Unsettling Geography: Enacting the Politics of Indigenous Ontologies

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Indigenous ontologies are multiple, place-specific, fluid, irreducible, and complex. The recognition that multiple ontologies exist, overlap, and interact, should unsettle geographical disciplinary thought. Using the praxis of 'unsettling' this article examines how Indigenous ontologies critically challenge how relationalities, place, and knowledge production are often understood by geographers. Drawing on Black, Indigenous, Asian and Latinx geographical scholarship, it argues for different ways of 'doing' geography that enable the transformative practices of resisting colonising university institutions, working beyond critique to advance hopeful alternatives, promoting (and working through the complex implications of) self-determination, and advocating for multispecies justice.

Mae ontolegau brodorol yn niferus, yn perthyn i leoedd penodol, yn amhendant, yn anostyngadwy, ac yn gymhleth. Dylai'r gydnabyddiaeth bod sawl ontoleg yn bodoli, yn gorgyffwrdd ac yn rhyngweithio, siglo syniadaeth ddisgyblaethol ddaearyddol. Gan ddefnyddio'r arfer o 'siglo', mae'r erthygl hon yn trin a thrafod sut mae ontolegau brodorol yn herio'n feirniadol y modd y mae perthynoldeb, lleoedd a chynhyrchu gwybodaeth yn aml yn cael eu deall gan ddaearyddwyr. Gan dynnu ar ysgolheictod daearyddol Du, Brodorol, Asiaidd a Latinx, mae'r erthygl yn dadlau o blaid gwahanol ffyrdd o 'wneud' daearyddiaeth, sy'n hwyluso arferion trawsnewidiol o wrthsefyll sefydliadau prifysgol gwladychol, gweithio y tu hwnt i feirniadaeth i hyrwyddo dewisiadau amgen llawn gobaith, hyrwyddo (ac ymdrin â goblygiadau cymhleth) hunan-benderfyniad, a siarad o blaid cyfiawnder amlrywogaethol.

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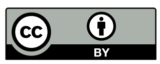

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous ontologies should deeply unsettle Anglo-Eurocentric (and other forms of colonial) geographies (Todd 2016). An ontology is a way of knowing what exists, of perceiving and interpreting the world and its reality. Indigenous ontologies generate knowledges and ways of being that contest a Cartesian understanding of the world. While contemporary human geography has long abandoned dualisms in favour of more fluid, relational and interdependent understandings of the world, there is much work still to be done to centre Indigenous geographies, actively challenge ongoing colonialism, and work with multiple ontologies (Cameron at al. 2014; Smiles 2024). This article outlines what challenges Indigenous ontologies bring to the discipline of geography, and how geographers should heed the call for political action and decolonisation. Examining how Indigenous ontologies unsettle and disrupt some geographical knowledges and practices reveals the risks of colonial appropriation and knowledge extraction, of how 'difference' is conceived and valued, and the utility and problems of identifying universalism or commonalities (de Leeuw & Hunt 2018).

Indigenous ontologies are multiple, place-specific, fluid, irreducible, and complex (Whyte 2018; McGregor 2018). They cannot be reduced to a technical or artefactual additions to dominant approaches, nor can they be employed as an additional perspective that resolves the limitations of Anglo-Eurocentric and colonially shaped geographies. If ontologies are merely considered as forms of 'difference' they are easy to dismiss, assimilate or reduce to their own mythic unities (Reid & Sieber 2020). Seeking to extract elements from Indigenous ontologies, for example, to rethink the culture-nature dualism, without attending to the deep political implications of Indigeneity, reduces and confines its possibilities and power. This selective engagement is also a form of appropriation and colonisation of Indigenous knowledge. It is vital, therefore, that geographers engage with Indigenous ontologies in conceptual, political, and practical ways.

This engagement with Indigenous ontologies should be further complicated by acknowledging that many people already navigate multiple ontologies (it is not a dualistic framework of Indigenous versus Anglo-Eurocentric ontologies). This does not mean, however, that it is necessarily possible nor indeed desirable to seek to translate or equate between different ontologies. de la Cadena (2010) argues that plural worlds are not commensurable – we must live with the acknowledgement of pluriversality and resist the desire to 'resolve' differences between ontologies into a singular way of understanding the world. In other words, engaging with Indigenous ontologies is not about fully translating, knowing, and understanding everything about these ontologies; rather, the political point is for geographers to acknowledge that we live in a world of plural ontologies, the tensions between and navigation of which offer us insight into the possibility of living differently, better understanding what it means to be human, and multispecies justice (Hunt 2014; Pellow 2016). Central to this is a need to work with the unknowable (that outsiders can never fully know Indigenous ontologies) while advocating for political changes that support the right of Indigenous ontologies to persist and have material presence in the world. This advocacy may involve forms of 'co-becoming' (Bawaka Country et al. 2016), self-determination, or asserting land or resource ownership privileges. This clashes with some anthropological approaches which seek to verify the detail and veracity of Indigenous ontologies in order to construct a universal understanding of

humanity (see Viveiros de Castro's 1998 discussion of the concept of Amerindian perspectivism).

As geographers have long explored how knowing about the world is embodied and materialised in ways of being, and consequently expressed through practices, we are ideally positioned to work with Indigenous ontologies productively. As Blaser (2014) argues, ontologies are a way of worlding, but it is only in how they become enacted, practised, and performed that they become political (see also Clément's 2017 examination of embodied Māori ontologies). It is in this enactment that geographers can (and already are) politically advocating for change in the academy and the world. It is in this political enactment, therefore, that Indigenous ontologies are unsettling the academic discipline of geography.

Using the praxis of 'unsettling' disciplinary thought (building on Meehan et al. 2023), this paper examines how relational geographies are unsettled by Indigenous ontologies, particularly in acknowledging the agency of place, that everything cannot become knowable, and the inseparability of epistemologies from ontologies. Relationality works best when it is generated through what Barker and I have conceptualised as 'doings together in place' (Barker & Pickerill 2020) – engaged, careful, empirical research through practices and lived experiences that unsettle assumptions about what it is possible to know, and instead builds relations through 'doings'. Doing geography differently generates transformative practices that challenge the coloniality of our university institutions, advocate for and support hopeful alternatives, work for self-determination and promote multispecies justice. Central to this process is engaging in the specifics of place, practices and lived experiences, and how as researchers we must get embroiled in the complex 'doings' of Indigenous ontologies. I conclude by reflecting on the possibilities this unsettling enables, while being cautious of the risks of engaging with Indigenous ontologies in ongoing colonial, extractive, and violent ways.

UNSETTLING GEOGRAPHIES

Unsettling can be uncomfortable, disturbing, and disconcerting (Owen et al. 2022). Unsettling generates uncertainty and, by destabilising what is known or claimed, can disrupt conventional norms and assumptions. Processes of unsettling can therefore create the conditions for change (Daley & Wright 2022). The term unsettling is used here to both denote the need for geographers to change how we engage with and produce knowledge, but also in how it directly seeks to subvert how settler colonialism persists – which shapes so much of contemporary Indigenous lived experience and non-Indigenous privilege. As Meehan et al. (2023: 1537) articulate, 'unsettling is a critical project with multiple registers – as metaphor and actual practice', which are present in methodologies, pedagogies, empirical, and conceptual work. Crucially, unsettling here is understood as a radical intervention which disrupts existing power dynamics and centres 'Indigenous peoples' own articulations of Indigenous-settler relations, their governance, legal and diplomatic orders, and the transformative visions entailed within Indigenous political thought' (Snelgrove et al. 2014: 26).

As Howitt (2020b: 193) so eloquently puts it, 'histories of colonial plunder produced geographies that settler societies take for granted as settled'. Yet settler colonialism is an ongoing form of oppression, denial, and erasure, not a singular historical event, and it is sustained through the ongoing actions of settlers and their institutions – including universities (Daigle 2019). If

colonialism has produced much of what we know about the world, then to unsettle colonialism geographers must challenge and rework much existing geographical knowledge. What was stolen, taken, and denied from Indigenous people still very much exists, but it is too often viewed by geographers as an appendage, marginal, subaltern and as a distinct worldview, or as diminishing populations, which can be either ignored completely as inconsequential or subsumed into a unified category of 'different others'. While Howitt (2020b: 204) acknowledges the need to retain understandings of 'the grand strategies of power, and the significance of key concepts such as class, gender and power', geographers must abandon grand narratives and instead focus on, 'Developing humbler, place-focused narratives in which sites are relationally connected and local struggles for justice, equity and sustainability are contextualised and woven into connected narratives is part of the task of unsettling the colonising research enterprise' (Howitt 2020b: 204).

This task is 'matched by a conceptual imperative … of tangling conceptually, methodologically and ethically with messy complexities through humble, contextual, embodied and emplaced theoretical work' (Howitt 2020b: 205). For Howitt this starts from understanding coexistence and 'of becoming-together-in-place as the common ground of human experience' (Howitt 2020b: 205). This is no easy task and requires unsettling conventional methodologies, ethical practices, and how knowledge is shared and reproduced.

Like Howitt I have always felt unsettled by the idea of working with Indigenous ontologies because I am a white English woman who has no family ties to colonialised lands. My ties of responsibility are instead as a benefactor of colonialism, and those responsibilities are ongoing in how I am privileged through a British passport, global mobility, access to cheap goods, and a high standard of living, built and sustained through ongoing settler colonialism, its associated oppression, the state, and racial capitalism. As such, it is, and definitely should be, an unsettling position from which to even seek to talk about Indigenous ontologies. As a geographer I also speak from a discipline built upon a legacy of supporting colonial endeavours through exploration and the extraction of knowledge and resources. These practices persist in the ways many Global North geographers conduct research in, and of, the Global South and Indigenous communities.

But feeling unsettled is not reason enough to avoid engaging in difficult questions about multiple ontologies or Indigenous geographies. This became acutely apparent during my early research with Australian environmentalists where there was largely silence around Indigenous calls for justice. Few environmentalists felt able to even talk about the complexity of Indigenous-environmental relations (Pickerill 2009), and as a result Indigenous demands were subordinated in the quest to 'save nature'. I realised that if I too ignored the existence and importance of Indigenous peoples, especially in Australia, I would contribute to the ongoing colonialism of geography. Therefore, I have deliberately leant into the debates on Indigenous ontologies as an ally in decolonisation efforts and to enact my multiple responsibilities to those my predecessors colonised. This positionality is fraught, uneasy, uncomfortable, and should remain in a state of being unsettled. This is particularly as unsettling colonialism by working with Indigenous communities often requires rather modest quotidian 'backstage and supportive roles' (Steinman 2020: 572), which then also unsettles the hierarchies of academic status.

Indeed, this quest to unsettle geographies is building momentum in the discipline. There has long been a broad recognition within the discipline of the world-shaping power geometries of colonialism and its relations to capitalism, violence, and loss. Much of contemporary geography seeks to make visible not just the history of colonialism but its many on-going implications. Yet there remains a reluctance to actively de-centre non-Indigenous/ settler/ white geographies (de Leeuw & Hunt 2018). The sub-disciplinary concern with Indigenous geographies remains a niche, and there is an urgent need to unsettle this paradigm.

At the heart of contemporary human geography is an acknowledgement that the components of the world as we know it exist *in relation* to each other. Our existence (humans and non-humans) is reliant upon numerous other beings, places, and materials, which actively shape who we are, how we are, and what we do. To understand the world, therefore, requires analysis of these relations, and how these relations co-constitute beings and phenomena. Such an approach rejects the notion of objective individual atomized agency and challenges universalist assumptions about there being fundamental truths about, for example, what it means to be human (Hunt 2014). Instead, a relational geography examines how the world emerges through interdependencies and mutual entanglements, and how these relationalities are shaped by numerous components, often from distant and different places. In basic terms this means that 'everything is always in relationship with everything else' (Kanngieser et al. 2024: 1).

Working with relationalities reveals, for example, how and why capitalism works, and the ways in which consumption practices have been generated across the globe. In understanding co-constitution and interdependences, relationalities also identify commonalities and patterns across and between places. These relations are always dynamic, such that relations 'are always in the process of being made' (Massey 2005: 9). A relational geographies approach not only challenges the existence of any dualisms and associated separations, but details how humans are embedded and emerge with 'nature' and how environments and humans are co-created. This has obvious implications, for example, for how 'natural disasters', 'wilderness', and climate change are understood (Howitt 2020a).

Examining relationalities has been productive in situating humans in and amongst non-human worlds and in identifying numerous forms of responsibility, often across the globe, but also in understanding the limitations to, and disconnections of, such responsibilities in practice (Noxolo et al. 2012). Indigenous ontologies are also deeply relational (Tynan 2021). Despite significant heterogeneity in the details of what is known, by whom, and how that knowledge is shown, there is commonality in Indigenous ontologies of a relational ontology of the interdependences of humans and non-humans, and that in these relationships all entities constitute the world, such that nature is 'sentient, … something that can see, hear, walk and escape' (Carolan 2009: 8).

There are three aspects of relationalities in human geography which Indigenous ontologies unsettle and therefore require further attention: understanding the vitality of place as having agency; that everything cannot become knowable; and that ontologies cannot be considered separately from epistemologies.

First, while place is commonly understood by human geographers as lively, emergent, dynamic, and relational, the agency of place – in how place exerts influence on human actions and social conditions – is too often missed. This

is in part a deliberate move to counteract previous disciplinary paradigms that prioritised environmental determinism, but place agency is much more that this and about mutual constitution not determinism. In Indigenous ontologies, 'more-than-humans and humans co-become *as* place/space, in deep relation to all the diverse co-becomings that also constitute it. Space/place *is* its doings, its beings, its knowings, its co-becomings' (Bawaka Country et al. 2016: 456). Place is an active component in relationalities with 'all beings – human, animal, plant, process, thing or affect' (Bawaka Country et al. 2016: 456). Place has agency in how it relates to us, and therefore there is no place that has meaning absent from its relational connections.

Place in Indigenous ontology is not an object of study but an ever-present member of a wider, more-than-human relational community, with wants and needs of its own and dynamic and unknowable aspects beyond human comprehension (Larsen and Johnson 2012a, 2012b, 2016). As Cree geographer Michelle Daigle argues, the discipline of geography 'requires more dialogue on the ontological underpinnings of place, geographies of responsibility, and land as an animate being imbued with political agency' because, for Indigenous communities, 'place has meaning precisely because of the agency that lives within our ancestral lands, including animal and plant nations' (Daigle 2016: 268). Place is political, it is powerful; place is a conscious being and calls for humans to act in certain ways, it speaks, creates, and teaches (Yates 2021). Therefore, geographers need to engage directly with the political agency and relationality of place, especially when working in a context of decolonisation (Todd 2015).

Second, Indigenous ontologies unsettle the idea that everything can become knowable. There is a danger in seeking to abstract specific knowledges into universalised understandings (of concepts like place) of overwriting the specificity of Indigenous ontologies. As Bawaka Country et al. (2016) argue, there are limits to human perceptions such that we cannot perceive or necessarily understand all the co-becomings that are occurring, but we must trust that they are there because we may be impacted by them in some way. Accepting this unknowability respects the fluidity of Indigenous knowledge. Such knowledge is not a fixed entity which can be consumed and turned into a product for academic knowledge production; it is a living, connecting reference point and 'the future of Indigenous rights and political struggles depend on the ability of Indigenous knowledge to retain its active, mobile, relational nature rather than the fixity it is given in colonial law, stuck at the point of contact with colonizers' (Hunt 2014: 30).

As Viveiros de Castro (1998) and de la Cadena (2010) advocate, respecting the place-based specificities of Indigenous ontologies, and not seeking to equate between the ideas, symbols, or objects in these knowledges with those in Anglo-Eurocentric geographies is crucial politically. There can be no certainty, verifiability, or necessarily clarity of knowledge for Anglo-Eurocentric scholars of Indigenous ontologies, and seeking simple translations can confuse rather than aid understanding. Similarly, Indigenous ontologies cannot easily be appropriated or aligned for political gain. de la Cadena (2010) demonstrates this in examining the differences between environmental arguments against a mine with Indigenous activists' claims. While sometimes these political groups might align (even with different rationales), they can just as easily end up in opposition because of the different relationalities of Indigenous ontologies. The danger here, then, is in reducing Indigenous ontologies to a politically useful position, rather than engaging with their ongoing, emerging, and dynamic complexity. Likewise,

the full extent of this complexity cannot be known by Anglo-Eurocentric geographers, and instead must be trusted as an unknown.

Accepting unknowability leads to two further unsettling realisations: the consequences of plural ontologies and pluriversality, and that relationalities can have purposeful boundaries. The notion that we live in plural worlds – that there are plural ontologies and many people already navigate multiple ontologies – is increasingly accepted by human geographers (Larsen and Johnson 2012a, 2012b, 2016) and as Noxolo argues 'decolonialisation is a process of building towards the pluriversality of knowledge' (Noxolo 2017: 318). This multiplicity makes sense of geographical assemblages and ethnographic identification of 'others' (Blaser 2014). However, this recognition troubles attempts at identifying commonalities that might be necessary in seeking politically progressive action and in determining political agency (Ioris 2020). Pluriversality and unknowability complicate attempts to build common political agencies at scale. At the same time, while in theory 'everything is always in relationship with everything else' (Kanngiser et al. 2024: 1), and therefore there are ongoing processes of transformation and mutation through these relations, in practice politically different ontologies will be articulated as separate to assert political goals, such as political representation or land back (Bawaka Country et al. 2016). There are two processes at play here: that relational thinking is articulated as bounded and bordered for political gain, but also that the lived experiences of Indigenous ontologies are of one that is placed, material, limited and in juxtaposition to, often Anglo-Eurocentric ontologies of settler colonialism. As Cochrane and Arredondo (2005) argue, 'relational thinking implies openness that often belies the *lived-experience* of many' (cited in Bawaka Country et al. 2016: 460). There are political advantages to articulating boundedness and this distinctiveness can reflect a lived experience of contestations between ontologies.

Finally, Indigenous ontologies cannot be considered separately from epistemologies – ontologies are best understood through practice and doings (Wilson 2020). Indigenous ways of knowing are expressed and articulated as ways of being and doing, 'we become tangible proof of our ontology … we are able to show (Do), respectfully and rightfully (Being) what we know (Knowing)' (Martin & Mirraboopa 2003: 210). Indigenous knowledges centralise relationality in epistemological processes, and through embodied, phenomenological, and affective approaches to knowledge production. This shapes how research is conducted just as much as it shapes what research is seeking to understand.

Relationalities, therefore, are central to working with Indigenous ontologies, but also unsettle Anglo Eurocentric methodological and ethical demands. Indigenous scholars require autonomy to develop and work with, and through, Indigenous epistemologies with accountability to Indigenous communities and protocols first and foremost. Indigenous research obviously requires collaboration and interaction with participants in non-extractive ways that are always in process – in relation – and need to remain open-ended and sustained over time. Crucially, these relational engagements also enable the refusal and rejection of involvement in academic research. This refusal of co-becoming is a vital aspect of resurgent Indigenous nationhood which means sometimes it is better not to do the research at all.

Indigenous ontologies, therefore, unsettle Anglo Eurocentric approaches to relationalities by focusing on the agency of place, challenging the notion that

everything can become knowable, by demonstrating that relationalities can have purposeful political and lived boundaries, and in the inseparability of epistemologies from ontologies. The relationalities (and non-relationalities) of Indigenous ontologies disrupt attempts at universalism and the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges for colonial gain. Furthermore, there is a need to value and respect the distinctiveness of Indigenous place-based ontologies given how they are explicitly tied into political calls for the return of Indigenous lands. It is also vital to acknowledge that land rights here are about much more than questions of ownership, but underpin language, culture, and self-determination.

DOINGS

This emphasis on the political implications of Indigenous ontologies and the inseparability of Indigenous ontologies from their epistemologies, requires a focus on how we 'do' geography (Barker & Pickerill 2020). It is through the acts of 'doing' that 'knowing' and 'being' emerge. Doings are engagements with the material world, a sensory embodied experience; 'it is only by walking and singing the land that it is possible to truly know a law and in turn the people who emanate from that land' (Black 2011: 19). Therefore, embodied engagement is required to understand (know) the world, 'specifically, a form of knowing that is based on a recognition (perhaps conceptual, perhaps sensory) of more-than-human agency' (Bawaka Country et al. 2016: 463). Knowledge, therefore, is co-constituted by human doing with these non-human agencies be that place or other entities, a process that Bawaka Country et al. (2013, 2015, 2016) conceptualise as 'co-becoming'. The world can only be known through doings:

> 'Indigenous knowledge also arrives through action from within the world ... epistemology is a practical doing in and with the environment. Epistemology and ontology therefore involve all manner of participations with (non)humans, as well as 'feelings *in*' (emotions) and the 'feel *of*' place (affect and intuition)' (Robertson 2016: 4). Indigenous knowledge is ''verb-based' … [and] conceived as being something that you *do*' in 'relationships with the land' (McGregor 2004: 79).

This understanding of how Indigenous knowledge becomes known unsettles any separation between ontologies and epistemologies, but more importantly unsettles any separation between knowledge and place, and therefore between knowledge and politics. Without interactive and sustained relationships with place, it is not possible to 'know' or understand the world. Tuck and McKenzie (2015) call this 'critical place inquiry'. 'The task of critical place inquiry is to organize itself around commitments to Indigenous' social and political theory—including 'Indigenous sovereignty, refusal, and the non-abstraction of land—not as peripheral points or extra considerations, but as foundational to its praxis' (Tuck & McKenzie 2015: 149).

Knowledge generation is dependent on journeys of ontological *and* epistemological discovery to further understand a living, dynamic, changing environment. This unsettles any academic attempts to distinguish between theory and empirical research, or indeed to construct universal theories bereft of grounding in particular doings in place. It challenges the Anglo Eurocentric impulse to generate meta-theories of the world. An emphasis on doings facilitates the recognition of the vitality of place, and the need for both the return of lands to Indigenous ownership and peopled landscapes (Atchison et al. 2024). In basic terms an emphasis on doings acknowledges

the political imperative for humans to have access to, dwell, and interact with all places.

Geographers need to *do more* than recognize and celebrate place alone, or indeed to acknowledge relational ontologies. There is a risk that such discussions of place, particularly when using more-than-representational approaches, become apolitical. Valuing and understanding place requires critical place inquiry, which as Tuck and McKenzie (2015) make clear, necessitates foundational shifts in how academic knowledge is constructed, produced, and used. The political implications of Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and the emphasis on 'doings' are vital in an academic discipline still shaped by colonial dialectics. Geographers' work should remain assertively political precisely because of this context and doings are a crucial part of this political work.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES

If geographers heed the call to 'do geography differently', and allow ourselves to be unsettled by Indigenous ontologies, then we need to transform geographical thought and practice accordingly. It is now generally accepted in the discipline that we need to recognise Indigenous ontologies for their different ways of being and doing. There are a growing number (albeit still too few) Indigenous and Black geographers, but there remains a disconnect between this recognition and purposeful political practice. In many ways geography as a discipline is stuck in the same political moment as many nation states (especially Canada, Australia and Sweden) that employ *recognition* of difference. These states often seek to reduce the implications of Indigenous calls for sovereignty by adopting approaches of multiculturalism or even assimilation, and fail to grasp the enormity of what transformation should look like in practice.

Indigenous, Black, Latinx and other non-white geographers are explicit about what transformative practices are required: challenging our university institutions' heritage and contemporary practices; working beyond critique to advocate for hopeful alternatives (for example, Thompson 2023); actively participating in decolonial practices beyond the academy to support self-determination; and advocating for multispecies justice.

First, we can begin this process by critically examining the university institutional histories and contemporary practices of where we work. This is two-fold: in reckoning with the colonial heritage and privilege that our institutions have built themselves upon and through which much geographical scholarship is still conceived; and in how those who challenge such structures – particularly Indigenous and Black scholars – are subject to unjust institutional processes that seek to invalidate their research methodologies, knowledges, and writings (Hunt 2014; Locke et al. 2021, 2022; Thunig & Jones 2021). We need, as a discipline, to seek to collectively transform how ethics and research protocols are understood, and how knowledges are peer reviewed and valued. This should extend to how we write – once and for all rejecting any notion of dispassionate objectivity, disembodied critical distance, or balance, and instead embracing how our emotions, positionalities, political intent, collaborations, and collectivitivies inform our research. This requires valuing work that speaks *from within* far more than research which reflects *from above*. Such research is place-based and is entangled with obligations and relationalities (Barker & Pickerill 2023).

Second, while geography has – for many decades now – detailed, demonstrated, and made visible how colonialism and capitalism (often

entwined) have been some of the most destructive and discriminatory forces to shape the world (especially racial capitalism), we have made less progress in identifying and building alternatives (Whyte 2018). There remains an emphasis on critique in the discipline – critique of dominant *and* counter narratives of possibility – that consequently fails to advocate for hopeful alternatives to the status quo. While geographers can determine what is wrong with the world in detail, what we can do about it is often only discussed in a vague single paragraph at the end of a journal article. Elements of geography where more hopeful readings of future pathways are made, such as in work on diverse communities (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), anarchism (Ince & Barrera de la Torre 2024; Véron 2022), eco-villages (Jarvis 2011), new municipalisms (Russell et al. 2022), and Indigenous geographies (Curley & Smith 2024; Pellow 2016), are too often dismissed as overly-optimistic and naïve (Swyngedouw 2009) and positioned as marginal in the discipline. This emphasis on critique works alongside a funder driven desire for research that works at an international scale, which combine to devalue work which might be socially just, ethical, and transformative. Decolonial research, often conducted by Indigenous, Black and BIPOC scholars, can require micro-scale place-based research over extended periods of time (especially to ensure appropriate reciprocal ethical procedures are developed and adhered to) and produces work which tends to challenge the meta-narrative approaches of Anglo-Eurocentric geographical theorists with suggestions for transformative practices, albeit often at a micro-scale.

Third, the detail of what actions are required to support transformation of the discipline are evident in Black, Indigenous and people of colour-led quests for self-determination (McGregor 2018; Howitt 2020a). There is an extensive range of decolonial practices that geographers are encouraged to embrace, including actively supporting land-back claims, reparations (repaying for loss and damage), cultural resurgence (Sultana 2022), and decentralised decision-making that 'are forged in opposition to selective recognition of kinds of modernisation and development projects acceptable to settler-colonial institutions' (Denzin Gergan & Curley 2023: 764). This requires supporting approaches of distributive justice (Sultana 2022), and equitable access to resources like affordable energy-efficient homes (Walton 2023). This is more than allyship or solidarity work, as it requires a radical shift in how, and with whom, geographers work – letting go of control and shifting outcomes, subordinating Anglo-Eurocentric ideas, and prioritising political rather than academic achievements. How to do this in practice is messy and complex, but examples include advocating for regenerative economies and agricultures (Begay 2023; Penniman 2023), which use Indigenous knowledge to manage land and ecologies (Birch 2007). What needs doing has been explicitly articulated by many (especially Indigenous and Black) geographers, but more work is required into *how* these ideas can be put into practice and the role of geographers in these actions.

Finally, but by no means least, being unsettled by Indigenous ontologies also requires geographers to extend our remit of concern for beings to well beyond the human. There has already been significant work in geography in exploring more-than-human worlds and advocating for their inclusion in our research (Greenhough 2014.). Yet this work has not necessarily connected to political practice in the ways articulated by Indigenous scholars (Weber & Barron 2023). If geographers were to acknowledge that water, the Earth itself, and other elements, are living things that require mutual relations of care, and a reciprocal ethics that respects that 'nonhumans have their own agency, spirituality, knowledge and intelligence' (Whyte 2018:

127), we would be closer to a multispecies justice (Pellow 2016; McGregor 2009). This requires understanding what it means to 'live well with Earth' (McGregor 2018) and 'belonging-together-in-Country' (Howitt 2020a: 1).

These transformative practices are required to shift geographers beyond mere recognition of Indigenous ontologies towards purposeful political practice. This requires adopting a position of agonism to the colonial and neoliberal institutions in which we work, decolonising our knowledges, and building new relationships that support self-determination and justice.

CONCLUSION

Geographers must change how we interact with the world. This includes rethinking our epistemologies, methodologies, pedagogies, communities, and political commitments. It includes 'doing' our teaching differently, thinking carefully about which names we use for places and people, citational justice, and spending time building relations in place. Indigenous ontologies can unsettle and disrupt geographical knowledges and practices if geographers engage with them in conceptual, political, and practical ways.

Indeed, the intent in this article has been to demonstrate why geographers should engage with Indigenous ontologies, what this engagement requires in practice, and with what consequences. This has political as much as conceptual outcomes, but at its heart is about 'unsettling the colonising research enterprise' (Howitt 2020b: 204). This unsettling seeks to generate more nuanced and complex geographies that can navigate a world of plural ontologies while retaining analysis of dominant (and often oppressive) power structures which are mobilised via gender, class, heteronormativity, race and so on. While attending to Indigenous ontologies unsettles, for example, how geographers should engage with relationalities and place, it also generates new perspectives, space and praxis, through which human and more-than-human coexistence might be understood and flourish, potentially enabling multispecies justice. Geographers need to 'make space for the enduring politics of struggle on multiple registers – body, home, classroom, park, city, community, region, and world' (Meehan et al. 2023: 1539).

Centring Indigenous geographies builds on decades of disciplinary progress in critically examining intersections of race, power, class, capitalism and colonialism, especially research advanced by Black, Asian, Latinx and Indigenous geographers advocating abolition, self-determination, reparations, and decolonisation. Despite significant work in the last few decades in reconfiguring geographical knowledge and in altering how we *do* geography, there remains a reluctance, as Esson et al. (2017: 384) argue, to de-centre 'white and otherwise privileged groups in the global architecture of knowledge production'. This is a crucial difference between postcolonial theory and decolonial scholarship. A decolonial and Indigenous-centred framing requires radical conceptual shifts in the discipline, being led by the work of Black, Asian, Latinx and Indigenous scholars, and an unsettling of existing structures, institutions and praxis to facilitate self-determination.

Understanding the importance of Indigenous ontologies in this broader context situates it amongst the numerous calls from geographers to do geographical research and teaching differently: 'Geography's reckoning is also a resurgence, emerging alongside Indigenous struggles to protect land relations; abolition movements linking state violence to environmental racism's slow violence; and queer, trans and crip-led movements centred on care, kinship and transformative justice' (Vasudevan et al. 2023: 1730). This requires much more than a theoretical recognition of pluriversality and

instead necessitates efforts to purposefully transform our disciplinary practices. This includes challenging university institutional practices, moving beyond critique, advocating self-determination (and interrogating how this manifests materially and again with what further implications), and extending agency and justice to more-than-human worlds. As Daigle and Sundberg argue, 'the discipline of geography will retain its Eurocentricity, coloniality and whiteness unless all geographers begin to do the anti-racist and decolonial work historically done by Indigenous, people of colour, women and queer faculty and students' (Daigle & Sundberg 2017: 251).

This process of unsettling will likely be uncomfortable, challenging, and emotional for many geographers because it is an ontological struggle of epic proportions which seeks to fundamentally shift how the world is known, who we are, what the world is and what we do. It is also a space in which geographers will encounter refusal and resistance – ruptures which will unsettle expectations and assumptions (Mahanty et al. 2023). This notion of a possibility of refusal is of course unsettling. We should dwell with these contradictions, to work through the practicalities of complicated lives (human and non-human) in place and in relation.

As Indigenous ontologies require new relations of us, they also generate new responsibilities. This will also be unsettling and uncomfortable. While it is not possible to decolonise geography *per se* (because we exist in a colonising context), we can *become decolonising* and focus on how we nourish, create, and mobilise decolonising processes. Indigenous ontologies unsettle many existing approaches and assumptions, requiring radically new praxis in academia that challenge how, for example, difference *per se* is understood. We should take seriously the call '*nothing about us without us'* that demands always being in relation with those with whom we research.

We can work with Indigenous ontologies to question the authority, purpose, and implications of geographical knowledges without equating, extracting or rarefying Indigenous knowledge. Indeed, even just acknowledging that there are politically important limits to the relationality of ontologies could have significant implications for geographers per se. Here the lessons we should be drawing from Indigenous ontologies are not necessarily the specifics of Indigenous knowledge, but the possibilities offered by a pluriversality of knowledge itself, and how vital it is that all research is conducted through relations (while understanding the limits of relationalities), doings, and the transformative practices these generate.

Ethics and consent

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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