

# Place-based learning and knowing: critical pedagogies grounded in Indigeneity

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**Abstract** For Indigenous peoples, knowledge and science are written onto the landscapes our languages “talk into being” through the “individual and collective consciousness of our communities (Cajete 2000, 284).” Our landscapes are the storied histories, cosmogonies, philosophies and sciences of those Indigenous knowledges which are increasingly being pushed aside by the ‘gray uniformity’ of globalization and its progenitor, European colonization. It is within storied places that we can still glimpse alternatives to this gray uniformity of globalization which brings with it a rhetoric of capitalism, modernism, abstract space and Western science. It is this rhetoric produced through globalization which erases the storied landscapes, destroying the libraries embedded within Indigenous toponyms, creating a *terra nullius*: an empty land awaiting a colonial/neo-colonial history and economy. As Paulo Freire has challenged us to see, critical consciousness requires us to “read our world,” decoding the images of our own concrete, situated experiences with the world (Freire and Macedo 1987, 35). A critical pedagogy of place recognizes the concrete experiences of communities grounded in shared histories, stories and challenges based within a politics of place. A critical pedagogy of place seeks to decolonize and reinhabit the storied

landscape through ‘reading’ the ways in which Indigenous peoples’ places and environment have been injured and exploited. This paper seeks to discuss how through reading the places in the world as ‘political texts,’ one may engage in reflection and praxis in order to understand, and where necessary, to change the world.

**Keywords** Place · Placelessness · Indigenous knowledges · Critical pedagogy · Indigeneity

## Introduction

“Being and place are conceptually linked. This is an Indigenous principle and, therefore, is maintained as such within Indigenous cultural philosophy and expressed in the most common or ordinary way” (Ortiz 2007, 135).

In comments on a recent grant application, I was chastised for failing to define ‘place’, as if the term had become specialist language. I responded to the comment, much as Tim Cresswell (2004, 1) has stated at the beginning of his book, *Place: a short introduction*; “[p]lace is not a specialized piece of academic terminology.” Of course, I must admit as does Cresswell, that place is also a complex set of concepts, debated from numerous perspectives, exposed to the intellectual rigors of philosophy and the social sciences, with a myriad of definitions.

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Perhaps, my failure to define ‘place’ in my three page grant application stemmed more from the impossibility to define such a complex term within such a short grant application but it was also based in the idea that place is a taken for granted, an ‘of course’ that should not need definition.

Some human geographers, along with social scientists in other disciplines, have, over the past few decades, increasingly employed place as a concept within their work. Unfortunately though, much of this work has left place ill defined, not distinguished at all or as synonymous with space (Agnew 2005, 81). John Agnew (1987) has defined three principal meanings for place as it has been employed within human geography: first, place as location or specific point on the earth; second, as a sense of place or the subjective feelings people have about places including the roles that they play in identity formation; third, place as locale or the setting and scale for everyday life, what Tim Ingold (1993) refers to as our ‘taskscape’.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, in an effort to narrow and more clearly define the discussion, I will focus on two conceptualizations of place: first, place as a way of understanding, knowing and learning about the world; and second, as the embodied location of everyday struggle for meaning; political, cultural and economic. The two meanings I have embraced do not fit neatly within the principal meanings outlined by Agnew just as the direction I intend to take this paper lies, at least somewhat, outside the mainstream of human geography. They do, however, fit well within a broadly defined Indigenous conceptualization of place and hopefully will lead toward reading and understanding places as political texts within Indigenous peoples’ daily struggles. As Gregory Cajete has described, “Native cultures are the earth, air, fire, water, and spirit of the place from which they evolved” (Cajete 2000, 284).

### Place and placelessness

“[O]ur cultural experience is ‘placed’ in the ‘geography’ of our everyday lives, and in the ‘ecology’ of the diverse relationships that take

place within and between places” (Gruenewald 2008, 137).

As David Gruenewald states in the quote above, our cultural experience, including our ecological relationships, are ‘placed’ in the ‘geography’ of our everyday lives. Unfortunately, just as place has become a taken for granted concept, so also have the places in our cultural landscape become taken for granted. This taken for granted relationship has allowed specific places to become only thinly conceived, or erased entirely. Placelessness, many authors have noted, is a primary component of our modern Western condition (Augé 1995; Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 2000; Berry 1977; Cajete 2000; Casey 1993; Deloria and Wildcat 2001; Escobar 2001; Gruenewald and Smith 2008; Little Bear 2000; Merchant 2003; Plumwood 2002; Rose 2004). Carolyn Merchant (1995) describes this placelessness as a byproduct of the Enlightenment metanarrative which serves to divide culture from nature, leading to a loss of connection to our places, to our environment, our landscapes and to the knowledge stored within these landscapes. Many may consider a discussion of placelessness as a trite, clichéd approach, particularly for a paper which hopes to address some issues pertinent to the struggles of Indigenous peoples in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately though, “[t]he ontological and epistemological legacies of European colonialism [based within Enlightenment thought] are highly resistant (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2003, 557).” Eurocentric thinking, broadly speaking, is based in a dualistic and reductionistic structure which divides the world into distinguishable segments with (supposedly) essential differences; what Bill Ashcroft refers to as the ‘Imperial binary’ (Ashcroft 2001). I am arguing here that placelessness, in addition to being founded within a dualistic metanarrative which separates cultured civilization from nature also serves to disconnect Western science and scientists from Indigenous struggles, from Indigenous ways of learning and knowing the world, and ultimately disconnects us from engaging a place-based critical consciousness in our work (see Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2003).

Place, rather than an abstract space, is a location endowed with meaning. Place-making, as Keith Basso (1996) has described, does not require special sensibilities or cultivated skills. It is a common response to

<sup>1</sup> Noel Castree (2009) provides an excellent discussion of the role of ‘place’ in contemporary geographic research.

common curiosities—what happened here? Who was involved? What was it like? Why should it matter?—and anyone can be a place-maker who has the inclination. Everyone, I would argue, does in fact partake in making places. Despite modern Western society's placelessness, there continues to be the ability to make places, and continually, we are creating meaning within the places in our daily landscape.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible for us to dwell within our landscape, and here I am using the verb to dwell in keeping with Heidegger's use of the word which he defines as "to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for" the landscape (Heidegger and Krell 1993, 349), or as Tim Ingold (1993) describes the process of active engagement with the landscape as 'taskscape', without gathering meaning from the places encountered. When I attempt to teach the concept of place-making to undergraduate students, I frequently ask them to remember their weekend outings and how they have described them later to those not present. The 'who', 'what' and 'when' of these events inevitably becomes attached to the 'where'. These events, remembered attached to a place, forever alter the memory of that place.

Despite the fact that we are continually 'making places' through our active engagement with our landscape, I would argue that what is missing from our place worlds is a connection to the significant cultural histories and moralities which, once upon a time, were stored within our storied landscapes. The significant depth of meaning attached to places has been displaced by a thinner layer of meaning. If as Peirce Lewis (1979) has argued, our landscape is our unwitting autobiography, the unwitting nature of this autobiography should perhaps be troubling. The place-making of our modern society creates only a thin layer of meaning, unlike the 'thicker' depths of meaning attached to place by Indigenous, oral societies.<sup>3</sup> As Keith Basso has eloquently shown, for societies without writing, places serve as a

primary repository for history. As one of his Apache research collaborators stated...

They came to this country long ago, our ancestors did. They hadn't seen it before, they knew nothing about it. Everything was unfamiliar to them. They were very poor. They had few possessions and surviving was difficult for them. They were looking for a good place to settle, a safe place without enemies. They were searching. They were traveling all over, stopping here and there, noticing everything, looking at the land. They knew nothing about it and didn't know what they would find. None of these places had names then, none of them did, and as the people went about they thought about this. "How shall we speak about this land?" they said. "How shall we speak about where we have been and where we want to go?" (Basso 1996).

Western society and our historians no longer use places as the primary repositories for their narratives. Our spatial events have been replaced with a historical stage upon which history itself creates a narrative merely repeated by the onlooker historian; "a fabric woven of self-reinforcing illusions (Carter 1987, xv)." Our written texts, and the tools of literacy, have enabled greater mobility for our knowledge production system; a system we somewhat arrogantly refer to as a universal science. Occasionally, although our places are no longer primary repositories for our history, we do remember our significant events by remembering their place names; Gettysburg, Chernobyl, Fallujah.

### Place-based learning and knowing

"Each one of use is a product of a lifetime of environmental and cultural education that includes our embodied experience of places" (Gruenewald 2008, 147).

While teaching at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, I was asked to assist with

<sup>2</sup> In a manner similar to Edward Casey (2001, 683), I am envisioning landscapes as "the presented layout of a set of places, not their mere accumulation but their sensuous self-presentation as a whole."

<sup>3</sup> I am using the terms 'thick' and 'thin' in keeping with Robert Sack's (1997) description in *Homo Geographicus*, as I find these terms offer a clear description of the shift in place making. I do not, however, agree with Sack's concern that a significant attachment to place requires shutting ourselves off

Footnote 3 continued

from the global society or caring about those beyond our borders.

a new course entitled, Māori and Indigenous science. One task I took on early in the course was to discuss the comparability of various knowledge systems, including Western science. As David Turnbull has described, “though knowledge systems may differ in their epistemologies, methodologies, logics, cognitive structures or in their socio-economic contexts, a characteristic that they all share is their localness” (Turnbull 2000, 19). No matter how adamantly one argues that Western science is a universal and therefore placeless science, even our physicists and biologists have begun to admit that experiments always vary to some degree from location to location. The act of observation alters how even the smallest particles will behave in the laboratory.

By detaching our histories, our stories and *our science* from place, Western science has developed an arrogance which seeks to elevate it above other knowledge systems, particularly those knowledge systems which have remained more attached to place. As David Turnbull has helped us to understand, all knowledge systems, Western science included, are local, placed knowledges. The experiences of dwelling and of the taskscape our dwelling create impact our knowledge production. To paraphrase Ingold (2000, 186), it is only because we dwell therein that we can think the thoughts we do. The knowledge we create is inevitably affected by the landscape surrounding us, and is a creation of our combined, communal taskscape. Perhaps more importantly, the landscape we carry within us, continually remembered and retold; the landscape which has played a part in our education, alters how we see the world around us and how we engage in the social production of knowledge. How do we store our common history? How do we convey important information, passing it onto future generations? Why do we erase the stories of our places in favor of the stories in our texts?

One afternoon while working on our dissertations at the University of Hawai‘i, my colleague Renee Louis and I began discussing the divide we perceive between two groups we decided to call ‘people of place’ and ‘people of text’ (Louis 2004). People of place construct and maintain narratives attached to places. Frequently the place name descriptors serve as mnemonic devices, standing for narratives which describe and inform a ‘right’ relationship between the individual, the community and the non-human landscape. N. Scott Momaday (1976; see also Cajete,

2000, 67–72) has described this ‘right’ relationship as “reciprocal appropriation;” the gathering of sustenance and meaning from the landscape while incorporating and maintaining an identity based upon the landscape. People of text have removed their histories and narratives from places, instead storing them within texts. As Giselle Byrnes (2001, 40) has described, “[b]y erasing distance, the written word allows the writer actually to be in two places at once—his body in one and his thoughts in another.” As the writer writes, she is not only erasing distance but also the storied landscape.

Byrnes has also noted that, “[s]pace becomes place simply by being named: in other words, place is space to which meaning is ascribed (Byrnes 2001, 9).” If this statement is true, then its corollary must also be true, and the erasure or removal of meaning from places allows for the creation of an abstract space, void of meaning. For places in the landscape, places with significant ‘longer histories’, with roles to play in the preservation of these histories, for these places to change into spaces and take on a resource role in the colonial and capitalist endeavor, then the ‘longer history’ must be erased. Once void of its previous history and culture, these newly emptied spaces are ready to be filled with settlers, crops, cattle and industry. The ‘longer histories’, created and maintained by Indigenous historians, were systematically erased by European colonialism, creating a tabula rasa, a blank landscape upon which a new story and history could be written (see Byrnes 2001). For those of us in the Western United States, this new story is lined by the Public Land Survey and Thomas Jefferson’s vision of an army of yeoman farmers who would bring Western civilization (and perhaps more importantly, order) to a landscape littered with half-buried Indigenous histories.

### Finding common ground

“Even the most liberal universities operate in ways that place substantial domains of human experience, thought and insight outside the conventional bounds of legitimate knowledge” (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2003, 557).

As anyone who has ever questioned the singular use of terms such as epistemology and ontology has been

informed, Western science intends itself to be the universal set of boundaries governing what is knowable about our world and universe. The reality, of course, is that people relate to, interpret and make meaning of the world around them in a multitude of ways. Acknowledging that an ‘ontological diversity’ does exist and “taking seriously the philosophies and experiences of [I]ndigenous groups,” is a first step toward finding a common ground upon which a dialogue between knowledge systems can take place (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2003, 557). Perhaps, more importantly though, acknowledging the multiplicity of the ways in which various peoples explore and conceive of the world is fundamental to reversing the atomistic approach within Western science. As Brian Murton and I have argued in an earlier article, “[p]erhaps place offers a ‘common ground’ between Western and Indigenous thought” (Johnson and Murton 2007, 127). This will require us though, to acknowledge the importance of place for many epistemologies and reincorporate place as one method of rewriting the Enlightenment metanarrative, as Carolyn Merchant (1995) has challenged us to do.

Just as physicists such as David Bohm (Bohm and Nichol 1998) have already done, social scientists and humanists are beginning to find bridges between modernism’s binary reductionism and the holistic approaches common to Indigenous epistemologies. Anthropologist, environmental historians and eco-lit authors such as Carolyn Merchant, Bill Cronon and Lawrence Buell, are attempting to bridge the divide between culture and nature, tearing down the city walls and its artificial liminality (Buell 2001; Cronon 1995; Merchant 2003). Likewise, some philosophers, anthropologists and geographers are attempting to bring Western thought back toward place and away from abstract space. As Edward Casey (1997, 286) has written, “is it not time to *face place*—to confront it, take off its veil and see its full face?” With space we attach meanings to the world around us, perpetuating an artificial separation between humanity and the world in which we live and dwell (see Ingold 1993). Not until we begin examining our landscape and the places within that landscape do we begin *gathering* meanings to us *from* the world.

As Lawrence Buell observes, “place is not just a noun but also a verb, a verb of action” (Buell 2001, 67). When we are engaged with place, we are carrying out an act of remembrance, a retelling of the

stories written there, while also continually rewriting these stories. Being-in-place is continually an act of engaged/active learning. Each place name acts as a mnemonic device, helping us to remember the story associated with that toponym. Each story is a text within the metanarrative of a particular culture, aiding through its remembrance, the continual re/creation of that society. We can look out across our landscape, seeing a series of place names, remembering the stories associated with creating and recreating our culture; I would argue that this storied landscape is the equivalent of a library. Its placed knowledge serves as a repository for the narratives, which through an oral literacy, are employed to access the knowledge produced within a knowledge system which values being-in-place.

It is the struggle to protect place and all of the wisdom/learning/known associated with places that leads us not only to place-based struggle for community self-determination but also for the protection and continuation of community knowledge. Here I am arguing that cultural survival is, as some sociologists have observed, at least in part, a preservation of non-Western scientific knowledge. Indigenous language programs, sacred site mapping and studies of place names are not merely cultural preservation programs, they are also crucial in preserving the extensive data sets associated with Indigenous and placed knowledges. Place-based struggle is hopefully then more than just a defense of resources and local economies but also a defense of history, knowledge and science.

### A critical pedagogy grounded in Indigeneity

“Increasingly I am convinced that, despite problems of appropriation, Native, Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal educational processes and epistemologies need to be at the center of place-based, culturally responsive teaching. Only through studying Native experiences will educators understand the enduring legacy of colonization and the possibility for diverse cultural ways of being” (Gruenewald 2008, 151).

At this point in the paper I am shifting away from the work of anthropologist, philosophers and geographers to bring in the work of critical educators. Within this literature, perhaps one of the most significant theorist



and activist is Paulo Freire (Freire 2000). Freire, trained as a philosopher and lawyer, decided to work as an educator and through this work developed a model for bringing written literacy to poor rural Brazilians. His experience in the Amazon aided Freire in envisioning his now world famous concept *conscientização* or ‘critical consciousness’. His literacy programs became a pedagogy not only about literacy but more crucially concerned with the ‘decolonization of the mind’. Freire’s phenomenological foundations are clear in this quote from, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; “[h]uman beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it.” I want to stretch (although in reality it is not a long stretch at all) Freire’s process of attaining critical conscious of a popular culture and identity to being a place-based process.

Developing our critical consciousness, I am arguing, means uncovering our place-based knowledge and acknowledging it as a significant part of our ontology. Recovery of place connections means, recognizing the importance of particular places within our lives. Protection of place-based knowledge means recovering place names and their associated stories and continuing to protect and encourage Indigenous language skills. The struggle to understand Indigenous knowledge systems requires us to unseat Western science from its high perch and engage in comparing knowledge systems on a level playing field.

As McLaren and Giroux (1990), two critical educators in the Freirean tradition observe, critical pedagogies are inherently pedagogies of place. To understand the place-based struggles of Indigenous communities requires an engagement with the pedagogies created by that place; the experiences, problems, languages and histories these communities rely upon to construct a narrative of collective identity. To be engaged in the struggles of communities, even within our research, challenges us to hope for the possibility of transformation. David Gruenewald, another critical educator, describes two aims for articulating a critical pedagogy of place, first to “identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (rehabilitation); and [second] to identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (Gruenewald 2003, 9).

Central to, or perhaps underlying my thesis today, is Indigeneity. As Ward Churchill has described, I intend through this paper, “to take the rights of indigenous peoples as the highest priority...[to draw] on the traditions—the bodies of knowledge and corresponding codes of value—evolved over many thousands of years by native peoples the world over” (Churchill 1993, 403). In this way, my focus is not just about recovering place but on bringing the knowledges, struggles and rights of Indigenous peoples to the forefront. I believe that within our place-based struggles one might glimpse alternative economies, politics and environmental management methods; informed by alternative knowledge systems and epistemologies. Accessing this information requires us, though, to recognize Indigenous knowledge, respect its place-based foundations, and to reciprocate in our own knowledge production by sharing with those who share their knowledge with us.

Another reason for fronting Indigeneity is that although all knowledge systems are in fact local and placed, Western Science has worked diligently over the past few centuries in cultivating the myth of its universality and hyper-mobility. Part of the arrogance of Western science has been that it “sets itself within a hall of mirrors...mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its world view” (Rose 1999, 177). Western science will need to break free of this ‘hall of mirrors’ and affirm the existence and value of other knowledge systems. In order for the academy to find its way back into place, we will have to have assistance; there will need to be dialogue with place-connected knowledge systems. For this dialogue to occur, we will need to create an ‘ethical space’ which Willie Ermine (Ermine et al. 2004, 20) describes as a process which seeks “substantial, sustained and ethical/moral understanding” while affirming the sometimes significant differences between cultures, worldviews and knowledge systems.

This recovery of place within Western thought will need to find common ground with other placed epistemologies. It will also need to embrace those anthropologists, geographers, ecological humanists and philosophers who are using phenomenology as a bridge between Indigenous and Western philosophies of place. It will need to acknowledge, as Jones and Cloke have, that a phenomenological approach

“offers a way to deal with the “richness” of place, where the ecological and the cultural, the human and non-human, the local and the global, and the real and the imaginary all become bound together in particular formations in particular places” (Jones and Cloke 2002, 6).

Finding a place for Indigenous knowledges within the academy and our research initiatives will require us to understand the importance of place within Indigenous epistemologies. To engage Indigenous knowledge systems requires a place-based pedagogy, a place-connected approach. To engage our research with the struggles of Indigenous communities requires a critical approach to understanding the place-based struggles of Indigenous communities. As Freire instructs, to engage with a community requires us to engage with the place, with the place specific ways of knowing that place and that community. If there are those who would argue against this place-based focus surrounding Indigenous struggles, I would reply, much as Noel Castree (2004, 163) has, that “real world projects [which] erect ‘strong’ boundaries around places—in both the imagination and practice—should not necessarily be deemed acts of geographical folly by those on the geographical left.”

In this process of placed engagement, there is the promise of healing the placelessness within our academic epistemologies and methodologies. This healing will hopefully serve to expand our abilities to critically engage as geographers and educators. Healing placelessness also holds out the hope of developing an autochthonous identity, an identity which springs from a reciprocal relationship with our place in the world.

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