

Book Review

Johnson, Leslie Main. Trail of Story, Traveler's Path: Reflections on Ethnoecology and Landscape. Edmonton, AB: AU Press, 2010.

Leslie Main Johnson's detailed study of the ethnoecology of Gitksan, Witsuwit'en and Gwich'in indigenous groups of northern Canada explores native people's intimate and narrative understanding of land, landscape and community. She writes:

In some ways this investigation is rooted in indigeneity, in the concept that ancient or original connection of people and land engenders a unique relationship between them that at once creates social identity, and... a deep and nuanced interaction with land which is, or should be, sustainable. (1)

Thoroughly exploring the nuances of indigenous language and "trail of story" about their environs, Johnson does not neglect the nuances of western colonialist language about ecology, mapping and land. Her carefulness results in articulate academic and philosophical conclusions about the often damaging, always challenging adaptations required of native communities today.

Johnson began her work in ethnoecology through the study of habitat formation for significant cultural plants in Northwest British Columbia. In Trail of Story, she extends this interest in sustained, endangered and obsolete landmarks of key plant localities into an analysis of the representation of place kinds, or ecotopes. She also explores the contradictions and adaptations of key landscape stories and descriptions between and within cultures. It makes for dense reading, with long interpretive sections mapping the connections between narrative, land use and terminology, and extensive citations of theory and research in the field of ethnoecology. However, overall the book moves fairly quickly thanks to Johnson's straightforward style and her willingness to share a few detailed and fascinating stories from informants/collaborators. By the time she moves into her conclusions about challenges and benefits of "the ecology of knowing the land," (Chapter 13) she has amassed ample data to support her argument.

Most powerfully, she honors and explains the experiential and linguistic connections between community and landscape. Life lessons, spiritual teachings and history are embedded in the ways the people walk the land together, because "landscape has agency" (204). The life of the land is a deep knowledge, focusing on "spatio-temporal nodes" of connection and dynamic shifts, embodied in "observation, replication and creative problem

solving,” in essence, “active engagement...[with] the storied landscape” (206). This “layered world” (208) cannot be translated or experienced through GIS and GPS mapping, modern electronic representations of geography that impose a political, mediated idea of the land over the lived landscape.

Yet, indigenous people are using GIS and GPS to move through the changing socioeconomics of contemporary land management. Johnson writes about their use, and the ways they serve or obscure effective mobility in a world dominated by reductionist colonialist concepts about land and nature. Since indigenous landscapes are part of ongoing relationships with communities and individuals, and Western science focuses on objects, not relationships, much is lost in the translation (213). Johnson seems to be calling for a more sensitive, perhaps even hybrid, collaborative approach to land/scape management when she concludes, “Resilience of the land and of human societies will be key in shaping the future” (217).

Local knowledge of place is vital in sustainable process, with ecotopes, ethnoscience and stories all part of managing resources and mapping strategies. I would be glad to see these important theoretical and academic analytical approaches applied to practical projects to build ethno/ecological resilience. If story is indeed a life-sustaining trail through the landscape, then everyone who walks the planet, indigenous or colonialist, would benefit from honoring the eloquence and wisdom of walking our path with more respect for older ways of knowing and being.