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Native Philosophies and Relationality in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

It's (Lion) Turtles All the Way Down

Miranda Belarde-Lewis (Zuni/Tlingit) and Clementine Bordeaux (Sicangu Oglala Lakota)

> The true mind can wither all the lies and illusions without being lost. The true heart can touch the poison of hatred without being harmed. Since beginningless time, darkness thrives in the void, but always yields to purifying Light.
>
> (Lion Turtle, "Sozin's Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters")

Is *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (*ATLA*) a Native story? Possibly. Can Native peoples see themselves and their philosophies reflected in *ATLA*? Absolutely. At least we can. We are Native people from vastly different Native communities (Zuni Pueblo/Tlingit and Sicangu Oglala Lakota), and yet there are many events, themes, and underlying philosophical messages within *ATLA* that resonate with us both. These include having deep relationships with a specific territory and landscape, a consciousness of the sheer strength of the natural elements within that landscape, being aware of and at ease with the spirit realm, and the easygoing acceptance of supernatural and extra-human abilities as part of everyday life for those in the *ATLA* universe.

The everydayness of benders reflecting the physical properties of their elements reminds us of the work of the late Jicarilla Apache philosopher V.F. Cordova (1937–2002). Cordova describes "bounded space" as a land base defined by geographic features such as mountains, rivers, deserts, lakes, oceans, and canyons. Being from a specific bounded space provides a chance to develop a heightened awareness of one's physical location, as well as the plants, animals, weather, and seasons of that environment. Being from a bounded space obligates a person to be knowledgeable of, and responsible for, that space. Part of the obligation and responsibility of bounded space is

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knowing that on the other side of that mountain, river, desert, lake, ocean, or canyon live different sets of people in *their* rightful and bounded space.[1]

The *ATLA* universe contains multiple examples of bounded space. As the series progresses, we're taken on a tour through the different nations and learn to recognize the ways each nation's bounded space is reflected in the landscapes, animals, and plants, and how the landscapes have shaped the humans in those spaces – in everything from their personalities, clothing, and food, to their relation to the spirit realm, and, of course, their benders.

There is a Lakota saying: "the same as above, as below," which means that the events taking place here, in the physical world, affect what happens in the spiritual world and vice versa.[2] While we're given hints that there are amazingly big metaphysical and spiritual events going on when Aang's iceberg bubble first surfaces and when the statues' eyes light up with Avatar energy at the Southern Air Temple, our first explicit introduction to the spirit realm is "Winter Solstice, Part 1," where the Gaang witness the effects of a scorched earth terror campaign typical of a Fire Nation raid and discover a nearby village being terrorized by an angry spirit – Hei Bai. After Sokka and Aang are transported to the Spirit Realm and back, the experience helps Aang (and us) see that living humans and the spirit world coexist and are inextricably linked. The spirit realm might appear scary. But as we dive further into the series, we realize that it's all around us and that it deserves respect and is not to be feared. Aang learns it's impossible to separate the physical world from the spirit world, a sentiment shared by many Native peoples from different tribal nations.

As Indigenous peoples watching *ATLA*, we bring our specific tribal understandings of the physical world, spiritual world, and more-than-human kin defined by the bounded spaces we grew up in. For example, in Lakota, understanding spiritual journeys after death involves traveling along the Milky Way to the Spirit world, which reminds us of Aang's path along a starry ribbon toward the universe as he learns how to master the Avatar state ("The Crossroads of Destiny"). In both Zuni Pueblo and Tlingit understandings of reincarnation and rebirth, the genealogical connections of family and heritage live on through successive generations and are acknowledged as an identifiable strength of individuals, families, and clans (extended family groups). Past lives play a vital role in passing on knowledge and wisdom through the Avatar line. We can see Aang's journey as he tries to restore the balance between good and evil, dark and light, and master all the elements as his understanding of air, water, earth, and fire deepens his connection to the world he's tasked with protecting.

The Benders: Defined by Their Bounded Space

At the beginning of each *ATLA* episode, the audience is reminded: "Long ago, the four nations lived together in harmony." The sequence shows four individuals bending the water, earth, fire, and air elements. The four

elements within the *ATLA* universe reflect the specific bounded space that obligates a person to be knowledgeable of and responsible for that space. *ATLA* characters within the Water Tribes, Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation, and the Air Nomads are bound to and shaped by their relationships with their respective nations.

Two episodes specifically highlight the impact of relationships between other-than-human persons, including animals and spirits of the bending world. In "The Siege of the North, Part 1," the moon and ocean stories are revealed to explain waterbending. In "The Firebending Masters," stories are shared regarding earthbending, airbending, and firebending. These two episodes are excellent examples of bounded space and relationality. Relationality, as explored by contemporary Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, is a deep-seated responsibility to the territory one comes from, as well as all aspects of that territory – land, waters, people, animals, plants.[3]

In "The Siege of the North, Part 1," we are introduced to the Northern Spirit Oasis and the spirits Tui (push) and La (pull), who took the form of koi fish in the human plane of existence. Princess Yue tells Aang, Katara, and Momo that the moon taught waterbending to the people of the Water Tribes as they observed the push and pull on the ocean. Yue further explains that "our strength comes from the spirit of the moon; our life comes from the spirit of the ocean." She takes them to a spirit oasis, the most spiritual area in the North Pole. Later, Yue reciprocates the life that was gifted to her as a newborn, in order to reanimate Tui's slain fish body, and thus takes her new place in the sky as an ancestor, the Moon Spirit. This act of selfless love for family and community reminds us of Tlingit clan insignia in the Pacific Northwest. The symbols used to represent various Tlingit clans were earned by ancient ancestors who gave their lives to animals, supernatural beings, or landforms, like mountains. In exchange, their surviving family group is now able to use and draw strength from the image of that animal or mountain. Likewise, the waterbenders (and Sokka) know that Yue is in the sky, guiding and watching over everyone.

In "The Firebending Masters," Toph shares her story of learning earthbending from the badgermoles: "I was able to learn earthbending not just as a martial art, but as an extension of my senses." She explains that the badgermoles utilize earthbending as a way of "interacting with the world." Aang tells us he learned from the Air Nomad monks, but they learned from the flying bison, the original airbenders. He even remarks to Appa that "maybe you'll give me a lesson one day, buddy," thus reducing the hierarchy between humans and animals, introducing the possibility that Appa could be the leader of a situation, and not just a ride and a pet. The connection to koi fish, badgermoles and air bison demonstrates the deep relationship to other-than-human persons integral to bending.

Later, in "The Firebending Masters" episode, the last dragons are revealed to understand fire, furthering Aang and Zuko's firebending knowledge. The ancient protectors of this knowledge, the Sun Warriors,

literally bring to light the way dragons continue to privilege and utilize firebending cultural knowledge. The Sun Warriors reveal an ontological formation that contemporary Quandamooka scholar and philosopher Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes as a matter of identity and state of being. She explains "we come to know who we are and who we claim to be, as well as who claims us and how we are connected to our lands."[4] Zuko and Aang's firebending suffers without a defined connection to the dragons and the land. Ultimately, Aang's apprehension toward firebending and Zuko's diminished firebending abilities are grounded in fear. As they witness firebending from the true masters, they see this ability as a responsibility rather than a right. Their commitment to firebending is present in their drive to bring balance to the universe. For each nation's benders, it's the connection to and awareness of the physical properties of their respective bounded spaces that results in their extra-human abilities and ultimately, the mastery of their bending.

The People

The specific bounded spaces of the respective nations are reflected in their people and their benders. In "Bitter Work," Uncle Iroh breaks down the main characteristics of the people and the four nations: the Fire Nation embody power and desire; the Earth Kingdom show endurance and diversity; the Air Nomads achieved freedom from worldly concerns (and also had a pretty good sense of humor); and the Water Tribes exude love and community, especially in the face of change. Contemporary Hawaiian philosopher and scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer states, "specificity leads to universality." [5] This idea about celebrating one's origins while still respecting differences is later expanded by Iroh and the others in the Order of the White Lotus, a point we'll return to later. The specificity of physically bounded places creates the unique traits of the people who live within those boundaries, which results in the incredible abilities drawn upon by each nation's benders.

Meyer writes that for Indigenous peoples, "one does not simply learn about the land, we learn best *from* land." She goes on to explain that we need to recognize and identify how "space has influenced our thinking. Because it has."[6] Prince Zuko's quest to reclaim his honor through his search for the Avatar leads him to experience every corner of the world with Uncle Iroh and his small crew. Later, when he achieves his long-standing goal of being at his father's side during a war meeting (shown as a flashback in "Sozin's Comet Part 1: The Phoenix King"), Zuko is looked to as the expert; he possesses nuanced insights that none of his father's advisors have. Zuko and Fire Lord Ozai realize that Zuko's interactions beyond the inner confines of the palace, where he is surrounded by servants and neighbors of other wealthy and noble Fire Nation folk, have

shaped his understanding of the other nations. In other words, Zuko's world travels have provided him with valuable insights into the Earth Kingdom citizens, which Princess Azula then twists into a genocidal plan immediately endorsed by Ozai. The difference between Ozai and Zuko boils down to a fundamentally different ethical understanding of their responsibility to the world and their rights as the leaders of the Fire Nation. Ozai feels he has a right to power over the world, while Zuko recognizes a profound responsibility to leading the Fire Nation as a contributor, and not the ruler of the other nations. We see this again later (in "Sozin's Comet Part 1: The Phoenix King") when the Gaang looks to Zuko to find Aang because, as Katara points out, he "is the expert at tracking Aang." His senses and knowledge of the world have been shaped by his interactions with many different types of land and the people within the Earth Kingdom.

Toph Beifong first appears in Aang's vision in "The Swamp." In some Indigenous communities, such as with many Lakota families, experiencing a premonition, or vision, leads to responsibilities to the community. King Bumi advises Aang to seek an earthbending teacher who "listens to the earth." We finally meet Toph in "The Blind Bandit," when Aang recognizes that she is literally listening to the earth. The vision in the swamp that helps Aang identify Toph as his earthbending master reinforces Native values of relatedness and interconnection.

In "Bitter Work," we see Aang struggle with earthbending. Toph's personality and teaching style is another example of the stereotypes for different nations' citizens. Toph barks orders and mocks Aang. Her taunting is an attempt to shame Aang into earthbending, resulting in frustration for them both. It's not until Katara reminds the easy-going and playful Aang that the natural opposite of Air is Earth, that he realizes that he needs to be patient with himself as he adapts to the internal qualities required to be an effective earthbender. Many Native stories about the origins of the world include obstacles put in the path of a trickster/hero/protagonist, meant to challenge them and make them stronger. Aang and Toph both display personalities shaped by their physical environments and remind us that the eternal struggle for balance and reciprocity sought by the Avatar requires adaptation, understanding, *and* balance. The search for connection, relatedness, and harmony is in line with the goals of many Native stories, cosmologies, and religious practices.

ATLA Universe

The *ATLA* universe provides narratives that point to Indigenous intergenerational ways of knowing. The concept of the North American continent existing on a turtle's back comes from a wide variety of tribal nations. Cherokee novelist Thomas King playfully uses the line "It's turtles all the way down" throughout his book *The Truth About Stories*.[7] Turtles on top

of turtles demonstrate relationality passed along intergenerationally and establish a spiritual foundation for those on the turtle's back. Within the *ATLA* universe, the experience of being on a turtle's back, or rather a Lion Turtle's back, signals a deep connection to the spirit realm. Additionally, the advice of the Lion Turtle mirrors the knowledge of elders that continues to present itself throughout the series. The *ATLA* universe transforms Aang's experiences into examples of long-standing intergenerational learning needed to solve problems within the human world.

In "Sozin's Comet Part 2: The Old Masters," two significant *ATLA* universe revelations illustrate the importance of relationality. The episode sets up Aang's first meeting with a Lion Turtle and introduces the Order of the White Lotus. Both revelations provide a way for the audience to understand the importance of intercultural collaboration for the safety and well-being of all nations. Furthermore, the introduction of a Lion Turtle reveals a more significant connection between bending and the spirit world. These plot developments ultimately shift our understanding to see that bending is not about power but rather a continuum of responsibility toward balance.

In "Sozin's Comet Part 1: The Phoenix King," Aang expresses inner turmoil as he contemplates whether he must kill Fire Lord Ozai. Throughout the series, Aang often takes a spiritual journey to visit his past Avatar lives or find advice from the spirit realm. However, when Aang goes missing in this episode, he is given the ability to ask his past Avatar selves what he should do, and he comes face to face with a Lion Turtle. By the end of his journey on the Lion Turtle's back, the Lion Turtle's advice leads him to realize an alternative to taking a human's life. Aang defeats Fire Lord Ozai (AKA the Phoenix King) by taking away his bending abilities rather than killing him. In a flashback, the Lion Turtle states, "In the era before the Avatar, we bent not the elements, but the energy within ourselves." Aang, reflecting on the Lion Turtle's advice, struggles to keep his spirit balanced. He accomplishes his task in taking Ozai's firebending away so that it can no longer be used to "hurt or threaten anyone else again." Aang's actions demonstrate that balance *across* the universe is more important than power *over* the universe.

Throughout his journey in the series, Aang realizes that an intergenerational connection to his past selves can ensure a future relationality grounded in the balance of the elements, nations, and spirit realm. His 100-year absence has caused the physical world to descend into chaos and selfishness. The power grab of the Fire Nation has disrupted the relationships to bounded space. Near the end of the final episode ("Sozin's Comet Part 4: Avatar Aang") Zuko states, "a hundred years of fighting has left the world scarred and divided." We are then reminded of the Lion Turtle's lesson to have an incorruptible spirit that relies on the ability to seek balance across generations.

Within the *ATLA* universe, intergenerational engagement is an essential aspect of relationality. In "Sozin's Comet Part 2: The Old Masters" we see

the longevity of intergenerational wisdom and knowledge across the different kingdoms, tribes, and nations. The Order of the White Lotus exemplifies a connection to and continuum between land and place shaped and protected by knowledge of the elders. While the Gaang tries to find a solution to defeating Fire Lord Ozai, they seek out Uncle Iroh for advice. They discover him with other "great masters," including Sifu Pakku, Jeong Jeong, King Bumi, and Master Piandao – a non-bender from the Fire Nation. These "old guys," as Toph calls them, explain that they are a part of "an ancient secret society, a group that transcends the divisions of the four nations." The Order of the White Lotus illustrates that bringing balance to the world is not just a task for the Avatar, but for everyone from all nations, both benders and non-benders. As a young honorable leader, Zuko seeks to restore balance to the Fire Nation. At the same time, the members of the Order of the White Lotus return Ba Sing Se to the people of the Earth Kingdom.

The concluding episode of the series transcends bending, nation, element, and bounded space to prove that *ATLA* is a story about relationality. To counteract the failings of individual people, the intergenerational tasks set before the Order of the White Lotus, the Aang gang, and the Avatar rely heavily on stories and experiences of those who have gone before. Lakota communities, as well as many Indigenous Nations, often turn to spirit helpers or familial ancestors to guide decision making. The Avatar continues to call on his past selves for guidance while the Aang gang and the Order of the White Lotus rely on aspects of their respective nation to bring balance to the *ATLA* universe. From an Indigenous perspective, elder knowledge or spirit knowledge is shared through stories or the storying of a place.

The Order of the White Lotus represents the stories of bounded space coming together to re-establish a relationship with the Earth Kingdom, with representatives from each nation and both benders and non-benders doing their part to restore Ba Sing Se's sovereignty. For example, Uncle Iroh recognizes that his vision of conquering Ba Sing Se was a misguided understanding of his youth. He states "only now do I see that my destiny is to take it [Ba Sing Se] back from the Fire Nation" ("Sozin's Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters"), which is why Iroh gathered the Order of the White Lotus. Uncle Iroh recognizes that the stories and understandings from each nation are what should bring balance to the world. The stories of the relationships between other-than-human kin, spirits, landscapes, and generations are essential to the function of relationality within the *ATLA* universe.

Opening (Spirit) Portals

Within the *ATLA* universe, we witness regular connections with the spirit realm or spirit world. Vine Deloria Jr. demonstrates that communities in North America often call themselves "the people" to reflect their deep

connection to the demands of the spirits of the land.[8] Deloria argues that the natural world dictates how Indigenous peoples engage with their land and cosmology. This engagement often takes the form of speaking to plants or animals, or connecting with spirits.[9] Many Indigenous scholars have explored these connections to the "spirit world" as understood in *ATLA*.

Our use of "spirit" in this chapter reflects the use of the word "spirit" in the series. David Delgado Shorter advises that the use of "spirit," "spiritual," or "spirituality," in regard to Indigenous peoples is a complex issue that often results in a dismissal of Indigenous ideas, concepts, and practices. Shorter supports the use of "related" instead, which is another reason why we focus on relationality to explain the spirit realm as it's depicted in the concepts of bounded space and bending in the universe of both *ATLA* and in *The Legend of Korra* (*LoK*).[10] To transform a spiritual relationship with others requires a proactive stance as opposed to a passive engagement with the world. We witness the transformation from the passive individualism of Aang hiding from his responsibilities or Zuko's narrowed goal of restoring "honor" to an active relational interaction between the Nations and their inhabitants. Throughout the series, we get different perspectives and moments of spiritual connections that demonstrate how Indigenous spirituality involves a deep respect, which requires actionable accountability to self, family, friends, nations, and the universe.

Although it's not the focus of this chapter, the importance of the spirit realm lays the foundation for the ability to access the spirit realm and the Avatar origin stories shared in *LoK*. At the end of *LoK* Book One ("Endgame"), Korra's bending has been taken away by Amon, and it's Aang who restores her bending, even though he is already dead. He blurs the lines between the spirit realm and the physical realm and shows Korra that she can access her connections with her past selves by simply asking for their help. As demonstrated earlier, the otherworldly presence of the Lion Turtle sets up a narrative of the origins of bending that existed before the timeline we see in *ATLA*. *LoK*, Book Two ("Beginnings: Part I") reveals the importance of the Lion Turtles to the formation of benders in the *ATLA* and *LoK* universe. In *LoK*, the Lion Turtles were the original beings that granted bending to humans in order to navigate the spirit realms. By the end of the series, Avatar Korra has permanently opened the spirit realm and provides the balance that the avatars have continuously sought for 10,000 years. She displays her responsibility to the physical world and the spirit realms through her right to open the portals. The spirit portals are open across space and time and are no longer limited to just the Avatars.

Native understandings of the world are as complex and varied as the tribes themselves (there are over 570 Native nations in the US alone!), yet, our stories, histories, ceremonies, and philosophies have always emphasized a deep, respectful relationship with one's surroundings and a quest to achieve balance within ourselves and with our relatives – human and otherwise. The balance between rights and responsibilities to a specific

landscape are reflected across both the *ATLA* and *LoK* universe and make for easy connections to Native and Indigenous philosophies that center relationality and accountability to community.[11] We can see ourselves reflected back in the gratitude of spirits such as Hei Bai and the Painted Lady, in the elders' knowledge shared through the Order of the White Lotus, and in the wisdom gained while on the back of a Lion Turtle. For us, the *ATLA* universe is turtles all the way down.

Notes

1. Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, and Amber Lacy, eds., *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).
2. Ronald Goodman and Alan Seeger, *Lakota Star Knowledge: Studies in Lakota Stellar Theology* (Mission, SD: Sinte Gleska University, 2017).
3. Shawn Wilson, *Research as Ceremony: Articulating an Indigenous Research Paradigm* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2004).
4. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm," in Jean M. O'Brien and Chris Anderson eds., *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 71.
5. Manulani Aluli Meyer, "Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning," in Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith eds., *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 217–232.
6. Aluli Meyer, 219.
7. Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
8. Vine Deloria Jr., *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006).
9. Deloria, 125.
10. David Delgado Shorter, "Spirituality," in Frederick E. Hoxie ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 433–452.
11. Shawn Wilson, *Research as Ceremony: Articulating an Indigenous Research Paradigm* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2004).