

Pragmatism, New Materialism, and the Study of Institutionalized Racism:

An Agent Ontology Approach

Over the course of the last decade, in collaboration with more than a dozen graduate students, I designed, directed, and conducted a study of a school district in the U.S. Southeast that was undergoing a process of restructuring that led to an increased level of racial segregation in its schools. Interviews with over two hundred public school students, teachers, and parents, observation of school board meetings, and policy documents were the among data used in the study. Analysis of this data raised a variety of foundational questions about the ontology of racism that underlies claims we were making and that social science researchers make about institutional racism in general.

Students' accounts of what the new school arrangement meant to them were, in a way, authoritative. Whether students correctly or incorrectly interpreted the motivations behind the policies affecting them, whether or not their interpretations were shaped by the discourses in which they were immersed (which they certainly were), the fact remains that they lived the interpretations, many of which were alienating to them and outrageous to those of us paying attention. The study offers some rather straightforward descriptions of how students experienced a racially segregated school, experiences that may have otherwise gone unnoticed or ignored by policy-makers and educators. In other words, student experiences were the object of our inquiry and our objective was to accurately describe those experiences. I believe there are things that can be learned from this study when it is regarded in this way.

This, however, would not be an adequate nor accurate description of the conceptual approach we took with the study. I have read too much poststructural and postcolonial theory to be comfortable with the idea that amelioration of oppressive social conditions will inevitably emerge from an emancipatory research project that seeks to “reveal” the reality of oppression by documenting the voices of those who are being oppressed. From Joan Scott’s (1981) and Gayatri Spivak’s (1999) critiques of the limitations of the claims of authenticity upon which such projects often rely, to the deconstructions of the politics of voice in qualitative research by folk like Lisa Mazzei and Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2009), to Lauren Berlant’s (2011) cautions about the cruel, self-defeating, optimism of many foundationalist political projects, I am convinced that simply describing experiences to communities who haven’t heard them is not an adequate conception of what scholarship can contribute to social change. At this point in history it is difficult to maintain the view that whiteness and white supremacist discourses are sustained primarily by faulty epistemic practices—that all we are lacking is good information.

Neither, however, do I believe that it is only the discursive categories of race that hold us in their thrall, and that all we need is to deconstruct the categories of race or performatively displace them from our community discourses and that this will transform the material facts of racial hierarchy in our communities. The psychic wounds and material bruises of racial segregation in the school district we studied were substantive. Memories of those hurts were obdurate. The grinding logic of property values and racially stratified wealth disparities had a momentum that carried discourse in its wake.

This theoretical and methodological tension between the need for specific epistemic foundations that can leverage calls for action and an aversion to endorsing any particular

version of those foundations for fear of getting caught in the trap of essentialized identities and overly narrow horizons of possibility is not new. In fact it is by now a well-rehearsed debate, one with which scholars in a variety of fields have been growing increasingly weary (Barad, 2007; Lather, 2007; Latour, 2004). Jared Sexton (2012), for example, identifies the conceptual tensions between the need to historicize racial identity formation and the need for a conception of racial identity that is more ontologically substantive than discursive performance as a defining feature of the field of anti-Blackness theory. He takes as central the following question: “Can anti-racist politics be approached in ways that denaturalize the color line, retain the specificities of discrepant histories of racialization, and think through their relational formation?”

The Turn to Ontology in the Study of Racial Oppression

Education scholars have explored many ways of theorizing the relation between the reality and representation of institutionalized racism. This proliferation of methodological adaptations, and attendant divergent epistemic and ontological assumptions, within the field might be interpreted as a form of philosophical confusion—a lack of clarity about the epistemological status of experience as a form of evidence or a lack of a defined object of study within the field. However, given the inadequacy of any particular philosophical framework—such as post-positivism, critical theory, or post-structuralism—to provide a comprehensively satisfactory engagement with the racial stratification of educational opportunity world-wide, the methodological opportunism within the field of education studies seems justified, wise even.

Atwood & Lopez (2014), writing about the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the study of education, observe:

CRT not only ask[s] us to shift our understanding of “what” we know, but also ask us to re-think “how we know what we know, how we come to believe such knowledge, and how we use it in our daily lives” (Pillow, 2003, p. 183)...

Such a shift asks us to question the very nature of reality itself. (p. 1147)

Others scholars focused on the study of racial oppression, such as Stefano Harney & Fred Moten (2013), Alexander Weheliye (2014), and Sylvia Wynter & Katherine McKittrick (2015), have come to similar conclusions. It is not that a new form of knowledge is needed, but that enlightenment settler societal conceptions of the relationship between knowledge, being, and action is itself a part of the operation of racial oppression, or is at least frequently co-opted by it. The response by these authors and others has been to shift their attention from epistemological considerations to a search for alternate ontologies to inform their intellectual, cultural, and political engagements with racism.

This provocation to ontological reorientation should not be surprising. The persistence of institutionalized racism despite the sheer scope of the suffering it causes, its resilience in the face of multigenerational organized resistance, the way it adapts to and subverts every political and intellectual intervention, suggests that we are dealing with more than a mere conceptual mistake. It suggests that empirical research on the phenomenon of racism, white supremacy, whiteness, anti-Blackness—whatever our theoretical suppositions lead us to call it—will ask more of scholars than adopting alternative epistemologies and practices of description. It will

require changes in our practices of being and our ontological relation to the process of inquiry. The question is what form will those changes take?

Agential Realism in Social Research Methodologies

It turns out similar questions about the ontological implications of our ways of knowing have long been a part of some traditions of scholarship such as indigenous studies or classic and contemporary pragmatist philosophy (e.g. Deloria, 1999, 2012; Eastman, 2003; Doefler, Sinclair, & Stark, 2013; Kohn, 2013; Peirce, 1992; Pratt, 2011; Short, 2007; Watts, 2013). Additionally, they have recently become the focus of vigorous attention in science studies and what is being called new materialism, feminist materialism, post-humanism, and/or the ontological turn (e.g. Alaimo & Heckman, 2008; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Coole & Frost, 2010). For my purposes here, I would like to focus on a concept all of these traditions of thought take up in one way or another: the concept of agential realism (Barad, 2007), also referred to as agent ontology.

Agential realism refers to the idea that it is neither adequate to think of our research being conducted on passive objects awaiting accurate representation, nor as if those objects are “social constructions” whose boundaries are determined entirely by human activity. Instead, it is preferable and more accurate to think of the objects of our studies as active non-human agents that by their nature cannot be adequately captured in a single representation. *Agential realism* is part of a constellation of ideas that treats inquiry not as the clarification of an epistemic representation but instead as the establishment of provisional onto-ethical relations between different agents, often between human and non-human agents. To those unfamiliar with this literature, the concept of non-human agents may sound far-fetched and

impractical. However, there are compelling reasons why many social science methodologists are drawn to these ideas.

Physicist, philosopher, and one of the originators of the new materialist movement, Karen Barad (2007), speaks of the relation established between different agents in an inquiry as an “intra-action.” Intra-actions are determined in part by the making of ontological “cuts” that define the boundaries between one agent and another agent, but that could always be made otherwise.¹ One way “cuts” are made is through conceptualizations that lead to the creation of an “apparatus” for an inquiry—an experimental instrument or a methodological practice. The world exerts its agency by responding to the apparatus in ways that can’t entirely be predicted. Once certain cuts are made, and an inquiry is conducted, ontological agents become “entangled” in specific ways. One value of this conceptualization is that it provides an account of how inquiries can be staged and lead to surprising outcomes—discoveries—about real things. However, it also highlights how inquiries can always be staged differently—involve different ontological cuts—which establish very different, sometimes contradictory, relational discoveries that are no less real. The world—including the world of matter—is framed as agential precisely because it is not reducible to any single representation, nor triangulation of multiple representations. According to this philosophical view, the substance of existence is different—it responds differently—and shapes us differently—depending on how we enter into relation with it.

Barad uses the diffraction grating experiments in the field of physics that led to the development of quantum mechanics to illustrate this counter-intuitive metaphysical idea. Depending on how a diffraction grating experiment is set up, a person is able to intra-act with

light as a particle, or as a wave, but not both. This is not nominalism. The light behaves as it does not simply because of our conception and instrumentation. It has an obdurate nature that intra-acts with our apparatus in decidedly counter-intuitive ways. Nor is this a failure of triangulation. It is not as if there is a more integrated phenomena of light out there awaiting a better experiment or description. Light is really a wave. Light is really a particle. It cannot be both at the same time. And we cannot encounter light as both in the same experiment. It is as if the nature of the light changes in response to the way we measure it. Experiments of increasing sophistication have tested and confirmed this principle of ontological exclusion (e.g. Jacques, Wu, Grosshans, Treussart, Grangier, Aspect, & Roch, 2007; Manning, Khakimov, Dall, & Truscott, 2015). Methodologically careful efforts to document one of these qualities causes the other not to manifest. The implication, according to Barad (2007), is that we live in an ontologically active and pluralist world. Our representations of the world can be accurate, can describe real things, without exhausting that reality. “Agency” is one of the few ontological concepts we have that fits within this logic. We regularly describe real qualities in other persons—to whom we attribute agency—but recognize that those qualities may change as a result of their agency. The phenomenon of light passing through a diffraction grating, Barad offers, can be thought of a non-conscious agent the reality of which shifts in response to the way we interact with it.

Barad and others who take up this line of analysis do not limit their attribution of agency to subatomic particles. It gets applied to a host of topics such as political processes (Bennett, 2010) , gender (Braidotti, 2013 Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Cool & Frost, 2010), ecology and environmentalism (Braidotti, 2013; Kohn, 2013), medicine (Johnson, 2008; Michael & Roberts,

2014; Rosengarten, 2012), education (Childers, 2013; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Taguchi, 2010; de Freitas & Sinclair, 2014), and colonialism (Lea, 2015; Nxumalo, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Rowan, 2011). According to this agential realist view, our responsibility when conducting inquiries is not exhausted by the confirmation of any one representation of a phenomena. There is also a performative aspect to our inquiries—a way in which the design of our inquiries—conceptually and materially—constitute the phenomena we study and they in return constitute us as subjects.² These mutually constituting processes—entanglements—have ethical implications because they have consequences and could always be otherwise. In this way, every inquiry is organized not just by a conception of present conditions, but also by a conception of futurity—how things might and should be (Tuck, 2014; Peirce, 1998; Weheliye, 2014; Kelley, 2003; Munoz, 2009; West, 1989; Rosiek, 2013).

Although I find Barad's language and examples particularly helpful, it is important to acknowledge that the new materialists are not the first to explore this kind of ontological theorizing. Indigenous studies scholars such as Vine Deloria (1999), Eva Garroute & Kathleen Wescott (2013), Bill Neidjie (2002), Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley (2006), Ralph Bungee (1984), Charles Eastman (2003), Gregory Cajete (1994, 2000), Thomas Peacock (2011), Makere Stewart-Harawira (2005), George Tinker (2004, 2008), Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran (1995), and many many others have written about the agency of matter, objects, land, animals, collectives, stories, and other non-human entities.³ Similarly, American pragmatist philosophers have explored these themes as well. Writing over a century ago, Charles Sanders Peirce critiqued linguistic nominalism that located all meaning within the human activity of representation. He argued for a more substantive relational ontology, posited that agency and inquiry were

characteristics of all things of this world, and spoke of inquiry as making “cuts” in an ontologically infinite “sheet of assertion” (Peirce, 1974, p. 332). Contemporary pragmatist philosophers have interpreted and developed these ideas (Belucci, 2013; Burch, 1994; Colopietro, ; De Waal, 2013; Short, ;) and increasingly social scientists are applying it to the analysis of human interactions in and with the world (Halton, ; Kohn, 2013; Verran,). There are striking similarities between these three broad philosophical traditions and the way they are being taken up by contemporary social science research methodologists. There are also salient differences, one of which is pivotal to our research on racial resegregation in schools.

Pragmatism, Purpose, and Agential Realism

Indigenous studies and contemporary pragmatism conceptualize non-human agency somewhat differently than Barad and other new materialists. The former includes “purpose” as a salient feature of non-human agency. Whereas, the latter have largely resisted associating “purpose” with non-human agency. The new materialist hesitance to include purpose as a feature of non-human agency appears to be motivated by a concern that the attribution of purpose would constitute an anthropomorphizing of non-human agents, and be a move back in the direction of centering the human subject.

Some new materialists have drawn upon Deleuze’s and Guattari’s (2004) “desiring-machine” language to describe non-human agency (Mazzei, 2010; MacClure, 2013). The machine-metaphor permits acknowledging the self-reproducing systemic nature of material and cultural “assemblages” without conveying human-like consciousness onto those systems. The machine-metaphor, however, seems to move back in the direction of treating the object of inquiry as an object, albeit a dynamic object. The concept of desire loses its agential quality and

takes on character of a natural force. For example, in *Vibrant Matters* Jane Bennet (2010) uses the term “trajectory” (p. 32) to describe the movement of political assemblages, a term that suggests inertial motion, motion that doesn’t change until acted upon from without—the opposite of agency. This sounds very much like the agent-structure dichotomy of familiar emancipatory theories of social change. There is a danger here that the radical ontological departure encoded into the concept of agential realism could be lost. Research focused on documenting the activity of material-cultural assemblages could become another form of phenomenological description of the obduracy of non-human things.

Having acknowledged the concerns that attributing purpose to non-human agents constitutes an anthropomorphizing regression into a narrow humanism, it seems equally valid to claim that retaining the attribute of purpose exclusively for human agents sets up a dualism that is itself an expression of a narrow humanism. This view is supported by the way several indigenous thinkers (Alfred, 2005; Deloria, 1999, 2012; Eastman, 2003; Bungee, 1984; Peacock & Wisuri, 2011) as well as several pragmatist scholars (Halton, 1997; Kohn, 2013; Peirce, 1992; Pratt, 2011; Short, 2007) have theorized non-human agency. T.L. Short (2007), a well known commentator on Charles Sander’s Peirce’s philosophy, argues that an agent ontology requires a conception of purpose associated with agents to avoid devolving into just another descriptive realism using different words. Purpose, according to Short, drawing on Peirce, is a form of ordering activity that seeks not a specific prescribed form of order—but instead a general form of order. For example, a chalkboard can order the people in a room into a general formation, so they are all looking at it, but where individuals sit exactly remains undetermined. Part of the board’s purpose in this case is to organize ordered attention. A seed organizes environmental

materials into the general order of an oak tree. Its purpose is to produce not a specific tree, but something in the general form of an oak tree. Its intra-actions with the environment will determine the specific shape and size of the tree. A well-crafted story can take on an agency of its own. It can organize the emotions and thoughts of large numbers of readers in a general way, though its reception will always depend on the combination of its content and contextual factors. Agency need not be conscious nor organic, but this ordering activity is what distinguishes a constellation of phenomena as an agent, according to Short. The precise philosophical argument for this conception of agency is long and technical and there is not time for it here.⁴ However, in what follows I can believe I can illustrate its utility for the study of things like the racial resegregation of public schools.

Racism as an Agent

It is through the above concept of purpose that agential realism becomes especially promising for the analysis of racial oppression. Consider the fact that contemporary conversations about institutionalized racism often feel the opposing pull of different ontological framings, such as the need to affirm individual experiences of racial oppression as real and the possible basis of an ethics and politics, the need to highlight the real material structural features of racism that transcend the experiences of individuals, and the need to historicize racism as a discursive processes and to avoid reifying the categories of racial difference that are ultimately responsible for the individual and structural manifestations of racial oppression. Each of these framings of racist oppression is compelling and each seems to exclude the possibility of granting a robust salience and realism to the other framings.

This is not to say that one of these theories is the right one and the others are wrong, no more than the diffraction grating experiments that measures light as a particle or as a wave is wrong. Light does have properties of a particle. It really is of a particle nature—when we interact with it in a certain way, these particle effects are real and consequential. And light really is of a wave nature. But we have learned we cannot expect to study these features of light simultaneously. Similarly we can say racism is a real personal experience, it is really a structural and material feature of our society, and it is really a discursive phenomenon. There are things that can be learned by studying these different, sometimes contradictory, but nonetheless real manifestations of racism. But over a century of studying racism seems to be suggesting that we cannot expect to describe the reality of racism all at once in a unified frame. It is an inheritance of enlightenment settler society foundationalist epistemologies, and the emancipatory theories of social change with which they are associated, that compels us to attempt to synthesize our understanding of racism into a single narrative. Perhaps these mutually exclusive conceptions of the reality of racism should be permitted to remain unsynthesized in our analyses.

The agent ontology literature provides a way of thinking about refusing the limitations of foundationalist conceptions of social change without forsaking a commitment to the realism of racism. It opens the possibility of understanding racism not simply as a single phenomenological or social object in need of description, but as an agent whose activity exceeds any single theory's ability to adequately frame a relation with it. Racism, understood in this way, is an agent whose activity includes both material formations and discursive formations.⁵

So what is the activity of racism as an agent? Here is where the relevance of the concept of purpose in agent-ontology is useful, I think. Racism is a highly adaptable distributed material-semiotic phenomenon whose organizing purpose is producing racialized social hierarchies.⁶ Racism operates in our cultural practices, our institutional arrangements, in microaggressive personal interactions, in the standards for what we call knowledge, in our legal code, etc. It is in no one of those places, but in all of them. Expose and oppose it one area, and its racially stratifying purposes are expressed in other registers.

Anti-racist scholars do not escape the organizing activity of such agents. The discursive manifestations of agential racism include even the social theories we often deploy as a means of resisting racism. For example, positivist research on race can reveal important patterns of inequity, but when public policy is limited solely to discussions of matters that can be documented in the narrowest of empirical terms, many real features of racism are occluded from policy discourse and therefore are rendered effectively invisible. Critical theoretic analysis of race provides illumination of the way economic and racial inequity are structurally co-constituted, but critical theory has also been used to justify minimizing race as an epiphenomenon of class oppression. Poststructuralist theory enables valuable critiques of racial essentialism, but has also been deployed to invalidate as discursively naïve any argument grounded in the personal experiences of racism, thus becoming an instrument of a form of racist silencing.

Like the diffraction grating experiments, all of these theories and others capture some portion of the reality of racism as an agent. And the more closely we examine racism through one of the theoretical apparatuses, the more the other real forms of racism fade from view. In

this way fetishizing any single theory or method for analyzing racism makes us vulnerable to becoming instruments of its social ordering activity. This activity manifests both through the production of racialized subjects and the materially inequitable conditions of living. Most importantly for our methodological considerations, agential racism has a pattern of co-opting the subjects of researchers themselves, bending every theoretical framework that is brought to bear against it to its own racializing activity.

Methodological Implications of Agential Realism for the Study of Racism

The methodological implications of agential realism are being discussed in many quarters (Garrouette & Wescott, 2005; DeFreitas & Sinclair, 2014; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Rosiek, 2013; Watts, 2010). This conversation is still too divergent to summarize in any easy way. What I will offer here is my own, relatively preliminary version of those implications for the study of institutionalized racism. It will be useful, as a way of beginning, to point out what I think the implications are *not*.

The project of a social inquiry practice informed by agential realism cannot be to describe the agent itself in some final fashion. In the case of research on whiteness as an agent, the project cannot be to describe in some authoritative and comprehensive fashion the operation of racism in contemporary society. To make this the project would be to deny the basic premise of agential realism, that any particular form of inquiry is itself a specific form of entanglement with another agent—one in which both subject and object are constituted in specific provisional ways. For example, presenting descriptive statistics of patterns of resegregation provides a picture of the scope of the consequences of racism and positions us as

a spectator subject viewing those patterns at a considerable distance. Ethnographies and grounded theory studies of the way race is interpreted in a community provides a view of the mechanisms and consequences of racism at a microsocial level and can also position the reader as a spectator to those effects. Critical theory scholarship on race renders racial hierarchies as a feature of economic structural processes and positions the reader as a potential conspirator in resistance to these structural processes. Poststructuralist deconstructions of the categories of race render the boundaries and substance of race unstable and invites the reader-subject into a state of ironic suspension. Arts-based narrative studies can provide evocative accounts of the affective and personal experience of racism that position researchers and readers as subjects in sympathy and solidarity with persons portrayed in a study. These different forms of inquiry all seek to generate different and arguably incommensurable forms of relational engagement with racism as an agent. Regarded in this way, there can be no final epistemic arrival point for the study of the activity of racism as an agent.

Instead, there are only choices between different possibilities for ontological entanglement with the reality of agential racism. The project of agential realist inquiry is to engage in particular ways while keeping track that each inquiry generates one entanglement among many possible entanglements with an agent. In this way, agential realism avoids becoming what Patti Lather (2006) has called a just another “successor regime” (p. 36) that seeks to displace all other analytics. Instead agential realism serves as a metaphysically minimalist frame for entering into and out of more specific ontological relations through the use of various methodological apparatuses. It also provides a frame for critical conversations about the consequences of these entanglements in specific settings and the futurities they

make possible. Research on whiteness as an agent is not, then, ultimately a process of documentation as a prelude to action. It is, instead, a form of action itself—an ontological intervention or a series of varied interventions in the service of the necessarily mutable project of anti-racist struggle.

This would change a researcher's relation with their object of study as well as with other researchers working with other theoretical and methodological apparatuses. Regarding racism as agentially real encourages eschewing agonistic cross disciplinary debates about who has racism "right," while still retaining a place for the value of precision within separate disciplines. If we are going to become entangled in antiracist struggle, we should use all the analytic tools at our disposal to become well entangled. And our conversations about which entanglements are best suited to which situations should be less imperial struggles over who occupies a final truth of the matter, and more situated comparisons of the values guiding our inquiries and the amelioration they make possible.

Furthering Pragmatism's Contribution to the Struggle Against Racial Oppression

It was once fashionable to observe that the pragmatic tradition of philosophy largely ignored the issue of racism. The last three decades of scholarship have made such claims unsupportable in two primary ways. Contemporary revisions to the pragmatist canon (McKenna & Pratt, ; Pratt, ; Seigfried, West,) have made clear how thinkers influenced by and contributing to the pragmatist tradition of philosophy such as W.E.B. DuBois, Alaine Lock, Anna Julia Cooper) have long been engaged with the resistance to various forms of social oppression including institutionalized racism. Contemporary pragmatists have extended and developed these streams of critical social analysis (Colapietro, ; Glaude, 2007; Hammington & Bardwell-

Jones, 2013; Harris, 2008; Kautzer & Mendieta, 2009; Koch & Lawson, 2004; McBride, 2012; Pratt, 2002; Sorrell, 2004; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). These developments in the philosophical literature, however, have been slow to influence the practices of social scientists studying racial inequality and other forms of institutionalized oppression. This is unfortunate, because one of the most consequential contributions the discipline of philosophy can make to the broader society is the refinement of our modes of analyzing social policy. The methodological and analytic frameworks social science scholars have at their disposal (e.g. post-positivism, critical theory, poststructuralism, standpoint theory) have proven valuable, but ultimately inadequate, to the task of ameliorating global racial disparities of opportunity and wellbeing.

In this paper we have pointed to a critical contribution pragmatist philosophy can make to contemporary anti-racist scholarship and activism. Charles Sanders conception of agency as an ontological feature of all of existence, not just human activity, resonates with contemporary new materialist philosophy and social theory. His arguments, developed and refined by T.L. Short, that non-human agency includes forms of non-conscious purpose as a defining feature, distinguishes his ontology from the new materialists in a way that makes it particularly well-suited for the analysis of oppressive social dynamics like racism. This in, combination with pragmatic philosophical work focused on the importance of socially engaged theorizing, has the capacity to contribute to the ongoing struggle with the material semiotic beast of racism. In the case of my most recent research, it provided an ontological framework for a multi-theoretic racial realist analysis of the resegregation of public schools in the United States.

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¹ In human inquiry, cuts can be made in a carefully premeditated way as in a scientific experiment or a carefully organized sociological study that decides what its object of inquiry how attention will be focused. However, sometimes such cuts are forced upon us by other agents, such as when tire or a vehicle is flat and commandeers our attention against our will, or something we desire enters our field of experience and becomes the focus of our thought and attention. In such cases intra-actions may or may not be formalized forms of inquiry, but involve some form of experiential exploration or problem-solving.

² This philosophical frame builds on Judith Butler's notion of performativity, but reaches beyond its limited linguistic semiotics for a more ontologically substantive understanding of performance (Barad, 2011).

³ Some indigenous scholars such as Eve Tuck (2015) and Valerie Watts (2013), have been concerned in recent years to point out that New Materialists often fail to acknowledge and engage this indigenous thought, and by so doing partake in a long standing practice of settler society erasure of indigenous culture and significance.

⁴ Several sections of Thomas Short's book, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, deal with the concept of purpose as it relates to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory and the theory of non-human agency therein. However, of particular note for this argument are pages 108-112 and 144-150.

⁵ In his excellent book *Habeas Viscus* Alexander Weheliye (2015) suggests something similar. Drawing on the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, he uses terminology such as "racializing assemblages" to describe the material semiotic fluidity and object+subject producing aspects of racism. This has appeal in that it puts the ontology of white supremacy into motion and frames the discursive and material aspects of racializing assemblages as continuous—which is what we found in our study. For reasons mentioned earlier, however, the language of "assemblage" does not have the advantages of agential ontologies for studying racism.

⁶ Note that this wasn't phrased as "Racism can be thought of as..." To use such phrasing would suggest a kind of constructivist nominalism that located the reality of racializing agent in human's conceiving of it as such. Agential realism is a form of realism, and so the phrase "Racism is..." has been used. (There is a form of recursive logic lurking behind this rhetorical decision. Since the appeal of agential realism is that it alludes to real agents that exceed any single discursive representation of it, one might legitimately argue that even agential realism is but one more discursive representation. This conundrum must be granted. But it has more of the quality of a challenge than a contradiction. It will take the development of a protean tradition of anti-racist scholarly practice and activism, rather than a logical argument, to satisfactorily address the concern that agential realism can be co-opted just as easily as any other theory.