Epilogue

Metagovernance

The website Native-Land.ca features a map of Earth marked with the territories of Indigenous peoples.[1] The territories appear not as the space between borderlines but as overlapping regions of color. Where I live, three regions intersect, those of the nations known in English as the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute. All three have been stewards of this place. But they have not claimed exclusive domain over it, since their seasonal, migratory ways of life long permitted them to coexist. Speaking from Indigenous North American experience and against today's ascendant nationalism, Glen Coulthard has written, with Matt Hern, of "non-exclusive sovereignties":

> Imagining new renditions of community beyond any transcendent identity is exactly what is required to surpass the brutal nations that stain our times. The idea of "we" can be stripped of its colonial, statist and anthropocentric fixities. It is wholly possible to embrace and refuse identity in the same breath, reaching for a concept of being together that is exposed to the more-than-human. Community needs to extend far past the human if it is to retain any force. It has to think past species and sovereignty as much as flag.[2]

Attempts to imagine new kinds of jurisdictions seem to be on the rise. There is the invisible nation of Wakanda in the *Black Panther* universe and Janelle Monáe's android city Metropolis. Online communities give themselves jurisdictional names that refer to old kingdoms and regions of outer space.[3] In an age beset with storms, fires, and extinctions signaling ecological breakdown, which existing regimes have been unwilling to reverse, the longing for other jurisdictions comes easily. The evidence of governance failures is everywhere, and our imaginations need somewhere else to go.
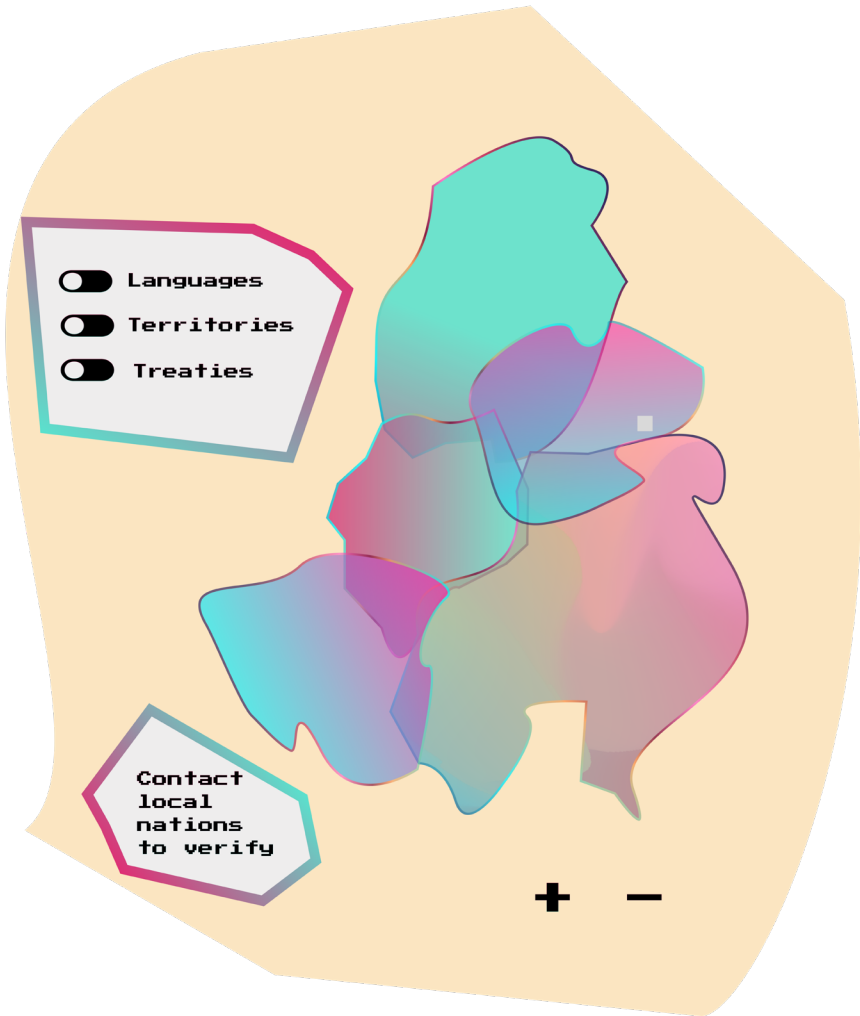
FIGURE 15.

One way to understand the global turn to ethnonationalist fantasies and strongman-style leaders is as a symptom of the nation-state's weakness. If governments continually fail to deliver the governance we actually need, we can at least feel better by doubling down on what governments are capable of still. Nation-states can't stop climate change, but they can enact a nostalgic fantasy of national identity and militarize their borders. Politicians can impress their constituents by denouncing transgender kids and insulting racialized minorities. They can invade less powerful countries for inexplicable reasons. But other paths are possible. Instead, the nation-state could offload some of its governance burdens to new

kinds of jurisdictions, concurrent layers of governance that are more tailored and accountable in their domains.

In an essay on the idea of post-nationalism, adrienne maree brown describes a sensation of liberation in trying to imagine something other than the usual tools of governance—the ballot boxes, the political parties—toward tools closer to what communities really need: "i know that the hardest step is not getting people to choose the best tools, but inspiring people to want to build something at all. and then, growing the belief that there is a structure they could cocreate in which they could belong without battle. i believe people can and will demand better tools as they fall in love with their own possible futures."[4]

Governable spaces are steps into possible futures, starting with the connective networks that are already now among us. I have argued for the importance of everyday online experience as a starting point for imagining through practice what it might be like to more fully, appropriately, deeply co-govern the world. The making of governable spaces invites questions I do not know how to answer. But this book is an attempt to frame the conversation, first by going back to how governance in online space has been for too long constrained.

Implicit feudalism is a design pattern written in code, upheld through network protocols, the circumvention of labor law, and corporate liability. It shapes and is shaped by, in turn, the practices of billions of people taking part in online social spaces every day. Feudal designs permit expressions of affective voice but not, for most users, the more direct leverage of effective voice. Feudal defaults teach their users the embedded ideology of homesteading, with its roots in the colonization of the American West, now colonizing the imaginations of the networked world. The result has been not the democratic revival that early internet evangelists promised but an authoritarian turn. Demagogic leaders have found that, better than pro-democracy protesters, they can take advantage of network norms and flows to seize power over societies increasingly accustomed to everyday feudalism. Homeplaces arise everywhere, as people rub against the defaults of the networks to create accountable and nourishing spaces. But do not mistake the resistance for the regime.

Some kinds of resistance set out to replace the regime, to unravel the habits of feudalism with self-governance. Through governable stacks, communities can identify and root out feudal patterns and remake them as commons. The stack is social, technical, and environmental infrastructure. It is affective and effective. It is economic and spiritual. Through relations of subsidiarity, communities can work out their stacks as they see fit locally, while still participating in larger networks. Through modular designs, they can copy and adapt practices from elsewhere and share their creations with others. Through an archaeology of past governance practices, infused with a spirit of ancestry, the wideness of possibility grows beyond tech culture's relentless and self-limiting fascination with innovation.

None of this can get very far without policies in the background that support community ownership, that respect self-governance over paternalistic decrees.

Even well-meaning policy can maintain the mystification of technology and fail to cultivate the political skills of people. Political skills can form only if we practice them in our most ordinary interactions. The everyday and the institutional reflect back on each other like a fractal house of mirrors. One does not begin without the other, and to that extent I cannot claim to offer an orderly program so much as a bidding to try everything at once.

Permit me one last concept. Political theorists began writing about *metagovernance* in the 1990s—as Bob Jessop defines it, "the organization of the conditions for governance in its broadest sense," or simply the "organization of self-organization"[5] Addressing failures of governance, this coterie recognized, requires more than simply considering a certain situation in isolation, because there is a broader context in which it occurs. The term arose as scholars began to see governance proliferating across domains more widely than they had noticed before, spreading across public and private institutions, especially through schemes for economic development. They noticed that international norms and rules were orchestrating and constraining the range of possibilities.

Implicit feudalism has been a kind of metagovernance, and like so much metagovernance, it too often hides beneath our notice. But changing how we govern requires being attentive to the metagovernance at work. Shaping the background conditions of governance is itself a form of governance.

Independently, people in crypto have begun talking about metagovernance, too—less as a theory than as daily practice. For them, metagovernance happens when one DAO, for instance, holds tokens from other DAOs. That means a proposal vote in that first DAO might cascade to other DAOs, across the ecosystem and potentially back again.[6] DAOs habitually engage in token swaps to solidify collaborations, exchanging power in each other. Products like dashboards and voting tools are appearing specifically to support the resulting kinds of many-sided governance. In these contexts, metagovernance means trying to comprehend a condition of bewildering integration.

What I have been up to all along in this book is a kind of metagovernance, a critique of feudal habits and a call for cultivating democratic communities. I have argued that the design of metagovernance for online spaces matters immensely. Social networks so far have fed democratic erosion and an authoritarian turn, but other kinds of design could draw people toward a world of non-exclusive sovereignties, as Coulthard and Hern put it, and of right relation to the more-than-human. More intentional metagovernance can veer human societies toward accountable connectivity and toward the planet now asking us to get our act together, or else.

What kinds of interfaces, power structures, and skills will guide us in a world where we can co-govern more and more of the jurisdictions we inhabit? A different sort of design, a different tenor of education, and different practices of attention will all be necessary. The Chilean president Salvador Allende attempted to

make his country a governable space with Project Cybersyn, a pre-internet computer network headquartered at a stylized nerve center in the capital.[7] How would the world look and feel if each of our communities were a Cybersyn, a convergence of transparent information flows and decisions, under democratic control?

As Native-Land.ca suggests, a habitable vision for the future can begin with recognizing more fully the legacies we stand among. *Metagovernance* is academic jargon and memetic vernacular all at once, and from both directions the word gestures toward a struggle for democracy many of us have not yet noticed is happening. What is at stake? Something no bigger than we are. Governable spaces are a starting point for becoming, together, more fully ourselves.