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REGENERATIVE ART

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My first and foremost acknowledgement must be to my ancestors, some of whom surely perpetuated the systems of power in their respective time, but most of whom fought against them, surviving the silencing and oppression by an array of world superpowers, from the atrocities of settler-colonialism, to imperialist power-grabs and Bolshevick communism. Their survival gave me the position of privilege from which I hope to aid the building of a more equitable world.

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Regenerative art, Decolonization, Cosmology, Environmental justice, Posthumanism, Anthropocene, Indigeneity, Ally to Accomplice

Klíčová slova

Regenerativní umění, dekolonizace, kosmologie, environmentální spravedlnost, posthumanismus, antropocén, domorodost, spojenec, komplic

This thesis utilizes a systems-thinking, relational process approach in its writing style, bridging multiple discourses and disciplines to depart from the problematics of the Anthropocene discourse. This is done through the examination of lessons learned from the well-established Indigenous-led environmental and social justice movements and intersectional environmentalism, the histories of which are both entangled in the traumatic divisions brought on by settler-colonialism, that have led to the capitalist imperative to own and control nature. Applying these lessons to environmental art and theory, this thesis calls for the decolonization of the Anthropocene discourse through the following steps: reflection and examination of colonial tendencies across the Ontological Turn of Euro-Western discourse, applications of the *Ally to Accomplice* concept, the *Holding of Space*, Learning from Grassroots Movements, and *Ethical Relationality*. It holds hope that this methodology can aid the many directions of Posthumanist thinking to act as a catalyst and change the direction of the Anthropocene epoch to become a force of regeneration, of both discourse and the environment.

Tato teoreticko-konceptuální práce využívá systémového myšlení a vztahového procesního přístupu ve svém stylu psaní, který propojuje více diskurzů a disciplín, za účelem odklonění se od problematiky diskurzu antropocénu. Děje se tak prostřednictvím zkoumání učení z etablovaných hnutí za environmentální a sociální spravedlnost, vedených původními obyvateli, a intersekcionalního environmentalismu, jejichž historie jsou zapleteny do traumatických rozdělů z dob osadnického kolonialismu a které vedly ke kapitalistickému imperativu vlastnit a ovládat přírodu. Aplikací těchto poznatků na obor environmentálního umění a teorii, tato práce vyzývá k dekolonizaci diskurzu antropocénu prostřednictvím následujících kroků: reflexe a zkoumání koloniálních tendencí napříč ontologickým obratem euro-západního diskurzu, aplikace konceptu *Od spojence ke komplicovi (Ally to Accomplice)*, *Držení prostoru (Holding space)*, učení se od občanských hnutí a *etické vztahovosti (Ethical relationality)*. Tyto metodologické kroky k dekolonizaci diskurzu antropocénu jsou realizovány v naději, že mohou pomoci mnoha směrům posthumanistického myšlení působit jako katalyzátor a změnit směřování epochy antropocénu tak, aby se stala silou regenerace, a to jak diskurzu, tak životního prostředí.

Regenerative Art

Bridging Discourses and Disciplines in the Environmental Justice Movement

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Introduction

“The role of the artist in the social structure follows the need of the changing times:

In time of social stasis: to activate

In time of germination: to invent fertile new forms

In time of revolution: to extend the possibilities of peace and liberty

In time of violence: to make peace

In time of despair: to give hope

In time of silence: to sing out ”

– Judith Malina¹

In 1985 American cartoonist Alison Bechdel coined a new way of determining female representation and the measure of sexism in fiction, which first appeared in her comic strip “Dykes to Watch Out For.” Bechdel, who has since credited the idea to Liz Wallace and Virginia Woolf, devised what is now known as “The Bechdel Test”; which, to this day, filters out a significant percentage of contemporary Hollywood movies and has influenced the film industry as a whole. She urged filmmakers, directors, and the audience to ask themselves a series of three straightforward questions: does the film have more than two female characters?; do these characters carry a dialogue throughout the movie?; and, does this dialogue contain a topic that is not related to the discussion of the male counterpart/character?

In this way, Bechdel created a methodological approach that, when utilized by the creators of any film or screenplay, significantly changes the outcome, shape and message of the film to include the female perspective. It fights against the traditional representation of women as side characters who only worry about their male counterparts, who are almost always the lead characters. Utilizing this methodology exposes inequality that would otherwise stay hidden. It holds space for the perspective of women to be seen and represented and provides young women and girls with a glimpse of gender equality in a world dominated by the patriarchy.

Inspired by Bechdel’s methodology, while utilizing a systems thinking approach, this thesis looks for a way forward in the field of environmental art and theory, hoping

¹ MALINA, Judith. The Work of an Anarchist Theater. In: LITTLE, Craig (ed.). *Reimagining America*. The Arts of Social Change. New Society Publishers, 1990. ISBN: 0865711690

to offer a new regenerative² application in this transdisciplinary and constantly evolving area of artistic practice and vision.

As we enter a new epoch, coined with the burdened term of the Anthropocene,³ the disastrous effects of the climate crisis are being felt worldwide, most profoundly in the Global South, and more superficially in the Global North.⁴ In Europe and the USA, awareness of this unraveling crisis has only recently permeated into most aspects of society and its cultures; the arts and humanities, which will be the focus of this thesis, have followed the same trend. "Environmental art," with its roots in the eco-art movement of the 1970s is on the rise again, galleries are filled with thematic exhibitions resonating with the seemingly changing political climate around the urgent crisis we are in. But the Anthropocene reflects its surrounding problems not with a new direction leading us out of this species-ending predicament, but rather as another one of its symptoms. The narrative it utilizes, of every one human being at fault⁵, adds to the confusion and scope of the crisis, taking space from the solutions at hand. There is no distinction in this narrative that would separate the "people, nations, and collectives who drive the fossil-fuel economy and those who do not."⁶

The most affected people and areas (MAPA)⁷, Indigenous and First Nations populations around the world are left out of the discussion, even though, as Métis scholar Zoe Todd states: "Indigenous peoples played and play an integral role in bringing the topic of climate change to the international stage."⁸ Wealthy nations of the Global North refuse to take sufficient action to aid the most affected of humans

² Regeneration is the process of renewal or restoration that goes beyond simply sustaining a system and is replacing the discourse of "sustainability".

³ I will use the term Anthropocene, although I agree with Donna Haraway, that "[i]f we are to name an epoch after its culprit, it might as well be called the 'Capitalocene'". However, as of the writing of this thesis the term Anthropocene has sunk deep into the discourse and energy will be expended towards the transformation of the direction this discourse is headed, rather than the changing of its name.

⁴ BiPoC, LGBTQIA+, womxn and poor, marginalized and underrepresented communities are most affected by the climate crisis as shown by the recent MAPA (Most Affected People and Places) model, which is replacing the discourse of Global North vs. Global South.

⁵ DEMOS, T. J.. *Against the Anthropocene*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-95679-210-6

⁶ TODD, Zoe. Indigenizing the Anthropocene. In: *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Open Humanities Press, 2015, p. 241-254. ISBN: 978-1-78542-017-7

⁷ FORTGANG, Amelia. *Countries and Territories Most Affected by Climate Change Also More Likely to Believe it to Be Personally Harmful* [online]. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2021 [Accessed on 4.4.2022]. Available from

<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/news-events/countries-and-territories-most-affected-by-climate-change-also-more-likely-to-believe-it-to-be-personally-harmful/>

see also RODRIGUES, Trella. *Act for Goa* [online]. Published 24.11.2020 [Accessed on 4.4.2022]. Available from <https://actforgo.org/resource/mapa-most-affected-people-areas/>

⁸ TODD, Zoe. Indigenizing the Anthropocene. In: *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Open Humanities Press, 2015, 241-254. ISBN: 978-1-78542-017-7

and habitats, and continue on the path of empty pledges and symbolic gestures, with no impactful policy change taking place.⁹ At the same time, the unraveling Anthropocene discourse stems from colonialist tendencies that enabled the rise of capitalism and the subsequent wide-scale commodification of nature (and female bodies)¹⁰ that has caused nearly 70% of species on Earth to go extinct since 1970¹¹ and threatens our own as we speak.

⁹ See the (lack of) results of all previous COP summits, most recently the COP26 in Glasgow.

¹⁰ This thesis assumes the underlying understanding that colonial-capitalist systems of commodification of nature have gone hand-in-hand with the commodification of female bodies. As the intersectional environmental justice movement has made clear, patriarchal systems of oppression are of the same nature as the wide scale exploitation of nature and her resources.

¹¹ ALMOND, R.E.A., GROOTEN M. and PETERSEN, T. (Eds). *WWF Living Planet Report 2020 - Bending the curve of biodiversity loss* [online]. WWF, Gland, Switzerland, 2020 [Accessed on 4.4.2022]. Available from https://files.worldwildlife.org/wwfmsprod/files/Publication/file/279c656a32_ENGLISH_FULLL.pdf

Art in the Anthropocene

Visual art and culture, insofar as the Anthropocene discourse goes, has taken on the role of representing the visuality of this new epoch. As art historian and culture critic T. J. Demos has proven, this representation is happening in two ways. The first feeds into the Anthropocene discourse, using the climate crisis as content, showing humans as masters of nature, creating a beautiful image of centuries-long slow violence¹²; going hand-in-hand with the political (in)actions taking place and continuing to erase the much longer history of traditional intellectual systems of thought and Indigenous worldviews. The second way this representation is taking place,¹³ for which this thesis argues, counters the Anthropocene's narrative, interlinking and bringing to light connections not made in popular discourse (such as the systems of power that have simultaneously commodified nature and displaced and oppressed the peoples connected to it, so that what Latour has coined 'The Great Divide'¹⁴ has become one of the tenants of Western thought).

Much of the artwork that merely thematizes the climate crisis focuses on aesthetics and pleasing visuals to represent this realistically very ugly and painful crisis, creating a paradoxically "beautiful catastrophe".¹⁵ An example representing the direction art of the Anthropocene is taking, is the work of Edward Burtynski, who materializes this issue with his photographic series and the film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*. The images he produces reinforce the aged paradigm of human exceptionalism. Although he sheds light on the scale of intervention that has brought forth the new geological era, the outcome perpetuates "[...] the techno-utopian position that 'we' have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging [...]," but as Demos points out: "[...] in fact the two, the dual colonization of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined."¹⁶

¹² NIXON, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-674-07234-3

¹³ also referred to as Art Against the Anthropocene, or, for the purposes of this thesis *Regenerative Art*

¹⁴ The Great Divide is a term coined by French philosopher Bruno Latour to represent the ontological split between nature and culture.

¹⁵ VRBA, Martin. Katastrofy jsou nejkrásnější v galerii. *Artalk.cz* [online]. Published 7.11.2019 [Accessed 4.4.2022]. Accessible from <https://artalk.cz/2019/11/07/katastrofy-jsou-nejkrasnejsi-v-galerii/>

¹⁶ DEMOS, T. J.. *Against the Anthropocene*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-95679-210-6

Although environmental art has been a field since the 1970s¹⁷, the newly arising trend of artists turning their mediums towards the problem of the climate crisis is itself becoming a problem.¹⁸ The creation of *art about the environment* has recently flooded public and private art spaces. Given the context of the attention economy, where individuals' attention spans are already mined and occupied by the same extractive models being applied to Nature, the sheer amount of art about the environment is becoming a hindrance to the intersectional environmental justice movement¹⁹. Awareness of the climate crisis has been raised to the point where the majority of the population either knows that there *is* a problem, or is experiencing its direct repercussions. Yet, more and more galleries are filled with artwork that hopelessly points towards problems it doesn't seem to understand in its full complexity, while only adding to the "white noise" of a mere surface trend in visual culture: the climate crisis. This so-called *art of proclamation*²⁰ leads to no change, although it itself calls for it.

Utilizing a relational process approach, this thesis distinguishes *environmental art* (art capable of regeneration and standing against the Anthropocene discourse), from merely *art about* the environment, especially in the Euro-Western context. As Western artists experience the everyday privilege our colonial past has afforded us, there is a need for *deep awareness* that is vastly different from the knowledge of the science behind the climate crisis, and goes beyond understanding the functions of global warming.

The language of popular visual culture tells us that technological progress is a universal tool to reverse the damage done. It continues to operate and find solutions only in its respective narrow fields of expertise and categorical divisions, and continually fails to connect the spread-out dots to become transdisciplinary and thus effective to society as a whole. As Margaret Wheatley states, "To create a healthier

¹⁷ In its beginnings, for example, installation art unfolded as a new form to counter the art object that was being commodified and sold, thus representing the extractive tendencies of the system it was itself criticizing. Although environmental art stems from this direction, this recent trend creates a similar paradox. Deeper historical contexts and complexities are sacrificed for the sake of marketable aesthetics.

¹⁸ See also LESCAZE, Zoe. How Should Art Reckon With Climate Change. *The New York Times Style Magazine* [online]. Release date: 25.3.2022 [Accessed on 8.4.2022]. Accessible from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/t-magazine/art-climate-change.html>

¹⁹ Intersectional environmentalism as defined by Leah Thomas is "[...] a more inclusive version of environmentalism that identifies the ways in which injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected." MADSON, Diana. What is Intersectional Environmentalism. In: *Yale Climate Connections* [online]. Release date: 30.9.2020 [Accessed on 8.4.2022]. Accessible from <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2020/09/what-is-intersectional-environmentalism-leah-thomas/>

²⁰ VRBA, Martin. Katastrofy jsou nejkrásnější v galerii. *Artalk.cz* [online]. Published 7.11.2019 [Accessed on 4.4.2022]. Accessible from <https://artalk.cz/2019/11/07/katastrofy-jsou-nejkrasnejsi-v-galerii/>

system, connect it to more of itself.”²¹ It has to be the counterculture then, the counter-visibility, that offers an inter-connected alternative. If society must transform itself in order to survive this crisis, the culture we live in must act as a catalyst. As Malina points out: “[...] the history of revolutionary change shows us that there has never been a social restructuring that has not been preceded by cultural upheaval.”²²

Art and its theories can be utilized to function as a language that can transcend the narrow cultural view of the Western order; to be a tool used as an amplifier, a bridge between worldviews and perspectives. As T. J. Demos demands, “[o]ur response must be to take what’s out of sight and keep it well in mind.”²³ Environmental art versus the Anthropocene is certainly not merely about the resulting carbon footprint of the work here, but about a complete transformation of both artistic practice and human's place on Earth.

As intersectional environmental movements around the world already know, understanding the climate crisis means understanding the historical systems of power and oppression that have enabled the Anthropocene to unfold the way it has. The grassroots intersectional environmental movement has been perfecting strategies of communicating the climate crisis for many decades, with Indigenous communities leading the way. Grassroots is paving the way out, finding solutions and implementing policy and systemic changes, decolonizing and pushing for reparations that are hundreds of years overdue. This thesis will draw from the baseline knowledge the intersectional grassroots movements of the fight for environmental justice have acquired and will apply it to the recent outpour of *art about the environment*, to aid it in the transformation it must undergo to bring forth real change. Radical environmental art and a new methodology for its implementation is needed; radical, in this case, meaning *from the root*.²⁴ This thesis underlines the need for the understanding of these historical roots and calls for space for *ethical relationality* to be made in the Euro-Western context.

²¹ WHEATLEY, Margaret. Bringing Schools Back to Life: Schools as Living Systems. In: *Creating Successful School Systems: Voices from the university, the field, and the community* [online]. Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1999. [Accessed on 4. 4. 2022]. Available from

<https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Bringing-Schools-Back-to-Life.pdf>

²² MALINA, Judith. The work of an Anarchist Theatre. In: LITTLE, Craig (ed.). *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*. New Society Publishers, 1990. ISBN: 0865711690

²³ DEMOS, T. J.. *Against the Anthropocene*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-95679-210-6

²⁴ This thesis uses two of the following definitions of “radical,” as defined by Webster’s dictionary: “of, relating to, or proceeding from a root” and “of or relating to the origin” *Merriam-Webster.com* [online], Merriam-Webster Dictionary. [Accessed on 4. 4. 2022]. Available from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/radical>

The Ontological Turn

Czech psychologist Jan Krajhanzl says that a “terminal diagnosis creates the deepening of life.”²⁵ Arguing that there is no deadlier diagnosis than our own species’ extinction, this thesis calls for environmental art to go deeper and become more radical in its practice. Rather than adhering to the predetermined and ever-growing separateness of specializations and categories, dividing science from politics from art, this thesis proposes an ethical relational process approach to practicing art and theory thematically connected to environmental issues, in all its forms. The connection of the individual and collective unconscious, pertinent to environmentalism, calls for “overcoming human alienation from nature in a holistic way that motivates the restructuring of society and organizations to bring them into line with the reality of nature.”²⁶ This means departing from the false notions of human (and often only “man”) sitting atop the imaginary pyramid of Earth’s organized life forms and categorical divisions, and accepting that there is, and has always been, a relationality between all human and non-human beings.²⁷

Since the 1970s the humanities have already taken a huge turn towards this understanding. Posthuman theory has emerged as a more encompassing view of our world, and fields ranging from sociology to political science to literary and visual studies are following a similar turn in the perception of our material and immaterial environments and human’s relation to them.²⁸ Posthumanism and its New Materialisms seemingly stand in direct opposition to the problematic of the Euro-Westerner’s “Great Divide,” which perpetuates the toxicity of human exceptionalism and the same categorical divisions that “authorized the foundational capitalist imperative to own and control nature.”²⁹

²⁵ Lecture by Czech psychologist Jan Krajhanzl for the Studio of Documentary Photography, FAMU Prague, 1.12.2020.

²⁶ KASPER, Debbie V.S., *Ecological Habitus: Towards A Better Understanding of Socioecological Relations*. In: *Organization & Environment*. Sage Publications Inc., 2009. Vol. 22(3) p. 311- 326. ISSN: 1086-0266

²⁷ The relationality of human and non-human actors has been a part of Indigenous cosmologies for millenia. For example, Black Elk, a Lakota healer, states: “[...] from that time, we have been related with the Four-Leggeds and all that moves. Tatanka, the buffalo, is the closest four-legged relative that we have, and they live as a people, as we do.” In: BLACK ELK, NEIHARDT, John G. and STANDING BEAR, Luther. *Black Elk speaks: being the life story of a holy man of the Oglala Sioux / as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)*. University of Nebraska Press Lincoln, 1961.

²⁸ Even beyond humanities, in the field of business and economics, for example, models such as the FairShares Commons, that view organizations and businesses as living ecosystems, are emerging and changing our perception of the world with its human and non-human agents.

²⁹ HORTON, Jessica L. and BERLO, Janet Catherine. Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in Contemporary Art. *Third Text*. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology [online]. 2013, 27(1) [Accessed on 2.1.2022]. DOI [10.1080/09528822.2013.753190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.753190)

“[New Materialism] shares a basic conviction that matter - whether the forest or the lab - has agency, can move, act, assume volition, and even enjoy degrees of intelligence often assumed to be the unique domain of human subjectivity.”³⁰

This important shift from the individual as paramount to his/her/their surroundings, is taking place in the ongoing Ontological Turn of the Western philosophical canon. Human exceptionalism is a crucial part of the Anthropocene discourse (as the name itself suggests), but the culture countering it, be it posthuman thought, environmental grassroots movements and active resistances, is exploring the interconnected web of multi-species life and environment, giving agency to things not considered alive in the Western cultures. This turn is happening across fields and disciplines. Taking example from sociology, Debbie V. S. Kasper builds on Bourdieu’s original concept of habitus, by creating a novel “Ecological Habitus”³¹. This framework describes the interconnections of distinct behavioral areas within a fundamentally ecological world. The Habitus maps the interdependency of individuals on their environments and societies, the merging of beings with relational processes, in layman's terms; connecting the dots of the separated world we coexist in. Today, her concepts could be to sociology what New Materialism is to art. Kasper draws a solution to the Western perpetuation in the separateness of parts. However, as the interconnectedness of newly identified variables forms a more encompassing worldview, a new ecological paradigm can only be formed if historical context is acknowledged and our cultural perspective changed; if this relationality is first and foremost *ethical*.

The Ontological Turn of the European academy is an important one; the rise in post-humanist thinking, the bringing of non-human actors and actants³² into play, comes as a response to the ‘Great Divide’ long felt in the Western culture. The way this is done, however, professes itself as yet another symptom of colonialism, rather than a solution. The more-than-human has been acknowledged, but Western historical tendencies still must be unlearned for Posthumanism to become a force of cultural regeneration.

³⁰ HORTON, Jessica L. and BERLO, Janet Catherine. Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in Contemporary Art. *Third Text*. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology [online]. 2013, 27(1) [Accessed on 2.1.2022]. DOI [10.1080/09528822.2013.753190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.753190)

³¹ KASPER, Debbie V.S., Ecological Habitus: Towards A Better Understanding of Socioecological Relations. In: *Organization & Environment*. Sage Publications Inc., 2009. Vol. 22(3) p. 311- 326. ISSN: 1086-0266

³² A distinction between actors and actants is made by Latour in the Actor Network Theory (ANT).

Upon further examination of these concepts we will find that they are not as “new” as their names claim. Although it does not apply to many other ontologies, the nature/culture split is viewed in the European-Western context as universal. This creates the narrative that any departure from it must therefore be ‘new’, allowing for the “[...] Euro-American framings of post-humanism [to] have a tendency to erase Indigenous epistemologies and locations.”³³ The systems within which these concepts are being created continue to silence worldviews that have contained inherent relationality for centuries, even millenia. In order for New Materialism, for example, to act as a solution, its processes need to change.

The climate crisis is a historical, political, social and philosophical issue, not just an ecological (scientific) one, and, in fact, acts as an accelerator to the underlying social ills of our times.³⁴ Art and its visual language can be used as a common language that can step in to bridge the multitudes of discourses. However, unless environmental art and theory can approach the relationality of the climate crisis in an ethical way, it will continue to act as a language of postmodernism: “[...] ethnocentric and insufficient.”³⁵ Post-humanism and its correlating theories must be used as a decolonizing toolkit, rather than a ‘new’ direction of philosophical thought. This thesis thus challenges environmental artists and theorists to acknowledge the *origins of* and *hold space for* these underrepresented worldviews.

In order to do this, however, the following question must first be posed: *Whose story is this?*

³³ SUNDBERG, Juanita. Decolonizing posthumanist geographies. In: *Cultural Geographies* [online] 2014, 21(1). 33-47 [Accessed on 3.3.2022]. DOI: 10.1177/1474013486067

³⁴ KLEIN, Naomi. *Let Them Drown - The Violence of Othering in a Warming World* [online]. Edward W Said Lecture, London, 4.5.2016 [Accessed on 4.12.2021]. Available from: <https://vimeo.com/166018049>

³⁵ GÓMEZ-PEÑA, Guillermo. The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Arts Community. In: *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality and Theatricality in Latin/o America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, 183-193. Cited in TODD, Zoe. Indigenizing the Anthropocene. In: *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Open Humanities Press, 2015, 241-254. ISBN: 978-1-78542-017-7

Decolonizing and Indigenizing the Anthropocene

“To change who tells the story, and who decides, is to change whose story this is.”

– Rebecca Solnit, *Whose Story is This*

One of the oldest forms of art is storytelling. To be able to look forward we must first look back, and not only down the narrow line of Eurocentric history told through incomplete narratives, but especially into the untold stories of repressed cultures and silenced peoples whose worldviews drastically diverge from the accepted Western reality of human exceptionalism. As artists and thinkers creating environmental art and its accompanying theories, cosmologies and systems of thought, we are constantly adding to an already existing narrative within the larger context of environmental justice and intersectional environmentalism as a movement.

An understanding of those still unheard in the European context is needed to connect the complex and intricate problematics of the systems of power and distribution that have birthed this climate crisis into existence. We must empower the narratives and stories that have been historically pushed out of sight, and weaken the ones commodifying, exploiting, under- and misrepresenting nature with all her human and non-human inhabitants.³⁶ Even history is the telling of a story. The transition from the European Middle Ages to the Renaissance is told to us as a story of a society-wide transformation that came about because of art.³⁷ Here, too, artistic practice first had to undergo a transformation, a liberation from the contemporary system of power, in order to become a catalyst. So why couldn't environmental art and its theories bring about another, more equitable and radical, transformation? If we look at history from a different perspective, as a story interpreted to aid the continuation of the exploitative capitalist venture, we will find roots of this Ontological Turn hidden away in the millenia-long traditions of wisdom cultures, that have been living within the Great Web of Life³⁸ long before the dawn of Posthumanism. To change whose story this is, we must first change who is telling the story.³⁹

³⁶ *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* [film]. Directed by Fabrizio TERRANOVA. Belgium, 2017.

³⁷ This story falls into the Western ontological narrative, but further questions arise regarding the histories of “Enlightenment” and Europe’s emergence from the “Dark Ages”. Although art influenced a new understanding of what is human, repression of traditional wisdom and knowledge (Indigenous Celtic traditions, for example) was happening simultaneously.

³⁸ This term is often used by the late artist and pioneer of early environmental art Helen Mayer Harrison and her partner Newton Harrison.

³⁹ SOLNIT, Rebecca. *Whose Story Is This?* London: Granta Books, 2019. ISBN: 978 1 78378 543 8

Post-colonial thinkers and Indigenous scholars have been emphasizing the necessity for the inclusion of alternative (relative to Euro-Western postmodernism) worldviews and traditional systems of thought for many decades⁴⁰, and as of the writing of this thesis, even though some progress is being made, many of their Anglo-Western counterparts have responded inadequately or not at all. Although much new important theory is arising in the European academic sphere that is closely related to Indigenous and traditional systems of knowledge, it is too often appropriated without correct or adequate credit given, or space for the actual representatives of these worldviews held. The most recent addition to this issue has come from Bruno Latour himself, as he creates a “new cosmology” and its corresponding exhibition *Critical Zones*, which took place at the ZKM Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2021 and 2022. The idea behind this cosmology, although presented as new, is grounded in Indigenous thought and perspective. “Landing on Earth,” as is emphasized throughout the catalog accompanying the exhibition, is used as a guide for modernist Europeans to view ourselves as part of Earth, rather than separate from it. This is supposed to function as a solution to the long debated “Great Divide” between nature and culture, humans and their environment. “Landing on Earth,” as Latour and Weibel introduce throughout the *Critical Zones* exhibition, is already part of many Indigenous cosmologies as the creation story⁴¹. In “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn”, Todd recalls attending one of Bruno Latour’s lectures in 2013, where he was presenting the concept of the climate being of common cosmopolitical concern. While referring to the concept of Gaia, she awaited at least a nod towards Indigenous cosmologies, where similar notions have existed long before Europe’s discovery of physics.⁴² Climate as a ‘common organizing force,’ as Latour referred to it at this event in Edinburgh, is regularly articulated in Indigenous cosmologies. Todd refers specifically to the Inuit knowledge system that understands Sila as both climate *and* a life force. Her expectation of credit given to Indigenous

⁴⁰ See Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*, where he brings to light the paradox between the reverence of long-dead western scholars (e.g. Locke, Weber, Marx) and the treatment of them as relevant, versus scholars from other intellectual traditions (e.g. Sanskrit, Persian, or Arabic) who are treated as truly dead. CHAKRABARTY, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2007. Cited in: SUNDBERG, Juanita. Decolonizing posthumanist geographies. In: *Cultural Geographies* [online] 2014, 21(1). 33-47 [Accessed on 3.3.2022]. DOI: 10.1177/1474013486067

⁴¹ “[...] these events took place. They were not imagined or fantasized. [...] This is what happened.” WATTS, Vanessa. Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!), In: *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* [online]. Open Access. 2013, 2(1), 20-34 [Accessed on 1.3.2022]. Available from <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/19145>

⁴² The cosmologies existing in Europe pre-dating the scientific revolution also deserve mention, as Europe’s own indigeneity has been systematically erased for millennia. From Celts to traditional knowledge similar to that of North American Indigenous cosmologies has often been carried and passed down by women, and underwent similar systematic erasure.

thinkers never came. The systems and practices of the Euro-Western academic and art worlds lead to events like these, where space is taken, not given, ideas 'discovered', not credited, despite the fact that the Ontological Turn is built on the backs of non-European thinkers.⁴³

Although the work of Bruno Latour has been foundational in many areas of philosophical thought and social theory, his latest 'new' cosmology of the Critical Zones lacks in the same area as his presentation of climate as 'common organizing force'. During the virtual Zoom call *dernissage* of the Critical Zones exhibition, a question, whether this new cosmology was at all inspired by traditional systems of knowledge and Indigenous cosmologies,⁴⁴ arose. At first, Latour tried to delegate the question to other curatorial team members, but upon further pressure, he responded that it would have been a completely different exhibition, if it had been inspired by Indigenous cosmologies. He continued to state that this cosmology originates in Europe, and his hope is that it will spread to the rest of the world from here. His answer implies a new colonialism rather than a 'new' cosmology.

As the Critical Zones catalog states, the scientific revolution of the 1700s reallocated "what could be expected from science, how the material world had to be conceived, what should be the place of religious beliefs, the function of the arts, the role of morality, the skills necessary for politics [...]"⁴⁵ As we enter the Anthropocene, another, different reallocation of these beliefs must be enabled and our predominant Eurocentric worldview challenged. Historical context can only be ignored at the price of perpetual complicity in neocolonial violence. As Edward B. Said states in his work *Orientalism*, "European's representation of the other always turns out to be a mirror/ing of the self." In this case, the Western paradigm has shown itself so exclusive, that in order to accept a different ontology, it has to be presented as 'new', originating in Europe and making its way to the rest of the world, in order to be accepted. Rather than becoming accomplices and allies we have defaulted again to neocolonialism, following the same cycle the discourse itself criticizes, landing not on Earth, but rather on the same hypocritical path that enabled our system to be the culprit of this ongoing catastrophe.

⁴³ TODD, Zoe. An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology* [online]. 2016, 29(1) [Accessed on 2.1. 2022]. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12124

⁴⁴ As I recalled, "landing on Earth" has already been done by Sky Woman, the creation story of the Anishinaabeg people. As of the writing of this thesis I am still waiting for the recording of this online event, which took place on 9.1.2022, to be able to properly quote Mr. Latour and his response to my question.

⁴⁵ LATOUR, Bruno and WEIBEL, Peter, 2020. *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*. London: ZKM and MIT Press Cambridge. ISBN: 978-0-262-04445-5

Todd points to the complicit violence that is inherent in the appropriative actions of this new reallocation taking place, without adequate credit being given and space being held: "When anthropologists and other assembled social scientists sashay in and start cherrypicking parts of Indigenous thought that appeal to them *without engaging directly in (or unambiguously acknowledging) the political situation, agency, legal orders and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars*, we immediately become complicit in colonial violence. When we cite European thinkers who discuss the 'more-than-human' but do not discuss their Indigenous contemporaries who are writing on the exact same topics, we perpetuate the white supremacy of the academy."⁴⁶ The space where the Anthropocene discourse takes place is predominantly white, and mostly male-dominated.⁴⁷ Bruno Latour and his contemporaries continue to omit any sort of acknowledgement of the origins and preceding cosmologies of this ongoing Ontological Turn.

"In order for the Ontological Turn, post-humanism, cosmopolitics to live up to their potential, they must heed the teachings of North American Indigenous scholars who engage in similar issues such as Dwayne Donald, John Borrows, Val Napoleon, Audra Simpson, Kim TallBear, Chris Andersen, Rob Innes, Tracey Lindberg, Sarah Hunt, Vanessa Watts, Glen Coulhard, Leanne Simpson, Eve Tuck, Cutcha Risling Baldy, Erica Violet Lee and so many other brilliant thinkers (this list is not exhaustive!). And they must heed the teachings of Indigenous and racialised scholars from all around the globe."⁴⁸

The above excerpt is transcribed here in full, as one of the first steps to using this Ontological Turn as a decolonizing toolkit against the Anthropocene, is to begin citing BiPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) scholars in academic writing, as much as (and hopefully more than) their European and Western contemporaries. Just as the Bechdel test exposed that the film industry gives space mostly to the hetero cis white male perspective, so is the Euro-Western academic and art world holding space almost exclusively for its white male scholars, theoreticians, artists and their 'discoveries'. One must only go as far as examining a school's curriculum, not in the least in the field of environmental and art education, to see the overwhelming disparity of representation between the cis white male and BiPoC scholars, artists and

⁴⁶ TODD, Zoe. An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology* [online]. 2016, 29(1) [Accessed on 2.1. 2022]. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12124

⁴⁷ Intersectional environmentalism and intersectional feminism are considered closely related to each other, in this case both are advocating for spaces occupied by predominantly white cis males to be held for marginalized voices.

⁴⁸ TODD, Zoe. An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology* [online]. 2016, 29(1) [Accessed on 2.1. 2022]. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12124

educators. The spectrum of whom we cite, who gets to speak, whose story this is, must be broadened. This directly applies to the Anthropocene and its surrounding discourse, which currently functions as an extension and symptom of the commodifying capitalistic system, birthed by the colonial 'discoveries' of our European forefathers. Unless we acknowledge and hold space for the worldviews and cosmologies thus far ignored in Euro-Western contexts, this Ontological Turn will perpetuate the exploitation of Indigenous peoples⁴⁹, and will not enable the change needed for the intersectional environmental justice movement to pave the way forward. "[D]ecolonization/Indigenization is necessary in order to bring Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and practices to the fore in a meaningful and ethical way," states Todd.

Once space for BiPoC scholars and thinkers is held, acting as an accomplice to the change and regeneration of this discourse can begin. As Todd has called for, another important step towards decolonizing the Anthropocene discourse is to recognize its historical beginnings. There has been much debate over the starting date of this new geological era, from the dawn of the Industrial revolution, all the way back to the Agricultural revolution ten thousand years ago. Any resolution starts with recognition. The predominant systems of oppression that have caused the number of climate refugees to increase to 21.5 million people since 2010⁵⁰, are the same systems of settler colonial practices that led to the genocide and ecocide of Turtle Island and Abya Yala (the continents that have since been wrongly renamed as the Americas) five hundred years ago. In order for these systems to be exposed, direct historical lines need to be drawn. To start connecting the dots of the Anthropocene, acknowledgement of the origins and direction of this path must be understood, as a prerequisite to the creation of new content in the field of environmental art and theory. Just like the commodification of nature goes hand-in-hand with the commodification of female bodies, accepting the beginning of the Anthropocene as more than the origin of the climate crisis can enable necessary regeneration of the discourse and catalyze the solutions stemming from it.

⁴⁹ TODD, Zoe. An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology* [online]. 2016, 29(1) [Accessed on 2.1. 2022]. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12124

⁵⁰ It is expected there will be 1.2 billion climate refugees by the year 2050. IDA, Tetsuji. Climate Refugees - The World's Forgotten Victims [online]. In: *World Economic Forum* [online]. Published 18.6.2021 [Accessed on 8.4.2022]. Available from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/climate-refugees-the-world-s-forgotten-victims/>

Ally to Accomplice

In the grassroots environmental and social justice movements, there is a widely taught concept of behavior called *Ally to Accomplice*,⁵¹ that describes the required actions of a privileged person being onboarded to be part of a movement of an oppressed peoples. The steps of moving from simply being an ally, to becoming an accomplice, consist of the accomplice's own freedom and liberation being tied to that of the fighting group. The accomplice's role is to directly challenge the systems that gave them their privilege, and "flipping" this privilege to aid those disadvantaged by the same system. An accomplice does not gain anything from joining this movement, their ego is no longer of importance and must be shed. Given the relative privilege the Euro-Western artist holds, when translated into power contained within any opportunity of showing work in a gallery space or speaking at an event (especially a traditionally white male space) a responsibility to act as an ally (and hopefully even as accomplice) should befall on him/her/them. As an Aboriginal activists group stated in Queensland in the 1970s:

"If you have come here to help me, you're wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."⁵²

When it comes to the climate crisis, the future of the white Western artist/theorist is by all means bound with the liberation of those in Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA). As our whole species now faces the impending doom of extinction, the climate crisis brings forth a unique new perspective on solidarity. The ally to accomplice model offers a tangible solution to the often hopelessness-inducing isolation and "bubble-effect" of European and Western discourse.

An important distinction that must be remembered throughout this process is that, as Todd restates in *Indigenizing the Anthropocene*, "[a]s Indigenous actors, we do not need anyone to speak for us." Rather, a space must be carved out in the white male-dominated galleries and academic lecture halls, where this discourse is being

⁵¹ OSLER, Jonathan et al. Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice: Moving from Actor to Ally to Accomplice. *Racial Justice Allies* [online]. Published 11.12.2016 [Accessed on 10.9.2021]. Available from: <http://racialjusticeallies.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/from-ally-to-accomplice.pdf>

⁵² Murri visual artist, activist and academic Lilla Watson has been credited with this quote but has requested that it be attributed to "Aboriginal activists group Queensland, 1970s". In: Keynote Address: *A Contribution To Change: Cooperation Out Of Conflict Conference: Celebrating Difference, Embracing Equality*, Hobart: 21.-24.9.2004. Available from <https://uniting.church/lilla-watson-let-us-work-together/>

formed, at conferences and Zoom talks, and huge exhibitions like the Critical Zones, curated by European superstars. The lack of such spaces points at the perpetual neocolonial tendencies Europe has not shed, because we do not, in any sense, act as “accomplice” to the groups of people and entire cultures that we have historically oppressed. We don’t have to look much farther than the COP26 talks in Glasgow last year, to see that Europe is nowhere close to claiming responsibility for the colonial and capitalist systems that have allowed for the almost 3.5 degree predicted rise in global temperature. The system that has catalyzed the thousands of displaced peoples is the same one that buries the deeper connections, which when exposed, allow a full picture to be painted, the dots to be connected. This is where we can join the already existing intersectional and inclusive movement for an environmental justice that goes far beyond curbing temperature rise.

Actor	Ally	Accomplice
<p>The actions of an Actor do not disrupt the status quo, much the same as a spectator at a game, both have only a nominal effect in shifting an overall outcome. Such systems are challenged when actors shift or couple their actions with those from Allies and/or Accomplices.</p> <p>The actions of an Actor do not explicitly name or challenge the pillars of White supremacy which is necessary for meaningful progress towards racial justice.</p> <p>There is an excellent quote by Lilla Watson on need for Actors to shift to Accomplices: <i>"If you have come here to help me, you're wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."</i></p>	<p>Ally is typically considered a verb - one needs to act as an ally, and can not bestow this title to themselves.</p> <p>The actions of an Ally have greater likelihood to challenge institutionalized racism, and White supremacy. An Ally is like a disrupter and educator in spaces dominated by Whiteness.</p> <p>An Ally might find themselves at a social gathering in which something inappropriate is being talked about. Instead of allowing that space to incubate Whiteness, the Ally wisely disrupts the conversation, and takes the opportunity to educate those present.</p> <p>Being an Ally is not an invitation to be in Black and Brown spaces to gain brownie points, lead, take over, or explain. Keep in mind that as White people, whether as an Actor, Ally or Accomplice, we are still part of the 'oppressor class'. This means we have to be very creative in flipping our privilege to help Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples.</p> <p>Allies constantly educate themselves, and do not take breaks.</p> <p>Francesca Ramsey's Video: 5 Ways of Being an Ally</p>	<p>The actions of an Accomplice are meant to directly challenge institutionalized racism, colonization, and White supremacy by blocking or impeding racist people, policies, and structures.</p> <p>Realizing that our freedoms and liberations are bound together, retreat or withdrawal in the face of oppressive structures is not an option.</p> <p>Accomplices' actions are informed by, directed and often coordinated with leaders who are Black, Brown First Nations/Indigenous Peoples, and/or People of Color.</p> <p>Accomplices actively listen with respect, and understand that oppressed people are not monolithic in their tactics and beliefs.</p> <p>Accomplices aren't motivated by personal guilt or shame.</p> <p>Accomplices build trust through consent and being accountable - this means not acting in isolation where there is no accountability.</p>

Figure 1: Table from *Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice: Moving from Actor to Ally to Accomplice*.⁵³

⁵³ OSLER, Jonathan et al. *Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice: Moving from Actor to Ally to Accomplice*. *Racial Justice Allies* [online]. Published 11.12.2016 [Accessed on 10.9.2021]. Available from <http://racialjusticeallies.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/from-ally-to-accomplice.pdf>

Holding Space

Holding space can be as simple as the act of solidarity that took place at the 45th Academy Awards ceremony in 1973. Marlon Brando gave up his time in the spotlight and refused to accept his Oscar for best actor, instead holding space for the Native American Apache/Yaqui actress Sacheen Littlefeather to raise awareness about the standoff happening at Wounded Knee and the American Indian Movement (AIM), that was the continuation of Indigenous resistance spanning hundreds of years. This act⁵⁴ brought the strategy of holding space into the very center of popular culture.

The practice of *holding space* is closely connected to the *Ally to Accomplice* concept, stemming from grassroots social justice movements and slowly paving its way into academic fields as well.⁵⁵ Another example emerged in 2016, when a group of white students held space for their Muslim classmates to be able to pray in a safe space amongst them, following a hate crime on their home campus at the Michigan University.⁵⁶ This strategy has been continually employed to help prevent disadvantaged people from being arrested and entering the criminal (in)justice system, and was used during nearly every protest and police clash at the Standing Rock site of resistance from 2016 to 2017. The militarized police force, at least in the USA, generally hesitates to arrest white protesters, while jumping at the opportunity to arrest any Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BiPoC)⁵⁷. What would it look like if the spaces we take for granted and feel entitled to, were held to amplify the voices of those oppressed and silenced by the systems of power that gave the European artist/theorist this privilege?

⁵⁴ This act could be viewed as *accompliceship*, however, an accomplice should be deemed as such only by a member of the group they are acting as accomplices to. It is not the place of the author, who is writing from a point of privilege endowed by colonial-settler histories, to designate any person as accomplice.

⁵⁵ PASCOE, Sophie, SANDERS, Anna, RAWLUK, Andrea, SATIZÁBAL, Paula and TOUMBOUROU, Tessa. Holding Space for Alternative Futures in Academia and Beyond. *Antipode Online* [online]. Published 22.4.2020 [Accessed on 10.9.2021]. Available from

<https://antipodeonline.org/2020/04/22/holding-space-for-alternative-futures-in-academia-and-beyond/> See also BAMRICK, Tierney A. Holding Space: Learning from a Black Arts Organization. *The University of Mississippi ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* [online]. Published 2020 [Accessed on 1.4.2022]. Available from <https://www.proquest.com/openview/23408c16a0ab21cdb09e28aa01f02811/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=44156>

⁵⁶ KURUVILLA, Carol. Allies Form A Circle Of Protection Around Muslim Students Praying In Michigan. *The Huffington Post* [online]. Published 16.11.2016 [Accessed on 9.4.2022] Available from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michigan-human-chain-muslims-interfaith_n_582b4217e4b0e39c1fa66670

⁵⁷ “Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons across the country at nearly five times the rate of whites, and Latinx people are 1.3 times as likely to be incarcerated than non-Latinx whites.” NELLIS, Ashley. The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons. *The Sentencing Project* [online]. Published 13.10.2021 [Accessed on 9.4.2022]. Available from <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>

Learning from Grassroots Movements

It can be argued that art itself can act as a bridge between the Euro-Western world view and the world view of Indigenous peoples, the Global South, and the rest of the world that is overlooked and underrepresented, because it didn't originate in an academy in Europe or the USA, or stem from a great awakening of our scientific renaissance. One identifiable "way in" to this problem is through the evolving theories of new materialisms, under the wings of which we may be able to find common ground, when approached in an ethical way (and this could be the 'new' in New Materialism, as the more-than-human aspects of these theories are not new to many other cultural perspectives).

If we can learn from the grassroots environmental justice movement, which on Turtle Island, in Abya Yala and many other parts of the world is indeed led by Indigenous and First Nations activists and communities, we will see that 'new' materialisms are already part of the grassroots discourse, and might be subconsciously more accepted in popular culture than previously thought. A fact largely acknowledged and respected in the intersectional environmental justice movement is that "[there] are more than 400 million Indigenous peoples in the world and [they] protect 80% of the world's biodiversity."⁵⁸ What this grassroots approach has resulted in, standing in contrast to the ways of the academy, is that activists on frontlines and on the ground have turned to Indigenous communities to listen and learn, to pave the way forward for the next seven generations. A few years ago this became evident on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, the home of the Great Sioux Nation, whose clean water was being threatened by the Dakota Access Pipeline, stretching 1700-miles across the United States, carrying oil from the Bakken tar fields and eventually exported to China. The tribe vehemently opposed the pipeline through legal battles and official proceedings, but in 2016, when it once again became evident that the channels and legal processes in place were set up to preference corporations over people, the tribe took to frontline action. Thousands of water protectors⁵⁹ gathered at the Oceti Sakowin and Sacred Stone camps along the Missouri river, to protect clean drinking water for 18 million people downstream from

⁵⁸ KATAN, Tuntiak on behalf of the International Indigenous People's Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC). In: *The Guardian* [online]. Published 26.8.2019 [Accessed on 9.4.2022]. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/26/tuntiak-katan-indigenous-representative-un-climate-summit>

⁵⁹ We preferred to use the term *protector* rather than *protester*, referring to the rights of nature we were protecting and the multiple treaties between the US government and the Great Sioux Nation that were being continuously violated.

the drill site, and become accomplices to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island fighting for their rights once again.

The term “Water is Life” was reborn and eventually spread across the entire world in waves of solidarity, taking on the form of banners, hashtags and protest chants. If we look more closely at this phrase though, it is much more than a campaign slogan. We accepted that *water has material agency*.⁶⁰ Taking a slight step back, this was a completely radical turn in Western environmental justice discourse, going hand-in-hand with the movement to give nature rights.⁶¹ New Materialism gained an unspoken presence in trending social media hashtags through the Indigenous worldview that made it into the mainstream. As Jessica Horton claims: “Intellectual traditions can point the way towards a truly global conception of ecological justice.”⁶²

The concept of material as living agent is currently also being explored by European artist Susan Schuppli, whose new book *Material Witness* and her artistic practice attempt to start viewing materials such as the melting glacier as an adequate witness to the unfolding climate crisis. The direction of this thought is noteworthy, as it is closely related to New Materialism, giving agency to non-human actors, for example, offering a perspective of climate as a living, organizing force. The questions start to arise when we explore deeper the processes of inclusion that did or did not take place in the creation of this concept. The topics discussed here are not to be used and moved from one white cube gallery space to the next without radical and critical examination of our own artistic and intellectual processes. Are we decolonising our own practices as we make new art and theory or are we simply taking space to add more unaware content into the ever-growing Anthropocene discourse? What is the role of the Western artist, centuries after romanticists painted a representation of nature that had its eyes closed to the realities of colonization, and the polluting industrial revolution happening at the same time?⁶³ Are we continuing on the same

⁶⁰ “[...] water is life, that is, materially and philosophically inseparable from humans and other living things.” In: HORTON, Jessica L. and BERLO, Janet Catherine. *Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in Contemporary Art. Third Text. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* [online]. 2013, 27(1) [Accessed on 2.1.2022]. DOI [10.1080/09528822.2013.753190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.753190)

⁶¹ or rather acknowledge the fact that nature does, in fact, have rights, which we (the Western capitalist venture) have been infringing upon for centuries.

⁶² HORTON, Jessica L. and BERLO, Janet Catherine. *Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in Contemporary Art. Third Text. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* [online]. 2013, 27(1) [Accessed on 2.1.2022]. DOI [10.1080/09528822.2013.753190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.753190)

⁶³ MIRZOEFF, Nicholas. *How To See The World. An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More*. Penguin Books Limited, 2015. ISBN: 9780141977416

beaten path and misrepresenting and aestheticizing a crisis that is functioning as an active agent of omnicide?

Ethical Relationality

As Horton puts it, “[g]lobal equity, the political promise of recent materialist trends, calls for a transcultural engagement with indigenous actors *on their own terms*. Material might act as a bridge [...],”⁶⁴ but it is up to the artist, theorist, curator her/him/themselves to hold the space for this exchange to happen. As Naomi Klein stresses, approaching the climate crisis as an amplifier to the social ills that are still seen as isolated problems, “finding and strengthening the threads of connections between all our various issues and movements is, I would argue, the most pressing task of anyone preoccupied with social and economic justice.”⁶⁵ In order to do so, however, the roots of the crisis must be exposed and understood. Only then can we move forward to visualizing a more just future for all human and non-human actors, and their diverse and interconnected relationships.

Developed by scholar Dwayne Donald, a descendant of the Papaschase Cree, *ethical relationality* goes far beyond the acknowledgement of more-than-human actors, and can overcome the epistemic limitations of the Euro-Western philosophical canon, the anti-Anthropocene posthumanist and new materialist discourse and knowledge practices:

“Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. This form of relationality is ethical because it does not overlook or invisibilize the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world.”⁶⁶

Ethical relationality opens a reciprocity to thinking that would prevent the Latours of the world to claim ‘newness’ to ideas derived from other cultures. The relational approach guides our individual reciprocal duties towards our fellow human and non-human actors, towards the land, water, climate, the societies and cultures with which we share territories, while acknowledging the historical contexts, be it of

⁶⁴ HORTON, Jessica L. and BERLO, Janet Catherine. Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in Contemporary Art. *Third Text*. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology [online]. 2013, 27(1) [Accessed on 2.1.2022]. DOI [10.1080/09528822.2013.753190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.753190)

⁶⁵ KLEIN, Naomi. *Let Them Drown - The Violence of Othering in a Warming World* [online]. Edward W Said Lecture, London, 4.5.2016 [Accessed on 4.12.2021]. Available from: <https://vimeo.com/166018049>

⁶⁶ DONALD, Dwayne Trevor. Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations in Educational Contexts. *First Nations Perspectives*. 2009, 2(1), 1-24. Cited in: TODD, Zoe. An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology* [online]. 2016, 29(1), 4-22 [Accessed on 2.1. 2022]. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12124

settler-colonialism or exploitative capitalism (or, most likely, both). Applying this concept in the context of inner-city education, researchers Kerr and Ferguson state that “[e]thical relationality is positioned as a way to unlearn colonial logics that disregard Indigenous peoples’ knowledges and perspectives, and that portray Indigenous and settler peoples as occupying separate realities, and their different perspectives, experiences, and knowledges as incommensurable.”⁶⁷

Art is the fertile ground of imagination, it pushes the limits of what is possible and allows for visualizations still unseen or in direct opposition to popular discourse. If we can hold the space, it can become filled with futurisms that have been vigilantly kept out of sight and out of mind. In the words of Jessica Horton: “The indigenous artist can enter Europe’s framework to hold up the mirror. Wielding the deconstructive toolkit of postcolonial theory, he cracks its surface.” Once Europe’s short-sighted mirror is demolished, when we can begin to act as accomplices and allies, a new ecological paradigm that is in line with the “realities of nature” can emerge. Only then can culture transform society in an equitable way.

One such transformative space was enabled at the 18th Sydney Biennale in 2012. Gerald McMaster and Catherine de Zegher co-directed the exhibition titled “all our relations”. The original term, translated from the Lakota language as “all are related,” or “all my relations” is not merely a phrase, but rather part of a cosmology in itself, reflecting the interconnectedness of the worldview the Lakota people of Turtle Island hold. As Winona LaDuke states: “Native American teachings describe the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas. Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together.”⁶⁸

Reacting to the categorization and pigeonholing of Native, Indigenous, and First Nations artists, the curators approached the biennale “[...] in coexistence, conversation and juxtaposition but also in purposeful connectivity.”⁶⁹ Stemming from Indigenous historical perspectives, and paying attention to the changes in cultural recomposition, the exhibition responded to re-explore the language with which art

⁶⁷ KERR, Jeanie and ADAMOV FERGUSON, Katya. Ethical Relationality and Indigenous Storywork Principles as Methodology: Addressing Settler-Colonial Divides in Inner-City Educational Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* [online]. 2021, 27(6), 706-715 [Accessed on 2.3. 2022]. Sage Publications. DOI: 10.1177/1077800420971864

⁶⁸ LADUKE, Winona. *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*. South End Press, 1999. ISBN: 9780896085992

⁶⁹ 18th Biennale of Sydney – all our relations. *E-flux Announcements* [online]. Published 2.6. 2011 [Accessed 1.4.2022]. Available from <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/35494/18th-biennale-of-sydney-all-our-relations/>

speaks: “[W]e wanted to move on from the kind of 19th and 20th century notions of modernity. Because we felt modernity was fairly colonial, if you will. The whole notion of disciplinary separation, the fragmentation of life was all about separating everything into its neat little packages. And we felt that the world was changing in a different way, where it’s all of a sudden coming together, it’s recomposing.”⁷⁰ In this exhibition art came to life to interact with the audience, rather than sticking to the norm of gallery space experiences, where artist presents and audience views. Presenting the exhibition as projects rather than separate pieces of work, underlined the interconnectivity behind the entire process, which was primarily viewed as an exchange of experiences. “All Our Relations” was brought to life as a practice rather than a mere title to be filled with thematic content.

⁷⁰ MCMASTER, Gerald. Recording of The Dr. Allen Root Contemporary Art Distinguished Lecture. *Landscape Path Lights* [online]. Published on 31.10.2012 [Accessed on 1.4.2022] Available from <https://landscapepathlightsdod.blogspot.com/2012/10/my-relations-biennale-of-sydney-2012.html>

Conclusion

The following series of questions hope to be to the environmental art scene what the Bechdel test has been to the film industry: a privilege-check before the creation of new works of art and theory, be it called social practice art, eco-art, environmental art, community-oriented art, educational or otherwise. The hope is to be able to experience more art that regenerates and point towards a way for anyone creating new content about the environment to become an accomplice to the many movements for social, environmental, economical and political justice, “[i]nstead of just taking these world events and social issues as input for their art works[.]”⁷¹ The series of questions will continue to be developed, as discourse continues to evolve:

1. Whose story is this?

What is the historical context within which this theory or work of art exists? Does it acknowledge this context and give adequate credit where it is due?

2. Does it hold space?

Can the work function as an amplifier to problematics or stories that are (systemically) unseen, hidden, or unheard?

3. Does it connect the dots?

Does it expose larger systems of power? Does it disrupt the status quo?

4. Is it regenerative?

Does it regenerate the environment it is relating to? Does it regenerate itself (the discourse within which it exists)? Does it point towards or amplify solutions?

This thesis hopes that a new stage of the Anthropocene might emerge, where the theories of Posthumanism will become the catalysts to regenerative artistic practices, by holding space for BiPoC scholars, thinkers, artists and philosophers in Euro-Western academic and artistic discourse. We must learn from the intersectional environmental grassroots movements and accept ethical relationality as a starting point for the Anthropocene discourse to be transformed into a force of *regeneration*,

⁷¹ TOPAL, Hakan. The Aesthetic Impossibility of Justice. Collateral Damage. In: GIELEN, Pascal and VAN TOMME, Niels (eds.). *Aesthetic Justice. Intersecting Artistic and Moral Perspectives*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015. ISBN: 978-90-78088-86-8

rather than degradation and destruction, as it has acted so far. As Judith Malina says: "From the historical perspective, cultural expression always sets the social agenda, creates it in fact, and the artist is privileged to decide in which direction to inspire / instruct / invigorate the stream of history."⁷² Solutions can only arise through a change in process, where the European and Western academy and artworlds stand and act as accomplices to those it has been othering for centuries. Change often occurs in the peripheries relative to the West. When we hold space, change can enter the "center", and bloom with a radical fervor necessary for any equitable transformation to take place.

⁷² MALINA, Judith. The Work of an Anarchist Theater. In: LITTLE, Craig (ed.). *Reimagining America. The Arts of Social Change*. New Society Publishers, 1990. ISBN: 0865711690

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