

## PERSPECTIVES OF “THE LAND”: THE MAKING OF CULTURAL TOPOGRAPHIES

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At the beginning of this new era, world perspectives and outlooks are necessarily shifting and turning, becoming an inescapable process in the creation of new intellectual topographies. It may sometimes involve rethinking the whole intellectual construct of the universe, the maps of reality or the topographies of the self and its surroundings. It may even involve stopping on our tracks, surveying our errors of judgment, listening to the voices around us; be it the voices of other peoples we - the heirs of Europe's empires - have subdued, conquered, and colonized, be it the voice of the Earth, itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Paula da Silva Machado tem vindo a dedicar-se ao estudo das epistemologias e ontologias dos povos indígenas do continente norte-americano, desde a sua dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos Americanos, na Universidade Aberta, Portugal (1998) e a sua tese de doutoramento em Estudos Ingleses e Americanos, na mesma universidade (2007). Lecciona unidades curriculares de 1º Ciclo sobre as Literaturas dos Índios Norte-Americanos e Cultura Canadina (com especial enfoque nas culturas indígenas), na Universidade Aberta. Apresentou comunicações em várias conferências nacionais e internacionais sobre Estudos Índios/Estudos Indígenas e publicou artigos em várias revistas académicas nacionais e estrangeiras, na mesma área. Foram-lhe concedidas bolsas de estudo por organizações oficiais luso-americanas (FLAD) e canadianas ( “Faculty Enrichment Program Scholarship”), que lhe permitiram aprofundar o estudo destas áreas, nos Departamentos de Estudos Índios/Estudos Indígenas de universidades americanas e canadianas (1996, 2002, 2009). Paralelamente ao seu interesse pelas ontologias e epistemologias dos povos indígenas norte-americanos, tem vindo a alargar o enfoque da sua investigação ao estudo comparativo do pensamento europeu, das suas ancestrais raízes africanas, orientais e gregas, até ao presente. Coordena o Curso de 1º Ciclo em Estudos Europeus da Universidade Aberta, desde 2010, e lecciona actualmente o seminário de 2ª Ciclo, Temas do Pensamento Europeu. É colaboradora do CECC desde 2007, onde integra a linha de investigação “Cultura e Conflito”, fazendo actualmente parte do grupo de investigadores que se debruça sobre “Teorias Epistemológicas – Formas de Ver o Mundo”.

Although this is not usually part of the West's academic discourse, tainted as it is by the very ideas and ideals that we are here calling into question, it is our intention to focus our attention on the ontologies and epistemologies of the Indigenous Peoples of America, and on the conflicts ensuing from their encounter with the West's hegemonic mindset.

We believe that at the root of the conflicts between the Indigenous cultures of America and the European settler cultures lies their divergent perspective of the Land.

If, for the European settlers, the Earth and its creatures were to be subdued, conquered, mastered by Mankind, for the Indigenous peoples of America, they were essentially teachers, guides, or fellow beings in Creation, with specific powers and knowledge.

"The Land" has always spoken to the Indigenous Peoples of America as a living entity. Not in the Western sense of a nutrient-rich soil, capable of bearing life in the form of trees, plants, insects, animals, etc, but as an ancient sentient, intelligent, wise being, capable of inspiring and instilling knowledge, providing visions and dreams of a higher and subtler nature, even inspiring the languages they speak.

Indigenous languages are indeed a form of inter-connection with the land itself; Indigenous languages live in the land, are the speech of the land acting upon humans, in constant relationship and transformation, leading to continuous creation, as Jeannette Armstrong expounds in her essay "Land Speaking":

It is the land that speaks N'silxchin through the generations of our ancestors to us. It is N'silxchin, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan People, which surrounds me in its primal wordless state.

It is this N'silxchin which embraces me and permeates my experience of the Okanagan land and is a constant voice within me that yearns for human speech. I am claimed and owned by this land, this Okanagan.

[...] The language spoken by the land, which is interpreted by the Okanagan into words, carries parts of its ongoing reality. The land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us. Within that vast speaking, both externally and internally, we as human beings are an inextricable part – though a minute part – of the land language. (Armstrong, 1998:178-183)

Native People's connection to the land they inhabit is, therefore, one of profound respect, awe, and abidance, not one of dominance and mastery, as we have become accustomed to in European-inspired cultures.

The earth, the stones, the plants, and the animals – the winged creatures, and the four-legged creatures, etc – are all sacred realms of the all-pervading mystery of existence – the Great Spirit, or Great Mysterious – and Native American People of the different nations - or "The People", as they almost invariably call themselves in their own languages - are the special link

in the unbroken chain of Creation. They came into being – often through different stages, worlds, or layers of existence - in order to become guardians of the established balance, harmony, interconnectedness, and reciprocity of living beings - be it from the mineral, plant, or animal kingdoms.

In this, we can glimpse the wide gap separating the Indigenous worldview and the European-rooted worldview – that is, the so-called “Western” worldview, which has spread to the whole world with colonization and, more recently, with globalization.

Indigenous knowledge springs from the Land, and is not separable from it; the interconnectedness of all creation is manifest in their Epistemologies - knowledge deriving from the Earth itself, (the Land), and from all living creatures. Even day-to-day implements depend on this relationship, as David Peat explains:

[...] within the Native world there is no such thing as abstract knowledge. The knowledge of the canoe [Algonquin canoe building] is tied to the environment, to the group, and to its long history. Now, tragically, the environment has changed. What will become of the knowledge? [...] The way this knowledge is learned is inseparable from the land and from the people who live on it. In this sense, Indigenous knowledge is never directly transferable as knowledge is in the West. [...] Knowledge belongs to a people, and the people belong to the landscape. (Peat, 2002:62-63)

The Spirit world is yet another dimension of existence and is present in every aspect of reality, there being no actual separation between the physical and the spiritual realms. In fact, the physical realm is deeply imbued with spirit. Yet, this is not what is usually defined as “animism”; it is rather more in accordance with Quantum Physics’ notion of the energy composing all matter. In a world essentially constituted by energy, it should not be difficult to conceive of the Indigenous spirit-pervaded reality/.

However, where Native people see a world of living, inter-connected, balanced, intelligent, and highly spiritual beings - be it stones, plants, animals, or the Land itself - the Western mindset sees only the physical dimension of the same reality.

The awareness of the ecological relationships between the various elements in Nature is only a fairly recent development in Western thinking, which owes a lot to the revolutionary social and environmental concerns of the Sixties. Getting to grasp those relationships at a spiritual level lies beyond the scope of Western Ecology, informed as it still is by the rational Cartesian thought-pattern.

To realize that not only the capacity to think makes us human, or attests to our existence is the first step towards the recognition of other people's worldviews, and of Indigenous Epistemologies, in particular.

After all, the West too has been touched by a holy, miracle-rich, non-rational message, so it shouldn't be too hard to envision a living, spirit-pervaded world. However, it is; and it certainly **was**, during contact times.

Back in the colonization days, it was hard, if not impossible, to understand how the Indigenous Peoples of America lived on the land without having an impact on it. This was understood as a sign of savagery, of ignorance, and of not knowing how to apply it to good use - that is, to serving mankind.

As Nishnaabeg (Ojibway) author Renée Bédard writes:

Whereas colonial society views the environment as separate, the earth consisting of raw material resources to use, exploit, and deplete, Nishnaabeg people view the land, water, plants, animals, and sky world as one unified and interdependent living system that works to sustain us all. (2008:96)

Thus, instead of seeing themselves as "Masters of the Land", the Native peoples of America saw themselves as "belonging to the earth", as caretakers and guardians of its sacredness, as mere links in the holy chain of existence (medicine wheel), and lived in a world of sacred relationships with the environment, as David Peat once again explains:

Knowledge in the traditional world is not a dead collection of facts. It is alive, has spirit, and dwells in specific places. [...] Coming-to-knowing means entering into relationship with the spirits of knowledge, with plants and animals, with beings that animate dreams and visions, and with the spirit of the people. [...] when a person comes into relationship with certain knowledge he or she is not only transformed by it but must also assume responsibility for it. (Peat, 2002:65)

Other examples of this difference in standpoint can be seen in this statement by the (WSÁNEC) Saanich people of Vancouver Island: *Fishing locations were not owned; rather, the families belonged to it.* (Simpson, 2008:54); or in a Mi'gmaq Elder's words: *The land has always taken care of our People* (Metallic, 2008:62). The Inuit, on the other hand, consider that: *Indigenous ways of being recognize the land as the source of all existence.* (Price, 2008: 130)

To tear Native Americans away from their traditional lands, cutting them off from their roots was thus more than a physical act of violence: it was an act of cultural genocide.

Strangely enough, that act endures to this day, without the awareness, or the willingness to recognize what it truly was, what it truly meant.



step forward in what Mig'maq author Fred Metallic considers to be the Indigenous struggle today: *The Indigenous struggle is about living and respecting the teaching of our ancestors. Our struggle is to rebuild our nations out of the shadow of colonialism. (2008:62)*

And to do that, according to Leanne Simpson, it is necessary to recover Indigenous ways of knowing. (2008:74) Those ways of knowing are intimately connected to land and language, as we have seen, therefore, many communities are engaged in language-recovery projects, led by Elders who are still fluent speakers, thus passing those languages on to the younger generations. In this process, they are equally being assisted by Indigenous Knowledge Holders, thus [...] *reviving traditional practices and protocols as a mechanism to resist colonialism and restore our relationships with the Natural World. (Sherman, 2008:111)*

However, when they no longer live on their traditional land, it is not always easy to reconnect with their culture, as Nishnaabeg (Ojibway) author Brock Pitawanakwat explains:

The relationship between the people and their natural landscape is at the core of Indigenous epistemologies. Honouring our ancestors means that we carry our language and customs with us wherever we go. As urban Nishnaabeg, our ancestral legacy is to reconnect with the natural landscape and live honourably and sustainably – wherever we reside. (Pitawanakwat, 2008:171)

Paula Sherman makes it clear that Indigenous peoples are not trying to find their way back to the past, but are rather:

[...] struggling to bring forward those teachings, ceremonies, practices, and ways of relating that can help to rebuild a strong cultural base from which to resist contemporary colonialism and the cognitive elimination that accompanies the physical changes to our territories and bodies. (Sherman, 2008:120)

This “de-colonizing process” does not merely affect the Native Peoples of America, or the Indigenous Peoples the world over. It strikes at the core of Western or European-inspired civilization. It makes us wonder if we have chosen the right path – or the “red path”, the “path of the heart”, as a Pueblo Elder once explained to Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung. It makes us wonder if the linear path of progress will indeed lead us to a better world, a “paradise” – or if perhaps we have been pursuing a millennialist movement, without realizing it. It should make us wonder if the cyclic, circular worldviews of Indigenous peoples and of our own ancient European ancestors are not more in tune with the latest discoveries of science itself. As Laura Hall also suggests: *Reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous ways of knowing and of living will create profound change for more than only our own people. (Hall, 2008:158)*

It should be apparent that the way Indigenous Peoples the world-over have related to the Land inspired a more balanced lifestyle, one that left no footprint on the Land, because their relationship with it was one of respect, awe, and spiritual exchange.

To reach a truly sustained, carbon footprint-free economy, we might start by reaching a different approach to the Land, to Knowledge, to Life itself; we might start by developing a different ontology and epistemology in the West. As Dene author Glen Coulthard states:

[...] our cultures have much to teach the Western world about the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world that are profoundly non-imperialist. (Coulthard, 2008:201)

According to an old Nishnaabeg (Ojibway) prophecy (The Seven Fires Prophecy), there was a time when it was not safe for Indigenous cultures to practise their cultures in the open. But then, a time would come when a new generation would bring those ancient teachings to life again:

There will be a rebirth of the Anishinabe nation and a rekindling of old flames. The Sacred Fire will again be lit.

“It is at this time that the Light-skinned Race will be given a choice between two roads. If they choose the right road, then the Seventh Fire will light the Eighth and Final Fire – an eternal Fire of peace, love, brotherhood and sisterhood. If the Light-skinned Race makes the wrong choice of roads, then the destruction which they brought with them in coming to this country will come back to them and cause much suffering and death to all the Earth’s people.”

Traditional Mide people of Ojibway and people from other nations have interpreted the “two roads” that face the Light-skinned Race as the road to technology and road to spiritualism. [...] The road to spirituality represents the slower path that traditional Native people have traveled and are now seeking again. (Banai, 1988:93)

It may be high time now, as we witness the downfall of the ivory towers we have constructed to ourselves, to start listening again, to acknowledge those voices of the Earth, and (once again) to start mapping out this long-forgotten territory, to start drawing a new topography of the Land, and with it, a new topography of existence.

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## **Abstract**

At the beginning of this new era, world perspectives and outlooks are necessarily shifting and turning, becoming an inescapable process in the creation of new intellectual topographies.

It may sometimes involve rethinking the whole intellectual construct of the universe, the maps of reality or the topographies of the self and its surroundings.

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It may now be the right time to listen again to those forgotten or silenced voices, so as to outline a new topography of existence.

