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To Forsake Becoming: Indigenous Ontologies, Land Defence, and the Resistance at Standing Rock

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ABSTRACT

In critical Indigenous and decolonial theory, grounded normativity is proclaimed to not only defy settler and extractive colonialism, but to liberate humanity from the violence of modernity. Whereas possession is understood to replicate the domination of Indigenous peoples, their ontological attachment to the earth is argued to disrupt colonial power relations. Close examination reveals that this conceptualization aligns well with the hegemonic status of neoliberalism. If Indigenous lifeworlds exist as webs of reciprocal relations, they may in fact inform rather than resist the systems that govern by new and evolving means. This appears to put Indigenous protests in a paradoxical bind. The question of what, exactly, Indigenous peoples are fighting to defend is obscured by new materialist theories of more-than-human becoming and exchange. In this article, I seek to show that the attributes used to typify Indigenous peoples, ontologically, feed back into and are represented by the forces that colonize them, including the critical infrastructure of the oil and gas industry. I argue that in the resistance at Standing Rock, however, another expression of indigeneity is clear. Here, and in other examples like it, we find a formidable opponent that acts on their political agency commensurate with Indigenous humanism.

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CRYNODEB

Yng nghyd-destun theori brodorol a dadwladychu, ystyrir bod normadedd seiliedig ar le (grounded normativity) nid yn unig yn herio gwladychiaeth ymsefydlwyr a gwladychiaeth echdynnol, ond hefyd yn rhyddhau dynolryw rhag y trais sy'n gysylltiedig â modernedd. Er y deellir mai atgynhyrchu arglwyddiaeth dros bobloedd brodorol a wna meddiannu'r tir, ceir dadl bod cysylltiad ontolegol y bobl frodorol i'r ddaear yn tarfu ar gysylltiadau pŵer trefedigaethol. Drwy ymchwilio'n fanylach, gwelir bod y cysyniad hwn yn cyd-fynd yn dda â'r statws hegemonaidd sydd ynghlwm wrth neoryddfrydiaeth. Drwy hynny felly, ymddengys mai paradocsaidd yw protestiadau brodorol. Mae'r cwestiwn o beth, yn union, mae pobloedd brodorol yn ymladd i'w amddiffyn yn cael ei dywyllu gan theoriau materoliaethol newydd o ddod yn greaduriaid y tu hwnt i fodau dynol a chyfnewid yn eu mysg. Yn yr erthygl hon, rwy'n ceisio dangos bod y rhinweddau a ddefnyddir i nodweddu pobl frodorol, yn ontolegol, yn bwydo'n ôl i'r grymoedd sy'n eu gwladychu, ac yn cael eu cynrychioli gan y grymoedd sy'n eu gwladychu, gan gynnwys seilwaith dyngedfennol y diwydiant olew a nwy. Fy nadl i, fodd bynnag, yw ffurf arall o fynegi cynhenoldeb yw'r gwrthwynebu a welir yn Standing Rock. Yn yr enghraifft hon, ac mewn enghreifftiau tebyg, fe ddown ni o hyd i wrthwynebydd aruthrol sy'n gweithredu yn ôl ei alluedd gwleidyddol mewn modd gyfled â dyneiddiaeth frodorol.

KEYWORDS

Keywords: neoliberalism; #NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline); ontology; possession; posthumanism; resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon today for researchers to engage with Indigenous thought and practices in a reparative manner. Much of social science and the humanities are trying to decolonize as they reckon with their complicity in colonial projects. The emergence of settler colonialism invariably relied on the dispossession of territory and relationships vital to Indigenous peoples. This was a process indebted to the modern episteme. The New World of the Americas was founded on the ideology that its original inhabitants were incapable of transforming nature into privately owned property. This made their survival uncertain in the minds of European colonizers (Tallbear 2017: 181). Instead, Indigenous peoples became objects of intellectual curiosity and signified key insight into an ancient past (Reardon and Tallbear 2012). This dynamic has long been pointed out by Indigenous thinkers. In one of the inaugural works of Indigenous Studies, Sioux philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. (1969: 78–100) declared that academia was unconcerned with the needs of Indigenous peoples. And it was Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 1) who provoked the academy to decolonize methodologies, stating that 'the word itself, research, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary'. If before there was an 'Indian problem' posed to the expansion and legitimacy of settler colonial states, though, Indigenous peoples are more recently framed in terms of their futural potential (Tsing 2008: 397). For many critical scholars it is their ontologies, which unite nature and culture metaphysically (Descola 2013: 9), that account for their persistence through centuries of hardship and ability to sustain a mutually beneficial relationship with the Earth and myriad nonhuman entities. These alternative ontologies are thought to reflect the more real entanglements that modernity has served to abstract. It is only with artificial categories, binaries and distinctions, that the modernist paradigm has instigated a global ecocide.

This is not to say, importantly, that colonial powers have not pursued other methods of trying to extinguish Indigenous presence, but that the terms of engagement are undergoing significant ontopolitical changes. The valorization of indigeneity by Western academics has preserved a colonial system of knowledge production. The work of David Chandler and Julian Reid, in particular their coauthored book, *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (2019), is seminal for its deconstruction of indigeneity as a model for living in today's world. It is also incisive for its critique of 'becoming', a concept that is in vogue among critical theorists. A 'world of becoming', as William Connolly (2011: 149) describes, 'is marked by an uncertain degree of openness'. It is 'reducible to neither linear causality nor providential design' (Connolly 2011: 149). To 'become Indigenous', argue Chandler and Reid (2019: 1), is a means to reflect this openness. They see that 'indigeneity is increasingly becoming a crucial marker for imagining new modes of living and governing in our contemporary condition of climate crises and economic uncertainty' (Chandler and Reid 2019: 1). Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts (2013: 25) explains that in Indigenous cosmology, human beings were the last to arrive on earth, thus entering an existence dependent on a multiplicity of beings that requires an ethic of reciprocity to cohere. These forms of immersive reality cannot be denied to Indigenous peoples. I want to suggest, however, that with an increased ethnographic surveillance of ontology, there has been a corresponding emphasis on the essential difference and non-possessive constitution of Indigenous peoples. This emphasis bespeaks the pervasive insecurity they are exposed to by virtue of colonization.

This has important implications for the protracted struggles of Indigenous peoples to reclaim their homelands. Land ownership, for example, is sometimes claimed by Indigenous peoples themselves to be a categorical mistake (Reid 2019a: 3). It is thus possible to read efforts to defend Indigenous territories from settler and extractive colonialism as contradictory. It might appear that Indigenous peoples advance a pair of incongruous claims: 'that they are the original and natural owners of the land that has been stolen from them, and that the earth is not something in which any one person or group of people can have exclusive proprietary rights' (Nichols 2020: 6). According to some activists advocating for the return of colonized land to Indigenous peoples: 'we aren't asking for just the ground, or for a piece of paper that allows us to tear up and pollute the earth. We want the system that is land to be alive so that it can perpetuate itself, and perpetuate us as an extension of itself' (Longman et al. 2020: unpaginated). Whereas possession is antithetical to Indigenous ways of being and instrumental to the daily violence inflicted by colonialism, relational ontologies are generative, and offered as antagonistic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism.

Problems arise, however, when in this day and age indigeneity affirms evolving rationalities of governance, and in turn is complementary to the very regimes that colonize Indigenous peoples. Because Indigenous ways of being are seen to radically decentre the human among webs of earth-wide animation, the perceived reduction of agency aligns well with the ethos of the neoliberal era, which seeks to curtail human influence in a world deemed alien and no longer, 'for us' (Chandler 2019: 697). In their previous collaboration from which we can trace their reproach of 'becoming Indigenous', Chandler and Reid (2016: 2) explain that the neoliberal subject is one whose autonomy and self-determination are a threat to be mitigated. It is only by cultivating closer attachments that the true nature of reality can be experienced. My aim in this article is to question the engagement with alternative ontologies by examining this notion of the dispossessed self that pervades neoliberal philosophy, and its potential consequences for the political geography of pipeline infrastructure and resistance. Representing a retreat from modernist understandings of political subjectivity, neoliberalism functions to produce subjects freed from the desire to transform the world, and with that, the tools that might empower their destiny. Neoliberalism does not perceive the dispossessed to be source of political contestation. They instead reflect a greater metaphysical attunement. The emancipatory projects of Indigenous peoples to seek 'life beyond the state' (Corntassel 2021) and be rid of possession are inscribed within governance and called for as necessary. And I argue, therefore, 'amidst the ever-changing terrain of contemporary shape-shifting colonization' (Corntassel 2021: 73), that Indigenous ontologies have become undifferentiated from the systems that maintain colonial power today.

My intention is not to suggest that neoliberalism literally mirrors Indigenous responsibilities to relations according to specific, nation-based customs and laws. I am instead interested in the reduction of indigeneity to a process. Although there are strands of Indigenous thought that express remarkable synergy with 'a neoliberal philosophy of complex adaptive systems' (Walker and Cooper 2011: 144) insofar as they convey socio-material entanglements to be an ontological category, my focus here is not on a critique of this thought. The base on which Chandler and Reid (2019: 82) 'stand against this ontopolitical demand' to become Indigenous is provided, in part, by Indigenous scholars who are equally as sceptical, and disdain how

indigeneity is assimilated into the Western imagination, its discourses of knowledge and governance (Chandler and Reid 2019). In my attempt to add to the refusals they issue, my concern is with what Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper (2011: 157) identify as the ability of neoliberalism 'to metabolize all countervailing forces and inoculate itself against critique'. It is via abstraction and appropriation that neoliberalism suppresses the critique levelled against it by Indigenous humanism.

Although my approach to this problematic is theoretical, I will highlight the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests, not as a fully developed case study, but as a way to illustrate the surface of contact that Indigenous ontologies share with neoliberal philosophies, and more crucially how Indigenous resistance transcends this mutual terrain. While resistance to resource extraction has elicited various articulations of more-than-human becoming from Indigenous and decolonial theory, I want to show that from the perspective of the oil and gas industry too, this resistance could be seen as part of a self-producing living system, of recursive interaction that is 'anything but autonomous' (Escobar 2018: 171). In doing so, I consider the benefit of working from a consciously abstract level. Some analyses of Indigenous ontologies will speak to specific traditions in deeply meaningful ways, and in ways that draw from the lived experiences that inform Indigenous Studies scholarship. Certainly there is more to learn from Indigenous ontologies and literatures than I offer here. I contend, as will be evident in what follows, that by raising the degree of abstraction and putting the strategies of neoliberalism on display, it can be interrogated from a clandestine position that confounds its blueprint for entrapment. The #NoDAPL movement is important, furthermore, because it exemplifies the Indigenous subject as possessing, powerful, and as a formidable political opponent.

POSSESSION

To begin this analysis it will be important to index some of the arguments made against Indigenous possession. Shiri Pasternak (2014) has shown that in the settler colonial context of Canada, individual property rights were presented as a means to liberate First Nations from restrictive colonial policies such as the Indian Act, which denied reserve communities access to home mortgages, credit, and thus the market economy at large. Settler colonialism is thus understood, according to this liberal imaginary, as an obstacle to material gain that can be overcome economically. The result, however, in the Indigenous struggle against poverty, is to assert that possession is attainable and to reproduce the original justification for colonial rule. Under the guise of equality, Indigenous peoples are invited to partake in the logic of possession. They are to be reconstituted as fully liberal, enterprising subjects, who are no longer barred entrance to modernity (Pasternak 2014: 183; Reid 2019a: 13). Capitalism therefore serves to rescue colonialism by reaffirming proprietorship as a form of whiteness (Pasternak 2014: 184). This echoes the work of Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015: xii) who argues that 'Indigenous ontological relations to land are incommensurate with those developed through capitalism'. Capitalism is bound to a possessiveness set in motion by European imperialism and its rendering of the world; its racial stratification that positioned whiteness as the pinnacle and sole guarantor of being.

The association of possession with whiteness is paradigmatic in Indigenous critiques of property. Métis author Chelsea Vowel defines this relation unequivocally. She states that 'essentially, the white possessive renders

everything – EVERYTHING – as "property" in various ways, resulting in a sense of entitlement to all aspects of existence' (2022: unpaginated). In a discussion of Indigenous naming practices and how they are stolen by white business entrepreneurs, Vowel follows this point by anticipating the 'tired argument' that claiming sovereignty over Indigenous names amounts to ownership, and argues that the self-determination of Indigenous language does not translate to a form of possession. These cultural expressions cannot be 'stripped of their embedded meaning and commodified at will' (Vowel 2022: unpaginated). Yet settler colonialism has succeeded in producing Indigenous subjects that are amenable to capitalism. Yellowknives Dene theorist of Indigenous resurgence, Glen Coulthard (2014: 42), for example, laments 'the creation of an emergent Aboriginal bourgeoisie whose thirst for profit has come to outweigh their ancestral obligations to the land and others'. Drawing on Karl Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, through which Marx explained how the proletariat was compelled to labour by enclosing commonly held means of production and alienating labour from livelihood, Coulthard underlines the importance of land and differentiates the experience of Indigenous peoples from those in Europe. While the expropriation of Indigenous lands resembles the enclosure of the commons, or rather violently initiated the material inequalities that enabled it, it was not primarily the labour of Indigenous peoples that European colonizers sought, but the land itself (2014: 13). For Coulthard (2014:13), this dispossession of land and the relational lifeworlds it entails provides substance to Indigenous critique. 'Stated bluntly':

> the theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism, including Indigenous anticapitalism, is best understood as a struggle primarily inspired and oriented around the *question of land* – a struggle not only *for* land in the material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land *as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can* teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms.

It is in response to the logic of possession that Indigenous peoples are called on to prefigure their resistance to settler colonialism through what Coulthard names grounded normativity: 'the modalities of indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world' (2014: 13). Often read as the counterpart to Coulthard's *Red Skin White Masks*, Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson's *As We Have Always Done* draws similar conclusions. Simpson (2017: 43) asserts that:

> Indigenous bodies don't relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to the land through connection – generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear relationship. The reverse process of dispossession within Indigenous thought then is Nishnaabeg intelligence, Nishnaabewin. The opposite of dispossession within Indigenous though is grounded normativity.

What these perspectives make clear is that Indigenous ways of being are not facilitated by the reinstatement of land for socioeconomic improvement. It is for good reason that critical Indigenous scholars reject this logic. Property is used as a tool for the control of Indigenous peoples. As Jeff Corntassel (2012: 88) of the Cherokee Nation states: 'Being Indigenous today means struggling to reclaim and regenerate one's relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization'. The power

of the self might be seen as distributed throughout 'all our relations' (LaDuke 1999). For some this will help call into question 'whether we are, as bounded and deliberate individuals, self-propelling and self-driven', or whether 'we cannot understand ourselves without in some ways giving up on the notion that the self is the ground and cause of its own experience' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 4). In the landmark text, *The Fourth World*, the Secwépemc leader George Manuel argued with Michael Posluns that behind the two incommensurate ideas of land – Indigenous and Western capitalist – lurks a 'conflict over the nature of man himself' (Manuel and Posluns 2019 [1974]: 6), making colonialism and the struggle against it fundamentally ontological. The relational ontologies of Indigenous peoples contest Man as the ideal standard of being, imbued with consciousness, rationality, and able to pursue perfection (Braidotti 2013: 13–15). I argue, additionally, that the crisis of modernity that many posthumanist scholars see as mapped out by Indigenous peoples is depoliticising, and that the Others of modernity also lay claim to the human, if in another form. If at one time assertions of ontological difference served to oppose colonial governance, diametrically, they are now more closely allied with its requirements.

Like posthumanist scholars concerned with undoing anthropocentrism, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013: ix) champion 'the forms of responsibility and resistance that emerge from a dispossessed subject'. The principles expressed in the most eminent of Indigenous philosophy are exploited by Western critical theorists as they admonish the human for its universally destructive tendencies, and move to celebrate the edifying effects of dispossession. This is increasingly clear as we advance deeper into irreparable environmental crises. The consensus is that humans never were exceptional in our relationship to the Earth. Or as Bruno Latour (1993) has claimed, 'we have never been modern'. Indigenous peoples, it would hold, have never been backward or primitive. Despite being dehumanized by their colonizers, they are more enlightened in their understanding of the Earth as a living force that conditions human possibilities. The only salvation, then, is to remain subordinate. Or to become Indigenous by removing political agency from the equation (Wakefield, Chandler, and Grove 2022).

NEOLIBERALISM UNBOUND

These questions of what it means to be an actor in the world, of what subjects should possess or divest themselves of, are a preoccupation of liberalism and reflect the way it has been overhauled over the past several decades. Neoliberalism has now reached a point of ubiquity in academic discussions. Because of the many ways it is conceptualized, neoliberalism is difficult to define (Birch and Springer 2019). I take it to mean a set of mentalities that guide the objectives of modern rule. These mentalities centre and contest the role of the free, individual subject (Chandler 2016: 9; Dean 2010: 182). Here it will be useful to expand on different understandings of neoliberalism and discuss how it links to posthuman governance and how it implicates indigeneity. For Marxist critics such as David Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is above all an economic system that works in fulfilment of capitalist accumulation, profit, and the restoration of elite class power. This socialist critique responds to the idea that individuals must be free to pursue their personal aggrandizement. It identifies their desired freedom as a false construct and suggests that individuals aspire to social security. Their liberties are only an individuated expression of this aim. As such, free market capitalism clashes with the necessities of social justice (Chandler 2016: 9).

Thinkers inspired by Michel Foucault argue that the pursuit of economic freedom is not simply for material gain. It is a process geared toward one's self-improvement. As Mitchell Dean (2010: 185) states: 'the individual will learn that freedom consists of not simply regarding oneself as an enterprise but of becoming an entrepreneur of oneself and all the innate and acquired skills, talents and capacities that comprise "human capital"'. The liberal subject is perceived to undergo a change wherein the inviolable liberty, long definitive of *homo œconomicus*, becomes pliable, and is diverted toward rational conduct, suited to and modified by its given environment (Dean 2010: 72). If the welfare state was an obstacle to global capitalist expansion, it was also seen as a paternalistic and prohibitive mechanism, reliant on an ineffective, bureaucratic provision of goods (Dean 2010: 180). It was a burden to the operating principle in neoliberalism, which is to shift political responsibility from external frameworks to ourselves. This creates a system of governmentality that envelops even socialist opposition to capital and state (Chandler 2014: 125).

Departing from Marxian and Foucauldian governmentality theorists, Chandler argues that although it appears to harness the energy of individual subjects and encourage them to invest in social responsibility, neoliberalism is different still because of the way it conceives of the subject as a problem fundamentally. The human is a threat because it has the potential to outmatch governmental reason. The warming of the planet, for example, is attributed to distantiation and imperceptible effects of human activity. The outcome of collective behaviour is conceded to be unpredictable, beyond our knowledge, and possibly disastrous. According to Chandler (2016:12),

> Neoliberalism is less a programme for governing society for specific goals or ends, that the systemic retreat from such a programme. While it is clear that neoliberal sensibilities lack the view that the state should just withdraw from society and 'let freedom reign', it seems equally clear that discourses of actively creating citizens, of empowering and capacity- building individuals and communities, are more concerned with the limits to societal change than with social transformation. Neoliberalism, in fact, marks an historic withdrawal from the project of 'rule'.

This parallels the transition in international relations from models of government to a system of global governance. Traditional, top-down approaches to government, epitomized by the desire of Western states to impart democracy, peace and stability throughout the world, delineated a clear boundary between society and external political influence. With many of the obstacles that served to hinder this process now removed, however, via the end of the Cold War and subsequent globalization, there emerged a different object of government – complex, interconnected, nonlinear, and unresponsive to command-and-control methods (Chandler 2014) – such that 'Increasingly…attention is drawn to the social processes constructed and reproduced through self-organizing, emergent, and complex processes of societal and networked interactions' (Chandler 2016: 13). In this context, 'the project of constructing or interpellating the neoliberal subject is less a concrete programme of rule and regulation than a declaration of the impossibility or attenuation of governmental agency in the current age' (Chandler 2016: 12).

This imaginary of governance is inseparable from the production of knowledge that shapes it. According to Dean (2010: 183), neoliberalism incorporates an ongoing learning process. It passes on the rules of conduct

that best enable subjects to invest in the government of the self. In this scenario, knowledge is apprehended in the manner described by Foucault and disseminated throughout society. From the perspective outlined by Chandler and Reid (2016: 1-2), however, the subject is governed to endure the inevitability of suffering. This is learned by abandoning the belief that it can determine its own conditions of existence. The demand placed on the subject to exist in a liberal relation to society is diminished, and is supplemented by the demand to be resilient to endemic hardships. The United Nations defines resilience as 'the capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazard, to adapt by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure' (UN 2004: Chap. 1, S. 1,17). Proponents of resilience argue that the laws that pertain to both natural and human worlds are no longer distinct, but are actually correlated (Reid 2010: 402). Social systems are said to be like living systems. They thrive, not by taking preventative action against threats, but through exposure and adaptation to them (Reid 2013: 114). As Urry (2002: 32) explains, the resilience of ecological systems depends 'not upon stable relationships but upon massive intrusions of extraordinary flows of species from other parts of the globe'. In order to be resilient, accordingly, Indigenous peoples would have to give up the fight against colonialism and embrace their oppression.

Faith in liberal modernity has decreased rapidly with the looming threat of mass extinction and ecological collapse. Neoliberalism cannot escape reference to the crisis engulfing the modern episteme, which idealized human agency in a calculable world. The binaries that have given structure to knowledge in the West – subject/object, mind/body, and nature/culture, do not adequately account for the complex, networked forms of life that have taken shape in today. It is unsurprising that under these conditions there is renewed interest in Indigenous peoples. Their survival is a testament to a life that could have been. As Watts (2013: 21) notes, Indigenous cosmologies house theories of existence in which these separations are refuted:

> Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts.

This embeddedness in the world affirms a reality in which the supposed laws of nature have lost meaning. Previously social and political thought 'operated at what we might call the level of "epistemology" – the level of perspectives and understandings – of the causes and reasons for norms and modes of division and how to maintain, improve or remove them' (Chipato and Chandler 2023: 157). It is now more favourable to contest the nature of reality itself, as opposed to determine how reality may be influenced or changed. Driven by the ontological turn in many academic disciplines, a focus on Indigenous ways of being has led to a growing body of research on the posthuman condition. For Watts (2012: 21):

> the idea of 'society' has revolved around human beings and their special place in the world, given their capacity for reason and language. Though this idea of society is still largely attributed to human relationships, in recent times we can see the emergence of non-humans being evaluated in terms of their contributions to the development and maintenance of society.

Posthumanism encourages a more perceptive understanding of the world. This world is not external to human being. Nor are humans the lone actors. They are only part of non-hierarchical and regenerating entanglements. This converges around the project of political ontology. Anthropologist Mario Blaser (2013: 547) states that 'Ontological conflicts (conflicts involving different assumptions about "what exists") are gaining unprecedented visibility because the hegemony of modern ontological assumptions is undergoing a crisis'. In the search for alternative modes of being, indigeneity becomes the field where these ontopolitical debates occur, making the Indigenous subject, then, a disputed, malleable entity, used to pit the human against itself. Whereas Indigenous knowledge is often counterposed as a mythical alternative to the scientific legitimacy of Western worldviews (Watts, 2013) ontology is employed to investigate and capture what cultural relativism has failed to account for. What constitutes life is no longer determined by using culture as a frame of reference. For Rosi Braidotti (2013), in fact, there is no common reference point that defines the human, and thus no indication that it does, or even should exist. Being receptive to ontology invites non-Indigenous thinkers to see the vibrant animacy that permeates the material world (Tallbear 2017). This is the emancipatory potential of alternative ontologies in alignment with neoliberalism. Traditionally, the critique leveraged against modernity was that it is overly dehumanizing. It was void of the humanity necessary for any ethical authority and bound only for the systematic plunder of Others. It is now maligned for its overly human characteristics. We have come to experience the human in all its hubris. It must therefore be expelled from the political realm as it gives way to a world of becoming (Chandler 2019).

STANDING ROCK AND THE POSTHUMAN WEB OF LIFE

The injunction to become Indigenous is increasingly relevant in policy discourse and initiatives (Brundtland 1987; Carson and Peterson 2016; IPCC 2012; Nakashima et al. 2012). Many institutions are moving to embrace the environmental stewardship of Indigenous peoples (Auger 2023). But the attributes used to typify Indigenous peoples, ontologically, are made into transferable currency. They are evident in the very structures that bear responsibility for ecological destruction, and which threaten Indigenous lifeworlds most acutely. Much has been said about the dispossession at work in the oil and gas industry. Sioux scholar Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon (2019a), for instance, document the intricacies of the DAPL in the United States, the extent to which it violated treaty, and its significance in the history of Indigenous displacement from ancestral territories. In 2016, the Dakota Sioux rose up to defend their territory from this incursion and prevent the damage it would cause to essential waterways. The protests drew international attention and solidarity from many Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous activists. It was one of the largest Indigenous-led uprisings the United States had ever seen. It has also been of interest to geographers wanting to analyse how Indigenous land defence disrupts and challenges circuits of capitalist accumulation (Bosworth and Chua 2023: 1347). Many voices from the DAPL protests describe their blockade and encampments in terms of kinship to land and water. 'Mni Sose is a relative: the Mni Oyate, the water Nation. She is alive. Nothing owns her. Hence the popular Lakotayapi assertion "Mni Wiconi": water is life or, more accurately, water is alive' (Estes and Dhillon 2019b: 2). Kristen Simmons of the Moapa Band of Southern Paiutes recounts the obligation to be in good relation with water protectors. To help forge alternatives to the settler colonial state which 'necessarily strangulates other forms of

relationality and coalition building' through the social and chemical violence of 'settler atmospherics' (Simmons, 2017).

Standing Rock was the site of extremely brutal and experimental techniques of repression, employed by a number of police and private security forces consolidated by the counterinsurgency. Thirty eight million dollars were spent to secure the DAPL in what amounted to a continuation of the 'Indian wars of extermination' (Estes and Dhillon 2019b: 5). The #NoDAPL movement posed a clear threat to the viability of the project, its financial structure, and the overarching system that governs extractive industry (Pasternak, Mazer, and Cochrane 2019). The severity of these threats often produce anxiety because they target the 'critical infrastructure' of the settler state. Ports, highways, railways, and pipelines especially, represent crucial 'chokepoints' for activist blockades, which as Bosworth and Chua (2023: 1346–1347) argue, not only jeopardize the circulation of commodities essential to the economy, but 'strike at the heart of the racialized economic and psychic operations of the state'. As such, 'critical infrastructure security' (CIS) measures are employed to manage contingency and anticipate the emergence of new and evolving threats (Bosworth and Chua 2023: 1348; Knudsen Tveitan et al. 2012).

It has been suggested with the risk posed to extractive colonialism, that industry itself adopt policies of resilience to better recover from 'unexpected shocks' and their 'unsustainable outcomes, which could arise from a plurality of interconnected processes, such as ecological and social dynamics' (Di Tommaso et al. 2023: 1). It is often argued that Indigenous land defence enacts a way of relating to the world that is foreign to colonial occupation, and that even when unsuccessful, this activism builds 'constellations' among multiple actors. These are diverse alliances that reflect the reality of our interconnection. They harbour an ethic of care that allows us to experience this connectivity on a deeper level (Bosworth and Chua 2021: 1346). This view might be increasingly untenable because of the way neoliberal capitalism appears to project and operate within a relational ontology. Simpson (2017: 23) describes Nishnaabeg intelligence as 'a series of interconnected and overlapping algorithms… Networked because the modes of communication and interaction between beings occur in complex nonlinear forms, across time and space'. While this is undoubtedly true, a similar reality informs the extraction of resources from Indigenous lands. Pipeline development, for example, fosters a relationality of its own in response to the radical uncertainty of a given project. DAPL, like any single pipeline, is not isolated. It is one node among an industrial system that enables the extraction and consumption of oil. Its infrastructure exists in both physical and virtual space and thus withstands easy spatial categorization. The conditions for one project may change very quickly depending on the status of others. Such is the 'many-headed-hydra' (Mazer, et al. 2019) of the 'hyper-connected oil and gas industry' (Pettersen and Olav Grøtan 2023):

> North American pipelines comprise a network with a series of moving and flexible parts; a single development on a single project – say, the revival of the Keystone XL – has effects that ripple through the rest of the system. Approvals, rejections, and movements to resist US pipelines reorganize the incentives and viability of other US projects, but also pipeline projects in Canada. The current contingency is continental (Mazer et al. 2019: 361-362).

These companies, furthermore, have developed sophisticated financial structures able to entice potential shareholders with stable returns, and outmanoeuvre tactics such as the mass divestment campaign that was integral to #NoDAPL (Pasternak, Mazer, Cochrane, 2019). While the movement sought to meet the dispersed, transnational network of industry as an explicit strategy, its vast linkages allow for it to search for the path of least resistance. When disruptions do occur, they are an opportunity for industry to enhance its ability to 'bounce back' (Mazer et al., 2019).

Critical Oil and Gas Infrastructure

Beyond the events of Standing Rock, the resilience of extractive industry serves to accommodate a broad range of unforeseen perils, including terrorist activity, cyber-attacks, extreme weather patterns, or the withdrawal of labour from its workforce. Bento and Garotti (2019: 4) provide insight into the resilience of complex systems from a perspective amenable to industry: 'The webs of interactions among different individuals do not exist *a priori*, but are the emergent outcome of evolutionary processes. From an evolutionary perspective, we do not design networks, but we can learn to influence them in positive ways' (Bento and Garotti 2019: 4). Networked infrastructure is a form emergent organization, neither restrained nor facilitated by deliberate design. Instead, it is wise for industry to read obstructions to development as possibly beneficial inputs for robust oil and gas production (Bento and Garotti 2019: 5). With the laws that pertain to biological life extending to non-biological entities, according to the new ecology, these disruptions are in fact necessary for the development of industrial success (Reid 2010: 402-403). If Indigenous land defence is interpreted through a more-than-human lens, water protectors can be reduced, in their autonomy and physical capacities, to simply another impediment among many: to auto-poietic, technical objects that shape the evolution of complex adaptive systems.

For inland Tlingit, Deisheetan clan, land defender Anne Spice, investigating an 'anthropology of infrastructure' reveals the interface between extractive industry and Indigenous resistance as a space of 'radical possibility' – 'possibility that is deeply threatening to the continued operation of the capitalist settler state' (Spice 2018: 48). It also provides, it would seem, the conditions for industry to flourish. The language of 'invasive infrastructure' elicits a vision of extractive industries as nonhuman agents (Spice 2018). While the good relations present in blockades and encampments may serve to disrupt settler futurity through the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, and slow, however temporarily, the circulation of capital, their incompatibility with colonial power is questionable. As Indigenous peoples mobilize their relational ontologies to counteract anthropocentric forces of neoliberal capitalism, the same forces absorb Indigenous assemblages to boost their evolutionary fitness and master 'the network form' (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001: 1). To secure critical infrastructures, according to the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is to protect the state's essential interests, its 'public health and safety, economic vitality, and way of life' (DHS 2003: viii). The USA PATRIOT Act similarly defines critical infrastructure as vital to a certain mode of being, such that its 'incapacity or destruction… would have a debilitating impact' (DHS cited in Bosworth and Chua 2023: 1348). Scholars critical of the security state argue that 'these framings of CIS [critical infrastructure security] are deliberately broad in their justification for criminalizing threats to economic flows, often seeking to expand the discretionary scope for interpreting

various forms of disruption as "terrorist" threats' (Bosworth and Chua 2021: 1348). There appears to be more to these relatively vague understandings of what critical infrastructure is, however, beyond the purpose of intensifying criminalization. To examine this on a more holistic level we can turn to *The National Plan for Research and Development in Support of Critical Infrastructure Protection*. The report suggests that physical systems 'must become reliable, autonomic (self-repairing and self-sustaining), resilient, and survivable in order to continue to operate in diminished capacity rather than failing in crisis conditions' (DHS 2004: xi). Physical systems are therefore reconceptualized as living systems, 'imbued with a particular agency that literally breathes life into what was once deemed inanimate' (Evans and Reid 2014: 19). It is perhaps helpful, then, to think with Indigenous ways of being in order to identify the nonhuman agency that already exists in the systems that Indigenous peoples resist on account of their more-than-human relations.

This will indeed problematize those forms of resistance that cite generative, relational entanglements as oppositional to the settler colonial state. What CIS reveals is that the state is less concerned with its securitization that it is able to rely on its vulnerability. In this regard, indigeneity becomes a metonym for the insecurity that runs through and animates critical infrastructure. 'Due to the ongoing changes in the operation of oil and gas production, different constellations of actors in a distributed system are built… At the same time as new technology offers opportunities, the technology-enabled distributed network of actors generate challenges for emergency handling' (Knudsen Tveitan, et al. 2012: 1960). To put it another way, the built environment is indistinguishable from the catastrophic elements that produce it (Evans and Reid 2014: 20). This makes it difficult to resist without some sense of security. The focus in much of the discourse on Indigenous resistance to critical infrastructure is on the type of politics that pipelines might enable, 'between proposal and completion' (Spice 2018). It is between these points, in suspension, that other worlds are generated. This does not require the actions of a creative subject. It requires a subject suborned to the creative forces of the world. This decolonial mantra forms an 'intuitive ideological fit' (Walker and Cooper 2011: 144) with neoliberal disempowerment. As settler states seek to extend control over Indigenous lands, they face continued resistance that forces some projects to a halt or to linger for years (Spice 2018: 49-50). This is not necessarily detrimental overall, however, as long as Indigenous collectivities and pipeline projects complement each other in a co-evolution of more-than-human living systems.

The New Materialisms

The perspective outlined above is reified by the new materialisms. As Coole & Frost (2010: 9) explain, new materialists 'often discern emergent, generative powers (or agentic capacities) even within inorganic matter, and they generally eschew the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological level'. This promotes suspicion about human distinctiveness. It invites a posthuman orientation toward matter as lively, 'self-creative, productive, unpredictable' (Coole & Frost 2010: 9). Matter is not simply the backdrop for human selfhood. Matter is sentient. We could thus understand pipelines and their opponents to operate synergistically in a 'choreography of becoming' (Coole & Frost 2010: 10)

> objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful to them, and subjectivities being constituted as open

> series of capacities of potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes.

The new materialisms force us to question the fundamental assumptions of Western scientific reasoning. For some Indigenous thinkers, the new materialisms are something to be given credit for, rather than dismissed as an uncritical school of thought. For Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim Tallbear (2017: 190), there is little necessarily 'new' about this nonhuman turn. It accounts for the 'networked sets of social-material relations' that are found in Indigenous metaphysics. It may empower Indigenous knowledge inasmuch as it holds that to 'really grasp the nature of and potential solutions to the world's most critical problems, including environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, systemic violence, and warfare, nonhumans in all their myriad forms must be given their due' (Tallbear 2017: 190). In a similar vein, Métis scholar Zoe Todd (2016) criticizes posthumanist scholarship for its failure to recognize Indigenous peoples as the source of its conceptual apparatus. It appears, however, that it is worth separating indigeneity from the new materialisms. Coole & Frost (2010: 20) confirm that:

> The human species, and the qualities of self-reflection, self-awareness, and rationality traditionally used to distinguish it from the rest of nature, may now seem little more than contingent and provisional forms or processes within a broader evolutionary or cosmic productivity.

To naturalize Indigenous peoples as insignificant by-products of planetary forces reinstates an insidious colonial ideology. We might say that posthumanism effectively recolonizes indigeneity, 'cynically manipulating critical, postcolonial and ecological sensibilities for its own ends' (Chandler and Reid 2018: 251). This is not to say that extractive industries simply poach Indigenous ontologies as a matter of policy. It is by cultivating resilience that pipeline development conveniently finds common ground in dominant framings of indigeneity. Contrary to the argument that Indigenous ways of being unsettle state and capital in ways that are more than financial or physical, but ontologically disruptive, and serve to 'destabilize the supremacy of settler epistemologies by nurturing responsibility to the land' (Bosworth and Chua, 2023: 1350), to promote grounded normativity also affirms the relational processes of an interconnected world. These are processes that the oil and gas industry depends on, equally. As Coulthard (2007: 438) argues about the politics of recognition – that it cannot transform Indigenous peoples' relationship to the colonial state – nor does a politics of relationality, I argue, challenge colonial power or free-market capitalism because Indigenous peoples are constructed as exemplary of the adaptive capacities and coping mechanisms that neoliberalism, and its critical infrastructures aspire to. If 'Language, cultural expression, and even spirituality don't pose an unmanageable threat to settler colonialism, because cultural resurgence can rather effortlessly be co-opted by liberal recognition,' (Simpson 2017: 50), then ontology must also be seen as conducive to neoliberal intimations of 'No Alternative' to either market forces (Chandler 2018: 18) or 'the deep interconnection between human beings and other elements of creation' (Alfred 1999: 60). It can easily be argued that neoliberalism is a pernicious ideology. Or that it represents the fragility of elite economic classes who resort to the hyper-securitization of capital through the most violent means. I would not dispute this. But I have offered an amendment based on the ability of neoliberalism to conceal itself in the everyday. Neoliberalism accommodates a broad range of interests and activities from which it also draws influence, and that inform its application

of governance. Most concerning is that it has moulded itself in the same image of indigeneity that it functions to produce.

Indigenous Humanism

In *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life*, René Dietrich (2023: 19–20) discusses how 'land' and 'water' are often understood in terms of their instrumental value. That 'water is life', as the water protectors at Standing Rock tell us, translates to many as 'water is the source of life', and 'appears immediately and solely in service of human and nonhuman populations…secondary to the forms of life that need to be nourished by it'. For anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2016: 46), this ensures that settlers remain comfortable in their assumption that Indigenous peoples have cultural beliefs about things, but do not redefine the parameters of life (Dietrich 2023: 21). What is not considered in non-Indigenous epistemologies is that water has personhood, 'independent of humans "giving" that standing or status' (Edward Valandra quoted in Dietrich 2023: 20). The view that water is meaningful in its own right, that it holds a perspective on the world, and that human life is subordinate to entangled relations with nonhuman entities, reads in contrast to the statement of Ogala Sioux Tribal President Bryan Brewer in 2014, that 'We're going to declare war on the Keystone XL Pipeline' (Brewer cited in Estes 2019: 25). The war story of Keystone XL, like the resistance at Standing Rock, is one that may inspire a form of possession. But decolonial futures are not said to be realized by taking control of external environments. They are rooted instead in 'the invisible, the inanimate, and the non-human forms that creatively reside as afterlives of the colonial encounter' (Gómez-Barris 2017: xx). This discourse could be read as imbued with colonial knowledge and power. 'Dispossessed, and disallowed the possibility to assert any counter-power to repossess' (Reid 2019b: 267), it might rewrite the question, as settlers imagined it, of whether Indigenous peoples are capable of properly inhabiting the land (Dietrich 2023: 8), or whether they are peoples with no ability 'to act in the sense of making anything like a definitive event occur in the world', as Povinelli argues (Povinelli cited in Reid 2019b). Brenda Bhandar (2018: 198) considers this question further, asking 'what might it mean to "own nothing" as a practice of (preparing for) freedom'? These constructions of indigeneity stimulate the neoliberal obfuscation of the human that I have attempted to put on display thus far.

These are constructions that Indigenous peoples must resist alongside settler and extractive colonialism, and which call for a renewed account Indigenous subjectivity. The stakes are not fictional. As social relations increasingly come under posthuman governance, there is precedent to formalize the ontological turn in law as a means to combat the narrowly conceptualized approach to environmental protection as determined by the modernist paradigm. These laws, it is argued, determine what is real without consideration for alternative ontologies and legal systems. The current 'legal form fails to fulfil its purpose of prevention and remediation, and constitutes a significant barrier to overcoming world(s)-destroying conditions' (Boulot and Sterlin 2021: 13). Environmental law is guilty of the abstraction that makes the Earth a resource for human consumption, reinforcing the flawed concepts of private property and the state. But to counter this by promoting reverence for an 'omnipresent and all-pervasive meshwork of relations, both ecological and social', would make Indigenous peoples, instead of the environment, 'a resource empty of meaning and purpose and therefore available for human annexation' (Boulot and Sterlin 2021: 14). As talk of posthuman citizenship abounds (Dedoglu 2023), the question is how this

changes the status of the human. According to one critical interrogation (Hakli 2016: 167), 'dismissal of human subjectivity as the basis of normative reflection risks losing from sight the possibility of citizenship as a political agency conditioned by society and entangled with non-human nature, yet capable of setting its own goals'. The granting of legal personhood to the Whanganui River in New Zealand in 2017 was a remarkable achievement. It resulted from the work of Indigenous and environmental activists, in recognition of Māori Peoples' longstanding relationship with the river and encounters with nonhuman entities as persons (Colebrook 2023: 79). Known too well, however, is the outrage of personhood attached to corporations in their assertion of economic dominance. Formalized by the United States Supreme Court in 2010, for-profit institutions are able to mobilize their First Amendment rights to influence political outcomes, blurring the fact of moral responsibility that comes with human title (McWhorter 2017). Although these cases are seemingly disparate and their comparison unlikely, they are arguably both part of a large-scale shift in thinking that has been recognized by the United Nations (2020: 89) as it draws from posthuman and new materialist frameworks in search of new modes of being.

The crucial task, then, is to conceptualize indigeneity in a manner that does not affirm prescribed tropes of vulnerability and adaptation, while still accounting for the grounded normativity of Indigenous peoples. I argue that apparent in Indigenous land defence is the spectre of agency through which Indigenous peoples disavow the posthuman condition. Or put another way, within the grounded, place-based lifeworlds of Indigenous peoples there exists a form of possession. It is indeed difficult to imagine that resistance to political power can occur whatsoever without maintaining some entitlement to human existence.

It is important to note that Indigenous resistance is an affront to environmentally degrading capitalism. These struggles against pipelines and extractive industries, ongoing in unceded Wet'suwet'en territory and beyond, have since 2010 curtailed fossil fuel emissions in the United States and Canada by one quarter, making Indigenous land defenders and the water protectors of the DAPL protests integral to the battle against climate change (Seraphin 2023: 283). The modus operandi is to define these movements as 'processes of learning and becoming-with, affirmations of anti-possessive relations to lands and waters' that 'require accountability, care, and love', and to insist that 'these movements make worlds' (Seraphin 2023: 284). This leaves little opportunity for the Indigenous to forsake the possibilities that condition new worlds: that is, to resist and dismantle the colonial powers of this world, and demand that it be more favourable to their security. There is an impetus in critical Indigenous and decolonial theory to think about resistance as a way of enacting 'another modality of being, another way of relating to the world' (Coulthard 2014: 169). Might we also think of it as an act of self-interest? Might Indigenous peoples be understood to not only harbour circumspection in their relation to the world, but also to instrumentalize and take control of their surroundings? Might this be of service, actually, in their confrontations with colonial powers? Colonialism is an enemy it its own right. It requires a political ethic of possession to resist. The humanism that exerts this possession is likely a greater threat to settler and extractive colonialism. It is the collective will to transform the world that colonialism must continue to attack.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have built on the critique advanced by Chandler and Reid against the idea that with the limits of modernity exceeded, we must become Indigenous – become one with nature, more-than-human, and act out 'choreographies of becoming'. The argument for becoming Indigenous affirms endless relational entanglement and blurs distinctions between colonizer and colonized. This narrow construction of indigeneity as a process of becoming, as part of unfolding posthuman landscapes, is of course far different from the many realities faced by Indigenous peoples, 'from perspectives rooted in their own cultures and languages' (Alfred and Corntassel 2005: 598). 'It is important to identify all of the old and new faces of colonialism that continue to distort and dehumanize Indigenous peoples', state Kahnawá:ke Mohawk activist Taiaiake Alfred and Corntassel (2005: 601) – 'the instruments of domination are evolving and inventing new methods to erase Indigenous histories and senses of place'. As such, one might wonder if for the Indigenous, along with other peoples suborned to live as though dispossession offers emancipatory potential, there is too a need to forsake becoming. Against the vision laid out for Indigenous peoples by neoliberalism, is there room to disagree, or to depart from traditional wisdom when it reflects these demands? I have argued that land defence offers a way to conceive of Indigenous humanism from a theoretical perspective. Can we look to specific, nation-based articulations of a possessing, autonomous subject, willing to take on this task of deconstruction? Engaging with Indigenous ontologies as alternatives to modernist scriptures, as Western scholars are wont to do, carries the risk of creating and deepening an essential divide, wherein the Indigenous are perceived to be without human agency, not capable of abiding a logic of possession, and where resilience occupies a normative position. The paradox, as I have argued, is that while Indigenous peoples are said to epitomize resilience, the same principles are incorporated into the systems responsible for dispossession and widespread ecological destruction, including extractive industry and the critical infrastructures of settler colonialism. If the changing nature of colonial power is to be understood, we must be wary of what narratives we are complicit in – especially narratives that lay claim to the nature of reality, and that are ready-made for Western consumption and assimilation into dominant political and economic paradigms.

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Ethics and consent

Not applicable

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