A Compass Rose for the Anthropocene

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Anthropocene: concept, metaphor, and territory which, although conceived more than thirty years ago, remains largely uncharted. This offers an opportunity for what philosopher Val Plumwood termed “a thorough and open rethink which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives” (2009) – a rethink readily understood as somewhat pressing.

While philosophers have been for decades calling for change to a dominant, reductive ontology, or worldview at the root of unsustainable practices, sanctioned approaches to sustainability have tended to be mechanistic, or technological fixes. While frequently effective, technologies are rooted in beliefs, assumptions, worldviews – and as artefacts, enforce these. (Kohak, McLuhan) Since artefacts and cultural practices enforce and affirm worldviews, they may also be world-forming, transformative.

Jumping off previous work, this presentation considers specific arts-based and cultural practices as effective drivers of cultural-ontological change. It especially considers contributions of, and collaborations with, traditional and indigenous epistemologies, worldviews and practices – particularly on the west coast of Canada, where colonizer/settler culture is forming new alliances and understandings with indigenous cultures. At risk here due to rapid and proposed fossil fuel development is the last relatively untouched temperate rainforest and ocean habitat – habitat the Haida, Salish, and other traditional peoples consider inextricably entwined with culture. (Guujaaw, 2006) Where the dual legacy of colonialism and reductive worldviews is a fault-line underlying sustainability, the arts can provoke, initiate, and cultivate a new landscape.

The Compass Rose is the ancestor of the compass, where wind names and directions were marked to aid the navigator. It is a metaphor and creative navigational device to assist us in venturing from well-trodden paths and worldviews through uncharted territories of the Anthropocene to a radically transformed understanding of, and way of being in, the world.

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