

Healing Landscapes: A Historical Perspective

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Introduction

This paper navigates through different worlds and worldviews on its way to a discussion of indigenous sacralised landscapes. It moves through the worldmaking process, with its frames of reference and social imaginaries, to interrogate the shape of “true knowledge.” This includes an examination of how the sacralised landscape is marginalized by the dominant social imaginary, and proposes an avenue of understanding for more fair and fit intimations of indigenous sacralised landscapes.

Exploring the social imaginary

Social imaginaries are comprised of paradigms with their core values, systems of signification, and a background metaphysic that provide order and unity to experience. Just as there is no ultimate proof for the proof of science, there is no standard for constructing, accepting, or rejecting a paradigm beyond what Thomas Kuhn characterized as the assent of the relevant community. Nelson Goodman reminds us that:

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described.¹

Extending outward from a social imaginary are analytic practices, each with their particular shape and logic. These practices and their practitioners “define what counts as reasonable evidence and as rational investigation into truth or falsehood in the first place.”² Marc Auge identified this as the “ideo-logic” that defines the sum of the “possible and the thinkable within a single society.”³ I have examined several of these analytic categories—self, time, space, and causality—that signify two very different social imaginaries: the tribal sacralised and the Western analytic. In this paper I will discuss one of these categories: space.

The politics of space and the influence of ideology have been characterized by Ruth Kark who distinguished between civil societies and societies based on kinship. In civil societies concepts of land are instrumental, economic, rational, legal (embodied in individual property rights) and territorial. In societies based on kinship the relationship of an individual or group to land is paramount and relations are largely governed by norms of interaction with the land. Concepts of land are mythical, religious, symbolic, animistic, and sentimental. The spatial kinscapes extend out from the location and from the present encounter and are contingent upon a larger spatio-temporal field of relationships.

The belief in *loca religiosa* landscapes is a recurring theme among Native American communities where inanimate objects and natural forces are considered alive. This discernment goes to the heart of Native American ways of knowing that “spiritual power is infused

and diffused throughout nature in general, as well as at interconnected spatialized places, and that knowledgeable people are participants in that power.

In indigenous communities this sacralised personhood of nature, “is not a metaphorical extension of human attributes. Personhood is literal.”⁴ Nor is this relationship equivalent to the spiritual contemplation between deity and human subject encouraged by the Christian tradition. It comes through “knowledge of the land and its agency [and is] not primarily the result of contemplative activity but of active engagement” with the landscape.⁵ These spatio-temporal spaces of emplacement are part of the *illud tempus*: the time of origins and emergence.

Nurit Bird-David described the agency of animated landforms as the “affordance” to produce and reproduce sharing relationships.⁶ Lyall Watson insists that “we are born animists” that he described as

a fortunate disposition and a time in both personal and human history when we are closest to nature . . . most accessible to a connection that provides a real sense of the presence of power around us. It lasts only as long as we let it, beginning to slip away as soon as we become more demanding, more distant, more inclined to ask inappropriate questions that push the presence away.⁷

The ontological and methodological status of the animated agency in landscape has been taken up by a number of writers, including Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes. Drawing on their experience among African cultures, they distinguished between Primary theory, that is “filled with middle-sized, enduring objects” and the “push-pull conception of causality,” with Secondary theory that illuminates a “radical hiddenness” of entities and processes and transcends the limited causal vision postulated by Primary theory.⁸

In the Western analytic, the production of true knowledge of landscapes is grounded in the regime of power of hierarchized formal scientific discourse and its dream of *mathesis universalis*. It is directed and adjudicated by instrumental reason, naturalistic materialism, mechanical/efficient causation, and utilitarian rationalism. This regime of power, part of the larger project of modernity, adjudicates what counts as reason, argument, or evidence, along with the anonymous rules governing discursive practices and the network of a force field of power relations of which these rules are a part. For Bird-David the most intriguing question is

why and how the modernist project estranged itself from the tendency to animate things. How and why did it stigmatize ‘animistic language’ as a child’s practice, against massive evidence? How did it succeed in delegitimizing animism as a valid means of knowledge, constantly fending off the impulse to deploy it and regarding it as an ‘incurable disease’?⁹

The provincialized landscape

Part of the answer might be found in the “provincialized” landscape. Patricia O’Brien asserted that power, rather than the sovereignty of the self or the rights of personhood, is the organizing principle of Western civilization. Taking a cue from Michel Foucault’s power-knowl-

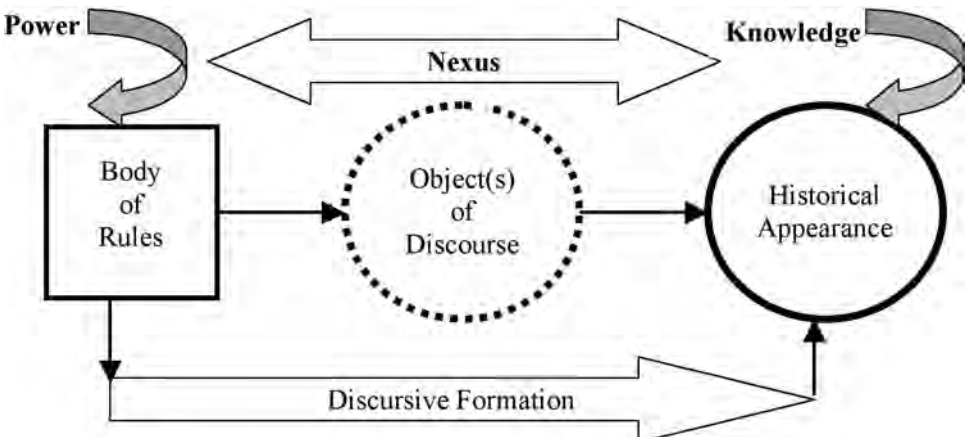
edge nexus, O'Brien insists that one must always ask: "Where is the power in the knowledge?"¹⁰

The power-knowledge nexus has four primary characteristics. First, it is ubiquitous in the sphere in which it operates. Second, it is a field of struggle between oppositions for domination in which the parties stake their claim for deciding who is empowered to say what is true. Third, it engages both unconscious and surface structures to create and adjudicate systems of knowledge and their discourse. Finally, it is a process, not a place; an unstable equilibrium of power-knowledge relations whose genealogy punctuates history. In this space of domination and resistance, truth is produced according to the rules defining the production of truth.¹¹

The project of modernity, according to the historian Willie Thompson, consists of institutions that serve as mechanisms of authoritarian control (that have now reached "monstrous proportions"), operating by way of self-policing subjects and ideologically positioned ways of knowing what is real and true knowledge. As the first movers who impose the rules of the game, the scientific regime of power and its constellation of governmentalities create the space, or *habitus*, "where truth is produced."¹¹ The function of the nexus is to create propitious angles that allow things to appear as true knowledge while ruling out other explanations or understandings. Regimes of power also provide the subjects with acceptable avenues for resistance, including jural-legal, legislative, and educational avenues, that serve to domesticate resistance.

One example is the bounded space of the American Indian reservation. The reservation system afforded an opportunity to simultaneously punish and reform indigenous societies through careful supervision within artificially bounded territories. They provided a venue for the deployment of what Foucault describes as the "micro-physics" of power and governmentality: the strict ordering of space and time to create a more accommodating disciplinary of utility and obedience. In a manner similar to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon—a prison designed around a central observation tower—these bounded and ordered spaces provided a sense of constant scrutiny in which the structure of the reservation would modify behavior,

Figure 1. The power-knowledge nexus.



and gradually adjust the inhabitants to new relations of power, modes of knowledge, and styles of reasoning.

The effect of the regime of power in relation to indigenous ways of knowing was not only to adjust behavior, but also to modify habits of mind through the power of discipline over both body and mind. Institutional control takes the form of various religious orders as well as the socializing disciplinary of conventional education, the regulations of the capitalized workplace, ersatz jural-legal institutions, bureaucratized as opposed to ancestral systems of governance, as well as the marginalization of indigenous languages and traditional religious practices that signify the sacred.

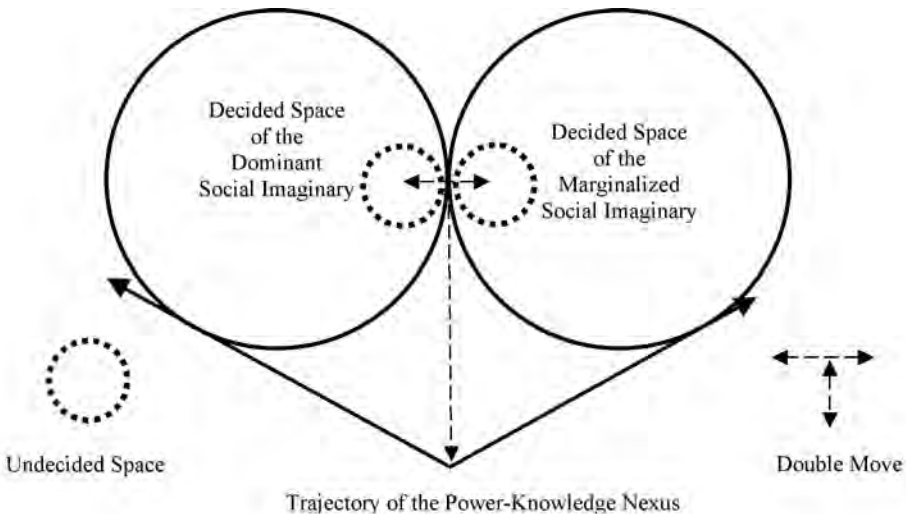
Signifying the sacred

An interrogation of power-knowledge, its relationship to the designation of true knowledge, and the double move of reflexivity and historical imaging, provides a means for disengaging from the hegemonic position through a portal that facilitates the apperception of the social imaginary of the “other.”

The first move requires an effort to cultivate a subsidiary awareness of the indigenous framework and its worldmaking properties. The purpose is to engage the social imaginary inherent in the indigenous view of the natural world. Beyond the fairness and fitness of this discourse are the positional relations between the dominant and marginalized social imaginaries. Marginalized by the larger social imaginary, the indigenous social imaginary persists an avenue of opposition and resistance, and as a means for reinvigorating and in some cases reconstituting ancestral beliefs.

The application of Foucault’s model illuminates routes of resistance and emerging ways of worldmaking through the limited realm of agency in the undecided space. Foucault proposed that the social subject “constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self” even though these practices are “not something that is invented by the individual.”¹²

Figure 2. The domains and trajectory of the social imaginary.



The subject escapes the normalizing effects of modern power by exploring the limits to authorized forms of subjectivity within an undecided space, and by asserting our capacity for freedom by producing ourselves as works of art and a critical ontology of ourselves that

has to be considered as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.¹³

What is common to the work of Goodman, Foucault, and the others is the importance of the artistic understanding—not the arts, *per se*, but the undecided space of the artistic disciplinary. In her analysis of Native American literature, Lee Schweninger points out the importance of this portal of understanding by way of Native American literature, stating that

the study of Native American literature as nature writing can provide . . . an understanding of Native American ecology and culture that will lead to a better understanding of and appreciation for the culture and . . . a better understanding of the dominant Western, Euro-American culture.¹⁴

The second step in this “double-move” interrogates the historical origins, evolution, processes, products, ends, and consequences of the modernist worldmaking enterprise and its signifiers. The aim of this move is to make explicit the construction, deployment, and reinforcement of the signifiers of the dominant social imaginary—to include its role in setting the legitimate limits of discourse—that serve to silence alterity and that ignore the positional relations of the dominant to the subaltern. This includes an analysis of the historical roots of the postmodernist hegemony and “the all-pervading power of representation.”¹⁵

Concluding remarks

In indigenous communities, the ideo-logic of the moral center is linked to the empowered, restorative power of nature, of human relations, and the interconnections between, around, and beyond them. In that sense, the indigenous social imaginary that grows out of the past is in direct conflict with the secular religion of economic growth has been the decisive factor in this nation’s use of nature. The attempt to marginalize the sacralised landscape, and the importance of opposing it, was forcefully expressed in the lines of a poem by Leslie Marmon Silko:

So they try to destroy the stories
Let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that.
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then.¹⁶

Endnotes

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2. Margaret R. Somers, "The Privatization of Citizenship: How to Unthink a Knowledge Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 128.
3. Marc Auge, *A Sense for the Other: The Timeliness and Relevance of Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 112.
4. Penelope Harvey, "Landscape and Commerce: Creating Contexts for the Exercise of Power," in *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile, and Place*, ed. Barbara Bender and Margot Winer. Oxford: Berg, 2001), 198.
5. *Ibid.*, 199.
6. Nurit Bird-David, "Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* vol. 40 (Feb. 1999), 573.
7. Lyall Watson, *Dark Nature: A Natural History of Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 263.
8. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, ed., *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 228.
9. Bird-David, "Animism Revisited," 579.
10. Patricia O'Brien, "Michel Foucault's History of Culture," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 39.
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.
12. Mark Bevir, "Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency against Autonomy," *Political Theory* vol. 27, no.1 (Feb. 1999), 77.
13. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1984), 50.
14. Lee Schweninger, "Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers," *MELUS*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 58.
15. Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 133.
16. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977), 2.