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## Psychogeography reimaged<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

A majority of the scholarship on psychogeography focuses on the impact of architecture, urban environments, and the physical construction of space and place on the psyche, emotions, behaviour, and health of individuals and society. Some use this approach as a way to delve into the soul of a city. Theoretical work on historical ecology, spiritual ecology, and spiritual geography offer new perspectives on the human-landscape dynamic, yet they lack psychological depth. This article explores the psychogeographical dimension of non-urban, Indigenous, and novel landscapes with an emphasis on early childhood development and spatial justice. Case studies—on the Akawaio in the Guiana Highlands of South America; and Indigital Schools, an educational technology startup in Australia—demonstrate the applicability of psychogeography for diverse contexts. Ultimately, this reimaging blazes a trail deeper into the soul(s) of the land.

### Keywords

psychology, geography, psychogeography, landscape, edtech, Indigenous peoples, Akawaio, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

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**Introduction**

The term 'psycho geography' was invented by Guy Debord (1956) who was inspired by the French nineteenth century poet and writer Charles Baudelaire's (1863) concept of a flaneur, an urban wanderer, and *dérive*, a mode of 'drifting' through varied ambiances. In *Theory of the Dérive*, Debord describes how these concepts informed his definition of psycho geography (1956: 23): 'The study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.' In *Psycho geography*, Merlin Coverley offers another definition (2010: 10): 'In broad terms, psycho geography is, as the name suggests, the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioral impact of urban place.' Much of the literature on psycho geography is preoccupied with the influence of urban spaces and places on the psyche, emotions, behaviour, and health of individuals and society (Self, 2007; Arnold, 2019; Pyry, 2019). For example, an article in *The Conversation* is poetically entitled: *Psycho geography: A way to delve into the soul of a city* (Lyons, 2017).

This article revisits, explores, and reimagines the theory of psycho geography to demonstrate its applicability to Indigenous, rural/local/non-urban, and novel landscapes (Teixeira & Fernandes, 2020); health and early childhood development (Dankiw et al., 2020); educational technology (edtech; Donahoe et al., 2019); civic ecology (Krasny et al., 2015); Indigenous journalism (Hanusch, 2013); self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2004); and spatial justice (Soja, 2010).

Humans rely on their environments for water, food, shelter, energy, and intangible benefits such as mental health, happiness, and spiritual fulfillment. Some describe these as cultural ecosystem services that provide psychological, philosophical, and social benefits essential to human wellbeing (Russell et al., 2013). Likewise, there are many dangers, threats, and symbolic meanings in our environments that influence cognition, attitude and identity (Stedman, 2002).

The human-environment relationship is dialectic. Physical and human spaces converge through exchanges that shape and reshape landscape morphology (Sauer, 1925). As outlined in the theory of historical ecological landscape (Balée, 2012), humans are critical co-evolutionary components of ecosystems that cannot be separated from them. In his fieldwork in the lowlands of Amazonia, Balée documented and analyzed ancient and contemporary human modifications of the environment through the construction of canals, levees, forest gardens, and anthropogenic soils known as *terra preta* or Amazonian Dark Earth. These discoveries informed Balée's theory of historical ecology and the idea that much of Amazonia is composed of cultural forests (2013). According to this perspective, every part of the Earth is subject to human influence, including through carbon emissions leading to a new geologic time period known as the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002).

This article builds on the theory of historical ecology with a deeper analysis and understanding of the psychological dialectics situated in rural, Indigenous, and novel landscapes. The fields of spiritual ecology (Sponsel, 2012) and spiritual geography (Cooper, 2019) complement historical ecology with spiritual and religious perspectives, land ethics (Leopold, 1949), and natural resource management techniques. Despite the merits of these approaches, they often neglect the psychological dimension of landscape that is central to understanding the nuances of Indigenous ontology and territory, demanding a new way of thinking.

Among many Indigenous peoples and local communities, land is central to life. It is composed of diverse habitats, resources, and beings that are potentially dangerous or helpful, having significant impacts on the psyche, behaviour, and health of individuals and populations. This article uses the theory of psychogeography to build a bridge between academia and Indigenous ontology with a theoretical and practical space that fosters self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2004) and spatial justice (Soja, 2010) for Indigenous and rural peoples.

Two case studies demonstrate the applicability of psychogeography as a framework for interpreting different Indigenous conceptual systems and non-urban landscapes. The first focuses on the Akawaio in the Guiana Highlands of South America. A deeper understanding of their beliefs and practices clearly demonstrates the geographical (Cooper, 2019), psychological (Stedman, 2002), eco-psychological (Roszak, 1995), emotional (Bondi, 2016), and cultural dynamics that influence perception, use, management and health of landscapes.

The second case study uses psychogeography to analyze an edtech startup in Australia called Indigital Schools that uses augmented, virtual, and mixed reality (AR, VR, and MR) devices and applications, especially within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landscapes. This innovative company aims to foster digital literacy, knowledge preservation, education, and tourism using modern technology in the classroom and community.

Not only do these case studies explore different conceptual and physical landscapes, they also diverge in the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a history of exposure to settler colonialism (Maddison, 2013) while the Akawaio are influenced by classical and neocolonialism (Rivas-Ramírez & Prieto Rios, 2020). This difference adds nuance to the investigation. It also indicates a need for further research to clearly interpret the psychogeographical legacy of diverse forms of colonialism and political violence on Indigenous peoples and rural landscapes.

### **Case Study #1: Akawaio psychogeography**

The Akawaio live in the Upper Mazaruni River basin of the Pakaraima Mountains in the small highly forested Amazonian country of Guyana in northern South America. They navigate and maintain their landscapes by adhering to strict social and environmental ethics and taboos developed over thousands of years through countless interactions with stones, plants, trees, animals, neighboring communities, and other-than-human masters and mistresses of animals, resources, and places (see Hallowell, 2002 [1960]; Colson & Armellada, 1990; Thornton, 2011; Cooper, 2015). Beginning in the late fifteenth century

(Rodway, 1888), they were exposed to colonial actors, religious institutions, governmental structures, and international organisations. Recent ethnographic research on the Akawaio focuses on minerals and border tension (Roopnaraine, 1995); language (Fox, 2003); land occupation, management, use, and conceptualization (Colson, 1977; 2001; 2009); spiritual beliefs and practices (Cooper, 2015; 2019); and syncretism with introduced Christian words, concepts, and rituals (Cooper, 2020; Amaral, 2019).

Much of the Akawaio territory in the Guiana Highlands is forested, though communities are generally located in savannah clearings along rivers and tributaries that pass through the region including the Mazaruni, Kako, Kukui, and Kamarang Rivers. Neighboring groups include the Ingarikó (in northern Estado de Roraima, Brazil; Ka'pon), Arekuna and other Pemon peoples to the west, Patamona (Ka'pon) in the east, Makushi (Pemon) to the southeast, and Taurepan (Pemon) to the southwest. According to oral histories, the ancestors of many of these Indigenous groups, including the Akawaio, were pushed out of coastal regions when colonialists began to arrive in earnest in the late sixteenth century (Cooper, 2015). Some were drawn to the Europeans and their knowledge and technologies, others fled to the highlands as a refuge from the disease, slavery, and conversion that swept through the lowlands. The history of forced migration and acculturation left a legacy of suspicion and exceptionalism in the highlands.

During fieldwork in 2013 (Cooper, 2015), the Akawaio and the Upper Mazaruni District Council rejected Guyanese government plans to adopt the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) that offered money to Indigenous villages in return for restrictions on the use and access to their ancestral forests. The LCDS was more widely adopted in the lowlands among the Makushi in Surama, Yupukari, Rewa, Annai, and other villages in the North Rupununi District Council. This disparity suggests that the lowland villages are more accessible (physically and administratively) and acculturated relative to the highland geographies of the Akawaio and other Ka'pon peoples (Cooper, 2015).

The most charismatic example of resistance in the Pakaraima Mountains is the Akawaio highland syncretic revitalization movement/religion known as Alleluia (Butt, 1960; Staats, 1996; Amaral, 2019; Cooper, 2020). According to oral history, the movement started in the lowlands of the Rupununi Savannah with a Makushi man named I'siwon who had a series of visions and allegedly traveled to England and brought back Alleluia (Cooper, 2015). I'siwon taught this new religion to several disciples who traveled around sharing the movement with others, including the Akawaio in the highlands. The movement faded away in the lowlands, displaced by various Christian missionary denominations including the Anglican Church, but was able to survive and thrive in the relative isolation of the highlands thanks to a series of pukena'ton (prophet leaders; Cooper, 2015).

Today, Alleluia is thriving in the highland geography of the Pakaraima Mountains with approximately 26 churches in the circum-Mount Roraima landscape that transcends Guyana, Brazil, and Venezuela (Cooper, 2020). Most of the churches are in Akawaio villages, including the headquarters located in Amokokupai near Phillipai Village. As explained by Staats (1996: 171; Cooper, 2015: 238): 'Despite internal disagreements, false starts, and the eventual adoption of a European signifier for the supreme deity, Alleluia followers have consistently presented the religion to travelers, missionaries, and ethnographers as a means of resisting coastal spiritual influence.' Resistance is clearly a fundamental aspect of the history, religion, psychology, and geography of the Guiana Highlands.

According to anthropologist James Whitaker who recently visited the Upper Mazaruni basin, many of the Akawaio (especially the Alleluia) living in Kamarang and Warawatta reject COVID-19 vaccines believing that they are part of a wider conspiracy to harm or 'spoil' them and take their land (personal communication, January 2021). Audrey Colson recently said that many Arekuna in Paruima Village (a Seventh-day Adventist Mission on the Kamarang River) also reject vaccines based on similar suspicions (personal communication, December 2021; see Tierney, 2001).

Throughout the Amazonian biome, including the highland Alleluia and Akawaio territories, the forest can be a dangerous place. One of the leading causes of death in this region comes from falling trees and branches. Since the tropical forest environment has nutrient-poor soils, Indigenous peoples must continually clear small plots of land and burn them to fix nutrients in the earth that support staple foods such as cassava, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, bananas, and more. The tropical forest environment can also pose threats from venomous snakes, jaguars, mosquitoes, biting ants, flies, other-than-human masters of animals, resources, and places (e.g., *poito'ma* and *amaiyko'*, small people that are sometimes referred to as 'nature spirits' or *imawariton*; Cooper, 2015), and many other pests and pathogens. These threats are even more pronounced at night when nocturnal creatures come out and visibility is limited. Historically, the forest was also a dangerous place because one could encounter a hostile enemy there (Chagnon, 1968; Colson, 2001; Whitehead, 2002). For all of these reasons, the forest is not only a source of food and resources, but also a potentially dangerous environment that is deeply engrained in the Akawaio psyche.

In the tropical forest environment, villages are like islands in a sea of trees where rivers are the primary infrastructure. These rivers pose significant opportunities and risks. Riparian zones are important sources of water, food, transport, and livelihoods; they also cause many deaths from drowning especially during the wet season when rivers become torrents. Rivers are also considered dangerous because one might have an unwanted encounter with an enemy there. In the local belief system, rivers, streams, ponds, and lakes are the home of *rato*, a 'water spirit force' that is the master of fish (a staple food in the area) and all other creatures and resources in the water (Colson & Armellada, 1990).

In addition to an abundance of rivers, the Guiana Highlands are composed of many majestic tepuis, table-top mesas known as the 'house of the spirits' or 'house of the gods' (Nieto & Derka, 2012). There are many taboos associated with visiting tepuis, as well as other mountains, hills, rocky outcroppings, and caves widely considered dangerous to go to, touch, look at, and think about (Cooper, 2018: 11). According to Akawaio Alleluia elders in Amokokupai, there is a cave outside the village called *Mo'kari Yen*, meaning 'taking out cave' where 'people would take others and eat them' (Cooper, 2015: 91).

The Akawaio are known for putting pepper in their eyes to protect themselves from looking at rocky outcroppings where a 'mountain spirit force' known as *piyai'ma* or *atai-tai* resides (Colson & Armellada 1990). These giant hairy humanoids are the most powerful masters of animals, resources, and places in the Akawaio highlands. They are known for kidnapping young children and making you get lost in the forest, though they can also be helpful to a *piyai'san* (*p-*, one who is; *iyai*, *iai*, or *ia*, spirit; *-san*, kin; *payé* in Brazilian Portuguese; shaman, *piyaiman*, or *piaiman* in English) who may call to *piyai'ma* for assistance and cooling powers during a *séance* (Cooper, 2015). *Piyai'ma* is said to wake up at dusk when everyone else is going to sleep, so there is a strong correlation

between these hairy giants and the night when dangerous nocturnal animals are known to proliferate.

Due to omnipresent threats, the Akawaio have social and environmental ethics and taboos that limit violence and death. The clearest manifestation of this is locally known as e'toto (meaning 'enemy'; see Colson, 2001) or kanaima. Among the Akawaio, these two words are often used interchangeably, while kanaima is more widely known and used in the lowlands (Whitehead, 2002). E'toto and kanaima are many things, including an invisible enemy, a dangerous spirit force, a hoarder, an outsider, an invader, a sorcerer, a group of attackers, a murder who strikes at night, a bird, a bat; and a form of anti-structure, control, and limitation on hoarding and violence (Colson, 2001). For the Akawaio, nearly every death is attributed to e'toto.

With a better understanding of the Akawaio, their landscape, and the various risks, threats, and opportunities that compose their territory, it becomes easier to interpret their psychology, behaviour, emotions, and health. These are just a few examples of the psychogeography of the Akawaio that help to explain the applicability of this term to an Indigenous conceptual system and landscape. The next case study offers another example of how an expanded understanding of psychogeography applies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and an innovative educational technology startup in Australia.

### **Case Study #2: Indigital Schools**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia inhabit diverse landscapes that are distinct from the tropical forests of Amazonia where the Akawaio live. They also have different colonial histories (Maddison, 2013). However, their conceptual systems have much in common, including animist beliefs that the surrounding environment is imbued with spiritual energy, personhood, and relationality (Glaskin, 2012; Bishop et al., 2021). The Akawaio refer to a 'time of origin' or 'beginning time' known as pia'atai that is accessible in the present through dreaming and ecstatic states of consciousness (Cooper, 2015). Aboriginal peoples have a similar notion in Australia called dreamtime, a 'time out of time' or 'everywhen' (Lawlor, 1991). Another similarity between Akawaio and Aboriginal communities relates to their use of songs embedded in the landscape. Among Aboriginal communities, these are known as songlines or dreaming tracks (Chatwin, 2016). The Akawaio also have thousands of sacred songs rooted in places, items, individuals, and activities, especially within the Alleluia movement (see Colson, 1977; Cooper, 2020).

This case study applies the reimagined theory of psychogeography to the Indigenous Australian context, focusing specifically on an innovative edtech startup called Indigital Schools that combines traditional knowledge and practices with new technologies. According to their website, [Indigitalschools.com](http://Indigitalschools.com): 'The platform was brought to life through a collaboration with Microsoft, Telstra Purple and Indigital, three organisations committed to the creation of an inclusive digital future.' The initiative specialises in digital skills training in AR, VR, and MR, artificial intelligence, machine learning, internet of things, and geospatial technologies in order to close the digital divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The website goes on to explain that (Ibid.): 'Together, we can use

digital technologies to express 80,000 years of human knowledge for generations to come.'

Indigital was founded by Mikaela Jade, a Cabrogal woman from Sydney, Australia. Jade grew up disconnected from the land but was always interested in the stories and knowledge of her elders. After working as a ranger, she turned to technology to bridge gaps in education, health, and job training. She began by creating an app called Digital Rangers that later became Indigital Storytelling. This application for hand-held devices contributes to the documentation of traditional landmarks and beings in Aboriginal stories and places brought to life using modern technology. One example of this was the creation of Namande, a 60,000-year-old being in the Kakadu World Heritage Area in the Northern Territory of Australia that was converted into a mixed reality format. Indigital Schools works with Microsoft as a sponsor to help develop an MR system using the HoloLens technology—a self-contained, holographic computer that enables users to engage with digital content and interact with holograms—to tell the story of Namande. As explained by Jade (Microsoft, 2017; quoted in Cooper & Kruglikova, 2019: 9):

So when you put on the HoloLens Namande is right in front of you and you're seeing him the way the Bininj people see him in the landscape, and his song and dance and his body paint and the dilly bag that's around his neck. And it will be translated into English, because currently the content we've developed is in Kunwinjku... The knowledge systems that go with it are the oldest living knowledge systems on Earth. One of the things I'm really keen to communicate through something like HoloLens is that these aren't bedtime stories – they're instructions for living on planet earth.

Not only does this partnership contribute to the preservation of the history and culture of Aboriginal territory, but it also provides a valuable opportunity for elders to engage with younger generations, and for locals to benefit from tourist economies. Indigital Schools creates jobs and training for the digital economy. The company is an Indigenous-owned and operated for-profit social enterprise that addresses the challenge of profit sharing by committing half of its profits to the local community (Cooper & Kruglikova, 2018). Additional safeguards ensure that the traditional knowledge is shared with the consent and oversight of village elders.

Indigenous communities have intimate understandings of and relationships with the landscapes that are closely linked to the practical needs and management of local socio-ecological systems. Indigital Schools is a successful platform to train teachers and children how to write code, gain digital literacy, engage with elders, and tell stories that focus on traditional knowledge, beliefs, practices, and geographies. Not only does this initiative preserve and transmit traditional knowledge using modern technology, it also reinforces the identity and pride of children by empowering them to engage with their heritage and land making them feel healthy and connected to each other, their past, and the landscape that surrounds them.

## Discussion

Land and geography are central to Indigenous and local livelihoods, identification, and psychology. An expanded interpretation of psychogeography that includes Indigenous

ontologies and non-urban domains contributes to more self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2004), empowerment, and spatial justice (Soja, 2010). Indigenous journalism plays an important role in this empowerment by communicating about local events and beliefs, especially because much of this reporting presents counter-narratives to mainstream media, functioning like a watchdog for traditional culture that limits misrepresentation and marginalization (Hanusch, 2013).

An increasing amount of research focuses on the impact of engaging children with natural environments and how this can contribute to overall wellbeing (Dankiw et al., 2020). Nature play—fostered through nature walks and the incorporation of trees, plants, and rocks into learning spaces—has positive impacts on physical activity outcomes and cognitive behaviours of children. According to Madelyn Marazoni (2022), in some instances, children considered anxious and problematic in traditional classroom environments can become imaginative leaders in natural environments, suggesting the impacts of geography and context on the psychology, education, and development of children.

A renewed understanding of psychogeography also has implications for the field of civic ecology (Krasny et al., 2015). Natural environments clearly have positive impacts on early childhood development; they can also contribute to the improved mental health and happiness of adults and urban populations, especially those who are exposed to polluted environments and inner cities where access to green spaces can be limited. In such areas, populations stand to benefit from the creation of novel ecosystems (Teixeira & Fernandes, 2020) and the rehabilitation and revitalization of abandoned or formerly polluted areas.

With the proliferation of new technologies and social media platforms, and the continued degradation of the environment within the context of climate change, an updated interpretation of psychogeography has profound impacts for Indigenous, non-urban, and novel landscapes. This reimagined perspective builds a bridge for Indigenous and local peoples, researchers, educators, journalists, development practitioners, and politicians to converge on mutual understandings of the importance and impact of rural and natural geographies on the psyche, behaviour, emotions, learning, and health of individuals and society at large.

## **Conclusion**

Recent research on historical ecology, spiritual ecology, and spiritual geography calls for a re-evaluation of the human-environment relationship that has wide-ranging impacts on the way we perceive, interact, and manage our environments. These enlightened views lack psychological depth and stand to benefit from the inclusion of an expanded theory of psychogeography.

Two case studies demonstrate how a reimagined understanding of psychogeography can be applied to diverse Indigenous rural landscapes. The history, highland geography, and ontology of the Akawaio play a significant interconnecting role in their psyche, emotions, behaviour, and health. Likewise, the communities that participate in Indigital Schools are uniquely empowered through digital technologies that connect young individuals with their



ancestral land and heritage contributing to their sense of identity and pride that is deeply rooted in place.

Psychogeography is a helpful framework that has wide applicability to urban and rural landscapes, and the diverse beings and conceptual systems that hold them together. This perspective also has significance for early childhood development, edtech, civic ecology, novel ecosystems, Indigenous journalism, self-determination, and spatial justice. Further psychogeographical research could focus on specific non-urban habitats (forests, mountains, volcanoes, savannahs, deserts, the arctic, etc.); the impacts of different colonial systems; toponyms; and kinship with the land as a form of resistance.

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