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Native Ways of Knowing: Navigating Life as a Transracial Adoptee

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education.

By

Rae (Lindsey Rachelle) Mottus

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ABSTRACT

Native Ways of Knowing: Navigating Life as a Transracial Adoptee

By

Rae (Lindsey Rachelle) Mottus

My dissertation titled *Native ways of knowing: Navigating life as a transracial adoptee* is an autoethnography of my experience in coming to understand my childhood and schooling experiences as a Native adoptee who grew up in a white family in Alberta Canada. I highlight my journey in coming to learn about my Native roots as well as unpacking experiences with various institutions, including primary, secondary and university schools' systems, all of which represent ways of learning that exclude Native ways of knowing. I view this dissertation as a way of regaining what has been long denied centering on Native ways of knowing, and integrating teachings from my biological family members, particularly my aunt uncle who invited me to the Siksika Nation located in southern Alberta.

I begin this thesis with an introduction to the reader as a participant in what is called a *talking circle*. A talking circle is a healing space for members to connect with Creator and share challenges and emotional wounds in a way that allows one to let go and replenish one's soul and voice. I welcome the reader into my virtual teepee, and begin with a traditional

smudging ceremony, all of which is visually illustrated through my artwork. As such, art is a throughline for this dissertation; I can best clarify meaning through art, which is a shared skill among members of my biological family who engage in a variety of crafts–beadwork, tapestries, painting, and the like. I come from a long line of artists and as such, the artwork presented throughout this thesis is a crucial component of my story.

Following the practices of Native scholars like Kimmerer (2013) and Archibald (2008), I tell my journey about coming to understand my transracial identity through an approach that reflects values centered on the natural world that communicates with us if we have the ears to hear. The flow of my story work begins with establishing the talking circle (*Grounding*), then moves to my understanding of scholarship about and by Native communities (*Native Ways of Knowing and Being*), and how *who* authors such work makes a big difference in how the Native lens of knowing and being is represented. Then, I tell the reader about my own story (*My Journey*) about how I came to know my native roots, and how no matter how long it takes, it is never too late to cultivate connections to one's roots. I end my talking circle with note of hope and care for all with experiences similar to mine (*Onward*), that while not all of us have, or will have the same opportunities to connect with our Native roots, and we represent a broad range of cultural identities, often a mix of ethnicities that should be celebrated.

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Part 1: Grounding

Oki*, *Nitsinihka'sim Rachelle. I am Blackfoot from Siksika Nation officially, and Chippewa Cree from Rocky Boy Nation, unofficially. This dissertation is not presented in a traditional academic style, but more in an authentic manner that is approachable to people of varying ages and backgrounds. My stories and artwork will show how I learned to navigate within the educational and governmental systems of Canada and the United States as a First Nations transracial adoptee into a white Canadian family. For those who are not aware, a transracial adoptee is a child of one race who is adopted into a family of a different race.

I have come to value how humility keeps us grounded by equality and respect for ourselves, our ancestors, and our Creator. I can now see the severely unbalanced relationship dominated by western society, which has never facilitated a safe learning environment for me, nor viewed us Indigenous peoples as equals (Louie et al., 2017). It took many years to come to these realizations after growing up within westernized educational systems, and now I am feeling the discomfort within my role as a researcher.

There are times when I feel drained by my Indigenous identity, but then I take a step back to think more clearly. It is my circumstances that are more draining for me, an Indigenous adoptee growing up in a white family who didn't acknowledge my identity. There is something to be said about growing up within a stable family unit that tried to facilitate their child's development. My parents supported me to the best of their ability by providing enriching opportunities like gymnastics and art lessons, but deep down I knew I lacked an anchor, I felt like there was something missing. My parents did not view my Indigenous heritage as important, so I did not think it was important either. There was no malice or bad intention in their attempts to

completely whitewash me. I think they tried to raise me based on what they thought was best, which is a colonial way of thinking. It may seem innocent and not harmful, but like all things, it's complicated. My upbringing resulted in inner turmoil and confusion that has been unsettling for my foundational sense of my identity. And what is even worse is that I cannot talk about this shaky foundation with either of my families–the one who adopted me and the one with whom I was born.

My biological family does not fully understand my situation and my adoptive family gets defensive and angry at me for being ungrateful. My biological mother holds a grudge against me because I am "too white" and I didn't contact her as soon as my adoption papers were released to me when I turned 18. My adoptive father would either change the subject or get angry with me when I asked questions regarding my Indigenous heritage, or in other instances he would try to convince me that I had Mongolian roots. My adoptive mother, who also ignored my roots, asked when I was a teenager, "What good is there in your people?". To this day, she completely denies asking me this question, but I clearly remember. Years later, she handed me a book on Native spirituality without any explanation, thinking this resolved all my questions. This is a brief overview of my experience growing up as an Indigenous transracial adoptee, and it is painful but truthful. I hesitated to share such experiences, but I realized that if I do not include this part of my past, you, the reader, may not understand how deeply my transracial identity affects me and affects emotionally and mentally. My inner dialog about who I am involves a constant pulling and pushing, separating me. Sometimes I feel like I have no room to breathe with these two people. The separation of self puts me into a position where I cannot please either side and at times, it makes me want to cry. My aim in my journey is to stay on the path towards acceptance

of the lack of balance between my adopted family life and my biological family, and in some way, this story shows the path that I'm taking.

There is also a lack of balance in how I view and navigate the academic world as an Indigenous scholar. Or am I just made to feel this way? Maybe I have a more balanced outlook about what is happening, and it is the westernized academic system that is out of balance. Any kind of institution–government or school based–represents pain for Indigenous people. Our long hair, ribbon skirts, and dark skin position us as imposters when we step inside official buildings for the purpose of attaining professional status according to unspoken standards. My experiences in higher education involved cramming–quickly reading, taking up, and adopting ideas with no time to spare. But my experiences listening to elders, which is a different kind of higher education, is the opposite. Long periods of listening, considering, giving space for each other. When my aunt and uncle speak, for example, I see their teachings as something different because they speak with good intention. I have the space to take up what I understand; there is no judgment, and no rules or directions to follow. This is the kind of learning that will guide my discussion with you, reader.

I have set up my story as if I am sitting in a talking circle with you. I realize that I will be doing all of the talking during this time but think of this story as the beginning for our discussion–throughout my time with you, I will ask you questions that invite you to think about your life experiences, and what is important to you. I hope my story will encourage others to open up and think of Native ways of knowing but also to think about how their story will impact others. I kindly invite you to sit down with me in my circle, but first I will smudge to clear the air……

Oki!
Nitsinihka'sim
Rachelle.

Traditionally, storytelling is about creation and the emergence of the animals and the land because such stories hold important lessons about morals and values, and our life experiences. How we were raised and our family dynamics, and the multiple environments that we are immersed in create our own unique outlook. No two people have the same outlook—we are all different. Our perception of the world is a kind of living entity that changes, shaped by our educational, professional, and familial experiences and contexts. Our perceptions will always shift and evolve throughout our lives. Our stories are living beings in a similar sense, shifting, and evolving as we grow and learn. This is why we must create

spaces that honor these stories, allowing them to breathe as a way to honor their life, to make room for their living presence. Like all living beings, we need to make space for them out of respect (Louie, 2020). Passing down these stories from elders to other family and community members is a gift and we need to treat it as such.

This passing down the gift of a story is special because it is filled with so many morals and lessons, and every time you retell it, you can always find new meanings to the story as you grow. It's as if the story grows with you, and changes to meet your needs. There are some parallels between storytelling and academic theories. When we learn about theories, old and new, we learn the importance of what they bring into the field. But as we continue to learn and do research, there are always new ideas and concepts that can add or change theories. As much as academics and researchers like to come to conclusive answers, it is unrealistic. We continue to strive to find more answers, which lead us to ask more questions. In this sense, building knowledge and storytelling are similar–always growing, and always holding important information that provides a kind of guidance to readers/listeners.

Much like storytelling, the act of learning is complex and filled with transformative potential. As soon as we leave our mother's womb, we begin our personal journey of learning. We learn to recognize our parents' voices through them sharing stories with us and teaching us. We rely too much on the theories and methodologies created and presented by those solely educated within a colonized system and society. Learning happens through all actions and comes from all walks of life. Everyone has something to contribute because everyone who has come to this world has lived. Experiences that are not fully recognized by western academics still hold value and validity. Dominant society values learning that has an official stamp from educational institutions, which excludes most of the Indigenous ways of

knowing. Our Native way of learning is just as valuable and includes the spiritual and ceremonial practices, and such practices do not take away the validity of our knowledge (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021). This one-sided, unbalanced view of learning greatly impacts our perception of the world. Archibald's (2008) telling of the story of Coyote Eyes is a perfect analogy of how to try and view the world outside of our own comfort zone, helping us become more aware of how our own view of life and learning is not the only one. The point of this story, for me anyway, is that while there will always be imbalance in our lives, it is up to us to find our own grounding.

In her retelling of the story, Coyote learns of a new trick from Rabbit where he can make his eyes fly out of his sockets and get them to return. He is excited about Rabbit's trick and begs for a lesson. Rabbit hesitates because he isn't sure if Coyote understands the ramifications if he does this trick too often. He warns Coyote that he should not do this trick more than four times a day. Coyote assures Rabbit that he understands the seriousness of this trick. Rabbit reluctantly teaches Coyote the trick, and then Coyote ventures off to show others. He is so excited about the trick that he forgets Rabbit's warning. The fifth time he does the trick, his eyes don't return to his sockets. He is so distraught and upset because he can't see without his eyes. Mouse and Bison empathize with poor Coyote and they each give Coyote one of their eyeballs. Coyote graciously accepts their eyeballs but to his dismay, they didn't properly fit in his eye sockets. Mouse's eye rolls around in one socket while Bison's eye is jammed tightly in the other eye socket. Coyote struggles to see the world with two very different eyes, so he has to learn how to balance the two together. Like Coyote, we have to be consciously aware of our positionality in life, and where our biases may lie. I resonated with the Coyote's Eyes story because I have my own story, which I will tell you

below: I have been trying to maintain balance by walking in two different pairs of shoes that represent walking in two different worlds. Most Natives can relate to this, especially those who have been adopted outside of their own Native culture. So, I ask you, the reader, are you consciously aware of your biases? If so, what do you do to maintain balance in seeing without bias?

Learning is complex. Stories and storytelling are complex. Both lived practices are multi-faceted. I shaped this story as a kind of talking circle to communicate with you, the reader, about my experiences and share one aspect of Indigeneity from a more personal perspective. But more importantly, I hope to communicate the power and validity of storytelling as a way of sharing knowledge and providing opportunities for myself and others to heal from past traumas. I hope this helps any reader who enters my talking circle to think about storytelling from a different lens and understand how others have used storytelling as a tool to send life-affirming, teaching messages to their readers or listeners. All stories have some value and we do not have to only seek stories of value from Native people alone; we all have storytelling power within us. We all have life experiences that are worth being shared if you are comfortable sharing. For this story, I aim to show you, the reader, how storytelling has multiple layers and how it gives value to the learning experience. In dominant, colonized school contexts, we do not give enough room or space for all students, young and old, to share their stories. If we did listen to our students, we would be able to see their value, their ideas, and their passions. The more we value the passions of others, the more all of us are seen for who we are in the world. The more all of us listen, the more we can meet the needs of younger generations so that they can thrive and not slip through the cracks of life and learning. Our most vulnerable–minoritized, undocumented youth see the value that they

have, need to see how they are part of our learning journey, and that they shouldn't be intimidated by schooling. I learned this need as an instructional member of our university-housed literacy clinic. I would have discussions with youth who attended this clinic, and they seemed to feel comfortable sharing about their life experiences. I recall one particular youth who I will call V, who needed a few sessions before she finally dropped the sassy exterior and opened up. I learned so much from her; she had a wealth of knowledge about sharks, and was going through family drama tied to divorce, with a mentally unstable mother, like her, who was also undocumented. I let her tell me her story, the good and the bad, and within this space, she also showed me how empathetic she was. Just like V, I'm sharing with you my story, and I thank you for the space that you will give me.

As you will see throughout the dissertation, my story has parallels to the Coyote story, where we are both in constant awareness of imbalance, and struggle at times to view and exist within the world. As Coyote tries to view and live in the world with one eye of the rabbit and one eye of the bison, I try to approach the world with one shoe (colonizer) and one moccasin (Indigenous).

It was not until my graduate studies when I realized I walk in two different shoes, one sneaker and one moccasin. I always walked with a completely different shoe on each foot, but I was never aware of it, or I tried to ignore it. My shoes provided more comfort and support while protecting my feet from the ground. These shoes look like everyone else's in the dominant, non-Indigenous society; the shoe allows me to continue in the race to achieve and succeed, to fit in with those around me, to work hard towards my goals like earning my degrees, to finding work that is supposed to validate who I am as a human being. This is a designer shoe that I intentionally wear so I do not draw attention to my Indigeneity. But it is

my moccasin that will bring me back to what is important, to not ignore my heritage and my ancestors. I used to think, why would I want to wear moccasins that would stand out and force me to be uncomfortable? I have come to realize that I need to embrace wearing moccasins on my own terms. It took me time and experience for me to understand how my moccasin grounds me and connects me to the land that I stand on.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Native scientist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) describes a different kind of knowledge, one that is rooted in a ceremonial sense of belonging. Traditional western schooling is full of ceremonial performances to demonstrate a membership through memorized words and conceptual practices. The ceremonial belonging that Kimmerer describes is one filled with gratitude; each artifact, each drumbeat, represents a connection that we have to the natural world. Knowledge is an ecosystem, and we need to tend to the ceremonial belonging that is nourished by it. As Kimmerer has explained, our minds, our bodies, our emotions, and our spirits are part of this ceremonial belonging. This ceremonial aspect of gaining knowledge creates a safe sense of belonging within a learning community. Indigenous peoples worldwide have sunrise ceremonies to express gratitude to the earth, or smudge daily to pray to the Creator. Just as Kimmerer explained how Natives express their gratitude through ceremony to the earth, we also express gratitude to learning and gaining knowledge through ceremony. This is the purpose of my smudging at the beginning of this story work. The act of smudging not only grounds the space, but this sacred practice brings in good intentions and a connection to the Creator. Knowledge is a precious gift that is exchanged between all of us, and I welcome you into my circle as I share my account of how I developed the eyes and shoes to see and walk through the world as it is and bring harmony to my life.

As a young student in Alberta, Canada, I remember singing the national anthem and praying every morning—I first attended a Protestant school and then transferred to a Catholic school. Such practices of institutional allegiance were done daily within the school systems I attended to show gratitude to our national government and to religion. Why do we make such an effort to show gratitude to different institutions, but we do not act on ceremonies to express gratitude to the natural world? When we first arrive in the world, our minds are already one with nature (as Kimmerer has stated), but our minds are not one in government and educational systems. Many of us who have grown up in a non-Indigenous, colonized world forget that we are a part of the natural world, and our connection with nature comes intuitively if we allow it. I have developed an understanding that we come into this world and leave this world through a need for a spiritual realm that is central to nature. Our connections with nature exist without any necessary man-made devices. Our connections with man-made institutions, however, require constant repetitions of ceremonial practices until we no longer see a difference between living as a human being and being a Canadian, American, or British citizen. This is what I mean when I state that our minds are not initially connected with the conceptualized systems created by man in which we live and have to learn. Our connection to the natural world is already ingrained in our minds and hearts when we are born; it is like second nature and that is why we do not put much thought into it. But like most things, we need to nurture our connections with nature in order to maintain this relationship. If we do not nurture this innate connection, then we can easily get caught up in the distractions of everyday societal life and what is expected of us. We then forget what is most important, and we redirect our focus to institutions that tell us what it means to be human in the world. What we think is important, as colonizers, are the man-made institutions, like our government and

educational institutions. This enactment of engaging in these daily routines creates a divide between us and the natural world.

From a young age, we are taught in schools to follow rules, do well on tests, and, in higher education, do research in order to gain more knowledge. But I have come to see that this form of learning is from an *outsider's* point of view. My role as a researcher and an Indigenous person situates me in a unique insider/outsider perspective. Creating a balance between being Indigenous and being a researcher at predominantly white institutions is a delicate dichotomy, especially the act of collecting data that can create a sense of distrust (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). The role of being an Indigenous researcher creates tension as the label represents a contradiction of sorts—I have Native roots, but was raised in a white family, hence straddling two worlds. It has been argued that for Indigenous people, being both an insider and outsider can be problematic, as it is nearly impossible to present Indigenous research academically (Brayboy & McCarty, 2010). For example, the dynamics between myself and my biological Indigenous family has been a challenge for me at times because I was aware I was asking too many questions. My questions seemed overwhelming for my family at times but yet they were also completely understanding of my westernized upbringing. The act of interviewing, asking questions is a custom that is not used in Indigenous communities and can even been seen as a sign of disrespect (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Brayboy & McCarty, 2010).

Kimmerer's framework in *Braiding Sweetgrass* will be the foundation of my theoretical framework and epistemological guide. Her work exemplifies the Indigenous way of life and thinking as a modern Native, and she explains this way by sharing her own process of logical thinking. She shares her personal journey of navigating her knowledge of

two worlds, Indigenous and Colonial. Kimmerer's journey is an example of Resilience, which is what all Native communities are striving to maintain. Indigenous groups here on Turtle Island are only recently being acknowledged as still existing, and so much of our world is unaware of Indigenous ways of life. In taking up Kimmerer's framework, I intend to share how I am navigating my journey walking between two worlds, wearing a shoe on one foot and a moccasin on the other, or like Coyote, seeing with Mouse's eye in one eye socket and Bison's eye in the other.

I take a multimodal approach to tell my story, since art plays a dominant role in my personal life, and it is embedded in Native ways of life. Creating art helps me process information, whether empirical or theoretical. Through creating visual art displays, I am able to capture impactful moments of learning more effectively. By including my artistic skills, I am able to share the story of my personal journey most effectively in connecting with my Native roots. Writing alone brings only one small perspective on knowledge about people and our life journeys, but with visual storytelling through art, I am able to channel more of

my voice. Such art-infused storytelling plays an integral part of the combined communities here on Turtle Island.

In writing this work, I am giving myself the agency to regain my identity, my voice, my way of life. The two "research" questions I address in my story are:

1. What is the Native way of knowledge building? How does this differ from traditional/societal ways of educating people?
2. What is the role of Native ways of learning in supporting my understanding of my bicultural (adopted/biological) roots?

These questions are important for me to learn about myself while navigating through this journey back to my Nation. I know I am not alone in my life experiences and in familial dynamics when I meet other Natives and hear their stories. I am not alone in trying to understand my place in a society that does not give much recognition or thought to us.

I use the terms *Native* and *Indigenous* throughout this dissertation*;* I am most comfortable with these terms as I have used them amongst my fellow Native peers since childhood. However, I want to make it clear that it is my own personal right as to which label, I choose. I have been corrected in the past by non-Native people, and I do not find it appropriate to be told how I identify myself.

This beginning, *Grounding* section of my story sets the tone of my talking circle space. My story is not written in traditional academic language, mainly because I want this story to be accessible for Natives from all walks of life as well as for those who simply want to gain more knowledge on Native perspectives (Tuck, 2009). The talking circle is meant to be a safe space where we do not place any judgment on one another. The talking circle is about sharing not just our feelings, but also ideas and concepts. Everyone has a chance to

speak from their mind and heart. It is a place for healing. It is a place for personal and intellectual growth. All of these purposes are true gifts because the experience of joining a talking circle holds more value than merely telling a story, by providing insights and lessons that will last for generations to come.

In the second part of my story–*Native Ways of Knowing and Being*–I share what I have learned about the ways that Native communities have been researched, and what Native scholars have learned in their work. My conscious decision to exclude academic language from my story and shape it into a talking circle is also to stay true to my values of equality. I have long lived a life of institutionalized learning–now is the time to explore and share all parts of who I am. I also want to share with the reader that I am open to their thoughts and ideas, too.

In the third section of my story–*My Journey*–I share my experience in becoming who I am today, which is still and will likely continue to be a tapestry in progress. As I previously mentioned, I share my experiences in a talking circle that I created just for you. Talking circles provide a more organic way of sitting and gathering together as a small community. This context is fitting because I share how I have recently connected with and started learning from some of my biological family members. I will be sharing an account of my trip to Alberta, and the events that led to the unexpected gift that I am still growing to understand.

I have often wondered how teaching would change if classrooms were designed in a more organic setting like a talking circle. Would it change the outlook of teachers if they were sitting in the circle as equals amongst their students, sharing stories of experience and eliciting sharing from others? Even though I am going to be doing the majority of the "talking", I will ask you, the reader, thought-provoking questions that will hopefully make

you think, feel, and look introspectively about the world, about learning, and about what it means to be human. What were your educational experiences like? Who was your most memorable teacher? And why did they make an impact on you? How do you hope to make an impact on your students and fellow educators? How have Native ways of knowing, if you have had opportunities to learn about such ways (e.g., Kimmerer, 2013), created a change in you, and how do you view Native students who are attending public schools, striving to attain employment opportunities, working to fit in our colonial world?

At the end of my story–*Onward*–I share where I am now, and what I am thinking, feeling, and looking forward to in my future life. My hope in telling my story, in all its parts, is for readers to have a better understanding about how Native people's resilience has provided the strength to persevere within educational systems that have failed us. Despite us facing our fears head on, living and thriving in Western society is still a difficult path to walk because there has been so much negative talk about our capabilities. How we view the world differently, our stories, our past, isn't something to be looked down upon; education can be found in many different forms and channels. It is understandable that the academic world is data-driven, but there also needs to be balance with the Indigenous ways of learning, which cannot be necessarily quantified. Such ways of learning are connected to the natural world and have been passed down across generations. Kimmer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* is the perfect example; she walks the fine line between science/academic teachings and her Indigenous ways of knowing. Sometimes we need other channels to come up with new concepts and theories, even if they don't lead to a concrete set of answers. But like all learning experiences, discoveries will make us ask more questions.

At the end of our talking circle, I hope non-Native readers will have a better understanding outside of their lives and ways of being. For Native readers, I hope my story brings voice to the voiceless. Native individuals tend to not share much outside of our circle, so I want others from Native communities to know that they are not alone in their experiences, and that we have value and power. I hope that by telling my story, I am able to let go of some of the hurt that I have carried since early childhood. So, in a sense, this talking circle is also a healing circle, for all of us.

Part 2: Native Knowing and Being

My aim in this section is for the reader to see what I have learned from previous studies and projects that have been conducted by academics in different Indigenous communities in the US and Canada, with the assistance of local Indigenous community members. These previous studies are important as they were the steppingstones toward recognizing the importance of Indigenous languages and ways of knowing and being and how such communities were impacted negatively from past actions of government and church institutions. I also share some of the negative impacts on communities who have been steadily losing their knowledge and languages.

Deconstructing Non-Native Research Perspectives

It is important for you, the reader, to be aware of and become familiar with Indigenous ways of knowing or Indigenous funds of knowledge. It is my belief that Indigenous scholars and the knowledge they share will become not only more prominent in academia, but that it is vital in order to step away from the colonial perspective that has dominated past research practices. I do not want to give more attention than necessary to research that has exploited so many Native communities. I only want to share enough for the reader to understand what a *colonizing perspective* is, and how it prevents us from the truth about Native knowledge and expertise. However, it is important to clarify what has been problematic in researching Native communities in order to understand what is needed in the ways that we learn and do research. We are not taught to think about the consequences of our actions in research, especially with Native communities. Researchers and their work tend to have a poor reputation amongst Native people (e.g., Smith, 2000). It is not possible to use

western academic theory to understand Indigenous values and beliefs. Mainstream academia seems unable to see the value of Native ways of knowing. The voices of Native community members in research studies related to language and cultural revitalization and preservation have remained largely silent until recently. Such studies have revealed that even with the best of intentions, researchers entering Native communities with outsider frames and goals do little more than exploit communities by taking information without full understanding. I share some examples of research that represents this outsider perspective.

Native Hawaiian studies. The *Kamehameha School's Early Education Program* (KEEP; Tharp, 1982) was developed in the 1970s for Native Hawaiian students who were considered to be at "high risk" for failure within the education system. KEEP came into fruition because of concerns about Native Hawaiian students' inability to perform well academically within the education system. Researchers associated with this project believed that if Native Hawaiian students reconnected with their language and culture within the school setting, this might strengthen their academic performance. What began as a five-year research program extended into a longer term that lasted for two decades. The program was framed as an ethnographic, linguistic, and cognitive study with the main goal of improving young students' cognitive development and educational success. The program originally started with 120 students, who ranged from kindergarten to grade three. KEEP was closed down in 1995, but there are schools in Hawaii that are active in teaching Hawaiian culture, values, and language. If I were in a program like KEEP as a child, I would have thrived even if the program was directly supporting a tribal community that was different from mine. To have access to other Native peers, to learn about Native ways of being in a school setting,

would have made the difference in how I viewed myself. Such a school did not exist in Alberta. One of my schools did offer a class in Cree, but my adopted mother insisted that I take French instead. From her colonialist perspective, French would be far more advantageous for future employment. Had I been permitted to take the Cree course; I think that my parents would have felt threatened by the questions that I would have asked about my Native roots.

In the KEEP study, Native elders from the Hawaiian community were not directly consulted about the goals and assessments used in defining progress, which was anchored to institutionalized outcomes. According to the authors of the study, Native Hawaiian children learn from their mothers in a more hands-on and less vocal approach in comparison to non-Native mothers, and their at-home learning involves their grandparents as well as parents. KEEP was a sincere effort to help Native students; however, the non-Native perspective overshadowed Native people's involvement and their perspectives of the project.

The Cherokee Nation. A similar study, conducted by Peter (2007), focused on a preschool language immersion program for the young students on the Cherokee Nation in northeastern Oklahoma developed by three researchers, the Chief, elders, and teachers. This program was called *Tsalagi Ageyui*, which translates to *Our beloved Cherokee*. The study documenting this program had a western academic bias because it was conducted by non-Native researchers who lacked a connection to the language or culture that they were observing. Peter was aware of her place of privilege and how it may have affected her relationships with the people in her study. The author's outsider perspective seems most obvious when she described her awareness of Native people not having much regard for non-

Native scholars; she expressed her concern and was sensitive towards this issue. She noted that she maintained continual contact with the Cherokee Nation, and she refers to the study as a "beneficial mutual partnership", but she does not go into explicit detail on how close she was with the people of the Cherokee Nation (p. 328). While Peter's awareness of Native's lack of trust is important, it seems that there was a misunderstanding of what counts as "mutually beneficial" for Native communities.

If I were a student or an Indigenous language teacher having a non-Indigenous researcher observing my interactions from the sidelines would be unsettling. Given my background as an Indigenous person, I have not necessarily had experiences where I can fully trust outsider researchers let alone trust their true intentions. It would make me wonder and ask questions–*Why are you here?* Peter automatically takes the researcher stance which creates a division between herself, and the Cherokee people involved in her program. Researchers must rethink their stance when interacting with Native communities and people in a more authentic and respectful manner based on much of the research I reviewed. There is a sense of being and doing that is lost to the researcher. As a four-year-old child, I was confused to encounter adults who would conduct assessments on me; I wondered what they were doing, and what was their purpose for being in my space. *You're in my space, but you're not with me.* The connection was purely for the benefit of the outsider. My four-year-old self decided to refuse the tasks that an outsider wanted me to do. The distance between me and the outsider was as great as Peter's distance from her research participants because

the relationship lacks authentic connection. I want to be seen as an equal individual, not a science experiment.

Native Families in Montana. Chao and Waller (2021) interviewed three Native families about their perspectives and experiences living in Montana. Chao's position reflects this study as she connects her bicultural background and bilingual (English and Chinese) identity to the bicultural nature of living in a Native community that is surrounded by White dominant society. The researchers' goal was to capture how each family unit has worked through the challenges of balancing life between two different cultures involving language learning and cultural teachings, as many are Native in heritage, but have assimilated into American culture, which creates a distance from their roots. Native children living in urban areas are not closely linked to their heritage language or culture because they are dominated by American culture. There is a lack of connection between the parents and the educators as well as a need for educators to be more inclusive and more culturally sensitive. There is a need for the educators to be more aware of Native culture and the Native parents need to have control of their own agency. This study addresses an important issue given that the Native population in Montana is not thriving, but it perpetuates the unfortunate negative stereotypes of Native people in the sense of struggling in the eyes of the dominant society. This is a double-edged sword that could be fixed if the researchers had also focused on the funds of knowledge and experiences of Native families. There need to be more studies that involve Native families as teachers, as experts in disciplines that are important for learning. This kind of asset-oriented research is largely missing in the bulk of past studies on Native

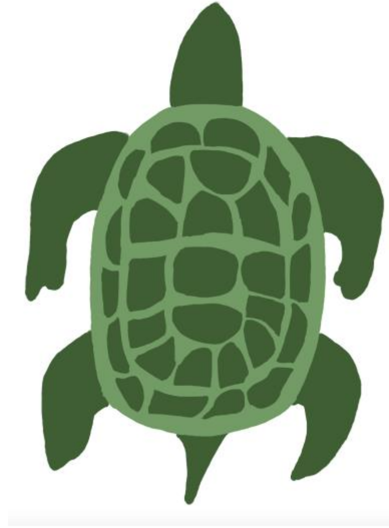
communities. It would also be valuable to do a follow-up study with the same people a few years later to see how their perspectives and situations have changed. Chao and Waller brought attention to the cultural identity and language struggles that we face on a continuous basis, but they excluded the efforts that had to be present. Trauma is a real experience shared across Native communities that represents a fresh wound, but the wound is experienced by strong, beautiful, skillful beings. The brokenness is like the Japanese art of kintsugi–broken bones healed with golden edges. Research on Native community living and being has missed this art altogether.

Language Reclamation Efforts in North America. In a review of efforts to heal Canadian Native communities from trauma, it was found that language revitalization efforts have helped to increase the use of Native languages among Canadian First Nations, hence revitalizing Native identities (Kainai Board of Education et al., 2004). This review highlighted a high school course, Aboriginal Studies 20, on healing historical trauma through revitalizing Aboriginal languages within this region, including Cree and Blackfoot. I did not have access to such a course during my high school years. The study included an historical overview of efforts since the mid-1990s to maintain Native languages, citing statistics that showed an increase in the number of people who can converse in such languages. This report was an effort to educate the broader public about the nature and importance of language in societal wellbeing. Bringing little-known practices and histories of Native languages to the public made visible the diversity that exists in Canada, which resulted in helping the wider public understand Native members of Canadian society.

It is important to note that such language programs are not only available to the representative Native communities but to all people in Alberta. Canadian actor Dan Levy, for example, has spoken openly about learning Cree via a virtual class through the University of Alberta. Mr. Levy used his notable position to raise money for the program and to create awareness via his fanbase on the Instagram social media website. Eugene Brave Rock, a Native actor who is also from the Blood tribe in southern Alberta, has also used this celebrity status to partake in the Blackfoot Language Revival, which is accessible through a multimedia website.

All such language revitalization projects are valuable in many ways, but they often lack an Indigenous outlook and exclude the community. The most important views and perspectives are from the Native people who are involved in these projects. It is hard to say if the elders of each of these communities were involved, and if they were it would be important to include their thoughts and advice. These programs directly impact their families and communities, which is why we need to have their input.

What was also overlooked is what the students liked or disliked about the programs, which is important because they are the core of the language and cultural learning process. We need to encourage more research from an Indigenous background. There also needs to be more research that will give support for urban natives and native adoptees, like me, who were never given the opportunity to learn about our traditional ways. Our stories are just as important as those who live on reservations with their communities. There is much diversity within Turtle Island. The turtle’s shell consists of almost hexagonal-shaped cuts and growth rings. To me that shell represents the diversity of Indigenous peoples of North America.



Research reviewed above on educational efforts in Native community spaces tend to focus on efforts to foster intellectual development among members for maintaining and preserving Native cultural practices. Such empirical work is absent of reciprocity and respect for Native ways of thinking, doing and being (Leonard, 2018).

It is essential to have some relational accountability in order to engage in more meaningful research with Native communities (Wilson, 2008). AsBrayboy (2005) and Native scholars have shown, our elders hold such rich histories, and their knowledge and ways of building such knowledge should be the center of any empirical effort. While there is a growing collection of research on revitalization efforts of Native languages and cultural practices, the voices of many elders in such projects remain largely silent. Even though these were successful language projects in these communities, did the Native community members fully understand how their work and participation would be used afterwards?

In Basso's book, *Wisdom sits in places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache,* he discusses how place-based theory encompasses our learning perspectives, whether good or bad. Placed-based theory is based on the understanding that

thought and the land are not separate from each other. The land is a complex living entity, as described by Kimmerer (2013), like humans, the land has a type of thinking process and communicates with us via our senses. We can see the trees, plants, and animals that live around us. We can hear the birds singing, the insects buzzing, and the ocean waves crashing onto the shores. We can feel the wind blowing onto our face and through our hair. We can smell flowers blooming and the salty ocean air. We can taste the local foods grown from this very soil that supports all life. This also means that the land can communicate via a type of multimodality. Poplar trees tell us when it's going to rain when they flip their leaves. Trees talk; all we have to do is learn to listen. We can learn to listen to our Indigenous communities.

As I write, there are fires breaking out across the United States and Canada, and the winds are blowing smoke from thousands of miles away. The record number of fires in recent years is an urgent message from the planet trying to communicate with us that we are not respecting it. Researchers should come with an open mind to our Native way of learning and knowledge before engaging in research with any Native community. The knowledge may actually help save life on our planet. The better a researcher's understanding about the vibrant, reciprocal connection with a community's homeland, the better they are able to represent Native perspectives.

Native Knowledge Building

There are three different forms of Native knowledge building or learning--intergenerational learning, learning of the local environment, and Indigenous traditional knowledge. These three forms of learning result in creating connections between the older and younger generations as well as encouraging a more innovative way of learning that can

lead to more positive changes for local communities (American Indian College Fund, 2024). This authentic, intergenerational, and place-based connection can help facilitate the learning process and make the educational environment a positive experience for all. Such an organic approach welcomes Indigenous teachings that honor elders and cultural teachers with their traditions and knowledge (Brayboy, 2005; Brayboy & McCarty, 2010). Intergenerational community engagement strengthens our connection to the land, our ancestors, and our teachings. Community serves as the roots that ground us and eventually lead us back to our true selves. When we are given control of our own agency and learn to navigate our own way back to the land, our ancestors, and ultimately the Creator, we build a healthier relationship with ourselves, which improves our mental health and wellbeing.

Silent Histories of Native Communities

The reader also needs to be aware of the history of adoption of Indigenous children and the ramifications that followed from these adoptions or placements within foster care systems. I can only speak from a Canadian First Nations perspective, but it was fairly common for Indigenous children to be adopted outside of their culture, into non-Indigenous families. The Canadian federal and provincial governments did not set up support systems or create plans for the adopted Indigenous children to be connected to their Indigenous roots.

Although I was given up for adoption voluntarily by my birth mother, many Indigenous children born before me were put up for adoption without the consent of their families. This is referred to as the *sixties scoop* in Canada (Sinclair, 2007). There was no specific governmental policy for this practice; rather such practices served as an unspoken shift from forcing Indigenous children into residential schools, which drew wide-spread criticism once the broader Canadian public became aware of severe abuses and deaths from

residential schooling. The pain of the residential schools is personal. as I have had family members who were forced into them. More importantly, the general public needs to be more aware that the last of the residential schools were closed only recently, in the 1990s. The people of both Canada and the United States are concerned about the state of affairs in other countries and hold protests against injustice elsewhere, but what about the genocidal and cultural genocidal acts that were committed here on Turtle Island?

The infamous sixties scoop led to approximately 20,000 First Nations and Metis children being taken out of their tribal communities and placed into white middle-class families (Dixon, 2008). Due to these unsanctioned adoptions, students were educated in public school systems, away from their tribal communities (Hanson, 2016). Indigenous children's cultural needs were never a priority during this time and, speaking from personal experience, I can attest that this situation creates a myriad of mental health issues and low self-esteem. For all of us, our cultural roots serve as an anchor that helps us develop a strong sense of identity that we carry throughout our lives. When we know our roots, we are grounded and have a strong sense of cultural connectedness. For many transracial adoptees like me, we did not have an anchor and it creates a sense of self that is filled with low self-esteem, speaking from personal experience. This lack of self-worth creates an even bigger uphill battle when dealing with discrimination from others in society and in the educational system. While earlier research studies focused primarily on cultural and language revitalization within Indigenous communities or amongst Native people who live off the reservation, they did not look into the emotional and psychological effects of losing our connections to our roots that defined our cultural identity. Researchers' main focus was to achieve a form of academic success within these groups, but what about the wellness aspect

of reconnecting to our roots? It can be an empowering process that is filled with emotions that have laid dormant for years, sometimes even decades. For us, it is not just learning the culture or language, it is an emotional entanglement that we may feel with our ancestors and Creator.

Such early research focused on the linguistic needs of preserving and revitalizing languages of Native communities, or on the perceived deficits of our people and our communities. While problematic and deficit-oriented, this early research is important because it set the stage for awareness of an array of Indigenous-related issues ranging from mental health, academic retention to language revitalization. Language revitalization and preservation are especially important because it is what keeps us linked to our tribal families, communities, ancestors, and adds a richness to our Indigenous ways of knowing.

Researching from an Insider Perspective

Navajo Rough Rock. I have argued that there needs to be more research done from an insider, Indigenous perspective. This is what keeps our ways of knowing alive. There are a few examples of such work, like the Navajo Rough Rock project, a language revitalization project inspired by the aforementioned KEEP initiative in Hawaii. The Navajo Rough Rock project focused on language and culture classes for students from kindergarten to 8th grade in the Navajo community in the northwestern region of Arizona (Begay et al., 1995). The project's team included a school administrator, and an unspecified number of teachers and teaching assistants, all of whom are Navajo with the exception of McCarty. The team developed exercises and activities, mainly creative writing and of texts that are relevant to

the Navajo culture but applied to other areas of knowledge. A preliminary three-part assessment was developed to monitor the students' progress in both the Navajo (Diné) and English languages. Student participants were assessed on their speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities in both Navajo and English throughout the program on a quarterly basis. This language program, which focused mainly on building on Navajo language and literacy skills, also showed significant growth in English language reading and listening comprehension. For example, the third-grade class featured in this study read and discussed creation stories, which were integrated into the curriculum and included works like V. Mabery's (1991) *Right After Sundown: Teaching Stories of the Navajos.* These creation stories were used in activities like journal writing, creative writing and science class activities. The study showed that engagement in heritage language learning boosts literacy in the English language. Early success was seen in K-3 through a series of language and literacy assessments that used the traditional Navajo stories to determine the students' levels of oral, written and comprehension development. The assessments were conducted in both English and Navajo every nine weeks. 71% of the K-3 students improved their English listening comprehension with scores of 70 percent or higher, and their mean listening scores increased by 15 points. Their English written scores also increased by 13 points. Because of these positive outcomes, the administration set goals to expand the program to the 12th grade. It is my firm belief, as a transracial adoptee, that if I was provided access to learning opportunities toward my heritage background, it would have created a more inclusive environment and made my educational experience a more positive one.

Potawatomi Nation. Another Native-led effort in revitalization can be found within the Potawatomi Nation, which includes a total of nine tribal communities located within the

Great Lakes region. Seven of the nine tribes are located within the United States. The tribes shared a mission of awakening their language and culture. Each tribal community's program goal slightly differed from the others, whether it was more linguistically or culturally focused. Some offered from after-school programs while others offered language immersion camps and the like (Wetzel, 2015). Despite these differences, the Potawatomi tribal communities made a concerted effort to meet every year to share and learn from each other on their progress within their respective programs. Each of the tribal communities within the nation had the freedom to set their own goals, and the project was not set up in a western, standardized way. When the communities gathered it was primarily to provide support for one another, to pay respect to each other on how they were planting the roots for their people within their communities.

One of the largest research efforts to understand the language revitalization practices in these Potawatomi communities was conducted by Wetzel (2006). He learned about inter-Native efforts to support community-specific revitalization practices that involved periodic conferences where presentations were made on the decline of the language, curriculum development, cultural beliefs and grammar. Wetzel's study is valuable because it captures how the people of the Potawatomi Nation took their language preservation and revitalization into their own hands. They refused the government's involvement in trying to erase us, meeting with each other every year to discuss what worked for *them*, as well as what didn't work. This study gives a sense that there are Native communities taking their power back. Wetzel is one of the few non-Native scholars that showed compassion for Native

communities and focused less on researcher boundaries. Wetzel positioned himself as first a community member who is self-aware of the differences in culture and language, but not in a way that separates from connecting on a human level.

Cold Lake First Nations. The Daghida Project was a Dene language revitalization program held at Cold Lake First Nations located in Northern Alberta, Canada (Blair et al., 2002). The word *daghida* is a word in Dene that translates to "we are alive" into English. This project was the combined effort of a Cold Lake First Nations member, Valerie Wood, a linguistics student, who studied under Dr. Sally Rice from the University of Alberta. The Daghida Project focused on offering Dene language classes from kindergarten to eighth grade students at the tribal community's LeGoff school. The way the article is constructed, however, seems to overshadow the voices of both Wood and elder John Javier, and the writing does not give a true sense of their thoughts and opinions from a Native perspective. Although this is important research, it still separates the Native people and the academic researchers involved.

Alaskan Yu'pik. The University of Fairbanks has a collaboration with the Alaskan Indigenous Yu'pik located in the southwestern part of Alaska. This paper focuses on a summer intensive program using a Master/Apprentice learning model with fluent language masters and an apprentice learning language teacher, both Yu'pik Natives. This summer intensive program was planned to be extended into a two-year program. There was some concern about the program facing challenges due to different dialects of their language and generational differences between the participating teachers and the elder participants

within the immersion program. The authors, two of whom are Yu'pik, captured the challenges teachers and elders involved. This reminds me of when my uncle explained to me the complexities of our Blackfoot language, when there are slightly different dialects within the community. There is the old way of speaking and the newer way of Blackfoot, so it is similar in a sense of the hesitation of the Alaskan Yup'ik elders.

The Four Rs of Native Ways of Knowing

McCarty and colleagues (2015) explored what they called the *four Rs*-- rights, resources, responsibilities, and reclamation--through three different case studies, which featured the Hopi, Navajo, and Yu'pik, respectively. The four Rs represent the core components that support a Native community, make visible the inequities the community is experiencing, and help guide building and problem solving. These scholars expanded on Brayboy and colleagues' (2012) four Rs of Critical Indigenous Research Methodology by further clarifying the "primacy of relationships with responsibility to, respect for, and reciprocity to Native communities" (p. 228). McCarty et al.'s analysis focuses on how the three Native communities they discuss are working together in regaining their sovereignty and creating by themselves for themselves. McCarty noticed the Hopi communities in Arizona have a valid concern about whether the younger generations will make the conscious decision of living a traditional Hopi life. She also points out the Alaskan Yu'pik are facing sociolinguistic and racial challenges, especially in relation to the school system, which they regard with deep-rooted distrust. McCarty and colleagues explain how a combination of challenges such as the different dialects of the Yu'pik language coupled with a shortage of

certified Yupik teachers can hamper community relationship building. For the Navajo Red Rock community, however, language is thought to be only for the elders, hence there is a unique challenge to reciprocity and intergenerational learning for this particular community. Awareness of this challenge has led the elders to take up their responsibility of educational leadership in fostering language development among all community members.

The power of our elders and ancestors has survived efforts to extinguish their sovereignty and identity by national governments and the Catholic church. Many Native people have clung to their knowledge and have bonded with younger generations later in life through activities and storytelling despite the many generations of Natives forced to forget their ways of knowing. Even now, we are served with different shades of doubt from non-Natives on our Indigenous perspectives and behaviors. There is a sense of grounding by sharing experiences and stories with one another. Just as trees communicate via the root systems under the ground, we share our knowledge that is solidified by Creator's earth. As Kimmerer (2013) reminds us, mind, body, emotion, and spirit are in all of us, and each are important branches intertwined. Extending each branch towards the land of knowledge may enable learning to become more impactful. There is also a responsibility when sharing knowledge amongst each other, which is to give respect to the knowledge keepers. This does not fully align with the colonial ways of thinking, but it is a reminder of where we originated, the soil we currently stand on.

What I see in research about Native ways of knowing and being is a need for scholars to avoid getting caught up in our own egos with educational goals, data gathering, analysis, etc. We must be willing to admit that we may overlook important details, particularly those that matter most to Native communities. Past research focused more on our deficits rather

than our strengths--was this a way to keep us small? Was this a way to keep fostering inequality? Did researchers not think about the repercussions of this on our mental health? The work by González, Moll, and colleagues (1995) emphasized the plural in Funds of Knowledge when characterizing the knowledge and expertise of community members. Native communities represent a wealth of life experiences, family, and community experiences; these forms of knowledge are just as important as classroom learning. How can we be expected to fully expand our knowledge on classroom experiences alone? If we do not expand our knowledge and views, then we are not diversifying the educational experience, and therefore not being fully inclusive.

There needs to be a more holistic approach to education and the act of learning. Learning needs to become a ceremonial practice. Indigenous funds of knowledge can help create a level of understanding among co-learners of different backgrounds. The educational system was a place of trauma for many individuals, especially those from an Indigenous background. It is an environment that lasted for generations where we were stripped of our sense of being and made into individuals who do not feel seen or valued. This intergenerational trauma still weighs down on many Indigenous students, like me, and it ultimately affects our mental health (Fernández-Llamazares, et al., 2021).

All of the earlier research shared in this section was done at a time when not many people were aware of the true damage that was done by the Canadian and U.S. governments towards Indigenous communities. Although these studies are valuable for raising awareness of our situation in terms of language and culture loss, the research was still being approached and viewed from a colonial stance. This approach is what keeps us Indigenous people small and helpless despite researchers having the best of intentions. That smallness comes from the

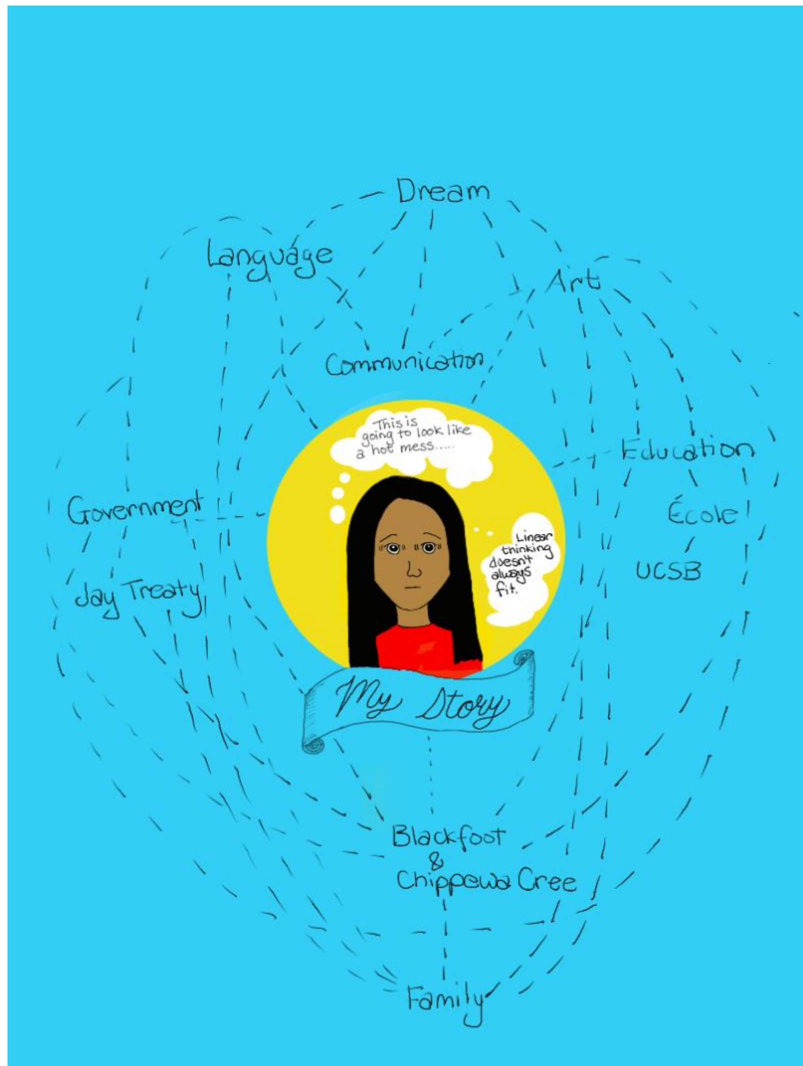
researchers' view of us using a long, telescopic colonial lens which deliberately creates a space between them and us. This sense of space is created with the combination of uncomfortable outsiders not knowing how to truly make a connection as equals with Native communities rather than focus on the perceived deficits of our people.

What is missing from these earlier studies is the lack of Indigenous researchers and those Natives, like student Valerie Wood and elder John Janvier, who were part of the research teams. Such studies use only the colonialist/Academic voice. For example, for the Cold Lake Daghida Project, it would have been more beneficial to hear the actual voices of student Valerie Wood and elder John Janvier. I would like to know what they had to say; the researchers' interpretations were not transparent enough. Any research conducted and written about Native communities needs to include Native voices as they were spoken and needs to be approachable for those who are not part of the academic community. It is important to keep those who are part of the Native communities involved in studies and to design research that creates a sense of inclusivity and equality, much like when we sit together in a circle.

In addition, Native youth should have a greater voice if the four Rs, Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility, are to be fully realized in research practices. Respect is on the top of the list because this is where we need to set boundaries for ourselves towards outsiders. We may not always be able to communicate our boundaries, and this is when researchers need to have a keen sense of awareness beyond themselves to respect what we may or may not feel comfortable with. Despite the previous actions of attempting complete erasure of us, as a race, we are never going away. Our trauma, our histories, our ways of knowing, our languages, our existence are never going away. Turtle Island is our home, and we may be quiet amongst the dominant groups who live here, but we ARE

relevant. This is why I made the decision to share my story, my voice, as a transracial adoptee, to speak about the experiences of those of us who have been adopted into families of a different race. There is not enough awareness of the consequences of adopting a Native child and how it will be detrimental to their mental health and well-being, and their sense of identity if their cultural roots are not made a priority. There needs to be a higher level of responsibility for governments and white middle-class families to make sure the Native child's cultural needs are being met to ensure a strong sense of self and to know that it is possible for them to safely set their roots. I want to speak my truth about being adopted, which was not by my personal choice, but purely situational. I am beginning to learn about my Native heritage, and while I am no longer considered a youth, the Native child within me never had a chance to grow. Setting up this metaphorical talking circle is my way of sharing with you my personal journey of how I came to be where I am now, learning about the Blackfoot ways of knowing and attempting to learn the Blackfoot language. So, I am asking you, the reader. What have you done PROACTIVELY to make yourself more aware of local Native communities and their ways of knowing? When have you ACTIVELY learned about the history of all Native groups on Turtle Island on your own time? I am asking because it is part of your responsibility to learn about the Indigenous population here on Turtle Island.

Part 3: My journey



My Storytelling Approach. Much of the methodology I use was inspired by the works of Indigenous scholars as they emphasize the importance of Indigenous knowledge, and it makes me feel empowered to share my authentic voice. Kimmerer's (2013) framework is unique in the sense that she includes her two voices, one that she uses in the scientific world and the other within the Native world and weaves them together. Her Indigenous voice

that she was born with and her trained scientific voice that she had to learn captures the whole of her life experiences and, thus, the wider audience. Kimmerer's style of storytelling has inspired and guided me to find my own voice so I could share my voice and my story.

Native scholars such as Kimmerer, Brayboy (2005) treat Indigenous knowledge as if it is a living entity or biosphere that needs constant care, attention, and the utmost respect. Indigenous ways of knowing encompass relationships with self, ancestors, family, spirituality, land, etc. Because of this interconnected way of seeing oneself, there is a sense of responsibility and values that are upheld throughout the research process. It is a process that you cannot separate yourself from because it forces you to look at the surroundings of the environment and others, but it also helps you create your own reality, as well as your own personal experiences and values that you were taught or that are inherent. My process of research is ceremony and fosters a connection, a relationship with knowledge. My ceremonial practice of research comes with accountability and reciprocity. Native scholar Wilson (2008) emphasizes the importance of our relationship to research being closely tied to authenticity and great connection as opposed to validity or reliability. Indigenous researchers are not looking from the outside in with the goal of pure objectivity, but rather we are looking for the core truth of the world for ourselves and our communities. Our experiences and relationships are what make us who we are, and these relationships are where our ideas originate from.

Kimmerer blends her words from both her scientific academic background and the native teachings she grew up with. She recognizes the importance of both worlds and sees

where science/academia and Indigenous knowledge have parallels. Her unique background gives her the opportunity to share with the rest of the world how valuable Indigenous funds of knowledge are. Academia typically takes an outsider perspective which can be often viewed as objective observation and does not take into account the natural/spiritual world. Throughout the book, Kimmerer recognizes the importance of her relationship with plants, and sees the relationships that plants have with each other and the animals that feed off them. Stories can be told in different types of modalities, and it doesn't have to be spoken. Stories can be silent, what is important is what they do. Kimmerer speaks of the silent stories of trees and the rings in their trunk telling the story of each year in their lives. Stories like this are just as powerful and can create an impact on people even if they are silent. Such stories are a quiet reminder that the plants and the natural world are storytellers in their own right but more importantly they are our teachers too. It may be hard to conceptualize that there are silent stories in the natural world, but we all tell our own silent stories without even knowing it.

Storytelling is a form of art. I often wonder if my ancestors viewed storytelling this way in addition to seeing it as a form of communication to share important information and lessons, and a time to bond with others. It is a type of ceremonial art by carving time out of the day/evening, gathering community and family members, and giving much thought to the words that are spoken. Stories are a form of living art that exists for as long as there are generations willing to pass them along.

Our body language and eye contact when interacting with our peers tells a story. Learning spaces are not confined within four walls; learning opportunities can be found in the surrounding environment around us, no matter where we are. Unfortunately, western, and academic forms of knowledge have long excluded the learning practices of Indigenous communities. However, this needs to change, and more institutions and non-Indigenous community members should be more open to hearing and being supportive of not only Indigenous knowledge, but more importantly our presence (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021). By telling the story of my journey, I aim to bring Indigenous learning practices front and center by creating an informal space where I share my own style of storytelling. I am in the early stages of this journey of storytelling, and it will take time to find my voice. I am sure my ancestors were aware of the imperfections in their storytelling, that growing is part of the process.

Another part of Kimmerer's storytelling is that she does not view herself as a scholar. She stated that she views herself as a student of a way of thinking, in terms of what she calls" the honorable harvest." This view resonates with me because I do not view myself as a scholar as I do not want to position myself as an expert. I feel more comfortable in a position of humility as opposed to ego. I learn and keep on learning as a student of life, a student in the different environments that surround me, and I believe that we keep on learning until the day we die.

The telling of my journey is a reclaiming of my agency. Colonizers/Settlers have taken away our land, our way of life and our way of knowing by forcing their concepts of

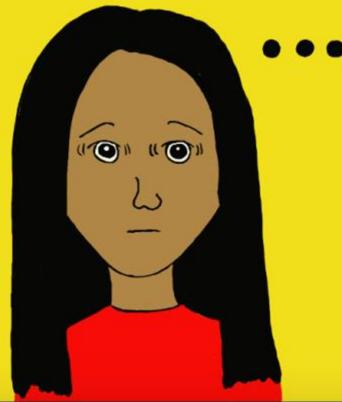
logic and religion into our minds. It is not just stolen land, stolen lives, stolen minds. They attempted to rob us of our identities through the concept of the "heathens", or "savages" not being able to speak for ourselves, not having any agency whatsoever. We lost our power and sense of agency. This loss resulted in history being written and taught from a colonialist perspective, which is only one side of the story. Our way of living is still being shared in anthropological settings like museums and in university level classes, being taught in a way that implies that we are extinct, and those who spread these ideas do not consider asking for our input or our permission. Any input that we did share in the past was not treated with respect through any form of reciprocation. As mentioned by one of my previous interviewees from the Chumash community, Kawa, she expressed her disdain, *how can we teach sacredness to a non-sacred society?* We were not allowed to have any agency; we were not allowed to have any space for our agency. That sense of savages, or the sense of subalternity has led us being treated as people who are unable to speak for ourselves. That sense of hierarchy has never left us (Tuck & Yang, 2014), There is also more to our stories than pain, and hearing only stories of how we were taken over keeps us in the position of being helpless Native people (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). That sense of hierarchy keeps hovering over our voices and our perspectives, preventing us from moving into our own power. The stories of massacres, the Trail of Tears, and removal from our traditional lands should not be viewed through the white person's fascination, or pity (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Our pain does not define us, instead it should be viewed as our strong resiliency.

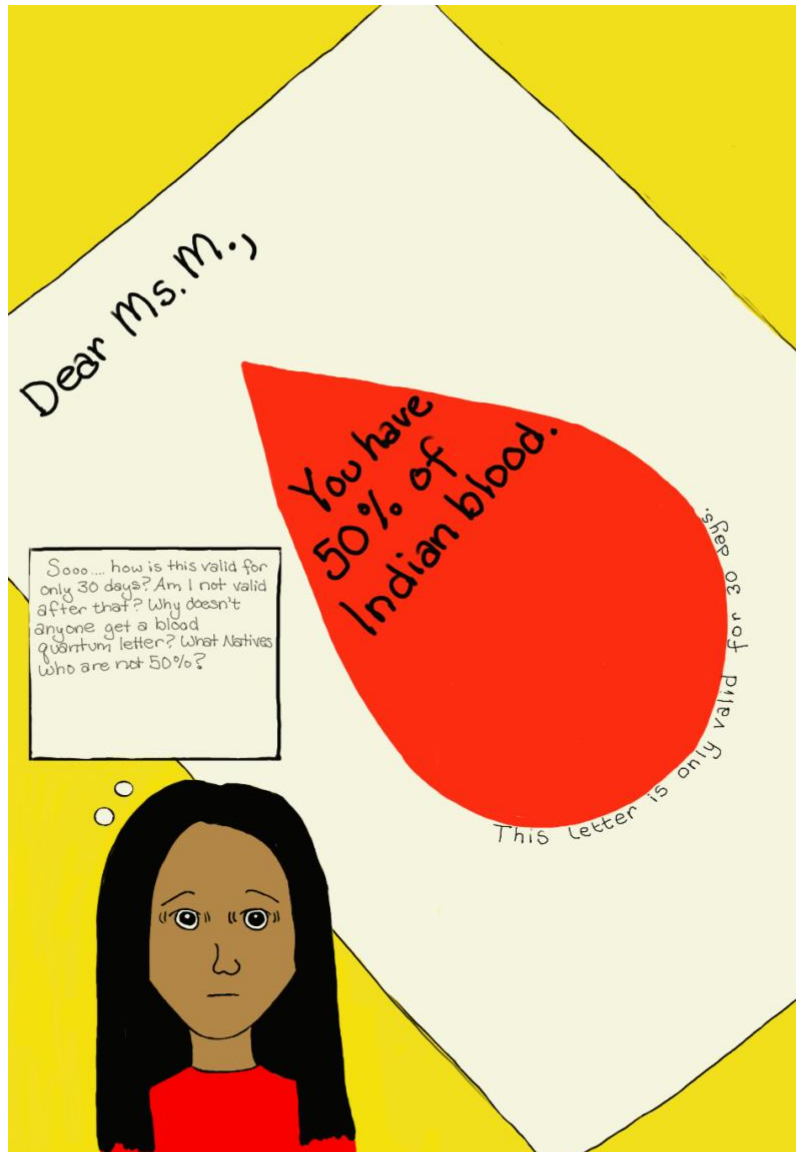
What is missing in published research described in the previous section is that our stories have deeper meaning, deeper complexities involving the natural and metaphysical worlds. As I have discovered through discussions with my aunt and uncle, dreams are not to be ignored, as there are important messages that are relevant to our lives from the spirit world. Creator, our ancestors, and the animal world will feel the need to teach us or warn us through our dreams. There are many lessons to be found and learned from the natural environments and the animals that live upon it. There are lessons of morals and values that our ancestors have learned from the natural world. Non-Natives may devalue our stories because they were orally passed down from one generation to the next and not documented in books, and each time a particular story is shared it may be told in a slightly different way. What is overlooked is that the main lesson is still passed down. That sense of hierarchy is ever present in how we think, how we view the world, how we speak. It reminds me of Kimmerer's discussion in the honorable harvest where she says that when her ancestors planted the three sisters, corn, beans, and squash, the colonists frowned upon what they thought was a non-systematic way of planting. Her ancestors were viewed as incompetent. That very same outlook still overshadows how we view the world. Learning is not a linear process, and it should not be treated as such. I had such reminders of the nonlinear process during my trip to southern Alberta last January that humbled me. I did not know the lay of the land, the distance, the road conditions or family communication patterns. Through each of these learning lessons of my journey, I could feel the white voices in me getting re-educated. I did not know much of the history of my biological family in Alberta, and during

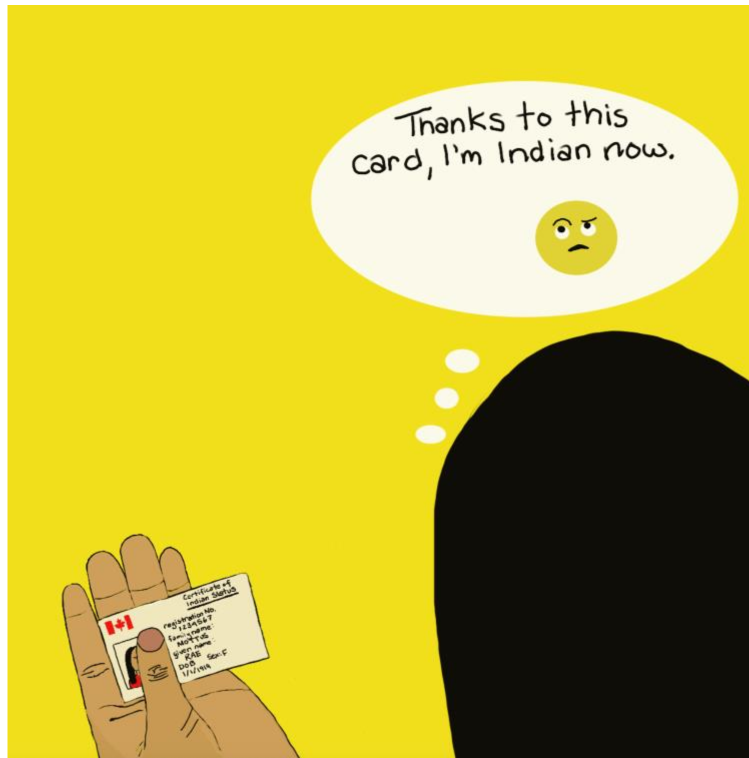
my time spent with relatives, I could feel that they saw me as white, even though I looked just like them.

I was born as Canadian First Nations under the affiliation of the Siksika Nation that was sanctioned by Treaty 7. This treaty was an agreement between the British Crown and the Native people from five different band in southern Alberta: Blood, Peigan, Blackfoot, Sarcee and Nakoda. I knew about my Native roots when I was younger, but I was not aware of my affiliation with Siksika until near to my 18th birthday I applied for my Indian status card and my adoption records were released. A fellow Native friend advised me to get my Indian status card because I would be eligible for many different forms of benefits, including healthcare, reduced taxes, and education. I remember not feeling comfortable about becoming affiliated because I felt that I would be taking unfair advantage. But she said to me, “You are Native and having access to these benefits are your right.” Applying for my Indian status card was just the very beginning of a small and unfamiliar door opening up to me, A door that would open up many opportunities and also lead me down a path to my Native identity. That was only the beginning because I wasn’t aware that I was able to live freely across the Canada/U.S. border without a visa.

What does it mean to be NATIVE?




Dear Ms. M.,
You have 50% of Indian blood.
This letter is only valid for 30 days.
Sooo.... how is this valid for only 30 days? Am I not valid after that? Why doesn't anyone get a blood quantum letter? What Natives who are not 50%?



Signs of welcoming When we cross borders, we cross over imaginary lines, there is nothing tangible about land borders. We can cut trees and bushes out to make a border or put-up fences and place border agents, but it is still not considered to be tangible to the natural world. The wildlife does not see borders in their minds, whether it is between countries or landowners. They are not conscious of this, but they keep living their lives according to how they see fit, yet us humans are obsessed with borders of any kind. When my uncle took me out for a drive out on the rez, one of the first things we pointed out were the train tracks that surround the entire area. These train tracks were placed on the outskirts of the rez by the Canadian market and used as markers as land borders. My uncle mentioned to me that anytime we drive over the train tracks that meant that we were either entering or leaving the rez. I remember the difference in signs going in either direction. When entering the rez, I

would see a *Welcome to Siksika Nation* sign, but when crossing the train tracks leaving the rez, there were *NO TRESPASSING* signs placed by the landowners. These signs struck me because, even though you were entering rez land, you were met with a welcome greeting, but when leaving, non-native landowners placed signs stating their ownership of their land. It was mentioned that it was pretty common for non-native people to enter onto the rez to hunt illegally.

Long before the colonists arrived, our ancestors roamed freely across their territories, as there was no concept of borders or immigration. They could move, migrate, and hunt without any thought about any possible limitations overshadowing them. After colonization, The Jay Treaty was signed between Great Britain and the United States in 1794 that permitted those who were 50 percent or more of the "Indian race" to move freely across the border. This treaty is now interpreted as an agreement for First Nations people to work, study, retire, invest, and immigrate to the United States. The treaty also means that Native people like me are able to apply for a Social Security Number (SSN), receive benefits and pay taxes in the United States like any other US citizen.

When I made the decision to move to the United States, I had to go to Seattle, Washington to apply for a SSN. I wanted to apply for the SSN before I moved down so that I could look for employment quickly. I remember the long journey, taking two different flights just so that I could grab a ticket and stand in line at the Social Security Office. I was that one person who made the day of all the agents in that office difficult. I explained my unique situation, with my official documents in hand, to the agent's blank and confused face. The agent did not know how to process my information. It took over an hour for the entire office

staff to process my application. I stood behind the glass barrier looking at the staff gathered behind the first agent, talking amongst themselves. The other agents stopped working with the other people at the counters, and the line behind me was getting longer. Just one Native person held up the entire office that day. As I endured the questions and confusions, I recall worrying about holding up the line for others who seemed to fit the bureaucratic processes commonly taking place in that building.

During my first few years of living in the United States, I wasn't aware that I could obtain a green card. Legally speaking, I do not need one, but crossing borders was more difficult without it. Every time I crossed the border, I stood before the immigration officer with my Indian status card and supporting documents in hand. It was important to remain extremely calm and to know my rights. The immigration officers would glance down at the documents in confusion, ask questions, followed by multiple silences, often calling their superior over. But all that changed when an immigration agent in the Atlanta airport kindly offered to help me fill out and submit the paperwork for a green card. My ancestral roots are much deeper than imaginary borders and green cards, but my unique position is virtually unrecognized by most institutions and the people within them.

As an undergraduate student and then a graduate student, I attended a university in California that is more than happy to use me as a number for its American Indian/Alaska Native demographics to boost its image of diversity. The irony is that the University would not include me as a part of the Native American Opportunity Plan, which provides free tuition to Native students, because I am not affiliated with a US federally recognized tribal

community. My identity has caused some disruption in the system, which institutions shape to dictate when to use my identity for their own benefit. From birth, I have been the center of controversy and confusion for institutional actors. My given names when I was adopted are part of a system that labels before a person is present before they are known. *Lindsey* and *Rachelle* are the kind of names that you can find in a typical naming book.

Crystal Anna Black Kettle – This name was given to me at birth. My biological mother did not name me. Her close friend came up with the name. I don't know why she chose those specific names.

Lindsey Rachelle Mottus – My legal name changed when my parents adopted me at two months old. They said they picked Lindsey Rachelle because it was the only combination they agreed upon. My mother had a more outlandish taste in names, whereas my father wanted a more "normal" name.

Lindsey – I have greatly disliked this name ever since I can remember. I never identified with it. People would also call me Lindz. I hated it. The name Lindsey is dead to me, Lindsey never was a name that fit me.

> **Rachelle –** My middle name given by my parents; was the name I could tolerate.
>
> **Rae** – My middle name shortened. I started using this name because I actually LOVE the shortened version of Rachelle. I now use this shortened name because people constantly mispronounce the full name: Rachel, Raquel, Rochelle, Richelle…… not as I pronounce it.

(This was taken when I was approximately 2 years old. The community school in the background is the one I later dropped out of.)

One of the greatest and most important gifts I received from my aunt and uncle was my Indian name. We discussed it on and off during my visit. I felt a sense of awkwardness because I was unfamiliar with the concept of having an Indian name. I asked myself when and how I would come to use this name, perhaps to the point of overintellectualizing it. When sitting down for dinner at a restaurant, my uncle said that we could hold a small Indian naming ceremony. I mentioned that I wanted to visit Castle Mountain, a part of our traditional lands, and he and my aunt quietly went back and forth about who could be my witness. They ultimately decided that it was okay for my aunt to be the witness. We never

did make it to Castle Mountain because the weather and the road conditions were unpredictable during the time of my visit. Instead, we held a super quick ceremony in their living room on my last day of the visit, where my uncle asked my cousins to be witnesses. He stood behind me, said my Indian name, and gently pushed me forward towards my two witnesses. Afterwards, he suggested that I record him saying my Indian name, so I would not forget it and also remember the meaning/translation of the name in English. Both my aunt and uncle mentioned that I would have to decide for myself how to spell my name. They explained to me that because our language was never designed or meant to be written down, there is no wrong or right way for my name to be written. My aunt says that it's more about an intuitive way of writing and that I can write my name how it sounds to me. This whole concept almost felt as though it was short-circuiting my colonized brain, and the thought of having control over how I write my name intimidated and confused me.

O____i – My adult Indian name. Did I spell it correctly? I am sounding out the pronunciation of the name silently in my head. It is an honor to have been given my given Indian name. My aunt and uncle put a lot of thought into it. It is sacred to me. I find that I am still getting used to this name, it’s as though O______i has a bigger presence to myself. We are still getting acquainted with each other; hence I am sharing only the first and last letter/sound. I want to keep it sacred by choosing not to share the full name here.

What does it mean to learn a name? Have people ever stopped to really think about what it means to learn their own name? We are all given names at birth by our parents, who put much thought into their children’s names before they are born. Usually, the name holds some form of special meaning to them, such as passing down a family name, or naming the

child after a loved one outside of their extended family, or simply it's because it is a name the parent likes. But no one ever thinks about our names as two separate entities: the sound of the name and its spelling. What about languages that were never meant to be written, like Blackfoot? I can write my Indian name one way and then at a later time, I can change the way I spell it, but this does not invalidate my name in any way. It is still the same name; it is still a part of me. But in the western system, changing the spelling of a name at will is not *legal*. Our western names in a sense keep boundaries around our identity. Identity boundaries have either tried to keep me in a box as a person or have left me out of boxes set by western governmental standards. Learning my newly given Indian name has broken these boundaries within my own colonized brain. My Indian name and I are still getting acquainted with each other.

What's in a INDIAN name?

Labels kept me small . . . I can see a parallel between the different names that I had over the years and the different names applied to my cultural identity. Indian, Native, Native American, American Indian, Aboriginal, First Nations, Indigenous, Blackfoot, Chippewa

Cree. All of these apply to me, and at times I have switched between labels, but for the most part, I refer to myself as Native, Native American or First Nations, depending on the situation, with those who know me well and of my background, I call myself a Native. With those who do not know me well, I refer to myself as Native American when I am in the United States. In Canada, I refer to myself as First Nations, a label that most people in the U.S. are not familiar with.

There have been occasions when I have been corrected by non-Native people when I have referred to myself by a particular label. One of the occasions was when I visited Canada and met a friend for lunch. I explained to her the process of renewing my status card that shows that I am of Indian blood, and I mentioned in passing that being Native American I needed to have this card for multiple reasons. She paused, looked at me and said that she didn't know whether it was "politically correct" for me to call myself a Native American. I explained that I have gotten used to calling myself Native American after living in the U.S. for so long. I told her, If I referred to myself as First Nations in the U.S., no one would know what that meant. I always tried to use the path of least resistance when using a label to avoid confusion.

The concept of labels, along with how and when to use them, has been a stressful burden, especially because I have so many. I wonder if other racialized groups get corrected or questioned by non-Native people?

Learning the land. I arrived in Canada thinking that my relatives would know everything about our history, language, and culture. It helped that I was transparent and was open with

them that I didn't have a clue about the Native way of living. I was apologetic for my pure ignorance, fearing that I might end up making a mistake that would cause offense. It was intimidating for me because I felt like nothing more than a white person wearing a Native person's skin. But reality was reset when my cousins told me they were still learning themselves and that we are all in different stages of learning about our ways. For me, it was not just learning about the history, language and culture, it was also learning about the lay of the land that I had never set foot on before.

Orienting to the land was a learning experience from the day of my arrival when I received directions from my uncle to his place on the rez. He gave me clear directions to our meeting place, "It's only a few minutes out of town. Just turn left onto Highway 1 and keep driving until you see the FasGas station on top of the hill on your right." It seemed straightforward for me, until about after 35 minutes of driving down the highway there was no FasGas station to be seen. I never realized how expansive the southern Alberta countryside was especially with the straight road that you could see for miles on end. I began to wonder if I missed the station and had gone too far. I finally came to a bend in the road, and I saw a PetroCan station. I pulled over to call my uncle. His response was, "Just keep driving east until you reach the hilltop and that is where the FasGas station is located." I muttered to myself with building frustration, "But I don't see ANY hills around here! It is all so flat!" I kept driving for another 10 minutes and I came up to the hill my uncle described, and I thought to myself, "THAT is a hill?" This experience taught me how we view time and space differently. My aunt and uncle wanted to meet me at the gas station by the highway because they knew I would get lost looking for their home, as there are no specific addresses

for any of the rural residences. (It was also one of my first times I experiences driving on pure ice.

Another experience of learning to view space in a different way was when my aunt and uncle took me for a drive around the reserve in their truck later that same day. They pointed out that train tracks were a clear marker of the assigned reservation lands. They explained to me that the government placed these train tracks as a temporary solution for the royal family touring across Canada in the early 1900's, and then used the train tracks to make the borders of the reserve. The train tracks were a clear divide, but what struck me was the differences in the signage. When entering Siksika Nation, you see a warm welcome sign, but going in the opposite direction leaving the reserve, private landowners place "No Trespassing" signs on the fence posts. My aunt and uncle told me that non-Native people place these signs to protect their lands, they do not show the same respect for Native lands and trespass on the reserve to camp or hunt.

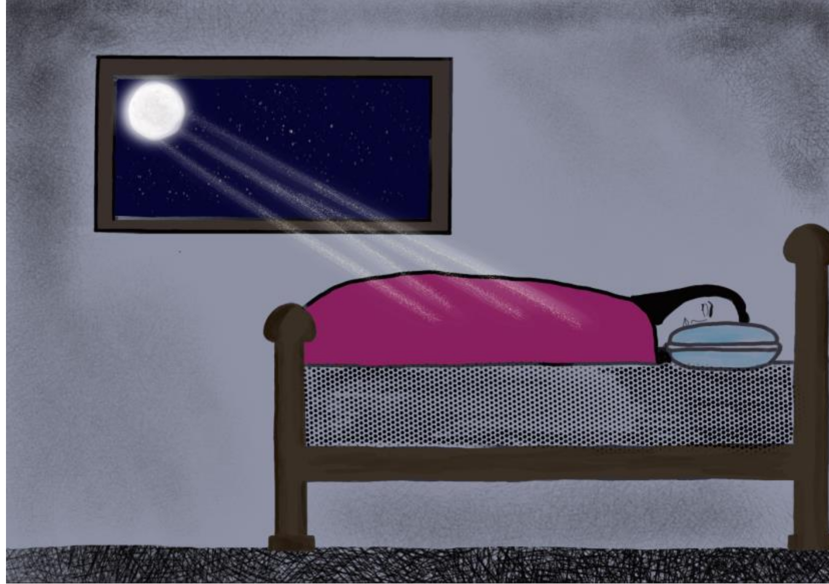
Driving through rural Southern Alberta, I could sense how it could speak for itself (Basso 1996), and how my ancestors translated the language of the land intuitively into Blackfoot language. Much of the land is flat with slight rolling hills and few trees. There is a section of "badlands" and cliffs that lead down to the river valley area, where it is more wooded with trees, and bushes. Much of the land is used for ranching or farming. On clear days you can see the Canadian Rocky Mountain range, a two-and-a-half-hour drive away. The land speaks for itself through vegetation that grows from it and the animals that live off it. I recall my uncle telling me that our ancestors never referred to the act of hunting animals, but instead they would say they were going to gather some medicine. They knew the types of plants in each animal's diet. They would hunt for the animal that ate a specific plant that

carried medicinal properties to aid their ailment. My uncle also mentioned that our ancestors valued the internal organs of animals more than they valued the muscle cuts of the meat because the organs held the most nutrients. Our ancestors also took great care in gathering plants, such as the sage and sweetgrass that grew in the low-lying areas near the river, with deliberate intention of not taking more than they needed. This was the same approach when they gathered the medicine from the animals. An intuitive communication was present in their relationship with the land, the plants and animals. This kind of communication is absent in dominant society as we can see from the present state of the climate and environment. Non-natives chose to ignore how the natural world communicates with us including through dreams in the metaphysical world.

Learning to interpret dreams. Dream interpretation is highly valued amongst our people. The land and the animals are also known to communicate with us in our dreams. That is when we are supposed to pay great attention. My uncle takes his dreams very seriously and lives by what is communicated to him in them. For example, he once had a dream that if he kept hunting particular animals then bad things would happen to him and his family. However, he stipulates that he is still able to hunt elk in the mountains because he has not had a dream that he cannot hunt them. I told my aunt and uncle about a dream I had about a year ago and that I did not understand it at the time. In my dream, I did not understand an object that I was holding in my hands. When I woke up, I quickly sketched out the object and sent the photo to them on my phone. When we met in person, they mentioned that the dream object looked like a dance whip. Apparently, my grandmother had owned one that she wore around her neck. Dance whips were used at gatherings, like pow wows, and someone would walk around holding the dance whip in their hands and gently tap those who were not

dancing, to encourage them to get up and dance. My aunt and uncle emphasized the importance of listening to my dream by making a dance whip myself. My uncle even offered to help me.

At one point, I held onto the western perspective that dreams held no significant value and are not to be taken too seriously. But I have always remembered one dream from years ago. My dream was in black and white, and I was standing on the very edge of some large sand dunes. I looked down, and my feet were completely covered in sand. I stood and looked around the area. I could see the sand ripples from where the wind was blowing. There were small dips in the sand where there were pools of water. I slowly looked up and saw these older women standing beside each other in the near distance. They both had long gray hair and worn, lined faces. Their eyes were black and looked at me with serious intention. They asked me why I was there and asked me to leave. They made it very clear to me repeatedly that I did not belong there. I remember hearing their voices saying to me repeatedly, “You don’t belong here, you don’t belong here.” I woke up startled and. Years later, I described the dream to my uncle. He knew of the place from my description and told me it was the sand hills, a place where our ancestors are and where we will eventually go in our afterlife. He explained that the two old women were telling me to turn away because I am still a part of the living world. Ever since talking with my aunt and uncle, I pay close attention to my dreams because I now understand that is how my ancestors communicate with me.



Learning the Language. My aunt and uncle told me that the way to learn the language was by doing and not by learning within a classroom environment. Also, learning Blackfoot never meant that you learned how to write it on top of speaking. Learning how to

write in the Blackfoot language is a relatively new aspect of language learning. As with my Indian name, they both encouraged me to sound out the words on my own and even spell them in a way that is relevant to me. They told me that there is no “wrong or right” way of writing. This concept was hard for me to conceptualize because it went against how I learned to speak my Native English language and French Canadian in school. It makes me wonder how different the English language would be if we were all learning in a non-colonized way. Would there be new dialects of the English language?

My uncle spoke of the different Blackfoot dialects in Blackfoot in addition to the old way of speaking Blackfoot versus the newer way. He told me that there are many different dialects within the reservation alone, within each family unit. He speaks the old Blackfoot with his older brother who also happens to be his neighbor, and he said that if any of the younger people heard them speak, they would not be able to understand. A local university offered him a position to teach Blackfoot which he declined. He did not want to create any confusion, or to stipulate what was correct or incorrect, because the language is more complex than that. This is a clear indication of the differences between dominant society and the Native people: there is no linear way of learning Blackfoot and there is no right or wrong way of learning. Learning Blackfoot as an English speaker in a colonized mindset does not align with the Native way of learning the language.

As I step away from the colonizer mindset, I try to create ceremony in writing and create art for this project as a way to embrace my intuitive Native way of knowing. Before I got in touch with my Native roots, I would begin the process of writing like any other student, by sitting down in front of the computer and trying hard not to let the blank pages intimidate me and getting word vomit out just for the sake of it. This always created a level

of heightened anxiety for me that has been compounded by years of anxiety of wanting to perform well academically……. but it all felt empty to me. All it was…. was just WORDS. Now, I am trying to reframe the process of writing by creating a sense of ceremony. I want to write and work coming from a sense of pure good intention. By bringing in good intentions into the work of this project, I sit down and pull out the small shell that I found at one of the local California beaches and carefully place some sage, cedar or sweetgrass to burn. I smudge myself and say a small prayer to clear any negative thoughts or energies that do not serve me…….and truthfully I also ask for help. This is an act of ceremony in itself where I am embracing my Native way and incorporating it into this project. There is ceremony in everything that we do, and it is present in our daily living too. Bringing ceremony in our everyday lives and tasks creates a sense of intention.

There are layers to Native ways of knowing and all the layers are interwoven together. Each layer was passed down to us from our ancestors through teachings/storytelling. My aunt said that after the evening dinner was the time for storytelling. The parents, grandparents, or other elders would sit down with the children to

share these stories. These stories were shared with much thought and intention, as they held great importance to teachings on lessons, morals and values. There is a level of intimacy and a sense of belonging through storytelling. The classroom environment does not share that same level of inclusivity and belonging.

Native ways of understanding my transracial (adopted/biological) roots. My growing Native ways of knowing are creating a sense of belonging to myself, and more importantly, making me feel a strong sense of grounding that I have never before experienced. Native ways of learning are creating a newfound foundation for me that are also teaching me to accept my adoptive roots. That sense of belonging is something that I never could fully experience; I always felt I was on the periphery of both my school and family environments looking in as the observer. This was before I fully grasped the concept of being a Native person. Creating a sense of belonging is a strong element in helping understand my transracial roots. The word "belonging" can be viewed in two ways: a sense of warmth, of community, or if someone has not experienced it, it can add to feelings of loneliness or isolation. When the white people came onto Turtle Island, they made it known from day one that we did not belong.

That sense of belonging began when I visited my aunt and uncle on my trip to Canada, and it created a deeper impact than I initially thought. I was an outsider/insider entering my ancestral territory but doing so opened a new doorway inwards that helped me come to the realization that we are all struggling with a sense of belonging. We just have to put in the concerted effort to maintain it, much like taking care of a houseplant. The houseplant represents our spirit that lives inside of us. Our spirit may lay dormant for years at

a time, or it may be active within us, or our spirit can leave our body if it chooses to. At times, in order for us to grow, we need to call in the spirit, but the way we call it can differ for each individual.

This artwork not only represents my spirit. The soil and the barbed wire is a layer of protection.

It is only recently that our agency and our voice as Indigenous people, we were never granted that right before. Previous stories of our experiences came from a settler colonialist's point of view and did not share our side of the story. I have come to understand how colonizers/settlers have taken away our land, our way of life and even our way of knowing by forcing their ways on our minds and bodies. It is not just stolen land, stolen lives, stolen minds alone. Much like the Potawatomi Nation, I would like to take some power back in my own way by using this academic space as a storytelling and talking circle space. By choosing my own way of communicating, choosing my own words, and creating my own images. I am refusing to conform to academic standards. There is power in informal writing as there is in academic writing. Instead of sharing data samples, I share my art and a different kind of

analysis. I hope my efforts help make room for present and future Indigenous scholars, and perhaps bring more visibility to the intellect and creativity of our population.

The Power of Story. Storytelling was traditionally an intimate practice, and it still is today for many, but with all of us connected to the internet and social media, we lose that intimacy. There is an element of vulnerability in the practice of storytelling, but that vulnerability can be easily twisted and misconstrued into something entirely different. That same vulnerability has also been violated by the practices of the social sciences (Tuck & Yang 2014). There is no guarantee that stories are entrusted to the right people, who understand respect and reciprocity. This was a huge concern of mine in writing this dissertation, and I have made the conscious decision to deliberately leave out a few stories of my own experiences out of respect to my community and my family for whom I carry the utmost respect.

Our experiences, stories, are what we think is true in our world, a kind of living entity that changes shape in educational, professional, and familial contexts. In dominant society, educational systems are created as knowledge factories. Exams take priority; scores determine the level that students like me are allowed to enter, much like in a never-ending video game of upping levels. With all the levels, it is easy to forget what and why we wanted to learn in the first place.

From a young age, I did not feel comfortable speaking in front of others. Growing up, my adoptive mother always corrected me when I mispronounced a word or scolded me if I used slang. She expressed her frustration with me if I answered the phone “incorrectly” and

would explain the correct protocol acc. Once, I was sitting on the stairs and I called my cat Boris to come closer to me. I said, "C'mere Boris!" My mother was sitting nearby at the dining room table and responded with, "You do not say c'mere Boris, that is not appropriate, you must say 'Come here' in proper English." This added to my growing silence as I was always afraid of saying the wrong thing. However, my fear is no comparison to what my biological parents and grandparents experienced when they were forced to live in the residential/Indian boarding schools where they were not allowed to speak their language. I can only imagine the fear they must have felt when they were not allowed to speak their language.

My educational experience growing up was not positive because I faced discrimination from certain teachers and the school principal on numerous occasions from middle school to high school. Either I faced criticism for not performing up to standards or when I did perform well, I was accused of cheating. My school principal openly told me that I would never amount to anything and would never graduate from high school. When I attended elementary school, we had to learn a second language and were given second language options. The choices were French, Ukrainian and Cree. The few Native students took the Cree class, and the students from Ukrainian families studied Ukrainian, while the rest of us studied French. My mother made the decision for me; she thought it was best for me to learn the French language and that it would come useful for me later in life. When I switched schools in sixth grade to a French Catholic school, French was my only option for a second language.

Growing up in silence. Growing up, I was naturally a quiet child, but it was also encouraged by my parents. They joked on several occasions that children should remain seen but not heard, but there was a serious undertone to their joking. I remember when I did try to speak up, I was usually met with a stern look from either parent or told that I was not old enough to understand so I should keep quiet. This quietness seeped into my schooling experience, although it was just generational: We could only speak when spoken to and, for the most part, we listened to every word from our teachers. But If I look at it from a different perspective, I learned from a young age to respect older people, or those who held power over me, and silence helped me develop not only a keen ability to listen, but also a keen ability to observe. But silence and observance were not always good things, as I discovered when I witnessed the experience of two Indigenous students in my class who would show up to class late on a continual basis. As soon as either student walked across the door threshold, the teacher would create a spectacle out of the situation. The teacher would yell at the student for being tardy and ask why they were late. When the student would answer, the teacher would respond with a deep sarcasm in their voice and make them pull their desk to the front of the classroom, facing the entire class. I remember one student, shuffling into the room with his textbooks in one hand and pulling up pants that were clearly too big for him with the other hand. His cheeks were rosy, and he had a runny nose. Externally, he didn't seem troubled by the situation, but I often wondered how he felt internally. The other student who walked in late was more visibly upset. The teacher kept shouting at him and telling him there was no excuse for being late. The student pulled his desk up and sat down, tears streamed down his face, and he buried his face in his hands to hide from the other students. As I looked at him, I could feel his pain, embarrassment, and shame. He was a quiet student like

me and never wanted to attract attention to himself. Both students only spoke when the teacher probed them with questions, but for the most part, they kept silent. The rest of the class, including myself, just looked on like spectators and stared at them. I felt terrible for the bullying shame they were experiencing from the teacher, but I never asked questions.

At that moment I was just glad I wasn't them. Because I was so sensitive due to my keen observation and intuition, I knew that people tended to look down on people like us. I thought because I was adopted into a white family, I was different. I was glad that I wasn't one of the native kids from the rez, or a native kid at all. My reasoning was, if my family is white, then I must be as good as white to the world. I never openly spoke about my heritage because I naively thought my silence would keep from attracting any unwanted attention. I didn't think of the obvious…...my facial features were a dead giveaway of my Indigenous heritage. Looking back, I feel ashamed of denying who I really am. How can I deny my heritage when it was a gift from the Creator?

The knowledge factory is designed to make us forget how to discover our passions. I imagine a knowledge factory as a long line of graduates moving along a travelator, each with multiple numbers over their heads–their identification numbers, their class numbers, their scores, all of which replace their unique sense of self. I also see a lot of memorizations of key facts, dates, and names of historical figures who are largely white and male. I hear the drone of teachers' rules and schools' expectations about where to sit, what pledges and prayers to recite, and how to respond to directives and inquiries. I can see all of this because I grew up in a knowledge factory. A factory that made me cling to my sense of self with desperation thanks to my ancestors whispering in my ears.

My Graduate School Experience. I began the graduate program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a mixture of eagerness, excitement, and my everlasting imposter syndrome. The first week was filled with introductions in the seminars I took with my cohort and with faculty within the department. In one seminar, I was one of the last students to introduce myself to the group. I said my name and referred to myself as Canadian Aboriginal. After my introduction, the professor walked up to me and quietly said, “From what I understand you shouldn’t call yourself Aboriginal because it is not appropriate, nor is it correct.” I was stunned and embarrassed to have a faculty member correct me. For the remainder of that seminar, I sat in my chair questioning my own identity. The professor made the comment with the best of intentions, but they gaslighted me into thinking that I didn't know how to identify myself. How many other minoritized students are corrected about their identities by individuals outside of their own racial and cultural groups?

When it came to fulfilling my independent research project requirement, I needed to apply and obtain IRB approval to conduct my interview research. After I submitted my application, I received an email from the IRB stating that I needed a letter or permission from the tribal chief. This requirement put me in the awkward position of talking to the cultural director of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians. She was understandably baffled by this requirement and informed me that it was under her jurisdiction to give permission for me to enter the reservation. Soon after, I was called to a meeting with the individual at IRB who was reviewing my application. They explained that in most tribal communities the tribal chief oversaw who could come in to do research. While I understand the IRB was trying to

be respectful of the community, it was hard to hear a non-Native person telling me how tribal governmental systems were run. In the end, my application was approved.

After I completed my independent project, I was asked to present to a graduate class about my research that included playing audio excerpts from my interviews and creating a gallery walk of my drawings that I posted within the classroom. An individual within the class was vocal that he did not like or agree with my work and made a dramatic exit. It was difficult to process this outburst because this research was deeply personal to me and to my fellow Indigenous people who have struggled to navigate the trauma of the educational system. This was about being vulnerable.

While these three experiences all happened during my time in graduate school, I did not let it define my entire experience. These incidents made me aware that many non-Native people are not consciously aware of our presence as Natives. However, it is imperative for us to make our presence known.

Journey Rich Points of Becoming–A Winter Trip to Alberta. Leaving my coastal Californian community and the University of California, Santa Barbara, for Calgary and Siksika Nation was eye-opening for me. It made me realize I was living in a bubble without a passing thought of my tribal community. Siksika Nation is not just in a different country and climate, it feels like it is worlds away when it comes to the Blackfoot way of being. That was the first thought that came to my mind as my plane landed in Calgary airport. I was unsure of what to think or feel as we flew over the white, flat plains, with the Canadian Rockies in the far distance. I was flying over the land that my ancestors once roamed freely, and I could already feel the connection with it but yet at the same disconnect was apparent to me. That

feeling of disconnection became ever more obvious when I walked out of the airport. I felt as though I was being slapped on the face by the cold air. I pulled out of the airport with my blue sedan rental car. I felt anxious and a little intimidated because I did not have any experience driving on roads in a winter climate. The GPS on my iPhone was my lifeline to finding my way around. As I reflect back, it is a bit alarming that I was so dependent on my iPhone to tell me where to go. What would my ancestors think?

Nervousness aside, I could still see the land's beauty as I drove down the Trans-Canada Highway, the main artery that connects the country from the east coast to the west coast. The flat prairie land was blanketed with snow. There were hardly any trees. I could see the land for endless miles, and the hills, though not too obvious, gently rolled throughout. Much of this land is privately owned as either farmland or ranch land, with many fence lines to show the division.

My uncle's take on the culture. Learning about my Indigenous roots took some time. I needed to get reacquainted with myself through a different lens and to get to know my biological family. It was uncomfortable because it meant that I was facing unfamiliar people, but also because I was facing an unfamiliar part of myself. I was no longer allowed to ignore that part of my identity: it was slapping me on the face to grab my attention. The unfamiliar is intimidating. Learning about my Indigenous side was like learning a new language, because learning a new culture is like learning a new language. I remember as I nervously sat down on the far end of the couch in my aunt and uncle's living room and explained to them my dissertation topic and that I told them I wanted to learn about my Blackfoot culture. My uncle said that he did not like the word *culture* because he felt that it was a colonizer's word that did not do justice to describing the Blackfoot ways. He felt that we should not give

colonization the power to describe our ways of knowing. From this point on, I knew that I needed to learn the ways of knowing, our Indigenous ways.

Multimodality learning-Indigenous learning is multimodal. Multimodality is ever present in Native communities across Turtle Island. It is used to express ideas and feelings in drawings, paintings, beading jewelry, etc. My biological family has always created different varieties of art to tell stories. My aunt has created beautiful, beaded jewelry that she either gifts to her family members, or sells online. My uncle leads drum making workshops for local community members, especially youth. He also paints and recently worked on a tipi painting project alongside his family members. They even gathered all the poles from the forest themselves. Everything that is created is done with the best of intentions, and it is believed that the first creation you make you must give to a loved one as a gift.

My uncle showed me some of the drums he had made and other pieces that were part of his dancing regalia, he created with various materials. He showed me a painting hanging up in his and my aunt's kitchen and explained the significance of it while I video recorded him.

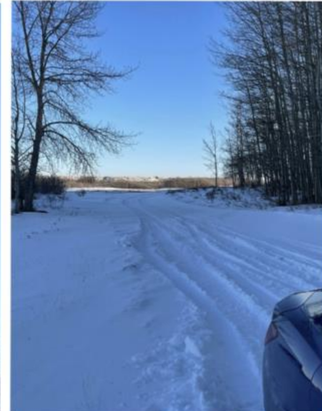
The painting represented the flag/emblem of Siksika Nation; it was the same emblem that was painted on the floor at the tribal community arbor where there are many community gatherings. The yellow circle in the center of the flag represents the sun, the green ring around it represents the grass, and the blue represents the sky. The feathers on either side represent us, the people. At the bottom, a peace pipe is placed on top of the tomahawk to signify peace between all tribal nations. The buffalo, who is our provider, is placed in the middle of the sun circle. Buffalo feeds us when we eat his meat; he provides medicine through his organs from all the plants he's eaten from the land. He also provides clothing and warmth from his hide. The arrow on the buffalo represents the seven different members within our nation: the Horn Society, Buffalo Woman Society, Crazy Dog Society, Deer Society, Prairie Chicken Society, Bumble Bee Society, and a seventh society that seems to be

forgotten by our people now. If it weren't for my uncle explaining the significance and symbolism of the emblem in his painting, I don't think I would have looked at it in such great detail.

Communication through art is a powerful way to show the world our ways of knowing, and sometimes art is more impactful than the written word. My uncle mentioned that not everything can be translated from Blackfoot into English, as it loses its meaning. I have a strong background in the history of art, which made me aware of how visuals send strong messages to the viewer, but when my uncle spoke of his painting, the experience solidified that art can be full of complex messages that can be easily overlooked. There is freedom in storytelling and there is freedom in storytelling in art.

My Uncle, the Land Teacher. My trip to Canada taught me to stay humble and respectful not only to my family and elders but more importantly to the land. I truthfully had overlooked the land and how I navigate my life around it. When I first arrived, I was overwhelmed by the immense amount of space and the huge presence of the big skies. This is when I noticed that people have a different sense of space and how they view the land. I really learned this lesson when I went looking for the local trading post on the reservation. I wanted to see the white bison that lived next to the trading post. This situation also taught me that I rely too heavily on modern technology like Google Maps because when I entered the location into my iPhone, I thought it was easy because my phone gave me a set of directions. Little did I know that Google was unreliable in rural areas. It led me into a completely different part of the reservation. When I arrived in the supposed location according to Google Maps, my frustration heightened. I decided to keep driving along the road as it got narrower and more heavily snow-covered. Perhaps, I should have turned around when I was driving

through the tree-lined road with ghosts hanging off the branches, but I decided to keep going. Eventually I turned around and tried to go back the way I came. I have no experience driving on winter roads, and yet I was driving in the rural country roads in my hybrid sedan with all-season tires, thinking that I was going to be okay. That changed when I hit a snow drift, and I could not get myself out. My car wasn’t equipped with any survival equipment or shovels. All I had were my two suitcases, a half-eaten power bar for food, and a bottle of frozen water left in the car the night before. I got out of the car to assess the situation and felt hopeful that I could get myself out of the drift. My hope quickly ran out when I looked at how much snow was piled on the side of the road, but naively I tried to dig myself out with a snow brush. I started getting cold and decided to head back into the car to warm up because I had failed to travel with a winter hat or gloves. I leaned my head against the steering wheel, hesitating to call my uncle. If I did, I felt that would mean that I was admitting defeat against the land. I pictured my ancestors laughing and shaking their heads at this lesson that I needed to learn; that I needed to be reminded, humbled by who I am in relation to the land. The land is our teacher, and we forget because we get so easily caught up in everyday distractions, causing us to fail to see what surrounds us. So, I ask you, when was the last time you looked at the land that surrounds you without any distractions, without being stuck in your thoughts? How do you think you would view the land differently if you did so?



From the very beginning of the trip, I was aware of how my view of the natural landscape differed from my aunt and uncle's. Our concepts of space and time affect how we view the landscape. For example, I was overwhelmed with the ample space of the flat prairie and the skies. In my eyes, there wasn't a whole lot to see, but at the same time there was so much to see. Trees and bushes planted to create windbreaks from the Chinook winds. were sparsely scattered across the landscape.

On this visit to see my aunt and uncle, I didn't have time to see the statue of John Hunter, my great grandfather, but I was able to see it a couple of years ago. It was surreal to see my grandfather here memorialized as a bronze statue surrounded by concrete streets and tall glass buildings that were constructed in glass and concrete. As I stood in front of the statue with people walking past me, I felt a mixture of pride, sadness, but also a strong sense of disconnection. I felt proud I read that he was a prominent figure of our local Indigenous

community. The Calgary Stampede is an annual outdoor rodeo and exhibition that celebrates the local Treaty 7 communities surrounding the city. I also felt sad and disconnected because I grew up not knowing a thing about him or the rest of my biological family but most important of all, I grew up not knowing about my heritage, my roots.

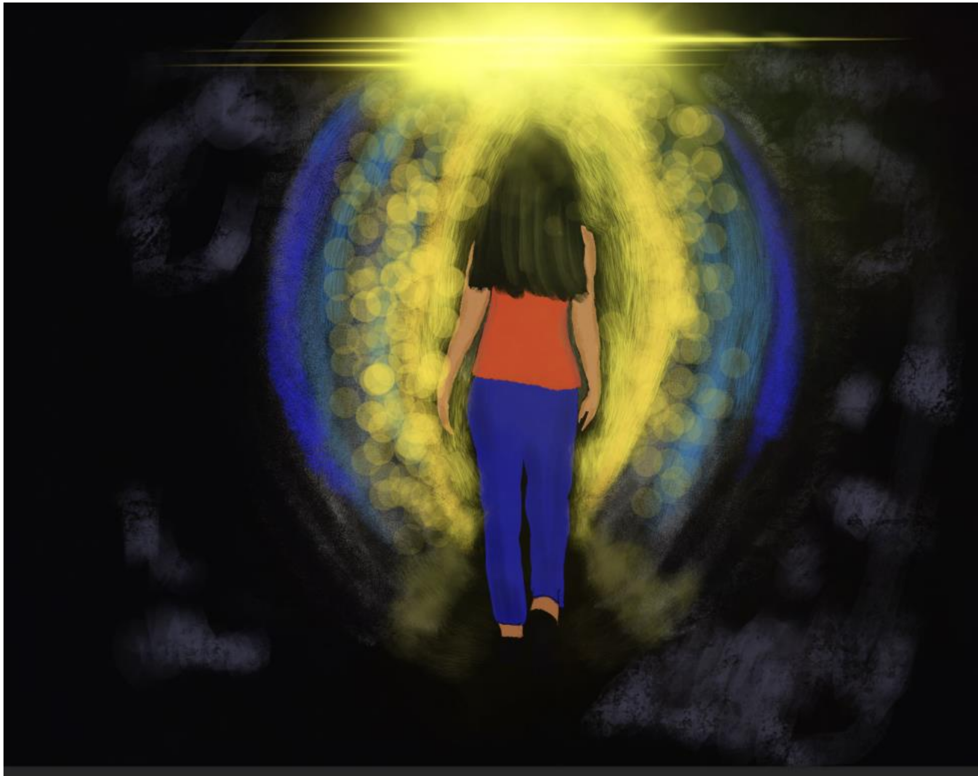
Another significant landmark that my aunt and uncle showed me was Chief Crowfoot's last tipi camping spot which overlooked the river valley. Chief Crowfoot was a key leader for Siksika who negotiated for our people in Treaty 7. Since it was nighttime in the dead of winter, I did not spend too much time looking at the spot, only enough to read the sign. My aunt and uncle waited in the truck to stay warm, while I bravely jumped out and climbed over the icy snowbanks to look. Even though it was a brief moment, it was memorable under the moonlight. I went back to this spot a few days later, just as the sun was setting. Unfortunately, I was not able to visit Chief Crowfoot's burial spot nearby because I was not sure of the road conditions. But even in my brief glimpse the land again was sharing a story of our past, of our ancestor and I wondered what it could show of our future.

Banff-Western vs Indigenous. Banff National Park always has a special place in my heart and has been a significant spot for the majority of my life. In my mind, Banff holds the many layers and complexities of my cultural identities. I spent many summers in the parks hiking as part of family summer vacations. I remember my adoptive dad giving me quick lessons about the land, for example how the water ran off the glaciers into the rivers and how they carved into the surrounding rocks. Looking back, it was a very different way of connecting to the land. The interaction was more western as we visited popular tourist destinations. I remember taking a boat tour of Lake Minnewanka with my family, where the guide spoke of how the Native people used to climb to a particular mountain by the lake

because they believed they could get closer and connect with their Creator. I still recall looking up at the mountain in complete awe, but looking through my western gaze, without realizing the Native people he was referencing were my people, my ancestors. Sometimes, I would head down trails alone and close my eyes so I could listen to the wind blowing through the pine needles of the trees. I remember thinking briefly that it was my ancestors and Creator speaking to me through the wind, then I stopped myself and told myself not to be thinking all crazy. But I also remember that when I entered or left the National Park, I would cry because I recognized it was my home without fully realizing it, only to find out many years later that it was part of my people's traditional lands.

Naming Ceremony. When I first arrived, my aunt and uncle mentioned that we could do my naming ceremony in Banff, because the land in that area was considered to be sacred. Unfortunately, that never happened because the weather up in the mountains can be very unpredictable. Also, I do not think it helped that I got lost and stuck in the snow the day before we planned to do it.

Part 4: Onward



It has taken since the beginning of my graduate studies to understand that my educational experiences are not a true reflection of how we build knowledge. I am starting to wake up from a bad dream, and I am starting to remember who I am. This talking circle centers on an autoethnography of my journey as a human being with Native roots recovering from the scars inflicted from the educational institutions that I attended for the past 40 years. My journey also includes the recent reunion I had with my biological family and the trip that I will take to stay with my biological mother and uncle to learn more about what I have missed since being adopted out of my family. My journey of my awakening to what, in my uncle's words, is "in my DNA." Through this account, I aim to make visible another kind of knowledge, one that is like a fragile ecosystem of becoming.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) describes a different kind of knowledge, one that is rooted in a ceremonial sense of belonging. Traditional western schooling is full of ceremonial performances to demonstrate membership through memorized words. The ceremonial belonging that Kimmerer describes is one filled with gratitude; each artifact, each drumbeat, represents a connection that we have to the natural world. Our cultures and way of knowing are deeply rooted in the Earth and the life forms that exist on it. As we have been assimilated within western societies, and pain of losing this deep connection with the Earth lingers within Native communities. We have been forced to conform to ways of knowing and being according to what the dominant society dictates. We have been told to fit in and become completely absorbed into the mass of a homogenous cultural constellation. The natural world is closely connected with the spirituality, beliefs, and values of Indigenous cultures. To fully comprehend it, we need to understand the imperative of sustaining cultural practices along with the surrounding environment. I have learned from my relatives, that one cannot simply learn a culture. The word *culture* is a colonizer's term. Our Blackfoot people view it more as a way of life.

Learning the Native way of knowing is going to be a lifelong experience with continuous lessons for me, and I think it is intended to be that way. Learning allows us to be in constant check with ourselves, making us question how we live our lives, how we affect others within our familial and community units. Do our actions align with what our ancestors or elders have passed down to us, in terms of morals and values? Kimmerer teaches us how to connect with the natural world, but we also need to be aware of how we connect with other people in the world around us. Human connection is important, and it's how we learn most about ourselves in a complex context.

The Complexities of Sharing. Saying no may be a simple refusal to do or consent to something. Creating and sharing art is way out of my comfort zone. So, I think there is a journey of acceptance in itself. But behind the word *no* is a myriad of meanings and complexities; that gives it power. As stated by Tuck and Yang (2014), the word *no* should not be seen as being difficult or defiant. To an outsider, researcher, or educator, this word, when uttered by an Indigenous person(s) who has been asked to cooperate with or provide information for research, may be viewed as non-cooperative because researchers do not understand the stance of the Indigenous person(s). Being able to accept a refusal and walk away is not only a sign of respect, but it also adds to the foundation of trust between both parties. Sometimes researchers have to simply trust the reasoning of why Indigenous people(s), like myself, say *no*.

To me, saying *no* or expressing refusal is giving myself, my fellow brothers and sisters, my tribal community a space to hold onto the sacredness of who we are, our ancestors, our knowledge, our way of being. Not everything that we know, or experience is meant for general consumption, as it may cause harm to our sense of agency, which is still relatively new to us, and may be taken out of context by people who do not fully understand. Yet at the same time, the westernized side of me can understand why we want to know more about other cultures or other ways of knowing that are completely outside of ourselves, our way of thinking. There is power in knowledge, there is power in learning more in order to expand our world of knowledge, opening doors to new ideas, new concepts. It makes me wonder if there is a way to create a bridge between the world of knowledge and the world of

sacredness. These two very different worlds may hold similar values, but they may lead into completely different directions. Can researchers align their values with their views of knowledge? Kimmerer views the world of knowledge and the world of sacredness as one, yet, I view it as two different worlds, because unlike Kimmerer, I was raised white. I was denied my right to learn about Native ways of knowing, let alone to be exposed to Native people and practices. Looking back, I did not realize how much of a void this loss created within me: it left me feeling hollow in my sense of identity, and my spirituality. I often reflect on how I used to look at the natural environment around me with a sense of emptiness but yet I instinctively knew that there was more. I was fully immersed in the western way of thinking and living without any ties to my Native side. The experience researching and writing of this dissertation has forced me to look at how I view myself and it documents the delicate process of how I am learning to view the world, where my values lie. In a way, this dissertation is a form of glue that is putting the pieces back together, much like the process of Kintsugi by the Japanese.

I know there are Native people out there like myself, who may or may not have similar circumstances, but have experienced or are experiencing the process of what they perceive as learning to navigate between two different sides, but it is really the process of finding the pathway to coming home. We are lost in a metaphorical fog that has prevented from us seeing our true selves and seeing our ancestors hidden within the spiritual world, which is embedded in the natural world that surrounds us.

The Native way of knowing is an authentic way of learning that you cannot learn in a classroom or from a book. The learning experience is not about learning in isolation, it is about creating connections with your family, friends, and communities. Unfortunately, the colonizer's way of thinking has infected us all and has created an unbalanced feeling amongst the communities within Turtle Island. The colonizer's perception has infected our way of thinking in the sense that we create limitations and labels amongst ourselves that perpetuate inequality. We are not considered Native enough if we are half white. We are not considered Native enough if we were not raised within our culture, our way of knowing. I am lucky that some of my relatives accept me as I am. I did not choose to be born as a transracial adoptee, and I should be allowed some grace to have the chance to learn and grow within my Blackfoot and Chippewa Cree roots. This infection of the colonizer way of thinking has created a sense of division and misconception amongst Natives, similar to the divide between outsider researchers and Native communities that I spoke about earlier. There needs to be a space of acceptance for Natives, like me, who did not have the opportunity to learn about our heritage. More importantly, there needs to be a level of acceptance within ourselves.

It has taken decades for me to even start to find any level of acceptance of my cultural identity, my unique positioning as a transracial adoptee, and my lack of knowledge of my Native heritage. I cannot speak for my adoptive parents, but I think they raised me with the best of intentions, although I do not fully understand the denial of my heritage. I only felt their frustration and fear when I tried to talk to them about my heritage. Unfortunately, I inherited that frustration and fear, which caused an endless cycle of denial and non-acceptance of myself mixed with occasional feelings of curiosity. Little did they know this

was harmful to my mental health. The sense of not knowing where I fit in caused an unsettled feeling internally, led to bouts of deep clinical depression and three suicide attempts because I did not have the capacity to fully accept all facets of myself. This long journey has shown me the importance of acceptance, to fully embrace my Native side. The importance of accepting myself is growing inside of me and continues to grow each day. In my earlier days, I was scared of my Native side. Because if my parents never fully accepted it, then how could I? I remember having conversations with my cousins about how we didn't grow up with Native role models and how it affected the way we saw ourselves. It was hard to see the beauty in our culture, our way of knowing, when the dominant society denied that beauty and distorted it with labels like *uncivilized*.

All I ask is for us to see each other as equals, not in the sense of denying our true cultural identities, but to see that ANY cultural identity is valid. Validity gives us a sense of being seen, heard, having a sense of agency, and not feeling invisible. The talking circle makes us all visible, everyone has a voice, everyone deserves to be heard. I hope this talking circle gives some comfort but also a sense of validation for other Native people who are transracial adoptees and offers some insight for those on the outside looking in. This dissertation is not about me being the victim, it is merely me sharing my story and showing my resilience. We are strong, resilient people and we will rise from the past. The criminal acts that were committed against us and the continued ignorance of who we are do not define us. We will continue to grow and keep educating ourselves and others who are willing to sit in this circle.

For my onward journey, I want to keep learning about the Blackfoot language and Blackfoot ways from my relatives in Siksika. I want to attend one of my uncle's drum

making sessions, and learn how to bead jewelry from my aunt, and learn how to gather medicinal plants like sweetgrass, and learn the stories that have been passed down. I want to connect with my Indigenous land as well as my family and fellow Natives, who are a priority for me. I believe the practice of opening without shame and connecting with my roots will be the healing part of my journey. My Indigenous land does not stop at southern Alberta; it includes Turtle Island in its entirety.

My hope, with the help of my ancestors, is to give back to my Native people, but I am not entirely sure what that looks like. This will be a continuous journey for the rest of my life.

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