In this paper, I argue that distinguishing between attributions of sentience and agency is a crucial analytical step to take when considering ontological and cosmological differences between groups. Scholars in ‘New Animist’ and Actor-Network Theory camps sometimes fail to make this distinction adequately and overlook the ways in which characterisations of different kinds of beings, and the implications of these characterisations, might change historically. Examining Australian Aboriginal practices and descriptions of spirit figures and sacralised landscapes, I argue that there is in fact an epistemological incommensurability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences of human-environment relations, but that there has been a partial transformation of the former, involving a reduction of the previous emphasis on nature- and place-based spirits.

Speaker
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