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INDIGENIZING AND DECOLONIZING FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Reclaiming Relationality through the Logic of the Gift and Vulnerability

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Abstract

This article addresses the conditions that are necessary for non-Indigenous people to learn from Indigenous people, more specifically from women and feminists. As non-Indigenous scholars, we first explore the challenges of epistemic dialogue through the example of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). From there, through the concept of mastery, we examine the social and ontological conditions under which settler subjectivities develop. As demonstrated by Julietta Singh and Val Plumwood, the logic of mastery—which has legitimated the oppression and exploitation of Indigenous peoples—has been reproduced in academia, leaving almost no room for Indigenous knowledge and epistemes. In the same vein, Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen reclaims and suggests the logic of the gift as a means to render academia more hospitable to Indigenous peoples and epistemes. In our view, reclaim(ing) as a concept-practice is a promising way to disrupt colonial, racist, and sexist power relations. Thus, we in turn propose to reclaim vulnerability as defined by Judith Butler in order to deconstruct masterful settler subjectivities and reconstruct relational ones instead. As theorized by Erinn Gilson, we propose epistemic vulnerability to imagine the conditions of our learning from Indigenous peoples and philosophies.

(Im)Possible Decolonial Dialogue

In the current context, structured largely by the rhetoric of identity politics, it appears difficult to move beyond two conflicting positions when seeking to address the question of decolonization and dialogue. Indeed, it seems we are faced with only two options: assimilation or separation. We believe this context is the result of a complex dynamic of power relations where minorities have faced disheartening experiences after trusting the good faith of dominant groups and trying to engage in dialogue. In Montreal, we have seen great examples of how this dynamic manifests itself through the cultural appropriation controversy sparked by *Slāv* and *Kanata*, two shows from prominent Canadian artist Robert Lepage (see O'Toole 2018; Drimonis 2018a; 2018b). Without getting into the details of the events, suffice it to say that legitimate claims were voiced

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by Afrocanadians and Indigenous people addressing the lack of representation and consultation of their members in the elaboration of the two shows. Those claims were immediately discredited by far-right media outlets and groups on the basis that they were displaying anti-white sentiment and censorship. Even after Robert Lepage himself, six months later, came out with an apology distancing himself from such media coverage (Lepage 2018), this rhetoric is still widespread. How then are we to learn from minorities while avoiding the pitfalls of assimilation/appropriation without also simply giving up on the possibility of dialogue altogether?

As non-Indigenous feminists situated in the Canadian academic and colonial world, we believe it is essential to enable dialogue with Indigenous philosophies as part of a *decolonial learning process*. This requires a serious commitment to the radical transformation of current colonial relations. It is no longer sufficient to only "pass the mic" to marginalized peoples (Gay 1982/2015, 9). As privileged women in the academic world, we want to explore the conditions under which these emerging voices can be *heard*. The editors of this special issue asked that we write about *what* we can learn from Indigenous philosophies. We believe that the position we hold as non-Indigenous scholars requires that, while undertaking this project, we also ask *how* we can learn from Indigenous philosophies. What is it that makes it so hard to *listen to* and to *hear* Indigenous peoples—and marginalized peoples in general? How can we transform ourselves in order to *actually hear* and *welcome* what is being shared with us?

Throughout this article we will reference TEK—traditional ecological knowledge—as an example of the challenges we face when non-Indigenous scholars try to learn from Indigenous knowledge systems. We turn to Nishnaabeg scholar, artist, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's critical examination of TEK in order to better locate these challenges. However, the core of our reflection is rooted in the important work of Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Kuokkanen 2007). In her book, Kuokkanen criticizes the academic world for its historical closure to Indigenous people and epistemes and proposes its radical transformation by foregrounding the logic of the gift as it takes form within Indigenous philosophies. In doing so, she opens the door for non-Indigenous individuals to learn from these philosophies:

> I also contend that the significance of indigenous philosophies extends beyond indigenous communities; these can be employed in various non-indigenous contexts as well. Indeed, I believe that indigenous philosophies offer a timely alternative paradigm for the entire world, which is increasingly characterized by tremendous human suffering and environmental destruction. (Kuokkanen 2007, 25)

In order for non-Indigenous people to learn from Indigenous philosophies, a profound change aimed at decolonizing the social relations linking them to Indigenous peoples is paramount. In this regard, we propose a reflection on the conditions necessary for receiving the gift so that this sharing does not result simply in reproducing colonial dynamics.

Our reflection is therefore based on the desire to imagine the conditions for transformative relationality in order to make it possible to learn from Indigenous philosophies within academia. Our focus will be on the deconstruction of what many feminists have termed *masterful subjectivity* as we believe we must reflexively engage in the transformation of ourselves in order to learn to listen to Others. In this regard, we believe the concept-practice of reclaim(ing) is highly promising because it is

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mobilized among both Indigenous women and feminists and among ecofeminists seeking to (re)construct worlds in which relationality between all elements of Creation—living and nonliving, material and immaterial—guides our actions, our discourses, and our experiences. The strategy of reclaiming thus allows for subverting power relations and reestablishing relational worlds destroyed or made invisible by masterful subjectivity. It is through this idea of reclaim(ing) that we will examine the critical studies of masterful subjectivity, the logic of the gift, and the ontological concept of vulnerability. First, Kuokkanen makes of the gift a performative practice of relational ontologies, essential to enabling decolonial dialogue—that is, a form of dialogue through which each party is open to being transformed through its contact with the other—between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and philosophies. Lastly, the concept of vulnerability, as defined by Judith Butler and Erinn Gilson, allows for the elaboration of relational worlds and fosters the necessary conditions for receiving and learning from the logic of the gift through the deconstruction of masterful subjectivity.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) or the Failure of Epistemic Dialogue

One paradigmatic example of how non-Indigenous scholars reproduce colonial relations through their inability to genuinely dialogue with Indigenous people is the construction of TEK—traditional ecological knowledge. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has aptly demonstrated, TEK is a colonial construct presenting itself as Indigenous knowledge in order to legitimate the continued appropriation/dispossession of Indigenous territories to the benefit of the settler colonial state (Simpson 1999; 2004). It first appeared on an international level in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to failing top-down development strategies (Nadasdy 1999; Dumoulin 2003; Nadasdy 2005). On the one hand, local resistance from Indigenous communities, among others, posed serious challenges to development projects. On the other hand, growing ecological consciousness brought forth the concept of sustainable development. At the time, recent anthropological work had started to give credence to Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems, especially pertaining to what academia calls "ecological knowledge." From there, new "bottom-up" development strategies were elaborated, seeking to solve the issues of resistance and sustainability through the consultation of local populations. By involving Indigenous peoples and their "ecological wisdom" in the development projects through TEK, the goal was to neutralize their resistance by making it seem that they were closely engaged in the process (Nadasdy 2005).

The same strategy was used in Canada through the co-management of development and conservation projects. What, at first glance, seemed like a potentially decolonizing collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples turned out, unsurprisingly perhaps, to be yet another colonial strategy to ensure the continuation of settler-colonial domination over Indigenous territories. TEK was an important component of this new strategy as it was used as a proof of genuine collaboration between Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous scientists and bureaucrats in charge of the elaboration of such development and conservation projects (Nadasdy 1999; Simpson 1999; Simpson 2004; Nadasdy 2005).

Simpson identified multiple issues with the way Indigenous knowledge has been integrated into hegemonic scientific knowledge. One underlying problem pertains to the ontological differences informing these different knowledge systems. Here, we understand ontology as it is defined by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, who propose conceiving of ontology as the study of "ways of existing of objects, beings and

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events" (Winograd and Flores 1986 in Escobar 2014/2018, 113, our translation). These two authors identify three levels within ontology. On the first level, ontology represents the preconceived ideas of different social groups regarding what exists a priori and truly in the world (Escobar 2014/2018, 113). On the second level, ontology is conceived as a performative matrix: ontology is enacted through the practices that make all the more "real" the presuppositions of the first level. On the third level, ontology is based on and legitimized by the stories people believe and tell about themselves through myths, rituals, stories of creation, and so on, which means ontology also constructs itself through mythological narration. Obviously, Indigenous knowledge systems differ greatly from one nation to another, but many scholars recognize that most Indigenous ontologies are holistic and relational (Simpson 1999; Wilson 2001; Simpson 2004; Kuokkanen 2007; Kovach 2010; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). This means, among other things, that they do not recognize nature and culture as radically separate. Rather, relational ontologies conceive the world as a network of reciprocal relations in which every being, human or nonhuman, plays a part in maintaining the balance of the whole. Such ontologies differ greatly from the ones underlying scientific knowledge—a cultural form of knowledge aiming to master the natural dimensions of the world (Blaser 2009). As we shall see, such a radical distinction between nature and culture creates an ontology based on rupture and domination rather than on reciprocal relations. The result is that scholars who engaged with Indigenous peoples through these development projects lacked the ability—and perhaps the will—to recognize the complexity and richness of the knowledge that was shared with them. Moreover, the conflation of TEK and Indigenous knowledge makes it more difficult for Indigenous people to then oppose the development or conservation projects the settler colonial states wish to impose onto their territories. As a consequence, TEK becomes a valuable tool for furthering the appropriation/dispossession of Indigenous land and their resources by settler colonial states, and obviously further weakens Indigenous peoples' capacity for self-determination (Nadasdy 1999; Simpson 1999; Simpson 2004; Nadasdy 2005).

Paul Nadasdy, an anthropologist who has also analyzed the political dimension of TEK, gives a telling example of such failure. While studying a co-management initiative aimed at the conservation of Dall sheep in Yukon Territory (Canada), members of the Kluane First Nation involved in the process shared their frustration about some of the outcomes of the project. The hunters and elders who were consulted explained the inadequacy of a hunting rule that limited hunting to full curl rams. Although this solution appears logical insofar as it prevents the killing of youngsters and females,

> They argued that these animals are especially important to the overall sheep population because of their role as teachers; it is from these mature rams that younger rams learn proper mating and rutting behavior as well as more general survival strategies. Thus, killing too many full curl rams has an impact on the population far in excess of the number of animals actually killed by hunters. (Nadasdy 1999, 7)

Here, Nadasdy points to the inability of scientists and bureaucrats to recognize the validity of Indigenous knowledge pertaining to the sociality of Dall sheep. According to his account, the scientists simply ignored the argument. One of Nadasdy's hypotheses is that the scientists either didn't recognize the validity of the argument or they didn't know how to integrate such information into their knowledge system based on statistical projections (8). The conflict at hand here opposes two different ways of conceiving knowledge: instrumental and relational. On the one hand, scientific knowledge

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serves as a means to an end understood as a direct relationship: we want to protect Dall sheep, therefore females and youngsters are the logical population to protect in order to increase their numbers. On the other hand, Indigenous knowledge systems understand the relationality linking the different elements of Creation and enable thinking beyond a quantitative analysis: the overall Dall sheep population has better chances of survival if the individuals responsible for teaching others how to survive are protected as well. Understood this way, the issue at hand is an ontological and epistemological one, but it is also a matter of power relations between people socialized within different ontologies. From our perspective, a transformative dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge holders should encourage both parties to take the other's propositions seriously—which was not the case in the example above: scientists didn't give credence to the hunters' and elders' claims. Therefore, we argue that, in a settler colonial context, such a dialogue requires the active deconstruction of subjectivities, especially on the part of the settlers, in order to disrupt well-established colonial dynamics. Of course, there can never be any guarantee of a successful dialogue, but there certainly are conditions that can foster its chances of success. We will explore such conditions in the following pages, but first, we want to examine the logic of mastery identified by many feminist scholars as playing a role in structuring modern and contemporary subjectivity, especially that of the settler subject.

Western Foundations of Masterful Subjectivity

As white women in the Canadian settler colonial context, we are very sensitive to the necessity of breaking with the logic of mastery. The logic of elimination at the core of settler colonialism is grounded in the logic of mastery that has aimed to appropriate Indigenous territories and to assimilate Indigenous people. Master subjects act as if they had the prerogative to determine who should have access to the territories and resources they claim to have discovered. In the words of Patrick Wolfe, "Whatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory" (Wolfe 2006, 388). The point Wolfe is making here is that in a settler colonial context, everything is subjected to the appropriation/dispossession of Indigenous territories. The logic of mastery claims as its own the bodies, lands, knowledge, and souls inhabiting the territories it aims to occupy and exploit.

In *Unthinking Mastery*, Julietta Singh—while refusing to offer a definitive and reductionist definition of mastery—pinpoints some qualities of the logic of mastery that enable us to identify it. First, it tends to produce deep divisions by erecting borders between the diverse elements of the world, for example, between reason/emotion, culture/nature, mind/body, "civilized"/"savage," men/women (Singh 2018, 12). Next, it tends to set them against one another by subordinating one of the elements *vis-à-vis* the other, thereby creating hierarchies. According to Singh, mastery has participated in constructing the hegemonic model of humanity and of the subject that we know today. She writes:

> The splitting that is inherent to mastery, the fracturing that confirms and inaugurates it, and the ongoing practices of subordination that drive it forward are inescapable in the foundational thinking of the subject of modern political thought. Therein, the very notion of the human relies on and is totally unthinkable without mastery. (13)

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Therefore, Western philosophy has historically constructed a model of the subject through masterful subjectivity that is based on the above dualisms and that requires mastery and dominion—by reason—of nature (Plumwood 1993; Gilson 2014; Singh 2018). The construction of dualisms has supported the association of otherness with the devalued side of the binary oppositions. As Erinn Gilson explains in *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, the masterful subjectivity that results from the logic of mastery claims to serve as a universal, neutral, and objective model of the subject (Gilson 2014). However, this model of subjectivity—based on the exclusion and domination of the devalorized terms in binary oppositions (emotion, nature, body, and so on)—necessarily excludes all the groups and peoples who have been tied to these spheres. Val Plumwood writes:

> The category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. Thus racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic difference as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture. (Plumwood 1993, 4)

The construction of the radical difference and submission of nature in the face of reason and culture not only had the consequence of creating otherness but also erasing dependency and relationality. For Plumwood, the type of dualism produced by mastery must be understood as a denial of dependency on whom and what has been devalued (nature, the sphere of reproduction, women, the work of colonized and racialized people, and so forth). Thus, the negation of our dependence on nature justifies its submission to the realm of culture and reason. In this sense, groups who have been tied to nature (women, racialized groups, and Indigenous peoples) are offered two choices: either be incorporated/assimilated in this master model by accepting the radical difference between nature and reason, or be denied the recognition of belonging to humanity. Plumwood writes:

> For Aboriginal and other colonised peoples, the dilemma of difference in racist society appears in the choice between the alien and the assimilated. The coloniser can recognise the other only as a form of self, valuing only those aspects of the colonised which reflect the master model. The coloniser erases unassimilated difference as terra nullius, creating alternatives of treating the unassimilated other as alien or subhuman versus incorporating the other via difference-denying assimilation. Incorporation in the empire promises "human" treatment on condition of abandonment of any political assertion of cultural difference. In both cases the other is valued only in terms of its conformity to the master norm, in terms of sameness. (161)

An important nuance in our argument, as demonstrated by Singh and Plumwood, is that one should not associate mastery strictly with white Western men, as it is equally important to guard against its reproduction within social relations and political resistance strategies (Singh 2018). Singh writes, "to put it crudely, a colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially *and* by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders 'legitimate' the forceful imposition of his worldviews"

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(Singh 2018, 9). Among others, liberal and eurocentric feminists have contributed to the exclusion of many women by adopting and reproducing masterful subjectivity as an emancipation strategy. This is also true within academia. As shown by postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, so-called feminist research has often resulted in the objectification of nonwhite women and the invisibilization of their strategies of resistance and emancipation. In so doing, white women have prolonged and perpetuated racist and colonial oppression (Mohanty 1984). Therefore, even within critical theory, such as feminist theory, it seems difficult to engage with the other in a transformative way. Kuokkanen has addressed this issue through the concept of hospitality, arguing for the academic world to become more hospitable to Indigenous peoples and epistemes. We now turn to her discussion of the logic of the gift to further deconstruct our own colonial perspective.

The Logic of the Gift as Enactment of Relationality

As we have seen, the academic community doesn't escape the logic of mastery since there is still little room for the worldviews and philosophies of groups and people other than those who have embraced mastery. In *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift*, Kuokkanen presents the logic of the gift as a practice that aspires to transform the academic world into a more hospitable environment for Indigenous persons and epistemes. However, as she puts it herself:

> Before we raise concepts that derive from our own cultural framework but that have strong colonial, European (more specifically Enlightenment), and patriarchal connotations in common parlance, we will need to carefully deconstruct and decolonize those concepts so that we will be able to employ them in ways that remind us to heed their oppressive origins in other cultural contexts. (Kuokkanen 2007, 25)

Kuokkanen thereby proceeds to a critical examination of non-Indigenous interpretations of the gift. According to her, classic interpretations of the gift as advanced by Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Godbout are problematic for many reasons. We will examine two, which we consider especially relevant for our purpose. First, these interpretations generally present the gift as an exchange between individuals, and thus this exchange is understood as taking place exclusively between human beings (26). The consequences of this interpretation lead us to the second criticism, which deplores the fact that the gift is interpreted according to the Western model of market exchange. In this sense, the gift is understood as entailing the receiver's indebtedness to the giver. This is why Bourdieu says that the gift is a practice "par excellence" of symbolic violence in precapitalist societies (27). As we shall see, Indigenous interpretations of the gift are far more complex and lead to a multiplicity of relational models. Framing its relational potential as being limited to violence is extremely reductive.

Kuokkanen then moves on to a critical examination of non-Indigenous feminist interpretations of the gift. She turns more specifically to Genevieve Vaughan and Kaarina Kailo, both members of the International Feminist Gift Economy Network,[1] who identify two distinct economic paradigms: that of the exchange and that of the gift. In their perspective, the gift is said to have been rendered invisible and contaminated by the hegemony of the exchange paradigm. Market economies involve the exchange of objects and services of equal value, and are based on the exploitation of

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the gifts of nature and the underpaid labor of precarious populations (30). Vaughan's argument is in line with the argument of women and feminists critical of masterful subjectivity. According to her, the gift paradigm, without ever disappearing, has been devalorized in the same way practices of care have been:

> According to the Western liberal norm of the individualist subject, dependence on other people is something to be feared. The common attitude of "no strings attached" or "even-steven" supports the existence of separate, self-contained individuals with minimal responsibilities toward one another. When this model is taken to its extreme, receiving gifts can only be a burden, because one then owes the giver something of at least equal value . . . . According to this ethos, dependence and responsibility are bad, because they imply obligations and duties that are external to oneself, whether these involve other individuals or society at large. (37)

Therefore, to be able to transform the exchange economy into a gift economy, the world must be restructured around values and practices of care (31). Although this interpretation is more appealing to Kuokkanen, she still takes issue with framing the gift as a strictly economic practice.

According to Kuokkanen and Kaarina Kailo, because women of color and Indigenous women have been subjugated by masterful subjectivity, their marginalization has enabled/forced them to remain closer to the practice of the gift (32). This is why Kuokkanen turns to the logic of the gift as it exists within diverse Indigenous communities. Rather than seeing the gift as an economic paradigm, she makes of it the site of (re)production of relational ontologies (32). The gift is a practice aimed at acknowledging the bonds of kinship that unite all elements of Creation. It is thus a practice that "enacts" relational ontologies, which echoes the performative level of ontology defined by Winograd and Flores earlier. In this regard:

> Thomas King notes that "while the relationship that Native people have with the land certainly has a spiritual aspect to it, it is also a practical matter that balances respect with survival. It is an ethic that can be seen in the decisions and actions of a community and that is contained in the songs that Native people sing and the stories that they tell about the nature of the world and their place in it, about the webs of responsibilities that bind all things . . . ." (King 2003, cited in Kuokkanen 2007, 33)

The gift thus appears as a much more complex practice embedded in the experience of Indigenous realities well beyond the economic sphere. As Kuokkanen explains, the gift is a practice that enables individuals to enact relational ontologies, but also to find their place in the relational world. This place is determined largely by each person's responsibilities for maintaining stability within this relational network. The gift is directly tied to the relational, interdependent nature of Creation and refers to the reciprocity/responsibility all elements of this world have toward one another. To illustrate how responsibility is understood differently in such contexts, Kuokkanen breaks down the word into two components: response and ability, "this kind of reciprocity implies response-ability—that is, an ability to respond, to remain attuned to the world beyond oneself, as well as a willingness to recognize its existence through the giving of gifts" (39).

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In our view, her work of decolonizing the gift is in itself a gift she offers to Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the academic community. However, as she herself acknowledges, receiving the logic of the gift is no simple matter. As shown by the example of TEK, receiving the gift of Indigenous knowledge can easily result in colonial appropriation. As Kuokkanen explains in a conversation with Ina Knobblock about the decolonization of feminism, it also often appears difficult for feminist academics to receive the gift and be inclusive of Indigenous philosophies and epistemes (Knobblock and Kuokkanen 2015). For Kuokkanen, being more inclusive of Indigenous thought should enable Indigenous and non-Indigenous people "to start conversing together, dialoguing and talking to each other on more equal terms, and to listen a great deal more, without arrogance or a sense of superiority. In fact, as a decolonizing process, such a dialogue would require talking on Indigenous—in this case, on Sámi—terms" (Knobblock and Kuokkanen 2015, 278). Therefore, Kuokkanen situates the ability to receive the logic of the gift itself as a condition for receiving any other Indigenous gifts, including Indigenous knowledge. She advocates for academia to embrace relational ontologies through the practice of the gift in order for Indigenous people and knowledge to find and make their own place within it.

Reclaiming Relational Ontologies, Creating New Realities

In *Peace, Power, Righteousness,* the Kanien'kehá:ka intellectual and activist Taiaiake Alfred explains that decolonization requires that indigenous people *reclaim* their "Indigenous contexts" (traditional cultures, knowledge systems, lifeways) in order to create new realities and move toward Indigenous resurgence (Alfred 1999; Simpson 2011, 17). Reclaim(ing) is a concept-practice we see as highly promising for imagining emancipation in the face of settler colonialism and Western colonial and patriarchal hegemony framed earlier as the logic of mastery. Reclaim(ing) enables Indigenous people to disrupt colonial mastery and cognitive imperialism, to reestablish relational ontologies and foreground new Indigenous realities that aim at rebalancing relations among all the elements of Creation. This is a promising concept because "from a Nishnaabeg theoretical and legal perspective[,] regeneration or restoration [of the language, Nishnaabeg values, political processes and philosophies] is at the core of the re-balancing of the relationships [with all of the elements of Creation as with non-Indigenous Canadians]" (Simpson 2011, 23).

To reclaim thus represents a political strategy of reappropriation, by oneself and for oneself, foregrounded by Indigenous peoples, women, feminists, and intellectuals, but also by non-Indigenous ecofeminists. Each of these groups enact and define reclaim (ing) strategies according to their own struggles. In the movements and writings of Indigenous people, women, and feminists (*Reclaim Your Power Facebook group*; *Reclaim Turtle Island Facebook group*; Maracle 1996; Maracle and Lamonde 2000; Anderson and Lawrence 2003; Simpson 2011), reclaim(ing) strategies are widely mobilized to resist the Western colonial and patriarchal world in order to reestablish and repair relational worlds (Perreault 2013). The concept of reclaim(ing) is also at the heart of ecofeminism. For ecofeminists,[2] reclaim(ing) pertains to the relationship and bond with nature and aims to subvert the dominant model that constructs itself outside of nature (Mies and Shiva 1993/2014; Plumwood 1993; Salleh 1997; Hache 2016). By reclaiming the bond with nature, these women express that we are all—women and men—intrinsically tied to nature. French ecofeminist Émilie Hache proposes a general definition of the concept: "reclaim[ing] signifies both rehabilitating and reappropriating

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something destroyed, devalorized, and modifying it—as well as being modified by this reappropriation" (Hache 2016, 23, our translation). In our view, reclaim(ing) *simultaneously implies* the following: 1. refusing the shame and inferiorization imposed by the assimilation/exclusion logic of the master model; 2. (re)affirming the existence of relational worlds and modes of relation that have been negated and rendered invisible by Western colonial, capitalist and patriarchal hegemony; and 3. envisioning new futures that enable the flourishing of those ways of being (Simpson 2011). It is important to keep in mind that, although we theoretically separate these three dimensions, in practice, they *overlap* and *co-construct one another*.

First, reclaim(ing) represents a necessary step in restoring the practices, modes of relation, and worldviews of inferiorized groups that have been marginalized and disrupted by the logic of mastery. They need to restore Indigenous contexts not because they have been completely effaced by colonial and sexist structures of oppression, but because their depreciation was used to justify relations of domination and humiliation. Reclaiming thus involves (re)signifying, by oneself and for oneself, what has been stigmatized, shamed, or rendered invisible. In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, Simpson writes about the colonial shame that has been imposed by what she calls *cognitive imperialism*:

> And if I am honest, I also thought about the shame that I carry inside of me from the legacy of colonial abuse, the unspoken shame we carry collectively as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. It is shame that is rooted in the humiliation that colonialism has heaped on our peoples for hundreds of years and is now carried within our bodies, minds and our hearts. . . . To me, this colonial shame felt like not only a tremendous burden to carry, but it also felt displaced. We are not shameful people. We have done nothing wrong. I began to realize that shame can only take hold when we are disconnected from the stories of resistance within our own families and communities. I placed shame as an insidious and infectious part of the cognitive imperialism that was aimed at convincing us that we were weak and defeated people, and that there was no point in resisting or resurging. (Simpson 2011, 13–14)

In this passage, Simpson unveils the shame that she feels from the story of her people being monopolized by the settler colonial state's narrative. This colonial perspective renders invisible Indigenous practices and "stories of resistance" (13). This is precisely what she means by cognitive imperialism. Thus, this example makes clear that refusing colonial shame is necessary for the search and creation of alternate stories about oneself.

Second, the concept-practice of reclaim(ing) seeks the symbolic and material reestablishing of ontologies marginalized by colonial and patriarchal oppression. As Simpson writes, "through the lens of colonial thought and cognitive imperialism, we are often unable to see our Ancestors. We are unable to see their philosophies . . . " (15). By means of diverse reclaim(ing) strategies, Indigenous intellectuals, women, and feminists are reappropriating symbols and practices that allow for repairing relational worlds and reestablishing reciprocity and balance in the world, in particular by reappropriating the spiritual dimension intrinsic to Indigenous cosmologies. Although Kuokkanen doesn't speak explicitly in terms of reclaim(ing), her work can be conceived as the reappropriation of a practice—the gift—that aims to reestablish reciprocity and balance. We also see this form of reclaiming among Indigenous researchers who integrate spirituality into their research practices or reclaim their creation stories. For Simpson, thinking about how to build new realities or "new houses" must "[begin] with our Creation Stories,

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because these stories set the 'theoretical framework,' or give us the ontological context from within which we can interpret other stories, teachings and experiences" (32). These Creation stories as theoretical framework through the restoration of relational ontologies set the conditions for the last dimension of reclaim(ing) as a concept-practice: the creation of futures that have yet to be imagined.

Finally, reclaim(ing) is changing the master story and "tak[ing] into our hands the power to create, restore and explore different stories" (Plumwood 1993, 196). Reclaim(ing) must be understood as not only a move toward subverting power relations, but as the creation of other possibilities. Hache explains that reclaiming simultaneously implies reappropriating, reaffirming, actualizing, and resignifying that of which one has been dispossessed. Hence, to reclaim does not signify so much a return to sources or to an essence. Rather, it is the remobilizing and actualizing of what has been destroyed or depreciated, and its positive reaffirmation for a *new ethico-political project*. For Alfred and Simpson, this new ethico-political project constitutes Indigenous *resurgence*:

> Resurgence does not "literally mean returning to the past," insists Simpson, "but rather re-creating the cultural and political flourishment of the past to support the well being of our contemporary citizens." For Simpson this requires that we reclaim "the fluidity of our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism" (Simpson 2011, 51). Resurgence, in this view, draws critically on the past with an eye to radically transform the colonial power relations that have come to dominate our present. (Coulthard 2014, 156)

Reclaiming is promising when thinking about the conditions of our learning from Indigenous women's, feminists', and intellectuals' philosophies because it provides the settings for imagining a move toward rebalancing power relations.

When Kuokkanen makes of the gift an ontological practice that allows for envisioning the opening up of the academy to Indigenous persons and epistemes, she is reclaiming a practice that holds the promise to rebalance power relations in the academic community. However, we must establish the conditions required to receive the gift of the gift extended to us by Kuokkanen. Without such a reflexive process, we may very well receive her gift through the logic of mastery, which would result in appropriation and the reproduction of colonial relations. She writes, "The gift of indigenous epistemes must be recognized and received appropriately, even if it may not be possible to fully grasp the logic of the gift. Full comprehension may prove impossible, and furthermore, to seek that comprehension may represent a colonizing, totalizing attempt to contain the 'other'" (Kuokkanen 2007, 120). Indeed, she calls upon us to ask ourselves, "How can we collectively and individually begin to transform our values so that they will better reflect the basic principles of the gift, that is, participation and reciprocation, which are the conditions of being human?" (157). In an attempt to offer a possible answer to this question, we now turn to the concept of ontological and epistemic vulnerability.

Deconstructing the Master Subject through Vulnerability

As we see it, and in line with Singh's proposition, vulnerability underlies a promising relational ethics in order to deconstruct masterful subjectivity and reconstruct ourselves as beings who fully recognize their relational constitution. This conceptualization of vulnerability is derived from Butler's and Gilson's theories: "On this account,

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vulnerability is a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways" (Gilson 2011, 310), putting forward the fundamentally relational nature of our being-in-the-world. This understanding of vulnerability aims at reversing the stigma attached to vulnerability as it is commonly understood. As previously demonstrated, contemporary capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial societies, with their inherent promotion of masterful subjectivity, ineluctably devalorize all features that conflict with their privileged model. In Gilson's account, this criticism of masterful subjectivity is articulated through the *myth* of invulnerability (Gilson 2011)—insofar as it is an inaccessible and illusory ideal of contemporary capitalist societies. Indeed, this myth not only underlies the common-sense definition of vulnerability as a negative condition, but also enforces an ideal of autonomy conflated with independence—which resonates with the denial of dependency comprised in the logic of mastery. However, as Gilson shows, the conditions of vulnerability and relationality of human existence are not simply a gauge of "negative" experiences such as the possibility of being injured, but are also the necessary condition of positive experiences such as love, friendship, and solidarity (Gilson 2011, 310). Vulnerability thus appears to be the very condition through which we experience relationality. In this sense, we consider that this resignifying work can be identified as a reclaiming strategy, in the same way as Kuokkanen's decolonizing of the gift.

Gilson's interpretation of vulnerability is inspired largely by Butler's work as she offers a rich and extensive theoretical account of the matter. Butler defines vulnerability as a primary condition (Butler 2004/2006, 26): we are born vulnerable—that is, *dependent* on others and on our environment to survive. Our primary vulnerability is simultaneously due to our condition as *embodied*, *social*, and *emotional* beings. Thus, we are at once dependent on 1. *material* conditions to feed and house ourselves, but also to act politically—she gives the example of infrastructure, such as streets, that allows for political protests to take place;[3] 2. *symbolic* conditions such as norms to name ourselves that, in turn, enable our social recognition; and 3. *emotional* conditions such as love and attention for our psychological development. This condition of primary vulnerability highlights our inevitable exposure to our social and natural environments. Such exposure happens under conditions beyond our control—it cannot be mastered, just as our environments cannot be mastered. The conditions and the outcomes of our inherent exposure are unpredictable. To the contrary of what the logic of mastery leads us to believe, Butler demonstrates that it is precisely this unpredictability that conditions our agency.

In adopting a *primary* conception of vulnerability, Butler shows that there are never individuals and then relationships, but *only already relational subjects*: we cannot speak of human beings without also speaking of the networks of interrelationships in which they are situated. In this sense, vulnerability is a condition that foregrounds the lure of masterful subjectivity and its alleged independence. Also, as Butler points out, we remain dependent on others and on our environments throughout our lives. This dependence is, of course, *inter*dependence: we depend on others, and they in turn depend on us. Butler illustrates this interdependence by examining the public nature of our bodies, which are supposed to be the private site *par excellence* since they are also the site of reproduction:

> who we are, bodily, is already a way of being "for" the other, appearing in ways that we can neither see nor hear; that is, we are made available, bodily, for another whose perspective we can neither fully anticipate nor control. In this way, I am,

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> as a body, not only for myself, not even primarily for myself, but I find myself . . . constituted and dispossessed by the perspective of others. So, for political action, I must appear to others in ways I cannot know, and in this way, my body is established by perspectives that I cannot inhabit but that, surely, inhabit me. (Butler 2015, 76)

In this sense, even my body is always *relationally constituted,* because it is the interface through which I appear to others. This appearance/exposure is marked by my condition of vulnerability because it is at once the affirmation of me *and* its dispossession: through my body, I appear to others in ways they cannot control, but at the same time, I have no control over what others perceive of this body that I am. In this sense, I affect them—by appearing—and they affect me in return through their perception and reaction to my appearance. This exposure to affecting and being affected is thus inherent in the exercise of our agency (Butler 2015; 2016).

Butler is well aware of the risks of theorizing agency and emancipation through a concept as heavily charged as vulnerability (Butler 2015, 139). For example, as we have seen, patriarchal mastery differentiates women and men on the basis of binary oppositions including activity/passivity, reason/emotions, strength/weakness, and *invulnerability/vulnerability.* Butler, like Singh, observes that seeking correspondence to the part of the binary couple associated with invulnerability, strength, reason, and so on results not in a radical transformation of social relations but in their "displaced" reproduction. It is in this way that the work of resignifying the concept of vulnerability can be viewed as an act of reclaiming. Instead of struggling to show that we are *not*—as asserted by patriarchy—vulnerable, Butler chooses to demonstrate how we *all* are vulnerable (143). However, for her, this shared condition does not mean that we all experience our condition of vulnerability identically. In *Precarious Life*, she addresses the necessity to find ways to speak of a common condition without obliterating difference, that is, without reducing all the beings who share it to a homogeneous "same" (Butler 2004/2006, 27).

Butler thus introduces the notion of *precarity* (Butler 2004/2006, 25), which allows for distinguishing the commonly shared condition of vulnerability from precarity, the condition resulting from the exploitation of the former. It is thus clear that, for Butler, the vulnerability—or the condition of (inter)dependence—that fundamentally characterizes the beings we are is not a problem in itself. Rather, what is to be criticized is the way regimes of power exploit this condition. However, as mentioned before, vulnerability is, at the same time, the necessary condition for the effective exercise of our agency. If dominant people and structures were not themselves also vulnerable, the power relations against which we struggle would be permanent, ahistorical, fatal—we could not even imagine social change. Social change requires that vulnerability be a universal and permanent condition for us all, that all of us can not only *affect* but *be affected*—oppressors and oppressed alike.

This is why, in line with the strategy of reclaiming, Butler demonstrates how vulnerability is also the ontological condition of groups in positions of power, even though they actively deny it. Thus, demonstrations of force by dominant groups are a means of denying this shared condition of vulnerability in order to perpetuate their domination. Violence is all at once a means to deny vulnerability and a way of relegating vulnerability to the Other. This first form of denial, which involves the use of violence, is accompanied by its "peaceful" corollary, that is, paternalism toward so-called vulnerable populations. Such a paternalistic approach, instead of acknowledging the relationality

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that links precarious populations to privileged populations—and thereby calling into question the modalities of these relations (exploitation, oppression, exclusion)—justifies taking charge and controlling precarious populations while proclaiming one's own moral and material superiority (Butler 2015, 144). These two forms of denial of vulnerability oblige Butler to conclude that "targeting [the denial of vulnerability through violence] and protecting [the denial of vulnerability through paternalism] are practices that belong to the same rationale of power" (144). As we understand it, this rationale of power is precisely the one that (re)produces the logic of mastery, hence the interest in resignifying and reclaiming vulnerability. Without resignifying vulnerability and recognizing it as our shared ontological condition, we always risk reproducing mastery's regime of power, which leads to precarity. In the end, when Butler calls on us to acknowledge—to reclaim—our shared vulnerability, that is, our condition of fundamental interdependence, it is not as a means to enable a utopian, harmonious, post-conflict world. Rather, it is to envision a world in which conflict is thought *through* the relationality that renders the different opposing parties mutually constitutive (151).

Relationality: Vulnerability and the Logic of the Gift

We, the authors, both have been socialized within a settler colonial context, and although our intentions are decolonial, we are well aware of the challenges we face when wanting to humbly participate in the project/process of decolonization. We do not claim to have proposed here a comprehensive solution to this complex issue. Rather, we took this opportunity to reflect upon the conditions under which our own subjectivities have been formed—that is, the logic of mastery in the Canadian settler colonial state—in order to better situate ourselves and the deconstructive work that needs to be done for an ethics of decolonial dialogue to be imagined and enacted within the academic world. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have demonstrated in their influential article "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" (Tuck and Yang 2012), decolonization cannot and must not be reduced to its symbolic dimension. However, we do believe this complex project/process must be approached on various fronts. Considering that the example of TEK demonstrates the intertwinement of knowledge and the material/structural dimensions of colonialism, we believe the proposition we have developed here may be of some use in enacting decolonial practices from a privileged standpoint.

The example of TEK has shown that simply asking "what" we can learn from Indigenous peoples, philosophies, and epistemes doesn't address the more fundamental question of the conditions under which genuine learning is possible. The ontological difference between an instrumental approach to knowledge and a relational one bars the way to the establishment of a transformative dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Pulling from Kuokkanen's invitation to familiarize ourselves with the logic of the gift in order to decolonize academia, we have sought a way to establish the conditions necessary for receiving its logic as people critical of—but privileged by—colonial relations. If we see in vulnerability, as an ontological condition, a promising avenue for fostering the receiving of the gift by non-Indigenous persons, it is because, like the gift, it foregrounds a relational ontology. Unless we acknowledge our shared vulnerability, we always risk understanding the gift through the master lens as an economic practice (an alternative one, perhaps) without enacting the ontological and subjective transformations required to overcome colonial domination. Vulnerability invites us to be open to difference, and this is the reason Gilson encourages us, as scholars, to move toward an epistemic ethics of vulnerability so that we can

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welcome this difference and learn from it. In "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," Gilson dissects her epistemic ethics of vulnerability into five complementary dimensions:

> first and foremost, . . . epistemic vulnerability begins with being open to not knowing, which is the precondition of learning. Second, it is an openness to being wrong and venturing one's ideas, beliefs, and feelings nonetheless. . . . Third, epistemic vulnerability entails the ability to put oneself in and learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign, and perhaps uncomfortable party. . . . Fourth and relatedly, the concept of epistemic vulnerability calls attention to the affective and bodily dimensions of knowledge. . . . Last, one must be open to altering not just one's ideas and beliefs, but one's self and sense of one's self. (Gilson 2011, 325)

As is made evident by this excerpt, an epistemic ethics of vulnerability creates the necessary conditions for transformative dialogue to take place across differences. In Butler's perspective, vulnerability should never be seen as an identical condition for all beings who share it. Rather, it is the condition of openness through which relationality is acknowledged.

As non-Indigenous academics working with Indigenous philosophy and literature, we searched for a way to develop a position open to transformation. By exploring critical race theory and decolonial/postcolonial theory we were made aware of how critical it is to decenter ourselves and our perspective on the world in order to make space for marginalized voices. Despite being sensitive to these issues, we sometimes felt we were resisting the critiques put forth by Indigenous philosophies. We were not resisting them by deeming them wrong, but by subconsciously relating to them as though they concerned other white people, and not us personally. Other times, we resisted them through the guilt and shame they evoked in us. By virtue of this resistance, we adopted a masterful position that foreclosed the possibility for transformation that should have unfolded with such contact with Indigenous people and texts. The concept of vulnerability and more specifically of epistemic vulnerability has taught us to stay attuned to those feelings and to engage them, instead of using them to deny the relationality they implied. Positioning ourselves as epistemically vulnerable has enabled us to transform distance into relationality and guilt into responsibility, which alters the relations of domination from which we benefit. In this sense, it moved us toward being open to receive the gift of the gift. Therefore, we believe reclaiming epistemic vulnerability as privileged scholars holds, if not the guarantee, then at least the promise of transformative dialogue between people who are differently situated within colonial (and other) power relations. This does not signify that we will automatically understand one another, only that the hierarchical relations that make it impossible to properly hear the Other will be brought to light, in an effort to establish a more level field for dialogue.

Notes

We consider that a theoretical reflection always emerges in relation and in dialogue with people, writings, spaces, and territories. Therefore, we want to acknowledge that this article has been written on unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory. We would also like to thank our professors and thesis supervisors Leila Iliana Celis and Naïma Hamrouni. Their works have inspired this article, and the trust they have always shown us is precious beyond words. Special thanks to Sonia Alimi for providing us with references in disability studies. Last but not least, we thank all the friends and allies who supported and encouraged us

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1 For further information on the Network, visit their website: http://gift-economy.com/

2 Ecofeminism is a highly diffuse and heterogeneous militant movement and theoretical current. In this regard, we do not claim here to present all the reclaim(ing) strategies or all the perspectives that exist among ecofeminists, but, rather, principally those related to our perspective.

3 Here, Butler derives her analysis from disability studies' demonstrations of human beings' universal dependence on infrastructure. For further reading on the topic in the field of disability studies, see Morris 2001; Erevelles 2002; Davis 2017.

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