

In between worlds: place, experience, and research in Indigenous geography

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In this introduction to the special issue, we explore how the experience of on-the-ground research in Indigenous geography transforms Native and non-Native practitioners by challenging, reworking, and ultimately expanding their existential, social, and conceptual understandings of place. Following a brief overview of contemporary work in the area of Indigenous geography, the essay unpacks this process of place-based metamorphosis with specific reference to the contributions that appear in the volume. As part of this discussion, we identify the epistemological, methodological, and ethical implications of candid and critical reflection on the relationship between place and experience in Indigenous approaches to geographic research.

Keywords: Indigenous research; place; methodology; epistemology; ethics

Introduction

The emergence of Indigenous¹ geography over the past twenty years is part of a broader impulse within academic and Native communities to critique and re-envision the taken-for-granted concepts, practices, and voices in formal research and knowledge production. Behind this development, however, are the real stories of practitioners—Native and non-Native—who have worked collaboratively with Indigenous communities and in so doing have had their own geographical understandings questioned, extended, and finally reformulated into deeper senses of place. In short, people who participate in Indigenous research often find themselves “in between worlds,” transformed irrevocably by the experience of having navigated across academic and Indigenous terrains. This special issue explores how Indigenous research transforms its practitioners by expanding their conceptual, social, and existential senses of place through sustained cross-cultural encounter, and also the implications this

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intellectual and interpersonal growth has for contemporary research praxis in Indigenous geography and beyond.

The transformations that accompany Indigenous research stem from the dynamic nature of its practice: the inevitable false starts, uncertainties and insecurities, turns of relationship, ecstatic experiences, unforeseen events, conflicts, and troubling occurrences, observations that go forever unexplained, the euphoria of insight into human and non-human collectivity. Yet rarely are these encounters discussed openly in scholarly discourse (important exceptions will be discussed in the next section). This silence has obscured the real significance of Indigenous research as intellectual praxis consisting of concrete, place-based encounters and relationships oriented toward the creation of ethical social and ecological worlds. That is to say, Indigenous research *takes place* through encounter and relationship, both in the ordinary sense of “to happen” and also in the metaphysical sense that knowledge *requires* an actively inhabited place for its disclosure and use (Casey 1993, 1997; Raffles 2002; Malpas 1999, 2006). This phenomenology of place reveals Indigenous research as an empathetic, relational way of knowing grounded in the nexus of being-on-the-land.²

A second and perhaps more obvious motivation for this issue’s theme is that Indigenous research involves communities who continue to experience (post)colonial practices aimed at their simultaneous assimilation, appropriation, and extinction. So, Indigenous research inevitably engages the “colonial present” (see Gregory 2004). In this regard, the manifold expression of place as lived experience, social metaphor (e.g., one’s “place” in society), and intellectual conceptualization provides a helpful framework for investigating the different epistemological, cultural, and political *positions* of Indigenous-research practitioners, that is, the diverse places we come from as well as the unique paths we follow toward richer social and ecological understanding. Not only do these positions shape how knowledge is produced, but their consequent negotiation can lead to stronger relationships and more productive research outcomes. Here in this introduction to the special issue, we draw from these three meanings of place to describe the interpersonal and intellectual transformations that commonly emerge as a consequence of participating in Indigenous research. Before doing so, we briefly review previous work that sets the context for our theme.

Indigenous geographies, extraordinary anthropology

Indigenous research materialized out of twentieth-century Aboriginal struggles for political, economic, and cultural self-determination. Broadly speaking, this approach to research seeks to decolonize extant Western methodologies while asserting Aboriginal questions, concerns, and practices in the production of knowledge (Smith 1999; Louis 2007).

Steeped in colonial histories of surveillance, control, and appropriation, conventional Western-academic methods for studying Native people have promoted systematic oppression and expropriation of land over roughly the past five centuries from the dawn of Europe's so-called "Age of Discovery" (Johnson 2008). Still in effect, these methodologies achieve their ends in part by objectifying and thereby containing the "Indigenous" within broader (post)colonial and power/knowledge discourses (Shaw *et al.* 2006; Johnson *et al.* 2007). By the 1980s, Native and non-Native practitioners alike had begun to develop alternative methods based on place-based epistemologies in which reciprocal relationships with human and non-human beings are both the precondition for, and source of, knowledge.

In many respects, these efforts culminated in 1999 with the publication of Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's landmark book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. By way of summary, the main features of her synopsis of Indigenous research include:

- a deconstruction of Western research paradigms to disclose how their application in the social and natural sciences has and continues to promote colonial relationships and practices;
- a shift from research conducted *on* and *for* Aboriginal peoples to research conducted *by* and *with* Aboriginal peoples (see also McNaughton and Rock 2004);
- a reconstruction of research praxis as integrative, holistic, and unflinchingly ethical instead of extractive and segmented into "disciplines";
- a reorientation of research toward the goals of individual and collective self-determination; and
- a recognition that no single Indigenous research paradigm exists, but rather myriad place-based paradigms that share basic principles such as reciprocity and engagement with the land.

The last item on the list bears elaboration. Not only does the Anglophone word "Indigenous" fail to account for the myriad conceptualizations of indigeneity, it also segments "Indigenous research" into a discrete area of knowledge that is positioned *in relation to* Western scholarship (Shaw *et al.* 2006). On the one hand, "Indigenous" can be construed to refer to anyone who has stayed in their place of birth. In this sense, the word's etymology from proto Indo-European (*-gen*, "to produce") via Old Latin (*indu-*, meaning "within") simply does not accommodate the meanings associated with its more recent appropriation by Native activists (see Coombes *et al.* 2011). Perhaps it is as a political tool that the term "Indigenous" takes on its clearest form by articulating an agenda found within the 2007 United Nations Declaration on Indigenous

Rights. On the other hand, the modernist impulse to order worldly objects—people included—within this singular, totalizing category inadvertently facilitates the marginalization of Indigenous principles and positions as an antipode encompassed within dominant intellectual discourse.

The same semantic problems apply to the formalization of “Indigenous geography” as a subdiscipline during the last decades of the twentieth century, which led Shaw *et al.* (2006, p. 267) to describe the label as a “vexed subdisciplinary descriptor.” They went on to argue, however, that the label may be retained on the grounds that it organizes and prioritizes intellectual space for Native issues and values, but only if its practitioners keep “one eye fixed firmly on [geography’s] ever-evolving capacity for ‘politics of difference’” (Shaw *et al.* 2006, p. 267). Conceptual difficulties and discomfort aside, Indigenous geography is now a vibrant research area within and beyond the discipline, one that involves Aboriginal leaders and activists, academics, local community members, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and many others.

The emergence of Indigenous geography was both accompanied and partly inspired by parallel developments in poststructuralism and cultural anthropology, allowing for fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas. The post-structural approaches informing the so-called “new” cultural and economic geographies of the 1980s and 90s bear at least some similarity to Indigenous research in the effort to deconstruct power/knowledge, highlight and celebrate marginality, and envision alternative social and cultural worlds. More recent work in animal geographies (Lorimer 2007) and posthumanism (Braun 2004; Whatmore 2004; Castree and Nash 2006) likewise resonates by elaborating non-anthropocentric frameworks in which the “human being” is deconstructed from an essentialized self, identity, or “thing” into a phenomenon of becoming characterized by impermanence and change. Similar efforts have been made to describe how non-human consciousness can be understood by “becoming animal” (Lorimer 2007; Watson and Huntington 2008), that is, taking on and acting out the senses, behaviors, and motives of animal (and even inanimate) beings.

Related work by ethnographers and cultural theorists on “extraordinary” anthropology also parallels some dimensions of Indigenous geography. As early as 1979, anthropologist Johannes Fabian signaled what was a broader shift in ethnography away from the analytical and methodological separation of ethnographer and cultural subject in the process of cultural interpretation and representation. Fabian’s (2001, p. 31) reasoning for this move was not derived from poststructural criticism, at least not primarily, but rather from the observation that “much of our ethnographic research is carried out best when we are ‘out of our minds,’ that is, while we relax our inner controls, forget our purposes, let ourselves go. In short, there is an ecstatic side to fieldwork

which should be counted among the conditions of knowledge production, hence of objectivity.” (For examples of and elaboration on this approach to ethnographic practice, refer to the edited volumes by Young and Goulet (1994) and Goulet and Miller (2007).)

Critically, the “ecstatic” dimension to fieldwork is not some irrational deviation from “normal” behavior, but rather “a quality of human action and interaction—one that creates a common ground for the encounter” (Fabian 2000, p. 8). As Amanda Coffey (1999, p. 33) pointed out, the ecstatic side of fieldwork is not concerned “with the ‘truth’ of [ethnographic] accounts, as with the ways in which they challenge the harsh rationality of the distinction between the observer and observed in the conduct of fieldwork and reconstruction of culture.” In the end, ecstasy directs us to the fundamental role of place in the experience of on-the-ground research, Indigenous and otherwise. The word itself comes from the Greek *ekstasis* roughly meaning “astonishment” but derived from *existanai*, meaning “to displace, to put out of place” and composed of the prefix *ex-* (“out”) and *histanai* (“to place, to cause to stand”). In short: ecstatic fieldwork is about leaving one’s comfortable psychological, political, and discursive “place” in an effort to engage others on “common ground,” as Fabian (2000, p. 8) put it. Time and again, those engaged in Indigenous research discover the ecstatic place where the divisions and dichotomies of colonial discourse dissipate and genuine (e.g., unpremeditated, empathetic, transformative) communication begins between people occupying vastly different sociocultural worlds. Indigenous research is fundamentally about *transformations* particularly those leading to greater prospects for individual and collective self-determination both within and beyond the community.

Metamorphosis is neither entirely nor primarily a euphoric, blissful experience. It is just as equally if not more so characterized by discomfort, pain, angst, failure, disappointment, and readjustment, all of which can be thought of as expressions of ecstatic encounter. Here, we identify and discuss three place-based transformations in Indigenous research, and which are described in greater detail by contributors to this issue. First, *existential place*: not only can Indigenous research call the meaning of one’s way of living into question, but it also reveals how places themselves are active and “alive” in the process of inquiry. Second, *social place*: the colonial-discursive divisions of ethnicity, class, power, and subjectivity are sharpened, challenged, negotiated, and finally reformulated during the course of the work. And finally, *conceptual place*: as practitioners draw from Western and Indigenous philosophies in the co-production of knowledge, they discover hybridized understandings of place that enhance the meaning and purpose of human life in the world. We now consider these transformations in turn.

Existential place

Over the past centuries, academia “disciplined” non-Western societies by assimilating them within colonized ways of thinking about and acting toward otherness. But academia disciplined its practitioners, too—students, faculty, staff, administrators—as scholarship and teaching were institutionalized as industrialized forms of intellectual labor (Foucault 1977, p. 220–222; cf. Shapiro 2009). This institutionalization both derives from and reproduces a distinctive spatiality for intellectual work. From Plato’s grove of olive trees on the outskirts of Athens to modern-day university campuses, the Western academy has been delineated socially, politically, and geographically as *the* locale where intellectual activity gets done. When academics venture off campus, they go into “the field” (paradoxically, the words “campus” and “field” have similar meanings), which is a presumably liminal space where knowledge is acquired—“discovered”—and subsequently transported, via the campus, into global networks of academic power and prestige (Raffles 2002; Shapiro 2009).

Indigenous research is, of course, a vastly different enterprise. Its practices rely on empathy and reciprocity as key modes of intellectual praxis. No particular space is separated out as the privileged location for exploration and discovery. Instead, the Indigenous act of investigation presupposes an entire genealogical cosmology in which knowledge is created, stewarded, and accessed via place-based relationships. In practice, Indigenous research is usually non-linear and often unpredictable; some of the most profound insights come from extraordinary events and visceral encounters. Amid this seeming confusion and chaos, academic practitioners in particular can experience their own existential senses of place becoming quite shaky and unstable, sometimes frighteningly so. They may find themselves asking: Will this work make any real difference to the community? What is the value of my work beyond a way of making a living? And further: What are the implications for the Aboriginal community of how I make a living as a researcher supported by a global economy built on the expropriation of Native lands? Why, then, do I continue to make my living the way I do?

Although responses to these questions are as diverse as the practitioners themselves, the contributions here describe how existential place can be expanded through lifelong, intersubjective explorations that cross the divide between academic and Aboriginal communities. In so doing, Indigenous research promotes both the critique and restructuring of hegemonic relationships in capitalist political economy. For example, catalyzed by her research experience with the Inuit, Nicole Gombay (this issue) embarked on an intensely personal exploration of the relationship between existential *control* and economic *value*. The paradox, she discovered, is that the more we try to control our world, the less we

value it intrinsically. Capitalism cultivates this obsession with control by commodifying the world in the monetized terms of exchange value. Nature is transformed into agricultural commodities and rural-real estate markets; the future is traded through investments on speculation and in futures exchanges. But as the Inuit well know, neither nature nor future can ever be fixed or pinned down. The land is always changing and moving; it is iridescent. The future can be prepared for but remains contingent on forces well beyond one's control. It is imperative, therefore, to cultivate keen awareness of how the land shifts and evolves, and how its inhabitants think and act, that is, you must always try to *be present*. By contrast, capitalism forever orients us toward an elusive future by turning the way we make a living into monetized abstractions of wages and profits, which promise but ultimately fail to deliver on genuine connectedness, satisfaction, and growth. The Inuit translation of the English word "economics" as "by money try to stand by itself" says as much, albeit in a pithier and in our estimation, more eloquent way.

Again, for academic practitioners especially, the existential sense of place is deepened by realizing that the land is alive, populated by beings and locales possessing an agency directly evident in their capacity for change (cf. Hallowell 1975). For Indigenous research, place is therefore central to the process of discovery, an active collaborator in the production of knowledge. Based on long-term collaborative work involving Yolngu and academic researchers in Bawaka, northeast Australia, Sarah Wright and others (this volume) show precisely how place enables some encounters and closes others. Place becomes through, and itself tells, story and myth, mind and memory. Place issues forth, and is co-created by, a whole host of beings—animals, ancestors, wind, rain, spirit forces—who actively participate in the research process. Perhaps most important, place gathers human and non-human beings together within a phenomenal coherence that allows for engagement, reciprocity, and questioning. This "being-in-place together" creates profound feelings of connectedness among research participants—human, non-human, place itself. In so doing, it overcomes, if temporarily and partially, the structural alienation that can result from the capitalist way of making a living; when put into practice, it can transform structural aspects of the system through social movements (Escobar 2001). Wright and her colleagues express this sense of connectedness, at least in part, by listing Bawaka Country as co-author of the essay.

Social place

Indigenous research also entails ongoing and sometimes intense negotiations over the social places of participants. The academic disciplines currently most associated with Indigenous scholarship—geography and anthropology—are, of course, historically tied to the study, surveillance,

and representation of Native people in ways that actively supported and enabled colonial resettlement. For many Indigenous communities, this history is not some abstraction or generality but includes actual and often recurrent transgressions by scholars and academic institutions in both the distant and recent past. Not surprisingly, this legacy has engendered attitudes of resentment, suspicion, and mistrust. To complicate matters, much traditional Indigenous knowledge is of a sacred or otherwise sensitive nature, which creates issues concerning when and how to share it with non-Native people, even those who consistently adhere to the most robust ethical standards. So the intellectual legacy of colonialism endures well into the present, which means that practitioners must carefully and consistently interrogate their collaborative research praxis, not just at the inception of the project but throughout its implementation. This sustained interpersonal interrogation reworks the social places of Native and non-Native practitioners as an integral part of the research activity. Several of the contributions to this issue describe the hybridizations that can result, as, for instance, in Brian Murton's discussion of *kaupapa* Māori, a research practice blending Māori and European epistemologies, and the description by Sarah Wright and co-authors of the extended place-based family that grew out of long-term research involving Yolngu and non-Indigenous collaborators.

The different social places in research speak to deeper distinctions between Western and Indigenous constructions of time and space (cf. Gombay, this volume). Academic schedules are predominately linear, oriented to the future, and structured by deadlines, timetables, funding windows and fiscal calendars, and pressures related to scholarly output, life-work balance, and institutional procedures. Compared to the global population, academics are also highly mobile as an occupational class, particularly in early career when changes in institution (e.g., graduate school, postgraduate or visiting position, first job, second job, et cetera) are frequent. Fieldwork, moreover, requires long periods of time away from home, as do professional conferences and workshops, albeit for shorter durations. Indigenous temporalities, by contrast, are grounded in place and based primarily on seasonal and cosmological cycles. As a result, these temporalities are more fluid than Western time. They do not depend on numerical calendars or a clock's precise mechanical segmentations, but rather on a phenomenology in which beings and events recur in place and therefore are cotemporaneous with the "present." The relevant temporal concerns are therefore oriented toward an awareness of flow and atmosphere (the English language approximates this temporality in the notion of "timing" and more recently, the positive-psychology concept of "flow"). As such, it often appears to academic practitioners that a great deal of (Western) time is required before reaching the trust and rapport for collaborative research even to begin. Challenges and frustrations emerge from temporal disconnections, as happens when academics

depend on meetings and projects to start “on time,” and from spatial disconnections, as occurs when academics must leave the community to return “home,” which may disrupt continuity in research interaction and engagement.

Karen Heikkilä and Gail Fondahl (this volume) provide a detailed exposition of these complexities in their work with Tl'azt'en First Nation of British Columbia. Karen's family originates from India but she is a Canadian citizen who now holds an Academy of Finland PhD studentship at the University of Eastern Finland; Gail is originally from the United States and now Professor of Geography at the University of Northern British Columbia. For her part, Karen felt that aspects of her biography appeared to “qualify her as a colonial subject,” but at the same time her mobility set her apart from Indigenous people such as Tl'azt'enne, who she notes are among the most “rooted” people in the world. In light of the temporal and spatial disconnections identified above, many of the struggles Karen and Gail encountered came from trying to devise research that was acceptable and beneficial to Tl'azt'enne but that also could work within academic-institutional frameworks of time and space. This was a difficult task to say the least. Given the pressures of academic time, how long can a graduate student or faculty member “afford” to wait (cf. Gombay, this volume) as negotiations unfold with the Indigenous community? What happens to the viability of the project when the researcher moves away from the community, as happened when Karen relocated to the Northwest Territories? And yet these difficulties lead to constructive innovation: At Karen's community research presentation, the audience (and one Elder in particular) spontaneously restructured what could have been a formal thesis defense into public storytelling and learning.

In other words, flexibility in one's social place—and being able to reflect on, interrogate, and expand that place—is essential for anyone who wishes to participate in Indigenous research. Such flexibility, in turn, requires more supple approaches to *time* (always in short supply, at least in the Western world) and *place*, that is, the effort and capacity to immerse oneself in the community and its lands. Ultimately, all participants have to “give,” at least a little. Only then will we have time and place enough for Indigenous research.

Conceptual place

A third transformation in Indigenous research concerns how place is conceptualized as an intellectual category. In academic geography, place has been defined most consistently in terms of object and subject, either a physical location or the human experience and meaning associated with that location, real or imagined (Entrikin 1991). This formalization of place has roots in Western modernity's binary logic of objectivity and

subjectivity, crystallized perhaps most famously in the Cartesian conceptualization of a thinking subject separated from the world (i.e., objects) of its reflection. In Indigenous contexts, however, “place” typically denotes a holistic reality in which myriad human and non-human beings are interconnected via genealogies contained within a landscape that is really more of a “storyscape” (Nelson 2006; Palmer and Palmer, n.d.) resonant of cosmological and social origins, events, and encounters.

Practitioners of Indigenous research are finding that the traditional Western conceptualizations of place are limiting and often inadequate for understanding the topology³ of Native lifeworlds (cf. Murton, this volume). There are relatively few avenues available, in fact, for approaching Indigenous ontologies solely from the standpoint of conventional Western scholarship. Yet some of the *integrations* of Western and Indigenous research epistemologies appear auspicious. In his discussion of the contested “geo-graphs” in Sàmi lands of the Nordic North, Ari Lehtinen (this volume) demonstrates how careful etymological deconstruction can unpack the hidden meanings and veiled intents embedded within Indo-European geographical concepts. By reading these deconstructions against the etymologies of Indigenous lexicons, it is possible to examine precisely how Western discourse can effectively disconnect, or “decouple,” humans (particularly Aboriginal people) from the landscape under the ostensibly progressive banner of ecological conservation. In so doing, the lexicons used to talk about environmental management can naturalize control over Indigenous lands and marginalize those communities in the process of decision-making and implementation. When dominant geo-graphs go unquestioned, such marginalization is concealed by so-called “real-world” issues such as environmental policy and economic development. Etymological deconstruction allows practitioners to tack between dominant and marginal languages as a way of creating more inclusive and equitable approaches to human-environment interaction.

Another way place is being expanded conceptually is by bringing contemporary work in phenomenology to bear on Indigenous research practice. The phenomenological scholarship (Casey 1993, 1997; Malpas 1999, 2006) seeks to build fundamental philosophy—ontology—by reflecting on lived experience as a place-based phenomenon, that is, a *placing* (Larsen and Johnson 2012). This work is helping Indigenous practitioners to draw productive philosophical connections between phenomenology and Aboriginal ontologies, which are similarly grounded in and through place. Brian Murton explores these possibilities by examining correspondences between *kaupapa* Māori and the Western-academic conceptualization of the “geographical self.” His effort moves us towards a hybridized Indigenous-research practice based on a significantly expanded conceptualization of human place. And while such philosophical synthesis does not guarantee seamless research—practitioners “must also be aware that they may be unwelcome [in traditional lands], even when they are of

Indigenous descent themselves”—his essay clearly shows that the effort is well worth the risk.

Conclusion

The transformative places marked out by the contributions to this issue point up new possibilities for developing Indigenous geography and research in the twenty-first century. By way of moving on to the pieces that follow, we would like to make two brief concluding remarks on our theme.

First, the challenges and difficulties commonly reported on as part of Indigenous research are part of much “deeper” (i.e., ontological) differences in the way human communities construct and engage their lifeworlds. Indigenous research constantly challenges the hegemonic Western construction of a self-contained, standalone subject alienated from the worldly objects of its concern. In this regard, place—as existential condition, social position, and philosophical concept—offers common intellectual, ethical, and methodological ground for the diverse practitioners of Indigenous research. On this ground, researchers are increasingly finding themselves able to move beyond a unilateral deconstruction of Western intellectual praxis, which characterized early efforts in this area, and toward research hybrids that prioritize connect-edness over alienation while simultaneously allowing for, and indeed celebrating, diversity and difference. In this way, a supple and robust understanding of place is essential for progressive academic-political praxis in Indigenous research and cultural geography more generally.

These essays also emphasize that while practitioners of Indigenous research continue the arduous tasks involved in cross-cultural collaboration, we also have reason to celebrate what has been accomplished so far. Following the initial period of intense disciplinary critique, methodological deconstruction, and candid reflection on the difficulties associated with this kind of work, the contributions presented here accentuate new integrations of Indigenous and Western research in the effort to generate ethical, grounded, and politically progressive knowledges. Again, we would suggest that such connections are possible because all of us—human, non-human, and otherwise—are bound by the place-based condition. By continually leading us back to this common circumstance of being placed, Indigenous research not only transforms those involved but also points us toward a more inclusive and sustainable world community in the new millennium.

Notes

1. Following precedents set by Johnson *et al.* (2007) and Panelli (2008), we capitalize the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, and Native as both nouns and

adjectives. Such capitalization is consistent with similar practice for Western identities and nations, and also reflects the political developments associated with Aboriginal efforts toward self-determination in the twentieth century. We discuss the semantic problems associated with these terms in a later part of this introduction.

2. It is worth clarifying that the “land” can include sea, river, estuary, ice, and so on.
3. Borrowing from the work of philosopher Jeff Malpas, we use the term “topology” to refer to “a meditative concern with the way a particular enviroing world comes forth around a particular mode of emplacement in that world” (2006, p. 33). In other words, topology is place-based ontology.

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