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**If Not all Stones Are Alive...:  
Radical Relationality in Animism Studies**

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**Abstract**

Irving Hallowell's conversation with an Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) elder in the early twentieth century has gained increasing attention in recent decades. It has been cited by many involved in the multi-disciplinary 'turns' to ontology, materiality and relationality. In particular, it has inspired many researchers involved in the 'new (approach to) animism'. This article considers efforts to rethink what 'person' or 'relation' might mean in the light of Indigenous ontologies and of the ferment of reflection and analysis offered by many colleagues. It proposes that we have not yet sufficiently understood what the elder intended by telling Hallowell that only some stones are animate. A more radically relational understanding of personhood has implications for the ways in which we approach and engage with/in nature, culture, science, and religion.

**Keywords**

Animism, personhood, relations, ontology.

There are, we have been told, turtles all the way down. The phrase evokes the inherent consciousness of all matter, 'down' from putatively higher mammals to subatomic particles.

If the early- to mid-twentieth century ethnographer Irving Hallowell had known this, would he still have asked an Anishinaabe elder in

Manitoba, Canada, whether all the stones around them were alive? Or would he have had asked about consciousness in Anishinaabe world-views and ontology? Would he have wondered whether the unnamed elder already had some access to quantum physics and its quandaries about particles responding to researchers and their experimental equipment? Would he have asked if the elder understood liveliness and consciousness to be synonymous or, in some way, distinct? Once he had learned that stones, *asiniig*, are animate in Anishinaabe grammar (the plural suffix *-iig* indicating this animacy), would he have linked the consciousness of matter to the animacy of stones? If so, might he then have summed this up as ‘turtles all the way down, stones all the way around’? Whatever the answers to such questions might be, Hallowell and his Anishinaabe hosts invite us to reflect on and debate about the relations of culture and nature, humanity and the larger-than-human world, consciousness and matter, and also religion and science.

In reality, Hallowell gifted us with a different complex phrase to set alongside ‘turtles all the way down’: that is ‘other-than-human persons’ (Hallowell 1960: 21 and frequently). Although this is now widely cited in publications and lectures by scholars from many disciplines, it deserves even more attention. This article begins with a précis of what Hallowell says about his hosts’ ontology, culture, behaviour, and worldview, largely unpacking what ‘persons’ might mean. The elder’s somewhat enigmatic answer to Hallowell’s question about the animacy of stones is crucial here and in the remainder of this article. Asked whether ‘*all* the stones we see around us here [are] alive?’ he replied ‘no, but *some* are’ (Hallowell 1960: 24). Having drawn attention to what Hallowell does with this and the notion of ‘personhood’, I then introduce recent discussions of animism and the related fields of the ontological, material, and relational turns. Noticing that although much of the ethnology discussed in animism-related literature harmonizes with the elder’s radically relational ontology, I have become exercised by the fact that analytical or philosophical discussions of animism tend to subsume ‘*some* stones’ into nature, materiality, ceremonial objects, and other enveloping categories. Therefore, in the following discussion I seek greater clarity about scholarly ways of disciplining the unruly data commonly labelled ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. What interests me here is the role of such terms in the processes of separation and fixity, which, as Bruno Latour (1993) asserts, are quintessentially modern. I consider a range of ways in which relationships and interactions between species require us to think again, perhaps differently, about Hallowell’s question (‘are *all* the stones we see around us here alive?’) and the elder’s enigmatic answer, ‘no, but *some* are’.

Happily, I am not alone in my ambition to speak more clearly about animist relationality. Therefore, this article is replete with quotations selected from the many ongoing efforts to speak about interactive relationships in the larger-than-human world. These aid me to move towards claiming that more than the inherent relationality of living beings is revealed by Hallowell's record of his conversation. Similarly, the mass of recent dialogue between scholars, Indigenous knowledge teachers, and other animists pushes beyond that point. Of greater importance, the more radical implication of multi-species co-dwelling (finding ourselves in the presence of other persons) is that to become a person one needs to act personably, motivated and (in)formed by locally appropriate etiquettes and ethics. I propose that it is not enough for scholars to consider this only as an ethnographic description of animist ontologies. We could also make use of it to advance our discussions about the constitution of the world and of academia beyond the nature/culture duality. In that context, I conclude that re-theorising religion as an aspect of inter-species relations might, at last, carry us beyond the constraints of our inherited modernist dualisms.

### *Other-than-Human Persons*

Hallowell's phrase 'other-than-human persons' is at the heart of his argument 'that in the metaphysics of being found among these Indians [the northern Ojibwa or Anishinaabe], the action of persons provides the major key to their world view' (1960: 20-21). This leads him to reflect on a wide range of information conveyed to him in conversation with his hosts, in observations within the community, and/or in reading previous publications. There is a richness even in this summary sentence that now seems to be prophetic of recent attention to studying lived reality, material and performance cultures, and personal interaction. The study of religions and cultures and other disciplinary pursuits have changed.

Hallowell's conversation with the elder is increasingly well known but it rewards regular re-visitation. In the short question and answer ('are *all* the stones we see around us here alive?' and 'no, but *some* are') Hallowell presents the heart and guts of what his hosts had taught him about Anishinaabe worldviews. In particular, he focuses our thinking about personhood. He observes that 'everyday life is so structured culturally' that, in their interactions with the larger-than-human world, Anishinaabe 'individuals act as if they were dealing with "persons" who both understand what is being said to them and have volitional capacities as well' (1960: 36). 'Persons' are wilfully responsive and communicative. In terms that some scholars prefer, they are subjects or agents.

Hallowell later notes that *some* persons are deemed capable of metamorphosis, shape-shifting, or dramatically altering their appearance (e.g. when bears look like humans). He writes that this

is one of the generic properties manifested by beings of the person class. But is it a ubiquitous capacity of all members of this class equally? I do not think so. Metamorphosis to the Ojibwa mind is an earmark of 'power'. (1960: 39)

Not all persons are equal. While some species appear to grow into the wielding of power (sometimes demonstrated by the ability to transform) more easily than others (eagles and bears being prime examples), others do so less easily. Humans are not particularly good at this, but some achieve the ability. They are accorded considerable respect, not solely for being able to metamorphose, but because that power indicates either the achievement of the social responsibility incumbent on elders, leaders and similarly venerable people, or the deceitfulness of sorcerers.

As his argument develops, introducing us to varied interactions between persons of different kinds, Hallowell explores the social and ethical standards expected within Anishinaabe culture. He says that

the same standards which apply to mutual obligations between human beings are likewise implied in the reciprocal relations between human and other-than-human 'persons'. In his relations with 'the grandfathers' [an honorific applied to elders but also to other-than-humans] the individual does not expect to receive a 'blessing' for nothing. It is not a free gift; on his part there are obligations to be met. There is a principle of reciprocity implied. (1960: 46)

The Anishinaabe social world is shaped by responsibilities and obligations that are, like the constitution of those deemed to be 'persons', not determined by species or by human-likeness. Or, rather, humans (like other beings) are 'persons' when they act as the larger-than-human community (which always includes them) determines is appropriate and/or respectful. Hallowell sums this up in the concluding sentences of his article, saying,

The entire psychological field in which they [the Ojibwa] live and act is not only unified through their conception of the nature and role of 'persons' in their universe, but by the sanctioned moral values which guide the relations of 'persons'. It is within this web of 'social relations' that the individual strives for *pīmädäzīwin*. (1960: 48)

*Pīmädäzīwin*, the good life or 'life in the fullest sense, life in the sense of longevity, health and freedom from misfortune' (1960: 45), is achieved in cooperation with others (not all of them human), requires reciprocal exchanges of gifts, and is sometimes marked by displays of power.

Before moving on from this highlighting of the sweep of Hallowell's article, it is worth saying something about negatively valued persons. Those who do not share power, but instead accumulate it for their own ends, are deemed dangerously antisocial. Persons do not have to be 'good' any more than they have to be human. However, they do have to deal with the expectation that they will seek to contribute to the common good. Even when seeking to take the life of others (e.g. in hunting or fishing), persons are expected to act respectfully. That they do not always do so is part of what makes all this more than a romantic tale of harmony in paradise. Rather, Anishinaabe cultural motifs have been worked out in the sometimes fraught interactions between persons who are members of distinct, sometimes competing, and sometimes edible species. This is an important facet of the story that Hallowell tells about 'Ojibwa ontology, culture, behavior and world view'.

### *Revisiting Animism*

I have summarized only one of Hallowell's publications, albeit the most frequently cited. In recent decades this and other works by Hallowell have gained increasing recognition. In introducing a special issue of the journal *Religion* in 1992, Ken Morrison offered what may serve as the briefest encapsulation of Hallowell's article about 'Ojibwa ontology' (along with other scholars' insights into Indigenous knowledges and lifeways) in the words 'Person, Power, and Gift'. He asserted that these 'still largely unexplored existential postulates...seem to affect the symbolic character of Native American social, political, economic, and religious life' (1992: 203). Happily, matters have improved: Person, Power, and Gift have gained significant and growing attention. They are, for example, frequent signposts in the 'ontological turn' and in the flourishing of Indigenous Studies globally. As significantly, interest in such matters has been a central feature of renewed consideration of animism.

The publication of "'Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology' by Nurit Bird-David in 1999 signalled the growth of these 'turns' (although the article does not use this term). Bird-David begins with the statement that '[t]he concept of animism, which E.B. Tylor developed in his 1871 masterwork *Primitive Culture*, is one of anthropology's earliest concepts, if not the first' (1999: S67). However, after surveying the appearance of the term in a wide range of publications, she notes that 'the ethnographic referent—the researchable cultural practices which Tylor denoted by the signifier/signified of "animism"—has remained a puzzle' (1999: S68). Indeed, she cites

Philippe Descola's assertion (1996: 82) that identifying such practices is 'one of the oldest anthropological puzzles'. In a further note, she credits Hallowell with having 'come close to revisiting the notion' of animism, and Stewart Guthrie (1993) with being a 'liminal exception' to the general failure to do more than cite Tylor. Bird-David's article not only summarized the nascent state of debate but also drew on her research among the Nayaka of India to propel matters further. She corrects what she saw as Hallowell's failure to explain how animistic views 'are engendered and perpetuated', noting that this was understandable given that cross-cultural research about 'personhood' was limited at the time. Nayaka use of the word *devaru* enables Bird-David to explore the ways in which Nayaka social space and epistemology facilitate relatedness, not as a thing in itself but as interactivity. This has become increasingly important in ongoing animism debates.

Around the same time, Descola's work (1992, 1996) had begun to differentiate between animism, totemism, analogism, and naturalism. His contribution to *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Harvey 2013a) sets out the further development of his thinking, with reference to further ethnographic data and to scholarly theorizing from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines. Briefly summarized, Descola envisages animism, totemism, analogism, and naturalism as four ways in which humans make sense of the relationship between 'physicality (in the sense of dispositions enabling a physical action) and interiority (in the sense of self-reflexive inwardness)' (Descola 2013: 79). This schema has been provocative even where it has not entirely been followed by others. For example, Marshall Sahlins argues that Descola's 'animism, totemism, and analogism are but three forms of animism, namely communal, segmentary, and hierarchical' (2014: 281), while Johannes Neurath demonstrates (2015) that the Huichols (Wixarika) of Western Mexico are adept at 'combining animistic and analogist tendencies' but may not go so far as to require us to use Michael Scott's (2007) term 'polyontology'. It contributes importantly to ongoing consideration of the relations between, for example, materiality and interiority, ontology and epistemology, modernity and Indigeneity.

Tim Ingold's prolific interventions about the world and the ways in which people move through it also contribute to revisiting animism. They include ethnographies of hunter-gather and farmer relations with other species (e.g. Ingold 1996a and 1996b), efforts to refine categories (e.g. 1998, 2006), and reflection on materiality and weather (e.g. 2007a, 2007b). Ingold brought much of this together in 'Being Alive to a World without Objects' (2013), a contribution to *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Harvey 2013a). Insisting that 'things' are not mere scenery,

backdrops to action, he concludes that ‘Animism is not about restoring agency to objects; it is about bringing things back to life. It gives us room to breathe’ (Ingold 2013: 25). In part this is a criticism of the attribution of a quite magical ‘agency’ to objects and other actors or inter-actors. In part it is a criticism of discussions of ‘materiality’ that do not engage with materials. In addition to reflecting on diverse ethnographic data, it invites scholars to re-imagine ways of working even as they consider what other people say, do, or might mean. Ingold’s fusion of phenomenology and environmentalism has indicated interesting directions for thinking differently and more carefully about how persons ‘become’ through their many relational interactions.

The proliferation of ‘animism’-related work escapes brief summaries, particularly as it continues to produce new conference presentations, publications, insights, and discussions. Much of this ferment cross-fertilizes and creates new hybrids, some taking up the challenge of revisiting other terms (and the phenomena they purport to identify), such as ‘totemism’ (Rose 1998; Pedersen 2001), ‘shamanism’ (Harvey 2003, 2010), and ‘fetishism’ (Graeber 2005; Hornborg 2011; Whitehead 2013). Two collections of new writing that have extended the range of cultural contexts in which animism has been debated are particularly worth consulting: Ernst Halbmayer’s special issue of the journal *Indiana* (2012)—which brings Amazonian and Siberian material into dialogue—and my *Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (2013a) with forty contributions. Mentioning these publications is not intended to exhaust the summary of what has been happening or to suggest that there is no more to be said. It does, however, indicate some of the topics that have become central, along with some of the main ways in which this debate intersects with others.

### *Turning Ontological*

A radical disruption of business-as-usual in the study of ‘other’ cultures was provided by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s effort to reveal plural ontologies rather than epistemologies. That is to say, where many previous scholars had managed the diversity of ways of *perceiving* the world, and thereby made some sense of the diversity of cultures, in 1999 Viveiros de Castro invited colleagues to take seriously Amazonian ‘perspectivism’. For his Indigenous hosts, the problem was not the multiplicity of cultures but of *natures*. A single culture was evident to them in the activities of all animate beings (sometimes including made things, cultural artifacts, but certainly including jaguars, peccaries, and other familiar forest-dwellers). It was the difference of bodies that



created the diversity of perspectives. Amazonia, as Viveiros de Castro presented this regional perspective to others, contrasted with the Euro-global dominant understanding of having a multinaturalism rather than a multiculturalism. Amiria Salmond says that the direct inspiration of Viveiros de Castro's manifesto,

drawing on writings of Bruno Latour, Marilyn Strathern, and Roy Wagner, among others, [is] the idea that a 'turn toward ontology' might be underway in anthropology was set in motion by the volume *Thinking through things: Theorizing artefacts in ethnographic perspective* (Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007), and was swiftly picked up by other commentators. (2014: 161)

She goes on to summarize that book as showing that

the proper subjects of ethnographic treatment are not necessarily (just) people, but may turn out to be all manner of unexpected entities, relations, and beings. They may include, for instance, artifacts of a kind we might intuitively think of as objects—only to find them playing subject-like roles: wood carvings that are ancestors; powerful powder; collections that make sense of catastrophes; and so on. (Salmond 2014: 167)

This is the essence of the ontological turn. As with other 'turns' it is not entirely new but more of a more determined, more popular, and perhaps more ambitious project than earlier engagement with the life of things had been. Important work from before *Thinking Through Things* includes Daniel Miller's *Materiality* (2005) and Latour and Peter Weibel's exhibition catalogue, *Making Things Public* (2005). Victor Buchli's *Material Culture Reader* (2002), a collection of previously published work, illustrates the availability of discussion and the establishment of a debate by that date. Indeed, the publication of the *Journal of Material Culture* since 1996 and of *Material Religion* since 2005 show that the 'turn' was well established. It is, however, undoubtedly true that *Thinking through Things* signalled a more robust emphasis on the 'subject-like roles' of objects. Just as some discussions of 'materiality' hardly touch 'matter' and some discussions of 'embodiment' are more about ideas than about corporeality, so it took books like *Thinking through Things* to truly keep matter in focus as more than symbols or representations of cognitive issues or beliefs.

The 'material turn' in multiple disciplines has now enabled a more determined engagement with the relations between humans and other physical social actors. These can include artifacts, as Salmond noted, as well as 'natural' objects. In part, this explains the re-visitation to the term 'fetish' alongside new work about animism, totemism, and shamanism. However, precisely the question of whether to place an object in the

'natural' or the 'artifact' category now becomes more urgent. At stake is the constitution of the world. Both ontology and the relations between those whose dwelling together comprises the world become uncertain.

### *Revisiting Nature*

One simple response to the proliferation of data (let alone the theorization) presented in debates about the new animism (new in relation to Tylor's older approach) is to subsume all stones within the animate category. Indeed, if Tylor's animists could be accused of believing that everything has a spirit, so Hallowell cites Diamond Jenness as saying that 'To the Ojibwa...all objects have life' (Hallowell 1960: 49, citing Jenness 1935: 21). However, Hallowell rejects this as a gross over-generalization, noting that 'If this were true, their *inanimate* grammatical category would indeed be puzzling'. However enigmatic the elder's thoughtful response, 'no, but *some* are' may seem, it rejects the elegant option of attributing life or animacy to all stones. Animism and life are more complex than this.

In other research, *some* artifacts are also revealed to be treated as animate, other-than-human persons, in some cultures. Indeed, anyone who has ever sworn at their computer or their car could be said to be doing something animistic. In addition, certain artifacts might be classed as animate only sometimes—in this respect, at least, made things are not that different to stones among the Anishinaabe. Zuni *koko* masks are always 'persons', even when made by non-Zuni under the false impression that it is possible to make replica-*koko* masks (Altieri 2000). However, a Zuni prayer-stick is 'given life by its maker and by the sacrificial gifts of grandfather turkey, the eagle, the birds of summer, and cotton woman' (Fulbright 1992: 226). They become persons in the process of gift exchange relational activities. Further examples could be offered that demonstrate that animists do not think of all objects (natural or artifactual), in all circumstances, as living persons.

Even if, however, we have not completely resolved the issue of 'what is alive', the question of whether animists distinguish categorically between 'natural' and 'made' objects also challenges nature/culture dichotomies. From among the many people who have contributed to rethinking such cultivated matters, allow me to quote a few highlights, with apologies to the many other colleagues who might have been cited.

Donna Haraway's diverse provocations of new thinking-and-becoming include work about human relations with technologies and with other animals. These can be exemplified by or coded in terms like cyborgs and companion species (e.g. Haraway 1991, 2003). In a lecture to

the European Graduate School she summed up much of her thinking by saying:

The kinship system includes the companion species, the cyborg, the genetically modified organisms, and the various kinds of entities out of which entire ways of life explode. I tend to think in terms of kinship systems more than oppositions. It is a kinship system that does damage to our notions of nature, surely, but also to our notions of culture, so that neither nature nor culture emerges unscathed from our meditations on these modes of being. Nature-culture ends up being one word. Humans invented neither nature nor culture, therefore social constructionism as a strategy of analysis ends up being kind of anemic and nutritionally deficient. (Haraway 2000)

More recently, she has insisted that:

Approaches tuned to 'multi-species becoming with' [or 'sympoiesis' rather than 'autopoiesis'] better sustain us in staying with the trouble on Terra. An emerging 'new new synthesis' in trans-disciplinary biologies and arts proposes string figures tying together human and nonhuman ecologies, evolution, development, history, technology, and more. Corals, microbes, robotic and fleshly geese, artists, and scientists are the dramatis personae in this talk's SF game. (Haraway 2015: ix)

Philippe Descola's reflections on the putative domains of nature and culture led him to conclude that

there was no need to presuppose some original fault lines in this network of discontinuities, in particular one that would separate the realm of nature from the abode of speaking creatures; I found that, however useful this constitutional division may have been in triggering the accomplishments of modernity, it has now outlived its moral and epistemological efficiency, thus making way for what I believe will be a new exciting period of intellectual and political turmoil. (Descola 2013: 90-91)

This belief is a current in the flow of ongoing work that might be identified as the 'ontological turn' but also animates some of the best ecological and/or environmentalist ferment.

However, none of this would have been a surprise if we (scholars and others) had learnt respectfully from Indigenous people (among others). For example, there is, in the end, little difference between the Zuni who make and use prayer-sticks and the physicists who make and use quantum microscopes. That is, it is precisely the fact of made-ness, following careful thought and experimental refinements, that makes a prayer-stick and a microscope trustworthy. Centuries of prejudice against fetishists and their fetishes ('mere objects' perhaps) or idolaters and their idols (things 'made with human hands' as the refrain goes) may have made this similarity hard to see (a point made by Latour 2010,

among others). Perhaps, too, somewhat fewer centuries of polemical marginalization of 'religion' as a private and personal concern has obscured the similarity between religious practices and other relationships with the larger-than-human world. That is a point to which I will return towards the conclusion of this article. It is, of course, the centuries of genocide that have prevented any sustained effort by 'Western' people to learn respectfully from Indigenous people.

### *Larger-than-Human Worlding*

Having told a version of an Indigenous creation story and a version of the Christian creation story, Thomas King notes that in the former 'the universe is governed by a series of co-operations—Charm [the name he gives to the first woman in the world as he tells the story], the Twins [Charm's creative babies], animals, humans—that celebrate equality and balance' (King 2003: 23-24). Later in his story-telling he considers 'the intimate relationship that Native people [have] with the land'. He says,

And here I am not talking about the romantic and spiritual clichés that have become so popular with advertisers, land developers, and well-meaning people with backpacks. While the relationship that Native people have with the land certainly has a spiritual aspect to it, it is also a practical matter that balances respect with survival. It is an ethic that can be seen in the decisions and actions of a community and that is contained in the songs that Native people sing and the stories they tell about the nature of the world and their place in it, about the webs of responsibilities that bind all things. Or, as the Mohawk writer Beth Brant put it, 'We do not worship nature. We are part of it'. (King 2003: 113-14, citing Brant 1990: 119)

Neither King nor Brant place Indigenous people within 'nature' in the same way that the ideologues of European-colonial-modernity did (or do). They do not mean the innocent naked animal-like beings of Columbus' rhetoric. Nor do they evoke the 'red in tooth and claw' nature of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Richard Dawkins. Rather, they meant the cultural larger-than-human world in which humans share responsibilities with all other persons (of whatever species) for co-creating and reciprocal caring for a multi-species community.

This larger-than-human world, nature-culture, or, more simply, world or community, is the same as that of Aboriginal Australian 'totemism' in Debbie Rose's (1999) terminology. It is a place where all species have 'their own rituals and law, and...they too [alongside humans] take care of relationships of well-being' among all the inhabitants of an area or 'country'. By virtue of co-habitation, all beings are related and therefore share rights and responsibilities, and are expected to be committed to

and concerned for each other's 'flourishing in the world' (Rose 1999: 7, 11).

This is also the world in which Val Plumwood discovered that crocodiles police inappropriate behaviour, or (knowingly) being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In an article originally entitled 'Being Prey' and now more prosaically named 'Surviving a Crocodile Attack' (2000), Plumwood writes powerfully of the place of humans in a food chain that does not benefit us. Her experience of 'being prey' provided her with a perspective that enriches her life-long contributions to environmental philosophy and (or as) eco-feminism and activism.

Another way of speaking about the way in which the world is both made of encounters and also shaped in stories or story-telling is offered in Anna Tsing's discussion of 'worlding'. She says:

worlding is simultaneously orienting and disorienting. Worlding is always practiced in relation; worlds come into being at the encounter—and at best they explain the encounter. (2011: 63)

Elsewhere she provides the vital insight that it is particular kinds of encounters that are vitalizing, producing movement, action, and effect. She calls these 'friction', noting that

A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. (Tsing 2004: cover)

All of these efforts to speak (differently) about the world arise because of an increasingly well-received view that to be alive and/or to be or become a person requires acts of relationship.

### *Relationality, Relations, and Relating*

All life is necessarily and inescapably related. Whether we learn this from Indigenous refrains such as the one that structures sweat-lodge ceremonial 'all our relations', or from the 'tree of life' diagrams produced by evolutionary and ecological scientists makes little difference. The fact is that we humans are related. The question is how we might relate. Our relationality is not in doubt but the appropriateness of our relating is questionable.

In 1999, Bird-David experimented with various ways of speaking about the relationality that constitutes persons. For example, she considered Marilyn Strathern's (1988) notion of the "'dividual'" (a person constitutive of relationships)' (1999: S68). More recently she has expressed a preference for speaking of 'relatives' or 'relations' rather than of 'persons' or any more difficult term (Bird-David 2015). That is, in

common with others who have tried to convey what new approaches to animism might entail for understanding the nature of personhood or of ontology, Bird-David has found that her audiences often respond badly to words like 'person' except as a reference to humans. 'Relatives', perhaps, also requires explanation if it is to serve as a reference to other-than-human relations.

The assumption that humans are being spoken of when anyone says 'person' or 'relations' is paradoxically revelatory of both positive and negative concerns. Negatively: the assumption separates humans into a unique category that undermines efforts to understand both evolutionary and ethical ways in which we are, in reality, related. Positively, at least as a thought experiment, the fact that terms like 'person' and 'relative' are assumed to refer to humans is indicative of the fact (true for all species) that some relations are closer than others. That is, humans typically have closer relations with other humans than with the vast majority of other species we might encounter. The 'frictions' that energize our relationships and our becoming are most often with those of our own species or with those of close companion species (which perhaps includes cyborgs and those things we call possessions). Perhaps this is most true of our conscious acts of relating. After all, the bacteria who dwell in our guts and on our skin are intimate relatives. Without them we would certainly not be humans or alive but we rarely pay them conscious attention.

The ethnographies that have established the viability of the new animism's reflections on what it means to be a person or relation have consistently circulated around the fact that some relations (persons or frictions) are closer than others. The elder who spoke to Hallowell about the animacy of '*some* stones' demonstrated (reflectively and discursively) that while *all* stones might be theoretically animate, only *some* stones had active relationships with some humans. The Anishinaabe cultural assumption (worldview or ontology) is that persons (of whatever species) move through a world of other persons. Some of those persons are more closely related. Some are of more importance to the life-long becoming that is the ambition to live a 'good life'.

A similar point is made by Ken Morrison in discussing early encounters between Europeans and Algonkians. In *The Solidarity of Kin* (2002) he examines the ways in which both communities understood and misunderstood the other, rooted in divergent or conflicting cultural assumptions. He reprised and summarized this in opening his 'proposal for a post-Cartesian anthropology' by contrasting the typical European ('first contact' and anthropological) question 'Are they human?' with the typical Native American question 'are these newcomers [Europeans]

persons?’ (2013: 38-39). As with the Anishinaabe, the accumulation of power and (other) goods rather than the sharing of gifts identifies beings as anti-social in a world in which everybody is always socializing in one way or another. It is, then, the way in which someone (of whatever species) acts that indicates their personhood. In this context, a statement to the effect that being a person is about relating would not be a statement about given facts, about nature, but about etiquette and ethics. Finding the appropriate local way to share, to give, and to receive gifts, is what makes someone recognizable as a person. This could mean something as basic as knowing whether tobacco or beer is an appropriate gift, but it might also involve knowing whether gift-exchanges (reciprocity) or the one-way process of offering or receiving free gifts is expected. Neurath’s (2015) discussion of the complex shifting patterns and performances of ritual relations among the Huichol (Wixarika)—in which both reciprocity and free-gift dynamics can be engaged—is enlightening here.

### *Religion in a Relational World*

Morrison drew important conclusions about religion from Hallowell’s work, saying:

Hallowell locates Native American religious thought and behavior in the freighted dialogue of various types of personal beings. Hallowell relocates the religious in the actual relationships which constitute the everyday world. Hallowell also anticipates recent understandings that have come to recognize that Native American life proceeds in terms of a gifting principle which shapes the ethical character of both tribal and cosmic life. Human and other-than-human mutuality can thus be understood as both the social and cosmic ideal, and the goal of ritual action. In all these ways, Hallowell points to the possibility of understanding Native American religious realities in the ways in which they are grounded in the interpersonal engagement of human and other-than-human persons. (Morrison 2000: 35-36)

I have become increasingly convinced that this is true not only of Native American religious traditions, and not only of Indigenous religions elsewhere, but also of almost everything that ought to be subsumed within the category ‘religion’. In contrast with the modernist project of curtailing the referential utility of the term (keeping it for privatised and interiorized pursuits separate from politics, citizenship, and other ‘public’ matters), I have joined those who argue for more relational, everyday, embodied, and material definitions and approaches (Harvey 2013b). For instance, I cite the inspiration of Te Pakaka Tawhai’s

statement that ‘the purpose of religious activity here is to...do violence with impunity’ (2002 [1988]: 244). That is, religious activity is about acting appropriately towards other-than-human persons in order to gain what is necessary to feed and shelter relations and guests. The precise form of ceremonial expression, etiquette, or ethics may be local and non-transferable. However, the general point stands: religion is a way in which humans engage with our other-than-human relatives in the larger-than-human world.

All this being so, we can and should find better ways of speaking about the world, about religions, and about persons than the exhausted terms that separate nature from culture, humans from other-than-humans, religion from politics, thought from action, and so much more. The experimentalism and empiricism of Anishinaabe and other Indigenous this-worldly, located religious life invite a renewed engagement with the animism that Viveiros de Castro has called ‘the only *sensible* version of materialism’ (Haraway 2015: ix). More than that, this animism invites a renewed engagement with nature, culture, religion, and science.

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