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## Writing *Wakan*: The Lakota Pipe as Rhetorical Object

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Examining the *chanupa*, or ceremonial pipe, from a Lakota perspective reveals it as responding to a particular ontology and extends indigenous rhetorics to consider the ontological dimensions of communication. Distinctions between indigenous rhetorics and new materialist rhetorics bring greater attention to how groups and individuals constellate themselves as beings.

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Discussing wind turbines on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Winona LaDuke notes their location near the radio tower for station KILI, “an amplifier for the heartbeat of the Lakota Nation” (239). LaDuke uses Taté, the Lakota personification of wind, as a figure for both wind and radio waves blasting across the prairie. Stories of Taté teach about “the power of motion and transformation” (242), and this teaching is *wakan*—great, mysterious, and holy. In short, LaDuke subtly points out connections between wind, power, and communication. She gives us clues and metaphorical suggestions as to how rhetoric, communication, and technology might be theorized from a Lakota perspective. Rather than using critique to argue for these

ways, LaDuke affirms the complicated and enduring stories, logics, traditions, and sovereignty of indigenous people as the requisite approach to understanding.

Yet indigenous voices and perspectives often face challenges to be heard, even when so affirmed. African American scholar Alexander Weheliye notes a “broader tendency in which theoretical formulations by white European thinkers are granted conceptual *carte blanche*, while those uttered from the purview of minority discourse that speak to the same questions are almost exclusively relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnographic locality” (6). This has led some indigenous scholars to question the relationships and discourses between their own cultural philosophies and a range of conceptual approaches often called *new materialisms*. Distinct from the historical materialism of Marx, new materialisms are various responses to the problems encountered with critique, ideology, and social construction. Perhaps foremost among these responses is the work of Bruno Latour, who sees our social fabric as encompassing assemblages of human and nonhuman objects that have certain capabilities “to modify other actors” (*Politics* 75). Such assemblages of objects, people, ideas, animals, and energy coalesce into networks of actants and should be seen in this wider scope in order to “reassemble the social” and give voice to the “parliament of things” (Latour, *We Have* 142). Latour has worked with and around other thinkers like Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Graham Harman, and Karen Barad. These thinkers have sometimes expanded on each others’ ideas and sometimes developed their own theoretical orientations. Nonetheless, what remains is a loose coalition of thinkers and scholars who are working to shift us away from assuming the primacy of human subjectivity by pushing the human actor off center stage while still retaining a role for it to play.

This concerns indigenous scholars because, as Kim TallBear writes, “indigenous peoples have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives,” and “‘Objects’ and ‘forces’ such as stones, thunder, or stars are known within our ontologies to be sentient and knowing persons (this is where new materialisms intersects with animal studies)” (234). Given legacies of cultural appropriation, genocide, and outright theft, indigenous scholars have reason to be suspicious of work that comes so close to their own. Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd has written in several venues on her reaction to seeing Latour and others overlooking indigenous thinkers who have also

worked across the human and nonhuman divide. Todd traces the “subtle but pervasive power afforded to white scholarship” (12) often manifested in “the silences” where such scholarship does “not currently live up to the promises” it makes (17). In an interview, she clarifies how “the danger with the ontological turn is that it’s still coming from a Eurocentric perspective and doesn’t acknowledge, not just ideas, but the laws that Indigenous people form that hold people accountable and that place the environment as a sentient thing” (Vantsinjan). The problem, then, is layered: not only are indigenous thinkers not part of the conversation, but the conversation is often grounded in very different approaches to ontological questions where some methods are given priority over others.

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We can see this as a matter of what Scott Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty (“Rhetorical”). This is not another term for agency. Rather, rhetorical sovereignty is “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires” in the pursuit of self-determination and “to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449–50; emphasis in original). Sovereignty is, in part, the recognition that the methods, systems, materials, and even the scope of interlocutors involved are determined by the users’ tradition and culture. This may look entirely different from—even confounding to—a Eurocentric gaze that has often built theories of communication based on speech acts between humans. Luckily, rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies already have examples of diverse literacy practices, such as non-alphabetic literacies in the works of Elizabeth Boone Hill and Damián Baca and indigenous material literacies in the works of Angela Haas and Malea Powell. While these are clear and instructive challenges to Eurocentric perspectives, they also urge us to look at the ontologies in which such practices develop and occur. Doing so, we may better include indigenous perspectives on the who, what, and how of rhetorical practices while remaining respectful of their different histories and trajectories.

To give one example of how such an approach is helpful, social anthropologists Jeremy Schmidt and Martha Dowsley note how modern resource management’s “peculiar ontology” plays out in the management

of polar bears as a “common pool” available to both Inuit and mainstream Canadians in the Arctic and sub-Arctic (377). The case they present highlights how “assumptions regarding the ‘passive properties’ of the commons marginalize Inuit practices that regard polar bears as non-human persons and as active participants in collective choice decisions” (378). For the Inuit, polar bears appear allowable as actors to be entreated since “[p]olar bears are particularly dangerous and, because *they are believed to under-*

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*stand human actions, words, thoughts and intentions,* they must be treated with respect beyond that shown to other animals” (381; emphasis added). Furthermore, “decisions made by the animal, *communication from animal to hunter* and whether the hunter made the appropriate response are consid-

ered by hunters to be determining factors in evaluating the outcome of a hunt” (382; emphasis added). In the highlighted phrases, we see the ways in which Inuit believe in something we might call *rhetoric* between animal and human. There is a dynamic signaling back and forth where bears understand people and people must be cautious about the proper response. This is not just between individual hunter and individual bear, but also at the political level, so that if one community behaves inappropriately, the polar bear community may retaliate.

Such ideas have long been dismissed by Western scholars as myth, and even when they have been taken seriously as religious practices, their implications for literacy, rhetoric, and composition are seldom discussed. To admit rhetorical sovereignty in such cases entails what Walter Mignolo calls “epistemic delinking,” a powerful discursive move that “leads to decolonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (453). His recognition that decolonial work involves the colonizer, colonized, and the “Western foundation of modernity” as it already inscribes us leads Mignolo to argue that a crucial move in delinking is to change the terms and not just the content of the conversation. Through the strategy of changing terms rather than changing the meaning of terms such as *liberation* or *emancipation*, Mignolo hopes to effect a double change in both colonizer and colonized. As he puts it,

If delinking means to change the terms of the conversation, and above all, of the hegemonic ideas of what knowledge and understanding are and, consequently, what economy and politics, ethics and philosophy, technology and the organization of society are and should be, it is necessary to fracture the hegemony of knowledge and understanding that have been ruled, since the fifteenth century and through the modern/colonial world by what I conceive here as the theo-logical and the ego-logical politics of knowledge and understanding. (459)

In order to put indigenous philosophies and new materialisms in dialogue, divisions such as mind-body, religious-mundane, and human-animal must be troubled, and to honor rhetorical sovereignty, we must understand those divisions and the troubles caused by their undoing as grounded in a Eurocentric worldview. It is not arriving at an objective truth that matters, but arriving at a place to begin equitable dialogue. Scholars such as TallBear, Todd, Lyons, and Mignolo alert us to places where we must work carefully and listen closely. They serve as something like ambassadors, welcoming perspectives but also demanding sovereignty.

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To engage these ideas further, I explore the ceremonial pipe, or *chanupa*, as a rhetorical object among the Sioux, especially the Lakota, the Western-most band of that nation. I center my study on Lakota to recognize the differences among the five hundred or so nations indigenous to North America. Diné, or Navajo, culture, for example, is very different from Lakota and holds very different lifeways, stories, and practices. Thus, while ceremonial pipes are used by many indigenous North Americans, I focus on Lakota culture to avoid conflating different traditions and lifeways, just as I work to keep distinctions among different new materialist projects. To do this, I draw upon my own work at Lakota sites, my participation in ceremony, and my engagement with published scholarship. What I do share from the published research has been corroborated to me by elders and discussed among my *tiyospaye*, or extended community, in order to maintain reflexivity about sharing this knowledge and account for cultural change. Like LaDuke and the other scholars mentioned, I attempt to advance indigenous thinking on its own terms as an act of what Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance*, and which Lisa King et al. define as “resisting those marginalizing, colonial narratives and policies so indigenous knowledge and lifeways may come into the present with new life and new commitment to that survival” (7).

## Pipe as Technology in a Universe of Related Movement

The chanupa has been studied extensively as a ceremonial, spiritual, and religious object. Raymond DeMaille and Douglas Parks's volume, *Sioux Indian Religion*; Paul Steinmetz's *The Pipe, Bible, and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota*; and William Stolzman's *The Pipe and Christ* show how the chanupa is an undeniably sacred object that operates at the center of Lakota culture.

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Yet, viewing the chanupa solely as an object for spiritual practice might conscript it into overly neat Euro-Western conceptual functions. As Luther Standing Bear wrote in the 1930s, "to the Lakota the pipe stood for that which the Bible, Church, State, and Flag, all combined, represented in the mind of the white man" (201).

Lakota beliefs and stories surrounding the chanupa should not be bracketed by the epistemological view that such beliefs are not "real," nor restricted to configuring Lakota ideas of sacred and secular as they are understood in European traditions.

A chanupa is usually a carved catlinite bowl attached to a hollowed, wooden stem. The soft, red catlinite stone is almost exclusively quarried at Pipestone National Monument in southwest Minnesota. The red stone is said to symbolize the blood of ancestral Sioux. A finished pipe may be adorned with eagle feathers or other decorative material. The stone itself can be carved into particular animals or shapes. The stone, its shapes, and the other materials all hold powerful meanings, and certain chanupa are used for certain ceremonies because of their symbolic and communicative potential. Stories about the chanupa continually figure it as an intermediary tool within a communicative system that is networked across the human and nonhuman. The chanupa, then, may be considered alongside quipu, wampum, and ledger drawings as yet another material artifact of indigenous literacy and rhetorical practice that has been misrecognized in the gaze of colonial scholarship. Rhetoric is useful to look at the Lakota stories and communicative practices in order to situate the pipe in a Lakota ontology to which it responds and in which it operates, revising and affirming its use.

The Lakota story of the origin of the pipe is fairly consistent, though it is subject to stylistic embellishments unique to each teller and occasion. I have heard the story related to me within a sweat lodge, around campfires,

and connected to lessons the teller wanted to impart. The versions I heard are similar to those by Black Elk (in Brown), Looking Horse (in DeMaille and Parks), and in the collected interviews by the early twentieth-century doctor James Walker. In the tale, two men were hunting one winter and came upon “something coming towards them in a very strange and wonderful manner” (Brown 3). It turned out to be a woman, and one of the hunters expressed sexual desire for her. Not persuaded by his companion’s plea for caution, the hunter approached the woman, and the two were suddenly covered by a great cloud. When the cloud lifted, only the hunter’s bones remained next to the woman. The woman then told the remaining hunter to tell his tribe that White Buffalo Calf Woman, or *Wohpe*, was coming and that she had a great gift for all the people. The hunter did so, and the chief made a lodge as instructed and prepared for her coming. After arriving and performing rituals of service, *Wohpe* gave the *chanupa* to the people, smoked with them, provided instructions for gathering and preparing tobacco, and told them

that as long as they preserved this pipe she would serve them. But she would serve them in this way. When the smoke came from the pipe she would be present and hear their prayers and take them to the *Wakan Tanka* [Great Spirit] and plead for them that their prayers should be answered. (Walker, *Lakota Belief* 111; emphasis in original)

Black Elk adds more drama, having her also proclaim,

Behold this and always love it! It is *lele wakan* (very sacred), and you must treat it as such. No impure man should ever be allowed to see it, for within this bundle there is a sacred pipe. With this you will, during the winters to come, send your voices to *Wakan Tanka*, your Father and Grandfather” (Qtd. in Brown 5)

In both cases, the pipe is figured as a means to communicate with *Wohpe* and to eventually persuade *Wakan Tanka*, just as prayers are understood in Western religions. At its most rudimentary, then, the *chanupa* is understood as an object through which one can communicate with nonhuman spirits or forces. It is not merely a sacramental device, as is, say, a Christian chalice. It is through the pipe that *Wohpe* can “hear . . . prayers” and an instrument to “send your voices” to greater powers through the loading of prayers into the bowl and the release of the smoke into the air. The story of *Wohpe* places

the pipe centrally in Sioux culture as a means for communication with powers beyond the human, thus framing relations between Sioux people and these powers.

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Even the materials smoked in the pipe are communicative and persuasive. Often translated as “tobacco,” *kinnikinnick* is a blend of sacred herbs such as *cansasa*, the inner bark of red osier dogwood, and the prime ingredient smoked in the chanupa. This is blended with various other herbs chosen for many reasons and used in many ways, but underlying them is an association with the smell of their smoke being “pleasing” to beneficent spirits and “offensive” to malicious ones. Prairie and mountain sage, for example, are cleansing herbs that drive away spirits who might cause mischief or harm. Walker records George Sword telling him that “The smoke of the sage will drive away all evil if it is made” in the proper manner (*Lakota Belief* 83). Sweetgrass, however, is attractive to the kind and helping spirits welcome in ceremonies, spirits like Wohpe (Walker, *Myth* 69). In a different interview with George Sword, Walker records him saying that “the spirit that is in the smoke of sweetgrass is pleasing to the Wakan Tanka” and any ceremonies having to do with the Great Spirit should utilize sweetgrass (*Lakota Belief* 76). The smoke of the herbs chosen for use with the pipe are not just communicative then; they are *differentially* communicative. That is, they do not send the same messages, are subject to a certain kind of grammar, and have different persuasive possibilities. The combination and sequence of herbs is important in the same way that one does not invite quarreling guests to the same event.

The general principle of relations is an important consideration in nearly all aspects of Sioux culture. The phrase *mitakuye oyasin* is often used in ceremonies along with the pipe. Usually translated as “all my relations” or “everything is related,” the phrase is a cosmological principle and important to understand the chanupa. Father Raymond Bucko’s ethnography of the *inipi*, or sweat lodge, ceremony reports a Lakota person saying “that the Catholic formula for the sign of the cross was the same idea as *mitakuye oyasin*” (195). Stolzman describes the phrase being uttered after ritual action, such as entering the sweat lodge, passing the pipe, or opening the sweat lodge door. I once heard it compared it to “The Force” in the *Star*

*Wars* movies, a sense that each and every thing was related to each and every other thing in some way, often beyond the ken of the human mind.

In discussing Sioux kinship, Raymond J. DeMallie notes that “to pray and to address someone by a kin term are the same action” (“Kinship” 128), and “[u]se of the pipe symbolizes acceptance of and participation in the system of relatedness that comprises the universe” (129). Siouan language in general is highly relational, with different morphemes needed to construct grammatically proper phrases and sentences based upon the relationship of the activity to the people in question. This is seen in grammatical constructs like dative and benefactive verb forms, where a verb is formed differently when it is done *for* someone or *to* them. Such verb forms imply particular qualitative relationships between subject, object, and interlocutors. *Mitakuye oyasin* combines “my relatives” with “every one” to point out not just the literal relationships among Lakota speakers, but all relationships of every kind without qualification (Lakota Language Consortium, 485). Thus, implied in each Lakota utterance is an orientation between speakers in their respective places. Without a place to speak from, there is no one a Lakota person can speak to.

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These endless relationships without qualification are also understood as being in dynamic flux. Along with *mitakuye oyasin* is the deity concept, *Taku Škanškan*, sometimes shortened as simply *škan*, who is also personified as a sky god in many tales (Walker, *Lakota Myth* 28). In both my own experiences and in the Walker texts, the full phrase is translated as “that which moves, moves” (Walker, *Lakota Belief* 35). This is another fundamental belief for the Lakota—the universe is in continual motion. The principle of movement underlies all objects in the universe and their relations. Arthur Amiotte describes *škan* as “a vision of the entire universe as infused with a force of movement” (87). Walker’s personal letters report that *škan* was sometimes interchanged with Wakan Tanka (31) though *wakan tanka* was also described as being four distinct divinities: *Inyan*, or rock; *Maka*, or earth; *Škan* or sky; and *Wi*, the sun, who was “the most powerful and august of *Wakan Tanka*” (35; emphasis in original).

No matter which term is used, however, the default translation to European concepts obscures the deeper meanings retained in Lakota language.

As Walker noted in a letter dated 1912, “Today if any Lakota is speaking to a white man he will use [Wakan Tanka] to mean Jehova, or the Christian God, and by common consent it has come to mean The Great Spirit” (*Lakota Belief* 31; emphasis in original). Further on in the letter, Walker notes that “to the younger generation, this term [Wakan Tanka] expresses a concept of Jehova while to the older indians it expresses a concept of the being

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that in former times they titled *Taku Škanškan*” (31; emphasis in original). Clearly, *Taku Škanškan* is an important aspect of traditional Lakota philosophy and cosmology. But to equate either *Taku Škanškan* or *Wakan Tanka* to a transcendent godhead is to misinterpret indigenous Lakota belief. Taken

together with *mitakuye oyasin*, we have a very different ontology in which the rhetorical action of prayer occurs. In order to understand the chanupa properly, we must also understand this ontology.

The association of the chanupa with proper relations and rhetorical action is not solely confined to spiritual or mythic tales but extends into secular relations. The symbolism of the pipe was so powerful, DeMallie reports, that in the case of two quarreling people, “a leader could physically thrust a pipe between the combatants and enjoin them to settle their dispute” (“Kinship” 130). This relatedness is further reinforced by prayers to the seven directions (four cardinals, up, down, and inward) as a ritual when filling the pipe and its use in any situation where “good will was to be assured” (128). Relations and their proper maintenance are central to the Sioux—one reason their defeat, near extinction, and forced removal from their homes has been and continues to be exceptionally devastating. And as contemporary insignia such as tribal flags and seals can attest, the chanupa continues to be a powerful symbol.

The chanupa also acts as an exigence for communication between people in ceremonies. Bucko notes the extensive presence of “back channeling,” or “verbal assents made in utterances by the participants” (125) during the *inipi*, or sweat lodge. These back channels are part of the communal and social nature of Lakota prayer, unlike the private and individual nature of prayer in many Western traditions. Not only are the prayers loaded into the chanupa communally, but such back channeling serves the maintenance

of social ties through support, empathy, attentiveness, sharing of news, and the ongoing activity of being available to those in need. One can hear prayers for others in the lodge, express solidarity or encouragement, and raise issues of concern in a nonthreatening environment since what goes on in the lodge is *wakan*, and one does not recount it afterward.

The pipe, then, is a potent locus for communication even if it is not itself the medium of that communication or the means by which communication is signified. As a central object for Lakota practices, it is understood as that which can connect Lakota people to the nonhumans and the ultimate great mystery, Wakan Tanka. This must be continually practiced since the universe is imbued with motion, and relations continually change. So, communication and rhetorical action via the chanupa occur and operate in a universe very different from standard Western conceptions. While the chanupa operates in a different ontology, there still remain questions of how that operation occurs, and I speculate on that in the following section.

### **Rhetoric and Change in a Lakota Ontology**

Understanding the chanupa as a rhetorical object that functions in a network of shifting relations begins the work of showing its relevance to contemporary questions and is a first step toward educational and social inclusion through strategies of epistemic delinking and rhetorical sovereignty. To draw this out further, however, we need to look at Lakota stories to see how prayers are believed to act in the world and what role the chanupa has in transmitting or relaying them to *Wohpe*, Wakan Tanka, or other powers. What are these powers supposed to do? How do they relate to one another? How do they operate in a universe of constant, yet related movement? Is there a general patterning of Lakota rhetoric surrounding the chanupa? Like LaDuke, I turn to the Lakota tale of *Taté*, father of the winds, to understand this, especially the coming of *Wohpe* to his lodge, a story that says more about Lakota ontology and networked communication within it.

*Wohpe* figures prominently not only as an intercessor called upon by the pipe, but as the daughter of *Taku Škanškan*. She has been likened to the Virgin Mary since both are intercessors on behalf of a more powerful force or deity. Yet the similarities stop there. When *Wohpe* is discussed, we get a series of binaries: “She is divine but chooses humanity. She is from the sky and chooses earth. She achieves a relationship that alternates between that of a sister and that of a lover to the winds” (Jahner, “Lakota” 50). *Wohpe*,

then, is not pure grace as Mary is often figured, but a much more complex entity that can cross and modulate opposites. The chanupa is a fitting object for her, then, as Arvol Looking Horse describes how a pipe's stem "represents a man, and the bowl, which is red, represents a woman" ("Sacred" 73). It is, in this sense, a joining of two sexes with all the procreative and familial connotations; a basic duality of relating from which bands, tribes, and nations are formed. The red catlinite material of the bowl is representative of blood and extended relationships through metaphors of ancestry. The

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pipe allows for reconciliation between the mundane and the spiritual. In these cases, there are dualities that form tensions and attractions, but rather than attempting to unify them, Lakota thought affirms their difference.

We can see just how different this is from Judeo-Christian notions of an ultimate deity and from European epistemology. Prayers are not carried to an unchanging, transcendent, and

eternal being. There is no sense of a divine will interceding through miracles. DeMallie cites Ella Deloria on how "the act of prayer was an invocation of relationship, calling on the *wakan* beings to live up to the kindness and generosity expected of good relatives" ("Lakota" 31; emphasis in original). The emphasis here is on hospitality, goodwill, reciprocity, and the maintenance of proper relations as part of an interrelated network. Like the whirling night sky, *škan* and *mitakuye oyasin* are ultimate principles of a vibrant universe, not a perfected Eden. That humans cannot speak perfectly is less a matter of repercussion from a Tower of Babel and more simply a condition of the proper place of human beings within the web of interrelations in the universe. Through good deeds, respect, and proper deference, not only can relations continue, but poor relations can be improved upon. The relations are reciprocal, each one affecting the other as elements retain their individuality.

Lakota tales reveal more about what makes networked relations function and include complex ideas about time and space. Walker records a tale of how Taté, the wind, and his sons establish the four directions. The plot is driven by Wohpe, who falls from the sky as "a shining thing" and is

adopted by Taté as his daughter (Walker, *Lakota Myth* 58). This initiates the establishment of a “third time” beyond night and day and the cycles of the moon. This time establishes the seasons and the year with each of Taté’s sons taking on the personification of a direction and its corresponding season. The brothers are told that Wohpe is to be treated like their sister, though Yata, the eldest and most arrogant son, treats her as a husband does his wife. Yata is deceived by the wizard, Wazi, and loses his right to choose the first direction in the west, instead taking his place in the north, where it is cold and bitter. Along with him is magpie because the bird defecated on Wazi at Yata’s behest, underscoring Yata’s cruel nature. This loss of birthright and reordering of relations between the brothers is foreshadowed by Wohpe. Her response to Yata’s request to bring him water as a wife does for her husband warns that relating to her in this way will bring “cold to everything you touch and no one will love you” (68). Further, Okaga, the south wind, displays a crush on Wohpe. Yet, he remains true to his father’s admonition and collaborates helpfully to establish the new time; his patient and gentle affection is eventually requited.

The characters in this tale form a network, yet it is not necessarily the characters themselves who are the main focus. The relations matter more: each son as brother to the others, from eldest to youngest; between each brother and Wohpe; and between Wohpe and Taté. Wohpe’s arrival disturbs the status quo of the lodge but does so productively in order for the world to have new spatial and temporal dimensions. Even other beings such as magpie are affected by and brought into the new order. In her editor’s preface to the tale, Elaine Jahner notes how the brothers’ relations

are mirrored by the spatial arrangement of their lodge, where each occupies the place proper to him. The lodge is a microcosm of the world, with an observable order tying the life of the individual to the life of the cosmos. As the tale progresses, the plan of life within *Tate’s* lodge is extended to all the world. But before such action can begin, the stability of life in *Tate’s* tipi must be upset by new relationships and oppositions. This is accomplished when *Wohpe*, the daughter of *Škan*, comes from her celestial home to *Tate’s* terrestrial one. (Walker, *Lakota Myth* 46–47; emphasis in original)

We see here how the border-crossing Wohpe perturbs the relations between the brothers and Taté in their lodge. The introduction or manifestation of her spiritual being into the material realm not only perturbs the rela-

tions of the brothers and their father but fundamentally alters them. The brothers now quarrel and have to realign their relations with each other as those relations are extended to the very directions of the world. Thus, the network of Taté's lodge, and concomitantly the world, changes through the disturbance and reordering of its relations into a new, emergent order of space and time.

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Spatially, Wohpe remains in Taté's lodge, at the center of the universe as the sons establish cardinal directions. As Jahner explains, "We have a situation in which the destiny of each son is linked to his finding his own place in the universe, moving outward from the center, where he lives with his father. This excentric movement, is accompanied by strengthened ties to the center, where *Wohpe* now lives" (Walker, *Lakota Myth* 47; emphasis in original). There is a dynamic relationship between the center and the directions, between the point of perturbation and the resulting order. Ultimately, the seemingly chaotic universe characterized by Taku Škanškan is brought into a patterning with his daughter, Wohpe, at the center, but only by virtue of the ongoing relationships to her brothers at the edge. Jahner also explains about the sequence of times (e.g., day, month, season, year) established through different tales:

Each time unit is determined by a journey through space that supernatural beings must make because of an initial disruption of order in the circle of the gods. From the temporal point of view, the disruption of order appears as movement toward new times and seasons; whereas from the spatial viewpoint, the displacement demonstrates that mobility and fixity together form a structure so that in the circle of life, center and circumference control each other. (Walker, *Lakota Myth* 46)

The tale of Wohpe and the four winds establishes an ontology based upon relations, one that admits difference and conflict as networked relational conditions for change and development. Difference resolves into another order, though an order emerging from and constituting a different set of beings—in this instance, the order shifts from supernatural beings to natural directions and from progressions of time marked by lunar phases to progressions of time marked by seasonal changes. Prior orders still continue and have lasting effect, yet the network as a whole progresses through cyclical states of becoming.

If we take Taté's lodge as a paradigm for a network of relations and Wohpe's disturbance as the introduction of new information or data, we can also see how information moves extrinsically throughout the network since Taté's lodge is not just Taté's lodge, but "a microcosm of the world." Wohpe remains at the center while the brothers carry information to the edge of the network, establishing a new order as Wohpe's presence is accommodated. Thus, we have a story that can be read as not about a cause and its effects, but as about an input of some data or a perturbation of a network by information. The network absorbs and accommodates new information and distributes it throughout the network; a subsequent realignment or equilibrium results from decisions made by network actors based upon the input.

As her admonition of Yata exemplifies, her presence in Taté's lodge is not one of imposing relations, but of working with them in a reciprocal manner. In time and under the right conditions, prohibitions can be undone, as Wohpe's relationship with Okagan exemplifies. A center changes the circumference, but the circumference forms all within it. This, I argue, is what Wohpe promises in her gift of the chanupa. She is not at the beck and call of humans, there to be summoned through the pipe to disturb or create new organizational patterns at their behest. She retains her own agency throughout any and all invocations. To think otherwise is to reduce the chanupa to a mundane instrument. What else should we make of the hunter engulfed by mist or of Yata's improper desire for her? Relate to her respectfully or she will act against you seems a pretty clear lesson. There are precise actions that need to be followed before prayers can be successfully heard, before communication via the pipe can be seen as effectual. Through proper use of the pipe, however, human needs and desires may extend out and find opportunity to realign relations and create new, more favorable orders.

Theological scholarship bears this out. Joseph Epes Brown records Black Elk describing how the pipe gets "filled with all the Powers and with all that there is in the universe" (21). In Francis La Flesche's description,

**We have a story that can be read as not about a cause and its effects, but as about an input of some data or a perturbation of a network by information. The network absorbs and accommodates new information and distributes it throughout the network; a subsequent realignment or equilibrium results from decisions made by network actors based upon the input.**

In filling a pipe, all space (represented by the offerings to the powers of the six directions) and all things (represented by the grains of tobacco) are contracted within a single point (the bowl or heart of the pipe), so that the pipe contains, or really is, the universe. But since the pipe is the universe, it is also man, and the one who fills a pipe should identify himself with it, thus not only establishing the center of the universe, but also his own center; he so “expands” that the six directions of space are actually brought within himself. It is by this “expansion” that a man ceases to be a part, a fragment, and becomes whole or holy; he shatters the illusion of separateness. (Cited in Brown, 21n9)

We see again the “excentric movement” Jahner pointed out in the tale of Wohpe and the four directions. Although there may be a range of identifications and symbols involved in proper use and understanding of the chanupa, they are all procedures for relating, especially for first establishing a center from which to relate. The properly loaded chanupa is thought of as a focal point, ritually and symbolically representing the whole universe/network, a point of contact between human and spiritual actions. This focal point brings together the *wicasa wakan*, or spiritual interpreter who bears the pipe and leads the ceremony, Wohpe, and the universe. Thus, the whole system can be ritually brought into contact to effect the prayers being communicated.

The technics of the pipe, then, might be seen as akin to broadcasting a signal, just as LaDuke suggests by juxtaposing wind and radio tower. The smoke is like the radio frequency manifesting the prayerful information, and the chanupa is the actual radio or its antenna beaming them out. The signal is broadcast, and some may tune into it, others not, yet Wohpe can amplify, helping it “blast across the prairie.” In this sense, the chanupa can be viewed as a rhetorical object grounded in the logics of temporal and spatial relations constituting Lakota ontology. It operates within its own particular indigenous conception of the universe’s being, responding to the very problems posed by that ontological arrangement.

### **Euro-Western Networks and Possibilities for Dialogue**

Now that we can see the chanupa in its own ontological context, we might look at recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition that has argued for revisions to human-centered notions of agency. These revisions might entail further suggestions on how to resist assimilation and colonization and also point to potential sites for dialogue and respectful distances across new

materialisms and indigenous scholarship. As Scott Lyons has argued, it is sometimes a matter of rhetorical sovereignty to keep things “respectfully apart instead of looking to play with hybridity” (“Fine,” 100). Sometimes the “mad dash for theories like hybridity” (102) disrespects the rules and laws of accountability. Thus, the relations between indigenous worldviews and new materialisms stemming from European thinkers must be made clear and open to dialogue.

Marilyn Cooper argues that agency is “an emergent property of embodied individuals” and that such emergent properties as agency “are not epiphenomena, nor ‘possessions’ in any sense, but function as part of the systems in which they originate” (421). Agency is, then, “responsive” (422) rather than causal since individuals and partial-individuals collectively perturb and attune themselves to one another, not unlike the characters in the story of *Taté*. Actions are less a consequence of what an individual caused as they are “a pattern that develops from the interanimating actions of a multitude of agents. Rhetors—and audiences—are agents in their actions, and they are responsible for those actions, but they are not the sole cause of what happens” (439).

Scot Barnett makes the object-oriented point more explicit, noting that material and object-oriented theories “emphasize the vibrancy, agency, and alterity of matter—the notion that matter and objects are not merely backstops for human subjects, but active and suasive forces in their own right” (para. 1). Barnett further argues that “reconsiderations of emotion, including classical conceptions of the *pathē*, have coincided with related efforts to theorize rhetorical activity as embodied and emplaced in social and material contexts” (para. 2). Thus, as with proper thought toward *Wohpe*, one’s mood is an element of consideration in a network and not simply an individual state of mind.

Cooper and Barnett both draw from Bruno Latour’s understanding of agency and suasion as manifest in a variety of actors since, as Latour says, “it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone” (*Reassembling*, 46). Yet, Latour also advances the idea that such a distributed agency cannot be thought of within a common metaphysical setting. He argues instead for an ontology without metaphysics, since “[a]s long as we remain in metaphysics, there is always the danger that deployment of the actors’ worlds will remain too easy because they could be taken as so many representations of what the world, in the

singular, is like” (117). In other words, for Latour, we can never know an ultimate reality explained through metaphysical abstraction. At best, we can only work with those beings as they disclose themselves to us, and since

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none of us are the same, we are all differentially positioned on the stage. This entails multiple manners of disclosure. Networks necessitate not just different perspectives, but also different ways of relating.

Yet, even the term *network* cannot be easily assumed. New materialisms are clearly concerned with networks of bodies, thoughts, habits, and tools, though not all theorists agree with one another. Where and how one draws

boundaries, deals with contingency, and creates identity leads to large theoretical differences. Network theorists Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker note the tendency for Western network theories to build upon things in their relations rather than the relations in themselves. Philip H. Gochenour calls this kind of thinking “nodalism” and argues how it

has many of the qualities of a myth, as defined by Roland Barthes. It is a way of perceiving the world, of presenting a certain factuality of things and overcoming conflicts, that is taken to be completely natural, a rendition of “things as they are,” that is strengthened through its association with hard data and computing machinery as purely neutral methods of representation and analysis. (para. 31)

Theories of networks sometimes take the world too simply, without investigating the ways in which that world could be understood otherwise.

Galloway and Thacker argue that networks must put relations first and that doing so succumbs neither to the objectivity of nodalism nor to a negation of networked sovereignty (not to be confused with rhetorical sovereignty). They urge us to consider how “networks and sovereignty are not incompatible. In fact, quite the opposite: networks create the conditions of existence for a new mode of sovereignty” (20) characterized by “a new alliance between ‘control’ and ‘emergence’” and “a newly defined sense of nodes and edges, dots and lines, things and events—networked phenomena that are at once biologic and informatic” (22). Similarly, Yuk Hui argues, “Relation still consists of one of the core philosophical questions

today” (“Towards” 139). Elsewhere, Hui proposes Gilbert Simondon’s work as a way to think about networks that prioritizes relations. A key term for Simondon’s philosophy is *transduction*, what Hui describes as “a process or an action that leads to a transformation across different domains” (*Existence* 191). The process of transduction requires a technical object—the transducer—that occasions or provides an initial energy or focus needed for systemic change. It carries the informational energy across previously disparate domains to effect a new order or arrangement. And here we get some interesting philosophical parallels.

Simondon’s own example begins with a “metastable equilibrium” such as a supercooled liquid or sugars supersaturated in honey (301). Rather than assuming these as stable, Simondon looks to “the potential energy residing in a given system” and the spread of information throughout that system that occasions the formation of an individual thing (302). For a metastable system, we have transduction with the introduction of a small change, say the change in pressure when opening a bottle of frozen soda. This leads to a whole-scale structural change, the entire solution solidifies, as the energy of the pressure differential is transduced throughout the entirety of the liquid. Understanding the solid’s individual being without accounting for the change in pressure—a phenomenon that does not inhere to the solid—misunderstands being. And this is precisely Simondon’s critique of ontology. Simondon argues that individuation, the process of “ontogenesis,” operates through informational networks of relations, often relations that do not inhere to the being once it is formed. As he writes, “Individuation, then, is a relative phenomenon, like an alteration in the structure of a physical system” (306), and “what we consider to be a *relation*, due to the substantialization of the reality of the individual, in fact forms a dimension of the process of individuation by which the individual becomes” (308–09; emphasis in original). There is sovereignty in the network.

Perhaps the most productive example to compare with Lakota tales of the chanupa and Wolpe is Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*. Rickert does not escape the European orbit since he draws extensively from Heidegger, but in many ways his articulation of an ambient rhetoric comes closest to my understanding of the context in which we might see the chanupa as a rhetorical object. In his discussion of networks and complexity, Rickert argues that “networks are not a structural epiphenomenon but an ontological way of being-in-relation-and-movement

and hence come to have descriptive power for everything that is” (102). Here he uses Heideggerian terminology but importantly connects relatedness and movement in ways that echo *mitakuye oyasin* and Taku Škanškan. He is clear to note that “the ‘new’ logics of complexity we are learning are not so much new as disclosed differently to us” (102) so that “the network discloses in a fascinating yet also perturbing manner the falsity of identity when construed as the maintenance of boundaries” (103). In other words, Rickert admits learning from the network itself, not simply its nodes or the

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messages that traverse it. His learning about identity is a reordering based upon, in his own word, a perturbation. This is a reordering that he apprehends, or that is disclosed to him, such that “[a]n ambient rhetoric brings to disclosure the cradle of affectability to which we are endlessly receptive, a sending that has been long in the wind” (285). In this all too

brief yet resonant summary, Rickert holds open possibilities for learning more about how we might look into preexisting relations rather than central essences or identities.

There are uncanny similarities and echoes, then, among these ideas, and such things rightly tell us we should pay attention. But what Rickert says is not the same as Sword, Todd, or TallBear, or even Latour. There is still a totalizing tendency in phrases like “descriptive power for everything that is” (102). However, we can see how Lakota ontology allows for particular disclosures of the world, ones similar to many new materialist approaches, yet still different enough to prevent conflation. New materialisms generally emerge out of science studies with notions of experimentation, out of Heideggerian philosophy with functional concepts of “being-at-hand” and “present-at-hand,” and they still grapple with a certain inaccessibility of objects (e.g., Graham Harman’s “withdrawal”). Even thinkers like Galloway and Thacker or Hui draw heavily from continental philosophy. Yet, for many indigenous people, the nonhuman beings of the world just are. They have agency because they have always had agency; reciprocity with them is a given, and terms like *posthuman* might ring strange. The nonhuman exist in their own being, and saying so doesn’t take much conceptual heavy lifting.

Moreover, who Lakota and other indigenous people understand *themselves* to be is predicated on those nonhuman others, not the other

way around. What matters for Lakota are the relations in which one already resides, how those relations are maintained, and how they constitute a proper place for people and their lives. We might say that Lakota stories and artifacts don't reach for descriptive power but provide *being*. I say *being* because for many, one's stories, artifacts, and their uses are about more than identity politics. Malea Powell et al. demonstrate this as they "emphasize rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical" in ways that do not "erase[] the human bodies involved in their making." This collective uses the term *constellation* rather than *network* or *intersectionality* to work differently with regard to border maintenance and politics of identity. Through their performance, the collective tells a story, provides a narrative, and constitutes, or constellates, itself as *being* "in building relationships between multiple traditions, multiple histories, multiple practices." One problem with Euro-Western scholarship raised by this constellation is how it cuts away at *being* by denying or hampering the sovereignty to constellate, or individuate in Simondon's terms, in addition to its problems negating identity and agency.

### **Completing the Circle: Sovereignty in Indigenous Networks**

We can return to Lyons's discussion of rhetorical sovereignty to find some telling words about how this might work for composition, rhetoric, and communication generally. Following Lyons and two more examples from Lakota, I want to suggest some "available means" in such a rhetoric of relations and constellating practices. Like the previous section, it is more a sketch than a fully realized vision, but perhaps this can be a locus for other changes.

Lyons notes that "A reclamation of sovereignty by any group remains . . . a recognition of that group's power—a recognition made by both self and other. It is not something 'new' or, worse, something 'given' by dominant groups" ("Rhetorical" 458). As with Galloway and Thacker, sovereignty emerges from networked systems yet is not given by any one element of the system. Agency, according to Cooper, emerges similarly, but only for individuals. Lyons also notes that "traditional Cherokee towns in Georgia were generally decentralized but loosely linked through language and kinship, each village ultimately retaining its own sense of independence" ("Rhetorical" 455). Such a structure allowed for both autonomy and cohesion across geography and kinship. As Lyons also points out about the Haudenosaunee, with this description by Oren Lyons:

Indian decision-making processes at the local level required the free *input of information* and advice for these *processes* to work at all. Any proposal brought to the Haudenosaunee was carried to each of the nations, where it was discussed either in clan or general meetings; the sentiments of the nation were then carried by the principal chiefs to the confederate council . . . and the chiefs had the authority to negotiate details of a proposed agreement according to their own judgment and in line with political reality. (Qtd. in “Rhetorical” 456; emphasis added)

Highlighting the terms *input of information* and *processes* signals the networked character of such social decision making. Information and its responses are carried up into one another so that the chiefs have authority *in line with political reality* that puts the relations between people (i.e.,

**Polity is always already caught up in ongoing constitution of boundaries (circumferences, chora), transductions of information (extrinsic movements, informational flows), and kairotic situations of affect, mood, and ongoing relations.**

the network) first. The Haudenosaunee were a *nation-people* in relation to others “for the sole purpose of promoting, not suppressing, local cultures and traditions, even while united by a common political project” (“Rhetorical” 456). In other words,

social organization worked in ways resonant with the relational ontologies called for by network theorists and with notions of agency as more than epiphenomena. Polity is always already caught up in ongoing constitution of boundaries (circumferences, chora), transductions of information (extrinsic movements, informational flows), and kairotic situations of affect, mood, and ongoing relations.

Such processes can at least check dogmatic (powerfully descriptive) thinking. Arvol Looking Horse, keeper of the sacred bundle containing the chanupa brought by Wohpe, issued the Green Grass Proclamation in 2003, declaring that only Native people could participate in Lakota ceremonies due to illicit drug use, “molestation taking place in ceremony, indecent mockery, mixing of new age beliefs, [and] charging for ceremonies and death.” Other Lakota dissented, with Eagle Man worrying that “Native spirituality never evolves into a hierarchy,” and Reginald Littlebrave questioning the impact of the proclamation on his biracial children, who might be excluded from cultural practices. Just as Lyons details diverse beliefs at his Leech Lake home, Lakota vary considerably in their practices, each

with their own inflection or expression of what has been passed down to them. Even the politics of Lakota ceremony can be seen as networked rather than hierarchically derived from a supreme sovereign, such as the pope, or an ecclesiastical body. Resistances and identifications are built into ceremonial and social practices so that no one has ultimate power, yet power and influence still flow through and help constellate a network of relations, something the chanupa helps effect.

Western ontology and epistemology do not generally admit nonhuman interlocutors nor admit that their needs be taken into account. However, as seen in the example of polar bears and with recent water protections, indigenous thought and understandings of communicative action may not only admit the nonhuman, but may rely on it. While helping set up a sun dance arbor in Kyle, South Dakota, we spied tornadoes forming on a ridge in the distance. We were told not to speak of them during the ensuing severe weather that came over Porcupine Ridge. After the storm had passed and we set our camp back in order, an elder gathered us and sang songs accompanied by his drum. In this way, the *wakinyan* or thunder beings were not offended, the relationship between our group and the thunder beings was affirmed, the destructive power of wind abated, and the possibility to learn from them was maintained.

In this difference between new materialist projects of descriptive power and indigenous materialisms of being, responsibility to sovereign constellations becomes paramount. The philosophical question to start with might not be “Who are you?” so much as “How are you?” In what way is your being? In what manner are you constellated *as* being? We might then pay attention to ways in which we are attuned to the world, how we relate to objects, institutions, each other, and how mood and emotion are powerful affective forces that bear on those relations. Yet new materialisms cannot address the laws by which polar bears and Inuit communities are bound. Good or bad hunts are determinations for the Inuit who live there and who hold their own sovereign relations with the polar bear as part of their own being. Perhaps, to extend Rickert’s terms, such relations cannot be properly disclosed unless one participates in their ongoing dialogue and permutations. This doesn’t mean the projects I have sketched here

**The philosophical question to start with might not be “Who are you?” so much as “How are you?” In what way is your being? In what manner are you constellated *as* being?**

cannot work together or even in harmony. It simply means one must carefully articulate one's projects, be clear about relations, and take note of ontological assumptions.

Looking at the chanupa as a rhetorical object extends the notion of indigenous rhetorics and rhetorical sovereignty to the nonhuman, complexly material, and ontological. Similar to new materialist orientations and network theories, attention to different ontologies affirms differences and suggests further possibilities for work across and within various traditions. The chanupa, as the Lakota understand it, is a key instrument of maintaining relations and responsibilities so that the Lakota may exist. It is an object of real consequence in maintaining, modulating, and constellating their individual and collective being. It is writing *wakan*, both powerful and mysterious. As such, it is central to Lakota projects of survivance and assertions of indigenous being.

This is my prayer. *Mitakuye oyasin*.

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