

Whither the Settler in the Transdisciplinary Study of Religion?¹

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As I began to prepare this paper, I was reflecting on how I haven't attended the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) annual meeting since 2018. In the years since, I completed coursework and comprehensive exams for my PhD in Political Science, before the pandemic up-ended "normal" life for some time. As a result, I have not only been absent from NAASR, but have also been practicing scholarship outside of a religious studies department for some time now.² While my undergraduate and masters degrees were in Religious Studies, I was drawn to the University of Victoria (UVic) for its focus on Indigenous research. There, fellow graduate students committed to the study of Indigenous politics became my primary social and intellectual community. In February of my first year, two of my classmates asked if I'd like to join them occupying an open-net pen salmon farm in the Broughton Archipelago over reading week. Though I didn't know much, if anything, about fish farms, there was a thirty-year history of opposition to the practice from Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations, who were protecting not only the water, but also the wild salmon and Kwakwaka'wakw ways of life that depend upon salmon. And so, citing my political commitment to support Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination, I went.

I have written that particular story elsewhere, in a book chapter entitled "Cracking the Settler Colonial Concrete: Theorizing Engagements with Indigenous Resurgence through the

¹ This paper was prepared for the NAASR 2023 Annual Meeting but sections of it are drawn from my unpublished dissertation, which is a work in progress. I would appreciate if you would get in touch with me if you are interested in sharing or citing it beyond the context of the NAASR conference.

² Mentioning my time outside of a religious studies department may serve as both detail and disclaimer.

Politics from Below.”³ I suggest that participating in events that support Indigenous resurgence, upon the invitation of Indigenous peoples and under the authority of their governance, has the potential to forestall the entrenchment of settler colonial-capitalist relations. Such a praxis does so, I argue, by opening up alternative pathways for understanding one’s embeddedness within social relations and therefore expressing agency in ways that are informed by Indigenous relationships to place, other peoples, and other-than-human beings. In the same chapter, I also touch upon a UVic student-led project to build a “Little Big House,” a tiny house on a trailer in the shape of a coastal Indigenous dwelling, for the Ma’amtagila.

My engagement with the Ma’amtagila, one of the Kwakwaka’wakw nations that oppose fish farms and the original villagers at Hiladi, has punctuated my time on Vancouver Island. In 2021, I participated in a work party to transport the Little Big House to Hiladi, or “the place to make things right” as an elder and matriarch explained to our volunteer team.⁴ In June of 2022, I was at Hiladi for another work party, this time to clear space for an additional bunkhouse to be built. This visit, however, had several new experiences for me. To reach Hiladi, myself and two others had driven over highway and logging road from Victoria. As we approached on foot over the last stretch of muddy road, we were stopped by a Ma’amtagila individual whom I have known and worked with for some time, who asked us who we are, why we had entered Ma’amtagila territory, and what our intentions there were. In response, we gave our names and indicated that we were there to support the Ma’amtagila people, to learn from them, and follow their leadership in how we relate to and care for the lands and waters. We asked for permission

³ Stacie Swain, “Cracking the Settler Colonial Concrete: Theorizing Engagements with Indigenous Resurgence Through the Politics from Below,” in *Democratic Multiplicity*, ed. James Tully et al., 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 234–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009178372.015>.

⁴ “Little Big House,” Ma’amtagila nation, 2021, <https://www.maamtagila.ca/little-big-house>. Within Indigenous communities, elders and matriarchs are those who are respected for their knowledge and guidance

to come onto the land, which was granted. After we set up our tents, we made plans for the next day's work and shared a communal dinner.

As the group relaxed in a circle around a fire, The Ma'amtagila matriarch leading the reclamation or "rematriation" of Hiladi asked for our attention. She introduced herself at length, talking about her personal history as well as the history and current significance of Hiladi. Then she asked each of us, in turn, to introduce ourselves. The matriarch was not simply asking us for our individual names, but rather to name our own ancestors and where they came from, for as far back as we could remember. In doing so, she explained, we would make ourselves and our ancestors known not only to her, but to the land, the ancestors, and the spirits who live in that place. When it came to my turn, I named my Canadian parents and struggled to recount my Ukrainian, Northern Irish, English, and Scottish ancestors, interspersed with what I know of their movements and where they settled, leading up to my life in Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ territories (Victoria, BC). While I cut down ferns, dug out stumps, and stacked wood over the remainder of my visit to Hiladi, I reflected on how little practice I have at historicizing myself.

Writing Stories as a Creative Method for Analyzing Sociocultural Location

By sharing the story above, my intention is to practice a methodology common within both feminist and Indigenous research paradigms, in which stories serve as a means not only for description, but also knowledge production and transmission.⁵ Here and in my dissertation, I practice what Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre call "writing as a method of inquiry," in which "writing stories" can serve as a "creative analytical process."⁶ These writing stories not

⁵ Though I know that many scholars across the social sciences and humanities, and even the hard sciences, appreciate the value of starting with a good story.

⁶ Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *The Sage Handbook of*

only open up “representations of the social,” but also serve to “situate one’s own writing in other parts of one’s life such as disciplinary constraints, academic debates, departmental politics, social movements, community structures, research interests, familial ties, and personal history.”⁷ In this vein, writing stories are also an opportunity for what Kocku Von Stuckrad calls “radical reflection” in which we “lay open the conditions that give birth to our meanings and subsequent propositions.”⁸ Writing as a method of inquiry, for the purposes of my scholarly praxis, serves a means through which to locate, unpack, and emplace the situated perspectives, layered contexts, and social conditions that shape my thinking, teaching, and writing.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to outline three key presuppositions of my research, which focuses on the politics of Indigenous ceremony and settler colonialism within Canada. Firstly, Indigenous nations comprise distinct social and political formations that remain ongoing and relevant; not by dint of delegated authority from states or acknowledgment through international legal mechanisms, but because of their own place-based, legal and governance orders.⁹ Secondly, the emic concept of “ceremony” names a mode of praxis through which Indigenous people and nations enact relationships and circulate power between themselves, other humans, and other-than-humans.¹⁰ Ceremony can thus be understood as a key means for the

Qualitative Research, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2005), 959–78.

⁷ Richardson and St. Pierre, 965.

⁸ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion: From States of the Mind to Communication and Action,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, no. 3 (2003): 261, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23550029>.

⁹ Michael Asch, *On Being Here to Stay: Treaties and Aboriginal Rights in Canada* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Arthur Manuel and Ronald M. Derrickson, *Unsettling Canada: A National Wake-up Call* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015).

¹⁰ Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver, B.C.: Press Gang Publishers, 1996); Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Pub, 2008); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Darcy Lindberg, “Miyo Nêhiyâwiwin (Beautiful Creeness): Ceremonial Aesthetics and Nêhiyaw Legal Pedagogy,” *Indigenous Law Journal* 16/17, no. 1 (2018): 51–65.

constitution and reproduction of Indigenous social formations and political collectivities. Thirdly, settler colonialism can be understood as a shifting and changing social formation, structure, and imaginary which historically and in the present works to eliminate, cover over, and/or domesticate Indigenous social formations and relationships to land,¹¹ including through racialized and gendered constructions of Indigenous peoples as with or without religion/politics and other categories (i.e. spirituality, history, diplomacy). Importantly, as scholars demonstrate, however, the establishment of settler hegemony is partial and incomplete.¹² Thus, the methods through which settler colonial states and societies attempt to perfect their sovereignty and jurisdiction, as a countermovement against enduring Indigenous enactments of the same, are a site for analysis.

In the afterword to a special issue of *Settler Colonial Studies*, Mohawk political anthropologist Audra Simpson asks,

Whither Settler Colonialism? Whither ‘structure’ through time? How to acknowledge, theorize from, perform analysis within and nuance this in light of cases, of specificities? How to nuance elimination when the body is not solely the thing to be eliminated and those eliminations take on sly, liberal forms? As well, how to think through the new forms of taking and reconfiguring territory in analysis?¹³

Simpson’s call is for scholars to attune our modes of analysis, and “in some moments, our

¹¹ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*; Sarah Hunt, “Settler Colonialism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Law and Society*, ed. Mariana Valverde et al. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 213–16.

¹² Kevin Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010); Shiri Pasternak, *Grounded Authority: The Algonquins of Barriere Lake against the State* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2017); Kiera L. Ladner, “Up the Creek: Fishing for a New Constitutional Order,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 4 (December 2005): 923–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423905040539>; Manu Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

¹³ Audra Simpson, “Whither Settler Colonialism?,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 443–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2015.1124427>.

politics,” to such questions. Her questions layer both theory and practice, asking us to not only pay attention to the processes we seek to study, but to also have a “deep and sustained attention to our own starts (and stops) in analysis.”¹⁴ The sort of attention that she calls for does not let the desire for a “clear and clean mode of analysis as with politics” preclude us from seeing not only the structural settler colonial project, but also how settler colonialism operates according to specificities and struggles in practice and in theory.¹⁵ Here, I propose to extend her questions to the topic of sociocultural location, and ask: whither the “settler” in the transdisciplinary study of religion? To break this question down further: where has settler colonialism, and the study of religion, taken and reconfigured territory? Whom, and what knowledges, have such reconfigurations dislocated or displaced? And how might addressing these questions matter to a specifically *transdisciplinary* study of religion?

In what follows, I tentatively explore these questions through the methodology of a writing story, understanding myself as a theorist-participant in the specificities and struggles of settler colonial and Indigenous politics that I described above. As a theorist-participant, as philosopher of science Helen Verran describes, I recognize that “the knowing subject is an emerging entity as much as anything else,”¹⁶ and thus the starts and stoppages that I have experienced are worth considering. In particular, I want to draw out three layers of the story that have, at different times, served equally as starts and stops: my participation in Ma’amtagila protocol and a ceremony aimed at producing a social relationship between myself and other-than-human beings; my scholarly training within Indigenous land-centric and relational social research paradigms; and, my training in the social scientific, anthropocentric study of religion.

¹⁴ Simpson, 444.

¹⁵ Simpson, 444.

¹⁶ Helen Verran, “Working With Those Who Think Otherwise,” *Common Knowledge* 20, no. 3 (August 1, 2014): 531, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-2733075>.

Reconfigurations of Territory, Social Relations, and Ways of Knowing

In past years, the study of religion has witnessed a revival in attention to the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, including the well-known text, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the Histories of Religions*.¹⁷ Unfortunately (and perhaps to the disappointment of some readers), I am not well-versed enough with this range of literature to reconstruct it here. Smith's argument, however, is often the scholar of religion's reference point when considering the relationship between scholar, description, interpretation, and analysis. As he writes elsewhere: "There are no places on which [the scholar] might stand apart from the messiness of the given world," and thus scholars must be aware of how our own language shapes and contributes to discourse.¹⁸ Sylvester A. Johnson, however, charges Smith with ignoring the specifically *colonial* and *racialized* messiness of Western imperialism, both on the ground and intellectually, in his consideration of how "religion" began to be imagined.¹⁹ In not engaging with the links between Enlightenment thought and the violence of empire, Smith also ignores "the scholarship of those who have taken seriously the colonial plight of non-white peoples as crucial data for interpreting the record of human history and for gauging the human condition."²⁰ Before turning to such scholarship, I

¹⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jonathan Z. Smith and Willi Braun, *Reading J.Z. Smith: Interviews & Essay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Sylvester A Johnson, "Religions in All Ages and Places: Discerning Colonialism with Jonathan Z. Smith," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 1 (March 6, 2019): 30–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfy047>; Michael J. Altman, "'Religion, Religions, Religious' in America: Toward a Smithian Account of 'Evangelicalism,'" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (February 12, 2019): 71–82, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341454>; Emily D. Crews, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Jonathan Z. Smith, eds., *Remembering J. Z. Smith: A Career and Its Consequence*, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield, South Yorkshire Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2020); Sam D. Gill, *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith* (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2020); Christopher I. Lehigh, *Jonathan Z. Smith on Religion*, Key Thinkers in the Study of Religion (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021); Barbara Krawcowicz, ed., *Thinking with J.Z. Smith: Mapping Methods in the Study of Religion*, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield, South Yorkshire ; Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, Ltd, 2023).

¹⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 289–90.

¹⁹ Johnson, "Religions in All Ages and Places."

²⁰ Johnson, 34–35.

want to address a specific reconfiguration of place/territory.

On today's maps, the easiest way to find Hiladi is by looking for the Adam River. Once you have found the Adam River, you can look for a differently-shaded, oddly-shaped block labelled "Haylahte Indian Reserve 3." A book cited by the BC Government website on geographical names notes that, "The Kwakwaka'wakw Indian name for Adam River is 'He-la-de,' meaning 'land of plenty' with lots of berries, birds, animals, and salmon."²¹ According to Ma'amtagila people, Hiladi, the name that I know it by, has always been a summer village for their people, while winters would be spent across the strait at the village of Itsekin, on present-day Turnour Island. In the late 19th and early 20th century, colonial archives show Ma'amtagila leaders testifying to their people's use and occupation of the land, which were severely affected by the introduction of smallpox and the 1920 law that made residential schooling mandatory.²² As Kwagiulth geographer Sarah Hunt explains of lands previously occupied and governed by Indigenous peoples, "settler colonialism is marked by the reconfiguration of these lands through socio-legal imaginaries which dispossess the original occupants via ongoing assaults on their worldviews, bodies, and ways of being."²³ In this reconfiguration of Ma'amtagila territory, a nation which has been declared legally extinct, the village of Hiladi/Haylahte reserve sits at the estuary of the Adam River and its main tributary, the Eve, with a log sorting facility located across the river. This place, and its layered socio-legal history of Indigenous and colonial (re)-configurations, is where I engaged in protocol and ceremony.

As Hunt highlights above, the reconfiguration of territory is not simply about land, but also affects worldviews, bodies, and ways of being. In the ceremony that I engaged in, I was

²¹ G. P. V. Akrigg and Helen B. Akrigg, *British Columbia Place Names*, 3rd ed (Victoria, BC: UBC Press, 1997), 2.

²² "Our History," Ma'amtagila nation, 2021, <https://www.maamtagila.ca/our-history>.

²³ Hunt, "Settler Colonialism," 213.

asked to introduce my ancestors to the ancestors at Hiladi. In reflecting on this practice now, I can consider how it served multiple purposes. In demonstrating and asking, the matriarch established herself as one who holds authority; not by dint of it being delegated to her from anyone, but from her familiarity with that place and how to relate to it. Additionally, Ma'amtagila relationality includes accounting for other-than-human persons, some of whom have physical materiality and some of whom do not; this includes not only the spirits of Ma'amtagila human ancestors, but can be extrapolated to include others such as the lands and waters themselves, animals such as the salmon that spawn in the Adam and Eve Rivers or black bears that eat them, or 'Matagila, the mythic seagull ancestor from whom the Ma'amtagila (people of 'Matagila) inherit their name.²⁴ All of these beings belong to the Ma'amtagila social order. Like many other Indigenous peoples, Ma'amtagila political and legal orders are oriented towards living in balance with and being accountable to their relations, though this does not mean that harms do not occur or that power imbalances do not exist.²⁵ Through my political praxis, I was invited to enter into socio-political relations according to a Ma'amtagila worldview and way of being. At the same time, the process of doing so—naming my own relations—highlights my socio-political identity as an ancestrally Ukrainian-British, now-Canadian settler, while also locating me as an agent who shapes/is shaped by the structural conditions, social

²⁴ Matthew Ambers and Rande Cook, "Origin Stories," Ma'amtagila nation, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.maamtagila.ca/origin-stories>.

²⁵ Val Napoleon, "Thinking About Indigenous Legal Orders," in *Dialogues on Human Rights and Legal Pluralism*, Ius Gentium: Comparative Perspectives on Law and Justice (Springer, Dordrecht, 2013), 229–45, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4710-4_11; John Borrows, *Freedom and Indigenous Constitutionalism* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2016); Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*; Heidi Stark and Gina Starblanket, "Toward a Relational Paradigm-Four Points for Consideration: Knowledge, Gender, Land and Modernity," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 175–207; Melissa K. Nelson, "Wrestling with Fire: Indigenous Women's Resistance and Resurgence," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43, no. 3 (August 21, 2020): 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.43.3.nelson>.

formation, and imaginaries of settler colonialism.

In thinking about settler colonialism and the socio-cultural location that I occupy, one might turn to my position and perspective as an academic researcher. That being said, I was not at Hiladi to “do research” or engage in fieldwork. There was no expectation that I position myself by naming my *intellectual* relations,²⁶ although these also shape my thinking and actions. While some such relations might be evident already from this essay—and are emergent, even as we write/read/speak—the question of scholarly praxis is also political. For example, Aileen Moreton-Robinson understands Indigenous social research paradigms themselves as expressions of Indigenous sovereignty, because “most Indigenous researchers adhere to a research agenda informed by our respective cultural knowledges, ethics and protocols.”²⁷ The field of Native or Indigenous Studies itself developed when Indigenous scholars carved out space within the academy to do research that is accountable not only to their colleagues, but also their communities and homelands. Thus, the principle of “relationality” is what Moreton-Robinson calls a “key presupposition” specifically within Indigenous *social* research paradigms. As she explains:

Relationality is a historically enduring discursive formation that gives rise to distinct forms of thought, often unconscious, which inform the intellectual work and research of Indigenous scholars... Relationality forms the conditions of possibility for coming to know and producing knowledge through research in a given time, place and land... Relationality is grounded in a holistic conception of the inter-connectedness and inter-substantiation between and among all living things and the earth, which is inhabited by a world of ancestors and creator beings. It informs our epistemological and ethical premise that social research should begin with an awareness of our proper relationships with the world we inhabit, and is conducted with respect, responsibility, generosity, obligation, and reciprocity.²⁸

²⁶ It’s worth noting that I am a first-generation scholar, and the first in my family to do a PhD. I was not raised with academic kin, though obviously rigorous intellectual activity is not solely found within the ivory tower.

²⁷ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm,” in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, ed. Chris Andersen and Jean M. O’Brien (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2017), 69, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315528854>.

²⁸ Moreton-Robinson, 71.

In other words, relationality for Indigenous scholars—and non-Indigenous scholars who work with Indigenous communities—is not a matter of identity (*ibid.*), but of a *positionality*²⁹ that requires locating oneself within a network of relationships that have ontological and epistemological implications for scholarly praxis.³⁰

Before taking the question of epistemology up further, there is anecdotal evidence that the principle of relationality has had an impact upon how one goes about research, teaching, and service in the academy beyond Indigenous social research paradigms. For example, self-location exercises have become a common practice within some academic spaces and literatures. In the literature, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous scholars often include preparatory remarks about their ancestry, history, and current location.³¹ At my own university, while particularly common within Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Governance departments, I have also seen self-location exercises used in classes in Political Science, Sociology, Environmental Studies, and Geography. Self-location exercises can also be related to land acknowledgments, which are intended not only to recognize the Indigenous peoples whose territories one is on but also the historical agreements and ongoing obligations that one has by dint of being located within such relationships.³² It must be said, however, that the land acknowledgments that one hears delivered by settler academics and administrators on campus typically focus on historical treaties

²⁹ Dian Million, “Epistemology,” in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja (University of Arizona Press, 2015), 341, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183gxzb>.

³⁰ Some Indigenous scholars resist separating these terms, preferring “onto-epistemology” (Million 2015, Gareau and Swain, forthcoming) or substituting “place-thought” (Watts 2013) to emphasize how Indigenous knowledge derives from relationships with the living earth.

³¹ Emilie Cameron, *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic*, 1st edition (Vancouver ; Toronto: UBC Press, 2015); Pasternak, *Grounded Authority*; Sarah Hunt / Tłaliłila’ogwa, “Looking for Lucy Homiskanis, Confronting Emily Carr,” *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, August 28, 2023, 7-33 Pages, <https://doi.org/10.14288/BCS.NO217.197905>.

³² For more on land acknowledgments, including critique of the phenomenon in the context of the academy and the spectacle of reconciliation, see Daigle (2019).

and Indigenous communities, rarely recognizing the land itself as a living and agential being. Furthermore, it's rarely evident that those who deliver such acknowledgments or engage in social location exercises recognize their potential as acts of epistemic disobedience.³³

The failure of many land acknowledgements and social location exercises to acknowledge living beings beyond the human reveals the hegemony of an anthropocentric conceptualization of the social. This brings us to the question of who, and what knowledges, have been dislocated and displaced through such reconfigurations of the social.³⁴ Indigenous scholars have made persuasive arguments stressing a fundamental difference between land-centric Indigenous methodologies and anthropocentric Euro-western methodologies. While social location exercises and land acknowledgements themselves may seem innocuous, Indigenous scholars stress that Enlightenment-based social scientific approaches have been incredibly harmful and violent to Indigenous bodies, lands, and ways of knowing and being.

These “colonizing knowledges,” as Linda Tuhiwai Smith first called them, have three key features that themselves operate through acts of *dislocation* and disconnection.³⁵ Firstly, as is often discussed in explanations of Enlightenment thought, colonizing knowledges operate by severing the operations of the mind from the senses, functions, and feelings of the body, in other words a mind/body dualism. With this disconnection between thinking and feeling, humans are

³³ This term draws on Walter Mignolo's work (Moreton-Robinson 2017). There is also an interesting example from New Brunswick, Canada, in 2021. The Wolastoqey nations made a title claim for land, which alleged that NB was not upholding the Peace and Friendship Treaties it had entered into with these nations. Legal counsel for the government advised public servants not to make land acknowledgements that contain title and rights claims, or use the words “unceded” or “unsurrendered,” and instead only to make “ancestral” acknowledgements (Ibrahim and Cox 2021). This example speaks to the interplay between the power of language, institutions, and socio-legal imaginaries.

³⁴ Another way of looking at this, in the context of my writing story, might also consider how the dislocation of my own ancestors from the Ukrainian, Irish, and English territories they formerly inhabited relates to imperial processes, structures, and imaginaries.

³⁵ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350225282>.

produced as knowing subject-agents, with will and intentionality, while other beings and the earth are rendered inert matter, those who are acted upon. Thirdly, colonizing approaches operate through what Moreton-Robinson terms “the God-trick,” or a patriarchal social construction of objectivity that produces “the detached knowing subject, observing from a neutral position” who is disconnected from both body and living earth while situated within a hierarchy of knowledge.³⁶ Following logics of discovery, “in the process of classifying and identifying one is producing epistemological possessions by bringing into consciousness and naming the previously unknown: Aborigines/Indians/Natives.”³⁷

Furthermore, those who become known through logics of discovery and possession are denied “the human act of world creation and interpretation” and “the violence of this silencing is basic to the hegemony.”³⁸ A key means through which colonizing knowledges perpetrate violence towards Indigenous worldviews and ways of being is by discrediting them. As Moreton-Robinson notes within the academy, “Critique of Indigenous research methodologies is usually made on the grounds that they are considered to be metaphysical and, by implication, lacking rationality.”³⁹ Such discrediting, however, not only foundational but also convenient to the “sly liberal forms” of settler colonial logics of elimination.⁴⁰ Just as Indigenous peoples may be represented as lacking science, such logics are operating when Indigenous peoples are represented and engaged with as peoples without history or politics. For example, settler governments and institutions may engage with Indigenous practices, providing they are solely classified as “cultural” and not used as a basis for political or legal claims. When Indigenous

³⁶ Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm,” 71, 75.

³⁷ Moreton-Robinson, 74–75.

³⁸ Million, “Epistemology,” 339.

³⁹ Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm,” 74.

⁴⁰ Simpson, “Whither Settler Colonialism?,” 443–44.

peoples do use languages and practices that are “religious” or “spiritual” within political movements, those assertions and actions are rarely seen as respectable or protectable within liberal rights regimes.⁴¹ Additionally, while this paper thus far has primarily focused on the ceremony that I participated in, that ceremony cannot be separated out from the protocol granting me permission to be on Ma’amtagila territory, which was an enactment of political authority.

As I have shown in this section, dislocation, displacement, and the reconfiguration of territories, bodies, and ways of knowing are layered processes. While scholars of religion (including myself) tend to focus on how the category of religion is tied to ideological processes of imperialism, we do not always ground our critiques *in the ground itself*. The tendency to separate out those matters perceived as religious/spiritual from those perceived as political/scientific, at least when it comes to non-hegemonic actors and peoples,⁴² has serious implications for the displacement of Indigenous peoples from both the positionality of knowing subjects with legitimate research methods, *and* from their lands and place-based modes of governance. Scholars have critiqued other ways this occurs, such as by problematizing the reduction of nationhood to racialization, emphasizing spirituality at the expense of political authority, and mis-recognizing the “sacred” as having solely otherworldly/immaterial importance.⁴³ Indigenous land-centric approach to research, knowledge, and governance are, as

⁴¹ Stacie Swain, “Why Is the Public Expression of Indigenous Religion Political?,” in *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Five Minutes*, ed. Molly H. Bassett and Natalie Avalos, Religion in 5 Minutes (Sheffield, South Yorkshire ; Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2022), 168–70.

⁴² McCutcheon’s *Domesticating Dissent* comes to mind here, in the sense that dominant powers are rarely held to the same standards - see Klassen as well.

⁴³ Peter Kulchyski, “Bush/Lands: Some Problems with Defining the Sacred,” in *Sacred Lands*, ed. Jill Oakes et al. (Alberta: Canadian Circumpolar Institute, 1998), 21–24; Chris Andersen, “*Métis*: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014); David Delgado Shorter, “Spirituality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199858897.013.20>; Shianna McAllister, “From Sacred to Public: A Hidden Place into the Stein Valley Nlaka’pamux Heritage Park,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 4 (October 1, 2019): 911–20, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7825726>.

was suggested above, often dismissed for their reliance on metaphysical claims about the earth and our relationship to it.⁴⁴ At the same time, however, scholars have pointed out that Euro-Western science and politics themselves operate through socially-constructed and culturally-shaped metaphysical claims, which have a genealogy that can be traced through Greek mythology, Christian theology, and Enlightenment thought.⁴⁵ What happens then, if we recognize that “all epistemologies are open systems reflexively formed in the same cauldron of living story, conjecture, place writ large, and practice that produce our own conceptual maps. Any difference stems from the uses that these modes of knowing are put to.”⁴⁶

Questions for a Transdisciplinary Study of Religion

If we return to the writing story that I began with, as a theorist-participant I can potentially put to use two conflicting—and some might say incommensurable—epistemologies. One, drawing on Indigenous notions of relationality and land-centrism, would pose questions that can be drawn from emplacing myself within the web of relations that the protocol and ceremony were meant to produce. This approach might lead to questions such as: what sort of relationship did my introduction to the lands and waters of Hiladi bring about? During the ceremony and in the time afterwards, were Hiladi itself or any parts of the living lands around me communicating to me? What might engaging with the ancestors, not only those at Hiladi but

⁴⁴ As Moreton-Robinson (2017) draws on the work of Walter D. Mignolo to add, even while theology and philosophy/science conflict with each other, they come together in order to discredit Indigenous knowledges.

⁴⁵ Kimberly TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Million, “Epistemology”; Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm”; Pamela E. Klassen, “Fantasies of Sovereignty: Civic Secularism in Canada,” *Critical Research on Religion* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): 41–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303215584230>; Pamela E. Klassen, “Spiritual Jurisdictions: Treaty People and the Queen of Canada,” in *Ekklesia: Three Inquiries in Church and State*, ed. Paul C. Johnson, Pamela E. Klassen, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Trios (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 107–74.

⁴⁶ Million, “Epistemology,” 339.

also my own, reveal about my obligations, responsibilities and ethico-political practices? How have the structures and social imaginaries of settler colonialism, including regimes of gender, race, and class, impacted how I and others engage in communication and action at/with Hiladi and the ancestors?

On the other hand, as my story reveals, I am also enmeshed within Euro-western socio-political, legal, cultural, and metaphysical relations, with the last meant in the sense described by Moreton-Robinson and Klassen.⁴⁷ That is, my sociocultural location is within the formations, structures, and imaginaries of empire, liberalism, capitalism, neoliberalism, and secularism, which grounded in anthropocentrism. Expanding from this and my own histories, the second epistemology that I might put to use is the anthropocentric study of religion.

As noted in my writing story, I was trained in the academic study of religion before I transitioned to political science and the Indigenous nationhood program. I can situate this trajectory not only communities and social movements, as above, but also academic and disciplinary debates. The anthropocentric approach arose from several critiques, including but not limited to: the manifold, sometimes over-determined and sometimes indeterminate meanings ascribed to religion; appeals to experience in order to forestall critical engagement; and, the reification of “religion,” such that it appears to be a substance “out there” just waiting to enlighten or invade us.⁴⁸ Willi Braun explains an anthropocentric approach to religion:

There is no religion in-itself apart from people who do things that both those who do them and scholars of religion call “religious,” though with different meanings of the term “religious.” In that sense, religion does not exist; all that exists for our study are people who do things that we classify as “religious.” This entails that the proper object of study consists of the “religious” behaviours of people, a study that consists of description and explanation in general anthropocentric terms. Thus, even when we study objects that in the religious doings of religious people represent themselves as

⁴⁷ *Supra* notes 26, 44.

⁴⁸ Willi Braun, “Religion,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Cassell, 2000), 3–18.

artifacts from the world of the gods, it is people who make this representation.⁴⁹

Given the anthropocentric approach's exclusive focus on *human* communication and action, this approach can be used to raise different questions than those asked above, which are inspired by an Indigenous social research paradigm in which humans are not the only social agents who think, act, and speak. Questions might include: who spoke, at which times and when, and in what place? Beyond what was said, what went unsaid? According to what imaginaries, ideologies, and concepts did myself and others describe the action of introducing ourselves? What histories have led to the particular language—intention, sovereignty, ancestors, land, spirits—that participants used when engaging in protocol and ceremony? How do such speech acts and linguistic choices function to mark boundaries and manage group relations, such as between Ma'amtagila and non-Indigenous settlers? Additionally, recognizing that only my description and not my experience itself is accessible data, what do I have to gain or lose as a theorist-participant by telling this particular story in this particular format, language, and context?

I do not pose these questions with the intention of answering them, but to demonstrate the types of questions that land-centric and anthropocentric approaches can offer and are limited to. The goal of my writing story, and in engaging in story as a method of inquiry, is to think through how the study of religion ought to be done in light of the long-recognized and layered roles that the category of religion, scholarship on religion, and the academy itself have played in dislocating and reconfiguring Indigenous knowledges. For me, the questions that stem from both methodologies have, at different times and in different places, served as starts and stoppages. I am thinking about how to articulate and sit with these tensions, feel the discomfort that arises from unpacking them in different contexts, and considering how they ought to shape my own

⁴⁹ Willi Braun, "The Blessed Curse of Thought: Theorizing Religion in the Classroom," *ARC. The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies*, McGill University, 29 (2001): 163.

scholarly praxis.

While my own theorization of these tensions draws on my embodied experience and my previous scholarly training, the issues that I raise can also be situated within current debates. For example, Pamela Klassen suggests that, “while the first question a religion scholar might ask about [Indigenous] Water Protectors is what they mean by the sacred... we need also to implicate ourselves in the question of what water asks of us.”⁵⁰ By this, Klassen means refocusing attention on the specificities of the places where we do our work, as sites of human, nonhuman, and natural interchange. Similarly, Kocku Von Stuckrad contends that, “To think ethically, theoretically, and methodologically beyond the human, and to link these considerations to scholarly practices in the production of knowledge, is the call of the day.”⁵¹ Stuckrad queries what this means for the study of religion when he asks, “How can we build a robust theoretical framework that allows us to leave anthropocentric understandings of religion behind in favour of knowing with *otherbodies*? What would a scholarly engagement with ‘religion’ look like if we could nomadically leave its disciplinary frame?⁵² Nomadically leaving (and perhaps returning to) familiar disciplinary frames, however, may come at some risk, and not simply to the scholar’s peace of mind.⁵³ Métis scholars Paul Gareau and Molly Swain⁵⁴ highlight some of the ways that violence can reproduced when they ask,

How can settlers understand Indigenous knowledges without elimination, extraction, or self-indigenization? How does this socio-political, self-reflexivity help non-Indigenous people appreciate Indigenous knowledges as intersectional experiences in storied places between distinct collective nations/peoples that are human and other-

⁵⁰ Pamela E. Klassen, “Back to the Land and Waters: Futures for the Study of Religions,” *Religion* 50, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 90–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681106>.

⁵¹ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Undisciplining the Study of Religion: Critical Posthumanities and More-than-Human Ways of Knowing,” *Religion* 53, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 616–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2023.2258705>.

⁵² Stuckrad.

⁵³ I should note, also, that a nomadic existence may be part of the problem, such as when the requirements of the academy require moving from place to place every few years before attaining tenure, making it difficult to build deep connections to places and peoples.

⁵⁴ No family relation.

than-human?⁵⁵

In seeking to address these thought-provoking questions and navigate them within my own research, writing, and teaching, I found myself noting the formation of this year's conference program, which speaks of "ecologies" in the "transdisciplinary" study of religion. In speaking of *ecologies*, we are already thinking about the interrelationships between living beings and the contexts that we live and work within. But what about "transdisciplinary"? For the purposes of this paper, I found myself intrigued by feminist transdisciplinary research, which is where I came across the notion of writing as a method of inquiry.⁵⁶ Also drawing on the language of "ecologies," Christine Hughes contrasts transdisciplinarity with *multidisciplinary* research, in which "the emphasis is on bringing different individuals from different disciplines into relation with one another. It is true that such an approach creates a very interesting ecological field of knowledge. However, ecologies are riven with power and dominance and the question of whose knowledge wins out over whose remains."⁵⁷ *Interdisciplinary* research suffers from a similar problem, in that "a researcher may draw on more than one discipline or knowledge field but in essence leaves that disciplinary knowledge intact."⁵⁸ In contrast, according to Hughes, "Transdisciplinarity is a method/ology for bringing disciplinary forms together as emergent and contingent assemblages... and a means of disrupting the fortress model

⁵⁵ Paul L. Gareau and Molly Swain, "Indigenous Knowledges," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁶ Feminist approaches are often mentioned within Indigenous critiques of Euro-centric epistemologies, since feminists have developed a body of thought critiquing how the scientific method has been used to obscure heteropatriarchy (see Tallbear 2014, Moreton-Robinson 2017, Gareau and Swain, forthcoming). Of course, Indigenous feminists have also soundly critiqued (mostly white) feminists for not attending to regimes of class, race, and indigeneity within their critiques (Allen 1992, Green 2017).

⁵⁷ Christina Hughes, "Introduction," in *Transdisciplinary Feminist Research: Innovations in Theory, Method and Practice*, ed. Carol A. Taylor, Jasmine B. Ulmer, and Christina Hughes, 1 Edition, Routledge Research in Gender and Society (New York City: Routledge, 2020), 2.

⁵⁸ Hughes, 2.

of disciplinarity through enmeshment of theory, positionality, politics and method.”⁵⁹ This enmeshment is what I have aimed to offer in this paper, by telling a single writing story and peeling back its layers.

With this notion of transdisciplinarity in mind, what might a socio-culturally located, feminist, transdisciplinary approach to the politics of Indigenous ceremony and settler colonialism might look like? Here, I’d like to sketch out some initial thoughts. For one, a feminist transdisciplinary approach may engage in methods that uneasily transgress disciplinary boundaries, but would remain historically-based and contextualized, recognizing both the structural nature of settler colonialism and enduring Indigeneity⁶⁰ and how these structures have and continue to affect both bodies and subjectivities. A feminist transdisciplinary approach to Indigenous ceremony might also experiment with adopting Kim Tallbear’s ethico-political orientation of “standing-with.” While first softening the boundary between those who know and those from whom knowledge is to be extracted, “A researcher who is willing to learn how to ‘stand with’ a community of subjects is willing to be altered, to revise her stakes in the knowledge to be produced.”⁶¹ Such a researcher will need to navigate how they are transgressing the fields and methodologies that we are familiar with. As Stuckard suggests, *undisciplined* feminist, transdisciplinary researchers may “need to explore our place in an entangled network of subject–objects that renders our knowledge vulnerable and dependent on the epistemologies and

⁵⁹ Like von Stuckrad (2023), Hughes (2020) uses a territorial metaphor, describing the feminist transdisciplinary researcher as one who travels across and outside of disciplinary comfort zones, often without “map or way finder” (ibid). While the territory metaphor continues to be illustrative, it may construct too strong an image of the individual and independent researcher, operating through logics of discovery, when our scholarly practices are in fact, always socially-located and thus never alone. Hughes, 2–3.

⁶⁰ J. Kehaulani Kauanui, “‘A Structure, Not an Event’: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (May 2016), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>.

⁶¹ Kim TallBear, “Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry,” *Journal of Research Practice* 10, no. 2 (2014): Article N17, <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/405/371>.

agencies of others.”⁶² Finally, such an approach would not eschew the embodied and affective experience that comes not only from participating in that which we claim to analyze, but also from wrestling with analysis itself. As Moreton-Robinson states, “Indigenous and feminist research demonstrates that bodies do matter in research and knowledge production and that these processes embody specific orientations towards the social.”⁶³

In this paper, my writing story represents a struggle that is both on the ground and intellectual, living in practice and in theory. There is, admittedly, much more to be said. While I remain committed to respecting Indigenous paradigms in both scholarly practice *and* in my politics, I also argue that examining discourses on religion and related categories, such as spirituality and ceremony, can offer critical and productive insight into how power is enacted, contested, and circulated within contemporary Indigenous-settler relations. For the purposes of concluding this paper, however, I want to suggest that locating oneself as a settler within the transdisciplinary study of religion compels analytic attention to not stop at “religion,” but also start to consider the “social” in the social sciences and the “human” of the humanities. Beyond historicizing our categories of analysis, scholars can historicize ourselves, the places we live and work with/in, and how we put familiar and comfortable approaches to use. In doing so, as I have found, engagement with Indigenous and feminist research can offer potential pathways into generative, self-reflexive, anti-oppressive, and intellectually rigorous paradigms *and* politics.

⁶² Stuckrad, “Undisciplining the Study of Religion.”

⁶³ Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm,” 75.

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