

“THEIR SHADOWS STILL WALK WITH US”: MAPPING A DECOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY OF STRUGGLE WITH INGRID WASHINAWATOK EL-ISSA

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This paper maps a cartography of struggle to document the dynamic, living legacy of Menominee leader Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa and her contribution to the decolonial possibilities of transnational Indigenous feminism. I propose that mapping a cartography of struggle is a useful way for movements to consider how the past informs the present and future possibilities of resistance and decoloniality.

KEY WORDS: transnational Indigenous feminism, decolonization, resistance, U’wa, seventh generation praxis.

“Sus sombras aún caminan con nosotros”: Trazando una cartografía de la lucha decolonial con Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa

Este artículo traza una cartografía de las luchas que llevó a cabo la líder Menominee Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa con el fin de documentar su legado dinámico y vivo y su contribución a las posibilidades decoloniales del feminismo indígena transnacional. Propongo la cartografía de la lucha como un modo útil para los movimientos, ya que a través de esta se pone de manifiesto cómo el pasado da forma a las posibilidades presentes y futuras de resistencia y decolonización.

PALABRAS CLAVE: feminismo indígena transnacional, decolonización, resistencia, U’wa, práctica de séptima generación.

Ingrid Washinawatok is most remembered for her work in movements for Indigenous rights and sovereignty in the United States and at the United Nations and other international fora. Unfortunately, many also know her for her tragic death in Colombia at the hands of so-called left-wing guerrillas in 1999 when working in solidarity with the U’wa people. In what follows, I map a cartography of struggle from within the transnational relations that exist between the U’wa people and the peoples related to Washinawatok. Plotting points in the “smallest of

spaces", I conceptually map Washinawatok's seventh generation praxis¹ to demonstrate how her practices and discourse reveal a cartography of Indigenous resistance along the dimensions of time, generations, and land. This mapping shows that Washinawatok's theory arises from generations of ancestral knowledge, while her practice reveals models of organizing for self-determination based on these Indigenous relational knowledges. Seventh generation thinking challenges Eurocentric knowledge formations and offers a decolonial option. This cartography of struggle goes beyond notions of Western or state-defined bordered locations frozen in time to remember resistance from the past that informs peoples' struggles today and for the future.

I first learned of Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa, an internationally recognized advocate for Indigenous peoples, through newspaper accounts of her death in Colombia in 1999. At that time, I worked at a human rights organization in California. The focus of my work was to support peace and justice movements in Colombia, from which my parents had emigrated, by ending U.S. militarization of the conflict and raising the visibility of alternative approaches. But it wasn't until I met Washinawatok's husband, Ali El-Issa, a few years later that I really began to learn about —and from— her. That year I joined the advisory board of a small organization, the U'wa Defense Project, that carried on part of the work that she had died for: the defense of Indigenous lands, culture, and way of life.² This organization served as the bridge between the U'wa people of northeastern Colombia and peoples and organizations in the United States.³ Beginning in 2003 I would sit for hours drinking coffee and sharing meals with Ali El-Issa, Paul Haible, and Ana Maria Murillo, the director of the U'wa Defense Project. Ali and Paul would share stories about Ingrid Washinawatok as mother, as friend, as Executive Director of the Fund for the Four Directions, and as an organizer for Indigenous rights and sovereignty within the United Nations and many other international spaces. The conversations were as hard as they were heartwarming. How could someone like Ingrid be lost to such violence? What could have been done to prevent it? Ali would tell us that she did not die in vain; we should use her memory to continue the work with the U'wa, just as he and many others built on her legacy through the Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa Flying Eagle Woman Fund for Peace, Justice and Sovereignty (El-Issa, 1999 and El-Issa, 2010).⁴

¹Seventh generation praxis is "a precept of the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy) which mandates that chiefs consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation yet to come" (Seventh Generation Fund, 2015).

² In 2006, UDP became a project of Amazon Watch. See www.amazonwatch.org for recent updates on their work with the U'wa.

³ For the international campaign to support the U'wa against U.S.-based Occidental Petroleum, see Wirpsa (2004), Rodriguez-Garavito & Arenas (2005) and Alvarez (2012).

⁴ The Flying Eagle Woman Fund built on Washinawatok's work as Executive Director of the Fund for the Four Directions.

Ten years after this tragic loss, the U'wa people sent a letter of remembrance to their families and communities:

We know that the war and the armed conflict that surrounds us is ultimately at fault, not us, the U'wa. We ask for forgiveness still, and join in the pain being felt on this anniversary. For us, they are not dead —their life work and their memory live on. We thank them for their dedication and time offered for our culture, for our spiritual leaders, and for the balance of Planet Earth and Mother Nature. We remember their path, their words, their joy, their passion, their dance, their wails, their songs, and their humor. U'wa children and elders remember them at every sunset. [...] Their shadows still walk with us, accompanying us along the path of resistance. (Amazon Watch, 2009)

This understanding, that Washinawatok continues to accompany the U'wa, signals an important aspect of Indigenous knowledges: time. Just as Washinawatok once said, “[t]he ancestors vision is alive, and it lives within us,” so do the U'wa recognize that connection across time through the spirit world and ongoing relations.⁵ This vision lives through the U'wa and many others whose lives she touched, including my own. In that spirit, I continue to support the U'wa struggle alongside Murillo and other U.S.-based Latina and Indigenous women, and to learn from Washinawatok's example. Washinawatok embodied and enacted this ancestral vision in thought, as captured through lectures, speeches, and interviews, and practice, and as evidenced through her multiple organizing projects, including the Indigenous Women's Network, the Pacific Cultural Conservancy, and Native Americans in Philanthropy, to name a few.

It is difficult to do justice to Washinawatok's legacy. I could focus on her role in international fora such as the State of the World Forum or the Indigenous Initiative for Peace (Frichner, 1998). Perhaps follow her involvement with the United Nations starting with her first participation as representative for the International Indian Treaty Council, her contributions to the Commission on Human Rights and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (Frichner, 1998) and finish with her position as Chair of the Nongovernmental Organizations Committee on the United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples.⁶ But I was struck by something Washinawatok told white, anti-racist feminist Mab Segrest in an interview: “It starts small. We can be up there lobbying Congress. Yes, we could be doing that. But in order to see the change in

⁵ Alongside a picture of Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa, this quote graced the website of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for several years in the first decade of the century and into the 2010s.

⁶ Oldham and Frank (2008) document her recognition at the final approval for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

how things are going, it really has to start small. The smallest is all over the place" (Washinawatok, 1999: 13).

For my mapping of her achievements, I focus on the small spaces through which Washinawatok worked as an organizer and organization builder, within family and community. For instance, on her initiative to learn Spanish by accepting a scholarship to study in Cuba which, I believe, demonstrated her commitment to building transnational relationships. I use mapping in the sense of weaving small spaces of our lives together to document the connections between relations in space and time. Maps demonstrate particular ways of knowing and measuring territories or places. Knowledge, from a European or Western perspective, allows for or gives way to taking ownership of (Pratt, 2008). If instead we map from a different —an *other*— point of view (Mignolo, 2011 and Escobar, 2003), one that is land-based and historical instead of land-hungry and ahistorical (objective), then mapping becomes a process of getting to know, connect, bring closer together in relation, remember, and interpret. This mapping questions linear narratives of time by thinking about how the past and future are together in the present. If mapping is understood as an attempt to make sense of the world, then Ingrid Washinawatok and the legacy she leaves through her words and actions helps to map a movement of possible futures.

Washinawatok's emphasis on generations ties the elements of this mapping together. Key to seventh generation praxis is the active concept of responsibility across generations.

Our people always look at the seventh generation. And I can't tell you how much or what that makes me feel, when I know that seven generations ago, someone was praying for me that I would make good decisions; that I would do things right; that I would continue the stories, the ceremonies, all these things that make me a Menominee. So now I pray for the seventh generation to know that somewhere down the line, seven generations from now, there will be young men and young women doing what they're supposed to be doing, carrying on our ceremonies. It's a very humbling feeling and it's a very empowering feeling to know that those prayers are there, and to know that I am answering the prayers of someone. (Washinawatok, 1992)

This is not a passive, theoretical stance. Responsibility across generations is a responsibility to life, which means to live in relation to the earth and to each other. Being rooted in the land means to be rooted in a relational identity to a community of people, including ancestors and descendants. The bonds of responsibility to (land) the earth and across generations tie societies together. The knowledge of a people's history gives the responsibility to future generations to both remember their material and spiritual past and the ties that bind them. This responsibility is at the core of Indigenous peoples' political and intellectual agen-

cy, and represents a radically different worldview from the hegemonic, Western, colonialist one that dominates politics. For example, she sat on the board of an organization, the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Development, whose name came from “a precept of the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy) which mandates that chiefs consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation yet to come. This principle guides us in our frontline work with all the grassroots Native communities we support in revitalization, restoration, preservation, planning and development projects”.⁷

Decolonization refers most directly to the recovery of colonized land (Tuck and Yang, 2012). The work of decolonization represents a five hundred-year struggle that Indigenous peoples of the Americas have engaged in, the proof of which we find in their survival. Decoloniality as a framework includes attention to the decolonization of knowledge as well. Washinawatok demonstrated the decolonization of knowledge through her emphasis on generational knowledge. This not only answered the prayers of those from seven generations ago, but also worked to make it possible for those seven generations from now to get to know the stories and ceremonies. In practice, for Washinawatok, this theoretical commitment manifested itself in different spaces that depended upon, or facilitated the exchange between generations. This exchange was not hierarchical; it was relational and cyclical. We see generational knowledge emphasized in her work with the Indigenous Women’s Network, the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous People, the Pacific Cultural Conservancy International, and Native Americans in Philanthropy. This relational knowledge is a decolonized framework which displaces European ways of thinking based on economic rationalities and binaries of superiority and inferiority. Offering different models and frameworks for thinking, being, and organizing contributes to the decolonization of the smallest of spaces. Where else will we practice our own way of being?

Building from the centrality of women and mothers in the education of children, Washinawatok co-founded the Indigenous Women’s Network in 1985. In an essay remembering Washinawatok, the co-founder of IWN, Winona LaDuke explained the importance for them of “the premise that we would be guided in our work by the ‘vision of our elders’” (LaDuke, 1999: 9). As co-founder of the Indigenous Women’s Network, Washinawatok cooperated in a collective effort to build a space for reflection, education, and capacity-building for intergenerational Indigenous women. The organization’s mission was to “support the self-determination of Indigenous women, families, communities and Nations in the Americas and Pacific Basin” (“IWN Vision Statement”, 1999). At the beginning of their process, the co-founders of IWN consulted their elders on their plans, which is another example of how the impulse to create the possibilities for intergenera-

⁷ For more information on the Seventh Generation Fund, see <http://www.7genfund.org/our-mission>.

tional exchange is a hallmark of Washinawatok's work. The framework had to be organized through the knowledge of the elders:

In that knowledge, now it's very powerful, because, for example, when I read *Black Elder Speaks*, the power that I felt from those written words transcended the page, when you talked about the powers that the people held and the communication with the unseen forces of life around us; that is something that was very life giving, knowing that they're there and that they had those visions and that they had those hopes and they had those prayers and knowing that seven generations before me there were people praying for me, my children, for my cousins, for our families. Superseding the *me* and the *my* to the *our* is something that is very powerful. Knowing that we're visions that were held and had by ancestors of mine that would guide us through and prayers that would guide us through what we are dealing with today. I am answering those prayers and prayers for our children and our grandchildren and their children on down the line. That's a very empowering feeling. (Williams, 1999)

In this work across generations, the *my* transcended to the *our*, another central theme in Washinawatok's theoretical perspective. As much as these organizing models considered the past and future generations, as well as the young and the old of today, Washinawatok also consistently worked to open up spaces in which people could build collectivity/collectively.

Beyond her work within organizations, which includes her work on multiple boards,⁸ Washinawatok used various forms of media to educate and inspire. Some of these include radio (Washinawatok, 1992), documentary video (Baer, 1992), and print.⁹ For example, in addition to essays on Rigoberta Menchu's Nobel Peace Prize and interviews with indigenous cultural producers, she wrote a regular column, "Auntie Ing's Tips", in IWN's magazine, *Indigenous Woman*. Her parenting tips considered responsibility within an intergenerational framework:

Our kids are constantly learning. (We still continue to learn). The elders say even they continue to learn. You continue to learn and balance yourself until you die. Everything our kids encounter is new and something to master, whether it is

⁸ Some of these included Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Development, the Sister Fund, the National Network of Grantmakers, the American Indian Community House, the Native American Council of New York City, and the Selection Committee for the Letelier Moffit Human Rights Award.

⁹ She was associate producer for a documentary film, *WARRIOR*, on Leonard Peltier (see Baer 1992) and produced a three-hour special for Pacifica Radio to reconsider colonization in light of the 500 anniversary in 1992 (see Harris and Washinawatok 1992).

how to walk across the room without spilling their juice, riding a two wheeler, or the ceremonial songs. They are seeing, grasping, and trying to make sense and logic out of the world around them. This is something that has gone on for every generation. I remember my parents talking about the things they had learned growing up that were different from us growing up just due to new inventions. But the point is that we all go through making sense out of our world. Those that were brought up in Boarding Schools have to almost learn certain things all over again, like re-parent ourselves from scratch because there are areas that we were left all alone on. (Washinawatok, 1991: 35)

Learning across generations, respecting those generations, was a central theme of Washinawatok's praxis. It grounded her attention to the historical and future meaning of everyday practices that mobilized her activism at all levels—from child-rearing to work with the United Nations in the decades of organizing first outside of, then within United Nations spaces, towards a recognition of Indigenous peoples (not just populations, but peoples). El-Issa, Washinawatok's husband, told a story that illustrated the smallest spaces of action during a meeting in Geneva of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations:

Ingrid, she fought since 1977 until her death for the letter S. There are a lot of indigenous people and indigenous peoples. (Though) you cannot protest and demonstrate in the United Nations in Geneva, even here (in New York), I remember, Ingrid bought coloring stuff, crayons, and t-shirt, and hats, and she gave some to my son. They start writing the letter S (on them)...They did that for all the indigenous people in the working group in the Geneva. And they asked them to wear it to show the governments of the world: We are peoples, we are not people. (El-Issa, 2010)

While working within the somewhat formal channels of the UN's Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Washinawatok demonstrated the importance of pushing the terms of engagement (from populations to peoples) while engaging her son in the act of protest. This is a fight for sovereignty. She witnessed another version of this struggle when she was a girl and her parents fought for the sovereignty and reinstatement of the Menominee. Through this example we see her passing on generational knowledge. So it is not just in the halls of the United Nations, but in the intimate spaces of everyday life and familial relations that the struggle is waged.

In her multiple roles as activist, educator, philanthropist, and rights advocate, her practices were based in seventh generation thinking. Bird Runningwater, who carried on Washinawatok's work as chair of Native Americans in Philanthropy, highlighted Washinawatok's work in the world of philanthropy where she incorporated seventh generation thinking into the building of institutions and distribution of funds to revitalize Indigenous languages and lifeways. Washinawatok advocated the use of the standard of the "seventh generation", to measure the potential benefits of different projects and practices for a

better world. Speaking as the chair of the board of directors of Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP), she explained:

those of us living now were our ancestors' seventh generation. As it was then, we put ourselves second in deference for our seventh generation. The work we do in the foundations or funds where we are employed or whose board seats we occupy, makes the principle of the seventh generation a paramount standard (Runningwater, 1999: 43).

One board she contributed to was the Pacific Cultural Conservancy International (PCCI), an organization founded by Hawaiian Lahe'ena'e Gay who went with Washinawatok to work in solidarity with the U'wa. Under Gay's leadership, the PCCI developed a model for educational projects that manifests the concept of universal kinship, or relations across time, space, and species (Barsh, 1986). This project recognized the integration of the multiple aspects of a people's lives and ecosystems (PCCI, 1999). A project planned for the Indigenous peoples of Panama, which had garnered support from the Panamanian Ministry of Education, envisioned a campus that would include "living educational tools" from Indigenous history such as gardens, living species protected areas, hydrology (water sources), and Indigenous history by depending upon teaching by the elders. In a response to questions about core values and strategic direction for the PCCI made to board members, staff, and advisors, Washinawatok encouraged further grounding the structure of the organization in an Indigenous model, such as that envisioned by PCCI education projects. This included a

circle of elders to provide spiritual guidance and to advise on traditional values and customs and a council or circle of youth to provide input as to their special needs in making the traditional values of their culture work for them and their children in the modern world. They would also be crucial to the successful passing on of their cultural heritage to their contemporaries and future generations.¹⁰ (PCCI, n.d.)

Instead of bringing in knowledge from outside the community, this project leaned heavily on the indigenous people's rooted knowledges in terms of their environment, medicines, and lifeways and accounted for intergenerational approaches to education.

To take the seventh generation into consideration and to develop the political practices that would keep those generations' well-being in mind, one needs to be rooted in land and community. This rooted identity is nurtured across generations. Washinawatok worked actively on multiple levels to nurture intergen-

¹⁰ Documents related to the PCCI and Lahe'ena'e Gay were granted access through the personal archives of Gay's partner, John Livingstone, and the organizational archives for the UDP housed at Amazon Watch. Ali El-Issa provided access to Ingrid Washinawatok's archives housed at the Flying Eagle Woman Fund.

erational learning and building. This is a common thread that ties much of her work together, from her work within the organizational structures of nonprofits to the “Auntie Ing” columns she wrote for the *Indigenous Woman* magazine.

One path that this cartography of resistance continues to chart is the inter-connection between Indigenous peoples of the North and South through the connection between her communities and the U’wa. The U’wa, as noted above, continue to remember and honor Washinawatok, Gay, and Freitas. And the Flying Eagle Woman Fund, Ali El-Issa and others continue to support the U’wa struggle in “small” ways, from logistical support for participation in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to fiscal sponsorship for the volunteer collective, *Mujer U’wa*.¹¹

In May 2014, Aura Benilda Tegria, U’wa lawyer and legal advisor to the U’wa governing council, visited the United States. She was a child when Washinawatok visited U’wa ancestral territory. The visit, greatly influenced by Washinawatok’s cartography of struggle, was planned around participation in the annual celebration and memorial of Ingrid Washinawatok’s life. Tegria shared a message from the U’wa women:

I want to tell you that our traditional authorities have done spiritual work for these two sisters, through the fasts that are performed on an annual basis, where their memories will be remembered and have become part of the collective memory of all the processes of resistance of the Indigenous peoples of the world. Their spirit of fortitude and commitment will be in each woman present here today. (Miyamoto, 2014)

Tegria’s visit aimed to continue the relationship building with organizations and people long engaged in the international campaign to support their fight against oil, coal, and gas mining on their ancestral territory and government recognized *resguardos* (reservations). And she also paid homage to Washinawatok and Gay, and aligned with Washinawatok’s seventh generation praxis. The following year, in February 2015, the U’wa announced another victory in their struggle to defend their land, their elders and their future. They were able to get the Colombian state oil company to dismantle a gas project on their ancestral territory.¹² This year, Tegria will travel again to New York and Washington D.C. where US-based *Mujer U’wa* members, Amazon Watch, and the Fly-

¹¹ *Mujer U’wa*: Iniciativa de Mujeres Defensoras de la Cultura is a bi-national community-based organization dedicated to supporting the empowerment of U’wa women and Indigenous and Latina women in the United States. It spun off the U’wa Defense Project in 2006 and is fiscally sponsored by the Peace Development Fund (<http://www.peacedevelopmentfund.org/>). Ali El-Issa sits on the PDF board, and Paul Haible is the Executive Director.

¹² For information on this victory, see Miller (2015). For a video about Tegria’s visit to the United States in 2014, see Miyamoto (2014).

ing Eagle Woman Fund through Ali El-Issa will accompany her. Together we will remember Ingrid's stories and continue the struggle for building relations across time and space in order to protect the land and our futures.

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