

Geographies of Difference and the Crisis of Knowledge

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In the essay, *Qallunology: A Pedagogy for the Oppressor*, Derek Rasmussen tells us of the Inuits who reside in Nunavut, a territory recently recognized and one that covers one-fifth of what is Canada. Their working philosophy is first of “doing good” and avoiding “doing evil” to others. He presents a telling story in which the dominant White culture has indeed done them evil in the name of converting them to Christianity, educating them and “developing” them. Rasmussen challenges us by showing that the differences between the Inuits and White culture are so wide as to be unbridgeable.

Several questions emerge from his narrative for me. What should we do with differences and diversities that are rather deep? To what extent can two cultures interact and mutually survive? To what extent can they maintain their autonomous spaces? Is intercultural dialogue possible when one of the participating cultures dominates the other? The problem arises because capitalist society, being intrinsically expansive, cannot survive without subsuming others within its own circuit of accumulation, production and consumption. What then are the options that other cultures have?

Rasmussen’s questions can be extended beyond the Inuits and the White people of Canada and be examined within the context of an increasingly globalized world. I consider globalization as the “ecological and cultural phase” of capitalist incorporation of the world. It is the latest phase of a process that started in fifteenth-century Western Europe and continued through the phases of enclosures, conquests, colonialism, imperialism, and development. At present, corporations, pharmaceuticals, and patent regimes operate as if the natural resources belonging to indigenous cultures and indigenous knowledge systems are just waiting to be made proper use of, managed, and to have a price tag put on them. But the problem arises, as Rasmussen correctly points out, because in order for this to occur, nature needs to be separated from culture, facts from values, information from knowledge, text from context and so on.

Instead of the poetics of the local, the incorporating process of global cultures and commodities is sustained through commercial ventures, communication networks, the English language, and a twenty-four hour economy. In this drama of nightmarish “action from a distance,” the geo-cultural spaces such as that of the Inuits are erased much faster than in the previous era. As economic time is outdoing biological and cultural time, we have begun to hear the countervailing narratives not only from the Inuits but also from the adivasis of India, the Mayan peasants in Chiapas in Mexico, and the Andean peasants in Peru and Bolivia, among others. Cultures like the Inuits are facing at least five-fold crises in terms of: (1) nature’s economy; (2) social justice; (3) survival; (4) knowledge, language and identity; and (5) governance.¹ While Rasmussen’s essay explains the realm of the fourth crisis, his narrative indicates that the other four crises are also implicated. As he writes, “when

American industries breathe out, Nunavuts die of suffocation” he is illustrating the combined crises of nature and justice.

THE ETHNOSEMIOTICS OF RESISTANCE

I urge us to pay close attention to this story because the author is not merely documenting the doom and gloom of culture clash but he is illuminating the very way the Inuits have begun to recognize their experience of colonization and have begun the difficult process of understanding and naming the colonizer. They have also been certain that the best thing for the White intruders is to leave them alone and not inflict any more harm on their culture, learning, and economy. But then how delicate is the process of resisting the relations of domination? Moreover, are the Inuits actually capable of overcoming such relations of power? The message from the Inuits is: you bet, yes!

Just as the Inuits have found a countervailing notion of *Qallunology* (as the study of white men), the Santal, Munda, and Ho *adivasis* (so-called tribal people) of the Jharkhand region in India, with whom I have worked, understand “development” as a *diku chalaki* (cleverness of the *dikus*). Jharkhand is a hilly and forested region rich in forest, mineral, and hydro resources. The *adivasis* of Jharkhand have called the outsiders who have come and looted their culture, resources, and political autonomy *Dikus*. *Diku* is a derogatory term referring to the cleverness and unethical and exploitative nature of outsiders. Historically, the *adivasis* told me, there have been three sets of *dikus* for them. They are *sahukari* (merchants and moneylenders), *zamindari* (landlords), and *sarkari* (related to government and its programs of mining, heavy industries and development). Akin to the countervailing notion of *Qallunology*, *adivasis* are also resisting as well as imagining what a *diku*-less life and a good life could be.

Building on the *Qallunology* story and stories from India, let me try to articulate what these responses might mean in terms of knowledge claims by those who I call “ecological ethnicities.”² First, different cultures have continued their own traditions of knowing and being in the world which are different than the dominant techno-industrial mode. Such traditions are alive and well although each of them has come under systematic attack. In some cases, resistance to the dominating tradition has strengthened groups’ internal solidarity as well as their awareness about the colonizer. So Ivan Illich’s and Inuit’s insights are right that we need to find ways to think beyond considering knowledge as paper, brain as book, game as football, thirst as Coca-Cola, world as school, and universe as library. A different lifeway based on a different language, cultural ethos and ecological principles is perhaps the way out. Such a path would be useful not only for the host community but for the larger humanity in case we will face eventual disaster due to the perpetuation of the monoculture of knowledge.

Second, recognition of difference also entails attaining social justice for those groups who have been rendered as subordinates. Globally, millions of peasants and indigenous peoples, many of whom inhabit the world’s remaining rainforests, coastal areas, desert, and hilly and mountainous terrain, exemplify the inextricable ways the crisis of nature and the crisis of social justice are inter-linked. As the Inuits are suggesting the extractive tentacles of dominant economy and culture need to stay

home and repair their own damage so that their negative impacts are minimal. Third, cultures like the Inuits are struggling to maintain the particularities of a place and not let it be erased by the motion of global capital.

I also want to bring home the point that biological diversity can be saved only if ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversities are also saved. I would add, not only saved, but thrived and lived by the members of that community. Interestingly, the regions that are diverse ecologically also are rich in linguistic diversity. In this context, would the act of saving of endangered plant species retain the same value if the people that named that plant and knew the use of it and used to have rituals about it, are gone? What if ideas about biodiversity are written and expressed only in a dozen or so languages? Given the rapid decline of linguistic diversity, we need to suspect the very idea of biodiversity conservation without at the same time taking care of the fact that more than a quarter of all languages still spoken on earth already have fewer than one thousand speakers and will soon be moribund. Some estimate that ninety percent of the world's languages will be extinct by the next century. For example, there are only two people left that speak the Eyak language in Alaska, only five that speak Osage. In Australia, fully ninety percent of the two hundred fifty aboriginal languages are on the verge of extinction. Ethno-ecologist Gary Nabhan thus rightly comments that if he had to choose five ambassadors for biodiversity, he would not select scientists. Rather he would choose a singer, an herbalist, a photographer, a gardener, a gastronomist, and a crafts promoter.³

Finally, cases like the Inuits show that ecological ethnicities are capable of moving from a phase of protest to a phase of proposal. In a phase of "protest," people might be aware of the adverse impact of the existing policies in their lives and defend themselves from those negative consequences by pointing out inconsistencies in the officially expressed promise of these policies and seeking to implement them fully. In short, these are protests that strive to achieve fair and equitable opportunities available within the existing political space. During the "proposal" phase, these movements go beyond such demands and articulate and propose alternative programs that are based on indigenous knowledge systems, technologies of production, consumption, and social distribution.

Like Gandhi's self-reliance, or Inuit's articulation of the ideology of "doing good and not harming others," cultural communities have begun to create their nucleus of protective cell membranes so that even if a disaster happens in their link with the outside they stand a chance of survival. I am glad to know that the ecological and cultural cell membranes of the Inuits are thick enough that they have not only unlearned the oppressor, but also reaffirmed their own and continued to teach us the web of life.

1. Pramod Parajuli, "Learning from Ecological Ethnicities: Towards a Plural Political Ecology of Knowledge," in *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*, ed. John Grim (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 559-89.

2. Ibid. Pramod Parajuli, "Beyond Capitalized Nature: Ecological Ethnicity as a New Arena of Conflict in the Global Capitalist Regime," *Ecumene: A Journal of Environment, Culture, and Meaning* 5, no. 2 (1998):186-217.

3. Gary Paul Nabhan, *Cultures of Habitat* (Washington DC: Counterpoint Press, 1997).