

# A Poetic Inquiry Into (Re)Connecting With the Language of the Land: Walking With dii ndéh

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, I strive to move beyond the pervasiveness of colonial ideologies and intellect, decolonizing my experiences by learning through the physical act of being and doing on the Land, while provocatively listening to the silences. It is through the exploration and ingenuity of poetry that the language and knowledge of my ancestors evolved. Weaving in and out of poetic and storied landscapes, I engage with learning from and with *dii ndéh* as the medicine stories of my matriarchs begin to unfold.

**Keywords**: Land; matriarchal knowledge; pedagogy; poetic inquiry

# Une enquête poétique pour se (re)connecter avec la langue de la terre : Marcher avec dii ndéh

## Résumé:

Dans cet article, je m'efforce d'aller au-delà de l'omniprésence des idéologies et de l'intellect coloniaux, en décolonisant mes expériences par l'apprentissage à travers l'acte physique d'être sur la terre, et d'y agir, tout en écoutant ses silences de manière provocante. C'est à travers l'exploration et l'ingéniosité de la poésie que la langue et les savoirs de mes ancêtres ont évolué. En me faufilant dans les paysages poétiques et historiques, je m'engage à apprendre de et avec dji ndéh alors que les récits médicinaux de mes matriarches commencent à se dévoiler.

Mots clés: terre/Terre; savoirs matriarcaux; pédagogie; enquête poétique.

s I (re)connect to the teachings of my matriarchs, I enter the storied landscapes of the past that bring forth the lingering words of matriarchal teachings found within the Land. Teachings that were once stolen from my tongue, my heart and my memories, I (re)discover within the landscapes as the language of *dij ndéh* (the Earth).<sup>1</sup>

Teaching and learning are intertwined on the Land as the pedagogy of *dji ndéh*. It is important as educators that we take time for experiential learning on the Land from matriarchal perspectives. Pinar and Grumet (1976) challenge educational researchers "to look inside ourselves as well as outside and begin to describe, as honestly and personally as we can, what our internal experience is" (p. 3). I reimagine the challenge brought forth by Pinar and Grumet (1976) in being truthful and paying particular attention to my internal experiences that include matriarchal stories.

As a student, I often felt a feeling of displacement within the history and textbooks I encountered. A sense of cultural anonymity, where looking back was looking into darkness. My teachers did not share about the cultural life of women on the Land that nurtured my spirit or attended to my womanhood. As I come back to the tradition of oral storytelling, it is healing. It provides me a space for the relationship with self and kinships to (re)grow and (re)generate within the context of history. This article is a rematriation of women's stories of *dij ndéh*, offering opportunity to nurture in reflection, not only for me, but for you as the reader, as you walk alongside me on this journey. Throughout, I recall oral tradition as I use poetic narratives to speak to my connection and (re)connection with the Land and language of my ancestors. In my Dene culture, stories are told and retold again. As the listener of the story, you may hear the story many times over, each time learning something new or connecting it to life experiences. This is called a spiral learning effect; it is not linear. I invite you to sit, come as you are, maybe pour a cup of tea, or even read this out loud, and enter a storied landscape of *dij ndéh* with me.

When we (re)think with the footsteps of our grandmothers, we are making their stories come alive. We are acknowledging the important teachings of the Land from a feminine perspective. I am grateful for the teachings I learned from my grandmothers, so now as I look back, their stories are present—stories that speak to the importance of my identity and gender as a First Nation woman. Some women are not so fortunate and have not heard their matriarch stories. Often they are left with stories that have taken their breath away, leaving them breathless—gasping for air, where the oxygen is depriving them of breath.

Kulchyski (2005) explains that "one can read the stories inscribed in the landscape with as much care as one reads the narrative of classical history" (p. 18), but I raise awareness of the importance of *listening* with the same richness as when you read the landscape. I have come to learn many aspects of the Land by listening, living and (re)living the stories shaped by my matriarchs. As I

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I intentionally capitalize the word "Land" as a sign of the honour and respect that I learned as a *ts'elî* (Dene) *iskwew* (Cree) woman in my relationship with the Land. For me, the Land carries spirit, and with that I revere it as a place of honour and integrity within my life and work. The Land has been and continues to be one of my greatest teachers. Out of respect, again, I use the Dene word *dji ndéh* to describe the Earth, and I capitalize the word "Earth" when referring to the holistic entity, though not when speaking of soil.

revisit memories of my matriarchs, I am revisiting the teachings of generations of women that sit with me as I reflect with *dii ndéh*. My matriarchs are great grandmothers, my grannies, my mother, my aunties and other relatives whose footprints have walked the Land long before mine. Their knowledge has been passed along orally over generations; their wisdom was not written down in textbooks. These women embody the notion of womanhood that accounts for intergenerational wisdom and stories, as I walk upon *dii ndéh*. I see their stories as I sit among the wildflowers, as I touch the soft tree branch while walking by and as I listen with intensity as the birds sing songs of nature's wisdom. Even though my matriarchs are not physically present alongside me, their presence is felt with each movement bringing me back into balance with *dii ndéh*.

It is their teachings that were missing from my classroom experiences. Teachings denied through colonial constructs. Today's classroom experiences are often very static, steadfast and quite frankly staunch, in comparison to experiences I have had learning alongside my granny. Remembering matriarchal wisdom as the geography of heart knowledge has compelled me to think critically about the Land, the ecology of place and the abundance of languages. It has helped me form a better understanding of self-in-discovery through storied narratives. As I (re)discover the language of the Land, the stories of wildflowers emerge from my memories. The pedagogy of wildflowers shared by my granny through the experience of being and doing with *dii ndéh* is a gentle reminder of how the story remains the same over time.

# Wildflowers

as I gaze upon the still waters reflections of my childhood emerge and visions of flowers begin manifesting before my eyes I am enthralled by their presence as I am reminded of their beauty for they hold valuable secrets secrets of my ancestral ways

often there are enigmas revealed within their petals and roots but one must watch attentively in order to realize their true essence in nature

I reflect upon my memories of these magnificent flowers growing wild and succulently along the lakes' edge as an ethno-beauty of delight appears before me like time travellers with a message communicating through the waters to inform me of their divine gifts gifts of silent wisdom whispered only through stories

stories passed along through my grandmother stories of sacred medicines stories of precarious grace stories of ultimate survival and stories of untold landscapes

the beautiful narratives coming to life before me as the flowers glisten within the stillness of the waters I am reminded of their wildness their hidden offerings only a precious few can see

as they are a sanctuary of teachings curriculum makers<sup>2</sup> in their own right beyond what the eye can perceive it is the stillness of the water that emulates the chronicles of the wildflowers that echo my memories

Kimmerer (2013) reminds me that "listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own" (p. 48) so now I am (re)learning this language as I bond with *dii ndéh*. With full embodiment. I am using all my senses, my sight, touch, taste, hearing, smelling, but also balance and movement, as I reinstate a stolen language. Language of *dij ndéh*.

# dịi ndéh náiidii—Earth as Nourishing Wisdom

I grew up with the nourishment of Land teachings from strong Dene women. Dene honour matrilineal ways of knowing, but our strong woman stories have often been overlooked in the history books. There is a desire to restore balance in our stories, where imbalance has left the pendulum of matriarchal voices motionless. I am attending to the way my grandmother's footsteps once walked the Land. I am also attending to the language, to the history, to the present, and to the self, as I (re)establish my own footprints. In this traditional way,<sup>3</sup> I am recognizing the matriarchal knowledge as the core of my understanding, as matriarchs were my first teachers. I connect with the Land in such a way that I carry traces and traits of my parents and grandparents, where the Land is an extension of genealogies that go far beyond two generations (Case, 2021).

I live knowing the blood of my matriarchs flows through my veins
I recognize it as I move with gentle steps on the Land

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "Traditional knowledges are living knowledges that evolve with the circular, fluid, and organic characteristics of Indigenous philosophies experienced through the Land" (Styres, 2017, p. 83).

and my heart begins to flutter at the sights and sounds of dii ndéh

I connect and (re)connect with the heartbeat
I feel it as my body moves in tune
with nature's flow
and the essence of her warmth embraces me

I sense it as I walk upon the soft ground and feel my feet upon dji ndéh

While I am on the Land I often think about the future generations. What footprints will follow mine? Will my grandchildren and their children feel the Land as I do? Will they hear the same stories? I seek to understand the Land as a place of knowledge and wisdom, a place where matriarchs and ancestors live among the sights and sounds of the landscapes. Like the breath in my bones, the Land is where the wisdom grows and expands. This wisdom I speak of is the wisdom of generations of matriarchs that have embellished these landscapes long ago. Wisdom that lives profoundly within me, ancient wisdom. Poet Rupi Kaur (2020) illuminates this notion in the following extract:

your beauty is undeniable but everything sacred and ancient in you is even more stunning (p. 182)

As I (re)connect with Land, I recognize that the places I visit had names long before the names they have now. Basso (1996) describes past place names as "bold, visual, evocative—lend[ing] poetic force to the voices of the ancestors" (p. 23). This traditional form of education is significant, as Gregory Cajete explains, "because [it] embodies a 'quest' for self, individual, community survival and wholeness in the context of a community and natural environment" (in Miller, 2019, p. xi). It is through thoughtful processes that I (re)connect to the Land in a way that honours the knowledge of generations. It is a place where matriarchal wisdom breathes life into the air; with each inhale of knowledge, it connects me to the Land, and, as I exhale, the fear that contains a dark history is slowly withering away.

Breathe in.
Breathe out.
Inhale.
Exhale.

It is a letting go ceremony with each breath I take.

Different storied experiences challenge us to view the world from varying perspectives. Each of us embodies unique experiences and stories. I am Dene and Cree and a direct descendant of Łiídlįį Kų́ę́ First Nation in the Northwest Territories, which translates to where the two rivers meet. I also have kinships across regions of Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and other areas of Northwest Territories. I understand that there are teachings found within all the places I encounter.

I currently live in *Mohkínstsis*,<sup>4</sup> *Wichispa Oyade*,<sup>5</sup> the Blackfoot and Stoney Nakoda languages for what is now called Calgary, Alberta. Both are Indigenous words that translate to terms connected with the Elbow River which runs through the heart of the city, connecting the nations. The river is a place of relationship that encompasses interconnectedness. I am new to this place and consider myself a visitor in relation to this Land. I have lived and worked most of my life in Treaty 6 Territory. I am aware of the hidden history that lies beneath my feet as I walk in this territory. I know there is more to the stories of this Land than what lays beneath the surface. As a visitor, it is important for me to honour these histories, these stories that centre the First Peoples of this Land.

When visiting new places, I intentionally take the time to learn about the stories of place: the hidden stories, the forgotten stories, the untold stories. I know there are stories that go deeper than those that are shared only on the surface. As a visitor on this Land, I grapple with the "complexities of being Indigenous in a place that I am not Indigenous to" (Case, 2021, p. 15). It is important that I connect with the local knowledge in a way that centralizes local voices and stories found on the Land. It is a way of exploring myself in relationship to *dii ndéh* and the local histories of place. Storytelling is essential to shifting our ideologies of place meaning, and "changing our relationships to places involves changing the stories we tell about place" (Somerville et al., 2012, p. 5).

# Shifting Narratives of dji ndéh

When you sit with the Land do you ever wonder what stories reside there, maybe from long ago or even from yesterday? I do. It is a practice of self-in-relationship. "Self-in-relationship is embodied, expressed, and grounded within the conceptual principles, philosophies, and ontological understandings of Land" (Styres, 2017, p. 56) and a way to connect with identity and situating self within place.

In order to breathe life into my bones, to live with my relations on this Land, I *must* attend to *dij ndéh* as Indigenous relatives of this Land have done and continue to do. It is about attending to the sacredness of the Land, the stories and the teachings. It is the sacredness of the Land that provides all life and living. It is "where our thoughts and actions are guided by the wisdom" of the Land as the understanding of *ethical relationality* (Donald, 2016, p. 11). Part of being in relation, for me, is to observe, to listen and to wonder with grace and integrity to all that surrounds me, including all animal beings, plant and flower wisdom, the wondrous winged ones and glorious sky beings, the sacredness of the waters—all the way to the tiniest insects. For me, this is (re)connecting to a matriarchal *dij ndéh* curriculum, a mode of (re)establishing a foundation of pedagogy that breathes life into matriarchal teachings. In the following poetic narrative, I continue to bring you alongside me as I connect with place and *dij ndéh*. I offer you to inquire into your own ideologies of Earth-based inquiry as I attend to intergenerational wisdom and insight practices. It is one way to engage with matriarchal stories of the Land.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Mohkinstsis is Blackfoot for what is now called Calgary and translates to *elbow*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Wichispa Oyade is Stoney Nakoda for what is now called Calgary and translates to elbow town.

# dechitah—On the Land

I welcome you to take a walk with me. As I share with you the realms of dii ndéh. The Earth mother. Where the soil that rests upon the vast mountainous landscapes sits waiting for me to walk upon and to remember. I am aware and grounded within this Land, as it is the core of my existence. The core of the Earth. Where the fire burns intensely. It is an ancient fire. Like the core of the Earth, the centre of dii ndéh, it is where matriarchal wisdom stems. Wisdom that burns so effervescently within me too. dii ndéh. The Earth mother. I am connected here like the belly button of a new-born, like mother and child. Inseparable. Undeniable. Connected and (re)connected upon this Land. There is no distinction between the two of us. There is only reverence. The roots of my bane existence make me wonder if others can (re)connect to place in connection to long ago. Why do we fight the urge to (re)connect? Why is our attachment not secure? How do I secure myself on the Land once again? These are questions I ask you as you walk upon dii ndéh, the Earth. How do we become one with our landscapes once again, in situ 26

I know the harsh colonial ideologies exist. They persist and exude resistance, although we are gaining ground. New, old ground, ancient ground. Ground that keeps me grounded but not rooted. I need my roots to flourish. I ask you, do your roots flourish here on this Land? Does dji ndéh speak to you too?

The voice of my mother's language has not been heard for generations. Voices of many grandmothers, silenced! Without sound, the silence is screaming where vocal cords once sang songs of wisdom, now distant cries in the background. Often felt is the rupturing of their existence, perpetuating our (dis)connection to one another and to the Land we stand upon.

I ask you to begin to (re)connect here. Be present.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Stand still. Love the tree, love the soil, love the feeling of dii ndéh as you glide upon our Mother's land. Feel the quiet spaces, the spaces where you can talk to the Land, talk to the spirit of dii ndéh as you enter into a historical embrace that existed long before your feet were planted. Shift, and keep shifting. There is wisdom that sits upon your feet.

There is a trembling from within, a complexity that transforms your restricted movements that you want to (re)connect with. Where your grandmother's voice sits silent, but you sense it is rooted somewhere upon dii ndéh. It is the belly button that enters the sanctuary of the trees, the roots, the soils. (Re)rooting you once again. Pause, and remember dii ndéh as it was before. Long, long ago. When the silences taught us if we only listened.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In situ is a phrase borrowed from the Latin language to mean "in its (original) place" or "occurring or situated in its local or natural environment" or "at the scene of the event" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022).

The mothers and grandmothers sat under this same tree, walked upon this same soil and planted their feet on the same Land we stand upon, naming it as the embrace of dii ndéh. I call upon you to listen to the silences, listen to the trees, listen to the wildflowers, and listen to the wind as it speaks with great reverence. The voices of your ancestors are there too. Keep account of the gaps and the tensions you acquire in the world. The ones found within the textbooks, televisions and medias. They exist. They shatter souls and defeat the progress of moving forward as strong matriarchs. Don't listen to the LOUD voices that overcome the journey forward, keep salient in your movements. Those voices lurk in the shadows, silencing the voices of matriarchs.

Move upon dji ndéh knowing your bloodlines are part of the Land itself. Pause.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Inhale.

Exhale.

There it is, the heartbeat. Feel it, touch it, listen to it, value your senses in every form. Give yourself to that moment, (re)call and (re)learn the movements of the matriarchs before you. You will find yourself encapsulated with this new feeling, dwelling in a space that belongs to you as well. You will recognize your own existence here as a place that represents you, too. It is common ground as we seek spaces that reflect the new and ancient ways forward.

Ask yourself: What happened on this land long ago? Whose footprints were here before mine? Where were the grandmothers and what knowledge did they share back then? What is important today that reflects their teachings? Bring forward your footprints with intention as you unpack the past, the traumas, the notions of heteropatriarchy that exist. Make new trails upon old trails. I know matriarch Dene footprints existed and still exist here, maybe relatives or maybe not. I honour those pathways as the wise paths, as the forgotten paths and now I remember them as I (re)establish my own pathways that allow me to exist here too. Mahsi cho<sup>7</sup> for taking this walk with me. I acknowledge you as a relative to dij ndéh.

# Knowledge From Grandmothers

Legat (2012) notes that "[Dene] elders maintain that learning the stories of the past allows you to be ready for the present and the future" (p. 27). When we think of pedagogical narratives, women are seldom present within these stories, more specifically Indigenous women. Rematriating our stories requires thinking with stories that emerge from the grandmothers. Not to say the grandfather stories are not important, too. The stories exist cohesively; however, my focus is on the grandmother stories. As a First Nation woman, I am (re)learning what was lost, I am (re)engaging with the Land in ways that shape who I am as a Dene Cree matriarch. "Dwelling with [dij ndéh] entails a relationship between all beings, a demonstrated respect for all entities that dwell in places, as well as a relationship with the place where one belongs" (Legat, 2012, p. 67) or is situated. Mother Earth is the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Mahsi cho is Dene for thank you.

foundation of life, for life begins with our mothers.

For too long, as First Nation women, history has nullified our relationship within history itself. Many of us have lost our connection with *dji ndéh*, hence losing connection to self. Internalizing my learning has taken me back to my childhood and to a place of learning that required a lot of listening and watching: it is learning found through the *being and doing* on the Land alongside my matriarchs.

# Dear dji ndéh—Mother,

I missed you.

I feel your nourishment as I step towards the stillness it is felt as I wander gently upon your soft surface (re)connecting to the sacred relationship in a ceremony of gratitude you are breathing life back into my voice where rigidness and false historical anatomy was once suffocating me a renewal of life force ventilates my blood memory as medicine stories emerge once again your royalty radiates my inner being as the heart knowledge of matriarchs sit with you and (re)centres my feminine nature.

Stories of women on the Land, or the deep history of women, are often overshadowed, overlooked and even over-doubted. There is dishonour in ignoring, disregarding or disrupting the strong women stories that exist. Legat (2012) states that "how, when, why and where knowledge originates is important as the knowledge itself" (p. 34), which is fundamental as I move to bring forward the matriarchal voices and stories of the Land in the places I visit. Learning through *being and doing* requires listening, remembering and acting with purpose. Intergenerational stories are remembered through the telling and (re)telling, and brought forward when experienced. As a young girl, I learned much about the Land from walking in the bush with my granny and mother. Nonverbal narratives existed as we travelled through the bush. They nourished me. I am mindful that grandmother stories exist within the landscapes we encounter. "Knowledge itself is important, so too is how it was gained and how 'knowing something' shows respect for [dij ndéh]" (Legat, 2012, p. 28). Take the time to listen, to value, to rematriate the power of women's stories, and reaffirm the living processes of women in pedagogical practices. In a 2021 webinar, Courchene expressed that "you cannot intellectualize spirit; you have to feel it" (see Courchene et al., 2021).

# Why Matriarch Stories

rematriating the Land with grandmothers' stories
is an actioning in place
it is rekindling the essence of their stories
where we continue to be advocates for the Land
creating a new story to live by
and learning with reciprocal relations
exposing stories of matriarchal wisdom
with robust exchanges of human and other-than human relationships
discovering from within, a harmony of self
where dii ndéh speaks to the heart
(re)tell, (re)peat, (re)learn the stories of dii ndéh
as relatives of Mother Earth
embracing their stories like gifts of nature

# Learning With Stories

Story guides me in this practice of writing, of sharing, of being and doing from and with *dji ndéh*. I have learned to listen. I have learned to be patient. My breathing is rhythmic, with each inhale, as I sense a new harmony, as I walk on *djj ndéh*, in this new place. The red and white cells of my body build strength as the diaphragm of knowledge grows roots with the natural worlds. The concomitant fear that used to embody my voice is now emerging in the life forces of nature. I have a new relationship with my breath and breathing in this place.

I fear not, as the breath in my bones reclaims and reconciles the darkness of silence. Holding strength in my body, nourishing myself with stories of *djį ndéh*, leaving a legacy of spirit as medicine stories are reunited on the tongue. Kimmerer (2013) asks the question, "How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?" (p. 6). I ask you, the reader: Do you know what the path feels like where you are situated? Do you know the grandmother stories of the Land you are connected to? Do you know your grandmother stories of *djį ndéh* from your relations? Growing up with the Land as my teacher and strong Dene women to guide my stories, I am (re)learning my kindred relationship as it was intended. I am learning *with* stories of *djį ndéh* shaped by my matriarchs.

# Kindred Relationship

when reflecting on this beautiful, humbling landscape I'm reminded of the beauty and splendour the Earth evokes in the seasons of the stillness of the early morning waters of the morning dew upon the Spring blades of grass

of the supple starry Summer nights
of the whistling of the lively leaves in the Fall
of the Winter and white blankets of snow
like a tender hug that calms my soul
allowing me to (dis)engage and (dis)associate from the urban satires
and leave the confines of my formal realities

at peace, I feel in this place, this Land a connection that brings solace to my spirit again and again unearthing feelings of delight and belonging

as I walk upon the soft, supple earth
I am instantly calmed by the healing water spirits
the sounds of nature, above and below,
for my relationship to this place
runs deep within my soul
I realize,
I am a part of this place as much as this place is a part of me
an everlasting feeling of contentment,
of connection,
of familial spaces
as I (re)engage in this
newly explored relationship
with place

inspiring my passions assuring my existence captivating my heart with my kindred relationship to place

In this way of reuniting with the stories and teachings of our matriarchs, we are ventilating our body with old wisdom. We begin to breathe words that ignite the voices of languages that have not been heard for so long: dij ndéh [Earth], k'oh [sky], et'qq [flowers] and ts'élî [woman]. Words that connect me to the ground, the earth, the sky, and grandmother's wisdom. Words that I am (re)connecting and (re)rooting within me, where I am beginning to recognize them again as heart songs from long ago. The sacred fires are being relit as we aerate our stories found in place. It is important to recognize that old knowledge is established within our "contemporary contexts because they are living knowledges" (Styres, 2017, p. 83). Dene stories have stories of strong women who have shaped our communities and were heroes of their time. They endured on the Land so I may endure, too. In recognizing these stories as stories of importance, I am able to render them as oral histories to be passed on to my daughter and future grandchildren. These stories and actions will live on within dij ndéh and within the language. I am paying attention to the linkages of breath and breathing, of language and voice, of Land and dij ndéh. (Re)connecting with language allows me to

remember the old ways on the Land, as the language of the Land is consistent with the values, beliefs and morals that remain there. "We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering" (hooks, 2009, p. 5). I encourage you, the reader, to reconnect with *dij ndéh* from a "new, old way" (Arbon, 2008), too. The stories beneath allow me to remember "how to breathe again, as I know the heart of any pedagogical process is learning to breathe" (Leggo & Holmes, 2020, p. x).

# Breathe Again

as we breathe in new connections to dii ndéh.

the land, water and skies nourish our storied lives
expelling narratives of matriarchal strengths
carrying forth our ecological connections and intimate relations
to place and time
(re)storying herstory<sup>8</sup>
where the breath in our bones
is filling the gaps
as bone marrow breathing heals
with each deep breath she takes
herstory is alive once again.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Herstory is a feminist perspective that emphasizes the role of women in story.

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