Orenda, Transatlantic Ethnography, and the Indigenous Roots of Charisma

Where does ‘charisma’ really come from? In the century since Max Weber’s adoption of the word, it has become an indispensable crutch for scholarly and popular thinking about authority. Yet despite the growing interdisciplinary literature on the concept, its history remains poorly understood and its debts to global intellectual traditions overlooked. The received narrative certainly reads like a Eurocentric affair. Conceived in ancient Greece (khárisma, ‘gift of grace’), the word migrated to Rome as part of Renaissance theology, was re-imagined as a political term in German sociology, and found its most compelling use as an explanation for Italian and Nazi fascism. In Mieke Bal’s terms, all ideas are ‘traveling concepts’ in that they migrate between fields and cultures, taking on new life as they evolve (Bal 2002: 1). But they also travel avant la lettre. Ideas as rich and suggestive as charisma inevitably possess many ‘aliases’ that predate and shape them (Roach 2007: 6). The dynamics that Weber was using the word to describe had long travelled under different aliases in different cultures at different times.

A cross-cultural approach to this history is needed to more fully understand the role of charisma in modern thought. Looking beyond the concept’s contemporary ubiquity allows us to grasp just how recent and culturally arbitrary charisma truly is. It also allows us to see how our prevailing understanding of, and over-reliance on, this most magnetic of Western ideas limits how we understand politics, society, and both human and non-human authority. This essay offers one route into this line of thinking. It does so by examining a context that lurks unacknowl-
emed in the background of the concept of charisma itself: that of Native American philosophy.

This context can be glimpsed in a quietly momentous passage from Weber’s Sociologie of Religion (1920) in which the famous concept is unveiled:

These extraordinary powers that have been designated by such special terms as ‘mana’, ‘orenda’ and the Iranian ‘maga’ (the term from which our word ‘magic’ is derived). We shall henceforth employ the term ‘charisma’ for such extraordinary powers. (Weber [1920] 1993: 3)

In this moment, we see our modern political vocabulary taking shape before our eyes. It does so in a puzzling way. Of the non-Western semantic aliases auditioned and absorbed, one is far more enigmatic than the others: orenda, a word drawn from the Huron language to describe an omnipresent spiritual energy inherent in and shared by people and their environment. A newcomer to Western scholarship, it had only been introduced in a 1902 academic paper (Hewitt 1902: 35) but soon embraced in landmark sociological works – most notably in the work of Marcel Mauss ([1902] 2001) and Émile Durkheim ([1915] 2008).

Though Weber ultimately opted for the ecclesiastical familiarity of charisma, he frequently invoked orenda as an explicit equivalent and component. When we use the former word, therefore, we summon up not only a Hellenic or Christian worldview but also a non-Western cosmology. Though Kennan Ferguson has recently complained that ‘Native Americans are missing from political science’ (Ferguson 2016: 1029), it may well be that indigenous ideas in fact shaped the field at one of its founding moments, only to be largely erased and forgotten.

How might orenda change our view of charisma and the traditions out of which it emerged? What stories can orenda tell? This essay offers a series of answers from the perspective of nineteenth-century transatlantic intellectual history. First, it situates Weber’s use of orenda within two key intellectual traditions: the use of non-Western labels in turn-of-the-twentieth-century social thought, and depictions by non-native writers of ‘indigenous charisma’. Turning to orenda itself, I show how the concept offers provocative ways of thinking about the complexities of indigenous knowledge production. On the surface it seems to be a familiar colonial tale of the expropriation of non-Western thought by outside research. As I show, however, the actual story is more intriguing. The author of the original 1902 article on orenda, John N. B. Hewitt, was in fact one of the most important indigenous intellectuals of his age, whose simultaneous status as icon of survivance and agent of colonial bureaucracy, I argue, makes orenda an instructive test case for more recent projects for decolonising knowledge.

Authoritative Words and Floating Signifiers

In order to appreciate what orenda was doing in Weber’s work, it is necessary to reflect on the heuristic role that labels drawn from ‘primitive’ languages played at the birth of modern social science. The period from the late nineteenth century to World War I, when ‘ethnology’ transitioned into ‘anthropology’, was an age of terminological creativity. All emergent disciplines require new universal terms of art arrived at through processes of concept-naming that modern lexical scholars call onomasiology. Both ‘orenda’ and ‘charisma’ were products of this process, in different ways.

In the United States, in the years following the founding of the Bureau of American Ethnology (1879) there was an urgent self-consciousness about labels (see Patterson 2001: 35–41). In an 1892 conference address, the Pennsylvania ethnologist and linguist Daniel Brinton urged on his peers the ‘utmost importance’ of clear rules for ‘well-defined nomenclature [for a] comparatively novel brand of study and one that is rapidly progressing’, a cause supported in an accompanying statement by Bureau director John Wesley Powell (Brinton 1892: 56). Similar matters occupied the fledgling discipline in Europe during the following decades. In 1904, Max Weber described social science in terms of ‘the perpetual reconstruction of the concepts through which we seek to comprehend reality’ (Weber [1904] 1949: 73). In The Threshold of Religion (1909), the Oxford anthropologist Robert R. Maret saw the disciplines emerging from this process as requiring ‘marking off by the aid of a few technical designations to serve as a rallying point’ by way of ‘some improved technical terms’ (Marrett 1909: 100).

A paramount need was for universal terms for the supernatural powers that new researchers identified across non-Western ‘primitive’ societies. As European and American intellectuals analysed the mass of new global data about ritual and belief, they were particularly fas-
in the work of rudimentary religion if we make what use we can of the clues lying ready to hand in the recorded efforts of rudimentary reflection upon religion? (Marrett 1909: 101)

Nonetheless, since French-American linguist Peter Du Ponceau introduced the idea of polysynthetic compression of indigenous languages in his 1810s work, words from Indian tongues were often afforded greater ontological status than the more generic European lexicon (Du Ponceau 1919). In Maret’s terms, they also simply possessed superior ‘classificatory authority’ (Marrett 1909: 4).

These words, which so enchanted Weber and his contemporaries, played up to the Euro-centric demand for timeless essentialising judgements, and generalisable truisms. There was always the recognition, as the German Max Müller said of mana in 1878, of their ‘vague and hazy form’ (Müller 1878: 123). But one could argue that their authority was a product of this otherworldly opacity. Appetite for ‘exotic’ labels was motivated by the promise of opening up a world of mystery or, in Weber’s terms, enchantment. As Ralph Waldo Emerson famously put it in 1844, ‘language is fossil poetry’ (Emerson 1844: 112). This was particularly true of the wave of anthropological borrowings that treated non-Western words as a form of residue and archive. Their use involved confusion between the onomasiological impulse of concept-naming and the semasiological project of word comprehension. Poorly understood in the first place, these terms were then decontextualised, applied anachronistically, and used in ways that conflated non-European cultures (see Cheyfitz 1991).

To an important degree the authority of these terms was poetic. As the analytical tradition of Clifford Geertz has made clear, the emergence of social scientific disciplines during the period owed a great deal to the impressionistic methods and rhetoric of literary texts (Geertz 1988: 109; see also Henson 1974). The aspiration towards universalist terms was a capsule form of rhetorical endeavour, a matter of slogans and ‘rallying points’ in Maret’s terms. Revealingly, it was by reference to this exact context of imported terms that postmodernist thought gained one of its own most resonant phrases. Claude Levi-Strauss recognised these words, in all their exotic capaciousness, as a unique category, and writing about Mauss in the 1950s, he was to debut one of his most crucial ideas, arguing that

There are those who dislike the introduction of native terms into our scientific nomenclature. The local and general usages, they object, tend to become confused. This may, indeed, be a real danger. On the other hand, are we not more likely to keep in touch with the obscure forces at their disposal when we speak the language of the people? (Marrett 1909: 101)
such words represent nothing more or less than that floating signifier [...]. I see in mana, wakan, orenda and other notions of the same type, the conscious expression of a semantic function, whose role is to enable symbolic thinking to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it. (Levi-Strauss [1950] 1987: 63)

We might add charisma to this list. It is both a travelling concept and a floating signifier because it is built on the symbolic semantic function and expropriated authority of multiple global concepts such as mana.

However, there was a key difference with orenda. Whereas the introduction of many of the terms above was the work of Western scholars operating outside of the traditions they chronicled, some were offered from within. In the North American context, in particular, from the 1880s a new generation of scholars from Six Nations backgrounds became professional ethnologists, analysing and presenting ideas and concepts from their own cultures (for more on this generation, see Vigil 2015). As the way in which these scholars were cited by their non-native peers suggests, there was a particular authority attached to their ‘authentic’ indigenous knowledge. One key instance is the Meskwaki anthropologist William Jones, trained under Franz Boas at Columbia, who contributed pioneering research into manitou, the ‘impersonal essence’ in Algonquin thought (Jones 1905: 184). As we shall see, Hewitt’s work for the Bureau of Ethnology on orenda was to prove the most consequential example.

**Myths of Indigenous Authority**

In order to understand Hewitt’s contribution, however, it is also important to recognise a broader second Euro-American tradition against which he was writing. A lineage centuries old by the 1900s, but one that scholars such as Weber still recognisably belonged to. Like many before him, Weber came to the Native American question with a set of semi-formed preconceptions. He was already well-versed in the proto-sociological literature on what he called ‘the American Indian’, and would draw upon this work in his later writings (Weber [1921] 1978: 1133). On his one trip to America to speak at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, he turned down a White House invitation from Theodore Roosevelt, opting instead to head to the Oklahoma plains, citing a ‘burning interest’ in witnessing what he could of the remnants of indigenous life he had read about in the pages of ethnographic studies (Weber qtd. in Scaff 2011: 93; for an account of this period, see ibid.: 93–96). But there was also a broader cultural tradition upon which his generation of sociologists inevitably drew, one wryly captured in his excited references in letters home to his wife of that ‘old Leatherstocking Romanticism’ of the West (Weber qtd. in Scaff 2011: 93).

What is important here is that James Fenimore Cooper’s ‘Leatherstocking’ novels were merely the most prominent of several genres unified by a fascination with tribal authority. Just as charisma can be traced avant la lettre in transatlantic writings through tropes of magnets or mesmerism, it can also be seen in the ways in which European explorers and ethnographers tried to understand indigenous societies. Ever since John Smith’s astonishment in his published journals of the 1620s at the effects of Granaganameo’s oratory on his Wingandacoa followers, the written record of English contact in North America can be seen as structured around a fascination with indigenous charisma, and the seemingly strange ways in which tribal groups cohered around individuals of peculiar authority (Smith 1624). There were of course concrete colonial motivations for such a fascination. Preserving military supremacy over settled lands meant understanding the locus of power in disparate, ever-shifting groups. Preserving cultural distance from indigenous societies meant dismissing charismatic connections among tribes and leaders as superstition, fanaticism, paganism, and witchcraft. As a result, popular understandings of native societies were shaped by centuries of writings fixated on images of supernaturally powerful native leaders, and of obedient and superstitious tribal followers.

The trope of the iconic Indian chief was the most obvious feature. From the Revolutionary period onwards, demonisation of indigenous peoples was accompanied by a transatlantic counter-tradition that presented tribal leaders as Romantic figures whose compelling power held indigenous societies together, established coalitions among disparate peoples, and whose individual authority was ultimately responsible for the volatility of Euro-Indian relations (see Sayre 2006; for the role of such representations in British writing, see Fulford 2009). Influential reference points include histories such as Francis Parkman’s *Conspiracy of the Pontiac* (1851) or Benjamin Drake’s *Life of Tecumseh*
(1856), which presented North American history as a story of Carlylean heroism. From a transatlantic perspective, imitators of Cooper such as the German novelist Karl May helped globalise these depictions (see Penny 2013). Equally familiar was the trope of the ‘eloquent Indian’ across the poetry, fiction, theatrical and oratorical culture of the century (Eastman 2009: 83–115). In particular, collections of speeches including the much-republished Columbian Orator (1791) helped cement a public impression of uniquely persuasive tragic figures, often conscripting Indian oratorical prowess into the service of republican ideology. As Carolyn Eastman has shown, however, the uses to which this tradition was put were often complex, and shifted considerably as the century progressed (ibid: 83–89).

It is possible to shift our understanding of these traditions to see them as less about individuals than about crowds. Time and again, accounts of indigenous authority or oratory became attempts to unravel the emotional stakes of irrational followship. For example, Thomas Jefferson’s rhapsody over the oratory of Mingo chief Logan in Notes on the State of Virginia (1785) can be read as a commentary on the function of public performance, noting how the ‘principles of their society forbidding all compulsion, they are to be led [...] by personal influence and persuasion. Hence eloquence [becomes] the foundations of all consequence with them’ (Jefferson 1785: 103). Similarly, in the next decade, Colonel John McDonald’s account of Tecumseh cast its gaze at the Shawnee leader’s audience, remarking that while this ‘orator of nature was speaking, the vast crowd preserved the most profound silence’ as he ‘dispelled, as if by magic their apprehensions [...] so that they could only be defeated by force of numbers’ (Drake 1856: 201). Lewis Henry Morgan’s League of Iroquois (1851), a work whose vision of primitive communism fascinated Karl Marx, presented indigenous society as woven together by a thousand ‘council fires’ at which eloquence as ‘pure and spontaneous as the fountains of their thousand streamlets’ allowed sachems to exercise ‘local and individual authority’ (Morgan 1851: 120). In the History of the Indian Tribes (1857) by Henry Schoolcraft and his Ojibwe wife Jane, tribal orators’ ‘stirring appeals’ moved audiences ‘with such a talismanic power, that they were ready to seize the lance and rush forth to a perilous encounter, without allowing a controlling thought to restrain them’ (Schoolcraft 1852: 678).

As Steve Conn’s work has shown, depictions of Indian crowds often served as indirect political commentary (Conn 2006). Fixation on tribal bonds became a way of talking about the risks posed by demagogues to the direction of the American democratic experiment. This is at its most obvious in the key scene of Huron oratory in Last of the Mohicans (1823), when a speech from Hawkeye ‘gradually wrought its influence’:

Uncas and his father became converts to his way of thinking, abandoning their own previously expressed opinions with a liberality and candor that, had they been the representatives of some great and civilized people, would have infallibly worked their political ruin. (Cooper 1985: 281)

This understanding of credulous indigenous devotion was also expressed in subtler terms through recurring politically charged keywords such as ‘superstition’ and ‘susceptibility’ throughout discussions of indigenous society. Parkman wrote of ‘the great susceptibility of the Indian to superstitious impressions’ (Parkman 1851: 186). Washington Irving’s ‘Traits of Indian Character’ (1819) had told its readers that ‘eloquence and superstition combine to inflame the minds of the warriors’ (Irving [1819] 1983: 1002). This was a sentiment perpetuated by guidebooks such as G. Turner’s Traits of Indian Character (1836), which presented ‘superstition’ as the cause for how Seneca chiefs had ‘propagat[ed] a belief among the natives [...] and acquired an influence’ (Turner 1836: 201).

As the century ended, a new and insidious phrase came to the fore. In the late 1880s, a Paiute spiritual leader named Wovoka initiated a ‘revivalist’ movement that spread from Nevada across the indigenous groups of the north-western states, centred on the form of religious ceremony in which participants summoned up visions of a returned utopia (for a broader account of these events, see Keohoe 2006). Demonisation of such movements had long been a feature of settler commentary on Indian affairs. This new movement was duly soon termed ‘Ghost Dance’, a name largely imposed upon it by the US press as part of a conscious misreading of its spiritual practices. Especially after the movement’s role in the revolt leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre of the Lakota in South Dakota, the movement became used as
media shorthand for frenzy, excess, and volatile magnetic leadership. In the symbolic economy of political language, ‘the messiah craze’ and ‘ghost dance’ took on new life, notably used to dismiss the emotive populist appeal of William Jennings Bryan in the presidential election of 1896 as atavistic and primitive (for examples of this analogy, see Anon. 1896).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Native American intellectuals and leaders had a complicated relationship with these myths. It was certainly true that the appeal of indigenous speaking tours, from the seminal lectures of William Apess in the 1830s through to the high profile tours of Red Cloud and Sarah Winnemucca in the 1870s and 80s, were in part based on the legacy of the charismatic Indian myth (see Anon. 1870). But as Lisa Brooks and others have shown, there was a rich tradition of indigenous thought that aimed to push back against these tropes (Brooks 2008; Stromberg 2006). In the 1790s, the Mohican leader Hendrick Apanmut had dismissed Tecumseh as ‘the emissary of Satan’, and wrote instead about the peaceable models of authority in Indian life (qtd. in Peyer 2007: 72). A century later, Winnemucca’s *Life Among the Paiutes* (1888) defended the rationality of indigenous democratic governance against notions of savage demagoguery: ‘we have a republic as well as you [...] the council-tent is our Congress and anybody can speak who has anything to say’ (Winnemucca 1883: 52).11

One of the most profound acts of resistance against misrepresentations of indigenous charisma, however, was to come in the form of a single word presented by a Tuscarora scholar.

**Orenda as Survivance**

In 1902, two years before Weber’s visit to Oklahoma, Hewitt published his *American Anthropologist* piece introducing the ‘mystic potence’ he claimed was universal to the indigenous peoples of North America:

That life is a property of every body whatsoever – inclusive of the rocks, the waters, the tides, the plants and the trees, the animals and man, the wind and the storms, the clouds and the thunders and the lightnings, the swift meteors, the benign light of day, the sinister night, the sun and the moon, the bright stars, the earth and the mountain. (Hewitt 1902: 32)

In prose at times almost Emersonian in its expansive exuberance, the essay detailed a subtle cosmology of diffused power and connectedness:

This hypothetic magic potence is, then, held to be the property of all things, all bodies, and by the inchoate metation of man is regarded as the efficient cause of all phenomena, all the activities of his environment.

And, to a living faith and trust in the reality of this subsumed mystic potence, this reified figment of inchoate mind, human experience in all times and in all lands owes some of its most powerful motives and dominating activities. (ibid.: 35)

The ambition here was vast. Hewitt offered not just a window into a specific worldview but a ‘key to the interpretation’ of a vast range of ‘human activity and thought’ including all Western prayer and worship, witchcraft and soothsaying, the curses of *Macbeth*, the sacrificial rites of *The Iliad*, the divination of the Torah, and ‘all the arts of wizards’ (ibid.: 38). Since there is no name in the English language that adequately defines such a concept, Hewitt proposed that ‘the Iroquoian name for the potence in question, orenda, be adopted to designate it’ (ibid.: 35).12

In Hewitt’s conception, nature was the battle of warring orendas, be they natural objects or individuals. Orenda is presented as a power and authority that all people and things possess at various times and to various extents as ‘a hypothetic potence or potentiality to do or effect results mystically’ (ibid.: 33). Authoritative individuals were simply those who have channelled this common, shared energy. This is illustrated by showing how the root of ‘-ren’ is typically incorporated into a verb within the Mohawk language as part of compound Iroquoian words.13 He noted for example that ‘a shaman, rarëndiowá:nél, is one whose orenda is great, powerful; a fine hunter, rarëndiio’ is one whose orenda is fine, superior in quality’; whereas ‘a prophet or soothsayer, rarënd; ats or hatrëndótha is one who habitually puts forth or effuses his orenda, and thereby learned the secrets of the future’ (ibid.: 36). A sense of how the idea works in practice might be taken from the Seneca tale ‘A Hunter Pursued by Genonsgwá’ that Hewitt translated in one of his collections:

The man was forced to hide in the centre of stream all night.
Clearly this mystic potency cared little for patriarchy. Submission to the *orenda* of another was also not a matter of blind obedience but of recognition of superior possession of a shared trait. *Orenda* was also less about the authority of specific individuals as it was about what happened in the moment of ceremony. Hewitt illustrates by analysing the role -*ren* plays as the root for the terms ‘to sing’, and ‘to voice’ and ‘speech’. Rather than a matter of powerful individuals with innate attributes, or about superstition or susceptible crowds, *orenda* was about the dynamics of context, setting, and circumstance.

This presentation of *orenda* was the highlight of a remarkable career. Raised in a Tuscarora community in Niagara County, New York, Hewitt had started his career in the early 1880s as an assistant to Erminnie Platt on a Tuscarora-English dictionary, before moving to Washington D.C. in 1886 to work at the American Bureau of Ethnology, and undertaking decades of regular fieldwork. He became one of the most important authorities on Iroquois languages and folklore, publishing guides to cosmology and folk tales and leaving behind a vast archive of raw ethnographic materials and linguistic data. The essay on *orenda* was one of his most lasting pieces. Its striking phraseology and cross-cultural ambition saw it enjoy a vogue in early twentieth-century sociology in the works by Durkheim, Mauss, Robert Marrrett, and Weber discussed above. It remains relevant to modern indigenous studies scholarship as a key precursor to the agent ontology of Vine Deloria Jr., and into American philosophy through the work of Scott Pratt (see Deloria and Wildcat 2001). Perhaps more importantly, the word lives on in popular culture. It is probably most familiar as the name of a US military helicopter, a publishing house, and scores of businesses eager for hazily spiritual branding. It gives its name to a 1998 album by the Oneida singer Joanne Shenandoah, and an award-winning 2013 novel by the Canadian author Joseph Boyden (Boyden 2015).

In this way, the word *orenda* represented a vivid instance of survivance, through which indigenous culture would endure (Vizenor 1999: 4). Though Hewitt was reticent about the relevance of his own heritage, his works show that he saw his career as an extended corrective to the misguided salvage ethnography of non-native scholars. Where his employers at the Bureau saw the solution to the Indian Problem as the comprehension and overthrow of the old ‘customs and practices,’ Hewitt saw his duty instead as to correct misconceptions. Against the use of indigenous language as imperial technology, Hewitt’s activist anthropology fought against linguistic dispossession. In place of irrational dominance he presented a dignified vision of societies bound through a collective unified force. In place of Morgan’s notions of the ‘Great Spirit,’ the misty notions of *mana*, the rhetoric of superstition and ghost dance, he offered a linguistically precise cosmology as an eloquent argument for the universality of Iroquois thought.

**Orenda’s Limits**

It is tempting to end the analysis here. And such a surface-level approach to Hewitt’s ideas was largely that taken by his sociological heirs, who absorbed and disseminated *orenda* with little further reflection. However, as the Onondaga historian Theresa McCarthy has argued, Hewitt is ‘one of the most complicated scholars of Iroquois studies’ (McCarthy 2016: 89), and his work has been widely criticised by subsequent scholars both within and beyond indigenous scholarly circles. At the 1901 conference at which he first presented his ideas, fellow anthropologists had already cast doubt on its over-arching applicability. In the decades that followed, theologians also dismissed the speculative leaps of ‘the so-called orenda theory’ as ‘more euphonious than useful’ (Babcock 1908: 21). Mauss found it attractive but thought it ‘too general and too vague’ (Mauss [1902] 2001: 139). Later indigenous scholars brought more serious charges. Since Hewitt never left evidence of his methods, one linguist of the Huron has suggested that there was little evidence that the concept was ever used, rendering the ‘speculative’ nature of Hewitt’s proposed concept ‘limited in value’ (Steckly 2007: 214). Most recently one anthropologist baldly stated that ‘many of us believe [Hewitt] made things up’ (William A. Starna qtd. in Antrosio 2013).

Various aspects to his presentation of *orenda* certainly complicate the meaning of his work. One was the expansive role that Hewitt
made his concept play. Rather than being a timeless Huron term, the word was in fact an Anglicised coinage, and he justifies this ‘neologism’ with care. But by translating a metaphysical concept into a graspable linguistic form the term also condensed a multiplicity of comparable North American tribal beliefs. His essay specifically made orenda stand in for the Algonquin manitous and the Sioux wakan, on the basis that orenda was ‘better defined than that of the other terms’ and ‘of easy utterance’ (Hewitt 1902: 38). Rather than doing justice to or helping to preserve indigenous multiplicity, therefore, Hewitt’s scholarship was yet another act of erasure, packaging an over-arching concept of use to his Euro-American readers, who were more than willing to accept streamlined accounts of these beliefs (Thomas 2007).

More revealing still was Hewitt’s attitude to the Iroquois past. He described orenda as a ‘living belief’, but his account presented a dead way of life in which the beliefs he detailed were merely ‘vestige’ (Hewitt 1902: 38). Tellingly, his statements veer between past tense (‘the Iroquois was’) and present (‘orenda […] is regarded’) without truly settling. Like many Euro-American anthropologists before him, Hewitt’s writings froze Iroquois development at the moment of contact rather than engaging the lived experience of his Haudenosaunee contemporaries. This was of a piece with his estrangement from indigenous revitalisation movements, and with his critical views of his fellow Tuscarorans, whom he accused of cultural amnesia (McCarthy 2016: 61). Yet it is telling that other comparable work by indigenous linguists and ethnographers of the period, such as Jones’s work on manitous, was framed as reporting on the ideas of communities that were very much alive (see Jones 1905). By contrast, by consigning indigenous phenomena to the past, Hewitt undercut the potential connection that could have been built between Western thought and contemporary indigenous communities. Orenda was described as having nothing to do with the Indian question; it was merely a new type of analytical shorthand and imperial technology. Rather than engaging with the real-world concerns of the communities he studied, Hewitt seemed more committed to chronicling a vanishing past, and in doing so participated instead in the very same ‘salvage anthropology’ he elsewhere criticised (for a discussion of this tradition, see Smith 2000).

This was nowhere clearer than in his embrace of primitivist tropes: He presented his project as a matter of reaching back into ‘barbarism’ and the ‘inchoate mentions’ of ‘savage man’ (Hewitt 1902: 33). This was in part simply the house style of his employer. In the Bureau of Ethnography’s 1891 annual report, for example, Powell summarised research into the ‘primitive religion’ of the ‘savage man […] [and his] occult agencies’ (Powell 1891: 38). Nonetheless, Hewitt’s detachment at times exceeded even this, consigning orenda to ‘the childhood, perhaps the beasthood of humanity’, and reflecting that, ‘from the monody of savagery to the multitioned oratorio of enlightenment, the way is truly long’ (Hewitt 1902: 35). His work was explicitly aimed at ‘men of science’ who had ascended beyond the ‘incipient reasoning’ represented by orenda (ibid.: 34). Once again, such stadial rhetoric was entirely absent in Jones’s account of manitous, which frames the views it charts as not ‘savage’ but an ‘unconscious relation with the outside world’ (Jones 1905: 182). But the importance of these elements lies in more than simply Hewitt’s relationship to his own heritage. There was of course every reason for Hewitt to not foreground his heritage or write as a representative of indigenous communities. His scholarly and tonal decisions certainly complicate his role as pioneering Huron intellectual, but the tense relationship between linguists as ‘native informants’ and the indigenous knowledge they provide for the consumption of settlers is a tale of transmission as old as contact itself.¹⁸

Rather, the problem lies more in what Hewitt’s presentation of Iroquois society and thought allowed subsequent thinkers to do with his ideas. Most relevantly, Weber influentially argued that modernity was defined by a loss of ‘enchantment’, one that he described in his seminal ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1917) lecture as our distance from the world of ‘the savage for whom such mysterious forces existed’ (Weber 2004: 13). Orenda was one of the sources that underpinned this teleology. And it was able to do so because it was presented as a dead system rather than a viable epistemology. When Weber described features of modern politics and ‘types of domination’ as charismatic, he thus summoned up this primeval world (Weber 1921/1978: 1134). We wield the word and those like it in much the same way: The mob is ‘savage’; populists are ‘tilismatic’; superstitious followers obey ‘tribal’ instincts. In this way, charisma is an idea always rooted in a racialised past, not simply in early Christianity but the spirituality of ‘savage man’. And Hewitt's
framing of *orenda* made this orientalist rhetoric possible. Placing his work back at the heart of modern intellectual thought re-affirms the role of indigenous intellectuals as active shapers of knowledge. Yet it also allows us to see the ambivalent role that such thinkers have played not only in colonial processes of knowledge production, but in the intellectual and rhetorical structures that underpin them.19

**Orenda and Charisma’s Futures**

Charismatic authority is an ideal example of an idea that can benefit from rethinking through non-Western epistemologies. In the West we define and reflexively explain the felt magnetic authority of others as charisma. Yet other terms might be as useful. Seeing charisma as one idea along a continuum that ranges from versions of authority such as the *baraka* of Sunni Islam, *huaca* of Incas, the *jinn* of the Berbers, the *zemí* of the Carribean Taino, helps decentre the European frame of reference and open up vital new perspectives on authority. As compromised and faulty a piece of knowledge as it might be, *orenda* deserves a special place in this list, and it can consolidate two important directions for the progressive updating of charisma for a new world (for a discussion of these terms, see Tomlinson and Käwika 2016).

First, instead of the commonly accepted notion of charisma as the authority of an individual, *orenda* proposes a more diffused notion. Weber’s writings are conflicted on this point: He variously defines charisma as ‘not accessible to everybody but linked to some definite carrier’ yet elsewhere as ‘collective excitement’ (Weber [1921] 1978: 1134, 1120). But when we use the term today it is almost always shorthand for the power of the lone figure. There is a long tradition of thought stretching from Durkheim through Edward Shils to contemporary sociology, arguing for more attention to the social construction of charisma (see Shils 1965: 201 and Downton 1973; more recently Turner 2003 and Joosse 2014). In offering a vision of authority as diffused impersonal flows and forces, *orenda* provides a model for just this, allowing us to re-imagine charisma in social, systemic terms. This emphasis could take some of the heat out of outlandish claims about individual agency in popular psychology, political science, and management theory, and make us turn instead to other models of system theories (for this possibility, see Ito et al. 2020). *Orenda* also allows us to ask new questions about the neoliberal version of ‘charismatic authority’ as at-tainable attribute that dominates the vast self-help discourse swirling around Weber’s concept.20

The second challenge *orenda* presents is to undermine charisma’s anthropocentrism. In the universe Hewitt sketched, stones, mountains, or trees could all have *orenda*, as part of a world full of will and intent. Taking this view of non-human authority seriously forces us to reflect on other ways that extraordinary power is perceived through objects, ideas, energies, or technologies. Again this is in part what Weber intended, with his notion of the charisma of ‘office’, traditions, rituals, and institutions. *Orenda* thus provides a valuable perspective on debates over object-oriented ontology found in the tradition of new material philosophy, and the new ways that eco-theorists such as Timothy Morton use charisma to explore the authority of artworks (see Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2020; Morton 2015). It can also help develop ideas in digital media studies about the radiating charismatic function of connective networks (Lee 2020). Most consequentially, perhaps, by reading *orenda* as part of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) the word can also help open up new perspectives on the charismatic authority of certain commodities such as renewable energies (Simpson 2004).

If nothing else, *orenda* can grant us the level of detachment necessary to help us appreciate the rhetorical nature of charisma itself. Charisma is perhaps less important for what it describes than what the word allows us to do. The contemporary global crisis in democracy requires scholars across all disciplines to grapple with the emotional stakes of new forms of authority and belief. A vital starting point is to interrogate the vocabularies we use to do this, and the histories from which they have emerged (Turner 2003; Joosse 2014). Though we may find that what Weber called ‘our conceptual apparatus’ is no longer fit for purpose, we may also find productive alternatives buried within it (Weber [1921] 1978: 1123). One of the most cherished words in the modern conceptual toolkit might owe its renewal to the council-fires of indigenous America.

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Notes

1. The most comprehensive overviews of the concept are Lindholm 1990 and Potts 2009. For Weber’s adoption of the term from the German church historian Rudolf Sohm, see Haley 1980. For a dis-
euss of its journey into American thought, see Derman 2011.
3. For mana’s origins and legacy, see Meylan 2017.
5. These arguments have also been explored in Pratt 2002.
6. This understanding of ‘research’ has been most influentially expressed in Smith 1999.
8. The term is a borrowing from the German, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the study of language which deals with the identification of a preconceived meaning or concept by name or names’.
9. For use of arunuku, see Durkheim [1915] 2008: 100–9; for Jusina, see Crossland 2014; for maniarias, see Jones 1905; for an important early adoption of wakan, see Riggs 1866.
10. For example, when Mauss quoted Hewitt, he pointedly cites him as a ‘Huron by birth’ (Mauss [1902] 2001: 139).
11. For more on Winnebago’s rhetoric, see Powell 2002.
13. Louellen White notes that ‘orenda is the Anglicised version of the Huron term Irenda. It is called orenda or karenna in the Mohawk languages’ (White 2015: 181).
14. Details of Hewitt’s career are derived from the obituary by Swanton (1938) and from Rudes and Crouse 1987.
15. Intriguingly, the word appears first in Powell’s introduction to Frank Hamilton Cushing’s Zulu Folk Tales (see Cushing 1901). It seems likely that Powell was drawing upon Hewitt’s work pre-publication.
16. His attitude to the ghost dance can be seen his tribute to Mooney (see Hewitt 1922).
17. ‘Messrs. McGee, Fewkes […] and Pierce spoke in favor of adopting this word, but Miss Alice Fletcher thinks the word will cover all forms of belief among our tribes’ (American Association for the Advancement of Science 1902: 391).
18. For more on this group of scholars, see Biolsi 2008.
19. For a compelling articulation of these ideas, see Wilson 2004.
20. The most recent examples of which at time of writing include Callam 2020 and Michaels 2020; the most important recent contribution to this literature would be Cabane 2013.

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