

Article

Religion, Animals, and Indigenous Traditions

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Abstract: This article examines how the field of Indigenous studies can contribute to expanding the way religious studies scholars think through the question of the animal. It suggests that Indigenous intellectual traditions, which often position animals as persons, relatives, knowledge holders, and treaty makers, prompt further reflection on the fundamental questions of what it means to be a human animal and member of a pluralistic cosmology of beings. The article considers how Indigenous activists and scholars are actively re-centering animals in their decolonial pursuits and asks how a re-centering of animals might also contribute to decolonizing the study of religion.

Keywords: animals; indigenous religious traditions; decolonization

1. Introduction

Heaven for the Cree is the trail where all animals meet. This statement expresses a common conviction held by Iiyiyiuch, the James Bay Cree Peoples, who live in what is now territorialized as Northern Québec. I have encountered many different iterations of this statement while living and working in Iiyiyiu Aschii, the Cree Peoples' land. I read it as an environmental teaching that invests the natural world—the animals and the lands upon which they flourish—with intrinsic value and profound spiritual significance. At the same time, such a statement calls for cross cultural dialogue and prompts reflection on the fundamental questions of what it means to be a human animal, to exist in relation with, and be part of, a pluralistic cosmology of beings.

This article asks how Indigenous intellectual traditions might contribute to expanding the way religious studies scholars both frame and think through the question of the animal. This is not intended to serve as an exhaustive survey of all literature written at the intersection of Indigenous religious traditions and animals—that work would be far too broad in scope for any single entry. It is perhaps even a misnomer to entitle an article such as this “Religion, Animals, and Indigenous Traditions”. For one, animals are so deeply woven into the fabric of Indigenous lives and philosophies that to impose the conjunction “and” between these two phrases might imply a conceptual or practical distance that is non-existent. Indigenous religious traditions are often characterized as being relational and holistic (Rose 1999; Wilson 2008; Shorter 2016). This makes it difficult to extricate animals from the webs of interdependent relationships in which they are entangled. Furthermore, as many other critical scholars of religion have pointed out, the very category of religion, as an English language word and western construct that derives from a particular white protestant Christian imperialist intellectual history, often fails to transpose well onto Indigenous contexts (Owen 2011; King 2013; Nye 2019).

To be clear, there is enormous diversity within both Indigenous and western knowledge systems. I am not suggesting that western and Indigenous theory is always incommensurable, though there are often important points of tension that require careful attention when it comes to the question of how animals are viewed and valued.¹ Rather, in this paper I problematize what I term settler colonial modes of relation, which I define as a specific set of attitudes, beliefs, and ethical dispositions towards animals that have been taken as normative within both the study of religion and settler colonial politics. Throughout this



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article, I call attention to how Indigenous modes of relation, which position animals as persons, relatives, knowledge holders, and treaty makers, run counter to settler colonial modes of relation which tend to value animals as objects, resources, or possessions. Throughout this article, I sometimes speak of animals in the abstract sense and other times in the fleshy literal sense. Animals, after all, embody pluralities (Todd 2018). They are at once symbols, metaphors, allegories, and stories at the same time that they are species, prey, predators, and food.

I focus largely on the work of Indigenous feminist thinkers who are actively re-centering animals in their decolonial pursuits and reflect on how a re-centering of animals might also contribute to decolonizing the study of religion. I intentionally privilege the voices of Indigenous feminist thinkers because, as they themselves have pointed out, though Indigenous women are often at the forefront of community activism and possess a wealth of cultural knowledge, their voices are often left out of both policy and scholarly debates surrounding animals. In addition to land restitution, decolonization requires a divestment from unjust systems of knowledge and domination. Centering animals, I suggest, invites religious studies scholars to critically reconsider the field's privileging of human beings as the only social, political, and religious actors and to re-evaluate how our religious imaginations shape our relationships to animals and consequently our relationships to our environments, other humans, and ourselves.

Following the wisdom of several decolonial methodologists, before I begin the work of relating to others, including the animal others I engage throughout this article, it is necessary to situate myself (Kovach 2009; Wilson and Breen 2019; Smith 2012). I am a settler scholar whose ancestry can be traced back through different parts of Europe, primarily Ireland and England. I was born and raised on Algonquin territory in Ottawa, Ontario in Canada. I currently teach and live on Kumeyaay territory in San Diego, California where I serve as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. I conduct the majority of my research in Whapmagoostui, Iiyiyiu Aschii, Cree territory in Northern Québec. Throughout this article I think with animals who narratively and literally inhabit these lands, as well as others that have captivated the colonial imagination and have been central to the violent work of settler nation making and also those that have captured the decolonial imagination and sought settler colonialism's undoing.

2. Animal Colonialism: Capturing, Killing, and Disappearing the Animal

Animals, like Indigenous Peoples, have been targets for colonial violence. Diné feminist scholar, Kelsey Dayle John names the twin violence against Indigenous Peoples and other-than-human animals "animal colonialism" to call attention to the ways in which assaults on animals are simultaneously attacks on Indigenous life and lifeways (John 2019a, p. 42). The colonial violence John speaks of involve both concrete acts of physical harm and the killing of animals as well as epistemic forms of violence such as the denigration of Indigenous-animal relationalities and the narrative removal of animals from landscapes. Animal colonialism, she suggests, is a useful analytic for understanding the ways in which the attempted genocides of Indigenous Peoples and animal genocides are interconnected and co-facilitated by the colonial institutions of heteropatriarchy, environmental racism, and religious fundamentalism.

John offers her own personal experience of animal colonialism when she discusses how colonialism undermined Diné-horse relations. John describes how within the Diné creation story, "horses come to the Earth's surface and are made to be a tool for and gift to Diné. With them comes a set of instructions in husbandry, songs, and prayers that reflect the deep and intrinsic connection that both share with Nahasdzaan (Mother Earth)" (John 2019a, p. 56). John suggests that Navajo livestock, and in particular mustang horses, were judged as being less valuable by the colonial state simply because they existed in close proximity to Navajo Peoples. Applying a Diné feminist perspective John further interrogates how this depreciation was gendered. She explains how colonial

narratives of wildness surrounding Diné women, horses, and lands were deployed by colonial officials to justify the assimilation of the Diné Peoples through Christianization and formal schooling. The Diné matrilineal tradition of caring for livestock was undermined by a colonial patriarchy in which ownership and possession were afforded to males alone. As John explains, the dispossession of women from their roles as care takers of horses, and of Diné Peoples from their lands, negatively impacted Diné-horse relations, which for the Diné continue to be held sacred.

Perhaps the most devastating and well known example of animal colonialism to take place under the aspiration of nation making in North America was the systematic slaughter of Prairie Bison, or Buffalo, which had dire consequences for Indigenous Peoples of the Plains (Hubbard 2009, p. 66; see also: Legge and Robinson 2017). Historian Ken Zontek has argued “Native Americans established a virtually unprecedented human-animal relationship with the bison, in which buffalo country became Indian Country” (Zontek 2007, p. xiv). Prior to colonization Bison provided Indigenous Peoples living on the Plains with valuable source of nutrition as well as spiritual, cultural, and material sustenance. Hunting ensured a reliable food source, and Buffalo also offered building materials, clothing, and medicines (Daschuk 2013, p. 4). Buffalo were central to ceremonial life, and understood to be more-than-human persons.

Historians and ecologists estimate that approximately between twenty-five to thirty million Buffalo were present in North America in the sixteenth century. By 1902, they estimate these numbers were reduced to only two dozen surviving Buffalo now protected within the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. Colonial officials targeted buffalo as a strategy of subjugation. One U.S. Army Commanding Officer, Col. Richard Irving Dodge, famously stated in 1867: “Kill every buffalo you can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone” (see: Zontek 2007, p. 25). Tourists were even encouraged to shoot Buffalo from moving trains and bounties were offered for Bison hides and tongues (Crawford O’Brien 2021, p. 110).

The decimation of the Buffalo had devastating effects for Indigenous Peoples. Historian Ken Zontek describes the loss of Buffalo as “nearly cataclysmic” and having constituted a “virtual apocalypse” (Zontek 2007, p. 26). By 1884, for example, one-fourth of twenty-three-hundred Blackfeet Peoples in the United States starved to death without Buffalo to sustain them (ibid.). In response to such grave losses, new religious movements directed towards restoring the Buffalo and by extension the health of the lands and peoples, such as the Ghost Dance, spread across the United States (Wenger 2009).

Animals also accompanied and facilitated colonialism. The introduction of domesticated animals to North America was of profound consequence to Indigenous ecologies and political economies. Domesticated animals assisted settlers with the work of “taming the land” and establishing colonies (Bauer 2016, p. 57). These animals introduced diseases, such as anthrax, Texas tick fever, brucellosis, and bovine tuberculosis (Daschuk 2013). According to Wailacki and Concow historian of the Round Valley Indian Tribes, William J. Bauer Jr. “domesticated livestock accompanied tomatoes as emblems of colonialism and federal Indian policy” in California (Bauer 2016, pp. 56–57). Domesticated livestock interfered with traditional subsistence practices. Pigs unearthed acorns, cattle scared away deer, and sheep eroded soil and ruined streams where communities hunted and harvested. Bauer explains that these domesticated animals were targeted for violence. Settlers antagonistically grazed their animals on reserve lands as a strategy for asserting their power while Indigenous groups killed livestock for food in acts of survivance (Bauer 2016; see: Vizenor 1994).

Indigenous communities also appropriated domesticated animals and placed them within their own cultural frameworks and care practices as strategies of survival. For the Kumeyaay community, Barona Band of Mission Indians, ranching and farming were a way to survive during the depression era in the 1930s. When the City of San Diego removed the Kumeyaay from their reservation El Capitain to build a reservoir, a group of tribal members bought the Barona ranch, now the Barona Indian Reservation near Lakeside. Barona Band of Mission Indians were able to sustain themselves through ranching and farming although

many tribal members continued to live in poverty until band opened the Barona Casino and pursued other economic ventures in the 1990s.

Animals also resist settler colonialism along with Indigenous Peoples. Métis/otipemisiw anthropologist Zoe Todd found this to be true of fish while conducting research in Paulatuq, the North Western Territories in Arctic Canada, and amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) in Treaty Six Territory. According to Todd, fish resist settler colonialism in various ways. Todd explains fish act as “sites of memory” and “stories” that strengthen community and kinship relations because fishing and the care taking of fish bring people together to establish shared ethics and experiences (Todd 2014, 2018). According to Todd, fish are also “non-human persons with agency” who bear witness to and resist colonial encounters. Todd describes how Paulautuuqmiut (community members from Paulatuk), concerned about the wellbeing of local char, mobilized in the 1980s to shut down a commercial fishery that the federal government initiated as an economic development project in the 1960s. She suggests this instance serves as an example of humans working together with fish to disrupt colonial law by living out their reciprocal obligations to one another (Todd 2018).

Currently, Indigenous Peoples are working to restore species populations, revitalize animal knowledge, and restore kinship practices. These practices of re-relating to animals can be considered modes of religious regeneration because they incorporate ceremony, relearning cultural knowledge, and repairing relationships with animals. The Intertribal Buffalo Council (IBC), for example, which formed in 1991, includes 58 tribes in 19 states working together to restore and care for Bison populations. According to Suzanne Crawford O’Brien, “For these communities Bison restoration is not simply an economic venture, it is a spiritual one, deeply informed by ritual, ceremony, and prayer” (Crawford O’Brien 2021, p. 110). For Kelsey Dayle John, training and working with Navajo mustangs has been the central means by which she has been able to revitalize a Diné epistemology. Centering Navajo horses as “teachers and knowers for decolonization”, John explains, has been instructive for working through the tensions of settler colonialism to restore relationships to horses, community, and land (John 2019a, p. 42).

Whereas colonial governments attacked certain species to undermine Indigenous Nationhood and introduced new animals which helped facilitate the taming of Indigenous lands, other acts of colonial violence against animals were ideological. Scholars focusing on Indigenous-settler-land relations have called attention to the ways in which the theft of Indigenous lands was justified by a religious imagination that perceived land as empty and promised to settlers by God (Miller et al. 2010; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). This religious conviction was backed by international and domestic law, in particular the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of 15th century papal bulls which stated that any Christian who discovered land populated by non-Christians could assert ownership, and the Johnson v. M’Intosh (1823) decision, which codified this principle of Euro-Christian supremacy into the US legal system. These religious understandings and legal principles have been heavily interrogated in settler colonial studies, less attention, however, has been paid to how a religious reading of the land as *terra nullius* not only effaced human polities from place but expunged animal beings from their ecologies.

Agents of empire also narratively removed animals from lands to be settled in order to establish emptiness and appropriate territory. Animal erasure is a current practice employed by colonial governments and industries to justify the continued annexation of Indigenous territories. Zoe Todd has illustrated how this colonial politics of erasure, or what Kānaka Maoli scholar, Hi’ilei Julia Hobart names a “de-animation” of landscape, perpetuates in the colonial present in the Canadian Prairies (Todd 2018; Hobart 2019, p. 31). The prairies, Todd explains, are often represented by Canadians as dry and barren grasslands, but as she notes, in actuality are filled with vibrant waterways and thus fish and other animals. Lake Winnipeg, for example, encompasses seventeen rivers that extend themselves into Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Depictions of the Prairies as dry lands narratively remove fish and water from the landscape, which Todd argues “renders

palatable large-scale resource extraction, commercial agriculture, municipal development, forestry and other activities which severely impact fish habitats” (Todd 2018, p. 62).

These narrative removals of animals are repeated across a variety of Indigenous land bases in order to secure settler futures. In the geographic imaginary of southern Québécois, for example, Iiyiyiu Aschii, James Bay Cree territory in Northern Québec, is represented as a cold and barren hinterland. These narratives of a desolate North help justify the Québec government’s move to aggressively pursue mining, logging, and hydroelectric development in the territory (Desbiens 2013). This too, has negatively impacted fish habitats whose waters have become polluted with mercury. In contrast, for Iiyiyiuch, land is seen and experienced as encompassing all “the various beings with whom the Cree interact” (Carlson 2008, p. 4).

Indigenous oral traditions narrate visions of landscapes that are alive and animate with other-than-human beings. Indigenous stories are filled with depictions of animals talking, dreaming, thinking, and carrying about their lives like humans (Legge and Robinson 2017). These stories impart important geographical, historical, ethical, and religious information and embed Indigenous communities in ecologies of belonging. In his history of California, William J. Bauer Jr. draws on a variety of distinct Creation stories from Concow, Pomo, and Paiute cultures, to illustrate how Indigenous oral traditions narrate an understanding of California as having been created and shaped through human-animal relationships. The stories he shares acknowledge animals as historical actors capable of establishing their own social roles and political relationships. Bauer, for example, retells a story shared by an eighty-five-year-old Paiute man from Bishop Bridgeport about a council of animals who came from far and wide to a gathering at Mono Lake:

From the west, Padwa (Bear) came. From the south, Esha (Coyote) trotted to Mono Lake. Togoqua, Rattlesnake, slithered from the north. Many other animals attended the conference, but these three, Bridgeport Tom explained, were the most important. The animals discussed the jobs that each would perform in the world. They appointed Humming bird to be the king of the air. The animals told Padwa to protect the woods. They asked Deer to keep peace in the land and Pogue (Fish) to keep the streams pure. Esha, of course, ruled the Paiutes as their father, and the animals made Togoqua the king of the land, sun, and moon. This was an extremely powerful gift—too powerful, in fact. The animals gave Togoqua so much power that it turned to poison and went to his head . . . (Bauer 2016, p. 35)

The story goes on to explain how as a result of this excess of power, Togoqua, or rattlesnake, became a dumb and dangerous creature. According to Paiute wisdom, this excess of power is why rattlesnakes require caution, proper handling, and respect. Failure to respect Togoqua often results in unbearably hot weather. According to Bauer, this story imparts an important moral lesson: each individual has something valuable to contribute to the collective, and each must learn to work well together for the overall good. Bauer argues that these stories, which were told and recorded during the Great Depression in the 1930s, speak to the historic moment in which they are being spoken as well as to the present in which he is writing because they assert Paiute sovereignty and their long history of occupation at Mono Lake and the Owens Valley (Bauer 2016, p. 36). These Creation stories are political assertions that undermine the “legal doctrines that dispossess them” and express an “Indigenous right to land”, which as Bauer explains is “not vested in papal bulls or nineteenth-century Supreme court decisions” but “assigned at the moment the animals gathered on the shores of Lake Mono to give each other a job . . . ” (Bauer 2016, p. 39). From this perspective, it is human beings’ knowledge of, and interdependent relationship with, other animals that bind them to place and authorize their occupation of and jurisdiction over specific territories.

In contrast, settler colonialism tends to position human beings in hierarchal fashion above Creation. As Suzanne Crawford O’Brien explains, settler colonialism insists “human beings are the only sentient beings, the only beings with souls, and the only beings who

ultimately matter. In this worldview, the earth is inert, existing only to provide resources for extraction and profit" (Crawford O'Brien 2021, p. 35). Several Indigenous theorists locate this assumption of human superiority as belonging to a Christian and Eurocentric worldview (Harrod 2000; King 2003; Tinker 2008; Legge and Robinson 2017). Writer and storyteller Thomas King who self-identifies as Greek and Cherokee, for example, suggests that this assumption of human superiority stems specifically from the Christian creation story of Genesis which establishes "a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies—God, man, animals, plants" (King 2003, p. 23). King suggests that the issue with modernity is that the West has continually told itself this same old story of human exceptionalism and this has led to a collective sense of conceit. He writes,

... by the time we arrived in the wilderness, broke and homeless, the story of being made in God's image, of living in paradise, of naming the animals must have gone to our heads, for while we weren't the strongest or the fastest or the fiercest creatures on the planet, we were, certainly, as it turned out, the most arrogant. (King 2003, p. 28)

According to critical scholars of religion and animals, this is now the issue religious studies scholars must confront—namely, our arrogance. We have asserted too much power by assuming we are the only religious subjects in a world replete of inanimate objects. Given that the study of religion is a product of western imperialism and derives from a particular white protestant Christian intellectual history it is possible that the uninterrogated assumption of human ascendancy over animals in the study of religion is itself a shrouded theological conviction. Aaron Gross suggests precisely this when he writes, "there is a leap of faith (perhaps of a Western, Protestant Christian, biblical, Abrahamic, or modern kind) in the apparent secularity and objectivity of taking religion as a human—and only human- phenomenon" (Gross 2014, p. 117). Indigenous knowledge systems fundamentally challenge this anthropocentrism.

3. Animal Decolonialization: Relating to, Learning from, and Governing with Animals

Religious studies scholars have long been intrigued and perplexed by Indigenous statements about animals, including claims that human beings can communicate with animals, that animals are their kin, that animals can become human, and that humans can become animals, that animals can shapeshift and change gender, and so on. The animals of Indigenous religions have proven to be ontologically elusive creatures for religious studies scholars to apprehend. Early scholars of religion often misread Indigenous-animal relationalities through a mode of observation and analysis that largely depended on Christian frames of reference. Indigenous Peoples were said to be "believing in", "worshipping", "sacrificing" and sometimes even "confusing themselves" with animals. Nineteenth century English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871) on his search for the origins of religion, for example, regarded Indigenous Peoples as "primitive animists." From Tylor's colonial comparativist perspective, monotheism, and Christianity in particular, represented the highest expression of religiosity. Conversely, he regarded Indigenous Peoples, as lost in state of nature, conflating animals with gods, and placed them at the bottom of the evolutionary pole. Such theories of religion are "deeply rooted in the politics of colonization" (Laack 2020, p. 12).

Human geographer, Amba J. Sepie offers insight into why Indigenous claims about animals have proven difficult for western theorists to fully rationalize and make sense of when she suggests "modern humans are encouraged to speak *about* animals as part of a category called 'nature', not speak with them" (Sepie 2017, p. 5). The Euro-Christian imagination firmly divides nature from culture and associates human beings and animals according to this binary logic. Animals are assumed not to possess culture or reason or morality or language. This is not true for Indigenous knowledge systems. Whereas within the western academy repositioning animals as agentive subjects might entail a paradigm shift and a move to rewrite the very rubric for what counts as religion (let alone how the academy in general compartmentalizes knowledge with hard divisions between the

natural sciences and the humanities), understanding animals as socio-religious actors may seem an obvious truism to many, if not most, Indigenous knowledge systems that grant animals personhood.

A. Irving [Hallowell \(1960\)](#) has been credited as the first anthropologist to expand scholarly understandings of Indigenous notions of personhood through his work with the Beren River Ojibwe. By focusing on Ojibwe conceptual categories, Hallowell discerned how within an Ojibwe ontology possessing personhood does not necessitate a being to be a human, or even humanlike. Rather, within an Ojibwe ontology personhood is an expansive category of meaning that is constituted and cultivated through a being's interactions with other sentient beings. As such, not only is personhood expanded to be inclusive of other animals, but also of other elements, including rocks, trees, and even thunder. Although Hallowell's findings on Ojibwe conceptions of personhood were novel to the field of anthropology in the 1960s, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar, Kim TallBear, reminds us that "indigenous peoples have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives" ([TallBear 2015](#), p. 234).

The Indigenous oral tradition is rife with stories of animals thinking, talking, living and interacting as much as humans do. Take for example the following Ojibwe story I summarize below which was told to anthropologist William Jones in 1904 by an Ojibwe-French man living in Fort William on the north shore of Lake Superior ([White 1999](#)). It involves a woman who married a beaver and imparts the knowledge that animals are persons intimately engaged in social and spiritual relationships with human beings.

In this story, a young woman goes on a vision quest and sees "a person in human form" who asks her to marry him. She eventually concedes, marries this person, and gives birth to four children. However, later on in their life together she notices something peculiar—whenever her husband and her children would leave the home, they would return with all sorts of items used to prepare and eat beaver including, kettles, bowls, knives, and tobacco. The accumulation of this peculiar mélange of items leads the woman to realize that she had married a beaver. According to the story, her husband and children were continually being captured, killed, and eaten without ever dying. Rather, they would return home with the offerings people provided them. Eventually, the woman's beaver husband does die and the woman returns to live for a very long time among other human beings. During this time, the woman cautions the humans to never speak ill of beaver, for "if anyone regards a beaver with too much contempt, speaking ill of it, one simply will not {be able to} kill it" (quoted in [White 1999](#), p. 110).

The story of the woman who marries a beaver displays how for the Ojibwe Peoples communing with animals is made possible through religious modes of communication including, fasting, dreaming, prayer, and in this case, visions. Given the story was told during the fur trade era when Ojibwe women were actively marrying fur traders, historian and anthropologist Bruce M. White suggests that the story also conveys the vital role women played in crossing boundaries, both spiritual and social, to enlarge their communities ([White 1999](#)). The story also imparts a very clear environmental ethic about the proper care and respect that ought to be paid to beavers in order for them to provide for the people. In the story of the woman who married a beaver, hunting and trapping is expressed as a relationship based on love, care, respect, and reciprocity. The notion that animals are social actors who willingly gift themselves to hunters and trappers in exchange for respect and gratitude by adhering to proper ritual behavior and codes of conduct is common to many hunting cultures ([Nadasdy 2007](#); [Scott 2013](#); [Walsh 2016](#)).

Since Hallowell, it has become widely recognized by academics interested in Indigenous cultures that Indigenous Peoples' conceptions of personhood extends to animals (see also: [Schermmerhorn 2021](#)). However, as anthropologist Paul Nadasdy has pointed out, Indigenous Peoples' assertions that animals are persons are rarely taken seriously as factual statements but rather interpreted as metaphors. Nadasdy suggests that this is because Euro-American scholars are "reluctant to expand their own analytic concept of society to include animals" and "much less spiritually powerful ones" ([Nadasdy 2007](#), p. 29). This re-

lucance presents a problem for co-management and co-governance arrangements because once it is appraised as metaphor, the knowledge Indigenous Peoples hold of animals as persons is omitted from wildlife management decisions, land claim agreements, and other political dealings (Nadasdy 2007, p. 26). Religious studies scholar, David Walsh, also found conflicting notions of personhood to be a cause of contention between the Tłı̄chǫ Dene, with whom he works, and the North West territorial government surrounding caribou management in Denendeh, where centuries of colonialism, species decline, and climate change, have impacted Dene—caribou relations.

The primary herd for the Tłı̄chǫ Dene is the Bathurst caribou, which declined from approximately 475,000 animals in the mid-1980s to as low as 16,000 animals in 2015, representing a loss of 97% in thirty years (Walsh 2017, p. 13; see also: Walsh 2022). In 2010, the Northwest territorial government decided the best way to address the situation was by placing a total ban of the caribou hunt. As Walsh explains, in accordance with their own sovereign intelligence Dene Elders insisted upon continuing with the hunt in order to demonstrate proper respect to the caribou and persuade their return. According to Walsh, the Elders regard caribou, along with other “animals, ancestors, and environmental beings”, as actors engaged in socio-spiritual relationships. From the Dene Elders perspective, the caribou had chosen to remain inaccessible to humans in response to being treated poorly and it was ultimately up to them to determine the success of the hunt (Walsh 2017, pp. 208–15). The Dene with whom Walsh works are asking us to take animal personhood seriously, not simply as metaphor or religious belief, but as a fact, ethical obligation, and socially structuring force.

As persons, animals often take on the roles of teacher, advice giver, and knowledge holder within Indigenous stories. Several Indigenous Creation stories, for example, position human beings as the younger siblings of animals or as in need of assistance and instruction from their wiser and more worldly animal neighbors. In the Haudenosaune Creation story of Skywoman, for example, Skywoman falls to the earth from the skyworld and it is up to the animals, including birds, muskrat, and turtle to see to her rescue, help her find her bearings, and make a home in a strange new world (see: King 2003; Benton-Banai 2010; Watts 2013). Indigenous narrative traditions also possess, what have been popularized as trickster stories, stories where curious and sometimes mischievous cultural heroes like the Anishinaabeg Nanaboozhoo, or Raven from Haida culture, bring lessons for humanity through their own trials and tribulations.

In the colonial present, Indigenous thinkers, legal theorists, and activists are returning to these stories of animals as first teachers as a way to decolonize minds and institutions. In her famous essay, “Land as Pedagogy”, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, Leanne Simpson calls for a radical break from state education systems that indoctrinate “individuals willing to uphold settler colonialism” and for a recuperation of Indigenous languages, spiritualities, governance structures, and modes of diplomacy (Simpson 2014, p. 1). This recuperation, Simpson explains, requires another kind of education, a land-based pedagogy. For Simpson, this pathway toward liberation begins with Ajidamoo, a red squirrel, and Kwezens, a young girl.

According to this story, Kwezens discovers maple syrup by closely observing and mimicking the behaviors of Ajidamoo.² But it is not just simply through observation and experimentation that Kwezens comes to know of the sweetness of maple syrup. Maple syrup is gaa-izhi-zhaawendaagoziyaang, or that which is given lovingly to us by the spirits. Simpson explains that Nishnaabeg knowledge originates in the spiritual realm and how in order to access this knowledge one must “align themselves within and with the forces of the implicate order” (Simpson 2014, p. 10; see also: Henderson 2006). This involves performing ceremony, embodying teachings, and living in “long-term, stable, balanced warm relationships within the family, extended family, the community and all living aspects of creation” (Simpson 2014, p. 10). Kwezens embodies this way of being and opens herself to the wisdom of the universe when she offers tobacco to the Ninaatigoog. For Simpson, the goal for Anishinaabeg education is to recreate the conditions that make

Kwezens discovery of maple syrup possible. Arguably, this might begin with the work of re-relating to Ajidamoo as teacher.

Indigenous legal theorists suggest that animals not only teach human beings how to make discoveries, like harvesting sap for maple syrup, but also instruct human beings about law and legal theory. In his book, *Law's Indigenous Ethics* (2019), member of Chippewas of the Nawash First Nation and Canada research Chair, John Borrows, suggests that heeding the guidance of Indigenous legal orders can lead to “healthier Indigenous government relationships.” Part of this work involves a central concept Borrows learned from Anishinaabe Elder Basil Johnson, aki-noomaugaewin, which literally translated means to take direction from the land. As Basil Johnson explains in *The Gift of the Stars*:

In reality, it was the land, along with its plants, insects, birds, animals, and fish; climate, seasons and the skies that taught our ancestors what they needed to know about the land and themselves in order to live in harmony with it. They called the earth's teachings “aki-noomaugaewin”, the lands directions. (quoted in [Borrows 2019](#), p. 5)

As Borrows explains, Anishinaabe Peoples derive understandings of law by learning and drawing analogies from their surroundings. In this context animals model ways of being in the world and ways of relating to other aspects of creation that should be instructive to human socialization. Throughout his book, Borrows follows the journey of a young woman and her teacher Nigig or Otter, as they travel new places learning about the seven Grandmother/Grandfather teachings. The little girl and Nigig's relationship model for Borrow's readers the concept of aki-noomaugaewin and the idea that animals are some of our most cherished companions and best teachers.

The stories I have been summarizing here of the woman who married a beaver, of Skywoman, and of the gathering of animals at Mono Lake, convey the understanding that human beings are not separate or above animals, but rather dependent upon and existing in close relationships with animals. Indigenous Peoples often express these relationships as kinships. Thomas King explains the phrase “all my relations”, for example, is common to many Indigenous Nations in North America. He writes,

“All my relations” is a first reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship to animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, “all my relations” is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within the universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner ([King 1990](#), p. ix)

Here, King explains how the common expression “all my relations” encapsulates a socio-environmental ethic of care for all beings that humans share the world with. “All my relations” acts as a reminder of what scientists are increasingly realizing: equitable and just relationships with other-than-human kin are crucial to our collective flourishing. One specific cultural expression of “all my relations” is the Ohenten Kariwatekwen, or the Haudenosaunee Thanks Giving Address, a prayer or greeting that is spoken at the beginning of gatherings. The Ohenten Kariwatekwen is performed to acknowledge and give thanks to all elements of Creation, from the earth and waters, to the cardinal directions, to the four-legged and winged beings, to the plants and so forth. After offerings of gratitude are made each stanza is punctuated by “and now our minds our one” calling forth collective awareness of human beings' deep entanglements with other-than-human beings and entities. In this sense, the Thanks Giving Address operates as what Kanien'kehá:ka scholar, Gerald Taiaiake Alfred names a “regime of conscience” that promotes “harmonious coexistence” ([Alfred 1999](#), p. 5).

Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice has called attention to the stark difference between Indigenous conceptions of kinship and settler colonial understandings. He de-

scribes how within a settler colonial social structure kinship is often understood in terms of “biological relationship and genetic inheritance, with its various logics of identity transmitted through ideas of race, blood, and DNA” (Justice 2018, p. 74). Justice critiques this model of relationality for allowing “only certain patriarchal and heteronormative kinds of relatedness” (ibid.). Within Indigenous networks of belonging, kinship extends beyond the biological family to include other human beings, animals, rivers, plants, and other persons. But Daniel Heath Justice also cautions us to not overly romanticize Indigenous notions of kinship. Like all relationships, relationships with animal kin are complicated and hold the potential for harm. As the Dene Elders insisted to the North West territorial government, failing to adhere to the respectful protocols and practices in the hunt can have dire consequences. Caribou might leave and refuse to return. As Justice puts it, “relatives aren’t just static roles or states of being, but lived relationships” (Justice 2018, p. 73). Lived relationships require continual maintenance and care.

Recognizing animals as persons and kin, who exercise agency and possess knowledge is a politically actualizing realization. Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2018) points out that for many Indigenous Peoples, animals along with plants, waters, and ecosystems, are understood to be moral agents with reciprocal responsibilities to one another. As such, animals constitute their own social and political collectives. The story told earlier by the Paiute Elder from Bishop Bridgeport about a council of animals convening at Mono Lake exhibits how animals engage in treaty making and co-governance arrangements. Animals hold commitments and exercise responsibility to one another. Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts suggests that because of this “habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies from an Indigenous point of view” (Watts 2013, p. 23). Watts further explains how other-than-human beings are active members in society and also “directly influence how humans organize themselves” (ibid.). To illustrate this point, Watts offers the example of Skywoman who once landed on Turtle’s back entered an already thriving and functioning society, with its own sets of rules and agreements that she had to learn from and participate in.

Perhaps the most well-known example of animals influencing human social organization and governance is the doodem or doodemag tradition (doh-DEM or doh-DEM-mahg pl.). Early scholars of Indigenous religions, like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Emile Durkheim interpreted “totemism” in metaphoric terms and theorized that Indigenous Peoples were projecting their own social concepts onto animal archetypes. Great Lakes historian Heidi Bohaker explains that doodem for the Anishinaabeg are more accurately understood as a category of kinship that “places humans in interdependent relationships with other-than-human beings, who are considered persons with a soul and also relatives to whom one owes a duty of care” (Bohaker 2020). Doodem defined local and regional politics and helped delineate the responsibilities a person had across their kin networks, allyships, and territories for the Anishinaabeg. Drawing on the records kept by French fur trader and diplomat, Nicolas Perrot (1644–1717), Bohaker explains how the doodem tradition derives from the Anishinaabeg recreation story in which Nanaboozhoo, the Great Hare, recreates the world after a terrible flood.

After the flood, Nanaboozhoo calls upon a council of animal beings, or First Ones, to help him rebuild the world. The animals, one by one, attempt to dive to the bottom of the waters in order to retrieve soil to make ground. After much deliberation and many failed attempts among the animal beings, it is finally muskrat who returns successful. Nanaboozhoo takes the grain of sand muskrat has clutched between her fists and scatters it to create Earth. After this re-creation of the world is accomplished, the animal beings withdraw to “places which each kind found most suitable for obtaining therein their pasture of their prey” (Nicolas Perrot quoted in Bohaker 2020, p. 45). Bohaker explains Anishinaabeg understand themselves to be descendants and therefore kin to these other-than-human doodem who helped remake the world, including bear, moose, beaver, and others. Human social groupings of particular doodems are responsible for the lands associated with their

doodem beings. The connection between doodem and their human kin is more than simply territorial, however; they are understood to share souls. Bohaker explains:

In Anishinaabe worldview, the human body is home to at least two souls. One soul expresses the essence of the individual; it is this soul that can leave the body (even when the person is alive), and it is this soul that can travel to the afterlife. The other soul is shared with doodem, as the doodem itself also has a soul—an animating essence in common with all who have that doodem. Shared souls forge the relational link between doodem kin, both humans and other-than-humans, throughout the Great Lakes region and beyond, connecting ancestors and descendants. (Bohaker 2020, p. 55)

This understanding of shared souls, Bohaker explains, is why it is so important for Anishinaabeg to be brought back to their homelands upon death—so their souls can reunite with doodem. Doodemag are also associated with particular traits or qualities in character. Anishinaabe Elder Basil Johnson explains “each animal symbolized an ideal to be sought, attained, and perpetuated” (1976, p. 58). Caribou, for example, possess grace and watchfulness, cranes eloquence for leadership, bears strength and courage. In her book, *Doodem and Council Fire* (2020), Heidi Bohaker speaks about how the doodemag tradition is being revitalized and re-associated with social roles related to these traits and relevant to life on the reservation and wage economy. Fish doodem, for example, traditionally associated with wisdom and learning have come to be identified with careers in teaching. These positive associations with animals represent a radical departure from the sentiment encapsulated by the common insult “you are behaving like an animal.” Given doodem are “at the heart and soul of Anishinaabe conceptions of collective identity”, Bohaker suggests that this reclamation of doodemag among young Anishinaabe has been a means of political and cultural resurgence. These doodem animals among other animals, like Leanne Simpson’s red squirrel, Kelsey Dayle John’s mustang horses, John Borrow’s Otter, and the Anishinaabe earth diver muskrat, are forging pathways for decolonization and rebuilding worlds anew.

4. Conclusions

How we imagine the animal religiously is of profound political and environmental consequence. This is true not only for Indigenous Peoples, but of all societies. Settler colonial society, of which religious studies is (for now) a part and continues to play a role in upholding, is founded on its own metaphysical assumptions that position animals as inferior to and existing apart from human beings on the opposite side of the nature and culture divide. In settler colonial society, we read our children stories about animals that talk, think, feel, and act as our friends, only to tell them later they are childish for believing in the personhood of the other-than-human. We forget about animals as kin somewhere along the way.

In the field of religious studies, this lack of regard for animals has led to theorizing religion in ways that are not fully reflective of, responsive to, or situated in the actual world. Graham Harvey, influenced by the various Indigenous religions he studies, insists that in order for our theories to be relevant and fruitful scholars of religion need to begin accounting for religion as it appears in the real world. This, Harvey argues, is a “world in which humans have co-evolved alongside and among myriad related species as embodied, emplaced, and interactive co-creative persons. It is a world without hyperseparations, in which nothing is unique about humans except the specific mix that constitutes us in each emergent and interconnected temporal-and-located interaction” (Harvey 2013, p. 207). Indigenous knowledge systems have never forgotten about this world or the animals in it and all the potentialities they hold.

Indigenous oral traditions, theories, governance structures, and ceremonial practices contain a great wealth of knowledge of animals. And yet, oftentimes Indigenous Peoples and their knowledges are overlooked and/or misapprehended by scholars interested in the question of the animal. Kelsey Dayle John has criticized the field of animal studies, for

example, for being “a predominantly western dominated field” that has failed to “center Indigenous voices and knowledges” (John 2019b, p. 11). Zoe Todd levies a pertinent critique against most of the humanities, relevant to scholars interested in animal studies when she points out how the ontological turn claims novel insights while failing to acknowledge Indigenous contributions. She writes, “the Ontological Turn—with its breathless ‘realisations’ that animals, the climate, water, ‘atmospheres’ and non-human presences like ancestors and spirits are *sentient* and *possess agency*, that ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘human and animal’ may not be so separate after all—is itself perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples”. (Todd 2016, p. 16). For Todd, the issue remains that in the academy those who are credited for the “incredible insights into the ‘more than human’, sentience and agency” are never the Indigenous Peoples “who built and maintain the knowledge systems” (Todd 2016, pp. 7–8). Todd writes, “when we cite European thinkers who discuss the ‘more-than-human’ but do not discuss their Indigenous contemporaries who are writing on the exact same topics, we perpetuate the white supremacy of the academy” (Todd 2016, p. 18). What Todd is advocating for is long-term structural change and a politics of citation in which the western academy acknowledges its indebtedness to Indigenous thinkers (Todd 2016, p. 10).

When Indigenous knowledge of animals is being recognized, it often gets misinterpreted and misrepresented in politics and academic literature as being mythic or metaphorical. Critical Indigenous studies scholars have also articulated how Western academics have a tendency to extract, abstract, and then subsume Indigenous knowledge of animals into “the cultural archive and body of knowledge of the West” (Smith 2012, p. 64). Hupa, Yurok and Karuk scholar and enrolled member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe, Cutcha Risling Baldy speaks to this problem of assimilating knowledge in her discussion of scholarly treatment of Coyote as trickster figure. Baldy explains that although there has been a lot of scholarship written on Coyote, within this academic literature Coyote is typically decontextualized and deterritorialized and then remade into an archetype. Risling Baldy names this reframing “colonial parallelism”, which she describes as a move to “erase culturally based knowledge” to construct a universal representation that parallels western ideas of the world (Baldy 2015, pp. 4–5). Risling Baldy advocates for reclaiming Coyote First Person stories as a tool for decolonization and reminds readers,

To the Chinook s/he is Italpas. The Navajo call him/her Ma’ii. The Lakota call him/her Mica. S/he is Skinkuts in Kutenai and Isil in Cupeno. The Pima call him/her Tcu-unnkita and consider him/her the off-spring of the moon. Throughout the Americas s/he takes on many different roles, sometimes as a parental figure, sometimes as spoiled and childlike, and sometimes as savior or hero. (Baldy 2015, p. 9)

Each Coyote First Person embodies their own local, land-based, and community contextualized epistemologies. When western theories render Coyote a metaphor for a universal trickster subconscious, this separates Coyote First Persons from their lands and peoples. Reclaiming and retelling Coyote First Person narratives are powerful devices for decolonization because they restore connections to place and community (Baldy 2015, pp. 16–18).

If animals cannot be extracted from their local environments, they also cannot be disentangled from the webs of relationships in which they are enmeshed. Ajidamoo did not bring the gift of maple syrup to Kwezens all by themselves; Maple Tree gave her sweet water willingly. The Haudenosaunee Ohenten Kariwatekwen does not end with animals but goes on to thank the trees, soil, rivers, and so forth. Member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and biologist Robin Wall-Kimmerer reminds us plants are human beings’ first teachers and that we need to heed their guidance now more than ever. Kimmerer writes, “Human damage has created novel ecosystems, and the plants are slowly adapting and showing us the way toward healing the wound” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 333). Plants, trees, water, and soil are also sentient beings, who, along with animals, instruct humans on how to live in and repair the world.

Animals, and the other life forms they are connected to, are crucial to the work of decolonizing and revitalizing. Perhaps Choctaw scholar Leanne Howe captures this best

when she says, “ . . . even if worse comes to worst and our people forget where we left our stories, the birds will remember them and bring them back to us” (Howe 2002, p. 47). This statement is an acknowledgement of the remarkable capacity for remembering that birds possess and also of birds’, like the red tail hawks’, importance to Choctaw culture. Howe’s statement, however, is also a suggestion that culture cannot be lost when it is embodied in animals and embedded in the land.

Religious studies has yet to have robust conversations around decolonization. Malory Nye claims that religious studies “came into being through empire and colonialism, and the contemporary ‘colonial matrix of power’ is very often how the study of religion continues to justify itself” (Nye 2019, pp. 27–28; see also: Mignolo 2007). Scholars whose research and scholarship meet at the intersection of religious studies and animal studies could play a vital role in centering Indigenous voices in thinking cautiously and constructively about how Indigenous knowledges of animals might challenge the very foundations on which knowledge about religion is constructed. If, indeed, heaven for the Cree is the trail where all animals meet, then perhaps following this trail a little further might lead to a place of new decolonial possibilities for the study of religion.

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Notes

- ¹ For a discussion on incommensurabilities between Indigenous and western theories of animals see Billy Ray Belcourt’s analysis of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka’s *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2013) in which Belcourt critiques critical animal studies for reifying the settler state and suggests that Indigenous cosmologies could offer radical alternatives for conceiving of animality (Belcourt 2020).
- ² This story was shared with Simpson by Washkigaamagki (Curve Lake First Nation) Elder Gidigaa Migizi (Doug Williams).

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