The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement

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Abstract
Both new materialist philosophy of science and Indigenous studies scholarship have developed theories about the agency of non-human things. There has, however, been relatively little articulation between these two literatures in the qualitative social sciences. This essay looks at the possible reasons for this lack of engagement—including the relatively recent emergence of new materialism, pervasive racism within the academy, and foundational differences in the priorities and philosophical assumptions informing these two literatures. Addressing new materialist scholars, the essay inventories the ethical, political, and intellectual reasons social scientists using Karen Barad’s concept of agential realism should also be reading and citing Indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies. It makes the case that the Indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies have strengths in precisely some of the places new materialist social science is facing challenges. Examples are provided and the broader political implications of such work are examined.

Keywords
native American studies, ethnicity and race, feminist methodologies, methodologies, new materialism, posthumanism, Indigenous studies, feminist materialism, decolonization

A multiplicity of paths and histories and the situatedness of time are also aspects of quantum temporality, which is not to suggest that (specific) quantum and (specific) indigenous approaches are identical or commensurate or have the same effect or stakes, but they do share in offering profound disruptions of the conception of homogenous empty time.

—Karen Barad (2017)

... Indigenous (Maori) ontologies always already assume a profound sameness, and therefore sense of recognition, between the abilities and sensibilities of objects and those of humans. For Indigenous scholars, the struggle is to find a way to enable these ontologies to be recognized and reproduced in their academic work. For Western researchers intrigued by new materialist arguments, the ontological struggle is different. Within/against Western ontologies, it becomes necessary to create a new vocabulary and to trouble the familiar language of empiricist or interpretivist social science in order to open up a space where objects can express their vitality—or, at least, where humans can experience their (objects’) vitality.

—Alison Jones and Te Kawehau Hoskins (2016)

Realism is enjoying something of a comeback in recent years among critical scholars of the social. Weary with well-rehearsed debates between naïve empiricists who frame the social world as a passive object awaiting the one best description of its inner workings and social constructivists who frame all claims of realism as misguided denials of the way language and culture mediate encounters with objects of inquiry, qualitative researchers have been experimenting with alternative ontologies of inquiry. Scholars are searching for a theory and practice of inquiry that preserves the incisive examination of our practices of knowing characteristic of the best poststructuralist social analysis, but that retains an ability to acknowledge the protean materiality of things as a source of meaning (Barad, 2007; Lather, 2017; Latour, 2004).

A relatively recent movement in the philosophy of science literature offers an allegedly novel entry into these debates. This movement has been referred to by a variety of names including new materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010; Barad, 2007, 2011; MacLure, 2018), new feminist materialism (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Van der Tuin, 2011), posthumanism (Alaimo, 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 2008), new

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The pervasive context of settler colonialism cannot help but influence both the practice of new materialist scholarship and its reception. As a consequence, new materialist scholars’ enthusiasm for agential realism could, by failing to acknowledge and seriously engage the Indigenous scholars already working with parallel concepts, end up reinforcing ongoing practices of erasure of Indigenous cultures and thought (Ahmed, 2017; Deloria, 1999b; Todd, 2016; Tuck, 2014; Weheliye, 2014). In addition, ignoring Indigenous theorizations of non-human agency involves a performative engagement of Eurocentric philosophical traditions and differences in the history, structure, and express purposes of these scholarly traditions. Looking specifically at the shared interest in the topic of non-human agency, we find performative differences in the practice of inquiry that often go unacknowledged and that can make the Indigenous studies literatures somewhat illegible to scholars trained exclusively in Eurocentric philosophical traditions. We conclude that it is precisely some of these differences that make a substantive engagement with Indigenous studies literature ethically, politically, and methodologically compelling.

Columbus Discovers Non-Human Agency

The identities of the authors are relevant here. All three of us identify as feminists, are influenced by the work of feminist of color and Indigenous feminist literature, and are committed to practical and scholarly projects of decolonization. All three are cisgender men. Two of the authors, Jerry Rosiek and Scott Pratt, are white and members of settler colonial heritage communities. Jimmy Snyder is Indigenous and is an enrolled citizen of the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas. All three encountered agent ontologies first in the Indigenous studies literature and traditions of thought, but have since had a sustained engagement with the new materialist literature.

Our interest in this essay is not with claims of intellectual and relational originality. The matter of who came first to agent ontologies, Indigenous studies scholars or new materialist scholars, is too simple a matter to justify a paper. To the extent this is a salient consideration, then it should be understood that Indigenous thinkers and scholars developed ideas about non-human agency thousands of years earlier than contemporary philosophers of science. That being said, different communities may come to similar understandings of the world through different conceptual paths. Our concern in this article is that these different literatures on agent ontologies do not remain isolated from one another, but instead have the opportunity to inform one another, extend their respective influence, and bring what benefits are latent within them to local and global communities.

Chronology is significant, however, insofar as it helps us see the political inflections of the encounter between the new materialism and Indigenous studies literature. This encounter emerges out of a continuing history of power-saturated displacement of Indigenous peoples and cultures, as well as a centuries long history of Indigenous cultural survivance and contemporary resurgence movements (BANNER, 2004; Corntassel, 2012; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Simpson, 2014, 2017; Vizenor, 2008). This essay presumes its readership is committed to actively avoiding complicity with Indigenous displacement and to solidarity with Indigenous peoples in their struggles against colonialist violence in the academy and beyond.

The pervasiveness of settler colonialism cannot help but influence both the practice of new materialist scholarship and its reception. As a consequence, new materialist scholars’ enthusiasm for agential realism could, by failing to acknowledge and seriously engage the Indigenous scholars already working with parallel concepts, end up reinforcing ongoing practices of erasure of Indigenous cultures and thought (Ahmed, 2017; Deloria, 1999b; Todd, 2016; Tuck, 2014; Weheliye, 2014). In addition, ignoring Indigenous theorizations of non-human agency involves a performative engagement of Eurocentric philosophical traditions and differences in the history, structure, and express purposes of these scholarly traditions. Looking specifically at the shared interest in the topic of non-human agency, we find performative differences in the practice of inquiry that often go unacknowledged and that can make the Indigenous studies literatures somewhat illegible to scholars trained exclusively in Eurocentric philosophical traditions. We conclude that it is precisely some of these differences that make a substantive engagement with Indigenous studies literature ethically, politically, and methodologically compelling.

The phrase “agential realism” refers to the idea that agency is not just a human capacity but a quality manifest in all aspects of reality. The appeal of agential realism lies in its ability to simultaneously affirm the way the things of this world exceed our representations of them while also highlighting our responsibility for the role we play in constituting the world through our representational activity. Similar ideas can be found in some Indigenous studies literature, where an ontology that includes non-human agency as well as a conception of ethics including more than human-to-human relations has long been a starting point for analysis (Coulthard, 2014; Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Deloria, 1988, 1999a, 1999b; Martin, 2017; Simpson, 2017; Todd, 2014; Watts, 2013). There has, however, been limited dialogue across these literatures about their shared onto-ethical commitments.

Given the distinctive character of agential realism within the Western philosophical traditions (Davies, 2018) and its significant similarity with Indigenous conceptualizations of non-human agency, this lack of engagement calls for critical examination. In what follows, this essay addresses the community of scholars in the qualitative social sciences building on the new materialist philosophy of science literature. We look for reasons that can help explain why it has made more sense for these scholars to reach for Deleuze (2004) instead of Deloria (1999b), Bennett (2010) rather than Bungee (1984), Guattari (2005) rather than Garroult (2003), Massumi (2002) rather than Marker (2018), Alaimo (2016) rather than Atleo (2007), and so on, when working out the implications of agential realism for social science methodology.

In what follows, we examine multiple reasons for the lack of engagement with Indigenous studies literature including racism and Eurocentrism in academic disciplines and differences in the history, structure, and express purposes of these scholarly traditions. Looking specifically at the shared interest in the topic of non-human agency, we find performative differences in the practice of inquiry that often go unacknowledged and that can make the Indigenous studies literatures somewhat illegible to scholars trained exclusively in Eurocentric philosophical traditions. We conclude that it is precisely some of these differences that make a substantive engagement with Indigenous studies literature ethically, politically, and methodologically compelling.

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contradiction with the emphasis on the ethics and politics of social inquiry claimed as a promise of new materialist philosophy. This erodes the credibility of the new materialisms in ways that inhibit the ameliorative work these theories might help us collectively undertake.

Some reflection on the recent history of the application of agential realism to social science inquiry will help us see the contours of this risk. We examine three conditions which contribute to the current dearth of engagement with writings about agent ontologies found in Indigenous studies literature: (a) a lack of awareness of similarities in the literatures; (b) racism and settler colonial bias in the academy; and (c) the way claims that “this has all been done before” fall into a familiar pattern of patriarchal dismissal of scholarship that has been largely forwarded by feminist scholars. Although explanatory, we argue that none of these justifies continuing inattention to the Indigenous literature on non-human agency.

Agental realism is a relatively recent development in the philosophy of science literature. Karen Barad was writing about it as early as 1996. It took some time for the publication of her book Meeting the Universe Halfway (2007), before it was taken up by social scientists. Since then, Hillevi Taguchi’s Going Beyond the Theory Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education was published in 2010. Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter was published in 2010. Alecia Youngblood Jackson and Lisa Mazzeti’s Thinking With Theory in Qualitative Research came out in 2012. Ezekiel Dixon Roman’s Inheriting Possibilities was published in 2017, just to name a few. In just over a decade, there has been an efflorescence of interest in Barad’s agential realism across a number of fields.

We note this, because during the early years of an emergent theoretical literature like new materialism, a lack of articulation with other literatures is understandable. It takes time to recognize that certain themes are shared with other traditions of scholarship. Then reading, conversation, and discernment of differences and resonances have to happen. However, once an initial recognition of similarity has occurred and a certain period of time has passed, a lack of substantive engagement with the Indigenous studies literature can no longer be reasonably attributed to the youth of the theoretical formation.

By 2019, new materialist scholarship has crossed such a threshold. Themes shared between new materialist and Indigenous studies literature have been noted and brought to the attention of the field on a number of occasions. For example, there was a keynote at the 2013 Summer Institute for Qualitative Research by Alison Jones and Te Kawehau Hoskins titled “Object Lessons: Vital Materiality, Methodology, Indigenous Studies” published later (2016) as a book chapter titled “A Mark on Paper: The Matter of Indigenous Settler History.” There was a 2014 conference at the University of Oregon entitled “Beyond Reflexivity and Advocacy: Exploring the Ontological Turn in Education Research” that brought together new materialists, Indigenous studies scholars, and other scholars interested in the ontology of social inquiry to discuss connections between these fields of study. Eve Tuck, an Unangax scholar and an enrolled member of the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island in Alaska, has challenged the lack of new materialists engagement with Indigenous scholarship at the American Education Research Association (Tuck, 2014). Vanessa Watts (2013), Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2015), Sebastine De Line (2016), Brian Martin (2017), Marc Higgins (2017), Zoe Todd (2016), and Lesley le Grange (2018) have published articles comparing the two literatures. In recent years, we occasionally see brief acknowledgments in new materialist social science scholarship that Indigenous communities and scholars have worked out the implications of agent ontologies with distinct, yet parallel, features (e.g., Barad, 2017; Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016; Rosiek; 2017; MacLure, 2017; Smith, 2017; Snaza et al., 2014).

Despite the citations mentioned above, the engagement of scholars interested in new materialism with the relevant Indigenous studies literature remains an infrequent occurrence. It has not been approached with the sustained collective energy that, say, the use of Deleuzian ontologies for the application of agential realism in the social sciences has. Nor have these connections been explored as often as parallel ontological themes in the work of Baruch Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead, or Charles Sanders Peirce. This difference cannot be attributed to the unfamiliarity of the conceptual vocabulary found in Indigenous studies literature. All of the aforementioned Western philosophical resources are notoriously dense and difficult to grasp. Choices are being made about which literatures are worth the effort of engaging.

Many factors beyond a lack of awareness may be contributing to this sustained silence. Racism, for example, plays a part. The assumption that Indigenous studies scholarship is primitive, less rigorous, less theoretically refined, simplistically concerned with identity politics, and so on lingers throughout the academy and can frame people’s encounters with the literature before they read it or even pre-empt such reading. Such assumptions, where they exist, are simply false and born of ignorance. They need to be surfaced, named, critiqued, and relentlessly checked as part of any 21st-century scholarly practice (e.g., Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Deloria, 1999; Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). This essay is intended to contribute to that work.

There are also complex disciplinary and intersectional dynamics contributing to the lack of attention to Indigenous studies writing about non-human agency in the posthumanist social science literature. In the early years of an emerging school of thought, the desire for a room of one’s own in which to develop distinctive questions with a novel conceptual vocabulary is understandable. This kind of generative theoretical scholarship is difficult work. It involves trying
to think outside of the bounds of deeply inscribed habits of thought, habits encoded in the language we have for describing thoughts. Setting boundaries and drawing together with those who share similar intentions help with forging new habits of thought and valuation.

Such considerations are especially important for efforts to apply agential realism in the social sciences, because there is a persistent backdrop of a positivist hegemony that devalues and denies the significance of qualitative research generally. Qualitative inquiry based on complex philosophical theory and unfamiliar notions like non-human agency is even more likely to be marginalized. Within the field of qualitative inquiry, initial challenges to a theoretical status quo are frequently met with dismissals of the sort “Oh, that has been done before.” In the case of a school of thought being forwarded largely by feminist scholars, such as new materialism, the refrain that this or that male scholar (be it Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Sanders Peirce, or Michel Foucault) has done all this before is all too familiar. It can sound like (and often is) an effort to displace and block a critical intervention into the existing theoretical literature. Given this, it is reasonable that scholars interested in agential realism would seek to insulate the development of this line of thought from such dismissal by nurturing so as to nurture it on its own terms.

As true as this may be, concerns about positivist silencing of qualitative researchers or hetero-patriarchal displacement of feminist voice are difficult to apply to calls for citation of Indigenous scholars who have been writing about non-human agency for a long time. Indigenous studies, like any field, wrestles with its own gender politics, but is more explicitly intersectional in its politics than the general social sciences literature (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Goeman & Denetdale, 2009; John, 2015; Million, 2009; Sabzalian, 2018). More to the point, the calls for engagement with the Indigenous studies literature on non-human agency have not been efforts to dismiss, supplant, or displace new materialism, but instead have been calls for the new materialism to not be an agent of displacement. The argument, generally, is not—This has been done before, so there is nothing new here. Instead, it is—We have been working with these ideas for a very long time. Why are we not cited, sought out, and included in the conversation? Why are you acting as if we are invisible—again?

All of this should give us pause. When there is a literature that has explored similar themes, specifically an Indigenous tradition of thought that vastly predates the emergence of the new materialist philosophies of science, a literature sitting in plain sight with scholars pointing at it, and still substantive engagement with this thought is sparse, it raises questions. It partakes of the same settler colonial forms as Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Willem Janszoon, Abel Tasman, and other colonists arriving on a shore and simultaneously seeing and then willfully not seeing the Indigenous people living there.

As frustration mounts about Indigenous knowledges and ways of thinking not being acknowledged or cited one more time, efforts to have inter-theoretic conversations are increasingly strained. Indigenous studies—identified scholars may be inclined to withdraw from the conversation, unwilling to do all of the work of dialogue and finding the repetition of settler colonialist erasure in one more intellectual movement predictable and disappointing. Furthermore, there is a historically justified pessimism about intellectual exchanges with Eurocentric scholars devolving into a form of settler colonial appropriation—taking a few things they feel are useful—but failing to commit to solidarity in broader projects that bring amelioration to Indigenous communities. Eve Tuck gives voice to this pessimism:

I spent almost all my career, up until recently, believing that if white settlers would just read Indigenous authors, this would move projects of Indigenous sovereignty and land rematriation in meaningful ways. I underestimated how people would read Indigenous work extractively, for discovery. I underestimated how challenging it would be for settlers to read Indigenous work, after all these years of colonial relations. (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2018, p. 15)

The expressions of such frustration can feel pointed and personal to scholars excited about new materialism but not familiar with Indigenous studies. They can inspire increased caution when approaching the Indigenous studies literature, a reluctance to cite it without significant mastery, or just avoidance of conflict altogether. This rationale for avoidance is common and in turn can be seen as a performance of white privilege or white fragility. This only reinforces the aforementioned frustration, setting up a feedback loop that diminishes the possibility of dialogue. This, to some extent, is already happening.

Given the history of European colonization, such tense dynamics may be inevitable, but, rather than inspiring the end of engagement, they should indicate that new approaches are necessary. It underlines the need for Eurocentric scholars to recognize their responsibility to engage Indigenous thought and traditions and to do so in light of the history of colonization, displacement, and genocide. This means, at minimum, the adoption of an inclusive politics of citation and the pursuit of historically informed interdisciplinary collaboration where parties are willing. Inclusive citations and collaborations, we believe, can both address some internal challenges emerging in new materialist scholarship and build more respect for the relevance of Indigenous philosophies to the practice of social science among those unfamiliar with this literature. We will know if that respect has moved beyond a desire to possess knowledge Indigenous communities have, to a respect for the lives that are the source of that knowledge, if it is accompanied by an increase in solidarity with the self-determined political projects of Indigenous communities. In what
remains of this essay, we try to imagine what a path to this sort of engagement might look like.

**Agential Realism: Ambitious Interventions and Performative Challenges**

One of the central challenges of applying agential realism to the practice of social science inquiry is working out its specific implications for methodological practice. The philosophies gathered under the banner of “new materialism” reconsider several foundational concepts central to social science as it has been traditionally understood—such as taken for granted notions of representation (MacLure, 2013), the idea of a single or stable object of inquiry (Barad, 2007; Mol, 2002), and the concept of “data” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Agent ontologies, however, put more than these individual concepts under reconsideration. They also question the performative practices through which we “have” ideas and the very idea of the “we” of inquiry itself. Barad’s agential realism is an effort to transform not just the ontology of our objects of study but also the ontology of subjects involved in inquiry, and the relation between objects and subjects. More colloquially, it gestures toward a practice of inquiry that involves transformations not just of our ways of knowing but also of our ways of being, feeling, committing, and living in the world.

We should not expect such a reorientation would be a smooth process even for those convinced of its necessity, that it would involve lurches, false starts, and backsliding of various forms. The material-semiotic architecture that both enables and constrains our practices of scholarship, knowing, and civic responsibility in Western settler colonial societies is very old and runs deep. It is encoded into our language; our habits of perception, feeling, and desire, our identities, the social communities that sustain those identities and desires, the legal codes that bound and bind those communities, the material arrangements of property, land, food consumption, power grids, and much more. We can critically question one part of this matrix, but the others remain as ballast that draw us back into past practices that are networked with other cultural and material aspects of the world. Consequently, as new materialist scholars invent ways to enact agentially realist inquiries, there is a significant risk that proposed innovations will be superficial and will be interpolated back into deeply ingrained practices of knowing and being. As Maggie MacLure (2017) observed in her 2016 Keynote to the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry,

It is difficult to think outside of the Enlightenment structures of the Cartesian self, and the stories it tells itself about progress, reason and the advancement of knowledge. So although we have come a long way in formulating cartographies for new materialist research, we are necessarily some way from the anticipated ontological transformations to our field. . . I think we continue to underestimate the sheer difficulty of shedding the anthropocentrism that is built into our world-views and our language habits. (p. 55)

One of the risks for the new materialisms involves framing the goal of inquiry as producing an improved description of our objects of inquiry, while leaving unchanged the construction of the inquirer as a spectator subject. This can be seen in the emerging literature that seeks to document the operation of self-organizing non-human phenomena. This includes research on algorithms, cognitive biology, and neuroscience (Dixon-Roman, 2016, 2017; Hayles, 2017) that identify the ways in which non-human systems engage in pattern recognition and response to changing environments. It can also be seen in research on self-organizing socio-material systems such as disease (Mol, 2002), political formations (Bennett, 2010), or institutionalized racism (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016). Such scholarship provides informative accounts of the materially dynamic, evolving, nature of our objects of inquiry often through the use of the Deleuzian vocabulary of assemblage (e.g., Alaimo, 2016; Bennett, 2010; Fox & Alldred, 2015; Mazzei, 2017; Taguchi, 2018). However, the ontology of the knowing subject assumed in scholars’ representation of these dynamic objects of study remains largely unaltered (MacLure, 2017).

This reinscription of the enlightenment spectator subject can also be seen in the turn to affect in some new materialist scholarship (e.g., Clough, 2009; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002; Zembylas, 2014). In an effort to get outside of a conception of inquiry based primarily on linguistic representation, cognition, and epistemology, many scholars are shifting their attention to the immediacy of affect. Scholars working in this vein offer that the influence of non-human agents on us may take the form of influence on our affect as much as our cognition. However, in an effort to explicate this expanded view of knowledge, scholars often resort to descriptions of the ways affect and cognition are integrated in some practices of knowing, as opposed to performing that integration.

These shifts in the objects of social inquiry are salutary in our opinion. However, when transformations occur primarily at the level of the object of inquiry, the free-floating rational subject of inquiry characteristic of enlightenment thought remains largely unchanged. This misses the more radical, and therefore more difficult to implement, ontological implications of new materialist philosophies of science—namely, that the very being of inquirers are also multiple and transformed in the entanglement of inquiry. Karen Barad (2007) cautions against this underestimation of the departure she is recommending:
To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future. (p. ix)

Ironically, even Barad’s general theorizing about agential realism can be interpreted as iteratively reinscribing the enlightenment spectator subject. Focusing on the general features of agential realism as something that can be described, while useful, still establishes the reader in a relation of observation. This is something other than risking the transformations of self and being that allegedly come with particular intra-active relations. Read in this way, such theorizing appears to be something like a preamble to the performative work of onto-epistemic and ethical intra-activity with non-human agents.

The question before us, therefore, is not just how the object of our inquiries are understood differently in our inquiries, but also how are we ourselves becoming different through inquiry and how our relationships with the other agents in our inquiries are transformed. The risk we face is that a new materialist practice of inquiry would remain caught in inherited habits of description that produce spectator subjects and fail to robustly explore the range of possible reciprocal transformations of agents entangled in inquiry.

A second, related, challenge faced by those attempting to apply agential realism to social science methodological practice is working out the place of ethics in our inquiries. Reconceiving of inquiry as ontologically generative of agents (both human and non-human) implies that ethics moves from being an afterthought of inquiry design—be sure to do no harm and be sure to apply the knowledge you acquire in moral and just ways—to a consideration of the ethics of ontologically generating forms of being through inquiry—knowing subjects, habits of relation, material possibilities, and impossibilities. Barad (2012) takes pains to underscore the way ethics, epistemology, and ontology are inextricable from one another in agential realist conceptions of inquiry:

Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities. . . . Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self. This way of thinking ontology, epistemology, and ethics together makes for a world that is always already an ethical matter. (p. 69)

To the extent that social science inquiry informed by new materialist philosophy remains focused on redescribing social phenomena using a new vocabulary—even one that stresses the agental or affective nature of these phenomena—it will leave in place the traditional enlightenment dichotomy between knowledge and values. It will do this performatively, by engaging non-human agents first and foremost through a practice of representation, as opposed to through a practice of ethical reciprocity. So far, there has been little exploration in the new materialist social science literature of what specific performances of an ethical reciprocity with non-human agents would look like. What are the ethics involved in becoming generatively entangled with things like assemblages of institutionalized racism, a specific geographic place, assemblages of medical technology and concepts, or curricular materials in public schools? How are we to be ethically responsive to the other agents that emerge with our own agency in the inquiry, as well as to others affected by these emergent agencies? This is different than the familiar resistance/reproduction binary that has framed critical questions about social inquiry for nearly a century. It presumes some version of both resistance and reproduction happen together. The reproduction is not mechanical, nor is solely the product of human decisions. It is also in part the product of the activity of agents other than ourselves.

Agent Ontologies Found in Indigenous Studies

Agent ontologies in Indigenous studies literature are well developed in many of the places where the new materialist agential realism literature is not. The current literature on agential realism in the Eurocentric canon is most frequently focused on justifying the idea of non-human agency against the grain of presumptions that the objects of our studies passively await our discovery and description. The language and assumptions underlying contemporary Indigenous philosophy, by way of contrast, often presume the existence of pervasive non-human agency. There is, therefore, less need to argue for agent ontologies against more mechanistic ontologies that have characterized Western thought for centuries. A greater portion of Indigenous scholarship focuses on working out specific performatve and ethical implications of agent ontologies on their own terms.

This difference makes the Indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies illegible to some scholars of Western philosophy or it makes it seem less rigorous or less genuinely theoretical. This can be the response, even though the
role of “theory” is supposedly put under reconsideration by Barad’s agential realism. Conversely, to someone already convinced of the ubiquity of non-human agency, the prevalent interest among Eurocentric scholars with justifying a departure from their inherited humanist ontologies seems like a highly provincial obsession, one that distracts from the more substantive work of shaping productive ontological relations with a world full of human and non-human agents.

Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen (1986) writes about this preference for the doing of an agent ontology rather than simply talking about it.

American Indian People do not content themselves with simple preachers of this truth, but through the sacred power of utterance they seek to shape and mold, to direct and determine, the forces that surround and govern human life and the life of all related things. . . . This is in essence the great principle on which all productive living must rest, for relationships among all the beings of the universe must be fulfilled; in this way all individual lives may also be fulfilled. (pp. 55-56)

We can see this more performative aspect of an agent ontology—what Allen refers to as a preference for utterance over preachment of truth—in several themes that appear regularly in Indigenous studies literature. Among these are a focus on the particularity of relations with non-human agents and on the performance of ethical reciprocity with non-human agents.

**Engaging the Particularity of Non-Human Agency**

In Indigenous studies scholarship, non-human agency is taken as a given and so is less frequently introduced as a general concept. Instead, there is more emphasis on the formation of relations with particular other-than-human agents. This is a reflection, in part, of the fact that there is no one “Indigenous” cosmology or metaphysics. Within this diversity, however, there are repeated and consistent references to an understanding of the character of agency as something that emerges out of particular circumstances in such a way that its most salient features are missed if it is dealt with primarily as a general abstraction. In *Spirit and Reason*, Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria (1999b) writes,

> Indians do not talk about nature as some kind of concept or something “out there.” They talk about the immediate environment in which they live. They do not embrace all trees or love all rivers and mountains. What is important is the relationship you have with a particular tree or a particular mountain. (p. 223)

This emphasis on particularity of relations is tied, in Deloria’s writings, to an understanding that these are relations with other agents (Deloria usually uses the term “persons”). Our relations are therefore not only epistemic, or even utilitarian. They are also personal and ethical. This gives rise to an empiricism with a character that is different than that of settler colonial empiricism. “American Indians,” Deloria observes, “understanding that the universe consisted of living entities, were interested in learning how other forms of life behaved, for they saw that every entity had a personality and could exercise a measure of free will and choice” (pp. 52-53). This implies we live in a moral universe in which everything is an agent or part of an agent and every action carries a moral dimension. As a result, . . . there is a proper way to live in the universe: There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief. . . . There is a direction to the universe, empirically exemplified in the physical growth cycles of childhood, youth, and old age, with the corresponding responsibility of every entity to enjoy life, fulfill itself, and increase in wisdom and the spiritual development of personality. Nothing has incidental meaning and there are no coincidences. . . . In the moral universe all activities, events, and entities are related, and consequently it does not matter what kind of existence an entity enjoys, for the responsibility is always there for it to participate in the continuing creation of reality. (Deloria, 1999b, p. 47)

The relational character of agency has an impact on all activities including those of inquiry. “The key to understanding Indian knowledge of the world,” Deloria and Wildcat (2001) conclude, “is to remember that the emphasis was on the particular, not on general laws and explanations of how things worked” (p. 22). The key to knowing is not to determine universals and derive particulars, but to know the particulars.

Detailed explications of the relation between particularity, non-human agency, knowledge, thought, place, and being are ubiquitous in contemporary Indigenous studies literature. Michael Marker, an Arapaho education scholar living and working in British Columbia Canada, provides a compelling illustration of the tie between agent ontology and particularized forms of knowing. In a reflection on place-based conceptions of knowledge in coastal Salish cultures, he cites conversations with Salish elders recorded in the early 20th century. In these recordings, they attempted to explain to an obtuse interviewer that it was not supernatural beings residing at sacred places that transferred power to someone who visited those locales. Instead, it was the act of being in the place that made certain kinds of understanding possible. Marker (2018) explains,

Not only are spirit powers known to reside in certain specific places on the landscape, but the methodology for learning about powerful forms of consciousness and visions cannot be extracted from the “being in places” where the powers exist. The place itself is saturated with energy forms that exist only in the dimension of that landscape. This is an Indigenous interface
with two sentences: the mind of the place, and the human mind that is convening and opening to it. (p. 4)

Sounding themes similar to Karen Barad’s assertion that agency is constituted through particular intra-actions, Marker remarks on how in this interface, sometimes the land enables the agency of the human and sometimes the human becomes the extension of the agency of the land. Referring to the idea that the land often “names itself,” Marker (2018) observes,

In Indigenous cosmologies, the actual landscape does often have the capacity to name itself and uses the human beings to enact the self-naming. In this way of understanding reality, the human mind is a conduit for the consciousness of the land to be expressed in language. Yup’ik scholar A. Oscar Kawagley (2003) explained how the Yup’ik language clearly shows “the elements of nature naming and defining themselves” (p. vii). (p. 2)

Janelle Baker, a Métis scholar, similarly talks about the sentence of places. Writing about ecological restoration projects on Indigenous lands, she talks about the need for respectful relations not just with the humans living in a place but also with non-humans and the land that are also a part of the local community and kinship relations. This necessity has implications for the practice of research; she asserts, “[A] researcher needs to be sensitive to, and participate in, systems of respect and reciprocity belonging to the people, ancestors, and sentient landscape of the place in which they are doing research” (p. 110).

Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts takes this reflection on the relationship between the agency of land and humans a step further. In her 2013 essay “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Among Humans and Non-Humans,” she provides an account of the Anishinaabe understanding of human agency as emanating from a relation to the personhood of the land. “Place-Thought,” she writes, “is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (p. 21).

She also offers a diagnosis of why this mode of relation seems difficult for members of Westerner settler colonial cultures to understand, respect, or engage, and why assimilation into settler culture can cause Indigenous persons to lose this relational capacity. She locates the difficulty in the Western philosophical practice of thinking in terms of an epistemological/ontological or knowing/being binary. Within the frame of such binaries, the “material (body/land) becomes abstracted into epistemological spaces” (Watts, 2013, p. 31). This abstraction enables the naturalization of the treatment of land and other non-human beings as resources, to be mapped, known, and cataloged as objects, and owned by human knowing subjects. In this frame, place-based Indigenous ways of knowing-as-being appear flawed in their failure to prioritize objectification that enables commodification. Watts observes, “It is not that Indigenous peoples do not theorize, but that these complex theories are not distinct from place” (p. 22).

Watts finds this limitation of Euro-Western thought not only in classic positivist traditions of inquiry but also in the writings of new materialist science studies’ authors such as Bruno Latour (1987), Vicky Kirby (2008), Stacey Alaimo (2008), and others. Although these authors allow for the existence of non-human agency, by her interpretation, they take pains to redefine agency in a manner that dissociates it from mind, will, and purpose. These sorts of things are reserved for humans and this leads to a hierarchy of agencies, in which some beings have agency, but “humans possess something more special” (Watts, 2013, p. 30). Anishinaabe cosmology, she explains, does not posit such hierarchies of agency. Relations with non-human agents are approached with no sense of superiority and with a focus on establishing ethical commitments to particular agents and communities of agents.

Watts (2013) speculates further on the reason for this difference. She points out how contemporary science studies’ authors are concerned to avoid a materialism that risks any biological essentialism that might underwrite racist or patriarchal discourses. Acknowledging the particular character of non-human agents and committing to specific relations with non-human agents seem to risk something similar to essentialism. In Anishinaabe cosmology, for example, the relation to land is both spiritual and gendered. The land is a female person with a long, complicated history. The gender specificity and details of this history, according to Watts, have implications for practices of relating to the land and, for the practice of relations between other agents, human and non-human who owe their existence to the land. Considered without her specific qualities, the land ends up regarded as a generalized object emptied of character. Watts considers the aversion to any form of essentialism to be part of what keeps Euro-Western theories of non-human agency focused primarily on the abstract idea of agency. She notes that . . .some Indigenous female writers have been accused of being reactionary or gynocentric, implying they edge on a dangerous essentialism. However, essentializing categories of Indigenous cosmologies should not be measured against the products of Euro-Western mistakes. Nor should Indigenous peoples be the inheritors of these mistakes. (Watts, 2013, p. 32)

Another related factor that might contribute to the persistent failure of Western settler colonial social theorists to connect with Indigenous agent ontologies is the way privileging relational entanglement with particular non-human agents may be experienced as a loss of autonomy. Notice that for many of the aforementioned authors, the
contribution of place, land, and country to the constitution of non-human agency implies that humans need to be comfortable with, perhaps even seek out, a condition of being an instrument of another agency. Deloria (1999a) states directly that in the revelatory experience of sacred land, we “find that we are objects within a place and no longer acting subjects capable of directing events” (p. 254).

This stands in contrast to liberal individualism and its epistemic correlates in Western thought, where sublimation of human agency into other processes is almost always framed as negative, as a restriction or subversion of human freedom. This anxiety about loss of freedom may be contributing to the current trend of treating non-human agency as either a new way of describing objects of inquiry (no transformation or restriction of the spectator subject) or as a pretext for claiming that agential realism requires the complete dissolution of the individual humanist subject. 5

Whatever the cause, the divergence of emphasis on the particular and general features of experience is a persistent site of misunderstanding and disconnection between settler colonial culture and Indigenous thought. A practical example of this kind of misunderstanding can be found in various reports about the protests against the building of an oil pipeline near the Standing Rock Indian reservation in North and South Dakota, USA, from 2016 to 2017. These protests were initiated by members of the Standing Rock Sioux when they established the Sacred Stone Camp at the confluence of two tributaries of the Missouri river. According to the Standing Rock community Historic Preservation Officer, LaDonna Brave Bull Allard (2016), 380 recognized archeological sites were put at risk by the entire pipeline, 26 of which were at the site of the protest. The basis for the Standing Rock Sioux objection to the pipeline was the disruption of the relation between the Sioux people and these particular sites found at the confluence of rivers in question.

The U.S. government is wiping out our most important cultural and spiritual areas. And as it erases our footprint from the world, it erases us as a people. These sites must be protected, or our world will end, it is that simple. Our young people have a right to know who they are. They have a right to language, to culture, to tradition. The way they learn these things is through connection to our lands and our history. . . . If we allow an oil company to dig through and destroy our histories, our ancestors, our hearts and souls as a people, is that not genocide? (Allard, 2016)

This concern about the possible disruption of the community relationship with these water sources was at times expressed using the Lakota phrase Mni Wiconi which has been most frequently translated as Water Is Life. This phrase simultaneously referred to the importance of the relationship between the Standing Rock Sioux community and the specific rivers in question as well as to the more general relationship between humans, water, and the earth. However, it was most often the general meaning of the phrase “Water Is Life” that was heard and commented upon when it was picked up by non-Indigenous reporters and environmental activists. The phrase was appropriated as an environmentalist slogan and became a hashtag that was circulated through social media and news outlets. Water in general was referred to as a form of “life” in the broadest sense—a part of human life, a resource material on which our lives depend. The understanding of the river or a particular confluence of rivers as the only place where particular insights become possible, as the only place where certain words and concepts can be understood, or as a relative that teaches future generations essential lessons about life was filtered out by the extractive epistemic habits of public media discourse. 6 Similar filtering frequently occurs in academic discourse.

More could be said here about the work of the cited Indigenous authors and activists as well as many others. The point, however, is not to persuade readers of the exclusive merits of any specific Indigenous community’s cosmology or ontology. Our purpose, instead, is to illustrate the scope, depth, and distinctiveness of theorizing about non-human agency found in Indigenous studies literature for readers who may be unaware of it. In this section, we have argued that one of the most distinctive features of this theorizing is prioritizing the performative establishment of particular relational entanglements with non-human agents over seeking generalizable understanding of that agency. We believe this is one of the most promising points of possible connection between the writings on agent ontologies in contemporary science studies literature and Indigenous studies literature.

**Ethical Relations With Non-Human Agents as Performative Reciprocity**

If Indigenous studies scholarship of the sort cited above draws our attention to the challenge of moving beyond general “preachments” about the agency of non-human things and into particular practices of relational entanglement with non-human agents, then the question arises: What might those practices look like, especially in the context of scholarship and social inquiry? Of course, there can be no single answer to this question. That being said, a theme that recurs in the Indigenous studies literature is the foundational importance of ethical reciprocity in all relations including processes of research (Cajete, 2016; Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008).

For example, Margaret Kovach (2009) has written about the application of the Cree concept of “miyo-wicêhtowin (good relations)” (p. 63) to the process of seeking knowledge. Citing Irene Calliou, a Metis elder, she talks about the importance of...
Dene First Nation, calls this a “grounded normativity” that human-to-human imperatives are almost always grounded in reciprocal relations between human communities. These principles are often reflected in formal agreements between Indigenous nations and government agencies, universities, and research centers (e.g., Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003; National Ethics Advisory Committee, 2012).

The establishment of such agreements is absolutely vital work. The principle of ethical reciprocity found in the Indigenous studies literature, however, is not limited to reciprocal relations between human communities. These human-to-human imperatives are almost always grounded in principles that are thought to apply to relations with non-human agents as well (e.g., Deloria, 1999b; Garroutte & Westcott, 2013; Jones & Hoskins, 2013, 2016; Simpson, 2017). Glen Coulthard (2014), a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, calls this a “grounded normativity” that entails “certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and lakes, in much the same way that we hold obligations to other people” (p. 63).

In the case of social inquiry, an ethic of reciprocity with non-human agents would imply that, when seeking insight into some part of the world, an inquirer would not be entitled to that knowledge. Instead, they would need to consider what they are giving back to the agents co-constituted with them in the inquiry and the broader network of relations in which the encounter is nested. What is reciprocally given in acts of inquiry might include substantive service to purposes other than one’s own, or symbolic gestures that acknowledge interdependence. Within many North American Indigenous communities, for example, reciprocity is at times marked through an offering of tobacco (Kovach, 2009). Sometimes the gesture is more dramatic, as in practices of fasting, dancing to the limits of endurance, and other physical and mental exertions. These gestures perform—no, not perform—they embody an understanding that in seeking knowledge, a person becomes involved in a co-constituting relation with another agent or group of agents. These actions alter the ontology of the subject engaged in inquiry in so far as that subject is no longer constituted as a spectator or critical observer, but as a participant in ethical relationship with other agents.

Such enactments of reciprocity can seem wholly out of place in inquiry governed by settler colonial conceptions of knowledge in which inquirers can engage passive objects of knowledge without affecting them. When the world is presumed to be inert and awaiting representation by scholars, things like offerings of tobacco appear to be category mistakes—erroneous projections of agency and ethical significance onto inanimate phenomena. Combined with pervasive racism and settler colonial forms of bigotry, such practices are easily caricatured, and their distinctive subject-producing effects can be overlooked.

However, when we consider disciplined inquiry to be a process that generates, not just representations, but also configurations of onto-ethical relations with both human and non-human phenomena, the valence of the comparison inverts. The options of becoming individual authoritative spectator subjects or critical ironic subjects in settler colonial traditions of inquiry appear narrow when compared with the range of ethical subject formation that can be established between human and non-human agents in some Indigenous philosophical frameworks. Viewed in this way, Indigenous practices of inquiry appear to instantiate a broader conception of inquiry than Western humanist inquiry, which seems rather provincial and limited in comparison.

In advocating that attention be paid to the Indigenous studies literature on practices of ethical reciprocity with non-human agents, we are not moving toward a suggestion...
that contemporary non-Indigenous social scientists adopt Indigenous ceremonial or community practices wholesale and try to enact them in the context of academic processes. This would be crass appropriation and violate the express admonitions of many Indigenous communities. It would also constitute an avoidance of the work of reimagining the substance of contemporary academic inquiry practices by simply trying to tape a signifier of Indigenous authenticity on otherwise untransformed scholarship. Instead, we are suggesting that these practices be taken seriously by non-Indigenous scholars as intellectual and cultural achievements that establish and renew particular agent-producing relational entanglements. In this way, Eurocentric social sciences can learn from the Indigenous literature in a manner that simultaneously addresses some of the challenges facing new materialist social science and that substantively contributes to the decolonization of the academy generally.

We find a compelling example of what such learning might look like in Eva Garroutte and Kathleen Wescott’s (2013) essay “The Story Is a Living Being: Companionship With Stories in Anishinaabeg Studies.” In this essay, Garroutte and Westcott write about the agency of stories. They are concerned that new developments in narratology might look like in Eva Garroutte and Kathleen Wescott’s (2013) essay “The Story Is a Living Being: Companionship With Stories in Anishinaabeg Studies.” In this essay, Garroutte and Westcott write about the agency of stories. They are concerned that new developments in narratological research, although offering improvements on past social scientific analysis of Indigenous knowledges, fall short of the Indigenous literature in a manner that simultaneously addresses some of the challenges facing new materialist social science and that substantially contributes to the decolonization of the academy generally.

We find a compelling example of what such learning might look like in Eva Garroutte and Kathleen Wescott’s (2013) essay “The Story Is a Living Being: Companionship With Stories in Anishinaabeg Studies.” In this essay, Garroutte and Westcott write about the agency of stories. They are concerned that new developments in narratological research, although offering improvements on past social scientific analysis of Indigenous knowledges, fall short of the Indigenous literature in a manner that simultaneously addresses some of the challenges facing new materialist social science and that substantially contributes to the decolonization of the academy generally.

Scholars have contributed a considerable body of research on Native American stories. Yet such research has often yielded results that those stories’ caretakers find unsatisfying. (p. 61)

The problem, they offer, is that contemporary Western narratology treats narratives as objects to be analyzed and dissected. The new, more respectful, narratology takes a dialogic approach to studying the narratives that shape community life, where the dialogue is with community members and serves the purpose of triangulation and member-checking. The reciprocity achieved through such dialogue, however, is reciprocity with other humans, and the story remains an object of study passively awaiting representation. According to Anishinaabeg traditions, stories are living agents that merit an ethical response themselves. The ontological view here is nuanced and resonant, though not isomorphic, with the themes of new materialist philosophy of science. Quoting an interview with Westcott, an Anishinaabeg/Cree storyteller, the chapter explains,

The vital qualities of stories enable them to work “co-creatively” with hearers, Westcott continues, helping to mold the shape of the world. And they imply that stories do not reduce to their constituent parts. “I was taught . . . that the story is a living being. It’s not an entity in the way that, say, a bear is, because it is carried on the word. The story is able to procreate through the telling, but it is not identical with the words that people use to tell it.” The living nature of stories even enables modes of interaction beyond narration: “Even at times when my purpose is not to tell the story, I may enter the story; I watch it and listen to it.” (Garroutte & Westcott, 2013, p. 68)

To some extent, humans and stories as agents exist prior to their coming together by this account. However, note there is also an interdependent emergence of agency between stories and humans. This is both similar to, but different from, Barad’s account of agency emerging exclusively in intra-action. Also note the additional ontological claim made: that the story exists even when it is not being told. Westcott goes on to say the stories exist even if there are not humans who know how to tell them. It exists not only as discursive performance, but as a possible performative relation.

This agential ontology of stories has implications for the conduct of inquiry according to the authors. A practice of inquiry focused on representation, categorization, and parsing of Anishinaabeg stories not only risks missing part of the phenomenon in that representation but also does something to the stories—inhibits their agency.

. . .to the extent that it moves only within the confines of representational assumptions, the Anishinaabe myth loses the capacity to evoke a mythic reality. It loses the ability to testify to possibilities for being in the world as a relative within an infinitely extended web of human and other-than-human relationships. It does not lead its hearers to conclude that they can move beyond empathic awareness to become of one mind with other beings. It fails to teach an audience that they can be fully transformed by such relationships. . .In so doing, these conventional narratives for guiding scholarly engagement with stories disenable “possible lives.” (pp. 75-76)

Encapsulating traditional Anishinaabe stories within a broader Western narrative of discovery and representation makes parts of these stories available to wider audiences and yet disables other possible meanings the stories carry. Westcott and Garroutte question the merits of this trade-off. The question they suggest researchers need to be asking themselves is not are we representing the elements of the stories accurately?—but are we good companions to the stories? The authors conclude,

As researchers in the new field select different analytic tools, our remarks suggest that they should not make choices without realizing that these will affect what their stories can do: those stories’ ability to evoke realities and to illuminate possible lives. (Garroutte & Westcott, 2013, p. 76)

Garroutte and Westcott provide here a glimpse of some possible points of connection between new materialist and Indigenous studies’ conceptions of non-human agency. Although they are concerned about the impoverished representation of traditional Anishinaabe stories, they also
provide an illustration of the distinctive way agent ontologies in Indigenous studies scholarship might transform the practices and purposes of social analysis. According to their commentary, inquiry generates not only forms of utility for human inquirers but also enables and constrains the agency of the stories we purport to study. Understood in this way, we can begin to see the contours, a performative ethical reciprocity with non-human agents—a sense of responsibility to something more than human that does not devolve into a prescriptive material determinism. According to Garrouette and Westcott, responsibility involves considering not just representational accuracy, but the relational futurities we participate in creating with other non-human agents. It is the protean agency of non-human agents that both requires an ethical response and that prevents such ethics from becoming rigid calculus or set of imperatives.

Summary and Conclusion

Ethical reciprocity with non-human agents such as stories is just one example of the theorizations and enactments of agent ontologies found in contemporary Indigenous studies. Concepts like “spirit,” and “power,” are also key elements of most if not all North American Indigenous views of agency (e.g., Deloria, 1999b; Marker, 2018; Watts, 2013). Described in various ways in different traditions, power is often both what distinguishes among individuals and unites them as kinds. On this view, an individual human being has a specific power that makes her who she is at the same time also associates her with others of her kind by disposing her to act in ways that others share, in this case, humans. Such powers are not instrumental means of acting on other beings, but emerge in relation with other beings like animals, rivers, places, and stories.

The idea of power also has sacred dimensions that differ among tribal traditions and are generally not shared outside the tribe. Well-known conceptions of power named manitou, wakan, and orenda, among others, are ordinarily explained in only the most general terms to other communities. What this means for people who are within the tradition remains then and now a matter closed to wider consideration. Nevertheless, the clear presence of an essential “spiritual” dimension of agency adds both to the complexity of Indigenous views and their status as outside what is expected of theories in the present world of social science research. As Maori scholar Linda Smith (2012) comments in her book Decolonizing Methodologies,

The values, attitudes, concepts, and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contrast and mark of difference between Indigenous peoples and the West. It is one of the few parts of ourselves that the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control... yet. (p. 74)

This brings us to a final consideration, that some parts of Indigenous traditions of thought are shared only within their communities of origin. At times, some forms of knowledge and insight are only entrusted to specific designated members of a community. What is available for general discussion are those accounts of reciprocity practices that have been published with community permission in scholarly journals or books. This is important to note for a variety of reasons. First, it signals that there are normative principles governing the sharing of knowledge other than the democratic imperative that knowledge should be equally available to all citizens or the capitalist imperative that values knowledge that can be sold on the widest market. Second, it signals that eligibility to know something requires more than just a desire to know it. Third, this refusal to share knowledge is at times a political practice of refusal that draws attention to the history of exploitive Western appropriation of Indigenous possessions. Respecting such boundaries will be a necessary part of any conversations to come between Western scholars and Indigenous scholars about agent ontologies.

We have attempted to encourage such conversations by reviewing two major themes found in Indigenous studies literature on non-human agency—the privileging of particular relations over general relations with non-human agents, and the enactment of an ethic of reciprocity in relations with non-human agents. We elaborated on various features of these relational practices, not to convince readers to adopt any particular approach to non-human agency in social inquiry. We described them as a way of illustrating the thoroughness and distinctiveness of the agent ontologies found in Indigenous studies literature. This level of detail, we hope, will help prevent some common misreadings and misunderstandings that are currently inhibiting discourse between these two communities of thought.

We consider the conversation about agential realism to be a propitious development that holds promise for breaking the social sciences out of stale debates between constructivist and correspondence theories of truth, and that opens the way for a more nuanced inclusion of ethical and political consequences as a core consideration of research design and practice. These possibilities, however, are not guaranteed to come to fruition. Agential realism as it is being applied in the social sciences faces the risk of becoming merely a reconceptualization of the objects of our inquiries, as opposed to a more foundational transformation of the co-production of both inquiring subjects and objects in the onto-ethical entanglement of inquiry.

Scholars interested in agential realism also risk becoming colonialist caricatures by reinscribing long-standing patterns of erasure of Indigenous peoples and thought when they disregard Indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies. This kind of erasure is wrong in and of itself, both as a citational
practice and as a cultural practice. It is also profoundly unwise. The theorization of non-human agency in Indigenous studies literature, as we have attempted to illustrate, offers insight into how to move beyond transformations of the object of inquiry. Indigenous studies scholars spend less time justifying a divergence from Eurocentric epistemic norms and more time working out the implications of the subject transforming implications of agent ontologies for inquiry and social practice. In other words, it is more developed precisely in some of those places where new materialism is currently less developed.

For all these reasons, in our view, there is no path to the amelioration agent ontologies make possible that does not include sustained engagement with agent ontologies found in Indigenous studies literature and Indigenous traditions of thought. Such engagement will require more than reading what is for some a new and unfamiliar literature. If scholars are to avoid the reproduction of settler colonial practices of extraction from Indigenous communities without reciprocal contribution to those communities, then this scholarly exchange will need to happen as part of a more robust solidarity in the political and material work of promoting well-being of Indigenous peoples. This kind of reciprocity will likely entail difficult, as yet unimagined, personal, professional, and political work. The futurities made possible by understanding the world as a relational entanglement of many forms of human and non-human agency is, we think, worth the effort this will require.

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Notes

1. This article was conceived, in part, in response to comments made by Eve Tuck at the 2014 conference at the University of Oregon entitled “Beyond Reflexivity and Advocacy: Exploring the Ontological Turn in Education Research.” At that conference, Tuck remarked on the need for non-Indigenous scholars to engage in the work of making connections between these literatures and not to expect all of that work to be done by Indigenous scholars.
2. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGhncA-niZ0
3. See also Deloria’s (1988) *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* for an extended critique of the emphasis on abstraction over particularity in European settler culture.
6. For a more in-depth treatment of this topic, see Konsmo and Recollet’s chapter in Smith, Tuck, and Yang (Konsmo & Recollet, 2019).
7. For example, at the 1993 Lakota Summit V, over 500 representatives from 40 different tribe and bands of the Lakota passed a declaration of war against the “scandalous assortment of pseudo-Indian charlatans, wannabes, commercial profiteers, cultists and New Age shamans” who are “imitating our ceremonial ways and by mixing such imitation rituals with non-Indian occult practices in an offensive and harmful pseudo-religious hodgepodge” and the settler peoples who enable such imitators (Gaustad & Noll, 2003).

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