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**Keywords**
Algonquian-speaking peoples, Canadian Shield, landscape, colour, rock art

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Spectacles to behold: Colours in Algonquian landscapes

Dagmara Zawadzka

Color is a vital necessity. It is raw material indispensable to life, like water and fire. Man's existence is inconceivable without an ambience of color (Léger 1973:119).

Introduction

Colour, ubiquitous in the environment, conveys crucial information about our surroundings and allows us to make sense of our world. Colour is also a powerful medium for cultural meanings and categories, and its semantic potential is unleashed through stories, symbols and experiences. Colour communicates and evokes emotions, sensations, memories, ideological and religious beliefs, identities, gender, economic statuses and places, all the while defining periods and events in human history (e.g. the psychedelic colours of the 1960s and the Red October Revolution in Russia), and structuring social relationships. Colour, the radiation of the wavelengths of the visible light spectrum, is perceived as hue (the dominant wavelength), saturation (intensity) and lightness (brightness), and all of these aspects can be manipulated in visual communication.

Humankind seems to have always been captivated by colour’s expressive and aesthetic potentials. Our modern poly-chromatic existence and attitudes towards colour are due to factors such as the explosion in the manufacture of synthetic dyes in the nineteenth century. However, humans in the past likewise enjoyed a chromatic world as is attested, for example, by the discovery that classical Greek statues were painted or by the extant kaleidoscopic textiles of ancient Andean cultures (see Brusatin 1986:24, 79-80; Gage 1999:31). Modern scientific interest in colour dates back to the seventeenth century and Isaac Newton’s experiments with the light spectrum, which led to other influential colour theories, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1970[1810]) Theory of colours, and Michel Eugène Chevreul’s (1855) The principles of harmony and contrast of colors. The anthropologist Franz Boas (1881) commenced his academic career with a dissertation in physics on the colour of water, Beiträge zur Erkenntniss der Farbe des Wassers. Colour has been explored in various disciplines, such as psychology, neurophysiology, philosophy, art history, as well as anthropology. Colour can be observed and measured scientifically (for example with the Munsell chart), and yet its perception is subjective as when different people discriminate diversely the same hue.

Anthropological studies have recently turned to the exploration of colour in material culture, as well as in landscapes, revealing its intrinsic role in the semantic, symbolic and empirical dimensions of human life. This paper aims at expanding this field of inquiry by discussing the symbolic and experiential aspects of colour in the landscapes of Algonquian-speaking peoples of the Canadian Shield and the Great Lakes area. A brief discussion of colour studies in anthropology and archaeology will be followed by an examination of Algonquian colours in natural and “human-created” places.

Colour studies in anthropology and archaeology

Studies of colour in anthropology took off in the 1960s via cognitive anthropology which sought to elucidate systems of beliefs and thought processes through the study of taxonomies and semantic categories (Colby, Fernandez, and Kronenfeld 1981:422-423). Chromatic categories were studied at a worldwide level in order to shed light on universal cognitive
structures. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay’s (1969) study, *Basic color terms*, determined that black (dark), white (light) and red are the basic universal colour terms. It remains the standard study of colour perception and categorization that has prompted various scholars to revisit the topic (e.g. Bornstein 1975; Sahlins 1977; Saunders 2000; Wierzbicka 2008; for studies documenting colour categorization in specific cultures see Baines 1985; Conklin 1955). In addition, colour, cognition and perception have been explored in relation to human evolution and the emergence of trichromatic colour vision (see Taçon 2008:163).

Anthropologists have also tackled the symbolic dimension of colour through studies of ritual and art (e.g. Beck 1969; Gill 1975; Strathern and Strathern 1972). Colour can be an element of cultural key symbols (Ortner 1973) as attested to by the role of cattle for the Dinka people of Sudan: “The Dinkas' very perception of colour, light, and shade in the world around them is... inextricably connected with their recognition of colour-configurations in their cattle. If their cattle-colour vocabulary were taken away, they would have scarcely any way of describing visual experience in terms of colour, light and darkness” (Lienhardt 1961:13 quoted in Ortner 1973:1340).

Victor Turner’s (1966) study of Ndembu colour symbolism, where he linked the colours red, white and black with bodily fluids and excretions, substances of the natural world such as clays and, ultimately, with gender, and concepts of danger, goodness, evil and purity, remains one of the most influential discussions on the topic of colour symbolism. The white-red-black triad seems to represent a widespread phenomenon where red is universally associated with blood and life, though other significance can be attached to this hue as other ethnographic studies demonstrate (Scarre 2002:229; see Young 2006a:178-179 for discussion of studies critical of Turner’s colour triad).

Archaeology has always been interested in colour as a heuristic device for describing and categorising artifacts and soils. Moreover, colour can shed light on the provenience of materials and ancient technologies through, for example, the analysis of the chemical properties of pigments. Chromatic studies are often hampered by colour’s survival. Some colours fade, while others find themselves in contexts that ensure their preferential survival; therefore, what remains “colours” our perceptions of the past. One such mineral that stands the test of time is red ochre (see Bednarik 1994). Red ochre has often been invoked in early human symbolising, and its use has been documented as far back as the Middle Palaeolithic (e.g. Hovers et al. 2003; Marshack 1981; Taçon 2008:163-164). The ancient appreciation for colour is likewise evident in the use of colourful stones for tools and colourful or white shells made into beads by *Homo erectus* (Gage et al. 1999:120).

As post-processual approaches gained a footing in archaeology and studies emanating from symbolic anthropology percolated into archaeology, colour stopped being perceived as a simple empirical attribute of material culture and began to be envisioned as an important component of past social lives. Colour was symbolically potent (e.g. Plog 2003, Saunders 1999, 2001; Taçon 1991), and its attractiveness is among the factors that have prompted, for example, the creation of an extensive trade in exotic materials and the development of new techniques for working metals to achieve lustre. However, it is worth mentioning that questions of colour and archaeology have been especially explored by scholars interested in prehistoric art (e.g. Gage et al. 1999; Taçon 1991, 2004) as colours are an indelible element of visual
arts, and finely coloured, aesthetically pleasing objects are often categorised as art.

Colour studies in anthropology and archaeology have gained momentum as experiential and sensuous approaches began to be increasingly explored in the discipline. This realisation was further entrenched as anthropology and archaeology recognised the holistic nature of present Indigenous and past worldviews, thus altering the view that colour is an isolated abstraction (Thomas 2003:573).

As the “sensuous turn” in anthropology contributed to the dismantling of the primacy and objectivity of vision (e.g. Howes 1991), it additionally opened up the door for an exploration of synaesthesia. Colours are known to evoke emotions, smells, tastes and sounds (e.g. Classen 1990; D'Andrade and Egan 1974; MacLean 2001 and for archaeology Hosler 1995; Saunders 2002:218-219) and thus, participate together in the maintenance and reinforcement of cultural concepts.

Experiential approaches such as phenomenology and studies of materiality (the relationships between people and the material world in which they live) have promulgated the power that colours can exercise in experiences, whether of material culture or of landscapes. Colour is inextricably bound with its medium, often becoming its index. The shape, texture, size and placement of the object, as well as the interplay of colours on the object (e.g. contrasts) are all revealers of meanings (e.g. Cummings 2002; Tilley 2004:11-12). Moreover, the lighting condition affects the perception of colours. For example, reds are always darker at dawn while light blues are almost white, a phenomenon known as Purkinje effect (Gage 1999:16). The state of the colour’s preservation and the visible signs of aging and handling of an object evoke meanings and values, which contribute to the object’s reception. The example of sperm whale teeth necklaces (tabua) from Fiji illustrates this point:

Most tabua have moved through many hands and this longevity of chiefly ownership and exchange is much venerated. As a whale's tooth ages it becomes darker in colour as oils from the hands of its many owners become incorporated into the ivory, and the power of successive chiefly owners accumulates within the substance of the tooth. The depth of a tabua's colour, as indicator of a lengthy biography, is a primary determinant of a tooth’s value (Gosden and Marshall 1999:170-171; see also Young 2006a:174, 181).

Chromatic changes resulting from manufacturing processes are similarly imbued with significance (Cooney 2002:95), and indeed colours are great markers of transformation, seasonality and temporality, whether in material culture or in landscapes (e.g. the changing colours of tree leaves) (e.g. Beck 1969; Borić 2002; Gage et al. 1999:122).

Young (2006a) argues that colour has been dematerialized by scientific, linguistic and symbolic studies. Instead, colour is better envisioned as a “relational quality” participating in the lived world of daily and seasonal social practice, where its relation with humans and objects is of importance. Colour unfolds in social practice as it is manipulated and it manipulates. It acts as an agent, affecting/animating (e.g. empowering) objects, people and places. An example of the power of colour is evinced in the canoe prow-boards from the Trobriand Islands, where the dazzling designs of bright hues participate in the magic inherent in the board and affect
The experience of colour is often subjective and is immersed in a specific cultural and historical context. However, colour perception occurs through a species-shared neurophysiologic mechanism, and some qualities of colour seem to have affected people throughout history. Such an effect is brilliance, which finds expression in the symbolic value attached to bright, shiny and luminous surfaces and consequently to materials such as shells, pearls, quartz, crystals, gold, as well as light sources such as sun and moon (Bille and Sørensen 2007; Jones and MacGregor 2002:14; Gage et al. 1999:120-123). Light and brilliant hues are often linked with spiritual ideas, this situation no doubt arising from the presence of light and brilliant colours in shamanic visions and the attribution of radiance to supernatural beings (Saunders 2002:213; e.g. Köhl 1985[1860]:205-207).

The “aesthetic of brilliance” (Saunders 1999) has been documented in various places and times. In Australia, among the Yolngu, the concept of bir’yun (brilliance) is the aesthetic visual effect created by the cross-hatched designs in bark paintings, the brilliance encapsulating ancestral power (Morphy 1989). In the case of the Americas, Saunders (1999, 2001, and 2002) has devoted much ink to ideas associated with brightness and light and to the various materials, such as pearls or obsidian which convey these ideas. In Christian beliefs, light is imbued with high ideals as one of the titles of Jesus Christ, Lux Mundi, attests, and the shimmering mosaics and stained glass windows of Byzantine churches serve then to capture this godly light (see Gage 1993: 39-61). Jones and MacGregor (2002:14-15) additionally point out that colour patterning – juxtaposition, contrast – also strengthen colour’s communicative potential and have been used variously across the ages to accentuate the aesthetic appeal of objects.

**Landscapes of colour**

Colours in landscapes are potent semantic agents that contribute to the experiences of places whether they are present naturally (e.g. geological formations, rainbows) or due to anthropic agency (e.g. architecture). Natural places with salient, striking colours such as mountains, quarries or mineral outcrops were often imbued with cultural significance while rainbows can be linked with power and spirits (e.g. Boivin 2004:10-12; Saunders 2002:211; Taçon 2008). Minerals, including lithic materials used in tool manufacture (e.g. Taçon 1991, 2004) and the construction of temples, mounds or cairns were often characterised by specific colours which carried symbolic overtones. Stones of various colours, textures and sizes were combined to convey particular meanings and create specific experiences of monuments and landscapes. For example, white stones and quartz were used in the construction of Neolithic monuments in the British Isles, and at times, striking contrasts were created. For instance, the façade of Newgrange in Ireland is dominated by black and white stones. Sometimes, these materials were imported from long distances like, for example, the bluestones used in the construction of Stonehenge (e.g. Darvill 2002; Gage et al. 1999:113-117; Jones 1999; MacGregor 2002; Scarre 2002:232-236; Trevarthen 2000). At the same time, soils of different colours were used in the construction of mounds and embankments (e.g. Bernardini 2004:340; Owoc 2002). The sensuous engagement with (past) landscapes is mediated through colours and colour manipulation can be an effective component in the methodological toolkit of phenomenological landscape studies. Tilley, Hamilton and Bender (2000) have employed variously
coloured materials to wrap stones at the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age settlement on Leskernick Hill in the south-west of Britain and in the process gained new understanding of the stones within the landscape.

Colours are an inextricable element of cultural landscapes (see Buggey 2000) that not only have symbolic potential but further mark the identity of a place, establish relationships to places and manifest the agency of a landscape. Taçon (2008; Gage et al. 1999:121) has discussed the role that colour plays in the identity of a place and pointed out that toponyms, as well as the practice of using colour to communicate in places through, for example, place alteration (e.g. rock art sites), enactment of rituals and storytelling, establishes relations between places, people and colours. Colours of places can form and maintain interactions between groups, as among the Yolngu of northern Australia, who determine their seascape tenure patterns based on the colour of water (Young 2006b:242). Among the Aangu of South Australia, relations with landscape are, moreover, maintained by dressing in concordance with the colours of the landscape, the change in landscape colours being itself an indicator of the agency, sentience and ancestral power of landscape:

After winter rains sheets of flowers cover the desert in sequences of colour; purples, pinks, yellows and more rarely, blues. Women, and to a lesser extent men, use the colours of their clothing to create a synergy between their bodies and country. Thus women might wear very green or green and blue clothing when heavy rain has turned the land green (Young 2006b:240).

Materials traded from distant locales become the palpable embodiments of these places, or “pieces of places” (Bradley 2000:96) and of the symbolism inherent within them. The colours of these materials are often the links to these other places (Bradley 2000:91; Cooney 2002:96; Taçon 1991). Case in point, ultramarine, a blue pigment made from lapis lazuli was highly prized in medieval and Renaissance Europe. Ultramarine means “beyond the sea” harking back to its origins in the Middle East (Gage 1999:13). Additionally, colours in landscape can influence cultural expressions. For example, the colours in landscape (stones, boulders) influenced the depiction and placement of the Rainbow Serpent rock art motif among the Waanyi of northern Australia (Taçon 2008:173).

Colour studies in anthropology have demonstrated that colours are potent symbolic agents inextricably bound to their medium. Whether in material culture or in landscapes, they communicate, structure relations and anchor identities. The Algonquian-speaking peoples have also tapped into this chromatic potential, and it is to the discussion of their colours that we now turn.

Algonquian colours

The Algonquian-speaking peoples were and are one of the most populous groups in North America. The people who inhabit the Canadian Shield and the Great Lakes area are the Anishinaabeg (also known as the Ojibwa, Odawa and Algonquin^2), the Cree, and the Innu (also known as the Montagnais-Naskapi). These groups, which traditionally subsisted through hunting, fishing and gathering, shared many common cultural traits but were by no means homogenous. Their material culture represented an adaptation to the range of environments they inhabited and their religious and social life likewise
exhibited variation. However, socio-religious commonalities prevailed as attested to by the presence of shared beliefs and rites. In the early post-contact era, the groups in question were traditionally organized into egalitarian bands of approximately 100-300 people headed by nominal leaders who acquired their status through their exceptional hunting skills or medicinal knowledge and powers. Bands were traditionally mobile and practised seasonal rounds by aggregating in the summer into larger settlements and scattering to the family’s hunting grounds in the winter (Hallowell and Brown 1992:36, 44-49; Wright 2004:1562). These people situated themselves within a multilayered universe inhabited by various other-than-human persons (e.g. Underwater/Underground beings such as Mishipeshu) where the secular and the sacred were inextricably linked (e.g. Hallowell and Brown 1992: 74, 81; Smith 1995: 22-23, 44-47).

For these people, colour was an important element in their cultural life, a structuring agent in the environment replete with symbolic and ritual significations, often inseparable from the medium which carried it. As hunters and gatherers, these people were sensitive to the sensuous nuances of their environment and their sensitivity to colour is evident, for example, in the terminology for the various colour phases of the fox (Burgesse 1944:13). Colour was the source of nomenclature. For example, animals such as the hare/rabbit are called wâpus (Cree) or wâbos (Ojibwa), that is “the white animal” (Chamberlain 1901:674, 678; see also entries for opossum, mouse, marten, hornet). These names and, in some cases, the colour symbolism attached to animals are entangled with their appearance and/or seasonal exploitation, further cementing the bond between people, landscapes and cultural practices.

The fondness for colour is evident in the well-known practice of body decoration (paint, tattoo, and accessories), as well as the decoration of various items of material culture, decorations which not only embellished the items in question but also carried symbolic and ritual meanings, transmitted information on identity and, in the case of body art, protected against biting and stinging insects. The various dyes and pigments used, often praised for their durability, were chiefly derived from minerals (e.g. iron oxides), clays and plants (e.g. the bark of trees, roots, berries, lichens). They were mixed with water or oil and applied with fingers and various implements such as brushes; objects such as porcupine quills were immersed in colourful solutions in order to dye them (e.g. Blair 1911-1912:1: 327; Densmore 1974[1928]:369-374; Franklin 1823:89; Harmon 1820:377-378; Schoolcraft 1821:231).

Attention to colours seems to be present from the beginning among the people who inhabited the Great Lakes and the Shield region. Exotic stones with surfaces of various colours and textures, often traded over long distances, have been exploited in lithic production since the Palaeo-Indian Period (e.g. Storck 1982:22). For example, Laurentian Archaic (8,000 to 4,500 years ago) bannerstones in southern Ontario were made from banded slate, which comes in various colours and were polished to further accentuate the contrast between the bands (Penney 1986-87). Ellis (1989) argued that the visual characteristics of the materials played into the lithics’ role as emblems of social identity. The use of red ochre, a spiritually potent and animate substance, in mortuary contexts is likewise well documented throughout the area (Ritzenthaler and Quimby 1962; Williamson 1980).

Colours are linked with spiritual power and are potent carriers of symbolic meaning. The power of colours is evident,
for example, in their association with medicine. Medicine bags, essential paraphernalia of the medicine-man, contained various potent substances for communication with spiritual beings, and for healing and protection, such as coloured mineral materials (Boyle 1895:18-19; Hoffman 1891:220). Franklin (1823) described the medicine bag of a hunter as possessing “a little bit of indigo, blue vitriol [Copper sulphate], vermillion or some other showy article” (64). Densmore (1974[1928]:331) reported that among the Ojibwa, red pipestone (Catlinite) was used as a remedy for scrofulous neck (tuberculosis of the neck).

Offerings to other-than-human persons were sometimes of a specific hue. For example, to appease Underwater beings and ensure that no calamity occurred during a canoe voyage, white or black dogs were thrown into the water (Blair 1911-1912:1:61; Jones 1861:84; Morriseau 1965:27). In other instances, red was the preferred colour. According to the missionary, Peter Jones (1861), the maymaygwayshiwuk (beings that live in cliffs), “are reported to be extravagantly fond of pieces of scarlet cloth and smart prints; and whenever they appear to an Indian, if he can only bestow some such gaudy present upon them, however small, the giver is sure to be rewarded either with long life or success in hunting” (157). Indeed, spiritual beings are fond of cloth, that is known as “colour”, and the brighter the cloth’s colour the more pleased they are (Zawadzka 2008:140; see also Dorman 1881:319).

One of the most famous examples of colour symbolism among Indigenous people of North America is the colour symbolism of the cardinal directions (e.g. Dixon 1899; DeBoer 2005). For the Algonquian-speaking peoples, cardinal directions were associated with specific teachings and were homes to four spirits (Jenness 1935:30-32; Köhl 1985 [1860]:60, 152; Smith 1995:47). Ceremonies were often performed in relation to the cardinal directions in a “sun-wise” (clock-wise) manner. For example, the calumet pipe was pointed to the four cardinal directions (east, south, west and north) in order to offer smoke to spirits (e.g. Franklin 1923:75; Hallowell and Brown 1992:62, 70, 74; Jenness 1935:30; Tanner 1979:90-91). Entrances to ceremonial structures might face a particular direction, often east (e.g. Franklin 1823:74; Hallowell and Brown 1992:74), and offerings might be displayed facing a particular direction (e.g. Blair 1912:2:234). Hues associated with the cardinal directions might vary (e.g. Hoffman 1891:178, 256, 275 vs. 182; Pitawanakwat 2006). East was often associated with white, yellow or red (the colours of the sun) (Dixon 1899:11), north with black or white, south with green or red, and west with red or black.

A chromatic trilogy

Various hues were and continue to be employed in the symbolic language of Indigenous people. However, red, white and black are colours which seem to predominate in the ritual and symbolic universe of Algonquian-speaking peoples, as pigments, material culture and stories attest (e.g. Barnouw 1955:347-348). George Hamell (1983, 1987, 1992 and Miller and Hamell 1986) has written extensively on the symbolic aspects of colours and the materials associated with them. Hamell argued that white, and by proxy other light colours such as blue associated with clear skies or green associated with clear reflective water, stands for Life, Light, Great Being, Knowledge, and the positive social state-of-being. Dark colours, such as black or indigo represent the asocial state of being and ideas such as death and mourning which are contrary to the social aspects of life.6 Red is a mediating colour that represents the
emotive and animate aspects of life, as well as the anti-social state-of-being epitomized by war. Redness could signify life, in contrast to death, or aggression, in contrast to peace and harmony.

Substances endowed with these colours were often ritually potent and were exchanged over vast distances. Among them were white shells, crystals, red ochre, catlinite, native copper, obsidian, and charcoal. Shiny, reflective, bright, translucent and light-coloured materials are elements in a semantic field of a “metaphysic of light” and are positively valued among people. The special nature of these materials is further highlighted by the fact that many were obtained from other-than-human persons, especially the Underwater beings, such as a “big snake that looked like brass” and whose “eyes and horns shone like a mirror” (Hamell 1983:5-6, 1987:75; Radin and Reagan 1928:145-146). The intimate bind between colour and substance highlights the importance of the spiritual world which materializes through ritually effective substances (Vastokas 1992:30). The aesthetic of brilliance was exemplified, for instance, by the practice of polishing and rubbing wooden bowls with oil (Philips 1987:89). A general penchant for bright hues was equally in effect (e.g. Burden 1895:78, 121; Harmon 1820:377; Schoolcraft 1821:127).

Objects that appear white reflect the light of the entire visible spectrum. White in Algonquian thought is often associated with daylight, the rising sun and the dawn spirit and thus, east (Brinton 1868:174-175; Chamberlain 1891:207, 1900:276; Hoffman 1891:275; Tanner 1979:102-103). A sunrise ceremony among the Eastern Cree and Naskapi involved the presentation of a decorated white moose or caribou hide to the rising sun. The hide would absorb the power of the rays and would later be worn to ensure luck in hunting (Tanner 1984). White is associated with powerful other-than-human persons such as the culture-hero Nanabush (known as the white rabbit) and Thunderbirds. Underwater beings, such as Mishipeshu or the Great Lynx and the bosses of animals were similarly perceived as white (e.g. Chamberlain 1891; Jenness 1935:23, 37). The hair of powerful spiritual beings was also white and denoted long life (Hallowell and Brown 1992:90; Köhl 1985[1860]:207; Miller and Hamell 1986:324).

Many objects and beings associated with the sacred Midewiwin society were white. The white cowrie shell was the sacred symbol of the society and the white bear was one of its powerful spirits (Hoffman 1891:167, 220, 265). Köhl recounted a story relating to the sacredness of white:

An Ojibbeway, of whom I inquired why a white colour was so specially esteemed by the Indians, told me that the cause was as follows: “When the first man on earth fell sick, and saw death before his eyes, he began to lament and complain to the Great Spirit about the shortness and suffering of this life. [To help the Great Spirit sent messengers bringing the Midewiwin]. These messengers brought down at the same time a white hare-skin, the feathers of a white-headed eagle, and a medicine-sack of white otter-skin. These contained all the Indian medicines and benefactions of the Great Spirit to mankind. And from this time forth white became a sacred colour among the Indians.” (Köhl (1985[1860]: 414-415)

Red was especially associated with ochre and native copper. Morriseau (1965:19) claimed that red ochre was a stone
Red meant “joy” for the Ojibwa and the Menominee, and vermillion or red ochre was used to enhance the redness of native copper, the redness itself bestowing the most importance on the metal (Köhl 1985[1860]:16; Skinner 1913:63; Turgeon 1997:9; see Zedeño 2009:412-414 for discussion of red ochre as an animated substance). Known as miskwá bik (red metal) in Ojibwa, its name was connected with blood known as miskwi (Baraga 1853:245, 246). Copper was considered a powerful animate substance, a Manitou, and tobacco was offered to masses of copper (Köhl 1985[1860]:60-64; Whittlesey 1862:2-3). Red rocks for pipe production were highly valued. Such was the case of the catlinite stone and its quarry was a sacred place (Dorman 1881:136; Schoolcraft 1821:192).

The interplay of colours was often replete with symbolic meanings. Wampum belts, made from shells to commemorate events such as treaties, conveyed their message not only through the pictographs depicted but also through the juxtaposition and sequence of their colours (Muller 2007:133-134). Belts made with white wampum represented friendship and those of blue wampum beads painted with vermillion, war, while alliance belts were made of white and blue wampum (Blair 1912:2:185, 238-239; Brinton 1868:15; Copway 1860:135; Speck 1919).

**Colours in landscapes**

The Canadian Shield is a vast territory that stretches, in Canada, from the province of Québec to the Northwest Territories and Nunavut and, in the United States, from north-eastern Minnesota, northern Wisconsin, northern Michigan and north-eastern New York (Adirondack Mountains). This immense territory is a labyrinth of lakes and rivers set predominantly within the boreal forest (conifers); however, the north is dominated by tundra, while temperate mix forest covers the south-central portion of Québec and Ontario and the American states. The colours which predominate in these landscapes are greens, blues, greys, reds and browns; whites prevail in winter, while reds and yellows dominate the temperate forests during fall.8

The Shield and the surrounding Great Lakes region are the cultural landscapes of Algonquian-speaking peoples. These landscapes set the stage for the socio-religious, political and economic life of Indigenous people, and house their memories and stories while shaping their cultural identity. Places in landscapes are remembered for the mythological events, as well as the important historic events for the tribes, that occurred there and which are remembered in the “intangibles” — stories and toponyms. The landscapes are sacred and filled with other-than-human persons, which co-habit Earth with humans and which are associated with various layers of the universe and often with particular features on the landscape such as mountains, unusual rock formations, trees, lakes and rapids. For example, Thunderbirds were said to dwell on top of mountains (e.g. Copway 1860:147-149; Jenness 1935:34-38; Jones 1861:85; Smith 1995:80-81). Places of cultural importance can bear obvious marks of anthropic activity (e.g. mounds or rock art sites); however, many natural places, such as mountains, rivers, caves and effigy formations are similarly imbued with signification (see Bradley 2000 for importance of natural places in archaeology). The importance of natural places is further evinced by the fact that the distinction between nature and culture is not as pronounced in Indigenous ontology as it is in the Western one (Hallowell and Brown 1992:63). Many natural formations are the result of activities and transformations of mythological beings and humans (e.g. Köhl...

The colours encountered in Algonquian landscapes participate in people’s cultural lives. Often, it is unusual colours – bright, brilliant and atypical for the region – that will point to and sustain the spiritual potency of places. The importance of colours emerges in immaterial goods, such as stories and toponyms; in atmospheric phenomena such as the aurora borealis; in natural places, such as rock formations and water bodies; and in human-made places such as rock art sites, mounds and effigies. In combination with haptic, auditory and olfactory qualities and embedded in stories, colours reveal the cultural landscapes of Algonquian-speaking peoples.9

**Stories**

Stories are often engrained in landscapes. “The story and the place dialectically help to construct and reproduce each other” while the story helps to anchor teachings and knowledge onto the land and to create and reaffirm ties between people and places (Basso 1996; Tilley 1994:33). Colourful landscapes are invoked on the earthly plane, as well as in the mythological dimension. In Ojibwa beliefs, souls travelling along the path of the dead encounter a giant strawberry, which turns into a rock when the soul attempts to eat it. The people around Lake Superior envisioned the rock to be the red sandstone of the type found in that area (Tanner and James 1830:290). The nineteenth century fur trader George Nelson, who lived among the Cree and northern Ojibwa, recounted the story of the Indigenous Esculapius10, the spirit owner of medicinal plants and minerals, who was visited by those seeking medicinal knowledge during vision quests.

According to Nelson's account, Esculapius lived in a mountain from which issue forty rivers:

> The water in every one of the rivers is of a different color, no two being alike, one is Black, another white, red, Green, blue, *ash-color*, &c, &c… In the latter grow herbs and plants of a vast variety… These rivers, i.e., waters, are of different colors, so also is the rapidity of each stream; some of them moving in a turbulent and awful manner as the rapids and eddies at the foot of large falls; some moving in large majestic waves like the swells of a large and deep Lake agitated by the wind; and some in a beautiful smooth current, down which the canoes are scarcely perceived to move. These are the tokens or signs or emblems of the manner of our lives, here below, so far as regards to health and sickness. (Brown and Brightman 1988:55-56)

These coloured waters were mixed with powders to produce medicines (Brown and Brightman 1988:57). This account of polychromatic rivers linked to powerful medicines hints at the power of colour in the landscape as a source of spiritual power.

Atmospheric phenomena could moreover create varicoloured manifestations. Aurora borealis or the northern lights, the spectral illumination in the sky that can be accompanied by sounds, was envisioned as dancing spirits (Chamberlain 1902:62; Dorman 1881: 337; Franklin 1823:283-284). In one myth recorded among the Ottawa, the aurora borealis is a “reflection of the great fire kindled” by Nanabush (Hamilton 1903:231).
**Toponyms**

Place names arise out of experiences, affix memories in the landscape and act on subsequent experiences and memories of people. Place names orient a person or people within a landscape, and they regulate the relations between places and those who are in the place (Tilley 1994:18-19). Among Algonquian-speaking peoples, particular places received their names based on “some unique or distinct characteristic within the area” (Johnston 1986:9) as well as based on activities and events that occurred there in historical and mythological times (Arsenault 2004a:297). Salient colours and useful colours, such as those used in pigments, were commemorated in toponyms. Places could be named after a chromatic particularity as was Ka-wa-ba-ton-gwa or White Sand River, Ka-ma-ka-te-wa-ga-mig or Black Water River and Nipigon Lake, a contraction of the expression for “Deep Clear-water Lake” (Bell 1870:339, 340, 354).

Red ochre is referred to in certain toponyms. For example, the river La Romaine in Québec is a 'frenchified' version of the Innu toponym Oluman shibu, which means “the river of red paint” on account of the red ochre deposits found there; at least one explorer recorded the reddish colour of the water (Pâquet 1984:237; Rouillard 1906:77). Other references to red ochre and paint are similarly made in the names of Onaman Lakes (Ontario, Québec), O-na-manisagi River (Ontario), and Oloman River (Québec) (Bell 1870:340; Guinard 1960:123-124, 130-131), and most likely, the many Vermillion and Red Lakes and Rivers found throughout the Shield.

**Natural places**

Many rock formations of unique and prominent hues also bore chromatic appellations. These striking colours were among the environmental “affordances” (Gibson 1979), in this case, the potentialities that nourish spiritual expression. As Peter Jones (1861) remarked, “[a]ny remarkable features in natural scenery or terrific places become objects of superstitious dread and veneration, from the idea they are the abodes of gods: for instance, curious trees, rocks, islands, mountains, caves, or waterfalls” (85; see also Dorman 1881:136).

The nineteenth century explorer, Major Stephen Long, described the appeal of one such formation in Illinois on the Mississippi River. Known as the Red Rock, it was venerated by the local Indigenous groups:

> It is a fragment of sienite, which is about four and a half feet in diameter. It is not surprising that the Indians should have viewed this rock with some curiosity, and deemed it wonderful, considering that its character differs so materially from the rocks which are found in that neighborhood. A man who lives in a country where the highest hills are wholly formed of sandstone and secondary limestone, will necessarily be struck with the peculiar characters of the first specimen of the granite that comes under his notice, and it is not to be wondered at that one who “sees God in all things” should have made part of a stone an object of worship. (Copway 1860:233-234)

Luminous, shiny and often white formations in the landscape were equally recognised. In Québec, there is Montagne Brillante or Shining Mountain, which is very likely thus called on account of the white and greyish quartz intrusions sprinkled in its upper reaches (Valiquette 1909:43). A famous example of a sacred location of white colour is the account left by the Jesuit Pierre Laure of the Antre de Marbre cave in
the quartzite outcrop of la Colline Blanche in Québec:

The most remarkable of all the curiosities to be seen in these woods, in the direction of Nemiskou, is a cave of white marble, which looks as if a workman had carved and polished it. The aperture is easy of access, and lights up the interior. The vault corresponds, by its brilliancy, to its supports. In one corner is a slab of the same substance, but somewhat rough, which projects, forming a kind of table as if to serve as an altar. Consequently the savages [sic] think that it is a house of prayer and council, wherein the Spirits assemble. Therefore all do not take the liberty of entering it; but the jugglers who are, as it were, their Priests, go there in passing to consult their oracles. (Thwaites 1896-1901:68:49)

Jones (1861) recounted that “the La Cloche mountains, [near Manitoulin Island, Ontario]...being principally composed of white flint rock, when viewed from a distance... have all the appearance of snow-capped mountains. It is on these mountains...the thunder-gods, or eagles, have their abode, and hatch their young” (43). Keating (1824:2:153) reported that the Wabasemo Wenenewak or White Dog tribe (Ojibwa) dwell near a white rock that was held in veneration. Extraordinary humans could turn into rocks which sometimes were white (e.g. Jenness 1935:19). Another example of a white formation was provided by the ethnologist Henry R. Schoolcraft:

A few miles beyond the termination of this clay bank, (about fifty-five miles above

Fort Gratiot [Lake Huron, Michigan],) we passed the White Rock, an enormous detached mass of transition limestone, standing in the lake, at the distance of half a mile from the shore. This is an object looked upon as a kind of milestone by the voyageurs, and is known to all canoe and boat travellers of the region. It has already found a place upon some maps. The White Rock is an object which had attracted the early notice of the Indians, who are the first to observe the non-conformities in the appearances of a country; and it continues to be one of the places at which offerings are made. (Schoolcraft 1821:87-88)

As is evident from Schoolcraft’s account, these colourful places not only anchored spiritual powers, but they further acted as landmarks in navigating the uniform landscape of water, rocks and trees (see Golledge 2003). Algonquian-speaking peoples relied on this navigational strategy when creating maps and when travelling. Thus, maps would emphasize landmarks, and travellers, whether on land or by water, relied heavily on landmarks for orientation (Hallowell, 1955:190-191, 196). Hence, colours act as important referents in the landscape for spiritual reasons, as well as practical ones.

Water, ubiquitous in the landscapes in question, could also be indicative of spiritually charged places based on its colour. Smith (1995:114-115) wrote that many lakes, associated with the Underwater/Underground other-than-human person, Mishipeshu, were recognised as such due to factors such as great depth, turbulent waters, whirlpools and unusual colours. One such lake is Quanja Lake (Manitoulin Island,
Ontario) which is characterised by a peculiar colour and great depth. The Rev. Frederick Frost described the lake in 1904:

It was truly a wonderful sight; the water was, indeed, a peculiar color, a glittering, lustrous, greenish blue, not like the color of the water at Bermuda, or the blue of the Meditarranean, nor like the water in the harbour at Barbadoes, nor a mixture of these. The Indian was right when he said it was ghastly. It was a beautiful color, yet somewhat repulsive. I have never seen a blue snake, but it was the same color a snake would be, supposing it were blue. It was intensely brilliant, glittering in the sunshine; it looked like a pigment, yet it was quite white, of course, when taken up in a vessel or in the hand. It might have been the descriptions of the Indians that had affected my imagination, or the contagion of superstition, but I do not wonder that they were struck with the unusual appearance of the lake. It was not the sunshine that made it that peculiar color; it was not the reflection of the sky. It was the same when cloudy; it was the same always, in the daytime probably. (Frost 1904: 135-136, quoted in Smith 1995: 115)

Copway (1860:227) reported that near St. Paul (Minnesota), the explorer Jonathan Carver came across “a remarkable cave, called by the Indians the dwelling of the Great Spirit. The entrance was about ten feet wide and five feet high. About twenty feet from the entrance was a lake, the water of which was transparent” (Copway 1860:227). Within the cave were found petroglyphs.

**Anthropic places**

Colours can be used to mark special places in the landscape. Stones, which were venerated, were sometimes daubed with red paint (e.g. Keating 1824:1:304, 334, 360; Thwaites 1896-1901:55:191-193). Rock art sites are among the most striking places where colours have a story to tell in the chromatic spectacles of landscapes. Dewdney and Kidd (1967:32) described the Crooked Lake site (Minnesota) as “a great bulk of granite … its walls streaked with rich mosaic of iron stains, vari-coloured lichens, and vivid deposits of precipitate lime [where] man’s art is apt to be unnoticed, modestly appearing some fifty yards south of this colourful display.” It was rock art scholars who first paid attention to the semantic potential of colour in the landscape as they tackled the study of sacred Indigenous landscapes (e.g. Arsenault 2004; Conway 1993; Molyneaux 1980, 1983; Vastokas 1990; Vastokas and Vastokas 1973; Zawadzka 2008).

The Canadian Shield is dotted with hundreds of rock art sites, with the greatest concentration occurring in north-western Ontario, eastern Manitoba and north-eastern Saskatchewan (see Dewdney and Kidd 1967:164; Rajnovich 1994:10). Pictographs painted with red ochre predominate, though a few sites have images painted in yellow, white and black pigments (Dewdney and Kidd 1967:6). They are found almost exclusively on vertical rock formations bordering lakes and rivers. There are a few petroglyph sites which are carved or pecked into the rock and which also tend to be located along waterways. According to a classificatory scheme devised by Dewdney and Kidd (1967), Canadian Shield rock art includes images of human figures (“anthropomorphs”), human hands, animals such as moose, bears and snakes, mythical creatures such as Thunderbirds, objects of material
culture such as canoes, and the so-called abstractions such as dots and short strokes known as tally marks. Abstractions account for most of the motifs. The tradition is believed by some researchers to be at least 2,000 years old (Arsenault 2004b:356; Rajnovich 1994:41); however, rock art continued to be produced well into the post-contact era as evidenced by figurative motifs such as guns and horses. Today, in certain areas such as Lake of the Woods in Ontario, rock art is still sporadically created by the local Indigenous people (e.g. Colson 2007:269, 374-375). However, it is difficult to determine the age and cultural provenance of the majority of the sites.

Red ochre is a sacred substance that can further act as an index for the spiritual powers it represents. William Allen studies the experiential dimension of sacred Indigenous landscapes and he often discusses the importance of effigy formations in the landscape (see also Zawadzka 2008:81-82). Allen works closely with the Algonquin Elder William Commanda and the following incident, which occurred during an inspection of photographs of pictographs from Algonquin Park (Ontario), illustrates the evocative nature of colour and its connection to rock art, landscape and its inhabitants:

After the pause [William Commanda] continued, “Yes, it’s such a beautiful… colour.” Now I wasn’t expecting a comment about colour. I thought I would be hearing about the shape and the meaning of the shape. “Yes, such a beautiful colour,” he continued, “It’s the colour of a fox. There must be a fox here somewhere.” …within the texture of the rock on which the pictograph had been painted. After several minutes Elder Commanda raised his head and smiled. He looked at me directly and tapped the table with his finger signaling me to look through the magnifying glass. I did so and, much to my surprise, there within the image was the most perfectly proportioned outline of a fox head. (Allen 2009:10)

The positive valuation of light colours is observed in the preference for smooth and light-coloured surfaces (e.g. Arsenault 2004a:304; Dewdney and Kidd 1967:168). Moreover, the rock itself can be white, such as the white granite boulders at the Gros Cap site (Conway 1984:3), the limestone background of the Burnt Bluff pictograph site (Lugthart 1968:98) and the rocky outcrop of the Peterborough Petroglyphs (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973) (Figure 1). Light coloured surfaces were also created by calcite/silica precipitate that has been observed at many rock art sites. For example, at the Picture Rock Island site (Ontario), a heavy and widespread coat of precipitate has been exploited for rock art creation. The precipitate is visible at a great distance and is not uniform but ranges from white to grey. From a distance, this characteristic makes it resemble a frozen waterfall issuing from the rock itself (Figure 2). Through their ethnographic research, Conway and Conway (1990:12) were able to obtain seventeen original rock art sites names. The names such as Ka-Gaw-Gee-Wabikong or “Raven Rock White Cliff Beside the Water” alluded to birds of prey, which were a metaphor for Thunderbirds. The White is said to refer to bird excreta, which can be observed below nests. Therefore, the white calcite washes are a metaphor for Thunderbird droppings (Conway and Conway 1990:12-13). Surfaces can also be shiny. At the Nisula site in Québec, the shimmering surface on which the pictographs are painted...
shines especially in the morning sun (Figure 3). At some sites, sun rays reflected off the water surface dance on cliff portions where pictographs are located.

The aesthetic of brilliance is further evident in the mineral feldspar and quartz veins which crisscross the predominantly granite rocks of the Shield. Quartz is usually translucent or white, but it can be pink, purple or grey. It is characterised by a vitreous lustre. According to one legend, the shimmering inclusions in rocks have a supernatural origin:

Kitche Manitou wrought the mountains, the cliffs, precipices, and escarpments. Thinking that perhaps the massive rocks were too imposing and dark and grey and dreary, Kitche Manitou fashioned small stones, the size of plum pits and of brilliant hues of white, crimson, green, blue, yellow, amber, azure. He hurled these brilliant pebbles against the mountains and rocky sides of the earth. Immediately, the rocks and mountains began to sparkle. (Johnston 1976:167)

In addition, De Charlevoix (1766:2) reported that “[a]ccording to the Montagnais, [lightning] is the Effort which a Genius makes to bring up a Snake which he hath swallowed, and they found this Notion on observing, that when the Thunder falls upon a Tree, it leaves a Mark something like the Shape of a Snake” (173).

Dark colours are likewise manipulated for visual effects. Cliffs where contrasting dark and light colours are present were sometimes chosen for the production of images. The main panel at the Fairy Point site is adjacent to a black surface (Figure 5) and black vertical bands run along the cliff of the Nisula site (Québec). The exploitation of these visual effects is yet another demonstration of the aesthetic appeal for contrasts and bold colours among Algonquian-speaking peoples that is manifested, for example, in the decoration of objects such as bark-containers decorated with contrasting colours (Phillips 1987:89-92). Furthermore, it harks back to the universal fondness for colour patterning (see above Jones and MacGregor 2002:14-15; for a discussion of aesthetic effects present at rock art sites, see Zawadzka 2010).
Colours were manipulated in other contexts through anthropic agency. A zoomorphic intaglio effigy mound located north-west of Lake Superior, near Kaministikwiia River has been described in ethnohistorical accounts (Dawson 1966; e.g. Keating 1824:2:136-137). According to historical documents, the effigy, probably of a dog, was of a brilliant white colour and easily discernible by canoe travellers. Dawson (1966:31) suggested that it had been sprinkled with a shiny substance, such as fine beach sand. Finally, burial mounds in Ontario were constructed with intermittent layers of brown, black, yellow and white clays and soils (e.g. Boyle 1897:24, 29).

**Conclusion**

The opening quote of this paper, written by the French painter Fernand Léger, seems to hold true for most of humanity’s history. Colour’s expressive potential has been employed to negotiate relations between people, material culture and landscapes for millennia. Though initially perceived as an epiphenomenal aspect of the lived world, colour is increasingly recognized within anthropology as an important player in social practice that defines relations between people, things and landscapes. This paper hoped to demonstrate the power that colour held and continues to hold for the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the Canadian Shield and the Great Lakes region. In this area, chromatic symbolic aspects have been harnessed in both material culture and landscapes – the lived and mythological ones. Colours are of importance in the intangible heritage of stories and toponyms; their physical manifestation in atmospheric phenomena and natural and anthropic places reinforces cultural beliefs of spirituality, while helping these peoples to negotiate the lived everyday landscapes. Salient colours, especially the important black-white-red triad, as well as radiant light effects are present in stones, minerals and water. Some of these colours define animate substances. This is the case of red and ochre. These animate colours present in the landscape speak in their turn of the animate nature of Algonquian landscapes. Inextricably bound to their medium, colours reinforce the relationships of people to places and carry on the legacy of cultural landscapes.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Prof. Daniel Arsenault and Dr. Antti Lahelma for comments on previous versions of this paper. This research is sponsored by the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

**Notes**

1 Comparative and evolutionary colour nomenclature studies have been carried out since the nineteenth century (see Saunders 2000:84-85; e.g. Rivers 1902).
2 Algonquin is a designation given to a single tribe, while Algonquian is a term that refers to a group of different tribes whose members speak Algonquian languages.
3 Other-than-human persons is a classification devised by Irving A. Hallowell to designate supernatural entities, mythological beings and natural elements such as winds and sun who are animate and have powers but who are not supernatural in the Western sense as the division between supernatural and natural does not exist among Indigenous people (see Hallowell and Brown 1992:63-65).
4 For example, the Mistassini Cree (Québec) associate white with the caribou based on the species' predominantly white coat and its winter exploitation (Tanner 1979:143).
5 In 1665, David Pietersz de Vries wrote about the Indigenous people of what is now Manhattan Island: “Their pride is to paint their faces strangely with red or black lead, so that they look like fiends. They are then valiant, yea, they say they are mannette, [Manitou] the devil himself” (Boyle 1896:75). This description, which highlights the spiritual agency of pigments, could certainly apply to the people further north.
For example, among the Ojibwa, youths undertaking the vision quest (an important liminal stage in life) would sometimes apply charcoal in order to blacken their faces and elicit pity from potential guardian spirits (e.g. Hamell 1987:76). Mourners applied black pigments to their bodies (Schoolcraft 1821:231).

There is an interesting connection with the turtle, who traditionally acts as a mediating spirit in conjuring ceremonies, as an interpreter and messenger (e.g. Brown and Brightman 1988:110-111). One Ojibwa word for turtle is *miskwadessi*, which corresponds to the Nipissing term *miskwatesi*, and means "red creature" (Chamberlain 1901:682).

Detailed descriptions of the polychromatic minerals and rock formations of the area are found in the accounts of early geologists and explorers (e.g. Bell 1870; Schoolcraft 1821).

Haptic, olfactory, auditory and visual qualities all play into the cultural experience of a landscape. For example, among Algonquian-speaking people, thunder is considered the voice of Thunderbirds (see Zawadzka 2008 for a discussion of these qualities in the Algonquian sacred landscapes).

Esculapius (variant of Asclepius), the name used by Nelson, refers to the ancient Greek god of healing and medicine.

The white calcium precipitate is formed by water which evaporates from the surface of the rock leaving behind dissolved, opaque calcium streaks. Silica precipitate is formed in the same way except that the deposits are clear.

The author is unaware of a classificatory system by First Nations peoples regarding birds but it is unlikely that it resembles that of modern biological/ornithological classification. Ravens, though not of the same family, do resemble birds of prey in appearance and do feast on other animals though usually in the form of carrion. Conway and Conway (1990) associate ravens with birds of prey such as eagles and thus Thunderbirds in that they are all said to inhabit cliff tops.

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Figure 1.
The white rocky outcrop at the Diamond Lake site (Ontario).
August 2009 (all photos by author.)
Figure 2.
Figure 3.
Shiny surface with pictographs (lower right) at the Nisula site (Québec). August 2009.
Figure 4.
Thunderbird clutching a quartz vein, Lake Mazinaw (Ontario). September 2010.
Figure 5.
Main panel at Fairy Point site (Ontario). September 2006.

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