KINSHIP CROSS-TALK

KINSHIP CROSS-TALK:
LOVE AND BELONGING IN CONTEMPORARY COMPARATIVE LITERATURES

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, *Kinship Cross-Talk: Love and Belonging in Contemporary Comparative Literatures*, examines contemporary models of kinship as expressions of relationality, resistance, responsibility, witnessing, and love. I ask: how do literary texts depict "never-easy kinship[s]" (Grosz 128) that bind the self to others and the world in particular expressions of love and responsibility, inseparable from familial, national, transnational, and/or trans-Indigenous modes of belonging? Specifically, my dissertation looks at Indigenous, queer, and human rights-based literary texts that articulate shared kinships and intimacies, and facilitate a "critical re-imagining" of "being-together" (Mackey 168) in global contexts. My research methodology emphasizes the historical and cultural contingencies of contemporary models of kinship by engaging the epistemological traditions I encounter on their own terms. Often this means a turn away from Euro-American humanist approaches to subjectivity and relation to attend to other modes (critical or wry humanist, diasporic, spiritual, ecological, gustatory) and materials or environments (water, salt, ocean, for example) that shape kinship beliefs and practices. This dissertation studies three primary literary texts: the fictional autobiography *What Is the What* authored by Dave Eggers, Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt,* and *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai*, a collection of poetry by Hawaiian author Brandy Nālani McDougall.

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INTRODUCTION | KINSHIP CROSS-TALK

> [O]ur relation to the world [is not] […] one of merger or oneness, or of control and mastery, but a relation of belonging to and of not quite fitting, a never-easy kinship, a given tension that makes our relations to the world hungry, avid, desiring, needy, that makes us need a world as well as desire to make one, that makes us riven through with the very nature, materiality, worldliness that our conception of ourselves as pure consciousness, as a for-itself, daily belies. (Grosz, *Time Travels* 128)

I begin with this passage from Elizabeth Grosz because it introduces some of the main tensions that will feature throughout this dissertation. Hunger, avidity, desire, need, suggest a relation to the world that is as much about the connections we long for, as it is about how those connections constitute us directly, on a bodily, affective, and as always, political level (undoing narratives of merger, oneness, control, and mastery). This is a project about kinship and the self in "never-easy" relation with human and other-than-human others, read through three primary pieces of literature that play at the borders of fictional and nonfictional worlds and genres, that brush up against and imaginatively answer the call of the world to facilitate a "critical re-imagining" of "being-together" (Mackey 168) in shifting global contexts. The "never-easy" kinships that this dissertation explores invite us to reflect upon the following: the mutual material relations that make up human and other-than-human bodies; the way such relations resist reproducing the wholly coherent, self-made, autonomous, "free" subject of Western Enlightenment thinking; and how rethinking kinship has powerful repercussions for not only how we understand relationality, but

things like "geography, history, culpability, and obligation; the extraction of wealth and the distribution of life and death; hope and despair; and the seemingly self-evident fact and value of freedom" (Povinelli 10). [1]

The primary literary texts studied here are: the fictional autobiography *What Is the What* authored by Dave Eggers, Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt,* and *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai*, a collection of poetry by Hawaiian author Brandy Nālani McDougall. Each of these texts is embroiled in the referential world: part of, not outside, that which they describe. They bring into the imaginative fold non-fictional intertexts, paratexts, and contexts, as well as timely questions, legal debates, and fraught histories. *What Is the What* presents a fictional yet true account of one man's experience of the Second Sudanese Civil War and his resettlement to America, a country that is represented as simultaneously hostile and (conditionally) hospitable to strangers. Eggers's book can be read, then, as a Sudanese refugee witness narrative on the limits of both the humanitarian promise and the notion of a global human family. *The Book of Salt* builds on found but scant true details of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas's

[1] Povinelli traces the origins of an Enlightenment (and even pre-Enlightenment) concept of the autonomous individual; her work is an anchor for the idea here that alternative or resistant kinships move away from a model of subjectivity based on the sovereign, self-made man. She uses the term "*autological subject*" to refer to "discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy and capitalism" (4).

household in Paris and the migrant workers they employed there, to craft an alternative vision of queer diasporic kinship between Vietnam and Euro-American contexts that is differentiated from the queer liberalism of Stein and Toklas. And though not explicitly in conversation with such civil rights movements as the struggle for equal marriage rights, it demonstrates how alternative queer kinships pose a challenge to liberal queer legitimization in the form of, for example, gay marriage (a legitimation that, in the words of Judith Butler, is an "ambivalent gift" given its potential to delegitimate other forms of queer kinship or radical sexual politics) (Butler, "Kinship" 17). *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai* demonstrates how the revitalization of Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiian) kinship ties in art, poetry, mele (song), and moʻolelo (story) contributes to vital activist movements to reclaim Hawaiian sovereignty.[2] McDougall's collection explores real-world struggles for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, kinship, and water rights in Hawaiʻi, in political, spiritual, and at times highly personal terms. McDougall's work demonstrates that Indigenous Hawaiian conceptions of kinship set the terms of Indigenous legitimacy and recognition beyond the purview of the state, which, as Chadwick Allen points out, holds the power to limit tangible, symbolic, and social resources (*Trans-Indigenous* 158).

[2] I use the terms "Hawaiians" and "Native Hawaiians" interchangeably. In ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi (the Hawaiian language), "Kanaka Maoli" refers to the noun "Hawaiian person" and the adjective "Hawaiian," while "Kānaka Maoli," with the macron, refers to the plural, "Hawaiian people." "Kanaka ʻŌiwi" also refers to the Indigenous people of Hawaiʻi.

Taken together, these texts imaginatively depict historical or contemporary non-fictional wounds of lands and bodies. They also share a critique of a territorially bound, Euro-American logic of liberal inclusion, negotiating the often self-interested motivations that are performed under a banner of equality and care in humanitarian promise, queer liberalism, or the assimilative reparations made for Indigenous peoples in the aftermath of forced statehood.[3] Read jointly, they awaken us to the need to engage in collaborative rethinking or "epistemological cross-talk" (Coleman, "Epistemological Cross Talk" 2) across difference, in order to better understand how emplaced, affective forms of kinship and subjectivity might bear a relation to larger projects of

[3] Throughout this dissertation I refer to a liberal logic of inclusion, or a liberal humanist politics of belonging. I do not mean to imply that they are the same thing, but variants of one another. I am interested in how the values of liberalism and humanism work to reinforce one another. As such, liberal democracy, for example, has been critiqued "not only for its hypocrisy and ideological trickery but also for its institutional and rhetorical embedding of bourgeois, white, masculinist, and heterosexual superordination at the heart of humanism" (Brown 53). Noting that liberalism is associated with many movements and outlooks (classical, modern, and radical liberalism, for example; as well as liberal democracy, new liberalism, and neoliberalism), I consider John Gray's argument that its variants often all often draw on the following qualities: *individualist* ("in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity"); *egalitarian* ("inasmuch as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings"); *universalist* ("affirming the moral unity of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms") and *meliorist* ("in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements") (Gray xii).

"being-together" that resist the neoliberal and neocolonial effects of late capitalism.

These are literatures situated across vastly different contexts. These widely dispersed texts perform the challenging work of kinship, while simultaneously depicting selves that are ontologically, materially, and ethically obliged to callings from without. The "never-easy" tension of kinship that Grosz speaks to, then, will feature (to varying degrees and in their own terms) in each of these texts, as well as the dissertation as a whole: this dissertation enacts the very difficulty of kinship it describes by placing side-by-side, and engaging with, but not resolving the tensions between incommensurate social worlds, knowledges, and contexts.

In this introductory chapter, I consider different understandings of the relational and embedded self on a local, planetary, or cosmological scale, such as Gayatri Spivak's notion of "planetarity," Lorraine Code's concept of "ecological thinking," and Daniel Heath Justice's modeling of Indigenous kinship and the "ecosocial." These critical models are considered here because their engagement with subjectivity and relationality are attuned to the nuances of what it means to not only co-exist with difference, but to do so in a way that grapples with the rich interconnections that place the subject (and indeed de-centre the subject) in relation to a much larger world of living beings. Throughout this dissertation I draw on perspectives from postcolonial theory, Indigenous theory, cultural

anthropology, material feminism, human rights scholarship, and queer studies. *Kinship Cross-Talk* is necessarily cross-disciplinary, staging a conversation between literatures and theories that foregrounds relationality, embodied epistemologies, and responsible relations. I present kinship as a matrix of alternative knowledges that are both critical of and attentive to the multiple materialities of history, place, body, affect, memory, and migration.

I begin by addressing the ethical and disciplinary implications of this kind of work, and then move on to an exploration of how kinship figures in relation to understandings of subjectivity, embodiment, spirituality, and cross-oceanic migration. In the "hybrid production" that is the history of the making of the nation-state—on the one side the citizen, and on the other, the "raced, gendered and refugee bodies"—there are always "new possibilities and threats for the 'reproductive labour' of the nation, unsettling categories such as home, family, kin, community, culture and citizenship" (Perera 62). Further, diasporic, Indigenous, and colonial histories and pluralisms "tend to embarrass all narratives that attempt to naturalize" the history of the modern nation-state as one of territorial stability and ethnic singularity (Appadurai 346). This dissertation is interested in the latter dimension of this double-sided production, in the histories and bodies that "seep through" the "supposedly impermeable borders" of national history (Sheller 3), and reorient notions of national, reproductive, and citizenship-based belonging.

I am drawn again and again to literatures that chart our complex material and ethical obligations to the world and to others, rendering untenable, and even undesirable, the concept of the autonomous individual. Working to reconfigure autonomy relationally, on the other hand, Lorraine Code stresses the need for ecological thinking, with its methodological pluralism and sensitivity to detail and diversity.[4] An ecological approach looks at a "materially situated subjectivity for which embodied locatedness and deliberative interdependence are constitutive of the very possibility of knowledge and action" ("Perversion" 203). Ecological thinking "works against the imaginary God-given human dominion over the earth and, more precisely, of dominion arrogated to certain chosen members of the human race, not just over the earth but over human Others as well" (*Ecological* 32). According to Daniel Coleman, Code's concept of "ecological thinking takes ecology's relational and locational focus to its logical

[4] In "The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women: Discourses of Social Advocacy at Century's End," Lorraine Code argues that while autonomy aims to empower, and may appear to do so in theory in its heralding of an unimpeded use of reason regardless of material and sociopolitical constraints for women and Others, there remains a disjunction between the ideals it upholds and the ability for those ideals to be realized by all members of a society. Central to Code's article are the following questions: whose rational utterances are endowed with public authority; whose testimonies are inadmissible or subordinate forms of knowledge; and further, does this valuing of certain voices over others not mimic the very hierarchical heteronomy that autonomy tries to eradicate? She argues for what she terms advocacy relations. This includes "representing, arguing for, recommending, acting, and engaging in projects of inquiry" which can both counter, or reinforce, the incredulity of marginalized knowers whose "utterances" are seldom heard (185, 189).

conclusion by embedding knowledge itself in the system it is trying to know" ("Toward" 10). The same might be said of kinship thinking: that it sees knowledge itself in the very systems and relations of kinship it describes, with real world consequences for projects of social change. Further, thinking kinship in relation to disciplinarity and genre entails an exploration of the "never-easy" borders of selves and worlds, yes, but also disciplines and genres.

These opening reflections point to a series of questions that have stayed with me throughout my academic career. While the contexts about which I write shift, the same series of questions remain. How is the self constituted in relation to others and the world? How are we becoming and unbecoming, in relation to and alongside one another? What is shared in this relation between self and other, and does this something shared constitute a form of kinship (and should it)? What does it mean to be in kin with one another, in political, ontological, affective, and strategic ways? How do we reconcile the potential of the inter-subjective, our connected human condition, with the illusion, false promises, inequities, and universalizing impulses associated with its possibility? What is the role of literature as an imaginative, but also commercial practice in the staging of alternative histories? What implications are there—in thinking, reading, and knowing relationally—for projects of social justice? Ultimately, how do we exist together, across sometimes incommensurate difference? And how is the self, and the kinships of which it is a part, in a constant state of negotiation, becoming

and unbecoming? These are big and in some ways unanswerable questions, but ones that animate this work.

Kinship Cross-Talk as An Ethical Space

While I argue that the projects of kinship engaged and depicted in my case studies are related, I also maintain that they are at the same time immeasurably and irreconcilably different. In order to emphasize the historical and cultural contingencies of the contemporary models of kinship each of my primary texts depicts, I engage the epistemological traditions I encounter in those texts on their own terms. This commitment to epistemological particularity necessitates attending to critical modes (diasporic, critical humanist, queer, Indigenous, spiritual, ecological, gustatory) and alternative materials or environments (water, salt, ocean, for example) that shape kinship beliefs and practices. This work, then, seeks to challenge the "humanist paradigm of ethics proposed by Enlightenment philosophers since Kant, which focuses on human freedom, autonomy, and reason," looking instead to radical relationality and "the out-turning of the subject that is foundational for political action and solidarity" (Pui-lan 42).

To be clear, at no point do I want to suggest that these literatures and contexts form a seamless fit. I align myself with Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey who observe that the "shared goals of social and ecological justice

might be reached through a dialogue that accommodates multiple epistemologies and experiences of nonhuman nature" (83). How would such dialogues unfold? How does reading these texts as incommensurate but relatable intervene in conversations in postcolonial, Asian North-American, queer, comparative, and, or, Indigenous literary studies?

Further, how might a comparative project such as this one present the possibility of what Willie Ermine calls an "ethical space?" An ethical space is one that is produced by the meeting of at least two "contrasting perspectives of the world" and "offers itself as the theatre for cross-cultural conversation in pursuit of ethically engaging diversity" (202). Ethically engaging diversity means thinking of difference as neither impassable, nor surmountable, but, rather, as the energy or life force of productive (as well as strained, intimate, difficult, rewarding) dialogue. In Édouard Glissant's words, this engagement involves tapping into "the human spirit's striving for a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence" (98). While Ermine speaks specifically of human-to-human encounters, there is room here for an equally contagious and "electrifying" (Ermine 195) epistemological space which "repels presumptions of human mastery," offering ample room for diverse human perspectives *and* "for the more-than-human world to act, and, more to the point, to intra-act, in surprising ways" (Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal" 251).

Disciplinary Cross-Talk

Readers of this dissertation might be wondering about the implications of shuttling between Indigenous theorizing, comparative literature, ecofeminism, cultural anthropology, and postcolonial theory, to name a few of the disciplinary approaches that feature here. A point of clarification is due. It should be stated that the stakes for rethinking kinship are, as will be discussed in greater detail in this dissertation's final chapter, different for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, especially in light of the fact that in North America the ways by which Indigenous people recognize themselves, and the ways by which nation-states recognize Indigenous peoples, differ drastically, with consequences for the resources available to Indigenous peoples and communities. The sum effect of U.S. federal recognition, for example, which is accompanied by a host of special services such as business loans, subsidized housing, scholarships, health care, the provisions of law enforcement, and leasing of land, is that it determines "the distribution of resources for the colonized" as well as the survival of the reservations and tribes themselves (Justice, "Recognition" 248).

To put Indigenous kinship in conversation with other conceptions of kinship, or notions like planetarity and ecological thinking, then, is to risk flattening the real-world differences and consequences of this kind of cross-talk. But to not do so is, perhaps, to take a greater risk. Daniel Coleman writes, "If there is to be any possibility of collectively decolonizing our minds, Euro-Canadian scholars must engage in epistemological cross-talk with indigenous and

non-Western writers and teachers in an effort to break the hold of what Battiste calls 'cognitive imperialism'" (Coleman, "Epistemological" 69).[5] This is where Diana Brydon's term "cross-talk"—the impetus for this dissertation's title—can be helpful. Brydon originally uses the idea of "cross-talk" (with a hyphen) to "evoke the ambivalence of the conflictual classroom where dialogue is engaged about issues that matter enough to get people angry" ("Cross-Talk" 70). In her essay she speaks to the important work of cross-talk, of working through "misguided notions of politeness" that act as a barrier to debate, and finding strategies to bring such "muted disagreements" to attention "in ways that allow them to do their productive work" (Brydon, "Cross-Talk" 81). In a subsequent introductory essay in the volume titled *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*, Brydon and Marta Dvořák turn to the compound word "crosstalk," instead, to emphasize that this crossing is "continuous, ongoing, and co-constructing" benefiting from "multi-voiced narratives" and requiring "friction" for any sort of movement to occur (8). The tension that both troubles and organizes this dissertation needs not be resolved, for it reflects the tensions of kinship itself, whereby relation (filial or affiliative, chosen or inherited)

[5] As Allison Mackey points out, "[Walter] Mignolo warns that, unless thinking through difference comes from subaltern perspectives (what he calls the 'space of the colonial difference') 'border thinking becomes a machine of appropriation'—using the 'colonial difference as an object of study rather than as an epistemic potential' (45)" (44).

requires attention to and respect for difference, as well as constant work and care.

A turn toward invoking a common humanity marked twentieth-century responses to colonial dispossession, racial and sexual inequality, and the atrocities of the Second World War. Marianne Hirsch writes:

> In the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War, in view of an escalating Cold War and an increasing nuclear threat, and in the midst of growing movements of national liberation and decolonization, the invocation of human universality had the force of a powerful political statement, particularly emerging from the United States. To demonstrate an overriding human equality was to reinvoke Enlightenment notions of a universal brotherhood that directly contradicted all-too-recent Nazi ideologies of racial hierarchy which denied humanity to the greater part of the earth's population. (50)

Though premised on an enduring belief in the human family, this turn was predicated on a collapsing of difference rather than recognition of how, as Driskill et al. remind us, "familial ties invite relationship *across* differences" (20, emphasis mine). Eggers's, Truong's, and McDougall's texts were written when promises of a better life—given rhetorical force through assumptions of a rights-based, common, unified humanity—remained unfulfilled, and the idea of the

sovereign, free subject had proven itself untenable.[6] Instead of revitalizing such promises and the liberal ideologies upon which they rely, each author calls for a redefinition of kinship. They turn to complex terms such as oceanic, bodily, critical humanist, Indigenous, queer, and diasporic—terms that are necessarily uncertain. While Eggers's book is a critical examination of human rights as a (failed) regime of kinship legitimation tied to the inequities that continue to mark U.S. racial politics, *The Book of Salt* and *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Pa'akai* present possibilities for resistant kinships, in part through their unconventional exploration of embodiment, materiality, history, memory, and cosmology, "'connect[ing] less familiar dots'" of relation (qtd. in Franklin and McKinnon 13) and broadening the domains and disciplines in which kinship is studied.

Recent anthropological work takes up this movement toward the cultural, transnational, political, and bodily contingencies of kinship.[7] Kinship has featured

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[6] Though Eggers's, Truong's, and McDougall's text were all written in the twenty-first century, they are each responding to the inequalities of the twentieth-century: *What Is the What* is, of course, primarily about the devastating effects of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983 to 2005); *The Book of Salt* takes place in the interwar period, but is also, to my mind, meant to be read as a contemporary retrospective account of the inequality that grew out of uncritical celebrations of modern queer liberalism; and *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani* deals with an immense span of time (from the time before creation), but my focus here is on U.S. legislation that impacted kinship ties, and specifically the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) of 1912.

[7] Chapter Three will speak more explicitly to trans-Indigenous exchange. See Chadwick Allen's work in *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* and "A Trans*national* Native American Studies? Why Not Studies That Are Trans-*Indigenous*?" for an explication of the term trans-Indigenous.

centrally—has indeed been thought of as "symbolic of the anthropological tradition" itself (Franklin and McKinnon 1). But the anthropological approach to kinship has been undergoing a radical shift since the 1950s, moving away from a model "'based on' or 'derived from' a set of natural facts"—a model that has been thoroughly critiqued for its reliance on an ethnocentric biologism—toward much more contingent, ambivalent, and nuanced examinations of kinship (Franklin and McKinnon 6). Recent work in anthropology thus emphasizes the necessity of "reading across different cultural domains" (9) to help us to consider how kinship is "created in ways that coexist with, push against, complement, contradict, erase, and make explicit divergent means of connection and disconnection" (13). Anthropological studies of kinship, then, are beginning to maintain a necessarily "fluid" connection between kinship and other forms of relationality (13). Current anthropological studies of kinship also attempt to take into account the varying beliefs and knowledge systems, as well as unequal geopolitical vulnerabilities and mobilities, of our times. This dissertation takes inspiration from recent critical interventions that widen both the terms and spaces (disciplinary and otherwise) within which belonging and relationality are conceived, refashioning what can be known by such a weighty term as kinship.[8] I

[8] For other anthropological work on kinship, see *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, which looks at "hidden geographies and insurrectionary political forms that question the territorial restriction on justice and belonging" (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr xxx); Marilyn Strathern's

will explore in detail in each of the chapters that follows, how kinship shapes, and is derived variously from, expressions of relationality, labour, resistance, intimacy, local, transnational, and trans-Indigenous belonging, responsibility, witnessing, and love.[9]

One such example of this sort of anthropological work is Elizabeth Povinelli's book, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Povinelli reflects on the way forms of liberal governance in settler colonies become manifest in embodied intimacies, illustrating the ethical implications of discourses of individual freedom and social constraint in disparate parts of the globe for love, sociality, and the body. Povinelli examines in particular two very different socialities as incommensurate but "vitally related" (2). Writing about the social worlds of Indigenous men and women living in Belyuen (a small community in Australia's Northern Territory) and the social worlds of progressive queers in the United States who identify as radical faeries, Povinelli seeks to demonstrate how these socialities are understood and regulated through a common logic of liberal governance. Within this logic, the conjugal couple becomes the only socially sanctioned site of intimacy authorized

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Kinship, Law and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise; and Kath Weston's *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*.

[9] Chapter Three will speak more explicitly to trans-Indigenous exchange. See Chadwick Allen's work in *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* and "A Trans*national* Native American Studies? Why Not Studies That Are Trans-*Indigenous*?" for an explication of the term trans-Indigenous.

to mediate "the tension between the autonomy of the individual and the constraints of cultural legacies," while "other forms of intimacy are policed and punished" (Epstein 1771). "Liberal settler colonialism," also referred to by Povinelli as the "liberal diaspora," refers to the far-reaching effects of settler colonialism, effects that were not contained to the colonies of Western Europe and the North Atlantic (Povinelli 17). The accumulation of wealth and power that resulted from settler colonialism, in other words, extends beyond the borders of the site of colonial settlement. Povinelli attempts to understand how these two social worlds (the Indigenous peoples of Belyuen and radical faeries in the U.S.), each embroiled in and responding to the effects of liberal setter colonialism, are affected, governed, and circumscribed by the "liberal binary concepts of individual freedom and social constraint," and considers what alternative intimacies are found in each (2-3).

Like Povinelli, I am interested in "*both* sides of the governance of love, sociality, and the body in liberal settler colonies—its disciplinary effects *and* its disciplinary failures in the face of a set of social refusals" (19, emphasis mine). In considering how local and actual-world "heterogenous ways of living" pose a challenge to and sometimes refuse normative scripts of kinship, we can examine how the local and particular call attention to the shortcomings and universalizing impulses of global calls for connectedness. What is of interest here is not only the issue of incommensurate but connected social worlds, but also the mapping

of other forms of social desire and belonging that do not reject kinship outright but move it "beyond patrilineality, compulsory heterosexuality, and the symbolic overdetermination of biology" (Butler, "Against" 14). Further, placing these conceptions of kinship side-by-side allows us to map ideological continuities of the liberal diaspora, and thereby deradicalize the claims of equality and freedom found in a limiting discourse like queer liberalism when viewed as part of a larger ideological trajectory of liberal emancipation.[10]

I am also interested in how the move away from the universalizing and reductive impulses of global collectivities does not necessarily mean abandoning the global altogether, but seeing in it the possibility of a comparative ethical reading practice, one that is, perhaps, more "planetary" in nature than global. In *Death of a Discipline* Gayatri Spivak proposes that we overwrite the globe with the planet because, the "globe" is the space that allows us "to think that we can aim to control it," whereas the planet is in "the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan" (72). Spivak does not

[10] For a discussion of queer radicalism, an antisocial, anti-community tradition, which critiques liberal inclusionism, as well as reproductive and heteronormative politics, see Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, and PMLA forum (Vol. 121, no. 3, May 2006) on the "antisocial thesis." Though this introduction likewise is critical of liberal logics of inclusion, within the debate on the anti-relational, antisocial thesis in queer theory, my argument is more so aligned with José Muñoz. See *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, as well as his response in the 2006 PMLA forum, and a brief discussion in the conclusion of this dissertation.

conceptualize the planet as our "constitutive other" (Moore 27) as it will carry on without us: "it contains us as much as it flings us away" (Spivak, *Death* 73). For Spivak, grappling with "planetarity" is also about radically reorienting the disciplines of what she calls Old Comparative Literature and Area Studies, moving away from humanist or identity-based relations with the Other (28). Moreover, and important for my project in this dissertation, the planetary is "fully embodied" and "cannot be abstracted from the interlacing multiplicity of bodies (galactic or cellular)" or the irreducibly local (Schneider 47).

I am drawn to Spivak's notion of planetarity for its invocation of the planet as outlined above (embodying the local, and the multiplicity of different bodies), as well as her insistence that "To be human is to be intended toward the other" (73).[11] So, even as the planet flings us away, we are still intended toward it and its beings. Recent work in postcolonial theology picks up on this nod

[11] Allison Mackey argues that there is a specifically ethical dimension to a notion of planetarity:

> As a descriptor, the term planetarity suggests "both contingency and movement," and Gilroy suggests that, as such, it is a less "imperial" term than "globalization." [… Planetary] awareness also differs from conventional gestures toward "cosmopolitanism" in that it deemphasizes the idea of privilege or choice when it comes to mobility, foregrounds relationality, and allows space for conceptualizing responsible relations with other-than-human others in a world that so clearly privileges the mobility of goods over living beings. In Spivak's understanding, it is necessary to "perhaps take a step, learning to learn from below, toward imagining planetarity" (*Death* 100), and the writing and reading of global literature(s) has an important role to play in this imaginative practice. (Mackey 42-43).

toward relationality to conceive of planetary *love*, drawing from Spivak's insistence that we learn from the "original practical ecological philosophies of the world" through the "supplementation of collective effort by love" (Spivak, *Critique* 383).[12] Might, then, kinship cross-talk, in its inter-disciplinary complexity, be a forum for thinking of planetarity as a radical force of love? Planetary love, suggests Laurel Schneider in a collection on postcolonial theology and planetary love, is always difficult because it is "*relative*, requiring relations," and draws attention to both "relations forged in support of empires" as well as love that "that takes up the irreducibility and multiplicity of bodies" (50, emphasis mine). Planetary love is based in "memory, lament, and refusal to fetishize the Other" while also grounded in the "*presence and processes* of bodies" (50). There is nothing here to suggest that planetary love is easy or assumed, but rooted in the untidy work of being in a relationship with the world and with others, always complicated by the "contrariness of bodies" (50-51) and the larger power dynamics of which we are all (differentially) a part.

It is love, too, for Daniel Heath Justice, that is the abiding force that has created the opportunity to take on the "messy, contradictory, complicated, uncertain" work of kinship ("Rhetorics" 257). Speaking both in terms of Indigenous tribal responsibilities and in his practice of reading of Indigenous

[12] See the 2011 collection titled *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* edited by Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera.

literature through kinship, he reminds readers that this work of kinship is worth taking on, to at the very least honour "those who loved one another enough to allow us to be here today, who wanted more for their descendants than simple descent" ("Rhetorics" 257).[13] Both Spivak and Justice see an integral connection between literature, theory, and real-world communities; Spivak, writes Schneider, sees "the importance of bodies, of the actual bodies that hunger and hurt, that feast, work, protest, create, and die as not insignificant for theory" (51).

Indigenous North American concepts of kinship might be more so what Spivak means when she invokes the "original practical ecological philosophies of the world" (*Critique* 383).[14] As Justice explains:

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[13] By "more than descent" Justice is referring to the way federal acknowledgment of Indigenous peoples in North America limits Indigenous identity to descent, by which is meant essential categories of race that are deemed measurable. He continues: "colonialist recognition" is based on "either static or retractive categories of essential *quantity*, most deeply rooted in 'blood' (or, increasingly, genetics)" (245).

[14] We risk reifying time-old stereotypes the moment we begin to read Indigenous texts and philosophies through their ecological or "environmentalist" sensibilities; the stereotype of the "ecologically noble Indian" argues Paul Nadasdy, "has its roots in the much older image of the noble savage" (298). The term "environmentalist" implies that attitudes toward the environment are being judged by a Euro-North American standard of environmentalism, which, as Nadasdy has convincingly argued, tends to place Indigenous practices within a specific spectrum of belief that is by and large inapplicable to Indigenous lifeways and kinship practices and beliefs. Thus, an Indigenous environmental ethos, always place and tribe specific, cannot be confined to Euro-American *environmentalist* conceptual categories, but needs to understood in the context of specific, local practices and beliefs that often combine the political, the

> Among most Indigenous communities throughout the world, uncolonized models of identity are most often expressed through the active practice of kinship, in the active attention to the rights and responsibilities of each person to the rest of Creation, among both humans and other-than-human peoples. Kinship is posited on one's behavior—if you've been accepted as family *and* maintain your obligations as a family member, then you're recognized as being family. It is qualitative in scope, potentially ever-expansive and inclusive, attentive to the different strengths, talents, and commitments of those participating in the circle. It is also attentive to a broad constituency, only some of whom are human, as the animals, plants, elements, and spirit beings are participants in the relationships that define kinship. ("Recognition" 245)

Justice describes these networks of kinship as "ecosocial:" "an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships" ("'Go Away, Water!' 151). Indigenous kinship as such is both "*local* and

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artistic, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. Contemporary Indigenous writing, read through the lens of kinship, rather than ecology or environment, then, might even serve to speak back to environmentalist groups who have taken it upon themselves to bemoan the cultural losses suffered by Indigenous communities when they fail to conform to long-held master narratives and stereotypes of ecological nobility.

localized," but also "inclusive and expansive," not confined to racial compartmentalization ("Recognition" 245, 257). Kinship here is about obligating relations of responsibility that attend "to the turbulence and inconsistencies of human social relations," positing that "humanity is one of many equal peoples in the world—sharing the right of consciousness and significance with the rest of creation" (250). Further, thinking kinship as an ongoing, complex, changing relationship speaks more fully to the range of human and other-than-human experience that form kinship bonds in Indigenous communities (and beyond), as well as aesthetic and artistic production, political organizing, sacred embodiment, social history, and so on, none of which can be "divorced from the context of community" in which these things take place (Justice, "Recognition" 254).

The Material, the Intimate, and the Spiritual Subjects of Kinship

The title of this dissertation, in referring to kinship cross-talk, rather than the more specifically located queer, Indigenous, or human rights-based kinships, may suggest too loose a connection between these projects of kinship. But one of the reasons for this capaciousness is that I am interested in seeing what transpires when we look to "forms of social obligation beyond given articulations of identity" (DiFruscia and Povinelli 83), starting from the premise that though identity matters and informs much of our lived experience, it is also "shot

through with unnamable networks of deep unspecifiable, unnamable obligation" (83). Kinship as obligation stresses the way that kinship, with regard to the texts studied here, is more accurately thought of as a verb—a changing, adaptive community—rather than a noun. Obligation in Povinelli's sense refers to the "delicate spaces of connectivity" one experiences when open to the world, reflecting a "continual nurturing, or caring for" that is neither something we completely choose nor something by which we are determined. Further, obligation is not exempt from the reaches of liberal governance and structures of power, in the way that no intimate event or relation is (DiFruscia and Povinelli 83-84).[15] I see these kinships as expansive archives of knowledge and intimate

[15] In a conversation with Kim Turcot DiFruscia, Povinelli describes obligation as follows:

> What is interesting about obligation is that it constitutes a no man's land between choice and determination. Obligation is not determination. Being obliged to something does not mean you are determined by it. It is a much richer form of relationality, a continual nurturing, or caring for, bindings that are often initially very delicate spaces of connectivity. I think if one is opened to the world—and by that I just mean being alive and having one's senses intact!—one will find oneself drawn to something, to a somewhere, to be bound to it without having known one was. […] or, obligation is another's call that we decide to bind ourselves to. Again, this "being drawn to" is often initially a very fragile connection, a sense of an immanent connectivity. Choices are then made to enrich and intensify these connections—or these are described retrospectively as choices!—even as, as one binds deeper, she is herself transformed. And this is really what I mean by obligation. I might be able to describe why I am drawn to a particular space and I may try to nurture this obligation or to break away from it, but still I have very little that can be described as "choice" in the original orientation. Indeed obligation is a space within which neither choice nor determination is an adequate

affects, not beholden to politics of identity, but stretching and moving in relation to material and discursive worlds. For reasons I will detail below, the body figures prominently here, as does intimacy and spirituality. Like Povinelli, I want to "try to understand materiality in late liberal forms of power and to try to make the body matter in post-essentialist thought"—but I argue that in order to do so we need to understand that bodies are more than just discursively produced, but also material or carnal (and, for many communities, spiritual) (77-80). This project moves between a politics and poetics of kinship to account for those difficult-to-name obligations and flows of connectivity, and brings diverse theories of materiality, intimacy, and spirituality to bear on the subject ever-in-kin with others.

To be intended toward (Spivak), obligated to (Povinelli), or in ecosocial kinship with (Justice) suggests there exists a tension within the very material makeup of our bodies, a tension that composes us directly, prompting us to consider the ways in which kinship and embodied materiality are intertwined. I argue throughout this dissertation that resistant kinships are not merely about reframing familial, loving, or ancestral connections: old and new, chosen and inherited. I contend that kinship cross-talk is about more than just social arrangements, but offers compelling insight into the human subject "in-relation" in an ontological sense. I argue that kinship is also about what it means to be

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synonym. (84)

human in a material, bodily, political, spiritual, and cultural way, and about how and in what ways we are connected to a larger world of living beings.

Current work in material feminism views the body as always in a position of relation (to others, to the other-than-human, to nature, to larger political and economic systems), and so has particularly powerful implications for political practice, ethics, and subjectivity by conceiving of responsibility and connectedness as both corporeally grounded and co-constitutive. Material feminist conceptions of embodiment do not reduce the body to an object, nor do such conceptions associate the material body with an absence of intellect or (psychological, spiritual, intuitive) knowing. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman describe this "material turn" as a "wave of feminist theory that is taking matter seriously" (6), turning toward rather than away from the body as a potential site of knowledge. Acknowledging that there exists a "corporeal ground" (Rich 40) to intellect, and not, rather, a separation between, and unequal valuation of, corporeality and intellect, is vital to the process of breaking down traditional hierarchical binaries—such as those between mind/body, culture/nature, public/private, spirit/matter, self/other, rational/non-rational—that have justified all manner of exclusionary acts and claims made against marginalized groups.

Take, for example, the narrator, Bình, of Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, the focus of my second chapter. Bình has quite the percipient tongue, but

also a memory for taste, forged from years of culinary servitude. A Vietnamese, queer, migrant worker, Bình is constantly musing about his American employers in Paris—lesbian lovers Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas—and their respective tastes and the differences between him and them. When Toklas wants to know the secret to Bình's highly esteemed omelets that he makes for her everyday, Bình responds, to himself:

> Do I look like a fool? […] Please, Madame, do not equate my lack of speech with a lack of thought. […] If there is a "secret," Madame, it is this: Repetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call. While you have been waking to the aroma of coffee brewing, dressing to the hushed rhythm of other people's labor, I have been in the kitchen since I was six and in your kitchen since six this morning. In my life as a minor domestic, a bit character in your daily dramas, I have prepared thousands of omelets. You have attempted three, each effort wasted, a discarded half-moon with burnt-butter craters, a simple dish that in a stark and economical way separates you and me. (153-154)

Bình consistently "places" his employers in this way, calling to the reader's attention their class and racial biases and turning the stereotype of the "unskilled" labourer on its head. Even as their telling questions put him in *his* place time and again, Bình responds, not to them, but to himself, with biting (and often humorous) observations that render his employers woefully ignorant of

the larger power dynamics that shape the relationship between them, despite a shared queerness. Bình consistently breaks down binaries and calls attention to their exclusionary effects, not only through his shrewd attention to the class and race-based differences that separate him and his employers, but also in his deployment of affect, taste, and sense as a knowing, resistant language. Taste is a way of knowing for Bình, and one that defines him as a queer, diasporic subject. Taste and tongue are not just motifs, despite the many meanings and connotations of tongue in Truong's novel, referring variously to the mother tongue, the tongue that wrestles with language, the tongue that tastes and differentiates, and the tongue that loves. They are entryways into Bình's intimate subjectivity, and into the modes by which he relates with those around him. Tongue and taste suggest an embodied and politicized material subjectivity that is perceptive, knowing, and in touch with the complex ways that both labour and intimacy are connected to larger circuits of power and privilege.

Diana Brydon pinpoints how various affective turns to "'embodied political subjects' (Marso), to emotional geographies, and the socio-cultural dimensions of emotion (Harré)" carry implications for "theorizing community and citizenship" within postcolonial studies ("Global" 1003). An unmet challenge of postcolonial studies, according to Brydon, then, is to understand how affect grounds and shapes the political in the formation of alternative communities (or kinships) and epistemologies. A recent special issue of *Interventions*

"*Postcolonial* intimacies" likewise "foregrounds the epistemic decolonizing potential in turning to affect as a basis of exploring injustice, conflict, trauma and reparation" (Antwi et al. 2). Building on recent scholarship interested in the epistemological dimensions of affect to better understand histories of trauma and injury, "postcolonial intimacies," in the words of the editors, relocates "the concept of intimacy to conditions of postcolonial exchanges" (2). Kinship cross-talk contributes to this conversation, as it allows us to scrutinize how the intimate, the affective, and the everyday are entangled in global histories of belonging, displacement, and dispossession. Kinship refers to the very systems, structures, or communities of intimate relations that embed and are informed by what the editors of the special issue call the "inter- and intra-continental circuits of passionate politics" (2). I read these concerns with intimacy, affect, and structures of emotion in postcolonial, cultural, and geographical contexts as communicating a specific kind of urgency when thought in light of kinship. The intimate, as Truong's narrator Bình demonstrates, implicates the material body. Alongside Brydon I argue throughout this dissertation that not only are our understandings of kinship, community, and citizenship profoundly altered by a move toward affect as a "mode of decolonizing critique" (Antwi et al., "Postcolonial Intimacies" 2), but so are our understandings of ontology and embodied subjectivity.

What would it mean to see the material embodiment not as inimical to spiritual matters, but as fundamentally imbued with spirit? Put another way, what would it mean for the "rebel disciplines"—"postmodern, postcolonial, feminist, multicultural, and queer studies" (Coleman, "Ecology" 8)—to take spirituality seriously? Indigenous knowledge traditions prompt a reconsideration of humanist conceptions of self and world by refusing to see the material and the spiritual as mutually exclusive binaries. Indigenous epistemologies position the body in relation to place, and are about apprehension of a world that is material *and* spiritual at once, has its own ethics, its own "intelligible essences" (Battiste and Henderson 37) that exist independent of human perception and theory. Relationality, flux, perception, contingency are at the core of these traditions. As Marie Battiste and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson explain:

> Perhaps the closest one can get to describing the unity in Indigenous knowledge is that knowledge is the expression of the vibrant relationships between the people, their ecosystems, and the other living beings and spirits that share their lands. These multilayered relationships are the basis for maintaining social, economic, and diplomatic relationships—through sharing—with other peoples. All aspects of this knowledge are interrelated and cannot be separated from the traditional territories of the people concerned. (42)

Indigenous knowledge, which emerges from adaptations to local ecologies, while not a self-same, wholly knowable field, in its specificity is a *sui generis* (self-generating) knowledge that brings into kinship people, ecosystems, and *spirit*, all interrelated in their materiality (Battiste and Henderson 39; Little Bear 9). Material and spiritual relations between living bodies, in turn, mediate larger political and social relations of diplomacy, obligation, and responsibility. When this dissertation refers to Indigenous spirituality, the spirit, or the sacred, I am speaking to these terms in both their general and specific formulations in Indigenous thought—to both the "sacred reason" of nature and events that "rub the wrong way against logic" that, as Linda Hogan writes, "have been spoken by our elders and our ancestors" for millennia, as well as the specific cosmologies and genealogies that inform clan and tribal relations throughout the world (19, 17). Sacred knowings, in turn, are intimately connected to and emerge from bodies, as depicted in literary and theoretical Indigenous works.[16] Daniel Heath Justice comments that "When one is uprooted from ancestral lands, the next landscape under siege becomes the body and its identities" ("'Go Away, Water!'" 160). Material, spiritual, and bodily topographies and belonging flow into one another: when kinships are lost or destroyed, feelings of displacement take root at the intersection between corporeal, geographic, and memoried terrains.

[16] Robert Warrior states, "theory, however abstract, is something that is done in our bodies" (340). Lee Maracle begins her Indigenous feminist tract *I Am Woman* with these words: "The tools I pick up are rooted in my body" (xi).

To respond to dispossession that cuts across these intersecting terrains of inhabitation, Taiaiake Alfred calls for a spiritual, rather than legal or political revolution (Coleman, "Ecology" 23). He is not speaking of spirit as separate or outside of the struggles and realities facing all Onkwehonwe (original people), but as part of relational regeneration: "We are separated from the sources of our goodness and power: from each other, our cultures, and our lands. These connections must be restored" (20). He advocates for a "restored spiritual foundation" for Onkwehonwe, and for "spiritual strength and the unity it creates" as a "power that can affect political and economic relations" (22).

Other scholars and disciplines are likewise insisting on the need to not only take matter, but specifically sacred matter, seriously, in the domain of political and social relations. M. Jacqui Alexander looks at sacred embodiment in relation to transnational feminisms, Black feminisms, and other "radical projects" (326).[17] In her study of sacred embodiment, Alexander reminds us that "even the most egregious signatures of new empire are not the sole organizing

[17] To name a few other examples of this turn toward the sacred or spiritual, The South Pacific Creative Arts Society (SPCAS) founded the journal MANA in 1973, selecting the title because the word *mana*, a term with sacred import that "carries connotations of power, psychic force and socio-political influence," exists in most Polynesian and many Melanesian languages (Keown 4) and has particular resonance for Indigenous Pacific islanders. Selina Tusitala Marsh develops a "'specifically Polynesian feminist critique' by invoking the conceptual framework of mana tamaʻitaʻi'" combining the word mana (here with connotations of power and respect) with "tamaʻitaʻi', a 'nonexclusive Samoan word used to refer to a woman'" (Keown 10).

nexus of subjectivity" (328). Alexander insists that embodiment is not merely about struggling against the body's commodification as it is "summoned in the service of capital" or appropriated by violent discourses and practices or used to theorize from the point of marginalization, but it is also a source of sacred knowledge (326-329).

Alexander and Alfred each suggest, alongside others, that such ontological and institutional moves are essential if we are to take the beliefs and realities of Onkwehonwe (Alfred 22) and the "primarily working-class women and men seriously" (Alexander 328) the world over. For many people the Sacred, spirit, or mana are not "an embarrassingly unfortunate by-product of tradition" (Alexander 15) but the life force or energy of humans and other-than-humans alike, and an everyday condition of locally specific living, embodiment, and well-being. Reading across these epsistemologies (both trans-Indigenously and in relation to Black Diasporic thought) illustrates how sacred embodiment or spirituality, thought in conjunction with political, economic, and social relations, is a material, bodily, intimate site of restored relationality and therefore survival.

Beyond Territorial Thinking: the Waterways of Kinship

Oceans, rivers, waterways, I argue, are fundamental to understanding kinships as moving, crossing, mobile archives. How and for what reasons we travel across waterways has implications for not only our understandings of

relationality, but also the way we conceive of the physical environments that are an integral part of those relations. At the same time that the kinships examined here resituate the complex relations inhabited by the self, then, they also resituate oceanic and watery relations, and our inherited ideological determinations of those spaces.

The idea that relationality is made, and remade, through travel is not new. Travel writing in the early territorial phase of capitalism, for example, helped to cement a Eurocentric understanding of kinship and subjectivity, resulting in dominant metaphors of oceanic crossing that fail to account for other subjects and modes of travel. Discussing travel writing of the eighteenth-century, Mary Louise Pratt argues that a "Eurocentered planetary consciousness" can be traced back to the creation of natural history—an endeavor enabled by, and inextricable from European economic and political planetary expansion through oceanic travel (Pratt 38). Though this dissertation critiques a Eurocentric understanding of *kinship*, it is instructive to recall some of Pratt's writing here to establish the way that crossing, location, and movement all work to inform planetary relations.

Pratt's study begins in 1735 with the publication of Swedish naturalist Carl Linné's *Systema Naturae* (*The System of Nature*), "a classificatory system designed to categorize all plant forms on the planet, known or unknown to Europeans" (Pratt 15). The Linnean system of naming turned out to be hugely

influential, redefining the relations among the natural world according to European patterns of global unity and order.[18] Significant to this dissertation is the way in which natural history interrupts "existing networks of historical and material relations among people, plants, and animals wherever it applied itself" while displacing or obscuring the European observer as an active agent in this process (Pratt 32). While claiming "no transformative potential whatsoever" (38), the European bourgeois subject of natural history nevertheless asserts a hegemonic vision that differentiates itself from "imperial articulations of conquest, conversion, territorial appropriation, and enslavement" (38) while being imbricated in those very processes through the creation of a "Eurocentered planetary consciousness" (what Spivak might call a Eurocentered "global" consciousness). Many similarities can be observed between Linnaeus's naming and systemization, on the one hand, and the processes of manufacturing, military organization, and firearm production, on the other (35). Pratt argues that these last analogies are especially suggestive if one considers bureaucracy and militarization as "central instruments of empire" both today

[18] Pratt explains: "One by one the planet's life forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order. The (lettered, male, European) eye that held the system could familiarize ('naturalize') new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system. [… N]atural history asserted an urban, lettered, male authority over the whole of the planet; it elaborated a rationalizing, extractive, dissociative understanding which overlaid functional, experiential relations among people, plants, and animals" (31-38).

and at the time of Linné's study (35-36). It becomes important to consider, then, how empire fundamentally has re-ordered, and continues to re-order, the world's kinships systems according to its ostensibly benevolent and neutral Eurocentric terms.[19]

While much scholarship heeds the way oceanic space has been fundamental to the making of modernity and global capitalism, less has focused on how this awareness alters understandings of relationality.[20] Pratt's work, with

[19] Indeed, the Povinelli's "autological subject," as well as the constraints placed on that subject's modes of intimacy "emerged from European Empire as a model and maneuver of domination and exploitation and continue to operate as such" (4, 17).

[20] Throughout the history of European imperial navigation, land claiming, and settlement, nation-states have held tightly to a notion of territorial sovereignty as their "fundamental political and juridical rationale and basis" (Appadurai 337). While nation-states maintain a fidelity to the idea of land-based territoriality, territoriality itself is and has been dependent on a certain kind of exclusive unrestricted oceanic mobility, moving in and out of other sites with relative ease. Nation-state sovereignty and "free" oceanic travel ("free" only in regard to certain male, white subjects, while forced, or "unfree" for indentured labourers, slaves, and prisoners), in other words, work to reinforce one another. Indeed, maritime sovereignty and global hegemony, argues Ian Baucom in *Spectres of the Atlantic*, have for a long time worked in tandem, harkening back to the days of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (189-193). Eventually the ocean itself would become a site for nation-states to exercise their holding power and expand their global reach. Elizabeth DeLoughrey points out that when, after World War II, the U.S. first extended its territorial reach to include two hundred miles out into the ocean, it generated a global "'scramble for the oceans'" in direct violation of the international "freedom of the seas" doctrine (705), first defined by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius in 1609 (Cohen 661). The effects of this claim of ocean territory, as well as the heavy militarization of oceans beginning with World War II and continuing today, has turned the world's waters into waste repositories with large amounts of tritium, plutonium, and uranium (DeLoughrey 707).

its focus on travel narratives, makes this point explicit: travel writing places emphasis on oceanic crossings as a historically specific mode of travel (a means to other worlds, and other natural resources) that have enabled ideologically charged contact zones, where "a 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted *in and by their relations to each other*" (6-7, emphasis mine). Framing kinships as cross-oceanic in this dissertation allows me to return to the oceanic itself as a space of resistant politics and belonging, through a re-envisioning of its dominant metaphors of crossing, contact, and relation.

I look to the project of cross-oceanic kinships as a world-enlarging enterprise, to be sure, but one of an entirely different sort than the one imagined in the making of capitalist modernity. Rather, I argue that these kinships are inclusive of different oceanic crossings and imaginaries (Pacific and Indian ocean crossings, for example), and reflect relations between diverse subjects, some as a result of millennia-old oceanic navigations. [21] Following Pratt's work, I want to think about mobility and movement as an integral part of how kinships and ideological relations are formed; kinship here is an expression

[21] This dissertation contributes to a disruption of the ubiquitous focus on Atlantic crossings to America. Paul Gilroy's influential text *The Black Atlantic* offers important insights about the formation of Black diasporas via Atlantic crossings, but his writing tends to favour "the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch" of the African diaspora (Zeleza 36) and cross-oceanic movement. With the exception of Chapter one, this dissertation examines texts that move away from the ocean (or more specifically, the Atlantic) as perpetually "framed by European desire" and "rendered masculine in intent" (Chambers, "Maritime Criticism" 680).

of moving, changing, adaptive interactions and communities, containing histories of (forced and chosen) migration, spiritual regeneration, embodied relationality, and the local effects of global economic and environmental flows. The kinships I examine in this dissertation focus on traveling subjects who maintain a relational tie to the spaces they traverse and demonstrate the need for alternative oceanic imaginaries that reflect the life-worlds and epistemologies of a diverse range of subjects and crossings.

And what of the actual waterways, rivers, and oceans in-between? The focus on the fact that terrestrial and marine power went hand-in-hand in the making of the modern world (Chambers, "Maritime Criticism" 680) risks perpetuating an understanding of the ocean and our relation to it in strictly Eurocentric, global (following Spivak) terms.[22] Christopher Connery points out that European sea power conceived as a totalizing mono-narrative tends to miss other significant moments of oceanic navigation and maritime presence the world over that attribute different meanings to watery crossings (687)—we need

[22] if territorial sovereignty and "free-going" oceanic mobility have been co-producers in the making of the nation-state, they have also been integral to the making of the sovereign liberal subject. Countless western imaginaries and colonial narratives depict the "prerogative of the liberal subject to self-realisation in the eternal arena of the ocean" (Perera 61). The ability for certain privileged individuals to travel the seas unimpeded, a theme, remarks Margaret Cohen, much celebrated in sea fiction heavily influences dominant oceanic metaphors (661). Transoceanic travel as such represents the ocean as "*aqua nullius*, a space of transit in which the sea is barely present, subsumed by the telos of masculine conquest and adventure" (DeLoughrey 704).

only look to adaptive Indigenous systems of thought that have emerged from the process of navigating shared land and waters to see that ongoing travel "was already the old and ongoing story of incised rock and painted hides; of baskets, pottery, and textiles; of fish hooks, canoes, and projectile points; of carvings, personal adornments, and sacred objects; of all manner of vessels and tools (Allen, "Transnational" 1). Early North American Indigenous writing such as the *awikhiganak* (birchbark scrolls) and wampums, for example, represented the "relationships between people, between places, between humans and nonhumans, between the waterways that joined them" (Brooks 12). Indigenous ways of being in the world emerged from and adapted to engagements with the earth's provisions and waterways. The idea of a body of water "as a blank space to be traversed" (DeLoughrey 703) as Connery points out, is most certainly reflective of European expansion into the world through a "distinct set of orientations toward maritime space"—but this does not account for all oceanic space and maritime presence, but is merely the "world's most ideologically overdetermined version of oceanic space" (687).

Chapter three, in particular, looks at cross-oceanic navigation as a feature of Hawaiian kinship practices (as well as on-island watery flows), noting that this navigation predates the oceanic exploration and travel of Captain Cook when he arrived in Hawaiʻi in 1778. Simultaneously, this chapter is cognizant of Elizabeth DeLoughrey's warnings about the recent Oceanic turn—i.e. that it has the

potential to fail to account for the heavy militarization and territorialization of oceanic waters taking place today (705). Indeed, much attention *is* being paid to the twin processes of colonialism and militarization in Asia and the Pacific (see Shigematsu and Camacho's *Militarized Currents*). Indigenous kinship demands a longer view of (oceanic) history to better understand the militarization of oceanic waters that presently concerns us and to broaden our concept of salt and fresh-water history to include pre-contact travel and navigation. Finally, thinking kinship in relation to moving archives or oceanic, maritime, or riverine crossings suggests that the work of kinship, like the work of crossing, "is never undertaken once and for all" (Alexander 14-15).

I look specifically at cross-oceanic kinships, or kinships that resist a territorially-bound logic of belonging because this focus enables a critique of the ways the values and priorities of Euro/American nations, even in the context of humanitarian intervention and globalization, are largely land-locked and nation-bound, given the necessity of boundaries to imperial, colonial, and humanitarian intentions. Each of the literary texts I study in this dissertation can be thought of as a (resistant) travelogue or crossing, a narrative about human subjects who travel, and with them, kinship and knowledge systems of their own. When speaking of oceanic-crossings or watery flows in the chapters themselves, I am referring to both physical travel across waterways and metaphorical flows and crossings. I present a purposeful mix of the foundational and the fluid, which, in

my view, is essential to thinking with kinships that pose an epistemological challenge, putting pressure on how we conceptualize the material and metaphorical relation between people, places, and spaces.

Literatures of Kinship: Overview of Dissertation

Chapter One begins with the premise that human rights are framed as the idealized expression of equality and freedom between members of a supposed global human family. Eggers's *What Is the What* is about the plight of Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, who journeys across Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya until he is eventually resettled in America as a result of the Second Sudanese Civil War. He is part of a group of refugees known popularly, and problematically, as the "Lost Boys." I am interested in how human rights and their universal humanist assumptions—based on a rhetoric of rescue and promise of membership in a universal human family—position the global North as benevolent and hospitable, and refugees such as Valentino as always in a position of waiting or need. In this chapter I explore the usefulness of alternative, wry, or critical humanist "frames" for figuring relationality and connection between human subjects.

Throughout *What Is the What*, Valentino questions the universal humanist assumptions upon which a rhetoric of rescue is based, particularly its positioning of the U.S. as benevolent and hospitable. Valentino critiques how

humanitarian promises fail to deliver for many of the south Sudanese resettled on American soil, with the promised freedom and equality for all that emerges from conceptions of a universal humanity continually offset by the realities faced by the relocated refugees. Chapter One considers the productive provisionality, then, of a wry or critical humanism: that is, its self-conscious critique of universalism as a site of Euro-American values, and its potential to prompt us to imagine "an intricate mosaic of non-identical kinship" (Brah 8) as an alternative model for the "relations among people in the world" (Abu-Lughod 88). This chapter looks at how *What Is the What* is vigilant in its critique of human rights as a perpetually deferred promise of kinship, and how such a promise, steeped in a rhetoric of global familial inclusion, confines our understanding of subjectivity to those universal humanist assumptions set forth by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At the same time that *What Is the What* concentrates on the disappointments and ironies in the promises of humanitarian narratives, it also risks confining Valentino to the very relations (of need and rescue) it wishes to critique.

What Is the What is jointly conceived, but singly authored. It is narrated by Valentino Achak Deng, written by Dave Eggers in the first-person, based on the true details of Deng's life, but pronounced a work of fiction. Finally, then, I examine how the novel enacts the paradox of a strategically common and non-

identical humanity that features within the narration of the autobiographical fiction itself.

In the U.S., rights discourse frames and informs other discourses of human emancipation, such as what David Eng refers to as queer liberalism, the focus of Chapter Two. In *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, Eng reads the historical emergence of queer liberalism as a celebration of queer belonging in liberal humanist terms predicated on a disavowal or forgetting of race, and on the dissociation of race and sexuality as "coeval and intersecting phenomena" (4). Queer liberalism, as Eng points out, is heralded as a form of social belonging that is *beyond* race precisely at a moment in U.S. history when "race is said to be irrelevant to the law, to political doctrines of the liberal individual, and to U.S. citizens as abstract and equal subjects" (*The Feeling of Kinship* 4-5). Queer liberalism represents a de-radicalization of queer politics because it imagines a queer kinship of sameness and homogeneity, with no regard for how other markers of identity inform experiences and communities of queerness. The advent of colourblindness in the U.S. nation-state, Eng continues, becomes "the *condition of possibility* for the historical emergence of queer freedom as the latest political incarnation of 'the rights of man'" (*The Feeling of Kinship* 4, emphasis mine). Where do we go from here—what other forms of social belonging might we seek out—if the "rights of man" often fall short of the very equality and freedom to which they aspire? Are

resistant forms of kinship and belonging viable alternatives to the project of rights? And why might such a search for kinship alternatives be necessary?

My second chapter thus explores differential queer dynamics in Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt*. Caught having an affair while employed at the home of the governor-general of Saigon, Vietnamese cook, migrant worker, and narrator of *The Book of Salt*, Bình, is cast out of his father's house and natal home, and sets off for the open sea. Bình winds up, of all places, in the Parisian household of famous lesbian couple Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas as live-in cook. Eng, who performs an important critical reading of the book, argues that Truong, in focusing on Bình's queer subjectivity, and by extension, forgotten or lost queer desire, hones in on "that stubborn remainder—a reservoir of insistent, queer desire" that "individuates" Bình through his queer longings (*The Feeling of Kinship* 59). In so doing, Truong is able to rethink the "what-can-be-known" of history by drawing "insistent attention to the epistemological as well as the ontological limits of a liberal humanist tradition that affirms particular subjects while excluding others from historical consideration" (Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship* 59). These are precisely the issues that concern Chapter Two: I perform a reading of Bình that affirms the resistant queer subjectivity that Truong has envisioned for him, and consider how his subjectivity can be read as alternative epistemology or ontology.

While this chapter reads *The Book of Salt* as exemplary of what Eng refers to as queer diasporas and their challenge to conventional structures of kinship, it also considers how communities and kinships are constituted in bodily, sensate terms—through, for example, shared tastes and memories. Bình's taste has "'no canon,'" so to speak, it is an "'aesthetic of attachment'" that has been formed outside—even if profoundly affected by—the purview of state authority or normative ideals of intimacy and kinship.[23] But his tastes are profoundly community-oriented, and they are a reflection of his unique queer, diasporic subjectivity.

The way in which communal and individual desires comingle to inform Bình's sense of queer kinship also informs his relationship to the oceanic. Waterways allude to a central trope of Vietnamese culture. I look at Vietnamese symbolism in conjunction with formative migratory experiences to argue that Truong constructs a subject who can be read through *both* affective forms of national belonging as well as a broader queer diasporic community. I perform this reading of Bình by decentering the subject as a site of sovereign knowledge and coherence, and heeding the co-imbrications of multiple material realities

[23] "Arguing that intimacy is 'more than that which takes place within the purview of institutions, the state, and an ideal of publicness' (Berlant 2000: 4), but that neither is it a romanticized ideal that exists outside of the normalizing power of institutions, Berlant suggests an 'aesthetic of attachment' can be discerned when one pays attention to the 'glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon' (2000: 5)" (Antwi et al., "Postcolonial Intimacies" 4).

within the novel. Salt figures prominently here, referring variously to the salt of Bình's labour, the material deposits of sea and ocean, the intimate trace of love, and the silt of nation and home. Salt is the substance shared by watery bodies (human and oceanic), obligating Bình to the world in complex, and sometimes contradictory ways.

My final chapter considers how we might reframe the struggle for land, language, waters, bodies, and identities across Indigenous lands as a struggle against kinship dispossession. How might this reframing help to affirm that in anti-state movements and battles for Indigenous nationhood, "land is not territory, except in a colonial way of looking at the landscape" (Alfred 206)?[24] Daniel Heath Justice argues that nation-state nationalism is often "dependent upon the erasure of kinship bonds in favor of a code of assimilative patriotism that places, and emphasizes, the militant history of the nation above the specific geographies, genealogical, and spiritual histories of the peoples" ("'Go Away, Water!'" 151). Along these lines, it is the argument of this dissertation that adding the modifier "kinship" to dispossession (the latter often associated

[24] In speaking of an anti-state movement that will attempt to reunite Onkwehonwe to land, Alfred argues: "But one thing, somewhat ironically given the long-term objective of restoring Onkwehonwe connections to *land*, is that the movement will not be tied to *territory*. It will transcend Euroamerican notions of time and place that constrain the recognition of Onkwehonwe identities and rights to those who act in ways and lives in places sanctioned by the state. Land is not territory, except in a colonial way of looking at the landscape" (Alfred 206).

merely with dispossession of land in a strictly economic sense, reflected in the appeal to purely economic incentives when prospecting on Indigenous lands, and an ignorance about what constitutes the sacredness of particular sites) creates a fuller picture of the kind of severed ties of relationality that on-going colonial displacement enacts.[25]

For example, in 1912, the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) was created in response to the nineteenth-century depopulation in Hawaiʻi as a result of colonial dispossession, disease, and poverty (Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood* 2). The HHCA "allotted approximately 200,000 acres of land in small areas across the main islands to be leased for residential, pastoral, and agricultural purposes by eligible 'native Hawaiians'" (2). The HHCA is also responsible for the contemporary legal definition of native Hawaiian as a "'descendent with at least one-half blood quantum of individuals inhabiting the Hawaiian islands prior to 1778'" (2). While early versions of this act were intended to revitalize Kānaka Maoli, the act had the effect of creating a "class of people who could no longer

[25] Even conservation efforts, for instance, frequently constitute acts of violence and kinship dispossession. Conservation efforts fundamentally depend on an appeal to the myth of a *people-less* wilderness, or untouched pristine landscape (and indeed garner much of their support by invoking narratives of discovery and the sanctuary of a transcendent, uninhabited nature) (Dowie 18). To even begin to imagine a wilderness that is without people, one must, of course, first subscribe to a belief in a fundamental, ontological, spiritual divide between human and nonhuman actors and the environment. But more than this, one must also be completely ignorant of the ways in which kinship dispossession of this sort, which severs ties between bodies and lands, interrupts Indigenous kinship systems in profoundly damaging ways.

qualify for the land that constitutes the Hawaiian Home Lands territory" as well as stripping these people of a legal Hawaiian identity (2-3). In the words of Hawaiian poet Naomi Losch, "They not only colonized us, they divided us." Land dispossession and kinship dispossession in Hawaiʻi cannot be thought apart.

Chapter three, then, follows water (salt and fresh) in Hawaiian poet Brandy Nālani McDougall's collection of poetry *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai*. Water is fundamental to Hawaiian kinship cosmologies; I follow its historical pathways, its colonial siphoning, and its eventual return to Indigenous lands in order to illustrate how attending to the salt and sub-surface water in Hawaiʻi connects Hawaiians to ancestral voices. The Ocean is, as Epeli Hau'ofa has compellingly demonstrated, not just home, but part of what defines and connects Pacific Islanders in historic expressions of belonging and kinship, while fresh water plays an integral role in connecting Hawaiians to their ancestral relations, as well as traditional social and economic organization.
Selecting two poems in particular from McDougall's collection—"Hāloanaka" and "On a Routing Slip from the U.S. Postal Service, Pukalani Branch"—I illustrate how they chart the ancestral, cosmological, and historical (oceanic and fresh-water) flows of kinship between the Kānaka Maoli and their near and distant earthly and spiritual relations. The return to Hawaiian kinship cosmologies, as demonstrated above, resists the authority of the settler-nation state by articulating ancestral flows and connections that are before, beyond, and above

histories that privilege humanist, Euro-American colonial first-encounters. I thus argue that a thirst for water—sacred, imaginative, mobile, past, present, underwritten by an assertion of Hawaiian sovereignty, language, and tradition—flows just beneath the surface of McDougall's words.

The ideological and spatial tenure mapped by each text's understanding of kinship can be thought of in terms of how each is situated vis-à-vis their respective literary marketplaces. I begin with literary production for a global marketplace (*What Is the What* and *The Book of Salt* are geared toward metropolitan, Western, Anglophone readers), and end with a very situated text with McDougall's collection of poetry *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Pa'akai*. We have, then, the universalism of rights that purports to include all of humanity and connect diverse geopolitical spaces across oceans and nations in *What Is the What*. In *The Book of Salt*, we have an American liberal queer kinship, embodied in the depiction of the relationship between Stein and Toklas, that though a more particular form of community-making and source of support for the likes of queer subjects Toklas and Stein, still borrows from a Western universalizing discourse of emancipation and so a form of exclusion for migrant, racialized subjects like Bình. And finally, we have Kānaka Maoli genealogies and sovereignty movements, which are quite localized in Hawaiian shores, but nonetheless expansive in their own right, tied to the salt-water coasts of Hawai'i

and other Pacific Islands, and compatible with other Indigenous understandings of kinship.[26]

Thinking these texts in terms of a critical kinship demonstrates, to put it crudely, the narrowing effects of discourses of universalism, and the far-reaching implications of the "utterly present, irreducible, unrepeatable, and incommensurate local" (Schneider 47). It is presumed that the "larger, more worldly view" is the one "to be counted on for peace, liberal civility, and tolerant co-existence" and yet, as Wendy Brown argues, it requires a "reduction of local zeals and loyalties and a corresponding increase in moral and political detachment" (36). The latter (as in the local), on the other hand, reaches out into the world in far more generative ways than a discourse of universalism might ever be able to, demonstrating the necessity of specificity in any sort of project of planetary love or belonging.

Though I invoke terms like planetarity and ecological thinking in this introduction, I do so with caution. Literature, I believe, has the potential to "change the moral universe in which we live" (Haskell 356) by widening circuits

[26] See, for example, the Declaration of Kinship and Cooperation Among the Indigenous Peoples and Nations of North America: http://www.afn.ca/index.php/en/about-afn/national-congress-of-american-indians; Alice Te Punga Somerville's *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania*; and Robert Alexander Innes's book *Elder Brother and the Law of the People: Contemporary Kinship and Cowessess First Nation*.

of global connection and witness.[27] Literature is an imaginative practice, one with activist possibilities, that opens oneself to "the consciousness of another," as Georges Poulet has argued (42). But this opening also shapes and is shaped by publishing markets and trends, and is never entirely above or outside the ideologies it purports to critique.[28] In relation to human rights-based narratives, Benjamin Authers argues, alongside Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, that

> The demands of publishing markets can also be seen as shaping the nature of the rights that are discussed in these works, with Schaffer and Smith noting that they "may lose their local specificity and resonance in translation" (24), and that they frequently privilege individualism and the rights predominant in liberal democracies over more collective conceptions. At the same time, these literary depictions are not wholly delimited by their complicities with the market: […] Smith and Schaffer go on to argue that […] "Given their imbrication in the flows of global capital

[27] Thomas Haskell describes how modern innovation collapses the geographical divide that restricts the reach of our moral and ethical responsibility. Haskell illustrates how technological innovation can alter "the conventional limits within which we feel responsible to act" (356); without physical access to the conditions of life "elsewhere" through changing modes of travel, for instance, we are unable to even imagine the possibility of intervention. In other words, the reach of responsibility and conventions of morality have, since 1750, according to Haskell, been widened to include a broader geopolitical space. One medium with an ever-widening reach of not just sympathy but other modes of connection and witness is, of course, literature.

[28] See Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons*, Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights. Inc.*, and Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*.

> and the commodification of suffering, stories are received and interpreted in unpredictable ways by the audience whose attention they seek and garner." (*This Charter*)

Joseph Slaughter adds that literature has the capacity to "disseminate and naturalize not only the norms of human rights but also the paradoxical practices, prejudices, and exclusions codified in the law" (Slaughter 5). Thus literature can become complicit in perpetuating the "hegemonic 'common sense' of 'liberal-democratic ideology'" (6) by drawing on an "egalitarian imaginary" (5) that is nonetheless exclusionary in its reach. Literature, too, can reinforce these scripts on an affective level, and so can be a particularly potent medium through which liberal ideology is passed on. In the literature I explore, within narratives of displacement, dispossession, and oceanic crossing, liberal ideology is at once reinforced and challenged through compelling moments of love and (be)longing, of reaching out into the world or being called to it. At the same time that these literatures enact a longing for social justice and equality in explicitly political terms, they cannot escape becoming embroiled in liberal logics and aspirations. Embodying the intimacies of human-to-world connection in stunning and contradictory ways, *What Is the What*, *The Book of Salt*, and *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Pa'akai* each straddle a delicate line between self-conscious critique, unwitting alignment of a liberal logic of inclusion, and nuanced but persistent boldness about imagining obligation and kinship otherwise.

While much has been written on what this reaching toward others through literature means for the "we" of this formulation – i.e. how humanitarian life writing, human rights novels, and postcolonial fiction construct a "Western" readership, "driving a constant creation and re-creation of imaginary boundaries between 'we' and 'others'" (Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 7)—this dissertation is less interested in how kinships construct a "we" in relational opposition to an "other" and more interested in kinships that reimagine relationality altogether. Of course, because these literatures all address non-fictional wounds, and sometimes take on the difficult work of speaking for others, they continually risk being appropriative, but they do so in order that we may imaginatively and affectively inhabit zones of (sometimes ineffective) witnessing. It is my belief that this risk is worth taking. The chapters themselves explore both the promise and problematics of cultural production and circulation, demonstrating how the literary marketplace has shaped readerly expectations and created a taste for certain kinds of stories and subjects while also amplifying these problematics.

Kinship as an organizing frame allows us to both examine how state-based forms of legitimation routinely fail, and enables us to maintain a politics and poetics of kinship that does not derive all meaning and consequence from state action. While Chapters Two and Three, focusing on queer and Indigenous kinship respectively, speak to each other in generative ways, they are quite

specific in their formulations of the body and its modes of belonging. Bình does not stand in for *the* diasporic queer subject; his story has powerful implications for our understanding of queer diaspora, yet it is also quite localized and unique. Similarly, McDougall's poetry speaks to *one* Kanaka Maoli genealogy among several that inform Hawaiian identity, and while Hawaiian kinship beliefs extend out across the Pacific to include other Pacific Islanders, they are, of course, specific to regional histories and struggles for sovereignty within settler nation-states.

Kinship Cross-Talk does not signal absolutes or arrivals. I do not attempt to define kinship once and for all, but understand it through a lens of (mutual) obligation. Like Povinelli I am "less interested in the meaning and semantics of love, sociality, and the body, and more interested in their forms, fits, materialities, moorings, anchors, and landings" (Povinelli 7-8). Thinking diverse kinships together means that we are not always comparing the peripheral, colonized spaces to the formation of the centre (or vice versa), but heeding, rather, the complex mobilities of colonization, and the entangled histories of modernity, global capitalism, and nation building, as well as intimate, mobile archives. The literature studied in the following chapters offer compelling insights into what it means to be human subjects ever-related to the world (of spirit, matter, history, and memory) around us.

CHAPTER ONE | HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE AND WRY HUMANISM: DAVE EGGERS'S *WHAT IS THE WHAT*[29]

> Human rights are the proper name of a particular set of promises about a future of social equality and justice, about "the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want," as the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) articulated in 1948. This means that there is always a gap between the imagination of human rights and the state of their practice.
>
> (McClennan and Slaughter 4)

> How, then, are we to answer this call for human rights meaning? Arguably, human rights break their promise when they fail to be bearers of outrage and compassion. It is arguably […] in the "felt" gap between the "now" and the "not yet", in the savage contradiction between human rights promise and human rights betrayal, which the illimitable energy and paradox of human rights returns. For it is in the very experiential realities of the betrayal of the promise of the universal, in the viscerally felt failures of inclusion, in the embodied, lived senses of marginalisation, exclusion or excision that human energies surge back into the space of human rights failure, articulating new words, breathing (literally) a pain that re-awakens human rights as an endless contestation concerning the constitution of the "human family."
>
> (Grear 33-34)

The label "Lost Boys" was applied by the international humanitarian community to the group of southern Sudanese refugees who, fleeing attacks by government-armed Arab militias in southern Sudan during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), were orphaned from their families as young boys and

[29] I want to thank Benjamin Authers, Sally Booth, Tom Couser, Erin Aspenlieder, Leigh Gilmore, Smaro Kamboureli, Allison Mackey, Laurie McNeill, Y-Dang Troeung, Gillian Whitlock, and John Zuern for their generous and thoughtful comments on various versions of this chapter. I am also grateful to the participants of the Life Writing and the Posthuman Symposium, hosted by the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, for their engaged and enthusiastic responses to an earlier version of this work.

resettled to America's "Promised Land" (McKinnon 404).[30] Chronicling the resettlement of nearly four thousand Sudanese refugee boys in the United States, the "Lost Boys" narrative quickly gained wide recognition, recurring in multiple genres and modes of storytelling, including print and televised news media, documentaries, life histories, and autobiographies.

What Is the What, pronounced a novel and an autobiography by its author Dave Eggers, is the life story of one of Sudan's so-called "Lost Boys." Fusing fictional representation with autobiographical and historical detail, Eggers's first-person narrator is written in the voice of Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng.[31] *What Is the What* follows the displacement of Valentino from his homeland in southern Sudan's Marial Bai to his resettlement to America. Valentino begins the narration of his life story bound and gagged in his apartment in Atlanta, Georgia, in the midst of a home robbery. After a few

[30] On July 9, 2011 South Sudan gained independence from Sudan. *What Is the What*'s context and the context this chapter describes refers to Sudan pre-referendum and vote in 2011. When this chapter refers to *southern* Sudan, I am referring to what is now the sovereign state South Sudan, but at the time of the Second Sudanese Civil War was still part of one country, as this is where Eggers's text and the political context it speaks to is grounded. The cultural, political, economic, and religious differences between northern and southern Sudan were the impetus for the separation, and thus this chapter reflects this tension (by referring to *southern* Sudanese refugees, for example) even prior to the country's split.

[31] I use "Valentino" to refer to the composite narrating and narrated "I," the autobiographical narrator that Eggers has created in *What Is the What*, and "Deng" to refer to Valentino Achak Deng, who exists and acts in "real life" and is the author of the book's Preface.

indignant but unsuccessful attempts at resistance, Valentino resigns himself to awaiting rescue. In this lag time, while his fate is uncertain, he relates for his reader an embedded narrative of the multiple displacements and resettlements that he has experienced as a result of the Second Sudanese Civil War. Forced to flee his Dinka village in Marial Bai, journeying by way of a circuitous and harrowing route to this apartment in Georgia, Valentino is part of an American refugee resettlement program. In the U.S. he begins to tell "silent stories" of the hardship he has endured, talking "to the air, the sky, to all the people of the world" (Eggers 29). *What Is the What* is such a silent story. From the state of siege in his home, Valentino begins to describe the inhospitable terrain of Kakuma, "the howling grey desert of northwest Kenya" and "the yellow nothing of Ethiopia" (7), across which he journeyed as a young boy. These are lands that have borne witness to unimaginable cruelty, but that were still, he remarks, preferable to the situation in which he now finds himself: captive and vulnerable in his apartment, again helpless and awaiting rescue. Though he is expressly thankful for the resettlement program that has supported him in the U.S., he is "tired of this country," "tired of the promises" (Eggers 7).

Human rights, as McClennan and Slaughter argue in the epigraph that begins this chapter, constitute a set of promises about a future of social equality and justice. But as promises, human rights do not by virtue of their existence constitute any sort of guarantee; there is always "a gap between the imagination

of human rights and the state of their practice" (4).[32] Anna Grear argues that we are able to identify this gap between promise and practice in the "experiential realities of the betrayal of the promise of the universal, in the viscerally felt failures of inclusion, in the embodied, lived sense of marginalization" (33-34). This chapter will argue that *What Is the What* mobilizes the moral and rhetorical force of the promise as narrative strategy and mode of critique, by depicting the betrayals, exclusions, and sense of marginalization that live in the gap between the promise and practice of rights (and, in particular, rights-based belonging) in Valentino's narrative and Deng's life.

Indeed, *What Is the What* takes place entirely within the gap between the promise and practice of rights. *What Is the What* is a narrative that understands the pleasure it gives by deferring, always just a little while longer, the story of Valentino's displacement. As one reviewer writes:

> What's remarkable is that, given its harrowing subject matter, the book isn't simply horrifying or depressing. The considerable appeal of Valentino's personality and the force of Eggers's talent turn this eyewitness account of a terrible tragedy into a paradoxically pleasurable

[32] See Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, page 17, on the difference between the perlocutionary and illocutionary speech act (the former is where the saying and its consequence are temporally distinct, the latter is where the saying and its effect are one and the same).

> experience. As with any book we enjoy and admire, we keep turning the pages to find out if everything will turn out all right in the end.

What Is the What, in other words, partakes in the ritualization of human rights (Authers, "Utopia"), a ritual that derives its pleasure and utopian appeal not only in "the promises of equality, freedoms and protections" but in "the enduring distance or disjuncture between those promises and people's lived realities" (Hajjar 3). The problem with the pleasure derived from a narrative as such, is not necessarily in the mode of deferral per se, but in how this mode of deferral places the refugee subject in—and confines the refugee subject to—a place of perpetual waiting, in Butler's "nonplace" of recognition ("Kinship" 20).

Valentino's life is continually cast, in Eggers's words, as a "promise that could not be fulfilled" in Africa and the United States. The humanitarian promise, like the refugee subject it constitutes, remains in the space of the "not yet" throughout *What Is the What*. To understand the refugee as beholden to rights-based promises of belonging, is to play into the liberal humanist script that places the refugee in the space of some perpetual and stagnant "not yet," while the reader/citizen, conversely, as a supposedly whole and sovereign subject, has "arrived," or is immune to global violence and its structures of dominance. This chapter thus focuses primarily on how *What Is the What* refuses this narrative by implicating the reader in Valentino's story, and repositioning the humanitarian promise as one of failed kinship and stratified universalism in both Africa and the

U.S.. But I also examine how, at the same time, *What Is the What* reinforces some of the limiting scripts of humanism by eliding the specificities of Valentino's experience of displacement in Africa and the U.S. and potentially submerging other moments of kinship and belonging by instrumentalizing Deng's life story for the purpose of humanitarian critique.

A complex play with genre and voice is one that readers of Eggers, however, have come to expect; as with Eggers's own memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, *What Is the What* is openly suspicious about the ethics of its own storytelling (Dawes 182). Autobiography and human rights narrative each make "ethical claims" that are important for the human subject (Gilmore 92).[33] The former "offers the dynamic material from which to craft authority, offering the presence of the real person, speaking authentically of the value of his or her own life" (92). The latter has been pivotal in humanizing the subject in the face of horrific abuses and violence committed against her. Indeed, in rights discourse, the human subject remains vitally important. Yet both autobiography and human rights have been critiqued for perpetuating and

[33] "Human rights narrative" here refers to any narrative that depicts an absence or violation of human rights, whether or not it adopts the legal language of rights. Often used in the service of human rights claims, "humanitarian narratives" depict situations of violence, oppression, or marginalization that actively elicit the support, understanding, or intervention of others. Slave narratives, which historically were used to humanize the slave in the name of equality or equal rights movements, share many of the generic conventions of humanitarian and human rights narratives.

privileging a narrative of human agency through mastery and self-control. *What Is the What* critiques the problematic, exclusionary, and at times racist scripts of humanism that underpin autobiographical production and humanitarian storytelling. As Valentino narrates his experiences of betrayal, exclusion, and marginalization, he continually questions the universal humanist assumptions upon which a rhetoric of humanitarian rescue and rights-based belonging are based, and in particular, its positioning of the U.S. as benevolent and hospitable.

We might, then, call Eggers's approach as embodying a *wry* humanism: "'wry' in the sense of being critically self-conscious" and remaining "ironically aware" (Coleman, *White Civility* 43)[34] of the assumptions of humanism in autobiographical and humanitarian storytelling, while never fully abandoning the (problematic) promise of equality and freedom achieved through rights-based aspirations for a global human family.[35] *What Is the What* cannot be read simply:

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[34] This line of thought is indebted to Daniel Coleman's coining of the term "wry civility" and his thoughtful suggestion that Eggers, in a parallel move, deploys a "wry" (i.e. "reflexive and critical") engagement with humanitarianism, which does not reject humanism or humanitarianism altogether, but inhabits it critically (if at times problematically). See *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada.*

[35] Where a posthumanist and wry humanist critique overlap is in their "complex and ongoing engagement with the legacies of humanism" (Whitlock, "Post-ing Lives" vi-vii), a "critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism" (Badmington 21-22). Given the uncertain and often painful circumstances out of which the need for humanitarian aid or human rights arise, a *post*humanist inquiry could also be well suited to this study because of its shift in focus from the humanist "study of exemplary selves to an engagement with selves in conditions of alteration and relations of interdependence" (Gilmore 84). But given the range of contexts

the complexities of its production (as a book that combines multiple genres and voices) will be explored here with a view to how its examination of the failures of rights-based belonging contributes to the larger conversation this dissertation stages about "never-easy" relations of kinship. I read Eggers's book as a critical examination of the promises of human rights, beginning with what is arguably its foundational promise: that of membership in a global human family, and the benefits that are meant to accompany such membership. This chapter will thus first establish the idea of the universal human family as central to an understanding of rights-based belonging, and outline what problematic assumptions follow from this understanding when applied to humanitarian narrative. I then demonstrate how *What Is the What* stages a critique of the romance of the human family through Valentino's unfulfilled longings for familial connection in the U.S. I turn next to consider how *What Is the What* intervenes in the "Lost Boys" genre of storytelling in particular, and in humanitarian storytelling more generally. In Eggers's use of a "wry" humanism, he is able to work within humanism by calling attention to the value-laden frames of

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within which posthumanism is taken up—where the concept of the human is explored in relation to, among other things: the hierarchies of speciesism; the ever-shifting modes and boundaries of technology and science; or new modalities of critical materialism (Whitlock, "Post-ing Lives" vi-vii)—I find wry humanism to signal a more direct engagement with the ideals and promises of humanism. See "Post-ing Lives" by Gillian Whitlock for a critical gloss on the many uses of the term posthumanism, especially as they relate to autobiography and life writing.

humanitarian witnessing and promising and their real life effects. I devote considerable attention to how the promise of rights-based belonging—a promise that *What Is the What* very much engages—constructs both Valentino the narrator as a refugee subject, and the reader as a second-person witness to Valentino's story. I maintain throughout that *What Is the What* cannot escape the dynamics it aims to excoriate: the book therefore continually risks appropriation of Deng's life story. While cataloguing all the ironies and disappointments with the promises of humanitarian narratives and rights-based belonging, *What Is the What* risks confining Valentino's subjectivity to the same (liberal humanist) terms of relation it aims to critique. Finally, I consider the complicated role of genre and authorship in its production, and what critical potential does inhere in *What Is the What*'s unusual writing situation. I ask, how might Eggers's and Deng's collaboration offer a model for the difficult and vexed work of an inter-subjective kinship, enacted in their shared (if uneven) production and narration of the text?

Human Rights and the Universal Human Family

Since its adoption in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has centrally framed the international human rights project. This is despite the fact that, as Grear argues, rights treaties, regional human rights regimes, and critiques of the UDHR have proliferated in its wake. Even where

regional rights regimes reflect "radically differing regional and cultural commitments and histories," Grear continues, "it is notable that they all, without exception, explicitly affirm their normative continuity with the iconic UDHR" (21). Moreover, the UDHR places specific emphasis on the protection of the *human family* as foundational to the values it espouses, namely, freedom, justice, and peace. The preamble to the UDHR states that the "recognition of the inherent dignity" and "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Grear argues that it is this aspiration for human familial inclusion, coupled with the explicit rejection of discrimination based on distinctions between humans of any kind that together create an "enduring paradox" (27) of human rights. This paradox consists of:

> the directly contradictory (re-)production, within international human rights law, of an entire range of outsider or marginalised subjectivities. The puzzle of this contradictory state of affairs seems to hinge on a fundamental contradiction inherent in the figuration of the abstract form of human nature deployed as the 'universal' subject of rights. (27)[36]

[36] Article 2 of the UDHR states: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of

In other words, human rights-based kinship or belonging often fails to live up to its aspirations for equality, freedom, and protection for all because human rights discourse universalizes the human subject across vastly different scenarios and contexts.

Despite the problematic assumptions of universalism in rights discourse, the production, circulation, and reception of much humanitarian storytelling reveals an enduring belief in and longing for the concept of a universal humanity that connects us across vast geopolitical and cultural divides. Multiple reviews of *What Is the What*, for example, emphasize the universally "human" dimensions of what is perceived to be an inhuman or inhumane situation: the violence to which the southern Sudanese have been subject and in which they have at times been forced to take part. Reviewers applaud and reinforce any gesture to a universal humanity, and the way Eggers highlights Valentino's "simple humanity above the drama of his terrible situation" (Iweala), crafts a "stubbornly humane history of the Sudanese tragedy" (*Time Out Chicago*), and elucidates "the best and worst of our common humanity" (Prendergast). Their collective emphasis on humanity, the human, and the humane, a characteristic impulse of humanitarian storytelling, attempts to recuperate the "[human] and humanist subject [rendered] unstable" by human rights abuses (Whitlock, "Remediating" 475).

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the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty."

While such a notion of a shared humanity across conflict zones and cultural divides has been crucial to struggles for equality and plays an important part in calls to humanitarian action and intervention, the notion of the human on which it relies is very particular in its derivation and use.

Historically, ideas of universalism have played an integral part in colonialism:

> The idea of a "civilizing mission," of colonialism as a *humanitarian endeavor*, relied on a universal conception of humanity that suggested everyone was in some way part of a shared community. It also relied on a hierarchical understanding of that human community which suggested that European powers and populations had an obligation to assist the colonized in developing their human capacity. (Feldman and Ticktin 8, emphasis mine)

The challenge in appealing to a singular, universal human condition that persists in situations of extreme, dehumanizing violence is not necessarily that such a human condition, with the advent of rights, now explicitly includes all of humanity with the "invocation of terms such as 'everyone' and 'the human family'" (Grear 26). Instead, the challenge is that calls for a universal humanity are usually made without the appropriate reckoning with the distinctions and differences among us. The problem with the inclusivity of human rights, in other

words, is not one of membership, but of how that membership is defined and circumscribed.

To draw uncritically on the concept of a common, universal humanity is to risk glossing over the historical processes and institutional arrangements that have been responsible for its coding. "[F]rom nation-states to flourishing forms of transnational governance and advocacy in a global world," many particular institutions have helped to install "these dialects of universality" as a universal understanding of the human. The human of human rights and humanitarian storytelling is, again, "particular" (Abu-Lughod 87, 85). Rights discourse and humanitarian narrative thus force a crisis in (if and) how we ought to define the human, for to "define the human may be damagingly and unethically prescriptive" (Halliwell and Mousley 9-10). Refusing to define the human, on the other hand, bears its own risk, as we need some "sense of what a human being is in order to know when he or she is being degraded" (9-10).

"I am tired of watching families, visiting families, being at once part and not part of these families:" Familial (Be)longing in *What Is the What*

Though *What Is the What* does not explicitly use the terms *human rights*, or *human family* it nevertheless is both "shaped by the norms of a rights discourse" and the "ideological function of rights […] in affirming certain narratives of nation, the state, and the individual" (Authers, "This Charter" 3, 7),

while challenging those norms and assumptions, particularly with regard to how rights are framed as an equalizing expression of human, familial belonging. When I refer to the promise of human rights, the humanitarian promise, or the promise of rights-based belonging in this chapter, then, I am referencing the embedded promise within rights discourse, derived from its founding document, of not only freedom, justice, and peace, but a universalized, idealized, and global sense of belonging.

What Is the What is largely a story about displacement from home, land, and family, and the arduous journey of thousands of orphaned children to not only survive, but to find the familial belonging promised to them upon resettlement at multiple points in their journey. *What Is the What* is marked by a persistent and unfulfilled longing for rights-based familial inclusion, one that is forestalled by the uneven terms by which Valentino and his U.S. hosts are brought together. Throughout the book, Valentino is aware of himself as a refugee who is caught in difficult relations: "This is the refugee way—not knowing the limits of our hosts' generosity" (Eggers 355). After being released from Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta following the home invasion that begins his story, Valentino seeks shelter and safety, uneasy about going back to his home and the scene of the attack. He contemplates appealing to the Newton family, his benefactors in the U.S., at 4:48 in the morning when he is cleared to return home. The Newtons, an African-American family, first meet Valentino at their

Episcopalian church where he has been asked to give a talk. He describes them as "a prosperous family living in a large and comfortable house, and they opened it to me; they promised me access to all they had" (115). But there are limits, of course, to their hospitality. Remembering the Newton family Christmas card—which included a photograph with Valentino in it, only months after they had met—"warms [Valentino] to the idea" (355) of visiting at this early hour as a member of the family. Yet Valentino's place in the family portrait is, he understands, symbolic. Valentino is exasperated by the terms of his familial relationships, perpetually defined by the giving and receiving of aid: "I am tired of needing help. I need help in Atlanta, I needed help in Ethiopia and Kakuma, and I am tired of it. I am tired of watching families, visiting families, being at once part and not part of these families" (355-356). Valentino is not only subject to the "not yet" as a human subject awaiting recognition, aid, friendship, security, but his familial membership (in global and domestic terms) remains in a perpetual "not yet," *What Is the What* suggests.

Marianne Hirsch discusses the normalizing function—or fiction—of the family photograph, which suggests a degree of "togetherness" and sustains "an imaginary cohesion […] by creating images that real families cannot uphold" (7). While the family photograph "opens the family image and album to the possibility of broad-based identification and affiliation" it can also, simultaneously, "support the antidemocratic aspects of photography, drawing

borders around a circumscribed group and strengthening its power to include and thus to also exclude" (47). If one is admitted into the "particular bourgeois family romance of the family album in the mid- to late-twentieth-century United States, it is to support the ideologies that undergird it, that is, as the desiring other, fantasizing that 'everyone's the same,' and thus supporting the dominant desire to veil inequality and exclusion" (47). Valentino's inclusion in the Newton family photograph, and his subsequent realization of the limits to this act of inclusion, illustrate the risks of the American family romance, when "diversity is reconfigured as familiality" (47). Hirsch goes on to argue that this fiction of familial togetherness is tied to the anthropological, museum, and human rights fantasy of the "family of man," the appeal of which lies in "the global sphere with the aim of revealing points of intersection between familial relation, on the one hand, and cross-racial and cross-national interaction, on the other" (50).

How might the framing discourse surrounding human rights, then, function similarly to the family photograph? As Anna Grear argues, the UDHR and its emphasis on familial inclusion act as the central "frame within which the international human rights project unfolds" (19-20, emphasis mine). She continues:

> much as a family photograph might reveal the unconscious favouritisms or oversights of the parent holding the camera, the framing of international human rights law's universal subject suggests a degree of

> dysfunction or fracture attending the 'human family' evoked by the aspirational text of the UDHR. (18)

The Newtons' family photograph draws attention to the way in which the framing of human rights as a form of aspirational global kinship predicated on the human family obscures its own "unconscious optics" (Hirsh 11). Valentino blames himself for his mistake in thinking it appropriate to visit at that early hour: "when I arrive at their house, the plan seems ridiculous. […] I have lost my head" (Eggers 255). But by taking us through Valentino's thought process from warming himself to the idea of visiting to bringing himself back to reality, so to speak, *What Is the What* draws attention to the family Christmas card as a performance of belonging, as much for ourselves as for others. How human rights are framed—as a kinship between universal subjects, whereby difference is framed as familiality—is here shown to obfuscate the potential dysfunction or performance that attends the human family of rights and their aspirational founding text.

The "Lost Boys" of Humanitarian Narrative

Much has been written about Sudan's "Lost Boys," a name that conjures sympathies for "long-held shared narratives" (Robins 34) in the West of Peter Pan's (ahistorical, timeless) orphaned boys. Newspaper coverage of the "Lost Boys" at the time of their resettlement to Canada, Australia, and the U.S.

valorized American consumer culture, an enduring belief in rugged individualism, and depicted a "devastated and 'backward' Africa" (Robins 30). The label thus "clearly designates their positions as political subjects . . . always 'Lost,' thus in flux, not stable, in transition, and forever orphaned" (McKinnon 404).[37] (To name but one characteristic example, one reporter describes resettled refugee Michael Nyak, who is six feet tall, as a "child-man," and goes on to describe his sheer bemusement at things like coffee makers, refrigerators, table lamps, and toilets [Robins 35].)[38] Such discursive frameworks are both infantilizing and sterile, casting the Dinka as intelligible only through the initial act of displacement, and obscuring other generative engagements with the world the Sudanese refugees come to foster at Kakuma refugee camp and elsewhere.

This paternalistic characterization of the southern Sudanese refugees sits neatly with a concomitant and generous characterization of the U.S. as their benevolent hosts. In response, Christopher Quinn's documentary *God Grew Tired of Us*, and Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk's documentary *Lost Boys of Sudan* reveal a different side to the story of the Sudanese's resettlement. In both

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[37] Mike, from the Dinka clan, one of Sudan's so-called "Lost Boys," remarks: "'What does it mean usually when we say we are 'lost'? When they say a 'Lost Boy' that doesn't mean we are mentally lost, no, this is a media term and it even could be on political basis'" (qtd. in McKinnon 404).

[38] Melinda Robins, in her article "'Lost Boys' and the promised land: US newspaper coverage of Sudanese refugees," performs a textual analysis of top U.S. newspapers that covered the Sudanese "Lost Boys" as they were being resettled in the U.S. after years of civil war and exile.

documentaries, the story of the "Lost Boys" is adopted with irony; the much sought-after "Neverland" of America is revealed to be a promise that remains unfulfilled. Against a humanitarian story of promise and hope, a narrative of failed promises undergirds these stories documenting the life histories of Sudanese refugees. Pressures upon them build as they are placed in menial, low-paying jobs, severely limiting the funds they are able to send home and delaying the start of much sought after educational opportunities. Both documentaries demonstrate how the darkness of their skin signifies "'an other otherness,' or 'refugeeness'" (McKinnon 407) that marks them off from other Black Americans.

Undermining heroic narratives of the U.S. as safe haven and land of equal opportunity, then, is the isolation felt by the "Lost Boys," relocated to a country still deeply uneasy about Black Africans. When Daniel Abol Pach, one of the subjects of *God Grew Tired of Us,* muses about the culture of "I" that pervades the U.S., he comments: "You cannot go to the house of somebody you don't know, though you are all Americans. They call the police and say, 'Why did this guy come to my house? I don't know him.'" The narrator (Nicole Kidman) intervenes here, reminding viewers that such restrictions, such inhibitions about being approached by a stranger (or neighbour, as the case may be), are not simply about a culture more invested in individualism than in community building, but are intimately tied to American racism. Kidman tells us that Pittsburgh merchants filed complaints with local police that the "Lost Boys"

traveled in groups, and the police in turn advised the "Lost Boys" that the merchants were feeling intimidated.

But despite their awareness of the complexity of the Sudanese refugees' experiences in the U.S. with respect to race and refugee status, these documentaries, as with many other "Lost Boys" narratives, adopt a familiar humanitarian liberal framework. They each replicate the stereotype of the African subject moving along a teleological line of development from a situation of extreme violence and unforgiving wilderness to a modern, industrial space, rife with hardship, but also rich with opportunity. These documentaries, as with other accounts of the "Lost Boys," advance, even if unwittingly, the notion that prior to their arrival in the United States the Dinka exist outside of—or are lost to—modern industrial time. Many reports narrow in on the most sensational aspects of the Sudanese refugees' journey across Sub-Saharan Africa (attacks by lions, hyenas, and crocodiles) and the sense of awe and wonderment of the young men as they travel to the U.S. and experience, for the first time, electricity, subway stations, and fast food. In her analysis of journalistic reportage on Sudanese refugees in the U.S., Robins notes: "Every reporter without exception describes how the refugees have never seen a flush toilet, an electric light, a refrigerator, a TV, a computer" (41). Through the image of the lost child in need of rescue, such narratives capitalize on tropes of the timeless

African subject and a privileged Western audience.[39] The social imaginary of humanitarian narrative situates the Sudanese as primitive subjects in need of rescue not just from war and displacement, but from a state of underdevelopment, illustrating the persistence of colonial scripts in humanitarian work.[40]

McClennan and Slaughter point out that the "'humanitarian impulse'" that was widespread in the nineteenth century was used as a rhetorical cover for European imperialism in Africa (3). Civilizing missions illuminate the "paradoxical presence of a humanist, universalist component in the ideological constitution of racism" (Balibar and Wallerstein 59). *What Is the What* does not necessarily refuse the teleological scripts of humanitarianism, but its own sardonic take on the sensationalized details of the Sudanese refugee's journey illustrates an attempt to expose the racist undertones in humanitarian storytelling. Valentino

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[39] Anne McClintock argues, "In the mapping of progress, images of 'archaic' time— that is non-European time—were systematically evoked to identify what was historically new about industrial modernity." According to nineteenth-century colonial tropes, entire continents, like Africa, were envisioned as "anachronistic space . . . a land perpetually out of time in modernity, marooned and historically abandoned" (qtd. in Sheller 2).

[40] As Halliwell and Mousley put it in discussing the critical messiness that accompanies any attempt to define the human: "Given the 'many crimes', writes Alain Finkielfraut *In the Name of Humanity* (1996), that have been 'committed in the name of higher values—in particular, humanity', any humanism which constructs itself as a norm may be highly questionable. One glaring example is the colonialist construction of Western civilisation as the beacon of enlightened humanity, and non-European cultures as primitive and savage. Such a construction is based on a highly prescriptive, normative and very often racist humanism" (9).

draws attention to racism in the U.S., continually casting it in direct comparison to, and importantly against, stories of American "progress." For Valentino, the shock of unabashed racism always proves to be far more unsettling than flush toilets and packaged food:

> But while Sasha told us that in America even the most successful men can have but one wife at once—my father had six—and talked about escalators, indoor plumbing, and the various laws of the land, he did not warn us that I would be told by American teenagers that I should go back to Africa. (Eggers 18)

When Valentino is trapped in his apartment, he wishes for—prefers, even—"the yellow nothing of Ethiopia" to his current predicament and the so-called "Promised Land" of America. *What Is the What* is self-conscious about generic and cultural expectations whereby stories of survivors are "translated, edited, and rewritten to fit the officially sanctioned vocabulary" of aid institutions (Dawes 4–5) and the sympathies and desires of potential listeners. "Sponsors and newspaper reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements," Valentino comments, "and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible" (Eggers 21). Valentino continually plays with these expectations, often leading readers through a process of critique:

> Didn't we all walk across the desert? … Didn't we all eat the hides of hyenas and goats to keep our bellies full? Didn't we all drink our own urine? This last part, of course, is apocryphal, absolutely not true for the vast majority of us, but it impresses people. (21)

Valentino reminds us that appealing to such expectations erases individuated human experience and vulnerability for the sake of a more compelling story—a story that reveals more about readerly expectations than it does about the actual experiences of the vast majority of the Sudanese refugees. The resettlement of the "Lost Boys" may well have been motivated by a desire to help fellow humans in need, but the "Lost Boys" narrative demonstrates how such a desire embeds a hierarchy within the concept of the human that impacts our ability to recognize the lives of others and constitutes its own discursive violence by privileging a Western humanist structure of subjectivity.

In *What Is the What*'s play with genre, Valentino openly reflects on the expectations readers will have as he tells his story, expectations shaped by the protocols of humanitarian narrative in general and the formulation of the "Lost Boys" stories more specifically. How refugees are recognized as subjects is shaped by "complex ways in which different categories of refugees are variously imagined and received by the host country" (Ong 79). The specific formulation of the "Lost Boys" narrative has been critical in shaping Valentino's experiences and

expectations, and the failed promise of the humanitarian activism (private and institutional) upon which he depends.

Proliferating Promises and the Refugee Subject

What Is the What is shaped according to two trajectories that are temporally and geographically remote, yet linked through the theme of failed promise. The first is the narrative that unfolds in the present tense of *What Is the What*, which begins with the attack in Valentino's apartment and illustrates the failed promise of the American institutions of policing and medical care. Valentino is abandoned to his fate in downtown Atlanta, and again he walks his way to safety. This framing narrative contains the embedded and retrospective account of his experience as a refugee, walking from one camp to another, across the landscapes of Sudan, Ethiopia, and the borderlands of Kenya.

What I am interested in here is how Eggers exposes the limits of promises of belonging and hospitality to which refugees and other marginalized subjects are susceptible within the so-called "universal" discourse of human rights and familial inclusion, as well as how he mobilizes the temporal and discursive aspects of promise-making to both drive the narrative and open up multiple moments of humanitarian critique. The promise is structurally and thematically essential, embodying the idealism of the framing discourse of rights (as aspirational and shared), while always deferring completion. But the refugee's

subject position as such—as one who can only be subject to promises but cannot make any of his own—is part of a problematic humanist production of the subject that this book both reinforces and deconstructs. Replicating the notion of the failed promise that marks his journey across Africa in the U.S., *What Is the What* casts Valentino time and again as the recipient of limited inclusion and tolerance, while also collapsing important differences between these contexts.

At multiple points in his life narrative, Valentino gratefully receives promises of aid (Eggers 250, 347), of safety and security (403), of abundance (196), of a better life (360), of education (471), of resettlement (510), of success in America (529), of belonging (355), and so on, illustrating both the outpouring of support or hope offered to him and the extent to which the rhetoric of the promise becomes a ritualized response to human rights abuses (Authers, "Utopia"). For Valentino, the promise of resettlement began as a rumour that the "Lost Boys"—some, all, it wasn't clear—would be resettled to America, spreading quickly and with little regard for fact, but with all the hope of such a seemingly bizarre and miraculous promise. Eventually Valentino learned that

> The United States planned to resettle hundreds, perhaps thousands of the young men at Kakuma. It became the sole occupying thought in my mind. Resettlement was known to happen to refugees from camps like ours, but the conditions were always extreme and rare, reserved for well-known political dissidents, victims of rape, others whose safety was

> continually threatened. But it seemed that this undertaking would be something very different, a plan whereby most or all of us unaccompanied minors would be taken and brought across the ocean to America. It was the most bizarre idea I had ever heard. (Eggers 482)

As rumour was replaced by fact, the promise of resettlement grew in significance and possibility. But Valentino, like many others, with very little information as to the specifics of the plan for resettlement, had to settle into waiting, guessing, not knowing what would come next, making his "day-to-day existence difficult" (483), at first for weeks, and eventually months. Finally, of course, Valentino is chosen to be "brought across the ocean to America" (482)—an oceanic crossing which, though laden in the benevolent rhetoric of humanitarian rescue, has already taken shape in Eggers's narrative as an experience of confusion and misinformation, from elders expressing their dissent, worried that the younger generation will forget their culture, to the arduous experience of writing his autobiography for the UNHCR as part of a screening process.

Paul Gilroy, Ian Baucom, and others have demonstrated how the making of an economic, political, philosophical, and, for M. Jacqui Alexander, secular modernity has relied on the subordination or enslavement of Blacks, who were forcibly transported across the Atlantic through the Middle Passage. Baucom illustrates that African displacement (and in particular the trans-Atlantic slave trade) licensed the global spread of modern finance capital, upon which

humanitarian appeals for aid rely (59). Further, Baucom contends that the rhetoric of human rights

> conceals the twin epistemological grounding of rights discourse and sovereign reason in a speculative idealization and regulation of humanity as bare life. The trouble with human rights discourse is not that it fails to indict sovereign violence but that its language of indictment, its grammar of human understanding, is borrowed from (and implies the universal unquestionability of) the epistemological register and human understanding on which both democratic and totalitarian forms of sovereignty draw. (192)

By continually unsettling this promise of America's Promised Land, *What Is the What* establishes displacement and resettlement as a part of an ambivalent and unequal economy of exchange in the global arena. Thinking through the oceanic crossings occasioned by humanitarian efforts in relation to both a history of modern finance capital and multiple African diasporas, in other words, invites a critical reading of the benevolent representation of cross-oceanic humanitarian movement. While a narrative of well-intentioned rescue might highlight the remarkable opportunity afforded by this kind of ocean-crossing, the history of the Middle Passage suggests that often the movement of subaltern transnational subjects is never that simple, often beginning as an experience of disorientation

and loss that relies on the same discourse and capital with deep roots in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[41]

Human rights articulate a specific set of promises for a better life: freedom of speech and belief, freedom from fear and want, and freedom from inequality. But how refugees are constituted through these promises has much to do with the complex interplay between an unequal economy of global exchange, and the particular "system of refugee resettlement" to which they are subject and how that system "functions to constitute refugees […] as proper subjects in relation to the state" (McKinnon). The language of rights, divorced from its legal-juridical context, is, in the U.S., increasingly subsumed by a language of desire and indulgence, of an "entitlement to enjoy the fruits of free markets" (McClennan and Slaughter 2). Belonging in the U.S., then, is recognized through "democratic, racial, and market norms" whereby citizenship is more and

[41] But we also ought to be aware, as Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Meg Samuelson point out, that there are other, underplayed African diasporas that need to be heeded, including intra-African diasporas (in *What Is the What*, between African nation-states Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia) which indeed comprise a significant portion of the Sudanese's displacement as they walk from one country to the next *within* Africa. Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic has received much critical attention for its privileging of the Atlantic in conceptions of Black or African diaspora. Meg Samuelson, for example, examines the role of South Africa's "other ocean" (i.e. the Indian Ocean) in "producing a poetics of (un)settlement" for South African's Indian indentured workers, "eschewing a diasporic discourse articulating allegiance to an (imagined) homeland" (273). Likewise, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza historicizes and pluralizes the African diasporas to include historical and contemporary dispersals within Africa and from Africa to all parts of the globe, rather than focusing exclusively on the Atlantic, Anglophone, or American branch of the African diaspora (36).

more "defined as the civic duty of the individual to reduce his or her burden on society, and instead to build up his or her own human capital—in other words, to 'be an entrepreneur of her/himself'" (Ong 15, 12). And just as "there is always a gap between the imagination of human rights and the state of their practice" (McClennan and Slaughter 4), so too do American visions of equality and a better life promise more than they can deliver, tied as they are to the inequities and empty promises of materialism that have emerged from the neoliberal state and free-market capitalism. That rights discourse is particularly amenable to the language of capitalism is unsurprising given its humanist emphasis on the acquisition of freedom and success through hard work and accumulation of goods, and given the nature of the promise itself, which "intrinsically demands an indefinite postponement of its fulfillment" (Miller 33).[42] *What Is the What* confirms that the U.S.'s founding promises of freedom and equality, success and influence, are promised, but not available, to all. From the very start, *What Is the What* lays out the stakes of the failed American promise, of the "cruelly optimistic fantasies that are 'normatively on offer for "the good life", like […]

[42] Drawing on the work of Max Weber, Susie O'Brien points out that the "rhetorical structure of the promise, which foretells the translation through work, faith, and God's grace of present hardship into future plenitude, chaos into meaning, displacement into homecoming, was ripe for secular conversion into the doctrine of free-market capitalism, in which disciplined labour holds out its own vision of plenitude" (3).

national culture, or upward mobility'" (Berlant and Prosser qtd. In Antwi et al., "Postcolonial" 5) for marginalized subjects like Valentino:

> I am thankful for it, yes, I have cherished many aspects of it for the three years I have been here, but I am tired of the promises. I came here, four thousand of us came here, contemplating and expecting quiet. Peace and college and safety. We expected a land without war and, I suppose, a land without misery. We were giddy and impatient. We wanted it all immediately—homes, families, college, the ability to send money home, advanced degrees, and finally some influence. But for most of us, the slowness of our transition—after five years I still do not have the necessary credits to apply to a four-year college—has wrought chaos. […] Too many have fallen, too many feel they have failed. The pressures upon us, the promises we cannot keep with ourselves—these things are making monsters of too many of us. (Eggers 7-8)

Gaining access to the promise of plenitude has not always ended well for the Sudanese living in the U.S., because the universal yet national language upon which such promises are founded is premised on exclusion.[43] Refugees often negotiate the "tenuousness of refugee resettlement" through "shared memory

[43] Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* reminds us that European humanism's emphasis on universal rights "is often a smoke screen to hide a 'racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters'" (Halliwell and Mousley 54).

and identity—if only to maintain a cohesive sense of self and belonging amongst the discursive messages that always, already label refugees as fearful, stateless subjects" (McKinnon 400). Having walked together, survived, suffered, and lost together, and now faced with the challenges of living in America together, the ties formed between Sudanese refugees are both sustaining—"we rely on each other for virtually everything," Valentino comments (16)—and fraught, marked by tribalism and ethnic divisions (between the Nuer, Dinka, Fur, and Nubians) that have resurfaced as a result of unequal opportunities afforded among the Sudanese within the U.S.. In other words, the pressures and promises of universal belonging also profoundly impact the Sudanese diaspora that has emerged as a source of support in the U.S..

The United States, created through acts of exclusion, continues to repeat its founding myths as its promises, which as *What Is the What* demonstrates, are not only failing the Sudanese and other immigrants, but an increasing number of U.S. citizens as well. Translation into the dialects of universal humanity—a language that claims to represent the whole of humanity across multiple geographical and epistemological positions—becomes increasingly difficult for both Valentino and for America's own citizens. The undeliverable promises of equality for America's vulnerable subjects, then, extend to the circumstances of other characters in the book as well. Michael, the child who holds Valentino hostage in his apartment, becomes a fellow victim in the course of *What Is the*

What. "I know everything one can know about the wasting of youth, about the ways boys can be used," Valentino narrates, speaking to the many ways in which war uses up young men (Eggers 47). An accomplice to the home invasion, Michael is another "lost boy" of the narrative and of the neoliberal state, a lost boy of America,[44] caught up in the criminal dealings of his parents and the limited opportunities afforded him in U.S. society.

*What Is the Wha*t refuses any neat separations, collapsing the geographical and temporal distance that locates Africa and the U.S., the refugee and the citizen, in separate spheres, but demonstrates their complex global entanglements. At the same time, however, there is risk in mapping the frame story that takes place in the U.S. onto Valentino's experiences with civil war in Africa: one might conflate the time waiting for aid or the living death that is starvation, in which the passing of time increases the death toll, with the time waiting in America to secure good paying jobs, go to school, and so on. Valentino's experiences of suffering and destitution in Africa and the United States are in many ways incommensurate, and *What Is the What*, to a certain extent, collapses important differences through the theme of the failed promise.

[44] The idea that *What Is the What* deconstructs the category of the victim through the creation of a lost boy in America is indebted to Sidonie Smith's insightful and generous comments in response to a working draft of this paper presented at the Life Writing and the Posthuman Symposium, held at the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa.

We might argue that Eggers uses the different trajectories of *What Is the What*'s narrative, however, to draw parallels between these two locations so that we may reflect upon the violence done to the subject who is dependent upon hospitality and at risk of being perpetually unrecognizable to others. Promise and its failure here both reflect the utopian vision of the human rights family and lay bare the uncertainty that is embodied by the refugee in the process of forced migration and resettlement. On his way toward the Kenyan border, chased out of Ethiopia by the Eritreans and the Anyuak after the overthrow of Ethiopian President Mengistu, Valentino is without hope.[45] The most difficult stretch of his migration is the last stage, as he journeys from the camp at Pinyudo, Ethiopia, to Kakuma, in Kenya:

> My life in Pinyudo worsened as the years went on, and Achor Achor, I feared, was dead. And now this, walking to Kenya, *where there were no promises*. . . . After my walk to Kenya, when Maria found me on the road wanting to be lifted back to God, I spent many months thinking about why I should have been born at all. It was a grave mistake, it seemed, *a promise that could not be fulfilled*. (Eggers 360, 370, emphasis mine)

[45] As Valentino remembers this particularly difficult stretch, "I had no dreams of bowls of oranges. I knew that the world was the same everywhere, that there were only inconsequential variations between the suffering in one place and another" (Eggers 349). When there are no promises—divine, state, or otherwise sanctioned—he comes closest to resignation.

Valentino moves from "war, famine, and refugee camps to another, less obvious, state of 'war' and abandonment: the neoliberal state that turns against its most vulnerable residents" (Mackey 29). An annual report to U.S. Congress by the Office of Refugee Resettlement tells us that the "Lost Boys" are recognized as "one of the most successful refugee resettlement programs in U.S. history" in terms of employment rates, fluency in English, and attendance in school (McKinnon 398). And yet, the paradoxical role played by the promise of a better life in *What Is the What* is that it has, despite the program's notable successes, contributed to feelings of extreme isolation and loneliness, and even, to paraphrase Valentino, the dehumanization of the self: "The pressures upon us, the promises we cannot keep with ourselves—these things are making monsters of too many of us" (Eggers 7-8).

If promises of rights-based belonging (increasingly subsumed by the discourse of capital) are based on a dialect of universalism, what do such dialects mean for the Sudanese refugees living in the U.S., who are, according to its narrative of human development, never quite there, always waiting, forever on the receiving end of humanitarian promises? *What Is the What* draws attention to how subjects like Valentino are constituted by the promises of others, "in a continual state of transition, never quite intelligible as fully citizen, fully subject, though subjugated to these processes all the same" (McKinnon 398). Valentino challenges the "normative conditions" that shape the recognizability of human

life (Butler, *Frames* 4), insisting that in the harsh deserts and refugee camps there is life, movement, creation. When held captive in his apartment, under the supervision of Michael, Valentino narrates, silently:

> TV Boy, there was life in these villages! There is life! This was a settlement of about fifteen thousand souls, though it wouldn't look like it to you. If you saw pictures of this village, pictures taken from a plane passing overhead, you would gasp at the seeming dearth of movement, of human settlements. Much of the land is scorched, but southern Sudan is no limitless desert. This is a land of forests and jungles, of rivers and swamps, of hundreds of tribes, thousands of clans, millions of people. (Eggers 47)

Alongside the Dinka, other tribes, clans, and people, forests, rivers, and swamps, pockets of life have both preceded and sprung up after the arrival of the Sudanese. Despite the real and perceived stagnation of waiting, people are, even in the most dire of circumstances, Valentino reminds us, capable of "the creation of life from nothing" (319), living lives "that resembled the lives of other human beings, in that we ate and talked and laughed and grew" (371).[46] Recognition of

[46] Shortly after reading *What Is the What*, I was perusing the stacks of my university library for a book on the "Lost Boys" of Sudan when I happened to meet, by mere chance, two young Sudanese men who had been resettled from Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya to Guelph. As southern Sudanese immigrants to Canada, I imagined that it was possible these two had spent a considerable portion of their lives living in Kakuma, the temporary home to some 40,000

marginalized subjects as human subjects is crucial, and *What Is the What* prompts us to question the frames of recognition that shape humanitarian witnessing, and to consider whether they further augment the ethical difficulties we encounter in narrating—and recognizing—the lives of others and the complex terms of their existence.

The Promise in Second-Person

In reflecting on the implication of the second person witness in humanitarian narrative, Gillian Whitlock argues that characteristically,

> interracial autobiographical acts produce a painful and profound mirroring effect in the second person who attends them. For this reason it is their readers, not the autobiographical subjects, who are unreliable,

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Sudanese who have been forcibly displaced over the past twenty-five years. Indeed, only minutes into the conversation one of the young men, Malith, offered to share some of the research he had done while living in Kakuma refugee camp on what the relative peace in Southern Sudan might mean for the livelihood of the Turkana: the local population with which the camp regularly trades. While awaiting resettlement, he researched alternative sources of livelihood should the trade base of the Turkana be diminished were the Sudanese refugees, who comprised the majority of the camp's population, to be repatriated (Chol). It is uncanny and somewhat unsettling to then return to my home and presume to write about the Southern Sudanese refugee condition that has been constituted and framed by various international, institutional forces and lived out in all its embodied particularities by men such as these. Our encounter disrupts and unsettles any kind of easy interdependency between human subjects who are differently positioned, as we are, on axes of power and privilege; more specifically, our encounter is a reversal of the terms by which Western subjects and refugees meet, i.e. through the unidirectional giving of aid.

> and who must be told and reminded repeatedly to respond from the heart. ("In the Second Person" 209)

What Is the What produces one such mirroring effect by alerting the reader to the fragile contract of bearing witness through promise-making, drawing attention to its potential for hope and for failure, and to the promise's relation to "appropriate ethical responsiveness" (205). A longing for connection and response drives Valentino's first-person narration as he "continually attempts to make contact with other people through storytelling" (Mackey 27). His silent address to others is made to a "second-person 'you' [that] wanders from person to person, restlessly searching for someone who will finally listen [and I would add, respond] to his story" (28). *What Is the What* engages the "you" of its narration, then, as "the implicated reader": the reader who "comes to the story with particular presumptions, presentiments, and prejudices about development, colonialism […] social, racial, and gender relations, as well as a general bourgeois humanitarian and Bildungsroman literary sensibility" (Slaughter 230-231). In particular, the reader—the second person "you"—becomes, throughout the course of the book, aligned again and again with the ability to promise.

What Is the What, then, prompts us to ask: what vision of the self is implied by the kinds of promises that arise from bearing witness to suffering others in humanitarian life narrative? Who is permitted to promise? What kind

of kinship is possible when we are tied to hierarchical structures of promising? A humanist emphasis on sovereignty is exercised in the promise of humanitarian activism and intervention, and humanitarian narrative often reflects back to its readers a version of the Western subject as sovereign and benevolent. *What Is the What*, however, denies the reader the pleasure of the promise and the appeal of this vision of the self as a free agent by aligning the reader with the compassionate but ineffective witness who takes the form of the second-person "you" throughout the text. Valentino calls on the vision that his readers might have of themselves as members of a "progressive-minded international consortium" (Eggers 441) to ask them to question the ethics and relational structures of promises, even those delivered with the best of intentions, that inform humanitarian witnessing.

Mobilizing the promise as *What Is the What* does—i.e. to signal more than just the hope or aspirations of human rights, but to draw out its implications for our understandings of the self in unequal kinships with others—implies some kind of reciprocal, if highly uneven, *relation*. In Mackey's engagement with *What Is the What*, she argues that the "enactment of a relational narrative […] engages the implicated reader in order to expose the limits of universal discourse" (30). We can expand the insightful work of Mackey here to think of the relational narrative of *What Is the What* as performing a critique of rights-based belonging by explicitly placing the reader in the position

to make—and break—promises. By revisiting the generic scripts of humanitarian storytelling and human rights literacy to enable what Whitlock calls, borrowing from Felman and Laub, a "'witnessing [of] the self'" that operates in addition to a witnessing of the trauma of the autobiographical subject of humanitarian storytelling ("In the Second Person" 199), Eggers reminds readers that promises—as with kinships—implicate and put into relation multiple actors. In Eggers's critique of the extent to which the life of the refugee is in the hands of those who have the faculty to promise, then, *What Is the What* asks us to consider the ways in which the "promise" of aid (by states and humanitarian actors) engages in acts of witness in humanist terms. As readers we are also prompted to consider how and in what ways human subjects are constructed through that relational narrative or promise (universally, hierarchically, differentially, etc.).

Eggers introduces a number of addresses for Valentino's narrative as a way of establishing his implicated reader as someone with the ability to promise. For example, Valentino indirectly addresses the reader as an accomplice to his suffering through his (silent) address to the nurse Julian as he awaits treatment at Piedmont hospital in Atlanta following the home robbery:

> Does this interest you, Julian? You seem to be well informed and of empathetic nature, though your compassion surely has a limit. You hear of my story of being attacked in my own home, and you shake my hand

> and look into my eyes and *promise* treatment to me, but then I wait. We wait for someone, perhaps doctors behind curtains or doors, perhaps bureaucrats in unseen offices, to decide when and how I will receive attention. You wear a uniform and have worked at a hospital for some time; I would accept treatment from you, even if you were unsure. But you sit and think you can do nothing. (Eggers 250, emphasis mine)

Valentino draws attention to the unreliability of the compassionate witness (i.e. the reader) and her capacity to act. At the same time, the feeling of helplessness Valentino habitually feels as a result of his reliance on others is made familiar to the reader through both the feeling of not knowing how to act, as well as an exceptional situation that is closer to home: the emergency ward of a hospital. Most of us accept the conditions of an emergency ward as impossible to change: at least in the immediate present, we give in to its terms and protocols for treatment and response, and we resign ourselves to the fact we are going to wait for an indefinite, unspecified amount of time. But most of us cannot properly imagine what it would be like to be in a liminal space of emergency indefinitely. When Valentino arrives at the refugee camp at Pochalla, his friend Achor Achor looks around at the injured and helpless and remarks "I really don't want to be one of these people […] Not forever" (Eggers 345). Eggers's strategy here might be to place the reader in an affective zone similar to the (forced) helplessness

Valentino experiences time and again, drawing attention to the limits of institutional and individual responses to need.

What Is the What also questions those foundational assumptions that underpin the promise of a liberal humanist kinship—an aspirational relationship between distant others that does not, or perhaps cannot, live up to its promise of mutuality, even in the seemingly benevolent context of humanitarian aid and intervention. As Mackey argues, while "Valentino's repeated expressions of gratitude toward his benefactors, as well has his continued perplexity regarding the 'act of generosity' of the U.S. in accepting refugees like him… appear on the surface to confirm self-congratulatory first world sentiments of humanitarian benevolence," *What Is the What* also defamiliarizes and displaces the "assumed priority and goodness of the values" its implicated readers are presumed to hold (31). W*hat Is the What* breaks down these values, in part, by deconstructing the hierarchical relations that structure promise-making and acts of (conditional) hospitality. Indeed, *What Is the What* critiques the possibility of an idealized, unconditional hospitality, pointing to "the disjunction between the values espoused by the [international human rights] community and the actual practices that occur" (Schaffer and Smith 3). Promises of hospitality are conditional for the refugee, for though there are risks on both sides, they are often weighted unevenly in favour of the host, and they are always subject to

elaborate protocols and responsibility.[47] Reflecting on the conditions at Kakuma refugee camp, Valentino remarks:

> Do not think it was lost on us that the Kenyans, and every international body that monitors or provides for the displaced, customarily place their refugees in the least desirable regions on earth. There we become utterly dependent—unable to grow our own food, to tend our own livestock, to live in any sustainable way. I do not judge the UNHCR or any nation that takes in the nationless, but I do pose the question. (Eggers 454)

Eggers constructs Valentino as a subject who is ever-grateful for, and yet ever-critical of the aid given to those who are, as he rightly puts it, made to be utterly dependent.

Inter-Subjective Authorship as Negotiated Kinship

We learn from the book's Preface, a paratext written by Deng, that *What Is the What* began as a series of stories shared between him and Eggers over the

[47] A Derridean ethics of hospitality, on the other hand, posits that he who is "wholly other" is welcomed unconditionally. Derrida differentiates between *conditional* and *unconditional* hospitality: "'Pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality *itself*, opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other. I would call this a hospitality of *visitation* rather than *invitation*. The visit might actually be very dangerous, and we must not ignore this fact, but would a hospitality without risk, a hospitality backed by certain assurances, a hospitality protected by an immune system against the wholly other, be true hospitality?" (qtd. in Borradori 162).

course of many years—a kind of oral history that, through the illumination of one life, serves "as an example of [the] atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed against its own people" (Deng xiv).[48] "It should be known to readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place," Deng writes,

> and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What Is the What* a novel. I could not, for example, recount some conversations that took place seventeen years ago. However it should be noted that all of the major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages. (xiv).

Deng's Preface inverts the convention of a much older tradition of humanitarian and human rights narrative by establishing Deng, and not Eggers, as the authoritative voice verifying the book's claims to autobiographical truth. Deng solidifies the narrative's "distinctive relationship to the referential world in its temporality" (Smith and Watson 18), while recognizing the problems of finding a believing witness—one of the reasons the narrative is told in the form of a novel and through a collaborative process of authorship. Deng and Eggers both sustain the value of its uneasy production (and a humanist language of rights-based

[48] In 2004 Dave Eggers cofounded *Voice of Witness*, "a series of books that use oral history to illuminate human rights crises around the world" ("About Dave Eggers").

global belonging) as an important medium for raising funds and awareness, and as a mode of witness for the very real atrocities depicted therein.

We might think of Valentino's autobiography as a "bicultural composite composition" (Krupat 3) whereby the "I" who narrates and is narrated is formed of at least two distinct voices—Deng's and Eggers's—as well as the usual confluence of voices and subject positions across different but overlapping histories, cultures, and geopolitical spaces that create a narrating and narrated "I" (Smith and Watson 63–102).[49] It is important to note the effect of this "bicultural composite composition" for Dave Eggers as a white, male, American celebrity author. (The effects of this narration on how Deng becomes construed through Valentino the narrator, have, hopefully, been made clear throughout). As much as *What Is the What* is a critically minded project for Eggers, it is also a way of accruing cultural capital; *What Is the What* is a book that is widely hailed for its staggering historical breadth and emotional depth, and the ease with which Eggers "humanizes" the events of the Second Sudanese Civil War (Donahue). Further, Deng and Valentino were brought together, in effect, by a

[49] This composite "I" derives its material from Deng's and Eggers's already "multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous" voices (Smith and Watson 75). Deng's recollection and oral recitation of his life to Eggers, and Eggers's subsequent transcribing and transforming of the words into story, are inflected by, among many other influences, the voices that have impacted Deng throughout his life, the narrative intention that drives Deng to tell his story, the retrospective nature of autobiographical speaking, and the shattering experience of trauma—all transformed by Eggers's imaginative and ideological rendering of Deng's sense of his self and his life.

highly unequal geopolitical distribution of "corporeal vulnerability" (Butler, *Precarious* 28-32) and the constitutive flows of globalization. The Dinka clans constitute a particularly "abject class of global travellers" (Nyers, "Taking rights" 48), having traveled to, among other places, Pinyudo refugee camp in Ethiopia; Khartoum, Sudan's capital city; SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army) training camps throughout Southern Sudan; Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya; and for Deng, as for many others, cities and university towns across the global North.

But while our encounters with marginalized others are often determined by unequal relations of geopolitical mobility, it is important to resist imbuing such dynamics with essentialist or reductive value. I want to suggest in these final remarks that *What Is the What*—however imperfectly—enacts an inter-subjective kinship through the production and narration of the book itself. This is not exactly the "ethical space" Willie Ermine speaks of—at least not in the sense that the main text of *What Is the What* presents a singular voice and so makes it impossible to sort out what "belongs" to Deng's life and what to Eggers's imagination (and therefore does not explicitly inhabit a space of difference in the way Ermine describes). But in many ways the book cannot be read in isolation from the "paratextual" elements that inform it and its reception (the book's preface by Valentino, book reviews, radio interviews, reading guides, the foundation and website mentioned at the end of the book, and so on), which often feature the collaborative work of Eggers and Deng within and beyond the

book.[50] And though we cannot afford to lose sight of the physical and psychic ravages that the Sudanese have experienced as a result of multiple displacements, in my discussion of how the "Lost Boys" are interpellated as refugees by the flimsy promises of others, and the promises they make to themselves, I want to end with the possibility of an inter-subjective kinship to come.

Unfulfilled Promises and a Not-Yet Ethic of Kinship

> Critical accounts of human rights underline the sense in which human rights are always […] 'floating signifiers': their promise constantly draws the human imagination forwards, but is ever-deferred, always 'not yet'. Meanwhile, their meaning, as critical accounts stress, remains contestable, semantically unsettled, radically porous, open to co-option, colonisation and, importantly, never, ever above the interplay of power relations.
>
> (Grear 25-26)

What Is the What begins and concludes in the U.S. While the reader desires an end to Valentino's suffering, it is an end that ultimately proves to be undeliverable. By virtue of the circular nature of the narrative whose layering

[50] Gillian Whitlock speaks to the "textual cultures" created by the "paratextual" elements of autobiography, which include "the covers, introductions, acknowledgments, dedications, blurbs [or the "peritext"]" as well as the "elements outside of the bound volume: interviews, correspondence, reviews, commentaries, and so on [or the "epitext"]"(14). Paratextual elements help us with the following questions: "Who is getting to speak autobiographically, how and why? To what effect? What becomes a best-seller, and what is remaindered or republished? How do these elicit our attention? What kinds of engagement come into play? How do these appeal to readers, and what kind of consumers are we asked to become" (*Soft Weapons* 14).

denies the teleology and closure that marks the postcolonial bildungsroman, the book exposes the reader to the difficulties of life in the U.S. (the supposed end-point in narratives of humanitarian rescue) from the very start. *What Is the What* thus "continually lure[s] the reader into a feeling of hope that has already been crushed" (Dawes 205). We might read this refusal of narrative fulfillment as an ethical move, a critique of "an Enlightenment concept of unfinishedness (as teleological potential) . . . [that explores the possibility of] something more radically relational and hopeful" (Mackey 263). *What Is the What* asks us to contemplate the ethical implications of the failed promise, of the anti-humanitarian narrative or "dissensual Bildungsroman" that narrates the "failure of social integration" (Slaughter 315), and "what it might mean when 'the generic and human rights promise of free and full human personality development remains unfulfilled'" (Slaughter, qtd. in Mackey 263). Might human rights as kinship, when viewed through a lens of wry humanism, signal not a shared human essence but merely the shared inheritances and legacies of humanism? And how, then, might we move from kinship as sameness, to kinship as intersubjectivity (where "inter-" signals relation between and among discrete subjectivities, while insisting that our lives are complexly entangled in one another's, dependent on one another, but always struggling to maintain non-possessive, non-hierarchical relations)? How might such a move prompt us to imagine beyond the confines of universalism to consider "an intricate mosaic of

nonidentical kinship" (Brah 8) as an alternative model for global familial relations?

What Is the What, as a final note, does not entirely move away from the notion of a universal humanity. The book begins with a Preface written by Deng that confirms his faith in humanitarian story and the notion of a common humanity. The affirmation of the power of humanitarian narrative, despite the difficulties of its promises, is echoed in the final paragraph of the book, spoken by the narrator Valentino:

> Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories. I have spoken to every person I have encountered these last difficult days, and every person who has entered this club during these awful morning hours, because to do anything else would be something less than human. I speak to these people, and I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. I will fill today, tomorrow, every day until I am taken back to God. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend

> that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist. (Eggers 535)

When Valentino speaks to the importance of bearing witness, of telling these stories to the "you" that is his addressee, he remarks "to do anything else would be something less than human. […] I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there" (535). *What Is the What* institutes a humanist model of relation here by insisting that the sharing of stories gestures to our shared humanity. But the book also critically intervenes in this model of relation. *What Is the What* breaks down the limits of a universal discourse and draws attention to the extent to which universalism can reinscribe the very hierarchical humanist relations it aims to disrupt.

Valentino testifies at various points throughout *What Is the What* on behalf of the many thousands of displaced Sudanese, that it seems that their lives are not worth the trouble of the higher powers of state or divinity.[51] Throughout the narrative we are privy to moments when Valentino wonders if anyone even truly sees him. That multiple reviews speak to the book's ability to "humanize" and make real the otherwise abstract suffering of the Southern Sudanese is testament to the fact that we habitually bracket lives such as

[51] Echoed also in the title quote from Quinn's documentary *God Grew Tired of Us*.

Valentino's as illegible, unreal, less than human. When Valentino observes the lack of response by the police to his home robbery, for example, he comments: "This is the moment, above any other, when I wonder if I actually exist. . . . [I]t seems clear that there has been no acknowledgment of my existence on either side of this crime" (Eggers 471).[52] Here, in pointing out the impossibility of pretending the reader does not exist, Valentino is calling attention to the assumption that judgments of humanity are ones that are, in humanitarian narrative, typically conferred onto others, and never called into question with regard to the self. In other words, Valentino is prompting the reader to consider the fragility of an existence when recognition is something that must be granted by a benevolent other. The inter-subjective pact that we might say characterizes the entire narrative receives explicit emphasis again at the end: *What Is the What* asserts that storytelling, the sharing of experience, is utterly and inescapably human.

What might "human" mean here, at the end of a book that so rigorously interrogates humanism and humanitarianism? Valentino's understanding of humanity insists that we exist interdependently. Anything less, he states, would

[52] Events in both the U.S. and Africa thus raise questions about "precarious life": "Whose lives are real?" Judith Butler continues: "Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization. What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as 'unreal'? Does violence effect that unreality? Does violence take place on the condition of that unreality?" (*Precarious* 33). These questions are obviously pertinent to civil war and other atrocities, but Eggers brings them close to home.

be less than human. And yet, the terms of this interdependence are productively unclear. *What Is the What* exposes the "parochial and exclusionary character" of universality, opening a space for an alternative articulation that, as Butler argues, "far from being commensurate with its conventional formulation, emerges as a postulated and open-ended ideal that has not been adequately encoded by any given set of legal conventions" ("Universality" 359). Valentino is ever hopeful about the possibility of intersubjectivity, about the electrifying and "collapsible" space between us, despite the violence of misrecognition to which he is continually subject. By inverting in its closing sentences the text's dynamic of witnessing, he challenges the "unilateral rigidity of the observer-observed/subject-object relationship that we have inherited from humanism" (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 32). In an act of bearing witness to the reader's existence, Valentino asks: "How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist" (Eggers 535). *What Is the What* asserts the impossibility of the wholly sovereign subject by pointing to our embeddedness in a co-constituted world: *neither* of us can pretend that the other does not exist.

How do we reconcile the fact that the category of the human is, on the one hand, one on which marginal subjects (those who have been deemed inhuman) rely, and on the other, a category that is always, to some degree, exclusionary (even if only of other life forms)? Halliwell and Mousley locate this

tension in the dialogue between foundationalist and post-foundationalist humanisms. They conclude that a critical humanism takes place somewhere at the heart of this dialogue, so that the human is neither the product of an "endless plasticity and pliability" (10) nor of prescriptive, colonialist norms that value some forms of human life over others. Even as Valentino finds his own way, and his narrative follows the trajectory of the postcolonial Bildungsroman, there is "a constitutive relationality that haunts the sovereign subject" of rights discourse (Mackey 10). *What Is the What* questions the viability of a liberal humanist subject, provoking a rearticulation of an open-ended universalism upon which the human subject is founded.

Valentino's final provocation—Eggers's fictional reiteration of Deng's nonfictional preface—asks us to move beyond simply considering what might be done for subjects like Valentino to include how we too are made by his story. We are encouraged, then, to think beyond conventional frames—of humanitarian narrative, of the UDHR's global family—that lead to epistemic closure and see, instead, how such frames are vulnerable to "reversal," "subversion," and "critical instrumentalization" (Butler, *Frames* 10). Through its wry humanist critique of humanitarian life narrative, *What Is the What* places both Valentino and his addressee as precarious and not fully knowable human subjects, both subjects of a more productive "not yet." Butler encourages us to see the "not yet" as proper "to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains 'unrealized' by

the universal constitutes it essentially" ("Universality" 359). To avoid repeating humanism's fallacies as its promise, then, we might consider the productive provisionality of a language of the not yet. *What Is the What* does not turn away from the universal of human rights discourse, but rather provides a critical frame for exploring both the damaging humanist scripts universalism resurrects and the possibility of an inter-subjective, nonidentical kinship that is radically incomplete in its place.

CHAPTER TWO | A SUBJECT OF SEA AND SALTY SEDIMENT: DIASPORIC LABOUR AND QUEER KINSHIP IN MONIQUE TRUONG'S *THE BOOK OF SALT*[53]

> *To say in English that a man has 'lost his country' is not the same as to say in Vietnamese that he has 'lost the nuoc' (mat nuoc). If the English phrase sounds almost abstract, the Vietnamese expression evokes an ordeal by thirst, the despair of a fish out of water.*
>
> (Thông, "Preface" vii)

Caught having an affair with the *chef de cuisine* while employed at the home of the governor-general of Saigon, Vietnamese cook, migrant worker, and narrator of Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Bình, is cast out of his father's house and natal home and sets off for the open sea. Many menial cooking jobs later, Bình winds up on the doorstep of the famous lesbian couple Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas at 27 rue de Fleurus, Paris, with a help-wanted ad in hand: "LIVE-IN COOK: Two American ladies wish to retain a cook" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 11). Bình observes that in Paris, there are three types of potential employers: the first are the dismissive, who, "after a cat-like glimpse" (16) of Bình's face, turn him away without so much as a word uttered; the second are also determined in their rejection at first glance but intent, nonetheless, on peppering Bình with intrusive questions as to the curious route by which he left Vietnam and arrived in Paris; and the third are the "collectors," those who

[53] I would like to offer sincere thanks to Donald Goellnicht, Y-Dang Troeung, and Benjamin Authers for reading an earlier version of this chapter, and for the insightful comments and suggestions that were offered with care. I would also like to thank JTAS's two anonymous peer reviewers, and guest editors for *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* (4.1) Tanfer Emin Tunc, Elisabetta Marino, and Daniel Y. Kim for their thoughtful and encouraging feedback.

"yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast" whom they ravenously bring into their homes and cast out just as unfeelingly (19). To the dismissive, the curious, and the collectors, Bình is at once an abstract source of labour, culinary and sensual pleasure, and curiosity.

Frustrated by the terms of these relationships, Bình despondently concludes that his life is "nothing but a series of destinations with no meaningful expanses in between" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 18). Yet, the "expanses in between" are anything but devoid of meaning. Most notably in reference to waterways—the Mekong River, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean—expanses of water allude to a central trope of Vietnamese culture. Historically, water represents life source and community; the term *nước* in Vietnamese means both water and country or homeland (Taylor 48). In *The Book of Salt*, water also comes to signify and enable diasporic movement, and importantly, is associated with queer kinship and desire.

Truong's construction of a diasporic queer subjectivity reformulates a Southeast Asian nationalist narrative of compulsory or normative heterosexuality. Furthermore, as David L. Eng argues, ocean crossings and other "in between" moments stage diasporic queer desire in *The Book of Salt* as both lost and unreadable (and indeed a challenge) to official, teleological history and an alternative to the space-time matrix of European modernity ("The End(s) of Race" 1484). At the same time that Bình connects across the ocean to other

queer subjects, he continually looks to, and longs for, home. *The Book of Salt*, then, does not forgo affective forms of cultural or natal belonging in favor of a queer diasporic community. Bình can be read as a queer transnational subject, a global migrant worker, as well as an expatriate of Vietnam, exiled because of his queerness (and thus a part of a larger queer diaspora), but nonetheless entangled in the history and symbolism of home. Kinship here is inseparable from a diasporic and oceanic geography of desire, and has implications for how the relational, the material, and the affective are (co-) conceived.

Economies of movement, desire, taste, and language, in *The Book of Salt*, find expression on the tongue. That Bình is so aptly able to discern between types of salt reflects an awareness of coextensive yet differential queer histories, and posits "the tongue as an organ of [a different sort of] truth" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 178)—that is, as an embodied epistemology and language to take the place of (disapproving) words. French words, for Bình, when not utilitarian are often accusing or berating, forcefully forming their impression on Bình's tongue as if they were the "seeds of a sour fruit that someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed" into his mouth (11-12). The novel's eponymous salt links "the suffering [bodies of its] producers with the satiated bodies of [its] consumers" (Sheller 72) and thereby infuses all manner of intimate relations (lovers' quarrels, shared meals, late night conversations, distant letter writing) with multifaceted networks of global and local power. Thus there are multiple

meanings and connotations of "tongue" within Truong's construction of Bình as a global, diasporic, queer subject.[54] Truong reverses the terms by which language and taste become markers of the social and racial elite by arming Bình with a *resistant* tongue—not only through his narrative flare and culinary skill, but also through his keen affective sensibility that is able to read racialized and sexual differences through their micro and macro histories of belonging.

Extending Truong's title motif, I argue that Bình's sensitivity to differential power and histories enables, in turn, his keen reading of the different types of salt (of tears, sweat, and sea). The many resonances of salt within the novel (the sediment of labour and love; the sedimentary deposits of sea and oceanic crossings; the silt of nation and home), I argue, thus must be considered within the context of a reimagined (transnational) modern queer kinship. After all, Bình, whose character is modeled after the details of cooks who were actually employed at 27 rue de Fleurus, is deliberately placed in the Parisian home of

[54] I locate Bình in a queer diaspora following David Eng (see: "The End(s) of Race" and *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*), but use the term carefully. Sau-Ling Wong cautions against the "inherent developmental narrative in the term diaspora" not only as a potentially teleological way to understand global movement or Asian American experience, but also as a privileged or trendy term of cultural criticism that might obscure other modes or phases of Asian American subjectivity. Bình's mobile history and conflicted connections to Vietnam and waterways signal multiple modes of subjectivity not easily confined to any one experiential (or institutional) trajectory. See page 17 of Sau-Ling Wong's "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads."

American expatriates Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, who have come to occupy a sort of seminal place in modern queer literary study, but are here revealed to perpetuate the sometimes-racist scripts of queer liberalism. If queer kinship is reformulated in Truong's novel as encompassing and emerging from differential histories, as well as the material strata of home (salt, ocean), Bình as portrayed and narrated by Truong demonstrates the untenable nature of these kinships when based on occlusions of race and class, as well as the way in which being obligated to the world and to others creates rich moments of shared intimacy *and* shared materiality, not all of which can be understood through a politics of identity.

Bình's movement between national spaces explicitly parallels the process that turns water to salt, the latter described at one point as a "gradual revelation of [the] true self" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 98) in which queer desire is able to exist in another, perhaps less circumscribed, form outside of the patriarchal homespace. His sea-travels are a consequence of his (queer) desire, and the means by which he is brought to Paris, where he is able to experience pleasures, both culinary and sexual (the latter often associated in memory with the in-between-ness of the ocean), that he is denied in his father's home. Eng reads Bình's slippage in memory to the sea (he finds himself, in memory, back at sea again and again) as summoning "an epistemology of the oceanic," shifting our attention to "the sea as history, from 'roots' to 'routes'" ("The End(s) of Race"

1489). Drawing on Lily Cho's wager that community might be constituted in taste, "in that which has precisely been rejected as too subjective, too individual, and too nostalgic for the formation of community" (102), I argue that for Bình the sea embodies both of these meanings, rooting him to a gustatory Vietnamese collectivity and routing him to queer terrains (in body and memory). Such a kinship is borne of intimate working and loving practices, and is mindful of the origins of salt, its movements, and its manifold meanings. The formation of kinship through taste, mobility, and nostalgia has particular resonance for queer studies, as Bình joins other "iconic [queer] figures [who] *turn backward*" (Love 5, emphasis mine), "looking back on" and refusing to forget history's exclusions and losses of queer subjects. He also is figured as a transnational subject whose sense of belonging or home cannot be singularly located within the frames of nation, family, race, sexuality, or class. Swept up in "global streams of migrant labour" (Eng, "The End(s) of Race" 1480), while departing from and longing for home, Bình is a diasporic subject whose labour and love are fundamentally comprised of sea and salty sediment, expressive of histories of nation, global movements, and affective communities.

Modernism and the Mother Tongue

Throughout this chapter, the body and its "ongoing interconnections with the material world" (Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal" 3) become the basis for

understanding an alternative queer kinship. I am interested in how the materiality of the biological body "necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that ravel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual" (3). Bình's gustatory engagement with the world can be read through a theoretical framework, then, that takes seriously the body's capacity for narration, memory, and knowledge. Lily Cho envisions diasporic memory as rooted in and triggered by the sensate body—a body that is both individual and collective in nature, and at once familial and transpacific.[55] Cho's notion of a diasporic community rooted in collective gustatory desire or memory offers my reading of *The Book of Salt* a partial lens through which to understand Bình's recurring memories and references to water and salt: memories and desires that are individually unique, queer, and nation-based, as well as community and kinship oriented. A complement to Cho's notion that memory materializes history (especially in the body), Elizabeth Wilson's approach to corporeality locates the body as a site of psychic disturbance and knowledge; her "gut" feminism provides an apt analogy for Bình's gustative skill (his keen differentiation of tastes) as one that empowers him and situates him as an individualized colonial subject responding, counter-discursively, to the

[55] Lily Cho comes to these theorizations by way of a close reading of Fred Wah's poetry, drawing on literary and scientific modes of inquiry and the collective or cultural nature of proprioceptive sensory engagements.

primacy of the visual for racialized bodies,[56] and posing the body and its senses as a provocation against the ostensibly progressive (for its time) politics of Stein's modernist prose.[57]

Bình's body in Paris is indelibly marked (by ignorant others) with an indiscriminate, non-specific, Indochineseness, as though presenting "an exacting, predetermined life story" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 152) of migrant labour. However, as Bình points out: "the spectacle fools the eyes but rarely the stomach, as the latter is always the more perceptive of the two" (78), foregrounding his own discerning gut in the presence of objectifying gazes. King-Kok Cheung reads these complex motivations, desires, and modes of resistant communication as "textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations," deconstructing a firmly held Eurocentric belief in the oppositional valuing of speech and silence (4). Expanding on Cheung's assertion that some silences ought to be read as "articulate" despite quietude's association with passivity or victimization, I consider Bình's narration to be rife with articulate expression, full of his mother's tongue and taste for stories.

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[56] Wilson argues for a psychological etiology of the body and for a theory of the psyche "that is more extensive and less attached to the primacy of rationality, self-control, good judgment, and sound appraisal," positing, instead, that the psyche pervades and inhabits the body and can thus be accessed through bodily modes and responses (41).

[57] In a paper presented at the annual meeting of the *American Studies Association*, entitled "Tasting History in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*," Ann Cvetkovich argues that Bình's meals are indeed Truong's "contemporary version of high modernist prose."

Much of Bình's commentary is spoken to us as readers, which remains unheard by Stein and Toklas. Bình's unspoken desires, to which only the reader is made privy, prompt us to ask: "what are the political stakes of either succeeding or failing to convey queer intimacy, for instance, in verbal registers? Particularly given the tendency for queerness to be associated with absence, the unintelligible, the unspeakable, the indecipherable" (Antwi et al., "Not Without Ambivalence" 113). Bình's lack of speech, when read through a certain kind of liberal humanist logic, does indeed render him unintelligible to his employers. Truong, however, has given Bình a range of other literate modes, a repertoire that differentiates him as a queer, racialized subject. Indeed, Bình calls into question the oft-made assumption that reason is the highest form of intellect or literacy. Bình's skill in the kitchen, is, of course, honed as he reminds us through years of "Repetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 154). His mastery of all things related to taste, however, is not only a function of his many years of labour, but also indicative of his fluency in, and ontological embodiment of a gustatory epistemology that unsettles dominant forms and expressions of literacy-based knowledge. Aside from his knack for wit and keen observation, his most literate mode is taste, suggesting that the tongue, its taste preceptors, its preference for sweet or salt, is an organ of bodily, affective, and sometimes unspoken truths. Indeed, it is through taste that Bình is best able to describe his own queer sensibility, even

before he can name it as such. Bình therefore demonstrates how kinship registers in the body, in affective, knowing, searching ways, obligating and connecting Bình to the world through deeply complex affective and political matrices. Queer kinship as such draws persistent attention to the way in which acts of intimacy are not only shot through with dynamics of power, but also move us beyond discourses of "freedom and constraint" (Povinelli 2-3) to illustrate those unnamable connections, obligations, and kinships that take root at the level of body, sea, history, and memory.

Before Bình orchestrates ingredients into dishes, he must first imagine them—a skill learned from his brother Anh Minh, the only one of Bình's brothers who can make him "long for home" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 14). Through culinary and improvised fancy, he dreams tastes familiar and foreign, "all on [his] tongue," before crafting them into meals (66).[58] He tells us: "Every kitchen is a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender" the result of which, in a reversal of roles associated with the articulate subject and voiceless other, leaves his employers with "slackened jaws, silenced" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 10).

[58] Monique Truong states in an interview with publisher Houghton Mifflin: "I cook, like the characters in my novel, to remind me of where I have been. I always cook or rather I always 'taste' the food first in my mind. I approach a recipe like a story. I imagine it, sometimes I have a dream about it, then I go about crafting it" (Truong, "Press Release").

That he arms himself with an alternate language to silencing effect, a language both reminiscent and inaccessible, desirable and just out of reach, does not protect him against the taste some employers cultivate for the "pure, sea-salted sadness of the outcast" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 19). Nor is such expression unequivocally resistant. Bình quickly learns, working in the kitchen of the French governor-general's house in Vietnam alongside Anh Minh, that the "vocabulary of servitude" is not built upon knowledge of foreign words, but on one's "ability to swallow them" (13). Defiance in servitude becomes Bình's resistance, and it enables expression. While Bình's inability to function in French allows those around him to stereotype him as an ignorant labourer, the stereotype of assumed ignorance also permits Bình's defiance to go undetected, so blinded are his employers by their own sense of superiority. As Bình ironically remarks: "the French never tired of debating why the Indochinese of a certain class are never able to master the difficulties, the subtleties, the winged eloquence, of the French language. […] So enamored of their differences, language and otherwise, they have lost the instinctual ability to detect the defiance of those who serve them" (13-14).

Recall that Truong uses the scarce details of two Vietnamese cooks who actually worked for, and lived with, Stein and Toklas at 27 rue de Fleurus and at their summer house in Bilignin, as a point of departure for the fictional character

of Bình.[59] By picking up on the details of these "Indochinese" men, found in a chapter called "Servants in France" in the *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Truong launches a critique of the different types of labour that undergird a modernist literary aesthetic—and, ultimately, a modern liberal queer kinship—like that of Stein's, hailed in its time for its disruption of a teleological "patriarchal linguistic code" (Benstock 184).[60] As Truong suggests, Stein's modernist literary contributions were most likely enabled by varying degrees of domestic support or servitude. Stein's own writing has been celebrated for its unmooring of words

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[59] Truong talks about her inspiration for Bình's character when reading the *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* in college:

> In a chapter called "Servants in France," Toklas wrote about two "Indochinese" men who cooked for Toklas and Stein at 27 rue de Fleurus and at their summer house in Bilignin. One of these cooks responded to an ad placed by Toklas in the newspaper that began "Two Americans ladies wish- " […] When I got to the pages about these cooks, I was to say the least surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence and such an intimate one at that in the lives of these two women. These cooks must have seen everything, I thought. But in the official history of the Lost Generation, the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, these "Indo-Chinese" cooks were just a minor footnote. There could be a personal epic embedded inside that footnote, I thought. *The Book of Salt* is that story, as told from the perspective of Bình, a twenty-six-year old Vietnamese man living in Paris in the late 1920's. I have imagined him as one of the candidates who answered Stein and Toklas' classified ad. ("Press Release").

[60] See also Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry." This line of inquiry is the result of the helpful comments of an anonymous reviewer for *The Journal of Transnational American Studies*, who suggested that Truong deliberately sets Bình against "a modern queerness that has become almost synonymous with queerness itself: that of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and the expatriates of the Left Bank of Paris, and modernist disruption of teleological narrative and patriarchal linguistics."

from their habitual meanings; Stein spoke of "the need to avoid 'associative habits' whereby words were cast into 'tired, worn forms that prevent perception'" (Dydo 15). One might argue that Truong is similarly interested in breaking down "associative habits," taking to task the often-made association between literary modernist prose and "novel" or resistant forms of expression, perception, and meaning.

In *The Book of Salt*, the literary tongue is not the (only) great arbiter of perception, truth, and artfulness. The labourer's tongue, and in Bình's case the tongue of the hired migrant chef, proves to be most perspicacious of all. Indeed, Bình's narrative authority is achieved both through his discerning attention to the nuances in his employers' language (which often veil class and racial biases) and, as will be discussed later, his keen ability to detect distinctions among types of salt. That Truong draws on the conceits of literary fiction to render Bình's perspective in a highly polished literary prose is done so ironically—that is, to mock the language of the elite while simultaneously stripping it bare of its pretense of hospitality and exposing it for its paternalism. Commenting on Stein's and Toklas' ad for a live-in cook, Bình remarks: "Two American ladies 'wish'? Sounds more like a proclamation than a help-wanted ad. Of course, two American ladies in Paris these days would only 'wish' because to wish is to receive. To want, well, to want is just not American. I congratulate myself on this

rather apt and piquant piece of social commentary" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 11).

Where Stein's style has elsewhere been described as experimental, turning words and phrases over until they are freed from their habitual meanings to create new ones, Bình does not separate words from the people who tongue them—that is, from their class and racial locations. Stein's own belated recognition as a serious modern writer, who gained wider readership only in the latter half of her life, might be attributed, in part, to her own gendered and sexualized location and expatriate status. Thus while Bình, Stein, and Toklas might all be placed in the same class of queer exiles, and might otherwise be in kinship with one another, such alliances are undermined by profound differences in racialized histories— differences that pose material and economic barriers for Bình, but differences that arguably heighten his fluency in other epistemological modes rendered inaccessible to Stein and Toklas, both of whom are unable to see past their own privilege. Bình's, Stein's, and Toklas's tongues are thus differently skilled, despite a shared queerness, and these lingual differences reflect their respective locations on a class and racial hierarchy, stifling the celebratory tone of a modern queer kinship or queer liberalism.

Within the kitchen space, Bình becomes a practitioner of his mother's strength, or mother's tongue, in which surviving the domestic, the necessary, and the everyday is at once an act of "perseverance and flexibility" (Truong, *The*

Book of Salt 198), pairing quotidian daily rituals with the waywardness of stories, words, and bodies. As Bình remarks, "While my mother's hands followed a set routine, her stories never did. They were free to roam, to consider alternative routes, to invent their own ways home" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 81) Cooking, then, through bodily modes and interventions (mostly) unencumbered by reason, speech and ocular inspection, recreates and imagines place. For Bình, cooking is oriented homeward and outward, weaving familial histories, gendered constraints, and colonial impositions with future aspirations and longings. The body, gut, and *tongue* are at the center of such engagements, with their capacity for memory, affect, inventiveness, and pain.[61] Bình's gut is especially sensitive to months of loneliness with each summer spent in the countryside of Bilignin, away from his Sweet Sunday Man (known as Lattimore, Bình's clandestine lover), and more tellingly, away from any face or body that resembles his own (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 141). Bình's isolation results in a loss of appetite, his body thinning, becoming readable like a face with "a forlorn expression" (138). He yearns for the recognition of himself in an unknown other that the streets of Paris afford in shared, passing glances exchanged between Vietnamese migrants. These silent encounters allow Bình to be, even if fleetingly, not *the* "Asiatic" labourer of Bilignin, but simply "a man or a woman like any other, two lungfuls of

[61] For a discussion of the ways in which the nervous system responds creatively, and even thoughtfully, to intrusions from without, see Elizabeth Wilson's *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Chapter 4.

air, a heart pumping blood"—a body in community with other bodies "hungry for home-cooked food [… and] in constant search for the warmth of the sun" (142).

***Water:* Waterways, Crossings, and Queer Kinship and (Be)longing**

Such longings for home and the warmth of the sun, while certainly in communion with other Vietnamese migrants and their bodily wishes, are also, for Bình, decidedly queer. While Cho argues that cravings or desires for foods that taste like home, are, for the Chinese diaspora, constitutive of larger, historical sadnesses brought on by indenture and dislocation (100), Bình's longings ought not to be read as nostalgia for happier times and places, but through his experiences as a queer subject, and the Vietnamese community and family to which he uneasily belongs. In other words, Bình's feelings of being out-of-place in both Vietnam and Paris are not only a condition of being a diasporic subject but also a condition of being a queer subject negotiating filial ties of kinship and belonging. As Y-Dang Troeung eloquently writes, "his race and sexuality render him forever unhomely in all of the homes in which he lives, including the supposed 'haven' of America [i.e. the home of his two American employers in Paris]" (119-120). As with other Asian American subjects, in his Mesdames' home, Bình is neither afforded unconditional entry and belonging, nor is he free from disciplinary rule, foreshadowing the delimited hospitality that

will be afforded to Vietnamese refugees on American soil as a result of the displacement brought on by the Vietnam War.

How, then, does Bình's relationship with his Mesdames speak to a larger politics of queer legitimation, accommodation, and contingent hospitalities? How do we sort out which "forms of intimate dependency count as freedom and which count as undue social constraint" (Povinelli 3)? For Bình—as for Valentino in *What Is the What*—a safe space of familiality is more easily imagined than it is attainable in practice—more so an as-yet-to-be fulfilled promise than reality. Any kinship that is offered is done so contingently, on the host's terms, whereby other modes of belonging, or of being with one another, become unreadable to the hosts, and therefore often go unrecognized, at best, or sanctioned, at worst. (Recall that the "Lost Boys" in Pittsburgh were advised not to travel in groups as local merchants felt them to be intimidating when traveling together.) Bình registers his complaints about the metropolitan queer household in which he is housed silently to us as readers; Bình's narration, then, acts as an extended apostrophe into the reader's ear, remaining mostly silent in the presence of Stein and Toklas. Silence here might signal both acquiescence and strategic resistance to queer liberalism and the benefits that accompany it. The hegemony of queer liberalism is such that there is enough to benefit Bình at 27 rue de Fleurus for him to stay, and yet there is a sense of mis-fittedness and inequality that festers, due in part to his differentiation as a working-class, ethnic-racial queer. His

silence thus tracks the subtlety of his differentiation from queer liberalism: Truong's use of silence suggests that the hegemony of a metropolitan or liberal queer kinship operates such that it cannot properly hear the complaints logged against it.

It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what implications this yet-to-be fulfilled liberal promise has for queer subjects who are embroiled in contemporary legal debates about how kinship is defined and recognized. Certain benefits accompany appealing to the state for legitimacy and recognition of, for example, gay marriage, while, in the process, other forms of radical kinship are lost, or made unreadable to the state. In appealing to the state, in other words, its power to decide what is and what is not eligible for "translation into legitimacy" is reinforced at the expense of other modes of sexuality and relation (Butler, "Kinship" 18). In *The Book of Salt*, Bình's mode of narration attests to this ambivalent relation; his place in the Stein/Toklas household both enables expression even as it circumscribes it, mirroring the conflicted relationship contemporary queer subjects might hold today to state-based forms of legitimation. Through Bình, however, Truong maintains the hope of a "not yet here" queerness—what Jose Muñoz describes as the "time of queerness," a "hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity, [and] a notion of futurity that functions as a historical materialist critique" (22, 26)—by critically returning to the past to give him many other literate, resistant, and decidedly

queer modes of embodiment, articulation, and critique that combine future and community-oriented ontological, cosmological, and epistemological challenges to Western assumptions about what makes a subject.

An epistemology of the oceanic, likewise, with its emphasis on in-between-ness, drift, and movement of water as constitutive of bodies that are in, of, and between multiple places and historical spaces, leaves room for the sort of queer possibilities Truong and Muñoz envision when read alongside the "linearity of straight time" of a teleological liberal queer legitimation. But any epistemological exuberance must be tempered by the limits that condition such possibilities. For Bình, the sea is in memory and imagination coupled with expansive desire—at the sight of Bình's Sweet Sunday Man watching him, Bình writes: "I am at sea again, I thought. Waves are coursing through my veins. I am at sea again" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 37). Later, he remembers, fondly, a "love lost to a wide, open sea" (74). However, the sea is also the *physical* space into which he pitches himself, reluctantly, as a consequence of the uninhabitable terrain upon which his father's house rests.

Bình sees his own move away from home paralleled in the story of the basket weaver, who takes leave in search of an alternative to the specific silt of his family's land. Village after village, the basket weaver is unable to harvest the hyacinths he carries with him needed for their stalks. Bình is struck by this story, by how "nonexportable" the hyacinth is, "an indigenous thing, requiring as it

does the silt of his family's land" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 56). More importantly, why does the basket weaver not simply return home, to "a house surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple bloom?" (63). Bình's home, like the basket weaver's, while pulling at him from afar, is, however, inimical to queer desire: "to take one's body and willingly set it upon the open sea," Bình speculates, "is not an act brought about by desire but a consequence of it" (59).[62]

Despite Bình's distance, his father's angry, disparaging words reach him in all places and spaces, with "no respect for geography" (12). This is not dissimilar to the experience of queer Asian Americans who, argues Richard Fung, depend on their families or ethnic communities as "a rare source of affirmation in a racist society"—families who, at the same time, can be heteronormative or homophobic and a source of mixed support and conflict. He writes: "In coming out, we risk (or we feel that we risk) losing this support" (Fung 118). Home as a referent for safety and belonging becomes dislodged for Bình. The sea provides a

[62] We may read in this—the question of why the basket weaver does not simply return home—an insertion of Truong's own diasporically entangled relation to Vietnam. She turns to the trace details of Vietnamese migrant workers as the inspiration and impetus for her story, citing the "departure, the loss of home, that act of refuge seeking" that she experienced in her own life when she left Vietnam in 1975 and came to the U.S. as a refugee with her mother, as having "everything to do with the themes playing themselves out in *The Book of Salt*" (Truong, "Press Release"). She asks: "as a child of wartime, one of the questions that stays with me and that I've tried to answer for myself by writing this novel is what if there was not a war, what then would make a person leave the land of their birth behind?" ("Press Release").

safe haven for Bình's imagined (and real) queer desires, operating as it does as a sort of liminal zone of time and space (and of recorded history) with room for different bodies and orientations (Eng, "The End(s) of Race" 1484). Salt-water, and the open sea, then, unruly and ever moving, carry remnants of the unremembered or forgotten past, of the many exiles that have boarded its ships.

An epistemology of the oceanic, then, summons those who have been both lost *and* found at sea. Bình cannot escape the traumatic recurrences of memory as they are lived out and transported within the body, no matter which passage he takes as an escape. "Mountains, rivers, oceans, seas," writes Bình, "these things have never kept him [the Old Man] from homing in on me, pinpointing my location, and making me pay my respects" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 12). The "Old Man," who is never named but sometimes referred to as "father," is a persistent, ghostly presence in Bình's life. Bình later comments: "I should have thrown his body into the sea, expelled it and not me" (194). Both the sea and the queer feelings Bình maps onto it encompass belonging *and* estrangement, physical immediacy as well as displacement.

Finally, it is fitting that Bình finds a version of home at sea, or (reconstituted) familial belonging. Such a configuration of sea as home recalls (if unintentionally) two of many popular meanings aligned with the word or symbolism of water in Vietnamese culture: *nước*, as mentioned earlier, means country or homeland in Vietnamese (a point to which I will return in more

detail), and Ba Thuy, a spirit of the water, who is known to inspire fear in locals who, in turn, avoid "speaking her name and are careful to placate her" (Taylor 48). Like the water spirit, Bình's father is impossible to placate, and yet a presence to which Bình consistently bends or responds.

Bình's confusion over the basket weaver's departure from home (what could possibly compel someone to leave "a house surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple bloom?") corroborates Huỳnh Sanh Thông's explanation of the *làng nước,* which in Vietnamese conjures images of water and rivers while referring to a broad collectivity or a local community or village: "unless forced by inexorable necessity to migrate, the Vietnamese peasants prefer to live and die in their own *làng* and their own *nước*" ("Live by Water, Die for Water" 146). One might argue that although Bình is, arguably, forced from his father's home and natal land, the kinship ties he maintains to his *làng nước*, conflicted as they may be, demand further critical scrutiny from the perspective of a specifically *Vietnamese* queer subject and the nationalist sentiment expressed throughout the remainder of the novel. A look at waterways and their deposits of salt show that kinship ties create complex, multi-directional desires and longings for Bình, that are ultimately resistant to hegemonic narratives of queer belonging and subjectivity.

***Salt:* Vietnamese Waterways and the Unseasonable Sediments of History**

Waterways have mythological as well as historical significance in Vietnam. Along the banks of the lower Mekong delta in Vietnam, settlement has developed over several hundred years as a result of Chinese, Vietnamese, and French colonization. Recent expansion of road infrastructure has begun to drastically change the landscape, bringing changes to the flow in economic, cultural and social exchange.[63] In other words, the waterways of Bình's home ought not to be read as static sites of nostalgia, but spaces that have been and will continue to be sites of negotiation, exchange, and meaning-making. Thinking about watery relations in this way also brings us beyond both a traditional Cold War narrative and premises of American exceptionalism so that we may seek a view of history that understands the complex relationship between Vietnam and various colonial or imperial impositions within a transnational frame. We might read Bình's move to Paris as enabled by centuries of French colonial incursions into Southeast Asia and the French-Vietnamese mobilities that resulted, transporting missionaries, French gunships and troops, cargo, foodstuff, and cheap labour between shores. This is not to say that the massive influx of Vietnamese refugees to America and other nations following the Vietnam War does not constitute a significant historical moment with reverberations for

[63] See Taylor's "Rivers into Roads." Taylor's section titled "Local Perspectives" looks at the cultural, practical, and historical meanings of water for the people of the Mekong delta.

Vietnamese American subjects, but that, as Mark Philip Bradley argues, the global discourse and practices of colonialism, race, modernism, and postcolonial state-making "at once preceded, were profoundly implicated in, and ultimately transcended the dynamics of the Cold War," often borrowing from the transnational circulation of ideas, beliefs, labour, people, and commodities that preceded it (Bradley 8).

Bradley discusses water symbolism in a poem by Ho Chi Minh titled "Majestic Pac Bo." Fusing revolutionary nationalism and internationalism, Ho skillfully brings together modern leaders of internationalism (Marx and Lenin) with Vietnamese symbology: "Distant mountains, distant water / Each immense they must be named anew / This stream Lenin, that mountain Marx / Two sides united into one country (*son ha*)." Both mountains and water, writes Bradley, "were commonly used in elite and popular texts as symbols to express the mythological origins of Vietnamese identity" (Bradley 110). The Vietnamese often use the phrase *núi song* ("mountains and rivers") to "signify the homeland in both its physical and affective aspects," and in some cases to signal national independence from French colonial impositions (Thông, "Live by Water, Die for Water" 148). *The Book of Salt* stages the movement of transnational bodies and ideas prior to the Vietnam War through its depiction of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, referred to initially as the "man on the bridge" and only later revealed to be Ho Chi Minh. Ho's stated fondness for bridges in *The Book of Salt* ("I have always liked bridges"

he comments while atop the Seine with Bình) foreshadows this kind of fusing of national and transnational sentiment, in his stated appreciation for their connection to two sides, their expression of an "agreement, a mutual consent […] a monument to an accord" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 92). Bridges, like oceanic crossings, enable movement as well as kinship between places. Ho's partiality for them is thus unsurprising given that Ho finds himself in multiple colonial spaces (necessitating travel over different seas, working many menial jobs) before becoming a revolutionary leader and the President of Vietnam. However, Truong's depiction of him in *The Book of Salt*, though clearly in tune with the sorts of internationalist philosophies that will come to influence his own thinking, positions him primarily as a formative figure for Bình's budding queer sensibility and his affective longings for a Vietnamese community.

A sense of community between Nguyễn Ái Quốc and Bình is first communicated through the taste of salt. Over a shared meal with Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Bình inwardly reflects on the numerous types of salt, each with its own depth and sensuality: "A gradual revelation of its true self…is the quality that sets *fleur de sel* apart from the common sea salt that waits for me in most French kitchens. There is a development, a rise and fall, upon which its salinity becomes apparent, deepens, and then disappears. Think of it as a kiss in the mouth" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 97-98). Bình detects such differences in sea salt by its taste on the tongue, its development, rise and fall in the mouth, comparing true

fleur de sel to "a kiss in the mouth"—a phrase repeated shortly thereafter to describe an encounter between Bình and Nguyễn Ái Quốc as they stroll through the Jardin du Luxembourg. Eng reads this passage as raising "the specter of a scandalous, perhaps unthinkable, desire that binds Bình and Ho Chi Minh in their shared queer diasporas" (*The Feeling of Kinship* 62). This suggestion prompts us to consider how queer diaspora, "as a conceptual category—outside the boundaries of territorial sovereignty and in excess of sanctioned social arrangements—brings together dissonant desires with the political, thereby forcing in the process a crisis in historicism" (62).[64] My reading differs slightly in emphasis from Eng's, in that I argue that Truong's construction of the queer diasporic subject, though certainly forcing a crisis in the narratives of history and nation, is still a subject rooted *in and between* spaces of belonging including his natal home. Queer possibility and desire, in other words, flowers as does salt, through the sea—but not just any sea, not the abstract ocean that exists outside

[64] David L. Eng uses the concept of queer diasporas to signal both an object of knowledge and a critical methodology. As a critical methodology, queer diasporas seeks to move beyond a "conventional focus on racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability" and instead explore contemporary Asian movements through the "lens of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency" (*The Feeling of Kinship* 13). What this enables is a more pliable notion of diaspora, and ensures that studies of queerness are always attuned to the intersecting narratives of race, nation, class, and globalization. In the words of Gayarti Gopinath, "'If "diaspora" needs "queerness" in order to rescue it from its genealogical implications, "queerness" also needs "diaspora" in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization'" (*The Feeling of Kinship* 14).

of time and space, but the sea that makes its way to and from the Vietnamese homeland, geopolitically and affectively. Recall that the term water or *nước* in Vietnamese also means country, nation, or homeland, and in other Vietnamese sayings is used to refer to "a step you take in order to reach some goal. It is a pass you come to, and also a way out of the difficult spot" (Thông, "Live by Water, Die for Water" 142). One might draw a comparison between Bình's diasporic movement, enabled by his sea travels and his expression of queer desire, mimicking the process that turns water to salt, while embedding Bình within transnational as well as national spaces of kinship and belonging.

It is no coincidence that Bình finds in Ho Chi Minh (significantly, a nationalist, anti-colonial revolutionary) a certain sense of home, nostalgia, comfort, even queer love, for he embodies the kind of "unfastened," and yet firmly rooted subjecthood that we see in Bình.[65] Picking up on all of these threads, Truong reintroduces Nguyễn Ái Quốc into the novel one last time in the form of a salt print photograph. Bình attempts to purchase the photograph, but the photography shop's proprietor is unwilling to let it go: "'I can't, Monsieur. That print is dear to me. It is, you see, an old method from the last century. I charge four times the usual price for a salt print like that one, Monsieur. It takes

[65] Eleanor Ty uses the term "unfastened" in her study of globality and Asian North American narratives to "refer to subjectivities that have 'not been fastened' to specific nations, languages, or religions and to refer to borders—geopolitical, psychic, class, cultural, community, and social—that have 'been loosened, opened, or detached'" (xxi).

a full day of sunlight to develop. A full day of sunlight in Paris! Monsieur, can you imagine?'" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 246). Y-Dang Troeung argues that for Bình, not at home either in Vietnam nor fully accepted in the household of Stein and Toklas, "belonging is a state of desire that is perpetually deferred" (119). And yet we are not meant to read this state of unbelonging or displacement as a mark of absolute marginality.[66] For both Bình and Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Paris is a formative site for their development. The sea in *The Book of Salt* comes to be associated with queer desire, the continual search for a safe space in between lands already mapped and claimed physically and ideologically by others.[67] Perhaps the salt print photograph, then, is meant to gesture to both forced and chosen forms of migration (gesturing to the salt of sea travel, and the nourishment of the Parisian sun), demonstrating the agency expressed through movement between national spaces in which old and new kinship ties are affirmed or created.

Here we may glean how diaspora and queer kinship converge for Bình. Diaspora as a "state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that

[66] Eleanor Ty writes: "I would like to use and recuperate the terms mobility and displacement without misrepresenting the place of Asian North Americans as a whole by situating them in a position of always not at home and marginal. Displacement as perpetual exile and unbelonging goes against the strategy of 'claiming America' by and for Asian Americans, while displacement as movement, that is, taking the place of something else, suggests agency and subjectivity. Asian North Americans are not always put in situations not of their own volition" (Ty xxvii).

[67] Bình's mother, on the other hand, never allows Bình's father "to claim the land that she calls home" (Truong 198).

encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings" (Zeleza 41) is a fitting term to describe Bình's feeling of being out of place in both his putative homeland and place of settlement. Much like the mobile forms of belonging mapped out in the introduction to this dissertation, I am interested in how queer kinship for Bình, like diaspora, signals "a navigation of multiple belongings"—quite literally in terms of cross-oceanic movements, migrations, and displacements, but also in terms of longings, struggles, and imaginings of community and kinship, past, present, and future. The figure of Ho Chi Minh sheds light on how we might conceive of an alternative queer kinship. Queer kinship, like diaspora, signals "complex social and cultural communities created out of real and imagined genealogies and geographies" (Zeleza 41) while simultaneously speaking to the way such connections are ontologically based and embodied on a very material, carnal level.

In Truong's novel, salt seasons and blooms with the taste of home; unfolds on the tongue in expressions of queer desire; and issues forth from labouring bodies in droplets of sweat. As a recurring motif, salt is meant to be read not simply as mineral, seasoning, or sediment, but through its formative processes and movements, through its relation to the bodies that harvest and deposit salt and the larger colonial histories within which those bodies are situated. One of the novel's very first references to salt occurs when Bình receives a letter from his brother Anh Minh at Stein's and Toklas's Parisian salon.

He wishes to taste the envelope with his tongue, certain that he will find "the familiar sting of salt" and wanting to know what kind: "kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea." He continues: "I wanted this paper-shrouded thing to divulge itself to me" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 5) reminding us of the literal and figurative salt that seasons our affections, that bears traces of where we have been, and that we attempt and invariably struggle to put into words. The "paper-shrouded thing," as a "thing" that has travelled and passed through many hands, is soaked in and obscures gustatory meaning. Our usual ways of reading such "things" relies on our sense of sight—not *nearly* as exacting as Bình's sense of taste in divulging and discerning the bodily states from which words fitfully emerge. As the rest of the novel unfolds, salt continues to be depicted as the material and metaphorical residue or memory of queer kinship, and illustrates how labour, movement, love, and nation are inseparable from Truong's depiction of queer kinship.

Bình often muses on the difference between types of salt, concluding that as the sediment of working, loving bodies, salt is a taste many would prefer to be regulated. Nguyễn Ái Quốc, still the inscrutable but vaguely familiar "man on the bridge" at this point in the novel, recalls working in a sweltering hot bakery in Paris in which he was required to tie a cloth around his forehead so that his sweat, the salt of his labour, "wouldn't turn the pies from sweet to savory" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 88). Unbeknownst to the guests of the

Governor-General's house, as Anh Minh and his crew whisk egg whites into meringue, "sweat beads descended from necks, arms, and hands and collected in the bowls"—"Their salt, like the copper and ice, would help the mixture take its shape" (46). Attempts to contain the taste or use of salt are not merely about the dictates of distinguished culinary taste, but are about the unpalatable spoils or salt of labouring bodies upon which the privileged depend but about which the privileged are enjoined not to think. Most messieurs and mesdames "would prefer to believe that their cooks have no bodily needs, secretions, not to mention excrement, but we all do" (64).

In *A History of Food*, a chapter of which is devoted to the history, symbolism, and production of salt, Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat argues that salt has been collected and put to use for centuries largely at the expense of the peasant or working classes, the arbitrary taxing of whom was to become one of the main causes of the French Revolution. Toussaint-Samat writes that the exploitation of salt labour has for centuries made it of vital interest to colonial, national, and international commercial entities vying for economic power" (426). Thus, salt labour in *The Book of Salt* gestures to a history of exploited bodies in the context of global capitalism. Like other staple commodities (e.g. the sugar plantations in the Caribbean), salt has been crucial to the emergence of Western modernity, both as a commodity and the byproduct of working bodies. Salt signals the essential, colonial mobilities that have been integral to the

"formation of world systems of trade and production, but also to the constitution of world systems of consumption" (Sheller 4-5).[68] To this day salt-pans and salt-works in France remain subject to taxation laws and it is still "forbidden in French law for anyone to take so much as a litre of salt-water without the permission of the Ministry of Finance" (Toussaint-Samat 423, 425). Not only are salt-pans and mines themselves caught up in uneven national and transnational economic flows, but it is also the unrecognized or undervalued salt of another's labour that facilitates such exploitative and unequal exchanges in the first place. "Symbolically as well as scientifically, salt is an intermediary" (426), dividing, rather than reconciling, along economic and racial lines.

In the novel, Alice Toklas's wish to control Bình's use of salt might be read, then, in an even longer *longue durée* of history,[69] in which those with economic, political, or racial capital have attempted to maintain absolute control over the uses of salt. Toklas exerts her control over Bình through her capitulation to elitist or exclusionary culinary practices, despite her expressed awareness of the origins of salt. Bình describes Toklas's lesson on salt:

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[68] For a fascinating discussion of how such mobilities of people, commodities, images, and ideas undergird the construction of Western modernity in the Caribbean, see Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean from Arawaks to Zombies*.

[69] Truong's novel can be read, argues Eng, through a *longue durée* of history, beginning with the tenets of the Enlightenment and traceable to the "colorblind" and postidentity politics of today (Eng, "The End(s) of Race" 1480).

> A pinch of salt, according to my Madame, should not be a primitive reflex, a nervous twitch on the part of any cook, especially one working at 27 rue de Fleurus. Salt is an ingredient to be considered and carefully weighed like all others. The true taste of salt—the whole of the sea on the tip of the tongue, sorrow's sting, labour's smack—has been lost, according to my Madame, to centuries of culinary imprudence. […] "In my kitchen, I will tell you when salt is necessary," my Madame said, concluding the real lesson for that day. (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 212)

Toklas, sensitive to the taste of salt as the substance of sea, sorrow, labour, sees it, above all else, as something to be measured, weighed, or tempered. Salt, as Toklas intimates, is the stuff that bodies of water (oceans, humans) leave behind. The taste of toiling, weeping, and loving bodies is an affront to "civilized" palettes, and yet, a reminder that we are all constituted by watery ways, that all desiring, working bodies leave their salt. Upon admiring Toklas's sweaty body for the first time, Gertrude Stein responds: "salt enhances the sweetness. Delicious" (185). Toklas speaks of the salt of sorrow's sting and labour's smack, and Stein savors the salt of her lover's movement. Both Toklas and Bình are able to perceive how labouring, loving, and cooking call for or produce salt—that we are connected, even, in our mutual deposits of salt. Bình is not alone, then, in showing understanding of the ways in which salt (like the bodies from which it is extracted) carries its own knowledge, its own memories of its formative

processes and movements. But while Toklas demonstrates that she can read salt in its complexity, she seems incapable of understanding Bình's knowledge as equal to her own, and seeks to colonise Bình's knowledge with her own more "civilized" or cultured understanding of salt and the experiences from which it can be known.

In the novel, deposits of seawater are also described as mounds of salt that are borne of, and thus hold within them, memories of the sea. Nguyễn Ái Quốc compares the remnants of sea to the left-overs of bodies; or, put another way, he likens the salty remains of watery bodies (humans and oceanic) to one another, each to be read through their particular landscapes and histories. Attending to the variances in salt, the unseasonable or untimely left-behind traces, as Bình so often does, is to look backwards as one engages forward, to taste and recognize the salt of otherness. Thus, Truong's queer diasporic subject, though uniquely positioned as a Vietnamese migrant worker in a bourgeois Paris household, is one of many queer exiles to refuse to turn his back on the (salty) sediments (i.e., bodies) of history. To cast a backwards glance on sorrow, to engage in non-conforming, queer love, is an affront to, as Truong states in an interview with her publisher Houghton Mifflin, the Biblical God who famously turns Lot's wife into a pillar of salt "for 'looking back' at her home, to the city of Sodom" at the moment it is being destroyed, disapproving of the practices of both nostalgia and sodomy (Truong, "Press Release"). Heather Love argues that a

"central myth of queer existence describes the paralyzing effects of loss," originating, in part, in the "lesson" of Lot's wife, which is significant

> not only as an account of the violence perpetrated against those accused of the grave sin of homosexuality; it also describes the consequences of the refusal to forget such losses. […] By refusing the destiny that God offers her, Lot's wife is cut off from her family and from the future. In turning back toward this lost world she herself is lost: she becomes a monument to destruction, an emblem of eternal regret. (Love 5)

Truong does not steer Bình away from the experience of regret; indeed, it follows him like a "crippling seasickness" across the ocean and onto land (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 248). Regret, loss, nostalgia are never far from the surface for Bình, triggering bouts of loneliness and habitual cutting since childhood. However, Bình's story does not replicate the cautionary tale of Lot's wife. Bình's story is, instead, as he often remarks, a gift. Y-Dang Troeung brilliantly picks up on this idea in her exploration of postcolonial collaborative autobiography, arguing ultimately that the gift Bình leaves us with is "the story of Bình's intimacies, secrets, and memories that he gives, not to Stein and Toklas, but rather to his imagined community of the underclass, the long line of servants, migrants, and queer exiles who have preceded him through the master's door and who have laid claim to this gift in the past" (130). The story of the basket weaver is one that Bình puzzles over and returns to throughout the

novel. In the end he concludes: "I, like the basket weaver, looked at the abundance around me and believed that there was something more" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 249).

The Book of Salt situates the local, the intimate, and the material within macro-histories of (be)longing, whereby loss does not stifle movement, but is its impetus. Waterways and their salty constitutions are thus similar in composition to Bình's queer subjectivity and his sense of (be)longing or kinship: a state or space of both being and longing that never quite settles, that is always in transit, that is infused with the silt of home (watery deposits of his father's infertile land *and* the salt of nation). At sea Bình learns that "time can also be measured in terms of water, in terms of distance traveled while drifting on it. When measured in this way, nearer and farther are the paths of time's movement, not continuously forward along a fast straight line. When measured in this way, time loops and curlicues, and at any given moment it can spiral me away and then bring me rushing home again" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 190). The ebb and flow of the sea posits a different sort of relation to time and space, aligning, again, more closely with the circularity of memory and desire than the "straight line" of recorded history. Truong's purposeful use of the "spiral" rather than the circle, suggests that there is no point of return, the spiral signaling Bình's movement nearer and further, looping close to the point of departure but never quite arriving or returning. Such movements, in Eng's words, lack "a particular

historical destination or documentary intent" ("The End(s) of Race" 1484). They also situate the sea and the queer subject (of the sea) between and always informed by inherited and chosen forms of destination or (af)filiation.[70]

Within the novel Bình discovers a manuscript titled "The Book of Salt" penned by Gertrude Stein about his life. "The Book of Salt" by Stein, a metaphor for modernist imperial appropriation, is "enabled by the labor of Bình, or more precisely, by the story of Bình's labor under colonialism and capitalism" (Troeung 117). While the novel by Truong, and the fictional manuscript by Stein (Truong comments that there was no such manuscript, despite that Stein did in other instances write about cooks and servants that lived with her), each take Bình's culinary character as a point of departure, they do so, then, to drastically different effect.[71] *The Book of Salt* by Truong, with Bình as narrator, overwrites

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[70] In an analogous context, David L. Eng argues: "Suspended between departure and arrival, Asian Americans remain permanently disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability" ("Out Here and Over There" 31). My reading of displacement and in-betweenness, on the other hand, is aligned with Eleanor Ty's, who, refusing to see "Asian North Americans simply as fatalities of globalization" suggests that "we see 'practices of displacement' as 'constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension'" (xxviii, xxvii).

[71] When asked in an interview if there is "really a manuscript by Stein entitled The Book of Salt?" Truong responds:

> No, I made that manuscript up. In the novel, Bình claims that Stein's *The Book of Salt* is about him. Stein has certainly written about cooks and servants. In *Portraits and Prayers*, for instance, there is a piece called "B. B. or the Birthplace of Bonnes" about all the women from Brittany who had worked in the Stein and Toklas' household. Also, two of the "lives" in Stein's *Three Lives* were servants. So, it does not seem improbable to me

the fictional manuscript, not in an act of attempted erasure—for the lives of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas are well documented elsewhere—but, for Bình, to preserve a story that is illegible, and distasteful, to official, historical narratives. Christopher Castiglia writes about the politics of memory for gay communities, reminding us that in "telling different stories of the past" we are "avoiding unnecessary loss and becoming present to ourselves. To look back is, after all, to refuse the imperative laid down at the destruction of Sodom" (Castiglia 175). Bình's narrative is not necessarily a reinvention of the past, but a means through which we can "think critically about which stories are credited with access to the truth, to the social 'real'" (175). Bình's narrative agency is enabled by his fluency in other epistemological modes—his ability to distinguish between the material and metaphorical differences in the body's salt—which in turn encourages us to question not only which stories (and which epistemological modes) are credited with truth, but upon whose salt these stories depend. In the process of telling his story, Bình is present to himself in a way that he is not present to his father, but also in the way that a story such as his would not have been present to those with whom he was most intimate, again questioning the inclusiveness of a queer modern kinship as embodied by Stein and Toklas for someone like Bình.

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that Stein could have devoted a few words to a cook like Bình. ("Press Release")

An epistemological mode based on the sensate necessitates a melancholic turn backward as a source of both sorrow and strength in the present and yet-to-come future. Wary of becoming lost in a "sea of absolutes," though, and cognizant of the difficulty of "remain[ing] objective when alone in memory" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 105), Bình's version is also a corrective to the authoritative, teleological line of history, drawing attention to his own story as a work of (sometimes unreliable) memory that narrates and meanders in self-conscious uncertainty. Truong mobilizes the queer diasporic figure to construct a more contingent, radical mapping of kinship and belonging, coupled with an obvious current of feeling for the homeland or national space. Bình's backward glance need not be read as a longing for nation per se, or as a longing for national citizenship or other state-sanctioned forms of belonging, but might be read as feelings of homesickness for a natal space that exceeds legal or official configurations of nation, encoding an affective, physical space (mountains and rivers, salt and sea), filial and affiliative ties, and everyday struggles and intimacies associated with a particular place and a particular history.

In the final pages of the novel, Bình silently adjures Gertrude Stein to be more sensitive in her use of salt, reprimanding her for using him as fodder or seasoning for her writing and drawing us back to salt as the stuff of stories and bodies, neither free for the taking. Bình writes: "Salt, I thought. GertrudeStein, what kind? Kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same.

Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine. Do you know, GertrudeStein, which ones I have tasted on my tongue? A story is a gift, Madame, and you are welcome" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 260-261). Bình's description of the important distinctions between salt—in kind (kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea) and in character (their stings, smarts, strengths)—separates his queer sensibility from Stein's and Toklas's. His tongue, like theirs, no stranger to queer love, is nevertheless differentiated by his keen taste for *particular* bodily and geographical locations (Cho 99). Thus, ever sensitive to the taste and varieties of salt, ever hopeful for a "sea change" (Truong, *The Book of Salt* 15) in affairs of the heart, Bình can be read as a queer, diasporic subject whose desire is cast onto and enabled by the drift and movement of sea, and whose watery and salty constitution bear traces of nation, displacement, and labour. To read Bình this way is to attend to queer expressions of kinship that occupy a "not yet" time and space of possibility, conditioned and enabled by non-normative sexuality, and comprised of a never fully satiable desire or taste for home, familiarity, and love.

CHAPTER THREE | KINSHIP FLOWS IN BRANDY NĀLANI MCDOUGALL'S *THE SALT-WIND / KA MAKANI PAʻAKAI*[72]

> We sweat and cry salt-water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood.
>
> (Teresia Teaiwa, qtd. in Hau'ofa 41)

> As indigenous peoples, *our* nationalism is born not of predatory consumption nor of murderous intolerance but of a genealogical connection to our place, Hawaiʻi and—by Polynesian geographical reckoning—to the Pacific. In our genealogy, Papahānaumoku, "earth mother," mated with Wākea, "sky father," from whence came our islands, or *moku*. Out of our beloved islands came the *taro*, our immediate progenitor, and from the *taro*, our chiefs and people. Our relationship to the cosmos is thus familial. As in all of Polynesia, so in Hawaiʻi: elder sibling must feed and care for younger sibling, who returns honor and love. The wisdom of our creation is reciprocal obligation. If we husband our lands and waters, they will feed and care for us. In our language, the name for this relationship is *mālama ʻāina*, "care for the land," who will care for all family members in turn.
>
> (Trask, *From A Native Daughter* 59)

> When I first began learning the Hawaiian language at the University of Hawaiʻi, my teachers taught me that the phrase "i wai noʻu" meant that I wanted water to drink. But after studying Hawaiian culture, language, and history for several years, I learned that the simple request for water could have many other meanings. When people wish to fight, they might challenge their opponents by calling out "i wai noʻu!" with the belief that

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[72] From the special issue on Water of *Feminst Review* (Issue 103), I would like to thank Laleh Khalili, Rutvica Andrijasevic, and Benita Rajania for their editorial guidance (and patience!), as well as two anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback on an earlier version of this paper. To Candace Fujikane, Brandy Nālani McDougall, and Benjamin Authers: many, many thanks for casting a critical and caring eye over multiple drafts of this paper—your feedback was both invaluable to bringing this paper to its current form and wonderfully supportive. Finally, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Daniel Coleman, Alexis Motuz, Hayden King, and Rick Monture for proofreading earlier drafts or portions of this paper, and to Craig Howes, Amy Brinker, and Chantrelle Waialae for pointing me to appropriate Hawaiian texts, writing, activism, and artwork.

> their opponents will quench their thirst for a battle. Lovers might say this to each other in the throes of passion, wanting their desires to be slaked. The subjects of the Hawaiian kingdom might have said something similar to this to Queen Lili'uokalani, the last reigning monarch, when they were asking for a new constitution to replace the oppressive Bayonet Constitution. These examples reflect different facets of urgent desire, constant seeking, and yearning, all crying out to be quenched. This same deep thirst defines and motivates the contemporary cultural and political movement to recover Hawaiian sovereignty, language, traditions, and stories.
>
> (Kuwada et al. 1)

Water is of central importance to the Pacific Islands. Salt-water encircles and enlivens island spaces, and fresh-water feeds streams and rivers essential to terrestrial ecosystems and healthy watersheds. *Moana Nui*, the "Great Ocean," connects the people of the Pacific through the currents of their ocean home. [73] The Pacific itself is an ocean continent: oceanic waters do not divide the islands but rather connect them as pathways. Hau'ofa argues in his seminal essays "Our Sea of Islands" and "The Ocean in Us" that Oceania's varied islands, home to generations of seafarers touched in every aspect by the influences of the sea,

[73] I use the terms Oceania (from Hau'ofa and others) and Moana Nui throughout this paper. Alice Te Punga Somerville points out that some scholars use the term Moana instead of Oceania/Pacific (the latter being in the language of the colonizer) but as Teresia Teaiwa would "perhaps caution us, the term 'moana,' while usefully pan-Polynesian is not Pan-Oceanian, and so reinforces a Polynesian hegemony in scholarship of the region" ("Nau Te Rourou, Nau Te Rakau" 98). Moana Nui has also been taken up in contemporary activist contexts, and it is this sense with which I invoke it. The *Moana Nui 2011* conference and organizing, for example, emerged in response to the militarization of the Pacific, which includes: the Asia-Pacific region, nations of the Pacific rim (Australia and the American and Asian nations), and Pacific Island nations ("Moana Nui").

ought to come together under a new regionalism that has, in some ways, always united the people of Oceania.

The sea is the real physical space that unites the Islanders of Oceania, one that all can perceive with their senses, but it is also a most wonderful metaphor (Hau'ofa 56). This (re)turn to both the oceanic world and the subterraneous groundwater that circulates through island spaces presents a shift in thinking: we move from "'islands in a far sea'" to "'a sea of islands'" (Hau'ofa 31)—from faraway clusters of archipelagos surrounded by ocean to a huge liquid rhizome encompassing island groups. Such a shift serves to reclaim the fullness of life in Oceania in response to disempowering representations that privilege land over water and falsely characterize the Pacific Islands as isolated masses of land, or, "tiny fantasy islands" (Trask, *From a Native Daughter* 41) in a distant sea.[74] Most importantly, by reclaiming Oceania as a regional identity, Hau'ofa's vision "decenters the relationship between colonizer and colonized in favor of local constructions of the region as a space overwritten by multiple crisscrossings and navigational histories" (Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific* 193). In other words, Indigenous knowledges and movements of the Pacific are recentred through this critical return to Oceania.

[74] Haunani-Kay Trask writes: "For the First World, the Pacific archipelagos are filled with tiny fantasy islands more reflective of a 'state of mind' than an actual geographic place. This view, of course, is rejected by Pacific Islanders themselves, since the Pacific is their ancestral ocean but lately invaded by colonial powers" (41).

This chapter focuses on poetry that emerges from one constituent part of Oceania—the islands and waters of Hawaiʻi. I follow the salt- and subterraneous fresh-water flows in Hawaiian[75] poet Brandy Nālani McDougall's collection of poetry *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai*. In so doing, I illustrate how, borrowing from Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, a thirst for water in Hawaiʻi—both literal and metaphorical—reveals a deeper thirst for a revitalization of Hawaiian kinship practices. As in Chapter Two, this chapter articulates a form of kinship with a strong regional focus that unsettles a territorially-bound logic of belonging: in both chapters, waterways and cross-oceanic navigation are simultaneously pathways to and sites of belonging—oceans and rivers do not necessarily divide the homespace, but enlarge it. For Bình the ocean is a complex space, and his oceanic mobility cannot be read simply; he casts himself out to sea as a consequence of his father's rejection, but also flourishes, in a sense, while at sea as a queer subject who is afforded a refuge from the patriarchal homespace. Chapter Two posited the "potential efficacy of theorizing intimacy [or queer desire] as a 'moving' archive" and asks how we might "imagine intimacy encounters as archives of postcoloniality, diaspora, displacement, dispossession and other forms of global movement?" (Ahmed qtd in Antwi et al., "Not Without Ambivalence" 120). Thinking kinship and intimacy as moving archives constitutes

[75] See footnote 2 in this project's introduction for a discussion of my use of the terms "Hawaiians" and "Native Hawaiians."

an essential remapping of territorial space and teleological timelines of state and family according to the complex desires, movements, and histories of diasporic and mobile subjects—rather than heeding to the time, space, and story of Euro-American modernity which would exclude such subjects from its narrative (Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship* 64).

That nation-states have been made through territorialisation (of land and water) obscures the unequal geopolitical mobilities that have characterized oceanic modernity, but also unmakes water as a living, vital presence (Perera 65).[76] How are waters made into lifeless sites of passage, repositories of waste, sites of military bomb-testing through a "crude sovereign logic of territoriality" (Perera 59)? As with Chapter Two, then, a turn toward kinship in this final chapter means rethinking oceanic space, here through waters that are spatially and ontologically connective: "the sea," Hau'ofa writes, "is our pathway to each other and to everyone else, the sea is our endless saga, the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us" (58).

This thirst for water, in responding to the devastating effects of cross-oceanic colonial incursions into island spaces, is underwritten by and inseparable

[76] Suvendrini Perera, borrowing from Deborah Bird Rose, writes: by means of "serviceable geographies, the oceans are annexed to the global borderlands. Water is unmade, configured as a space of stasis, suspension, confinement, capture and death" (65).

from a quest for Hawaiian sovereignty, language, and tradition. Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada describes this thirst in Hawaiʻi thus:

> Writers, artists, scholars, dancers, poets, musicians, farmers, and fishers have all expressed a deep and unquenched thirst that has driven them to action. We are searching not just for literal water, by lobbying for water rights, restoring streams and fishponds, and reopening loʻi, but also water that sustains us as a people through the reawakening and reinvigorating of our culture, language, and sovereignty. In many ways, the seeking is also the drinking because these efforts to find sustenance have provided it as well (Kuwada et al. 2).

In exploring efforts to reawaken and reinvigorate Hawaiian culture, language and sovereignty as a thirst, and one that also finds expression in *The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai*, I am reminded of the aspirational and ever-deferred desire that characterizes Valentino's search for belonging in *What Is the What*, except for that here, the "seeking is also the drinking," implying sustenance in the search itself. McDougall illustrates that in order to begin anew in the aftermath of American imperialism and environmental destruction, one must return to the salt-water and sub-surface waterways, and the ancestral connections and voices therein that beckon her (and others) home. In this way, her work is situated within contemporary movements within the Pacific, presently coming together in deimperializing efforts to restructure a future for the Pacific that is "beyond

empires" (Fujikane 191) by emphasizing the connecting currents of Moana Nui that have enabled trans-Oceanic travel and trans-Indigenous exchange between Pacific island communities long before the violent imposition of settler-nation states.[77]

Hawaiian literature plays an integral role in these efforts by creating counter-narratives that place Hawaiians and their values, and the intimate relations between the land, sea, and people at the "'centre of the creative endeavour'" (Haunani-Kay Trask qtd. in McDougall, ""From Uē to Kūʻē" 61). Here, I illustrate the centrality of water and genealogy to Hawaiian sovereignty, language, tradition, and stories. I look to how the water that passes through the taro plant infuses all manner of kinship, economic, and social relations in Hawaiʻi, connecting Kānaka Maoli to their common ancestor Hāloa, and to land, sea and each other, as well as—through the formative oceanic movements of Moana Nui—to other Pacific Islanders.

[77] Candace Fujikane summarizes the collective impact of current efforts to expose and challenge militarized capitalism and the "fragile fictions" of US empire through anti-APEC and Moana Nui organizing. She writes: "As anti-APEC and Moana Nui organizing and demonstrations illustrated the fragile fiction of empires, it is the cumulative effect of these deimperializing moments that is restructuring a future beyond empires. The magnitude of this imperial, militarized capitalism is rendered as a global map of stress points that cannot bear its inhuman burdens. Interlinked popular movements and their production of knowledge, then, become like bursts of runaway voltage striking at these stress points" (Fujikane 191).

Drawing on the Hawaiian concept of *kaona*,[78] I explore how water mobilizes spiritual and familial interdependence.[79] On Hawaiian shores, epistemological (as well as physical, emotional, and spiritual) resistance to American colonial and imperial presence has been ongoing since the time of contact. Kaona, "understood as the multiple (and sometimes artistically hidden) meaning of words" is a "general phenomenon in the Hawaiian language" (Arista 666). Noelani Arista describes it as a Hawaiian-based reading practice and historical methodology that reveals interconnected meanings and contexts and, in so doing, questions the "validity of monoperspectival Euro-American interpretations of contact, colonization, and resistance" (668). Arista asks: "How does one use *kaona* to think—for example, to conceptualize history—in a *kaona*-conscious way? Or, more simply, in a way that reflects Hawaiian systems of thought and connection and their tolerance and preference for multiplicity in

[78] From here, I have not italicised Hawaiian words in order to foreground the fact that ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi is not a foreign language in Hawaiʻi.

[79] Being kaona-conscious is particularly important in this context in terms of being aware of the "ethical and political aspects of our epistemic conduct" (Fricker 2)—both how I undertake a reading of Hawaiian kinship practices from the outside, and the methods or metaphors I choose to follow. As a non-Indigenous, Canadian scholar, my reading of water in McDougall's poetry is limited by my geophysical, cultural, ontological, and epistemological distance, and my fledgling cultural and linguistic knowledge (on the necessity of the latter, see Arista 18). I take to heart the call for "a re-cognition of Hawaiʻi as sustained by indigenous conceptions of place and genre" (Bacchilega 1), and acknowledge the centrality of community and place. This entails "unmaking the naturalized fiction that is a *legendary Hawaiʻi*" constructed primarily for the interest of tourism" (1) by following the lead of others who are "re-envisioning" Hawai'i, instead, as an "indigenous 'storied place'" (1).

relation between not only words but also *worlds*" (666). McDougall and Nordstrom write that "the enactment of kaona is deeply cultural; it is an aesthetic appeal and, at the same time, part of a rhetorics of survivance that has been and continues to be employed by Hawaiians to assert rhetorical sovereignty, a means of communication essential to a national citizenry" (100).[80]

Further, kaona communicates in ways that readers of Hawaiian texts need to be attentive to—political, historical, cultural, critical, and activist ways—and also in ways that suggest such layered meaning can be deployed as a strategy of resistance. Not only does kaona demand an in-depth knowledge of the Hawaiian tradition, but its hidden meanings communicate directly to a Hawaiian audience, delivering messages specifically to Hawaiian readers, affirming Hawaiian traditions and modes of telling, and creating unity among Hawaiian listeners (McDougall and Nordstrom 117). Kaona requires that the non-Indigenous reader do the work required to understand not only the words of the poem, but the context within which the poem was composed and published or performed, the literary aesthetic and political traditions upon which it is based, and the importance of its retelling to Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians alike,

[80] See McDougall and Nordstrom's article on Haunani-Kay Trask and Queen Liliʻuokalani. Their paper looks at how both Liliʻuokalani and Trask used/use kaona in their writing, both part of a resistant "literary tradition of Hawaiian intellectualism that pre-dates Western contact" (113).

acknowledging, of course, that for non-Hawaiians, there will always be (strategically) hidden meanings that will remain inaccessible or off-limits.

Understanding Hawaiian kinship by following water—which is equally essential to land claims (there indeed is no land without the streams that run through them) as it is to Hawaiian ontology—redirects a discussion of Hawaiian genealogy and sovereignty so that it is not always couched in terms that privilege land-based understandings of law and history.[81] Indeed, water is a central organizing feature of social, economic, and legal systems in traditional Hawaiʻi, as illustrated by the fact that wai (water in ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi), is the root of the words waiwai (wealth) and kānāwai (law). It is no surprise then that water "continues to be one of the most hotly disputed areas of law" (Earth Justice) despite the fact that water in Hawaiʻi is a public trust resource, protected under the state Constitution and Water Code.

Following water moves beyond colonially based beginnings, starting instead with ancient water routes and memories carried by sea and wind. Most importantly here, following water enables a more fluid, as well as historically and

[81] In writing this chapter, I was inspired by an unpublished manuscript written by Daniel Coleman called "Watershed." Curious about the water beneath his feet, he writes about his attempt to follow the water in his backyard that seeps beneath the soiled surface, water that is shape-shifting and "shy and retiring" always looking for lower ground. What he discovers about the watershed on top of which his house rests is that from "time immemorial, people have come here because of water"–the Attawanderons and the Princess Point peoples, and many others after, uncovering the ancient routes and memories housed in the waterways next to which he lives.

culturally accurate depiction of the meaning of kinship in Hawaiʻi—that is, a kinship that literally flows through and beyond island lands to other Pacific Islanders.[82]

***I wai noʻu* (give me water): A Thirst for Kinship and Sovereignty**

In an introduction to a special issue on Hawaiian sovereignty, Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, inspired by an "evocative and impassioned explanation" of the phrase "i wai noʻu" given by poet Noʻukahauʻoli Revilla, draws from its simple meaning—give me water—to speak to more complex "facets of urgent desire, constant seeking, and yearning, all crying out to be quenched" (Kuwada et al. 1). Kuwada therefore makes a connection between a thirst for the literal waters of Hawaiʻi and the "deep thirst [that] defines and motivates the contemporary cultural and political movement to recover Hawaiian sovereignty, language, tradition, and stories" (Kuwada et al. 1). A revitalization of Hawaiian kinship

[82] I intentionally describe this latter movement as between *Indigenous*, rather than transnational, spaces. In Chadwick Allen's critique of the scholarly construct of the "transnational" in its attachments to dominant, US-based formations of states and area studies, he reminds those interested in comparative Indigenous work of the kinds of assumptions such a term makes. Does such a rubric, Allen writes, "position the Indigenous within and beneath systems of meaning-making dominated by the desires, obsessions, and contingencies of non-Indigenous settlers, their non-Indigenous nation-states, their non-Indigenous institutions, their non-Indigenous critical methodologies and discourses" ("A Trans*national* Native American Studies*?"* 3)? These are extremely important questions—particularly in the context of Moana Nui, the ocean continent, and the navigational histories it represents, which have facilitated trans-Indigenous exchange well before the fashioning of the term transnational.

practices—which derive from deeply rooted cosmologies and epistemologies that dictate all manner of ecological, economic, and social practice—go hand-in-hand with sovereignty efforts. Further, Hawaiian understandings of kinship are not restrained to island spaces; reclaiming waters and homelands on an individual *and* collective scale in Oceania is also part of Hau'ofa's point. Sovereignty efforts work in conjunction with, and are an integral part of, "Hau'ofa's reframing of the (colonially imagined) Pacific as the (Indigenously imagined) Oceania" (Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific* 112). An Indigenously imagined Oceania is, however, "additional" to struggles of sovereignty within settler nation-states (Hau'ofa 42). McDougall's poetry is multiply situated, reflective of both "ongoing [expressions of Hawaiian] sovereignty" (McDougall, ""From Uē to Kūʻē" 51) within and off-island spaces, gesturing to a familial Pacific, as well as expressive of Hawaiian concepts such as aloha ʻāina (love for the land, patriotism, nationalism), moʻokūʻauhau (genealogical connection to the land and to other people), and kuleana (a sense of responsibility).

Barriers to the contemporary sovereignty movement are as epistemological as they are historical and political in nature, and too numerous to account for here. But of particular note is that even though there is growing public awareness of Hawaiʻi's current colonial situation (Kuwada et al. 1), what is still unknown to many who have settled in or visit Hawaiʻi is the fact that

sovereignty in Hawaiʻi is "not an objective that Kānaka ʻŌiwi are fighting for but it is a political condition they have never lost" (Fujikane 196). Claims to sovereignty are further complicated by the continuing presence of white and Asian settlers in Hawaiʻi who are implicated, even if unwittingly, in the colonial erasures of the US settler state by contributing to the dispossession of Indigenous lands and waters (see Fujikane and Okamura).

Given U.S. law that quantifies, by blood, Hawaiian claims to identity and land, resistance to ongoing colonial scripts and presences entails a revitalization of genealogical practices among Hawaiians that emphasize the importance of Hawaiian notions of kinship over blood quantum in Indigenous Hawaiian epistemologies (Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood* 3-5). Indigenous kinship is, Justice writes, "adaptive," while race, which features in state-based forms of recognition, "always runs the risk of becoming washed out to the point of insignificance" (Justice, "'Go Away, Water!'" 159). I argue that McDougall's poetry frames resistance to the ongoing colonial scripts and presences, then, through this thirst for water, and the articulation of ancestral flows of kinship. Thirst, again, implies constant seeking whereby the sustenance is in the search itself, emphasizing the work involved in, and adaptive movement inherent to, flows of kinship.

McDougall's poetry explores the exchanges that take place between Kānaka Maoli and ancestral lands, waters, and oceanic navigation via an ethos of

"reciprocity" (Wilson, "Towards"). A reading practice that follows water in this way as ancestral, reciprocal flow demonstrates how poets like McDougall contribute to acts of resistance through works that simultaneously assert the sovereignty of Indigenous Hawaiians and enact the "world enlarging" genealogical project of Oceania that Hau'ofa maps out. I start, then, with the salt-laden winds of McDougall's collection, which situate Hawai'i's history centrally within the great ocean continent and guide us through historic and contemporary sites of exchange.

Salt-water

In coastal areas in Hawai'i, salt from sea spray is picked up by wind, leaving a fine layering of salt on cars, clothes, plants, houses, and skin. But the salt-wind of McDougall's collection carries more than just salt. It carries the deeper truths held by an ocean that has borne witness to all manner of sea travel, exploration, and exploitation.

The dispossession and environmental destruction of Hawaiian lands and waters by years of colonial, imperial, military, tourist, and corporate incursions is well-documented (Trask, 1999; Kajihiro, 2008; Shigematsu and Camacho, 2010; Fujikane, 2012).[83] Absent from the fictionalised version of Hawai'i many have

[83] For a summary of how some of these forces have aligned in Asia and the Pacific, see Candace Fujikane's article "Asian American critique and Moana Nui 2011: securing a future beyond empires, militarized capitalism and APEC" (Asia-

come to know through the tourist industry is the fact that for over a hundred years, Hawaiʻi has been a nation illegally occupied by the United States. On 17 January 1893, the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi was overthrown by US military force. US Public Law 103-150, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, apologizes for the overthrow of "the indigenous and lawful Government of Hawaii [sic]" by armed naval forces, recognizing an unlawful abuse of authority with both immediate and insidious ill effects for Kānaka Maoli. Public Law 103-150 acknowledges that Native Hawaiians "never directly relinquished their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people or over their national lands to the United States" ("UNITED STATES PUBLIC LAW 103-150"). Loss of Hawaiian sovereignty, however, did not begin with the overthrow, but had its roots in the 1848 Māhele, which marked the legal transition in land tenure from communal to private ownership (Kameʻeleihiwa, *Native Land*). ʻĀina (the land) is, as Kameʻeleihiwa points out, "the basis for all sovereignty in Hawaiian society" (*Native Land* 13), and so the dispossession of both the land and the water that runs through it struck a forceful blow to fundamental Hawaiian beliefs and traditions that see and treat

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Pacific Economic Cooperation). For a brief history, and current status of the US militarization of Hawaiʻi, see DMZ Hawaiʻi / Aloha ʻĀina website: http://www.dmzhawaii.org/. See, also, the edited collection *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho, and *Noho Hewa: The Wrongful Occupation of Hawaiʻi* (2008).

land and humans as related and interdependent, obligated to one another for both spiritual and physical survival.

The ravages of colonial encounters in Hawaiʻi are recounted—but also decentred—in the very first poem of Brandy Nālani McDougall's collection, called "Pō," which references night, chaos, darkness, the "primordial female element necessary for all creation" (hoʻomanawanui, "Mana Wahine" 32):

> Before the land was tamed by industry,
> the oceanside resorts and pineapple plantations,
> before the cane knife's rust, the dark time of sickness,
> the coming of cannons, the bitter waters drunk,
> before the metallic salt of blood, the rain emptied
> into rivers, the winds carved valleys and mountains,
> before the earth spurted fire, birthed islands,
> her churning magma and her inner core of iron,
> before the stars dwarved, their coronas ignited,
> before the centripetal spin of galaxies,
> the unwinding gestures of time and space,
> before the light and heat—
>
> There was darkness without breath and Pō,
> pressing the entirety of a universe into a shell
> the size of an atomic nucleus, waiting.
> (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 3).

Regarding Pō, Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa argues that "mana wahine represents a 'force that men must never ignore, for in a world where genealogical ranking [means] everything, the first ancestor [Pō, the female night who gives birth to herself] is the most powerful'" (*Nā Wāhine Kapu* 3 qtd. in McDougall, *Laugh of the Goddess*). That genealogy is fundamental to Hawaiian identity is not an

overstatement here. The essential lesson of the Kumulipo, "the great cosmogonic genealogy," states Kameʻeleihiwa, "is that every aspect of the Hawaiian conception of the world is related by birth, and as such, all parts of the Hawaiian world are one indivisible lineage" (*Native Land* 2). She continues: "Conceived in this way, the genealogy of the Land, the Gods, Chiefs, and people intertwine with one another, and with all the myriad aspects of the universe […] Our shared genealogy helps us define our *Lāhui* (nation) as an entity distinct from the waves of foreigners that have inundated our islands" (2-3). Genealogy situates Hawaiians within and in relation to time, history, land, ocean, cosmos. It is epistemology and ontology, and for these reasons inseparable from struggles for sovereignty. McDougall does not evade the muddy waters of history in this opening poem, but wades through them to return to a time before creation—long before Cook's arrival in 1778. Industry, plantations, and sickness appear in "Pō" as a—not insignificant—but still relatively small blip on a much larger cosmological scale of the creation of valleys, mountains, stars, galaxies, time, space, light, and heat. Finally arriving at the primordial place of darkness, honouring and embodying the creative element of the first ancestor, Pō, the speaker births the Hawaiian world into being through poem. From here a series of events is set into motion that will connect all Hawaiians through time and space.

The Salt-Wind, salted by ocean, and carrying on its wind the history and memory of sea, courses through the collection and speaks to both Native Hawaiian historical stories and ecologies that underwrite and continually renew the poetic voice, drawing attention to historical annexation and colonial incursions by archiving their material remains (i.e., the salt of blood and bone). Micro- and macro-histories of the island—including those both familial and cultural—can be read through traces of salt: "the metallic salt of blood" (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 3), the "salt-swept waves" (6), "the salt / of tears, of bone" (12), the tide's "lei of salted steam" (13) and "the salt-pricked wind" (61). The salt of blood, of waves, of tears, of bone, and of wind variously marks "The History of This Place," as the title of one poem gestures, from the time before tourism and plantations, to the massacre at Olowalu (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 11), to the arrival of Captain Cook (52), to a father's embarrassed tears (44), to visitations from ancestral spirits (45), and so on. Ancestors whose "bones lay sleeping" in "sand dunes and caves," now disturbed by the encroachments of foreign development,[84] bear the salt of sea and history (Andrade 221). As in

[84] To provide but one example: in the late 1980s, the development of the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Kapalua, Maui, disturbed a sacred burial site. Protests by Hawaiians were successful in moving the location of the hotel away from the sacred site and further inland. Their successful effort not only helped recognize Honokahua as a sacred site, it also spurred the amendment of Hawai'i's law on historic preservation, Chapter 6E, to include "'the care and treatment of prehistoric and historic burials'" (Inserra 97). See Collins "Historic Preservation"

Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, salt is the sediment of this movement, the left-behind of tears, sweat, voyages of sea, labour, love, melancholy, joy. It stays ashore when the waters of life have long since washed away.

At the same time that salt acts as a kind of witness to a violent history of settler colonialism in Hawaiʻi, the salt-laden wind that drifts through McDougall's poetry serves as a gentle but persistent reminder that all Pacific Islanders are connected through Moana Nui, through their deposits of salt. Salt, in other words, is borne of the ocean, and draws attention to trans-Pacific exchange and connection, in ontological, as well as material terms. In the collection's foreword, Māhealani Perez-Wendt writes,

> salt adds its savor throughout the collection—it pulsates in the blood, forms rivulets of tears, is spun fine by time, washes over rocks, etches glass, is sieved through valley rains—it is the commonest of elements and the poet reminds us that we are part of its vast surround. Our home is ocean, and we, too, are carried on the winds; we, too, will return, and return again. (xii)

The people of Oceania are watered like the ocean, and they too, like the ocean and its salt-wind, not only leave their salt, "but return, and return again,"

---

in Howes and Osorio, *The Value of Hawaiʻi: Knowing the Past, Shaping the Future* p. 203; and Franco Salmoiraghi, "Honokahua."

articulating new forms of resistance and knowledge. This is echoed in the final lines of "Over and Over the Return, Moʻokūʻauhau."

> Soon, the wind will carry its delicate fragrance
> of commingled pine needles, old kukui shells and niu husk,
> all the salt of its journey, infinitesimal pieces of broken bottles
> under the naupaka, and everything else unseen and nearly
> forgotten
>
> turned to sand. This same wind will return
> to the same folds of mauna, offering over and over
> its gifts, and like nā kūpuna, always leaving, always returning.
> (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 86)

Here the wind picks up shards of interwoven histories, the salt of its journey a reminder and material trace of what has come before. Salt clings to bones, words, winds, surviving and defying a colonial project of erasure. The salt-wind, like the kūpuna (elders), carries important and difficult truths, but returns again and again to offer its gifts. Hawaiian kinship itself implies a continual return, a perpetual connection backward and forward simultaneously, drawing lines of continuity to those of the past and those not-yet arrived.

In 1896, three years after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, English was elevated to the official language of Hawaiʻi, while ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi was relegated to the status of a foreign language. Reflecting on all the lost words left unspoken by the introduction and privileging of English, McDougall's "Ka ʻŌlelo" is a series of five sonnets that explores "native-language loss and acquisition" (Perez 90). In the first sonnet, the speaker mourns the loss of words, including

those that were given to the winds and the rains that, as Perez observes, wait for their reclamation (91). The winds and rains of each district in Hawaiʻi were named for their scent, the nature of their caress, and their "manner of travel" across land and sea (McGregor 213). The *Salt-Wind*, then, is named by McDougall for the difficult and joyful histories that persist into the present, its salt continually beckoning back to an ocean that whispers, "*This is where you belong*" (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 23, emphasis in original).

Salt does not signal the evaporation of sea, then, but is its fine material imprint. The *Salt-Wind* and the ocean it emerges from are also sacred in their incantations. Being that makani (wind) also means spirit, the *Salt-Wind* alludes to the spirits that ride on and accompany the different winds of the island. As briefly mapped out in the introduction to this dissertation, there is an epistemological turn across various academic disciplines, all invested in challenging the "interpretive epistemologies we have inherited from the secular, Euro-American Enlightenment tradition" (Coleman, "Epistemological Crosstalk" 54), towards a grappling with the spiritual profiles of (human and other-than-human) existence. In terms of the Hawaiian context, Leilani Holmes reminds us, "Political/social history does not exist in a different realm from indigenous [Hawaiian] cosmology; rather, it intersects with that cosmology" (Holmes 38). Mary Kawena Pukui, a much respected kupuna and translator of Hawaiian-language texts (chants, songs, histories), writes, "In old Hawaiʻi, one's relatives

were both earthly and spiritual" (Pukui, Haertig, and Lee 168). McDougall's *The Salt-Wind* does not simply remind us of the necessity of such projects; like many others the world over reclaiming the experiential, spiritual, and embodied knowledge of Indigenous people, texts like *The Salt-Wind* are the reason for—not the result of—such crucial academic and ontological moves.[85] *The Salt-Wind* demonstrates that the spiritual is not only epistemological (Alexander 293), but a regenerating, life-giving force that guides diplomatic, socioeconomic, and political relations in a world devastated by ongoing forms of imperialism.

How then does water (salt and fresh) facilitate genealogical—and spiritual or cosmological—flow in McDougall's poetry? And how does this thirst for water—as desire, as sustenance, as contention, as corrective, as cosmology—motivate and inform "Hawaiian sovereignty, language, tradition, and stories" (Kuwada et al. 1)? To continue to formulate an answer, I turn towards the subterraneous flows of fresh-water, and finally over and across the ocean to offshore relations with familial others.

[85] In the Second Edition of *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, we see the addition of two new sections, one on "Environment" and the other on "The Sacred," at the same time that we see new transdisciplinary programs in Spiritual Ecology. See, for example, the Spiritual Ecology Concentration offered by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hawaiʻi Mānoa.

Kinship Flows

In among poems recounting conversations across oceanic expanses, the mana of rain forming puddles at a young girl's feet, and a journey to Maui's Haleakalā, the last section of McDougall's collection, titled "Hāloa Naka," follows the slow but hopeful process required to tongue anew a language silenced by years of settler colonialism, and reclaimed by a wide open sea, English proving inadequate to the task of encompassing "the land's unfolding song, nor the ocean's / ancient oli" (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 66).

The poem "Hāloanaka," which appears midway through this final section, speaks to the islands' splendid offerings that form the basis of Hawaiian kinship relations. To understand just how, it is useful to chart the complex cyclical chain of extended atmospheric and familial relations that are set in motion by the birth of the poem's eponymous Hāloanaka. Embedded in this relationship is an ethic of care and reciprocity, and an epistemological and spiritual relation to time and place.

In the epic tradition of Wākea (Sky Father) and Papahānaumoku (Earth Mother), the birth of both kalo (taro) and Kānaka Maoli is recounted. Wākea and Papahānaumoku have a daughter named Hoʻohōkūkalani. One night, Wākea seduces Hoʻohōkūkalani, and together they have a child whom they call Hāloanaka (long quivering stalk). Hāloanaka, stillborn, is buried in the earth, and from Hāloanaka's body grows the first kalo plant: its leaf is named lau-kapa-lili,

and its stem, Hāloa. The second child of Wākea is called Hāloa, named in honour of his elder brother, after the stalk of the taro plant. Hāloa, in turn, is "the progenitor of all the peoples of the earth" (David Malo qtd. in Handy, Handy, and Pukui 80). Hāloanaka (elder sibling), in the form of taro, "must feed and care for younger sibling [Kānaka Maoli], who returns honor and love" (Trask, *From a Native Daughter* 59). From this relationship a tradition of reciprocity is born: Mālama ʻĀina, or "caring for the Land" represents "the reciprocal duty of the elder siblings to hānai (feed) the younger ones, as well as to love and hoʻomalu (protect) them. […] So long as younger Hawaiians love, serve, and honor their elders, the elders [the ʻāina, the kalo, and the Aliʻi Nui, or chiefs] will continue to do the same for them, as well as to provide for all their physical needs" (Kameʻeleihiwa, *Native Land* 25, emphasis in original). The poem "Hāloanaka" begins, then, with a gracious address to Hāloanaka, common ancestor to all Kānaka Maoli, for whom the poem is named:

> There is no need to sweeten
> your body's ripe offering
> to suit my open mouth.
>
> I take you in, as you are—
> the taste of earth and light,
> salt-wind sieved through valley rains.
> (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 71)

Hāloanaka not only signifies the earliest of cosmological kinship ties between Kānaka Maoli and their land, but goes on to play a central role in

Hawaiian culture as a major source of sustenance. A semi-aquatic plant, the taro cannot exist without "earth and light, / salt-wind sieved through valley rains" (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 71)—that is, an abundant supply of rain, sunlight, and fresh-water, the latter of which flowed from mauka to makai in running streams that ran through irrigated terraces and were diverted back into those same streams during the pre-contact era (Sproat, "Water" 188). The entire subsistence economy of Hawaiʻi before Western contact was determined by this economical and sustainable course of fresh-water streams and ditches, whereby the "streams and ditches were "the regulators, the law givers, in communal relationship; not directly, but because *upon their water depended the taro, and upon the taro depended man*" (Handy, Handy, and Pukui 76; emphasis mine). Furthermore, the fresh-water that fed into the near shore marine areas in pre-contact times, comments Kapuaʻala Sproat, "provided nutrients for our estuaries and fisheries and were really the nursery ground for the animals in our ocean area" (Sproat, Moriwake, and Knoblauch). Water flowing from mountain to sea sustained all life across this terraqueous terrain, infiltrating all aspects of public and private affairs, and demonstrating the deeply rooted nature of the "land/sea continuum" (Andrade 218) in Hawaiian stories of origin and belief. Hāloanaka is thus also associated with Kāne, one of the Hawaiian pantheon's four principle akua (gods, ancestors). Kāne is the god of freshwater sources and the embodiment of male procreative energy in sunshine and in the fresh-water that

flows in springs, streams, and rivers and falls as rain (Handy, Handy, and Pukui 64). Life-giving waters are therefore deemed sacred as "a physical manifestation of Kāne," and for this reason, could "not be commodified or reduced to physical ownership" (Sproat, "Ola I Ka Wai").

A reading conscious of kaona explores how each word, each reference, opens up a deluge of interrelated Hawaiian meanings and worlds. In the brief opening lines of "Hāloanaka," while never explicitly detailing this complex chain of relations, or the role of water in sustaining them, the speaker weaves her way through a cosmological genealogy of origin, with allusion to the role of earth, light, salt-wind, and rain, not only in the cultivation of taro but in the spiritual regeneration and continuity of Kānaka Maoli. The taste of the taro plant unfolds on the tongue as waterlogged, sun-soaked earth—enfolding past, present, and future in this act of absorption.

Hāloanaka's birth is far from a singular offering. The final lines of the poem read, "Still, you give yourself over / and over again, e hiapo, / your sacrifice made ripe / in the soil's short incubation— / so that we may live knowing love / and 'ohana, our bright belonging" (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 71). 'Ohā refers to the corm or the sprouts of the taro plant, and is the root of the word 'ohana, the word for family in Hawaiian, in a much extended sense of the term. Further, taro has for thousands of years been cultivated across Polynesia, Melanesia, Indonesia, and Southern Asia, though nowhere else cultivated as "intensely or as

skillfully as it was in the Hawaiian islands" (Handy, Handy, and Pukui 79). Thus, taro becomes identified as both primordial *and* pan-Polynesian (79), connecting Hawaiians to, through, and across the familial Pacific.

From taro comes poi. And poi opens up the body to receive the foundational flows that have sustained Hawaiians: the speaker's taste in "Hāloanaka" summons Hawaiian gods and immerses us in historic flows as terrestrial ecosystems filter water into precious aquifers and set into motion profoundly rooted socioeconomic and spiritual relations. Hāloanaka's coming into existence through water, earth, and sun reflects a relation that is physical and spiritual at its core, and illustrates that Hawaiian kinship swells from the subterraneous ground up. To harvest both wetland and dry land taro, water is essential. Taro grows from the water-drenched earth of the loʻi kalo. The watery bed from which the taro grows is at times barely visible beneath the mass of heart-shaped leaves, but it is there, always there, as a reading conscious of kaona might reveal.

Oceanic Crossings and/of Poi

> No fo'get eat poi, brah. Az da connection to Hāloa
> to yaw ʻohana, yaw kūpuna, yaw histawry an yaw
> ancestry
> Az da best way fo' mālama kou kino—respec'
> one Hawaiian, brah.
> An if you not Hawaiian—az how you respect us. Oh yeah—an
> give us back some waddah an ʻāina so we can keep growin'

an grinding ʻum!

(hoʻomanawanui, "The protocols of poi" 33)

Traditionally in Hawaiʻi, most of the water used for taro cultivation was returned to the streams so that water always remained in the watershed and could be communally accessed. Fresh-water streams from almost every watershed in Hawaiʻi have, since the establishment of plantation agriculture in the nineteenth-century, been diverted to service sugar plantations for private profit, and following the sugar industry's decline, are being used as a source of profit for water companies that have emerged in their place. In order to accommodate new demands for water, large-scale irrigation systems were constructed that circumvented natural watersheds and redirected them from "wet, Windward, predominantly Native Hawaiian communities, to the drier Central and Leeward plains where sugar was cultivated, and wells siphoned ground water" (Sproat, "Water" 189). The diversion of water away from the loʻi kalo to service plantation agriculture, and now other ventures of capitalist enterprise, is a violation of long-held customs and laws in Hawaiʻi that, as mentioned earlier, hold that water is a public trust (Sproat, "Ola I Ka Wai").[86] The loss of this public trust resource is about a loss of *relations* as much as it is about water shortage; that is, projects of colonial or corporate development enact

[86] For an analysis of water as a public trust from ancient times to present day protections, see *Ola Ika Wai: A Legal Primer for Water Use and Management in Hawaiʻi* by Kapuaʻala Sproat.

psychic, economic, spiritual, cultural, and geophysical alienation. Given the diverse life forms dependent on the free-flowing waters of Kāne, by restoring stream flow in Hawaiʻi, all manner of traditional economic, ecological, social, and recreational practices can be revitalised. When the island of Maui saw the restoration of two legendary streams—Waiheʻe River and Waiehu Stream—that were part of a water system that interconnected taro patches before their diversion, the effects on plant, animal, and human life were immediate, as the streams feed estuaries that replenish food supply from the ocean and are crucial to wetland taro cultivation (Earth Justice).

Lack of water and access to taro-growing lands also affects the deeply rooted and watery kinship connections that find expression in the making and sharing of poi. Made from the corm of the taro plant, poi, a staple of the traditional Hawaiian diet, continues the ethic of care and reciprocity that informed Hāloanaka's birth and lives on in the cultivation of taro. In McDougall's poetry, then, the return to/of water is part of a wellspring of Oceanic resistance (re)surfacing across the islands, taking many interrelated forms: the revitalisation of genealogical practices, stream flow restoration, oceanic criss-crossings and exchange.

The poem "Hāloanaka" is directly followed by "On a Routing Slip from the US Postal Service, Pukalani Branch," which reproduces a loving note from the speaker's grandfather, appended, fittingly, to a package of poi:

Received 7 April 2002, after careful inspection in New Zealand

16 March 2002
Brandy,

This poi was frozen—hopefully
it'll keep until it gets to you.

You'll need to microwave it.
(like how I told you—with water).

Hope it's not too sour. Maybe
I'll send the fresh poi next time.

Love you,
Grandpa
(McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 72)

As the original food plant of, and sibling to, Kānaka Maoli, taro's origins and respect for kūpuna are expressed in the customs of eating poi. Mary Kawena Pukui warns that there shall be no "quarrelling, haggling, or arguing" when the poi bowl is open as "this would offend Haloa[87] who was present in the form of the *poi*" (Handy, Handy, and Pukui 81, emphasis in original). The custom or protocols of poi incorporate a reciprocal relation of care, reiterated in a series of poi haiku called "Poi-ku" by McDougall: "Light stirred into earth. / Wai stirred into paʻiʻai. / Huli replanted" ("Poi-ku"). Light and water infuse hand-pounded taro, and the top of the taro plant returns to the earth to be replanted. The

[87] The use of diacritical marks in Hawaiian-language writing was introduced in the twentieth-century. I have not added the glottal stop (ʻ) or the macron where they are not present in source material.

poem continues to describe how mākua (parents and main stalk of a plant) share with keiki (children or shoot of the taro), again referencing Hāloa as ʻohana to Kānaka Maoli. The last lines of "Poi-ku" read, "Poi / dries around your mouth like skin, / like it always was" ("Poi-ku"). The cultivation and sharing of poi embodies the foundational and intergenerational respect for and relation to Hāloa, passed on from stalk to shoot, from parent to child, from poi to mouth. As one Maui taro farmer, Kyle Nakanelua puts it, the relationship of the mahiʻai kalo (taro farmer) to Hāloa is one of stewardship, mutual obligation, and extended familial relation:

> *Serving the elder sibling by tending to the tedious mundane drudgery of cleaning*[,] *nourishing*[,] *and supporting his leadership day in and day out is necessary in this relationship, for it is the elder sibling that sacrifices his life on behalf of all those that come after him. This is a relationship of Alo Hā. The sharing of each other's essence face to face. I give to you, you give to me, and together we live. Eia nō ka ʻoihana Kalo. This is the work of Taro.* (TSPT Report)

But even this most foundational relation has been subject to the imposition of state law and regulation. From the 1911 House Bill 160, which restricted poi production to factory-like settings (Kim), to more recent regulations set by the Department of Health, which forbade the public distribution of paʻiʻai (hand-pounded poi), labeling it as a "'potentially hazardous food,'" state law has failed to "recognize the traditional methods of hand-pounding taro as a time-tested, safe precedent that [has] fed Hawaiians for over a thousand years" (Black). Thus, the imposition of state laws that attempt to

control or restrict the making of paʻiʻai not only contributes to barriers to local food security, but also continues to alienate Hawaiians from genealogical, traditional, and physical sources of sustenance. [88] In kuʻualoha hoʻomanawanui's poem "The protocols of poi," the speaker says, "No leave poi on da sides of da pakini, cuz goin' look kapulu [careless/unclean] an / tūtū going get huhū [angry/offended]. / Hawaiians clean clean people, brah, especially wit food / wit poi" (33). Cleanliness is not only an integral part of the traditional practice of making poi, but also a show of love and respect to one's ʻohana—to one's immediate, extended, and cosmological family.

In "On a Routing Slip from the US Postal Service, Pukalani Branch," the travel of poi across the Moana Nui, the ocean continent, shows the ways in which families continue to take care of each other across great distances. Embedding many instances of kaona—hidden (and humorous), but also political meaning—this poem reproduces an actual note written by McDougall's grandfather that was sent to McDougall appended to a package of poi while she was living for a year in Aotearoa, "where it is too cold to grow taro," and where "poi refers to the poi used for kapahaka, and of course, looks very different"

[88] To this end, Mililani Trask speaks to the dire health consequences that globalization and a dependence on exported food has had on the health of Pacific Islanders ("Mililani Trask"). Alternatively, paʻiʻai has been called a "local superfood" for its extensive health benefit—it is hypoallergenic, low-glycemic, contains its own food preservation element and is a source of healthy probiotics (Black).

(McDougall, "Re: Salt-Wind Paper"). A scientist, McDougall's grandfather set out to find a way to send poi to McDougall; deciding that freezing poi was best, he sent it by Global Express mail, but neither he nor McDougall predicted "the way New Zealand would receive and inspect it" (McDougall, "Re: Salt-Wind Paper"). As the month-long gap between the date sent and date received implies, there was, of course, "no way of saving the poi after being 'inspected' for so long" (McDougall, "Re: Salt-Wind Paper"). (Despite these state-imposed obstacles, he was eventually successful in finding a way to ship poi to his granddaughter.)

Sending his granddaughter poi ensures the continuity of the loving, ancestral ties that, though birthed on Hawaiian lands, through Hawaiian waters and gods, remind readers that Hawaiians are "a voyaging people" (Kauanui, "Blood and Reproduction" 115) with ties that travel, ties that are both rooted and routed. "On a Routing Slip" also acknowledges the many diasporic Hawaiians who, though off-island, continue "to return time and again as part of their ongoing on-island attachments" (Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood* in note to readers).[89]

[89] This is not to discount the high rates of outmigration, as well as unemployment, health problems, low educational attainment, institutionalization in the military and in prison, and occupational ghettoization experienced by many Hawaiians (Trask, *From a Native Daughter* 17). Trask writes: "Indeed, so great is the oppression caused outmigration of Hawaiians from their island homes that, despite the highest birthrate in Hawai'i, we remain only twenty percent of the resident population. Some estimates report that more Hawaiians now live on the West Coast of the United States than in their Native land" (17).

We can glean from "Hāloanaka," a short yet expansive poem, how oceanic peoples do "not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions" despite their alleged isolation, their universe comprising the underworld, the ocean, the constellations above and everything in between (Hau'ofa 31). "On a Routing Slip" is similarly expansive, gesturing to the ongoing world-enlargening project of Hawaiians as a navigational people. The transit of poi is subject to the protocols and restrictions of settler nation-states, but by placing "On a Routing Slip" *after* "Hāloanaka," state impositions are subordinated or peripheral to the foundational relation between Kānaka Maoli and Hāloa, privileging Kanaka Maoli histories, protocols, and exchanges.

This recentring of Kanaka Maoli movements and stories, in turn, enables Hawaiians to reclaim their place not only in their islands, but also in Oceania or Moana Nui, through emphasis on "their genealogical connections to all Pacific peoples" (Kauanui, "Blood and Reproduction" 113). In "On a Routing Slip," the package of poi travels from Pukalani, Maui, to Aotearoa, gesturing to long-woven networks of reciprocity both within the immediate Kanaka Maoli family and the familial Pacific. Management of poi—in the form of the "careful" and unnecessarily drawn out inspections of the New Zealand postal service in McDougall's poem, and in one hundred years of state attempts to control the protocols of paʻiʻai in Hawaiʻi—is overwritten by a much longer view of history with the travel of taro into Polynesia, and here, the seemingly insignificant travel

of poi from Maui to New Zealand. Perhaps the travel of poi in this way also gestures to "a way of looking at New Zealand and Hawai'i [as] 'outside/beyond colonial'" control (Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific* 34)—as home to Māori and Kānaka Maoli, Aotearoa and Hawai'i, already connected and in community outside and beyond the settler nation-states of New Zealand and the United States (34). That the speaker herself travels from Maui to Aotearoa—both connected through the pan-Polynesian ancestor Māui (78)—foregrounds a navigational history and shared ancestry that is at once originary and ongoing. The cultivation of taro and the transit of poi harkens back to ancient flows of fresh-water streams and oceanic travel. Revealing the political stakes behind fresh-water and oceanic pathways demonstrates how a thirst for sovereignty and reclamation of ceded lands and polluted waters has far-reaching implications both on-island and as part of a collective challenge to the forces of economic and cultural globalization.[90]

Such transits and circuits of connection also allude to the ways in which Pacific Islanders are coming together to challenge the laws of settler-nation

[90] *Water Writes*, a series of collaborative mural projects across the globe, documenting the current local and international water crisis. The mural in Honolulu is a stunning and powerful testament to the centrality of water (past, present, and future) to an independent, self-sustaining, Kanaka Maoli centered Hawai'i.

states that continue to circumscribe Pacific Island traditions and movements.[91] In May of 2011, Senate Bill 101 passed, once again allowing paʻiʻai to be sold and distributed to the public. Given a history of restrictions placed on the making of poi by the settler state, the kinds of dependencies created by US imperialism and globalisation, the radical decline of taro-producing lands with the diversion of fresh-water streams, and the drastic decrease in the varieties of taro since the time of Western contact—which numbered between 300 and 400 at the time of contact, most of which have since disappeared (Black)—the revitalization of taro cultivation and paʻiʻai not only contributes to increased food self-sufficiency and access to locally produced healthy alternatives to highly processed or low-grade exports, but also demonstrates a renewed commitment to tradition and abundance. Anti-GMO/Hawaiian rights activist from Molokaʻi, Walter Ritte, speaks of the importance of abundance to traditional Hawaiian economies

[91] The mission of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, to give an example of the latter, is to champion "'free and open trade and investments'" particularly through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But as those who are critical of APEC and its objectives agree, its "representation of transnational interests has led to the deregulation of Asian and Pacific economies that makes possible the exploitation of human and environmental resources with devastating effects. In the wake of such exploitation, a collective effort has emerged that maps out alternative Pacific economies and relations to those of APEC and the TTP, and other interlocking forms of imperialism in the Pacific. Thus while trans-Pacific exchanges are restricted by both the laws of the settler state and the predatory capitalism of US foreign policy, as Fujikane states, anti-APEC organizing and the participants in Moana Nui 2011, on the other hand, demonstrate how "the peoples of Asia and the Pacific are coordinating their struggles, countering globalization with globalized sites of resistance that produce alternative forms of knowledge" (Fujikane 207).

(Ritte). Molokaʻi is home to several *ʻāina momona* (abundant lands); Ritte demonstrates that "the people of Molokaʻi are creating new economies by restoring ʻāina momona" (Fujikane 206). If settler colonial capitalism is dependent on the reduction of abundance to scarcity, restoring abundance "raises the possibility of just distribution" through providing an alternative "to the scarcity of colonial and imperial capital" (Fujikane 207). This abundance comes in the form of restoration of water to ancient streams, the recreation of taro terraces,[92] and the cultivation of an abundance of taro varieties, challenges that are currently being taken up across Hawaiʻi in the form of activist efforts that are part of a much broader move in the Pacific to resist, challenge, and expose the damaging and ongoing effects of US imperialism.

Pacific Islanders are often defined from the perspective of the United States by unilateral flows and unequal relationships of aid (Trask, 1999; Keown, 2005; Hau'ofa, 2008). Growing militarized and capitalist interest in the Asia-Pacific region with dire consequences for "indigenous peoples, farming and fishing communities, workers, women and poverty-stricken people" demonstrates that such attitudes go hand in hand with the ongoing imperialism that marks the United States's relationship with the Pacific (Fujikane 190). But as McDougall reminds us, everyday people of Oceania continue to expand their

[92] See Māhuahua ʻAi o Hoi: A Native Hawaiian Land Restoration Program for one example of how communities are coming together in Hawaiʻi to restore taro fields, in this case, the Heʻeia Wetlands into taro fields (Māhuahua ʻAi o Hoi).

worlds, despite global discourses that only see (and indeed create) situations of vulnerability and dependency, and the (ongoing) imperial planetary ambitions described by Pratt that continue to contribute to the evacuation of meaning, people, and resources from the planet.[93] As they move between Indigenous spaces, the people of Oceania demonstrate not only the mobility of oceanic people, but the role "local principles and cosmologies" play in "radically shift[ing] the terms by which" Pacific Islanders know themselves and "each other" (Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific* 5–6).

In response to US colonial laws that attempt to quantify, by blood, Hawaiian claims to identity and land, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui examines Kanaka Maoli "genealogical practices and kinship and how they differ from the U.S. colonial imposition of blood quantum" (*Hawaiian Blood* 3). The US government has recently tried to subsume Hawaiians under U.S. federal policy on Native

[93] Regional battles for land rights and political sovereignty in response to the intrusions of capital, tourism, agri-business, the petro-chemical industry, urban renewal, climate change, transnational conservation, and so on, are taking place the world over. Numerous examples abound: oil, copper, niobium, diamond, and gold mining activity across Canada threatens the lakes, lands, and livelihood of Métis, Cree, Dene, Chipewyan, Mohawk, Dogrib, Kitikmeot Inuit, and numerous other First Nation peoples. In the U.S., despite the 1978 *American Indian Religious Freedom Act*, the sacred sites of a host of Indigenous American tribes are under threat, including the Cochiti Pueblo, Hopi People, Navajo, Apache, Blackfeet, Blackfeet, Sioux, and more (Deloria, *Spirit & Reason* 323-338). The Pacific Islands, rich in biodiversity and under increased threat of human harm, have been at once claimed for military bomb testing and as ideal sites for the practice of international conservation and tourism.

Americans, threatening Hawaiian claims to national independence through a redefinition of Hawaiian identity (3). Up against these challenges that aim to "undercut" genealogical, Indigenous ties to land (2), Hawaiian kinship cosmologies challenge the authority of the settler-nation state by articulating earthly and watery ancestral flows that are before, beyond, and above histories that privilege humanist, Euro-American colonial first encounters.

Forms of resistance to such limiting scripts of Pacific Island life range from envisioning alternative economies and modes of production that embed economic relations into the very fabric and rhythms of society and culture—a society-driven economy (rather than an economy-driven society) that has for thousands of years been a characteristic of Indigenous economic and social organisation the world over (Bello)—to literary, poetic, artistic, and activist expression. McDougall, alongside other poets, contributes to this effort by working "with an understanding of cultural memory that emerges not from nostalgia but from reappropriation of multiple, emplaced stories [and practices of Hawai'i]" (Bacchilega 26). And by invoking this ancestral connection to the Pacific and to the people of the Pacific, Pacific Islanders are able to come together in a collective refusal to participate in predatory, capitalistic, neo-liberal, and profit-driven relations that currently mark the region by underscoring, instead, the cultural and genealogical practices of Hawai'i and Moana Nui.

Co-constituted Futures: Navigating Shared Waters of Existence

Earth, light, salt-wind, and rain, the elements that sustain the much-valued taro plant and its human offspring, speak to a kinship that is spiritual and "ecosocial" (Justice, "Kinship Criticism").[94] As McDougall states, Hāloanaka, the common ancestor, is an intersecting ancestral point to which all Hawaiian genealogies are connected (McDougall "Re: Salt-Wind Paper"). The story of Hāloanaka's birth reflects the origins of reciprocally constitutive relations between people, land, and cosmos. Genealogy and history here are one and the same—that is, "Hawaiian genealogies are the history of the Hawaiian people" (Kameʻeleihiwa, *Native Land* 21) and in their re-telling, a constant source of hope and resistance. Like other Indigenous knowledge traditions, "Hāloanaka" encourages apprehension of a world that is concrete and material, as well as spiritual, a vibrant expression of the relationships between "people, their ecosystems, and the other living beings and spirits that share their lands" (Battiste and Henderson 42).

The ocean and its salt-wind illustrate the constitutive watery flows that define, differentiate, and unite peoples across the Pacific. At the same time that I have been following water in *The Salt-Wind* I have been contemplating the ways

[94] Recall, Daniel Heath Justice defines the ecosocial as "an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships" ("'Go Away, Water!' 151, emphasis mine).

in which Oceania's cosmologies exist in productive solidarity with other Indigenous knowledges. Following the constitutive movement and materiality of water is promising in this way. Understanding the molecular, material, or energetic movement between bodies of water, which takes place at gastrointestinal, psychic, affective, oceanic, and cosmological levels, necessitates coming to terms with our co-constituted futures with watery others living oceans apart (Neimanis 87–88). The project of rethinking matter and mobility together through water is necessary and urgent for a myriad of reasons, not least of which is the opportunity to begin to query the role played by our cultural imaginary and inherited modes of thought in the prevalence of environmental, human, and epistemic injustice.

But why poetry? In her autobiography, Queen Liliʻuokalani observes that "The ancient bards of the Hawaiian people" gave "to history their poems and chants; and the custom is no different to this day, and serves to show the great fondness and aptness of our nation to poetry and song" (Liliʻuokalani 53). McDougall continues in this tradition of using poetry as history and chant,[95] birthing anew *old* genealogies. "Hāloanaka" and "On a Routing Slip" demonstrate, through kaona, that Hāloa, taro, and poi are Native Hawaiians' connection to ʻohana, kūpuna, history, and ancestry. And because none of these can be thought apart from the water that sustains them, the best way to respect

[95] See Brandy Nālani McDougall and Craig Santos Perez's recording *Undercurrent.*

that is to "give us back some waddah an ʻāina so we can keep growin' / an grinding ʻum!" (hoʻomanawanui, "The protocols of poi" 33). A thirst for water—sacred, imaginative, mobile, past, present—thus flows just beneath the surface of McDougall's words. Akua Kāne, the embodiment of male reproductive energy, and the wellspring of the life-giving waters of Hawaiʻi, reminds us that the thirst for water speaks to a thirst for life, sustenance, and sovereignty. *Salt-Wind* is a site of becoming and of going home; the tongue, with the salt of ocean on its tip, is "the steering paddle of the words uttered by the mouth":

> […] This is our legacy—words strewn
> among wana spines in the long record
> the sand has kept within its grains, closer
> to reclaiming our shells, now grown thicker.
> (McDougall, *The Salt-Wind* 67)

CONCLUSION | KINSHIP AND LOVE

> The loving eye is a critical eye, always on the lookout for the blind spots that close off the possibility of response-ability and openness to others and difference. Love is an ethics of differences that thrives on the adventure of otherness. This means that love is an ethical and social responsibility to open personal and public space in which otherness and difference can be articulated. Love requires a commitment to the advent and nurturing of difference. […] Loving eyes are responsive to the circulation of various forms of energy, especially psychic and affective energy, that enable subjectivity and life itself.
>
> (Oliver 20)

> The language of lovers can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and order our senses insofar as such social narratives are tied to the law.
>
> (Sandoval 140-141)

In this moment of heightened engagement with global humanitarian crises, human rights, and the global human family imagined by its framing document, function as a very persuasive global familial optics in the West. New media and technology have played a vital role in linking "the notion of a universal humanity [upon which human rights are based] to the idea of familiality" itself, and so, have helped extend the "familial gaze beyond the nuclear family's domestic domain and to endow it with vaster and more global ambitions" (Hirsch 48). It is unsurprising, then, that the notion of the human family, "a liberal ideology of universalism" is a powerful tool used by many humanitarian charitable organizations post-World War II (48), while simultaneously a function of national discourses of equality.

But in an appeal to the universal human family, aspirations for equality, for a humanitarian oneness, are often unable to productively contend with, and value, difference. As Povinelli puts it, "people still dream of a form of equality that would hegemonize the entire social field, solving once and for all the difference of difference" (179). On a domestic level (both nationally and within the home), then, discourses of equality and justice borrow from the same liberal, humanist logic and language as human rights, and so risk replicating their exclusions.

What Is the What is very sensitive to the ways in which Valentino, and subjects like him, are either left out of this global and national familial optics in the U.S., or else are incorporated in ways that reinforce stratified universalisms. Further, Eggers is careful not to limit this critique of universal familial inclusion to refugee subjects, but applies it to the circumstances of America's own citizens as well. *What Is the What* offers the most explicit critique of the way human rights reinforce universalist assumptions of global familial inclusion. The fictionalized autobiography also shows us how such models of inclusion or kinship are, in some ways, unjustly aspirational, functioning as perpetually deferred or failed promises for the completion of the human subject and a better life. The sovereign, self-made, free subject, the end point for a humanitarian narrative of human development, is continually cast "into a spectral realm, halfway between being and becoming" (Povinelli 15) in *What Is the What*. Valentino's story itself

functions as a promise deferred, as does much humanitarian storytelling, and so the novel embodies (and in some ways undoes) its own critique on both a generic and thematic level. Wry humanism allows us to see the structural irony of a narrative of humanitarian promise: the promise is essential to propel the narration forward, but only insofar as it denies completion. Given the ethical claims made by both life-writing and human rights, Chapter One ultimately seeks to ask if it's possible to extend humanitarian promises—for that *something* shared between human subjects, as Valentino implies in the final words of the novel—without also extending the unintended exclusions of a humanist promise of kinship.

How we come to know the self—how we reach out toward and find ourselves in connection with others—is also profoundly influenced by understandings of kinship. Reviews of *What Is the What* suggest that the novel's affective force is directly proportional to the extent to which the novel humanizes its refugee subjects—the extent to which we see an "us" in a "them." But Eggers's book implicates the reader in such a way that the "us" or "we"—the supposedly sovereign, self-made, free subject to whom Valentino tells his story—routinely fails to respond as an effective witness. As readers who may (wish to) recognize ourselves in the implicated reader of *What Is the What*, we simultaneously are called to question our modes of witness and response, and

the ontological and epistemological dynamics upon which humanist structures of relation and promise-making are based.

The Book of Salt examines what constitutes the self through embodied structures of relation and opens up a space for rethinking the self in terms of not only how we understand the material body as a site of knowing, but also how the relay of self and other has "historically established a differential of power as a differential of knowledge" (Povinelli 21). Bình continually draws our attention to the way power circumscribes not only the movement of migrant bodies such as his, but also how power determines what counts as knowledge, and what counts as (a) life. His story is one that his employers assume, again and again, is free for the taking. Stein and Toklas also habitually neglect to recognize his moments of defiance, his embodied knowings illegible or incompatible with their own, despite a shared queerness.

Reading Bình as a queer diasporic figure, on the other hand, means he becomes legible within a history that has relegated him to the margins. Truong is careful, though, in her implicit critique of a national narrative of compulsory heterosexuality and homonormativity, not to shy away from an affective longing for Bình's natal home, conflicted as such longings may be. Here water acts as an intermediary, connecting but never fully reconciling the lands and shores that have claimed Bình, lands he is obligated to (in an affective, embodied way) despite efforts to reject the patriarchal homespace in Vietnam and feelings of

loneliness in Paris. Bình's sense of kinship, caught between multiple spaces, is fraught, searching, and much of the time unhappy, but still, ultimately, hopeful. Following Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, I am thinking about the hopefulness of unhappy alternatives to "happy heterosexuality" (114) that signal hopefulness through a rejection of normative scripts of heterosexuality and their attendant forms of state-based recognition. By drawing on, and refusing to forget a history of unhappy queers in which the "unhappiness of the deviant performs a claim for justice" (97), unhappiness for Bình, and for others who follow, enacts hopefulness through defiant, persistent, refusal to reconcile the tension Bình feels within his materially embodied relations between people and places. His story is also one that refuses to forget race and refuses to accept the exclusions of queer liberalism, which posits the arrival of (i.e. the completion of equality for) queer subjects through the denying of struggles against racial oppression and other radical politics.

Literature is a complex space for an inquiry into alternative kinships; it can both flatten and appropriate, as well as enliven and engage nonfictional lives and worlds. While there will always remain the possibility of assimilation or submersion of nonfictional elements to problematic or reductive ideological frames within storytelling, there is also always the possibility of imaginative, generative openings. Kinship itself likewise maintains a referential, ongoing

relationship to real (and imagined) time, and is in the literature examined in this dissertation at once aspirational (both cruelly and critically so), and adaptive.

Indigenous literatures demand a reading of kinship as an aspirational and adaptive archive of real communities and their relations. Daniel Heath Justice describes kinship criticism as a profoundly powerful exercise for understanding Indigenous conceptions of time, space, sovereignty, and identity:

> We exist today as indigenous nations, as peoples, and the foundation of any continuity as such is our relationships to one another—in other words, our kinship with other humans and the rest of creation. Such kinship isn't a static thing; it's dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most indigenous contexts, is something that's *done* more than something that simply *is*. ("'Go Away, Water!'" 150, emphasis in original)

The Salt-Wind / Ka Makani Paʻakai embodies this ethic and aesthetic on multiple levels. We could not, for example, read the taro plant in its relationship to Kānaka Maoli without unearthing a rich and complex chain of relations from the common ancestor Hāloa to taro farmers and the sharing of poi today. This is a relationship that requires work, not only to harvest the taro, but also to fight for Hawaiian sovereignty, and with it, the lands and waters that are absolutely essential to reopening restored loʻi (taro patches) across the islands.

Return of stream water to irrigated ditches needed for the cultivation of taro is an essential part of this move toward restoring Hawaiian sovereignty and livelihood. The University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa's Kamakakuokalani Centre for Hawaiian Studies houses a cultural research and outreach program, where high school, college, and university students, as well as community members, can engage in malamaʻaina (caring for the land) on the first Saturday of every month. Volunteers gather at the Kanewai, where a loʻi sits, and together they work the land to prepare for taro farming, while learning about the importance of the loʻi to Hawaiian cosmologies. I was fortunate enough to attend one of these gatherings, and literally soak my hands and feet in the water-drenched earth that I argue is so crucial (spiritually, economically, and physically) to Hawaiian kinship systems.

From the perspective of a non-Hawaiian scholar, understanding these cosmologies and kinship ties requires work and care. Kaona is central to Hawaiian literature and poetry, and there will always be meaning that is out of reach for a scholar like myself. But as a gesture of respect for knowledges and relationships that are ultimately about reciprocity (elder sibling feeds younger sibling, and younger sibling in return cares for the land and waters needed to harvest the taro), it is worth noting that my understanding of McDougall's work

developed—and deepened greatly—in conversation and in community.[96] It would be fair to say that unearthing the layers of kaona in McDougall's work was not something that could or did happen in isolation, and so this chapter is the work of a self very much in relation (as all work is, despite pretending to otherwise). As with the difficult-to-practice kinships I study here, attending to these rich modes of relation meant nurturing a loving eye "always on the lookout for the blind spots that close off the possibility of response-ability and openness to others and difference" (Oliver 20). And in some ways, this kind of methodological approach not only speaks to, but also embodies the way in which alternate kinships see the unseating of the self, so that it is not the self, but the relation, that is central.

This project seeks to bring together diverse conceptions of materiality and mobility, each embedded in asymmetrical power relations. Each chapter reformulates understandings of kinship so as to move away from unidirectional flows of power or agency, naming and claiming, of reaching toward others, and to look to knowledge systems that conceive of complex modes of changing,

[96] I presented an earlier version of Chapter Three at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa (UHM), accompanied by McDougall herself who read her poetry throughout my talk—a collaboration that proved invaluable to my chapter and its reading of McDougall's work. I also joined the Visiting Speaker Series committee at my home university and invited McDougall to give a talk and poetry reading alongside her partner Craig Perez Santos (a native Chamoru from the Pacific Island of Guåhan/Guam, and also a faculty member and poet at UHM).

embedded, affective relation. Both a study of kinship and a study of materiality are invested in the "material interconnections between the human and the more-than-human world," most especially at a time when "'human' and 'environment' can by no means be considered as separate" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2). Both, then, have ethical consequences for thinking our relationships and responsibility to and for the human and more-than-human world. My hope is that this project might also contribute to a conversation about the necessity of seeing connections among material bodies (be they oceanic, human, geophysical, animal, earthly, linguistic), in order that we may mitigate human and environmental suffering in the service of our collective interests and survival, but at the behest of communities most marginalized by dominant systems of thought and exchange. Such collectivities are, by necessity, tentative, uneasy, and fraught, requiring constant care and renewal, attention to and respect for difference, as these texts demonstrate.

The kinships explored throughout this project are in many ways incommensurate; though this study looks at each text in (relative) isolation, I placed them side by side not only because they articulate alternatives for imagining community and kinship in contextually-specific terms, but because they are each attentive to aesthetic, ethical, poetic, material, and political obligations that bind us to the world. Their differences are what animate them, what makes them ethically and aesthetically attuned to context, places, and

flows. Chapters Two and Three can be specifically located in disciplines that are reimagining kinship on their own terms (queer diaspora studies and trans-Indigenous studies, respectively), while Chapter One speaks to a deeply ingrained belief in human connection that cannot seem to shake its (problematic) humanist roots and assumptions. But all three chapters, simultaneously, speak to an ineffable quality of connection—an obligation, to return to Povinelli's words, to "a sense of an immanent connectivity," which is at first a "very fragile connection" (DiFruscia and Povinelli 84) but one that eventually binds us deeper, one that might even be a form of radical love.

It is love, I must admit, that I find most compelling about a study of kinship, so long as those kinships are able to speak for themselves, in their own languages, in their own time; so long as such kinships can find room to breathe, adapt, and move according to embodied desires and longings, present and past. The kinships mapped out in this dissertation—between Valentino, an ineffective witness, and Michael, the "Lost Boy" of the U.S.; between Bình, his Madames, his Sweet Sunday Man, and other queer exiles; between Kānaka Maoli and ancestral waters and relations they have been forced to fight for—are difficult, strained, but necessary. They are each guided by and inseparable from the politics that circumscribe them, as well as obligations that are carnal, material, and in some ways, before or without choice, callings from outside or inside the self.

The Nonplaces and the Not Yet Here Places of Kinship Cross-Talk

I want to end with some thoughts on the "not yet" place of kinship cross-talk. Part of what is so compelling about bringing the particular kinships explored in these pages together is that each text studied straddles fictional and non-fictional worlds, real wounds accompanied by real imaginings of a not-yet future, inseparable from a not-yet past. They share what Barthes calls the "that-has-been" quality of a photograph (92), but also gesture to what might one day be. But the meaning of the "not yet" repeated throughout this dissertation shifts. On the one hand, it signals both the aspirational not yet" that services the normative and marginalizing scripts of liberal ideology—the "cruelly optimistic fantasies that are 'normatively on offer for "the good life", like sexual intelligibility via the couple and the family, or national culture, or upward mobility'" as well as "territorialized citizenship's regimes of legitimation" (Antwi et al., "Postcolonial Intimacies" 5-6). On the other hand, the aspirational "not yet" also refers to the kinships that aspire to, or have for a long time maintained, something radically different. The promise and the "not yet," then, also signal hope, regeneration, reclamation.

What Is the What's exploration of human rights speaks to blocked or unfulfilled desires, cruel and unjust promises, and teleological understandings of human development that imply a perpetual "not yet" on the part of marginalized or unrecognizable subjects who will, according to dominant modes of

subjectivity and historicist timelines, never quite arrive. We see this deferral, again, in Chapter Two, which examines how Monique Truong narrates an alternative story of queer diasporic kinship that develops alongside that of Euro-American modernity. On the one hand, Bình is subject to a perpetual waiting (he remains in the margins of Euro-American modernity, always waiting for but never receiving recognition), while on the other, he narrates an alternative to, and "interrupts the contemporary emergence of[,] queer liberalism" as the latest fashioning of human progress (Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship* 59). Finally, McDougall's work is a part of current deimperializing efforts within the Pacific with the collective aim to imagine and work toward a future that is "beyond empires" (Fujikane 191), connecting and giving strength to Pacific Islanders in a not yet future and not yet past. The affective, intimate, and spiritual "sedimented traces of uncharted histories" (Chambers, "Maritime Criticism" 681), as well as salt and fresh-water flows in both Truong's and McDougall's texts, then, both signal a refusal to forget the past and simultaneous opening into the future.

Lauren Berlant writes of intimacy as "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared. A story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (1). Each of the texts examined here explores at least one such intimacy story that reflects this aspiration for something shared, be it on a bodily, cultural, spiritual, or historical level. These stories and intimacies embody

the hope that their aspirations will come to fruition in certain ways, and so are future-oriented at the same time that they draw on past injuries, memories, and desires. The story of the subject and her relation to the world, of course, is never complete, and this dissertation has attempted to differentiate between when this incompleteness is a set-up, if you will—an inevitability based on the norms of recognition and legitimation available or not available to us—and when this incompleteness creates an opening for imagining otherwise. The "not yet" might simply be a mode of deferral, another way in which to postpone or keep in waiting marginalized subjects from achieving legitimation on their own terms. These waiting zones (waiting for the legalization of gay marriage, and therefore the legitimization of queer desire, for example; or waiting for the state to recognize claims to Indigenous sovereignty) are, in Judith Butler's words,

> nonplaces in which one finds oneself in spite of oneself; indeed, these are nonplaces where recognition, including self-recognition, proves precarious if not elusive, in spite of one's best efforts to be a subject in some recognizable sense. They are not sites of enunciation, but shifts in the topography from which a questionably audible claim emerges, the claim of the not-yet-subject and the nearly recognizable. (Butler, "Kinship" 20)

But this dissertation also looks to the "not yet" to see what might have emerged, what could have been, and what might one day be. In the words of José Muñoz,

who articulates queerness as "not yet here," I understand the "not yet" as indebted to the past as it is committed to the future. The "not yet here" deploys "the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the here and now, in which nothing exists outside the current moment and which naturalizes cultural logics like capitalism and heteronormativity" ("Thinking" 825). Muñoz's "anti-antiutopianism" stance looks not to abstract, but "concrete utopias" as they are "relational to historically situated struggles," as I have aimed to do here in my discussion of situated kinships (*Cruising* 3).

There is incredible work being taken up in activist contexts, especially where literature, poetry, and politics collide, where the "not yet here" activates a critical love. To name one of many possible examples, Hawaiian spoken word poet Jamaica Osorio weaves moʻolelo and mana into every one of her poems, breathing life into stories and songs almost forgotten. Of her ancestors not forgotten, she exclaims "i want to taste the tears in their names / trace their souls into my vocal chords so that i can feel related again" (Osorio, "Kumulipo"). She speaks to her genealogy as a poet and activist, moving from anger, to searching, to finding a language, to love. Love as a radical force for social change does not signal movement forward without looking back. Speaking to an overlooked relationship between Hiʻiaka and Hopōe in one of the great Hawaiian epics, love, for Osorio, is the possibility of seeing in moʻolelo that "my body, able to love bodies that reflect mine has been shown throughout our history" (Osorio,

"Poetry as Translation"). Osorio speaks of poetry as translation and ends her talk by offering aloha to her audience by way of reinvisioned love poems between Hiʻiaka and Hopōe, her and her lover, and in so doing weaves into her words Hawaiian history, language, aesthetics, poetics that are at once personal, and inescapably political. Love, like kinship, is not a resting place, but a radical new beginning of the old, where the words and moʻolelo of her extended ʻohana of the past can speak to her queer, loving body in this time and future-place, as they always have.

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