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Other Wise Democracies: What the Tree Canopies Know

Rebeccah Nelems

> [P]erhaps it is time to touch the algorithms of our longings, to linger at the terrifying fault line where a different kind of politics might sprout. Perhaps it is time to name the electoral politics that hides its shrivelling body behind the spectacle of who won and who lost, and nurture its weirder cousin. A politics of the otherwise.
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> - Bayo Akomolafe[1]

INTRODUCTION

Brazilian sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos recently observed that "democracies are dying democratically"[2] through the election of antidemocrats around the world. The ballot-box wins of antidemocratic parties around the world are quick to hail public attention. However, Santos' words point to an even deeper source of morbidity troubling Western democracies, warranting a deeper interrogation into the societal conditions within which democracy might be dying by its own hands. Can the current precariousness of democracy be blamed on antidemocratic movements, leaders and/or supporters alone? Or might democracy not be as democratic as thought? In this chapter, I take up the call to critically examine the sources of democracy's morbidity from a social systems perspective.[3]

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[1] Bayo Akomolafe, "Without prejudice to my American brothers and sisters, who have been, and are, fighting with every drop of their blood to topple the alarmingly pro-fascist villainy of Donald Trump," Facebook, August 30, 2020, www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=635532823741994&id=130394687589146.

[2] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The Crises of Democracy: Boaventura de Sousa Santos and James Tully" (webinar, *Global Politics in Critical Perspectives – Transatlantic Dialogues*, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, March 15, 2019), www.youtube.com/watch?v=-i9aFUsTipk.

[3] Babic calls for three entry points to be examined with respect to the interregnum he argues we find ourselves in. These entry points are drawn from his Gramsci-inspired tripartite framework, which includes "the global political economy level of analysis (the processuality of the crisis) . . . the state

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This lends itself to considering that the ongoing swell of antidemocratic movements might be symptoms rather than causes of democracy's crises. From this vantage point, important new lines of inquiry come into view.

The chasm between democracy's rhetoric and people's lived experiences is vast. From racialized state violence and systematic discrimination, to the denial of Indigenous nations' sovereignty, to ecocide, it is clear the "emperor" has no clothes. Too many state-sanctioned injustices are happening on democracy's watch – brutalities that the rhetoric of equality, inclusion and representation cannot conceal. Transmuted through the nation-state's webbed relationships with systems of anthropocentrism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, racism/whiteness and capitalism, some are more equal, included and represented than others.

In the rift between democratic rhetoric and lived experience, the "demos" takes matters into their own hands. On the one hand, these matters include guns and others' throats. On the other hand, they include care and cooperation across the usual lines of separation, and the resurgent deepening of ecocentric ways of being. The effect is a present surge in both "democratizing and undemocratizing processes"[4] across local and global stages alike. I distinguish between the "undemocratizing" vs. "democratizing" processes of which Santos speaks according to the worldview and ontological canopy that each enacts:[5] respectively, individualist ways of being that reference an us/them ontology of "disconnect";[6] and relational ways of Intrabeing that enact an interconnection with all that is, including the more-than-human.

As elaborated in this chapter, an individualist ontology of separation and nonrelationality erects the unfounded, *terra nullius* grounds upon which structures of hierarchy, dominance, violence and exploitation become both possible and justifiable. Such grounds become the basis of all "us/them" logics and binary structures, including anthropocentrism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, racism/whiteness and capitalism. While the particular modalities, institutions, practices and processes of each of these structures differs across regions and contexts, their enactments depend on lifeways that generate a vicious ontology of disconnect and separation. It is this commonality of ontological structure to which I wish to draw attention. Understanding how democratic institutions operate in ways that can

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(organicity) and … the societal level (morbidity)," as detailed in Milan Babic, "Let's Talk About the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 767–86.

4 Santos, "The Crises of Democracy."

5 It is likely that some of the processes that are named by their constituents as democratizing may not adhere to the definition I offer. This is not to discount another's claim to a distinct brand of democracy as defined by them, but rather to present with clarity the framework from within which I interpret and define democracy.

6 Aaron Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism: Growing Political Community" in *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 133–74.

(intentionally or unintentionally) uphold and reproduce this hegemonic ontology is critical to understanding what democratizing, counterhegemonic and decolonizing projects might entail. Operating through institutions, processes and ways of being, the lifeways that enact these structures generate the "abyssal,"[7] invisible lines of privilege and discrimination that invoke injustices and violence on human and more-than-human lives and bodies alike.

It is often argued that such structures threaten democracy by superseding or "rolling back" its powers. However, to the extent that democratic actors and institutions participate in and reproduce these structures of dominance, I concur with Gane that what we are witnessing is not the "roll back," but the "roll-out"[8] and emboldening of these structures *through* democratic institutions.

The Canadian government's "nation to nation" relationship with Indigenous nations offers one helpful example. Insofar as Canadian law is asserted as the universal, sovereign frame within which Indigenous nations must negotiate and Indigenous legal systems must be interpreted, there is no possibility of genuine dialogue between equal parties wherein each might be encountered on its own terms.[9] Canada's engagement in nation-to-nation relationships is thus enacted as a form of "false dialogue"[10] that drains dialogue of its democratic and transformative potential. This move within setter colonial states can be understood as an example of what Tully describes as the representative democracy's "pretense of inclusion and dialogue [which] is often simply the assimilating and subordinating ruse of the hegemonic partner."[11] Such assertions of sovereignty rely on the false and unfounded grounds of nonrelationality. In other words, by imposing an external colonial law and order, they uproot or disembed themselves from relational accountability[12] to Indigenous peoples and the lands, waters and more-than-human ecosystems over which they have claimed sovereignty. This disembedding claim to sovereignty is inherently violent, as claiming the universal requires not only an erasure of its own parochial roots,[13] but both legalizes and necessitates the moves to systematically and genocidally eradicate Indigenous democracies and lifeways, as in Canada.

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[7] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Eurozine*, June 29, 2007, https://www.eurozine.com/beyond-abyssal-thinking/.

[8] Nicholas Gane, "The Governmentalities of Neoliberalism: Panopticism, Post-Panopticism, and Beyond," *The Sociological Review* 60 (2012): 613.

[9] For Tully, the deparochialization of one's system is a necessary condition for "genuine dialogue" to be possible, in which actors might encounter one another on "the terms of their own traditions without inclusion, assimilation or subordination." James Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory and Beyond: A Dialogue Approach to Comparative Political Thought," *Journal of World Philosophies* 1, no. 5 (2016): 52.

[10] Ibid., 54.

[11] James Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, eds. Asch, Borrows, and Tully, 58.

[12] Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

[13] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory."

In another example, US government trade negotiations with democratically elected governments in countries such as Kenya are brokering deals at the behest of the world's largest chemical makers and fossil fuel companies. Such agreements have resulted in the quadrupling of plastic waste exports from the USA to Africa. More than one billion pounds of plastic waste was exported from the USA to ninety-six countries in one year alone, with millions of pounds of hardest-to-recycle plastics landing in their rivers and oceans.[14] In the growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all of life, these democratically elected governments are privileging colonial, anthropocentric and capitalist logics at the cost of ecosystems, the human citizens who rely on these ecosystems and the more-than-human who become the "collateral damage" of such actions. Upstream are the practices that condone and enable the proliferation of plastic production and consumption.

While these examples differ in important ways, they are both cases in which democratic actors and institutions invoke a relationally disembedded, undemocratic logic of individualism that constitutes a lethal blow to the very premises and promises of democracy. In so doing, democratic actors create critical points of vulnerability for the system of representative democracy itself. The vulnerability lies in its inconsistency, as noted by Santos: "Democracy is incompatible with the kind of capitalism that rules the world today. So we either have democracy or we have capitalism."[15] These points of democracy's vulnerability become the conditions of its own morbidity, hollowing out the values it purports to uphold, effectively dumping them in the waterways alongside the unrecyclable plastics. So long as democratically elected representatives and governments reproduce the entangled and settled logics, hierarchies and structures of anthropocentrism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy,

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[14] "According to documents reviewed by The New York Times, an industry group representing the world's largest chemical makers and fossil fuel companies is lobbying to influence United States trade negotiations with Kenya, one of Africa's biggest economies, to reverse its strict limits on plastics – including a tough plastic-bag ban. It is also pressing for Kenya to continue importing foreign plastic garbage, a practice it has pledged to limit. Plastics makers are looking well beyond Kenya's borders. 'We anticipate that Kenya could serve in the future as a hub for supplying US-made chemicals and plastics to other markets in Africa through this trade agreement,' Ed Brzytwa, the director of international trade for the American Chemistry Council, wrote in an April 28 letter to the Office of the United States Trade Representative … In 2019, American exporters shipped more than 1 billion pounds of plastic waste to 96 countries including Kenya, ostensibly to be recycled, according to trade statistics. But much of the waste, often containing the hardest-to-recycle plastics, instead ends up in rivers and oceans. And after China closed its ports to most plastic trash in 2018, exporters have been looking for new dumping grounds. Exports to Africa more than quadrupled in 2019 from a year earlier." Hiroki Tabuchi, Michael Corkery, and Carlos Mureithi, "Big Oil Is in Trouble. Its Plan: Flood Africa with Plastic," *New York Times*, August 30, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/climate/oil-kenya-africa-plastics-trade.html.
[15] Santos, "The Crises of Democracy."

racism/whiteness and/or capitalism, they themselves enact undemocratizing processes.

In this context, it is no surprise that representative democracies find themselves facing populist, undemocratizing "backlashes":[16] the latter are entirely ontologically consistent with the undemocratizing processes being democratically enacted, as outlined earlier. As any parent can tell you, such "do as I say, not as I do" behavior effectively extends an invitation for citizens to follow suit. In the democratic void between words and practice emerges a dystopian chasm within which disenchanted and/or alienated citizens decrease, withdraw and/or refuse their hegemonic consent to the democratic system on offer. In these ways, the crises of democracy lie in the ways representative democracies reproduce individualist ways of being.

If the cause of democracy's morbidity is in our midst, however, so too are the protective factors. The boundaries and enactments of representative democracies have long been troubled and shaped by democratizing processes and movements that stretch and are situated well beyond the individualist canopy of understanding. Enacting an ontology of Intrabeing, the horizons and possibilities for otherwise democracies beyond the bounds of individualism are not only possible, they already are. Drawing on the wisdoms of humans (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and more-than-humans (in the ecosystems of tree canopies), this chapter presents a relational framework within which democracy might be resituated and reconceptualized. In their porous, dynamic, entangled and "grounded relationality,"[17] tree canopies embody a rooted relational framework within the context of which distinct and diverse democratic traditions might be considered. Additionally, tree canopies invite us to consider how the relational accountability of the ecosystem offers a model for democracy that is regenerative, porous, adaptive, diverse and resilient. In contrast, I propose an "*ego*-cycle" diagram, which depicts how hierarchical, us/them structures and lifeways enact an individualist logic of disconnect that thwarts and distorts each stage of the ecocycle in unsustainable, violent ways. Like the tree cut down to build the slave ship, individualist or egocentric ways of being violently uproot the individual from self, others and earth.

[16] Babic, "Let's Talk About the Interregnum," 767–86.
[17] My conceptualization of "grounded relationality" intersects with that presented in Jodi A. Byrd et al., "Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities," *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (2018): 1–18. Drawing on the work of Coulthard and Simpson (Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2016): 249–55, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0038), Byrd et al. use the term "grounded relationalities" to refer to "a being grounded and living relationalities in which the nonhuman world and the materiality of land and other elements have agential significance in ways that exceed liberal conceptions of the human"; Byrd et al., "Predatory Value," 11. They ask: "What would it be, then, to think and work for a grounded relationality, at once addressed to Black placemaking, geographies, and other racialized diasporas, as well as to proprietary violences incommensurate to yet not altogether separate from Indigenous land and sovereignty?"; "Predatory Value," 14.

A TALE OF TWO WORLDVIEWS

As ontologies, worldviews can be understood through distinct types of creation stories or stories of origin.[18] Despite their coexistence, one can see that the individualist and relational worldviews introduced above represent two very different types of creation stories. Not only do they have different beginnings, plotlines and backdrops, they generate radically different endings: the first characterized by unsustainable lifeways that cogenerate ecocide, social, political and economic injustices (Tully's vicious cycle), the other characterized by gift–gratitude–reciprocity lifeways that regenerate reciprocal, sustainable and relationally accountable ways of living (Tully's virtuous cycle).[19]

I refer to the first of these worldviews as *individualist* (as opposed to liberal, Western, etc.) to reflect the fact that the central unit around which this ontological orientation is organized is that of the discrete, disembedded individual human. The "individual" in these stories stands in for the inherent dissociative logic of disconnect:[20] from self (as relational being), from others and from the more-than-human. It is critical to note that the structures and processes that generate this dissociative orientation constitute forms of epistemic violence[21] that also enact physical violence and embodied traumas on human and more-than-human alike.

While one may consider certain groupings such as the nation-state as social or collective instead of individualist, Tully shows how the very logic of such institutions rests on the conceptual disembedding of individuals from prior inherent relationships as the foundational prelude to installing modern conceptions of citizenship. This "first process" entails: "the ongoing dispossession and alienation of human communities from their participatory ways of being in the living earth as plain members and responsible citizens, and the discrediting of the participatory ways of knowing that go along with them."[22] Calling this the "great dis-embedding," Tully references Polanyi to document the processes by which modern civil citizenship then re-embeds humans "in abstract and competitive economic, political, and legal relationships that depend on yet destroy the underlying interdependent ecological and social

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[18] This draws from Charles Eisenstein's framing of two distinct societal stories: the story of Separation and the story of Interbeing, as outlined in Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2013). Additions I offer to his discussion of stories include the pluralization of these stories, the reframing of Interbeing as intrabeing, and the framing these stories as distinct types of creation stories.

[19] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 83–129.

[20] Mills notes that insofar as settler peoples found their political communities upon a logic of disconnect, it is founded on "violence, which slowly destroys it from within": Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism," 135.

[21] Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003).

[22] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 108.

relationships."[23] The new groupings are then structured as if they were individual units in binary relation to Others – whether nation, race, gender or other. Insofar as Western representative democracy is a system of governance based around the rights and representation of individual humans and collections of individual humans, it enacts a story in which the human individual is the unit through which life is encountered and apprehended. It is thus necessarily located not only upon an "us/them" foundation of anthropocentrism,[24] it is also built on the primacy of the individual human unit[25] over the relational. In this way, an individualist logic is core to the very structure of nation-state and nationalism. The latter's borders separate humans by geographies and citizenship while relegating and demarcating lands, waterways and the more-than-human within its borders to property or the "wild," denying it its own agency and representation. (As any river might tell you, the borders of nation-states do not make much sense to them, though their effects are sensed.)

In contrast, relational worldviews reflect interconnected, intra-active,[26] relational lifeways between all that is. While grounded in the distinctiveness of each, there are key points of shared relational ontology found in a range of traditions and cultures around the world. Drawn from the concept of Interbeing found in contemporary theorists ranging from Eisenstein[27] to Thich Nhat Hahn,[28] the relational premise of intrabeing has articulations across many distinct traditions. For example, the concept of "All Our Relations" within Indigenous traditions across Turtle Island, the Zulu phrase *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* commonly known as *Ubuntu* ('I am because you are'), and the tenets of animistic, pantheistic East Asian nature religions such as *kami-no-michi* (Shintoism) all point not just to a communal nature of life but to an indivisible interdependence of being. Nuu-chah-nulth Hereditary Chief Umeek (E. Richard Atleo) explains the specific context within which a relational ontology of interconnectedness is specifically rooted and enacted in Nuu-chah-nulth traditions, through the concept of *heshook-ish tsawalk*:

In a view of reality described as *tsawalk* (one), relationships are *qua* (that which is). The ancient Nuu-chah-nulth assumed an interrelationship between all life forms – humans, plans, and animals. Accordingly, social, political, economic, constitutional,

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[23] Ibid., 104

[24] An exception to this is Ecuador's extension of personhood to nature in its 2008 constitution. New Zealand has also made moves to recognize the rights of certain more-than-humans, including the Whanganui River, which is of particular significance to Maori peoples.

[25] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012).

[26] Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" posits that while *inter*-action presumes separate actors, *intra*-action depicts an enmeshed relationship that more accurately depicts the assemblage and nonseparate nature of all life forms. From Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[27] Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World*.   [28] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory," 62.

environmental, and philosophical issues can be addressed under the single theme of inter-relationships, across all dimensions of reality – the material and the non-material, the visible and the invisible.[29]

The concept of oneness within a relational frame of Intrabeing is notably distinct for its pluralistic dynamism versus the assimilative, binary and/or exclusionary orientations of individualism. As in an ecosystem, this oneness comes not as the result of assimilation or the erasure of difference, but through the inherent plurality, relationality and agency of all. Within the context of another Indigenous tradition, Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, depicts the dynamic process of weaving sweetgrass as an act of gift-reciprocity between weavers that reflects the reciprocal relationships of living between peoples with one another and the earth.[30] Wilson of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation reflects on this relationality by disrupting the notion of the individual unit that is often embedded in Western conceptions of relationship: "Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of."[31] This intersects with the self-proclaimed relational ontologist, feminist Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action"; while *inter*-action presumes separate actors, they note that *intra*-action depicts an enmeshed relationship that more accurately depicts the assemblage and nonseparate nature of all life forms.[32] Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh offers another take on this point, stating that we should not regard individual beings as having life, but of life being in them: "You shouldn't say, life *of* the leaf, but life *in* the leaf, and life *in* the tree. My life is just Life, and you can see it in me and in the tree."[33]

Within a relational ontology of Intrabeing, individualist stories are artificial[34] and without foundation. Extraction or expulsion from the relational world is simply not possible. Conceiving of the self as separate from other beings constitutes a bifurcated, dissociated conception of the self – what Einstein called a "delusion of consciousness."[35] However, it is this perception of disconnect that renders egocentric ways of thinking and being possible,

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[29] Umeek E. Richard Atleo, *Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), ix.

[30] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), ix.

[31] Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 80.   [32] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe*.

[33] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2009), 23.

[34] Mills writes: "Rooted constitutionalism would say disconnection doesn't exist except artificially, and I would add that it's the first step off of the path of growth, onto the path of progress": "Rooted Constitutionalism," 160.

[35] "A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." Albert Einstein to Mr. Robert S. Marcus, February 12,

characterized by the "aggressive refusal of non-attachment, openness, empathetic dialogue, and so of deparochialization."[36]

Umeek[37] also sees the perception of differences as naturally antagonistically, competitively and hierarchically oriented as inherent to the individualist view– one that has led the world into its current intertwining sets of economic, political, social and ecological crises. In contrast, he and other Indigenous thinkers such as Kimmerer[38] reflect on the lessons learned from the more-than-human world wherein diversity and polarities are not inherently competitive, but rather viewed as essential for the co-generation of life. Umeek's *Tsawalk* shows that within stories of intrabeing, insofar as everything is connected, everything somehow belongs: "Nuu-chah-nulth perspective on the nature of reality is that all questions of existence, being and knowing, regardless of seeming contradictions are considered tsawalk – one and inseparable. They are all interrelated and interconnected."[39] Tully's work might be read as the tracing of individualist and relational ontologies within and across distinct histories and traditions of political thought. While Tully particularly highlights the relational ontologies and lifeways of Indigenous traditions, he also observes the presence of relational lifeways across a plurality of democratizing practices, movements and processes around the world, including the West.[40] These lifeways are characterized by Tully as enacting practices of ecological and Gaia democratic engagement across a diversity of ethno-cultural and spiritual traditions. These lifeways enact a relational ethos of interconnectedness that nurtures relationships with self, others and earth, are regenerative of virtuous cycles of life – resonant with conceptions of gift–gratitude–reciprocity within Indigenous governance and legal systems. In this way, Tully's work consistently points to what Indigenous traditions and communities have long showed – the ongoing proliferation of lifeways that, in their resilience and rootedness, even in the face of systematized structures of genocidal oppression, persevere. In the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault also traces patterns of relationality across Western thought, which he traces back to Ancient Greece. A master trickster, he shows how even individualism has historical roots in a "relational mode of knowledge."[41] By troubling a contemporary[42] individualism's self image, Foucault's observation suggests that individualism's inclination to banish relationality in its midst is so strong it would even negate its own ancestry.

1950, quoted in John Briggs, "Reembodying, Human Consciousness in the Earth," in *Consciousness: Ideas for the Twenty-First Century* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1–23.
[36] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory," 63.   [37] Umeek, *Principles of Tsawalk*.
[38] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.   [39] Umeek, *Principles of Tsawalk*, ix.
[40] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 83–129.
[41] Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 235.
[42] As Benjamin noted, "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Shocken, 1969), 261.

WORLDVIEWS AS CANOPIES OF UNDERSTANDING

In the sociological literature, ontologies or worldviews are often conceptualized as "canopies" of understanding, drawing on the work of Berger and Luckmann.[43] As a metaphor for the structures by which a social group makes sense of the world and governs itself, the structure of the canopy is constituted by the institutions, laws, discourses, norms and lifeways that a social group enacts. Signifiers, concepts and institutions within this canopy of meaning are reified as "common sense" and naturalized, providing its constituents with what phenomenologists call a "natural attitude" toward the world, in which the constructed and parochial contexts of one's worldview is a settled fact that remains unseen, like the air one breathes. For Berger and Luckmann, the perceived objectivity of social institutions "'thickens" and "hardens," generating a certain fixity to their structures and "firmness of consciousness."[44] Within the enclosing canopy, the institutions, laws, discourses, norms and lifeways that uphold the canopy are both structurally imposed upon its constituents and actively reproduced by them to the extent that they are internalized and socialized into them.

Berger and Luckmann's canopy is thus experienced as an integrated, comprehensive understanding of the world while the particular contours of it remain unseen. However, in its social constructedness, the canopy operates as a singular lens through which one might encounter the world, like a flashlight in a forest.[45] Although canopies offer the experience of having a comprehensive view on reality, they only light a narrow cone on the world, leaving "the totality of the world opaque … [in] a background of darkness."[46] Phenomena that do not fit within the bounds of Berger and Luckmann's sense-making canopy thus appear as "non-sense,"[47] remaining unencountered, unintelligible, banished and forbidden. Hall refers to "common sense" or "the regime of the 'taken for granted'" as "a moment of extreme ideological closure."[48] In this way, Berger and Luckmann's canopy resembles that of a *tent* canopy and, like a tent, this canopy is constructed upon an uprooted, nonrelational foundation the underpinning "law-gic" of which shapes the tent's structure, contours and borders.

While presented as a universal theory for theorizing about worldviews, a reparochialization[49] of Berger and Luckmann's canopy shows it to have distinctly individualist features. The first clue of this is insofar as Berger and Luckmann's canopy refers only to the human world. In this theory of worldviews, the earth and the more-than-human are anthropocentrically relegated to incidental backdrops to human existence. The establishment of the canopy thus metaphorically relays the very process of re-embedding

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[43] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Random House: New York, 1967).
[44] Ibid., 59.   [45] Ibid., 45.   [46] Ibid., 44.   [47] Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences*.
[48] Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985): 105.
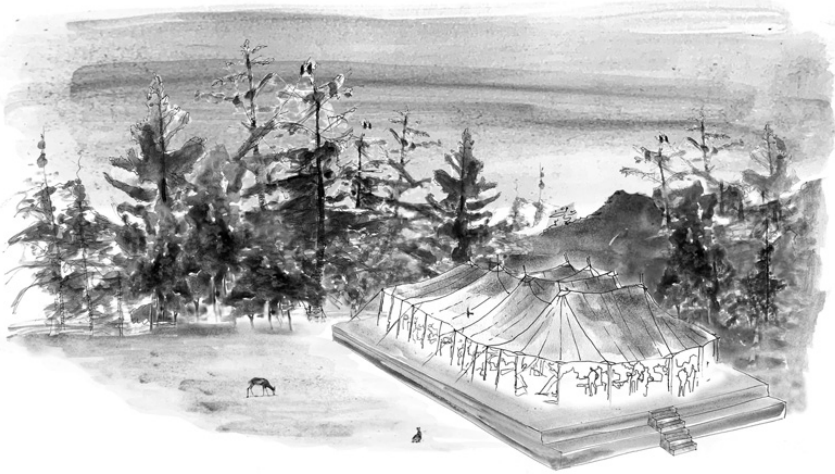[49] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory."

FIGURE 9.1 *Tent Canopy* by Karen Yen

disembedded individual humans in socially sanctioned institutions such as Tully describes.[50] Uprooted from relationships with the earth and the more-than-human, a key feature of the canopy is categories of membership, both within the walls of its particular institutions as well as those on the outside who are refused entry. More than being left in the metaphorical darkness, beings, experiences and aspects of beings that fall surplus to the cognitive bounds of the canopy manifest as other or are rendered into the abyss. Any acting outside the bounds of the canopy are encountered and treated as fugitives according to the settled colonial lawgic of the canopy.

Further, in its concealment of what its inhabitants might otherwise encounter, the tent canopy is also a metaphor for hegemony. The tent canopy mirrors the hegemonic process Vahabzadeh describes by which actors are "resettled" within new "cognitive grounds and experiential terrains" with reconstituted selves.[51] Although the "hegemonic worldview" is presented as "objectively" true,[52] it will never be fully referential to one's experience that precedes and exceeds the frames of the tent. Insofar as it both enables and limits how one thinks of and apprehends the world – a phenomenon he calls "experiential hegemony"[53] – the erection of the tent canopy is a moment of epistemic violence for Vahabzadeh. In all of these ways, Berger and Luckmann's conception of the way worldviews function is a version of Otto Scharmer's egocentric system that can not see itself.[54]

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[50] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 109.   [51] Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences*, 65.
[52] Ibid., 67.   [53] Ibid., 97.
[54] Otto Scharmer, "Impacting Climate Change by Operating from a Place of Awareness-Based Collective Action" (webinar, *TEDxGAIAjourney: Impacting Climate Change by Operating*

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF CANOPY

A relational worldview articulates a radically different structure than Berger and Luckmann's canopy. The latter's abstract and universal prototype is at fundamental odds with relational conceptions of the world that are rooted in particular contexts through ongoing intra-active relationships with others and the earth. To extend Berger and Luckmann's theoretical concept of worldviews as tent canopies to relational ways of thinking and being would be to engage in the same type of "discursive translation" that Coulthard notes is imposed on Indigenous nations within the settler colonial state, resulting in the "reorientation" of meanings of Indigenous self-determination.[55] Starblanket and Stark caution of the ongoing ways in which such mis-translations reinscribe Indigenous concepts and practices – such as relationality – through the settler colonial lens of states such as Canada, noting the tendency of colonial ways of thinking to absorb and co-opt.[56] In true hegemonic form, the individualist worldview moves quickly to repair any challenges that might compromise the integrity of its canopy of being, resulting in alterations and patchwork rather than transformation. Tully refers to this as a form of "hegemonic ventriloquism,"[57] in which one may use the same words as another but fail to encounter or understand them on their own terms – a practice core to genuine dialogue and the ethical engagement of another.[58] It thus becomes important to imagine a relational canopy on its own terms rather than "discursively translated"[59] through the lens of an individualist conception of worldviews.

As opposed to an enclosing and self-concealing structure, a relational ontology is characterized by its self-disclosure (or deparochialization) and an openness to encountering and engaging difference through "reciprocal elucidation."[60] By a relational logic, one can only understand and know themselves through their relationships with others. For this reason, thinkers from across a diversity of traditions (Borrows, Derrida, Lorde, Foucault, Scharmer and Tully, to name a few) note that such disclosure can only take

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from a Place of Awareness-Based Collective Action*, Presenting Institute, Cambridge, MA, October 15, 2020), www.presencing.org/programs/live-sessions/tedxgaiajourney.

[55] Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 78.

[56] Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, "Towards a Relational Paradigm – Four Points for Consideration: Knowledge, Gender, Land, and Modernity," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 175–208.

[57] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory," 64.

[58] The conditions for "genuine dialogue . . . include the ethical practices of openness and receptivity to the otherness of others that enable participants to understand one another in their own traditions (mutual understanding) and to appreciate the concerns of one another regarding globalization and the injustices and suffering it causes (mutual concern)": Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory," 52.

[59] Coulthard, *Red Skin*.   [60] Ibid., 60.

place through relationship with, and in the presence of, another. Tully writes: "Humans literally need dialogue with other limited traditions of political thought to see their own limitations and to see beyond them by means of the perspectives of others. Hence, it is dialogue itself that deparochializes."[61] Similarly, from the systems-thinking tradition, Scharmer states that a system cannot "see and sense itself" unless there is another who plays the role of mirror within "a learning structure" which supports awareness, listening, openness, curiosity, compassion and courage.[62]

Inspired by Mills' rooted constitutionalism,[63] tree canopies offer a radically different type of canopy that exist through their rootedness in relationships and specific contexts vs. the uprooted foundations of the tent. There are countless distinct tree canopies, and no two tree canopies are the same. Insofar as tree canopies are intra-active assemblages of beings and the lifeways that constitute them, they are defined by their specific and evolving constituents, pluralisms and relationships – not their borders. However, they share a porousness to the diversity of life forms in their midst, who cocreate the particularities of a given tree canopy's pathways, permacultures, landscape, lifeforms, enclosures, points of gestation, growth, maturity, destruction, rigidities and boundaries.

In these ways, tree canopies disclose themselves in ways similar to Tully's multiverse of "being-there (*Dasein*) and being-with (*Mitsein*)":

Ways of life of humans are seen perspectivally, as one moves around; neither as independent, all the same, nor antagonistic; but, rather, interconnected and interdependent by infinitely complex webs of similarities and dissimilarities expressed in the languages of the world. This is the participatory experience of diversity awareness, of the lifeworld as a multiverse rather than universe, and of being-human *as* both being-there (*Dasein*) and being-with (*Mitsein*).[64]

It is from the wisdom of the tree canopies that I invite a reconceptualization of democracy.

WHAT THE TREE CANOPIES KNOW

> During Hurricane Katrina, you would have thought the live oaks ... would have died when actually only four out of over seven hundred trees died. Why is that? ... It turns out the whole thing is a blueprint for how to survive hurricanes. Their trunk is spiraled so they flex in the wind and their branches are spiraled so they flex and their leaves when the wind hits them, they curl ... which allows the wind to flow through with minimal friction. And even more importantly, under the ground its roots are entwined with the roots of the trees next to it. So when a hurricane hits a live oak in New Orleans, it's not hitting one tree, it's hitting a whole community. So perhaps in rebuilding New Orleans to be more hurricane resilient, instead of

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[61] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory," 56.
[62] As presented in Scharmer, "Impacting Climate Change."
[63] Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism," 133–74.   [64] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 62.

our individual … foundations, we may think about foundations that have horizontal components that twine together with the foundations of the buildings next door so that you've got the wind hitting an entire community of buildings and not just one … think like a live oak tree.[65]

The logic of tree canopies is found in the trees' inseparable relationality with the countless beings that simultaneously enable and are enabled by their existence, those with whom their lives are entangled. Trees are but one entangled and inseparable form of life within a tree canopy amidst soils, minerals, mycelium, sunlight, air, bugs, creatures, waters, rocks and mosses with whom they transmutatively cocreate the life of their ecosystem – along with the countless others that migrate and porously traverse through. From within the knowing of the tree canopy, each "being" in the canopy might not be considered a single entity – though the uniqueness and diversity of each is required for the existence of all. Like all ecosystems on earth, tree canopies are dynamic, emergent, elaborate labyrinths of beings that engage in the collaborative regeneration of life distinctly in that ecosystem and – as citizens of the earth – also to that of the planet.

Turning to the contrasts between the trees and the tent canopies, one might consider that while the tent can block or distort the view of the tree canopy, the latter might be able to coexist with the former. Indeed, the image of a tent canopy situated within or encroaching upon a tree canopy lends itself well as a metaphor for the relationship between, respectively, a settler colonial state and the Indigenous governance systems in which this colonial state enacts itself. However, to restrict an analysis to this point is to stop at the us/them binary frame that individualism itself establishes. There is more to see in a forest. Tree canopies invite ways of thinking and being beyond a colonial sense of spatiality – ways that offer critical insights into conceptions of democracy.

Tree canopies' resilience and regenerative, democratizing capacities lie in their participation in ecocentric, relational modes of being, as articulated in the ecocycle model. While its roots hail from global governance theory, the ecocycle[66] is used in systems theory to explore the complexity of human systems in which apparently contradictory or incommensurate impulses are at play. Sharing the same shape of the Métis and the infinity symbols, the ecocycle depicts four distinct moments in an ecological system, with a directionality of moving from the lower left quadrant ("Birth: tending"), to the upper right quadrant ("Maturity: harvesting"), to the lower right quadrant ("Creative Destruction: plowing"), to the upper left quadrant ("Gestation: sowing"), then moving back to the lower left quadrant of Birth again.[67] These can be

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[65] WIRED, "Using Live Oak Trees as a Blueprint for Surviving Hurricanes," August 26, 2015, YouTube video, 1:31, https://ed.ted.com/best_of_web/dKKIiKsz.

[66] Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz, "Ecocycle Planning," in *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures* (Seattle: Liberating Structures Press, 2013), 294–99.

[67] Please note, there are different versions of the ecocycle or panarchy model. The language I am using is consistent with the ecocycle diagram presented by McCandless and Lipmanowicz:

conceived of as the distinct stages in a single entity's life cycle (or even as the four seasons of Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter). However, within systems thinking, it is recognized that in any natural ecosystem (including human systems), each stage is always at play somewhere in the system at any given moment – for example, the presence of new tree growth, mature trees, trees falling to the forest floor to make way for and support the incubation of new life.

When systems theorists apply the lens of this cycle to human organizations and systems, they note two "traps" that the latter tend to fall into: the "rigidity trap," which falls in between the stage of Maturity and Creative Destruction, and the "poverty trap," which falls in between the stages of Gestation and Birth. They are called "traps" within organizational theory because of the tendency in human systems for parts of those same systems to inhibit regenerative movement between the stages where they are located. The effect of these traps is to impede, destabilize or incapacitate the ecosystem's regenerative capacities. The "rigidity trap" lies between the stages of Maturity and Creative Destruction.[68] In human-dominated systems, indicators of this trap include the material structuring of the world according to individualist logics of ownership, hierarchy and capitalist-colonial accumulation, ownership, dispossession and legalized hierarchies. Relational structures, such as Indigenous governance and legal systems, are circumscribed, limited hegemonically absorbed or destroyed in the service of keeping the hegemonically dominant structures and processes of capitalist-colonialism intact.

The "poverty trap," on the other hand, is located between the stages of Gestation and Growth[69] In human systems, this trap is encountered when there is insufficient investment in the permaculture needed to cogenerate life (whether social, legal, economic, political or ecological), leading to the starvation or extinction of needed diversity and new growth that ultimately benefits the overall system. In a human system, this trap can entail the excessive depletion, exploitation and/or destruction of the resources needed by distinctive lifeways in order to regenerate, proliferate or thrive.

Building on the notion of these traps, Tully's vicious cycle might be understood as the disproportionate and distorted investment in the linear segment of the ecocycle between the stages of birth (tending) and maturity (harvesting). When the logic of relationality is replaced with that of "us/them" disconnect and separation, a linear logic of individualism becomes possible – a tending to, and the over-harvesting for the few, at the direct cost and expense of others. Humans' separation from self, others and earth thus serves as the paramount moment when the lifeways that enact

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"Moving Online in Pandemic: Ecocycle to Attend to What Is Shifting," Full Circle Associates, Nancy White, https://fullcirc.com/2020/03/08/moving-online-in-pandemic-ecocycle-to-attend-to-what-is-shifting.

[68] McCandless and Lipmanowicz, "Ecocycle Planning."
[69] McCandless and Lipmanowicz, "Ecocycle Planning."

disconnect and inequality establish the "artificial"[70] grounds of individualism. This point of disconnect becomes the uprooted foundation of the tent canopy that leads to the thwarting and distortion of each of the stages of the cycle in distinct ways that threaten all of life as we know it in the world today. The egocycle diagram (Figure 9.2) outlines how each stage is reframed.

Mills writes, "Rooted constitutionalism would say disconnection doesn't exist except artificially, and I would add that it's the first step off of the path of growth, onto the path of progress."[71] The stage of "Maturity" of this linear progress sees the establishment of "Settled hierarchies" by which privileges are extracted and over-harvested for the few at the direct subjugation of others – human and more-than-human alike. The stage of "Creative destruction" is in turn directed into "Systemic violence" that organize and administer the costs and burdens onto these same bodies and lifeways. Finally, the "Incubation" stage becomes "Exploitative depletion," wherein instead of revitalizing the permaculture in which new seeds might be sown, further extraction and depletion occurs.
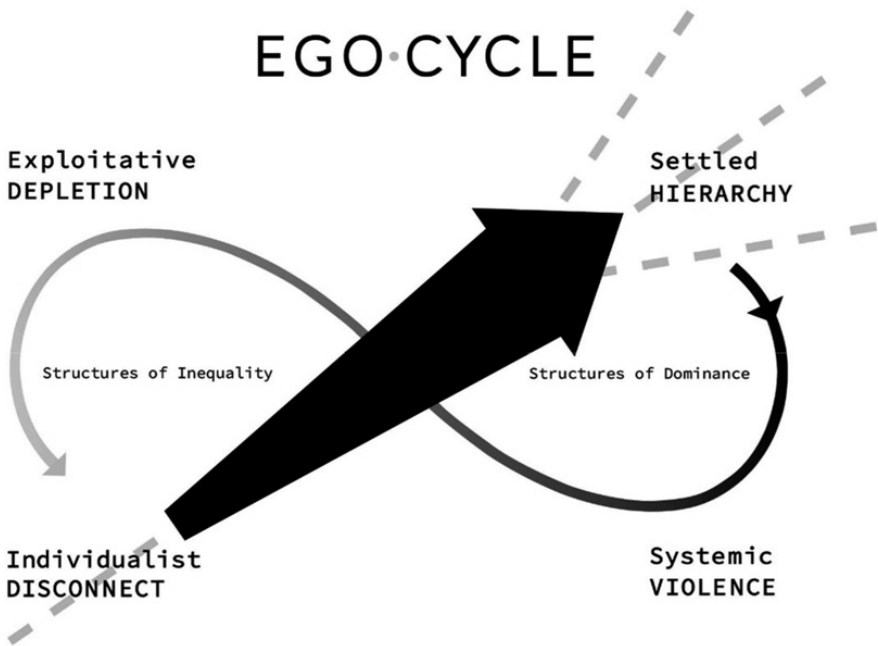

FIGURE 9.2 Egocycle by Rebeccah Nelems; graphic co-designed by Rebeccah Nelems and Amanda Pentland

[70] Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism," 160.   [71] Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism," 160.

As reflected in the diagram (Figure 9.2), while the linear logic of individualism rigidifies and generates structures of violence, inequality and exploitation, its own delusional narrative of nonrelationality and linearity simultaneously erases lines of relational accountability. Deluded, artificial and dissociated conceptions of self, other and earth thus become the uprooted and baseless grounds upon which individualist lifeways are settled. Experientially, these moments of dissociation are moments of trauma.[72] Having established "us/them" lifeways, the grounds for anthropocentrism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, racism/whiteness and capitalism are paved with intersectional bodies and beings. By over-producing, over-exploiting, dominating and over-consuming rather than sympoetically regenerating through gift-reciprocity and relational accountability, these lifeways traumatize rather than revitalize and thwart the inherent abundance of diversity by wielding and generating scarcity.

If "the means sow the seeds of the end,"[73] democratizing processes need to operate in ecocentric ways. In this light, democratizing processes are the modes by which actors seek to transmute the egocentric modes into the ecocentric, and undemocratizing processes might be understood as egocentric ways of being that thwart the stages of the ecocycle, or those that uphold or reinforce the stages of the egocycle.

However, ecocentric modes of being must radically disrupt and thwart the egocycle while not reproducing its egoic modes of being. This is why Hall says we must "address ourselves 'violently' towards the present as it is, *if we are serious about transforming it*"[74] and not if we are serious about destroying it.[75] Akomolafe's use of the concept of *composting*[76] suggests pathways forward

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[72] Peter A. Levine, *Waking the Tiger* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997).

[73] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 114.

[74] Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," *Marxism Today*, January 1979, 14–20 (emphasis added).

[75] While hopeful, the popular argument that human society is in an interregnum, a transition between an era of individualism and an era of interdependence, is also unhelpful, ultimately relying upon an individualist narrative of progress that implicitly claims society is always epistemically and ethically improving over time. Charles Taylor describes "stadial consciousness" as the sense of superiority of "our present understanding over other earlier forms of understanding," noting that it is the "ratchet at the end of the anthropocentric shift, which makes it (near) impossible to go back on it": Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 289. This trope would well benefit from Santos' injection of fear – "Hope without fear is terrible but fear without hope is also terrible. Most people in the world today are fearful and have no hope and a few have only hope. We have to instil fear into the hopeful ones and instil hope in the fearful ones." Santos, "The Crises of Democracy" – as world events consistently attest that the move from undemocratic to democratic is not unidirectionally predetermined, especially in a context where Western representative democracies have only been at play for an infinitesimally short period of time. The narrative also invokes the notion that it is possible or desirable to eliminate or expel the "old" – another "tell" of an individualist, competitive logic of exclusion.

[76] "There is some urgency in the felt vocation to investigate the ways our bodies are being made and remade within the regime of whiteness. The point is not to defeat whiteness, to treat it as an evil,

here, referencing social change as a process of intra-active cotransformation through fugitive, relational and decolonizing practices. Inspiring visions of a pluralistically enriched "regenerative permaculture,"[77] the notion of composting invokes practices that transform through structurally disrupting that radically transforms egoic lifeways. Akomolafe points to a fugitive perspective that refuses to believe the hegemonic guards of individualism who say there is no escape from egoic individualism. Democracy in this light entails the radical transformation of political, social and economic structures – including representative democracies – through the tending, harvesting, plowing and sowing of relationships, systems and processes in ways that necessitate and demand accountability to the relationships that always already are.[78]

CONCLUSION

Representative democracy is ultimately a system that includes and represents some while excluding and failing to represents others, built within an anthropocentric story of disconnect that values the human over all other forms of life. With the exception of Ecuador and New Zealand, representation is denied to the more-than-human as well as to the countless categories of humans that the system itself produces, including the 82.4 million displaced peoples in the world, of which 20.7 million are refugees,[79] and the unknown "many millions" who are stateless.[80] Historical and current examples show countless Indigenous and other peoples and nations whom representative democracies fail to represent, whether through denying them the right to vote, acts of hegemonic ventriloquism or other. Transmuted through its webbed relationships with anthropocentrism, colonialism, racism/whiteness, cisheteropatriarchy and capitalism, it would be a gross understatement to say that within representative democracies, some are more equal than others.

The ways democratic actors and institutions intersect with ecocentric and egocentric lifeways matters, with the results leading to either the "abyssal lines"[81] that enact undemocratizing injustices on lives and bodies, or enacted

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to transcend it, or to imagine it as a pathogen we can rid ourselves of in small doses of workshop attendances: the invitation is, I feel, to compost it, to trace all the ways it is still connected to the earth, to mistletoes everywhere, and then to inhabit those 'spots', and allow ourselves to be acted upon." Bayo Akomolafe, "Through the imprisoned archetypal figure of Baldur, I continue to find a useful way to think and talk about 'whiteness'," Facebook, August 6, 2020, www .facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=615959105699366&id=130394687589146.

[77] Tully, "Reconciliation Here on Earth," 109.   [78] Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony.*

[79] These figures are cited by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for 2020: "Figures at a Glance," UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html. It is recognized that many refugees are also stateless; however, the numbers are presented as such to specifically reference the categories of humans the state system generates.

[80] "Statelessness Around the World," UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/statelessness-around-the-world.html.

[81] Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking."

democratizing ways of being that are relationally accountable. To the extent that representative democracies fail to invest in new permacultures of democratic Intrabeing always already in their midst, and the transformation of structures of dominance and violence, individualistic or egocentric lifeways are reproduced and reinforced – contributing to the very same us/them ontology that gives rise to antidemocratic movements. It is entirely consistent that within such a system, polarization and undemocratizing processes operating according to the same underpinning logic of disconnect emerge.

In this way, democracies have been generating their own morbidity, and, like the emperor in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, are exposed. However, in this moment, they need not double-down and recloak. The tailors in *The Emperor's New Clothes* are but fugitives seeking to democratically hold an empire to relational account. While egoic conceit may have inspired the Emperor to parade naked through the street, perhaps their unexpected exposure affords them the chance to see themselves from the standpoint of another.[82]

While representative democracies may have historically enacted individualist ontologies of disconnect, relational and democratizing processes have also long intra-actively shaped their becoming in critical ways. Just because many actors, institutions and processes within Western representative democracies have endorsed and invoked the egoic structures of individualism to undemocratizing effects, they have not uniformly done so, and their continued allegiance to these structures is up for relationally accountable, democratic debate and contestation. "Post-abyssal thinking"[83] demands of us that we think and act beyond the ontological bounds of individualism and in terms of relational accountability.[84]

Francisco Varela, the Chilean biologist and neuroscientist who cointroduced the concept of sympoiesis to biology, states: "When a living system is suffering from ill health, the remedy is found by connecting with more of itself."[85] For this to take place, critical practices of dialogue and engagement need to be carved out. As Tully notes, "Unless there is a critical practice within a tradition or within the course of the dialogue that brings this problem to self-awareness and addresses it by bringing aspects of one's background horizon of disclosure into the space of questions at the centre of the dialogue, genuine dialogue cannot begin."[86] Across history, processes, practices and precedents exist whereby undemocratizing processes at play have been addressed democratically. Given what is at stake, a revisiting of the question "what is

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[82] For Derrida, "There is no nudity 'in nature'" and human animals are "[a]shamed of being naked as a beast": Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 4–5.

[83] Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking."   [84] Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

[85] Various versions of this quote are attributed to Francisco Varela, including sources such as Curtis Ogden, *Strengthening the Network Within* (Boston: Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2016).

[86] Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory," 53.

democratic?' is warranted. The resilience and regenerative capacity of all social systems – including representative democracies – rests on the willingness and actions of those actors and institutions upholding them to connect, reconnect and enter into genuine dialogue with the countless democratizing traditions and movements alive and well beyond their borders.