On Mastery, the COVID19 Pandemic, and Governing Otherwise

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the modern/colonial governmentality of some contemporary political societies. It argues that practices and technologies of governance and objectives pursued by governments during the covid19 pandemic are particularly disclosive of mastery. It further argues that mastery is integral to modernity/coloniality and that it disavows and disqualifies other ways of governing. Ultimately, the paper suggests ways to envision governance otherwise. To achieve this, the paper begins with a brief account of the covid19 pandemic response. It identifies three moments and three pursued objectives, which are all united by a desire to return to normal and restore control over the crisis. The paper then presents First Nation and Native American views about governance to offer a lens through which the practices and technologies of governance exemplified by the pandemic response can be looked at decolonially. Finally, from these Indigenous perspectives, the paper presents mastery as the ethos of the covid19 pandemic response. It suggests that governance could be achieved otherwise, i.e. in relational mutually accommodating ways that do not rely on coercive measures and that are responsive to other-than-humans.

Keywords: Covid19; governmentality; mastery; Indigenous peoples; decoloniality

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In times of crisis, governments are called upon to be especially reactive to circumstances. They resort reflexively to known and accepted strategies and technologies of governance. As such, crises are particularly instructive about the governmentality of a political society: their analysis can disclose *practices and technologies of governance* – the practical means used to direct human conduct[1] – and the associated *mentalities* that make such practices and technologies effective and appealing.[2]

Since March 2020, at least where I am writing from in Canada, we have been living in such a time of crisis due to the covid19 pandemic. It is only in the spring of 2022 that governments decided that the crisis was officially – even if not practically – ending and that it was time to learn to live with the virus, heralding a return to normal, which has yet to fully materialize. Given the contemporary exceptionality of this pandemic and given how negotiating its various aspects has required the deployment and mobilization of a multiplicity of strategies of governance, it is an

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[1] Whether this is done in ways that can effectively manage and/or resolve the crisis is a different question. It could also be the case that a crisis is seen or created as an opportunity to institute a state of emergency to increase and consolidate the power of those who exercise it. See: Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (London: Eris, 2021).

[2] I use Foucauldian vocabulary and concepts, but I did not come to those directly through Foucault. Despite the proximity, and while it could be worthwhile to draw on Foucault, I do not tie my conceptual framework to his work.

instructive moment to perceive the governmentality of contemporary societies.[3] I thus look at the covid19 pandemic response in Canada to identify aspects of this governmentality.

Specifically, I explain how the pandemic response relied heavily on authoritative directives to which penalties for non-compliance were attached and pursued a return to normal that repudiated the need for transformative adaptation of human societies in response to natural events. The pandemic was thus negotiated in important ways by resorting to management and coercion, with the objective of taking control over the crisis and by confirming the capacity of and need for humans to control nature. I argue that this governmentality expresses an ethos of mastery. An ethos is a spirit or character expressed and acquired through conduct. It is not equally revealed by every token act of governance, but it should be perceptible, like the overall course of a ship tacking into the wind, as underlying practices, technologies, and mentalities of governance. As such, the ethos of mastery I am concerned with is not the whole story nor the only consideration to make sense of the pandemic response, but it is a determinant characteristic.[4]

Part of the issue with mastery is that it forecloses the envisioning of options to resolve a crisis that would require forsaking control, engaging in mutual accommodation, and transformations. This is because mastery, while it may be very efficient at achieving some desirable outcomes, is ultimately self-referential: it is fundamentally about the power to control

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[3] My focus is primarily on Canada, but my analysis could be extended to other societies.

[4] On ethos, see: James Tully, "On Resurgence and Transformative Reconciliation," in *Plants, People, and Places: The Roles of Ethnobotany and Ethnoecology in Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights in Canada and Beyond*, ed. Nancy J. Turner (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 413.

and manage those who are subordinated, such that it requires no responsive reciprocity with those who are subordinated, humans or other-than-humans. This makes it delusional as one who pursues mastery ends up seeing oneself, and one's power, as indispensable when in fact one's power may be less than optimal or even detrimental and part of the problem. I suggest that in the case of the covid19 pandemic, mastery over nature may precisely be a root cause, such that deep transformations in governmentality are required, yet such transformations cannot be countenanced as they require the relinquishment of mastery.

Importantly, this ethos of mastery is a manifestation of modernity/coloniality, which means that the governmentality that dominated the pandemic response can be a target of decolonial thinking to see how it masks ways of governing otherwise. While governments could be held accountable through internal critique for realizing their own normative ideals of good government, looking at governmentality from the exteriority of modernity/coloniality, specifically through the critical lens of diverse First Nation and Native American – hereafter Indigenous[5] – perspectives about governance offers a distinct critical perspective to envision governance beyond the indispensability of mastery. Indigenous political thought offers a privileged, decolonial, avenue to perceive the modern/colonial aspects of governance, to challenge their givenness and naturalness,

[5] I use Indigenous as a collective shorthand, but my focus is on specific First Nation and Native American perspectives even if there are instructive parallels with other Indigenous peoples, some of which I draw, notably in reference to decolonial theory.

and to ultimately envision how governance could be otherwise.[6] Importantly, Indigenous perspectives are not merely instrumental in the criticism of dominating approaches. The point is not to serve and improve Western governance, but to challenge the destitution of Indigenous approaches and to engage with Indigenous options as sound and valid approaches that both reveal limitations of dominating approaches and that offer ways of acting and thinking otherwise. More specifically, I argue that Indigenous approaches offer a view of governance in which mastery is replaced by non-coercive relational self-determination and responsiveness to others through reciprocal accommodations.

My method is inspired by decolonial studies. It adopts the view that decolonial investigations can be pursued by delinking how we think about certain concepts and phenomena from their dominating universalized modern variants[7] and by "starting from other places, not by asking what X means in non-European ways of knowing and living, but by asking what is *relevant* in non-European languages, what ways of knowing and living are lacking in European ways of living."[8] Accordingly, I challenge the dominance of mastery as a modern/colonial

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[6] Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, On Decoloniality (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Walter Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[7] This is not just about changing the definition of the concept, but also about changing the terms themselves. Walter Mignolo, "DELINKING: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647.

[8] Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 306.

governmentality, not merely by asking what governance means in Indigenous political thought but by articulating what is lacking from it when we start from the exteriority of modernity/coloniality. My account of this exteriority is informed by the work of Indigenous scholars who articulate Indigenous lifeways as a resurging radical otherwise to the current modern/colonial and settler Canadian society. Importantly, I emphasize how these Indigenous otherwises disclose distinct ways of relating to humans and other-than-humans that do not express mastery and that are lacking from dominant modern governance.[9] Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark offer a clear statement of what it means to engage with Indigenous views of governance to challenge the dominant ethos of governance and for centering an Indigenous otherwise. Their statement summarizes the methodological approach I strive for:

> it is most useful to understand Indigenous modes of relating as presenting a challenge to modernity that calls into question its hegemonic claims and highlights the destructive and oppressive nature of its inherent logic by way of contrast, while also creating specific opportunities to bring forward the values and precepts underlying our traditional laws and values within contemporary contexts. Rather than getting discouraged by the seeming futility of enacting past practices in the present, we might instead understand these practices as the embodiment of values and beliefs that were given life in the past in relation to

[9] This does not rule out counter-discourses internal to the Western tradition with which a braiding of perspectives is possible.

> particular contexts, that have lived on in spite of efforts explicitly aimed at their erasure or assimilation, and that can continue to be given life anew.[10]

With this method, we can look at the pandemic response to see how it is contaminated by modern/colonial governmentality and realize the extent to which Indigenous governance beckons to act otherwise.

An Overview of the Covid19 Pandemic Response in Canada

I strive for a synthetic overview of the governmental pandemic response, while emphasizing aspects relevant to reveal the centrality of mastery to this response.[11] Without being a strict chronological account, it maps the progressive development of the pandemic response along three distinct moments: (1) initial knee-jerk reaction; (2) securing compliance; and (3) preserving legitimacy. I identify three guiding objectives of the measures implemented by the governments, which are all expressions of a desire to return to a pre-pandemic normal through the (re)gaining of control: (A) preventing the breakdown of the healthcare system; (B) finding a vaccine; and (C) learning to live with the virus.

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[10] Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, "Towards a Relational Paradigm − Four Points for Consideration: Knowledge, Gender, Land, and Modernity," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 199–200.

[11] This is only part of the story as it ignores the multiplicity of direct political actions of citizens who sought to realize an otherwise, notably through mutual aid, to the response enacted by the state.

(1) In March 2020, it became clear that the epidemiological situation was getting out of control. Initially, only a few cases of covid19 emerged among people who had recently traveled abroad and among their shared-household relatives. Strong with the experience of quashing the outbreak of SARS in 2003, these cases were quickly isolated, and the Canadian public was reassured that the situation was under control.[12] In Italy, notably, the situation was degenerating, and the healthcare system was put under significant pressure. The exponential spread of the disease, its devastating impact on patients with acute symptoms, especially the elderly, and the level of care required for these patients in contexts of limited resources – e.g., physical instruments like respirators and oxygen supplies – and healthcare professionals, who were themselves falling sick, meant that it was increasingly likely that healthcare systems would collapse.

Progressively, it became clear that community transmission was taking place. Tension was high among the public. Calls to cancel everything started circulating.[13] On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared covid19 a pandemic. Governments started implementing measures to lock down society and stall community transmission: stay-at-home orders, closing public spaces like libraries and parks, restaurants and bars, work-from-home orders, closing

[12] Marco Chown Oved, "First Case of Coronavirus in Canada Identified at Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital, Province Says," *The Star*, January 25, 2020, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/01/25/first-presumptive-case-of-coronavirus-identified-at-sunnybrook-hospital-province-says.html.

[13] Yascha Mounk, "Coronavirus: The Case for Canceling Everything," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-cancel-everything/607675/.

schools and universities, mandatory quarantines for returning travelers, infected individuals and contacts, forbidding gatherings in private residences and limiting freedom of movement, notably by limiting, as in Québec, travel between administrative regions to essential travels. Many states declared a state of emergency. Eventually, with growing evidence of the airborne nature of covid19, masks were made mandatory in public places. In sum, the initial response was a (justified) knee-jerk reaction in the face of a new disease with potentially terrible consequences and of the associated uncertainties and fears.

(2) At first, the measures implemented by the states were broadly followed, but they were far from an instant fix and while we were initially told that these measures were only for a few days or weeks, we were in fact in for the long haul. What appeared justified and sustainable at first – yes, I can stay home for a few days – turned into weeks and into months and became increasingly more unsustainable – no, I cannot stay home any longer because I need a salary, or because my home is unsafe. This became even more of an issue when measures had to be reimplemented after having been lifted following the subsiding of a wave of infections. Similarly, while the vaccines were hoped to prevent infection and transmission and were seen by many as a 'get-out-of-jail card,' it progressively became clear, with the emergence of new variants, that they would prevent neither and that, despite a significant portion of the population being vaccinated, other measures were still required.

Governments thus had to find ways to secure compliance to their measures. For this, they resorted to diverse technologies of governance. One such technology was rational justification. Through frequent, even daily, public briefings, members of the government and public health professionals provided updates on the pandemic, explained the rationale and objectives for different measures. This was an attempt to convince the public that these measures were well

founded. It relied on the expectation that the public would share a commitment to realizing the objectives of these measures, that they would understand why they ought to be followed and that they would agree to follow them.

This was complemented by other technologies of governance meant to motivate compliance and to lift potential obstacles that would make it difficult or impossible to comply even if one was convinced of the importance of the measures. For instance, the governments called for solidarity, and emphasized the importance of protecting the most vulnerable, they also proposed challenges and sought to make agreements with the public, e.g., François Legault, the premier of Québec, proposed a 'défi 28 jours' and a moral contract.[14] When vaccines were eventually made available, a lottery was created in which all those who got vaccinated were entered and a vaccine passport was implemented that allowed fully vaccinated individuals to engage in some activities forbidden to those not fully vaccinated, like going to the restaurants. Governments thus tried to motivate voluntary compliance through solidarity, pride in overcoming challenges, the weight of commitments, and the appeal of personal gain and rewards.

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[14] Cabinet du ministre de la Santé et des Services sociaux, "Pandémie de La COVID-19 - Le Ministre Dubé Demande 28 Jours d'effort Pour Casser La 2e Vague," Gouvernement du Québec, September 25, 2020, https://www.quebec.ca/nouvelles/actualites/details/pandemie-de-la-covid-19-le-ministre-dube-demande-28-jours-deffort-pour-casser-la-2e-vague/; Cabinet du premier ministre, "Le Gouvernement Propose Un Contrat Moral Aux Québécois Pour Le Temps Des Fêtes," Gouvernement du Québec, November 19, 2020, https://www.quebec.ca/nouvelles/actualites/details/le-gouvernement-propose-un-contrat-moral-aux-quebecois-pour-le-temps-des-fetes/.

In terms of lifting challenges, one of the primary concerns was that the implemented measures would lead to thousands of job losses and that people could not afford to be off work for as long as required by the mandatory quarantines. The governments thus implemented emergency packages to quickly get money to people and to support those who needed to isolate.[15]

Even if governments sought to secure compliance by getting people on board, they also attached significant penalties to non-compliance. When the Canadian government implemented mandatory quarantines for people returning from abroad, those who failed or refused to quarantine could face six months of prison and fines up to $750 000.[16] When the Québec government implemented a curfew, those who disobeyed could be fined between $1000 and $6000.[17] Similarly, attending an illegal gathering could lead to a fine and, in some jurisdictions, businesses that enabled such illegal gatherings and activities, like gyms and karaoke bars, could also be fined or closed. In sum, coercive measures were key to underlie other technologies of governance and secure compliance.

Governments also sought to secure compliance through surveillance and shaming, and by making the coercive power of the state omnipresent. Robocalls were used to remind people

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[15] Kathleen Harris, "Trudeau Unveils $82B COVID-19 Emergency Response Package for Canadians, Businesses," *CBC News*, March 18, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/economic-aid-package-coronavirus-1.5501037.

[16] Public Health Agency of Canada, "New Order Makes Self-Isolation Mandatory for Individuals Entering Canada" (News Release, Ottawa, ON, March 25, 2020).

[17] Benjamin Shingler, "Quebec Imposes Curfew as Part of 4-Week Lockdown," CBC News, January 6, 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-lockdown-legault-1.5863426.

returning from abroad that they needed to quarantine, and during that time they could receive a surprise visit from an inspector. Denouncing illegal gatherings was facilitated in places. Two curfews were implemented in Québec and when they began, the government used the public alert broadcasting system to send a notification on everybody's phone, television, and radio, and police cars activated their rotating lights and sirens and circulated in empty streets.[18] Once the vaccine passport was implemented, one was constantly reminded of the coercive power of the state by repeatedly having to justify one's presence in public spaces where the passport was required. Beyond these official measures, people who traveled during the pandemic were often publicly shamed on social media[19] and the prime minister of Canada referred to a group of influencers who disobeyed public health directives on their flight to Mexico as "Ostrogoths."[20] In sum,

[18] Isaac Olson, "Quebec's COVID-19 Curfew Officially Takes Effect," CBC News, January 9, 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/police-crackdown-curfew-quebec-covid-19-1.5866953.

[19] Natalie Compton, "Traveling Was Once Social Currency. Now It Might Get You Shamed.," The Washington Post, September 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2020/09/01/pandemic-travel-shaming/.

[20] Thomas MacDonald, "Trudeau Went Off On Those Quebec Influencers Who Partied Maskless On A Cancun Flight," *Mtlblog* (blog), January 5, 2022, https://www.mtlblog.com/trudeau-went-off-on-those-quebec-influencers-who-partied-maskless-on-a-cancun-flight.

As reminded by Alexia Leclerc, it was sometimes sufficient for people to challenge or question governmental decisions and measures to be accused of being conspiracist.

governments also relied on panoptic technologies of governance to steer human conduct in desired directions.

(3) The longer the pandemic lasted, the more demanding the measures put in place felt and the less acceptable they appeared. For many, the virus did not seem particularly dangerous, especially after vaccination, and they did not feel that they should have their liberties limited to such an extent. This was notably clear in the growing resistance, with the arrival of the warmer days in 2021, to the curfew imposed by the Québec government. Others challenged the curfew less based on their assessment of their risk, but in terms of its nature and impact within a free and democratic society.[21] Importantly, these challenges framed the limitations on people's rights and freedoms as excessive, in ways that called into question their legitimacy.

The measures were also challenged by those who subscribed to a diversity of conspiracy theories and who were influenced by misinformation. For instance, cellular 5G antennas were destroyed due to a supposed link with covid19[22] and many refused the vaccines because they are

[21] Jonathan Durand Folco and Alexandra Pierre, "Pour La Santé Publique, Contre Le Couvre-Feu," *Le Devoir*, May 10, 2021, https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/600410/coronavirus-pour-la-sante-publique-contre-le-couvre-feu.

[22] Kelvin Chan, Beatrice Dupuy, and Arijeta Lajka, "Conspiracy Theorists Burn 5G Towers Claiming Link to Virus," *ABC News*, April 21, 2020, https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/conspiracy-theorists-burn-5g-towers-claiming-link-virus-70258811.

supposedly experimental.[23] The spread of these theories are deep challenges to the legitimacy of governments and to their capacity to secure compliance.

In early 2022, a diversity of people united by their opposition to the pandemic response joined a truck convoy, called the freedom convoy, and occupied downtown Ottawa for about a month. Despite demands by the authorities to end the occupation, it persisted, and called into question both the capacity of the state to act and its legitimacy. It is revealing that during that time, an officer of the Canadian Armed Forced publicly called to stand against the government and its measures against covid19.[24] Eventually, on February 14, the government of Canada invoked the Emergencies Act, and Ottawa was progressively cleared.

These three issues reveal that governments faced an increasing need to preserve both the legitimacy of the pandemic measures and their own legitimacy. Given the nature of the challenges, rational justification and coercion have limited capacities in restoring legitimacy. When challenged by conspiracy theories and misinformation, rational justification is dismissed, and coercion is perceived as a proof of governments' hostile intentions.

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[23] Reuters Staff, "Fact Check: COVID-19 Vaccines Did Have Clinical Trials," Reuters, February 2, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-vaccines-clinical-trials-idUSKBN2A22D3.

[24] David Pugliese, "Military Investigates Officer Who Is Calling on Soldiers to Fight Government's Pandemic 'Tyranny,'" Ottawa Citizen, February 11, 2022, https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/military-investigates-officer-who-is-calling-on-soldiers-to-fight-governments-pandemic-tyranny.

As governments faced growing unrest, dissatisfaction, and challenges to their legitimacy, the call to learn to live with the virus started increasingly to circulate. To what extent this should be attributed respectively to the evolving epidemiological situation and to the evolving socio-political one is not something I can determine. But it appeared to some that despite the efficacy of the vaccines to prevent severe complications, it was premature to return to a pre-pandemic 'normal' given the presence of new variants, the reduced efficacy of the vaccines for these variants regarding transmission and infection, the still elevated number of deaths and hospitalizations, and the risk associated with unrestrained transmission for the emergence of new variants. As such, the transition between these two phases of the pandemic response felt jarring to some, who were then more likely to see it as a political move responding to growing dissatisfaction and unrest, and, especially given coming elections, to the ways in which some opposition political parties were attracting dissatisfied electors.

These three moments in the pandemic are united by the underlying objective of returning to normal, which I understand as the taking back or securing of control in circumstances understood as crises. (A) The first manifestation of this objective can be seen in the fact that measures implemented were generally presented as temporary and as designed to limit the spread of the disease to avoid the collapse of the healthcare system. This is the logic of taking back control by flattening the curve. Once flattened, the expectation is that the measures will be lifted, and normal will resume.

(B) The objective of returning to normal can also be seen in the fact that very early on the hope was placed in the possibility of quickly designing a vaccine. Once enough people vaccinated, it would then be possible to regain control, lift all measures, stop wearing masks, and change nothing to the ways in which our collective life was and is to be conducted. Even now that existing

vaccines have proved overall unable to stop transmission and infection, some hope for the design of mucosal vaccines that could have the potential to achieve this.

(C) Finally, the most recent step in the pandemic response has been a call to learn to live with the virus. In practice, this has generally meant turning prevention measures into issues of personal choice and responsibilities, and collectively doing nothing rather than implementing measures like improved ventilation, air filtration, and place- and context-specific masking protocols.[25] Learning to live with the virus does not appear to mean transforming the ways in which things are done to limit transmission, it seems to mean returning to the pre-pandemic normal with some added hand sanitizer dispensers and reminders to stay vigilant. This can be read as a way for people to (re)assume control over their lives and for governments to secure their power in the face of growing challenges to their legitimacy. Interestingly, the focus put on returning to normal throughout the different steps of the pandemic means that diverse opportunities to act otherwise that were contemplated, but never extensively entertained, have fallen on the wayside.[26]

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[25] The exception being healthcare contexts, where masks are still generally required.

[26] There are some exceptions, like the now widespread possibility of working from home, if only for a few days a week. Nevertheless, there were (and still are) strong voices asking for a quick return to full time in-person and in-office work, primarily to sustain economic activities relying on workers commuting to central business districts. The pressure to return to normal has prevented a full exploration of the transformative potential of working from home, to address climate change for instance: David Suzuki, "The COVID-19 Pandemic May Be an Opportunity to Transform the Way We Live," *CBC News*, March 27, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/the-covid-19-pandemic-may-be-an-opportunity-to-transform-the-way-we-live-1.5512241.

Indigenous Views About Governance

The pandemic response has various critics,[27] many proposing policies that could have resulted in fewer deaths and infections. While such criticism has its place, my concern is different. It is with the governmentality revealed by the pandemic response. As explained, governments relied on different technologies of governance that were ultimately sustained by the threat of coercive measures and by surveillance, with the expectation and motivational appeal that pre-pandemic life could resume as before (for most[28]). It is the givenness of this way of governing that I challenge and the ways in which it constrains our vision about the conduct of human affairs. I thus aim to evoke how governance could be otherwise, not to formulate specific alternative policies. To do so, I look at the pandemic response through the lens of Indigenous perspectives about governance.

In engaging with Indigenous perspectives about governance, I am not pursuing a complete synthesis of what would be a coherent shared view of governance, essentially Indigenous. I am rather appealing to (existing) approaches that have been disqualified by dominating (modern/colonial) views of governance and that express broadly shared perspectives. While there is an ideological discourse that frames Indigenous peoples as different to better dominate them,

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[27] Josiane Cossette and Julien Simard, eds., *Traitements-chocs et tartelettes: bilan critique de la gestion de la COVID-19 au Québec* (Montréal: Somme toute, 2022).

[28] In the process of returning to normal, the lives of some were made dispensable, as part of the socially and politically accepted cost of lifting measures. This includes those who died and those who developed debilitating long covid. For them, the call to learn to live with the virus is at best cynical, at worst outright disgraceful. See: Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, chap. 3.

there are also distinct Indigenous lifeways that have been and that still are disqualified and challenged by modern/colonial structures.[29] It is these lifeways – and specifically what Indigenous thinkers write about them – with which I am concerned.

In evoking Indigenous governance as different from and as an alternative to dominating approaches, I participate in an existing intellectual discourse in which various Indigenous scholars and authors engage to theorize broadly shared Indigenous understandings of how to rightly conduct human affairs, in contrast to dominating, modern/colonial ones. For instance, Taiaiake Alfred writes that "the challenge before us today is to recognize the common elements in the indigenous tradition of governance and develop them into a coherent philosophy."[30] He further states a distinctive feature of Indigenous governance, which guides the account I provide: "Indigenous governance systems embody distinctive political values, radically different from those of the mainstream. Western notions of dominion (human and natural) are noticeably absent; in their place, we find harmony, autonomy, and respect."[31] Similarly, Russel Lawrence Barsh discusses Indigenous political systems through "a hypothesis about what is characteristically North American in social theory"[32] and Georges Sioui argues that Indigenous peoples in North America share a circular worldview that affirms the equal dignity of all beings, which is in sharp contrast

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[29] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*; Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*.

[30] Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

[31] Ibid., 29.

[32] Russel Lawrence Barsh, "The Nature and Spirit of North American Political Systems," *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1986): 181.

with dominant views of progress, "wherein humans are lords of creation devoid of conscience."[33] In the same spirit, I propose to engage with Indigenous perspectives about governance as distinctively non-coercive, relational, and embedded in natural contexts.

As explained by Alfred, who draws on Barsh, Indigenous governance should be understood as framed by 'the "primacy of conscience."'[34] This primacy of conscience is explained by a view of the world in which "the human purpose is to explore the unfolding universe and to play an unending role in the moral drama of its creation." This means that perspectives and opinions, in their diversity, come from the fact that "each individual strives to contribute his own irreplaceable fragment of the whole mosaic." In this context, each should strive "to respect and understand the pieces contributed by others,"[35] and "we have no right to judge others."[36] The conduct of human affairs should then not be achieved in ways that affront or override individual conscience, but in ways that respect differences, disagreements, and individual perspectives. Decisions should be made collectively, in ways that grant individuals power to determine collective affairs and that leave them free to dissent.[37]

Importantly, human conduct should not be directed through coercive measures that impose the will of the governors and override individual conscience. As Alfred argues, the Indigenous

[33] Georges E. Sioui, *For an Amerindian Autohistory : An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 29.

[34] Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 49.

[35] Barsh, "The Nature and Spirit," 182.

[36] Ibid., 184.

[37] Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 49.

view of governance and of the respect owed to individual autonomy and power 'precludes the notion of "sovereignty"—the idea that there can be a permanent transference of power or authority from the individual to an abstraction of the collective called "government."'[38] The eschewing of coercion and of sovereign authority in Indigenous governance is confirmed by various Indigenous authors. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes about Nishnaabeg views of governance as "non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian and non-coercive." She also writes about the ways in which "dissent was also a normal and a critical part of decision-making processes in all levels of social organization" and that it was protected by an "ethic of non-interference."[39] Similarly, Kiera Ladner states that Blackfoot governance "was predicated on the idea that one cannot interfere with the life way of another" and that it was accordingly characterized by the absence of a "hierarchically defined political structure which claimed a legitimate monopoly over the institutionalization and operationalization of coersive (sic) power or which claimed sovereignty over citizens and territory."[40]

The eschewing of coercion and the primacy of conscience should not be confused with the absence of accepted standards and principles to guide human conduct. On the contrary, Indigenous perspectives about governance regard "respectful coexistence as a tolerant and harmony-seeking

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[38] Ibid., 49.

[39] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Pub, 2011), 46, 73.

[40] Kiera Ladner, "Governing Within an Ecological Context: Creating an Alternative Understanding of Siiksikaawa Governance," *Studies in Political Economy* 70, no. 1 (2003): 138, https://doi.org/10.1080/07078552.2003.11827132.

first principle of government"[41] that should guide how we conduct ourselves with others. This is an investment of mutual accommodation, solidarity, and kinship with guiding significance in the determination of human conduct. The fundamental autonomy of the individual, grounded in their conscience, is then not a license to do as they please. There is a relational framework to self-determination[42]: the conduct of human conduct is structured and framed by a mentality according to which self-determination is to be achieved in respectful relations to others, who are to be regarded as our kin. This ongoing process of respectful mutual accommodation and relational self-determination is what is termed harmony.[43]

Significantly, once we appreciate this Indigenous focus on harmony, coercion appears contrary to the achievement of social order. As Nick Estes explains: 'In contrast to their own customary laws, Lakotas created the word Woope Wasicu to describe the white man's law. Woope Wasicu described "the cruel equipment" of law—from armed soldiers and cops, to guns, cannons, balls and chains, and prisons. According to Luther Standing Bear, this kind of law "designated not

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[41] Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 12.

[42] Wahpimaskwasis (Little White Bear) Janice Alison Makokis, "Nehiyaw Iskwew Kiskinowâtasinahikewina—Paminisowin Namôya Tipeyimisowin; Learning Self Determination Through the Sacred," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de La Femme* 26, no. 3,4 (2008): 43.

[43] Aaron Mills, "What Is a Treaty? On Contract and Mutual Aid," in *The Right Relationship: Reimagining the Implementation of Historical Treaties*, ed. Michael Coyle and John Borrows (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 236.

order but force and disorder."'[44] A social order should be achieved through a relational mentality that informs how to conduct ourselves with others. With coercion, force takes the place of this mentality.

For Indigenous governance, rather than being directed through externalized directives and threat, one's conduct is to be determined through one's conscience, but one's conscience should be under the influence of internalized guiding considerations that require responsiveness to others and that orient one's conduct towards harmony. Alfred explains that "the governance process consists in the structured interplay of three kinds of power: individual power, persuasive power, and the power of tradition."[45] One's conduct depends on one's conscience, but it can be informed by the persuasion of others, and, more importantly for the point I am making, it should be guided by inherited principles and considerations that consolidate the importance of respectful joint self-determination. As such, governance is not about doing as one pleases, neither is it about lording it over others through coercion; it is a process informed by traditions and principles that guide conduct towards mutual harmonization. As John Mohawk explains: 'The Iroquois tradition of law is not a tradition of law, exactly. The Iroquois tradition of law is a tradition of responsible thinking. It is not something written in paragraphs and lines because it doesn't matter whether the letter of the thing is right. The questions that have to be put before the people are *what is the thinking? Is*

[44] Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future; Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), 71.

[45] Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 50.

the thinking right?"[46] The fact that it can be asked whether the thinking is right shows that the inherited principles offer standards to assess one's conduct as oriented towards harmony or not.[47]

As noted, the process of self-determination is to be informed by "mutual solidarity and kinship."[48] It is essential to emphasize how deeply relational this perspective is. Kinship, as a key aspect of the mentality of Indigenous governance, calls for a distinctive and *concrete* sensibility to, awareness of, and responsiveness to others, without which mutual accommodation and harmony cannot be achieved. Barsh makes explicit the concrete demands of kinship on the

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[46] John Mohawk, "The Indian Way Is a Thinking Tradition," in *Indian Roots of American Democracy*, ed. Joe Barreiro (Ithaca: Akwe:kon Press, 1992), 23.

[47] The relevant mentality was consolidated, notably, through "the power of public opinion and ridicule." Barsh, "The Nature and Spirit," 184. See also: Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 122.

While the power of tradition plays a significant role in governance, various Indigenous authors emphasize or illustrate the propriety and necessity of critically engaging with it: Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets : Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 2–3; Joyce Green, "Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminisms," in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, ed. Joyce Green (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 20–32; Daniel Heath Justice, "Notes Toward a Theory of Anomaly," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2010): 207–42, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-020.

[48] The full quote is: 'Social conduct was based on mutual solidarity and kinship, in what Standing Bear calls Woucage, "our way of doing things."' Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 71.

determination of conduct: "Although kinship is universal, it is also both personal and fragile. Kinship is not maintained by laws and cannot be sustained through coercion. Families are nourished by sentiment, the exchange of aid and gifts, and the reconciliation of misunderstandings. Kinship is a living system, constantly changing… Relationships must periodically be remembered and renewed to restore order."[49] As such, Indigenous governance is simultaneously deeply personal and deeply relational: it focuses on the individual and their conscience, but it sees this individual as embedded in thick networks of relations that must be sustained, maintained, and renewed, and thus calls on the individual to determine their conduct in ways that express respect and care for these relations. The conduct of human conduct is thus achieved through a mentality, socially reproduced as an inherited tradition, that elevates the pursuit of harmony as a guiding principle.

Further, Indigenous governance is understood as taking place and as being informed by a natural/ecological context of inquiry. This is a concept discussed, notably, by James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson[50] and Kiera Ladner[51] to explain how political aspects of Indigenous

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[49] Barsh, "The Nature and Spirit," 193.

On the need to renew relationships, see: Dale A. Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 49–50.

[50] James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson, "Ayukpachi: Empowering Aboriginal Thought," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 248–78.

[51] Ladner, "Governing Within an Ecological Context: Creating an Alternative Understanding of Siiksikaawa Governance."

societies express a multigenerational understanding of what it means to live well in a specific and concrete natural context that incorporates humans, other-than-humans, and the land. As Ladner writes: "Governance is… an expression of how they see themselves fitting in that world as a part of the circle of life, not as superior beings who claim dominion over other species and other humans."[52] A natural/ecological context can be understood as referring then to the natural concrete reality, often referred to as land or ground, and the ways in which it informs and ought to inform Indigenous governance. It can be said, to borrow Brian Burkhart's formulation, that Indigenous governance does not 'float free from the land,' it is not about abstract principles and requirements applicable everywhere, but about local and concrete right relationships between humans, other-than-humans, and the land itself that are normatively invested.[53] The achievement of harmony is then not an abstract good, applicable across contexts; it is realized locally in ways that account for the concrete context and relationships it is concerned with. Governance is always place-specific

[52] Ibid., 125.

[53] Brian Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019). See also: Warrior, *Tribal Secrets : Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, 65, 105.

and grounded/rooted.[54] Indigenous governance is truly indigenous: socially, legally, and normatively it is developed in and through specific places and belongs to these places.[55]

To govern ourselves rightly, then, we ought to be responsive to humans, but also to other-than-humans. Our required responsiveness to other-than-humans in governance comes precisely from the fact that the world is understood as "a web of symbiotic relationships, of organisms that are partners, interdependent and mutually supportive" and that sustaining this order requires "the

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[54] Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard both use the concept of grounded normativity, John Borrows writes about Earth-bound ways, and Aaron Mills writes about rooted constitutionalism: Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Glen Sean Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Placed-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 249–55; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); John Borrows, "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 49–81; Aaron Mills, "Rooted Constitutionalism: Growing Political Community," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 133–73.

[55] Kayanesenh Paul Williams, *Kayanerenkó:Wa : The Great Law of Peace* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018), 37.

efforts of all its components"[56] and an awareness and sensibility that extends beyond human beings. Expressing related ideas, Simpson writes about an ecology of intimacy and about Indigenous internationalism; about "relationships based on deep reciprocity, respect, noninterference, self-determination, and freedom"[57] that extend beyond humans of her nation to "a series of radiating relationships with plant nations, animal nations, insects, bodies of water, air, soil, and spiritual beings in addition to the Indigenous nations with whom we share parts of our territory."[58] This discloses the extent to which Indigenous governance builds on a distinctive and extensive understanding of the social that encompasses the natural world and requires responsiveness to it. As Vanessa Watts explains, the distinction between the natural and the social does not hold within this perspective: "habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies from an Indigenous point of view… Non-human beings are active members of society. Not only are they active, they also directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society."[59] Watts further explains how "all things possess agency" and that "our ability to have sophisticated governance systems is directly related to not only the animals' ability to communicate with us, but their willingness to communicate with us." Governing ourselves rightly requires welcoming and

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[56] Ibid., 4.

[57] Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 8.

[58] Ibid., 58.

[59] Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 23.

engaging with the "land's intentionality."[60] It requires being sensitive, aware, and responsive to other-than-humans in the pursuit of harmony.

The Pandemic Response as Mastery and Envisioning an Otherwise

By mastery, I refer to a way of governing that can be idealized as focusing on the management and control of human affairs and nature through a hierarchical logic. This hierarchical logic is characterized by subordination and division: those who command, manage, and control occupy a superior, privileged political position to, and are separated from, those who obey.[61] Mastery thus depends on the recognition of the propriety and legitimacy of enforcing compliance through the exercise of power-over, and not only power-with.[62] Accordingly, it generally relies on authoritative commands backed by coercive threats. Furthermore, mastery extends its dominion to the other-than-human world, which may be fully managed, controlled, exploited, and used.

Mastery is a distinctive form of power-over because it sees the power to manage and control not only as desirable but also as indispensable and because the separation between those who govern and those who obey that characterizes it makes it deeply self-referential and thus unresponsive to others and other-than-humans. Governance as mastery may be receptive to inputs but it is not involved in reciprocal accommodation; it is always fundamentally directed outwards and downwards. As such, mastery is a form of delusional power-over: while it may be very

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[60] Ibid., 30.

[61] Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery; Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Duke University Press, 2018), 13.

[62] James Tully, "On Global Citizenship: Replies to Interlocutors," in *On Global Citizenship: James Tully in Dialogue*, ed. James Tully (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 269–327.

efficient and may achieve significant successes, its assumption regarding its own indispensability and its lack of responsiveness make it fundamentally unable to properly assess circumstances and unable to envision options for which control should be relinquished or that require deep transformations of the existing structure of subordination. Significantly, it cannot perceive itself as a problem.[63]

Mastery is distinctively modern/colonial. Modernity/coloniality is a central concept of decolonial studies. It refers to the ways in which modern ideas like progress, civilization, development, and rationality have a darker side, which is coloniality. In enunciating and constituting modern ideas as universal and desirable – which are in fact the local ideas of European peoples and their settler descendants – the ways of being, doing and knowing of Indigenous peoples and non-European peoples are destituted and the colonial dominion of European powers can be justified.[64] Mastery is central the modern subject's understanding of itself, of those it dominates and of the natural world. It is also central to the ways in which Indigenous peoples have been dominated and their systems of governance disqualified. As such, mastery is the ethos of governance expressed and pursued by modernity/coloniality.[65]

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[63] I develop mastery as an ethos of governance more fully in a paper in development co-authored with John McGuire, who helped me formulate my views.

[64] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*; Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.

[65] It surely has been exemplified in other contexts; being distinctive should not be confused with being unique.

Key to this connection between modernity/coloniality and mastery is the logic of subordination (constitution/destitution) shared by both. As Singh explains, for some to control and manage, some must be controlled and managed, which calls for a separation between those on the side of power and those on the other side and a subordination of the latter to the former: "The splitting that is inherent to mastery, the fracturing that confirms and inaugurates it, and the ongoing practices of subordination that drive it forward are inescapable in the foundational thinking of the subject of modern political thought."[66] This is central to the ways in which modern/colonial powers have extended their control over most of the world. As argued by authors associated with decolonial studies, colonial powers could justify their dominion because they understood themselves and their societies as superior to others, alternatively, in terms of practicing the right religion, of being properly civilized, and of being fully developed nations.[67] They further understood themselves as being fully human, while restricting membership in full right- and power-bearing humanity on the basis of three pillars: race, gender, and nature. These three pillars split those who could aspire to master the world from those who had to be subordinated and it excluded the latter from exercising control and even from aspiring to it: 'This Man/Human… posited himself as master of the universe and succeeded in setting himself apart from other men/humans (racism), from women/humans (sexism), from nature (humanism), from non-Europe (Eurocentrism), and from "past" and "traditional" civilizations (modernity).'[68] In sum, mastery is paradigmatic of modernity/coloniality because it is operationalized and implemented through the

[66] Singh, *Unthinking Mastery; Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*, 13.

[67] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*; Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*.

[68] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 163.

assertion of differences whereby one is constituted as a master and one is destituted as a subordinate.

Beyond being central to the process of dominating Indigenous peoples, the connection between mastery and coloniality/modernity also clarifies how Indigenous modes of governance are disqualified. This is because the same process that constitutes modern governmentality also destitutes other options. Thus, when we look at governance through the lens made available from the exteriority of modernity/coloniality and what it has tried to erase, we can better perceive the artificiality of the separation between the governors and the governed and especially between humans and nature. We can critically look at practices of governance and envision how things could be otherwise and what decolonizing governance implies.

In contrast to Indigenous governance practices, the pandemic response clearly appears as an expression and pursuit of mastery for two main reasons: (1) the underlying reliance on coercion for the direction of conduct and (2) the desire to control and manage expressed in seeking to return to normal present in the three objectives discussed previously.

(1) Throughout most of the pandemic, decisions were made under a state of emergency without (or without much) consultations with opposition parties and without much reliance on the legislative branch of government. It was the executive branch that assumed the responsibility to resolve and manage the crisis and it relied on exceptional coercive measures and the intense gaze of the state apparatus to enforce its decisions. Regardless of any attempt at convincing citizens to comply voluntarily, the intensity of the coercive measures made any such convincing redundant. This is an insight central to republican views of freedom: to be dominated is not merely to be interfered with, it is to be under an uncontrolled threat of interference, which is enough to make

one modify one's behavior in a servile manner.[69] In effectively denying the freedom of dissent central to Indigenous governance, the pandemic response exemplified the pretension to control and manage subordinates central to modern mastery. Those subjects to state directives end up awaiting orders and directives as opposed to being active participants in collective decisions. How could it be otherwise given the penalties associated with disobeying?

One could argue that such coercive measures are necessary to achieve compliance, especially in contexts where high levels of coordination are essential for the success of the measures implemented. I suggest instead that we need to consider how practices of governance and mentalities cannot neatly be separated. Modes of governance are not tools to be implemented on human beings who remain unchanged, as if the issue was about finding the most appropriate mode of governance for a fixed human nature. On the contrary, practices of governance and the individuals we find in a society, the considerations they value, their mentality, and how they conduct themselves and decide how to act are co-dependent and mutually reinforcing.

This is made clear from the Indigenous perspective: in Indigenous governance social cohesion and compliance is not achieved through coercion but through the weight of tradition, solidarity, and the weight of public opinion that call for responsiveness to others. Practices that can sustain and consolidate these include traditional Indigenous approaches to ethical reflection where one would be "helping others to recognize circumstances in which a choice with impacts on others is being made" instead of telling them "what kind of decision they should have

[69] Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms; A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

reached."[70] They also include the ethical practice of ancestry that requires us to think about what kind of ancestor we want to be and thus about how to relate rightly to others, including in an intergenerational manner.[71] These practices edify mentalities and enable Indigenous relational governmentality.

It is primarily in a society whose governmentality relies on coercion to enforce compliance that mastery appears necessary: this is because people who are normally told what they must do perceive the absence of the threat of coercion as allowing non-compliance. Furthermore, while the current stage of the pandemic, with its emphasis on personal choice and responsibility, may seem consistent with aspects of Indigenous governance that center the primacy of conscience, it is lacking the required mentality to ensure that individuals conduct themselves in others-regarding and caring ways. Indigenous governance shows that governance could be otherwise, that high levels of coordination could potentially be achieved without coercion and mastery, but for this, mentalities need to be edified to make care for others central to the determination of conduct.

Before moving on, it is essential to explain why the weight of public opinion even if it was mentioned both in the account of the pandemic response and of Indigenous governance does not serve the same role. In the case of the pandemic response, public opinion served to enforce conformity by condemning disobedience. It was an expression of mastery in its desire to control

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[70] Burke A. Hendrix, "The Political Dangers of Western Philosophical Approaches," in *Oxford Handbook of Indigenous People's Politics*, ed. José Antonio Lucero, Dale Turner, and Donna Lee VanCott (Oxford: Oxford University Press Online, 2013), 9.

[71] John Hausdoerffer et al., eds., *What Kind of Ancestor Do You Want to Be?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

and manage others. In contrast, in Indigenous governance the focus of public opinion is not on the letter of the law but, as John Mohawk explained, on whether the thinking is right. It serves to consolidate a mentality of care that is responsive to others, not strict conformity.

(2) The delusion of mastery about its own desirability and indispensability, its inability to be responsive to inputs that put it into question and its pretension to dominate other-than-humans can all be seen in the objective of (re)gaining control over the crisis and of returning to normal, as expressed in the different stages of the pandemic response. Consider, for instance, the focus placed on vaccines as a solution to the pandemic. While vaccines are a phenomenal technology essential to fight a pandemic, the way in which extreme and exclusive hope was placed in them shows the extent to which mastery was both expressed by the means adopted to resolve the crisis and the objectives pursued. Indeed, it was (hubristically) hoped that through innovations and technology, nature could quickly be mastered, this new disease controlled and vanquished, without ever having to change anything about human conduct or its relationship to nature. In seeking to master nature, lockdowns were approached as mere temporary measures until a vaccine was made available. They required temporary sacrifices of freedom until its full scope could be embraced again. It is no wonder that the longer governments delayed the return to normal, the more challenges they faced. The so-called pandemic exhaustion/fatigue may not be a natural response to an enduring crisis. Perhaps it is an expression of a will to control and promise of control too long curtailed and delayed.

The wish to return to normal and the almost exclusive focus on means to take back control, like vaccines, appears natural and normal, as *the* way to approach such crises. Indigenous governance makes it possible to challenge this perspective. It shows what is missing in the modern/colonial view of governance: an engagement in reciprocal accommodations to strive for

right relationships, which requires a willingness to transform, including in response to other-than-humans. Put differently, the will to return to normal illustrates the self-referentiality of mastery. It is a reassertion of dominion over nature and a failure to reconsider the normal that is wished for. It shows the lack of responsiveness of mastery towards natural phenomena and a lack of recognition of their intentional aspects. Mastery sees them as a mere "threatening and irrational aspect of existence" to be controlled and managed.[72] It is thus unable to be responsive to inputs from other-than-humans that challenge the viability of the normal or that reveal mastery as a problem.

To act otherwise and decolonize governance, we who are members of political societies with the ethos of mastery must become responsive to the intentionality of natural phenomena. This would require at least understanding the recent emergence of zoonotic diseases like covid19, monkeypox and the Marburg virus, as a call to not return to normal and as a sign that the pretension to hold dominion over nature needs to be abandoned. Indeed, mastery over nature can in fact be seen as a root cause of the current crisis[73] and of the increasing emergence of zoonotic diseases given its role in fueling evermore encroachments on wildlife habitat, destruction of biodiversity,

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[72] Quoting John Mohawk: Williams, *Kayanerenkó:Wa*, 34.

[73] The issue with mastery extends far beyond the pandemic response. For instance, rainwater is now unsafe to drink everywhere on the planet, but we are told that we need to learn to live with it rather than radically change our relationship to nature: Agence France-Presse, "L'eau de Pluie Est Impropre à La Consommation Partout Sur Terre, Selon Une Étude," ICI Radio-Canada, August 10, 2022, https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1904459/eau-pluie-non-potable-recherche-universite-stockholm.

and climate change.[74] But this intentionality is disavowed when it is expected that everything nature can throw at us can eventually be controlled. Responsiveness to and reciprocity with other-than-humans mean accepting that returning to normal may not be the thing to do and that on top of resolving the current crisis – with the help of vaccines – we also need to transform our conduct to strive for harmony rather than dominion.

Conclusion: The Destructiveness of Mastery and the Option of Care

Indigenous perspectives on governance help to see the extent to which mastery was expressed and pursued through the different moments and objectives of the pandemic and how governance could be otherwise. While mastery may be highly efficient, it is fundamentally concerned with the self-referential (re)consolidation of its own power. The last stages of the pandemic response seem to exemplify this: it is not so much the effectiveness and necessity of the implemented measures that now seem to guide governments but the consolidation of their power in the face of growing challenges to their legitimacy and of limits to what they can successfully implement – which has led some to level criticism of gaslighting[75] or to perceive a disconnection between facts and

[74] Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London; New York: Verso, 2020).

[75] Jason Hannan, "Why COVID-19 Gaslighting by Politicians Is so Dangerous for Democracy," *The Conversation*, May 4, 2022, https://theconversation.com/why-covid-19-gaslighting-by-politicians-is-so-dangerous-for-democracy-181103.

governmental measures.[76] This is because mastery holds constant the pursuit of one's agenda and the imposition of one's will on others and on nature; and because those who govern are split from those they govern such that no deep responsiveness to others and others-than-humans is required. One who pursues mastery becomes deluded by one's own power: dominion is either furthered or it has reached a frontier of what is supposedly possible – a frontier that we need to learn to live with – but it is never itself at issue. Mastery thus cannot countenance options to deeply resolve a crisis that require the relinquishment of control and deep transformations.

As such, mastery also comes with a destructive incapacity to acknowledge how the dominant 'normal' conduct, especially towards nature, is fundamentally at cause. Drawing on Indigenous perspective, we can see that decolonizing governance would require non-coercive and relational forms of collective self-determination that are grounded in ecological contexts and sensitive to, aware of, and responsive to others and others-than-humans through reciprocal accommodations. Such reciprocal responsiveness would ensure that the crisis be more fully resolved by allowing the normal to which we should return to be transformed, notably considering nature's intentionality. Indeed, for many Indigenous thinkers, the Indigenous alternative to and rejection of mastery is not only desirable, but also necessary and urgent. As the authors of the Red Deal note, there is a "revolutionary potency" to "what Indigenous resistance stands for: caretaking and creating just relations between human and other-than-human worlds on a planet thoroughly

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[76] David Berger, "The Notion That COVID-19 Has Been Vanquished Is Not Supported by the Facts," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 2, 2022, https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-notion-that-covid-19-has-been-vanquished-is-not-supported-by-the-facts-20221031-p5budz.html.

devastated by capitalism."[77] As George Manuel states, the real strength of the "traditional relationship of Indian people with the land, the water, the air, and the sun… lies in the accuracy of the description it offers of the proper and natural relationship of people to their environment and to the larger universe."[78] He later adds that 'perhaps when men no longer try to have "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that liveth upon the earth," they will no longer try to have dominion over us. It will be much easier to be our brothers keeper then.'[79] Ultimately, this shows the extent to which the governmentality instinctively resorted to during the pandemic faces challenges that are more profound than disagreements about specific policies. It is a governmentality that needs to be otherwise.

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[77] The Red Nation, ed., *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021), 7–8.

[78] George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 256.

[79] Ibid., 264–65.