

The Land is Text: Indigenous methods for learning relationships with place
By Jessica M. Dolan, © 2020

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My goal with these Indigenous studies podcasts is to reframe how Brattleboro residents and visitors see Brattleboro, so everyone can begin to acknowledge that Brattleboro was Indigenous land, and that there are ongoing Indigenous relationships with this place: in the past, present and for the future. Indigenous land acknowledgements in writing, at events and in educational contexts have become an important practice, because, as European settler populations grew more aggressive in their occupation of land, and most particularly since the colonies broke away from England and declared Independence as the United States, colonial narratives have erased Indigenous presence in Northeast, erasing Indigenous nations’ connection to their homelands. Settler publications throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries displayed a conviction that they had a divine right to settle land in North America --called Manifest Destiny. In the process, they mischaracterized and stereotyped Native people in all manners of vicious and harmful ways, most frequently as savage, dangerous, bloodthirsty, or cunning, as a means of justifying their approaches towards colonization.

Scholars Jean O’Brien, Thomas King, Lisa Brooks, Marge Bruchac, and Christine DeLucia, among others, have all explored the kinds of tropes about Native people that historical publications created and perpetuated. One trope is that Native people simply “vanished.” Another was that they were inevitably “dying out” from some mysterious cause; part of this trope is the idea that Native people are mysterious, spiritual, rare, and noble – and yet the “last of their kind.” A third trope, as scholar Eric Wolf has described, is that Indigenous people are and were people “without history” – that is, without civilization and its higher manifestations like art, writing, fashion, music, poetry, and cuisine – and so therefore, needed to be “civilized” by Europeans and Christianity.

None of these are true. But they gesture toward common misconceptions and stereotypes that persists in New England to this day that the histories and cultures of Native people are “lost.” About this, historical anthropologist Margaret Bruchac writes:

“Textual erasures and material misrepresentations have proven to be remarkably effective strategies for obscuring the linkages that connect modern indigenous communities to their pre-colonial past. Re-colonizing is not just an antiquarian pursuit; it can be found in state-produced documents that limit indigenous sovereignty and human rights. Perhaps most ironically, the relative density or scarcity of documentary evidence still shapes our understandings of indigenous populations: the absence of evidence is routinely interpreted as ‘evidence’ of ‘absence.’”

“Colonization, in this interpretation, is not just an historical era that indigenous peoples passed through on their way to the modern (and theoretically post-colonial) world. Rather, it is an ongoing process that is reinforced by the production and dissemination of colonizing

literature and ideologies.....The products of colonial ideologies—misleading and biased texts, images, and characterizations of Indigenous people—are surprisingly durable and self-replicating. Some have been circulated and re-circulated for decades; as a result, their compelling familiarity and emotional resonance can obscure, if not displace, more factual representations. These practices and products constitute a remarkably effective methodology of historical misdirection and erasure that I characterize as ‘re-colonizing’” (Bruchac 2011: 68).

Indeed, how we read history heavily influences how we perceive the present: the past unfolds and is lived continuously in the present. In the example of New England, the popular perception that “little is known” or the projection that “we may never know” about the Indigenous inhabitants of Southern Vermont and Western Massachusetts stems precisely from that deliberate erasure, omission and obfuscation of the histories of Native lives here, and of Indigenous-settler relationships during the 17th through the 2^{1st} centuries. Yet there are abundant forms of textual material, including the landscape itself, from which to learn about Indigenous histories and lives in New England.

Indigenous historical and cultural inheritances are embodied and lived by Native people in New England today, despite centuries of attempted physical and textual genocide and ongoing racist stereotypes. Although the American and Canadian governments have been relentless in attempting to disconnect Native people from their homelands through wars, policies, residential schools, and enacting norms and narratives to kill the cultures, histories, and the peoples themselves, Indigenous people are still alive and well today all across North America. Correcting false colonial narratives and bringing to the forefront the genius and resilience of Indigenous lives is the work of Indigenous studies scholars.

In her book, “The Common Pot,” Abenaki historian Lisa Brooks describes the land and landscape as “text.” This podcast and the others I’ve produced are introductions to culturally appropriate methods for learning about Indigenous histories and lived experiences in the northeast. There are a number of ways to be an active learner of Indigenous histories and cultures that are ethically-appropriate and restorative; Indigenous studies scholars call these “Indigenous methodologies.” One first and necessary step is to suspend your belief in dominant historical narratives, to understand that histories are often written from the perspective of the so-called “winners,” or the people who were dominant and had enough resources to elevate their voices through written text, art, or otherwise. For example, when reading an historical text about Vermont, such as the book on Vermont history by Rowland E. Robinson, think, “What might have been the different perspectives and experiences of all the parties he is describing – for example, the British colonists, the French Canadians, the Green Mountain boys, and the Wabanakis?” Think - who is NOT represented in the text, who must’ve surely been alive and living in the same place at that time? This process of thoughtful and critical interrogation is called historiography. Historiography is necessary for Indigenous studies, because dominant narratives have drowned out Indigenous voices for so long.

Indigenous studies scholars use multiple forms of text to do restorative research. These pathways of learning and inquiry form the methods I follow to research and write these podcasts and do other research. One of the best ways to learn about Native cultures is to show up and listen to Native people themselves speak about their own histories and cultures, when they host educational events, lectures, classes, art exhibits, cultural days, or gatherings. There are also

great academic Native American and Indigenous Studies publications. In addition, there is a form of literature that is referred to as “treaty literature,” (Brooks 2008). Treaty literature and the agreements encoded in treaties are available to learn from in several forms: one primary source is written correspondence and documentation of political meetings between Native people and settlers. Another source is in the form of Wampum belts, which are belts woven with symbols that serve as mnemonic devices for people to understand the agreements about the relationships which the belts symbolize. For example, one of the best known wampum belts is the Two-Row Wampum belt, which was exchanged between the Mohawk Nation and Dutch settlers in what later became Albany, New York, which encoded an agreement that forever after, Indigenous nations would have sovereignty over their people, their homelands, and resources, and the newcomers would likewise have political jurisdiction and responsibility for their own people and villages; settlers were to abide by the settlement agreements arrived at with their hosts, but never interfere with Indigenous leadership or autonomy. The Mohawk people first gave this to the Dutch in the Albany area in 1613, so this agreement and its oral history have been passed through generations for 400 years.

Another form of historical “text,” is oral history. There are many oral cultures throughout the world. North American Indigenous cultures are still considered oral cultures, even though they have been writing and publishing in their own languages and European languages for hundreds of years, because essential parts of their history and culture are passed only through their oral traditions. Oral history and its transmission was and still is, an active way of teaching and learning in Indigenous communities. It is Indigenous literature, history, science, and philosophy all in one. Correspondence and treaty literature, as well as wampum, songs, stories, dances, and art, are all conduits of oral history; all of these historical and art forms are mnemonic devices for remembering philosophy, science, art, events, relationships, and social values of the past, in the present, and for the future.

One of the major Indigenous teaching methods for teaching and learning histories of relationships with place, as well as cultural values and life skills, is by learning outdoors, by physically going out on the land. This kinesthetic practice of learning in place is often described as “learning on the land.” Learning on the land can involve learning major life lessons about human social life and ecology from observing and working with the natural world, whether it be through learning from gardening, hunting, fishing, wild harvesting plants, gardening, cooking or crafting outside, or making a special journey over land on foot or horseback, or by waterway in canoes. It could also involve going to particular culturally important or sacred places, and learning about its history and peoples’ relationship with that place from a knowledgeable teacher who may share traditional stories and creation stories. Experiential learning about the environment and history by being out on the land is familiar and popular with Vermonters; many Indigenous communities also emphasize formal and informal intergenerational land-based learning, through spending time on the land together. There are many kinds of land-based learning that conveys Indigenous knowledge and relationships with land.

In terms of learning about Abenaki and Indigenous history in Vermont and New England, a second question we can ask (after considering who are the people who are Indigenous to this place), is What was and is their relationship with the land and environment of their homeland? This is a huge question that can and does take a lifetime to learn. But, we have to start

somewhere. What about starting right here, at what today is called the Retreat Farms and Retreat Meadows?

Abenakis belong to the Wabanaki Confederacy, who are “People of the Dawn, People of the East (Brooks 2012); Wabanakis refer to their homeland as “N'dakinna,” or “our land.” The Sokokis were the Abenaki people who are the original inhabitants of what later became Brattleboro and all of Southern Vermont. Over the course of the first one hundred years of colonization, Sokokis moved and took refuge with other communities of Native people – Missisquoi, Odanak, with cousins from the Wabanaki Confederacy, with Schaghticokes, Mahicans, and Mohawks. Nevertheless, when diving deep into Abenaki and Sokoki history, one cannot separate the people from the range of their homeland. In a wonderful essay on the identity of the Sokokis, linguist Gordon Day looks carefully into early writings and communications of Europeans and Native people to establish that Sokoki homeland is from Northfield, Massachusetts northwards all the way up to Cowass or Cowasuck, which was named Newbury, Vermont by settlers (Day 1998). Day continues to explain that the village of Saint Francis in Quebec, which is called Odanak by the Abenakis, was founded by a majority of Sokoki people: this area and its environs is where many Sokokis moved to when English settlers forced them to migrate from their homes. Other Sokokis moved to Missisquoi homeland, which is on Lake Champlain, or to areas around the source of the Connecticut river, on both sides of the Canadian and American borders. Day notes that a French Jesuit missionary, who traveled to New England in 1650-51, described the Connecticut River as the river of the Sokokis.

Dr. Day cites Rowland Robinson, a late 19th-Century Vermont author whose book I have reviewed for these podcasts, who learned the translation of “Sokoki” from his Saint Francis Abenaki friend John Watso as meaning, “the people who withdrew from the others.” Another interpretation is “the people who separated or broke apart.” (Robinson 1894: 34; Day 1998: 93). Bruchac has pointed out that people Indigenous to the Connecticut River valley have confusingly been referred to in texts from the 18th and 19th Centuries variously as “Schaghticokes,” “North Indians,” “Loups,” “River Indians,” and “Saint Francis Indians” (Bruchac 2011). The town name “Squakheag,” which one can find in many historical texts, is attributed to the area that settlers named Northfield, Massachusetts, and is translated to mean “fishing place,” or “place for spearing fish” (Bruchac 2011; Cabot 1921; Calloway 1990). Indeed, the areas between the two great falls – those in Bellows Falls, Vermont, and Turners, Falls Massachusetts – were historically very rich fishing places for the Sokoki. However, note: Sheldon mistranslated this place-name; the original word is Sokwakik, which means “separated land”.

Other Sokoki names for this area that we have inherited, although in anglicized forms, are Kwinitewk (for which there is variation in the spelling: Brooks leans toward Kwinitewk, others use Kwenitekw, and there is also Kwanitekw) and Wanascatok. Kwinitewk is, of course, the Connecticut River, and the word translates to mean, the “great river” (or more closely, “long river”) (Brooks 2018; Cabot 1921; Callaway 1990; Robinson 1894). And Wantastagok and Wantastekw describe the West River whose confluence with the Connecticut faces the mountain of the same name, or Mount Wantastiquet (Brooks 2018; Cabot 1921; Callaway 1990; Robinson 1894).

Like other Indigenous peoples across the continent, waterways are and were central to Abenaki habitation, history, social organization, livelihoods, and travel – since time immemorial. Historian Lisa Brooks describes Abenaki homeland using the rivers not as boundaries, but as markers of edges of overlapping territories with other Indigenous peoples. She traces Abenaki homeland as, “Inhabiting networks of waterways – or watersheds – from Lake Champlain to the west, to the Kennebec river on the east, to the mission towns of Odanak and Wolinak on the Saint Francis River to the North and the multinational towns of Megantic and Menassan.” (Brooks 2008: 275). The Connecticut River, or “Kwinitewk” in Abenaki, Brooks describes as the “Central character” of Abenaki civilization, flowing through the countries of the Koasek and Sokwakik, and a “cradle of agriculture” and “bountiful salmon” (Brooks 2008: 275).

In an interview with Liz Charlebois, an Abenaki educator, seed keeper and nurse, she describes Abenaki villages from time immemorial through the first hundred years of European invasion and co-habitation as small in comparison to other Indigenous towns like that of the Haudenosaunee. She describes the Cowasuck, Missisquoi, Elnu, Nulhegan, Pikwakit, and Pennacook as all Abenaki, all the same people. These extended family “bands” for thousands of years had villages – but also traveled seasonally for hunting, fishing, trapping, for trade, political diplomacy, and to visit friends and relatives. Bruchac describes Abenaki villages as usually consisting about 500 or more people (Bruchac 2011). The concentrations and locations of these villages and communities changed in the 18th Century, when Abenakis were forced out of their homelands by English and American settlers, concentrating Abenakis in Northern Vermont and New Hampshire, Eastern New York, and in the communities of Odanak, Wolinak, and the Eastern Townships of Quebec, or becoming “absorbed” into other Native cultures, as is the case for Abenaki kinship with Mohawks.

Dr. Bruchac also describes how Abenakis continued to inhabit their homelands even after they were forced to move away from them, by traveling through and camping, selling baskets, medicines and other wares, throughout the 19th and early 20th Century, and returning to visit their homes for generations after displaced by settlers – right up to the present. Historian Alice Nash and anthropologist Christopher Roy both describe how livelihoods of seasonal travel for land-based work continued in the 19th and 20th centuries, after European settlers dominated Abenaki homeland and they were forced to migrate or hide their identity. Trapping and hunting continued, but many Abenakis became guides for sport hunters, and basket makers who traveled and sold their crafts (Charlebois 2019; Nash 2003; Roy 2012). In the late 19th and throughout the 20th Centuries, Abenakis who remained in Vermont faced eugenics policies if they identified themselves as Native people, so many went “underground” with their Indigenous identity, as they built lives and livelihoods within Vermont society. In her book *The Common Pot*, Lisa Brooks writes:

“While some [of the ancestors of present-day Abenaki people] remained very close to home, many families took the old superhighways of the Kwinitewk, Molôdomek (Merrimack), and Kennebec south in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, returning to old villages or traveling to Massachusetts and Connecticut to seek jobs, holding a persistent sense of northern New England and/ or Southern Quebec as home. The late 20th century has been a time of reconnection, with families moving back up north to renew ties with the families who remained. It has also been a time of reconstruction, as we put the pieces of the puzzle back

together, exchanging our family stories. Writing has been an important tool in the process of recovery. Piles of documents and boxes of family photos fill so many living room corners, and they have been brought out time and again at kitchen tables, weaving images and written words into oral histories” (Brooks 2008: 276).

Many local people and visitors often wonder, what were Abenaki traditional foods and medicines? The answer to this is in many of the foods that Americans and Canadians eat today – but some that we have neglected to take up, too. Another interesting avenue of inquiry is how knowing Abenaki pre-Columbian and traditional foods and medicines can help us “read” human history on the landscape, as Abenaki people managed the Vermont landscape for food for thousands of years. One way to do this is to imagine where we are, at the Retreat Meadows, as an Abenaki village. This is exactly where I interviewed Liz Charlebois, and we were looking around at all the trees, plants, the water and the landscape as we spoke.

Contemporary scholars and Native people in this area believe that the Retreat Meadows and Retreat Farm were Abenaki settlement areas since time immemorial. One reason we can infer that is because of the petroglyphs that are etched into stones submerged in the Retreat Meadows today. We don’t know how old those petroglyphs are, but we know from historical documentation and through Indigenous iconography, that they were made by Native people and not settlers, and that they were already there when European settlers moved into the area (for more information about the petroglyphs, please listen to the podcasts on the petroglyphs). Another reason why we may infer that the Retreat Farms and meadows were Abenaki settlement places is that Abenakis returned to camp just above them, at the base of what is now called Harris Hill, throughout the 19th Century (See Rich Holschuh’s podcast on the Gypsy Camps). As Abenaki scholars have written, Abenaki people would return to camp near their original homes throughout the 19th Century, after they were displaced by European settlers. This practice is often documented by describing the campers as “gypsies” or “peddlers.”

Indigenous historians have also documented how settlers in New England often built homes and farms where Native people had already managed the land for villages and agriculture. Settlers took advantage of Indigenous knowledge to learn the foods and crops of the Northeast, and then they also took advantage of Indigenous land management skills when they acquired Indigenous lands and displaced Indigenous people. We know that the Retreat Meadows and farms were some of the earliest places that Europeans built homes and farms in Brattleboro. And, when you stand at the Retreat Farms and focus on all the different species present and the confluence of rivers, forest, field and fertile flood plain, you can see evidence of Abenaki caring for the land today. The Sokoki lived here since time immemorial, setting up and breaking down different village sites all around this area. They hunted, fished, cultivating vegetables and herbal medicines in forests, fields, and in wetland gardens. Let’s return to my interview with Liz -

JD: So, getting back to tying the historical to the present, this area where we're sitting right here, the Retreat Meadows. OK, all of this is Sokoki territory, but this particular area, and over there where the retreat farms and the Grafton Cheese Company are. Ok, Rich [Holschuh] and I both think that this area was cultivated. Because, there wasn't water all the way over there. And so, it was a nice flood plain right next to the confluence of these two rivers. So, my guess is that, and then going up into the forest there's nut trees, and there's also the very ecologically-speaking and

ethnobotanically-speaking, there's also the very fertile edges between the fields and the forests where lots of foods and medicines grew. So, I was wondering if you could speak about Abenaki traditional foods, and where they are and were.

LC: Sure! Well, I'll preface it by saying you know we definitely cultivated our land. Maybe not in the same way that Europeans did. But, you know if you read the historical texts that say when the Puritans came over, they found this place and they thought it was given to them by God, because the fields were already tilled and already ready for farm land. Well, that's because all the people who live there *died* and their fields were left. So, we definitely historically would do things like burning, and cultivation for crops, because we *are* farmers. We do corn, beans, and squash and wild edibles, and fish and game meat in this area.

In this area, we are very lucky to have a varied food source. It's not like when you go into the Great Plains and they have buffalo, and that's pretty much it. And when the buffalo died, the people died. But here we have so many different foods that we can eat, so many different game animals and so many different crops and ancient seeds. I myself keep a seed library of Indigenous seeds that I grow out.

JD: Indigenous to the northeast?

LC: Yes. Yep, for sure. And that also goes back to the trade routes and the interactions between different Tribes. Because we have Skunk Beans, and I've heard people say, "Oh, those are Mohawk beans!" But they were grown in Vermont, and Vermont is Abenaki country. And so, the way I see them they're Abenaki beans. And, I've even talked to Rowan White who is a really famous Mohawk seed keeper. And she agrees that, yes, they are same bean, but they were grown by two neighboring people! And I've heard Abenaki people say, "Well, Mohawk skunk beans." And I think to myself, "Sweetie, those are Abenaki skunk beans!"

JD: Do beans care about Nationhood? [Both laughing]

LC: That's right! And it's not unusual to think that, with the inter-marrying and the trading that was going on, that these foods would be shared by both communities. Especially considering there are no real lines, you know, like state lines. Those are imaginary constructs built up by white folk when they came here. So...

JD: So, what are some of the indigenous game and fish and birds, did people hunt birds as well, for food?

LC: Yeah, like, well, duck and turkey and for sure... So, there's rabbit, there's squirrel, there's deer, there's beaver, bear... You know some people will eat bear. I choose not to, because I feel it's taboo. But I do know Abenakis who do eat bear. But we also have a Bear Clan [laughing]

JD: I was going to say with Haudenosaunee people, I know sometimes people who are of a certain clan won't eat that food. But I'm not sure about the deer clan. But I just know it to be true for, say, the Beaver clan, the Bear Clan, and Eel clan for sure.

LC: For sure! Yes, well eel is another traditional food... For fish, there's shad, sturgeon... And Abenakis, we're really lucky that we always were ocean people *and* lake people, mountain people. So, the variety in the food also has to do with the variety in our homeland. Our homeland is not uniform. Traveling from Eastern New York to the ocean, you can pass I don't know how many different types of ecosystems, and all the different animals and fish that live there. You know, trout. Think of all the fish that live in the water? Those are the fish that we would've been eating. But I know for sure about shad because we have stories that the shad are running when the shad berries are blossoming.

JD: Nice! Ohhh, hmmm, ecological indicators of when it's time to harvest things.

LC: Yep, for sure. And think about wild edibles: lots of berries. Berries are very central in native life here: strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, black raspberries, shad berries.

JD: What those ones who taught me about at the Food Summit They're sort of green. Were they more of a bush, like a taller bush? Um, I can't remember.

LC: Are you talking about the Autumn Olives?

JD: Yeah! re those are actually more like fruits?

LC: Well they're berries, but they're an introduced invasive.

JD: Oh, they are, ok!

LC: So, but apples are also introduced. And I have I guess a different opinion about introduced foods than a lot of people do. And a lot of these foods have now been here for hundreds of years. Is it the ideal that we have these foods here? No, it's not, because they're not Indigenous to this area. But, our ancestors would have been eating those foods once they discovered they were edible. So, are they traditionally Indigenous foods? No, they are not. However, they have value in our communities.

JD: There's a lot of Native folks who I've talked to who have talked about 'naturalized knowledge systems,' and how people incorporated what was *useful* into their pharmacopeia, and their palate -- I guess gastronomy, you could say -- because that was just the way it's not like people were being too purist. As time went on, people felt if something was useful, and worked, and nutritious, and tasty, then why wouldn't they embrace it?

LC: Yes, exactly! It's sort of like Velcro! And duct tape! Our ancestors if they had access to it, you bet they would be using it! [laughing] We are a living, adaptable culture. If you are not able to adapt to your environment, to your food systems, then you die. And we've proven that Indigenous people have been here for 10 at least tens of thousands of years. Our communities would not have been sustainable were we not adaptable.

JD: Right, that's true! What if people were like, "Nope, it's woolly mammoth - or else! Unless it's Saber Tooth tiger, it's not tradish!"

LC: Exactly! Exactly! [laughing].

Liz describes a varied and nutrient rich diet, based upon a combination of hunting, fishing, harvesting, and agriculture. Frederick Wiseman has recently published a book about this, too, that is called, “The Seven Sisters” (Wiseman 2018). Main Abenaki foods are corn, beans, squash, sunchokes, ground cherries, venison – game animals, shad, salmon, fowl, and all the fish berries. Abenakis managed trees for their nuts, such as chestnut, walnut, hickories, beechnut. In Liz’s role as an educator, seed-keeper, and cook, she often prepares educational dinners for people to try Abenaki cuisine today. Restoring traditional cuisine, along with arts, dance, music, language, gardening, seed varieties, ceremonies, games, and other elements of Abenaki culture are all part of an Indigenous resurgence occurring across North America today. Another way to decolonize from mainstream society’s mis-education about Indigenous people and honor them today is to appreciate their current creative, intellectual, artistic, athletic, political and other ongoing contributions to the world. Knowing this, I asked Liz,

JD: What are some of the most exciting contemporary things that Abenaki people are working on?

LC: Oh, I think there's a lot, honestly! And part of it has to do with the state recognition, although you know, I find that we don't need a government to acknowledge us to be who we are. But, it's given more freedom for lots of Abenaki people to be more expressive. So, I think that there's a big resurgence in the language. I think there's a big resurgence in our Indigenous food ways, which is really important, which I didn't get much of a chance to talk about but we will. Also, art and culture. Myself, I do a form of art that probably hasn't been done here in hundreds of years, the Birch Bark biting, which is traditionally definitely an art form that our people would have done. But no one was doing it, and had even heard of it for hundreds of years. But there's evidence of it in museums. So, I think that just overall there is a huge cultural resurgence in lots of aspect of Abenaki life right now. And it's wonderful!

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