

# COMPOSTING SETTLER NATIONALISMS



Mathew Arthur and Reuben Jentink

UNAFFILIATED AND SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Our compost experiment plays out in two short provocations that work toward a list of provisional sensibilities to guide our knowing-together with nonhuman others as non-Indigenous theorists on Indigenous lands. In the first provocation, we briefly retell the history of colonial expansion as a matter of waste-making, and reframe Canadian-colonial occupation as a project of recycling—reproducing only beings and knowings that are deemed useful to nation-building. Eventually, and with the help of Indigenous science and feminist science studies, we cultivate a performative understanding of compost as a mode of multispecies storying that provokes accountability. In the second provocation, as we wonder how to tell stories that are culpable to and for their own telling, we hang on to the idea that nonhumans might have their own stories, or at least storied lifeways that generatively contribute to keeping on together in a place. We trace out crucial crossings between multispecies ethnography and Indigenous sovereignty by demonstrating how compost as a mode of attunement to nonhuman stories can be done in both theory- and art-making. Finally, we offer a tentative list of compost intimations that might guide our thinking, reading, and writing with human and nonhuman others as we continue to tend to our kinship obligations on Indigenous lands.

## KEYWORDS

nationalisms, kinship, Indigenous sovereignties, multispecies ethnography, reading and writing practices

## The mix of what we're in

This text is leaky—and while it tries to make-stable the contours of a time in a place, it seeps past itself into something altogether unfinished. The composting-as-method we go on to propose is provisional and messy and others (like Donna Haraway) have set off its ferment (Franklin 2017). Why settler nationalisms? As we wrangled these words into place, we were slinging compost in a garden at a university campus on stolen Indigenous land, heading into our country's hundred-and-fiftieth year of having violently settled here. In the thick of ecological ruin and Indigenous protest, boulevards city-wide were lush with Canada 150 tulips planted to commemorate colonial rule. We found ourselves feeling around for a theoretical practice that might stay in the mess of things both ruinous and regenerative while responding to what is affecting and being affected in a place, at a time.

In what follows, we imagine compost as a way of thinking, reading, and writing with land as a storied place where humans and nonhumans are being made and unmade in the ongoing recomposition of a common world. Why compost? Because, in our take, compost is syncretic—it fuses and confuses human and non-human capacities across inter-imbricating scales, speeds, and states with a sense of messiness expedient to the disruption of the sanitizing, assimilationist force of settler nationalisms. Not only in sesquicentennial celebrations or national flowers, but in the very academic institutions of colonial sovereignty that are constantly at work recycling Western ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and methods at the expense of Indigenous land and life. Our understanding of land as the place of compost-thinking (rather than the academy) is informed by Indigenous political and intellectual sovereignties in which knowledge flows from land (Simpson 2014b; Watts 2013), and politics takes the form of a relational injunction to include all constituents of a territory in the task of getting on together.

Our experiment plays out in two short provocations—motley accumulations of stories and theoretical tetherings—that work toward a list of provisional compost sensibilities to guide our knowing-together with nonhuman others as non-Indigenous theorists on Indigenous lands. As we go along, we use 'story' and 'theory' interchangeably in order to give equal weight to Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge practices (see Atleo 2011, 141-54). And we should note, too, that our use of 'land' is not exclusive of other elements of place: seas, skies, and the rest.

In the first provocation, we briefly retell the history of colonial expansion as a matter of waste-making, and reframe Canadian-colonial occupation as a project of recycling—reproducing only beings and knowings that are deemed ‘useful’ to nation-building. By way of this short restorying, we come to see that wasting, recycling, and composting are not just tropes or innocent imaginaries for industrialists, extractivists, environmentalists, or activists but are, instead, world-making material and discursive practices that shape lands and how we respond to the nonhuman constituents of a place.

We feel around for a theoretical situation for compost and, as we wonder what compost as a material practice and figure to think with *can do*, we land on ‘affect’ as a question of ever-shifting relational capacities, and theories of affect as a way of paying attention to things in ongoing transformation. But, because no two compost piles are the same and caring for compost requires attending to what is in the mix (in the case of this text, both Canada 150 tulips and tulip-kin), we come to realize that some modes of theory-making—even as they trouble Western notions of sovereignty—do not work in the compost-theoretical heap alongside Indigenous-empirical sovereignties. Eventually, and with the help of Indigenous science and feminist science studies, we cultivate a performative understanding of compost as a mode of storying, a world-making knowledge practice open to humans and nonhumans alike, that provokes accountability for the stories we tell.

In the second provocation, as we wonder how to tell stories that are accountable to and for their own telling, we hang on to the idea that nonhumans might have their own stories, or at least storied lifeways (and nonlifeways) that generatively contribute to keeping on together in a place. Thinking with anthropologist Anna Tsing and Vancouver-based artist annie ross, we trace out crucial crossings between multispecies ethnography (including storying practices that confound the concept of species) and Indigenous sovereignty by demonstrating how compost as a material and storying practice—and as a mode of attunement to nonhuman stories—can be done in both theory and art-making. Finally, we offer a tentative list of compost intimations that might guide our thinking, reading, and writing with human and nonhuman others as we continue to tend to our kinship obligations on Indigenous lands.

We start with a flower, genus *Tulipa*, a small anxiety in our relationship: one of us likes its unsubtle efflorescence, the other does not. First domesticated by the Ottomans, its bulbs landed in Antwerp in 1562 alongside tobacco and tea, tracing lines of trade and traversing unsteady borders to land on the grounds of Amsterdam’s rich (newly flush from the exploits of the Dutch East Indies Company) a transnational undertaking with the power to establish colonies and negotiate

treaties). Then there was Tulipomania, the early seventeenth-century market craze of unchecked floral speculation, and tulip futures made possible by striated, fiery cultivars whose changes in pigmentation were transmitted flower-to-flower by aphids infected with the tulip mosaic virus.

Another time, another continent away, the national myth of Canada's 'cultural mosaic'—a happy take on multicultural success—spreads like a virus, transmitted garden-to-garden by the Canada 150 Tulip in a botanical display of national unity. Developed in the Netherlands, trade-named by the Canadian government, and sold by a chain retailer of building supplies, the selectively bred Triumph cultivar (with a mottled red and white flower meant to evoke the Canadian flag) marked the sesquicentennial anniversary of Canada's Confederation—styled as 'Canada

150.' In the lead-up to Canada 150 celebrations, a Liberal Member of Parliament described the official flower as symbolic of "rebirth and promises" (CTV 2016); hinting maybe that the sesquicentennial would coincide with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's (now-broken) campaign promise of renewed state-Indigenous relations (see Palmater 2017), spurred on by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's foregrounding of the cultural genocide of Canada's Indigenous peoples.

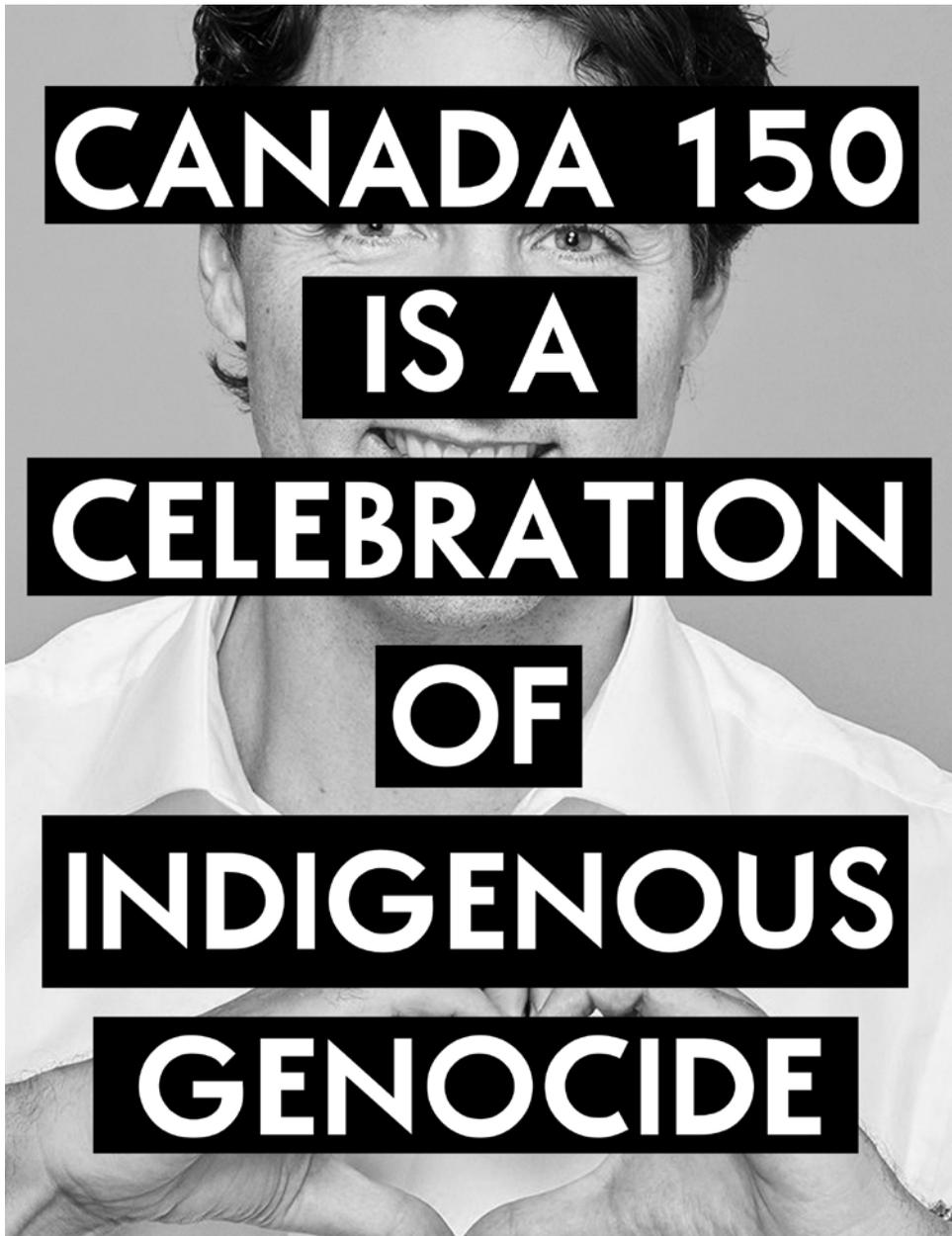
Prepending 'cultural' to 'genocide,' of course, allowed the Canadian federal government to sidestep international legal culpability, keeping genocide in the past tense (as a culture-decimating force 'back then') and reinforcing the normalization of colonial violence in the storying of present-day liberal democratic nationhood as a cultural mosaic in which Indigenous peoples might now participate with equal opportunity—nevermind that Canadian multiculturalism



The Canada 150 (Carnaval de Rio) cultivar bears an uncanny resemblance to the virus-infected plants that fuelled Tulipomania.

*Tulipa*, Balthasar van der Ast, 1620. Gouache, 313x202mm, Institut Néerlandais, Paris.

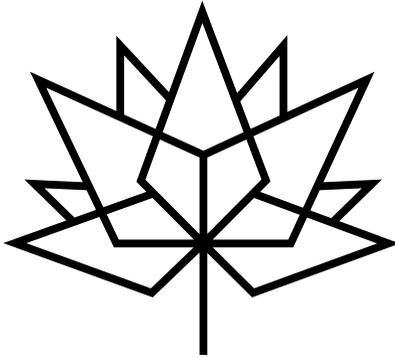
is an assimilationist framework institutionalized in Section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that allows the state to determine what is acceptable in diversity at the expense of Indigenous life and land (MacDonald 2014; Palmater 2015; Simpson, James & Mack 2011). We think a t-shirt designed by educator Eric Ritskes (2017) better announces Canada's legacy; it consists of an inverted



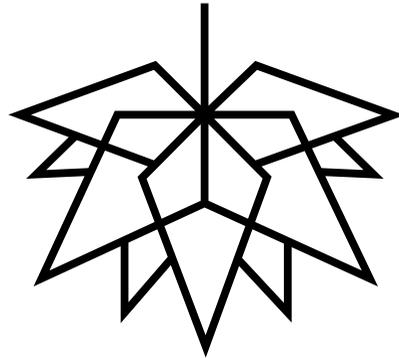
*Anti-Canada 150 Poster Pack, Anonymous, 2017*

Canada 150 logo (a meshwork of diamonds forming a mosaic-like leaf) and the label: “Colonialism 150.” From happy stories of national unity to more than a century of colonial violence, this is a lot for a flower to bear.

Canada 150 logo, Ariana Cuvin, 2015 and  
Colonialism 150 logo, Eric Ritskes, 2017



**CANADA 150**



**COLONIALISM 150**

Caught up in this floral ethnography are the material marks of trade and territory; political and economic atmospheres; colonial aspirations and occupations; the temporalities of a plant’s reproductive cycle or a nation’s federation; a latticework of aphid vectors; and the shifting potentials of multispecies and nonliving entities: flora, insects, viruses, humans, and the conceptual categories they inhabit. Streaked red and white, a flower asks so much *more*, cropping up in questions about the governance of difference in state multiculturalisms, reifications of difference in scientific taxa and selective breedings (or transnational friendships), and the collapse of difference in the banal naming of botanical life under the rubric of nation-building. We are tangled in this story, too: one of us a third-generation Dutch-Canadian with an affinity for his motherland’s flower, the other whose Franco-colonial ancestry spans more than 150 years on Indigenous territories. We stand together on the stolen land of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples—in what is now called Vancouver, British Columbia—sober with the weight of being here and accountable to the demands of Indigenous nationhood.

Writing from British Columbia’s public research university on Musqueam territory, Cherokee theorist Daniel Heath Justice (2016, 352–353) describes Indigenous nationhood as sovereignty predicated on tribal webs of kinship responsibilities: entanglements in which humans, animal and plant-people, spirit-beings, and

other geological, hydrological, and meteorological forces make nations together. By Western standards, Indigenous sovereignties are nonsovereign, but only in the mix-up of translating between two incommensurable forms of governance—one in which politics are shored up by natural and social sciences that apprehend tulips as ‘natural’ and distinguish humans from nature as ‘cultural,’ the other which is a science for living together where politics means accountability to a nonhuman world in which tulips are kin. Unlike the fixed stories of settler-Canadian nationhood that necessarily abstract violence to human and nonhuman bodies in projects of sovereignty requiring national unity, Indigenous sovereignties coalesce into forms of governance around relationships defined by situated ancestral laws communicated through ever-evolving stories and performed in ceremonies that provoke human participation in the ongoing renewal of land (see Corntassel & Bryce 2012; Simpson 2016).

We stand, likewise, in a crowd of nonhuman others, wondering how to read and write stories about, what to do about, this pernicious Canada 150 flower—other than to compost it, to discompose its fast and easy reconciliations, to let it decompose, slowly, into the responsibilities and workings-together of soil. But also, to honour its spirited way of life: as it tends itself, tends for its invertebrate and microbial others; as it buds, withers, and feeds the dirt into which it can grow again, renewed. With the limp stems and putrescent blooms of Canadian-colonial nationhood heating up on our compost pile, we want to ask: how can we intervene in the naming, narrativizing, and performing of sameness and difference as a measure of Canada’s colonial success? Which kinships, which sovereignties matter? Which beings and belongings-together can be read or written into nationhood? Here, and following Bruno Latour (2002), we invoke sameness and difference in both ontological and epistemological registers in order to read Canadian multiculturalism as mononaturalism: the idea that we inhabit a singular reality configured by verifiable natural laws that structure sameness and difference in biophysical terms (always already primed by metaphysical givens tied to Western intellectual histories), while whatever aberrations or disagreements remain in the wake of mainstream technoscientific articulation are relegated to the cultural field as it avowedly contours and conditions ontologies and epistemologies incommensurable with those that obtain ‘facts.’

Meanwhile, Canada’s federal, provincial, and civic governments have made reconciliation the ambition of state-Indigenous relations under the ambit of multiculturalism, while the governance of difference—the authority to say what counts as an entity, which entities count, and which knowledges authorize their accounting—continues to hang on the “evidence-based” approach of Canadian liberal democracy and its “great advantage of neutrality” (Policy Horizons Canada

2013); even as ‘evidence’ is invoked to explain away the destruction of Indigenous lands in extractive projects. But there is no neutrality in backgrounding ‘nature’ as mere material support for human life or fashioning flora into nation-building props. There is no neutrality in the half-millennium of human control over tulip reproductive cycles and genetic compositions, over how or where a form of existence can continue on. Human-tulip relations have forged economies, carved out transcontinental mobilities, and propped up the makings of nations in ways that require Indigenous stories about plant-peoples as political subjects and familial relations to be fiction.

Anxious with the question of which political and intellectual sovereignties matter, we are looking for evidence of a different order, through the invested and decidedly not-neutral living-out together of a common world animated by Indigenous empiricisms, in which knowing is an ongoing relational response to the conditions of keeping on in a place based on participation in the continuity of all lifeforms or forms of existence (including nonlife) and cultivating attentiveness to the teachings nonhumans have to offer. In Indigenous empiricisms, human-non-human diplomacies are encoded in stories, and stories are told, retold, and tested against human and nonhuman thriving (see Atleo 2011; Simpson 2015). If it is in the everyday sharing of stories that nations are made, as Sara Ahmed (2000, 98) contends, then the stories we tell about tulips matter: they shape materialities, pattern shared meanings, insinuate value, and guide our response to the humans and nonhumans around us. As a storying practice, the Canada 150 Tulip not only maintains settler nationalisms, but stipulates a mode of encounter for meeting nonhumans which carries the weight of an entire system of being, knowing, and doing that reinforces settler nation-building projects.

In the mix of competing sovereignties (one scaffolded on abstract rights as species-based entitlements and proprieties bound up in evidence-based claims in which the terms of being and knowing are always already set, the other rooted in kinship responsibilities to a constellation of entangled nonhuman others), we also want to ask: how can we think, read, and write with nonhumans, including those caught up in the erasures and extinctions of colonial nation-building? What would it mean to compost settler nationalisms?

## I. Turning to compost

We arrive at compost in the thick of three everyday tropes implicit in both agricultural and industrial histories of nation-building and liberal ecological sensibilities: waste, recyclable or recycled materials, and compost. As material and conceptual or discursive repertoires, these tropes are not just nouns describing before and after, finitudes and excesses, or goods and bads—rather, they are wastings, recyclings, and compostings done by humans, fungi, industrial robots, crabgrasses, and seagulls. Our understanding of making, using, disposing, remaking, and regenerating as world-making practices in which method and matter are always co-shaping is informed by John Law and feminist science studies at large (2015) in the idea that practices (as done by humans and nonhumans) are productive—do something in and to the world—and that what is practiced or repeated is done at the expense of what is not. And, it is human practices that spark our concern: material and conceptual exclusions of nonhumans and those held to be less-than-human enacted in colonial renditions of waste, recycling, and compost.

Histories of colonial expansion, for example, might be read through the effects of waste-making practices: having laid waste to their own lands in overexploitation, Europeans set sail in search of new resources and routes by which to exchange them (Beinart & Hughes 2007, 2–10). In the ‘new’ world, unwilling to participate in the performance of waste as ‘surplus,’ Indigenous peoples were deemed incapable of industrializing their lands into usefulness and, in the instantiation of land-tenure frameworks based on intensive cultivation as a measure of ownership, were dispossessed not only of their lands but of the possibility of enacting sovereignty predicated on regenerative land use practices. As James Tully (1993, 147, 156–63) notes, the material practice of wasting and its correlate conceptual shapings (as both under- and overuse) were integral to the colonial project, in both the coupling of ownership and overproduction, and the rendering of Indigenous territory as squandered wasteland in order to justify expropriation in the service of making lands useful to the demands of nation-building.

Even now, lands figured as resource, and the subject of national anxiety and frenzied media attention (including the Athabaskan tar sands or the cedar forests and shale gas deposits of the Pacific Northwest), are said to be wasted opportunities when left untouched (Lorenc 2016). Then, there is the waste that extractive endeavours afford: a breached tailings pond at Imperial Metals’ Mount Polley copper and gold mine that spilled millions of cubic metres of arsenic-poisoned slurry into the watershed of Secwepemc territories in central British Columbia. Or, further north, the stalled Site C hydroelectric dam—dreamt up to capture an

oversupply of power while drowning thousands of hectares of land in the heart of Treaty 8 Nations' ancestral lands. For the extractivist, land left untouched sits wasting away. But after intensive cultivation, land is laid to waste along with a host of entirely other beings, knowings, and doings tied to Indigenous lifeways.

In *On Garbage*, John Scanlan (2005, 71–81) moves that Western philosophy and science attained mastery over nature (which, on Indigenous territory, we are inclined to render as 'land') in ongoing performances of sanitization: acts of extraction or separation in which beings and knowings deemed useful mark the disposal of everything and everybody else. Seen this way, Western wasting enacts Western-colonial sovereignty—the authority to say which ontologies and epistemologies count, to say what is useful or valuable and therefore qualified for incorporation into the political body. Just as our national identity leans on multiculturalism as a means to camouflage the ongoingness of the colonial project, the idea that being Canadian means being sustainable (see Boyd 2004, vii) implies that we have made a clean break from waste.

But recycling—the mainstay of liberal ecological sensibilities—works like waste, reproducing only what is considered valuable: useful materials, useful concepts. As Daniel Lang (2007) writes, “recycling means never having to say you're sorry”—it serves as a material and discursive alibi for the absence of real change (n.p.). When its cover is blown, however, recycling proves as materially costly as waste: from the effects of energy-intensive re-manufacturing processes to the by-production of hazardous contaminants (MacBride 2011; Rogers 2006, 176–79). Moreover, there are material limits to what recycling can *do*—as Michael Huesemann writes, “how will it ever be possible to recycle the numerous chlorinated organic hydrocarbons that have bioaccumulated in animal and human tissues across the globe?” (2003, 260). Unlike recycling, and despite the measured inputs and rigid stages of industrial composting, almost all compost processes are able to break down hydrocarbons—compost is materially regenerative (US EPA 1998). And, while much has been said about recycling as a figure for the reproduction of conceptual architectures of power (Kendall & Koster 2007), we want to know: what can compost—as it figures material regeneration—do for theory-making?

Our experiment with compost hangs in the balance between *decomposition* as the undoing of Western intellectual and political sovereignties that rely on enclosures like 'subject' or 'species' (and authorizations like 'science' or valuations like

‘useful’), and *recomposition*: making and remaking a different world alongside nonhuman co-constituents of land. Thinking with decomposition is certainly generative in blurring inherited conceptual categories and reframing bodies as nonsovereign, leaky or permeable, and belonging to a world (see Barnett 2016). But while decomposition is ubiquitous, an Earth-process that gets by just as well without human aid, compost pulls humans into the mix amidst water, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, earthworms, bacteria, fungi, molds, protozoa, and other organic and inorganic matters (Park & Allaby 2017; Trautmann & Olynciw 1996). Perhaps this is what Donna Haraway calls “staying with the trouble”: multispecies players—including humans, their legacies of ruin, and their agencies of care—living and dying together in “flawed translations across difference,” attuned to the possibility of somehow getting on together (2016, 10).

And so, compost is about going to the trouble of trying, and trying again, in the midst of always different difference. As Haraway says of compost, “you can put the wrong things into it,” it can be a place of “culpable failure” (Franklin 2017, 51). Nuancing the difference between recycling and compost, or between compost as decompositional and recompositional as a matter of staying with the trouble, offers up cautious hope for regeneration amenable to Indigenous sovereignty as human and nonhuman cooperation in the ongoing renewal of land; where culpable failure is a matter of learning from doing, while paying attention to everyone (including nonhumans) and keeping on together in a place.

Our work, as such, ferments in the mix of a number of ‘turns’ concerned with the inclusion of nonhumans in makings of theory and in social, cultural, and political life at large, including critical animal studies, posthumanisms, ontological turns in science studies and anthropology, new vitalisms and materialisms, and theories of affect as a circulating, world-making force. But while turning is a responsibility of composting, turns in knowledge are so often enacted as overturning: modes of citational abjection, of throwing entire bodies of knowledge to waste, or of discrediting moves (often in service of newness) that never quite arrive at turning as attending to something that has been there all along—like Indigenous knowledges. Turns can be the estate of recycling, too: refashioning something old to turn it into something new without ever disrupting authorial, disciplinary, and institutional forms or warrants—never questioning inheritances, their obligations, and their citational architectures.

Speaking of inheritances, we take seriously the risks of ‘non’ as a prefix for human in light of histories of scientific racism, affirming alongside Dakota theorist Kim TallBear (2012) that systems of knowledge (namely Western philosophy and social and natural sciences) invoked to animate nonhumans have historically de-ani-

mated Indigenous peoples, even as Indigenous peoples have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential and enmeshed in social relations as cultural and political subjects. With Zakiyyah Jackson (2015), we acknowledge, too, the many ways that race comprises the terms through which ‘nonhuman’ comes into coherence.

We are hanging on, nonetheless, to the risks of thinking alongside ‘nonhuman’ even as compost matures within wider agricultural histories fraught with violence to bodies and lands. In our take, attending to the place-bound particularities of compost includes caring for how bodies arrive at the site of compost already subject to reciprocally constructing terms like gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability, and the segregations of conceptual categories like subject/object, life/non-life, or species. There is no universal composting subject. We recognize, too, the trouble of multiple and divergent agricultural worlds so often rendered singular as civilizational ‘fact’, as compost becomes embedded in practices of everyday life as an often-greenwashed panacea to ecological ruin at the expense of Indigenous and other non-Western agricultures—and their attendant ontologies and epistemologies—that assert the cultural nature of land.

So, we are in search of a theoretical framework and citational lineage from and in which to do compost as a theory-making method—a framework capacious enough to encounter the nonhumans of compost as social subjects, generators of knowledge, and co-collaborators in the fluctuations of culture and politics. Any theoretical or disciplinary tethering for composting settler nationalisms must stay with the trouble of violent colonial pasts and presents, including ongoing material and theoretical performances of wasting and recycling as modes of Indigenous dispossession (both materially and in knowledge projects, especially those of the academy that work to reanimate the nonhuman), and as a means of apprehending nonhumans as inert or insensate and devoid of agency as mere objects, natural ‘resources,’ or nation-building props. The theoretical situation of compost, moreover, should be empirical: attentive, as in the act of composting, to material workings through doing, sensing, and learning—and alert also to the ways in which the ‘parts’ and functions of a process or thing (like composting and its constituent matters) are encountered, named, and evaluated through the ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, methods, and citational arcs of Western philosophy and science, and thus regulated by the enclosures and exclusions of Western political and intellectual sovereignties authorized by what counts as normative in being, knowing, and doing.

The workings of compost are not static, they are always in the making and hard to pin down. Accordingly, the specifications of our theory-choosings and -makings must somehow remain tensile and on the move. We agree with Sebastian Abrahamsson and Filippo Bertoni who write that, in composting, there are no “normative guidelines for togetherness”—composting is not a question of kinds of relation but rather of asking what compost-relations “can do” (2014, 126–127). As a question of slippery methods and leaky subjects, with ever-shifting capacities who are always in the making, it would seem reasonable that our experiment inhabit a zone of theory-making staked out in the processual Spinozan-Deleuzian definition of ‘affect’ as the power “to affect and be affected” that unfolds in and between bodies and worlds being made and is, as such, “proto-political” in its implicit relationality (Massumi 2015, ix). For Brian Massumi, affect offers a problem rather than a solution, a different kind of staying with the trouble: to attend to the always-transitioning capacities of bodies in relation is to witness a “matrix of variation” that forces theory-making to indefinitely regenerate the terms involved in ways that crosscut inherited conceptual categories and disciplinary territories (50).

Crucially, as a mode of theory-making that attends to what a body can do (where ‘can’ signals relations in encounter that always exceed a body), affect puts pressure on the privileging of language and cognition as markers of human exceptionalism. Language, in Massumi’s take, belongs to a continuum of bodily potentials that include the nonlinguistic, such that the linguistic is merely a threshold past which the feeling of a change in bodily capacity being expressed changes qualitatively in nature. And, because cognition accompanies a body as it is always being made, always affecting and being affected, thinking is not interior to a subject, rather it is “in the world” (2015, 211–12).

Affect, it seems, does most of what we think a compost theory should do—and we are alive to the possibilities of locating thinking in the world and the promise of what an ongoing, relationally situated regeneration of conceptual terms might do for theory-making. But as non-Indigenous scholars living and working on lands inscribed with settler schemes of beings, knowings, and valuings, we wish to remain productively skeptical of the ways in which theories of affect methodologically bracket out what comes after or above the threshold of being registered or qualified (including epistemological concerns), and their privileging of what Lawrence Grossberg describes as “singular event or plane” rendered as “the universal ontological substance of the real” (2010, 192). We wonder, too, if theories of affect—in the tradition of Spinoza, Deleuze, and Massumi—again enact the mononaturalism (in privileging affect as an ontological heuristic) and mul-



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ticulturalism (in affect's situational or subjective registration) of Western liberal democracy in ways that decentre Indigenous stories and empiricisms, kinships and sovereignties.<sup>1</sup>

As Anishinaabe and Mohawk theorist Vanessa Watts (2013) cautions, while critical focus on ontology might allow for a river's agency (or, in the case of this text, a tulip's agency), it cannot account for a river's—or tulip's—own knowing; to bracket out epistemology leaves ontology empty and ready for inscription in ways that fictionalize Indigenous creation stories and invalidate human to non-human communication and treaty-making practices. Of course, in thinking affect as infra-cognitive, and the registration of affect as continuous with (albeit qualitatively different from) the nonlinguistic, it is conceivable that in its own way a tulip might register changes in its capacity in terms of meaning.

We affirm the entanglement of ontologies and epistemologies in reality-patterning stories (including settler national narratives and Western theoretical canons), and their power to make present or absent the entities that are available to live with, think with, and care with—the power to make kinships and sovereignties—in order to rephrase the question of what compost can do (as both a material practice and figure to think with) as a question of whose stories, whose theory-makings matter in the place where we are. Inasmuch as theories of affect promise to open our compost-thinking to nonhumans and nonlife, we also recognize that affect cannot do everything. In its Massumian vein, affect as theory is decompositional: writing the body as porous, unsettling disciplinary and generic territories, and foregrounding the inadequacies of capture and translation as discursive operations that aim to say something about a world always in the making. And, the theorization of affect is anticipatory in its attention to how things come to be in temporary composition, tracing emergent modes of power and the precarious atmospheres of political unrest (Massumi 2017). But as storying practices that shape and are shaped by the world's unfurling, as a matter of ongoing recomposition, can theories of affect continue to remain agnostic about what worlds are being remade in their own worldly implications?

In theory-making, attending to the relational textures of being a person folded into a place is a matter of accountability in citational habits, in deciding theoretical foci, in choosing methods and moods, in centring some political projects and not others, in choosing to collaborate and shake up the individualist politics of attribution, and in becoming sensitized to who or what is being called upon to authorize, translate, or nuance what or whom. Does the privileging of potential (even 'bad' potential) in theory-making obscure culpable failure? Can theories of affect make room for Indigenous sovereignties? Sometimes this will mean not do-

ing affect theory at all. Accordingly, we want to ground our compost theorization in Indigenous sciences (a term deficient in describing the intra-impingements of spirituality, philosophy, natural science, and politics in Indigenous empiricisms)—not to claim innocence in our place on Indigenous territories, but to rise up to the relational responsibilities of being here, and as a matter of demonstrating what we think a compost theory should do as a world-making knowledge practice that attends to what is in the mix in a place. In doing so, we knowingly risk collapsing multiple and situated indigeneities or belongings-to-place—but some loose commonalities can be ventured.

Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) theorist and education activist Leroy Little Bear describes three interrelated tenets of Indigenous sciences. First, and related to the verb-heavy nature of many Indigenous languages, Indigenous sciences share an acknowledgement that everything in the world is in “constant flux,” dissolving, transforming, and reforming. Second, the nature of constant flux is taken to be both a question of being and knowing: everything in existence comes into being as fleeting accruals of energy waves or oscillations accompanied by a transfer of energy, and knowledge is located in (and transmitted by) transfers of energy such that units of analysis like ‘particle’ or ‘wave’ in classical and quantum physics, ‘affect’ as a name for body- and world-making forces, or Indigenous words that end up translated as ‘spirit’ are all capable—as part of a web of knowing—of describing the same thing. Importantly, and pointing to the third tenet, allowing for multiple or divergent modes and expressions of knowing does not slip into relativism because ‘truth’ is related to, or tested against, the continuity of all forms of existence that make up a place as kin. Third and finally then, because everything being unmade and remade is animate, everything has spirit (or is comprised of waves, or has the capacity to affect and be affected) and, as Little Bear reckons, “if they all have spirit, that’s what we refer to as all my relations” (2011, np). Significantly, what distinguishes Indigenous sciences from affect studies and other ‘new’ materialisms or posthumanisms, as Chinese-Métis theorist Sebastian De Line (2016) notes, is an explicit framing of relations between bodies as positioned “deep within networks of belonging” that are “personal, intimate, and shared” rather than impersonal and abstract (6).

Because we want to ground our thinking in what is here, on the pile—in the mix, to be accountable for Canada 150 Tulips and to tulips as kin, we must also stay with the trouble of our own non-Indigenous systems of knowledge—even as Indigenous sciences help us to see our relations with the nonhumans of compost

as personal and intimate. We are cautious, too, of the trend to invoke Indigenous knowledges as analytical accessories that do the work of undoing Western conceptual categories (see Todd 2016; Wilkinson 2017). Regeneration is not recycling—and it requires attunement to that which is here now, and to what ‘that which is here’ needs in order to transform or keep on. We want to stress, too, that even as we identify the abstractions of certain modes of theory-making as incompatible with our own understandings of the obligations of non-Indigenous theorists on Indigenous lands, a compost-inspired theory can never be prescriptive: just as the constituent scraps of compost invariably vary, there can be no rules or citational quotas for a compost theory and, just as no two compost heaps are the same, there can be no cut-and-dry political imperative for compost-thinking.

Rather, goods and bads in composting are merely about paying attention—through trial and error—to what works in the mix; in this sense, any theoretical framework that makes room for nonhumans might reasonably engage or at least acknowledge Indigenous systems of knowledge, forms of governance, and practices of everyday living that have sustained and continue to sustain nonhuman lives (and nonlives) for millennia. Karen Barad’s agential realism, for example, affirms that theory-making is world-making, that philosophy and natural and social sciences are ontological, epistemological, and ethical engagements, that nonhumans can and do know, and that matter—what the world is made of—is intimate: “feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, 59). We should note, too, that agential realism is not exclusive of affect (Sheldon 2016) and, like affect, its citational and theoretical patternings are predominantly Western. Reworking physicist Niels Bohr’s insights about the interplay of experimental and theoretical apparatuses and his assertion that interactions between agencies and objects of observation are integral to quantum phenomena, Barad (2007) proposes that the ongoing self-differentiating materialization or material configuring of the world is rendered intelligible only by cuts in its fabric—such that, in temporary stabilizations, materialities, meanings, and responsibilities emerge simultaneously as things come into coherence as things.

Reality, in Barad’s construal, is not anterior or independent but, rather, comprises a “topologically dynamic complex of performances” (2007, 380); as the temporary resolution of ontological indeterminacies through cuts as specific, enacted relational patternings or ‘intra-actions,’ knowing is simultaneously available to and constitutive of human and nonhuman ‘individuals’ (including nonhuman life and nonlife), and—in the making of differences, in matter’s differential responsiveness—being, knowing, and responding to inclusions and exclusions are inseparable acts. Barad’s project is complex, and we offer it here only in the form of a short provocation to demonstrate a way of thinking, reading, and writing

with nonhumans that calls, explicitly, for relational responsibility in knowledge practices. We find the idea of agential ‘cuts’ fitting for thinking through both the ways in which Western ontologies, epistemologies, and systems of value have, in their reenactments, inscribed Indigenous lands with literal, material scars and the more subtle erasures of Indigenous land and life that happen even in Western sovereignty-disrupting theory-makings.

To attend to cuts is to challenge the underpinnings of intellectual and political sovereignty in Western philosophy and natural and social sciences while still attending to how ‘individual’ things come into coherence. In making-stable what is always on the move, cuts do not throw out the possibility of having stories-in-common for getting on together, they simply ask that we—those who share the same stories—are paying attention to how our stories come to be.

## II. Doing compost

Doing compost starts in the garden with cuts. It is in weeding, transplanting, or deadheading that grounds are readied for Canada 150 Tulips and teeming heaps of those more subversive trimmings (who did not make the cut) assemble. For a garden to be tamed into form, as Thylias Moss (2011) writes, some plants must go to a “killing field or field of minor-league obscurity, an agricultural pesticide-ridden or penal death row” (285). The rose garden at the far end of the University of British Columbia—our campus, for example, is shaped by stern curvilinear hedges with repressed bursts of colour, a clipped formality achieved only by what has been made absent. Here, the story of what makes a formal English-style rosarium is inseparable from its material effects, sharpening the dull blades of shears, overheating leaf-blower engines, and hewing hedges into intricate geometries. The material presence of the rose garden, too, is an ontological, epistemological, and axiological engagement bound up in histories of imperial and colonial nation-building practices: that the grounds are on unceded Musqueam land requires the displacement or cutting-out of an entirely other way of being, knowing, and doing, in which the nonhuman inhabitants of a rose garden can know and be known as kin, as social, cultural, and political subjects.

Pragmatically, landscaping is agential realism in action, oversimplified of course and explained in terms more leisurely than quantum phenomena. In trimming, a campus rosarium or national garden is brought into form or coherence by cutting

other things out—Indigenous bodies and bodies of knowledge, the possibility of sentient and knowing nonhumans, and nonhumans as kin. What is made present is made durable or valuable and comes into focus as something to respond to, even celebrate, at the expense of what is thrown out. In the garden, though, unwanted things have a way of growing back—of resisting cuts or making their own way—whereas roses and their imperial-colonial nostalgia or Canada 150 Tulips and their promise of multicultural success must be maintained. For Sara Ahmed (2010, 21–33, 133–59), nationalisms are maintained in both stories and “happy objects,” objects which have been storied in repeat encounters and whose capacities to affect (to make us happy, for example) have been already determined in histories of cuts, in turning to or including some things and turning away from or excluding others.

The maintenance of ‘Canada’ as a happy story of multiculturalism relies on nonhumans being in compliance, being storied and turned toward in certain ways: as easy resources that generate already-determined social goods rather than troublesome kin, as flourishing or at least being ‘under control’ rather than being in distress or in anthropogenic disaster. It is tourism board-funded clips of pristine wilderness and not aerial photos of clearcut northern British Columbian forests that are markers of national happiness. For Ahmed, accounting for how goods and bads are established in objects that orient or gather bodies around them puts pressure on the relationship between happiness and nationhood in ways that “recognize the impossibility of putting certain histories behind us” (159).

Theories of affect, feminist science studies, and Indigenous sciences can all help in the task of remaining accountable for cuts—for what stories are made or repressed—and for the ways in which these stories cut across the registers of being, knowing, and responding-to as they accrue in (and are provoked by) ‘objects’ or nonhumans and our patterns of encounter with them. As compost gathers together the undulations and muddy crossings of mutually affecting or intra-acting phenomena in constant flux, it implicates human modes of story-making like biological or biochemical theories about what the living matter of compost is and how it works, ethological accounts of how nonhuman life behaves in compost, and histories or ethnographies of how humans compost. Because we are invested in staying with the trouble of unhappy histories while having stories-in-common for getting on together, we are most interested in stories of humans and nonhumans composting together—in multispecies ethnographies that theoretically integrate human and nonhuman entanglements in the sometimes-speculative endeavour of flawed translation across difference.

As we see it, multispecies ethnographies are compatible with Indigenous empiricisms (and sovereignties that take into account the endurance of nonhuman others), as texts that come to be in the ongoingness of keeping on together with nonhumans. Multispecies stories, moreover, often take into account nonhuman modes of “storied experience,” what Thom van Dooren (2016, 67–69) describes as the nonhuman capacity to engage worldly happenings as meaningful. We are cautious, though, in seeking out sites of compost hope, turning again to dispossessed humans, nonhumans, and their knowledges as resources for ecological resilience (Simpson 2014a). We insist, as such, the work of turning and turning the pile is not a turning-to (as if there were someone or something to look to for answers, some ‘pure’ state of encounter, or a final answer about the workings of agency or knowledge), but rather a turning-with: an always present living-out together in “*this* here and *this* now,” always situated (see Butler 2017). Being together in compost is not always pleasant—with jarring smells and off-putting ooze—and stories of human and nonhuman entanglement are not always happy stories even as they work at regeneration.

Take, for example, the Red River, whose unhurried course has been reinscribed by the North Dakota and Minnesota border, but whose waters crosscut national lines to empty into Lake Winnipeg in Canada. In April of 1997, the river flooded and, along its course, levees and emergency dams failed—an unhappy story by most accounts. But Kim TallBear (TallBear & LaBare 2015) describes her encounter with the aftermath otherwise: abandoned farmlands have returned to wetlands and are home again to seabirds. She does not describe what the river has ruined, but rather “the devastation to the Earth wrought by white people’s agriculture,” now undone by the river’s force (n.p.). Quoting Eben Kirksey (2015) TallBear calls these lands “sites of biocultural hope” (n.p.). As both the story of a river’s own agency (the cuts it makes as it is both in-the-making and making the world), and a story that marks human lives with twisted fences and submerged dirt roads, the Red River flood might be read as a kind of compost process in which humans and nonhumans negotiate regenerative ways of getting on together amidst waste or ruin. The new wetlands that emerge from ruin are not pure: rotting farmhouses, overturned cars, grasses, and seabirds are all caught up in the water’s rise and fall in varying states of decay and growth—like compost.

Attending to the ongoingness of place and cultivating attunement to human and nonhuman needs in regeneration, through the figure of compost, allows us to recognize the trouble of violent colonial pasts, contest what counts as waste

or what is recycled as useful, and to remain attentive to the material workings of regeneration. In this way, doing compost as theory is staying with the waste. For multispecies ethnographer Anna Tsing (2015), we inhabit a world marked by economic and ecological ruin: for us, the perhaps soon-to-be-flooded reservoir of the proposed Site C dam and poisoned watersheds surrounding the breached Mount Polley mine tailings pond. As Tsing argues, neither averting ourselves from wasted places in favour of happy stories of technoscientific fixes nor turning to sites of ruin as hopeless dystopias will help us to think about “collaborative survival” (19). Instead, she asks that we follow nonhumans around as they lead us back to places laid waste by civilizational force and still bearing colonial and capitalist pressures—but places alive in regeneration even in ruin. And, following nonhumans around (like Canada 150 Tulips and tulip-kin) while making accountable accounts is how we want to do our compost-thinking.

Tsing, we think, is a practiced composter, attuned to what is making- and unmaking-together in a place. Her text is a lively tracing of mushroom commodity chains, including the networked lives of matsutakes and their Japanese-, Lao-, and Cambodian-American pickers, sellers, and buyers who are connected and disconnected in waves of transoceanic migrations, present realities of colonial expansion, asymmetrical demands of capitalism and citizenship, competing interests of industrial forestry and forest conservationists, and the transformations of global warming. In what she deems an “anti-ending,” Tsing concludes her ethnography of the matsutake by describing her first encounter with the mushroom. Down on all fours, below gangling tanoak and between the rotting stumps of once-towering Douglas fir, Tsing describes how she learned to feel the forest floor with her hands. “We were looking for mushrooms by feel alone,” she recounts. But mushroom hunting, as we learn, is more artful than pawing about wildly; one needs to know particular plants and fungi and where mushrooms are likely to pop up. This method, writes Tsing, is a “combination of intimate knowledge and feeling through the duff” that focuses attention to the here and now, in “the middle of things” (277–278). At the end of Tsing’s text, we find ourselves never quite arriving, always back in the middle of human-mushroom relations.

Like Tsing, feeling through the leaf litter for matsutakes, we continue to get a feeling for compost by fumbling around with our hands—homing, honing in, and grounding ourselves here and now. Even as compost theory happens in the abstract, we learn and continue to learn from the material practice of composting. For us, this learning began in and around the compost bins at the x̣ẉc̣ịc̣əṣəm Indigenous Health Research and Education garden at the UBC farm, where we volunteered last summer. We dug into the compost and sensed its heat and dampness; we scrunched our noses at the sudden smells, discovering that compost learning is

not only visual or tactile and is not always pleasant—that compost can be trouble. We learned that we could get a sense for the state of decay, of where a pile was ‘at’ in its process of decomposition and recomposition, by paying attention to who or what was still around. Sometimes we failed. We got to know which plant-kin are easily decomposed and those that crop up again and again in weedy tufts around the pile. We learned something of both Western and Indigenous sciences. By getting to know the heap in its ongoing composition (or compost-ition), we came to know something of compost and composting. In learning to attend to ongoing recomposition as a way of knowing the world, we found ourselves back in the middle of things—and wondering if we might extend our understanding of compost beyond the garden and beyond compostable carbon-based life.

With Tsing (162), we recognize that ‘species’ are “not always the right units” for telling stories and that the term ‘multispecies’—as TallBear (2015, 234) notes—is incapable of making room for Indigenous understandings of nonliving or immaterial nonhumans as sentient and knowing subjects. In learning from the messiness and unpredictability of compost (which can often include nonliving things), we have realized that conceptual categories like ‘species’ are storying cuts which, while sometimes useful, make absent the teachings that inorganic nonhumans have to offer and the ways in which nonlife affects and is affected by human life. What might an inorganic composting practice look like? In the series “Happy Birthday Super Cheaper,” Vancouver-based sculptor annie ross weaves ceremonial garments for throwaway items: a plastic T-Rex, a detergent bottle, or a brass deer figurine. These items, ross (2009) writes, would otherwise end up in a landfill, “where it all ends up, unless someone pulls you out, or you pull yourself out, and put it all back together” (n.p.).

Pulled from the waste, ross’ series can easily be read as recycling, having something in common with DIY or maker projects that repurpose trash. But ross’ objects are not upcycled into reusability, she makes no such demands of the junk she assembles, and plastic dinosaurs remain plastic dinosaurs. What is regenerated in ross’ art-making compost practice is not the object, but how the object is storied, a mode of encounter. Resonant with ross’ own words, ‘compost’ finds its roots in the Latin *composita*, something ‘put together’—and we wonder if the labour of putting it all back together attends to stories doubly: restorying throwaway objects (and how we might encounter them) while staying with the trouble of the stories that shaped how these items came to be as artifacts of overuse and

ruin. What if composting inorganics is as simple as paying attention differently? In clothing cast-off items, ross asks that these objects become recognizable as subjects, relatable-to as kin, apprehendable as having the capacity to affect, and deserving of response which might otherwise have been extended toward humans or, at best, animals. If it is possible, then, to ‘compost’ plastic or brass, it is a matter of apprehending compost as a mode of encounter or, as Warren Cariou (2017) says, recognizing the “sensory skills and the teachings” these material forms have to offer as they are (n.p.).



annie ross, *Petroglyph Deer Goat*, from the series *Happy Birthday Super Cheaper*, 2005-2007

Opening ourselves to material encounters reveals our vulnerability to nonhuman others and, to illustrate, Anna Tsing proposes that a walking stick is an “encounter in motion,” a person-and-stick (29). Concatenations of human and nonhuman abound, most obviously in going through the motions of sustaining livelihoods as with the matsutake and its pickers, or entire lifeways as with salmon and their coastal Indigenous kin—but also between humans and the many non-living material supports of human life. Relying on the help of nonhuman and nonliving others is a fact of the everyday, not the stuff of heroic or happy stories but of messy encounters and sometimes-failed collaborations. Thinking through collaboration, Tsing asks: “how do gatherings sometimes become ‘happenings?’” (29). More than just a collection of things, a happening establishes expectations, responsibilities, and agreements between those, human and nonhuman, who have (or find themselves to have been) gathered.

As a place of contingent capacities, a compost pile is one such happening—whether the pile is a heap of organic and inorganic scraps, a bibliography, a body of theory, an institution, or a nation—where the responsibilities of turners, decomposers, makers, and bystanders must be continuously negotiated. Perhaps this ‘happening’ is akin to what Ahmed (2010) calls a “politics of the hap,” where the ‘hap’ of ‘happiness,’ traced to Middle English, suggests chance or possibility. As Ahmed sets out, such a politics attends to how what *is* came to be, and to what has been made impossible—but works “toward a world in which things can happen in alternative ways” (223). To think, write, and do compost might mean recognizing the already wasted and its per-haps, its could-be-otherwise—never atrophying in the happy promise of ecological or theoretical utopias, but being creative about, with, and in wasted landscapes and sites of knowledge and the responsibilities they provoke.

Both Tsing and ross teach us that encounters with matsutake mushrooms and plastic dinosaurs (or Canada 150 Tulips) are not mere gatherings, but happenings in which beings, knowings, and doings are unmade and remade—that following mushrooms around or weaving finery for trash to wear can be an act of composting settler nationalisms in the enactment of worlds, in theory and in practice, incommensurable with Western political and intellectual sovereignties. Tsing and ross, alike, draw our attention to wasted sites and objects that offer biocultural hope in regeneration, acknowledging that the realms of culture and politics are continuous with the nonhuman world including nonliving things. To encounter a motley mix of often cast-off things as compost, as a non-neutral happening that establishes expectations and responsibilities, is to live out the difference between Western and Indigenous sovereignties.

In focusing back on sites of ruin or throwaway objects, Tsing and ross demonstrate culpable failure: that we must stay with the trouble we have made even as we try again and again. And, in Tsing’s account of Mien and Hmong refugees, Native Americans, and matsutake mushrooms getting on together (for better and worse), we learn that as non-Indigenous theorists and activists on Indigenous lands, being ‘for’ Indigenous sovereignty does not entail a waste-making reversal or making-pure—but rather that being here together requires careful attention to what is in the mix and how it might work together (or not). Finally, through Tsing, ross, and compost itself, we learn ways of knowing what is good—beyond inherited categories—by living in relationships with humans and nonhumans over time—what we have been calling Indigenous empiricism.

In the figure of compost as a happening, a place of mistakes and responsibilities between kin, we see intimations of an ontology of entangled human and nonhuman composters-together who arise in webs of belonging, being made and unmade together in regenerative processes. Whether the workings of compost are personal or impersonal—whether they emerge in or from Little Bear’s constant flux, Barad’s intra-action, or Massumi’s affect—the ontology of compost is webbed to how we come to know a heap’s composition. Thinking with compost as a material practice and a figure for theory-making unearths a way of knowing that attends to what is always in-the-making and to how that which is being made is encountered, named, evaluated, and otherwise ‘cut’ in Western and non-Western systems of knowledge; in the theory-makings of philosophy, science, or cultural and political theory; in the storied experiences of nonhumans; and in the fleeting atmospheres, intuitions, or impressions that make knowledge known—just as composters-together constitute these multimodal and multisensory knowings. To compost in this way is also to think, read, and write as methods of attending to emergent materialities and meanings such that we might have stories-in-common for being here together, even as we stay with the trouble of fraught pasts, precarious and sometimes-ruined presents, or uncertain futures.

In composting, we experiment with what goes into the pile, finding that different combinations or techniques work differently—different materials, methods, texts, or moods do difference differently. To attend to what is in the mix in a place might mean finding erasures or connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stories, between citational lineages, styles, or disciplines and mediums (like Tsing’s mushroom anthropology or ross’ art-making). Because what matters in the constituent materials and practices of compost is syncretism, composting requires an ethics: a way to know what is good or what works in the midst of constant change. And, in compost-thinking, we are indebted to Indigenous empiricisms—knowledge practices that, in attending again and again to relations, find value in everyone (human and nonhuman, living and nonliving) enduring in a place.

While never easy, compost is slow—it gives us time to react, to sense, to consider, and reconsider. Being together in compost’s slow regeneration suggests a politics of cultivation, a way of storying how we might keep on together as mutually-affecting individuals and collectives in messy and sometimes fraught collaborations, that is attuned to how stories themselves can shape a mode of encounter. In attending to what everyone in the mix needs, in the midst of ongoingness, the politics of doing compost—materially and as theory-making—will always exceed the enclosures of Western sovereignties and settler nationalisms, turning-with what kinships and sovereignties are already *here* and to what we humans and nonhumans might compost together.

## Endnotes

1. Significantly, we do not want to discount productive intersections of affect and Indigeneity such as: Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson (2013) writing on trauma and embodiment in multimodal Indigenous storytelling; Driftpile Cree theorist Billy Belcourt (2016) mapping the affectivities of queer experience and life on the reserve; Jennifer Biddle (2013) witnessing the traumatic affect of Indigenous Australian cinema; Tanana Athabaskan scholar Dian Million (2009) emphasizing the importance of the felt histories of Indigenous women; or Maori and non-Maori scholars collaborating on the interchange between Indigenous relational framings and national affective-discursive repertoires (Wetherell et al. 2015).

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