced immediately, even in the first moment of a beginner's meditation,” although the

novice may not yet recognize enlightenment even as she experiences it in practice.³⁸ Thus Jiko, in sitting *Zazen*, can shed her body-mind and Ruth's body-mind and transcend all bounds of time and space to help lead Ruth to enlightenment. Conversely, Ruth, in attempting *Zazen* even unsuccessfully at first, immediately begins to experience enlightenment the moment she tries it.

The first time Jiko visits Ruth in her dreams she answers the elevator question discussed above. In addition to serving as a Koan to help speed Ruth and Nao toward the second step of enlightenment, forgetting themselves, Jiko's cryptic response also points to the second of the traditionally held "four marks of Zen" supposedly brought from India to China by Bodhidharma in the fifth or sixth century—that Zen "does not rely on words or letters."³⁹ As Ozeki herself explains in the Appendix to the novel, according to the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, "truth is like the moon in the sky. Words are like a finger. A finger can point to the moon's location, but it is not the moon. To see the moon, you must look past the finger."⁴⁰ The point of any Zen Buddhist statement is to point to this ultimate reality beyond the false binaries of language. It is thus no mistake that Ruth's dream ends with the Buddhist nun standing staring at the moon: "The smooth skin on her shorn head caught the light. From a distance, where Ruth stood, it looked like two moons, talking."⁴¹

In the second dream, Jiko appears once again as a shape-shifting Jungle Crow "unfurling the wide black wing of her sleeve" and giving Ruth a preview of the second and third steps on the Buddha way—forgetting the self and becoming enlightened by all things.⁴² In the dream, Jiko indicates that Ruth is to wear her glasses, but when Ruth puts them on, the world dissolves into "a place or condition that was unformed, that she couldn't find words for."⁴³ Like Hegel's "abyss of nothingness in which all being sinks," Ozeki describes this prelingual state as "a feeling, of nonbeing, sudden, dark, and prehuman, which filled her with such an inchoate horror that she

cried out and brought her hands to her face, only to find that she no longer had one.”⁴⁴ However, Jiko guides her from this nihilistic abyss of nothingness into a Buddhist emptiness, where “empty of a separate self” becomes “full of everything in the cosmos.” Here, in “this eternal sense of merging and dissolving” with no forward, no through, no up and no down, Ruth suddenly feels “a feather-light touch” and hears “a chuckle and a snap:”

In an instant, her dark terror vanished and was replaced by a sense of utter calm and well-being. Not that she had a body to feel, or eyes to see, or ears to hear, but somehow she experienced all these sensations, nevertheless. It was like being cradled in the arms of time itself, and she stayed suspended in this blissful state for an eternity or two.⁴⁵

Similar to old Zen stories about the touch of a feather or the sound of a snap bringing sudden enlightenment, Jiko teaches Ruth what it feels like to let go of her socially constructed self and to replace Barthes’s “oblique into which every subject escapes” with the deep Buddhist interconnection of all beings across time and space.

It is following this second dream that Ruth reads Nao’s instructions for doing zazen, and the two begin to practice “together” in the sense that Ruth begins at the same time that she reads about Nao’s beginning practice. In this sense, author and reader have already connected across time even without the metaphysical shedding of body-mind that Ruth is able to achieve later in the novel. Nao, simply through writing the instructions for zazen, has reached forward in time and significantly altered Ruth’s world for the better. One can argue about what exactly Nao meant as the author, or whether her words can ever approach any real description of ultimate reality, but like Jiko teaches Nao when she writes that up and down are the same thing and yet simultaneously different, it is not the words themselves that matter, but the experience of reality which the words unlock. Ruth has a genuine experience thanks to Nao’s words reaching forward through time.

Step 4: Dropping the Body/Mind

Having experienced the first three steps of Dōgen’s study of the Buddha way—studying the self, forgetting the self, and becoming enlightened by all things—Ruth is now equipped for the final stage, dropping away of the body-mind of the self and the body-mind of others. She achieves this final stage (as Jiko had done before by appearing in her dreams and shape-shifting into a Jungle Crow) by transcending time and space and appearing to Nao’s father just as he is about to kill himself. After being led through a surreal landscape of swirling letters which form themselves into the word “crow,” Ruth finds herself on a bench next to Nao’s father, who is waiting for his suicide partner. She is able to convince him of his importance to Nao and send him to meet her at the bus station where she is waiting for the bus to take her to see the now-dying Jiko, whose final message to them both is a single Japanese character which translates “to live.”⁴⁶ Both Nao and her father instantly understand that this message is meant for them, and they make a pact that they must abandon their suicidal thoughts and seek to truly live: “we have no choice,” Nao’s father tells her. “We must soldier on!”⁴⁷

Ruth’s intervention in Nao’s life through the written word as both Nao’s reader and author is intimately tied to both Zen Buddhist and post-structuralist theories of language. As Jean-Francois Lyotard states in *The Postmodern Condition*, “simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodernism* as incredulity toward metanarratives. ... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements.”⁴⁸ As Ruth struggles to “go find [the words]” to the end of Nao’s story as her husband Oliver tells her to do, she finds herself in a dream where “sounds merge and separate, coalesce and differentiate. Words shimmer, a darting cloud of tiny minnows.”⁴⁹ As she pushes through this literal cloud “of narrative language elements,” trying to find her narrative function as a hero in Nao’s story, Ruth also realizes that the slippage between language and meaning has to do with time. While

structuralist theories of the sign “had dictated that meaning be analysed as a spatial structure in relation to a snapshot of the language system as a whole at any one time,” the post-structuralist concept of *differance* allowed “time back into the analysis.”⁵⁰ By revealing “that the elements of a sentence were always in motion, or that the meaning of any sign was somehow always qualified by those which followed,” Derrida showed the way that any given sign “is not present within itself” but is “somehow spread out across all the others” both spatially and in time.⁵¹ Thus, when Ruth, in her dream, struggles through the cloud of words and letters to find Nao’s father, her problem lies in what she calls a “pileup of sounds, like cars colliding on a highway, turning meaning into cacophony.”⁵² As she also expresses it, “something’s gone wrong with the words in time.”⁵³

Not only must Ruth struggle with the traces of the past and present held captive within every narrative utterance, making it almost impossible to find Nao or her father in time (either to locate them in time or to be in time to stop their suicides), but she also finds that physical objects hold these traces across time as well—making an obvious ecological connection not only between living organisms in the present, but across past and future as well. Trying in her dream to slice through the paper that holds the words that might lead her to Nao, she finds that the paper has a “fibrous memory that still lingers there, supple, vascular, and standing tall. The tree was past and the paper present, and yet paper still remembers holding itself upright and altogether. Like a dream, it remembers its sap.”⁵⁴ Zen Master Thich Naht Hanh teaches a very similar understanding of the interconnection between words and the physicality of paper in his commentary on the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*. Teaching the doctrine of interconnection through a piece of paper, Hanh explains how the clouds are in a piece of paper because the rain grew the tree which was cut down to make it. Similarly, the sun is in the paper, as is the logger who cut the tree down, and the food that fed the logger and the parents who gave birth to him. Hanh concludes that we are all “in” the sheet of paper on which his book is printed because “when we look at

a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also.”⁵⁵ Through language, which is communicated through the physical media of ink and paper, we are interconnected with those we read about both physically and mentally. As Nao writes elsewhere of the encounter between her journal and her future reader: “maybe none of these things will happen except in my mind and yours.”⁵⁶ And yet, both Nao and Ruth’s connection to very real physical events such as the nuclear meltdown and the tsunami which caused Nao’s journal to wash up on Ruth’s North American shore are also intricately tied up with both words and time.

Time, Quantum Mechanics, and Post-structuralist linguistics

Not only is Ruth’s intervention in Nao’s life tied to Zen Buddhist and post-structuralist theories of language and ecological connection across time, but Ozeki also uses the “many worlds” theory of quantum mechanics to explain Ruth’s ability to intervene in Nao’s life across these boundaries of time and space. Following Ruth’s dream, in which she appears to Nao’s father, thereby changing the course of Nao’s story, and thus her life, the words from the last few pages of the journal reappear. Of course, Ruth’s question is, how did this happen? Did the words really disappear to begin with, or are her worst fears coming true, and she is experiencing the early onset of Alzheimer’s? Muriel, her neighbor, who pointed out the shape-shifting mythology associated with crows in Sliammon tradition, posits the most obvious yet simultaneously most unbelievable theory. She explains:

This crow from Nao’s world came here to lead you into the dream so you could change the end of her story. Her story was about to end one way, and you intervened, which set up the conditions for a different outcome. A new ‘now’ as it were, which Nao¹ hasn’t quite caught up with.⁵⁷

¹ Ozeki plays with word puns again, as Nao is juxtaposed with “now.”

Ruth replies that she isn't comfortable "having that much agency over someone else's narrative," to which Muriel responds humorously, "that's a fine way for a novelist to talk!"⁵⁸ As Ruth further speculates on the possibility of her engagement in a story that had already taken place years before, the problem of time crops up once again. If Ruth changed Nao's ending in her own time, then was there a time before Ruth read the journal in which Nao and her father had already killed themselves? In returning to Nao's time in a dream, did she alter that past? How could multiple endings be possible at the same time?

To understand the way Ozeki links Quantum mechanics to Zen Buddhist theories of time, it is necessary to give a brief rundown on Dōgen's theory of the "Time Being" from which Ozeki's novel takes its title. Rein Raud, in his article "The Existential Moment" posits two different definitions of time which he argues are essential for understanding Dōgen's Time Being. The first he calls durational time, which he bases on Aristotle's definition of time as "the numerical expression of movement in respect to 'before' and 'after,' and it is continuous, because it is the derivative of a continuum."⁵⁹ Strikingly, this durational definition of time is almost entirely analogous to Dōgen's description of the view held by "ordinary folk who have not studied the Buddha's teaching."⁶⁰ Dōgen explains that "ordinary folk" think of time "like having crossed rivers and crossed mountains. They think, 'Even though those mountains and rivers may exist still, I have passed them and am now in the vermilion tower of the jewel palace—the mountains and rivers and I are as far apart as sky and earth.'"⁶¹ In this ordinary or durational view, a human being as a concrete and permanent self traverses time like a physical journey, where the events of the past, present, and future are also concrete and permanent like a mountain or a river. You have crossed the mountain and the mountain now exists behind you, and in the past.

This view of time, Raud argues, is rooted in the essentialism of language because "we can use a word for only the set of those properties of a thing that necessarily characterize it in the same way at all

moments of time.”⁶² Calling a large mass of rock thrust up through the earth's crust a “mountain” gives the word essential characteristics which allow it to be defined as such. The mountain can exist in the past and the future and it will still retain the essentializing label of “mountain.” However, in Derrida’s terms, the sign “mountain” is a “structure of exclusion,” because it “posits a common essence” between mountains “which effaces the rich variety” of mountains for which this sign can signify.⁶³ The traveler in Dōgen's example thinks of themselves in the same essentialist and exclusionary way. The same person who traversed the mountain, is now living in the vermilion tower of the jewel palace. Ignoring the “rich variety” of change within this person’s subjectivity across time, they view themselves as the same person, only having moved in time and in space.

There are two problems coded into this essentialist view of beings engendered by a durational view of time. The first is a problem of subjectivity. The person living in the jewel palace is not the same person who crossed the mountains. In accordance with the Buddhist principle of impermanence, both a person's physical body and sense of self are constantly in flux as they are acted on and composed of external circumstances and power structures around them. This is part of what Dōgen means when he calls humans “Time Beings.” Thus, while the essentialist linguistic label which designates a person (such as a name) implies a permanent identity, no such permanent identity exists. People are always in flux. The second problem is that the durational view of time falls prey to the same logical inconsistency as the riddle of the tortoise and Achilles. If the tortoise has a head start, and Achilles reduces this lead by one half with every stride, the distance between them will get smaller and smaller, but will never entirely disappear. Similarly, when you try to chop time up into tiny parts, you find that no matter how small you make every “moment,” it can always be divided further. Nao writes a memory of herself as a child trying to understand this paradox of “now.” Driving along the coast of California in the back of her parent’s car, she tries repeating the word “now” faster and faster “trying to catch the moment when the

word was what it is: when *now* became *NOW*.”⁶⁴ She quickly realizes, however, that “in the time it takes to say *now*, *now* is already over. It’s already *then*. *Then* is the opposite of *now*. So saying *now* obliterates its meaning, turning it into exactly what it isn’t.”⁶⁵ Again, post-structuralist theory echoes Ozeki’s Buddhist understanding of both time and language. Speaking of Derrida’s concept of the sign as a structure of exclusion, Currie writes that “any definition of what a moment is, any attempt to cleanse the moment of the trace of past and future and see it as pure presence, will be forced to impose arbitrary boundaries which mark off the present from past and future.”⁶⁶ This leads Derrida to question the durational or linear view of time as well, since any attempt to understand the sign as pure presence results in an originary mythology which ignores the traces of the past and present which condition it. This is why Raud posits that Dōgen must be read with a different theory of time in view—the momentary view of time.

If a moment in time cannot be isolated or defined (as soon as you have finished defining it, it is already gone), then a moment becomes more akin to a mathematical point on a line. It has no dimensions because as soon as you define a border between one point and the next, that border can be divided into even smaller pieces. If a moment is undefinable because it has no definable beginning and end, and because it is always gone the moment you label it, then it can be thought to express many of the same characteristics of sub-atomic particles as defined by quantum mechanics, which posits that an electron, just like a moment in time, exists not as an isolated entity, but as a “wave function” or a “smear” of “all of its possible states at once,” as Ozeki explains in the appendix to her novel.⁶⁷ This helps explain what Dōgen says next in the passage about the mountains and the jewel palace: “does not that time of climbing mountains and crossing rivers swallow up this time of the vermilion tower of the jewel palace? Does it not spew it forth?”⁶⁸ If all moments exist as a wave function of all of time, then to discriminate between the time of climbing a mountain and the time of living in a palace is as

unenlightened as to discriminate between up and down. As Jiko would say, they are “not same. Not different.”⁶⁹ Defining things in time is no different than defining things in space since, as Dōgen says, “there must be time in oneself.”⁷⁰

In Ozeki’s novel, Oliver posits the “‘many worlds’ interpretation of quantum mechanics” as posited by Hugh Everett in 1957 to explain how Ruth changed Nao’s ending.⁷¹ He explains that in this theory of quantum mechanics the crucial factor is that of the observer. Although sub-atomic particles exist as a smear of all their possible states at once, the moment they are observed, only one of these states can be seen. Thus, theoretically, there are a multitude of universes in which the particle is observed in each of its possible states, and therefore on a macro scale, there must be a multitude of universes in which every possible outcome has also happened. So, in Nao’s case, there could be a world in which she kills herself, and a world in which she doesn’t. The crucial factor, again, is that of the observer. In interjecting herself into Nao’s world, Ruth becomes an observer and changes her outcome, freezes it in one of its possible states. In this case, through her compassion for Nao and her father, she freezes it in a state in which they choose to keep on living. But she is only able to become an observer in Nao’s world by following Dōgen’s steps for the study of the Buddha Way, ending in her ability to shed the body-mind of herself and the body-mind of Nao in order to merge their respective universes across time and space.

Conclusion

In writing this novel, Ozeki is of course aware that by “causing the body-mind of oneself and the body-mind of others to be shed,” Dōgen was not referring to a literal shedding of the body resulting in the ability to shape-shift and appear in dreams. However, in writing the novel this way, Ozeki is practicing what she told Eleanor Ty in the interview quoted earlier, holding her story lightly. In realizing

that we are composed of the stories that we tell ourselves, Ozeki is able to imagine Nao as a character calling to an author.⁷² In this way, it is no longer significant whether the pages actually went blank and were recalled by Ruth's incursion into Nao's storyworld. Nor is it significant whether Ruth herself finished writing Nao's diary for her, as is left open to possibility by Oliver's comment that *she* needs to find the words because she is a writer.⁷³ Rather, what Ozeki ultimately seems to achieve in this story of an author and a reader crossing the boundaries of time and space to create meaning for each other's lives, is simply that—a reassertion of the ability for author and reader to create collective meaning in spite of, or perhaps because of, the reflexive quality of words that fold every symbol or node back upon itself but also reflect the whole. As Ozeki describes the third and final dream in which Ruth is able to cross into Nao's storyworld:

*Sometimes mind and words both arrive. Sometimes neither mind nor words arrive. A spider drops on a silvery thread from the branch overhead. A faint breeze stirs the treetops. Dew and rain cling to the leaves and ferns of the understory. Each drop holds within itself a small, bright moon.*⁷⁴

In turning to this nature imagery to describe the interconnection between perceptions of time and language, Ozeki shows that both language and ecology are composed of vast and mutually constitutive networks of interconnection. This is the ultimate meaning of Dōgen's discussion of "Time Beings." Every living being is connected to every other living being just as every sign is connected to every other sign like dewdrops holding each within itself "a small, bright moon."⁷⁵ And just as every sign is bound to every other sign through the traces of the past and present as a centerless network of *differance*, so every living being is also tied to every other living being across time and space in the never-ending attempt to make meaning out of this centerlessness—or in the Buddhist terminology—to make form out of emptiness.

In ending her novel with another line of Dōgen's chapter "Being Time," Ozeki points to this similarity between ecological and linguistic interconnection. Dōgen writes: "mind and words are time

being. Arriving and not-arriving are time being.”⁷⁶ The point seems to be that despite the second mark of Zen’s statement that Zen “does not rely on words or letters,” once one realizes the total interconnection of everything in the universe, mind and words cannot represent ultimate reality, but they also *can* represent a reality we create for ourselves insofar as they promote an experience of connection between author and reader. In this sense, mind and words are achieving Zen’s mission of pointing beyond the self to the interconnection of all living beings. And by becoming a bodhisattva, a compassionate observer, Ruth is able to freeze the world in its best possible state. This, I would argue, is what Ozeki accomplishes in *A Tale for the Time Being*—showing the power of the author to reach across the time and space separating her from her reader and to freeze the reader’s world in its best possible state.

Notes:

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- ¹ Stephen Crites, *Dialectic and Gospel in the Development of Hegel's Thinking* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 192.
- ² Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, trans. Richard Howard, 1, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf>.
- ³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 155.
- ⁴ Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.
- ⁵ David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, *Deep Ecology and World Religions : New Essays on Sacred Ground*, SUNY Series in Radical Social and Political Theory (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 1, <http://proxy.libraries.smu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=67096&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- ⁶ David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, 1.
- ⁷ David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, 77.
- ⁸ John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, "Introduction," in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 3.
- ⁹ David Loy, *The World Is Made of Stories* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 11.
- ¹⁰ John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, "Introduction," in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 2.
- ¹¹ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 369.
- ¹² Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, "Introduction," 2.
- ¹³ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, 13.
- ¹⁴ Beverly Hogue, "Differentiation, Entanglement, and Worth in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," *MELUS* 45, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlaa013>.
- ¹⁵ Hogue, 70.
- ¹⁶ Michelle N. Huang, "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2017): 98.
- ¹⁷ Hsiu-chuan Lee, "Sharing Worlds through Words: Minor Cosmopolitics in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," *Ariel* 49, no. 1 (2018): 27, <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/10.1353/ari.2018.0001>.
- ¹⁸ Lee, 27.
- ¹⁹ Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Viking, 2013), 26.
- ²⁰ Eleanor Ty, "'A Universe of Many Worlds': An Interview with Ruth Ozeki," *MELUS* 38, no. 3 (2013): 162–63.

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- ²¹ Thich Nhất Hạnh and Peter Levitt, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 10.
- ²² Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Viking, 2013), 40.
- ²³ Michelle M. Haggerty and Mary Pearl Meuth, eds., *Texas Master Naturalist* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 183.
- ²⁴ Eihei Dōgen, “The Issue at Hand,” in *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen*, ed. and trans. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 32.
- ²⁵ Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 3.
- ²⁶ Ozeki, 30.
- ²⁷ Ozeki, 61.
- ²⁸ Ozeki, 124.
- ²⁹ Ozeki, 18–19.
- ³⁰ Ozeki, 39.
- ³¹ Ozeki, 194.
- ³² Ozeki, 313–14.
- ³³ Ozeki, 183.
- ³⁴ Ozeki, 109.
- ³⁵ Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory, Transitions* (New York: StMartin’s Press, 1998), 84.
- ³⁶ Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 259.
- ³⁷ Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), 18.
- ³⁸ Tanahashi, 15.
- ³⁹ Ruben L. F. Habito, *Experiencing Buddhism: Ways of Wisdom and Compassion, Faith Meets Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2005), 110.
- ⁴⁰ Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 415–16.
- ⁴¹ Ozeki, 40.
- ⁴² Ozeki, 122.
- ⁴³ Ozeki, 122.
- ⁴⁴ Ozeki, 122.
- ⁴⁵ Ozeki, 123.
- ⁴⁶ Ozeki, 362.

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- 47 Ozeki, 369.
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- 49 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 345.
- 50 Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Transitions (New York: StMartin's Press, 1998), 76–77.
- 51 Currie, 77.
- 52 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 347.
- 53 Ozeki, 347.
- 54 Ozeki, 346.
- 55 Thich Nhất Hạnh and Peter Levitt, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 4.
- 56 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 5.
- 57 Ozeki, 376.
- 58 Ozeki, 377.
- 59 Rein Raud, “The Existential Moment: Rereading Dōgen’s Theory of Time,” *Philosophy East & West* 62, no. 2 (n.d.): 153.
- 60 Eihei Dōgen, “Being Time,” in *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen*, ed. and trans. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 105.
- 61 Dōgen, 105.
- 62 Raud, “The Existential Moment: Rereading Dōgen’s Theory of Time,” 154.
- 63 Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 79–80.
- 64 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 99.
- 65 Ozeki, 99.
- 66 Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 81.
- 67 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 414.
- 68 Dōgen, “Being Time,” 105.
- 69 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 40.
- 70 Dōgen, “Being Time,” 105.
- 71 Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 417.

⁷² Eleanor Ty, “‘A Universe of Many Worlds’: An Interview with Ruth Ozeki,” *MELUS* 38, no. 3 (2013): 169.

⁷³ Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 345.

⁷⁴ Ozeki, 347.

⁷⁵ Ozeki, 347.

⁷⁶ Ozeki, 347.

CHAPTER 5: A Transatlantic Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

The last two chapters identified a transpacific Buddhist imaginary which connects characters, authors, and readers across boundaries of time, space, nation, race and species using non-human narrative devices such as the mongoose in *Oscar Wao*, the jade in *Gods Go Begging*, and the Jungle Crow in *A Tale for the Time Being*. Chapter 5 turns to a transatlantic eco-spiritual imaginary that grows from traditional Congolese spiritual connections to their local eco-system to challenge the coloniality inherent in Christian missionary work and its often concomitantly imperialist agenda. Looking to Melanie Harris's concept of ecowomanism as a foundation for the dual critique of patriarchy and coloniality inherent in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, I explore the way that both novels deconstruct the white male God of Protestant Christianity to reveal a divine immanence in nature compatible with both Christian and local Congolese beliefs.

In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Harris draws from Walker's definition of a Womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of color."¹ Arguing for an "African cosmological vision" which "provides a base from which an ethical mandate for earth justice can be gleaned," Harris identifies Walker as one of the founding mothers of ecowomanist theory which she describes as "the reflective and contemplative study of the ecowisdom that is theorized, constructed, and practiced by women of African descent."² While ecowomanism thus exists at the point of intersection between ethnicity, gender, and ecology,

womanism also develops the intersection between gender and spirituality in important ways. As Darryl Dickson-Carr explains, “the goal [of womanism] is to eschew hierarchies constructed by men for men, in favor of inclusive pluralities and a pantheism that stands in sharp contradistinction to traditional religions.”³ Womanism is thus a highly intersectional movement that embraces an eco-spiritual imaginary unique to women of color.

The enunciation of this unique imaginary is also deeply tied to fiction, and specifically Walker’s fiction, as both Harris and Dickson-Carr note. Harris writes that literature is “a primary conversation partner in the work of black self-recovery and earth care,”⁴ while Dickson-Carr explains that fiction offers womanists the possibility to make “full use of their voices and their creative capacities ... by portraying them in imagined worlds or positing them through the words and actions of pivotal characters.”⁵ He adds that “this is especially true of Walker’s later works, especially *The Color Purple*.”⁶ While Walker’s characters are thus clearly embodiments of this womanist identity at the intersection of race, gender, ecology, and spirituality, Kingsolver’s novel presents a striking counterpoint which also engages with these issues albeit from a white perspective.

Both narratives follow missionaries to the Belgian Congo through an eco-spiritual transformation, but one protagonist is black and the other white. While Walker’s novel is clearly both womanist and decolonial, I argue that Kingsolver’s novel contains important parallels and differences that help carve out an anti-racist/anti-colonial space for white writers within the decolonial project. In both narratives, white and black characters develop an eco-spiritual imaginary which, like the transpacific Buddhist imaginary in the previous chapters, crosses boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species through a literal grounding in the earth, looking to local ecological practices in the past to create a vision for the future that is not post-

race, but rather post-human. Through this pluri-versal* rather than uni-versal vision, both writers/characters maintain the local discourses and practices of their own literary/ethnic traditions while simultaneously grounding themselves in a shared spiritual reverence for the planet.

The Color Purple articulates this decolonial eco-spiritual imaginary through the parallel stories of two sisters, Celie in the United States and Nettie in an unspecified part of “Western Africa” that is most likely modeled on the Belgian Congo. While Celie delinks from the patriarchy and its intersections with both race and religion in the United States, Nettie delinks from a more direct system of coloniality perpetuated by Belgian religious and economic colonization of Africa. For both sisters, nature becomes a common metaphor linking Celie’s spiritual and sexual revolution to her sister Nettie’s shifting conceptions of God while serving as a missionary in Western Africa. As Celie learns to articulate the ways her husband Albert oppresses her and Nettie begins to articulate her outrage at the oppression of the Olinka people by British and Belgian corporations, they enact a simultaneous decoloniality in their embrace of God’s immanence in nature. The novel traces the growth of this decolonial eco-spirituality through a series of letters, first from Celie to God, then from Nettie to Celie, finally becoming a correspondence between the two women which relinks them to identities outside of the colonial matrix of power altogether.

*The term “pluri-versal” derives from Walter D. Mignolo’s almost utopic vision for the endgame of coloniality, what he calls “pluri-versality as a uni-versal project.” Rather than replacing the totalizing knowledge scheme of coloniality with another totalizing narrative (even one that is decolonial), Mignolo argues for a universal movement in which every system of knowledge respects every other system, thereby allowing a plurality of narrative universes to coexist simultaneously with no hierarchical or totalizing knowledge scheme. Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (March 2007): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.

In Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, the Baptist missionaries who arrive in the same Belgian Congo as Nettie are white Americans, not black. Through these white characters, Kingsolver wrestles with an astoundingly similar number of themes to Walker, including the numerous intersectional ties between American and Belgian colonization, patriarchy, and Christianity as well as a transformative ecological spirituality flowing from indigenous African relationships to the greater-than-human world. However, what sets her white characters apart from Walker's is their acknowledgement of their racial subjectivity as white and their enunciation of a complimentary but importantly different set of steps toward an eco-spiritual imaginary. Charting the different reactions of four sisters to their sudden immersion in the Congolese culture, spirituality, and eco-region, Kingsolver's characters represent a variety of white approaches to understanding, embracing, or resisting the white supremacist and imperialist version of Evangelical Christianity espoused by their father. While the oldest daughter, Rachel, grows up to establish a whites-only hotel in the segregated French Congo, the middle child, Leah, stays in the newly created Democratic Republic of the Congo through its early hardships with the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the installation of the U.S.-backed dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Like Celie and Nettie, Leah also embraces God's immanence in nature as she works through her own complicity in the history of Euro-American coloniality by transforming an abandoned rubber plantation into an agricultural asylum for political refugees from Mobutu's reign of terror. Looking to pre-colonial agricultural methods from the Kingdom of Kongo for inspiration, Leah develops an anti-racist perspective that compliments the decolonial work of her Congolese compatriots.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Set in the mid-twentieth-century southern United States and the Belgian Congo, the novel begins with a series of letters from Celie to God which function as private confessions of the actions she is forced to take by the brutal conditions of her highly patriarchal black community. As the oldest daughter of a sexually abusive stepfather, Celie's relationship to her younger sister Nettie is initially defensive. Her letters to God correspondingly take a detached tone as she describes the sickening lengths to which she must go to divert their "Pa's" attention from her more attractive sister, actions which in Nettie's later words "made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it."⁷ In addition to her emotionally detached tone in these early letters to God, Celie's relationship to nature is detached as well. She is forced to work in the family's field, and nature imagery reinforces her emotional repression: "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man."⁸ When Celie is married off to a man the same age as her step-father and Nettie finally decides to run away, Celie supports this decision reassuring Nettie that she'll survive without her little sister, telling her, "long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along."⁹ While her faith in God's companionship and her identification with and personification of the trees show the spark of an eco-spiritual imagination, it isn't until she discovers a bundle of letters from Nettie hidden by her husband that she really begins to discover both a Pan-African imaginary and an eco-spiritual imaginary through her long-lost sister.

As the epistolary address shifts from Celie's letters to God into Nettie's letters addressed to Celie, the women's transatlantic connection initiates a simultaneous decoloniality away from what Celie calls the "old white man" God and toward an eco-spiritual imaginary.¹⁰ The novel prefaces the appearance of Nettie's letters with Celie's account of their discovery. When Nettie

runs away, Celie makes her promise to write, but “she never write,” Celie explains.¹¹ Halfway through the novel, however, she discovers that her husband Albert has hidden a large bundle of letters sent to her by Nettie who has found her way as a missionary to Africa. In these letters, Nettie describes her own spiritual decolonization, including her realization that Jesus did not come from Europe and was therefore not white. Nettie writes, “that’s why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb’s wool. Lamb’s wool is not straight, Celie.”¹² After rejecting the notion that God is white, Celie next abandons the notion of God as male, as her lover Shug explains to her that “if you wait to find God in church ... that’s who is bound to show up, cause that’s where he live.”¹³ Rather, Shug argues, “I believe God is everything.”¹⁴ Celie takes the idea of God as “everything” and applies it specifically to nature, writing to Nettie: “My first step from the old white man [God] was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.”¹⁵ In addition to this subtle reference to Charles Chesnut’s short story “Po’ Sandy” in which a slave is turned into a tree and then hacked up for lumber, Celie has transformed the white, slaveholder’s God (which she used to serve by cleaning the church and preparing the communion) into a deep ecological connection to the earth, in which every part of nature is interconnected, and harm to one element of the ecology inherently does harm to every other element.

If Nettie’s letters help Celie initiate a decolonial shift from Euro-centric patriarchal religion to the interconnection of nature, they also chronicle the early stages of her own eco-spiritual revolution as well. Her comment to Celie about Jesus being Black forms a small piece of the decolonial history and theology Nettie begins to amass from the moment she runs away from her stepfather until the time she returns to the United States. When Nettie finds a temporary

home with a Black missionary couple preparing for a trip to Africa, the family, consisting of Samuel and Corrinne and their adopted children, invite Nettie to join them and begin her re-education. Speaking of her White teacher back home Nettie writes, “Miss Beasley used to say [Africa] was a place overrun with savages who didn’t wear clothes,” but “did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago?”¹⁶ Once the White American myth of African savagery has been exposed, Nettie then begins to learn the history of the transatlantic slave trade and to understand her own heritage as an African American, an intellectual journey which prepares her to begin the ecological shift in her spirituality. On first sight of the African coast, Nettie feels an immediate connection, writing, “we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried—and lived and died—to see again.”¹⁷ This felt connection to the African shore becomes rooted in a local ecology when she arrives in the Olinka village where she plans to stay and learns that “the people ... have always lived on the exact spot where their village now stands. And this spot has been good to them. They plant cassava fields that yield huge crops. They plant groundnuts that do the same. They plant yam and cotton and millet. All kinds of things.”¹⁸ While the diversity and longevity of this local eco-system and the people’s place within it help root Nettie in a new kind of respect for the earth, her eco-spiritual revolution is not complete until she learns the story of the roofleaf and the way that Belgian and British colonialism destroy the delicate balance of Olinka life.

The story of the roofleaf teaches Nettie the delicate balance of life within the Olinka’s local ecology as well as the interconnection between religion and imperialism on the one hand and spirituality and ecology on the other. According to the story, a greedy chief once “wanted more than his share of land to plant” so that he could trade the excess with the “white men on the

coast.”¹⁹ As he expanded his wealth, he began to take the land where the roofleaf grew, the plant used by the people in the village to thatch their roofs. After a huge storm destroyed the people’s houses, they could no longer find enough roof leaf to repair their roofs and many people died from hail, disease, and exposure during the ensuing rainy season. When the roofleaf finally grew back in enough plenty to repair everyone’s houses five years later, the story of how greed destroyed their community was told and retold until it became part of their local lore and the roofleaf itself was revered as sacred. When Nettie and her missionary friends arrive in the village, the people present them with a roof for their house, a ceremony which “the white missionary before you would not let us have,” their interpreter tells them. “We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?” he asks.²⁰ Nettie finds herself agreeing.

The story of the roofleaf becomes decolonial when a European rubber company arrives in the village, enacting through imperial greed the very same fate the villagers warned against in this story. Most likely referencing the historically real Anglo-Belgian India-Rubber Company, Walker describes a corporation representing both Belgian and British capital which builds a road right through the center of the Olinka village, not only destroying homes and crops, but decimating the nearby fields of roofleaf, once again leaving the villagers exposed to starvation and the elements.²¹ For Nettie, the loss of this symbiotic relationship between the Olinka and the roofleaf plant caused by European colonization of both the land and the people helps drive the development of her own eco-spiritual imaginary as she begins to see the connection between a Christianity that seeks to impose a white God over local spiritual traditions and a colonial government that seeks to impose profit over local ecological practices. Nettie writes “God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more

internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us.”²² For both sisters, then, a form of eco-spirituality initiates the decolonial narrative they need to delink their identities from the patriarchal/Christian colonial matrix of power. Through connection to their local ecologies, Celie through trees and purple flowers in the United States, and Nettie through the African roofleaf plant and its centrality to the Olinka ecology, both sisters are relinked to new representations of both spirituality and gender/sexuality. Step by step, they begin the process of delinking from the colonial matrix of power and relinking to their new identities outside of its systemic white supremacy. They do this first by healing the nature/culture divide through an eco-spiritual understanding of interconnection with the earth and all living things. Next they are able to understand the social construction of race and gender as they come to realize that in relation to nature we are all just human. Third, once they acknowledge these social constructions, they are able to see the historic utilization of race/gender for oppression and its legacy in continuing systems of white supremacy and coloniality today. Finally, they delink from the colonial matrix of power by enunciating new identities which actively resist the coloniality of religion and patriarchy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Nettie and Celie's Steps Toward Decolonizing Their Minds

1. Heal the nature/culture divide through an eco-spiritual understanding of their interconnection with the earth and all living things.
2. Understand the social construction of race/gender (in relation to nature we are all just human)
3. Understand the historic utilization of race and its legacy in continuing systems of white supremacy and coloniality today (e.g. Christianity/patriarchy).
4. Delink from these social constructions of race and enunciate a new identity which actively resists the coloniality of religion and the patriarchy.

Pan-Africanism and the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

These new identities begin with their move toward an eco-spiritual imaginary, but it is an eco-spiritual imaginary also deeply rooted in a transatlantic Pan-African identity as well. As Samuel reminds Nettie, “We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. ... We and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere.”²³ While Nettie confesses a Pan-African belief in the communal fight against racism in the United States and colonialism in Africa, Walker’s novel constantly complicates any easy understanding of Pan-Africanism as a purely unifying imaginary. As Tamba M’Bayo writes, “despite its rhetoric and noble ideals, inconsistencies between Pan-African theory and practice have been integral parts of the movement's long and checkered history.”²⁴ The novel reifies these inconsistencies as Nettie seeks to enunciate her own identity amid a flurry of conflicting ideas, emotions, and opinions both within herself and from those around her. While she exhibits a strong sense of excitement at the prospect of discovering her African heritage toward the beginning of her time in Africa, she is quickly troubled by African ambivalence towards her arrival and the colonial attitudes of other black American expatriates. Coupled with her horrified realization that the toxic masculinity she escaped in America is mirrored on the other side of the Atlantic in the small African village where she is headed, Nettie moves over the course of the novel from a simple Pan-African excitement toward a complex instantiation of the eco-spiritual imaginary unique to women of the African diaspora—an imaginary akin to what Melanie Harris calls eco-womanism.

Between Nettie’s letter from New York and Nettie’s first letter from Africa she begins to ask some of the questions which will complicate the simple universalism of her initial Pan-African imaginary. This happens as she begins to meet some indigenous Africans in Africa and

notices the diversity between countries and cultures first in Dakar, Senegal, and then in Monrovia, Liberia. In recognizing these differences and asking the questions they inspire, Nettie follows a well-documented trajectory. As M'bayo explains, "most Africans in diaspora sought answers to fundamental questions about their heritage and identity: what is Africa? What does it mean to be an African, African American, Afro-European, or Afro-Caribbean? More importantly, what is the essence of 'Africanness'?"²⁵ While Nettie may never firmly answer these questions, throughout her journey through Africa she does begin to gain an understanding of the intersections between African and African American identity. The crucial point where these identities intersect is the African slave trade

Caught between identification with her African heritage and a sense of betrayal for being sold away from Africa in the first place, Nettie also wrestles to understand these feelings through the conflicting lenses of her Euro-American civilizing mission and her acknowledgment of European colonialism in Africa. In London, "a country full of white people and some of them very nice," Nettie meets with the Anti-Slavery and Missionary Society.²⁶ Here, at an organization which conflates abolition and the Christianizing of Africa, Nettie feels reassured in her colonial conditioning: "our work began to seem somewhat clearer in England because the English have been sending missionaries to Africa and India and China and God knows where all, for over a hundred years."²⁷ However, in the very next breath, she acknowledges the artifacts the British have pilfered from these places alongside their Christian mission work. Nettie interprets these artifacts as evidence that "Africans once had a better civilization than the European (though of course even the English do not say this)."²⁸ What the English do say is that Africa has "fallen on hard times," a phrasing which Nettie reveals as a strategy for making it "easy to forget that Africa's 'hard times' were made harder by them."²⁹ While she sees through this colonial rhetoric

to a degree, Nettie has been too strongly conditioned by Euro-American coloniality to avoid victim blaming the people of Africa who she says have “murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks” and “are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion” as a result. Thus, while she sympathizes with Africa and understands the role colonialism has played in its decline, she still feels justified in her Christian ministry to people who “believe in the devil and worship the dead” and her resultant sense of superiority is bolstered by her sense of betrayal as she asks “why did they sell us? How could they have done it?”³⁰

As Nettie leaves London and arrives first in Senegal and then in Liberia, the question of her ancestral betrayal remains strong even as she continues to wrestle with the differences between her African and African American identities. In an initial comparison between the two African countries, Nettie is struck by the “blueblack” beauty of the Senegalese in their bright, colorful clothing, but is disenchanted by their ambivalence to her status as a returned descendant of slaves. She feels more at home with the African American expatriates in Liberia, a country founded by former American slaves. In acknowledging her cultural identification with these black American expatriates, however, Nettie can’t help also noticing some disturbing similarities between American racism and the colonial attitudes of the President and his cabinet in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia. In the first place, American colorism seems to play a role in the country’s power structure as the president not only has white Americans in his cabinet but “a lot of white-looking” African Americans as well. In the second place, the president begins discussing his “problems with the natives,” referring to the indigenous Senegalese people. Nettie notes that this was “the first time I’d heard a black man use that word [native],” and while he immediately clarifies his meaning, Nettie notes that none of these “natives” had been appointed to his cabinet. Nettie’s discomfort with the colorism and colonial attitudes of the founders of Monrovia

reinforces her earlier line of questioning as she wonders whether any of the Monrovia's "parents or grandparents [had] been sold *from* Monrovia ... and what was their feeling, once sold as slaves, now coming back, with close ties to the country that bought them, to rule."³¹ As an American and a grandchild of African slaves, Nettie feels uncomfortable with the mimicry of white settler colonialism which she finds in Monrovia between its class of ruling elites and its indigenous population.

Nettie's concern in the novel is certainly not without historical reason. The settlement of Monrovia, like the larger "back-to-Africa" movement out of which it came, was born from the surprising and contradictory marriage of white supremacy and black nationalism in the United States. Thus, while it served in many ways as a haven from the racist institutions of slavery and Jim Crow which black Americans dealt with at home, this freedom remained tied to American capital, and Monrovia remained financially dependent on various forces in the United States with deeply conflicting motives. Monrovia was founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society, a strange collaboration of abolitionists and white supremacists who realized a common goal in the "repatriation" of freed slaves to the African coast.³² Both ideologies believed there was something to be gained by sending free black people "back to Africa" whether to gain a greater measure of freedom outside the white supremacist structures of American society and government or because they didn't want their slaves seeing successful free blacks living among them. Either way, both sides believed whites and blacks couldn't live successfully together and so they founded the city of Monrovia, named for supportive president James Monroe. From this collaboration of white saviors and white supremacists, the new city and its brand new country of Liberia was never really free, and when the country became mired in debt, American capital in the form of a five million dollar loan from the Firestone Rubber Company in exchange for access

to the country's natural resources ensured that American imperialism would continue to control the new colony.³³ The class of ruling elites described in Walker's novel consisting of both white Americans and light-skinned African Americans were thus supported by American corporate and political interests.

Despite American imperial control, Monrovia still held an important place in the development of a Pan-African imaginary in the United States, and avid supporters such as Marcus Garvey began to influence both black Americans seeking racial justice in the United States and Africans fighting colonization in their own countries. Garvey, who is credited with popularizing the "back-to-Africa" movement among working class African Americans in the early twentieth century, even raised money to buy three steamships he dubbed the Black Star Line which were supposed to transport African Americans to Monrovia. While his ships never made it to the west coast of Africa, his Pan-African publication, *The Negro World*, did. From Monrovia, Garvey's ideas spread along the African coast carried by educated Ghanaian, Nigerian, Senegalese and Sierra Leonean immigrants who eventually found their way to the Belgian Congo's capital city, Kinshasa. As West Africans familiar with Garvey moved into Kinshasa, the educated elites among the Congolese also picked up these Pan-African ideas, forming an underground organization called the "Congomen" which would in turn influence a radically decolonized version of Congolese Christianity known as Kimbanguism.³⁴ Initiated by a Garveyist named Simon Kimbangu, this blatantly political sect preached "two concomitant goals: the salvation of the soul and the liberation of the Congo from Belgian colonialism."³⁵ Local superstitions regarding a "white world ... where African people go when they die" were transformed by Garveyism into a promise of aid from "powerful and resourceful people who

were about to return home and use their skills to help establish the heavenly kingdom on earth, in Kongoland.”³⁶

While the influence of Garveyism in the Belgian Congo helped create a strong Pan-African and decolonial religion during the first half of the twentieth century, the region already had a long history with African American missionaries. Some came fully indoctrinated by the Euro-American civilizing mission, while others preached a more social gospel. In 1891, an African American missionary named William Henry Sheppard became enraged by government and corporate treatment of its so-called “citizens” and started the first NGO human rights watch organization known as the Congo Reform Association (CRA).³⁷ Supported by the investigative journalism of African American historian and journalist George Washington Williams as well as the biting wit of popular white writer Mark Twain, the CRA successfully rallied popular opinion in Britain and the U.S. against Leopold II’s treatment of his colonies, in large part forcing the transition from crown domain to colonial government.³⁸ While this change did little to improve the conditions in the Belgian Congo, it did at the very least reveal the hypocrisy inherent in Leopold II’s claim that his presence in the Congo was a “civilizing” mission to fight against the slave trade and to Christianize the heathen. Although Walker’s novel takes place well after Leopold II’s abdication of the throne, her African American missionary characters, like many other black missionaries to Africa, start their missionary journey with this civilizing mentality. For Nettie especially, however, her civilizing mission is quickly replaced with a complex mixture of respect for the indigenous culture, dismay at their dismissiveness toward her, and a growing understanding of their local eco-spiritual imaginary as expressed through the story of the roofleaf.

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

As in *The Color Purple*, protagonists in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* begin to understand the social construction of race and their relative positions within this social construct by acknowledging ecological interconnection as expressed by indigenous African forms of spirituality and relationship to the greater-than-human world. By observing these eco-spiritual practices rooted in pre-colonial epistemologies, characters in both novels are able to begin questioning the history of racial construction and the ways that systems of white supremacy continue to affect them in the present. However, this is the point where paths diverge for Walker's characters of color and Kingsolver's characters who have been conditioned as white. At this point, characters of color are prepared to choose what Mignolo calls the decolonial option—to delink from the colonial representations of race which have imprisoned them and enunciate new identities outside of the colonial matrix of power. White characters, on the other hand, have only completed half of their journey. At this point, they can either choose to embrace their whiteness and become overtly racist (like Rachel does in Kingsolver's novel), or they can acknowledge their complicity in systems of white supremacy, work through their guilt, and begin to make reparations on behalf of both themselves and the history of white settler colonialism itself (as Leah does).

For U.S. white people, part of this process might involve a return to an ethnic identity before colonization,[†] but it is certainly not decolonization in the same sense as for people of color, since the construct of whiteness arose as a mechanism for continuing colonization. As

[†] For example, in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, a group of white eco-terrorists articulate a directive to return human life to the paleolithic era when their ancestors lived in caves in Europe (689). In this sense, these white Americans identify with a pre-colonial ethnic identity as Europeans. Other white Americans and Europeans return to Druidism in the novel as a pre-colonial and earth-centric spiritual identity. .Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 719.

Cecilia Lucas explains, “white U.S. citizens committed to participating in our own decolonization and in the decolonization of our (social, political, educational, and economic) structures and relationships with others must learn from but cannot simply imitate or appropriate decolonial methodologies developed by indigenous people and people of color.”³⁹ While the process by which white characters and writers can challenge coloniality is not the same as for people of color, white writers like Kingsolver can, and I argue do, learn from the decolonial aesthetic in Walker’s novel. Kingsolver certainly does anti-racist work in her writing, but in framing this work in the context of narrative fiction, she goes beyond a critique of white power structures. She does this by creating characters who not only actively work against racism, but who also, like the characters in Walker’s novel, seek to enunciate a new identity for themselves outside of the logic of white settler colonialism which they are actively working against. This search for a new identity within the decolonial project for people who have been conditioned as white will become a crucial next step as more and more white Americans are faced with incontrovertible evidence of police brutality and systemic injustice toward people of color and choose to begin examining their own complicity and seeking ways to become actively anti-racist.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver begins to articulate this search for a new identity through the post-human construct of an eco-spiritual imaginary. While her representation of this search for identity has its flaws and its shortcomings,[‡] it represents an initial attempt to partake in the decolonial movement—an attempt by white people to delink from the logic of white settler colonialism and enunciate a new identity as part of the pluriversal project of the decolonial option. While white Americans have not been colonized and therefore cannot de-colonize (in fact

[‡] See subsection “Step 4: The Work of Reparation” and the section labeled “Conclusion” for examples of Leah’s mistakes.

they represent coloniality), they *have* been conditioned in the logic of white settler colonialism, in many cases unconsciously and unwillingly. When educated about coloniality and their unconscious participation in it, white people are not only given the opportunity to admit their complicity and to fight against it, but they are also primed to play a part in the construction of a new pluriversal imaginary.

By a pluriversal imaginary I refer to Walter D. Mignolo's almost utopic vision for the endgame of decoloniality, what he calls "pluri-versality as a uni-versal project."⁴⁰ Rather than replacing the totalizing knowledge scheme of coloniality with another totalizing narrative (even one that is decolonial), Mignolo argues for a universal movement in which every system of knowledge respects every other system, thereby allowing a plurality of narrative universes to coexist simultaneously with no hierarchical or totalizing knowledge scheme: "no human being has the right to dominate and be imposed over other human beings. It is that simple and it is so difficult."⁴¹ This is why he stresses the language of the decolonial "option."⁴² If anyone is forced into a movement, perhaps especially one that its participants consider universal, it risks becoming another form of hegemony. Because at this point the entire world is already interconnected within the colonial matrix of power, the decolonial option can occur simultaneously within any combination of the "heterogenous historico-structural nodes, crossed by colonial and imperial difference."⁴³ A particularly powerful combination of historico-structural nodes is the intersection of spirituality and nature which I am calling the eco-spiritual imaginary.

An eco-spiritual imaginary is particularly effective as a decolonial/anti-racist option for both white people and people of color because it acknowledges the global while remaining rooted in the local. As a planetary construct, an eco-spiritual imaginary acknowledges the

interconnection of all living beings within our biosphere while simultaneously grounding itself in the local eco-regions where it independently arises. Thus, when Mignolo describes pluriversalism as “a world in which many worlds could co-exist [which] can only be made by the shared work and common goals of those who inhabit, dwell in one of the many worlds co-existing in one world,” he could just as easily be describing the interworking of the local and the global in an ecological sense as a cultural one.⁴⁴ What’s more, if all cultural imaginaries are to be equalized and their discourses of power abolished within a new pluriversal system, everyone must learn to take their proper place here, including the primary standard-bearers of coloniality themselves—white Europeans and white Americans. Comparing both the unique and the shared imaginaries in which Walker (as a black writer) and Kingsolver (as a white writer) participate in their narrative art reveals one such decolonial option for descendants of the founders of the white settler colonial state. To understand this decolonial option, white people must first center narratives of color as the departure point for their own narratives or they will not be able to break free from the incredible centrifugal force of Euro-centrism.

To escape this Euro-centric force, decoloniality as an aesthetic movement imagines a possible future by looking to a pre-colonial past. Thus, it depends heavily on a particular type of imaginary akin to what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined community.”⁴⁵ While Walker and Kingsolver both enunciate a form of transnational eco-spiritual imaginary that transcends boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species, they arrive at this eco-spiritual imaginary only through a complex negotiation of the various cultural imaginaries and communities through which their characters travel and to which their characters look. For Walker’s Nettie, the eco-spiritual imaginary forms as a part of a larger Pan-African imaginary that stretches between two geographic points in the present—her sister Celie’s experience of

God's immanence in trees and flowers in the southern United States, and the Olinka tribe's ecological symbiosis with and worship of the Roofleaf plant. For Kingsolver's Leah, however, this eco-spiritual imaginary stretches between her identity as a white woman from the southern United States and her status as an American expatriate living in the Congolese subsistence economy during the country's move toward independence. Leah's conditioning into the white imaginary makes her path toward participation in the eco-spiritual imaginary different from Nettie and Celie's in important ways.

Like Celie and Nettie, Kingsolver's Leah must first acknowledge both the historical fact and legacy of colonization in what Nzongola-Ntalaja calls the "colonial trinity" of church, military, and corporation.⁴⁶ While Celie and Nettie are both victims of these systems of coloniality across intersecting lines of race and gender, Leah is not. While Leah is a victim of her father's violent patriarchy, as a white woman, she benefits from her privileged position in the system of coloniality. This white privilege, coupled with her repression of both the reality of historical colonization and her complicity in its ongoing legacy, adds an extra couple of steps on her journey to decolonization. Not only must she acknowledge the history of colonization and its ongoing effects in the present, but she must acknowledge her own guilt in perpetuating those effects through her participation in her father's colonial project, and she must seek to make reparations for that complicity. Thus, while Leah follows the same first three steps for decolonization as Celie and Nettie, 1) healing the nature/culture divide, 2) understanding the social construction of race/gender, and 3) acknowledging the historic utilization of race and its ongoing effects in the colonial matrix of power—as a white woman, she must take additional steps to acknowledge her whiteness and her complicity in coloniality and begin to make

reparations through anti-racist action. Only then can she begin the attempt to imagine a new identity in the future by looking to the pre-colonial past (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Leah's steps toward anti-racism

1. Heal the nature/culture divide through an eco-spiritual understanding of our interconnection with the earth and all living things.
2. Understand the social construction of race/gender (in relation to nature we are all just human)
3. Understand how the historic utilization of race to oppress people of color perpetuates its legacy in continuing systems of white supremacy and coloniality today (e.g. Christianity/patriarchy).
 - a. Acknowledge her own whiteness
 - b. Acknowledge her own complicity in systems of coloniality
4. Seek to make reparations by:
 - a. Listening to/acknowledging the narratives/demands of people of color.
 - b. Acknowledging complicity in the system of white supremacy and admitting mistakes.
 - c. Using white privilege to call out racist systems/actions/ideas.
 - d. Putting the narratives/perspectives of people of color at the center of history/society where they belong.
5. Imagine a new identity in the future by looking to the pre-colonial past.

Step 1: Developing the Eco-Spiritual Imaginary

As I have indicated in Figure 2, both black and white characters in the two novels start their decolonial journeys by replacing their belief in the white male God of American Christianity with an eco-spiritual sense of connection to their local ecologies. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah begins this process as she listens to her parents' conversation with the white Catholic priest, Brother Fowles, who comes to check on them and give them advice for living among the Congolese. When Orleana, the Baptist missionary's wife, complains to Fowles about how frustrated her husband Nathan is with the Congolese people's resistance to Jesus, Fowles

exclaims, “They are very religious people, you know, ... for all that.”⁴⁷ He explains that “everything they do is with one eye to the spirit. When they plant their yams and manioc, they’re praying. When they harvest, they’re praying. Even when they conceive their children, I think they’re praying.”⁴⁸ Fowles perspective, similar to the one that Orleanna’s daughter Leah also later adopts, differs drastically from her father Nathan’s, who frequently calls the people of Kilanga “pagans” and warns them that their “idol worship” will land them in hell. Rather, Fowles values the spiritual traditions of the local people, viewing them as an essential part of their connection to each other, the divine, and the earth. While the Olinka in *The Color Purple* pray to the Roofleaf, the people of Kilanga sing a “hymn to the rainfall on the seed yams.”⁴⁹ Fowles remarks: “It’s quite easy to move from there to the parable of the mustard seed. Many parts of the Bible make good sense here, if only you change a few words. ... And a lot of whole chapters, sure, you just have to throw away.”⁵⁰ While Brother Fowles might play fast and loose with the Christian Scriptures, he interprets them in such a way that *he* can be changed by the Congolese rather than trying so hard to change them, as Nathan does. Fowles quotes the book of Romans in the Christian New Testament to explain his own malleability, asking, “Do you get the notion *we* are the branch that’s grafted on here, sharing in the richness of these African roots?”⁵¹ Fowles’s sense of connection to the people among whom he lives is also deeply ecological, as he explains to Nathan, “I’m a fool for the nature images in the Bible, Brother Price. That fond of it. I find it all so handy here, among these people who have such an intelligence and the great feeling for the living world around them. They’re very humble in their debts to nature.”⁵² Fowles adopts this perspective of debt to nature, making his living through a stipend from National Geographic to study local fauna and telling Orleanna once again, “We’re branches grafted on this good tree, Mrs. Price. the great root of Africa sustains us.”⁵³ While in some ways Fowles’

Catholic faith could be seen as appropriating Congolese spirituality as Catholicism has done in much of South and Central America, the crucial factor here is that Fowles is willing to change his own religious faith in order to understand Congolese spirituality rather than the other way around. For Leah, this is an important starting point in changing her own rigid faith.

Leah begins to understand the Congolese eco-spiritual connection to the land for herself as she watches her father Nathan's colonial attempts to impose U.S. crops and cultivation methods on the Congolese soil. Rather than building mounds for his crops like the Congolese do to cope with heavy flooding in the rainy season, he digs deep scars into the land, only to watch his tomatoes and other American crops wash away in the floods. Determined to colonize the Congo with his American crops, he replants his garden declaring it to be his "first African miracle: an infinite chain of benevolence rising from these small, crackling seed packets, stretching out from our garden into a circle of other gardens, flowing outward across the Congo like ripples from a rock dropped in a pond."⁵⁴ Even when his second garden grows because he finally follows the local advice on how to plant his seeds, he discovers that none of his plants will fruit because the local pollinators are not attracted to their flowers.⁵⁵ While Nathan falls into despair over his garden's failure, Leah recognizes this moment as a paradigm shift in her own Euro-American colonial understanding of nature.

Step 2: Understanding the Social Construction of Race

As Leah begins to appreciate the Congolese relationship to the land, healing her own sense of disconnection from nature, she is able to start healing her white supremacist disconnection from the people of her village as well, realizing the social construction of race with which she has been conditioned and building friendships with the local people with whom

she increasingly identifies. Thus, she begins the second step in decolonizing her mind, understanding the social construction of race and the corollary fact that we are all just humans. This happens first as her friendship with Anatole, the local Congolese schoolteacher (and her future husband), begins to blossom. While Leah's father, Nathan, is busy reminding his daughters about Jim Crow laws back in the United States and insulting Anatole over what he believes are incorrect translations of his sermons, Leah is developing her first crush. The closer Leah gets to Anatole and the other people in the village, the more her indoctrination in what Sociologist Joe Feagin calls the "white racial frame" is challenged. The white racial frame is "thousands of stored 'bits' ... of cultural information—images, stories, interpretations, omissions, silences—that are passed along from one person and group to the next, and from one generation to the next."⁵⁶ As a white American southerner from Georgia, Leah has been fully immersed in this white racial frame, passed on most obviously by her father's injunction against romantic relationships with black people. As Leah challenges this command and falls in love with Anatole, she begins the lengthy process of dismantling this racial frame and reorienting her view of the Congolese people as culturally, socially, and spiritually equal to herself.

Step 3: Understanding Coloniality Today

Dismantling the white racial frame and realizing that race is socially constructed is an important step for white characters to take but stopping there leads to the white fantasy of a post-racial society and statements such as "I don't see color." While it is true that "we are all just human," the systems and institutions of coloniality in the United States, Europe, and across the Global South have created societies structured by the premise of race. For a white person, therefore, acknowledging the difference between their own experience of these systems and the

experiences of people of color becomes a crucial next step. Leah begins to understand these differences along with some of the history of Belgian colonization when she accompanies her father to Leopoldville (now the capital city Kinshasa) and attends the ceremony where King Baudouin of Belgium officially cedes the Belgian Congo to the new democratically elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. Following Baudouin's speech which casts independence as if it were the culmination of King Leopold II's "civilizing mission" in the Congo, Lumumba stands up and tells the real story, translated to Leah by a Belgian missionary as follows: "He's saying we despoiled their land and used the Negroes for slaves, just as long as we could get away with it."⁵⁷ Leah doesn't yet understand her complicity as an American, asking Mrs. Underdown, "we did that?" To which she responds, "Well. The Belgians in general."⁵⁸ However, when Lumumba describes the wealth of the Belgians taken at the expense of the Congolese people, Leah understands, writing, "He was right. ... Leopoldville is a nice little town of dandy houses with porches and flowery yards on nice paved streets for whites, and surrounding it, for miles and miles, nothing but dusty run-down shacks for the Congolese."⁵⁹ Leah is not savvy enough and she left the United States too young to catch her father's hypocrisy when he responds that "Americans would never stand for this kind of unequal treatment," when in reality, Leah and Lumumba could have been describing the racial disparity in any number of towns in the United States.

Eventually realizing the similarity between American Jim Crow and segregation in Leopoldville, Leah next learns of her own country's role in the assassination of Lumumba and the installation of his American-backed replacement, Joseph Mobutu. As the American media began a smear campaign, representing the Congolese as savages and Lumumba as a communist, Eisenhower authorized the CIA to fund Mobutu, one of Lumumba's political rivals in the

election. Mobutu planned to open the Congo's vast diamond and cobalt mines to American corporations, while Lumumba as a strict nationalist planned to use the Congo's resources to develop its own economy. As Anatole explains the transition from Belgian colonization to American coloniality, "foreign hands moved behind the curtain and one white King was replaced with another. Only the face that shows is black. Mobutu's U.S. advisors even tried to hold elections here, but then got furious when the wrong person won ... so they marched the army into parliament and reorganized it once again in Mobutu's favor."⁶⁰ As Leah begins to understand the link between the history of Belgian colonization and her own country's bid for resources in the new Democratic Republic of the Congo, she also begins to understand her own complicity as a white American more completely. Answering her earlier question, "we did that?" Leah writes that "we are all co-conspirators here ... all of us."⁶¹ Now that Leah understands the history of colonization, the ongoing effects of coloniality, and her own complicity in the system of white supremacy, she is ready to begin the work of reparation.

Step 4: The Work of Reparation

While Nettie, upon understanding the ongoing effects of coloniality in the Congo, is ready to delink from her identity in the system of coloniality and enunciate a new identity within the eco-spiritual imaginary, Leah, as a white person, must take another step before she can think about creating a new identity for herself—she must begin the work of reparations by becoming actively anti-racist. While I would argue that recognizing complicity in the system of white supremacy can be a form of reparations, acknowledgment alone is not sufficient to be anti-racist let alone to decolonize white identity.[§] Anti-racism requires positive action toward ending

[§] When people talk about reparations, they usually refer to economic reparations, and this is certainly an essential discussion to have. However, I think there is value in differentiating between economic reparations on a societal

racist/colonial systems of power at both institutional and individual levels. Leah attempts this in a number of ways, although she often falls short or makes mistakes along the way. This is just part of the anti-racist process for people who have been conditioned as white—learning how to admit mistakes and correct them in the future. When talking to her future husband, Anatole, for example, Leah tries to understand how America got involved in the diamond trade in the Belgian Congo, asking, “What are Americans doing down there anyhow? I thought the Congo belonged to Belgium.”⁶² When Anatole is upset and corrects her, saying “the Congo is the Congo’s and ever has been,” Leah acknowledges her mistake: “I’d said a stupid thing, and felt terrible.”⁶³ If Leah is able to begin acknowledging complicity in the system of white supremacy in the Belgian Congo and admitting when she makes mistakes, this is only because she has also started actively listening to the narratives and demands of the people of color around her. This is the second step in becoming anti-racist. White people cannot dismantle racism without understanding how it affects those whom it oppresses, and they cannot understand from their own experience, so they must listen. Leah begins this process in a conversation with Anatole about why her Congolese students are so disrespectful to her in class: “what *is* the problem?” she asks. His answer covers gender, race, and class: “Understand, first, you are girl ... And understand, second, you are white.” Third, he goes on, “they think you represent a greedy nation” (281). When Leah protests that she doesn’t understand how the Congolese can simultaneously protest for the removal of white people from the Belgian Congo and ask for monetary reparations, essentially deflecting the claim of greed onto the Congolese, Anatole patiently explains the way their village distributes excess food to ensure that no one goes hungry: “when someone has much more than he can use,

level and personal reparations in the form of anti-racist action. Characters such as Leah have no political power to influence monetary reparations, but she can still make amends for her own complicity in the system of white supremacy through acknowledgement, listening to people of color, calling out racism when she sees it, and decentering white historical narratives.

it's very reasonable to expect he will not keep it all himself.”⁶⁴ Even ignoring the vast amounts of wealth robbed from the Congolese by both the Belgians and Americans, the communal nature of Congolese culture dictates that everyone deserves equal access to resources. While Leah's white capitalist upbringing doesn't allow her to understand this perspective immediately, her growing love and respect for Anatole motivate her to continue trying.

So far, Leah's first two steps toward reparations have been primarily passive. She has acknowledged complicity in the system of white supremacy and she has learned to listen to the perspectives of the people of color around her. The next two steps are active and put Leah and her sister Rachel into direct contrast and conflict with one another. ** Decades have passed since their missionary childhood and their escape from their abusive father, Nathan. During this time, Rachel has acquired an old plantation in the French Congo and turned it into a luxury hotel for rich white businessmen while Leah and Anatole have repurposed an old Portuguese plantation as a farming co-op for Congolese refugees from Mobutu's reign of terror. The two women's husbands have also worked at cross purposes. Rachel's first husband, Eeben Axelroot, worked with the CIA on Lumumba's capture and eventual assassination, while Leah's husband, Anatole, worked to free Lumumba and oppose Mobutu. Both women have learned to acknowledge their whiteness, but while Leah seeks to understand and make amends for her complicity, Rachel keeps her hotel strictly segregated, explaining that Africans are poor because “they don't have the same ethics as us.”⁶⁵ If Rachel embraces her whiteness by becoming openly white supremacist, Leah takes the third step toward reparations, using her own white privilege to call

** In the Christian Old Testament, Leah and Rachel also had a conflict-filled relationship with one another when their father, Laban, tricked his nephew Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. Eventually, Jacob married Rachel as a second wife, making these names especially pertinent for these characters in light of the villager's references to “Tata Price's five wives.” Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 490.

out white supremacy where she sees it, even at a cost to her personal relationships. When Rachel tells Leah that she “*might*” allow Anatole to stay at her hotel, Leah responds sarcastically, “Oh, no, don’t bother. You have your standards of white supremacy to uphold, don’t you?”⁶⁶ Leah also doesn’t shy away from explaining American coloniality in Zaire (Mobutu’s new name for the country) and the French Congo even though Rachel knows this is “the only reason I have any customers at all on my side of the river.”⁶⁷ Eventually, Leah loses this relationship with her sister, willingly giving up her own family to disrupt white solidarity.

Leah and Anatole’s farming co-op in Angola becomes Leah’s final step toward reparations and her first step toward articulating a new identity for herself as she looks to the Congo’s pre-colonial past for a possible future. She is only able to do this by decentering white historical narratives and putting the narratives/perspectives of people of color at the center of history/society where they belong. As Leah and Anatole lie together in bed after their children have grown and moved away, Leah says that Anatole “tells me the history of the world.”⁶⁸ For Anatole, the history of the world begins in the pre-colonial Kingdom of Kongo where the first Portuguese to make it that far would have seen “Men and women black as night, strolling in bright sunlight along the riverbanks” wearing “hats, soft boots, and more layers of exotic skirts and tunics than would seem bearable in the climate.”⁶⁹ Countering the European mythology of naked African savagery, Anatole explains the Portuguese’ surprise at finding a sophisticated monarchy not unlike their own with lavish clothing, a royal court, a rich literary tradition, and an efficient system for taxation. Beginning the “history of the world” from this perspective reveals European colonization for what it was—a hostile invasion in search of resources—not the great civilizing mission Europeans claimed it to be. The European justification for this invasion was the Kingdom of Kongo’s lack of a nature/culture divide. Anatole writes that “the Portuguese

peered through the trees and saw that the well-dressed, articulate Kongo did not buy or sell or transport their crops, but merely lived in place and ate what they had, like beasts of the forest. In spite of poetry and beautiful clothes, such people were surely not fully human—were *primitive*; that’s a word the Portuguese must have used, to salve their conscience for what was to come.”⁷⁰ Once this judgment had been made by one European nation it paved the way for others, the Portuguese slave trade gave way to Belgian colonization for rubber and ivory which bled into American coloniality for diamonds and cobalt.

Leah and Anatole return to this first moment when the history of the world went wrong: “we start with five hundred years ago, when the Portuguese came poking the nose of their little wooden ship into the mouth of the Congo River.”⁷¹ They try to set that initial trespass right by reclaiming a Portuguese palm-oil plantation as a farming co-op for political refugees using pre-colonial methods of agriculture and an understanding of the local ecology to live a self-sufficient and communal life as indigenous people of the Kingdom of Kongo did 500 years ago.^{††} This vision for a future based on ecological lessons from the pre-colonial past becomes the final piece in the eco-spiritual imaginary Leah began to develop as a child in the village of Kilanga. On this reclaimed plantation, she works toward an imaginary in which “learning to believe in the nutrient cycle requires something close to a religious conversion,” and “to be here without doing everything wrong requires a new agriculture, a new sort of planning, a new religion.”⁷² This new religion is a trust in the “rowdy society of flora and fauna that have managed to balance together

^{††} While it might be objected that Leah is in danger of cultural appropriation or even a white savior complex, I argue that several factors mitigate these risks. First, Leah and Anatole found this co-op together, so it is based on a cross-racial collaboration from the start. Second, while they do look to pre-colonial indigenous agricultural practices, Leah is not claiming these as part of her own identity, but merely trying to work in harmony with the existing eco-system where she finds herself, trying to make “something right in at least one tiny corner of the vast house of wrongs.” Thus, I view her work as another form of reparations for the harm her family and country have done to the Congolese rather than an attempt to appropriate their culture or “save” them. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 473.

on a trembling geologic plate for ten million years: when you clear off part of the plate, the whole slides into ruin. Stop clearing, and the balance slowly returns.”⁷³ As Leah attends to this balance, the people of her co-op are able to meet their basic needs and return this former European commodity plantation to its place in the local ecology, serving as a final act of reparations not only to the people of the Congo but to the land itself.

Conclusion: Post-humanism vs. the White Post-racial Fantasy

In the process of restoring the land Leah completes her personal transition, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, from the white man god to an eco-spiritual imaginary. Yet, as Leah works on the creation of her farming co-op for refugees of Mobutu’s violence, forging a new eco-spiritual imaginary out of what was past, she must still wrestle with the fact that she is white. Her ancestors were not from the Kingdom of Kongo whose local ecology she now embraces, but rather they were the colonizers of Africa and the American buyers of slaves. Where does this leave her identity? Leah’s eco-spiritual connection to pre-colonial agriculture in the Belgian Congo is not the same as Nettie’s in *The Color Purple* since Nettie is relinking to her own heritage while Leah is still a European American in Africa. Like Nettie she has both understood and repudiated coloniality and its harm of indigenous people and nature. Like Brother Fowles, she has acknowledged her own complicity and been changed by local eco-spiritual practices. And yet, in her search for a new identity outside the coloniality of whiteness, she still has to work through her white guilt, wondering repeatedly if the Congolese hate her for being white⁷⁴ and denigrating the United States as her “hateful homeland.”⁷⁵ As a white character enunciated by a white author, Leah is still flawed in her struggle with her own identity. This is an important point because it emphasizes that the work of racial reconciliation is not complete. Even after

taking all four of the steps outlined so far, white people must continue the work of anti-racism both on the societal level and the personal level. Leah's struggles model the pitfalls that many white people encounter along this path.

Leah's mistakes fall into two categories endemic to white people attempting to engage with issues of race: looking to people of color to absolve white guilt and pining for a post-racial society. Leah suffers from a severe case of white guilt and white self-loathing. While she uses these feelings productively to drive herself into anti-racist action, she also constantly looks to her Congolese husband and mixed children to absolve her of this guilt. She writes of Anatole, "I need him to insist that I'm useful and good, that he wasn't out of his mind to marry me, that my white skin is not the standard of offense. That I wasn't a part of every mistake that's led us to right now."⁷⁶ While a few lines down she acknowledges that he can't take her guilt away for her, she still constantly fishes for his absolution, wanting him to tell her "not *you* Beene."⁷⁷ Working through her guilt, Leah wishes she could "scrub the hundred years' war off this white skin till there's nothing left and I can walk out among my neighbors wearing raw sinew and bone, like they do."⁷⁸ Like many white people, Leah reveals her wish for a post-racial society in which the construct of race will cease to exist. Towards the end of the novel she writes, "I wake up in love, and work my skin to darkness under the equatorial sun. I look at my four boys, who are the colors of silt, loam, dust, and clay, an infinite palette for children of their own, and I understand that time erases whiteness altogether."⁷⁹ While Leah's final chapter might seem to be suggesting a post-racial society in which "time erases whiteness altogether" as the solution to the problem of white identity, her sister Adah's final chapter reveals Kingsolver's solution to be not so much post-racial as post-human.⁸⁰

While a post-racial society is the tempting stuff of white utopian fiction, Leah is incapable of scrubbing off her whiteness whether she wants to or not, and to attempt to do so would negate all of the work she has done to become anti-racist and anti-colonial. A posthuman society, on the other hand, as Adah reveals in her final chapter, would offer white people a new identity within the eco-spiritual imaginary which would simultaneously allow them to acknowledge and look beyond their subjective racial construction. While posthumanism has come to be defined in a number of differing and complex ways, its central tenet to decenter humanity as the defining ontology on planet earth remains crucial. †† Adah writes: “if you could for a moment rise up out of your own beloved skin and appraise ant, human, and virus as equally resourceful beings, you might admire the accord they have all struck in Africa.⁸¹ ... Believing in all things equally. Believing fundamentally in the right of a plant or a virus to rule the earth.”⁸² Adah’s conclusion with a belief in “the right of a plant ... to rule the earth” strikes a familiar chord in relation to Walker’s association of the roofleaf plant with Christ when the Olinka interpreter tells Nettie “we know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?”⁸³ While the Christian tradition casts God in man’s image through the incarnation of Jesus—God comes to earth in the form of a human—the Olinka see God incarnated on earth as a plant. Although they do still worship this plant in relation to the human need for shelter, it is consistent with Melanie Harris’s assertion that “spirit, nature, and humanity are connected in an interdependent web of life in African cosmology.”⁸⁴ As she states later in *Ecowomanism*, “this African cosmological vision provides a base from which an ethical mandate for earth justice can be gleaned.”⁸⁵ While ecowomanism is a movement of and for women of color, Kingsolver is

†† Priscilla Ybarra sees posthumanism as inherently decolonial in its rejection of modernisms humanist dichotomy between the mind/body and human/nature. Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016), 15.

able to “learn from” but does not “simply imitate or appropriate decolonial methodologies developed by indigenous people and people of color.”⁸⁶ Without negating the important differences between Walker and Kingsolver’s work or the tension inherent in the question of white decolonization, the eco-spiritual imaginary they share thus allows both writers to deconstruct the white, male God of American Christianity in exchange for this ethical mandate for earth justice as they see it in the indigenous eco-practices of what was once the Kingdom of Kongo.

Notes

- ¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1st ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.
- ² Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Ecology and Justice, an Orbis Series on Integral Ecology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 14–15.
- ³ Darryl Dickson-Carr, *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction*, Columbia Guides to Literature since 1945 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 231.
- ⁴ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 107.
- ⁵ Dickson-Carr, *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction*, 231.
- ⁶ Dickson-Carr, 231.
- ⁷ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 122.
- ⁸ Walker, 30.
- ⁹ Walker, 26.
- ¹⁰ Walker, 178.
- ¹¹ Walker, 26.
- ¹² Walker, 126.
- ¹³ Walker, 177.
- ¹⁴ Walker, 178.
- ¹⁵ Walker, 178.
- ¹⁶ Walker, 123.
- ¹⁷ Walker, 132–33.
- ¹⁸ Walker, 141.
- ¹⁹ Walker, 141.
- ²⁰ Walker, 142.
- ²¹ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (New York: Zed Book Ltd, 2002), 22.
- ²² Walker, *The Color Purple*, 227.
- ²³ Walker, 127.

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- ²⁴ Tamba E. M'bayo, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Pan-Africanism in Liberia, 1919–1924," *The Historian* 66, no. 1 (2004): 19.
- ²⁵ M'bayo, 24.
- ²⁶ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 128.
- ²⁷ Walker, 129.
- ²⁸ Walker, 129.
- ²⁹ Walker, 129.
- ³⁰ Walker, 129.
- ³¹ Walker, 129–30.
- ³² M'bayo, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Pan-Africanism in Liberia, 1919–1924," 20.
- ³³ M'bayo, 27.
- ³⁴ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, 49.
- ³⁵ Nzongola-Ntalaja, 50.
- ³⁶ Nzongola-Ntalaja, 49.
- ³⁷ Nzongola-Ntalaja, 24.
- ³⁸ Nzongola-Ntalaja, 24.
- ³⁹ Cecilia Cissell Lucas, "Decolonizing the White Colonizer?" (UC Berkeley, 2013), 1, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06g372z8>.
- ⁴⁰ Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (March 2007): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.
- ⁴¹ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, Duke University Press Books, 2011), 21.
- ⁴² Mignolo, 16.
- ⁴³ Mignolo, 16.
- ⁴⁴ Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality," 499.
- ⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 7.
- ⁴⁶ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (New York: Zed Book Ltd, 2002), 27.
- ⁴⁷ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 246.

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- 48 Kingsolver, 247.
- 49 Kingsolver, 247.
- 50 Kingsolver, 247.
- 51 Kingsolver, 252.
- 52 Kingsolver, 252.
- 53 Kingsolver, 258.
- 54 Kingsolver, 36.
- 55 Kingsolver, 80.
- 56 Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 35.
- 57 Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, 183.
- 58 Kingsolver, 183.
- 59 Kingsolver, 183.
- 60 Kingsolver, 433.
- 61 Kingsolver, 474.
- 62 Kingsolver, 230.
- 63 Kingsolver, 230.
- 64 Kingsolver, 281.
- 65 Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, 424.
- 66 Kingsolver, 477.
- 67 Kingsolver, 489.
- 68 Kingsolver, 520.
- 69 Kingsolver, 520.
- 70 Kingsolver, 522.
- 71 Kingsolver, 519.
- 72 Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, 524–25.
- 73 Kingsolver, 525.

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- 74 Kingsolver, 279.
- 75 Kingsolver, 430.
- 76 Kingsolver, 437.
- 77 Kingsolver, 437.
- 78 Kingsolver, 474.
- 79 Kingsolver, 526.
- 80 Kingsolver, 526.
- 81 Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Perrenial, 2005), 529.
- 82 Kingsolver, 531.
- 83 Kingsolver, 142.
- 84 Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Ecology and Justice, an Orbis Series on Integral Ecology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 15.
- 85 Harris, 15.
- 86 Cecilia Cissell Lucas, "Decolonizing the White Colonizer?" (UC Berkeley, 2013), 1, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06g372z8>.

CONCLUSION:

A Planetary Imaginary

The writers examined throughout these chapters navigate a liminal narrative space between a pre-colonial past and a post-colonial future. I call this space a narrative space in that past and future can only be understood through narrative construction/re-construction. What's more, I call this space liminal because human language can only explain the present in terms of its relation to past and future—as Derrida's concept of *differance* has shown. In this sense, the problem addressed by decoloniality—an ontological undoing of colonial Master narratives—exists primarily as a narrative problem. While the pre-colonial world is irretrievably gone, it persists in the stories told by indigenous people about their pasts. By looking to these stories from the past, the writers I examine here imagine a possible future beyond the enduring colonial mythologies of the present. While each story is entirely unique to every people and eco-region from which it has arisen, they all share a spiritual reverence for the earth as the origin, source of sustenance, and point of departure for human constructions of place and meaning in the universe. The eco-spiritual imaginary as I have explained it in these chapters, therefore, is a planetary identity that is nevertheless rooted in local ethnicities and bio-regions. Holding this tension between the local and the global, the eco-spiritual imaginary co-opts the postmodern narrative techniques of the Euro-American novel to translate indigenous knowledges and methodologies to a broader U.S. audience.

In identifying a U.S. audience for these novels, however, as U.S. publishers have clearly done, one of the broader problems or implications of these chapters becomes apparent. While I emphasize U.S. ethnic authors writing from within the borders of the United States, their narratives simultaneously defy what José David Saldívar has called “field-imaginaries” in the humanities organized around Eurocentric national boundaries (e.g. “American Literature” or “British Literature”).¹ Although these novels fit within the literary field of multi-ethnic American literature, they challenge this classification by charting the transnational connections made between authors, readers, and characters across boundaries of time, space, nation, race, and species—between Georgia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, L.A. and Vietnam., New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, New Mexico and the Philippines, California and Mexico, British Columbia and Japan. In crossing these national boundaries, the novels I examine participate both in what Saldívar calls “trans-americanity” and what Lionnet and Shih call “minor transnationalism.

In his 2012 monograph *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico*, Saldívar builds on Quijano and Wallerstein’s 1992 “Americanity as a Concept” in which they theorize a world-system composed of North and South America as a particular geo-social space. This alternative geo-social perspective can be mapped over national constructions to reveal the way that the “invention of the Américas over the past five centuries developed what they call ‘the pattern,’ ‘the locus,’ and the ‘the prime testing ground’ of what today we mean by modernity and the ‘capitalist world-system.’”² Central to this “invention” of the Américas through colonization was the “Iberian and British classification and re-classification of the planet’s population” as a form of power hierarchy which translated into labor control. This categorization not only controlled labor (slavery for

Black Africans, coerced cash-crop growing by Native Americans, indentured labor for the European working class)³ but also created a redistributive system of wealth that funneled capital away from the colonies and into the European metropolises:

Within the context of some five hundred years of the genocide of native peoples in the Américas, the hegemonic (infra-human) classification of humans into ethno-racial formations brought over from the metropole to the colonies of the Américas as a kind of set of rules for labor control, and an emerging capitalist world-system in which an enormous metallic colonial wealth in the Américas (gold and silver) was transferred to central European bankers and to British, French, Dutch, and Flemish industrialists and merchants.⁴

This creation of a capitalist world-system via the colonization of the Americas in turn engendered the creation of a hegemonic narrative of Eurocentric history which “erased and silenced a large part of the planet—what became known as the geo-social construct of the Américas—because it was an unthinkable space to those writing universal history.”⁵

Into this gap in history, Saldívar plunges, arguing not only that Quijano stops “short of locating a coherent explanation of the Southwestern U.S.-Mexican borderlands” but also that narratives of the subaltern along this borderland are essential to the process of decolonization, or in Quijano’s terms—“epistemological reconstitution.”⁶ If history, and through history identity (in terms of race/ethnicity), have been written as a hegemonic Eurocentric narrative (American exceptionalism and manifest destiny in the case of the U.S. borderlands), then U.S. ethnic writers must not only challenge the hegemonic narratives of the nation from which they write, but they also have to “formulate the very possibility of a grammar of the subaltern by which the ‘unspeakable’ individual and collective trauma of her vision might be meaningfully communicated.”⁷ The concept of trans-Americanity reveals one way to construct this grammar of the subaltern by resisting the North American superiority complex revealed in the habit of many White U.S. citizens of calling themselves “Americans” while excluding the inhabitants of the

rest of the American continents from this label. Many of the novelists I have analyzed in this dissertation directly challenge this definition of what it means to be part of “American literature” as they construct an imaginary rooted in a history of trans-American ethnicities and bioregions.

As I’ve shown in Chapter One and Chapter Two, for example, the novels addressed in this dissertation that are set in the U.S. Southwest participate in this trans-American challenge to national boundaries. Silko’s *Ceremony*, set in post-World War II New Mexico, ignores state and national boundaries, constructing instead a meta-narrative of good vs. evil, ceremony vs. witchery, that casts even the white settler colonial state as a pawn in a game of much larger cosmic forces. Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* and Castillo’s *So Far from God* are also set in New Mexico, but their characters understand their conflicting ethnic and cultural heritages not within the context of U.S. state or national boundaries but by the waves of successive colonization that have swept across the American continents from the early Spanish conquistadors to Mexican colonists and Anglo settlers. Alfredo Véa is another prime example of a U.S. ethnic writer whose work redefines “American Literature” as trans-Americanity. While his novel *Gods Go Begging* (1999), which I analyze in Chapter 3, is transnational in character, his earlier novel, *La Maravilla* (1993), makes some distinctly trans-American moves. Similar to *Bless Me, Ultima*—a bildungsroman about a young protagonist coming to terms with his conflicting ethnic and cultural heritages—*La Maravilla* focuses on the character Beto’s mixed Spanish and Yaqui heritage. The Yaqui nation originated in what is now the southern Mexican state of Sonora, but Véa’s novel focuses attention on their trans-American migration under persecution first by the Spanish, then by the Mexican State, and finally by the United States where the novel takes place in the U.S. state of Arizona. As Beto begins to reckon with the tension between his grandfather’s Yaqui heritage and his grandmother’s Iberian ancestry, played out between them through their

squabbles as an old married couple, he begins to understand the land from his grandfather's perspective outside of the various national constructions that have tried to claim it. Yaqui spirituality, Beto learns from his grandfather, draws on a sense of eternity deeply rooted to place across past, present, and future. Describing his work on a highway construction crew, Beto's grandfather explains his connection to the land despite the tar and gravel he is forced to cover it with or the different nations who have claimed/named it across the centuries.

When I leave to go to work in the morning and I cross that shitty overpass on Black Canyon, it's the rio Yaqui. In another world, like two different spaces folded one on top of the other—he placed a dark right hand flat on the left—"at the very same tick of the clock my skin is almost black with the sun and my feet are touching the dirt like a moving root. I fish the river and till the dirt and I need to buy nothing. I am standing at both places, in this hard world. (38)

In stepping outside of time, Beto and his grandfather also step outside of the capitalist world-system identified by Saldívar as the driving force behind constructions of nations and states in the Americas. Instead, they tap into an eco-spiritual imaginary that sees the land as it is without the artificial borders drawn on maps. In challenging classifications of nations and states throughout the U.S. Mexico borderlands, Vea thus also challenges his own classification as a U.S. writer—expanding the definition of “American Literature” to include both the American continents with their shared history of European colonization and indigenous resistance.

Lionett and Shih's concept of minor transnationalism further challenges what it means to be included in the field of “American literature” as it reveals ties that extend beyond the American continents and across the globe. In their introduction to *Minority Transnationalism*, Lionnet and Shih argue that poststructuralists such as Derrida and Foucault acknowledge the linguistic and biopolitical margins but only in their relation to the center, as a vertical struggle against the dominant: “Critiquing the center, when it stands as an end in itself, seems only to

enhance it; the center remains the focus and the main object of study. The deconstructive dyad center/margin thus appears to privilege marginality only to end up containing it.”⁸ This analysis of the center and the margins, while coded in lateral terms, is actually a vertical relationship between the major/dominant and the minor, thus hiding the lateral discourse of the so-called margins between one another— what Lionnet and Shih call minor transnationalism:

Thus to be “French” is to relate vertically to an ideal image of the French nation, not to find common ground with other immigrants who have embarked on this process of “becoming-French.” There is a clear lack of proliferation of relational discourses among different minority groups, a legacy from the colonial ideology of divide and conquer that has historically pitted different ethnic groups against each other. The minor appears always mediated by the major in both its social and its psychic means of identification.⁹

Against this implicit mediation of underrepresented literary voices by the Eurocentric forces of both global capital and consequently the publishing industry, Lionnet and Shih argue for a “recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries.”¹⁰ These networks, they argue, already exist whether the forces of global capital represented in the publishing industry recognize them or not. Every one of the novelists I address in this dissertation reveal hints and traces of these minor networks across racial, national, and ethnic boundaries. For example, in Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, the persecution and relocation of nations indigenous to the Pacific Northwest coast is compared to the persecution and relocation of indigenous peoples by Japanese imperialism. Similarly, in Alfredo Vea’s *Gods Go Begging*, a Chicana soldier connects with a Vietnamese prisoner of war who reveals that he is also an ethnic minority in his own country. The men’s shared experience of ethnic marginalization leads them both to question the war they are fighting for countries which have mistreated them—albeit on opposite sides of the conflict.

In writing narratives that connect characters such as these two soldiers across boundaries of nation, race, time, space, and species, the authors in this dissertation therefore challenge the very concept of the nation as a colonial construct. As Nasia Anam has written, “this is the distinguishing marker of the Global Anglophone* text: a pervasive sense that the nation-state has failed, and that doom is nigh on the world's horizon.”¹¹ Any future work on an eco-spiritual imaginary would need to take into account this demise of the nation as a viable imaginary for addressing the impending climate crisis. If the eco-spiritual imaginary is transnational in its very nature—emphasizing a planetary identity over a national identity—then the question becomes, where else might this same intersection of local ecological values, indigenous spiritual reverence for the earth, and transnational politics appear? If U.S. authors writing from within the boundaries of the United States use narrative to reveal their inextricable ties to other nations, ethnicities, and species, how are authors from outside the United States challenging the boundaries of their nations, and do they look to a similar eco-spirituality to replace these national boundaries? Starting with novels by more established Anglophone writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Chinua Achebe, and moving toward newer authors like Emmi Itäranta, James Bradley, Rajat Chaudhuri, Pitchaya Sudbanthad, Helon Habila, and Omar El Akkad, much work remains to be done on the intersection of the ecological, the spiritual, and the decolonial on a global scale.

* While the term “Global Anglophone” attempts to break outside of the canonical categories of national literatures like “American” or “British,” it comes with its own complexities and problems. As Nasia Anam has explained, the term appears to have arisen out of a desire to avoid the implications of labeling anything not written in Europe or the U.S. as “World Literature.” While Global Anglophone does successfully escape the national and Eurocentric boundaries of an older Western canon, the colonial origins of a global literature in English still must be reckoned with. Literature written in English across the globe remains tied to a legacy of British colonialism and U.S. imperialism within the publishing industry. Not only is English the language that many former colonized peoples were educated in, but it is the language with capital for publishing and advertising literary works as well. Thus, while I use this term to refer to literature written in English regardless of national origin, I understand its limits as well.

Notes

¹ José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico*, New Americanists; Variation: New Americanists. (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2012), xxvii.

² Saldívar, x.

³ Saldívar, xii.

⁴ Saldívar, xiii.

⁵ Saldívar, xiii.

⁶ Saldívar, xviii.

⁷ Saldívar, xix.

⁸ Lionnet François and Shu-Mei Shih, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2005), 3–7.

⁹ François and Shih, 2.

¹⁰ François and Shih, 7.

¹¹ Nasia Anam, “Introduction: Forms of the Global Anglophone,” *Post45* (blog), February 22, 2019, <https://post45.org/2019/02/introduction-forms-of-the-global-anglophone/>.

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