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“To me, Indigenous research means to be in a transformational state that honours my ancestors, myself, and those around me.”

HEALING, TREE-BARK, AND A WALKING STICK FOR YOU

Abstract

My partner and I often go for walks in Weasel Head Park close to the Tsuut’ina reservation where we will pick up a stick from the path and ask each other how we see ourselves in the stick. In this intimate relationship between sticks and walking in the forest, I think about the natural appeal of a walking stick in the bush. In life, our spirit is always walking a path, and while sometimes we walk in untraversed land, most of the time we are walking paths that relate to the paths our ancestors walked. Depending on the terrain, a walking stick can serve as a conversation piece and/or a sturdy life-saver. A walking stick’s spirit is happiest when it is fulfilling its purpose, to aid in all ways in walking the path of life, and especially when we go for walks through forests of knowledge. Our walking stick represents the growing relationship with the forest as the two of us, you and I, grow together, and I pass this stick to you.

Healing as a Cultural Process

What began as a journey for justice and good mental health, has become a quest for decolonization and *Healing*. Mental health, while justified in its crusade, is a Western concept of health and therefore limited to the thinking of objectivity and noun-ness. In an effort to decolonize, and eventually master the English language (Wilson, 2001, p. 179), I choose to substitute the idea of mental health for

Healing or something that creates Healing. To leave the Western ontological space and enter an Indigenous space we will use “Healing” as our focus; “Healing” with a capital H respects the ontological and epistemic significance of the relational methodology used to write this paper. “Indigenous languages are verb based; in the Cree language, the literal translation into English for a chair would be ‘the thing that you sit on’” (Wilson, 2008, p. 73). Therefore, Healing means the relationships with our four realities: emotion, mind, physical, and spirit (personal communication, Miksika’am, Nov. 8, 2019).

Healing acts to dismantle hierarchies between people, because Healing-people do not try to fill holes in themselves with power; however, if I claim to be a *Healed* person, a person whose Healing lives in the past, I might feel *entitled* to power. Culture is how we build relationships with each other, and a culture of Healing relationships is a culture that perpetuates balanced human beings. Healing, with respect to all of our realities, acts to remove *unnneeded* power dynamics that erode relationships. While I believe this form of health is beneficial for all humans of Mother Earth, my focus is pragmatically for Urban Indigenous peoples as this would best describe my experience as an Indigenous person, and the placement of my family in the ongoing wake of colonialism.

As I speak a little Blackfoot, and less Mechif (Metis Language), English is the language that I am closest to mastering, and I am comforted by the words of Wilson (2001): “I don’t think it is helpful to make people who cannot speak an Indigenous language feel bad about it. But I do think that it is important that everyone masters the language that they do speak” (p. 179). It is also worth noting that mental health is a noun, and, as a social movement towards self-care and other mental health-related initiatives, mental health ultimately carries the state-of-being in-animate that goes with being a noun. Healing is the way we renew ourselves; as Miksika’am has said to me, we must do the things that maintain our spirit (personal communication, Sept. 21, 2019), and it is impossible to be *inanimate* and a *being* at the same time.

Therefore, we should make steps towards normalizing Healing, not as a response to acute injuries to our realities, but as contributing to the ongoing process of reclaiming our humanity through decolonization. If all of our realities - mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual - were constantly maintained, we would not need to overcompensate our social image, compare our material selves to others, force our emotional state on others, or question another’s source of faith. We would have the capacity not to pour our anger out on another person when they cut us off in rush-hour traffic. We would have the courage to tell the people we love how we truly feel, and, simultaneously, they would have the courage to hear you. So, what are the things that get in the way?

Relationship with the Land

It has been through my relationships with other spirits that I have come to understand the world around me. I often talk to Tree Spirits as they often talk to me. I can remember trees holding my weight as a child, as each tree, large enough to climb, seemed to offer a playground of its own. On a working retreat to Thompson Rivers University, one of the Trees in the landscape courtyard was telling me about its magnificent bark. As my fingers ran through the crevasses created by the bark growing into a larger circumference, I started to think of bark for its protective qualities, and then I thought of the relationship between

the bark and the insides of the tree. There is a trust that is created by the bark’s dedication to protection, and in the bark’s absence, this trust might be broken.

The Bark Protects the Tree’s Insides

The bark of a tree protects the insides of the tree, and as Niitsitapi, or human beings, our relatives are the trees. They teach us, as many of the plant peoples do. My experience with the Tree described above made me think of the bark we grow, as Niitsitapi, to protect ourselves from the outside world. We all have bark, and we grow it to protect ourselves from different forces: “[s]ome [trees], like ponderosa pine or Scots pine, put a lot of energy into creating thick outer bark to protect themselves from fire. Others put more effort into protecting against insects: balsam firs have bark studded with resin ducts that serve as bug traps” (Rankin, 2017).

My family is of both Indigenous and settler origin; the customs, celebrations, and collaborations held by my family are carried out through Western culture. I feel like this is a sign that my family has been assimilated, yet my ancestors are not all Indigenous; some are settlers, which is something that I feel requires reconciliation. When we come together we do not seem to fit into these Western ways: we stand out, and I take this to be a sign of our family’s story.

Challenges to the assumptions of my family’s culture have been met with resistance and defensiveness, and bark has seemingly grown to mitigate further intrusions; it becomes clear in these moments who holds the power. On my mother’s side, those who yell the loudest are the ones who create the family narrative to which everyone uncomfortably adheres. On my father’s side it feels like a remnant of consensus thinking that dive-bombs into inaction. As described by DeAngelo (2018), “The idea of racial inferiority was created to justify unequal treatment” and to describe my experience, as related to Indigenous identity, triggers both sides of my family to show their bark (p. 16).

Wilson tells us that “[a]s a researcher you are answering to *all your relations* when you are doing research” (2001, p. 177). When I think about positioning myself in my research and being accountable to *all my relations* I get a *sticky* feeling of being accountable to my

family, the people who are the closest thing I have to a home community. One of the most significant moments in my life was when my parents were no longer living together and the transition period, which was characterized by violent words and actions between my parents, leading up to life in separate homes. As kids we did not have a say in what was happening, but what was happening had a dramatic effect on us. In the name of my own decolonization and Healing, I have granted myself permission to have a say in how I respond to this information and period of my life.

As we decolonize ourselves, we are removing weapons (Thomas, 2001, p. 204), such as racism, patriarchy, and homophobia, that have been plunged deeply into our being. After removing a traumatic weapon (a weapon of intergenerational trauma [IGT]) we must Heal the wound. My racialization is as a mixed-race person, and my Elder and adopted Mum has told me that I “must learn how to honour both my White side and my Native side” (personal communication, Betty CrazyBoy, July 8, 2019). While I feel that connecting myself to Indigenous culture, in general, has been Healing, I also feel that the reality is that I now must make peace with both my settler and Indigenous ancestors. Feeling caught between the settler world and the Indigenous world is the experience of most Indigenous people living on Turtle Island today, and is not necessarily bound only to mixed-race Indigenous people.

As a White-passing Indigenous person, I do not receive the belligerent racism and oppression that non-White Indigenous people experience. When I was first presented with this information, I found myself defensive. What were the insides my bark was protecting?

We grow bark to protect ourselves. Our mind determines what is threatening and we grow our bark as a reaction to that fear. I say reaction because we often do not question the bark we grow. Pushing the metaphor further to relate to a tree’s life: if the insides of the tree do not trust that their bark protects them, their insides cannot be at peace.

Insides We Are Protecting

When White people get defensive, there can be what is called “white fragility” (DiAngelo, p. 2). This is linked to their undealt-with trauma

inherited from their ancestors. In Western culture, it is normal to disregard your ancestry as if the impact of our ancestors’ experiences is something you can selectively turn off. Being in a racial position as White-passing, I get to spend a lot of time experiencing the world from a White perspective as well as from an Indigenous perspective. In White circles, I have observed that the closest thing to Healing is consideration for mental health, and this is fairly new, not something that has been around for generations. I also find it interesting to ask why White settlers have moved to Turtle Island, and almost unanimously, it has been because of difficult conditions back at home. Most settlers were fleeing poverty or war, and were suffering traumas while they fled. All of these people, when they first arrived, did not have any Indigenous Knowledges of Turtle Island, making them aliens to this land. At this point in our story (“history” superficially decolonized) (KRS ONE, 2009), not having this knowledge could have led to their demise, but the East Coast Indigenous peoples tended to the newcomers, and they responded by using ecological colonialism in an attempt to reverse the roles of who is alien to this land.

While at the Decolonizing Health Care Congress (Appendix 1), a conversation in one of the breakout rooms led me to a narrative of European history that I had not considered: “the White people had Indigenous relationships with the land until they all started conquering each other” (July 22, 2019). What an interesting thought, that settlers come from conquered peoples, and that they have not yet healed from this. This narrative also informs White fragility of settler Canadians. They have not yet dealt with their traumas, and as a result, cling to their identity as Canadians, and this extends to the culture in which we find ourselves; this is perhaps why settlers, and White settlers in particular, are so resistant to ontological and epistemic changes, as their systems are based on the assumptions of Eurocentrism (Oliveira Andreotti et al, 2015, p. 33) and domination.

As a reflective exercise, I encourage settlers to think of how they came to possess the power to say which traditions are allowable (Christmas, as an example), and which are



prohibited on Turtle Island. I have heard Elders say rhetorically to settlers, “Where are your stories? If you have a relationship with this land, what stories demonstrate the relationship you claim?”

Many progressive settlers, and this is not meant to be mean, focus on inclusion. They see the lack of inclusion in their institutions as a “problem,” but are actually participating in soft reforms not meant to make ontological or epistemological changes (Oliveira Andreotti, Stein, Akenhaw, & Hunt, 2015, p. 25). I believe DiAngelo (2016) when she states “[t]hough white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is ... is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage” (p. 2); therefore, if we are meant to decolonize our relationships in such a way that trust can be established, we must be able to recognize the hierarchies to which we all are conditioned and speak to each other in a way where power dynamics are equalized. With this awareness I take a stance in stating that while Indigenous people do need to Heal from genocide, the most significant changes to institutional and state power would come from the Healing of settlers, and that it is a racist position to expect that Indigenous people are the only ones who need to Heal.

Violence is Normal

A book by Lee Maracle, *My conversations with Canadians* (2016, p. 88), has led me to understand that those who hold racist beliefs are likely to be people who come from generations of unhealed trauma. If we could imagine generations living without colonial violence, and then generations filled with apocalyptic violence, we get a sense of the experience of the conquering of our peoples. Ancestors who endured many generations of oppression have had their identity progressively stripped, have been displaced from homelands, and have found residence in a colonial state where they do not make the rules (laws). This story, while viscerally real for Indigenous people, is also the ourstory of the settlers in power right now, except they get to make the rules. Those who have been oppressed, become the oppressor (Freire, 2004, p. 62). Those in power, set the culture of those subject to that power.

I believe this is the reason for the entitlement that White people carry with them today, and the normalization of the violence carried out. It is a bark that protects them in lands far from their ancestors. Settlers assert nationalistic rights with the utmost expectation of having them increasingly filled by the colonial state. They stand on a folded blanket of colonialism that stretches over and suffocates Indigenous peoples, the land of Turtle Island, and all other beings of this land. And this ‘They’ is also ‘Me’ and my own ‘We.’ We, settlers and Indigenous peoples, are granted a lifetime of existence, and a collective request for Healing to begin, on wounds long inflicted by and upon our ancestors, is of the most human possible.

Different People at Different Emotional Levels Cannot Be in a Relationship

Emotional maturity plays a big role in how people communicate with each other; in fact, people who are on different emotional levels do not have much to talk about as they are “practically speaking different languages” (Greenspan, 1997, p. 248). When I consider the Indigenous and non-Indigenous composition of my family, it is common for the Indigenous person to partner with a White person, and while from a colonial perspective, these folks are together due to assimilative forces, they are also together due to their similar emotional maturity levels. What does this say about our humanness and need to Heal collectively?

Healing through Ceremony

Our spirituality is the core of our cultures as Indigenous peoples. In our Indigenous ceremonies, we communicate with spirits, we listen for the guidance of Creator, and we do it together with other Human Beings. In my own experience of ceremonies, we sit together not as Indians and Whites, not as settlers and Indigenous people, not as different peoples, but as one people. This poses a real challenge to contemporary decolonizing society as White people can avoid addressing their whiteness by saying they were raised to see all people as human beings and are therefore not racist. While this may be confirmed by other Whites of this generation and the generation before,

this sentiment negates the prejudice that is passed on, regardless of the intent of the family members. Whites, like myself, are constantly reminded and encouraged to see non-Whites as somehow less-than, and not see ourselves in that less-than category. When Whites speak of people, the experiences and standards they are describing are white, but they, and myself at times, will speak about this reality as if all people have the same reality available to them, which is also an example of post-positivism that characterizes White culture.

In attempts to see the humanness in myself, I am working on my own whiteness and racial conditioning, which is to say, being conscious of my violence towards others. Inside, I feel from my White side, that I am innocent because I do not know any better; at the same time, I carry the hurt from the genocide of my ancestors. My humanness is deeper-rooted than these socially constructed categories, but it is hard to speak from this place. My humanness is my spirit-ness, and I am a spirit experiencing a life within the existence Creation has given me.

By placing my spirit first, I can then see why it is important to consider the spirits of others. How does one spirit ask another spirit how to stop their participation in structural racism? I think one way might be to bring White people into ceremony so as to Heal them and give them perspective; however, this then places the burden on Indigenous people to heal White people in order for them to get to a place of understanding. This is problematic as the burden of decolonization should not be on Indigenous peoples but decolonization cannot happen without the participation of Indigenous peoples.

The question of Indigenous and settler relationships is one of Healing, and the answer is Healing; however, the answers that are more tangible only come from the *process* of Healing. In Western ways of thinking this is problematic because the outcome cannot be guaranteed ahead of time and the tangible answers are only guaranteed by participation in our *own* Healing. However, we never get to know ahead of time what that Healing will give us.

“The ancient ones taught us that the life of the Tree is the life of the people. If the people wander far away from the protective

shadow of the Tree, if they forget to seek the nourishment of its fruit, or if they should turn against the Tree ... great sorrow will fall upon the people” (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1985, p. 7). Spirituality, in the metaphor of a tree, can help us understand the question of what is truly human between us, and how we validate that humanity as genuine when we have been socialized to be divided. This is the power in Indigenous paradigms because we are accountable to our kin, and to our intuition (Wilson, 2001, p. 178), not to dominant White-settler culture or institutions.

Things Have Spirit

When I was a little boy I would walk through parks on dirt paths made from people walking on grass, and I would find garbage. I would pick the garbage up, things like cigarette butts and chip bags, and carry them to the garbage can. It is the colonizers who teach us that the material world does not have spirit. The spirits of Western synthetics do not belong with spirits of the forest. Everything that relates has spirit, and we must think of how these spirits relate to each other.

Healing Through the Dominant System

Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015) have mapped out different levels of decolonization (Appendix 2) and rather than being a continuum, the regions are ongoing areas of decolonization that co-exist, and are even in opposition to one another at times (p. 25). Many who begin to wake up to the oppressive hierarchies that exist in Western culture eventually get bogged down in the epistemic fight for reform in Western institutions. In the final region, the “Beyond-Reform Space,” it is recognized that oppression comes from ontological dominance, what is real, not simply which epistemic systems matter (Oliveira Andreotti et al, 2015, p. 25). “While affirming the importance of both radical-reform and beyond-reform [participation], we note the risk of vanguardist heroism that some of these critiques potentially inspire,” which are real issues for an activist to face if they do not want their whole identity to be built off the anti-system thinking (Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 25).

Racism is a colonial mechanism of favoritism that benefits those who think and look in a White way. "To speak of the coloniality of knowledge is to recognize that colonial domination has an epistemic dimension and that epistemic violence is an integral part of the colonial relations of power that characterize the world since 1492" (Burman, 2012, p. 105). As the social systems around us reward White thinking, as they have for 500 years, they also do not allow for people of non-White cultures to be their whole selves. Therefore, an example of institutional racism is to have White expectations of the student body; in other words, to assume the whiteness of the student body. Students who either choose not to fit this mold, or who attempt to for the sake of getting their education but have trouble thinking in this way, are systematically punished. This can be demonstrated by the expectations that are sometimes placed on graduate students by White thinking supervisors.

I have found myself, in my research process, subject to epistemic violence where I was employing Indigenous methodologies, but my supervisors, both White, were not capable of validating these methodologies; for all of us, it was our first experience in using Indigenous methodologies. This has led me to consider that we, as a settler-Indigenous society, need to find ways to Heal, maybe together, but always without romanticizing what an Indigenous-settler relationship is supposed to be. This also recognizes that IGT is something that my family is working on Healing, but also that, as mentioned previously, IGT is something that settlers need to deal with as well.

While this work is hard, the difficulty should be used as a compass to direct us to the work we need to do with ourselves. As White people, myself included, it is uncomfortable to come down to a level where we are not protected by our whiteness; however, doing so gives those not born into that privilege an opportunity to trust you and to see you are not wearing your bark to protect yourself from their excess of suffering and lack of privilege.

Walking Stick

Walking through the bush is a great way to connect with your body. I find spending time on Mother Earth, not covered in concrete, to

be very therapeutic to my mind. As we find ourselves on this path of growth, it is my honour to offer you this gift: a walking stick, made out of 100% metaphor, that you can call on at any moment in your life.

Words Can Be Good Medicine

As you, the reader, have been attentively listening to my experiences and thoughts, I want to offer you a carving in your walking stick. While all of the systems of oppression I have been talking about perpetuate hate and violence, I want to remind you that words can be good medicine. Every time I introduce myself, I always introduce my Hip Hop name, MC GoodMedicine, and I usually follow my introduction with "because I believe words can be good medicine." All of the words used in oppressive systems are words given the spiritual power to be hurtful; I would like to offer you the thought that you do not have to use those words, in any oppressive system, and the same language can be put to work to carry out love and compassion.

Relational Research Methods

When Wilson (2008) asked rhetorically, "how can I find out more about this other being, or idea ... ?" and responded with, "the answer ... is [Indigenous] methodology ... the more relationships between yourself and the other thing, ... the greater your understanding becomes (p. 79), I was powerfully struck with the synergy of my own sense of relationality, an intuition that feels normal. "So the methodology [Indigenous methodology] is simply the building of more relationships" (Wilson, 2008, p. 79). We make things so complicated and get away from relationships. To the Western mind, this may seem questionable, but my research method must respect my relationships in a way that addresses the power dynamics that exist today, as a result of the ourstory that settlers and Indigenous people share. To do otherwise would be to go against Indigenous culture, and against natural law of relationality.

As an Indigenous researcher, I have been engaged in a relational research method for approximately two years. I have been building new relationships and fostering the ones I have already built. However, I think that the challenge with this methodology goes way deeper

than it seems, as I have had to recognize my own shortsightedness with the challenges of settler and Indigenous relationships, especially in the context of a research team. To dedicate oneself to a relational methodology is to resist judging my own shortsightedness, and that of others. As we all live in Western culture, which does not encourage self-liberation from hateful character, we need to be prepared to know what the commitment is when we commit ourselves to this process.

Someone Can Take It upon Themselves to Heal

There was an Elder from the Navaho Nation, Robert Curly, who taught me that in Healing others we move people, then put them back where they were. In that moment he gave me a tool for navigating the Healing world on which I have been so focused (personal communication, Jan. 26, 2018). In this way, I feel that the reader should feel that I have given them something they may use. I imagine a walking stick. When navigating the social cartography of the land, a walking stick can make the best of companions, especially when such journeys bring up pain; it is nice to have someone to lean on. I say “someone” because this walking stick I have handed you has a spirit. It is a mental walking stick, one that you can build your own relationship with as you walk the terrain that I have, with some of the thoughts I have shared; you will indeed have your own thoughts and realizations.

I hand you this walking stick as a way to encourage you to walk. The trail gets challenging at times, and one must rise to the occasion. Doing so in companionship, in relationship, is how we can move through our life in a good way.

Having your own tools empowers you to use them for your own influences, and your own Healing. Like the seemingly infinite number of little birds flying together and all turning in unity, we must turn towards Healing as a culture, altogether, such that we can restore balance with ourselves and all of our relations.

While I struggle to approve of myself speaking English while simultaneously preaching decolonization, I recognize this is the post-apocalypse for myself and other Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, and nothing is fair or simple. I am again encouraged by Wilson (2001) who asserts, “I don’t think it is

helpful to make people who cannot speak an Indigenous language feel bad about it. But I do think that it is important that everyone masters the language that they do speak” (p. 179).

When an individual becomes ready to pursue their own Healing, their motivations are naturally to encourage Healing in the people around them. It is our current cultural lack of understanding of the value in Healing that keeps us from our health and, ultimately, our connection to our spirit and Mother Earth. Walk powerfully.

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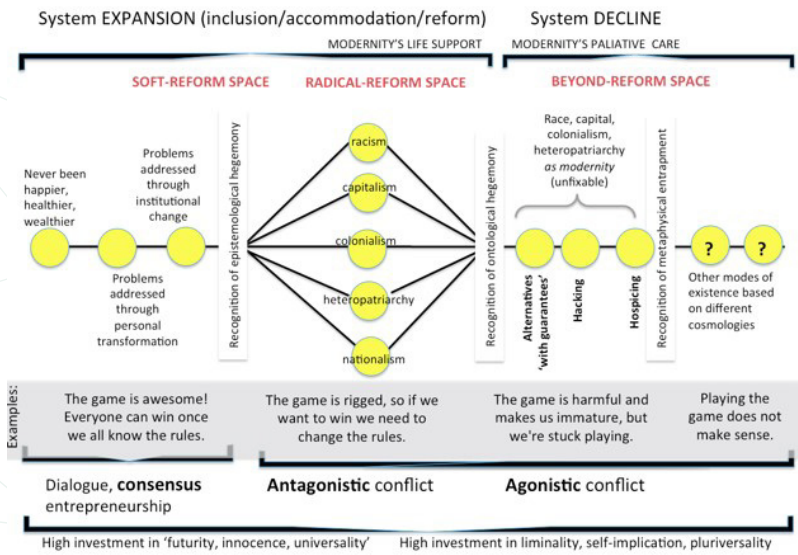
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Appendices

Appendix 1

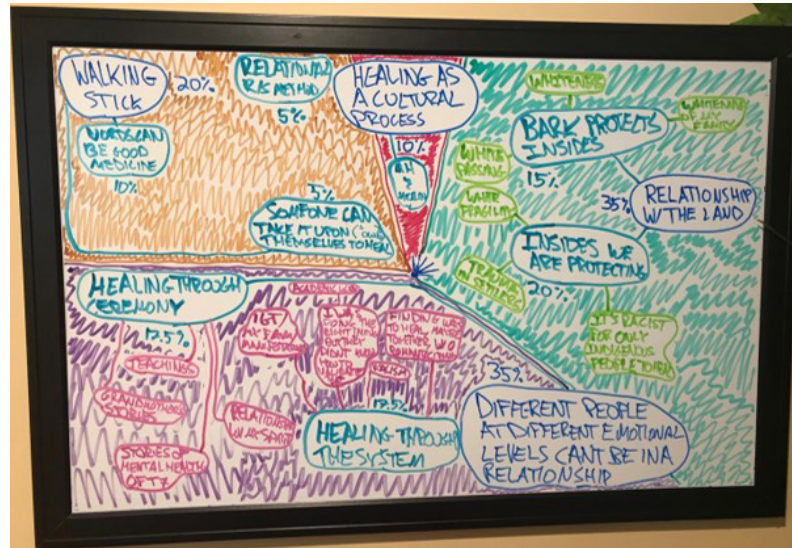


Appendix 2 (Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 25)



Appendices

Appendix 3 (Mind Map for Planning This Paper)



Appendix 4 – AIM-HI Network (the original funders of my research)



The Alberta Indigenous Mentorship in Health Innovation (AIM-HI) Network

