

# SEEKING SOCIAL SALVATION IN A WORLD MADE FRICTIONLESS: COMMUNION, EXTRACTIVISM AND INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The convention theme of “social salvation” draws our attention to how Christian notions of salvation, like the Jewish traditions from which they emerged, demand more than individual escape from the morass of historical and material existence. They insist, in the words of John the Baptist, that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”<sup>1</sup> This sense that salvation is bound to flesh and history is expressed powerfully in the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anguish of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anguish of the followers of Christ.... That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.<sup>2</sup>

The church’s obligation to embrace the world in its suffering and fallenness is linked with important theological notions such as communion, encounter and solidarity. These are always moral and spiritual challenges. In this paper, I will explore how the material dynamisms of contemporary civilization, rooted in patterns established by Western colonialism, render communion, encounter and solidarity particularly difficult by making it all-too-easy to neither see nor attend to the anguish of human and non-human others. I will describe this problem in terms of a “frictionlessness,” in which human, ecological and biological differences are engaged and then overcome in extractive processes. Frictionlessness contributes to injustice by freeing protagonists from engagement with one another and, thus, from moral

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:6. For a constructive theology of flesh that encompasses human, animal, vegetal and lythic, see Scott McDaniel, “Of Mountain Flesh: Space, Religion, and the Creatureliness of Appalachia” (PhD thesis, University of Dayton, 2018), [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=dayton1524776446663574](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=dayton1524776446663574).

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §1, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html). Translation modified by author.

reckoning and reconciliation. I pursue this analysis not to absolve indifference, but to bring into focus a dynamism that encourages indifference so that we might better resist it.

After setting the scene with Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism*, this paper offers four vignettes of contemporary frictionlessness. It then turns to theologies, histories and anthropologies of extraction and colonialism to consider extractivism and the overcoming of friction as a fundamental form of the sin of our world. With this framing of the problem, it takes up the question of salvation. Seeking to deepen attentiveness to the density of relationships that extraction destroys, it turns to Pope Francis's notions of synodality and integral ecology. It concludes with a brief engagement with the "New Materialism" in order to augment integral ecology's limited attention to horizontal relationships among creatures.

## **2. SALVATION ON THE BATTLEFIELD, A PLACE OF NO FRICTION, AND THE SILENCE OF THE LAND**

Henri de Lubac was an influential voice in theological grappling with social salvation. The term appears repeatedly throughout his 1938 book *Catholicism*.<sup>3</sup> De Lubac opened the book with a challenging epigraph from Jean Giono's 1936 *Les vraies richesses*. After characterizing Christian joy as personal and individual, "In his blessedness [the Christian] passes through the battlefields with a rose in his hand," Giono replies, "My joy will not be lasting unless it is the joy of all. I will not pass through the battlefield with a rose in my hand."<sup>4</sup> De Lubac aimed to show that Christian salvation was essentially social; that it did not understand salvation in a way that would abandon suffering humankind on the battlefield. Indeed, there are passages in the book that are clear precursors to those lines from *Gaudium et Spes*, such as his praise of Mechtilde of Magdeberg as an exemplar of catholicity who took "on the fear and the hopes, the sorrows and the joys of the whole of humanity."<sup>5</sup>

### *Glimpses of the Battlefield*

We do indeed live on a battlefield. I offer four glimpses from my partial awareness with the goal of discerning the material challenge of frictionlessness to *Gaudium et Spes*'s call for communion and solidarity.

The first glimpse dates to life before kindergarten. I grew up on the Northside of Pittsburgh. My earliest political memory is being taken by my mother down the street from our home because there was "something she wanted to see." Pittsburgh is a hilly, terraced city. We walked to the end of our block and looked out along the main street below to Perry High School a few blocks away. My mother wouldn't let me look for long. What I remember was a roiling mass of heads filling the street in front of the school and the roar of the crowd; an ugly roar in a minor key. This was an anti-bussing

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<sup>3</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: The Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980), 61, 120, 123, 156, 166.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Giono, *Les vraies richesses* (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1936), 20, 26; cited in *Catholicism*, 13. (De Lubac cites page numbers from a different edition, but does not provide publication data.)

<sup>5</sup> De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 244-245.

riot, part of the northern white working class's resistance to the legal victories of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>6</sup> Legal and political wrangling about school desegregation would continue for three decades, as white flight accelerated to the suburbs.

A second glimpse concerns another crisis that was unfolding at the same time. Pittsburgh's steel industry, which itself had only recently desegregated its union seniority system, would, within a year of that event, begin its collapse under competition from what we would come to call globalization. As a child I didn't distinguish the working class from the middle class. I thought they meant the same thing. Steel workers drove luxury cars, owned boats and had hunting cabins. That was all gone by the time I was in high school. A way of life was destroyed: By 1983, 133,000 manufacturing jobs had been lost. Pittsburgh's unemployment rate hit 17 percent. Some surrounding towns were as high as 27 percent—worse than during the Great Depression.<sup>7</sup>

There is much to be said about both of these conflicts. Here I want to focus on one of their shared characteristics: how their outcomes were driven by a lack of social and economic friction. My aim here is not to suggest reductionistically that all of these struggles are driven by one dynamic, but to unearth a factor that runs through them all and frustrates our attempts to address them.

The riot was a violent reaction to an attempt to advance racial justice. School desegregation, however, was not defeated in the streets. Although resistance took place in courtrooms and school board meetings, above all, refusal was enacted in real estate offices through the market freedom of white buyers. My family fled the neighborhood where my parents had first dated, a home they had painstakingly remodeled together after they married and a parish where my grandfather had built the convent in which my grade school teachers, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden lived. These astoundingly deep connections could not hold us. They were swamped by racial animus and fear. We fled a community with deep ties for an uprooted existence in what were then the exurbs.

As the collapse of the steel industry unfolded, there was a common video trope on the evening news: the bemused faces of union steelworkers gathered around garbage-can fires at picket lines that were painfully futile against globalization and deindustrialization. You can't picket that. The world had changed and they had no tools to engage it.

I grew up in a no-place that couldn't define itself, because it could neither acknowledge these battlefields nor imagine what to do about them. The Catholic Church overwhelmingly dwelt then and dwells still, in the same unacknowledged territory. This is not to say there weren't homilies about racial or economic injustice,

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<sup>6</sup> This was likely 1972 when "24,000 of the city's 70,000 school students vacated the schools" during a "citywide school boycott," Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 130. See also William Dodge Rutherford, "The 'Unraveling': Resistance to Desegregation in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, 1971-1998" (honors thesis, Department of History, Tufts University, 2014), <https://dl.tufts.edu/concern/pdfs/9306t910k>.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Toland, "In desperate 1983, there was nowhere for Pittsburgh's economy to go but up," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 23, 2012, <https://www.post-gazette.com/business/businessnews/2012/12/23/In-desperate-1983-there-was-nowhere-for-Pittsburgh-s-economy-to-go-but-up/stories/201212230258>.

but more troublingly, that they had little impact. The US Bishops' pastorals "Brothers and Sisters to Us" and "Economic Justice for All," while not perfect, spoke to the moment with force yet had little traction. I fear that necessary theological criticism of the content of such letters can implicitly presume agency is ready to hand if only properly employed. Behind the church's failure on these issues lurked real powerlessness. "Economic Justice for All," widely regarded as a highpoint in episcopal engagement, was drafted in a way that facilitated a broad civic conversation. It offered a profound critique of the US economy and proposed principles for a more just order, but found little traction as the ratchets of globalization and deindustrialization transformed economic life for good.

In the 1980s, the Central American crisis loomed large in Catholic and secular media. This was a fundamental moral challenge to US citizens whose government had both destabilized the region and funded and trained its repressive counter-insurgencies. The Latin American church provided stunning witnesses to the Gospel. That context, where Christians faced death and yet were still willing to engage in loving solidarity, landed as both an inspiration and a temptation in my context: an inspiration from those who witnessed to the gospel in those terrifying conflicts; a temptation to escape from the intractable morass of the cold wars of race and class in the US rustbelt.

That powerful context provided little guidance for understanding my own. In the United States, the National Guard had indeed been mobilized in Pittsburgh and hundreds of other cities in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. During the '70s and '80s, however, unlike Central America, no elite national guard brigades threatened violence in our streets, yet racial segregation and economic disenfranchisement continued with unrelenting effectiveness. (Police shootings of Black citizens did not become a dominant pattern in Pittsburgh until the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>)

This violence worked instead through silent, invisible and obdurate material structures: neighborhood boundaries, urban redevelopment, highway construction, property values, collapsing tax bases, corporate ownership and foreign exchange rates. I lived on a battlefield against which resistance seemed not so much futile, as impossible to imagine.

Consider a third, more-recent, event: The place was an unremarkable suburban box store during a weekday after work rush a decade ago. To one side of the door about fifty people gathered in a circle, holding candles. It was a memorial for John Crawford III, held days after police shot the twenty-two-year-old Black man to death in the store for holding a BB gun that had been displayed unboxed on a shelf.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Johnson, "MLK riots: 40 years later, turmoil on the Hill stirs memories," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, April 2, 2008, <https://www.post-gazette.com/life/lifestyle/2008/04/02/MLK-riots-40-years-later-turmoil-on-the-Hill-stirs-memories/stories/200804020183>.

A timeline of police brutality in Pittsburgh documents ongoing violence against Black citizens from the founding of the Police Department in 1857 through the present, but police shootings did not become a dominant pattern of violence until quite late. Jody DiPerna and Elaine Frantz, "Historical Context: Violence Occurring Against Black Pittsburghers Today Has Been Happening for More than a Century-and-a-Half," *Pittsburgh Institute for Nonprofit Journalism*, June 19, 2022, <https://pinjnews.org/historical-context-violence-occurring-against-black-pittsburghers-today-has-been-happening-for-more-than-a-century-and-a-half/>.

What stands out in my memory about the protest, was the space it occupied, or more to the point, did not. Gathering near the main store entrance, organizers were careful to not disrupt the flow of traffic or customers entering the store. As members of the gathering spoke, sang, prayed, and conducted a libation ritual, people walked right by. The vast majority seemed to have no idea what the group was doing: displaying no interest, resentment or even awkwardness. The assembly was free to gather and utter, but unable to engage or mark space. It just as well might have been held in social media. The physical space was frictionless: permitting neither encounter nor confrontation.

Let's return to Giono's battlefield to consider a final aspect. Although we can see how that powerful quote made it onto one of de Lubac's famous note cards, Giono's concerns were not primarily social. Giono might be described as a pantheistic agrarian, *Les vraies richesses* was a critique of urban civilization's destruction of the earth and consequently, humankind.<sup>9</sup> The battlefield he described was about ecology as much as society. He points us to the ecological and material underpinnings of the social.

Giono's French context differs from ours. Although Gaul was colonized by the Romans, it was not emptied. All of the events I've described transpired on ground taken from Indigenous peoples who were driven from the land through invasion, disease and murder. Many of the land's other plant and animal inhabitants were expelled through similar dynamics. The CTSA is meeting in Baltimore this year. If you have the chance to visit Inner Harbor, note the ambient recordings of once-indigenous species now reduced to soundscapes for tourist space. Their homes eliminated like those of the evicted human inhabitants—from the Piscataway and Susquehannock peoples to those more recently dislocated by redevelopment.

I hold a deed to the land I live on, a fact that locates and implicates me in colonial space. At the time of its original sale under the terms of the Congressional Land Ordinance of 1785, it had been inhabited by the Myaamia, Shawnee and other peoples. That sale was ten years before it was formally ceded in the Treaty of Greenville in 1795.

Occasionally, I do research in a very small stand of uncut forest that, somewhat symbolically, is located just a few miles north of the site of the Greenville treaty's signing and its cession line. The place offers a glimpse of the land before conquest. Its fifteen acres are dense with diverse understory plants and fungi. It is small, no bigger than a woodlot, but it still has a voice that whispers what once sang in the boreal woodlands across this continent.

I met a puppy on my first visit to the forest. He brought a ball into the woods and dropped it at my feet. Having been socialized into this ancient game by generations of his relatives, I knew the rules. I threw it and he brought it back instantly. After a couple of rounds, I explained that I had work to do and headed off. He dropped the ball and accompanied me for more than an hour, sharing in every task. If I looked at a tree, he would look at it with me. Sometimes taking the other side—just so we'd have the whole thing covered. When I bent to look at something, he'd focus with me. Together we considered understory plants, mushrooms, aquatic life in a vernal pool, and the

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Piquet, "A l'heure de la COP 26, pourquoi il faut relire 'Les Vraies Richesses' de Jean Giono," *Marianne*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.marianne.net/culture/litterature/a-lheure-de-la-cop-26-pourquoi-il-faut-relire-les-vraies-richesses-de-jean-giono>.

terrifying rhizomorphs of *Armillaria mellea* fungus: hungry tendrils, shining like a black widow's leg, relentlessly searching underground for trees to penetrate and consume. *Armillaria* are the largest living creatures on the planet, often stretching through miles of forest. The one living in these woods is systematically consuming and killing all of the ancient oak trees there.

The puppy was an Australian cattle dog—his enthusiasm and hard work are typical of his breed. In the 1820s, British settler George Hall bred them in the then Colony of New South Wales from Highland Collies and Australian Dingoes, dogs that had been domesticated by many of Australia's Aboriginal peoples. These brought the skills of silence and heel nipping to the breed.<sup>10</sup> Hall's Heelers, as they were called, were bred to drive small herds of cattle to market through the difficult Australian terrain; an agricultural process that devastated those ecosystems and accelerated the expulsion of the Aboriginal peoples who had inhabited the land for at least forty thousand years. So, this dog who lives next to one of the last fragments of the pre-colonial ecosystem in the Midwest, bears in his DNA a parallel history of colonization, and deeper still of human and canine cooperation stretching back to the early millennia of the Holocene for his line, and at least five to ten times longer for our two species. We've been working and playing together for a very long time.

Contrast those woods with the land to which I hold title. This Spring, after twelve generations of settler ownership, the small strip of woods between my house and the neighbor behind saw only a single native wildflower—a Virginia bluebell. The rest is a panoply of invasive species: several types of ivy and other ground cover, escaped pot herbs, lesser celandine and bush honeysuckle. The latter produces chemicals that attack underground fungi and the roots of competitors, rendering the soil thin and lifeless.

The land has been emptied, reducing its ecological community to silence. There is nothing left to provide friction against our plans. Norman Wirzba quotes Isaiah 5:8, You "who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land."<sup>11</sup>

Consider the common features of these vignettes. Each injustice was facilitated to some degree by frictionlessness: the ability of white residents to flee a neighborhood, frustrating attempts to build an integrated community; the ability of capital to be extracted, moved and redeployed, rendering the communities from which it was extracted without recourse as their physical spaces and bodies no longer mattered; a community gathered to mourn and protest the killing of an innocent young Black man unable to effectively impact others' experiences of the very place where he had been shot dead only days earlier; a landscape so emptied of its ecological communities and the human communities who knew them that there is little left to engage.

A battlefield indeed, but one where it seems difficult to do anything but pass through with a rose, or more to the point, an ineffective protest sign in hand. What might it mean to seek salvation in this socially, economically and ecologically frictionless space? In order to address that question, we turn to a consideration of the origins and nature of this frictionlessness.

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<sup>10</sup> "Australian Cattle Dog," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, updated June, 19 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian\\_Cattle\\_Dog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_Cattle_Dog) .

<sup>11</sup> Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 143.

### 3. THE SIN OF OUR WORLD, THE 500-YEAR PROJECT, AND THE TWO-STEP OF FRICTION AND EXTRACTIVISM

In the Fraction Rite, we echo John the Baptist, praying "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us." What is the sin of our world? In the *City of God*, Augustine offered an account of the *Libido dominandi* that was both a description of the universal sin of the world and a contextual description of the fundamental vice of the Roman Empire. Our civilization is quite different from the Roman Empire. Might we develop a contextual description of the sin of our world?

#### A. Castillo: *The 500 Year Project*

Daniel Castillo has offered a comprehensive account of the forces that create the context I've sketched. Synthesizing the work of Enrique Dussel and numerous other scholars, he outlines a "500-year project" that extends from European colonization of the western hemisphere through modernity and neo-liberal globalization, to the Anthropocene.

If we read this as an account of the sin of our world, Castillo provides a helpful distinction. He describes it, not simply as a "system of domination," but one whose most fundamental, orienting dynamism is "plunder."<sup>12</sup>

Macarena Gómez-Barris, provides his definition of plunder: "an economic system that engages in thefts, borrowing, and forced removals, violently reorganizing social life as well as the land by thieving resources from Indigenous and Afro-descendent territories."<sup>13</sup> Race is a fundamental part of this system. Castillo cites Achille Mbembe: "To produce blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a *body of extraction*... a body from which great effort is made to extract maximum profit."<sup>14</sup>

This account of colonial plunder is mapped in the geography of center and periphery. Castillo cites Eduardo Galeano's poetic words, "Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European—or later—United States capital, and has thus accumulated in distant centers of power."<sup>15</sup>

Castillo's project focuses on this center/periphery exploitation. Colonized lands and peoples provide "ghost acres" that feed colonizing nations. They provide the raw materials and energy that fuel their industrial production. The "false and superficial" political ecology of neoliberal globalization "obfuscates" these exploitative relationships.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 142.

<sup>13</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xvii, cited in Castillo, *Ecological Theology*, 147.

<sup>14</sup> Castillo, *Ecological Theology*, 156, citing Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 12; cited in Castillo, *Ecological Theology*, 149-50.

<sup>16</sup> Castillo, *Ecological Theology*, 154, 166-70.

Castillo insightfully reveals the colonial roots of the context sketched above and offers a way of considering the dominant character of the sin of our world. Colonial plunder is both the historical foundation and ongoing fuel for our civilization.

But there are aspects of our context that this account does not address. It is premised on the militaristic models of colonialism that dominated what became Latin America. In *Indigenous Continent*, Pekka Hämäläinen contrasts Spanish and Portuguese colonization of Central and South America with the French and Dutch colonization of North America. The former involved conquest of hierarchical empires and the mass enslavement of Indigenous populations for mining and large-scale plantation farming. In short: genocidal plunder. The Spanish were much less successful in the more egalitarian societies of the Southwest of North America. In the Northeast, the French and Dutch were interested in building trading empires more than occupying land and the no-less-destructive colonization of what became North America proceeded by different means.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, British colonialism, which became the dominant form in North America, was, in addition to trade, focused on colonization and engaged in genocidal war from the start (e.g., King Philip’s War in 1675). It practiced the systematic enslavement of African and Indigenous North American peoples from the beginning and would eventually incorporate enslavement into large plantation agriculture.

I make the distinction between the early phases of the colonization of South and North America as a step toward refining our understanding of colonialism’s contemporary legacy, not to suggest that the colonization of North America was somehow morally better than the South. Both were genocidal.

### ***B. Tsing: Friction***

To understand the difference and its significance for our context, I turn to anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. In a book that provides the key concept that I’m employing in this essay, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Tsing offers an ethnography of the “sticky materiality” upon which the dreams of global capitalist connection depend. She describes “friction” in terms of the “duality” at the heart of all universals. “Friction” gives universals “purchase...allowing them to spread as frameworks for the practice of power” but this necessary imbrication in the local prevents them “from being everywhere the same.”<sup>18</sup> These frictions are not transparent to the market process. They cannot be characterized as mutual negotiation of interest or optimization of outcomes because they can involve fundamental misunderstandings and mutual incomprehension. Friction is, nonetheless, a form of engagement across difference.

Tsing offers an example of friction with an account of the commodity chain that links coal mined in Kalimantan, Indonesia with power plants and steel mills in India. Coal’s ability to function as a commodity lies not in “a vague and transcendent ‘coalness’,” but in “a step-by-step negotiation of the possibilities at hand—for digging,

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<sup>17</sup> Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: Norton Liveright, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1, 8-10.

sorting, transport and so on." Coal the commodity is made in the friction with which "the lump of coal rubs up against other participants in the chain."<sup>19</sup>

Tsing's account centers on a Singaporean coal export manager whom she portrays as an impresario of friction: deftly coordinating mining engineers, truck drivers, barges, coal graders, conveyor belt operators and stevedores with cajoling, bribes and at one point, an impromptu purchase of a passing bargeful of melons—a gift that shaved two days off of the loading time for a cargo ship. The ship itself is commanded by Indian officers and crewed by Indonesians. Communicating only through gestures and pantomime because neither speaks the others' language, they complete the many tasks required to transport coal across the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup>

Friction, as theorized by Tsing, is not about resistance, rather it is what binds the links of commodity chains together. In this sense, commodity chains are a negotiation, a connection to people and place. Friction is how abstract market forces get connected to and through local cultures, societies and ecologies.

Tsing offers a less desolate account of friction in the main study of the book: an ethnography of the strange alliances in a successful Indonesian ecological movement that united Dayak Indigenous forest dwellers, bourgeois urban nature enthusiasts, and international NGOs. The alliance was not characterized by consensus or even mutual understanding, but by chains of friction that nonetheless successfully established a Dayak community-managed forest that halted commercial logging.<sup>21</sup>

Tsing's account of friction has earned wide acclaim as a seminal work in global ethnography. I respect the value of her main insight but what sticks with me is a less remarked material counter-point in her account which suggests that friction, like a ratchet, works primarily in one direction: with the flow of extraction.

In contrast to the charismatic impresario of friction, Tsing offers an account of an unremarkable, silent, muddy logging road that nonetheless enacts profound material changes in the forest through which it is cut. It disrupts community geographies by separating villages with the newly dangerous territory surrounding the road. It opens forest interiors to extraction. It enables wildcat loggers to enter. Village heads are bribed for permission to cut timber. Forest dwellers begin to reimagine the forest in terms of the cash each tree might bring. There is a rush to sell trees off quickly as deforestation grows at the hands of larger gangs who respond to attempts to resist or to even bargain with violence. Forest dwellers may have a fleeting say in negotiating the despoiling of their lands, but once the road arrives, they do not have the power of refusal.<sup>22</sup>

Friction imbricates global capital; it does not resist it. As the logging road opens the forest to extraction, the friction of Indigenous communities and the landscapes they inhabit are gradually eroded. This material, spatial dynamic is common in forests around the world, whether South East Asia, Africa, or the Amazon.<sup>23</sup> The lesson I take

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<sup>19</sup> Tsing, *Friction*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Tsing, *Friction*, 52-54.

<sup>21</sup> Tsing, *Friction*, 245-247.

<sup>22</sup> Tsing, *Friction*, 27-50.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, this NASA presentation of Landsat satellite data from 1975 to 2012, showing the impact of logging roads in Rondonia Brazil: Aries Keck, "Fishbone Forest," Scientific Visualization Studio, NASA, August 16, 2012, <https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/11061/>.

from Tsing is that extraction begins in, but gradually overcomes friction's engagement with difference.

Tsing helps us understand the colonization of North America, which proceeded through different dynamisms from Latin America. French and Dutch colonists offered manufactured trade goods in exchange for animal pelts which were needed in enormous quantities for felting for European headwear. Indigenous peoples were enthusiastic participants in this trade. It motivated both intensive diplomatic efforts and armed conflict between tribes and colonial nations. This was a cooperative extractive undertaking of mind-boggling scale. As the land was emptied of fur bearing animals, there was increasing conflict over access to trapping lands, which deepened conflict among Indigenous nations.<sup>24</sup> Like Tsing's logging roads, trade centers became centers for influxes of outsiders, in this case, settler colonists, who brought both destructive domesticated animals and disease. French and Dutch models of trade gave way to the onslaught of English settler populations. What began in friction, ended in expulsion and genocide.

Tsing's notion of friction adds a key insight to our understanding of extraction. She illuminates extractive dynamics that lack the visibility of plunder's overt violence. While the outcome is often the same, not all extraction is adequately described as plunder. It is not always practiced initially as violent expropriation, but as a confusing two-step: extraction is pursued in the friction of negotiated cooperative exchange. In North America, trade began with mutual interest. But as other factors intervened (disease, declining animal stocks, European imperial conflict, settler colonist population pressures), consent and cooperation collapsed while the flow of resources continued. What begins in friction, ends in expulsion and extraction. This two-step of friction and extraction is a pattern that repeats itself time and again.

### ***C. Arboleda: The Entire World as a Site of Extraction***

The 500-year project continues to develop through the refining of extractivism. Martín Arboleda explores its development in *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism*. Arboleda's analysis shows how extraction becomes both a freestanding dynamic, no longer confined to the plunder of the peripheries, and increasingly unbound from human frictions.

Building upon Achille Mbembe's observation of the decline of Europe as the "center of gravity of the world," Arboleda argues that the circuits of extraction have moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific, "destabilizing...categories of core/periphery and even of global North/global South." Technological innovations have transformed the mine from a specific site of extraction into a "a dense network of territorial infrastructures and special technologies vastly dispersed across space...that...wholly blends into the circulatory system of capital which now transverses the entire geography of the earth."<sup>25</sup>

Arboleda illustrates these transformations with an account of how the extraction of copper in the Andean Plateau minimizes human labor: automated mining trucks

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<sup>24</sup> Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent*; William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2020), 4-5.

deliver ore to automated smelters and the resulting copper cathodes are shipped across the Pacific to Chinese “dark factories” that produce wire with almost no human labor.<sup>26</sup> Without labor, extraction is increasingly freed of human friction. This helps us understand that friction is not simply an obstacle, but the possibility of human political involvement in these processes.

Arboleda argues that this automation of extraction and production coincides with the fragmentation and exploitation of labor around the planet.

Millions upon millions of indigenous and *campesino* communities have lost their livelihoods in Latin America as infrastructures of extraction expand aggressively and destructively across the region’s erstwhile countrysides. Many have been proletarianized or forced to migrate to *favelas*, *villas miseria*, *comunas* and *campamentos*, among some of the modalities of shantytowns in which Latin American cities have become ever more ensnared. However, is the plight of these peasants substantially different from that of the millions of Chinese migrant workers who have had to leave their families to work in the overcrowded, fractured and polluted manufacturing cities of the *hukou* system? Or that of subcontracted workers in the logistics warehouses of the United States, whose children go to bed on empty stomachs most nights?<sup>27</sup>

The extractive dynamic of our civilization has taken on a life of its own: enveloping what were once colonizing centers while continuing its exploitative work on the peripheries. Equally importantly for understanding our context, however, friction is a transitional state. What begins in friction ends in extraction—everywhere. It is not simply that all obstacles are eventually defeated, but that any system or community is engaged, absorbed and liquidated to extract value.

#### **D. Zuboff: Digital Extraction**

How are we absorbed into the systems we create? Shoshona Zuboff describes the business model of the internet giants that dominate our lives as one of mining “human experience as free raw material” for commercial extraction. Whereas previous forms of “industrial capitalism transformed nature’s raw materials into commodities...surveillance capitalism lays its claims to the stuff of human nature for a new commodity invention. Now it is human nature that is scraped, torn, and taken for another century’s market project.”<sup>28</sup>

Digital media companies extract data to build the behavioral models that fuel their main product: advertising (although that is too old-fashioned a term to describe the sophisticated forms of manipulation they offer). They are therefore eager to host any form of human interaction and mediate any form of expression.

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<sup>26</sup> Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Arboleda, *Planetary Mine*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8, 94.

Big Other [as Zuboff calls it] does not care what we think, feel, or do as long as its millions, billions, and trillions of sensate, actuating, computational eyes and ears can observe, render, datify, and instrumentalize the vast reservoirs of behavioral surplus that are generated in the galactic uproar of connection and communication.<sup>29</sup>

This business model is based upon a fundamental dishonesty. Products are marketed as free services—messaging, email, word processing, social media—but are designed as tools to extract behavioral data.

Zuboff's preferred term for the object of extraction is human "experience." There is value, however, in thinking about the social institutions and structures they liquidate in order to access that experience. The power of this system of digital extraction is particularly evident in its impact on older forms of mediation. The internet giants have picked apart the business model of local papers: using once-paid classified ads as free content to make money at scale off of a handful of paid topics and "freeing" information once locked in local newsprint and selling ads on it—again at low margins on enormous scale. They extract the value from the journalism produced by other firms and communities.

I start with print media because that crisis has played out over decades now. All along we had conversations about how the internet could allow newspapers to reach new audiences and provide new forms of content, etc. The two-step dynamic of engaging friction and liquidating extraction has bankrupted local papers across the nation, left major national papers dependent on the largess of billionaires, ended journalism as a sustainable career for more than a small elite, and left countless communities relying on Facebook and national cable networks for news. That stark outcome is beyond dispute.

The same dynamic is at play with countless other communities and institutions. Consider the debates about the impact of dating and hookup apps. These bring a broader, more refined marketplace to human relationships, reifying and fetishizing the choice of partner, and lifting this more purely transactional exchange between individuals from the places and communities in which previous generations learned to form relationships. Similar dynamics are at work in adolescent spaces, as interest in driving declines because both the place of the car and the physical places where adolescents once gathered are replaced by social media spaces.

We can see how the same two-step of friction and extraction takes place in these digital spaces. In both cases, serious arguments can and have been made about how these digital options allow marginalized persons to associate more freely, easily and safely. And, given the astounding inadequacies of legacy institutions' communal and social practices (think of the churches and universities we know), they promise attractive alternatives.

But what began as promised enhancements to extant places and communities, have, in a short time, come to replace them almost entirely. In the process, those seeking relationships and social engagement have been rendered isolated individuals, accepting the attenuated forms of relationship these networks allow, alone in the interface of the given app without the broader social support of the imperfect human

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<sup>29</sup> Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 377.

communities of physical places. Social media extract the value of sociality itself. What begins in friction, ends in extraction, as complex social institutions are removed like mining overburden to get to the ore of monitorable human interaction.

Note that print media is one of the elements of classic civil society on which we have come to rely for reform in the church and consider their fate in digital media. Churches turning to digital media with their business model of liquidating communities has led and will lead, to the further deregulation and heterogenization of religion as much as communal reform.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note that Zuboff is offering a critique of a particular form of digital mediation—what technology critical theorist Andrew Feenberg would call a “technical code.” There are non-extractive forms (as opposed to *uses*) of digital mediation, as evident in Agnes Brazal’s discussion of the “vTaiwan” platform which employs the “Pol.is” algorithm that was designed to build consensus or Katherine Schmidt’s argument about the value of Zoom in liturgies (Zoom remains a paid service).<sup>31</sup>

As digital media increasingly becomes the dominant form of socialization and the fundamental institution of civil society, they have a profound influence on identity. Identity as we still value it, was forged in the struggle for political recognition in the modern era of nation states.<sup>32</sup> That expanded into a fight for inclusion in citizenship by marginalized and minoritized communities, often those who were colonized, struggling for rights in the settler nations that occupy their lands. In this context, identity was and remains fundamentally political; part of a struggle for self-determination, participation and political and economic rights. When identity is translated into social media space, those social, material and political connections are in danger of getting sheared off. In that construction of relationship, identities are reconstructed as performative and elective.

To connect but one dot, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* in 1990, twenty years before Instagram existed and social media platforms became the infrastructure of adolescent socialization and identity. Butler’s discussion of performativity likely appears as common sense among generations native to these spaces, but the political outcome is likely quite different than those Butler articulated in 1990. These spaces tend to dematerialize and depoliticize identity by reducing its practice to symbolic representation in the forms allowed (images, video and brief text), all ruthlessly sorted by algorithms to preference those that maximize time on platform. Identity in these

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<sup>30</sup> See Vincent J. Miller, “Media Constructions of Space, the Disciplining of Religious Traditions and the Hidden Threat of the Post-Secular,” in *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, ed. William Barbieri (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 162-198.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Agnes Brazal, “Synodality and the New Media,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (2023), 95-109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221150888>; Katherine Schmidt, “Let there be streams of Mass” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/let-there-be-streams-mass>; Katherine Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Lexington Books, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Jason Blakely, “Where Identity Politics Actually Comes From,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/where-identity-politics-actually-comes-from>.

deracinated spaces, is the fulfillment of the extractive process: a consumer self with little awareness of the material exploitation and extraction upon which they rely and a self that is largely insulated from friction with others save through that encountered via elective choice.<sup>33</sup>

### ***E. Summary: The Interplay Friction and Extraction***

We can summarize the two-step of friction and extraction as a pattern in which sources of friction, such as cultural, ecological and geochemical relationships, are attended to only instrumentally. They are explored, embraced, negotiated, or tolerated in order to obtain some desired good or outcome. They are not, however, valued in themselves and thus we fail to ponder them (or the incompleteness of our understanding of them) in a way that might give us pause in enacting our plans.

I do not share the Augustinian analysis, common in theology, that these external realities emerge primarily from disordered desires. Nor do I share the dominant culturalist assumptions in the contemporary academy that sees discourse and narrative as the primary drivers of politics. There is formation in all directions. Extractivism is a mutually reinforcing interplay of disposition, culture and material structure. Dispositions lead to actions and to the construction of cultures and structures. Structures, in turn, form culture and individual dispositions.

It is essential to see how the extractivist project transforms the world materially. To paraphrase Eve Tuck and Wayne Yan, “colonization is not a metaphor.”<sup>34</sup> Colonization may manifest in hierarchical discursive polarities that silence Indigenous and other peripheral voices but these are part of a material project to usurp and control land, ecologies and bodies.

Colonialism’s material project has ground down and destroyed the geographical, ecological and human differences that friction engages. I want to exercise caution here, because terra nullius is a fundamental part of the settler imaginary as a pretense for conquest. It was, however, also its outcome as peoples and ecologies were driven from the land. We can’t allow this history of destruction to justify ignoring the living presence and demands of Indigenous people, but we also have to face colonialism’s genocidal and ecological legacies as the material baseline of the world in which we currently dwell. The emptier the world, the less friction.

The dominant structures of our world enact extraction at a planetary scale upon this emptied baseline: a global neoliberal market system built upon the legacy power imbalances of racialized colonialism facilitates the resource flows that undergird the technological, biological and social systems that sustain much of the human

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<sup>33</sup> References to the spatial location and construction of performance are not common in *Gender Trouble*, nor are they central to Butler’s argument. We can consider how the reconfiguration of what they term the “mundane social audience” by social media has consequences for their notion of performativity by considering this reference to “exterior space”: “Gender ought not be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140-141.

<sup>34</sup> Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

population. These structures are taxing planetary biophysical systems, upon which all life depends, to the point of collapse.<sup>35</sup> If European colonialism was an attempt to cheat the metabolic constraints of living in its own territory by plundering other societies, its end game in the Anthropocene brings the hard lesson that limits cannot be ignored in the long run.

The concepts of friction and extraction can be applied to a range of realities. They illuminate tensions in the church’s mission to be the “sacrament of the unity of humankind in God” (to paraphrase *Lumen gentium*). Think of the many ways in which the church falls short—speaking of deep communion but failing in the work to achieve it. To mention but two examples of recent scholarship: Jennifer Scheper Hughes chronicles how the desire for “incorporation” did not halt the rapid collapse of missionary *cura corporalis* in the face of the overwhelming death in the epidemic of 1576 and could not countenance the Indigenous ecclesial creations that emerged from it and Susan Reynolds’s analysis of communion ecclesiology’s inability to adequately deal with difference and power in the concrete life of a multicultural parish.<sup>36</sup> Unless the hard work of friction is sustained, it collapses into extraction.

This is the cultural space in which theology currently works. We need to come to terms with its frictionlessness. I worry that our spatial imaginations are clouded by nostalgic assumptions about social space still holding people together and thus, we read all failures to connect as a moral choice. We live in a world that may no longer resemble the phenomenological space of the Road to Jericho. Disruptive, demanding bodily encounters across difference are not impossible, but are rendered much less likely. Theology has to contend with this material construction of space.

Likewise, our theological speech lands in a vast, clamorous arena of choice. Both civil society and ecclesial structures of elite opinion formation have been utterly remade in a world that gives platform access to everyone. I long for a world in which clear, warranted argument and compelling witness wins the day, but we live in one where each sentence has to earn its attention. Innocent suffering, difficult and demanding truths, and nuanced distinctions are at a disadvantage in a world of neuropsychologically informed content algorithms.

With this understanding of the origins and nature of frictionlessness, we can now turn to our driving question: How might we seek salvation “linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds” in such a frictionless space?

#### 4. SALVATION IN A FRICTIONLESS WORLD

For a paper on salvation, this has focused quite a lot on sin. I have explored extractivism as an account of the underlying form of the sin of our world that ignores and erodes the friction of human and ecological relationships. Here Tony Alonso’s insistence that grace continues to work even in contexts that seek to coopt it and with

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<sup>35</sup> Katherine Richardson, et al., “Earth beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries,” *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023): eadh2458, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas* (New York: NYU Press, 2023); Susan Bigelow Reynolds, *People Get Ready: Ritual, Solidarity, and Lived Ecclesiology in Catholic Roxbury* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023.)

which we are complicit is an essential warning and guide.<sup>37</sup> Salvation, to be salvation, must be intimate with fallenness. We can name eschatological endpoints and virtuous ideals—communion, encounter, solidarity— but the work of salvation is done in their tension with the sin of our world.

By naming and analyzing the sin, we can begin to identify the path of its undoing. This is not to claim that we save ourselves, but that diagnosis is essential to our cooperation with God’s gracious salvation. Friction can be thought of as a premoral element of social physics that holds us together and makes our decisions about encounter and transgressive solidarity possible. To be a bit literal in using the metaphor from physics, the “coefficient of friction” is lower in the civilization we have built. Forces sufficient to once hold us together for encounter no longer bind us. When the coefficient of friction is low, more “normal force” is required to establish the same force of friction. How can we push harder to stay together?

### A. An Ecclesial Response

As I said above, we err by attributing the frictionlessness of our culture to individual failures to embrace the challenge of encounter. Steven Battin describes the historical work of salvation as a “mode of existence” through which “God acts to bring about right relatedness” in order “to effect unity among all things.”<sup>38</sup> Battin’s notion of a “mode of existence” highlights the collective, ecclesial nature of this problem and our response to it.

Ecclesially, we need to respond to a world in which attention to the thickness of relationships and encounter is difficult to sustain. This means cultivating attentiveness to difference, listening to the voices that are easily missed, embracing the “awkwardness,” inefficiencies and entanglements of communal, intercommunal and ecological processes.<sup>39</sup> We need to ask: What friction is being avoided? What ideal is being unwittingly realized through extraction? Who is missing from our unity? This doesn’t mean there are no legitimate grounds for exclusion, but in a world that empties, sorts and separates, this must be a deep and omnipresent concern. Socially and ecologically, who is excluded from the common good? Human societies are always imperfect, but we must be extra mindful of such failures in a civilization that is premised upon such exclusions.

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<sup>37</sup> “Through created material elements and through the work of the hands, structures, and systems of the world *as it is* and not merely as God or we wish it to be, God accepts and transforms what we have done and what we have failed to do with them.” Antonio Eduardo Alonso, *Commodified Communion: Eucharist, Consumer Culture, and the Practice of Everyday Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 123.

<sup>38</sup> Steven J. Battin, *Intercommunal Ecclesiology: The Church, Salvation, and Intergroup Conflict* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2022), 128, 143.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the importance of awkwardness as affect, see Tamalone Eijnden, “The Politics and Poetics of Commoning: Reclaiming Commoning Work as Desirable in Fiction and Practice” (Lecture, Reclaiming the Commons, Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment Conference, Portland, OR, July 11, 2023), developing insights from Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times\*,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 no. (2016): 393–419, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816645989>.

The church as a human community with a planetary scope is positioned to practice community in a way that transgresses colonial divides and brings humans and the biological communities in which they participate into deeper communication and communion.

Pope Francis' push for a synodal church, a "church which listens" has enormous potential in this regard.<sup>40</sup> The Synod for the Amazon was exemplary. It attended not only to a local church, but also to the entire human, ecological and geological community of that place.<sup>41</sup> I have argued elsewhere that synodality in this sense can provide a way of broadening the church's mission as a sacrament of unity beyond the church itself.<sup>42</sup> This, of course, remains a profoundly unrealized potential for which obstacles must be overcome and constructive work must be done.<sup>43</sup> It is a work the church has been entrusted to offer the world even if its scandalous failures hinder its success and reception.

### ***B. Integral Ecology as Attending to the Density of Relationships***

How might the church work to listen to relationships and seek encounter in a world that renders it more difficult? *Laudato Si*'s notion of integral ecology provides a useful model. Although it has a clear ethical component, here I will focus on how its ontological, epistemological and affective dimensions provide resources for reestablishing friction and resisting extractivism.

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<sup>40</sup> Francis, "Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (Vatican City, October 17, 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

<sup>41</sup> See Vincent J. Miller, "Resource Extraction and the Call for Solidarity: The Networks We Have and the Network the Church is Called to Be," in *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining: Integral Peace, Development, and Ecology*, ed. Caesar Montevecchio and Gerard Powers (New York: Routledge, 2022), 202–20; Vincent J. Miller, "We're all tied to the Amazon through globalization. Can the synod help us listen to its cry?," *America Magazine*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/02/19/were-all-tied-amazon-through-globalization-can-synod-help-us-listen-its-cry>; and Vincent J. Miller, "Pope affirms Catholic Church's duty to indigenous Amazonians hurt by climate change," *The Conversation*, (2019), <https://theconversation.com/pope-affirms-catholic-churchs-duty-to-indigenous-amazonians-hurt-by-climate-change-125123>.

<sup>42</sup> Vincent J. Miller, "Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church: The Struggle for Communion in a World Divided by Colonialism and Neoliberal Globalization," *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (March 2022): 8–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221076556>.

<sup>43</sup> See Peter De Mey, "Synodality as a Key Component of the Pontificate of Pope Francis: The Difficult Way from Theory to Practice," in *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life*, ed. Mark D. Chapman and Vladimir Latinovic (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2021), 323–31; Massimo Faggioli, "From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis's 'Listening Primacy,'" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): 352–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140020916034>; Bradford Hinze, "Dreams of Synodality, Specters of Constraint," *Louvain Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 297–312, <https://doi.org/10.2143/LS.43.3.3288709>; Amanda C. Osheim, "Stepping toward a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 370–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919836225>.

Francis offers a theocentric ontology in which all beings reflect the relationality of their triune creator:

The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships.<sup>44</sup>

*Laudato Si'* also offers epistemology as a site of transformation.<sup>45</sup> Citing Bonaventure, it ascribes our failure to perceive these relationships to finitude and sin. We could readily contemplate these traces of trinitarian communion “if only the human gaze were not so partial, dark and fragile.”<sup>46</sup>

This partial gaze is embodied in the technocratic paradigm, which “exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.” *Laudato Si'* extols, in contrast, a “gaze of serene attentiveness” that can broaden the scientific gaze.<sup>47</sup>

The word “gaze” is central to the epistemological project of integral ecology, but Francis’s use of it is also suffused with the language of affect. There are nearly fifty invocations of affect and feeling in *Laudato Si'*, significantly more than references to ethics, morals or epistemology. This is particularly evident in his discussion of St. Francis:

Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. ... For to him each and every creature was united to him by bonds of affection. ... If we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.<sup>48</sup>

These aspects of *Laudato Si'* offer much to awaken awareness of the destructiveness of extractivism and to cultivate dispositions that can challenge its ignorance of the density of relationships. Both seeing and feeling are modalities that open us up to the rest of creation, drawing us out of indifference and coercive dominion

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<sup>44</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), §240, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (hereafter cited as *LS*).

<sup>45</sup> Vincent J. Miller, “Integral Ecology: Francis’s Spiritual and Moral Vision of Interconnectedness,” in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything is Connected*, ed. Vincent J. Miller (Bloomsbury, 2017), 11-28.

<sup>46</sup> *LS*, §239.

<sup>47</sup> *LS*, §222, n. 141.

<sup>48</sup> *LS*, §11.

and into a trinitarian mysticism of creation that attunes us to each creature's value as a manifestation of God's goodness and a partner in our eschatological pilgrimage.

Laudato Si' repeatedly insists that "everything is connected" and links social and ecological concerns. It synthesizes Catholicism's resources for attending to the density of relationships, and thus, resisting extractivism's overcoming of friction.

### C. Supplements from the "New Materialism"

*Laudato Si'*'s theocentric focus powerfully conveys both the value of the rest of creation independent of human use and respect for the density of ecological relationships. It does not, however, provide sufficient guidance for engaging creaturely difference on the horizontal level. Sibling language is all for the good, but how, actually, are we to imagine and practice of communion with limestone, a body of water, an insect or a forest? *Laudato Si'* teaches clearly that all creatures communicate the divine goodness, but it is less successful in conveying what we have to learn from them about themselves.<sup>49</sup>

I will conclude by seeking a supplement to integral ecology from a different metaphysical approach—the so-called "New Materialism"—a discourse that builds upon insights from Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour among many others.<sup>50</sup> In a seminal text, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett argues for a "vital" materialism that broadens agency beyond humans. She speaks of "*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."<sup>51</sup> She elaborates this idea using Bruno Latour's notion of an "actant," which he defined as something, human or not, "that acts or to which is granted activity by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general."<sup>52</sup> In the wake of a global event that resulted from some interaction between an RNA virus, a bat and a large proportion of the human species, it is hard to deny the analytical value of this perspective.

Bennett seeks to broaden anthropocentrism into "a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations."<sup>53</sup> Bennett's goals go beyond ontological accuracy, however. She frames her project as one of transforming affect: broadening our attachments to things and transforming epistemology to draw "human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being

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<sup>49</sup> LS §86.

<sup>50</sup> The resonances I propose here should not eclipse the profound metaphysical tensions between Christian theology and the New Materialism. The most germane here is that these authors would hesitate to embrace the eschatological and teleological assumptions of Christian salvation. New materialism tends toward what Althusser described as "aleatory materialism," a tradition focused on the chance conjuncture of atoms that he traced to Epicurus. See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>52</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 9 quoting Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369-81.

<sup>53</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans.<sup>54</sup> In this way, her project parallels the epistemological and affective moves of *Laudato Si'*.

The New Materialism does more than resonate with integral ecology, however, it helps deepen it. This is evident in Bennett's description of vital materialism's "political goal" as "not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members."<sup>55</sup> This focus on communication between human and nonhuman actants can provide the tools to broaden cherished theological notions of communion, encounter, solidarity and the common good beyond the human, in a way that is more than an inspiring metaphor, but actually guides engagement and practice.<sup>56</sup>

The insights of the New Materialism can transform how we imagine our moral predicament. We are certainly destroying the beauty and order of God's creation, but we are also refusing the joy and terror of relationship with our sibling human beings and creatures. Thus, repentance can be refigured: from restoration of an abstract, third person, ecological order, much of which is forever gone, to a loving, intimate, frightening and risky re-engagement with our fellow creatures to find new forms of flourishing together. Haraway speaks of "learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings."<sup>57</sup> Remember that puppy. Our shared history is marked by violence and coercion but also by the joy of being together.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude on the topic of salvation: Francis's assertion that "no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together"<sup>58</sup> is fruitfully read alongside Haraway's injunction that "to be one is to become with many."<sup>59</sup> The question of social salvation

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<sup>54</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112.

<sup>55</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104.

<sup>56</sup> Latour's proposal for a "parliament of things" is a crucial contribution in this regard. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>58</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), §32, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

<sup>59</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4. Haraway's use of "contact zones" in this book is cited in *Laudate Deum*. Haraway has spoken of how being "cursed and blessed with sacramental consciousness" from a Catholic formation as a child has influenced her thought, enabling her to see the "Irreducible semioticity of materiality and vice versa." See Donna Haraway, "Cyborgs, Dogs and Companion Species," European Graduate School Video Lectures (2000), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yxHIKmmI70>, 3 min, 50 secs. For her critical reflections on being quoted in *Laudate Deum*, see Aleja Hertzler-Mccain, "Feminist scholar Donna Haraway reacts to inclusion in Pope Francis' climate letter," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/justice/feminist-scholar-donna-haraway-reacts-inclusion-pope-francis-climate-letter>.

draws our attention to our entanglements and challenges us to engage them more deeply, seeking justice and healing, rather than escape from them.

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In the eighth chapter of the Book of Amos, there is an odd ending to a stereotypical series of prophetic visions of destruction: a locust swarm, a rain of fire and a plumb bob. After being shown the first two visions, Amos, in good prophetic form, intercedes: "O Lord God, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" And the Lord relents, "This shall not be." The final vision is often overlooked. Perhaps because it breaks the form. Perhaps because of its disturbing strangeness—stranger even than a plumb bob. The Lord shows Amos a basket of succulent ripe fruit, which twists into dead bodies lying in the street, and a final word: "silence." The prophet himself is reduced to silence. After this vision, there is neither intercession nor divine relenting.<sup>60</sup>

We face a silence of our own making and we are not small. Without presuming equal guilt and complicity for all, our cutting, burning, draining, plowing and mining have driven countless species to extinction—silencing their voices in the song of creation. Settler nations have enslaved, expelled and murdered Indigenous peoples who lived and flourished, imperfectly, but far better than us, in these inter-species communities and silenced countless languages, each a human echo of and response to the songs of their landscapes.

So much silence.

Perhaps at this moment, we can manage what Amos could not: To cry out, "Oh, Lord God, no! Not this silence;" and beg the grace and the love to open our ears to hear and our eyes to see; to become partners in the broken creation that desperately, enthusiastically wants to flourish with us in the shalom for which we were all made and into which God never ceases to draw us.

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<sup>60</sup> Yvonne Sherwood, "Of Fruit and Corpses and Wordplay Visions: Picturing Amos 8.1–3," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25, no. 92 (2001), 5-27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908920102509202>.

