



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

How Dr. Mark Palmer Sustains Indigenous Stories Through Geography

Geography is often thought of as the study of physical entities, but for Dr. Mark Palmer, it is defined by relationships. A member of the Kiowa Tribe and a professor at the University of Missouri, Dr. Palmer joins *Key Conversations* to discuss Indigenous Geographies and the power dynamics inherent in cartography. From the Eurocentric origins of UNESCO World Heritage nominations to the "intangible" spiritual heritage of sacred sites, this conversation explores how diverse cultural perspectives challenge Western scientific classifications and offer a more holistic view of our world.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Mark Palmer. Dr. Palmer teaches Indigenous Geographies, Geographic Information Systems, and Environmental Geography at the University of Missouri. His research has taken him from archival work at UNESCO in Paris to ethnocartography fieldwork in Tongariro National Park in New Zealand. He is currently working on a book that explores the process of translating Otomi calendar knowledge developed by the Otomi people who have inhabited Mexico's central plateau for at least 7,000 years into a dome planetarium presentation as a form of digital heritage. Welcome, Professor.

Mark Palmer: Thank you, Fred. How are you doing today?

Fred Lawrence: Pleasure, Mark. Nice to have you with us. Mark, I noticed from your website bio, you say that you are originally from the great state of Oklahoma, that you love thunderstorms and tornadoes, and you tell us a little bit about the music you like as well. Tell us a little bit about your upbringing and childhood in the great state of Oklahoma.

Mark Palmer: Yes. So the tornado and thunderstorm, a problem for most people, but delightful for me, began when I was young, and it was exciting when I was 4, 5, 6 years old. The sirens would go off and my dad would turn the couch over in the front room and it was almost like building a tent or having a make-believe community, and the storm would pass. Everything would be fine. On the TV, there were meteorologists who actually really inspired me as someone who goes out into nature, let's just say a naturalist or an ecologist. One of them was a fellow named Gary England. He was a meteorologist for the CBS affiliate in Oklahoma City, and so it went from being someone that was interested in thunderstorms through direct experience, but also being captivated by the live-warning cast and his use of topographic maps and Mylar and pins to begin with, but soon moving into the digital realm of storm tracks and digital Doppler radars and so forth.

Fred Lawrence: So you grew up in Oklahoma and went to the University of Oklahoma. So that sounds like a pretty straight path. Is that how it felt? Growing up, did you assume that you'd go to Norman and go to University of Oklahoma, or are there twists and turns along the way in that path of primary school and secondary school?

Mark Palmer: Originally, Fred, the first thing that I wanted to study was Eastern European languages and literature. When I was 18 years old, in 1985, I traveled to Romania, which, at the time, was behind the iron curtain. They were led by a dictator named Nicolae Ceaușescu. It seemed more exciting than going to Sweden, although my parents wanted me to go to Scandinavia. I went to Eastern Europe and I learned a lot. I learned a lot because I had a lot of questions about what we hear here in the United States versus what's actually on the ground.

Now, when I went up to Transylvania, into the smaller villages of Transylvania, I remember there's a town called Sinaia, and it is above what's called the Prahova River, and there was a monastery there, a little monastery, Eastern Orthodox Church. I followed the masses up there. When I got there, I walked into the church. There were three priests in front. It was a very small church. You could smell the burning candles, the incense, and everybody was standing because there were no chairs and there were no pews. They had to climb up there and they had to leave, and so that kind of got me thinking about, "Well, okay, maybe the official policy in communism is atheism," but when it comes to the people in Transylvania, the people outside of the capital, it's anything but that. They were very dedicated. They were very faithful.

So that was just one of many things that I learned on that particular trip and it caused me to question things. Don't just take things at face value, even if they come from a world-leading expert. Because the world-leading expert has access to some information about a particular place, but not all of the information. Of course, all humans are extremely complex and different. But when you're 18 years old and you're familiar with a particular place, I have a legacy at the University of Oklahoma of my dad and I'm a member of the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma and you go with what's familiar, and so that's what I did. I kind of leaned toward the more familiar. My parents lived in Norman. My dad is a former professor of linguistic anthropology.

So I started out in Eastern European studies. At the University of Oklahoma, we have what was called Soviet Studies, and we had some characters there. I don't know if you remember Admiral Crowe from the 1980s?

Fred Lawrence: Oh, sure.

Mark Palmer: So he taught a few geopolitical courses there. I never got to take one, and it was more language-based, but I was very interested in that part of the world. Those area studies, degrees, have a lot of geography in them. What really turned me into a geographer, an academic geographer, I took four courses from a professor. His name was Neil Salisbury. He was a geomorphologist. So he studied how river systems changed the land, shaped the land. Floodplains, bluffs, oxbow lakes. What I really liked about him was his mannerism. He was from the upper Midwest. I think he got his PhD from Iowa. But here's what really got me. It's these little things that can get you. He would show his slides of a river bank or a particular type of formation, and every slide he would say, "Okay, this is a cut bank, blah, blah, blah, and there's my pipe for scale." So he'd have his pipe sitting on the side. I thought that was so clever.

Fred Lawrence: The things that we remember and the things that faculty members have no idea are going to influence us, and quite possibly the career of a young aspiring geographer has something to do with that pipe on the slide.

Mark Palmer: Exactly. Exactly. And to this day, I think about it, and whenever I see my former classmates from that era, I'll always talk to them about, "How about Neil Salisbury and his pipe? Do you remember?"

Fred Lawrence: They say in research that half of the work is selecting the topic, coming up with something you're going to work on. Your research focuses on social aspects of geographic information systems, including connections and disconnections with indigenous communities around the world. How did you find your way to that?

Mark Palmer: Well, I'll tell you what, here's how it happened. So during my bachelor's degree years, my focus was environmental geography. I took some meteorology courses, geomorph courses, but there were also some human-like economic and regional and so forth. My Master's degree was at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. So it's beautiful there, right? It's a free spirited, beautiful, open space that existed in the 1990s. But I had an advisor who started to ask questions about American Indian allotment land. And so the allotments are the end result of the liquidation of the reservations. So instead of a 4 million-acre continuous reservation, allotment would be, like, a checkerboard. So the US government gave heads of the household 160 acres of land. So in Oklahoma, we don't have reservations. We have allotted land. It's a checkerboard. The only reservation would be Osage, but that's underground. They kept the mineral rights, which is very smart in Osage County. As I got into the PhD program, you've got to make your decision. You've got to narrow. The more education you get, the narrower this track gets.

Fred Lawrence: Narrow the focus.

Mark Palmer: Right, right. And so my advisor, Dr. Robert Rundstrom, who's retired from the University of Oklahoma, suggested going to the history of science. So I hooked up with a faculty member there named Hunter Crowther-Heyck, and he was a historian. He was a technological historian, but instead of case studies, he really relied more on theoretical frameworks. He introduced me to social constructivism, or the social construction of technology, in particular, which led to this co-production of both society and technology, which would be actor-network theory, systems theory, heterogeneous engineering, which is what John Law calls it. So more of an amalgamation or assemblage of these components that come together to produce work or agency. So I took that actor-network path and it was more post-structuralism, post-structuralist type of thinking, as opposed to a more structured dichotomy, dichotomous type of thinking

Fred Lawrence: This sounds less like rivers and how they affect culture and much more like post-modern sociological thought, really.

Mark Palmer: Yes, exactly. But think of a river, too. So in Oklahoma we have what's called the, and I'm just going to use the English names, not the Kiowa names, but we have the North

Fork of the Red River. The Kiowas call that Mountain Sand River. Then you have the Red River that we all know about that comes out of the Texas Panhandle, and the Kiowas called that Great Sand River. And then we have, one, the Peace River, which comes out of Northern Texas into the Red River. It's called the Prairie Dog Fork Red River, or the Kiowas call it the Prairie Dog Sand River.

So when you look at it, you ask yourself, "Okay, well, when we classify things in a Western sense or a scientific sense, we designate each river as a single entity, right? The North Fork, the Red River, and the Prairie Dog Fork. Who cares?" But the Kiowas use the adjective of "sand" in each one of those rivers. So Fred, do Kiowas, did Kiowas see things as single discreet objects, or did they see it as a sand-river system? That type of network thinking, post-colonial, however you want to describe it, kind of opens up a compartment that allows you to, "Okay, let me think differently about this."

Fred Lawrence: So it sounds like you're saying, in a way, geography is not the thing that exists out there separate from us, it's really the relation between us and the thing we're observing.

Mark Palmer: The relationships. That's what it's all about. Yes.

Fred Lawrence: So I know you've been quite involved in World Heritage with UNESCO and GIS, geographic information system, in Paris. Tell us a little bit about how sites get nominated for UNESCO, World Heritage Sites, your role in that, how the process works. I know you've also been particularly involved in trying to allow for greater indigenous participation.

Mark Palmer: Oh, Paris. What a place. I mean, it's just magnificent. And what you do to get nominated, so what we call states parties, right? So these are state actors like a park service or the New Zealand Park Service or Department of Conservation.

Fred Lawrence: Government organizations as opposed to non-government organizations.

Mark Palmer: Exactly. And it's those organizations that have the power to nominate a site within a country, within a nation state. Tongariro National Park was one of the first UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Cahokia down the road here outside of St. Louis was another one. They're all around the world. You nominate a site as either cultural or natural or a cultural landscape, which is a mix of both the cultural and the natural physical landscape.

Fred Lawrence: Like Burgundy for its wine production.

Mark Palmer: Exactly. Exactly. The nomination process, when you look at someplace like Cahokia, the nomination was 20 pages, black and white, old maps. No digital, right? It's all analog. So they're taking maps out of Encyclopedia Britannica. They're making a photocopy. They're cutting it out. They're gluing that to a piece of paper. They're making a photocopy of that like we all used to do.

Fred Lawrence: I was going to say, it sounds pretty old school.

Mark Palmer: All the analog. All of the analog techniques that we use, that's what they look like. Now today, when you look at the dossiers, they're huge. They may contain several volumes of information and data, and your job is to convince the IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which is the natural site evaluators or ICOMOS, which is the International Cultural Organization It's a cultural group. They're out of Paris. They will take a dossier and they say, "Okay, we're going to break this down. There are three volumes. There's a thousand pages of data here. We're going to break that down into a four-page summary of what this is all about."

And that's where the voters, the people who are nominating these sites will get that information so that they don't have to go through it. They're not experts, they're not ecologists, they're not cultural specialists. So they get this nice, tidy, little objective. So the IUCN and ICOMOS don't put their opinion, like, "Yes, you should vote for this," or, "You shouldn't." They give you the information.

And that goes through a process every year where, I think, and this is in my mind, I can't remember the exact number, but I think it's 21 different nations who will vote on a dossier. Now, in the past, some of the countries in Africa, South Asia, and also even South America were saying that the process itself, the nomination process, was Eurocentric. So it's very much based on all the Parisian World Heritage Sites or in Rome and Italy, all of these types of sites, it's built for those things.

Fred Lawrence: And those are the original UNESCO World Heritage Sites, right?

Mark Palmer: Those are the original UNESCO.

Fred Lawrence: Right.

Mark Palmer: Now things have broadened out. We have what is called Intangible World Heritage, which is spiritual, and so we won't see it, but there's some kind of feeling there. You're walking through the streets of Jerusalem following the path of Christ, the crucifixion, or whatever. That would be intangible, right? There's nothing there, but the feeling that....

Fred Lawrence: You know you're on the Via Dolorosa and that's a different place to be and you have a sense of the history of what happened there, and for some people, that history plays a significant role in their own spiritual and emotional lives.

Mark Palmer: Exactly.

Fred Lawrence: Mark, we've been so delighted this year to have you as a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa, and one of the things I always ask my guests on Key Conversations is to help our listeners build their reading lists. I wonder if you could share with us a couple of suggestions of books for some for whom this is of interest, but a brand new area of

inquiry, and for those with some background in geography and some of the issues we've been talking about who want to take their level of knowledge to a new level.

Mark Palmer: Sure, sure. Well, the first one I'd recommend is *Cartographic Encounters* by Malcolm Lewis. He was a geomorphologist, so he was a physical geographer who became a historian. That's what I always like to tell my historian friends and some of my friends in the humanities is I'm really a closet historian. I love it, man. I love digging in archives and old maps. But that's the first one. And that book, in addition to Malcolm presenting really great introductory chapters, one of them is on bureaus and archives, and he tells you where specific maps are located. It's up to you to fill up your tank, fill out a research card, and go into those archives and find them.

The second one, and this is where this postmodern type of post-structuralist idea starts to really hit hard, is *The Power of Maps* by Denis Wood, and it's just his writing style. The way he talks about, well, there's a difference between cartography, which is this more formalized, standardized type of activity that we do. It's different from mapping. And so mapping opens up opportunities to be an artist and present a representation, be an indigenous group that uses sand and colored sand and maybe stones to not only look at their place, which could be the Colorado Plateau, it could also be the entire universe.

In that space, the idea of scaling can be really important for cartography. I have a 1:2,000 map or a 1:24,000 scale map. When you have an article, which looks like a dream catcher, that might represent the entire universe. You can hold it in your hand. It's just like you can hold Einstein's equations in your hand, right? $E=mc^2$. That's a powerful formula. It's very powerful. But Denis Wood kind of lays that out and says, "It's really up to you people. It's really up to you and what you think is important to map and how this is going to develop in the future."

Fred Lawrence: One of the things we talk about a lot in the world of Phi Beta Kappa is the inherent interdisciplinarity of liberal arts and sciences, and it's so clear from your body of work that you have a field and a department because you've got to have an address and you have to have something to put on that business card, but in fact, the work itself expands so far beyond that. It is, as you've told us, actually it's natural science, it's social science, it's humanities, it's philosophy, it's geography, it's science, it's history. It's all of that. I'm so pleased to have you with us as part of the Phi Beta Kappa family this year, and thank you for joining me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Mark Palmer: Thank you very much, Fred. It has been an honor.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is the lead producer and mixed this episode, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more

about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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