



Walking on This Earth, Finding Belonging: Ruminations of an Unsettled Settler

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Abstract:

In this paper, I contemplate my positionality as a non-Indigenous settler of Scottish, English and German descent. I (re)visit places that have shaped my life-journey and engages in a thoughtful participation between language, land and my positionality as an emerging researcher within an Indigenist paradigm. I consider Regan's (2010) concept of the unsettled settler, defined as non-Indigenous people learning to embrace the struggle to face truths of colonialism and the consequences of the Indian Residential School system. Through photovoice and poetic inquiry, I reflect on my own encounters with the land and more-than-human relatives as a way to disrupt colonial assumptions. Ruminations, pictures and a collection of poems invite an exploration of the curricular implications of land-based teachings and reconciling ways of knowing with the land. By delving into and sharing my own personal experiences on the land, I hope to invite non-Indigenous educators to consider their own positionality and relationship with the land as part of their response to the Truth and Reconciliation (2015) calls to action.

Keywords: Blackfoot language; curriculum; Indigenous ways of knowing; land; photovoice; poetic inquiry

Marcher sur cette terre, trouver son appartenance : les ruminations d'un colon instable

Résumé :

Dans cet article, je contemple ma positionnalité en tant que colon non autochtone d'origine écossaise, anglaise et allemande. Je (re)visite des lieux qui ont façonné mon parcours de vie et m'engage dans une participation réfléchie entre la langue, la terre et ma positionnalité en tant que chercheuse émergente au sein d'un paradigme autochtone. Je considère le concept de Regan (2010) du colon instable, défini comme un peuple non autochtone apprenant à se battre pour affronter les vérités du colonialisme et les conséquences du système des pensionnats indiens. À travers la photographie et l'enquête poétique, je réfléchis à mes propres rencontres avec la terre et des parents plus qu'humains comme moyen de perturber les hypothèses coloniales. Des ruminations, des images et une collection de poèmes invitent à explorer les implications curriculaires des enseignements basés sur la terre et à réconcilier les manières de savoir avec la terre. En explorant et en partageant mes propres expériences personnelles sur la terre, j'espère inviter les éducatrices(teurs) non autochtones à considérer leur propre positionnalité et leur relation avec la terre dans le cadre de leur réponse aux appels à l'action de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada (2015).

Mots clés : la langue des Pieds-Noirs; curriculum; les modes de savoir autochtones; la terre; la voix aux photos; l'enquête poétique

Being on the land is a highly intellectual practice that is a living interaction between heart, mind, and movement.

(Simpson, 2017, p. 215)

Who Am I and Where Do I Come From?

My name is Stephanie. My ancestry is Scottish, English and German, and I grew up on the un-ceded land of the Qayqayt First Nation, members of the Coast Salish peoples. I am a mother to two children and have been an educator for 21 years. I now live in Blackfoot territory where I am guided on a journey by Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto, Randy Bottle. I seek to inspire myself and other educators to build relationships with the land and Elders so that we can teach children to care for each other and the Earth.

I am learning to develop a kinship with the land and connect Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing to education in respectful ways (Donald, 2016; Kelly, 2018; Wilson, 2008). Eve Tuck and Ruben Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) critiqued the field of curriculum studies, pointing out that the field has “played a significant role in the maintenance of settler colonialism” (p. 76). Similarly, Dwayne Donald (2016) has challenged curriculum scholars to move past a reflective response to current events and colonialism towards a complete (re)imagining of what curriculum could look like during these times of reconciliation. Both learning on the land and thinking about positionality and relationships are critical responses to curriculum studies that are urgently needed.

I am keenly aware of my heritage and the assumptions, barriers and misunderstandings that I carry (Regan, 2010; Tuck & Yang, 2012). I recognize that my connection with land is flawed. No matter how much my identity is shaped by land, I grew up in a position of White privilege on un-ceded land that belongs to Indigenous peoples (Adams, 2006; Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). I do not seek to ignore, erase or appropriate Indigenous knowledges, nor do I seek to make them my own (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Understanding a path towards truth and reconciliation requires engaging in the ongoing work of recognizing the colonial project in its past and present forms (Battiste, 2013; Simpson, 2017; A. Smith, 2005; L. Smith, 2012). This includes acknowledging my role in the colonial project as a result of the privilege of being born a settler.

The conscious awakening that I have about my own colonial past is as much a part of me as my intricate connections to the land where I grew up. Reflecting upon childhood memories and placing them alongside current experiences on this Indigenous learning journey guided by a Blackfoot mentor opens up further reflection about the knowledge that I carry in my bones. This knowledge that I carry from my childhood calls forth my relationship to land as a settler.

I have always loved nature, particularly dense forests, rocky beaches, oceans and lakes. Growing up, I spent more hours than I can count lying on my back staring at the trees, the clouds and the mountains. This genuine appreciation equates to Sandra Styre's (2019) definition of land with a lower case “l”, which refers to “physical geographic space” (p. 27). That is, I enjoyed visiting

places of personal significance and felt both peaceful and energized, but I didn't understand or couldn't articulate what it meant to be in relationship with those places. On the other hand, Land with a capital "L" is "both space (abstract) and place/land (concrete). . . . Land is spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land is experiential, remembered, and storied; Land is consciousness—Land is sentient" (Styres, 2019, p. 27, italics in original). I visit with Indigenous perspectives to better understand our relationships—with each other, the Land, and our more-than-human relatives—as important aspects of truth and reconciliation. I can't ever fully understand the sacredness of Indigenous peoples' relationships to the Land. I am, though, trying to practice respect, responsibility, and reciprocity, as I nurture a relationship with the Land¹ (Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson, 2008).

Where Am I Going?

In my work, I turn to an Indigenist paradigm to understand how I can immerse myself respectfully in Indigenous research (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Tanaka, 2016; Wilson, 2007). Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2007) describes an Indigenist research paradigm as a deeply personal call to engage in Indigenous research, regardless of the cultural background of the researcher. Non-Indigenous scholar Michele Tanaka's (2016) research and teaching is guided by Elders and influenced by relationships with herself, with others, and with the Earth (p. 12). I feel a sense of tentative affirmation to discover that there is a space for non-Indigenous researchers who find themselves, as I do, between two worldviews: Western and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Yet, engaging in Indigenist methodologies requires that I do the ongoing hard work of understanding both perspectives, as well as the ongoing impact of colonialism (Coulthard, 2014; Kovach, 2015; Simpson, 2017; L. Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

This exploratory paper seeks an ethical balance between two worldviews (Little Bear, 2000) using photovoice (Cook & Buck, 2010; Higgins, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997) and poetic inquiry (Leggo, 2019; Prendergast et al., 2009; Sameshima et al., 2017). I see balance as a careful attention to the four "R's" of Indigenous research methodologies, which are respect, responsibility, relationship and reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Wilson, 2008). Aesthetically, the photographs and the accompanying poetry are aligned in the centre margin to represent my effort to find balance between worldviews.

Walking as an Unsettled Settler

Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Paulette Regan (2010) describes an unsettling pedagogy as when one takes "the necessary time to critically reflect upon one's own decolonizing journey in ways that translate into action" (p. 197). She goes on to explain that "the challenge for settlers is to listen attentively, reflectively, and with humility" (p. 211). Although Regan refers to dialogue between Indigenous peoples and settlers, this paper is an attempt to extend the concept of unsettling towards shifting relationships between humans and the Land.

¹ Part of the exploratory nature of this paper is to create a conceptual usage of the term Land. I will continue to use land with a lower case "l" except when I am trying to highlight the sentient nature of Land with an upper case "L".

The collection of poetry that appears later in the paper is an active contribution to my unsettling as I move from understanding land as places with meaningful memories, to a relationship with the Land and our more-than-human relatives.

Rooted in a space of “critical hope” (Regan, 2010, p. 22), I look to Indigenous peoples, the Land and more-than-humans to listen and to learn. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) acknowledged that the work of reconciling ways of knowing is a struggle. This active struggle to recognize truth seems to be a necessary part of the journey towards a hopeful future. Paulo Freire writes that, “without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope . . . dissipates, loses its bearings and turns into hopelessness. . . . Hence the need for a kind of education in hope” (Freire, 1995, p. 8-9). Connecting to my past and present through the Land is hopeful to me. I lean into this struggle.

Reconciling ways of knowing for the future of the Earth asks that Indigenous knowledge systems be valued and understood as vital to environmental stewardship (Wall Kimmerer, 2020). Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) shared that this is not about environmental management. It is about relational teachings with the Land. Further, Sandra Styres (2019) wrote that “there is a Haida teaching that states ‘we do not inherit the land from our ancestors—we borrow it from our children’” (p. 28). This teaching awakens the senses. If we borrow the land from our children, then it is an imperative that we care for it lovingly and carefully.

As I experience learning on the Land with Elder Saa’kokoto, I am becoming more attuned to my own life and my positionality. I realize that these experiences are at once personal and pedagogical. My experiences on the Land are similar to those of children sitting in circle with an Elder. I listen carefully with an open heart and yet, after the lesson, I see two choices: I could reflect on a beautiful experience and let it drift in my memory, or, in the work of unsettling the settler (Regan, 2010), I could ask what I am to do with these teachings. Elder Saa’kokoto shares that he hopes that the wisdom of his lessons and teachings end up at home:

It’s what’s at the kitchen table that matters. The family is learning from what the kids are learning in school. Students are dealing with colonization every day. But when we take them out on na’a and teach them to appreciate the lessons of na’a and the Blackfoot language and history, we plant the seeds of Indigenous knowledges for the future. We plant the seeds and the students go out and educate the community. The students are the ones who carry this forward. It’s the kitchen table where we change attitudes (Saa’kokoto, Kainai Nation, lives in Calgary, Alberta; oral teachings, September 25, 2020).

When children have the opportunities to learn and teach others, we all move forward on the path towards truth and reconciliation. Educators are required to address the Truth and Reconciliation (2015) calls to action. Accordingly, a deep inquiry of self-in-relation to colonial and Indigenous worldviews provides an opening of how educators could begin or further their own journeys so that they can seek learning experiences for their students. Learning to appreciate the land and different stories and teachings should never be a one-time experience that reinforces the colonial project

(Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Instead, working together over time with Elders and knowledge keepers helps to keep knowledge moving forward towards a collective future (Elder Saa'kokoto, oral teachings, c. 2017-2020; Tanaka, 2016; Wall Kimmerer, 2020).

Where possible, I use Blackfoot words that I have learned through experiences on the Land with Elder Saa'kokoto. I am drawn to the verb-based, action-oriented Blackfoot language. African scholar Bagele Chilisa (2012) suggests that using Indigenous language wherever possible as part of an Indigenous research methodology becomes an act of decolonization. Learning words as part of an encounter with Land or a more-than-human relative feels like a small, significant gift of traditional knowledges for me to respect.

I offer the following glossary of Blackfoot words in Figure 1 as a pedagogical invitation. Traditionally, Blackfoot language is an oral language. I have provided a phonetic guide down the centre of the glossary, created with Elder Saa'kokoto as an invitation to practice these words as they appear in the poetry that follows.

Blackfoot Word	Phonetic Pronunciation	English Translation
<i>asinai'pii</i>	<i>ah sin a pee</i>	Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park
<i>ehsikotoii</i>	<i>eh see koh to yee</i>	white-tailed deer
<i>giaiyou</i>	<i>Gee eye you</i>	bear
<i>gii'nii</i>	<i>gee knee</i>	rosehips
<i>iipootaiks</i>	<i>ee poe tehks</i>	the winged ones
<i>kakh'sin</i>	<i>kahk'sin</i>	bear berry
<i>ko'komikisum</i>	<i>koe koe mo kee suum</i>	Moon
<i>ksisktaki</i>	<i>ksisk tah kee</i>	beaver
<i>na'a</i>	<i>nah'ah</i>	Mother Earth
<i>nitsitapii</i>	<i>knee see ta pee</i>	the real people, including the Blackfoot
<i>natoosi</i>	<i>na toe see</i>	Sun
<i>okonokii</i>	<i>oh koh noh kee</i>	Saskatoon berries

Figure 1. Glossary of Blackfoot terms. Includes phonetic pronunciation and English translation.

As a reciprocal act, I practice these words—roll them over my tongue and squirm at my mispronunciation when it takes many tries to pronounce a word properly. But taking the time and effort to pronounce a word properly matters (Basso, 1997; Kovach, 2015). Slowing down to listen carefully demonstrates the significance of the words that I am learning. Taking the time to practice shows Elder Saa'kokoto that I understand the responsibility that I carry to now refer to these relations by their original names.

Research Methods

Together, photovoice and poetic inquiry simultaneously connect and juxtapose different perspectives. Photovoice originated as a process where people were invited to take pictures and

reflect critically about their own photos in relation to a participatory research study (Wang & Burris, 1997). Though rooted in a Western research tradition, photovoice is compelling here for two reasons. First, Marc Higgins (2014), a scholar who seeks to articulate the space between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, recognized the impact of photovoice with/in research participants. He conceptualized a “rebraid” of photovoice that draws upon Indigenous research traditions and community values so that it fits within Indigenous cultural contexts (p. 209). Second, photovoice as a pedagogical tool is introspective and empowering (Cook & Buck, 2010). Deeply pedagogical in its own right, poetry is a nourishing and loving response to my insights (Leggo, 2019; Sameshima et al., 2018). I will walk you, Reader, through a tangled mix of words and photos representing a topography specific to Indigenous and settler land-based experiences. The pictures amplify my words, helping me to articulate how I walk in the world as educator, researcher, human. In so doing, I simultaneously contemplate the pedagogical implications.

Process

Many of the following poems reflect Elder Saa’kokoto’s teachings. I followed Blackfoot ceremonial protocols and asked for his guidance. Elder Saa’kokoto gave his permission for me to share his teachings within the context of this paper. In a series of what Sto’lo scholar Jo Ann Archibald (2008) refers to as informal research chats, I took care to share various drafts of my evolving work, incorporating Elder Saa’kokoto’s thoughts and feedback into various drafts and revisions. Even with guidance, I often heard the voice of the unsettled settler within (Regan, 2010) chiding me, reminding me that there are stories about the Land that I can’t share as a settler. Then, the voice of my Elder teacher, telling me that I can trust my heart. That it’s ok. And that his lessons and stories will help me to understand my own. When speaking about truth and reconciliation, Elder Saa’kokoto reminds people that

what happened generations ago in residential schools is not your fault. But you need to listen to the stories. To learn. Once you know, it is your responsibility to share the knowledge that you have gained. To share with others so that they will know. That is the action. (Saa’kokoto, Kainai Nation, lives in Calgary, Alberta; oral teachings, February 3, 2020).

As part of my process, I began by placing the collection of land-based photographs together, then layered my poetry. Throughout the process, I noticed overarching values such as patience, reciprocity and love from my Land-teachers. I wondered what new possibilities might reveal themselves through this work and what it might mean for children to learn these teachings from the Land. Within each collection of photos, there was often a cycle through the seasons or through time as my learning deepened through (re)visiting a place. The poetic ruminations that follow seek to answer the questions: how might a close examination of land photography teach me new perspectives about who I am in my research and how I came to be here? How might this effort to compose my positionality in relation to the land be relevant for others who seek to do the same? Why might this be relevant for curriculum and teaching?

Poetic and Photographic Ruminations²

Learning from Niitsitapi



birds
sang louder than my thoughts
intertwining song and wind

natoosi
cast her light
whimsical movement of shadows
changing direction

ehsikotoii jumped through the grove
ipootaiks flew this way and that
no fear

cacophony of
more-than-human movements
sounds—inter-connected
beckoned me to pay attention

² All photos taken by the author.

I took this in
leaned back gazed
left, right
near, far

trees parted in a new line of sight
forming a shared path extending
as far as I could see

to the left
aspen stood tall, close
together sharing
connected root systems
supporting young and old

to the right
spaced yet entangled mix
aspen and poplar
either leaning closer or bending away

Natoosi



One foot in front of the other, I climbed
the steep, narrow gravel
track they called a road

small groups chatted in front and behind
while I wandered alone
with my thoughts

barren landscapes held
secrets—energy of the mountains
pulsed in the silence

What was sacred here in this place?
Water? Sun? Wind? Rocks?

natoosi
(what do they call Sun in Berber?)
white-light rays
guided my eyes

to a boulder leaning over the edge
catching me in a
cosmic, earthly communication
between natoosi, the rock and me

Sweetgrass

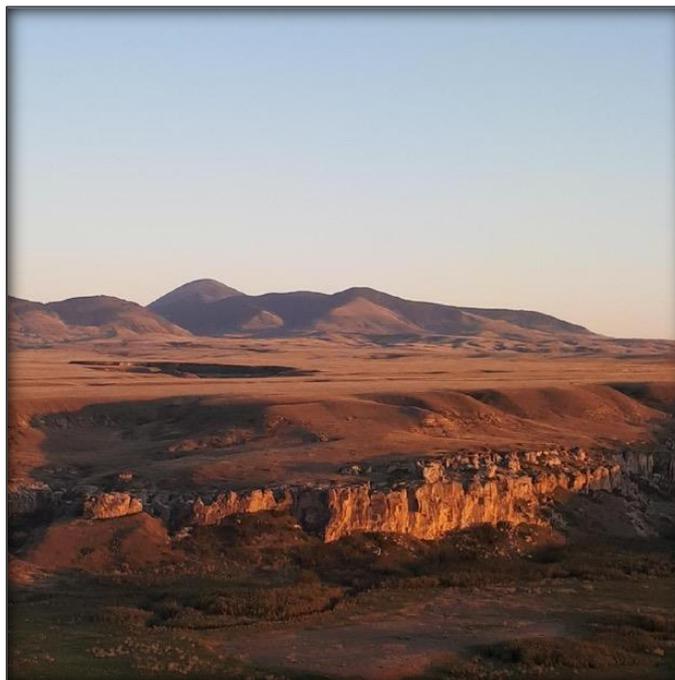


the strength of a braid
nudges me to remember
gifts offered by na'a

I tried searching for sweetgrass
last summer
but didn't succeed
she wasn't ready
to reveal herself

I am learning
some knowledge is not for me
equally beckoning
elusive
protected

Asinai'pii



Most people in Alberta
know this place
as Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, but
the Blackfoot people
have always called it Asinai'pii
when I first went, I knew it as Writing-on-Stone
sacred university for the Elders
I also knew that there were spirits
that the wind blew, hard
some Blackfoot people
do not want to sleep in the river valley
while others embrace
the whispers of the ancestors
in the wind

Gii'nii



My rose hip lessons began in early summer
funny how I paid attention and yet
even then, I didn't know
that gii'nii had gently decided
to teach me

that their vitamin C is the reason why
colonizers survived those first winters
that the generosity of Indigenous peoples
led them to share their knowledge

this told to us tongue in cheek
with a wry smile and a short laugh
by a Cree colleague sharing plant knowledge
with teachers

gii'nii and I met again
in early fall when I learned
that I could make tea

reciprocity harvest
take just what you need
my friend said to me

humbled by protocols
and a growing sense of pride
something shifted in my heart
before I could catch up
and understand

Okonokii



Saskatoon berries don't always grow
in abundance, in fact,
for most years of my childhood, okonokii
shrivelled and dark
were best left to iipootaiks, the birds

if I could measure time
by okonokii, it would move slowly
berries dripping from every bush
has happened twice
in thirty years

I haven't seen them like this since I was a kid!
exclaimed my uncle as we shared
okonokii when I was young

I haven't seen them like this since I was a kid!
I shouted in delight to my own children last summer
realizing they were the same age as I was
the last time they were plentiful

I taught my own children
how to care for okonokii
taking some to enjoy but
leaving enough to share
for iipootaiks
and gaiyou, the bear

Kakh'sin



vibrant green leaves, gathered like family
embracing my learning, yet still
an arm's length
away from understanding

Iipootaiks



too much time at the computer trying
to write about research paradigms
methodologies and the like

I sat
in the brown grass
amongst aspen trees, let
my mind, spirit attune

I noticed
iipootaiks accepted my presence,
began to call
swooping down and around

to the presence of my more-than-human
relatives
I watched, waited

two pheasants walked
together
feeding in the grass
one camouflaged, the other shone

bright amidst dull foliage
moving slowly
in the safety and freedom
of the hidden grove

I exhaled, felt
words take shape, smiled
and began to write

in the textured silence
I bore witness to more winged ones that day
robins, chickadees
ducks, woodpeckers

chirped, pecked
as they ventured close to my place
on the log, offering
advice and support

iipootaiks, the winged ones
taught me to listen

Ksisktaki



first time on the land jolted
my spirit I remembered
it is not awakening, it is coming home
a (re)awakening deep in my bones

hair in braids
I hopped and scampered
through the shady aspen grove

searching

for the right place, you know,
the one where time slows
to match the rhythm of ancestral land and old stories

breath caught in the sun-filled clearing
where ksistaki the beaver
hard at work

chomped down aspen trees
shrunk them down
short, carved off stumps

Walking on This Earth, Finding Belonging

a visitor here, I sat
quietly adjusting to small offerings of time
reminding me
of earthly relatives

Circle Teachings



1.

It is all about circles, she told me
when I was a tiny chickadee
beginning my journey

2.

the drum is a circle, beginning at the centre
spiralling outward in a continuous
circular motion of learning

3.

everything is in circles
we go to the left
beginning in the east with the sunrise
following the sun throughout the day
cycling through the seasons

4.

we care for each other in the circle
listen and speak from the heart
trust that what we say
stays safely here inside

Strawberries, Hearts, Gifts



Did you know that the roundest, juiciest berries
grew on the sunny slope up the hill in front
of Uncle Ernie's cabin?

they used to
grow in the old driveway beside our log house
when I was young
until too many cars parked there
the trees grew too tall

and one year they didn't return
I knew the rhythm of these berries
felt it in my own bones
in early summer, right after school let out,
white blossoms beckoned
if you missed the message, forgot to look
we just found leaves and red runners
reaching out new possibilities
for next season
if you pinched too hard,
they squished
all you could do was suck the juice
from your fingers, and keep looking
leave the half ripe ones
and come back tomorrow
leave the ones with a nibble or a hole
to share with the mice and ants
today, some grow over in the birch grove
an offering for a few days
in early summer
long before I learned from the ancestors
that strawberries are gifts
of reciprocity with the land and others
my heart understood the gift
with each surprise burst
offered in juicy red sweetness

Ko'komikisum



Sapphire sky -
white moon cradles
my dreams in its curved
palm an instant
before sunrise

time suspends, I am
breathless
while intense velvet
sapphire sky holds the secret
of how my day will unfold

magic fades leaving
a pink-purple ribbon
of wonder weaving
its way through
snowy mountain peaks

as the sky simultaneously
brightens and pales,
white moon gently
tosses my destiny down
to earth,
then
the smile reaches my eyes

(Re)Imagining Curricular Spaces

The original purpose of this poetic photovoice inquiry began as a way to define my positionality. Through this work, I hoped to inspire other educators and researchers to do the same through experiences on the Land. The reflexive practice of photovoice evolved this intention to also evoke purpose and a counter-reaction to feeling burned out from the institution of school. When Elder Saa'kokoto and I visit with teachers out on the Land, their first comments are inevitably "I had forgotten what this feels like" or "I need to do this more often. I am too connected to my technology" or "I am too busy" or "I need to stop rushing". Inspired by the notion of (re)imagining curriculum, I am reminded of Elder Saa'kokoto's message about the importance of sharing these land-based stories, teachings and noticings around the kitchen table.

This was not a straightforward task of collecting photographs and writing up my thoughts. Poetry and Elder Saa'kokoto's teachings nudged me to write to discover what exactly moved me in each photo. I became part of the writing experience as evocative memories activated a sense of the familiar from my Western upbringing and also of new possibilities, inspired by Blackfoot ways of knowing, being and doing. It is important—but not enough as a settler—to love a place. I sought a critical understanding of a place. I listened for the language and stories that reside there, and the relationships with the more-than-human. This reciprocal love with the Earth and our more-than-human relatives provides a desperately needed path towards reconciling ways of knowing so that all humans can learn and practice stewardship of the Earth. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) points out, we can only learn by placing Indigenous values and traditional knowledge at the centre of these conversations.

(In)Conclusion

Working together with poetry and engagement with these land-based pictures revealed that I am constantly searching. Searching for strawberries and kakhsin and sweetgrass and okonokii. Engaging in photovoice empowered me to look at my experiences in a different way. These poems and photos circled around, revealing the ever-present connections to patience, reciprocity, and love again and again. Like educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2001), "I am what I am not yet" (para. 1)—I am always becoming. As I spiral slowly over time through land-based teachings, scholarly readings and critical self-reflection, I am learning. Indigenous ways of knowing ask me to behave differently in the world. I continue to adjust and (re)imagine (Donald, 2016) my positionality as an unsettled settler within my work. I tread carefully, and listen to the voices of our Elders, natoosi, the berries, kokokomokisum, the Land and the grass rustling in the grove where ksisktaki and ipootaiks visit together.

About the Author

Stephanie Bartlett is a PhD candidate at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, where she is also an instructor. Emerging from her experiences in collaborative creativity in educational practice, her research focuses on education for reconciliation, ecological and Indigenous pedagogy, poetic inquiry and life writing.

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