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An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism

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Abstract In this article, I ask how anthropology can adopt a decolonial approach that incorporates and acknowledges the critical scholarship of Indigenous thinkers whose work and labour informs many current trends in Euro-Western scholarship, activism and socio-political discourse. I also query how to address ongoing structural colonialism within the academy in order to ensure that marginalised voices are heard within academic discourses.

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Last October I wrote a blog post on the Ontological Turn and citational praxis that went viral—it has now had over 30,000 views. I have now expanded on that post and incorporate material that further elaborates my relationship to turns of thought in anthropology, and the British academy, as an Indigenous feminist (Red River Mêtis, Otipemisiwak) woman from amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada).

Vignette Number One

Personal paradigm shifts have a way of sneaking up on you. For me, it started, innocently enough, with a trip to Edinburgh to see the great Latour discuss his latest work in February 2013, as part of the University of Edinburgh's Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology. I was giddy with excitement: a talk by the *Great Latour*. live and in colour! Bruno Latour's work was, in part, the reason that I switched my focus away from a pure science degree in Biology in my undergraduate studies. At the time I was a biology student working in a gastroenterology research laboratory, with vague hopes of pursuing a medical career. The discovery of Science and Technology Studies, and Latour's work with Stephen Woolgar in *Laboratory Life* (1986), in a 2004 Anthropology of Science course taught by Franca Boag at the University of Alberta was enough to push me out of medical research and into the social sciences. You can imagine how my whole being buzzed with anticipation, since Latour was (and is) very much a personal hero of mine. In his talk, on that February night (Latour 2013),

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one of the issues he discussed in his lecture on Natural Religion was the climate as a matter of 'common cosmopolitical concern'.[1] Having just returned from a year of research in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region in Canada's Western Arctic, I was intrigued. Funny, I thought, this sounds an awful lot like the little bit of Inuit cosmological thought and legal orders that I have been taught by Inuit colleagues, friends and teachers.

Surely, I naively thought, if Bruno Latour was referencing *Gaia*, maybe he would reference *Sila*, the well-known Inuit concept that is today translated by many non-Inuit as climate but Sila is also "the breathe [sic] that circulates into and out of every living thing" (Qitsualik 1998). According to some scholars, Sila also links environment to knowledge (Martin 2012: 5). As literary scholar Keavy Martin (2012: 5) explains:

> The word *sila* has multiple significations, most commonly, it refers to the environment, such as the phrases *silami qanuippa?* (how's the weather?) or *silaup asijjipallianinga* (climate change). The other meaning of *sila*, however, refers to wisdom, or cleverness, as in *silatujuq* (he/she/it is intelligent, sensible or wise).

Inuk author Rachel Qitsualik (1998) explains further how Sila is bound with life:

> Inuit noticed that the breath, a force seemingly no different from wind and being drawn from the air itself, appeared to be the animating principle of life. They logically concluded that life itself was in fact the breath, the sila, and that when the Sila was drawn into a body, it was alive and animate. The observation of childbirth may also have contributed to this thinking, since when a baby is born, it is not at first drawing breath.
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> The belief naturally evolved over time. Eventually, Sila became associated with incorporeal power, quite understandable, since not only does Sila — through breath — convey the energy that drives life, but sila also manifests itself as tangible weather phenomena, such as the slightest touch of breeze, or as the flesh-stripping power of a storm. Sila, for Inuit, became a raw life force that lay over the entire Land; that could be felt as air, seen as the sky, and lived as breath.

The infinitesimal bit of the concept of Sila that I can claim to understand is that it is bound with life, with climate, with knowing, and with the very existence of being(s). And, in some respects, it sounds an awful lot like the idea of *Gaia* to my Métis ears.

It is reasonable to assume that Inuit concepts of climate will be referenced in international fora regarding the topic of climate-as-commons. Indigenous peoples played and play an integral role in bringing the topic of climate change to the international stage (IWGIA). And among these Indigenous activists, Inuit played and still play a very important role. My friends, such as elder Millie Thrasher, have taught me that the climate, Sila, is an incredibly important organizing

concept for many actors in Inuit territories. As noted above, Sila is both climate *and* a life force (Qitsualik 1998). I have also been fortunate to learn about Inuit relationships to climate from friends like Rosemarie Kuptana, former President of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada and former Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. In 2000, Rosemarie narrated a feature length documentary on climate change as a global concern, entitled *Sila Alangotok-Inuit Observations on Climate Change* (IISD 2000). This film was just one part of her considerable advocacy work on Inuit relationships to climate change: she also presented on Inuit perspectives on climate change to COP2 in 1996 (Kuptana, 1996), long before many people were paying attention to the climate-as-commons. I thought excitedly of the forward-thinking role that Inuit actors, among other Indigenous[2] advocates, took in the initial and ongoing stages of international climate advocacy movements (IWGIA). When Latour mentioned the climate as a common organizing force, a common concern, my mind started to wander to how Inuit climate change activist and leader Sheila Watt-Cloutier was publicly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize alongside Al Gore in 2007 (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2007), only to be dropped before the prize was later awarded to Gore and the IPCC.

The relationship between public consciousness of climate change and the Arctic has been shaped significantly by the work of Inuit activists like Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Rosemarie Kupatana, and others. This work is visible in public campaigns to address climate change: Greenpeace reminds us daily, after all, that the Arctic is a commons in need of saving from climate change (Save The Arctic 2015). Such heavy environmental advocacy around the climate and the Arctic as commons, in turn, has helped polar bears to become one of the most instantly recognizable symbols of climate change for many people around the globe (Slocum 2004). I think to a fair amount of people worldwide, climate change and the Arctic are inextricably bound in the public consciousness, and they can be thought of as what anthropologist Elizabeth Reddy (2014) calls the Anthropocene: a 'charismatic mega-category'. Ironically, when climate change and the Arctic act as mega-categories, they can quickly erase arctic Indigenous *peoples and their laws and philosophies* from their discourses. It is easier for Euro-Western people to tangle with a symbolic polar bear on a Greenpeace website or in a tweet than it is to acknowledge arctic Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems and legal-political realities.

So, I waited. I waited through the whole talk, to hear the Great Latour credit Indigenous thinkers for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all* relations, and with climates and atmospheres as important points of organization and

action. I waited. I waited, with baited breath, as I do through most of these types of events in the UK—waited to hear a whisper of the lively and deep intellectual traditions borne out in Indigenous Studies departments, community halls, fish camps, classrooms, band offices and Friendship Centres across Turtle Island (North America) right now. European and North American academies are separated, after all, by a mere pond, and our kinship relations and ongoing colonial legacies actually weave us much more closely together than geography suggests.

It never came. He did not mention Inuit. Or Anishinaabeg. Or Nehiyawak. Or any Indigenous thinkers at all. In fact, he spent a great deal of time interlocuting with a Scottish thinker (John Hume), long dead. And with Gaia. To be fair, this was a gracious gesture to his Scottish hosts for the series of talks—the Gifford Lectures—that this particular presentation was part of, and a kind nod to the contributions of the Scottish Enlightenment, specifically natural theology, to Euro-Western thinking in the last few centuries. However, I was left wondering, when *will* I hear someone reference Indigenous thinkers in a direct, contemporary and meaningful way in European lecture halls? Without filtering ideas through white intermediaries—apologies to the vast majority of my anthropology colleagues—but by citing and quoting Indigenous thinkers directly, unambiguously and generously. As thinkers in their own right, not just disembodied representatives of an amorphous Indigeneity that serves European intellectual or political purposes, and not just as research subjects or vaguely defined 'collaborators'. As dynamic Philosophers and Intellectuals, full stop. Rather than bequeathing climate activism to the Al Gores of the world, when will Euro-American scholarship take the intellectual labour and activist work of Inuit women like Rosemarie Kuptana and Sheila Watt-Cloutier seriously?

I left the hall early, before the questions were finished: I was unimpressed. Again, I thought with a sinking feeling in my chest, it appeared that another Euro-Western academic narrative, in this case the trendy and dominant Ontological Turn (and/or post-humanism, and/or cosmopolitics—all three of which share tangled roots, and can be mobilised distinctly or collectively, depending on who you ask), and discourses of how to organise ourselves around and communicate with the constituents of complex and contested world(s) (or multiverses, if you're into the whole brevity thing) - was spinning itself on the backs of non-European thinkers. And again, the ones we credited for these incredible insights into the 'more-than-human', sentience and agency, and the ways through which to imagine our 'common cosmopolitical concerns' were not the people who built and maintain the knowledge systems that European and North American anthropologists and philosophers have been studying for

well over a hundred years, and predicating many of their current 'aha' ontological moments (or re-imaginings of the discipline) upon. No, here we were celebrating and worshipping a European thinker for 'discovering', or newly articulating by drawing on a European intellectual heritage, what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia: *the climate is a common organizing force*!

Once again, I felt as though I was just another inconvenient Indigenous body in a room full of people excited to hear a white guy talk *around* themes shared in Indigenous thought without giving Indigenous people credit or a nod. *Doesn't this feel familiar*, I thought. What struck me here was the unintentional (even ironic) evocation of theories about the climate as a form of *aer nullius*,[3] which it often becomes in Euro-Western academic discourses: where the climate acts as a blank commons to be populated by very Euro-Western theories of resilience, the Anthropocene, Actor Network Theory and other ideas that dominate the anthropological and climate change arenas of the moment. Of course, I extend due credit to Latour for framing it as a space of 'cosmopolitical concern' – which does make space for other ontologies and charismatic beings to exist within it, including the Inuit concept of Sila. However, my concern here is not really with Latour himself, but with how a Euro-Western audience consumes Latour's argument (and the arguments of others writing and thinking about the climate, ontologies, our shared engagements with the world) without being aware of competing or similar discourses happening outside of the rock-star arenas of Euro-Western thought. I do not think Latour intended to elide decades of Indigenous articulations and intellectual labour to render the climate a matter of common concern. Nor do I think he intended to suggest that his notion of the climate as a matter of 'common cosmopolitical concern' was indeed the first of such calls. But the structures that produce talks like the one I attended make it easy for those within the Euro-Western academy to advance and consume arguments that parallel discourses in Indigenous contexts without explicitly nodding to them, or by minimally nodding to Indigenous intellectual and political players. Because we still practice our disciplines in ways that erase Indigenous bodies within our lecture halls in Europe, we unconsciously avoid engaging with contemporary Indigenous scholars and thinkers while we engage instead with eighty year old ethnographic texts or two hundred year old philosophical tomes. In events like the one I attended in Britain, we implicitly give credit to the person at the lectern, and that person is very rarely an Indigenous thinker.

Was it entirely Latour's fault, therefore, that he did not mention Inuit? If a European audience is not familiar with the breadth and

depth of Indigenous thinking and how strongly it influences many of the current strands of post-humanism and the Ontological Turn (Watts 2013), can a speaker be blamed for side-stepping a nod towards Inuit climate advocacy in a discussion of the 'climate as common cosmopolitical concern'? Should I welcome his silence: better that he not address Indigenous thinking than to misinterpret it or distort it? As Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts (2013) points out, the appropriation of Indigenous thinking in European contexts *without Indigenous interlocutors present to hold the use of Indigenous stories and laws to account* flattens, distorts and erases the embodied, legal-governance and spiritual aspects of Indigenous thinking. So there is a very real risk to Indigenous thinking being used by non-Indigenous scholars who apply it to Actor Network Theory, cosmopolitics, ontological and posthumanist threads without contending with the embodied expressions of stories, laws, and songs as bound with Indigenous-Place Thought (Watts 2013: 31) or Indigenous self-determination. Her writing affirms what I witnessed directly as an Indigenous woman from North America moving through the halls of the UK academy: Indigenous stories are often employed without Indigenous peoples present to engage in the application of them in European work. However, there is a risk as well, to Indigenous thinking not being acknowledged at all. How do we hold these two issues in tension and apply them accountably in anthropology? I concede that there are elements of post-humanism, cosmopolitics and the Ontological Turn that *could* potentially be promising tools in the decolonial project, if approached with an attention to the structural realities of the academy. In my current work (Todd 2015a; Todd 2015b) I now cite Juanita Sundberg (2013) extensively, who describes her own efforts to engage with post-humanism as a decolonizing tool kit, while flagging how euro-centric the project of post-humanism remains. Specifically, she points out (2014: 35) that Euro-American framings of post-humanism have a tendency to erase Indigenous epistemes and locations. Further, she argues that posthumanist thought makes a common error of asserting the nature/culture split as a universal phenomenon rather than a reality localised to specific knowledge traditions (Sundberg 2014: 35). Sundberg and Watts both provide Euro-Western scholars with practical tools for employing Indigenous ontologies in their work with care and respect: account for location (Sundberg 2014) and Indigenous Place-Thought (Watts 2013: 31) - and consider the ongoing colonial imperatives of the academy.

Ultimately, the issue I am describing here is a structural one: it is a critique of systems and practices that *culminate* in events such as the one I attended. It is a critique of a discipline and intellectual environment that currently claims to be striving for the worthy goal

of 'ontological self-determination' (Holbraad et al. 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2003) but failing to create the conditions wherein many of its practitioners respect our physical self-determination (and right to ensure Indigenous thinking is employed accountably) and intellectual presence as Indigenous peoples within its very own bricks-and-mortar institutions.

Vignette Number Two

Let me include a second vignette to assure you that the problem outlined in this essay is deeper than any single scholar associated with dominant thought in the European academy at the moment—including the 'Ontological Turn'--but is due, rather, to the European academy's *continued*, *collective* reticence to address its own racist and colonial roots, and debt to Indigenous thinkers in a meaningful and structural way.

On the day after a Missouri Grand Jury, in America, decided *not* to indict the police officer responsible for the murder of black teenager Mike Brown, the President of the American Anthropological Association issued a press release calling for more public discourse on the issues of structural racism in America (American Anthropological Association 2014). Curious to see what the flagship organisation of anthropology in the UK, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (the ASA) was up to, I visited the ASA's website, only to stumble upon the theme for the upcoming association conference in Exeter in April 2015 (ASA 2014). The theme, "Symbiotic Anthropologies: Theoretical Commensalities And Methodological Mutualisms", is a bit of a self-consciously theoretical tongue-twister that does not directly reference anthropology's colonialism, but in and of itself still offers the potential for decolonial, intersectional and critical race theory to emerge in its panels and papers. At least I hoped this would be the case. However, upon reading the theme backgrounder document for the 2015 event (ASA 2014) my hopes were dashed:

> Ethnographic methodologies have evolved in relation to other intellectual traditions, internalizing over the years diverse scientific, political, literary, cinematic, linguistic and artistic techniques (e.g. experimentation, film, photography, pastiche, activism). Physical, emotional and analytical proximity can be perilous – we risk losing our compass, getting too close and '*going native*'.(emphasis added).

Going native! What hubris! After I voiced concerns over this wording, a footnote clarifying the use of this term as intended to spark critical debate around the historical relationships between anthropologists and the people they researched was added to the website (ASA 2014[4]). Following this experience, I reflected on how often I witnessed racially charged phrases used in day-to-day exchanges in the UK academy [broadly—not contained to any single institution or discipline] without

anyone questioning their impact on the few Indigenous scholars and People of Colour (POC) within British humanities and social science departments. In turn, I reflected on how my public criticism of this phrase being used by the ASA was met with a suggestion (from an anonymous anthropology scholar in North America) to 'lighten up'. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2014a) writes very directly about this exact dynamic on her blog *Feminist Killjoys*:

> So many heavy words, we feel the weight of them; we feel the weight each time, every time, all the time.
>
> Black, brown, race, racism: words that come up; words you bring up.
>
> Heavy; down.
>
> Slow, frown.
>
> It is not that we only feel the weight through words. The load does not lighten when light remains white. Whiteness is a lightening of a load.

To lighten up is to whiten up, as Ahmed points out. And, I argue that to whiten up is to thrive in the British academy. My mind wanders to a time a peer in the UK told me my own advocacy and theorising regarding Indigenous architecture and re-claiming space in my hometown of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada was an example of me 'going native', a statement none of my (all white) peers in the room challenged. There was no irony in the usage of the phrase that day--the inflection was not jovial. It was an earnest, clear dismissal of my work because, ostensibly, Indigenous thinkers cannot maintain objectivity when working with our own political, legal and intellectual concerns. Apparently, to be seen as credible in the European academy, Indigenous thought must be filtered through white intermediaries. Trusty interpreters, usually male, usually middle class, can birth Indigenous thinking into the mainstream. In other words: the revolution will be mediated. As Ahmed (2014) demonstrates: the knowledge of Indigenous people or People of Colour (POC) is not accepted in Europe until the white balance is adjusted.

This brings me to the ongoing reality of 'anthropology as white public space' (Brodkin et al. 2011): that space that anthropologists Karen Brodkin, Sandra Morgen and Janis Hutchinson describe in their research on racism in North American anthropology. This concept is *so* instructive to my current work within the discipline and I keep citing their work in almost everything I write (see Todd 2015a, 2015b) because I believe it bears repeating until anthropology takes its whiteness of praxis seriously. Brodkin et al. demonstrate (2011: 545) that, for People

of Colour within anthropology departments in North America, racism operates in two ways:

> first through a racial division labour whereby those responsibilities assigned to faculty and graduate students of color have lower status and rewards than those of white colleagues. The second praxis is cultural and discursive, including a range of departmental and individual practices that carry racial baggage but also deny their racial subtexts and racially unequal outcomes.

I experience anthropology as white public space: in the hostilities that some scholars express towards my use of Indigenous scholarship in my work; in the subtle but pervasive power afforded to white scholarship (Ahmed 2013; Ahmed 2014) that distorts or erases or homogenises distinct Indigenous voices. I must note here that I am a white-passing Indigenous woman, so I carry the privilege of 'passing' for white within 'white public space' (Brodkin et al. 2011). This article must be read in the context of my experiences as someone who *is* Indigenous, but who is not *read* as Indigenous by many academics. I do not want to conflate my experiences as a white-passing person with those of my peers, family members and friends who experience direct and hostile racism based on the colour of their skin. As someone who experiences the world through whiteness, I have a curious access into spaces where people 'say what they really think' about Indigenous issues or People of Colour when they assume everyone in the room is Caucasian. This is a space that must be acknowledged and problematised, for it is a space that deeply influences how Euro-Western thought is produced within the academy. The vast gulf between 'what is' and 'what can be' within a discipline like anthropology lies within those spaces where whiteness protects itself when it assumes there are no POC (and/or Indigenous peoples) to bear witness to its insecurities, hostilities. I witness the complex ways that Di Angelo's (2011) concept of 'white fragility' manifests and pities and consoles itself when white supremacy is challenged within the academy. I therefore have a front seat to the whole spectacle of whiteness—how it is practiced when it claims to be dismantling itself and in turn how it is practiced when it shores itself up against necessary critiques from Indigenous scholars and Scholars of Colour. These are the under-acknowledged spaces where official academic discourse and promises of decolonial ethos mingles with the real practice, and prejudice, of our disciplines. Where racism and whiteness are reinforced and reproduced (but also where they can be challenged and dismantled). This is the space that Sara Ahmed (2014) writes so powerfully about:

> When we talk of "white men" we are describing an institution. "White men" is an institution. By saying this, what I am saying? An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of

individuals within a given community. So when I am saying that "white men" is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the *mechanisms* that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. "White men" refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived; behaviour as bond.

What I have experienced in the UK academy is what Ahmed describes: white men as an institution that reproduces itself in its own image. It is important to note that Ahmed speaks to the *structures* of whiteness, and indeed we must remember that a critique of whiteness is meant to draw attention to the *structural*, *routinised* aspects of 'white public space' (Brodkin et al. 2011). Ahmed (2014) goes on to describe how this reproduction is citational—one must cite white men to get ahead. In this way, we are conditioned to cite Al Gore before Sheila Watt-Cloutier; to reference Irving Hallowell before we engage with and acknowledge contemporary Anishinaabeg thinkers like John Borrows. Recent studies demonstrate a disconcerting lack of People of Colour in the UK academy. As I have noted in other recent pieces on decolonising the academy (Todd 2015a, 2015b), in 2013, of the 18,510 Professors in the UK, there were only 85 Black Professors, 17 of whom were women (Grove 2014). Recently, a spotlight was focused on the reticence of the UK academy to support black scholarship when University College London (UCL) declined to implement a Black Studies program (Lusher 2015). The course was developed by one of the very few Black philosophy scholars in the entire UK, Dr. Nathaniel Coleman (Lusher 2015)—and when the course was rejected, a representative of the University stated that "it became apparent that UCL is not yet ready to offer a strong programme in this area" (Lusher 2015). But the inevitable postponing of critical scholarship about race, racialisation and racism forestalls the ability of Indigenous scholars and POC to invest our careers in these topics within the academy. *If Universities are not yet ready to challenge white supremacy, will they ever be*? And if a program on critical race thinking is not supported *today*, how can White Scholars advance claims that academy is in fact a safe space for Indigenous scholars, let alone claim that decolonisation is occurring within the halls of the academy itself?

To survive the push-pull rollercoaster of hoping for decolonial scholarship to take root within British institutions, and the inevitable heartbreak when colonial and racist trends rear their unruly heads, I have developed coping strategies to maintain my sanity as an Indigenous person infiltrating the British academy. Therefore, as an Indigenous woman, I have tried, over the last few years, to find thinkers who engage with Indigenous thought respectfully; who give full credit to Indigenous laws, stories and epistemologies; who quote

and cite Indigenous people rather than only citing anthropologists who studied Indigenous people 80 years ago. This is not always easy. I am so grateful to scholars like David Anderson, Barbara Bodenhorn, Julie Cruikshank, and Ann Fienup-Riordan, among others, for giving me hope amidst the despair I've felt as the 'Ontological Turn' gains steam on both sides of the Atlantic. I am so grateful too, for the Indigenous thinkers who wrestle with the academy, who position themselves to speak back to Empire despite all of the polite/hidden racism, heteropatriarchy, and let's face it–white supremacy–of the University writ large.

As an Indigenous feminist, I think it is time we take the Ontological Turn, and the European academy more broadly, head on. To accomplish this, I want to direct you to Indigenous thinkers who have been writing about Indigenous legal theory, human-animal relations and multiple epistemologies/ontologies for *decades*. Consider the Indigenous and/or POC scholars referred to within this piece as a 'cite this, not that' cheat-sheet for people who feel dissatisfied with the current Euro (and white, and quite often, male) centric discourse taking place in our disciplines, departments, conferences and journals.

My experience, as a Métis woman from the prairies of Canada working between the UK and Canada, is of course limited to the little bit that I know. I can only direct you to the thinkers that I have met or listened to in person, whose writing and speaking I have fallen in love with, who have shifted paradigms for me as an Indigenous person navigating the hostile halls of the academy. I cannot, nor would I try, to speak for Indigenous thinkers in other parts of the world. I guarantee that there are myriad voices in every continent being ignored in favour of the 'GREAT WHITE HOPES' we currently turn to when we discuss ontological matters (I speak here, of course, of ontology as an anthropologist, so hold your horses, philosophers, if you feel my analysis of 'the ontological' is weak. We can discuss THAT whole pickle another day. Indeed, David Graeber (2015) has done just that in a recent piece on the Ontological Turn).

So why does this all matter? Why am I so fired up at the realisation that (some) European thinkers are replicating Indigenous thought, seemingly with no awareness? Well, it's this little matter of *colonialism*, see. Whereas the European academy tends to discuss the 'post-colonial', in Canada I assure you that we are firmly still experiencing the *colonial* (see Pinkoski (2008) for a cogent discussion of this issue in anthropology). In 2009, our Prime-Minister, Stephen Harper, famously claimed that Canada has 'no history of colonialism' (Hui 2009). And yet, we struggle with the fact that Indigenous women experience much higher rates of violence (Laboucan-Massimo 2014) than non-Indigenous women (1200 Indigenous women have been murdered or gone missing in the last forty years alone (LeBlanc 2014)), prompting cries from the

UN and other bodies for our government to address this horrific reality). Canada's first Prime-Minister, proud Scotsman John A. MacDonald (I refuse to apply the 'Sir') famously attempted to operationalise the pervasive colonial notion of the time to 'kill the Indian in the Child' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada), with the Indian residential school system in Canada. Canada is only now coming around to the realisation that through things like residential schools, and the deeply racist—and still legislated(!) *Indian Act* - that it, as a nation was built on cultural genocide (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: 1) and dispossession. Given our strong British roots in Canada, you can imagine that acknowledging legacies of cultural genocide and colonial violence is *All Very Uncomfortable* and creates a lot of hand-wringing and cognitive dissonance for those who have lived blissfully unaware of these violences. Ask any Indigenous person, and you will hear that nobody from an Indigenous Nation has ever laboured under the fantasy that Canada is post-colonial, or benevolent. Nor would we pretend that the British Empire saddled us with solely *happy*, *beautiful*, *loving* legacies. For all its excessive politeness, the British colonial moment rent and tore apart sovereign Indigenous nations and peoples in what is now Canada, and though the sun has set on Queen Victoria's Empire, British institutions (including the academy) still benefit from that colonial moment. We are enmeshed, across the Atlantic, in ongoing colonial legacies. And in order to dismantle those legacies, we must face our complicity head on. I firmly believe we can confront these legacies with a great deal of love and accountability, and build processes and structures that are attentive to and accountable for the ongoing impacts of colonial rule.

Similarly, with the wave of the post-colonial wand, many European thinkers seem to have absolved themselves of any implication in ongoing colonial realities throughout the globe. And yet, each one of us is embedded in systems that uphold the exploitation and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The academy plays a role in shaping the narratives that erase ongoing colonial violence. My experience in Britain has been incredibly eye-opening: as far as the majority of Britons seem to be concerned, their responsibility for, and implication in, colonialism in North America ended with the War of Independence (in America) or the repatriation of the Canadian constitution (1982).

Is it so simple, though? To draw such arbitrary lines through intergenerational suffering and colonial trauma, to absolve the European academy and the European mind of any guilt in the genocide of Indigenous people (if and when European and North American actors are willing to admit it is a genocide)? And then to turn around and use Indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems in a so-called new intellectual 'turn', all the while ignoring the *contemporary* realities of Indigenous

peoples vis-à-vis colonial nation-states, or the many Indigenous thinkers who are themselves writing about these issues? And is it intellectually or ethically responsible or honest to pretend that European bodies do not still oppress Indigenous ones throughout the world?

Zygmunt Bauman (1989) takes sociology to task for its role in narrating the Holocaust, and its role in erasing our collective guilt in the possibility for a future Holocaust to emerge. He argues that by framing the Holocaust as either a a) one-off atrocity never to be repeated, "a failure of modernity" (Bauman 1989: 5) or b) an inevitable outcome of modernity, sociology enables humanity to ignore its ongoing complicity in the conditions that created the horrors of the Holocaust. The rhetoric of the post-colonial is similarly complacent: it absolves the present generation of thinkers, politicians, lawyers, and policy wonks for their duty to acknowledge what came before, and, in keeping with Bauman's insights, the possibility it could happen again — that within all societies lurk the 'two faces' of humanity that can either facilitate or quash systemic and calculated human suffering and exploitation. The reality is, as Bauman asserts, that *humanity is responsible, and humanity must be willing to face itself and to acknowledge its role in these horrors. We must do so in order to ensure we never tread the path of such destruction again.*

I take Bauman's words to heart, and ask my non-Indigenous peers to consider their roles in the ongoing colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples. The colonial moment has not passed. The conditions that fostered it have not suddenly disappeared. We talk of neo-colonialism, neo-Imperialism, but it is as if these are far away things (these days these accusations are often mounted with terse suspicion against the BRIC countries, as though the members of the G8 have not already colonised the globe through neo-liberal economic and political policies). The reality is that we are just an invasion or economic policy away from re-colonising at any moment. So it is so important to think, deeply, about how the Ontological Turn–with its breathless 'realisations' that animals, the climate, water, 'atmospheres' and non-human presences like ancestors and spirits are *sentient* and *possess agency*, that 'nature' and 'culture', 'human' and 'animal' may not be so separate after all—is itself perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples.

Holbraad et al. (2014) reference Viveiros de Castro's (2009) call for the 'permanent decolonization of thought'. This is a worthy goal, one I support. However, if the academic structures through which this decolonisation of thought is being carried out continue to reproduce the white supremacy of the academy so eloquently described by scholars like Sara Ahmed (2014), can we expect lasting change, or decolonization, to occur? Can the hopeful goals outlined by Holbraad et al. (2014) be borne out in current academic environments? My personal experiences within the discipline of anthropology in the UK

suggest that the decolonisation of thought cannot happen until the proponents of the discipline themselves are willing to engage in the decolonial project in a substantive and *structural* and *physical* way, and willing to acknowledge that the colonial is an extant, ongoing reality.

What I am critiquing here then, really, are the silences. It is not that current trends in the discipline of anthropology or the Euro-academy more broadly are *wrong*. It is that they do not currently live up to the promises they make. I do think many people making claims regarding the promise of current turns in anthropology have very good intentions. However, these cannot always easily translate into long-term structural change. Our interventions as Indigenous feminists are thus necessary to hold our colleagues up to the goals they define for themselves. Holbraad et al. (2014) tell us:

> This, in our understanding, is what the ontological turn is all about: it is a technology of description (Pedersen 2012a) designed in the optimist (non-skeptical) hope of making the otherwise visible by experimenting with the conceptual affordances (Holbraad, forthcoming) present in a given body of ethnographic materials. We stress that such material can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone; there is no limit to what practices, discourses, and artifacts are amenable to ontological analysis. Indeed, articulating "what could be" in this way implies a peculiarly non- or anti-normative stance, which has profoundly political implications in several senses.

If 'material can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone', then why is it not happening? Why is there still a bias towards citing white male scholars (Ahmed 2014)? More importantly, who is doing the describing? What are the political-legal implications for Indigenous peoples when our stories, our laws, our philosophies are used by European scholars without explicit credit to the political, legal, social and cultural (and colonial!) contexts these stories are formulated and shared within? As Kwakwaka'wakw scholar Sarah Hunt cautions, the use of Indigenous ontologies can invoke a serious problem within the neo-colonial logics of the Euro-Western academy, and can in fact act as a form of 'epistemic violence' (Hunt 2014: 29) that erases the embodied, practiced, and *legal-governance* aspects of Indigenous ontologies as they are enacted by Indigenous actors.

Hunt (2013) critique coincides with Watts' (2013) work described above: both of these Indigenous scholars demonstrate that Indigenous thinking must be seen as not just a well of ideas to draw from but a body of thinking that is *living and practiced by peoples with whom we all share reciprocal duties as citizens of shared territories* (*be they physical or the ephemeral*). A point I am making in my dissertation, informed by the work of Indigenous legal theorists like John Borrows, Kahente Horn-Miller, Tracey Lindberg, and Val Napoleon, is that Indigenous thought is not just about social relations and philosophical anecdotes, as many an ethnography would suggest. These scholars have already

shown that Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies represents *legal orders*, legal orders through which Indigenous peoples throughout the world are fighting for self-determination, sovereignty. The dispossession wrought by centuries of stop-start chaotic colonial invasion and imposition of European laws and languages is *ongoing*. It did not end with repatriation of constitutions or independence from colonial rule. Europe is still implicated in colonial exploitation, whether it likes it or not.

So the argument I make here is that Indigenous peoples, throughout the world, are fighting for recognition - fighting to assert their laws, philosophies and stories on their own terms. When anthropologists and other assembled social scientists sashay in and start cherry-picking parts of Indigenous thought that appeal to them *without engaging directly in* (*or unambiguously acknowledging*) *the political situation, agency, legal orders and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars*, we immediately become complicit in colonial violence. When we cite European thinkers who discuss the 'more-than-human' but do not discuss their Indigenous contemporaries who are writing on the exact same topics, we perpetuate the white supremacy of the academy. At the moment, it is by-and-large the academy that creates, legitimises and reproduces anthropology. However, for Indigenous academics like me, it is also the structures of academy that prevent the discipline from realising its loftiest, most transformative goals. The academy is anthropology's 'human error': the white supremacist, Imperial human dimensions of the academy itself prevent the re-imagining of disciplines like anthropology.

In order for the Ontological Turn, post-humanism, cosmopolitics to live up to their potential, they must heed the teachings of North American Indigenous scholars who engage similar issues such as Dwayne Donald, John Borrows, Val Napoleon, Audra Simpson, Kim TallBear, Chris Andersen, Rob Innes, Tracey Lindberg, Sarah Hunt, Vanessa Watts, Glen Coulthard, Leanne Simpson, Eve Tuck, Cutcha Risling Baldy, Erica Violet Lee and so many other brilliant thinkers (this list is not exhaustive!). And they must heed the teachings of Indigenous and racialised scholars from all around the globe. The systems through which thought is produced in the Euro-Western academy would do well to incorporate the reciprocity Donald (2009: 6) references in his work on 'ethical relationality':

> Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. This form of relationality is ethical because it does not overlook or invisibilize the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world. It puts these considerations at the forefront of engagements across frontiers of difference.

Donald's (2009) concept of ethical relationality invokes a reciprocity of thought, and this concept is central to my own dissertation on the negotiation of both 'sameness and difference' across legal pluralities that Inuvialuit fishermen mobilise, with respect to fish as non-human persons, in the context of colonialism in northern Canada. Reciprocity of thinking requires us to pay attention to who else is speaking alongside us. It also positions us, first and foremost, as citizens embedded in dynamic legal orders and systems of relations that require us to work constantly and thoughtfully across the myriad systems of thinking, acting, and governance within which we find ourselves enmeshed. Before I am a scholar or a researcher, I am a citizen of the Métis Nation with duties and responsibilities to the many different nations/societies/peoples with whom I share territories. This relational approach means that my reciprocal duties to others guide every aspect of how I position myself and my work, and this relationality informs the ethics that drive how I live up to my duties to humans, animals, land, water, climate and every other aspect of the world(s) I inhabit. An ethical relationality means that more than just the Indigenous scholar in the room would have expected Latour to reference his Indigenous interlocutors on a topic as broadly discussed and publicised, and as intimately linked to political claims by many Indigenous nations and peoples, as climate change.

So, for every time you want to cite a Great Thinker who is on the public speaking circuit these days, consider digging around for others who are discussing the same topics in other ways. Decolonising the academy, both in Europe and North America, means that we must consider our own prejudices, our own biases. Systems like peer-review and the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle violence of European academies tend to privilege certain voices and silence others. Consider why it is okay to discuss sentient climates in an Edinburgh lecture hall without a nod to Indigenous epistemologies and not have a single person openly question that. Consider why it is okay for our departments to remain so undeniably white. Consider why it is so revolutionary for Sara Ahmed (2014) to assert a 'citational rebellion' in which we cite POC, women and others left out of many academic discourses. And then, familiarise yourself with the Indigenous thinkers (and more!) I reference here and broaden the spectrum of who you cite and who you reaffirm as 'knowledgeable'.

Notes

[1] In an earlier version of this piece initially posted on my blog (zoeandthecity.wordpress.com), I stated that Latour framed the climate as sentient, which is my reading, as an Indigenous scholar, of his discourse on natural religion David Hume, and the climate presented during his Gifford lecture on February 19, 2013. However, a reader of my blog, identified only as Philip, pointed out

that I had mis-heard Latour. So I watched the Youtube version of the talk again, twice, and re-assessed the notes I had taken that evening in 2013. Yes, in fact, Latour was using the term 'common political concern', which I still interpret as a concept that is very close in nature to the political-legal advocacy and scholarly work that Inuit leaders have done on the climate-as-commons (and, specifically, climate-as-sentient-commons) for the last thirty years.

[2] I use the term Indigenous in keeping with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP (United Nations 2007), and also in keeping with the theoretical arguments put forth by Alfred and Corntassel (2005) on Indigenous as a more autonomous, self-determining term than 'Aboriginal'. Its use here, however, is not exhaustive and I do not attempt to capture the inherent tensions in deeming who is or is not Indigenous for the purposes of this piece.

[3] Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) discusses (Coulthard 2015) the idea of urban-spaces-as-commons in urban planning discourses in North America, positing that these spaces are imagined by non-Indigenous scholars and urban planners as a form of *terra nullius* that is best described as *urbs nullius*. Here, I employ a similar turn and argue that Euro-Western thinkers imagining the climate-as-commons are guilty of sometimes framing it as *aer nullius* (as in: it belongs to no one).

[4] http://theasa.org/conferences/asa15/theme.shtml

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