



Editorial Introduction. Ontologies Aren't Essential

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It is such an honour to welcome readers to this inaugural issue of *Agoriad: A Journal of Spatial Theory*. Each Issue of *Agoriad* emerges in conjunction with the Gregynog Theory School. This is a two-day residential theory school held annually at Gregynog Hall, in Powys, Wales, exploring current theoretical debates in critical geography. In 2023, the theme of the theory school was 'Indigenous Ontologies', which was chosen to progress the decolonising conversation taking place within geographic thought, as we struggle with legacies of and continued participation in coloniality.

The editorial team has benefited from the momentum started by the 2023 Gregynog Theory School which comprised of an interview, published in this issue (Rose and Pickerill 2024), and five discussions drawing on fourteen key readings (published in article 1.1 of this issue). In November 2023, the Wales Graduate School of Social Sciences (WGSSS) hosted a webinar (*Agoriad* 2023) where Dr Deondre Smiles grounded Indigenous understandings of cases such as Turtle Island, and gave perspectives from his paper on the importance of Indigenous geographies (Smiles 2024). These elements played a key part in generating the call for papers resulting in this Issue.

As geographers attempt to decolonise worldviews and mindsets, Indigenous thinkers have explained the radical anti-colonial praxis existing within their cosmologies, place-thought, and life-ways. Indigenous thought inevitably challenges systemic coloniality and can shift paradigms for all of us. The intention of this Issue is to uplift decolonial scholarship. Whilst we reckon with our continued complicity in structures that continue to exploit and dispossess Indigenous peoples, we strive to contribute to the transformation of academic thought, through genuine attempts to decolonise.

The editorial team has been delighted with the breadth of critical thought that we have received. The submissions serve as a remarkable response to the questions and cautions that emerged from the 2023 Gregynog Theory School and were laid out in our call for papers. One issue that all the articles address concerns how normative understandings of both 'Indigeneity' and 'ontology' maintain a persistent essentialising gaze, one that is consistent with a colonial categorising abstraction. This constant tendency to essentialise has been considered by Indigenous scholars to be an 'epistemic violence' (Hunt 2014: 29). So, first it will be necessary to define our key terms centring Indigenous definitions.

Euro-Western thought has continued to essentialise Indigenous peoples through an understanding of indigeneity tied to genetics, biology, ancestry and, of course, territory. This understanding is deeply contested by Indigenous scholars themselves (TallBear 2013). In this Issue, we follow multiple Indigenous scholars and activists in understanding Indigenous identities to be complex social, cultural and political identities, formed in resistance to the dominant structures of settler colonialism (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2017; Tuck & Yang 2012). We capitalise the term Indigenous throughout this Issue because it is an identity name. It is a recognition that Indigenous peoples are political communities with the right to self-determination.

'Ontology suggests something essential', warned our call for papers. Discussions at the theory school questioned if it was possible to name distinct ontologies, identify them, and their capacity to challenge colonial knowledge production without essentialising; without creating categories, boundaries and binaries between 'theirs' and 'ours'. Many of the submissions here problematise these discussions. The five papers, two book reviews, and an audio arts piece that constitute this special issue, explore Indigenous ontologies that challenge the colonial perspective that essentialises

Indigenous ontologies. Primarily featuring PhD and early career researchers, the works in this issue stretch into the conflicted space of academia, in order to use Indigenous thought to directly challenge and critique academic normative ways of theorising. As Vanessa Watts suggests to us, '[t]he epistemological-ontological removes the how and why out of the what (Watts 2013: 24, original italics)'. Where Euro-Western theory persists in defining ontologies as static descriptions of what 'is', many Indigenous ontologies cannot be separated from embodied, lived, and practiced life-ways. As such, Indigenous ontologies are living; they adapt and transform and exist in relation (Byrd 2019; Coulthard & Simpson 2016; Hunt 2014).

Agoriad translates as 'openings' and is the title of Hywel Griffiths' poem, commissioned for this journal. It contains a perfect image for this issue. He writes: 'and the door that should be opened / has swollen in its frame' (Griffiths, this issue 1.2: 1). This resonates with challenges highlighted in this introduction, where relational and transformative understandings (opened) are beset by stuck, static, essential (swollen) understandings. 'Politics is Hard: An interview with Professor Jenny Pickerill', printed in this issue, expands in what ways Indigenous thought can aid the transformation of Euro-Western traditions, moving beyond a recognition of difference and into an application. The interview, recorded at the 2023 Gregynog Theory School, also takes us through the anarchic activism which has informed so much of her work. She illustrates the patronising stereotype that exudes from settler-coloniality, through the prescription of what Indigenous life-ways should look like. She illustrates this modality by describing a settler critique of Indigenous use of modern renewable energies, because this practice, through the settler gaze, contradicts traditional sacred use of land. Similarly, Pickerill describes the legislation around hunting Dugong in Queensland, Australia, which only legalises the use of a spear rather than firearms. This assumption of representation, Pickerill says, 'locks [Indigenous people] into that colonial past' (Pickerill & Rose, this issue 1.10: 9) This fundamentally misunderstands that Indigenous ontologies are dynamic, place-based and relational, making assumptions about ontologies that constrain the community to a particular historic imagination.

Pickerill's paper in this issue, 'Unsettling Geography: Enacting the Politics of Indigenous Ontologies', expands on this discussion. The article emphasises the necessity of integrating Indigenous ontologies into the discipline of geography, positing that these perspectives fundamentally challenge Eurocentric frameworks and colonial practices. While contemporary geography has moved towards more interconnected and relational understandings, there remains a significant need to prioritise Indigenous perspectives and confront the lingering effects of colonialism. Again, this contains a critique of ontology as essentialising, as Indigenous ontologies are characterised as diverse, context-specific, and inherently complex. What is revealed is the necessity of a deeper engagement from geographers that transcends mere acknowledgement of difference. The title of Pickerill's paper is itself representative of the dynamic and renewing quality of Indigenous ontologies in their capacity to unsettle. It highlights the importance of disrupting traditional power dynamics and the ongoing impact of settler colonialism. This process is described as both uncomfortable and transformative, requiring geographers to re-evaluate how knowledge is produced and shared. The call is for a more humble and place-focused approach that acknowledges local struggles and intricate relationships, moving away from grand narratives that often marginalise Indigenous perspectives. This appreciation for the power of small-scale

action divulges Pickerill's partiality to the anarchic activism which she discusses at length in her interview.

Alice Essam gives us a thought-provoking paper which brings a considerable level of detail to the more theoretical discussions that are prominent in this edition. Her paper, "'Not Just Plants, but Also Plants": A Political Ontology of *Pohã Nãna*, the Medicinal Plants of the Guaraní-Kaiowá', invites us into the deep consideration and political implication of plants being spiritual leaders (*tekoaruvicha*). The Guaraní-Kaiowá's medicinal plant knowledge is embedded in their cosmology, where plants are much more than material entities; they embody spiritual forms, rooted in complex metaphysical relationships. Essam's description of Amerindian cosmologies, which includes the Guaraní-Kaiowá, reveals the agency of plants. They are 'ascribed personhood and related to as kin' (Essam, this issue 1.6: 13). This worldview contrasts starkly with Euro-Western ontologies, and she particularly describes the threat that comes from the 'unsustainable rationality of agribusiness' (Essam, this issue 1.6: 13). Euro-Western continue to erase the cosmological and spiritual significance of plants, reducing them to materialist or biochemical objects that can be analysed for medicinal potential and used as pharmaceutical resource.

While geography's ontological turn re-animated more-than-human agency, and reduced anthropocentric understandings, Essam's paper highlights a continued limitation of ontological framings. That is, ontologies continue to be associated with the theoretical, and struggle to include the cosmological. Quoting Sarah Hunt, she reiterates, 'Indigeneity "is not just an idea," it is alive, embodied and relational involving humans and nonhumans, land and place' (Essam, this issue 1.6: 4). As has been discussed, the use of the term ontological can be limiting, particularly when it is understood as the 'way things are' – a presumption that implies a static and therefore essentialising understanding of the term. Essam implores us to remember the multiplicity of ontologies, Indigenous and other. There is not a singular Indigenous ontology that can be used to decolonise Euro-Western thought; ontologies are uniquely place-based, dynamic and living.

Matthew Gravlin's paper, 'To Forsake Becoming: Indigenous Ontologies, Land Defence, and the Resistance at Standing Rock', reflects on the jeopardy of co-optation. Gravlin argues that the logic of possession is both necessary for challenging neoliberal infrastructures and considered incommensurable with Indigenous ontologies. He exposes throughout the paper how neoliberalism is capable of mirroring and absorbing Indigenous practice to suit its purpose. Neoliberalism is itself an unstable set of ideas, dynamic and flexible to suit its purpose. Gravlin explores how Euro-Western knowledge systems have appropriated and commodified Indigenous ways of being and particularly explores neoliberalism's retreat from state intervention favouring governance through decentralised, adaptive networks. He describes Indigenous resilience that 'thrive[s], not by taking preventative action against threats, but through exposure and adaptation to them' (Gravlin, this Issue 1.7:7). This troubles the relationship with neoliberalism: if resilience requires exposure to threat, then threat is a necessary partner of resilience, and neoliberalism becomes a constructive challenge to Indigeneity.

What is more, the reverse is discussed through The Standing Rock protests of 2016. As Indigenous mobilisations resist and attack neoliberal infrastructures, 'the same forces absorb Indigenous assemblages to boost their evolutionary fitness' (Gravlin, this issue 1.7: 10). As such, Gravlin

argues, Indigenous resistance cannot ‘transform Indigenous people’s relationship to the colonial state’, nor does it ‘challenge colonial power or free-market capitalism’ (Gravlin, this Issue 1.7: 11). Instead, the adaptive capacities of Indigenous peoples are constructed as exemplary and are co-opted as a further tool for creating adaptive and resilient neoliberal systems.

Gravlin’s contribution argues for ‘specific, nation-based articulations of a possessing, autonomous subject’ (Gravlin, this Issue 1.7: 13) as a necessary Indigenous perspective for the task of anti-colonial struggle and particularly in resistance to neoliberalism. For Gravlin, the rejection of possession (because possession only replicates Indigenous domination) manifests from a static understanding of Indigenous ontologies. In this way, Indigenous ontologies are constructed as ‘alternatives to modernist scriptures’, and this carries the risk of ‘creating and deepening an essential divide’ (Gravlin, this Issue 1.7: 13).

Cole Virk’s paper, ‘Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Tourism: The Pattern of Exploitation, Assimilation and Erasure’, examines the continuous reconstruction of coloniality. The article explores Indigenous tourism, particularly focusing on the Seminole and Miccosukee nations of so-called Florida, USA, and how tourism perpetuates settler control over Indigenous communities. Virk argues that despite the potential for economic agency, Indigenous tourism often reinforces capitalist, neoliberal values and assimilation pressures, aligning Indigenous livelihoods within a Western capitalist framework. This entrenches dependency on Western ideals of progress, eroding traditional knowledge and reinforcing settler structures. Virk adopts settler colonial theory to explore the normalisation of colonial power dynamics that contribute to assimilating Indigenous communities to the dominant society by repackaging Indigenous culture. Through this process, Indigenous people are cast as exotic or archaic, thus binding Indigenous being to romanticised and stereotyped modalities.

The agency of place is a strong theme throughout the submissions to this issue. Rachel Solnick’s paper, ‘Cultivating Diasporist Ontologies: Identity-Based Agrarianism and the Practices of Anti-Colonial Place-making’, again echoes aspects of Pickerill’s argument. Solnick explores how Indigenous perspectives see places as active participants in relational dynamics, possessing their own agency and influencing human behaviour. Her concept of ‘diasporist ontologies’ suggests that place needs to be thought as specific ‘ways of being’ that draw on histories of tradition and cultural practice alongside the transformative influence of the specific context.

Resonant with Indigenous identities, diasporist identities are explored as anti-colonial identities transcending national boundaries, particularly within movements like the Black Radical Tradition, and Jewish Radical Diasporism. These identities are non-territorial, anti-assimilationist, and anti-nationalist, focusing on continuous transformation rather than fixed identities. The interplay of diasporist and Indigenous ontologies reveals a shared understanding of identity shaped by histories of migration, displacement, and cultural production. Solnick explains that both diasporist and indigenous ontologies ‘carry previous relationships with place with them, holding them as part of their being as they come into new land and place-making’ (Solnick, this Issue 1.9: 11). She argues that the ontological is inseparable from active cultural practice, and illustrates this with case studies within identity-based agrarianism that cultivate belonging and liberation through active place-making.

Practices that deepen and reveal the specific agency of places are also explored through the audio artwork of Cairi Jacks in this Issue: 'Listening to the land: Exploring Indigenous place-thought through eco-somatic art'. Jacks has designed a piece to allow listeners to come into deep relation with and witness the specific agency of place. She intends to reclaim something of this situated relational practice in order to challenge Western, mechanistic views of nature rooted in Cartesian dualism, which separate life from nonlife. The artwork invites a decolonised perspective that recognises land as a living entity.

Drawing from Indigenous Studies and the field of eco-somatic art, Jacks' work is influenced by Watts' (2013) concept of 'Indigenous place-thought', which understands the Earth as animate, with human and non-human agencies intertwined through the land's vitality. This shift aligns with Indigenous scholars' emphasis on grounded relationality, advocating for interconnected, reciprocal relationships with the Earth, in contrast to viewing land as mere property or resource. Jacks highlights that reconnecting with the land is necessary for addressing colonial histories and contemporary ecological crises.

We are so grateful to have an art-based submission that serves as a practical exploration of the themes discussed variously within the Issue. What is more, Jacks enables us to bring these practices back to these Welsh lands, Cymru: the lands she calls home. Jacks is conscious not to co-opt Indigenous practice; instead, she explores how embracing Indigenous frameworks can transform our feelings and behaviours toward the natural world. She suggests that nurturing this kind of relational consciousness can inspire new, anti-colonial ways of being, encouraging us to perceive the land not as an inert backdrop but as an active, animate collaborator in our shared existence.

The book reviews in this Issue bring our attention to examples of Indigenous reclamation, preservation and practice. Alice Essam reviews *Medicinal Plants: Empowerment, Land and Memory of the Guaraní -Kaiowá* [Pohã Ñana: Ñanombarete, Tekoha, Guaraní ha Kaiowá Arandu Rehegua], by Paulo Basta, Islândia Sousa, Aparecida Benites and Ananda Bevacqua (2020), which documents traditional plant knowledge and discusses a detailed political-ecology. Aled Singleton reviews the classic decolonial text *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986). Singleton relays Ngũgĩ's descriptions of Indigenous languages and highlights Ngũgĩ's view that language informs our very being. The violence experienced by the erasure of Indigenous language is related back to the Welsh context by Singleton, and the deep losses and cultural reclamations of Welsh language taking place. Both reviews illustrate colonial threat and uplift Indigenous knowledge.

In Zoe Todd's 2016 paper, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: "Ontology" is Just Another Word for Colonialism', she reminded us that drawing on Indigenous thought must be done with a duty of care and attention to the peoples on whose shoulders we stand. This is not to say that we cannot draw on Indigenous thought, just that we must do so in a way that continues to uplift, acknowledge, and respect its thinkers. Her central plea is that we do not co-opt Indigenous thought. Equally important to recognising the legacies of the Indigenous thought that we draw on is addressing the coloniality that may consider that there is a static 'theirs' that can be appropriated. Instead, we are reminded that Indigenous ontologies comprise '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)’ (Todd 2016: 17).

We must understand that there is no static, essentialising Indigenous ontology to be co-opted. The discussions at the 2023 Gregynog Theory School, and our call for papers for this inaugural issue of the journal, repeated normative (read colonial) framings of Indigenous ontologies. This is challenged (if not thoroughly rebuked) in the contributions to this Issue. The central learning is this: ontologies are not essential.

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Author’s Contributions

Rachel Solnick: lead on conceptualisation and original draft. Aled Singleton: conceptualisation and supporting the original draft.

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A Journal of Spatial Theory

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