

Being with the Land: A Perception of Indigenous Phenomenological Ontology

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Phenomenological ontologies of intersubjective being in Indigenous conceptualizations of being in the world are directly linked to the reciprocal relationship between Indigenous groups and the land they are a part of. For example, as can be seen in Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* (2019), which is a fictional piece depicting the life of a young Inuit girl living in a far northern community, these notions of being as a part of the environment, no different than the weather or a stream within a landscape, are born from traditional Indigenous ontologies. These themes carry forward through the works of Leanne Betosamosake Simpson as well. Particularly, in her publication titled *Dancing on our Turtle's Back* (2021), she discusses the role of land in Nishnaabeg identity- not only as a place for cultural practice continuance, but in that the land has an active role in rooting identity, in participating in ceremony, and in being with the community as a member. Pertaining to the methodologies of working on this research, I reference perspectives and thoughts shared by Simpson as well as a group of geographers and anthropologists: Emilie Cameron, Sarah de Leeuw, and Caroline Desbiens. In addition to analyzing Indigenous phenomenological ontologies, the theories of intersubjective constitutions of the self, as identified in Descartes' *Second Meditation* (1641), as well as questions regarding the 'what' that makes these ontological systems exclusively Indigenous must be engaged with and answered. Many of the phenomenological ontologies of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island are inextricably linked to the land they inhabit and are manifested as physical representations of epiphenomenal qualia by the way they interact with the land, leading to intersubjective notions of the self to include the land within an Indigenous context.

In Emilie Cameron, Sarah de Leeuw, and Caroline Desbiens' publication "Indigeneity and Ontology" (2014), they discuss current and historical engagement with indigenous ontology within the fields of geography and anthropology. Particularly, they engage with notions of

Euro-Western centrism, the dialectic ‘othering’ and ‘saming’ of understanding indigenous ontologies, and the harms these lines of thought have created. In regards to methodology, they echo a quote from Sarah Hunt’s presentation at an *Indigeneity and Ontology* session in Seattle Washington where she asks the audience and fellow presenters “in whose name does a group of mostly non-Indigenous geographers gather to question the intersections of Indigeneity and ontology, and for what purpose? On what footing, for whose lives, and for whose benefit?” (Cameron et al, 2014). The ideas of self-examination and positionality in reference to discussing Indigenous ontology are central in their work. My methodologies for engaging with this material are also rooted in this positionality and mindfulness. Similarly, in Leanne Simpson’s publication *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, she introduces a Nishnaabeg concept called “Biskaabiiyang” (Simpson 2021). Literally, it means “to look back”, but in the context of scholarship its meaning can shift to “returning to ourselves” (Simpson 2021). This entails “a process by which Anishinabek researchers and scholars can evaluate how they have been impacted by colonialism in all realms of being” (Simpson 2021). While I am not Anishinabek, reflecting on how colonialism has and continues to affect me is pertinent in discussing Indigenous conceptions of ontology, and this reflection will be seen throughout this essay.

Within “Split Tooth” a discussion relating to the topic of phenomenological ontology can be seen, particularly in the ambiguous relationship between character and land which is presented in such a way as to construe them as synonymous or at the least interrelated. For example, she writes about a time in her character’s life where there was an overpopulation of foxes. Saying that it occurs in 4-7 year cycles when too many fox pups survive to see winter, most of them will end up starving as there is simply not enough food to feed them all (Tagaq, 2019). In response, Tagaq’s character’s dad takes his gun and kills some of the foxes, saving

them from a long death of starvation (61, 2019). From a western perspective, this may appear to be a simple logic-based solution, or perhaps even a moral duty. However, from the Indigenous perspective, as Tagaq alludes to, it is simply the thing to do. That is to say, Tagaq explains through this narrative an Indigenous teleological being in relation to the land. It is a purposive means to engage with the world and meet our ends as Indigenous people. Rather than it being something one “ought” to do, this is simply an example of what needs doing. It is not an act of ethics.

Leanne Simpson shares similar understandings of land-based ontologies in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*. In speaking with Nishnaabe Elder Edna Manitowabi, she is told that “our culture brings our hearts great joy... it nurtures our hearts and minds in a way that enables us to not just cope, but to live” (Simpson 2021). Elder Edna Manitowabi continues saying “in order to have a positive identity we have to be living in ways that illuminate that identity, and that propel us towards *mino bimaadiziwin*, the good life” (Simpson 2021). To engage with one’s culture as an Indigenous person necessitates a relationship to community and land, as they are foundational to cultural practices, and epistemologies. Simpson later speaks about how walking through the bush reminds her of these concepts, stating “we saw Lady Slippers, and I was reminded of our name for the flower and the story that goes with it, and then moss, and then butterflies... we walked through a birch stand and I thought of Nanabush” (the first teacher or the Elder Brother) (Simpson 2021). This example reveals differences in worldview between Indigenous people and western society. There are experiences, epistemic systems, and histories referenced and acknowledged through the land that do not exist in the broader western geist.

Shared with students at the 2023 Knowledge Makers workshop hosted at TRU on the traditional lands of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc within the Secwepemcul'ecw, Elder Mike

Arnouse of Adams Lake Indian Band discussed the importance of salmon to his community. He said that salmon are not just food, but that they bring the community together in a setting of shared learning, experience, and reciprocity (Mike Arnouse, KM workshop, February 25th, 2023). In the context of harvesting, and further through storytelling and cosmology, the salmon become a locomotive for epistemologies, culture, and relation with the land. The act of harvesting salmon in community gives physicality to the epiphenomenal qualia discussed by Frank Jackson in his publication “Epiphenomenal Qualia” (1982).

Jackson speaks of the immaterial but *real* sensations/mind-objects which, in part, inform an Indigenous ontology entrenched in *being with the land*. He discusses notions of non-causal mental states that are nonetheless real, and perhaps limited from one person to the next. He creates a thought problem to explain wherein a guy named Fred has exceptional vision that allows him to differentiate between the reds of ripe tomatoes. Jackson states that “He sees two colours where we see one, and he has in consequence developed for his own use two words 'red1' and 'red2' to mark the difference” (2, 1982). While no one else may be able to tell apart red1 from red2, their existence as separate entities is true for Fred, meaning that there are in fact, intangible non-causal mental states that can exist in certain persons which reflects their experience in being at that moment. Similarly, a non-indigenous person attending a salmon harvest may not experience the shared qualia that community members experience. Coming from a western perspective, a non-indigenous person may lack understanding of the complexities and depth that surface during a harvest, but are inherent to Indigenous phenomenological ontologies.

Thomas Nagel’s “What is it like to be a bat” speaks to the difference between imagining an experience and living the experience firsthand, or to experience something as that thing. Particularly, Nagel states that “we may call this the subjective character of experience” (2, 1974).

The idea that there are subjective characters of experience correlates with Indigenous conceptions of being, and being in relation to the land, as separate qualia from a settler participating in the same activity.

In Descartes' *Second Meditation*, he argues for a dualist system of being, wherein we have a material body which is controlled by an immaterial mind. He comes to this conclusion by utilizing a framework of doubt, where he asks questions such as: "Am I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist?" (1641). If this argument is accepted and a system of dualism is established, it can act as a foundation that can broaden the argument of the mind-body problem to include notions of an intersubjective self. In the case that a dualist system is accepted, we lose the physical boundaries that limit the extension of the self as seen in materialist views. With this in mind, in addition to the substantiation of phenomenological ontologies and physical manifestations of epiphenomenal qualia in an Indigenous context, it seems logical to conclude that the land is in fact constitutive, in part, of the self.

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