Unsettling the Land: Indigeneity, Ontology, and Hybridity

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Political ecology and environmental subjectivities

Early work in political ecology examined the issue of land degradation, calling attention to the political-economic forces that work to discursively produce land according to socially constructed schema of quality rather than reflecting an “objective” ecological condition outside of society (Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). In recent years, this literature has challenged scholars to show that how we see “nature” and how power moves in relation to its management are inextricably linked (cf. Robbins 2012). Tim Ingold (2000) outlines two opposing ways of seeing land as, on one hand, a spherical, embedded, localized perception and, on the other, a global view where the human transcends nature and the world is seen as property or resources to be managed for the public good. The view from above that a global perspective engenders is one that writers such as James Scott (1998) and Bruno Latour (1987) have similarly seen as enabling abstraction, measurement, calculation and accumulation of knowledge by experts at centers of calculation and power. These authors focus on the role of simplification in enabling power to expand, including the simplification of landscapes. These simplifications make things legible (Scott 1998) or immutable, accumulatable, and combinable (Latour 1987). When the simplifications ultimately fail, this failure is not acknowledged as such, but rather understood as something in need of a techno-scientific fix (Mitchell 2002; Scott 1998). Techno-scientific claims of understanding—and thus power over—landscapes are thus strengthened.
Through this process, the way in which landscapes are seen shifts. As Donald Moore observes in his analysis of struggles for territory in Kaerezi, Zimbabwe, “abstract, empty, and exchangeable space is a historical product, not an essence” (2005: 20). In his examination of the impacts of colonization in Egypt, Timothy Mitchell describes how the process facilitated “the spread of a political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real” (1991: ix). Thus, another key insight from the political ecology literature is that, whereas ways of understanding land can change how power over land operates, these concepts can also change actors’ subjectivities, changing how they manage their own conduct in relation to land. Looking at colonialism, development, and other projects of land management, a number of authors, often influenced by Foucault’s work on governmentality, explore how subjects come to participate in projects of their own rule (Agrawal 2005; Li 2014a; Moore 2005) and how, in Moore’s words, “different political technologies produce territory, including its presumed ‘natural, features’” (2005: 7). Jeremy Campbell (2015) explores how settlers on the frontier can work to conjure private property in the absence of a strong state presence, demonstrating the limits of state-centric approaches that fail to account for the political and economic power of settlers to realize their own visions of a transformed landscape. Bruce Braun (2000) examines how the evolution of a geological vision impacted conceptualizations of Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands) in Canada. Braun argues that when governing is done to manage the relationship between populations and territory, the qualities of territory (land) are not static, but rather are continuously reconstituted as a result. Governing must be continuously reordered to structure conduct in response to shifting constructions of nature. The adoption of a geological understanding of land in Haida Gwaii, for example gave rise to new forms of calculation and
governance in relation to it. As land came to be understood as vertical, human subjectivities changed to better manage it. Arun Agrawal (2005) touches upon similar ideas in his discussion of community forestry programs in Kumaon, India. He conceives of environmentality as a framework for understanding how environmental subjects are created, through participation in the “intimate government” of local forests. Timothy Luke (2009) similarly shows how subjectivities of expert management are recast when nature is conceived in terms of coupled socioecological systems. Seeing nature as a complex system under threat invites expert managerial control. By examining the work of three technical scientific bodies, Luke demonstrate how Earth System Science has given rise to a global green governmentality exercised by ecological expertarchy to map, monitor, measure, and, ultimately, manage nature and population for the public good.

For these authors, self-interest comes to be realized through participation in different forms of practice. For Li (2014b), ways of understanding land outline what, and especially who, is excluded from that land. Every regime of exclusion has to be legitimated and can, therefore, be contested. Li notes the prominence of moral arguments and references to the social value of investment in driving contemporary land grabs. This is the extension of Ingold’s idea of the need to optimize land use for the public good: not only can we manage land according to global understanding, but we must do so for the public good, even if some publics’ interests must be sacrificed to do so.

This literature, though useful in examining how we come to understand land, has been critiqued for some of its limitations. Thus, the emergence of an Indigenous political ecology has built on these insights but also sought to address the elisions of political-economic approaches that are “limited by a reliance on Euro-derived concepts of power, political economy and
human–environmental relations…[that] may reproduce colonial relations of power, while eliding Indigenous peoples’ own solutions to problems” (Middleton 2015: 561). The unique position of Indigenous peoples, given their status as both authorities on their homelands at the same time they are subjects of a settler state which lays claim to this homeland, contrasts with many cases in political ecology where “singular states comprise the operational governmental authority to which their subjects must react” (Carroll 2014: 37). Middleton outlines the key tenets of an Indigenous political ecology as:

“(1) attention to ‘coloniality’ or ongoing practices of colonialism (e.g. displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands; no recognition of indigenous self-determination); (2) culturally specific approaches reframing analyses in keeping with indigenous knowledge systems; (3) recognition and prioritization of indigenous self-determination, as expressed through indigenous governance; and (4) attention to decolonizing processes that explicitly dismantle systems of internalized and externalized colonial praxis” (Middleton 2015: 562)

Conceptions of land configure how one relates, not just to land, but to many other actors—human and non-human—in the broader community (cf. Nadasdy 2003; 2007). In accepting colonial recognition of their rights to land, Indigenous nations can end up undermining their reciprocal relationships to that land. Coulthard argues that political recognition of Indigenous peoples in Canada obscures the ongoing settler colonial project of primary accumulation—the drive toward dispossession of Indigenous lands while extracting further surplus value through resource exploitation. And that any attempt to transcend these structures of domination requires the resuscitation of relationships of mutual obligation between land and people as opposed to deeper engagement with settler-state institutions. Carroll, writing about the Cherokee Nation, also remarks that Indigenous environmental governance represents a different, “relationships-based approach” that allows for “agency of nonhuman beings and the maintenance of relationships with them” (2015: 8).
Recent critiques of the cultural underpinnings of sovereignty inherent to Indigenous nation-building have suggested that sovereignty itself can have problematic instrumental effects (Alfred 1999; Nadasdy 2017). But the necessity of engaging its forms still stands. One hybrid approach is the use of land-as-property in creative ways that inflect its forms to promote the creation of Indigenous space (Carroll 2014). As Carroll notes, “the need to maintain land-based practices as critical components of tribal identities continues to make the topic of land reacquisition and consolidation central to the study Indigenous environmental issues, and, despite its conceptual flaws, Indigenous sovereignty is a critical tool in this process” (2014: 38).

**Posthumanism and Indigenous ontologies**

The recent ontological turn has implications for questions of how ideas of land are constituted and what that means for Indigenous struggles for land and decolonization. A number of scholars have argued that by overlooking Indigenous ontologies, post-humanism misses critical insights that might be gained from Indigenous perspectives. Kim TallBear argues that “indigenous standpoints accord greater animacy to nonhumans, including nonorganisms, such as stones and places, which help form (Indigenous) peoples as humans constituted in complex ways than in simple biological terms” (2017: 187). She argues, along with others, that Indigenous peoples have more intimate and complex sets of relations with the animate/inanimate agents bound up in land than much post-humanist scholarship can capture. What is seen as “alive” in much post-humanist discourse is more limited than in much Indigenous thinking. Zoe Todd (2015) makes a case for the need to decolonize post-humanist scholarship and questions the locus of agency ascribed in Eurocentric thinking. Juanita Sundberg similarly argues that “Anglo-European scholarship is the only tradition truly alive in posthumanist theorizing” (2014: 38). She
argues that all other scholarship or epistemologies are treated as truly dead through their exclusion. Understanding that the human/nature divide is far from universal is key for decolonizing and expanding post-humanist scholarship for these scholars. Many offer Indigenous ontologies, asserting that they capture more nuanced perspectives than a simple erasure of a nature/culture schism can capture. Vanessa Watts, for example offers Place-Thought as a way of framing an understanding that land is alive and thinking and, “that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (2013: 21). She frames the world in this view as a space “where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated” (Watts 2013: 21). This framing helps overcome what she sees as the problem of subjugated agency for non-humans in post-humanist scholarship where “the controversial element of agency is often redesigned when applied to non-humans, thereby keeping this epistemological-ontological divide intact” (Watts 2013: 29). Sundberg (2014), drawing from both Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen and the Zapatistas’ framing of the pluriverse, highlights the importance of “multiepistemic literacy” in an expansive post-humanism that doesn’t subordinate particular ontologies and forms of agency. These Indigenous ontologies of land are oriented around relationality and reciprocal obligations among humans and the other-than-human. For these scholars land, as a relationship consisting of complex and non-subjugated agencies, is key to overcoming the ontological hurdles of Eurocentric imaginings of post-humanism that these authors critique.

**Brief Concluding Thoughts**

Land is not just a material object, but a “way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others” (Coulthard 2014: 61). Drawing upon work in Indigenous studies,
posthumanism, and political ecology highlighting the importance of relationality and reciprocation across the human and other-than-human, we are poised to better address the politics at stake in ontologies of land by attending to the possibilities of hybridity. Structures of dispossession are not only defined by their economic or political valence to settler society, but through the notions, practices, and representations they obfuscate. Indigenous movements for social and environmental justice are deeply tied to issues of land rights. By operating on multiple ontological registers rather than the occlusion of one mode by another, indigenous movements can focus not just asserting ownership over lands but revitalizing the land-based practices that shape the fundamental nature of relationality.

REFERENCES (includes all from the longer paper)


Bigart, Robert, and Clarence Woodcock, eds. 1996. In the Name of the Salish and Kootenai Nation: The 1855 Hell Gate Treaty and the Origin of the Flathead Indian Reservation. Pablo, Mont.: Salish Kootenai College Press.


