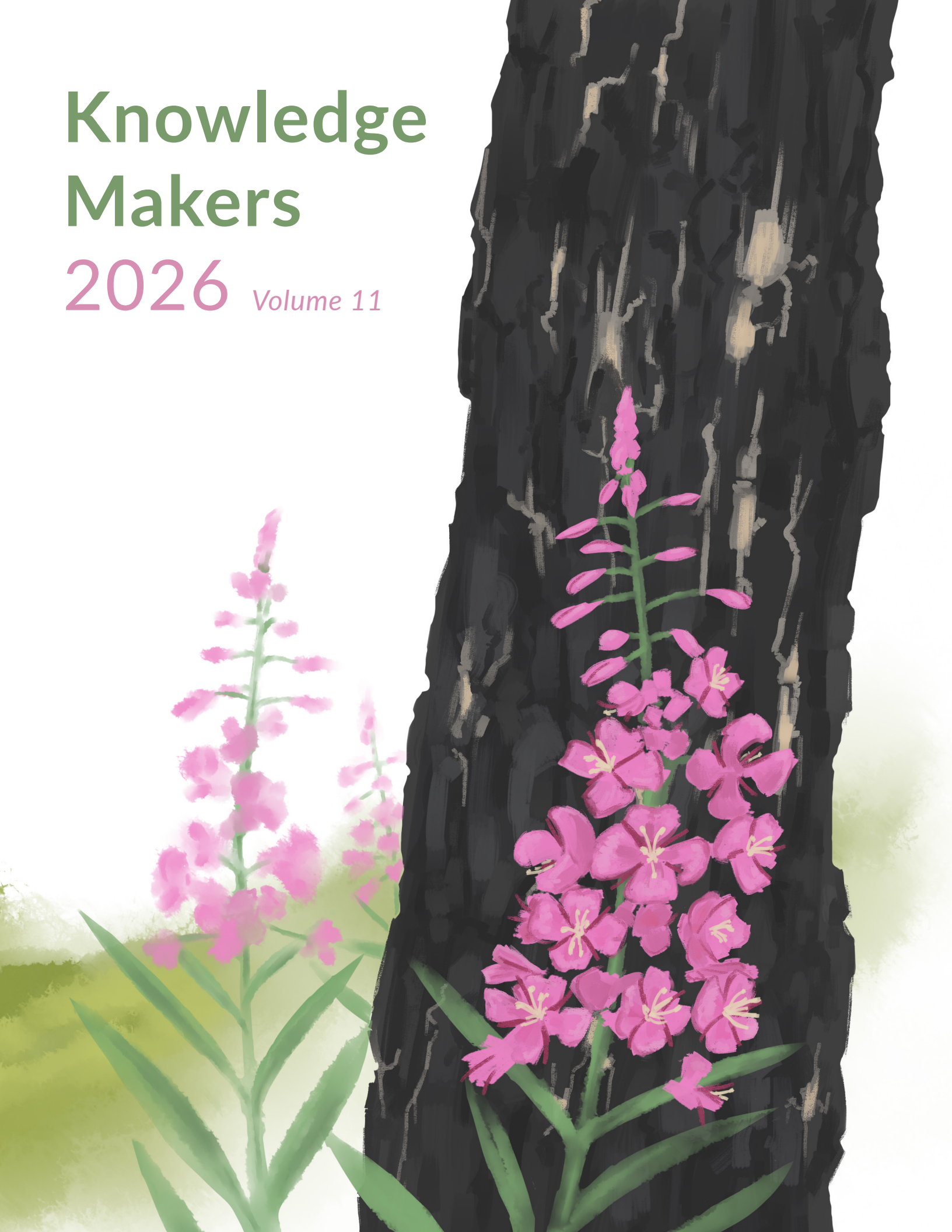


Knowledge Makers

2026 *Volume 11*



"Fireweed is a plant that is near and dear to my heart. I first knew it as a vibrancy against a sea of green, the magenta claiming space across fields of grass and rising above towards the sun. Then, I knew it as a medicine, as a tincture sold at markets, as a tea ingredient, then as a plant with a role in my culture. Fireweed is one of the first flowers to emerge after a wildfire. It brings life back to a landscape that had once made you question what damage would linger. It reminds that even in the wake of something that seems so destructive, there is always something there worth appreciating, however small, and however fragile.

Life is uncertain and it is so easy to focus on the ash that is left behind from disappointment, stress, anxiety, grief, frustration, and discouragement. We do not live in easy times, but reminding yourself that there is beauty, kindness, compassion, and humanity around you still is vital to living. Fireweed means more to me than just a pretty plant: it is the resilience that emerges through adversity, the healing balm applied after harm has been done, and the reminder that there is beauty in life's simplest moments. I wish to encourage others to find the fireweed in their lives; to remember that whatever challenges they face within their schooling, their career, their friendships and family ties---that there is beauty worth seeing in every field."

- Shay Paul



Shay Paul is a Secwepemc multi-disciplinary artist, arts practitioner, curator, and researcher with a background in Indigenous food sovereignty and decolonial art practice. Her work is rooted in grassroots, community-led activism that prioritizes collective needs and relationality through arts, culture, heritage, and storytelling. As an active artist in the community, Shay's passion for working with and helping other artists drives her work in all aspects.

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Foreword

Connecting with Our Past to Create Solutions for Our Future

We are so grateful to have you here with us to celebrate the showcasing of these authors' voices. This year's edition revolves around the theme of creating solutions for the future through reflecting on the past. We asked our students to come together this year to reflect on how our communities continue to create, resist, and reimagine new futures in the face of uncertainty.

The authors within this volume come from many Indigenous nations spread widely across our shared home. From Secwepemc'ulucw to Sápmi territory and the Pasqua Nation of Treaty 4 Territory; The Akan tribe of Ghana through the Yoruba and Urhobo tribes of Nigeria and back to Rádlıh Kóé. Our voices came together in February of 2026 with the annual Knowledge Makers workshop held at the Kamloops Campus in Secwepemc'ulucw. We spent those two days co-creating knowledge, sharing lived experiences, and fanning the flames of passion within each of us to create better worlds for our future generations.

We know through lived experience that Indigenous knowledge systems hold practical solutions to many of the ongoing crises faced today. Our communities have datasets that span thousands of years, offering sophisticated solutions to biodiversity conservation, environmental stewardship, disaster resilience, and how to maintain community in times of extreme turmoil. Taking guidance from our ancestors who have gifted us this invaluable wealth of knowledge, this year's cohort of Knowledge Makers looks to their own personal experiences to present solutions to real-life issues that have affected them or continue to affect them today.

For each incredible student writing within these pages, there is also a faculty or staff member from TRU who generously mentored and nurtured each student. We could not offer the level of care and support that exists within our network without the dedicated and passionate Indigenous leaders and allies who selflessly share both their time and skills each year to encourage and cultivate each cohort of Indigenous scholars.

Since this journal's inception 10 years ago, we have had the greatest honor of supporting over 140 Indigenous researchers from over 90 different Nations, showcasing their voices. In these ten years, over 48 Knowledge Makers alumni have moved forward to complete graduate school, 10 have completed their PhD, 24 have become Research Assistants, and 7 have become university faculty members. This is a testament to the momentum that has been built within this mentorship network to nourish Indigenous research from the ground up. Showcasing the voices of students whose lived experience and cultural knowledge are often sidelined within academic institutions results in increased confidence, hope for belonging, and future successes that break barriers.

While the articles within this volume stand as lasting contributions to Indigenous scholarship, they represent only the visible strands of a much deeper weaving. What is not always captured on the printed page are the relationships nurtured in quiet conversations, the laughter echoing across shared meals, the courage it takes to write from the heart, and the responsibility each Knowledge Maker carries in telling stories rooted in community. Behind each paper lies a process of transformation, of being witnessed, held, and uplifted by others walking a similar path. This work is relational, ceremonial, and intergenerational. It is informed by teachings passed down through aunties and elders, by land-based wisdom that cannot be footnoted, and by moments of vulnerability and strength exchanged across cultures and continents. The Knowledge Makers program does not simply produce research; it nourishes a space where Indigenous youth and mentors from across the world braid together knowledge systems, life experiences, and collective aspirations.

The contributions in this volume are the tangible outcomes, but the real power lies in the invisible threads: the moments of reciprocity, the growth of kinship networks, the honoring of protocol, and the mutual commitment to a shared future grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This is where transformation takes root. It is our hope that as you read these pieces, you are reminded that knowledge is not only found in text, but in relationship.

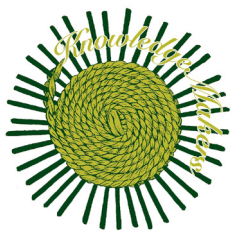
What we build together, through trust, humility, and shared responsibility is what truly endures across generations.

Jeneen HERN-Jensen

Dr. Rod McCormick

Olubukola Osuntade

Chuying Jiao



Acknowledgements

Thompson Rivers University campuses are on the traditional lands of the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc (Kamloops campus) and the T'exelc (Williams Lake campus) within Secwépemc'ulucw, the traditional and unceded territory of the Secwépemc. The region TRU serves also extends into the territories of the Stat'imc, Nlaka'pamux, Tsilh'qotin, Nuxalk, Dakelh, and Métis communities. We recognize that this territory has been a place of research, teaching, and learning since time immemorial.

Thank you so much to all the faculty, staff, Deans, students and alumni who joined us this year to participate in this ritual of cultivating ideas for our next generations. A special thank you to Emma Gottfriedson for opening this year's Knowledge Makers gathering with story and prayers to guide us to do this work in meaningful ways.

We humbly acknowledge Winter 2016 Knowledge Maker Levi Glass for his talent in designing the Knowledge Makers' artwork that still shines strongly on the cover of our journals today. Thank you to the extraordinary All My Relations team that brought this publication to print for Knowledge Makers Volume 11, and all the background work that goes unseen while nurturing this publication into fruition. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the mentors who generously volunteered their time and expertise to guide the students (In alphabetical order) Thank you Dr. Alana Hoare, Andrea Brassard, Dr. Bala Nikku, Dr. Dian Henderson, Gabriel Archie, Dr. Gloria Ramirez, Dr. Jason Johnston, Dr. Jess Owen, Dr. Joyce O. Adjei, Dr. Juanita Dawne Bacsu, Kaleena Carriere, Marie Sandy, Megan Banman, Dr. Mixalhitsa7 Roxane Letterlough, Dr. Mukwa Musayett (Shelly Johnson), Dr. Murray Sholty, Dr. Patricia Liu Baergen, Dr. Rod McCormick, Sharon Gottfriedson, Ted Gottfriedson, and the incredible faculty volunteers who work to keep this network strong.

Knowledge Makers would not exist without a strong and extraordinary team that is committed to creating a student-centered experience from inception to publication. Thank you to Dr. Rod McCormick, Chuying Jiao, Jeneen Hens-Jensen, Dr. Bukola Osuntade, Leticia Kanywuiro, Shay Paul, Olivia Lane, Ellis Rondquist, Nathan Wilson, Dr. Shannon Wagner, Sukh Heer-Matonovich, Kimberly Roll, and Brian Lamb. Thank you to Colleen Hens-Jensen for always volunteering her time to grab food, sit with a student and support this program in any way possible. We are beyond grateful for the endless hours of behind the scenes work that goes into assuring Indigenous students are supported.

We would be nothing without the guidance of elders who tirelessly support Indigenous learners within and outside this institution, especially Colleen Seymour, Mike Arnouse, Joanne Brown and Doe Thomas. We acknowledge the support and supplemental funding provided by the faculty of Education and Social work as well as the Office of Research and are grateful to members of faculty across campus who consistently support both this program and our students. We thank Dr. Sereana Naepi and know that her energy, intelligence, and advocacy as an Indigenous scholar herself make amazing things possible in amazing ways. We also thank Dr. Airini whose unrelenting passion and advocacy to grow Indigenous researchers make programs like the Knowledge Makers possible.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank the Indigenous students who committed themselves to the Knowledge Makers program. We look forward to hearing about your research journeys in future years.

Kukstéc-kuc



Opening Words

It is with privilege and humility that I offer an opening for Volume 11 of Knowledge Makers, a volume dedicated to the theme *A Focus on Solutions – Connecting with our past to create solutions for our futures*. This volume, like those before it, is a labour of love - each article carefully curated, nurtured, and supported to ensure the author's voice is both heard and lifted.

The student authors in this volume continue the long history of Knowledge Makers by using their writing to speak their truth. The authors reflect on important topics such as knowledge and language revitalization and sovereignty, healing and wellness, identity and belonging, and relationality and our collective future. They use their stories to learn from the past, and to learn for the future.

It is hard to think about another time when the world has felt more precarious compared to this moment. Collectively, around the globe, we are seeking tradition, meaning and understanding to help us cope, learn and heal. The topic of this volume is timely, relevant and personal for the student writers who have put themselves into their articles as their way of contributing to a positive future. It is not easy to put your personal thoughts and reflections into the public sphere; I hold my hands up to these students for their bravery and willingness to share their wisdom with others.

Research has not always been a friend to the world's Indigenous peoples. Dr. Rod McCormick, Academic Director of All My Relations and Knowledge Makers, can often be quoted as saying, "research used to be done on us, then it was done *with* us, now it's time that it's done *by* us". Knowledge Makers is Rod's way of making sure that he, and the Knowledge Makers team, make this statement true – the commitment of the Knowledge Makers team is unparalleled, and they deserve sincere thanks from me, the research community, and from all of the authors whose voices who would otherwise have gone unheard.

Knowledge Makers and the voices of all of the Indigenous writers in each and every one of the Knowledge Makers volumes are a gift, a gift that is critical to *connecting with our past to create solutions for our futures*.

Dr. Shannon Wagner

Vice-President Research, Thompson Rivers University



In Honor of Johnny Bandura



In Honor of Johnny Bandura



Johnny was a passionate and creative person. A musician, an artist, an activist - A father, a brother, a son and a friend.

His voice remains within the hearts and spirits of those who loved him. He lived a life full of energy and intense dedication to righting historical wrongs.

We believe that Johnny's voice will continue to inspire Indigenous artist even in his absence. We honour the work he has done to create better futures for Indigenous peoples.

Candis Garant

ᑭᑭᑭᑭᑭ Dene

Human Services 2nd year

For seyaa (my son) Kowin. Neghodide?o (I love you).

This dedication is also for the visiting Indigenous student. For the one who feels out of place. For the quiet one whose voice has yet to find its place. For those carrying loss, distance, grief, or complicated family ties. For those learning to trust themselves and their own story. I hope you use your voice. I hope you speak your truth. I hope you know that your story matters. Know that I see you. I am rooting for you.

This is written for you.

RECONSTRUCTING THE LOOM FROM THE INSIDE OUT: A Journey of Displacement, Identity and Reclamation

INTRODUCTION

Dánet'e? Candis Garant sededi. Radeyili koe gots'e ?aht'e. Se?ama Dene he' Japanese hili hagu se?aba Molawa hili.

I am a daughter, an aunt, a mother, a sister, a friend, a student, and I begin this paper from a place shaped by relationships, lived experience, and the teachings that have guided me throughout my life. As part of this journey, I have chosen to incorporate K'áshogot'íné Xədə throughout this article. This reflects my own ongoing process of learning to speak, understand, and write my language. I share the translations as well, so that those who read can learn alongside me. In many ways, my reconnection to language has unfolded alongside the writing of this article. Including Dene words throughout these pages is both a reflection of that journey and a way of honoring the knowledge, teachings and relationships that continue to guide me.

My journey has been marked by displacement, loss, addiction, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism. It is from this place that I explore what it means to navigate double displacement and the search for belonging while often feeling unseen. This article is also a way of carrying forward some of the work of my sister, Rhyannon Garant. Her words, insights and teachings on leadership continue to shape how I understand healing, belonging and our Dene identity.



Figure 1: Authors younger sister Rhyannon Garant. Authors photo

Over time, I have come to understand that displacement is not simply a historical event or an institutional outcome. It is an ongoing colonial reality that can begin in our earliest relationships and continue to shape how we see ourselves and move through the world. By weaving together personal stories, lived experience, Indigenous scholarship, and the work of my sister, I explore the lessons that cannot always be found in textbooks, yet they carry the knowledge that deserves recognition within academic spaces.

The Contrasting of the Landscapes

There was a feeling of disorientation that had nothing to do with not knowing which road to take. It lived in my body before it reached my mind. It was a low, steady hum of wrongness that pulsed beneath my skin the moment I stepped onto land that wasn't mine. As a Dene moving to Tk'emlups in 2018, that feeling inside me was not abstract. It was immediate, sensory and quietly devastating. Back in my home community Rádłıh Kóé (Fort Good Hope, NT), which means "place of the rapids," I remember the land breathing in a certain way. The subarctic forest surrounded me with intention. Red willows pressed tightly against muskeg and the air carried the cold sweetness of black spruce with the silty water of the mighty Deh Cho (Mackenzie River). The horizon - low and intimate - beneath a sky that danced green from the Aurora Borealis in late August. The ground was soft beneath my feet. It remembered me. Every smell, every texture, every angle of light carried the accumulated memory of my people moving across it for thousands of years. I did not simply see that land; it held me.

The Secwepemc interior was different. It opened wide and dry, whereas home was close and wet. Sagebrush replaced spruce. The plateau rolled in brown waves beneath a sky so large it felt indifferent. The heat was drying and sharp, rising from the pale dust and sun-bleached rock rather than gently radiating from the sun-warmed moss. Even the air smelled unfamiliar, bitter and earthy in a way that felt wrong. My body registered all of this before I could fully think it. It tightened. It reached for something familiar but found only

open, beautiful, foreign ground. This was not a criticism of the territory. The land here is alive with its own deep history, relationships, and songs. But I was not part of those songs and my body knew it. I wonder if every visitor feels the same, whether they say it or not? Two years later, I was homeless from addiction on this Secwepemc territory, and it made me transparent to the world around me. People's eyes slid past me on the street with practiced efficiency. I was scenery, not a person. I quickly learned that some spaces tolerated my presence while others policed it. My suffering, no matter how visible, felt like something most people wanted to ignore. That invisibility was a kind of violence that built up over time. Raeesa (2026) describes it as:

It's hard to overstate how dehumanizing it feels to be homeless. You're often treated like you're invisible or a nuisance, and that can be incredibly demoralizing. You're often met with suspicion or ignored entirely. You're often denied basic services and amenities, like bathrooms or a place to sit down. You're constantly reminded that you're seen as "less than" by society. And you're forced to live in conditions that are often unsanitary, unsafe, and uncomfortable. It's a constant reminder that you're not seen as a human being deserving of respect and dignity. (para. 4)

To be a Dene without a safe space/home on land that was foreign created an additional layer of invisibility - one that the shelter systems, outreach workers, and even well-meaning allies rarely acknowledged. But how could they? The Dene way of doing things was not here. My language, K'áshog-ot'ıné Xədə - the precise way my people always spoke to the land and each other - had no reflection in this place. My ancestors were thousands of kilometres north. The drumming and chanting that grounded my spirit and reminded me of who I was, beyond my circumstances, belonged to a geography I just couldn't reach.

The Secwepemc People have their own ways, their own language, Secwepemctsin, and their own relationships with this territory. They were unfamiliar to a visitor from another Indigenous Nation to grasp. So, I moved through the land in a kind of spiritual

silence that deepened the social silence of being homeless. I existed in two worlds but belonged to neither. And yet, I looked. I couldn't help but look. Survival had always meant finding what could sustain me or fill the pain within. When the obvious things - home, family, a sense of belonging - were out of reach, I learned to search for smaller anchors. Waking up homeless on the bank of the North Thompson River, I saw a familiarity that could bridge the gap between where I was and where I came from. In the quiet of that morning, the riverbank whispered of another time - memories of days spent in Little Chicago with my late granny Christine, where I received my Dene name 'Sukadego.' This connection to the water and open air lived in my blood and bones. It was a silent reminder that I was safe. As the sun climbed, the way the light hit my face brought me comfort, warming my every move.

Sometimes the anchors were trees. A lone stand of poplars near the river swayed, with their leaves trembling almost like the poplars back home. I stood by them longer than made sense, allowing their rustling to fill the spaces where my memories of safe and happy times lived. Sometimes it was a scent carried in on a cooler evening air; something green and wet that briefly reminded me of a morning somewhere north of here. At times it wasn't sensory at all, but relational: a moment in a talking circle when an Elder's rhythm felt familiar, like the gentleness of Joanne's hand reaching out to me (Cheslatta Carrier Nation), the way Uncle Mike (Secwepemc, Adams Lake Indian Band) held a safe silence before he shared his welcoming wisdom, or the warm smile and laughter, followed with a hug by Trudine (Nlaka'pamux, Lytton First Nation) while sitting at the table.

These gestures felt like something I recognized across the distance of different nations and languages. A shared Indigenous value emerged through those moments: Reciprocity, the acknowledgement of the land by the chewing of a willow like back home, the understanding that a person is never only defined by their worst circumstances. These anchors did not erase my disorientation. They didn't change who I was or make the interior feel like home or lift the weight of double

invisibility. But they offered something crucial: a thread of connection linking who I was to where I was, however, fragile. They proved that I hadn't been completely erased by distance or hardship - that something in me still knew how to reach for belonging, even when it felt far away.

Leadership Comes from Within

As I gather my thoughts for this Knowledge Makers article, I keep thinking about sedá (my younger sister) Rhyannon Garant, who also authored an article in Volume 3 of Knowledge Makers in 2018 called *Beadwork Teachings: Indigenous Women and Leadership in Higher Education Communities*. She focused on narratives about Indigenous women that provided a glimpse of their rich cultural identities that were influential to their individual leadership practices. She included a bit of her steps towards leadership, along with beadwork teachings from our ama, Florence. Out of four daughters, Rhyannon and I were raised together with our ama. We shared the same parents, while our two older sisters had different dads and were raised on the island and in the Northwest Territories. Rhyannon was the youngest and the first to pursue higher education, completing both undergraduate and graduate studies. I remembered her sharing with me that she wanted a different life for herself, and with that, she was always accepting new opportunities to learn and grow. The path she created wasn't hers alone. It has now become part of my journey. Taking on her legacy feels like both a duty and a celebration. So, I write with her in mind, as well as those who have guided me; and for my son Kowin, whose future influences my understanding of belonging and responsibility. Shilling et al. (2021) notes:

"Sister, for us, is a deliberate word choice for engaging in a type of scholarship; it indicates family, kinship, care, equality, support, celebration, trust, and kindness. Being a sister puts one directly into close relation with others, recognizing that one is always in relation with others; one is not and cannot be a singularity, and that being alone is not the same as being only."

I keep returning to the idea that displacement is not just something that happens in institutions. It starts much earlier in our lives, within our earliest relationships, and follows us into every new space we enter. For me, reclaiming a sense of place has meant confronting intergenerational trauma and taking on a form of leadership that can feel isolating but is needed to break the cycle of what has been handed down. For my sister and I, displacement was experienced at home. Our ama, Florence, is a residential school survivor, so colonialism had shaped how our ama raised us. We grew up in an environment with violence, addictions and abuse, where the nurturing a child needs was missing. Instead of safety, we faced instability. Instead of guidance, we learned to survive. When parents were absent, we took on parental roles. When home does not feel like a safe place, something shifts inside. You carry that feeling with you. You navigate the world without a clear sense of belonging, even in places where you're expected to feel at home.



Figure 2 and 3: Author and her sister Rhyannon Garant as adults and children. Authors photos

Rhyannon and I learned early how to protect one another within that environment, and against bullies in our community. As her older sister, there were times I tried to shield her from the harm and chaos the best I could, even if it meant I was hurt more. Years later, when I was struggling and unable to fully care for myself, she became that person for me. In many ways, we took turns carrying each other through the impacts of trauma and survival. Looking back, I now see how deeply colonialism shaped not only our upbringing, but also the roles we stepped into in childhood - long before we should have had to. Yet through everything, our bond remained rooted in love, protection, and an understanding that only comes from the same history together.

Subsequently, that internal sense of displacement did not end with childhood. It also followed me into my relationships, communities, and education. It shaped my understanding of connection and how I moved through unfamiliar or uncertain spaces. Even in places that promised opportunity, a part of me felt out of place. At the same time, I was learning what it meant to live on land that was not my Nation's territory. As a Dene woman living on Secwepemc land, I experienced another layer of displacement. Being Indigenous does not eliminate the responsibility of being a visitor. There are boundaries, protocols, and a sense of in-betweenness that accompany that. When I talk about being homeless, I mean unhoused, but I also mean the internal sense of not being grounded along with the reality of not being in my own territory.

A moment in 2020 changed my perspective. A conversation with my son Kowin redefined how I viewed my life. I learned my son was heading down a well-known and destructive path. What I once saw as struggle has since transformed into a sense of responsibility. It became about what I carry forward and, more importantly, what I choose not to carry. Holding my sister's legacy has led me to reflect on the meaning of leadership. Her role in our family was extraordinary. She knew how to bring us together for shared meals, either cooking herself or assigning roles to each of us. She was inclusive. She was a safe, gentle person. She created access within

institutions, showing us what was possible in spaces where our family had not been before. That work matters. It opened the doors I now walk through. But over the years, my understanding of leadership has evolved - beyond sedá Rhyannon's original thesis on leadership.

To me, leadership is not just about education or being the first. It is about the work that occurs within. It involves confronting intergenerational trauma directly and learning not to pass it on. It is about understanding our own wounds and choosing relationships that teach us healthier ways of coping, connecting, and responding to life's challenges. Connection is the answer to attachment disruption and complex trauma (O'Neill et al., 2016). Personally, it relates to sobriety and the clarity that comes with it. It means building a relationship with oneself rooted in care rather than harm. These aspects are not separate from leadership; I truly believe they are essential. I became willing to look at all parts of me (positive and negative) whether it was through a 12-step program, ceremony, counselling or education. I needed to learn more about who I was. Linklater (2014) discusses the importance of identity development and cultural healing and how it has become fundamental to nurturing the physical, spiritual and communal wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. Since displacement was a result of colonization, developing cultural and spiritual identities restores the spirit and helps initiate a sense of value and belonging. Therefore, I do not see my path as separate from my sister's. I view it as an extension. What she opened within our community and institutions, I carry forward into healing. I've learned that access alone does not create belonging. I remember her often sharing how she never felt like she fit in or was not accepted, whether in relationships, with our distant family, or in academia - with the exception of a handful of people, who later were the same people that gracefully accepted me. This highlights that we can enter spaces, achieve recognition, and still feel displaced if deeper work has not been done.

Sedá Rhyannon never had the opportunity to fully heal from the trauma of sexual abuse, displacement, lateral violence, mental illness and substance use - but she searched for healing through academia and art. During

one of our sewing sessions, she called us the 'Creative Natives' while we laughed and shared ledí (tea), as we worked on applique, ribbon skirts, and jingle dresses. She taught me to sew and patiently shared her knowledge, which I continue to share with others. Our Dene Laws taught us to *ełets'énáts'edi* and *asjjeteghats'eradi* (help one another and share what we have).

Feelings of exclusion or disconnection in community or academic spaces are not where displacement starts. They reflect something deeper. Early lessons that belonging is uncertain can impact how we experience every space afterward. It can make belonging feel conditional - something to earn or maintain. Indigenous scholars such as Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2000) and Eve Tuck (2021) have written about how colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and institutional systems continue to shape Indigenous peoples' experiences of identity, belonging, and displacement today. Their work reflects how these experiences are not only historical but continue within educational institutions, workplaces, and even Indigenous communities through lateral violence, exclusion and ongoing impacts of colonial systems. What has changed for me is understanding that the work is not just about finding belonging in those spaces but about creating it within myself first.

Choosing sobriety was part of that shift. It helped me see patterns more clearly - the cycles of harm, silence, and disconnection passed down through our family system. It required me to face reality, honestly and without distraction. That process has not been easy, especially when facing myself. In many ways it was lonely because I had to separate from my family. Leadership, as I understand it, can mean stepping away from familiar patterns, even when those patterns are harmful. It can involve no longer participating in dynamics that once felt normal, and there is a kind of aloneness in that. But there is also clarity about the person I want to be.

I now view leadership not as recognition or status but as responsibility. It is the duty to interrupt what has been passed down. It has involved making different choices, even when the choices are hard. It means building

something that those who come after me can stand on more firmly than I did. Reclaiming a sense of place has not come from being accepted into spaces or being validated by them. It has come from building a sense of grounding within myself. It has involved moving from survival to something steadier. I transitioned from comfort to discomfort, with grace. I learned that belonging is not just something given; it is something cultivated through the relationship I have with myself and how I share that in my relationships with others (Shilling et al., 2021).

I also recognize that this process is much larger than myself. The complex process of breaking cycles, making repairs and relearning healthier ways of relating does not happen in isolation. Even when the changes feel small or unseen, they have contributed to broader forms of intergenerational and collective healing. When I think about my son, I consider what he will inherit. It has not been an easy path for him either. He was moved in and out of my care, and later it was decided he was to live with me in his teen years, which has required ongoing repair and living amends. He was very close to his aunty Rhyannon, who named him Kowin when he was born and who stepped in to care for him when I could not. I ponder the difference between perpetuating cycles of harm and passing forward something transformed. That is where my understanding of leadership becomes real. It is not abstract. It is lived and ongoing.



Figure 4: Little Chicago, NWT (July 2004) Left to Right: late Elder Joe Taureau, my late granny Christine Harris, my cousin Lawrence Caesar

Ultimately, honoring my sister means continuing her work while being honest about

what that work must include. Her path created access and mine explores what it means to be whole in those now accessible spaces. Both are important and necessary. Yes, displacement has shaped a small part of my journey, but it does not define where I stand now. By making different choices through sobriety and healing, I am interrupting the intergenerational transmission. In stepping into leadership with a sense of responsibility, I am rediscovering what it means to be rooted - not just within institutions, but in who I am. That fire my sister Rhyannon carried still burns. Now, I carry it forward in my own way, with intention, so my son, now 21, does not have to inherit the same weight of what was left unresolved. How does one do that? For me, it began with awareness. On this journey to self discovery, I have learned to recognize patterns and take responsibility for my own actions, beliefs and emotions. "I was wrong," "I apologize," and "I don't know," have helped build the bridge of humility between my son and me - far more than the dysfunctional patterns I was raised with such as keeping secrets, triangulation, criticism, and enmeshment. I learned more about these patterns in my current program through relationships with healthy, stable professors, Elders, mentors - men and women both - who are active parts of my life today. They have shown me different ways of relating to others and to myself. One lesson that stands out is the importance of recognizing the many strengths, contributions and gifts in others. Doing so does not take away anything from me. Instead, it deepens the connection and reflects the kinds of relationships I want to nurture with my son and others in my life. These may seem small, but they are meaningful ways of interrupting the cycles passed through generations.

Redefining Leadership: Beyond Institutional Hierarchies

So, what counts as leadership and who gets to define it? Formal education has its place - it can name the barriers Indigenous women face and make them visible within institutions. But I've also seen how easily the focus stays there. How quickly leadership becomes tied to degrees, titles, and positions

of authority. Garant (2018) mentions the “academic lamplight,” and I keep coming back to that image - because when the light stays fixed in one place, everything else fades into the background.

And yet, that background is where so much leadership actually lives.

When I write *Garant* (2018), I am not only referencing an author, but I am also writing in relation to sedé Rhyannon, who sadly passed in November 2022 from an accidental drug overdose. As her older sister, I never got to tell her how much I loved her, and how genuinely grateful I was of her before she passed. For creating new paths in her humanness while being a sister, the mom to her two daughters, the aunt to my son, and my best friend. For trailblazing, for showing up and loving, unconditionally. The way she lived her life, the hearts she touched, the care she carried - *that* is what I understand as leadership.

I’ve seen that kind of leadership in spaces that would never be recognized as formal. In the quiet decisions people make every day to live differently than what was set out for them. In the return to ceremony and learning their language now because they never grew up with it, to then sharing it in a circle. In learning to sit with Elders and allow them to love you. In choosing to parent with care, even when that was never modeled. That kind of leadership doesn’t come with recognition, but it carries weight. It carries responsibility. It carries historical connection (Shilling et al., 2021).

When I hear reclamation described as subtle, it doesn’t sit right with me. There is nothing subtle about breaking a three-generation cycle of residential schooling. I watched my sister do that on her own, with and without the support of family. There is nothing small about choosing to live differently when everything around you has been structured otherwise. That is leadership in its most real form. Before institutions ever see us, there are people doing the work that makes it possible to even get there. What gets called “experiential expertise” - surviving poverty, finding sobriety, raising our children with intention - is often treated as separate from academic success. But I don’t see it that way. I see it as the foundation. Without that work, there is no next generation walking into those spaces.

Why Parity is Not Enough

I also find myself questioning what we are being asked to work toward. Rhyannon’s research from 2018 points to a “20 percent” plateau for Indigenous women in political and academic leadership (Voyageur, 2011; Turpin et al., 2014). And while those numbers matter, I don’t believe they tell the whole story. Because if the goal was simply to increase representation within systems that were never built for us, then don’t you think we are still measuring success on someone else’s terms? For me, a more meaningful question is how we nurture cultural self-determination in our institutions, relationships, communities and everyday practices.

When I think about the arduous techniques of beadwork (Garant, 2018), I don’t just see patience: I see intention, care, and the passing on of knowledge. I see something being built that doesn’t rely on institutional validation. Leadership, to me, lives in those same spaces. It’s in the return of the hand drum. It’s in the gathering of sacred items for a bundle one will carry forward and it’s in holding onto identity in ways that colonial systems tried to erase. In 2025, I met Elder Norman Retasket from St’uxwtéws. He is a father, storyteller, a drum maker, a survivor, and someone who has become very important to me. We met during a trip to Taiwan in early December to attend the World Indigenous Games where we quickly formed a close friendship. Through the process of travelling, then making drums together, we have shared many healing moments that included laughter and tears over a shared meal or a drive in the mountains. Those experiences have strengthened our connection and deepened my understanding of the importance of relationships and cultural learning and wellness.



Figure 5:
Author and Elder
Norman Retasket.
Authors photo.

Another significant relationship that was formed during this journey was with Dr. Natalie Clark. She was one of my professors in the first year. During our class introductions, she invited each of us to dedicate the work we would be doing throughout the course to someone important in our lives, whether they were still with us or had passed on. She shared her dedication first, and then I followed by dedicating my work to my sister Rhyannon. As we spoke after class, we put two and two together; it was then we both realized we were connected through Rhyannon, as they also did some 'sister work' together years earlier, facilitating a girls' group in Neskonlith.



Figure 6: Dr. Natalie Clark and Author. Authors photo.

Dr. Clark has been very influential to many of us. She encouraged our class to truth-tell and share our own strategies for resisting violence and oppression and the importance of witnessing that sacred work. Later, I realized that is exactly why she asked each of us to dedicate our work to something or someone we loved, as it created a connection from past to present. In that moment, I felt flooded with emotions, knowing that she established a safe space for me to share about my sister Rhyannon, and acknowledge the rage and love I was carrying at the same time. In Dr. Clark's article *Red Intersectionality and Violence-informed Witnessing Praxis with Indigenous Girls* (2016), she states "it is vitally important in our listening and our witnessing that we do not continue to create narratives of risk and harm separated from the stories of strength,

resiliency and survivance" (p. 54). With our class, she had respect for where each person was in their journey, and gave the option to pass, which also demonstrated consent, care and safety within the space. That is not separate from leadership - it is leadership.

Moving forward cannot only mean entering institutions. It must also mean creating and sustaining spaces that exist beyond them (Shilling et al., 2021). Because if those institutions continue to operate "in the face of Whiteness" (Henry et al., 2017) and nepotism, then increasing numbers alone will not create balance. While visibility can be important, it is not the same as meaningful change. Simply bringing attention to inequities or celebrating representation can create the impression that progress has been made, even when the systems, structures, and people that created those inequities remain unchanged. In some cases, those who become the face of that visibility carry a heavy burden, facing greater scrutiny while also being expected to educate others and share their personal experiences (de Leeuw et al., 2013). Without changes to policies, power, and decision-making processes, visibility can become symbolic rather than transformative (Warren, 2017). Awareness may grow, but if the foundations remain the same, the deeper issues persist beneath the surface. Balance comes from recognizing where Indigenous life is already happening, already leading, already teaching - whether or not it is acknowledged within those systems.

Rebalancing Responsibility and Collective Accountability

Garant's (2018) image in my head of "spilling the beads" stays with me, along with many other memories. I think about what it means for things to come undone - not as failure, but as a part of that restoration of balance. But I also think about how often that responsibility is placed on individuals, especially Indigenous women (Dixon, 2024; Mc Kinley et al, 2021). And I don't think it belongs there alone.

History has shown and proven the systems we are navigating were not created by us, yet we are often expected to adapt, to carry, to fix. While there is always reflection in

our own “beading,” there is also a responsibility to question the “loom” itself. To ask who built it, who it serves, and what it would mean to create something different, something inclusive and safe, just like many before us and just like my sister Rhyannon did.

I’ve also been thinking about the idea that moving forward in a good way is entirely subjective (Garant, 2018). And while there is truth in personal experience, I don’t see leadership as something we hold alone. Our cultural teachings guide us (Chavez & Minthorn, 2015), but they also connect us. They remind us that how we move impacts others, because leadership is a conscious responsibility to not only ourselves, but also to others (Gram-Hanssen, 2021). It is relational. It is accountable. It lives in how we show up: with all Elders, with Two-Spirited kin, with our families, mentors, community members and with those who are still finding their way. When leadership is grounded in those relationships, it stays connected to the collective. It doesn’t drift toward institutional validation - it stays rooted in responsibility.

With these final thoughts on leadership and change, I find myself returning to integrity as a moral compass. It raises a simple but important question to ask: Do our insides match our outsides? It is one thing to speak about equity, reconciliation, inclusion, or cultural safety but another to embody those commitments in our relationships, policies and everyday actions. I feel integrity invites us to look beyond what is said and ask whether our actions truly reflect the values we claim to hold.

THE GATHERING OF THE BEADS

Reconstructing my own loom has required me to sit with truths that are not always comfortable. Forgiveness, for me, has not been a single moment or a final place I arrived at. It has been something I return to, as I try to move through my life with more honesty and less harm.

In my years of addiction, I caused harm - sometimes intentionally, sometimes without fully understanding the impact of what I was doing. I can’t change any of that. What I can do now is stay accountable to it, learn from it, and try to move differently. Sobriety didn’t remove my mistakes. It just made me more aware of them. I’ve still stumbled. I’ve still reacted from old wounds. I’ve still had moments where I had to take responsibility for my actions and make amends where I could. What has helped me stay grounded are the people who have walked beside me through all of it. The ones who have seen me at my worst and continued to show up with honesty and care. The ones who didn’t let me disappear into shame but also didn’t allow me to avoid accountability. Their presence has taught me something important about being human. We make mistakes. We learn. We repair what we can. And then we keep going.

My sister Rhyannon often spoke about spilling the beads. For a long time, I understood that teaching through the lens of loss. After she passed away, it felt as though

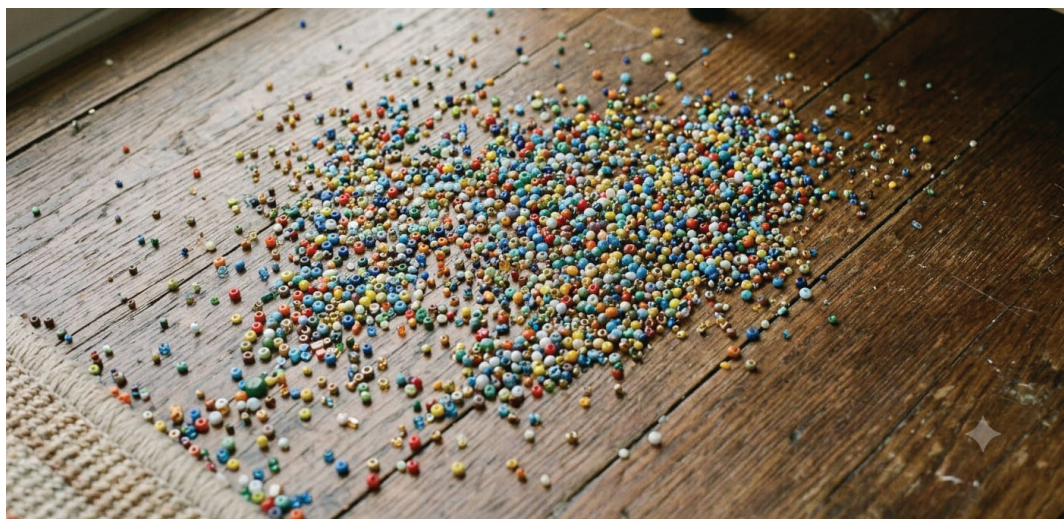


Figure 7: Spilled multi-colored beads on a hardwood floor. Authors Photo.

everything had been spilled across grief, addiction, guilt, family history, silence, injustice, and all the things neither of us could fully fix. I carried a lot of rage after her death. Rage for what she experienced. Rage for what I experienced. Rage for the ways some harms were never acknowledged, and some stories never received the justice they deserved. For a while, that anger felt like it lived just beneath my skin. Looking back now, I can see that beneath much of the anger was grief. And beneath the grief was love.

Part of moving through that grief was finding ways to honour my sister's life rather than remaining only in the pain of her loss. I wanted to honour her as a Dene woman, as an educator, and most importantly, as my sister. Not long after she passed, I took some of her ashes with me to Vancouver Island. I found a beautiful lookout over the ocean and released them there. It felt like the right place. One of her dreams had been to continue writing by the ocean, finding inspiration by the water, the rhythm of the waves and the quiet that came with being near them. Standing there that day, I felt connected to that dream and to her.

As time went on, I looked for other ways to carry her teachings forward. I helped create an award in her memory for female Indigenous students who have faced adversity. It felt important to recognize the strength and perseverance that my sister embodied and to see those qualities honoured in others. I also found myself returning to the things she taught me. I continued sewing and making skirts, often gifting them to other women. I cooked meals she would have appreciated. I listened to music that her and I shared together. I spent time with people I love. These may seem like small acts, but they became part of my resistance and grieving process. They were ways of keeping her close, not through loss alone, but through action, memory and relationship.

A close friend said to me "Even though your sister is physically not here, you are still in relationship with her," and that brought me peace of mind knowing that we are still connected, even though the relationship looks different. These acts did not erase my anger, nor did they resolve the injustices that still trouble me. But they created space for something else to exist alongside that anger.

Over time, I became less consumed by rage and more open to forgiveness. Rachel Flowers (2015) describes it as directing love within by giving ourselves permission to experience the sacredness of our own laws and governance, not through competition or power over others, but through genuine love and kindness for ourselves, and the love for our people. However, it doesn't mean what happened in the past didn't occur or change, nor am I under any obligation to appease the injustices at my own expense. But it does mean validating the authenticity from inside of me. Over time, I have also come to understand my sister's teaching about the spilled beads in a different way. Instead of only seeing what was spilled, I find myself picking up the beads.

The beads, for me, have become the people and experiences that helped me stay alive and to keep going. Elders who shared teachings when I was ready to hear them. Professors who challenged me to think differently and not listen to those colonizing whispers of imposter syndrome. Mentors who believed in me. Friends and very few family who remained present through grief, recovery and healing. Even the harder lessons that came through the countless mistakes, accountability, and perseverance have become part of the collection.

Some of those beads may have come through my sister's journey. Some may have been left behind without either of us knowing. Some seemed to have appeared exactly when I needed them. When I think about displacement now, I understand it differently than I once did. There were times in my life when I was physically displaced, including periods of homelessness. But there were also times when I was displaced from myself. Addiction, grief, trauma, and loss can create distances that are not always visible. They can separate us from our spirit, our relationships, our values, our teachings, and our sense of belonging. Reconstructing my loom has been, in many ways, an act of returning. Returning to the parts of myself that were scattered and spilled. Returning to relationships that help me to remember who I am. Returning to the teachings that continued to exist even when I had lost sight of them. Each bead I have gathered has helped bridge the distance between where I was and where I am now.

Not all relationships were restored through that process. Some family connections remain distant, shaped by intergenerational trauma, addiction, resentment, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism. While those realities still bring sadness at times, I no longer carry them in the same way. Healing has taught me that people move through their own journeys in their own time. What has become important to me is remaining connected to people who are committed to growth, accountability, and making repair when harm has occurred. Those relationships do not replace my family. Rather, they help me continue becoming the person I want to be. They remind me of my values, challenge me when I lose my way, and encourage me to keep learning. If we are going to break cycles, we cannot do it alone. We need people around us who are willing to have honest conversations, take responsibility for their actions, and choose a different path when necessary. Those relationships have taught me that change is possible, and they continue to guide me as I reconstruct my own loom with that unconditional love.

Recently I returned to the North Thompson River, to the place where I had once been homeless. It was just after 6 in the morning and the sun was beginning to rise over Mount Paul. I stood in the water up to my knees and offered tobacco. Facing each of the four directions, I called my spirit back to me. I called back all the names I have ever been called. The parts of myself that had become scattered over the years. The pieces lost through addiction, grief, shame, survival and struggle. I called my sister's spirit back too because she is part of me. Part of my story. Part of the person I continue to become. I asked the water to take what no longer belonged to me and to fill me with what would help me moved forward in a good way, in a more whole way.

The area by the river looked different to me than it once had. Where there was once a hole in the ground, covered with dead branches and a plastic tarp, there was now tall green grass and flowers reaching towards the warmth of the sun. The river wasn't there to cleanse me. But it did awaken something in me. Standing there, I felt connected to the water in a way I hadn't before. Much like the Deh Cho back home carries life through

the land, I felt the river moving through me, reminding me of where I come from and who I am- Denewá Yənəne Ráse (strong Dene woman).

I don't try to imagine my sister's loom and mine as the same, nor her work and my work as being the same. Hers was hers. Mine is mine. But I do believe her teaching about the spilled beads continues to guide me. As I gather them, I am not trying to recreate something perfect. I am learning to work with what is already here. Some beads carry sorrow, some carry joy. Some remind me of the people who helped me find my way. Others remind me of the lessons I learned the hard way. All of them belong.

The parts of my sister's story that never received justice, I now acknowledge within myself. The wounded parts, the grieving parts. The angry parts, and the parts that wanted someone to finally say, "I see what happened." Rather than waiting for that acknowledgement to come from somewhere else, I have learned to bear witness to those truths myself. These days, I spend more time noticing what has been gathered than what was scattered.



Figure 8:
The shore of the
North Thompson
River. Authors
photo.

As I reflect on the people who have helped shape my journey, I am also reminded that leadership is rarely learned from one person alone. It is gathered over time through many relationships, teachings, observations, and experiences. Some of my most important lessons came from those from many different backgrounds and ways of knowing. Each offered something unique, and together those teachings helped shape my understanding of leadership, responsibility and relationship. I have also come to appreciate the people whose names may not always be spoken in the rooms we occupy today. The ones who came before us. The ones who challenged systems, carried knowledge, created opportunities, and cleared paths that other now walk. In academia, and other spaces, it can be easy to focus on where we are going and forget who helped make that journey possible. Yet so much of what we inherit is the result of

someone else's labour, sacrifice, courage, and persistence. For me, honouring those contributions is important. It reminds me that none of us arrive where are on our own. We are connected to the teachings, struggles, and accomplishments of those who came before us, just as we carry a responsibility to those who will come after us.

Mahsi cho to everyone who has been part of this journey with me. To all of those who have shared teachings, encouragement, honesty, and care along the way. Whether you present for a season or for many years, you have become part of this weaving. The loom I am building is imperfect, and so am I. But it is real. It holds loss and love, grief and forgiveness, mistakes and growth. It carries the people, teachings and experiences that helped me find my way back to myself. And it continues to hold everything I am still becoming.



Figure 9: Author standing with her back to the camera on the shore of the North Thompson River. Authors photo.

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“

Instead of becoming mirrored in cycles of blame or remembrance, we might reconceptualize language as a potent tool for the future rather than as a casualty of past events.

”

- *Otobrise Akarah*



Kaleena Carriere (Loehr)

Métis

4th Year Bachelor of Arts

AEN VOYAAZH - A Métis Journey Towards Fundraising



Figure 1: Author standing looking down. Authors photo.

NIYA AWA (*This is me*)

Throughout my life, I have often found myself struggling with a sense of belonging when it comes to my Indigenous identity. I have always known that I am Métis, but the connection to that heritage was never something that resonated with me until I was an adult. I recognize that I am “white passing”, a term that speaks to how my physical appearance often does not reflect the cultural heritage or knowledge that I carry with me. Growing up, I did not have the privilege of being raised with an understanding of my culture or history, and because of this my indigenous roots seemed distant and unreachable to me.

I remember having an Indigenous support worker assigned to me in high school, however I never took advantage of the supports being offered to me. Looking back, I now realize that I did not fully understand what type of support or community connections they may have been able to offer me, or even why I should seek their guidance. I did not have a deep understanding of my Métis identity or how it fit into the larger fabric of my life. In my youth, I didn't see the relevance of connecting with this part of myself, because the Indigenous culture I was exposed to at school in the lower mainland of British Columbia wasn't representative of the Métis heritage I was told I had. The education I received in

school primarily centered on West Coast Indigenous peoples, focusing on cultures and histories that were unfamiliar to me and not aligned with the places that my family came from.

When I first attended University at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) for my Bachelor of Journalism degree, I continued to avoid engaging with Indigenous resources on campus. TRU offered services through its “First Nations house,” but I felt a sense of alienation when I considered entering that space. It wasn’t just that I did not feel connected to the services being offered; it was that I wasn’t sure I belonged there. The discomfort stemmed from a feeling that due to my upbringing and the way I looked, I wouldn’t be welcome in a space dedicated to First Nations students, as it’s an identity that I wasn’t sure I could connect with. It felt that my lack of understanding about my culture, coupled with my physical appearance, created an invisible barrier that made it hard for me to seek help or even step into that environment.

This sense of uncertainty about my place within the Indigenous community has persisted into adulthood. There was, and still is, a lingering feeling that although I am Métis by blood, I had not been raised with the tools or the knowledge to embrace that part of myself fully. My journey to understanding my identity has been a process of unlearning and relearning. A search for my roots. That despite being intertwined in my very being, seemed so far removed from my everyday experience.

WAANASHTEW (*Displace*)

My Métis citizenship is traced through my maternal grandfather’s family, whose history is directly connected to the Métis scrip system and the broader land-extinguishment processes imposed by the Canadian state in the late nineteenth century. The scrip records associated with my ancestors, including multiple members of the Goulet and Boyer families with roots in the Red River and St. Norbert area, situate my family’s story within the same colonial processes that reshaped Métis lives across Canada.



Figure 2: Dominion Lands Branch money scrip certificates and affidavits issued to Goulet and Boyer family members, 1876. Source: Library and Archives Canada. (Library and Archives Canada, 1876a, 1876b, 1876c, 1876d)

Métis scrip was introduced as a means of settling Métis land claims, but in practice it functioned as a system of dispossession. As reported by CBC Radio “Unreserved,” (Muzyka, 2019) Indigenous rights lawyer Jason Madden describes scrip as a coupon for land or money that Métis people were required to redeem through a process that was confusing, geographically inaccessible, and easily exploited by speculators. Métis families were often forced to travel far from their home communities, severing ties to kinship networks and cultural practices, only to face financial pressure to sell scrip at a fraction of its value before land was ever secured. This system also marked the beginning of a broader struggle for the Métis, as it shifted relationships with land into unstable and inadequate monetary exchanges. This resonates deeply with my own family history, where a lack of sustained funding and financial security can be traced back to these early disruptions. The Supreme Court of Canada (Muzyka, 2019) has since described scrip as “a sorry chapter” in Canadian history, acknowledging the federal government’s failure to uphold its commitments and the lasting intergenerational impacts on Métis identity, belonging and connection to land.

NAME: LAMPRANT, Antoine also LAMPRENT, LAMPREAU, LAMPSTONE, LAMPROIRE, LAMPROUE		PARISH: born in Manitoba		ENTERED SERVICE: 1840	DATES: b. 15 Oct. 1823 d. 24 Dec. 1909
Appointments & Service					
Outfit Year*	Position	Post	District	HBCA Reference	
<i>*An Outfit year runs from 1 June to 31 May</i>					
1840-1850	Interpreter	Thompson River [Kamloops]	Western Department	A.10/60, fo. 13; A.12/FT 334/1a, fo. 63	
1850-1859	Midman/Labourer	Thompson River [Kamloops]	Western Department	B.239/g/30-32; B.226/g/1-7	
1860	"Sundries"		Western Department	B.226/g/8	
1861	Midman/Labourer	Thompson River [Kamloops]	Western Department	B.226/g/9	
1862-1863	"Sundries"		Western Department	B.226/g/10-11	
1903	Granted pension			A.12/S 525/1b, fo. 57	
1909, 24 Dec.	Died			A.12/S 525/1b, fo. 57	

Although Lamprant does not appear to be listed in the Abstracts of Servants Accounts other than for the years 1850-1863, his actual years of service were from 1840 to 1870. On 18 September 1902 Lamprant wrote from Kamloops to the Company's London Office, claiming to have "been in the continuous employ of your Company for the period of thirty years throughout British Columbia..." (A.10/160, fo. 441). His appeal for financial assistance was forwarded to the Commissioner in Winnipeg (A.6/75, fo. 13), who replied on 13 March 1903 that he had learned from enquiries that Lamprant had been an "Interpreter & Fur Buyer at Kamloops [Thompson River] from about 1840 to 1870 [and was] now 78 years of age, almost blind, in destitute circumstances and unable to earn a livelihood." (A.12/FT 334/1a, fo. 63) According to Mary Balf, *Kamloops: A History of the District up to 1914* (Kamloops Museum, third ed., 1989) p. 124, Antoine Lampreau manned a fort at Barriere for the Hudson's Bay Company in the winters of 1851 and 1852.

Search File, "Lamprant, Antoine"



Filename: Lamprant, Antoine (1823-1909) (fl. 1840-1903) AM/Jan. 1993 (rev. JHB 3/93, 4/93) Reformatted PC ¼

Figure 3: Hudson's Bay Company Archives biographical sheet for Antoine Lampreau (Lamprant), documenting his service as an interpreter and fur buyer at Thompson River (Kamloops), ca. 1840–1870. Source: Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba. (Hudson's Bay Company Archives, 1993)

Further complicating my sense of belonging are my ties to Secwepemcúl'ecw through my maternal grandmother's family, which illustrate how colonial recognition frameworks unevenly recorded Indigenous identity and kinship in British Columbia. Hudson's Bay Company records (Hudson's Bay Company Archives, 1993) identify my ancestor Antoine Lampreau as having served as an interpreter and fur buyer at Kamloops [Thompson River] from approximately 1840 to 1870, firmly situating his life and work within the Secwépemc territory well before the formalization of colonial land and identity regimes. While these records preserve Antoine's occupational history in detail, they simultaneously obscure the Indigenous identity of his Secwépemc wife Xwulinek (also known as Mary or Marie) and reflect a broader pattern in which Indigenous women were marginally documented or rendered invisible within colonial archives. When I reached out to our home First Nation by email (Simpw First Nation, personal communication, 2016) seeking records related to their daughter, Amelia Lampreau, I was informed that no records (or Indian status) existed for her, despite the presence of rich and complete

documentation for her brothers. This absence underscores how colonial systems prioritized male lineage and employment while systematically excluding Indigenous women and their daughters from formal recognition, reinforcing intergenerational experiences of loss, exclusion, and non-belonging. Through our continued correspondence, since 2016, the Archives department has expanded the research on file relevant to Amelia and her mother Xwulinek.

Taanishi, Kaleena Carriere dishinihkaashoon.
Hello, my name is Kaleena Carriere.

"En Michif Niya," I am Métis...

but am I Métis enough?

AEN VOYAAZH (A Journey)

I never considered a career in Fundraising. To be honest, I didn't even know it was a career I could pursue. I was aware of the concept of fundraising, I was aware that several people fundraise as one of the tasks on their

workload: executive directors, researchers, non-profit leaders to name a few. However, the idea of fundraising as a profession wasn't something that was ever discussed in the circles I moved through, and I had no understanding of the kind of education or experience that would be necessary to step into this profession.

It wasn't until 2022, while I was working at TRU, that I even considered the possibility. A colleague mentioned that a role would soon open in our Advancement department, focusing on Fundraising for our Indigenous initiatives. She encouraged me to investigate it and urged me to consider applying. This was a pivotal moment for me, a chance to explore something new, something that aligned with my passion for Indigenous programs and community work. The first step I took was simple, yet essential,

I Googled: “What degree does a fundraiser need.”

What I found was a list of degrees and skill sets that seemed to align perfectly with my own educational and professional background (Indeed Editorial Team, n.d.). The options ranged from public relations and journalism to business and marketing, communications, event planning, and even non-profit management. The more I read, the more I thought, “Wait, did I accidentally train myself for a career in fundraising?”

I hold a bachelor's degree in journalism from TRU, which has helped me build skills and work experience in communication, research and public relations, all of which are integral to fundraising. As I continued to dig deeper, I realized how much more my education had prepared me for this kind of work. I'm currently completing a Bachelor of Arts degree at TRU with a concentration in English, which has enhanced by writing and storytelling abilities, both of which are key in writing grant applications, connecting with donors and building relationships. Additionally, I've earned a certificate in business skills with a supervisory option from TRU, further strengthening my leadership and management

skills, both of which play an important role in fundraising efforts.

Beyond my formal education, I've gained invaluable experience through my involvement in the community and administrative leadership roles. I currently sit on the Board of Directors for our local Métis Child and Family Services office, where I directly engage with Indigenous initiatives and witness the meaningful impact fundraising and partnerships can have on programs supporting children and families. Through this work, I have also had the opportunity to deepen my connection to Michif language and culture, as the organization continues to embed language learning into its practice model.

My previous role as an event planner taught me the intricacies of organizing large-scale gatherings, skills that transfer directly to fundraising events, and donor engagement. In addition, my work at the local Métis office in Fort McMurray, combined with my experience in the oil and gas industry, allowed me to build strong, respectful relationships with Métis and other Indigenous Elders and community members. During this time, I reconnected with my Métis culture and began learning from community Elders and Knowledge Keepers, building relationships that I continue to maintain and hold close. Their teachings, grounded in lived experience, storytelling and land-based knowledge, have been essential in shaping both my personal identity and my professional approach to relationship-based fundraising.

Through this reconnection to community, I became more deeply engaged in Métis cultural practices and community knowledge sharing. At the Métis office, I built meaningful relationships with Elders through ongoing learning, listening, and participation in cultural teachings rooted in respect and reciprocity. I also had the opportunity to work alongside or genealogical team and board President in researching Métis family scrips and histories, which further deepened my understanding of Métis displacement, resilience and identity. It was an honour to assist in the final review of *Mark of the Métis: Traditional Knowledge and Stories of the Métis People of Northeastern Alberta* (Fort McMurray Métis Local 1935, 2012), a book published by our office during

my time there, contributing to the preservation and sharing of community knowledge and stories. As part of this work, I also acted as a ghostwriter for the foreword (Fort McMurray Métis Local 1935, 2012) provided by our Board President, an experience that strengthened my ability to write in another's voice and adapt to different perspectives. At the same time, this role prompted reflection on the ways Indigenous people's contributions can be rendered invisible within formal publications, reinforcing my commitment to ensuring that Indigenous voices, labour, and authorship are more fully respected.

I further strengthened my connection to land-based practices by becoming a certified trapper through the Alberta Trappers Association, reinforcing the importance of stewardship, responsibility, and traditional ways of life. In addition, I took up beadwork and began creating jewelry, a practice I continue to develop in collaboration with Indigenous and Métis students and Elders. Through this work, I engage in cultural revitalization while fostering relationships rooted in shared learning and respect. Together, these experiences have supported a deeper, more grounded reconnection to my Métis identity, one that continues to evolve through community, relationships, knowledge sharing with my daughters, and ongoing cultural learning.

I have also served as Administrative Assistant to the Dean in the Bob Gaglardi School of Business and Economics, a role that strengthened my ability to manage complex administrative responsibilities, including organizing records, coordinating meetings and follow-ups, preparing briefing materials and maintaining detailed documentation. This experience prepared me to thoughtfully manage the administrative side of fundraising, ensuring donor data, reporting, and gift processing are accurate, timely, and aligned with institutional policies and procedures. Finally, my service on several non-profit boards has provided valuable insight into strategic and governance aspects of organizations that rely heavily on donations and community support, reinforcing the importance of administrative systems in supporting effective relationship-based fundraising.

Looking back, I realize that my journey

into professional fundraising wasn't as accidental as it felt at the time. It was a culmination of all the experiences, education, and personal passion I had cultivated throughout my life. The pieces of my background that seemed unrelated to one another; event planning, journalism, business management, Indigenous relations and community involvement, had all come together in a way that made me uniquely qualified for a career in fundraising for Indigenous initiatives. What once seemed like an uncharted path now felt like the natural next step, one that I am deeply committed to.

Is there an underrepresentation of Indigenous people in the Fundraising Profession?

When I started my career in Fundraising, I was unsure if there were other Métis or Indigenous fundraising professionals around. I wanted to find a sense of community, a space where I could connect with others who understood the unique challenges and opportunities of working in this field while also honouring cultural protocols and practices. I wanted to be able to bounce fundraising strategies off other Indigenous people; those who would understand that my goal was not just financial support, but a holistic approach to fundraising that respects Indigenous values, histories and way of life. My goal as a fundraiser was to "Indigenize" my fundraising efforts, to ensure the initiatives I supported reflected the needs, aspirations, and culture of Indigenous communities, but were completed in a way that aligned with my own morals as an Indigenous person.

AEN NATOONIKAYHK *(Research)*

To begin exploring how many Indigenous fundraising professionals there are, I first turned to existing sector-wide data sources. The Association of Fundraising Professionals completes an annual Compensation and Benefits Report, which is a voluntary survey sent out to their membership of Fundraising Professionals. According to their website, "The Association of Fundraising Professionals is a member-based group that empowers

Year	# Survey Participants	# Canadian Respondents	# Indigenous Fundraisers (Canada) (First Nations, Métis, Inuit)	% Indigenous Fundraisers (Canada)
2025	2414	247	5	2 %
2024	2449	273	4	1 %
2023	3203	475	10	2.1 %
2022	3262	403	4	1 %
2021	2775	405	4	1 %
2020	3488	405	4	1 %
2019	Data Unavailable – website link broken			
2018	2930	416	4	1 %
2017	2032	294	0	0 %

Table 1: Summary of Indigenous Representation in AFP annual Compensation and Benefits study 2017 – 2025. Note. Table created by Kaleena Carriere using data compiled from Association of Fundraising Professionals annual Compensation and Benefits Study. (Association of Fundraising Professionals, 2017; Association of Fundraising Professionals 2018; Association of Fundraising Professionals 2020; Association of Fundraising Professionals 2021; Brown, 2022; Brown & Strawser, 2023; Strawser & Webb, 2024; Strawser, 2025).

individuals and organizations to practice ethical fundraising through professional education, networking, research and advocacy” (Association of Fundraising Professionals, n.d.).

After my first review of the market, the numbers didn't look like they were in my favour. The 2025 Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) Compensation and Benefits Report (Strawser, 2025) interviewed 2,414 fundraising professionals in Canada and the United States. Of the 2414 respondents, 247 resided in Canada. For this analysis, only Canadian-specific data will be considered.

Among the 247 Canadian respondents in 2025, only 2% self-identified as being of Aboriginal, First Nations, or Indigenous Ancestry (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), representing just five people nationwide (Strawser, 2025).

A similar pattern occurs in earlier years. In 2024, AFP surveyed 2,449 members in Canada and the United States. Of the 247 Canadian respondents, only 1% identified themselves as Indigenous, representing just four people across the country (Strawser & Webb, 2024). In 2023, 3203 members were surveyed, with 475 respondents from Canada. Of those 2.1 % identified as Indigenous, totaling 10 individuals (Brown & Strawser, 2023). In 2022, AFP surveyed 3,262 members overall, with 403 respondents from Canada, only 1

% of those Canadian respondents identified as Indigenous, representing just four individuals (Brown, 2022).

Looking back, the trend remains consistent. In 2021, AFP surveyed 2,775 members, including 405 respondents from Canada, of whom only 1 percent identified as Indigenous, representing four individuals (Association of Fundraising Professionals 2021). In 2020, despite a larger sample of 3,488 participants and 405 Canadian respondents, Indigenous representation remained unchanged at 1 percent, again reflecting four individuals (Association of Fundraising Professionals 2020). Data for 2019 is currently unavailable due to a broken website link, limiting analysis for that year. However, in 2018 AFP surveyed 2930 members overall, with 416 Canadian respondents, only 1 percent identified as Indigenous, representing four individuals once again (Association of Fundraising Professionals 2018). Most strikingly, in 2017, among 294 Canadian respondents, no Indigenous fundraisers were reported at all, resulting in 0 percent representation (Association of Fundraising Professionals 2017).

Although the 2023 figure is notably higher than the years before and after, it raises important questions about retention within the profession. It is unclear whether those

individuals remained in fundraising roles, or why they are no longer reflected in the 2024 or 2025 data. The overall pattern suggests not only barriers to entry but also challenges in sustaining Indigenous participation within the profession.

These findings are particularly interesting when compared alongside national population trends. Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada 2023a) reported that Canada's population hit 40 million people on June 16, 2023. "According to the 2021 Census, there were 1.8 million Indigenous people in Canada, representing 5.0% of the total Canadian population, up from 4.9% in 2016," (Statistics Canada, 2023b) which continues the upward trend of Indigenous people occurring through previous census periods. Despite this population growth, Indigenous representation within the professional fundraising field remains consistently and significantly below national population proportions. Across nearly a decade of AFP reporting, Indigenous fundraisers have rarely exceeded 2 percent of Canadian respondents, highlighting a persistent and systemic underrepresentation within the sector.

The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the Canadian Council for the Advancement of Education (CCAEE) are leading professional associations that shape the fundraising and advancement profession in Canada. Through initiatives such as CASE Insights on Philanthropy (Canada) produced in partnership with CCAEE, these organizations collect and publish nationally significant data on philanthropic outcomes, donor trends, staffing levels by functional area, and institutional investment in advancement within higher education. These studies provide benchmarking tools for post-secondary institutions and contribute to a broader understanding of philanthropic activity across the Canadian sector. However, the data collected focuses on institutional performance and staffing measures and does not include demographic information about individual advancement professionals, such as race, gender, or Indigenous identity (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, n.d.).

As a result, while CASE and CCAEE data is valuable for measuring fundraising activity,

it is not useful for tracking representation or examining the underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples within the fundraising profession itself. The absence of demographic workforce data limits the sector's ability to understand who is doing the fundraising work and whose voices are present in shaping philanthropic priorities. In either regard, CASE and CCAEE remain in noteworthy and influential organizations within the field. Given their leadership roles in professional standards, education, research, and advocacy, they are well positioned to support Indigenous fundraising professionals through intentional capacity building, mentorship pathways, inclusive data and practices, and professional development opportunities.

NEU DOO ATOOSHKAAAN (I'm going to work)

What does the data mean, outside the fact that Indigenous representation in the field of fundraising is alarmingly low and in other cases not noted at all. It's a stark reminder that while Indigenous people are integral to the fabric of Canadian society, our presence and voices are still largely absent from spaces like the fundraising profession. The data reflects not only underrepresentation, but isolation. It is also important to recognize that the data itself may not fully capture the presence of Indigenous professionals in fundraising. The absence reflected in these numbers does not necessarily equate to a complete absence of Indigenous people, but rather points to layers of invisibility shaped by systemic erasure and the ways in which Indigenous voices are often positioned behind the scenes.

Additionally, as participation in the survey is voluntary, some Indigenous individuals may choose not to self-identify due to concerns around safety, trust, or past experiences of marginalization. This hesitation is itself indicative of a broader issue: when individuals do not feel comfortable naming their identity within a profession, it signals that the space has not yet become one where Indigenous fundraisers feel fully seen, supported, or in community with one another. As a result, the data may underrepresent

not only participation, but also the potential for connection and collective identity within Indigenous fundraising.

Current fundraising for Indigenous programming, students, and initiatives is most often led by non-Indigenous professionals. While many of these fundraisers are well-intentioned and committed, this reality can create challenges and missed opportunities. Fundraising for Indigenous communities should be deeply relational and grounded in trust, cultural understanding, and experience. When Indigenous voices are absent from the fundraising profession itself, important context, values, and community priorities may be unintentionally overlooked. This absence can limit the depth of relationships with Indigenous donors, foundations, businesses, and communities, and can also place the responsibility of advocating for Indigenous needs on individuals who may not be culturally positioned to do so effectively.



Figure 4: Author during Knowledge Makers Workshop holding up brainstorming sheet. Authors Photo.

This dynamic also raises significant ethical concerns, particularly when Indigenous fundraising is conducted through performance-based compensation, consulting fees,

or percentage-based fundraising models. These approaches are widely debated within the fundraising profession because they can prioritize revenue generation over relationship-building, stewardship, and community accountability. In the context of Indigenous philanthropy, such models risk reinforcing extractive practices, where funding meant to support Indigenous peoples is partially diverted to non-Indigenous professionals through commissions, bonuses, or contractual percentages tied to funds raised. This can undermine trust, perpetuate inequities, and shift focus away from long-term community wellbeing toward short-term financial outcomes.

Moreover, percentage-based and performance-driven fundraising can create power imbalances that conflict with Indigenous values of reciprocity, collective benefit, and relational accountability. When compensation is tied directly to dollars raised, decisions about which projects are prioritized, how stories are told, and whose voices are centered may be influenced by financial incentives rather than community-identified needs. Ethical fundraising for Indigenous initiatives requires transparency, respect, and a commitment to ensuring that resources flow back into communities in ways that are culturally appropriate and community led. Addressing these ethical concerns further underscores the importance of increasing Indigenous representation within the fundraising profession and investing in training, mentorship, and professional pathways that support Indigenous fundraisers to lead this work themselves.

These statistics are not just numbers; they represent an opportunity for change. They signal the need for greater inclusivity and the importance of supporting Indigenous voices in every sector, including professional fundraising. While I acknowledge that many Indigenous people contribute meaningfully to fundraising through roles such as CEOs, Executive Directors, Researchers, Academics, and Community Leaders, the persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous professionals within fundraising as a defined discipline points to a broader structural issue. In most cases, the responsibility for philanthropy is placed in the hands of individuals or communities who may

not have been provided with adequate training, mentorship, or resources to fully succeed in these roles. Addressing this gap requires intentional investment in capacity building, education, and access within the fundraising profession itself, ensuring Indigenous fundraisers are not only included, but supported to lead.

PAYYAKOO (Alone)

In 2020, the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) published *“Indigenous Perspectives on Philanthropy: An Emerging Force,”* (Picco, 2020) which highlights the organizations early engagement with Indigenous inclusion within the fundraising profession. The article (Picco, 2020) centers Indigenous voices, particularly those of Sharon Redsky, Kris Archie, and Tim Sidock, to articulate how Indigenous approaches to philanthropy are grounded in reciprocity, stewardship, relationship, and historical context. It situates Indigenous philanthropy within the broader legacy of colonialism and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, emphasizing the need for the sector to better understand Indigenous history and systems of giving. While the article (Picco, 2020) acknowledged the scarcity of Indigenous fundraisers within professional spaces and highlights feelings of isolation experienced by Indigenous practitioners, its primary focus is on awareness-raising and reframing philanthropic narratives rather than on structural interventions. As such, it represents an important early moment of recognition within AFP’s discourse but stops short of outlining concrete strategies for increasing indigenous representation, retention, or leadership within the fundraising profession (Picco, 2020).

A moment from the 2020 AFP article that continues that most resonated with me is Tim Sidock’s observation that when his three-person team from ImagineNATIVE attended AFP Congress in Toronto, they encountered only one Indigenous fundraiser (Picco, 2020). This account mirrors my own experience as an Indigenous fundraising professional several years later. In 2024, while reviewing my first declined grant application in a fundraising

role, I met with a major Indigenous funder in Canada. During that conversation, a member of the funder’s granting team, who was Indigenous himself, told me that I was the first Indigenous professional fundraiser he had ever met. This organization distributes millions of dollars annually to Indigenous initiatives, yet until that moment, no Indigenous fundraiser writing grant applications for Indigenous programs had crossed his path. This experience underscores the ongoing invisibility of Indigenous fundraisers within philanthropic systems and raises critical questions about how funding relationships are structured, who is positioned as the intermediary between Indigenous communities and funders, and why Indigenous fundraising professionals remain largely absent from roles that steward philanthropic resources toward their own communities.

AFP published another article at the start of 2022, titled *“Embedding Indigenous Perspectives into Our Practice”* (Association of Fundraising Professionals, 2022a), which outlined efforts by the AFP Manitoba Chapter to advance inclusion and awareness of Indigenous perspectives within the fundraising profession. While the article highlights meaningful steps toward learning and relationship-building, it falls short of addressing how Indigenous fundraisers are recruited, supported, and retained within the sector. The initiatives described in the article focus primarily on equipping non-Indigenous fundraising professionals with knowledge of Indigenous history, culture, and reconciliation practices, rather than on creating concrete pathways for Indigenous people to enter and sustain careers in professional fundraising.

Actions such as cultural training sessions, workshops, and land acknowledgements, while valuable as educational tools, do not on their own empower Indigenous professionals or dismantle structural barriers within the profession. By concentrating on how non-Indigenous practitioners can embed Indigenous perspectives into existing systems, the article overlooks the deeper issues of representation, access, and capacity building. Without targeted investment in Indigenous-led training, mentorship, career development, and leadership opportunities, such efforts risk

reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than meaningfully transforming the fundraising profession.

Later in 2022, AFP Canada published a three-part series titled *“On the Road to Truth and Reconciliation,”* (Association of Fundraising Professionals, 2022b) documenting the work of the Action identification Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation, a joint initiative of AFP Canada and the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy – Canada. The series outlines the formation of the working group, its learning process, and the actions it identified for AFP’s engagement with reconciliation. Although this work represents meaningful organization steps in acknowledging the philanthropic sector’s relationship to Indigenous communities and histories, the series remains largely focused on internal process and learning outcomes for AFP as an institution.

In the third part of the series, *“On the Road to Truth and Reconciliation: Unpacking the Trip”* (Association of Fundraising Professionals, 2022b), we see a significant progression towards actual action, including legitimate recommendations that have the potential to support Indigenous recruitment and retention within the fundraising profession. Included in these recommended actions was a look at how AFP recruits for board and committee, dedicating scholarship funding to increase Indigenous access to professional development, concentrating on the inclusion of Indigenous fundraisers within fellowship programs, and supporting research into Indigenous philanthropy and pathways to inclusive leadership. Although these recommendations begin to acknowledge workforce barriers and capacity gaps faced by Indigenous fundraisers, my personal experience in this realm shows that we are still failing to solve the problem.

DRET ANAVAAN (Straightforward)

Despite these efforts, the pathway into professional fundraising for Indigenous people is not as straightforward as it should be. In 2024, AFP published an article titled *“AFP Supports a New Career-Track Training for Indigenous Fundraisers,”* (Association of Fundraising Professionals, 2024), highlighting a partnership between AFP Canada, Indspire and the New School of Fundraising aimed at introducing Indigenous students to fundraising as a career option. This initiative represents a meaningful shift toward targeted recruitment and culturally grounded training, particularly in its Indigenous-led design, emphasis on relationship-building and alignment with community values. The program offers tangible entry points into the profession, including AFP membership, chapter introductions, mentorship exposure, and assistance with identifying internship opportunities.

In June 2024, I reached out to the New School of Fundraising (New School of Fundraising, personal communications, 2024) seeking opportunities to connect with other Indigenous fundraisers, motivated by a growing sense of hope that I was not alone in the profession. While the response I received was courteous, I was informed that the existing program focused on individuals entering the fundraising profession, and that there were not current opportunities for Indigenous fundraisers already working in the field to come together or build community. Beyond subscribing to a newsletter and following them on LinkedIn, no further avenues for connection or support have been offered.

Once again, I found myself experiencing a sense of non-belonging as an Indigenous person within a space that explicitly purports to support Indigenous peoples. This experience differed from earlier moments of questioning whether I was “Métis” enough to belong in Indigenous spaces. Instead, it prompted a deeper more troubling reflection on whether there are, in fact, spaces for Indigenous fundraisers at all. While programs introducing Indigenous people to fundraising are essential, the absence of sustained peer

networks, mentorship structures, and professional communities once individuals enter the field reinforces isolation and limits long-term retention. Without intentional systems to support Indigenous fundraisers beyond entry points, even well-designed initiatives risk functioning as temporary access points rather than sustainable pathways within the profession.

Reflecting on the Métis scrip system, it becomes clear that these gaps are not new but are rooted in longer histories of economic exclusion. Scrip functioned as a mechanism that shifted Métis people away from land-based wealth into unstable and inadequate forms of monetary exchange, undermining long-term land claims and contributing to enduring economic marginalization (Fort McMurray Metis Local 1935, 2012). This legacy continues to shape present realities, including the underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in fundraising and philanthropic spaces, where access to wealth, networks, and decision making power remains uneven.

As I continue my work, I am committed to being part of the movement that not only fills this gap but also ensures that Indigenous ways of knowing being and doing are centered in the practices of professional fundraising, creating pathways for other like me to follow. In doing so, I hope to contribute to creating pathways for others like me to follow, and to a future where professional fundraising more fully reflects and serves the communities it is intended to support. The path forward is both clear and complex. The persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous fundraisers reflects deeper structural gaps in recruitment, mentorship, and retention within the profession. Addressing this requires more than entry-level programs; it calls for sustained, Indigenous-led pathways and a shift toward fundraising practices grounded in relationship, reciprocity, and community accountability.

Equally important is the creation of spaces where Indigenous fundraisers can connect and build community. One practical step forward is the development of Indigenous mentorship circles, offering relational spaces for shared learning, support, and cultural grounding. These circles can help address the isolation experienced by Indigenous

fundraisers while strengthening retention and collective growth within the field.

For me, this journey is both professional and deeply personal. Where I once questioned whether I was “Métis enough” to belong, I now recognize that my experiences, relationships, and continued learning are part of that belonging. As I continue in this work, I am committed not only to advancing fundraising, but to helping create space for other Indigenous professionals, advocating for ethical practices, and contributing to a future where Indigenous voices are present, visible, and leading within the profession.

Aen voyaazh continues.

Southern Michif Words referenced throughout:

Southern Michif	English
Aen Voyaazh	A Journey.
Niya awa	This is me.
En Michif niya	I am Métis.
Waanashtew	Displace.
----- dishinihkaashoon	My name is_____.
Aen natoonikayhk	Research.
Neu doo atooshkaan.	I'm going to work.
Payyakoo	Alone.
Dret anavaan	Straightforward.

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Nothing can be independent
if everything is connected.

Everything we do has an
impact on the world and the
world has impacts on us.



- *Sarah Grey Fosseneuve*



John-Paul Vallente

Ilocano, Philippines

Master of Education

BUILDING BAHAY KUBO FROM BAMBOO GROVES IN A FOREIGN SOIL: Studying Filipino Indigeneity from Across the Pacific

WHERE THE BAMBOO FIRST GREW

For over a decade, I worked as a teacher educator in Ilocos Norte, in the northern Philippines, training pre-service teachers at a state university. As an Ilocano—an ethno-linguistic identity that means “people of the rivers” or “people of the lowlands”—I carried into this work the values of my upbringing, and the work itself immersed me further in the lives of students from across the region, including members of Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs). Those years of teaching, learning alongside colleagues, engaging with communities, and navigating the complexities of Philippine higher education were, in a figurative sense, the years I spent cultivating my bamboo grove where I nurtured the rhizomes from which new growth would eventually emerge. Each relationship formed, each lesson taught, each challenge overcome became part of the root system that would one day support the scholarly dwelling I am now attempting to construct. I did not know it then, but I was preparing the materials for a metaphorical bahay kubo, a structure of understanding that I would later need to build in foreign soil.



Figure 1

Map of the Province of Ilocos Norte, Philippines
Note. From *Willingness to Pay for Dog Rabies Vaccine and Registration in Ilocos Norte, Philippines [Diagram]*, by Meseret G. Birhane et al., 2016, ResearchGate (https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-province-of-Ilocos-Norte-Philippines_fig1_299341821)



Figure 2: The Ilokano People
From Ilocano People [Photo], by Memories of Old Manila &
Beyond, 1920s, Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilocano_people#/media/File:Ilocano_Family_from_Tagudin_c.1920s.jpg)

Bamboo holds a sacred place in Filipino consciousness. Our origin story tells of the first humans, Malakas and Maganda, emerging when a bird split open a bamboo stalk. Strength and beauty born from the same source, stepping into the world as equals. This is why Filipinos are often compared to bamboo. We bend with typhoons but do not break; we survive earthquakes, floods, and the upheavals of history because we have learned to be pliant without losing our core. Bamboo never grows alone. It rises in groves, each stalk connected to others through an underground network

of roots and rhizomes. This is the communal spirit that pulses through Filipino life. Our folk dances celebrate this interdependence. The tinikling, for example, requires dancers to move gracefully between clapping bamboo poles, a rhythm of trust and coordination that can only succeed through partnership. One dancer's misstep affects the whole, teaching us from childhood that we move through life together or not at all. Our children's games carry the same lesson. Bamboo stilts demand that friends steady each other's balance, and bamboo cannons require teams to work in concert, which transform play into early practice for the cooperative life that awaits. And for centuries, our ancestors used bamboo to build their homes—the bahay kubo.



Figure 3: Photo of a Traditional Bahay Kubo
Note. From Traditional Bahay Kubo [Photo], by Dayang Marikit, 2019, Reddit Thread (https://www.reddit.com/r/Philippines/comments/g5cnww/photo_of_a_traditional_bahay_kubo_this_makes_me/)



Figure 4: The Sea Nomads (Sama-Bajau) of the Philippines
Note. From The Badjao: A Closer Look at the Lifestyle and Legacy of the Seafaring People of the Philippines [Photo], by Datu Kidlat, 2025, Discover Philippines (<https://www.discoverphilippines.org/p/the-badjao>)

The bahay kubo, the traditional Filipino bamboo house, takes different forms across our archipelago. In the coastal lowlands, it rises on stilts above flood-prone ground, its walls of woven bamboo slats allowing the sea breeze to pass through. In the mountainous Cordilleras the structure becomes sturdier, with thicker walls to keep out the highland chill. In the Visayan islands, the thatched roof pitches steeply to shed monsoon rains. Yet despite these regional variations, the essence remains the same: a dwelling creatively built from what the land provides, carefully constructed through collective effort, and intentionally designed to shelter family and community. It is in this sense that the bahay kubo is more than architecture: it is philosophy made visible. Its elevated floor lifts inhabitants above life's floods. Its bamboo frame bends with storms rather than resisting them. Its open windows invite neighbors in. Every tied joint and woven wall represents not just construction but the enactment of values passed down through generations.

It is this bahay kubo that I will use as an extended metaphor throughout this chapter as I narrate my experience studying (I)indigenous knowledge systems from my home country while living in Canada. I use this unconventional notation—(I)indigenous—deliberately. In the Philippine context,

“Indigenous” with a capital I refers to specific ethnolinguistic communities legally recognized under the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA), which protects the rights of identified ICCs and Indigenous peoples (Eligio, 2012). For instance, the Ifugao who carved the rice terraces into mountain slopes, the T’boli known for their dreamwoven t’nalak cloth, the Mangyan of Mindoro who preserve one of the few surviving pre-colonial scripts in Southeast Asia through their sacred poetry, the Lumad peoples of Mindanao whose name means “born of the earth,” and many other groups who kept distinct cultural practices, languages, and territorial boundaries amidst relentless colonial pressure. These communities hold formal acknowledgment of ancestral domain rights, cultural integrity protections, and self-governance provisions. When I write “indigenous” with a lowercase i, I am speaking of the broader Filipino population (Bertrand, 2007; dela Cruz et al., 2023). All of us who descend from the Austronesian peoples who first populated our islands, who were collectively labeled indio by Spanish colonizers, a term meaning “native” but wielded as a slur to mark us as the lowest class in the colonial hierarchy. Both carry profound wisdom about sustainable living, community governance, spiritual practices, and educational philosophies that have survived conquest,

Figure 5: Ifugao's of the Cordillera Mountains in Luzon, Philippines Celebrating Punnuk Note. From Ifugao'd Punnuk Celebration [Photo], by Jacob Maentz, 2014, Project Katutubong Pilipino (<https://katutuboproject.org/2014/09/03/ifugaos-punnuk-celebration/>)



colonization, and modernization. My notation (I)indigenous holds both meanings simultaneously, acknowledging the legal and political distinctions, at the same time, honoring the shared heritage of resilience.

My work in the Philippines, those years of gathering bamboo, eventually led me to pursue a Master of Education (MEd) at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in Kamloops, British Columbia. There, I developed a project focused on braiding a precolonial Filipino philosophy, specifically Babaylan wisdom traditions, with contemporary gender and sexuality education in Philippine teacher preparation. The Babaylan were the spiritual leaders, healers, warriors, and keepers of knowledge in precolonial Filipino societies (Magos, 1993; Nono, 2013; Mendoza & Strobel, 2013), and their philosophy presents an ancestral gaze of understanding gender, sexuality, and human relationships that challenge the binary frameworks imposed through colonization (Rodriguez, 2025b). I was positioned in the peculiar situatedness of diving deeper into my own culture's ways of knowing while surrounded by an entirely different cultural landscape. I then find myself trying to understand Babaylan concepts of cosmic balance and spiritual calling while seated in our library's individualized study cubicles, attempting to grasp their rituals of healing and community validation through digitized texts

and recorded interviews rather than through the embodied participation by which such knowledge is traditionally transmitted.

Scholars term this experience diasporic indigeneity, defined by Fox Tree (2015) as "an emergent mode of identity characterized by immigrants claiming indigenous status in their new place(s) of residence, based on their status as colonized indigenes in the place(s) where they or their ancestors lived formerly, and a corresponding re-imagining of their homeland as a geographic super-territory that includes both places" (p. 1). Additionally, Herrick (2022) describes this as negotiating indigenous spirituality "between lost homeland heritages and new hostland responsibilities" (p. 2), exploring what she terms "how to 'belong to place(s)'" through dual (re)indigenization projects she identifies as "homeland yearnings and hostland learnings" (p. 3). But academic terminology does not capture the specific loneliness of researching your own people's knowledge systems, separated from the community, the elders, the ceremonies that give that knowledge its life and meaning. Building a bahay kubo requires bamboo, and bamboo does not grow easily in foreign soil. The Filipino people and localized experiences that form my building materials are scarce here. The communal effort that raises this dwelling place is difficult to summon when your people are scattered across oceans. And when I relocated again,



Figure 6: Heads of the Vaigalan Babaylan Community in Ilo-ilo, Philippines Performing Shamanic Healing Arts
Note. From Maestro & Maestra Babaylan [Photo], by Hilot Maharlikan, 2023, HilotMaharlikan (<https://www.hilotmaharlikan.com/about>)

this time to Hay River in the Northwest Territories, in the northern frontiers of Canada, the challenge intensified. Here, in a land of permafrost and long winters, where snow blankets the ground for much of the year, the idea of cultivating bamboo seems almost absurd. How do you build a Filipino dwelling in a landscape so starkly different from the tropical archipelago where that architecture evolved? How do you nurture the communal spirit of the bahay kubo when you are one of the few Filipinos for hundreds of kilometers? Yet it is precisely in confronting these challenges that three Filipino philosophies become essential—Kapwa, Bayanihan, and Indio-genius—three principles that guides my exploration throughout this chapter.

The first is Kapwa, a concept that sits at the heart of Filipino psychology with no direct English translation. Developed by Virgilio Enriquez, the founder of Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino Psychology), Kapwa is often inadequately translated as “other” or “fellow being,” but this misses its depth (Enriquez, 1978). Kapwa is the recognition that we share an inner self with others—that the boundary between “self” and “other” does not exist in Filipino consciousness in the same way (Rodriguez, 2025a). When we say Kapwa, we acknowledge that you and I are not separate beings who happen to interact but that we share a common humanity, a common loób (inner being) (Matienzo, 2022). The bamboo that forms the bahay kubo’s skeleton once grew in groves, each stalk drawing strength from the root network that connected it to countless others. Similarly, our identity as Filipinos emerges from this shared essence. Whether I find myself in the sun-scorched grasslands of Secwépemc territory in Kamloops or the snow-laden boreal forests of

K’atl’odeeche First Nation territory in Hay River, thousands of kilometers from home, I am not truly alone. My Kapwa extends across oceans, and when I examine my own experience, I am simultaneously examining my connection to my people.

The second philosophy is Bayanihan, the spirit of communal unity and cooperation that has defined Filipino social life for generations. Cambroner (2014) notes that Levedo Cepeda, born and raised in the Philippines, “broke down the literal meaning of ‘bayan’ as nation and ‘ihan’ with no direct English translation,” clarifying that the origin “had originally meant ‘a [communal] action to help carry a fellow man’s hut when they moved’” before the term “eventually came to mean unity, nationalism, or patriotism” (p. 22). Gundayao and Hernandez (2025) further elaborate that etymologically, bayanihan derives from bayan (town, nation, or community) and bayani (hero), with the former underscoring shared community while the latter conveys readiness to sacrifice for the common good. The most



Figure 7: A Group of Men Carrying a Traditional Bahay Kubo as Part of a Relocating Effort on the Island of Mactan, Philippines
Note. From Bahay Kubo House Relocating [Photo], by George Rodger, 1955, Iconic Images Gallery (<https://iconicimagesgallery.com/en-ca/collections/george-rodger-collection/products/george-rodger-bahay-kubo-house-relocating-1955-limited-edition-print>)

iconic image of Bayanihan is the literal carrying of a neighbor's bahay kubo to a new location.

Here, community members gathering beneath the bamboo structure, hoisting it onto their shoulders, and transporting an entire home through collective strength. This is Kapwa transformed from philosophy into action. Gundayao and Hernandez (2025) observe that bayanihan, typically symbolized by neighbors carrying a bahay kubo together, embodies a moral conviction that one's welfare is inseparable from that of others. The understanding that your neighbor's home is, in some extended way, also your home. Their struggle is your struggle. Their journey is your journey. As Solis (2023) articulates, "the bayanihan spirit shows Filipinos' concept of supporting each other most especially in times of need." Barrameda and Barrameda (n.d.) emphasize how bayanihan serve as "coping mechanisms during emergency situations," particularly during typhoons and flooding, where "the participants narrated instances through which the spirit of . . . bayanihan helped them in coping with emergency situations in the midst of typhoons and flooding" (p. 141). In diaspora, Bayanihan takes new forms. The phone calls home, the remittances sent to support family, or the online communities where scattered Filipinos share knowledge and encouragement. My scholarly work itself is an act of Bayanihan, which is my humble attempt to carry forward the wisdom of my people, to transport the bahay kubo of Filipino knowledge to new ground where it might shelter others.

The third philosophy is what Filipino National Artist and filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik calls *Indio-genius*. Born from his Ifugao mentor's (Lopes Na-uyac) mispronunciation of the word "indigenous," this concept celebrates how Filipinos transform limitation into innovation, colonial wounds into cultural strength (Campos, 2015). Tahimik deliberately reclaimed the Spanish slur *indio*—a term meaning "native" that colonizers wielded to mark Filipinos as the lowest class in the colonial racial hierarchy—and fused it with *genius* to honor our people's unstoppable ability to adapt, survive, and create under any circumstances. The *bahay kubo* itself is a testament to *Indio-genius*,

engineered to bend with typhoons rather than break, designed to stay cool in tropical heat through natural ventilation, built entirely from sustainable materials that the land freely provides. Where others see poverty of resources, *Indio-genius* sees creative opportunity. This is not romanticization of backwardness but recognition of what Tahimik witnessed in Ifugao communities: "a certain genius, even before colonial forces have subjugated the local culture" (Campos, 2015, p. 65). The Ifugao rice terraces maintained a *pinugo* irrigation system assuring constant water "24 hours a day, 365 days a year" for over 3,000 years—a feat of engineering that emerged from indigenous wisdom deeply attuned to environmental realities (Campos, 2015, p. 65). And where I might see the impossibility of growing bamboo in Canadian snow, *Indio-genius* asks: How might one cultivate bamboo in climates where it was never meant to grow? What creative adaptations allow the *bahay kubo* to rise even when the familiar soil lies an ocean away?

These three philosophies—Kapwa, Bayanihan, and *Indio-genius*—are the invisible architecture of my being, as essential to my formation as the bamboo framework is to the bahay kubo. They are the conceptual tools I will use to examine what it means to study your own people's knowledge systems from across the world, to build scholarly dwellings in foreign soil, and to discover that displacement can become not merely a setback to overcome but a creative force that generates new forms of understanding.

PAGMUMUNI-MUNI AT PAGSASALAYSAY:

A Way of Inquiry

In writing this chapter, I draw upon pagmumuni-muni at pagsasalaysay as my way of inquiry. These two are Filipino practices of deep reflection and narrative meaning-making rooted in Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino psychology), an indigenous psychological framework developed by Virgilio Enriquez (1994a, 1994b) that emerged as a liberation psychology challenging Western universalist claims (Cambronero, 2014). Instead of

adopting Western methodological frameworks wholesale, I turn to the intellectual and spiritual resources that my own culture provides, trusting that Filipino ways of knowing are capable of generating substantive and meaningful scholarship.

Pagmumuni-muni is the Filipino practice of deep reflection, contemplation, and introspection (Ferriols, 2016). It is more than casual thinking. It is a sustained, deliberate, and often reverent attention to inner experience. Filipino elders practice pagmumuni-muni before making important decisions, understanding that wisdom requires the patient work of turning experience over in the mind and heart until its significance becomes clear. In pagmumuni-muni, the self is understood as a valid source of knowledge and is recognized as a legitimate pathway to understanding (Ferriols, 2016; Quito, 1983). This indigenous approach to inquiry represents what Enriquez (1994a) termed “indigenization from within,” whereby the theoretical framework and methodology emerge from the experiences of the people from the indigenous culture itself, based on assessing historical and sociocultural realities, understanding the local language, unraveling Filipino characteristics, and explaining them through the eyes of the native Filipino (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Pagsasalaysay is the act of narration, of telling one’s story. But the Filipino language reveals something revelatory about storytelling that English obscures. The root word of salaysay (story or narrative) is saysay, which means meaning or significance. To tell a story (magsalaysay) is literally to make meaning, to give significance to experience. This linguistic connection runs even deeper. The Filipino word for history is kasaysayan, which shares the same root word saysay. In Filipino thought, history is not merely a record of events but the collection of stories that carry meaning for a people. When I engage in pagsasalaysay, I am not simply recounting what happened to me, but I am participating in the creation of meaning, contributing my thread to the larger tapestry of Filipino kasaysayan. It is important to note that pagsasalaysay, while sharing etymological roots and conceptual biology with the indigenous research method of pakikipagkwentuhan (story-telling), operates differently

in crucial ways. Pakikipagkwentuhan, as articulated by Orteza (1997) and elaborated in Pe-Pua’s (2000) comprehensive discussion of indigenous Filipino research methods, is “an informal, free, social process of exchanging information, thoughts and knowledge that are innate in a group’s everyday life” (p. 118). It is fundamentally dialogic and interpersonal, a collective research method where researchers and participants share equal status in the spirit of pakikipagkapwa (treating each other as fellow human beings). The stories that emerge through pakikipagkwentuhan are co-created in dynamic social contexts where participants spontaneously join the kuwentuhan (storytelling or discussion) if interested in the topic, and where researchers are expected to share their own views and add to the stories, creating a free exchange that produces narratives analyzable through grounded theory approaches (Orteza, 1997).

In contrast, pagsasalaysay as I employ it in this methodology represents an internalized, intrapersonal form of kuwentuhan, a storytelling to oneself and not with others. Where pakikipagkwentuhan requires the researcher to establish at least pakikipagpalagayang-loob (rapport/understanding/acceptance) with participants and to navigate the various levels of Filipino social interaction from pakikitungo (civility) through pakikiisa (being one with), pagsasalaysay operates within the researcher’s own consciousness as an internal dialogue. This does not make it solipsistic or disconnected from community, however. Instead, pagsasalaysay functions as pakikipagkwentuhan with one’s own loob (inner self), which, as Enriquez (1978) explained through the concept of kapwa, is never truly isolated but always already constituted through relationships with others.

Together, pagmumuni-muni at pagsasalaysay form a cyclical process. In this rhythmic space, I reflect deeply on my experience (pagmumuni-muni), then shape that reflection into narrative form (pagsasalaysay). The act of narration deepens my reflection, which in turn enriches the story. This is not autobiography in the Western individualistic sense, because Kapwa means there is no purely individual self to examine. Kapwa—perhaps the most philosophically pregnant term in Filipino social

thought—represents the Filipino conviction that the self is constituted through the other, implying a shared identity, an overlapping interiority, a sense of “we-ness” that precedes the isolated “I” (Enriquez, 1978, 1994b; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000; Rodriguez, 2025a). As Enriquez (1978) unpacked, *kapwa* reveals the Filipino intuition that being is communion, positioning it as the core value at the heart of the structure of Filipino values. When I reflect on my experience as a Filipino scholar in diaspora, I am reflecting on my connection to my people, my community, and my ancestors, as well. Here, my story is not mine alone but it is a window into the collective experience of Filipino scholars moving through the spaces of neither-and-both, of indigenous peoples maintaining cultural identity across distances, of anyone who has ever tried to feel their way into home more deeply by leaving it. This relational understanding of self fundamentally shapes how I approach *pagmumuni-muni* at *pagsasalaysay* as methodological practices that honor the interconnectedness of experience while maintaining scholarly rigor.

Of this methodological framing, I should be clear: it is not a fully developed research methodology with extensive existing literature. The formal articulation of Filipino methodologies remains an ongoing project. It is an intentional choice to ground my inquiry in Filipino ways of knowing. In this very choice lies an act of *Indio-genius*, curating and using scholarly approaches from the resources my culture provides, adapting ancestral practices to contemporary academic contexts, and refusing to accept that legitimate knowledge-making must always follow foreign, imported forms. And so, just as I turn to Filipino philosophy for my methodology, I turn to Filipino imagery for my structure. The following sections of this chapter are organized around what I call the nodes of my inquiry, borrowing from the *buko* (nodes) of bamboo, those raised rings that mark points of growth and provide structural strength. Without nodes, bamboo would be weak, hollow tubes easily crushed. With them, bamboo becomes one of nature’s most pliant and resilient materials. Like bamboo nodes, these points of inquiry are not external impositions but organic features that emerge from the *pagmumuni-muni*

at *pagsasalaysay*.

The first node asks: What does it mean to study one’s own people’s knowledge systems from a foreign land, and what challenges emerge in this diasporic space? This node takes up the questions I raised earlier. In the section that follows, *Studying Home Away from Home*, I examine the particular loneliness and difficulty of this work. The second node asks: How might *Kapwa*, *Bayanihan*, and *Indio-genius* transform these challenges into sources of creativity and innovation? Here I return to those earlier questions from a different angle. The section, *When Displacement Becomes Creative Force*, explores how constraint can become generative. The third node asks: What vision of diasporic indigenous scholarship emerges from this reflection, and what might it offer to others experiencing and living within similar spaces between worlds? This node, addressed in *Roots Across Waters*, reaches beyond my lived experience toward broader contribution, sharing not prescription but one scholar’s *salaysay* in hopes that it might carry meaning for others walking parallel paths.

STUDYING HOME AWAY FROM HOME

The first node of my inquiry asks: What does it mean to study one’s own people’s knowledge systems from a foreign land, and what challenges emerge in this diasporic space? To answer this, I must turn inward, practicing the *pagmumuni-muni* that allows me to examine my experience with the sustained attention it deserves, then shape that reflection into *pagsasalaysay*, a narrative that carries meaning not just for myself but, I hope, for others who have walked similar paths. The reflections that follow are drawn from my experience conceptualizing and writing my MEd project at TRU, a scholarly endeavor that sought to braid *Babaylan* philosophy with contemporary gender and sexuality education (GSE) in Philippine teacher preparation.

The project culminated in a conceptual micro-credential course design that demonstrates how precolonial Filipino understandings of gender, rooted in cosmic balance, spiritual calling, and community validation,

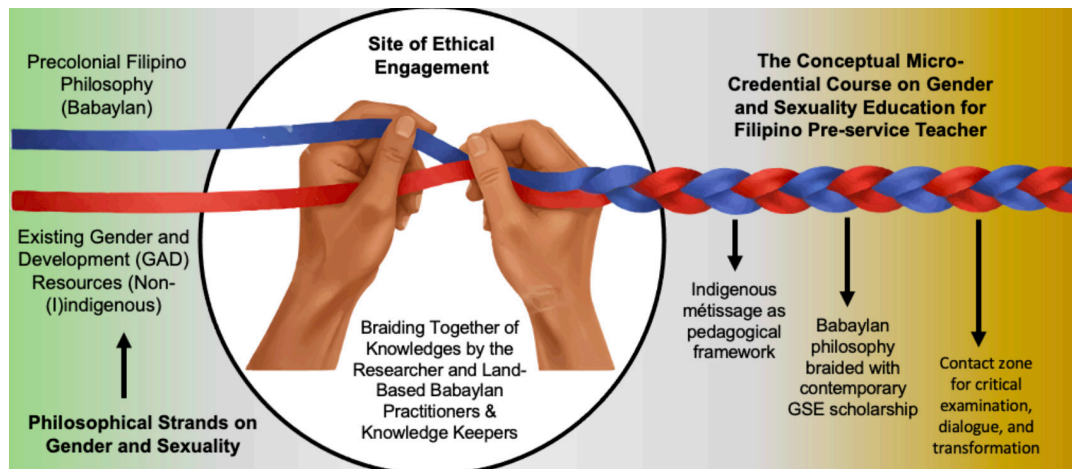


Figure 8: The Métissage Braiding Process in GSE Micro-Credential Course Design
Note. This figure illustrates the interweaving of precolonial Filipino philosophy and non-(I) indigenous philosophical strands on gender and sexuality, leading to the conceptualization of a micro-credential course design on gender and sexuality education in Philippine teacher education program. Figure created by the author.

might be woven together with existing educational frameworks to prepare pre-service teachers for culturally responsive practice. It is through the challenges I encountered in developing this project—challenges of distance, of mediated knowledge, of navigating between academic worlds—that I came to understand what diasporic indigenous scholarship demands.

The Loneliness of Diasporic Scholarship

Before I narrate my own experience, I must first sit with the concept that scholars use to name this condition: diasporic indigeneity. The term itself holds a tension. Diaspora, from the Greek word for scattering or dispersion, originally described the Jewish experience of exile and has since been applied to any population dispersed from its homeland (Brubaker, 2005). Indigeneity, by contrast, emphasizes rootedness or the connection to ancestral territory, to the land that shaped a people's identity over generations (Fox Tree, 2015). To speak of diasporic indigeneity is to name a paradox, which is the experience of maintaining and deepening one's indigenous identity even as one remains physically displaced from the territory that grounds that identity. As Fox Tree (2015) defines it, diasporic indigeneity is "an emergent mode of identity characterized by immigrants claiming indigenous status in their new place(s) of residence, based on their status as colonized indigenes in the place(s) where they or their ancestors lived formerly, and a corresponding re-imagining of their homeland as a geographic super-territory that includes both places" (p. 1). Herrick (2022) elaborates that diasporic indigeneity

aids in "capturing this specific negotiation of indigenous religion/spirituality between lost homeland heritages and new hostland responsibilities," exploring "how to 'belong to place(s)'" (p. 2). It is to be simultaneously rooted and scattered, connected and severed, home and away. Herrick (2022) observes that while "(re) indigenizing processes can presume a 'rootedness in place' with resources of a stable connection to land-based cultural memory to draw upon," this stability is disrupted because "forces of colonialism disrupt communities and require diasporic resettlement elsewhere, thus creating tensions within and between lost homelands and new hostlands" (p. 2). Durán Matute (2019) further notes that for transnational indigenous communities caught in diasporic flows, "indigeneity is maintained despite losing the 'external markers', adapting to the political setting of the... nation-state and incorporating new places, relationships and processes" (p. 8).

For Indigenous peoples who have migrated, whether by choice, by necessity, or by the complex interplay of both, diasporic indigeneity raises difficult questions. Can one remain indigenous while living far from ancestral lands? What happens to knowledge systems that are intimately tied to specific places, specific ecologies, and specific communities when the knowledge-holder is removed from those contexts? How does one practice relationality across distances that strain the very bonds that make relationality possible? These are not merely academic questions. They are lived realities for the millions of Indigenous peoples worldwide who find themselves, for whatever reason, building lives away from the territories their ancestors called home. For me, diasporic indigeneity

took a particular form. I was not simply living away from the Philippines but actively studying Filipino (I)ndigenous knowledge systems from that distance. The displacement was not incidental to my scholarly work. It was its defining condition. And it was in this condition that I encountered a loneliness that no amount of preparation had led me to expect.

When I began my MEd project, I chose to focus on Babaylan philosophy, which is the wisdom traditions of precolonial Filipino spiritual leaders whose understanding of gender, sexuality, and human relationships presented alternatives to the binary frameworks that colonization imposed upon my people. It was a topic that felt urgent, necessary, a way to contribute something meaningful to Philippine teacher education. What I did not anticipate was the isolation that would accompany this work. I remember sitting in the university library in Kamloops, surrounded by the quiet efficiency of individual study cubicles, trying to understand concepts of cosmic balance and spiritual calling that my Babaylan ancestors transmitted through embodied practice, through ceremony, through the living presence of community. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Outside the window, the grasslands stretched toward mountains that held no memory of my people. I was reading about rituals of healing and transformation, about the *sapi* ritual or the sacred possession through which Babaylan became vessels for

benevolent spirits, and I realized that I was attempting to grasp through text what was meant to be known through participation. The same isolation followed me back to my rental unit, where I would continue working late into the evening. The walls of my small room holding none of the communal warmth that traditionally accompanied the transmission of such knowledge.

This is the peculiar grief of diasporic scholarship where the knowledge you seek feels simultaneously intimate and impossibly distant. Babaylan philosophy is not an abstraction to me. It is part of my heritage, woven into the cultural fabric that shaped my upbringing even if I did not always recognize its threads. Yet here I was, approaching it as one approaches a foreign subject, through e-books or scanned copies sent through emails, through digitized archives, through the mediation of scholars who had themselves worked to recover what colonization tried to destroy. The intimacy of inheritance met the distance of academic study, and in that meeting, I felt the ache of recognizing that I was grasping at shadows of knowledge that should have been transmitted to me through the living breath of community.

When I later relocated to Hay River in the Northwest Territories, the isolation took on a different texture. In Kamloops, at least, the university provided a community of scholars, however different their research interests



Figure 9: Babaylan as Community Leader and Healer
Note. From *Pag-unlad ng Panggagamot sa Pilipinas (The Progress of Medicine in the Philippines)* [Mural], by Carlos “Botong” Francisco, 1953, Philippine General Hospital (<https://www.travelswithcharie.com/2018/07/the-art-of-carlos-botong-francisco.html>)

might be. In Hay River, I found myself in a small northern town where winter stretches for months and the sun barely rises above the horizon in December. There is a small Filipino community here—nurses, caregivers, tradespeople, families who have made lives in this northern frontier—but most are preoccupied with their own work, many holding two or even three jobs to support families both here and back home. We gather when we can, during birthday celebrations or Christmas parties, moments of warmth and shared food and familiar language that briefly dissolve the distance from home. But these occasions are infrequent, and between them stretches the ordinary reality of days spent working in isolation, evenings spent alone with my research, and the deafening silence of the subarctic night pressing against the windows. It was in those moments that I most keenly felt what I was missing: the voices of elders who could correct my misunderstandings, the presence of community members who could affirm or challenge my interpretations, the ceremonies that would anchor abstract concepts in lived experience.

The Challenge of Kapwa Across Oceans



Figure 10: Modern Babaylan Performing a Sacred Ritual for Nature Spirits and Deities Note. From *Way of the Ancient Healer: Sacred Teachings from Philippine Ancestral Traditions* [Photo], by Eduardo Muñoz-Seca, 2010, Filipinas Heritage Library Photo Collection

The isolation I experienced was not merely geographic, but it also struck at the heart of Kapwa itself. As I explained earlier, Kapwa is the understanding that we share an inner self with others, that the boundary between self and other does not exist in Filipino consciousness (Matienzo, 2022; Rodriguez, 2025a). But how do I maintain Kapwa when the others with whom I share this inner self are scattered across an ocean? How do I honor the principle of shared identity when I am, in the most literal sense, alone? These questions haunted my research process.

The Babaylan traditions I was studying are held primarily by ICCs in the Philippines. For instance, the Visayan peoples, the communities of Mindanao, the various ethnolinguistic groups who maintained these practices despite centuries of colonial suppression. These communities are protected under the IPRA, and any research involving their knowledge systems must follow rigorous ethical protocols established by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB) (NCIP, 2012; PHREB, 2017). Central to these protocols is the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)—not simply individual consent, but the consent of the community, obtained through processes that respect traditional decision-making structures and the authority of elders (PHREB, 2017). From Canada, I could not fulfill these protocols. I could not travel to ancestral domains to seek community consent. I could not sit with elders and explain my intentions, could not participate in the rituals that might precede such conversations, and could not demonstrate through sustained presence that my research was meant to serve. The geographic distance became an ethical barrier, and I found myself in the uncomfortable position of writing about Kapwa while being unable to practice it in the ways that mattered most.

Bayanihan, too, was challenged by my circumstances. The communal spirit that traditionally raises the bahay kubo requires physical presence: shoulders beneath bamboo, shared sweat, the coordination of bodies working toward a common purpose. In diaspora, Bayanihan must find new forms like video calls

across twelve-hour time differences, collaborative documents edited asynchronously, or email threads that stretch over days as messages travel back and forth across the Pacific. These digital approximations of community served their purpose, but I could not escape the feeling that something essential was lost in translation. I found myself wondering whether Bayanihan could survive when we cannot feel each other's weight, whether the spirit of collective effort could persist when the work is done in isolation, each contributor laboring alone before their screen.

The Problem of Mediated Knowledge

As I delved deeper into my MEd project, another challenge emerged, one that complicated my relationship with the very sources I depended upon. Much of what we know about precolonial Babaylan traditions comes to us through colonial documents, such as Spanish friars' accounts, administrative records, and the observations of colonizers who viewed our ancestors' practices through lenses of suspicion and disdain. The Boxer Codex of 1595, for instance, provides valuable documentation of Tagalog spiritual practitioners, noting that *catalonan* (the term used in that region for Babaylan) could be either male or female. Diego de Bobadilla's writings from 1638 to 1640 confirm the presence of male Babaylan, evidencing gender fluidity that characterized precolonial spiritual leadership. These sources are precious. Without them, we would have even less access to our precolonial past. However, they are also deeply compromised. The Spanish colonizers who created these records did so within a framework that positioned our ancestors as pagans to be converted, savages to be civilized, and subjects to be controlled. Their observations were filtered through Catholic theology, European gender norms, and the political imperatives of colonial administration.

A difficult tension emerges in relying on these documents despite an awareness of their limitations. When Spanish friars described Babaylan rituals as witchcraft or demonic possession, they were not offering neutral ethnographic observation, but they

were justifying the suppression of practices that threatened their religious and political authority. When they noted with disapproval the presence of male Babaylan who dressed as women and married other men, they were documenting gender diversity through a lens of moral condemnation. To use these sources, I had to read against the grain, extracting what information I could, as well as remaining alert to the biases that shaped their creation. The challenge was compounded by the relative scarcity of Indigenous voices in the historical record. Precolonial Filipino societies transmitted knowledge, such as Babaylan practices, orally, through apprenticeship and ceremony over written text (Dagmang, 1994). With the arrival of Spanish colonizers, they systematically suppressed and executed Babaylan traditions, even brutally feeding practitioners to crocodiles as documented by Teresita Obusan, burning sacred objects, and working to erase the memory of what had existed before (Magos, 1993; Mendoza & Strobel, 2013; Nono, 2013; Strobel, 2016). What survived did so in fragments: in the practices of communities remote enough to escape the full force of colonial disruption, in the cultural memory that persisted beneath the surface of Catholic conversion, and in the oral traditions that elders continued to transmit despite the risks.

Contemporary scholars—Babaylan-inspired researchers like Mendoza and Strobel (2013) and Nono (2013, 2021), Filipino anthropologists like Salazar (1983, 1996, 1999, 2015) and Apostol (2010)—have done invaluable work in recovering and articulating these traditions. Their scholarship provided the foundation for my own project. But I was acutely aware that I was engaging with Babaylan philosophy through their interpretations, through texts that were themselves mediations of knowledge that was meant to be transmitted directly, embodied, lived. I was building my understanding from secondary sources when the tradition itself demanded primary engagement not with documents, but with practitioners; not with interpretations, but with the living knowledge that continues to pulse through ICCs.

Navigating Competing Expectations Between Two Worlds

Perhaps the most persistent challenge I faced was the daily work of navigating between two academic worlds with substantially varied assumptions about knowledge, authorship, and the purpose of scholarship. Canadian academic conventions shaped the institutional context within which I worked. My project required a literature review that positioned my work within existing scholarly conversations. It demanded clearly stated research questions that could be answered through identifiable methods. It expected individual authorship—my name on the title page, my voice throughout the text, and my contribution to the field. These conventions are so deeply embedded in academic practice that they can seem natural, inevitable, basically the way scholarship is done.

Although at every turn, these conventions sat uneasily beside the Filipino and Indigenous principles I was trying to honor. The literature review format, with its systematic organization of sources into themes and arguments, flattened the relational nature of knowledge, reducing the wisdom of elders and the insights of community practitioners to citations in a scholarly apparatus. The research questions framework, with its emphasis on answerable queries and definable outcomes, struggled to accommodate the cyclical, emergent nature of (I)indigenous inquiry. The expectation of individual authorship conflicted with the communal ownership of traditional knowledge. I could not, in good conscience, claim sole credit for a project that depended so fundamentally on the wisdom of countless others, living and ancestral, named and unnamed.

Within this context, I occupied a position where I constantly translated between English and Filipino and between entire epistemologies. When I wrote about Babaylan philosophy, I had to find ways to render concepts into language that would make sense within academic discourse. When I described my methodology, I had to balance the legitimacy granted by recognized research frameworks with my desire to center Filipino ways of knowing. Every

choice involved compromise, and the guilt that accompanied this navigation was persistent. Am I, by writing about Babaylan philosophy from a Canadian university, perpetuating the extractive practices that colonialism introduced? Am I taking knowledge that belongs to communities and processing it through Canadian academic machinery for my own professional advancement? These questions did not have easy answers. I tried to address them by being explicit about the provisional nature of my work, by acknowledging that any course materials I developed would require substantial revision through genuine collaboration with Babaylan practitioners, and by framing my project as a foundation for future partnership, NOT a finished product. But the discomfort remained, a productive discomfort perhaps, that kept me attentive to the ethical dimensions of my work, but a discomfort nonetheless.

This, then, is what it means to study one's own people's knowledge systems from a foreign land. It means loneliness that no amount of digital connection can fully address. It means practicing Kapwa and Bayanihan in attenuated forms, reaching across oceans for a sense of shared identity that distance constantly threatens to dissolve. It means working with sources that bear the fingerprints of colonizers, reading for Indigenous knowledge through texts that sought to suppress it. It means inhabiting the space between worlds, translating constantly, compromising inevitably, and carrying the weight of questions about whether the work serves or betrays the traditions it engages. It is, in short, the challenge of building a bahay kubo without ready access to bamboo, but still, working with memory, with photographs, with the hope that what I construct might, somehow, provide shelter for those seeking to understand their own (I)indigenous traditions from afar.

WHEN DISPLACEMENT BECOMES CREATIVE FORCE

The second node of my inquiry asks: How might Kapwa, Bayanihan, and Indio-genius transform these challenges into sources of creativity and innovation? Through pagmumuni-muni, reflecting deeply on my experience developing the MEd project, I have come to recognize that the very constraints that seemed to threaten my work also generated unexpected possibilities. This is the paradox at the heart of Indio-genius. It is the transformation of limitation into innovation, of constraint into creativity. What follows is my pagsasalaysay of how each challenge I described in the previous section—the loneliness of diasporic scholarship, the difficulty of maintaining Kapwa and Bayanihan across oceans, the problem of working with colonially-mediated sources, and the struggle of being positioned between two academic worlds—became, in its own way, a teacher. The subsections that follow directly respond to these challenges, showing how what appeared to be obstacles became openings for new forms of understanding and connection.

Transforming Loneliness Through Kapwa's Intentionality

The loneliness I described in the previous section was real and persistent. As I continued working on my project, something shifted in my understanding of what Kapwa requires. I had assumed that the shared inner self could only be maintained through physical proximity and the embodied presence that traditional Filipino community life provides. But Kapwa, I came to realize, is not essentially about geography. It is an ontological truth that transcends space. Such a recognition emerged gradually as I worked through the literature review for my MEd project.

When I read the scholarship of Babaylan-inspired researchers, I was not simply engaging with their ideas, but I was also connecting with Kapwa who had walked similar paths of recovery and reclamation. Strobel

(2016) herself wrote from diaspora, from the United States, working to understand Filipino Indigenous wisdom traditions while physically separated from the Philippines. Her work demonstrated that diasporic scholars could contribute meaningfully to the recovery of Indigenous knowledge, that distance did not necessarily equal betrayal. In reading her words, I felt less alone. Here was someone who understood the peculiar challenge of studying home from away, and who had found ways to do so with integrity and respect. More importantly, I realized that every time I engaged with Babaylan philosophy, I was not studying something external to myself. I was exploring the foundations of my own being, the cultural inheritance that shaped me even if I did not always recognize its influence. The shared inner self that connects me to my people persists across oceans because it was never about physical co-presence, but it is about recognition and honoring the connection that already exists.

How I approached my work was transformed by this awareness. In my project's positionality statement, I wrote explicitly about being Ilocano, about my decade of work as a teacher educator in the Philippines, and about the relationships and experiences that formed my bamboo grove. I acknowledged that my story was not mine alone. That when I reflected on my experience, I was simultaneously reflecting on my connection to students, colleagues, community members, and my ancestors. The loneliness did not disappear, but it became bearable because I understood that Kapwa requires intentionality more than proximity. Every choice I made to center Filipino ways of knowing, and every effort to honor Indigenous protocols even from a distance, was an act of maintaining that shared inner self.

New Forms of Bayanihan in Digital Space

Bayanihan, too, found new expression as I worked on my project. The communal spirit that traditionally raises the bahay kubo through collective physical effort had to be reimagined for the constraints of diaspora and the realities of graduate student life in

northern Canada. What emerged were digital forms of cooperation that, while different from traditional Bayanihan, carried the same spirit of mutual support and collective purpose.

One of my earliest discoveries was the Global Indigenous Space within the All My Relations office at TRU. When I first reached out to their research staff, explaining my project and the isolation I felt in studying Filipino Indigenous knowledge from so far away, their response was immediate and generous. They connected me with resources on Indigenous research methodologies, invited me to attend workshops on ethical engagement with Indigenous communities, and most importantly, affirmed that the work I was attempting mattered. Knowing that there was an institutional space dedicated to supporting Indigenous scholarship, and that the people within that space understood the unique challenges of diasporic Indigenous research, made me feel less alone in this work. Certainly, it was Bayanihan in an unexpected form where non-Filipino Indigenous scholars and staff extend the communal spirit across cultural boundaries, realizing that our struggles shared common roots even as they took different forms.

I also discovered the Indigenous Studies Circle, an online community of Filipino (I) indigenous researchers whose conversations became an essential lifeline for my work. The group brought together scholars, community practitioners, and students who were all grappling with similar questions: How do we represent Indigenous Knowledge Systems responsibly in academic research? How do we honor the protocols and wisdom of ICCs while working within university structures? Through their online discussions, I learned about current struggles facing ICCs in the Philippines, such as ongoing land disputes, the challenges of maintaining traditional practices in the face of modernization, and the work being done to revitalize Indigenous languages and ceremonies. I also learned about accomplishments like collaborative research projects that genuinely served communities and educational initiatives that centered Indigenous ways of knowing. These conversations kept me connected to the living reality of Indigenous scholarship in the Philippines, reminding me that my work was part of a larger collective effort.

The Bayanihan extended in practical ways to accessing resources that geographic distance made difficult to obtain. Many important texts on Filipino Indigenous knowledge systems are published locally in the Philippines and are not available for international shipping or online purchase. When I encountered such barriers, former colleagues back home would scan relevant book sections and send them to me via email, a labor of care that required their time and effort on my behalf. For texts written in Filipino that I needed to analyze carefully, I would ask colleagues for translations into English, seeking multiple translators to ensure interrater reliability. This careful attention to accurate interpretation felt crucial; I did not want to misrepresent concepts because of my own linguistic limitations. Each scanned page that arrived in my inbox, each carefully translated passage, was a tangible reminder that I was not working alone. My colleagues' willingness to serve as bridges between me and the knowledge I sought embodied the Bayanihan spirit across thousands of kilometers.

Similarly, when I was developing the conceptual micro-credential course design that formed the heart of my project, I drew on Bayanihan by conducting informal conversations with former colleagues in the Philippines. These were not formal interviews as I could not conduct formal research with ICCs while I am in Canada without proper FPIC protocols. However, they were dialogues that helped me understand current challenges in Philippine teacher education. Through video calls and email exchanges, colleagues shared their experiences implementing gender and sexuality education, described the gaps they saw in current approaches, and offered thoughts on what pre-service teachers needed. Their insights shaped my course design in crucial ways. They remind me that even provisional, conceptual work could be strengthened through collective wisdom.

Reading Against the Grain: Indio-genius and Colonial Sources

The challenge of working with colonially mediated sources required perhaps the most Indio-genius, where limitation is creatively transformed into opportunity. I could

not access living Babaylan practitioners to learn directly from their knowledge. I could not observe ceremonies or participate in traditional knowledge transmission. What I had were texts, such as Spanish colonial documents, contemporary scholarly interpretations, and recovered oral histories. The question was how to use these compromised sources responsibly.

During my time at TRU, I enrolled in a course titled “Privileging Indigenous Oral Traditions and Storywork in International Indigenous Research,” where I learned to approach Indigenous knowledge systems ethically even from geographic distance. Through engagement with diverse Indigenous scholars, I learned that Indigenous research demands working in respectful, relevant, and reciprocal ways that honor Indigenous rights to self-determination and privilege oral traditions (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). It was here that I encountered Archibald’s (2008) concept of Indigenous storywork, which serves as both methodology and pedagogy where stories act as living entities carrying teachings and demanding respectful protocols. Archibald’s seven principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy transformed how I understood my relationship to Babaylan knowledge (Archibald, 2008). I was not extracting information from texts; I was entering into relationship with the stories these texts carried, with ancestors whose wisdom they contained, with communities who continued to hold these traditions.

My approach to colonial sources was largely influenced by this understanding. When Spanish friars described Babaylan as practicing witchcraft, I learned to read past their condemnation to extract the ethnographic details embedded in their disapproval. The very practices they condemned, such as gender fluidity, spiritual possession, and healing through ritual, became evidence of precolonial Filipino wisdom that challenged colonial norms. This was storywork in action where it is critical to listen for the stories that colonial texts tried to silence, and then to honor knowledge that persisted in spite of attempts at erasure.

Archibald’s (2008) principle of inter-relatedness also taught me to foreground contemporary Filipino and Babaylan-inspired scholars engaged in knowledge recovery. Instead of being largely reliant on colonial sources, I centered the scholarship of Salazar (1983, 1996, 1999, 2015), Apostol (2010), Dagmang (1994), Magos (1993), Nono (2013, 2021), Strobel (2016), and others who had spent decades studying with ICCs, learning from elders, and documenting practices that survived colonial suppression. These scholars had done the relational aspect that story work demands, which include building relationships with communities, listening to elders, and earning the right to speak about these traditions through sustained commitment, among others. Through repositioning their voices from the peripheries towards the center, I honored the web of relationships that connected my work to theirs, to the communities they worked with, and to the ancestors whose knowledge they recovered. Such moments exemplify Indio-genius in action, as available tools are creatively utilized even as their limitations are critically acknowledged. I made explicit throughout my project that I was working with secondary sources, that my engagement with Babaylan philosophy was mediated and provisional. This honesty about limitations became itself a form of integrity, refusing to claim authority I did not possess while still contributing what I could from my position in diaspora.

The Creative Work of Translation

The final challenge demanded constant translation between Canadian and Filipino academic worlds, but this translation work itself became generative. In developing my MEd project, I chose to employ Indigenous *métissage* as my pedagogical framework, a concept developed by Donald (2009, 2012), a Papaschase Cree scholar in Canada. *Métissage*, Donald (2012) explains, is about bringing different knowledge systems into ethical relationship without forcing synthesis or maintaining artificial separation. This framework gave me language to describe what I was attempting, NOT replacing Western frameworks with Filipino ones, or simply adding (I)

indigenous content to existing structures, but braiding them together in ways that honored both.

The course design I created demonstrates this braiding. For instance, each weekly unit places Babaylan concepts in dialogue with contemporary gender and sexuality education scholarship. Specifically, week one examines both binary gender models from Euro western sexology and Babaylan understandings of cosmic fluidity, which then moves to week two that explores European gender-fair language policies alongside the inherent gender neutrality of Philippine languages. Throughout, the structure creates productive tensions, which are spaces where different knowledge systems engage each other without one dominating the other (Donald, 2009, 2012). Necessarily, such an approach required Indio-genius—the creative adaptation of Euro western academic structures to carry Filipino content. I had to write literature reviews that satisfied institutional requirements, at the same time, centering Indigenous voices. I had to develop research questions that could be recognized as legitimate inquiry while remaining true to the cyclical, emergent nature of Filipino ways of knowing. The result was not perfect, but it was honest. For me, it is a genuine attempt to build scholarly dwellings that could house

both ancestral wisdom and contemporary analysis.

Looking back through pagmumuni-muni on this entire process, I recognize now that displacement did not diminish my research. It transformed it. The constraints of diaspora forced innovations I might never have discovered if I had remained in the Philippines, surrounded by the familiar. The distance created analytical clarity that proximity might have obscured. The longing for connection drove me to develop new methodologies for bridging gaps, for maintaining cultural bonds across vast distances, and for honoring Indigenous knowledge even when separated from its source. This is the lesson of Indio-genius. That bamboo can indeed grow in foreign soil when we are willing to adapt, to experiment, and to transform limitation into creative force, no matter how challenging.

EXTENDED ROOTS ACROSS WATERS

Envision bamboo rhizomes extending beneath the Pacific Ocean, threading through bedrock and seabed, connecting Philippine volcanic soil to Canadian earth. From such extended rootedness, stalks emerge in

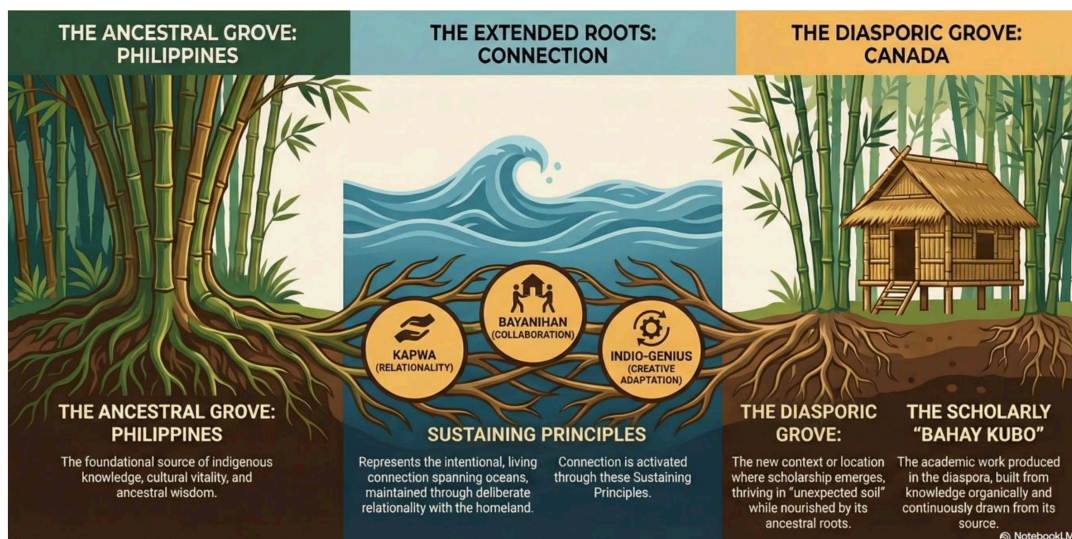


Figure 11: Extended Roots: A Framework for Diasporic Indigenous Scholarship

Note. This figure reimagines Indigenous research through the metaphor of bamboo rhizomes, suggesting that cultural knowledge remains vibrant and connected even when separated by vast geographical distances.

Figure created by Google Notebook LM, prompted by the author.

Kamloops and Hay River, not as transplanted specimens severed from origin, but living extensions of ancestral groves. Similarly, from my pagmumuni-muni at pagsasalaysay studying Babaylan philosophy at TRU emerges a vision of diasporic indigenous scholarship grounded in three interconnected principles: relational ontology transcending geography (Kapwa), collaborative knowledge co-creation across distances (Bayanihan), and creative adaptation within constraining structures (Indio-genius). Unlike conventional diaspora studies emphasizing disconnection and loss, or place-based Indigenous research requiring physical presence in ancestral territories, scholarship anchored in extended roots identifies that Indigenous knowledge systems maintain vitality through networks spanning oceans and borders.. The bahay kubo I construct in Canadian academic soil uses bamboo drawing nourishment from Philippine lands, not a replica architecture mimicking ancestral forms, but dwelling built from materials organically connected to homeland sources.

Methodologically, diasporic indigenous scholarship demonstrates several innovations relevant for researchers situated within similar liminal spaces, each reflecting how bamboo adapts to foreign climates without losing connection to root systems. It foregrounds provisional framing as ethical stance rather than limitation. Acknowledging that my conceptual work requires future collaboration with land-based Babaylan practitioners following ethical protocols models how displaced scholars can contribute meaningfully without severing authentic connections to community knowledge keepers. Moreover, it employs reading against the grain of colonially-mediated sources as legitimate research practice, meticulously reading and sifting Indigenous presence from documents attempting erasure, which is similar to how bamboo finds nutrients even in depleted soil. It also demonstrates how Indigenous research frameworks from one context can be adapted ethically to other colonial situations, provided scholars attend carefully to specific histories shaping each location, much as bamboo varieties adapt while maintaining core characteristics.

For (l)indigenous scholars experiencing geographic displacement in graduate education, my chapter confirms that physical distance need not prevent authentic engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars can maintain meaningful connections through digital networks, partnerships with homeland researchers, and centering Indigenous voices. Distance can present valuable perspectives where patterns invisible from within communities are revealed. The constraints of diaspora often spark methodological creativity that engender innovations in knowledge transmission and ethical protocols that benefit broader Indigenous research communities. Like bamboo growing stronger under wind stress, displaced scholars can transform limitations into possibilities.

Furthermore, my chapter shows that diasporic indigenous scholarship creates important pathways for knowledge preservation as (l)indigenous peoples increasingly pursue opportunities requiring geographic mobility. It exhibits how cultural knowledge travels and remains vital across distances, and that such a vision offers neither romanticized ideals nor paralyzing standards. Instead, it treats diasporic (l)indigenous scholarship as rigorous, ethical work requiring sustained relationality, humility about knowledge limits, and faith that intentional connections support meaningful contributions to both academic conversations and community wellbeing. Bamboo groves illustrate this approach: strength comes not from isolation but from networks of mutual support, flexibility in changing conditions, and rhizomes that nourish growth even in unexpected soil. From groves connected through extended roots spanning oceans rises the bahay kubo, which is a scholarly dwelling that honors both ancestral wisdom and contemporary analysis, sustained through the Filipino (l)indigenous concepts of Kapwa, Bayanihan, and Indio-genius.

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“

I feel integrity invites us
to look beyond what is
said and ask whether our
actions truly reflect the
values we claim to hold.

”

- *Candis Garant*



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THE BODY AND SPIRIT ARE ONE: Debwewin, Treaty Rights, and the Legacy of Healthcare in Canada

The history of healthcare in Canada is often told through a Western lens, shaped by policy, institutions and colonial ideology. As an Anishinaabe and Nakota woman from Pasqua First Nation in Treaty 4 territory, I approach this history from a different place; one that is grounded in Treaty, oral history, and intergenerational knowledge. From this perspective, healthcare is not simply a system of services, but a responsibility comprised of relationship, mutual obligation and commitments made between Nations and the Crown. These understandings have often been overlooked or dismissed in dominant historical narratives, which have shaped how First Nations peoples have been perceived and treated within the healthcare system.

This work brings forward stories of advocacy, resistance, and lived experience within my family and community to challenge these narratives. It traces how Treaty understandings of health were disrupted through colonial practices, including the Indian Act and the creation of Indian Hospitals, and how these systems still contribute to ongoing inequities. At the same time, it will affirm that First Nations peoples have always acted with agency, advocating for our rights, maintaining knowledge systems, and continuing to care for our Nations across generations. By sharing my truth, this paper reframes healthcare not as something given, but as a Treaty responsibility that must be recognized and upheld.

I begin this work from a place of *debwewin*

and *zhawenamin*, grounding my understanding of health, healing, history and responsibility in my family, my community and the intergenerational knowledge I carry. Holding these traditional values close, and raising them in honour of my ancestors, I can tell our truths in a good way, leading with a good heart. I am an Anishinaabe and Nakota woman who lives in and comes from Pasqua First Nation, located in Treaty 4 territory, and I write from a First Nations Treaty perspective, woven with the teachings of my ancestors. This work is guided by relational accountability. In this manner, I stay truthful and honest to who I am, while honouring the traditional and intergenerational knowledge that has been gifted to me.

I carry the voices of my parents; my father who instilled traditional spiritual values and ceremonial upbringing and my mother who instilled in me the responsibility of care and nurturing of oneself to our relatives. I carry the voices of my grandparents, primarily my maternal grandparents of whom one was a Treaty spokesperson and the other one of the first Indigenous Registered Nurses in Canada, both Residential School Survivors. Finally, I carry the voices of my maternal great-grandparents; my great grandfather who has guided this work in restoring essential pieces of our truth telling with the advocacy and resiliency that shows up today, and my great grandmother who found herself fighting within systems that denied her rights as a First Nations Treaty person.

Sharing our knowledges is important for truths to be told so we can dismantle the current narratives. For far too long, First Nation perspectives have been ignored and overlooked. This shift must change if we are truly going to heal and move forward together as a people. To be clear, I am speaking about First Nations communities, families, and knowledge keepers whose voices have too often been left out, minimized, or interpreted through outside systems.

With all these kept in mind, I write from a place of determination, sovereignty and carry the truths of our knowledge, to share with others. I will tell a story of how we have never been passive within history, nor within these systems. It is my hope to restore pride, along with dignity, to overcome disparities and inequities that have existed in a space made to assimilate our identities into a box. Much of what will be revealed tell us that as First Nations peoples, we do not fit into boxes but rather dance around the spaces outside of them.

This paper focuses on First Nations within Treaty context, but I recognize that the broader impacts and ongoing narratives discussed extend to Indigenous peoples more widely. This paper comes from my understanding of healthcare, where wellness is relational, collective and grounded in balance. This grounding shapes how I understand healthcare, not as a system, but as a responsibility rooted in Treaty.

Mino-Ayaawin – First Nations Health Worldview

First Nations understandings of health are rooted in a wholistic worldview that recognizes the body, spirit, land, sky, family, community and all our relatives in nature as interconnected and responsible for maintaining balance (Absolon, 2010). Relational accountability is what helps maintain this balance, reminding us that we have responsibilities to one another, to the land, and to all living beings. My great-grandfather, Andrew Gordon Sr. is recorded as stating that, “According to Christian teaching...the body is responsible for the soul...According to our ancient belief, the body and the soul are one

and we pray to the Great Spirit to give us long life here and not in some unknown hereafter” (Mendelbaum, 1934). This statement reflects more than a spiritual belief; it articulates a wholistic understanding of health grounded in First Nations knowledge systems. It solidifies the connection between health as being one in body and spirit connected to our surroundings, not separated into different entities as we are led to believe. In this respect, spending time outside in the natural environment not only works the mind in grounding to creation, but also exercises the body, thereby enacting both in a sense of wholistic balance. To understand this concept, it is important to critically examine and deconstruct the prevailing health ideologies within Canadian society.

The current Western biomedical model emphasizes the separation of mind, body and spirit, with antidotes for each segmented piece. For instance, a person may be referred to see a mental health therapist to address the mind’s health, and a fitness trainer to support the physical body. While these supports can be helpful, this separation can create an imbalance when wellness is treated in isolated parts. As First Nations peoples, health is understood as wholistic and relational. It is not only connected to the individual, but also to the family, community, land, spirit, and all our relations. This is supported by Josewki et al. (2023), who emphasizes the Indigenous models of health as “the deep interconnections that exist between the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental dimensions of health and wellbeing” (p.5)

Another example where this separation becomes evident is within healthcare settings. The biomedical model of care often only focuses on the physical body, while First Nations healing practices, ceremonies, and medicines are treated as separate or outside of care. Roher et al., (2023) explain that Indigenous patients may be hesitant to speak with biomedical providers about Indigenous healing practices when trust has not been built, while some healthcare providers may also be hesitant to work with Indigenous healers because they do not understand or trust Indigenous medicines and healing practices. This can create an imbalance for First Nations peoples because the health system may treat the body

while leaving out the spiritual, cultural, emotional, and physical parts of wellness.

Our knowledges tell us of living the greatest life while here on Aki (earth) and with creation because it is the utmost goal in achieving a life purpose. As my great-grandfather, Andrew Gordon Sr. believes (Mendelbaum, 1934), there was no looking forward to an unknown after death because life was fully lived to its extent while alive. These are the traditional teachings that have been passed onto me, and this is the knowledge many First Nation peoples hold and must share to help us out of the disparities that have been created. To move forward, one must understand how much of our knowledge was not always recorded or presented accurately because much of what we know is documented through colonial systems and filtered through colonial Western ideas. Adams-Campbell et al. (2015) explain that “Native histories are often included in settler histories in ways that disconnect them from living populations” (p.113). This shows why First Nations histories must be understood as living knowledge that continues through families, traditions, memories, lived experience and not just through colonial records.

This knowledge can also be understood through the Treaty-making era of the late 1800s, when First Nations’ inherent ways of life shaped how relationships were made and maintained. For our people, Treaties were not simply land transaction agreements, even though settler-colonial legal systems have framed them this way. As McCrossan (2018) states, Indigenous Treaty understandings are often pushed aside in favour of Western ideas of land, law, and ownership. In contrast, First Nations scholars such as Askew (2020) remind us that Treaties are relational agreements grounded in law, spirituality, responsibility, and ongoing obligations to the land. Treaty making was also conducted through ceremony, during which our ancestor’s sought guidance on maintaining their ways of life, values, and relationships with both people and the land.

Maintaining health was a part of that relationship. Not only that but health encompassed a wholistic view of leading a good life, *mino bimaadiziwin*, and that meant good relations of living in balance with all creation. This

included human life, but also our relatives in nature and of nature. As Beal (2007) explains, First Nations in the Treaty 4 area “regarded the treaty relationships as living things that needed regular nourishment, not as static entities set in pieces of paper” (p.113). Treaties were, and continue to be, understood as living and sacred documents that reflect ongoing relationships our Nations and the Crown. Our Elders have always reminded us that these agreements were meant to last as long as the sun shines and the waters flow. (Pasqua First Nation, 2003, Book II). This shows how Treaty relationships required ongoing care, responsibility and renewal, including the duty to maintain health, balance, and well-being.

Due to the written text of these agreements, much of the oral transmission and traditional knowledge was lost in translation through systems that did not reflect who we were and continue to be. It is important to recognize that understandings of Treaty relationships are often overshadowed by written interpretations, rather than what oral tradition tells us. The written text and its interpretation reflect a colonial perspective, based on the assumption that written language alone can fully capture what was originally agreed upon. This is false. One cannot capture the essence of a spiritual living movement meant to exist forever. This has always been an issue of contention that continues today. An example can be seen with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori peoples, where different interpretations of Treaty continue to shape the relationship between Māori and the Crown. Mutu’s (2019) article, “To Honour the Treaty, We Must First Settle Colonisation”, shows that Treaty cannot be honoured while colonial systems continue to define its meaning. Mutu further argues that colonial authority “has replaced the harsh reality of its racist violence and its illegitimate usurpation of power with a feel-good rhetoric of Treaty-based good faith and Crown honour” (p. 8). Although this example comes from across the globe, it resonates with Treaty 4 because it shows how Indigenous understandings and colonial partnerships do not share the same underlying values. This difference continues to create difficulties for future generations when colonial systems remain in control of Treaty making.

The Treaties are a living piece of our history and cement our relationships with the settlers of Canada. So much so that our ancestors knew how much it would mean to us in the generations to follow. My grandfather Andrew Gordon Jr. (2003) always spoke about how we must always look after our people and the ones yet unborn. Many of us carry this belief as a responsibility while navigating the world today. Chief Paskwa was a signatory to Treaty 4 and documented his understanding of the Treaty through a pictograph. This shows how First Nations' forms of knowledge and recording were kept (Beal, 2007). It depicts drawings of the Treaty responsibilities established in 1874 and portrays the Treaty moment from the perspective of our leader (CBC News, 2017).

Although this pictograph was taken from our Nation and kept overseas for over a century, it was later repatriated to its rightful home in 2007 (Pasqua First Nation, 2010). What's interesting about this piece, however, is the fact that it now sits in the Royal Saskatchewan Museum in Regina, Saskatchewan. We have always held our truths because they exist in our stories, our teachings, and even in pictographs that show how our ancestors understood Treaty relationships. Yet this document is confined behind glass in a museum, regarded as a historical artifact instead of a living expression of law.

Honouring Our Debwewin and Our Knowledge-Systems

I ask: why are these records not recognized in legal spaces to uphold the promises they carry? Whose knowledge is legitimized and regarded as law? And why is this sacred living document not upheld in the same regard or honoured in the same respect? In expressing our truths, debwewin, this perspective is frequently overlooked or minimized, framed as belonging to the past rather than understood as a living pedagogy. This reflects the disruption of our knowledges that have always been present, caused by the way colonial systems have operated against First Nations peoples.

The ways in which Treaties are taught within education are often one-sided and shaped by a colonial lens of interpretation.

As First Nations peoples, we hold oral history that reflects our own understandings of what the Treaties were meant to represent. These understandings included the ability to continue living our ways of life - with our language, culture and spirituality intact - alongside the settlers. Treaty was not solely about land transactions. The intent of these agreements did not mean fostering dependence on government compensation, but to uphold our ability to maintain our ways of life, with support provided as necessary. We all know the narratives that have been shaped in mainstream society: narratives that depict a war that was lost and lands that were conquered. This relationship plays out between First Nations peoples and the Government of Canada through ongoing issues around healthcare, education, land and governance. First Nations continue to understand Treaty as a living relationship, while Canada often responds through policies, funding limits, and colonial legal systems.

Understanding this perspective helps explain why First Nations leaders later advocated for Treaty rights, specifically access to healthcare. This was demonstrated by leaders such as Perry Bellegarde (Little Black Bear First Nation) and Matthew T. Peigan (Pasqua First Nation), who continued to assert that Treaty 4 is not only about land, but about the health, well-being, and future of our people (Ponace, 2024). Peigan's leadership, especially as Pasqua First Nation's longest-serving Chief, reflects how treaty responsibility continued across generations (King, 2025).

This advocacy did not come from nowhere - it came from the knowledge systems our people continue to carry. What is not often shared is how First Nations peoples maintained these knowledge systems and carried these forwards into advocacy for the inherent rights within the Treaties. In plain terms, while the word 'Treaty' is used, it represents far more than a written agreement. It encompasses our entire way of life, including the responsibilities to land, language, culture, spirituality, and future generations. These were never meant to be negotiated away or signed away.

How Knowledge Was Held in Nations

In reflecting on this thought, we must shift how we understand Treaty and recognize that our knowledge systems were recorded in ways that do not align with colonial perspectives. As a result, much of this knowledge remains unknown outside of First Nations communities. To better understand this, Treaty must be understood beyond the written text and the colonial interpretations attached to it.

First Nations knowledge has long been documented in various ways, including oral histories, pictographs, traditional teachings along with song and dance, but also in modern ways such as affidavits and community records. These records reflect intentional systems of meaning-making and documentation that are grounded in First Nations worldviews. Yet, many of these forms of knowledge are overlooked, stripped of their context or confined behind glass in museums – reduced to static artifacts such as the Chief Paskwa Pictograph. Yet, these records are not always given the same weight as written documents in Canadian society. This raises important considerations about First Nations records, especially when this pictograph documents the Treaty relationship. Borrows (2005) reminds us that Indigenous legal traditions carry law, meaning, and responsibility, even when Canadian systems do not fully recognize them. This matters because Treaty is often spoken about as something from the past, while law and policy continue to shape how Treaty responsibilities are recognized, limited, or ignored today (Borrows, 2017; McCrossan, 2018). When First Nations records are minimized, law and policy do not remain neutral. They continue to rely on colonial records while treating Treaty as history rather than something living. This raises the larger question of how First Nations knowledge systems can be recognized as equal knowledge sources within legal and policy frameworks. If Canadian society relies on law and policy to determine what is valid, then these same systems must also be questioned when they continue to minimize First Nations' knowledge as culture, rather than recognizing it as law.

With this in mind, I turn to how First Nations knowledges were carried from one generation to the next. In my community of Pasqua, one of the oldest forms of this knowledge can be traced through the Chief Paskwa Pictograph (see Appendix A). It is an essential piece of our history because it is understood as the only known document in North America to show a Treaty interpretation from a First Nations perspective. (Pasqua First Nation, 2010). Our knowledges were documented not just in pictographs, but also through oral transmission. Many of us still carry knowledge passed on to us by our parents, grandparents and ancestors.

In searching for information about my Nation, it becomes clear that historical records exist but are often not properly credited. It is evident that First Nation knowledge was documented but often filtered through a Western lens and embedded in colonial systems. One example is the work of American Anthropologist David G. Mandelbaum, who documented Plains Cree life across the Prairies in Canada. Although his study was first published in 1940, I cite the 1979 edition of *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study*. Although written from his perspective and within colonial systems, First Nations knowledge remains present through the guidance of interpreters, including my great-grandfather Andrew Gordon Sr., who is listed in the transcripts (Mandelbaum, 1934). These interpreters played a central yet unrecognized role in the dissemination of information demonstrating that our knowledge systems were never absent. They have always lived and are carried within our people.

My great grandfather decided what information should be given, as well as what information should remain with the people. It is evident in reading Mandelbaum's 1934 transcripts that information was carefully screened. This is reflected in the archival record where one account notes,

"As we were talking one of the old women got suspicious and advised the old men not to talk to me, but they did not mind her much. They twice asked me what I wanted to know all this for" (Mandelbaum, 1934, July 9, para. 6).

Not only does this illustrate how First Nations peoples carefully governed the sharing of knowledge, but it also challenges the assumption that these records represent open or complete accounts. When this knowledge is reframed with this context in mind, it reveals a different understanding that challenges dominant perspectives.

Instead, what is documented reflects what was permitted to be shared within this colonial encounter. First Nations peoples exercised sovereignty through the selective sharing and protection of knowledge, determining what could be disclosed within colonial encounters and what remained within their own protocols. When searching through Mandelbaum's book *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study* (1979), there is no acknowledgment of my great-grandfather's contribution, nor many of the other First Nations peoples who shared their knowledge and contributed their experiences. The lack of recognition given to First Nations peoples from whom it originated is clear and reinforces the broader pattern of First Nations peoples being positioned without voice in the histories written about them.

Recognizing that knowledge transmission did not only occur through oral accounts is crucial in legitimizing First Nations knowledge systems. Another example is archival records that reveal that many of our people did document what was occurring in their Nations through letter writing to the Department of Indian Affairs. My great-grandfather once again engaged within the colonial systems by writing letters, which he may or may not have understood to be preserved in archives for generations to come. As one such letter states, "After stating these facts, I would be grateful if the Department would grant the discharge of my two children from the Qu'Appelle Industrial School" (Gordon, 1934, p.2). This statement demonstrates how advocacy for one's own children had to be expressed through deference to colonial systems, revealing the imbalance of power embedded within these interactions.

This is further reflected in Department of Indian Affairs correspondence, where resistance was framed through a colonial lens. In a report, Indian Agent Booth (1936) states that

"if not, I'm afraid Andrew will be a source of trouble until his children are of age" (p. 1). This characterization depicts how First Nations resistance to colonial control and efforts to protect their children were constructed as "trouble", positioning advocacy, values and sovereignty as disruption within these colonial systems. These documents confirm that First Nations peoples were not passive in colonial constructs and actively resisted how their knowledges and lives were interpreted and controlled.

How Our People Resisted

However, First Nations knowledge did not end within colonial archives. It continued within communities, families and Nation-based practices of recording and sharing information. In 2007, I created and distributed *Dibajiimo Masinahikan*, a community newspaper for Pasqua First Nations members that documented local events, histories and lived experiences. This reflects how knowledge continues to be recorded, shared, and preserved within the Nation itself. The exclusion from formal systems of evidence raises important questions about whose knowledge is valued, particularly when these records exist alongside affidavits, oral histories, and other forms of First Nations documentation that speak directly to Treaty understandings and lived realities. Despite ongoing policy efforts to silence these voices, they continue to be carried forward and remain present today within the families and communities who hold them. While it appears that First Nations peoples were not active participants in their histories or in shaping them, this is not the case. My great-grandfather, Andrew Gordon Sr., ensured that knowledge was passed onto his son Andrew Gordon Jr., and to his children, including my mother Andreanna Gordon, who passed it on to me. Our people maintained their agency and autonomy, making decisions and protecting our knowledges in ways that did not align with colonial definitions of what is considered legitimate or valid. Knowing this, our people's knowledges are no less than what is cited as evidence. Reclamation then is not only about recovering this but about living our truths, debwewin, and sharing it with others.

When examining systems created within settler society, such as health, education and justice. It becomes clear who was positioned as inferior. These settler frameworks carried beliefs about First Nations people that shaped how they were treated and viewed. These beliefs created the Residential School System, which was based on the idea that schools needed to assimilate First Nations children into mainstream society. Within the justice system, institutions positioned themselves as neutral and righteous, yet many First Nations were criminalized and treated as though they were guilty rather than innocent until proven guilty otherwise. Crosby (2021) shows how Indigenous resistance is often monitored and treated as suspicious, reflecting broader colonial patterns of surveillance and control. A similar pattern exists in healthcare, where First Nations knowledge has often been viewed as deficient, while Western medicine was positioned as being the solution to all health concerns.

Settler narratives were shaped through racism and reinforced the belief that First Nations ways of life were deficient or inferior. Without meaningful understandings of First Nations culture, language, or knowledge systems, our ways of life were often labelled as “archaic” or “backwards”. These narratives did not stay in the past. They continue to shape healthcare systems today. When our knowledge systems are framed as lesser or outdated, Indigenous health knowledge is also disregarded. Healing practices, ceremony, medicines, kinship, land-based knowledge and spiritual understandings of health are often treated as cultural beliefs rather than valid forms of health knowledge. Redvers and Blon-din (2020) provide an example of a patient who told her oncologist she was seeing a traditional healer, only to have the oncologist respond by calling the healer a “witch doctor” (p.9). This shows how First Nations health knowledge is not only disregarded but openly disrespected within Western healthcare systems. This reinforces deficit-based frameworks and positions Western medicine as the only legitimate response to First Nations health concerns, which stands in direct contrast to the original meanings embedded within Treaty relationships.

It's important to understand that from the late 1800's to the present day, Canada's treatment of the Treaty relationship shifted from one of respect and mutual agreement to one based on a colonial agenda of control. This became even clearer with the introduction of the Indian Act of 1876. This policy reinforced the systems that continue to exist and regulate the narratives of First Nations and Indigenous peoples today. The Indian Act of 1876 reinforced a colonial system of control that reached into the “social, cultural, economic, political, gender and even spiritual” dimensions of First Nations life (Richmond & Cook, 2016, p. 3). Its impacts are still felt in healthcare, where poverty, overcrowding and limited access to resources continue to shape the health and well-being of our people. These inequities were not created by First Nations peoples, but by policies that continue to influence access, care and outcomes today.

Healthcare as Treaty: First Nations Understandings of Indian Hospitals

This control over First Nations' lives and well-being was not only written in policy – it was carried out through healthcare systems and later through institutions such as Indian Hospitals. As shared through a family-held interview, my grandfather, Andrew Gordon Jr., recalled an account from the 1920s where First Nations peoples were excluded from settler healthcare systems due to racist beliefs about disease and contamination. He recounts being told by a settler healthcare worker “...we cannot accept any Indian in our hospitals, because they'll pass it on to the people and then to our children” (A. Gordon Jr., personal communication, July 14, 2000). This illustrates how First Nations peoples were not only denied access to care but were also constructed as a threat within settler healthcare systems. It was within this context of exclusion, racism and the denial of Treaty-based responsibilities that the need for First Nations-controlled healthcare spaces emerged. One of the truths that exist in our knowledge system is the story of how Indian hospitals came to be in Canada. Due to the emerging narratives of First Nations peoples, our people understood that we needed to

maintain our ways of life and did so under Treaty implementation. "Later on, my dad set up a Treaty organization so that the government would honour Treaties. He wanted a school and a hospital for our people. They got the Indian Hospital at Fort Qu'Appelle for the Qu'Appelle bands" (Gordon, 2003, as cited in Pasqua First Nation, 2003, Book I, p. 3). The advocacy of an Indian hospital was not a passive response but a deliberate and intentional assertion of Treaty rights. For First Nations leaders, access to healthcare was understood as part of the Treaty relationship and the responsibilities promised by the Crown. Their advocacy showed that healthcare was not a favour being asked for, but an obligation that Canada was required to uphold.

In Treaty 4 territory in the early 1920s, Nations came together including Pasqua, Muscowpetung and Piapot Bands to discuss the health crisis that was facing our people (A. Gordon Jr., personal communication, July 14, 2000). Named by Indian Affairs as the Qu'Appelle Agency, spokespeople within these bands gathered to strategize what could be done to help their people. The representatives for the Bands included my great-grandfather Andrew Gordon Sr., alongside Chief Ben Paskwa of Pasqua First Nation, Pat Cappel and Charlie Pratt of Muscowpetung First Nation, and Abel Watetch and Harry Ball of Piapot First Nation. Together, they formed an organization called the Allied Bands (Saskatchewan Indian, 2000) and later changed its name to the Protective Association for the Indians and their Treaties (Pitsula, 1994, p. 134). Their advocacy focused on the original promises outlined in the Treaties. One of their concerns was obtaining a hospital for their people.

As a result, people in the Nations started fundraising to support the spokespeople who would travel to Ottawa to present their grievances and proposals grounded in Treaty, a reality long held in oral histories and reflected in historical accounts (Lux, 2016). Oral history describes how people sold pickets and wood, held box socials, and sold baked goods to raise funds. As my grandfather recounts, "In 1928 then they got ready. And how were they going to pay their passage over there? Alright now, the people sold wood, sold pickets, everything they could. They used to have box socials,

selling cakes, pies, and everything. And this is the way they got their money" (A. Gordon Jr., personal communication, July 14, 2000). He further explains that they even obtained a permit from the Indian Agent to sell cattle to settlers. These efforts demonstrate not just resilience, but intentional collective action grounded in Treaty responsibilities and the protection of our people.

Oral histories passed down through my family recount that these leaders travelled to Ottawa despite the restrictions imposed by the pass system, which limited the movement of First Nations peoples under the Indian Act. While they informed the Indian Agent of their intended travel, they strategically left the night before to avoid surveillance by the North-West Mounted Police. My great-grandfather travelled to a train stop outside of the reserve at Moscow, where they boarded a train through Melville and Winnipeg, eventually arriving in Ottawa. As my grandfather recounts, "While this fellow was searching, searching the trains here, those guys were walking around in the House of Commons" (A. Gordon Jr., personal communication, July 14, 2000).

This moment in our history shows intentional and strategic leadership, as our people navigated colonial systems to uphold Treaty responsibilities and protect our communities. What they believed to be active movements of resistance fulfilling these Treaty responsibilities, the Canadian government turned these obligations into a segregated system of Indian hospitals, which controlled access to care and limited what Treaty promises were meant to uphold.

In the 1930s in Treaty 4 territory, the Fort Qu'Appelle Indian Hospital was built. First Nations peoples believed they were receiving their Treaty right to healthcare. However, these hospitals became key sites of structural violence within Canadian healthcare. They became mechanisms of control over First Nations autonomy, and without explicitly recognizing it they controlled and exercised their domination over First Nations bodies and communities.

This shift was particularly evident during the tuberculosis epidemic of the early 1900s. Originally understood as "the White Plague", tuberculosis became reframed as an "Indian

problem" as infection rates rose in communities already impacted by colonial conditions. "Secondly, disease is scattered by the association of Indian people with Whites in work, travel and exploration" (Steward, D. A. 1936, p.675). In this respect, although initially contracted and spread by settlers, the responsibility was displaced from systemic factors onto First Nations peoples themselves. "First Nations peoples were increasingly constructed as "unhygienic", "diseased", or incapable of caring for themselves, while Western medicine was positioned as the necessary solution" (Meijer Drees, L., 1996, p.160). Intrinsic within these narratives were the ideologies of First Nations peoples being apathetic in their care, "the poorer health conditions are, the more apathetic are the patients" (Moore, P.E., 1946, p. 141).

These narratives hid the realities of how our people were living and actively resisting. My grandmother Rosabelle Gordon recalls visiting her grandmother who had tuberculosis, "She stayed in a tent on the reserve, away from everyone else" (Gordon, R. personal communication, July 14, 2000). Families took measures to prevent illness, isolating sick relatives away from others. The loss of her family members from tuberculosis speaks to how rampant it was within our Nations. These accounts challenge dominant narratives by revealing not neglect or apathy, but rather the care, adaptation, and community responsibility in the face of limited resources our Nations were facing.

Within Indian Hospitals, separation became a defining feature. "Indian hospitals as sites of confinement and control worked to isolate disease and continue the state's assimilationist agenda by other means" (M.K. Lux, 2010, p.28). First Nations peoples were often taken far from their communities, sometimes for months or years, resulting in isolation, loss of language and disconnection from family. Some never returned home. While individual healthcare workers may have acted with care, the system itself functioned within a colonial structure that treated First Nations peoples differently and reinforced inequities. To a much greater extent these harms that were done on First Nations peoples are being brought to light today. For example, when First Nations patients or families have to advocate to be

heard, believed or treated with dignity, colonial perceptions of stereotypes and barriers are present that continue to impact safe and respectful care. This changes the treatment plan for that person, which often results in more harm being done.

Family Legacy Inside Healthcare

The legacy of Indian Hospitals is still felt today in all aspects of healthcare. These systems were not abstract policies but are living realities that shape experiences of healthcare across generations, including within my own family.

My family's presence within healthcare systems across generations reflects both the impact of colonial institutions and the continued role of First Nations people as caregivers within these same systems. My grandmother Rosabelle Gordon was a Residential School survivor. A Nakota, Assiniboin Sioux, woman from Carry the Kettle Nakota Nation, who was taken to Brandon Residential School in Manitoba. She was raised within a system of assimilation and religious indoctrination. Despite this, she succeeded within this system. In a 1936 student record, my grandmother is described as "one of our most promising girls. Hard working and reliable" (Department of Indian Affairs, 1936, p.5). This highlights the colonial ideas of control and reinforces the negative narratives of First Nations peoples.

My grandmother graduated and entered the nursing field, becoming one of the early First Nations Registered Nurses in Canada, though what is formally documented in history differs from what is held within our knowledges because she is not credited anywhere. She began her career in Norway House First Nation and later became a head nurse at the Fort Qu'Appelle Indian Hospital in the 1950s-60s. Within our family and community, she is remembered as delivering many babies around the Qu'Appelle Valley and was known for her compassion and care.

She worked as a nurse most of her life, becoming ill in her seventies after contracting Addison's disease as a result of tuberculosis exposure. I was fortunate to have had her in my life from her seventies until her early nineties when she passed away in 2005. Her spirit

name was White Star Woman, given to her by her grandfather Dry Bones, because he had seen her in white. Just days before she was taken to residential school he gifted each of his grandchildren, including my grandmother, an eagle feather which symbolized an act of cultural continuity in the face of impending separation and institutional control (Benjoe, 2015). Although these expressions of identity were quickly targeted, as my mother recalls, “they took the feather away when she got to school”, but she “still had her name” (Benjoe, 2015). This moment illustrates both the deliberate disruption of First Nation identity through colonial systems and the persistence of cultural knowledge that could not be fully removed. Although my grandmother did not actively practice her traditional and spiritual ways of life, she embodied many of their values and passed on teachings that helped reclaim pieces of who we are.

Her story shares the complexity of First Nations presence within colonial systems where she worked within institutions that were often harmful to our people, yet she still embodied care, strength and responsibility to her people. My grandmother recalls how traditional medicines were used by patients but often had to be hidden: “Somebody made it for her. I didn’t ask her. She drank that all the time. In the hospital the new matron she searched all of them, all the patients who had Indian medicine. And all the nurses hid that thing, behind their backs...” (Gordon, R., personal communication, July 14, 2000). This emphasizes the perspective of how our traditional healing ways were minimized, disregarded and often dismissed as unscientific or irrelevant, limiting its legitimacy within formal healthcare systems.

I often wonder if she understood the system that she was working in. At the same time, I recognize the strength and determination she carried in caring for our people. That sense of responsibility didn’t end with her, it continued across generations. Her memory reflects what it meant to provide comfort and advocacy within systems not built for First Nations peoples. In this way, debwewin is shown as truth carried through memory, lived experience and the responsibility to act on what has been passed down

These teachings, along with the commitments carried forward into the next generation, shaping our family’s presence within healthcare systems. The same systems that once sought to erase us. My mother Andreanna Gordon continued this path, entering healthcare and carrying forward the legacy of my grandmother. She became a Licensed Practical Nurse in the 1970’s after graduating from Red River College in Manitoba. As shared in a *Regina Leader-Post* feature, my mother initially resisted healthcare “because she knew how time consuming such a career could be and she didn’t want that for herself” (Benjoe, 2015). She too later became employed at the Fort Qu’Appelle Indian Hospital.

My mother had a deep passion for helping others, which extended into supporting our Nation. She went on to become the Health Director of Pasqua First Nation, helping to establish our Nation’s first community health clinic. Her work illustrates a broader commitment to community wellness and self-determination. This intergenerational transmission of care extended into my own path, as I became a Licensed Practical Nurse, navigating the same healthcare systems shaped by colonial policy. Yet, like the generations before me, my presence within these spaces is not passive. I carry forward the teachings, resilience, responsibility and continued commitment to our people. In this way our presence within healthcare is not simply participation, but a continuation of Treaty, responsibility and resistance.

This intergenerational experience illustrates how colonial systems not only disrupted our knowledge systems, but also defined what is now recognized as legitimate knowledge, privileging Western medical frameworks. These systems disrupted First Nations knowledge by separating the body from the spirit and dismissing wholistic approaches to health that had been sustained across generations. This did not occur by accident, but rather through intentional processes, along with policy that controlled how knowledge was recorded, interpreted and transmitted. It is not confined to the past and continues to influence present-day healthcare outcomes and relationships with healthcare systems for First Nations peoples in Canada.

Ongoing Impacts

The impacts of these historical systems continue today, as structural violence shapes First Nations health outcomes through inequities in access, treatment, and trust within healthcare systems. Despite these ongoing impacts, there is evidence that federal narratives have minimized or omitted the history of Indian hospitals, contributing to broader erasure of their role in shaping present-day inequities (Drohan 2017, p. 6). Efforts continue to reclaim First Nations knowledge, restore balance, and reassert self-determined approaches to health and healing.

One example of this is the All Nations Healing Hospital, built in 2004, replacing the Fort Qu'Appelle Indian Hospital after sustained advocacy by First Nations leaders, "this hospital is symbolic of our determination to control the delivery of our own health care, and our treaty right to medical care" (Ewart 2023, p. 222). This demonstrates a continuation of advocacy dating back to the early 1900s, when First Nations leaders first pushed for a hospital grounded in Treaty rights.

Reclamation is not only about restoring what was disrupted, but also about asserting the continued presence and strength of First Nations ways of knowing within contemporary healthcare contexts. These approaches emphasize balance, connection and responsibility offering pathways to healing that extend beyond Western biomedical models.

However, the impacts of the colonial systems continue to persist with leadership and decision-making still grounded in settler perspectives. Without meaningful inclusion of First Nations voices in policy development, implementation, and the foundations of care, including nursing, these systems risk reproducing the very inequities they seek to address. Colonial systems continue to shape healthcare in ways that reproduce anti-Indigenous racism (Essien, D. M. A., 2025, p. 45).

Until First Nations knowledge systems are not only acknowledged but actively centred, healthcare institutions will continue to perpetuate systemic racism and structural inequities that shape the health and well-being of First Nations peoples. Grounded in

Treaty, the path forward is one of responsibility, one that calls for the centering of First Nations knowledge systems to ensure healthcare upholds the rights, dignity, and well-being of our people.

Understanding healthcare as a Treaty responsibility requires acknowledging both the ongoing impacts of colonial systems and the implementation of First Nation knowledge systems and advocacy moving forward. This work has traced how narratives about First Nations peoples were constructed, distorted, and institutionalized through colonial systems, particularly within healthcare. These narratives did not emerge by accident. They were shaped through policies, laws, and practices that positioned First Nations peoples as inferior and incapable, while elevating Western systems as necessary and superior. Within this context, Indian hospitals became more than sites of healthcare; they became sites of control, segregation, and structural violence.

Yet, these imposed narratives stand in direct contradiction to our own understandings. Oral histories, family teachings, and community knowledge continue to affirm that healthcare was always understood as a Treaty right, grounded in relationship, responsibility, and mutual obligation. Our ancestors were not passive recipients of care, but active leaders who advocated, organized, and fought to uphold these responsibilities. The story of leaders travelling to Ottawa, raising funds through community effort, and strategically navigating colonial restrictions reflects not only resistance, but the responsibility of Treaty obligations that our Nations uphold.

At the same time, the reality of Indian hospitals reveals a painful truth: what was believed to be an affirmation of Treaty became entangled within a broader system of assimilation and control. The promise of care was transformed into experiences of separation, loss, and harm. Families were divided, cultural practices were suppressed, and First Nations bodies were regulated within institutions that rarely addressed the root causes of illness. These systems reshaped public perception, reinforcing harmful stereotypes while obscuring the structural conditions imposed on First Nations communities.

Despite this, our people endured and continued to endure. Within these systems, First Nations caregivers, like my grandmother, carried forward care in quiet and powerful ways, often holding onto cultural knowledge even when it had to be hidden. These acts were not small; they were forms of resistance, expressions of responsibility, and continuations of our ways of knowing. This strength carried into the next generation, as my mother worked within healthcare and contributed to building community-based services grounded in our Nation's needs.

This legacy continues with me. My presence within healthcare is not separate from this history. It is shaped by it. It reflects both the impact of colonial systems and the enduring strength of our people to remain, adapt, and reclaim space within them.

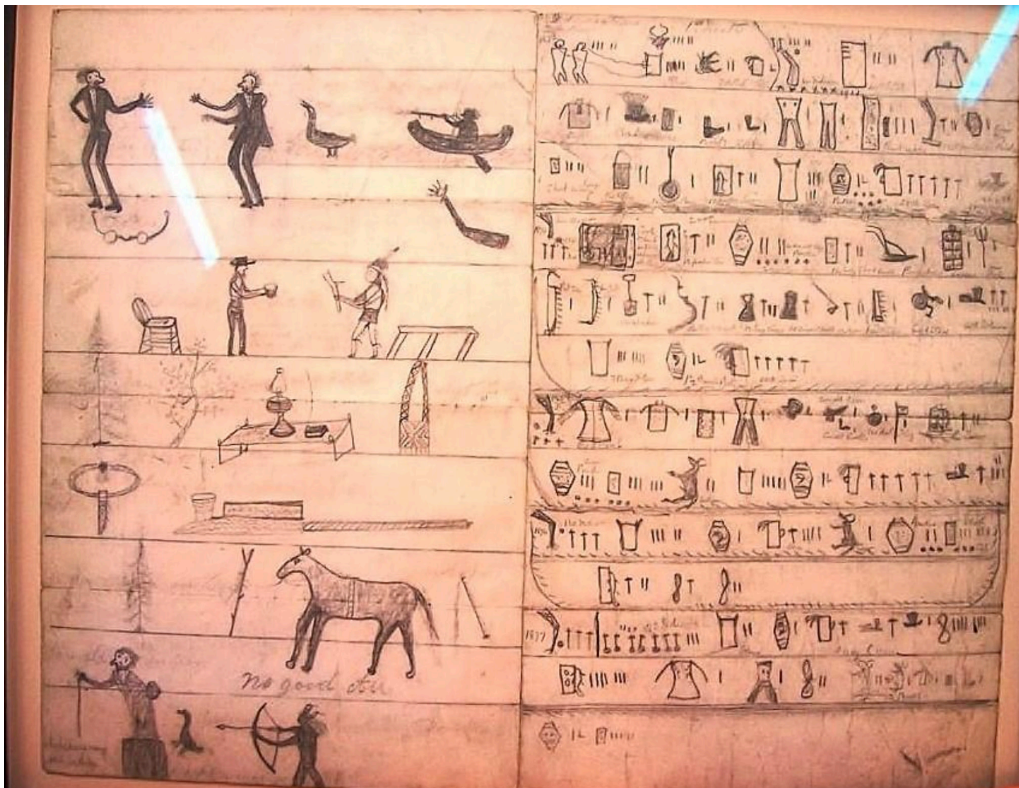
Ultimately, this work challenges dominant narratives by centering our own truths, grounded in *debwewin*, living truth carried through our responsibilities, histories and relationships. It affirms that First Nations peoples have always been knowledge holders, advocates, and caregivers, guided by *zhawenamin*, a love and compassion that calls us to care for one another and uphold our responsibilities. In doing so, it calls for a re-examining of healthcare systems, not only as sites of harm, but as spaces where Treaty responsibilities must be recognized, honoured, and upheld.

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Appendix A Chief Paskwa Pictograph and Treaty Relationship

Note. Personal photograph of the Chief Paskwa pictograph taken by the author at the homecoming/ repatriation on Pasqua First Nation in June 2007. This image is included with respect to its meaning as a First Nations record connected to Treaty relationships and the ongoing meaning carried through First Nations knowledge systems.

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FROM SILENCE TO VOICE: Storytelling, Identity, and Indigenous Language Sustainability

ABSTRACT

Languages carry stories, ancestral knowledge, cultural values, and collective memories that cannot be fully translated into another tongue. Yet across the globe, many Indigenous languages are fading at an alarming rate. In 2016, UNESCO reported that nearly 40 percent of the world's languages are at risk of disappearing. This decline represents not only linguistic loss but also a profound cultural displacement. For linguistically diverse countries like Nigeria, which is home to over 500 oral languages, the digital transmission of these languages has become a critical strategy for their preservation and long-term sustainability (UNESCO, 2016). Reclaiming these languages therefore requires innovative and culturally grounded strategies, one of which lies in the enduring powers of storytelling. Nigeria's multilingual landscape is undergoing rapid cultural and linguistic erosion, particularly among minority languages such as Urhobo. This article proposes storytelling as a pedagogy approach in revitalizing Indigenous languages, identity formation, and educational equity for Indigenous students. Leveraging digital tools and platforms not only supports documentation but also strengthens intergenerational transmission, ensuring that these languages continue to thrive in an increasingly globalized world. The article concludes by presenting a digital storytelling platform as practical pathways for linguistic justice and cultural sustainability.

Childhood Foundations: Language as Identity and Belonging

Growing up in a rural Urhobo-speaking community in Delta State, Nigeria, my earliest encounters with learning were deeply grounded in cultural and linguistic belonging. Urhobo was not just a language; it was a lifestyle, a knowledge system, and a cultural compass through which I saw myself and still see myself today. At both home and school, Urhobo was the medium through which we learned to count, solve problems, and express

ideas. Numbers were first introduced in Urhobo before being translated into English, and the alphabet was taught using native Urhobo vowels. Addition and subtraction exercises were explained in the local dialect, and storytelling rich with proverbs, folktales, and moral lessons was a central learning strategy. In the classroom, every word spoken carried a story, reaching far beyond textbooks and lessons, as seen in these daily classroom

expressions.

- › *obo forho obo uye obo fon* - When hand washes hand, it makes it clean (being our brother's keeper)
- › *owoh owoh she koh owoh* - You fall for me I fall for you (we grow when we cooperate).

These expressions simply mean one thing, that we all need each other to advance in this world. This reflected our deep communal orientation and affirmed our shared identity. Learning was relational, practical, and culturally immersive, was never isolated or individualized. I belonged to my community, and my community belonged to me. Education affirmed who I was because it was rooted in the traditions and values of my community. My home, school, and the community at large were all seamlessly connected. I felt celebrated, safe, and seen, Omor'oto (child of the land); that is who I was. My parents' physical presence was not necessary for me to behave or understand my role in the world in my community. I was reared in the village where there is a shared task of growing up; every child was a sibling, every adult a guardian, and every elder teacher. Instead of individualism, the collective rhythm that bound us all together established my identity. Some of the most formative memories unfolded under the large village tree, illuminated by the soft glow of a kerosene-fueled lantern. That space was our classroom, our theatre, and our cultural archive. We gathered there at night; children, elders, and neighbors listening to stories of the tortoise, the hornbill, and other farm animals whose adventures carried moral lessons and cultural wisdom. Those storytelling nights, along with the dance festivals where I proudly participated, were not just entertainment but identity-forming experiences. Through them, I learned confidence, expression, humility, and the joy of belonging to something larger than myself.

I was never afraid to express myself whether through traditional dancing, singing, or simply sitting among other children absorbing the stories that shaped our worldview. Sharing these stories with my teachers was effortless because there was no language barrier separating my home life from my school life. The language of learning was the language of living. My teachers understood the

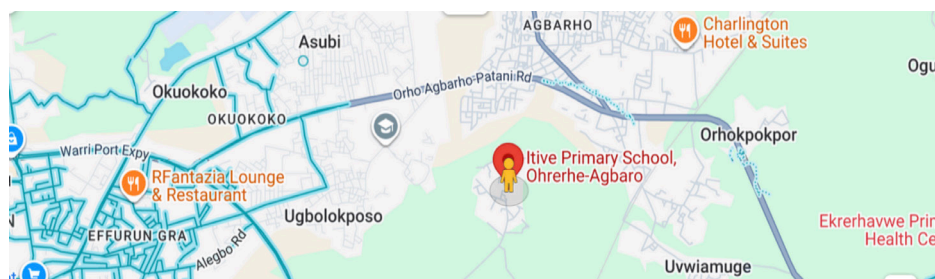
metaphors, humor, and cultural references embedded in the tales. This alignment created a learning environment where I could bring my whole self, my culture, my voice, and my experiences without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. These early experiences formed the foundation of my identity, they taught me that learning flourishes when it is rooted in community, when language is honored, and when children are invited to express themselves freely through story, movement, and cultural practice. As an Omor'oto, the land, the people, and the stories served as my moral compass; respect was absorbed rather than enforced, and responsibility was modelled rather than commanded. I discovered early on that my actions reflected the entire community that raised me, not just my family. My adult life is still shaped by the qualities of humility, empathy, and accountability that this community upbringing instilled in me. Some of the most formative memories.

From Belonging to Silence: Language Trauma experiences

After completing my primary education at the age of eleven, I felt hunger for more: more learning, more possibility, and more of the world beyond what my village could offer. Yet the village was my comfort. I grew up wrapped in its calm, quiet and peaceful nights, walking home under the moonlight after an evening spent under the village tree where stories were told, and dances carried my laughter, as perfection was not required, just presence. These moments filled me with joy and at the same time awakened a desire for education that I could not ignore. I loved my village, but I knew that staying meant accepting limits I was not ready to accept. That love for home and longing for education pulled me in two directions. It pushed me forward in the end.

I saw that I could take my community with me, even though I was leaving it. I could love where I came from and still look for what was next. So, I left. I moved from the rural paths that I knew so well to the unfamiliar rhythm of the urban world. It was a change of hope, curiosity and the conviction that home is not only a place you stay but a place you

Figure 1:
Google maps
location
of authors
childhood
school.
(Google,
2022)



carry as you grow. That journey changed me; it opened my eyes to new possibilities while reminding me of the beauty of where I came from. (Image from google map,)

The transition from my childhood learning environment to urban schooling marked a profound rupture in my linguistic and cultural identity. That affirmation of self was replaced with silence when English was imposed. Urhobo was discouraged and speaking it was punishable by the school standards set by the colonial masters over a century ago and still in practice after independence obtained in 1960. The language that has shaped my earliest memories, my sense of belonging, and my understanding of the world became something forbidden. What I experienced was a kind of language trauma, a painful separation from words that expressed who I was. I remembered the confusion of being unable to express myself freely, the fear each time an Urhobo word slipped out, and the shame that followed the discipline meant to “correct” me. My identity, once celebrated in my community, became something I was taught to hide at the urban school. Ugwu (2025) expresses these traumatic memories in her work *Supporting Young People’s Identity through Translanguaging in English as a Second Language Classroom*, which examines Igbo-speaking students in Nsukka in southeastern Nigeria, taught in strict English-only classrooms shaped by colonial legacy. She noted the effects of suppressing their home language, lead to feelings of inadequacy and cultural disconnect, and offered translanguaging as a means of promoting healing and recognition. Even more confusing for me was that French, another European language with no connection to my culture and identity was made a compulsory subject, yet my native language had no place in the curriculum. Sadly, this is the case until date.

Agwu (2019) observes that the growing prestige attached to English and French has increasingly marginalized Nigeria Indigenous languages. According to him, both schools and families prioritize the colonial languages and treat them as a marker of social mobility, while Indigenous languages are dismissed as lacking and inferior. This institutional and parental preference accelerates the marginalization of native languages and weakens cultural identity. This social pressure does not remain abstract; it shapes children’s identities and classroom experiences in profound ways. I lived this reality. My peers mocked me, calling me “the native girl” who could not form a complete sentence in English without mixing in her local dialect. This reflected what Agwu (2019) described where fluency in Indigenous languages is treated as a deficiency rather than a strength. I became quiet and withdrawn. I turned to books and this gradually improved my English language proficiency. Agwu (2019) points out that a child who is grounded in their native language early in life not only becomes fluent in it but is also better equipped to learn additional languages. My silence was never a sign of incapacity but the consequence of an educational system that rejected the language through which I first understood the world.

Attending university was not different because all instructions were conducted in English. There was no space for local languages, cultural references, or Indigenous knowledge systems. It was a rigid, British-structured curriculum designed to prepare us as global citizens, but being a global citizen meant not speaking the local language, acting in ways that were seen as modern, and judging my intelligence by how well I spoke English. Education was competitive and individualistic, a far cry from the communal, story-centred, and identity-affirming learning I had known and experienced in my rural schooling as a child.

Academic performance results were posted publicly, and subtle rivalries emerged. The environment encouraged academic performance but discouraged cultural self-awareness and communal cooperation. One might assume that this experience occurred in a distant region of Nigeria, perhaps somewhere far removed from my cultural roots.



Figure 2: Image of map showing Urhobo land.
(101 Last Tribes, n.d.)

The Urhobo people are one of the main ethnic groupings in Delta State, where I finished both my school and university education. With numerous kingdoms and settlements dispersed around the area, the Urhobo nation makes up a sizeable percentage of Delta State's 25 local government areas. However, my language had no place in the classroom, even in a country where my people are both historically and numerically present. Urhobo was viewed as outdated, unimportant, or even inferior. It hurts to see this inconsistency. How was I denied the opportunity to speak Urhobo in school although I was surrounded by Urhobo land, people, and culture? How could my mother tongue be completely banned while French, a language with no cultural or historical ties to my town, was required? The message was very clear; I was expected to distance myself from myself, as I attained formal education to fit in. (Image credit 101 Last Tribe, n.d)

After graduation, I completed my mandatory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) assignment in a rural community, a turning point in my professional life. I was posted to teach Economics to senior secondary students, most of which were rural children. In this school, teachers were permitted to explain complex ideas in their native languages. That permission transformed teaching into a

powerful, human experience. I rediscovered the joy of education as a relational, inclusive process. I did not just teach; I organized seminars and activities, especially girls, drawing on my own experiences and passion for empowerment. I saw myself in that community and found joy in making learning meaningful.

Although I found fulfilment in teaching, I eventually pursued a professional path in the banking sector. This shift was necessitated by the rural school's inability to retain me due to budget constraints. My first place of assignment in the banking job was in a community where Urhobo was still widely spoken, and daily interactions were comfortably conducted in the Indigenous language. However, I was later transferred to a city branch where most of the clientele were young adults. When I spoke Urhobo with them, many responded with discomfort or resistance. One remark struck me: *Urhobo is for old people*. That statement stayed with me. How did we come to drift so far from our roots? How did a language once used for teaching mathematics and values become something to be ashamed of? Their uneasiness reflected a larger social tendency that Agwu (2019) draws attention to, young people increasingly view Indigenous languages as outdated, uncool, or without any sort of social advantage. Youth's usage of their mother tongues has steadily decreased because of this mindset shift. They now distance themselves from their linguistic heritage and identify prestige and modernity with English and French.

Language is not just communication but a carrier of identity, worldview, and intergenerational belonging (Broberg, 2022). These languages encode ways of understanding the worlds that are deeply rooted in land, community, spirituality, and relationality. Some of which cannot be fully expressed in English or any other dominant languages. Broberg (2022) further argues that the loss of Indigenous languages can cause a break in cultural identity and a sense of alienation from one's ancestry. Speaking one's native tongue becomes a statement of identity, rooting people in their heritage, origins, and identities. Language reclamation promotes cultural continuity, pride, and a sense of true belonging. Additionally, it rebuilds links between generations through

shared stories, teachings, and oral traditions. This is what Broberg (2022) described as a form of *living Memory*. Reclaiming Indigenous languages should therefore be an intentional cultural and political action. It resists historical erasure by all factors that have contributed to the loss of languages.

Global Context: Indigenous Language Decline

My experience of linguistic suppression in school was deeply personal, yet it is not unique to me alone. What happened to me is part of a much larger pattern, one that extends beyond Delta State, beyond Nigeria, and beyond the African continent. Around the world, Indigenous people face similar ruptures. The silencing of their mother tongues, the devaluing of their cultural knowledge, and the gradual elimination of the stories that once shaped their identities. My story is one thread in a global fabric of language suppression.

When I came to Canada, I learned that my story of language and identity suppression was also the story of Indigenous peoples in Canada who were robbed of these essential rights through the massive colonial project in residential schools. I only learned about the residential school system after I enrolled in the Master of Education program at TRU. I initially enrolled in supply chain management due to its job prospects rather than personal meaning. However, I felt disconnected because many of the courses mirrored my university experience, heavily exam-focused and driven by career preparation while lacking relational depth. The turning point for me was being invited by a friend to the capstone paper presentations in the Master of Education. Something ignited me when I read project posters that challenged systemic injustice, educational inequity, and curriculum exclusion as I moved around the room. I recognized myself in those inquiries. I witnessed my early years, my hardships in urban schools, the erasure of my silent objections, and my happy rediscovery when serving in the youth corp. I recalled the delight of sharing stories, the teachings infused with proverbs, and the satisfaction of witnessing students' smiles as knowledge was applied to their everyday

lives. I knew that day that I needed to make a change.

My earlier academic experience at the same institution had been entirely exam-driven, test-focused, and lacking Indigenous content. Both programs exist in the same university, yet they felt like two different worlds. It was shocking how drastically different they were; there was no mention of Indigenous histories and no engagement in the supply management program. I had no idea prior to this that Canada had an Indigenous population that has endured generations of cultural suppression through the residential school system. As Toth (2022) noted, a similar pattern is evident globally, where colonial systems, residential schooling, and dominant-language education have limited Indigenous peoples from their linguistic and cultural heritage. These realities were not visible until I entered the Master of Education program where this injustice was openly discussed. Indigenous viewpoints, decolonizing methods, and critical reflection served as the foundation for the curriculum, conversations, and learning environment. The history of residential schools and their continuing effects on Indigenous communities were introduced to me for the first time. The encounter was enlightening. It exposed the extent of Canada's colonial heritage as well as the worldwide trends in educational institutions that marginalize, silence, or erase Indigenous identities trends that mirrored my personal experiences silence.

Nigeria Language Policy and Pedagogical Approaches

Nigeria's language policy has long reflected a tension between the recognition of Indigenous languages and their limited implementation in classrooms. Although policies such as the 2013 National Policy on Education emphasized the use of mother-tongue as a foundation for learning and cultural preservation, these aims remained largely inspirational due to weak implementation, framework, and lack of researchable models. In November 2022, the Federal Executive Council approved a new National Language Policy that could have been a turning point. (Premium Times, 2022; Nigerian Educational

Research and Development Council, 2022). Its goal was to change how primary education is structured. A key aspect of this reform is a requirement for teaching the child's first language for the first six years of school. This is a big change from decades of English-centered teaching. By the middle of 2023, there were still no clear standards for full execution, which made the deployment unclear and incomplete (Daily Trust, 2024).

Theoretical contributions from scholars like Bamgbose, 2000; Cummins, 2000; Garcia & Wei (2022). and Paris, D. (2012) further reinforced the value of additive bilingualism, translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy. However, their application in Nigeria remains limited due to structural and institutional constraints, and how colonial hierarchy has elevated English while devaluing Indigenous languages, resulting in policy responses being weak, fragmented, and mostly symbolic. These systemic inadequacies are compounded by a lack of trained teachers in Indigenous pedagogies, educational resources and standardized orthographies. Sociopolitical factors that connect English to mobility and prestige help maintain its dominance, while school policies that discourage or punish Indigenous language use reinforce this hierarchy in the day-to-day activity of the education system (Imam, 2012). Experimental initiatives like The Six-Year Primary Project (SYPP) in Yorubaland and The Rivers Reader Project have worked in the past (Francomacaro, 1994).

The SYPP was introduced in the 1970s and early 1980s and was based on the use of Yoruba as the medium of instruction in primary schools and the gradual introduction of English as a topic. Students in the program routinely outperformed their counterparts in English-only schools with higher reading, understanding and long-term academic improvements. Similarly, the Rivers Readers Project created graded readers and teaching materials in local languages such as Kalabari, Nembe and Okrika, training teachers to use culturally known stories and vocabulary to promote early literacy (Francomacaro, 1994). These programs enhanced educational achievements and promoted cultural pride, illustrating that Indigenous education is both feasible and advantageous when sufficiently

supported (Fafunwa et al., 1989; Franco-macaro, 1994). However, their impact stayed locally within their region of implementation. The lack of impact at the national level could be attributed to insufficient political and institutional support over time. Moreover, colonial linguistic hierarchies that positioned English as superior, language policies which do not translate into classroom implementation, insufficient financial resources, gaps in teacher education programs (e.g., lack of Indigenous pedagogies), absence of teaching materials in Indigenous languages, and institutional practices that often discourage or punish the use of Indigenous Languages, are persistent barriers to the flourishing of Indigenous languages in the education system.

Another critical gap in existing approaches is the lack of meaningful engagement with urban youth and the limited integration of digital platforms. Hassan (2024) refers to this issue as colonial alienation, which constitutes a psychological and cultural dislocation that hinders the formation of identity. Trudell (2018) points out that several language programs do not engage young individuals, particularly in urban settings, owing to the insufficient utilization of participatory platforms and digital technologies that correspond with their lived experiences and media consumption patterns. Additionally, current models often fail to address the complexity of the multilingual classrooms, particularly in the Nigerian context where linguistic diversity, lack of code-switching practices and models, unequal language status, gap in language policy and place-based realities shape learners' experiences. Maybe it is time to change the narrative from one that is primarily focused on deficits to one that emphasizes possibility, agency, and strategic opportunity, even though historical truth should never be underestimated.

As Imam (2012) emphasizes, meaningful transformation in contemporary times necessitates addressing these historical legacies and promoting inclusive language policies that respect Nigeria's cultural and linguistic diversity. Colonialism has left a mark on Africa that goes far beyond politics and economics. Instead of becoming mirrored in cycles of blame or remembrance, we might

reconceptualize language as a potent tool for the future rather than as a casualty of past events. In today's globalized environment, multilingualism especially the capacity to communicate in both Indigenous and foreign languages offer substantial benefits. Multilingual people are better suited for positions in transnational leadership, international organizations, diplomacy, and global research networks (Cecchi-Dimeglio, 2024). Notable Nigerian Leaders like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who has held senior roles at the World Bank and is now the director-general of the World Trade Organization, speaks Igbo her mother tongue, English, and has working knowledge of French. Her multilingual competence supports her ability to engage with diverse stakeholders across regions (Those Who Inspire, n.d.)

Beyond these opportunities, emerging research highlights the cognitive benefits of multilingualism (Bialystok et al., 2012; Kuo et al., 2017). Growing up with two or more languages can fundamentally reshape the brain, promoting capacities like tolerance for ambiguity knowing fully well that not all Indigenous words can be translated, cognitive flexibility, and long-term neural resilience (Brown, 2026). By reframing from the conversation in this way, we can advocate for what can be gained instead of grieving what was lost. It presents

language as a strategic asset that boosts global competitiveness, extends opportunity, and maintains identity. More significantly, it encourages communities, educators, and policymakers to view the restoration of languages as an investment in a more inclusive, culturally grounded, and globally relevant future rather than just as a recovery effort.

A promising way to close the persistent gap between policy and practice in Indigenous education is to combine an Indigenized curriculum with digital storytelling platforms such as community-rooted websites. Fu et al, (2024) demonstrates that GenAI-enabled storytelling participants articulate personal narratives and community knowledge tied to cultural locations, promoting deep critical thinking and heritage preservation. As UNESCO reported in 2016 which was updated in 2023, digital technologies now serve as a powerful tool for preserving Indigenous Languages. Its Digital initiatives for Indigenous Languages toolkit outlines eight principles to achieve these goals; facilitating, multiplying, normalizing, educating, reclaiming, imagining, defending, and protecting (UNESCO 2023) This strategy could tackle systemic problems of language loss by using technology to protect and educate Indigenous languages, getting young people involved and community-based digital

Figure 3: Culturally Sustaining Storytelling and Language Framework (Canva, 2026) (Flowchart created and designed in Canva and enhanced with guidance from Microsoft Copilot)



archives, and helping multilingual classrooms with adaptable, customized content. It would also fit with worldwide movements of language justice and cultural sustainability, while still being based in Nigeria's own context. This technique not only builds on what we already know, but it also pushes the limits of what we know. It offers a transformative approach to rethinking Nigeria's education and culture policies one that strengthens communities, respects Indigenous history, and encourages a stronger sense of national identity. By aligning policy, pedagogy, and technology, it offers a pathway towards sustainable language revitalization that supports both cultural identity and global engagement

In figure 3, I propose a storytelling-centered teaching framework that positions narrative inquiry as the core pedagogical practice of Indigenous language sustainability. Surrounding that foundation is the translanguaging practices where students are allowed to switch between languages in interpretation of meaning and knowledge expressions, while cultural continuity reflects living practices across community and digital spaces. The other layers represent the outcome and benefit envisioned when this framework is employed including but not limited to Identity strengthening, Intergenerational continuity, cognitive development and global relevance in terms of diplomacy and transnational leadership. Storytelling in this framework is seen as not just a method of teaching; it is also the way language, identity, and cultural knowledge are made, shared, and kept alive. I learned true perseverance and harmony between land, people, and spirituality while

growing up in a rural community. Storytelling is the base, but it needs to be done through active language activities. When these activities are put into real-life cultural contexts, they become relevant.

Thematic Representation of my Identity

My understanding of language, identity, and cultural continuity is based on lived experience, and theoretical frameworks that position multilingualism as a cognitive, cultural, and global asset. Through the intergenerational lessons I learned in rural storytelling practices that are rooted in perseverance, harmony, and relationality, I have come to understand education as a space where language and identity are actively constructed. My perspective was further reinforced in the storytelling circle I participated in a TRU classroom, where diverse voices were heard, respected, and shared with clarity with mutual understanding, often finding commonalities across Indigenous groups of the world. Hence, storytelling was not simply an educational tool, but a relational practice that reaffirms identity, promotes empathy, and enhances collective meaning-making. Aligning with Indigenous scholar like Iseke, (2013) who describe story as an Indigenous research methodology that connects people, land and community knowledge. Storytelling is grounded in cultural and linguistic action and not only transmits memories and values but also enhances the cognitive flexibility and intercultural awareness needed to participate in an interconnected world. These interlaced influences provide a thematic picture of my identity that I represented in the table below.

Table 1: Thematic Representation of my Identity

Themes	Experience	
Early life	Language	Valued
	Culture	Central/Communal
	Storytelling	Learning Pattern
	Language Usage	Accepted
	Identity	Affirmed/Seen
	Community	Support System

Themes	Experience	
Silence	Indigenous Language	Devalued/ Language Trauma/ Punished
	Colonial Structure	Dominant
	English Proficiency	Measure of Intelligence
	Academic	Pressure/No self-reflection/ Rote memorization to pass exam
	Identity	Disconnection/Feeling Inferior/ Loss of voice/ Divorced from self
	Rural background	Stigmatized
Reawakening	Indigenous System	Acknowledged
	Learning	Interactive and engaging/ Self Reflective Expression/Global Awareness of other Indigenous Struggles and Resistance efforts
Schooling Context	Canada	Nigeria
	Access	Limited Access
	Acknowledgement	Policy gaps
	Visibility	Invisibility

Table 1, show my identity as an Indigenous language speaker, a student within a Western-oriented education system, and a member of a rural community positioned me at a point of disadvantage where my ways of knowing were often devalued. These are not abstract concepts but lived realities that shape identity, learning, and resilience. As Anita Gopaldas (2016) emphasizes, individuals are not defined by a single identity but by the intersection of several realities shaping their unique experiences interconnected themes; early life, silence, reawakening, and schooling which form the anchor for the conceptual framework. My early childhood was rooted in a rich cultural community where storytelling, communal living, and intergenerational relationships shaped learning, reflecting translanguaging as a natural practice. My Linguistic and cultural identity were unrecognized and marginalized in urban schooling leading

to language trauma, academic pressure, and feelings of inferiority. This led to a disconnect between my authentic self and school expectations. My reawakening emerged through interactive and reflective classroom in TRU, Stories from other Indigenous communities across the Globe from other international students, and individual reflections via lived experiences, allowing me to reclaim my voice and reconnect with my identity. This phase in my journey reaffirmed my language and cultural knowledge as strengths rather than deficits, sitting my story within a broader view of resilience and cultural continuity. A comparison of the educational system obtainable in BC, Canada and Delta State Nigeria further indicates that there are structural differences and inequalities in the Nigerian system of education. While the Canada educational space is making efforts to sustain and acknowledge Indigenous knowledges through

efforts like the Truth and Reconciliation, the Nigeria government on the other hand is still struggling with maintaining policies regarding Indigenous knowledge inclusion in education. In Canada, digital access to curriculum and historical resources including those related to residential schools supports transparency and intergenerational learning. In contrast, limited access to such resources in Nigeria particularly in Delta State limited access to continuity and the preservation of linguistic heritage. Together, these thematic themes illustrate how storytelling, translanguaging, and cultural continuity are shaped by intersecting realities to inform identity formation, learning experiences, and educational outcomes.

Decolonializing Education in Nigeria

Olaniyan and Martins (2025) highlighted that the ongoing colonial legacies in Nigerian education encouraged cultural disconnection and identity struggles. They contend that actual decolonization necessitates a transition from theory to practice through the reformation of curricula to incorporate African histories, Indigenous knowledge, Language, and local realities. (Olaniyan & Martins, 2025). Co-creating content with educators and communities, as well as leveraging digital forums is essential in promoting inclusivity and timely reform. Fu et al. (2024) further strengthen this insight by researching on how storytelling now supported by digital and AI technologies continue to safeguard cultural legacy. As an adult, who relocated far away from her roots, I still find the lessons I learned as a child through stories and tales of my community to guide me in my daily encounter with the rest of the world. The narratives remain central to how I approach relationships, ethical conduct, and decision making, reminding me that cultural knowledge is not static but lived. I feel proud that I can speak my language well with my family here in Canada. Every discussion in my own language brings with it a sense of familiarity and belonging a reassuring reminder of home even if I am miles away.

To decolonize education in Nigeria, we need to reconnect with Indigenous knowledge systems, change colonial structures and

accept different ways of knowing to return authority and bring back cultural awareness (Ojo et al., 2023). In line with this goal, I created a website in my just concluded Master of Education program, housing educational resources, Indigenous stories, and common words in Urhobo booklet titled “Reclaiming Our Roots, One Story at a Time” which was created using the free lovable AI website builder. An interactive digital platform that brings the framework to life hold a proposed curriculum design, Interactive language games with common Urhobo words, and language learning resources. There will be numerous Urhobo stories, songs, and practices on this site, which can be used by other Nigerian communities as well in the future to enrich curriculum and learning.



Figure 4: QR code to authors website titled **Reclaiming our roots**.

Integrating Storytelling into an Indigenous-Centered Curriculum and Language learning

Storytelling plays a vital role in preserving culture because it enables communities to transmit values, ideas, histories, and worldviews across generations. According to Bending Borders (2025), storytelling is a global tool for cultural preservation, particularly in the digital era, which highlights its effectiveness as a sustainable pedagogical approach in resolving language erosion and declines. Further to that, Broberg (2022) emphasizes the importance of community-rooted narratives and approaches in Indigenous language recovery, demonstrating how stories convey meaning, cultural markers, linguistic metaphors, and moral knowledge which can be embrace holistically for epistemic justice in educational system. Personally, growing up

with my great grandmother, I was privileged to have heard many stories, but the tale of Apiapia (hornbill) and Tortoise (ogbeyin) strikes a deep chord, and I feature this story in my just concluded project in the Master of Education program. The story is a classic example of African oral traditions, using humor and symbolic animal characters to teach moral lessons. In this story, Apiapia travels with Tortoise to marry a bride, but becomes so distracted by the feast prepared in their honor that he neglected the purpose of their journey. Tortoise, being tricky as usual, seized the moment, deceiving the bride's family into believing he is the rightful groom, leaving his friend Apiapia to discover too late that his negligence had cost him his bride. Embedded within this simple story are powerful teachings; distraction and negligence both have bad consequences, greed harms both self and others, and wisdom requires prioritizing long-term goals over immediate pleasures. This story is still important today because it teaches us moral and societal truths that will always be true, such as how important it is to keep relationships and be honest. In the educational context, this story can be used to teach critical thinking, moral responsibility, and cultural literacy.

As Borders (2025) affirms, storytelling is not merely a reflection of the past; it is a dynamic force that connects generations and location, sustaining identity and collective values. Another major resource the website offers is a context-responsive curriculum design with teaching methods that treat language as a cultural resource rather than a barrier. It challenges deficit-based theories by recognizing the linguistic diversity of Nigerian learners and framing Indigenous languages as instruments of empowerment, identity development, and cognitive advancement. The curriculum uses inclusive, learner-centered strategies, graphic cards, visual aids, storytelling circles, oral presentations, role-play, drama, dance and collaborative projects to ensure all students participate meaningfully. Storytelling circles form the core part of the curriculum activities, it gives all students a chance to listen, retell and think about folktales in their own language and then translate them into English to help with understanding

and multilingual literacy. These circles help students become more comfortable and fluent in speaking, telling stories, and being proud of their culture. It combines art with language learning, letting students learn new words and cultural ideas while creatively interacting with Indigenous stories. Music and dance are great ways to get to know a culture, and this curriculum includes traditional songs and dances that show how the seasons change, feelings and emotions, what people value, and what happened in the past. These exercises help with memory retention and emotional attachments to heritage, and they also help with language patterns by making students repeat and perform these songs. These teaching strategies work together to create a fun and welcoming learning environment that respects Indigenous knowledge systems and supports growth in all areas.

Grounded in Ladson-Billings' (1995) assertion that effective teaching mirrors students' cultural communication patterns, this curriculum links school learning to community knowledge, transforming the classroom into a space of inclusiveness, cultural expression, and educational justice, and Aligning content to the seven storylines of Soini and Birkeland (2014), that highlight the critical function of educational systems in retaining cultural identity, customs, and practices, especially within multilingual cultures. The curriculum was created through a careful, multi-step process that made sure it was both culturally relevant and in line with policy. The two main goals of each stage were to be educationally relevant and to bring about decolonial change. The curriculum can be adapted to any Indigenous language teaching and can be accessed on my website. I agree with King's (2003) statement in "The Truth About Stories" that the same stories can be told in different ways depending on the context and the person who tells them. Our stories, though they may be different, share similar messages of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and relationships. Therefore, adapting this curriculum to a place-based context was one of the considerations I had in mind while designing this.

The first phase was a full needs assessment that looked at national language laws, global education frameworks, and previous

scholarly interventions, drawing on sources such as National Language Policy, UNESCO position papers on multilingual education, and programs like the Six-year Yoruba Project and the Rivers Reader Project (Francomacaro, 1994). These sources collectively showed that there is still a gap between policy intentions and practical classroom realities, highlighting that although Indigenous languages are officially recognized, they remain underused in practice, showing the necessity of addressing this gap through curriculum reform that is linguistically inclusive. The second phase centered on incorporating Indigenous epistemologies into the curriculum by using storytelling traditions, oral histories, folktales, and communal learning practices, which functioned as both cultural expressions and pedagogical instruments for conveying values, worldviews, and linguistic heritage, thereby validating students' identities and enhancing their sense of belonging. The final phase ensured the alignment with national and international educational requirements, including the growing role of technology in knowledge dissemination and documentation while responding to global mandate on Indigenous language revitalization efforts. The curriculum promotes the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), by making sure that everyone has equal access to learning experiences that are relevant to their culture (United Nations, n.d). In addition to these structured phases, my own thematic identity journey spanning from early cultural affirmation, linguistic silence, a later reawakening, and the contrasting schooling contexts of Nigeria and Canada served as an important source of experiential data that shaped the curriculum's direction and purpose. The curriculum is mainly intended for early childhood and elementary education, although it can be adapted for junior secondary students as well.

The goal is to help students develop cultural pride, language skills, and a strong sense of ethical behavior by exposing them to the rich oral traditions and communal knowledge systems. Each unit is carefully designed to combine language instruction with cultural exploration. This way, students not only learn how to communicate in their languages freely, but they also gain a deep

understanding of their cultural heritage. Students start by engaging with creation stories, folktales, and ancestral stories to help them form their own identity and feel like they belong. Then, they learn how to use proverbs to make ethical choices through interpretation, role-play, and personal proverb journals. Traditional songs, rhythms, and dances teach them about the emotional depth of cultural expression and how knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next. Daily language-use activities, like greetings, functional phrases, and translanguaging practices, make Indigenous languages more common in the classroom and help students become more fluent. The curriculum also includes cultural art, festivals, and community rites. This lets kids learn about symbols, seasonal celebrations, and moral stories by building masks and reenacting them. These interrelated elements work together to create a complete learning experience that connects language to culture, identity, and community life. They are also flexible, open to everyone, and able to change based on the needs of the community.

Recommendations

Returning to the knowledge that shaped us reflects the Sankofa bird of Ghana, turning its back to retrieve the eggs it let behind while moving forward, it shows that true advancement comes from reclaiming our wisdom, languages, and cultural practices. Reconnecting to our root is the Ubuntu concept of South Africa, *I am because we are* and the Urhobo concept of *owoh owoh she koh owoh- we grow when we cooperate*. Collectively, these remind us that learning is collective, and culture is adaptive, fluid, and dynamic. *Grounded in these philosophies*, I recommend implementing this framework for teaching language and curriculum through a structured and collaborative strategy that integrates cultural, systemic, policy, and pedagogical considerations to ensure long-term sustainability impact. Drawing on Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model Kotter (2007), I propose beginning by creating a sense of urgency, drawing on UNESCO reports on Indigenous language decline UNESCO, (2019) (c and my Personal experience of silence in my own state

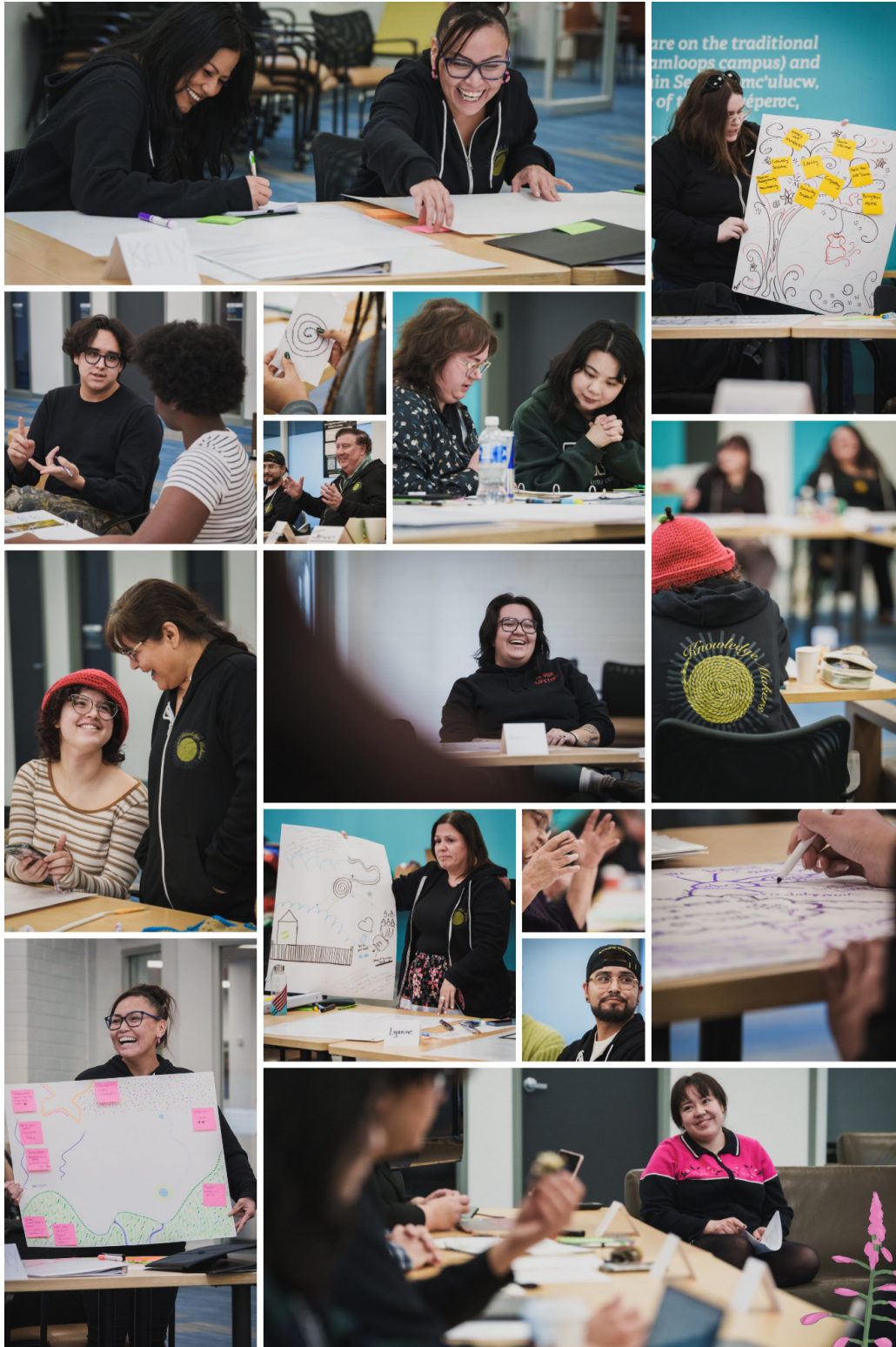
in an urban school due to colonial educational structure. I further recommend forming a diverse coalition of collaborators including teachers, linguists, cultural custodians/knowledge holders, native speakers, policymakers, and community elders to guide and support implementation. A clear and compelling vision should then be developed to revitalize and sustain Indigenous knowledge through storytelling-based methods. This vision should be clearly and consistently communicated through workshops, community forums, and digital platforms in alignment with national priorities and global frameworks such as SDG4 (Quality Education). To ensure effectiveness, investment in professional development is essential, equipping educators with skills to sustain culturally grounded, linguistically inclusive practices.

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Keagan Myran

Anishinaabe, Cree and Dakota

Bachelor of Education

WHAT THE FOREST TAUGHT ME

My name is Keagan Myran, My Spirit name is “Eagle with Thunderbird on her back who dances in the rain”, and I am Anishinaabe, Cree, and Dakota from Long Plain First Nation in Treaty 1 Territory. The story I’m going to share is both a reflection on my experiences working with Indigenous youth, and a reflection of my own journey through education. While I tell this story through the metaphor of a forest and the animals who inhabit it, every experience shared is true. Through these stories, I explore the relationships, teachings, challenges, and moments of growth that have shaped my understanding of what it means to teach in a good way.

Entering the Forest

There is a forest in my classroom. Tall, lush trees, long flowing grass, a fast-roaring river. Within it lives a whole community. It has a fox, otter, bear, beaver, deer, and even a moose. Each animal brings something special. Fox is quiet but clever, Otter, Fox’s brother, is resilient, silly, and social. Beaver is a quiet leader, Deer upholds kindness, Hawk is a protector. They are what makes this forest alive. And I, have the privilege of teaching them.

I walk into the room, I’m nervous, and the animals can sense it. Immediately Beaver asks who I am and why I’m there. I look around, they are all looking at me. I smile and say “I’m Keagan. I’m here to help you learn!” Not Ms.

Myran, that’s too formal. I’m not even a certified teacher.

I sit down beside Bear. She’s looking at a picture book. She asks, “Wanna read this with me?” I say yes, we read it. By time the book is over, it’s clear to me...Bear can’t read.

I look around and I still see eyes on me. I’m an unknown person in this space. The animals have community; this is their home. I remembered I am a visitor. I don’t know how these animals get along, I don’t know anything about these beings, just that I am standing here with them now.

The first few weeks I try to be authoritative. I want control, but I feel myself losing control the more I try to grasp it. The animals don’t respond well to instruction, and they have a hard time with structure. They don’t get along well and are constantly fighting each other. The forest feels like chaos.

I realize the problem is me. I am a visitor. This is their space. I can’t make them adjust to me and my outsider rules; I need to adjust my own expectations. I start to observe the animals. See the relationships, the way they act, I notice little things like how Rabbit tells tall tales, that everyone listens to Beaver, how Deer demands peace, how shy Turtle and Rabbit both are, and how the Wolves constantly tease Bear. I see how Fox and Otter are so different but also very similar, and the same with Hawk and Bear. I also see that most of these animals came to class with hungry

tummies. I realize this can't just be a classroom. I can't just be a teacher, there is more work that needs to be done than just Math, English language arts, and Science.

Learning From Experience

I do a full 180. I meet them where they are, I start helping each animal one on one. In the next few weeks, I teach Bear to read! I realize what this forest is lacking, and I know how to start helping.

Emotional co-regulation; but imagine trying to teach a forest how to feel their feelings in a healthy way when the rest of the forest is also lacking these skills. Trying to tell a Bear to not attack when the Wolves keep nipping at her. To regulate the Wolves displaced from their packs so they can be civil with Bear. It felt impossible at first, but I realized it starts with safety. It starts with encouragement. Battiste (2013) and Peltier (2021) emphasize the importance of safety, encouragement, and relationship-building in fostering growth and learning. Their work has helped me better understand the concept of emotional co-regulation within teaching.

Deer was a sweet girl. She carried herself with this quiet confidence, like she didn't need to be loud to be heard, but somehow everyone listened anyway. She was very "no monkey business." If anyone was being rude, or not listening to me, she would immediately call it out without hesitation. There was something powerful about that, especially because it didn't come from a place of meanness, it came from a place of care. She wanted peace in the forest. She expected better from everyone, and they respected her for it.

Even though her attendance wasn't the best and she only came every few weeks, her presence made a difference every single time. It was like the energy of the room shifted when she walked in. The animals listened more, they settled down a bit, they remembered how to be kind to each other.

She is smart, she did all her work without complaint, and she genuinely loves reading. I could see that learning came naturally to her, but more than that, she valued it. She valued being there. And I think that's why the others listened to her, because she wasn't

pretending. She was real.

I think about her a lot when I think about what kind of environment I want to create. Not one where students behave because they're scared of consequences, but one where they care about each other enough to do better. Deer did not need rules to force her into kindness, she chose it. That's something you can't teach through punishment or strict control. That comes from feeling safe, from feeling seen, from knowing you belong.

Fox was quiet. He was very shy, but very smart. He would often come to school sullen. He seemed very sad some days. He was very closed off, armoured. I noticed that extra attention lit him up. One day Fox arrived in class with tears in his eyes. He wouldn't speak to me. He hid in the corner curled up and ignoring everyone. I asked him if he wanted to go for a walk while the rest of the animals ate breakfast. He agreed with no hesitation and left the class. I chased after him and caught up eventually.

He wanted to sit in the grass. I sat with him. I asked him how he was doing, and because I was a safe place, he opened up. He told me that the days felt sadder and he doesn't know why. He told me that some days he wishes he wasn't here. He told me that last night he got in trouble for something Otter did, and Otter let him take the blame.

While holding space for Fox's feelings, a man walked towards us, sat down and told Fox to "man up and move on." His dismissive comment towards Fox validated the toxic masculinity this man carried around like a backpack. His rude comment clearly made Fox upset and self-conscious, and it also made me angry. It was a confirmation of the toxic mindset that is often normalized for men- that vulnerability is dangerous (Innes & Anderson, 2015).

What I wasn't aware of was how patriarchal this forest was before I entered it. The men lead with little to no care for the rest of the community, too much confidence, and no emotional safety. They dismiss women's voices and they dismiss vulnerability.

In that moment it felt like the safe space I had built for my class, for my animals, was tarnished, damaged, torn. I realized, I cannot protect them outside our forest, I cannot heal

the entire community. I felt my heart break. I realized that while my time here with them isn't permanent, I can do everything I can while I'm here to help these growing and learning beings. Reflecting on this experience, I came to understand that care is not about controlling every outcome but about being fully present and offering support while the opportunity exists. My realization aligns with Archibald's (2008) emphasis on relational responsibility and Battiste's (2013) call to nurture growth through respectful, caring relationships.

I wasn't sure how to resolve what the man did. I still do not have the answers to solve toxic masculinity and the patriarchy. All I could really do was continue being a safe space. Continuing to care, to listen, and to see.

As the seasons changed, our forest changed. It was now freezing outside, and our forest barely had heat. There was snow and ice everywhere and the animals stopped showing up every day. Only Fox, Otter, Bear, and Hawk were consistent. Wolf occasionally showed up and brought Beaver with him. With the cold, came a sort of peace. While there was still conflict between Bear and Wolf, most days the animals were focused on staying warm.

Before I came to this forest, there was already a long history of Bear and Wolf not getting along. Wolf himself struggled with feeling like he did not fit in as he did not live with his parents, and he had told me that it was because his mom did not like him. In my forest, he made Bear feel like she did not fit in, like she did not belong.

Being able to see the bigger picture of why he might be acting out was helpful, but it was sad because how do you convince a lone wolf they *do* belong in the pack when his pack has cast him out? I could not stop every fight. I could not keep everyone safe. However, I did my best.

While trying to help my students I realized I saw myself in each of them. I was silly and quick-witted like Otter and Fox, I could lead effortlessly like Beaver, I live with kindness like Deer, and I was hyper and silly like Wolf. I remembered why I cared the way I do. I have felt I did not belong as well.

Me as a Little Eagle

I was once just a little animal in a big forest too.

When I was but a small eagle, my schooling experiences were not great. I remember my first experience of racism happened when I was in grade two. My mother had just bought me a new outfit and I was so excited to wear it. When I got to school, I was told "I saw that outfit in the garbage earlier.... Keagan digs in the garbage for clothes!" While this comment was not explicitly racist, I was the only Indigenous person in my class. And I was the only person constantly picked on. I later moved to the big city, which was exciting for a little eagle! New people! New environment! New experiences!

I didn't think the racism would follow, but sadly, I was mistaken. I remember leaving gym class, and hearing someone yell my name in the chaos of class switch. I looked around and heard "go back to the reserve where you belong dirty Indian" Anger filled me. I can admit I was young and not in the right, as I met her where she was and returned the racism. I don't think calling someone white trash is equivalent to being called a dirty Indian or being told to return to the reserve where I belong, but I was the person who got in trouble. Due to my words, she got off free.

No punishment. No discipline. Nothing. That was the first time I felt injustice. That was the first time I realized how ugly this world can be. That was the first time I realized; I wasn't safe in school. I didn't have anyone on my side.

I came to school wearing adidas once, and a boy asked me, "do you know what adidas stands for?" When I said no, he said: "a dirty Indian deserves a slap" and slapped me across the face while laughing.

But then, Mrs. Manning came into the picture.

She saw me, she saw my intelligence, she saw my passion and my kindness. She was my first safe place in school. She encouraged me, she cared for me and she was on my side. Looking back, I realize that she has become one of the little voices I hear in my head when I doubt myself. I hear her encouraging words; I hear her dreams for me. It keeps me going and

I'm forever grateful for having her especially during my formative years.

Racist and condescending experiences kept coming to validate these negative feelings, they were almost louder than Ms. Manning's voice. I was suspended for drinking in the changing room in high school. Even though I wasn't drinking, I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time with two other girls who happened to be, but as they weren't Indigenous, they weren't suspended.

But I was.
Someone who wasn't even involved was suspended.

The teacher told me I smelled like a bar and looked drunk. But no alcohol had even come near me, nor did it till I was eight months over 18 years old. These silly school experiences filled me with a shame that was hard to shake, and I carried this shame into my adult years. Shame that is still present every time I'm proud, every time I speak up.

All these experiences taught me an important lesson about the kind of educator I never want to become. I know first hand how powerful a teacher's words can be whether they are positive or negative, and how easily assumptions can damage a growing mind's confidence and sense of belonging. As I began to imagine myself as a teacher, I found myself looking not just to educators who made me feel small, but to the women who made me feel seen, valued, and cared for.

The Matriarchs I Learned From

As I reflect on the teacher I hope to become, I realize that my understanding of education did not begin in a university classroom. It began with the women who raised me. The values that guide my practice; care, relationality, resilience, and responsibility, were taught to me by the matriarchs in my life. My grandmother and Niimama embody what I believe is often missing from colonial education systems: a commitment to relationships before outcomes, people before policies, and community before individual success. The way they cared for others, advocated for Indigenous children, and created spaces of belonging continues to shape how I approach teaching today.

The main reason I am the way I am is because of my Grandmother, Brenda Myran. She went to residential school and witnessed terrible abuse. She never hid that part of her life, but she also did not just talk about it. You had to ask, and growing up I did not know the right questions to ask. The first time I really heard her speak about it was on Orange Shirt Day at my University. She asked me to sit beside her at the front for emotional support while she shared her story.

I sat there beside her while she spoke her truth, silently crying. She talked about the predatory principals and teachers, and the awful abuse she had seen and heard. She spoke about her friend who went skating, fell on the ice, broke her arm, and was told to walk back to the school, which was about a kilometre away. She never saw her again. She spoke about how it was to escape, and how when she finally made it home the second time, her mother welcomed her with open arms.

After she shared, she told me that the weeks leading up to speaking about it are always hard for her. That remembering is triggering and that it sits with her for days after. She told me that was the last time she wants to speak about it and then she gave me a big hug.

Listening to my grandmother speak about residential school helped me understand that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (2015) are not abstract recommendations; they are responses to real harms experienced by real people. Survivors like my grandmother carried the burden of speaking difficult truths so that future generations could understand what happened and work toward change. Calls to Action 62 through 65 specifically emphasize Indigenous education, the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, and teacher training on the history and legacy of residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). As an aspiring educator, I see these Calls to Action not simply as policy recommendations, but as responsibilities. They challenge educators to create learning environments that honour Indigenous identities, address historical injustices, and ensure that schools become places of healing rather than continuing to be places of harm.

Brenda went into teaching because she wanted to protect Indigenous children. She worked in many schools, with all grades, and even as a resource teacher. She was offered principal jobs many times, but she always refused because she wanted to stay with the students. She was a single mom, raising my mom and my aunties on her own. She is caring and kind, she loves Star Wars and fantasy, and she is the strongest and most loving person I know.

And Niimama. Amanda Myran. She is a life-long learner, she taught me to love learning. She taught me to love myself and the world around me, and to keep my passion. Her and my grandma were constant.

She is strong and attentive, but also so loving in the way she showed up for my siblings and I. She would make rainbow cupcakes with little rainbow strips and icing clouds or roses out of fruit by the foots for school bake sales. She made small things feel big. She always emphasized how important education was there was no shame if we fell behind or failed, she was always supportive and encouraging and let us move at our own speeds. She has always been the most important person in my life. Being with her feels like stepping into a room filled with warmth and light, every moment spent with Niimama leaves me feeling rich with love.

When my brother was born sick, she didn't just care for him, she became his full-time anchor, tending to his needs with tireless devotion. And yet, even with that enormous responsibility, she never let her own ambitions fade. She worked full time, pursued her degree with relentless determination, and somehow carried both roles with grace, patience, and unwavering love.

She is educated, yes, but it is her compassion that shines brightest. She is fiercely kind, fiercely caring, and a natural leader whose strength is quiet yet undeniable. She makes the impossible seem possible. In her presence, I understand what it means to rise with integrity, heart, and purpose. She has shaped my world in ways too profound to measure, and now, as she steps into her campaign to become Chief of our reserve, I watch her with awe and pride, knowing the same dedication and love that guided me through my childhood might now guide our entire community.

I carry both her and my grandmother with me in everything I do. Their courage, their love, their resilience. They are threads woven into the very fabric of who I am, whispering strength into my heart and lighting the path I walk each day.

As spring returned to the forest and the snow melted, the land began to wake, and so did my students. Among them, Fox and Otter



**Figure 1: Keagan,
her Mother and
Grandmother**

emerged, as brothers whose bond shaped the rhythm of the entire forest. Fox: quiet, clever, and sensitive, had been the one I watched most closely at first. His growth was steady but subtle: he learned to voice his needs, to ask for space or a walk when overwhelmed, to trust that his feelings mattered. Hope, fragile at first, grew stronger each day within him as he realized he could dream beyond the forest.

Otter, by contrast, was loud, playful, and endlessly resilient. He carried the energy of the forest in his grin, in his jokes, in the way he would leap into a conversation or chase a leaf across the field. He reminded me of myself, of my siblings, the mischief, the wit, the stubborn joy that refuses to be dimmed by hardship. Yet beneath the laughter, there was depth. Otter had faced trauma before I arrived, and still he came each day, ready to engage, to connect, to learn with his brother.

What made them remarkable was the way they shaped each other. Fox drew strength from Otter's confidence and playfulness, while Otter looked to Fox for quiet guidance and reassurance. Their bond became a foundation for learning, a tether to safety and belonging.

In my classroom, I emphasized hope and dreams at every opportunity. I encouraged Fox to voice his ambitions, to imagine life beyond the forest, to see that education could be a bridge to new possibilities. I celebrated Otter's resilience, his energy, his capacity for joy, and I reminded him, and the forest, that strength comes in many forms. These brothers' learning journeys show that knowledge is not separate from being but formed through it. Just as Peltier (2021) and Cajete (1994) emphasize education as a holistic, relational process that supports identity, belonging, and the unfolding of purpose within community. Their work reinforces the understanding that learning environments can nurture not only intellectual growth but also the capacity to envision and step toward meaningful futures grounded in relationship and responsibility.

Through Fox and Otter, I learned the power of connection, the importance of nurturing hope, and the role of a teacher not as an authoritarian, but as a witness, guide, and safe place. Their dreams were intertwined with my own commitment: to cultivate a forest where

every voice is heard, where every student feels capable of more than survival, where the seeds of ambition and care are planted and nurtured with attention, love, and patience.

A DECOLONIAL CLASSROOM

For me, kinship is at the center of a decolonial classroom. As Indigenous people, we do not only care for our own children, but we also care for all children as if they are our own. That responsibility is shared, carried collectively, and rooted in love, care, and accountability (Simpson, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In my classroom, this means creating a space that feels like family, where students are not just learners, but relatives. I believe schools should move away from being heavily assessment-based and instead focus on skills, growth, and lived learning. Hands-on, experiential learning reflects the ways our people have learned from the land for thousands of years (Cajete, 1994; Kimmerer, 2013; Archibald, 2008). In my decolonial classroom, I understand that before any meaningful learning can happen, barriers must be removed. Not just the academic ones, but the invisible barriers carried in hungry bodies, tired minds, and guarded hearts. Many of my students do not walk into the classroom ready to learn in the ways the system expects, and that is not a failure on their part, it is a reflection of systems that were never built for them (Battiste, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

To teach in a good way, I must first care for them as whole, developing human beings. This means ensuring they feel safe, fed, and valued, recognizing that regulation comes before instruction, and relationship comes before curriculum (Peltier, 2021; Archibald, 2008). I see my role not as someone who delivers knowledge, but as someone who walks alongside them, gently removing obstacles so they can step into their own strength. This work is rooted in kinship and responsibility, in understanding that each child carries stories, histories, and potential that deserve to be honoured (Simpson, 2017; Cajete, 1994).

When we shift our focus from control to care, from compliance to connection, we begin to create a classroom where students are not forced to survive education, but are supported in growing, healing, and becoming. A classroom grounded in the Seven Sacred Teachings would guide not only what we learn, but how we treat one another, with respect, humility, honesty, bravery, wisdom, truth, and love at the core (Benton-Banai, 1988).

For me, the Seven Sacred Teachings are not simply concepts to be displayed on a classroom wall; they are practices that shape daily interactions. Respect means honouring each student's voice and experiences. Love means creating a space where students know they are valued regardless of academic performance. Honesty requires acknowledging difficult truths, including the impacts of colonialism and systemic inequities. Humility reminds us that teachers are also learners, and that knowledge exists within students, families, Elders, and communities. Courage allows students to advocate for themselves and others. Wisdom encourages thoughtful decision-making and reflection. Truth asks us to live authentically and take responsibility for our actions. Together, these teachings create a foundation for a classroom rooted in relationship, accountability, and collective wellbeing.

I envision a space where culture and language are not additions, but foundations. Where students engage in sharing circles, smudging, and community meals, building connection and belonging through everyday practices (Battiste, 2013; Archibald, 2008). A space where mental health is prioritized, and students are taught how to understand and care for their minds, recognizing the realities of intergenerational trauma many carry (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Research shows that ritual and community are powerful in healing trauma and addiction, and in an Indigenous classroom, these practices can be reclaimed in meaningful, culturally grounded ways.

I also believe we must challenge rigid structures, including the traditional school schedule. Learning should honour the natural rhythms of children, rather than forcing them into systems that do not support their wellbeing (Battiste, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). If education has historically been a place of harm

for Indigenous people, especially through residential schools, then our classrooms must become places of healing (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). They must be the opposite of those systems: spaces of safety, care, identity, and empowerment. This is my vision of a classroom, not just as a place of education, but as a place of restoration. A place where our youth feel safe, valued, and deeply connected to who they are (Simpson, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

As summer approached, the forest changed once again. Some of the students stopped coming, their absence leaving gaps that were impossible to fill. We struggled, right up until the end, to keep everyone engaged, to hold the forest together. And yet, the animals who stayed, the ones who came consistently, showed me what persistence, resilience, and care could create. Bear learned to read, her eyes lighting up every time a story unfolded beneath her fingers. I taught Otter multiplication, watching the pride swell in his grin as the numbers finally clicked. Even Fox, once so quiet and guarded, began to speak, to imagine, to dream.

At times, I felt a sense of peace, rare and fleeting, as I watched the growth cement itself in my mind. Exhaustion came in waves, but it was tempered by the knowledge that this, this work of seeing, guiding, and nurturing; was exactly what I was meant to do.

Three weeks before the school year ended, my boss passed away. We often had a hard time seeing eye to eye, and yet her absence added a heaviness to our last days together. Saying goodbye to my students so suddenly, especially in that context, was sad. The last time I saw them, was at her funeral. I felt a swirl of grief, gratitude, and pride, carrying both loss and love with me.

Before leaving, I found Fox sitting quietly. At the start of our time together, he hadn't cared much about the future; video games and small joys were enough. But in that last conversation, I asked the students what they wanted to do when they grew older. They joked and laughed, teasing one another, but Fox looked me in the eye and said, "I want to move to the city. I want to go to college." In that moment, I saw his hope take root. I

realized my forest had done more than teach; it had nurtured dreams. And as I watched him dream aloud, I understood that this, truly, is why I want to teach. This is what I'm meant to do.

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INTERDEPENDENCE:

A Culturally Congruent Solution for the BC Disability System

I have always struggled in ways others did not, but I never thought of myself as disabled. In my mind, everyone has their own struggles they must work around or need support with. Just as everyone has their talents and strengths unique to them. However, these struggles eventually caught up to me, and I was advised to apply for BC Disability Assistance. I was surprised when my application was promptly and unquestionably approved. Looking back, I realize this surprise highlighted a profound cultural incongruence between clinical definitions of disability and my own Cree Indigenous worldview.

Cultural congruence is a concept that is growing in importance due to the rise of multiculturalism (Dziak, 2020). It refers to the degree with which a person's cultural beliefs and practices are in alignment or tension with their environment. In a culturally incongruent medical system, culturally diverse patients often compromise their cultural practises to receive western medical care (Dziak, 2020) and are at a "higher risk of having negative health consequences, receiving poor quality care, or being dissatisfied with their care" (Health Policy Institute, 2022, para. 10). Culturally congruent medical care on the other hand, promotes greater comfort and dignity and improves health outcomes for minority groups, like Indigenous people, who have been "traditionally underserved and misunderstood or exploited by the medical community" (Dziak, 2020, para. 7). Culturally

congruent care can also contribute to reducing health disparities for racial and ethnic minority groups disproportionately affected by chronic diseases according to the Health Policy Institute (2022).

This concept is important to factor into disability rights as how people conceptualize disability and what it means forms the basis of the models of disability that society supports. These models then have strong influence on the policy and social norms within that society (Jacobs, 2008). What western mental models of disability tend to have in common is a goal of promoting a version of independence for disabled people that has strong tension with the interdependence honoured by both disability culture (Butler et al, 2016) and many Indigenous cultures. This means that the current policies and norms concerning disabled people in western society are culturally incongruent with most disabled people and many Indigenous people.

This cultural incongruence can be seen in the service gaps within the BC Disability System and intersectionality adds an additional layer to the complexity of the issue. Social workers have a unique perspective that allows them to both factor in intersectionality and the cultural incongruence provided they have the training for it. In this article, I argue that with Indigenous cultural training, social workers are in a prime position to bridge the cultural gap between the BC Disability system and disabled Indigenous people to provide

and promote culturally congruent care. To support this argument, I will be utilizing academic literature, media produced by disabled and Indigenous creators and my own positionality as a disabled Indigenous person who has experience with the BC Disability System. In doing so, I hope to emphasize that interdependence is already a component of proven solutions being utilized in BC. If expanded to the formal BC disability system, interdependence-based approaches could rectify the cultural incongruence for both indigenous people and disabled people.

Explaining Interdependence and Independence

Interdependence is the “recognition that human beings exist in a web of mutual reliance” (Langtree, 2026, para. 2) where everyone needs to rely on someone at some point in time and will most likely be called on to help someone else as well (Langtree, 2026). This value is important to disability culture and can be seen in the push for disability justice where it represents the need for disabled people to stand together in a community, but also to create strong interdependent local communities for everyone (Hudson, 2021).

Within my own life and understanding of interdependence, it is like an ecosystem. Nothing can be independent if everything is connected. Everything we do has an impact on the world and the world has impacts on us. This is an example of reciprocity and stewardship values often held by many Indigenous communities within BC which are closely tied to interdependence. For example, Wâhkôhtowin is a Cree word that mostly closely translates to kinship and “refers to the interconnected nature of relationships, communities, and natural systems” (Dion, 2020, para. 2). This concept is important to both the Cree people and the Metis, who have adopted it as part of their core values (Rupertsland Institute, 2022).

Western society places strong value on individual independence instead as part of the individualistic culture. Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines independence as “the ability to live your life without being helped or influenced by other people” (B1). While

independence is also important to disability culture and disabled rights, the type of independence disability advocates pursue is that of personal agency and choice. This kind of independence is compatible with interdependence. The type of independence that underlies the BC disability system is heavily influenced by the dominant model of disability however, which skews it into incongruence.

The medical model of disability is the dominant model within Canada and the rest of western society (Smith-Carrier et al., 2017). Under this model, the definition for disability is a deficit in the individual that must be fixed (Jongbloed, 2003). The specific type of independence promoted by this model, sees seeking or requiring help from others as weakness or being a burden on others which can cause stress and psychological distress for people who do require the help of others according to Langtree (2026).

GAPS OF SERVICE

The incongruence between the medical model of disability and interdependence highlights three important areas service gaps within the BC Disability System. In this section, I will highlight them and go over how the medical model creates the gap and the current solutions that try to fill the gaps, often headed by social workers.

Gap 1: Outreach and Stigma

One of the first challenges in applying for BC Disability Assistance is acknowledgement of disabled status. The deficit focus of the medical model leads quickly to stigmatization as disabled people are looked upon as “flawed, weak or abnormal relative to the ‘normal’, non-disabled population” (Smith-Carrier et al., 2017, p. 1573). The stigma promotes the view that disabled people cannot contribute to society as equals due to biological deficiencies and sees them as a subject of pity or charity (Smith-Carrier et al., 2017). This charity mindset leads to the pathologization of disability as a welfare issue in which financial need is one of the criteria for assistance and in which one must prove they are deserving of support.

Welfare and poverty stigmas are then added on top of the disability stigma.

This inherently negative viewpoint and the stigmas attached to the label of disability causes people to resist or reject identifying as disabled. In a study by Bogart (2017) it is noted that 15% of the world's population has a disability but significantly less than that self-identify as disabled. The results of their study found that severity of impairment and severity of stigma experienced were the highest predictors of a person with impairments self-identifying as being disabled. In other words, the less able they were to hide it or pretend otherwise, the more likely they were to accept the label. The natural refusal to take such a negative label and apply it to oneself, results in an outreach gap in the system. This is one of the reasons I failed to recognize myself as disabled until a social worker asked and did an assessment with me. I have heard many stories from others who had the same experience of needing an outside perspective to help them see they were disabled.

Gap 2: Navigation and Eligibility

The next challenge in applying for BC Disability Assistance is navigating the system. Despite the name of the medical model referring to the medical profession and the disability system eligibility requiring a form to be filled out by a medical professional, there is a separation between the medical system and the BC Disability System that creates another service gap. The disabled person must act as the mediator and the client between the two. This gap exists because the medical model sees the challenges faced by disabled people as their personal responsibility to handle (Smith-Carrrier et al., 2017). Consequently, assistance is only be provided in cases where the deficit caused by the medical condition is so severe that it cannot be reasonably managed by the individual. This threshold is reflected in the eligibility criteria for BC Disability Assistance, as set out by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (2025), which requires a severe long-lasting impairment that significantly restricts the person's ability to carry out daily living activities without the assistance from a person, animal or device.

This framing risks excluding many disabled people who might have less severe, episodic or progressive disabilities and leaves them unable to receive support. Not to mention, there are two systemic gaps in the application process itself. The first, I learned from social workers who help people with their application forms: you are supposed to fill out the form as if it was your worst day, when all symptoms are acting up. Yet, this critical instruction is not formally communicated, leaving many applicants to underreport their limitations or incorrectly assume they are ineligible. This is also a barrier to individuals who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as their communication style might require direct explanation rather than assumed understanding of what is required. Second, the eligibility criteria are not based on a specific diagnosis, but rather on how the condition affects the person's daily living activities. Medical doctors and nurse practitioners are the only ones allowed to sign off on the forms, but they deal in diagnosis and treatment. While doctors are familiar with the symptoms of various medical conditions, they may be less informed about how those symptoms and conditions manifest into limitations in daily functioning. This is why Disability Alliance BC (2024) offers individuals seeking to apply for disability assistance a letter to take to the doctor that explains what they need to do. In addition, social workers also offer their services to do assessments and fill out the form so that the doctor just needs to verify and sign off on it. By doing this, they are fulfilling a crucial role in the application process despite not being a formalized part of it.

Gap 3: Housing and Caregivers

Once a person has obtained the BC Person with Disabilities (PWD) status, they become eligible for specialized support through BC Housing, a crown corporation of the BC Government (BC Housing, n.d.-a). This can take the form of subsidized housing with a reduced cost or supportive housing that provides support services (BC Housing, n.d.-b). The first service gap with this program comes from the medical model's definition of independence leading to a goal of independent living and the programs subsequent

definition of acceptable family being limited to a spouse and dependent children. Acceptable family are the only ones who can share a BC Housing unit together. According to Doctors of BC, 70-75% of caregivers for chronically ill or disabled seniors are family members (Shore, n.d.) who may be a non-dependant adult child, parent, cousin, aunt, in-law or other form of extended family.

Under this program, a person who cannot afford market rent to live with their caregiver would have to apply for limited supportive housing to be taken care of by a stranger. In a 2023 study by Gibson et al. of three BC Housing supportive housing sites in Kelowna, it was found that 72% of tenants had unmet health needs, with people who had developmental disabilities experiencing the highest rate. In contrast, a 2024 study by Kueakomoldej et al. found that when disabled people are given the ability to hire a caregiver of their choice, including friends or family, there was an association with better caregiver well-being and reduced unmet needs.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Why is Interdependence so important for disabled people? The answer lies in where it places the focus of what defines an individual. The medical model says that a disabled person is their disability. It is the most important thing about them. Independence says that the individual takes priority and their ability to stand on their own is what is important. Opposite to this is interdependence and the Indigenous viewpoint. These perspectives say that a person is defined by their connections, relationships and role in the community they belong to. This is a viewpoint that is important for disabled people, Indigenous people and those who are both, because it leaves room for both and more by being compatible with intersectionality.

Intersectionality was coined and popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw and black feminists to consider how oppression and privilege are shaped by multiple identities that a person can simultaneously have (Wolbring & Nasir, 2024). Essentially, a person who is Indigenous and disabled must contend with the impacts

on their life from both disability and Indigenous identity both together and separately in a way that creates a unique experience of living. The medical model only focuses on the disability aspect while independence only focuses on an outcome. Interdependence is broader and has the nuance to account for all aspects of a disabled person's unique experience. Some common forms of intersectionality for disabled people are having more than one disability, having both physical and mental disabilities, race and cultural identity, gender and orientation, generational trauma and poverty. When policy and solutions are presented, it is important that these intersecting factors are considered.

The Social Worker Perspective

The use of intersectionality as a tool has increased dramatically in the last decade within the social work profession (Hudson & Mehrotra, 2021). Pieces of it can be seen in the biopsychosocial model used that considers a person's well-being to be a result of the influences of biological, psychological and social circumstances (EBSCO, 2022). More pieces can be seen in the ecological perspective that focuses on the interaction between a person and their environment and understands that personal troubles can arise from systemic issues such as discrimination (Danny, 2025). These models and perspectives acknowledge intersectionality and have the features of both independence and interdependence within them. This places social workers in a unique position that can allow for them to provide a bridge between the BC Disability System and Indigenous people with disabilities.

Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) is a framework introduced by Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall (Bartlett et al, 2012) that focuses on looking at a subject through the western perspective and then the Indigenous perspective separately and holding them both at equal value so that the knowledge can then be weaved together. In this next section, I will use this framework to identify both the Indigenous and western perspectives surrounding disability and show how the social workers perspective could be used to weave the two together into a culturally congruent solution.

The Indigenous Eye:

The Indigenous perspective on disability is complex as many cultures do not have a word for it and many have different views on what constitutes a disability (Larson & Robertson, 2016). "Disability is rarely seen as a separate issue but is perceived as part of problems which are widespread and accepted as part of the life cycle" (Gething 1995, p.81). In this way, an Indigenous person is not defined by their physical features; they are defined by who they are in relation to their community. This is seen in Indigenous relationality and Wâhkôhtowin (Wildcat & Voth, 2023). This applies to practitioners and experts too. It is believed that diversity of thought and perspectives on an issue is a good thing and that no one perspective is entirely right or wrong (Martin, 2012). In this way knowledge generation and use is communal and participatory and experiential knowledge from living is respected.

The Western Eye:

The western perspective on disability is based on the medical profession and the medical model of disability that has already been discussed. According to Larson and Robertson (2016), due to the medical model, clinical symptoms are emphasised and the lack of ability to achieve individualism and self-sufficiency create the label of disability. They further state that the biomedical perspective also ignores the social aspects of disability or anything that is not a part of the body or mind of the disabled person. Within the medical model, practitioners and experts are given authority over the disabled person who is seen as a patient and who may be overruled by the physician. Knowledge generation is evidence-based and restricted in whom can provide it, while knowledge use is restricted to those with education and training.

Through Both Eyes: The Social Worker

Social workers approach their work using the person in environment perspective to see

both the individual and the environment they live in and the interconnections between them (EBSCO, 2023). In this way they see their clients as an independent person and as an interdependent part of their community. As a practitioner, they have training and hold the authority that comes with it in western society but also work with their clients in a more partner-like relationship by meeting the client where they are and offering their skills and knowledge as needed (O'Leary & Tsui, 2019). While social workers do make use of evidence-based practice, they also are taught to engage in reflection and evaluation to ensure that what they are doing is having the intended effect (Cleece et al., 2025). This makes their knowledge partially experiential. Social workers also pay attention to information shared by their clients and customize their techniques and approaches to suit the client and situation. This makes their methods more flexible and personalised.

INTERDEPENDENCE SOLUTIONS

I believe it is possible that social workers can leverage their unique perspective to offer culturally congruent solutions for indigenous disabled people. However, there is an unfortunate history between social workers and the Indigenous peoples of Canada that continues in some places. For these reasons, this idea cannot become a path forward without safeguards and oversight such as the careful and respectful training of social workers in both this history and Indigenous culture to ensure that it will be done in a manner that bridges the gap rather than widens it.

Only if the concerns of potential injustice are dealt with can we move forward into culturally congruent solutions. For these, a solid start could come from modifying already existing, proven interdependence-based solutions to suit Indigenous disabled people. Three are described below.

Person-Centered Planning

Person-Centered Planning (PCP) is an alternative approach of handling a person's



care. Rather than clinical professionals making decisions on behalf of the disabled person, the individual is put at the center of decision making for their own care (Bradley, 2024). PCP is based on principles of mutuality and respect that align with interdependence. Research by Ebrahimi et al. (2020) shows an association of PCP with improved health outcomes, quality of care and higher self-efficacy. Importantly, they also found that it contributes to lowering social inequality in health care. However, PCP is not limited to just medical care. Vela Canada (2025) is a not-for-profit based in BC that helps people with developmental disabilities and their families set up PCP frameworks for themselves that support greater autonomy. This can take the form of a micro board, individualized funding or a person-centered society. All of these involve the person with disabilities being at the centre of a circle of support that is directed to help them fulfil their goals in life. In a 2026 study involving people with developmental disabilities, it was found that choosing their own personal goals in PCP was associated with increased likelihood of 20 other quality of life areas being present in the person's life, such as community involvement, respect and safety (Friedman, 2026).

This could be easily modified for Indigenous disabled people. It is known that indigenous people prefer family provide personal supports rather than professionals outside their culture (Larson & Robertson, 2016). With a version of PCP, the individual could choose members who are a part of their culture or family to form their circle of support. People they trust and who understand them personally and culturally.

Adult Community Places

Adult community places are a well-known solution for seniors, often called senior centers. They are neighbourhood places for people to meet and interact in a neutral third space environment that promotes social engagement in a way that has been proven to support the health of seniors (Sugiyama et al., 2022). These centers promote interdependence by improving the connections and social capital of participants. Some centers go further and provide activities and

opportunities for community participation as well. Expanding on these programs and creating centers for people with disabilities would likely see similar benefits due to the overlap between seniors' status and disabled status as well as similarities in challenges with mobility, health and isolation. Many senior centers exist in BC and across Canada, but there is also a BC program that promotes interdependence through community participation in a unique way. The Community Inclusion program run by Spectrum Society for Community Living (2024) is a program for adults with developmental disabilities that functions a bit like PCP. They support the individual to participate in their local community in some way, such as through work, volunteering, education or other means. Similar to adult community places, they encourage community involvement and social engagement, but they have the benefit of being more flexible on time and place as well as being more customizable to the individual. This is in comparison to other day programs for people with disabilities that are far more rigid with programming occurring in a predetermined scheduled manner. This programming is based on the priorities of the provider, not necessarily what the participants would like to do.

Many Indigenous people live on reserves while most of the day programs for disabled people and seniors occur off reserve. With a modified version of the Community Inclusion program, Indigenous disabled people would not need to leave the reserve to receive programming. They could engage in programming that get them involved within the community that they live in on the reserve rather than the community where the nearest day program is.

Cohousing

Cohousing is a community model that plans for neighborhoods with private dwellings mixed with communal areas and common facilities that are cooperatively managed by the residents (Carrere et al., 2020; Puplampu et al., 2020). As of 2019, there were 14 completed cohousing communities in Canada with more in development (Puplampu et al., 2020). The two main types of cohousing are

multigenerational and seniors focused. These communities' foster interdependence in a way much like adult community spaces, but with even stronger community connections and networks. According to Carrere et al. (2020), cohousing improves quality of life and lowers isolation for seniors. They find this is likely due to the association between wellbeing and social support due to studies that have shown a positive correlation between a sense of community and health outcomes. Within BC, there is another similar program that operates on a different scale. Home Sharing Support Society BC (2025) runs a home sharing program that pairs adults with a developmental disability with a home care provider that they live with and who supports them in a way similar to PCP. The care provider helps with daily living, community activities and goals of the disabled individual. In this way, the individual is cared for in community by a member of the community. Either of these programs could be modified to support Indigenous disabled people.

CONCLUSION

The current disability system in BC is culturally incongruent with Indigenous disabled people due to the medical model of disability that underlies it. If the model were changed to one that emphasises interdependence rather than independence, we would see a shift in focus from the deficits of disability to a definition that includes the individual strengths and talents that a disabled person has to offer. This would shift the understanding that disability is not a 'type' of person, but a stage of life everyone will go through at some point or another. Social workers can be part of the solution and bridge the cultural gap between the indigenous disabled population and western society through modifying the existing solutions to be culturally congruent. All that is needed is the proper training and support to bring these solutions into the formal disability system of BC, so it can foster stronger inclusive communities for us all.

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Kinship is at the center of a decolonial classroom.

As Indigenous people, we do not only care for our own children, but we also care for all children as if they are our own.



- Keagan Myran





Mariiam Tambieva

Karachay/Balkar

CAUCASIAN FOOD IN ISTANBUL: Two approaches on how to include Indigenous food into the restaurant business

ABSTRACT

This practice-based paper describes two approaches to how the modern Food industry can benefit from collaboration with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, while helping to revive and promote traditional cuisine. This article also describes the history and problems of the North Caucasus Diaspora in Turkey, as well as the problems of Knowledge disappearance in the homelands due to historical and political circumstances. The history of the diaspora here dates back more than 150 years, as thousands moved to Anatolia after the Caucasus War.

This case shows how Indigenous knowledge survives migration, stays authentic, and gradually becomes part of the host country's food culture. It also describes how women, as knowledge keepers, develop their own businesses far from homeland. It shows that Indigenous Knowledge is valuable not only as historical or ethnographic notes, but as a source for a better life, better food, through two contemporary observations:

- › The author's work on creating the first fine-dining seasonal Caucasus menu in a Michelin-listed restaurant, presented in May 2025 in Istanbul.

- › The restaurant Ficcın (in the historical center of Istanbul), run by a Caucasian woman born in Turkey who preserves Indigenous recipes, organizes workshops and hires female "koop-eratif" to make traditional pastry.

Methods used in this paper are observation and descriptive analysis. In the first case, the author, as an objective observer, describes in detail how the team of Indigenous women works at a real restaurant.

In the second part, the author changes roles, becoming the creator of an Indigenous menu. Here, the entire process is described step by step, from the archive observation to the menu presentation. Also shared personal conclusions and what to keep in mind when working with professional chefs.

Some of the insights shared in this paper are drawn from the author's extensive experience in gastronomy, comprising years of hands-on research, recipe synthesis, and oral communication with Indigenous communities, rather than from traditional academic literature.

KEYWORDS:

Indigenous Knowledge, fine-dining, North Caucasian Food, diaspora, women's knowledge, Indigenous menu design

INTRODUCTION:

The Gap between Indigenous Knowledge and the Modern Food Industry

What does a century-old Michelin-listed restaurant, a drive-in cafe for truck drivers on the outskirts of Chicago, and a traditional family dining in the heart of Istanbul have in common?

The answer is Indigenous Caucasian women and their knowledge, which lets them run a business based on old family recipes. Each case above offers traditional dishes on the menu, nutritious for guests, and cost-effective for owners. Moreover, it attracts new audiences for diners and provides employment opportunities for women knowledge keepers.

In this paper, you will meet stories of how just a small group of Indigenous women makes an impact with their knowledge. I invite you to İstiklal, the heart and the nerve center of tourist Istanbul, with shiny stores and restaurants, crowds, and tram bells. Colorful, loud, and contrasting, with mosques, churches, embassies, museums, and clubs. It represents what modern Turkey is: diverse, rich inheritor of the Ottoman Empire with many nationalities and cultures. Moreover, the North Caucasus diaspora has its own place, as well as in the narrow backstreets of İstiklal. These cases show how collaboration between the food industry and Indigenous knowledge keepers can benefit both businesses and people's diets.

This approach, unfortunately, is still not acknowledged by many industries and governments. Knowledge practiced and approved by generations of people, wisdom gathered by thousands of years, and proven by centuries of "field practice" has great value, especially in the food industry. Kefir is a fermented dairy product, and one example of how the human diet can benefit from Indigenous food. Kefir is a result of the industrial adaptation of Karachay-Balkar gypy-ayran, a milk product, produced through mixed fermentation involving lactic acid bacteria and yeasts (Kulikova et al., 2016, p. 55).

The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food

(1939) described kefir as a nutritious dietary product manufactured in 970 Soviet dairy factories operating at that time. In 2001, the original Karachay Ayran name and production method were patented in Russia.

Despite examples such as Kefir and multiple other successes, our food is too often underestimated and consumed mostly as a regional tourist product, such as our cheese, meat, honey, and herbs. There is very little research or attempts at learning surrounding Caucasian food culture, and when these products are consumed, there is often no acknowledgement of the cultural knowledge resulting in their creation. All we have today is a work of enthusiastic ethnographers and home cooks, or self-employed Indigenous women, as I mentioned in the examples above.

The problem is a gap between the food industry and traditional food systems. Professional chefs and food engineers do not know Indigenous culture, and Knowledge Keepers, who rarely have professional education in this field, do not know how to approach the industry and make their voices heard. There is an overwhelming prejudice that traditional food is too simple to hold any financial benefits. Within the North Caucasus communities, much knowledge was lost due to the Caucasian War in the 19th century and repression in the 20th century. This resulted in an abundance of recipes, stories, and traditions disappearing with the loss of those who kept them. This loss highlights how crucial it is for us to preserve and restore what is possible from past documentation. It is difficult work scattered across ethnographies and various locations, but it is necessary work to revive, preserve, and promote our food knowledge.

My goal is to show how Indigenous knowledge can enrich the food industry through collaboration with professionals, by providing jobs for women, and building sustainable business models in countries where people have moved from their lands of origin and are recognized as diaspora. Two cases in Istanbul illustrate the history and perspectives of the Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey. First is Ficcın (Fidjin), a traditional restaurant serving Turkish and Caucasian dishes. Alongside a professional kitchen, the owner organized a separate kitchen for Indigenous women who

prepare home-cooked meals using family recipes.

The other example is the experience of presenting an Indigenous menu at a fine-dining restaurant, 1924 Istanbul (Rejans). It was created in collaboration with the chef and team; they adapted traditional Caucasian recipes for modern plating, while keeping the recipes and ingredients authentic.

Before we dive into the details of these cases, it is necessary to explain the history of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey.

CONTEXT:

Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey, Cherkes, Caucasian, Adige, and other terms

You might ask, what do Caucasian natives do in Turkey?

The history of the diaspora reflects the history of the region as a whole as well as the legacy of the Eldest Empires. Byzantium, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and the Russian Empire controlled or influenced different parts of the Caucasus for centuries. Today, the North Caucasus is part of the Russian Federation.

It constitutes the northern part of the wider Caucasus region, which separates Europe and Asia. It's bordered by the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea to the west, the Caspian Sea to the east, and the Caucasus Mountains to the south. The region shares land borders with the countries of Georgia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus ("North Caucasus," n.d.).

It's an interesting but difficult region for research, as there are more than 50 nationalities and ethnic groups with different languages, belief systems, and histories. We have Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Buddhist followers, as well as Orthodox Old Believers, and groups who continue to keep some pagan elements in their lives.

Moreover, the North Caucasus had economic and cultural interconnections with other regions throughout history. Aliev (2001) states that the Caucasus became a zone of economic and political rivalry in part because it was located at the intersection of trade routes linking Asia and Europe.

Within the broader Eurasian trade networks often associated with the Silk Road, the Caucasus also strengthened its position in international trade relations (Canbek, 1978). This affected not only trade and the economy,



Figure 1. Basic map of the North Caucasus Region of the Russian Federation (ECHO Base Map), 2013. Source: JRC, European Commission (2013).

but also food and culture. Along the Silk Road in the Caucasus, people knew about a wide range of products and spices ages ago. At the same time, this geoposition brought a lot of sorrow to the Caucasus.

The trade route was at the crossroads of many civilizations and empires, such as the Ottoman, Byzantine, Persia, Russia, Rome, Ancient Greece, and others. The region and trade routes were impacted by the Ottoman-Russian wars, the Caucasian War in the 19th century, and the destruction of empires in the 20th century. In addition, Caucasian natives experienced deportations in the USSR from 1943-1957, and later the Chechen wars in the 1990s and 2000s. This has led to a situation where the Caucasus Indigenous people have a diaspora in different countries. Mostly in Asia, the US, Europe, and Turkey.

While Turkey does not collect data on citizens' ethnicity in their statistics, there is an estimated population of about 3–4 million people, according to M. Akhiyadov (2020). Such data relies on oral reports, academic surveys, and NGO data.

They are mostly concentrated in Central and Eastern Anatolia, the Black Sea region, and big cities such as Istanbul, Konya, Eskişehir, Ankara, Bursa, and Yalova (Kipkeeva, 2000). Today, the Caucasus diaspora comprises the descendants of the immigrants of the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as post-Soviet Caucasians who moved here in the 1990s and 2000s.

Who are the Cherkes and Caucasians? Furthermore, how do they refer to themselves?

Another layer of this problem is terminology: in Turkey, following Ottoman Empire usage, often does not specify most ethnicities from the North Caucasus, and puts them under the umbrella term *Çerkes*/Cherkes (Kipkeeva, 2000; Kaya, 2005). At the same time, in Russia, every day and media discourse often uses the term “Caucasians” to refer to all nationalities in the Caucasus. However, people in the North Caucasus never call themselves Caucasians or Cherkes. On this land, people recognize each other's ethnicities by adding to the identity of a specific area. For

example, people introduce themselves as: “I’m Balkar from the Baksan region”, “I’m Dargin”, “I’m Kabardey”.

In addition, related ethnic groups have their own names. For example, Chechen and Ingush have a group named Vaynakh, using it as an umbrella term. Karachay and Balkar people use the group name Taulula. The Adyghe 12 tribes are usually listed in English as Abzakh, Besleney, Bzhedug, Hatuqwai, Kabardian, Mamkhegh, Natukhai, Shapsug, Temirgoy, Ubykh, Yegeruqwai, and Zhaney (Kazemzadeh, 2018). They traditionally refer to themselves as Adige/Adyghe rather than Cherkes (Bilge, 2020).

We, natives of the North Caucasus, never use umbrella terms such as Circassian, Caucasian, or Cherkes that were imposed on us by Ottoman and European travelers and historians.

In the Soviet period, the government divided all twelve Adyghe tribes into official categories: Adygei, Shapsug, Kabardey, and Cherkes in Karachay-Cherkessia. That's how Besleney, Bzhedug, Temirgoy, and other groups were crossed out and united under the name Cherkes. Now, in the post-Soviet area, by “Cherkes” one means the Adyghe-speaking nation in the Karachay-Cherkess Republic. Not all of the Adyghe tribes, not all the North Caucasus population.

Meanwhile, in Turkey, it's the opposite. According to Kipkeeva (2000), “It is important to note that the so-called ‘Cherkes diaspora’ in Turkey actually consists of representatives of the Abazins, Abkhazians, Avars, Adyghe, Balkars, Dargins, Kabardians, Karachays, Kumyks, Nogais, Ossetians, Chechens, etc.”

As a researcher, one should be aware of this sensitive topic. When talking with people who call themselves Cherkes in Turkey, the interviewer should also ask about their place of origin or mother tongue to clarify their ethnicity.

These academic regional issues are in addition to the global Indigenous challenges people face in the food industry. Research is rare and fragmented, conducted mainly by enthusiasts and descendants of Caucasian communities, rather than as a well-established academic field. These name discrepancies lead to tangles and errors in academic publications;

as a result, the original knowledge is disappearing. As Elders who carry oral wisdom pass away, the next generation risks losing it completely, with no chance to recover knowledge by word-of-mouth, interviews, or academic research.

Ficcin, the Restaurant with a Kitchen Designed for Indigenous Women

Just steps away from the central İstiklal and St. Paul Cathedral, Ayhan, Filiz, Saime, Deste, Medine, and Hatice start their day by kneading dough. All these women are Ossetian Indigenous. More than a century ago, their grandparents moved from the North Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire, established new villages in Anatolia, and started new lives.

As 4th-5th-generation immigrants, these women still speak Ossetian and cook traditional food just like their grandmothers did. They still follow their family's recipes, only changing them to use a professional mixer for 20 kg of dough for Ossetian pies and dumplings in Istanbul's historical center.



Figure 2: Ayhan, preparing spinach for velibah pie. Source: author's photograph, 2026.

It's a daily routine at Ficcin, an Ossetian restaurant run by Leyla Kılıç for 30 years, just a few steps from Misir Apartment, Galatasaray Lyceum, and other significant places for tourists from all over the world. Ficcin is a restaurant with a mixed Turkish and Caucasian menu. They prepare Anatolian classics such as meze, kebab, and pide, as well as Cherkes tavuk, gabin, ficcin, and velibah - classic food of homelands carrying with it memory and generations of tradition.

Cherkes tavuk is a dish with an amazing story. Today, it is a widely recognized dish in Turkey, served in restaurants and canteens. It's a dish of immigrants, adopted by the Ottoman Palace in the 19th century, and now one of the classic Turkish appetizers, as a cold chicken dish with walnut sauce that can be found in many restaurants. Moreover, it is sold at the women's kooperatif, an initiative to organize joint cooking of home-style dishes for sale at farm markets and eco-stores in Turkey.

Gabin are Ossetian dumplings, with cheese, potato, or meat fillings. Ficcin is the Turkish transliteration of the most famous Ossetian meat pie, Fydjin. As well as velibah, a flatbread with various fillings.

It is important to note that there are a few distinct differences in the naming of dishes by diaspora in Turkey. For example, in Ossetia, every pie with a different filling has its own name: tsakharadzhin (beet greens and cheese pie), nasdzhin (pumpkin pie), kudurdzhin (bean pie), ualibakh/velibah (cheese pie). In Turkey, velibah has become an umbrella term for all pies. In Ficcin, they make it with spinach, potatoes, or cheese.



Figure 3: Ficcin restaurant. Source: author's photograph, 2026.



Figure 4: Traditional ornaments in the restaurant design.
Source: author's photograph, 2026.

The story of this restaurant began with a simple wish: to share the flavors of the homeland in Istanbul. "My ancestors were originally from Alagir, North Ossetia. They settled in Yozgat in the second half of the nineteenth century, after the Caucasian War, like most of the Ossetian immigrants. I was six years old when my family moved to Istanbul", Leyla recalls (L. Kılıç personal communication, April 7, 2026).



Figure 5: Leyla Kılıç, owner of the Ficcın restaurant. Source: author's photograph, 2026.

As for all Caucasians, there are no official statistics for Ossetians in Turkey, and academic data varies. Georgy Chochiev (2015) estimates roughly 20,000 individuals of Ossetian descent for the early twenty-first century, whereas Richard Foltz (2022) estimates up to 60,000. Historically, Ossetian

muhadjirs settled in the Kars/Sarıkamış region, the Muş-Bitlis-Siirt belt, and parts of Central Anatolia, especially Sivas, Tokat, Yozgat, Niğde, and Maraş. Muhadjirs is an Arabic term used to refer to Turkish migrants from the Balkans (Kaya, 2005). Migrants from the Caucasus also call themselves muhadjir.

In 1996, after she completed the Business Administration course, Leyla opened a small cafe in the backstreet of İstiklal. The name she founded immediately: Ficcın - after the most famous Ossetian dish, a meat pie baked in the oven, filled with minced meat and spices. At first, Leyla was cooking with family recipes, pies, soups, and dumplings. All, learned from her mother and grandmothers. "I just wanted to share our food", she explained, "our culture is disappearing, nobody knows the Caucasian people and our food" (L. Kılıç personal communication, April 7, 2026).



Figure 6: A woman preparing Ficcın, a traditional meat pie.
Source: author's photograph, 2026.

At the time, İstiklal wasn't popular among tourists, so most of her customers were office workers, teachers, journalists, museum and theatre workers, and parents of Galatasaray kids.

Once, I met with alums of Istanbul Galatasaray Liceum, the oldest and most prestigious school in Turkey, and was shocked by their deep knowledge of the Caucasus and our food and culture. They recall their school years and lunches with parents after liceum in Ficcın. That's how I learned that if there are women who keep knowledge and share it, such knowledge can survive migration and living in diaspora for generations.

Soon, Ficcın became popular in the

Beyoglu area, and Leyla hired a woman to help, then one more, and rented an additional place from a neighbor. Step by step, Ficcin grew into a large restaurant occupying much of the side street, with separate hot, cold, and dough-preparation kitchens (Culinary Backstreets, 2017). The menu has expanded to include Turkish dishes as well. The Caucasian menu has developed over the years.

"We cooked Dagestan hinkal, Chechen hingalsh, and jijig galnash, and other Caucasian dishes, but not all were popular on the menu. So, we are keeping them as pre-order options. If someone wants, they can order ahead, and our cooks will prepare. Daily, we prepare appetizers, soup, pies, and dumplings - our bestsellers." (L. Kiliç personal communication, April 7, 2026).

To this day, a group of 10-12 Ossetian women prepares all of the pastry and Caucasian dishes. All of them are descendants of muhadjirs from different villages in Anatolia.

Daily, they prepare 20-30 kg of dumplings, 15-20 Ficcin pies, and breakfast pastry in the early morning. Breakfast starts at 7.00 am, so for the freshly baked bread, the women start around five or six am.

Leyla organized a traditional kitchen for them, according to their wishes, with a long

marble table around the perimeter for rolling dough and a big table in the center, to work as a traditional women's circle.

In the first years, it wasn't easy to find workers; at the time, women working outside the home was a rare idea. Most of them didn't believe they could handle restaurant busyness. But I like working with women. If they know traditional kitchen - it's enough professionalism; they know how to cook, how to knead, when to roll, and how to clean the kitchen and keep it crystal. They never miss anything; all skills are trained, essential, with wisdom and generations of knowledge. No need to explain simple things (L. Kiliç, personal communication, April 7, 2026).

It needs to be pointed out: it's not a charity project "providing women jobs." It's been a win-win case working for 30 years now. The first Indigenous employees retired a couple of years ago; now, in the kitchen, a second- and third-generation team is working, with 5, 10, and 15 years of experience. None have professional education, only trained at home with their grandmothers.

They give the restaurant exactly what it requires: original taste, full understanding of the process, and zero waste.



Figure 7: Preparation of gabin, Ossetian dumplings, with potatoes. Source: author's photograph, 2026.

Figure 8: Women rolling dough with a traditional rolling pin. Source: author's photograph, 2026.



Israf yok (no waste), explained Hatice, gathering all leftover pieces of cut dough, which we use to prepare noodles and flatbread for breakfast. Here, we cook the same way as at home: three-fourths hands and different zones; one kneads, the other rolls out, and the third forms dough. (Hatice, personal communication, April 7, 2026).

Hatice has been doing this all her life, since she was five years old, when she first started participating in the kitchen with her mother and aunts. First, as a small, curious assistant, and later as an equal home cook.

"If we don't cook and share, our culture will die with us. These women do what they were doing all their lives at home, but with a salary, insurance, and promoting our pies" (L. Kılıç, personal communication, April 7, 2026).



Figure 9: Inside Ossetian decoration and books. Source: author's photograph, 2026.

This story is inspiring, a true case of how business can benefit from Indigenous Knowledge. Women with Knowledge passed down by word of mouth and hand-to-hand cooking teaching in the family established a successful business based on Indigenous recipes, providing not only stable work for a group of Indigenous women but also a sense of self-esteem, saving Caucasian Food Knowledge in diaspora ages and kilometers away from the homeland. As well as the Ossetian language, songs, and dances.

Every month, Ficcín hosts cultural evenings with national music and dances. So, I would say it's the unofficial warm heart of the Ossetian diaspora in Istanbul, where, as in centuries past, women create a warm space with home cooking, lights, and music for all.

Leyla never studied Gastronomy or Hospitality; she still uses recipes from her grandmother and follows Caucasian guest etiquette, as it's a big part of Caucasian culture, rooted deep. In many North Caucasian communities, hospitality and the offering of food are important markers of respectability and social order (Karaketov & Sabanchiev, 2014). She welcomes guests, stops by to say a couple of words, and serves "today's specials" as a compliment.

For many years, it was the only restaurant in Istanbul with Caucasian food, until the pandemic. After the 2020 quarantine, people got used to spending more time in their suburbs,

and many local restaurants opened, as well as a few authentic Caucasian restaurants in different parts of Istanbul. However, Ficcın is still the biggest, oldest, and most famous. In May 2026, Ficcın opened a branch in Cihangir, a prestigious area near the Museum of Innocence and Galataport.

Leyla, with her truly Caucasian hospitality and warmth, is a famous person promoting Caucasian Food and culture, gives interviews to the media, and hosts special events. Moreover, every month she organizes cooking and craft workshops at the Ossetian dernek (a cultural Non-Governmental Organization) for women and children.

She shares knowledge that has enabled her to build a successful business, making her a legend of İstiklal and Beyoğlu. Stopping to say hello to old customers and neighbors on İstiklal is rare now, on Istanbul's most crowded street. Walking with Leyla through the streets of Beyoğlu gives this experience a full feel. Generational residents stop her to say hi and spend time recalling old days with pies and family events in Ficcın or ask if they will cook chicken soup today.

Stories like these remind me repeatedly that there is knowledge we as Indigenous women can share with the world. Years ago, back in my homeland, when I was just starting to research recipes, I met other women who run businesses with food knowledge passed down through their ancestors: bakeries, restaurants, frozen preps, etc.

Now I see the same on an international level. Women can save Knowledge, promote it, and run meaningful and impactful businesses even while being in the diaspora.

1924 Istanbul: first-ever presentation of Indigenous Caucasian food at a fine-dining restaurant

Interestingly, on the very next street from Ficcın is another restaurant now also closely tied to Indigenous Food History.

The 1924 Istanbul (Rejans) is one of the oldest fine-dining restaurants in Turkey, listed in the Michelin Guide. Established by Russian aristocrats who ran away to Istanbul after the revolution, this legendary restaurant hosted Atatürk, Vertinsky, Agatha Christie, Greta Garbo, and other 20th-century luminaries (1924 İstanbul, n.d.).



Figure 10: Inside the 1924 Istanbul restaurant. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

FUN FACT

Although the word *ayran* appears in the eleventh-century *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* (Compendium of the Turkic Dialects), the earliest description I have found of *ayran* as a North Caucasian dairy product belongs to Blaramberg in the 1830s. Earlier travelers, however, also described fermented dairy products consumed by local communities. In 1905-1907, lactic acid bacteria were recognized through the work of Grigorov and Metchnikoff on fermented milk.

In 1908, 10 pounds of gypsy-*ayran* starter culture and a recipe were gifted to technologist Irina Sakharova by Karachay prince Bekmirza Baychorov. Soon, Kefir production started in Moscow (Shamanov, 2009, p. 98). Among the first consumers was Moscow's Botkin Hospital.

The regular menu includes traditional Eastern European dishes and one appetizer from the Caucasus, Cherkas Tavuk. Now, it's the first restaurant to present an Indigenous-Caucasian menu at a professional level—keeping authentic tastes, ingredients, and techniques, mixed with modern plating and service. We approved that Indigenous Cuisine can be presented at any level and meet the professional demands of different industries. The main thing is the joint work of knowledge keepers and industry professionals.



Figure 11: Seasonal North Caucasian menu by Mariam Tambieva at 1924 Istanbul. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

During May 2025, 1924, Istanbul served a seasonal menu based on traditional North Caucasian recipes. So, this restaurant, a symbol of Russian immigrants' history, became a cultural bridge between the Indigenous and professional Food industry, for the North Caucasus, the Diaspora, Turkey, and Russia. That's how Food can unite eras and countries.

My name is Mariam Tambieva, and I am the founder of the "Highland Hearth" project and an Indigenous food expert. I spend time reviving forgotten recipes from all over the North Caucasus and have collected over 1,000 traditional dishes. I also organize workshops, festivals, and train chefs. Inspired by the 1924 seasonal menu, I aimed to follow rather than copy the 1924 restaurant concept and to preserve authentic North Caucasian dishes with meaningful stories. To create this seasonal menu, I drew on my archive of more than 1,000 recipes and applied criterion-based selection to choose dishes for the next pilot testing at the professional kitchen.

My criteria for creating a seasonal fine-dining menu were:

1. **Kitchen and cooks' capacity:** selection of recipes available to replicate for non-Indigenous cooks with professional equipment (pots, pans, sauté pans, grills, freezers) and maintain taste and quality.
2. **Season and availability:** ingredients for dishes available in Istanbul in May are fresh and of high quality.
3. **Balance and flow:** the menu includes hot/cold, light/filling, and meat/vegetarian options. Dishes were also selected to fit the restaurant's concept, serving cold and hot appetizers, main courses, salads, and desserts.
4. **Representation:** no menu could represent all the nations of the Caucasus, so I included dishes from several regions, as well as similar ones across regions, such as meat soups and flatbreads.
5. **Natural products and simple structure:** natural ingredients took priority, such as nettles, apricots, cottage cheese, and meat, as well as dishes with a clear, uncomplicated structure. This refers most to North Caucasus cuisine: the use of natural products and the highlighting of ingredients' natural flavors.
6. **Recognizable or accessible tastes:** the guests of the 1924 restaurant are Turkish citizens, Russians, and international tourists. The menu had to include dishes that could evoke childhood memories for Russian or Turkish guests (for example, flatbreads or cabbage rolls) and be understandable to international guests, such as dumplings.
7. **Storytelling:** as the restaurant is built on a historical frame and uses it in every aspect, from the menu and decorations to the photos on the walls. We chose dishes with the potential to build storytelling, such as Karachay Shorpa - the ancient soup with roots from Pagan times.

After selecting recipes that fit all filters, I had a pool of about 50 recipes.

The next steps to design a balanced and understandable set within the concept and fine dining standards of the 1924 Istanbul restaurant were:

1. **Creating a shortlist:** selecting five recipes for each category (cold appetizer, hot starter, main course, dessert) for the seasonal set.
2. **Menu balance control:** the selected dishes were compared with each other to build a balanced set, so as not to let one taste suppress another. The result was a shortlist of 18 dishes.
3. **Kitchen tests and professional evaluation:** tests of each of the chosen recipes in the professional kitchen, including cooking time, service speed, equipment compatibility, and repeatability. In the end, we had a final set of six dishes, each with its own sauce or garnish.



Figure 12: Chefs Başak Yüce, Hakan Demirtaş and CEO Mike Norman at menu shooting. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Chefs Hakan Demirtaş and Başak Yüce refined each dish and compiled an elegant menu according to the restaurant's concept. For this article, it is important to note that Başak is a 25-year-old female sous-chef, which is very rare in Istanbul gastronomy.

Cold appetizer: Cerşh (Djers) Libje - Adyge bean paste

Components: White bean puree/garlic/onion/cream/smoked ground pepper; service: green oil/roasted pumpkin seeds/lavash chips.

Presentation: served cold and shaped with a piping bag, decorated with green oil, roasted pumpkin seeds, and spicy lavash chips. It's a very old, almost forgotten recipe that was

restored after an interview with an Adyge woman in Cherkessk. Originally, it served as a cereal or soup; the fine-dining concept served in a "hummus-like" style.



Figure 13: Cerşh Libje – Circassian-style bean cold appetizer. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Hot starter + one sauce: Dagestan Nettle Chudu with flaxseed sauce Urbech

Components: Nettle-curd filling/soft dough; service: sour cream/urbech sauce (flaxseed)/curd cheese/microgreens.

Presentation: served hot with a bit of butter, curd cheese, and microgreens on top, with sour cream and urbech sauce. Urbech is a Dagestan superfood made from ground flaxseeds, butter, and honey; it's a nutrient-dense sauce rich in vitamins and fatty acids. Chudu is a famous Dagestan pastry, with variations for every ethnic group. Fine dining served as a hot starter in a small, accurate half-moon shape.



Figure 14: Dagestan Nettle Chudu with flaxseed sauce Urbech. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Hot starter: Pumpkin kurze (Dagestani dumplings)

Components: pumpkin/dough/spices. Service: pumpkin chips/sour cream/pumpkin seeds/crispy onion

Presentation: served hot with sour cream on the side; a little butter, pumpkin

chips, roasted onion, and pumpkin seeds on top. Kurze is a type of dumpling from Dagestan with different fillings inside (vegetables, greens, dairy, meat). The most characteristic sign of kurze is the “braids” on the top of each dumpling.



Figure 15: Dagestan Pumpkin kurze. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Main course + one sauce: Karachay Shorpa with Tuzluk sauce

Components: lamb/broth/potato/carrot. **Service:** garlic yogurt sauce/microgreens/broth

Presentation: serve hot with one piece of meat, a potato, and carrot slices on each plate, with finely chopped greens. The broth is brought very hot in a sauceboat and served by pouring it at the table in front of the guest. A small bowl of garlic herb yogurt sauce comes on the side. The guest adjusts the spice level to their taste with this sauce. Shorpa is one of the most ancient dishes, dating back to Pagan times; men served it during the celebration of the God. Serving sauces and spices separately is a Caucasian tradition, giving guests a chance to try the dish and adjust it to their taste.



Figure 16: Karachay Shorpa with Tuzluk sauce. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Main course + one sauce + one garnish: Golubtsy (Dagestan version, mini cabbage/meat rolls) with vegetable quenelle and ajika sauce.

Components: cabbage/minced meat/onion/carrot/pepper/rice/tomato/spices/microgreens/sour cream

Presentation: served hot with sour cream, vegetable quenelle, and tomato-garlic hot sauce on the side. Traditionally in Russia, Golubtsy are large; in Dagestan, they're as thin as a thumb. It also looks similar to Turkish sarma, so this dish is a recognizable “culture bridge” for guests.



Figure 17: Golubtsy with vegetable quenelle and ajika sauce. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Dessert + sauce: Kurch (dried apricot cream with urbech sauce)

Components: dried apricot/urbech sauce/ice cream/almond crisp/gelatine

Presentation: served cold, with diced dried apricots placed in the middle; one scoop of ice cream on top; warm, flowing urbeç sauce drizzled over it; one slice of biscuit on the side. Kurch is a dessert served at weddings and women's after-birth gatherings in Dagestan. It's a nutritious, easy-to-make food rich in vitamins that helps the body rehabilitate.



Figure 18: Kurch with urbech sauce. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.



Figure 19: North Caucasus Seasonal Menu at 1924 Istanbul.
Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

The menu was printed in the 1924 Istanbul Restaurant style in both English and Turkish. It was served à la carte, featuring meat-based and vegetarian options, appetizers, mains, and dessert. Several dishes were introduced to the professional kitchen for the first time: Cerşh Libje, Chudu, Pumpkin kurze, Kurch, Urbech sauce.

This set showed how varied and rich Caucasian cuisine is. People here know how to cook wild greens and seeds, enriching the daily diet with healthy, accessible food. To complete the menu, more familiar meat-based dishes included: stuffed mini cabbage rolls, aromatic Karachay lamb shorpa with tuzluk (yogurt-garlic) sauce.

After menu approval: presentation, service preparation, and launch

After the final set of six dishes was approved, the process continued as follows:

1. **Team training and tasting:** plate composition was detailed, including garnish, sauce, and decoration. At the same time, a tasting was organized for the service team, with storytelling and explanations of Caucasian

culture, following the menu's testing with several special groups.

2. **Photo and video shoots** for promotion in the media and blogs.
3. **Promotion:** announcements about presenting the Indigenous menu were sent to various Turkish Media covering the restaurant industry, culture, events in Istanbul, and the Caucasus Diaspora. For the official launch, diaspora representatives, media, influencers, and gastronomy writers were invited.



Figure 20: North Caucasus Seasonal Menu official presentation evening at 1924 Istanbul. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

As a result, the Indigenous menu received a good response. Two Turkish media companies, Yeni Şafak and TRT, produced videos about it. In addition, several Istanbul media published articles and announcements. The response on social media was stronger: the post about the menu presentation was reposted by dozens of Indigenous and gastronomy accounts, influencers, and culture centers.



Figure 21: Mike Norman, CEO of 1924 Istanbul. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.



From the heart of the Caucasus to the heart of Istanbul, this collaboration celebrates more than cuisine, says Mike Norman, CEO of 1924 Istanbul. It's a cultural moment, and we're thrilled to share it with our guests. In 1924 Istanbul, we believe food is memory, connection, and identity. This menu is a presentation of food heritage and culture (press release, May 2025).

Key points from this experience:

1. **Language barriers.** The project could be more difficult if I hadn't already spoken Turkish and English. English was necessary for presenting the menu to guests and for communication with the restaurant management. At the same time, Turkish needed to work with the kitchen staff, who don't speak other languages. Otherwise, we'd need interpreters every day.
2. **Cultural considerations.** This international collaboration showed that cultural and culinary details must be explained in detail, repeatedly. For instance, Turkish cuisine uses spices generously in the dish itself,

whereas in Caucasian tradition, seasonings are served at the table. Such differences need to be clarified and controlled in the kitchen.

3. **Vision.** Cases like this are still rare and require committed actors on both sides: the restaurant and the Indigenous specialists. Successful collaboration depends on people with unique skills and a shared vision. Caucasian cuisine has potential, and I'm proud that the 1924 team shares this idea with me. It's a big honor to collaborate with visionaries, a team ready to explore forgotten recipes and give them new life. Here I want to thank chefs Mike, Hakan, and Basak. Their professionalism and creativity made this collaboration possible.

Cases like this are still rare and require committed actors on both sides: the restaurant and the Indigenous specialists. Successful collaboration depends on people with unique skills, practical flexibility, and shared vision. Caucasian cuisine has considerable potential, and I am proud that the 1924 team shared this commitment. Their willingness to explore overlooked recipes and give them new life made this collaboration possible.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous Food Knowledge has potential in modern restaurants, not only as an exotic trend but also as a sustainable system to enrich the diet with a range of products and methods that have been applied for centuries.

The Caucasus and the Middle East are among the historical centers, the places of origin for many products and cooking techniques, and Indigenous people here continue to keep ancient knowledge. Research on it could benefit the industry by cutting costs, enriching diets, improving health, and reducing waste.

The problem is, to realize the potential of Indigenous Food, we need not only knowledge keepers at different levels (from home cooks to professional chefs), but also visionaries in the food industry. These professionals can see beyond old school.

I described two approaches:

- › a traditional one, in which artisans work in the kitchen under the guidance of a chef, creating the most authentic product possible for an audience seeking familiar, “home-made” flavors;
- › and a more modern one, in which the knowledge keepers collaborate with professional chefs to create a menu based on traditional recipes for fine-dining restaurants, with specific requirements for cooking speed, quality, and service. The audience at such restaurants expects not only the “taste of childhood” but also elements of show and demonstrations of the chefs’ and waiters’ skills.

These are small, yet inspiring examples. If a few women transform their family knowledge into a working business or research, what can we achieve with systematic support for both industry and academia?

I never studied cooking, like millions of other Indigenous women all over the world. I was just lucky to have my grandmother and learn from her. I moved to Istanbul in 2022, and over the years, my knowledge of traditional cuisine has helped me manage diet and professional life as an Indigenous researcher and Food expert. Every time I write about it, I turn back to the grandmother’s huge role in Knowledge systems: to keep, share, and teach, from one heart to another.



DAGESTAN NETTLE CHUDU

Flatbread recipe from Dagestan, the most multicultural region with more than 30 ethnicities recorded officially, more than 50 in reality.

Different Indigenous people in Dagestan has their own recipes of chudu, such as Laks, Dargins, Avars, Lezgins, and others. Each community cook it with specific ingredients, details, shapes.

I learned this pecipe from my aunt, a Lak woman. She grew up in a mountain village, where nettle and other spring herbs are the first fresh food after a long, cold winter. It's a nutritious plant, rich with vitamins and fiber, a healthy "superfood" with intense, satysfying taste. With nettles, they prepare soups, dumplings, and these flatbreads, called chudu.

These family recipes I used in the seasonal menu for the 1924 Istanbul restaurant on Istiklal Street, in the heart of the city.

We didn't change anything in the process and used the same ingredients (nettle, cottage cheese, flour, butter, etc.). To adapt it for restaurant service, we made small, elegant shapes, as half moons, and used microgreens and cottage cheese.



Dagestan nettle chudu, served at 1924 Istanbul. Source: author's photograph, May 2025.

Ingredients

For the dough:

Wheat flour - 800 g
Warm water, about 40°C - 200 ml
Salt - 1/2 teaspoon

For the filling:

Nettles - 500 g
Cottage cheese - 250 g
Onion - 200 g
Dill, parsley - to taste
Vegetable oil - 3 tbsp
Salt, black pepper, ground coriander- to taste

Urbech sauce:

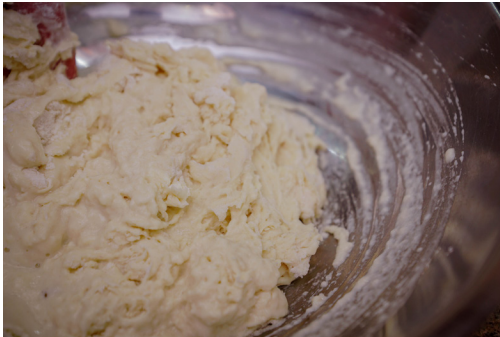
Urbech (black flaxseed) paste - 100 g
Butter - 50 g
Honey - 50 g

For serving:

Sour cream/butter - to taste
Cottage cheese - to taste
Greens/microgreens - to taste

Preparation

1. Warm the water to 35-40 C, add salt, and let it dissolve. Add flour step by step, and knead a very soft, barely sticky dough. Cover and let it rest for 30 min.



2. Rinse nettle leaves several times carefully, and drain well. Remove leaves from the stems. Use gloves, nettle is itchy.
3. Finely chop all leaves, put them in a bowl, and add a pinch of salt. Leave for 10-15 min to draw the liquid. Then, rub and squeeze the nettles with your hands until they release liquid and reduce in volume.
4. Drain off "juice" carefully, otherwise it'll provide a bitter taste.
5. Dice the onion into small cubes, sauté in a pan in oil until golden and soft. Add it to the nettles.
6. Pass cottage cheese through a metal culinary sieve to make it more homogeneous and soft. It's better to use full-fat cottage cheese, as it makes the filling more tender and nutritious.
7. Chop the greens (dill, parsley, green onion), add them to the nettle and cheese. Add salt, ground coriander, and black pepper to taste, and mix it all well.

8. Divide the dough into small balls and roll each one out into a thin round, about 15 cm in diameter.



9. Spread a thin layer of nettle filling over one half, leaving a small border around the edges.
10. Put the other half of the dough over the filling and seal the edges. Trim the edges with a knife. D-shaper half-moon flatbread is ready to cook. Start it immediately; otherwise, the dough will dry and crack.



11. Cook each on both sides in a dry pan, no oil or butter. When you see small brown circles on the dough, it's ready. Turn it over and repeat the same.
12. Place fried chudu on a plate, brush it with butter on each side generously. Put the next prepared flatbread on top and grease it too. Repeat the same with all chudu, building a "tower" of flatbreads.



13. When all is ready, cover the plate with chudu with a foil or a special cup. Roll it over with a towel and let it rest a bit in its own warmth. That will make chudu more tender and soft.
14. Meanwhile, prepare a very special sauce, Urbech. Urbech is a specific Dagestan superfood - a paste made from ground black flax seeds, rich in nutrients. In Dagestan, people make a special sauce with it, adding butter and honey, and this sauce is also called urbech. Served with pastry, dumplings, cereals, and apricot soup.
15. To make the sauce: place a metal bowl over a saucepan of slowly boiling water to make a bain-marie (a "water bath"). Put in a bowl the urbech paste, butter, and honey. Mix it well until it becomes a warm, homogeneous sauce.



16. Serve three warm chudu per portion, decorate with three half-moons with micro-greens and a pinch of cottage cheese on top. Serve small sauce cups with the urbech sauce, butter, or sour cream on the side as Lak women do at home.



17. You can eat chudu with your hands: take small pieces of the flatbread and dip them into the urbech sauce. The combination of tender, cheesy nettle and sweet sauce is so deep, you will never forget!
18. The best drink to accompany nettle chudu is hot herbal tea.



Traditional service of chudu in Dagestan. Source: author's photograph, 2020.

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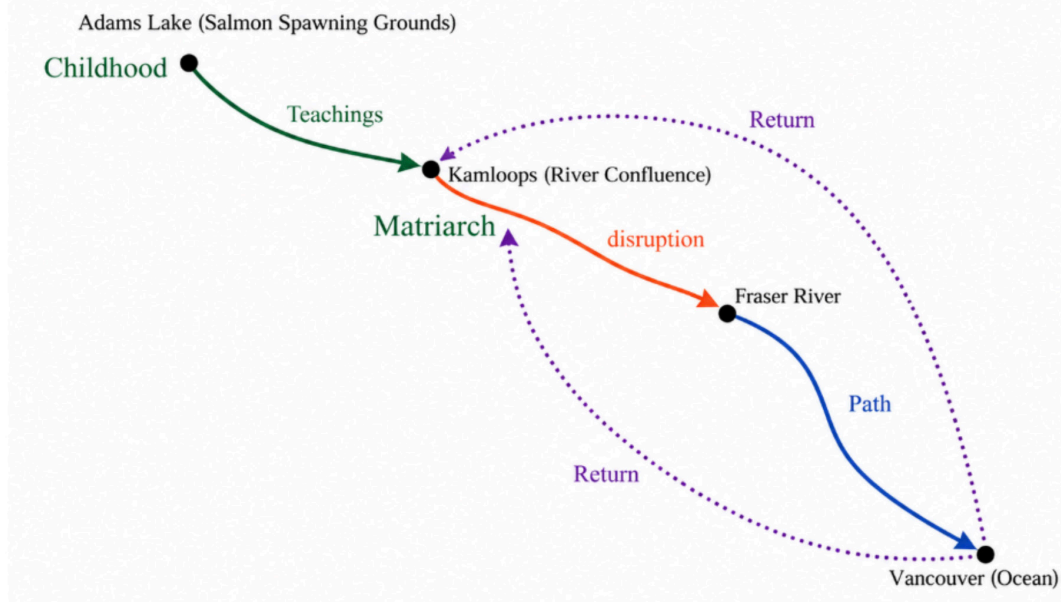
Georgia Jules

Secwépemc

Indigenous Land Stewardship

OUR LANGUAGE CARRIES OUR LAWS: Secwépemtsin, Governance, and Secwépemc Knowledge Systems

Fraser River System: Adams Lake to Vancouver



A Note on Secwépemtsin Language

Secwépemtsin words are used throughout this paper intentionally. While English translation may be provided, they do not fully capture the laws, relationships, responsibilities, and worldview embedded within the language. (Battiste, 2013; Ignace & Ignace, 2017).

Terms such as **Secwépemc**, **Secwépemcúl'ecw**, **kwséltkten**, **Kye7e**, and **Melmelnetqwe7** are retained to honour their original meanings. Readers are encouraged to engage with and learn the language, as some concepts can only be fully understood through Secwépemtsin itself.

My positionality begins where the rivers meet.

I come from the Secwépemc Nation, raised in Neskonlith, with matriarchal roots in Adams Lake and Patriarchal roots in Skeetchestn. These places are not separate from who I am. Like the waters that gather and flow through Secwepemcul'ecw, my identity is shaped by the convergence of land, family, and teachings.

My Secwepemc name, Melmelnetqwe7, meaning Shadow or Medicine Over the Water, was given to me by my grandmothers. It carries responsibility. It reflects a lineage of women who understood their roles long before I understood mine. My Adams Lake family are stewards of the salmon, and my Skeetchestn roots ground me in my Patriarchal strength and Secwepemc Laws. Like the salmon, our teachings move with the water, returning again and again to sustain future generations.

These teachings shape how I understand land, governance, and responsibility as a living system, like water, moving through confluence, disruption, and return into who I am becoming.

When I speak about Indigenous land governance today, I am not speaking from theory alone. I speak from lived experience, from memory, and from teachings carried through generations. My work in Indigenous Land Stewardship, and my role as an emerging matriarch, required me to understand how colonial systems continue to interrupt these natural flows.

Beyond policy, the Indian Act disrupted something deeper.

It displaced our matriarchs from their roles within community governance. It imposed patriarchal systems that did not reflect our laws, our kinship structures, or our responsibilities to one another. Where women once held central roles in decision-making, land stewardship, and the transmission of knowledge, colonial systems worked to silence, sideline, and redefine those roles.

Where our systems are rooted in relationship and responsibility, the Indian Act imposes restriction. It holds reserve land under Crown title, limits the ability to use land as collateral, and places decision-making authority in federal systems rather than our own Nations. These structures create barriers to economic self-determination, slowing

development, and limiting our ability to act in accordance with our own laws. (Government of Canada, 1985).

This is not just a policy issue. It is a disruption of natural law.

Just as a river cannot flow freely when it is dammed, our governance systems cannot function when the roles of our matriarchs are interrupted. The removal of women from positions of influence impacts not only leadership, but the balance of community, the care for land, and the strength of future generations.

Yet, like water, our systems persist.

The work of Sarah Hunt, particularly in *Enacting the Authority of Our Grandmothers*, speaks to the resurgence of Indigenous women's authority and the responsibility to carry forward matriarchal teachings (Hunt, n.d.). This work reminds us that reclaiming governance is not only about legal reform, but about restoring the roles, responsibilities, and voices of Indigenous women within our Nations.

International frameworks such as the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirm what we have always known (United Nations, 2007). The right to self-determination, to maintain our own systems, and to govern our lands and resources is not new. It is inherent. What is required now is not recognition in words, but implementation in practice.

When I speak in spaces of advocacy, I carry these teachings with me.

I speak on behalf of Indigenous educators, land stewards, and community members who continue to advance land governance and sustainable economies. I speak knowing that our economies are not separate from land but grounded in it. True economic self-determination begins with land and flows outwards into community well-being, cultural continuity, and future generations.

This is where my positionality and my research meet.

As a Secwepemc woman and emerging matriarch, I understand my role is not only to analyze these systems, but to help restore balance. This means learning, listening, and carrying forward the teachings of my grandmothers and mother. It means recognizing that governance is not just structure, but

responsibility. (My grandmothers told me water is gentle yet powerful and goes where it needs to go)

To enact my Kye7e's is to step into that responsibility with intention. It is to restore what was disrupted, to bring forward what was always there, and to ensure that the next generations inherit not only knowledge, but strength. Dr. Uncle Shane Pointe from Musqueam always said Intergenerational Intelligence, Intergenerational strength.

And it means remembering that everything returns.

Shadow Over the Water

*kwséltkten, all my relations
They gave me a name
before I understood its meaning,
before I knew the weight of water,
before I learned how shadows move with light.*

*My grandmothers knew.
Regina from Adams Lake,
Teresa from Skeetchestn,
their hands steady,
their prayers quiet,
their love woven into my bones
long before I could carry it myself.*

*They raised me in stories,
in kitchens filled with laughter,
in the sound of language
that wrapped around me
like morning fog on the water.*

*They knew I would walk
between worlds,
between hurt and healing,
between past and becoming.*

*Shadow Over the Water.
Medicine Over the Water.*

*Not darkness
but protection.*

*Not silence
but presence.*

*I carry my parents with me,
my mom's fierce love,
my dad's stories and prayers,*

their strength flowing
like rivers returning home.
I carry my siblings,
my family,
my people,
kwséltkten,
all my relations.
Like the salmon returning,
I find my way back
again and again
to who I am.
My grandmothers already knew
the path I would walk.
They saw the water
before I did.
They saw the shadow
before I became it.
And now I walk forward
with their teachings beside me,
their voices in my heart,
their love guiding my purpose.
Shadow Over the Water.
Medicine Over the Water.
I am who they prayed for.
I am who they raised.
I am who I was always meant to be.

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Carys Smith

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Bachelor of Education

LEARNING TOO LATE: Truth, Identity, and Reconciliation in Education

"We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Indigenous peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement."

— Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Call to Action #62

Education is often described as the key to success. For Indigenous peoples, however, education systems have often done the opposite for decades. First Nations communities have been unable to implement reconciliation into classrooms due to barriers such as institutional bureaucracy. This process was called to action but has made zero progress in binding Indigenous education into curriculums. This issue leaves a gap for Indigenous students across North America, and it also leads to a loss of identity and their stories. If students were aware of what their people endured, their future could start opening rather than closing. This can end the epidemic of failure amongst Indigenous students.

Reconciliation in education is essential for the achievement of both educational outcomes and the reconciliation process for Indigenous students (Battiste, 2013). Indigenous education needs to be implemented into curriculums and used for every subject, rather than just a single day, hour, or lecture (Power, 2022). Implementing the history that has been replaced with colonial ways will push the success of many Indigenous students. It

may not be the easiest thing to do, but it is the most beneficial. Reconciliation belongs in Indigenous classrooms. Students deserve to know their true histories, their stories, for their own success. Students can become greater than they are if they are taught the reality of our history.

Learning the Truth in University

I experienced this gap firsthand when I attended an Indigenous Studies course at the University of Winnipeg. I sat in a lecture hall filled with students from different parts of the world. The professor lectured from PowerPoint slides that included terms such as "Indians" and "savages," discussing historical documents where those words were used. The ninety-minute lecture felt endless. After the lecture, class discussions would begin where the professor would ask questions about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the legacy of residential schools. I remember sitting there completely lost.

What legacy?

Until that moment, I had never realized how much of Indigenous history had been withheld from me. The reactions in that classroom revealed how differently people had been exposed to Indigenous history. Some students were as old as their mid-thirties, while others were brand-new adults like I was. Some sat silently, barely reacting to the material. Others were shocked, crying, or visibly upset. Some even left the lecture early. One student said, "Every time I hear this story, I cry and feel angry." I remember sitting there wondering what she meant by "every time." How was it possible that someone with no Indigenous background knew more about my people's history than I did?

I sat quietly in my chair with tears rolling down my face, feeling both anger and confusion. This was the same truth I was asked to write about two years earlier. Before this university class, I would not have been able to sit down with a pencil and paper and explain how reconciliation was possible. Writing about something I was unaware of would have been like telling someone to sing a song word for word without knowing the lyrics, let alone the chorus.

Discovering Reconciliation Too Late

I did not know what reconciliation meant until I was sitting in a Grade 11 English classroom. My teacher had asked me to enter a writing contest where the central theme was Truth and Reconciliation. I knew what truth meant, but the concept of reconciliation was unfamiliar to me. The word carried a weight I did not yet understand, so I told my teacher I would take the contest home and think about it, but I never did. It was not because I did not know how to write, but because I did not know what reconciliation was, or what truth they were asking us to confront. I understood fragments of that truth, but not the depth of it. No one had ever talked about it before. I felt defeated.

Maybe if I had understood Truth and Reconciliation then, my dream of becoming a writer might have started earlier. But how could I write something I knew nothing about? Reconciliation cannot succeed when Indigenous youth themselves were never taught the

truths that reconciliation is meant to address. If they were to ask a student with no background of Indigenous heritage though, I feel that they would answer with a deeper educational understanding than I had at the time. This is not criticism; it's a fact. Non-Indigenous students are often taught more in depth of our histories, but I think their interpretation is almost often seen as a tool to address the "Indian problem" Scott, D. (1920). Colonial systems often frame assimilation as a solution rather than recognizing the harm it caused. Which is also another issue for Indigenous students, if they are being taught to some extent, it is often used to show students that this was an attempt at getting rid of them for their own sanity and successes along the way. We were taught that living according to colonial ways of life was safer and more beneficial than knowing our own truths. This results in Indigenous youth feeling profound grief, anxiety and shame surrounding who they are without the ability to see that this historical trauma is being internalized (Wexler, 2009)

Silence Within Education

Why is silence considered safer for Indigenous students rather than learning about their own history?

Whenever I ask this question to people, discussions arise about how these topics are dense and uncomfortable, or even seen as a trigger for some educators. Why were these histories not being taught sooner? Why did I not understand this topic? Why was I not being taught the history of Indigenous peoples inside a band-run school in Pimicikamak Cree Nation? Was it fear? Yes, it was.

But the truth is that teaching these histories is exactly what reconciliation requires. It requires honesty, even when that honesty is uncomfortable. Yet reconciliation often stays in something written in policy rather than something practiced in classrooms. Even within First Nation communities, these conversations are sometimes avoided, not out of spite, but out of fear. The colonial legacy that has created this trauma has created silence that lives in place of open discussion and honest explorations of history (O'Neill et al, 2018). I cannot blame my own community

for this silence, but I do believe that learning these truths earlier would have helped us greatly, especially when we eventually leave our communities and enter universities.

The Manitoba Framework for Learning now identifies Truth and Reconciliation as the core component of Grade's K to 12 educations through its guiding principle of Mino-Pimatisiwin (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). Even though this represents a huge step forward, many Indigenous students, including myself, did not experience these important teachings consistently throughout our educational journeys.

Reconciliation can exist in a room but never be acted on if everyone inside it remains silent.

Silence is a significant issue for Indigenous communities, including my own. People in positions of authority are often left dealing with the consequences that come from silence rather than the consequences that come from speaking openly and teaching honestly. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action were created to address the impacts of residential schools, including abuse, trauma, and the long-term effects those schools had on Indigenous communities, (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). The impact of these systems has continued to affect Indigenous peoples for generations, leading them to have troubles with the loss of identity, culture and languages, and they have also affected mental health and the wellbeing for many, (Bombay et al., 2014). They were meant to support Indigenous people, but this cannot happen if there is no way of helping Indigenous youth understand injustice and the impacts of colonization. Colonial education systems have repeatedly created gaps for Indigenous students for years, this often leaves the students more capable of reaching failure rather than success, and it also leaves them with immense guilt and remorse for being unable to know the history and knowledge of their own people, (Battiste, 2013).

That understanding is only possible if people know why the Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015) were made in the first place. Putting policies in place and expecting people to live up to them when they have no recollection

or understanding of what they mean is not a beneficial way to reach reconciliation between peoples and nations. To understand the historical trauma is an essential tool to have for Indigenous youth for them to make sense of their surroundings, their experiences and as well as their place within the ongoing systems of unfairness and inequality, (Kirmayer et al., 2014). This is especially true in classrooms, where education has the power either to illuminate the truth or continue hiding it.

Knowledge as Identity

Learning what had happened to my people later in life changed the way I saw everything. If I had known the truth earlier, I could have done everything in my power to live up to reconciliation, to help make the future better for our children. Instead, like many Indigenous people, I had to navigate life without understanding why I was in the position I was in. I sat in lecture halls feeling like I did not belong, listening to professors explain residential schools as if they were distant history rather than lived reality. It felt like being a stranger in my own home.

Learning our history is more than gathering information. It is a teaching—a passing down of knowledge, experiences, and cultural understandings from one generation to the next (Battiste, 2013). Learning the history of one's people shapes identity. When children learn who they are and where they come from, they gain a deeper understanding of why certain struggles exist and why it is important to hold onto their identity as Indigenous people (Kovach, 2009). Education then becomes much more than memorizing facts or repeating myths: It becomes a way of life for everyone involved in the learning process. When a student's education reflects who they are where they come from, it allows a connection that is much stronger to learning and, the students will have a greater sense of belonging (Gay, 2018).

Education can become a system of integration rather than segregation. Language and identity are often lost when Indigenous knowledge is separated from education. If students can learn who they are through education that tells our stories, they will have a stronger

understanding of both who they are and what they can become.

To know who we are is to know where our roots begin.

Our identity carries story, history, knowledge, and so do the colonial systems that are being used in Indigenous institutions, so why not combine the best aspects of both to create a stronger whole. Neither one forgotten, erased, or attempting to overwrite the other by creating solutions to problems that don't exist. It is a way of life.

Indigenous students need to learn who they are all while learning about the systems around them. This will strengthen their abilities to navigate their way through the real world where failure is often the only thing expected from Indigenous people. Learning who they are will help students break cycles that were once thought of as unbreakable and recognize the options that exist for them while both holding on to who they are and where they came from.

Education as Growth

Failure is becoming an epidemic for Indigenous students. Graduation rates are lower in First Nations communities compared to non-First Nations communities (Statistics Canada, 2018). For many Indigenous communities, schools are often the primary place where children spend most of their day. Specifically because of this, schools should be places that nurture students to grow rather than simply places where they sit and listen to people talk about a man discovering lands that were never lost to begin with. When education is relevant and holistic, Indigenous students flourish both academically, collectively and interpersonally (Scott, 2025).

Learning about identity later in life, particularly in university, is not always the most effective way to sustain reconciliation. If students learn who they are earlier, they develop a stronger sense of where their roots begin and how they can grow throughout their life. Indigenous students deserve to grow with knowledge, confidence, and a sense of belonging in every classroom they sit in (Gay, 2018). When students begin to understand the “why” behind the struggles their communities have

endured, they begin thinking about solutions. This is what happened to me the moment I learned the real history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. That knowledge helped me find my voice. It helped me take up space. It helped me use knowledge as a tool in the real world my ancestors once feared. I started seeing education as a leverage and not a barrier once I started learning the truth. Even though it was later in my life, it was still early enough to start doing the work to make sure that reconciliation is being lived up to and not just discussed.

An educator once told me that the phase we Indigenous students are in now is the transition phase, and that it took forever to get here. Which is true and understandable broadly, but I find that this is nearly false for students in Indigenous communities because of the lack of resources and culturally historic information that is being left out in the primary years of a child's life. If a child is being taught these necessary truths when information is most easily absorbed, it is often during the early years of life. When we teach youth the necessary history of reconciliation, we empower them to be agents of change and affect how they see the world they belong in (UNICEF, 2010). Leaving out historical facts and replacing them with myths about who they truly are will affect their growth as people and stop a child from reaching their full potential.

As the late Honorable Murray Sinclair often emphasized, we cannot truly know who we are without understanding where we come from. Reading this, it was a moment of realization that the systems that were once meant to assimilate us, are not attempting to save us from the effects their efforts have had on us, and therefore the work needs to be done on my own time. As a future educator, it will be my responsibility to make sure my students will not sit in a chair with uncertainty about who they are, where they come from, and where they want to be. My classroom will not be a place where silence is praised over the truth. It will be a space where Indigenous students will know their work reflects who they are.

Breaking Cycles Through Truth

No child should spend most of their life sitting in classrooms where their histories are masked or avoided. It is especially true when their histories continue to shape their lives and sense of self today. When students learn the truth, it has the potential to break cycles within families, institutions, and even within the way individuals understand themselves (Bombay et al., 2014)). Cycles of trauma have been a common issue for many Indigenous people today, with many experiencing multiple forms of intergenerational trauma. These can be patterns passed across families. Instead of stories being passed down, silence is often carried forward. These cycles are not random occurrences or personal failings; they are embedded within systems that were put in place long ago. They are created and supported by the systems around us, and they expect us to fit into a mould that was never meant for us. Amy Bombay (2014) wrote about intergenerational trauma from residential schools and how it continues to affect generations today. She talks about the impacts these traumas have on identity, education, and mental health. These are examples of the cycles that exist in front of us, they are real and they are documented. I say truth breaks cycles because it gives understanding, context, and an explanation for the struggles that may come along the way. If there is no truth, students will continue in these cycles and start having no one to blame but themselves, which is a sad reality for many who internalize this as a personal failure. The confusion then becomes awareness, and shame becomes understanding. These are feelings that many Indigenous youths are often battling with. For some, it can eventually lead to a road of depression, substance use, or even missing people; In some cases, it can lead to suicide (Bombay et al., 2014).

Knowing the truth is a way of strengthening identity, culture, and community. If a student's identity is strong, it can carry resistance towards the systems that try to shape them. Then, the student will have the potential to navigate the education system that was once meant to fail them. It is our responsibility,

as their parents, educators, and leaders, to make sure that institutions are not continuing cycles that were never meant to be broken by Indigenous people alone. Instead, they break them by telling the truth

A Framework for Reconciliation in Education

If reconciliation were to exist in a classroom—the classroom first must have a framework that follows Policy, Practice, Relationships, and Responsibility (PPRR). This is a framework that shares similarities with what is currently known and frequently used in Indigenous education known as the 4R's (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). The 4R's are respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility, which are deeply rooted in Indigenous education frameworks (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001).

For my framework, I am putting forward the acronym PPRR rather than the 4R'S. It is similar in a way, but it has different steps and approaches that come from both my lived experience as well as my work within education.

Policy comes first as it is what is written and shapes our current social realities. It is the written agreements in the Indian Act, the TRC, (2015) and curriculums. The written policy for Indigenous education is how there is a written document stating that change needs to be made amongst education for Indigenous students, particularly in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of Canada Calls to Action #62-65 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Policy is the backbone of creating a system of education that holds teachers and curriculum to account to assure that change is consistent.

Practice is the actualizing of policy into the real world. One thing that is a known practice for many First Nation schools is the surface-level approach of teaching reconciliation (Power, 2022). These are examples of “tokenistic teachings”, which are often one-day lessons that happen on Orange Shirt Day, Indigenous Peoples Day, or other celebratory days that honor Indigenous people. The First Nations Education Steering Committee recommended that the material must have full integration across all subjects and

not in isolated units that are relegated to optional attendance (First Nations Steering Committee [FNESC], 2020). If the curriculum were integrated, students would have a greater understanding, stronger engagement, and better retention of learning material, as demonstrated through initiatives such as *Walking Together* (McGill University, n.d.). Students have a higher chance of remembering what is repeated rather than something briefly introduced.

Relationships in this framework explains who is involved and the foundation of learning. These can be people from the community, elders, knowledge keepers, and leaders. If students see their people teaching or telling stories, it gives them a sense of excitement and the opportunity to dream of being up there one day—I know I did. The key idea about relationships is that students will learn content through connections, which has been a teaching for many Indigenous peoples for a millennium. Building education on the foundation of relationships has been shown multiple times to support Indigenous student success, such as in this article by the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning (2023).

Knowledge must always be shared, not just delivered on mandated days.

Lastly, is **responsibility**. I chose to put it last because reconciliation is a huge responsibility. This is where the role of educators comes in. It is proven by the Canadian Teachers' Federation that many educators are often unprepared to teach Indigenous content (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2018). This is often because of a lack of training and worry. Nothing will be possible to overcome if we are avoiding the problem. We, as educators, must take responsibility for the consistency of teaching Indigenous education, one that reduces bias and gives students a chance to perform better and their learning environments a safe place to be. It is our role to ensure that reconciliation is alive in that classroom.

If we combine Policy, Practice, Relationships, and Responsibility (PPRR), we create a holistic education system that is the backbone of both academic success and identity development.

Reconciliation as a Door

Reconciliation can be imagined as a door built into a wall, with truth lying just beneath it. A person may never see that door unless they either choose to look for it, or someone shows them where it is. Education can become the key that allows that door to open. Learning the truth allows reconciliation to become something students can move through rather than something that blocks their path. This process will not be easy: students may cry, feel anger, frustration, or become deeply triggered by the realities they learn. This is where educators play a significant role in guiding those students to use those emotions into fuel for change. Students will come to understand that their ancestors stood with pride, resilience, and resistance. Thanks to that strength, future generations will be able to stand just as tall, and even taller.

As future educators, it is our responsibility to open that door for the people who come after us. Hold the door open. Reconciliation is on the other side of it. Sit through the grit—the uncomfortable realities of what our people went through. It is then that more papers like this one will exist, and classrooms will finally become places where students can go to learn the truth rather than escape the harm that came from not knowing it.

Knowledge Keepers in the Classroom

Knowledge does not appear on its own. Indigenous knowledge is carried by people—knowledge keepers. These individuals can be children, parents, elders, leaders, students, educators, and community members. These are the people who should be present in classrooms regularly, not just during Orange Shirt Day or Indigenous Peoples Day. Elders are among the most important knowledge keepers. They carry lived experiences, stories, language, and teachings that cannot be found in textbooks or online searches. Their knowledge is often relational and always tied to the land and their community.

An elder once told me to write down everything he says, because he won't remember telling it again. He said that the memories just come flowing out his mouth like water draining out of a pipe. These were horrific stories; the way the stories of abuse were pouring out like abuse was the only thing he lived. It is always important to sit and listen with respect. Elders have seen the impacts of colonial policies firsthand, and their voices carry truths that cannot be replicated through written sources. Elders may be teachers, but that is not just what they are; they are what paves the way for us. They need to be inside the classrooms every day, not just on September 30th.

Survivors as Teachers

Residential school survivors are also knowledge makers. Many survivors share their stories as a form of resistance and healing (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015; Kovach, 2009). Their stories help younger generations understand why reconciliation matters.

They are proof of the pain that came from years of abuse, but they are proof of resistance. They are living witnesses who hold knowledge that does not exist elsewhere. And they may not know it yet, but they are educators through experience.

Survivors are the information we will never find in a scholarly article or textbook.

Textbooks and articles often simplify history. Survivors have a way of telling their stories that makes it impossible to ignore because it is real. This can be a way of making sure no student can sit in a university classroom and wonder why a person has heard stories of their own people "multiple" times and they have not heard it once, such as I experienced. In the TRC (2015), there were over six thousand survivor statements collected. These statements became a central focus of the TRC process.

Everything we know about residential schools came from survivors speaking about their truth.

Allowing survivors to speak in classrooms creates opportunities for students to learn directly from those who lived through these

experiences. It also provides survivors with a chance to be heard, seen, and respected in spaces that once caused fear. Students will learn and understand the consequences that came from colonization because the learning becomes lived and relational rather than just historical. For many Indigenous students, the truth will be something they feel, not just memorize.

Creating Future Knowledge Makers

When students learn these histories early, they themselves can become knowledge keepers. Students can start sharing these stories with their siblings, parents, and friends. Teaching our students their true history will give them their voice and their truth. These students will then bring their own cultural knowledge into other community spaces, allowing a wider range of people to understand the reality of Indigenous people.

Education has the power to help Indigenous youth break cycles of trauma and rediscover their identities (Battiste, 2013). It gives youth a chance to replace confusion with understanding. When students know who they are and where they come from, they become stronger leaders for their communities. Through knowledge, identity grows. Through identity, reconciliation becomes possible. Future generations will not have to worry about discovering their identity "too late." It can bring a sense of certainty and relief for survivors, elders, and communities that their stories are now being told inside the classrooms they once feared. Their stories, their teachings, and their knowledge will become normalized rather than hidden.

The Role of Educators

Reconciliation is a thing that exists on paper: it is a policy, a rule. It is a thing that tells us what we need to do. But on paper it is the only place where reconciliation seems to exist, and it needs to be brought into action and practice where it can be a living commitment. This is where the role of educators becomes the primary tool in making reconciliation exist everywhere.

In the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission, Calls to Action #62-65 (2015) these are focused on reforming education into a more reconciliation-focused approach. It is not optional, so it should not be ignored. Implementing these Calls into our schools can help students. It may not be comfortable, but change is never comfortable. We need to get to work.

Many educators that I have talked to about this topic have always said that it is too uncomfortable and not an easy subject to teach. I do understand the difficulty these stories may bring, but we should start considering the benefits that will also come. Now, there are some schools in First Nation communities that do teach this. However, it is always vague. It is surface level information. This is tokenism in education; it may be included, but to what extent? None of this will ever make sense to these children if they are only getting surface-level facts about their own histories. As their teachers, we must teach from the roots, because of our cultures, that is where everything begins. And if one does not know where their roots begin, they cannot grow to their full potential.

So many Indigenous students drop out of university because what they are learning is not relevant to them. This is an experience I have witnessed myself through my friends; I can remember her stating, “Why can’t I learn about things that actually mean something to me? Like my people?” She went home because of this when all she needed was some reflection of herself in the material she was learning. Many students also fail because of the low

expectations placed on them. If a student sees that you do not believe they can succeed, that is what they will believe. Make your students believe that this is a story they can use as a leverage to success, and not a barrier.

CONCLUSION

Education is supposed to be the key to success. If reconciliation exists inside a classroom that holds Indigenous students inside of it, sitting nicely in rows and staring up at the board, we should at least hope that the information going back to them is nothing but the truth of our people. It is our responsibility as educators to ensure that this is being acted through policy, practice, relationships, and responsibility.

We must stop avoiding this and start acting. Education will always have the power to either harm or repair, but as Indigenous peoples, the damage has been done for far too long. Truth will always bring understanding, and that understanding will show you who you are. Knowing who you are will drive you to crave change. That is how I feel. Education was both my harm and repair.

Drafting this paper is how I deal with the damages that have not only been done to me, but to millions of Indigenous students that came before me. Therefore, I will be the one to open the door for the people that come after me. Reconciliation will only exist when it is lived inside every classroom, and not when it is just written in policy.

*“To know who you are,
you must forget who they told you to be.”*

— Carys Smith

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“

The intimacy of inheritance met the distance of academic study, and in that meeting, I felt the ache of recognizing that I was grasping at shadows of knowledge that should have been transmitted to me through the living breath of community.

”
- JP Vallente



Shay Paul

Secwépemc

All My Relations Research Assistant

To situate my place in this narrative, I come forward not only as a Secwépemc multi-disciplinary artist, but as an arts administrator, project director, and founder of the Indigenous Resurgence Project as well as curator for the Stínesten Gallery and the Thompson Okanagan Regional Director of Arts BC. I have grown up in Tk'emlups (Kamloops), where I have spent every season learning the rhythms of this land. I have known food plants, dry-spells, fire seasons, and emergency responses. I have helped people navigate systems that were never designed with them in mind. In time, I came to realize that the artistic landscape surrounding me reflected many of the same conditions of the land around me: a landscape where creativity struggles to take root in drought-compacted soil while a handful of established species dominate and spread across the grasslands. My career has been dedicated to mending the soil and cultivating biodiversity of the arts and culture, nurturing the creative ecosystem, and supporting arts vitality through visual sovereignty, peer-mentorship, and storytelling practice.

HEALING THE BURN SCAR: Cultivating Indigenous Futures in Contemporary Canadian Art Landscape Through Secwépemc Teachings

Those in the central and southern regions of British Columbia's Interior have become familiar with wildfire 'burn scars': areas of land in which wildfire was eaten through, leaving behind charred trees and blackened soil. The scars are visible where vibrant green forests once sat, places that lent proof to the slogan, 'Beautiful British Columbia,' but little was it recognized that those same lush forests were the very thing that was choking out the land it sat upon. Preserved in picturesque perfection, our mountains and valleys were the subject of paintings and postcards alike, creating a rather romantic notion of the West for those who fantasized an untouched country.

The nation needed to preserve the most idyllic and marketable version of place where visitors and tourists could consume

the fantasy they sought: wild, untamed, untouched by time—a view that is both timeless and historic, softened around the edges, vintage and yet exactly as expected. This is not a concept that applied strictly to land; though it started with West's ideals of fixed existence, this narrative bleeds into how art is observed and consumed in other cultural aspects. The national parks tourism sold the idea of an exhibition not only of the land, but the people within it. Indigenous people existed in a narrow margin of perspective, and it is that colonial paradigm that is choking out the arts landscape as harshly as the overgrown trees across the province. The land is being smothered by old monoliths, towering over the new generation of seedlings below, unable to sprout into new growth.

AT THE SITE OF WILDERNESS:

National Parks as the First Exhibition Site

"Such of nature's works are always worthy of our preservation and protection; and the further we become separated ... from that pristine wildness and beauty, the more pleasure does the mind of enlightened man feel in recurring to these scenes, when he can have them preserved for his eyes and his mind to dwell upon"

George Caitlin, *An Artist Proposes A National Park* (p. 287, Hall, 2002)

In the early days of the creation of "Canada", the nation sought to establish an identity, which is where the *Western Romanticism* movement started to take root in the country. Renowned artists like Albert Bierstadt, George Caitlin, and Paul Kane solidified the visual aesthetic of the country (Hall, 2002; Lukavic & Eshragi, 2025). Many of these artists were celebrated for their reaching, picturesque landscapes, with vast valleys and towering mountains that showcased a land different from the norms of many European settlers at the time (Watson, 2007). Aside from the visual campaigns that were re-imagining the perspective of the frontier, poets and authors of varying backgrounds were re-writing the literary canon of the virgin landscape, enticing

a new wave of immigration in the height of the industrial revolution (Bentley, 2012).

The glorification of this untouched land metaphorically and literally paved the way for the creation of Canadian National Parks (Mackey, 2018; Paul, 2024). The National Parks were meant to be the new bastion of "naturalness", preserving the most beautiful sites of beauty in the heart of wilderness. A mystifying "othering" developed with the idea of natural landscapes, and the public perception established these sites as being on the 'edge of the empire' (Mason, 2014; Smith, 2018). This narrative forwarded the impression of an unoccupied and unsettled New World that was idyllic of a New Eden, born from the dominant Christian theology of the time (Hall, 2002). Nationhood was the virility of the Canadian upon a virgin land ripe for settlement and rich with a bounty of paradise (Mackey, 2000). Bentley (2012) goes on to say that "the settler subject can never be in more than fleeting harmony with the Canadian environment until it has been modified in accordance with settler goals and ambitions" (p. 69). To many Euro-Canadians, the ideals of conquest were both religious and practical, as Count Buffon decreed, "It is I, I alone, who can make [nature] agreeable and living" (p. 663, Glacken, 1967). National Parks, in essence, became a living exhibition for travelers, tourists, and artists alike—a hypocritical engagement wherein the land must be untouched to be consumed. Artists like George Caitlin fought for land preservation



Figure 1: Sunday in the Park by Kent Monkman, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by Shay Paul (2026).

in order to reflect the romanticized notions of what the Canadian wilderness ought to look like for Westerners, primarily the pre-colonial depictions of Indigenous peoples, which is where most of his artistic fame originated from (Hall, 2002). Indigenous people must only be visible if they were conducting themselves in accordance with European expectations. Photographs and paintings only depicted them into narrow binaries of 'noble savage' or 'wild Indian', and their inclusion in artwork was only to further the consumption of static culture in this exhibition of the land, if they were included at all (Mason, 2014). Concurrently, the competing notions of guilt and uncertainty around Indigenous displacement created a sub-theme within Romantic works and literature of the time, creating the myth of the 'vanishing Indian' who was disappearing from the landscape as industrial society edged ever westward (Bentley, 2012). The creation of the Rocky Mountain Park (now known as Banff National Park) in 1887 was perhaps the inciting incident towards this solidification of Canadian "naturalness" as an expectation, as well as the idea that the Indian only exists in some yesteryear era that has passed with time.

In conjunction with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), the Rocky Mountain Park marketed primarily to sports men and women by offering an escape that was an "antidote for the poisons of industrial society" (p. 84, Mason, 2014). Many of the promotional materials targeted wealthy railway passengers, focusing on the rejuvenating benefits of nature and the exotic outdoors unmatched by anywhere else. Banff was the perfect postcard illustration for what Saari (2015) describes as a fantastical "post-war playground" (p. 402). A place where settlers could live out fantasies away from the modernity of civilization and revisit a completely fabricated fiction that catered to desires for the great outdoors (Mackey, 2018).

The Banff Indian Days is a primary example of how a cultural tradition was exploited and curated to feed tourists' hunger for their fantasies. What started as annual gatherings of Indigenous celebration, trading, competition, and cross-nation socialization was then used as a tourism marketing hook to entice

settlers with performances for the sake of spectacle and entertainment (Mason, 2014). This cultural pandering delivered an escape from the lived realities and hardships of Indigenous people in exchange for digestible imagery of a homogenous pan-Indian. Well into the mid-20th century, the dominant narrative placed Indigenous people in a static, pre-colonial stasis within Canada's identity. Media, promotional material, and representation of Indigenous people was limited, and the only way Euro-Canadians knew to categorize Indigenous people was either "untouched, invisible, and out of the way, or defiled by contact with modernity, visible, and therefore unwanted" (p.87, Mason, 2014). So, this "vanishing Indian" myth was created, where the safest way to showcase and recognize Indigenous people was to place entire cultures through a glass lens that froze them in a pre-colonial existence. We were, in essence, reduced to a museum showcase; our cultures pressed flat into two dimensions and archived for the pleasure of Western audiences. Our existence on the land was directly attached to the preserved "naturalness" of the landscape, and, therefore, untouchable.

This need to preserve the natural exhibition site laid the foundation for consequences generations later. Without the ability for Indigenous groups to migrate through the area, carry out natural resource management practices, and operate prescribed and controlled burns—as a result, the forests began to overgrow (Parminter, 2023). Where the tourism managers and travelling visitors saw a lush, bountiful landscape of the likes of an Albert Bierstadt painting, what they were not seeing was the systemic suffocation of flora and fauna within the park boundaries. As Hall (2002) explores, the conservationists of the time wanted wilderness to contain "no human activity that would be unsympathetic to the primitive nature of a wilderness area" (p. 292.). It was the joint venture moved first by the tourism industry and then backed by the forestry industry that started the momentum behind conservationist movements of the early 1900s (Hall, 2002; Sutherland, 2018). It's clear through several different sectors between art history and the natural resource management disciplines that the visual and

commercial curation of the land was a heightened priority to not just the national identity, but the national economy. As Sutherland (2018) states, “a national park, though a natural place, is a nature narrated by those that manage it” (p. 22).

Yet at this same time, the historical managers of this land—the Secwépemc, Syilx, Stl’atl’imx, Nlaka’pamux, and Ktunaxa people among many others—were being denied their right to manage the health of their own lands (Turner, 1999). Old growth was beginning to overtake the landscape, shrubs and greens crowding the forest floors, and thousands of acres of excess fuel were being built under the canopy of trees. Christianson et. al (2022) describes the Indigenous worldview as seeing the natural field as “neither a wild virgin landscape, nor the product of exclusive human enterprise” (p. 260), but an interconnected web of socio-natural relationships between land and people. Indigenous people had been tending to this land for generations, and the inhibiting policies introduced by federal jurisdiction and colonial agendas has only degraded our collective ecological health and the biodiversity of flora and fauna within it (Turner, 1999; Sutherland, 2018; Christian et. al, 2022).

From my Secwépemc perspective, fire has always been a source of rebirth and renewal. Every spring, my family and I light fires around our property to clear out the spent plants from last year’s season and welcome the seeds of this year’s growth. Fire is a tender to the land, and when used gently, can cleanse the soils of harmful pathogens and stratify new seeds through a heat-breakdown cycle (Turner, 1999). Having been in roles that engage with traditional food procurement or Indigenous natural resource management, this has been knowledge that I have known not through text, but from continued practice from as young as I can remember. I could argue the importance of prescribed burns or the importance of soil biology and agrology, but I can’t as easily communicate a teaching that lives in my genetic memory to another person who sees fire as a destructive force. Yes, it can be destructive, and the rate of which wildfires currently burn are on a larger scale than anything that is healthy. The roar of flames in our forests is the release of generations of neglect and trauma: not the tender hand of renewal, but harrowing and painful release of suffering. From my eyes, I witness this not only as a natural disaster, but as the land begging to be released of burden.



Figure 2: Mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Resurgence of the People by Kent Monkman. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by Shay Paul (2026).

HISTORY IS PAINTED BY THE VICTORS:

The Background to the Current Arts Landscape

"We are in the fringe of the great North and its living whiteness, its loneliness and its replenishment, its resignations and release, its call and answer, its cleansing rhythms. It seems that at the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow that will ever shed clarity on the growing American race, and we Canadians being closest to this source seem destined to produce an art somewhat different from our Southern fellows."

Lawren Harris, *Revelation of Art in Canada* (p. 277, Watson, 2007).

In February of 2026, I was able to see Kent Monkman's *History Is Painted by the Victors* exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art (MMFA). Many of his paintings were visual critiques and responses to the 'Old Masters' of Romantic and Neoclassical works and the absence of humanity—or rather, the absence of Indigenous peoples (MMFA, n.d.). The popularized visual aesthetic of the early 20th century removed any trace of Indigenous occupation from the land, or if it was included through painters like George Caitlin and Paul Kane, it was caricaturized or stereotyped to fit the pre-existing notions of what an American Indian was in European perspectives (Lukavic & Eshrāgi, 2025). The perpetuation of the 'vanishing Indian' left an entire culture of representation absent from the historical artistic canon, which Monkman was adamant on addressing within the colonial space of gallery culture with his exhibition.

Historically, we see how the artistic landscape has shaped perspectives and ideologies. Art is a powerful tool of communication and influence, but a tool can be used in both a well-meaning hand and a malicious one. The phrase 'painted by the victors' was something that seemed to peel back every layer of propriety and confront the cracks beneath it: that it is only the dominant culture that survives the passage of time, and in turn, has the power to write the narrative of Canadian culture.

Within this narrative, we have already seen the "natural" identity, and the Romantic nature of artists and authors from Canada's early years, but it was during the maturing youth of this country's existence when we began to see the artistic canon begin to take root.



Figure 3: Photo of the Lawren Harris Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario. Photo by Shay Paul (2026)

Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Franklin Carmichael, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J. E. H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley—more commonly known as the Group of Seven—were at the centre of this mid-century movement of visual and artistic nationhood. All original members of the Group of Seven were children of British immigrants, or immigrants themselves, pre-conditioned into the Romanticism of Canada before their careers even fully formed (Watson, 2007). There was a lingering elitism that they carried with them across the Atlantic, and an inclination to link the Northern lands of Canada to other Northern nations and 'above' the culture and race politics of the United States at the time, born from Canada's loyalty to Britain (Mackey, 2000). The idea of a national identity is always based in relations: relations to land, relations to people, relations to self; and the relations that existed by Canadians at this time were threads of conquest and British superiority against the rebellious south. As Watson (2007) goes on to say, through the eyes of Lawren Harris, "Canada was to be the white head on America's mixed-race body" (p. 278). The Group aimed to rise above such frivolous and trite discourse and instead deliver to viewers their ideal Canada: the regal solemnity

of the northern kingdom standing tall against its southern counterpart (Lord, 2007).

This ideal and curated nationalism fostered by the Group proliferated during the Second World War, where Canadians were not only seeking an escape from the global conflict, but had more available access to their works through the National Gallery of Canada's (NGC) print reproduction programme created by Group member A. Y. Jackson (Zemans, 2007). At this time, the NGC was looking to promote a visual identity that was distinct from both American and British backgrounds, and the modernist and art-nouveau inspired styles of the Group of Seven provided that fresh visual language (Whitelaw, 2007). As Mackey (2000) states, "nations do not emerge spontaneously from some primordial source, but are shared fictions created and maintained through media, education, cultural products, and government programs" (p. 125), and the Group created such a palatable fiction for their peers. To boost Canadian morale during 1944, the Group's artwork was broadcast to art schools across the country in conjunction with the National Film Board and accompanied by over 120,000 silk-screen reproductions of key artwork (Zemans, 2007). The aesthetic curated by the Group of Seven provided Canadians with the soft, ideal fantasy of Canadian landscape, offering a succour that was both prideful and indulgent (Whitelaw, 2007).

The Group of Seven had effectively colonized the artistic landscape by carving out their preferred canon to solidify in the hearts and minds of Canadians during a paramount time of national identity. Where Monkman criticizes the work of the original colonizer that pushed through frontier land and sent the first vestiges of Canada back to the Old World, I believe that the true victor lies not in the frontiersman, but the war-time propaganda that was spread like seeds during the mid-century identity crisis. Though perhaps this is merely a what-came-first scenario. Would Harris have still carried that Old World arrogance and superiority if it were not first fed by the likes of Caitlin and his campaign for archiving the wilderness? Was it the fault of the early Romantics for the monopoly the Group amassed, or did it merely accelerate and

propagate a process that was merely waiting to happen? Regardless of whether the frontier created the need for the fort, what is clear to me is that, from the very beginning, art history in Canada was always meant to be white.

From sentiments of Paul Kane's campaign to "record the images of so-called authentic Indian life" (p. 220, Crosby, 2007) to Lawren Harris' ferocious white Canada (Mackey, 2000) laid the ground for the perpetuation of 'charity' by artists to preserve the disappearing culture of Canada's First Peoples. It was easier and more appetizing for Canadians to consider the Indian an archival footnote rather than acknowledge the lived realities and disparities of Indigenous communities. The victors have had their sway, and so the Indian existed in Canada's landscape in a permanent past-tense, which was both acceptable and desirable by Euro-Canadian fantasies (Watson, 2007). The only way the Indigenous body could continue to fit into the aesthetics of what was considered 'profitable beauty' was if the Indian was either naturalized in historical context or erased entirely (Bently, 2012; Blackhawk, 2025).



Figure 4: Caw-wachum (Flat Head Woman and Child) by Paul Kane. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by Shay Paul (2026).

With this established artistic canon, the forests of Canadian visual identity were carefully cultivated. Towering trees of colonial heritage dug their roots deep into the soil

and were declared old growth. Eurocentric schools of art were mapped, protected, and preserved as though they represented a natural order rather than a deliberate construction. Preservation became an act of exclusion, and anything growing outside the boundaries of this sanctioned landscape was cast as invasive, unruly, and out of place. Any deviance outside of the canon was not only deviance from a common aesthetic, but to many Canadians it was an attack on the dominant identity they had come to accept and an attack on the universal narrative to which they grew so comfortable with. With this curated conquest, the victors of the mid-century have had their say, determining what would stand like monuments and what would be cleared from the forest floor (Lukavic & Eshrāgi, 2025). The landscape that exists now asks us to look beyond what has been preserved and wonder to whose hands authored the paths we follow, and whose perspectives remain obscured and overshadowed beneath the canopy.

FIREWEED AND PINEGRASS: Re-Imagining Contemporary Indigenous Art

*"And only where the forest fires have sped,
Scorching relentlessly the cool north lands,
A sweet wild flower lifts its purple head,
And, like some gentle spirit sorrow-fed,
It hides the scars with almost human hands.*

*And only to the heart that knows of grief,
Of desolating fire, of human pain,
There comes some purifying sweet belief,
Some fellow-feeling beautiful, if brief.
And life revives, and blossoms once again."*
Emily Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson,
Fire Flowers (p. 61, *Academy of American Poets*, 2022).

Our arts landscape has been overgrown for decades. Current contemporary artists have been shown the blueprints of the masters of yesteryear and said that is the way to create. Art audiences have adapted to a contradictory expectation of artists, which is to demand art

that is recognizable and abides by the status quo, while avoiding repetition or boring for the consumer, ensuring that the art is still doing something innovative. Indigenous artists especially are placed in this box—or cage—of expectation; the Indigenous artist must meet the aesthetic expectations of what it is to be Indigenous (Todd, 1992). And what is 'Indigenous'? Well, according to artists like Paul Kane and Emily Carr, 'Indigenous' is a dying culture that needs the charity of the settler to preserve it (Crosby, 2007). Or perhaps 'Indigenous' is a postcard from Banff, showing feathered headdresses and buckskin-wearing drummers (Mason, 2014). 'Indigenous' is a commodity to be bought and consumed. As Todd (1992) states, "everything about us—from our languages to our philosophies, from our stories to our dances—has become material in a quest for further discovery" (p. 71). The artistic audience wants to consume us like a thicket of blackberries creeping through the underbrush.

Within my experience of regional Indigenous art discourse sits two arguments: that artists must learn the techniques in art academia to be successful and able to fit into the Western world, or that artists must not fall into the clutches of Western technique and abstain from contemporary altogether. In other words, artists must assimilate and learn the language of the Euro-Canadian canon or reject it entirely for more traditional and 'authentic' Indigenous art styles. Arguments can and have been made for each with plenty of valid concerns and considerations for both sides. The nature of the discourse evidently comes down to the specific regional conditions in which it exists within (Barker, 2005). In his essay, Man (1992) explores something he calls the 'Native Perspective', which is the process of taking the dominant Western perspective of individuality and linear thinking and reinterpreting it from the understanding of interconnected sociological relationships within Indigenous worldview. More concisely, Rickard (2017) describes a similar process and calls it "visual sovereignty". My interpretation of these ideas from a curatorial standpoint is that each piece of artwork reflects the artist and their personal story, and how does one accurately categorize a story when it is not

theirs to tell?

When we prescribe to this artistic dichotomy of 'traditional' or 'contemporary', 'modernist' or 'post-modernist', we are limiting ourselves as Indigenous artists and giving ourselves restrictions that are—from a *native perspective*—antithetical to creativity. Indigenous artists have been reinventing art styles and practices based on modern access to resources, tools, and materials with little loss to culture or continuity for as long as we've had the means and inspiration to do so (Man, 1992; Racette, 2017). Kent Monkman does not lose credibility as an Indigenous artist because he uses the Western techniques of the Old Masters, but rather that practice becomes a new tool on which he can sharpen his messages (Lukavic & Eshrāgi, 2025). We, as Indigenous artists, are expected to work within the bounds of the pre-existing canon and play nice with the established infrastructure of neocolonial art academia and gallery culture. Our art practices and aesthetic styles are continually discussed through a perspective that is not ours and misinterpreted without the required cultural context or our 'divergent' sociological understandings (Todd, 1992). It is up to us as Indigenous artists, academics, and cultural workers to become the scholars of our own stories, to catalog and curate our cultural works, and to interpret these pieces from our *native perspective*.

Working and navigating through this art world as an arts administrator and a gallery curator, speaking with dozens of Indigenous artists on their personal challenges and struggles with artistic identity, aesthetic, and visual sovereignty, I find myself looking at the landscape not as a rich and bountiful environment, but as a forest that has grown too thick to walk inside. My ecological background knows well the danger of overgrowth and the stifling presence of monoculture practice, and I often wonder to myself, "how do you make way for new growth?" Returning to the Secwépemc teachings, I am not suggesting that we burn the entire artistic landscape down to ash—however tempting the idea—but rather restore a balance of stewardship and co-existence. Fire, to the West's perspective, is seen as a destructive force. I don't dispute that, but from the Secwépemc perspective,

it is necessary. Change is always an uncomfortable experience, but it is the underlying teachings that bring me ease. I have the lived experience to see and know that sometimes you need to let go of for the betterment of the whole. We grow idle and complacent in the known, and if we do not venture outside of that, we rob ourselves of possibility and the reinvigorating enjoyment of newness.

It is clear to me that there is excess colonial overgrowth that exists all around us, and that there is a need for at least some uncomfortable change. The purpose is not to replace one art canon with another or continue a rigid dichotomy that uproots every institution and artistic era that came before. The purpose is to burn away the overgrowth that has festered around them: the commodification of Indigenous culture for consumption (Martinez, 2012), the stereotyping and rigidity of aesthetic expectations (Rangel, 2012), the decades of neocolonial fuel and misrepresentation by dominant agendas that have accumulated on the forest floor (Todd, 1992). All these pieces have been choking out artists' growth, suffocating the development of visual and narrative sovereignty, and leaving no room for sprouting seeds of ideas, perspectives, and cultural exploration. Like a forest after a fire, art need not begin again but rather make space for the seeds of the next generation to flourish.

I encourage arts practitioners to see beyond the burn scar. It is not a site of pain and loss alone, but a reminder that all life is cyclical, and all things must grow, live, and eventually end so that new growth can take place. The same forests that were so vehemently fought to be preserved were never meant to remain untouched, as the overall health of the landscape always depended on change. In British Columbia, pinegrass (*Calamagrostis rubescens*) is one of the first sprouting plants that emerge after a wildfire. The heat and ash from the fire alters the soil's nutrients, and the increased light from overshadowing plants' absence makes the perfect environment for native grasses. First, the burn scar flows green with the vibrancy of new growth and fresh sprouts, then the first flower emerges: the fluorescent pink of the fireweed plant (*Chamerion angustifolium*).

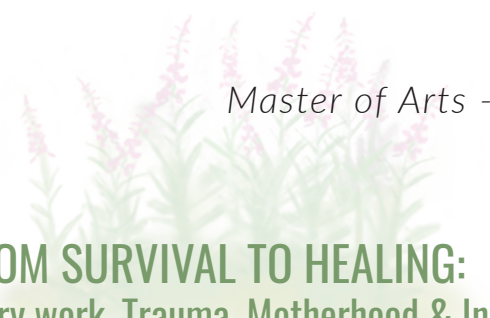
In Secwépemc culture, fireweed is a medicinal plant used commonly for several ailments from congestion to indigestion, but it is most effective as a salve or poultice to treat wounds and burns. When applied to a topical wound, the plant's astringent properties help to draw out infection and relieve inflammation. Fitting, I think, that the first flower to emerge after fire is one whose purpose is healing.

Perhaps our artistic ecology is asking the same of us. We should not simply mourn the disturbance and absence of previously established monoliths of creative canon or cling to an outdated illusion of an untouched cultural landscape. Perhaps we should embrace this moment for what it is: an opening in the canopy, and a chance for stories that were buried beneath the soil to emerge from the shadows and reach the light. Healing the burn scar is not about leaving all iterations of culture behind or preserving old-growth forests alone but about trusting the environment to continue systems of renewal and regeneration and allow for a richer, more diverse ecosystem to emerge.

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FROM SURVIVAL TO HEALING: Story work, Trauma, Motherhood & Intergenerational Change

INTRODUCTION

Tansi, Nitsihkason, Kelly Stanley.
Hello, my name is Kelly Stanley. For my Knowledge Makers 2026 entry, I want to express my lived experience through a catalyst of stories from my childhood to early adulthood, to motherhood. These lived experiences shaped both my life and my daughter Gemma's life. This work and research are guided by Q'um Q'um Xiim, Jo-ann Archibald's (2018) Indigenous story work and intergenerational healing work (Bombay et al., 2014). The writing process helps me understand trauma, memory, and healing through Indigenous knowledge systems and the medicine wheel teachings: mental, physical, emotional, and most importantly, spiritual. For most of my life, I separated my lived experiences into categories. Childhood trauma was one thing; domestic violence was another. Addictions, educational disruptions, grief, and healing all existed in separate parts of my mind. It wasn't until I began my post-secondary journey that I started to understand just how interconnected and woven together my experiences truly were. The older I get, the more I realize trauma (whatever that looks like to you) does not always leave visible scars. What I realized through my lived experience is that sometimes trauma finds space in our minds and bodies through people's pleasing, fear of abandonment, emotional shutdown, silence, or the

constant fear that safety can disappear at any moment in time. From a young age after my kidnapping, I started to shift my mindset from having trust in people to putting the blame on myself. When awful things would happen to me, I would question what I did for that to happen to me, and this will make sense further into my story. Trust and safety became separate worlds to one another in my infant mind. When I look back now, I reflect on how my childhood experiences have shaped the relationships and circumstances I accepted later in my unhealed life.

Childhood, Safety, and Memory

As a child, I learned early that safety could be taken away unexpectedly. Even though my first memory of my kidnapping incident remains fragmented, my body remembers the fear. From what I vividly remember, it was a calm, warm spring day. We lived at the townhouses near the elementary school in Cadotte Lake, Alberta. I was around five or six years old, and in kindergarten at the time. I was playing outside at the playground behind my home when an older teenage girl approached me. She told me my parents allowed me to visit her. I believed her and proceeded to follow her down a narrow path into the woods.

This is where my memory becomes unclear. What I remember is fragmented and distorted. Caruth (2019) argues that trauma

is often fragmented, indirect, and difficult to fully express in language, as it tends to appear through delayed memories, repetition, and unclear or broken recollections. She suggests that trauma is not a single, fully narratable event, but an ongoing and re-lived experience that resists complete explanation.

In some parts of my memory everything feels warm and green, like summertime. On other parts, the ground is covered in snow and there is a distant house in the trees. I have spent years trying to understand these contradictions in my memory. Eventually, my two older brothers, who were nine and ten at the time, found me while riding their pedal bikes. They saw me with that girl and brought me home. I later found out she was a young teen from an unstable home environment. I am still not entirely sure what happened, or what could have happened had my brothers not found me before we reached the house, if we ever actually made it there. I don't know, and I may never fully know. What they told my mom was that it was a party house. Even, as an adult and a mother, I am deeply grateful that I don't have the answers to those "what ifs". When I returned home, I was then disciplined to leave the playground without permission.

What stayed with me was not only the event itself, but how quickly safety, confusion, distrust, and punishment became intertwined. I did not have the words for what had happened, only bodily memory. Looking back as an adult now, I understand that children do not interpret danger through logic, rather they interpret it through trust (Van der Kolk, 2014). That is why this memory has stayed with me in such a complicated way. It wasn't the situation, but more so how it was processed without understanding. When I shared this story with my daughter, she asked me why I went with the older girl, and why I was talking to a stranger. I normalize telling her she should not speak to strangers. I told her I was little and my parents didn't warn me of the dangers of not talking to strangers, I didn't know any better. Her response shifted something in me. It showed me that teaching these life lessons to our children, whether small or big, is impactful because life is very unpredictable. I was hesitant to reiterate this story to my daughter Gemma because of her young age. I choose

to share this lived experience with her now that she is reaching the age I was during my abduction. This is my biggest fear as a mother for my daughter that even if I take my eyes off her for a split second anything could happen. I was never one to believe that tragedy only happened to other people because my childhood experiences taught me that unexpected events can happen to anyone.

As an Indigenous woman, I understand my lived experiences within a broader reality of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. There were later moments in my life where I avoided becoming part of that statistic. These experiences shaped how I understand vulnerability, survival, and the ongoing systemic violence imposed on Indigenous women and little girls like, Gemma, continue to face. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) highlights how this violence is connected to colonial systems, racism, and intergenerational trauma.

Reading this final report by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) made many personal memories feel even more real and connected to something larger than myself. One testimony that resonated with me was that of Carol W., a First Nations woman who is deaf, and whose daughter Karina went missing ((p. 101). Carol described feeling ignored, dismissed, and denied meaningful communication support when she first sought help from the police (MMIWG, 2019). As I read her testimony, I was not surprised by how a mother desperately searching for her daughter was treated as though neither she nor her missing daughter mattered. Her experience further illustrates how systemic barriers and institutional indifference can victimize Indigenous women and families during moments of crisis.

These experiences are not isolated. They exist within a larger systemic reality. As the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) emphasizes, Indigenous women are not targeted solely because they engage in so-called "at risk" lifestyles. Many Indigenous women are disproportionately vulnerable to violence because of the ongoing colonial structures

that continue to devalue Indigenous lives (NIMMIWG, 2019). Understanding this reality deepened my awareness that what happened to me was part of a broader pattern of systemic violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls across Canada. As both an Indigenous woman and a mother to my daughter, Gemma, this understanding carries an even deeper significance reinforcing the importance of advocating for the safety, dignity, and future of Indigenous women and girls.

Early Adulthood, Domestic Violence, and Lost Identity

This personal experience jumps about twenty years into the future, my first “love” or what I believed was ‘love’ at the time. It wasn’t until a few years ago that I began speaking openly about my experience with domestic violence. For a long time, I would minimize it in my own mind. It was so normalized within our communities and families that I assumed it was the norm, so why would I talk about it? Whenever I tried to tell my story, I would silence myself with thoughts like, “oh someone else had it worse,” “it was my fault,” or “it wasn’t as bad as I think it is.” The reality of what I lived through contradicted all those thoughts. Prior to this experience, I had already experienced instability in education and my identity. I attended Lakeland College in Lloydminster. Long story short, I ended up withdrawing from my program due to being homesick and unable to adjust to urban life outside of my comfort zone, which was my home community of Frog Lake, Alberta. That part is important to understand in relation to this story. Later, I was accepted into the University of Saskatchewan’s ITEP (Indigenous Teaching Education Program) and moved to Saskatoon, which marked an important attempt at rebuilding my future. This was a major step for me. I had a second chance for hope, success, and change. Around the same time, I was still emotionally attached to an unhealthy relationship back home. I struggled to let my old lifestyle go while trying to create something new for myself. After leaving university during my transition, I attended a house party where I met someone who would

later become my abuser.

Everything with him happened so fast. At first, he was so kind and attentive to me, and I felt cared for in a way I hadn’t experienced before. I interpreted that as safety. Over time, the relationship became controlling and violent. It escalated into physical harm, emotional manipulation, isolation, and fear. I became disconnected from myself, family, friends, and eventually left university for the second time. I felt hopeless. I began to use substances to cope with this and believe I had failed in life yet again. This is exactly what he wanted. He wanted me to feel empty and like my life didn’t matter; believing that I was worthless. Believing all those lies that were fed into my mind during my most vulnerable period of my life. Looking back, I understood now that I wasn’t failing, I was surviving something I did not yet have the tools to understand.

At my lowest point, I remember feeling like my life no longer mattered. One moment stands out clearly. I was physically done; I lay on that hardwood floor, ready to let myself go. But he stopped. It all stopped. The next day I called my Nikawiy (Mother) and she came immediately. She gave me an ultimatum. I had refrained from going to the RCMP for the longest time because of a previous encounter that had left me feeling unheard. Years earlier, a bystander witnessed my former boyfriend treating me aggressively in our vehicle and contacted Edmonton police. When officers arrived, I was detained because of a previous DUI charge. At the time, I did not understand the legal precautions surrounding traffic related charges. During the interaction, the responding officer immediately sided with my former partner and accused me of lying because I could not produce the phone he had broken in half as evidence. Considering I wasn’t the person who had called police in the first place, the experience left me feeling dismissed and unsupported. I lost faith in the criminal justice system that day. My experience echoes back to the story of Carol W. and her frustration and hurt with the lack of support from police enforcement.

Despite my fear of my previous experiences, I managed to scurry up the last bit of courage I had to go to the RCMP station and press charges. It was either that I face my fear

of being rejected by those trained to protect us versus my fear of potentially being beaten to death by the hands of my former partner. They say it takes an abused woman to leave after the seventh domestic dispute; I must have tripled that. That courageous decision marked the end of the relationship, but not the end of its impact on me. For a long time after, I minimized what had happened. I told myself it was not that bad or blamed myself. Through the lens of *Brave Heart* (1998) I better understand how historical trauma and intergenerational grief can shape the normalization of violence, silence, and survival pattern within Indigenous communities impacted by colonial disruption. One of the most difficult things I had to unlearn was how normal survival had become. That was the end of it, but it was also the hardest thing I have ever done, because I thought it was love. It was love, based on what I understood love to be at the time.

This awareness has shaped how I mother my daughter, Gemma, who is six years old. I am intentionally working to create a calm, stable, and safe home environment for her. Something I did not always know when I was growing up. I want her to understand what love consists of: safety, patience, and care. At the same time, I don't want to raise her in fear of the world. Instead, I want to teach her awareness and discernment. How to recognize safe situations versus unsafe ones without assuming that every 'stranger' is dangerous. For example, she can learn that saying hello to someone walking their dog is different from being asked to go somewhere alone or leave a safe area. My goal is to help her build confidence, not fear, so she can move through the world with both awareness and trust in her own judgement.

Most importantly, I want Gemma to grow up knowing that she is not responsible for managing danger alone, and that she can always come to me. In doing this, I am also learning alongside my daughter on what it means to build these safe spaces, boundaries, and love that is steady and calm, rather than fearful. This process has also made me reflect on all the work Indigenous women have undertaken to reclaim healthy relationships with themselves, their families and their culture after generations of colonial disruption.

Many of the cycles that Indigenous women are working to break were not created by us, but imposed through colonial systems that disrupted Indigenous families, identities, and ways of nurturing. Breaking these cycles is difficult, but necessary, because healing extends far beyond an individual level and shapes the futures of generations to come. Gaudet & Caron-Bourbonnais (2015) highlight the importance of reclaiming Indigenous women's practices and knowledge as a pathway toward healing and well-being. In choosing to parent through safety, connection, and love, I am participating in this larger process of rebuilding and reclaiming relationships and ways of nurturing that have been disrupted.

Healing and Rebuilding: Wounds to Motherhood

It took me a long time to let that relationship go. Even years later, I continued contact with my abuser. I still cared deeply, but from a distance. A part of me held on to hope, a hope that he had changed, that things could be different. Nearly eight years after our breakup, we briefly reconnected during a trip. He had not changed, and at that moment, I had to face a difficult truth: sometimes they don't. Real healing began when I chose complete separation. I learned to equate love with pain, instability, and survival.

Letting go meant unlearning all of that. During my second year of my undergraduate studies, I was unexpectedly blessed with my daughter, Gemma. Motherhood shifted something deep within me. Motherhood made healing no longer optional, but necessary. I began to understand that my choices were no longer just my own; they were part of a larger story of intergenerational impact. This shift forced me to think differently about what I wanted my daughter to inherit, emotionally, mentally, physically, and most importantly, spiritually. I don't want her to believe love should hurt. I don't want her to normalize chaos. I don't want her to learn abandonment as self-love.

Society often teaches us that a successful family follows a particular dynamic that includes a mother, father, marriage, and children, possibly even a family pet. Through

media outlets such as television, social media, educational institutions, and other social influences, these ideas are normalized and reinforced. Mary et al. (2025) argues that the fantasy of traditional motherhood, according to which women find fulfilment through family care, still dominates market texts. As a mother, I want Gemma to know that her worth is not determined by whether she abides by those expectations. I want her to understand that it's okay to be an independent woman and create a life that reflects her own values, beliefs, and goals. If she chooses a two-parent household and marriage one day, that is wonderful. If she chooses a different path, that is equally valid. More than anything, I want her to know she does not need to conform to societal expectations to be whole, successful, or loved.

I asked my daughter what love means to her. She said, "warm, happy, and cozy." Those words will stay with me because for most of my life, love and safety were separate concepts. Motherhood made me slow down and reflect on my patterns. How I attach to people, how I cope with stress, and how I needed to rebuild boundaries and self-love.

My Christian faith has also guided this process, offering me a sense of purpose, forgiveness, and strength as I navigated both healing and motherhood. I began to redefine what love meant, what safety looked like, and what I would accept in my life. I was no longer surviving; I was choosing. My faith did not erase my trauma, but it grounded me. It gave me a deeper understanding of forgiveness, grace, and purpose during times when I struggle to understand myself. Through this journey called life, I began to understand healing not as becoming someone new, but as returning to myself. Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) explains Indigenous story work as teaching through lived experience, stories, relationships, and responsibilities. This shifted how I viewed my own narrative. I no longer see it as something to hide or feel ashamed about, but as something that carries responsibility and teaching through lived experience.

At the same time, Tuck (2009) challenged damage centered narratives that define Indigenous people only through trauma. This helped me deeper understand that while trauma is a part of my story, it does not

define me. My lived experience includes survival, growth, motherhood, and the ongoing process of healing. This newfound perspective has been vital to my parenting and the kind of future I want to create for not only my child, but the next generation. Instead of passing narratives focused on pain or loss, I am learning to focus on healing, responsibility, and love that's grounded in safety and good intentions. Through this perspective, healing becomes not only personal, but relational. This is shaping how I parent, teach, and hope to guide Gemma as she grows into her own person with her own identity.

CONCLUSION

Despite the obstacles and challenges I endured while chasing my educational goals, I persevered. Today, I no longer believe I am not smart or capable enough. Education and expanded knowledge became my stepping-stone toward my healing journey. Every step I have taken academically represents something I once thought I could not survive. My story is not only trauma, but also survival, reflection, responsibility, faith, testimony, and transformation. Brave Heart (1998) explains that historical unresolved grief is the grief that accompanies the trauma experienced by Native people. This helped me understand that much of what I carried into adulthood was not just individual pain, but the layered grief of intergenerational experiences that were never fully healed or spoken, impacted by colonial disruption.

Most importantly, I hope my story inspires others who have gone through similar situations in their lives. Most importantly, I want future generations to inherit healing instead of silence, and awareness rather than shame. This work is not only personal but also relational and ongoing, shaped by connection, responsibility, and lived experience. My healing is not separate from my life; it is a continuation of it. My healing journey is not something to be witnessed from a distance; it is relational, and in sharing this story, others become part of its continuation.

Hiy-Hiy, Kukwststsemc, Thank you for reading!

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THE HIDDEN WOUNDS BENEATH THE HONOUR OF LIVING VOICES: Yoruba Girls, Childhood Trauma, and Resistance

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how sexualized violence and childhood trauma shape the lives of Yoruba girls and women from childhood into adulthood, with attention to the cultural, emotional, and intergenerational effects of abuse. Drawing from personal experience, community stories, and existing literature on child sexual abuse in Nigeria, the paper examines how values such as family honour, respect for elders, *ifaradà* (endurance), and *itijú* (shame) can create conditions of silence, victim-blaming, and hidden suffering. At the same time, it highlights the healing wisdom within Yoruba culture, including storytelling, proverbs, spirituality, and the guidance of trusted women and elders.

Using a decolonizing view, this paper argues that Yoruba knowledge should not be treated as background or decoration, but as a valid source of theory, resilience, and healing. It asks how survivors of sexualized violence find voice, resistance, and recovery within their own cultural worlds, and what changes are needed in families, communities, and systems to better protect children. By centering Yoruba lived experience and cultural expression, this paper aims to challenge shame, uplift survivor voices, and contribute to more culturally grounded approaches to trauma and healing.

INTRODUCTION

I began exploring this research with stories I have carried and heard for a long time. I am a Yoruba Muslim girl from Nigeria, raised in the big city of Lagos, but shaped deeply by my grandmother, family, and community. Nigeria is home to 36 states and 520 native languages, spoken across many different tribes and traditions and cultures. Yet, in my home, I was taught wisdom is not only found in books, but in how people listen, speak, and care for one another. In my family, we were taught not to judge people quickly, but to understand

where they are coming from. That lesson has become part of how I think about trauma, shame, and healing.

Growing up in Lagos as both a Yoruba girl and a Muslim, I learned early that silence was often expected of girls, especially when the subjects were around sexuality, violence, or pain. Many girls are taught to endure, to stay quiet, and to protect family honour even when harm has already entered the home. In situations like this, shame is placed on the girl instead of the person who caused the harm.

This personal experience has led me to ask deeper questions about how Yoruba girls and women live with the effects of sexualized violence from childhood into adulthood. This topic is not only research, but it is a personal journey that touches the body, the family, the community, and the question of whose voice is allowed to be heard.

This topic is deeply connected to Yoruba cultural values. In many Yoruba families, girls are taught *ifaradà* (endurance) and *itijú* (shame), alongside the ideal of *Ọmọlúwàbí*, the standard of a good character, respect, well-mannered behavior, and moral responsibility. While these values can encourage strength and responsibility, they can also become tools of silence when a child needs protection and is instead told to obey, keep quiet, or avoid bringing disgrace to the family. My research grows out of this tension on how a culture that teaches dignity can also make it difficult for survivors to speak and how that same culture also offers pathways to healing.

What has shaped my thinking most is not only what I have lived, including what I have seen and heard, but also what I have read. Research on child sexual abuse in Nigeria shows that sexual violence is not only an individual event; it is also shaped by family structures, gender expectations, cultural beliefs, and fear of social shame (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Ajayi et al., 2022). Survivors often struggle with trauma, fear, stigma, and silence, while communities may respond by hiding the issue rather than confronting it (Akinlusi et al., 2024). At the same time, I have learned that Yoruba knowledge systems contain wisdom about healing. This knowledge lives in proverbs, storytelling, spiritual practices, and guidance from elders that carries meaning about truth, survival, and repair. They also offer ways of making sense of pain, restoring dignity, and rebuilding connections.

I am writing this research because I do not believe Yoruba girls should have to carry abuse in silence. I want to challenge the idea that a girl's body does not have to bear the weight of family shame and instead show that the shame belongs to the person who has caused harm to her. I also want to create a space where Yoruba ways of knowledge are treated as valuable sources of respect,

not only as background or decoration but as a source of insight and healing practice. By combining the stories I have encountered, the experiences I have heard, and the knowledge I have acquired through reading, I hope to tell a story that is honest, culturally grounded, and committed to justice while uplifting girls' voices to be heard.

World Context of Trauma and Healing

Across the world, trauma is understood as more than a painful event in the past; it is an experience that can shape a person's body, mind, relationships, and future. Childhood trauma, including sexual violence, neglect, war, displacement, and family abuse, can affect emotional development, learning, memory, trust, and mental health across lifespans.

Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) has shown that early trauma is linked to long-term health and mental health effects in adulthood, with each unit increase in ACE score associated with a 4–34% increase in the odds of adverse health outcomes or depression (Shu et al., 2025), which means its impact can continue far beyond the moment of harm. In this sense, trauma is not only a private wound but also a global human issue. The world context also shows that trauma does not affect all children in the same way. Children living in poverty, conflict zones, unstable homes, or communities with weak protection systems are more likely to experience repeated harm and less likely to receive support. This pattern has also been documented in research on disaster, war, and mass trauma, where children's experiences are shaped not only by the event itself but also by the social conditions around them (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Trauma becomes even more damaging when survivors are blamed, ignored, or forced to stay silent. Global research consistently shows that recovery is supported when survivors are believed, protected, and given culturally appropriate care (Senbera & Sandlana, 2023).

This global understanding is important for my study because it places Yoruba girls' experiences within a wider conversation about childhood suffering and healing. Although

the specific cultural language may differ from place to place, the pattern is familiar: silence, fear, shame, mistrust, and emotional distress often follow sexualized violence. What makes my research different is that it asks how Yoruba cultural knowledge, oral tradition, and community wisdom can support healing in ways that are meaningful to the people themselves. This approach is decolonized because it refuses to treat Western frameworks as the only valid way to understand trauma. Instead, it recognizes that communities already hold forms of knowledge that can help survivors reclaim voice, memory, and belonging. A useful comparison is Ubuntu, which emphasizes relational wellbeing, dignity, and shared humanity within African communities and can play a key role in promoting suitable virtuous morality and ethics in healthcare (Somni & Sandlana, 2015; Senbera & Sandlana, 2023).

Nigeria Context of Trauma, Silence, and Harm

In Nigeria, trauma is shaped by more than the event itself; it is shaped by family structures, social expectations, poverty, conflict, gender norms, and the fear of shame. Child sexual abuse is a serious social and public health issue in Nigeria because it affects children's emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing across time (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Akinlusi et al., 2014). Research shows that sociocultural norms can increase children's vulnerability to abuse and make disclosure difficult, especially when family honour, respect for elders, and community reputation are treated as more important than the child's safety (Ajayi et al., 2022). Recent evidence from female undergraduates in Southern Nigeria showed that 19.3% experienced sexual violence, while only 42.2% disclosed their experience and 68.7% did not seek medical care after the incident, often because of shame, fear, and stigma (Duru et al., 2025).

A major part of the Nigerian context is the culture of silence. In many communities, survivors are expected to endure pain privately, and speaking out can lead to blame, disbelief, or public shame. Studies on Nigerian women's experiences of sexual abuse show that gendered expectations, religious beliefs,

and family or community pressure can make it difficult for survivors to seek help or leave abusive situations (Ajayi et al., 2022; De Veause Brown et al., 2022). In cases of child sexual abuse, this silence becomes even more dangerous because children may not have the language, authority, or protection needed to report what happened. As a result, many survivors are left without care, while the abuser remains hidden from institutions that should respond (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Akinlusi et al., 2014).

Research on sexual assault in Lagos shows that survivors often receive inadequate care and that reporting, treatment, and justice are not always accessible or survivor-centered (Akinlusi et al., 2014). More recent work on adolescent survivors in urban low-income communities in Nigeria also shows that health-provider responses and access barriers can make it difficult for survivors to use support services (Ikuteyijo et al., 2023). In many areas, survivors face institutional responses that are dismissive, judgmental, or poorly informed about trauma. In some cases, families try to "settle the matter" privately to avoid scandal, which can deepen trauma and protect the perpetrator rather than the child (Ifayomi et al., 2024). At the same time, wider social violence, conflict, and displacement in parts of Nigeria have also contributed to psychological distress among children and adolescents, showing that trauma in the country is both interpersonal and structural.

This is why I choose to explore this matter in the Nigerian context. It is not only about documenting harm, but also about understanding how Nigerian cultural values, family expectations, and silence shape the experience of trauma. I focus especially on Yoruba girls because that is the context I can speak from, knowing that their stories are often held inside family boundaries, and their pain is frequently transformed into private shame. By placing the Yoruba experience within the Nigerian context, my research can show both the harms of silence and the possibilities for culturally grounded healing by pulling from cultural strengths. That is the space where my project begins: with pain, but also with the determination to reclaim voice, dignity, and belonging.

Trauma, the Body, and Intergenerational Harm

Learning that trauma is held in the body is an important part of this research. Trauma is not only what happens in the mind; it lives in memory, fear, posture, relationships, and the way survivors experience their own bodies. People who experience trauma relive that traumatic event repeatedly, and their mind, body, and soul are affected long after the initial event. Emotions, thoughts, and memories go unprocessed and get dumped into the body, showing up as emotional and physical symptoms like flashbacks, rage, depression, body aches, and pain (Shared Hope, 2019). Yoruba spirituality also provides a rich framework for somatic ritual healing through its emphasis on balance between the physical and spiritual worlds (Ogunbadejo, n.d.). For many Yoruba girls and women, the effects of sexualized violence can show up as anxiety, anger, withdrawal, difficulty trusting others, or an inner sense of being “bad” or “damaged.” These responses are not weaknesses. They are ways the body and spirit try to survive harm.

When children are repeatedly silenced and discouraged from expressing their emotions, the effects of trauma can persist well into adulthood. Children are silenced in many ways when it comes to sexual exploitation, whether by family members, friends, or outsiders. Some are silenced because if an outsider or the community hears about what has happened, it might bring shame and tarnish the household’s reputation and honour. Some children do not receive care or justice at all, and that unresolved pain can be passed down. In some cases, it is intergenerational. A mother may have experienced abuse but had no one to share it with, and that unhealed wound can be “passed down” to her children, becoming a trigger point across generations. The crime of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) undermines the very foundation of communities, with its effects resonating across time and forcing an inherited legacy of trauma and suffering on the descendants of survivors (Forbes, 2025).

This is part of how I connect to my ancestors not through blame, but through

understanding. Through Yoruba stories, family teachings, and the wisdom of my grandmother, I have come to see that healing is also a form of return. I have learned that we do not have to repeat the past; we can carry our ancestors’ strength while changing the patterns that harm us. A powerful way to think about this is that we should not ask people to “*Ẹni Ẹàngó bá tojú rẹ wọlẹ, kò ní bá wọn bú ọba kòso.*” This means we cannot expect survivors to heal by being forced back into the conditions of their harm without support, safety, or care. Healing must happen in a context of belief, protection, and respect.

Sexual Abuse in a Bigger Space

Sexual abuse is not a small, isolated or individual issue; it is a global harm that crosses countries, religions, and generations. Research estimates that around the world, roughly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 10 men report experiencing sexual abuse before the age of 18, and in some regions, including parts of Africa, the rates are even higher (Euronews 2025; Birmingham University, 2025). Sexual violence is also one of the most common forms of violence against women and children, affecting millions of lives through physical, emotional, and psychological injury. These numbers show that sexual abuse is not rare; it is a widespread pattern of power, control, and silence. Because sexual abuse often happens in private spaces, homes, institutions, schools, religious settings, or trusted relationships and can be hidden for years. Survivors may carry fear, shame, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and difficulty trusting others well into adulthood. At the same time, global work on violence prevention recognizes that sexual abuse is not only a personal tragedy, but a structural problem shaped by gender inequality, economic stress, cultural norms, and weak systems of protection and justice. This has led to international calls for better laws, education, survivor-centered services, and community awareness (Miele et al., 2023).

The global context is important because it shows that sexual abuse is global, but the ways communities respond are local. In some places, movements like “#MeToo” and national campaigns have pushed for accountability and

public conversation. In other places, silence still dominates, and survivors are told to forget, forgive, or keep quiet, with a significant increase in self-reports and stranger-offender reports of sexual violence between the pre- and post-#MeToo time points (Worthen & Schleifer, 2024). In other places, silence still dominates, and survivors are told to forget, forgive, or keep quiet. In Nigeria, according to the 2014 Violence Against Children in Nigeria national survey, sexual violence against girls is a widespread problem, and ending violence against children, especially girls, needs to be a national priority (Spotlight Initiative, n.d.). Botswana ranked first in worldwide rape statistics, while Nigeria and Kenya ranked 135th and 103rd, respectively, with lifetime sexual violence ranging between 45.4% and 56% across Sub-Saharan African countries (ACC Science, 2024). My research enters this global conversation by asking: how does a culture like Yoruba, with its own values and wisdom, handle this global harm? And how can that same culture help survivors reclaim their voice instead of pushing them further into shame?

Yoruba Cultural Values and Their Impact on Survivors

When many elders were growing up, girls were strictly taught *ifaradà* (endurance) and the heavy burden of *itijú* (shame). If a difficult or inappropriate experience occurred, especially regarding sexuality or abuse, the overwhelming instruction was silence. Girls were taught that speaking up about sexualized violence would “spoil” their name, ruin their future chances of a good marriage, and bring unimaginable disgrace to their family. The burden of maintaining the family’s purity was placed squarely on the shoulders of the girl, teaching her to swallow her pain to keep the peace. The burden of maintaining the family’s purity was placed squarely on the shoulders of the girl, teaching her to swallow her pain to keep the peace. This disgrace can come from both social pressure and religious expectations: community gossip, shame rituals, and religious teachings about purity and honour all reinforce the idea that the girl is responsible for the harm (Ajayi et al., 2022).

Growing up, I learned that girls were not given the privilege to speak, especially when they are being abused by someone, because people believe that if they speak out, many others will use it against them at that moment and also in the future. In Yoruba culture, the concept of *Ọmọlúwàbí* is paramount. Children are taught absolute submission to elders: you do not question an adult, look at them directly in the eye when being scolded, or refuse their requests. The family’s reputation is guarded fiercely through culture and honour. These values have long served a spiritual and social purpose in Yoruba identity, linking moral character to communal belonging and respect for ancestral order. However, in practice, they have also been used to silence girls and protect the status of older men, reflecting the patriarchal structure that places boys and men in positions of authority while girls and women are expected to be obedient and self-sacrificing (Ajayi et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, protection often took the form of extreme strictness or warning girls to avoid “strangers.” The tragic blind spot in this teaching was the assumption that danger only lived outside the home. Respect for elders made it incredibly difficult for a child to report an uncle, a family friend, or a religious leader if they were the abusers. Parents teach their children from a young age what it means to respect people, especially their elders, no matter how many times they see them in a day. Girls were told that their honour and dignity as a woman was their virginity, and once a woman got pregnant, it was often seen as the end of her life prospects. A lot of girls and women change after they have been through a painful and difficult situation. Many become traumatized; some whose trust has been broken and who believed in deceitful love end up distrusting or even hating their opposite gender because of the pain and experiences they have carried. When a girl experiences hidden trauma, the change is usually profound but often misunderstood by the community. A once lively, outspoken girl might suddenly become withdrawn, highly defensive, or lose her academic focus, and the community may see this as a “bad character” rather than the mark of trauma.

The community’s responses are often

painful. Instead of asking, "What happened to you?" the community would ask, "What is wrong with you?" (Ajayi et al., 2022). If the truth came out, the immediate reaction would often be victim-blaming. Questions like "*Kí lo wò?*" (What were you wearing?) or "*Kí lo lọ ẹe nìbẹ?*" (What did you go there to do?) were common. The instinct was to cover it up quickly so people wouldn't talk. One of the things that helps these women and girls is when they find someone who can stand for them, give them courage and trust, and help them ensure that the person who has harassed them faces the consequences by handing them over to proper authorities.

Some women and girls grow up blaming their parents for their blind trust in neighbours or family friends by entrusting their children to them, which led to sexual assault. Others feel that their parents have no personal experience with trauma and so cannot truly relate to their pain or emotions during difficult times. This pattern is not limited to girls; males are also vulnerable to sexual abuse, though they are often more hidden and more likely to be silenced by shame and patriarchal expectations about masculinity.

Yoruba Stories of Sexual Abuse and Trauma: Stories that has been Shared with Me

In Yoruba communities, conversations about sexual abuse are often carried quietly through stories rather than spoken openly in public. What I know comes not only from academic literature but also from stories shared within families, communities, and everyday relationships. In Nigeria, sexual abuse is not only a statistic; it is lived in stories people carry quietly. I have heard stories about girls who were touched inappropriately by relatives, neighbours, or religious leaders and told to "just endure it." I have heard about young women who became pregnant after being attacked and were then blamed for "ruining their future," as if their body was the only thing that mattered. In some of these stories, parents responded with denial, saying, "How can this happen in our home?" Other survivors ended up distrusting the opposite gender, losing trust in love, and becoming defensive and withdrawn, not because of weakness, but because of pain that was never named or treated.

Public accounts and survivor testimonies from Nigeria show how deep this trauma can go. In one widely shared story, a woman revealed that she was sexually abused by her stepfather starting from childhood and carried that pain for years before speaking out (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024). In another context, male students described being used for sex and "arranged favours" by lecturers and older men who were trusted by families, yet the boys said nothing because they were told it would bring shame to their homes (Abreu et al., 2025). In these cases, trauma is not only from the act itself, but from the silence afterward, the pressure to protect family reputation, the fear of not being believed, and the internalized belief that it is the survivor's fault.

Within many Nigerian communities, girls are taught early that their honour is closely connected to expectations surrounding their sexuality and virginity. When sexual abuse occurs, survivors may be questioned about their behaviour, clothing, or decisions instead of being asked what happened to them (Ajayi et al., 2022). From what I have witnessed and heard throughout my life, these responses can deepen trauma by encouraging secrecy, emotional suppression, and self-blame. Children who were once confident and expressive may become withdrawn, struggle academically, experience anger or anxiety, or lose trust in those around them. Such changes are sometimes interpreted as behavioural problems rather than understood as responses to trauma. Research in Nigeria similarly demonstrates that child sexual abuse can have lasting consequences for educational achievement, self-esteem, mental well-being, and future relationships, particularly when survivors experience isolation or limited support (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Akinlusi et al., 2014).

At the same time, interviews and lived-experience studies of Yoruba families indicate that many Yoruba households also value collective care, forgiveness, and community support when harm is acknowledged and addressed (Ikuteyijo et al., 2023). I have heard stories of women who finally found one person like a mother, aunt, grandmother, or elder friend, who listened without judgment and stood with them. That one person can make a difference by saying, "It is not your

fault,” and by helping the girl seek justice or protection instead of shame. In some cases, families and communities have started to realize that holding abuse in the family has not healed the child; it has only buried the wound deeper. These stories show that healing is possible, but it requires belief, courage, and a shift in thinking about who deserves shame and who deserves protection. In my research, I want to hold both sides of the truth: the deep harm that sexual abuse causes in Nigeria, and the safe, quiet spaces where Yoruba girls and women find resistance, resilience, and the beginning of healing.

Healing in Yoruba Communities

Healing for Yoruba girls and women often happens in quiet, hidden pockets of safety. True healing usually begins with a trusted older woman, a mother, an aunt, or a grandmother who believes the girl without judgment. When that one person listens, acknowledges the pain, and refuses to doubt the girl’s story, it becomes the first step toward mending the spirit. Deep healing occurs when the community narrative shifts from *itijú* (shame for the victim) to *ètó* (justice/righteousness). When a community stands by a survivor, validates her pain, and refuses to let her carry the abuser’s guilt, that is when the spirit begins to mend (Ikuteyijo et al., 2023).

Faith and spirituality can also play massive roles in finding peace, provided religious leaders offer grace rather than condemnation. When abuse happens within the family, elders often convene a meeting to “settle the matter internally” to avoid police involvement and public scandal. The abuser might be made to apologize privately or sent to live in another town, but the victim is forced to continue attending family gatherings as if nothing happened (Ifayomi et al., 2024). This traditional method of conflict resolution prioritizes the unity of the *Ẹbí* (family) over the psychological survival of the child. This is a practice that desperately needs reforming, because it leaves the survivor carrying the pain while the community pretends it has “been dealt with.”

A quote that I once heard was

“A kì í fí eélá pa mó sára ká máa fẹ̀ kẹ́kẹ́kẹ́” meaning “You cannot hide a festering sore on your body and expect to enjoy a good laugh.”

In the context of my research, sexualized violence and childhood trauma are the “festering sores” in our society. By forcing girls to hide their trauma under the guise of family honour, the community is simply covering a wound with fine clothes. True joy, healing, and healthy adulthood can only be achieved when we uncover the wound, clean it, treat it with honesty, and allow it to heal properly in the light. That is the work my research hopes to support.

At the same time, there is an important question about men’s healing. In a society that prioritizes moral integrity and character (*Ọmọlúwàbí*), men must also be taught to endure harmful desires and to feel *itijú* (shame) not for being survivors, but for committing harm. Yoruba values can be reframed to call men to *ifaradà* (endurance) of temptation and to accountability, so that they protect women and children rather than perpetuate violence. This shift requires community education, male-led accountability spaces, and cultural stories that model respect rather than domination. However, there is currently limited research on how to apply Yoruba values specifically to men’s healing and prevention of violence, which is a gap this research highlights.

One Indigenous narrative that informs my understanding of healing is the story of Yemoja (*Yemoja*), one of the most revered *Òrìṣà* within Yoruba spiritual traditions. Yemoja is widely associated with motherhood, nurturing, fertility, water, protection, and the sustaining of life. Although interpretations of Yemoja vary across Yoruba communities and throughout the African diaspora, scholars consistently describe her as a powerful symbol of maternal care, communal wellbeing, and cultural identity.

I do not present Yemoja as a universal solution to sexual violence or as a singular representation of Yoruba beliefs. Rather, I draw upon her story as an Indigenous framework that helps me think about healing through relationships of care, protection, accountability, and restoration. From this perspective, survivors are not expected to carry shame in

isolation. Instead, families and communities are called to protect those who have experienced harm, to bear witness to their stories with compassion, and to pursue justice as an expression of collective responsibility.

My understanding also resonates with broader Yoruba philosophies that value relationality, reciprocity, and communal wellbeing. Scholars on Yoruba women and motherhood suggest that maternal roles have long been understood as sources of social, moral, and spiritual strength rather than merely biological identities (Makinde, 2004; Olajubu, 2008). Through this lens, Yemoja becomes more than a religious figure; she offers an ethical orientation that invites communities to nurture, protect, and restore those who have been harmed. For my research, Yemoja serves as an Indigenous conceptual guide for imagining healing as a collective responsibility grounded in justice, dignity, and compassionate care rather than silence, stigma, or isolation.

Gap in Knowledge: What Is Missing in Literature?

Despite growing attention to sexual abuse and trauma, there are still important gaps in the research, especially when it comes to Yoruba girls, childhood trauma, and Indigenous healing. Existing studies in Nigeria have shown that child sexual abuse is a serious social and public health issue, and that sociocultural norms can increase vulnerability and prevent disclosure (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Ajayi et al., 2022; Akinlusi et al., 2014). However, most of this work focuses on prevalence, reporting barriers, institutional response, or psychological harm, with much less attention to how survivors themselves find meaning, resistance, and healing within their own culture (Ifayomi et al., 2024).

One major gap is the under-representation of Yoruba-specific knowledge and healing practices. Much of the trauma literature in Nigeria uses Western psychological language and frameworks, and rarely centers oral tradition, storytelling, proverbs, spirituality, or elder-guided wisdom as forms of knowledge and healing. That creates a disconnect: the pain is described in “global” terms, while the healing that happens quietly in homes,

markets, and family gatherings is left out of the conversation. This is especially true for Yoruba girls whose experiences of sexualized violence are often hidden behind family honour and shame narratives, yet whose stories are rarely documented on their own terms.

Another gap is in how trauma and shame are framed. In many studies, the focus is on how shame silences survivors, but there is less work on how communities and elders can shift from carrying shame toward carrying justice and care. A Yoruba perspective can help reframe this by asking: when does shame protect the perpetrator, and when does *ẹtọ* (justice/righteousness) protect the child? There is also limited research on how intergenerational trauma is experienced and passed down in Yoruba families, and on how Indigenous storytelling and proverbs can help break that cycle instead of burying it deeper. This matters because decolonizing trauma research means treating Indigenous knowledge not as folklore but as theory.

Finally, there is a gap in how survivors’ voices are centered. Too often, studies talk about “cases” and “samples” without letting survivors fully narrate their own experiences, especially in Yoruba language and cultural idiom. Survivor testimonies from Nigeria show how deep this trauma can go, including women who were abused by stepfathers from childhood and carried that pain for years before speaking out (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024), and male students who were used for sex by lecturers but said nothing because it would bring shame (Abreu et al., 2025). When stories are told, they are frequently filtered through medical or legal frameworks, rather less attention has been given to the knowledge and wisdom carried by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and community elders, whose intergenerational wisdom, storytelling, relational care, and cultural teachings have long supported survivors and fostered healing within Yoruba communities. My research aims to address this gap by placing Yoruba girls’ voices, experiences, and cultural knowledge at the centre, and by using storytelling, proverbs, and poetry as both research methods and forms of healing.

Community, Family and Systematic Change

Moving forward, change needs to happen on at least three levels: the community, the family, and the wider systems that shape how sexual abuse and trauma are understood and responded to. At the same time, healing is not only about stopping harm; it is also about rebuilding dignity, voice, and belonging for Yoruba girls and women who have survived sexualized violence. This is where both Indigenous Yoruba knowledge and supported Western trauma practices can meet in a respectful, survivor-centered way.

At the community level, people need to fundamentally reshape how Yoruba communities think about shame, honour, and the body. A girl's body should not be treated as a repository of family's reputation; it should be recognized as a site of dignity, autonomy, and physical/emotional safety. Communities can begin by asking, "What happened to you?" instead of "What did you do wrong?" This simple shift can reduce blame and help survivors feel seen instead of being silenced. Studies on Nigerian women's experiences of sexual abuse show that fear of gossip, stigma, and social shame are major barriers to disclosure and help-seeking (Ajayi et al., 2022). When community responses are less about reputation and more about care, survivors are more likely to speak and access support.

A practical way to build this is a decolonized, community-based response that would also refuse victim-blaming and actively work to decrease stigma around sexual trauma. In many Nigerian settings, girls and women are shamed for being "used" or "damaged," while the person who harmed them remains unaccountable. This kind of narrative does not reflect the core Yoruba values of *omoluwabi*, which emphasize respect, empathy, and responsibility toward others, including children and vulnerable people. When communities hold abusive adults accountable and protect children, they are living *omoluwabi* more fully than when they hide abuse behind "family honour."

At the family level, parents and elders need to learn how to listen to children and

youth without judgment and to protect them even when that means confronting a trusted person whether a relative, family friend, or religious leader. In many cases, families try to "settle the matter internally" to avoid scandal, but research on child sexual abuse in Nigeria shows that private family settlements often re-traumatize the child while protecting the abuser (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Akinlusi et al., 2014). Families may also normalize silent endurance, teaching children that hiding pain is the price of keeping peace. Healing begins when families choose the child's wellbeing over the family's image and when elders are willing to stand beside survivors instead of asking them to endure in silence.

Storytelling and cultural memory can support this shift. When older women and girls share their experiences in safe, respectful spaces, they can help younger ones understand that speaking out is not betrayal, but courage. One Yoruba proverb that resonates with this is "*A kò lè fi èsẹ pa ẹni kan létin*," which can be paraphrased as "no one can permanently erase wrongdoing from a person's life just by silence". This reminds us that hiding harm does not make it disappear; it only buries the truth deeper and passes the pain across generations. When families learn to name what happened instead of burying it, they interrupt the cycle of intergenerational trauma.

At the system and policy level, governments and institutions must invest in better child protection, trauma-informed counselling, and survivor-centered reporting systems. Research shows that survivors of child sexual abuse in Nigeria often receive inadequate care; much health-care professionals report low confidence in identifying abuse and limited knowledge of referral pathways, leaving children without the support they need (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Akinlusi et al., 2014). In some areas, survivors also face blunt-headed institutional responses that minimize spiritual, emotional, and cultural dimensions of healing. Transitioning toward trauma-informed, multi-agency responses that include legal protection, medical care, and mental-health services can help reduce the long-term impact of trauma on children and families (Ifayomi et al., 2024; De Veause Brown et al., 2022).

A decolonized system response would also include Yoruba-grounded and Indigenous-informed healing practices alongside Western mental-health support. This means designing services together with Yoruba communities, elders, traditional healers, and cultural practitioners, so that support is not only clinical but also spiritual, communal, and relational. For example, Western therapeutic models of trauma focus on validation, safety, and resilience of the individual, while Yoruba oral traditions, proverbs, and storytelling focus on truth-telling, community memory, and moral repair. When these approaches are brought into respectful dialogue, survivors can receive care that understands both the psychological and cultural layers of their experience.

Voice, Healing, and Decolonizing Resilience

Conclusively, learning that trauma is held in the body is central to building this kind of decolonized, resilient response. Trauma shows up as anxiety, somatic pain, startled reactions, difficulty trusting others, and emotional shut-down, especially in girls and women who have been taught to stay silent and “endure.” When people understand that trauma is not only in the mind but also in the body, they stop asking, “Why can’t you just get over it?” and start asking, “What environments can we create so that your body feels safe enough to heal?” Decolonizing trauma work means recognizing that healing is not about returning to some “before” state, but about building a future where survivors are not left to carry the weight of their communities’ shame.

In my own life, the way forward begins with reclaiming voice and resilience. I want to use storytelling, proverbs, and poetry rooted in Yoruba tradition to show that survivors do not have to carry trauma in silence. I also want to show that healing is possible through community, care, and culturally grounded practices. This research is not only about harm; it is about what can be restored, re-named, and re-imagined. By holding both pain and possibility, I hope to contribute to a world where Yoruba girls and women are believed, protected, and free to speak their stories without fear, and

where research and practice together nurture resilience that is Indigenous-centered, relational, and healing-oriented.

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“

I have learned that Yoruba knowledge systems contain wisdom about healing. This knowledge lives in proverbs, storytelling, spiritual practices, and guidance from elders that carries meaning about truth, survival, and repair. They also offer ways of making sense of pain, restoring dignity, and rebuilding connections.

”

- Adenuga Shalewa



Franklina Anokye

Akan Tribe, Ghana

BSc Computer Engineering

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: The Wheel of Wisdom and Connectivity



Figure 1: Franklina Anokye With Her Artwork, The Wheel of Wisdom and Connectivity

My name is Franklina Anokye, and I am a Computer Engineering student at Thompson Rivers University. I am originally from Ghana and belong to the Akan tribe. I enjoy creating traditional crafts and learning about the cultural traditions and symbols that reflect my heritage.

As a member of the Akan tribe of Ghana, I wanted my artwork to be rooted in my own cultural heritage using Adinkra symbols. Adinkra symbols are an important part of the cultural heritage of the Akan people of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, originating with

the Bono people of Gyaman in present-day Ghana (Gouba, 2024). Traditionally, they were printed on cloth worn at important ceremonies, especially funerals, as the word *Adinkra* means “goodbye” (Gouba, 2024). Over time, their use expanded, and they came to represent deeper ideas such as wisdom, unity, strength, resilience, and spirituality. Today, Adinkra symbols serve as a visual language that communicates important cultural values across generations.

After arriving in Canada in January 2026, I learned about the history, culture, and

experiences of First Nations peoples, which inspired me to research their traditional symbols. During my research, I discovered that many First Nations symbols express values like those represented by Akan Adinkra symbols, including wisdom, unity, respect, and community. Since I was studying in Canada, I felt it was meaningful to connect my own culture with one of the Indigenous cultures of my new home. Through this artwork, I aimed to highlight the shared values and teachings found in both cultures despite the distance between them.

Description of my artwork

My artwork, *The Wheel of Wisdom and Connectivity*, is a circular design that represents the connection between Ghanaian Adinkra symbols and First Nations animals which share symbolic meaning. The wheel shape represents unity, continuity, and the idea that knowledge is shared across cultures. At the center of the wheel is the map of Ghana, colored red, gold, and green with a black star, reflecting the colors of the Ghanaian flag. This center shows the origin of the Adinkra symbols. Around it, Adinkra symbols are arranged in a circular form, showing that each value is connected. On the outer layer, each Adinkra symbol is paired directly with a First Nations animal that has similar meaning, creating a mirrored structure. This structure was shaped by the way I understand symbols and meanings as interconnected rather than separate. In arranging the Adinkra symbols and First Nations animals associations in a mirrored circular form, I aimed to reflect the idea that cultural values can relate to one another across different traditions while still maintaining their distinct origins. The overall design reflects my perspective that identity and knowledge are isolated, but continuously linked and shaped through connection and shared meaning.

Adinkra and First Nations Symbolic Connections

Akan Adinkra symbols and First Nations animal representations both communicate important cultural values, and their meanings

can be connected through shared ideas expressed in different ways.

Dwennimen (ram's horns) symbolizes strength and humility, showing that even the strong must remain modest (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). I paired this symbol with that of the Bear, as within Indigenous communities in North America they are given immense respect due to their strength. The Blackfoot Nation as well as the Navajo believe that the Bear is the most powerful of beings who protect other spirits from harm, as well as provide medicine-men with their knowledge (Corvin, 2019). Together, the *Dwennimen* and Bear show that true strength includes responsibility and care for others.

Nkotimsefo mpua (Court attendants' hairstyle) signifies loyalty and service (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). This symbol teaches the value of dedication to duty, and that honorable service preformed with humility strengthens relationships and communities (Adinkra Art, 2025) This symbol is paired with the Honeybee, which dedicates its life with willingness to serve for the sake of its community. Anishinaabe storytelling showcases the Honeybee as a sophisticated blueprint for collective learning where everyone holds a sacred role (Barberstock, 2024). Put together, these symbols emphasize commitment and service to others that acknowledges the importance of service to support overall wellbeing.

Abe dua (Palm tree) symbolizes wealth, resourcefulness, and self-reliance (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). This symbol embodies the idea that if you work hard and are resourceful, this will lead to prosperity and the ability to thrive no matter your conditions (Adinkra Art, 2025). In North American Indigenous beliefs, prosperity is often not represented through the idea of wealth as mere currency but is represented through the eternal cycle of life and the ability to provide for yourself and community (Bellis, n.d). In Haida mythology, Frog symbolizes wealth, good luck and abundance (Bellis, n.d). Both symbols relate to prosperity and natural provision that can adapt to any situation with hard work.

Mmusuyidee (That which removes bad luck) symbolizes good fortune, sanctity, and optimism (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). This symbol reminds us that cleansing and

renewal are important for growth, and that the role of balance restores harmony in a person's life (Adinkra Art, 2025). This philosophical significance aligns with the Hummingbird which to the *Diné* believe bring everything beautiful to their lives (University of Utah, 1998). Hummingbirds taught the people how to make offerings and when to stop and enjoy the nectar. Both symbols convey positive energy and well-being that comes from harmony within one's life.

The *Akoma Ntoaso* (Linked Hearts) symbolizes unity and mutual understanding (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). It teaches that strong relationships are formed when individuals listen to each other, cooperate, and build harmony through shared values. This aligns with the *Wolf*, known for loyalty and teamwork (Spirits of the West Coast Art Gallery, n.d.). It is often understood as a teacher and protector, guiding people in survival, community living, and respect for nature, where strength of wolf pack reflects the importance of unity, cooperation, and shared responsibility within human communities (Wolf Stuff, n.d.). Both emphasize the importance of working together and maintaining strong relationships.

Gye Nyame (Except God) signifies the supremacy of God (the Creator) and the belief that all life exists under His divine control (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). This aligns with the Moon symbol, which symbolizes tranquility, guidance, and protection across many Pacific Northwest Indigenous cultures. Among the Nuu-chah-nulth, the Moon is believed to protect the people, reflecting its role as a symbol of care and spiritual protection. In Haida tradition, the Moon is an exclusive crest reserved for a few high-ranking chiefs, highlighting its importance and prestige. Shamans often called upon it as a spirit guide because of its spiritual power (Artina's Jewelry, n.d.). Both reflect belief in a higher power that guides and sustains life.

Aya (Fern) represents endurance, independence, and the ability to survive difficult conditions (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). It teaches that true growth comes from facing challenges with perseverance and self-reliance, using difficult experiences as opportunities to build inner strength and achieve long-term success (Adinkra Art, 2026).

This aligns with the Octopus, which symbolizes adaptability, flexibility, and intelligence in facing challenges (Spirits of the West Coast Art Gallery, n.d.). Its ability to change color, shape, and texture, as well as regenerate lost limbs, reflects ideas of resilience, renewal, and the capacity to navigate challenges through flexibility and survival in changing environments (Spirits of the West Coast Art Gallery, n.d.). Both emphasize resilience.

Nyansapo (Wisdom knot) represents wisdom, intelligence, patience, and problem-solving ability (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). It represents the idea that true wisdom is complex and requires patience, experience, and deep understanding to apply effectively. It teaches that intelligence is most valuable when used wisely through careful decision-making, lifelong learning, and the ability to consider different perspectives before acting (Adinkra Art, 2026). This aligns with the Owl, which stands for wisdom, intuition, and knowledge (Spirits of the West Coast Art Gallery, n.d.). Among the Haida, the Owl is viewed with deep respect as a keeper of ancestral knowledge. The Owl is also regarded as a bridge between the physical and spiritual world (Bellis, n.d.). Among the Kwakwaka'wakw, it holds a dual symbolic meaning. In ceremonial dances, it is recognized as the "Wise One" and a keeper of knowledge. While also serving as a symbol of ill-fortune and warnings of death. This dual role reflects the Owl's connection to both wisdom and the spiritual mysteries of life (Anderson, 2026). Both reflect thoughtful understanding.

Abusua pa (Good family) signifies family unity, strong kinship ties, and support (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). It teaches that when families nurture respect, cooperation, and shared values, they create stability and a sense of belonging that strengthens both individuals and the wider community (Adinkra Art, 2025). This aligns with the Otter, which symbolizes friendship, peace, kindness, and family (Spirits of the West Coast Art Gallery, n.d.). In Haida cultural teachings, it represents curiosity, loyalty, and trust, and teaches that maintaining harmony between work and play is essential for living a balanced and meaningful life (Bellis, n.d.). Both reflect the importance of relationships.

The Akofena (Ceremonial Sword) represents authority, courage, and legitimate leadership (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, n.d.). It teaches us that true victory comes from inner strength, determination, and the ability to act with honor and valor even in difficult situations (Adinkra Art, 2026). It is paired with the Thunderbird, which represents power, protection, and strength (Spirits of the West Coast Art Gallery, n.d.). Among the Navajo, the Thunderbird is a sacred and powerful being that is believed to protect people, warn of danger, and support the growth of crops through its control over the skies. It is also viewed as a spirit guide that helps guide souls on their journey after

death, offering comfort and protection, and representing strength, generosity, and divine power (Kachina House, 2021). Both symbolize leadership and protection.

Although Akan Adinkra symbols and First Nations symbols come from distinct cultures, they convey similar ideas about life. Both use symbols pulled from real life animals or objects to communicate values such as strength, wisdom, unity, resilience, and spirituality. The wheel of wisdom and connectivity shows that cultures that seem different are connected through shared human experiences. It highlights that people across the world express the same ideas in diverse ways, underscoring that humanity is more connected than it appears.



Figure 2: The Wheel of Wisdom and Connectivity (2026)

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APPENDIX A

Symbolism of the Colors of the Ghanaian Flag

Red represents the blood shed by Ghanaian ancestors during the struggle for independence from British colonial rule (Caitriona,2026).

Gold symbolizes Ghana's rich mineral resources and wealth (Caitriona,2026).

Green represents Ghana's vegetation and natural resources (Caitriona,2026).

The Black Star symbolizes the hope and freedom of Africa (Caitriona,2026).

APPENDIX B

The Wheel of Wisdom and Connectivity





Pyper K. Kristiansen

4th Year Bachelor of Arts

STRENGTHENING CONNECTION: Relational and Strengths-Based Approaches in MMIWG Research

Author Note - Artificial Intelligence (AI) Declaration: No AI was used to plan/organize, write, or polish any written works by Pyper Kristiansen.

POSITIONALITY

My name is Pyper Kirsten-Tove Kristiansen. I am currently engaged in researching my family lineage and Indigenous ancestry. At this stage, I have identified Indigenous ancestors but have not yet been able to determine with certainty the specific Nation(s) from which they came. As a result, I do not claim affiliation with any specific Indigenous Nation. My perspective is instead informed by my lived experiences, the communities in which I was raised, and my ongoing efforts to learn about my family history and Indigenous heritage. I grew up on the lands of Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, within Secwépemc'ulucw, the traditional territory of the Secwépemc people. A big part of my childhood was living on the reservation, in a little trailer park right across from the Powwow grounds, or as many would know it to be where the old residential institution sits.

I was given the option to use other modalities for this work, but I have chosen to share my research through writing. Writing is the primary mode of communication recognized within academic spaces, which I acknowledge are shaped by Western European norms. Even though this is true, it is also a skill I cultivated through years of being

silenced, including my experiences as a former youth in care and is one that I am proud of. Through writing, I claim space and voice where they were not always afforded to me. My innate urge to learn, reflect, and teach others is vital to my being. This is what drives my commitment to research that affirms and uplifts Indigenous women and girls, even while I navigate and work within the constraints of colonial modality.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Indigenous women and girls experience disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence in Canada (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2022). Despite decades of advocacy and increasing public awareness, Indigenous women continue to face significant social, economic, and systemic barriers that contribute to heightened vulnerability to violence (Klingspohn, 2018). Existing responses have often focused on crisis intervention, victim services, and supports provided after violence has already occurred (Crooks et al., 2020; Fotheringham et al., 2021). While these services remain essential, prevention requires

understanding the factors that help protect and empower Indigenous women and girls before harm takes place.

Growing research (Burnette, 2018; Ogden & Tutty, 2024) suggests that protective factors are often rooted in relationships, culture, community, and identity. Indigenous scholars and community organizations have increasingly emphasized the necessity of strengths-based approaches that move beyond deficit-focused narratives and instead recognize the resilience, knowledge, and leadership present within Indigenous communities (Bryant et al., 2021; O’Keefe et al., 2023). These approaches seek to strengthen the social and cultural conditions that support wellbeing while addressing the broader impacts of colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and systemic inequities (Bryant et al., 2021; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

A strengths-based perspective is particularly important because Indigenous women and girls are frequently discussed within academic, policy, and public discourse through the lens of risk and victimization (Jaffer & Andrews, 2026). Although documenting these realities is necessary, an exclusive focus on deficits can obscure the protective factors that already exist within communities and the successful initiatives that are supporting Indigenous women and girls across Canada (Bryant et al., 2021). Understanding what is working in practice may provide valuable insight into how prevention efforts can be strengthened and expanded.

This paper examines the strengths-based approaches that seek to protect and empower Indigenous women and girls. Specifically, it explores how mentorship and role models, cultural connection and identity, storytelling and narrative sovereignty, and women-centered support services function as protective factors that promote safety, wellbeing, and empowerment.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of peer-reviewed scholarly articles, written primarily by Indigenous authors or Indigenous-led research

teams. The Thompson Rivers University (TRU) Library research database was used to find articles from academic journals in a variety of fields, including anthropology, psychology, health, and Indigenous and feminist journals. Additional sources included major policy reports and community-based publications relevant to Indigenous women and girls. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as *Indigenous women*, *resilience*, *gender-based violence*, *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)*, and *community programs*. Sources were selected based on their relevance to Indigenous-led approaches, strength-based frameworks, and the prevention of gender-based violence. Additional sources included major policy reports, community-based publications, and grassroots initiatives relevant to Indigenous women and girls. These sources were included to capture both scholarly evidence and community-led approaches that may not be represented extensively within academic literature. Populations of interest include Australian and African Indigenous communities in addition to Indigenous people in North America. The purpose is not to generalize across contexts, but to identify shared strengths-based principles that can inform community-specific approaches to addressing MMIWG. These insights are considered in relation to, rather than in place of, the distinct cultural, historical, and social realities of Indigenous communities in Canada.

KEY FINDINGS

This review recognizes that Indigenous peoples are not a homogenous group and that First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and other Indigenous communities possess distinct cultures, languages, histories, and knowledge systems. Many of the studies included in this review described participants broadly as Indigenous without identifying specific Nations or communities. Consequently, the discussion reflects the level of specificity reported in the available literature while recognizing that shared themes and strengths-based principles should not be interpreted as representing a single Indigenous worldview.

Several themes arose from the synthesis of these articles. Many communities are banding together and retracing their roots, connecting with the past to aid in the present. Despite generations of trauma, communities continue to demonstrate love, acceptance, and mutual support in efforts to keep Indigenous women, girls, and families safe from harm. A recurring strengths-based strategy identified across the studies is mentorship and the presence of positive role models (Montesanti et al., 2025; Murry et al., 2021; Povey et al., 2022). Another prominent theme is cultural connection and identity (Hunter et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2024; Gittings et al., 2024). Storytelling and narrative sovereignty also emerged as important resilience-building approaches (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2017; Rieger et al., 2023; Wieskamp & Smith, 2020). Finally, on how Indigenous women and girls can be empowered, the literature emphasized the importance of women-centered support services (Varcoe et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2026; Souleymanov et al., 2025). These programs are not only defined by what they do, but also by the values on which they are built. Across the studies, relationships, cultural connection, and community responsibility were consistently identified as central to supporting Indigenous women and girls (Bryant et al., 2021; Ogden & Tutty, 2024; Ferguson et al., 2021; Dudgeon & Bray, 2019). Collectively, these themes point toward a shared underlying mechanism: relational connection and sustained visibility within community contexts. Rather than operating as isolated program types, these interventions function as interconnected expressions of relational infrastructure that shape wellbeing and safety.

Mentorship and Role Models

Mentorship can provide guidance, support, and positive role models, fostering wellbeing, leadership, and a stronger sense of connection to community and culture (Ferguson et al., 2021; Lopresti et al., 2021). Having reliable figures and role models throughout life can reduce the risk of experiencing violence and fall into patterns or cycles of abuse (Njeze et al., 2020). Mentorship is applicable to all ages, especially in Indigenous communities,

where our relations to each other strengthen our bonds with our sense of self-determination and future (Montesanti et al., 2025; Napoleón, 2005). Montesani et al. (2025) identified a crucial factor in the successful development of Indigenous motherhood and raising children in a culturally safe home; Elder-led mentorship programs. In a northern Alberta community, Montesani et al. (2025) co-designed a pilot Elder-led mentorship program to help young Indigenous mothers through engaging with traditions and cultural teachings that would otherwise be difficult to experience in this remote location. Before the program began, there was a widely held belief within the community that Elder mentorship strengthened cultural identity, connection, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The program's findings supported this belief, with participants reporting greater cultural pride, stronger feelings of belonging, and increased social support. Cultural teachings and relationships with Elders were also identified as important contributors to resilience and wellbeing. Montesani et al. (2025) further found that the program not only helped the young mothers but the elders themselves as well. As a participant in the mentorship program shared,

It is good for the Elders, too, because I find many of our Elders, their significant spouse or whatever passed on, so they're lonely. That is why it would be much better for them and the mothers to be there for each other. (Montesani et al., 2025, p. 12).

One Elder leading the program also shared,

I also want to remember the spiritual teachings and traditions I was taught. In some cases, I was taught, and in other cases, a lot of things that I learned we never shared. You know, we just never had a chance to share them. But I am more than willing to help anybody who needs help, and I always have that little protective bear spirit in me that never wants a baby to be taken away by anybody. (Montesani et al., 2025, p. 13)

This attitude is critically important within the MMIWG movement, as it highlights both

the presence of community support and the importance of intergenerational care. In this way, mentorship operates not only as an individual support strategy but as a relational system that reinforces collective responsibility and reduces social isolation, both of which are associated with increased vulnerability in contexts of gender-based violence. Programs that centre these values help reinforce that Indigenous women are not alone, while also nurturing shared responsibilities to protect future generations. The Elder-led program was well received, as Young et al. (2024) took this program to a virtual setting to keep mentorship connection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Navigating Westernized academic environments, with their rigid structures and colonial foundations, presents unique challenges for Indigenous students. In these spaces, the presence of Indigenous faculty, Elders, and mentors offers culturally grounded support that affirms identity and creates opportunities for students to feel that they belong. Murry et al. (2021) found that Indigenous mentorship in the health sciences extends beyond traditional academic guidance by centering relationality, identity, and advocacy. Mentors acknowledge the systemic barriers their mentees encounter while fostering trusting relationships that support both academic and personal growth. They also encourage students to advocate for themselves within institutional systems while developing a critical awareness of the colonial structures that continue to shape higher education. Strengthening Indigenous identity and belonging through mentorship enables students to better navigate academic settings while supporting the presence of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in higher education (Murry et al., 2021).

Mentorship and role modelling are most effective when they are embedded within community-based and grassroots programming, where Indigenous girls and young women have consistent barrier free access to mentors who reflect their cultural identities and lived realities. Rather than occurring solely in academic or institutional settings, mentorship often takes place through Indigenous-led initiatives that prioritize relationality, cultural continuity, and intergenerational learning. For

example, the Indigenous Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Network (IMAGEN) supports the development of "Girl Societies," where Indigenous girls are connected with mentors and Elders in local, matrilineal, and community-based spaces designed to strengthen collective identity, leadership, and cultural knowledge (Indigenous Justice Circle, n.d.). Similarly, Indigenous Friends Association's IndigiTECH program integrates digital skills training with mentorship, cultural grounding, and paid internship pathways, creating environments where Indigenous participants are supported not only professionally but also relationally and culturally (Indigenous Friends Association, n.d.). These programs demonstrate that mentorship is not limited to guidance or skill development alone and is also a process of visibility and relational presence, where young people can regularly see Indigenous adults occupying roles of leadership, knowledge-sharing, and community care. In this way, grassroots mentorship initiatives help translate abstract notions of "role models" into sustained, lived relationships that support identity formation, belonging, and long-term empowerment.

Mentorship is also grounded in relational accountability, where knowledge sharing and guidance are shaped by respect, reciprocity, and connection to community (Povey et al., 2022; Ferguson et al., 2021). These findings highlight that mentorship is not solely about academic success, but about supporting the whole person within environments that can otherwise feel exclusionary. This is critically important within the context of violence prevention, as mentorship helps reduce isolation, strengthen identity, and build networks of support that can protect against vulnerability to violence. Through fostering agency, connection, and long-term stability through education and professional pathways, Indigenous mentorship can serve as a protective factor that supports both individual wellbeing and broader community safety. Across institutional and community contexts, mentorship consistently functions as a mechanism for producing sustained relational visibility, reinforcing belonging, and reducing isolation through ongoing interpersonal connection.

Cultural Connection and Identity

Cultural connection and identity are foundational to empowerment and violence prevention among Indigenous women (Simpson, 2017). Engagement with culture through language, ceremony, land-based practices, in addition to community relationships strengthens self-esteem, resilience, and overall well-being (Hunter et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2024). These connections are especially important given the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism, which has intentionally disrupted cultural continuity and identity formation.

Hunter et al. (2022) conducted the culturally grounded “Native Spirit” program for American Indian and Alaskan Native youth to strengthen cultural connection among a population facing significant social and mental health challenges. Participation in the program significantly increased cultural identity and self-esteem, while cultural engagement through traditions, teachings, and community relationships was associated with positive mental health outcomes. Programs rooted in Indigenous values foster belonging and encourage youth to develop a stronger sense of identity (Hunter et al., 2022). One participant in Hunter et al.’s (2022) study reflected:

I’m most curious about after all the stuff that they went through throughout history because I learn about American history and usually Natives are there and they’re always being abused and tortured and treated unfairly. And I just wonder, how did they, how were they able to pull through? How are they able to stay strong when it comes to that and fight through and they’re here today. (Hunter et al., 2022, p. 13)

This reflection challenges deficit-based narratives that frame Indigenous communities only through trauma and victimization. Instead, culturally grounded programs encourage Indigenous youth to understand their communities through resilience, survival, and continuity. Learning about the strength of Indigenous peoples despite generations of colonial violence can foster pride, belonging,

and cultural identity (Liebenberg et al., 2019; Burack et al., 2024). These outcomes should be understood as relational protective conditions that are associated with reduced vulnerability factors, rather than direct causal pathways to violence prevention.

Similarly, Tachine et al. (2017) explored how cultural connection shaped Native American students’ experiences during their first year of post-secondary education. Students described Indigenous cultural spaces, relationships with Indigenous peers and mentors, and opportunities to engage with their cultures on campus as important to developing a stronger sense of belonging and identity. Rather than requiring students to separate their academic and cultural identities, culturally affirming environments allowed participants to integrate their cultural identities into their educational experiences. The authors suggest that educational institutions can support Indigenous student well-being by creating environments that validate Indigenous knowledge, relationships, and ways of being (Tachine et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate that cultural connection can foster empowerment not only in community-based programs but also within educational settings, where identity affirmation is associated with greater belonging, resilience, and well-being.

Programs centered on cultural revitalization also allow Indigenous women to reclaim and strengthen their identities in ways that resist internalized colonial narratives (Anderson, 2016; Simpson, 2017). Cultural identity is not only a source of personal strength, but also a form of resistance against colonial systems that have historically devalued Indigenous knowledge and ways of being (Million, 2009; Reid, 2024). This aligns with strengths-based approaches that emphasize resilience, community capacity, and collective empowerment rather than vulnerability alone (Bryant et al., 2021; Prehn, 2024).

Across community and educational settings, culturally grounded initiatives are consistently associated with stronger identity, greater belonging, improved mental health, and increased self-esteem (Hunter et al., 2022; Murry et al., 2021; Gittings et al., 2024). These outcomes contribute to violence prevention by strengthening self-esteem,

resilience, help-seeking behaviours, and community connectedness among Indigenous youth (Hunter et al., 2022; Gittings et al., 2024). In this way, cultural connection acts as both a restorative and preventative force by addressing some of the underlying impacts of colonialism while supporting empowerment and well-being among Indigenous women and youth. Across contexts, cultural continuity functions as a stabilizing relational system that supports identity formation, belonging, and sustained social connection.

Storytelling and Narrative Sovereignty

Storytelling and narrative sovereignty are powerful tools for reshaping how Indigenous women are represented and understood. Much of the dominant discourse surrounding MMIWG has historically relied on deficit-based narratives that frame Indigenous women as victims, often erasing their agency and complexity (Hargreaves, 2017; Bourgeois, 2015). In contrast, storytelling practices rooted in Indigenous traditions reclaim narrative control and center lived experiences, resilience, and survivance (Mozeley et al., 2025; Roberts et al., 2026; Sharma, 2025).

In 2017, Charleyboy and Leatherdale, in collaboration with over 30 Indigenous artists, published a book “#NotYourPrincess” using storytelling, art, and personal narratives to challenge stereotypes and colonial representations. The contributors coming from across a breadth of nations in North America highlight themes of identity, culture, activism, gender, and community (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2017). The anthology emphasizes self-representation and narrative sovereignty, allowing Indigenous women to speak for themselves. This collection highlights diverse experiences and perspectives rather than portraying Indigenous women as a single narrative (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2017). Youth voices and creative work demonstrate strength, agency, and leadership among Indigenous women and girls.

Beyond challenging external stereotypes, storytelling also strengthens identity and supports healing within Indigenous communities. Drawing on the experiences of an

Indigenous Youth Storytelling Circle in British Columbia, Friskie (2020) describes storytelling as a culturally grounded practice that reconnects Indigenous youth with their identities, communities, and cultural teachings. Rather than functioning solely as a means of sharing personal experiences, storytelling facilitates the transmission of Indigenous knowledge across generations, reinforces cultural continuity, and creates spaces where participants can reclaim identities disrupted by colonialism and intergenerational trauma (Friskie, 2020). Through collective storytelling, youth developed stronger relationships with Elders and peers, reported a greater sense of belonging, and gained confidence in expressing their own experiences while reconnecting with Indigenous ways of knowing (Friskie, 2020).

This emphasis on narrative sovereignty is particularly significant within the context of MMIWG. The stories of missing and murdered Indigenous women are frequently told through media coverage, police reports, court documents, and true crime narratives, often without meaningful involvement from families or communities. As a result, Indigenous women may become known primarily through the circumstances of their victimization rather than through the fullness of their lives, relationships, and identities. Initiatives such as *#NotYourPrincess* (Charleyboy & Leatherdale, 2017) challenge this pattern by creating space for Indigenous women and girls to define themselves on their own terms. Similarly, Friskie (2020) emphasizes that storytelling is a culturally grounded practice through which Indigenous peoples strengthen identity, reconnect with community, and reclaim voices disrupted by colonialism and intergenerational trauma. Together, these approaches demonstrate that narrative sovereignty extends beyond resisting harmful stereotypes; it creates opportunities for Indigenous women and girls to assert agency, strengthen cultural identity, and shape how their stories are understood. Through centering Indigenous voices, experiences, and creative expression, narrative sovereignty shifts visibility away from violence and toward resilience, self-representation, and collective wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated reliance on digital technologies for

communication, education, and community engagement, while also highlighting persistent digital inequalities among marginalized populations. These disparities were particularly pronounced among geographically isolated communities with limited access to reliable internet services and digital technologies. Although much of the literature on MMIWG focuses on North American contexts, similar challenges related to geographic isolation, digital exclusion, and limited access to communication technologies have been documented in other regions of the world (Richardson & Wilson, 2024). Examining these initiatives can provide insight into broader strengths-based approaches that support connection, self-representation, and community engagement. For example, Richardson and Wilson (2024) explored ways to improve digital inclusion for Indigenous women living in rural and geographically isolated communities in Zimbabwe. Through community-based digital literacy training and increased access to mobile technologies and internet connectivity, participants were able to engage more actively in online spaces, share cultural knowledge, and tell their own stories on their own terms. Richardson and Wilson (2024) found that increased digital access fostered both individual and collective forms of empowerment by enhancing participants' confidence, strengthening their ability to communicate and advocate for themselves, and creating new opportunities for community engagement. The study highlights how digital access can strengthen both individual confidence and collective community connection by reducing barriers to participation, visibility, and communication. While the historical and cultural context differs from Indigenous communities in Canada, the findings demonstrate how digital spaces can function as important sites of storytelling and cultural continuity for Indigenous women experiencing geographic isolation. These comparative contexts are used to identify recurring relational mechanisms across diverse Indigenous and Indigenous-adjacent settings, rather than to assume equivalence between distinct cultural, political, and historical realities.

These practices of storytelling and digital inclusion align with broader Indigenous-led understandings of narrative sovereignty

within the context of MMIWG. The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (2023) situates narrative sovereignty as part of a broader movement toward restoring Indigenous jurisdiction, safety, and self-determination for Indigenous women and girls. Rather than treating storytelling as symbolic or individual expression alone, the article frames narrative sovereignty as a structural and political issue, arguing that Indigenous communities must have authority over how the lives, experiences, and losses of Indigenous women are represented, documented, and responded to (National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, 2023). Within this framing, the control of narrative is directly linked to safety and justice, as dominant institutional narratives have historically contributed to the invisibility, misclassification, and devaluation of Indigenous women within systems of media, law enforcement, and policy (National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, 2023). Storytelling therefore functions not only as cultural expression, but as a mechanism of sovereignty that challenges institutional control over Indigenous women's visibility and representation.

Narrative sovereignty has broader social and political implications. By challenging harmful stereotypes and dominant narratives, storytelling shifts public discourse and increases awareness of systemic inequities (Wieskamp & Smith, 2020; Richardson & Wilson, 2024). This reframing is essential for prevention, as it influences how institutions and communities respond to violence. As Dian Million (2009) argues, "If Native women were to speak, they would need to create their own space" (p. 55), highlighting the structural barriers that have historically limited Indigenous women's voices. Storytelling, then, becomes a way of actively creating that space, allowing Indigenous women to assert control over their narratives and challenge imposed representations. When Indigenous women are recognized as knowledge holders and agents of change, it disrupts the conditions that perpetuate harm (Montesani et al., 2025). Thus, storytelling contributes to both individual empowerment and collective resistance. More broadly, narrative sovereignty operates as a structural mechanism of visibility, determining who has authority over representation

and how Indigenous women's lives are made legible within public, institutional, and digital spaces.

Women-Centered Support Services

Women-centered support services are essential for addressing both the immediate and long-term needs of Indigenous women while also contributing to violence prevention (Souleymanov et al. 2025; Cooper et al., 2019). Varcoe et al. (2019) identified limitations in the Intervention for Health Enhancement After Leaving (iHEAL), an intimate partner violence (IPV) intervention that did not adequately address the unique experiences and needs of Indigenous women, despite Indigenous women being disproportionately affected by IPV. Working with a Western Canadian sample of 152 women, the researchers (Varcoe et al., 2019) adapted the intervention in collaboration with Indigenous participants and an Indigenous Elder. Participants provided extensive feedback on how the program could better reflect Indigenous understandings of healing, wellbeing, and support, and ultimately renamed the intervention "Reclaiming Our Spirits" (ROS). Unlike the original iHEAL program, ROS incorporated Indigenous cultural teachings, relational approaches to healing, and discussions of colonialism and intergenerational trauma. The program also expanded its focus beyond recovery from IPV alone, emphasizing holistic wellbeing, cultural identity, empowerment, and connection. In doing so, ROS positioned Indigenous women not simply as survivors of violence, but as active agents in their own healing and wellbeing (Varcoe et al., 2019). This reflects a broader shift in which support services operate as relational ecosystems rather than crisis-response mechanisms, emphasizing continuity of care and sustained connection.

Varcoe et al. (2019) underscores a crucial part of effective violence prevention and healing initiatives for Indigenous women: support systems must move beyond crisis-response and deficit-based frameworks toward approaches grounded in connection, cultural safety, and empowerment. There is a serious need for programs that do not focus solely on deficit narratives. While programs such as

iHEAL (Varcoe et al., 2019) were designed to help women recover after experiencing violence, ROS (Varcoe et al., 2019) meets women where they are at and allows them to connect regardless of their circumstances. Rather than defining Indigenous women through trauma alone, the ROS program emphasizes relational support, cultural identity, and personal strength, creating space for healing before, during, and beyond moments of crisis.

In Australia, Roberts and colleagues (2026) followed a similar goal in providing Indigenous women-centered care for both Indigenous youth and young adults. They evaluated a health and wellbeing program for First Nations girls and young women in Australia that was delivered through an Aboriginal community-controlled health organization. Using the Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance (RE-AIM) framework, the researchers conducted interviews with participants and program staff to examine how the program supported wellbeing, engagement, and cultural connection (Roberts et al., 2026). Roberts et al. (2026) findings emphasized that the program's success was rooted in strengths-based and relational approaches that prioritized culture, trust, and community connection. Participants described the importance of feeling supported, valued, and connected to both their identities and each other. Storytelling and yarning practices allowed young women to situate themselves within broader family and community histories, strengthening their sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

Roberts et al. (2026) also highlighted the importance of Indigenous women-centered care delivered through Aboriginal community-controlled services. Rather than focusing solely on risk or crisis intervention, the program emphasized empowerment and relational wellbeing. Researchers found that culturally grounded programs were most effective when they removed barriers to participation and created environments that were affirming, supportive, and community-driven (Roberts et al., 2026).

These findings reinforce the importance of programs that strengthen cultural identity, relational support, and community belonging before violence occurs. By creating spaces

where Indigenous girls and young women feel valued, connected, and visible within their communities, women-centered approaches may function as protective factors against isolation and vulnerability. Roberts et al. (2026) study further demonstrates how Indigenous-led services can foster empowerment through cultural continuity, collective care, and relationship-building rather than deficit-based intervention alone. Taken together, women-centered services illustrate how structural safety is produced through relational accessibility, cultural grounding, and sustained support networks rather than isolated interventions.

NEXT STEPS

While the literature identifies several strengths-based approaches that support the empowerment of Indigenous women and girls, translating these findings into meaningful action requires structural, community, and research-level changes. The following section outlines key next steps, including policy and institutional reform, community engagement and partnerships, and approaches to evaluation and research. Collectively, these directions emphasize the importance of Indigenous led, culturally grounded, and relational strategies to ensure that empowerment efforts are both effective and sustainable.

Policy and Institutional Support

Addressing MMIWG requires systemic change at the policy and institutional levels. One of the most significant issues is the chronic underfunding of Indigenous-led programs, despite strong evidence of their effectiveness (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2022). Concerns surrounding unstable funding remain ongoing, as Indigenous organizations have reported funding reductions, program uncertainty, and staffing losses that threaten the continuity of services supporting Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people (SpearChief-Morris, 2026; Passafiume, 2024). Sustainable, long-term funding is essential for

ensuring the continuity, accessibility, and scalability of these initiatives. Without consistent investment, even well-established community-led programs may struggle to maintain services, retain staff, and build the long-term relationships necessary for meaningful support and prevention efforts.

Policy reform must also prioritize Indigenous self-determination. This includes supporting Indigenous governance in program design and implementation, as well as addressing jurisdictional gaps that limit access to services (Bourgeois, 2015; Simpson, 2014). The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls identifies self-determination as foundational to preventing violence, emphasizing that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people are rights holders whose safety depends on Indigenous-led governance, culturally grounded services, and the recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction. Accordingly, the Calls for Justice urge governments to partner with Indigenous communities to implement Indigenous-led solutions, ensure Indigenous women's representation in governance, transform policing and child welfare through self-governance, and provide stable funding for Indigenous-designed health and wellness services (Walia, 2019). Structural barriers such as systemic racism, inequitable healthcare access, fragmented services, and jurisdictional neglect continue to undermine prevention efforts and must be addressed through coordinated policy action that recognizes Indigenous authority and decision-making (Walia, 2019).

It is recommended that shifting from reactive approaches to proactive, strengths-based prevention strategies (Bryant et al., 2021; Lines & Jardine, 2025). Policymakers can create the conditions necessary for long-term change through sustained investment in community wellbeing and culturally grounded programs. These reforms are critical for empowering Indigenous women and preventing violence at a systemic level. These recommendations align with the broader finding of this paper that MMIWG prevention is fundamentally shaped by the presence or absence of relational infrastructures that support visibility, belonging, and sustained connection for Indigenous women and girls.

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Community engagement and partnerships are central to the success of any intervention aimed at preventing violence against Indigenous women. It is important for programs to be community-led and grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems to be effective and sustainable (Mannell et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2019).

Relational accountability is a key principle in this work, requiring researchers and practitioners to build relationships based on trust, respect, and reciprocity (Wilson, as cited in Cooper et al., 2019). This approach ensures that programs are not imposed but co-developed in ways that reflect community priorities and values. Collaborative partnerships also enhance program relevance and effectiveness by incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise (Drawson et al., 2017; Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

Trust-building is particularly important given the history of exploitative research and policy practices. Long-term engagement, transparency, and genuine collaboration are necessary for overcoming these challenges (Thunig, 2022; Simpson, 2017). In practice, this involves engaging Indigenous women, families, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community organizations as equal partners throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs rather than consulting communities only after decisions have been made (Gupta et al., 2026). It also includes strengthening Indigenous-led initiatives that communities have already established, such as family advocacy networks, community search efforts, and locally developed communication systems, rather than replacing them with externally designed interventions (Gupta et al., 2026). Grounding these interventions in community knowledge allows Indigenous women to shape the kinds of support that are meaningful to them. In this context, meaningful engagement functions as a mechanism for producing relational accountability and ensuring that prevention efforts are grounded in lived community realities rather than externally imposed frameworks.

Evaluation and Research

The evaluation of programs addressing MMIWG must move beyond deficit-based frameworks and adopt strengths-based, culturally grounded approaches. Research consistently emphasizes the importance of Indigenous methodologies that prioritize relationality, storytelling, and community engagement (Rieger et al., 2023; Lines & Jardine, 2025).

Strengths-based research shifts the focus from problems to possibilities, emphasizing resilience, success, and community capacity (Bryant et al., 2021; Thurber et al., 2020). This approach aligns with Indigenous epistemologies and provides a more accurate and respectful representation of Indigenous experiences. It also supports the development of interventions that build on existing strengths rather than attempting to “fix” perceived deficits.

Avoiding tokenism is essential in this context. Genuine inclusion requires meaningful participation of Indigenous communities at all stages of research, from design to dissemination (Mannell et al., 2021). This ensures that research is not only ethical but also relevant and beneficial. This shift in evaluation practices is essential for accurately capturing relational and community-based outcomes that are central to Indigenous definitions of wellbeing and safety.

CONCLUSION

Violence prevention for Indigenous women and girls is closely connected to the social and cultural conditions in which Indigenous women live, grow, and participate within their communities. Programs centered on mentorship, cultural continuity, storytelling, and women-centered care consistently emphasize relationality, belonging, and Indigenous self-determination as foundational to wellbeing. These approaches reflect longstanding Indigenous values of collective responsibility, intergenerational care, and community connection, while also responding to the ongoing impacts of colonial violence

and systemic marginalization. Importantly, Indigenous women and communities actively shape these approaches, producing counter-narratives and practices that emphasize survivance, cultural continuity, and relational strength in ways that challenge deficit-based and crisis-centered framings.

A recurring issue is that Indigenous women often become publicly visible primarily in contexts of violence. Media coverage, institutional responses, and public discourse frequently situate Indigenous women within narratives of trauma, disappearance, and death, while their lives, relationships, strengths, and contributions receive far less recognition. This pattern reinforces conditions of invisibility and disconnection that shape how Indigenous women are socially and institutionally perceived, while also influencing how Indigenous girls understand their place within the world around them. At the same time, Indigenous women and communities actively resist these framings through counter-narratives that emphasize presence, relationality, cultural continuity, and everyday strength, challenging representations that reduce Indigenous women to experiences of victimization.

Strengths-based approaches offer an alternative framework for violence prevention by centering Indigenous women's strengths, knowledge, and leadership. Mentorship programs strengthen intergenerational relationships and social support networks, while cultural continuity initiatives reinforce identity, belonging, and resilience. Storytelling and narrative sovereignty create opportunities for Indigenous women to define their own experiences and challenge colonial representations. Women-centered, culturally safe services further support Indigenous women as whole persons rather than defining them through experiences of violence alone. Together, these approaches foster protective conditions that reduce isolation, strengthen community connections, and support individual and collective wellbeing.

Preventing violence against Indigenous women and girls requires more than responding to harm after it occurs. Effective prevention is rooted in Indigenous self-determination, cultural continuity, and

community-led efforts that strengthen relationships, identity, and belonging. By investing in Indigenous-led mentorship, storytelling, cultural programming, and women-centered supports, communities can help create the social conditions that reduce vulnerability to violence while promoting resilience and empowerment. Ultimately, the prevention of violence against Indigenous women and girls is inseparable from the relational conditions that determine how they are seen, connected, and supported within their communities.

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Learning and the accumulation of knowledge are not something that can be bought and purchased, but rather earned through time and experiences.



- Cassidy Ashley



Cassidy Ashley

T'exelc

Bachelor of Science - Biology

PLUK'WENTWÉCW:

The Deconstruction and Decolonization of a Bachelor of Science Degree to Uplift and Empower Indigenous Education

Secwepemctsin	English Translation
Stseptékwlls	Oral Tellings
Tmícw	Land, waters, everything above and below
Séwllkwe	Water
İkséltkten	Family
Qelmúcw	Indigenous Peoples
Mesmesen	Animals
Skú7pecen	Porcupine
Re Skú7pecen re Stseptékwlls	Story of Porcupine
Skelép	Coyote
Qéqllem	Braid
Pluk'wentwécw	We gather collectively
Ec k yúcwementwecw-ep	Take Care of Each Other

Table 1. The Collection of Secwepemctsin Used Within this Research Paper and its English Translation.

INTRODUCTION

The power of education exists in many forms; every person is unique in their experiences, as well as how they view and interact with the world. For Secwépemc Peoples, education can be found in Stseptékwlls, the Tmícw, Séwllkwe, and İkséltkten. Our view of Mother Earth is rooted in a reciprocal

relationship in which we not only take but also give back to help her flourish in return for her many gifts. Our Secwépemc Ways of Knowing and Being prioritize land connection, oral knowledge, relationality, collectivity and stewardship. In contrast, Western science prioritizes empirical data, individualism and

reductionism. For example, in literature it has been the experience of many that Western science focuses on data collection through experimentation; it is defined by isolation and academic literature, whereas Secwépemc Ways of Knowing and Being focus on the transmission of knowledge across generations while rooted in inclusivity (Mazzocchi, 2006). To prosper, we must deconstruct the system and rebuild in a way that braids both Secwépemc Ways of Knowing and Being with Western science.

A western science classroom is often behind a device, in a building, away from the Tmícw. As a result, western epistemology is fundamentally different from how we, as Secwépemc Peoples, view the world. Instructors are chosen based on western credentials: bachelor's degree, master's degree, and then a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), which supposedly proves western standards of proficiency in their given fields. The issue with this structure is that education is not always a quantifiable metric, it is constantly evolving and changing. Additionally, the western system often produces poor educators, as there is a lack of educational training for a department such as science, that is focused heavily on research as opposed to student education. Whereas Indigenous teaching practices are both holistic and encompassing of each timeline, and each and everything (Billy, 2009). For example, we as Secwépemc people prioritize intergenerational knowledge transfer, rooted in the teachings of our kwséltkten (Billy, 2009). This experience of generational transfer helps shape our overall identity and repository of knowledge. Successful learning is not something that can be placed into a list of qualifications or a box that is checked, but rather a representation of our whole being. It has already been said in literature that decolonization must occur in order to restore Traditional Ways of Knowing and Being (Billy, 2009). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to understand the current limitations of Indigenous education in the Bachelor of Science program, specifically at Thompson Rivers University and how we can use this data with Secwépemc Ways of Knowing and Being to tear down the current construct and reshape it into an inclusive braid of knowledge.

Lived Experience

Who are you today? One of many teachings I have learned when listening and reading Secwépemc Stseptékwlls is to create a relationship with the Stseptékwlls by connecting with one of the Qelmúcw, Mesmescen, and Tmícw (Personal Communication, 2025). Each time you interact with a Stseptékwlls, ask yourself who do you see yourself as? (Personal Communication, 2025). The Stseptékwlls is a teacher who guides you at each point in your journey (Personal Communication, 2025). Each interaction is a new lesson, built within itself. I have been very fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from these Stseptékwlls. On my journey, I have also been privileged to learn from various kwséltkten and elders. Their experiences and words have shaped me into the Secwépemc Woman I am today: empowered and supported in every room I step into. I am a collection of education, experience, and opportunity. The need to step into my power as an Secwépemc woman and give back in the same capacity that has been given to me has propelled me to pursue a Bachelor of Science, moving forward into either a degree in law or medicine. This journey stems from the desire to create change in the health care and law systems that it is supportive and inclusive of Indigenous Peoples and Secwépemc Ways of Knowing and being.

As of 2026, I will have completed my third year in the Bachelor of Science program at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) with a major in Biology and minor in Business Law. Since attending TRU, I have experienced a style of education that is separate from what I am used to. For example, when I took a lower-level biology course there was a lack of acknowledgement towards Indigenous Peoples. The only time Indigenous content was included was a short mention on the use of dentalium by Indigenous people, in contrast with the hundreds of slides displaying western scientific course content. The professor didn't go into detail about the meaning of dentalium to Indigenous Peoples, or how it is harvested and used. This act displays the empty promise of TRU's 2020 mission statement and Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILO) which will

be discussed later in this paper (TRU, 2026). During this class, I recall feeling frustrated that the bare minimum was being done. These feelings were often validated through the performative use of Land Acknowledgements in classrooms as well. I felt the delivery and use of Land Acknowledgements by professors was like checking a box, rather than taking the time and energy to truly express gratitude and acknowledgment for the Secwépemc Lands in which they worked.

To further appearance over action, TRU's mission statement from 2020 is based on interconnection, and relationship building, which are the goals of the University for the next decade (TRU, 2020). The statement is written in both English and Secwepemctsin which gives an appearance of reconciliation and change; however, it has been six years since its implementation, and the true work to create such change has not been done (TRU, 2020). My experience in the classroom, where there was a lack of education on dentalium proves just that and is unreflective of the mission statement. As time carries on, we are already over halfway towards their decade mark yet left with empty goals that were stated to be "at the heart of TRU's path forward" (TRU, 2020).

These experiences are not mine alone. In my time here, I have seen and heard the frustrations of other Indigenous Peoples in Sciences and other departments. For example, other students at TRU have expressed how there is a lack of Indigenous representation, in science classes, general electives, and the institution is still rooted in a Western mindset (Smith, 2025). Across departments, and into navigating general student life, Indigenous students felt they had no guidance, especially when it came to barriers (Courtoreille, 2024). Furthermore, Courtoreille (2024) noted that there was a 57 % retention rate of Indigenous Students at TRU following their first year which emphasizes the lack of belonging that contributes to leaving TRU. When there are multiple students having experiences such as these, what can we do to change the system and empower Indigenous youth? As Indigenous peoples, we are backed by generations of kwséltkten. With the strength of our ancestors, we have a responsibility to set up the

next seven generations for success. To do this, we must start from the inside and break down the limitations that have been imposed by a colonial system.

Limitations of Western Science

If you can't get a seat at the table, the table should not exist at all (Personal Communication, 2026). One of the limitations in Western Science is the lack of Indigenous educators. In TRU's Integrated Planning and Effectiveness Report (IPE), they display student and employee headcounts (TRU, 2025). For the student section headcounts are taken based on gender, age, program, and ethnicity whereas in the employee section headcounts are taken based on gender, age, and employee type (TRU, 2025). The largest gap in the employee section is that ethnicity is not reported. TRU explicitly states that there are 2,955 Indigenous students but does not say how many Indigenous faculty there are or how many of those are Secwépemc (2025). It is concerning that this question is not even being asked which results in there not being any data to determine Indigenous faculty. Once again from an outward perspective, TRU appears to be on the path to reconciliation by "Strengthening Secwépemc Perspectives" though the S7extekékstmen research position; however, this is only one role and job position (2025). It is disappointing that the University has only gone to the extent of creating one position, and furthermore it is frustrating that there are no positions such as this in the science department. If these positions do exist, the University is not making this knowledge available to students let alone the general public. While it is not officially reported, though conversation it has been said that the amount of Indigenous faculty members in the science department is minimal (Personal communication, 2026). This limited representation is rooted in the exhaustive list of qualifications required to instruct a science course.

SPECIALIZED REQUIREMENTS

- A Ph.D. in the related discipline from a recognized University/Institution.
- A minimum of one year actively involved in teaching and other scholarly activities at the University level.
- Demonstrated scholarly activity: Publications/presentations/research and a combination of teaching/research and/or industry experience.
- Demonstrated theoretical and professional knowledge of the discipline.
- Demonstrated competence with relevant course content.
- Sound knowledge and demonstrated application of best teaching practices.

Figure 1. The required qualifications for an assistant teaching professor position in the Department of Biology (TRU, 2025).

QUALIFICATIONS

- Ph.D. in Chemistry (or completed before the position start date of July 1, 2026).
- Established teaching experience at the post-secondary level is an asset.
- Analytical instrumentation experience is required.
- Evidence of a program of scholarship/research.
- Current external funding or demonstrate the potential to acquire if an early career researcher.
- Postdoctoral experience is an asset.

Figure 2. The required qualifications for an assistant professor position in the Department of Chemistry (TRU, 2026).

Both above figures display that a PhD is almost always a requirement when it pertains to teaching a science course. However, institutional accreditation is not always the end-all be-all when it comes to knowledge and experience. One of many limitations of a PhD is that it demonstrates proficiency in a specific discipline from a Western science perspective. Indigenous Peoples have practiced science since time immemorial, whether that is through harvesting, gathering, or preserving. For example, it is our scientific knowledge that has helped the Tmícw flourish in rural communities (Ijatuyi et al. 2025). We were one of the firsts to experience research by problem solving over a millennium (Ijatuyi et al. 2025). Our knowledge base is not defined by “Scholarly Activity” or years spent behind books in an institution, checking a colonial box. To be a Knowledge Carrier we have our own criteria, and job descriptions that do not incorporate

or acknowledge the place-based science that Indigenous people carry does not follow their own mandate. Alternatively, to acquire a PhD would remove Indigenous peoples from the land, and thus it is not a valid standard of proficiency and would even take away from our ability to become an Indigenous science knowledge carrier. Our people have preserved, gaining a lifetime of knowledge to become the educators they are today. Indigenous Peoples have experienced generational educational blocks as a result of the long last effect of Residential Schools (Melvin, 2023) in addition to the compulsory enfranchisement that Indigenous people were subjected to until 1985 if they attempted to obtain a degree (Leslie, 2016). This block of Indigenous education was organized, intentional and once again creates a gap in educational opportunity that has not fully recovered even in 2026 (Melvin, 2023).

The Department of Natural Resource Sciences (NRS) invites applications (<https://www.tru.ca/science/programs/nrs.html>) for a motivated candidate for a tenure-track position at the rank of assistant/associate professor (Tripartite) in one of the following areas: fisheries management/conservation, wildlife management/conservation, and/or ecosystem disturbance. Responsibilities include: 1) contributing to the teaching and mission of the NRS Department at the undergraduate and graduate level; 2) developing and teaching courses focused on their specialty; 3) participating in Departmental, Faculty and University committees, and 4) developing a robust research program.

Figure 3 (Part 1 of 2): The required qualifications for an assistant professor position in the Department of Natural Resource Science (TRU, 2026).

ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS: We are seeking exceptional candidate who specializes in one of the areas of fisheries management/conservation and/or wildlife management/conservation and/or ecosystem disturbance or related areas. The ideal candidate will have a PhD degree.

The candidate must have: 1) the ability to teach effectively at the undergraduate and graduate level; 2) a PhD in fisheries management/conservation, wildlife management/conservation and/or ecosystem disturbance (e.g. wildfire, pests); 3) the ability to communicate effectively with students, Indigenous groups, professionals, and the general public 4) and, the ability to develop a robust research program .

Figure 3 (Part 2 of 2): The required qualifications for an assistant professor position in the Department of Natural Resource Science (TRU, 2026).

These constructed requirements extend beyond science and into Natural Resource Science. Once again, a PhD is seen as a minimum qualification, where the ideal candidate has experience working with conservation and management of wildlife, fisheries, and ecosystems (TRU, 2026). Our experience and knowledge base from working on the Tmícw is just as valid, if not more than, a traditional learning system. For generations, our people have hunted and harvested on the land based on a reciprocal relationship, observing over a long-term period the direct insights that have allowed our people to thrive. We have treated the animals, plants, and water like a sister or brother, where we not only take but also give back. Since time immemorial, our knowledge of the Tmícw has allowed us to foster a connection to our cultural identity and support ourselves and community throughout time (Ndizulafhi, 2023). Learning and the accumulation of knowledge are not something that can be bought and purchased but rather earned through time and experiences. Our people spend lifetimes on the land accumulating knowledge on our land, from conversation

practices to harvesting techniques. There is no better way to truly understand something than to have your boots on the ground and be up close and personal. Indigenous peoples hold a wealth of knowledge accumulated over thousands of years, obtained firstly through observation and thus passed down through generations (Mazzocchi, 2006). This type of knowledge and experience is not something that can always be gained through a degree program; it is independent and equal. We are the biologists, chemists, ecologists, botanists and natural resource stewards. We are the scientists.

The majority of the time while learning in lectures and labs, we are confined to a building while working through a slide set or procedure. This environment is sterile and far removed from engaging with the topic we are learning, and it is rare to get opportunities where we can experience on the land learning. For example, the figures below detail a course centred on population biology however, our seminars are restricted to running simulations in a computer program behind a screen (Jones, 2026).

Course description

Populations are aggregations of internally replicating individuals of a given species (or genetically distinct lineage) that live in a defined area over some period of time. The study of populations is central to ecology and provides foundational information that helps to develop an understanding of more complex ecological structures and functions. Concepts in population biology run through a variety of applications ranging from managing invasive species to modelling projected COVID infections or determining the rate that a life insurance company may charge its clients.

Populations are not static but rather a dynamic union of members. They have unique evolutionary histories that structure their genotypes and subsequent physiological and behavioural adaptations to their environment. Thus, to understand populations, we must examine species genetics, microevolution, life-history strategies, spatial distribution patterns, intra- and interspecific relationships, and subsequent population growth rates.

Given the dynamic nature of populations, we commonly rely upon mathematical models to predict changes over time. Therefore, we will introduce the concept of modelling and its applications.

Figure 4. The Course Syllabus for BIOL 3030, Population Biology Winter 2026 (Jones, 2026).

Seminars in this course serve two purposes. First, they allow you to engage directly with the models and techniques that we cover in lecture. However, as engaging with the models requires simulating, manipulating, projecting, and visualizing data, the second purpose of the seminars is to give you sufficient background in R to accomplish those tasks. To that end, the prep document for each assignment covers R functions that you will need to use to complete the assignment. This should give you the tools you need to successfully interact with the models. Learning to code in R is like learning any language: There is no substitute for practice.

Figure 5. The Seminar Syllabus for BIOL 3030, Population Biology Winter 2026 (Jones, 2026).

The western system views the classroom as neutral but fails to recognise that this space is also setting the tone for the learning that happens. In my time here, I have only had one lab where we got to go on the land; however, it was only for a quick data collection rather than as a teaching experience. This course viewed on the land learning in a different way than Indigenous Peoples do. Communities across Turtle Island see the Tmícw differently; however, we are all similar in that learning is rooted in connection: connection to the land, one another, and ourselves. This learning model is more than just one thing; it is “the importance of language and the geography of stories, cosmologies, and world views, land protections, and rights, relationally and accountability, a connection to reconciliation and much more” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 1). This is an experience that you must be immersed in and cannot be obtained during a quick jaunt to collect data about wildfires, for example, without taking the time to understand the connection to the land and how fires have impacted Indigenous communities. Our conservation practices, data collection and stewardship of the land is entrenched in our cultural practices and traditions (Vinayaka & Ramachandra, 2025). It requires understanding, care, and time.

Limitations of Thompson Rivers University

The need to create such change and connection is reflected in the new Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) (TRU, 2026). These pillars were set in place for the benefit of students and aim to create well-rounded graduates, and they encompass “Connection, Engagement, Exploration, and Local to Global”

(TRU, 2026). Within the local to global pillar, a learning outcome is “Indigenous Knowledges and Ways: a TRU graduate recognizes and respects the value of Indigenous knowledge and ways” (TRU, 2026, p. 12). While the idea behind these ILO’s steps in the right direction towards reconciliation, there is still a gap in the implementation process. For some programs, it is a graduation requirement to complete a course that meets the ILO’s standards, whereas for others it is not. Specifically, in a BSc program, it is noted that ILOs may be a requirement; however, through degree works, it shows that you do not have to take a course encompassing ILOs (TRU, 2026). For myself, this gap leaves me feeling unfulfilled with the completion of each course. Most often I feel left without the most important outcome. If policies are created, it is very important to ensure that they are being integrated, incorporated, and used. Without this knowledge, graduates enter the workforce and world without the true tools needed to work towards change. There must be a change in the system to ensure the degree is rooted in the teachings of the Indigenous Peoples whose land we reside on. This proposed change and conversation must be inclusive of Indigenous Peoples.

In order to make the table accessible for all to sit at, we must remove the barriers that prevent people from pulling their chairs up. Furthermore, in one of my Business Law classes, we were taught the law that policies that are built to be neutral and inclusive can still have adverse and discriminatory effects on groups which comes from the case of *Stewart v. Elk Valley Col Corp*, 2017 SCC 30 (Little, 2026). To reach inclusivity, there must be accommodation, as each human being is

unique in what they bring to the table.

While I acknowledge that the proper qualifications are important to the job, I suggest we reconstruct how we think and redefine our view on what these qualifications are, as well as the process to obtain them? The reconstruction of hiring process should be inclusive of the Communities and Nation whose territory the institution resides on. TRU currently has a Prior Learning and Assessment Program (PLAR) that recognizes traditional ways of knowing, as credits towards a degree (TRU, 2026). It has been previously said that “The colonized process of PLAR, with the heavy written piece, the compartmentalizing of learning and how it is evidenced, was not working” (TRU, 2023, p. 5). While changes have been made to PLAR to make it more inclusive of Indigenous Knowledge, we should widen its scope to not only be used in the granting of degrees, but also the hiring processes (TRU, 2026). For example, PLAR could incorporate into both the job posting and hiring process for the position outlined in Figure 3. To further this, let’s say I do not have education at the university level, however I have spent my entire life in community accumulating knowledge by managing our bodies of water, in addition to hunting practices. The original intent of PLAR was to recognize this knowledge base. By following this process of recognizing experiential knowledge the door will be opened for job applicants. It also poses the question of how we define experiential knowledge, and who on the hiring committees makes that decision? While TRU does not disclose their hiring committee members, this group should include a diverse and receptive array of individuals, inclusive of Indigenous Peoples. As of now TRU is not meeting their publicised mandates, allowing there to be many empty acknowledgments in classrooms. The lack of inaction stems from the lack of representation and yet that is further

perpetuated by a lack of inclusion in hiring criteria. Allowing yourself to be open and acknowledge all ways of knowing and being will truly open the door towards reconciliation and decolonization.

Secwépemc Ways of Knowing and Being

Indigenous peoples are not one singular thing. We are the Séwllkwe, the Tmícw, the Stseptékwlls, the Mesmescen, the kwséltkten, and the Qelmúcw. We learn in a wealth of ways and always give back. We are guided by our ancestors and empowered by their strength in each room we walk into. Our knowledge base is both quantifiable, able to validate, qualitative and all-encompassing. We are not bound to institutional standards but rather free to experience this life in a diverse way.

Stseptékwlls are a fundamental piece of Indigenous education. They foster connections and are layered with lessons and guidance. The Skú7pecen Stseptékwlls has been a pillar in my life through the work I have done with the organization Qwelminté Secwépemc. In addition to learning who I want to be and how I want to be in this world (Personal Communication, 2023). Re Skú7pecen re Stseptékwlls was told by Secwépemc storyteller Sexwélecken to James Teit and was translated to Secwepemctsin by Skeetchesten elders Daniel Calhoun, Leona Calhoun, Amy Slater, Christine Simon, Garlene Dodson, Doris Gae, Mariane Ignace, Ron Ignace, and Julianne Ignace (Qwelminté Secwépemc, n.d). As you read the Stseptékwlls of Skú7pecen I urge you to ask yourself, who do you see yourself as and what lessons have you learned?

Diversity and Inclusion Commitment:

Thompson Rivers University is strongly committed to hiring based on merit with a focus on fostering diversity of thought within our community. We welcome those who would contribute to the further diversification of our staff, our faculty and its scholarship including, but not limited to, women, Indigenous, Black and People of Colour, persons with disabilities and persons of any sexual orientation or gender identity. Please note that all qualified candidates are encouraged to apply, however applications from Canadians and permanent residents will be given priority.

Figure 6. The hiring diversity and inclusion commitment (TRU, 2026).

Re Skú7pecen re Stseptékwlls (The Story of Porcupine)

"Cw7it te qelmúcw tsyem-ekwe ne nekúlecw te tmicw. A large number of people lived together in one place, so they say.

Re speqmíc ri7 re kúkwpi7s-ekwe. Swan was their chief, they say.

Ne kekéw te tecwllúlecw, te nekwséqt-ekwe me7 re scwesét-kt, te tekenu7s re skwelkwélt, tsyemes-ekwe te ticwell te qelmucw te sts7émet.stem te Tsi7emc. In another far away place, one day's journey away, beyond the snowy mountains lived another group of people, they were called the Deer People.

Yi7éne te tmescéen lu7 re tsi7, re teniye, re selcwéyecen, re sxwetéy, re yigelécken ell re s7i7llcw. These people included deer, moose, caribou, mountain goat, mountain sheep and some others.

Re tcetś-ekwe lu7 re kúkwpi7s. They say that their chief was Elk.

Ye-ekwe yiri7 k scmentwécws te tsqwétsten te m-sq7es. For a long time, they had been enemies.

Kwemtús re skelcmentwécws, tri7 yem wel re kwekwiyúsem re s7elkwstsíllens. They were interfering in each other's business all the time, that's why they had a hard time putting away food.

Tecticwell re stkwénm7íple7s, ell re tsutsúwet.s. They each had a different kind of government and different ways of doing things.

Nekúsem relralt re sw7ecs, kemell nekusem ta7 tri7 k sle7s, tri7 yem wel kwemtús re skwekwiyusems. What one group did well the other group did poorly, that is why all of them they always suffered.

Re spipyuy7e titéypens re tmescéen ell re tmescéen titéypens re spipyuy7e tri7 wel qwen-qwént re xwexwéytes. The birds were acting like four-legged animals, and the four-legged animals acted like birds, that is why they were all pitiful.

Re speqmíc qwenmíns es texwentés tkenhé7e re lele7stw7écws, es ta7es cuýtsem re skelcmentwécws. Swan wanted to fix how they could be good to each other, so that they wouldn't interfere in one another's affairs anymore.

Re speqmíc necwentés es pálpelt.s re tsqwétsten, tri7 yem wel w7ec re yewsentwécwes. The swan believed that the people were stubborn that is why they were troublesome and were being a nuisance to one another.

Neku7 te sitqt te m-ístkmes, le gattes re swucwt ne skwelkwélt, m-melkwilcmens re kwsélt-ktens re speqmíc. One day in winter when the snow was deep in the mountains, Swan gathered his people together.

Neri7 m-lexéyect.s stemi re sptínesems, m-yews re sulltimt.s swéti7 me7 nes es tsxlitens re tcetś, swéti7 tri7 re sxilems me7 éyentem cw7it te sxixlem. And he told them what he had thought and then asked who would go to invite Elk to come, and whoever would do that would be paid lots of dentalium.

Tsúntem te skélép, “Re ntsétswe7 me7 néns-ken.” M-yews re sllecwentés re s7ícenst.s te stemstítemt.s, tskerni7te silltsu7úwi, ell xwexwéyt re sxixlems ell re mémles. Coyote said, “I will go.” Then he put on his fancy clothes, his embroidered moccasins, all his dentalia and his necklaces.

Le estklucwes m-qwetséts re skélép, kémell ta7ks qwenens es kwétems ne xgatt te swucwt. Tri7 yem m-tentyénmens re c7istkten wel tskwtekre skékw7es le xqilltes re kwséltktens. Coyote left at sundown, but he did not want to walk in the deep snow. That's why he kept circling the underground house until sunrise when his relatives woke up.

M-séwentem te speqmic, “kénem me7e ta7 ke7 sqwetséts ey?” Swan asked him, “How come you have not left yet?”

M-éytsentem te skélép, “m-etsxmimen tucw ens cwiwselc, tri7 wel ta7 ey ken sqwetséts te sqeltus. E r7ales me7 qwetséts-wen. Coyote answered, “I was practicing running, that's why I haven't left for the mountains yet. I will leave tonight.

M-r7ales tspíqwstem le qwetsétses te kwséltktens wel re m-legúp. In the evening the relatives watched him until he was out of sight.

Ta7 k sq7es m-xpqnwénses k sgatt7uys re swucwt, cwelpilc m-tspelqilcwas, mstsilcwas ne kwellkémts re xnicw ne ckemqíns re c7istkten. It was not long until he found the snow too deep, so he turned around and went back, and he lay down under the ladder on the roof of the underground house.

Le xqilltes re qelmucw m-wiktem te xexe7 re s7itcs re skélép, m-xúqleqses. Mséwentmes te speqmic, “kénem mé7e ta7 ke7 sqwetséts ey?” When the people woke up they saw that coyote was fast asleep and snoring. Swan asked him, “why didn't you leave yet?”

M-tsúntem te skélép, “m-etsxmímen ens cwiwselc, tri7 yem wel cetsétsus-ken.” E r7áleses me7 qwetséts-wen. Coyote told him, “I was practicing running, and that's why I got tired. I will leave tonight.

Re speqmic m-séwens re kwselktens sweti7 me7 exték es qwetséts.s. Xwexwéyt re stsetsut, yiri7 re sku7pecen tikwemtus re skukuwétems ne skwelkwelt, ne gatt te swucwt, tri7 yem me7 exték es qwetséts.s. Swan asked his relatives who would be the fittest one to go. They all said that the porcupine always walked in the snowy mountains in the deep snow, that's why he would be the fittest one.

Tri7 yem m-twinélesmentem re sku7pecen es qwetséts. Thus, they depended on Porcupine to go.

tqwentés re silltsu7uwis ne sitest wel re m-cwénwen, m-yews re syexs te qwets. He sewed his moccasins

Le-tsekuilecwas re tmicw m-qwetsétses. He left at the break of dawn.

M-wiktmes te skelép m-tulímentem, tsuntmes, “yumell re ntsétswe7 ta7 ks xenwéwen ens qwetséts, tkenhé7e me7 xillt.s yi7ene te qwenqwént, te kenkint, te ctsetsscécen te kwséltkten-kt es t7eks ne gatt te swucwt? When Coyote saw him, he laughed at him and said, “If even I could not make it, how can this pitiful, slow and shortlegged relative of ours make through the deep snow?”

E r7aleses m-kitsc re sku7pecen re tcetšre tsitcws, xexé7 re stlels, stsmuxmux-ekwe te scúyent ell te swucwt. In the evening, Porcupine arrived at Elk's house, he was very exhausted and covered in ice and snow.

Le qw7étses re skú7pecen, m-kectés re tcetšte stélsnems re speqmic es tsxlitens re tcetšmet re kwséltkens. M-yews re sulltimcwes te stiteñc ell te téqceñ es tqwentés re silltsú7uwis. After Porcupine had warmed himself, he gave Elk the message from Swan and asked for sinew and an awl to sew his moccasins.

Le-wi7es re stélsneñ s, m-tsuntem te tcetš, “Pexyéwt me7 tégwentp-kucw re ntsétswe7 met ren kwseseltkten ne tmicw-emp.” When he was finished delivered, Elk told him, “Tomorrow me and my people will visit you in your country.

M-pelqilc re sku7pecen ne tmicws, m-lexéyect.ses re speqmic steñi lu7 re stélsneñ s re tcetš. Porcupine returned to his country, and then he told Swan what Elk's message was.

Le yigapes re tcetš met re kwséltktens m-tsecwmintem, m-yews re smetéms. When Elk and his relatives arrived, they were warmly greeted and feasted.

Le wi7es re s7illens m-xitelc well re speqmic met re kwséltktens ne sxetéqs re tcetš. After they finished eating, Swan and his relatives knelt before Elk.

Re speqmic m-tslexemcit.s xwexwéyt re stem re stslexméms, ell m-lexéyect.s tkenhe7e m-tsetšeclementwécws, ťri7 yem m-kectéses re tcetšxwexwéyt re texpquenwéllens ell re m-tkwenm7íplemenses. Swan shared his wisdom with them and told them how they could fix one another. This is how he gave Elk all his knowledge and his advice.

M-yews re tcetš met re kwséltktens m-xitelc ne sxetéqs re speqmic ell re tcetšmkectés xwexwéyt re sptinesems ell re tkwenm7ipe7s. yiri7 re sxepquenwellentwécws ell tqwews p7ecws re sle7s re sxenwéllens es tsetséts.s es yucwmentwecws. Then Elk and his relatives knelt before Swan and Elk shared all his thoughts and his advice. And this is how they learned from one another, and they were able to look after one another.

M-yews re p7ecws re sle7s re sw7ecs, m- le7stwécw wel me7 yews, m-ta7es cuýtsem re stñiqentwécws. Then they lived much better, they were good to one another from then on, and they stopped fighting.

Yiri7 re tkwenm7íplemeñtwecws wel me7 tekweníte7. These are the laws they gave to one another.

Re skú7pecen m-kwenwéñses te cwesqlewte sxixlem. M-yews re skucwsentem te skelép. And Porcupine became rich with dentalia and was much envied by Coyote.

Yiri7 re stsecwtéps!

This is the end” (Qwelminté Secwépemc, n.d).

The Power of Skú7pecen

Creating the Re Skú7pecen re Stseptékwlls in my mind starts with the Tmícw, I imagine Secwepemcúlecw, the rolling mountains, thick with Séwllkwe that has transformed into fluffy white snow. I imagine the Mesmescen, enduring the winter months through their thick coats rich in warmth and colour. I see the conflict between the birds and the four legged as a ball of red fire, one that has grown so large they cannot yet see the prosperity that awaits them if they were to work together. I see Skelép big in size and ego that blinds his ability to bring the two nations together. Skú7pecen may be small, however he is mighty in the strength within each and every one of his quills and determination to create change. Upon their feast and collaboration, I see the red fire transform into a golden yellow sun that shines above both nations, rooting them in a reciprocal and prosperous relationship where they can move forward as a collective.

Each time I experience this Stseptékwlls, I draw a new lesson. For example, in writing this paper, this passage speaks out to me: “[T]his is how they learned from one another, and they were able to look after one another. Then they lived much better, they were good to one another from then on, and they stopped fighting” (Qwelminté Secwépemc, n.d, p. 4). To move forward in a good and kind way, we need work with one another and incorporate all ways of knowing and being for our shared success.

We are also guided and taught by the Tmícw. This educational relationship is held steady by balance. The reciprocal nature is

necessary to truly understand and learn; you cannot simply take and take. The Tmícw is not only a provider but also a sibling, a shoulder to lean on, and a place to find yourself in. If you’re feeling lost, grounding yourself in the Tmícw will steady you and guide you. The teaching of the Tmícw being an educator spans across Turtle Island. Right here in BC, the climate work of Janna Wale is aligned with the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in science, “Our people are scientists—the original scientists” (Monte & Wale, 2025, p. 29). There is a responsibility to break down barriers and ensure your voice is heard. Knowledge is rooted in the Tmícw, spanning from harvesting practices to hunting, and “Science really is about observation. It’s about being in connection with the Land” (Monte & Wale, 2025, p. 4). We must look beyond the lab, and into the rich and flourishing Tmícw that surrounds us. On the land experiences will look different for each community, but it is the incorporation of language and lessons that focus on respect and reciprocity (UNESCO, 2021). We can look to other universities for guidance on beyond the lab learning: for example, at The University of Saskatchewan their Indigenous land based graduate program is rooted in the idea of knowledge coming from and connecting to the land in addition to relationships (UNESCO, 2021). Other programs involving on the land learning opportunities emphasize that working on and with the Tmícw is more than an outdoor educational program, but rather a time to foster connection and truly see how the Tmícw influences all aspects of life (Learning the Land, 2020). The construction and cultivation of the learning opportunities, such as the Tmícw, must be done with care and intent.



Figure 7. A collection of the Séwllkwe, the Tmícw, the Stseptékwlls, and Secwepemcúlecw (Ashley, 2026).

To grow and change, a steady foundation needs to be created strong enough that it will withstand pressures and time, and allow you to grow empowered, resilient, and tall. The work of Secwépemc and Sylix Knowledge Sharer Elaine Alec does just this and can be a great example for ways we can move forward (Alec, n.d). The cultivating safe spaces framework she has created works to build leadership, decision-making, and governance (Alec, n.d). Her work has been instrumental in working towards accountability and effective partnership.

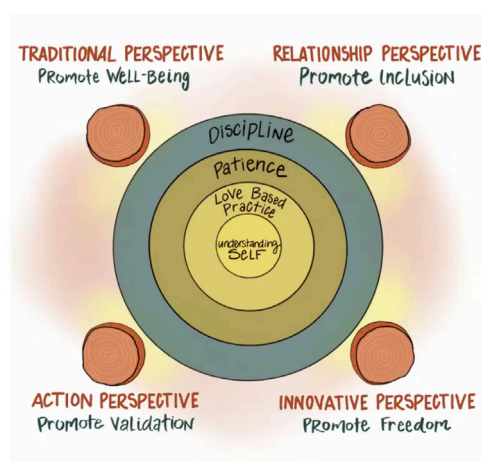


Figure 8. Elaine Alec's framework on cultivating safe spaces (Animikii, 2021).

Her framework is built on four perspectives and four conditions (Naqsmist, 2026). The perspectives are Traditional, Relationship, Action, and Innovation, and the conditions are discipline, patience, love-based practice, and understanding self. To be disciplined, you have to show up even when it's not perfect, you must stay consistent and create a sense of stability to ensure your voice is not dismissed (Naqsmist, 2026). To be patient, you must remain calm in rough waters and acknowledge your humanness (Naqsmist, 2026). To create a love-based practice is to have faith, trust, and respect for all the Qelmúcw, including yourself (Alec, 2026). To understand yourself is to remain grounded and look within so that you can step forward with strength and accountability (Naqsmist, 2026). The knowledge and path to move forward already surrounds us; we just need to take that first step or weave the first part of the Qéq'llem.

The Qéq'llem

As said by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), a braid is strengthened by its many fibres and strands that run through it. To move forward in an impactful way, we must take our strengths and knowledge bases and weave them together. The braid of knowledge must start at the top with our educators where we redefine what we deem to be appropriate qualifications, creating space at the table for multiple voices and lived experiences. As the braid of knowledge is woven, we must work towards the integration of Indigenous Knowledge systems into the science program. This work exists in many shapes and forms, for example, the L.A.N.D. Circle Committee is a group of students at Thompson Rivers University dedicated to increasing Indigenous representation in the Master of Environmental Science program. I was brought onto this team though a coworker just this past year and thrust eagerly into the redefining work that they are doing. We host circles with honoured guests from Secwepemcúl'ecw, all the way across Turtle Island, to share their scientific knowledge and experiences. For example, this past fall we had Alexis Gottfriedson the S7extekéktmen Office of the Vice President of Research at TRU to speak on Secwépemc Language and Honouring. In the winter we then had Jessus Karst, who is a Biodiversity Policy Advisor and Board Member of Braiding Knowledges Canada to speak on "The Importance of Relationships when Including Indigenous Science in Research" (Karst, 2026). The purpose of these circles is to break down barriers where students can feel safe and comfortable to ask experts questions and foster meaningful connection and relationships. As students, we have taken the initiative to increase the representation of Indigenous Knowledge systems into the science realm. During this process of integration, it is important to acknowledge and understand the responsibility of sharing Indigenous Knowledge, as it must be done with caution and care, while following the OCAP principles. The principles of ownership, control, access, and possession reaffirm that Indigenous peoples and Communities control the distribution of our knowledge (FNIGC, 2026).

As the braid continues to grow through its weaving process, we must also look to the incorporation of the Tmícw as an educator and allow students to engage with on the land learning opportunities. Right here in Secwepemcúlecw we can look to Knowledge Carriers such as Elaine Alec (2026) and incorporate frameworks such as hers into the science curriculum. As we dedicate time to the lab, we should also dedicate just as much to on the land learning opportunities. Engaging with the land must be equally prioritized as a learning space, and lab time could be equally split between both spaces. Literature has displayed that a braid can happen by identifying pillars and priorities of both Indigenous Knowledge systems and Western science, and looking at the strengthens of both to work together (Bowles et. al, 2026). Western science has much to learn from Indigenous Ways of Knowing, in terms of how we view science disciplines as interconnected as opposed to distinct entities (Nargari, 2026). Going further, we can use resources that already exist such as Knowing Home (Snivley & Williams, 2016) which is a book based on braiding Indigenous and Western sciences to teach both educators and students how we can intertwine these two knowledge systems. As time moves on, the braid will continue to grow in both strength and size, and we must grow with it. We must keep striving to strengthen the connection to one another, ourselves, and the need to evolve education.

Pluk'wentwécw

Pluk'wentwécw, "We gather collectively" (Gottfriedson, 2021). This Secwpmetsín word is an inclusive term, set in the present tense (Gottfriedson, 2021). The intentionality behind Pluk'wentwécw, as the title of this research paper, is that the time for change is now. The tense holds just as much value as the meaning of the word. We must gather collectively in this moment and work towards creating a future and educational system that is better for the next seven generations to come. This work can be strengthened collectively by looking at the successful work of other Universities across Turtle Island. We can utilize strengths that already exist and implement them into our own structures in a way that is relevant to best support our local communities. When looking at other Universities for guidance, I looked at the hiring processes and on the land learning opportunities that exist within these spaces across Canada. I wanted to understand if eastern Canada had moved further towards reconciliation as opposed to western. By analysing their processes, we could strengthen our own efforts with a guided hand. Below is a collection of data from universities in western, central, and eastern Canada. This data was searched for through Google using key words such as "Science Department", "Open Job Postings", and "Canadian Universities" it was then selected by open job postings at the time of writing this paper, June 8th, 2026.

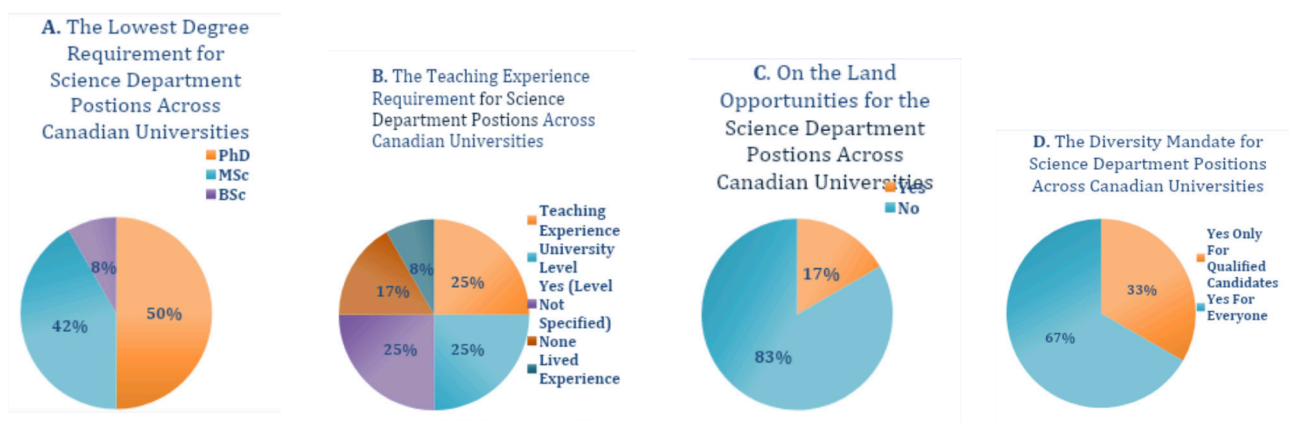


Figure 9. Canadian University Data, regarding Science Department Job Postings from Western, Central, and Eastern Canada (n=12).

This data proves that this problem is a larger issue spreading across Canadian Universities. The graphs show that we are stuck in the requirement of a PhD and lacking in the incorporation of on the land learning opportunities. While I was disappointed to see that these other Canadian Universities are also deficient, we can still use this data as a model for our own program at TRU in Secwepemcúlecw. We are lacking in making our diversity mandate at TRU and western Canada open to all applicants even those who do not meet the required qualifications such as a PhD. For example, the figure below outlines the University of Toronto's (U of T) inclusive hiring practices (U of T, 2026).

Lived Experience Statement

Candidates who are members of Indigenous, Black, racialized and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, persons with disabilities, and other equity deserving groups are encouraged to apply, and their lived experience shall be taken into consideration as applicable to the posted position.

Figure 10. The lived experience statement posted within U of T's active job postings. (U of T, 2026).

We can also look to schools such as U of T as a guide where they embed lived experiences directly into their job postings and hopefully hiring process (U of T, 2026). We need to start seeking out Indigenous educators, from across Turtle Island and especially the Nations in which these institutions reside upon. Rebuilding this degree will help shape young individuals such as myself, to enter the workforce informed and mindful so that I can work to give back positively to the communities who have supported me each step of the way. This implementation will truly create a cycle of reciprocity between communities and students. Pluk'wentwécw, we must gather now to deconstruct and decolonize a Bachelor of Science Degree to uplift and empower Indigenous Education. We must incorporate Secwepemctsín, and Secwépemc Knowledge in the educational system residing in Secwepemcúlecw.



Figure 11. Ec k yúcwementwecw-ep (Charlie, 2025).

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Figures

Figure 1. The required qualifications for an assistant teaching professor position in the Department of Biology (TRU, 2025). TRU. (2025). *Assistant Teaching Professor-Biology*. <https://tru.hua.hrsmart.com/hr/ats/Posting/view/33573> Accessed 6 May 2026.

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Figure 3. The required qualifications for an assistant professor position in the Department of Natural Resource Science (TRU, 2026). TRU. (2026). *Assistant Professor / Associate Professor*. <https://tru.hua.hrsmart.com/hr/ats/Posting/view/33637> Accessed 6 May 2026.

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Figure 7. A collection of the Séwllkwe, the Tmícw, the Stseptékwlls, and Secwepemcúl'ecw (Ashley, 2026). Cassidy Ashley. (2026). A collection of Secwepemcúl'ecw.

Figure 8. Elaine Alec's framework on cultivating safe spaces. Animikii. (2021). *Cultivating Safe Spaces with Elaine Alec*. Animikii Indigenous Technology. <https://animikii.com/insights/cultivating-safe-spaces-with-elaine-alec> Accessed 6 May 2026.

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Figure 11. Ec k yúcwementwecw-ep (Take Care of Each Other) (Charlie, 2025). Roarke Shmoowa Charlie, Lytton First Nation, for Qwelmintec Secwepemc (2025). @Rork22. "Take Care".



Jyotshna

Dalit (Khatik)

Master of Education

FROM CASTE TO CONSCIOUSNESS: A Dalit- Khatik Woman's Journey of Identity, Freedom, and Belonging

INTRODUCTION

I am a 26-year-old woman and an international student from India, currently studying for my master's degree in Canada. For most of my life, I knew that I belonged to the Scheduled Castes community in India. I knew the word "Dalit." I knew there had been discrimination in the past. But I did not fully understand the depth of my history.

Recently, while studying and learning about Indigenous communities in Canada, I came across a scholarship that made me reflect deeply on my own identity. Rawat (2024) explains that early twentieth-century Dalit activists, especially those connected to the Adi-Hindu movement, used the term "Adi-Hindu" to describe untouchable communities as the original inhabitants of Hindustan, or India. This historical and political framing helped me see Dalit identity not only through caste oppression, but also through questions of land, belonging, exclusion, memory, and self-respect. This realisation changed how I saw myself. It was emotional, powerful, and painful at the same time.

I called my mother. I spoke to my grandmother. I asked them about our history, our struggles, and what they had faced. Through those conversations, I began to understand that my freedom today is not accidental. It is the result of generations of suffering, courage, and resistance. This paper is both

academic and personal. It briefly explains the origin of the caste system in simple language and reflects on my emotional journey of discovering my identity as part of a historically oppressed and possibly Indigenous community from India.

Understanding India's 3,000-Year-Old Caste System

The caste system is an ancient social structure in India. It divided people into groups based on their birth. A person's caste was assigned at birth and usually could not be changed. It affected where people lived, the jobs they could do, whom they could marry, and how society treated them.

Brahma and the origins of caste

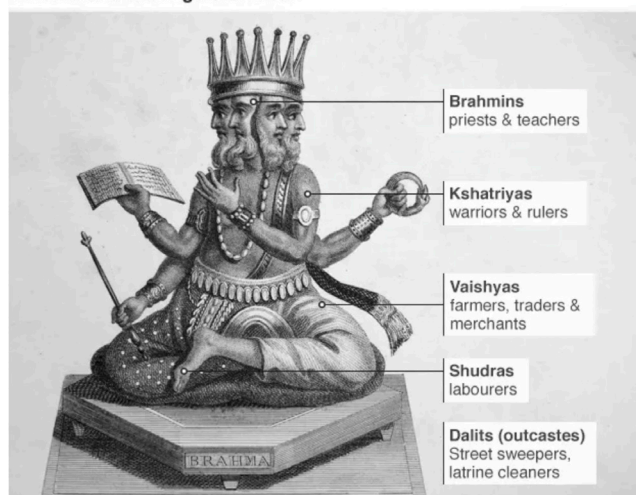


Figure 1. Description of Caste system (BBC News, 2019)

Traditionally, Hindu society was divided into four main groups called varnas:

- › Brahmins (priests and teachers)
- › Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers)
- › Vaishyas (traders and business people)
- › Shudras (labourers and service providers)

Outside of these four groups were people who later came to be called “untouchables.” Today, they are known as Dalits and officially recognised as Scheduled Castes under the Indian Constitution. The term “untouchability” not only refers to the word used to describe Dalits, but also to a social practice where they were excluded from everyday activities, such as entering temples, using public spaces, or interacting equally with others. This practice was legally abolished in 1950 under the Indian Constitution, but its social effects can still be seen in different forms today (Goghari & Kusi, 2023).

While learning about caste, I also began reflecting on Indigenous communities and how Indigenous identities and experiences are understood differently in India and Canada. In India, the idea of Indigenous communities is more complex and is most commonly connected to Adivasi communities, also known as Scheduled Tribes, who are recognised as tribal and land-connected communities with their own distinct cultures, traditions, languages, and histories. Dalits and Adivasis are both historically marginalised communities in India; however, they are socially, constitutionally, and politically categorised differently. Dalits are officially recognised as Scheduled Castes, while Adivasis are officially recognised as Scheduled Tribes, and these categories have distinct historical, social, and political meanings (Kapoor Mehta & Das, 2012). Dalit communities, including the Khatik community, have historically been located within caste-based systems of social exclusion and have experienced discrimination, unequal access to education, limited access to resources, and restricted opportunities across generations (Bellwinkel-Schempp, 1998; Goghari & Kusi, 2023).

Although the historical systems in India and Canada are different, there are still important similarities in the experiences of marginalised communities in both countries. Many communities have experienced

exclusion, poverty, discrimination, underrepresentation, and barriers to education and social mobility. At the same time, both Indigenous communities in Canada and marginalised caste communities in India continue to show strong resilience, cultural identity, community strength, and ongoing efforts toward equality, dignity, representation, and educational empowerment. For example, Sasakamoose et al. (2024) show how the Muskowekwan First Nation has responded to colonial trauma through cultural preservation, traditional healing, land-based practices, and community-led wellness. Learning about Indigenous histories and communities in Canada encouraged me to reflect more deeply on caste, identity, belonging, and the historical experiences of marginalisation within my own Dalit community.

The Shock of Realisation

When I came to Canada as an international student, I did not expect to rediscover myself. In my classes, I learned about Indigenous peoples in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. I learned about colonisation, land loss, residential schools, cultural suppression, and the ways Indigenous children were separated from their families and communities. At the same time, I also learned about resilience, survival, healing, and pride.

As I listened, something inside me felt familiar.

I started reading more and came across discussions such as those by Narayan (2023), who suggests that Dalit communities may be connected to some of the original and historically marginalised peoples of India who were later pushed out and excluded under the caste system. Hans (2025) and Khadka (2026) further connect this history to broader experiences of exclusion, loss of social status, displacement from land and resources, and the disruption of community ways of living. For me, this connection is not only about ancestry or background; it is also about understanding the shared experiences of marginalization, survival, and resistance. Hans (2025) explains that the term Dalit means “broken” or “crushed,” reflecting the long history of discrimination,

exclusion, and injustice experienced by these communities.

As I continued learning, I began to understand the deep impact of the caste system, which has existed in India for more than 3,000 years. The caste system divided people by birth and treated some groups as “untouchable” or impure (Ambedkar, 1936). It controlled where people could live, the work they could do, and their access to education and opportunities, creating long-term inequality and poverty. For generations, many Dalit communities were denied equal access to schools, public spaces, clean drinking water, land ownership, and respected occupations. Even more were pushed into degrading and low-status labour, such as sanitation work, leatherwork, and street sweeping, because society considered these occupations “impure” (Hans, 2025). and not suitable to be done by others.

Although untouchability was legally abolished in 1950, the long-term effects of caste discrimination continue to shape the lives of many Dalit communities today through poverty, educational barriers, underrepresentation, social inequality, and limited access to resources and opportunities.

Scholars such as Rege (2006) explain that Dalit women’s stories and lived experiences are important forms of knowledge because they reveal the everyday realities of caste, gender, exclusion, resistance, and survival that are often ignored in dominant social narratives. Reading these discussions helped me understand that personal stories are not just individual experiences, but also reflections of larger social and historical realities.

That realisation shook me. I had always understood my identity mainly through the lens of caste discrimination, but I had never deeply reflected on my relationship to land, belonging, and how generations of exclusion continue to shape people’s lives and opportunities today.

I remember sitting alone in my room after reading about this. I felt confused, proud, angry, and emotional all at once. I immediately called my mother to understand more about the experiences and struggles faced by Dalit women in our family and community. I spent hours talking with both my mother

and grandmother, listening to their stories, challenges, resilience, and journeys across different generations.

AN INTERGENERATIONAL STORY:

My Grandmother, My Mother, and Me

When I called my grandmother and asked about our family’s past, she started telling me stories from a very different time.

She said that when her parents, my great-grandparents, were young, education was not something people from our community could even imagine. They were not allowed to go to school. In fact, they never even dreamed that one day they could study. School was simply not meant for people like them.



Figure 2: Balviri Devi (Grandmother). Authors photo

When I called my grandmother and asked about our family’s past, she started telling me stories from a very different time. I share what she told me below in a more informal written style so that the authenticity, emotion,

and conversational nature of this interaction remain visible.

Then things slowly started to change. When India gained independence in 1947, my grandmother was a teenage girl. She told me that after independence, new rules and laws were introduced that supported equality and access to education for all citizens (Balviri, personal communication, 2026). For the first time, people from our community were officially able to imagine school as a possibility.

Even then, life was not easy. My grandmother herself did not get many opportunities to study. She got married young and stayed within her region her whole life. She never went to university and never travelled far. But she had one very strong dream: that her children would go to school and build a better life.

And she made that happen. My father went to school and continued his education. That was already a big step forward for our family.

Then I spoke to my mother. My mother was born in 1975. She told me that by that time, education was more open for people like us (Rani, 2026). She was able to go to school without the same restrictions that her grandparents faced. She studied science and worked very hard. Today, she works in the medical field.



Figure 3: Rani Puran Chand (Mother). Authors photo

When she told me this, I realized how much each generation pushed the door a little more open.

Then there is my story. I was born in 1999. Even today, only a small number of women from my community are well educated and settled in stable careers. In India, there is a clear gap in educational attainment between Dalit and non-Dalit women. The literacy rate for women from Scheduled Caste (Dalit) communities is around 56%, while for women from other groups it is closer to 75% or higher (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MOSPI], 2022). This gap becomes even wider in higher education, where fewer Dalit women continue their studies, and dropout rates are higher. Research shows that this difference is not just about access to schools, but also about social discrimination, financial difficulties, early responsibilities, and lack of support, which affect Dalit women more strongly (Kumar, 2023). These conditions make it harder for them to complete their education and move into stable careers. When I think about this, I realise how rare and meaningful my own journey is. Today I am studying in Canada, writing academic papers, and travelling across continents.

Sometimes this realisation becomes very emotional for me.

My great-grandparents were not allowed to dream of education.

My grandmother dreamed of education for her children.

My mother achieved an education and built a professional life.



Figure 4: Photo of Authors profile on the student wellness ambassador team. Authors Photo

And now I am living opportunities they could never imagine.

My freedom is not only my achievement. It is built on my grandmother's dreams, my mother's hard work, and generations of resilience.

And while I feel proud of how far my family has come, I also know there is still a long way to go. Many people from my background, especially women, are still fighting for the same opportunities.

That is why their story is also my responsibility.

EDUCATION:

A Gift of Struggle and Courage

B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), often referred to as the Father of the Indian Constitution, was a renowned Indian jurist, economist, social reformer, and political leader who was born into a Dalit community that was considered “untouchable” under the caste system (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.; Jaffrelot, 2005). As a child, Ambedkar often had to sit outside the classroom while listening to the teacher because he was not allowed to sit with other students. Still, he did not give up. He continued studying and later received higher education in India and abroad. He then fought for the rights and dignity of the Dalit people. In 1950, he played a major role in shaping the Constitution of India, which promised equal rights and educational opportunities for all citizens (Jaffrelot, 2005). I deeply respect his struggle because his work opened doors for people like me to study, dream, and move forward.

Travelling the World with Free Will

Sometimes I pause and think: my ancestors were not allowed to enter certain spaces in their own villages. And today, I cross international borders with a passport in my hand.

I choose what I study.
I choose where I live.
I choose who I become.
This freedom is powerful.
It is also emotional.

I travel not only as an individual but also as a representative of generations who were denied movement, dignity, and opportunity.

My success is not just mine.
It belongs to my grandmother.
It belongs to my mother.

It belongs to every Dalit woman who was told she was “less than.”



Figure 5: Garima (Sister). Authors photo

Gratitude and Responsibility

Learning about my possible Indigenous connection not only gives me pride. It also gave me a sense of responsibility. If my ancestors were pushed to the margins of society, then my education must not be used only for personal success. It must be used for awareness, empowerment, and solidarity. One important way to do this is through storytelling, oral knowledge sharing, and writing that shares my lived experiences while respecting Indigenous ways of knowing. By sharing the stories of my community, people can better understand our struggles and experiences. Knowledge Makers allows students like me to take part in research and share our stories in meaningful ways. Through programs like this, I have the opportunity to share my story and learn from people from different backgrounds. These spaces help build understanding, respect, and awareness. Patel and Da Costa (2022) remind us that dialogue

and collaboration across communities must also pay attention to caste, power, and positionality, especially within Western academic spaces. I believe that more such opportunities, along with open discussions in education, can help bring positive change.

As an international student, I now see my identity differently. In this article, I mostly use the word Dalit because my story is connected to the broader history of Dalit communities, caste-based exclusion, education, dignity, and resilience. However, when I call myself Dalit-Khatik, I am being more specific about my own community location. Dalit is the wider identity, while Khatik is the specific community that my family and I belong to within that wider Dalit community. This can be understood simply: Dalit is the larger umbrella, and Khatik is one community under that umbrella. Therefore, I do not separate Dalit and Khatik as two different parts of myself. They are connected. Dalit helps me explain the wider history of oppression and resistance, while Khatik helps me name my own family background, community memory, and lived identity.

The Khatik community has its own history within caste society. Bellwinkel-Schempp (1998) explains that Khatik's in Kanpur were historically connected with animal-related labour, pig-breeding, pork butchery, vegetable selling, and the bristle trade, occupations that were often treated as low-status within caste-based social structures. This matters to my story because caste not only decided how people were seen; it also shaped what kind of work communities were expected to do and how they were judged for that work. At the same time, I do not want to describe Khatik's identity only through pain or stigma. For me, being Khatik also means belonging to a community that has carried family strength, survival, cultural memory, and hope across generations. This is why I use the term Dalit-Khatik: Dalit connects my story to a larger social and political struggle, while Khatik makes that struggle personal, specific, and rooted in my own family history.

This understanding makes me humbler and more determined for the future. The more I learn, the more I realise that many histories, stories, and perspectives are still waiting to be

uncovered. As I reflect on my own identity, I also recognise that larger conversations are taking place about what it means to be Dalit in relation to history, land, belonging, and social exclusion. For generations, Dalit communities have lived on the margins of society because of the caste system, yet many scholars argue that Dalit identity is not simply inherited but is continuously shaped through historical memory, lived experiences, and efforts to reclaim dignity and self-respect (Sikka, 2012). Learning about these discussions has helped me understand that identity is not fixed. It is constantly being negotiated and reconstructed through personal experiences, family histories, education, and collective memory.

Sikka (2012) explains that remembering and reclaiming Dalit histories can be a powerful way of challenging oppression and rebuilding a positive sense of selfhood. This idea resonates deeply with my own journey. Through conversations with my mother and grandmother, I began to see that their stories were not just family memories but important sources of knowledge about resilience, survival, and social change. These stories helped me understand how education transformed opportunities across generations and how personal experiences are connected to broader social and historical realities.

While I do not have all the answers, these conversations encourage me to think differently about my own place in the world and my responsibilities to future generations. They have also encouraged me to reflect on questions of land, belonging, and identity in ways I had never considered before. I want to contribute to the future of Khatik women in my community, beginning with my own family, including my sister, mother, cousins, and friends. I know this is a challenging goal, but I believe meaningful change begins one step at a time. For me, this work is also a way of honouring my ancestors and expressing gratitude for their resilience, courage, and determination to create better opportunities for future generations.

RESILIENCE, STRENGTH, AND HOPE:

Carrying the Future Forward

As a 26-year-old Dalit woman studying in Canada, I recently experienced a shocking but empowering realisation about my identity. Through learning about Indigenous peoples in Canada, I began to see possible connections to my own community's history as a people who experienced generations of exclusion and marginalization. Although the histories and political contexts are different, I noticed important similarities in the ways Indigenous communities in Canada and Dalit communities in India have faced barriers to education, social exclusion, discrimination, and unequal access to opportunities. For example, Indigenous communities in Canada experienced the harmful impacts of residential schools, where education was used as a tool of separation, cultural suppression, and assimilation (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, n.d.). Today, Indigenous education can also become a tool of self-determination when it supports cultural knowledge, language, identity, healing, and community strength. This connects with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) Calls to Action, which emphasize education, Indigenous histories, language, culture, and reconciliation.

In a different but meaningful way, Dalit communities in India were historically denied equal access to education, literacy, public spaces, and positions of social power. For Dalit communities, education has often become a way to challenge caste-based limits, build dignity, claim voice, and create new opportunities for future generations, a vision strongly reflected in Ambedkar's anti-caste work and struggle for equality (Ambedkar, 1936/2004; Jaffrelot, 2005). In both contexts, education is not only about going to school. It is also about reclaiming identity, rebuilding confidence, and creating a future that earlier generations were denied.

The conversations with my mother and grandmother helped me see my life through their eyes. My grandmother lived in a time

when education was not even seen as a possibility for girls like her. My mother worked hard to get an education and build a stable life despite the challenges she faced. From them, I have learned the value of resilience, sacrifice, patience, and the importance of education. Their experiences remind me that every opportunity I have today was once a dream for them.

I can read, write, travel, and dream freely because they carried the burden of a system that limited them. I carry their strength with me in every classroom, every airport, and every page I write.

My story is not only about caste. It is about the journey of 3 generations of Dalit women.

It is about gratitude.

It is about belonging.

It is about responsibility.

It is about honouring their journey and continuing their legacy by using my education to create awareness, support others, and open more opportunities for future generations of Dalit women.

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Purba Drong

Garo from Bangladesh

GARO'S TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The Garos are an Indigenous Tibe-to-Burman ethnos of the Indian subcontinent, primarily inhabiting the Indian states of Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland, as well as adjacent regions of Bangladesh, particularly Mymensingh, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Tangail, Gazipur, Sunamganj and Sylhet (Misra, 2018). The Garo society is one of the few remaining matrilineal systems in the world, where lineage, inheritance, and family identity are traced through the female line, typically from mother or grandmother to descendants (Marak & Sharma, 2025). This matrilineal structure plays a significant role in shaping social organization, cultural practices, and knowledge transmission within the community. Like many Indigenous and ethnic communities, the Garo people have historically depended on forest ecosystems to meet their essential needs, including food, nutrition, shelter, and medicinal requirements (Islam et al., 2020). This deep relationship with nature has resulted in the development of extensive Indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in the field of traditional medicine. Forest resources, especially medicinal plants, remain central to their healthcare practices and daily survival.

In the Garo community, traditional healing is primarily provided by folk herbalists and medicinal practitioners known as “Kavi-raj” (also referred to as Kobiraj or Khamal). These healers possess specialized knowledge of medicinal plants, disease diagnosis, and treatment methods, which are transmitted orally across generations. They play a crucial role in addressing various physical, mental, and spiritual ailments within the community, particularly in areas where access to modern healthcare facilities is limited (Rahmatullah et al., 2011; Talukdar & Gupta, 2020). Garo communities have relied on forest resources for their food, nutrition, and medicinal needs since time immemorial. This long-standing dependence reflects a sustainable relationship between the community and their natural environment (Dey et al., 2014). However, this system is increasingly under pressure due to environmental degradation, deforestation, and socio-economic changes (Dey, 2008).

According to the Population and Housing Census (2022) the total Garo population in Bangladesh is 76,846. The community is mainly concentrated in Mymensingh, Netrokona, Tangail, Sherpur, and Gazipur districts. The gender distribution shows 37,895 males and 38,951 females, indicating a slightly higher female population, which is consistent with the matrilineal nature of Garo society. An investigation was conducted to understand the knowledge of medicinal plants among the Garo people



of Bangladesh. This study was carried out using structured questionnaires and consultations with traditional herbal practitioners. The research is grounded in the understanding that approximately 40% of pharmaceutical products today are derived from natural sources and traditional knowledge systems, including important medicines such as aspirin, artemisinin, and treatments for childhood cancers (World Health Organization, n.d). This highlights the global significance of Indigenous knowledge and the importance of documenting and preserving traditional healing practices for both cultural and scientific advancement.

1.2 Problem Statement

Classical healing systems of the Garo community are declining with the modernization of people, changing environment and increased dependence on modern systems of healthcare. In addition, the oral transmission of healing knowledge, and the lack of interest in the practice among younger generations, puts the knowledge system at risk. Research has been conducted on the medicinal applications of plants in Indigenous communities, but limited research has considered the physical and mental healing practices of the Garo community. This absence of an all-encompassing documentation can lead to the loss of valuable cultural and healthcare knowledge forever.

1.3 Rationale of the study

The study is relevant and significant to the conservation and documentation of the traditional healing practices of the Garo people because it adds to the knowledge of the Garo people. Indigenous healing systems are such an important cultural resource that has been a support of community health for generations. This study examines both physical and mental healing practices, offering a wider perspective on the traditional healthcare system in Garo society. The results could also be helpful for future researchers, healthcare providers, policy makers, and cultural institutions in the field of Indigenous health, cultural heritage, and community-based health care. Furthermore, the research promotes the awareness and application of traditional knowledge in

addressing health issues in a culturally responsive manner.

1.4 Research Questions

Primary Research Question

1. What do the old healing methods say about the health of the Garo in Bangladesh in both physical and mental terms?

Secondary Research Questions

1. How is the physical and mental health of the Garo treated in traditional ways, medicinal ways and rituals?
2. How do traditional healers, community elders, and family members contribute to the healing process?
3. What are some of the problems for traditional healers in retaining and applying traditional healing knowledge?
4. What is the impact of modernization, climate change, environmental issues, and shifting health preferences on traditional healing?
5. What can be done to safeguard and pass on the traditional knowledge of healing for future generations among the Garo?

1.5 Research Objective

General Objective

- › To learn about the traditional physical and mental healing process of the Garo community and understand the problems faced with the preservation of it.

Specific Objectives

- › The specific aims of this study are to identify traditional treatment methods of the Garo people for both physical and mental ailments, understand the role of medicinal plants, traditional healers, and community elders in healing, analyze how the process of modernization, climate change, and the loss of Indigenous knowledge have impacted traditional

healing, and stress the need to document and preserve Garo traditional healing knowledge for future generations.

1.6 Research Gap

The research on the Garo community has been done mostly on medicinal plants, ethnobotanical knowledge, and physical healing practices. There has been little focus however on the mental, emotional and social aspects of traditional healing, and how traditional healers and community elders deal with the issues of family disputes, social conflicts, fertility and emotional wellbeing. Moreover, the impacts of “modernization, environmental change, and the oral transmission of knowledge on the sustainability of these practices have been sparsely investigated”(Marak & Mathew, 2022, p. 289). The aim of this present study is to meet these gaps and give a qualitative study about both physical and mental healing practice of the Garo people and also to record the obstacles and possibilities to preserve this important Indigenous knowledge system.

2. TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES: MENTAL AND PHYSICAL

2.1 Physical Healing Practices

Traditional healing practices among the Garo people are deeply rooted in the use of natural resources, particularly medicinal plants, herbs, and locally available materials (Mal & Saikia, 2025; Hasan, 2020). Physical illnesses such as fever, wounds, stomach disorders, and some common diseases are generally treated through herbal remedies prepared by traditional healers with available resources. These healers often possess extensive knowledge of local flora and their medicinal properties, which has been passed down through generations. In many cases, treatment also involves rituals or symbolic practices believed to enhance the effectiveness of herbal medicine by restoring balance between the body and nature (Sarker & Ghani, 2009). The use of traditional healing has been on the decline, although it still

serves a variety of purposes for many common illnesses. This is partly due to the growing use of medical technology and medical services. Although some research has started looking into the ethical and social implications of traditional healing practices, such studies remain limited. Therefore, it is suggested that further detailed research is recommended to elucidate the advantages and drawbacks of these practices. To ensure the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge and foster responsible engagement in modern healthcare dialogues, more systematic documentation and extensive research is essential.

2.2 Mental and Spiritual Healing Practices

Mental and emotional well-being in Garo culture is closely linked with spiritual beliefs that have been passed down over time from their ancestors, the traditional religion “Sangsarek” and community harmony. Conditions such as anxiety, emotional distress, or experiences interpreted as spiritual disturbance are often treated through rituals, round prayers, and guidance from traditional healers or spiritual leaders. These practices may include chanting, offerings, or ceremonial acts intended to restore spiritual balance and remove negative influences (Mal & Saikia, 2025b). ‘Azia’ is a common form of Garo folk story based theatrical performance which expresses aspiration, emotion, prayer and regret. ‘Re Re’ song is another Garo folk tradition used to express sadness and sorrows (Hasan, 2020). In addition to these examples, they also have ‘Randi Mikchi Galla (a program of mourning for widows), to stand with a widow. People first try to solve any problems themselves before seeking outside assistance, and in Garo communities, the elders, senior citizens and other respected members of the community are consulted in the village to deal with the mental and social problems of the community, like land disputes, family conflict, etc. Healing is collective, and the participation of families and communities is deemed crucial in the patient’s healing and emotional stability. Studies examining traditional healing practices and their benefits for mental and social well-being are still limited, although work in this

area is slightly more developed in the context of physical health.

In Garo traditional belief systems, physical and mental health are not viewed separately but as interconnected aspects of overall well-being. Illness is often understood as a disruption in harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Therefore, healing practices aim to address both the physical symptoms and the underlying spiritual or emotional causes (Marak & Mathew, 2022, p. 289). This holistic approach reflects a broader Indigenous understanding of health that integrates the body, mind, society, and environment into a unified system of care.

3. GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS

This study focuses on Garo Indigenous communities in Sherpur (Nalitabari), Mymensingh (Haluaghat), Tangail (Modhupur), and Sylhet. These areas are closely connected to forests and natural ecosystems, where Garo communities depend on medicinal plants and traditional healing practices. Sherpur and Mymensingh border forest regions, Tangail includes the Modhupur Sal forest, and Sylhet

is rich in biodiversity (Misra, 2018; Uddin, 2025). These ecological settings are important for understanding Garo traditional healthcare systems.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research approach to document the ethnomedicinal knowledge of the Garo community in Nalitabari Upazila (Sherpur) and Haluaghat Upazila (Mymensingh). Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDI) with 10 Garo traditional healers (Kavirajes/Kobiraj) selected purposely based on their knowledge and experience.

A semi-structured guideline was used to gather information on medicinal plants, including local names, parts used, methods of preparation, and treatment practices. Field observations and photographs of medicinal plants were also taken for identification and documentation.

The data were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns in traditional healing practices. Ethical standards were strictly followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for Indigenous cultural



Figure 1: Map illustrating the habitat of the Garo people in Bangladesh (Author created photo)

values throughout the research process. The research was firmly grounded in community protocols and carried out with strict respect for cultural norms. To best accommodate the traditional healers, informed consent of this study was provided orally and audio-recorded rather than through written forms. In addition, the study adhered to the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). The researcher follows the community protocol and cultural norms when documenting traditional healing knowledge and obtaining consent from the participants before collecting and sharing. Traditional healers and community members were engaged with due respect for community governance structure, and all documented knowledge was shared in accordance with the principle of community ownership and ethical stewardship of Indigenous knowledge.

5. OBSERVATIONS

Case Narratives from Selected Key Informant Interviews

(6 out of 10 KIIs)

From the total 10 Key Informant Interviews conducted with Garo traditional healers, six cases were purposely selected as key illustrative narratives to represent the depth, diversity, and lived reality of Indigenous ethnomedicinal practices in the study area. The section below will briefly outline who these individuals are, and the context of which they operate as community healers.

5.1 Augustin Chiran

(85 years old, Mariamnagar, Jhinaigati, Sherpur) has been in practice for over 50 years and is one of the most experienced traditional healers in the region with a continuous practice of forest based Indigenous medicine. In his whole career, he has treated about 2,000-3,000 patients from various districts such as Mymensingh, Sherpur and even from far off places like Dhaka. His specialty is as a healer of miscarriage, Assistance to reproductive health, treating burns and skin injuries, menstrual

ailments, and bone fracture. He has also been vital in preserving his Indigenous Knowledge with his family, ensuring the continuity of Garo traditional healers. His story speaks to the richness of experiential knowledge and the extended social significance of traditional healers in the community.

5.2 Protiva Chiran

(60 years old, Mariamnagar, Jhinaigati, Sherpur) is a symbol of the continuity of inter-generational transmission of knowledge in Garo healing systems. Her grandfather taught her traditional healing methods, and she remains an active practitioner of traditional healing. She specializes in treating conditions involving infertility, miscarriage prevention, stomach pain, abdominal disorders, and jaundice. Indigenous medical knowledge is passed on through family lines and handed down orally from one generation to the next and is evident in her practice. Her case also underscores the important role of women healers in the maintenance of reproductive health knowledge in the community.

5.3 Pattisa Chiran

(84 years old, Mariamnagar, Jhinaigati, Sherpur) is a widely respected traditional healer serving communities across Sherpur district. Her practice covers a broad range of health conditions, including miscarriage prevention, reproductive health care, burn treatment, menstrual disorders, throat infections, blood purification, diabetes management, general weakness, and headaches. Her extensive knowledge reflects the holistic nature of Garo Indigenous healing, where physical, reproductive, and general health conditions are treated through plant-based and traditional methods. Her narrative demonstrates the complexity and versatility of Indigenous healthcare systems in addressing both acute and chronic illnesses.

5.4 Mallika Drong

(57 Years old, Songra, Haluaghat, Mymensingh) is a well-known Garo healing practitioner in her region Songra, Jayramkura, Polashtala

and Haluaghat. People like to call her 'Kaviraj' as she is involved in traditional body massages and giving herbal medicines for the patients who have different kinds of illness like abdominal pain, vomiting, excessive pain in hands and legs, paralysis, headache etc. She has been serving beyond her own community people (Garo) for the last 10 years. Primarily she learnt the process or systems from her cousin who has now passed away. She seems very eager to pass this knowledge to someone who can carry the 'Kaviraji' profession within her bloodline. She shows anxiousness as many necessary treatment ingredients like specific leaves and tree branches are rare to find. According to her lived observations, this kind of scarcity is happening because of deforestation, overpopulation and demand for new habitats or home making.

5.5 Deepika Drong

(57 Years old, Songra, Haluaghat, Mymensingh) is another traditional physical treatment provider who is very much trusted in her village-Songra. People are being treated for various illnesses such as vomiting, headache, chest pain, fidgeting, loose motion, dizziness, loss of appetite and any kind of body pain that is benefited by having a body message. Generally, she prefers to treat on a small scale and not at a professional large scale. She uses Oporajita, Black pepper, Rama-ni/Haowa ni Sam/Dikki (local language of a leaf), Dhone pata (long coriander leaves) for example as her medicinal elements. She administers a heat therapy that has sickle in the mixture of the herbs before using/applying the processed medicine in the patient's body. This is the ritual she applies every time she treats someone. She has worked as a treatment provider for over 10 years, though she spiritually believes that her planted 'Rama-ni Sam' tree is the reason for bad energy/negativity as her ancestor used to believe it over ages. So, she never ploughs them in the dark or evening. To take care of the emergencies she preserved the leaves by blending and folding them as a mini ball.

5.6 Wandri Sku

(80 years old, Askipara, Haluaghat) is an expert and experienced in the field of traditional healing practices. For over 25 years she has been engaged in this profession. She adopted these skills from her late father Asang Mrong who used to serve people after the liberation war of Bangladesh (1971). He used to be very popular among the people across his region. Districts like Sherpur, Mymensingh, Dhaka, Netrokona, Jamalpur were all in his list of serving areas. Just like her father, Wandri Sku is very renowned. She usually does not have any helping hand, but she takes help from some suppliers who bring her the mandatory tree leaves for making medicines. The tree names are adurak (used to join broken legs or hands), ginger, one type of stone, dry fish, dojagupi (a traditional Bengali wild edible flower), samthap (local names) and some other almost 20 tree leaves or branches. These ingredients are collected from different areas such as Meshkura (Tangail), Panihatta and Jhinaigati (Sherpur) and Durgapur (Netrokona) for diseases like pneumonia, dizziness, low blood pressure, and joining broken legs or hands. But because of climate change, adurak, dojagupi and samthap leaves are rare to be found nowadays. She treats everyone beyond her own community as she takes this profession as a noble contribution to society and humankind. Like Mallika Drong, she also has a wish to pass these skills down to her next generation or someone whom she can rely on. However, the generation seems less interested in learning these methods; rather they prefer scientific modern medical treatment. It is a matter of concern and sadness that some modern people ignore and disbelieve her treatment, as she is left facing mockery sometimes.

5.7 Overall Insight from the Selected Cases

The narratives from the six respondents collectively demonstrate that Garo traditional healing is a deeply rooted, experience-based Indigenous knowledge system sustained through forest resources and oral transmission. Across all cases, medicinal plants

remain the foundation of treatment practices, and knowledge is primarily inherited through family and community learning. However, all healers consistently reported a significant decline in the availability of medicinal plants due to deforestation, land conversion, and changing rainfall and climate patterns. This environmental degradation is directly threatening the availability of the medicinal plants, the sustainability of traditional healing systems, making knowledge preservation increasingly urgent.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was based on interviews with ten Garo Indigenous healers. The findings suggest that use of the traditional healing system among Garo people is still very much a primary healthcare system, especially for skin diseases, fever, gastrointestinal disorders, reproductive health problems, diabetes, general weakness and minor ailments. Traditional healers (Kobiraj/Kaviraj) are still accepted particularly in rural areas and forest dependent communities where there is limited access to formal medical facilities. This is mostly based on the traditional knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs of the Indigenous people. Their knowledge of plant medicine uses various parts of plants, such as roots, leaves, bark, seeds, and fruits, to create remedies for various physical and mental ailments. The participants pointed to the importance of these treatments being accepted in the community due to their low cost, availability, and familiarity.

One of the important conclusions of this study is that the knowledge of traditional healers is being handed down primarily orally. Healers have said that much of the information on medicinal plants, their identification and treatment has not been recorded. Instead, this knowledge is passed from one generation to the next by observation, apprenticeship, and family tradition. Some of the participants shared their concerns that this precious Indigenous knowledge was under threat of being lost, due to the low interest from younger generations to learn the traditional healing arts. This knowledge system is therefore facing

growing doubts concerning its continuity. The study also identified that environmental changes are a great concern for traditional healing practice sustainability. The participants reported that many medicines of plants that were once easily available are becoming scarce. However, the availability of valuable medicines has declined due to deforestation, land conversion, habitat loss, forest degradation, and climate change. Healers reported that the irregularity in weather patterns, the increase in temperatures and the variation in the rainy season have a negative impact on the growth and availability of these medicinal plants, which makes it hard to practice traditional healing methods.

In addition, it was noted that over the years public trust in modern healthcare systems has grown. Improved access to hospitals, clinics, and biomedical treatments has shaped people's attitudes towards seeking medical care, especially among younger people. Traditional healing has been honoured among the community, though fewer were interested in learning and practicing traditional healing as a profession. Moreover, Indigenous healing practices are not formally recognized in the government healthcare system, thus providing limited institutional support for Indigenous healing. However, traditional healing is still important in Garo society. Results indicate that its affordability, reach, cultural appropriateness, and trust are factors that drive its sustained usage. If it is not documented, preserved and supported in the transfer of knowledge, there is significant risk that this valuable Indigenous healthcare system will slowly decline. It is therefore important to document, preserve and promote the traditional healing knowledge of the Garo people as an important part of their cultural heritage and healthcare system.

The other significant observations were that traditional healers were very committed to traditional medicine despite the difficulties they encountered, both in their personal and professional lives. While the participants reported that the number of patients is decreasing in some places and younger generations seem less interested in learning the traditional healing practices, they still have a commitment to their communities and are

willing to serve. Patients' recovery via healers' treatments brought a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment to many of the healers. Traditional healers indicate that people from various villages and communities come to them to seek treatment, even after the war, and their treatment successes encourage them to keep working. For many healers, traditional healing is also an obligation of culture and tradition, and even a family tradition that they want to preserve, which makes it a source of livelihood as well. Despite a lack of appreciation and growing competition from the current healthcare systems, their dedication is an indication of their wish to keep supporting human beings and keep practicing their healing tradition passed down by their ancestors.

7. CONCLUSION

The traditional healing practices of the Garo people represent an important part of their cultural identity and Indigenous Knowledge system. This study explored how the Garo community uses herbal medicine, rituals, spiritual beliefs, and community support to treat both physical and mental health conditions. The findings show that traditional healers continue to play a significant role in maintaining health and well-being within the community on both smaller and larger scales. The research also highlights that Garo healing practices are based on a holistic understanding of health, where physical, mental, and spiritual balance are closely connected. Although modern healthcare systems are becoming more common, many people still value traditional healing because of its cultural importance, lack of expense, and accessibility. However, modernization and changing lifestyles are gradually reducing the practice and transmission of this knowledge to younger generations. It is also a matter of concern that the new generation of people sometimes becomes the reason for traditional healers' discomfort which affects their spirit and courage to continue their work. Traditional healers' treatment skills are effective on some common physical and minor ailments in the Garo community but limited in the treatment of complex, serious and emergency cases like

surgery and the treatment of critical illness. Currently, patients need a hand at present biomedical health and welfare. Thus, the practice of traditional healing and conventional medicine can be considered complementary and so, the integration of traditional healers and modern health care providers into a collaborative effort may enhance the quality of health care services and access.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an urgent need for the documentation and preservation of Garo traditional medicinal knowledge, including medicinal plants, preparation methods, and healing practices, through community-led and ethically guided research initiatives. National and local authorities should recognize traditional healers (Kobiraj/Kavirajes) as important primary healthcare providers, particularly in remote and forest-dependent areas, and explore their inclusion in community health strategies. The intellectual property rights (IPR) of the Garo community over their traditional knowledge, medicinal plants, and healing practices must be ensured and protected, preventing misappropriation, commercial exploitation, or unauthorized use by external actors without prior informed consent and fair benefit-sharing (Marak & Mathew, 2022, p. 289; Hasan, 2020). Strong forest conservation and biodiversity protection policies should be implemented, as traditional healing systems are directly dependent on medicinal plant availability and healthy ecosystems. Community-based reforestation and medicinal plant conservation programs should be promoted to restore declining plant species and ensure sustainable access for future generations (Dey, 2008). Climate change adaptation strategies must include Indigenous knowledge systems, recognizing the role of traditional ecological understanding in monitoring environmental change and plant availability. There should be targeted programs to strengthen intergenerational knowledge transfer, including youth engagement initiatives, community learning spaces, and cultural education programs (Talukder et al., 2022). Collaboration between traditional healers and formal healthcare

systems should be encouraged to ensure complementary healthcare delivery, especially for rural populations. Policy frameworks should support ethical integration of Indigenous medicine into public health systems while ensuring community ownership and protection of intellectual property rights. Educational and awareness programs should be developed to promote the value of Indigenous knowledge among younger generations, reducing the risk of cultural and knowledge loss. Further scientific and ethnobotanical research should be supported to validate, document, and sustainably utilize medicinal plants while respecting Indigenous knowledge sovereignty (Faruque et al., 2018). Given the rapid pace of scientific and technological development, it may be more challenging in the future to depend on traditional healing techniques alone. Hence, partnership between traditional healers and conventional health care providers can be beneficial for conservation of useful Indigenous knowledge along with advancement of scientific studies on traditional healing. This integration can help pave the way for more effective, culturally competent, and accessible healthcare solutions in the future.

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APPENDIX A

PICTURES OF PLANTS AND HEALERS



Figure 1: Reksiri (Miscarriage)



Figure 2: Duranasin (Abdominal pain)



**Figure 3: Sanpangpil
(Blood and Throat Refinement)**



Figure 4: Nayantara (Cataract)



Figure 5: Akon Pata (Paralysis)



**Figure 6: Naal Dakat (Abdominal pain and
Burning Sensation in Handa and feet)**



Figure 7: Moniponcha/Masu-(Headache)



Figure 8: Samtak Kari (Fluid Jakbrak Retention)



Figure 9: Dumur (Diabetes)



Figure 13: Wandri Sku



Figure 10: Hawa/Dikki Sam



**Figure 14: Processed Medicine
(Made by Wandri Sku)**



Figure 11: Long Coriander



Figure 15: Pattisa Chiran

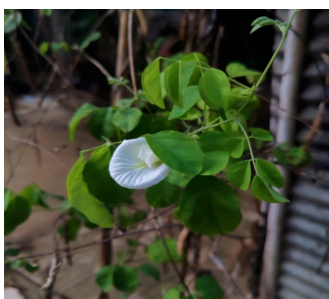


Figure 12: Butterfly Pea



Figure 16: Augustine Chiran



Figure 17: Mallika Drong



**Figure 18: Medicinal Ingredients
(by Mallika Drong)**

Source: Authors Own Photos

APPENDIX B

Table: Ethnomedicinal Plants of Garo Community

Plant Local Name	Local Uses	Parts Used
Reksiri	Miscarriage prevention, reproductive health	Leaf, root
Mada gandeng	Burns, menstrual problems	Leaf, root
Sampangpil	Throat infection, blood purification	Leaf, root
Nayan Tara	Cataract, eye disease	Flower
Dumur (Ficus spp.)	Diabetes	Fruit, leaf
Olotkambal	Gynaecology, diabetes, piles	Bark, leaf, root
Kunch	GI disorders, leucorrhoea	Fruit, seed
Akon pata	Paralysis treatment	Leaf
Arobi gach	Cough, catarrh	Leaf, stem
Duranasin	Stomach pain, abdominal pain	Bulb/root
Bel	Diarrhoea, constipation	Fruit
Naal dakat	Toxicity, burning sensation, urinary retention	Root, pulp
Piyanj	Cold, fatigue	Root
Roshun	Diabetes, infection, heart disease	Leaf
Bach gach	Kidney weakness	Root, stem
Samtak Kari	Fluid retention (edema)	Whole plant
Satim	Fever, diarrhoea	Bark
Elachi	Gastric, bad breath	Seed
Satamuil	Sexual weakness	Root, stem
Punornova	Kidney disease, edema	Root, leaf
Monipanchcha	Weakness, headache	Leaf, root
Duranasin	Abdominal pain	Roots

Rosa Marina Flores Cruz

Afrobinniza from the
Isthmus of Tehuantepec



RESEARCH BY AND FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN: The Caracol methodology, a collective proposal from the Indigenous Futures Network

ABSTRACT

In this article, I want to reflect on my experience as an Indigenous researcher, where I have had to unlearn many lessons and forge new paths of reflection about science, knowledge, and power. In my current journey, I ask myself how, and from what perspective I write and conduct research. I also ask how the methodologies proposed by academia are shaped to exclude the way knowledge is constructed and understood by Indigenous and African descendants.

Through processes of exchange and learning among Indigenous women, especially in conversation with my colleagues in the Futuros Indígenas network, we have laid the groundwork for building a research methodology, community action, and narrative change that we like to call: Caracol (snail) Methodology. To explore different ways, we can dialogue with the construction of situated knowledge, as Indigenous women with interdisciplinary approaches. Always going back to the land, recognizing the importance of spirituality in our collective practices and in a continual exchange with our community work.

INTRODUCTION

My educational journey and professional development have been profoundly shaped by the wisdom of Indigenous and African descendants' women, land defenders, and community leaders around me. These experiences give me a sense that we were educated in a school system that is inherently violent and racist, and we are compelled to challenge and transform it. In academia, students are allowed to be labeled, studied, categorized, and caricatured to stay within the frameworks and structures that have been set as boundaries for our reflection. Dismissed from our rituals, our spirituality, and aesthetic visions. Without the opportunity to imagine epistemological approaches closer to our own way

of seeing the world.

In research, both Indigenous and African descendants, as well as their communities are almost always treated as subjects of study; this is especially true when looking at environmental issues, as our existence cannot be separated from the analysis of environmental issues. However, the complex constructs that surround our ways of living are often limited to the observable aspects and are not considered when developing theoretical or methodological frameworks. This surface level observation of our knowledge systems does not fully encompass the complex ways of knowing within our communities.

This article reflects on the collective

process led by Indigenous and Black women and dissidents. Spanning over the past five years through the Futuros Indígenas network, between people from different native nations across the territories known today as Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Mexico. In addition to being closely connected to our territories, many of us share the experience of being first- and second-generation professional women in our families. We work together to create mechanisms for communication and systematization of the deep reflections we share about our connection to the land, community work, ancestral knowledge, and climate justice.

These experiences are collected in this text, beginning with my personal, educational, and professional perspectives both inside and outside the institutional academy. Following this, there is the experience built with my companions in the Futuros Indígenas network, where we have been systematizing our collective reflections by creating podcasts, conversations, and other formats of communication. Additionally, I compile the initial ideas we have developed regarding research methods that emerge out of our community's experience, as Indigenous women engaged in interdisciplinary work. The Metodología Caracol (snail methodology) seeks to be a two-way path, in constant change and development, as a way to discuss situated knowledge, acknowledging the value of ancestries, not as superficial asset, but as a starting point, a mirror where we can reflect. The conversation does not emerge from words disconnected from reality, but from lived experience; where wisdom and daily life are not considered anecdotes, but as practical knowledge. Rituals, reciprocity, and joy are placed at the center, as integral parts of the cycle of creating knowledge.

Finally, I would like to present some conclusions that will emerge from this back-and-forth, from the constant movement of the snail that reflects along its spiral path, where the internal has to return and then come back again, a constant communication between the personal and the collective, without the personal being reduced to mere individuality.

Between “Anecdote” and Theoretical Knowledge

I was born and raised in Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca, a Binnizá community located in southern Oaxaca, in the region known as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Also, my dad belongs to one of the larger African descendants' communities in the Costa Chica of Guerrero, Cuajinicuilapa. It is highly unlikely to be born as Binnizá in this region and not maintain a connection to Indigenous thought and way of life. In our food, clothing, and the melody of our language, our identity as an Indigenous people shapes the way we relate to our ancestors, our territory, and the rest of the world. When I left my region to study a bachelor's degree in environmental sciences followed by a master's degree in Rural Development, I realized how much my family's way of life differed from that of my classmates, who did not come from Indigenous or rural communities. Ritual practices, food, clothing, ways of celebrating, and the wisdom passed down to me by my grandmother were some of the differences in how I viewed and lived life.

Getting an academic and career education changed the way I see and understand life. It changed my language, my vocabulary, and even the way people address me. Formal education that is certified by an institution places me in a different spot in terms of how people see and treat myself. Institutional education uses epistemological structures of science based on the separation of humans and nature, viewing them not as complementary but in opposition; competition as the primary way to interaction with others; and the vision of progress and development as the primary reason for creating innovation and knowledge (Curiel, 2017).

In Mexico, there has been a change in recent years in the presence of Indigenous and African descendants' women in academic training programs. Since 2000, efforts have been made to increase the access to higher education, alongside the national recognition of self-identification as a member of an indigenous community which, for African descendants, was not implemented until 2019 (Carlos, 2026). At the time, I was only

ten years old, and my mother, a Binniza' language speaker woman from Juchitán, was in the process of completing her master's degree. Thanks to these higher education support programs, both my sister and I are exceptions: the second generation of Indigenous women in our family to have access to postgraduate education. As a postgraduate student, my mom wrote an essay in which she clearly describes the difficulties faced by her and her mom (my grandma):

"I often heard my uncles tell my mother, 'Why are you sending her to school if she is going to get married and have children? Her husband will support her; you're wasting our family's scarce resources.' They advised her to send only the boys to school, because they would have to support their wives and children" (Velázquez, 2000, p.3).

Furthermore, she clearly points out how this situation is the result of several factors that have kept Indigenous communities, and women in particular, living in poverty and exclusion. This is due to an economic model, a tendency towards territorial control, and patriarchal violence (Velázquez, 2000).

Twenty-six years later, while the participation of Indigenous women in higher education has grown, institutional exclusion, racism, and violence persist (Carlos, 2026). This is primarily due to the fundamental structure of higher education, which is clearly a product of colonialism: "institutions are spaces shaped by culture and by the racial project of mestizaje" (Carlos, 2026, p.11), promoting the integration of Indigenous and African descendants' people in a single model national identity. According to Statistical yearbook of the higher education school population in Mexico (Anuario Estadístico de la Población Escolar en Educación Superior, 2025) the percentage of women that speak an Indigenous language and is registered to study in a postgrad context had decreased from 0.68% (2012) to 0.66% (2025). This data doesn't take in count the criteria of self-description, that is a fundamental indigenous right in Mexico, but it does give an idea about the gap in the access for Indigenous women within higher education.

From my experience, I found that in academia aspects of my collective and communal identity were treated as "anecdotes". Knowledge that had been passed down and consolidated over generations of women, expressed in rituals, aesthetics, and ways of understanding and relating to the world, was dismissed as nothing more than personal views. There were demands to strip myself of this knowledge to think and write based on the theoretical frameworks of people, mostly men, who were completely unrelated to my own experiences. It is not just a matter of numbers and statistics; the deep-rooted violence in academia is a direct result of the inequalities that sustain these institutions. As with the state, academia has also adopted strategies that, as Yásnaya Aguilar (2018) says, "seek to include individuals from Indigenous peoples while continuing to prevent the participation of their communities" (para. 20). Within this context institutional integration becomes superficial, as it is based on the continued existence of historical and systemic inequalities (Carlos, 2026). In both structures, you can be part of the system and be authorized, legitimized, and certified, but epistemological and methodological approaches must still adhere to the dominant systems worldview. This is why being part of the joint reflection and creative processes with my Indigenous and Afro descendant sisters in Futuros Indígenas network is such a powerful and transformative experience. Together, we named the causes of the climate crisis and systematized its impacts with our rituals as a guide, grounded in our deep connection to the earth and our own worldviews. We use creative techniques that make sense for our processes and relationship with the land. As an Indigenous researcher of environmental conflicts and the climate crisis, I have had to unlearn many lessons and forge new paths, rethink this long acquired epistemologies is not fast neither easy. This process has led me to question how and from where I write and research, since academic methodologies do not include an understanding of the way knowledge is constructed and understood by Indigenous and African descendants' peoples. It is through joint dialogue with my companions in the Futuros Indígenas network, where we are currently discussing our own

methodologies for research paths, community action, and narrative change.

Futuros Indígenas' Network and the Communication of Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Justice

In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a call for applications for a training program on communication and narrative methodologies began circulating across various digital platforms, with a view to addressing climate justice from the perspective of indigenous peoples. Hackeo Cultural facilitated a workshop in which women, men, and non-binary people from organized territorial movements, activists, journalists, and community communicators came together to reflect on ways to create and change narratives by focusing on the experience and existence of local communities. In our web site we present our manifesto:

"The Futuros Indígenas network began as a direct result of that process, with the desire of the participants and some of the facilitators to remain organized and to create a place for action and reflection to put the defense of land and territory at the center of the conversation about the climate crisis" (futurosindigenas.org, Trans, 2021).

"We are defending territory, our way of being and existing; we are uniting efforts and hearts through communicative actions and the creation of narratives in defense of life. We name ourselves Kiliwa, Cucapá, Nahua, Acolhua, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Nuu Savi, Hñatho, Amuzga, Purépecha, Ayuuk, African descendant, Zapoteca, Popoluca, Maya, K'iche', Wayuu, Zoque, and germinate as #FuturosIndígenas" (Yala, 2021, para 6).

In times of extermination, ecocide, and genocide, pandemics, plundering, extreme droughts, massive fires, air pollution, water wars, regional famines, communities displaced by climate catastrophes, ecosystem destruction, mass extinction, in times of imposed death, we organize. Since then, the network has changed in different ways, particularly

in its composition; currently, it is a space by Indigenous women and dissidents from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Using digital and virtual tools to open dialogues, act from solidarity, and create communication strategies that highlight how Indigenous peoples' lives represent a living solution to the climate crisis.

As an organized group, we have participated in international advocacy forums, challenging the exclusion of our voices and the isolation of our perspectives from essential discussions and decision-making processes (United Nations Conferences of the Parties [COP] 26 and 27 on the Climate Crisis; COP15 on Biodiversity; and the International Forum of Indigenous Peoples in 2024 and 2025). At the same time, we have been part of national and regional coordination efforts among Indigenous peoples, such as the Assembly of the Nahua People of Morelos in 2022, the national forum and caravan "El Istmo es Nuestro" in 2024, and as organizers of the Cura da Terra women's assemblies in 2022, 2023, and 2025. Different scales of alliances are necessary to strengthen community organization, bringing to the center of climate justice the reflections of Indigenous women who care for the territory. We are seeking to create connections beyond distance and borders to discuss and analyze the impacts of the climate crisis within our territories. Militarization, energy transition, patriarchal violence, migration, forced displacement, enforced disappearance, and state violence are the causes of the sickness, and we respond to them with narratives rooted in our ancestral knowledge, spirituality, and the Cura (healing) of the Earth.

Rituality and diversity are at the heart of our political journey. We put the fire at the center as a guiding light of change and transformation, a metaphor that teaches us that movement without care can be destructive. Urging us to be mindful in our decision-making and actions, because this energy must be nurtured and protected with wisdom and knowledge. In many of our cultures, fire serves as a call to unity, to sharing, and to the creation of food and medicine; it is where we can tell stories and discuss what is happening in our families and communities. Fire and change allow us to understand "time" as a cycle rather

than a linear progression, welcoming us to reflect from a perspective more centered on our ancestral knowledge. The linear view of time imposes accelerated rhythms, reinforces homogenizing narratives (narrative monocultures), and perpetuates structural inequalities (in access to education, food, housing, and communication). This view attempts to dictate how we, as organized Indigenous women, should see ourselves, act, and build our communities. We decided to challenge these “narrative monocultures,” using our own narratives, questioning assumptions, and systematizing our reflections. The snail is a symbol of the spiral, opposed to linear paradigms and views. It is a shift from a fast to calm, reflective footstep; a comeback to our ancestral home within the shell, rather than prioritizing productivity and exposure.

This proposal for a paradigm change is not new, in “El pensamiento en Espiral” (The Spiral Knowledge), the Chilean Mapuche researcher Victor Gavilán (2012) shares about how Indigenous knowledge turns in spirals, without a specific beginning or ending, as a historical process in constant transformation. According to Gavilán (2012), the occidental model of thinking, knowledge inquiry, and science focuses on words, concepts, and ideas; in a different sense, an Indigenous view includes symbols, concrete acts, and rituals. The spiral is on a constant turn; a whirlwind of change and transformation. We recognize that the cycles of ritual do not stop; maybe they can find shelter to protect themselves. Our communities have been developing strategies to survive colonization for centuries, and now we face the direct consequences of climate change and its primary causes. Indigenous territories are building organizational processes against mining projects, fossil fuel and renewable energy projects, the introduction of monocultures, industry, urbanization, pandemics, floods, and displacements, and through this process, we create knowledge and wisdom.

Central to our snail methodology, we want to create a secure place to exchange knowledge and practices and to create from the guidelines of our diverse spiritualities and worldviews. We find ourselves in a constant exchange between ancestral and

contemporary knowledge, a back-and-forth of transformation and intergenerational exchange. In the reconnection with native plants, the re-possession of land, the management of the territory, through our languages, or through the experience of the colonial break that made us lose it. And, always, from a critical view of the deep, historical, and power implications of naming ourselves as Indigenous and African descendants’ women and people. We address how academia frames us, as creators of “experience” but not as producers of knowledge. By pointing out to us as creators of science and wisdom, shared in our ways, we respond to constant inquiries from outside researchers who seek to use our processes as data, with the intent of providing scientific validation to our existence.

Historically, the connection between our people has been targeted for elimination by structures of domination that have created maps, borders, and worldviews, which have accelerated the impacts of the climate crisis in our territories. Therefore, we draw strength from solidarity that transcends borders, from the exchange of tools, and from opening spaces for conversations that invite us to understand how our diverse worldviews intersect. We are committed to reflecting on the construction of collective knowledge from the perspectives of women, non-binary Indigenous peoples, and land defenders, as well as from the diversity of our professional backgrounds and our community work. Committed to building ways of systematizing and creating narratives that resonate with the worldviews of our Afrobinniza’, African descendants, Ayuujk, Lepa Wieran-Lenca, Maya K’iche’, Maya Kaqchikel, Peninsular Maya, Nahua, Nuu Savi, P’uhrhépecha, Pipil, and Zapotec peoples.

Developing methodologies rooted in our experiences is a path we are going through at the snail speed. It will allow us constant reflection, breaking limits to visit and create our own frameworks, facing the ones we have been forced to learn in the name of assimilation. When I left my region to study a bachelor’s degree in environmental sciences, followed by a master’s degree in rural development, I became aware of the differences between my way of life and my family’s, comparably to

that of my classmates, who did not belong to a community. Ritual practices, food, clothing, ways of celebrating, and the wisdom shared to me by my grandmother were some of the different things about how I viewed and lived life.

METODOLOGÍA CARACOL (SNAIL METHODOLOGY):

A Collective Process Ongoing

To share my reflections on the “snail” methodology, I must return to my personal concern and interest in the systematization of this experience. In 2023, I participated in the Knowledge Makers training program for Indigenous women, organized by Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia, Canada, and the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), where I was carefully guided to write and publish a paper. Once again, the Knowledge Makers journal has welcomed me to share these reflections, for which I am deeply grateful.

The process with Knowledge Makers showed me the importance of ritual in research and the existence of Indigenous approximations and epistemologies. Since I began my academic journey, it has taken me more than a decade to discover that alternative approaches to conducting research can be closely aligned with and reflective of my own lived experience. I started to create my own questions and reflections about how Indigenous women, in my context, can develop methodologies for studying and register reality, and about how people from Indigenous communities, in daily live, generate and systematize knowledge. At the same time, within the Futuros Indígenas network, we were engaged in two deep conversations. The first focused on how migration and forced displacement are experienced from the perspective of our territories, which is “Migration is ancestral and displacement is colonial” (Futuros Indígenas network, Trans, 2026). The second was a dialogue podcast on traditional knowledge systems, healing practices, spirituality, and conservation linked to plants in our territories titled “Healing with

the Earth: Knowledge and Cosmo-sensibilities of Plants in the Territory” (Milpamerica Resiste Episode 1, 2025)

It is not by chance that we chose the snail as a symbol; in Mexico and parts of Central America, the Zapatistas’ movement is the first reference to Indigenous movements and organizations. All the women part of Futuros Indígenas were tootlers or children in the Zapatistas uprising in 1994 in Chiapas, some even were not born, we grew up in a country changed by the historical event for Indigenous peoples.

After the uprising, the Zapatistas made a call to other Indigenous communities and organizations to walk towards autonomy. In 1996, they built the Caracoles (snails), as communities to share knowledge and tools to ensure autonomy following the principle of “leading by obeying”, in a “whether to go from the biggest to the smallest, from the smallest to the biggest, or both ways” (Gonzalez Casanova, 2009, p. 338). Today, twenty years from their creation, they are still a referent for Indigenous autonomy, but they are living the harder threat by the current violence of paramilitary groups with the allowance of the Mexican Government (Solano, 2023).

As a symbol, the snail represents this invitation to build autonomy, a reminder to walk slowly through the land and the sand, to connect with nature and other living creatures. The figure of this small mollusk has been used by the Zapatistas as a reminder to slow down, following the principle of going into the steps of the slower. In Futuros Indígenas, in one way, the snail represents these Zapatistas’ teachings, and in addition, the figure of its shell shows the continuity of the spiral, turning to the center with transformation, where we put the fire and the togetherness.

This figure connects with the Mapuches’ spiral thinking in Chile (Gavilán, 2012), the Caracoles Zapatistas (Gonzalez Casanova, 2009), and with other indigenous epistemologies on the continent and around the world. The Misak people in Colombia also had:

“A conception of time and the Lata-Lata and Pachikwa methodologies grounded in traditional spiral discussion circles that bring together community members, elements

of the natural world and ancestors, each situated at a different point on the spiral, yet remaining in communication with one another through rituals and dreams" (Linka, 2012, p.49).

The vision of the cycle as a Circle in constant comeback is also identified as a methodology for qualitative studies, facing "the oppressive Eurocentric attitudes and practices currently shaping research norms" (Fyre, 2000, p. 361).

The Circle as methodology brings a vision of continuity and gives relevance to the political place we are taking as researchers and as part of the community we are inquiring, presented in a poetic narrative, re-shapes even the formats in which we must communicate our inquiries. As the snail brings its house back, we always carry with us our territories; and, as there are different kinds of them in the ocean, lakes, rivers, and soil, our existence is diverse.

*"As Metis woman, scholar, activist, teacher and healer
I enact First Voice as pedagogy and methodology.
Observing my own lived experience as an Educator
Sharing meanings with Others
Create collective context"
(Fyre, 2000, p. 363).*

In a similar way to what happens in the cases of dispossession and threats of megaprojects in our lands and territories, in academics we have experienced racism, contempt, exclusion, and paternalism. Epistemic impositions continue colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal patterns to transform our ways of thinking and our connection to Mother Earth. To challenge these hegemonic research models, we begin recognizing our diverse educational backgrounds (in anthropology, environmental sciences, psychology, biology, political science, sociology, social work, and communication sciences), to connect interdisciplinary knowledge with territorial knowledge.

Defending the territory is also defending the ways in which we analyze and interpret reality; that is the reason why, at Futuros Indígenas, we have started to develop our own

strategies for researching, systematizing, and reflective thinking connected to our diverse ways of life. The snail methodology allows us to name the spiral movement of knowledge, breaking away from the linearity of the occidental knowledge. We recognize the continuous cycles of opening and closing, when we return to the center (our communities, lands, and territories) to share the tools, an ongoing dialogue.

The Snail Methodology proposal begins with a practical idea: talk together, build a fire at the center of our conversations, share thoughts, wisdom, abilities, and tools, and question our academic journals. In practice, we begin by acknowledging the ways of thinking, the context, the history, and the territoriality of the different individuals who are part of Futuros Indígenas; our contexts come with us, are part of our shell, our political statement, and we cannot isolate ourselves from the subject we are researching, since we are part of that subject (Fyre, 2000, p. 363).

In our conversations, we reflect on what we perceive in our territories and in the reality that shapes us; together, we decide on an approach to the struggles and needs we collectively identify in our territories. With these main ideas, we organize dialogues in gathered circles, guided by the central fire kept alive by Indigenous women; in those conversations, we can invite male colleagues, non-Indigenous allies, institutional scholars, and even members of non-governmental organizations. We explore the structural causes of violence and dispossession in our territories, through cosmo-sensibilities, spirituality, celebration, enjoyment, desire, and care. Based on these conversations, we develop communication initiatives that we share at various scales, particularly in the digital spaces. Our inquiries come in the shape of poems, stories, posters, short videos, or podcasts (always released under Creative Commons licenses) so they can spread across territories and sensibilities, both online and on the ground. After the dissemination, the end returns to the origin; we return to the questions, to feel the territory, to name our concerns and pains, and to share collectively through our individual experiences. This is our proposal for continuous change: reviewing and transforming ourselves

with our territories and contexts. With fire, joy, and ceremony always present, walking together with the snail.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Scientific thinking has been presented as the only valid way of constructing knowledge (verifiable and replicable), yet it does not do enough to capture the fluid, intangible, and transformative forms of ancestral wisdom. As scholarly Indigenous women, the forms of violence we have experienced in our bodies and territories are also embedded in our thinking. Narrative and epistemological monocultures have been established to block our connection with other knowledge experiences in connection with our rituals.

These conceptions of the world, cosmologies, and epistemologies are not exclusive to us; they are part of the ways different Indigenous peoples around the world build their relationships with the earth and nature. Our proposal recognizes the differences among Indigenous peoples' cosmologies; we name "Indigenous" as a political category shaped by colonial structures. Still, we identify the resistance and resilience that link us, the diversity of experiences we share, shaped by a colonial, racist, and patriarchal history. This is an exercise to understand these oppressive patterns in our thinking and reshape them.

Fire, cycles, and the spiral are symbols in many cultures because they represent transformation, movement, care, and endurance. Unintentionally, we found ourselves engaging in a deep form of thought that connects us as peoples who identify as Indigenous to the land and nature, to our ancestors, and to safeguarding the essential elements that define our diverse identities: language, garments, alimentation, and rituals.

We create spaces to exchange tools, reflections, and proposed approaches regarding how we interpret the world and act upon it through our agency. Caracol Methodology does not pretend to be homogenous but rather embodies the diversity of our peoples. It is ritualistic, adaptive, and continuous; it is full of symbols, like a spiral we try to turn inward toward the center to heal and then

open outward again to share. It protects itself within its shell when needed and resumes its gentle, soft step to move forward in its own transformative time. It is not completely shaped, and it changes with the necessity of the path; this is part of the challenge of sharing this experience. Still, one of the gaps we identify when we talk about our place in academics is the constant exclusion and how difficult it is to find frameworks that have resemblance to ours; so, it is important to systematize in this format these first steps, so other collectives, organizations, Indigenous and African descent community members can imagine their own possibilities to rethink the knowledge inquiry.

This article can be seen as an initial exercise to consolidate our thoughts, with the intention to encourage other alternative strategies to create, inquire, and systematize knowledge, linked to the ways of organizing and being as Indigenous, African descendants, rural, women, queer, diverse people, all the diverse forms of existence that are historically cut off from the Eurocentric epistemic visions.

Science and knowledge are in everyday life, and they have existed in our territories for centuries; surviving devastation for generations. Today's violence in our territories is the result of a system of inequalities imposed by those who have placed a single narrative above our own; through colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, a way of thinking and coexisting with the land has tried to be imposed, breaking ancestral bonds to facilitate dispossession. Climate justice from the perspective of Indigenous peoples involves transforming narratives and epistemologies, proposing different ways of creating knowledge to clearly show the living solutions carried by Indigenous peoples who protect the land and territory. In Futuros Indígenas, we are working hard on the inside to strengthen our process, systematize our experiences in contexts surrounded by violence, facing megaprojects, patriarchal violence, organized crime, and institutional persecution.

Caracol Methodology is part of our actions, territorial and digital ones, while we cross borders to build solidarity, and as we learn from the experiences of other movements. The fire remains alive to receive what we contribute; meanwhile, we keep it nourished and cared for.

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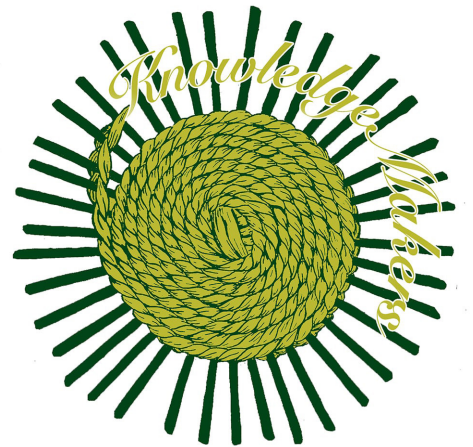
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Reconciliation will only exist
when it is lived inside every
classroom, and not when it is
just written in policy.

-Carys Smith





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