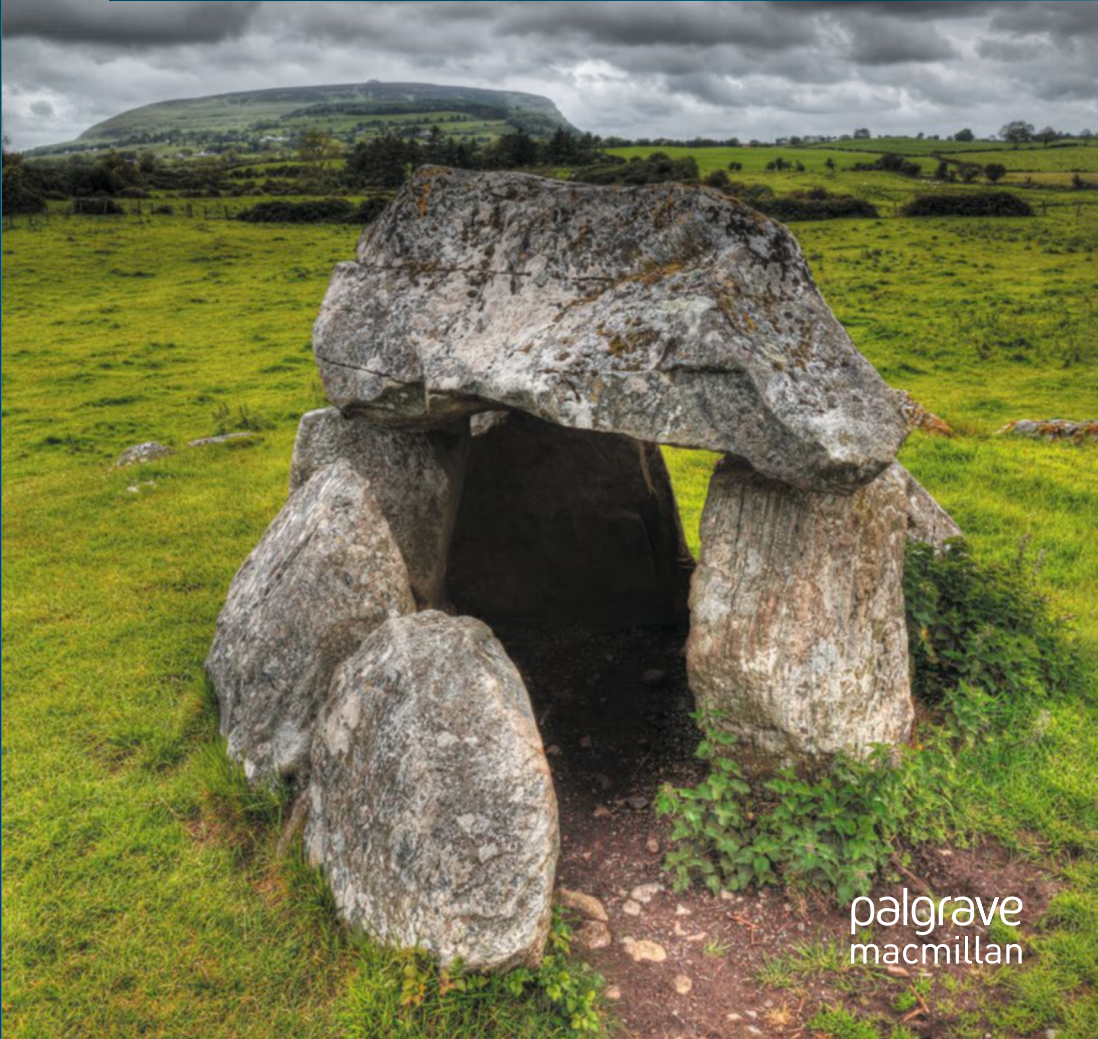




Political Spirituality in the Face of Climate Collapse

Of Monsters, Megaliths, Mules, and Muck

James W. Perkinson



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Political Spirituality in the Face of Climate Collapse

“James W. Perkinson and his spiders are back again. There is no other thinker in the US that can think political spirituality in such an imaginative, complex, fundamental, disturbing and helpful way. *Political Spirituality in the Face of Climate Collapse: Of Monsters, Megaliths, Mules, and Muck* is a work of prophetic imagination, combining fabulation/speculation, Realpolitik, viruses, Biblical stories, economy, Christianity, biodiversity, multispecies concerns, indigenous wisdom, climate change and more. This is indeed a monstrous theological work that we must engage. We don’t know where we are going in these scary times and Dr. Perkinson knows that. However, his deep sense of being lost might be one of the ways to get ourselves oriented. This is indeed a must read book!”

—Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Professor of Worship, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, author, Ritual at the World’s End: Essays on Eco-Liturgical Liberation Theology*

“Activist, poet, scholar, and prophet James Perkinson dives into monstrous waters with his new book on climate collapse, the contribution of the Christian tradition to this crisis, and what it might mean to live within our species’ and our planet’s limitations. Looking both to the past and to the non-human as primary conversation partners, Perkinson re-imagines ways in which humanity can think through what it means to be monstrous, and to live as part of a wonderfully monstrous world. Perkinson draws from a wide range of disciplines, including ethics, environmental studies, monster studies, theology, and social sciences, to create a truly unique work of both scholarship and vision.”

—Brandon R. Grafius, *Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Academic Dean, Ecumenical Theological Seminary, Detroit, and author, Lurking Under the Surface and Concerning Dust and Ashes (forth., Oxford University Press)*

“Monsters come in many sizes and shapes, from roaming empires to mites and viruses. They congregate at the high table, and they have forgotten that the excretion of one monster is the food for another. Civilised and faithful human-kinds who walk in the light of their scriptures are among the monsters who terrorise the world. With flare and determination, Perkinson points readers to reins that could hold back our monstrous tendencies: shed the illusion of supremacy, inhale the spirit of reciprocity, collaborate with other-kinds, and sing songs that affirm (bio) diversity as necessary for L.I.F.E.”

—Jione Havea, *pastor Methodist Church, Tonga, research fellow Trinity Methodist Theological College, Aotearoa, New Zealand, and author/editor, Vulnerability and Resilience: Body and Liberating Theologies (among many others)*

“Jim Perkinson’s immense, yes monstrous, adventure into the planet’s ecology invites you on a journey intimate and terrifying, microscopic and galactic, nomadic and cosmopolitan. Don’t resist its story, its data, its epiphany. Let its ancient and coming energies provoke your collaboration with the more-than-human—now!”

—Catherine Keller, *George T. Cobb Professor of Constructive Theology, Drew Theological School, author of Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Chances*

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Dedicated to all who have been coerced into outsized lurching and struggling, through no desire of their own, whether too large or too small, in the press of this now caterwauling world of grabbing—whether two-legged or winged, finned, leaf-ed or loping, churning or splitting, in longing and wonder and rambling still dreaming the mystery of giving and becoming, life, food, beauty, blessing!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In deference to my growing awareness of ancestry and more indigenous practice—around me, under me, over me, and hopefully, after me—I begin as each day now begins: saluting what I am learning to call “Grandfather Sun.” But also, then that ancestor’s own Mother, the Great Mysterious Enveloping and Ever-Birthing “Dark,” Womb of the Day, Orchestrator of the Vast Panoply of Night, a multiple trillion-fold of galaxies, with all their astral offspring holding forth in song and sight! These have once more conceived and delivered a book—strange critter of a tiny creature, haunted with a name and history marked out as “me.” And yes, that “me” does not belong to me, but is itself a temporary dance—mostly of empty space around cavorting and rebelling molecules—but also of conjunctions such as iron and copper (in trace filaments), lots of water, and air both hot and cold in comings and goings both surreptitious and bold, mastication of countless plant-kin and animal-companions, all assembled as a minority in lullaby or shouting-match with the majority vote in my body made up of bacterial co-presiders and viral-riders, wooing cells and promising alternative futures. All of it on loan from a mystical biome and ever-snookeying and -lovemaking and -fighting engagement of ecozone with ecotone—even as duress-ed and trammed as the Earth crust is today!

So yes—ancestors all! Before and beyond those of skin and bone that look more like my own, whether pink in delight, red in embarrassment, blue in chill, or green/yellow in envy and fear, as indeed brown in “black” example and teaching and correction (and ancient African conception and Eve-mothering), or multi-toned “bronze” in Native cast, watching with

never-silenced demand to return the land and learn the wisdom. As well—and obviously—my own line of germ granting Irish poesy and German disdain of brevity and periods! Hale and acknowledgment to all. As indeed to a few name-able faces that an aging and slowing brain can yet remember: a mother five-years deceased, whose witness to blossoming and then *withering-with-style* through more than a century remains undiminished. A father, more remotely “passed” whose bombast and laugh I sometimes find still questing for audience and response, right through the “window” of my body! A ribald crew of Detroit Water-Warrior-ing resisters to shut-offs. A Kresge Arts Grant cadre refusing to give up on celebrating the word-rousting genius of Cass Corridor “Poetry Grand-Pappy” Ron Allen. The Kateri-bustled bevy of Sunday-morning shufflers in St. Peter’s sanctuary. The Larkins Street squad of rabble-rousing gardeners and protestors. The men’s group of aging raconteurs dribbling beer down their chins (and occasionally their mouths). Long time community consorts Ron and Jackie and Richard and Nancy. Millennial mentor-mentees Tim and Lindsay and Tommy. The Dreaming Stone collaborators in all things “arts and ecology”! The Ecumenical Theological Seminary sodality of provocateurs and comforters. And hovering, glaring, jamming on saddle with riddle and willow and salamander-in-a-puddle, teacher-extraordinaire Prechtel, whose vision and flare are all up in here.

And interspersing with this rumbling crowd of human connivers, a Red Bird pair who four years previous adopted me as their slot-machine-provider of sunflower seeds at our townhouse front door—often backed by a mob of sparrow/chickadee reinforcers and “squirrely-scalds” making sure I extend the generosity. Right alongside the Old Woman Locust Tree, losing limbs in seasonal storms, but still arcing sunward, proud and green-ing. And most crucially, imperatively, unrelenting and irresistible and ever-snorting in laugh and lancing in stiletto thrust of word and insight, and bedecking in eye-assaulting, breath-capturing regalia of color and jewel—my own Sovereignty Queen woman, as touching and demanding as any Maeve of a rock cairn on an Emerald Isle in my wildest ancestral dreams. All hail!

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PART I

Meeting Monsters



CHAPTER 1

Mirror

THE DUEL

This book is itself a bit of a “monster.” Such is only appropriate when dealing with levels of reality that do not admit encompassing perception or easy reduction to language. Certainly, our hour on the planet is a time of comeuppance, of facing the monstrous effects our modern industrial conceit has unleashed on the biosphere. We now subsist as a cyborg composite of billions of human beings, amassed and enmeshed in a globalized economic armature admitting very little choice outside its markets and virtually no escape from its “climatic” provocations. Even indigenous communities still relatively intact face the fallout! It is tempting to say here that we flounder like Jonah in an angry ocean, already feeling the rush of water into the maw of some huge sea beast surging up to devour. But that particular image may not quite be what it seems (Perkinson 2019, 271–280). In the ancient Hebrew story, the fish, in effect, “saves” the renegade prophet. The scaled body—perhaps like a living “narwhal” version of the skin tarps covering the Mosaic “tent of meeting”—becomes a mythic sanctuary, granting room to breathe and give thanks, before depositing the overwhelmed fugitive back on land (Jon: 1:17–2:10). And already we are deep into the dilemma. Monstrosity indeed signals the clichéd perception around which this writing will dance. But the word—as we shall see—evokes something far more layered and wondrous than merely large-scale terror.

Over the short course of our species' tenure on the planet, we have trucked with forces ever larger in our propensities to interrupt and re-tool. Now not only nuclear fission has been made to answer to our desire to wield power and destruction, but the cumulative effects of our techniques and our hiccups, our probing and dicing and splicing and re-designing, have occasioned a peculiar fetishizing of our (over)reach: in both horror and pride we who think to be "modern" now self-identify as lords of an epoch. The newly emerged progenitors of the Anthropocene, "writing" ourselves into rock! Basalt and granite give report on planetary history in a longevity exceeded only by iron (in Earth's core) and fire (whose primordial flare goes back behind Earth's lifespan to Big Bang). We imagine some far distant offspring standing in awe before a "Grand Canyon" strata of their day, "reading" our presence in veins of sediment and mineral, floral imprint and faunal skeleton—or their absence—that bespeaks our overbearing alteration of the balance of things. And while we may quail before the implied trauma, at some primal inchoate level, supremacy grins. We simply beam in inner certainty of our irresistible capacity. Altering the actual crust of the earth! Whatever else we feel—how sublime our potency! And one more time, we give the lie to our reality.

The emergency we face is in large part an effect of our *effacement* of the fact that we remain imbedded within all the forces and interdependence we pretend to command and re-arrange (Haraway 2016). Master and slave are finally both part of a "relationship gestalt" that neither encompasses nor controls. Climate change is something we have provoked, not ourselves created or carried out. We are not a hurricane. Nor a virus. We are merely part of the "intricate bigness" unleashed. Wild nature—as embattled and problematic as those terms may now be—is the ultimate author here (and I will entirely agree that indigenous human communities ancient and recent have ever been part of the very "wild" and "natural" world they have codified in culture and often enough enhanced with respectful practice and attention. And here "Anthropocene" also is a misnomer: the true agents of destructive alteration the term seeks to track are the "civilized" and now modern industrialized cultures that first began pursuing surplus production and coercive domestication some 5000 years

ago).¹ We have never *not* been floating on the sea that shall also swallow us. And some cellular part of us—no matter how solid the sarcophagus or coffin—will at some point end up inside a fish. The monster is not alone “us.” It is the house we live in . . . and it yet remains magnificent! But today that monster and our own hyper-inflation as a species have precipitated a “duel.” We live in a mirror. We’ve grown monstrous and the biosphere responds in kind!

THE OMEN

And even these words, tentative as they actually are and seeking to interrupt our habitual “modern” propensity to focus—within the crosshairs of our reading—the “object” of inquiry and rumination we are pursuing in writing, are themselves interrupted. My last book before this one (*Political Spirituality for a Century of Water Wars*) offered a pair of arachnid asides, moments when little spider-creatures put in unexpected appearances while I was writing, that serendipitously “commented” upon the process of narration outside my human intentionality (Perkinson 2019, 211–213, 255–256). And now it has happened here as well. Yesterday late afternoon, after beginning this Introduction, I worked out (as I am wont to do every other day). The first part involves lifting light weights as well as stretching exercises in my study before heading outdoors to jog. While on the floor doing crunches, a little web-spinner began working on the screen window a couple of feet above floor level. I watched her patterned movements while doing my own, and then when the time came to do some leg stretches, I half-thought to change my usual direction so I could continue watching, but then gave way to habit and did them facing away from the window. On my second left leg extension while on hands and knees, my foot crashed into a row of milk crates near the window covered with cloth on which I have displayed small wood carvings and ceramic

¹Though I am quite cognizant of the current scholarly antipathy to the term “wild/wilderness” so often employed as a colonial convention suggesting humans cannot be an integral part of natural settings (eclipsing indigenous presence on the land as congenial to ecozone flourishing across species), it appears (as *midbar* in the Hebrew lexicon) in biblical narration as an often spiritually animate, counter-colonial reference. I use the term here without being wed to it but do insist on being able to talk about the natural world before and outside of concern for human beings *in some manner*, while also insisting human communities for much of our history and in some of our best expressions before being colonized were and are part of the wild. So, for now, “wild” will serve—but precisely as designating sites “outside” heavy-handed human coercion into serving human pretension to master the world.

artifacts. A miniature Filipino-gong-player statue and a glazed tile from an artist friend both flipped to the floor and broke. In gathering up the pieces, I must have scared off the web-worker, as she was gone when I next looked at the window. And I wondered if I had missed “receiving” her movements as a tiny trickster-sign to break with routine (if I had faced toward rather than away from the window in my stretches the “accident” would not have happened), felt a little chagrined at having cracked the art pieces, but finished up my exercises for the day.

But this morning upon rising and moving to the window to greet the sun, there she was back again in the same place. After getting my coffee and sitting down to write, she showed up yet a second time—on the wall next to my desk and played hide-and-seek along a crack between the plaster board and a furring strip. I flushed briefly with tears and gratitude for her company, here inside my civilized abode that on the whole is largely destructive for the planet at large, drawing upon so many mined resources and metal tools and untested chemicals in a carbon-footprinted process nowise sustainable for the future. This little one had adapted—a bit of “wild” making counter-use of the very thing (my house) that constitutes a modern attempt to extrude all things not two-legged and tamed! Such upwellings of feeling are now common for me—little body-responses to what I used to take for granted. Certainly not yet contributing to the kind of change the biosphere is enjoining for our species on penalty otherwise of probable extinction. But nonetheless a nascent breakout from blind obliviousness to begin to let register a tiny spec of the amazingness of reality otherwise consigned to the quotidian on this small blue marble cruising the unthinkable vastness of galactic space. And this minute spider beast is also a monster in her own right. Monsters are not only titans. Indeed, size is always a matter of context and scale—in front of the chemical “feeler” of a bacterium, an arachnid mouth probably comports like the Mediterranean Sea does to a Jonah eye.

THE BOOK

So, what is the book about? Yes, monsters. But not Hollywood versions. The concern here is pointedly “scale”—and the irremediable fact that our species is now “out of scale” by any careful reading of evolutionary history. There are too many of us given our body size (and thus calorie uptake) according to a research initiative like the Paleontology Data Bank Project, as will be covered in subsequent chapters. We as a species have become the

quintessence of monstrosity for the rest of the biosphere, precipitating, as our capitalist aggressions now are, as many as 150 species extinctions per day. It is a monstrosity that first began to show its consequence some 5000 years ago, when our species shifted in a concerted way from subsistence to surplus in production and from mutualism to dominance and coercion in political decision-making, in the form of various city-state systems cropping up around the Fertile Crescent and Egypt and soon after in China and elsewhere. That consequence since the advent of “civilization” is the loss of 83% of wild mammals and half of plants as well as highly organized exploitation and violent aggression visited on our own kind (Carrington 2018).

But the book is not merely a treatise on a major politico-economic “Rubicon” that appears in our history and the calamities it has provoked, but precisely the spiritual dimensions and assumptions attending such. And at this juncture of our common history there is no spiritual habituation more culpable than the religious tradition going by the name of Christianity or its written ideation known as the bible. More dead bodies—human and more-than-human—lie at its fervently “missionary” feet than clutter the tracks of any other “world religion” practices. All “citi-fied” elaborations of spiritual intuition have ended up in service of violent aggression and expansion to one degree or another. But the Constantinian conscription of the nascent Galilean Jesus Movement into service of Roman Imperial pretension—both ancient and then medieval—succeeded and extended by Euro-settler colonialist aggrandizement across an entire planet, does now hold the record for depredations genocidal, enslaving, witch-killing, plundering, and toxifying.² And that record demands accounting.

So, the book here works within that loosely bounded tradition (Christianity as of today encompasses more than 45,000 different “Christian” denominations) and seeks to open out, from within its conceits and too-easy recitations, a vision and premonition moving far beyond merely human preoccupation (Snibbe 2023). Christianity’s pet insistence that divine “incarnation” in this world was (is) limited to one human being alone—in the form of a Jewish male of first-century Palestine known in his time as *Yeshua*—will be teased apart from both within and without the tradition in adverting rather to a “Big” sense of Ultimate Mystery, itself ineluctably material in its constant movement and mutation through

² David Stannard’s *American Holocaust* is one account (among many) detailing such.

a universe uncomprehend-able in merely human languages or even entire blackboards of formulas (after all, only some 4% of “what is” answers to light and thus even our hardest of hard sciences must glibly enunciate provisional constructs like “dark energy” and “dark matter” to stand in for what cannot now or maybe ever be grasped in nature). (Inevitably, a book on monstrosity will occasionally give birth to a monstrous sentence or two!) The work here will at times labor with certain Christian tropes—especially the New Testament nomenclature of “Principalities and Powers”—in seeking to occasion imaginings and questionings that hint at dimensions of our reality larger than either our words or our eyes. But it will not be limited by such—indeed, it will careen way out beyond that tradition in its wandering wondering. And my own articulation here stumbles on itself!

THE SCOPE

Because the big question of our hour is precisely one of limitation! How get our species to stop assuming its supremacy and recommit to a reciprocity with the more-than-human world that might actually have a future? The seeming imperative governing the surface of our planet for the last half billion years could arguably be said to be Life (Bush 2020). And what Life requires, in Earthly organizations of such, is clearly biodiversity—a mode of vitality determined on local scale by the way water “sheds” (as in “watershed”)—that flourishes in a force field of mutual co-determination in which everything is *bound up with and limited by* everything else. If one species manages to dominate to the exclusion and demise of many others, the whole ecozone finally upends into decimation. Looking at the contemporary emergency in the eye without fantasy thus compels for a rampaging species such as ours, a full halt: What does it really mean to be human? Have we always been self-destructive and thus in need of something like a heretofore unattainable (much less unimaginable) revolution? Or did we once know the mutualism inherent in eco-systemic viability over long stretches of time that allowed both human and more-than-human flourishing in a co-communion simultaneously magnificent, but also uncompromising in its enforcements of limits?

What such statements might mean is the subject of the writing here. But clearly the conviction of this author is that much of our indigenous ancestry *did* know how to “live in place” with a durable and particularized

vitality taught by whatever local ecozone they inhabited (Gowdy 2020).³ Such a track record is actually “there” in every one of our genetic trees, though certainly further back for those of us of European stock than others such as Native folk on this continent or nomad peoples herding their grazers just below the taiga in Asia or subsistence dwellers on the grasslands of Africa, etc. “Sustainability” is profoundly a part of the history of our species when taken seriously in its entire ambit on the globe and not restricted solely to written memory developed as a function of urban organization and “legibility” (Scott 2017, 9, 22–25, 33). Three million years of hunting and gathering shaped our species’ genetic-heritage in a profound experience of eco-reciprocity that remains extant somewhere in our make-up even if repressed (for most of us now) under five millennia of civilizational assault and disavowal (Lee 1998, ix; Wells 2010, 118–119; Dunbar 1993, 681ff). And it is this conviction that will occupy our attention in what follows.

What most demands recovery and revaluing at our critical juncture is relationship with the more-than-human world as peer and teacher and even “elder” if we are to have a future at all. Opining such is not to romanticize⁴ the deep past as if we can simply turn around and go back. It is

³And here a quick note on a large subject. I will use the Latin-based term “indigenous” throughout, primarily in the sense of a *lifestyle commonality* shared by those “in-born” to a *particular place*, whose land-taught ways of dwelling communally are largely determined over generations by a given ecosystem/watershed/bioregion (Four Arrows 2019). I recognize the term today is and can be claimed by various ethnic groups to designate a bloodline and cultural particularity no matter the lifestyle adopted, and were there another term or set of terms more closely correlating with my own focus, I would use such. Indigenous studies scholar Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows) emphasizes that different locales give rise to quite different cultures, but to the degree those cultures remain (at least somewhat) rooted in the teaching of those places, the values and orientation to living exhibit a basic “pan-indigenous” commonality quite distinct from more urban-based, higher-tech, supposedly “civilized” habits and modes of dwelling.

⁴Though it is also worth a comment that when challenged about the dangers of romanticizing a given subject, I often acknowledge such, but also push back to the effect that I am not willing “to live without romance” in my life. And part of the question is “whose romance about what?” I would argue that most of us raising issues about romanticizing arguments in fact tend to live a huge unremarked romance of modern life, taking for granted such things as hot showers and cold drinks, etc. I seek to open, inside that typically unexamined romance of modernity, a little space, for a brief moment, to let something not modern be magnified in its otherness. I take for granted that I do romanticize; the question is, do I do it honestly and halfway well—and of course, *that* is always subject to challenge. But likewise, the turn-about: what of the romance of screens and comfort that “has” most of *us*?

rather to say, “halt the lockstep race to the cliff’s edge and remember”! There are ancestral wisdoms about plants and animals, waters and metals, mountains and winds, that we would do well to examine and question and perhaps relearn and adapt.

And it is this specification of the *more-than-human-world* in collaborative “monstrosities” both terrifying and wondrous that organize the otherwise disparate essays that make up this book. The chapters here were initially given as papers at various conferences. As hinted in the book subtitle, the meandering topicality could easily seem a “mess.” But messiness is exactly how creativity tends to birth—and especially in the “womb” called compost. The planet is strangely composed—what comes out as one species’ waste is another’s food. Just take a breath! I confess I am addicted to what is in effect “plant poop.” And who would have thought that a promiscuous climax of hydrogen and oxygen would assemble into a fetus called “water”—another “drug input” I tend to mainline and largely “am”! The spiral of metabolism and defecation, as indeed of subduction and volcanism, combination and cleavage, is the magic by which Earth “molts” and Life unfolds.

So, thus! The commonality shared across the range of mule and metal (not mentioned in the subtitle but nonetheless a chapter rumination), stone menhir and humid muck, is that of more-than-human agency and even “personality” and spirit-proclivity in the mix of life and genesis on the planet. The range is suggestive; the investigation imaginative under impress of indigenous conviction and folk wisdom. The ass has often been keystone in human-burro collaborations rendering otherwise unlivable terrain habitable (such as in Egypt and Palestine). Iron is embraced as a mystic potency of political machination and revolution (as an *orisha* in Nigeria, a *lwa* in Haiti, and an amulet-sword in old Europe). Phonolite stone has anchored spiritual apparition in Cailleach-invocations accompanying Celtic wanderings across France or Black Madonna “outcrops” in Languedoc mountains. And a “garbage art” installation redeploing car hoods and polka dots in inner city Detroit reworks urban mud and abandoned home into a street shrine of revelatory challenge. What each figuration shares with the other is the refusal of non-human “beings” to stay supine or captive inside utilitarian categories of industrial practice as mere “resource” or “object.” They are rather co-creative agents of evolutionary chance and novelty.

And what is then patent for the “Christian” leanings of this particular writing is the way these “monster agencies” intersect with the tradition’s

fascination with angels both beneficent and “fallen”—as Messengers⁵ elaborating wisdom or as Powers engendering destruction. Monstrosity is a living alchemy of the planet’s ecology; how might ancestral traditions across the globe enable life-giving collaboration with such rather than ecocidal manipulation and extinction? In particular, the imagination of “divine” messengers as having suffered a major displacement (from “heavenly” employment to perverse enslavement), if held in dialogue with indigenous entertainment of the entirety of the material universe as living and spirited, yields both wonder and direction. How might we then comprehend a “Principality” or a “Power”? In gospel writer Luke’s narration, when prophet Jesus is accosted with scribal surveillance sent from Jerusalem and publicly charged with trucking with a Nether-World Prince named Beelzebul, he neither assents nor repudiates, but tantalizes that he has such a potency “wrapped around his finger” as it were, and pointedly hints that his intent regarding large-scale Force is neither capitulation nor destruction, but “downsizing” (Luke 11:14–28; Perkinson 2013, 83; 131–137). Are these Up-scaled and Out-sized Agents—that are inferred as “Haunts” of political organizations (like Roman legions or Jewish Temple-State banks) or social institutions (like latifundia farming operations or patriarchal conventions of stoning adulterous women)—the equivalent of wild natural powers that have been displaced and coerced into untoward service as the spiritual aura of imperial infrastructure (Mk 5:1–20; 11:15–19; Mt 20:1–15; Jn 8:1–11)?

That is to say: if asses and iron and stone and mud are actually part of the sacrality of the created world, what happens to their spiritual efficacy when domesticated and mined and quarried and baked as part of the political apparatus of aggression and control? Perhaps “elemental spirits” become imperial agents. Perhaps “angelic” force fields like that of a mountain council of clouds and rains and down-washing nutrients are conscripted into aqueduct-transport as a Leviathan-monster serving bathhouse lifestyles of Roman administrators and half-king collaborators like Herod.

⁵ Often throughout the explorations offered in these writings, I will both capitalize and assign gender to various more-than-human “natural” beings to call attention to more typically indigenous conventions of relating to such as both living, active creatures and as participant at some level in the kind of “vernacular gender” thinking of many older communities (Illich 1982). Obviously, in all of the embattled politics and discourse about notions of gender today, the subject is not simple. Engaging that battle is beyond the space limitations of this book; here I can recount a desire to honor indigenous traditions, but also say such is not meant to be a hard-and-fast delineation, but rather an evocation.

Were the winged singers of ancient forests and savannahs freeze-framed by urbanizing enclaves into “heavenly” choristers/messengers as heralds of the future and then ventriloquized as imperial “media” of surveillance and propaganda (demonic “powers” sporting wings) (Abram 2010, 183–185, 193–194; Perkinson 2013, 178, 105–107, 127–128)? Maybe seraphim-guardians of ecotone borders in the desert might be given metallic-embodiment as serpentine bronze-totems enforcing social hierarchy by way of priestly threats against violations of purity standards in the Jerusalem Temple (Jn 3:14–21; Num 21:4–9; 2 Kgs 18:4). And of course, copper moved quickly in history from shimmering ritual eloquence when first mined to coercive amalgams with tin or zinc as tool- and weapon-implements serving aggression and expansion, and iron likewise moved from meteor gift from on high to an intensive-heat smelt from ore, destined to become Celtic eel-swords or Roman pikes.

THE RHYTHM

In an Introduction, I can but hint. But the résumé of chapter topics herein pursued, wantonly “skips”—with indigenously provoked curiosity and biblically exercised exuberance (and maybe exorbitance?)—across seemingly unrelated possibilities. Indigenous ken, in particular, very often does not draw a hard-and-fast line between the animate and (supposedly) inanimate as does modern science. Yet even the latter is now being pushed to give increased recognition to both communicative intentionality and perhaps even proto-conscious vitality not only in plant and animal existence but even in otherwise seemingly “dormant” material substance like electrons and protons much less stones and iron, water and air (Goldhill 2018; Zadeh 2021). And it may be that consciousness (and spiritual potency?) is not so much anchored in “quanta”—or particularized packages of cells that we are used to identifying as this plant or that animal—but is rather an emergent property, a gestalt or inter-activeness animated in “call/response” reciprocation and provocation across the biodiversity of a given ecozone or ecotone. Thus, the real “internet” is organic and animist (e.g., the “wood wide web” coinage for the network of mycelial-tree root collaboration under many forest floors). Donna Haraway has long written not only of cyborgs and monsters but of the “sym-poesis” of “tentacular kin” and “chthulucene webs.” And now comes “Object Oriented Ontology,” Actor-Network Theory,” and “New Materialism,” all echoing the same late lament that enlightenment thought has been far too

individualized, narcissistic and reductionist. So, in this “mixed up” exploration, I have growing post-modern company. But the real fascination here is ancestry—what the Old Ones knew. And did. The effort here then seeks to provoke and prod, conjure and probe, occasion wonderment and not shy from consternation and even “wild” speculation. As will become apparent. And as such, it is incumbent to say upfront (as has already been intimated), that this particular book seeks to rouse rather than conclude, to juxtapose in hopes of an arcing “flash” rather than cement in fixedly mortared connection—and readily acknowledge the uncertainty embraced and the challenges likely galvanized. So be it!

As was the case with a previous collection of disparate writings of mine pulled together into a book, here also my own fetish-fancy likes to answer to both chiasm and rhythm—and such inevitably also means repetition (Perkinson 2015, 8). In this organization, the twelve-chapter assemblage is structured in a five-part grouping of chapters running 3/2/2/2/3—a chiastic concatenation of syncopation whose sequence spirals from our “human-centered” present back through a “more-than-human” geologic focus governing the deep past and then returns to a more human-animated musing that repeats the beginning but with a difference. Interlacing those five major “Parts” is a bit of alliterative allocation focused on the letter “M” but combining noun and verb (participle) forms giving a more “off-beat” tone to the 3/2/2/2/3 numeric emphasis. And those two 3-chapter sections can be read as riffing on each other: the “Monsters” we (need to) *meet* as an organizing trope of perception seeking to move us away from perceiving the world in terms of an “individualized” human subjectivity, in which phenomena are dissected in language as discrete entities, isolatable and expendable in their supposed separation from each other. And the “Monsters” we have *mobilized* across many millennia as companions, not only enabling survival in otherwise inhospitable environments, but facilitating resistance when our own appetites waxed monstrously ominous in extractive metropolitan organization and militancy. So Parts I and V as centered in our own human agencies of inquiry and mobility.

But Parts II through IV then flip the script, probing Agencies bigger than our own self-preoccupation to entertain ideas of Monsters *musings* through us, *mentoring* all around us, and *meddling* with us—all “from without” in origin and aim, serving an intention mysterious and beyond our comprehension, but ineluctably involving us (and ultimately “eating” us!), whether or not we would cooperate in kind. What is Dreaming us, what Teaching us, what Tricking us with a fecundity and design that

exceeds our own self-fetishizing concerns as a species? And here the “center” is off-center and careening, divining the mysterious role of the “mothering maw” at the heart of “all things material” (beyond the more easily embraced collaborations of supposed biologic “friends” like plants and animals) and the ever-active (though typically in such slow motion we can’t decipher it experientially) stone crust on which we stand—to both of which we owe such a profundity of indebtedness for biophilic support that it almost entirely escapes our capacity to recognize. And likewise, the dream-myth fomented by the very locale of land on which we stand and the metallic core of a turning planet whose churn of iron into electromagnetics secures the very air we breathe and “are.” As already stated—all of this by way of hint.

And this seemingly odd invocation of a subtle musicality in organization is actually part of the argument. It is becoming ever clearer to science that the universe (or perhaps even multi-verse as some would speculate)—wonderous and terrifying and astoundingly complex as it appears—at many levels is apparently a structuration of sound. And this holds true for both macro- and micro-dimensions of reality. For instance, even the black hole at the center of the Perseus constellation in the last few years has been deciphered by NASA as “singing” at a rhythmic throb in a B-flat vibe some 57 octaves below middle C, with an oscillation period of ten million years, that has held “on tone” for the last two billion years (Overbye 2022). We now know that plants “cry” when cut or dehydrated (Incorvaia 2023). Apparently when whale keening is sped up just the right amount, it actually exhibits the recognizable eloquence of a hummingbird song and vice versa (Prechtel 136–137). And even sight itself is a function of such reverberation—the color yellow showing up as a rhythmic effect of retinal dye molecules vibrating some 500 trillion times in a one second viewing of butterfly wings, while for other colors, the frequency ranges from roughly 300 trillion to 700 trillion (Leonard 1978, 8). And thus, an invite here to the reader to “vibe” with the text in whatever way works for your own sense of rhythm—a read straight through or a syncopated “landing” on disparate chapters, one at a time.

THE OUTLINE

In Part I, Chap. 1 (obviously) already has you in its maw. But Chap. 2 then jumps off from an indigenous/corporate encounter in the Philippines in 2017 to which the author was party, to sketch a broad frame for the

meandering investigation of these essays. At core the argument seeks to provoke imagination in the direction of perceiving our current emergency as the culmination of a 5000-year history of settlement, in which city-states first emergent in Mesopotamia and Egypt not only begin coercively organizing labor into surplus production and ecosystems into inordinate and destructive yields of “goods,” but in the process, also simultaneously deform the “Spirit-World-haloing” of natural phenomenon into an out-sized service of imperial reach. Fault lines in social relations (race, class, gender, sex, etc.) are matched by and inseparable from fracture-zones in spiritual concourse and manifestation. Tracking such in broad stroke also entails a personal “siting” of the author’s own journey and itinerary in inner city Detroit and the Great Lakes Basin, while simultaneously outlining the big structures of decimation today (AI conscription, petrocapi-talism, white supremacist colonialism) as well as incipient movements of resistance attempting to push back (Standing Rock, The Poor People’s Campaign, water struggles in Detroit and Flint). Such a framing likewise entails noting more indigenous modalities of recognizing and relating to potent natural forces like oceanic waters and metallic ores in a spiritual practice of ritual and myth, as well as registering the cultural codifications attempting to name and wrestle such forces once they are crowbarred out of more natural fields of reciprocity into political duress as “weaponized” tools and monstrous infrastructure. A personal experience (with my Filipina wife) of indigenous counsel linking the healing of racialized trauma with the healing (of the environmental abuse) of the Detroit River both concludes the overview and opens the wandering (and wondering) through the menagerie of chapters to follow.

Tellingly, however, monstrosity is not itself limited to largeness. Chapter 3 camps out on the recent emergence of a “shot across the bow” of our species’ aggrandizement on the globe in the form of a tiny “syllable” spoken by the bat community. Or more accurately, an adaptive “improv” lancing out from the microbial zone of innovators we label “viruses” without quite being able to grasp their input as either living or inanimate. Here the RNA Prince (“Coronavirus”) will be tracked in advent from natural habitat among wingeds to routinization in our own species’ articulation of a regime of plunder and decimation epitomized in global capital. Innocuous within its habitat of origin, the virus was effectively weaponized in our racialized political and healthcare systems such that poor and BIPOC peoples and the Global South inordinately experienced infection and demise. But for a historical millisecond, this

micro-creature shut down the macro-monster of a globalized economy! This chapter continues the probe of the word and the reality, tracing medieval eucharistic exhibitions of a Jesus rendered plant-human-mineral-astrol “Presence” in a *monstrance*—an entire ecozone concentrated in a wheat-wafer consumed by an eye—through a backward trek to the apparent Proto-Indo-European (PIE) origins of the word “monster” in a cluster of related concepts including “*memory*” and “*premonition*” and *monument* (among others), and forward to a more generalized consideration of monstrous epiphanies in indigenous languages and mythologies. By way of our own “monstrance-showing” of what such an interdependent promiscuousness looks like when our eyes revolt against colonial reductions and begin to register some of the wonder otherwise eclipsed, we conclude the foray by profiling the amazingly *monstrous symbiosis* orchestrated by whales with the aid of plankton and krill in southern oceans and the milk-culture miracle of steppe peoples for 3000 years buoyed and fed by a *monstrous microbial complex* of dairy-preparation, yurt cooking, wooden-barrel-storage, sheep-gut processing, etc.—in spite of being lactose intolerant and minus the requisite gene!

In a shift to a more explicit challenge to traditional Christian practice in Part II, we plunge directly into the more-than-human mediations and “musings” we will be tracking across the rest of the chapters by querying our modern and Western modes of representing such. Chapter 4 continues the probe of monstrosity by querying our species’ own self-aggrandizement into an unsustainable planetary presence alongside the kindred counter-response we are provoking from the biosphere, loosely figured as “climate-crisis.” But here the crisis is perhaps better composed in language as “comeuppance”—at once a re-action and re-balancing. The trek begins with a summary invocation of monster theory—especially in the work of Steven Engler, arguing for an interpretive rather than representational approach to the study of monsters that does not so much cast the monster figures found in older cultures around the globe as “figurations” for something else (race, sex, excess, transgression) but rather takes those emblems seriously in context and focuses on delineating the way the figures “signify” in that context. But in this exploration the approach will invert the scholarly gaze to ask questions about what is lost when monsters are reduced merely to objects of study (much less cinematic entertainment) and the actual capacity for “feeling” monstrosity, so carefully kept alive in more indigenous cultures, is shriveled in modern arrogance into mere fascination with “the other.” Again, the supposition here is that

human monstrosity on the planet in terms of our numbers and environmental impact is today quite real and indeed outsized—as is the blowback occasioned in response. But what is missing is the communally mediated *emotionality* necessary to perceive such. The chapter works with a triad of theorists running from African American scholar Charles Long’s mobilization of Rudolf Otto’s *Mysterium Tremendum et fascinans*, through Potawatomi biologist Robin Kimmerer’s characterization of the cannibalistic Anishinaabe Windigo apparition, to Lakota lawyer-theologian Vine Deloria’s invocation of a dread Land Presence—each of the three differentially marking out experiences of monstrous “hauntings” engendering trepidation and demanding respect. Together the three diagnose what could prove to be a fatal incapacity in modern global culture to wrestle with *monstrosity as a real spiritual/material eventuality* and with the *eco-reciprocity and sense of limitation* it more readily inculcates in cultures that still narrate the danger of excess as a central trope in their collective sensibility.

Chapter 5 invokes the same triad of scholars as in the previous chapter but dives deeper. Deloria’s indigenous notion of a dread and foreboding *Land Presence encountered as revelation* by many Native American communities living in a local ecozone over generations anchors the exposé. The experience of “being watched” and in effect made aware of a human/non-human boundary delineating a given terrain as sanctuary of the Other World as indeed of Wild Nature “Herself” is a kind of primordial baseline that Deloria likens to, and differentiates from, mystical encounters in various “world” religions. For Deloria, it is an experience of being objectified before a much bigger Subjectivity of Place.⁶ The chapter juxtaposes to Deloria’s evocation, Kimmerer’s description of a big Anishinaabe “Stalker Spirit” (the Windigo), incarnating insatiable hunger during the late winter “thin times” and Long’s mobilization of Otto’s *Tremendum* relativizing Euro-colonial terror to explore what might be said to happen when human

⁶ And the exercise engaged is modestly offered as but a tiny step toward decolonization (as scholars Eve Tuck and C. Y. Yang have so forcefully argued, “decolonization is not a metaphor” for resisting oppressions in general, but fundamentally focuses on actual land-return; 2012). But it does push on imagining land-relations outside of private property obfuscations, behind settler colonial theft, when Native folk typically occupied the same terrain for generations on end, buried ancestral bones, listened to ecozone and ecotones, and gradually took their mental preoccupations, their emotional vitality, and their sense of ceremonial obligation to maintain gift-economy reciprocity with wild nature *from* the land’s own spiritual agency and provocation.