Vital Materialism and Political Theory: 
Reanimating Nature, Reconstituting Colonization?

by

Laticia Vierra Chapman
B.A., University of Victoria, 2010

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment 
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS 

in the Department of Political Science

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Dr. R.B.J. Walker, Department of Political Science
Supervisor

Dr. Nicole Shukin, Department of English
Academic Unit Member
Abstract

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In Western thought, the concept of nature has a long history in relation to the question of what or who counts as the subject of politics. This thesis works in the relatively recent body of work that engages the possibility of ‘re-vitalizing’ nature; challenging the legitimacy of mechanistic conceptions of nature with the aim of offering the possibility of consciously different behaviour in relation to the more-than-human world. I engage with Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, in their thinking on the agency or ‘subjectivity’ of the extra-human world, nonhumans, and matter itself. While each author offers an analysis of the shortcomings of current political givens, and each proposes alternative but demonstrably associated ways of conceptually, ethically, and practically relating with nonhumans, this thesis asks: when thinking about taking nature into political account, in what ways are we at risk of forgetting the history and politics that excluded, obscured, or collapsed peoples into ‘nature’, as the very operation of bringing the modern subject of politics into being? In a resonance that will gain meaning as my text proceeds, colonization (of lands and bodies), the subject, and nature can be seen to form a triad for thought. My question, specifically, is to ask if, and how, the political-ecological history of colonization is omitted in the recent ontological impetus to think an animate nature.
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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to my family, my mum and dad, Louisa and Bill, and my brothers, Oleh and Roman. You have given me the time and space to write this, kept me fed and sheltered and taken me on adventures, you remind me of the good in this scholastic life even when I am uncertain of it—and because of you I keep returning, to the joys and difficulties of staying close over long distances, and to the fulfillment of working with hands, body, and brain and doing things well. This thank you is extended to my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandmothers, with whom I hope to spend much more time in the years to come. And given the nature of my topic, I would be remiss in forgetting those nonhumans, dogs, chickens, ducks, and others, as well as cars, trucks, and bicycles. If their history was not tangled up with mine, I would not be.

Secondly, the University of Victoria, and the city of Victoria at large, has been my home for the past six years, a realization which has only slowly dawned on me. In my undergraduate degree, I craved the moment of insight, of reading something new, mulling it over, and coming to some realization I had never had before (these moments often happened while running, from Mount Doug to Oak Bay, to James Bay and everywhere in between). I once described this feeling as ‘seeing what was behind the surface of things’—not their truth, exactly, but the implications that were overlooked when something was taken at face value. So many professors in different departments responded to my enthusiasm, and I am fortunate to have had the chance, in staying in Victoria for my Masters, to take more classes with them, to have had that much more time to become aware of the contours of their own intellectual passions and to have benefitted from the care, concern, patience, and encouragement they have shown their many, many students. Rob Walker, Nicole Shukin, Arthur Kroker, Matt James, Jim Tully, Feng Xu, Warren Magnusson, James Rowe, Brenda Beckwith, Eric Higgs, Christine O’Bonsawin, Glen Coulthard (now of UBC), Michael Asch, Serhy Yekelchyk, thank you. A special thank you to Wendy Wickwire: I continue to benefit and learn from her commitment to and passion for her work. I have always been interested in challenging the boundaries between and within the arts and sciences, and am so grateful for the existence of the interdisciplinary Cultural, Social, and Political Thought (CSPT) concentration, and for the professors, staff, and students who keep it vital.

Finally, so many of you are both dear friends and teachers, and in that capacity Rob Hancock, Liam Mitchell (now of Trent), Marta Bashovski, Serena Kataoka, Scott Lansdowne, Heather Cosidetto, Stefan Morales, and Felix, Russell Myers Ross and Patricia Weber and Nalina, Joyce Balul, Nicole Pierce, Lindsay Tallman, Joshua Hazelbower, and Laura and Chris Anctil, your presence in my life is appreciated more than I know how to express. The Wayward crew and the subterranean dwellers at Cenoté, Serina, Ashley and Rocky (and Mavens), Josh Z., Elaine, Michael F., and the 2010 and 2011 inhabitants of the Political Science and CSPT Masters and PhD offices, hallways, and haunts—for the inspiration, conversations, the projects, the late nights, and the adventures. I wish you all every success, and I hope our paths will continue to intertwine in the future. Writing these names simply serves to remind that I will never be able to account for everyone—but right now it’s time to go out in the sun, to walk up the hill with the dog, listen to the cicadas and eat sun-warm, sweet Saskatoons and bitter Soopolalie.
Dedication

For Jane, and the months and miles of running and talking that taught me to appreciate a different music

and to the memory of my grandfathers, Jim (Ihor) Kupchenko and Glascott Eire Dawson-Grove, strong and brilliant men.
Introduction: Circumscribing a Niche

In Western thought, the concept of nature has a long history in relation to the question of what or who is the subject of politics. This history works through the overlaps and interstices between knowledge and power, between the intellectual and disciplinary processes of gaining the authority to say what nature is, and the materiality of claiming and dividing up land, regulating and legitimizing who gets to do what, where and when. Writing this history is a project that would simply never be complete.

My concern in the pages that follow is to circumscribe one tangent of this history, to inhabit a niche, as it were, and in so doing to engage in, perhaps, creating new territory for thought. My terrain will be the relatively recent body of work that engages the possibility of ‘re-vitalizing’ nature, of challenging and finally overturning the legitimacy of the mechanistic conceptions of nature that can be traced back to the political thought inspired, in part, by the scientific revolutions, and revolutions in thought, of Galileo, Newton, and Descartes. This ‘vitalist’ body of literature takes on the twofold method of parsing Western thought for alternative ways of conceptualizing nature, and of showing how such alternative conceptions are not actually a departure from the ways that we already think and behave, as scientists, as political agents, as subjects of capitalism, and in everyday life. And the aim of such work is to offer the possibility of consciously different behaviour in relation to the more-than-human world; of undoing the ability to take the world for granted that seems to be the consequence of assuming the existence of a fundamental separation between humans (as creative, undetermined beings, at least under certain social circumstances) and nature (as mute substrate, realm of forces and necessity).
I have a question to ask this body of work, one that I think is rightly asked of any text appearing under the mantle of Western thought. But before turning to this question, a few words from Bruno Latour clarify what is at stake in the revitalization, or the taking into political account, of nature:

the terms “nature” and “society” do not designate domains of reality; instead, they refer to a quite specific form of public organization. Not everything is political, perhaps, but politics gathers everything together, so long as we agree to define politics as the entire set of tasks that allow the progressive composition of a common world” (2004, 53).

Latour shifts the grounds of contention from ‘reality’ as such, into the realm of ‘public organization’. This statement suggests a twofold movement, which is developed in different but perhaps complementary ways within the texts I have been drawn to. First, a recognition of nature’s (or ‘nonhumanity’s’) relationship of creative interaction with human life (the denaturalization of nature and the ‘socialization’ of the extra-human world), and thus a breaking down of the barriers between ‘nature’ and ‘politics’ (the human social world); and second, a disciplining of this nonhuman potential into something organized, something amenable to structures of governance.

Insofar as the history of modern political thought can be understood as the history of the creation of the subject –the human as governable- then extending conceptions of sociality and governability to the extra-human world comes replete with the history of the subject.1 What I wish to remember about this history is where it begins: in the distinction between politics and the state of nature, the very distinction that Latour hopes to break down. But in the shift to thinking

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1 The inverse of this statement could be formulated as follows: sovereignty as an assumption, discourse and practice has been the key ordering principle of political organization since the collapse of ecclesiastical forms of authority. It has defined political community and situated us, sometimes against our will, each as a citizen of a particular bounded territorial state, which in turn has an obligation to provide us with the freedom to live in peace as individuals, and with a locus for the expression of our individual and collective political will (Shaw 2008, 3). But as Shaw suggests, the history of sovereignty is also the history of the subject of sovereignty, as the individual locus of (state) political community.
the socialization and subjectivation of nature, I find grounds to remember that the history of the subject is very much a site of contestation over who can count as a subject, and of the cost of being recognized as a subject. In other words, when we think about taking nature into political account, in what ways are we at risk of forgetting the history and politics that excluded, obscured, or collapsed peoples into ‘nature’, as the very operation of bringing the modern subject into being?

In a resonance that will gain meaning as my text proceeds, colonization (of lands and bodies), the subject, and nature can be seen to form a triad for thought. My question, specifically, is to ask if, and how, the political-ecological history of colonization is omitted in the recent ontological impetus to think an animate nature.

Colonization and colonialism are complex, and certainly not univocal, concepts. My intent is to draw attention to a particular operation of colonization, that of the initial ‘geographic’ move of instituting law (Asch 2007, 282). The law ensures that what proceeds, proceeds on a blank space. It has the function of wiping from thought, disallowing from thought, political and social configurations that preexisted the moment of colonization. The move in theory is much simpler, less messy and more complete than the complex and ongoing legacies on the ground, and yet the institution of the zero-point, the origin, in modern political thought, is undeniably the point from which our continued struggle with the legacy of colonization begins.

Though I will not be calling heavily on his work in what follows, I would like to turn briefly to James C. Scott, for a succinct insight into the relationship between colonization, territory, and ecological repercussions. In Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, Scott draws on the connection between visuality and remaking a landscape as an exercise of power. His discussion focuses on what he describes as
‘high modernist’ planning, but encompasses colonial modernization schemes that operate on the displacement and sometimes resettlement of peoples, especially in relation to land-use. As he states, “Colonial regimes...have often been sites of extensive experiments in social engineering...the authoritarian power inherent in colonial rule [has] encouraged ambitious schemes to remake native societies” (Scott 1999, 97).

The promise of becoming a subject is intimately related to colonization.² It exists in the promise of remaking, as Scott suggests, of starting, in theory, from a blank slate to achieve a potential not accessible in one’s prior state. The offer held out to the extra-human world, in vitalist writing, is very much concerned with potential, with the potential to be treated, politically and ethically, as an equal partner in making and sustaining ecologies. The other side of this natural contract is contained in the moment of remaking, which is also a moment of erasure and collapse. We can begin/build from nothing, humans and non-humans alike, through the performative feat/fiat of the law, a power to institute the new through the whiting-out of the pre-existent (Serres 1990, 75).

Becoming a subject is not simply, then, a moment of reinvention. It is rather the moment when one is brought into the fold of the law. When an entity becomes subject to law, it is not merely endowed with the capacity to act legitimately, but also to act in a fashion compatible with some configuration of political organization. In one respect, the premise of extending subjectivity to nature is about this double-movement, of authorizing –bringing into law- nature, as politically consequential potentiality.

² Indeed, Foucault argues this point succinctly, highlighting the intimacy of the relation by which ‘the West’ and ‘the new world’ take form through colonization:

It should never be forgotten that while colonization, with its techniques and its political and juridical weapons, obviously transported European models to other continents, it also had a considerable boomerang effect on the mechanisms of power in the west, and on the apparatuses, institutions, and techniques of power. A whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonialism, or an internal colonialism, on itself (2003, 103).
But while our attention has been focused on what happens to nature as it is brought within the fold of law, I would like to turn back towards the origin, in modern political thought, of the subject. The subject has always been intimately concerned with the question of who or what counts as a political actor. Hobbes framed his state around a conceptualization of human nature, and the need to moderate that nature through sovereignty. No less does Rousseau rely upon human nature, although he describes a more generally benign account of this nature, and a processual account of the transition to society -with ‘war’ appearing as a result of the inequalities engendered by socialization rather than our inherent lot (1987, 68). In either case, the raw material out of which the modern political subject is formed is the figure of the ‘natural’ human, the pre-social, and crucially, the pre-political.

‘Thought experiments’ these figures may have been, but they remain both practically and theoretically enmeshed in the relations by which modern political thought seeks to conceptualize and account for the world in which it operates (Asch 2007, 282). Because of this history, the vitalist discourse is open to questioning. If bringing nature into the realm of subjectivity allows received concepts of the political to surreptitiously ride along, we risk forgetting the ways in which conceptions of what counts as political are premised on the exclusionary extension of particular political forms as ‘the’ political.

I do not claim to be offering an exhaustive survey of work that concerns the reanimation of nature, but rather, I am curious to tease out particular implications of ‘socializing’ the extra-human world. To that end, I follow the trail of the subject, as political figure, from inception, to ‘socialization’ in the figure of the citizen, to the decentering of subjectivity and its implications, which preoccupies certain strands of contemporary political thought. Rather than necessarily seeing these revolutions in the trajectory of political thought as radical breaks from each other, I
am hoping instead to trace a problem that accumulates through this arc—the problem of the subject as a figure complicit in the sovereigntist architecture of colonization.

Diversity exists in vitalist literature, and so the scope of my question is narrowed around a constellation of works which, I would like to suggest, can be shown to trace the history of the subject—and its corresponding institutions—in Western political thought. I will suggest that the history and theoretical implications of subjectification are never very far from the surface of vitalist thought. I follow this theoretical arc from, if you will, Hobbes through Rousseau to Foucault, discussing how the implications of subjectivation, socialization, and the decentering of subjectivity, as performed by each respectively, are implicated in the theoretical and material operations of colonization. Rather than bending their ideas to my own purposes by engaging each of these writers directly, I find resonances—and thus find my question brought into sharp relief—between the history of the subject and the vitalist work of three contemporary writers: Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett.

These three, thinkers I initially associated incidentally, in tracing the arc of the subject, have various overlaps and crossings in their larger bodies of work. I am primarily concerned to investigate singular texts, but it is interesting to note that, despite their intellectual, theoretical, and practical differences, there are connections outside of the particular trail I am following.3 I was drawn first to Michel Serres, whose book The Natural Contract offers a revision of contract theory turned towards an extra-human world that can no longer be conceptualized as mute backdrop to human drama. The connective tissue—perhaps the mycorrhizae—of this thesis is indebted to another of Michel Serres’ works. The Parasite proposes a way of thinking the

relation of life itself, or life itself as a relation, in such a way as to both demystify parasitism and to reincorporate ‘parasitic’ behaviour within ecological and conceptual systems. In both books, subjectivity is uneasily extended to the natural world, as a potentially dangerous partner in a ‘common’ world.

In Politics of Nature: Bringing the Sciences into Democracy, Bruno Latour writes that politics, in the Western tradition, has always orbited around a conception of nature –what underwrites politics is the notion of a singular, and separate, nature. The pluralization and socialization of nature through the hybridization of human and non-human concerns are moves toward a radical democracy, and a politics no longer able to stifle dissent by recourse to an external ‘nature’.

Because of the intimate relationship between knowledge and power where nature is concerned, this thesis will of necessity be interdisciplinary. I will be drawing attention to particular conceptions of nature, and their deployment in buttressing claims about power and political organization. Following this technique, my first two authors can be considered as writing from the perspective of ‘science studies’ –how do the sciences communicate their findings with the world beyond the discipline, what is the role of science in informing environmental policy and in shaping ontological and ethical dispositions? It is not only important to ask what the sciences have to say about ways of conceptualizing nature, but also to ask if and where the sciences are concerned to take into account the histories and relations of power that enable sense-making, and, more specifically, to account for the accumulation of knowledge as a colonial/colonizing project. Do proposed solutions to environmental crisis, or even the assumptions that underpin scientific inquiry, reflect a sensitivity to those histories of
categorization, exclusion, and reification which are specifically concerned with the conquest of land and displacement and marginalization of peoples? 

While Serres and Latour respectively invoke the subject and the citizen, by now traditional figures of modern politics, Jane Bennett, in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, *Vibrant Matter*, and other texts, turns towards ‘enchanting’, non-linear, and interacting ecologies to advance –within political theory- a decentering of subjectivity, the dissolution of received ontological boundaries, and an anti-legalistic materiality. Bennett, working from within the terrain of political theory, addresses the decentering of subjectivity from the human and into the material realm, situating herself in close proximity to the intellectual tradition of ‘vitalism’, which she extends from Epicurean philosophy through Spinoza, Marx, Bergson, and Deleuze and Guattari, with several other stops along the way. We can understand this trajectory (the precise term Bennett employs for the position she occupies, in *Vibrant Matter*, is “vital materialism”) as a challenge both to mechanistic conceptions of nature, and to the exclusions and oppressions that constitute the subject. My question, in reading Bennett, concerns the liberatory potential of decentering subjectivity. In other words, is philosophically and ontologically unsettling the atomized, autonomous subject enough to undo the subject’s history of exclusion, or can deprivileging the subject work to entrench or revive colonial power?

This is an admittedly theoretically heavy work. I intend to ground the arguments in corresponding studies of colonial technique, to consider the ways in which the figurative abstractions of subject, citizen, and population translate into the politics of colonizing land and refiguring/remaking indigenous bodies and politics –and to suggest a warning to ecological politics about the incidental revitalization of colonizing thought. These studies reference

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4 In broad strokes, this is a question with affinity to Donna Haraway’s oeuvre. I consider myself indebted, among other works, to her 1989, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge.
Canada’s ongoing history of colonization, for two reasons in particular. One is personal and practical: as a settler Canadian, it is the context that feels most immediate to me. It is the milieu in which I live, an everyday setting which has become more and more clearly, for me, a persistent source of anger and a deep sense of injustice – and complicity. The other is more textual and theoretical, related to the slippage between theoretical constructions and the rhetorical necessity of making them stick – of making an argument possible in the imagination.

In this case, we have Hobbes to thank for naturalizing the state of nature, the out-side of sovereignty, civilization, and the possibility of meaning, among “the Savages of America” (Shaw 2008, 32). Thus, though Hobbes’ argument is not explicitly directed towards/against Indigenous peoples, it is made concrete through reference to a ‘real’ place, the Americas of the colonial imagination. And so Canada, as a state in these ‘Americas’, is a primary site for the state of nature, a case-study of the marriage of theorization and practice in the history of colonization.

A further clarificatory note on my choices of ‘case-study’ is required. It will be noted that each vignette – the appeal verdict in a land claims case brought by Roger William of the Xeni Gwet’in Band against the Government of British Columbia over logging concerns; the Delgamuukw land claims case, which raises the question of ‘intelligibility’ in negotiating and traversing differing epistemologies and claims to authority; and Val Napoleon’s exploration of ‘ethnic’ versus ‘civic’ nationalism and the subject of ‘blood’ in contemporary Indigenous struggles over self-definition and community- veers away from the ‘nonhuman’ to focus again on what appear to be ‘human’ concerns. I follow Jane Bennett’s lead in striving for an acute awareness of the ways in which human and nonhuman (interests and actions) are entangled, such that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate one from the other – that is, what continually re-emerged for me, during my reading and research, was the problem of how
‘humans’ and ‘societies’ become settled questions, as the operation that allows for the ‘animation’ of the ecological thought I followed. In light of this apparent elision, I sought to revisit the contested ground of ‘the’ subject of politics, an especially complicated terrain when it is clear that questions of political identity and community are always conjoined, in colonial situations, with the problems of ‘land’, ‘environment’, and ‘nonhumans’, in all their manifestations. Though the three studies focus on ‘human’ actions and concerns, the first two examples arise out of the question of contested jurisdiction over territory, and, in *William v. British Columbia*, explicitly over logging not authorized by the Tsilhqot’in National Government or Tsilhqot’in people–logging which was set to take place on lands that are only part of the Canadian state, as the appeal decision reveals, by a work of selective colonial amnesia, and so by force. In the example of *Delgamuukw*, my question is slightly different, focusing on clashes of epistemology to highlight some potential consequences of Latour’s assurances of ‘due process’. The ultimately very limited criteria for the admissibility of evidence in *Delgamuukw*, within a process that appeared, at the outset at least, to be striving for epistemological inclusivity/demonstrating the ability of the Canadian legal system to offer judicial decisions that would be regarded as legitimate by Indigenous and Canadian political bodies, suggests that even before assuming the competence of Latour’s model of judicial process to decide on matters of human-nonhuman relations, questions remain about ‘Western’ judicial processes in general, especially when they attempt to work at epistemological and linguistic boundaries. Finally, Jane Bennett is perhaps most explicit in wishing to render unmissable the material within the ‘animate’–and more than this, the animateness of matter itself. This ontological proposition is, for my purposes, most interesting when we remember that such conceptions are neither entirely new (as her own research demonstrates), and nor is such ‘vibrant’ potential necessarily
compatible with any given political framework. In the quantity/quality of ‘blood’, as described by Napoleon, the contested nature of a seemingly material substance is right inside the Indigenous bodies and political communities struggling against colonial definitions.

Although I expect to critique the authors and ideas I will be working with, rather than directly applying them to diagnose or analyze a problem in contemporary eco-political thought, I remain looking for signs –that is, in what these authors do not say, and in the marginal spaces their discourses offer, is it possible to find traces of ecological theories able to work in contested terrain, within a history of displacements and political struggles that can never simply be between human and nature, but are always between peoples living within and sometimes struggling over nonhuman terrain? What I do not intend to do is to reject or find vitalist thought empty –my hope is to discover what it might say, where the discourse multiplies or cracks the edifice of Western thought, where traversing and revitalizing alternative variants of this intellectual tradition might suddenly stumble upon some taken-for-granted niche that proves fertile and unsettling.

To this end, my final chapter will recall Michel Serres’ Parasite, a literary, biological, and communicative figure of unease, one which unsettles both notions of a comfortable, safe, benevolent ontology of nature, and which repoliticizes relations between guest, host, and habitat. It is my contention, on the one hand, that we can never be too certain of the nature of nature –the parasite suggests that nature is neither inherently ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, and allows us to pause before attributing value to the apparent self-organization invoked in some of the literature falling within a vitalist or ‘systems theory’ envelope.⁵ A vital nature is one promised as difficult to ignore, difficult to marginalize or make into ready grounds for exploitation, doubly so if this potentiality

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means something not necessarily assimilable to received political notions. The parasite is also a reflective gesture, a call to consider the politics of settling and assuming (ecological) jurisdiction over already inhabited lands. In the sense that such organisms are always both inside ecosystems, and also (sometimes destructive) interlopers, I inhabit the parasite as a figure for thinking through the enmeshment of subjectivity, colonization, and political ecology.

Whatever conclusions might be drawn, I will close with some (tentative) reflections on post-coloniality, and where resonances might be drawn between an ecological politics that is both acutely sensitive to Western political theory’s implication within regimes of colonial power, and to the possibilities of thought that works with nature (the extra-human world) as always already inside—human bodies and whatever institutions we might wish to build.

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6 This detail is something to be more thoroughly explored in the body of the thesis. The authors I am following draw connections between the behaviour and ontology of the nonhuman world, and between ways of conceptualizing politics. Much as I think they do, I wish to walk a finer line between ‘letting nature lead’ and recognizing that any politics explicitly drawn from nature is an act of persuasion, of rhetoric, a political act—and thus never simply about taking nature into account.
Artificial bonds, or covenants. But as men, for the attaining of peace, and conservation of themselves thereby, have made an artificial man, which we call a commonwealth; so also have they made artificial chains, called civil laws, which they themselves, by mutual covenants, have fastened at one end, to the lips of that man, or assembly, to whom they have given the sovereign power; and at the other end to their own ears. These bonds, in their own nature but weak, may nevertheless be made to hold, by the danger, though not by the difficulty of breaking them (Hobbes 1962, 160).

The construction of a politics of nature is a double game. If we take seriously—and it is hard to avoid being in their debt—the works of foundational authors in political thought (in this chapter I will be calling on Thomas Hobbes at every turn), we confront a tension between naturalism and artificiality. A politics that accurately represents and takes into account the natural world struggles with the problem of whether to subsume the political into the natural: to argue, for example, that authority has a natural basis in kin relations, physics, materiality, psychology, etc.; or to argue that politics is not natural, that states are fundamentally different from ‘local’ relations—or, for that matter, that any relation is contingent, and it is how actors argue and position themselves in relation to each other rather than the essence of the relations themselves that allows for any narrative of naturalism.

Naturalizing politics runs the risk of casting events in human history, some or many of which we would like to contain and condemn—genocide, slavery—in the light of inevitability. How can we be held responsible if our actions are simply emergent from our biology, our constitution as a small part of a greater whole? But the grounding of politics as a purely social construction marginalizes the appeal and authority of the nonhuman world—nature, in this view, appears to have no power in itself to inspire responsibility for our consumption, our pollution, and learning about and conserving nature becomes something we can do or not do, simply one choice for concern among many. In either case, it seems that we are left with a careful rhetorical
game, where claims to naturalism can be shown to be effects of strategy, and authority
nevertheless requires some calling back to nature, natural processes, ‘the way things are’, to gain
the ring of legitimacy.

In *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres walks his own line between naturalism and
artifice by maintaining –or rather, reinstituting- a fundamental separation between the human and
the natural worlds, and yet effects this separation in such a way that responsibility becomes a
mutual affair, shared jointly between the two worlds. This is a text about law and structure, and
to my mind at least, a text analogous to *Leviathan* in its tectonic reordering of the balance of
power between the two, newly emergent subjects.

This tension between natural and artificial is at the core of the subject, or the constitution
of something as a subject. Hobbes has it that there are

*Things personated, inanimate.* There are few things, that are incapable of being represented
by fiction. Inanimate things, as a church, an hospital, a bridge, may be personated by a rector,
master, or overseer. But things inanimate, cannot be authors, nor therefore give authority to
their actors: yet the actors may have authority to procure their maintenance, given them by
those that are owners, or governors of those things. And therefore, such things cannot be
personated, before there be some state of civil government (1962, 126).

In other words, things of matter require a human animator –a separation has been effected
between animate humans, who may ‘govern’ things and make them function, and inanimate
things. Serres' problem is how to personate the ‘inanimate’ object of the world, an effect he
seeks without resorting to an externally motivating spirit, ‘owner’, or ‘governor’. How are we to
conceive of the extra-human world as a subject, in the face of both a persistent belief in nature as
mechanistic, raw material substrate, and in light of the supplemental, yet no less problematic
multiplicity of nature –its “local” character, always presumed relative to personal interests
(Serres 1990, 3)? If our sciences, our ways of cataloguing and describing the world reveal no unity, we cannot say what nature wants.  

Serres works around the apparent multiplicity of nature, and our general struggle with recognizing something ‘personable’ in this diversity, by means of a founding event. Nature has become a subject, he argues, because humanity has become a natural force:

Finally we have reached such sizes that we exist physically. The thinking individual, having become a beast collectively, is now joined to others in multiple ways and turns to stone. Upon this rock is built the new world. The hard, hot architecture of megalopolises is equal to many a desert, to groups of springs, wells, lakes – far greater streams than the river of Achilles, shifting sands so much larger than Goya’s quicksand – or to an ocean, or a rigid and mobile tectonic plate. At last we exist on a natural scale. Mind has grown into a beast and the beast is growing into a plate (Serres 1990, 19).

This passage invokes the sheer scale of human effect on the very stones of the world. The visceral effect of our weightiness can be found almost anywhere now: I feel it in the logged sites and tailings ponds of interior British Columbia or walking along the baking concrete of cityscapes. This morning I thought of Edward Burtynsky’s photographs, which reveal the nonhuman scale of human industrial power in a way that is so disquieting precisely because it appears not simply horrifying, but beautiful as well.  

For Serres’ purposes, a subject is that whose actions influence another. Nature “influences human nature, which, in turn, influences nature. Nature behaves as a subject” (Serres 1990, 36). This definition is really not so far from Hobbes' own definition –the iconic passage on ‘men’ as “by nature equal” (1962, 98), and therefore in principle each equally entitled to pursue his needs and interests against any other, comes to mind. But whereas in Leviathan, the subject begins from a place of strength, atomistic and individuated, the

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7 Moreover, for Serres, so long as we continue to focus on human concerns, what nonhumans are attempting to articulate, “reminding us of their presence” (1990, 2) is only ever a proxy for conflicting human interests (1990, 1-3).
“worldwide world” (Serres 1990, 12) of The Natural Contract gains this power to affect the totality of human life in relation to our own, lately globalized ability to affect the earth on a scale commensurate to ‘natural’ phenomena. When we encroach on the world, in its own register, the world becomes a subject, with the power to limit our collective being.

Thus, what is also at stake is the transformation of many into one. The starting point of Serres’ argument is the unification of humans and their institutions into humanity -the “worldly world” (Serres 1990, 12) –and through this globalization of human effect, the making of the earth into the Earth.

There are thus two subjects in Serres' account of the politics of nature: the ‘worldly world’ (humans and their institutions, at this point in time), and the ‘worldwide world’ (the Earth, comprised of animate and inanimate non-humans and bio-physical systems). Hobbes has unification occurring under representation: “A multitude of men, are made one person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented…For it is the unity of the representer, not the unity of the represented, that maketh the person one” (1962, 127). But for Serres, the unification is mutual, in relation to each other; and their unity in relation to each other is guaranteed in the contract each ‘allows’ (Serres 1990, 124), or necessitates, that the other ‘sign’. I will return later to potential implications of this mutual subjectivity in relation to the problem of colonization, but for now the question remains, how do we come to recognize this (mutual) unification, in order that it may have political effect?

We rely on natural events, or on the description of events as natural, as having objective effects within the natural world, in order to institute a conception of this world, and of humanity, as two separate, unified, but mutually entangled subjects. To put this in Hobbesian terms, ‘nature’ and ‘humanity’ appear as unified concepts through their transformation into ‘artificial
persons’ – they are two subjects, the many into two. And Serres argues that when we appeal to this unified concept of nature, a shift is instituted in the grounds of the ‘courts of appeal’ – there is an exchange of who or what can be deemed competent to ‘decide’. Because ecological concerns require the inquiries and judgments of the sciences in order to take a form where they can have political effect, when we make an appeal to knowledge of the natural world, the grounds of competence are shifted from those persons and institutions dealing with ‘worldly’ affairs to some other, more comprehensive, less human plane:

Galileo’s reply… calls into question the competence of whoever is judging. [He claims] that there exists another space, … a natural earth in movement, which can serve as a point of reference; thus [he challenges] the authority before which [he is] appearing (Serres 1990, 82).

In matters concerning global environmental crisis, for Serres, courts dealing solely in human law have no competence to judge on apparent facts or to authorize courses of action. Science comes to occupy the space of law, because science alone can provide the “expert testimony” (Serres 1990, 84) on the earth’s movements, testimony on which the courts rely to come to decisions concerning human-nature contact or conflict.

What animates this shift in the balance of power, of knowledge over law, is not simply the sciences’ growing power to discern the nature and complexity of the nonhuman – an emerging perceptiveness which is also an act of mastery, for Serres (1990, 19) - but also the

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9 Thus, for Serres, there is no necessary ‘animating’ or ‘personating’ force separate from ‘nature’ or ‘humanity’ – animation arises from our mutual effect on each other. The ontological holism of materiality and animateness is at the heart of Jane Bennett’s larger project in Vibrant Matter, to be discussed in Chapter 3.

10 Exactly what Serres means by ‘mastery’ is a problem I do not intend to contest directly, but which deserves a certain amount of explanation. For Serres, The entire history of science consists of controlling and mastering this chain, of making consistent the highly improbable linkage of butterfly thought to hurricane effect. And the passage from this soft cause to these hard consequences precisely defines contemporary globalization (1990, 19).

Serres is arguing that the means by which humans come to recognize nature as a subject, the process out of which this global, mutual subjectification emerges, is a process devoted to the making sense of “improbable” events, fashioning perception of these events as consequential wholes. The process of making sense, the process of science, is a process of mastery – but a mastery which is inevitably undone by the globalized power of this emergent, unified nature. Thus, mastery gives onto a newfound potential equality, a mutual uncertainty. It is to this ‘political’ relation that I will return, later in the chapter.
shift in perception, partly facilitated by what natural sciences tell us about our effects on the

earth, towards nature as a subject of pity:

In the days of the Iliad and of Goya, the world wasn’t considered fragile; on the contrary, it

was threatening, and it easily triumphed over men, over those who won battles, and over wars

themselves. The quicksand sucks in the two combatants together; the stream threatens to

engulf Achilles—the victor?—after having swept away the corpses of the vanquished.

The global change now underway not only brings history to the world but also makes the

power of the world precarious, infinitely fragile. Once victorious, the Earth is now a victim.

What painter will depict the deserts vitrified by our war games? What visionary poet will

lament the vile, bloody-fingered dawn?

But people are dying of hunger in the deserts just as they are suffocating in the slimy

quicksand or drowning in the rising rivers. Conquered, the world is finally conquering us. Its

weakness forces strength to exhaust itself and thus our own strength to become gentler (1990,

11-12).

And yet knowledge appears to work through law rather than overthrow it entirely. Serres

conceives of law in the performative. That is to say,

Law never gives orders and rarely writes or speaks in the imperative; nor does it designate,

that is, write or speak in the indicative...This means that truth, the conformity of the spoken

or the prescribed with the facts, ensues immediately from its prescription or its speaking. The

performative makes speaking an efficacious act, a sort of fiat (Serres 1990, 75).

Law describes what happens in any kind of space, whether real, material, formal, or linguistic:

the discovery and the division of this original space are the very origin of law. Its language,

not prescriptive but performative, by describing sites and attributes, that is, places and

properties, makes them into what they are (Serres 1990, 77).

When legal and political institutions call on the sciences to give expert testimony on the

state of the earth, these descriptions, through their articulation in the performative space of law,

become the authorized description of what nature is/is doing. And if nature becomes a subject

(to and through law), and thus able to enter into contract, through being legally described as able

to affect human survival, we are playing a (Hobbesian) game of forces. Serres makes the point:

What is nature? First, all the conditions of human nature itself, its global constraints of rebirth

or extinction, the hostelry that gives us lodging, heat, and food. But nature also takes them

away from us as soon as we abuse them. It influences human nature, which, in turn,

The minimal condition for subjectivity, here, is being able to influence another.¹¹ This is in keeping with Hobbes’ nominal portrait of ‘man’ as by nature equal, each with equal right to every thing, and this right to every thing sets up conditions for violence between people(s).

Serres again:

Now this classic argument is valid when an individual subject chooses, for himself, his actions, his life, his fate, his last ends; it is conclusive, to be sure, but has no immediate application, when the subject who must decide unites more than the nations: humanity. Suddenly a local object, nature, on which a merely partial subject could act, becomes a global objective, Planet Earth, on which a new, total subject, humanity, is toiling away (1990, 5).

Our mutual ability to harm each other, to impede each other’s chances for survival, is then not only at the bottom of Serres’ effective subjectification of the human and the natural; it is also at the heart of his conception of what justice between the two worlds might appear as.

Serres invokes Leibniz’s concept of rendering, that is “If everything has its sufficient reason, we must render that reason to the very thing, well named, that we call the given” (1990, 90). Nature gives us everything, gives us the possibility and conditions of our lives. For Serres, in this sense, nature is ‘the given’—and what is given must be returned in kind.¹² Here we see the foundations of Serres contractual agreement, one he writes under the heading of an equilibrium, the double arrow of a chemical reaction (1990, 91).

Through this alchemy of the apprehension of mutual harm on a global scale (which humans come to realize through the evidence furnished by science), and which engenders mutual dependency, the worldwide world and the worldly world are separated and bound together.

Doubtless there are other ways of conceiving of the relation, but Serres’ version performs a

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¹¹ And the conditions for the apprehension of ‘influence’ are, for Serres, conveyed through the testimony of the sciences, in their invocation of another court—the sciences ‘make the world move’ (Serres 1990, 81-86). What is suggested is not so much that there was something already moving which objective scientists observe, but that the sciences make this something move in a way that was imperceptible to those judgments which placed humans at the center of all things. The sciences are, in this sense, never objective, they are effecting—but in such a way as to reveal the previously unthought capacities of the nonhuman world.

totalization and a naturalization, which taken together are structurally massive. The sense of necessity is at the heart of both Serres’ and Hobbes’ contracts. Hobbes defines a contract as “The mutual transferring of right” (1962, 106), and goes on to distinguish between “Signs of contract express” and “Signs of contract by inference” (1962, 106).

Signs by inference are sometimes the consequence of words; sometimes the consequence of silence; sometimes the consequence of actions; sometimes the consequence of forbearing an action: and generally a sign by inference, of any contract, is whatsoever sufficiently argues the will of the contractor (Hobbes 1962, 106).

In the problematic of the worldly and the worldwide worlds, no formal means of conceptualizing our mutual relation exists, yet in the world’s ‘woundedness’ Serres detects the conditions for such a transfer of right. Both the violence that we inflict on nature and the violence with which it responds can be thought in correspondence with a violent ‘state of nature’ and as the conditions of possibility for contract. If the contract is necessary, and can be considered instituted by inference, no physical signatures are needed. Their trace will be found in our actions.

Where Hobbes projects the moment of contract into the past, or into theory, Serres’ text is devoted to arguing that the moment to sign is at hand. Here again, I think that whether the contract is to be taken as artificial or real is a question deserving of further scrutiny, given that the efficacy of such a contract surely relies on its ability to command our imagination, our perception of legitimate (ecological) action. I would like to suggest that there are two dimensions to this question, the first being the ‘reality’ of the contract, and the second being, despite the explanation furnished by tacit consent, the question of how such a contract is to be considered instituted.

For Hobbes, what secures the contract is a ‘common power’, that is, a sovereign. There can be no law, no contracting of wills between subjects, that does not bring into being a third
power, the power that binds the signatories to each other, and, crucially, punishes them should they go back on their word:

Howsoever, it may be perceived what manner of life there would be, where there were no common power to fear, by the manner of life, which men that have formerly lived under a peaceful government, use to degenerate into, in a civil war (Hobbes 1962, 101).

Serres discusses the contract in far more mutual terms, a point of differentiation that either calls into question the efficacy of ‘mutual limitation’, or the necessity of sovereignty, as a binding agent. While, in a round-about way, I will be interrogating the problem of the sovereign in a contract with nature, at this moment I wish to draw attention for the moment to the play of appeal to nature and artifice in this relation. Nature, as global subject, appeals to humanity, that we might limit our right to fight among ourselves; humanity, as global subject, appeals to nature in the face of nature’s sudden worldwide capacity to respond to our wars. These appeals take the form of violence, and so are not necessarily conceived of in terms of voice or written language. As such, while it remains an act of imagination to conceive of actions as indicative of subjectivity, the crucial point is an issue of space and time. While Hobbes’ contract occurs in the past, at an ‘earlier stage of development’, or in theory, Serres’ may be taking place right now: readers are to believe that the two worlds are in the process of drawing up such a contract.

The seeming inevitability of contract is also in interesting relation to nature and artifice. Insofar as the natural has often been allied to the predetermined (and Hobbes himself seems to have subscribed to this idea), the contract as arising from actions (the contract by inference, as opposed to explicit) as opposed to choices or intentions seems a neat way of naturalizing the contractual relation, and of cementing the identities of the two parties involved.

Serres makes an important distinction between violence, war, and peace. In his writing, the difference between the ‘state of nature’ and the legal state of the ‘natural contract’ is the
difference between violence and war. In human wars, the earth is subjected to violence. That is, while the human combatants presumably recognize in each other the formal equality necessary to wage war, the damage they inflict on the ground beneath their feet is one born out of having no mutual language (Serres 1990, 8). Serres’ contract does not therefore guarantee peace between the worldly world and the worldwide world, but merely works to transform relations of violence to relations of war: in contract, we gain a common language, and this language is law. Hobbes too invokes the necessity of shared language as the basis for security, but his argument goes beyond the purely mutual to engage with the question of how a common language and shared meanings are guaranteed—that is, what force secures mutuality? It is through shared understanding, and the work it does to prevent violence that we principally encounter the sovereign (Shaw 2008, 22).

By what operation do the human combatants move from Hobbes’ state of nature to Serres’ state of war, social contract, or ‘worldliness’? Serres invokes the outlines of conventional modern politics, social and economic activity:

If we move from war to economic relations, nothing notable changes in the argument. Quirinus, god of production, or Hermes, who presides over exchanges, can sometimes keep back violence more effectively than Jupiter or Mars, but they do so using the same methods as Mars. One god in several persons, then, Mars calls war what the first two call competition: the pursuit of military operations by other means—exploitation, commodities, money, or information. Even more hidden, the real conflict reappears. The same schema is renewed: by their ugliness and by the filth which they accidentally spread around, chemical factories, large-scale livestock raising, nuclear reactors, and supertankers bring on objective global violence once again, with no arms other than the power of their size, no end other than the common and contractual quest for domination over men (1990, 15).

What must be asked—and what will occupy the remainder of this chapter—is how we account for the seeming universality of this schema. I do not think we are past the time to reconsider the universality of the ‘worldly’ world. In other words, what appears to be universal activity has a history also—the history of sovereignty and, necessarily related, the colonization of
Indigenous lands and peoples. Though Serres effects a separation between past, when nature (before it behaved as a subject) was unquestionably more powerful than any and all scattered human groups, and present, where the sheer weight of our combined activity, regardless of the behavior of individuals or particular groups, pulls on the earth “like a sea” (1990, 16), the ways in which ‘men’ have engendered and exerted sovereignty over and through others and how this particular activity has brought contemporary environmental claims and crises into existence remain largely unthought in The Natural Contract. I would like now to turn towards untangling the ‘making subject’ of humanity. The stakes, I would suggest, involve a second silencing of Indigenous voices; if the operations of Serres’ ‘worldly world’ are allowed to stand as the naturalized, globalized condition of humanity.

I ask, following many other thinkers: how did humans everywhere become subjects, given the initial conditions, laid out by Hobbes, which exclude some ‘men’ from the family of persons as the very condition of producing subjectivity (Shaw 2008, 30-34). One route is to question the assertion on its historical accuracy – and perhaps come to the conclusion that there never was a time or place when people were not subjects, when there was no law – though perhaps there were different laws. If we take this route, I am concerned that to insist, through recourse to whatever evidence anthropology, ethnography, archeology, can be obliged to provide, that there never was a person or society outside the law serves simply to reinforce the animating force of the subject: law, and by extension, sovereignty and the violence of subjectification. We need to ask, if we take this route, what kind of laws, making what kind of subjects? How flexible, how porous, how rigid or encompassing? Perhaps not all laws are created equal, in which case assuming the universality of ‘law’ without disentangling it from
sovereignty leaves sovereignty unchallenged, especially if the avenues of knowledge through which we pursue the law are those guaranteed by the sovereign (Shaw 2008, 32).

However, such a comparison falls outside the scope of this particular text. For my purposes, rather than insist on the foundational unity of the concept of ‘humanity’, I would like to focus on the initial operation that makes a universal subject by necessarily excluding some (after which, those excluded may be extended the possibility of incorporation). That is to say, in Hobbes’ formulation, for there to be a legal subject, there must have been a time and place where there were no such subjects. We can only be subjects in virtue of there not having been subjects (Shaw 2008, 33). The moment of contract, of subjectification, is, in this schema, a moment both of artifice (if we look closely) and yet inevitable. We cannot say when it happened; we only know it must have happened. And this leads to a search, “for something very far away” (Shaw 2008, 33), for the time, place, or people who are not subjects, so that we can verify our transition.

In part, the question I am asking could be a question of responsibility. Do the factories, the wars, the clearcuts, the garbage dumps, the displaced persons and permanent refugee camps really belong equally to all of us? When did we all agree to shoulder the blame for processes that have cultural and geographical histories, often histories of force? The globalization of humanity is a history of force, not merely against ‘Planet Earth’, but also, and initially, against those peoples who occupied land that was desirable to imperial interests.\footnote{And, helpfully to the colonial project, those marked as lacking subjectivity then also are necessarily presented as without ‘proper’ claim to these lands, without the proper form of (a) territory-based commonwealth (Shaw 2008, 33).} It is, I would argue, not necessary to argue about how those who came to be colonized occupied these lands; the question is not whether or not particular ways of life are amenable to the status of ‘subject’. It is not even whether or not particular ways of life make better or worse claims to environmental responsibility. What is in question is that the subject is an exceptional category –it operates
through an outside which must not be thought, and the force of sovereignty, and of contracts, stems from the possibility –the threat- of being before, or outside, of subjectivity.

With the space left in this chapter, I would like to turn from a theoretical analysis of the subject of contract, towards consideration of the implications of this particular formulation of political agency, especially in relation to the status subject-hood confers upon peoples in relation to land. Michael Asch has written extensively on the problem of the assumption of Canadian sovereignty in relation to the political struggles of Indigenous nations. In a short paper on Foucault and the problem of governmentality, he writes:

Hobbes’ argument rests on the distinction he makes between the State of Nature; a “thought experiment” (exemplified nonetheless in the world of the Indigenous), in which he posits that humans live in solitude, unable to form political communities; and the State of Society, exemplified by civilization, in which people live together in a community under a Sovereign. It is an origin myth, in which the “origin” is a dehistoricized moment of transformation from Nature to Society (the Social Contract), and the “myth” is constructed from juridical and philosophical principles deduced through “Reason.”

…As Foucault explains, the conflict (the English Civil War, under which Hobbes wrote Leviathan) was directly connected to two competing versions of an origin myth concerning Sovereignty based on a shared historical-political discourse that originates in the encounter between Normans and Saxons in 1066. Foucault argues that “what Hobbes wants to eliminate is the Conquest” (1997:98) as the basis for determining which version is authentic. To this end, Leviathan introduces an origin myth based on juridical-philosophical discourse as another, more compelling way to authenticate sovereignty (Foucault 1997:98-103).

…Here [in Canada] the settlers...do not have a historical-political discourse connected to their territory sufficiently compelling to stand as the narrative of the nation in the face of the more lengthy historical-political discourses of the Indigenous peoples within. In Canada, governmentality functions not only to establish the hegemony of juridical-philosophical principles in the establishment of state culture, but also to legitimate the historical-political discourse of the settlers as that of the nation. This process is fostered by the transformation of the State of Nature from an imaginary “thought experiment” about a period before political-juridical time to a fictionalized time before historical-political discourse came into being; an ethnological epoch before origin myths about sovereignty that is exemplified in the way in which Indigenous peoples lived before the arrival of the settlers. It is a period where the land was not occupied by political communities – a terra nullius as defined in Canadian jurisprudential law (Asch 1993). Therefore the historical-political origin myth to legitimate Sovereignty can only begin with European settlement.
The doctrine of terra nullius justifies sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and their lands in Canadian law by erasing Indigenous historical-political discourse (Asch 2007, 281-282).

Asch is arguing, through Foucault, that for Hobbes, sovereignty serves as a more compelling political discourse than those contesting claims to authority provided by historical or ‘local’ discourses of authority. In other words, to have been living here already is insufficient grounds for political autonomy, in colonizing discourse, because there is no sovereign figure to arbitrate disputes between contesting claims to ‘legitimate’ existence. But settler Canadians secure the state’s narrative of sovereignty by virtue of cleaving to/being recognized as “juridical-philosophical” subjects—and by being married to an imaginative “historical-political” nationalist discourse. For this narrative to be able to obscure Indigenous narratives of right in relation to land, political autonomy, etc., the Canadian state must perform an operation by which Indigenous occupation cannot be seen as political—the land must be empty/emptied for the state to exist, and for the nation to take on subjectifying flesh. In the same way that Serres flattens humanity into a universal one in order that the earth might become the universal Planet Earth, ‘our’ fellow subject, the Canadian state functions by placing Indigenous peoples, Indigenous land occupancy, and Indigenous ecological relationships outside visibility in order that the territory of sovereignty might map perfectly with the land to be settled and secured.14

The recent decision in the British Columbia Court of Appeals on William v. British Columbia essentially upholds Crown sovereignty, in such a way that underlines the state’s necessary inability to be receptive to the outside of sovereignty. A June 27, 2012 article in the Globe and Mail, a Canadian national newspaper, sums up the background of the case:

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14 While I am using, for the moment, an argument from inside a state, Serres argues that the conditions for globalization are met when there is “no left over space” (1990, 41) –that is, when the territory of the human maps completely onto the space of nature. This is the moment of subjectification, when human and nature cannot help but feed back upon each other instantaneously (Serres 1990, 40-41). If we follow the logic, if Indigenous peoples are necessarily outside Hobbes’ logic of subjectivity, their continued, acknowledged existence in a territory that would be sovereign means that sovereignty itself cannot exist in that space.
The case began when Roger William, then chief of the Xeni Gwet’in band, brought an action on behalf of the larger Tsilhqot’in First Nation in an attempt to stop several forest companies from logging in the Nemiah Valley.

I grew up just east of Nemiah and the Tsilhqot’in lands in question, and so this case has a particular concreteness for me. That the appeal judgment should have been delivered as I write this lends acute resonance to the argument I am following. The *Globe and Mail* article gives details of the ruling, in which the Court of Appeals upholds an earlier B.C. Supreme Court finding of Aboriginal right but not Aboriginal title in the territory in question:

The Tsilhqot’in First Nation, which represents six bands in central B.C., won partial victories when both the Supreme Court of B.C. and the Court of Appeal confirmed their traditional rights to use the land.

But the decisions failed to give the Tsilhqot’in what they really want – a clear declaration that they hold aboriginal title over more than 4,000 square kilometres of land west of Williams Lake.

…In its ruling, the B.C. Court of Appeal upheld key aspects of a landmark 2007 decision in which the late B.C. Supreme Court Justice David Vickers found the Tsilhqot’in have rights to the lands they use and that logging unfairly infringes on those rights.

He declined to make a declaration of title over the disputed land, but said: “The court offers the opinion that Tsilhqot’in aboriginal title does exist inside and outside the claim area.”

The Appeal Court, however, rejected some of Mr. Justice Vickers’ legal reasoning, specifically challenging his notion that aboriginal claims to title can be established simply by proving native people travelled across the land. It said broad use of territory isn’t good enough, but rather intense use of specific sites must be shown.15

Perhaps the key point in the ruling is to be found in section 219, which reads as follows:

[219] I also agree with the defendants that a territorial claim for Aboriginal title does not meet the tests in *Delgamuukw* and in *Marshall; Bernard*. Further, as I will attempt to explain, I do not see a broad territorial claim as fitting within the purposes behind s. 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* or the rationale for the common law’s recognition of Aboriginal title. Finally, I see broad territorial claims to title as antithetical to the goal of reconciliation, which demands that, so far as possible, the traditional rights of First Nations be fully respected.

without placing unnecessary limitations on the sovereignty of the Crown or on the aspirations of all Canadians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.\textsuperscript{16}

In light of Serres’ arguments about the necessity of there being ‘no left over space’ in order for humanity and the world to become subjects for each other, and when read against Asch’s argument to the effect that a finding of Aboriginal title would infringe on Crown sovereignty and on the narrative of legitimacy that sovereignty (the clean slate of \textit{terra nullius}) grants the state, we can read “the goal of reconciliation” as in essence the court’s affirmation that, within the state, reconciliation can only mean the absorption of Indigenous peoples into the fold of sovereignty. In this way, the relation between land and people can be figured as uncontested: one territory for one people, one Earth for one humanity. That the case should originally have been brought to court by the Xeni Gwet’in in the context of trying to forestall logging on their lands, lands which are not seen by any but the most infinitesimal proportion of the Canadian (settler) population, simply lends to the transparency by which sovereign interests violate Indigenous concern, even in the face of (supposedly shared) environmental consequences –consequences which the Tsilhqot’in people will inevitably bear more profoundly than their settler neighbours.

As I wrote above, part of what remains intriguingly underthought in Serres’ depiction of the natural contract is the difference between war and peace. War may be a legal state, but to the extent that war is violence transformed through legalization, there is still reason to ask who is subjected to war, and where war turns back into violence. Again, the play of nature and artifice is in evidence here: with the artifice of law, terrain shifts from human conflicts, perhaps some of them conducted between peoples working in politically incommensurable languages (conflicts born of mistranslation, or of insistences on particular translations), to human-nature conflicts.

\textsuperscript{16} http://www.courts.gov.bc.ca/jdb-txt/CA/12/02/2012BCCA0285.htm.
It is an interesting move for Serres to insist that the element of violence cannot be expunged from his human-nature relation. This is in direct contrast to the position held by some strands of environmental thought (generalized by Latour and Bennett, as we will see, under the heading of ‘deep ecology’), where the founding assumption is of underlying harmony between human interests and the power and potential of the nonhuman world. And yet, in the naturalization and legal ‘taming’ of such violence, the violence of colonization slips under the radar, as the subject of contract assumes universality and subsumes any and all other forms of subjectivity, reducing alternatives once again to the constitutive null of the State of Nature.

Before moving finally to our next chapter, I would like to extract one final piece of the structural puzzle Serres sets for us. This is part of Serres’ narrative of progress, which, as we have seen, is about the accumulation of knowledge through science on the one hand, but is also about a moral revaluation, a progressive social contract whereby those who oppress lose the respect of the majority. And yet, because “we” have already ‘reached the age of majority’, “Once again, we must rule in the case of the losers, by drafting the rights of beings who have none” (Serres 1990, 35). In a strange alchemy,

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen gave the possibility to every man to attain the status of subject of the law. The social contract was thereby completed, but closed upon itself, leaving the world on the sidelines, an enormous collection of things reduced to the status of passive objects to be appropriated. Human reason was of age, external nature a minor” (Serres 1990, 36).

I hope, in this chapter, to have opened a problematization of the exclusivity of this contract with man –how this seeming unification and equality in the attainment of status came about is not Serres concern; I am concerned that it must be. But if there are grounds to question the presumed univocality of the human part of this relation, does Serres’ unified nature fall apart

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17 Jane Bennett explores the underlying anthropocentrism of deep ecological or ‘holist’ positions in her 1987 book Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment: Nature and the State in a Post-Hegelian Era, a text I will call on in greater depth in later chapters.
as well? Recall that Serres achieves the globalization of nature through the consequences of particular human activity; that is, through the knowledge produced by the sciences and authorized in political institutions. To some extent, then, the unification of nature is independent of the totality of humanity—the ‘universality’ of nature is instead made perceptible through specific, rather than global, human activity.

But if we take Serres at his word for a few minutes more, we grasp that by virtue of this specific human activity, humans in general are gaining a slowly (re)dawning knowledge of the earth’s ability to act on us. Humanity in total is meant to begin to realize the necessity of recognizing a new relationship, one which shakes us from our belief in man surrounded by, at the center of, an environment:

So forget the word environment, commonly used in this context. It assumes that we humans are at the center of a system of nature. This idea recalls a bygone era, when the Earth…, placed in the center of the world, reflected our narcissism, the humanism that makes of us the exact midpoint or excellent culmination of all things. No. The Earth existed without our unimaginable ancestors, could well exist today without us, will exist tomorrow or later still, without any of our possible descendents, whereas we cannot exist without it. Thus we must indeed place things in the center and us at the periphery, or better still, things all around us and us within them like parasites (Serres 1990, 33).

In rejecting a center-periphery distinction for humans and nature, but in upholding an underlying condition of violence (legally tamed into war, which can mean the absence of overt conflict) between the two, I think we can perhaps affirm that Serres is working in a variant of internationalist terrain. That is, the worldly world and the worldwide world are two sovereigns, but sovereign only in relation to their ‘subjects’—universal humans and nonhumans, respectively. When nature ‘comes of age’, neither the worldly world nor the worldwide word is sovereign over the other, echoing Hobbes’ digression in Chapter 13, “yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators” (1962, 101). The sovereign who guarantees the contract is difficult to
find, in *The Natural Contract*, because it does not exist in the international Serres constructs – and so the efficacy of the contract, if we are convinced by Hobbes’ arguments, must be in doubt.

Although all humans depend on the world, the operations through which we come to recognize, or grant, its subjectivity, allow a legal separation between the two subjects at a ‘global’ level. Examined from one angle, this conception seems to affirm a shifting, horizontal difference. We may be interdependent, but on the level that guarantees the relation as between humanity and nature, there are (only) two subjects – subjects for each other but sovereigns in relation to the humans and nonhumans who constitute them. To digest what is intended by this interdependence, though, we will have to shift from Serres’ ‘planetary’ perspective, and venture inside a vision of the commonwealth, as given by Bruno Latour in his *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*.
Chapter 2: Speaking/Appealing: The Collective and its Propositions

Hobbes’ subject of contract is a minimal figure. The intent of this chapter will be to trace the transformations by which the subject might become a ‘citizen’, becomes fleshed with political rights, and becomes a participant in a system of government. With this chapter, I would like to relocate from Serres’ ‘worlds’ to Latour’s Collective, from the contours of sovereignty to the inside of administration.

What is at stake is whether the kind of governmental citizenship that grows out of the minimal conditions of the subject is fundamentally at odds with, or compatible with, the model of sovereignty given us in Leviathan (or in The Natural Contract). Does the apparent disappearance of the sovereign in a ‘democratic’ model, such as the one Latour proposes in Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy, signal an end to war, or does this transformation conceal a deepening of violence?

Detached from their claim to describe domains of reality, the terms "object" and "subject" are reduced to polemical roles that make it possible to resist the supposed monstrosity of their confrontation. What is a subject, actually? That which resists naturalization. What is an object? That which resists subjectivization. Like the warring twins of mythology, they are the heirs of the division into two powerless assemblies that we abandoned above. By changing Constitutions, we are thus also going to find out how we can get rid of the tiresome polemics of objects and subjects (Latour 2004, 74).

One of my pressing concerns, at the opening of this chapter, is to pay attention to the transformations of words. Specifically, I am concerned to account for differences in meaning between the way that Serres invokes the subject, as the weighty body subject to law, and the subject that Latour wishes to do away with. Latour's subject is much more closely associated with the problem of naturalization and essence, and not with law, or with law as ‘constitution’ rather than fiat. From the quote above, we can see that he is concerned about the subject as one
half of the binary of subject and object, defined in opposition to each other. So long as the essence of the object is to be the indisputably 'factual' outside of the subject, which comes back to haunt the subject in the spectre of nature as the reduction to a ‘thing’ (Latour 2004, 76), then the essential characteristic of the subject must be free-will (Latour 2004, 78). Free-will, however, is figured as the tyranny of opinion, the violence of infinite, irreducible beliefs, which must be quelled through recourse to certainty, to the ‘fact’ of nature. For Latour, if we continue to focus on these problems of essence, free-will and fact, we cannot get ourselves out of the binary that pits humans (as subjects) against the world (as object, or recalling Serres, surrounding environment) (Latour 2004, 76), a separation which circumvents politics (Latour 2004, 91).

This is Latour’s intervention into political ecology, less to challenge existing political systems with ecology and more to politicize ecology, to recognize ecology as a political field. Latour undertakes this revisitation not through an interrogation of the way in which ecology is a field of social ‘power relations’, but rather through a reevaluation of the study of nonhumans as a potential political model. Changing the grounds of debate is important, for Latour, because he considers political ecology to be beholden to a theory of nature which is detrimental to a political project of erasing the conceptual boundaries between humans and nonhumans (2004, 19-22, 65). In this sense, his concern is not so much with protecting or conserving nature as it is with suspending “our certainties concerning the sovereign good of humans and things, ends and means” (Latour 2004, 21). For Latour, uncertainty is the ethical and practical dispossession that gives on to ‘better’ politics –and the question of this better politics, this more promising common life, is one to which I will return in a few pages.
First, I would like to open the conversation with a discussion of what is wrong, for Latour, with current ecological movements. For Latour, “the popularized version of deep ecology” is a movement with vague contours that claims to be reforming the politics of humans in the name of the “higher equilibria of nature.” Now, deep ecology, in my interpretation, is situated as far as possible from political ecology; moreover, the confusion between these two approaches is what constantly disrupts the strategy of the “green” movements. The latter, persuaded that they could organize themselves along a spectrum ranging from the most radical to the most reformist, have in effect agreed to put deep ecology at the far end of the spectrum. By a parallelism that is not accidental, deep ecology fascinates political ecology, as communism fascinated socialism—and as the serpent fascinates its prey. But deep ecology is not an extreme form of political ecology, it is not a form of political ecology at all, since the hierarchy of beings to which it lays claim is entirely composed of those modern, smooth, risk-free stratified objects in successive gradations from the cosmos to microbes by way of Mother Earth, human societies, monkeys, and so on. The producers of this disputed knowledge remain completely invisible, as do the sources of uncertainty; the distinction between these objects and the political world they bombard remains so complete that it seems as though political ecology has no goal but to humiliate politics still further by reducing its power, to the profit of the much greater and much more hidden power of nature—and to the profit of the invisible experts who have decided what nature wanted, what it could do, and what it ought to do (2004, 26).

Latour’s concern is to preserve the potential of politics, which appears as always under threat through the very operations of those who claim to wish to protect the nonhuman world from political decisions. In place of this circumvention, Latour works to illuminate the political character of the epistemological processes by which humans come to recognize ‘things’ as being worthy of taken into account, a politicization he hopes will reveal an irresistible ambiguity about the character and capacities of all things subject to investigation. He begins by proposing a series of modifications on the term ‘actor’, a strange choice if we come back to Hobbes. By actor, Latour means:

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18 For Hobbes, the actor is essentially what he intends by the sovereign, an artificial person (one whose words or actions represent the words or actions of another or of a group of natural persons) whose actions are authorized by those he (or it, in the case of an institution as the governing body) represents (1962, 125). In other words, for Hobbes the actor is an authorized or animated representative, the common body of the collective or commonwealth.
Let us suppose now that someone comes to find you with an association of humans and nonhumans, an association whose exact composition is not yet known to anyone, but about which a series of trials makes it possible to say that its members act, that is, quite simply, that they modify other actors through a series of trials that can be listed thanks to some experimental protocol. This is the minimal, secular, nonpolemical definition of an actor (2004, 75).

Keeping his definition, Latour modifies the term ‘actor’ to ‘actant’ (2004, 75), to highlight the inseparability of actors and their ‘environments’, to confound the separation of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, and to rid the term of its traces of “anthropomorphism”. Later, Latour substitutes a new term, “propositions” (2004, 83), to indicate actants in the uncertain and complicated process of appearing before/to a “new and unforeseen association” (2004, 83). For Latour, the term ‘proposition’ has the advantage of indicating uncertainty – we cannot make assumptions beforehand about the composition and character of a proposition- and, related to this uncertainty, of suggesting that the normalized requirements of recognizably ‘political’ language need not be a limiting factor for a human-nonhuman collective. But how are we to get from Serres’ separation of the worldly and worldwide worlds – that is, his separation of human and nature- to Latour’s commingling? Forgive me an extended quotation from Latour, which I think serves to highlight the displacement Latour seeks to effect:

Readers may object that there is still a total difference between human social actors and nonhuman social actors, since the former can never be mastered and the latter must on the contrary obey nothing but brute causality. If such an objection is raised, it is because readers are still using the old model that viewed human subjectivity as something that intervenes to disrupt the objectivity of laws, to pollute the quality of judgment, to suspend the succession of causes and effects. Those readers are still making use of the old distribution of roles between the necessity of things and the liberty of subjects, either to chasten nature and elevate man, or to glorify nature and belittle man. In both cases, they are continuing to use the polemical energy still left in the notions of object and subject and are continuing to function as if we were still living in the old cosmos, with its radical distinction between sublunary and supralunary worlds. Yet it was in order to keep human passions from disturbing objects that the need for "strict respect for causality" was endlessly stressed.

For readers to be fully convinced, it seems to me, they need only take seriously the label "actor" that was introduced in the preceding section. Actors are defined above all as
obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective. To put it crudely, human and nonhuman actors appear first of all as troublemakers. The notion of *recalcitrance* offers the most appropriate approach to defining their action (2004, 81).

Latour’s ‘minimal’ definition of an actor is, at bottom, not different from Serres’ subject, and, indeed, is ultimately not antithetical to Hobbes’ definition of ‘man’: all refer to something that disrupts, something that has the potential to act on others. As Hobbes sought to minimize the (destructive) freedom of subjects by transforming what appeared to be freedom into the natural causality of objects in motion, Latour seeks to shift the terms of the discussion away from ontology per se, with its battles over freedom and determinacy, and instead on to what we can learn from how we go about becoming aware of something, a politicization of epistemology. In this view, actors (or propositions) appear ‘above all as obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective’ (2004, 81).19

Actors modify other actors, and this modification appears first of all as interruption. The interruption of what? Latour is clear: the interruption of the Collective, in the form of the known world. And yet, this interruption is not incomprehensible. Reading *Politics of Nature*, it is possible to have the sense that, though there may be a difference between known and as-yet-unknown actors, everyone/thing is, unexpectedly and from the beginning, speaking the same language, *because* “political ecology (as Latour conceives it) no longer divides nature from society, ecology from politics” (2004, 50).20 What is more, an actor or actant, even one

19 And this quotation echoes back to Serres’ invocation of the human collective closed upon the institution of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a collective which is necessarily incomplete because it is founded through the exclusion of the ‘natural’ subject (Serres 1990, 36). So both Serres and Latour invoke a necessarily incomplete collective, one in the process of becoming inclusive or perhaps sensitive to the potential of an expanded sense of the number of things that might be considered capable of acting on others.

20 Again, this echoes Serres’ emphasis on a shared language being necessary for the conduct of relations in some other mode than violence. As an assertion, this is anticipated by Shaw’s illumination (discussed in Chapter 1) of the way that the shared language of sovereign/subject is constituted *through* the definition of a category to be excluded.
seemingly ‘recalcitrant’, can come inside the Collective, through a process, “through a series of trials that can be listed thanks to some experimental protocol” (Latour 2004, 75). In other words, in a single collective without these ontological differences, what is unknown is unknown not by virtue of difference but simply as a matter of time—not unknown but rather not-yet-known.

The Collective, and the ‘civilizing process’ it effects through the extended apprehension of the speech of nonhumans (Latour 2004, 71) are where I would like to concentrate my discussion for the next few pages. It seems to me that if there is concern to be had with Latour’s re-drawing of the map, from subjects and objects battling between freedom and causality to actants speaking, it is to be found in the implications of the Collective and its ‘gathering’, “collecting” (Latour 2004, 55), or “articulating” (Latour 2004, 86) process.

Latour’s project is asking ‘political ecology’ to ‘let go of nature’ (2004, 91). He asks, in a retelling of the allegory of Plato’s cave, of the passage from the world of representations to the world of things as they really are:

What is the use of the allegory of the Cave today? It allows a Constitution that organizes public life into two houses. The first is the obscure room depicted by Plato, in which ignorant people find themselves in chains, unable to look directly at one another, communicating only via fictions projected on a sort of movie screen; the second is located outside, in a world made up not of humans but of nonhumans, indifferent to our quarrels, our ignorances, and the limits of our representations and our fictions. The genius of the model stems from the role played by a very small number of persons, the only ones capable of going back and forth between the two assemblies and converting the authority of the one into that of the other. Despite the fascination exercised by Ideas (even upon those who claim to be denouncing the idealism of the Platonic solution), it is not at all a question of opposing the shadow world to the real world, but of redistributing powers by inventing both a certain definition of Science and a certain definition of politics. Appearances notwithstanding, idealism is not what is at issue here. The myth of the Cave makes it possible to render all democracy impossible by neutralizing it; that is its only trump card (2004, 14).

A political ecology that continues to maintain a separation between subjects and objects, between society and nature, and that furthermore believes the solution to ecological crises lies in

from subjectivity: the condition of possibility for shared language and meaning is an outside of absolute difference, absolute unintelligibility.
somehow bringing these two (back) together, is, according to Latour, falling prey to the wrong problem:

For the cold, gray nature of the ancient (political) epistemologists, the ecologists have simply substituted a greener, warmer nature. For the rest, these two natures dictate moral conduct in the place of ethics: apolitical, they decide on policy in place of politics (2004, 19).

At the root of this error, according to Latour, lies the appeal to nature to settle debate, an appeal shot through and through with power – because only a few humans are authorized to tell us what is what, what is immobile, what ‘merely constructed’ (2004, 11). He writes:

If political ecology poses a problem, it is not because it finally introduces nature into political preoccupations that had earlier been too exclusively oriented towards humans, it is because it continues, alas, to use nature to abort politics (Latour 2004, 19).

This nature, the nature of the ‘Cave’ (or, outside of the cave), is one that serves as a “reservoir of incontrovertible certainties that could be brought in to put an end to the incessant chatter of obscurantism and ignorance” (Latour 2004, 12). So long as we continue to think of the political as the paradoxical realm of both freedom, on the one hand, and opinion (ignorance, subjective belief) on the other, we continue to search for external certainty to quiet the noise and quell the immanent violence that exist in the absence of truth. For Latour, recourse to certainty, in the form of ‘nature’ as objective reality, is the worst kind of power politics, because it shuts down debate through the opposition of knowledge and power, for him an opposition which is inevitably a game of exclusivity (2004, 186).

In place of power politics, Latour wishes us to turn ourselves towards a different flame, politics as “the progressive composition of the common world” (2004, 18). Each word in this definition might be up for debate, but the two I upon which would like to concentrate are ‘progressive’ and ‘common’.
‘Progressive’, as deployed by Latour, suggests a gradual process – one that begins without knowing what it will be, that slowly takes more into account (2004, 90). Taken in concert with ‘common’, ‘progressive’ suggests also a unity, or universality, and Latour is explicit on this point: he wishes to abolish the ‘old constitution’, with its two domains of nature and politics, object and subject. Instead, he hopes for a single world with two houses. Latour’s vision for this Collective is explicated in Chapters 3 and 4 of Politics of Nature (2004, 91-183), but my interest is less in the internal separations of powers that make the Collective work – its government, if you will – and more towards traversing the membrane that constitutes the space to be governed; how and why actors might pass in or out, under what circumstances they might be included or disqualified, and where inclusion might function as disqualification.

In light of this distinction, I would like to turn to the brief passage where Latour calls upon ‘comparative anthropology’ to bolster his claims regarding the abolition of nature:

Non-Western cultures have never been interested in nature; they have never adopted it as a category; they have never found a use for it…We do not mean to suggest that non-Western cultures correspond point for point to the political ecology whose protocol we propose to draw up. On the contrary, as we shall see in Chapter 4, all the institutions of the collective remain contemporary inventions, unprecedented in history. We mean only that the other cultures (to keep on using a quite ill-conceived term), precisely because they have never lived in nature, have preserved the conceptual institutions, the reflexes and routines that we Westerners need in order to rid ourselves of the intoxicating idea of nature. If we learn the lesson of comparative anthropology, these cultures offer us indispensable alternatives to the nature-politics opposition, by proposing ways of collecting associations of humans and nonhumans using a single collective clearly identified as political. More accurately, they refuse to use only two collectors, just one of which, the social world, would be seen as political, while the other, nature, would remain outside of power, outside public speech, outside institutions, outside humanity, outside politics (2004, 43-44).

Latour goes on to argue that

the other cultures under consideration did not blend the social order and the natural order at all; they were unconcerned by the distinction. To be unaware of a dichotomy is not at all the same thing as combining two sets into one – still less “getting beyond” the distinction between the two (2004, 45).
While it might be an obvious point, the universality with which Latour invokes ‘non-Western cultures’ and universally characterizes ‘their’ orientation to human and nonhuman relations is reductionist in a way that parallels the ‘noble savage’ fixation he criticizes in those political ecologists against whom much of his argument is directed. Latour’s justification of the claim that, in essence, ‘non-Western cultures have no (or have never had a) concept of nature’ relies on a suspect invocation of anthropological knowledge, and appears entirely disengaged from what even contemporary anthropology (double-edged as the field has been throughout its history) might have to say about Indigenous conceptions of ‘non-humanity’.

Further, and as importantly, by invoking “we Westerners”, it becomes clear that Latour is speaking to those people conventionally represented under the problematic banner of Western modernity. The peculiarity of this position becomes all the clearer when one notices that Latour invokes ‘non-Western cultures’ political assemblages as models or analogies for his new Collective. Non-Western cultures are temporally and spatially excluded from the Collective, through the operation of invoking their political assemblages (or at least, those political assemblages as they appear through the lens of Latour’s anthropology) as models for the (modern/contemporary) Collective.

Now that readers have a sense of who is constitutively excluded from the Collective, I would like to turn to the question of how actors join the Collective.

Latour wishes to rid us of the ‘external’ reserve of standing nature, on the consideration that it is both illegitimately excluded and illegitimately wielded as a threat to democratic discussion (2004, 121). But, in the new structure of the Collective, he maintains a difference between inside and outside, between what is inside the Collective and what is outside. In

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21 Personal communication, Rob Hancock, July 15 2012.
22 Or actants – the difference in terms seems to lie more in the word and not in the definition.
contrast to the ‘illegitimacy’ of static nature outside the Cave, he emphasizes ‘due process’, which he characterizes as “representation” (Latour 2004, 126), the process by which actors become citizens (Latour 2004, 79). I deliberately use the word citizens to signal a ‘civic’ or ‘civilizing’ shift that occurs from outside to inside in Latour’s Collective: all things (humans and nonhumans) may be actors or actants, but not all are inside the Collective, at the very beginning. The Collective is defined by incompleteness. This being a ‘progressively composed’ association, there is a process for incorporating or evaluating the citizenship-potential of actors. Latour lays this out:

Every new proposition first goes through the four compartments of this figure, responding in turn to each of our essential requirements: it induces perplexity in those who are gathered to discuss it and who set up the trials that allow them to ensure the seriousness of its candidacy for existence; it demands to be taken into account by all those whose habits it is going to modify and who must therefore sit on its jury; if it is successful in the first two stages, it will be able to insert itself in the states of the world only provided it finds a place in a hierarchy that precedes it; finally, if it earns its legitimate right to existence, it will become an institution, that is, an essence, and will become part of the indisputable nature of the good common world (2004, 123).

If it is not already obvious, Latour is deliberately, playfully, provocative in his diction. I do my best not simply to critique him on these word choices, which are also artifacts of translation and so perhaps at one remove from Latour’s intended significations, but rather to ask what assumptions lie behind the provocations, and specifically where provocation might serve to distract from political implications, namely, the suggestion of a ‘universality-to-come’ and how it is ‘to come’. In the progressive composition of the Collective, in this ‘due process’, I find the strongest resonances with a civilizing mission, which structurally institutes a new universality even while the Collective can be considered incomplete, with clear but underexplored criteria for what makes a political subject and therefore, for what or who is exceptional, unassimilable but of necessity always already defined for, and in this sense known to (inside) Latour’s ‘common
world’. Although the minimal definition of being ‘surprising’ (Latour 2004, 79) seems innocuous enough; when coupled with Latour’s operation of inclusion, it seems to me that the emergent ecosystem is rather less open, less flexible, and very much concerned with the hard designs of ‘authority’ and ‘legitimacy’.

In the title for this chapter, I suggest that Latour turns from a version of the one to a version of the many. While Serres conceives of ecological crises as a problem between (mutually sovereign) worlds, subjects for but not subject to each other, Latour argues that the role of political ecology is to create a structure that will be able to take the many into account – where Serres sees two ones, Latour writes of a whole with many propositions, actors, potential citizens. Karena Shaw, in her discussion of Deleuze and Guattari’s rethinking of sovereignty, hits on the implications of ‘appealing’ for inclusion in a seemingly common world:

Rather than “primitives” needing to be civilized, the problem that motivates the conflict is that the forms of power that enable the state –precisely because they depend on identity and resonance- cannot tolerate alternative resonances around them. The state forms of power thus consistently strive to force resonance around the state in order to sustain the authority and identity of the state. Thus the state always seeks to “capture” primitive societies, to produce resonance, to produce sovereignty (2008, 166).

There is something in the question of intelligibility, the conditional ‘resonance’ of shared meaning (Shaw 2008, 22-25), which gives me pause. It seems a question that must be addressed, perhaps especially when discussing humans and nonhumans, but also, and crucially for the project of an anti-oppressive ecological politics, when discussing associations of peoples. How are we to communicate, when at first glance we may not share a common language –and indeed, when the conventional assumption is that we (humans and nonhumans) do not even all share language?

Latour addresses this problem by arguing that things always speak. Speech is always mediated, even between those (humans) who believe they share language. The speech of
nonhumans is mediated by “prostheses” (Latour 2004, 67), the articulated apparatus of the
laboratory. But the speech or intelligibility of those humans and human collectives that do not
organize themselves in a way amenable to colonizing states, whose political existence pre-exists
the state’s in some territory or whose claims to autonomy threaten the self-identity and authority
of sovereignty, is also subject to being incorporated into ‘the collective.’ Shaw proceeds to a
discussion of the way in which

the “primitive” has always marked and produced the margins of the state…As such, they are
not “simply” objects or victims. They are, rather, crucial figures: if the state operates through
a process of collective subjectification, the outsiders are potential agents capable of much
disruption: “What counts is the collective figure of the Outsider (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:
469). It is through these figures that sovereignty can be most deeply challenged, as it is upon
these figures that its own identity/resonance/authority rests (2008, 169).

It is here that I would like to return to an impetus that I think lives behind Latour’s
political ecology; that of the promise of the good life, attained through the progress of
knowledge. The good life, what it consists of and how it is to be provided, is one of the
perennial preoccupations of (political) philosophy. For Hobbes “it is through this shared use of
language that the possibility for order is established” (Shaw 2008, 22). And the necessity of a
defined and bounded order is what undergirds the possibility of knowledge, and, even more
importantly, knowledge figured as the production of “a common identity, collaboration,
“progress”” (Shaw 2008, 24). But whereas Latour envisions the progressive composition of a
common world, Shaw emphasizes Hobbes’ circumspectness in regard to the potential of
knowledge, since we cannot know things in themselves (even through revealing ‘prostheses’) but
always know through the limitation of language, the shared meaning and reason of which can
only be guaranteed by the authority of sovereignty (Shaw 2008, 22-24).

Capturing the speech of those constituted as outsiders and making it intelligible in the
terms of the state is thus a way not simply of creating the conditions of possibility for shared
meaning and ‘the good life’ conceived of as the progressive accretion of knowledge, but is implicitly a means of controlling the potentially destabilizing challenge of those ‘others’. 23 As a bonus for the Collective’s legitimacy, incorporating ‘others’ has the appearance of making the state representative of a multiplicity. And yet, this representation is inevitably narrow, oriented towards producing particular subjectivities amenable to receiving and reproducing the ‘common good’ proposed by the state. Again, from Shaw,

> Given this, it is not difficult to imagine the conditions under which, rather than being “quashed,” these movements [of resistance or rebellion, or, perhaps, refusal to appeal to the Collective] might be controlled, in particular through recognition…This recognition could only be granted, thus, to those groups that could and would agree to particular forms of resonance, to agree to resonate with the state, to become a part of the realization of [whatever ‘common good’ the state sought to provide, as part of the conditions of its legitimacy (Shaw 2008, 171)] (2008, 173).

Before moving on to an illustration of the implications of incorporation through knowledge, it may be worth retracing the terrain I have covered, in order to sort out some overlapping scent trails. In relation to Latour’s Collective as a structure for ‘progressively composing the common world,’ both human and nonhuman actors are subject to a process of becoming recognized as members. While Latour’s version seems to offer a model of how to look politically at something already in practice; that is, the ways in which the practices of the sciences activate and articulate the ‘speech’ of nonhumans, in a way that seems to undo the distinction between subjects and objects, if we look at this process in the context of the ‘civilizational’ discourses of colonizing states, a violent dynamic emerges.

23 Here, I must be careful not to misrepresent Latour by too quickly identifying the Collective with the state. Latour himself wishes to distinguish his speculative institution from the ‘Leviathan’ on the grounds that ‘the State’ turns to ‘Science’ in exactly the way he wishes to disallow; that is, to circumvent the political (dialogue, dissent, uncertainty) through the medium of technocracy (2004, 202-203). But on my reading, the Collective may not be reconcilable to the institutions and processes of any contemporary state – and yet the goods that Hobbes envisions (sciences, knowledge, the possibility of a common life) are analogous to those Latour endorses. Latour may not talk about sovereignty, but the collective still has a membrane to be crossed, and there is the possibility of sense and common life within, yet-to-be common life and shared meaning deferred without.
When Latour is not referring to anthropology, he does make reference to the relationship between ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘mononaturalism’. Latour figures ‘multiculturalism’ as ‘acquiring its rights’ through definition in opposition to, and through, ‘mononaturalism’ – that is, multiculturalism at its furthest extent allows that not only are all cultures diverse, but all can make equal claims to define reality in their own terms; they no longer stand out against a background of unified nature; each is incommensurable with the others; there is no longer any common world at all (2004, 48).

To save us from slipping into the vacuum of incommensurability, multiculturalism has been contained by reference to a single nature, and that nature figured as inaccessible to direct knowledge but indifferent to human being (Latour 2004, 33). Latour thus has two problems on his hands: how to sustain reference to a common world, and how to figure that common world as not merely out there to be known, but as modified by and modifying human actions, at times through the very processes we engage in as we attempt to bring atoms, minerals, water, trees, genes, etc., under (our) control (2004, 33-34).

While in principle I agree with Latour’s concerns about the falsity of this split, with politics in here and nature out there, I would suggest that the problem is not merely the ‘relativism’ and ‘idealism’ of (Latour’s) multiculturalism, but rather that differences of worldview such as those presented by Latour under the label of ‘multiculturalism’ cannot be figured solely in terms of culture, but represent fundamental challenges to the form of politics articulated throughout Politics of Nature.

Incorporation and dispossession have always walked hand in hand for Indigenous peoples caught up in the state colonization of their environments. Latour speaks several times of the “banality” (Latour 2004, 46, 50, 76, 79) of the process he offers, as a way of neutralizing
potential charges of radicalism and impracticality. But Shaw, by way of Deleuze and Guattari, suggests that the apparatus of capture [by which states assimilate peoples and restructure both their social relationships and relationships to land] proceeds not through explicit violence, but through apparently banal practices of organization. For example, Deleuze and Guattari develop an analysis of ground rent as an apparatus of capture. Although an apparently innocuous practice, ground rent striates and organizes people in relations to land, “capturing” possibilities for being on the land. It imposes an agricultural economy, but in the process, not only are possible ways of being constrained, but what land “is” changes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 441). The effect of this is a reconstruction of the possibilities for being, for social organization in relation to space. In this way, the apparatus of capture—through mechanisms and logics of agricultural production—functions to produce resonance [with the state, as collective subjectivity] (2008, 166-167).

Banality, then, is by no means either novel or a mark of innocence, as an institutional process. While Latour’s discussion of incorporation in/appealing to the Collective, and even of how to recognize an actor, focuses on questions of epistemology over those of ontology, the Collective nevertheless functions as an ontological proposition. Its ‘progressive composition’ notwithstanding, we would perhaps do better to understand this structure and its operation as the extension and reproduction of “its own limits (the limits of sovereignty)” (Shaw 2008, 169). Because sovereignty is maintained through progressive incorporation, it must of necessity produce that which escapes its coding, or resonance (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 448-49). This is why “state” and “primitive” societies must not be considered in a relation of succession: the “primitive” has always marked and produced the margins of the state (Shaw 2008, 169).

This is absolutely not to suggest that Indigenous peoples are produced by the state—or that Indigeneity is always already opposed to state forms of organization and intelligibility. Rather, it is to argue that the categories of nonspeaking, or unintelligible, or yet-to-be-incorporated are produced by the state as an apparatus for capturing ‘recalcitrant’ actors, and thus for securing its own boundaries and legitimacy, as the structure which allows for
intelligibility. Latour’s twist is to make recalcitrance appear as a ‘surprising’ appeal for
intelligibility and eventual incorporation –the very mode of resistance is thus reconfigured as a
desire to be collected.

In the last chapter, I briefly discussed recent developments in William v. British
Columbia, the case brought by the Xeni Gwet’in on behalf of the Tsilhqot’in National
Government to protest unwanted logging in the Nemiah Valley and to test the Crown’s ability to
recognize Aboriginal rights and title in the area in question. I would like to turn to Shaw’s
discussion of the 1991 Delgamuukw v. British Columbia case, to highlight precisely these issues
of intelligibility and incorporation. Delgamuukw is “a land claims case filed by the hereditary
chiefs of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en First Nations” (Shaw 2008, 108) in 1984. In contrast to
Latour’s specific assertion that his proposed Collective is to be composed progressively, rather
than pre-determined by existing institutions, it became clear in Delgamuukw that precisely what
must remain beyond the reach of questioning, what is ‘pre-composed’, is the apparatus of
intelligibility. In the form of the court and its judge, the apparatus of intelligibility assumes the
authority to rule on the authority and legitimacy of claims about what and who counts as an
actor, as a representative of matters of ecological concern and territorial jurisdiction.24 And, of
course, what authorizes the apparatus is precisely the sovereignty called into question by such a
case (Shaw 2008, 113).

While McEachern C.J.’s decision was unequivocally racist, and the resulting appeal
reformulates the question from “who has sovereignty over the territory in question” to “on what

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24 One area that, as far as I can tell, Latour does not venture into is the relationship between actors and use –and by
this I mean something like the relationship between an actor, which may be human or nonhuman, and those humans
or nonhumans who depend on that actor for their life and livelihood. Under these circumstances, what is in question
is not simply discerning what or who is or is not an actor, actant, or proposition, but also who is authorized to make
use of whom, to depend on, inhabit, conserve, etc., and this seems precisely where conflicts arise –not simply over
matters of knowledge but over matters of contested ‘occupation’.
terms the sovereign –Canada- will recognize and facilitate the continuation of forms of Aboriginal authority within and contingent upon Canadian sovereignty” (Shaw 2008, 127), I would like to focus more closely on the questions this case raises about the possibilities of intelligibility and of achieving shared meaning within a colonial system. The Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en

felt that the only way they could prove their claim to the land would be to convince the court not only that it had been unjustly appropriated, but that they has a relationship with and a claim to the land that pre-existed contact with settlers (Shaw 2008, 109).

As the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en have oral rather than written traditions, the majority of the evidence presented specifically by Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en peoples was in the form of oral histories, rather than as written records. The challenge this posed to the court, of course, was one of epistemological validity. Although these oral histories were backed up with more familiar forms of “scientific” evidence when possible, counsel argued that the force of the case required that the court accept these histories as valid [systems of authoritative and authorized knowledge] on their own terms as well (Shaw 2008, 111).

That the court was unable to accept Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en evidence as verifiable on its own terms –indeed, any testimony other than that which fit the common-sense bill of scientific evidence was summarily dismissed- indicates that sovereign systems (in the position of adjudicating on appeals brought forward in languages or forms not already amenable to the preferred language of sovereignty) are incapable of perceiving challenges to their authority as anything other than a desire to be translated and incorporated –figured as other in order to be brought ‘inside’. Actors must have no other system of meaning that the one that secures the adjudicating body’s own sovereignty –and so commonality comes to appear as rather less than a common or mutual affair.

But to figure this failure on the part of colonial sovereignty purely as a defeat for Indigenous peoples is to underestimate the consciousness, on the part of the Gitksan and
Wet’suwet’en, of colonial inflexibility. In fact, Satsan (Herb George), Speaker of the Office of the Hereditary Chiefs of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en, explained:

The criticism that we had to take was that we were entering a game in which we had no involvement whatsoever with the putting together of that game, the making up of the rules, in the appointment of referees and umpires. We entered a game that most people believed we could not win. And it’s true. We put the institution of justice in this country in a dilemma. Although we knew what the game was, and what the rules were, we had to take into account that the greatest thing we were in danger of losing was our very beings as Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en people.

If we were to accept what has now come to be known as the conventional view, if we were to approach this whole issue of our rights in a step-by-step manner, then at the end of the day it may well be that we can gain something small and certain. No. We are Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en people. We like to be that. We want to continue to be that (Cassidy, 1992b:54) (qtd. in Shaw 2008, 122).

In this statement, I would like to suggest that ‘appealing’ to the Collective appears less as a desire to be taken into account than it does as a need to test the limits of sovereignty. As such, an ‘appeal’ is not necessarily something that the Collective can assume is done because those appealing recognize and defer to the authority of the Collective (and desire to be recognized within it) – it may instead be a way of affirming one’s independence or externality from a colonial sovereignty (Shaw 2008, 123-124). This leaves the question of a particular definition of common life on uncertain, if not inhospitable, ground. If, within the boundaries of sovereignty, the sovereign authorization of what counts as reason, meaning, and intelligibility (the shared grounds of the collective good life) necessarily produces itself through exclusion, then we are dealing with a much less permeable membrane than Latour leads us to believe. From within this boundary, ‘appeals’ appear either as the desire for incorporation or as willful segregation – and both positions have traditionally confirmed, in practice, a colonizing state’s constitutive othering of Indigenous peoples, as necessarily but impossibly assimilated/eliminated.
But under the heading “Time’s Two Arrows”, a reciprocal figure also invoked, if we recall, by Serres, Latour rejects of “the clock of the moderns” (2004, 190), with its progressive arrow of time casting out representation and particularity in favour of unmediated objectivity – and this may signal an interesting political possibility. On the one hand, as I have discussed above, Latour’s Collective functions to blank the slate of politics. So long as the terms constitution, progressive, common, etc., are used to signal a body that both takes all into account and distinguishes between what is already included and what must ‘appeal’ to become recognized as a speaking actant, there exists the suggestion of a zero-point that nevertheless is always already universal. If this Collective, universal and ‘contemporary’, regards Indigenous political assemblies as models, but is not concerned to regard them as equals, which may neither need nor want incorporation, the Collective is not international, but imperial; it does not recognize the cultural or historical particularity of Republics (Latour 2004, 54) –and to the extent that it claims that humans and nonhumans speak only through the prostheses of modernity, represented specifically as the sciences, it does play a sovereignty game, that of blotting out knowledges that come from many other associations –which may or may not be ‘banal’ for those who participate in them.

The point is that such imperialism effects again the colonization of non-Western actors, by forcing the translation of all knowledges into the knowledges of the laboratory or the field study, and by making insensible –by casting into the role of model, commensurate with the role of ‘historical model,’ in the modernizing logic of states- other forms of assembly. If Latour’s vision of political ecology disallows the modern arrow of time -‘disinvents’ it, as Latour has it (2004: 193), the suggestion is that modernity is replaced onto an equal footing with those cultures it deemed premodern, uncivilized, etc. My concern remains that, though Latour’s
Collective may indeed manage to make illegitimate the process of circumventing debate by recourse to a mute and objective nature, the process it introduces for ‘taking into account’ these newly illuminated humans and nonhumans remains a civilizing process—the demand that actors appeal for inclusion, that they be included under particular sense-making conditions, and that, by extension, because their appeals are figured as evidence of ‘wanting in’ they are always already incorporated, but must appeal to be heard, is deeply problematic when read alongside the history of the citizen, as the ‘gradual civilization’ of people and peoples who could not be allowed if the modern state was to become universal.

Thus far, I have been reading this potential reconceptualization of relationships between humans and nonhumans through authors who are concerned primarily with the interaction of the sciences with what appears as the political world—the world of law, state, sovereign, and citizen. They have written in the language of classical political theory, of law and of republics. Contemporary political theory has come to deeply question the exclusions and oppressions effected by law, the subject, the republic, the citizen, ‘civilization’ and universality. In my third chapter, I turn to Jane Bennett, whose thought follows in the tradition of questioning the assumptions that underpin the subject. Does displacing rationality, autonomy, and mastery—displacements that Latour’s concept of the actor has already introduced to us-help us find a different, less universal political structure? Perhaps more to the point, what do undoing the subject and distributing the potential to act across and through human-nonhuman relations have to say about addressing the history of exclusion of which it is so much a part?

25 Or rather, brings to light, because Latour, in opposing the practices of the sciences to the theory of ‘Science’ espoused by sociology and held onto by political ecologists who seek to reinvent politics in the name of ‘nature’, argues that the proposed government is nothing new; it is essentially what the sciences do already (2004, 3-25).
Chapter 3: Interjecting: Inside the Vital Subject

Thus far, in writing with Latour and Serres, I have been paying attention to the structures they create out of questions of knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge and power. I have not paid quite so much attention to the visceral composition of a ‘vital’ ontology.

I raised the problem of what seems to me to be a continuity between both Serres’ and Latour’s minimal descriptions of the subject/the actant, and Hobbes’ own definition of ‘man’ – the faculties of its mind and body- as an object in motion, with the capacity/inevitability of affecting or acting upon others (Hobbes 1962, 98). What deserves more scrutiny is whether or not there is a fundamental difference between man as object in motion, and the sense of animateness or vibrancy which Serres, Latour, and Bennett invoke as a challenge to the hierarchy of subjectivity. Keep in mind that Leviathan works to naturalize man within materiality, in order to set up the conditions by which the capacity to restrain human nature appear as a (necessary and inevitable) artifice –nature cannot be governed from inside its own workings, although this government emerges from the character of human nature (Hobbes 1962, 14). This in itself is not so very different from Serres’ reconfiguration of humanity and nature into two mutually subjectivating worlds: the worldly world and the worldwide world, bound in the object of contract. Or, indeed, from Latour’s monism, of articulated actants orbiting/being incorporated into the conceptual and organizing body of the Collective.

The shared difference Latour, Serres, and Bennett introduce is the element of surprise. Where the terrain has shifted, it has shifted away from an animatedness that follows predictable laws of force, towards an animateness where things, by their very nature as interactive and
undetermined, express potential—that is, potential not as the freedom to become what one must, but freedom to be, as Bennett describes, following Adorno, “nonidentical” (2010, 14).

Part of what is at stake in this difference between mechanistic animation and vitality is the question of autonomy. While we can see Hobbesian subjects moving, crashing into each other like billiard balls in the proverbial physics problem, actors—especially Latour and Bennett’s actors—are always articulations and combinations, coming apart and reamalgamating such that it becomes impossible (or rather, merely temporary and contingent) to differentiate between ball, table, cue, chalk, the eyes and hands of the players… And it is in this indeterminacy and potential, for Bennett, where the ability to surprise, to alter other actants, lies:

I have been trying to raise the volume on the vitality of materiality per se, pursuing this task so far by focusing on nonhuman bodies, by, that is, depicting them as actants rather than as objects. But the case for matter as active needs also to readjust the status of human actants: not by denying humanity’s awesome, awful powers, but by presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality. In other words, human power is itself a kind of thing-power. At one level this claim is uncontroversial: it is easy to acknowledge that humans are composed of various material parts (the minerality of our bones, of the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons). But it is more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the directions of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind (Bennett 2010, 10).

Bennett is sensitive to the displacement she is effecting, and the consequences this may have for human subjects’ sense of themselves. By performing the double maneuver of both going inside the body and finding “foreign power[s] within it” (Bennett 2010, 17), and extending this ‘liveliness’ across the elements, she performs an attack on the concept of individuality and autonomy—a clear challenge to the subject itself. Where Serres gave us an ‘international’ (the two globalized subjects of man and nature), and Latour described a single Collective (a state, of sorts), Bennett plunges inside the individual subjects of these new assemblages. We have ridden along, through the political layers as they are both constructed and traversed, and now find ourselves at a recognizably organismal level—only to find that the organism has been shunted to
the wings, and in its place, ‘components’ suddenly facing us with life of their own. The challenge cannot be underestimated:

The fear is that in failing to affirm human uniqueness, such views authorize the treatment of people as mere things; in other words, that a strong distinction between subjects and objects is needed to prevent the instrumentalization of humans. Yes, such critics continue, objects possess a certain power of action (as when bacteria or pharmaceuticals enact hostile or symbiotic projects inside the human body), and yes, some subject-on-subject objectifications are permissible (as when persons consent to use and be used as a means to sexual pleasure), but the ontological divide between persons and things must remain lest one have no moral grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization (as when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans) (Bennett 2010, 11-12).

In this chapter, while paying greater attention to Bennett’s exploration of an ontology of a vibrant world, I would also like to trace the political implications and assumptions of this ontology. Bennett is clear to connect ‘vital materialism’ with an ethical disposition (insofar as we can continue to think of ourselves as ethical subjects), that of “generosity” (Bennett 2001, 12). There is also a suggestion that vital materialism and an ethic of generosity are, for Bennett, connected to a critique of contemporary, deregulated capitalism (Bennett 2010, 24-28), and while an extended engagement with this aspect of Bennett’s thought is beyond the scope of my text, I will nevertheless call on her concern to illuminate, hopefully, the ethical and ontological contours of her larger project.

I would like to ask after the relationship, for Bennett, between analysis and critique. Thus far, I have been arguing that, especially in the relation I am considering –between the colonization of humans and nonhumans and manifestations of ‘vitalism’ at various scales- more classical narratives of the political have been underthought, with the effect that these ‘old’ narratives sneak in, hitch a ride, as it were, and absorb new life in the corners of vitalism’s ‘new’ political proposals. In light of this tendency for sovereignty and colonization to have already been amenable to vitality, I want to pursue Bennett’s vital materialism beyond ethics—and to ask
if analysis is enough. That is to say, perhaps a vital materialist analysis can offer a different perspective on political and ecological events, but is novelty sufficient to give rise to new and effective ways of critiquing and perhaps redressing injustices—in this text, those of sovereignty and colonization?

*Vibrant Matter* introduces vital materialism as an analytical framework, a method for understanding the way that assemblages of humans and nonhumans work. Bennett opens “Chapter 2: The Agency of Assemblages” with a vital materialist interpretation of the electrical blackouts that affected the American eastern seaboard and portions of southeastern Canada in 2003, as an example of the inseparability of human and nonhuman actants. She asks that we make room for a “naive ambition” (Bennett 2010, 17), that we suspend disbelief over our ability to access things in themselves, in the possibility that such suspension does allow us to unseat ourselves (Bennett 2010, 19). Akin to Serres’ injunction that we not relate to nonhumans as ‘our environment’ (1990, 33), and to Latour’s argument against social construction (2004, 53-54), Bennett’s intention is not to argue for the comprehensiveness of human knowledge, but rather to challenge the solipsism of thought that retreats from things into ‘idealism’. Although social construction has the virtue of attempting to contain the hubris—and universalizing tendencies—of knowledge that claims unmediated access to what is ‘out there’—thought that refuses the materially (human and nonhuman) mediated element in all human exploration26 has the paradoxical side-effect of placing the human at the center of its own prison, a metaphysics of suspicion that ends up denying the ubiquity and indispensability of nonhuman influence.

Indeed, it would seem that to treat what is conventionally thought of as belonging to the human as impermanent/susceptible to revolution is the height of a sort of individualistic faith, an

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atomism highly compatible with free-market ideology and simplistic conceptions of freedom, wherein any sort of historical, cultural, gendered, or class-based analysis of oppression falls by the wayside. And it is this naivete—assuming that social constructions are flexible and amenable to willful interventions simply because they are ‘human-made’—that Bennett attempts to circumvent.

As Bennett conceives of it, nothing is (strictly) ‘human-made’:

I have been suggesting that there is not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed...as a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage. This federation of actants is a creature that the concept of moral responsibility fits only loosely and to which the charge of blame will not quite stick (2010, 28).

Efficacy points to the creativity of agency, to a capacity to make something new appear or occur. In the tradition that defines agency as moral capacity, such new effects are understood as having arisen in the wake of an advance plan or an intention, for agency “involves not mere motion, but willed or intended motion, where motion can only be willed or intended by a subject.” A theory of distributive agency, in contrast, does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits. To figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings, for an intention is like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire or neural network: it vibrates and merges with other currents to affect and be affected. This understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes. It loosens the connections between efficacy and the moral subject, bringing efficacy closer to the idea of the power to make a difference that calls for response. And this power, I contend along with Spinoza and others, is a power possessed by nonhuman bodies too (2010, 31-32).

*Vibrant Matter* seeks to trace this “swarm of vitalities” in various locations, in food, in stem cells, in metal, in electrical blackouts, always connecting distributive agency to questions of contemporary power, and perhaps especially to the ways in which capitalism permeates contemporary life. Questions of commodity shortage, commodification, and the offloading of political responsibility for supplying common goods and sustaining common worlds onto private corporations and individual actors form, I think, the backbone of concern for the text.
From the extended quote above, we have some notion of how Bennett sees distributive agency replacing agency (or rather, as a more accurate description of agency than the one offered by the concept of individual subjects with discernible moral intentionality). With agency always plural, and moreover, always heterogeneous (2010, 33), Bennett moves to make the point that it is a safe bet to begin with the presumption that the locus of political responsibility is a human-nonhuman assemblage. On close enough inspection, the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other “foreign” materialities. Human intentionality can emerge as agentic only by way of such a distribution. The agency of assemblages is not the strong, autonomous kind of agency to which Augustine and Kant (or an omnipotent God) aspired; this is because the relationship between tendencies and outcomes or between trajectories and effects is imagined as more porous, tenuous, and thus indirect (2010, 36)

An ontology of vital materiality thus has clear political implications: To affirm a vitality distributed along a continuum of ontological types and to identify the human-nonhuman assemblage as a locus of agency is to unsettle (the belief in the exceptionality of humans). But must a distributive, composite notion of agency thereby abandon the attempt to hold individuals responsible for their actions or hold officials accountable to the public? …Autonomy and strong responsibility seem to me to be empirically false, and thus their invocation seems tinged with injustice (Bennett 2010, 37).

In finding an empirical locus for distributed agency, Bennett challenges any noncomplex notion of agency, and thus also challenges a fundamental sense of the location of political responsibility. If a decision is rendered through the collaboration and competition of a complex of human and nonhuman movements (none of whom are working simply at the level of intent or conscious desire), Bennett argues, a politics of “moral outrage” (2010, 38), “of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins…becomes unethical to the degree that it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of first resort” (2010, 38).

Bennett thus connects an empirically rooted theory of distributed agency to a careful, a prudent, politics; and a political critique “hesitant toward assigning singular blame” (2010, 38).

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27 Recall, from Chapter 1, Serres’ concern to differentiate between violence and war, the better to identify and circumscribe violence.
Thus, political critique is, for Bennett, inseparable from ethical concern, from a concern to make the violence of isolated blame difficult, ontologically, to justify.

In an earlier book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Bennett connects the beginnings of a vital materialism to a critique of modernity as disenchanted. Her discussion draws attention to a number of sites where the story of modernity, as having separated, once and for all, agency from things, and confined agency to the human realm, falls short. The curious thing about this particular vision of modernity is that it confines humanity to, as I phrased it earlier, a prison of our own making. If, in a disenchanted world, humans only possess creativity and agency, then our political and economic structures (not to mention the ecosystems, nonhumans, and other actors beyond human making), dis-enchanted though they may be, nevertheless confine us by their very disenchantedness –because there is no meaning other than what we make, a position defined by a sense of contingency and loss (Bennett 2001, 8).

Bennett offers the possibility that such structures are in fact not at all disenchanted, and the kind of enchanting power they possess/embbody is in fact what makes it difficult to think outside of them, to eschew our ‘attachment’ to them, the “strange pleasure” we take in them (Bennett 2001, 106). I would like to focus briefly on the way that she describes capitalism, as a way into understanding the importance of ethics to Bennett’s project, and as a way of grasping the ethical disposition Bennett has in mind. In Bennett’s reading, Marx’s great criticism of capitalism lies in the violence that it does to labour and labourers (Bennett 2001, 117); by assigning value to (commodifying) objects disembedded from the effort of producing them, capitalism illegitimately “animates artifacts and then obscures the source of that animation” –the labourer (2001, 117).

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28 Recall, from the last chapter, that Latour makes the same point.
The possibility of this round-about critique of capitalism is to foster an ethic of generosity, a disposition Bennett hopes will expand our capacity to appreciate agency in whatever location it might appear. Rather than being forced to choose whether agency lies with producers, consumers, or in commodities themselves (or, indeed, in the ethos and functioning of capitalism itself), we might find the capacity to be affected distributed between all of these, in which case it becomes difficult (or, for Bennett, the wrong project) to locate –and presumably condemn– the ultimate site of exploitation and alienation. The other side of this distributed potential to enchant is that no site or actant may claim for themselves a site of innocence, outside implication. Here too is a sort of monism, where actants and forces can be isolated and identified only contingently: we can never grasp the whole fabric at once, there are no objective vantage points.

I have made a digression into Bennett’s ethical concerns because I think they are important to her overall desire to convey a capacity to be transformed and enchanted by the material world, and for this capacity to be taken seriously not only as an ethical disposition, but also as an analytical method, and as a way of living. What continues to draw me to her work is, in part, a sense that she is giving voice to my own inhabitation in the world –my own visceral wonder at the life of ‘my’ organismal microbiome, at the Evening Grosbeaks chasing each other around the feeder and flinging sunflower seeds outside my window, at the internet, conveying endless distraction and affective transportation (primarily in the form of music). But, as a political project, I question the emphasis on ethics, in part because I retain a sense that affective connections in the form of personal identifications sometimes serve to distract us from discerning the contours and reach of political power –that, in fact, in the affirmation of the particularity of experience that affect offers, in the suggestion of infinite heterogeneity, there is a
kind of assumption of leveling and sameness; and this difference in similarity, this monism, is connected to the illusion of homogeneity by which structures of exclusion operate.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will venture to argue that Bennett does not pay sufficient attention to the problem of sovereignty, and to suggest why sovereignty remains an important problem for vital materiality/materialists. This reaches back to my discussion, in the previous chapter, of Deleuze and Guattari’s apprehension of sovereignty as an ‘apparatus of capture’, and in particular to Karena Shaw’s deployment of this figure in the colonial state.

My question, following Bennett’s analytical example, is to ask if (colonizing) sovereignty is susceptible to being thought in terms of vital materiality. If Bennett can discern a vital materiality in the way that commodities become animate and animate consumer desires in a capitalist economy, is it possible to find within sovereignty a similarly disembodied, ‘beheaded’ agency? I have in mind a motion which need not be seen as novel, but rather can be understood as a re-examination of classical or canonical notions of sovereignty, ones which eschew any particular human intent or determination and instead focus on the structure of sovereignty, what animates it, and where those subject to sovereignty achieve particular forms of vibrancy through its power.  

Both Hobbes and Bennett are giving us versions of the world. One does not have to believe in the truth of their accounts, but I find myself obliged, at least, to follow through on the

30 In simplest terms, in Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976, Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978, and in subsequent works, Foucault charts the displacement of sovereignty, where political power was over life itself, towards ‘governmentality’ or ‘biopower’, where the authority to govern and the political powers associated with these complexes go ‘inside’ life itself – they make life, rather than merely allowing life to continue. It will be noted that I continue to speak in terms of sovereignty, even when exploring the ‘biopolitical’ implications of vital materialism in colonization. This is because, as I hope to demonstrate, under conditions of colonization, the ‘force’ of power over individual lives and the more sophisticated operations of ‘positive’ power to measure and mold life itself appear less as radical shifts in the scope and purpose of government, than as two, simultaneously active techniques in the processes of colonial politics.
coherence and implications of each—in the knowledge that such a reading is inevitably particular, not comprehensive, and its success will rely not so much on the truth of the argument as on its carefully orchestrated plausibility.

Considering sovereignty as vital materiality, and identifying the implications of this perspective, necessitates identifying the elemental structure of sovereignty: Hobbes locates this in ‘men’, in individuals, but his deterministic picture of matter, contra Bennett, associates naturalism with necessity and appears to contradict vitalism’s emphasis on the surprise, novelty, and heterogeneity of material interactions. What is important for my purposes, though, is to recall that, for Bennett, vital assemblages are “emergent” (2010, 24) and not the effect or product of any particular united will or intent. Insofar as sovereignty, for Hobbes, arises of necessity from the natural inclinations of individuals (in one reading I have been pursuing), it is also not the product of any one’s will. Sovereignty, then, is a two-part structure, arising from the tacit relation of the population governed (subjects) and the figure of the sovereign—often embodied in a ‘natural person’, although in essence the ‘artificial person’ “personated” in the aggregated vitality of subjects (Hobbes 1962, 126).31

In this sense, it would be misleading to ask what sovereignty wants, or to assume an absolute, deterministic agency. While vital materialism argues against absolute determining hierarchies, it acknowledges differing distributions of power, at different scales, in different places, in different times (Bennett 2010, 24). As we learn, following Foucault, power need not be associated with intent or direction, and thus need not be coupled, necessarily, with an external, motivating force.

31 For the moment, I am setting aside the problem of law, the contract which seems to imply some sort of mutual awareness of intent, to privilege the problem of tacit consent, the consent that must exist as the origin point of Hobbes’ story, in order for us to believe that we are what he tells us we are (Shaw 2008, 37).
We have seen how Bennett envisions capitalism through the lens of vital materialism—by discerning the animation of objects of production through commodification (2001, 116). But the problem of political sovereignty is conceived of as a problem of social structure—sovereignty is about the management of subjects, and the idea of subjectivity, as argued by Serres in his ‘globalized’ depiction, is not necessarily reducible to a problem of discrete material bodies. Sovereignty and subjectivity are, at first glance, related through the force of law, and while law is not the same as will, soul, spirit, or mind (Bennett 2010, 28-29), we tend to think of it in terms of an immaterial motive force, something that compels and conducts (thinking) bodies, rather than arising from them or intrinsic to them. My task, then, is to ask if it is possible to discern a connection between political sovereignty and vital materialism—and I think we are given the genetic material of this potential in Leviathan itself, through the reduction (or dissection) of ‘man’ to a collection of forces, and ‘humanity’ to the nominally evenly distributed aggregation of these forces (Hobbes 1962, 98). As natural phenomena, men are inclined to sovereignty.

Does sovereignty have room to be both immaterial abstraction and vital materiality? At this point, I would like to call briefly upon Foucault’s analysis of the governing of ‘populations’, and his assertion that governmentality treats population as a species quality (Foucault 2007, 75). The appearance of the concept of population as a natural entity, traced by Foucault through economic revolutions in political thought from the seventeenth century onwards—as a phenomenon “specific to relations between men, to what happens spontaneously when they cohabit, come together, exchange, work, and produce” (Foucault 2007, 349), with its own

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32 Hobbes makes a distinction between natural right and natural law, conceiving of the former as a property intrinsic to each person (liberty) and the latter as that which binds (obligation) (1962, 103), thus sustaining a different ‘nature’ for emergent and external properties. Perhaps strangely enough, neither Bennett nor Latour explicitly reference ‘natural law’, and while Serres briefly associates science with ‘natural law’, as the “ongoing relation between the contract uniting scientists and the world of things” (1990, 22), his usage appears to suggest less the laws of nature and more the laws that reference nature. For my purposes, I will follow Bennett and Latour’s lead by steering clear of the intricacies of this particular problem.
“internal mechanisms” of regulation, growth, diminishment, health, and movement (Foucault 2007, 352) - displaces the subject from its position as object of politics. If the subject was a sort of immaterial manifestation of the legally governable human, population has no need of the human (as individual) as such. What is to be managed is a vital force, within a defined territory, managed for ‘productivity’, for health and illness, birth and death rates, for levels of education, (un)employment, and for acceptable behavior –participation in and consumption of ‘the good(s of) life’ provided by a state-enabled capitalist economy (Shaw 2008, 171), endorsement of state-centered government through voting, patriotism, etc.\(^3\)

If population is not-necessarily human –that is, not subject-centered but rather species-centered, then the state takes on a newly ‘natural’ valence. The decentering of the subject has been a key aim of important contemporary thought –not least, as we have seen, in the oddly doubled ‘civilizing’ of Latour’s actants and in Bennett’s own vital human-nonhuman assemblages. The project of decentering the subject has many ends: challenging the naturalization of the autonomous individual, delegitimizing the exclusions and instrumentalization of those people and places assumed to be ‘insufficiently autonomous’, responding to, as Bennett and Latour do, an increasing empirical and practical realization that autonomy simply does not exist in the world presented to us by biology and physics. My concern then, for the remainder of this chapter, is not so much to cling to the notion of the human

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\(^3\) Here I should note a slide that Foucault documents, from an ‘old’ naturalness that has been ascribed to the “medieval tradition, broadly speaking, … [where] a good government, a well-ordered kingdom, was part of a world order willed by God” (2007, 349) to the “radical break” (2007, 349) introduced by the state as a space carved out from the world, from the concerns of natural order (2007, 348). But naturalness reappears within this seemingly unnatural realm with the invention or discovery of modern economics, “not the naturalness of processes of nature itself, as the nature of the world, but processes of a naturalness specific to relations between men…the naturalness of society” (Foucault: 2007, 349). Here, in one way of looking at the problem, is the transformation from the study of sovereignty to the study of government (Shaw 2008, 38) –but this is not to say that sovereignty is no longer a problem. Rather, we can consider that the background of the sovereign state gives the condition of possibility for the isolation and study of a population as an internally-regulating entity. And indeed, the sensibility of ‘the good life’ as an economic question seems in harmony with Foucault’s own emphasis on the rise of ‘population’ as tied to the rise of the field of governmentality enabled through the study of ‘economics’.
as it is to catch on to some of the perhaps underthought implications of the displacement of the subject, especially as this displacement is effected through vital materialism.

I argued that the displacement of the subject is coupled, paradoxically, with the naturalization of sovereignty. This movement hinges on the ‘naturalness’ of population, population as a species concept, and, by extension, as ‘vitality’. While decentering the subject is, for the authors I have concerned myself with, linked to a critique of modern political forms which seem incapable of taking non-human nature into account—of being exclusively and myopically ‘social’—my concern is that the figure of sovereignty is quite capable of figuring its governed in vital materialist, nonhuman terms—that is, as a (universal, Collective) population. Population naturalizes sovereignty, and sovereignty naturalizes and reifies population. At the same time, this is a displacement of other forms of political organization, through a mandate to optimize the ‘vital force’ of a natural phenomenon, and to exclude/capture ‘recalcitrant’ elements. As a spatial and as a temporal phenomenon, the concept of population invites analysis and management at the level of the group, through individual members, and inside individual bodies to monitor statistics and generate trajectories, for, for example, ethnic composition, birth rates, insurance purposes, or projected resource use.

No example that I can give will not be dramatic—but I hope readers will bear with me as I attempt to ground this paradoxical naturalization through a study of the Canadian state’s attempts to define, and thereby manage, Indigenous peoples through provisions in legislation ranging from the 1800’s “when the imperial and colonial governments enacted their reserve policies” to Bill C-31, an amendment to the Indian Act passed in 1985 (Napoleon 2001, 115-124). These repeated attempts to absorb Indigenous women and children and, in a very real sense, to subsume the reproductive potential of Indigenous peoples by redefining their populations. Such attempted
transformations hinge on seeing Indigenous peoples as insufficiently governed—and, more to the point and more complicated, as insufficiently rational, insufficiently human—and therefore as a potentially disruptive (political) force. They emerge from the necessity, for colonizing states, to recognize pre-existing political structures (with their own methods for determining inclusion or exclusion) only in such a way as to underwrite the political authority of the state over a defined territory and the bodies within it: sovereignty constitutes its outside that it may define a space of security and legitimacy within (Shaw 2008, 33). In this case, the production of the outside appears in a space that can be conceptualized in familiar terms—in terms of population, a ‘discovery’ that appeared as a natural entity from its inception—but involves the isolation of a particular population that poses a series of related problems for the colonizing state.

In a larger discussion detailing the differences between civic and ethnic models of nationhood for Indigenous peoples, Val Napoleon writes:

The current debate [in the Canadian context] about membership in First Nations has its roots in the 1800s when the imperial and colonial governments enacted their reserve policies. Once the federal government had set aside land for exclusive “Indian” use and occupation, it had to define who was Indian according to government, rather than First Nations, criteria (2001, 115).

Facilitating the dispossession of Indigenous peoples—that is, confining “Indian” land to small reserves, in order to settle and develop—or hold in reserve (but not ‘in reserves’)- the greater portion of the territory and secure the sovereignty of the colonizing state as the sole legitimate political entity in a given territory-was thus effected, in part, by substituting colonial definitions of “Indian-ness” for Indigenous models and practices of recognizing belonging, political and social responsibilities, and ties to specific and general places on the land. Several different articulations of the colonial “statutory definition of ‘Indian’” have been in play over the years, from the Act for the Better Protection of the Lands and Property of the Indians in Lower
Canada, passed in 1850 (Napoleon 2001, 115), to 1985’s Bill C-31, which allowed Indigenous women to reclaim Indian Status that had been lost to them upon marriage to partners defined as non-Indian prior to that date. What these definitions have in common, Napoleon argues, is an emphasis on ‘blood’ or quasi-biological criteria, but this emphasis should not be seen in terms of a neutral measuring or quantification of biological ‘Indian-ness’, if indeed such a thing were possible. Rather,

the Indian Act and [some] band-adopted membership codes are not really about genetics despite the incorporated blood-based standards and the rhetoric. Nor do the…codes appear to have anything to do with the preservation of First Nations culture. It becomes apparent that the underlying intent of the federal government’s membership initiatives for First Nations communities is simply about socially and politically controlling them and thereby maintaining the disconnection of First Nations from their land and resources. Furthermore, the imposition of the federal government’s definition of “Indians” and the criteria for determining who is “Indian” have served to limit its future obligations to First Nations people by limiting the number of people who qualify as Indians (Napoleon 2001, 123).

Thus, in the case of Bill C-31,

The bill maintained the same divisive “classes” of Indians as were in the former Indian Act, status and non-status –now also called categories 6(1) and 6(2) [in reference to the descent rules contained in the legislation], “real” Indians and “half” Indians, or simply “C-31s”. It also enabled bands to adopt membership codes that were distinct from the Indian Register, thus separating status from band membership. Indian people could be on the Indian Register but refused membership, and so a new class of bandless Indians was formed. The main criticism of Bill C-31 is that its only “success” was to shift the burden of discrimination from the Indian woman to her children and grandchildren (Napoleon 2001, 119).

‘6(1)’ and ‘6(2)’ classifications are not simple, but the essential distinction between the two is that ‘6(1)’ persons are those already on the Indian Register or entitled to be re-registered under the bill, while ‘6(2)’ persons are the descendents of those entitled to re-registration (Napoleon 2001, 119-120). I would like to reproduce a short passage from Napoleon’s text to illustrate the way that Bill C-31 shifts the burden of identity onto the children and grandchildren
of Indigenous women, in order to highlight the way that the bill instantiates a ‘phasing-out’ of Indian-ness, through federally-endorsed quasi-biological criteria:

An example using siblings demonstrates the unfairness of the new rules. Suppose that a status brother and his status sister both were to marry non-Indians before 1985. The children of the brother would fall into the 6(1) category because both parents would have status. (The non-Indian mother would have gained Indian status as a result of her marriage). The children of the sister would fall into the 6(2) category because only one parent (the mother) could have status. This would have nothing to with Indian ancestry, since for the 6(1) as well as the 6(2) children that would be the same (2001, 121).

But after 1985 and the passage of Bill C-31, things look quite different. Given the same example, an even stranger distribution occurs. Essentially, there are five possible ‘combinations’ under the new legislation:

- A person with 6(1) status marries another 6(1), and their child ‘is’ 6(1).
- A person with 6(1) status marries a person with 6(2) status, and their child ‘is’ 6(1).
- A person with 6(1) status marries a ‘non-Indian’, and their child ‘is’ 6(2).
- A person with 6(2) status marries another 6(2), and their child ‘is’ 6(1).
- A person with 6(2) status marries a ‘non-Indian’, and their child ‘is’ ‘non-Indian’.

We have to wait until the second generation –that is, the children of people (women, for the most part) who regained their status under Bill C-31 to see the ultimate effects of the legislation.

Instead of the two classifications of status and non-status ‘Indians’ (classifications in themselves arbitrary so far as they reflect state classification rather than Indigenous ways of recognizing membership) the possibility arises for children, born to non-status parents, to be legally prevented from claiming ‘Indian’ identity. Napoleon quotes form Harry Daniels’ 1998 paper “Bill C-31: The Abocide Bill” to drive the point home:

“[w]e merely have to ask what would happen is all status Indians alive today married a non-Indian or someone without status, and their children did the same: after two generations, there would be no status Indians left in Canada” (Napoleon 2001, 121).

This quasi-biological orientation serves to highlight the interplay of the eminently political relationship between nature and governmentality. By limiting the number of people
who qualify as ‘Indian’, and indeed by introducing legislation which works to progressively reduce the number of ‘Indians’ on paper, the federal government achieves the objective of securing and homogenizing the Canadian population, under the banner of the ‘natural’ ebb and flow of generations:

Indeed, what better way to accomplish Duncan Campbell Scott’s goal of not having a single Indian left in Canada than simply not to count them? It’s easy – just name them something else (Napoleon 2001, 124).

Given that ‘blood’, as Napoleon points out, is a dubious biological entity, perhaps the enforcement of such quasi-biological criteria can be thought of as an example of Latour’s concern that the political recourse to ‘nature’ is not about natural phenomena as such, but rather about shutting down or shutting out debate and uncertainty. However, because of the inherent fuzziness of such criteria (even when they offer the appearance of ‘precision’), the highly charged atmosphere permeating the interplay of ethnicity and political community, and the very real effect these have on people’s self-identity and sense of political acceptance in a given community, I would like to propose that the nebulous interaction of ‘blood’ and politics is an apt candidate for the status of vital materiality. Napoleon’s ultimate concern lies with the naturalization of this ethnic (or, as articulated above, given its preoccupation with such ‘pre-subjective’ concerns as birth, ‘blood’, and the relationship between generations; vitalist) mode of nationalism within Indigenous communities:

At the heart of the ethnic nationalist model manifested in many First Nations communities in Canada is a siege…mentality. This is the idea that there is only so much money and there are only so many resources, and so if there are too many members, then everybody will get only a little bit of what is already too scarce, or worse, there won’t be anything left. …At its root, ethnic nationalism for First Nations people has the insidious consequence of depoliticizing First Nations rights, title, and national status in Canada. Menno Boldt argues that to describe Canadian injustice to First Nations as racism is to trivialize it. This, he writes, is because a racist paradigm individualizes injustice and creates a false perception that the problems of First Nations are social and rectifiable by human rights legislation.
…Ethnic nationalism among First Nations is a result of history since contact and is what remains when the attributes of substantive nationhood have been stripped away – land ownership, resource management, governance, legal system, social structure, and economic practices (Napoleon 2001, 141).

As can be seen, there is a clear connection between the vitalist discourse of the Canadian state in relation to Indigenous populations and the ongoing struggle over who has the authority to do what, where, and how, especially in relation to the questions of land and resources and differential positioning in relation to either. Vital materialism offers a way of engaging with and perhaps denaturalizing the colonial interests involved in manipulating ‘populations’, but the problem is the same as it always has been: the colonizing state seeks a way to make its jurisdiction over lands and peoples both complete and natural. Napoleon, in contrast, seeks to break away from such ‘population’ or ‘ethnicity’ based measures of nationhood, emphasizing ‘civic’ models rooted in the many and varied Indigenous methods for determining membership in a political community – models which are characterized, in her writing, not by the centralized study of abstract vital qualities and quantities, but rather by localized “inclusive” practices involving individual and collective choice, consent, and negotiation (2001, 127-136). What is at stake is both the reclamation, for Indigenous communities, of Indigenous people and peoples who have been excised from their lands and families through state manipulation, and the reassertion of the political power that comes from claiming and practicing non-state methods of recognizing members (Napoleon 2001, 139). And in this reclamation, the colonizing state might stumble onto the dissolution of its rationale for marginalizing and dispossessing a ‘dwindling’ population, particularly in relation to contested environments and territories.

While Bennett’s vital materialism seeks to cultivate greater appreciation of and tolerance for the heterogeneity of vitality, I see also in this disposition the political potential for an
underlying homogenization and absorption. In the figure of population, the state finds vitalism, and the colonial state –emerging in a territory where its concern is to naturalize itself as the sovereign source of political authority and legitimacy- finds a way of identifying, neutralizing, and absorbing the ‘vitality’ of Indigenous peoples. This work is always intimately connected with securing the relationship between state, territory, population, and the management, distribution, and development of nonhuman ‘resources’. Because ‘population’ carries the connotation of being a natural phenomenon, to be understood not only as an aggregate of individuals but also as a vital assemblage living, dying, consuming, reproducing, respiring, jostling, healing, sickening, digesting, etc., the identification of the state with the management of such natural functions allows also for the naturalization of the regulation and absorption of those elements identified as outside, as ‘insufficiently’ or ‘improperly’ vital –and this naturalization is perhaps the most insidious feature of colonization.

In the face of the naturalization of colonization and the displacement of the subject, we are left with a curious problem. The colonizing state is comfortable with decentering the subject –indeed, is familiar with the uses of ‘population’ as a governable phenomena- and the subject has its own totalizing, colonizing legacy. To challenge the subject can elide the affinity of the governmental state for vital materialism –and yet the apparent vital character of a population is bound to the conceptual persuasiveness of an apparent naturalism, self-organization, internal coherence. In my final chapter, I return to this play of artifice and nature through a figure Michel Serres writes, with unnerving sensitivity to the intricacies of these themes: the parasite.

34 Although I do not have the space to engage nearly as deeply as I would like with Vibrant Matter’s discussion, in “Chapter 7: Political Ecologies”, of ‘democracy’, my concern here is not so much with the “formerly ignored bodies” who, in Ranciere’s terms, spontaneously disrupt pre-existing orders (Bennett 2010, 105), as it is to call attention to bodies, and peoples, who must be forgotten (not ignored) in order to secure the constitution of a colonial order.
Chapter 4: Parasites of Sovereignty: Between Artifice and Nature

Although theorists such as Hobbes and Tocqueville had no direct hand in Indigenous peoples’ treatment, the concepts, principles, and logics of their arguments, the political structures they produced, legitimated, and defended, were responsible for shaping and legitimating the treatment of Indigenous peoples. To be clear, a direct line of causality here is less important than the resonances across contexts: political theory expressed and legitimated what was possible and desirable. As such, it is implicated, and is itself a key site of engagement: violences and limitations of inherited concepts and institutions must be revealed and explained, and other visions of what is possible must be articulated (Shaw 2008, 136).

In this last chapter, before my concluding thoughts, I would like to bring together the ideas, figures, and implications that have been trailing through this text. If there are connecting threads running through the text, they have run along two parallel lines, one questioning the political ‘revitalizations’ that hitch a ride along with the extension of political agency, in the form of subjectivity, to nature, and the other concerned with the ecological and political relationship between knowledge and power. I would like to expand briefly on this second point.

By the relationship between knowledge and power, I mean primarily the extent to which Serres, Latour, and Bennett base their claims to authority (the authority of their analyses, the authority of their governmental formulations) on empirical claims. For Serres, the emergence of a worldly and a worldwide world can be detected in the scientifically observable ways in which the Earth seems to be rejecting humanity’s continued self-absorption. For Latour, the study of the processes of knowledge acquisition in the laboratory provides the model for his parliament of human-nonhuman assemblages. For Bennett, the studies are varied, ranging from scientific publications on the effects of ‘healthy fats’ on mental health, to Thoreau’s texts on wildness, to personal observations on the affective qualities of trash—all, for her, point to the vitality of material, of the materiality of human life, of the “it” within, and animating, the human “I” (Bennett 2010, xi).
Hobbes based his deductions of the social consequences of ‘ungoverned’ humanity on a belief that he was describing a picture of nature – that this “tendency towards self-preservation, together with desire for power… Hobbes tried to exhibit as a particular case of the movement of bodies within the natural world” (Peters, qtd. in Hobbes 1962, 13). But while man appears as a natural machine in the Hobbesian ontology,

He saw clearly that the state is an artificial construction which does not develop naturally like a beehive. It depends on agreement, contract, institution, and other manifestations of human decision. Laws do not develop naturally; for it is authority, backed by force, that makes a law (Peters, qtd. in Hobbes 1962, 13).

If Bennett’s intent is to show how vital materialism can serve as a lens of analysis that can see the agentic nature of matter, in my last chapter I attempted to extend this analysis into the realm of sovereignty, and to show how, when the object of sovereignty is the government of the population rather than (or, that comes after) the subject, both population and state can be shown to take on characteristics of vital materialism. This analysis hinges on the decentering of the subject as a political agent. The effort to break humanity out of the solipsistic prison imposed by the not-quite material social construction of the subject risks overlooking the way in which sovereignty begins in reference to natural phenomena. To assume that the object of sovereignty is the immaterial artifice of the autonomous legal subject is to reduce the ambiguity of sovereignty – which plays both a natural and an artificial game.

But I agree, in principle, with the project of extending subjectivity to the nonhuman and material worlds, and of decentering the place subjectivity occupies in conventional conceptions of the human. This opening-up, this ethical and empirical generosity, has the potential, I am persuaded, to at least trouble easy recourse to human exceptionalism, in relation to nonhumans. Following Bennett’s ‘hunch’,
the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-
destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting
(seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating
around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or
disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect”
(provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense) (2010, ix).

Bennett’s re-enchantment of materiality, and humbling of the human within this
materiality, is for the most part, for me, an affectively appealing displacement, with the side-
benefit of offering a broader scope of actants in any arena where we try to trace political
responsibility and causality. As an ethical and analytical technique, what vital materialism does
not do, however, is offer any safeguard against the ends to which newly material humans, or
newly material social structures, might “aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade”
each other.

The element of surprise, or of emergent causality, is a continuity between Serres, Latour,
and Bennett. If no decision is ever made in isolation, and no effect can be shown to have an
ultimate (human) cause, the ‘subjects’ or ‘actants’ envisioned by these three authors all have the
ability to behave in unpredictable fashion, with consequences perhaps primarily for humans
grown used to assuming that they and only they were organisms capable of effecting novelty in
the natural and social worlds.

Now, perhaps, that we might come to recognize agency as having always been a shared
and distributed property, the question of the incommensurability of novelty and nature loses its
force. But my concern has been to remain alert to creeping naturalization, or depoliticization.
My sense is that, in a sense, a sense of the political must retain a valence of artificiality in order
that we remain suspicious of claims to necessity and authority – and perhaps the place where this
concern becomes most acute is in the realm of colonization.
As we have seen, I am concerned with a definition of colonization that invokes a blank slate, that invokes a kind of novelty often predicated on determining some territory or people as ‘in a natural state’—as, in classical terms, in a pre-political state. What this determination authorizes is the assumption of a singular humanity. Either the people living in land subject to colonization are termed pre-political, a natural quantity to be managed, civilized, absorbed, or ‘allowed’ or helped to ‘die out’, or, as was more obviously the case in Serres, and to an ambiguous extent in Latour, the human is aligned with the subject, and no consideration is given to the different histories which mean that the subject was constituted, in the history of political thought, in reference to some concept of natural man.

The flattening of the human into the Western subject and politics into Western social and historical forms, by definition is insensible to other configurations and definitions of humanity, of personhood, and of social, political, and ecological relationships. In Latour, we confronted a generalization of comparative anthropology that aimed to show how ‘non-Western peoples’ have no concept of nature—and in this example I fear the continuing inability of Western thought to engage with Indigenous peoples except as silent models or artifacts, abstractions for a theory already firmly in place.

Claiming to rely on empirical evidence, then, whether this be in the form of ‘comparative anthropology’ or in the emergence of an apparent distribution of agency and responsibility across material boundaries, has the potential to fail to notice the artifactual differentiations that have naturalized and homogenized the human in the form of the subject, and the political in the form of contract law and parliaments. The current chapter, then, is a call to play with the persuasions of artifice and nature, and to trust neither, with the ultimate aim of highlighting the ongoing
plurality of claims to authority and legitimacy when it comes to speaking with, representing, and entering into agreements with humans and nonhumans.

As I have burrowed through and feasted on the rich material offered in *The Natural Contract*, *Politics of Nature*, and *Vibrant Matter*, I would like to cast off the hide of student of theory (perhaps its own kind of parasite) in this last chapter and re-emerge in the figure of *The Parasite*, Michel Serres’ book of 1980. My effort will be primarily to ask after the political implications of (colonial) parasitism, but as an aesthetic and ecological figure, the parasite is a vital actant that crosses any and all conceptual and material boundaries.

In one sense, this is another test of Bennett’s claims that vital materialism can function as an analytical mode. I would suggest that it also, perhaps, serves as an imaginative and rhetorical mode, given that the persuasive power of any figure lies not simply in its faithful appeal to ‘the way things are’, but rather in its appeal to convince us of its plausibility, or its ability to persuade us to see differently.

*The Parasite* is Serres’ blending of mythology, folktale, biology, and cultural critique, and at bottom is a suggestion that the ultimate figuration of life is parasitism. Rather than an extraneous invasive external to autonomous bodies, or a dangerous interloper on legitimate relations, the parasite appears (in many guises), in Serres’ tale, as ubiquitous, as always already present, and as a reversing and shifting vector (1980, 246-251). A question running through the text is “Who parasites whom?” –and we can never be sure. Parasitism is always contingent upon which perspective one takes, and it is this shifting and reversing perspective that I think both fits into the larger picture of vital materialism, and offers a critique of certain of the political assumptions at play in the alternating vital materialisms I have been following.
A sense of inclusion, of expanding the circle of relevant actors, has been intrinsic to the arguments put forward by Serres, Latour, and Bennett. Bennett makes explicit that her concern is with facilitating democratic engagement (2010, 104), and, although neither republics nor contracts, nor ecosystems, are necessarily democratic in a way recognizable to contemporary political thought, there is something in the legal leveling of subjects of contract and in the constitutional equality of citizens that presumes a kind of disclosure towards democracy, shared and distributed collective articulation. The nagging remainder, which I have been chasing in different registers, is the given assumption that democracy is a good unquestioned and, most importantly, that we extend a good that all should aspire to when we expand this circle of democratic inclusion.

But first in the figure of the subject of contract, premised upon a lawless state of nature, second in the citizen, premised upon a gradual civilization of actants, and thirdly in the decentering of subjectivity, which allows us to discern the ‘it’ inside the ‘I’ or ‘we’ and thus recognize an expanded political field in our mutual vital materiality, what remains implicit, I have argued, is the assumption of sovereignty, and the sovereignty of Western political theory, as the guarantor of the political field – which permits an understanding of disruption as “formerly ignored bodies” seeking inclusion (Bennett 2010, 105) rather than perhaps already fully articulate political bodies challenging a colonial status quo.

In the figure of the parasite, I would like to raise two questions. The first, I have been asking all along, namely, what or who is excluded in extending subjectivity to nature through a retelling of Western political theory? The second is to rethink the notion of the extension – in other words, to re-examine the parasitic relation that allows the notion of inclusion or the gift of political voice to precede some awareness of what has been denied or appropriated.
“Look for a third before reaching for the hatchet” (1980, 24) is Serres injunction to those seeking the place of arbitrator on a matter of justice or political space. But for those who are being decided upon, included,

A villager walking by, on his own land (note this well), gathers up the snake, brings it inside, stretches it out by the fire, where it immediately begins to awaken. From the outside to the inside, from numbness to life…Someone made himself the serpent’s benefactor, saviour, and father. You are sleeping quite peacefully, and when you wake you find yourself in debt. You live with no other need, and suddenly, someone claims to have saved your country, protected your class, your interests, your family, and your table. And you have to pay him for that, vote for him, and other such grimaces. Thus the serpent awakens obliged to another. Something to get angry about. But, moreover, the villager was taking a walk at home, then goes into his house, still at home. As far as he is concerned, he never changed territories, never crossed a border. For himself, he is at home. On the contrary, the serpent does change. It was undoubtedly in its nest and finds itself in a foreign land. More than having been given a spot, his own has been taken away. Another debt. Thus when the balance sheet is drawn up, the demanded payment is turned around. And the host is less a host than he thought. Less hospitable than he thought…Who is the host and who is the guest? Where is the gift and where is the debt? Who is hospitable, who is hostile, again the same word, the same thing (Serres 1980, 22-23).

In one register, Serres is talking about relations between a villager, a human subject who might find himself suddenly in political ‘debt’, and nature, in the form of the snake who suddenly finds its life, its being, in debt, perhaps, to its human ‘saviour’. While the vital materialism I have been pursuing steers clear, for the most part, of notions of saving or protecting nature, in favour of forms of conceptual and ethical equality, the offer vital materialism makes –to take into account- nevertheless seems to rest on being taken into preexisting political forms. Perhaps this is down to a concern with remaining comprehensible – the immediate audience, after all, is presumably ‘human’, and the task at hand is likely to prove daunting enough without insisting on the reformulation of the political (Bennett 2010, 107). But insofar as the offer is to extend Western political forms to the natural world, even at the cost of a confrontation with the human subject’s own materiality or nonhumanness, the subject and implications of those political forms remains intact. And, Serres’ implication seems to be that
we, in our innocence, forget that our desire to extend goods to nature –to decide what nature needs- might override realizing that the snake was already inhabiting a place.

By a sudden stroke, we have put nature in our debt, a debt it may not have intended to take on –and we have assumed an equality of goods. Perhaps under the guise of saving, benefitting, or pragmatically modifying political space in favour of a more comprehensive ecology of actors, we overlook the extent to which our concerns remain focused on our own security. A snake where you can keep an eye on it seems less likely to take the citizen by surprise than a snake camouflaged by its conventional habitat, a rocky hillside, grassy field, tree canopy, swamp.35

With our (selfless) motivations in doubt, we can ask, with Serres, who is the parasite, who parasited? Rather, in fact, than righting our relations with the natural world by inviting it to be recognized as capable of political authority, speech(es) or signatures, perhaps we are camouflaging our continued distrust, and continuing displacements and abuses, under the guise of hospitality. Does anything change if we consider ourselves hosted, rather than the host?

The precarity of the guest and host relationship, writes Serres, leads to anger and hostility (1980, 22), and for this reason I am not sure that ‘humbling’ (Bennett 2001, 158) ourselves in the face of nature as host is a proposition that is likely to hold beyond the ethical dispositions of some (but not all) individuals.

But while it may be impossible to resolve the question in favour of guest or host (who is what?), so long as we consider the relation to be between the human world and the natural world, what remains unacknowledged is the parasite –the parasite as a third actant which makes “the

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35 In an earlier text, *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment*, Bennett endorses a ‘fractious holist’ disposition which, while constituted on an apprehension of the interconnection of “human and nonhuman elements of the world, both intelligent and intelligible dimensions of life” (1987, 149), also acknowledges that “the complex whole is not entirely coherent or harmonious”. There is no guarantee that all things work in each others interest, that no harm will be done.
system of relations” (Serres 1980, 8). In this case, the concern to secure certain boundaries even as we tear others down keeps vital materialism invoking the political in terms that preserve the (parasitic) sovereignty of Western political thought. While this relation appears to have two terms, nature and human, Serres recalls that parasitism is always about the relation of thirds, which he characterizes as the positions of host, parasite, and interrupter (1980, 19). Though I do not follow strictly on his (shifting) classification of these positions, in what follows I would like to trace two different triads, as they relate to the politics of colonization.

First, the relationship between the settler, indigenous persons, and the colonial state. As we have seen, the colonial state is premised on the ‘capture’ of those it identifies as being presently outside subjectification, through erasure and/or through the inducement of resonance between the actions and desires of colonial subjects and colonized subjects. Those peoples subject to colonization are marginalized, socially and in terms of land or environment, to make way for the settling of newly sovereign territory, securing borders against foreign elements external and internal. But who are these settlers? They occupy a place of privilege in the eyes of the state, endowed with the legal status to purchase land, to represent themselves, perhaps, before the law and before government. And yet, of course, they have been made in subjectivity to the sovereign also. The subject, who becomes the settler in the context of colonization, is the other side of the sovereign boundary between natural man and the individual of politics (Shaw 2008, 33). The settler parasites indigenous peoples and their land, the sovereign parasites both, parasites the settler in order to colonize the indigenous, in this case. We can argue that the subject is constituted by sovereignty, that subjects of Western political forms must understand themselves, on some level, through the lens of sovereignty, and yet, this sovereignty is premised on the idea that subjects were not always what they are now (were, indeed, not always in
existence). There has been a process of capture and domestication, of the exclusion of what ‘came before’ the subject, which is not only present in the narrative of sovereignty but in the naturalization of this narrative, and the bounding of ‘politics’ as what happens within already constituted political communities…[and] confined to and defined as the negotiation of rights and duties between already-constituted “subjects” and their “sovereign” (Shaw 2008, 35).

And if the Western form of constitutional democracy has, in the light of colonization, the unavoidable valence of foundational exclusion, then it is also important to recognize that any invitation to join in political speech is premised on the violence of capture, through the reorientation towards the state under the guise of participation in governance (Shaw 2008, 143).

Generosity, from another perspective, looks less like the extension of goodwill from a humble host and more like the demand to give up the right to defend oneself, to refuse, or to make political alliances under some other form.

But this is not to say that sovereignty is merely an extraneous parasite on what might otherwise be a harmonious relation between peoples, between settlers and original inhabitants. The second triad is between the settler, indigenous peoples, and the land or nature.

Perhaps to claim a property right is to parasite; certainly for Serres claiming property has its origin in pollution, a parasitic act in that it externalizes waste, leaves waste to deter another presumably with equal or even perhaps prior right –and by

“scattering material and sensory garbage, …covering or erasing the world’s beauty and reducing the luxurious proliferation of its multiplicities to the desert and solar uniformities of our laws alone” (Serres 1990, 24).

Property claimants leave their own filth at boundaries, to avoid having to clean up after themselves and to mark/make exclusive possession (Serres 1980, 140). And marking possession is also simplification, Serres suggests, subjecting the complexity of natural proliferation to the
reductive, declarative laws of ownership. But in the moment when possession is uncertain there is the experience of becoming strange to oneself, an experience afforded in a ‘new land’ – the sense that a complex and unknown world demands our presence, demands the best of us. The new world is the place where we can and must think, must be responsible for our decisions, having cast off the sedimented, anesthetizing bonds of an old (human) world (Serres 1990, 113).

So the settler, enabled to ‘cast off’ through the territorial mission of colonization, finds itself only loosely yoked to old customs when thrown into an apparently nonhuman space. This new world is also an unforgiving space – really, a law-full space, given that sovereignty, fully realized in the old world and thereby having passed into “degrees of freedom” (Serres 1990, 112), having passed from thought into habit, is yet-to-be fully realized here. What is new at all about this dialogue? Nothing – but what is excluded remains the possibility that bonds might not be simply between “the sheer wall of the world” (Serres 1990, 112) and the ‘competent’ or ‘virtuosic’ stranger. This is the narrative of pioneers, or of their troubadours, whose preoccupation with the quality of virtuosity allows them to forget that it is not the world only that imposes limits on their freedom, that demands their attention.

I do not know if one can challenge this argument by reference to something other than what has been the eventual empirical realization, that there are, and have always already been, other people here. But the settlers’ presence is enabled both by that indigenous presence and by the settlers’ ability to eventually (once the thread of sovereignty they carried with them has re-knit itself through their government and their property claims) forget (and/or depoliticize) that presence.
In this sense, the waste that is the byproduct and marker of property claims can be seen both as an ecological problem and as the engine of political unquiet in colonized land. After an anecdote about spitting in a common salad, Serres moves on to argue that the object varies from food to general ecology. But what does not vary is the phenomenon that is used to chase away the neighbor, the twin rival, to transform public into private property, making the common one’s own. A process has to be found, originating at one point, that can fill some surrounding space; some sort of expansion has to be created…It has to be a sound or an odor. It must hit the open ears or nostrils (1980, 141).

To find the form of contemporary ecological crises in the markers of private property is a singular critique of discourses of ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ (Shaw 2008, 42), and yet the underlying assumption is the defilement of common land—that is, an unmarked space. But what if ecological crises do not take place simply on uninhabited land, but rather, in the context of colonization, can be seen as a colonizing attempt (by the colonizer in general; settlers, corporations, and government) to erase pre-existing inhabitations, pre-existing marks of distribution, attentiveness, apportionment, and trade. Ecological crises defile common land as part of the operation of making land common, making the relation appear as between human and nature, rather than between peoples with differing relationships and claims to the same ecosystems—and the erasure or ‘naturalization’ of pre-existing relations can also be thought of as a way of circumventing the settler’s moment of strangeness to him or herself. If we believe Serres, that property always contains an element of the “stercoral” (1980, 139), then the last one to spit in the soup, the one who considers his or her claim unopposed (1980, 140), may simply be less sensitive to the possibility that others may have already been where he or she is now—or more willing than the others to eat someone else’s spit.36

36 Although I do not have the space here to discuss the many and varied ways Indigenous peoples relate to specific places in a wider environment, it is worth mentioning that we need not assume the ways of marking ‘property’ are confined to privatization (through careful bounding by waste) or common-ness/lawlessness. The developmentalist/capitalist narrative that presumes enclosure to be the foundation of a right to land is a particular
Fortunately the forgetfulness of the settler is uneasy, in part because Indigenous peoples are not and never have been quiet about the sovereign occupation of land and the attempted assimilation of their bodies and people. Repeated attempts to figure this rejection as the desire for inclusion (and depoliticization) have always been contested (Napoleon 2001, 141). But it seems to me that there is no way to contain the engulfing requirements of colonizing sovereignty without transforming it. And it is because of its disruptive potential that I return to the figure of the parasite.

Ecologically (and politically) speaking, the parasite is an opportunist. In Serres’ terms, neither use nor exchange has value in its eyes, for it appropriates things – one could say that it steals them – prior to use or exchange: it haunts and devours them. The parasite is always abusive (1990, 36).

And so the parasite, for Serres, is not quite a legal figure, not quite a subject, because although it embodies one of the subject’s characteristics – that of being able to affect those around it – isolated in its appropriativity, it is unable to be affected by others. The parasite is not a mutual figure, and so not quite a subject; it does not participate in “the judicial… [the] double, two-way arrow that seeks to bring flows into balance through exchange or contract” (Serres 1990, 36). In Chapter 1, I devoted space to critiquing both Serres’ argument to think the contract as between humans and nature, and the consequent problem that the contract Serres envisions appears as a one-sided extension of a particular form of human law – something in which humans ‘take nature into account’ (Serres 1990, 37), or not. Because of this, I suggest that perhaps we should not be so hasty to substitute law for the figure of the parasite.

If we take the colonial context as established, then the rights to appropriate, investigate, or speak for nature are invested in the settlers. This remains an inequitable relation, both for the
nonhumans in question and for the Indigenous peoples marginalized in the process.\textsuperscript{37} The parasite, the not-quite-subject, makes the substitution of law for appropriation difficult to forget. Shall we look again at the ‘good’ extended when the state offers to secure Aboriginal rights and title through the medium of Crown sovereignty (Shaw 2008, 126)? Is this not, still, appropriation under the guise of law? Sovereignty refuses to be affected by the collective force of pre-existing laws, except insofar as it can ‘take these laws into account’ in such a way as to secure its own legitimacy.

The parasite is then the most absolutely dependent ecological and political figure. It cannot exist without others to appropriate. And for this reason, it cannot claim the innocence that colonization attempts to effect: the apparently clear space invoked by the journey to a ‘new world’ is undone in the knowledge that whatever the parasite attempts to claim, someone or something has been there already. There is no autonomy and no innocence for the parasite.

If this reads like a bleak apology for colonization, with settlers as parasites who are nevertheless inevitable elements in post-colonial political relations, I would ask the reader to look again. Innocence need not be the basis for interconnected political and ecological life, and the desire to erase oppression in a ‘generous’ democratic homogenization reinscribes oppression to the extent that it endorses existing (naturalized) political forms, and substitutes government for more fundamental questions of authority and legitimacy. It is not my desire to propose a solution to this relation, but I do think there are suggestive gestures throughout the texts with which I have been engaged.

First, Serres’ depiction of Goya’s \textit{Duel With Cudgels} presents the human fighters combined into a single combatant, in light of their relation to the quicksand which is swallowing

them. But their combined violence, and the earth’s response, does not negate that there are still two battles going on, and three participants that we can see. Though Serres’ solution is to make sovereigns out of the (human and natural) worlds he identifies, perhaps we should be looking less to reduce the number of political structures and more to discern their proliferation. The concern this presents is how such nations, states, republics, etc., constitute themselves, and how they recognize each other. Napoleon, among others, argues that self-definition must be at the root of Indigenous nationhood, and that one of the most insidious colonial techniques has been the extension of forms of government that mobilize the colonizer’s terms, thereby supplanting Indigenous forms (2001, 122). What this leaves unarticulated (perhaps intentionally, respecting the possibility of some emergent, as-yet-undefined relation), is some semblance of the ways Indigenous nations and colonial governments might conduct their international relations and negotiate their ecological concerns on what remains contested land.

But secondly, there is a figure which does not define the political so much as calls into question what appeared to be settled ground. The triangle I have adapted from Serres’ human and natural combatants suggests an equivalency between all three. While it is possible to imagine the parasite in the position of the colonial state, I would like to close this chapter by calling back to Bennett’s articulation of vibrant matter as the ‘it’ inside the ‘I’ – in this case, the parasite inside the settler. In this sense, the parasite is perhaps both a fictional representation of the settler in relation to Indigenous peoples and colonized ecosystems, and a way of imagining colonization outside of the definition of the human. Given that discourses of sovereignty operate through the reassurance that the colonizer is human, civilized, a person, a subject, in relation to all that falls on the other side of the boundary, then colonization thought through the lens of the nonhuman unsettles the settler perhaps most of all – we can no longer be so sure of the relation
between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and in this lack of certainty about what we are, perhaps there is an invitation to interrupt, rather than reconstitute, the extension of familiar political forms.
Conclusion: Post-colonial Nature?

By locating the realm of the properly political as the negotiation of relations between preconstituted subjects and a sovereign—in relations of governance—Hobbes effectively stabilizes politics in the form of the modern sovereign state. Sovereignty—the ground of legitimate authority—is produced in the realm of the pre-political. The violences of its production are rendered necessary and inevitable, rather than open to scrutiny or contestation. According to the discourses of sovereignty, all political claims must be framed and interpreted within the framework of governance, rather than posing a challenge to its constitution. Thus, although Hobbes himself explicitly reveals and acknowledges the particularity of the constitution of sovereignty—the processes through which the shared ontology and subjectivity of the citizens are produced and guaranteed—the structures through which he made them appear as natural and necessary have remained stronger than perhaps even he could have anticipated (Shaw 2008, 203).

My parasite is not a preconstituted subject, but an invitation to interrogate our received political ground, a biological figure and an allegorical one. Crucially, it operates in the framework naturalized by the assumption of sovereignty, and in particular, it has a relation to the question of nature, both those biological and material nonhumans and those humans rendered natural, pre-political (though always only precariously passive) in the founding separation of an inside, secure and knowable, and an outside, beyond the bounds of knowledge and in need of neutralization.

Rather than simply opposing one caricature of thought to another—some archetype of ‘Western’ thought against an ‘Indigenous’ archetype—I chose to search texts (those by Bennett, Latour, and Serres) firmly ensconced within Western thought for underexplored recesses, some warm dark place where a small burrowing creature could find habitat and perhaps wreak small havoc. And in this parasite, I have a personal analogue. This is not to say that I want the place of the parasite—my place, insofar as my political identity is that of a settler Canadian—to be a necessarily privileged location. Rather, because it is both ubiquitous and can cause harm left unchecked, I like that the parasite invites reflection, containment, some kind of ecological
“limitation” (Serres 1990, 36), some kind of fundamental recognition of the necessity of diversity, interdependence, and perhaps even breathing space for the health of any system. Furthermore, as Serres suggests, not everything can be a parasite all the time; the parasite is also relative to one’s perspective. Rather than assuming that the essential question is how to include more, the parasite invites asking what ‘hosts’ have been systematically excluded, colonized, in order to secure the ‘hospitable’ boundaries of an apparently inclusive, naturalized territory.

The concern animating this study, while resolutely grounded in a concern to ‘denaturalize’, particularize or re-sensitize ‘the political’ as it is presented in Serres, Latour, and Bennett’s democratic, Western, post-French revolution visions, remains bound up in the question of nature, of human relationships with the natural world, and of how to achieve some more equitable and even just relationship between peoples and the material and biological forces that make our lives possible, from the inside out. Serres, Latour, and Bennett’s conceptual and imaginative feats are inspiring in part because they denaturalize nature. The natural world still appears as an object of knowledge –it can, and perhaps must, in their narratives- be pursued scientifically. None of the texts I drew on is antiscientific; all share a commitment to an idea that nonhumanity/ies need not be mystified in order to be powerful and surprising, to have its (or their) own, various, recalcitrant limits.38 And, there is an equity in play here: although human and nonhuman individuals are not asked to give up their presumed self-interest, “[a] vital materialism also recasts the self in the light of its intrinsically polluted nature and in so doing

38 Indeed, Bennett argues that, far from being receptive to ‘otherness’, the mystification of nature found in some versions of environmental holism betrays an underlying anthropocentrism, “that nature is designed for us and we designed to fit it” (1987, 139). Nevertheless, my authors’ faith in the processes of the sciences is an optimistic one, choosing to focus exclusively on the potential of scientific inquiry as interlocutor, and as progressive, cumulative sociological phenomenon –and not to look at the equal potential of the sciences as cultural processes, constituted not purely through reasoned inquiry but also through a host of individual and structural disciplinary processes, that, if they cannot be said to lead down ‘wrong’ paths, certainly do not always point simply to rational, disinterested subjects oriented faithfully towards the pursuit of knowledge.
recasts what counts as self-interest” (Bennett 2010, 116). Nonhumanity always ‘infects’ us, this infection is what effects our being –and so self-interest is never purely about the self.

Without recourse to an easy separation between humanity and nature, we are invited, among other revaluations and inversions of perspective, to become more sensitive to what remains unthought –and powerful- within our own bodies. But a reminder that all humans are bodies does not acknowledge the way those bodies have been differentially produced, explicitly in relation to some conception of nature. I have argued that bringing nature into relief as a vital question has allowed for the renaturalization of a politics of colonization, sovereign structures appearing under the guise of agency, the production of knowledge, inclusion in a polity.

I entered this text on a supposition that colonization begins with a rhetorical and practical clearing of the slate. The parasite cannot see –or perhaps ignores- the body in which it burrows or on which it travels, and instead finds only virgin land, a wilderness of plenty. As Serres puts it, “[the] outside for it is the inside of another. Its outside is an inside” (1980, 195). Serres, Latour, and Bennett each effect their own clearings, and my concern has been to invite their vital materialisms to turn this institution of novelty inside out –not to step back from their ontological and rhetorical innovations for a better view, but rather to effect a second-order inhabitation. It has never been my intention to close off this text in solutions or resolutions or vermifuges for a new, innocent landscape to host us.

My sense is that a post-colonial nature is one where ecological and social relations have not only suffered the initial disruption of invasion, but one also where the invasion has in a biological, political, and psychic sense marked, if not transformed, human-nonhuman relations. That is, the parasite induces an altered state, and what follows the moment of colonization carries this alteration through time, through political institutions, through environmental attitudes, and,
depending on the time and place and nature of the relationship in question, through the ways in which we are able to communicate and coexist with each other in daily life. There is no innocence after colonization. But where to go from here, given that a vital materialist disposition understands that new thoughts might very well make new wounds, that “the limits to molding...material, while having a certain definitiveness, are usually recognizable only after they have been violated” (Bennett 1987, 155), that “the social order...[is] a precarious achievement, [where] perhaps an experimental attitude is best, for we cannot know in advance the concrete consequences” (Bennett 1987, 153) of any call to action?

Within Serres’ ‘worldly world’, we need to ask after those processes which unevenly distribute environmental burdens more heavily on some people and peoples than others. Though the aggregate effects of human activity are global, these effects are differentially produced. And, perhaps more importantly, it still matters who and where you are for the threat of pollution, sickness, the destruction of ways of life on the land to be counted as worthy of concern. Rather than nature becoming third party to human wars, it is still possible to flip the triangle, for violence to be perpetrated by one human polity on another through the proxy of a wounded nature –and so the worldly world is much less a given, settled, unified prospect than it appears in Serres’ depiction.

Latour’s collective needs to ask whether it hears appeals for inclusion only, or whether it is a sensitive enough instrument to detect appeals to be left alone also. Given that we have seen how sovereignty functions by producing an outside to be incorporated, to become known, to be enabled to exercise the power of speech, it might seem naive to expect that ‘outsides’ might be voluntarily left unmolested by the gathering apparatus of collectivity. But there have always

been multiple human collectives, and through times of war and peace none has yet managed to proclaim itself ultimately, uncontestedly sovereign. Periods of ascendancy for any one collective give way to periods of decline, to different exercises of power and different ways of conducting diplomacy. And if it is in the nature of sovereignty to produce difference, and since the differences effected by sovereignty have, of necessity, been misrepresentations of difference, perhaps what is required is some sort of halt, something fundamentally more hesitant than the slow (2004, 3) collection Latour envisions.

Though Latour writes of a monism of human-nonhuman actants, the sovereignty of the collective depends on being able to enforce a single vocabulary, a single register of shared meaning, over all space. The implicit violence of this translation invites critique – why must everyone and everything be made to speak in the same concepts, and how will this happen? Why this mode of expression rather than some other? Latour offers a vision of the good life – of the shared and distributed enterprise of building knowledge – but the violence with which it is effected is something with which we are already familiar. This time, those to be incorporated into the structures of intelligibility are not only people but rather (potentially) all human and nonhuman actants.

There are two spaces of difference in play under colonization, the difference engendered by sovereignty, and the collective lives of peoples named ‘different’ by sovereignty. In these overlapping spaces; indigestibility, static (Serres 1980, xiii). Though some answer is beyond the scope of what I can accomplish here, we must continue to ask why the underlying impulse is always to outlaw multiple meanings, seemingly incommensurable but coexisting systems of law, knowledge, and politics. At the very least, the collective requires the possibility of situation in
an international, and not the kind of international premised on the unifying concept of sovereign states in the wild, the untamed, the yet-to-be-known.

Insofar as Bennett walks furthest from structural suggestions, her writing is perhaps closest to an injunction to transform personal, lived experience. But she too calls for an extended sense of matter as vital to translate into an extension of ‘democracy’ – and by our apprehension of the vital nature of fundamental matter, all have been included, tacitly. An ontological move with ethical impetus, vibrant materiality nevertheless dances away from the question of what it might be unleashing. There is no guarantee that the elevation and transformation of matter – from passive, inert, to generative, contingent– has any necessary connection to political democracy. Indeed, my fear is that the assumption of democracy might be functioning as Bennett’s political blind spot, even as I find her ontology, her weaving of scientific findings with the history of thinkers who were close operators in material and cultural worlds, to be both enchanting and inspiring. As I endeavoured to show, there are indeed ongoing events, in colonial times, where the state attempts to define and harness the reproductive (vital) potential of a colonized population to eliminate, legally and/or culturally and/or materially, ‘difference’ within its borders that threatens to reveal ‘democracy’ as itself a system premised on exclusion. Democracy is not simply the directionless “swerve” (Bennett 2001, 71) of vibrant matter and emergent publics – it is a claiming of speech, an assertion of political legitimacy, and also the possibility of discord and coercion, not transcendent consensus. Bennett recognizes this, and yet perhaps in her desire to both sensitize her readers to the potential of a vital nature and awaken us to vitality’s not-quite-human, or human-life-enhancing, capacities, she overlooks the trials inflicted on people/s

So alliances are not guaranteed, and nor, while the animating assumption of the sovereign state steers both political theory and other sites of inquiry –science studies, anthropology, ecological thought– is domination a possibility that has been successfully circumscribed. I do not know from where alliances might come, but my suspicion is that Indigenous peoples and settlers might find common ecological ground in pragmatic relations rather than in any overarching political framework. Working together might be temporary, piecemeal, site- and question-specific, and based in personal relationships and moments of shared curiosity and concern rather than a grand project of ecological ethics, a unified field. I am uncertain if such collaborations might indicate a greater and more lasting transformation in the triangulation of colonization.

I am convinced of the conceptual and ethical worth of thought that ‘naturalizes’ the animateness of matter, and am moved by the materiality of human life. But this exploration of vital materiality has led me to believe that the ability to be surprised by entities living and non is startling also when they –these material things, these worlds– disclose the historical, habitual, and imaginative camouflage in which political thought cloaks itself. One day, we were walking through some woods –somewhere it seemed that no human had walked before– senses overawed in the mass and vitality of all that matter, all those processes that happen before, after, under, over, around, and through us. But our sight adjusted, some pattern resolved, and perhaps we saw no longer just the forest of maple trees, but also, in double vision, the contours of the state that hopes to live there too.
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