

BRAIDING AGAINST THE GRAIN: INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY, POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY AND THE DECOLONISATION OF ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN *BRAIDING SWEETGRASS*

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ABSTRACT:

This article argues that the Indigenous philosophical ideas presented in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) should not be viewed as an adjunct to Western posthumanist thought, since they emerge from a distinct intellectual tradition that predates and, in many respects, extends beyond it. Building on Gayatri Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, Walter Dignolo's work on the coloniality of knowledge, Glen Coulthard's critique of the colonial marginalisation of Indigenous philosophies, Enrique Salmón's notion of kincentric ecology, and critical perspectives on the ontological turn offered by Sarah Hunt, Zoe Todd, and Kyle Whyte, the article examines Kimmerer's Potawatomi worldview as an autonomous system of knowledge capable of assessing Western posthumanist theory on its own terms. The discussion develops through three central arguments. First, Kimmerer's use of the animate pronoun "ki" represents an ontological perspective that cannot be adequately expressed within the structural limits of English grammar. Second, the ethical principles embodied in the Honorable Harvest, together with Salmón's kincentric ecology, describe a shared distribution of agency across human and non-human life that Western new materialism often seeks to explain theoretically but struggles to realise in practice. Finally, the article argues that storytelling in *Braiding Sweetgrass* is far more than a method for communicating ecological knowledge; it is the very process through which that knowledge is created, maintained, and passed from one generation to the next through lived relationships. The article concludes that posthumanism's failure to acknowledge Indigenous intellectual antecedents reproduces the very systemic injustice it claims to diagnose.

KEYWORDS: Robin Wall Kimmerer, posthumanism, Indigenous epistemology, epistemic violence, kincentric ecology, decolonial theory, narrative as epistemology, relational ontology

INTRODUCTION

In the opening pages of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Kimmerer 2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts the story of Skywoman: the first human being to touch the earth, carried downward through a hole in the sky, caught by geese, and settled onto the back of a turtle by the animals, who recognised in her arrival the beginning of a relationship. Kimmerer offers this origin narrative not as prelude to the scientific and ecological knowledge that follows but as its epistemic condition. Skywoman arrives already in a posture of reciprocity, already in a world constituted by multispecies obligation and mutual address. That the human is embedded in rather than sovereign over the non-human world is, in Western ecological discourse, a relatively recent "finding." In the Potawatomi tradition from which Kimmerer writes, it has always been a founding. This article takes that difference seriously.

Within the environmental humanities, the question of posthumanism and its relationship to non-Western knowledge traditions has become increasingly urgent. Rosi Braidotti's formulation of the posthuman subject as a relational, affirmative assemblage constituted through its entanglements with non-human forces represents a decisive break with the liberal humanist subject, whose Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and will to mastery she diagnoses with precision (Braidotti 2013). And yet, as scholars including Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and Kim TallBear have observed, posthumanism's celebrated decentring of the human has proceeded largely without interrogating which human it displaces, or at whose epistemic expense the theoretical revolution was conducted. If the Cartesian split between human subject and non-human object has been the central target of posthumanist critique, the question that posthumanism has been slower to ask is how that split was produced: through what colonial, institutional, and linguistic mechanisms the living world was rendered inert, and whose knowledge systems were epistemically foreclosed in the process. *Braiding Sweetgrass* addresses precisely this question, and it does so not through critique from within Western theory's own vocabulary, but by inhabiting a different epistemic starting point entirely.

This article proposes that Kimmerer's Potawatomi-informed ecological epistemology constitutes a form of posthuman subjectivity that is not derived from or reducible to Western posthumanist theory; it operates as an

independent account of more-than-human relationality that is, in certain respects, more philosophically rigorous than the frameworks with which it is increasingly paired. Three claims structure the argument. First, that epistemic violence, in Spivak's sense, is reproduced at the level of language, institutional practice, and disciplinary form, and that Kimmerer's grammatical intervention around the animate pronoun *ki* enacts its decolonial work at precisely these sites (Spivak 1988). Second, the relational ontology implicit in Potawatomi practices such as the Honorable Harvest articulates a distribution of ethical agency that Western posthumanism theorises but cannot institutionally sustain, wherein human action is governed by obligations of reciprocity rather than stewardship principles and non-human beings are moral agents. Third, in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, storytelling functions not just as an educational tool for ecological knowledge but also as its inherent form, intrinsically tied to the place-specific attentiveness, relational practices, and communal transmissions that enable its creation and preservation. Such claims conclude on a more comprehensive thesis regarding the structural incoherence of Western posthumanism: a theoretical endeavour dedicated to relational accountability that perpetuates, within its own epistemological practices, the extractivism it purports to critique.

It is necessary to take care of positionality. There is a real risk involved in claiming that Indigenous philosophy is infused with posthuman subjectivity: Indigenous knowledge will be used as raw material in a Western theoretical discourse, with its philosophical density reduced to illustration or proof. While acknowledging that such a manoeuvre, carried out within the institutional apparatus of a Western academy, is already situated within the asymmetries it diagnoses, this article tries to go in the opposite direction, allowing Kimmerer's epistemological framework to serve as the critical lens through which Western posthumanist theory is read and found wanting. Instead of being resolved by theoretical fluency, the inconsistencies must continue to be apparent and functional within the analysis.

The Grammar of Violence

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that the academy's institutional and discursive apparatus, including the apparatus of critique, has already established what constitutes speech, what registers as knowledge, and whose modes of knowing are understandable as theory rather than testimony (Spivak 1988, 271–313). In Spivak's reading, physical violence is preceded by epistemic violence, the latter functioning at the level of categories that make the world legible. As a result, such violence gets unwittingly reproduced even by people with the best of intentions. Spivak presents a theory of the conditions of audibility rather than a theory of silence, and for her, the factors determining whose voice gets heard are imbricated in colonial history in ways that cannot be reversed by sympathetic reading. Walter Dignolo extends this argument through the concept of the coloniality of knowledge. Dignolo argues that colonialism did not simply reshape political and economic systems but also transformed the global organisation of knowledge in ways that continue beyond formal decolonisation (Dignolo 2000). Within this framework, Western scientific rationality is the benchmark against which all other forms of knowledge are measured. Knowledge traditions that do not conform to these standards are treated as partial, culturally specific, or lacking scientific legitimacy. In this way, coloniality operates by establishing a hierarchy of epistemic authority rather than an equal plurality of knowledge systems. As a result, Indigenous knowledge is relegated to the status of folklore or cultural tradition. For Dignolo, this hierarchy is not the outcome of superior reasoning but of historical power relations. It reflects a geopolitics of knowledge in which colonial domination secured the authority to determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose ways of knowing are granted recognition.

Kimmerer's insights into the Potawatomi language in *Braiding Sweetgrass* must be seen within this framework, as a philosophically significant intervention into the coloniality of knowledge at the level of grammar. In Potawatomi, trees, rivers, mountains, and other natural entities are considered to be subjects in their own right. They are grammatically endowed with agency, something which is noticeably absent in the English language, which sees these as inanimate objects. For Kimmerer, the use of the English pronoun 'it' is ontological in nature because it forecloses relationality and deprives the non-human world of agency. Grammatical systems are not neutral carriers of meaning. They reinforce particular modes of thought, predetermining at the outset what kind of entities can be valid subjects of experience and deserve acknowledgment as such. Neat boundaries are laid down between subjects and objects, a divide which was established by Cartesian metaphysics in the pursuit of objective knowledge. Such a dichotomy necessarily functions as the basis for an extractive and exploitative orientation. In response to this act of grammatical violence, Kimmerer offers a proposition that is almost radical in its simplicity. She presents the term "*ki*," derived from the Potawatomi animate third-person pronoun, to be used for "beings of the earth" in place of the objectifying pronoun 'it' (Kimmerer 2015). This grammatical move would also avoid the anthropomorphic implications present in the masculine and feminine third-person pronouns. The plural term for Kimmerer's '*ki*' would be '*kin*,' a signifier that clearly connotes the ecological relationship tying together all the denizens of planet earth. This is a decolonial act at the level of language, introducing a relational capacity into English that is structurally absent. The Potawatomi language is presented as a remedy rather than as a cultural alternative.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida's late work shows that the English "it" cannot contain the live thing it identifies (Derrida 2008). His classic deconstructive reaction is to expand the question, illustrating the boundary's instability without suggesting a possible replacement. What Kimmerer does in face of the same problem is to simply propose an alternative to the offending pronoun, obviating the need for lengthy detours into philosophy. In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard analyses how colonial systems have historically valued only the technical aspects of Indigenous knowledge, reducing land to resource and culture to folklore (Coulthard 2014). This analysis

accurately applies Mignolo's diagnosis to modern institutional life. Such an orientation is epistemic as well as structural, resulting in a failure to acknowledge plants as kin, whose gifts create a relationship of obligation, an ecological dynamic inextricably linked to the stories that a culture tells itself. *Braiding Sweetgrass* enacts relational, story-embedded, place-specific knowledge systems that reveal the commodity logic underlying colonial economies.

Kimmerer recounts a telling anecdote about being chastised that her desire to know why asters and goldenrods looked beautiful together was not 'scientific' enough for a botanist-in-training (Kimmerer 2013). It provides a clear explanation of the disciplinary mechanism that keeps Indigenous ways of looking at the living world out of the realm of valid knowledge. It is unacceptable not because such questions cannot be answered, but because they can only be answered within a framework that the institution has already rejected. *Braiding Sweetgrass* simultaneously rejects such foreclosure at the content and form levels through its formal structure. The book interweaves Potawatomi stories, botanical science, personal narrative, and ecological observation in a structure that does not subordinate any of these registers to the others. It does not argue for the validity of Indigenous knowledge within the terms of Western scientific epistemology; rather, it proceeds as though those terms have no final word. When Kimmerer writes about the 'Three Sisters' (corn, beans, and squash), she presents both as knowledge, held in a relationship of mutual illumination that neither subordinates nor translates the other, rather than using the Haudenosaunee story of their origin as a preamble to the botanical explanation of their companion-planting synergies (Kimmerer 2013). The reader must modify their expectations if they anticipate that the science will take precedence over the story; in other words, they must experience a slight but real epistemic reorientation. The thesis of the book is executed through this reorientation, which is not incidental.

Kinship, Gratitude, and the Ontology of Commodification

In one of *Braiding Sweetgrass*'s first and most philosophically focused chapters, "The Gift of Strawberries," Kimmerer talks about stopping on a walk to eat wild strawberries and discovering that she was unexpectedly thankful (Kimmerer 2013). The recognition that something has been given rather than merely found or taken is the source of the thankfulness. Lewis Hyde's contrast between gift economies and commodity economies in *The Gift* serves as the basis for her response to the philosophical dilemma this presents (Hyde 1983); in Kimmerer's hands, this division becomes both an ontological and an economic one. Value is set at the time of exchange in a commodity economy, and the transaction ends the relationship — money exchanges hands, the account is cleared, and there are no further obligations. In contrast, the value of what is given is relational and cumulative in a gift economy, creating duties of appreciation and repayment that support the relationships through which the gift circulates. Receiving a gift signifies starting a relationship; receiving a commodity signifies ending one.

Kimmerer argues that commodity capitalism systemically excludes the principles of relational ontology that emphasise the feeling and practice of gratitude. In such a society, the non-human world is stripped of all subjectivity, making the practice of gratitude literally impossible. The generosity of non-human entities cannot be acknowledged if they are reduced to mere resources. This is a clear example of how a specific economic system generates a specific metaphysics and results in a specific ecological disaster; Kimmerer's argument finds resonance in the work of another Indigenous thinker. Enrique Salmón's concept of kincentric ecology arose from Rarámuri traditions. In his essay "Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship," Salmón proposes that Indigenous communities see themselves and the natural world as members of a single, extended family (Salmón 2000). Together they comprise a community of kin whose shared ancestry, reciprocal dependencies, and continuing relationships form a web of obligation that predates and is more fundamental than any instrumental relationship to the land. In contrast to related ideas like biocentrism and ecocentrism, the term "kincentric" is conceptually precise. Although biocentrism and ecocentrism extend moral considerability to non-human life, they do so within an ethical framework that is essentially external. The human moral agent chooses to broaden her circle of concern to include the non-human world. In contrast, kincentrism places the human within a kinship network that has always included the non-human. It does not extend moral attention from the outside. Rivers, mountains, plants, and animals are considered entities whose claims on human behaviour stem from the structural reality of shared kinship. In this context, gratitude is a given.

'The Honorable Harvest', defined by Kimmerer as a system of regulations controlling the collection of plants and other materials from the living world, exemplifies the intersection of gift ecology and kincentrism (Kimmerer 2013). Unlike Western environmental ethics, which derives principles from prior theories of moral considerability and applies them to resource issues, the Honorable Harvest is a kinship practice. It is a code of conduct in respect to family members whose contributions make human life possible. Protocols such as asking permission before taking, taking only as much as is needed, never taking the first or last, expressing gratitude for what is provided, and giving back in return are not limitations on human freedom but manifestations of relational obligations. Harvesting outside of them, taking without asking, without showing thanks, or expecting nothing in return is not just unethical behaviour but also a familial severance. Acting as though the relationship does not exist eventually causes it to vanish.

According to place philosopher Edward Relph, "placelessness" — the displacement from local geographies, ecologies, and cultures resulting from the combined forces of mobility, urbanisation, and the global circulation of commodified goods — is one of the defining experiential conditions of modernity (Relph 1976). The lived experience of a subject who has been rendered incapable of the place-specific attention that kinship with the living world demands, due to the systematic organisation of economic and social life, is known as placelessness, the

phenomenological aspect of kinship severance. Colonial capitalism destroyed the relational framework that allowed Indigenous groups to understand themselves as part of and obligated to the living environment, rather than merely introducing new economic activities. Common-land enclosure, the commercialisation of seeds, the privatisation of water, and the suppression of Indigenous languages that encoded relationships with non-human beings are coordinated attacks on the kinship ontology that made ecological restraint, gratitude, and reciprocity lived orientations rather than philosophical stances.

It is at this juncture that the limits of Western posthumanism's relational turn become most sharply apparent. Rosi Braidotti's account of the posthuman subject as a nomadic, affirmative assemblage constituted through its transversal connections with non-human forces offers a powerful theoretical dismantling of the liberal humanist individual: self-enclosed, sovereign, defined against a nature it masters and a body it transcends (Braidotti 2013). Her concept of *zoe*, the impersonal, generative force of life flowing across and through all living systems, is offered as an alternative to the exceptionalism of *bios*, the politically qualified human life that Western philosophy has consistently privileged. This is a genuinely significant philosophical move. And yet Braidotti's framework operates at a level of abstraction that renders it incapable of accounting for what Kimmerer and Salmón are describing, not because it is wrong about the ontology but because it has nothing to say about the material-economic conditions under which relational subjectivity is systematically produced and dismantled. *Zoe* is impersonal; it flows through all living things regardless of the economic systems within which those things are embedded. The commodity form, however, is not impersonal in the same way; it targets specific relationships, specific communities, specific knowledge systems, and specific languages, doing so unevenly along the lines of colonial power. The question of who can sustain a kincentric orientation toward the living world under conditions of late-capitalist modernity is not answered by the claim that *zoe* flows through all bodies. It is answered by asking which communities have had their relational frameworks most violently dismantled, and which have retained or are actively recovering the practices through which kinship with the living world is possible.

Karen Barad's agential realism, which holds that entities do not pre-exist their relations but are constituted through the ongoing material-discursive practices in which they participate, represents perhaps the most rigorous account of relational ontology available within Western new materialist thought (Barad 2007). Her framework carries an ethical dimension: if boundaries are produced rather than given, then the question of how they are drawn is always a question of justice as well as ontology. This is a productive opening toward the kind of decolonial argument this article makes. However, Barad's intra-active ontology, which is mostly based on quantum physics, reaches its relational conclusions via a path that is strongly influenced by Western scientific epistemological institutions. Kinship as an ethical and political condition and intra-action as an ontological condition differ not just in scope or approach but also in the purpose of relationality. The transition from "we are constitutively entangled with non-human others" to "we must ask permission before we take, and give thanks, and give back" necessitates a relational practice that is sustained over time within a community, embedded in language and story, and accountable to the particular living world in which that community is situated. This is something that neither Barad's physics nor Braidotti's vitalism can provide. Better theory cannot make up for this shortcoming. This suggests that Kimmerer and Salmón's project is what Salmón refers to as "reimmersion" — the recovery and active cultivation of the relational, linguistic, and experiential conditions under which kinship with the living world is a daily orientation rather than a philosophical conclusion (Salmón 2000).

Narrative as Epistemology: Story as the Form of Ecological Knowledge

Form and content are treated as independent in the prevailing epistemological paradigm of Western science. In theory, a botanist's knowledge of the mycorrhizal network that forest trees use to exchange nutrients is independent of the medium in which it is conveyed; it can be expressed in a journal article, a textbook, a lecture, or a conversation without any significant loss. At every stage of its development, *Braiding Sweetgrass* rejects this presumption. Instead of telling Potawatomi tales about plants before discussing the botanical science of those plants, Kimmerer writes in a style that makes it difficult to distinguish between the layers of science and story. The realms of folklore and science are not domains exclusive of each other. Knowledge is embodied in the relationships enacted between people and the non-human world. This is not a mere stylistic preference but an epistemological claim foundational to the world Kimmerer inhabits. Ecological knowledge is a living body of relationships maintained by the narrative traditions and place-specific wisdom that Western scientific epistemology has consistently excluded from the domain of knowledge proper; unlike the latter, it cannot be divorced from the place and culture which engenders it. In *Spirit and Reason*, Vine Deloria Jr. argued that Indigenous knowledge and Western science are epistemologically different ways of being in relation to the world rather than conflicting explanations of it (Deloria 1999). The scientific pursuit of knowledge that is universal, transferable, and context-independent, which is applicable anywhere, for anyone, regardless of their connection to the location or community in which it was created, purchases its universality at the expense of relational specificity, severing its ties to the specific locations, relationships, and communities necessary for the creation and maintenance of ecological understanding. In *Native Science*, Gregory Cajete develops a complementary paradigm, contending that Indigenous knowledge systems are structured according to what he calls natural laws of interdependence, a framework in which knowledge is inextricably linked to the relational web in which it is created and maintained (Cajete 2000). According to Cajete and Deloria, Indigenous epistemologies refuse to bear this expense.

These differences highlight a crucial aspect of the formal structure of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. The book is organised along the cycles of giving and receiving, structured around the passage of seasons. Traditional thematic progression

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is supplanted by the rhythms of planting and harvesting, which, in turn, reflect the cyclical temporality of the living world Kimmerer writes about. The cyclical narrative structure performs the relational ontology it describes by embedding the knowledge it carries in a temporality of return and renewal. The title's central metaphor, the braiding of sweetgrass, is structurally constitutive of this epistemological argument. Sweetgrass braiding requires multiple strands that are distinct in themselves; to braid them is not to dissolve their distinctness but to create from their interaction a strength and coherence that no single strand could achieve alone. Applied to knowledge systems, this metaphor makes a claim that is simultaneously against epistemic hierarchy and against epistemic relativism. Indigenous knowledge and Western science are not equivalent (a claim still made from within the universalist framework that Potawatomi epistemology challenges) nor incommensurable (which would leave them unable to enrich each other); they are genuinely distinct and genuinely complementary, each possessing a kind of knowing the other structurally cannot replicate, requiring both, held in relation without subordination.

Kyle Whyte, a Potawatomi philosopher of Indigenous environmental justice, argues that the ecological knowledge embedded in Indigenous cultural practices like ceremony, harvest protocols, management of specific landscapes, and stories that encode the history of human-plant-animal relationships over generations constitutes not merely information about the environment but a form of what he terms kinship responsibility: a set of ongoing obligations to the specific living communities, human and non-human, with whom a people shares a place (Whyte 2017; 2019). This knowledge cannot be extracted from the relational practices that generate and sustain it without ceasing to function as knowledge, because its purpose is not to describe the living world from outside but to orient a community's conduct within it. Story is the primary medium through which kinship responsibility is transmitted across generations: not because story is a convenient way of packaging information, but because story is the form in which the relational, obligated, affectively structured character of ecological knowledge is preserved. Scientific propositions can be transmitted to strangers; kinship responsibilities require a community to sustain them and a tradition to transmit them, and narrative is the vehicle through which that transmission occurs in a form that preserves rather than reduces what is being passed on.

Kimmerer's own account of learning to identify plants, first through the taxonomic protocols of academic botany and then through the Potawatomi practice of attending to a plant until it tells you its name, enacts this distinction (Kimmerer 2013). Latin identifies the same plant in any classroom in any country, by anyone trained in the Linnaean system; botanical names enable classification and comparison across a universal system, but it is the Potawatomi names that make relationships possible. The Potawatomi name, which opens a form of address, acknowledges the plant's standing and serves as a reminder of the responsibilities involved. These are not two labels for the same knowledge; rather, they refer to distinct types of knowing produced by different modes of relation, maintained by different activities, and focused on different goals. In the Potawatomi concept, knowing a plant means having a specific kind of relationship with it that makes claims on one's behaviour, rather than having propositional knowledge about it. Kimmerer is not adorning science with mythology when she narrates the tale of Skywoman; rather she is arguing that a people's ecological knowledge cannot be sufficiently conveyed by scientific claims alone. The knowledge would be destroyed rather than distilled were the botanical discoveries abstracted from the stories that carry them.

According to Dwayne Donald, stories serve as events that pull the listener into a new set of relationships with the world and place them into a web of responsibility they did not previously fully inhabit, rather than moral precepts imparted from the outside (Donald 2009). This description of the story as a relational event rather than an informative piece highlights what Kimmerer accomplishes with the structure of her writing: the reader is not instructed but implicated, not informed but reoriented. A similar approach is provided by Keith Basso's description of place-based storytelling among the Western Apache in *Wisdom Sits in Places*. Certain landscapes serve as locations of ethical instruction; places are, in a precise sense, texts that teach people how to live properly (Basso 1996). The story and the setting it takes place in are inextricably linked; telling the story takes the listener back to the setting and, via it, to the moral demands it conveys. Kimmerer's attentiveness to specific plants in specific seasons in specific landscapes enacts this principle: the aster, the sweetgrass, the pecan are not illustrations of ecological concepts but presences that make ethical demands on those who attend to them. Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie's conception of place-based decolonial pedagogy, understood as the restoration of just, reciprocal, and accountable relationships with the land rather than the acquisition of abstract knowledge, describes precisely what *Braiding Sweetgrass* enacts (Tuck and McKenzie 2014). David Orr, from within Western environmental education, has arrived at an adjacent conclusion: that real ecological learning must begin with a sense of place, because people protect only what they have come to love (Orr 1992). The convergence is not coincidental; it suggests that what Indigenous knowledge systems have always understood about the inseparability of place-attachment and ethical conduct is something that even Western environmental education is beginning, belatedly and partially, to recover.

Recognition, Reciprocity, and the Political Ontology of Kinship

The critique of Western posthumanism's relationship to Indigenous thought has been mounted with increasing precision by Indigenous scholars whose interventions are not marginal corrections to an otherwise sound theoretical project; they are structural diagnoses. Three of the most consequential contributions are Sarah Hunt's account of the politics of ontological recognition, Zoe Todd's analysis of Indigenous intellectual labour and its appropriation, and Kyle Whyte's theorisation of kinship responsibility and collective continuance. Together, these three

frameworks name the most important unresolved problem in the environmental humanities today, and the problem that *Braiding Sweetgrass*, read on its own terms rather than as a tributary of Western posthumanist theory, most powerfully forces into visibility.

Sarah Hunt, writing from within Kwakwaka'wakw legal and political tradition, argues in “Ontologies of Indigeneity” that the theoretical celebration of Indigenous ontological difference does not in itself disrupt the colonial structure of knowledge production; it may, in fact, reinforce it (Hunt 2014). The mechanism Hunt identifies is recognition: the process by which a dominant institutional framework acknowledges the validity of an alternative ontology without ceding the authority to make that acknowledgment. When Western theory recognises Indigenous ontology as genuinely different, as a legitimate and philosophically interesting alternative to Cartesian dualism, it does so from a position that retains the power to determine what counts as a legitimate ontology, what kinds of difference are recognisable, and what the terms of recognition are. Indigenous worldviews are often acknowledged in educational settings only after being denuded of their most distinctive qualities and pared down into a version that can be assimilated into the existing paradigm without generating too much friction. As a result, academia fails to engage with Indigenous ideas in their full cultural complexity. Making Indigenous knowledge palatable for a Western audience severs it from the communities, languages, landscapes, legal traditions, and everyday practices that give it its significance. Stripped of cultural specificity, it transforms into abstract theory — yet another form of intellectual commodity. For Hunt, this is not genuine dialogue but a type of extraction in which Indigenous knowledge is integrated into academic discourse while simultaneously suppressing the system that produced it.

This criticism invites a more in-depth examination of how *Braiding Sweetgrass* might be perceived in light of posthumanism. It is worth asking what is lost in the process of translating Potawatomi ecological knowledge for Western readers. Some aspects of that knowledge are acceptable in scholarly discourse, while others remain outside its conceptual boundaries. For example, the idea of regarding strawberries as a gift from the earth rather than a product that can be bought and sold might appear naive and romantic at first glance. Similarly, the grammar of animacy is more potent as lived reality than as philosophical concept; the latter diminishes its relational significance. The same is true of the Honorable Harvest: it loses significance when viewed as an ethical concept rather than a reciprocal obligation. These tensions highlight an ongoing conflict between the living tradition represented by *Braiding Sweetgrass* and the philosophical interpretations generated by it. Hunt's paradigm highlights this contradiction by reminding the reader that relational practices are inextricably linked to the cultural contexts that support them (Hunt 2014). A posthumanist reading in which abstract notions are prioritised over lived interactions risks overlooking this distinction and resolving the tension too facily.

Hunt's intervention is extended by Zoe Todd's, which is more polemical in orientation. “An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism” was written by Todd, a Métis scholar working in environmental philosophy, anthropology, and Indigenous studies (Todd 2016). The title's clear, unadorned phrasing rejects academic circumlocution as an expression of the essay's critique of academic gatekeeping. Todd's main argument is that the ontological turn's celebrated conceptual apparatus — emphasising non-human agency, more-than-human relationality, and the porousness of the boundary between individuals and their environments — is strikingly similar to the intellectual frameworks that Indigenous thinkers have upheld and articulated for generations. This is a structural symptom of the epistemic hierarchy that the turn aims to dismantle, not merely an oversight on the part of the leading figures of the ontological revolution. Todd recounts that Bruno Latour developed his own account of non-human agency and political ecology without acknowledging the intellectual tradition from which an Inuit scholar spoke, after attending that scholar's lecture on the legal personhood of animals and the relational obligations between human and non-human communities. The result is a theoretical economy in which the Indigenous thinker acts as a catalyst for the European theorist's breakthrough: a source without becoming a reference, a contributor without being acknowledged. Todd's analysis is not so much about bibliographic ethics as about the political economy of intellectual labour — who gets to be a theorist, whose contributions register as theoretical rather than anecdotal or cultural, and how the system of citation and attribution distributes recognition along lines that reproduce the racial and colonial hierarchies it claims to transcend.

Todd's argument has a feminist dimension, which is openly signalled by her title (Todd 2016). She draws on a feminist science studies tradition, including Donna Haraway's own work, to examine how the production of knowledge is shaped by the social situations of its producers, and how particular types of intellectual labour are systematically discounted on the basis of gender and race. Todd contends that the unacknowledged intellectual labour of Indigenous thinkers within the ontological turn is structurally similar to the unacknowledged domestic and affective labour that feminist scholarship has long identified as constitutive of the conditions under which the apparently autonomous intellectual can appear to produce knowledge independently. In both cases, what appears to be individual theoretical innovation is supported by forms of labour — the labour of upholding customs and knowledge systems in the face of systematic suppression, the labour of passing down kinship responsibilities across generations in the face of colonial disruption — that are rendered invisible by the prevailing epistemic framework, because acknowledging them would necessitate acknowledging debt and dependency. Todd suggests that posthumanism's theoretical independence from humanist presumptions is maintained by an unconscious reliance on precisely the intellectual traditions it neglects to mention, a reliance that its own relational ontology should, if consistently applied, oblige it to recognise and reciprocate.

Hunt and Todd diagnose the suppression of Indigenous familial knowledge, and Whyte's contribution shifts the register from epistemological and political critique to ontological and temporal analysis, revealing the full depth of

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what is at stake. His central claim is that kinship responsibility, understood as the web of obligations to human and non-human kin through which Indigenous communities sustain their relationships to specific places and living worlds, is not an ethical supplement to a prior ontological account of how humans and non-humans are related (Whyte 2017). The kinship relation and the responsibility it generates are co-constitutive: to be in kinship with the living world is already to be obligated to it, and the obligation is not an addition to the relationship but its substance. There is no prior, neutral ontological condition to which kinship responsibility is subsequently applied. This marks a decisive divergence from the structure of Western ethical frameworks, including the posthumanist ones this article has been engaging throughout. In Braidotti's framework, the posthuman subject's entanglement with non-human forces is an ontological condition with ethical implications: the ethical claim is derived from the ontological one, the ought follows from the is (Braidotti 2013). In Barad's framework, similarly, intra-active constitution generates an ethics of responsibility for the cuts one makes (Barad 2007). Whyte's kinship responsibility does not derive obligation from a prior account of relational being; it understands obligation as constitutive of the relation itself. When kinship relations are disrupted, the violence is simultaneously ontological (the destruction of a way of being in the world) and political (the dismantling of the relational infrastructure through which a community exercises its capacity for self-determination). No amount of theoretical recognition of relational ontology can substitute for the practical, communal, place-specific, and temporally extended work of maintaining and renewing kinship obligations in the living world.

Whyte's concept of collective continuance names the capacity of an Indigenous community to adapt to change, including the catastrophic changes imposed by colonialism and climate disruption, in ways consistent with its own values, relationships, and self-understanding (Whyte 2019). This is not cultural preservation in a static sense; Whyte is explicit that Indigenous communities are dynamic, adaptive, and forward-oriented. Rather, collective continuance names the capacity for self-directed change: the ability to navigate disruption while remaining, in some meaningful sense, the community one has been and is becoming. The knowledge of how to adapt, how to maintain relational continuity across disruption, how to sustain kinship obligations when the conditions of their fulfilment have been damaged, cannot be held in data or archive. It is held in story, in ceremony, in language, and in the embodied, place-specific, communally sustained practices through which kinship responsibility is enacted and renewed. To destroy the stories is not to lose a record; it is to lose a map, and to suppress that map, as colonial policy has repeatedly and deliberately done, is not to impede cultural expression but to attack the political capacity for self-determination at its ontological root.

Both Kimmerer and Whyte write from within the Potawatomi tradition. Their agreement on kinship, reciprocity, narrative transmission, and the political implications of relational knowledge is not the result of two scholars arriving independently at similar findings; rather, it is a single tradition considering its own tenets from different vantage points: Whyte from the standpoint of political philosophy and environmental justice, and Kimmerer from the standpoint of botanical praxis and ecological narrative. The resonances between their frameworks are expressions of a shared intellectual and relational tradition whose internal consistency and philosophical depth are themselves evidence against the posthumanist assumption that relational ontology is a theoretical achievement of the Western academy. Bringing Kimmerer and Whyte into explicit dialogue, as this article does, models at the level of scholarly method the kind of intra-traditional accountability that the Hunt and Todd critique demands of posthumanist scholarship more broadly.

The Limits of Posthumanism's Self-Knowledge

Western posthumanism's signal achievement is the theoretical dismantling of the liberal humanist subject: the self-enclosed, rational, autonomous individual whose sovereignty over his body, his reason, and the nature he stands apart from and above has been the operative fiction of Western modernity. The works of Braidotti, Barad, Haraway, and the broader new materialist and multispecies turn have generated a body of theoretical work of genuine consequence, work that has made it possible to think the human differently, to take seriously the agency and moral considerability of non-human beings, and to understand subjectivity as a relational, processual, and materially embedded achievement rather than a metaphysical given. The importance of this project should not be minimised. In the context of an academy still largely shaped by humanist assumptions, posthumanism's decentring of the human has been philosophically necessary and politically significant.

And yet the critiques mounted by Hunt, Todd, TallBear, and the broader field of Indigenous studies converge on a structural problem that theoretical sophistication alone cannot resolve: Western posthumanism has largely conducted its decentring of the human without examining the conditions under which it became possible, without asking what prior acts of epistemic violence cleared the theoretical ground on which its innovations could appear as innovations. When Haraway writes of sympoiesis, of making-with, of the entangled relations that constitute living beings as always already more than themselves, she is articulating a relational ontology that the Potawatomi language has grammatically encoded for generations, that the Honorable Harvest has practised as daily ethical conduct, and that Salmón's kincentric ecology has theorised from within a living tradition (Salmón 2000). She does so, as Todd has argued, largely without acknowledging these antecedents (Todd 2016). The failure is not one of personal attribution but of structural accountability: posthumanism has not yet developed the tools to ask how its own theoretical novelty has been produced through the systematic marginalisation of the knowledge traditions that held these insights long before they became legible within the Western academy. Coulthard's observation that colonial systems reduce culture to folklore and land to resource finds its mirror in posthumanism's tendency to reduce Indigenous philosophy to case study and Indigenous thinkers to occasion, performing within the most

progressive corners of the academy the same epistemic operation that the colonial institution performs in its most conservative ones (Coulthard 2014).

This is a particular kind of epistemic bad faith associated with posthumanism, and it is a serious matter. It is not tenable for a theoretical enterprise with relational accountability as its primary ethical commitment to consistently omit its own knowledge production from that accounting. The question of whose knowledge posthumanism has intra-acted within its own construction — what it has drawn on, what it has failed to acknowledge, and what it has left behind — is a first-order problem rather than a secondary one, if intra-action is taken seriously. Posthumanism cannot claim to have dismantled extractivist ontology while reproducing extractivist epistemology in its own disciplinary formations, citation practices, and account of intellectual history. Ignoring this question is not only an ethical transgression but also a theoretical incoherence. This point is not made directly in *Braiding Sweetgrass*; Kimmerer's book is neither written in dialogue with Braidotti or Barad, nor is it a polemic against posthumanism. However, this is exactly what makes it such an effective lens for the argument this article has been making. Kimmerer does not reference the Western theoretical frameworks that have lately arrived at similar findings by a far longer path. Instead, she speaks from within a living tradition, in a voice accountable to specific locations, specific flora, and specific communities. This absence of reference is a refusal to capitulate to Western frameworks that have historically disregarded such forms of knowledge. It is, in this sense, an asymmetric exercise to read *Braiding Sweetgrass* against Western posthumanism. To posit that Kimmerer requires posthumanism to justify her epistemology is to re-enact a colonial discursive regime in which Indigenous ecological knowledge cannot be acknowledged as such until it gains the approval of institutional authority.

Such a reckoning carries several implications for posthumanism. First, it would entail admitting that the relational ontologies it portrays as theoretical accomplishments are, for the most part, theoretical recoveries — partial, mediated, and institutionally constrained approximations of orientations toward the living world that Indigenous communities have preserved, protected, and passed down in the face of ongoing colonial violence. Second, it would mean engaging with Indigenous knowledge traditions not as case studies that confirm posthumanist theory but as theoretical interlocutors whose frameworks may challenge, exceed, and in some respects correct the frameworks they are brought alongside. This requires a different kind of reading, one that does not arrive at Indigenous texts with theoretical conclusions already in hand, seeking confirmation, but approaches them with the genuine openness to being reoriented that Kimmerer's pedagogy requires of its readers. Third, and most fundamentally, it would mean asking what posthumanism's theoretical commitments require in terms of institutional, pedagogical, and political practice and recognising that the gap between posthumanism's theoretical radicalism and its institutional conservatism is not incidental but symptomatic of exactly the unexamined privilege it claims to dismantle.

CONCLUSION

Kimmerer's strawberry, with which this article began in all but name, is still waiting for a subject capable of receiving it as a gift, capable of the gratitude, the acknowledgment of kinship, and the obligation of return that genuine ecological relation requires (Kimmerer 2013). Producing that subject is not a theoretical project. It is pedagogical, communal, linguistic, and above all practical. It is the kind of project that Kimmerer and Salmón describe as a living inheritance that is maintained, transmitted, and enacted in relation to specific places and specific living communities across generations. Western posthumanism, at its most honest, can acknowledge that it does not know how to do this, that its theoretical tools are not sufficient for the re-immersion that ecological transformation requires. What it can do, and what this article has argued it is obligated to do, is stop presenting its own belated arrival at the relational as though it were a discovery rather than a return, and begin to learn from the traditions that never left with appropriate humility. The question that *Braiding Sweetgrass* finally puts to Western thought including its most radical posthumanist variants is not whether we can theorise our entanglement with the living world. The question is whether we can live it; whether we can sustain, in practice and in community, the forms of attention, gratitude, and reciprocal obligation through which the living world becomes more than just the object of our ethical consideration.

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