Living ON THE Land
Introduction

Indigenous Women and Knowledge

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Inquiry into Indigenous knowledge, as a field of study, has grown at both national and international levels. However, some scholars have questioned whether Indigenous knowledge stands alone as a system, revealing the struggle to validate it vis-à-vis Western concepts and ways of knowing. Others have pointed out that Indigenous knowledge can be crucial to managing natural resources, mitigating climate change, and revitalizing communities. In looking closely at this body of literature, it is possible to argue that, as a system, Indigenous knowledge is interrelated with territory, kinship, identity, governance, economy, and education (Trask 2007; Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2009; Coulthard 2010). Although scholars have observed that this knowledge is connected to how people inhabit the world, less attention has been devoted to exploring Indigenous women’s knowledge. In Indigenous societies, gender roles and responsibilities are delineated on the basis of protocols that shape the survival needs of the collective. The common preoccupation with the practical dimensions of Indigenous knowledge, however, has had the effect of decontextualizing it from the social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural processes in which it is embedded. Regardless of location and size, societies provide their members (men and women) with a sense of being in the world and with pathways to achieve...
status and recognition. Men and women often make use of different spaces and resources and, for this reason, they are knowers as well as keepers of specific knowledge. Differences between men and women’s knowledge result not only from their specific activities and responsibilities but also from the historical and contemporary social context in which this knowledge is produced and mobilized.

Emphasizing Indigenous women’s knowledge is important for several reasons. First, communities and individual experiences differ, and being an Indigenous woman is intertwined with lived experience and the worldview of her community. As noted by Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Maggie Walter, “Indigenous women’s ways of being and belonging are derived from their relationship to country, humans, and ancestral beings” (2009, 5). To ignore the specific ways in which Indigenous women know is to undermine them as active producers of knowledge that participate in complex socio-environmental community processes. Second, from an Indigenous women’s standpoint approach, it is important that we emphasize that places are connected to broader social and power relations. For example, gender cannot be separated from other systems of domination within which people operate and different degrees of privilege and penalty are accorded (Dhamoon 2015, 30). Power and penalty are accorded simultaneously within and among communities. Thus, a lack of attention to how such systems of domination work often means that Indigenous women’s interests and concerns are concealed and erased within and outside their communities (Trask 2007, 296). Indigenous women’s experiences are integral to decolonizing knowledge production.

The contributors to this book, the majority of whom are Indigenous, aim at grounding Indigenous women’s knowledge in the land both historically and presently. They also explore the ways in which Indigenous women have resisted colonial attempts to assimilate and subordinate them. The chapters in this book represent Indigenous women’s experiences beyond their domestic role and insists on connecting them to a variety of tasks within and beyond the household. To this end, the book aspires to prevent the continued neglect of Indigenous women’s knowledge and contribution to their peoples and society at large. We do not mean to suggest by our emphasis on women’s knowledge of land that women’s participation in the production of knowledge is limited to the land and territory. Others have challenged prevalent representations of Indigenous women’s domesticity by demonstrating how their work and labour have contributed to their urban households and
communities’ economy while subsidizing the market sector (Williams 2012). We do not theorize Indigenous knowledge as a practice either. Instead, the purpose of this book is to highlight the diversity of women's experiences by exploring and examining the lives of women as they are evidenced in oral history, interviews, economic processes, and life histories. The interpretative approaches pursued by the authors show the breadth of Indigenous women’s knowledge while noting its ontological and epistemological commonalities (Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2009). As the editors of this volume, we think the complexity of Indigenous women’s knowledge and experiences cannot be captured by a single methodological approach. In addressing the differences as well as the commonalities, this book seeks to reveal the systems of domination that shape women’s interactions with the land, the environment, the community, and the knowledge production process. We argue that, far from being irrelevant, such systems have rendered Indigenous women’s knowledge invisible and politically marginal. In paying attention to Indigenous women as knowledge holders, the contributors to this book anticipate opportunities for gendered social transformations and the decolonization of knowledge itself.

Indigenous Knowledge

An extensive body of literature has been written on Indigenous knowledge since the 1980s. A literature review shows that Indigenous knowledge has been often defined in opposition to Western knowledge, whose origins can be traced back to the Enlightenment and the European scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Linda Smith, the development of Western, rational, scientific knowledge was connected with colonialism and the “discovery” of the Indigenous Other by Europeans (1999, 59). Similarly, Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste (2002) has pointed out that knowledge production from the West constitutes a form of imperialism that disregards and erases other types of knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge is often defined as “traditional knowledge” (TK), a label that emphasizes non-scientific, practical knowledge that is “handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (RCAP 1996, 454; Berkes 2008, 9). This type of knowledge is not only specific to place but also cumulative, holistic, experiential, and dynamic (McGregor 2004; Kolawole 2005). Orally based Indigenous knowledge draws
“on the knowledge of a population who have lived experience of the environments in question, and provide peoples with ownership of the development process” (Briggs and Sharp 2004, 661). Although these definitions emphasize the fact that Indigenous knowledge is socially and culturally transmitted, they continue to focus on the performativity of knowledge.

Though in the past Indigenous knowledge was regarded as an obstacle to development, in the 1990s it became an essential element of development policies (Agrawal 2004). Indigenous communities, academics, and to some extent governments insisted on the benefits of using Indigenous knowledge in the planning, management, and monitoring of land and resources. Policies passed by the Northwest Territories government, for example, challenged policy makers to “incorporate Traditional Knowledge into government decisions where appropriate” (Parlee 2012, 56). International conventions have noted the importance of protecting Indigenous knowledge. Similarly, in 2014 the United Nations Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples’ Issues noted that Indigenous women could provide a unique and valuable perspective on the emergent water crisis (Inter-Agency Support Group 2014). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) stresses the right of Indigenous peoples to control and maintain their social and cultural differences by living according to their own historically developed ways of life. In 2012, a United Nations resolution further recognized “the value and the diversity of the cultures and the form of the social organization of Indigenous peoples and their holistic traditional scientific knowledge of their lands, natural resources and environment” (n.p.). Thus, Indigenous knowledge is closely considered in the search for appropriate and sustainable ways of managing resources. Many of these discourses imply that Indigenous peoples are the holders of some kind of magical secret that can save the world.

This increased attention to Indigenous knowledge also raises concerns over the hierarchical relationship between Western and Indigenous knowledge. Conflict often develops between Indigenous knowledge holders and scientists due to the insistence of Western knowledge on categorizing, organizing, and objectifying the knowledge (Kendrick 2003). For some pursuing the integration of Indigenous knowledge into Western knowledge, the process has become “a convenient abstraction, consisting of bite-sized chunks of information that can be slotted into Western paradigms, fragmented, decontextualized, a kind of quick fix, if not a panacea” (Ellen and Harris
In their attempts to universalize highly localized knowledge, actors have coopted what is essential to their interests while overlooking the power imbalances driving such cooptation (Wohling 2009, 2).

Others regard Indigenous knowledge as static and unchanging, while a few question the relevancy and even existence of such knowledge (Widdowson and Howard 2008; Flanagan 2008). The assumption that Indigenous knowledge is a relic of both an “idealized” and “backward” past is rooted in the colonial discourse of the nineteenth century (Nadasdy 2003; Howitt 2001), and was used to justify colonialism and land dispossession. Political, methodological, and epistemological differences are at the heart of the divide that exists between Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge. Indigenous scholars have been extremely critical of the way scientists have treated Indigenous knowledge, noting that indigenous knowledge has been generalized or abstracted from specific context as a way to “scientize” it. As John Briggs notes, “such an approach misses the point of the special character of local needs” (2005, 110). Patrick Sikana and Timothy Mwambazi also argue, such an approach ignores the reality of the “socio-economic and historical situation of the local community in which the technology is applied” (1996, 108).

According to Arun Agrawal (2004), “it makes much more sense to talk about multiple domains and types of knowledge, with differing logics and epistemologies” than to focus on the differences between Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge. He argues for “the recognition of a basic political truism” based on the usefulness of knowledge to different peoples instead of a focus on “the sterile dichotomy between Indigenous and Western, or traditional and scientific knowledge” (5). By concentrating on a productive dialogue that safeguards the interests of those who are disadvantaged, one is able to go beyond labels and “make intellectual space for Indigenous cultural knowledge systems that were denied in the past” (Rigney 2001, 9).

Scholars have established the need to deconstruct the hegemony of Western knowledge in order to emphasize Indigenous ways of being in the world and ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge systems have developed over millennia and are grounded in living relational schemas. Relationships not only highlight the strong attachment Indigenous peoples have to their homelands but also underline the ontological framework that land occupies in those relationships (Coulthard 2010, 79). These relationships are reciprocal and develop among people as well as between people and non-human beings.
The moral code, norms, and laws governing those relationships are based on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and obligation (Trask 2007; Kuokkanen 2009). The norms, laws, and systems of governance that guide these relationships at the level of the family, community, and human and non-human interactions are specific to place (Cajete 2000, 1995; Kuokkanen 2009) and are more than a set of practices. As such this knowledge is not fragmented into silos or categories; rather, ontologies, epistemologies, and experiences are interwoven into this system.

Indigenous knowledge draws on different sources such as stories, dreams, visions, practices, and experiences (Young-Ing 2008). Similarly, Marie Battiste and Sa’ke’j Henderson (2000) note that the interconnection of aspects of Indigenous knowledge is communicated in oral tradition, songs, artifacts, stories, dances, and ceremonies (9). From these points of view, the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge comes from social relationships and cannot exist without them. These relationships are not only embodied by human beings but also by animals, plants, spirits, water, and mountains.

Indigenous ontologies have not been destroyed by colonization although they are worn out by it (Coulthard 2010). Inuvialuk activist Rosemarie Kuptana (2008) argues that because Indigenous knowledge reflects unity rather than fragmentation, when something new is learned “the new knowledge is incorporated into a holistic worldview and becomes part of the explanation of the entire ecosystem as a whole, and explains the working of the ecosystem and not just an isolated particle” (n.p.). From these points of view, Indigenous knowledge evolves and changes over time and these new forms are a valid expression of indigeneity (Wohling 2009, 3) that continue to guide alternative visions of social relationships and coexistence (Coulthard 2010). Indigenous knowledge can be useful to operationalize a past in the face of contemporary colonialism. As such, Indigenous knowledge is a source of resistance and decolonization. In Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence, Leanne Simpson (2011) stresses the importance of “researching back” Indigenous intellectual traditions. She calls for Indigenous peoples to “delve into their own culture’s stories, philosophies, theories and concepts to align themselves with the processes and forces of regeneration, revitalization, remembering, and visioning” (148). Thus, rather than returning to a frozen Indigenous past, it is about reclaiming Indigenous knowledge to make sense of the present and imagine future possibilities. As Kahente
Horn-Miller demonstrates in her chapter, “Distortion and Healing: Finding Balance and a ‘Good Mind’ Through the Rearticulation of Sky Woman’s Journey,” stories have the potential to strengthen families and communities and provide a better understanding of the role women play in the governance of the community.

**Indigenous Women’s Standpoint**

Although scholars have done an important job in conceptualizing Indigenous knowledge, they have paid less attention to how knowledge is specific to place and differs according to gender, age, sexuality, livelihoods, and experiences of colonization. These factors have an impact on individuals’ access to knowledge and ability to use it. Gender differences raise particularly important issues. Indigenous women’s ways of knowing are shaped by their livelihoods and shared experiences of racism, colonialism, and by their experiences as leaders, mothers, sisters, and grandmothers. The “Indigenous women’s standpoint” approach developed by Maori scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000), focuses on Indigenous women’s knowledge and is informed by a feminist paradigm (1). According to Moreton-Robinson, at the centre of this methodological paradigm is a shared positioning among Indigenous women and an acknowledgment that they also have diverse individual experiences. She argues that “the intersecting oppressions of race and gender and the subsequent power relations that flow from these into the social, political, historical and material conditions of our lives [are] shared, consciously or unconsciously. These conditions and relations discursively constitute us in the everyday and shape the problems Indigenous women confront” (5). As Moreton-Robinson puts it, a “different way of being human” and the colonized status of Indigenous women provide us with a unique vantage point from which to analyze colonizing power (7).

Privileging Indigenous perspectives involves understanding that being *Indigenous* and being *woman* are derived from the relationships established with place, spiritual beings, humans, and the environment. Men and women inhabit, experience, and belong to the world and as such they are holders of knowledge. This knowledge and belonging to the world are based on the interconnections among the social, political, spiritual, economic, and natural spheres.

In Indigenous societies, gender roles and responsibilities stem from and are part of broader relationships. That is to say, Indigenous peoples and
societies differentiate between the roles that women and men assume based on social interactions and survival needs of their collective society (Cohen 1999). Feminist scholars have explored how men and women have differential knowledge of natural resources. Gender differentiation and specialization means that the Indigenous knowledge and skills held by women often differed from those held by men; this affects patterns of access, use, and control of land and resources and results in different perceptions of landscapes and priorities (Agarwal 1992). Others have shown that although men often have privileged access to resources, women have specific knowledge of resources that allows for the survival of the household (Rocheleau 1996; Wangari, Thomas-Slayter, and Rocheleau 1996). However, Indigenous women’s knowledge expands beyond the activities done by women and involves a system of inquiry that reveals Indigenous processes of observing and understanding and the protocols for being and participating in the world.

Because Indigenous knowledge is inherently tied to land, there are particular landscapes, landforms, and biomes where ceremonies are held, certain stories recited, medicines properly gathered, and transfers of knowledge properly authenticated (Morphy 1995; Basso 1996). The knowledge held by Indigenous women is lived and embodied, is a process of sharing social life, histories, economic, and political practices. Because relationships to land and identity have been mediated by colonial regulations and policies, Indigenous women’s knowledge and experiences have been underpinned by a variety of personal and communal experiences and gender processes.

As the contributors to this book show, such processes shape how knowledge, knowledge sharing, and revitalization take place. Each chapter in this book converses with these different manifestations and weaves the threads of legibility and illegibility through stories, histories, struggles, and resistance. Although the chapters mainly focus on Canada, the endeavour to stimulate a transnational conversation is also present. Altamirano-Jiménez enters these dialogues as a Zapotec scholar teaching in Canada and Kermoal enters as a Breton historian working with Métis people in Canada. We are both committed to building ethical and collaborative relationships with Indigenous scholars and communities and to centering the experiences and voices of Indigenous women. The book is organized relative to the various dimensions of Indigenous women’s knowledge. It begins with examinations of Indigenous oral history and experiences, and follows with explorations of Indigenous women’s knowledge of the land and the political, social, legal,
and economic implications of misrepresenting such knowledge. The colonial inequalities of the past that continue on into the present become apparent in legal cases, cartographic approaches, and grievances about the loss of land. The authors show that challenging and displacing hegemonic Western knowledge is required to enable other forms of literacy and knowledge to coexist. This book is a tribute to Indigenous women's profound and expansive literacy and knowledge.

In chapter 1, Kahente Horn-Miller shows how ancient stories provide teachings for contemporary Kanien’kehá:ka women regarding their roles and responsibilities. Horn-Miller, who comes from a matrilineal culture, refers to herself as Sky Woman's great-granddaughter, and as such she—as well as the other women in her community—passes down Sky Woman's knowledge. Combining first-hand knowledge with cultural and communal creation stories, Horn-Miller demonstrates how traditional learning helps to strengthen families and communities, generating new possibilities to resistance. According to the author, “it is in the interactions between Sky Woman’s life as a theory of being and our life in actual practice that her experience provides special insights” for understanding the role of Indigenous women in governing and sustaining communities.

The fact that stories have the political potential to resist the everyday exercise of power is also addressed in chapter 2. Shalene Jobin, of Cree and Métis descent, writes that her grandmother’s learning and passing on of Cree stories and teachings was a way of resisting assimilation and cultural genocide after attending a residential school. Jobin notes that the Cree stories that her grandmother recorded convey teachings “about ways of being in the world, ways of interacting with other humans and animals, and ways of being in relationship with the land.” In their respective chapters, Horn-Miller and Jobin emphasize how Indigenous knowledge continues to guide women’s resistance as well as provide alternative visions of social relationships.

In chapter 3, Carole Lévesque, Denise Geoffroy, and Geneviève Polèse are concerned with knowledge and the roles Naskapi women play in the development of the Naskapi cultural and ecological heritage. Through interviews with elders from the Kawawachikamach community in Northern Québec, the authors identify four main organizing principles of the knowledge and expertise of men and women and show how social laws govern the rules around knowledge and who is a holder of knowledge. Neither Indigenous knowledge nor laws are confined to knowledge of the environment. Both are
rooted in different ways of knowing and that knowledge is simultaneously
gendered and spiritual.

Although Indigenous women’s knowledge has continued to exist and guide
their lives, it has also remained largely “invisible.” As the contributors to this
book show, this invisibility is not an accident but is rather an expression of
the power relations that flow into the social, political, and historical struc-
tures that shape Indigenous women’s lives and the challenges they confront
in the present. For instance, large-scale resource development rarely takes
into consideration the socioeconomic and cultural implications that such
projects have for communities as a whole, to say nothing of the impact on
women in particular. Little attention has been paid to Indigenous women’s
knowledge in resource management or land use studies despite the fact
that Indigenous communities in Canada and beyond have retained many
aspects of their traditional resource use and allocation systems: including
how and what to harvest in specific seasons and how to produce, prepare,
and preserve food. Most of the research in the area of resource management
has focused on male-dominated activities, and as a result we have relatively
scant understanding of the role that women play in the gathering and pro-
cessing of resources. As Brenda Parlee and Kristine Wray note in chapter 7,
contemporary studies still reflect the idea of “man the hunter.” An idea that
has been reproduced in the legal recognition of Indigenous rights in Canada.

In chapter 4, Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez and Leanna Parker analyze
how the model of the male breadwinner was also replicated in the case
brought against Nicaragua by the Awas Tingni community. Based on
research conducted in the Atlantic coast region of Nicaragua in 2008,
the authors explore the use of mapping in securing land rights and how it
not only tends to impose a western understanding of land and resources
on Indigenous communities but it also rests on a frozen understanding of
Indigenous traditional economic activities. These authors show that the
cartographic legal approach unevenly benefits certain groups of people
and redefines Indigenous peoples’ relationship to the land. This approach
is even more problematic for Indigenous women, who have already seen
their land rights eroded through colonialism. Neither the law nor geog-
raphy are neutral, they are embedded in Western knowledge and values.
Altamirano-Jiménez and Parker argue that if Indigenous mapping is to
benefit Indigenous peoples, maps must be presented in ways that articu-
late the legal systems of Indigenous peoples.
Similarly, in chapter 5, Nathalie Kermoal notes that, in the wake of the 2003 Supreme Court decision in *R. v. Powley*, Métis rights are often framed around male activities such as hunting and fishing, rarely taking into consideration Métis women’s roles and responsibilities. By focusing on the medical expertise of Métis women in western Canada, Kermoal presents a compelling case for the connections women have with the environment. Instead of always positioning women at the periphery of inquiries, she proposes to centre Métis women’s knowledge for greater empowerment of communities. Kermoal urges scholars to undertake gender-sensitive research to understand how Métis women conceptualize their relationships with the land, and how these conceptualizations have changed over time, in order to better understand identity and territory. She argues that effective environmental consultation requires a holistic approach, which should centre on Métis women, as their knowledge may provide a deeper and richer perspective on the land.

In chapter 6, Kathy Hodgson-Smith and Nathalie Kermoal move away from “man the hunter” and discuss the traditional occupancy and land use study experience of the Métis of northwestern Saskatchewan. This land use study included the work and knowledge of women and provided valuable insights about women’s activities and their longstanding relationship to the territory and to the land. The study demonstrated that Métis women’s activities adapt to changing conditions and when faced with challenges due to appropriation or regulations, alternatives are created and developed.

On the basis of research carried out between 2007 and 2011 with seven communities in the western Arctic, Brenda Parlee and Kristine Wray argue in chapter 7 that the representation of women in the spheres of natural resource management, including the management of barren ground caribou, has in large part been obscured by stereotypes of the past. As they point out, the oversimplified image of “man the hunter” in management and policies narrows “our understanding of the place of caribou in the lives and livelihoods of peoples in the Canadian North” and has a tendency to “discount, rather than embrace, the complexity and diversity of the relationships that exist in northerly communities between human beings and the environment.”

Parlee and Wray’s findings also apply to fishing, as Zoe Todd demonstrates in the final chapter. Drawing on research conducted in Paulatuuq, Northwest Territories, Todd examines the intersections of women’s knowledge of
harvesting, fishing, and food security. She found that “these activities are crucial to a sense of continuity, providing opportunities for Paulatuuqmiut to connect with memories of the past, to create and sustain relationships with other people and with the environment, and to pass knowledge along to children and grandchildren.” In a time of climate change and potential resource exploration, this knowledge is vital to guide decision making at the local, territorial, and federal level.

The chapters in this book explore different dimensions of Indigenous women’s knowledge in different locations and through different disciplines. In the questions raised and the possibilities offered, these chapters call for transforming knowledge, colonial power imbalances, and male-dominated political processes. We hope to contribute to expanding the intellectual space for the visibility of Indigenous women’s knowledge.

References


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