

Righting Names

The Importance of Native American Philosophies of Naming for Environmental Justice

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Controlling the names of places, environments, and species is one way in which settler colonial ontologies delimit the intelligibility of ecological relations, Indigenous peoples, and environmental injustices. To counter this, this article amplifies the voices of Native American scholars and foregrounds a philosophical account of Indigenous naming. First, I explore some central characteristics of Indigenous ontology, epistemic virtue, and ethical responsibility, setting the stage for how Native naming draws these elements together into a complete, robust philosophy. Then I point toward leading but contingent principles of Native naming, foregrounding how Native names emerge from and create communities by situating (rather than individuating) the beings that they name within kinship structures, including human and nonhuman agents. Finally, I outline why and how Indigenous names and the knowledges they contain are crucial for both resisting settler violence and achieving environmental justice, not only for Native Americans, but for their entire animate communities.

■ **KEYWORDS:** environmental justice, epistemology, ethics, Indigenous philosophy, ontology

A name is a site of power. This is true in part because of the concrete power—often political, hierarchical, statist, and colonial—that determines who gets to name whom. But for many American Indian philosophies, names also come with their own power; names have power to create or destroy worlds, build or raze relationships, and embed their bearers in networks of being and meaning that extend far beyond the “human.” Furthermore, acts of naming in Native philosophies do not simply pick out singular, complete entities; rather, naming is a humble, communal, educational enactment of the ways in which Native Americans know and relate to their world and each other.

This differs from dominant, settler colonial philosophies in which, according to Saul Kripke, names individuate and pick out entities from their environment rather than situate and embed them within it. As Viola Cordova suggests, Western names tend to refer to “static nouns” (2007: 100). Names enclose and capture unified, essential identities in exclusive possession of definable and stable traits, consistent in time and space. They designate individuals, not a relational node in a network, a personality that can shift between bodies, or a complex multiplicity. In Western philosophy, naming is connected to a particular ontology that understands individuals as the fundamental units of reality and thus of ecology, biology, anthropology, politics, ethics, law, and so on.



Why is this important for thinking about environmental management from an environmental justice perspective? Because while settler colonialism is foremost about the ongoing dispossession of land (Alfred 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012), it includes the ongoing imposition of Western “processes of ordering” the world that continually dispossess and disallow Indigenous ways of managing land and relations with their peopled communities (Snelgrove et al. 2014; Standing Bear 2006; Whitt 2009; Wildcat 2009; Wolfe 2006). In North America, environmental management practices and policies have long participated in settler dismissal of Indigenous knowledges and needs. Such practices typically rely on settler knowledges of land, ecosystems, and bodies, and often seize control of environmental resources to which American Indian tribes have claim through complicated “bureaucratic processes that often conflict with Indigenous cultural orientations towards the natural world” (Richmond et al. 2013: 3). Even when environmental policies are aimed at including American Indian voices in practices of comanagement, they often lack the infrastructure or resources to follow through (Middleton 2013), or find Indigenous naming and knowledge of nature incompatible with the Western values that drive environmental policy (Watson 2013). For example, when Koyukon elders tried to clarify their concern regarding the decline in migrating birds in the Koyukuk/Nowitna wildlife refuge, their local knowledges and oral histories about the frequency of “speckled-bellies” (the Koyukon name for white-fronted geese) did not meet conservation biology’s standards for scientific quantification. Koyukon counting did not count, so no preservation or management plan was put in place despite the bird’s absence (Watson 2013).

In short, one can exist on one’s traditional lands and still have the use, development, and names of the lands and creatures altered so radically that Indigenous communities are still ontologically and epistemologically displaced (Alfred 2012). In particular, settler colonial namings, naming practices, education, and language colonization have dramatically altered American Indian engagement with the “material and social world . . . thus preventing ontological security.” Controlling the proper names of human or nonhuman persons—that is, the name that is ethical or appropriate—is one way in which settler colonialism and environmental management practices erase Native American knowledges and ontologies (Bang and Marin 2015: 541; see also Lomawaima 2007). In other words, “naming is *the* site at which issues with references between Western and Indigenous epistemologies unfold” (Bang et al. 2014: 11, emphasis added).

Where I live as a settler and guest in Kalapuya territory, in central Oregon, the names of lands, places, rivers, seasons, directions, and species have been changed. This is true for most territories of Turtle Island, or the land settlers now call North America. Changing the names obscures and destroys not only American Indian cultures and languages but also the familial and ethical relations represented and brought about by those names. The result is that very pressing problems—like water rights, use and distribution of “resources,” ecosystem management, and invasive species solutions—are all operating without Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies represented in those names. For example, using settler colonial names for the Chicago and Des Plaines rivers, rather than using their Indigenous names also or instead—*Sikaakwa* (Miami for “skunk place” or “onion field”) (Callary 2009), and *Sheshikmaoshike sepe* (Potawatomi for “river of the trees which flow,” referring to sugar maple trees and their sap) (Vogel 1962)—not only establishes settler temporalities, placing Indigenous names and lands in the past. It also erases important relational realities about the land itself: realities about the kinds of things that grow and live there, how the rivers interact with the wetlands, and thus how to restore or make healthy the spaces currently occupied or corroded by settler extractive technologies. In other words, not only are the regional knowledges and networks held within the names lost, but this loss has all manner of consequences for our ability to come up with holistic, creative, and just environmental policies (Bang and Marin 2015).

Furthermore, as new names and designations arise in environmental movements—names like “invasive species”—they are mostly distributed by non-Indigenous activists or scientists outside of contact with Native American peoples and thus do not reflect Native relational philosophies. Yet these new designations are often and nonetheless the only way of rendering legible Indigenous claims against settler colonial technologies or troubling species management practices. Through their control of names, settler colonial ontologies control how ecological relations, environmental injustices, and Indigenous bodies are intelligible, making it difficult for Indigenous peoples to clarify harms against their peopled communities, where people, for Thomas Norton-Smith (2010), includes animals, plants, and land and where a person is not an individual but, as Megan Bang and Ananda Marin (2015) suggest, a set of relations. As Bang and colleagues remind us, the anthropocentrism at work in Western ontology and naming is itself a form of “dispossession and epistemic violence,” as it erases the agency and value of the non-human peoples with whom Native Americans build their communities (2014: 8).

For centuries, American Indians have resisted settler colonialism and its extractive, eradicatory, domesticating violence on Native communities, creatures, and lands precisely through radical acts of naming and renaming. In his essay about the importance of Native studies, Peter Kulchyski even argues that the interdisciplinary work done by Native studies can be summarized as “the setting right of names, the righting of names as much as the writing of names” (2000: 13). Yet there exists no extensive, systematic account to express why and how those names matter, or to explain how Indigenous names designate relations and networks, rather than individuals, and to explore how they enact and perform relational ontologies, creating tangible bonds broken by settler renaming or misnaming.

This article thus weaves together Native philosophies, philosophy of language, Indigenous stories of naming and resistance, and anthropological literature on American Indian naming to create a fuller picture of Indigenous philosophies of naming.¹ Importantly, I am not *creating* a Native philosophy of naming from fragmented stories that lack philosophical rigor or require translation. That kind of project would reproduce Western philosophy’s condescending, derisive treatment of Indigenous thought. Instead, following Norton-Smith, I highlight the fact that American Indian philosophies of naming are robust and fully formed, already present within and demonstrated by Native practices and beliefs (2010: 2). I want to learn from these philosophies, foregrounding Native voices, to emphasize the importance of names and the knowledges they contain for building and sustaining Indigenous communities beyond the human. Native names must become central for environmental justice to resist settler colonial violence against *all* members of Native communities.

First, I explore some central principles regarding Native American ontological theory, epistemic virtue, and ethical responsibility, setting the stage for how Native naming uniquely connects these three elements into a complete, robust philosophy. Though these philosophies may share commonalities with Indigenous philosophies from elsewhere in the world, this article focuses on American Indian philosophies because I am a settler occupying Native American lands, and my responsibility is to learn from and defer to these specific communities in their quests for environmental justice.

Amplifying the work of many American Indian authors and allies, I then focus on several principles or characteristics of Indigenous naming. In general, I note that Native American names tend to emerge from communities to expand or reaffirm those communities and are embedded in networks of consensual action by many other respectful agents (including the names themselves). Names are also intended to recall and secure knowledge of particular associations and relations, so they do not individuate but rather situate and embed what we might call “individuals-in-relations” within specific kinship structures.

Finally, I consider how decolonizing Native naming practices, and deferring to or including Indigenous names, is paramount for pursuits of environmental justice, as well as for accurately understanding the environmental and ecological relations to which Indigenous names refer and in which Native lives are embedded. Hope for environmental justice and for revitalizing land, recovering species, and so on, resides in affirming Indigenous names.

Native Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics

Before diving into Native philosophy of naming and its distinct ontological, epistemological, and ethical implications, let me clarify what exactly American Indian scholars mean by ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Can we even make claims about Native ontology without erasing important differences between various Native American philosophies?

For Cordova (2007), Norton-Smith (2010), Donald Fixico (2003), Anne Waters (2004), and others, there is no singular or unified Native American philosophy: only philosophies. There have always been and continue to be irreducible differences between the hundreds of American Indian cultures, lifeways, and philosophies. In maintaining their vital differences, Native Americans have resisted both homogenization by Western philosophies *and* assimilation by Western culture. Yet Cordova suggests that American Indians have begun recognizing that they “have more in common with other indigenous groups, regardless of their obvious differences, than they do with the conceptual framework of the European colonizer.” Cordova argues that it is “possible to identify some of the conceptual commonalities shared by Native Americans,” yet these commonalities are recognized and thematized by Native Americans themselves, not the colonial, Western eye (2007: 102). Even as Norton-Smith rejects a monolithic set of American Indian beliefs, he argues for the importance of recognizing “themes” and “principles” that “seem to occur across American Indian traditions” (2010: 3). Furthermore, Anne Waters and Agnes Curry (2009) suggest American Indians recognize commonalities for specific reasons. For example, commonalities help form an argument in defense of American Indian philosophies as fully formed worlds (Norton-Smith 2010). In short, these represent goal-oriented efforts (taken up at specific times for specific reasons), directed by American Indians themselves, to reject overarching, unifying theories by respecting differences while also recognizing important connections. In lieu of addressing a single Native ontology, epistemology, or ethics, I defer to Native American scholars who address contingent commonalities among irreducibly plural American Indian ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics.

Ontology is the aspect of philosophy that considers the nature of being or of what is. Waters claims that Indigenous ontologies build worlds that are multiplicitous, fluid, complex, relational, and entangled. They affirm the change of categories and identities rather than permanence and fixed essence. Summarizing the distinctions between Western and Native American ontologies, Waters suggests that Indigenous “ontology, as animate (continuously alterable),” and thus open to change rather than fixed, “will be inclusive (nonbinary) rather than exclusive (discrete binary), and have nondiscrete (unbounded) entities rather than discrete (discretely bounded) entities” (2004: 107). Jarrad Reddekop describes Native ontologies as being characterized by relationships, “beginning with an assumption that *relations* are prior, that any atomistic ‘thing’ is rather only a kind of (at least temporary) fixity or concrescence, a gathering constituted in and through these prior, dynamic, and contextual relations.” Native relational ontologies thus focus on what “happens *between* (including between levels of structure) rather than focusing *on* supposedly individual things, and indeed do so as a way of understanding what any particular thing is at any given time” (2014: 35). By doing this, Native languages, systems of categorization, and

orderings represent wholly different worlds: “different words make different worlds” (Norton-Smith 2010: 6). That is, Indigenous ontologies and beliefs create complete if open systems that “have the power to orient us in life” (Hester and Cheney 2001: 319).

For American Indian philosophies, epistemology—the study of knowledge and truth—is not independent from ethics, since knowledge is often contingent on knowing *rightly*, or in ways that help the community. In Indigenous epistemologies, the world does not need to be poked, prodded, controlled, and dissected in order to discover its inner meanings. American Indian truths are fundamentally guided by the right actions, the right goals, or what Lee Hester and Jim Cheney call responsible knowledge (“responsible truths”) and an “ethical-epistemological orientation of attentiveness” rather than of domination (2001: 319–320). For Norton-Smith, we know our knowledge is true when it is characterized by “a *respectful* success in achieving a goal” (2010: 64). Knowledge is thus based on a particular context: “Without context there can be no knowledge, or knowing, and hence knowledge exists only when belief practices develop, are in harmony with communal well-being” (Simpson 2014: xxi). In other words, how we come to understand inflects and colors the things that we know, and what we know needs to be directly related to helping our community (Cajete 2000, 2004; Jojola 2004). Vine Deloria suggests that “no body of knowledge exists for its own sake outside the moral framework of understanding” (1999: 47). So knowledge must be both respectful and useful for the community: these are the ways of determining the success or accuracy of knowledge (Basso 1996; Simpson 2014).

Furthermore, Indigenous epistemologies are characterized by humility. There are no bare facts (Deloria 1999; Norton-Smith 2010; Whitt 2009). Native American philosophies do not assume that the structures of our minds have unmitigated access to the inherent, permanent, and discrete structures of the universe, and instead recognize that no set of beliefs or knowledge is ever value neutral. American Indian epistemologies tend to affirm both the world and their ontological maps of the world, but do not confuse one for the other, as Western sciences and epistemologies often do (Norton-Smith 2010).

That respectful practices are built into epistemologies bespeaks the centrality of ethics for Indigenous worlds. According to Cordova, Native American ethics prioritizes the “we” over the “I,” understanding all life as fundamentally social and reliant, while simultaneously rejecting hierarchical ways of organizing those relations (2004: 177). Instead of seeing hierarchies, Native ethics affirm differences between creatures, land, and forces, all of whom equally “participate in the continuing creation of reality” (Deloria 1999: 47). This “‘complete’ system” of ethics, as Cordova names it, includes responsibility not only for other members of society—which, as we recall, extends well beyond the human—but also “toward the planet which has produced one and upon which one is dependent” (177).

Importantly, these ethics are not strictly deployed with other humans, but are exchanges between the entire peopled world, where “people” includes plants, places, lands, animals, and so on (Atleo 2011; Callicot 1989; Cordova 2004; Jojola 2004; McPherson and Rabb 2011; Norton-Smith 2010; Whitt 2009). In their sweeping account of the connections between ethics, land, and personhood, Dennis McPherson and Douglas Rabb clarify that “a person is someone with whom our relationships may be, indeed must be, evaluated morally” (2011: 89). These personal relations are so intertwined that disrupting Indigenous relations to land and fellow peopled communities can be considered a way of disrupting their personhood (Alfred 2012; Bang and Marin 2015; Corntassel et al. 2009; Tuck and Yang 2012).

This connection between the animals, the environment, and personhood is central for understanding what ethics and justice mean for American Indian communities. In order to be in ethical relations with Native American peoples—to speak of the rights of or duties to Native American communities in terms of environmental justice—we must speak about the *whole*

community, including the “other-than-human persons organized into congeries of societies alongside Indigenous peoples” (Callicot 1989: 14). So while, for James Grijalva, environmental justice means “achieving a level of environmental quality adequate for Indigenous people to practice and maintain their self-defined cultural relation to the land and natural environment,” we must remember that this must also include achieving justice for the *totality* of their peopled communities (2012: 26). In order to affirm this totality, we must respect and defer to Native names, along with the relationships and knowledges they tenderly bear into the more-than-human world (Atleo 2011; Cajete 2000; LaDuke 1999, 2005; Rose 1992; Schreyer et al. 2014; Whitt 2009; Wildcat 2009).

Indigenous Philosophy(ies) of Naming

Because environmental justice depends on affirming Indigenous communities, we now consider how Native American names, naming ceremonies, and practices play a crucial role in establishing, maintaining, and protecting Native communities, and persons within communities (Norton-Smith 2010). But a work of this scope on naming runs the risk of, as Joshua Nelson puts it, erasing “the diversity within the diversities of indigeneity” (2014, 28). So instead of making universal claims about Indigenous naming as such, I attempt to amplify the voices of Indigenous scholars and allies, providing a few leading but contingent characteristics or principles that might serve as a guide, pointing toward the vaster affirmations within complex, Native American namings.

Names always come from and affirm peopled communities. In *The Dance of Person and Place*, Norton-Smith provides a rich account of Shawnee child-naming practices and ceremonies that explicate this principle. In these ceremonies, new members of the Shawnee community are named and given *um’soma* affiliations, ten days after birth, by a number of the tribe’s elders or other respected persons. In Shawnee life, *um’somaki* are name groups that represent “various kinds of or characteristics of nonhuman animals” (2010: 103). Each tribal member belongs to one *um’soma*, is affiliated with one animal, and shares comradery and companionship with other members of their *um’soma*.

Nine days after a child’s birth, two elders, chosen by the family, are asked to spend one night praying and dreaming about the character and traits that each animal’s *um’somaki* represent, and to let names appear to them. On the morning of the tenth day, after a name occurs to the elders, the elders present the names that came to them, clarifying which *um’somak* the name belongs to, and retell the characteristics and habits of those animals. Once the parents choose which of the names they prefer, thanks are offered to the animals for their wisdom and power.

Here, one’s community is both the condition for and the result of a naming—and community includes the human persons, land, ecosystems, and animals whose *um’somaki* bind them together. The continued placement of children in these *um’somaki* is imperative to continue those creaturely relations. If names and the *um’somaki* change, then those relationships are distanced, dulled, or broken. In fact, naming practices, language, words, and names, and the objects, persons, and relations to which they refer are all considered alive and affective entities, part of a single community that names facilitate and result from.

Naming ceremonies and practices are themselves agents. Both are agential, equal parts of the community, as they are responsible for the actual giving and bestowing of a name (Bang and Marin 2015; Norton-Smith 2010). Native naming practices and ceremonies are often those in which “aspects of the natural world (e.g., places and concepts) are assigned names which become semiotic signs of nature–culture relations” (Bang and Marin 2015: 536). The naming ceremony,

when done appropriately and respectfully by the correct people, “creates a bond between the name and its bearer, giving the name the power to care for and transform the bearer” (Norton-Smith 2010: 104). It is the ceremony—which is composed of a community, a name, relatives, and an *um’somaki*—that bestows the name with power, setting the name into relation with the name bearer. In other words, the naming ceremony is in part responsible for facilitating or enacting the community. The “creative act of naming” brings bodies into relation with one another (Cajete 2000 181). Citing Gregory Cajete, Bang and Marin conclude that “knowing and building a relationship with land occurs through the ‘creative act’ of naming” which can make visible “conceptual and relational realities” (2015: 536).

As agents, naming ceremonies teach respectful, epistemological practices. Contrary to Western naming, in which names can be applied to any old thing, no matter how distant or abstract, acts of Native naming teach that it is not just inappropriate and presumptive but also impossible to name distant or abstract relations that one does not know, care for, or regularly engage with. Indigenous ways of knowing exchange the apprehension of external and settled states of affairs for respectful and responsible participation with other lives. A name situates the name bearer in a network of relations, outside of which the name does not make sense.

Names thus result from respectful observations of and participation with, not power over, other agents. Native names and their ceremonies place “communication and reciprocity with natural environments—rather than the desire to dominate or to establish ‘truth claims’ about those environments—at the very heart of the production of knowledge and wisdom.” Knowledge of the named creatures comes about through attentiveness and respect, not control (Hester and Cheney 2001: 324; see also Norton-Smith 2010). Tim Ingold highlights this characteristic in his discussion of the Koyukon of Alaska and their animal communities. Ingold suggests that the animal people get their names through the character traits they express. Creatures are not named by humans, *per se*, but appear to name themselves through their own enactments, habits, personal narratives, and individual life stories. For example, “stares into the water” (ospreys) and “knocked the swan down” (green-winged teal) get their names from their own life activities and self-actualization (2011: 170–171). The latter name comes from a story passed down through the Koyukon and still enacted (retold) every time Knocked the Swan Down too hastily and carelessly takes off from the water, disturbing and tipping resting creatures. Instead of abstractly bestowing a name upon a creature based on, for example, the discoverer’s name, the creaturely people in the Koyukon community perform and enact their own names. They are agents. When communities refer or speak to these peoples, they respectfully use these names, retelling the stories from which they come. In fact, Ingold calls these names “miniature stories” or “episodes of stories”: encountering a name is to encounter and experience a story about one way of being in the world (172). These names then offer real information about the ecological relations in the world.

Native naming is governed by humility. The Koyukon first witness practices of self-naming or agency in which other bodies in their communities name themselves through their stories, actions, songs, and lifeways. Then, as these storied names are passed down within the Koyukon community, the Koyukon respectfully recognize and refer to these creatures through their self-appointed names. Their own role in this naming practice is one of humility: to see and call as the creatures see and call themselves. In her poem “Naming the Animals,” Linda Hogan affirms this Native practice of recognizing the names of others over alternative methods such as the biblical telling of Adam’s naming of the animals. Of course, Adam’s method of naming—basically just point a finger and make a sound—is also the model of scientific naming enabled by power over rather than relationship with. For Hogan, Adam’s naming model is ludicrous: “as if [the animals] had not been there / before his words, had not / had other tongues and powers

/ or sung themselves into life / before him" (1993: 40). As Leanne Simpson reminds us, "true engagement requires consent" from "all beings involved" (2014: 15).

Trial and error are important parts of naming and becoming. Such is the case in William Smith's Alsea telling of the naming of the animal peoples. As Smith tells it, "Coyote kept on saying, 'I want that all the people should put on this horn. I want to see whom the horn will fit best.'" Notice that the animals are included in the designation 'people,' reminding us that Native ethical communities are composed of nonhumans. As each person (or people group) unsuccessfully tries on the horn, Coyote offers them names according to their practices: "Then crane put it on. He walked around, but attempted to go into the ocean. The Coyote said to him: 'It does not look good on thee, take it off. Thy name will be just crane. Thou wilt habitually wade around for mudcats (catfish). Continuous-Wader shall be thy name'" (quoted in 2012: 34). The animals thus are not essential entities in the world, before their namings; they become who they are through specific acts and are named accordingly.

Names are context specific. Western philosophy has obsessed about the difference between proper and improper names. In Native philosophies, names are proper insofar as they refer to specific bodies. But they might also refer to animals, whose names are both proper and common (Coyote, Raven, Spider). At the same time, individuals are often named after places, even as those places are named after other animals or relations, and so on (Basso 1996; Schreyer et al. 2014). Native names disrupt the stable differences between personal, proper names and collective, group names; the name depends on whom and how you encounter (Ingold 2011: 171). This requires listeners to engage and find out context, but it also affirms that being a person and being a collective, or in a set of relations, are interrelated.

Names themselves are agents. Names are not mere words or abstract signs that agential minds enact on dormant bodies. Nor are names important only because of the animal person, attribute, or other namesake they convey. According to Norton-Smith, the name bearers, naming community, and namesakes are all "animate entities," but so too are the ceremonies and practices that bestow the names, as well as names themselves (2010: 204). Names have real power as independent agents: they are living, affective, agential entities who exist in relationships with other agents and have real, concrete power in the world on their own terms (Bang et al. 2014; Bang and Marin 2015). To be an agent, or to have agency, is to actively and selectively participate with one's environment (Bang and Marin 2015: 24). Names, along with thoughts, dreams, and stories, as well as all manner of persons (human, plant, animal, etc.) count as animate, as agents. For Norton-Smith, since all of the entities are animate agents, they all display traits of personhood (2010: 7). For this reason, the mutual consent and respect of all agents are imperative if relations are to stand (Simpson 2014). When names and the relations they refer to are not respected, things could go poorly for the named individual or the ceremony participants, or perhaps the name will refuse to stick (Norton-Smith 2010). When chosen wisely, a name "is an animate entity that takes care of its bearer (104).

Finally, *Native American names refer to relations rather than strictly individuals.* Naming does not so much distinguish or individuate one body from others, but instead connects, situates and embeds bodies amongst their instantiating, enabling, cohabiting, co-constituting others. When summarizing Western theories, Steve Martinot suggests Western naming "individuates what it points out by setting it apart." This processes of individuation is totalizing because by separating a thing from its background, and by clarifying its boundaries, one makes it into a whole. This supposes that naming merely "gives presence, or brings to light what is already there awaiting individuation and discernment through an added articulation."

But from an American Indian epistemological perspective, recognizing that there are no "neutral facts," this represents a fundamental misconception about the order of operations. It

seems that naming, as a theory of individuation, must actually presuppose the very self-present, bounded individual it believes itself only to be perceiving. It merely “points to something one already has in mind” (2006: 28). To borrow Maria Lugones’s, phrasing, it is only by ontologically assuming the existence of individual unities—beginning with the belief that “the world of people and things is unified”—that our naming practices serve to extract, differentiate, and individuate (1994: 465).

Of course, Native names also clarify, address, and identify something. Indeed, American Indian naming is hyperattentive to making-present (Bang and Marin 2015: 536). Just as Western naming begins with the individual, and through a “complex series of fictions” convinces itself to have discovered this unity, Native philosophy also assumes the unit of measurement it believes itself to name (Lugones 1994: 464). But there are major differences. First, Indigenous namers not only recognize but explicitly thematize their role in creating meaning in order to know responsibly without assuming their knowledge perfectly captures the world (Norton-Smith 2010). Indigenous epistemologies do not deploy a series of fictions to make their truth universal.

Second, what they assume and make present are “relational realities” (Bang and Marin 2015: 536). Names do not function to pull out stable bodies, or totalize by “separating something from its background” (Martinot 2016: 28). Instead, names identify nodes, axes, conrescences, or intersections in a spider web. These axes cannot be reduced to the mere addition of smaller, component parts (like owl+tree, where owl and tree are individuals added together). Nor is the name-bearing node a bounded fixture, extractable from the vaster network in which it belongs. Rupert Ross, in collaboration with the Mi’kmaq, claims that Indigenous peoples have “a habit of thinking relationally, i.e., understanding *between-ness* to give rise to (at least temporary) fixities/“things” rather than assuming a world of atomistic things from the outset (2004: 6).

Names still refer to particular people. But the personhood revealed is fundamentally relational. Persons are always persons-in-relations or individuals-in-relation. Western philosophy sees and picks out individuals, while Native philosophies see relations, groupings. Consider Son of Raven (Clutesi 1967), Standing Bear (2006), or even Coyote (Frachtenberg 2012). To assume that these names pick out individuals is to start from an ontological position that assumes unity. Instead, Son of Raven, Standing Bear, and Coyote name places in relational nodes that have their own character and characteristics but are nevertheless not abstract or extractable.

Third and finally, the individuals-in-relations made present in these names are understood as contingent and shifting, open to change, rather than fixed and permanent. This is in part because many names pick out relations that may shift over time (Basso 1996). The boreal owls in Koyukon territory are not named just because they perch but because they perch in a certain place on a certain kind of tree (Ingold 2011: 272). A rock spring in Apache territory named Tliish Bi Tuè (Snake’s Water) would presumably be named otherwise if inhabited by frogs. Relational shifts or new relational entities are marked by new names and renaming ceremonies (Norton-Smith 2010).

But this is also because many Native names pick out *actions*, where actions are contingent and agential rather than fixed and instinctual. For example, Koyukon animal names pick out actions in the world rather than fixed identities. The mink’s name is “bites things in water, spotted sandpipers are “flutters around the shore,” boreal owls are “perches on the lower part of spruce trees” (Ingold 2011: 169). Verb-derived names refer to a kind of doing, or a set of actions, or habits, which are in process and changeable, rather static individuals fixed in time and space (Frachtenberg 2012; Ingold 2011; Ross 2004). To behold an animal person is not to observe an object that is then perceived to act. It is “to glimpse a moment of activity that may subsequently be resolved into an objective form.” In Koyukon ontology, “each animal is the instantiation of a particular way of being alive” and a mere “concentration of potential . . . in the entire field of

relations that is life itself” (2011: 170). Indigenous names are “more frequently verb-centered, trying to emphasize not the thing-aspect of Creation but the pattern, flow and function aspect” (Ross 2004). In this way, bodies become visible not as minks but rather through the activity of “minking.”

Recovering “Proper” Names: Environmental Justice

When named respectfully, Native names affirm and create ecological relations, educate their users on Native relational ontologies, and enact Indigenous ways of knowing in resistance to settler/ed knowledges. They are thus crucial for decolonizing the environmental movement and for affirming the bonds between Native Americans and their peopled communities. This final section will look at three ways in which recovering or using Native names is important for environmental justice.

First, reclaiming Indigenous names of people (humans, land, or animals) restores those bodies to their relational networks of respect and care (Bang and Marin 2015; Bang et al. 2014). Names can bring these kinships or axes into being (again). Even as we affirm Native naming, we must be careful not to treat its decolonizing effect as mere metaphor (Alfred 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). Settlers (especially in environmental movements) have a long and troubled history of using both discourses of decolonization and justice, and of stealing Native stories and words, while simultaneously supporting settler practices of land occupation and use (Whitt 2009). Ethnotopography, a popular anthropological habit in the early 1900s, more frequently than not failed the Native American communities they intended to serve, sometimes despite the author’s best efforts, and exposed Native lifeways and worlds to the colonial gaze (Deloria 1999; Standing Bear 2006; Thornton 1997). This led to a Native cultural and linguistic extraction and eradication (Deloria 2007; Rose 1992; Whitt 2009). Foregrounding Native naming without addressing material redistribution affirms settler ideology. Much like language of reconciliation, such gestures might “relegate all committed injustices to the past while attempting to legitimate the status quo” (Corntassel et al. 2009: 145), ignoring other aspects of justice, including widespread recognition and respect of traditional tribal and spiritual practices, Indigenous sovereignty, participation in the political decision-making process, financial transfers and redistribution, and so on (Alfred 2005).

Yet, without these names, supposed settler allies find themselves “paying lip service to the Indigenous peoples of the region while subsequently reinscribing settler names and histories on the landscapes” (Snelgrove et al. 2014, 16). Furthermore, for many Native American peoples who do not strictly separate the material from the nonmaterial (Bang and Marin 2015; Deloria 2007; Wildcat 2009), names are part of the material fight against environmental erasure and ecological injustice. Restoring the proper names of places and peoples not only makes Indigenous lives and relations visible in the present, advancing what Bang et al. (2014) call Indigenous “time-space relations,” thus resisting settler temporalities that would relegate them to the past (Bang and Marin 2015). They are *also* part of land reclamation and revitalization, affirming Indigenous knowledges and embedding individuals in the relations to which the names refer (Bang et al. 2014; Bang and Marin 2015; Corntassel et al. 2009; Schreyer et al. 2014). Recall that names are agents that actively situate bodies back in networks of power with land, rivers, places, and peoples (Bang et al. 2014; Bang and Marin 2015). These naming practices are a mode of resistance against settler coloniality because they have the power to establish communities, connect entities to one another, and affirm future-oriented relations; they “make present certain relational realities” (Bang and Marin 2015: 538). Names enact the relations.

Speaking precisely to the reconnection brought about by these names, people of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, in what settlers call Alaska and northern Canada, have worked to compile an online, interactive map of their territory with Tlingit names, meanings, and stories. Community member Louise Gordon suggested using Tlingit names helps people “get into a good rhythm with the land,” and Susan Carlick claims of this renaming, “I think that our land would appreciate it” (quoted in Schreyer et al. 2014). These statements assert that (right) names possess the power to situate their bearers and namers back in *real*, and not simply imagined or abstract, relation to one another. They understand this naming to have real effects on not only the people but also the land, places, and rivers.

Bang and Marin make naming of place and peoples one of their central principles for desettling colonial nature-culture relations (2015: 536). They describe several moments in which an Indigenous name of a plant, river, or spot of land situated Indigenous peoples in the present and in relation to lands. First, Bang and Marin recount a moment in which a Miami teacher, Robert, helps students to understand the ontological stances reflected in Miami names, where “water-animal relationships [are] imbued in language.” The use of the Miami name *sikaakwa* for the Chicago River, combined with the teacher’s explanation of the river’s meandering, connections with other rivers, and land relations, allow the river to become visible as a network of changing, affective relations. This naming thus allows a “counter-mapping” that turns Indigenous ways of knowing into discourses of resistance against settler temporalities (537). *Sikaakwa*, roughly translatable as “pungent onion,” even clarifies that the river was named for the onion plants that dotted its shores. Here, Bang and Marin clarify that by naming places “through the use of Indigenous languages,” these teachers construct “non-humans as agentic place makers” in networks of ongoing—which is to say, contemporary—relations with the listeners (356).

We already see the second way in which Native names are important for environmental justice. Native names are caretakers of ecological knowledge about the relationships between the creatures, lands, plants, forces, and humans that have composed Native American communities but have been obscured, cut away, or paved over by settler lifestyles and economics. For Indigenous communities to be treated justly, we must recognize that “community” refers to the more-than-human world and that justice must mean learning of and restoring or otherwise caring for the ecological relations of the other bodies in those lands.

The importance of ecological knowledge in restoring ethical, just relations to Native communities is represented by two of the four primary principles guiding the Tlingit effort to restore names to their homeland (and restore their homeland): (1) place names teach you how to respect the land, and (2) place names teach you about the land (Schreyer et al. 2014.) The former reminds us that place names come with stories that contain long-held knowledge and details about lands, creatures, and how to respect them. For example, Tlingit elders recall that the name of their old summer campgrounds near Mount Áa Tlein (Altein, in English, and Tlingit for Big Lake) called “Wéinaa, which means alkali or where caribou used to come for salt lick” (Nyman and Jeer 1993; Schreyer et al. 2014, 107). But according to Tlingit community member Andrew Williams, these names came from stories that taught Tlingit young how to respect the active, seasonal relationship between these entities—the mountain with the lake, the lake with the caribou (Schreyer et al. 2014). Without these names, those stories and their knowledges disappear.

The second principle, that names teach you about the land, is formulated by Tlingit themselves: “Age-old Tlingit place names, as poetic as they are practical, carry valuable ecological and survival information. Place names represent locations where fish spawn, where moose come to drink, where edible fern roots could be found” (Schreyer et al. 2014, 108). Tlingit member David Moss recalls the oddity of a particular European island renaming that erased knowledge the ecosystem and its habitants: “But Teresa Island, I don’t know who Teresa is, but it used to

be Goat Island right? That gives you a better idea of what's on that island" (quoted in Schreyer et al. 2014, 124). In his encounters with Apache elder Charles, Keith Basso (1996) is told that many of the place names in western Apache territory refer to waters that have long been dry. As so many place names do (Basso 1996; 2005), these names offer knowledge about the healthy relations between islands and goats, caribou and salt, moose and rivers. Without the knowledge contained in those names, how can we achieve justice for the entire Tlingit community, and not just its humans?

In another example, we find that creaturely names within the Anishinaabe language appeal to relations outside of settler colonial knowledges (Bang and Marin 2015). In this example, by using the Anishinaabe language to describe a dead tree as an entity with an ongoing relationships to the ecosystem, two young Indigenous boys and their mom construct important, desettled, ecological knowledge about the kinship of all lives. About this renaming, Bang and Marin suggest that "this is a remarkable ontological transformation of the presumed possible relations between humans and non-humans as distinct and separate that was present when the interactional medium was English. We suggest the use of Anishinaabe language (Ojibwemowin) supported relational perspectives between humans and non-humans" (540).

The ecological relations made present in these names provide much-needed knowledge about restoring and aiding creatures and places that have been devastated by settler technologies or neglect. It is knowledge of relations invisibilized under Western naming schemas. Yet as valuable as those knowledges are, Indigenous naming is not focused on returning things to the "past." Despite the long histories of these Native naming practices, they are not sedimented in an idyllic, pre-settler past, but continue to inform the very lively, very present naming practices of Indigenous peoples in resistance to settler names and the colonial, individualist ontologies they represent. Because Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies tend to be built on change and flexibility, rather than fixity and essences, American Indian worlds can encounter new problems and integrate new ideas into the groups without breaking the system (Deloria 2007; Standing Bear 2006). Native names offer ways of moving forward, even in places where the land and its inhabitants have been violently altered. This flexibility allows them to meet devastating circumstances in ways that still affirm their ontologies (Deloria 2007: 13).

Bang and colleagues' quest to rename their "plant relatives" as well as invasive species highlights how important it is to include Native Americans in the categorization of new relations, entities, and knowledges. Speaking about the process for this naming, the authors

recognized our use of the term invasive species signaled a particular epistemic and ontological stance to youth—a western science one specifically—and not one that we intended. Thus, the term invasive species placed buckthorn, and other plants that were forcibly migrated to Chicago, outside our design principle around naming our plant relatives because while they may not have been our relatives, the term disposed them as relatives to any humans. (2014: 11).

We again see that Native namings reflect ethical knowing and relational ontologies even when they need to create new names and designations for creatures. Bang et al. resist the settler colonial border, nationalist, and police logics that name various new-coming plants "invasive species," a name that would essentialize, and individualize bodies as culprit. Instead, Bang and company affirm the Indigenous epistemological principle that knowing means knowing rightly and in accordance with a relational ontologies, and name them "plants that people lost their relationships with" (11).

Here we also find Indigenous naming themes at work. As Coyote taught us about the value of trial and error in naming (Frachtenberg 2012), Bang et al. tried out a few names to see what

fit best: “We ‘fished around’ to find a name centered in our own epistemic and ontological centers” (2014: 11). And as we learned from the Lakota, Koyukon, Mi’kmaq, and Blackfoot, names are often based on verbs and actions, rather than static identities. Bang et al. also name plant relatives through their actions, and specifically, the losing of relationships. Rather than violent and eradicatory responses, this name makes present a tenderness and concern for the plants and their relational networks.

This reflection on “plants that people lost their relationship with” points toward the third way in which Indigenous names are crucial for environmental justice: using Native names elucidates relational violences that exceed the harms to “individuals.” Given our focus on relations, this point is by now already intuitive, so we can be brief. One cannot isolate harms in Indigenous ontologies. If you harm *Wéinaa* (alkali, where caribou used to come for salt lick), you harm the caribou (Nyman and Jeer 1993; Schreyer et al. 2014). If you harm *Sheshikmaoshike sepe* or *Sikaakwa* (rivers), you will harm the entire network to which they are connected, including the stinking onions and flowing maples. And if you harm these, you harm the Native people who were and are embedded in these communities.

Conclusion

Working with Native American thinkers, I have tried to explicate the robust philosophies of naming at work in American Indian practices and to demonstrate their importance for better and more just environmental management practices and ecological futures. So what does settler responsibility actually look like?

Maybe we begin with recognizing the names we have been given: “*yonega* is a Tsalagi (Cherokee) term for white settlers, which connotes ‘foam of the water; moved by wind and without its own direction; clings to everything that’s solid.’” The Dakota use the term “*wasicu* . . . which means ‘taker of fat.’” In the northwest of Turtle Island, where I am a guest, “*hwunitum* is a Hul’qumi’num and SENĆOŦEN word for settler, that some have described as ‘the hungry people’” (Snelgrove 2014: 16). Accepting these identifications means recognizing we are not mere individuals, but are already seen by and situated within a network of relations to which we are accountable. Why begin here? Because responsibility cannot only mean a feel-good solidarity with, but must, more substantially, mean a responsibility, accountability, or even deferral to.

This responsibility-to means that *yonega* recognize that struggles to reclaim Indigenous place and species names are serious political and ethical struggles about who has the power to tend to or use environmental resources and in what ways. Thus, deferring to and taking up Native names is part of a “commitment to the fundamental concept of sovereignty” for Native Americans (Lomawaima 2007), especially sovereignty over their own lands and relational networks (in which we are also embedded, if often in negative ways). When we do not defer to Native names and knowledges they contain, even attempts at partnership or collaboration between Native Americans and Western scientists can end up “supplanting Indigenous peoples as legitimate knowers” of wildlife, ecological patterns, etc. (Watson 2013: 1099). As long as natural spaces, ecological problems, and environmental victories are understood through and measured in colonial terms and names, environmental resources, political power, and material distribution will lay the hands of the *yonega* (Snelgrove et al. 2014).

But American Indian efforts to rename also attempt to rekindle or bring into being the relationships obscured or broken by settler lifeways. To this end, settler responsibility to right names is also an epistemic responsibility to attend other lives in their instantiating relations, not essential identities (Simpson 2014: 8). Deferring to Native American names refuses the impulse to

see ourselves, or any other creature, as situated outside of or as removed from named relations: for “the environment” is not “something outside of, surrounding a people,” but fundamentally “a part of the people” (Whitt 2009: 43). If we want to combat settler violence against Indigenous and creaturely peoples, we must rightly name the bodies-in-relation, human and non, with whom we co-make our worlds (even if those names are not in our language). We must insist on the right names of the places, peoples, creatures with whom we cohabit, and demand that these names and the relations they facilitate become central to environmental movements so that they can unsettle our relations and habits with human and nonhumans alike (Bang and Marin 2015). “May it soon be usefully so” (Basso 1996: xvii).

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■ NOTE

1. I almost exclusively cite Native American authors. I know that much Western literature, especially anthropology, has treated American Indians as others to be exposed and undressed before the Western gaze. Every non-Indigenous scholar I cite (other than non-Indigenous coauthors) was first cited as a positive resource by Native Americans. I also did extra research to clarify whether they were collaborating with Native American peoples and attending to their voices and preferences. For example, I encountered Tim Ingold in the work of Bang and Marin (2014), and further research confirmed that he is a resource used positively by many Native scholars. Many texts were excluded from this literature review because their claims were clearly at the expense of, and not in the interests of, the Native stories and persons about which they spoke.

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