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Keith J. Williams

First Nations Technical Institute and St. Francis Xavier University

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New Materialism and Indigenous Food Systems Research: Reproducing Structural Inequities or Revealing an Open Futurity?

Food, Agriculture and Social Change: The Everyday Vitality of Latin America edited by **STEPHEN SHERWOOD, ALBERTO ACRE, and MYRIAM PAREDES.**

Routledge, 2017 \$50.95

Reviewed by **KEITH WILLIAMS**

Food, Agriculture and Social Change: The Everyday Vitality of Latin America is composed of fourteen chapters that explore food and agricultural activities in various Latin American countries. Sherwood, Acre, and Paredes, in the introduction to this text, suggest that the rich possibilities associated with the multiplicity of everyday practices are foreclosed by the homogenizing narratives of neo-liberalism and “third way” political ideologies. New materialist methodologies, which underpin the works in this collection, de-centre the human subject and offer a way to attend to the myriad relationalities within and between humans, nonhumans, and inanimate matter (Barad). The historical connections between, and similarities across, Indigenous cultures of the Americas (Smith) suggest the possibility of cross-contextual insights. This review focuses on two chapters that deal specifically with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge.

In the third chapter, Camilo Torres and Gerard Verschoor point out that the turn to relationality in academic research “insufficiently involve(s) Indigenous people in thinking about the affects and experiences with food in the contemporary world” (48) and they suggest that the Indigenous “perspective opens up unexplored conceptual terrain and allows imagining other possibilities” (48). The authors describe cosmological understandings of the Andoque—a cultural group Indigenous to the Colombian Amazon—in reference to illegal gold mining in their territory, an activity with many harmful social and environmental impacts. The Andoque attribute contemporary food scarcity, loss of cultural identity, and other problems to an imbalance in the relationships between humans and non-humans resulting from illegal mining activity. Community elders’ efforts to realign the human-nature relationship via negotiations with various spirits are described in some detail, presenting a radically different way of understanding human-food-ecosystem relationships. Torres and Verschoor conclude by suggesting that Andoque concepts of abundance may be described as processual rather than fixed or reified and that Indigenous knowledges should not be viewed as archaic but rather as systems from which mainstream society could learn more relational, sustainable lifeways; “(p)erhaps the Andoque can help us to save ourselves?” (58).

Torres and Verschoor present a perspective from a radically different ontological orientation: the Andoque Indigenous worldview. As promised, their work alerts the reader to the depth and complexity of Andoque relationality. However, the authors’ conclusion that Andoque traditional knowledge can save humanity is a manifestation of the “saviour narrative” that seems to dominate mainstream interpretations of Indigenous culture (Williams et al.). This “saviour narrative” appropriates and instrumentalizes Indigenous knowledge, often without consent, for the benefit of a dominant cultural system that has imperiled the future of the earth and leaves little room for authentic expressions of Indigenous aspirations.

In the seventh chapter, Oscar Reyna figures the peyote cactus as nomad, rebel, and uncommodifiable agent; a subject rather than object. Peyote is a psychedelic sacrament used

by several Indigenous groups, such as the Wixáritari (Huichol) people of Mexico and Indigenous peoples associated with the Native American Church, which extends from Mexico, through the United States, and into Canada (Maroukis). Reyna's description of peyote's agency is, in part, based on its biology and its profound effect on people who consume it. The author details an encounter between a group of non-Indigenous alternative builders who were participating in a workshop in Wirikuta—a Wixáritari sacred site in the mountains of central Mexico that is currently threatened by mining operations—and the peyote. Reyna describes the ensuing ceremony as “typical of New Age Mexican ceremonies” (108) and explains how peyote experiences such as this have created an international network of solidarity with the Wixáritari in defense of Wirikuta. Eating peyote is essentially a nomadic act, “enabl(ing) one to become a nomad-of-the-mind” (112), challenging assumptions of objectivity and substituting “values of profit, democracy, autonomy and equality” with “values of well-being, solidarity, co-creation, and exceptionality” (112). Reyna concludes that we all need to identify the everyday practices and more-than-human “others” that can help us to “challenge the status quo inherent in capitalist consumption” (112).

Based on Reyna's account, non-Indigenous people participating in a New Age peyote ceremony in Wirikuta is akin to psychedelic enthusiasts engaging in Indigenous Ayahuasca ceremonies in the Amazon. There is an established tradition, arguably dating to the late 1950s, of Western seekers taking psychedelics in Indigenous contexts for personal benefit. Reyna makes a good case that this non-Indigenous attention may bring benefits to the Wixáritari, but a few questions come to mind. To what extent does power and privilege shape the experience for non-Indigenous (or non-Wixáritari) seekers, for the Wixáritari themselves, and for peyote? Does the unique configuration of *colonial seeker—Wixáritari—peyote* foreclose some futurities while opening others? Who benefits? Can new materialist thinking reveal inequities and, in doing so, reveal possibilities for more equitable relations between colonial seekers, Indigenous people, and sacraments?

Sherwood, Eleanor Fisher, and Acre propose that the studies presented in this volume, which are based on new materialist methodology, are “free from assumptions of a priori relationships between people and food based, for example, on gender, race or class” (211). The dynamism and indeterminacy of new materialist ontologies may offer “a hole out of the old boundaries of the self” (Anzaldúa 49) and connect us with the vibrancy of matter. However, inattention to the ongoing legacy of colonialism faced by Indigenous peoples may serve to unintentionally reinforce those same structural inequities.

Food, Agriculture and Social Change makes several important contributions. It is the first published work, to my knowledge, approaching food systems from a new materialist orientation. New materialist relationality, inherent in the studies comprising this collection, offers hope for a truly transformed food system: one that supports equity for the more-than-human by recognizing that agency is not exclusive to humanity. However, as we see in this collection, new materialist researchers may fail to account for historical inequities and colonial power dynamics while attending to the nuanced richness of materiality. Finally, this volume offers examples of everyday food practice in Latin America that disrupt and counter totalizing global progress narratives. *Food, Agriculture and Social Change* is an excellent example of accessible scholarship, and hopefully, the beginning of a new materialist turn in food systems research.

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KEITH WILLIAMS is Director of Research and Social Innovation at First Nations Technical Institute, on Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. Keith is also pursuing a doctorate in educational studies at St. Francis Xavier University, and is working on a capacity building project with a farmer organization in Honduras.