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Research Article

Before the 'New': Reclaiming Indigenous Relational Ontologies through Linda Hogan's Memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*

Nesrin Yavaş

Ege University, Faculty of Literature Department of American Culture and Literature, İzmir, Türkiye, nesrinyavas@yahoo.com, ror.org/02eaafc18

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Abstract: This article critically examines the epistemological limitations of Western new materialist theory by foregrounding Indigenous relational ontologies, with Linda Hogan's memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* serving as a focal text. While new materialism has challenged anthropocentric paradigms by recognizing the agency of nonhuman entities, it frequently overlooks longstanding Indigenous philosophies in which land, matter, and spirit are inseparably entangled. This study highlights how Hogan's narrative embodies a relational worldview where earth, animals, objects, and memory participate in the production of meaning and ethical responsibility. By framing Indigenous materialisms as autonomous theoretical systems rather than cultural supplements, the article redefines matter as sentient, storied, and historically embedded. This perspective not only destabilizes the perceived novelty of Western theory but also proposes a model of human–nonhuman relations grounded in reciprocity, place-based ethics, and spiritual kinship. The article contributes to current debates in environmental humanities and decolonial theory while establishing a foundation for future research on non-Western materialisms, multispecies worldviews, and local ontologies across global contexts.

Keywords: Indigenous Materialisms, Relational Ontology, New Materialism (s), Epistemic Colonization, Linda Hogan

1. Introduction

The genesis of this article lies in a personal experience at an international symposium convened in Türkiye in 2019, which catalyzed a deeper engagement with the epistemic exclusions embedded within Western academia. During a keynote lecture delivered by a prominent scholar/theorist of the *new* materialist school of thought, I was struck by the omission of Indigenous scholars in the conceptual framework presented; not a single Indigenous name or reference adorned the PowerPoint slides that sought to theorize relational/reciprocal ontologies and nonhuman agency.[1] Although the presentation was intellectually engaging, the glaring absence of Indigenous epistemologies, which have long articulated the concept of relational materiality, was both noticeable and disconcerting. When I raised a question to highlight this gap during the discussion, the lack of a substantial response only intensified my concerns. This experience resonates with Métis anthropologist and scholar Zoe Todd's observations of attending a lecture by French philosopher Bruno Latour, where Latour celebrated the agency of the climate without acknowledging *sila*, the Inuit cosmological thought that is frequently translated into English as weather, climate, or environment. Inuktitut word *sila* embodies a considerably more nuanced interpretation derived from Inuit cosmologies, which challenge the reduction of its meaning to Western conceptions of external environmental phenomena.[2] As narrated by Todd (2016), she waited in vain

[1] The typographic emphasis on the word *new* signals a skeptical stance toward the presumed originality of Western new materialism. This formatting choice draws attention to the fact that many of the ideas now framed as theoretical breakthroughs—such as relationality, nonhuman agency, and vibrant matter—have long been foundational in Indigenous ontologies.

[2] Chantal Bilodeau's climate change theatre play *Sila* (2015) is set against the backdrop of climate-induced disruptions affecting the Inuit population in Nunavut, Canada. As the first part of the Arctic Cycle—a series of eight plays exploring the wide-ranging effects of climate change in the Arctic—*Sila* is part of a larger theatrical project dedicated to addressing environmental crises across the eight Arctic nations. The series includes works such as *Sila* (2015) for Canada, *Forward* (2016) for Norway, and *No More Harveys* (2022) for Russia and the United States, each focusing on the unique environmental challenges faced by its respective region. For a forthcoming discussion of this topic, see:

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for Latour to mention Inuit or other Indigenous ontologies—no such acknowledgement was made. Instead, Latour engaged with a long-deceased Scottish thinker and abstract notions of "Gaia," treating the idea of a sentient climate as if it were a novel insight of his own, rather than one long present in Indigenous knowledge (Todd, 2016, pp. 4-5). Todd's critical reflections demonstrate how Western academia's ontological/material turn can inadvertently perpetuate colonial epistemic hierarchies by appropriating relational concepts while sidelining Indigenous intellectual contributions. My experience at the symposium reinforces Todd's insight that unless materialist frameworks meaningfully engage with Indigenous knowledges, they risk merely reproducing the very colonial dynamics they aspire to transcend.

Over the past two decades, Western environmental humanities have been invigorated by the rise of *new* materialist thought that challenges anthropocentric and dualistic understandings of the world. Scholars like Karen Barad (2007), Jane Bennett (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010), Rosi Braidotti (2013), Stacy Alaimo and Serpil Oppermann (2012b; 2014), among others, have argued that matter is active and entangled with meaning, and that nonhuman entities possess forms of agency once reserved for humans. This onto-material turn in the Western academy emerged mainly as a corrective to poststructuralist theories overly focused on language and discourse, aiming to re-center materiality, affect, and relationality in our understanding of reality. However, as Virginie Magnat (2022) incisively observes, many ideas heralded as *new* in these frameworks are in fact longstanding principles in Indigenous philosophies. Indigenous peoples worldwide have for millennia upheld worldviews in which land, water, animals, plants, stones, winds, minerals—all non-human entities traditionally considered inanimate until the ontological turn in Western academia—are regarded as living relatives or ancestors imbued with agency, consciousness, and spirit. These Indigenous materialisms, which encompass diverse, place-based ontologies of vibrant/agential matter, not only predate contemporary Western discussions but often exceed them in conceptual breadth by incorporating spiritual and ethical dimensions that are largely absent from secular Western theories.

The body of work surrounding Western *new* materialist school of thought offers significant insights into the agency of matter; however, it is not without its critiques, particularly regarding its Western-centric perspective, which often marginalizes non-Western ontologies and epistemologies. In their introduction "Stories Come to Matter" in the edited volume *Material Ecocriticism*, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014) reiterate the concept of "storied matter" by invoking Western theories of materiality and narrativity, while Indigenous ontologies remain conspicuously absent Although their scholarship effectively elucidates the entanglement of matter and meaning, it conspicuously neglects to engage with Indigenous ontologies and knowledge systems that have long articulated similar frameworks of understanding. This trend is evident in their prior significant essays as well: In their article titled "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity," Iovino and Oppermann (2012a) frame their discourse on material agency through the lens of renowned Western theorists such as Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, without any reference to Indigenous knowledge systems. This pattern is further reinforced in their collaborative essay "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych," where the intellectual framework remains entirely rooted in Euro-American thought, yet without acknowledgment of non-Western ontologies and epistemologies (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012b, pp. 448–475). Their reliance on a Euro-American philosophical canon, while theoretically innovative, thus inadvertently reproduces the very epistemic exclusions that contemporary materialist and posthumanist projects claim to challenge. As Burow, Brock, and Dove (2020) point out, Western posthumanist and *new* materialist discourses often *claim* to undo human exceptionalism while failing to engage seriously with Indigenous ontologies that have long

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treated nonhuman entities as active, thinking participants. In other words, Western theory extends agency to animals, plants, or objects in an abstract sense. However, it typically does so within a continued Western philosophical lineage, without integrating Indigenous peoples' voices or knowledge systems for whom such agency is a lived reality. The result is a theoretical landscape that, though advocating for "dis-anthropocentric" thinking, inadvertently reproduces epistemic exclusions by not acknowledging the deep roots of these ideas in non-Western ontologies.

This article critically investigates Indigenous materialist ontologies and illustrates how these ontologies both precede and contest Western *new* materialisms. By drawing upon analyses by Indigenous scholars, the study elucidates key differences in worldview, notably the inseparability of matter and spirit, reciprocal ethics, and the conception of land as an active agent. It posits that recognizing Indigenous materialisms is imperative for authentically decolonizing knowledge and surpassing the confines of the Western *new* materialist frameworks. The exploration commences with an Indigenous materialist interpretation of Linda Hogan's memoir, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* (2001). This examination reveals that new materialist thought has been an essential component of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies long before the influential works of Karen Barad (2007) and Susan Hekman (2010), who are often recognized as leading theorists in the domain of Western *new* materialist school of thought. It is critical to acknowledge that Hogan's memoir was published in 2001, before the rise of Western *new* materialism(s) in Euro-American academic discourse. The insights the memoir offers are not exclusive to Hogan's oeuvre. Her narrative is offered here as illustrative rather than exhaustive. The relational worldview expressed in Hogan's narrative—where land, animals, objects, and elemental forces are viewed as agential and interconnected—mirrors themes present across a broad spectrum of Indigenous literary texts, including novels, short stories, autobiographies, and oral histories.

The selection of Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* for this study is based on two primary considerations: First, the text remains relatively underexplored within academic scholarship, offering an opportunity for original contribution and critical engagement. Second, the narrative is deeply rooted in Hogan's life experiences, reflecting the authenticity of her personal reality. This emphasis on lived experience aligns closely with Indigenous epistemological frameworks, wherein knowledge is often grounded in embodied and relational realities, thereby making Hogan's memoir particularly significant for discussions surrounding Indigenous materialisms and relational ontologies. By foregrounding Hogan's text in this theoretical context, the goal is to challenge the prevailing Western academic framework and show that what is described as innovative is, in fact, part of a much older, cross-cultural intellectual inheritance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Before the "new": Indigenous materialisms and the colonial blind spots of Western "new" materialism(s)

The idea of an animate, relational material world is a foundational aspect of Indigenous cosmologies across the globe. While diverse in expression, many Indigenous cultures share the understanding that matter and spirit are deeply intertwined, and that non-human entities—such as animals, plants, mountains, water, and stones—possess agency, personhood, or spirit. Often described as "Indigenous materialisms," these perspectives refuse the dualism that underpins much of Western metaphysics. Importantly, these knowledge systems do not frame materiality and spirituality as separate realms. Instead, they perceive all human and non-human beings as enmeshed in dynamic relationships of reciprocity, respect, and co-responsibility. For example, Linda Hogan's Chickasaw worldview exemplifies this relational ontology: in *The Woman Who Watches Over the Worl*d, Hogan (2001) writes of a sacred clay figure and a loon bird not as metaphors but as literal agents and healers in her life,

affirming that for her community, "matter and spirit co-exist." As Lidia Ziarkowska (2014, p. 88) observes, Hogan's work prompts readers to take such stories seriously, not as symbolic folklore, but as ontological claims about the nature of reality. This worldview is not limited to North America. Indigenous literatures and oral traditions from across the globe are replete with examples of animate matter and relational ontologies. Alison Ravenscroft (2018) offers one such illustration in her discussion of Australian Aboriginal epistemologies. Drawing on Jennifer Biddle's ethnography of a Warlpiri women's ceremony, Ravenscroft recounts how dancers' feet "feed" the land, making the ground an active participant in the performance. "The ground is lively, sensate," she writes, "human and inhuman are responsive to and responsible for each other in a relation of mutual nourishment" (Ravenscroft, 2018, p. 355). This is not a flattening of distinction between human and non-human, but rather a recognition of their ontological inseparability. It exemplifies a worldview in which land is not inert but sentient, and humans are not masters but kin. Such accounts long predate Western "vital materialist" theories, yet offer a remarkably sophisticated understanding of agency, interdependence, and ethical responsibility.

Recognizing this longstanding Indigenous philosophy has implications not just for how we read Hogan (2001) or Ravenscroft (2018) but for how we theorize materiality itself. Grounding Hogan's memoir within Indigenous theoretical contexts clarifies that her portrayal of a communicative, healing Earth is not an idiosyncratic literary device, but part of a coherent knowledge system. When Hogan shows clay, water, and loons acting with purpose, she dramatizes what Native epistemologies have long affirmed: matter is alive, aware, and responsive. This insight operates as a subtle yet profound corrective to the epistemic blind spots of Western materialist frameworks. It also challenges the supposed novelty of "discoveries" now celebrated within Western academic discourse. As Vine Deloria Jr. (1999, pp. 43–44) has emphasized, the division between the material and the spiritual is not a universal truth but a cultural construction rooted in Enlightenment thought. Indigenous ontologies, by contrast, often resist such splits, viewing sacred presence and physical landscapes as aspects of the same continuum.

However, this relational worldview is metaphysically distinct from Western paradigms and carries a radically different ethical orientation. If land, water, and all other non-human entities are recognized as living, relational beings, then to exploit them is not merely a technical or economic act, but an act of violence against kin. This ethos of reciprocity stands in sharp contrast to the extractive mindset that arises from seeing nature as dead matter. The work of Hogan and other Indigenous scholars, therefore, does more than describe cultural difference: it calls for a profound restructuring of theoretical and ethical frameworks. As Rosiek et al. (2019, p. 338) argue, genuinely engaging with Indigenous thought requires treating Indigenous texts as theory, not as anecdote, and recognizing Native scholars as intellectual peers, not cultural informants. Citing Vine Deloria Jr. (1979; 1999), Winona LaDuke (2005), Marie Battiste (2011), and others is not an act of charity—it is a necessary step toward correcting epistemic injustice and enriching theoretical inquiry with perspectives grounded in centuries of lived experience.

However, while some recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge the relevance of Indigenous ontologies, the broader field of Western new materialism(s) still exhibits significant epistemic blind spots. Emerging in the early 21st century, new materialist thought aims to decenter human exceptionalism and reanimate the role of matter in shaping events. Thinkers such as Jane Bennett (2010) and Karen Barad (2007) emphasize agency, affect, and the entanglement of humans and non-humans. Yet, as Virginie Magnat (2022) and others argue, these theoretical advances often reproduce colonial patterns by treating Indigenous insights as recent revelations rather than long-standing knowledge systems. This dynamic exemplifies what Magnat (2022) calls the "Columbus problem": the repackaging of ancient, place-based Indigenous wisdom as Western innovation.

Nathan Lawres and Matthew Sanger (2022) extend this critique by showing how Western theorists frequently filter Indigenous knowledge through European conceptual frameworks like Heidegger or Latour, rather than engaging Indigenous scholars directly. They call for redirecting intellectual attention toward Native philosophers, who have long articulated relational ontologies grounded in lived experience. These frameworks emphasize that agency, intentionality, and personhood are widely distributed among humans and nonhumans, and that knowledge is rooted in place—a "spatial epistemology" that cannot be adequately translated into Western terms without distortion (Lawres & Sanger, 2022, p. 9).

Métis anthropologist and Indigenous feminist scholar Zoe Todd (2016) offers perhaps the most incisive critique. Reflecting on a personal encounter with Bruno Latour, she poses a simple yet profound question: if theory is truly open to all practices and peoples, then who is doing the theorizing, and who is being theorized upon? Todd (2016) observes that Euro-Western scholars often use Indigenous ideas without acknowledging their origins or the specific communities they belong to. In doing so, they risk stripping those ideas of their political and relational grounding, transforming them into decontextualized concepts easily absorbed into dominant paradigms. She calls for accountability in scholarly engagement, starting with citation. Todd writes, "For every time you want to cite a Great Thinker who is on the public speaking circuit these days, consider digging around for others who are discussing the same topics in other ways" (2016, p. 19). Decolonizing theory, in Todd's view, begins with the ethics of attention: whom we cite, whom we ignore, and why.

Māori scholar Brendan Hokowhitu (2021) takes this further in his concept of "disciplinary colonialism." He argues that Western theorists often treat Indigenous ideas as if they belong to no one until they are claimed by the West—a dynamic he terms "cogitatio nullius," or "no one's thought" (Hokowhitu, 2021, p. 158). While open to dialogue, Hokowhitu insists that such engagement must start from a recognition of epistemic asymmetry. Theories like Barad's "agential realism," which sees matter and discourse as co-constitutive, can provide a point of contact, but only if they are placed in conversation with Indigenous ontologies on equal terms. Otherwise, what is framed as theoretical innovation risks becoming yet another instance of colonial appropriation.

Alison Ravenscroft (2018) echoes this concern through her close readings of Indigenous Australian Alexis Wright's fiction, showing how Indigenous literature offers not only alternative narratives but alternative theories of matter, time, and relation. Her critique is methodological as much as conceptual: she calls for a mode of scholarship marked by estrangement, humility, and poetic receptivity. Only through such decolonial methods, Ravenscroft argues, can Western theory begin to appreciate the depth and originality of Indigenous materialisms.

Finally, Sara Ahmed (2008) reminds us that the framing of "newness" is never neutral. In her critique of new materialism's founding gestures, she argues that what is called "new" often depends on a selective forgetting of prior feminist, queer, and anticolonial traditions. The act of naming something as new, Ahmed (2008) contends, is also an act of erasure—a politics of memory that marginalizes those who have long been doing the work.

Empirical research supports these critiques. Rosiek et al. (2019) demonstrate that even in supposedly progressive spaces like the onto-material turn, Indigenous scholars are rarely cited or engaged. This is not accidental but indicative of persistent biases that deem Indigenous knowledge less rigorous or less theoretical. Such prejudices create a cycle in which Western theory is positioned as universal and forward-thinking, while Indigenous perspectives are relegated to the realm of culture, tradition, or data. Unless this hierarchy is actively dismantled, even radical-sounding theories risk reinscribing the very colonial power structures they aim to subvert.

In conclusion, the critique of Western new materialist thought offered by Indigenous scholars and allies is not a rejection of materialist inquiry but a call to deepen it. If the aim is to rethink agency, relation, and matter, then Indigenous materialisms must not be peripheral or optional but central. Recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate theoretical frameworks is essential for developing a genuinely decolonial materialism. This approach should be founded not on claims of innovation, but rather on enduring relationships characterized by respect, accountability, and place-based wisdom.

2.2. Contrasting indigenous and Western materialisms: Relational ontologies of land and agency

Although varying widely among different Indigenous nations, Indigenous peoples share several core principles – often cited as respect, reciprocity, relationality, and responsibility – that bind humans and other non-human beings (Magnat, 2022, pp. 24–25). In Indigenous ontologies, the category of "person" frequently extends beyond the human to include animals, plants, rocks, waters, mountains, and spiritual entities. Rather than seeing matter as passive or inert, Indigenous epistemologies recognize all material entities as dynamic participants in a network of relationships (Glass, 2022, p. 224). As anthropologist Aaron Glass (2022) notes, Indigenous ontologies understand things as having life-force and spirit; even what Western science calls "inanimate" may be considered a living relative within an Indigenous framework (Glass, 2022, pp. 222–224). In his article Indigenous Ontologies of Active Matter, Aaron Glass (2022) discusses the story of Stone T'xwelátse, a sacred ancestral being for the Stó:lō Coast Salish people. Glass explains that for many years, Stone T'xwelátse was kept as an artifact in the Burke Museum in Seattle, treated within Western museology as an inanimate object. However, for the Stó:lō, T'xwelátse has always been regarded as a living entity, carrying spirit and life force and embedded in ongoing kinship relationships. After sustained efforts by the Stó:lō Nation, the stone was successfully repatriated to its ancestral homeland in British Columbia, where it is now honored through daily rituals that affirm its vitality and relational presence (Glass, 2022, p. 223). Instead of an object to be preserved in inert form, T'xwelátse exemplifies an Indigenous materialist understanding: matter is alive, ensouled, and ensconced in relationships that carry obligations of care and respect.

Crucially, matter and spirit are not separate in these ontologies. Many Indigenous knowledge systems conceive of the physical and spiritual as a unified reality, a point emphasized by scholars like Vine Deloria Jr. (1999), Gregory Cajete (2000), and Manulani Aluli-Meyer (2013). Vine Deloria Jr. (1979) observed that Western dichotomies of material vs. spiritual simply do not apply in Indigenous contexts, because existence itself is defined by the interpenetration of the seen and unseen. Aluli-Meyer (2013) later articulated a "holographic epistemology" to describe Native Hawaiian ways of knowing, wherein physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions are integrated and inseparable, forming a holistic understanding of reality. Knowledge, from this viewpoint, is not merely an intellectual construct but emerges from embodied and spiritual relationships with the world. As Shawn Wilson (2008) puts it, in Indigenous research paradigms, "research is ceremony" – generating knowledge is a ceremonial, relational act that involves accountability to the human and more-than-human community (Wilson, 2008, p. 87). These perspectives contrast sharply with Western academic traditions that separate researcher from subject, mind from matter, or the sacred from the empirical.

Another defining feature of Indigenous materialisms is the pervasive ethics of reciprocity and responsibility. Because other beings (animals, plants, elements, ancestors, lands) are persons or kin, humans must engage with them through respect and mutual obligation. Relationality is thus not just a description of ontological interconnectedness, but also an ethical framework. Virginie Magnat (2022) emphasizes that Indigenous philosophies embody a performative ethics: reality is continually co-created through respectful, ceremonial actions that maintain balance and relationships. For instance, many Indigenous communities have protocols of offering tobacco, prayer, or song when harvesting plants or hunting animals – gestures that acknowledge the agency and sacrifice of those beings and commit to reciprocity. This ingrained ethical dimension means that knowledge and practice are never

value-neutral; to know something (like the medicinal properties of an herb) is simultaneously to shoulder a responsibility (to harvest it sustainably, to thank its spirit, to share it appropriately). In Western new materialism(s), there is often an attempt to remain descriptive, pointing out that matter has agency, without a required moral response. On the other hand, Indigenous frameworks insist that recognizing nonhuman agency requires a shift in behavior: one of humility, restraint, and care in how humans interact with the non-human world. In short, Indigenous materialisms unite ontology, epistemology, and ethics in a manner that exceeds the scope of most Western theoretical models. They offer a vision in which humans are one part of a wider community of beings, all of whom have roles, voices (agential/actant in Western new materialist thought|), and intrinsic worth in the continual negotiation of life.

In particular, one of the clearest points of contrast between Indigenous materialisms and Western new materialism(s) lies in the understanding of land and place. In Western traditions, influenced by Judeo-Christian and Cartesian legacies, land has often been treated as an inert backdrop for human history – a space to be owned, managed, or symbolically represented, but not a subject in its own right. Posthumanist and *new* materialist scholars have attempted to challenge this by arguing that landscapes and ecosystems exert agency. However, Indigenous perspectives on land go much further, framing land as not only agentic but also conscious and communicative. Vanessa Watts's concept of Place-Thought encapsulates this difference: Watts (2013, p. 21) asserts that in Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe worldviews, land is a thinking entity, such that place and thought are fundamentally inseparable. Human beings and nonhuman beings alike derive their agency through participation in the thinking processes of the land itself (Watts, 2013, p. 22). This means that mountains, rivers, forests, and other locales are not passive settings but active participants in the formation of knowledge, culture, and governance.

Watts (2013, p. 24) contrasts this Indigenous notion with the Western epistemological divide between mind and matter. In the Western framework, rooted in Cartesian dualism, thought is the domain of humans, whereas matter is brute and insentient. This distinction rationalized the treatment of land as both property and resource within colonial contexts, given that if land is devoid of consciousness and emotion, it lacks inherent rights or desires. By stark contrast, if land is understood to think and to have will, then it must be related to as one relates to a powerful elder or kin, with negotiation, respect, and mutual dependence. Watts (2013) illustrates this by discussing governance systems: in Indigenous traditions, treaties and agreements are often made not just among human nations but between humans and the land and animals. For example, the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace and many North American Indigenous treaties include agreements to uphold relationships with the "Three Sisters" (Corn, Bean, and Squash) or with animal nations, recognizing these nonhuman *subjects* as partners in society (Watts, 2013, p. 27, emphasis added).

Such Indigenous governance structures demonstrate an evolved understanding that society is multispecies and multibecoming, an idea that has only recently been echoed in Western scholarship as "more-than-human politics." Donna Haraway's concept of "multispecies becoming-with," developed in her 2008 work *When Species Meet*, articulates the idea that humans and nonhumans shape each other's existence through relational entanglement and co-evolution (Haraway, 2008). Haraway's notion of "more-than-human worlds" and "multibeing societies" marked a significant shift in Western posthumanist theory, challenging human exceptionalism and emphasizing multispecies relationality. However, it is crucial to recognize that such insights, while celebrated as radical in Western academia, have long been foundational to Indigenous epistemologies. For countless generations, Indigenous knowledge systems have affirmed that humans live in reciprocal, co-constitutive relationships with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, elements, and ancestral spirits. The Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace and similar Indigenous governance systems illustrate that Indigenous societies were organized as multispecies collectives, where nonhuman beings were political and social partners (Watts, 2013, p.

27). Thus, Haraway's "becoming-with" should not be seen as an unprecedented theoretical innovation, but rather as a late Western recognition of relational ontologies that Indigenous peoples have lived, practiced, and theorized since time immemorial.

The implications of these divergent worldviews are significant. Colonization can be understood not merely as the appropriation of land but as an attempt to impose a Western ontology upon it—an imposition that strips land of its intrinsic personality and disrupts the profound relational connections that Indigenous peoples maintain. Watts (2013) argues that colonization deliberately characterized Indigenous ontologies as "myths" and instituted an epistemological divide between humans and land. This bifurcation had the dual effect of undermining Indigenous identity and facilitating environmental exploitation (pp. 23–26). By recontextualizing nature as inert and devoid of spirit, colonizers sought to legitimize their extractive and expansionist practices, leading to catastrophic outcomes. This process not only dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their territories but also alienated both Indigenous and settler societies from recognizing land as a fundamental source of law, identity, and consciousness. The violence inflicted upon the land paralleled the violence inflicted upon Indigenous bodies, particularly those of Indigenous women. Watts elucidates this connection by contrasting Western Genesis narratives—where a woman's interaction with a nonhuman, the serpent, results in "fall" and subjugation—with Indigenous Sky Woman narratives, where women's engagements with nonhumans are both originative and sustaining (Watts, 2013, pp. 25–26). Within Indigenous thought, harming the earth equates to harming female sources of life, and vice versa; thus, the assault of colonization on both women and land is deeply interconnected (Watts, 2013, p. 27).

Western new materialists agree that the human/nature divide is problematic, yet as Burow, Brock, and Dove (2020) argue, posthumanist theorizing has often failed to dismantle it completely. They observe that while posthumanism speaks about distributed agency, it often does so in a way that "redistributes" agency without dismantling colonial hierarchies (Burow et al., 2020, p. 200). For instance, a posthumanist might argue that a river has an agency in shaping a city's development, but this tends to remain a functional kind of agency acknowledged within a Western scientific frame. Indigenous perspectives would add that the river has personhood and possibly intentions; it is a relative to consult and honor, not just a force to account for. Indigenous feminist scholar and bioscientist Kim TallBear (2017) points out that Indigenous epistemologies grant far greater animacy to nonhumans than even most posthumanist models do, viewing animals, plants, and minerals as lively relations rather than as actants defined solely by their interactions. Similarly, Zoe Todd (2016) argues for the need to decolonize posthumanism, observing that despite its radical veneer, posthumanism often remains Eurocentric and ignores Indigenous worldviews, thereby continuing to center Western intellectual traditions. Juanita Sundberg has underscored that much of posthumanist and new materialist scholarship treats Euro-American epistemologies as the only truly "living" source of theory, effectively rendering Indigenous traditions invisible or archaic (qtd. in Burow et al., 2020, p. 199). Vine Deloria Jr. (2001), who, challenging the epistemological superiority of Western thought, constructed the Lakota worldview as a form of theoretical philosophy, wrote: "The best description of Indian metaphysics was the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because ultimately everything was related (p. 2). Deloria Jr. (2001) describes the Indigenous world as structured through two fundamental experiential dimensions: place and power, where "power" refers to spiritual energy or life force rather than political control. In this view, people cultivated deep familiarity with the distinct personalities of various objects and entities in the natural world, regardless of whether they were animate or inanimate. Such familiarity allowed them to understand where each being or presence properly belonged and what kinds of experiences and interactions each place would afford or invite. Conversely, an intimate knowledge of place made it possible to engage meaningfully with the entities that inhabited it, emphasizing a reciprocal and situated relationship between people and the land (2001, pp. 2-3).

These critiques converge on the idea that without directly engaging Indigenous concepts like Place-Thought, Western theory cannot genuinely escape its human-centered, colonial heritage. Thus, by embracing Indigenous notions of land and place, theorists can gain a more robust understanding of agency and ontology. Watts's Place-Thought, for example, reframes the Earth as a site of consciousness that humans participate in rather than command. This perspective not only predates Western theory but surpasses it, proposing a radically inclusive cosmology in which the Earth's own thoughts and intentions play a role in what Westerners would call "history" or "politics." It challenges scholars to envision forms of agency that are not instrumentally tied to human projects at all. An exemplar of this is seen in the movement to recognize legal personhood for rivers, inspired by Indigenous activism and worldview (especially of the Māori), which compels Western law and policy to treat rivers as entities with their own rights and voice. Such developments suggest that Indigenous materialisms offer practical pathways for rethinking human-non-human relations in an era of ecological crisis. As Burow et al. (2020) conclude, understanding land as a living, relational entity is vital for true decolonization and the healing of both social and ecological systems (p. 200). In sum, where Western posthumanist thought is still grappling with letting go of human authority over nature, Indigenous frameworks provide a model of already de-centered human existence, one grounded in place-based reciprocity and profound respect for the agency of the land.

3. Discussion

3.1. Indigenous relational materialism in *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*

Linda Hogan's memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* offers a vivid embodiment of an Indigenous materialist worldview, one in which land, objects, and animals are agential relations rather than inert backdrops. Throughout the text, Hogan blurs the boundary between human experience and the more-than-human world, portraying matter as alive with memory and purpose. A key opening image sets the stage: Hogan becomes entranced by a clay figurine of a woman "made with clay from the earth" – a miniature guardian intended to "watch over the world" (Hogan, 2001, p. 18). When this clay woman arrives in the mail broken into pieces, Hogan does not simply discard her. Instead, she perceives the figurine's shattered body as communicating a truth. The damage should not be interpreted merely as an accident; it fundamentally represents a significant reflection of the pervasive brokenness within both the external world and the individual's internal experience (Hogan, 2001, p. 18). As Hogan reflects, "the woman who watches over us is as broken as the land, as hurt as the flesh people… She is a true representation of the world she flies above" (Hogan, 2001, p. 18). In this moment of insight, Hogan concludes that "something between us and the earth is broken" (Hogan, 2001, p. 18). The shattered clay figure becomes a teacher rather than an object: its materiality carries a story about trauma, resilience, and the interdependence of human and earthly realms. What Western thought might interpret as mere metaphor, Hogan approaches as literal reality – the clay woman is *alive* in a spiritual and narrative sense, imparting a lesson Hogan earnestly studies and absorbs. The memoir builds on this guiding metaphor, structuring its chapters around a "body/land/history triad" linking personal memory to specific places and material things (Ziarkowska, 2014). In other words, each fragment of Hogan's life story is tethered to a piece of the living world, suggesting that history truly "lives in the body" – both the human body and the body of the land – in an Indigenous ontology of interconnected being.

Hogan's close relationship with the clay woman figurine exemplifies how Indigenous materialism treats matter as animate and communicative. Rather than seeing the broken statue as lifeless matter, Hogan tends to it and listens. She writes that the figurine's broken form best communicated the truth about the state of the world (Hogan, 2001, p. 18), conveying that the injuries suffered by the land through colonization, environmental destruction, and those suffered by human beings through personal and collective trauma are ultimately part of the same story. The land's pain, in Hogan's view, is not a distant abstraction but as real as the pain in her own body. Indeed, Hogan endures significant physical and

emotional pain in her life – from a debilitating injury to the inherited scars of historical violence – and she continually situates her personal healing in relationship to the non-human world. For example, when conventional medicine fails to cure her chronic pain, Hogan turns to the natural world for comfort and guidance. She recalls that "my doctors became earth, water, light, and air. They were animals, plants, and kindred spirits", yielding "not… a life free from pain, but a kind of love and kinship with a similarly broken world" (Hogan, 2001, p. 16). Here, Hogan explicitly credits elemental forces and non-human beings as her healers. In doing so, she affirms a core principle of Indigenous epistemology: The idea that humans are embedded in a network of kinship with animals, plants, rocks, and waters, all of whom have agency and wisdom. Healing, therefore, is not a unidirectional human endeavor but a reciprocal relationship – a partnership with the living material world founded on respect and love rather than domination.

One night, Hogan's Lakota daughter feels "urged" to drive hours through the desert, stopping only to scoop up red earth near Chimayó, New Mexico, "not knowing where she was' or why" (Hogan, 2001, p. 148). Days later, mother and daughter learn that the spot was El Santuario de Chimayó,Santuario's famous tierra bendita, "earth with great medical powers"(Hogan, 2001, pp. 149–150) and has drawn pilgrims for centuries. Hogan reads the incident as evidence that land itself can summon human kin, exemplifying a geology of healing that predates—and corrects—Western notions of inert matter:

> There are places of power on the earth. They have meaning not just because humans associate meaning with them, but because they resonate. They are designated sacred places not only because of stories humans tell about them, but because of the energies of the places themselves. They are alive. Stone. Clay. Mica. Minerals. They are associated with healing, or with other kinds of aid. They may be mountains, they may be a bend in a river, but they are sacred sites (Hogan, 2001, p. 149).

This relational model repeats itself across other episodes in the memoir, particularly in Hogan's interactions with animals and ancestral figures. The same reciprocity shapes Hogan's bond with Mystery, the rescued wild mustang whose shattered pelvis mirrors the author's own injuries. During the emergency birth that kills Mystery's foal, Hogan simply raises her arms instead of wielding a whip, and the horse "rose up and walked right into the trailer" for surgery (Hogan, 2001, p. 157). In the months that follow, Mystery "expressed milk to the earth," mourning her lost offspring even as Hogan learns to walk again (Hogan, 2001, pp. 157-158). Their parallel recoveries dramatise Hogan's claim that human and more-than-human bodies heal—or remain wounded—together.

This model of material–spiritual relationality is also embodied in Hogan's invocation of Lozen, the Chiricahua Apache warrior-healer. After the earthy intimacy of Chimayó and the embodied convalescence shared with Mystery, Lozen's presence introduces a historical and geopolitical dimension to Indigenous materialism. Known for her extraordinary ability to detect enemy movement by turning slowly in a circle until her "hands began to tingle" (Hogan, 2001, pp. 140–142), Lozen exemplifies a form of land-based perception in which tactical knowledge emerges through bodily attunement to terrain. She "became known as a shield for her people" (p. 140), not simply due to her physical prowess, but because she could read land as a communicative force. In Indigenous epistemologies, such as those described by Shawn Wilson (2008) and Margaret Kovach (2009), warrior and healer roles are not opposites but intertwined forms of knowledge production—especially among Indigenous women, whose ceremonial and survival knowledges are often intergenerational and place-anchored. By incorporating Lozen into her narrative, Hogan affirms that epistemic authority is not the exclusive domain of abstract reason or written tradition. Rather, it can reside in the body, in intuition, in reciprocal relationships with the land. Lozen's survival intelligence arises not from domination but from multispecies and elemental collaboration, just as Hogan's does. Collectively, the invoking of Chimayó,

the shared healing experiences in Mystery, and Lozen's land-based divination enhance the memoir's philosophical assertion: Matter possesses mindfulness, and relationships constitute medicine.

The memoir's narrative arc reinforces this theme of reciprocal healing between people and place. Hogan illustrates how landscapes themselves remember and respond to events, and how attending those places can spark personal insight and restoration. Throughout her journey, Hogan visits sites of historical trauma and natural beauty, suggesting what she also affirmed in her 1995 book *Dwellings*: the sentience and memory of the earth. When Hogan (2001) writes, "As I looked about me, it seemed as if the past haunted the place itself, as if memory resided in the ground itself and I became only an interpreter of it" (p. 47), she reflects that land is a *subject* that remembers everything. In context, Hogan is urging us to recognize that human histories – including our wounds and atrocities – are literally embedded in the living landscape, which actively participates in history through its enduring memory. When she confronts the painful history of her Chickasaw ancestors and the experiences of her adopted daughters, who survived harrowing abuse before finding a home with her, Hogan does so by engaging with the land. In one chapter, she traces her daughters' origins to the vicinity of Wounded Knee, describing how the massacre's legacy a century earlier still reverberates in the lives of Native children (Hogan, 2001, pp. 84–86). By interweaving the story of her daughters suffering with the memory of a well-known atrocity on Indigenous land, Hogan implies that trauma is not only inherited through human memory but also embedded in the very soil and geography. Each personal story in the memoir is thus grounded in a *place* or a material element that holds memory, whether it be desert clay, oil-tainted water, or a house filled with artifacts. Hogan's act of writing becomes, by extension, a material act of healing: she gives voice to broken bodies and landscapes, acknowledging their pain and agency, and in doing so begins to mend the relational fabric that colonialism tore apart. Rather than treating the non-human world as passive scenery, Hogan consistently honors it as an active participant in her narrative. This approach strongly resonates with Indigenous concepts like Vanessa Watts's (2013) "Place-Thought," which posits that land and thought are co-constitutive and that places themselves think and communicate. Hogan's insights often arrive through direct encounters with place – listening to "land . . . relatives . . . culture, and knowledge" that had been historically silenced (Todd, 2016, p. 15), affirming that wisdom emerges through respectful engagement with the living earth.

One of the most moving episodes in the memoir involves Hogan's encounter with a wounded loon, which poignantly demonstrates her ethic of care and nonhuman relationality. Hogan and a friend discover a loon soaked in oil and near death on a beach, a victim of environmental pollution (Hogan, 2001, pp. 25–27). The loon's life hangs in the balance because of human-induced ecological harm, making it a living embodiment of how human and non-human fates intertwine. Hogan cradles the ailing bird and seeks help, ultimately spending a long day ensuring the loon receives treatment. In the end, although the loon survives only briefly, the experience leaves a profound imprint on Hogan and her community. She writes that something was "righted" in that act of compassion, as if the very imbalance of the world had been addressed in a small yet significant way (Hogan, 2001, p. 29). Gathering with the others who helped save the bird, Hogan comes to a powerful realization: "Our healing, we both knew, was connected to this other healing, as woman to land, as bird to water. We are together in this, all of us, and it's our job to love each other, human, animal, and land, the way ocean loves shore, and shore loves and needs the ocean, even if they are different elements" (Hogan, 2001, p. 29). This epiphany encapsulates the memoir's ethos of radical interdependence. Hogan understands human well-being and non-human well-being as one and the same: "together in this, all of us" (Hogan, 2001, p. 29). The imagery of ocean and shore loving each other despite their difference poetically conveys an Indigenous ethic of mutual care across species and elements. In Hogan's community, this act is not taken lightly: an elder honors her by bestowing the name "The Girl Who Saved the Loon," valuing her not for personal accolades but for showing compassion to a fellow creature (Hogan, 2001, p. 30). Such recognition reflects an Indigenous worldview in which moral identity is built on relationships with the more-than-human world. Through the loon story, Hogan

demonstrates what a materialist philosophy grounded in Indigenous values looks like in practice: it is a lived commitment to kinship, responsibility, and healing between humans and the non-human world.

Hogan's memoir articulates an Indigenous epistemology in which knowledge is not abstract, disembodied, or exclusively cognitive but emerges from the entangled relations between body, land, and spirit. In a particularly revealing passage, she writes: "There is something that we Indian people share at the deepest levels of ourselves, and it is a living, present thing. It is there in the dreaming, in a voice always at the ear, an old song, the land we come from, but also in the clay and breakings of earth, woman, bird" (Hogan, 2001, pp. 27–28). Hogan affirms that Indigenous knowledge is not abstract or external to the world but emerges from material, relational, and spiritual entanglements. The "living, present thing" she describes is a collective and embodied form of knowing rooted in land, voice, memory, and interspecies kinship. By naming "clay," "earth," "woman," and "bird" as sites where knowledge resides, Hogan positions brokenness and nonhuman life not as symbols but as epistemic agents. This reflects an Indigenous materialist ontology in which land and more-than-human beings are both carriers and producers of knowledge, bound to humans through ethical relationships and shared history.

Hogan's clay woman can be seen as an instance of what literary ecocritics have termed "storied matter," carrying narrative within its form (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). Likewise, her recognition of the loon and the landscape as co-healers echoes the *new* materialist insistence on the entanglement of human and nonhuman lives. However, Hogan's text makes it abundantly clear that these principles are not "new" at all – they have long been integral to Indigenous epistemologies. What contemporary theory describes in abstract terms, Hogan conveys through lived experience and ancestral understanding. For Indigenous peoples, it has always been understood that "the land is alive" and that animals and plants are persons with their own spirit and knowledge (Deloria, 1999; Kimmerer, 2013). Indeed, as Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) notes, many Indigenous languages embed this worldview in grammar, refusing to objectify natural entities by using animate pronouns instead. Hogan's memoir enacts this animacy in English prose: she consistently refers to nonhuman beings with empathy and respect, never as mere objects. In one instance, she writes of "talking about the healing we have each sought" while sitting by the Pacific, including the ocean itself in that healing conversation (Hogan, 2001, p. 23). The epistemic framework of the memoir is therefore distinctly Indigenous and relational. Hogan is not adopting a trendy philosophical stance; she is articulating an Indigenous ontology passed through generations, one grounded in stories, ceremonies, and lived connection with the land. This understanding teaches that matter and spirit are not separate – a teaching evident when Hogan says, "with all our medical discoveries, we are still, like the clay woman, coming apart and breaking" *(*Hogan, 2001, p. 19). Humanity's fate remains bound to the fate of the earth, a truth her elders and community have long recognized. In this light, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* stands as a literary act of decolonization: it recenters knowledge about material agency in an Indigenous context, implicitly urging readers (and scholars) to rethink any assumption that Euro-Western science or theory has the exclusive claim on insight into the non-human world.

3.2. Decentering Eurocentric ontologies: Toward epistemic decolonization

Integrating Indigenous materialisms into contemporary scholarship constitutes a critical aspect of epistemic decolonization, aiming to challenge the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge systems. Scholars such as Magnat (2022), Todd (2016), and Lawres and Sanger (2022) argue that Indigenous philosophies must be treated not as supplementary insights but as central to theoretical discourse. This involves a paradigmatic shift: recognizing Indigenous thinkers as theorists in their own right and resisting the tendency to assimilate their ideas into Western frameworks without altering those frameworks themselves.

Indigenous scholars exemplify rich traditions of relational ontology that remain underacknowledged within dominant academic narratives. Despite current trends such as the "ontological turn" in

anthropology, Indigenous worldviews are often refracted through Eurocentric lenses, particularly those of Heidegger or Latour, rather than being engaged on their own terms. Lawres and Sanger (2022) advocate for a reorientation toward Indigenous spatial epistemologies—understandings of knowledge as inherently tied to land and place—that offer conceptual resources yet to be fully appreciated by Western theory.

Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning (2019) cautions against the superficial incorporation of Indigenous concepts into Western theoretical projects, a practice that can replicate colonial dynamics under the guise of inclusivity. Meaningful engagement requires a shift in values: humility, accountability, sustained relationship-building, and the recognition of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty. Practical commitments include obtaining permission to cite community knowledge, involving Indigenous scholars as co-authors, and amplifying Indigenous leadership within institutional structures.

Such a transformation is not only ethically imperative but also intellectually generative. Indigenous knowledge systems provide crucial tools for addressing global challenges, particularly those stemming from ecological imbalance. Their emphasis on interdependence and sustainability can inform more holistic approaches to environmental crises. To decolonize theory meaningfully, Indigenous materialisms must become structurally embedded in scholarly practice, not as peripheral case studies, but as foundational contributions. While developments in publishing, conference programming, and authorship norms suggest momentum, deeper institutional reforms in curricula, citation practices, and funding priorities remain essential for enduring change.

Ultimately, embracing Indigenous materialisms is not about rejecting Western thought wholesale, but about enriching and correcting it. It is about moving beyond a token inclusion of "other perspectives" towards a pluralistic intellectual practice that can genuinely address the complex crises of our time, from ecological collapse to social injustice. For the academy, this means the predominantly Western narrative of theory must yield to a more inclusive conversation, where Indigenous materialisms are not just acknowledged but become foundational to our understanding of reality. Only by doing so can Western scholars truly say that their materialist philosophies have broken from the colonial past and entered a space of cross-cultural respect and learning. In sum, Indigenous materialisms demonstrate that the world has always been more-than-human, alive, and relational; it is now incumbent on Western scholars to listen, learn, and let these longstanding truths transform what we call "knowledge."

4. Conclusion and Future Research

This article has argued that Indigenous materialisms—far from being supplementary or culturally specific anecdotes—constitute sophisticated ontological frameworks that precede and, in many cases, exceed the epistemological reach of Western new materialist theories. Through a close reading of Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*, we have seen how Indigenous knowledge systems articulate a deeply relational, ethical, and place-based understanding of matter, agency, and interdependence. In Hogan's memoir, the world is not a backdrop to human experience but a co-actor, co-sufferer, and co-healer—a sentient network of beings whose vitality and voice have long been recognized in Indigenous thought but remain unacknowledged or co-opted in dominant theoretical paradigms.

The Western academy's celebration of *new* materialist thought often rests on acts of epistemic erasure—reinscribing colonial dynamics by extracting conceptual insights while disregarding the intellectual sovereignty of the communities from which these insights emerge. This article challenges that epistemic asymmetry by insisting that relational materialisms theorized by Indigenous scholars and storytellers are not derivative, but foundational. As long as Indigenous philosophies are treated as secondary or decorative to Western theory, any claim to decoloniality within the humanities remains intellectually and ethically hollow.

To theorize responsibly in the 21st century requires more than formulating novel concepts—it requires a fundamental reorientation in how knowledge is valued, sourced, and shared. What is often celebrated as *new* within Western materialist thought has, in many cases, long existed within Indigenous epistemologies that center relationality, reciprocity, and the sentient vitality of the land. The call, then, is not for newness per se, but for a renewed ethical posture: one that listens before it names, collaborates before it theorizes, and acknowledges before it appropriates. This shift compels scholars to move beyond the symbolic inclusion of Indigenous voices and toward structurally embedded forms of epistemic justice.

Such a transformation must not be confined to North American or settler-colonial contexts. As the imperative to decolonize knowledge extends globally, it opens pathways for rethinking local ontologies and marginalized traditions within other geographies. In this regard, the framework developed throughout this article also opens critical avenues for scholars working in the Turkish context. Particularly, longstanding Anatolian cosmologies and Central Asian shamanic traditions—often dismissed as premodern belief systems—can be reinterpreted not merely as cultural heritage, but as complex ontological frameworks that parallel Indigenous materialisms. In such worldviews, the shaman is not simply a spiritual intermediary but a knowledge-bearer who listens to the memory of the land and communicates with the ethical consciousness of the more-than-human world. Stones, waters, animals, and places are not metaphors but living entities engaged in reciprocal relationships. Recognizing shamanistic ontology as a form of materialist thinking allows Turkish scholars to revisit local knowledge systems not as folkloric remnants, but as epistemologies in their own right.

This comparative lens challenges the dominance of Eurocentric theoretical paradigms and invites a revaluation of Indigenous and place-based philosophies within Türkiye's academic landscape. Ultimately, Indigenous materialisms are not only critical but constitutive—they offer transformative tools for rethinking what counts as theory, who gets to theorize, and how knowledge remains grounded in land, relationship, and ethical entanglement.

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