

# *A Sensory Experiment into Languages as (R)evolution*

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## **Abstract:**

How are we informed and transformed by tuning into our relationships to land, emotions, relations, and bodies within our academic *pathways into languages*? In this paper, we tell a story of our journey, as scholars, into how languages relate to land, historicity, bodies, and the ecosophical concept of *ubuntu*. Our discussion brings in the temporal and spatial multi-disciplinary lineage of languages, as an open space to re-envision, re-experience, and re-engage with our academic writing in new and ancient ways. We use multimodal layers of language ontology—from ecological, physical, historical, and intercultural perspectives—as a decolonizing, pedagogical process of (re)covering humanness. We use the particular example of academic writing and reading as a sensory experience to dive into languages as ontological ways of becoming human. And because we are academics (or failed magicians) we try to provide insights into theoretical and practical ways to transform this conversation into pedagogy.

**Keywords:** languages, postcolonialism, reconciliation, indigenous, narrative inquiry, experiential learning

## Our Conversation

**I**n time, art forms reveal several layers of meaning, while encompassing all of them simultaneously. Our writing is inquiring. As writers we became curious about how various interdependencies are revealed through our relationships to languages. When we met, Colin was presenting on how we need to re-envision our thinking about thinking and Julie was presenting on the metacognition of creating digital stories. We discussed how tuning into marginalized experiences of languages, such as sensory perceptions, might challenge our writing experiences as scholars. We examined the origins of such marginalization, not only in academia, but in the Western world's constructs of epistemologies.

Thus, we began a conversation on how a multilingual, multi-historical, multi-environmental approach to languages might assist us in finding a sense of unity within the sometimes very complex experience of being and relating to all species and worlds.

[Colin] My research involves exploring the broad multi-disciplinary perspectives of human learning. I am intrigued to find ways to expand our thinking about language of and for learning, including metaphysical aspects of place, historicity, and the physical aspects of embodiment and human interdependence. As a scholar, I have been seeking alternatives to the hegemonic application of Western words and meanings as mechanisms to produce and disseminate knowledge. I speak English and explore what lies within one language when it is considered in the multidimensional ways of physicality, throughout time and space.

[Julie] I grew up on unceded Innu land, in Quebec, Canada. I constantly navigate between my language of origins—French—and my second language—English—in my family and in my professional life. Furthermore, my experience of languages has been expanded through the gift of tuning into the physical, picture-driven world of my son, as he entered the world of language through the door of autism. As a scholar, this invisible thread of inclusivity within experiences of languages—through *who* and *where* we are—invited me into questioning forms of academic writing as epistemic violence and the way I, as an emerging scholar, need to navigate them, within and away, simultaneously.

[Us] Our conversation became an open-space of questions, where we wondered how reconsidering languages in multidimensional ways might bring ways to de-colonize how we relate to writing—either from psychological, socio-cultural, epistemological, or ontological perspectives. Vivien Burr (2003) acknowledges that aspects of experience are difficult to translate into thought or language, and so suggests that “we should regard such forms of experience and expression as *extra discursive*, i.e. existing in a realm outside of language and discourse” (p. 197). From a critical feminist perspective, Elana Michelson (1998) notes the ambivalent relationship involved in this rejection of the body as a site of knowledge; she refers to the dualisms of skill-knowledge, reflection-experience, and theory-practice as “versions of the mind-body split and the privileging of mind over body” (p. 228), suggesting that the theoretical underpinnings of learning are “socially overdetermined” (p. 227).

## Our Purpose

Consider how – emotions – history – land – body – transcend the content of languages.

Why, then, should we write/teach/relate, in academia, as though we are not inhabited by emotions, history, land, and body? Why should we perpetuate the politics of divisiveness? Why should we, as academics, agree to the “separation and dissociation of Eurocentric consciousness” (Bastien, 2004, p. 125) lost in the various re-interpretations of languages, including the act of translation?

Gardner Seawright (2014) reminds us that “an effective place-based education not only reshapes abstract understandings of nature and land, but provides a pathway for the tearing down and reconstruction of oppressive ontological relationships with the natural world” (p. 570). Entering respectfully into the paths of others, including Ted Aoki (1996/2005), Deborah Britzman (1998), Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers, Carl Leggo, and Wanda Hurren (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Chambers, 2004a; Chambers, 2004 b; Hurren & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014), Narcisse Blood, Dwayne Donald, and Ramona Big Head (Blood, Chambers, Donald, Hasebe-Ludt, & Big Head, 2012), we ask: Can we learn from marginalised relationships to languages? How might this inform the writing of academic papers, in general, and this paper, in particular?

Thus, we point to the fundamental paradigm shift in considering languages as multidimensional ontological layers. In our conclusions, we share intuitions about our responsibility, as scholars, to cultivate our humanity in all its vulnerabilities, resiliency, and hope.

### Our Pathways

In this rhizomatic paper, we point to the initial connection between vision and writing, and how it has been progressively disconnected between symbolic literacy and the act of writing. We examine how lineage, ancestry, and more-than-human complexity are intertwined in our relationships to language(s). Here, we turn to indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in relationship to land and languages to illustrate how an “emotional understanding shapes all knowledge we produce” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 230), hence becoming a central dimension of a critical complex epistemology. Like Cynthia L. Selfe (2009), being aware of the irony of writing a paper about a conversation on aurality, we include sense-studies in our writing. Each segment provides alternative entry points: personal stories, art, or soundscapes as ways to experience languages beyond characters aligned on a page. We explore in these *sense-studies* a critical approach to co-creating academic papers, and re-enacting our learnings in contexts.

This approach may also assist in understanding how a Huron-Iroquois word meaning “village”—*kanata* (<http://canada.pch.gc.ca//eng/1443789176782>)—became a country built at the expense of the erasure of indigenous voices (Stanley, 1999). As Jessica Ball and Onowna McGivor remind us, tuning in to these terms is not only the tip of an extraordinary learning iceberg, it is also a matter of survival for the 60 aboriginal languages still present in Canada today (Ball & McGivor, 2013). As a symbolic contribution, we have chosen to entitle the sections of this paper by pointing to concepts used by distinctive nations in their relationships to land, such as *aoksisowaato’op*; *uapitsheushkamik*“. These terms have been used by people who have inhabited the land since time immemorial and have shared their knowledge in research endeavours. As Cynthia Chambers (1999) reminds us it may be a way to

cultivate a new kind of curricular imagination that not only honours the multitude of ways the Canadian landscape shapes how Canadians “see” things, but, more importantly, that explores how such shaping itself is an active process that cannot be simply described through the Eurocentric instrumentalities of previous generations. (p. 143)

Reflecting on the interdependency of these elements and their various relationships within the worlds provides anchorage to retell academic writing through the sensory world of orality and the act of writing and ways to dream it differently.

We aim to write/teach/relate to languages in multiple forms and to re-enact these through the phenomenological lens of human senses trying to extend through tuning into landscapes.

### Layers of Interdependency

How may the complexity of land and languages and conversations be portrayed/experienced *through* and *within* our current highly technological environments, contexts, and lands?



Elizabeth LaPensée (2016). *Returning to Ourselves*.  
Artwork commissioned for The Initiative for Independent Futures.<sup>1</sup>

In “Returning to Ourselves,” by Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish game writer, designer, and artist Elizabeth LaPensée,<sup>2</sup> we read the intricate relationships of all species and all worlds experienced through language. In this, we are inspired by the depths and diversities in which relationships within land and language, ancestry, ecosystems, ethics, and spirituality inhabit words.

Reflecting on the interdependency of these elements and their various relationships within the world provides anchorage to retell academic writing through the sensory world of orality and the act of writing and ways to dream it differently.

### Ubuntu-Ukama and the Genealogies of Humus

As we seek to understand the perceptual disconnect between experience and the spoken or written word, Lesley Le Grange’s (2012) ecosophical concept of *ubuntu-ukama* is helpful. He contends that the traditional interpretation of the concept of ubuntu, “I am because you are,” fails to consider how becoming “fully human does not mean caring only for the self and other human beings but also for the entire biophysical world” (p. 56). Le Grange explains that

ubuntu originates from the Xhosa expression *umuntu ngumuntu nga-banye Bantu*. There are similar proverbial expressions in Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, and other African languages. Though not easily translatable, the proverb means that each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others and in relationships individuality is truly expressed. In Shona there is a broader concept ukama, which means relatedness—relatedness to the entire cosmos...In short, the concept of ukama embodies an inseparable oneness between past, present,

and future generations. But *ukama* also means humanity's relatedness to the natural (biophysical) world, which is advanced through totemic ancestorhood. (p. 62)

For Le Grange (2015) "traditional values such as *ubuntu* should be harnessed and combined with other values to support common principles aimed at addressing a deepening global socio-ecological crisis" (p. 307). As such, an *ubuntu* approach to languages would include parts of the human experience, but also include a *trajectory across time and space* (Donaldson, 1998; Hornberger, 2008). Wane (2008) describes "indigenous knowledge as a living experience that is informed by ancestral voices" (p. 183). In "An Invitation to Contemplate the Topos and Humus of Curriculum on Genealogical Grounds: A *Festschrift/Gedenkschrift* for Ted Tetsuo Aoki," Wanda Hurren and Erika Hasebe-Ludt (2104) wrote:

Ted influenced curriculum studies in innovative, provocative ways. He inspired generations of curriculum scholars, students, teachers, and administrators by always provoking them to *let learn*, to dwell in curriculum as both a lived and planned topos, and to remember that human identities are shaped by the nourishing gifts of the humus they share with other living beings on this earth. (p. 14)

As such, as we shall see through our sense-studies, this reconnection with the various languages of the world, land, species, and ancestry brings relational ethics to the center of our conversations.

### Land – *Aoksisowaato'op*

Blood et al. (2012) explain that for the Blackfoot the term *aoksisowaato'op* means "the ethical importance of visiting a place as an act of relational renewal that is life-giving and life-sustaining, both to the place and to ourselves" (p. 48).

Historically, a sociology of nature (Macnaghten & Urry, 1997) aimed to decipher how nature has always been elaborately entangled and fundamentally bound up with the social. However, Western cultural filters present the *world* as synonymous with *social*, and *experience* as synonymous with *environment*, as though "they were the same wherever one happens to be" (Pepper, 1984, p. 6). Ted Benton and Michael Redclift (1994) critically examine the heritage of social theory in relation to the natural environment, arguing that sociology has made a slender contribution to the study of the environment because

culture, meaning, consciousness, and intentional agency differentiated the human from the animal, and effectively stemmed the ambitions of biological explanation. In one move the opposition between nature and culture (or society) made room for social sciences as autonomous disciplines distinct from the natural sciences, and undercut what were widely seen as the unacceptable moral and political implications of biological determinism. (p. 3)

Paul Hager (1999) argues that

with the decline of the fortunes of the scientific approach in the late twentieth century, scientism seems to have been replaced by *discursivity* as its mirror image. Whereas scientism is the extreme view that all genuine understanding is scientific, then discursivity is the equally disputable view that language is the key to all understanding. (p. 71)

Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (2003) suggest that

we stand at the threshold of a history marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms...[and that] we may also be entering an age of greater spirituality...with an emphasis on enquiry that reflects ecological values...whilst promoting freedom and self-determination, with reflexivity that respects communal forms of living that are not Western. (p. 286)

Kenneth Gergen (1999) also calls for an expansion of the concept of relational to include the non-social, and particularly the natural environment, as a “major transformation in our way of conceptualising ourselves” (p. 138). These alternative metaphors of *ecologism*, as whole-systems thinking and postmodern ecological worldviews, embrace environmental/sustainability issues beyond the social into the more-than-human world where *other* views (behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, constructivist) are neither abandoned nor ignored, rather weaved within a larger emerging framework of meaning and understanding, using both/and/or thinking. Can we rise to this challenge and weave our human language back into the earth, our land(s), and the diverse experience of becoming human? What can be learned with, and through, a reconnection with the diverse voices, and ways of being, conveyed within indigenous epistemologies? Suddenly, research becomes a pathway to learn and understand ecological worldviews as a collective, co-constructed responsibility. Reconnecting with nature goes beyond self-actualization to spiritual, political, fundamental relearning to be, as humans, a mere part of a greater universe.

How can we be guided by our ancestors as we seek a balanced movement of thoughts that are not restricted by what is possible in existing political struggles based on regional, representational and epistemological claims? (Ahenakew, de Oliveira Andreotti, Cooper, & Hireme, 2014). How are particular relationships to land for various Canadian First Nations, Métis, and Inuit portrayed/experienced *through*, and *within*, the current highly technological environments we find ourselves in? As stories are heard and performed in various social contexts, they create various openings into curriculum, including a particular sense of ethics in intercultural relations, defined as *rematriation* by Eve Tuck (2011), an “understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, seeks to understand mutual implication, puts indigenous epistemologies at the forefront, and requires a more public form of memory” (p. 84). In this sense, an ethical framework developed by exploring languages in their relationship to land and memory has been identified as key to the Canadian reconciliation process (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

### *In-corporating? Em-body-ing?*

Everyday language is steeped in spatial, bodily, sensorimotor metaphors: I see what you mean; *step-by-step* process of change; as we *grasp* the notion. These metaphors assist the brain to understand. Recent work by Shaun Gallagher (2005) uncovers valuable insights from neuroscience to shed further light on how the body shapes the mind. In *higher* education we expect high levels of thinking and this often involves an ability to compare and contrast, to conceptualise and categorise, and organise thought. This categorisation is the intellectual underpinning to work. Every living being tends to categorise; this is important in understanding how the embodied and embedded cognitive processing of the mind works in learning experiences. Thought is said to be mostly unconscious, and abstract concepts largely metaphorical.

Reason is not purely literal, but largely metaphorical and imaginative—not dispassionate

but emotionally engaged (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson give a simple explanation—the eye has a hundred million light-sensing cells while there are only about a million fibres leading to the brain; therefore, the clustering of information is necessary. This necessary reducing of information involves data clustering, underpinning why we tend to categorise. It occurs because so many neural connections of the brain cluster information in this way. Gestures would have been and still are products of brain organisation across evolutionary time frames; the links between movement, language, and thought would have influenced the structure of the brain (see, for example, Gallagher, 2005).

## Language Phenomenology as a Framework for Inclusive Education

Our more-than-human world has become disconnected from us: the ancient reciprocity with this world has been largely severed, yet it still exists within each of us. If we dwell in a forest, for many months or even a few mindful moments, then we may come to feel that we are part of that forest, consanguineous with it, and that our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself. Early language forms arose from the sensual world, evolving from the sounds and shapes of the animate landscape, within and between the human community, and from the body “which points out, and which speaks” (Merleau-Ponty, as cited in Abram, 1996, p. 81). Immersion in nature promotes a strong sense of belonging and is widely recognised as an experience that has positive psychological/therapeutic benefits (Burns, 1998).

### Hearing

#### Sense-study 1: Tuning into land.

At this point in your reading, please go to a bird-sounds recording by Klankschap:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKhFZPefb64>

Around the world, humans whistle their language  
Some live in mountains, others in forests  
Whistling is used to speak across distances  
This means of communication makes a person one with nature  
One can express love and every aspect of life  
The melody resembles birdsongs  
It tells the story of the people, of their lands, and of human language.  
(Meyer, 2015, p. 1)

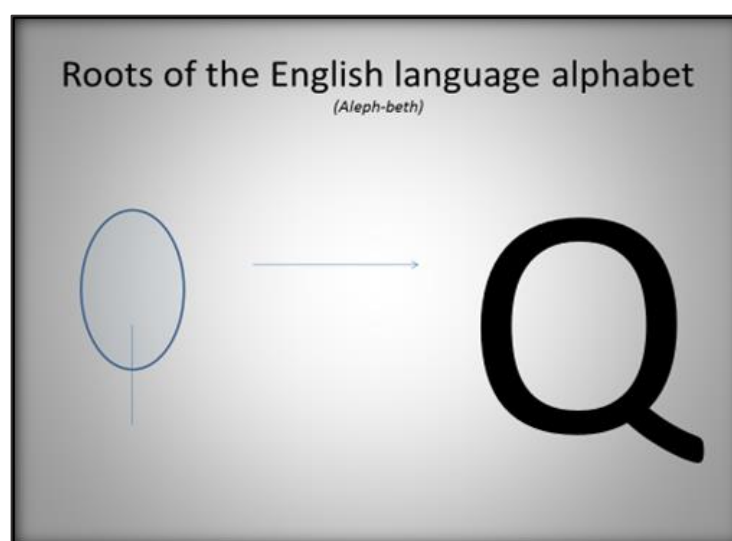
Kull (2008) proposes that:

Coming into wilderness solitude is like studying where everyone speaks a language you have forgotten so long ago now it seems completely foreign. You know you have something important to learn, but you don't understand. It takes time to keep listening and listening. I hear the voices of nature and try to translate what I hear into conceptual thought language so I will know I understand in my mind. But the language of nature cannot be translated into human concepts. It is deeper and different. I realise I have heard and understood when my heart softens and opens to love and peace and beauty around and within me. (p. 279)

Here, our conversation can be mapped as tuning into a polyphonic meaning making, such as tuning into a realm of diverse sounds within a forest helps us connect with plurality and oneness within the same moment.

Seeing

Sense-study 2: Writing the world.



Colin Beard (2013). *Pictographic Remnant of the Monkey Tail in Alphabet.*<sup>3</sup> Graphic.

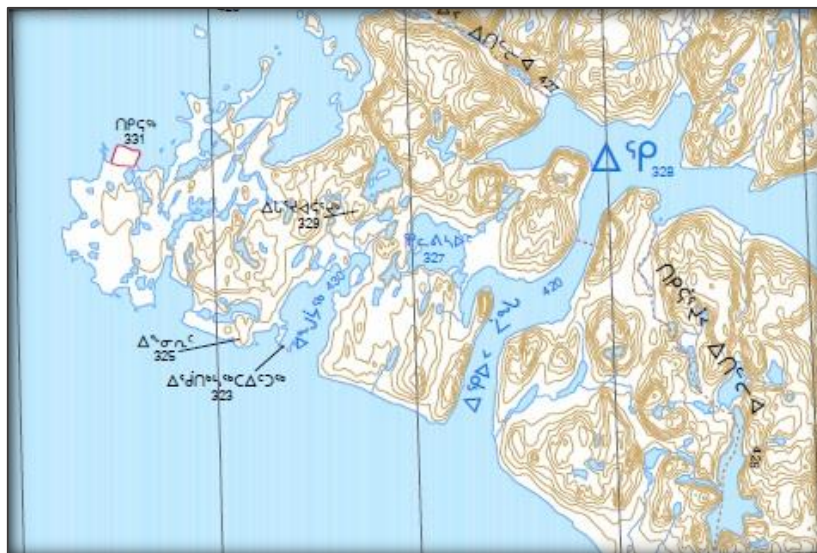
David Abram (1996) identifies the development of an alphabet, accelerated by the development of the visual pun, or rebus, as a significant factor in the divorce and distancing of language from the more than human world. He notes that “our first writing, clearly, was around tracks, our footprints, prints in mud or ash pressed upon the rock” and that the “early writing systems of a species remain tied to the mysteries of the more-than-human world” (p. 96). The word *belief*, for example, can be made up of an image of a bee and a leaf. The picture creates the sound, and it is the human breath (*spiritus*), as a gesture of the mouth, that plays a fundamental role in the evolution of a phonetic script and ultimately the “strange and potent technology which we have come to call the *alphabet*” (Abram, 1996, p. 95). These visual puns came to be employed by scribes, for example, in China and the Middle East. Few of our children are aware of the pictographic vestiges that remain within the 26 letters of the alphabet: from the Hebrew scribes came the *aleph-beth*, and it was the Hebrew letter *qoph* that was also the Hebrew term for *monkey*, and the letter Q retains an element of this simple animal with a tail. Several other letters contain these pictographic remnants as the *aleph-beth* transformed into the Greek “alphabet.” The same disappearances, or absences, may be observed in “how language has named and tamed our lands, like the breaking in of a wild horse” (Griffiths, 2006). The place names that held an intimacy of knowing are gone. Everest lacks meaning.

In our past, places were named to convey utility, sacredness, or secular dimensions. *Nunangat*, in Inuktitut, means “Land of Ice and Water” in Inuktitut (from the Pan Inuit Trails Atlas, <http://www.paninuittrails.org>) or the diverse iteration of “snow” for the Inuit people. A less known example of how people identify places by names that were helpful is the Inuktitut word for one particular shingle island with very little vegetation or moss: it is *Iqutiksaqtaittuq*, which roughly translated means “there is nothing to wipe your bottom island.” Beyond these tongue-in-cheek considerations, Griffiths (2015) notes:

With a few exceptions, the explorers ignored Inuit place names, because it would have given the lie to all their myths: the myth of the land's enmity, the myth of the blank and unknown land, the myth of their solo heroics, the myth of the land's emptiness, the myth of the ice as enemy.” (p.70)



In present days, research projects such as the Pan Inuit Trail Atlas (Aporta, Bravo, Taylor, Lloyd, & Abele, n.d.) seek to re-document how “delineations of trails and place names play a critical role in documenting the Inuit spatial narratives about their homelands” through “both published and unpublished accounts of Inuit engagement with cartography during the 19th and 20th centuries” (<http://www.paninuittrails.org>). Moreover, the Inuit Heritage Trust Place Names project lobbies for traditional Inuit place names to appear on maps as a recognition of local knowledge of the land (<http://ihtl.ca/eng/place-names/pn-index.html?agree=0>).



Inuit Heritage Trust (n.d.). *Map of Iqutiksaqtaittuq*.<sup>4</sup>

### Sense-study 3: Plurilingualism as emerging academic form.

This suggests not only the emergence of new conversations, through telling words and their land-stories in a view of *decolonizing education* (Battiste, 2013), research (Smith, 1999), and land rights (Tuck & Yang, 2012), but also as a way to experience words and languages as a multidimensional map of historical *violences*, and the continuing violences of modernity (Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015). What would it mean, in our pedagogies, to reconsider the historical-relational layers of heritage languages?

As Valerie Galley (2009) argues, in the Canadian context of reconciliation, one major appropriate action to be undertaken as strongly and as swiftly as possible is to revitalize indigenous languages (p. 255). In this sense, we may consider the following abstract, in its form and content, by Jessica Ball and Onowna McIovor (2013):

wihtaskamihk kîkâc kahkiyaw nîhîyaw pîkiskwîwina î namatîpayiwa wiya môniyâw onîkânîwak kayâs kâkiy sihcikîcik ka nakinahkwâw nîhiyaw osihcikîwina. atawiya anohc kanâta askiy kâpimipayihtâcik î tipahamok nîhiyaw awâsisak kakisinâmâkosicik mîna apisis î tipahamok mîna ta kakwiw miciminamâ nîhiyawîwin. namoya mâka mitoni tapwîy kontayiwâk î nîsohkamâkawinaw ka miciminamâ nipîkiskwîwinân. pako kwayas ka sihcikiy kîspin tâpwiy kâ kakwiw miciminamâ nîhîyawîwin îkwa tapwiy kwayas ka kiskinâhamowâyâ kicowâsim'sinân. ôma masinayikanis îwihcikâtîw tânihki kîkâc kâ namatîpayicik nipîkiskwîwinân îkwa takahki sihcikîwina mîna misowiy kâ apicihtâcik ka pasikwînahkwâw nîhiyawîwin nanântawisi. (Translated into Nîhîyawîwin (Northern Cree) [crk], a language of Canada, by Art Napoleon) (p. 19)<sup>5</sup>

Here, reading/seeing Northern Cree prior to the English translation as a chapter opening becomes political.

## Silences

Yet, in this tension between *education* and *learning*, this additional struggle between experience and discourse surfaces. In this awareness of language as both liberating whilst limiting and restricting, we turn to a doctoral study of solitude by Robert Kull (2008) who, like us, finds difficulties in both thinking and writing about our sensual world:

[I]n conceptualising, organising, and thinking about these sensory impressions, the immediacy of experience can easily be lost. It requires patience and practice to soften this habitual activity by over and over letting go of thought and analysis to simply stay with the swirl of sound just as it is without trying to do anything with it. (p. 279)

The problem is exacerbated when it comes to making notes for his research:

I drop the notebook and feel myself sink more deeply into the world. All desire to write disappears. What has happened to my flow of language? I fall mute before such wonder and beauty. I try to describe the delicate shades and patterns of shifting colour as wind swirls water around immovable rock, but my images feel dull and trite. There is no dance between word and world. What I see and feel begs a sensuous tango, but my words march static and stiff in lines across the page. (p. 184)

In her account of Mi'kmaq resilience, Marie Battiste (1986) describes *symbolic literacy* in similar ways, as joining the immediate world of experience and the spiritual world in a pictographic manner; the profound connection between the two worlds was at the core of community—holistically, what Battiste refers to as *unity of consciousness*.

### Sense-Study 4: Touching. *uapitsheushkamik*<sup>u</sup>. “Caribou moss” in Innu-ainum.

The English-Innu-French Dictionary is a joint partnership between the Linguistics Department at Memorial University, the School of Linguistics and Language Studies at Carleton University, the Labrador Innu School Board (*Mamu Tshishkutamashutau—Innu Education*) and the Quebec Innu organization *Institut Tshakapesh* (<http://www.innu-aimun.ca/>).

Moreover, framing the disconnect/reconnect between experience, land, and discourse brings forward collective responsibility. It allows for re-considering our experience (or lack thereof) and respect (and lack thereof) of indigenous languages in decolonizing higher education pedagogy.

[Julie] Lichen grows abundantly on the North Shore of Quebec. I find this species impressive—it grows very close to the land; takes a very long time to grow; its texture is both soft and resilient; spongy and strong. I dreamt of lichen teaching us about languages and resiliency? Like lichen, Innu-ainum has grown and expanded close to the land, survived the colonial crushing of colonial schools, thrives and survives and more....In fact, the Innu-ainum language is spoken by a majority of Quebec's Innu population, with French as a second language (Leclerc, 2015). Tuning into learning the language of the unceded Innu territory where I grew up transformed my representations of bilingualism. Taking into account history and identity in our storytelling processes, our way of speaking and hearing “silenced languages” (Stanley, 1999, p. 3) in relation to land and to body is a transformational pedagogy.

Reading to my kids in Innu-ainum, attempting to pronounce these long words as a first *way in*. I am struck. This may be what a multidimensional ecological approach to language(s) feels like, for me, at that moment? Within a minute, I experienced intergenerational care, as I became the storyteller through my mother's teaching, including: impressions of a land, based on my childhood unceded Innu territory; a

sadness about unrevealed family narratives of my own ancestry; a pleasure in daring to pronounce words, as best as I could, in a language I do not know; and seeing my children's interest and curiosity. I wonder. What can lichen teach me about belonging? How is my attachment to where I grew up reflected in my children's sense of belonging?



Julie Vaudrin-Charette (2016). *Longing for uapitsheushkamik*.<sup>6</sup>  
Digital photograph.

## Sensing

### Belonging. Be-longing.

In fact, the sense of belonging and attachment is an area of concern that most education institutions address in some way. The recognition and mapping of “pre-existing discourses that are very much out of our control” not only contains various spaces for “intercultural learning” (Uryu, Steffensen, & Kramsch, 2014, p. 246), but also brings us back to how the human need to *belong* is hardwired (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Humans, as mammals, are intensively nurtured from birth by our mothers: thus commences our ancient and intense need to belong, a need that spreads outwards to the wider family, communities, to the land, and the more than human world it embraces.

An evolutionary perspective offers some insight. Two million years ago the brain of the homo species expanded rapidly, but it was 500 to 100,000 years ago that the most rapid expansion occurred (Buss, 2012). The earliest men and women, 2.5 million years ago, had brains of about 600 cm<sup>3</sup>. Modern homo sapiens' brain averages 1200–1400 cm<sup>3</sup> (Harari, 2011). Significantly Yuval Harari enquires:

[W]hat was the sapiens' secret of success? How did we push all other human species into oblivion? The most likely answer is the very thing that makes the debate possible: *homo sapiens* conquered the world thanks above all to its unique language. (p. 20)

However, in Le Grange's (2012) ecophilosophical terms, we may also ask how the languages of wind, earth, and species have contributed to the expansion of our common ancestor's brain.

Language and learning are terms that embrace not only practical everyday issues for teachers, but human language is a problematic issue within a diverse range of philosophical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological explanations (Hager, 1999). Learning in a phylogenetic sense precedes human language, and expands beyond education.

Ball and McIvor indicate that “even if schooling is provided only in the dominant language, educators can support Indigenous children by understanding how children’s early language socialization is likely to influence their interests, attention, memory, story-telling, social interactions, and responses to pedagogical techniques” (p. 44).

### Sense-study 5: Immersive.

Tuning into Elizabeth LaPensée’s whimsical digital stories and games assists us in contextualizing languages, land, and body. How may we learn to decolonize through immersive technological experiences such as gaming?



Elizabeth LaPensée (2011). *Survivance*.  
Multimedia art from video game.<sup>7</sup>

In Elizabeth LaPensée’s video game *Survivance*, participants are welcomed into the game as a pathway of listening to and telling these stories. They are challenged to make steps such as recovering or revisiting language, traditional stories, family stories, and historical stories; taking care of themselves and others; and taking direct action for their own wellbeing and consequently the wellbeing of the community, given that Indigenous cultures are communal. (LaPensée, 2014a, p. 570)

During the 2015 Provoking Curriculum Studies Conference, as a way to point out how multilingual awareness of relationships to land can become fundamental pedagogy, Jesse Butler and Julie Vaudrin-Charette created an evolutive mindmap, accessible online: [Reflex-c-tive tale](#). Elsewhere, using participative digital storytelling methodology, elders and youth have been brought together to document stories of land-based belonging (Budach & Patrick, 2011), re-creating pedagogical materials such as storybooks and interactive maps. These pedagogical materials developed through this process enhance

the dialogue between the *language-learning* and the *relational* curriculum of the community.

[Colin] Will technology assist us in reconnecting our sensory world and academic writing? It has started already, with gesture-based technology, particularly on large touchscreens, enabling a new way of moving, classifying, categorising, and enlarging data or models. This occurs now in an everyday capacity on mobile phones and tablets. Gestures now contribute to the learning processes in new and different ways.

Such categorization continually occurs in everyday life, in both conscious and subconscious ways; yet, Joe Kincheloe (2012) invites us to explore knowledge formation as a complex and ambiguous social activity (p. 28). Storytelling and performance have been powerful dialogical tools to engage bodies, and they provoke and construct new conversations on identity.

[Us] Anchoring our relationships to languages through invisible and visible threads; interstitial; treasures; survival and love.

[Julie] Where I now live and work—on the unceded land of the Anishinabeg nation—Anishinaabemowin is reviving. In hearing, or reading, or experiencing these languages I have been humbled by how they open up gateways into a sense of historical consciousness, emotions, relations, and land. As I write this, and attend to how I narrated this story, I remember a dream I once had. I was a spider weaving a web of relationalities.

Focusing on the tensions in and between epistemologies, I see invisible threads, which would not exist without each of its anchors. In this paper, I have used the particular examples of epistemological and ontological approaches to languages as gateways in research, teaching, and being. Joe Kincheloe (2004) remarks how a key dimension of our critical identity involves our ability to imagine—our ontological imagination of what we might become as individuals and as a species. As linguistic, imaginative entities we can transcend what are believed to be innate biological tendencies and change violent and destructive behaviours that threaten other human beings and the planet in general. (p. 231)

In summary, from ecological, physical, historical, and intercultural perspectives, languages are an integral part of dreaming and enacting a pedagogy of reconciliation. My intuition is that by exploring the inner borders and potentialities of languages, in sensuous, but also confronting ways, we will contribute to expanding and anchoring our pedagogies as researchers.

### Revisiting Language Learning as Evolutionary Ubuntu/Beyond-Reform Space

As such, envisioning teaching and learning of languages through harvesting the potential of multimodal tools and approaches presents a tremendous potential which is starting to be examined in indigenous research in education, but also in the fields of psychology, environment, among others. Could multimodal ways of teaching enhance our experiences of interconnectedness with land, body, emotions, and ancestry? We are convinced it will, and are excited to be part of future research in this regards.

As we have seen, looking at approaches in teaching languages in plurilingual environments, we use the particular example of breathing through symphonic layers of language ontology—from ecological, physical, historical, and intercultural perspectives—as a decolonizing, pedagogical process of [re]covering humanness. We have sense-studies as a way to explore origins of languages, including the emotional, physical, and spiritual *components* of teaching and learning languages, dwelling into the anchoring and reconciling potential of indigenous languages based on current research located on unceded Anishnabeg territory in Canada. To do so, we weaved into our conversational

multilingual paper four aspects of language learning: seeing connection to place, hearing acknowledgment of diversity, touching reciprocal relationships, and sensing spiritual connections. Our hope is that such meta-cognitive and physical grounds transform some of our pedagogical relations in language teaching and learning and contribute towards reconciliation and decolonization.

If we're going to take pedagogy seriously, and embrace the complex notion of student transformation, then we have to consider some of the fundamental problems inherent within the use of human language and text. Language has been powerful for humans; it has the ability not only to explain some very complex things, but also, for example, through poetry and stories, to create very strong emotions. Our work is to suggest there is also something missing in our understanding of language and therefore more we can do. Going beyond the post-structuralist perspectives on languages allows us, as Le Grange suggests, to tune-in with the more-than-human as a part of understanding and positioning our experience as a species depending on other beings, on air, on water, on land, among other elements, for survival.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IF) is conducted by Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), a research network based at Concordia University. (<http://abtec.org/iif/>).

<sup>2</sup> Images by Elizabeth LaPensée are used with kind permission of the artist. <http://www.elizabethlapensee.com/#/art/>.

<sup>3</sup> This graphic was presented at the 2013 International Conference on Experiential Learning in Lima, Peru.

<sup>4</sup> Map detail retrieved from [http://ihtl.ca/eng/place-names/NU37C\\_Qaggiujaq.pdf](http://ihtl.ca/eng/place-names/NU37C_Qaggiujaq.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Translation: Canada's indigenous languages are at risk of extinction because of government policies that have actively opposed or neglected them. A few positive steps by government include investments in Aboriginal Head Start, a culturally based early childhood program, as well as a federal Aboriginal Languages Initiative. Overall, however, government and public schools have yet to demonstrate serious support for Indigenous language revitalization. Language-in-education policies must address the historically and legislatively created needs of Indigenous Peoples to increase the number of Indigenous language speakers and honor the right of Indigenous children to be educated in their language and according to their heritage, with culturally meaningful curricula, cultural safety, and dignity. This chapter describes how Canada arrived at a state of Indigenous language devastation, then explores some promising developments in community-driven heritage language teaching, and finally presents an ecologically comprehensive strategy for Indigenous language revitalization that draws on and goes beyond the roles of formal schooling. (Ball & McIvor, 2013, p. 19)

<sup>6</sup> Photo taken by Julie on a sunny afternoon with family.

<sup>7</sup> A social-impact game that asks us to explore our presence and create works of art as a pathway to healing. Shown at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival 2013. See the feature on La Pensée by Alexa Ray Corriea, "Games can preserve indigenous stories and oral histories" as well as LaPensée (2014b).