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# “World”-Traveling in Tule Canoes: Indigenous Philosophies of Language and an Ethic of Incommensurability

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## Abstract

Indigenous language activists talk about incommensurability all the time—in interesting ways that link language and knowledge as components of Indigenous lifeways that can't be disentangled. According to many of these scholar-activists, what is untranslatable about Indigenous languages is often what is incommensurate about Indigenous worlds. Drawing upon resources from Indigenous language-reclamation work, I outline here a nonexhaustive taxonomy of incommensurability in the literature about Indigenous philosophy of language, and gesture at the ways coalitional relationships might be built that hold space for these different varieties of incommensurability. For ease of explication and to honor Indigenous ways of knowing, I employ here an organizational metaphor rooted in my own communities' traditions of canoe-voyaging to organize three forms of incommensurability that emerge from Indigenous philosophies of language: *impassable incommensurability* and *strategic impassable incommensurability* (big water through a rock garden), as well as *incommensurability with technical passage*: (heavy water through a rock garden). These forms of incommensurability, as they spring from Indigenous philosophies of language, lend themselves toward nuanced insights for careful and considerate world-traveling (à la Lugones) that holds space for epistemic and linguistic sovereignty.

What is an English word for “just before the actual summer”?  
—Tommy Akulukjuk<sup>1</sup>

frameworks yes we used what the newcomers called frameworks  
to gather our relations the salmon nations  
these were our installations and properties and sets  
molding us to the places of the river which named us  
through our naming of them the land languaged us  
with the breath it gave us we spoke to identify (actually to relate) our connecting

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our fishing platforms and scaffolds held us over breakwaters hairpin bends  
 and back-eddies with our three-pronged spears and gaffs harpoons  
 basketry traps weirs set lines set lines set-nets dip-nets gillnets scoopnets  
 and drying racks ready to enact the prayer  
 which adapted us the condition/al/s the laconic geographies  
 a few weeks of good fishing meant survival rather than starvation  
 and it was rarely longer a time we were given to store for the winter  
 “if” was not an overly used morpheme in our vocabulary  
 —Peter Cole<sup>2</sup>

## I. Situating Indigenous Philosophy of Language

Indigenous language activists talk about incommensurability all the time—in interesting ways that link language and knowledge as components of Indigenous lifeways that cannot be disentangled. According to many of these scholar activists, what is untranslatable about Indigenous languages is often what is incommensurate about Indigenous worlds. Drawing upon resources from Indigenous language-reclamation work, I outline here a nonexhaustive taxonomy of incommensurability in the literature on Indigenous philosophy of language, and gesture at the ways coalitional relationships might be built that hold space for these different varieties of incommensurability. For ease of explication and to honor Indigenous ways of knowing, I employ here an organizational metaphor rooted in my own communities’ traditions of canoe voyaging to organize three forms of incommensurability that emerge from Indigenous philosophies of language: *impassable incommensurability* and *strategic impassable incommensurability* (big water through a rock garden), as well as *incommensurability with technical passage*: (heavy water through a rock garden). These forms of incommensurability, as they spring from Indigenous philosophies of language, lend themselves toward nuanced insights for careful and considerate world-traveling (à la Lugones) that holds space for epistemic and linguistic sovereignty.

## II. Incommensurability in Inuktitut: A Representative Exchange

As a pushing-off point for a journey through Indigenous philosophy of language, I begin with a close reading of an epistolary exchange between Derek Rasmussen and Tommy Akulukjuk (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009). Rasmussen and Akulukjuk are both Inuit policy advisers for various social, political, and educational entities regarding Inuit of Nunavut Territory, and throughout their exchange, they provide detailed accounts of their own relationships with Inuktitut, their ancestral language. Incommensurability, or the untranslatability of the Inuktitut language and cultural concepts, comes up throughout their exchange.

Akulukjuk seems skeptical of translation projects that attempt to make Inuktitut concepts, especially those pertaining to the land, conform to English, or English speakers’ relationships with the land conform to Inuktitut. Akulukjuk explains that when he is asked to translate the weather forecast from the English-language news program for his father, who speaks only Inuktitut, translation is possible, but mostly inadequate. The onto-epistemic protocols associated with Inuktitut require that Akulukjuk tag his weather report as coming from the television, “an electronic item, which gives us an impersonal and such a fake feeling for the world” and that the weather is unwelcome by the newscasters, since they “only welcome the weather when it is going to be

sunny and warm, and they are usually negative about it when that doesn't happen" (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 282). These translations into Inuktitut, Akulukjuk claims, are not really Inuktitut. These translations are "just a transfer of English into Inuktitut phrases and sounds. . . ." He asks, "Is it really Inuktitut, do they really capture the language and the feeling of what is being said?" (283).

Responding to Akulukjuk, Rasmussen writes: "it's funny how governments never seem short of money to translate from English into Inuktitut, to 'help' equip Inuktitut conceptually to describe economics and technology—money for translating 'important' words from English into Inuktitut—words like *satellite*, *computer*, and *accounting*" (284). Here, Rasmussen notes that there is a deficiency-model at play in the ways Indigenous languages are approached by Canadian cultural agencies. According to dominant logics, Indigenous languages are missing something that can just be plugged into a formula and output as an Inuktitut concept. But this deficiency-model does not work the other way around. Rasmussen continues: "and yet I am not aware of a single government dollar going into translating Inuktitut into English (to try to illustrate/illuminate the beauty and the uniqueness of it), or of a single program to celebrate the breadth and utility of Inuktitut to Inuit and European Canadians" (284). Rasmussen depicts the unsurprising imperialistic language practices of English-speaking Canadian agencies, but also implies that translation of Inuktitut into English is not only possible, doing so might be useful to both Inuit and European Canadian communities alike.

Akulukjuk and Rasmussen appear to be professing very different commitments to incommensurability, or untranslatability, between Indigenous and settler worlds. Rasmussen gives words like "kayak" and "igloo" as examples of borrowed word/concepts from Inuktitut in relatively wide circulation in English, but goes on to exclaim, "what other Inuktitut terms and concepts might enrich our understanding of the world, if only we chose to ask?" (284). Here, Rasmussen doubles down on the possibility and potential of borrowing terms and translating between worlds, and the usefulness it holds for settler communities. Akulukjuk responds, with a note of what sounds like caution, writing:

Inuktitut captures what the nature has said to Inuit. Even what seems to be a simple word in Inuktitut is so difficult to translate into English. A word like *kajjarniq*. *Kajjarniq* means "to reflect positively about our surroundings." We usually use that word when we like the weather. And because people like all sorts of weather, we say *kajjarniq* to refer to different kinds of weather. It can even refer to indoors, when people experience what they remember and have that positive outlook on it. I guess it's like nostalgia. (285)

I read Akulukjuk's translation of *kajjarniq* as intentionally vague and self-aware of its inadequacy to capture the meaning of *kajjarniq*. He trails off and likens the meaning of the word to a feeling like nostalgia. However, in the print version of Akulukjuk's translation, there is a footnote in which a long note from an elder and community leader named Joanasi Akumalik is interspersed into the essay, a small excerpt of which reads:

I have to disagree with Tommy with his attempt to explain "*Kajjaanaqtuq*." This word encompasses so many meanings. I agree that it's to reflect positively but it goes beyond that. It touches your inner soul thereby providing serenity to one's

self. Have you ever got up in the early morning by yourself and felt serene? The twilight, the slowness of things starting to move, the place you are in, hear the clock . . . I cannot translate it. (290)

This exchange is likely familiar to other Indigenous readers. I myself have had countless identical exchanges: a few young people (one of whom is usually me) start to wax philosophical about our traditional knowledge systems, and suddenly an elder pops in to drop some serious wisdom, pops back out just as quickly, and leaves us all swimming in thought. In my experience, these exchanges often take place around the language table, in intergenerational language-reclamation spaces, and consist in (usually friendly, but sometimes not) disagreements about whether a translation is accurate, or whether translation is even possible. What is often at stake in these conversations are the prospects for our communities to build relationships and coalitions with outsiders or to form common goals around projects like climate justice, reconciliation, or how to live together in the world in a good way. Translation between languages and translation between worldviews are linked in ways that sometimes can't be disentangled in Indigenous language-reclamation projects, and projects like dictionary- or database-building can become sites rife with deep philosophical disagreement with respect to incommensurability.

### III. Indigenous Philosophies of Language: Some Key Concepts

The exchange between Rasmussen, Akulukjuk, and their elder in the footnote is a representative example of the intergenerational language work being done within Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. We see in their exchange that even within one community, there is active philosophical debate about a range of approaches to concepts like incommensurability. Indigenous theorists and language-reclamation activists posit a diverse range of views regarding the connections between Indigenous knowledge systems and Indigenous languages, many of which I am not able to detail here. The thoughts, worries, and methods of practitioners of Indigenous language work are not mere preferences or language ideologies; they are expressions of Indigenous philosophies regarding the very nature of language and should be treated as such (Leonard 2017; McCarty et al. 2018). I have organized the following section around just four lines of thought regarding the sort of hermeneutic resources languages are in the accounts of knowledge offered by Indigenous theorists and language activists. These lines of thought are interconnected in a way that is betrayed by the separations of section headings, but for ease of explication, I have isolated each into distinct topics to illustrate a range of key concepts.

#### *Indigenous Languages and Land Are Linked*

Indigenous languages and land are inextricably linked. Jenanne Ferguson and Marissa Weaselboy write: "Indigenous ontologies of language conceptualize the indivisibility of language and land, and land and humans" (Ferguson and Weaselboy 2020). This means several things: that Indigenous languages come from the land itself, that Indigenous languages are normatively infused with instructions about how to be in good relation with the land, that Indigenous languages are ways of communicating with plant, animal, and spirit relatives, and that the attempted colonial destruction of language also destroys land and vice versa, just as the reclamation of land and language are linked. Simon

Ortiz describes how both the Acoma people and the Acoma language come from the land and are interdependent upon one another (Ortiz 2018). Akulukjuk notes,

the names of animals [in Inuktitut], especially birds, are after the sounds they make, not after some guy who wrote about them in a book. . . . Take, for example, the Canada Goose: it is called nirliq. Next time you see one, listen carefully to the sounds it makes, and you'll notice that it sounds like it is saying "nee-r-leek." (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 282)

In my own language communities, we see similar sentiments in Payómkawichem (Luiseño) and Kúupangaxwichem (Cupeño) conceptions of language. It is not uncommon to hear that the land is *in* the language—that if one listens carefully, one can hear the land within each piece of the language. This is a somewhat literal sentiment, since I have heard elders say, for example, that the word for frog “waxáwkiłay” comes from the sound the frog makes, just like the word for coastal live oak “wíasal” sounds like the coastal mountain wind rustling through the branches of the oak tree. This sentiment may also hold a slightly less literal meaning, as Louise V. Jeffredo-Warden implies when she explains that being on the land where her ancestors spoke her language gives a profound “sense” to her language (Jeffredo-Warden 1999).

Rasmussen and Akulukjuk write,

in Nunavut, the land speaks Inuktitut. What I mean is that the land (and sea) evolved a language to communicate with (and *through*) human beings, namely an indigenous language that naturally “grew” in that area over thousands of years of interaction between the elements and the human and plant and animal beings. (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 279)

Akulukjuk describes the Inuktitut mode of reporting the weather “reading” the land, interpreting the land in the land’s language (284). In Luiseño and Cupeño cosmologies, animals have their own languages, and some of our songs and prayers are in their languages. In other Indigenous cosmologies, mountains, stones, and rocks have knowledge and languages as well, and some communities report that the land will tell listeners its own name (Deloria 1988; Cajete 2000). Because of the link between language and land, language-reclamation projects are often on the land or include the land in their immersion work (Chiblow and Meighan 2021), and political land-reclamation projects are also often guided by sustainability principles embedded in Indigenous languages (Armstrong 2018; Ferguson and Weaselboy 2020).

### ***Indigenous Languages Are Infused with Spirituality, Governance-value, and Communal Responsibilities***

Some Indigenous theorists conceive of Indigenous knowledge/language systems themselves as animate, not in a metaphorical sense, but as living, dynamic forces, infused with spirit that must be tended to and cared for (Bastien 2004; Noodin 2014; Leonard 2017). As Kyle Whyte argues, Indigenous knowledges have governance value in that Indigenous knowledges are not simply interesting facts about ecosystems that can be extracted and input into Western environmental management paradigms; rather, Indigenous knowledges are inextricably connected to how Indigenous communities nation-build, resist colonialism, and organize themselves politically (Whyte 2018). On views where language and knowledge are closely linked, Indigenous

languages, too, have governance value. Knowledges about geography, gender, ecosystems, clan structures, animacy, and kinship are imbedded in Indigenous languages, all of which factor heavily into how Indigenous communities organize themselves politically.

Jeffredo-Warden describes a feature of the Luiseño language, the ceremonial couplet, which refers to two words in our language that always appear together, usually in songs and prayers. Relationality, our responsibilities to one another, are imbedded in this couplet and we are reminded of it in songs. Jeffredo-Warden asked Luiseño elder Mrs. Hyde what it means if you separate the ceremonial couplets; Mrs. Hyde responded that if you separate them, “you’re not making sense” (Jeffredo-Warden 1999). Jeffredo-Warden takes this profound sense or deep relationality to connect to both the question: “Who before me also stood here to contemplate this place?” and the overwhelming feeling of being home in one’s homeland. Language, knowledge, relationality, and land are connected in these ceremonial couplets. Importantly, humans, alive and walked on, are not the only holders of knowledge in Luiseño cosmology; we learn from the First Ones, the knowers that came before us, the “insects, animals, mountains, hills, valleys, rocks, minerals, plants, trees, sands, soils, and waters” (Jeffredo-Warden 1999, 333). The land is full of knowers and knowledge and has its own languages, the overwhelming sense that fills up those with fluency, those who are at home in their homelands, and responsible to all of creation that surrounds them. Language, on many Indigenous accounts, is a mechanism for building and maintaining relationships of responsibility with all of creation.

Betty Bastien describes Blackfoot ways of knowing, noting that Niipaitapiiyssin, the Blackfoot language, contains within it an ethical system that includes the responsibilities of all creation to maintain balance and unity. On Bastien’s account, Blackfoot knowledge contains within it complex networks of governance, kinship, spirit, and responsibility that cannot be accommodated by English (Bastien 2004). Similarly, Akulukjuk describes the respect that is imbedded within Inuktitut, writing that the language “commands” him to relate to the land and all living things in a particular way (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 289). He writes, “Inuktitut made sure that I care for the trees and grass and bees and insects” and that “the respect the language teaches is inseparable from your own personal surroundings” (289). Susan Chiblow and Paul Meighan also argue that the ethical responsibilities to the land and knowledges about how to fulfill those responsibilities are embedded in Indigenous languages, specifically in Anishinaabemowin and Gaelic (Chiblow and Meighan 2021).

### *There Are Protocols for the Proper Exchange of Indigenous Languages*

Indigenous language activists often focus on epistemic protocols that are practiced in Indigenous gathering spaces. These protocols protect speakers from being exploited, but also protect listeners, be they children, spirits, or the land, from having knowledge imposed upon them irresponsibly. Lee Hester and Jim Cheney describe knowledge-exchange among Choctaw communities as a process tethered to responsibility and accountability, giving examples of several words that act as “tags” to show how a speaker came upon a particular type of knowledge (Hester and Cheney 2001). These “tags” also occur in Luiseño storytelling. One often begins a Luiseño story by using a *kuná* tag, which signifies that one is telling a story that was once told to them. It is often translated as “reportedly” or “allegedly,” but I’ve noticed that in English, this translation carries the connotation that one does not fully believe the claim or that the claim is suspicious.

In Luiseño, *kuná* does not carry that connotation; rather, it's part of an epistemic accountability protocol that simply expresses the way the speaker came to be able to tell this story. Other Indigenous cosmologies also have linguistic tags for how one comes to know particular stories and songs, whether one is "allowed" to relate a story, and whether it is the appropriate season for a particular story (Hester and Cheney 2001; Cushman 2013; Bow and Hepworth 2019). Some Indigenous languages have similar tags for referring to particular people, especially those who have walked on, for knowledge-exchange about those who have passed away is also knowledge with special language protocols.

Because of these sorts of epistemic protocols, many Indigenous communities have expressed apprehension at methods of recording knowledge (Innes 2010; Thorpe and Galassi 2014; Bow and Hepworth 2019). Some Indigenous archivists are concerned about the potential for spirit violence to travel through recordings, since the proper knowledge-exchange protocols sometimes cannot be heeded. Pamela Innes has published on this topic, noting that for the protection of community members who engage with Indigenous language archives, context-rich metadata should be included in any corpus or archive that details knowledge-exchange protocols undertaken in the collection of certain language resources (Innes 2010). Within many Indigenous communities, certain teachings are shared at certain points in a person's life-stage ceremonies. When someone has knowledge imposed upon them, or for particular periods of mourning, there are also protocols for unknowing or forgetting.

Some Indigenous theorists argue that Indigenous languages and knowledges must be protected from outsiders and have cultivated Indigenous-led archiving spaces (Innes 2010). Others who believe Indigenous knowledges should not be shared with outsiders insist on practicing oral tradition and share traditional knowledge only in face-to-face exchanges where protocols can be ensured. Erin Debenport writes about an Indigenous community she has worked with who see such strong relationships between their language and their ceremonial practices that they do not want their language written down or circulated at all. However, this community does allow linguists to translate some words and concepts from their language into English and for those translated concepts to be circulated (Debenport 2011).

Even though universities or tribes will try to assert ownership over these resources (for reasons that can be good or bad), language-reclamation communities sometimes come up with their own protocols and networks for sharing language resources with one another clandestinely, outside the purview of universities and tribes. In my experience, these protocols tend to defer to the speakers whose voices and images are recorded in said language resources, as well as to the descendants of those speakers. Some language activists have taken up practices of including their own metadata, keeping their own archives, and dealing with the access dilemma outside the confines of the linguistic sovereignty dilemma (Meissner 2021). Protocols regarding reciprocity in the exchange of Indigenous languages are also important and vary across language-reclamation spaces. Providing cultural gifts to language keepers, as well as how a community deals with the issue of compensating language teachers for their time and resources, are important but contentious issues that outsiders often fumble over.

### *Language and Knowledge Are Interwoven*

The connections between language, land, governance, responsibility, and community in Indigenous philosophies illuminate that language and knowledge are interwoven in



ways that are difficult if not impossible to separate. Language, very rarely, in Indigenous contexts refers to the morphological abstract entity constituted by phonemes and grammar; rather, language is a complex, socially constituted system of relating to one another that changes radically depending on context. Context here is not simply situational in terms of which speakers and audience members are present and what their relationships are like; language in many communities is a way of relating to the land and may even come directly from the land; it is infused with protocols and acknowledgments of relationships.

In some Indigenous communities, especially in the context of language-reclamation, it is not uncommon to hear sentiments like “when language dies, our knowledge dies with it.” Indigenous language activists like Wesley Leonard have posed important challenges to the promotion of terminal narratives like this one, conveying that as long as Indigenous people exist, our languages cannot die, be lost, or disappear, because we cannot preclude the possibility that someday our languages will be awakened and reclaimed by us or those who come after us. In addition to complicating terminal narratives of language loss, Indigenous language activists also discourage the propagation of myths of authenticity or purity that render Indigenous languages and cultures inadequate if “mixed” in any way (Hinton and Ahlers 1999; Leonard 2008; 2011; Tuck and Yang 2012). In some cases, it seems possible that proponents of the sentiment “when language dies, our knowledge dies with it” are challenging Leonard’s condemnation of terminal narratives, or cleverly taking up a terminal narrative to fire up urgency in language learners and would-be funders of language-reclamation projects. In many cases, however, I believe these sentiments are intended to express a different idea altogether.

Language activists like Bastien and Jeffredo-Warden sometimes take on what initially sound like terminal narratives to express that Indigenous languages and Indigenous knowledge systems are so intimately interwoven that they cannot be separated from one another nor can they be translated into English (Jeffredo-Warden 1999; Bastien 2004). This is a hardcore view of incommensurability between cultural worlds, but it need not imply any loyalty to myths of purity or terminality. Different in important ways from theorists like Bastien and Jeffredo-Warden, some proponents of incommensurability do not seem to believe that it is impossible to translate between languages, rather, they simply refuse to do so (Kirwan and Treuer 2009). And finally, several Indigenous theorists offer views of another sort of incommensurability between worlds in which it is difficult to translate between worlds, but it is not impossible or unacceptable. There are also Indigenous theorists who likely do not see any sort of incommensurability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, but these views are beyond the scope of this essay. The forms of incommensurability we have addressed so far are semantic, concerning language and translatability, but are also political and epistemic, due to the deep linkages between language and knowledge in Indigenous lifeways.

#### IV. Incommensurability and World-Traveling

Indigenous philosophies of language draw strong connections between language and knowledge, as is detailed in the co-constituted and inseparable network of relations detailed above between language, land, knowledge, governance, and communal responsibility. In addition to drawing strong connections between language and knowledge, some Indigenous philosophies of language are also committed to the existence of incommensurability between worlds. In the following sections, I will expand upon



three types of incommensurability that emerge from Indigenous philosophies of language and their implications for coalition-building; but first, a quick note on why and to whom incommensurability matters.

Incommensurability—or a lack of/rejection of congruence or translatability between disparate worlds, languages, paradigms, or political movements—is an immense concept that has likely been approached by every academic discipline and subdiscipline. Conversations about incommensurability range from demarcating where semantic incommensurability does or does not exist, to distinguishing methodological or cultural conceptions of incommensurability in the cultivation of scientific resources, to the co-creation of tools for navigating various forms of incommensurability, or the elimination altogether of incommensurability where possible (Kuhn 1962; Hoyningen-Huene 1990). Many conversations about incommensurability take place within philosophy of language, science, and linguistics and concern questions of translational, semantic, and conceptual incommensurability (Quine 1960; Kitcher 1982; Hoyningen-Huene 1990). Conversations about incommensurability have also been taking place in social and political philosophy and feminist epistemology, as well as within Indigenous studies, African American studies, postcolonial studies, and critical theory, among other sociopolitical theory-based disciplines (Fanon 1967; Lyotard 1984; Melas 1995; Schutte 1998; Bardwell-Jones 2008).

Possibly most relevant for the conversation this article aims to join, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang offer a brief account of an ethic of incommensurability, or how to build coalitions even when incommensurability is a feature of our ontologically pluralistic worlds (Tuck and Yang 2012). Tuck and Yang and Glen Coulthard (Coulthard 2007; 2014) situate their conceptions of incommensurability within anticolonial rejections of common measure and recognition. This conversation seems to be less about language and more about epistemology and political solidarities, but as we have seen in the previous two sections, Indigenous language activists offer interesting interconnections here. Incommensurability between languages and worlds can undergird incommensurability between imagined futures. Tuck and Yang importantly provide the language of incommensurability as an ethic or a way of moving forward in strategic and sometimes temporary coalitions, since the end goal of decolonization is not held in common with all liberatory movements. Tuck and Yang write:

An ethic of incommensurability, which guides moves that unsettle innocence, stands in contrast to aims of reconciliation, which motivate settler moves to innocence. Reconciliation is about rescuing settler normalcy. . . . concerned with questions of *what will decolonization look like? What happens after abolition?*. . . . Incommensurability acknowledges that these questions need not, and perhaps cannot, be answered in order for decolonization to exist as a framework. (Tuck and Yang 2012, 35)

In these next sections, I am interested in exploring insights from Indigenous language activists offer conceptions of incommensurability that link language and epistemology in fascinating ways and provide insights about navigating incommensurability in its many forms. In some ways, I see this endeavor as one that re-emphasizes the language part of incommensurability within conversations about the ethic of incommensurability (see Coulthard 2007; Tuck and Yang 2012; Coulthard 2014). As we've seen in the previous two sections, Indigenous philosophies of language offer nuanced conceptions of

the relationships between language and knowledge, and thus offer important insights into a multifaceted spectrum of incommensurability.

Feminist epistemologists engaged in conversations about epistemic violence, epistemic oppression, and coalitional projects are also an important target audience for this endeavor. These projects posit multiple knowledge models of the world that overlap significantly with Indigenous theorists' descriptions of the world. Many feminist epistemologists describe the world as one consisting of multiple knowledge systems that emerge from different communities of knowers (for example, Lugones 1987; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Dotson 2012). The multiple knowledge systems, or "worlds," as Lugones refers to them, are affected, constituted, or reformed by power structures like patriarchy, racism, and imperialism. Because knowledge systems are so deeply linked with power structures, in detailing their accounts of multiple knowledge systems, these theorists often also offer accounts of epistemic oppression, or when one epistemic community compromises the participation in knowledge-creation or maintenance of another (for example, Ortega 2006; Bailey 2007; Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus 2012).

Many of the projects concerned with epistemic oppression draw mitigation strategies from accounts that provide epistemic tools for expanding, retooling, and transforming dominant or oppressive epistemologies. Lugones's conception of "world"-traveling is one such account of a mitigation strategy drawn upon by epistemic oppression projects (Ortega 2006; Medina 2013). Lugones describes knowledge systems that emerge from particular epistemic communities as "worlds" (Lugones 1987). Worlds, for Lugones, are onto-epistemic spaces of perception that demarcate different organizations of life. Some worlds, like those of white Americans, are full of "agon, conquest, and arrogance" and are dismissive of, if not entirely ignorant of, other worlds (Lugones 1987, 17). Arrogant perception, a failure to identify with women and people of color, is a dominant mode of perceiving within white American worlds (Lugones 1987). Women of color in the US are participants in multiple worlds, some of which they feel "at home" in, and in some of which they are treated as subjects of arrogant perception. Lugones encourages traveling between worlds playfully, without self-importance, open to being constructed, learning, or being made a fool. The world-traveling Lugones describes is done in a mode that differs greatly from the agonistic, colonial, projects of Western epistemology (Townley 2006). World-traveling is not just the superficial, theoretical engagement of reading or citing the work of other women whom a world-traveler may want to know; it is an embodied practice that seeks out "actual" "flesh and blood" experiences (Lugones, 1987, 9). Ortega writes:

"World"-traveling has to do with actual experience; it requires a tremendous commitment to practice: to actually engage in activities where one will experience what others experience . . . learn people's language in order to understand them better not to use it against them; to really listen to people's interpretations however different they are from one's own; and to see people as worthy of respect rather than helpless beings that require help. (69)

Kristie Dotson interprets world-traveling to require that we recognize and "appreciate genuine differences, of which alternative hermeneutical resources are an example" noting that alternative hermeneutical resources are "very difficult to access". Elena Ruíz writes, "engaging in advocacy discourses aimed at achieving material benefits for concrete individuals and communities is . . . a critical part of feminist liberatory projects and feminist of color theorizing" (Ruíz 2016, 422).

Of course, there are many salient critiques of and amendments to “world”-traveling. Shannon Sullivan cautions against the tendency for white “world”-travelers toward “ontological expansiveness,” or to feel entitled to and comfortable within worlds that are not their own (Sullivan 2004). Mariana Ortega emphasizes that the strongest versions of “world”-traveling would be *critical* world-travel, which necessitates “an ongoing process of evaluation and interpretation of not only what is learned through traveling but also of the very practices of traveling across worlds” (Ortega 2016, 131). Sue Campbell, Ortega, and Melanie Bowman critique the affective component, or the playfulness of “world”-traveling, noting that in cases where white “world”-travelers do not fall prey to their own ignorant ontological expansiveness, they will likely not feel playful at all. The shock of being unsettled when so used to comfort might become frightening and cause defensiveness or despondence (Campbell 1999; Ortega 2016; Bowman 2020). Bowman questions much of the “world”-traveling enterprise, drawing our attention to the risk of epistemic tourism, and summing up most of the critiques of “world”-traveling quite succinctly: “when a privileged person recognizes that he is subject to cognitive distortions that produce ignorance, those distortions do not simply go away, leaving the gaps in knowledge to be filled unproblematically” (Bowman 2020, 480). I would add to these critiques that I have always been suspicious of Lugones’s suggestion that nonagonism is recognizable to all would-be “world”-travelers; without an analysis of hierarchized binaries, agonism seems difficult to eliminate from worlds where the dominion of man over the land is taken for granted. Even the example of play that Lugones offers—one in which children smash rocks noncompetitively—is one in which the taken-for-granted agonism toward the land is somewhat striking.

I personally do not find that the critiques or amendments require us to discharge “world”-traveling completely, though they do give us many reasons to be apprehensive and particular about the ways in which we choose to travel to or around worlds that are not our own for the purposes of coalition-building. As we see from the critiques of and amendments to “world”-traveling, the strategy, in its strongest form, should be one that is critical, careful, and holds space for incommensurability between worlds.<sup>3</sup> Bowman writes, “In the meantime, and as we continue developing the skills of learning to work in coalition, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which seeking knowledge is embedded in a material and social world, and that our knowledge-seeking is not morally or politically neutral” (487). To this end, this next section aims to answer the following question: What do Indigenous philosophies of language—which link language, land, governance, community responsibility, and knowledge in an inextricable nexus—show us about how we can world-travel with an ethic of incommensurability?

#### V. Tule Canoes: Three Kinds of Incommensurability

To answer the concluding question of the previous section, and to honor Indigenous ways of knowing, I employ here an organizational metaphor rooted in my own communities’ traditions of canoe-voyaging to organize three forms of incommensurability that emerge from Indigenous philosophies of language; these forms are *impassable incommensurability* and *strategic impassable incommensurability*: (big water through a rock garden), as well as *incommensurability with technical passages*: (heavy water through a rock garden). These forms of incommensurability, as they spring from Indigenous philosophies of language, lend themselves toward nuanced insights for careful and considerate “world”-traveling that holds space for epistemic and linguistic sovereignty.

### *Impassable Incommensurability: Big Water through a Rock Garden*

Impassable incommensurability is the view that Indigenous worlds, knowledges, and languages are intricately linked to one another and onto-epistemologically distinct from other worlds such that they cannot be translated, transposed, or expressed in other languages or by outsiders. Theorists and activists who express this view often draw very strong connections between language and knowledge systems and show concern about changes being made to Indigenous languages. When canoeing a river, a rock garden is a part of the river where large, smooth, river-worn boulders obstruct the river. When the water level is very high, or “big,” from flooding, and moving rapidly through a rock garden, the river is impassable. Like big water through a rock garden, this form of incommensurability poses important challenges for the concept of world-traveling.

Some of the Indigenous language activists and theorists above describe total incommensurability between Indigenous worlds/languages and non-Indigenous worlds/languages, specifically English. In the exchange between Rasmussen and Akulukjuk, the elder who enters the conversation in the footnote, Akumalik, expresses a view of impassable incommensurability when he corrects Akulukjuk and says that *kajjaanaqtuq* can't be translated. It's not just that this word doesn't have a correlate in English, it's that the very nature of Inuktitut disallows translation (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009). Akulukjuk, though he does attempt to translate *kajjaanaqtuq*, still offers a view of impassable incommensurability, insinuating that when he tries to translate English to Inuktitut, what is generated is not real Inuktitut (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009). Jeffredo-Warden alludes to the unexpressability of the sacred in English, while attempting to explain the ceremonial couplets of the Luiseño songs, stories, and prayers (Jeffredo-Warden 1999). Jeffredo-Warden borrows wording from our elder Mrs. Hyde, expressing in the only way that she can that one simply fails to “make sense” if one were to separate the ceremonial couplets. Bastien argues that the ways of knowing connected to English make it impossible for Blackfoot thought to be translated into it (Bastien 2004). The English language, according to Bastien, is infused with binaries, like the separation of mind and body, and teleological processes that presuppose linearity and narratives of “progress.” Translating Blackfoot thought into English is a violent process that strips Blackfoot thought of meaning. Roger Spielmann, adopting a terminal narrative of Indigenous languages, writes: “If a person loses his or her language, lost also are the ideas and culture-specific ways of relating to each other,” implying that these modes of relating to one another and the land cannot be translated into English (Spielmann 1998, 239).

This hardcore form of incommensurability is linked to what is believed about the hermeneutical resources of the English-speaking world. Each of the theorists above describe limitations of the metaphysics associated with colonial language, like hard binaries, absolute divisions between nouns and verbs, and the abstract (disembodied, untethered to land and community) nature of the language. Indigenous philosophers have theorized the limitations of the hermeneutic resources broadly associated with Western modes of knowing and colonial languages. V. F. Cordova describes the knowledge systems that emerge from communities as “matrices.” For Cordova, some matrices, like those of her own Indigenous communities, are self-aware and reflexive, acknowledging the knowledge systems of others noncompetitively. Western knowledge matrices, on the other hand, are not self-aware; rather, Cordova conceives of the Western mode of knowing as one that does not acknowledge acceptable alternatives and seeks to subsume or correct forms of life that diverge (Cordova 2007). Dian Million describes Western

epistemic communities' knowledge systems as "sociopolitical imaginaries" consisting in embodied practices and discursive content. Like Cordova, Million argues that the socio-political imaginaries of Western epistemologies contain discursive stereotypes and felt, affective knowledge that render Indigenous people as mere caricatures (Million 2013). Lee Hester and Jim Cheney describe Indigenous knowledge systems as "maps" that correspond to the same terrain as Western "maps," but that do so in a different mode (Hester and Cheney 2001). Gerald Vizenor calls the practices of Western epistemologies "manifest manners," noting that Western epistemologies produce mere "simulations" of Indians (Vizenor 1994).

Proponents of impassable incommensurability describe the hermeneutic resources of Western epistemic communities as inflexible and unaccommodating of Indigenous experiences. Concepts captured in the English language cannot be recaptured in Indigenous languages on these views because they are metaphysically inconsistent. The rock garden of incommensurability in these cases is metaphysically untraversable. This means that one cannot, no matter how well-intentioned they may be, travel into Indigenous spaces and epistemologies to "understand them better," if the traveler comes sailing with the trappings of dominant discourse.

In addition to the sentiments expressed by theorists like Bastien, Jeffredo-Warden, and Spielmann, other proponents of impassable incommensurability spring from different motivations. Because of the aforementioned abuses by outsiders and continued attempts of non-Indigenous research institutions to establish and maintain control of Indigenous language archives and reclamation programs, claims of radical incommensurability may serve an agenda of linguistic and epistemic sovereignty (Meissner 2021). Novelist David Treuer says his characters' Ojibwe thoughts cannot be translated into English, but he expands this thought to include that even if the character's thoughts could be translated, Treuer would refuse to translate them because he wants to defy the tropes of ethnography and the constant calls from settler society for the labor of translation (Kirwan and Treuer 2009). Treuer refuses to translate the Ojibwe language as an act of linguistic sovereignty. As Debenport describes, some communities exercise similar control over the transmission and translation of their languages by rejecting writing systems altogether. Debenport enacts a nuanced ethnographic methodology in which she does not include any written accounts of a particular Indigenous community's language, but she does give examples of translation into English. Whether this is a violation of community knowledge-transmitting protocols is up to that community, but Debenport's work certainly offers an example of an attempted strategic assertion of incommensurability that works to undo the expectations set by ethnographic modes.

### *Strategic Impassable Incommensurability*

Debenport's form of impassable incommensurability might be better described as *strategic impassable incommensurability* and the definition might differ from that offered to describe commitments about the metaphysics of English-speaking worlds. Strategic impassable incommensurability is the view that Indigenous worlds, knowledges, and languages are intricately linked to one another and onto-epistemologically distinct from other worlds such that they *should not* be translated, transposed, or expressed in other languages or by outsiders. Andrea Simpson, Coulthard, Kim TallBear, and Rachel Flowers theorize the politics of Indigenous refusal, a concept similar to strategic impassable incommensurability (Simpson 2007; TallBear 2013; Simpson 2014; Flowers

2015; Simpson 2017). Simpson writes, “Refusal’ rather than recognition is an option for producing and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions away from and in critical relationship to states” (Simpson 2017, 19). The refusal to translate or to play the role of a translator or guide is practicing radical departure from recognition-based politics, be they in the form of state-recognition or ethnographic recognition. Indigenous people who refuse to play these roles are producing or maintaining incommensurability as a mechanism for subverting a game in which settler society, in having Indigenous people translate, casts Indigenous people as having consented to their own oppression. Simpson writes that consent “operates as a technique of recognition and simultaneous dispossession” (18). In cases of refusal, the rock garden of incommensurability is untraversable due to the refusal of would-be guides. The notion of a guide leads to another distinct sentiment regarding incommensurability expressed within Indigenous philosophies of language.

### *Incommensurability with Technical Passages: Heavy Water through a Rock Garden*

*Incommensurability with technical passages* is the view that Indigenous worlds, knowledges, and languages are intricately linked to one another and onto-epistemologically different from other worlds such that they cannot be easily translated, transposed, or expressed in other languages or by outsiders. With careful navigation, the hermeneutic resources of different worlds can be modified to accommodate Indigenous thought. Theorists who express this view describe flexibility within dominant discursive tools that allows for the accommodation of nondominant experiences. Sometimes a portion of a river where a rock garden has emerged is navigable in heavy water, but only with expert guidance. The path through the rock garden is called a “technical passage,” and one knows a technical passage only if one has spent a lifetime traveling them or is taught by someone who has. Like heavy water through a rock garden, incommensurability with technical passages is navigable only with expert guidance. This form of incommensurability poses important challenges for world-traveling in that it requires dangerous labor from marginalized knowers.

This form of incommensurability is expressed by Rasmussen’s initial exchange where he asks, “what other Inuktitut terms and concepts might enrich our understanding of the world, if only we chose to ask?” (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 284). Here, Rasmussen seems to suggest that with careful guidance from Inuktitut speakers, Inuktitut terms and concepts can be introduced into settler worldviews, which could “enrich” their understandings of the world. Rasmussen also implies that translation from Other views of the possibility of translation from English into Inuktitut is also possible and unproblematic, though he expresses frustration with the tendency for Canadian agencies to perpetuate the idea that Indigenous worldviews need to be “corrected” by creating concepts for things like “computers and time-clocks” (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 284). Rasmussen is not specific about the types of skills required to produce accurate translations but maintains that translation is possible in some cases.

Scholars working in Two-Spirit and Indigenous queer discourses are doing the hard work of locating and restoring traditional conceptions of gender, sexuality, and kinship. This process is one of translation that requires patience, skill, and profound connections to communal responsibilities. Deborah Miranda, for example, engages in painful memory work with the JP Harrington archives in which she must weed through the violent hermeneutical resources of the colonial Spanish era and through Harrington’s notes in order to find fieldnotes pertaining to southern California third-gender lifeways. In



reforming the English language to accommodate the concepts Miranda is attempting to translate, she and other Two-Spirit Indians often turn to poetry. Quoting Janice Gould, Miranda writes, “the work that indigenous women poets . . . do in grieving, honoring, and writing our historical losses [is] “a resurrection of history through writing. . . . This writing, I would say, amounts almost to an act of exhumation” (Miranda 2010, 276).

Nicole Latulippe provides a helpful typology of resource management and environmental sciences literatures pertaining to traditional knowledges (TK), classifying the scholarship into four dynamic categories: ecological, critical, relational, and collaborative. Each of these modes carries with it its own insights as well as risks during collaboration (Latulippe 2015, 120). On Latulippe’s model, critical and relational approaches “tend to emphasize fundamental differences between [Western and Indigenous] knowledge systems”; these views also seem to attribute impassable forms of incommensurability between Indigenous epistemologies and non-Indigenous epistemologies (125). Ecological and optimistic approaches, on the other hand, “celebrate [Indigenous and Western epistemologies’] similarities, or at least their potential for symmetry” (125). On Latulippe’s model, ecological and optimistic approaches generate views more akin to incommensurability with technical passages or views that do not see incommensurability at all between Indigenous epistemologies and non-Indigenous epistemologies.

Latulippe offers examples of ecological and optimistic projects like those of Whyte and Robin Kimmerer, noting that these projects approach the sharing of traditional knowledge as “a means of creating long-term processes to facilitate cross-cultural and cross-situational collaboration” (Kimmerer 2002; Whyte 2013; Latulippe 2015, 125). Latulippe writes that these projects, though optimistic, are critical in that they “[focus] on the political, legislative, institutional, and policy transformations needed to facilitate empowered forms of collaboration” (Latulippe 2015, 125). Kimmerer and Whyte offer projects that seem to see translation as possible with expert guidance and ideal conditions, some of those ideal conditions being commitments to ontological pluralism and mutual respect from both parties (Kimmerer 2002; Whyte 2013; Latulippe 2015).

Proponents of views of incommensurability with technical passages endorse creativity and optimism, which at first blush might appear to be positive spins on coalition-building, but poetry and optimism are also dangerous labor required from marginalized knowers in the translation process. Technical passages through the rock garden are known only by Indigenous knowers, and in these circumstances, Indigenous knowers, technical passages, and Indigenous worlds can be exploited by reckless world-travelers. In the following section, I hope to gesture at some ways of framing respectful world-traveling in light of the incommensurability expressed in Indigenous philosophies of language. Taking incommensurability seriously need not halt the goals of preventing epistemic violence, though it may add important caveats to how we go about seeking those ends.

## VI. Navigating Incommensurate Worlds

I am the great, great, great, granddaughter of canoe builders. California Indian people built canoes of various sorts and used them to engage in a praxis of visiting. Luiseño people visited our cousins throughout the river systems and up and down the coastline of what is now called “California.” We made frequent pilgrimages to the sacred islands of Kíimki Haraasa where we hear stories of *kiikatum*. While my generation is engaged in the reclamation of this visiting praxis, I often wonder how my ancestors encountered



so many different communities with so many different epistemologies and languages and did so in a good way? How can we engage in “world”-traveling, literal and figurative, with *chamsúun lóoviq*/good hearts? Akulukjuk seems to have answers to a very similar question when he writes of traveling the world with his language:

Inuktitut made sure that I care for the trees and grass and bees and insects of the south even though our language is not really made for the southern climate, but the respect the language teaches is inseparable from your own personal surroundings so I felt I had no choice but love the environment given me. My language is so respectful that I learnt to respect every other race and being on this earth, no matter what they have done. (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 289)

Akulukjuk writes that his language is intricately connected to a way of being in relation with the world. He treats his land-based language as a guide for how to relate to other communities, even those physically and onto-epistemologically distant from his own, knowing full well there are other ways of being in the world. Akulukjuk’s depiction of his language mirrors Cordova’s depiction of Indigenous matrices, as self-aware and reflexive, acknowledging the knowledge systems of others noncompetitively. Akulukjuk’s and Cordova’s accounts also mirror Lugones’s depiction of playful world-traveling, as being conducted without self-importance, open to being constructed, learning, or being made a fool. Below I have gathered some concluding thoughts, pulling guidance for responsible world-traveling from Indigenous philosophies of language.

### *We Should be Cognizant that Not All Worlds Are Open*

Some Indigenous philosophies of language posit strong views of incommensurability, some of which are tied to dominant discourse’s infusion of binaries, like the separation of mind and body, and teleological processes that presuppose linearity and narratives of “progress” (Bastien 2004). Other Indigenous philosophies of incommensurability spring from a politics of refusal (Simpson 2007; TallBear 2013; Simpson 2014; Flowers 2015; Simpson 2017). In both cases, incommensurability should be taken seriously, and world-traveling should not be attempted. Acknowledging that not all worlds are open is an important step in being a respectful world-traveler. Flowers writes: “As Indigenous peoples increasingly take up the politics of refusal, the settler too must demonstrate a willingness to be refused” (Flowers 2015, 24). Incommensurability and refusal can be generative (Simpson 2007; TallBear 2013; Simpson 2014; Flowers 2015; Simpson 2017).

Dotson’s account of world-traveling, or acquiring trans-hermeneutical fluency through third-order changes, requires expertise, consent, and trust. She writes: “One’s motives must be assessed, an epistemic community willing to apprentice the perceiver must be located, and a relationship of trust must be built before one can even begin to learn a set of hermeneutical resources that follow from a given resistant epistemological position” (Dotson 2012, 35). Dotson’s account of world-traveling allows for the possibility that marginalized epistemic communities might refuse to translate, or even that translation might not be possible in some cases. Dotson also leaves open the possibility that epistemic exclusion might be warranted.

The prospect of closed worlds causes trouble for projects that see Indigenous languages and knowledge systems as sites of liberatory instruction. These projects want to extract from Indigenous worldviews without centering our sovereignty or respecting

our refusals. These views are not quite as obviously destructive as those that see Indigenous knowledges as mere supplements to Western knowledge systems, as in Whyte 2013 and Latulippe 2015. Rather, these views often take the form of radical feminisms, climate-justice projects, queer critiques, anarchisms, and environmental philosophies that denounce Western paradigms. These projects attempt to model their liberatory projects on instructions that have not been willingly shared by Indigenous communities (Rifkin 2010). Some feminist epistemology projects are committed to views that attribute “more objective” knowledge to marginalized communities; respectful world-travelers acknowledge that not all knowledge, no matter how liberatory, is up for grabs.

Though not all worlds are open to world-travelers, coalitions can still be made with communities who have closed worlds. As Tuck and Yang note, “opportunities for solidarity lie in what is incommensurable rather than what is common . . .” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 28). Indigenous activists, including those who are from closed worlds, are often skilled at using colonially imposed resources to their own advantage. Marginalized groups, in virtue of their marginalization, often share the hermeneutic resources of the oppressor. Even if the hermeneutic resources of dominant discourse are inflexible, it seems possible that loose coalitions can be formed through dominant discourse. We can get out of our canoes and meet in the colonizer’s language to advocate on each other’s behalf without ever having visited each other’s worlds. We can give each other the benefit of the doubt that we each are knowers and that my world is intact, whole, and beautiful, even if it is inaccessible to you. We can embrace a playful mode without ever going anywhere.

### *We Can Work Together to Retool Dominant Canoes*

As Akulukjuk expresses above, some Indigenous philosophies of language posit that there are instructions for how to relate to the world imbedded within the languages we inherit from our communities. Theorists like Bastien describe that inside the English language are instructions to approach the land as if it is an object over which man is the master. Whether the English language is flexible enough to accommodate new modes of relating remains an open question, but most feminist philosophers will attest that there are serious problems with dominant logics. Alison Bailey describes the world as consisting of many knowledge systems and maintains that the dominant knowledge systems—white logics, —must be “retooled” (Bailey 2007). It is not just the case that white logics have built a faulty picture of the world, rather, the actual surveying methodology—the logics—for the construction of the picture is faulty and must be abandoned. If proponents of impassable incommensurability are taken seriously, a solution like Bailey’s also requires the abandonment or radical retooling of colonial languages. Perhaps we see attempts at this work with the increasing use of “they” as a gender-neutral alternative to the binary enforced by “she” and “he” or in the increased use of “Chicanx” and “Latinx” among Spanish speakers. It is not clear that these ultimately small changes are chipping away at an entire hermeneutical network that refuses to see the limits of itself or recognize itself as imposed, but they may be radical sites of retooling.

For some proponents of incommensurability with technical passages, Indigenous languages are infused with spirituality, governance value, and connections to the land that makes them ideal vessels for containing Indigenous knowledges and for expressing the sacred (Jeffredo-Warden 1999; Leonard 2017). With hard work, the hermeneutic

resources of dominant epistemologies and dominant languages can be modified to accommodate concepts and ideas expressed easily in Indigenous languages. Indigenous theorists who utilize poetry and other creative uses of English are reforming language to act as a vessel that can contain their translations (Miranda 2010). Ruíz describes language as constructed and maintained by the culturally powerful, which manifests “some harms more visible than others,” meaning that those who are not part of the culturally powerful class experience violence that there are not interpretive tools ready-made to express (Ruíz 2016, 422). Speakers put into the position of having to make testimony in a space where there are no ready-made, collective interpretive resources to accommodate that testimony, according to Ruíz, are experiencing linguistic alterity. Ruíz emphasizes the agonizing difficulty of being un-interpretable and having no social power to make new interpretive resources salient. Respectful world-travelers, especially those from dominant social positions, can make Indigenous theorists’ reformations of dominant hermeneutical resources salient by reading and citing Indigenous theorists who generate poetry, theory, and tweets.

### *Tip Your Guide*

As referenced above, the work of translating between worlds, of guiding travelers through technical passages, can be agonizing and exhausting. Respectful world-travelers traversing heavy water with technical passages will note that the precious paths through the rock gardens are known only by Indigenous guides. Translating between worlds and leading travelers is dangerous, often life-threatening work for the guide. Guides should be listened to, respected, and compensated when possible. Again, respectful world-travelers, especially those from dominant social positions, have the power to make Indigenous theorists’ reformations of dominant hermeneutical resources salient by reading and citing Indigenous theorists who generate poetry, theory, and tweets.

### *“World” and “Fluency” Are Not Metaphorical in Many Indigenous Spaces*

Indigenous philosophies of language draw connections between knowledge, language, land, governance, responsibility, and community that are not taken seriously in mainstream discourse. The connections illuminate that language and knowledge are interwoven in ways that are difficult if not impossible to separate. Language in Indigenous contexts very rarely refers to the morphological abstract entity constituted by phonemes and grammar; rather, language is a complex, socially constituted system of relating to one another that changes radically depending on context. Context here is not simply situational in terms of which speakers and audience members are present and what their relationships are like. Language in many communities is a way of relating to the land and may even come directly from the land; it is infused with protocols and acknowledgments of relationships. Because language plays this important role in Indigenous cosmologies, experiencing fluency in a world is not a metaphor, nor is the sense of feeling “at home” in one’s world. When theorists “world” travel, they are often world-traveling too. This discourse takes place on stolen land, on land who speaks in languages some people are trying to listen to.

## **VII. Taking Indigenous Language Activists Seriously**

In this article I have attempted to outline some key components of Indigenous philosophies of language, with special attention to the relationships between language and

knowledge and the implications of these relationships for incommensurability. I have offered three views of incommensurability expressed in Indigenous philosophies of language, and described the challenges posed by these forms of incommensurability for “world”-traveling. I conceive of “world”-traveling throughout the essay by way of an extended metaphor, journeying a river aboard a tule canoe—a method of visiting practiced by my California Indian ancestors and being reclaimed by my generation—and incommensurability as obstacles in the river. Indigenous communities’ views on incommensurability should be of serious importance to feminist philosophers concerned with coalition-building, solidarity, and contending with epistemic violence and oppression. I hope to have shown that to take seriously the sentiments of Indigenous language activists and theorists requires a confrontation of the difficulties incommensurability raises for “world”-traveling. Finally, I have gestured toward ways we might “world”-travel in the rivers between incommensurate worlds without causing harm to one another.

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## Notes

- 1 Tommy Akulukjuk, Inuit policy adviser, in a conversation with Derek Rasmussen (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009).
- 2 Peter Cole, “aboriginal technological frameworks” (Cole 2002).
- 3 Interestingly, but unfortunately outside the scope of this article, there are also important implications about strategic uses of language and “world”-traveling in conversations around mestiza consciousness, hybridity, and borderlands/*fronteras*, especially ones that focus on the use of colonial languages like Spanish in colonial English-dominant spaces.

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