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Embracing Agency: Ontological Considerations for Wilding Pedagogies

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has explored the concept of “wilding pedagogies” to more deeply engage the more-than-human world in environmental and outdoor adventure education. Thus far, the scholarship around wild pedagogies has been primarily epistemic and pedagogical, focusing on epistemological principles that can guide pedagogy. There has been less focus on ontological considerations for wild pedagogies. This paper offers a theoretical exploration into such ontological considerations that can further inform the practice of wilding pedagogies in outdoor adventure education. The emergence of (new) materialism coupled with an increasing awareness of Indigenous philosophy has problematised many of the ontological assumptions embedded within Eurocentric philosophical ideals. Challenging dualisms and the traditional boundaries of substance, these philosophies consider relations as ontologically primary. From this ontological posture, we can engage with the phenomenon that exists in the space *between* humans and nature, thinking *with* nature rather than *about* nature and recognizing the agency of the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Agency; human-nature relations; indigenous ontology; place-inclusive pedagogy; relational ontology

Introduction

I sat by the campfire, surrounded by 8 young adults who were on the verge of starting their first year of college. We had just completed 14 days of backpacking and canoeing in the Great Lakes region. Part of our expedition included several days of paddling on giche-gami (Lake Superior), the water so clear we could still see the bottom even in the middle of the bay. We had encountered the full gamut of weather, been lulled to sleep by the yodel of loons, eaten wood sorrel and thimbleberries, lost our patience (and our minds) with the mosquitoes, and seen countless wonders of the natural world — from the microscopic to the grandiose. Here, our last night, I asked this group of intrepid travellers, “What is wilderness?”

A rich discussion ensued, mostly centring around wilderness as a construction rather than a physical place. The students talked about the difficulties of our journey, the physical and emotional challenges, the lack of modern amenities, and the amount of resilience and perseverance required to complete the journey. For these young adults, “wilderness” was not a physical place. It was a conceptual place that involved challenge and a certain amount of resolve, a place to be tested and to strengthen core competencies that would be needed to survive the difficulties of life. The metaphor was clear, transferable, and human-centric. And “wilderness” likely lived on in their cognitive structures as just that: a metaphor for life’s difficulties.

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I often think back to that conversation and wonder why we didn't acknowledge the trees, the lakes, or the loons (among other things). We had just spent two weeks of our lives trekking, paddling, cooking, and sleeping outside. We had walked through meadows and cool forests, slept on beds of moss and ferns, risen to the sound of morning birdsong, and relied on the many streams and lakes for sustenance. And yet, none of this was central to our conversation that final night.¹ The lessons were valuable – we all need opportunities to practice resilience and perseverance with real, low-stakes consequences. However, I'm now convinced that a fuller richness was missing from our experience. We learned perseverance and resilience *through* the more-than-human world², but what had we learned *with* the more-than-human world? Was there meaningful, reciprocal engagement that resulted in a greater sense of mutuality? Or had we simply practiced a form of pedagogical extraction?

A brief review of literature

This example from the USA occurred within the context of expedition-based outdoor adventure education (OAE), defined by Ewert and Sibthorp (2014) as “[a] variety of teaching and learning activities and experiences usually involving close interaction with an outdoor natural setting and containing elements of real or perceived danger or risk in which the outcome, although uncertain, can be influenced by the actions of the participants and circumstances” (p. 5). Transplanted to North America from English and German models, OAE historically used wilderness settings to address perceived declines in physical and moral character as a result of industrialisation. The educational model attempted to provide what James (1911) called a “moral equivalent to war” using the natural world as a crucible, a “man-against-nature” endeavour meant to inspire physical and mental perseverance.

Outdoor adventure education has experienced little change since the 1970's (Smallwood, 2023). While it's become more gender-inclusive (early programmes were only for boys and men) and certain approaches like adventure therapy and service learning have been integrated, the overall structures and philosophical foundations have remained fairly stagnant, particularly as it relates to human relations with the natural world. Militaristic influences remain, with experiences and places designed to be crucibles (Daniel, 2010), chiselling away at the indolence of civilised life to “inspire strength of character” (Outward Bound, 2025) and to “challenge you to step beyond your comfort zone and unlock your full potential” (NOLS, 2025).

While there is certainly value in building strength of character and discovering one's potential, these outcomes can be pursued through a variety of mediums. Outdoor adventure has proven to be a powerful choice; however, traditional (anthropocentric) approaches to OAE have the potential to instil a humans-against-nature paradigm, leading to a utilitarian (at best) or adversarial (at worst) relationship with the more-than-human world (Smallwood, 2023).

Disillusionment with this humans-against-nature paradigm is not new. Many others recognise that OAE can extend beyond these traditional anthropocentric outcomes, particularly with greater attention to place. As Gruenewald (2003) states, “a multidisciplinary analysis of place reveals the many ways that places are profoundly pedagogical. That is, as centres of experience, places *teach* us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places

¹Here I acknowledge Fiona Nicholls, Plymouth Marjon University, who made similar observations connected to her research and presented at the 10th International Outdoor Education Research Conference (“Why don't they remember the dolphins?” — A critical examination of learning outside the “comfort zone”)

²Throughout this manuscript I use the term “more-than-human,” coined by David Abram, to describe what is commonly referred to as “nature.” This terminology attempts to recognise humans as part of nature – that humans are embedded in nature which exceeds human culture (Abram, 2024). To make reading a bit more fluid, I have also used the word “nature.” For the purposes of this manuscript, “nature” is considered synonymous with “more-than-human.” Through this language, I hope to convey a nonbinary approach to understanding humans, the natural world, and our multiplicity of relations that are complex and intertwined.

make us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (p. 621, emphasis in original).

With a recognition of the profound impact places can have on education, pedagogues have suggested various alternative approaches to centring places within the educational experience, the most recent being wild pedagogies (Jickling, Blenkinsop, Timmerman & Sitka-Sage 2018). Scholars at the heart of wild pedagogies understand that deep change is needed if we are to more intentionally involve place in our educational endeavours (Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023; Jickling *et al.*, 2018). Others have called for more research that considers the ontological and epistemological frameworks surrounding “place” and “relationship” within place-based education (Harrison, 2010). And while pedagogy certainly needs to be addressed, our methods are driven by philosophical assumptions that often lie hidden beneath the surface. Specifically within OAE, pedagogy is in many cases still being guided by the onto-epistemological assumptions that fuelled colonialism and the Romantic movement (Smallwood, 2023). These assumptions are based in anthropocentrism and a hierarchical view of relationships, both driven by a substance-based ontology. In addition, there remain problematic divides between subject and object that pervade pedagogical practices and human relationships with place, which impacts the ways in which we understand experience and how we construct the knowledge that emerges from our experiences.

While ontological frameworks have been explored in a variety of fields (Eyster *et al.*, 2023) including environmental education (EE) (Payne, 2015; Riley *et al.*, 2024; Lange, 2018; Paulsen, 2023), childhood nature (CN) scholarship (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles *et al.*, 2020; Murris, 2020), and education more broadly (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles *et al.*, 2020) there is less philosophical work in OAE literature. OAE and EE are often lumped together under the broader umbrella of outdoor education. However, OAE differs in the depth of embodiment and degree of risk that accompany adventure experiences. This manuscript attempts to contribute to the wild pedagogies discourse through an exploration of ontological perspectives that arise from Indigenous ways of knowing, building connections between our ontological paradigms, the agency of the more-than-human world, and epistemology of experience within the context of outdoor adventure education.

Philosophical implications of nature as co-teacher

Wild pedagogues have identified six “touchstones” to serve as guidelines for educational design: nature as co-teacher; complexity, the unknown, and spontaneity; locating the wild; time and practice; socio-cultural change; and building alliances and the human community (Jickling *et al.*, 2018). It is not my intent to fully summarise these touchstones. Excellent summaries are widely available (Jickling *et al.*, 2018; Morse *et al.*, 2018), and my assumption is that readers are already somewhat familiar with the foundational concepts of the touchstones. Rather, I intend to work under the surface of these touchstones, to discuss how our ontological assumptions will need to shift if we are going to be successful with our efforts to reform pedagogy in OAE.

Much of the following discourse is focused on the first touchstone, nature as co-teacher, which is foundational to the other five and arguably the one that is most impacted by ontological structures. This simple statement has profound implications. As described by the authors of *Wild Pedagogies*, “This [touchstone] implies more than simply learning from the natural world; it includes learning with and through it as well; and thus, its myriad being become active, fellow pedagogues” (Jickling *et al.*, 2018, p. 80). Where my opening example illustrates learning *from* the natural world, where nature provided a backdrop or stage for learning, adopting nature as co-teacher requires that we embrace nature as a fellow pedagogue. This implies sharing control of the learning space and acknowledging nature’s agency in helping to construct meaning. The immediate and surface level question that emerges is, “how is it done?” However, there are deeper questions that must first be addressed. How does this concept of nature as co-teacher change the way we understand the existence and substance of nature? How does nature communicate meaning? How do we relate to nature in a way that allows for a mutual construction of knowledge?

From a philosophical standpoint, my concern is that Western³ ontologies lack the framework needed to apply the concept of nature as co-teacher. Considering the “how,” necessitates an exploration of new ontological frameworks that are strong enough to hold the assumptions this approach requires. Before suggesting new ontological frameworks, however, it will be helpful to first provide a brief overview of what I mean by Western ontology, including an analysis of some of the primary features that drive Western ontological assumptions.

Substance-based ontology of the Eurocentric West

Ontology, a sub-discipline of metaphysics, studies the nature of being or existence. We all have ontological assumptions, even if we are unaware of them, and every theory rests on certain assumptions about what is real, what it means to be human, and the essence of what is not human. Ontology also drives how we understand epistemology, which studies the nature of knowledge and how we come to know or believe.

Western ontologies tend to focus on *substance*, that is, what makes up the nature of a particular being or an object. In our attempts to explore the nature of existence, the ideas of the West have encouraged us to think of substance as *primary* and thus *a priori*. Following from this assumption, substances must exist before relationships are formed; therefore, where substances are primary, relationships are *derivative*. This means that relationships only exist in the way they are defined by substances. Relationships do not exist in the absence of substance.

In addition to the primacy of substance, Western ontologies also suggest a substance-based dualism as a foundation for ontology. Humans, for example, are understood as physical beings — flesh and blood, dependent upon outside sources for sustenance, with a distinct beginning and end. We are also cognitive beings — capable of reflective analysis and multi-layered awareness of both ourselves, the things around us, and our impact and influence on the things we encounter. Thus, to be human is to be both body and mind; these two substances make up our identity and drive our actions and interactions with the world around us.

Epistemologically, then, our ability to *know* is also based on substance. From the perspective of a substance-based ontology, to truly understand something we must be able to identify its substance and to reduce that substance into analysable units that help us conceive of the whole. In the physical realm, this is achieved through empiricism and reductionism. In the cognitive realm of the mind, this is achieved through causal determinism (e.g. psychological experimentation that identifies behaviours resulting from certain conditions in a causal relationship).

There is also a resulting ontological-epistemological divide that pervades Western philosophy. Mind-body dualism results in an epistemological framework that separates our perceptions of the world (e.g. nature) from what constitutes it (Descartes, 1641/1996). This divide results in an epistemology that requires the one perceiving (human) to be separate from that which is being perceived (non-human) in order to understand its true nature (Kant, 1781/2008).

In addition to substance-based dualism, Western ontologies also suggest that humans are the only entities that possess agency. That is, only humans can act intentionally based on certain mental states such as beliefs, emotions, and moral judgments. While more-than-human entities can be viewed as agents, they do not possess agency. Instead, more-than-humans are driven more by instinct and survival and the structures that make up their substance. This positions humans as having more advanced cognition that allows a level of evaluation and reflection related to action, which in turn creates a hierarchical structure where humans are “above” more-than-humans, and, by extension, valued more highly.

I would argue that when epistemology is driven by a substance-based ontology, educators are often drawn to teaching methods that are formulaic, repeatable and thus dependable. Substance-

³The word “Western” here and throughout the manuscript specifically refers to the ideas of the Eurocentric West and colonial ideals, exclusive of Indigenous ideals and philosophy.

based ontology assumes an ability to know “objective reality” and an ability to replicate learning through a repeatable process.

Relational ontology

In contrast to substance-based ontologies, relational ontology asserts that “relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves” (Wildman, 2010, p. 55). Notwithstanding recent scholarship around relationality, referenced earlier, Western philosophers and theorists have historically struggled to create frameworks for relational ontology, primarily due to the slippery nature of what we mean by “relational.” From the lens of Western philosophy, relationships are notoriously illusive and not easily distilled to analysable concepts (Wildman, 2010). This is certainly the case with human-human relationships. I might refer to someone as “friend” or “acquaintance” based on how emotionally safe I feel with the other person, how much time we’ve spent together, or the nature of our shared experiences. And this perception might not be mutual; I may call someone “friend,” and that person may refer to me as “acquaintance.” We have a myriad of other ways to categorise human-human relationships as well — colleague, family, lover, enemy, etc. These sentiments denote, to some degree, the connection the other has to my own identity. Identities are fluid, however, always changing in unpredictable ways. “Relationality is therefore an ongoing creative and recursive process—a moving target—actively defining and redefining social relationships as well as social beings” (Baltus & Baires, 2018, p. 153).

Despite these difficulties, research around relational theories and accompanying ontological paradigm shifts have grown exponentially in the last decade across a broad range of disciplines (Rosiek *et al.*, 2024). What some are calling an “ontological turn,” post-structuralist approaches recognise that “relationality . . . means that the more-than-human is understood as an agentic presence and can thus exert effects on human life in ways that preceded and go beyond discursive meaning-making by humans” (Nxumalo & Murris, 2022, p. 108).

Given the amount of research around relational ontologies that has sprouted in the past 25 years (Eyster *et al.*, 2023), it is tempting to think of it as something new — some modern paradigm that advances our theoretical understanding of reality. Associated terms, such as “ontological turn” and “new materialism,” suggest new ways of thinking. However, while it might be new to those of us who have “grown up” philosophically under Eurocentric colonial structures, many theorists attribute relational ontology to Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste, 2000; Cajete, 2000; Ingold, 2006; Kimmerer, 2013; Todd, 2016). In my efforts to reclaim OAE pedagogy from colonial structures, it would be a mistake to reference Western Eurocentric scholarship exclusive of the vast scholarship provided by Indigenous scholars. As Native scholar Todd challenged, “[Eurocentric theorists] unconsciously avoid engaging with contemporary Indigenous scholars and thinkers while we engage instead with eighty year old ethnographic texts or two hundred year old philosophical tomes” (Todd, 2016, p. 8). Additionally, Rosiek *et al.* (2020) contend,

When there is a literature that has explored similar themes, specifically an Indigenous tradition of thought that vastly predates the emergence of the new materialist philosophies of science, a literature sitting in plain sight with scholars pointing at it, and still substantive engagement with this thought is sparse . . . it partakes of the same settler colonial forms as Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Willem Janzoon, Abel Tasman and other colonists arriving on a shore and simultaneously seeing and then wilfully not seeing the Indigenous people living there (p. 334).

It is my intent, then, to discuss relational ontology that originates from North American Indigenous scholarship. In doing so, I recognise there are associated risks — namely, that of tokenising and/or misappropriating the intellectual work of Indigenous scholars. Further, I also acknowledge myself as a white, Eurocentric female who does not own Indigenous narratives and is unable to fully embody Indigenous ontological frameworks without significant deconstruction and a willingness to question and unravel aspects of my own identity. And, while I reference Western European scholars, I recognise that many of them have not acknowledged the significant

intellectual work of marginalised populations, including the rigorous body of knowledge produced by Inuit and Indigenous thought leaders on relational ontology. To the degree I have access, I make every effort in the following discourse to reference the works of these scholars, embracing suggested strategies for respectful engagement of Indigenous theories (Rosiek *et al.*, 2020).

There is additional risk in discussing relationality in generalised, globalised terms, particularly when it comes to human and more-than-human relations. Relationality is highly localised and the dynamics change over space and time (Baltus, 2018; Haber, 2009). Relationships are specific, individual, and vary extensively between different sociocultural & environmental conditions. While I refer to “relationship” generally, I acknowledge the underlying complexities that impact perceptions of relationality.

One such complexity resides in substance-based designations between animate and inanimate, and the granting of agency for that which is considered animate. The distinction between animate/inanimate and understandings of agency arise out of a substance-based ontology that embraces mind-body dualism. Epistemologically, substance-based ontology helps us understand “what is and what isn’t.” That is, substance-based ontology guides us in *either-or* thinking. However, substance-based ontology is less helpful for “*both-and*” thinking, which shifts the focus from substances to relations.

Embracing the agency of the more-than-human world encourages both-and thinking, allowing us to recognise something as more-than-human while simultaneously acknowledging it as agentic. While this manuscript considers the more-than-human world in generalised terms, I acknowledge that within these generalities exists cultural and local dynamics and individual identities, which can change the dynamics of relations.

To further explore the concept of relationality from North American Indigenous scholarship, the following two theories, Place-Thought and Kincentric Ecology, offer profound insights for relational ontology, recognising both the animacy and agency of the more-than-human world.

Place-thought

As noted earlier, Western ontologies only acknowledge humans as possessing agency. Socioculturally, humans are the actors on the stage; the more-than-human world provides a backdrop for the unfolding drama of society and culture. According to many theorists, much of what we perceive regarding the agency of humans and the more-than-human world can be traced back to our cosmological narratives — our stories of how the world began (Kimmerer, 2013; Watts, 2013). Kimmerer (2013) states, “Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness” (p. 7). Watts, a Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar, contends that ontological foundations must begin from a perspective of Indigenous cosmology as being founded in truth rather than myth. “The difference in a Haudenosaunee or Anishinaabe framework is that our cosmological frameworks are not an abstraction but rather a literal and animate extension of Sky Woman’s and First Woman’s thoughts” (2013, p. 22).

The two competing meta-narratives that drive much of Western thinking cosmologically are the Judeo-Christian story of creation and the Darwinian theory of evolution. While these narratives differ greatly and provide much fodder for controversy, both propose a version of cosmology that places humans at the top of the food chain and/or evolutionary process. The theory of evolution acknowledges the *potential* for more-than-human agency, though that potential is only realised through a slow process of mutation and natural selection, based on competition and survival of the fittest, that produces a human.

By contrast, Indigenous “Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans [*sic*] derive agency

through the extensions of these thoughts” (Watts, 2013, p. 21). Place-Thought recognises the role of Sky Woman as a co-creator, accepting gifts from more-than-human entities she encounters and, in gratitude for these gifts, singing and dancing the world into existence (Kimmerer, 2013). Thinking is something that happens *with* the land, co-creating our sense of meaning, our identities and our relations.

When Sky Woman falls from the sky and lies on the back of a turtle, she is not only able to create land but becomes territory itself. Therefore, Place-Thought is an extension of her circumstance, desire, and communication with the water and animals — her agency. Through this communication she is able to become the basis upon which all future societies will be built — land (Watts, 2013, p. 23).

While Watts is specifically referencing Sky Woman in this passage, the concept is reciprocal. Sky Woman becomes land, and land becomes Sky Woman. Indigenous Place-Thought opens the door for the agency of the more-than-human world and also places humans *within* the world as equal players (Baires, 2018). More-than-human agents play a role in the development of society, are part of that society, and act as agents in creating and maintaining that society. Phenomenologically, from the perspective of Place-Thought, humans are not discursive beings who theorise *about* the world. Instead, there is opportunity for humans to think *with* the more-than-human world and to consider the relational dynamics that make up the lifeworld of humans and more-than-humans alike – a shared identity that impacts the reciprocal flourishing of each.

Watts (2013) says it this way, “Our truth, not only Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee people but in a majority of Indigenous societies, conceives that we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension of soil. The land is understood to be female: First Woman designates the beginning of the animal world, the plant world and human beings” (p. 27).

Kincentric ecology

Place-Thought helps to connect epistemology with ontology by centring the cosmological meta-narrative of Sky Woman. Similarly, Kincentric Ecology, also arising out of cosmological meta-narratives, seeks to bridge linguistic differences that cloud meaning. As Kimmerer (2013) asserts, “The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be human” (p. 57).

Salmón, of the Rarámuri people of the Sierra Madres region in Chihuahua, Mexico, also laments this linguistic poverty, conceding that translating certain Indigenous concepts into English language and thought is simply not possible (2000). To address this, Salmón offers the term *Kincentric Ecology* to recognise the degree to which, “Indigenous people in North America are aware that life in any environment is viable only when humans view their surroundings as kin; that their mutual roles are essential for their survival” (2000, p. 1327). Salmón discusses the ways in which this notion, which is meant to mirror the Rarámuri concept of *iwígara*, is embedded in Rarámuri life through ceremonies, rituals and language that continuously reinforce the “interconnectedness and integration of all life in the Sierra Madres, physical and spiritual” (2000, p. 1328).

Salmón’s concept of Kincentric Ecology helps to define human relations with the more-than-human world as familial. For the Rarámuri, the relationship “is not one of wonder, but of familiarity” (2000, p. 1329). It is this concept of family that influences the Rarámuri’s sense of responsibility and obligation to the natural world.

These concepts from Indigenous ways of knowing highlight the central role that relationships play in shaping both Indigenous thought and identity. Relationships between entities carry ontological significance and are connected to the identities of both humans and nature. These relationships are considered familial, requiring action that stems from a sense of responsibility and care. While cosmologies across Indigenous people groups vary, there is a shared belief “that all life shares the same breath. We are all related to, and play a role in, the complexity of life” (Salmón, 2000, p. 1328).

Ontological synergy

The concepts of Place-Thought and Kincentric Ecology invite us to think differently about relationality and how relations can impact both knowledge and identity. Engaging respectfully with these concepts requires a deep respect for the lives of Indigenous communities, the sovereignty of Indigenous Nations, and a willingness to more explicitly centre Indigenous scholars in the broader scholarship around relationality (Rosiek *et al.*, 2020).

The ontological frameworks needed to support wilding pedagogies must be sourced in relationality, and while (new) materialist scholarship offers promising ideas from Western scholars, educating for socio-cultural change — one of the touchstones of wild pedagogies — requires engaging in decolonising practices (Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023). Indigenous voices must be included in the conversation in a way that is not extractive, but collaborative. Western scholars do not own Indigenous stories or philosophies, but perhaps Western and Indigenous ideas can come together in a synergistic and collaborative way, one that is both honest about the historical (and current) violence⁴ that has been enacted on both humans and the more-than-human world and that is also solutions-focused and regenerative.

Acknowledging both substance and relation as ontologically primary in a synergistic and dynamic pluralism opens the door to new epistemologies. A substance ontology allows us to acknowledge the individual identities of the relevant features of an encounter as independent and autonomous, and a relational ontology allows us to recognise the interaction *between* substances and the resulting impact on both entities. Indigenous ways of knowing embrace this plurality, recognising the multi-modal path towards understanding that involves all aspects of our being – mind, body, emotion and spirit (Cajete, 1994).

Ontological applications for pedagogy

Returning to pedagogy, one of the consistent pedagogical features between the various forms of outdoor education is the attention given to experience. In an effort to move toward connecting relational ontology to wilding pedagogies, it will help to outline the epistemic role of experience.

An epistemology of experience

Epistemologically, outdoor educators contend that the construction of knowledge begins with experience. While this concept has been generally uncontested, there has been some historical debate regarding how experiences themselves are construed.

The concept of *experience* was problematised by 16th century philosophers, especially as it relates to epistemology and the validity of knowledge gained through experience. Experiences, after all, involve our senses as well as our emotions. Western philosophers have been sceptical that either of these can be trusted to provide an objective view of the world.

Crosby (1981) discusses the debate around epistemology that occurred between the Rationalists and Empiricists. Rationalists, who followed the philosophy of Descartes, claimed that true knowledge could only be gained through reason, whereas Empiricists, led by Hume, argued that only data empirically generated from the senses could be trusted as true knowledge. It was Kant who provided a way forward. He identified a problematic ontological assumption at the root of both Rationalism and Empiricism; namely, that the world has some objective order that we must perceive correctly to truly gain knowledge. This would make knowledge impossible for us to perceive as it would require us to be outside of our own minds.

⁴This violence includes but is not limited to the forcible removal of Indigenous people from their historic homelands; the erasure of Indigenous thought, culture, and language through forced assimilation and genocide; violent extraction techniques, such as clear-cutting and mountaintop removal mining; and monoculture farming that uses harmful pesticides, herbicides, and GMO's.

Kant instead suggested that the source of order is in the human mind. That is, rather than the mind attempting to perceive some objective order that already exists in the world, the mind instead is an active agent that constructs order. Kant allowed space for experience to play a role in education by acknowledging the activity of perception. The mind plays a role in constructing knowledge, combining sensory experience with rational thought to support a coherence model of truth (Crosby, 1981).

However, constructing knowledge in this way is a solitary endeavour, an internal process that exists in the mind of the self. Education that relies on Kant's ideas alone does not leave room for the influence of other humans or more-than-humans. The pragmatists of the early 20th century sought to address this by suggesting that "individual experience . . . is realised only in transaction with others" (Roberts, 2012, p. 51). Pragmatists contended that the construction of knowledge extends outside of the mind as we interact with others. We construct knowledge together through intersubjectivity. In other words, the mind constructs knowledge by combining sensory experience with rational thought (i.e. reflection), but knowledge is also gained through co-construction with other minds.

This acknowledgement of social construction's role in epistemology recognises that the self is connected to other humans through our understanding of the world. Pedagogically, adopting the notion of social construction means that learning is an inherently social experience. Palmer addresses this by describing learning as a "community of truth." In *Courage to Teach*, he claims that "reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it" (1998, p. 95).

Redefining education as relationally dynamic, Palmer's work serves to empower learners by flattening the traditionally hierarchical structure between teacher and student and centring the subject as a unifying element in the educational community. In this way, he attempts to illustrate the removal of barriers – power dynamics, the withholding of knowledge, the inaccessibility of the subject matter – by suggesting a synergistic relationship as a starting point. In addition, Palmer advances the notion of "self" by recognising the role of the subject as a co-constructor of knowledge. In Palmer's Community of Truth, learning is a dynamic and relational process that includes the subject as an active member and as a centralizing presence.

Palmer's work is valuable, but it stops just short of allowing for relational ontology as a starting point. While he identifies the role of relationship in holding a community of truth together, he does not go so far as to suggest a primacy of relations. He also does not clearly define what he means by "subject," and the reader is left to imagine a setting for this community as the notion of place is left undefined. His model is place-less, left on the white background of the page without any reference to *where* this community might find itself.

Towards a place-inclusive pedagogy

Palmer's model provides an interesting stepping-off point and opportunity to broaden the notion of "community" in ways that include the more-than-human world. As illustrated above, we can trace the expansion of epistemology that refines how humans construct knowledge – both individually and socially. Can we broaden this concept of construction to include the more-than-human world? The ontological framework needed to support this epistemology must be able to recognise relations as primary and the more-than-human world as both animate and agentic.

In addition to this, the embodied nature of our experiences in the outdoors – the way we are engaged sensuously and emotionally, particularly through adventure — creates an opportunity for us to become more attuned to what is happening *before* the cognitive construction of these experiences. In other words, there is an embodied dimension to our encounters with the more-than-human world that occurs before our cognitive and social constructions attempt to make sense of what we are experiencing. While embodiment is an inherent part of any experience, adventure deepens our sense of embodiment as we are continually adapting to changing

environmental conditions (temperature, precipitation, wind, currents, animal encounters, etc). The element of risk is part of this as well. While we often gather as much data as possible in preparation for an outdoor adventure — including checking the weather, planning routes, reading previous trip reports — there are still unknown factors that can impact the overall outcomes.

Whereas in traditional approaches to OAE these dynamics are often constructed to highlight intra/interpersonal outcomes — such as self-discipline or tenacity, as the opening example illustrates — if we embrace a new ontological posture, shifting our focus to the *a priori* embodied nature of the experience and the agentic presence of the more-than-human world, a new experience might emerge.

Conclusion

In contrast to the opening illustration, I'm reminded of another OAE experience that felt closer to Salmón's description of Kincentric Ecology. I was an assistant instructor, leading students on a whitewater canoeing adventure on the Rio Grande River. During the paddling instruction phase at the beginning of our expedition, the lead instructor was demonstrating the proper body position for navigating rapids. As he demonstrated kneeling in the canoe, he said, "the only way to approach a river is on your knees, in humility." Throughout that trip there was awareness and discussion about the ways in which our bodies interacted with the river. As we learned to navigate the rapids, we recognised a tenuous balance between control and surrender, a balance we could feel in our bodies. We learned to steer our canoes in ways that would exert control on our movements. We also learned to feel the play of the water against the hull and to respond — to work *with* the river and not against it. There was a kind of dance, a give and take, a mutual understanding of one another's agency.

At the end of that journey, our group articulated a shared sense of sadness upon leaving the river, who we collectively acknowledged as "friend." We each felt the need to say goodbye, to have some sense of closure, and to recognise the relationship that had developed. The river was central to our experience, helping us learn a measure of resilience while also gaining a sense of humility, respect, and care for this member of the more-than-human world. Our dependence upon the Rio was acknowledged as a gift, and we hoped to reciprocate that gift in some small way.

There were many factors that lead to this experience being different — more than I have room to discuss. But one of the primary factors was the ontological posture of our lead instructor. His careful facilitation of the experience, from the paddling instruction to daily debriefs, came from an ontology that regarded nature as agentic. While there were certain things he said or did pedagogically, as the example above illustrates, it was more about who he was and the kind of posture he modelled.

A similar example is provided by some educators in the UK, seeking to engage with wilding pedagogies, who invited a group to Wild Ennerdale, a UK re-wilding project. They resisted too much pre-planning, instead creating space for nature to inspire activities and discussions. Their intent was to help their students connect with place, exploring the overarching question, "What kind of outdoor educator could you be here, in this valley?" The authors concluded "that a different outdoor educator can emerge when the norms of practice are withheld or challenged" (Towers & Loynes, 2018).

Application often implies strategy and action. However, I think in the case of wilding our pedagogy, it's more about becoming. Similar to the way virtue ethics shift the question of "what must I do?" to "who must I be?", I believe we must shift the focus from "how is it done?" to "who are we here, in this place?" Challenging our need for control, we instead create space for nature to co-create an experience, embracing the unknown and spontaneity.

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