

# Ontologies of Indigeneity: the politics of embodying a concept

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## **Abstract**

This paper asks how Indigenous ways of being and knowing can become legitimized within western theorizations of ontology, given the ongoing (neo)colonial relations that shape geographic knowledge production. My analysis emerges within my narrative accounts of being a Kwakwaka'wakw scholar in two spaces of knowledge production: a geography conference and a potlatch. Through these stories, I engage with the individual embodied scales at which we reproduce geography as a discipline and reproduce ourselves as geographers. I argue that making ontological shifts in the types of geographic knowledge that is legible within the discipline requires destabilizing how we come to know Indigeneity and what representational strategies are used in engaging with Indigenous ontologies, as differentiated from western ontologies of Indigeneity.

## **Keywords**

colonialism, conferences, Indigeneity, Indigenous geographies, ontology, storytelling

Ontology is, ironically, not a word that comes to mind when I think of Indigenous ontologies. What comes to mind, instead, are stories. Investigations into western ontological possibilities are bounded in ways that limit their ability to fully account for Indigenous worldviews. Yet Indigenous knowledge and the work of Indigenous thinkers (scholars, elders, community leaders, activists, community members) contain a wealth of place-specific practices for understanding how categories of being are made possible within diverse Indigenous cultures. So how can Indigenous ways of being and knowing become legitimized within theorizations of ontology, given the ongoing (neo) colonial relations that shape geographic knowledge production? Looking to Indigenous epistemologies for ways to get beyond the ontological limits of what is legible as western scholarship, a number of Indigenous scholars have pointed to stories, art, and metaphor as important transmitters of Indigenous knowledge. Stories and storytelling are widely acknowledged as culturally nuanced ways of knowing, produced within networks of relational meaning-making.<sup>1</sup>

My reflection on Indigenous ontologies is therefore organized around two stories that are illustrative of two very different spaces of knowledge production: one, a geography conference, the

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other, a Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch. I purposefully frame my analysis in this narrative register to engage with the individual embodied scales at which we reproduce geography as a discipline, and reproduce ourselves as geographers. My movement through these two sites of knowledge production suggests that it is not enough to talk about Indigenous ontologies without addressing how we come to understand what Indigeneity and ontology themselves mean. Making ontological shifts in the types of geographic knowledge that is legible within the discipline requires destabilizing how we come to know Indigeneity and what representational strategies are used in engaging with Indigenous ontologies, as differentiated from western ontologies of Indigeneity.

What processes of change will the discipline of geography need to undergo if Indigeneity and diverse Indigenous knowledge are to gain a meaningful presence in the discipline? What spaces exist within academic conferences and journals for those of us who embody Indigeneity, bringing Indigenous worldviews to the discipline through our presence in spaces of legitimized geographic knowledge production? These questions were on my mind as I entered the conference centre to attend the 2011 AAG – my first time at the conference. They became louder and more persistent as I attended the sessions on Indigeneity and ontology, which form the basis of this special issue.

I stepped into the conference centre, and, at once, I was dancing, though my feet did not show it. There is an inherent subtlety to dancing between worlds. Early in my academic training, I learned the necessity of bringing shapeshifting, of moving between worlds, into strategic play as I navigate among diverse sites of knowledge production. My work entails moving from rural community to university classrooms, from conferences such as these to sacred sites of ceremony, as well as spaces that are simultaneously ceremonial and educational. As an Indigenous person in this academic space, I am in what Zadie Smith calls 'Dream City', a place of many voices where 'everything is doubled, everything is various. You have no choice but to cross borders and speak in tongues'.<sup>2</sup> The conference was held in Seattle, the territory of the Coast Salish people, which has spanned across the now-present US-Canadian border since time immemorial. Being Kwakwaka'wakw, I am a visitor here, as most of us are, though we act like we own the place, claiming positions of authority as the experts we are supposed to be. Shapeshifting is an important skill for those of us who occupy multiple voices, who embody supposedly dichotomous subject positions: colonizer/colonized, native/academic, and community member/scholar. As Smith reminds us, people from Dream City 'conjure contrasting voices and seek a synthesis between disparate things'.<sup>3</sup> Here, the voice I raise is at once Indigenous and scholar, though it feels impossible to be heard as both at the same time.

As I raised my hand to ask a question, I had to be careful to perform according to institutional standards in order to be taken seriously as an academic. Yet as an Indigenous person, these norms work in constant tension with other networks of responsibility, and the standards to which I will be held by multiple other communities. My ethical responsibilities emerge from complex relationships rooted in my social and political position as Kwakwaka'wakw and a member of my family, while I am simultaneously bound to institutional ethics that have a set of concerns altogether different from Indigenous ethics. Similarly, the methodologies I use in my work necessarily stem from both my own Kwakwaka'wakw teachings and from the types of geographic research with which I hope to engage in the academy. At another scale, this navigation of Indigenous and academic worlds involves a set of political tensions that relate to broader efforts of Indigenous resurgence and assertions of sovereignty.

According to Glen Coulthard, a liberal discourse of 'recognition' has become the hegemonic expression of self-determination used by Indigenous peoples in Canada,<sup>4</sup> as First Nations have sought state validation of their rights and status, including the right to self-government. The shift in federal Indian policy from the language of assimilation to nation-to-nation recognition reflects

the mainstreaming of a dialectic that requires Indigenous people to identify with profoundly asymmetrical forms of recognition granted to them by the colonial state and society. Thus, Coulthard and others argue that recognition, like assimilation, serves to reinforce the dominance of colonial power, and as such is not a viable way to transform the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada. Processes and strategies of recognition are always pre-determined by political relations that reinforce state sovereignty and dominant power relations. Yet, strategically, it does not seem that outright rejection of all forms of recognition are politically viable, especially for those of us working in institutions such as universities where we are required to navigate around disciplinary norms. If Indigenous sovereignty can only be attained through self-affirmation, how do we reconcile the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, and ourselves as Indigenous people, in those dominant institutions?

Despite what conferences such as these might lead us to assume, given the need to fit academic papers into time-limited presentations expressed in PowerPoint slides, Indigeneity is not just an idea. It is not just words on a screen, theorizations, discourse analysis or a series of case studies. Indigeneity is also lived, practiced, and relational. Yet Indigenous knowledge is rarely seen as legitimate on its own terms, but must be negotiated in relation to pre-established modes of inquiry. The heterogeneity of Indigenous voices and worldviews can easily become lost in efforts to understand Indigeneity in ways that fix Indigenous knowledge, suppressing its dynamic nature.

Engagement with Indigeneity involves the establishment of ontological limits around what knowledge is and is not legible – the establishment of boundaries of meaning, the creation of categories, and making them real through their use in geographic knowledge production. In order to be legible, Indigenous geographic knowledge must adhere to recognized forms of representation. Representational strategies and their materialization through law, policy and the daily actions of people and institutions, have long been of concern to critical scholars across a range of disciplines investigating the construction of western hegemonic discourse. Represented through western categorizations, Indigenous geographies have remained peripheral to broader geographic theory, as ‘indigenous geographies are somewhat removed from the rigours of disciplinary debate and remain *out there*, on the post-neocolonial edges of the disciplinary orbit’.<sup>5</sup>

Knowledge production within dominant institutions and disciplinary conferences such as these thus involve epistemic violence<sup>6</sup> – the work of discourse in creating and sustaining boundaries around what is considered real and, by extension, what is unable to be seen as real (or to be seen at all): ‘It is not simply, then, that there is a “discourse” of dehumanization that produces these effects, but rather that there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility.’<sup>7</sup> Colonialism in Canada has involved the imposition of western worldviews and the simultaneous suppression of Indigenous worldviews – those heterogenous, place-based ways of knowing through which Indigeneity comes into being. Processes of colonialism in North America involved representational strategies that transformed Indigenous peoples and their lands conceptually and materially, in order to facilitate their displacement and to render them less than human. This ideological imposition has been central to the violent suppression of Indigenous peoples’ vitality and sovereignty, through such spatialized strategies as the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands through forced deterritorialization,<sup>8</sup> as well as the displacement of Indigenous children from their families to residential schools.<sup>9</sup> As Cole Harris argues, Indian reserves, which are often naturalized as the homelands of Indigenous peoples in Canada, can be understood as the manifestation of colonial (not Indigenous) ideologies: ‘[T]he reserve map of British Columbia maps the mind and values of a settler society.’<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging the role of the geographic imagination in this colonial history and creating new representational strategies has been of concern to critical geographers, in order that colonial and imperial projects overall (not just in geography) do not remain unchecked.<sup>11</sup>

Reflecting on my participation in this conference as an Indigenous scholar invested in decolonization, I wonder how to *be* a geographer, given these tensions within the discipline, and the historical role of geographic practices and knowledge (and, importantly, geographers themselves) in facilitating colonial expansion. As Blomley argues, western spatializations such as the frontier, the survey and the grid, played an important practical and ideological role in colonial expansion, legitimizing the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their territories.<sup>12</sup> Following calls from within the discipline to decolonize geography<sup>13</sup> and fundamentally challenge western geographic hegemonies,<sup>14</sup> how might geographic knowledge serve to facilitate decolonization or anti-colonial projects? And how might Indigenous geographic knowledge, or knowledge rooted in Indigenous worldviews, be situated in relation to the discipline of geography and its hegemonic ontologies? As geographers, how can we avoid being agents of assimilation when it comes to Indigenous knowledge, people and communities?

The potential for Indigenous ontologies to unsettle dominant ontologies can be easily neutralized as a triviality, a case study or a trinket, as powerful institutions work as self-legitimizing systems that uphold broader dynamics of (neo)colonial power. Sitting in the session on Indigeneity and ontology, I consider whether or not to ask a question, aware that as Indigenous people within these sites of power, we must ask ourselves: on whose terms are we willing to speak? At a very basic level, those of us who write and speak in English are necessarily always hybridizing Indigenous knowledge, even as we try to perform it in terms that are specific to Indigenous ways of being. I do not see this as necessarily invalidating Indigenous knowledge, but as part of the dynamic nature of our socio-legal practices. The future of Indigenous rights and political struggles depend on the ability of Indigenous knowledge to retain its active, mobile, relational nature rather than the fixity it is given in colonial law, stuck at the point of contact with colonizers: 'We are told "you can't go there" when we want to trek beyond imposed ideological boundaries, which stereotype us as past-tense peoples. The same restrictions cannot be said to apply to non-Indigenous people. When they want to venture through land or time, they are presumed to carry their rights with them.'<sup>15</sup>

Reflecting on destabilizing dominant ways of knowing the world in order to make room for assertions of Indigenous knowledge, I am reminded of the story of another first – the first potlatch I attended as a young child. I was excited to be there, and ran around asking people to show me what to do. How should I move when I dance? What do I do first? What move is second? How do I know what to do when the beat changes? I was told to follow my aunties in front of me, and was promptly sent out into the bighouse without any instruction. I was filled with excitement, watching my aunties, surrounded by swirling button blankets, with the sound of drums and song holding me up as I moved around the fire. When the dance was over, and we all walked into the back of the building again, I was scolded for two major errors: chewing gum and smiling. I was not given any additional instruction but was simply sent out to dance again, following in the footsteps of my aunties as I learned over and over what it is to perform our law, our business, our spiritual obligations and relationships. There was a productive confusion in this way of learning, one which would not have been possible had I been told in a linear way how to dance at a potlatch. No guidebook or PowerPoint, no essay or instructional video could have given me this type of knowledge. Even though I have since read many books and articles about the potlatch, none of them have captured what I know the potlatch to be. The ontological differences are difficult to explain yet that is where their power lies – in the spaces between intellectual and lived expressions of Indigeneity. I would propose that these gaps in regimes of knowledge provide sites where ontological shifts are possible. So how do we better expose and explore these gaps?

One starting place might be accepting the partiality of knowledge. Its relational, alive, emergent nature means that as we come to know something, as we attempt to fix its meaning, we are always at risk of just missing something. If we accept the alive and ongoing nature of colonial relations, and the lived aspects of Indigeneity as critical to Indigenous ontologies, any attempts to fix Indigenous knowledge can only be partial. Reconfiguring ourselves as academics, geographers, or experts, could facilitate the creation of other kinds of hyphenations: expert/learner, geographer/settler, or academic/witness, for example.

As a discipline, geography is faced with the task of confronting the epistemic violence entailed in closures established around geographic knowledge. How do we come to know that which is rendered outside the knowable world? As I suggest, for non-Indigenous people interested in engaging with Indigenous ontologies, this may involve becoming unhinged, uncomfortable, or stepping beyond the position of 'expert' in order to also be a witness or listener. Geographers must begin grappling with the unsettling nature of engaging Indigenous knowledge in processes that are rarely clear, neat, linear or straight-forward, but are instead productively confusing. This might entail embracing the shifting relationality, complexity and circularity of Indigenous knowledge as productive and necessary. The situatedness and place-specific nature of Indigenous knowledge calls for the validation of new kinds of theorizing and new epistemologies that can account for situated, relational Indigenous knowledge and yet remain engaged with broader theoretical debates within geography. There is a danger in ghettoizing Indigenous geographic knowledge as 'other' or a curiosity, rather than engaging this knowledge in broader efforts to actively decolonize geography, navigating among differing power relations at the scales of both the individual academic and the broader discipline.

Importantly, it must also be asked what it means for Indigenous knowledge to be moved from spaces of lived Indigenous governance and culture, such as a potlatch ceremony, to a conference session on ontology with very few Indigenous people and little space for Indigenous methods of teaching and learning. When I consider the broad implications for the production of Indigenous geographic knowledge within the discipline, I find it useful to consider the emergence of feminist geographies. What would feminist geographies be without women in geography? Although men may take up feminist geographic analyses, methodologies, and so on, it seems the active role of women in creating new forms of geographic knowledge is necessary for feminist geographies to hold their meaning. Feminism would mean something ontologically different without women shaping its foundation. So what does it mean for Indigeneity to be theorized, accounted for, and constructed as a category, within hegemonic geographic systems of knowledge production where only a small number of Indigenous people situate their work?

In discussing Indigeneity and ontology, then, we must engage in discussions about the broader politics of knowledge production. As Katharyne Mitchell notes of concepts of hybridity and third-space, liminal spaces of opposition are always at risk of appropriation by dominant hegemonies.<sup>16</sup> We must be cautious that 'Indigenous' does not come to signify engagement with 'the other' without an actual shift in disciplinary ontologies and epistemologies. Given these cautions, we must consider the work required at individual and disciplinary levels.

If I say I am dancing, what does it mean to you now? I am dancing not for you, but in the footsteps of my ancestors who taught me how to resignify Indigeneity, or more specifically Kwakwaka'wakw knowledge, such that it does not lose its meaning and power in the face of colonial constraint. I am dancing because I must, in order not to lose my hyphenated existence. I dance in the hopes that future generations of Indigenous students will want to become geographers, finding a space where there is room for them to be seen and heard as both Indigenous and geographer at the same time.

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## Notes

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