I Live in a Place That a River Runs Through:
Localized Literacy, Currere, and a Summer in an Ojibway Community

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Abstract:
In this paper, I analyze a particular artifact from my lived curriculum – a short children's book I wrote while running a literacy program in an Ojibway community. In doing this, I draw upon Ng-A-Fook's (2011) (re)imagining of *currere* as specific experiential snapshots that open up into wider landscapes of meaning. After situating the book within my own lived experience, I unlock some of the meanings contained in it by analyzing it through three different theoretical lenses. I first examine the book in relation to research on place-based literacy (e.g. Kulnieks, Longboat, & Young, 2010), and suggest the value of such a localized approach to literacy education. Secondly, in relation to the scholarship on settler colonialism (e.g. Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013), I question whether my choice as an outsider to write a work of "literature" incorporating aspects of local intergenerational knowledges should be seen an act of appropriation. Thirdly, I draw on literature arguing for the development of ethical intercultural meeting places (e.g. Haig-Brown, 2008) in order to suggest that this artifact is best understood as a record of my gradual development as an educator and a researcher. I suggest that *currere* is not just a way for teachers to become "amateur intellectuals" (Kanu & Glor, 2006), but also a way for researchers such as myself to become "amateur practitioners," by learning to situate our experience within the skilled practices of a curriculum of place (Chambers, 2008).

Keywords: *curriculum studies; currere; Indigenous education; literacy; place-based education; settler colonialism*

> Everyone likes to give as well as receive. No one wishes only to receive all the time. We have taken something from your culture. . . . I wish you had taken something from our culture . . . for there were some beautiful and good things in it.
>
> – Chief Dan George, 1998

My wife and I spent the summers of 2011 and 2012 in Wabaseemoong (Whitedog), an Ojibway community in northern Ontario. Wabaseemoong in many ways exemplifies Chambers' (2012) claim that "like most colonies around the globe, the Canadian North [is] expendable" (p. 27). The local fishing economy was harshly interrupted in the 1960s when the entire river system was poisoned with mercury from a nearby mill (McQuigge, 2012). The fish have only recently become (officially) edible again, but this has not interrupted the rich ancestral connection Wabaseemoong has to its river. In our first summer in the community we were involved in several youth programs, but the most important one for my own learning was a fishing camp. Out on the vast, ancient, and sometimes violent river that flowed behind our houses, I began to see how those waters continue to shape the community in deep and complex ways. As Restoule, Gruner, and Metatawabin (2013) have described, in the context of another Indigenous community, "for the Mushkegowuk, the river is a way of life: one that has existed for thousands of years. As such, the river has many significant uses and meanings, physically, emotionally, and spiritually" (p. 80). Similarly, and in spite of everything that has happened, in Wabaseemoong, the river remains a way of life.

This paper explores a short children's book called *Summer in Whitedog* that my wife and I made while we were running a literacy program in our second summer in the community. It was an attempt on our part to fulfill a need we perceived for locally developed literacy materials. At the time I felt very positive about this project, but, returning to it several years later, I find my relationship to it more conflicted. In the intervening years, I have completed a teaching degree and started a PhD in Education, along with building relationships with the local First Nations, Métis, and Inuit community here in Ottawa. I recently pulled the book off our shelf, and re-read it from the new perspective given me by recent learning and experience. That tiny volume – really just a few pages folded and stapled – awoke a whole range of reactions in me, from nostalgia to aching self-doubt.

In order to better understand this artifact, and the role it has played in my own lived curriculum (Aoki, 1986/2004), I am using *currere*, a methodological approach first developed by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet in the 1970's (Ng-A-Fook, 2011). As Pinar (2012) explains, *currere* is a process in which a writer moves through several stages of self-analysis. First it involves a review of one's past experiences and an anticipation of one's future. It then requires the writer to undertake an analytic distancing from these experiences, in order to study them critically, before returning to a synthesis in the present. My approach here is specifically influenced by Ng-A-Fook's (2011) (re)imagining of *currere* in relation to the practice of *denkbild*. Ng-A-Fook presents *currere* not as a simple linear narrative but as specific, experientially rich snapshots that open up beyond themselves to broader landscapes of lived experience. In this way, *currere* can explore the complex textures of particularity. I link it in this sense also to Indigenous storytelling practices that explore the meanings that reside in particular places (Blood, Chambers, Donald, Hasebe-Ludt, & Big Head, 2012). My approach has also been influenced by Kanu and Glor's (2006)

proposal that contemporary teachers should take up *currere* as a way to become "amateur intellectuals," who can see the meaning of their actions and respond effectively to ambiguous and contradictory demands. In this sense, I take up *currere* here in order to interrogate the complexities of my experience as a White educator in Indigenous communities.

In order to better understand and situate this artifact, I first situate it autobiographically, in relation to its cultural and community context, and in the pedagogical role it (briefly) played. I then examine it from three different theoretical perspectives. Firstly, I explore the experience of writing and sharing the book as a potentially valuable example of place-based literacy. Secondly, I situate it in relation to the literature on settler colonialism, in order to problematize my role as an outsider to the community, attempting to write a story I had no claim to. Thirdly, and more hopefully, I draw on literature arguing for the development of ethical intercultural meeting places in order to suggest that this artifact is best understood as a record of my own gradual development as an educator and a researcher.

Through all of this, I attempt to situate my discussion within the temporal landscape of Wabaseemoong, in a place where all life exists in relation to the river. In our short time there we could only glimpse these complex relationships, but we tried to capture them in some small way in our book, and I try to do so here as well. I use a river journey as a guiding metaphor throughout, with the past being upstream and the future being downstream. I refer to the three bodies of literature I use as "landings" – particular points along the length of a river where you can land and survey your route from a different perspective. This structural metaphor, like most of the content, is inspired by my experience in Wabaseemoong, but what I write here about the community can only be what Chambers (2008) describes as "stammering" – an attempt to articulate in my own language a reality situated in the language of another place, with which I have only a passing acquaintance (p. 114).

Looking Upstream: My Summer in Wabaseemoong

Our second summer in Wabaseemoong was focused on running a literacy program for elementary students. In order to provide the students with one-on-one tutoring, we spent much of the day driving back and forth along the community's one main road, tracking down particular students for their scheduled tutoring times. When we found them, we would bring them to the school for a half-hour session. Wabaseemoong had a beautiful, brand new school that had just been built that year, after decades of bureaucratic delay. It was in wide use that summer for a number of programs, and we sometimes had to negotiate for a room to work in. Our connections, through the local organization that ran our program, enabled us to get our own room most of the time. But we were not the only well-intentioned outsiders coming into the community to run summer programs, and we sometimes had to share.

We lived in one of the designated teacher houses, next to the decrepit former school building. Behind our house we had a breathtaking view of the river, where it moved gracefully and powerfully past us. Students would often come and knock on our door outside of program hours. More often than not they were wandering back and forth along the road, looking for someone to take them to *Goshawk*, the closest safe place for them to

swim. We tried to take each of our students there at least once. As adults we were more fortunate to be able to swim at Eli's, just down the road. There was a little cove sheltered from the current, with some impressive outcroppings of rock to jump off into the gloriously cold water. Children weren't allowed to swim there, though – there were stories of a spirit in the waters that kept them away.

We were provided with particular recommended resources for our program, with a key one being the *Jolly Phonics* program (see http://jollylearning.co.uk/). This is a set of books that was written and published in England, but which has been used across the English-speaking world as an introductory course in phonics for elementary students. It takes a multisensory approach, in which a particular sound is linked to a particular example, which both demonstrates the sound in use and imitates the sound onomatopoeically. Students see, hear, and speak these sounds, alone and in the context of different words, and also trace the shape of the letter with their finger on a tactile track on the page. We did have some success with these books. Many of our students, for instance, seemed quite comfortable with the *S*, which was demonstrated visually, tactically, and onomatopoeically by a snake. (Whether they knew this particular trope from the bush or from TV, I'm not actually sure.)

However, these books also caused many problems. Many of their examples were based on experiences that might be common for middle class English school children, but that were very foreign to our students in Wabaseemoong. The letter *T*, for instance, was represented by *tennis*. This is a clever example, in that the sound of a tennis racket hitting a ball does sound a bit like a <t> – but it only works with students who actually watch tennis. In our context, more often than not this lesson got derailed by having to explain what tennis is – inverting the purpose of having an example in the first place. An even bigger concern that we began to recognize was in the nature of phonics itself, which is invariably tied to particular dialects of English. In many places where a British English speaker would use the <t> sound, an Ojibway English speaker from Wabaseemoong will tend to use a sound closer to a <d>. Again, this simple fact would completely derail a lesson, as we tried to adapt the examples – both in their form and their content – to the situated needs of our students.

Eventually, we stopped using the phonics books, and took more of a "whole language" approach. We got some Dr. Seuss books, which weren't much closer to students' experiences, but at least were fun to read together. We also found some reading materials in the school that dealt with life on an Indigenous reserve. I did not consider these books very well written. Like the old *Dick and Jane* readers, the language was overly simplistic, and the tone sometimes felt condescending. But at least the subject matter and the dialect of these books were more recognizable.

Wanting to combine the fun and creative approach to literacy of Dr. Seuss and the culturally relevant content of the Indigenous readers, my wife and I ended up writing a short children's book called *Summer in Whitedog*. It used rhyme and rhythm to tell a story about the daily lives of the children we were teaching, based on our own experiences of their community and on stories they had told us. We built it around typical local childhood experiences, such as swimming in the river, fishing, blueberry picking, and biking back and forth along the community's single road. We also incorporated aspects of the local dialect, including *Wabaseemoong*, the traditional name for Whitedog; *Kookum*, or grandmother; and *Goshawk*, the children's favourite place to swim. We kept the name *Whitedog* in the title

since this is what most of the children actually called their community, but one of our hopes was that the use of *Wabaseemoong* in the book, phonically reinforced by the rhyme and the rhythm, could build the familiarity of the children with that traditional name.

Though I did not know this at the time, such a reclaiming of traditional place names is one of the decolonizing projects put forth by Smith (1999). As Restoule, Gruner, and Metatawabin (2013) describe in a similar context: "The focus on the word is an explicit attempt to retain a relationship to the rivers, the lands, and the communities joined together by them" (p. 77). The first student I showed the book to was an extremely bright little girl who, fittingly, lived with her grandmother. Her eyes widened as she sounded out *Wabaseemoong* on the first page. Then she looked up at me and said: "My *kookum* says that's the name of the place where we live." Her utter astonishment at seeing this one small piece of her own language in print was beautiful and heartbreaking.

Figure 1: *Summer in Whitedog*[1], cover

[1] Story and images created by Jesse and Kat Butler.

Figure 2: *Summer in Whitedog,* pages 1-2

I live in a place
that a river runs through.
The river is old,
but each spring it is new.
My grandmother taught me,
and she's never wrong.
She said that this place
is called **Wabaseemoong.**

Figure 3: *Summer in Whitedog*, pages 3-4

My grandfather taught me
to fish from the river.
He says that it *gives* us fish,
it's such a giver.
The fish that live in it
are carried along
from far far away
into Wabaseemoong.

Figure 4: *Summer in Whitedog*, pages 5-6

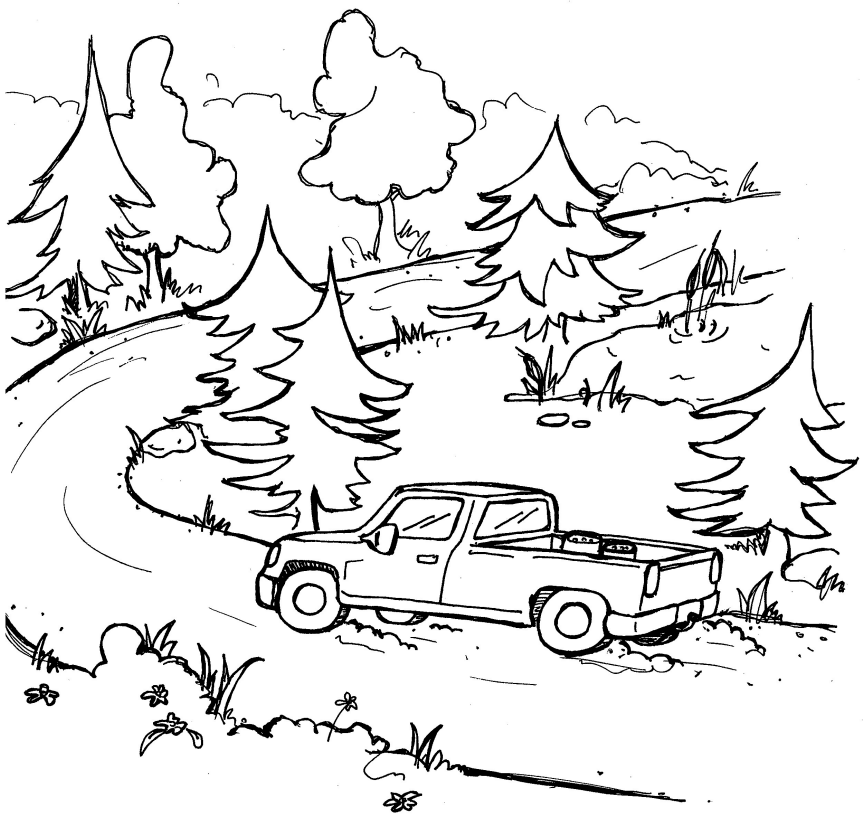
It's so hot today
that I let Kookum rest.
I bike the whole road,
West to East,
East to West.
There's Kookum!
She'll take me to Goshawk to swim!
I'll see all my friends there,

like **her**, **her**, and **him**!

And then we go picking,
where every blueberry
is blueberry blue!
Very blue? Very very!
The woods can be scary
but Kookum is strong.
She'll get me back safe
home to Wabaseemoong.

Figure 5: *Summer in Whitedog*, pages 7-8

Now it's getting dark,
but we've had lots of luck.
With buckets of berries
I sleep in the truck.
We ride the road home.
This is where I belong.
I'll wake up tomorrow
in Wabaseemoong.



The First Landing: A Localized Approach to Literacy

I had not yet read the literature to situate my experience, but the choice my wife and I made to create *Summer in Whitedog* responded to some important concerns in the scholarship on Indigenous education. While the Canadian curriculum has historically relegated the experiences of Indigenous communities to the periphery, recent research has called for these to be brought back to the centre of education (Weenie, 2008). Battiste (2013) has made this point in relation to teaching the humanities subjects:

> Every conception of Indigenous humanity begins from a consciousness in which a specific place takes prominence. This locality initially shapes an understanding of being and by experience in that place shapes and sustains the people, providing them an understanding of themselves and an awareness of their being at home in the world. (p. 113)

Kulnieks, Longboat, and Young (2010) further develop the implications of this place-based approach to teaching the humanities, particularly as it relates to the literacy curriculum. They argue that all "literature" must be understood as having developed ultimately from stories told in specific interpersonal contexts, which invariably are situated within particular places. This is true as much for European cultures as it is for Indigenous cultures (Kulnieks, 2005). Oral culture, therefore, should be considered ontologically prior to literacy. This is not to deny the complex interrelationship of orality and writing (Low, 2011). Rather, the emphasis on orality in Kulnieks et al.'s argument is intended to counterbalance the bias toward print in contemporary education. They conclude:

> In an effort to modernize, we have to be aware that we are giving up a knowledge of place that is essential for human survival. The perceived necessity to write more (and more) limits perceptual capacity through fostering the belief that literacy is far more useful than the nature of orality. The reality and the beauty is that we need both. (p. 22)

McKeough et al. (2008), meanwhile, propose the use of oral narratives from local elders in order to scaffold literacy education for Indigenous elementary students. Their research suggests that the cognitive abilities fostered through the learning of oral narratives are essential building blocks for literacy. Furthermore, it is important that such stories be drawn from the local community. As they argue: "This type of community engagement not only offers children a model of how stories should be structured and told; it also signals to them that, within their very communities, there are stories to tell" (p. 149). In this way, the education of Indigenous students can build essential literacy skills, while also working to overcome the legacy of "cognitive imperialism" that has historically devalued local Indigenous cultures (Battiste, 1998).

As this research indicates, cultivating stories from the local community is an important aspect of teaching Indigenous literacies. Not only does such a practice scaffold the cognitive skills all students need in order to engage productively in more abstract forms of academic literacy, it also has the potential to decolonize education through prioritizing the experiences of the local culture (Aquash, 2013). In this sense, I believe the existing research supports my original concerns about the learning materials we were given in Wabaseemoong – they were fundamentally colonial, in the sense of imposing foreign values onto the local community. Even the "culturally relevant" learning resources we found, featuring First Nations subject matter, were based in generalizations about First Nation

communities that did not honour the particularities of the specific community we were in (Donald, Glanfield, & Sterenberg, 2012). Given these considerations, the development of localized literacy materials in a community like Wabaseemong is an important – even a necessary – step toward educational decolonization.

The Second Landing: Settler Colonialism and the Role of an Outsider

However, even if my creation of *Summer in Whitedog* as a localized literacy resource is accepted as a worthwhile endeavor, I must still interrogate whether I was the appropriate person to undertake this task. I was caused to rethink this when I first read Blood et al.'s (2012) account of the need to build ongoing relationships to a place in order to be able to tell that place's stories. In the words of Cynthia Chambers:

> I arrived in Blackfoot territory 20 years ago, *matónni* [just yesterday], just long enough to know that to dwell here, I have a lot to learn and that there are beings willing to teach me. There are stories to help me learn how to dwell in this place, dwell, rather than occupy a condo, or build a career. (Blood et al., 2012, p. 73)

In reading these words, I was struck by my arrogance in attempting to tell stories about Wabaseemoong – even something as simple as a day in a child's life – after just two summers in the community. Some time later, I was discussing *Summer in Whitedog* with my wife in relation to my graduate studies. At that point we had not really looked at the book for several years, so she asked me to recount it to her. When I finished, she pointed out the line: "The woods can be scary." "Those kids wouldn't say *woods*," she stated, "they would say *bush*." I realized that she was absolutely right – that I had incorporated a few tokenistic pieces of local dialect, but primarily written in my own urban, White, "literate" voice. Since that conversation, I have had the impulse to change the word *woods* to *bush* in the poem. I have resisted changing it here, primarily in the spirit of *currere*, in which it is important to situate the past as past so that we can learn from it (Kanu & Glor, 2006). Besides, the problem is far deeper than any one dialectical term.

The full complexity of the problem is revealed in the literature on settler colonialism. As Veracini (2010) makes clear, settler colonial nation states have fostered a unique brand of colonialism, in which the Settler population must constantly assert its superiority over the Indigenous population in order to justify their presence on the land. According to Donald (2009), this has led to our educational structures being modeled on the logic of a frontier fort, in which the Settler population is understood as perpetually "inside" colonial institutions, and the Indigenous population as "outside." Because European educational institutions are prioritized, Indigenous schools are expected to follow the same model, and high numbers of "qualified" non-Indigenous teachers are moved temporarily to Indigenous communities to help "educate" them. The presence of these teachers in Indigenous communities creates a dilemma. Do they simply impose the Eurocentric curriculum they were taught, continuing the long heritage of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998)? Or do they attempt to translate their lessons into a local cultural context with which they are only superficially acquainted, and risk appropriating local stories and knowledges they have no right to tell (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013)?

This was the position we found ourselves in, as teachers in Wabaseemoong. The program we were running had been requested by community leaders who saw the acquisition of European models of literacy as important to the future of their children. In this

sense, our presence there, to fulfill a specified role in response to locally defined needs, seems appropriate. Nonetheless, we were still entering the community as outsiders, and needed to be cautious about not transgressing the implied boundaries of our role. We had been brought in as experts on Eurocentric forms of literacy, not on local intergenerational Indigenous knowledges. This seems obvious, but well-intentioned efforts to teach the Eurocentric curriculum in "culturally relevant" ways can quickly blur these lines. As Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) and Ng-A-Fook (2013) make clear, it is all too easy for non-Indigenous educators and researchers, in seeking to understand Indigenous cultures, to simply repackage them into familiar Western forms. On reflection, I fear this is precisely what I did with *Summer in Whitedog*. With what to me now is astonishing arrogance, I didn't even think to consult with any community members in creating this book. I took my two short summers in the community as a sufficient basis on which to tell this story. I am grateful, in a sense, that my knowledge was as limited as it was, in that I did not know enough of Ojibway culture to even *attempt* to tell any traditional or sacred stories. But even the simple story I told, of a day in the life of a child in Wabaseemoong, was beyond the limited knowledge I had. McKeough et al. (2008) highlight the necessity of a consultation process, in which educators and researchers work alongside local Indigenous knowledge holders to determine which stories should be told, and when, and how. I can see now why this is so important.

The Third Landing: Learning a Curriculum of Place

In keeping with the scholarship on settler colonialism, the previous section presented Settler and Indigenous cultures in fairly binary terms. I believe it is necessary to do so sometimes, particularly for those of us more on the Settler side of that equation. We need to be reminded sometimes that when we feel overly comfortable with the state of Settler-Indigenous relations, it may just mean that the colonial project of replacement is succeeding (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). However, this can be taken too far. As Donald, Glanfield, and Sterenberg (2012) remind us, creating a binary opposition between our cultures is also a colonial project: "The overriding assumption at work in these colonial frontier logics is that Indigenous peoples and Canadians inhabit separate realities. The inherent intention is to deny relationality" (p. 54). How, then, do we begin to *accept* relationality? Ermine (2007) has called for the development of *ethical space* – spaces that are beyond the control of either culture, and that therefore allow us to encounter each other on equal terms. For those of us more on the Settler end, therefore, the first and vital step is to acknowledge that our epistemologies are not total. Haig-Brown (2008) describes this as learning to take Indigenous thought seriously:

> When we really begin to take Indigenous thought seriously in our theory and in our practices, we move to inhabit border worlds. Far from being temporary border crossers, we come to see our space shaped irrevocably by the colonial presence that created this new nation, Canada, as an overlay of multiple existing nations. (p. 14)

This process takes time, but it also takes *space*. It is no doubt valuable to learn to take Indigenous thought seriously in principle, but true ethical relationality comes through long-term interpersonal encounter in particular shared places (Donald, 2009, 2012).

This involves learning what Chambers (2008) calls *a curriculum of place*. Inspired by Indigenous educational traditions, a curriculum of place functions very differently from

Eurocentric curricula. It is not abstractly transferable from one location to another – in fact its focus is on learning to live deeply and well in the particular places we already are. A central aspect of this curriculum is *enskillment*, which involves learning the situated and practical knowledge required to survive in particular places. As Chambers (2008) describes: "This knowledge is embedded within the skilled practices, and those practices are constituted within specific locales by particular human beings who are becoming who they are as they practice those ecologically embedded skills" (p. 118). As Kulnieks et al. (2010) suggest, such practical, situated enskillment was at the root of European curricula as much as it is the living legacy of Indigenous education. Many of us Settlers have simply forgotten these origins, through a long series of displacements and abstractions. The more we take time to live in spaces of ethical relationality, the more we will learn to take Indigenous thought seriously, and the more this will enable us to more deeply learn a curriculum of place.

Where Kanu and Glor (2006) recommend *currere* as a way for teachers to become "amateur intellectuals," I would like to add that it is also a way for researchers to become "amateur practitioners." By following Ng-A-Fook (2011) and engaging *currere* not as a linear narrative but as a snapshot of a particular situated experience, I can critically examine *how* I have lived in particular places, and the degree to which I learned to practice enskillment. It is in this spirit that I present *Summer in Whitedog* here as an artifact. I do not present it as any particular meaningful pedagogical breakthrough, nor as any sort of authentic example of "Indigenous education." I present it simply as an example of a Settler scholar's faltering steps into a border world of ethical relationality and a curriculum of place. In these regards, it is certainly more of a failure than a success. It is a record of my arrogance in trying to single-handedly tell a story about a place I had lived in so briefly. To be able to do so properly would require a deeper engagement in ethical relationality, a richer enskillment in that particular place. As Chambers (2008) remarks:

> The Blackfoot say about the settlers who came into their territory a century and a half ago, "They have just arrived." This is stated as fact. But also with some astonishment that those who have just arrived could presume to know so much. (p. 116)

I suppose there is a measure of arrogance even in being concerned that I could appropriate the rich intergenerational wisdom of a place I encountered so briefly. Even if I were trying to appropriate their culture (which I wasn't), surely anything I brought away with me would be mangled beyond recognition through its removal from the rich relational context of that particular place. If this artifact is a record of anything, it is a record of how the beauty and wisdom of that community and its landscape has shaped me in my slow development as an educator and a scholar.

Looking Downstream: Reflections Toward a Conclusion

The three landings from which I have viewed my experience in Wabaseemoong have generated three separate but related reflections. First, I suggest that the creation of local literature based on local stories is an important aspect of Indigenous literacy education that is too often overlooked. In this regard, I share *Summer in Whitedog* here simply to demonstrate that it is not that difficult. The book is not ideal, for reasons I have described, but I don't think it is terrible either. In a lot of ways, I believe it was more effective than

any of the "published" resources available to us. The second reflection, however, is that we need to be careful who takes on this task, and whose voices it captures. Most of the time, this will require close collaboration between teachers and researchers (who often come from outside an Indigenous community) and local Indigenous knowledge holders. This, in turn, is related to the third reflection. In such collaboration, the teachers and researchers have an opportunity not just to *teach* but also to *learn* by entering into ethical relationality and learning a curriculum of place. I did not take nearly enough advantage of these opportunities in Wabaseemoong, but I hope to do better in the future.

I am now living in another "place that a river runs through." The Ottawa river is just a short walk from my house, but I have not yet learned to relate to this landscape in the way I was shown in Wabaseemoong. One of the many things that community taught me is captured in the line: "The river is old, but each spring it is new." As I gradually learn to enter into these border worlds of ethical relationality, I believe this line can provide me with guidance. The relationality of living in a place is not something you can capture and document once and for all. It is ancient and stable from generation to generation, yet it must be continuously renewed through intentional and respectful encounters (Blood et al., 2012). If I hope to meaningfully work alongside Ottawa's urban Indigenous community, I must learn to relate to this landscape in the way I saw modeled in Wabaseemoong. I must take the time to encounter the river that moves behind my home, that continues to bring life to this valley generation after generation. I need to encounter it as both very old, and continually renewed. . .

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