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THIRTEEN

Reassembling the *Oikoumenē*

Kathryn Poethig

I want to expand the meaning and membership of our contemporary ecumene (from the Greek *oikoumenē*), the “whole inhabited earth.” While we now include nonhumans (animals and ecosystems) as participants in a peaceable, sustainable earth, I take from the arguments of de Sousa Santos that we need more radical projects to “reassemble the social” and affirm an “ecology of knowledge” that includes the worldviews of marginal communities in conflict zones. Embarking on a transdisciplinary “anthropology of the imagination,” my current work takes seriously the social imaginary of local religious communities who seek out the invisible world for guidance and solace. It focuses particularly on religious dreams in “undreamy times.”¹ I consider the role of epiphany dreams during and after revolutionary conflict, particularly in Cambodia.

In refugee camps, living rooms, and among friends, I’d heard personal refugee accounts of those who endured Cambodia’s “travesty of history” from 1975 to 1979 when the Khmer Rouge walked into the capital Phnom Penh and declared “Year Zero,” inaugurating a revolutionary communist regime in which a quarter of the population was exterminated or died of malnutrition. While all cities were evacuated, the most stunning was Phnom Penh, where members of the former regime were assassinated or sent to interrogation centers such as Toul Sleng. Choeng Eck, a field of mass graves outside of town, is the most notorious of the hundreds of “killing fields.” The regime ended in early 1979 when newly socialist Vietnamese invaded, occupying Cambodia for a decade until the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991.²

This political world saturated with violence is also set within a Cambodian Theravada worldview that is often neglected.³ Mediating the

spirits and interaction with the supernatural are integral to Cambodian cosmology. *Boramey* (or *parami*) are spirits associated with Buddhism and manifest benevolent supernatural power. *Boramey* can be the attribute of a statue, such as the Leper King,⁴ or a manifestation of mytho-historic figures (generals, kings) who possess a medium.⁵ The *boramey* often speak through dreams. *Neak ta*, on the other hand, are guardians of the land. Friends noted that during the Khmer Rouge era *neak ta* were disrupted and the palm trees would not bear fruit. *Preta*, hungry ghosts, inhabited desecrated holy spaces. Buddha statues were decapitated, churches were destroyed, wats (monasteries, temples) were used for storage and torture, and mosques became pig pens.⁶ The “killing fields” were saturated with phantasmic terror, populated with roaming *preta* because the near-dead had been violated, and when dead, not properly buried.⁷ They could not continue on to the next life.

I’d had encounters with *preta* and *boramey* in my time with Cambodians both in Asia and the United States. My spooky meet-up with a *preta* occurred on a travel seminar to Phnom Penh coordinated through San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1992. A decade after the Khmer Rouge departure, the city still seemed bedraggled and slightly surreal, residents four-to-a-bicycle plying Monivong Avenue, dark nights interrupted by generator-driven pools of light. Bats hung like overripe fruit in the naked trees near the UN Transitional Authority compound. Even the most prominent wats were derelict and forlorn, decapitated heads of the Buddha laid out near their stupas.

So it was not entirely surprising that after a visit to Choeung Ek, my roommate looked wan. She sat at the corner of her bed and shot me a nervous glance,

“When you lie down, do you see anything?”

“No.”

She hesitated, “When I lie down, I see three men with machine guns at the foot of my bed.” Chills shot up my back. The room suddenly felt ominous and cold. We improvised an exorcism, and when we ran out of ideas, we went to sleep. I was startled awake by the pressure of a ghostly body on top of me. I plopped a pillow over my head, praying feverishly, until—whoosh—the room felt clear. “A *preta*, a hungry ghost,” mused a Cambodian friend when I relayed the story later. There seemed to be many *preta* prowling around Phnom Penh.

Boramey, the beneficent power of supernatural entities, offers a shared sense of “spirit” across religious communities—if you understand it as attributed to material objects (statues, amulets, holy water) and holy persons (saints, gods). I have been investigating its cross-cosmological significance in relation to statues who appear in dreams, requesting to be re-

covered from rivers, caves, and rice fields. I first learned about statue recovery from a Vietnamese Catholic priest at Wat Champa, a Vietnamese immigrant fishing village along the Mekong. The priest relayed how, when Wat Champa was a Khmer Rouge commune in the 1970s, an elderly Khmer man was afflicted by a recurrent dream. Each night, a “*lok ta*” (old man) appeared, saying “Take me out of the river and I will help you.” Deep into the third night, the man slipped to the Mekong and found a statue stuck in the mud. He hid it. The lustral water he poured over the statue healed both humans and beasts. Who was this powerful spirit? The statue’s identity was a mystery until a ragtag band of Vietnamese settlers arrived in Wat Champa and, recognizing it, called out “St. Francis Xavier!” For several years, the embattled Khmer and Vietnamese communities shared admiration for the power of the saint and his statue.⁸

Hungry ghosts and dream encounters are often left out of our texts and disappear from the “refugee narrative” upon arrival in the United States. Even in theological work on conflict, one doesn’t often read about signs that offer survivors critical information, the statues, amulets, or tattoos that protect at border crossings, or apparitions of Mary or Kwan Yin who appeared to Vietnamese when their engines stalled in the sea or pirates trailed them, or *neak ta* who inform a mother that her daughter is dying, or Jesus appearing to a Buddhist prisoner of the Khmer Rouge with advice that saves him. At the refugee center in the Philippines, I met a snake who had replaced Rithy, son of a refugee woman who disappeared at the Thai-Cambodian border. Are these phantasms of the superstitious? Langford, in writing about Lao refugees struggling with American hospital protocols, asks, “How do we make sense of [. . .] ghostly figures [. . .] without ‘anthropologizing’ or ‘psychologizing’ them, that is, without reducing them to examples of cultural belief or psychic symbols of trauma?”⁹

As a North American Christian lesbian in the secular age, I, like most academics, dismissed interaction with the spirits, trees, and dreams as peripheral to the *real* revolutionary work of materialist theory and political theology. I *dare* to argue here that scholars, activists, peace professionals of the North must develop a broader “ecology of knowledge”¹⁰ to learn how certain communities interact with the invisible realms and employ different contours of being and knowing (that statues call out in dreams, hungry ghosts haunt). How can we “reassemble our ecumenes,” be more elastic with the boundaries of our real, learn how to learn about different ways of being, so that the worldviews of those we study, advocate for—and resist—are constitutive of a range of personhoods? By this I mean, how our personhood is reflexive and reconstituted by the social worlds we occupy.

ECUMENE AS AN EMPIRE OF EXCLUSION

A claim to “reassemble” the ecumene requires some attention to its genealogy. Christianity refers to the *oikoumenē* as the church and the church’s intent to bring the gospel to the whole world. Thus, the *ecumenical* world is made up of churches united in their difference.¹¹ But the notion of the ecumene has an imperial history. On a conceptual level, it maps out the spaces we consider “inhabited.” It distinguishes between realms of the known and realms of the unknown. In this sense, it foregrounds de Sousa Santos’s notion of abyssal thinking, which I will refer to later. Greeks divided their *oikoumenē* as “the inhabited world” into three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa.¹² Beyond these worlds lay barbarian lands. When Rome colonized the Hellenized world, they took *oikoumenē* to mean first “the entire Roman world,” then “the whole inhabited world,” which were civilized by their imperial practice.¹³ Like the Greeks, Rome depicted those beyond the imperial borders as fantastic and grotesque, people with heads like dogs and cannibals.¹⁴ New Testament writers referred to the *oikoumenē* as the imperial (ungodly) world fifteen times in the gospels. Joseph and Mary, for example, return to Bethlehem due to an imperial decree that “all the world” (*oikoumenē*) be subject to census (Luke 2:1).

This ecumene-as-exclusion continued through the Middle Ages. Cartographers inscribed imaginary creatures in the terra incognita (unknown world) at the margins of the map. The advent of modernity brought new practices to re-mythologize the “known world’s” view of the margin. One can see this in two maps a decade apart. The famous *Nuremberg Chronicle* (or “Book of Chronicles”) appeared in 1493 at the triumph of Catholic Spain’s Reconquista over the Moors of Andalusia. Its biblical world history shows three continents populated by Noah’s sons: Shem in Asia, Ham in Africa, and Japheth in Europe. Shunted to the terra incognita are the excluded races: one-footed Sciopods, reverse-footed Antipods, bearded women, and one-eyed monsters.¹⁵ In 1507, a decade after the *Nuremberg Chronicles*, Waldseemüller’s World Map redrew the known world. One of the most important maps in the history of European cartography, it reveals a world ripe for conquest: a continent separated from Asia and a new ocean, the Pacific (First Maps of the World).¹⁶ Though not visually present, Incas, Mayans, and other New World “savages” will replace the Sciopods at the margins.

Dussel claims that the modern ecumene came into being when Europe advanced against the Islamic world to the east and “discovered” the Americas to the west.¹⁷ In so doing, Europe was able to reposition itself at the very center of this newly conceived world. Dussel asserts that contemporary modernity was born when Europe, by posing against an “other,” could colonize “an alterity [otherness] that gave back its image of itself.”¹⁸ Quijano and Wallerstein argue that it was Europe’s coloniza-

tion of the Americas that forged our modern conceptions of ethnicity, race, gender, nation, labor, and economic development.¹⁹ For decolonial theorists, the architecture of this “coloniality of power” is based on an epistemic falsehood, a *pensiemente unico* in which no alternative ways of thinking are possible, once again forced to the margins.

BEYOND *PENSIEMENTE UNICO*

Decolonial theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos challenges the politics of knowledge implicit in *pensiemente unico* as an example of “abyssal thinking,” an epistemological divide dominated by one side, Western knowledge, considered valid, rational, and normal. This divide completely obscures the non-Western side of the *abyss*. In this newer version of the medieval *terra incognita*, this non-Western realm does not exist, its exclusion so radical that its knowledge is not even accepted as an alternative to Western scientific truth. In other words, abyssal thinking eliminates its own co-presence. The world beyond Western modernity’s hegemonic thought is an invisible, non-dialectical absence. “There are beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings, which, at the most, may become objects or raw materials for scientific enquiry.”²⁰

Post-abyssal thinking pushes back against this occlusion and assumes a radical co-presence of both realms of knowing, so that practices and agents on both sides of the line have equal standing.²¹ De Sousa Santos works out this “cognitive justice” by foregrounding an anti-imperial “epistemology of the South.”²² This is not a geographical South, but a multiplicity of epistemological souths, counter-knowledges emerging from peoples’ struggles. Taken together, they produce an “ecology of knowledge” that affirms a diversity of knowledges beyond scientific knowledge and widens the territory of the knowable. De Sousa Santos concedes that preparing the conditions for a post-abyssal thinking is a complex task. Western theory has to be deprived of its abyss(m)al characteristics, prominent among them a claim to universality and the monopoly of truth.

How do we as white Northern academics engage with a post-abyssal way of knowing? How do we balance our incredulity, or temper the stories of others, or interrogate the inexplicable? Deborah Bird Rose, a white American anthropologist who has worked among Australian Aboriginal people and with animals on the edge of extinction, suggests that we attend to reflexive epistemologies.²³ For Bird Rose, learning to listen is a “situated connectivity,” a process of knowledge production that occurs when both knower and known are mutually embedded in an encounter. When knowledge is exchanged, both parties are changed. Learning is a reflexive process of participant observation that requires one’s whole being. She argues that this kind of openness leads to scholarship

“that is dialogical, reflexive, and attentive to process, and that extends beyond the human and into the lives of plants, animals, and all manner of extraordinary beings and modes of communication.”²⁴

A post-abysal reflection on my encounter in Phnom Penh would consider its multiple interpretations (as sleep paralysis, as *preta*, as projection). It can be set within new affirmations of the “extra-ordinary,”²⁵ ways to investigate the “super-natural,”²⁶ and new histories of popular mysticism²⁷ in which the real might also be true.²⁸ These scholars ask how one investigates the invisible. How does one act differently in a world that the “Holy Spirit” shares with multiple ethereal entities that are not “anthropologized”?

ECUMENE REASSEMBLED

An ecology of knowledge assumes new ontologies, new notions of the social. For Latour, the social is a basis for associations. It does not exist a priori to that exchange and is not limited to humans. In his controversial critique of the fundamental basis of sociology, he defines the social “not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling.”²⁹ This reassembling refers to a radical relationality best understood by Latour and others as an assemblage. An assemblage thus clusters every “thing,” such as a statue, God, a landmine, utterances, happenings, or events, as composites or assemblages of affective relations rather than, as is traditionally held, isolated substances.³⁰

Latour attributes agency not only to humans or sentient beings, but also to inanimate entities (vinegar, guns, hammers, paper). He calls these entities quasi-agents or “actants” that (or who) participate in social interactions. Actants are anything that “modif[ies] other actors through a series of” actions.³¹ Agency is thus determined as one thing modifying another. Vital materialists and speculative realists argue that actants are garbage dumps, video games, and cyborgs.³² They are not objects but subjects of a flat, ontologically plural community. As political ecologist Jane Bennett argues, if they are subjects, then they are politically constituted and demand a hearing.³³ Furthermore, Latour argues, it is essential to deconstruct the assumptions of (Western) natural science because we do not want to “eliminate entities from the pluriverse.”³⁴ Such a radically broadened notion of the social and its pluralities challenge the very basis of a human-centric ecumene. But how do we interact with this plurality of worlds? What choices of communication are available in an ecology of knowledge? Who “speaks” for whom, and in what language?

DREAM WORLDS IN THE NEW ECUMENE

In this reassembled ecumene, which affirms a plurality of persons communicating within an ecology of knowledge, I turn back to the story of St. Francis and dreams as a mode of communication with different interpretations on either side of the abyss. There are conflicting understandings of the nature of dreams. Western dream theory rests on the notion of what Taylor has called a “secular self.”³⁵ For Taylor, the secular “buffered self” assumes firm boundaries between self and other, between mind and body. Western notions of the self and psyche assume that dream material is generated “within” the person.³⁶ In Taylor’s useful (though simplistic) typology, the European pre-modern self was “porous.” The “enchanted” world of the “porous self” is a space in which spirits and cosmic forces “cross a porous boundary and shape our lives, psychic and physical.”³⁷ Those with a porous self might consider dreamscapes as an interpenetrating dimension, borderlands of the visible/invisible, dead/living, awake/sleep in which figures come “from outside.” Such dreamers consider their bodies available for visitations. In Ceconi’s ethnography of the dreamlife of Peruvian peasants during the conflict between *Sendero Luminoso* and the Peruvian army, many received premonition dreams and were visited by dead relatives.³⁸

The case I offer below is based on a particular kind of appearance: epiphany dreams. *Epiphaneia* means “manifestation.”³⁹ Epiphany dreams consist of the appearance to the dreamer of an authoritative personage who may be divine or represent a god, and this figure conveys instructions or information. This is certainly an Abrahamic perspective in relation to dreams, as we note the biblical stories in which God or angels offer directions in dreams.⁴⁰

In 2008, almost thirty years after the Khmer Rouge era, another Catholic statue, this time of Mary, was recovered from the Mekong. During the most auspicious days of the Cambodian calendar—Khmer New Year—Buddhist Vietnamese fisher-folk pulled an encrusted, six-foot statue from the murky water. Catholic Vietnamese neighbors immediately recognized the statue as Our Lady of Lourdes. The Buddhist fisher-folk set a price so steep that their Catholic neighbors despaired. That night, Mary’s spirit circled the ceiling of the Buddhist fisherman’s house where her statue was kept, so frightening him that he convinced his friends to donate the statue to the church before she cursed them. The Vietnamese Mary Queen of Peace parish built a high grotto for the statue and called her “Our Mother of the Mekong.” It was assumed that the statue had been dropped overboard by Vietnamese Catholics fleeing the violent anti-Vietnamese purges of the 1970s.

Four years later, during the 2012 ASEAN meeting in Phnom Penh, another statue of Mary with the infant Jesus was recovered from the

Mekong. In this case, a Buddhist Vietnamese fisherman dreamed the directive:

I dreamed about Jesus. He asked me to pick up the statue, but when I went there, I cannot pick up. I draw the boat away from the shore. Even though we used two boats, we still cannot pick up, and we try with 4 boats and still cannot lift. Later on, I went out to rent a crane to pick it up. We brought the statue back to the *preah vihear*. And then I woke up and looked at my watch, it was 5 to 3am.⁴¹

He immediately went out and enacted his dream. Both statues are greatly venerated, drawing weekly busloads of pilgrims from Vietnam.

But questions linger about these statues and the ways they have transformed this small Catholic Vietnamese fishing village, a community at the periphery of the Khmer political body. If we take as a form of real the intervention of spirits through their statues into our hybrid ecumene, are the statues actants? And if so, we encounter different methodological questions. What do the Marys *want*? And since the interpretation of dreams is such a long historic and varied practice across cultures, what criteria might we use to evaluate the veracity of a multi-faith epistemology?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has challenged the membership implicit in a “whole inhabited earth” as a starting point for other questions. I have considered the decolonial challenge to Western modernity which has obscured other knowledges, peoples, and realities, and proposed a reassembled ecumene that offers a radically different way to experience the world, one in which simultaneous other worlds coexist with the quotidian world we occupy. I want to consider the invisible world and its entities because it is the most obscured in the fields I know—religion and peacemaking and progressive Christian theology. Many methodological questions emerge from a decolonial transdisciplinary study of religious communities in conflict zones. In theology’s implicit transdisciplinarity, I wonder what questions we pose about (and to) a phenomenon if we assume that the phenomenon is a subject and thus has agency? What does Mary *want*? Research questions become theological.

My concern is also driven by my interaction as an outsider with communities in conflict zones, primarily Cambodian. It has demanded some “reflexive learning” to enter into ways of knowing quite different from a North American mentality. How many progressive theologies refer to epiphany dreams and ghosts? Within an ecology of knowledge, what resources exist to determine the spirits that liberate and afflict? What does a politics of discernment mean? If we Western scholars and Christian theologians consider an ecology of knowledge that welcomes multi-

ple ontologies,⁴² what are the implications for a progressive Christian *oikoumenē* in the global ecumene?

NOTES

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2. The Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, signed on October 23, 1991, by nineteen governments and four warring Cambodian groups, brought an end to the Cambodian-Vietnamese War. It also initiated the UN Transitional Authority Commission (UNTAC), the first time the UN took over governance of a state. See Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3. See Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Oahu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

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7. Peg Levine, *Love and Dread in Cambodia. Weddings, Births and Ritual Harm under the Khmer Rouge* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010).

8. See Katherine Ewing, "Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe," *American Anthropologist* New Series 96.3 (1994): 571–583.

9. Jean Langford, "Spirits of Dissent: Southeast Asian Memories and Disciplines of Death," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25 (2005): 143; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 105.

10. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Revista Critica de Ciencias Sociais* (2007); <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-29-santosen.html>; accessed November 15, 2016).

11. See the "Common Vision and Understanding of the World Council of Churches" (14 February 2006), a policy statement adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and commended to member churches and ecumenical partners for study and action in September 1997 (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/common-understanding-and-vision-of-the-wcc-cuv>).

12. Eric C. Stewart, "Reader's Guide: New Testament Space/Spaciality," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42 (2012): 143.

13. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

14. Stewart, "Reader's Guide"; James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

15. Karin Friedrich, "Review of *Chronicle of the World: The Complete and Annotated Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493* by Hartmann Schedel," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 82 (2004): 749.

16. "Columbia or America: 500 Years of Controversy," First Maps of the New World, Cornell University (<https://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/columbia-or-america/maps>); accessed December 12, 2016).

17. Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)," *Boundary 2* 20.3 (1993): 65–76.

18. Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," 66.
19. Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, "Americanness as a Concept. Or the Americas in the Modern World-System," *International Journal of Social Sciences* 134 (1992): 549–552.
20. de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking," 80.
21. de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking."
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26. Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2016); cf. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
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33. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
34. Bruno Latour, "Which Cosmos, Whose Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck," *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004): 458.
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42. Cf. Kathryn Poethig, "Visa Trouble: Cambodian American Christians and Their Defense of Multiple Citizenships," in *Religions/Globalizations: Theories and Cases*, edited by Dwight N. Hopkins, Lois Ann Lorentzen, Eduardo Mendieta, David Batstone, 187–202 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).