

## THE INDIGENIZATION OF ACADEMIA AND ONTOLOGICAL RESPECT

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Abstract: My intent in this essay is not to discuss the actual content of Indigenous experiences and knowledges, as I have neither the requisite expertise nor experience to do so with any competence. Rather, what I wish to discuss are some implicit pitfalls in the idea of “Indigenization” when advocated in the context of Western metaphysical assumptions that have not been made explicit. Like it or not, this context is one in which we all now stand, but it is also disrupted by very different contexts, as revealed by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission for instance. More specifically, I wish to raise the possibility that an implicit ontological framework derived from Western European history may surreptitiously guide the negotiation of the interface between Western and Indigenous scholarship, and do so in a way that, rather than bringing about decolonization, actually may perpetuate colonization at more subtle and insidious levels. Drawing upon Heidegger’s work, I argue that making such ontological frameworks explicit increases the chance of success for any such interface by opening the door to what I will call “ontological respect” (to be distinguished from the respect of persons as commonly understood in terms of Western liberal democracy and human rights). To put it simply, if we are going to understand the other, we must also understand ourselves (where the “we” in this case refers to the settler heirs of Western history). Such ontological respect, I will argue, is itself made possible by a Heideggerian variant of the phenomenological “epochē” or suspension of presuppositions, which suggests an explicit methodology for intercultural exchange, a methodology I call the “intercultural epochē.”

Keywords: Decolonization; Epochē; Heidegger; Indigenization/Indigeneity; Ontology; Phenomenology; Worldview

### WHAT IS RESPECT?

While acknowledging the fact that, in its literal sense, “reconciliation” refers to

“the re-establishment of a conciliatory state” which “never has existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people,” Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) asserts that reconciliation “is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.”<sup>1</sup> Hence for the TRC, reconciliation directs us back to respect. If the prefix “re-” in “reconciliation” is not quite accurate, perhaps the “re-” in “respect” might prove more fertile.

Obviously, the word “respect” connotes more than one meaning as well. In Western liberal democracies we commonly think of respect in terms of rights: one respects the rights of others as rights-bearing individuals. The social contract is then fulfilled when I respect your rights and you respect mine. There’s a kind of territoriality in this: to each person there inherently belongs a sphere of rights that others are obliged to respect, which means that one must avoid violating anything in that sphere. “Belonging” indicates what is *proper to* a person, and hence property, as what is “proper to,” is already implied in the Western-liberal idea of rights. But rights operate at a macro-level: I can avoid violating your rights while disrespecting you in innumerable other ways that are not captured in rights-based discourses and never will be. In this way rights are like one-size-fits-all clothing: they don’t fit anyone really well, but everyone can wear them.

The word “respect” comes from the Latin word *respicere*, which with its prefix *re-* (“again, back, anew, against”) and suffix *specere* (“look at”) means “to look back at” and hence “to regard, consider.”<sup>2</sup> Etymologically, then, respect entails a *looking back* or a *revisiting*, but it also implies a sense of *renewal* in the connotation of “anew.” Hence it is a looking back that simultaneously looks forward.<sup>3</sup> However,

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<sup>1</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). ‘What we have learned: Principles of truth and reconciliation’, 113. [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2015/trc/TR4-6-2015-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/trc/TR4-6-2015-eng.pdf) (<http://publications.gc.ca/pub?id=9.800280&sl=0>) [accessed Dec. 4, 2019]. Although my remarks regarding Indigeneity and the TRC in this essay are oriented by the Canadian context, I believe that the principle of ontological respect to be defended here is transferable to other contexts of intercultural interface. One such example, Heidegger’s account of a cultural exchange between a European and a Japanese scholar, will be explored below in greater detail.

<sup>2</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary: [https://www.etymonline.com/word/respect#etymonline\\_v\\_45930](https://www.etymonline.com/word/respect#etymonline_v_45930) and [https://www.etymonline.com/word/re-?ref=etymonline\\_crossreference](https://www.etymonline.com/word/re-?ref=etymonline_crossreference) [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

<sup>3</sup> In this respect we might also call attention to the “transculturalist” approach to intercultural exchange which differs from that taken in this essay. Whereas transculturalism looks ahead to cultural meanings that evolve in the processes of intercultural exchange, my own approach derived from Heidegger will operate

there is also a sense of obligation. I don't look back out of mere curiosity, nor even out of my own interest, but as a response to a call. Something obliges me. I don't first choose respect; respect first *calls me* – it calls me back from my everyday involvements in a pre-given world in order to take heed. My choice lies in heeding the call rather than in choosing to be respectful out of a self-satisfied good conscience. Hence the TRC is appropriately framed in terms of a normative *call*.<sup>4</sup> That call is situated in terms of the truth of a historical context governing the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Put less anonymously, it is a call to me as a white male settler. In this case, however, to what am I called back? At an empirical level, I'm called back to look squarely at the truth of the history of colonialism in Canada and to publicly acknowledge it. At an ontological level, however, I'm called back to the truth of an experience of being that is *other than* the European experience of white settlers.

#### WHAT IS “ONTOLOGY”?

Although traditionally relegated to philosophy in its pursuit of questions about the meaning of being or existence, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the word “ontology” gained greater currency in other fields.<sup>5</sup> There has been a purported

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within a suspension (epochē) of one's own cultural baggage in order to allow modes of worlding (in a sense to be explained) with which one is not familiar to be manifest as free as possible of one's own cultural framings. As I see it, this approach neither forecloses nor competes with transculturalism. However, my worry about transculturalism alone, without something like the “intercultural epochē” defended here, is that in an intercultural exchange in which unequal power relations are at play, as is the case in relations between colonizer heirs and colonized peoples, any newly evolved cultural meanings may bear the imprint of that colonization and wind up privileging Western concepts and categories. I think that this has certainly been the case with concepts like “worldview” (which will be discussed below). On the other hand, cross-cultural exchanges have often proven to be catalysts for the creation of new cultural works and meanings. In my view, however, such transculturalist evolution would only be strengthened and kept respectful by the intercultural epochē. But the development of this argument would take us beyond the scope of this essay, which will be limited to the Heideggerian hermeneutic approach that informs the intercultural epochē.

<sup>4</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*

([http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)) [accessed Dec. 4, 2019]. Of particular relevance to this essay is call 62ii.

<sup>5</sup> See Busse et. al., ‘Actually, What Does “Ontology” Mean? A Term Coined by Philosophy in the Light of Different Scientific Disciplines’. *Journal of Computing and Information Technology – CIT* 23, 1, 29–41. (2015).

“ontological turn” in the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> In sociology “social ontology” refers to the nature or “being” of social reality.<sup>7</sup> In computer science, according to the website *Technopedia*, “ontology” refers to “a framework for defining the domain that consists of a set of concepts, characteristics and relationships.”<sup>8</sup> A “business process” ontology “defines the terms and concepts (meaning) used to describe and represent an area of knowledge, as well as relations among them.”<sup>9</sup> The learning outcomes of a nursing course at my home institution includes the ability to “analyze ontological, epistemological, and methodological implications of various paradigms of nursing knowledge and ways of knowing” and to “demonstrate a critical understanding of how evidence is constructed and knowledge legitimized in differing worldviews,” and the course assignments include the essay topic: “My View of the Ontological Dimension of Nursing.”<sup>10</sup>

It is not entirely clear exactly what is meant by the word “ontology” in these instances or if there is a common thread holding them together, but the fact that it is intimately bound up with ideas like “knowledge,” “worldview” and “viewpoint” invites caution. Closely associating ontology with knowledge encourages its conflation with epistemology and misleadingly implies that it has to do with concepts in our heads referring to something out there in the world, and hence to one’s overall “viewpoint” about things in general. When it is historicized, ontology is perhaps most often conflated with the concept of “worldview,”<sup>11</sup> but these should be clearly distinguished because the very idea of a worldview already assumes a certain specific ontology, namely, the well-known Cartesian metaphysics that centralizes the subject as the “I” viewpoint or thinking-perceiving consciousness who “has” a worldview and projects that view upon an external spatiotemporal realm. Through the notion of worldview,

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<sup>6</sup> See A. Escobar, “The ‘Ontological Turn’ in Social Theory: A Commentary on ‘Human Geography Without Scale,’ by Sallie Marston, John Paul Jones II and Keith Woodward”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 32(1), 2007, pp. 106–111.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Gittler, ‘Social Ontology and the Criteria for Definitions in Sociology’, *Sociometry*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 355-365.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/591/computer-ontology> [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bptrends.com/publicationfiles/o9-03%20WP%20BP%20Ontologies%20FAQ%20Jenz.pdf> [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.athabascau.ca/syllabi/nurs/nurs608.php> [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

<sup>11</sup> For an example of such conflation in the field of education, see <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-importance-of-the-study-of-ontology-in-education> [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

Cartesian metaphysics gets a cultural facelift and becomes the viewpoint, not of an individual consciousness, but of an entire culture. Such culturalization or historicization disperses the individualist bias but still retains the same metaphysical assumption of a subjectivity (now an intersubjectivity) that holds a “view” of things out there in the world, thereby also reinvoking a classic Western dualism that predates the modern idea of subjectivity: the presumed opposition between nature and society. But there is a specifically modern twist to this.

By suspending the naïve assumption that the world simply presents itself in a worldview, and by tracing how being (ontology) came to be understood as accessible only through a representational thinking that places its objects before itself, such an understanding begins to appear, not as self-evident reality, but as an *imposition* brought about by a specifically European way of being-in-the-world. Already framed in terms of constraint in the eighteenth century, Kant had asserted that the early modern scientists of Europe “learned that reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own, and that it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature’s leading-strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason’s own determining.”<sup>12</sup>

Hence the modern European twist, as Heidegger argued, is that subjectivity places the whole of existence before itself in *representation*. Such representation is therefore also a production carried out by a “representing-producing humanity” that sets the whole of what is before itself in a kind of “world picture.” “Whenever we have a world picture,” Heidegger asserts, “an essential decision occurs concerning beings as a whole. The being of beings is sought and found in the representedness of beings.”<sup>13</sup> Because the world is brought before human subjectivity in representation, “[A]s soon as the world becomes picture the position of man is conceived as world view.”<sup>14</sup> This is not limited to a cognitivist understanding of human subjectivity as a disinterested theoretical gaze contemplating the objects placed before it – it also entails any understanding of

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track* (a translation of *Holzwege*), trans. J. Young and K. Haynes, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 67-8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

being that makes human subjectivity, however conceived, the “primary center of reference.” Therefore speaking of pre-modern civilizations in terms of worldviews, e.g. the “Greek worldview” as opposed to the “Medieval worldview,” is necessarily a naïveté that uncritically interprets previous eras of history in modern European terms. Heidegger sums up the impositional character of the modernist European experience of being as worldview by asserting that the “collective image of representing production” bound up with conquest is the “fundamental event of modernity.”<sup>15</sup>

It is this position in which modern European humanity understands itself as a subjectivity providing the measure for what counts as real, valuable, important, etc., that “secures, organizes, and articulates itself as world view.”<sup>16</sup> Hence the securing, organization, and articulation of the “collective image of representing production” in a worldview belongs to a conquest which, in its contemporary global form, has been shifted onto a different register. The Earth is no longer a vast terrain of “uncharted” territory to be explored and exploited by a European humanity while the Indigenous people who exist on that territory count as merely non-existent or expendable. No geographical territory remains to be charted by colonialist desire. In place of earth and land, we now have the globe populated by multiple cultures and peoples, each with their own unique and equally valuable worldview that should be “respected,” which means placed alongside other worldviews in a vast egalitarian registry in which the European worldview accepts its place as one global citizen among others. But what gets overlooked in such egalitarian presumption is that, insofar as the registry itself already belongs to the collective image of representing-production, it merely constitutes a subsequent stage of cognitive conquest.<sup>17</sup>

It matters little if the attempt is made to assert the “incommensurability” of worldviews. A grand registry that frames all possible ways of being-in-the-world as worldview and imposes that framework in advance is still tacitly posited. As

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Insofar as this analysis addresses the ontological level, individual attitudes are not relevant. Hence changing one’s attitude is only an epiphenomenal alteration in a subject still placed as the “primary center of reference,” and hence also well-intentioned efforts by settlers to overcome colonialist oppression can unwittingly fall into this cul-de-sac.

Heidegger puts it, because the collective position of representing-production that has emerged out of Europe is articulated in terms of worldview, “the decisive unfolding of the modern relationship to beings becomes a confrontation of world views.”<sup>18</sup> Hence when Leroy Little Bear attempts to give expression to the confrontation of the world of settlers with that of Indigenous peoples as one of “jagged worldviews colliding,”<sup>19</sup> he inadvertently places the Indigenous world within the modernist framework of global European conquest. Similarly, few would contest Sarah Hunt’s assertion that colonialism “has involved the imposition of Western worldviews and the simultaneous suppression of Indigenous worldviews,” a claim leading immediately to the kind of seemingly self-evident question one often hears in various forms with respect to the academic disciplines (in this case that of geography): “And how might Indigenous geographic knowledge, or knowledge rooted in Indigenous worldviews, be situated in relation to the discipline of geography and its hegemonic ontologies?” Thus she further asks how we can “avoid being agents of assimilation when it comes to Indigenous knowledge, people and communities,” as if invoking “worldview” and “representation” has not already turned us into assimilating agents before the question is even raised.<sup>20</sup>

That a collective image of representing-production is not the only possibility, however, is indicated when Heidegger suggests that wherever “beings are not interpreted in this way, the world, too, cannot come into the picture – there can be no world picture.”<sup>21</sup> The door is only left open to other possibilities as a bare suggestion: Heidegger’s primary concern was the West and how it might free itself from an ontological encroachment threatening to alienate human existence from its own vocation of active participation in the disclosure of being. My concern here, however, is not with the salvation of the West but rather with a kind of “suspension” of the West that would allow Indigenous worlds to come to language in their own terms (more on this below). To casually speak of an “Indigenous

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Leroy Little Bear, ‘Jagged Worldviews Colliding’, in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. M. Battiste, Vancouver, UBC Press, 2000, pp. 77-85.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Hunt, ‘Ontologies of Indigeneity: the politics of embodying a concept’, *cultural geographies*, Vol 21(1), 2014, pp. 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 68.

worldview,” however, is to already foreclose other possibilities, circumscribing a non-European reality within a distinctly modern European enclosure. It is already to make “an essential decision” about “beings as a whole” and hence also about Indigenous peoples. Indeed, this may be the primary ideological gesture of Eurocentrism today. At the very least, we should be able to see from this that “ontology” is not equivalent to “worldview” precisely because the very idea of a worldview already presupposes a very specific, modern European, ontology.

Hence the problematic and loose usage of the concept of “worldview” is particularly egregious when applied to Indigenous peoples. The most cursory review of the literature on Indigeneity shows a remarkably pervasive and uncritical usage of the word, both by Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous writers. The problem, as Heidegger suggests, is not merely the use of a less-than-ideal word that we might just replace with something else. Rather, the problem is a certain European experience of being that makes such terminology appear to be obvious and self-evident to all parties involved, including Indigenous writers themselves. The kind of experience of being to which Heidegger calls our critical attention is not just a cognitive “perspective” or theoretical position, but is affective before cognitive and embodies an entire manner and way of the being-in-the-world of a society and culture. Hence the problem is the metaphysical baggage carried along with the framework of such thinking and being, a framework whose legible indicator is “worldview,” like the dog-whistle tip of a massive colonialist iceberg.

At its extreme, understanding the human relation to the world in terms of “worldviews” leads us to a kind of culturalist idealism in which we can’t say anything about objective reality since that reality has always already been filtered through the tinted lens of one’s own culture. Such cultural relativism sets up a false dichotomy between either absolute unattainable knowledge unblemished by one’s own culture and history or a culturally embedded “knowledge” that is only validated within its own practice, a kind of Wittgensteinian “language game,” as it were, played out on the terrain of epistemology.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, if we

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<sup>22</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, for instance, sets up a similar foil for the “validation” of what he calls the “epistemologies of the South” - see *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 37ff.

adopt the so called “realist” assumption that there *is* an objective reality, but that different “ways of knowing” can contribute to our understanding of what that reality looks like, we’re still operating within the metaphysical assumption of a subjectivity set over and against a reality that we’re all trying to describe, albeit in various differing and equally valuable ways. Of course, the well-known problem faced by relativists is self-refutation: the claim that all knowledge is relative to one’s culture (or history, language, etc.) either tacitly presumes to stand outside the culture (or history, language, etc.) in which it is asserted, in which case it refutes itself, or it loses its own presumption to universality, in which case it refutes itself. As Hegel demonstrated, the more one tries to reject universality, the more one runs headlong into it.<sup>23</sup>

Of particular interest with respect to the “ontological turn” mentioned above is Mario Blaser, who advocates “political ontology” as an alternative to the uncritical ontological assumption in classic anthropology of a single objective reality refracted through multiple cultural lenses.<sup>24</sup> Given the prevalence of the latter assumption, it is unsurprising that the concept of “worldview” has gained traction in academic as well as popular discourse. Against this, Blaser raises the possibility of “ontological conflicts” which, in order to be considered, requires calling into question assumptions such as the idea that “the cultural differences that exist are between perspectives on one single reality ‘out there’...”<sup>25</sup> He suggests a “political ontology” according to which multiple ontological realities are produced by cultural practices. Thus he claims that “ontology is a way of worlding, a form of enacting a reality.”<sup>26</sup> Such multiple ontological realities he calls “worldings,” a term that proves useful for my purposes in this essay. Careful attention to ontology, then, is a way of taking difference seriously, as opposed to turning it into a merely epiphenomenal feature of a single presumed ontological

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<sup>23</sup> See the treatment of “sense-certainty” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>24</sup> See Mario Blaser, ‘Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology’, *Current Anthropology*, Vol 54(5), 2013, pp. 547-568, and, ‘Ontology and Indigeneity: On the political ontology of heterogeneous assemblages’, *Cultural Geographies*, Vol 21(1), 2014, pp. 49-58.

<sup>25</sup> Blaser, ‘Ontological Conflicts’, p. 548.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 551.

reality.<sup>27</sup>

One obvious objection is that such a “pluriverse” of multiple ontologies is merely the same old social constructivism again, extending “culture” all the way down into “ontology” and thereby making the latter just another word for the former. One way Blaser might be said to have countered this charge, even if he doesn’t explicitly invoke constructivism in this context, is with the example of Annemarie Mol’s work, according to which “atherosclerosis emerges as a different entity depending on the practice under consideration,” supporting, in his view, “the key point” that “in practice, atherosclerosis (or reality) is multiple because there are multiple practices. This is ontological multiplicity.” The idea that there is a single objective reality of which these various “different entities” are manifestations is, for him, simply another enacted practice or “story.” However, he admits that “the assumption of singularity is crucial to the very practices” that yielded a multiplicity in the first place. So the one story of singularity makes possible the other stories of different emergent phenomena, underlining his claim that ontology is something that is enacted.<sup>28</sup>

But there is an ambiguity here as to the ontological status of the phenomenon in question. If Blaser denies that there is a reality to atherosclerosis that we do *not* simply “enact” with our various “storied performatives” about it, then it seems he falls into constructivism and it’s difficult to tell why we should prefer the term “ontology” to “culture” (assuming we are not committed to understanding “culture” in the classic sense of various interpretations of one reality, which is what constructivism, at least in its strong form, rejects). On the other hand, if he admits that there is a reality to atherosclerosis irrespective of our storied enactments – e.g. that people can become sick and die from it when undiagnosed and untreated (recalling Alan Sokal’s rebuke to postmodern pretensions) – then he’s back to the one reality he wanted to avoid.

At least some of the difficulties encountered by Blaser’s approach, it seems to me, are brought about by his retention of an unexamined ontological assumption *in his very critique* of the assumption of a single reality “out there” with respect to which there are multiple cultural interpretations. In other words, the weight of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 550 (citing Matt Candea).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 552; see also ‘Ontology and Indigeneity’, p. 54.

his critique focuses upon the assumption of *one* reality as opposed to the assumption of a *reality* that is simply “there,” present in some way. Hence he opposes a pluriverse to the assumption of a single universe, but he doesn’t critically examine the way the universe he rejects is assumed to be *present* (or, indeed, of the way the pluriverse he embraces is present), and hence he inadvertently leaves an ontological assumption intact to surreptitiously frame his entire discourse. That ontological assumption is what Heidegger early on called “objective presence” (*Vorhandenheit*), namely, the assumption that “being” names what is merely present, “there” as a bare existence which may be characterized in terms of various properties or features.<sup>29</sup> Blaser works hard to avoid making commitments to “ontology as a statement of facts,”<sup>30</sup> thereby assuming that the only thing an ontological commitment *could possibly be* is a “statement of facts” – that is, a statement about objective presence. He claims that “in contrast with other modalities of critique or analysis, political ontology is not concerned with a supposedly external and independent reality (to be uncovered or depicted accurately),” as if such objective presence is the only ontological alternative. It is the ontology of objective presence that underpins the metaphysical assumption of an objective reality observable by a subjective consciousness, indexable as a set of “facts,” and that is taken up into the representation of the world as worldview. However, whether *what* is considered to be objectively present happens to be a universe or a pluriverse has no bearing on the ontological assumption of objective presence *pe se* insofar as both can equally be understood in those terms.

To be sure, he offers a caveat in that “the pluriverse is a heuristic proposition, a foundationless foundational claim, which in the context of the previous discussion, means that it is an experiment on bringing itself into being.”<sup>31</sup> But in his critique of the idea that ontology is merely “a heuristic device, a tool to rethink our analytical concepts,” he argues that “what is not self-evident is why rethinking

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<sup>29</sup> It’s a pity that Blaser was deterred from engaging with Heidegger by the latter’s early use of the term “fundamental” in “fundamental ontology” (‘Ontology and Indigeneity’, p. 53), as the phenomenological clarity that could be gained from Heidegger’s work with respect to ontological questions might have also helped clarify Blaser’s own notion of “worldings.” As any familiarity with Heidegger’s oeuvre will quickly show, not only was such a fundament never found, but it soon collapsed into a groundless abyss.

<sup>30</sup> Blaser, ‘Ontological Conflicts’, p. 551.

<sup>31</sup> Blaser, ‘Ontological Conflicts’, p. 552; ‘Ontology and Indigeneity’, p. 55.

our analytical concepts is something that should be pursued”<sup>32</sup> – an important question to raise as it brings into view the questionable horizon within which all such implicitly normative demands are made. However, he neglects to ask the same question here: why is bringing the pluriverse into being something that should be pursued? He cannot lay claim to the attempt to determine the true nature of reality (i.e. by claiming that reality – or ontology – *is really* multiple) without falling into the trap he has set for himself by thereby assuming an ontological reality of some sort.

Laudably, Blaser does take his approach to mean that we should “avoid the assumption that reality is ‘out there’ and that ‘in here’ (the mind), we have more or less accurate cultural representations of it.”<sup>33</sup> However, it is difficult to avoid the impression that he makes the very kind of ontological commitment he wishes to avoid when he immediately adds that “reality is always in the making through the dynamic relations of hybrid assemblages that only after the fact are purified by moderns as pertaining to either nature or culture.”<sup>34</sup> To say that reality is in the making through multiple enactments doesn’t get one off the ontological hook insofar as it is still, after all, a claim about what reality is like. On the other hand, if there is no ontological imperative that addresses us from something we do *not* merely enact or perform, the question remains: why is bringing the pluriverse into being something that should be pursued? Perhaps there is a normative presupposition lurking behind the imperative to enact a pluriverse, but Blaser doesn’t seem to offer any explicitly normative arguments.

Blaser attempts to address the problem of implicit ontological commitments by asserting that “the claim of the pluriverse (or multiple ontologies) is not concerned with presenting itself as a more ‘accurate’ picture of how things are ‘in reality’ (a sort of meta-ontology); it is concerned with the possibilities that this claim may open to address emergent (and urgent) intellectual/political problems.” However, he attempts to situate his political ontology “at the interstice between the possible and the plausible that the foundationless foundational claim

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<sup>32</sup> Blaser, ‘Ontological Conflicts’, p. 551; the question is repeated on page 566.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 551-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 552.

of a pluriverse opens.”<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding his attempt to rescue the idea of plausibility from “accuracy” by associating it instead with “efficacy,” surely some kind of reference to “reality” is unavoidable in order to make a meaningful distinction between what is “plausible” and what isn’t. Furthermore, since the word “plausible” has been associated with truth since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the attempt to tie it exclusively to efficacy is dubious. At best this reflects an unconvincing bias toward pragmatism and at worst an attempt to redefine the word in order to fit a predetermined theory.<sup>36</sup>

And finally, the purported connection of efficacy to plausibility is itself said to be “just another way of referring to the actual environment that has been brought into being from the infinite possibilities of the pluriverse,” which not only brings us right back to a purportedly “factual” claim about an “actual environment” (casual reference to the “actual” often signals the assumption of objective presence), but stakes its claim that political ontology entails no meta-ontological commitments on the assumption that the pluriverse, which is what is at issue, *is what has brought into being an actual environment* in which efficacy is connected to plausibility, which is supposed to rescue the pluriverse from meta-ontological commitments. So the connection of political ontology to efficacy purportedly rescues it from making truth claims about the world, and efficacy in turn connects it to plausibility, a connection said to be grounded in the pluriverse which brought it into being. In other words, the very claim that political ontology entails no ontological commitments is itself based upon an ontological commitment to the claim that the pluriverse has brought something into being.

Despite his admirable efforts to the contrary, Blaser leaves us in the quandary of perpetually running into ontological assumptions in the very attempts to avoid them. It seems to me that, rather than beginning from a normatively ambiguous imperative to bring a pluriverse into being, a similar effort might be better served by first suspending the ontological assumptions that have grown out of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 554.

<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, if Blaser intends to bring us back to the earlier meaning of the Latin *plausibilis*, “deserving applause, acceptable” ([Online Etymology Dictionary](#)), then it is no more connected to “efficacy” than it is to anything else that might be deserving of applause.

European experience of the world, as Blaser begins to do,<sup>37</sup> but without immediately positing anything about multiple ontologies. The methodology of such suspension is the phenomenological epochē, to be discussed further below. As a subtractive methodology, it doesn't begin with a big picture of multiple ontologies, whether this picture be theorized or enacted (or theorized as enacted, which is what Blaser's account does). Rather, in suspending theoretical assumptions it doesn't first seek a big picture. Instead, it first limits itself to the phenomenon at issue, whatever that may be. It can only proceed piecemeal, as it were, much as Heidegger had to begin with that being that lies closest – one's own existence as a concrete "being-there" (*Dasein*) – and through phenomenological analysis discovering the historical, and therefore also European, character of that being. Hence it was always an open question as to whether, and if so in what ways, the phenomenological ontology Heidegger carried out in *Being and Time* might be relevant to non-European modes of existence. As Martin Holbraad remarks in his response to Blaser, "What is ontology is itself an ontological question—a virtuous circularity that keeps anthropological horizons open"<sup>38</sup> (I would only subtract the qualifier "anthropological"). Hence it cannot begin as a project to either purify difference of sameness, to discover sameness behind difference, or to bring a pluriverse into being – even if the latter winds up being one of its effects.

#### ONTOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE MODERNIST ERA

Now although the Western European subject-object paradigm is well-known and has been thoroughly criticized in multiple ways, Heidegger did not take it to define the genuine *experience* of being that belongs to European modernity. Such subject-object dualism, a *cogito* set over and against a realm of spatial extension or, more colloquially, consciousness confronting a world of objects, is already an abstraction that we don't generally experience as such. We do not just exist indifferently alongside other objects "in" a world that contains us. When we engage in such theoretical abstractions, we've already left behind the world as we

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<sup>37</sup> As pointed out by Anders Burman in his response, Blaser follows many others in this – 'Ontological Conflicts', p. 561.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 563.

really experience it, and it was Heidegger's early claim in *Being and Time* that human beings always already live and act within an implicit pre-reflective understanding of "being" that is primarily given through affect, worldly know-how, and talking with others.

The representational character of modern European thought itself testifies to an active involvement that brings about validity and knowledge through the production of representation. But that drive toward knowing the world in Baconian power ultimately turns back upon the subjectivity that was its presumed initiator, only to reveal such subjectivity as itself swallowed up in a subjectless "placing before" with no one "before" whom it is placed. This is the error committed by those who assume that suspending Cartesian metaphysics is sufficient to ward off the interference of Western assumptions – they've merely suspended what was already a theoretical abstraction without digging down to a more pervasive experience of being-in-the-world. Ironically, the view of Western existence as something framed by the subject/object ontological paradigm itself belongs to the representational thinking that places the real before itself in representation. Or, to put it more simply, this kind of critique remains at the theoretical level and so neglects stepping back to a critique of the very *theoria* of theoretical representation as itself an abstraction from an experience of being that cannot be adequately understood in those terms.

Rather than simply adopting an understanding of ontology from the readily available options given in the Western philosophical tradition, Heidegger proposed to clarify ontology through phenomenology – that is, by letting "what is" show itself on its own terms, as it were. This entails the phenomenological "epochē" or suspension of one's own assumptions and presuppositions in order to let the matter of inquiry be manifest in its own terms, which in turn requires a critical awareness of what those assumptions and presuppositions are.<sup>39</sup> Hence

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<sup>39</sup> Heideggerian "hermeneutic" phenomenology is often distinguished from Husserlian "descriptive" phenomenology in that, whereas the latter requires the suspension of presuppositions, the former recognizes the impossibility of such a requirement, and instead asserts the necessity of entering into one's presuppositions in a certain way. However, I hold that suspension (the epochē) is equally necessary in Heideggerian phenomenology, and so anchoring the difference between Heidegger and Husserl upon these descriptors is misleading. We only gain insight into what must be suspended by way of a careful examination of our presuppositions *in light of* the way phenomena show themselves, and hence what saves the

the epochē is key, an argument I will elucidate and develop below. Even though Heidegger himself abandoned this Husserlian term, the suspension named by it is nonetheless operative in his approach to letting a matter of inquiry show itself on its own terms. The entire argument of his magnum opus *Being and Time*, for instance, is carried out within a rigorous suspension of the ontology of objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*), that is, the assumption that “to be” means to “be present,” actually or potentially, to a consciousness or awareness that can in turn observe such being-present and specify its properties, an assumption whose most explicit form can be seen in Descartes.

Scant research has been done on the possible relevance of Heideggerian thought to Indigenous/settler relations or to the project of decolonization. A notable exception is Nelson Maldonado-Torres who, following Heidegger’s early thought in *Being and Time*, attempts to develop the “being of coloniality” as an explicit theme.<sup>40</sup> Although I find useful his distinction, adopted in this essay, between “colonialism” as a historical event and “coloniality” as the systemic cognitive and experiential legacy of that event in post-colonial societies, I also find that, because the epochē is not rigorously deployed, his otherwise admirable attempt to bring Heideggerian thought into connection with the project of decolonization falls short of its potential.

For instance, not only does he seem to conflate chronological priority with ontological priority in an attempt to assert an ego defined through conquest (“*ego conquiro*”<sup>41</sup>) as constitutive ground of the Cartesian *ego cogito* simply because the former predated the latter,<sup>42</sup> but he also conflates Heideggerian and Cartesian ontologies as well. When he concludes that, because “Heidegger’s ontological turn missed” what he believes to be the Cartesian suppression of coloniality, “Cartesian epistemology and Heideggerian ontology presuppose the coloniality

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“hermeneutical circle” from vicious circularity is the manifestation of phenomena as the measure to which phenomenological analysis submits.

<sup>40</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the development of a concept,’ *Cultural Studies*, Vol 21, Nos. 2-3, 2007, 240-270.

<sup>41</sup> The term *ego conquiro* is taken from the work of Enrique Dussel. Although it seems apparent that Maldonado-Torres misunderstands Descartes in positing a desire to exclude the rationality of certain (colonized) other minds in the *cogito*, which contains no reference to other minds at all (colonized or not), it is not my purpose here to defend Cartesian thought but rather to suspend it.

<sup>42</sup> Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being,’ p. 245)

of knowledge and the coloniality of Being,”<sup>43</sup> he mistakenly attributes assumptions to Heidegger merely because he (unconvincingly) attributes the same assumptions to Descartes. Therefore, by neglecting to suspend Cartesian ontology, Maldonado-Torres ends up overlooking what is unique about Heidegger’s understanding of being-in-the-world, with respect to which Cartesian ontology is simply irrelevant. Hence his interpretation is based upon two errors: the assumption that Cartesian ontology presupposes coloniality and that Heidegger in turn presupposes Cartesian ontology. He thereby overlooks the *suspension of* Cartesian ontology within which the entire argument of *Being and Time* transpires, and so provides us with a salient example of the pitfalls of neglecting the epochē in the project of decolonization.

In this case, beyond a merely academic concern about accurate interpretations of western philosophers, it means that Maldonado-Torres’ attempt to think the coloniality of being fails to think at a properly ontological level at all, and winds up merely exhausting its critical force at the “ontic” level. Even though Maldonado-Torres explicitly invokes Heidegger’s notion of the ontological difference which “allows one to think clearly about Being and not to confuse it with beings or entities or God,”<sup>44</sup> that difference is immediately collapsed into a difference between different beings: the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, the ontological difference is that between particular beings and the way those beings are manifest, as distinct from an “ontic” difference between particular beings (e.g. the difference between cats and dogs, tables and chairs, doctors and lawyers, etc.). The only kind of difference I see in what Maldonado-Torres calls the “colonial difference” between colonizer and colonized is an ontic difference that is no more “ontological” than the difference between any other two types of beings in the world.<sup>45</sup>

That in itself could be regarded as an innocent oversight that only a few philosophy professors might worry about, were it not for the fact that the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to say, however, that there may not be ontological differences between different *worldings*, in Blaser’s sense of that term. But multiple worldings is hardly something that can be captured in an ontic colonizer/colonized binary.

“colonial difference” between colonizer and colonized that operates along the axis of superiority/inferiority – or, as Maldonado-Torres puts it, a “difference between Being and what lies below Being or that which is negatively marked as dispensable as well as a target of rape and murder”<sup>46</sup> – is an *ontologically illegitimate* one: it’s a difference that isn’t. Because it is a *semblance* of difference imposed by colonizers upon the colonized, the last thing we need to do is ontologize it. We want to *suspend* it, to put it out of commission – *not* assign it to an ontological level. The problem is that this way of approaching coloniality may inadvertently reconstruct the “damage centered” approach that Eve Tuck has thematized: a “pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community.” She primarily has in view the kind of social science research that aims “to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe,” and that “looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy.”<sup>47</sup> Hence it is well-intentioned and necessary even if problematic. However, elevating such brokenness and oppression to the ontological level risks rendering it even more intractable. Interestingly, Tuck calls for the “suspension” of such approaches, implying the necessity of an *epochē* of sorts without explicitly naming it as such.<sup>48</sup>

If the *epochē* were explicitly practiced, we need not go down the “damage centered” rabbit hole. The problem is that, through neglect of the *epochē* and the consequent failure to think at an ontological level, a semblance of difference at the ontic level get “ontologized” and thereby inadvertently reinforced by being placed outside of human agency, which is especially problematic with respect to Indigenous/settler and colonized/colonizer differences. The point is not to deny

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Eve Tuck, ‘Suspending damage: A letter to communities’, *Harvard Educational Review* 79(3), 2009: 409-27., p. 413. See also Chandler/Reid’s critique of the notion of Indigenous “resilience” as something “being deployed to valorize disempowering conceptions of subjectivity” (D. Chandler & J. Reid, “‘Being in Being’: Contesting the ontopolitics of Indigeneity”, *The European Legacy*, 23:3, 251-268., p. 263).

<sup>48</sup> I would also argue that the “desire-based research framework” she offers in place of damage-centered research would fare better under the *epochē* explicitly practiced. Any attempt to depathologize “the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered” would benefit from explicitly suspending the conceptual and affective framings that bring them to appear as nothing more than broken, conquered, and oppressed.

real differences. Rather, the point is to suspend all ontological assumptions along with the differences they presuppose in the epochē, only thereby hoping to catch sight of what might be manifest on its own terms. If there are differences at the ontological level, they will only become manifest through the epochē. Otherwise we risk merely reinstating semblance rather than truth, an ontological concern, and pathologizing entire peoples, an ethical concern.

Hence unlike Maldonado-Torres, what I draw from Heidegger is not a departure point for conceiving the colonized experience of being, but rather an *intercultural methodology* defined by the epochē, a methodology that is subtractive rather than additive. That is, I make no attempt to conceive of colonized or Indigenous ways of experiencing being since, as I will argue below, the epochē is a necessary condition for any such attempt.

#### THE HEIDEGGERIAN CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

When Heidegger turns to a phenomenological examination of what the ontological framework guiding European modernity looks like, the first assumption to be suspended in the epochē is that of Cartesian metaphysics. But the phenomenon that thrusts itself into the foreground in any attempt to understand the modern world is technology. Hence the inquiry into modernity suggests an inquiry into the essence of modern technology. For Heidegger, “essence” refers not to an abstract universal but rather to the way a phenomenon appears when it is allowed to show itself in its own terms, that is, phenomenologically. It’s a *way* of appearing or a *manner* of emergence, rather than something that appears or emerges, and is not to be confused with the classic metaphysical notion of a universal “essence” behind appearances.<sup>49</sup> Thought phenomenologically, “essence” is the way something appears as the phenomenon it most properly is, on its own terms. Hence the essence of technology is not to be confused with technological artifacts. In fact, the “essence” of modern technology on Heidegger’s account turns out not to be anything *technological* at all – a point sorely misunderstood by critics who immediately assume that Heidegger is anti-technological. Rather, the essence of modern technology, on Heidegger’s

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<sup>49</sup> “Essence” is a translation of the German word *Wesen*: see Heidegger’s discussion of this term and what he took to be the danger facing modern humanity in the essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell, London, Harper Perennial, 2008, pp. 311-341).

account, is a certain way in which phenomena are manifest in the modern world.

An everyday assumption we tend to make about modern technology is that it is merely a means to an end that is created by human beings – an assumption Heidegger calls the “instrumental/anthropological” model of technology.<sup>50</sup> When we see ancient and modern technologies as being essentially the same except that one is more efficient and advanced, we primarily have such an instrumental/anthropological model in view. This model also predominates when we see technology as something that’s in itself neutral but which can be used for good or bad purposes. Heidegger proposes that we suspend this instrumental/anthropological assumption as well, but he also thinks we may get somewhere by asking what a “means” to an “end” is in the first place.

Insofar as a means brings about an end, it assumes a notion of causality that Heidegger traces back to its Greek origins in the word *aitia*, which means that which enables something to be. Enabling to be brings something into manifestation, leading us to think of the essence of technology as a way of letting appear or a “way of revealing.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, we can trace the word “technology” itself back to its Greek origin in the word *techne*, which means bringing something about through craft or knowledgeable skill and was contrasted with *phusis*, usually translated as “nature,” which referred to something emerging into existence spontaneously of itself. Together, these two modes of bringing forth into manifestation belong within the wider notion of *poiesis*, which is “bringing forth into manifestation” per se. The point is that, once again, we arrive at manifestation or revealing.<sup>52</sup> So Heidegger takes this as a legible hint in language suggesting that, above and beyond technological artifacts, the essence of technology is a way of revealing or a mode of disclosure: it brings things to appear in certain ways. The question then becomes: in what way are things revealed in the modern era?

One of the examples Heidegger focuses upon in response to this question is that of a commercial airliner, which can easily be represented as an object with specific properties. This representation is “correct” enough since we can verify

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<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 312.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 313-318.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 318-19.

statements about those properties but, when we fixate exclusively upon it, the way the phenomenon is actually manifest in the world as the commercial airliner that it is remains hidden from view behind the assumption of its objective presence. If we follow the phenomenological method by suspending our assumptions about what an airliner is and attend to how it actually appears, the phrase “ready for take-off” seems to describe the essence of the airliner far more appropriately than, say, defining it as “an industrially produced mechanical object designed for air transportation.” The phrase “ready for take-off” is much closer to the way this phenomenon is manifest in our actual experience than is an abstract description of its objective properties in isolation from its real-world relations – a description that actually abstracts it from the world in which it appears. As ready for take-off, the plane shows itself to be something on hand and readily available for use, bound up in a network of relations.<sup>53</sup> The clue Heidegger takes from this is that the essence of technology as a way of revealing has something to do with revealing things as constantly available and on hand for ready deployment, calculation, extraction, and storage, like a repository of data or stock. The emphasis is not even on usage per se but merely upon *availability*. The German term Heidegger applies to this way of revealing is *Bestand*, which is usually translated as “standing reserve” but can also be rendered as “constant availability” (I will use these phrases interchangeably).<sup>54</sup>

To take another of Heidegger’s examples, when we compare an old wooden water wheel set into the current of a river with a modern hydroelectric dam in terms of neutral instrumentality only, they both seem to be more or less the same kind of thing except that one is modern and efficient whereas the other is primitive and crude. But Heidegger suggests that the old water wheel was “built into” the river in such a way that it derived its essence (its manner of appearing) from the river. That is, the way the water wheel appears is drawn from and depends upon the way the river itself is manifest – it is manifest in terms of the river. We might say that the appearance of the water wheel is contextualized by

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>54</sup> For the association of the essence of modern technology with “total availability,” see David Kolb, *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 145 and passim.

the river. In the case of the hydroelectric power plant, by contrast, the river is “dammed up into” the power plant, and thereafter the river derives its essence from the power plant.<sup>55</sup> That is, the situation is now precisely reversed: the way the river appears is drawn from and depends upon the way the power plant is manifest – it is manifest in terms of the power plant. Here we must say that the appearance of the river is contextualized by the power plant.

Contextualized this way, the river is henceforth manifest as a power utility or resource. This now names what the river *is*, which means the way it appears. It is “challenged” in a way to be revealed as an energy source by the essence of technology, which is a kind of revealing that challenges. In other words, Heidegger finds something less than peaceful about this mode of disclosure in that it sets upon things in order to extract and store, a “setting upon” that shoves other possible ways of revealing into the background as inessential or, at worst, mere subjective projections. Nature becomes “natural resources,” and river current remains available as a utility to be taken up, stored, and sold by power companies. But surely the river is nonetheless a pretty sight irrespective of the power plant. Of course: as Heidegger puts it, it is “an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry.”<sup>56</sup> Even the beauty of nature becomes something readily available for tourists to extract and store on cell phones. Images of “natural attractions” will now be replicated on T-shirts, coffee mugs, screen savers, and social media posts.

Insofar as this way of revealing is a kind of challenge, it’s not just a neutral way of seeing things but rather is a kind of *demand* that requires expediting, and which can be summed up in the phrase “maximum yield at minimum expense.”<sup>57</sup> In this sense “efficiency,” a word that seems so self-evident that we automatically give voice to it without a second thought, is a modernist criterion. Thus to merely say that modern technology is more *efficient* than earlier technologies is to read the earlier in terms of the later. It is to impose a modernist measure upon older worldings that were not responding to such a demand or criterion.

In the revealing that holds sway throughout modernity, everything is

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<sup>55</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 321.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

challenged forth and expedited so that it may be “on call” – that is, constantly available, on hand and ready for retrieval. Heidegger argues that, phenomenologically speaking, when things are revealed in this way they no longer merely stand over and against us as objects.<sup>58</sup> The cyberspace network we daily plug ourselves into on our computers and mobile devices doesn’t primarily appear as an object over and against us. It can be made to appear that way only when we pull back from our involvements with it and adopt the perspective of a detached subject looking at an object – which is not how we primarily experience this phenomenon. What is truly manifest is no longer an “object” per se but has become something more like multiple interlocking networks of data or information that are simply on hand and extant, and in which we are caught up and entangled. We hook ourselves up to a prosthetic cognition/affect network in such a way that where “it” ends and “I” begin is a fuzzy boundary, if indeed a boundary exists at all outside the kind of detached reflection upon it that we’re engaging in right now.

The Cartesian “subject” itself disappears into constant availability, yielding a *subjectless* network in which human beings appear as human resources and target markets. Social media now makes every aspect of one’s daily existence, down to the most trivial details, readily available and on hand for consumption. This also reveals that human beings do not simply preside over this way of revealing insofar as they find themselves equally placed under the demand to be on call and available, thereby showing the superficiality of the commonplace assumption that the essence of technology is merely a neutral human-created means to an end. As distance shrinks and constant point-to-point connection is assured, both objects and subjects disappear into a global distancelessness. But in conquering distance, Heidegger asks, has this way of revealing things brought anything near? Or has nearness been sacrificed along with distance?<sup>59</sup>

The way of revealing that holds sway in modernity is not a “worldview” insofar as this would posit the human-as-subject at the basis, a subject which can choose to adopt a “view” of the world. It doesn’t originate in the subject. Rather,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>59</sup> Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, in *Poetry Language Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, New York, Harper Perennial, 1971, pp. 163-164.

modern humanity is responding to what addresses itself to it. We are the ones addressed, not the other way around – we are not efficient causal agents. Humanity is itself challenged and ordered to exploit the energies of nature – that is, humanity itself is challenged and made to appear within the revealing that determines everything as standing-reserve. When human beings “see” nature as a storehouse of available information and resource, they are responding to something. When people are characterized as “human resources” and evaluated in terms of productivity and efficiency, they are standing within an experience of being that prevails in Western modernity and are responding to it. Such response takes place well before conscious awareness comes along and reflects on it. Heidegger will say that this response is a response to being – that is, it is a response to a disclosure that has come to define human existence. Human beings are not masters over but participants in this disclosure, a disclosure that is operative through one’s affect, one’s pre-objective understanding, and one’s language. Such disclosures or ways of revealing are the worldings in which we live, move and have our being. Human beings are neither active initiators nor the passive recipients of worldings. Rather, they participate *medially*. That is, worlding must be thought in the middle voice rather than in terms of the passive and active voices.<sup>60</sup>

Heidegger also saw the Western/modernist way of revealing as a preminent danger in its totalizing imposition: the demand is put to the totality of “what is” that it show itself in terms of standing reserve, and as that *only*.<sup>61</sup> It was this sense

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<sup>60</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to develop the middle voice with respect to worldings here, but I have written about the middle voice elsewhere with respect to interdisciplinarity (Kisner, W., 2017. ‘The Medial Character of Interdisciplinarity: Thinking in the Middle Voice’. *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, No. 35, pp. 29-52.) and ecological ethics (Kisner, W., 2014. *Ecological Ethics and Living Subjectivity in Hegel’s Logic: The Middle Voice of Autopoietic Life*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan). With respect to worldings, I would argue that only by thinking of enactment in terms of the middle voice can we extricate ourselves from the realist/constructivist quandary that besets cultural studies (in particular, see my discussion of the tension between realism and idealism or discovery and construction in Kisner 2017, op.cit., pp. 30ff.). In the response to a way of revealing, it is not as if we passively respond to a worlding already present and ready-made, nor is it as if we actively construct worldings through our collective enactments. Thought medially, it is both at once: we respond to that which we enact, and enactment only takes place through such response. Worlding emerges through the interplay of call and response, in which the call is only manifest in the response and vice versa.

<sup>61</sup> With respect to standing reserve, Amazon’s “Alexa” is an interesting example – see <https://money.cnn.com/2018/09/22/technology/alexa-everywhere/index.html> [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

of total imposition that worried Heidegger, and led him to call it a “totalizing framework” (*Gestell*).<sup>62</sup> The totalizing framework is not itself something technological like a cell phone, a computer, or even the Internet. Rather, these phenomena show themselves within the totalizing framework and in its terms. All technological apparatuses and activity are themselves responses to the totalizing framework that demands manifestation in terms of constant availability, while the totalizing framework is itself carried out by those responses.

Although the totalizing framework is not a result of human choice or deliberate construction, it does not come to pass apart from human involvement either. We modern human beings always already find ourselves within the totalizing framework that reveals reality in terms of constant availability and calculability. We can never only subsequently take up a relationship to this mode of disclosure, as if we could first stand outside this relationship and then choose to enter it. Therefore, the question as to how we are to relate *to* the essence of technology “always comes too late.”<sup>63</sup> As a being-in-the-world in which the “world” is the totalizing framework that reveals things in terms of constant availability, we have always already related to it and are always already in the process of doing so. But we can respond to that within which we already stand, and here is where the phenomenological epochē and the clarity thereby afforded become relevant. So long as we don't make the step back to think at an ontological level, which phenomenology enables us to do, we can't even get started. In order to see the possibility of other modes of disclosure, we must first see the one we're in.

#### INDIGENIZING THE ACADEMY

My worry about calls to “Indigenize” academia should now become clear.<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> I avoid the customary translation of *Gestell* as “enframing” because, in my view, this English word does not capture the impositional and totalizing character that Heidegger wants to convey.

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 329.

<sup>64</sup> For some recent developments in universities, see the online article ‘Indigenizing the academy’ at <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/indigenizing-the-academy/> [accessed Dec. 4, 2019]. These efforts have taken on some urgency in response to the TRC call to action 62ii: “Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.”

danger is that such “Indigenous content” will not appear in its own terms – which presumably would be terms radically different from those of the history of Western metaphysics – but rather will appear as one more repository of readily available data within the totality of scholarly research and knowledge. The totalizing character of the way of revealing just described is such that it can brook no mysteries – it demands that everything be rendered available and accessible. And this demand put to the Indigenous people who were already colonized bodily threatens to extend that colonization to an entire way of being on the earth (something we clumsily call “culture”).

Thus it is not with hope but with trepidation that I learn of Westerners looking to Indigenous “resilience” in order to “help western societies cope with the environmental crises of the Anthropocene,” or when “the modern subject is encouraged to “become indigenous” based upon the purported “radical promise” that we can create a better world “by learning to world in the ways indigenous peoples already do.”<sup>65</sup> Whereas Chandler and Reid are concerned, perhaps rightly, that “the figure of the indigenous, far from producing a decolonization of state thinking, is being deployed to valorize disempowering conceptions of subjectivity” as dispossessed yet “resilient,” my concern is that Indigenous worldings could be assimilated into a grand repository of readily accessible information as a “model to peoples worldwide”<sup>66</sup> within a totalizing framework that submits all phenomena to the same homogenous measure of disclosure: constant availability on hand for potential mining. The intentions and purposes behind various mining efforts, regardless of how benevolent they may be, has no effect on this. In the context of such a totalizing framework, any purported “ontological” differences between worldings are again reduced to epiphenomenal features of the same ontological disclosure in terms of standing reserve, so much so that the very singular uniqueness of each is affirmed simultaneously with its effacement. That such purported uniqueness itself *is precisely what gets taken up* into the stockpile of readily available data indicates how insidious and pervasive this ontological disclosure is, and it underlines the

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([http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf) - accessed Dec. 4, 2019.)

<sup>65</sup> Chandler and Reid, ‘Being in Being’, p. 254, 257.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

necessity of addressing it at the ontological level above and beyond calls for moral accountability and attitudinal changes.

Already framed in terms of unification (synthesis) over difference, the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) now offers “knowledge synthesis grants.” Under “emerging areas of research,” the 2018 SSHRC summary report listed “Models for bridging Indigenous and Western knowledge systems” and “Digitization, protection and accessibility of Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.”<sup>67</sup> The haste to “bridge” immediately carries with it the demand that Indigenous knowledge be made readily available through “digitization, protection and accessibility” – that is, that it be rendered on hand as standing reserve.

As Sa'ke'j Henderson and Marie Battiste somewhat cynically put it nearly twenty years ago, “The rush on Indigenous knowledge systems, teachings, and heritage by outsiders is an effort to access, to know, and to assert control over these resources [...] As Indigenous knowledge and heritage becomes more intensely attractive commercially, the cognitive heritage that gives Indigenous peoples their identity is under assault from those who would gather it up, strip away its honored meanings, convert it to a product, and sell it.”<sup>68</sup> The insidiousness of the totalizing framework Heidegger attributes to modernity is again legible in the fact that in this very resistance to it, that framework still creeps back in with the characterization of “Indigenous knowledge systems, teachings, and heritage” as *resources* that must be protected from outsider control. If Heidegger is right, those “outsiders” are themselves responding to a way of revealing over which they do not preside, and to frame the problem as a struggle over control of resources means that both Indigene and colonizer are drawn into the orbit of the same mode of disclosure.

Relevant to this problem but for very different reasons, Tuck and Yang advocate “an ethic of incommensurability” that foregrounds the differences

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<sup>67</sup> “Toward a successful shared future for Canada - Research insights from the knowledge systems, experiences and aspirations of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples”. [https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/society-societe/community-communitite/ifca-iac/03-aboriginal\\_peoples\\_in\\_Canada\\_report-les\\_peuples\\_autochtones\\_en\\_Canada\\_rapport-eng.aspx#intro\\_ksg](https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/society-societe/community-communitite/ifca-iac/03-aboriginal_peoples_in_Canada_report-les_peuples_autochtones_en_Canada_rapport-eng.aspx#intro_ksg) [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

<sup>68</sup> Marie Battiste and Sa'ke'j Henderson, ‘Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge’, Saskatoon, Purich Publishing Ltd., 2000, p. 12.

between decolonization and other social justice projects.<sup>69</sup> They raise the interesting possibility of decolonization as an unknown future incommensurate with any known paradigms, thereby implicitly framing it as a state of exception in its rejection of all settler juridicality, democratic or otherwise.<sup>70</sup> I depart from Tuck and Yang, however, in that I do not believe that the desire to find common ground is inherently a bad thing, nor do I accept the cynical view that reconciliation is reducible to “rescuing settler normalcy” and “rescuing a settler future.”<sup>71</sup> Keeping in mind the TRC’s delimited sense of the word, reconciliation signifies respect. But the “looking back” in respect must also be a looking forward to future possibilities.<sup>72</sup> Such futurity cannot be hastily grasped all at once and

<sup>69</sup> Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012, 1-40.

<sup>70</sup> For a sustained account of the state of exception with respect to both its democratic as well as totalitarian possibilities, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, p. 35. Although Tuck’s and Yang’s article explicitly rejects the assumption that “land can be owned by people” as a “colonial view of the world,” it inconsistently reasserts the very land ownership repudiated with the repeated demand that “stolen Native land” be “repatriated” (p. 24 and passim) – as if the theme of returning stolen goods can presuppose anything other than property, and as if those to whom stolen land is returned today would be anything other than the presumed rightful heirs. Sometimes the article accomplishes this feat in a single sentence, as when it states that decolonialization “requires the abolition of land as property and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people,” as if the possessive designation “Native land” does not presuppose the very “land as property” just renounced (p. 26). Indeed, the more the article tries to foreclose settler concepts, the more it relies upon them (e.g. sovereignty, justice, property, etc.). The more it tries to purify decolonization of metaphor, the more it depends upon massive metaphorical extensions of colonialism. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the article ends up simply being reactionary, with the “re” in “repatriation” signifying the reconstruction of a pre-contact state rather than a move forward into something beyond property and landownership per se. In the wake of its collapse into inconsistency and empirical impossibility, all that remains is what one suspects might be the motivation behind the article in the first place: maximization of settler guilt. And of course there is nothing specifically decolonialist about guilt – white settlers are well acquainted with a long history of guilt cultivation and indeed have relished it (just read Nietzsche!), making the upshot of the article another strident and tired call to feel guilty, even if only for settlers. The cultivation of guilt, of course, is a project that history has amply shown to be impotent at bringing about progressive change but quite instrumental in preventing it.

<sup>72</sup> I realize of course that my own argument could be all-too-easily dismissed as a settler “path to innocence” that side-lines the decolonialist project by drawing attention elsewhere. Aside from committing the circumstantial variety of the ad hominem fallacy by ignoring an argument’s logic in favour of posited nefarious motives hastily drawn from the circumstances of its author, such dismissal itself runs the risk of undermining the project it advocates by the uncritical adoption of Western metaphysical concepts. I seek to hold open futurity by suspending such assumptions and avoiding the foreclosure of possibilities in a haste

cannot be determined in advance by any individual or group. Whereas Tuck and Yang seek to differentiate the decolonialist project from other social justice efforts to the degree that the latter presuppose settler values and motives, their lack of attention to the ontological level lead them to overlook the Western categories they assume in their own conception of the decolonialist project. Hence not only do they presuppose inexplicit normative values, but they leave both settler as well as Indigenous experiences of being unclarified. To that degree the decolonialist project as they conceive it winds up predetermined, thereby foreclosing possibilities that may lie outside that conception – possibilities such as reconciliation.

My own purpose in this essay is not overtly decolonialist. Rather it is to clear the ontological ground, as it were, prior to ontic social justice projects through the phenomenological epochē. In that respect, again, the approach derived from Heideggerian phenomenological ontology, which I believe is appropriate to settler status, is subtractive rather than additive. Rather than assert what decolonialism should look like, I seek to put in abeyance assumptions that threaten to covertly intrude and predetermine it. And in order to do that successfully, those assumptions must be made explicit. It is imperative to recognize, however, that the project of reconciliation is fraught with risk, and in order to find a way forward it is incumbent upon us to be circumspect by making explicit the mode of revealing in which we swim like fish in water. At the minimum, and regardless of good settler intentions, it means we cannot assume that ways of life belonging to people other than us are or should be made readily available as information, data, resources, and so on. This requires *reticence* and *recognition of distance* without being in a hurry to add new content to existing curricula and bodies of knowledge. It is along these lines that I'd like to discuss what I call "ontological respect."

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to predetermine what it must look like. To be sure, Tuck and Yang conclude their piece with an assertion of the open-ended future of decolonization, but that openness is belied by the repeated assertion of land ownership/entitlement and that it will entail "abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples" (p. 36). The epochē I am proposing here, however, suspends both settler desire for future security as well as any present claims about what "land" will mean in the future.

## ONTOLOGICAL RESPECT

Ontological respect is not driven by rights claims or even by the desire to overcome colonialization, although it is consistent with these things and may be a necessary condition for them. Ontological respect is driven by the pursuit of wisdom and is characterized by reticence and recognition of distance.<sup>73</sup> Rather than immediately seeking to diminish distance, ontological respect holds back, allowing distance to show itself and remain what it is. Ontological respect is not in a hurry. It has no overarching agenda that must be satisfied, nor does it have a predetermined endpoint that must be reached. It doesn't seek moral approval, and it doesn't presume its own virtue. It allows the other to be other, not out of moral respect for rights or for the universal dignity of persons, but out of respect for (a cautious "looking back" to) an experience of being. Ontological respect does not desire to accommodate or appropriate such experience to one's own, still less does it seek to flatter or condescendingly "validate" anything. Rather, it merely seeks to understand, and it is ready to recognize when it doesn't. "Understanding," for its part is not about appropriation or assimilation to predetermined paradigms, but rather is a *listening* that carefully attends in an effort to let something show itself in its own terms and thereby show itself truly. Such listening is not about hearing another person out, or empathetically listening to the personal struggles and traumas of individuals. It is about hearing what is said in a language, hearing a way of being, a worlding.

But in order to be careful, such listening strives to be circumspect in an awareness of one's own experience of being and therefore also of one's own predetermined paradigms that conceal or reveal that experience. To put it more simply, in order to truly listen to the other, I must also listen to myself, where the "self" I hear is not my individual ego but rather the particular configuration of historical reverberations that determine my own experience of being. In order to listen, I must keep myself from getting in the way and becoming "all mouth and

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<sup>73</sup> Heidegger too speaks of "reticence" (*Verschwiegenheit*) with respect to authentic human existence (Heidegger 1996, 283), but whereas he locates it in the call of conscience back to authentic existence per se, my usage here refers to the specific mode of existence that is an authentic being-with-others (*Mitsein*). Held in common with Heidegger's sense of the term, however, is the call out of idle public chatter (*Gerede*) in order to listen in "authentic silence." Heidegger writes that "reticence articulates the intelligibility of Dasein [human existence] so primordially that it gives rise to a genuine potentiality for hearing and to a being-with-one-another that is transparent" (Heidegger 1996, 159).

no ears,”<sup>74</sup> which means suspending my presuppositions in order to let the matter show itself in its own terms rather than in terms I impose upon it. In phenomenology such suspension is called the epochē – literally a “holding back” – and it refers to the “bracketing out” of everything I take for granted in my natural everyday attitude as well as the metaphysical baggage that saturates my habitual language and thought.

Now oddly enough, considering Heidegger’s own disastrous political engagements,<sup>75</sup> an interesting model of cross-cultural reticence and recognition of distance can be found in a largely neglected dialogue Heidegger wrote in 1954.<sup>76</sup> The dialogue is in part fictional and in part based upon an actual meeting that took place between Heidegger and Tezuka Tomio, a professor at the Imperial University in Tokyo. A major caveat is in order, however: this is not a dialogue between colonizers and the colonized, and so it cannot be simplistically adopted wholesale without modification. As its subtitle indicates, it is a dialogue between “a Japanese and an Inquirer” in which the “inquirer” is apparently Heidegger himself. Hence its context is one of a post WWII intercultural exchange between members of distant societies that had recently come to terms out of one of the deadliest conflicts in human history. Nonetheless, despite the fact that it is a dialogue between members of two different colonizing nations, it is instructive in its reticence and respect for distance. In addition, unlike the well-known Platonic dialogues, it is a dialogue across cultures – or, even better framed

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<sup>74</sup> D. H. Justice, ‘All mouth and no ears: Settlers with opinions’ [online], *The Conversation*, 2017. Available at: [https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/all-mouth-and-no-ears-settlers-with-opinions/?google\\_editors\\_picks=true](https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/all-mouth-and-no-ears-settlers-with-opinions/?google_editors_picks=true) [accessed Dec. 4, 2019].

<sup>75</sup> There is no need for me to add to the voluminous work that has been done on this topic. For some recent appraisals, see A. Mitchell and P. Trawny, *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks: Responses to anti-Semitism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017. My own approach to Heidegger’s infamous involvement with national socialism is that, whatever one makes of it, I can still glean much that is of value from the Heideggerian corpus without running the slightest risk of either falling prey to fascism and antisemitism or of naively “validating” these noxious ideologies. Since Heidegger’s text is explicitly framed as a set of “formal indications” (*formale Anzeige*) that must be filled out and enacted by the reader’s own phenomenological engagement with the matter itself (*die Sache selbst*), it is performative rather than indicative (Dahlstrom 1994). To maintain then, as some do, that remaining sympathetic to Heidegger’s philosophy on any level is to find oneself complicit in such ideologies is to misunderstand the phenomenological text on a merely indicative, non-phenomenological level as a repository of ideas one should be wary of adopting.

<sup>76</sup> Heidegger, ‘A Dialogue on Language’, in *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. Hertz, New York, Harper & Rowe, 1971, pp. 1-54. Henceforth cited in the text as “DL.”

in Blaser's terms, a dialogue across heterogenous worldings.

The dialogue begins in reminiscence of Shūzō Kuki, a former student of Heidegger's from Japan who had since deceased, but it immediately turns to what had occupied much of his reflections: *Iki*, a Japanese word ambiguously connected to art.<sup>77</sup> However, as soon as the idea of "aesthetics" is invoked to frame the discussion, Heidegger interjects a note of caution insofar as this Western concept stems from a European tradition foreign to the Japanese world. What recommends Western concepts to Tezuka, however, is not even so much a superficial connection between *Iki* and aesthetics but rather the "modern technicalization and industrialization of every continent" which would seem to permit of no escape from the "European conceptual systems" Heidegger wishes to hold at bay in any authentic encounter with non-Western worlds. And yet, this "no escape" is an initial appearance which may only be a semblance insofar as "the technical world which sweeps us along must confine itself to surface matters," leaving open the possibility of a "true encounter" between Japanese and European existence (DL 2-3). The dialogue is thus framed from the start in terms of an incommensurability, but not a dogmatically asserted one. Rather than the kind of stalemate suggested by Tuck and Yang, this is the potentially fruitful incommensurability of the phenomenological epochē that holds at bay the intrusions which threaten to cover it over. Nonetheless the danger remains that, as Tezuka puts it, "we [the Japanese] will let ourselves be led astray by the wealth of concepts which the spirit of the European languages has in store, and will look down upon what claims our existence, as on something that is vague and amorphous" (DL 3). But this danger can only be staved off by keeping incommensurability in full view, that is, by remaining in the epochē that suspends hasty connections and well-intentioned comparisons.

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<sup>77</sup> My interpretation is diametrically opposed to that of Michael Marra, for whom the dialogue is merely a monologue reflecting Heidegger's own philosophical presumptions (a failure ultimately due the purported impossibility of any real encounter with otherness that Marra draws from Kuki's poetry – see Michael Marra, *Essays on Japan*, Brill Academic Publishers, 2010, pp.168-9 and passim). However, Marra not only provides little to support this assumption beyond a superficial comparison of the way *iki* is defined in Heidegger's dialogue as opposed the way it is defined in Kuki's own work, but he also makes no discernible attempt to first understand how *iki* comes to be thought in either source, and he ignores the presence of Tezuka as well as the cautious, tentative character of all that is said in the dialogue.

That there is no facile “solution” being offered here quickly becomes apparent in that the difficulty facing the epochē has to do with the nature of language itself. Heidegger’s oft-cited assertion that language is the “house of being,” meaning that one’s fundamental experience of being-in-the-world is articulated in and through one’s language, is reinvoked in this dialogue, minimally implying that, at least in some cases, translation may be impossible. Heidegger readily admits that, although Kuki had an “uncommonly good command” of several European languages, he himself remains at a disadvantage: “But we were discussing *Iki*; and here it was *I* to whom the spirit of the Japanese language remained closed – as it is to this day” (DL 4). Hence the very fact that this dialogue takes place in German, and in view of Heidegger’s own admitted ignorance of the Japanese language, Tezuka reframes the danger in their dialogue up to that point as one inherent within language: “The language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about” (DL 5).

However, the statement is cautiously worded in the past tense, indicating that this may not necessarily hold for the future. So even though Europeans may “dwell in an entirely different house” than the Japanese, leading Heidegger to skeptically say that “a dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible,” Tezuka rejoins, “You are right to say ‘nearly’. For still it was a dialogue” (DL 5). Hence dialogue can nonetheless take place, but only within and in terms of the incommensurability revealed by the epochē, and it will not go unnoticed that it is the non-Westerner Tezuka who calls both interlocutors back to this open future. Without the epochē, the two parties may well believe they’re having a dialogue because they use the same words – words like “worldview” for instance – but if they mean very different things by the same word, the appearance of a dialogue is mere semblance. Indeed, Tezuka explicitly calls attention to the Kurosawa film *Rashomon*, which foregrounds very different interpretations of the same event within the same language (DL 16-17).<sup>78</sup> And Heidegger must even remain reticent about his own assertion that language is the house of being, expressing

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<sup>78</sup> Even though Tezuka invokes the film as an example of Europeanization within Japanese culture through photographic objectification, it will not have been lost on the reader that the film makes radical difference visible behind the apparent sameness of a commonly perceived event, surely not accidentally invoked in the context of a discussion about whether or not “language” means the same thing across cultures.

uncertainty as to whether or not the nature of language as he has tried to understand it is appropriate for the Japanese language at all (DL 8).

But insofar as their dialogue does indeed continue, it does so in light of a future that is only dimly discerned, an undefined something that is hesitantly called “the nature of language” or “the house of being” – perhaps what Husserl might have called an indeterminate determinacy – that draws the dialogue forward even as its participants do not clearly see the outcome. Once that which calls forth the dialogue becomes barely visible, the two interlocutors resolve not to violate the silence of its call, but rather to leave it “in unimpaired possession of the voice of its promptings” (DL 22). It is this resolve that opens the way for Heidegger to pose the question: “What does the Japanese world understand by language?” (DL 23). Tezuka takes a moment of meditative silence before attempting an answer, a silence respected by the unhurried patience of both parties. The silence grants the reticence to let the being of language come to utterance in Japanese – as opposed to fishing around for a Japanese word that says something about language. As the interlocutors put it, the task is not to speak *about* language, but to speak *from* language (DL 26). Staving off the temptation of conceptual representation, what is sought is more like a “hint” than a category. But Tezuka withholds the Japanese word he has in mind, not in order to be coy, but because, “We understand only too well that a thinker would prefer to hold back the word that is to be said, not in order to keep it for himself, but to bear it toward his encounter with what is to be thought” (DL 50-1).

The interplay between incommensurability and unity, or difference and sameness, in the dialogue is complex. In and through holding open the difference, a hint of something the same emerges, until Tezuka exclaims, “I sense a deeply concealed kinship with our thinking, precisely because your path of thinking and its language are so wholly other,” prompting Heidegger to raise the “question of the site in which the kinship ... comes into play.” The hint of kinship is only made manifest by holding open the boundless distance Tezuka relates to the Japanese word *Kū*, “the sky’s emptiness” (DL 40-1).

Returning to the question about the Japanese understanding of language, Tezuka hesitantly gives it voice: *Koto ba*. Heidegger does not ask what the words *mean*, which would lead back to conceptual representations and Western

metaphysics. Rather, he asks what the words *say*. That is, in what way does the essence of language in the Japanese world come to utterance in these words? Having long abandoned the Western metaphysical notion of aesthetics as unhelpful in understanding Japanese, the word *Iki* had been tentatively defined as “the pure delight of the beckoning stillness,” which now proves useful insofar as *Koto* “names that which in the event gives delight, itself, that which uniquely in each unrepeatably moment comes to radiance in the fullness of its grace” (DL 45). One not only notices the absence of anything like the sensual/intelligible dualism bound up in conceptions of material signifiers and their cognitive significations, but also the singularity of a unique and unrepeatably moment that would seem to be far removed from the universality associated with general terms employed to designate multiple instances. “Ba” in turn names “the petals that stem from Koto,” (DL 47) which all leads to saying the nature of language in the Japanese world as “flower petals that flourish out of the lightening message of the graciousness that brings forth” (DL 53).

It is not my purpose here to develop the nuances of this strange sounding “definition” of language. Rather, I only call attention to the reticence and respect for distance with which the interlocutors wind up speaking *from* (as opposed to *about*) language in a way that will make little sense from the perspective of Western metaphysics, which is placed in epochal brackets throughout the dialogue.<sup>79</sup> Another thing we learn from this dialogue is that it is not sufficient to merely say that cultural members should articulate their own tradition as its sole authorities, because they also may inadvertently adopt Western metaphysical categories and then stand within an ontological framework foreign to them. For instance, when Heidegger refers to Kuki’s explanation of *Iki* as a “sensuous radiance through whose lively delight there breaks the radiance of something suprasensuous,”

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<sup>79</sup> Although the epochē prohibits hasty connections, we might cautiously invoke the Lnu’uk languages in this context insofar as the various senses of Lnu’uk words and stories, on Sa’ke’j Henderson’s account, seem to be open to future modifications according to context – perhaps indicating an altogether different, temporal and process-oriented understanding of “universality” (see L’nu Humanities, in Battiste 2016, 29ff.). Necessarily constrained by the English language in his account, Henderson writes, “The Lnu’uk language arose as a method to explain or to change energies, to contain or express them and their transformations” (Battiste 2016, 35). Given the methodological approach I’m advocating here, I would zero in precisely where the Indigenous sayings make the *least* sense in terms of Western metaphysics (see the following discussion about Heidegger’s method of interpreting ancient Greek texts).

Tezuka immediately embraces it as expressing how the Japanese experience art. What could be more authentic than a respected Japanese scholar speaking to a European about the Japanese experience? But once again, however, the epochē must be invoked insofar as the very sensuous/suprasensuous binary upon which Kuki's own explanation depends is itself a long-standing Western metaphysical opposition tracing back to the Platonic division between the sensuous world of becoming and the intelligible realm of ideas and persisting in various forms up through the modernist European distinction between realism and idealism (DL 14).

But revealing the fruitful nature of the incommensurability opened by the epochē, the interlocutors learn from this that the way Westerners often understand the nature of language – namely, as a sign system founded upon the distinction between material signifiers and non-material significations – is itself based upon the very same metaphysical sensuous/suprasensuous binary, prompting Tezuka to assert a radical difference between the European and the Japanese ways of understanding their own languages. Here we begin to get a sense of how sedimented metaphysical notions can be, even lodging themselves in seemingly innocent references to “language.” Hence once again the temptation “to rely on European ways of representation and their concepts” must be suspended. Heidegger even goes as far as to add that such “temptation is reinforced by a process which I would call the complete Europeanization of the earth and of man,” which indicates coloniality without explicitly naming it as such (DL 15). Throughout the dialogue, the danger not only never disappears but keeps recurring in slightly different forms and at ever more sedimented layers: from individual words and concepts like “aesthetics,” to the differences between languages, to the very idea that we understand the same thing by the word “language” when we make the comparison.

As we can see from this exchange, the fact that one may belong to a certain culture offers no assurance against the occlusion of that culture through Western metaphysical concepts. There is no authoritative guarantee of authenticity. The fact that Tezuka is Japanese doesn't prevent him from eagerly seizing upon Western notions in the attempt to render the full sense of key Japanese words transparent. Although caution is first suggested by Heidegger in reference to

Kuki's use of the term "aesthetics," Tezuka quickly sees the point and the dialogue proceeds in view of a mutual desire to connect whose zeal is tempered by reticence and respect for distance.

The absence of any authoritative guarantee of authenticity extends to Western culture and history as well. Merely being a European or an heir of Europe not only offers no such guarantee with respect to Western culture and history but, in Heidegger's view, a genuine understanding of the roots of the European experience of being is rare even among Europeans. This is particularly evident in Heidegger's method for interpreting ancient Greek texts, the understanding of which is often obscured when naively read through the metaphysical spectacles of subsequent Western history. His interpretation of the Presocratic philosopher Anaximander is a case in point, one which I take as a model for recovering the ontological senses and nuances of an experience of being from their concealment behind the metaphysical baggage of habitual concepts and terms.

Of course, an objection immediately comes to mind: when Heidegger interprets the ancient Greeks, he is dealing with material that stands at the beginning of Western history and so is hardly negotiating a cross-cultural connection. Indeed, this is a point Michael Marra makes with respect to Heidegger's interpretation of Holderlin's poetry, which Heidegger connects to the ancient Greeks, as opposed to Kuki's poetry, which has no such Western connection and so is more truly "other."<sup>80</sup> Certainly, Greek influence on subsequent Western history up to the present day is undeniable. However, a few important considerations are overlooked here.

First, in spite of Western valorization of the Greeks, there is no assurance that we have access to Presocratic thought at all. All we have are "fragments," which are not bits of papyrus discovered in archaeological digs, but rather are citations made by later authors. For instance, the only actual fragment we have of Anaximander's writing is a citation by an Aristotelian commentator named Simplicius who lived over an entire millennium after Anaximander's time. Prior to the modern printing press, the possibility that contingent variables may alter original sources become greater with the passage of time, and a millennium is a

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<sup>80</sup> Marra *op.cit.*

significant passage of time to say the least. What modifications, intentional or otherwise, may have occurred through the hands of successive copyists? And how accurately did Simplicius even cite the copy he had before him? Compounding this difficulty is the fact that we now look at these texts after almost two *more* millennia.<sup>81</sup>

Nonetheless, and of particular importance from a methodological perspective, it is precisely the retroactive historical sedimentation of successive interpretation that Heidegger suspends when looking at ancient Greek texts. Anything that suggests the ideas of later authors is subtracted in the hope of yielding something that speaks from out of the ancient Greek world undistorted by subsequent lenses. In this respect Heidegger's eventual translation looks quite strange, much like the definition of language at which Heidegger and Tezuka finally arrive. But *the very strangeness of its appearance is methodologically useful* in warding off customary assumptions and habitual concepts that otherwise easily intrude. Heidegger writes that even where "philological and historical research has occupied itself more thoroughly with the philosophers before Plato and Aristotle, their interpretation is still guided by modern versions of Platonic and Aristotelian representations and concepts."<sup>82</sup> Thus the Presocratics are often today understood as if they were theorizing about nature, but it was not until Aristotle that "nature" (*phusis*) became seen as a separate realm of inquiry over and against the realm of artefacts (*techné*).<sup>83</sup> Heidegger even winds up replacing his own cherished phrase "the being of beings" – since it's "neither clear nor firmly established what we ourselves think with the words 'being' and 'to be'"<sup>84</sup> – with "the presencing of what is present" (replacing *Sein* with *Anwesen*). Despite all these cautions, Heidegger's success in transposing himself and his readers into what "was thought and thinkable in such terms – as distinct from the prevailing representations of later times" is not a settled matter.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 245.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>83</sup> And even here, as Heidegger notes, it is not Platonic and Aristotelian concepts themselves but modern versions of those concepts that intrude – concepts such as "nature," from the Latin *natura*, often casually invoked as if this word means essentially the same thing as the Greek *phusis*.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

So too are the languages very different and, although Heidegger would like to believe that Western Europeans share a common “history of being” with the ancient Greeks, such an assumption is hardly assured, especially given the fact that Greek and German (as well as English) may well each embody entirely different “houses of being.” Therefore Heidegger states that “it is necessary that, before the translating, our thinking is translated into what is said in Greek. To make this thoughtful translation to what comes to language in the saying is to leap over a gulf.” To “translate” in German is *übersetzen*, literally to displace or cross (*setzen*) over (*über*); the Latin roots of the English “translate” have a similar meaning (*trans*, “across,” plus *lātus*, “carried,” hence literally to “carry over”). But whereas the Latin roots indicate carrying something over, the German indicates actually crossing over, which implicates the translator as well as what is translated. In order to translate a language, one must also at the same time *transpose* oneself into the world of that language. However, in order to carry out this crossing over, the epochē is necessary: “In order to trans-late ourselves into that which comes to language in the saying we must, prior to all translating, consciously set aside all inappropriate preconceptions.”<sup>86</sup> Moreover, in order to be successful, the epochē requires a unique kind of careful listening insofar as “even this casting aside of presuppositions wherever we find them inappropriate is insufficient so long as we fail to allow ourselves to be drawn into and to listen for that which comes to language in the saying.”<sup>87</sup> Once again, the epochē is characterized by an ontological respect that carefully listens before it speaks, recognizing distance and understanding the ever-present possibility of error.

Ontological respect, as a looking back that listens to what a word says out of the world of that language, does well to look back to the original senses of words with the kind of care and caution afforded by the epochē and practiced by Heidegger in the attempted recovery of the ancient Greek experience of being. Because it looks back to – that is, respects – the world in which the word first arose and made sense, such care regarding language is not just a pedantic exercise. Looking back to that world is not to privilege the past in reactionary nostalgia. Rather, it belongs to the epochē in suspending what has subsequently

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

come along to obscure that sense and that world in order to open a future that is not directed into the predetermined pathways of subsequent occlusions.

#### THE INTERCULTURAL EPOCHĒ

When it comes to a dialogue between the heirs of Europe and Indigenous peoples, of course, there are important differences. Not only is commonality hardly assured, but any assumed “sameness” must also itself be placed within the epochē. Here we depart from Heidegger’s hermeneutical circularity in which he assumes a sameness can be reached by translating Greek words into the language of “being,” and in turn suggests that such assumed sameness validates the translation.<sup>88</sup> Even though the subsequent history of Western thought has prevented hearing/reading the early Greeks in their own terms, that history has been in large part a response to the early Greeks nonetheless. Hence even if the connection is one of oblivion, as Heidegger maintains, it’s still a connection of some sort, and so he assumes a “same” – i.e. *that to which* Western history has been a long and protracted series of responses, whatever one makes of it – as a provisional direction for interpretation that is admittedly fraught with the possibility of error.

Unlike the ancient Greek world, no world of Indigenous peoples has ever served as a measure or touchstone to which Western history is challenged to look back in respect in order to respond in various ways. For the most part Western history has not been a series of responses to Indigenous peoples, and it can hardly be unequivocally characterized by a respectful regard that attempts to hear what is said from out of their worlds. As is well known, Western history has often been one of imposition, domination, and exploitation that recognized neither duty nor desire to thoughtfully respond to colonized peoples or to their worldings. If Western history can be characterized as oblivion with respect to its own roots at the ontological level, it might be characterized as oblivion with respect to coloniality at the ontic level.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>89</sup> There is of course also an alternate current in modern Western history, influenced by Herder, that defends colonized people against their colonizers, so it is not my intention here to be reductive about Western responses to colonization. The degree to which the values of Western liberal democracies can or should be adopted by non-Western societies, however, remains a problem lying outside the scope of this essay.

Hence an intercultural epochē with respect to Indigenous peoples can neither assume nor anticipate sameness. Indeed, it must actively suspend any such assumption or anticipation since, if anything is assumed, it is incommensurability. To put it another way, rather than an assumption or anticipation of commonality, a respect for distance constitutes the interpretative context. As in the dialogue between Heidegger and Tezuka, no such sameness is assumed, and so a very different hermeneutical approach must be taken – one that deploys an even more radical epochē. Not only are Western metaphysical notions and ways of experiencing the world put in suspension, but so also is any assumption of sameness. Only thereby can we hope to stave off the well-intentioned haste, like that which repeatedly crops up in the “Dialogue on Language,” to find common ground, a haste that often results in further occlusion.

The fact that there is no authoritative guarantee of authenticity, as mentioned previously, is further problematized when communication is carried out in English with respect to a settler audience. However, in the face of these obstacles I would suggest that the epochē, even if practiced implicitly and only sporadically, may allow something authentic to shine through the shroud of the Western experience of being. For instance Marie Battiste, citing primarily Western scholars, characterizes precontact Mi'kmaw pictographs as symbols that “portray” or “represent” abstract ideas and empirical objects, thereby assuming a sensual/intelligible binary.<sup>90</sup> I suspect, however, that she may be closer to the Mi'kmaw world when she explicitly suspends the Western “is/ought” dichotomy in order to suggest that “All aspects of Mi'kmaw life (i.e. Mi'kmaw law, Mi'kmaw religion and Mi'kmaw art), expressed the view that the ideal and actuality were fundamentally inseparable.” It is of course necessary to proceed further and bracket terms like “ideal” and the classically Aristotelian “actuality,” but we get the sense that this might be a fruitful point of departure for peeling back the layers of settler semblance enshrouding the Mi'kmaw world. However, because the epochē is not explicitly practiced as an intercultural methodology, she quickly slips back into the customary Western metaphysical lexicon by asserting that “the people sought to discover the universal lessons behind the ideals of a changing

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<sup>90</sup> Marie Battiste (ed.), *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the academy*, Sydney, NS, Cape Breton University Press, 2016, p. 134.

world. This unity of consciousness bonded the people into a strong worldview and an ideal of the Good...<sup>91</sup> Without an explicit methodology of the epochē, momentary interruptions of Western metaphysics by Indigenous incommensurability will be quickly covered over and metaphysically laden vocabulary will invade the text, inadvertently reinstating the very “cognitive imperialism” one sought to escape. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ubiquitous use of the word “worldview” by Indigenous advocates.

Now if merely ensuring that a purportedly authoritative member of a culture speak about that culture offers no assurance against occlusion through Western metaphysics, the problem is only exacerbated by the history of colonialism. Such Western terms are adopted not only because they’re readily available, but also because Indigenous people find themselves forced to speak the language of the colonizer in order to be understood at all. The cruel irony in this is that such an expedient to being heard actually prevents being heard. So you want us to respect your worldview? Great – we can all have our own worldviews in the big happy Cartesian family of intersubjectivity. Or – worse still – we can all contribute our worldviews to the big data picture of multicultural information within the total framework of constant availability. Then all such worldviews will be stored on hand and readily accessible for extraction as required. Everything gets annexed and, in their very availability, Indigenous experiences of being are concealed once again.

According to the argument I’ve laid out here, this is not respect; it is appropriation – inadvertent appropriation, perhaps, but appropriation nonetheless. It is also an annexation of Indigeneity when Indigenous people themselves demand that their “worldviews” be respected. The inadvertent and non-ethno-specific character of this annexation again underlines the fact that it is not a matter of changing our attitudes, which would preserve the metaphysical subject who “has” an attitude toward or a perspective on an objective world that is refracted differently through different cultural lenses. An attitude is something I adopt, a stance I take, a way in which I position myself. The point – for myself as a white settler, at any rate – is not to adopt a position or take a stance, but to suspend my positions and stances. What is needed is a heedful listening, which is

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

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only possible through the recognition and suspension of the Western experience of being in which we stand, and which in turn may open the possibility of experiencing things differently – although the latter cannot be the goal without instrumentalizing it and throwing us right back into the totalizing framework. This suspension of the Western experience of being as well as the anticipation of commonality while making Western metaphysical concepts explicit for bracketing is what I call the intercultural epochē,<sup>92</sup> and constitutes the ontological respect characterized by reticence and recognition of distance. As Heidegger’s inquirer reticently ventures to his Japanese interlocutor:

The prospect of the thinking that labors to answer to the nature of language is still veiled, in all its vastness. This is why I do not yet see whether what I am trying to think of as the nature of language is also adequate for the nature of East Asian language; whether in the end – which would also be the beginning – a nature of language can reach the thinking experience, a nature which would offer the assurance that European-Western saying and East Asian saying will enter into dialogue such that in it there sings something that wells up from a single source (DL 8).

Finding such a “single source” is the desire for genuine connection and being with one another. But we mustn’t be in a hurry to get there.

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<sup>92</sup> Although a better term might be something like “inter-worldly epochē” in that it invokes the heterogeneity of worldings at the ontological level as opposed to the problematic and perhaps over-used notion of “culture,” for the present at least I retain the latter term for its greater traction and recognizability.