Knowledge Production and the Unthinkable: Weaving Stories of Art, Gender, and Land

Christin Huntsman

University of San Francisco, christin.huntsman@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.usfca.edu/thes

Part of the Anthropology Commons, Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons, Epistemology Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, History of Gender Commons, Indigenous Studies Commons, International and Area Studies Commons, Philosophy of Science Commons, Place and Environment Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Queer Studies Commons, Social Justice Commons, Theory and Criticism Commons, Theory and Philosophy Commons, Theory, Knowledge and Science Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Huntsman, Christin, "Knowledge Production and the Unthinkable: Weaving Stories of Art, Gender, and Land" (2024). Master's Theses. 1581. https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1581

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the All Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.
Knowledge Production and the Unthinkable: Weaving Stories of Art, Gender, and Land

MASTER OF ARTS
In
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Christin Huntsman
May 1, 2024

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO
Knowledge Production and the Unthinkable: Weaving Stories of Art, Gender, and Land

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS
In
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Christin Huntsman
May 1, 2024

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

APPROVED:

Q.P. _______________________________ May 16, 2024
Capstone Advisor

Q.P. _______________________________ May 16, 2024
MAIS Director

Date

Date
Abstract

Colonialism is deeply and violently embedded in Western knowledge formation—dominant power structures produce epistemes that uphold and perpetuate colonial narratives. This kind of knowledge production forecloses other possibilities. Western discourse of truth becomes universalized to the point that other worldviews, other knowledges that do not conform to hegemonic norms, are suppressed or silenced. This thesis examines three areas of hegemony and erasure: art, gender, and land. First, the history of art clearly marks a delineation between Western elitist artistic masterpieces and non-Western ethnographic artifacts. Eurocentrism of art in the academy determines what counts as art and how art is categorized. Second, the gender binary perpetuates not just the inequality and subordination of women, but the very existence of the rigid notion of gender at all. Science is deployed to legitimize the naturalized truth claims about gender. Third, land holds the tension of being both home to ancestral plants, animals, and Native peoples; and also a location of historic and current ecological violence and dispossession. Indigenous memory and knowledge re-story land as part of a relationship of reciprocity. Overall, this thesis analyzes knowledge production and what has been made to be unthinkable.
Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my childhood self who, to the annoyance of all those around her, would not stop asking why.

I extend my wholehearted thanks to those who have been a part of this journey:

My advisor Quỳnh N. Phảm, for ensuring that my first foray into critical social theory was filled with decolonial thinkers. I feel that the stars aligned so that I could have you as my thesis advisor, and I could not be more sure that I am where I am because of your impact.

My second reader Jennifer Murphy, for giving me the confidence to think differently, and to lean into my own stories. You gifted me the understanding that I did not have to learn all the rules to break them in all the best ways, and this thesis was born from that wisdom.

Professor Olivier Bercault, for helping me ground my abstract concepts of theory in the real world realities of peace and conflict.

My fellow classmates, for being absolute treasures amidst the stress, excitement and confusion that was our lives. I could not have asked for a better cohort. I don’t know that I would have made it through without your chats, encouragement, grumbling, brainstorming, and laughter.

The two people who keep everything running: Aide Rodriguez and Stephanie Blanco. I would have been completely lost without your reassurance and assistance as you answered my countless emails and questions.

The photography teachers in my undergrad, for introducing me to the world through a camera lens. The ability to think creatively and to take critique has served me well in this thesis.

Remington, my husband, my sense-maker, for weathering the chaos of this journey alongside me. You’ve experienced this project from start to finish: reassuring me through the imposter syndrome and confusion, encouraging me in pursuit of areas of interest, and motivating me when my research became unwieldy—not to mention reading and discussing practically every version along the way. This thesis reached the finish line because of your unwavering support.

Alena and Keesha for hours spent giving me feedback and valuable insight into science realms.

My parents, for instilling in me the principles to go out in the world and find my own way, while always remembering my roots. I will always be grateful for growing up amidst the earth.

My siblings, for storying the world with me as we grew and then for always challenging my perspective. The deep conversations that have always flowed so freely between us made it easy to dig deep in my research and to always critically engage.

My found family and friends, for being with me in the journey of reshaping my worldview, and for truly listening to me as I talked about these topics ceaselessly.

The Indigenous/Queer/Feminist/Decolonial thinkers without whom this thesis would not exist. I am forever indebted to your restorying of the world.

The stones, for teaching me about truths before I knew to look.
Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements......................................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents............................................................................................................................. v
Introduction: An Awakening............................................................................................................ 1
Chapter 1: But is it Art..................................................................................................................... 8
  Decentering Eurocentrism........................................................................................................... 11
  Hegemonic Canon in the Academy............................................................................................. 18
  Art as Resistance......................................................................................................................... 21
  The Future of the Academy........................................................................................................ 31
Chapter 2: Beyond the Binary........................................................................................................ 36
  Ratiocentric Authority............................................................................................................. 38
  Challenging the Asymmetry of Gender................................................................................... 47
    Naturalized Hierarchy................................................................................................................ 50
    The Pseudoscience of Gender............................................................................................... 55
  Deconstructing the Gender Binary............................................................................................. 61
    The Pluriverse......................................................................................................................... 67
    Diverse Epistemes................................................................................................................... 71
Chapter 3: Talking to the Stones.................................................................................................... 81
  Stories that Create Us............................................................................................................... 85
  Land Holds Memory.................................................................................................................. 88
  All Land is Native Land............................................................................................................. 93
  Roots of Connection................................................................................................................ 108
Conclusion: Weaving Stories......................................................................................................... 111
Bibliography................................................................................................................................. 113
Introduction: An Awakening

Years ago, I taught myself how to weave. Not the beautiful detailed ancestral textile or Indigenous basket weaving found throughout the world, but weaving all the same. Chunky textiles in uneven rows with braids, loops, beads, and threads hanging loose. I started to weave as a form of therapy I think—a way to move and create freely without rules. Weaving did not demand from me, it gave. I rarely knew or planned for how the weave would look once finished—I was usually as surprised as anyone else by what appeared. Oftentimes I didn’t even know it was finished until it told me. I would start with a basket full of different fibers, whatever called out to me. Some fibers wove together smoothly, others I would reach for again and again, but they would whisper, “not yet.” Some pieces wove quickly and surely, others still sit unfinished and will not be compelled into conclusion. Through weaving, I learned to be still, to listen, and to create not with force but with reciprocity and connection. Perhaps, more than anything, weaving showed me how everything is intertwined and related.

I have always been comfortable with dissonance, with not knowing the end from the beginning, with weaving together concepts or ideals that seem mutually exclusive. My parents say that as a child, I asked, “why?” incessantly. I had a burning curiosity and need to understand everything—not to prove something wrong, but to simply see the world. Some answers to my questions seemed to merge easily while others were unwieldy and conflicting. Some truths whispered, “not yet,” that they would find a place when I understood more. As I grew, threads of cognitive dissonance wound their way through most of life’s answers.

In many ways, my research here was born out of this dissonance. As I moved through life wandering and wondering, I listened and wove what I found. As I wove my learnings and my own experiences, I started to awaken. I have asked myself many times what exactly I have been awakening to, and it is not always clear or completely evident—even the words I try to use here will not suffice because the tensions these awakenings carry go beyond my knowings, and beyond my words.

The way I would represent this process of discovery is the idea that I have awoken to find “erasure marks.” I find myself a person within a dominant system who was taught not to see, and am now coming to see, the ways the system has attempted to erase and hide other ways of
knowing and being. A system that dominates and produces knowledge and worldview. I know that not all knowings are for me, but I awoke to find things hidden from me, not out of sacredness or my own unsuitability—but because a colonial system erased those knowings from my field of vision, and then convinced me it had not done so. I am writing here about my realizations of these erasure marks, and the “alternative” ways of knowing and being that exist and have existed, even if I did not know.

As such, this thesis is not for those who already live in this battle, who are always resisting. Indigenous thinkers live, understand, and write about these areas of attempted erasure better than I could ever speak to. I speak from a place of my own new awakening and wondering and experiencing and weaving, so I write of the locations in my life where I have most clearly seen these erasure attempts.

As I was narrowing down specific locations from which to talk about colonial systems and the alternative knowings that had been hidden from me—alternative not because the knowings are subordinate in any way, but because they have been made secondary by dominant narratives that take up all the space—I thought of how the dominant discourses played out in my own life. There were some experiences and memories that would not be bypassed or put aside. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo wrote, “Memories can compress and expand. Arms and legs can stick out. Some stories are demanding…The stories tap you on the shoulder, pull at your shirt, begging for attention again.”¹ There were stories that demanded from me more listening, more learning, more writing, and more weaving:

_I was told I was getting a thorough global art history education in my undergrad. If there was an art worth knowing, we learned about it. Hundreds upon hundreds of flash cards, images, names, dates. We learned about movements and techniques and styles. I love art and what it reflects about society, and ate it all up. I felt like an art history connoisseur. Imagine my surprise when I realized that my comprehensive “global” art history knowledge was actually just_  

¹ Harjo, Poet Warrior, 27.
European art. There was an entire planet’s worth of beautiful and impactful art that had been hidden or made to seem unworthy of qualifying for art history lecture halls.

I was certain I had thought about the gender binary. After all, I was a feminist. I knew that gender was a social construction so far as women were pitted against men as their opposite. If men were strong, women were weak; if men were logical, women were emotional. Ridiculous. We were all socially mandated to look, act, and live certain ways. I knew that there was a gendered inequality in both paid and unpaid labor, social expectations, and government policies. Rah-rah women’s rights. At some point, I learned that there had been and still were societies without terms for gender. Could it be possible that my biology did not have to equate to social roles, expectations, and hierarchy? I think I breathed the first full breath of my life when I realized that freedom beyond the gender binary actually existed.

I grew up on farmland and often in the mountains. I think my soul remembered the reciprocal relationship we have with the earth even when my brain forgot. I knew land as something to be owned, dominated, developed, and exploited. But I also deeply knew land as something that gave freely, that was responsible for sustaining me in the same way I was responsible for sustaining it. I think waking up to this deep knowledge was a gradual experience. It didn’t happen in one grand moment. I carried some of it with me, and I learned as I listened deeply to the stories told by Indigenous peoples who had remembered, or stories from the land itself. Sometimes our journey in coming to know is one in coming to remember.

I chose to write my thesis on art, gender, and land to showcase homogenization of knowledge because they are the locations I experienced the most dynamic dehomogenization in my own knowledge. They are also locations where I was best able to comprehend how colonial domination invokes some of its most potent tools. These are foremost among the locations I have awoken to, where non-dominant stories are erased and made into alternatives to Western “truth.” As such, these are also the chapters in this thesis.

Chapter 1 focuses on the institution of the academy as a producer of knowledge in regards to art—and how non-Western art has been invalidated. Chapter 2 examines the institution of science as a producer of knowledge in regards to both gender asymmetry and the gender binary—along with the exploration of ways of knowing and being beyond that binary. Chapter 3 focuses on Indigenous knowledge production and reciprocity with land—and the settler colonial attempts to violently erase Native peoples and knowings.

Different systems of power, though separated in these chapters, are all entwined and interconnected as part of a larger system of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, white
supremacy, patriarchy, etc., that claims authority, objectivity, and truth. It is a system that produces knowledge not just for the sake of knowledge, but as the “right” or “only” way of thinking and knowing and being, thus erasing other knowledges. Scholar Francis Adyanga Akena interrogates the concept of legitimate knowledge by suggesting that, “European colonizers have defined legitimate knowledge as Western knowledge, essentially European colonizers’ ways of knowing, often taken as objective and universal knowledge.”

I seek to problematize this universalized knowledge production and its delegitimization of other knowledges—a delegitimization that pushes some knowings outside our realm of thought.

Here I would like to deeply examine a crucial concept from Haitian-American academic Michele-Rolph Trouillot: Unthinkability. In his book *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot analyzes how power can shape our understanding of history and make certain things unthinkable. In chapter 3, Trouillot centers how the Haitian Revolution—a series of conflicts at the turn of the 18th century in which enslaved peoples overthrew the French colonists and established an independent country; generally described as the first successful slave revolt in history—has been erased and trivialized by retellings of history. His main premise is that Western worldview and ideals of white superiority excluded the possibility of a slave rebellion: “The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”

As the revolt developed, the French went through phases of denial, shock, and then explanations to force, “the rebellion back within their worldview.” Upon the Haitian people’s achievement of their independence, the French excused it as orchestrated by any number of European conspirators. By virtue of how slaves were construed and characterized, the West could not

---

2 Akena, “Production of Western Knowledge,” 600.
3 Trouillot, “Haitian Revolution,” 73.
4 Trouillot, “Haitian Revolution,” 91.
5 Trouillot, “Haitian Revolution,” 90-95. In their minds, the revolution had to have been led by a Frenchman.
fathom, could not fit it in their worldview, that the enslaved peoples revolted, successfully, on their own. Trouillot said, “Woldview wins over the facts: white hegemony is natural and taken for granted; any alternative is still in the domain of the unthinkable.” He defines unthinkability more clearly:

  The unthinkable is that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased. In that sense, the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in its time: it challenged the very frame work within which proponents and opponents had examined race, colonialism, and slavery in the Americas. The revolution was unthinkable, in large part, because colonial hegemony dominated Western world view—and still does today. As such, Trouillot said, the telling of the Haitian Revolution from historians today mirrors the silencing from the West at the time. The Haitian Revolution is excluded from history, because colonization, slavery, and racism are also excluded from the history books. Trouillot says history reveals two tropes: formulas of erasure which directly erase the revolution (that it did not really happen or was not that bad), and formulas of banalization which trivialize the revolution (that there were explanations or exceptions). Both, he says, “are formulas of silence.”

  I bring this in with such specificity here because the concept of the unthinkable flows through this thesis. Each chapter examines how some knowings have been situated outside the bounds of Western thought—made to be unthinkable in dominant narratives. In my awakening to the erasure marks from a system that dominates knowledge production, there are some of these unthinkable things that have become thinkable to me. My use of the term unthinkable throughout

6 Trouillot, “Haitian Revolution,” 93.
7 Trouillot, “Haitian Revolution,” 82-83.
8 Antonio Gramsci is widely referenced as the origination for the concept of hegemony. Simon Roger explains hegemony as, “a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organisation of consent,” in “Gramsci’s Concept,” 21.
10 Trouillot, “Haitian Revolution,” 96-97. These tropes are reflected across most calculated historical erasures.
the chapters identifies a system of Western domination that positions itself as universal so that anything else gets pushed outside the realm of thought to the point of becoming unthinkable. It is the knowings outside the universal gaze, always resisting these attempted erasures and silencing, that I speak of here. As such, I wish to acknowledge my limits and location as a non-Indigenous thinker. Alissa Macoun argues that, “white settler researchers should approach critical encounters with and through our complicity in ongoing white colonialism, and that this involves attempting to appreciate our own political and epistemological limits.”¹¹ I am entrenched and participating in the very hegemonic colonial systems I seek to problematize here.

As part of my own resistance to this domination, and in acknowledgement to my own location, I include reflective writing and memories. Harjo speaks of the Old Ones reminding her to “practice memory,” that, “Growing memories and the ability to access memory is a skill that allows access to eternity.”¹² I tried to “practice memory” here. I cannot take myself out of why I am writing this, why I was drawn to these topics, how I was changed, how knowings came to me and I to them—so this thesis is filled with stories. My stories, the stories of others, and dominant stories. In Asegi Stories, Qwo-Li Driskill writes that, “...dominant histories are stories that do a particular work in the world,” and when we tell other stories, we can disrupt these dominant histories.¹³ Dominant norms and realities—the norms that just are, the things that we take for granted, the truths, the universal, the right way, the only way, the natural way—are also stories. These stories do not exist in neutrality, but have agendas, interpretations, and specific power. Telling different stories or retelling or restorying can help disrupt that normative order of legitimated knowledge that dominates all knowledge.

In Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer spoke about studying

¹¹ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence.”
¹² Harjo, Poet Warrior, 13.
¹³ Driskill, Asegi Stories, 6.
botany in a Western university, and how in that Western approach to knowledge, her own knowledge and connections became shallow. She said that eventually, she circled back to her beginnings, “Back to the questions that science does not ask, not because they aren’t important, but because science as a way of knowing is too narrow for the task.” It is my goal here as well to ask “why?” as I did as a child, to ask the questions and listen to the stories that the systems of power cannot ask, because their carefully produced knowledges are “too narrow for the task.”

---

Chapter 1: But is it Art

During my Art and Design undergraduate program, I chose to minor in Art History. Pre-Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Art History were required classes for everyone in the arts department—between these two classes, it was assumed the student would get a full and comprehensive introduction to the world’s basic art history. Then there was a list of other electives that art history students could choose from for the additional required credits. It did not yet occur to me that every option was some rendition of European art, times, or styles: classical, medieval, renaissance, baroque, contemporary, etc. As I was choosing my last elective class, I came across a class titled “Non-Western Art History.” The course description said it examined the historical significance of different cultural artistic relics and architecture from around the world and their religious and cultural context. I was not overly fond of the classical and renaissance art styles, so this class seemed to offer something more interesting, more “exotic.”

The professor started the class by suggesting what a ridiculous name “Non-Western Art” was for a class, as it put all the art in the context of simply being not from the West, located in regards to that central point. He brought in rich context, religious history, and often talked about the issues with looking at a history that has been written by the colonizers. We moved at breakneck speed covering East Asia, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Islam, Oceania, and the Americas. This one class, supposed to cover the art of every non-Western art culture across the world and throughout all of history, was just that: one class. Almost every other art history class offered some variation on Europe’s art history, often breaking it down into an ultra-specific focus. I would not realize for many years how significantly the class had altered my view of the world. The “thorough” art history education I thought I was getting was actually not globally comprehensive, and was instead very Euro-centered.

European worldview has been made the default, the norm, the center of the world. I did not realize until I had been presented with art outside of Europe, that I was only learning about European art. This is what unthinkability can look like: that it was impossible for me to even form the thought that we should have been learning about non-Western art. Until I had been presented with art outside of Europe, I did not know to even think about it. Dipesh Chakrabarty explained this dominating phenomena as a “first in Europe, then elsewhere,” type of mindset. In his book, Provincializing Europe, he argues that we should set Europe as a location instead of the more common universal understanding. To the art history students, the European art history education did not look Euro-centered, it just looked like art history. European art history was made to be universal, and non-European art was made to be invisible. Art historians Charlene

---

15 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 7.
Villaseñor Black and Tim Barringer explain that the West “has often continued to insist upon itself as the center, rendering all other parts of the world—notably those once or still under European colonial dominion—to the status of a periphery.”

Before I took the Non-Western Art History class, it was unimaginable to me that I could be missing out on so much of the history of art—not because I did not know the rest of the world existed—but because any other art had been pushed so far outside my realm of thought as to become unthinkable to me as art. How do we see the hidden and think the unthinkable? How do we step outside of a system that is built to take up our entire worldview?

In the case of the art history curriculum, why did the students unquestioningly accept the version of art history we were given as an obvious reality? How did the existence of non-Western arts become unthinkable to us? One aspect centers around power and authority. French philosopher and historian Michele Foucault said, “power [is] linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification.”

The institution was accredited, given authority, and we paid it to be taught ‘truth.’ When the art history department claimed our education was comprehensive, we believed them. Legitimization of knowledge is a central reason as to why I believed that authority.

While authority is often portrayed as a cryptic higher power, Edward Said talks about its roots: “There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; has status, it establishes canons of taste and

---

16 Black and Barringer, “Decolonizing Art and Empire,” 11.
17 Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 781.
18 If I were to follow the chain of authority it might have guided me thus: the curriculum was set by the professors who had been given authority from and were supposedly kept in check by the department chairs, who in turn answered to the broader university requirements. Perhaps the university’s authority could be traced to the federal government, which mandates rules about education. But universities appear most authoritative by their “experts,” those who are the arbiters of truth. Who gave those experts the authority to do so—probably universities. The chain of authority begins to look circular and unfounded.
value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces.”¹⁹ It was not accidental that the majority of our art history curriculum essentially covered a geographical area that is only a small percentage of the world but portrayed itself as globally comprehensive. Yet I argue that it was not the university alone that created such an unbalanced art history curriculum, but a broader discourse of truth that made the Euro-centric curriculum the only reality to choose from.

Foucault said, “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands.”²⁰ The dominance of European art history was not unique to my university; it can be found amongst the world’s museums, textbooks, websites, and curriculums.

Within the art world, the accepted narratives from power structures are so assumed and pervasive that considering anything outside of those narratives is often unthinkable. We have been taught to believe that Western art is the only type of art worthy of museums and lectures and “greatest hits” lists. Even when this has not been taught explicitly, it has been demonstrated when Western art is the only art that is shown.

In this chapter, I will examine the Eurocentrism of art history and the legitimization of Western art and knowledge in determining what counts as art. To start, I discuss the College Board as a location in which knowledge is produced and disseminated, and how it is part of a larger hegemony of canonized knowledge within the academy. Next, I examine specific art and artists that resist Western domination, including the sometimes unseen colonialism that art museums are built upon. Lastly, I inquire into the future of the academy and how Indigenous knowledges reject Eurocentric domination of knowledge.

²⁰ Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 98.
Decentering Eurocentrism

The College Board—a nonprofit organization founded in 1900—is an institution of power that draws boxes around what is important and determines curriculums. It developed the SAT test used for college admissions, and the AP program that provides undergraduate classes and tests to high school students for college credit—reaching more than 7 million high school students per year.\(^1\) Even though my own experience of Eurocentric art was as a college student, this representation is fitting because it illustrates a widespread influence on Eurocentric views of art across high school academia nationwide.

In 2015, the College Board restructured and consolidated its AP Art History classes. Prior to 2015, the AP Art History class curriculum varied greatly and relied largely upon the resources and focus of individual teachers. A 2012 College Board AP Art History Course Description document—designed upon the “most recent college curriculum surveys,”\(^2\) and reflective of the common art history curriculum in universities—details the course art coverage percentages at that time. The coverage was listed as: 30% Ancient through Medieval; 50% Renaissance to Present; 20% Beyond European Artistic Traditions (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Near East, Oceania, Global Islamic Traditions).\(^3\) Europe, which takes up less than 7% of the Earth’s geographical land area, accounted for 80% of the curriculum.\(^4\)

---

\(^1\) College Board, “About Us.”
\(^3\) College Board AP, “Art History Course 2012,” 6.
Since there was no specified curriculum of artworks, the 2012 Course Description manual encouraged teachers to refer to many of the most commonly used college art history textbooks, and any of their listed works. It also warned that there were likely insufficient resources for non-Western art: “While there are several excellent and widely used textbooks that focus exclusively on European art, teachers will need to supplement such works in order to provide sufficient coverage of art beyond the European tradition.”

Examining this quote from the College Board document, we can extrapolate a couple of things. First, we can see the contrast in the academic world between European and non-European art by the lack of any suggested or familiar official textbooks or resources for non-European art. The fact that the Board either could not locate any good suggestions for global art resources—or was not sure what, of the ones that exist, were most relevant—shows that there is a larger

---

26 College Board AP, “Art History Course 2012,” 5.
dynamic of unthinkability and silencing at work. Unlike the Eurocentric resources provided by the College Board, art outside of the European tradition saw no provided resources. Secondly, the quote explicitly leaves it up to the teachers to search out resources to provide coverage for the 20% of the course content designated for art beyond European tradition. The document suggests teachers visit College Board’s AP Central for reviews of the commonly used textbooks for European art, but that teachers would need to find their own sources for anything else.\textsuperscript{27} I can imagine that with no explicit resources for global art, that 20% of the course supposedly dedicated to non-Western art fell to a much lower percentage. The teachers may not have set out to only include European art, but they were operating within a system in which European art had reigned supreme for so long that other art was not only difficult to find, but likely foreign to them. Even a well-meaning teacher, cognizant of their own ignorance on the subject, might choose to skip non-Western art rather than risk error in explaining it. A teacher, unfamiliar with the non-Western art and not having been taught about it themselves, would have a difficult time sifting through possible options. Many non-Western art pieces are designated as architecture or artifacts, making it difficult to even answer the question: but is it art?

The 2015 changes made by the College Board to the curriculum matched what I saw in the years after completing my non-Western art history course—there was general upheaval in the art world and calls for change across the academy. Discussions turned to the ethics of tearing down statues, how to best restructure a telling of history, and how to diversify art and methods. Visual culture and theory professor Arya Rina explains that in this time, conversations also grew about decolonizing art in higher education.\textsuperscript{28} She said, “Recognized as elitist, Eurocentric and patriarchal, the discipline of art history came under scrutiny because of its inherent biases where

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item College Board AP, “Art History Course 2012,” 5.
\item Arya, “Decolonizing Art and Design,” 55.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
it purported to present the history of art but actually was a presentation of the history of western art,” and its own bias and imperialism was made invisible. This broad Eurocentrism was true for my undergrad art history experience and for the older 2012 AP Art History curriculum—and the art world had started to see it.

With the 2015 AP Art History class restructuring, there were attempts made to solve some of these inconsistencies and Eurocentrisms. The 2015 manual discusses a focus on a more global perspective. The new official curriculum consolidated the chaotic possibilities of thousands of art options into a focus on 250 specific art pieces in 10 geographical and chronological categories. The previously vague non-Western art section was even split into specific geographic areas.

![2015 Curriculum Percentages](image)

Figure 2. 2015 College Board AP Art History Course Geographical and Chronological Content Areas.

---

The inclusion of a more global list of artworks is a step in the right direction, but is it enough? According to a 2016 article in The Atlantic, John Williamson—vice president of AP curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the College Board—referred to most art history classes and the old AP test as largely Eurocentric. Of the new curriculum he said, “Roughly 65 percent of the course content is still art considered within the Western tradition. Now, 35 percent—around 87 artworks—come from ‘‘other artistic traditions’.” In addition to the 28% of non-Western artworks explicitly given space in the curriculum (as shown in figure 2), Williamson may be including a handful of works from the Global Prehistory, Ancient Mediterranean, and Global Contemporary categories—raising the percentage of non-Western art to 35%.

With this in mind, an 8-15% increase (compare figures 1 and 2) in non-Western art between the 2012 and 2015 curriculums is a positive change—especially when the new artworks are now part of a list of required arts to learn, instead of an open-ended suggestion to teachers without resources. This may be the first time many of these students are viewing and discussing art from around the globe—simultaneously exciting and disheartening. However, the marginally increased representation of global art does not address the systemic issues surrounding how non-Western worldviews are disregarded and hidden. Adding more global art to a list does not automatically change how that art is viewed or represented. It does not decolonize art history.

As much as my worldview shifted in taking an entire class on non-Western art, when I left that classroom, art was still very much in the stranglehold of Eurocentrism. The terminology describing great artists and masterpieces applied only to art and artists from the West. One could be a renowned art historian by becoming an expert on a master artist, but to be an expert on a

---

32 Urist, “Rewriting Art History.”
33 Urist, “Rewriting Art History.”
form of global or folk art was to relegate yourself to the quaint halls of history—no one cared to hear or pay for specialist critiques of unknown art. Aware of both the upheaval in the artworld, and the reality that Eurocentrism remains securely in power—Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price asked a series of questions\textsuperscript{34} to art curators, historians, and artists, about current movements to decolonize art history, and published their answers in a 2020 journal:

Artist and Director of the University of the Arts London Decolonising Arts Institute, susan pui san lok, argued that: “diversification ≠ decolonization.”\textsuperscript{35} It is not enough to diversify the list of artworks in the curriculum, more needs to be done. Art History professor Nada Shabout said that just including non-Western art, artists, and historians is not what decolonizing art means. Instead, “All spaces must start with moving away from Europe as the centre and the reference.”\textsuperscript{36} As colonization rests squarely on the assumption of the West as the default norm, decolonizing must remove the West as that standard. Lecturer Kamini Vellodi explained that decolonizing art history needs to be more than, “diversifying content, returning to supposed ‘authentic’ histories before colonialism, and/or exposing the colonialist historiography of the discipline and its objects,” but should address the actual epistemological foundations of art history.\textsuperscript{37} To decolonize art, we must reorganize how art is thought of by its roots, and therefore give place for other thoughts and other knowings. Vellodi argued, “Decolonization invites much more than new reading lists and objects of study: it offers an opportunity to challenge and transform the very nature of art history as a practice of thought.”\textsuperscript{38}

For the College Board to truly decolonize their art history curriculum, they would need to de-universalize Europe as the center of art history knowings and reshape the very roots of art.

\textsuperscript{34} Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History.” The four questions are detailed in pages 9-10.
\textsuperscript{35} susan pui san lok as cited in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 37.
\textsuperscript{36} Nada Shabout as cited in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 53.
\textsuperscript{37} Kamini Vellodi as cited in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 61-62.
\textsuperscript{38} Kamini Vellodi as cited in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 62.
Academic institutions direct more than just what appears in lists and textbooks—the academy is a central location of power in knowledge production. This is why adding non-Western art to curriculums is not enough—it simply gives the West an opportunity to continue to produce knowledge and formulate ideas about non-Western art from a location still centered in the West and still built on colonial ideals.

Even with its new list of non-Western artworks, the College Board fails to account for the need to acknowledge the systems of academic and Western knowledge production that created the erasure. It does not move Europe out of its centered location or challenge the hegemonic telling of the history of art. How can non-Western art really be seen if we have not deconstructed its ongoing invisibility?

If the College Board were able to properly decolonize its curriculum, de-centralize Europe and address its colonial roots, I argue that it would cease to be an acceptable and systemically valid art history course. Therein lies the problem. Because Western art is situated as legitimate art, a curriculum centering non-Western art and addressing its own hegemony would be foundationally illegitimate in the larger system of Eurocentric power. The College Board, while a conspicuous site of power, is in many ways a reproduction of truth from a pre-existing institutional and empiric power that employs Eurocentric ideals to push Western knowledge formation. Black and Barringer argue that Eurocentrism is located within the notion of empire. Therefore, “to decolonize is not to ignore or forget empire—it is to name, confront, critique, and strive to negate the effects of imperial thought and action.”

The effects of imperial and Eurocentric domination are most easily measured, Foucault

---

39 The College Board and the academy at large are both a power that perpetuates facts thereby defining what is true; and is in itself a subject of a power that has long oriented knowledge to Western axis. According to Foucault, “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.” Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 93. What this means for the art history curriculum is that power determines what is taught as truth, and that power is exercised as that very truth that is being produced.

40 Black and Barringer, “Decolonizing Art and Empire,” 11.
argues, not at the institutional level, but in its extremities.\textsuperscript{41} That is, we measure the production of power in the moments of students learning about “truths” of art history: in the moments students learn that European art is the only art in history, and think their education is full, complete and comprehensive, as I did. The universalization of Eurocentric knowledge pushes out other possible knowledges, attempting to make them unthinkable. The academy—the gold standard of authority and truth telling and ‘objective’ knowledge—needs to be understood within Foucault’s triangle of “power, right, truth.”\textsuperscript{42}

**Hegemonic Canon in the Academy**

As part of examining the role of the academy in knowledge production, I could not help but reflect on how much I love being in school and learning. My undergraduate degree took me far longer than the allotted four years, in part, because I took a myriad of courses just for the sake of learning something new. I love the environment, the thirst for knowledge, and the growth I experience in my pursuit for understanding. It is because of my fondness and adoration for the academy that I feel so strongly about its accountability. The academy holds a formidable position as producer and legitimator of knowledge, and as such, also delegitimizes knowledges. Art history is not the only location in the academy in which the West demands exclusive rights to knowledge production. Anything outside the Eurocentric bubble—whether art or other knowings—becomes unthinkable. Linda Tuhiwai Smith has talked about how the academy has been complicit in colonial and imperial oppression and dispossession in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*:

The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge. This form of global knowledge is generally referred to as ‘universal’ knowledge, available to all and not really ‘owned’ by anyone,

\textsuperscript{41} Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 96.
\textsuperscript{42} Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 93.
that is, until non-Western scholars make claims to it. When claims like that are made, history is revised (again) so that the story of civilization remains the story of the West.43

Of course, when I talk about unthinkability or erasure or invisibility, it is not that other ways of knowing simply do not exist. It is that they do not exist in the dominant narratives, because they have been actively excluded, made unthinkable and invisible to the West. Rauna Kuokkanen introduces ‘epistemic ignorance’ as a term that is crucial to understanding the homogenization and universalization of knowledges in the academy. She explains, “What I call epistemic ignorance refers to ways in which academic theories and practices ignore, marginalize, and exclude other than dominant Western European epistemic and intellectual traditions.”44 It is more than a simple not-knowing, but is indicative of a larger system that actively ignores and hides other epistemes or ways of knowing. In practice, this may look like ignoring the existence of non-Western arts in textbooks and museums, or simply not counting global art as ‘proper art.’ It can also look like not counting some non-Western sources as ‘academic enough.’

*During grad school, my classmates and I spent time putting together materials for our literature review and thesis. We were fairly early on in our research, but I knew I wanted to devote an entire section to alternative knowledges. By nature of the topic, this needed to include materials that contended with the Western understanding of what it meant to be a scholarly/academic/official source. I struggled with this, because beyond it being difficult to find the right source among a sea of resources to choose from, it’s also never been quite clear to me what qualifies something as an “academic source.” I would like to note that, besides a few books of poetry, I tried to make sure my sources consisted of well-known scholars creating or collaborating on projects that included storytelling and art, but focused on what would be considered thoroughly scholarly content. The irony was not lost on me when a professor told me that most of the sources in that section were inappropriate for a literature review, and would need to be replaced with more professional sources.*

As I became familiar with the research process, I was told to look at how many times a source had been cited—this was supposed to be a strong indicator for how professional a source was. The more it was cited, the more authoritative it became. While there is some value to this

43 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 72-73.
44 Kuokkanen, “Hospitality in the Academy,” 63.
process, a way to ensure that the more reputable sources can be referenced, it is also a way to contribute to the silencing of sources that may not be legitimate in Western views. Sara Ahmed explains that in the academy, ideas are assumed to originate with white men.45 Their ideas are canon. Therefore, to be considered scholarly, one must cite their work to be counted as professional. Ahmed refers to this as a *citational chain*: “you become a theorist by citing other theorists that cite other theorists.”46 To exist outside this citational chain—as was the case for so many of my alternative knowledge materials—is to be discounted in the academy.

Breaking the citational chain gives place for other knowings to exist in a space that has an exclusive guest list.47 In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed excluded white men from citations and decentered their normative knowledge formations. She shows that we can use citations for our own diverse knowledge chains: “Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow.”48

In *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick questions Ahmed’s foreclosure of white patriarchal citations, asking if we can actually unlearn who we do not cite, or if it would not be better to learn how to engage critically while centering the work of the unrecognized.49 She strikes an interesting balance in conversation with academic standards by acknowledging the colonial history of citing, but then using it to tell her own story and shape her own communal knowledges. To do this kind of work in the academy is to question how knowledge is produced. To fracture homogenized knowledges, we must question truth claims, look outside the

---

47 According to Macoun, “This requires not just a politics of ceremonial citation in our scholarship, but a more profound understanding that as white settler scholars we are always-already in political and knowledge relationships with Indigenous peoples—and these relationships are mostly not good.” “Colonising White Innocence,” 12.
49 McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 21-22.
legitimized canon, and find what has been made unthinkable. McKittrick states, “If we do not do this work, if we do not collaboratively call into question a system of knowledge that delights in accumulation by dispossession and profits from ecocidal and genocidal practices, if we do not produce and share stories that honor modes of humanness that cannot and will not replicate this system, we are doomed.”

The tension between Ahmed and McKittrick shows that there are different ways to grapple with and disrupt hierarchical logics. I would like to discuss a couple of examples of artworks that also grapple with universal and dominant narratives, and that provide moments of disruption and stories of humanness. I will examine art that calls out and decenters hegemonic narratives, and art that calls into question and engages with its own erasure by the West.

**Art as Resistance**

Dominant art has existed in its place of universalized knowledge for a long time—but it has also been resisted in many other forms for just as long. One of my favorite modern art resistance movements has been from the Guerrilla Girls. They are a group that wear gorilla masks, take pseudonyms of famous women artists, and address intersectional issues in the arts through posters, films, and performances. According to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, their first appearance was in 1985, when they pasted posters around Manhattan with statistics about racist and sexist discrimination in art institutions. They are known for punchy facts, humor, and conspicuous interventions. On the Guerrilla Girls website, their motto reads, “Do one thing. If it works, do another. If it doesn’t, do another anyway. Keep chipping away!”

One of my favorite pieces from the Guerrilla Girls protests the way in which women most commonly get into museums—usually as art instead of as artists:

---

50 McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 74.
52 Guerilla Girls, “Reinventing The ‘f’ Word: Feminism.”
This poster was distributed on the sides of buses to get the message to the masses. The Guerrilla Girls are problematizing not just the lack of women artists, but the commodity of women’s bodies as customary art subjects. However, it feels to me like part of what they are really disrupting is the status quo: the assumptions that artists are primarily males, that female nudes are the de facto subject to paint, and that “this is just the way it is.” They are problematizing the institutions that allow and perpetuate this status quo, the museums that facilitate the gender disparity in art. But bigger than that, they are problematizing the universalism that posits men as the great artists and women as muses. Like Ahmed, The Guerrilla Girls are excluding and decentering white men to break the chain of what counts as art in the academy.

I find it a bit comical that this piece now sits inside museums as art in its own right—I saw a copy when I visited the Tate Modern in London. Guerrilla Girls sells this and other posters from their website, saying, “Get the same poster owned by museums all over the world: MoMA, the Whitney, Getty, Tate Modern, Pompidou, MASP and so many more.” This incongruence of
sassy art and pretentious institutions is part of the point. Guerrilla girls protest and resist to enact some sort of change. The Tate quotes the Guerrilla girls: “We are a group of women artists and art professionals who fight discrimination. We’re the conscience of the art world…We use humor to prove that feminists can be funny…We could be anyone; we are everywhere.”

In March of 2024, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (the same museum critiqued in the Guerrilla Girls poster) produced a 30-minute audio tour with Katy Hessel titled, “Museums Without Men at The Met.” It highlights women artists, “who have been excluded from art-historical narratives and provides contemporary perspectives on issues of inclusion in the Museum and art world at large.” Hessel actually starts the audio tour by referencing the 1989 poster critiquing The Met’s underrepresentation of women, and how it is still relevant today because not a lot has changed. She says that in her tour, she will work to answer some of the questions the Guerrilla Girls presented, including: “do women actually have to be naked to get into The Met? Are there any great women artists? What does “greatness” mean anyway?” I appreciate that Hessel goes on to highlight women who pioneered new styles, women whose famous art was wrongly attributed to men, Black and Indigenous women who supplant Western art, etc. But I balk a bit at her question asking, “Are there any great women artists?” We know that the same question would not be posited so broadly about men. If it is not clear enough that great women artists exist, then the museums are not doing their jobs in showcasing said artists. Men have been universalized as the only artists worthy of museum space.

---

54 Hessel, “Museums Without Men.”
55 Hessel, “Museums Without Men.”
In *Epistemologies of the South*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines universalism as, “the force of an idea representing itself as being imposed without the idea of force.”\(^{58}\) The power at play here is that museums seem to be displaying Eurocentric and male-dominated art not under duress, but because that is just who *coincidentally* happens to do the best art. Art from male artists is universalized as the only legitimate option. The rhetoric might be that it is the only choice for a number of seemingly innocent reasons: female artists are difficult to find, there were less female artists historically, people do not seem to care as much about female artists as they do male artists which affects visitation. These excuses point to the power of universalism—that an idea can be imposed to the point that force is not necessary to achieve conformity because it is accepted as *just the way things are*.

The main issue here is not that Eurocentric venues value their own style or portrayal best, in fact, I would say that’s common for anywhere in the world—places and cultures and groups all have different ways to view and create the world. The issue, then, is that Eurocentric art is not located as specific to European taste, but is imposed as the best and only option. Santos added that, “A distinct feature of hegemonic knowledge is its capacity to impose its knowledge and ignorance criteria on the rest of the knowledges.”\(^{59}\) To homogenize knowledge is to make it uniform or similar, and to universalize knowledge is to make it universally or generally acceptable in all situations. So if the West is the template from which all knowledge is based, then all knowledge is reduced and homogenized to be uniform to the West—and it is then universalized outwards to fit all people and situations globally. Other knowledges, in turn, get violently erased, dismissed, hidden, rejected, and eradicated—and with them, the people and cultures they belong to.

---

\(^{58}\) Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledges,” 199.

\(^{59}\) Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledges,” 209.
There are many types of art that resist by interrupting the universal. The Guerrilla Girls intervened by pointing to the error of the universal story, while other artists interrupt by pointing to their own stories. This is art that resists universalization, hegemony, and its own erasure by deliberately not reproducing the dominant story—and instead telling another story. Hunkpapa and Oglala Lakota artist Danielle SeeWalker tells resistant stories in both her visual art and in her work on the Red Road Project. The project website reads, “Since inception in 2013, The Red Road Project’s purpose is to document, through words & visuals, the inspiring and resilient stories of Native America. These stories, not often told, highlight the people and communities that are taking positive actions and demonstrating resilience.”

In her book *Still Here*, SeeWalker writes on Native American history, boarding schools, language, reservations, and activism amidst loss of life and land (see chapter 3). She also includes interviews with people from different Native American tribes about “their stories of past, present, and future through their own voices and words.” Danielle Ta’Sheena Finn, Hunkpapa Lakota tribal judge, told SeeWalker: “This is not a time, nor day in age for someone to grow up and not know who they are; to live with a loss of identity. Once you know your culture, your language and your traditions, no one can take that away from you. They tried to kill us, they tried to change us, but we are still fighting, we’re still here.”

SeeWalker’s art reflects this fight, this resistance to being erased in a series of paintings reflecting on the, “broader concept of how Native people have been erased from media, data, history, etc.” Here are two of her pieces I feel most drawn to:

---

60 Red Road Project, “About the Project.”
61 Red Road Project, “About the Project.”
62 Danielle Ta’Sheena Finn as cited in SeeWalker, *Still Here*, 12.
63 First Nations, “Artist Danielle SeeWalker.”
Her contemporary style breathes life into what current living Indigeneity can look like in art. Not a relic of the past, but an intersection of past, present, and future. Of Erasure she said, “I intentionally made the creases of the woman’s dress to outline her figure as also a way to represent how most people see us today—as sexualized fantasies, the ‘token’ Indian, a mascot, a costume, a historical thing of the past, versus a real person who still exists today.”

SeeWalker depicted erasure not as an absence of Indigeneity, but as a representation by outsiders of what it means to be Native. This form of erasure is born from Eurocentric and colonial storytelling. In Čhanté Imáyaču, she represents stories of the Wiŋkte, or two-spirit people. On her website, she explains that wiŋkte people have always existed: “Wiŋkte walk between the world of the masculine and feminine. To have a wiŋkte person in your family was always considered an honor

---

64 First Nations, “Artist Danielle SeeWalker.”
65 SeeWalker, “Work: Art,” explains: “A gorgeous fact about Lakȟótiyapi (the Lakota language), is that pronouns do not exist. We don’t have ‘she’ and ‘he’. In Lakȟótiyapi, men will speak differently than women and vice versa. We know one’s gender identity based on how they talk and what words they are using.” See Chapter 2: Diverse Epistemes, for further exploration of the topic of gender and Indigenous two-spirit ways of being.
and blessing. They exist between the natural and the supernatural and are considered healers and spiritual leaders. It was never a sexual existence, but a spiritual one."66 By depicting a way of being that has become unthinkable due to Western colonialism, SeeWalker is resisting through the very existence of her art. Like McKittrick, SeeWalker is centering art and stories that have been erased while engaging critically with the system of knowledge that caused the erasure. Her art draws out tension, points to something that is not supposed to be seen, and illustrates a gap in Western knowings.

Despite the work of exceptional artists like SeeWalker, and a rise in diversity programs, the erasures live on due to museums still being overwhelmingly white and male. A 2019 study found that “85% of artists are white and 87% are men.”67 The data listed the percentage of remaining identifiable artists as: “9.0% Asian, 2.8% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.2% Black/African American,”68 with Native American artists not even featured in the specified list. However, I would like to draw attention to a flaw here in the representation of data: I claim that art from Indigenous artists and peoples actually fills museum halls in great numbers, but often as ancient artifacts not fine art. I wonder how much the data would change if all those artists were accounted for. To echo the poster question from the Guerrilla Girls (Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?69) I ask: Do Natives have to be ancient to get into the museums? There are so many Indigenous-related ethnographical items in museums, but so few Indigenous artists featured as artists in museums.

Historian James Clifford explains that, “Since 1900 non-Western objects have generally been classified as either primitive art or ethnographic specimens.”70 One key historical

70 Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, 198.
component in the construction of this system of classification was what is commonly referred to as *cabinets of curiosities*. These were 17th century collections of exotic/historic/natural/scientific/curious items and relics that served to signify the status of their European curators. Cabinets of curiosity could include paintings, sculptures, horns, plants, animals, and especially cultural artifacts from Indigenous peoples. According to the first treatise detailing what a cabinet of curiosity should be and hold, the most desirable collectibles amongst its recommended classes of objects were “exotica from Africa, Asia, and the New World.”

Samuel Quiccheberg, author of the 1565 treatise, encouraged diligent and diverse collecting. He said that the, “entire set of classes and inscriptions are intended to cover everything and anything that a collector might acquire to map the universe.” Indigenous items were collected not as art in their own right, but were seen as foreign, exotic, objects that could bolster a collector’s social standings. Clifford explains:

> The ‘beauty’ of much non-Western ‘art’ is a recent discovery. Before the twentieth century many of the same objects were collected and valued, but for different reasons. In the early modern period their rarity and strangeness were prized. The ‘cabinet of curiosities’ jumbled everything together, with each individual object standing metonymically for a whole region or population. The collection was a microcosm, a ‘summary of the universe’.  

> Cabinets of curiosity existed so that Europeans could make reproductions of the world from their own center in it. While called cabinets, the collections were often large enough to be displayed in rooms or entire buildings.

*The day I visited Hearst Castle in California, we were supposed to have views all the way to the ocean, but it was so foggy I couldn’t see across the ornate courtyard. Once a pillar of the California economy and a symbol of Western industry, it now sits as a decadent museum with over 25,000 artifacts (not including, of course, all the exotic animals William Hearst originally*

---

73 By collected, I also mean stolen during colonial conquest or taken while traveling or trading.
75 Hearst Castle, “History and Art.”
kept in his personal zoo—some zebras apparently still roam the area). As I walked through, the tour guide pointed out how practically every piece in the castle was authentic and had been moved there from somewhere in the world. Ceilings from Spain, Roman statues, tapestries from Italy, and in the courtyard there were sculptures of the Egyptian Goddess Sekhmet dating back to 1550-1070 BCE. The entire castle was an eclectic collection of things from different people and places. As we walked through the rooms, one of the other visitors who spoke Arabic pointed out some Arabic calligraphy tiles, and asked why they were unreadable. The guide responded that William Hearst had mismatched them on purpose. Hearst Castle was just one giant cabinet of curiosity—a mansion of curiosity, it could be called.

The transition of Hearst Castle to a tourist exhibit is a prime example of what happened to cabinets of curiosity through the times: most were made into museums. When this happened in larger institutions, European paintings and sculptures were given their place as “proper” art, while the Indigenous creations remained as historical cultural artifacts. The British Museum was one such conversion—established in 1753 from the collection of Sir Hans Sloane. According to the museum website, Sloane had collected 70,000 items in his lifetime, funded primarily by profits from his Jamaican sugar plantation and the labor of enslaved peoples. Most items in his collection were obtained as part of purchasing others’ cabinets of curiosities, or as individual purchases from various colonial settlers. As such, the British Museum is foundationally built on the exploitation of Indigenous, Black, and enslaved peoples. Museums, especially collections built from cabinets of curiosity, are bound to this colonial history. Black and Barringer argue that, “The institutions of our discipline are the products of empire and allow its ideologies extended life, ordering our museum collections, library shelves, and course catalogs.”

Colonization and its empire are preserved and perpetuated in these locations of art.

It is important to remember that museums are not just magically put together. Most are built on colonial foundations. People curate them in modernity, including and excluding art. In

---

76 Hearst Castle, “History and Art.”
77 British Museum, “Sir Hans Sloane.”
79 British Museum, “Sir Hans Sloane.”
the case of non-Western and Indigenous art, exclusion from prestigious museums has historically been the guiding principle. And often, when Indigenous art has been shown, it has been in the manner of fetishizing a people—a display to gawk at like a cabinet of curiosity.

I was exploring a San Francisco museum when one of my companions, a Diné woman from the Navajo Nation, stopped in front of a display case. Inside were over 60 ceramic replicas of corn cobs with colorful kernels. I remember how she related her surprise and confusion upon looking at this representation of corn cobs that she had grown up with, sitting here behind glass in a renowned museum. As if they were some novel wonder instead of everyday objects. As we strolled on and viewed other exhibits, I thought about the corn. As a child, I had come across this corn (what we problematically called Indian corn) when we visited the local pumpkin patch. The farmer grew a little area of the brightly variegated corn, and every year I spent much longer picking out my favorite corn cob than I did choosing my pumpkin for carving. As a child, they seemed extraordinary to me. I was usually surrounded by fields of bland yellow kernels, and here were these kernels that were like little multicolored gems. I would bring my corn cob home and roll it in my hands or hold it up to the light, each new angle providing a new combination of color. But this corn had been used by many Indigenous ancestors for more than just ornamentation: bread, baskets, clothes, etc. Corn was the lifeforce of many Native peoples. Yet here sat replicas behind glass in a museum, a symbol of a supposedly bygone people.

In 2022, The Chicago Field Museum worked to remedy some of its own colonial fetishizing when it opened a new permanent exhibition called Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories. The exhibit represents 105 tribes, and displays more than 400 items. Native News Online (NNO) highlighted it as the first renovation to the museum’s Native American hall in over 70 years, and reported on the ways local Natives were involved in the new development. NNO suggests that the museum recognized that they needed to change how they were displaying and presenting Native art, and collaborated with Native peoples on everything from the displayed items to the building materials. Dakota and Diné artist Dallas Goldtooth told NNO, “I’m so used to these spaces feeling so foreign, because it’s like we’re on display, Native people and cultures are on display. This very much feels like we are in charge of the narrative.”

---

81 For exhibition highlights, see Native Truths: Our Voices, Field Museum Exhibition.  
82 Turner, “Native Truths Exhibition.”  
83 Turner, “Native Truths Exhibition.”
The museum broke from historical templates that relegate Indigenous people to the past alongside their ancestral relics. Instead, NNO says, the museum features contemporary Indigenous artists showing a living culture. This is a crucial change for visitors to begin to associate Indigenous people as a living, not a past people. Yepa-Pappan, who advocated for many of the changes, told NNO, “I had always hoped that this exhibition would be for Native people—not of course, by Native people, but for Native people also. This is Native space. We made this our space.”

This renovation is indicative of what it can look like for a museum to transform some of its colonial foundations. It is due, in great part, to a movement in non-Western groups working to gain control of their own stories. The decolonization of art, art history, and art museums is not going to be established by the institutions and the academy, but by those who refuse to continue to be associated with historical relics or to have their stories told for them.

The Future of the Academy

So where does the academy go from here? How does the academy decolonize if diversifying artwork lists is not enough, and most if not all museums need to be completely overhauled to fix a colonial history of fetishization and erasure? “At this moment, a reckoning with art history’s assumptions, institutions, and practices is needed,” Black and Barringer argue. In “Decolonizing Art and Empire,” they refer to “epistemic disobedience,” as one such strategy, “to reject or delink from Eurocentric notions of objectivity, claims to transparency, and the fantasy of writing from an all-knowing position.” Black and Barringer go on to offer an example of this disobedience to Eurocentric hegemony, in the art interventions of Cree artist Kent Monkman.

---

84 Turner, “Native Truths Exhibition.”
85 Stewart-Harawira argues that, “outside of indigenous scholarship itself, within academic circles little serious attention has been paid to examining the possibilities inherent in indigenous ontologies,” “Of Order and Being,” 34.
86 Black and Barringer, “Decolonizing Art and Empire,” 11.
87 Black and Barringer, “Decolonizing Art and Empire,” 7.
I remember feeling incredibly uncomfortable the first time I viewed Monkman’s art. I thought it was irreverent, kitsch, and maybe even insulting to Indigenous peoples. In the years since, each time I have come across his art it has seemed more and more appropriate as a critique of European colonialism. Now I see the kitsch and irreverence as intentional commentary on colonial history and an inversion of the colonial gaze. His art did not change, I just awakened to its poignant relevance.

In 2019, two of Monkman’s pieces were exhibited in the large Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in a diptych titled *mistikôsiwak: Wooden Boat People.* Each piece was 22 feet long and demanded attention on either side of the entrance:

![Kent Monkman, Welcoming the Newcomers, 2019](image1)

![Kent Monkman, Resurgence of the People, 2019](image2)

Black and Barringer suggest that, in opposition to colonial versions, this depiction of European arrival to the Americas shows “sovereign Indigenous North Americans welcome needy migrants.” Monkman decenters Europeans as the civilized heroes and instead places Westerners as disadvantaged newcomers to a Native land and knowledgeable peoples. In many ways, Monkman is destabilizing Eurocentrism and offering a new—or really, an ancestral—way of seeing the world.

---

88 Metropolitan Museum of Art, “The Great Hall Commission.”
89 In much of his work, Monkman includes a depiction of his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. In a video interview he explained, “I wanted an artistic persona that could travel through time to reverse the gaze and look back at European settlers, that could really speak to Cree values. We had our own ideas of gender and sexuality that didn’t
In a Met video interview, Monkman explained that in making these pieces, he had studied art made by settler colonial artists depicting Indigenous peoples: “it’s always this Romantic view of the ‘vanishing race.’ In fact, we’re very much alive. My work really is refuting those themes of disappearance.” In this exhibit, Monkman decenters Eurocentrism in the arts, problematizes and restories Western colonial tellings of history, refuses Indigenous erasure, and holds museums accountable for their perpetuation of empire. In resistance to the Western hegemonic knowledge production, his art prioritizes Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Monkman’s exhibit was, in many ways, an example of what a reciprocal relationship can be between Indigenous artists and the academy and museums—an openness and collaboration.

“The future of the university is in its openness to the other,” Kuokkanen says, “This openness must go beyond a mere opening of the doors to indigenous people while dismissing or failing to recognize their epistemes.” Many institutions have sought to accomplish a sense of diverse collaboration by including Indigenous art, but not also the often anticolonial knowledges that guide such art. Expecting Indigenous people to come into the academy and conform, adjust and comply—without accepting the accompanying lived Indigeneity and knowledges is just another form of perpetuated colonial violence. For artists, this means that the academy and museums must be open to the tools and approach of the artists in a way I myself was not upon initially seeing Monkman’s art. It means celebrating a restorying of Eurocentric narratives, history and knowledges.

I would like to draw special attention in this exploration of the future of the academy, to a concept I learned from both Kuokkanen and Stewart-Harawira: ‘the logic of the gift.’ While not

---

91 Kuokkanen, “Hospitality in the Academy,” 75.
homogenous, it is a concept shared by many Indigenous communities. It is a belief in reciprocity and renewal of balance between all people and all things.\textsuperscript{93} Here, gifts are given, not for the capitalistic and commodified promise of a return gift, but to acknowledge our relationship with the world and our collective connection and responsibilities. By contrast, the Western academy most often facilitates an asymmetrical exchange, Kuokkanen explains, reflective of the larger oppressive power structures that universalize Western ideals and therefore foreclose Indigenous knowledges and prevent human connection and balance.\textsuperscript{94}

In order to make a place for any Indigenous knowledges to exist in the academy, we must first treat the epistemes as valid in their own rights—not as intellectual property to be studied or a story to be patronized. Kuokkanen suggests, “that to counter epistemic ignorance, indigenous epistemes have to be recognized as a gift to the academy.”\textsuperscript{95} It requires a new kind of relationship; an unconditional welcome, a reciprocal relationship, a responsibility on the part of the academy to actively address its power and dismantle its own hegemonic worldviews. This means that as an academic in the academy, it is also my responsibility to address my location of power and privilege and work to deconstruct my own complicity. Alissa Macoun argues that this may involve, “working from the basis that our knowledges—whatever they may be—are always partial and particular, our positions personally inflected and our perspectives interested.”\textsuperscript{96} Academics must acknowledge our own positions and complicity before we can hope to offer an unconditional welcome and true openness to the gift of Indigenous epistemes.

Unlike the way that the academy outlines official legitimized knowledge, Indigenous thinkers suggest that knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, on lists, or in libraries. It is lived.

\textsuperscript{93} See chapter 3 for more information on reciprocity.
\textsuperscript{94} Kuokkanen, “Hospitality in the Academy,” 69.
\textsuperscript{95} Kuokkanen, “Hospitality in the Academy,” 65.
\textsuperscript{96} Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence.”
Stewart-Harawira said that, “...rather than being limited to a ‘codified canon’, traditional or indigenous knowledge is an expression of life itself, of how to live, and of the connection between all living things. This is why it is so crucial for art history to include global historical arts, and why institutions of power keep non-Western art invisible. Art is a reflection of our lived knowledges—society, culture, religion, how we interact with each other and how we see the world. A history of art is also a history of our lived knowledges.

Art in all its forms—art history, poetry, paintings, photos, stories, oral histories, sculpture, language, songs, tradition, memories, kinship with land, dance—is a crucial knowledge. Oh, to be sure, art has been homogenized and Westernized and colonized and capitalized—but it fully exists and moves in, through, around, and outside those bounds too. It tells stories and makes the invisible visible. In a world where hegemony perpetuates the halls of history, art has the potential to illuminate the unseen and make the unthinkable thinkable. It has the potential to deconstruct colonial knowledge by providing ways for us to better see and humanize each other.

Chapter 2: Beyond the Binary

We are gendered from the very beginning. I come out of the womb and someone points to my anatomy and slaps me with a label: female. It's a girl! Pink blankets and bows turn into sparkly pink dresses and dolls. She’s so cute, what a sweetheart! Smile, don’t yell, sit with your legs closed, mind your manners, don’t play rough, be nice. She’s so well-behaved! I think I used to like pink and purple when I was little, but somewhere along the way it became stifling. Blue! I think I like blue. Girls are allowed to like blue. They think I like light blue, baby blue, girl blue—but I say blue and think of the boy blue, dark blue. How rebellious. She’s so friendly, what a good helper, she’ll be such a good mom! They pass out pencils at school—ew, pink, someone trade with me. I hate pink. I don’t even know if I like blue, but I like that it’s not pink. Be a lady, cover up, don’t laugh so loud, be more feminine. I want to be strong, I want to be pretty, I want to be smart. I am all those things. I am none of those things. She’s turning into such a beautiful young woman! She’ll be such a good wife! You’re being too much, don’t be so dramatic, don’t talk so much, don’t sass, don’t ask why. Why? I call my teacher a sexist pig for holding a boys-only eating contest, he relents. I am victorious. I ate too much, I feel sick. Shave, wax, wear more makeup, go natural, get an education, stay at home. Fulfill your purpose. Be everything. Be nothing. I am a strong, independent woman. I am a feminist. I decide I don’t hate pink.

As a child, I learned that there were a few attributes I possessed, not because I had learned them, but because they were intrinsically part of me. I was nurturing and gentle and sensitive not because my family valued those traits and taught me or even because I valued them myself—but because they were inherently part of me as a girl. Those traits were built into my DNA, my gender. In all actuality, I was probably more blunt and assertive than the average person—male or female—but I understood that variance to be in spite of my core nature, in dissonance with my true feminine gentle self. While other girls around me talked about how excited they were to be mothers, I felt uncomfortable but knew that I would be one someday, that my feminine nature would necessitate it, that it was my purpose. I could see it all around me, women were naturally destined to be mothers, to care, to help. I knew that God had literally made Eve for Adam, designed her to be a help to him. Our greatest purpose in life as women was to care for others. Of course, I could also see the independence, strength, courage, aggression, and wisdom of women in my life—but they felt like moments in the shadow, perhaps only necessary to continue the real work of nurturing. There was not a doubt in my mind that I carried feminine traits, not because all humans possess a harmony of feminine/masculine energy, but because they were innate to me as a woman. Biological. Natural.

I learned about gender through varying avenues in my life: my parents, religion, school, community, movies, music, friends, culture, etc. Everything about gender pointed back to the idea of our “fundamental nature.” I learned at home that women nurture and men provide. I was taught in church that men and women have different but complementary roles, God made us that way. When boys were rowdy and rough, I heard adults just chuckle and say “boys will be boys.” When I was rowdy and rough, the adults said that I needed to be more ladylike. Women are this
way, men are that way. Why? *That is just the way things are.* Men and women have biological traits, natural inclinations that align with our predestined roles. Our idea of gender ties back to our core beliefs about the very fundamental nature of women and men.

In this chapter, I would like to closely examine this “fundamental nature” assigned to gender. The West knows gender as something fixed, predetermined by nature or biology or God. I argue that this either/or gender binary is something that has been constructed, created, and made to be universally true, and I will explore some key reasons those things seem to have been made to be that way. This chapter will consist of two analyses of the gender binary. The first challenges asymmetry and hierarchy within gender. Gender is a social construction with assigned feminine/masculine characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and roles. Within the binary, there is also asymmetry: women have been made to be inferior in relation to men. The second analysis deconstructs the concept of the gender binary itself. The gender binary posits not only what each gender means in society, but that there is meaning assigned to these designations at all—only two gender options. Sex, like gender, is also a social construction. As such, there are those who live outside this binary gender construction.

Why do these expectations and gender/sex roles exist? How did this binary between man and woman come to be so pervasive? Or, to refer again to Michele Foucault’s triangle of power/right/truth, what are the powers that make these gendered norms valid and true? Things that are assumed to be natural or innate are actually often made to be that way. As I reflected on my awakening to the inflexibility of the gender binary and then ways of existing beyond the binary, I found a number of locations where my gendering seemed to originate. Yet as I traced them, they all seemed to connect to science as the authenticator of their truth claims. How do we know that women are *naturally* nurturing? Biology, research studies, brains, hormones, science.

---

98 Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 93.
The hegemony of science legitimized all other producers of gender knowledge in my life.

Therefore, while analyzing both sections about gender, I examine science as the legitimizer of the gender binary—the purveyor of what is natural and innate. Science has been invoked and deployed to prove the truth of the male/female binary—and its deconstruction as arbiter of truth allows us to see what might exist beyond the binary.

**Ratiocentric Authority**

I would like to clarify here what, exactly, I mean when I say science. I am not rejecting science or pushing anti-science rhetoric. I am actually quite fond of reading about new scientific advancements in medicine or space or everyday innovations. My sister is a high school biology teacher and I love that she can explain answers to some of my many questions—we once had a two-hour discussion where she explained to me exactly why most plants are green instead of other colors. I enjoy learning how the world works and think it is a crucial area of knowledge. Sandra Harding reminds us that as a tool, science has been used for much good: food, clothing, medicine, transportation, computers, and phones. It is simultaneously responsible for atomic bombs, chemical weapons, industrial exploitation, pollution, pharmaceutical corruption, and famine.  

Like many things, it is not faultless in its quest for advancement.

One of the first things I learned about science was the scientific method—an empirical process of gaining knowledge, requiring: Question, Research, Hypothesis, Experiment, Data Analysis, Conclusion. It is widely considered to be the backbone of science. If all the steps are followed, it is assumed the findings can then be repeatable and objective. But how can any data be wholly objective when subjective humans ask the questions, determine the research, make the

---


100 Nor is it inclusive in who it allows to be a scientist and to do science. In 177 of the largest tech companies: only 30% of employees identify as women, 8% are Latinx, and 5% are Black. Center for Employment Equity at University of Massachusetts Amherst as cited in Tonn, “Gender.” I find it ironic that science places great importance on accurate and balanced sample distribution in method and research—yet has asymmetry in its own distribution of scientists. However, I am aware that this asymmetry exists the world over.
hypothesis, design the experiments, analyze the evidence, and assign meanings to the conclusions? Well-known science educator William McComas argues that the existence of one universal scientific method is a misconception: “The notion that a common series of steps is followed by all research scientists must be among the most pervasive myths of science.”

Instead, he says, scientists are puzzle-solvers, and apply various methods equal to the problems. I argue that while active scientists may hold this nuanced understanding, the enduring legacy of a fallacious general scientific method only reiterates the power science has in signaling universal objectivity.

Harding argues that, “Science produces information, but it also produces meanings.”

Most of science is just data and numbers until we assign meaning to it. Like us, those meanings are subjective. “Why?” Davison and Hoffman ask, and answer, “Because our theories, ideas, understandings, commitments, and so forth partly guide our observations of the world. Not always consciously, but always.”

I am not trying to discredit the scientific method or science itself as valuable—just as inappropriate for use to determine universal truth and objectivity.

What I am ultimately referring to when I say science, is science less as a particular employer or school or technology, and more science as a larger discourse of truth. One that positions itself as fully objective, impartial, unbiased, neutral—and in so doing, also as the one source of truth, singularly knowledgeable, superior, universal, unequaled. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, Harding questions how we know what we know and who the “objectivity” of science really serves. Science, like most things, is not neutral, but serves a particular purpose.

---

103 Davison and Hoffman say, “Recall that empiricism requires that knowledge be value-free. Once knowledge is ascertained, however, empiricists seek to use it to produce specific outcomes, outcomes that carry with them many values.” *Interpreting Politics*, 5-6.
105 Even with a human element, the scientific method and general scientific exploration has proven invaluable, repeatable and consistent in many crucial scientific results, benefiting us in countless ways today.
Michele Foucault suggests that we should question what is legitimated and validated in order to question what has been made to be “true,” or in this case, objective.\textsuperscript{106} I am problematizing science as a location, the ultimate location, of unbiased, objective knowledge production for many knowledges, including gender.

I posit science has become the ultimate authority on gender and a great many other things, but some might suggest that other more conspicuous locations ultimately dictate gender. Here I would like to meet those claims and appraise how religion, patriarchy, and faulty scientists, might be mistaken as the “real” locations where gender truths are produced.

The way religion ties to gender is fairly straightforward, especially with regard to Christian creation stories. As a generalization, Christianity teaches that God made men and women to fulfill different roles based on traits that are innate to males and females. This leads to a gendered hierarchy in regards to marriage, leadership, expectations, and societal roles. For most of my life, I took my cues from religion for understanding how I was \textit{made} to move through the world as a woman. Christianity is not so much about people quoting scripture to explain gender, but about how God created men and women to fill divinely different roles. This looks like an end location where gender is determined, but I argue that religion actually appeals to science to prove its claims. It uses science to prove what it knows is true from God—that men and women are biologically predispositioned with different masculine and feminine qualities, that women are \textit{natural} caregivers while men are \textit{natural} providers. If God made the genders to be different, biology and scientific research shows those differences to be true. Religion may appeal to beliefs, but it uses science to authenticate those beliefs as natural.

Patriarchy’s tie to gender is perhaps most obvious. A system that construes men as superior to women seems like the most likely culprit for producing knowledge and expectations

\textsuperscript{106} Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 92-108.
around gender. Indeed, its reach is apparent in many areas: toxic masculinity and violence, men filling the majority of leadership positions; but inconspicuous in others: the gender pay gap, the expectation for married women to take their husband’s last name.\textsuperscript{107} Again, this patriarchy seems like the conclusive location for the regulation of gendered knowledge and norms, but I argue that the patriarchy also appeals to science to prove its right to dominate. It uses science to suggest that the genders are not only different, but that men are inherently and naturally stronger, more intelligent, and designed to lead. I suggest that the patriarchy is a result of the gender binary, not its creation. Patriarchy may appeal to man’s superiority but uses science to back its claims.\textsuperscript{108}

Both religion and patriarchy must appeal to the authority of science to substantiate their claims and prove their premises as innate and natural. Perhaps the most potent argument to suggest that science cannot be at fault for gendered knowledge production is that scientists, not science, make incorrect theories—that scientists produce problematic knowledges about gender because they misuse science. Perhaps it is a scientist’s bias or sexism that causes them to use science incorrectly. While it is true that individual scientists can make a lasting impact—Darwin’s theories still echo in the halls of science—they do not individually account for the collective discourse that narrates and weaponizes Western thought. To say that all erroneous knowledge lies squarely on the shoulders of the scientist who misused the science is to say that science can never be wrong. If it is always the scientist misusing science and never science getting it wrong, then science becomes infallible. I am not necessarily trying to debate the wrongness or rightness of science—I know that trial and error are a crucial part of discovery. Instead, I am interrogating the way we place science on a pedestal of guaranteed perfection, so much so that if science gets it wrong, it must have been an error on the part of the scientist, but

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{107} For more information on the patriarchy, see bell hooks, \textit{Understanding Patriarchy.}
\item \textsuperscript{108} Later in the chapter I will provide examples of how craniology was used to prove women’s inferior intellect.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
never science. It is dangerous to posit science as the invisible thing behind the curtain that substantiates claims and authorizes knowledge, but is never wrong, only misused.

With this in mind, I will define science here more clearly and deeply. For the sake of this chapter, science is defined less as the search for answers or particular experiments and processes to ask questions and disprove hypotheses, and more as the broad system of categorizing the world through, and only through, scientific means. In this sense, it might be more appropriate to use the term *scientism*. According to philosophy professors Williams and Robinson, “Scientism is, in its basic form, a dogmatic overconfidence in science and "scientific" knowledge.” Scientism places science as the only way to know anything. This contradicts what most scientists know in practice, that science and scientific process is imperfect and fallible. But it is also a highly seductive and alluring notion—that science could have all the answers to all the questions. My critique of science is not actually a critique of science, but a critique of a way of thinking, of a system of power, of an authority that would posit the science of a rigid gender binary as infallible, thus making it so natural that questioning it is unthinkable.

I am problematizing not science, but the hegemony of science. Williams and Robinson note that, “Scientism seeks to claim authority…In so doing, opposing views are cast not only as mistaken, but as making no sense, since scientific knowledge is held to be the only real knowledge that can make sense.” Under scientism, only scientific knowledge is valid knowledge—the only existing form of knowledge is scientific knowledge.

---

109 Menuge says that, “Scientism claims that science is the only or best way to know reality,” and that, “science is superior to any other discipline in its ability to know reality.” In many ways, his main goal is to give Christianity a valid place in offering knowledge science cannot—but his critique of the domination by scientism remains relevant here. “Making the Case Against Scientism,” 27-28.
rationality. Sylvia Wynter theorized that in the West, humankind transitioned from a theocentric order to a ratiocentric order, where humanness changed from being defined by sin/redemption to being defined by rationality. In the shift, the appeal to logic became the dominating power and the gods lost authority. Where previously, theology justified something with an appeal to God, that authority was replaced by an appeal to logic and rationality.

It should be noted that the theocentric and current ratiocentric eras are two in a long pattern of eras where humankind centered different ways to make sense of the world. Each era used a different authority to explain their lives. Angus Menuge explained that current scientism is simply a “form of reductionism, according to which there is a single mode of explanation that explains every fact about reality.” All eras reduced the world to fit a perception of knowledge. Science and rationality have not always been the legitimizers of truth. In the theocentric order, people made sense of the world through religion, authorized by God. In the ratiocentric order, people make sense of the world through rationality, authorized by science. Rationality is now the central tenet from which everything else is determined, which means science is the new god of thought and truth. The new benchmark of rationality is consistently pitted against assumed irrationality. If it is not factual, it is emotional. If it is emotional or irrational, it is less human. This becomes the foundation through which those deemed less rational by the West—women, children, non-white people and non-westerners—are made less human.

In the ratiocentric order, all knowledge can be measured by its rationality, and that

---

112 According Williams and Robinson, “It would be noncontroversial to say that science assumes and requires that the world be rational; that is, that it can be made sense of by a rational mind. The world must be orderly rather than random. There is no reason, however, that science should require that the rationality and order derive from, or have their roots in, any particular sort of reality.” In other words, science requires rationality, but scientism has certain rules for what makes rationale “scientific enough.” Scientism, 4.
113 Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 266-269.
114 Note that although the West is no longer considered a theocentric society, religion still plays a central role in how the West views gender and the world at large (see chapter 3). In a ratiocentric society, rationality and science are often invoked to prove that those theocentric and religious views about gender are natural and true.
115 Menuge, “Making the Case Against Scientism,” 27.
rationality is often measured through its adherence to principles of science. Once again, science as a search for knowledge or a process of discovery is not the issue here. The problem lies in science as scientism (which posits scientific knowledge as the only true knowledge), and ratiocentrism (which orders the world and humanness based on rationality).

It is important to note here that when I use the term rationality, I am not trying to confine it to the philosophical field of rationalism. In academic circles, rationalism is often pitted against empiricism in a way that makes them mutually exclusive: rationalism (often referenced with philosophy or math) is seen as reason and logic while empiricism (often referenced with science) is seen as experience and observation. I have talked at length about rationality and science, but science is most often technically associated with notions of empiricism. There has been a long-standing debate in philosophy and epistemology as to whether rational or empirical knowledge is better.\textsuperscript{116} Davison and Hoffman explain that for empiricists, “True knowledge of the natural and social world is only to be founded upon sensory experience.”\textsuperscript{117} This sensory experience is often pitted against reason and logic as a superior way of understanding the world. Davison and Hoffman wrote that empiricism sees itself as, “objective in the sense that empiricists believe that they have “universal” knowledge of the world as-it-is, available to all human beings and exclusive to empiricism.”\textsuperscript{118} So it seems that while empiricism and rationalism may stem from different modes, they seem to both rely on the same thing: a belief that they are omniscient in their wisdom and methods. Both played a part in replacing theocentric worldviews in favor of modern rationale, devaluing all other ways of knowing.\textsuperscript{119} This debate between the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{116}{For a detailed analysis of the debate, see Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Rationalism vs. Empiricism.”}
\footnote{117}{Davison and Hoffman, \textit{Interpreting Politics}, 4.}
\footnote{118}{Davison and Hoffman, \textit{Interpreting Politics}, 6.}
\footnote{119}{Davison and Hoffman reference philosophers like Comte, who, “declared that the days of knowing things through “traditional” means like prayers, oracles, soothsayers, magicians, or abstract philosophical postulations are over. Real knowledge is not based on abstract notions derived from religious, philosophical or ideological commitments. It must be based on what is immediately given to the senses.” \textit{Interpreting Politics}, 7.}}
two holds little sway in my larger analysis, as I argue that the Western narratives rooted in
science and reason use both rationalism and empiricism to claim power over universal
truth-telling while feigning objectivity.

So when I say science, what I am really referring to is the power structures that enforce
one, and only one, objective truth, and that the yardstick for measuring any form of knowledge is
based on foundational notions like rationality or empiricism to legitimize the claims made
around the gender binary.

Amidst all the controversial topics I would discuss with people about my research
interests, individuals were most deterred by conversations around the shortcomings of science as
objective knowledge. It is the only topic I mentioned that was repeatedly and vehemently
opposed. I remember chatting with a friend and seeing the specific moment I changed in his eyes
from an educated, progressive, maybe overly enthusiastic academic—to an uneducated,
backwards, illogical conspiracy theorist. It wasn’t any of my most politically disputed views. It
wasn’t when I talked about imperialism and capitalism as modern colonialism. It wasn’t when I
criticized academia for centering all knowledge in Western thought and actively excluding
Indigenous epistemologies. It was when I questioned science as the source of absolute truth and
objectivity—that, apparently, was too far. I had been talking about gender, how gender was a
construction, how maybe we could have a world without gender. He immediately referenced
evolution and the male/hunter female/gatherer trope that proves our gender roles are rooted in
biology. My earnest attempts to unravel science’s hold on the gender binary were met with a
scoff and a side-eye. There was no possible argument to be had, because gender had inherently
always been this way. Science proves it.

In a lot of ways, I could not blame him for taking this stance. I too, have ingrained ideas
of intrinsic qualities that make me a woman, that make me a natural fit in the gatherer role of
society. I still grapple with disentangling parts of myself from my innate biological qualities that
are supposed to be indistinguishable from a woman who lived thousands of years ago. I still
often refer to scientific facts as the ultimate authority, the conversation-winning comment.

The male hunter, female gatherer narrative has been the conclusive reference for many in
proving the deep-rooted biological nature of gender—but a 2023 publication dispels some of its
indisputability. “The Myth of Man the Hunter: Women’s contribution to the hunt across
ethnographic contexts,” looks at archaeological research and the continued prevalence of women hunters today. The research shows women were hunting in 79% of the foraging societies. Their specialized toolkits suggested that women not only hunted, but were skilled, and created personal strategies. Lead researcher on the study, Cara Wall-Scheffler, told NPR, “the hunting was purposeful. Women had their own toolkit. They had favorite weapons. Grandmas were the best hunters of the village.”

The study also referenced a 2020 publication by Haas et al., that determined that women were not just trivial hunters, but often big game hunters as well. Haas told NPR that during their 2018 study in Peru, his team found a 9,000-year-old individual buried with a great many hunting tools. He said they all sat around commenting on how great a hunter and warrior the man must have been—maybe even a chief. A week later, with bone structure analysis and tooth enamel scraping, they received quite a shock: “This apparent master hunter was female.” After reviewing records from similar past archaeological finds, they concluded that in 11 of the 27 previous sites, the assumed male hunters were actually female. Which means that many women in the Americas were big game hunters historically, and the gendered hunter/gatherer trope needs to be revisited—along with all its consequential assumptions about the nature of men and women. Scientists, thinking men were the ones with innate hunter attributes, looked no further upon uncovering a hunter surrounded by weapons.

Kimberly Hamlin, a history professor who focuses on women’s rights and the impact of

120 Anderson et al., “Myth of Man the Hunter,” 5-6.
121 Aizenman, “Men are hunters.”
123 Aizenman, “Men are hunters.”
124 Aizenman, “Men are hunters.”
evolutionary science, told NPR that this study could have extensive implications. If we believe that men were hunters and women were gatherers because it was our natural roles (men = strong, aggressor, provider; women = weak, nurturer)—and it has been that way for 200,000 years—it becomes unthinkable to suggest that we can be anything else. But a discovery that punctures that nice little binary might open up possibilities. Unfortunately, science is not always an effective tool for disproving history—as I will show later in the next section.

I need to first speak to the limitations of using science to disprove science—as I have done extensively in this section. Resorting to science reasoning to disprove more science reasoning plays squarely into the problem with science—that it has been made to be the ultimate authority. So much so that even here I felt the need to defer to science as the endmost proof in a chapter that is supposed to deconstruct science as the endmost source of knowledge. In our ratiocentric society, rationality is key and one must prove themselves as rational by using sources legitimated by scientific authorities. Science is alluring like that—offering the promise of objective truth and fact instead of what all narratives are: a particular discourse that tells a particular story.

**Challenging the Asymmetry of Gender**

When I was a teenager, I pushed against the gendered narratives suggesting that women are not tough. Any chance I got to show that girls could be strong, I would. When the boys were asked to put the heavy metal folding chairs away at church, I would run over in my dress and carry 4 chairs on each arm just to show that I was as tough as the boys. Shotgun shooting contests, leg wrestling, eating contests; anything to prove a girl could be tough. In some ways, I feel like these memories were some of the first experiences I had in reshaping the narratives that had shaped me. It was so liberating to push against gender roles and make my own place. Of course, we may push against and reproduce a mechanism, sometimes even at the same time. This surface-level pushback of proving I was tough probably fed into patriarchal systems and

---

125 Hamlin said that, “next to the myth that God made a woman from man's rib to be his helper, the myth that man is the hunter and woman is the gatherer is probably the second most enduring myth that naturalizes the inferiority of women.” Aizenman, “Men are hunters, women are gatherers.”

126 Ashis Nandy argues that using science to fix science, “suggests that while the scientific worldview cannot be judged by other worldviews, the other worldviews can be judged and indeed should be judged by science,” “Modern Science and Authoritarianism,” 10.
mechanisms of masculinity more than it disrupted them, but it fueled the beginnings of my feminist fire nonetheless.

In much greater battles than my chair-carrying antics, the feminist movement\textsuperscript{127} has fought for women’s liberation and equal rights, and seen some significant victories: access to education, the right to vote, reproductive autonomy, equal employment and equal pay, political nominations, financial autonomy, etc.\textsuperscript{128} All things that were not possible for women a century ago, a few decades ago, and in practice, sometimes still today. Why do women have to fight for the right to have what men have always had? What is it about being a woman that makes us apparently less capable? What qualities define us as inferior to men?

\textit{I once asked my husband to list quickly, first things that came to mind: what is a woman? He threw out things like: pretty, mother, nurturing, caretaker; kind, sweet, long hair, makeup, etc. I knew that he knew the list was erroneous, yet many of the same characteristics had come to my own mind. They were not characteristics that I believed, just ones that have been ingrained into me the same way I would answer that the sky is blue or lemons are sour. That is the thing about socially embedded cues: you can understand that a woman is not this paltry list—yet still give these answers as a knee-jerk reaction. It’s not a list of what makes a woman, it’s a list of characteristics that have been attributed to women.}

Simone de Beauvoir asked similar questions in \textit{The Second Sex:} What is a woman, are there even women, where are the women? She clarifies that while it is obvious that people split into two rudimentary social categories based on clothing, bodies, jobs, and interests—the differences are superficial and are not enough to actually define men and women.\textsuperscript{129} They are simply roles we take on and ways we present to conform to society’s expectations of gender. Judith Butler\textsuperscript{130} wrote about performativity of gender, the repetition of which creates a stable gender identity: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is

\textsuperscript{127} While Western feminism has accomplishments in gender equality in the West, it is fundamentally a White-Eurocentric movement that oppressed many others in its own agenda. For a look at feminism that acknowledges the compounding effect of different forms of oppression and intersectional feminist politics, see Crenshaw, \textit{On Intersectionality} and Taylor, “Combahee River Collective.”

\textsuperscript{128} Brunell and Burkett, “Feminism.”

\textsuperscript{129} Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, 1-3.

\textsuperscript{130} Butler’s work has transformed feminist and gender theory. For a more deep and authentic application of Butler’s work on this topic, see the second section of this chapter on deconstructing the gender binary.
performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.”¹³¹ In other words, performing the gender is what makes the gender real. When I did things that opposed my innate attributes as a woman, I broke the expected performance of gender and my behavior was chastised: girls do not act like that. We perform and present the gender behaviors that are expected of us, and to do otherwise is to be in opposition to one’s assigned gender.

Gender is the characteristics or behaviors that are associated with being a man or a woman—and those characteristics are most often dispensed as just that: a binary either/or, male/female, masculine/feminine. Therefore, gender is a social construction. To claim that gender is a social construction assumes that there is a constructor, a builder—that gender is not natural or predetermined, but has been made. Many feminist writers argue that the modern concept of gender did not just randomly come into existence, nor has it always existed in this way—but that it was actively created as such. María Lugones wrote about how gender was constructed as a form of domination. She defined our current understanding of gender as “the colonial, Eurocentered, capitalist construction,”¹³² created as a form of oppression in a larger system of domination and exploitation.¹³³

So if gender is actually not fixed, but a performance of socially expected behaviors, what is it that makes women inferior and unequal to men? Why has there been a need to fight for equality in the sexes? Gender is, of course, part of a nuanced and complex web of history and identity that would be impossible to fully elucidate in the space I have here. But it is also, in some ways, straightforward. Gender is subject to an unequal system of discrimination, sexism, misogyny, privilege; dependent on notions of biology, psychology, and social norms. In other words, because our idea of gender ties back to our beliefs about the very fundamental nature of

¹³¹ Butler, Gender Trouble, xv, 33.
¹³³ This will be discussed further in the second section of this chapter.
women and men, and science is invoked to legitimize those natures as biologically fixed, gender inequality is also seen to be predetermined. In this view, there is no gender inequality, just a misunderstanding of gender differences. In a society where rationality is the prevailing authority, women are inferiorized by notions of their innate irrationality—naturally more emotional, less intellectually capable, and less logical. Thus creating an asymmetrical gender hierarchy.

**Naturalized Hierarchy**

Gender asymmetry is rooted in comparison. Men and women are categories created only in relation to each other. Women are more or less of any characteristic as it relates to that characteristic in men. For many centuries the debates in medicine, philosophy, science and academia have relied on various ethical and social frameworks to justify the establishment of women as inferior. In day-to-day life, the term inferior is often replaced by more subtle notions of divine difference or natural disposition,134 but the inequality remains.

Well-known philosopher John Rawls detailed a thought experiment as an attempt to help people see past the excuses and rationalizations, to the reality of the oppression—I use it very loosely here to demonstrate gender inequality. In his “veil of ignorance,”135 amidst a great many other details, people are taken into an impartial position, ignorant of their own lives, to discuss the creation of equal basic rights in a just society and how to solve injustices. The goal would be to illustrate how it might feel if people are then essentially mixed up and placed in the life of someone else. Anyone could be placed into any time, location, circumstance, place, race, age, social or economic class, and as any gender. If placed in the life circumstance of a woman, would it feel fair?136 Would there be arguments for changes to society? While I appreciate this thought

---

134 Instead of saying a woman can’t be a leader because she is “inferior,” one might say she can’t be a leader because she’s naturally “too emotional,” or “less intelligent.” She’s not inferior, just naturally better at other things.
136 For the sake of this chapter, I focus narrowly on gender inequality. But it should be noted that the inequalities compound when multiple forms of oppression are stacked—often creating not just more inequalities, but new forms of discrimination where the marginalizations intersect. See Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality.*
experiment and have referenced it in conversations to illustrate the inequality of privilege and circumstances, it falls short when faced with the deeply ingrained ideas of innate traits. If privilege is not seen as privilege, but as a result of natural superiority, then it cannot be located as an injustice. For example, if women’s inequality in leadership roles is attributed to their innate lack of competence and assertion due to their gentle natures,\(^{137}\) then it is seen less as gender bias injustice and more as a natural result of gender.

For this reason, statistical data showing inequality can be easily excused with these same notions of the natural. Here I examine statistics on the gender wage gap as one of the more innocuous but obvious locations of gender inequality. The 2022 data listed here shows the amount of money paid to women comparatively for every dollar paid to a man, for the same work within each country.\(^{138}\) The percentage points remain within 5.7% of where they were over 20 years ago.\(^{139}\) I chose this source to represent the data on the gender wage gap because it shows the gendered inequality in countries that self-declare a focus on economic growth and stability.


\(^{137}\) It should be noted that when women exhibit the same behavior as men, it is often labeled differently: men are assertive, women are aggressive; men are passionate, women are hysterical; men demand, women nag.

\(^{138}\) This data is limited to only certain countries, and according to the OECD, even within those countries, the sampling can often be inaccurate. For details, see OECD, “Gender Pay Gaps,” 1.

\(^{139}\) OECD, “Gender Pay Gaps,” 1.
A well-known international organization called the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) offers this and other data from a collection of countries that have been accepted as some of the most committed countries in the world for achieving development. As an OECD member country, the United States Department of State endorses this organization as having been a reliable source of “evidence-based policy analysis and economic data,” for over half a century.\textsuperscript{140} They go on to specify that the 35+ “OECD member countries account for three-fifths of world GDP, three-quarters of world trade, over 90 percent of global official development assistance, half of the world’s energy consumption, and 18 percent of the world’s population.”\textsuperscript{141} Their goals revolve around economic development and scientific innovation, but still show a significant gendered wage gap (see figure 3).

From my experience, when the gender pay gap is brought up, the first excuses usually relate to how women work in different, lower-paying jobs than men. When presented with data that shows the gender pay gap within comparable jobs, the next excuses often emphasize women’s innate natures: that women are not built for work like men, or are not assertive enough to get a raise. While I have obviously taken liberties with these generalizations, the principle remains: gender inequality is delegitimated by the notion of biologically gendered traits. Rawls suggested that the veil of ignorance should be an exercise in finding agreement to social practices that would allow for the idea of fair inequality management—where marginalized groups would have very particular recourse methods to fix injustices.\textsuperscript{142} I question the ability of Western society to reach this point if gendered inequality is hidden under a preceding form of a veil of ignorance: ratiocentric biological determinism. The West cannot see inequality when it still believes certain groups to be naturally biologically inferior.

\textsuperscript{140} U.S. Department of State, “The Organization.”
\textsuperscript{141} U.S. Department of State, “The Organization.”
\textsuperscript{142} Rawls, “The Original Position,” 140.
While there are a plethora of other historical and modern locations we could examine to understand the asymmetry of gender, Foucault argued that we should analyze power not at its center, but at its extremities, at “the point where power surmounts the rules of right which organise and delimit it and extends itself beyond them, invests itself in institutions, becomes embodied in techniques, and equips itself with instruments and eventually even violent means of material intervention.”\textsuperscript{143} In the case of gender inequality, this means analyzing legitimation of gendered assumptions not at the level of statistical or institutional power production; but where it dictates truths about our lives and our bodies. The real power of ratiocentric science is that even when it leaves the halls of knowledge production, it still legitimates gendered norms.

Bias in the wage gap, intentional or not, is operational—it can be traced to employers, clients, managers, coworkers, and organizations. Allow me to describe a site where the bias is less visible, where there is not active bias and inferiorization of women—but women are experiencing subordination all the same.

Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration shows that, “Compared to men, women are 17 percent more likely to die in a car crash and 73 percent more likely to sustain serious injuries in a front-end collision.”\textsuperscript{144} Some people’s first thought might attribute the difference to women’s size or driving habits—yet the difference is more likely to lie in the fact that the very first female crash test dummy was not created until the end of 2022. According to \textit{Smithsonian}, crash test dummies have been used for 50 years to test the safety of vehicles, but EU and U.S. regulatory tests only require crash tests with an average adult male dummy\textsuperscript{145}—171 pounds, 5 feet 9 inches tall.\textsuperscript{146} The U.S. Department of Transportation website shows that, though

\textsuperscript{143} Foucault, “Lecture Two,” 96.
\textsuperscript{144} Osborne, “First Female Crash Dummy.”
\textsuperscript{145} Osborne, “First Female Crash Dummy.”
\textsuperscript{146} NHTSA, “NHTSA’s Crash Test Dummies.”
not required by regulation to be tested, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration does have a female dummy in its lineup\textsuperscript{147}—108 pounds, 4 feet 11 inches tall, about the size of a 12-year-old girl—that \textit{BBC} says represents the smallest 5\% of women and is essentially a scaled-down version of the average male model without any anatomical adjustments.\textsuperscript{148} The statistics clearly show that women are in more danger in car crashes, but safety testing continues to focus on male bodies.

That is why a Swedish team of engineers created a crash test dummy actually built to more closely match the average woman—137 pounds, 5 feet 3 inches tall, with different positionings for torso and joints.\textsuperscript{149} Astrid Linder, lead researcher in the Swedish team, told NPR that she hopes new assessments with the female crash test dummy will create changes in the regulations to now require testing with both the average male model and the average female model.\textsuperscript{150} Different engineers are working on a range of models with diverse body types, sizes, and ages, but they will not become applicable until the regulations change.

Women will continue to be allowed to die in vehicle accidents at a higher rate than men until these differences are seen as real inequalities. To refer again to Rawl’s veil of ignorance, if the same men who might rationalize a gender pay gap knew they would be 17 percent more likely to die and 73 percent more likely to be seriously injured due to a car crash if placed in a woman’s circumstances, would they push for more equal regulations on crash testing? Some could contend that it is just an oversight, or an unfortunate product of the patriarchy. I argue that this “oversight” is in fact an example of what gender asymmetry looks like in the extremities as an unthinkable concept. Unlike the gender pay gap—which is systemic but might also be traced

---
\textsuperscript{147} NHTSA, “NHTSA's Crash Test Dummies.”
\textsuperscript{148} McCallum, “Protecting Women Drivers.”
\textsuperscript{149} McCallum, “Protecting Women Drivers.”
\textsuperscript{150} Linder, “First Female Crash Test Dummy.”
to misogynistic managers who truly believe their women employees are less capable and less deserving of equal pay—gender bias here cannot be visibly traced to car manufacturers or crash testers. I cannot argue that women die in car crashes because misogynistic managers believe women should die in crashes. It is not easily traced to the scientists who work to improve vehicle safety, or even to the government regulations. The bias here is not individual, but part of a larger gender asymmetry that has inferiorized women for so long that we did not even think to question the lack of a female test dummy. It was outside our realm of thought—unthinkable.

I suggest that the ratiocentric legitimation of truth has such a stranglehold on knowledge that it becomes unthinkable for us to even consider anything that might exist outside its bounds. Women are subordinated both in being positioned as naturally irrational, and also as the second-rate gender. Because gender is an either/or relationship and men are dominant, women are perpetually inferior. Science is invoked as the ultimate authority to prove many of these ratiocentric truth claims about biology and gender. Here, I will look more closely at some of the ways science has historically been deployed to prove and authorize biological determinism.

**The Pseudoscience of Gender**

The field of science itself has a long history of omitting women on the grounds of science and rationality—or rather, women’s assumed irrationality and inability to perform science. According to the Encyclopedia of the History of Science, historically, “Universities and other institutions of science refused to hire women for a number of gendered reasons: women’s biology made them unfit to do science; women’s natural roles as wives and mothers precluded them from professional careers in science…” and their supposed lack of intellect would not have made them good scientists anyway.\footnote{Tonn, “Gender.”}

Elizabeth Fee described how the 1860’s women’s rights movement spurred scientists into
action. In order to quell the rising social unrest, female inferiority, though widely known, needed to be more definitively proven. Anthropologists “wanted simply to assign woman her true place in nature, so that she could live in accordance with her biological destiny.”\textsuperscript{152} In this case, that was motherhood, which was apparently free of and incompatible with any sort of work requiring logic and intellect.

Anthropologists began to study in earnest women’s brains to prove lower intellectual capacity. In \textit{The Mismeasure of Man}, Stephen Gould describes Paul Broca, French founder of the 1859 Paris Anthropological Society, as one of the lead researchers in this movement.\textsuperscript{153} Broca’s studies centered specifically on methods like craniology—the measuring of human skulls to determine intelligence. His argument of women’s biological inferiority hinged on two points: men’s brains were larger in modern societies, and the gap in size of men and women’s brains had only widened through history. In studying brains, Broca was familiar with the need to adjust for body size,\textsuperscript{154} but he did not adjust while studying women’s brains. He did not need to, because everyone knew that women were generally inferior.\textsuperscript{155} In an 1861 paper Broca wrote, “But we must not forget that women are, on the average, a little less intelligent than men…We are therefore permitted to suppose that the relatively small size of the female brain depends in part upon her physical inferiority and in part upon her intellectual inferiority.”\textsuperscript{156}

Science was deployed in service of ratiocentric ideals of gender. Women were already deemed to be naturally less rational, which meant these studies and perspectives began from a faulty gender-based bias. Because of this, there were a number of ratiocentric female

\textsuperscript{152} Fee, “Nineteenth-Century Craniology,” 415-417.
\textsuperscript{153} Gould, \textit{The Mismeasure of Man}, 83.
\textsuperscript{154} Broca had adjusted for body size when comparing brains of his own Frenchmen to Germanmen, in order to ensure French brains were approached proportionally. Gould, \textit{The Mismeasure of Man}, 89.
\textsuperscript{155} Gould, \textit{The Mismeasure of Man}, 103-104.
characteristics that could be assessed: intellect, logic, rationality, and reason—all of which women were already seen to be lacking in. Broca’s colleague, McGrigor Allan, wrote an 1869 paper comparing women’s brains to those of animals. This comparison, “explained the observed fact that women were sensitive and emotional, less guided by reason than men. If women were to be educated, their innate intuitive faculties might be destroyed.”157 Women were not only less rational, but could not be educated in an attempt to remedy the situation, for fear of ruining their natural qualities. Scientifically, the proof was in the craniology: the dimensions of female skulls were similar to those of babies or other races—thus proving women’s low intelligence.158

Pseudoscientific methods like craniology are most often referenced in the context of scientific racism. Craniology had already been used to grossly determine the inferiority of other races and justify slavery. Since women had already been deemed irrational, their skulls need only be compared by the same standards. According to Harvard Library, “Through the years, scientific racism has taken many forms, all with the goal of co-opting the authority of science as objective knowledge to justify racial inequality.”159 As rationality is key, science conveyed supposed evidence of white superiority by painting the other as irrational: unreasonable, barbaric, uncivilized, animalistic.160 Likewise, but to a less violent extent, science was used to prove male superiority by painting females as irrational: emotional, sensitive, simplistic. Science needed only to provide “proof” of what everyone already knew; of what was already “natural.”

Broca’s work had a widespread impact in the anthropological community.161 His studies had a ripple effect as other scientists approached the same studies he did, using the research he

158 Fee, “Nineteenth-Century Craniology,” 419.
159 Harvard Library, “Scientific Racism.”
160 Trouillot argues in “An Unthinkable History,” (72-83) that scientific racism, though often located to the nineteenth century, was embedded in ideals long before. Spurred by colonization and cemented by the idea of differing degrees of humanity, Black inferiority was ultimately based on ontology not empirical evidence.
161 His discovery of a frontal lobe speech center of the brain is still referred to today as “Broca’s area.”
provided. In 1897 Gustave Le Bon, a founder of social psychology, used data from Broca’s studies to definitively show the magnitude of women’s inferiority: “This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment; only its degree is worth discussion. All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women, as well as poets and novelists, recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution.” It is clear that craniology and science were simply tools in Le Bon’s arsenal for legitimizing what he already knew as fact.

Some might suggest that these scientists and anthropologists were just a product of their time, and cannot be blamed for looking to prove what everyone already knew was true. To that I say: exactly. Science is not detached from societal norms and common beliefs, truths, and knowledge. It is fully entwined—both as a method of creating such beliefs, and as a method of proving them fact. Scientists of the time measured the skulls of everyone—women, children, non-Europeans, poor classes, people of other races—against the upper class white male, and found them all to be, as assumed, naturally intellectually inferior. They used science and biology to justify their prejudice. A larger discourse had already positioned women as inferior, scientists were simply deploying scientific methods to legitimize those discourses.

Gould problematizes this flagrant biological determinism: prejudice may be as old as time, he said, but “biological justification imposed the additional burden of intrinsic inferiority upon despised groups.” In other words, bias and prejudice may already exist, but it is another level of domination to use science to prove the rightness of said prejudice based on differences being innate. The crucial point here is that biological determinism eliminates the notion of bias.

---

164 With rationality as the indicator of humanness, the inferior groups were interchangeable—you prove one as unintelligent, you prove them all. Gould, The Mismeasure of Man, 103.
Under biological determinism, one’s behavior and characteristics are entirely attributed to genetics, not social factors. In this worldview, women fail not due to bias, but because they are inescapably, biologically, predestined to do so. Oppression and control are easily justified.

By the mid 1900s, biology-based racism was largely disproven and pseudoscience like craniology was discredited. In 2017 Stuart Ritchie led a study further cementing the sham that was craniology.\textsuperscript{166} He suggests that the overlap in male and female brains confirms that the human brain cannot be considered “sexually dimorphic.”\textsuperscript{167} Michael Price from Science news said about the study, “In other words, just by looking at the brain scan, or height, of someone plucked at random from the study, researchers would be hard pressed to say whether it came from a man or woman. That suggests both sexes' brains are far more similar than they are different.”\textsuperscript{168}

Yet the assumptions of women’s inferior intellect subsist. Science has been deployed in the inferiorization of different groups of people, finding proof for what society already believed. When God was the ultimate authority, people were inferior because they were sinners. With rationalism and science as the authority, we can prove that people are inferior for no other reason than that being their natural and innate state of existence. Sandra Harding stated, “Studies of the uses and abuses of biology, the social sciences, and their technologies show how they have been used in the service of sexism, racism, homophobia, and class exploitation.”\textsuperscript{169} This is especially visible in history such as discussed here, when science has been used to measure bodies in order

\textsuperscript{166} Scientists analyzed 5,216 brain MRIs to better understand neurological issues that might vary by sex like Alzheimer's disease or psychiatric disorders. It was a larger sample size than Broca ever had. The research showed that men and women differ in which areas of the brain are bigger, but when accounting for brain volume based on body height, those differences were often negated. Ritchie, “Sex differences.”

\textsuperscript{167} Ritchie, “Sex differences.” Dimorphism relates to a distinct and obvious distinction in male and female representation. Examples of sexual dimorphism in animals include peacocks: where only the males have the large and colorful tail plumage. Human brains are not different enough to warrant this descriptor.

\textsuperscript{168} Price, “Study finds.”

\textsuperscript{169} Harding, \textit{Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?}, 34.
to dictate their worth.

We put the “pseudo” in front of science to denote a sham science, a fake science. Just some beliefs pretending to be real science when they are not. That is the thing about most pseudoscience—it was real science once. It was fully backed by the scientific community, with all sorts of proof and evidence and accurate use of the scientific method, used to dominate, to oppress, and to justify violence. Science has never been an unmoving force, but is constantly changing and proving itself wrong. Referencing Thomas Kuhn’s work on scientific revolutions, Davison and Hoffman explain that the history of science has been filled with different periods in which, “scientists look at the world in fundamentally different ways.”\(^{170}\) For example, in the geocentric model, Earth as the center of the universe was once the bedrock of science, but the tools and methods once used to prove it as fact would now be considered inaccurate.\(^{171}\) Harding claims that science has often functioned to provide “resources for some people’s domination of others.”\(^{172}\) Modern science may have rejected these old scientific methods, but still engages in using facts for domination today over people’s lives and bodies. Gould beautifully noted, “We pass through this world but once. Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within.”\(^{173}\) Science—when used to oppress and exploit people under the guise of inherent and innate inferiority, but justified based on arbitrary physical characteristics tied to race or gender—fails us.

The asymmetry of gender and perceived inferiority of women is based on these types of failures in science. Maybe someday it will change, and that shift will feel much like the


\(^{171}\) Davison and Hoffman, *Interpreting Politics*, 40-44.


discovery that our earth is not the center of the universe—that males were not the center of the world after all. Given enough time, the views of gender might even progress to a place where the equality between genders is of high enough priority that the real science of today around gender becomes the pseudoscience of tomorrow. However, this is unlikely to happen because the asymmetry of gender is built upon deep schemes of gender, sex, and humanness. I argue that to truly dismantle the patriarchy and gender inequality, we must first deconstruct the very notion of gender itself.

**Deconstructing the Gender Binary**

*It used to be the little issues of fairness, things I wasn’t allowed to do or was unfairly expected to do, that would light my feminist fire and rage. I upgraded from raging as a kid about not being viewed as strong enough to put away chairs, to raging as a teen about being relegated to domestic work. Then I turned to raging about how women aren’t paid equal to men but are still expected to do the majority of housework. Then I upgraded again to raging about an unequal system that places women’s lives at risk. I proclaim that I raged so much about gender inequality that I raged myself right off the concept of gender altogether. I found intersectional feminism and realized that I didn’t actually need anything to light my feminist fire—the whole world was already on fire. There was no person that patriarchy/colonialism/capitalism didn’t impact in some way, so there was no person that feminism didn’t fight for. I chased feminist issues into little dark corners where I learned things—things about feminism and gender and the powers that be. Or maybe I unlearned things. Just like I unlearned things about feminism, I unlearned things about gender. To unlearn gender is to come to know that gender is not actually real.*

I discovered that the whole time I thought I was fighting against the gender binary—against gender roles and women’s inequality and battling for women to have the same opportunities as men—I was really just fighting inside the gender binary. I was demanding equality within the constructed binary—and since that binary was established upon the foundations of two distinct categories that are diametrically opposed, it is impossible to fix gender from within the gender binary. Not that there is not plenty of work to still do for inequality in there—but the binary itself requires some deconstructing. The provocation here is not to just see the problems that exist within the gender binary, it is to see the existence of the
gender binary as problematic. The real gender myth science sold was not IF women or men are inferior, it is if women OR men.

In the first section, I posited gender as a social construction—a performance of roles and behaviors assigned to us based primarily on sex. Gender is most often tied to sex—especially since sex is presented as the ultimate immovable binary between male and female. Judith Butler’s analysis argues that, “sex is as culturally constructed as gender,” that when we spoke of sex, maybe we always meant gender. In this section, I would like to argue that sex, too, is a social construction. In fact, gender and sex are often used interchangeably in casual conversation, because Western society so thoroughly conflates the two. We are gendered at birth because if a baby was examined at birth and determined to be a biological female, then her gender is a woman, and she is expected to perform all accompanying gender roles. Maybe sex is also a social construction because we assign what sex means in society, and therefore how someone’s life should look based on that. After all, gender and sex are both just terms for how we are expected to exist in the world.

I can already hear people saying, “But biology!?” I would like to take a moment here to really specify what I mean—and do not mean—when I say sex is a construction. I am not saying that reproductive anatomy and genitalia do not exist. I understand that most people have either a penis or a vagina (I say most because, as explored below, sexual anatomy is also not a binary). I am not saying that I just do not acknowledge body parts anymore—but instead that those body parts have been arbitrarily assigned significance that ties to something much more meaningful in our society. I suggest that sex is a social construction because, like skin pigmentation,


\[175\] It is no coincidence that the term “pussy” is used as a slur for an effeminate man. To feminize a man by comparing him to a slang term for female genitalia shows that genitalia is not simply a neutral body part, but has been imbued with meaning.
reproductive anatomy has become symbolic of something greater than itself—an identifier for one’s place in society and assumed inherent traits.

So, to wryly parallel a previous gendered question asked by Simone de Beauvoir—what is a male? If sex is a rigid binary, what is natural, what is it that makes the difference, what makes a male? A penis? Chromosomes? Hormones? Maybe it is none of those, maybe you are a male because you act masculine like a man. Ah, well now—we are back to the performance of gender. “Gender is a different sort of identity,” Butler said, “and its relation to anatomy is complex.”

Neither sex nor gender is actually a binary, but are social designations.

In her book, Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality, American sexologist Anne Fausto-Sterling claims that, “labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender—not science—can define our sex.”

Sex is a social construction because we place social meaning on those very body parts—meaning that gets extended in a long chain of gendered determinism. Sex and gender are more about social designations than physical representations. Of our many different body parts, skin color and reproductive anatomy are two of the main physical characteristics that arbitrarily signify our place and worth in the world.

To illustrate this principle further, I would like to take a moment to sketch an example. I draw attention to a physical characteristic that is generally unobserved: earlobes. In a high school science class, in which we were learning about genetics and mapping out our eye color or other features with Punnett squares, I learned about the genotypes of attached versus detached earlobes (essentially, earlobes that attach directly to the head versus earlobes that hang past where they

---

176 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 1-3.
177 Butler, Undoing Gender, 63.
178 Fausto-Sterling continues, “Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place,” Sexing the Body, 3. As discussed in the beginning of the chapter, scientists are subjective in why and how and what they choose to research, but are susceptible to what science holds as truths.
attach). My classmates and I all started looking at each other and comparing how much free movement we had in our earlobes, as the differing levels of earlobe attachment was something that none of us had really noticed before. It was a feature that didn’t have a larger label, as it was not particularly relevant to society at large. Aside from arguable connection to systemic racial or ethnic complexities, the state of one’s earlobes does not in any way correlate with assumed behaviors or personality traits or roles in society. Earlobes do not clearly and immediately indicate intelligence, empathy, or aggression the way genitalia and skin color is assumed to. While reproductive anatomy holds more relevance to our lives than the shape of our earlobes, the point remains: body parts are body parts—we place value and meaning upon them.

We are gendered from the very beginning—based on biology. Sex is assumed to be biologically proven as a binary either/or male/female anatomy, even though medical studies have proven otherwise. Yet intersex people exist and have always existed in a spectrum. According to the United Nations, intersex people are those born with sex characteristics outside of the typical male/female sex binary. Because anything outside the sex binary is deemed by society to be abnormal or unnatural, the common practice with intersex babies is to perform surgery so their sexual anatomy looks “normal,” with parents and doctors essentially choosing the child’s sex and by association, choosing their gender and their role in life. In November 2023, the United Nations published a document detailing how these irreversible medical mutilations are violations of human rights, especially before an age when intersex people can give informed consent.

In the past, and still enduring today, is the notion that being intersex always means to

---

180 OHCHR, “Intersex people.”
181 Butler, Undoing Gender, 64.
have some combination of male/female sexual anatomy—but in fact, other biological factors like chromosomes and hormones contribute to someone’s sex.\textsuperscript{183} Throughout multiple chapters in \textit{Sexing the Body}, Fausto-Sterling makes it clear that sex is very complex and is not so easily classified.\textsuperscript{184} An intersex person may not even know they are intersex until they reach puberty, or a scan shows an internal reproductive organ, or they discover they have a unique mix of chromosomes.

Intersex people make up 1.7\% of the population—about the same percentage as the number of redheads in the world.\textsuperscript{185} I have known a good number of redheads in my life, which means that I have probably known a good number of intersex people as well. They are here, they have always been here. It has never been an issue of existence.

I would say that up until recently, most people in the West have not had to come to terms with the existence of the many forms of sex or gender outside the binary—and anytime they did, it was immediately written off as abnormal, deviant, or unnatural. However, the growing friction around transgender rights, bathroom politics, pronouns debates, and policy changes has put that gray area on most people’s radars. Many people look to science to solve the problem—to determine once-and-for-all where intersex, transgender, and nonbinary people fit within a world that was only supposed to have two genders.

As much as we might like to think it is, science is not omniscient. Science only knows what we know (or believe we know), and then authorizes certain knowledges from there.\textsuperscript{186} As

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{183}] OHCHR, “Intersex people.”
\item[\textsuperscript{184}] Fausto-Sterling, \textit{Sexing the Body}, 2-77.
\item[\textsuperscript{185}] OHCHR, “Intersex people,” and Misachi, “Red Hair.”
\item[\textsuperscript{186}] Fausto-Sterling asks the crucial question: “How do scientific facts get made in the first place?” She explains how until recently, the science community held all the power to decide the facts of gender and sex. They determined the truths. Then women’s, queer, and civil rights movements materialized, and “formerly voiceless patients pulled their chairs up to the science and medicine conference table,” and claimed authority over their own rights and bodies. Science as an institution is undoubtedly still in power, but may not hold such uniform authority as it once did. Fausto-Sterling asks, “Who, in this new world, speaks for science, and for whom does science speak?” \textit{Science Won’t Settle Trans Rights}.
\end{itemize}
such, science is often used across a spectrum of political arguments. In *Science Won’t Settle Trans Rights*, Fausto-Sterling reflects on how her own scientific work has been used both in opposition and defense of trans rights (thus showing that seemingly objective data can uphold different truth claims). Everyone seems to have “natural truth” claims backed by science to preserve their political stance—all the while claiming the other side is antiscience and in denial of fact. So science, while authorizer of truth in this ratiocentric society, is not going to be the final mediator on trans issues or anything that falls outside the carefully curated gender and sex binary. It cannot consolidate the existence of transgender and intersex people in the firm bounds of the gender binary the West upholds.

The sad reality is, that while science and politicians and the media argue over what counts as a male or female and the rules about existing in our bodies, transgender youth are suffering the consequences. Public bathrooms have been a hot topic in transgender discussions for years, but a 2016 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report reminds readers that for students, “being barred from facilities is not an abstract legal question, but a daily source of frustration and isolation.” HRW related the story of Elijah, a 9 year-old transgender boy. The report says that, no longer legally allowed to access the boy’s restroom, Elijah would go into the girl’s bathroom—but then the girls would scream that there was a boy in the bathroom—so Elijah stopped going to the bathroom altogether. He had a hard time and became suicidal. When he moved to a new school, the new administration ensured he would be treated as a boy, and in the report his mom said he was so much happier. It is clear that for transgender youth, “access to bathrooms and locker rooms is an urgent issue that affects their safety, health, privacy, and ability

---

The construction of the gender and sex binary has made it so humans cannot just go to the bathroom without first performing gender or proving sex.

I have been repeating that gender is a construction, sex is a construction. The either/or binary makes it unthinkable that there might exist something outside that construction. There are people—intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and two spirit people—that exist, and have always existed in that gray area between the only two options. “There are humans, in other words, who live and breathe in the interstices of this binary relation,” Butler said, and our job is to imagine a world where intersex people and all people outside the binary can exist without conforming or transforming. I would like to now focus on that world, those alternative ways of knowing and being—alternative not because they are secondary or abnormal, but because they have been relegated to the realm of “other” simply because the binary was positioned as the only way.

Science promises exhaustive knowledge, objective fact, and universal truth—relegating any other ways of knowing and being obsolete. Science, despite its “pursuit of knowledge,” makes all other knowledges unthinkable when it posits itself as universal. Donna Haraway puts it magnificently: “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision.”

The Pluriverse

What I have attempted thus far has been to situate science as a tool of colonial narratives that has condensed our worldview and our imagination of what is possible beyond the gender binary. In its current structure of power, science conceals the existence of other knowledges, other truths about gender, race, sex, and the ways we can live our lives. If Indigenous knowledge is, as Stewart-Harawira said, “an expression of life itself, of how to live, and of the connection

---

191 Butler, Undone Gender, 64-65.
192 Haraway, Situated Knowledges, 583.
between all living things,” then science is also suppressing other ways of being, of living, of connecting.

In *Coloniality of Gender*, Lugones stated her hopes that “articulating this colonial/modern gender system…will enable us to see what was imposed on us.” That by situating the modern colonial gender system, we will be able to see it as an imposed construction instead of the natural order of things. If the “natural order” can be located as a dominant narrative, then maybe we can also see its destructiveness. Haraway advocated for a new perspective, a “knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination.” She continued, “I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims.” This is my argument as well. We need a pluriverse of situated knowledges instead of the hegemonic universalized binaries the Western institution of science is deployed to prove.

I would like to start by detailing what I mean by knowledges beyond the binary. As a contrary way of thinking to the universal, it could be described as a pluriverse. *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* describes the pluriverse as, “a world where many worlds fit.” The pluriverse then, is the existence of truths and facts and ways of knowing and living and being that can exist together and around each other even when contrasting. This is placed opposite of science only so far as science claims all objective truth and can see no other valid knowledges. The advantage of the pluriverse, then, is being able to hold multiple knowledges in a non-exclusive way. Boaventura de Sousa Santos said, “The utopia of interknowledge consists of learning new and less familiar knowledges without necessarily having to forget the old ones.

---

196 Kothari et al., *Pluriverse*, xxviii.
and one’s own.” 197 The pluriverse posits that our relationships with each other and the world actually necessitate multiple ways of knowing. There are three particular ideas from Santos about ecologies of knowledges that I would like to expand upon here: 1) there is no general knowledge, 2) the West favors scientific knowledge, and 3) recognizing cultural diversity does not equal recognizing diversity of knowledge.

First, Santos argued that, “there is no ignorance or knowledge in general.” 198 To know something is to ignore other knowings, and any particular ignorance is ignoring a particular knowledge. In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all general knowledge or ignorance—all knowledges or ignorances are in relation to or in lieu of other knowledges or ignorances. To learn a particular thing may mean to unlearn or forget or reject other things. To know the gender binary as universally natural is to ignore other ways of living gender.

Santos’s second idea is that the West favors “practices in which the forms of scientific knowledges prevail.” 199 As has been shown in this chapter, the West relies on science to authorize knowledge. Therefore, the only ignorance that can exist in and for the ratiocentric West is ignorance of scientific knowledge. To ignore other knowledges is not really ignorance here, because they do not count as knowledges in the first place. The West makes a delineation between scientific and nonscientific knowledges, subordinating anything deemed as less rational. 200 The West has positioned science in such a place of superiority that other knowledges are pushed outside the category of real knowledge. 201

His third point is that, “recognition of cultural diversity in the world does not necessarily

---

197 Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledges,” 188.
198 Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledges,” 188.
199 Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledges,” 188.
200 Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledges,” 189-190.
201 I am in no way insinuating that in the pluriverse of knowledge, there is no science or rationality. Science and other knowledges are not mutually exclusive—in fact, all knowledges are necessary in the balance of the whole.
signify recognition of the epistemological diversity in the world." The fact that science acknowledges a diversity in forms of culture or race or sex does not directly translate to an acknowledgement that there are diverse ways of knowing and being. The West may recognize that people are diverse, but does not give place for corresponding diverse knowledges and lives. The unthinkability of other knowledges is what I problematize here.

How do we see the many knowledges that have been hidden? How do we think that which has been made to be unthinkable? Lugones wrote about her process of looking beyond this universalized reality to see other concepts of gender and other worlds: “I have gone outside the coloniality of gender so as to think of what it hides, or disallows from consideration, about the very scope of the gender system of Eurocentered global capitalism.” In order to embrace other worldviews—Indigenous ways of knowing and living and being—we must first move beyond the hegemonic knowledge formations. The problem has never been, as Byrd and Rothberg put it, that Indigenous people cannot speak, but that the world is unable to hear.

I would like to make it clear here that my purpose in exploring Indigenous epistemes is not to objectify their ways of life as if they are something to study and extract—but rather, to posit that there are divergent voices to listen to for how to move outside of the binary hegemonic system and into a place where many worlds fit. Picq and Tikuna argue that the world needs Indigenous worldviews. Not because they expand our vocabularies, but because they expand our political imagination: “It is not the decolonisation of Indigenous lifeways alone that is at stake. It is the diversification of ways of knowing that is at stake…Indigenous sexualities matter because of what we can learn from them, not about them.”

---

204 Byrd and Rothberg, “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity,” 5.
Diverse Epistemes

In the call from Lugones to look outside the binary and see and listen to what has been disallowed from consideration, I have found many examples of incredible resilience and the living of authentic lives amongst queer Indigenous stories. But there was one moment in particular in which my entire world tilted and I experienced the shift in my own soul—the moment that I didn’t just see that something might exist beyond the binary, but I felt what that might look like for me. I had been researching this topic, driven by a need to carve my own path undetermined by biology or society’s expectations. I read examples of Indigenous peoples who didn’t even have terms for gender. I read about gender roles based on personal proclivities and temperaments—in the Yuma society, if a female dreamed of weapons, she became a male in practice. This idea that gender could be understood in other than purely biological terms filled me with reverence. I remember thinking, could it really be that simple? To exist simply as you are? To move through life based on your own dreams and spiritual experiences and characteristics that only you determine—to set your own path. Any vibe, any role, any gender expression, any way of existing in this world. What freedom.

In The Sacred Hoop, Paula Gunn Allen explains that Native children learned their roles in the community based on their individual inclinations. She said, “Women are by the nature of feminine “vibration” graced with certain inclinations that make them powerful and capable in certain ways (all who have this temperament, ambience, or “vibration” are designated women and all who do not are not so designated).” At first glance, it seems Gunn Allen is speaking about women’s natural biological traits—but unlike Western ideas of gender, it was not being a biological woman that gave someone certain inclinations, but was instead their inclinations that designated them a woman. Native scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explained that in Nishnaabeg society, “People were expected to figure out their gifts and their responsibilities through ceremony and reflection and self-actualization, and that process was really the most important governing process on an individual level—more important than the gender you were born into.” In this sense, the reproductive anatomy you were born with was just that: anatomy, body parts, form, and structure—not a symbol of your gender performance, your expected

---

206 Gunn Allen, The Sacred Hoop, EPUB loc. 260 of 439.
207 Gunn Allen, The Sacred Hoop, EPUB loc. 274 of 439.
208 Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 4.
behavior, or your role in society. No, those gifts were yours to determine and to give.\textsuperscript{209}

As has been detailed in this chapter, gender as we know it in the West has been made to seem “sure and fixed, outside human construction, part of the natural or divine order.”\textsuperscript{210} Historically, however, not all societies were originally ordered along the gendered lines that are assumed and pervasive today. But Western history books do not show these possibilities. As a historian, Joan W. Scott acknowledged that this re-ordering occurs not just as an accidental product of time, but by historians—that when only one gender theory is universalized and the binary of male and female fixed, the way we look at history is “a reductive reading of evidence from the past.”\textsuperscript{211} History-writers assume gender has always been binary, so they apply that knowledge to the way they write history: to the view of family structures, societies, and individuals.

In \textit{The Invention of Women}, Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí gives an example of how the Western idea of the gender binary was implemented in a society that did not have a preexisting designation of gender. She says, “Yoruba society, like many other societies worldwide, has been analyzed with Western concepts of gender on the assumption that gender is a timeless and universal category.”\textsuperscript{212} When the concept of gender was introduced to them by the West, women were inferiorized for the first time—not only because in the Western gender binary women were inferior to men—but because the concept of woman was created for the first time for them. It was not that the body did not exist for the Yoruba peoples, but before Western notions, “The body was not the basis of social roles, inclusions, or exclusions; it was not the foundation of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{209} I want to be careful here not to overly romanticize Indigenous views of gender. Different Native nations moved through the world with varying degrees of gender fluidity, and many grapple with balancing ancestral and modern practices today.  \\
\textsuperscript{210} Scott, \textit{Gender}, 1073.  \\
\textsuperscript{211} Scott, \textit{Gender}, 1064.  \\
\textsuperscript{212} Oyèwùmí, \textit{Invention of Women}, 31.  
\end{flushleft}
social thought and identity.” Or, in other words, “the nature of one’s anatomy did not define one’s social position.”

In “Conceptualizing Gender,” Oyěwùmí explains that the Yoruba society was organized by age and seniority instead of gender. Hierarchy is determined by blood, not gender. The most important grouping in this family system is that of the children of one mother, or omoya—womb sibling. Oyěwùmí said, “Because of the matrifocality of many African family systems, the mother is the pivot around which familial relationships are delineated and organized.” The mother-child relationship is the anchorpoint in the Yoruba family.

In contrast, the anchorpoint in the Eurocentric nuclear family is the marital relationship. In the West, a woman is a wife of the patriarch first, anything else second. Oyěwùmí said, “There seem[s] to be no understanding of the role of a mother independent of her sexual ties to a father. Mothers are first and foremost wives. This is the only explanation for the popularity of that oxymoron: single mother.” To the West, single mother is a common term used to describe women who are not in a romantic relationship, but who have children. But how can a mother be alone when she has a child? It is contradictory to call a woman a single mother when she is one half of a mother-child relationship. In a Yoruba family—where the mother-child relationship is pivotal—to be a single mother would be an impossible thing. In a Western nuclear family—where the marital relationship presides—a woman is defined first by her relationship to a man (single), then second by her relationship to her children (mother).

These hierarchical gendered concepts are alien to many African cultures, Oyěwùmí explains, because they do not define their societies by the same, “binarily opposed male/female,

---

213 Oyěwùmí, Invention of Women, x.
214 Oyěwùmí, Invention of Women, 13.
217 Oyěwùmí, “Conceptualizing Gender,” 5.
man/woman duality in which the male is assumed to be superior and therefore the defining
category.”\textsuperscript{218} The West has such a binary view of gender, in large part because sex and gender are
inseparable and are seen as biologically predetermined identities. It is no surprise, then, that the
West assumed all cultures would also be ordered along gendered lines—even implementing it
where it had not previously existed.\textsuperscript{219} Oyěwùmí refers to this as the “one-size-fits-all (or better
still, the Western-size-fits-all) approach.”\textsuperscript{220}

Some societies had no terms for gender, and some had terms for many genders. Amidst
her research, Oyěwùmí presented a few words used by the Yoruba society that do not attach
gender to roles. There are no words for girl or boy, instead they use the word omo or offspring.
The terms oko and iyawo—which are often assumed to mean husband and wife—are actually
used to distinguish members of the family by birth versus marrying in.\textsuperscript{221} She stated, “Yoruba
language is gender-free.”\textsuperscript{222} Oyěwùmí said that in some Western historical writings on different
African tribes, authors mention male daughters or female husbands because they lack context on
how to define people.\textsuperscript{223} This, of course, says less about African tribes than it does about the
West: that Western understanding is so limited and narrow as to be unable to imagine anything
other than the rigid gender binary. As Edward Said theorized in \textit{Orientalism}, Western attempts at
describing and categorizing the East will always, at their core, tell us most about the West.\textsuperscript{224}

Manuela Picq and Josi Tikuna further examine this limited Western vernacular: “Perhaps
European colonisers could not understand native sexualities; they did not have the words to.”\textsuperscript{225}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[218] Oyěwùmí, \textit{Conceptualizing Gender}, 7.
\item[219] It was unthinkable to the settler colonizers that a community might exist without the same understanding of
gender, so Western implementation of gender was less about adding and more about fixing. Gender was so innate,
that the settlers assumed Indigenous peoples were being intentionally contrary—perverting what was natural.
\item[220] Oyěwùmí, \textit{Invention of Women}, 16.
\item[221] Oyěwùmí, \textit{Conceptualizing Gender}, 6.
\item[222] Oyěwùmí, \textit{Invention of Women}, 29.
\item[223] Oyěwùmí, \textit{Conceptualizing Gender}, 7.
\item[224] Said, \textit{Orientalism}, 12.
\item[225] Picq and Tikuna, \textit{Indigenous Sexualities}, 64.
\end{footnotes}
Therefore other sexualities were not seen as sanctioned orientations, but as unnatural, immoral, or perverse. Colonnizers had universalized their worldview to the extent that anything else was unthinkable: they did not have the words to translate what they were seeing into their binary understanding. Gender was so innate to Western views of themselves and the world, that anything else was outside the realm of thought, absurd.

Do not mistake me as using the fact that colonizers did not have the relevant language or words as an excuse for their actions. Instead, I am suggesting that it is simply a direct consequence of their world view being so homogenized and universalized that anything else was literally out of the realm of possibility—unthinkable. The pluriverse, the mere existence of other ways of living, was not comprehensible. The either/or binary is central to Western colonial discourse. When these alternative ways of existing were encountered, violence was a justification to fix behaviors deemed unnatural, barbaric, perverse, etc. In a science-powered and ratiocentric society, the nonheteronormative existences were deemed irrational—existential threats to what was rational. Picq and Tikuna described the colonial destruction of Native sexualities as more than merely the inability to see otherness. It was and continues to be a violent repression of language and culture in the process of modernization.

Unlike Western language, which played a part in the inability to conceive of more ways to approach gender and sexuality, Indigenous language often facilitated the opposite: fluidity. Picq and Tikuna referenced research done by Will Roscoe in gathering colonial documents

---

226 Picq and Tikuna, “Indigenous Sexualities,” 64.
227 This Western need to fix the unnatural was fueled by what Antony Anghie referred to as the “dynamic of difference.” It is the process of creating a gap between two groups, and then seeking to bridge the gap by normalizing the aberrant society. In other words, the civilizing mission. Anghie, *Imperialism*, 4. The West saw a gap between their idea of gender and sexuality and the Native practice, or non-practice, of gender and sexuality—a gap that really only exists because the West is incapable of accepting that someone else might do something differently—and decided it was their mission to civilize, fix, and educate the Native peoples into the “right way.” This was accompanied by ghastly violence, dispossession, and genocide. See chapter 3.
describing the Indigenous existence outside the binary. Roscoe found that over 150 tribes in North America had language for alternative genders. While gender terms and understanding likely differed between Native nations, the widespread existence of terms for other genders denotes a fluidity to the way gender was perceived and practiced.

Like gender, sexuality also held a sort of fluidity in many Indigenous societies. Picq and Tikuna detailed Evelyn Blackwood’s research in this area. Unlike modern Western norms, tribal gender and sexual identities were not synonymous. Picq and Tikuna said, “gender roles did not restrict sexual partners…sex was not entangled in gender ideology.” Heteronormativity was not standard, so it was not a social expectation that a male, being a male, should be in a relationship with a woman. They also made it clear that Blackwood’s research stressed “the unimportance of biological sex for gender roles.” In which case, being a male in terms of anatomy did not necessarily tie to any sort of gender, societal, or relationship expectations.

The Tikuna tribe—which the authors describe as one of the largest Indigenous groups in Amazonia—has historically had words to describe a man who has sex with another man, Kaigüwecü; or a woman who has sex with another woman, Ngüe Tügümaégüé. The authors explain that Tikuna society organized marriage not by heterosexual terms, but by the Rule of Nations: the expectation was to marry from different clans. When Christian missionaries arrived, same-sex relationships were designated as sinful. “What were uneventful couples under clan lines became abnormal ‘lesbian’ couples in religious rhetoric. Forbidden love was displaced from within the clan to within one’s gender.” Until intervention from the West, same gender

---

231 Picq and Tikuna, “Indigenous Sexualities,” 64.
relationships were not shameful or prohibited. Tikunan experiences vary today, but many are fighting to return to ancestral practices free from the outsiders' homophobia.\textsuperscript{235}

Eurocentric Western norms about appropriateness within the gender binary or the nuclear family or gendered relationships make other possibilities nonexistent. In the modern fight for queer equality and possibilities, Indigeneity is often relegated to a relic of the past. “Indigenous peoples are imagined as remnants of the past, whereas sexual diversity is associated with political modernity.”\textsuperscript{236} The irony here is that Indigenous gender and sexual diversity existed long, long before the Western fight for liberation—and that fight for liberation is really only necessary because of Western settler colonialism and intervention in the first place. “For many Indigenous peoples across the world,” Picq and Tikuna added, “diverse sexualities and multiple genders are not a Western introduction. Heteronormativity is.”\textsuperscript{237}

What about the locations where the modern fight for queer equality, and ancestral notions of gender and sexual diversity meet today? Kēhaulani Kauanui’s work in \textit{Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty} suggests that modern reclamation of these historical traditions is messy and complicated, in large part due to ongoing colonial domination. Kauanui explains that many examples of gender and sexual fluidity are found in Hawaiian precolonial norms: genealogical rank superseded gender for family structure, same-gender relationships, nonmonogamy, and gender fluidity. Hawaiian movements reclaiming ancestral concepts of māhū,\textsuperscript{238} the spirit of aloha, and historical traditions, have mirrored a broader global Indigenous resurgence and

\textsuperscript{235} Even before colonization there were a myriad of ways different communities organized their practices around gender and sexuality. However, the modern struggle to return to and live in accordance with those ancestral practices is made difficult by Western indoctrination.

\textsuperscript{236} Picq and Tikuna, “Indigenous Sexualities,” 57.

\textsuperscript{237} Picq and Tikuna, “Indigenous Sexualities,” 68.

\textsuperscript{238} The term māhū, which may have described a number of identities historically, has been reclaimed to mean, “those outside the male-female gender binary, including transgender individuals.” Yet māhū is not really about gender or sex, but about spirit, transcendence, and transformation—instead of boundaries there is fluidity and flexibility. Kauanui, \textit{Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty}, 157, 180-181.
reclaiming. Kauanui said that the activism around Hawaiian politics like the same-sex marriage bill—successfully passed in 2013—felt like a full-circle moment for many, a return to tradition. Yet she argues that the passing of the bill, “indicates a form of settler colonial continuity in Hawai‘i,” a form of state sanctioned dominance. It does not represent a return to ancestral ways of life, only an allowance by the colonizers to live a certain way. With the passing of the same-sex marriage bill, Hawai‘i did not get to truly return to its own same-sex cultural traditions, but was simply allowed to practice a specific form of sexual fluidity under specific regulations by the settler colonial state. The goal then, for a more true return to ancestral traditions, would be to “uncouple sexual relations from these forms of regulatory power and shift to a distinctly Kanaka form of ethical relationality.” If the state is the power sanctioning and regulating these relationships, it is simply a form of recolonization. A full-circle moment in Indigenous gender and sexuality is only achievable with the removal of the interloper, the colonizer, the civilizer—who created the violent loss of tradition in the first place.

It is, at times, difficult to locate the West when the West positions itself as universal. If it is everywhere, it cannot be somewhere specific. Western norms permeate the mind and regulate what is normal, acceptable, taken for granted. In this way, the West becomes invisible—not in the way alternative ways of knowing and being have been forced into invisibility and erased—but invisible as a dominating power. Western hegemonic colonial impact is invisible because it is so all-encompassing it takes up our entire field of vision and is deemed normal. Therefore, its norms about the gender binary and heterosexuality are also invisible as colonial impositions because they are seen as normal and natural. Lugones flips the script of normal heteronormativity by suggesting that in the Indigenous gender system, “...heterosexuality has

been consistently perverse,”

perverting Native relationships and lives. In this perspective, heteronormativity is the perversion, not the other way around. Cotett reminds us that, “Indigenous sexualities were never straight.” They were fluid and encompassing. Indigenous ways of knowing and being provide a window into another story, a re-storying.

Qwo-Li Driskill examines how we might resist the colonial lens and disrupt dominant narratives by restorying and reimagining. Driskill explains that *asegi* is a Cherokee word meaning strange—but it has also been reclaimed as an Indigenous queer and two-spirit identity. Throughout chapter 2 of *Asegi Stories*, Driskill continuously gives an *asegi* retelling of colonized stories. They imagine that different Indigenous resisters were two-spirit—even if there was no evidence they were—because there was also no evidence they were not. Driskill says, “Colonial and heteropatriarchal renderings of the past limit our imagination, dictate to us what of the past is remembered and how.” *Asegi* retellings and restoryings let us challenge this Western remembering and universality, and allow for an Indigenous reimagining.

The Eurocentric, ratiocentric, hegemonic, colonial, capitalist, universe where all other ways of knowing and being were pushed outside the realm of thought, made the existence of a pluriverse unthinkable. These ways of knowing and being exist and have always existed in beautiful ways, and I am awakening to Indigenous restorying and reimaginings. In my journey from pink bows and gendered expectations to challenging women’s inequality, I began to see that

---

244 Driskill notes that, “the whole Indigenous gender and sexuality spectrum was documented as aberrant by Western colonizers. Therefore, any gender nonconforming identities were rendered invisible because all Cherokees were seen as gender non-conforming and deviant.” *Asegi Stories*, 46-48. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to recognize a true two-spirit person, because all Native peoples were designated as gender and sexual deviants.
246 Science is deployed to universalize the production of knowledge. However, Davison and Hoffman remind that, “The truths of science are not objective and eternal; knowledge accumulation does not proceed linearly and grow uniformly; there are ruptures and shifts…the truths of science are truths in time, not over time; they are truths within history, not over it.” *Interpreting Politics*, 47.
it was not the asymmetry within gender that sat at the heart of the issue—it was the
universalization of the gender binary itself. A greater, more fulfilling challenge for me has been,
and will continue to be, grappling with the idea of gender being foundationally flawed. The
pluriverse is found beyond the binary.
Chapter 3: Talking to the Stones

When we were very young, my mom would take us on walks down the dirt roads of our farm. We would run around and explore through the fields or up the wash. After coming home from one of these walks, my little brother complained about a stomach ache. My mom checked him over, but all seemed to be well. He continued to complain that his stomach still hurt, especially when he bent over. After some more questions and attempts to find out what was wrong, we finally found the culprit: my brother had filled his pants pockets with rocks from our adventuring. Every time he bent over, the rocks would bite into his stomach. I am fond of this memory because it is quite reflective of our childhood. We always gathered rocks wherever we went. It was not uncommon to find rocks in the washing machine after we had forgotten to take them out of our clothes pockets. We each had boxes of rocks from our escapades stuffed under our bed or in our drawers, with a few favorite rocks hauled with us in our school bags. After finding out that my dad and grandfather had their own boxes of rocks collected over the years, it was once my childhood dream to become a professional rock hound when I grew up. To this day, amidst the boxes of our childhood participation ribbons and finger paintings, you will find cartons of rocks.

As I grew older, I gained a more nuanced relationship with rocks. Summers during my teenage years were spent “hauling rocks.” Every year, the earth pushes up large rocks that need to be removed to avoid breaking the machinery used to plow and plant the fields. The summer daylight hours would find my siblings and I walking/driving the 4wheeler and wagon up and down the fields looking for rocks larger than a fist to throw into the wagon. We found a few interesting things over the years, but most of the time it was just very bland medium-sized rocks. While picking up rocks we would tell stories, sing songs, make up book and movie plots, pick fights, whine and complain, and occasionally “accidentally” throw a rock right past someone in anger. Some years we would find a rock so large that it needed pry bars and tractor equipment to pull it out of the ground. One of those huge rocks still sits by our house, hauled out of the field by the forklift. We played “king of the rock” on it while I was little, jumping off to balance on the nearby pipes. Every year as I grew older, it seemed a little bit smaller. No one plays on that rock anymore, the pipes have all been moved elsewhere, but it is still there when I visit my parents. It's a symbol of home.

A decade later, when I had moved out into the world, I started collecting rocks again—this time of the more commoditized polished crystal variety. I was drawn to their aspects of healing, spirituality, symbolism, energy, and even just their beauty, but I didn’t have the time to go out into the world and wait for stones to find me, so I bought them. At some point, I had the urge to have a stone from home. I shopped around and I found a stone that was mined from my home area, but it still didn’t hit the spot quite right. I told myself that next time I went home, I would bring a rock back with me. The stars aligned and I found myself back home during rock-hauling season with my brothers. We spent time together again in the dusty fields we grew up in, under the blazing sun. I was a decade older than the last time I walked those fields—wiser in some ways and more learned, but more foolish in others and more forgetful. I was so different but these rocks were the same, grounded and full of memory. It healed something in me I had not realized had broken—this reconnection to the earth, to the stones, to the land I grew up on, to myself. I kept a couple of rocks that I had eased from the earth that day. They were more dirty and rough than the other sleek crystals on my shelf, but were somehow more beautiful—just like the ones I used to stuff in my pockets when I was little.
In the Introduction of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, the authors write about learning the stories of stones in this fragile world. They reference Marrow, a poem by Ursula Le Guin that, “...urges us to listen to stones without forcing our will on them:”

There was a word inside a stone.  
I tried to pry it clear,  
mallet and chisel, pick and gad,  
until the stone was dropping blood,  
but still I could not hear  
the word the stone had said.  
I threw it down beside the road  
among a thousand stones  
and as I turned away it cried  
the word aloud within my ear  
and the marrow of my bones  
heard, and replied.

This poem felt reflective of my experiences, and I read it the same week Maori Indigenous scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira met with my graduate class and told us her own stories of talking to the stones. Stewart-Harawira talked about being an adult before she was able to know her Maori ancestors on one side of her family. She explained that by the time she met them, she had been well trained as an academic—so she was always asking questions. They would just respond with, *Listen...Go and talk to the stones, go and listen to the stones.* Go listen, really listen. Be still. Connect. Let go. She and her family already carried stones everywhere, talked with them, gave them away. But she wanted answers to her questions, and it was not until she let go of the academy, the rigidity, and really listened, that she was able to hear things in a different way, and come to know. Talking to the stones is about a listening deep within us in a world where many have forgotten how to listen. Instead of the harsh violence, as Le Guin wrote, of a mallet, a chisel, a pick—it is a listening deep, deep into the very marrow of our bones.

---

247 Tsing et al., *Arts of Living*, 11.
249 Stewart-Harawira, personal correspondence.
In many ways, my approach to this chapter is an attempt to let go, connect, and listen deeply. This chapter is filled with stories and knowledges from thinkers who have spent their lives deeply listening. Many are Indigenous thinkers who grapple with the messy entanglement of land and settler colonial violence. Indigenous knowledges—the lived knowledges that connect and sing and tell stories and dig deep—have been delegitimated by the West. Throughout Indigenous thought, the term restorying comes up often in different formats. Restorying as a birthing of new meaning or a weaving of lived and ancestral experiences. Re-storying, as an intentional retelling or a reminding. Restore(y)ing is perhaps my favorite, as to me it signals that a crucial part of this process is a restoration, and a healing. There is much restorying needed because many stories and knowledges have been violently made unthinkable.

First though, I need to clarify my intentions surrounding what I mean when I say Indigenous knowledge. I am not trying to homogenize it as one unified knowledge. I know that as Indigenous knowledge is lived and living knowledge, there is as much variation as there are experiences. I have no lived experience of Indigenous knowledge from Indigenous heritage, and I do not wish to reduce Indigenous knowledge collectively as a basic “alternative” to Western knowledge. In showing the difference between Indigenous concepts of knowledge and the Western ratiocentric knowledge, Stewart-Harawira references work from Lakota scholar, Vine Deloria Jr who, “points out that whereas Western scientific knowledge draws conclusions by excluding some forms of data and including others, within traditional and indigenous systems of knowledge, all data and all experience are relevant to all things.” The West has long held the understanding that Native knowledges are primitive in comparison to Western knowledge; that

250 Jonathan Cordero, personal correspondence. Versions of restorying can be found throughout Indigenous thought.
251 See chapter 2.
253 Stewart-Harawira notes that the difference between Indigenous and Western knowledge is not that the West advanced in knowledge while Native people’s didn’t—but that the West focused on outer technologies, while
Western knowledge is civilized and superior. In so doing, Tuck and Yang suggest, settler colonialism categorized Indigenous knowledge as pre-modern, backward, and savage.\textsuperscript{254} The West found its knowledge and lifestyle to be so complete as to necessitate that everyone else should align themselves with the West’s ultimate magnificence. In settling, civilizing, colonizing, capitalizing, Westernizing—the West universalized itself right out of the pluriverse of knowledges. In so doing, the West destroyed itself, those it colonized, and the earth—because it forgot its responsibility to reciprocity and connection.

So here, when I speak about Indigenous knowledge, I speak about this reciprocity. I speak of Indigenous knowledges as a category of many knowledges, knowledges that collectively beckon us toward ways to know or to live—a way of living that involves the acknowledgement of the entwined, interconnected lifeforce. Stewart-Harawira refers to Indigenous knowledge as the “expression of life itself, of how to live, and of the connection between all living things.”\textsuperscript{255} In other words, Indigenous knowledge as a category here is broadly knowledge that might encompass all knowledges, all experiences.

Even with the differing knowledges across Native peoples, Stewart-Harawira suggests that, “Indigenous knowledge is recognized as arising in large measure from the relationship between Indigenous communities and their environment, a relationship which in many cases extends over several thousand years.”\textsuperscript{256} To deeply listen to Indigenous knowledge is to also listen to the stones, the earth, the plants, the cosmos, and our own connection to life itself. This chapter necessitates a sort of process of talking to the stones, to the land, to the earth—a

\textsuperscript{254} Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 5.
\textsuperscript{255} Stewart-Harawira, “Of Order and Being,” 35. A fitting term for this might be what Stewart-Harawira calls the “double spiral”: a Maori three-dimensional symbol denoting all forms and relationships of time, spirit, matter, universes, and understandings. Stewart-Harawira, Returning to the Sacred, 84, and “Of Order and Being,” 34.
\textsuperscript{256} Stewart-Harawira, Returning to the Sacred, 83.
reconnection to our roots. To talk about Indigenous knowledges without talking about land would be paradoxical. Accordingly, this chapter is also to a large extent about land and ecology. It is therefore also necessarily about settler colonialism. Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte describes settler colonialism as, “violence that disrupts human relationships with the environment.” Tuck and Yang argue that land is the central factor differentiating settler colonialism from broader colonialism: “the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence.” So, in this chapter, I discuss a decolonization of both land and worldview. And woven through it all, it is about stories—because it is our stories that ultimately shape us and how we see the world.

Stories that Create Us

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks about stories and listening and connection as she explains how our creation stories specifically shape our worldview. She brings a distinct perspective as an Indigenous scientist, combining academia, writing, botany, and Indigenous storytelling to teach the reader about stories and ways of knowing. She wrote about giving a survey to her General Ecology class about the relationship between humans and the earth. Student responses suggested that they all thought humans and the environment were a bad mix, and when she asked them about positive interactions between people and land, none of her students could think of any examples. She recalled being genuinely shocked. Her own view of the world had been shaped by stories that celebrated a reciprocity and a positive relationship between humans and nature.

---

257 See Walker explained, “Despite the cultural differences between each individual Native American tribe, there is one thing at the center of most American Indian spiritual belief systems and that is the basic principle that spirituality draws heavily upon the lands and beings of sacred grandmother earth. The idea of individual land ownership was never a passing thought to Indigenous people before colonization because of the concept that everyone belongs to the earth – not the opposite,” *Still Here*, 49.

258 Whyte, “Settler Colonialism,” 125.

259 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 5.

Skywoman Falling, a story from the Indigenous people of the Great Lakes area, is one of these stories that shaped Kimmerer. She relates that the first woman fell from the Skyworld, and the geese caught her. All the animals counseled on what to do to help, and Turtle offered his shell for her new home. Many animals dove into the water to find mud, and not all returned. Muskrat, the weakest diver, volunteered as well. He gave his life to help Skywoman, floating back to the surface with a handful of mud. They spread the mud on the Turtle’s back, and Skywoman danced in thanksgiving, spreading the mud—and her gratitude, together with all their gifts, made the earth. Skywoman had grabbed branches and seeds from the Tree of Life on her fall from Skyworld, and she tended the sacred plants, turning the brown world green. Kimmerer said, “Children hearing the Skywoman story from birth know in their bones the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth.” There is an understanding that the earth was created in partnership with humans and plants and animals, and that the sacrifices in that relationship should be honored.

On the other hand, Kimmerer explains, in the mainstream Western Christian creation story of Adam and Eve, Eve is banished from the garden instead of creating it. Humans were sent forth to subdue the wilderness instead of living in reciprocity and gratitude with the earth. Kimmerer said, “One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven.” Skywoman Falling offers something that has been made to be unthinkable by the West: that humans are part of a reciprocal relationship with the world, not its dominator. Western creation stories suggest a hierarchy with humans at the

---

261 Kimmerer, *Braiding sweetgrass*, 3-5.
top, all plants and animals being part of the human domain. Kimmer notes that Native stories
know humans to be “the younger brothers of Creation,” in need of learning from the wisdom of
the plant elders who were here first. Plants know how to live with reciprocity and generosity,
sustaining and providing air and life for all those around them.  

The Western ideal of “rationality” (as discussed in chapter 2), is challenged here. In the
West, humans—particularly white males—are the only lifeforms seen as having true intelligence.
“The settler,” Tuck and Yang say, “sees himself as holding dominion over the earth and its flora
and fauna, as the anthropocentric normal, and as more developed, more human, more deserving
than other groups or species.” In Native worldviews, Whyte explains, there is, “no privileging
of humans as unique in having agency or intelligence, so one’s identity and caretaking
responsibility as a human includes the philosophy that nonhumans have their own agency,
spirituality, knowledge, and intelligence.”

Growing up in a Christian religion, with the creation story of Adam and Eve, I was taught
that the earth was given to us. That it was literally put here for our use. Adam named the animals
and was given dominion over all the earth. There was still some minor sense of care—Adam and
Eve were to cultivate and care for the garden—but it was to the end of having something to eat
and something pretty to look at. The earth was something to just make do with, to use, before
moving on. It didn’t matter whether or not I believed the religious stories to be “historically
accurate,” or how I might have since reorganized my ideas on religion or creation—I was still
shaped by them, positioned as fundamentally superior in relation to all other energies, plants,
and animals. These stories said that the earth was for humans and we owed it nothing.

Yet at the same time, I had grown up with other stories. My great grandmother was bitten
by a poisonous snake as a child and her mother had felt inspired to look to the earth, to an
onion, to draw out the infection. I grew up with stories of the mountains, was shown some of its
secrets, and was taught both to see the beauty in everything and to respect nature’s power. As a
farmer, my dad often spoke of being a steward over the land, that he was meant to look after it.
He suggested the land was here for us to live off, but was also a place for us to learn and grow.
He taught us that if we took good care of the land, it would take good care of us. We always tried
to work with the land, doing the things that promoted health. We knew that everything in the
ecosystem served a purpose.

264 Kimmerer, Braiding sweetgrass, 9, 346.
265 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 6.
266 Whyte, “Settler Colonialism,” 127.
Sometimes our stories are obscure and we do not think to know them as stories. Sometimes they clash with each other, wearing away at rough edges until we discard pieces to make them fit together. Sometimes our stories flex and shift as we move through the world. Whether we claim them or not, they inform our shaping. Kimmerer reminds us that we are all impacted by stories like these. Our stories orient us to the world. “We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness.” These stories forge our most basic ways of knowing, including how we view our relationships and responsibilities with each other and the earth.

**Land Holds Memory**

Whether we as a society build our stories to match our worldviews, or follow our stories to those worldviews, I do not know, maybe it is a combination of the two. But a basic pattern can be seen between Western and non-Western stories: Western stories are colonization stories with themes of dominion, ownership, elitism, and takeover; while non-Western stories are often based around reciprocity, connection, and gratitude. Tuck and Yang argue: “Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place—indeed how we/they came to be a place.” Adam and Eve could be called the original colonizers, entering a new land set on dominating. In the West, we refer to land and nature as something to be dominated, taken from for “natural resources,” or as property. Indigenous knowledge sees the earth is part of a relationship of reciprocity, a relationship of mutual giving and sustaining. We all give freely, we all sustain each other. But the West breaks the relationship of reciprocity, taking and hoarding what would be given freely. Kimmerer gives

---

268 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 6.
269 For one example of an Indigenous practice of reciprocal recognition and consent, see Simpson, “‘I See Your Light’: Reciprocal Recognition and Generative Refusal,” chap 10. in *As We Have Always Done*. 
this example:

Imagine that while our neighbors were holding a giveaway, someone broke into their home to take whatever he wanted. We would be outraged at the moral trespass. So it should be for the earth. The earth gives away for free the power of wind and sun and water, but instead we break open the earth to take fossil fuels. Had we taken only that which is given to us, had we reciprocated the gift, we would not have to fear our own atmosphere today.270

We broke our relationship, we broke the land, we broke the spirit of mutual sustaining. True to the colonial stories, humans came and dominated. Without a sense of responsibility or connection with the land and all living things, the earth becomes something to be used (and then discarded, as modern consumerist culture encourages). Instead of accepting the gifts offered by the earth, we have taken and plundered. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, the authors describe our current circumstances with the term *anthropocene*: “the proposed name for a geologic epoch in which humans have become the major force determining the continuing livability of the earth. The word tells a big story: living arrangements that took millions of years to put into place are being undone in the blink of an eye.”271

I remember learning about different eras (Mesozoic) and periods (Jurassic), and the subdivisions of epochs. They are how we in the West are taught to distinguish and order time, and shape our views of history. In recent years, Anthropocene has replaced Holocene as a term to describe our current epoch, but it was not until March of 2024 that the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) met and voted on its official inclusion in the Geological Time Scale.272 Raymond Zhong from *The New York Times* said that, “Amending the chronology to say we had moved on to the Anthropocene would represent an acknowledgment that recent, human-induced changes to geological conditions had been profound enough to bring the

---

271 Tsing et al., *Arts of Living*, G1.
Holocene to a close."\(^{273}\) The Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) spent 15 years building evidence and a proposal for the change.\(^{274}\) According to a report from the IUGS, the voting committee consisted of “geological scientists of the highest calibre, from a range of countries, and with wide expertise in Quaternary stratigraphy and chronology.”\(^{275}\) They voted 12-4 to reject the proposal.\(^{276}\) The IUGS clarified that despite its rejection, the data collected by the AWG would continue to be valuable and impactful, and the concept of the Anthropocene would “remain an invaluable descriptor in human-environment interactions.”\(^{277}\)

Zhong spoke to a few scholars about the impact of the vote. Environmental scientist Erle C. Ellis emphasized that this vote was narrow in scope, and “has nothing to do with the evidence that people are changing the planet.”\(^{278}\) Still, I can imagine that this vote might influence narratives about human impact in the world. Regardless of the nuanced particulars of the vote and the committee’s timeline-specific reasons for rejecting Anthropocene as an epoch, from the outside it still looks like a group of scientists rejected the notion of a current era of human impact on the planet. Micropaleontologist Francine M.G. McCarthy, who worked on research in favor of the Anthropocene epoch, said, “We are in the Anthropocene, irrespective of a line on the time scale, and behaving accordingly is our only path forward.”\(^{279}\)

In *Poet Warrior*, Joy Harjo said that as she sat with the Old Ones, they reminded her that, “These times were predicted,” that we would forget, we would take too much from the earth, birds would lose direction, pollution would darken the sun, there would be famine and

---

\(^{273}\) Zhong, “Are We.”
\(^{276}\) International Union of Geological Sciences, “The Anthropocene,” 3. Amongst other factors, there were disagreements on variation and start date of the epoch.
\(^{278}\) Erle C. Ellis as cited in Zhong, “Are We.”
\(^{279}\) Francine M.G. McCarthy as cited in Zhong, “Are We.”
confusion. I remember as a child it rained so often on the farm that I came to associate home with the wonderful smell of wet sagebrush and damp earth. Now the rainfall amount is so low, that almost every year is considered a drought. I can no longer remember what wet sagebrush smells like. Harjo continued, “In these kinds of times, we are in great danger of forgetting our original teachings, the nature of the kind of world we share and what it requires of us. In this world of forgetfulness, they told me, you will forget how to nourish the connection between humans, plants, animals, and the elements, a connection needed to make food for your mind, heart, body, and spirit.” But there is also remembering starting—restorying, connecting, creating. Harjo said that the Old Ones, “all agreed that we are being brought to a place where we will once again remember how to speak with animals, plants, and life forms…Humans are not the only ones with a spirit, they reminded. Nor are we more important than everyone else.”

Humans are supposed to be the younger creations, here to listen and learn, give and sustain. Kimmerer adds, “It’s not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land…our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?” She talks about “re-story-ation” as a part of this healing process. For me, restore(y)ing helped me see the world not as something to be dominated, as my own creation stories had suggested, but as part of a relationship of mutual care. This includes my deep listening to Indigenous thinkers and the land. Stories hold power not just in their content, but in their essence as a tool for healing and reciprocity. The modern Western capitalist colonial concept of land is the opposite of healing and connection and reciprocity: it declares that land is

280 Harjo, Poet Warrior; 13.
281 Harjo, Poet Warrior; 13-14.
282 Harjo, Poet Warrior; 14.
283 Kimmerer, Braiding sweetgrass, 9.
284 Florencia Pech-Cárdenas spoke on this re-story-ation, after attending a conversation between Kimmerer and fellow Indigenous scholar Diane Wilson. In her understanding, re-story-ation means, “to return our stories to the land and to remember how to hear the stories the land tells,” “Indigenous Wisdom,” 108.
simply something to be owned, given to the highest bidder—private property.

In *The Ends of Paradise*, Loperena questions this framing and talks about land’s “other-than-property value.” He centers the stories and territorial struggles of the Garifuna, a Black Indigenous people who live along the northeastern coast of Central America. Tourist and development projects constantly work to dispossess Indigenous land and feed it to the capitalist machine. Defense of the land is not just about avoiding displacement, but is a defense of culture, of ways of life. “For the land defenders,” Loperena explains, “land is the axis around which notions of self and collective belonging cohere.” Garifuna elders describe their land as a spiritual connection with the culture and ancestors. So defense of land is fighting for a community, a culture, a soul. This is in large part because community members keep a relationship of reciprocal care with the earth, “living with, not off, the land.” The community sustains each other and the land, and the land sustains back. It is a relationship of reciprocal care, “an ethos of relationality—a sense of belonging to the land and vice versa.”

Perhaps, growing up on the farm, working with the land, I can understand some small part of this relationship of reciprocal care. My dad taught us to rotate crops (an Indigenous practice) to keep the soil healthy. We held prayers and religious ceremonies when we needed more rain. We were familiar enough with the wildlife that when a doe who frequented one of the fields struggled to birth her fawn, we were able to aid her in the process. I played freely in the alfalfa, roaming with my imagination, and gathering stones. I have not lived there for over a decade, but there is still no place that feels more like home to me, than when I catch sight of that beautiful valley. Yet I cannot claim to understand Indigenous relationship with land, what it means to live with and defend ancestral land. My connection with land is a consequence of a violent, settler-colonial chain of dispossession. If my family is displaced from our farm and our land for the sake of progress and development—I would be devastated—but it would not be my culture, my people, and my soul that would be getting ripped away.

---

286 Simpson, argues, “By far the largest attack on Indigenous Knowledge systems right now is land dispossession,” and its protectors are, “those who are currently putting their bodies on the land,” *As We Have Always Done*, 6.
290 In personal correspondence, Jonathan Cordero spoke about the difference between being *of* a place and *from* a place. Displacing Indigenous people affects the wholeness of their identity.
We must cultivate this reciprocity, this balance with each other and the land. Defend land, not for its value as property, but for its other-than-property value to all of us. How do we do that today when, as has been described, land is tethered to a history and continuation of violent settler colonialism, dispossession and oppression? Loperena declares, “To live ancestrally, therefore, is a way of being in relation with the land that refuses the supremacy of progressive time, the violence of development, and that enables other visions of community to emerge.”

It is important to note some nuance here: in speaking about the importance of land, Stewart-Harawira reminds us that the prominence of place-based relationships in Indigenous epistemology can sometimes lead to an oversimplification of the relationship of reciprocity. She says, “Indigenous knowledge holders describe a relationship of reciprocity with the essence of life itself.” Reciprocity is more than just an interconnection with land, but inseparably also a connection with everything. A true connection with the land is also a connection with each other, the cosmos, and the energy of life.

All Land is Native Land

I feel that it would not be appropriate to continue to wax poetic about land, nature, the gift, reciprocity with the earth, stories, connection—all of which are knowledges carried by Indigenous peoples—without first more fully addressing the violence these same peoples experienced by having their Native lands stolen. In *The Transit of Empire*, Chickasaw anticolonial scholar Jodi Byrd argues that we must approach any reimagining of the world within the lens of colonization—the U.S. empire was built on the backs of the Indigenous Americans.

As such, Indigeneity must be realized on its own terms instead of through the long-standing

---

291 Loperena, *Ends of Paradise*, 139.
293 For the purposes of this section, the analysis will rest primarily within the context of the violence and stories related to land in the United States. In attempting to show examples, I acknowledge that there is no way to capture the full height of the violence that is colonization.
Western representation. Decolonizing knowledge necessitates decolonizing land and peoples.

In my research and time learning in the academy, I have overused the term decolonization. I appreciate it for its ability to symbolize an overall need to decenter the West and Western thought. I love the title and content of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s work: *Decolonising the Mind*—and admittedly, decolonizing the mind is broadly what this chapter and my entire thesis is about. But for Ngũgĩ, decolonization was also a call for action in liberating Africa from Western language, culture, and worldviews. As a term, decolonization has become a sort of trendy rhetoric to symbolize a growing number of things and has lost connection to its foundational purpose. In the widely-quoted work, *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang speak of decolonization as, “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life,” not a metaphor for other social justice goals. Tuck and Yang suggest that decolonizing the mind is only the first step in dismantling the settler colonial system, but it is often the step that settlers stop on. I do not want to make that mistake here. Admittedly, I do not do enough in this thesis to emphasize that any true form of decolonization ends with reparation—but I want to at least reference what has become known as the Land Back Movement.

In an interview with NPR, Jonathan Cordero—founder of The Association of Ramaytush Ohlone—explains that the land back movement, while not new, has gained traction with the increased awareness of the ongoing broader racial justice movement. People seem to be waking up to the colonial history of forced removals, and with it, the need to restore land to sovereign peoples. 2022 marked the end of a decade-long buy-back program. The United States

---

294 Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xx, 73.
295 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind*.
296 Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, 21.
297 Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, 19.
298 However, I am already fully entrenched in the political context of what Macoun calls colonising white innocence: “a construction of whites as non-problematic and not implicated in either historical or contemporary violence...simultaneously enabling and erasing ongoing colonial violence.” “Colonising White Innocence,” 5.
299 Cordero, “California Land Back.”
Department of the Interior published a report detailing the program.\textsuperscript{300} Deb Haaland, the first Native American to serve as Secretary of the Interior, noted that colonial and state-sanctioned removal of 90 million acres from Tribal communities, has “lasting and inter-generational consequences.”\textsuperscript{301} With program funding, almost 3 million acres were returned to different Native nations.\textsuperscript{302} Upon first glance, the land buy-back program looks like a great way to get land back in the hands of Tribal nations. In actuality, it focused on purchasing land from individual Native owners to consolidate in a tribal trust—land which was only fractured to begin with because of colonialism.\textsuperscript{303} The program’s reception has varied, and other organizations are working to implement more Native-centered land back opportunities.

With his work in The Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, Jonathan Cordero has overseen different projects to acquire land and revitalize Indigenous communities. Cordero offers a reminder, though, that “colonialism and capitalism forever changed the natural world, and so giving land back, while beneficial, does not restore what was also lost—our wholeness as Native peoples.”\textsuperscript{304} As Indigenous peoples do not view land as merely property, being separated from it is to lose a part of a relationship, an identity. He is also clear that land must be returned free of contingencies: “Imagine what it must be like to have to ask for your own land back and then to have to fulfill a set of capitalistic and colonial requirements to do so?” He goes on to say, “I think it is incredibly important that the public understands what Indigenous sovereignty means. We are sovereign in our own lands, whether or not we are federally recognized.”\textsuperscript{305}

It is crucial to acknowledge that, especially in North America, settler colonialism was not just a land grab, but a genocide. A deep listening here means coming face-to-face with more than
the lovely concepts of connection with land, but also the atrocities that Indigenous people have faced because of settler colonization—compounded in part, because of that very deep loss of connection with ancestral land. Speaking of settler colonialism, Kyle Whyte said:

The settlers’ aspirations are to transform Indigenous homelands into settler homelands. Settlers create moralizing narratives about why it is (or was) necessary to destroy other peoples (e.g., military or cultural inferiority), or they take great pains to forget or cover up the inevitable militancy and brutality of settlement. Settlement is deeply harmful and risk-laden for Indigenous peoples because settlers are literally seeking to erase Indigenous economies, cultures, and political organizations for the sake of establishing their own.306

Common rhetoric in the early American West included the notion that the area was barren and uninhabited, in need of settlers to come work and develop the land. That fantastical notion was marred by the Indigenous peoples already living across the land. In order to continue settling and building the nation, the Native people were removed and erased. In Neither Settler nor Native, Mahmood Mamdani compares the events of American colonization to those of Nazi Germany.307 He calls them both nation-building projects—even stating, “Hitler made plain that he modeled his program of genocide on that of the United States.”308 Of course, he says, the Third Reich was prosecuted in the Nuremberg trials, not as a political project, but as the actions of individual criminals. To acknowledge and condemn Germany’s nation-building project would have necessitated condemnation of America’s own project. Mamdani said, “the United States is the outcome of a history of genocide, ethnic cleansing, official racism, and concentration camps (known as Indian reservations), and Nazi Germany followed a similar path in the construction of a German nation.”309 I emphasize that America’s history of dispossession is not to be mistaken as anything other than intentional genocide—the likes of which we publicly condemn when done

307 Mamdani, Neither Settler nor Native, 21-23.
308 Mamdani, Neither Settler nor Native, 22.
309 Mamdani, Neither Settler nor Native, 22.
by other countries. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson adds that settler colonialism is a perfect crime, “a crime where victims are unable to see or name the crime as a crime.”

As I was not educated on this in school growing up, I would like to give a few numbers here. Danielle SeeWalker says that the number of Indigenous peoples in the area of the United States dropped from ten million prior to Christopher Columbus, to around 250,000 at the beginning of the 1900’s. For the modern Native peoples, Simpson reminds, “It is not happenstance or luck that Indigenous peoples and our lands still exist after centuries of attack. This is our strategic brilliance. Our presence is our weapon.” So when I reference all the beautiful knowings about earth and reciprocity and balance—those are knowledges that have been kept and passed throughout and in spite of generations of state-sanctioned violence.

In addition to undisguised murder and genocide, the United States and other nations employed tools of veiled violence and erasure. SeeWalker writes about the cultural genocide enacted by the Indian boarding schools where Native children were forced into schools to eradicate their culture. She said, “These institutions were designed to assimilate Native people with the motto in mind: ‘Kill the Indian, save the man’.” SeeWalker explains that the children were forced to cut their hair, give up their traditional clothes and language, take English names, and underwent extreme abuse. The effects stretch generations with some of these children adapting to Western lifestyles for survival, and their descendants not knowing their own tribal culture. Amidst all this, SeeWalker also says this era is viewed as a time of great resistance and

---

310 Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 15.
311 Others have suggested that before European contact, the number of Indigenous peoples in the whole of the Americas could have ranged from 8 million to 112 million. See William M. Denevan, ed., The Native population of the Americas in 1492, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).
312 SeeWalker, Still Here, 36.
313 Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 6.
314 SeeWalker, Still Here, 15.
315 In The Way We Lived, 182, Elsie Allen told a story of being beaten for speaking her Native Pomo language. She promised herself that in order to protect her future children, she would never teach them her language or culture.
resilience by the Native peoples. Many resisted erasure and passed on stories and traditions, but whole peoples, languages, and traditional practices were still eradicated.

To further illustrate this calculated annihilation of Indigenous peoples in North America, I wish to refer to the near extinction of the buffalo in the early United States. The Intertribal Buffalo Council, consisting of 80 tribes, reports that over 60 million buffalo were killed in the 1800s, leaving only a few hundred. A photo depicting a man standing atop a massive mountain of buffalo skulls shows the extent to which this practice was implemented:

![Men standing with pile of buffalo skulls, Michigan Carbon Works. Photograph. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. 1892.](image)

Excuses have been made over the years that the buffalo were killed out of necessity: for

---

317 ITBC, “History and Mission.”
food or material or safety. In reality, Phippen said in a 2016 *Atlantic* article, the buffalo were almost exterminated in an attempt to solve the “Indian problem,” as Ulysses S. Grant put it. Phippen explained that as the United States pushed development, American Natives continued to roam with the buffalo and hunt, instead of withdrawing to their newly state-designated areas. The buffalo became a problem because wherever there were buffalo, there were also Native peoples—and the United States wanted the Native peoples gone so they could continue expanding, settling, and developing. Phippen said that to aid in this, wealthy sportsmen had been invited to hunt the buffalo herds at deliberate times and locations.

One such English sportsman, William Butler, wrote an autobiography in 1911, which included a detailing of his hunting experiences. Butler said he arrived at the Platte River in Nebraska Territory, and looking over the prairie, saw buffalo speckled to the horizon, a scene he described as never having seen the equal of—before or since. It is, of course, thanks to hunting parties like his, that such a scene will likely never be witnessed again by anyone. He spoke of a conversation with great hunter Colonel Dodge after a week of hunting buffalo: “More than thirty buffalo bulls had been shot by us, and I could not but feel some qualms of conscience at the thought of the destruction of so much animal life; but Colonel Dodge held different views. ‘Kill every buffalo you can,’ he said; ‘every buffalo dead is an Indian gone’.” Dodge’s words demonstrate that the eradication of the buffalo was part of the broader attack on Native Americans. It was not happenstance but was a state-sanctioned tool to further suppress and eliminate Indigenous peoples.

It is sardonic and bittersweet then, that in its desire to destroy the land’s preexisting

---

318 Phippen, “Kill Every Buffalo.”
319 Phippen, “Kill Every Buffalo.”
inhabitants, the nation almost destroyed what it would later adopt as a national symbol. The buffalo was named America’s National Mammal in 2016, symbolizing America next to the bald eagle.\textsuperscript{323} The U.S. Department of the Interior states that the bison are, “a symbol of our American identity and one of the greatest conservation success stories of all time.”\textsuperscript{324} The conservation was only needed because bison were originally a symbol of Native peoples—an association for which they were almost wiped out. The Intertribal Buffalo Council is working to consistently grow the numbers of buffalo. They are, “reestablishing buffalo herds on Tribal lands in a manner that promotes cultural enhancement, spiritual revitalization, ecological restoration, and economic development.”\textsuperscript{325} It is about the buffalo, yes, but it is also about a revitalization of a way of life, of the land, the spirit, the connection.

For many modern Americans, bison are most closely associated with Yellowstone National Park. According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, Yellowstone National Park continues to be, “the only place in the U.S. where bison have continuously lived since prehistoric times.” The bison roam freely in their natural habitat, occasionally injuring national park visitors who venture too close.\textsuperscript{326} Yellowstone is also the United State’s first national park, established 1872. A national park is an area set aside by the federal government, usually to protect and conserve the land. All U.S. National Parks are, of course, on originally Indigenous land. This makes them a distinctive location where the axis of both ancestral land and settler colonial development continuously meet today, with all the accompanying violent history.

The National Park Service (NPS) claims its mission is to “preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment,
education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”

In many ways, the first national park was created to keep some semblance of wilderness amidst rapid Western settler expansion—the government could not control its own land grab. An article from Michelle Cyca at *History* details “How Yellowstone Became America’s First National Park.”

Cyca notes that, “Though national parks are often imagined as untouched wilderness… at least 27 federally-recognized Native tribes had connections to the region that dated back to time immemorial.” These Native peoples were forced from the land so settlers could have a remaining sense of untouched nature. Since the turn of the century, Native nations have seen some developments in their long fight for restorative justice. In a law review document entitled “Re-Indigenizing Yellowstone,” Stark et al. suggest that this progress, “presents a critical opportunity to consider what the world’s first and most famous national park could do to reckon with and address its history of Indigenous exclusion.”

With partnerships between federal and Native governments like the above-mentioned bison management, new relationships and co-managements have begun to gain traction in NPS land.

In 1990, the NPS published a report on park funding needs to congress titled, *Keepers of the Treasures.* It relates some of the views from Native elders on how they felt land should be preserved. Despite the fact that *Keepers of the Treasures* is decades old, the views from tribal representatives who originally met with the authors to discuss preservation are as pertinent today as ever before. The introduction of the report specifies that, “Tribes seek to preserve their

---

327 National Park Service, “About Us.”
328 Cyca, “How Yellowstone Became.”
329 Cyca, “How Yellowstone Became.”
330 Stark et al., “Re-Indigenizing Yellowstone,” 400.
331 For a more in-depth legal history of “the evolution of relationships between Yellowstone associated tribes, the Park Service, and the U.S. military since 1872,” see Stark et al., “Re-Indigenizing Yellowstone,” Part III.
332 On their website, the National Park Service claims to celebrate and tell the “stories of all Americans.” It lists a number of Cultural Resource publications, including a Diverse and Inclusive History. It includes cultural content about Asian American Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, African American—and has at least three links under each for recent studies or colorful booklets. Yet under American Indian, there is only one link. One link for the people whose land the NPS sits on. That one link leads to a photocopied 1990 report to congress on park funding needs for preservation. NPS, “Telling All Americans' Stories,” and Parker and Banks, *Keepers of the Treasures.*
cultural heritage as a living part of contemporary life. This means preserving not only historic properties but languages, traditions, and lifeways.”

Like the Garifuna, Native American tribes fight for land preservation to keep both their ancestral heritage and current ways of life alive. Indigenous societies are not a people of the past, but a living community. In the document, Native peoples that had been relocated to reservations brought up concerns about sites of cultural value on the land they historically occupied, but had been expelled from. Although some were hundreds of miles away from ancestral lands, the elders still felt a responsibility for the care and protection of these sites. Because land is important as more than just a property or a space to live, the tribal elders sought preservation for spaces of meaning that they were no longer allowed to care for themselves due to dispossession.

In speaking on preservation, I would like to note another point the tribal elders made: that their peoples were not something to be preserved as an object or relic of history. The authors noted that the tribes were, “opposed to being objects of studies over which they have no control.” Native peoples should have autonomy to tell their own stories: portray their own heritage, history, and traditions instead of having it portrayed for them by settler colonial researchers and institutions. NPS published this report, but has not necessarily implemented the Native preservation suggestions. The parks remain in federal control and in many parks, the history is still told primarily from the view of the Western settler colonizer, not from those who would know the history of the land best.

I recently visited Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, and did a tour of the large Cliff Palace, marveling at the creation of dwellings built into the natural crevices by early Indigenous peoples. I felt overwhelmed by the chance to see such amazing cliff dwellings, while cognizant of my complicity in systems of dispossession. I love nature, and National Parks are often chosen for

---

333 Parker and Banks, Keepers of the Treasures, i.
334 Parker and Banks, Keepers of the Treasures, i.
335 See Chapter 1 for a deeper discussion on fetishization of Indigenous peoples, items, and art.
336 Parker and Banks, Keepers of the Treasures, ii.
being extraordinary examples of nature’s beauty, but they are also representative of settler colonialism and stolen land, and Mesa Verde is a good example of this. It was home to many peoples and now it’s a stop on a site-seeing portion of the park. In chatting with a park ranger about relations with the Indigenous tribes in the area, he shared that the NPS has apparently been trying to make amends for their settler colonial history and has worked with local tribes to change a lot of the historical materials and information. I asked the park ranger pretty pointedly if the Native peoples were allowed to come and go freely, and he said there was a group there just last week for a ritual. I asked because it was something I felt should be allowed, but I also don’t even know enough about the people who would want to come there or why. I headed to the visitor center, wondering what this new-and-improved transformation would look like that the ranger referred to, hoping to hear some of the Indigenous stories and history of the land. I thought maybe I could buy some books by Indigenous authors telling their own stories.

Inside the Mesa Verde visitor center, there were shelves lined with academic books detailing tribal histories of the area. One by one, I researched each book online. I do not think I expected a colonial institution to have Native authors filling the shelves, but I also did not expect to be unable to find a single author that claimed Indigenous heritage. I am not saying that every book was inferior—there were likely some well-done collaborative and ethically-sound projects in many of the books. What I am saying is that there are a great number of books out there written by Indigenous scholars or storytellers that could have also been lining those shelves. Instead, in many of the books, Native peoples were being again studied as objects, having their stories told for them. Perhaps the NPS could not handle the controversy of Native peoples telling the stories of that same land being forcibly removed from them. Perhaps Western visitors could not handle the unease—after all, we in the West seem to do everything we can to avoid hearing such harshly accurate retellings of history.

Six months later, I visited Yosemite National Park and found a small but robust section of books about the Native inhabitants of California. I wanted to familiarize myself with the memories and stories of the many peoples and nations whose land I was on, and a book titled,  

337 The first thing I saw at the visitor center was a 20-foot statue of a Native man climbing a cliff, titled The Ancient Ones. It was made in 2012 by Edward J. Fraughton—a non-Native artist most known for his works about the settler American West. In the new NPS inclusivity revisions, it probably would have been prudent to hire an Indigenous person to create and depict the story of an Indigenous people.
The Way We Lived: California Indian Stories, Songs, and Reminiscences caught my attention. While reading, I appreciated many of the pictures, poems, and stories told by Indigenous people from throughout modern-day California. However, I soon found myself uncomfortable with the realization that while the book was filled with true Native memory and re-storying, it was less of a collaborative collection and more of a compilation of stories pulled from various other texts by a Western editor. What was most discomfiting was to realize that as a researcher, I am doing the same thing—essentially cherry picking Indigenous words and stories to accompany my own narration.\textsuperscript{338} It is an unpleasant and unsettling experience—to both care deeply about the Indigenous right to tell their own stories and self-determine; and to be complicit in a Western retelling of Indigenous stories in my own research. To pull these beloved stories out of context, however well-meaning I may be, is to tell these stories from my own location. In “Colonising White Innocence,” Alissa Macoun speaks to these notions of feigned innocence. She says, “No politically pure or righteous way of being, acting or thinking as a white person or non-Indigenous person can exempt us from our political context, even though it is a context we collectively create, recreate, and may hope to change.”\textsuperscript{339} Whether or not I choose to recognize my location and political limits, I am complicit in this system of authorized colonial domination.

In light of that, I would like to focus on the stories of Indigenous people who explain their own experience living and working in the specific axis of both stolen and ancestral land: Native American National Park Service employees. NPS has 20,000 employees, but only 2.5% identify as Alaskan or American Native.\textsuperscript{340} All National Park land is Native, but Native nations are not the ones who are sharing their land or telling its stories. In an article titled, “We’re Still

\textsuperscript{338} Of course, pulling out of context and subjectivizing is probable with any sort of research, but as the West has dominated the telling of Indigenous narratives through history, this can be especially violent to Native stories and memory. It can be another form of colonization.
\textsuperscript{339} Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 2.
\textsuperscript{340} NPS, “About Us.” And DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
Here, five NPS employees share their unique situation: “Inevitably, Indigenous staff members face a host of challenges, underpinned by an uncomfortable truth: They are working—and living, in some cases—on lands that were, for the most part, illegally seized by the same entity that signs their paychecks.” Some of their stories relate how they came to work for the NPS, what might be difficult or rewarding, or how they re-story the national park land they work on:

Ravis Henry—Navajo/Diné—grew up as one of 40 families who live within the Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Henry has heard visitors comment with surprise that the park would allow people to live there. His answer: “No, the people and the Navajo Nation allow the park to be here and want the park to be here.” The Navajo Nation retains ownership, and offers guided tours for visitors—which Henry learned to do as a teenager with his father. That turned into a seasonal job with the NPS, and Henry has worked in parks in Hawaii, Alaska, and Colorado. His dream is that other parks will one day have more Native American representation with Indigenous people managing their own sacred spaces and sharing their own stories.

Jared Wahkinney—Comanche—is part of a family line of dispatchers (commonly referred to as WWII code talkers). His job with NPS today is to be a sort of dispatcher, to communicate with everyone and help. Wahkinney has noticed a shift in the NPS, likely due, he suggested, to Natives in places of power like Chuck Sams as Park Service Director—the first ever Indigenous Director. He would love to see more tribal and federal collaboration and co-management in the parks.

Albert Lebeau III—Cheyenne River Sioux—is a Native American archaeologist, which he considers a bit of an oxymoron. He had to learn to balance the rigid categories of archaeology

---

341 DeGroff, “We’re Still Here,” is in the Winter 2023 issue of the National Parks Magazine, (published by the independent National Parks Conservation Administration).
342 DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
343 Ravis Henry as cited in DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
344 Jared Wahkinney as cited in DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
with his familiar oral traditions. He spoke of the intergenerational trauma from reservation poverty, violence, suicide, COVID-19. His parents and grandparents are survivors of the Native American forced boarding schools, but they still encouraged both Western and traditional education, so Lebeau chased history through archaeology. He has spent 30 years digging, but still gets a thrill realizing that when he finds an artifact, the last person to see it could have been his ancestor.345

Šiná Bear Eagle—Oglala Lakota—grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and did not find out until she was an adult that 130,000 acres of her ancestral land was part of the Badlands National Park. As a child, she visited Wind Cave National Park, not as a national park, but as the sacred and spiritual location of her people’s emergence story. She took a job at Wind Cave, and despite it being a Native site, many of her teammates had never met an Indigenous person prior to meeting Bear Eagle. After realizing that Wind Cave had little to no accurate history of the area before white people, she led trainings to help fellow employees understand why Native visitors might have grievances, and drafted new accounts for historical battles and the Indigenous emergence story.346

Ethan White Calfe—Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara—volunteers as an interpretive ranger, telling stories and helping visitors make connections. He said it was weird talking about how the federal government slaughtered bison in Yellowstone—while working for the federal government—but that it is a story that needs to be told. His grandfather worked with the NPS, changing names of monuments and landmarks originally named after settler colonizers or Indian killers, and White Calfe is doing a similar work when he tells decolonial stories. One day, he hopes that more Indigenous people will be able to tell “their own stories from their own

345 Albert Lebeau III as cited in DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
346 Šiná Bear Eagle as cited in DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
homelands,” White Calfe said, but until then, “I try and make it my mission to go to these places and tell the stories that weren’t being told about the people who were there and how they lived.”

These stories are examples of the challenges of living and working in this axis. Amidst the opposition, these individuals have found a balance both working in national parks and restorying the land. SeeWalker says, “Native Americans today talk about the concept of living in two worlds. Some describe it like walking through life with a moccasin on one foot and a Nike shoe on the other.” This is what re-storying can look like, walking that line, that complex connection with ancestral land amidst the violence of colonial dispossession, a taking back of stories and a telling of Indigenous experiences—not as something relegated to the past, but as a grounding in current livingness.

I want to be direct here, that not all Indigenous people feel this same way, some suggest a more direct approach to restorying the land, one that has already been referenced in this chapter: land back. In an interview with NPR, Ojibwe author David Treuer argues that National Park land should be returned to the Native nations. He explains that when Yellowstone was legislated as the first national park, there were guarantees that the Indigenous peoples of the area would be able to continue to hunt, fish, and use the land. In reality, Native people were actively excluded from the area. This was representational of many of the treaties the government made with Native peoples. Treuer problematizes what a current national park land back situation—with all of its accompanying dilemmas—might look like and posits what the best option would be: land controlled by a consortium of all tribes with the overarching goal of

---

347 Ethan White Calfe as cited in DeGroff, “We’re Still Here.”
348 SeeWalker, Still Here, 71.
349 For a detailed look at the law and policy involved with land back movements and specific co-management success stories, see Stark et al., “Re-Indigenizing Yellowstone,” Part IV.
350 Treuer, “National Parks.”
351 Treuer, “National Parks.”
protection. He suggests that, “this kind of reparation is a chance for the country to put into practice its best ideals, its noblest impulses. America needs to be reminded of its capacity for justice, fairness and compassion.” This might open doors for other land back practices, and a greater openness to the knowledges and stories Indigenous peoples hold.

As I have visited more national parks, I have looked for more stories like these. I love the beauty of earth’s mountains, canyons, deserts, and rainforests—so much variety and so many places of awe and wonder to reconnect and remember how to breathe. I am glad they are preserved, but I have to reconcile that with the fact that they are stolen. The more I have listened, the more I have awakened to the land’s settler colonial scars and haunted landscapes. I am part of an often unwelcome visitation in the ancestral home of plants, animals, and Indigenous people. Land is not a neutral a-historical location, but is filled with messy memory.

Roots of Connection

My favorite sound in the world is the rustling of aspen trees in the wind. We called them quakies growing up. Beautiful straight white trunks with black scars and knots, and cute flat little leaves that rustle in the slightest breeze. In the fall, the leaves turn magnificent shades of vibrant yellow and orange, brightening the hillsides. I can hear the sound of quakies even now, but it’s hard to explain. The flutter of a thousand butterfly wings. The soft patter of rainfall. The rush of a distant waterfall. What I really hear is: home. The connections we made with each other and nature. The time we spent in the mountains together fishing, picnicking, hammocking, camping, singing by the fire, hiking—surrounded by the whispering of the aspens around us. When I visit quakies now, my heart stills and fills and they whisper to me the things I have forgotten.

There was one aspen-rich location we visited often. My dad had spent summers there with his parents, and my mom worked nearby after high school. It held special significance to us because my parents eventually met there. They told my siblings and I stories about the area. I remember there was one little group of quakies that would change color before the rest of the trees around it, turning red early in the shape of a heart. It happened every year, undetectable until the leaves changed color. My parents would tell my siblings and I that two people with lost love were buried there, and the trees change to remember them.

352 Treuer, “National Parks.”
353 In Home and Exile, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe detailed how stories hold a great power in reshaping colonial narratives. He said, “The twentieth century for all its many faults did witness a significant beginning, in Africa and elsewhere in the so-called Third World, of the process of “re-storying” peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession.” “Balance of Stories,” 79. Stories hold power.
354 For more information on this concept, see Tsing et al., “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene,” in Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, G1-G16.
I did not know it until later in life, but that area was especially significant because it is home to the world’s largest grove of aspen trees, called Pando.\textsuperscript{355} Or should I say—aspens \textit{tree}. That is the special thing about quakies: they are not multiple trees but are actually one large root system with different shoots. They are all connected. As an interconnected, mutually sustaining ecosystem, all the trees thrive or fall together as part of an inseparable relationship.

While there are many different ways of viewing land and cultural connections between humans and the earth, there seem to be some patterns in what Indigenous knowledge tells us: that we too have this same interconnected, mutually sustaining relationship with each other and the land. Linda Black Elk, ethnobotanist from the Catawba tribe told SeeWalker, “Native Americans know more about the environment than than anybody else because we don’t just live here and struggle to survive, we participate with the earth, with the animals and the plants, we are not separate from them, they are relatives: they take care of us and we take care of them.”\textsuperscript{356} Kimmerer says, “We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain those who sustain us.”\textsuperscript{357} She says that plants know this and, as the elders of creation, they teach us how: “They live both above and below ground and hold the earth in place. Plants know how to make food from light and water. Not only do they feed themselves, but they make enough to sustain the lives of all the rest of us.”\textsuperscript{358} They sustain us with every breath we take. It is exemplified all around us, this relationship of reciprocity, in the very way life energy moves through the world.\textsuperscript{359}

As a non-Indigenous person myself, I proceed with the awareness that these knowledges

\textsuperscript{355} According to the U.S. Forest Service, “Pando” website, “Pando is believed to be the largest, most dense organism ever found at nearly 13 million pounds.” They specify that Pando covers 106 acres, with more than 40,000 trees.

\textsuperscript{356} Linda Black Elk, as cited in SeeWalker, \textit{Still Here}, 12.

\textsuperscript{357} Kimmerer, \textit{Braiding sweetgrass}, 382.

\textsuperscript{358} Kimmerer, \textit{Braiding sweetgrass}, 346.

\textsuperscript{359} For a very interesting read on liveable collaborations and ecological survival, see Tsing, \textit{The Mushroom}. 
are something I am awakening to, and that I am still trying to find meaning and awareness of. In stories of the West, violent acts of genocide, colonization, takeover and assimilation and removal of cultural differences have all been “storied” into a much more benign narrative. Recognizing this and deeply listening to the stories from Indigenous thinkers facilitates a restorying of my own mind, of the way I know. I have begun to listen to the plants, to listen to the earth. I think I always talked to the stones, but I did not always listen. I do not know if I am doing it right, but it feels like it could be. It feels like Joy Harjo’s words:

That first earth gift of breathing
Opened your body, these lungs, this heart
Gave birth to the ability to interact
With dreaming
You are a story fed by generations
You carry songs of grief, triumph
Thankfulness and joy
Feel their power as they ascend
Within you
As you walk, run swiftly, even fly
Into infinite possibility 360

It is not just the plants that give sustaining breath, but our bodies, our dreams, our ancestors, our stories. Kimmerer said, “My breath is your breath, your breath is mine. It’s the great poem of give and take, of reciprocity that animates the world. Isn’t that a story worth telling?” 361

360 Harjo, Poet Warrior, 3.
361 Kimmerer, Braiding sweetgrass, 344.
Conclusion: Weaving Stories

When I was a child, my great-grandmother would invite her friends over to help her finish and tie off a quilt. They squeezed into the living room, sitting around the checkered quilt that was stretched across the quilting frame, passing bowls of candies and nuts while they stitched and talked. I was invited to sit underneath the quilt and pull the needles they worked, down and back up through the quilt. I remember gazing up at the muted light through the floral patterns in the quilt, listening to them chat. They soon forgot I was there (even though the needles kept miraculously remerging for them to pull), and began to chat about more interesting topics. I tried to remain quiet, because I felt an inexplicable need to hear interesting tidbits about neighbors or family, or be pulled into stories. As I grew older, I continued to be pulled to stories, sometimes as the listener and sometimes as the giver. As my friends and family can attest, conversation and storytelling are my favorite activity to engage in—time becomes irrelevant to me as the stories weave themselves through our minds and hearts.

In Poet Warrior, Joy Harjo talks about sneaking under the kitchen table where her mother and her mother’s friends chatted. She said, “My ears were bent for stories, for the forbidden, the mystery pieces…This story circle was a powerful place.” I felt a similar tug to stories as a child, and throughout my life. Throughout Poet Warrior, Harjo shares memories, tells stories, and writes poetry. I think reading her words was actually the first time I read poetry with eyes open instead of rolling. Her words were unrestrained by the usual rules of poetry: rhythm, rhyme, meter—and instead flowed freely and authentically. I, like Harjo, had learned poetry as an old, overly proper thing. I, too, was never taught to listen. But reading Poet Warrior was for me, in Harjo’s own words, “memory’s voice catching your ears when you thought you were done with listening.” I am, my memory tells me, not done with listening.

In this thesis, I have attempted to listen—to my own stories and reflections of my awakenings alongside the stories and reflections of those who have always been awake. I would like to refer back to Qwo-Li Driskill’s reminder that dominant histories are also stories, “stories that do a particular work in the world.” In this thesis, I also have attempted to show

---

362 Harjo, Poet Warrior, 24.
363 Harjo, Poet Warrior, 42.
364 Harjo, Poet Warrior, 4.
365 Driskill, Asegi Stories, 6.
dominating histories, erasure marks, and powerful narratives as the stories that they are. I have situated locations of knowledge production within the institutions of power across art, gender and land, in order to trace these knowledges as a truth instead of the truth—a story, but not the story. Because there are so many stories—so many knowings to be learned, to be woven together.

I have always been a strong believer that I am but a sum total of everything I have ever seen, heard, felt, and experienced. That I am continually reshaped by every choice, every interaction—that the person I am in this moment has never been and will never be again. Harjo adds another dimension of interconnectedness to our shaping. She recalls once wanting a donut after an exercise class, but realized the thought was not hers, it was from the person next to her. She said, “I began to follow all of my thoughts and was surprised how many didn’t belong to me. And how many had threads to ancestors, relatives, strangers, even plants, elements, and animals.” We are not made of singular experiences, changing only as we bump into each other on our individual paths—but are already entwined through the expanse of time and space. As referenced in the introduction, my time spent weaving reminded me of our tangleness. To weave in knowings about reciprocity and eternal interconnectedness is to acknowledge that I am also made up of many other threads—threads that connect in seen and unseen ways, many of which I still wait to learn and experience. I find myself filled with gratitude and reverence for the ways of knowing and living I have awakened to, and for the tangled threads that weave us forever together—even when we have forgotten.

---

366 Similar thoughts have been attributed to BJ Neblett, Maya Angelou, and Myles Munroe.
367 Harjo, Poet Warrior, 23.
Bibliography


Gunn Allen, Paula. The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions. New York: Open Road Media, 2015. EPUB.


McComas, William F. “Ten Myths of Science: Reexamining What We Think We Know About the Nature of Science.” School Science and Mathematics 96 (1996): 10-16.


