

Politics of Inner Place.....

Gus Van Harten

What is place? A niche... a spot... a situation in time. Identity. Beliefs. A quiltwork of designs, a web of choices, a muster of visits to other places, and a need to dwell in one's own.

Place is in society: in the home, school, work, library, grocery store, mall. These are the places where I have been shown the pathways. They can be very simple: perhaps to believe in God, finish school, raise a family, find a job; perhaps to watch football and drink beer after church on Sunday afternoon.

Portrayed as that which is truly concrete, that which is part of the Real World: places that call and motivate us in our efforts to succeed by meeting society's standards. Taught to me, touched to me, shown, sung, and fed to me since my life began. Equality of opportunity for success is practically guaranteed, if only I obey a few simple rules. These are the outer places of my culture and society.

But place is also deep inside. True inner place is more elusive than those manufactured in society, those culturally-molded to fit me so snugly. And to avoid a schizophrenia of wills, I must question social rules of outer place.

This is a story about visits to different places: societal places, concrete places, places in the Real World. Most of all, it is about small steps at the beginning of the long journey to a place within where true identity emerges and where life becomes an expression of true meaning and purpose in an often untruthful world.

In *The Natural Alien*, Neil Evernden presents E. F. Schumacher's description of the confusion and misunderstanding that he experienced when confronted with the gap between his beliefs and what which was taught to him in societal places:

All through school and university I had been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and that seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance to the conduct of my life. I remembered that for many years my perplexity had been complete; and no interpreter had come along to help me. It remained complete until I ceased to suspect the sanity of my perceptions and began, instead, to suspect the soundness of the maps.¹

Schumacher's difficulties arose from his inability to fit his true beliefs, motives, and commitments into the molds provided him by the outside world, the maps to the Real World. "The map is not the territory," writes Evernden, but "when a gap appears between what one experiences as real and what is officially recognized as real, conflict is inevitable."²

This is the deep conflict that has arisen in me as I try to reconcile my inner place with that which is often taught to me in outer places of home, school, work, and country.

Outer place should mean locality. Your home, your village, your neighbourhood. The place where you link identity to roots, to knowledge of the outside world, to your memories of the stages of existence. Al Purdy writes of the meaning of place as homeland in this excerpt from the poem "Man Without a Country"³

I am a child fishing for sunfish in a river
I am learning to skate under the town bridge in Trenton
I am lost for two days in the northern forest
I am going to school and failing at French and Latin
I am learning what a strange lonely place is myself
reflecting the present reiterating the past
reconnoitering the future

These are my history
the story of myself
for I am the land
and the land has become me

But I stand on stolen land. My identity changes with growing awareness about the atrocities committed in the outer places where I have lived. The tragedy that continues to happen in the Americas, after more than 500 years, is splayed beneath me each time I step outside; the more I read and learn, the more visible are the stains of blood on the snow and in the soil. And voices of victims call to me in classrooms, conference halls, shopping malls: Anna Mae Aquash, the Lubicon Cree.

AAnna Mae Aquash was a 31-year-old Micmac Indian from Nova Scotia whose murdered body was found beside a road on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, in February, 1976.⁴ She was a well-known activist in the American Indian Movement (AIM). Seven months before, on June 27, 1975, a shoot-out had taken place on the reservation between FBI agents and Sioux members of AIM, in which two agents and one Indian were killed.

Aquash's body was delivered to an FBI medical examiner who carried out a rapid autopsy and sent the body for burial in an unmarked grave without a death or burial certificate, reporting exposure as the cause of death; her identity was not made public until after the burial.

Aquash's hands were not buried with the rest of her body. Instead, they were severed from her arms at the wrists, placed in a jar, and sent to the FBI. After learning of her murder, the friends and family of Aquash demanded that her body be exhumed and re-examined. The second autopsy determined that she had been shot at close range in the back her head. Execution style, it was said.

A body without hands exhumed from the soil, her murderers never identified. Originally buried without traditional Native rituals after being manhandled and violated by a man wearing gloves, who was obeying orders after many years of training.

Could the doctor have known her? Did he mourn her passing? Had he performed other autopsies on Indian bodies? Activists for AIM or enemies of the state?



Lubicon hunting area as in the previous twenty years. Animal numbers plummeted. The oil companies were soon producing revenues of \$1.2 million a day, while the Lubicon hunting and trapping economy was for all practical purposes destroyed.⁵

The Lubicon Cree were an afterthought of Western expansion and genocide in the New World, a beleaguered holdout in the long war for privatized control of the land that meant annihilation of homeland.

As the white historian R. G. Robertson announced in 1969, demonstrating the dominant mindset of his society:

We all accept development as being good. Like motherhood, you don't have to argue about it. Any fool knows it is good.⁶

He was speaking at the Third Northern Resource

Autopsies performed like modern ritual.
 No burning of sweet grass or tobacco. No last weeping rites, family ceremonies. No placement with love in trees. Only the tilted lights, metal table, plastic bag, concrete floor.
 Perhaps a cigarette.



Oil was discovered in 1979 on the homeland of the Lubicon Cree in northern Alberta. Soon, over 100 oil companies were searching for profit on the land where the Lubicon ate and slept, sang and danced, trapped and hunted; where they experienced their lives and tried to inhabit their place.

The Alberta government carried out no studies of the possible environmental impact of the bulldozing, blasting, and drilling. No controls were enforced. Why would there be a need to control economic growth? To regulate development? To monitor the creation of jobs?

John Goddard writes of what happened to the place of the Lubicon in their homeland, their real world:

the region became the most active exploration and drilling field in the country. Over the next five years, crews drilled more than four hundred wells within a fifteen-mile radius of the Lubicon community... Bulldozers buried traps and blocked animal trails, sometimes deliberately; other traps were looted. Fires raged out of control: in 1980 alone, fire destroyed as much of the

Conference, held in Whitehorse.

Soon after the conference, plans were announced for the construction of an oil pipeline through the Mackenzie Valley. From Alaska, through the Yukon and Northwest Territories, to southern Alberta. Across 3,800 kilometres. Through communities of Dene, Inuit, and Metis. Slicing the roaming grounds of herds of caribou, packs of wolves, flocks of geese.⁷ A long, thin, black scar on the wide face of the land. For development, growth, jobs, and profit; for "motherhood," according to loud voices from the outer places I have inhabited in my culture.

For more than 500 years, we have accepted development as sacred, more sacred than the union between home and land to form a social place where people can live together with common purpose and commitment to each other in communities, villages, and neighbourhoods.



I have felt the aura of guilt and contradiction – of *misplacement* – described by Frederick Turner in *Beyond Geography*, as he wandered the hills of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota:

I saw myself there as both an inheritor of conquest and as an alien. I knew that both the Lakota and the Cheyenne had held sacred the Black Hills I could see in the westward distance, but I knew also that a belief in the sacredness of lands was not in my heritage. The distance I felt there was more than geographical. I could see the Black Hills. I was on a piece of aboriginal America. But I was estranged by history from them.⁸

As a visitor to spiritually distant Native places in the land, Turner's identity was divorced from his locale. He is part of a culture that finds it difficult to recognize deep meaning in place because of its failure to value closeness with the land, its denial of the need for roots, for common experience and feelings of intimacy, for commitment to beliefs. Denial of the need for homeland.

Souls more wise to the proper place of humans in Nature must shudder at deeds of the modern, industrialized world: a feeding frenzy of myopics intent on expanding forever and achieving victory in competition at any cost. Fixed on the next export contract, the next development project, the next TSE? dot, the next dollar.

New World Order. New era of Free Market Capitalism: freer trade, freer capital, freer profit. Even if the pursuit of this freedom degrades and destroys people's place in community and Nature, it must be maintained. Triumphant we are told that there will be a new global village; I need only pay the tolls on highways of international information, trade, and finance for my business stake in the world of the future. Does this assume the obsolescence of local communities?

The triumph of the market has been consummated. But how can a system based on global competition recognize the sacredness of local relationships between people and local ties to the land? It becomes necessary for towns in northern Ontario to disappear when corporations depart, for indigenous peoples in Amazonia to be evicted from the forest, even for union organizers and human rights workers in Columbia to be murdered. This is the way the race must be run, these are the imperatives of the Real World.

Disrespect the Earth, steal the land, and discredit whatever is shared among the people. By any means necessary, lower wages, reduce costs, and maximize profit. These are the dictates of the market, forged on tablets of stone, guided by the Invisible Hand of God. Surely, the hand is gloved to insulate it from diseases of locality: common purpose among people, respect for the local land, sharing, justice, love.

Globalization causing the alienation and erosion of place.

Money comes before morality for countries and corporations that must by definition maximize profit to survive and cannot afford more than a token commitment to people and place. In *The Culture of Terrorism*, Noam Chomsky calls corporate freedoms of trade and investment the Fifth Freedom, which guarantees:

the freedom to rob, to exploit and to dominate, to undertake any course of action to ensure that existing privilege is protected and advanced.¹⁰

To drill 500 oil wells within a 15-mile radius of the home community of the Lubicon Cree. To lie and deceive about the murder of Native activist Anna Mae Aquash. To ensure freedoms of the market by violating the basic rights of human beings, and the sanctity of Nature. To mur-

der opposition, assassinate dissent, and kill the potential for positive social change.

Motives and values. Science and conscience. Home and land. As these things are increasingly rent apart, what remains of the common place for people?

What will be my place, my niche, my spot; where can I transform rage into courage? Where can I return to beliefs, redefine my identity? To draw my own maps and navigate my own way. To find the strength to speak and the will to take action.

In *The Politics of Cruelty*, Kate Millet affirms the need for people to uncover the truth about state use of torture in the contemporary world so as to join in its condemnation:

The lesson of torture is this silence. Just as the torturer boasts – no one will ever hear you, no one will ever know, no one will ever discover.

For that reason, then, the silence must end, must be broken, the victim's voice be restored, since otherwise the torturers are never negated or defeated or even counterbalanced, they are merely in or out of power.¹¹

The need to learn about political truth and advocate positive change in society. This is the process of finding an inner place from which to take political action.

Millet describes the importance of repelling despair and working for change. To truly believe in Amnesty International's motto, for instance, that it is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness. As Millet states:

Ultimately, as individuals we are all helpless before the state, the collective power of armies and governments... But the knowledge of torture is itself a political act, just as silence or ignorance of it have political consequence. To speak the unspeakable is the beginning of action.¹²

Thus, awareness is liberating. It precedes understanding, action, and defiance. It allows one to break the conspiracy of silence that pervades cultural places and pathways.

I look to the courage of others for inspiration. Some who live and work under the constant, dripping threat of abduction, imprisonment, rape, torture, assassination. Many more who have been abused and intimidated, but remain defiant by returning to a place inside where they find the will to speak and the strength to carry on.

Colleen Beaumier, a Liberal Member of Parliament, spoke in the House of Commons on December 8, 1994 about being beaten and raped as a young woman. It was the first time she had revealed this in public, she had never told her children. Beaumier was responding to suggestions from a Reform MP that violence against women in Canada is overstated.

"Give them .32s" to defend themselves, one Reform MP had quipped; others guffawed. This in the wake of the five-year anniversary

of the Montreal Massacre, in which 14 women were brutally murdered because of their sex. This after several women were killed *that very week* by men, usually their "estranged" husband. With a machete, with a piece of wood; on a street in Hamilton, in a Toronto apartment.

Said Beaumier of her decision to speak about the past abuse:

It was something I had to deal with at the time. I dealt with it and put it away. But I couldn't sit and listen to it being so trivialized¹³

The way forward lies in the actions of those who are willing to break the silence and challenge the deceit. Those who reach out from their place to share wisdom with millions, to confront horrors of the past and bring them to bear on places in the present and pathways for the future.

Reflected in mirrors are billions of stars, leaving trails in the self, pointing to alternate routes, leading to knowledge disguised on journeys unscripted. The journey will be rewarding. Ideally, from experience emerges wisdom: finding one's true place, a philosophy of life that gives purpose and meaning to existence.

Inner place is where we take our stand. No culture is inherently evil. The greatest beauty in people is their capacity to speak, to act, to struggle together; out of hope, to make a better world.

Isabel Allende, the exiled niece of Chile's assassinated president Salvador Allende, describes the importance of the political novels she writes as a way to communicate ideas and raise her voice:

I feel that writing is an act of hope, a sort of communion with our fellow men. The writer of good will carries a lamp to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more – a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to initiate, if possible, a change in the conscience of some people.¹⁴

To make a small difference as people, to trust our true nature, to inhabit an inner place.

Otherwise we are doomed to wander among places on mass-produced and pre-determined pathways, from home to school, school to job, job to mall. Transient workers on the map of spiritual identity. Forever seeking an inner place where belief leads to meaning and commitment grows from truth.

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Notes

1 E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977) 1; in Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 26.

2 Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 25.

3 Al Purdy, "Man Without a Country," in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 392-394.

4 All information about the murder of Anna Mae Aquash from

Warren Allmand, "15 years later, few answers about the murder of Anna Mae Aquash," in *The Toronto Star* (31 August 1993) A13.

5 John Goddard, *Last Stand of the Lubicon Cree* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991) 3.

6 R. G. Robertson, "Concepts in Northern Development: An Historical Review of the Political and Economic Development of Canada's North," in *The Developing North* (Whitehorse: Third Northern Resource Conference, April 1969).

7 Thomas R. Berger, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland. The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry: Volume One* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1977).

8 Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983) xiii.

9 Toronto Stock Exchange.

10 Chomsky describes further how the Fifth Freedom is pre-eminent in the dominant ideology of the West, and has therefore been "the operative principle that accounts for a substantial part of what the U.S. government does in the world" despite it being "overlooked when Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced the Four Freedoms that the U.S. and its allies would uphold in the conflict with fascism: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear." see Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Boston: South End Press, 1988) 1-2.

11 Kate Millet, *The Politics of Cruelty* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994) 301.

12 *ibid*, 296.

13 "Darts and Laurels," in *The Toronto Star* (8 December 1994) A12.

14 Isabel Allende, "Writing As an Act of Hope," in *Paths of Resistance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) 48-49.



Photo by Anne Bell