

MA CAA Module HPCA7009 — Term 2 2019

Skyscapes, Cosmology and Archaeology

Week 2
Skyscapes &
Skyscape Archaeology



Fabio Silva

archaeoastronomy today

**Insufficient
Cultural Context**

- No engagement with archaeologists
- No engagement with the arch. record
- No interpretation of identified alignments

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Ethnocentric Bias

Precision alignments
Megalithic observatories/science
Astronomer-priests
Solar emphasis
Fallacious claims

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Pseudo Data Analysis

Large numbers of
standardised measurements
Little or no statistics
Overly mathematical expositions

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No Agreed Epistemology

No accepted Theory
No widely used methodologies

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Isolationism

No public engagement
No academic engagement
No critique (of self or other)

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No accepted Theory
No widely used methodologies

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Little or no statistics
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Reflexivity

‘In the broadest and most inclusive sense, one may think of the call to reflexivity as the injunction, in whatever one is doing, to be attentive also to the manner in which one does it – its conditions of possibility, so to speak.’

— Pedersen and Holbraad 2017: 9-10

Archaeo**Astronomy**

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Where are the people?

Where are their thoughts and beliefs that involve the sky?

Where are non-academic, non-scientific forms of engagement with the world?

the study is of the objects
beyond the Earth

Contrast the definition of astronomy with:

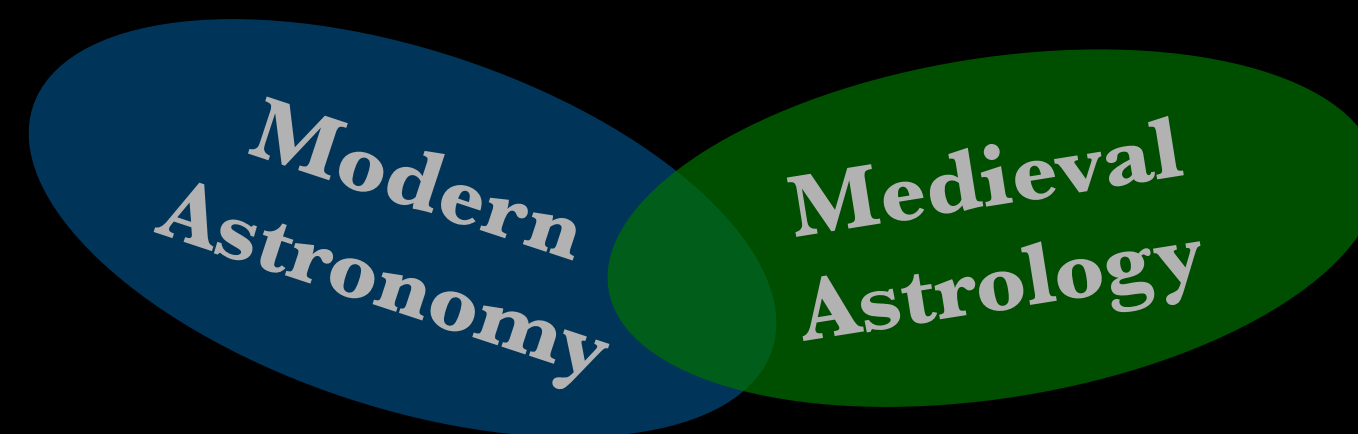
“There is no human society that does not somehow, in some way, **relate its fears, concerns, hopes, and wishes to the sky ...**”

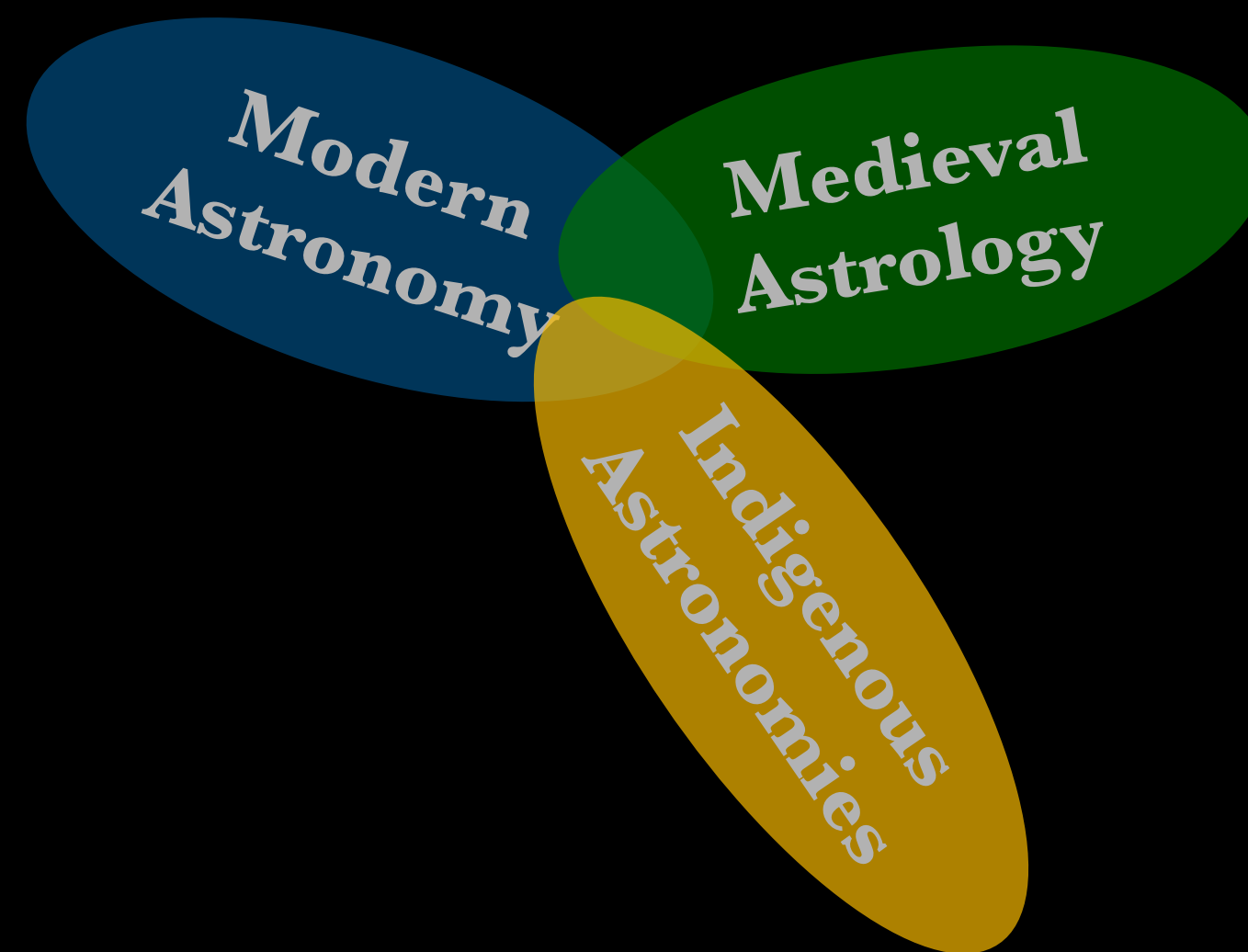
— Nicholas Campion (2012) *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions*. New York: New York University Press

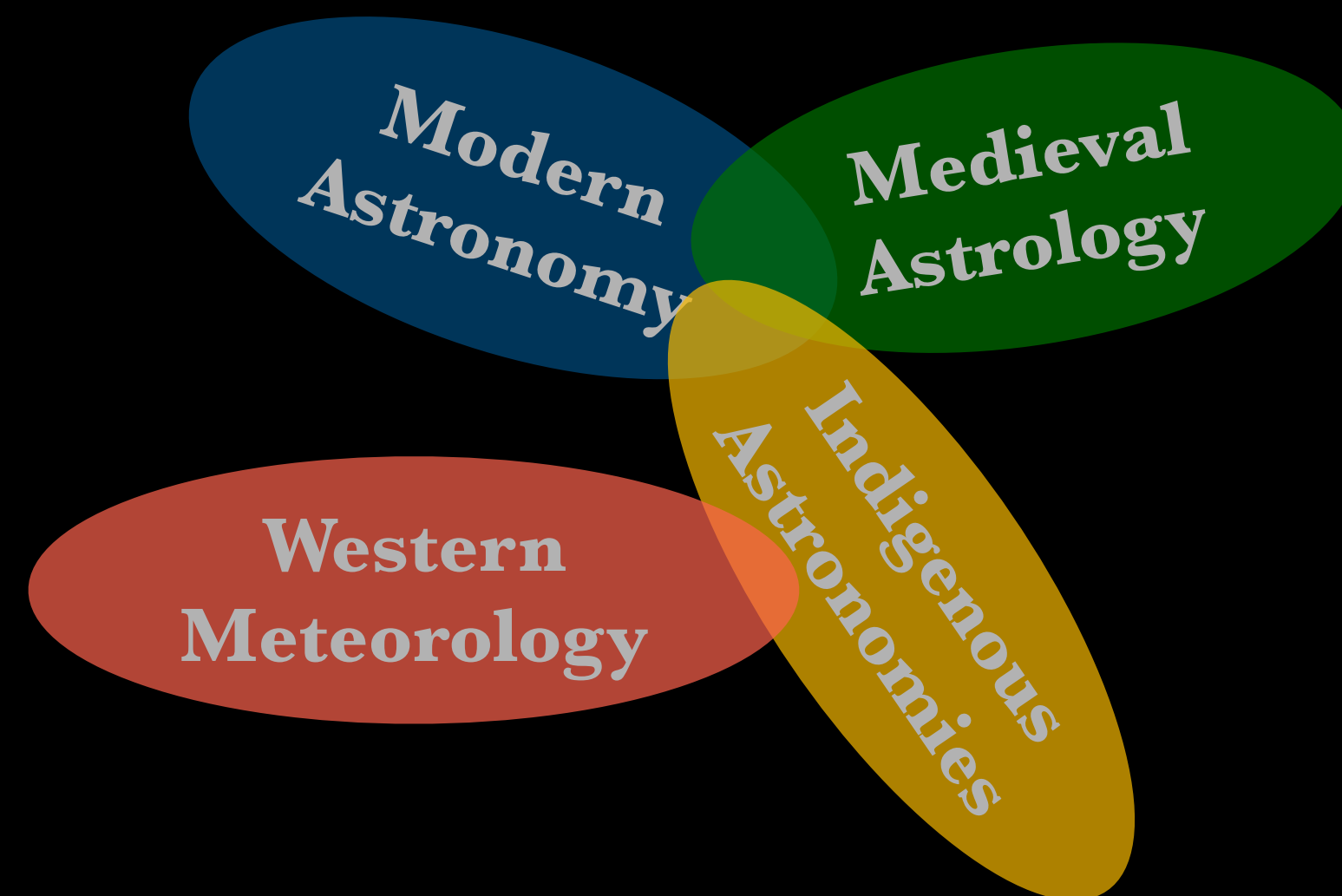
For many societies “important celestial bodies are perceived as **animate entities** and their motions in the sky are described in terms of **social relations** [...]. Human societies often people their skies with **supernaturals, ancestors or mythological heroes** to whom they become related through **family ties, mythological narratives, political alliances or power relationships.**”

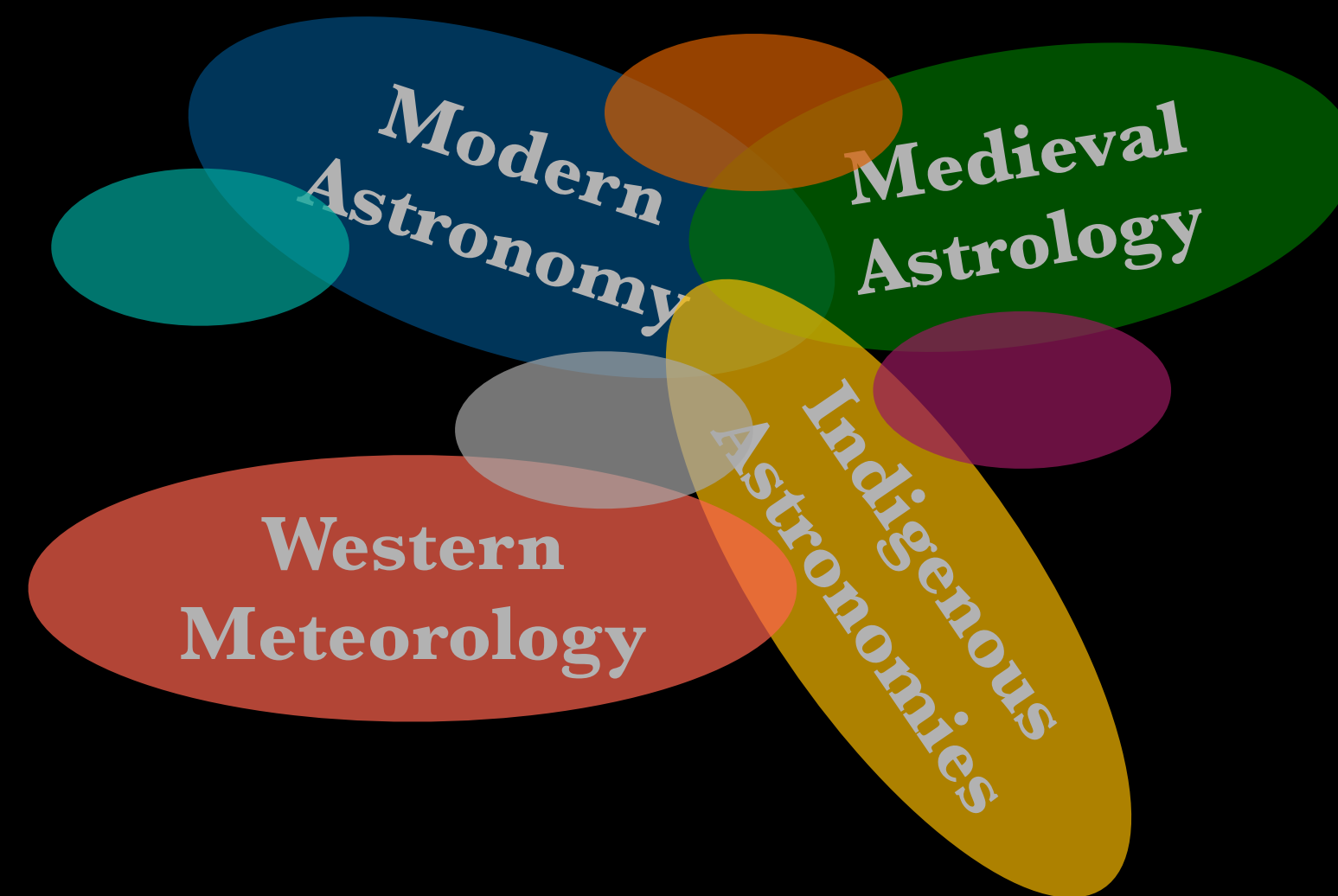
— Stanislaw Iwaniszewski (2011) The sky as a social field. *Proceedings IAU Symposium* 278, p.31

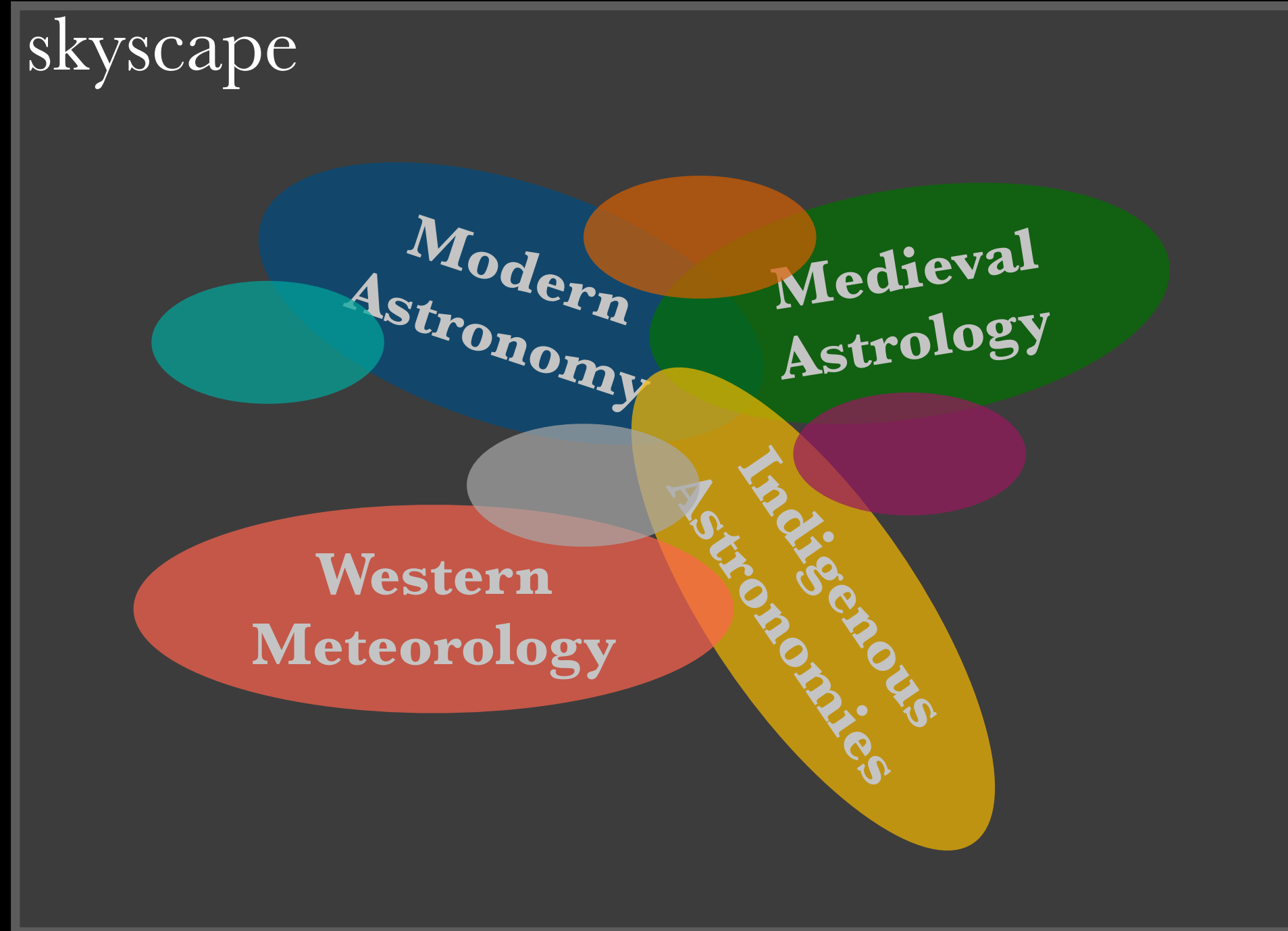
**Modern
Astronomy**











Any form of engagement with the sky is a skyscape

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There, although never defined, it is used 4 times:

“...thereby suggesting a close relationship between people’s **skyscape** and life cycles.” (p.26)

“Routeways, Pilgrimage, and **Skyscape**” (p.46)

“It does, however, demonstrate the close relationship that existed between the **skyscape** and life cycles, a connection anchored by the monuments themselves.” (p.47)

“And it is only through considering archaeoastronomy as a normal part of a prehistorian’s armory of aims and objectives — thereby investigating the ‘whole past, not just the comfortably preferred elements of it’ (Burl 1988:200) — that we can fully appreciate the extent to which the **skyscape** was an integral part of beliefs and practices.” (p.48)

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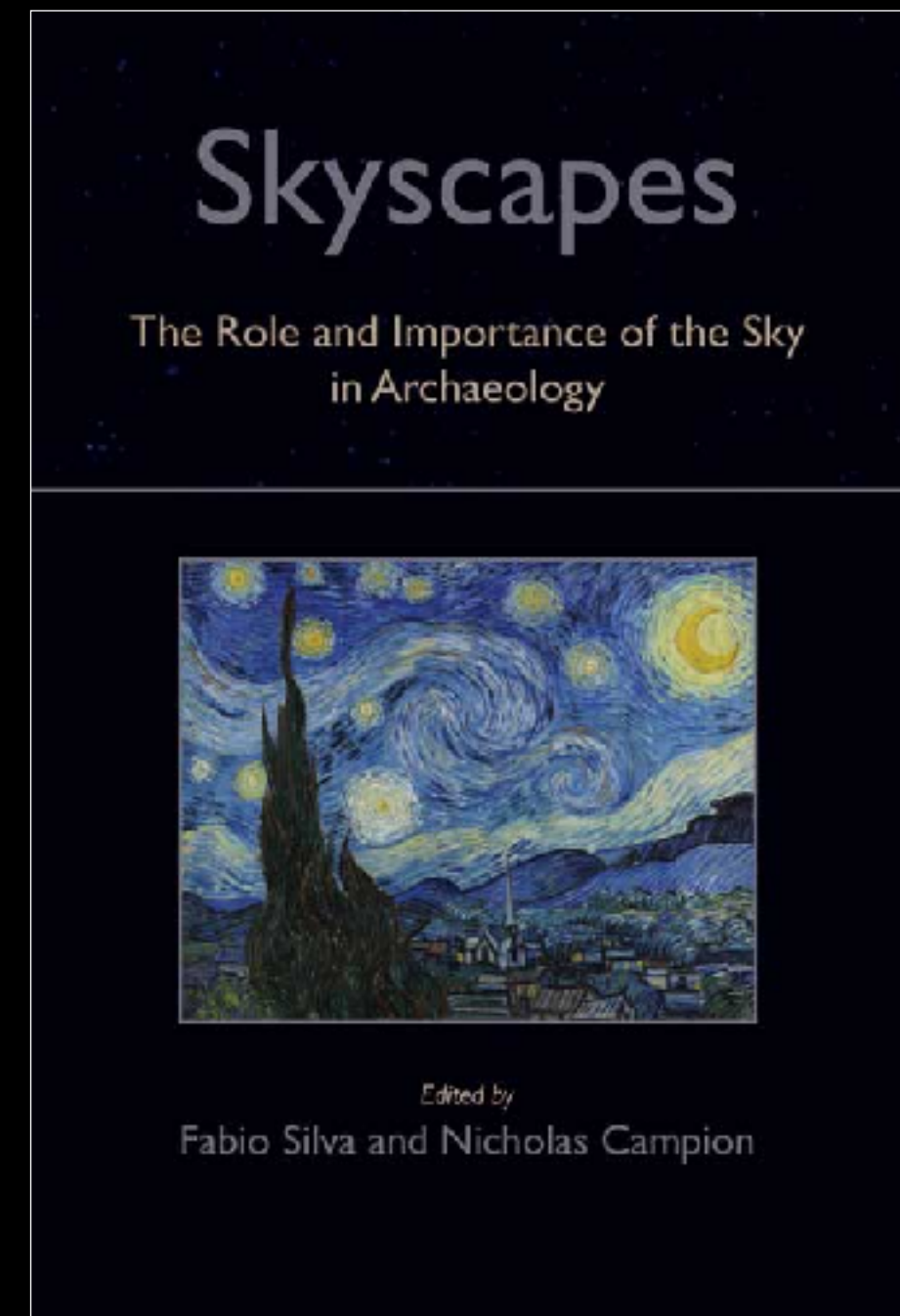
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It can be said that the authors were using the word to highlight the integral relationship between the celestial objects and the life cycles, beliefs and practices of the society they were studying; as well as the need for archaeology to take it seriously.

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Completely independently (or at least unconsciously) the word was used again by Silva and Campion in the abstract of a session in the Theoretical Archaeology Group meeting in 2012. This led to the publication of *Skyscapes: The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology* (Oxbow Books, 2015).



Since then, it has featured in many publications, including some by archaeologists.

Skyscape: indigenous conceptual framework that constitutes a society's understanding of the 'sky' and its 'inhabitants', and how they relate back down to the society's beliefs and practices, to their notions of time and place, to their structures and material culture.

— F Silva (2017) Defining skyscape *Sophia Centre Press Blog* **

Humans conceptualize skyscapes: they look up to the sky and derive or attach meaning to celestial objects; they correlate those objects with other aspects of social life; they create art to represent their own views of the celestial objects; they build monumental structures with alignments to them; they tell stories about them.



Different societies 'see completely different skylscapes' even though we would say that they might see the same sky



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A skyscape is **formed not only** of those constellations (in addition to other celestial objects), but **also of the socio-cultural elements** associated with them: stories and myths, productive and environmental cycles, art, structures that align with them, topographic features marking their risings and settings, etc.

Indeed, such a skyscape would be **part and parcel of a society's ontology**, of their own conceptions about the reality that surrounds them.



Since its introduction in 2012 (2015 in print), some scholars have adopted the term ‘skyscape’ to refer to either:

- the sky as part of the landscape;
- the union of sky and land;
- the intersection of sky and land (the horizon);
- the multiplicity of perceptions of the sky.



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Not all societies conceive of the heavens in these ways. To adopt one of these definitions we either bring new biases to our research, or lose generality of application.

Furthermore, where is the much needed reflexivity and thick description in these definitions? These definitions don’t necessarily imply an engagement with the social aspects of culture.



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Land

agency

Landscape

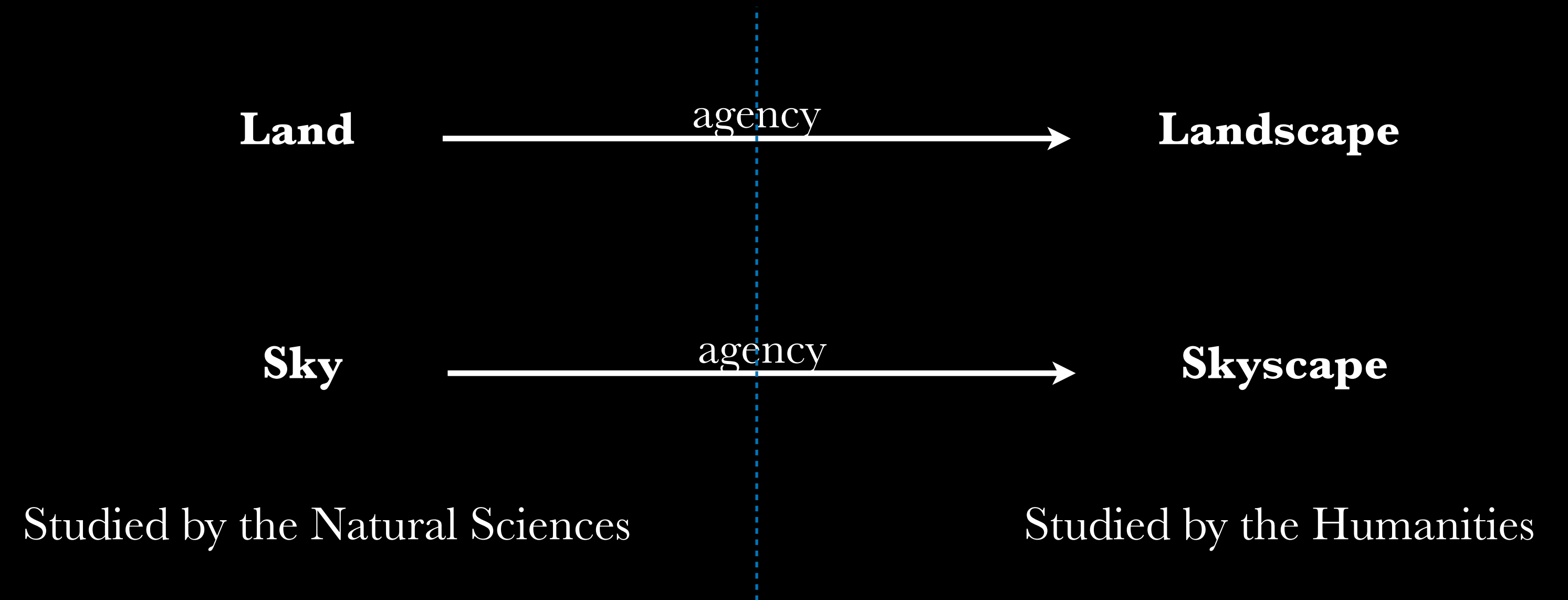
Sky

agency

Skyscape

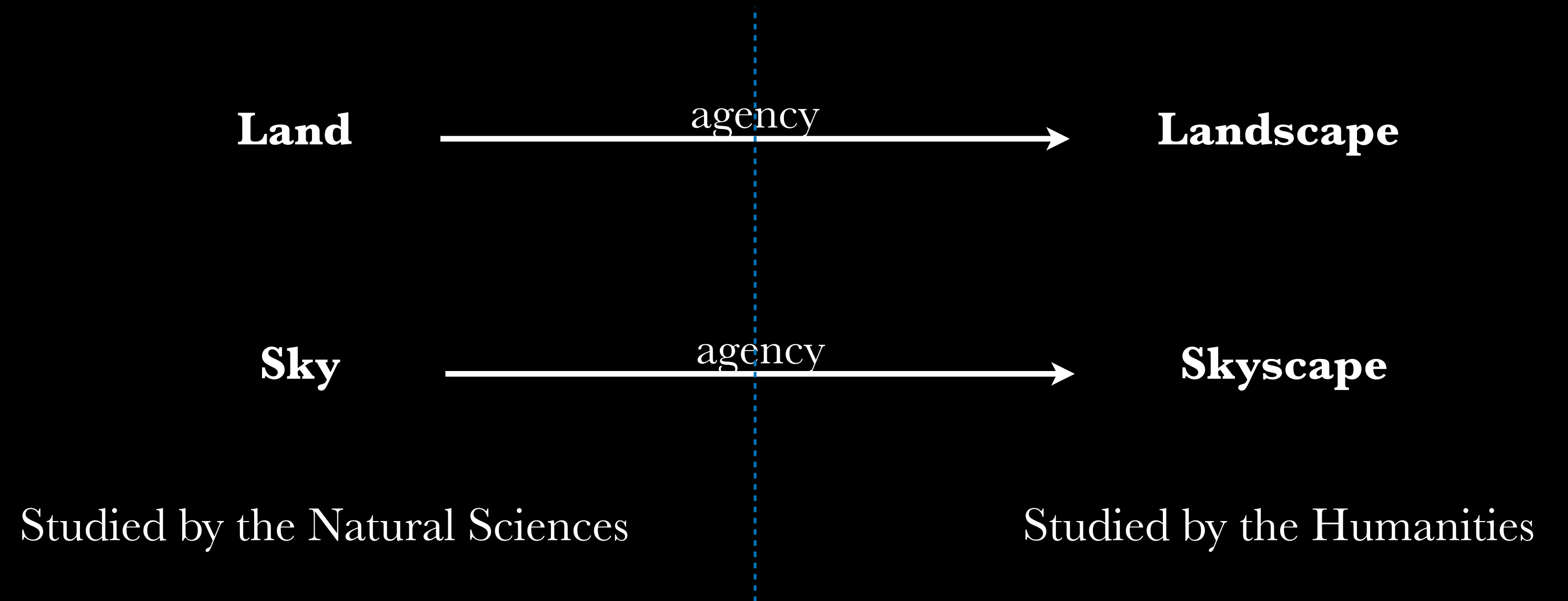


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This similarity (in both concept and sound) plays to our advantage since archaeologists and anthropologists intuitively understand the concept (contra archaeoastronomers).

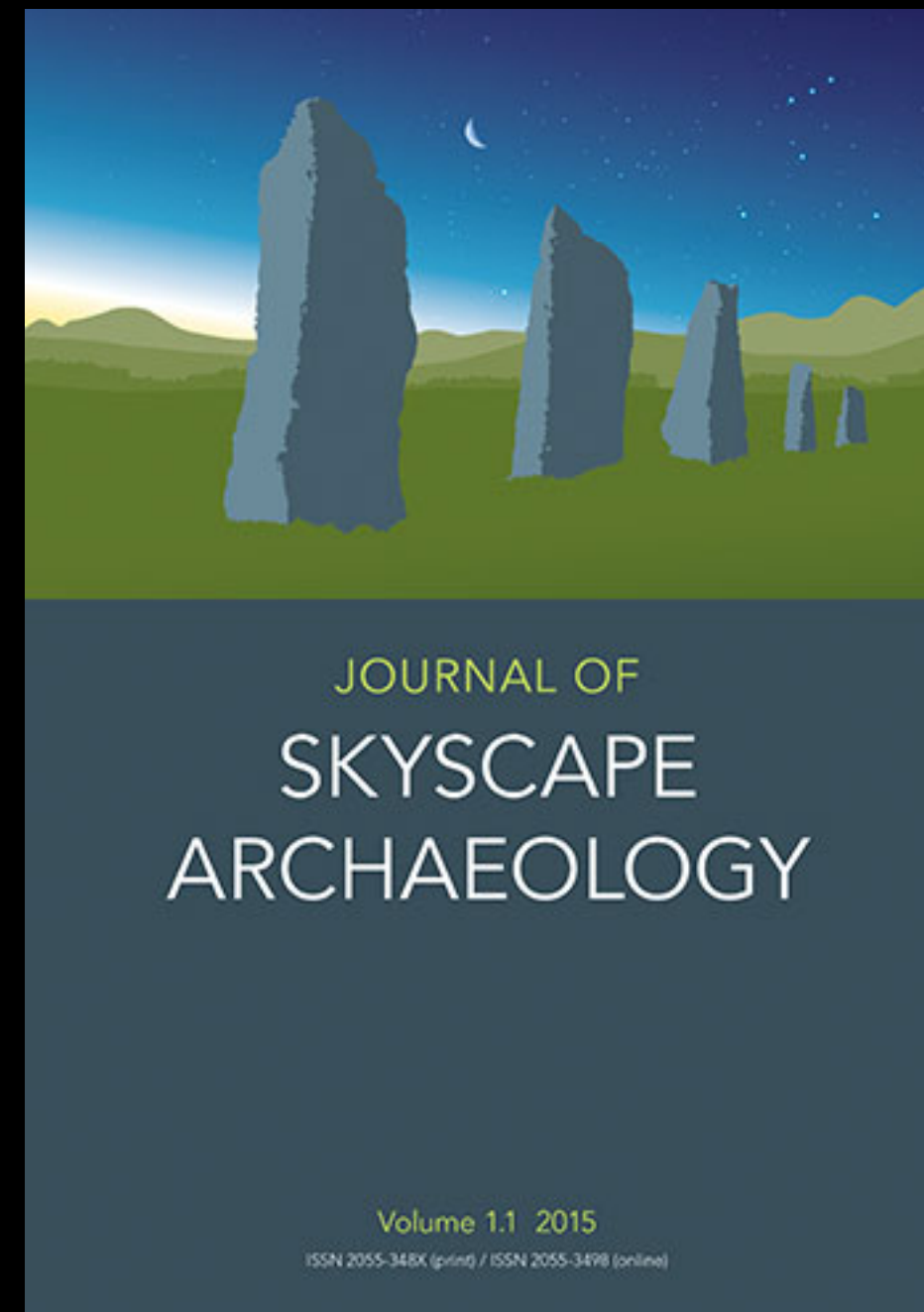
Hence it is our best bet in terms of bridging the existing gap between the fields.

skyscape archaeology

skyscape archaeology

First seen in print in 2014 (Silva 2014 ‘A Tomb with a View...’ and Henty 2014 ‘The Archaeoastronomy of Tomnaverie...’)

Journal of Skyscape Archaeology (Equinox Publishing) since 2015



skyscape archaeology

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skyscape archaeology

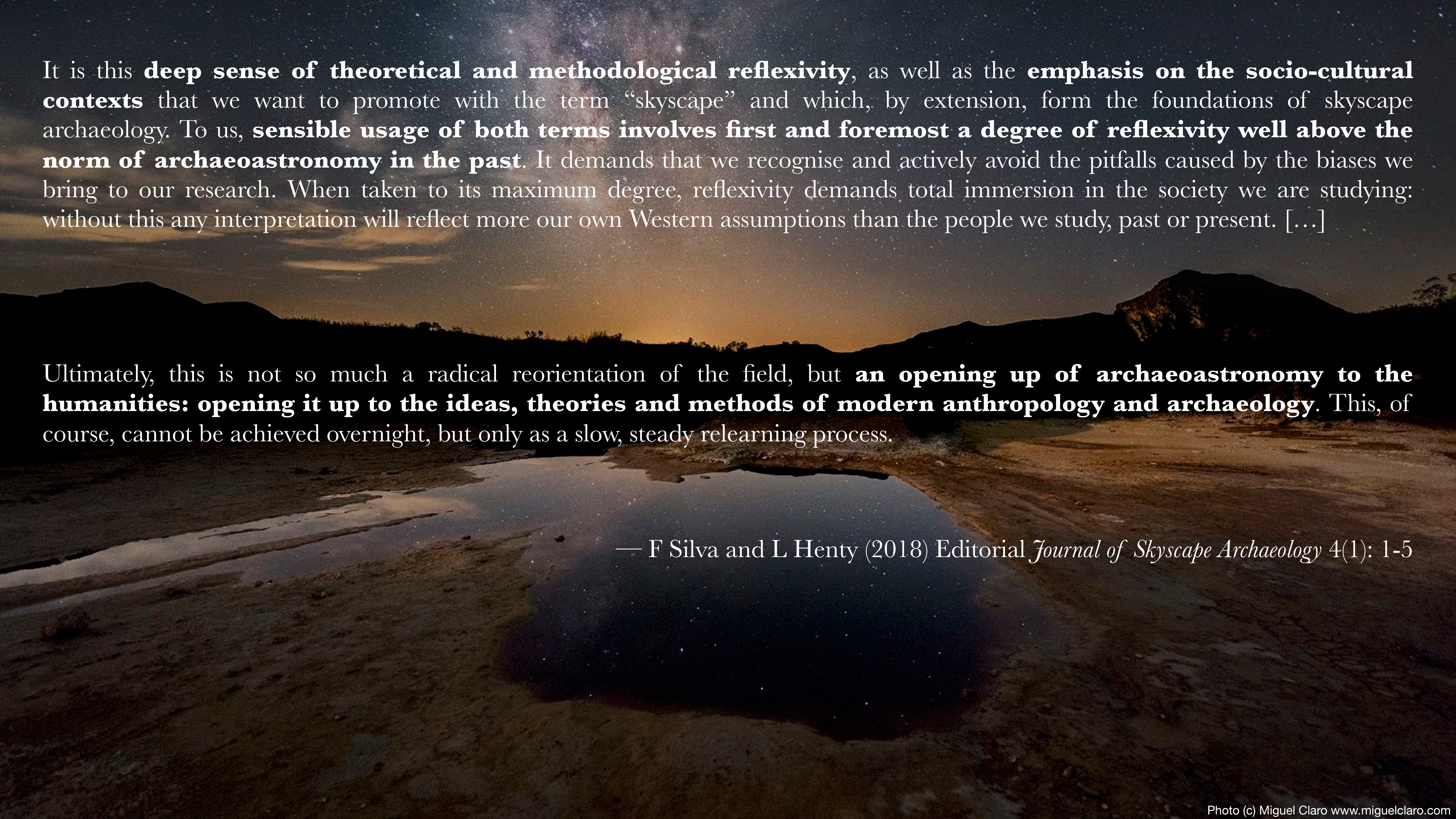
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Reflexivity is one of its cornerstones

A landscape photograph of a dry riverbed at night. The foreground is a dark, sandy riverbed with a small pool of water reflecting the starry sky. In the background, dark silhouettes of mountains are visible against a night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way galaxy. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

It is this **deep sense of theoretical and methodological reflexivity**, as well as the **emphasis on the socio-cultural contexts** that we want to promote with the term “skyscape” and which, by extension, form the foundations of skyscape archaeology. To us, **sensible usage of both terms involves first and foremost a degree of reflexivity well above the norm of archaeoastronomy in the past**. It demands that we recognise and actively avoid the pitfalls caused by the biases we bring to our research. When taken to its maximum degree, reflexivity demands total immersion in the society we are studying: without this any interpretation will reflect more our own Western assumptions than the people we study, past or present. [...]

Ultimately, this is not so much a radical reorientation of the field, but **an opening up of archaeoastronomy to the humanities: opening it up to the ideas, theories and methods of modern anthropology and archaeology**. This, of course, cannot be achieved overnight, but only as a slow, steady relearning process.

— F Silva and L Henty (2018) Editorial *Journal of Skyscape Archaeology* 4(1): 1-5