GUEST RESEARCHERS

Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)

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Abstract: This article will examine how agency is circulated through human and non-human worlds in the creation and maintenance of society from an Indigenous point of view. Through processes of colonization, the corruption of essential categories of Indigenous conceptions of the world (the feminine and land) has led to a disconnect between how this agency is manifested in Indigenous societies. Through a comparison between the epistemological-ontological divide and an Indigenous conception of Place-Thought, this article will argue that agency has erroneously become exclusive to humans, thereby removing non-human agency from what constitutes a society. This is accomplished in part by mythologizing Indigenous origin stories and separating out communication, treaty-making, and historical agreements that human beings held with the animal world, the sky world, the spirit world, etc. In order for colonialism to operationalize itself, it must attempt to make Indigenous peoples stand in disbelief of themselves and their histories.

This article attempts to reaffirm this sacred connection between place, non-human and human in an effort to access the "pre-colonial mind".

Keywords: *agency; epistemology; ontology; land; Indigenous women*

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Introduction

According to Haudenosaunee, Sky Woman fell from a hole in the sky. John Mohawk (2005) writes of her journey towards the waters below. On her descent, Sky Woman fell through the clouds and air towards water below. During her descent, birds caught her falling creature and saw she could not fly. They came to her and helped to lower her slowly to waters beneath her. The birds told Turtle that she must need a place to land, as she possessed no water legs. Turtle rose up, breaking through the surface so that Sky Woman could land on Turtle's back. Once landed, Sky Woman and Turtle began to form the earth, the land becoming an extension of their bodies.

Amongst the Anishnaabe, a similar history is shared. Leanne Simpson (2011) retells the Anishnaabe Creation Story, within the historical framework of the Seven Fires of Creation. The two fires that I would like to relate to this idea of Place-Thought, is the Fifth and Sixth Fire. In the Fifth Fire, Gizhe-Mnidoo (the Creator) placed his/her thoughts into seeds. In the Sixth Fire, Gizhe-Mnidoo created First Woman (Earth), a place where these seeds could root and grow.

Before continuing, I would like to emphasize that these two events took place. They were not imagined or fantasized. This is not lore, myth or legend. These histories are not longer versions of "and the moral of the story is….". This is what happened.

These Creation histories can sometimes take days to describe. For the purposes of this article, I would like to focus on a common historical understanding of the origin of the human species - the spiritual and the feminine. These historical accounts, two of many, speak to the common intersections of the female, animals, the spirit world, and the mineral and plant world. What constitutes "society" from these perspectives revolves around interactions between these worlds rather than solely interactions amongst human beings. Both of these accounts describe a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment – *Place-Thought.* Place- Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought 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.

Given this, Indigenous perceptions of whom and what contributes to a societal structure are quite different from traditional Euro-Western thought. The evaluation of human interaction and culture has been a concern of traditional sociology since its inception and has led to the definition of what constitutes a society or various societies. The idea of "society" has revolved around human beings and their special place in the world, given their capacity for reason and language. Though this idea of society is still largely attributed to human relationships, in recent times we can see the emergence of non-humans being evaluated in terms of their contributions to the development and maintenance of society.

This article will examine how agency circulates inside of two different frames: Place- Thought (Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies) and epistemological-ontological (Euro- Western frame). My intention is both to emphasize a differentiated framing of Indigenous cosmologies as well as to examine our rich and intelligent theories found in these cosmologies.

As an Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee woman, my worldview is continuously tested against the colonial frame. It is therefore an important task to imagine and strive for our original instructions, which are located in what Susan Hill (2011) describes as the "pre-colonial mind". Given this constant conflict, it is necessary to tease out what the land's intentions might be, and how she tries to speak through us.

Reclaiming our frame

Our understandings of the world are often viewed as mythic by "modern" society, while our stories are considered to be an alternative mode of understanding and interpretation rather than "real" events. Colonization is not solely an attack on peoples and lands; rather, this attack is accomplished in part through purposeful and ignorant misrepresentations of Indigenous cosmologies. In order to demonstrate this, let us examine how First Woman (Earth) and Sky Woman are translated through a foreign epistemological-ontological divide.

Frameworks are designs of understanding and interpretation. They are the basis for how humans organize politically, philosophically, etc. Frameworks in a Euro-Western sense exist in the abstract. How they are articulated in action or behavior brings this abstraction into praxis; hence a division of epistemological/theoretical versus ontological/praxis. The difference in a Haudenosaunee or Anishnaabe framework is that our cosmological frameworks are not an abstraction but rather a literal and animate extension of Sky Woman's and First Woman's thoughts; it is impossible to separate theory from praxis if we believe in the original historical events of Sky Woman and First Woman. So it is not that Indigenous peoples do not theorize, but that these complex theories are not distinct from place.

Below is a visual representation of these two separate framings. On the left is a depiction of how an Anishnaabe and/or Haudenosaunee cosmology might be represented. On the right, the process by which a Euro-Western meta-understanding can contribute to colonization of these Indigenous cosmologies:

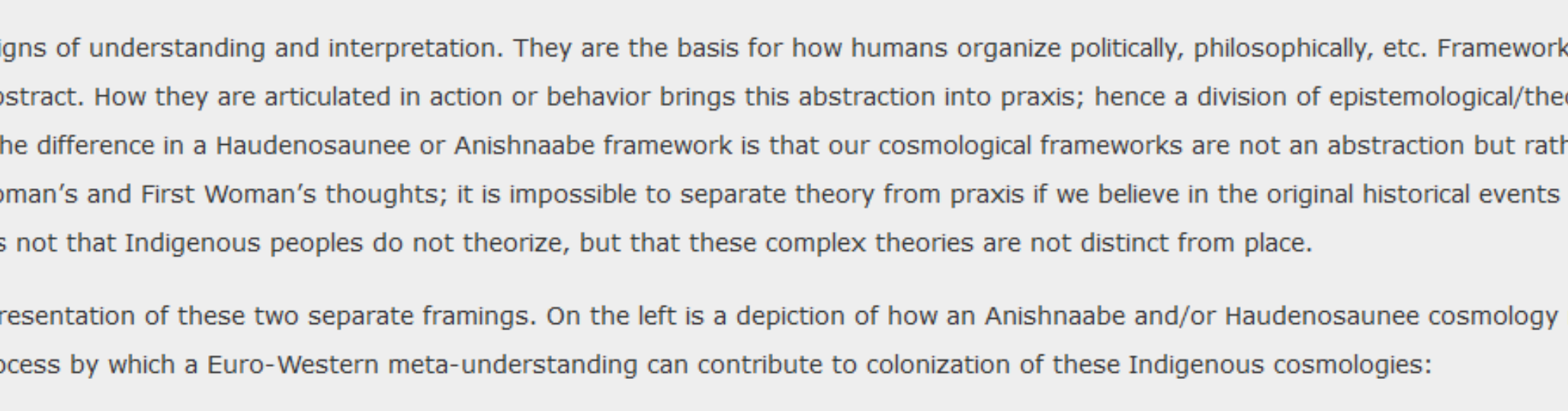
Spirit
Place-Thought
Obligation to communicate
Determines agency within creation
Societies and systems become extensions
Epistemology-Ontology Divide
Separates constituents of the world from how the world is understood
Limits agency to humans
Exclusionary relationship with nature

Table 1.1

The above figure is not intended to be a universal model of how all Indigenous peoples think, believe, etc. Rather, it is simply a depiction of the crucial differences between Indigenous and Euro-Western processes. The visual on the left describes the animate nature of land. To be animate goes beyond being alive or acting, it is to be full of thought, desire, contemplation and will. It is the literal embodiment of the feminine, of First Woman, by which many Indigenous origin stories find their inception. When Sky Woman falls from the sky and lies on the back of a turtle, she is not only able to create land but becomes territory itself. Therefore, Place-Thought is an extension of her circumstance, desire, and communication with the water and animals – her agency. Through this communication she is able to become the basis by which all future societies will be built upon – land.

In becoming land or territory, she becomes the designator of how living beings will organize upon her. Where waters flow and pool, where mountains rise and turn into valleys, all of these become demarcations of who will reside where, how they will live, and how their behaviours toward one another are determined. Scientists refer to this as ecosystems or habitats. However, if we accept the idea that all living things contain spirit, then this extends beyond complex structures within an ecosystem. It means that non-human beings choose how they reside, interact and develop relationships with other non-humans. So, all elements of nature possess agency, and this agency is not limited to innate action or causal relationships.

Thus, habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies from an Indigenous point of view; meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand and implement. Non-human beings are active members of society. Not only are they active, they also directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society. The very existence of clan systems evidences these many historical agreements between humans and non-humans. Clan systems vary from community to community and are largely dependent on the surrounding landscape. For example, whale clans are not present amongst Indigenous nations where there is no access to seawater. The structure of societies is demarcated by territory, which again, is an extension of Sky Woman's original circumstance. She is present in the relationships between humans and humans, humans and non- humans, and non-humans and non-humans.

Human thought and action are therefore derived from a literal expression of particular places and historical events in Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies. The agency that place possesses can be thought of in a similar way that Western thinkers locate agency in human beings. It follows that if, as Indigenous peoples, we are extensions of the very land we walk upon, than we have an obligation to maintain communication with it. A familiar warning is echoed through many communities, that if we do not care for the land we run the risk of losing who we are as Indigenous peoples. When this warning is examined in terms of original Place- Thought, it is not only the threat of a lost identity or physical displacement that is risked but our ability to think, act, and govern becomes compromised because this relationship is continuously corrupted with foreign impositions of how agency is organized. Colonization has disrupted our ability to communicate with place and has endangered agency amongst Indigenous peoples. The pre-colonial mind was confronted with a form of diminutive agency, and the process by which we ensured our own ability to act and converse with non-humans and other humans became compromised. A disruption of this original process goes beyond losing a form of Indigenous identity or worldview and how it is practiced – it has become a violation of Sky Woman's intentionality.

The epistemological-ontological divide processes agency much differently. A common understanding of epistemology would describe it as one's perception of the world as being distinct from what is in the world, or what constitutes it (Descartes, 1996). Thought and ideas are reserved for the one perceiving – humans. All other objects, actants, or beings in the world may have an essence (Kant, 1999; Latour, 1987) or an interconnection with humans, but their ability to perceive is null or limited to instinctual reactions.

The epistemological-ontological removes the *how* and *why* out of the *what*. The *what* is left empty, readied for inscription. Epistemology has many representations: there is Science, Christianity, Eurocentrism, Marxism, communism, etc. Ontology too contains many variables: do objects have an essence? What is in the world and how do its parts formulate a society? All of these concerns are by their very nature pursuits of human quandary and based on a capacity for reason. These distinct domains provide evidence that humans are assumed to be separate from the world they are in, in order to have a perception of it[1] (Kant, 2008). This is one theoretical structure to understand the world and its constituents. It necessitates a separation of not only human and non-human, but a hierarchy of beings in terms of how beings are able to think as well.

The man-made distinction between what and how/why is not an innocent one. Its consequences can be disastrous for not only non-humans but humans as well. If we lay this framing atop of nature, humankind is elevated outside or above the natural world. The reasoning being that perception is a gift or trait bestowed to the human mind, and most certainly not something possessed by a stone or a river. A river may act (i.e. flow) but does it perceive or contemplate this? An Anishnaabe perspective would respond in the affirmative. As we can see from the process of colonization and the imposition of the epistemology-ontology frame, our communication and obligations with other beings of creation is continuously interrupted.

For example, in the Christian origin story, we see how the interaction between a female (Eve) and non-humans (Serpent, Tree of Knowledge, apple) led to the damnation of all future humankind (Oh, that nosy woman!). It also meant that the garden, in which they were able to reside, quickly became a place where humans were cast out. They were no longer *of* their surroundings, but outside of them. The result has many consequences, but two significant ones for this purpose emerged.

Firstly, humans were positioned into a world in which they were able to reside over nature. Secondly, and interdependently, humans resolved that communication with nature held disastrous effects (Tree of Knowledge, the Serpent) and so inter-species communication became quite limited if not profane. In this worldview, agency became associated with human-human interactions. Societies were built upon domination over nature because of a perception that human arrangements with the animal world were unnecessary, if not dangerous. From an Indigenous perspective, though, the same interaction between a female and non-human has different results. For many Indigenous peoples, being aligned with the animal world was a position that was treated with respect and honour (Sioui, 1992). This relational paradox created a point of devastation, where our most sacred elements (land and women) were violently corrupted with a false profanity.

Conversely, in many Indigenous origin stories the idea that humans were the last species to arrive on earth was central; it also meant that humans arrived in a state of dependence on an already-functioning society with particular values, ethics, etc. (Benton-Benai, 2010). The inclusion of humans into this society meant that certain agreements, arrangements, etc. had to be made with the animal world, plant world, sky world, mineral world and other non-human species. Therefore, being associated with animals, whether it be through clan systems, ceremonies, or beings that acted as advisors, transpired from a place of reverence. In the Haudenosaunee origin story, Sky Woman becomes curious and falls through a hole in the sky and she is safely brought down to earth by different birds who land her on the back of a turtle. With the help of other animals, they are able to create territory, and the beginning of humankind.

Both the story of Genesis and the story of Sky Woman tell of a world that existed before humans. Both tell of a woman and non-humans interacting to create significant changes in creation as well as for humankind. In the latter, the relationship between animals and this female is regarded as sacred and ritualized over generations. This relationship also becomes the foundation for future clan systems, ethics, governance, ceremonies, etc. In the former, the female becomes responsible for all the pain of childbirth and resentment for being cast out of paradise. The interaction of Eve and the Serpent results in shame and excommunication from nature. Additionally, future dialogue and communication with animals becomes taboo and a source of witchcraft. It is at this point of conflict where thought, perception, and action are separated from the supposed inertia of nature.

Governance, agency, and non-humans

If we begin from the premise that land is female and further, that she thinks - then what if this most elemental female is conceived of as being responsible for pain, shame and excommunication, then doing destruction upon her does not seem that bad. In fact, maybe she even deserves to have violence done to her. After all, her curious nature compromised the life human beings could have had, but cannot experience because of her irresponsible actions – thus the basis for resentment. Any obligation to be empathic towards her is no longer necessary because this dominant worldview instructs that the feminine is synonymous with disappointment and stupidity. It is no surprise then, that amidst a Euro-Christian construct, land and its designations are silenced. Many Indigenous peoples wonder at how much destruction has persisted throughout the decades by the colonizer without any significant attempt at stopping. If you belong to a structure where land and the feminine are not only less-than, but knowingly irresponsible, violations against her would seem warranted.

When thinking about agency with reference to Place-Thought, where can it be located? I find it in animals, in humans, in plants, in rocks, etc. How did I come to think that these different entities and beings had agency in the first place? From stories/histories. For example, an event took place, perhaps, between a bear and a young woman and from this meeting an idea about a clan system came to be. Or maybe The Three Sisters, named Corn, Bean and Squash decided to make an arrangement about how they would live together. Maybe it seems like I am telling stories but really I am commenting on two examples of historical events that took place in a particular location, at a particular time, where consciousness, thought, desire, and the imagination of all individuals is in action.

In an epistemological-ontological frame, Indigenous cosmologies would be examples of a symbolic interconnectedness – an abstraction of a moral code. It would be a way in which to view the world – the basis for an epistemological stance. From a Haudenosaunee worldview, this is what happened. Further, Haudenosaunee systems, peoples, territories, etc. are affected by this relationship between the Three Sisters. It is more than a lesson, a teaching, or even an historical account. Their conscious and knowing agreement directly extends to our philosophies, thoughts and actions as Haudenosaunee peoples.

These types of historical Indigenous events (i.e. Sky Woman, the Three Sisters) are increasingly becoming not only accepted by Western frameworks of understanding, but sought after in terms of non-oppressive and provocative or interesting interfaces of accessing the real. This traces Indigenous peoples not only as epistemologically distinct but also as a gateway for non-Indigenous thinkers to re-imagine their world. In this, our stories are often distilled to simply that – words, principles, morals to imagine the world and imagine ourselves in the world. In reading stories this way, non-Indigenous peoples also keep control over what agency is and how it is dispersed in the hands of humans.

Over time and through processes of colonization, the corporeal and theoretical borders of the epistemological-ontological divide contribute to colonial interpretations of nature/creation that act to centre the human and peripherate nature into an exclusionary relationship. Land becomes scaled and modified in terms of progress and advancement. The measure of colonial interaction with land has historically been one of violence and bordered individuations where land is to be accessed, not learned from or a part of. Conversely, Anishnaabe Elder Fred Kelly (2006) states:

> If you listen to our Creation story, invariably we land on the back of a turtle. In our case, why do we call it Turtle Island? Well, this is the island that we were placed on, but in addition to that, to demarcate it, the Grandmother that lights the night sky, commonly called or colloquially called the Moon, in her full glory, comes out thirteen times a year – four seasons. Not twelve – thirteen times. And this is when she kisses the Turtle…Now look at the Turtle. Count the platelets on the back of a Turtle. Thirteen. That is why we call it Turtle Island. Now, the difference in concepts with Euro-Canadian law is the concept of ownership and property rights. Wherein Euro-Canadians talk about property rights we talk about territory. It is the closest relationship. And it's the relationship to Mother Earth. So therefore if you understand Sacred Law and the Great Law, that you are an integral part of Grandmother Earth, then is it conceivable that you could sell her? Firstly, to sell her is tantamount to selling yourself. Can you do that? Not under Great Law, not under Sacred Law. So therefore, you can't sell your Grandmother. It's just not allowed. Let me put it another way - it's unconstitutional. It's against the law - it's illegal. So under Indigenous law it is not possible to sell any part of Grandmother Earth, because we have a sacred relationship to her. You are a part of that. (2006, p. 11)

Our truth, not only Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee people but in a majority of Indigenous societies, conceives that we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension of soil. The land is understood to be female: First Woman or Sky Woman designates the beginning of the animal world, the plant world and human beings. It is the femininity of earth itself that institutes all beings as literal embodiments of localized meanings (Trask, 1999; Pesantubbee, 2007). In our understanding of how life began (as human beings), it is accepted that creatures, land and earth had existed long before us. Could Place-Thought be the network in which humans and non-humans relate, translate and articulate their agency? If I, as a human, am made of the stuff of soil and spirit, do I not extend to the non-human world beyond casual interactions? And what of these non-human – non-human relationships that demarcate various roles and responsibilities of human beings?

If we begin from the premise that we are in fact made of soil, then our principles of governance are reflected in nature. Sharon Venne (1998) writes:

> Our spirituality and our responsibilities define our duties. We understand the concept of sovereignty as woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility. This is a cyclical view of sovereignty, incorporating it into our traditional philosophy and view of our responsibilities. There it differs greatly from the concept of western sovereignty which is based upon absolute power. For us absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things; not only in human beings…Our sovereignty is related to our connections to the earth and is inherent. The idea of a nation did not simply apply to human beings. We call the buffalo or, the wolves, the fish, the trees, and all are nations. Each is sovereign, an equal part of the creation, interdependent, interwoven, and all related. (p. 23)

Kaagoogiiwe-Enaakoonige (Anishnaabe for "Sacred Law") literally translates to "the eternal important circular decision" (Kelly, 2006). The female earth or the feminine is intrinsically tied to the notion of sovereignty and how humans interact with non-human creatures in the formation of governance. Venne's description of sovereignty as being tied to responsibility or obligation to original instructions from the earth, lends to this idea that the feminine is not only to be respected but is looked upon as a source of power and knowledge. Sovereignty is not just a contested idea (located within an epistemology); rather, it is an essential obligation in the continuation of our selves. Conversely, this source of power is often conceived as a part of subjugated knowledge systems by Western categorizations of hierarchy. So what happens when the all-powerful centre attempts to create a de-subjugated space via non-human interactions?

A subjugated agency for non-humans

Because land is so vital to the formation of Indigenous societies and function of human beings, I want to explore how this element is traced in terms of agency by non-Indigenous thinkers – specifically Science Studies and Ecofeminists. Both discourses are considered to be progressive in terms of introducing the role of non-humans into Euro-Western thought. For example, Bruno Latour's (1987) Actor-Network Theory is built upon the premise of interconnecting referential chains of humans and non-humans, and how these connections recognize mutual exchange/effect.

Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* (1988) attempts to implode the centre where knowledge production (epistemology) is generally grounded in heteropatriarchy. Her work contributes a valuable discussion on how the localized knowledges, of what she terms as subjugated peoples, provide a space where the dominant boundaries of this heteropatriarchy can be imploded. However, Haraway resists essentialist notions of the earth as mother or matter and chooses instead to utilize products of localized knowledges (i.e. Coyote or the Trickster) as a *process* of boundary implosion: "I like to see feminist theory as a reinvented coyote discourse obligated to its sources in many heterogeneous accounts of the world" (Haraway, 1988, 594). This is a level of abstracted engagement once again. While it may serve to change the imperialistic tendencies in Euro-Western knowledge production, Indigenous histories are still regarded as story and process – an abstracted tool of the West.

It is not my contention that Euro-Western thinkers are inherently colonial. Rather, the epistemological-ontological distinction is oftentimes the assumptive basis by which Euro- Western arguments are presented upon. It is this assumption that, I argue, creates spaces for colonial practices to occur. We can see how Euro-Western thought is beginning to embrace the contributions of the non-human world; however, the controversial element of agency is often redesigned when applied to non-humans, thereby keeping this epistemological-ontological divide intact.

Alaimo (2008) describes the following: "Dirt demonstrates an agency without agents, a foundational, perpetual becoming that happens without will or intention or delineation. In fact, dirt, a rather indiscrete substance, is necessary for the emergence of less diffuse life forms" (p. 247). Thus, dirt acts. It does not think necessarily, nor does it want or desire, but it is constantly fulfilling its intention. It is necessary for other life forms to survive; it provides a space for life to emerge. Yet this type of agency is hierarchical; it is dependent on the belief that humans are different based on our ability of will and purpose. Dirt is acknowledged as an actant at best, no longer an afterthought but still limited with regard to ability. How does dirt affect me? How do I affect dirt? These are the questions that underscore the agency which is limited to a human- centric quandary.

Alaimo further states that dirt may not be elevated to the status of "family member," but at least elevated to "something worthy of proper care and feeding" (2008, p. 254). Consumption, ownership, etc. are conceptualized as the basis for trans-corporeality in the process by which borders are constructed and solidified. In this relationship with dirt, humans are responsible to land the way an owner might be responsible for a pet. This type of dirt is not First Woman; it is a plaything asking for attention.

Vicky Kirby (2008) goes further in her understanding of dirt and agency by stating: "…it goes without saying that nature/the body/materiality preexists culture/intellect /abstraction, and furthermore, that the thinking self is not an articulation of matter's intentions" (p. 216). Kirby insists upon a particular Cartesian dualism in which human intellect and intentionality are distinctive from the corporeal. It is not that one is not dependent on the other, for if humans had no flesh, they would have no body and thus would not possess the ability to intellectualize. However, Kirby argues that intellect or what constitutes culture is beyond the body and is therefore distinctly apart from the primordial. This taken-for-granted conceptualization of nature and culture is a problematic that has been re-coded in discourse time and time again – that humans are uniquely distinct from nature in their capacities. Interconnectivity is permitted, but only insofar as distinction from the thinking human and the acting natural world. True, the borders of flesh and soil rub up against each other but this does not mean one is guided by the other. The border where human-as-the-centre begins still exists and continues to determine the bounds for capacity and action.

Interestingly, Kirby concludes that it is dangerous to attach action to natural cause because this would detriment the uniqueness of humans and in fact perpetuate a continuum of 'progress' rather than pockets/sites of politically-minded agents. She writes:

> Natural determinations will seem like a prescriptive return to something from the past, something undeniable and immutable. In the former case, when we explain our thoughts and actions as cultural products and effects, we are also emphasizing that we are active agents in our political destinies. By embracing the notion of natural cause and determination, however, we run the risk of reducing what seems so special about the human condition to evolutionary happenstance, or nature's caprice. (p. 217)

It is true that natural cause and determination in Euro-Western colonial history have acted to rationalize and justify mass violence, biological racism, sexism and de-culturation. It is these consequences of colonialism that have propagated racist and violent forms of oppression, enclosing whiteness into the centre. Dismantling these ideas allows what is dominant to be questioned and pulled apart so that concentrated hegemonic ideologies become diffused into the spaces where borders and boundaries are confused and permeable. Yet Kirby's claim of the special-ness of humans apart from natural determinations disregards Indigenous conceptions of human and nature, while at the same time implying that natural cause and determinism are random and therefore unintentioned.

Similarly in Science Studies, many scholars have begun to redefine agency to solve the problem of the man/nature dichotomy. For example, Bruno Latour's (1987) Actor-Network Theory is built upon the premise of interconnecting referential chains and mutual exchange/effect is granted to the non-human world. Nash (2005) states that if agency is dislocated from the mind where thought and will reside, then agency can be granted to non- humans. Similarly, Lockie (2004) argues that if agency does not include consciousness or thought, but instead that these attributes are located in the *relations* between two individuals, then everyone and thing can possess some level of agency. Albeit, once more, the problem of subjugated agency remains redefined. These interpretations of agency place humans and non- humans in an interconnected web of cause and effect, where the plane of action is equalized amongst all elements. Agency, however, acts outside, within, and in between this web through carefully re-designed definitions where humans possess something more or special.

These levels of agency are a product of the epistemology-ontology paradigm. Imbedded within it, as demonstrated, is the idea of human ownership over non-human things, beings, etc. The inclusion of the non-human, in this case dirt/soil, has been causal or instinctual in nature. Meaning that, although the dirt/soil has been granted entrance into the human web of action, it is still relegated to a mere unwitting player in the game of human understandings.

However, if we think of agency as being tied to spirit, and spirit exists in all things, then all things possess agency. In the words of Elder Fred Kelly, our origin stories state that Sky Woman was able to communicate with the animals and vice versa. Our ability to have sophisticated governance systems is directly related to not only the animals' ability to communicate with us, but their *willingness* to communicate with us. Vine Deloria (2003) argued that all human events are referenced to land or with land in mind. This is not intended, at the outset, as political strategy (though it works as one); rather, it is something that we all hold as sacred. Spirit is contained within all elements of nature (Sioui, 1992) and therefore, we, as humans, know our actions are intrinsically and inseparably tied to land's intentionality – quite a counter position from notions of diluted formulations of agency.

How colonization operationalizes agency

What happens when soil is removed from territory? What happens when flesh is taken from the body? More importantly, what happens to the territory after its resources are excavated? Shopping malls and paper mills - a literal excavation of thoughts are forcibly transformed into objects of the colonial imperative. Those crops became their crops, that tree became their trees and so on and so on. Once the voices and thoughts of these two essential categories of creation (the feminine and land) are silenced and then corrupted, the acquisition and destruction of land becomes all the more realized.

From a theoretical standpoint**,** the material (body/land) becomes abstracted into epistemological spaces as a resource for non-Indigenous scholars to implode their hegemonic borders. The excavated First Woman and all of her teachings, ontologies, and actions are interpreted as sexy lore and points of theoretical jump-offs to dismantle and dissect that which oppresses. Noël Sturgeon (1997) writes:

> It is not necessary to make essentialist, biologically determinist arguments about the connection between women and nature in the case of Native American women; rather, their cultural traditions and their economic practices can be seen as making positive connections between nature and the feminine, as well as nature and the masculine. (p. 119)

Yet what happens when Indigenous ways of relating to land are based on an essential and literal connection to the feminine? Does this mean we are indulging stereotypes or perhaps we are naïve? Or worse still, validating the centre by being reactionary?

Smith (2005) describes the violence of Indigenous lands and Indigenous women as women as being essentially tied to one another. The techniques of this violence were and are used by settlers as strategies to govern Indigenous people (Stoler, 2002). Many Indigenous societies, at the time of contact, were matriarchal in composition, a key point of cultural and political difference with the incoming settler population (Sioui, 1992; Maracle, 1996). In order to gain access to not only territories, but to also facilitate change within the order of Indigenous societies, women were both utilized as a means of infiltrating societal structures, as well as being the object of violent subjugation through rape, removal of children from the home (i.e. residential schools), and death (Brand, 1981; Smith, 2005). This evidence suggests that the "Indian Woman" was both necessary and problematic to the colonial imperative, given her powerful status in many Indigenous societies.

The epistemology-ontology divide diverts agency away from land and other non-human beings. In this framing, the dominant society in North America points to disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous women in prisons, as sex workers, the victims of physical and sexual violence (Smith, 2005**)**. At the same time, land is increasingly being excavated, re-designed, torn apart. Is this merely a coincidence? Of course not. The feminine and land is fundamental to our extensions as people (Gunn-Allen, 1992). So, in an attempt to conquer such people, where would you start? Our land and our women, disabling communication with Place-Thought, and implementing a bounded agency where women are sub-human/non-human. Colonialism is operationalized through dismantling the essential categories of other societies.

Further, Euro-Western discourses have often attempted to remedy historical mistakes of biological essentialisms (i.e. scientific racism) by rejecting what are considered to be essentialist arguments. For example, 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. Rather, to decolonize or access the pre-colonial mind, our histories (not our lore) should be understood as they were intended in order for us to be truly agent beings. To disengage with essentialism means we run the risk of disengaging from the land.

Sky Woman and First Woman return home

As Indigenous peoples, it is not only an obligation to communicate with Place-Thought (ceremonies with land, territory, the four directions, etc.), but it ensures our continued ability to act and think according to our cosmologies. To prevent these practices deafens us. It is not that the non-human world no longer speaks but that we begin to understand less and less. This is why, despite five hundred years of colonialism, we are still not fully colonized and we are still continuing to fight; we have within us the ability to communicate with the land but our agency as Indigenous peoples has been corrupted within this colonial frame.

In Table 1.1, it was demonstrated how Indigenous cosmologies and the Euro-Western epistemology-ontology divide process agency differently. Our cosmologies (and the theories within them) are righteously different and cannot be separated from the stuff of nature. When an Indigenous cosmology is translated through a Euro-Western process, it necessitates a distinction between place and thought. The result of this distinction is a colonized interpretation of both place and thought, where land is simply dirt and thought is only possessed by humans. If we operationalize this distinction, we as Indigenous peoples risk standing in disbelief of ourselves. Even amongst ourselves it can be easy to forget that our ability to speak to the land is not just an echo of a mythic tale or part of a moral code, but a reality. Whether this forgetting has been forced upon us, or our ears have become dull to the sounds of the land speaking up through our feet, it is now incumbent upon us to remember. This is not a question of "going backwards", for this implies there is a static place to return to. However, given that the concept of time for us was never linear, we possess the ability to access the pre-colonial mind through the ability to travel in dreams, to shapeshift, to understand what might happen tomorrow, etc. Our teachings tell us that we travel through, under, above. So it is not a question of accessing something, which has already come and gone, but simply to listen. To act.

I hope in this article I have emphasized some of the important ways in which obligation and responsibility denote a commitment to the land, not just because it is a part of me (or you) but also because it continues to be removed, cemented, or ignored. Listening to what she tells us is not only about a philosophical understanding of life and the social realm, rather it is about a tangible and tacit violence being done to her - and therefore to us. I hope that this discussion will lead to conversations about bodies in action and how gritty flesh is elementally moved to protect and reclaim territories.

We will need to continue to resist the growing tendency to both be subsumed into de- essentialized epistemological spaces as well as fight against the dislocation of our thoughts from place. To this end, flesh becomes action not because it is material but because it must do so for ears to remain open and low to the ground. Only if the land decides to stop speaking to us will we enter the world of dislocation where agency is lost and our histories become provocative Indian lore in an ongoing settler mistake. Luckily for us, First Woman has shown herself to be much more intelligent than this by writing herself into our flesh.

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Notes

[1] For more information, please refer to the subject-object argument from Immanuel Kant's Copernican Revolution in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.