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Nehiyaw Two Spirit Creation Stories: Re-mapping home, desire, and Indigenous education through the body

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Abstract

Creation is an ongoing process and Indigenous stories are meant to reflect this never-ending process of creation, sharing stories that grow with context and to impart teachings appropriate to context. Michel First Nation (MFN) and related Nehiyaw (Cree) nation's creation stories, largely written about by white/settler scholars, narrate histories that extol the virtues of cis-straight men while rendering cis-straight women to the sidelines and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer (2S) people absent. Facing the highest rates of violence of any demographic (Martin et. al., 2019), 2S people are under threat of becoming ancestors before they are elders passing down knowledge. Uncovering 2S creation stories is therefore vital not only for 2S survival, but also for the restitution of these knowledges to entire Indigenous communities.

Drawing on Indigenous feminist/queer scholarship, this work brings 2S peoples and epistemologies to the forefront of anti-colonial projects in education and sovereignty/nation-rebuilding. Indigenous feminist scholars argue that these epistemologies must be centered because the ongoing project of colonization seeks to eradicate Indigenous ontologies that honor the sovereignty/bodily autonomy of 2S people (Deer, 2015; Wilson, 2018).

Using Nehiyaw-specific methods of miskâsowin (*deep self-reflection*), Talking Circles (Graveline, 2000; Kolopenuk, 2020) grounded in a Nehiyaw epistemic-ontology of wahkotowin (*interconnection/ accountable relationship to* all *human/other-than-human beings*), this project shares stories of five relatives of MFN who impart teachings that emerge from commitments to nation, lands, Indigenous resurgence, and past and future generations of MFN and related peoples. The stories that emerge from this project demonstrate 2S people and teachings as life-givers/creators who share a methodology of curiosity or "shapeshifting" reminiscent of Nehiyaw ancestral creation stories, definitions/practices of love that unsettle hierarchies and human-centrism, and tools and hopes for survival in a colonial world.

Keywords: *Cree/Nehiyaw, Two Spirit, Indigiqueer, Indigenous education, Indigenous feminism, Indigenous methodologies, Indigenous storytelling, Indigenous land, Indigenous relationality*

NEHIYAW TWO SPIRIT CREATION STORIES:
RE-MAPPING HOME, DESIRE, AND INDIGENOUS EDUCATION THROUGH THE BODY

by

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see out soon—you know every detail and every story and with that, you are making it possible for our people to know our past so that we can have and know a future. Charlie, thank you for all the stories and wisdom and I hope maybe someday we can head out to a reunion together. Emily, Auntie Eileen, and Uncle Louie, thank you for seeing me for who I am and allowing me to help. I learn so much in the process, but also just enjoy being able to spend time with, learn from, and laugh with you. You guide me in this work—to consider what you want, what all my elders and loved ones want and need—because when I do that, I am happy and I feel home.

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PROLOGUE

Ancestors, do you see what I see? Ancestors, do you smell, hear, feel, taste what I taste? I am your eyes and ears now in the mountains, walking the homelands that you had to leave. The landscapes have certainly changed.

Ancestors, I have heard you left your homelands. I hear it told you went north and west, never to be heard from again. Was it adventure you sought? Or were you escaping encroaching colonization in the east? What did you seek, Kwarakwante? What did you desire?

I stop for a moment. The wind picks up and dances with the tree branches and sun glitters on the path in front of me like stage lights. I sing, poorly, but I attempt it before turning music on my phone. I think my ancestors may prefer that to my voice and it makes it easier to hike and dance simultaneously. I dance for the trees. I dance for the ancestors.

Do you like this music, ancestors? Do you like how the trees dance now? I am trying to dance with them, hoping you can better see the performance. Did you dance when Kwarakwante arrived in your territories? Did you sing for Kwarakwante? I know so much of Kwarakwante, but what of you, dear women? What of you, my Two Spirit ancestors? What songs did you sing? Did you seek adventure?

I am returned to the present again with the snapping of a cedar branch, its fronds browned at the edges from a lack of rain, as it cuts into my arm when I hike and dance a bit too close to the edge of the trail. The browned edges of the fronds are beautiful despite being dry—perhaps *because* they are dry. My own skin, scraped by the branch, reflects pain and yet is not grotesque.

You were forced to leave these lands, ancestors. What do they look like now? How has the cedar changed? Did this tree touch your arm as you were marched from these mountains? I am

sorry you were forced to leave. How much do you miss these lands? Ancestors, let me be your body in these woods returning you to your home.

From the corner of my eyes—*or is it my ancestors' eyes*—I see a clearing in the cedar and make out the edges of a shore. Walking toward it, I see a clear pond open up before me, clearing my view for violet-colored mountains before me. Gentle winds make the waters bob like backup dancers on a stage. I begin to sway in rhythm alongside these waves. *Ancestors, I sense the lands miss you, too.*

The shores are covered with cedar fronds and pine needles. I find a large rock and set down my belongings, kneeling to sweep away the fronds and brush to see stones buried in a neat pile underneath. The piney odors are strong and I sense something I cannot yet place into words. I pull a journal from my backpack and begin writing.

What memories have you left underneath? What, dear Two Spirit ancestors, did you bury underneath your lodge when you had to leave? What hopes and desires linger there? I wait and listen, taking in the sights, smells, sounds, and feelings around me. I wonder, as I often have, about the Two Spirit people in the stories of my ancestors. I wonder if they were free. I wonder what stories they have to share for long it has been hard to find them yet so many of my kin I know today are Two Spirit. *Where did all of us come from?*

Who would you be today, ancestors, if colonization never dispossessed you of your home? What did you want for your future? For my future? For our *future?*

Two Spirit ancestors, let me be your hope renewed. Two Spirit ancestors, help me uncover and unearth your desires. Ây hay.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"Creation was not a single event—it is an ongoing state of being…" ~ Alex Wilson (2015)

In the beginning of Nehiyaw creation, wacask (*muskrat*) helped Wesakecahk—the shapeshifting being of sakihiwewin *(love)* and the constellation many know today as Orion—made the world for the Nehiyaw ([Plains] Cree). This point in creation places Nehiyawak (*Plains Cree people, plural*) in what is now central Canada starting from the last ice age. Wesakecahk still comes down from the constellation and walks, swims, or flies along the lands with Nehiyawak. Sometimes Wesakecahk is storied as a trickster and humorously helps Nehiyawak learn their place in the world. Often, Wesakecahk is storied as elder brother and takes the shape of a man.

Some ten thousand years after the last ice age melted, another man is born in Kanien'kehá:ka (*Mohawk*) Kahnawake territory among Jesuit missions near present-day Montreal. A master navigator in canoe of the rivers and waterways of his lands, he moved west to live among the Nehiyaw in the plains and Rocky Mountain region of what is now Treaty 6 territory in Canada encompassing most of central Alberta and Saskatchewan. In the Jesuit mission records, it is said that his name was Kwarakwante, born to Kanien'kehá:ka parents, and that he went west with the sun never to be heard from in the east again. The Sun Traveller, they nicknamed him.

In these lands in the west, Kwarakwante stayed, admiring the Nehiyaw plains and Asiniwaci (*Rocky Mountains*) that offered ample opportunity to maintain practices similar to those being supplanted quickly in the east with settler ones. There was plenty of caribou and other game, plump berries to pick and with which to make pemmican, and fresh waters for fishing and along which to harvest medicines. There, in these lands, was a beautiful exchange of Kanien'kehá:ka, Tse'khene, Otipemisiwak (*Métis*), and Nehiyaw languages, customs, and peoples and it is in this way a new group of nations emerged—ones who would all be family. And what a family it was!

Before his passing, Kwarakwante had nearly twenty-five children and most, if not all, spoke multiple language including Kanien'kéha (*Mohawk language*), Nehiyawewin (*Plains Cree/Y-dialect language*), Michif (*hybrid Nehiyawewin and French language*), French, and English and who it is said reshaped the fur trade in the Canadian west.

The settler project in the east was expanding and moving westward faster than an eagle flying after its beloved prey. The peoples who would soon fight to make the settler nation-state of Canada their sovereign began to drool over the bountiful Nehiyaw lands in the western plains and mountains with lust in their hearts.

Kwarakwante's many descendants wandered, traveled, and called different river valleys in the mountains and plains their home. Some wandered into the prairie lands around the foothills, following game and practicing their way of life, and others deeper into the terrain of the mountains.

White settlers seeking respite in the country, away from crowded and industrial cities, set their lust upon the awe-inspiring mountains that frame the beautiful western prairies. Seeing this as an untouched wilderness to fulfill all their desires of freedom, they were dismayed to see that Kwarakwante and the people were living in those mountains, fishing from the rivers, harvesting in the valleys, and traversing the high elevations to hunt and trap across the territory. They stewarded the land, protected it from overgrowth and fire, and maintained a balance so that all caribou, elk, moose, bears, and plants could thrive as the people did.

Kwarakwante's people were forced out of these homelands. It started in waves and the people would wonder when they would be forced to grow wings to fly into the sky or gills and fins to swim in the sea. Soon there would be no more land to which they would flee.

One of Kwarakwante's many children, Michel Callihoo, signed adhesion to Treaty 6 in 1878 in the hopes of surviving these threats. In so doing, he became chief of the newly named

Michel First Nation (MFN), a band of relatives granted First Nation reserve lands. On Michel Indian Reserve Number 132 (Michel I.R. 132), in present-day Villeneuve, a short distance northwest from Amiskwaciywaskahikan (*Edmonton*), the Michel people at first faired very well in their new reserve lands. A people with familiar with agriculture and farming as Kanien'kehá:ka people are in the east, they thrived on the reserve lands, creating bountiful harvests that sustained the people. Settler lust for these rich lands and harvest could not be contained. Settlers began to demand plots of land unclaimed by Michel First Nation families, many often confiscated illegally or sold by prospectors at pennies on the dollar. Promises made upon signing Treaty 6 to deliver plows, cows, grain, and other supplies to ensure the survival of MFN peoples were denied. The people were starved, some resorting to selling off their plots of land in exchange for pennies, for limited amounts of grain, and for the rights to move freely to sell their crops, beef, and other wares.[i] Leaving the reserve, many scattered, a large group to Lac Ste. Anne who are part of now the present-day Lac Ste. Anne Métis community.

Further west in the mountains, Chief Michel's siblings, parents, nieces and nephews, and relatives of the MFN peoples fared no better. Many of Chief Michel's siblings, nieces and nephews, and other relatives were being squeezed into smaller and smaller territories in the mountains as settlers pushed on westward. In 1907, when Canada's Jasper National Park was founded, Indigenous peoples—Kwarakwante and relatives of MFN peoples—were labeled squatters who faced eviction. Forced to flee, many of the descendants of these Kwarakwante and Michel families are of the Kelly Lake Cree Nation (also known as As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation) whose territories are on the eastern border between present-day Alberta and British Columbia. Some of the last families of Michel and Kwarakwante who stayed in the Jasper Valley, making their home, were eventually forced northward, marched out of these newly appointed national park

lands at gunpoint by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Stopping just northeast of the tallest of the peaks in the Jasper Valley, they made their new home in what is now Grande Cache, Alberta and they are the Aseniwuche Winewak.[ii]

It is in these ways that Michel First Nation has kin all across Alberta and it is in these ways that MFN peoples call Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation, Aseniwuche Winewak, and Lac Ste. Anne Métis peoples their family. On Michel I.R. 132, Michel people still practiced their way of life as much as they could, tending to these relations in other communities.

It was written by settler scholars that these large nations of people descendant from Kwarakwante and his family were pious, industrious, and Christian (Barman, 2019; Macpherson, 1998). The stories by settlers say that they were a hard-working people who dominated the fur trade and these stories herald the achievements of the men—or "forefathers" as they call them—of these great nations and communities.

Chief Michel, like his father, had over twenty children. One of his eldest children, a daughter, was Elise Callihoo. She took a husband for a time—Joe Gladu—who was the son of the successive chief after Chief Michel. Sometime later in her life, she took Francois Boudreau as her husband. A man born to a father from Kahnawake and Emilie Aubichon, his Cree-Métis mother, he lived in Manitoba's Red River region, the homelands of the Indigenous Métis peoples (Andersen, 2015; Hrycun et. al. 2019). Elise and Francois lived together on the reserve for some time and had many children. Their oldest was Julie-Olivine, nicâpân (*my great-grandmother*).

In the 1885 Northwest rebellion, Francois Boudreau took up arms. There are no stories in my family of how Elise assisted in this resistance. Did she take also take up arms, but it was never recorded because she was a woman? The granddaughter of Kwarakwante, the daughter of a chief who once took the son of a chief as her husband, did she lead her people in resistance and defiance

against settler violence? Did she make bannock, pemmican, and hot stews that would sustain all of the fighters in battle? Did she take her ribbon skirts out into the field to wrap them around the wounds of those who fought or to carry bodies back home to their families?

After the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, Indigenous people who resisted—and those *perceived* to have been sympathetic to the rebellion—were punished. Famously, Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) was imprisoned despite not actively engaging in the rebellion. Métis leader Louis Riel was also hanged. Others were forced to send their children to the industrial, residential, or mission schools or had their children outright taken from their homes as punishment.[iii]

It is for this reason that many of Elise's children were taken from her, some sent to the schools and some sent to live with family members in other Indigenous communities. Some were sent even further east among the families of Michel, Kwarakwante, and Francois Boudreau near Kahnawake or among those families who had sought sanctuary at Quebecois seminary schools. Nicâpân was among them. Census records list her and nimosôm as half-breeds, sometimes as other derogatory terms as well—even though they all of Cree and Kanien'kehá:ka and other lineages, are bred of nothing but stardust and are not half of anything, but indeed are as full as a clear sky blanketed in stars.

The Indian Act of 1876 introduced legislation that revoked the treaty status (i.e. citizenship or "Indian status" membership in respective First Nations) of Indigenous women who married non-status/non-treaty men. This effectively forced many women to leave their communities/reserves as they were no longer recognized as citizens of their respective First Nations/Bands (Million, 2013).[iv] Coupled with speculation and corruption in dealing with Michel peoples and lands; incarceration, theft of children, execution, and other forms of punishment for Indigenous people who fought in the Northwest rebellion; and refusal to deliver the rights and

resources guaranteed to Michel peoples at the signing of Treaty 6, fewer and fewer MFN families were able to still live on the reserve.

In 1958, Canada then terminated the entirety of the remaining Michel First Nation as a Band recognized under the Indian Act.[v] The reserve lands were scooped up by wealthy landowners and gravel mining operations. If one were to take a scenic drive through the roads of the old reserve in the present-day, it would showcase lush scenery: rich country, clear lakes, and mansions that could fit all of the peoples of MFN who have been scattered and desire to come back home. Today, only one elder remains on the lands that were, until 1958, sovereign territory of Michel First Nation Band #472 on Michel I.R. 132.

It is in this way that Michel First Nation, a nation of Cree, Kanien'kehá:ka, Tse'khene, Métis, and more Indigenous people living Nehiyaw ways in Nehiyaw lands, was born and it is in this way that many of the people now wander like lone, shooting stars without a constellation to return to in the sky. It is in this way that many wander without a home.

It also is in this way that I know this much of who I am. Nicâpân, she could skin the hide off you just with a look from her eyes, it has been said. Angry, she refused to speak English and there is little else that nikawiy remembers of her or that nimosôm who journeyed onto the ancestors in 1993, could share of her.

Nimosôm and kokum (*my grandmother*), another Indigenous woman without status whose eyes could also skin the hide right off you, moved to the United States to find work. It was then that nikawiy took nohtâwiy (*my father*) as her husband. An Irishman with family from the rebellious County Cobh in the south, nohtâwiy bonded with nikawiy over their shared experience resenting the hundreds of years of British, colonizing occupation of their peoples and lands.

It is in this story that I am born at that point and how my creation from these aforementioned lands and ancestors connects to the beginning of creation when Wesakecahk made the world for Nehiyawak to the birthing of Michel First Nation like a star, to now.

Like Michel First Nation, which continues despite Canada's attempts to eradicate the band, I too continue and my stories—like those of my nation and ancestors—also continue. Creation stories, like constellations, pass through cosmological changes. Living, breathing, and ongoing—creation stories are not just memories of past, but also expressions of futurity (Wilson, 2015, 2015a) designed to understand the past to continue to position Indigenous peoples firmly in the present and future. Indigenous creation stories are part of Indigenous storytelling pedagogy and methodology used since time immemorial to teach not only about the origins of Indigenous nations, but also to teach accountability to and reciprocity with all of creation—including human and non-human animals, plants and trees, waters and mountains, wind and sky, and stars and the cosmos. In Nehiyaw creation stories, Nehiyawak emerge from the cosmos—from the stars. Nehiyawak are stardust and come from the stars.

Stories of Kwarakwante and related peoples, including MFN peoples, however, have been largely written about by white settler scholars and authors who are fascinated with my nation's impact on the lands, fur trade, and survivance in the rugged terrain of the northern Asiniwaci. The information collected, however, tells a story of the Sun Traveller, Kwarakwante, and his family's piety, industriousness, and cis-heteronormative values and capitalist work ethics that sideline cis women to supporting roles and render Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people non-existent (Barman, 2019; Macpherson, 1998). A Two Spirit Nehiyaw who traces ancestry to the stars, I often wonder about the stories of Two Spirit creation be reflected in the cosmos.

What, then, are our Nehiyaw creation stories as Two Spirit people of these communities of Michel First, Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw, and Aseniwuche Winewak Nations, and of the Lac Ste. Anne Métis peoples? Even if we as Two Spirit people were not traditional, we are here now, so in the spirit of infinite creation, how did we come to be? What knowledges might the creation stories of Two Spirit people of these nations/communities? Might they form a constellation that orients us all wandering toward home? How might they help—as all creation stories do—support Indigenous education and Two Spirit futurity?

I arrive at this question after years of digging—much like wacask to get earth to make the world—to understand Julie-Olivine and the women in my community and to try find the Two Spirit ancestors and constellations in the sky people are. I know they are there; I have heard it told that to be Two Spirit is to be traditional, that there are words for people like me in Nehiyawewin, but these stories of our creation—of our tradition—are hard to find. The colonial stories threaten to supplant the ones that emerge from Indigenous memory.

My research questions are not posed in isolation, but rather are a concert of questions posed by the communities that claim me—Michel First Nation, relatives from related nations/communities, and Two Spirit kin across the western hemisphere (*sometimes known as Turtle Island and Abya Yala*). These questions sing together across time, space, and ancestral blood memory.

This is an anti-colonial project that makes a sovereign, self-determining *re*turn toward Indigenous (and specifically Nehiyaw) otologic and epistemic methodologies of temporality; interconnection, holism, and reciprocity; and accountable relation to and with all of creation, including land or other-than-human beings (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; S. Wilson, 2008). In Nehiyaw ontology, this is expressed through the natural law of wahkotowin *(responsible kinship*

with all relations—human and other-than-human). Miskâsowin *(deep, inward reflection on relationship to lands and people in order to come to know one's role/responsibility)* is how one comes to know their relational positioning and subsequent role and responsibility in order to be in miyo wîcêhtowin (*good, accountable relations*).

In this writing, Nehiyawewin terms will be used where possible and when appropriate in order to center the ontology of interconnection embedded *in* Nehiyawewin as much as possible (Bear, 2006; Highway, 2008; Kovach, 2009). A language born of the inherent interconnection endemic to Nehiyaw tradition, the terms I share in this writing in Nehiyawewin are those that better convey meaning than when translated—if possible, at all—into English.

When the terms are used for the first time, the English language meaning will typically be provided in italics and parenthesis after the Nehiyawewin term to center the ontology of Nehiyawewin *before* the English translation. I borrow this concept from Cree scholar Winona Stevenson (formerly Wheeler) who does so to center Cree as the first and English the *foreign* language in this work (Kovach, 2006, p. x). So often Nehiyaw and more Indigenous peoples have been forced to bend toward colonial teachings and I invite you, dear reader, into this world of instead bending toward a Nehiyaw ontology. For assistance, there is a Glossary of terms included in the Appendices.

If you, dear reader, are Indigenous and especially if you are Two Spirit/Indigenous LGBTQIA (Indigiqueer), this work is *for you* as I am responsible to these sets of relations. If you, dear reader, are not Indigenous, I also invite you in. Tawâw. Welcome. There is space. Your relationship to this work means you and I have different responsibilities to one another. I will be using second person pronouns in this text from time to time because, as Cree scholars Shawn Wilson (2008) and Tracy Lee Bear (2006) note it is important that there is an audience to this text,

that there is a relationship kiyânaw attempt to build with one another—you and myself, the writer—so that you may better know your responsibility to what you will learn in this work.

While this work can be beneficial to all (Nelson, 2008) it *cannot* be taken up unless the aim of it is to benefit living, breathing Indigenous people in all of their and our modern glory *today*. As an anti-colonial project, it is concerned only with the restitution of bodies—of lands, humans, and waters (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Dear reader, I invite you to consider your responsibility to this text and to ask yourself what your relationship is to the lands (and peoples *Indigenous* to those lands) to consider what you might do with what you learn from this work.

More than a project of decolonization, a term some Indigenous scholars denote can center colonialism and de-center Indigenous joy (Wilson & Laing, 2019), this is a project of Indigenous resurgence to reclaim Two Spirit/Indigiqueer bodies' hope and futurity. It is designed to carve out space for Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people to be together imagining a present reality and future hope where colonization no longer marks them as s*vage,[vi] inanimate, historical, and for the dead. In this project Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people *take up space,* both in their own bodies as well as on land from which they have been dispossessed. This project is a reclamation of Two Spirit stories and voices to rebuild relationships with those bodies and with the experiences and desires. These are desires that have been stolen through the colonial project's re-education of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer desires toward a narrow, whitestream, cis-heteronormative orientation (Barker, 2017; Grande, 2004; Morgensen, 2011).

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people *will* come home to Indigenous communities as active agents and vital members—as they always have been. Before becoming ancestors, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people will become elders and knowledge-keepers, so desperately needed to save Two Spirit//Indigiqueer youth and lives, and also so crucial to healing, thriving, dynamic communities.

More so than any demographic, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have been forced to experience the brunt of some of the most egregious forms of violence of the colonial project. Early Spanish conquerors depicted people who might today be consider Indigiqueer people as "devilish things" (Wilson, 2018, p. 189). In 1513, Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez executed an estimated forty Indigenous LGBTQIA people by *feeding them alive to his dogs* (Justice et. al., 2010; Wilson, 2018). These are but mere examples of a long history of abject horror and violence enacted in queer Indigenous peoples.

Today Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people continue to face horrendous violence. Approximately seventy-five to ninety percent of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people experience sexual or some other form of violence in their lifetime with as many as ninety percent experiencing it *twice* in their lifetime (Balsam et. al., 2004; Golden, 2021; Hunt, 2016; Lehavot et. al., 2009; Ristock et. al., 2019). Still here, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are at risk of becoming ancestors before their time. As Poarch Creek Two Spirit scholar and sex therapist Roger Kuhn says, "I don't know that I know a Two-Spirit person that hasn't experienced some kind of violence based on their identity" (Golden, 2021, para. 25). The violences since the dawn of colonization through to today threaten Two Spirit/Indigiqueer lives, futures, and the stories and medicines they carry.

To be Two Spirit is to be *in relationship* with *more than one* spirit. It is in the name. There is an implied understanding of interconnection. Two Spirit is not merely an identity; it is a role. These roles remind of important teachings about interconnection and how to be accountable—joyfully—to all relations. Two Spirit stories support deep understandings of Indigenized, resurgent practices in education that restore relational accountability through storytelling pedagogy and language revitalization as foundational to Indigenous education.

From the start, whitestream[vii] education was designed to disconnect Indigenous people from their respective epistemic-ontologies "to colonize [Indigenous] minds," writes Quechua scholar Sandra Grande (2004) "as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources." (p. 5). Part of this "colonization of minds" to get at "land and resources" included enforcing strict gender roles such as requiring boys cut their hair short and teaching girls only activities suited for white notions of femininity and womanhood such as learning to become homemakers and engaging in domestic labor (Barker, 2017; Grande, 2004). Any deviance from these norms was punished severely (Barker, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

Residential and boarding schools and Spanish missions in the Americas have been violent projects—and they are not projects of ancient pasts. The last residential school in present-day United States closed in 1978 and in Canada in 1996. Within these schools, that many Indigenous communities refer to as extermination camps, children were subject to verbal, emotional, and psychological terror. They were forced to stop speaking their Native language—often with violent consequences if they forgot or refused—change their names, cultural dress, hair, and more, and learn and practice whitestream cultural traditions. The abuse of the psyche was also inflicted on children's bodies. Corporal punishment, starvation through experiments to test nutritional supplements, severe beatings and even sexual abuse and rape were rampant in the schools. Many survivors of the schools today can recount these abuses and horrors—and more.

In May 2021, the remains of more than 215 missing children were found buried in a mass, unmarked grave under the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Since that time, Indigenous survivors of the schools and their families and descendants have called on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada to investigate all of the schools in the nation. As of early 2024, over the remains of over 3,000 children have been found in mass graves buried under

the schools. Because survivors and their families recount in testimony incidents of children's death by incineration, from fleeing the schools and never returning, and other manners, it is estimated that the number killed in these extermination camps is much higher.

The horror remains as memories are carried by survivors and passed on to descendants through generational trauma. With these egregious forms of bodily violence, the ontology of beautiful, Indigenous languages that convey feelings from the body, expressions that cannot be understood in English, and deep connection to sets of relations, were also ripped away. It left many survivors struggling to even grasp for the Indigenous worlds and methods that can express such insurmountable grief.

Resurgence in Indigenous education therefore must redress these violences and harms—returning languages that can express rage, grief, sorrow as much as expressing hope, dreams, and longings. Indigenous language revitalization efforts in Indigenous education is a key component of this work of educational resurgence (Garcia et. al., 2022). Within Nehiyaw and many Indigenous languages are also non-binary understandings of gender expansiveness that are important to *re*-member into Indigenous communities before they are erased, forgotten, or subsumed in the process of translation (Kovach, 2009).

Returning to Indigenous pedagogies is also crucial—including returning to methods of teaching and learning that can help heal from the rupture of colonial attempts to sever kinship ties (and related responsibilities). In Nehiyawewin, Cree scholar Judy Iseke (2013) writes that the word for teaching is kiskinohamâtowin, which implies a "communal happening or event involving the people, the earth, and the creator" (p. 570). Nehiyaw learning is *about* kinship, relationships, and in the context of these histories of violence in the schools—also healing.

Indigenous pedagogy and education teaches interconnection and accountability focusing on language and collaboration—not competition, which is endemic to the competitive and ruggedly individualistic traditions of whitestream education (Brayboy, 2005; Kulago, 2019; McCarty & Lee, 2014). These pedagogical models include land pedagogy and land-based education that return Indigenous ontologies of land-based kinship (Kimmerer, 2013; L. Simpson, 2014; Tuck et. al., 2014; Wilson & Laing, 2019; Wilson et. al., 2021).

A key method for practicing a relational pedagogy used in Indigenous communities since time immemorial is storytelling. (Iseke, 2013; Smith, 1999; Thomas, 2015; Wilson, 2013). Foundational to Indigenous learning, storytelling is a relational practice that educates the heart/body as part of the mind (Archibald, 2008). Stories invite readers and audiences of stories shared orally to become *witnesses* to the story, crafting meaning in a shared space between the storyteller and audience (Iseke, 2011).

Stories that overemphasize cis and heteronormative lifeways, however, predominate as hold-overs from colonial education (Barker, 2017; Wilson, 2018; Wilson & Laing, 2019). While not often intentional, the theft of Indigenous ontologies threatens—even as nations and peoples engage decolonization projects—to disappear from memory the worldviews and importance at the core of Indigenous language, epistemology, ontology, and stories. In particular, as this research describes, they threaten to disappear Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people from the stories and with it the vital teachings, histories, and knowledges that emerge from a people most impacted by the violence of colonization. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer storytelling resurgence is therefore vital not only for Two Spirit/Indigiqueer futures, but also for the health of entire nations and communities. Centering Two Spirit/Indigiqueer stories helps shift the imbalance in Indigenous education, that

shift itself one way to practice the Nehiyaw worldview of being accountable and responsible to harm enacted on relatives.

Using storytelling theory, pedagogy, and methodology as the center of this research, my dissertation brings together Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people of Michel First Nation and related kin from Kelly Lake/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation, Aseniwuche Winewak Nation, and Lac Ste. Anne (MFN and related nations/communities) to meet weekly in Talking Circles to dialogue on and craft creation stories from embodied experiences. Over the course of ten Talking Circle sessions, five Two Spirit storytellers from these communities, including me, analyzed, dialogued about, journaled on, and subsequently recreated—or re-mapped—our own creation stories centering our experiences and teachings we wished to convey.

Stories are meant to impart contextual teachings, conveying meaning pertinent only within a given set of relationships and time periods and/or contexts (Iseke, 2011; Thomas, 2015). As such, when stories are shared and re-shared throughout time and by different narrators and/or with different audiences, they must necessarily change to impart teachings vital to an evolving array of contexts and goals. Indigenous creation stories are representative of this, charting creation from the emergence of Indigenous peoples that carry meaning in the present while imagining the future. Like Indigenous peoples—dynamic, changing, and constantly in a flux of birth and growth—so too is (Wilson, 2015) and Indigenous stories. Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013) describes some of these contextual storytelling methodologies as an Indigenous feminist praxis referred to as *re-mapping*. Unlike colonial cartography—which creates static and relatively unchanging documents—is more of a storied almanac that charts relationships and interactions between bodies of ancestors, humans, and lands (2013, p. 25).

Wahkotowin is the Nehiyaw tribally-specific epistemology and natural law undergirding this work that knows all beings under creation are related. All beings of creation are interconnected and therefore must be accountable to one another, including redressing harms and restoring imbalances in order to be respectful, reciprocal relatives or kin. Disrespectfully ignoring those responsibilities would not only damage those relations but also oneself. Wahkotowin knows that all actions in turn impact the actor and vice versa.

Within this worldview of Wahkotowin, this research therefore echoes the literature, theory, and praxis of Indigenous feminist and queer scholarship and communities that argue for a centering of Indigiqueer people and cis-straight (cishet) Indigenous women in storytelling, education, and decolonial projects (Arvin et. al., 2015; Barker, 2017; Byrd, 2017; Deer, 2015; Justice et. al., 2010; Simpson, 2012; Simpson, 2016; Wilson, 2018). As recipients of the most egregious forms of gender violence (Ristock et. al., 2019), Indigenous feminist scholars argue that this violence is not only endemic to the colonial project, but a tool for maintaining colonial power (Deer, 2015). As such, the stories, knowledges, and teachings of these communities must be centered in order to better understand the colonial project, strategies for resisting it, and working to restore the balance wherein Indigiqueer people and cishet women have been pushed to the margins by both colonization and the cis male heteronormativity that can dominate many anti-colonial projects.

Every single "participant" in this research project I refer to as "storytellers" rather than "research participants." They came to the Talking Circles eager to learn and to share their story. All my blood relations, they engaged deeply in the Talking Circles, sharing critical insights and innovative stories that inform the entirety of this dissertation project. As a project of Wahkotowin, pulling in relatives and honoring their knowledges throughout the course of this research is but a portion of the accountability I must attend as a researcher responsible to my nation and broader

community of relatives in Kelly Lake/ As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw, Aseniwuche Winewak, and Lac Ste. Anne.

Over the course of this research, I facilitated Talking Circles, sharing with participants examples of Nehiyaw creation stories from our MFN and related nations/communities with prompts to consider how they related to or witness Two Spiritedness—or not—within the stories. I also offered prompts for crafting their stories, dialogue within the space to learn from the stories, and journaling to help them reflect on learning and story ideas. Thirteen different stories were crafted, and all are discussed and/or excerpted in this dissertation if not shared in full. For brevity and to protect the sacredness of some the stories, not all are shared in entirety. Some of the stories will instead be included in full in a published, digitized anthology.

This dissertation, the stories generated from this project, and the subsequent anthology of the collection of stories is presented as a gift of love and hope. It is an almanac—a storied anthology—of our Two Spirit/Indigiqueer interactions with one another as well as with the humans, lands, and histories that have shaped us.

Dispossession under colonial projects and in colonial education from bodies of lands and waters, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people returning home to one's own body can be as challenging as it is to return home to one's lands. The stories emerge from our bodies as Two Spirit people. It has been a sometimes painful, difficult process and yet the body—illuminated by those Two Spirit star ancestors in the skies—points the way home. Each trauma as much as each Two Spirit joy is marked on the body. In those scars, a new star is birthed. With each star-scar a constellation can be traced that maps the way home.

As a project of homecoming—to Two Spirit bodies if not to MFN and related nations'/communities' bodies of land—this project and the stories seek to resist colonial attempts to dispossess people of home, be that in our bodies, of their lands, and/or both.

An interconnected project of Wahkotowin, the writing in this dissertation weaves in and out and around like concentric circles. This work is first a gift to my community and thus I write it with their needs in mind as much as possible. Academia has long demanded Indigenous people bend to their whims and I practice refusal of these whitestream research and writing methods that have wreaked havoc on Indigenous communities, knowledges, and bodies (Burman, 2016; A. Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014). I instead ask you, dear reader, to embrace "ontological confusion" wherein you must come to unravel colonial, whitestream ontologies and be open to learn Nehiyaw ontology in order to better understand the nature, purpose, aims, and scope of this project (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. 5). I hope all readers can bend to this ontology, softly, as if in a gentle dance.

To better ensure that end, let us get a lay of the land (pun intended), with a summary of this text's chapters below.

In the Chapter Two, I discuss and define Wahkotowin and the definition of Two Spirit as I use it for myself and in this project. This chapter is meant to immerse readers into a world unlike the colonial/whitestream one that predominates most academic research. It is an entry-point, as if stepping through a narrow valley into new terrain, that is a short chapter just touching the surface of Nehiyaw worlds. Here, dear reader, you can start to build relationship with this text, and better immerse yourself in a Nehiyaw paradigm so that you can come to know as much as possible from this research.

In Chapter Three, I discuss existing scholarship—both academic and community-based *as well as* the theoretical frameworks underpinning my research. Normally chapters on literature and theory are *separate* in whitestream dissertation publications. I do not seek to critique existing literature, as is common in whitestream writing practices, a point made by Cree methodologist Shawn Wilson (2008). Rather the existing literature, scholarship, and community knowledge inform the theoretical frameworks that inform how I approach this project. I write Chapter Three as a symphony of literature and theory that demonstrates the epistemological framework undergirding the importance of this research and the resulting stories. In this chapter, I discuss Indigenous feminist understandings of the connections between land theft and gender violence amidst the colonial project, the importance of centering Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women in anti-colonial work, and storytelling as a contextual process wherein tâpwê (*truth*) only exists within a set of relations (Deer, 2015; Knott, 2018; Wilson, 2018).

In Chapter Four, I share the methodology that emerges from an epistemology and ontology of Wahkotowin, discussing miskâsowin, a Nehiyaw practice of deep, inward reflection. This practice is one that orients Nehiyawak toward community roles and as such, I discuss homecoming as a way to understand this project as one of refusal of whitestream methods as well as a restitution of Nehiyaw lands, knowledges, and identity (Kovach, 2006, 2009). I detail the nature of the Talking Circles, sharing anecdotes from the sessions, and end by discussing this work as one that embraces the Nehiyaw pedagogy of learning from the heart/body as much as the mind/intellect—a holistic approach to research (Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008). Those knowings from the heart/body that emerge from the stories of Two Spirit Storytellers detail our desire, a framework of Indigenous research that moves beyond the binary of Indigenous peoples as mere victims of violence (on one side) or agents who have "overcome" trauma (on the other side). Instead, desire-

based research asks what longings Indigenous peoples surviving colonization wish to share in research and anti-colonial projects (Tuck, 2009).

Chapters Five and Six outline four key teachings or insights that emerged from the stories and dialogues shared in the Talking Circles as well as the journals I kept during the process. They demonstrate the beauty of Two Spirit MFN and related peoples as creators who embrace the superpower of Wesakecahk's shapeshifting capabilities to embody all of the beings of creation. Through that embodiment, Two Spirit storytellers come to know, learn, and love all of creation by deepening those sets of relations. This is our sâkihito maskihkiy—our love medicine—that helps us as Two Spirit people survive and thrive under colonization. When we come together and share our stories in the Talking Circles, in this research, and with audiences who take them up with respect, they serve as the map to help us find our way home to one another as kin, to our bodies as Two Spirit people, and to the knowledges—and homelands—of Nehiyawak of Michel First and related nations and communities. We share them from our heart.

In Chapter Seven, the Conclusion, I offer considerations for how this work can and should be taken up, curious pathways for peoples from other Indigenous nations as well as educators to re-map stories, and end with *my* story to creatively demonstrates teachings storytellers imparted with love and heart.

Tawâw, Two Spirit and Indigiqueer relatives. Welcome home. We are the ones we and the ancestors have been waiting for. Tawâw. There is space for us all.

CHAPTER TWO: Wahkotowin, A Nehiyaw Epistemic Ontology

"A nation that does not know its past, does not know its stories, does not have a future."
~ Amber Paquette, descendant of Michel Callihoo and Kwarakwante

I introduce myself as a Nehiyaw-Otipemisiwak (*Cree-Métis)* and white (Irish) Two Spirit person born to nikawiy (*my mother*) and her in turn to nimosôm. We are from the Michel First Nation, but because of histories of theft, dispossession, and displacement, were not born *on* the reserve nor in homelands. Today, many kin of Michel First Nation refer to our community as a First Nation to counter the logics of colonial governance that seeks to render us a people without a land and self-determining sovereignty. We will be a First Nation again and we have governance and recognition as a First Nations by communities nearby.

Introducing my lineage and relations—as I have been taught to do by my relatives—locates me in my community, to my relations, and guards against "pretendianism." The term "pretendian" is a slang term used among Indigenous nations and communities to describe settlers—usually white people—who adopt an Indigenous identity and/or ancestry. Often this adoption is a settler move to innocence so as to demonstrate responsibility and culpability in inheriting and being complicit in a legacy of colonial violence as well as pretending one has a staked claim in belonging on Indigenous lands (Barker, 2021, TallBear, 2013).

Indigenous introductions are vital not only for guarding against pretendianism; they have been practiced customs since time immemorial and far longer than pretendianism has existed. They call to attention the importance of attentiveness to interconnection and that people are Indigenous *only* by those who *claim them* as their relation. Indigenous introductions also identify family; how many countless times I have heard someone with a family last name shared in my own lineage only to find out we are cousins who find each other in the foggy, long years of colonization through this traditional practice!

Identities can only be understood relationally in an Indigenous context (Cajete, 2000; TallBear, 2013; S. Wilson, 2008). I am not myself alone; I do not exist without my relationships to others. In Nehiyawewin and as I have understood from Nehiyaw elders, words convey that relationality. Nohkom, for example, means "*my* grandmother." There has not historically been a term for "grandmother" alone because one cannot be a grandmother without being *in relationship* to the generations to come (S. Wilson, 2008).

Relationality or interconnection is crucial to understanding the aims, scope, and methodology of this project. As Shawn Wilson (2008) notes, knowledge and meaning are made only within the space of relationships (p. 87). There is no tâpwê (*truth*) that exists except for that which can be understood from the bridging of the space between oneself and another human (or other-than-human being) (S. Wilson, 2008). The truths I know between my community of Michel First Nation, related nations, and between Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are *unique* to those of us in those communities. It is my hope that through this work, you dear reader will build and/or strengthen existing relationships with my nation and communities including and especially with Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people because the more one builds and strengthens relationship "the greater [one's] understanding becomes." (S. Wilson, 2008, p. 79).

Wahkotowin does not mean that, as relatives and kin with one another, that everyone sits in linked arms around a fire living without conflict. Wahkotowin teaches Nehiyawak how to be in *right* relationship—to be accountable, to address tensions and conflicts, and to honor respect and reciprocity.[viii] Wahkotowin is about addressing conflict, rectifying harm, and teaching appropriate responsibilities that humans have to one another and to their other-than-human-kin. Not everyone has to like one another, but everyone does have to show relations respect including of their

sovereignty and self-determination over their own lives. Being in right relationship can also look like *not being around* relations if your presence would cause them harm (or vice versa).

Wahkotowin is about the balance in relationships. Colonial projects upset the balance. Not all relations have the *same* responsibilities nor are those responsibilities of equal importance. One's social location—quite literally the lands one is on and the human and other-than-human kin and ancestors that comprise them—define their responsibility *to* those kin. This is how I approach this work and all work that I engage. I come to know my unique responsibilities through miskâsowin—deep inner reflection on my relationship to land and all relations, recognizing I *am comprised of my relations*—in order to know my role and responsibility and make meaning of the world in which I take up space.

I am Nehiyaw-Otipemisiwak and Irish or moniyaw (*white*) and I am therefore the relationship—the tension—between these identities. This tension does not mean I carry additional burdens than my darker-skinned Indigenous kin. Contrarily, the tension is but a valid, appropriate response to the ways in which I need to be accountable to my darker-skinned kin while also attentive to my Indigeneity as *central* to who I am. To forget or compartmentalize my Indigeneity is to do the work of colonial societies that endeavor to end Indigenous futures by severing ties to oneself, homelands, communities, and ancestors including those yet to come.

To ignore that I am moniyaw and *appear* or *present* as *white*, however, is also to do the work of colonial projects by ignoring the ways in which the white strands in the braid of my identity have given me undeserving and unearned advantages stolen from darker-skinned kin (especially Black-Indigenous kin who are also braids of their ancestors and often pushed out of communities due to anti-Black racism).

I am not "half white" and "half Indigenous." Percentages as markers of identity are colonial constructs that fracture bodies in two and are meant to eradicate us as Indigenous people (Deer, 2015). I am not a percent, quarter, or half of anything. I am a braid of everything wound together as Two Spirit.

I deploy the term "Two Spirit" in this work even as it is an imperfect term; it is an English-language term that attempts to convey an ontology emergent from Nehiyawewin/Oji-Cree languages to describe Indigenous people of what is now called the "Americas." During a 1990 Indigenous 2SLGBTQ conference held in Manitoba, Canada, a group of Nehiyawak, Oji-Cree, and other people Indigenous to Turtle Island proposed the term *"*Two Sprit" as both an interruption to the term "berdache" and an expression of global, Indigenous solidarity (Justice et. al., 2010). The term "berdache" carries with it the refusing the fetishizing, anthropological gaze of colonial research and connotes harmful meanings such as "slave boy" or "kept boy" (2010).

Oji-Cree elder Myra Laramee, in attendance at the conference shared a dream in which Two Spirit elders came to her (or those who would now be described as such) sharing that Two Spiritedness and people can observe things in "two ways" (Pyle, 2019, p. 87). Not to be confused with binary logics of gender, this observance in "two" ways can be a multitude of things from *at least two* genders to observing colonial and Indigenous worlds, human and other-than-human kin, and more.

It is there that Two Spirit as a term, still relatively new, was proposed to as a powerful, self-determining refusal of berdache as well as a stand-in term for Indigenous peoples/nations who either did not have or needed to *remember* and *reclaim* similar terms in their respective languages to describe. It is important to note that many sovereign nations and communities *do* have names for Indigiqueer/2SLGBTQIA peoples in their languages, ones that were never lost/stolen and/or

ones that have been reclaimed. Many nations have terms in their own tribal languages that are more suited and are coming to *re*member them or have always known and held them. Two Spirit is an English language term and therefore carries with it English language ontologies. It therefore cannot fully convey the powerful meanings from Oji-Cree/Nehiyawewin anymore that it can convey the ontological understandings from any other Indigenous language (Robinson, 2019).

In Nehiyawewin, I will often say that I am ayahkwew[ix] to refer to myself as not having gender. Even this term is contested. Nehiyawewin is not a dying nor stagnate language. It continues to grow and craft words. Other worlds may soon emerge that have either always existed or that are now being created to better describe people like me. I use Two Spirit as an expression of solidarity across communities who do not know, do not have, or cannot find words that fit their particular identity and as I use it in this writing similarly. Ayahkwew, even, does not describe everyone who is Nehiyaw and Indigiqueer/Two Spirit and/or LGBTQIA. It does not always describe me, either.

I am ayahkwew depending on who you are because I am only myself—under the logics of Wahkotowin—depending on my relation to those around me. I am iskwew (*loosely translated to mean woman*) at other times, depending on who you are. To my aunties, nikawiy, and a few others I am iskwew. To most of the rest of the world, I am ayahkwew who can slip in between iskwew and something else. That "something else" is without gender but always *full* of so much spirit—*at least* two spirits. Two Spirit.

I use the term Two Spirit for myself also as a way to honor the genealogies from which it came—the Nehiyaw epistemology in the lands of Manitoba and the Oji-Cree/Nehiyaw—as well as an expression of a desire to come home. Homecoming.

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I often prodded my mother with stumping questions. I wanted to understand why pineapples were not the hybrid of pine trees and apple trees. "Mom,"

I would say in moments like these. “It doesn’t make sense to me.” She would laugh at me and I would grow frustrated.

“OK, but man and woman,” I would argue, pausing, gesturing my hands as if to demarcate the that I was expressing a duality. “I mean I feel it—I know it. There is something else, isn’t there?” To this question my mom would never argue.

“Yes, on that you are right,” she would reply, nodding her head. “But I don’t know what either.” I would wonder if the pine trees and apple trees contained the answers. I wonder now if my mother knew—I wondered if the meaning and definitions were in her body, forced out through the Christianization and French language learning with which she grew up. As my mother and I carried on these conversations in those years of my youth, it was at the same time that the term Two Spirit was birthed like a star just a little northwest in Manitoba. I cannot recall when I first then heard the term—I had heard *berdache* first—but when I did, it was like a Nehiyaw star relative awoke within me and reminded me that yes, there was *something else.* Two Spirit. Indigiqueer. Ayahkwew.

In my self-determining deployment of the term Two Spirit, it does *not* mean that I have a combination of masculinity and femininity in me as predominant discourse may assume (Wilson, 2018). Because Nehiyawewin does not contain gendered pronouns, that duality does not fit the ontological view contained within my nation’s Indigenous language. Instead, Two Spirit means that my identity is always in relationship: I am in relationship with ancestors and kin, with relatives future and past, and especially with the land. I carry these spirits—both of myself and others—inside me as my *two spirits*. I carry my Indigeneity alongside my agender queerness—a braid of two strands that cannot be separated.

Oji-Cree literary scholar Joshua Whitehead defines the term "Indigiqueer" (sometimes spelled Indigequeer) as the braiding together of "Indigenous" and "queer" into creating something new (Whitehead, 2018b). A beautiful expression, it is a term I also use to describe myself and Two Spirit calls me home. It is an intentional act of reclamation of Nehiyaw histories and remembrances that we as Two Spirit people are not "new," but rather something old and ancestral. Unlike declarations of independence characteristic of "coming out" traditions in the whitestream LGBTQIA community, Two Spirit Cree scholar Alex Wilson discusses Two Spirit identity development as a "coming in" (A. Wilson, 2008, 2015, 2015a) that restores balance (2018, p. 188). In this process of coming in, there is a return or a homecoming to roles, responsibilities, and about balance. There is a return to tradition, communities, and sometimes homelands that have been ruptured through colonization. There is a return to oneself.

While not all Indigiqueer/Indigenous LGBTQIA people identify as Two Spirit, it also important to note that it is a word reserved *only* people who are Indigenous. I use Two Spirit in this project and to describe myself because it is a homecoming and because of the roles Two Spiritedness carries. Storytellers recruited in this project describe themselves as Two Spirit and so that term is used, as appropriate, to discuss and describe their identities.

I also employ the term "Indigiqueer" in this writing and research as a form of critique. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer scholars point to colonization as an act of *queering*—or rendering obscene—all Indigenous people to the cis-hetero-hegemony of white, settler occupation (Finley et. al., 2011; Justice et. al., 2010). All Indigenous people have been queered to be deviant to the norms of colonial society, though not all for the same reasons or at the same intensities. Indigiqueer recognizes the queering that is colonization—the marking of all Indigenous people as non-normative. Adding *Indigi-* in front of the term makes a sovereign *re*turn toward to when Two

Spirit people were not outsiders within, but rather central, integrated, whole, vital members of their and our communities.

To describe scholars, general concepts of queerness that emerge from this critical framework and Indigenous ontology generally, I use the term "Indigiqueer" so as not to conflate all queer Indigenous peoples and epistemologies with "Two Spirit/edness."

To be Two Spirit/Indigiqueer is to be *always* in relation, protective of the spirits of humans and other-than-human relations such as the land (Robison, 2019). An interconnected people, land is animate in Nehiyaw ontology. Nehiyawewin pronouns, for example, express animacy—rather than gender—to rendering the land as much as the humans of the land alive and animate . Not a space to be exploited or a resource to own and occupy, Indigenous people recognize the animacy and aliveness of land (Cajete, 2000; Goeman 2015; Kimmerer, 2013; L. Simpson, 2014; Te Punga Somerville, 2012). In this space where land is alive, Indigenous people have always freely expressed joy and deep intimacy with it. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer and Indigenous feminist literature often points to the land as a space that is a source of deep intimacy (Nelson, 2017; Whitehead, 2018a, 2022) where land has sovereignty, animacy, and its own sets of desires.

The freedom and joy of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer desire is an aberration to the norms of colonial cis-hetero-hegemony (Barker, 2017; Justice et. al., 2010; Wilson, 2018). These joys stand in the way of conquering a people who express sovereignty so fully, the land sings self-determination alongside. A sovereign people and land are hard to conquer and direct threats to colonial aims to own and occupy land and express sovereignty *over* it—the basis for the wealth of colonial/imperial empires such as the U.S. and Canada (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

A key strategy for getting land has been disconnecting Indigenous people from relations to one another and importantly land through outright genocide to forced assimilation and the residential/boarding school system, and gender and sexual violence.

CHAPTER THREE: Tâpwê*:* Literature Review and Theory

Land Theft: Land and Gender Violence

"The abuse of women is well known … and tells you a lot about what is happening to our earth."
~ LaDonna Brave Bull Allard (Standing Rock Dakota Sioux elder, historian, activist)

Within papal bulls, Christian decrees of the Doctrine of Discovery, and cultural norms of Manifest Destiny, colonizers have defined Indigenous lands as *terra nullius*—vacant, empty, "no-man's land" ripe for conquering and occupation (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Because Indigenous kinship ties to land view land as *kin* and not simply a resource or space to *own,* European colonizers have not recognized Indigenous sovereignty claims to land and territory. Colonial logics tried to erase Indigenous people, comparing them to the *flora and fauna* of the lands that colonizers sought to invade and exploit (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

This comparison of Indigenous people to the flora and fauna of the land is in itself not inherently harmful; Indigenous epistemic-ontologies tend to view humans as not separate from the land, but instead as human manifestations of it. Rather the harm occurs because colonial logics that view land as inanimate—as unalive, without a life-force, and denied personhood—by extension describe humans in the same manner. As bodies of lands and waters are deemed terra nullius, so too are bodies of humans and therefore all of decreed open territory ready for colonial invasion, occupation, and conquering.

Not merely historical, these logics persist contemporaneously having been upheld by the United Nations well into the late 20th Century and the citation of the Doctrine of Discovery to deny Oneida Nation land rights claims in the 21st Century.[x] The function of the National Park System in the U.S. and Canada also has relied heavily on the presumption that the "wilderness" spaces in the American and Canadian west were either uninhabited (by humans) or "untamed" spaces ripe

for exploration (Spence, 1999). The construction of the National Park System is steeped in violence.

My kin were marched away from the Canadian Rockies, a place my ancestors had called home and a home that called *them* kin. Removed from the turquoise Athabasca River that cuts pathways through the violet-colored, glacial mountains, Jasper National Park as it is now known, has become a site of (mostly white) tourist recreation. The rivers now carry my relatives' and ancestors' tears as the rivers meander and rage past photographers and families gawking on their banks.

One of nikawiy's many Aunties, Suzanne Kwarakwante, is buried a few hundred feet from her former home in Jasper National Park. Tourists can go and visit her home, overgrown now in the bush, the doors and windows locked tight. They can walk down to her grave and continue to a quiet lake that is surrounded by mountains. A serene place, not many do visit, but when they do, they are greeted by signage that talks about her as the rugged woman who lived, survived, and thrived in these harsh mountain terrains.

Suzanne had taken a husband but later remarried so that she could stay in the mountain terrains she adored. She raised children who, tended to the lands, harvested the medicines, and tended to the lands to ensure balance. Removed when they were older, many are now the relatives of mine in Aseniwuche Winewak Nation and Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw. Forced out of the mountains, evicted, and called squatters, Jasper National Park was born.

Suzanne and all the relatives in the area once tended to those lands, ensuring a balance of the plant and animal life, practicing controlled burns of brush to ensure that wildfires—far fewer before colonial-caused climate change—caused minimal if any damage to the terrain. Hunting and

harvesting to ensure an abundance, the caribou are now almost gone, devastated by competing with moose and other animals for the reduced vegetation that makes up their diet.

Today there is a town again and within, people again live in the mountains. They are not depicted as dirty, yet these people are a community of settlers. Settlers paved roads and lined the sides of them with gift shops, expensive restaurants, and resorts and hotels that make returning—for many of us from these lands—difficult and inaccessible. Elk often leap into roadways, killed by fast-moving traffic. Bears wander into the townsite, seeking food and nibbling at the fruit trees planted neatly in fenced in backyards of multimillion dollar homes. Residents and tourists fear them and I fear *for* them, because they too have been depicted as "wild" beasts to tame and bring under control.

American and Canadian imaginaries of conservationism require lands be pristine, untouched, spaces where humans are absent in order for the land to thrive (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010; Spence, 1999). This is counter to Indigenous logics, like those of my kin, who value all lands as sacred and as thriving when they are in relationship with each other—including humans. Indigenous people have lived and/or practiced ceremony, gathered medicines, and tended to lands "at virtually every elevation" (Martinez et. al.; 2008, p. 93). Indigenous ontology acknowledges "the whole earth as sacred." (Gray, 2008, p. 87). Dichotomous hierarchies of spaces and lands are not part of Indigenous ontology.

Rapid growth in the U.S. and Canada during the early 20th Century led to crowded and polluted urban territories. Early conservationists of this time period blamed overcrowding and pollution issues not on rapid growth of industrial capitalism for colonial expansion, but instead on the queer, Brown immigrant, and Black workers who were rapidly moving to cities and the north to seek work and as part of the Great Migration (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010).

Adopting white supremacist logics of purity, early 20th Century conservationists looked west—toward the "frontier" the "unexplored wilderness" to "save" these landscapes from urban destruction (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010; Spence, 1999). In particular, queer people in city spaces were an affront to cis-heteronormative desires (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010) and cis-white men sought to escape to play out their heteronormative fantasies. The imagining of lands, as depicted in early colonial maps, as "land [as] female or "virgin territory waiting to be fertilized and inscribed by European encounters…" played into such fantasies (Goeman, 2017, p. 113).

Encountering Indigenous people in these "wilderness" spaces (such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, Glacier, and—in Canada—Jasper National Parks as they are now called) proved a challenging obstacle for colonial conservationists. Removal was thus paramount—both because Indigenous co-habitation with the land in these spaces discredited colonial rhetoric that the land was otherwise empty or *terra nullius* and because it reminded conservationists of the "dirty" and "queer" cities they sought to flee. Indeed a famous early conservationist—John Muir—remarked that the Sierra Miwok of what is now Yosemite were "dirty" and unclean s*vages who did not know how to tend to the land (Spence, 1999, p. 23).[xi]

Rendering Indigenous people of the "frontier" in these "wilderness" spaces reinforced early logics of the "Native" as s*vage. These encountered lands and people became thought of in colonial imaginations as a "wild wilderness" to tame—both through rape and the violent *re*orienting of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer desire toward cis-heteronormative fancies (Barker, 2017; Justice et.al., 2010; Mortimer-Sandilands & Bruce, 2010).

These many rhetorical devices—land as *terra nullius*, an unexplored and "wild wilderness" frontier—"played out on the bodies" of Indigenous women and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people

(Deer, 2015, p. 51) in which colonizers could easily shift from the conquering of land, to the "the raping of a woman to the raping of a country to the raping of the world.'" (Deer, 2015, p. xv). Not merely an ancillary byproduct of colonization, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women point to these colonial logics to argue that gender violence *was* and *is* a primary mechanism of the colonial project of expansion (Barker, 2017; Deer, 2015).

Destroying Indigenous futures is essential for colonial sovereignty over Indigenous bodies of lands, waters, and humans. As Indigenous people remain, they will always exercise sovereignty of their and our own bodies while protecting lands' right to inherent sovereignty over itself. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have been marked as debase and for the dead in violent, torturous ways because their and our desires are an affront to the exertion of cis-hetero-hegemony that preserves white, cis-male domination (Barker, 2017; Justice, et.al., 2010; Wilson, 2018). Similarly, the bodies of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cis het women and their desires have been marked as *rapeable*—as terra nullius—ready for European fertilization to impose blood quantum requirements that destroy Indigenous futures (Deer, 2015; Simpson, 2016).

Blood quantum requirements are parameters imposed on Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canada—the only *human* demographic to which these parameters are applied—that define who is and is not Indigenous. In order to be identified as such, a minimum percent degree of "Indian" blood is necessary to recognize someone as "Indigenous."

Under colonial-imposed logics of blood quantum, tribal lineage and Indigenous ties to communities and land would be severed the less "Indigenous blood" one had, thereby freeing up those lands (and identities) to be claimed by (white) settlers (Reardon & TallBear, 2012). The *whitening* of Indigenous people to lower blood quantum is a mechanism Indigenous scholars point to as a form of genocide (Deer, 2015; TallBear, 2013).

Rape has been a colonial strategy used to reduce "Indigenous blood" because of this type of sexual violence's effect on reproduction (Deer, 2015, p.112). Offspring that may result from settler rape of Indigenous people would be considered "half white." Over the course of generations upon generations of rape—which Indigiqueer people and cishet women have endured—this "whitening" of "blood" vis-à-vis rape would eliminate claims to Indigeneity and with it, Indigenous sovereignty over lands (Deer, 2015).

These very historic logics—blood quantum, land as *terra nullius* for invasion and simultaneously a "wild wilderness" to be tamed—very much propel present-day colonial projects. Oil field construction sites and the extraction industry in general wreak havoc not only on the land with threats of oil spills, etc., they also wreak havoc on the bodies, lives, and futures of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women. As Dene zaa-Nehiyaw writer, social worker, and activist Helen Knott (2017) notes, "violence in its many forms accompanies the rapid growth of living in an oil and gas-based region."

The extraction industry often runs construction sites in rural areas and/or very near sovereign tribal lands, bringing with it an influx of temporary workers on the projects. These temporary workers live in what are referred to as "man camps" because they are temporary housing spaces for the (usually cis-male) workers who swell the local population. Near these sites, studies show that violence against Indigenous people in both the U.S. and Canada increases exponentially, in some cases as much as 70 percent (Martin et. al., 2019; Rickert, 2016).[xii]

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women experience the highest rates of violence of any other demographic in the U.S. and Canada. Indigenous women are murdered at ten times the national average in the U.S. and seven times the national average in Canada.[xiii] In the U.S., more so than any other demographic, Indigenous women and girls age twelve and older are 2.5

times more likely to be raped/sexually assaulted and at least 56 percent of all Indigenous women will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime (Lehavot et. al., 2009). In 97 percent of these cases—nearly *every* case—the perpetrators of violence are non-Indigenous men (National Congress of American Indians, 2018).

In Canada, Indigenous women and girls experience sexual violence at more than three times that of their peers[xiv] and an estimated 70 percent of Indigenous women and girls (some as young as eight years old) have been trafficked/forced into sex work in Manitoba (Deer, 2015, p. 76). Another study demonstrates that 85 percent of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer trans and cis women have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime, *four times higher* than any other women in the general population.[xv]

At the intersections of exponential anti-trans and other hate crimes against the broad LGBTQIA community, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people's lives are under constant attack—literally described a trans genocide by the broader trans community. Data is lacking to fully grasp the violences Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people face. Indigiqueer are often misgendered and/or miscategorized as non-Native in reports detailing experiences of violence—including murder/death—which then fail to bring these experiences and stories to light, reflected in statistical reports.

Statistics often fail to account for Indigiqueer and cis-het Indigenous women who are Black *and* Indigenous. Seen as *only* Black because of the logics anti-Black racism and *not* Indigenous because of the logics of blood quantum, victims of violence are often not included in statistical reports. These relatives—raped, missing, murdered, or experiencing any type of violence, deserve to have their stories echo together and be witnessed by of all of their Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous relatives.

Indigiqueer people and cishet Indigenous women have taken stands—literally and otherwise—to redress the constant threat they face. From the Standing Rock movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota to the Unist'ot'en Camp on Wet'suwet'en land trying to arrest the Coastal Gaslink Pipeline in British Columbia, Indigenous women and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have taken on lead roles, connecting the extraction industry to the violences faced by Indigenous people. Partnering with the Women's Earth Alliance and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network in Canada for a *Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies* initiative, Urban Métis doula and artist Erin Marie Konsmo works with communities to consider the ways in which bodies of both lands/waters *and* Indigiqueer people/cishet women are considered "empty" and "s*vage" therefore spaces to *conquer* (Konsmo & Pacheco, 2016, p. 81; Mack & Na'Puti, 2019, p. 15). While detailing this massive trauma, it is important to remember that Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women are not only *still* here, but also thriving and building communities within the apocalypse of violence. This research is but part of that work, nestling in amongst other Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people who are *re*-narrating pasts, desires, and futures.

Decolonizing Feminism & Indigiqueering Decolonization

"It is impossible to have a truly self-determining nation when its members have been denied self-determination over their own bodies."~ Helen Knott (2018, p. 72).

Indigenous people have not always allied with feminism because they recognize that Indigenous nations practiced gender equity and embraced the power of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women prior to colonization (Arvin et. al., 2013; Gunn Allen, 1999). Feminism, as expressed in whitestream discursive practices, does not ally with the relational worldview of

Indigenous people and instead seeks to gain power alongside men rather than critique the hierarchy of power and colonialism as the sources of misogyny and transsexism (Arvin et. al., 2013). Indigenous queer scholars argue that the freedoms with which Indigiqueer people and cishet women expressed desire and held power *made* the colonial project of conquering difficult because that power was an expression of sovereignty that continues to threaten colonial self-determination over Indigenous bodies and lands (Barker, 2017; Finley et. al., 2011; Justice et. al., 2010).

The expression of gender equity and power is contained in many Indigenous languages, which is vitally important because Indigenous languages are expressions of Indigenous ontological understandings of the world (Kovach, 2009).

Nehiyawewin, for example and as Cree scholar Margaret Kovach notes, suggests a "non-binary, complementary philosophy of the world." (p. 59). Nehiyawewin pronouns are animate, not gendered as earlier noted. They suggest relations and accountability. English-language, a binary language representing a binary ontology (Kovach, 2009) can and has made remembering these non-gendered and non-binary ontologies in Nehiyawewin challenging. When Cree people reference "Grandmother Moon" or "Mother Earth," as Alex Wilson writes, it was never meant to convey the *gender* of the moon or the earth, but rather to emphasize "that we have a deep and loving relationship with" other-than-human kin (Wilson & Laing, 2019, p. 144).

I have introduced myself as ayahkwew and that is accurate for the relationship I have with the broad audience of the readers of my work. For some of my nation and other Nehiyawewin-speaking relatives, I am iskwew. In Nehiyawewin, iskwew is what is now used to say *woman*, but the word I have learned from my language mentors is from iskotew, meaning *fire*. Fire is the heart of the lodge and the lodge is the heart of the people, thus iskwew is not to connote *gender* in English-language understandings. It implies anyone with a passion or role, regardless of

reproductive organs, who serves the function of the heart, soul—the fire—of Nehiyawak can be iskwew. I am never woman, sometimes iskwew, sometimes ayahkwew, often something else.

Indigenous languages, while many thriving and growing, still have undergone an upheaval and decimation through the ongoing onslaught of colonial violence. Residential schools (in Canada) and boarding schools (in the U.S.) are one of the most impactful ways in which colonizers have both stolen and rerouted Indigenous languages through a colonial ontology. The "dualist constructs such as like/unlike," writes Margaret Kovach (2009) "have resulted in a binary language and thought pattern" most apparent in the ontologies of European languages (p. 59). Thus, despite Indigenous language revitalization/reprisal, the permeation of English—particularly in the schools—threatens to influence and reroute Indigenous languages toward a colonial ontology (Robinson, 2019; Wilson, 2019)

The residential school system also entrenched Indigenous communities in "heteropatriarchy…other wayward teachings…and western influences," writes Alex Wilson (Wilson & Laing, 2019, p. 145). Christian and whitestream values of civilization such as modesty, the gender binary and strict gender roles, and cis-heteronormativity all were part of the education in residential schools, missions, and colonial paradigms. It was a "re-education of desire" to ward off the "s*vage" archetype of Indigenous people—particularly Indigiqueer people—and to orient them to Christian values (Morgensen, 2011).

Indigenous feminists and Indigiqueer activists and scholars caution that this re-education of desire can be thus transposed onto Indigenous teachings and stories (Barker, 2017; Wilson, 2018; Wilson & Laing, 2019), replicating colonial norms as harmful stand-ins for tradition (Finley et. al., 2011, p. 218-219).

In Cree creation stories, for example the shapeshifting trickster Wesakecahk embodied in the constellation known in Greek mythology as Orion is most often depicted as a male human (i.e. "the elder brother"). Alex Wilson points to Nehiyawewin language constructs that demonstrate the root of Wesakecahk's name comes from *love* (2015) and notes that Wesakecahk cannot be gendered (2015; Wilson & Laing, 2019, p. 142). In other Cree teachings Wilson (2018) describes, children learn that "the drum [is] female … and yet … only men can beat the drum. This latter assertion …takes power from and regulates the bodies of women and two-spirit and trans people, and simultaneously privileges men." (p. 185). In this teaching, there are strict codes of conduct and roles for cis men and cis women, leaving little room for variance both in roles and in genders outside that exist outside the binary of man/woman. Alex Wilson (2018) argues that these stories and teachings that essentialize gender "[have] accompanied" the high prevalence of missing and murdered Indigiqueer people and cishet women (p. 181).

Similarly, in other communities' teachings, Indigenous people have noticed patterns in which sexual violence is central to Indigenous stories despite understandings that this type of violence is a colonial import (Deer, 2015; Sy, 2018). In common retellings of the ancestral foundations of the Anishinaabe, for example, Anishinaabe scholar Waaseyaa'sin Christine Sy (2018) recounts that mother of Nana'boo'zoo (a key figure in Anishinaabe creation not dissimilar to Wesakecahk) is born out of the rape of Wenonah. Sy writes that this story constructs "woman as victim, man as [s*vage], and all people who transcend the colonial hetero-normative gender binary as invisible" (2018, p. 221 as if the "world is animated only by [binary] men and women" (p. 226).

Indigenous feminists and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people argue that stories and teachings such as these that impart sexual violence are not traditional, but rather have emerged from colonial

languages and ideologies in turn transposed onto and been transposed onto Indigenous epistemologies. Māori scholar Hayley Marama Cavino (2019) writes that colonization has been "a seduction" of our men, a process that encouraged them "to take up power *over* women" rather than acting in solidarity with women to combat colonization (p. 100). Language imposition, boarding/residential school re-education of desire, western influences, and more colonial upheavals have created a cacophony of patriarchal norms in which Indigenous "stories have been transformed" (Cavino, 2019, p. 97).

In order to *re*turn to tradition and decolonize, Indigenous feminists and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people argue (Knott, 2018; Million, 2013; Wilson, 2018) that Indigenous communities must necessarily take up an honest interrogation of cis-heteropatriarchy alongside all "decolonizing projects" (Simpson, 2012, para. 9). There can be no Indigenous sovereignty without Indigiqueer people and cishet women having bodily autonomy/sovereignty and self-determination over their "bodies, sexualities, and gender self-expression" (Wilson, 2018, p. 191).

Indigenous stories and teachings *contain* Indigenous tradition and are mechanisms for imparting teachings that are interconnected and relational between the storyteller and audience. The stories themselves, however, are not tradition. Tradition as only a past-tense remembering is a colonial logic that seeks to contain Indigenous people in the past in order to secure a sovereign, settler-colonial future. Indigenous tradition is dynamic, flexible, and adaptable—just as are Indigenous people (Teves, 2015). Tradition is not "dogma" (Simpson, 2018, p. 248).

In Nehiyaw culture, tradition includes interconnection and the natural laws of wahkotowin and practices of miskâsowin. With those traditions come teachings of not merely relationality, but also relational *accountability*, *responsibility*, and *reciprocity*. In the context of rampant gender violence against Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet women, stories/teachings that reproduce

those narratives are not *accountable, responsible,* nor *reciprocal* to relations who deserve healing from trauma and therefore they have "no place" in Indigenous teachings (Simpson, 2018, p. 246).

Indigenous feminists, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people, and educators call on and have been engaging in privileging stories that center the agency of Indigiqueer people and cishet women in order to correct the imbalance of stories saturated violence, cis male achievements, and that strongly enforce strict gender binaries/roles (Cavino, 2019, p. 103). Stories must be shared in a way that impart accountability to kin, the impact on the audience, and in Indigenous ontological understandings of respect and traditions of love (Simpson, 2018; Sy, 2018; Thomas 2015).

In the not merely the spirit of Indigenous tradition—but the ontological understanding—of accountability to kin, the relationship between storyteller and audience take precedence over story content. In those same interconnected logics, stories have always been central to Indigenous pedagogy teaching contextual, temporal knowledge that imparts tâpwê (*truth*) only pertinent to time, place, relationship, and context.

Storytelling: Tâpwê as a Relational, Contextual, and Temporal Process

"As the Elder said, 'some knowledges we can't know.'" ~ Margaret Kovach (2006, p. 100).

Many years prior to this writing, I had an opportunity to hear Kanatsiohareke Spiritual Leader and Spokesperson Tom Porter (Kanien'kehá:ka', Bear Clan) speak at an event at Syracuse University. I was not yet a student and had slowly begun to reconnect more to my community after years of trauma and disconnection had kept me in the shadows.

The room where he spoke was crowded, filled with people who were not all Indigenous and I had wondered at the time what they hoped to get out of sitting in these chairs listening. I

wondered if they had had seats at his talks many times before when myself and others in my community were still yet trying to find belonging.

Tom Porter's voice is so soothing; I have now heard him speak many times and every time his voice brings comfort. Indigenous stories are told this way to educate the heart (Archibald, 2008) as storytellers use their whole bodies, voices, sometimes medicines in their hands to capture and share a story.

"My parents" he said, "they loved me very much. Everyone thinks we are these stoic Natives." He laughed. All the Indigenous people in the room chuckled, me included. The white spectators looked nervous as they let out a contrived laugh. "We are the funniest people I know," he declared. "But you wouldn't always know it. See the boarding schools, they taught us how not to love. How not to express our emotions. They beat it out of us. I did not go to those schools, but my parents did and their parents did. They were taught not to say *I love you*. So I never heard it growing up."

I took in a deep inhale as he said this.

"Oh they loved me, they just did not know how to say it," he continued. "Colonization made us fear those emotions. Fear love. Because if we loved, they hurt us." I do not remember much else of what he spoke because I felt nikawiy and nimosôm and other ancestors. I only remember him saying that we as Indigenous people must break that cycle and say to our families and loved ones that we do indeed love them. *Kisâkihitin.*

The stories I share in this work have been chosen with great intention, were carefully selected and crafted, and—like all research—meant to impart knowledge and create shared meaning between myself (the storyteller) and you (the reader or witness to the story). Indigenous storytelling methodology and pedagogy is not mere fancy (Iseke, 2011) nor idle chit-chat (Thomas,

2015, p. 237). Endemic to Nehiyaw and other Indigenous methodologies and pedagogies (Iseke, 2013; Goeman, 2013; Kovach, 2006, 2009; Smith, 1999; Speed, 2019; Thomas, 2015; Wilson, 2013), Indigenous storytelling practices are shared very intentionally to impart purposeful meanings relevant to the given audience (Iseke, 2011).

Cree-Métis scholar Judy Iseke (2011) writes that Indigenous storytelling pedagogy requires participants (or "witnesses" to the story) and storytellers contend with and ask questions of their relationship to one another, the characters in the story, the context or time period of the story and the present-day, and the story itself. These questions drive the critical thinking and educational praxis of Nehiyaw storytelling tradition, a framework Judy Iseke refers to as Critical Indigenous Witnessing (CIW) (2011).

Tom Porter's story made me think of nikawiy and nimosôm. Nimosôm was always quiet. He loved my mother very much, she knew, yet he rarely if ever said the words. I always tried to get him to tell me stories and, only when no one was around, would he look at me and impart some short words of wisdom. It is difficult to recall them all now, but I feel them as much as I would feel the loud *whack!* he would make slapping down his hand on the table or cane on the floor when he was done. In those moments, stunned, people would rush into the room to see what had happened and there nimosôm and I would sit and he would look at me, narrow his eyes, and start laughing. A joke between just the two of us. No, nimosôm was far from stoic. He was funny, as Tom Porter said of his own kin. But he could not say I love you.

When nimosôm passed way, nikawiy and I watched him take his last breath and it was as if, with it, he took some of nikawiy's breath, too. Listening to Tom Porter speak, these memories came back to me. They formed curiosities and new inspired new meanings in my body and mind. Nikawiy knew nimosôm loved her, but he never told her.

Tom Porter did not know it then, but I critically examined these histories, people, and contexts—*and me* in relationship to them—long after he spoke. While I had already begun reconnecting, his story pulled me closer to my relations—to nicâpân and nimosôm.

What did you endure, nicâpân ekwa nimosôm? I wonder what memories you carry. I can hear them if you wish to share them, nicâpân ekwa nimosôm. Kisâkihitin.

Storytelling bridges the gap between relations in order to make shared meaning in the space contained therein (S. Wilson, 2008). Not merely because context is important for meaning-making, but because the only tâpwê (*truth or knowledge*) that exists is that which is contained between relations or a set of relations (Kolopenuk, 2020).

What I am learning about my family's and nation's history is often through unpacking the histories and stories of nimosôm and nicâpân with nikawiy as well as those from MFN and our related nations/communities. I want to rewrite her story and gift to nikawiy a version of her grandmother that is the loving, kind, and gentle Wesakecahk that made our world. That is not nikawiy's tâpwê. Nikawiy and nimosôm had to care for her in her last years, endure her anger, and witness the brunt of the legacy of trauma that I did and do not. It is not that my tâpwê does not matter, it simply means that there are knowledges in spaces of relations that are not for me (and vice versa).

Knowledge and truth—tâpwê—exist only in context between relationships and given the infinite relationships and contexts that exist, there are multiple truths, though not all hold equal value or importance (Kolopenuk, 2020). As Cree scholar Jessica Kolopenuk writes, "[when] a truth collectively resonates among a cluster of relations, then it must be true." (2020, p. 12). Tâpwê must be examined critically amidst the context, particularly against the power dynamics associated with more than 500 centuries of colonization. In the spaces where residential school survivors have

individually whispered their stories to their kin and youth, they together rose up in a chorus of experiences—and it has become tâpwê that can resonate collectively across relations.

These individually whispered stories gave rise to witnessed testimony—stories shared by survivors of their abject horror experienced in the schools—that created a resonating tâpwê across the lands now called Canada. This tâpwê addressed the violent harm and effects of the schools on survivors and descendants that demanded Canada take action to redress harms. Tâpwê, as a Nehiyawewin term, contends with power, context, accountability, and the need to take action in ways the word *truth* in English does it.

In the spaces where Indigenous cishet women and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have come together, whispered their stories of trauma, and shared them fearfully and courageously, tâpwê has emerged to generate theory about the connection between violence against the land and gender-based violence. This tâpwê has led to efforts to charge Canada with genocide for the high rates of violence enacted by settlers on Indigiqueer people and cishet women as well as to demand anti-colonial projects center experiences and teachings of gender sovereignty to uplift those most targeted for death by the colonial efforts.

I have often asked—to myself, my ancestors, and in conversations with Two Spirit and Indigiqueer people—*but what if these traditional stories that depict gender violence and/or strict gender roles and* binaries were *true*? Through these conversations, I have come to learn that even if they were once true, they are not true any longer (though in conversations with Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people, most of us agree they were *not* true). Tâpwê is contextual and therefore necessarily *temporal* limited. Indigenous storytelling pedagogy and methodology asks that stories be shared and reshared across generation because meanings are not fixed (Cajete, 2000; Iseke, 2011; Goeman, 2013; Thomas, 2015) and stories are not "'set in stone'" (Cavino, 2019). Stories

are meant to take on tâpwê, context, and experiences of the different bodies of the storytellers through whom they pass.

I have shared most if not all of the stories presented in this work dozens of times prior and each time, they have been rendered differently. It is not that the older versions of the stories are *untrue* or hold no meaning; they are the foundation. They were once tâpwê and may still be tâpwê in *some other context* or place, but they are no longer tâpwê, at least for this writing and for the knowledge that needs to be generated between me and you, the reader.

If I were to witness Tom Porter share the same story as before, I am sure it would come out differently. Perhaps instead of focusing on not hearing the words, "I love you," Porter might instead impart a more direct story of the experiences at the schools. Regardless, I would still feel Porter's story because the story is meant to tap into the embodied knowledge carried in my lineage. I am not a survivor of the schools, but instead they resonate the feelings of the generations before—the blood that comprises me. The feelings are those of nikawiy, nokum and nimosôm, and nicâpân. They would be also the sensations of all the stolen little ancestors of the residential schools who never made it home, some who might have been Two Spirit/Indigiqueer elders today.

Tom Porter's story, as I remember it now and if I were to hear it now does not and would not function to heal *me*. Rather it functions now against the linear passage of time that I may move into my role as the heart and soul of the people. I work to heal back—to heal up to the ancestors—to gift to nikawiy what was taken from her as I work to heal forward and make sure I can impart the words to nieces and nephews—the future ancestors. *Kisâkihitin.*

Lyackson scholar Qeul'sih'yah'maht (Robina Thomas) (2015) posits that the important function of context and particularly of *temporality* can be muddled when Indigenous oral traditions are transposed into written text published for academia. What I share in this work is simply what

I have come to know *now*. By the time one reads it, I will perhaps know something else far more meaningful or that makes what I share here changed—different somehow.

In the oral tradition, depicted as less advanced than written traditions in and by academia (Brayboy, 2005), the aforementioned tenets of relational, contextual, and temporal meaning-making are vitally important. What happens when Indigenous tâpwê becomes "set in stone" like some permanent, fixed pieces of knowledge that are largely decontextualized from the time, place, and relationships to which the work is accountable?

Re-Mapping: Temporal Storytelling

"Some people see scars and [see] wounding. To me they are proof … there is healing." ~ Linda Hogan[xvi]

The questions I pose in this research and the desires I have to express Two Spirit creation stories *also* emerge from a desire to return to and embody these practices and traditions of temporality and *re*sharing stories through the generations. Oral storytelling has been a profound tool in Indigenous communities for a long time and, recently, many Indigenous *do* wish for stories to be recorded and/or written down. Given the theft of Indigenous people—and with it stories—written recordings are important to mitigate against such theft and loss. Indeed, it is also important to acknowledge that many stories are *written* in order to leave historical accounts that address the very real needs of justifying to colonial and settler projects our existence as Indigenous peoples, accounts of interactions with land that can validate land claims, and more. Oral storytelling need not be the *only* way to practice temporality of knowledge.

This work employs *re-mapping*, a term and concept described by Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013, 2017), in order to keep Two Spirit/Indigiqueer creation stories as alive as the very

people who create them. Re-mapping is an Indigenous feminist practice for charting histories; ancestors; traumas and resiliencies; movement on and interaction with the land; and changes *to* bodies of lands, waters (and humans) to keep history a part of the present (Goeman, 2013).

In whitestream cartography, maps are permanent and relatively unchanging documents not unlike whitestream traditions of storytelling and knowledge-making. Indigenous mapping practices depict *interaction* with, historical transformations to, and dynamic changes of the land. Indigenous maps are not merely documents, but rather stories of these histories, more similar to the "mental map" of Indigenous oral traditions than to inflexible whitestream maps (Goeman, 2013, p. 25). Goeman makes the comparison of Indigenous maps to almanacs to better illustrate the difference between Indigenous and whitestream cartographies (2013, p. 25). Almanacs contain stories and they change with passing seasons and time.

The Athabasca River is a cloudy turquoise, pulling up glacial waters and mud from its depths below. It looks like turquoise gems mixed with melted opal. My cousin brought me to visit it for the first time. She brings me to it and tells me stories about how our ancestors traveled these waters, kept European fur traders alive, and danced in their canoes through the turquoise-opal cream that is the Athabasca River.

"You see over on the other side," she said pointing to the banks of the river opposite where we stood. "That was where Jasper House used to be. Our ancestors would have stopped through there when they were traveling across these mountains. Even in winter! Probably got in from the cold." My cousin and I both laughed. The homelands are beautiful, but even in June there is threat of snowfall in the high elevations.

The house she referenced is long gone now—a Jasper National Park tour stop to demarcate the fur trade that heralds the European markets and often overlooks the Indigenous trappers—my

relatives—who lived *with* these mountains. The river meanders differently now, without the house there to stop it. In the photos on the signage at the park, the river appears wider whereas now, it is narrow enough one might be able to easily cross on foot to the fallen site of Jasper House. Standing on the river's edge, my feet felt as if they floated across and I could see more clearly. I narrowed my eyes to better focus.

Ancestors, do you see what I see? I paused and took in all the smells and sounds and senses. *Ancestors, do you smell, hear, feel, what I do? I am your eyes and ears now by these rivers. The landscapes have certainly changed. I wonder what you think of them.*

My cousin and I brought with us medicines to the river's shore and she taught me a ceremony new to me. She is always doing things like that. I have learned a great deal from her.

After the ceremony, we laid down tobacco in the earth, as we are taught to do as Nehiyawak, and buried in the dirt it left a small scar. I wondered if nicâpân ever came here or if it was only the men who laughed and talked in the warmth by the fires in Jasper House. As they ate her pemmican to sustain them through the mountains, did little crumbs of dried berry fall to the earth? Did they fall so hard with little wacask's strength imbued in them that they, too, left a small mark—an indentation in the earth?

As my cousin and I finally dragged ourselves away from the river's edge, the river swelled with waves. Maybe our tobacco will reach what the ancestors laid on the other side.

Changes in the land tell stories—histories and teachings that would be lost if those changes were not acknowledged and shared. When we as Nehiyaw and other Indigenous people say that land is pedagogy (Kimmerer, 2013; L. Simpson, 2014; Tuck et. al., 2014; Wilson & Laing, 2019; Wilson et. al., 2021) it is not merely metaphor. Land is animate, in Nehiyaw ontology and therefore it has life and carries memories (Wheeler, 2010). So, too, do the bodies of Indigenous people.

Not limited to lands and waters, re-mapping also charts and re-stories the territories of Indigenous bodies as they change due to interact with each other, the land, and colonization. From an Indigenous ontology of interconnection, the land is always changing by human interaction with it and kiyânaw are also thusly changed by those with whom we interact—including humans and other-than-human entities (Cajete, 2000).

Indigenous women re-mapping their lives is a form of coming to know the map that is contained within the body, Mishuana Goeman notes (2013, p. 117). Just as bodies of lands and waters are pedagogy, so too are bodies of Indigenous (cishet) women—and Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people—who hold onto generations of scarring from colonization out of which stories (or maps) can fall like leaves blown by wayward winds.

Not merely a recounting of trauma, re-mapping is a contention with both pain and loss alongside longing and hope. It is a storied account of ancestors, experiences, and interactions with lands that fruitfully acknowledges the "pain…of colonization" and recognizes how that has impacted "consciousness and imaginations" to address those scars toward the aim of Indigenous futurity (Goeman, 2013, p. 13). As Lenape scholar Joanne Barker (2017) notes, recounting these histories re-*members* Indigenous women back onto the land and into their bodies (pp. 21, 28). Re-mapping is about making Indigiqueer people and cishet women vital members of their and our communities *and* sovereign members (inhabitants) of their and our bodies again.

The sexual and other forms of violence marked on Two Spirit/Indigiqueer bodies and lands can make habitation in all these spaces painful if not unbearable without contending with these histories. Re-mapping offers tools to *re*turn Indigiqueer people to their and our homes, lands, and bodies when colonization endeavors to deny these rights. The scars on Two Spirit/Indigiqueer

bodies are like small stars birthed that, when storied in the process of re-mapping, form a constellation that illuminates and points a map home to their and our desires, territories, and bodies.

CHAPTER FOUR: Miskâsowin, A Methodology of the Heart

"[R]esearch itself is a sacred ceremony within an Indigenous research paradigm, as it is all about building relationships and bridging this sacred space [between relations]." ~ Scott Wilson (2008, p. 87).

A desire-based, anti-colonial project of homecoming and home-calling, this project makes a sovereign turn toward Nehiyaw tribally-specific methodologies rooted in wahkotowin. Indeed Nehiyaw tribally-specific methodologies are the only ones I *can* use because the entire work is an interconnected, relational ceremony of gifting back teachings according to Nehiyaw ontologies of responsibility and traditions of temporal storytelling pedagogies that engage holistic research that employ an integration of the mind/intellect with the heart/body (Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008).

Miskâsowin is a Nehiyaw methodology that emerges from these epistemic-ontologies. It is a practice of deep, inward reflection to consider one's relationship to place, land, and all of creation. This reflection is mean to reveal knowledge, in particularly knowledge about one's role in their community and the broader world (McIvor, 2005; Kolopenuk, 2020). Because Nehiyawak are interconnected and comprised of ancestors and kin today, miskâsowin is not to be confused with the cult of individualism predominant in whitestream self-reflexive practices. Rather the inward reflection is a connection to blood memory, to lands, to star ancestors and cosmos, to nikawiy and nohkom, to knowledge-holders, and to future ancestors in Nehiyaw communities. Miskâsowin stems from this ontology of interconnection. Nehiyawak are tethered by an umbilical cord to the stars and contain centuries of knowledge, hopes, and dreams from the ancestors—human and otherwise—that comprise Nehiyaw bodies of lands, waters, and humans.

Cree scholar Margaret Kovach (2006) and Métis scholar Onowa McIvor (2010) say that deep, inner reflection is best done in nature because it is in nature, out on the land, one can more quietly pay attention to the way bodies of lands, waters, and oneself move together. Land/nature

communicates non-verbally—one that blends the body and heart with the mind and intellect to come to deep knowledge "inwardly" (Kovach, 2006, p. 110) on a "cellular level" (McIvor, 2005, p. 144). It is there I can pay attention to my *own* body and the stories it has to share without the burdensome noise of intellect so often revered in whitestream spaces for coming to knowledge.

Identifying insights from dreams and emotions (Kolopenuk, 2020; Kovach, 2009) or memories invoked by scent, and other sensory experiences (Scully, 2021), I journal to make sense of my the knowings that emerge from my heart and body. Not solely a solitary practice, however, I bring these insights into story and/or dialogue with trusted members of my community—to elders and humans with whom I have deep relationships. There I better make sense of the insights gleaned from my body and the bodies of lands and waters with which I engage. It is in dialogue with humans about the nature of my dreams and journal reflections or in sharing my story and receiving feedback that I come to know my role, one that both honors my desire as well as orients that toward those to who I am responsible.

A storyteller, a displaced Two Spirit who grew up away from my nation and community of the northern plains and Asiniwaci, I consider whether my research as a project of homecoming to Nehiyaw epistemologies also invites me home to the northern plains and Asiniwaci of MFN and related nations'/communities' lands, a consideration Cree scholar Margaret Kovach (2009) poses for all Indigenous researchers to consider.

Homecoming and Home-Calling

"Do Indigenous methodologies demand that the researcher go home? No, not really, but … they do demand that the researcher know whether they need to go home or not…" ~ Margaret Kovach (2006, p. 133).

Early in my doctoral program I was on a FaceTime call with my cousin who, because she is older than me, I jokingly kid her by referring to her as my auntie—and also to pay deference to

her status and far greater wisdom that she carries than I. She asked me about my research plans and I told her of a project I was preparing to launch in the city of Syracuse.

"Can't you do the work here?" she gently interrupted me. "Do you have to do it there or can you do it up here? For your people? Your nation?" Two time zones, a mountain range, and a colonially-contrived border between us, and I could still feel her desire for me to support our MFN and related peoples through my work. She did not shame me when she asked these questions. She was smiling the entire time, enjoying lunch while the two of us spoke. I feel that smile now as a warm embrace while I write this.

She was calling me *home* and I felt my heart pulled there. A Two Spirit displaced from my community, traumas on my mind and body, I only ever felt home in the mountains. I felt it the first time I was able to embrace my relatives *in our homelands*.

I grew up displaced. The federal government of Canada enacts termination policies on all Indigenous nations; in the case of MFN, however, Canada enfranchised the entire band as an entity—rather than as individuals—and MFN today remains *the only* Band to have been fully enfranchised.[xvii] Through numerous policies that included denial of benefits to MFN veterans unless they rescinded Indian status and outright land theft and starvation, numerous MFN citizens left Michel I.R. 132 before the 1958 enfranchisement and today only one former citizen resides on these lands. All MFN and related peoples have been displaced and scattered, not just me, though it is important to note many MFN and related peoples *are* still close to former reserve and longstanding homelands.

My cousin who took me to Jasper House, a leader in the fight for recognition, wants her children and grandchildren to have a place and sense of belonging after the vast harms and trauma our people have gone through. Many MFN kin are houseless on our/their own territories. They are

without shelter on the streets and sidewalks of Amiskwaciywaskahikan in Alberta, which I have heard is largely paved with gravel mined from the former Michel I.R. 132. My cousin has been working hard to find these kin and seeking funding to pull them off the streets. She is a warrior among our people, one many look up to for support. I am grateful and lucky to call her family.

I fight alongside my cousin and other relatives for recognition, not because Canada is the sovereign of MFN, but because it provides a mechanism to support MFN community needs in very material ways, such as securing housing or similar life-saving resources. While some nations have refused colonial standards of recognition (Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2014), Indigenous communities like MFN without colonial-government recognition tend to be under-resourced, impacting the ability with which they can support citizens/members. I want to see my relatives safe, alive, and housed. I want to see them home.

I hope—as many do—to see MFN gain recognition and land back in my lifetime. I want that for my cousin and auntie and their children and grandchildren. I want that for my mother to know that there is a brighter future for my nephew and other future ancestors. When my community thrives, I feel the rays of joy reflecting on me. I am but a part of them; what small ways I am gifted opportunities to support community *re*building efforts is returned to me immeasurably. My relationships with them have grown closer, understandings of teachings deeper, and commitment to them stronger. Similarly, when my community suffers, I feel the shadows, albeit to a far lesser degree than those experiencing harms such as houselessness, which I have once suffered to live through, but do not anymore.

To come home without calling others home would be to separate myself from my relations and therefore to fulfill the aims of colonial projects. It would be an individualistic, self-serving

endeavor rather than one routed in my responsibilities under wahkotowin and role understood through miskâsowin.

"It is your responsibility," my auntie told me on the video call, smiling. She was not saying this to scold me. It was another call home and a reminder that, in coming home, I must bring as many with me as possible. "Help us gather our stories. So much has been written about our nations and it has all been from outsiders. We need *us* to tell *our own* stories."

A storyteller at heart, her specific ask felt like another pull home—one to my own body and role as a storyteller in the community. As a child, I would make up dances to entire vinyl records—back and front—that demonstrated from my body what I thought the stories in each song were trying to convey. On my sisters' birthdays, I would scribble in pencil on lined paper tales of deer and bears befriending giants to forge alliances against tyrants. I taught creative writing in high school and eventually pursued it as a major in higher education. Later, unhoused and an addict living on the streets, the stories I would tell myself before falling asleep sustained me for a time. I wrote stories about the other unhoused people—mostly Black and Indigenous kin—who helped me stay alive. I narrated the tale of the unhoused drummers I would admire who played the heartbeat of the urban lands on which we survived, keeping my own unsteady heart in in rhythm.

Over time, addiction made storytelling a challenge. I stopped for a while, focused solely on survival until I started to connect with Nehiyaw tradition, language, lands, and my family.

My cousin—the one who fights tirelessly for our nation and tries to get our relatives off the street—texted me one day to tell me her son, my nephew,[xviii] had informed her that he was Two Spirit. He was just shy of his sixteenth birthday and she asked me to be there for him as a role model.

“He calls you an elder,” she joked with me. I sent laughing emojis back to her over text. “But no in all seriousness,” she continued, “I don’t know how to guide him to be Two Spirit. You can be that for him. You can show him the way.”

I had no idea what to do. I was barely sober and only recently stably housed. How could I guide a teenage Two Spirit in the ways I did not yet know? And yet I was called to move into this role quickly.

Not long after this conversation with my cousin, I was visiting her in Alberta and took my nephew on a long drive into the heart of Jasper National Park. We blasted Lizzo’s newest song on the car stereo while stopping to try to take wildlife photos of bears and elk, giggling with glee each time we spotted the behind of a grizzly bear scurrying into the woods. In that drive, my nephew opened up to me. He told me stories of hope that he had for using his photography to share beauty and his dream of creating a Two Spirit/Indigiqueer community group within Michel First Nation to host powwows, ceremonies, and more.

I spent years trying to be a good Auntie to him, encouraging and sometimes helping him take photography classes, starting a podcast with him that we both quickly abandoned when I realized that sound-editing was outside of my expertise, and finally starting a blog where the podcast ideas could be funneled into writing.

One afternoon, a few weeks after I had been on the phone call with my elder cousin, my nephew sent me one of his blog posts and we hopped on a FaceTime video call.

“You know,” he said, “I love writing. I forgot about it, but with this blog, I remember I used to always dream of being a writer—maybe publishing a book someday!”

When he told me this, a fear lifted from my heart—a fear that I knew nothing and had nothing to support my nephew. Memories of my own youthful dreams to be a writer and storyteller

returned to me and the ask from my elder auntie to collect our nation's stories became clear to me. It was as if, in concert with my nephew, I was being called home to collect *specifically* Two Spirit/Indigiqueer stories from our nation.

"Maybe I could start some Talking Circles" I offered. "Bring together Two Spirit people from our nation to share stories. And then I could help you craft yours.".

"Cha, you better!" he said jokingly with me.

"I will," I told my nephew, smiling just as I had earlier when I had told my cousin I would be there for him and just as I had earlier told my elder cousin that I would help collect our nations' stories. "Ây hay. Thank you for asking me to do so."

Two Spirit Storytelling Talking Circles

"[T]he more relationships between yourself and the other thing, the more fully you can comprehend its form and the greater your understanding becomes." ~ Shawn Wilson (2008, p. 79).

This project is designed to address these direct asks from my community—my family specifically. The stories and knowledge gleaned from my dissertation are gifts I humbly offer my community. They are small gifts, but in the smallness that is my life, in this body, in this current point of time and space, these are grand gifts and offered with sakihiwewin (*love*), respect and nanâskomowin (*gratitude*). In lieu of colonial nation-state recognition of MFN and until land restitution, stories are all that we as Indigenous people have and all we are (Silko, 1977; Kovach, 2009). They map the way home because they are Indigenous teachings of land use, language, dances, foods, cosmologies, and more. Home is a *re*turn to Indigenous lifeways when colonial society has attempted to remove them/us from those lifeways and assimilate us into non-Indigenous spaces like settled cities, residential/boarding/mission schools, and bordered territories.

I facilitated ten different two-hour Talking Circles sessions starting June 2023 with five Two Spirit adults genealogically connected to MFN, Kelly Lake/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw, Aseniwuche Winewak Nations, and/or Lac Ste. Anne Métis in order to gather stories and share insights learned from the storytelling process. Talking Circles are a widely used Indigenous practice for healing, education, and sharing stories (Graveline, 2000; Scully, 2021). They give everyone a place and time to share as equitably as possible, minimizing the dichotomous hierarchy and resulting power imbalances between researcher (me) and participants in the research (Graveline, 2000; Kulago, 2011). These practices of discussion, everyday conversation, and storytelling that Indigenous people have always made meaning and engaged the research processes (Smith, 1999; Thomas, 2015).

Storytelling is a dialogic, reflective, and community-based activity within a Nehiyaw paradigm. Cree-Métis scholar Judy Iseke (2011) discusses storytelling pedagogy and methodology as a practice of a critical "witnessing." Within this paradigm, audiences consider their relationship to one another, the characters in the story, the context or time period of the story and the present-day, and the story itself.

Drawing on Judy Iseke's scholarship (2011), I crafted prompts (some shared as samples in the appendices) for those joining the Talking Circle that would help us all make meaning from the stories as well as foster dialogue, reflect in journals, and develop our own stories. I refer to these as Critical Indigenous Witnessing (CIW) prompts and have used this model in dialogue facilitation in higher education, community-based Talking Circles, and conflict resolution practices (Scully, 2021; Scully & Romo, 2022). Some of these prompts included inviting storytellers to consider the deepest desires of some of the characters in our Nehiyaw creation stories or imagining an existing character in our creation stories as Two Spirit.

Other prompts included inviting storytellers to listen to music and reflect outside in nature, later returning to journal on the question, *What do you think those sensory experiences you noticed outside in nature are trying to tell you? What might the desires of the ancestors—of the characters in our Two Spirit stories—be trying to teach us?* I invited participants to share their responses in journaling, dialogue, as well as dance and other creative modalities, a practice that taps into felt knowledges from dreams, blood memory, ruptures caused by violence, and from desires that cannot be conveyed in spoken/written language or words alone (Scully, 2021). Similarly, storytellers were given options to craft their stories in the form of beadwork, music, dance, photography illustration, or other artistic modalities recognizing that storytelling from the heart sometimes needs to decenter oral/written language.

Those who wished to participate in the Talking Circles and this project were not required to be experienced storytellers, as noted on the recruitment post in the Appendices. Instead, they were recruited based solely on a *desire* to craft their story and would be welcomed into the space to gain valuable tools, workshopping opportunities, and CIW prompts to help them achieve that end. They were also offered an opportunity to have their story shared in this research and, if also desired, an anthology of stories to be developed to share our Two Spirit stories broadly with community and educators.

As noted in the recruitment post, Indigiqueer/2SLGBTQIA participants aged 18 and older with a relation to MFN and related nations/communities who had a desire to share stories in a series of dialogic Talking Circles were welcome to join. It was important for me to recruit were adults because, while I value and desire to create storytelling spaces for and share stories with youth, as an initial project where trauma responses can flare up during the course of the nature of this type of research, I did not want to subject Two Spirit/Indigiqueer youth to those pains without

first gaining experience managing that with adults. This project is a foundation to then open up opportunities for Two Spirit creation story development with youth in the future.

The interest expressed in this project was more than I could have hoped for with nine people from as far north as Yukon, west as British Columbia and east as Ontario expressing interest in joining. All related to one another by blood and many known personally to each other, we shared genealogy, history, and proclaimed excitement of glee to find one another in the dusty apocalypse that is living separate from one another in colonial times. These deep relations only enhanced the kinds of insights gleaned from this research because it is through deep relation that more knowledge can be gleaned in the research process (S. Wilson, 2008). Meeting in video conference format to accommodate our myriad locations, five of us remained committed and still meet regularly to connect, co-learn, craft and workshop stories, and concretize our dreams of being a Two Spirit/Indigiqueer learning and cultural hub for MFN and related kin.

I offered storytellers small stipends and medicine bundles per sacred, Nehiyaw protocol to show my respect and tend to my reciprocal responsibilities to relatives who chose to be a part of this research. As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008), notes, these are the three "Rs" of Indigenous research: respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (p. 77). Built into practices of miskâsowin that are rooted in wahkotowin, gift-giving is central to express nanâskomitin when knowledge is shared. Miskâsowin does not have "a codification of rules … " or an "ethical framework," writes Cree scholar Jessica Kolopenuk (2020, p. 18). Rather miskâsowin as a methodological practice means I am always tending to my responsibility to my relatives and asking questions that emerge from my "core" that in turn emerge from those relations who comprise me. Ethics is built into this as a research model (Kolopenuk, 2020).

I am Two Spirit. I am not myself alone. I am comprised of kin. Their questions are my research questions. Their well-being is my well-being. This is wahkotowin.

"What drew you to this project?" I asked near the beginning of our first Talking Circle. "What do you hope to get out of these Talking Circles?"

Opening the first Talking Circle with my relatives, I began with some icebreaker activities, a common practice in dialogic settings to build relationships and trust between participants (Kohli, 2012) and to deepen research insights through a Nehiyaw ontology (S. Wilson, 2008). In asking this question, it was my aim not solely to facilitate dialogue, but be attentive to providing kin with their wants and needs to the extent I was able.

"I joined because I did not grow up close to community," one storyteller shared in response. "So I wanted to come here to learn and then be that knowledge-keeper I didn't have growing up."

Others agreed and reiterated similar sentiment, indicating interest in joining the Talking Circles so that they could also learn and then become the knowledge-holder for our community that none of us had when we were young. They came in humility, wanting to learn not solely for themselves, but so that they could pass on those teachings. They came sharing questions I sought to address in my research, a reminder that this dissertation project was designed as a gift back to unearth the teachings my community sought to find. In particular, one cousin, working on crafting her master's thesis research questions, wants to understand how Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people define their relationship to land!

Two Spirit kin joining in this the Talking Circles do so as co-researchers. Whitestream academia has defined research as an exclusive process reserved only for those who have studied specific methods. This is largely due to the need to codify ethics in attempts to redress violent histories of the theft of knowledge and harm done to Indigenous, Black, and oppressed

communities/research subjects (Collins, 1990; TallBear 2013; Tuck, 2009). For Indigenous people, research is not so coveted a role; it can (and often must) be done by any and all in the community for it takes place in everyday activities, conversations, and stories we share (Smith, 1999; Thomas, 2015).

My auntie did not know much, she once told me, and so would sit and listen to all the storytellers and teachers at one of our culture camps. I did not know her well, which is all too common in MFN and related nations/communities given our enormous population and sadly our dispossession that has forced us all to be dispersed across the continent. When she said she did not know much, I believed her. The following year, she was leading beadwork classes and helping people sew ribbon skirts and shirts.

"Auntie," I said to her as we went for a walk, just the two of us. We were taking a break from the busy camp where she had been teaching and I had been running between them and helping elders work on the elk and moose hides. "You said last year you knew nothing. And now, here you are, teaching so many brilliant skills and teachings. I know you are humble, but either you are *so* humble that you knew a lot more than you let on to last year *or* you spent this past year fervently seeking to know as much as you can!" She smiled and didn't say anything. "Or both," I added, laughing. She smiled and pointed down the path toward a spot by the water where a large rock offered a comfortable rest.

"Well," she shrugged, "I mean you teach what you know. Why hoard it? If you know something—teach it. Even if you're no expert." She laughed and sat down, patting next to her for me to have seat. "So what are you going to teach this year," she asked?

Nehiyaw research is for everybody because it emerges from the natural laws of wahkotowin that govern relationships and is practiced in community, attentive to oneself (the

"researcher") and one's role in the community—miskâsowin—which drive what needs to be known and shared. Humble, like my auntie, relatives in the Talking Circles have sought to uncover and craft Two Spirit creation stories not solely for their benefit, but to share those stories with community. Throughout the ten Talking Circles, we identified themes from the stories we shared, our journals, and our dialogue, in turn journaling, dialoguing, and crafting stories *based* on those themes. Insights from this, as shared in Chapters Five and Six, are co-created teachings and knowledges braided together in this dissertation, the strands of which are comprised of *all* of my relations and of course, in particular, my Two Spirit co-researchers in the Talking Circles. These researchers, who wished to be known by name, are Aimee, Braedyn, Cora, Karin, and me and together we crafted stories and teachings that emerge from our hearts.

Heart-knowing

> "[M]uch of the sacredness … would never appear in my written research document—family gatherings … smiles, teasing, tears … a deer sprinting across the open prairie… These experiences constitute meaning that cannot be written, only felt, remembered, and at best spoken." ~ Margaret Kovach (2009, p. 140).

Whitestream academic methodologies often discredit the knowledge that emerges from sensory experiences and emotion. Emotion, so often associated with people of oppressed genders, is devalued amidst colonial traditions of cis-hetero-hegemony that center mind/intellect-knowing as supreme. Heart/body-knowing—embracing all available senses in the research process—is therefore a reclamation of inherent epistemological power associated with marginalized genders and peoples (Bear, 2016; Justice, 2008; Lorde, 1978). In my work, I emphasize learning from the heart/body not because it is *more* valuable than learning from the mind/intellect but rather to work toward shifting imbalances that have devalued knowing from the heart. Centuries of diminishing Indigenous epistemologies have cut off important knowledges contained within the spaces of the

heart, thereby rendering whitestream research and learning one-dimensional and incomplete. Importantly, emphasizing heart-knowing is a mechanism to support healing and self-determining embrace of one's own body when colonial projects attempt to disfigure Indigenous bodies, expressions of emotion, desires, and sensualities.

And miskâsowin *is* a *sensual* practice that requires engagement and attention paid to all *available* senses. I invite you, dear reader, to sound out the Nehiyawewin term, "ôhow." Phonetically written, *ou-hoo-oo*, feel the word on your lips This is the Nehiyawewin word for "owl." Do you hear and feel the owl's cry?

This is how Nehiyawewin is born; it is born from non-judgmental, respectful observation and from feeling the music made by the land. It reacts to and recognizes the sounds and other sensory experiences of the world to form words (Bear, 2006; Highway, 2008). As Nehiyaw scholar Tracy Lee Bear (2006) writes "the colour red is 'being red'" (p. 65). It is a verb, not an objectified noun as it is in English. There are words in Nehiyawewin that cannot be translated into English because they are so in tune with the sensations of the body (including of lands and waters) that they are audible expressions of those experiences.

Nikawiy and I used to take long road trips to see aunts and uncles when I was young, just the two of us listening to classic Motown oldies on cassette tapes and singing along terribly. Neither of us could carry a tune—but we loved the music because in the notes, we envisioned dances. Later, at home with no one else around, nikawiy would put vinyl records on at full volume and cut up a rug dancing. Following along, I learned her steps. Nikawiy never shared the steps with me verbally, I just learned by observing her steps, following her lead, and making mistakes—by just *doing* it.

It is no surprise that for well over a decade, I then became a dancer and dance teacher. As an instructor, I would invite students to not only consider how their musculoskeletal system made movements but also how muscular technique alone makes one an athlete only—not a dancer. When my arms move in performance, they reach for nikawiy's teachings, for ancestral memory, for lands, and for the future. They reach out of desire.

"What are you reaching for?" I would ask my students in class as they leaned onto their right hip, legs straight, torsos pulling away and to the right, their arm floating upward and away along the line of their bodies. "You know the muscles to use. Now you need to take it further. What or maybe who is over there beckoning you? Imagine that someone or something is just out of reach. Don't worry about how your triceps in your arm feel. Instead, check in with your heart and your gut. Let those pull you there."

I invite you, dear reader, to attend this dance class with me briefly. You do not need to feel like nor have experiencing with dancing. You need not have unlimited space and capacity to move to partake in this activity. Simply find some music to listen to or vibration to feel—which can include birdsong or the bustling of a city street or the rhythmic pattern of breeze against your body. Consider your deepest longing. Reach for that. Let that longing you feel in your heart or gut move whatever part of your body comes along for the ride, be that the hairs on your head, your fingers or wrist, an arm, or even your whole body. Now that you have begun moving, can you tell more clearly what you are reaching for? What do you desire that only your body knew and maybe now your mind is beginning to understand—if only in a glimmer?

Journaling is an important tool for being able to learn the insights that come from the body and heart. Journals inspire internal responses, emotions, initial thoughts, and burgeoning insights on experiences conducted during the research process (Kovach, 2009). The insights that emerge

from journaling are so vivid and important because they unearth knowledges that have long been buried by colonization. They unearth trauma and also the wisdom of trees in urban landscapes, the memories of mountains carrying the footprints of hundreds of thousands of ancestors and settlers who have traversed their slopes, and the teachings of rivers and swamps.

Having hiked hundreds of mountain peaks, I often dictate into a recorder journal reflection from my experience on the land—and memories that emerge in the quiet space alone hiking mountain paths. Sometimes I would be recording these journal entries while hopping over rocks and through streams or traversing steep edges or the final push close to the mountain summit, my words almost breathless on the recording.

Of course most often, I do journal safely seated in one place and do not recommend my risky reflection practices on steep terrain as a methodological practice for you, dear reader. Rather, journaling in nature allows my mind to quiet so I am better able to hear the land communicating with my body and heart and then, in that space—speak those insights into a journal (Kovach, 2009, p. 140).

Sometimes I am afraid to journal because when I begin, it is hard to stop—even when at cliff edges some 2,700 meters above sea level (give or take)! As I journal, memories are sparked of a dream or conversation with nikawiy from my youth emerges and opens up new and/or important insights into what my heart and body are telling me and it can be hard to take my pen from paper or stop my voice from recording reflections as important knowledge—even whole worlds—open up before me.

For my dissertation research, I journaled after every Talking Circle, journaled on each of my relative's stories, on dreams that occurred during the span of this research, and I journaled again as I organized themes emerging from the stories and reflections. I journaled on story ideas

and the journals prompted new iterations of my own story, in turn prompting more journaling. Miskâsowin is not a one and done process. It is never-ending process of continuing to learn in collaboration.

Often journaling outside in nature, safely seated on flat ground, I would *feel* the conversations that took place like vibrations or *hear* again storytellers' voices as they spoke in the Talking Circles. In the rare few times I rushed through the process in an attempt to meet academic deadlines, I would pause and catch myself. The insights in those reflections were often minimal, reduced to mere summary descriptions of the conversations of the Talking Circle without any feeling, connection to memory, or knowledge that emerged from the heart. I would remark on that in the journal and it would shift my writing, returning again to accessing knowledge from the heart.

On one such occasion, I was journaling outside amidst a summer heatwave. Dryly narrating the events of the previous Talking Circle, I felt nothing but the stickiness of the hot summer sun made more unbearable by my long hair cascading around me like a blanket. Sighing, I set aside my writing to move to a shaded area and pull my hair off to the side, weaving it strand by strand into a braid. As I pulled my hair more taught, I could feel as if nikawiy was there, braiding into my hair her stories just as she did when I was younger.

Growing up, Nikawiy would weave stories into my hair. Teachings to counteract what I was learning in the predominantly white school I attended or her experiences as an Indigenous iskwew. Before we would dance, before going to Onondaga for cultural events, a place she often brought my sisters and me to connect with Indigenous community away from our own in MFN, nikawiy would comb her hands across my scalp, weaving strands of hair into a braid, each one representing a teaching from her heart.

One of her favorite stories she would like to tell was the time she brought me—barely a toddler and still so young as to be held in her arms—with my older sisters walking beside her on their two legs, to go to Onondaga to see Dennis Banks. Nikawiy, herself an activist, loved that she got to even glance for a moment at the American Indian Movement (AIM) activist who was living in sanctuary on the sovereign Onondaga Nation in the early 1980s when the Federal Bureau of Investigation had targeted him and other AIM leaders and activists.

"It was crowded," she would say excitedly while braiding my hair. "A bunch of people ran with him up to the edge of the nation—the border there where all the troopers were. There were so many troopers just waiting for him. All the lights going like crazy. Anyway they all just stopped right at the edge and went, 'nah nah nah nah nah nah.'" She would laugh. "You can't catch me!" she would add at the end.

When nohtâwiy died in 2014, nikawiy offered to come over to my place and braid my hair every day for a week—in the traditional style—like she used to do when I was a child. She was quieter then, weaving stories and teachings in my hair just with her hands as we sat in silence—weaving in her heart-knowings. Stories and knowledges have been woven into my hair and with them, love when the words for them in English do not roll off the tongue quite the same way as in Nehiyawewin.

"Kisâkihitin," I said to her this past summer at culture camp while she braided my hair one morning over coffee. "I think I said that right, hey?" I asked her. "'Gee-SAH-geetin,' hey?"

"Mm-hmm," she replied, distracted, reaching down for the hair tie I held between my fingers. Faintly, as she pulled the tie taught around the end of my hair, I heard her whisper "kisâkihitin." It was as if she wove with her hands the pronunciation into the strands of hair, rooting them so that they came from her heart into my mind.

Kisâkihitin.

The sakihiwewin—not merely the events and discussions in each Talking Circle—were the most illuminating. Returning to my journal entry, I shifted from a dry narration of the events of the prior session to instead discussing the *care* or sakihiwewin that I felt for my Two Spirit kin who chose to be a part of this research. In doing so, I paused to recognize that each came to this research as creative, brilliant, accomplished storytellers.

Some were already published writers and poets, others frequently sought after spoken-word artists, and all of them creative.[xix] Most of them crafted multiple stories during the course of this research all spanning genres such as traditional teaching stories, personal narratives, speculative fiction, and sci-fi and fantasy. They are immensely *creative*, my storytelling cousins. This was a theme I saw emerging when I sat, simply in awe, of the beautiful pieces they created. Reaching into my heart/body to *feel* the knowledges shared in dialogue and stories, I recognized that my relatives—each one of them—were *creators*.

"Stories are all we are," one cousin noted in the Talking Circle. "It is the only way we know our past." Not merely speculation, "stories are [Indigenous people'] theories" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 426). Qualitative researchers' work tell stories; they pull information, make decisions on what is necessary to share *and not* share based on reflections in memos and coding practices, and then craft a story from those results. Academics call this a *research paper*. Journalists call it news. Indigenous people call them all stories.

Stories share teachings that are first made known to the heart (Archibald, 2008) before they braided with the mind/intellect. As one of my relatives shared her story verbally over video conferencing, every participant remarked at how soothing her voice was. In other stories, participants noted the vivid detail that "transported them" into the story—as if the story was

embodying their own lives and experiences. Storytellers crafted characters based not just on their singular lives, but the merging of lives of multiple ancestors, from ideas that came from dreams, and also from other-than-human relatives.

It is a practice of sakihiwewin to embody these relations—to ask, ancestors, nikawiy, nokum and nimosôm, nicâpân, and more relatives what might be or have been their inner worlds. Each storyteller in the space sought not only to narrate their lives, but the lives of those who comprised them. With humility and veneration, storytellers asked specific questions during workshop to ensure stories were respectful of (not impervious to) traditions and elders in order to bring to the forefront heart-knowings of kin that have often been erased through colonial violence.

What knowledges are contained only in their bodies/hearts? What knowledges are contained in their desires? What hopes and dreams did nikawiy braid into my hair, whispered over the touch of her fingers against my scalp as she wove the strands together?

Desire

"Just as Indigenousness itself has long been a colonialist target, so too has our …desire."
~ Daniel Health Justice (2008, pp. 103).

To know with the body is a refusal of colonial attempts to disfigure, disavow, delegitimize, and ultimately destroy Two Spirit/Indigiqueer lives and futures. Embracing my deepest desires in my work is an anti-colonial turn toward self-determination and sovereignty when colonizers want Two Spirit people like me dead. Sovereignty over one's own body is central and inseparable to nation rebuilding. Because decolonization calls for a restitution of bodies of lands and waters to Indigenous stewardship (Tuck & Yang, 2012), so too must resurgence call for a reclamation of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people to self-determine the territories of their own bodies. By embracing

the body as a site of knowledge and honoring its desires is a return home to Nehiyaw territories and—a return our own bodies if not also of lands and waters.

Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck (2009) describes desire as a research methodology that contending with the pain and "damage" endured by Indigenous communities alongside the hopes, dreams, wishes, and futures of those communities in mind. Centering *desire* does not require that communities "overcome" trauma, as demanded by neoliberal calls to "pull oneself up by one's bootstraps" and related discursive strategies. These neoliberal traditions stress individual accountability and subsequent resiliency without accounting for the large-scale socio-political and economic structures of colonization accountable for the trauma and damage in the first place (Million, 2013).

As Eve Tuck (2009) writes, desire "is the song about walking through the storm… that recognizes rather than denies that pain doubtlessly lies ahead" (p. 419). It concerns itself with the "not yet and, at times, the not anymore… Desire is about a longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future." (p. 417). Desire-based research reclaims the *power* of people harmed by colonization (Hammonds, 1994; Lerum, 2001; Lorde, 1978). It reaches into the past to unearth ancestral desires and what those hopes they may have for Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people today. When Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people come to know through the body and reclaim stories buried by ancestors and stolen by colonization, we/they rekindle those as expressions of futurity and hope.

Sensuality, embedded in Nehiyawewin, and sexuality are not taboo subjects in a Nehiyaw epistemology and, if represented as such, are largely due to colonial impositions of purity narratives and cis-heteronormative traditions. There are storied accounts across many tribal communities that celebrate "sexuality as a sacred process" (Nelson, 2017, p. 234). Indigenous

stories have sometimes recounted humans expressing intimacies with other-than-human kin, coupling with bears and/or humans shapeshifting into other nonhuman animal family systems (Nelson, 2017; Whitehead, 2018a, 2022). For some Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people, embracing an intimate love cannot be conveyed in colonial languages such as English. Sakihiwewin is about more than love of nuclear families, sexual couplings, or even chosen friends. Sakihiwewin is a Nehiyaw law—an embodiment of community—that is connected to the cosmos and to sensuality embedded in Nehiyaw ontology (Wilson, 2015b, 2018).

Sensuality is not *merely* sexual, as might be understood in the rigid binaries and Christian values associated with colonialism. Sensuality is literally an *embracing of the senses* and of the interconnection between body and mind. It is recognizing that there is life and importantly desire not just in human bodies, but also in the bodies of lands, waters, skies, stars, and more. In a world where other-than-human kin are relations, where everything and everyone is animate means living in a "world of endless potentiality." (Nelson, 2017, p. 242).

Even Wesakecahk, in traditional Nehiyaw renderings before the onslaught of colonial cis-hetero-hegemony, was an embodiment of these endless possibilities because Wesakecahk could "be whoever [they wanted], a man, a woman, animal, or all at once." (Wilson, 2015a, p. 1). Imagined by some Nehiyaw Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people as one of the first Two Spirit ancestors, Wesakecahk does not mean "elder brother" as is often depicted in stories. As Two Spirit Cree scholar Alex Wilson notes, the term "Wesakecahk" comes from the Cree words sakihiwewin (*love*) and acahk (*star* and also *soul*) in the Cree language (2015). The root word for love—*SAKI*hiwewin—is in the middle of Wesakecahk's name (weSAKEcahk/SAKIhiwewin) and the root word for both star and soul is toward the end (wesakeCAHK and aCAHK). Wesakecahk is born of the stars—the souls and ancestors of the Nehiyawak—and love.

A child in love with the land, outside memorizing plant names and trying to melt, I also would imagine half of the lands as my lovers. The maple was my home at which I would sit and gaze out at fields that were nitotemak (my friends). The bushes lining the backyard was the location where my imaginary lover—who believed me to be *his one true* love—lived. Much to his chagrin, the wild vines were my secret lover that I would take back with me to the maple. I had many imaginary lovers in the land. Sometimes they were men. Many times they were women. More often than not, they were *something else.*

Some summer days, when school was out and I was done with chores or nikawiy was too busy to dance with me to Motown records or braid my hair, I would instead lie on the grass. Arms outstretched, positioning myself as directly under the sun as possible, I would sweat from the heat and hold my breath as long as possible. I thought, *maybe, if I hold my breath and lie under the sun long enough, the sun may just melt me into the ground and the rest of me just float into the wind in the air*. I would always stop, gasping for air as a breeze or strong gust of wind would pass. Cooling my sweat, breathing air into my lungs, I would take in a deep breath and return inside, often begrudgingly, to tend to more chores or scribble stories on lined pieces of paper.

A survivor of childhood sexual abuse, sometimes I *did* want to melt away or be scattered invisibly to the wind. I believed that this was the case and that there was something about me I had to "fix" in order to survive. Interestingly, some of this began to shift when I was in graduate school—though not because of the benevolence of a colonial education, but rather because of the guidance of Indigenous and women of color faculty and the Nehiyaw scholars to which they introduced me.

Cree scholar Margaret Kovach (2006, 2009) discusses her life as a Nehiyaw child who was adopted by and into a white family as a part of the Sixties Scoop. In Canada, Indigenous children

were and are removed (or "scooped") from their homes, families, and communities and placed into foster care/adopted into non-Indigenous families at disturbingly high rates. This was a particularly pronounced and well-documented phenomenon during the 1960s and was and is part of the colonial project to eradicate Indigeneity through assimilation of children. Those "scooped" and adopted by white families during that time are often called "Sixties Scoop Survivors." While not part of the Sixties Scoop specifically, adoption is part of my MFN genealogy and family history and it is why nikawiy and most of my nuclear family is far from MFN and related nations'/communities' lands.

In Kovach's work (2006, 2009) she shares a story about growing up on the Canadian plains, not knowing yet her Nehiyaw identity, and being called to the land even as she roams the lands searching for arrowheads. It is only later in life, Kovach writes (2006, p. 23), that she realizes this was the land pulling her closer to a Nehiyaw identity and knowledge.

Reading Kovach's work (2006, 2009), it became so clear to me then that I had not wanted to melt into the land and wind as a child because I had wanted to disappear (at least not because of suicidality or self-hatred) but rather I wanted to disappear from colonial violence that separated me from my body as much as it did from *home* in Nehiyaw lands and epistemologies. The land was also pulling me to a Nehiyaw *desire* to express my love of and identity as part of the land and in turn, my nation/community.

I do not lie in the grass and hold my breath anymore waiting to be swept away by the wind, anymore. Instead I hike mountains, where wind air whips at my ankles when I reach the summit, my body almost taken by the gusts that pass above tree line.

I hike for days, wading through rushing rivers and swamps, pulling myself up rocky slopes, and spending dawn till sunset navigating mountain terrain until I reach their peaks. As I rise in

elevation, I can feel the wind enveloping me, pulling strands out of my braid like a trickster. As I pass milestones in the landscape or the occasional hiker on the trail until I reach the summit, I feel I *am* the wind coming to flirt with the mountain for a time. The boundaries between myself and kin blurs. Once at the top, the wind is so strong that I have for a moment disappeared, welcomed by the mountain for taking the effort to come to know their slopes and peaks. I am, for another moment, just the wind. In love with the mountain.

"To take joy in our bodies—and those bodies in relation to others," writes Indigiqueer Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2008, p. 103), "is to strike out against five-hundred-plus years of disregard, disrespect, and dismissal" (pp. 103). I experience pure decolonial joy that reverberates across generations, time, and genealogies. I feel as if I am picking up the hopes, dreams, and desires I had before when colonization bombarded my life with an onslaught of violence. I wonder if those hopes, dreams, and desires are mine or if they are my ancestors'. I wonder if they are both.

Oh, to be the wind that rages against the centuries of decolonization, causing catastrophe in its wake and then calm again moves as a breeze to clean up the mess it has left in the aftermath of a storm. To be the wind, moving air, touching everything with its movement, like Wesakecahak who embodies all the lives and loves of the earth, air, water, and cosmos. To be the wind, a dancer moving effortlessly, making dance partners of trees, messes of braids that come unraveled, and falls in love at the tops of mountains.

If discussion of these intimacies feels jarring, dear reader, I invite you to consider that the brutal violence inflicted on Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people since the dawn of colonization is, in fact, what might be considered jarring—and disturbing. Colonialist traditions only view humans as having lifeforces. To witness Indigenous expressions of sakihiwewin with the land are therefore

affronts to their cis-hetero and human-centric understandings of love, logics that must be stamped out.

When I am the wind for a moment—embodying the wind through story—I not only embrace my epistemic and ancestral power as a shapeshifting Two Spirit, I also have an opportunity to escape the pain that lives within my body. The scars weigh heavy. As the wind, however, they are light enough to waft around mountains carved by wind and turquoise rapids of the Athabasca River. There they dance with trees and embrace the peaks. As the wind, scars can be blown into gusts up to the sky where they settle among the stars. Like Wesakecahk, who always returns to the constellation in the sky, so too must I return at times to my human form.

It is this that is jarring.

Knowing with one's whole bodies and embracing desire is a challenging, often painful process. It opens up these wounds that are not only on individual, but collective ones that mark the bodies of humans as well as lands and waters. I am sometimes envious of settler scholars who only engage work through "mind-knowing" as it seems it is a simpler, less laborious task. And yet this is not only the only work I *can* do because the Nehiyaw methodology of miskâsowin requires I look inward—at myself as a subject of research (McIvor, 2010). My desire does not exist in isolation, of course. Perhaps were I to engage a desire-based research method that examined myself inwardly as a distinct individual without relations that comprise me, I would have succumbed to early insights that I thought I wished to disappear. Instead, because miskâsowin is practiced through an ontology of wahkotowin, my desire pulled me home to multiple bodies: mine, the body of knowledge in MFN and related nations/communities, and to the bodies of lands and waters where Two Spirit/Indigiqueer teachings are buried.

Many Two Spirit/Indigiqueer ancestors had to take their desires, practices, stories, and longings “underground” and “out of sight of colonizers” in order for them to “survive” (Wilson, 2018, p. 189). There they hid their identities, desires, ways of life, longing—their sakihiwewin—to be safe from colonial destruction and that they might one day be dug up and found again. This does not mean are not there or “forgotten...They’re just forgone.” (Whitehead qtd. in Johns, 2022).

How many stories are under the boulders that protrude from the depths of the Athabasca? What happens when Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people put their and our ears to the ground? Do the stories dance out? Will the ancestors sing their longings? What traumas linger there, yes, and what hopes, also?

Nikawiy came to culture camp for her first time on her last trip around the sun before she would turn eighty years old. Culture camps are common gatherings in Canadian First Nation, Métis, and Inuit nations/communities wherein Indigenous peoples spend time in the bush on ancestral lands learning and sharing traditional teachings—often with elders. Teachings can include hide tanning, language revitalization, storytelling, traditional cooking and fire preparation, the names of plant medicines, and beading and sewing.

Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation started a culture camp for our expansive nations and communities in 2018. Because of the global COVID-19 pandemic, among other barriers, this was the first year nikawiy was able to attend culture camp and visit her homelands and family. A dancer, perhaps a couple of decades ago she would have come to camp to teach steps. She tells me that, in her dreams, she can still dance like she used to. I dream in dance, too. In dance—and dream—I often find I am the wind arriving at the summit of a long-climbed mountain and it is only when I stop moving or wake that I realize I am not.

This year nikawiy came as an elder. Instead of teaching dance, she helped all the younger kin make ribbon clothing—skirts, shirts, and more—and kept off her feet as much as she could. The second day of camp, I had been running around all morning helping my Auntie. I was all day flinging my long hair over my shoulder, trying to keep it from the flames drying the moose meat or from getting caught in the flesh of the elk hide I was scraping. My auntie remarked I would look so pretty with my hair in a braid and a cousin of mine, working hard and standing nearby, said she could do it.

"No, no, you two take a break. Go get her mom to do it, hey," my Auntie said.

I went to see nikawiy, seated in the shade under a tent talking to one of her cousins. Drinking iced tea, they were on break from teaching sewing and nikawiy called to me.

"Oh there you are!" she yelled. "Come over here, hey. I don't see you, you run so fast around here. I think we should call you one who moves too much. One who can't sit still." She cackled in laughter with my cousin who gave me a hug before getting up to check on the bannock on the grill.

"Hey, show me where you're camping," Nikawiy said, getting to her feet and reaching for my arm to help her. "I want to see the river. Just help me get there." I held onto her arm and we started walking through the open prairie land to the riverbank. Largely shielded by willow, pine, and quaking aspen, it was a rocky and often precarious terrain to reach the river's shores and the water moving dangerously fast.

"So you're really camping?" she asked as we walked, her arm linked in mine. "In a tent? Not staying in the cabins, *with your own mother*?" She added, joking and also nervous that at some late hour of darkness, in my tent, maskwa (*bear*) might take me away. She knew, if maskwa arrived, I would likely go willingly on such adventure.

Laughing I confirmed that I was indeed camping, but that I promised not to get stolen away while she was asleep. “The cabins are for you,” I reminded her. “Elder and families with small kids. So I’ll be in the tent.” I held her arm closer and we walked slowly and carefully toward the trees, gingerly maneuvering through clearings in the brush to make our way toward my tent, its door facing a clearing that perfectly displayed the turquoise river and the lavender mountain on the other side.

“See it’s perfect,” I said, showing her how soft the moss was under my sleeping mat and the view of the mountain through the trees.

“Mm-hmm. I can hear it,” she said, motioning her head further ahead toward the rushing sound of water. “Let’s keep going so I can see it better,” she added. Finally we approached an opening, coming down a gentle slope, that made the bright turquoise of the river visible against the base of the lavender mountain on the other side of the riverbank.

“You okay?” I asked her, making sure she was steady on her feet as we paused to watch and listen. She nodded without responding and I went back behind my tent to get a folding camp chair on which for her to sit. “Here,” I said, helping her down onto the seat. I started to let go of her arm to sit next to her on the ground, but she held my arm close and I looked. She had tears in her eyes.

“If you cut me right now,” she said, “the blood in my veins would run the color of this river.”

I am yôtin (wind), nikawiy is sîpiy (river). Cutting through terrain, raging over rocks, nikawiy-sîpiy sometimes is enraged, like me. She carves ruts in silt and soil, helping push earth into tall mountain peaks. It is fitting sîpiy is nikawiy. She made me. Yôtin. Something else. Two Spirit. Ayahkwew. She created the conditions in the terrain that allowed yôtin to carve the

mountains into tall peaks and slopes. She touches all the life in the water and I touch all the life in the air and together not one life is without sakihiwewin. Like the rapids of sîpiy, I too rage. I yell and fight back against centuries of violence that have tried to decimate us—take away our lifeforce and obscure the path home. At the sîpiy, looking up at waciy (*mountain*), yôtin picks up. The sky is light late in the summer, so the constellations are not yet there, but I wonder if—when I sleep in my tent, the screen on the roof open—I could see gusts of wind moving toward the constellations, the ones that point us home.

"I'm glad you are home, nikawiy," I said. Nikawiy nodded, drying her tears.

"Yes, yes," she replied. "This is where I want you to put me when I die." Without skipping a step or giving me time to respond, she let go of my arm.

"Now let's get this braided," she said, tugging at the messy strands of my hair. "You have a hair tie with you?" she asked, motioning for me to sit in front of her. I pulled one out of my pocket as I sat.

"Kinanâskomitin, nikawiy," I said, holding the hair tie in my fingers while she used hers to pull strands of hair from my scalp, weaving them in a braid down my back.

"Remember when I used to do this when you were little?" I nodded. "Hey, sit still," she joked. I laughed as she smoothed out the strands and asked for the tie in my hands and secured my braid at the bottom. "And 'member when your Pop died and I braided your hair every day for a week afterward?" I told her I remembered. "Well culture camp is a whole week. Maybe I can braid your hair everyday while I'm here."

Every day, when the constellations in the melted into sunrise, I would go to nikawiy and we would drink warm coffee before the day warmed as she wove in her hopes and dreams with each strand in my braid.

Figure 1: Photo of Athabasca River (Nikawiy's Veins) by Scully

Image description: the Athabasca River, a rushing river that cuts through tall pines at the base of a mountain's shoulder visible in the distance. The sky is brilliant blue with fluffy white clouds and the river looks like a turquoise that was melted together with milk.

CHAPTER FIVE: Two Spirit Creators and Shapeshifting Methodology

"And the creator keeps creating…"
~ Karin, 2023

And the creator keeps creating…

Soon after Sky Woman had fallen through the hole in the sky, her sister's child approach the hall and peering through, saw the wonderment below.

The child followed sky woman, but the wind was blowing and the child landed in the water.

As the child sunk into the depths of the water, they saw the most incredible light show equal to that of the heavens that they had floated down from.

Soon after, the child was reborn in the belly of a whale, and that small whale pup swam in the beautiful waters with freedom, surrounded by beauty in the love of its pod.

After a long life, the whale washed up on a beach and gave its life—its meat to a family of starving wolves at the shore.

A wolf pup was born as a result of the nourishment from that whale. The wolf pup, surrounded by family, grew up to roam the forests freely and, raise new pups of their own.

One day, when the wolf had grown old, it came across the five-fingered ones who were sick, starving, and dying alone.

Old now, the wolf gave itself to the five-fingered ones. As thanks, the five-fingered saved the beautiful wolf coat and wore it in ceremony to honor and thank the wolf and all that had come before them.

In so doing, a family among the five-fingered ones gave birth to a new child, this one who Two Spirit.

~ *Untitled Story* (Karin, 2023)

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Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are creators and life-givers. They/we give life to ideas, imagined possibilities for resurgent futures, to ancestors reborn in their/our stories, to plants and animals for which we care, and more. Some Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people can and desire to give life through birthing (human) children from their own bodies and that is of course also a beautiful part of creation.

Life-giving from a Two Spirit paradigm is an expansive concept that cannot be understood *solely* through the lens of the biological act of reproduction. Wesakecahk and wacask made life

when they reached into the waters for earth to put on the turtle's back. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people across Nehiyaw and numerous tribal nations have made life by passing on Two Spirit/Indigiqueer knowledges and teachings to the next generation, raising children that had been orphaned or did not have other closely related kin to care for them, and more (Justice, et. al., 2010). Planting medicines that are then grown and harvested by the loving care of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer hands is also life-giving and sprouts new creations and nourishes new generations.

In this research, Two Spirit storytellers birthed ideas and teachings that only Two Spirit perspectives can teach, worlds that exist outside of (or as a response to) the pain of colonization, and characters including ancestors remembered and brought (back) to life. As noted in Chapter Four, storytellers created powerfully imaginative narratives, spanning fiction, fantasy, personal narrative, traditional creation/teaching stories, and even a second-person choose-your-own-adventure story, summaries, and examples of which I share below.

Karin's untitled story, as shared in the introduction to this chapter, centers a reimagined understanding of an example of MFN and related communities'/nations' creation. Sky Woman, part of many MFN and related nations'/communities' creation stories that contain Kanien'kehá:ka cosmologies, is rendered as an "Auntie" to one of the main characters—a child who is curious about what they see down below where Sky Woman landed. After falling through the sky, the child is reborn (presumably and as discussed in Talking Circles) by being eaten by a whale. Then consumed by wolves, and finally fed to save and sustain the five-fingered ones, the story demonstrates that life is also given in death. Creation takes places in multiple locations, as well. It is in the sky—the stars, where we as Nehiyawak emerge—and the water, where the whales live, and the lands wolf where the wolves roam on earthen terrain.

Karin's story opens up a plethora of possibilities for considering nonhuman animals (whales, wolves, etc.) as direct creators of new life and even new species. Importantly it also centers Two Spirit youth, as represented by the non-gendered child whose creation eventually births a Two Spirit five-fingered one, as agents in creation—as themselves also creators.

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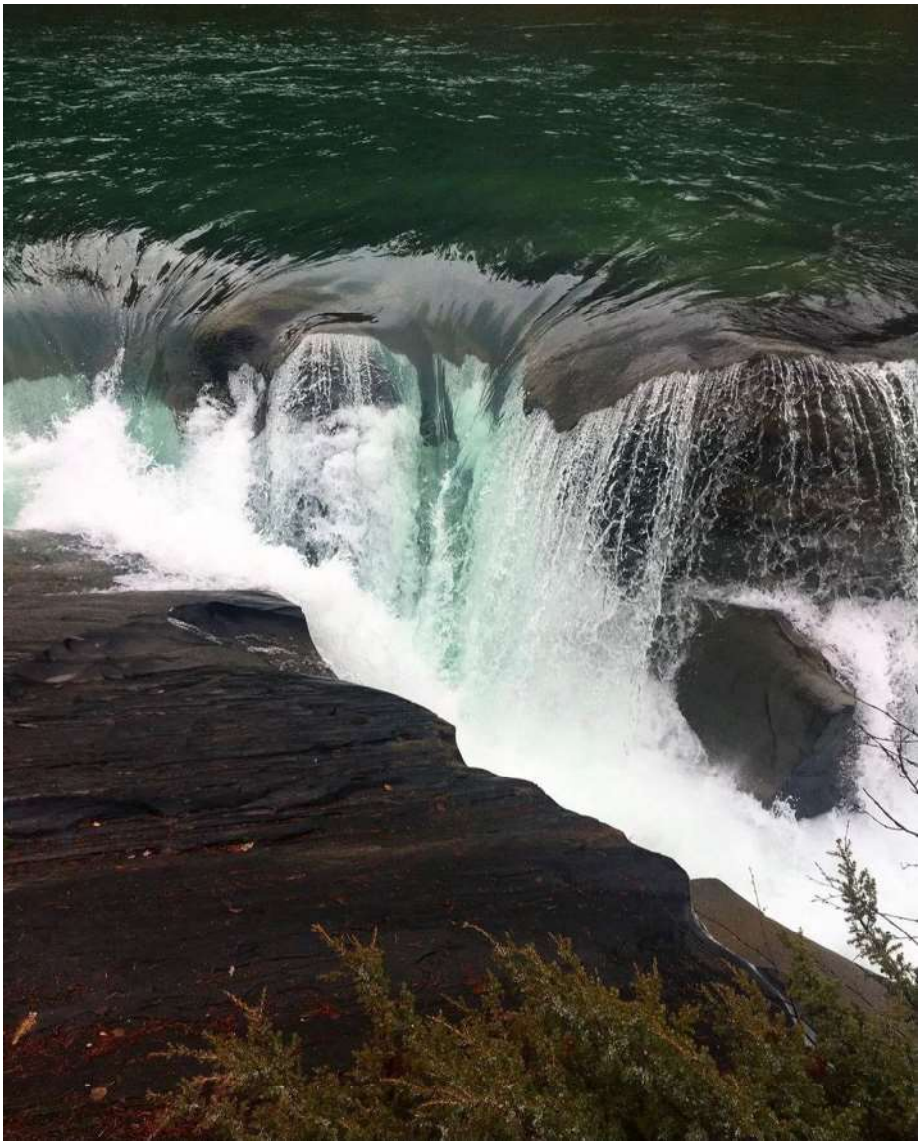

Figure 2: Athabasca Falls, Photography by Braedyn
Image description: a photo of Athabasca Falls and its turquoise green waters rushing over rocky cliffs into a wide, frothy waterfall colored white and pale turquoise as it tumbles into a steep canyon.

Braedyn, the youngest in the Talking Circle, is the favorite uncle of his many nieces and nephews. A youth of only twenty-one years of age, Braedyn is a creator by helping raise his small nieces and nephews (alongside their loving parents and grandmother, my cousin). He creates possibilities in his imaginative pursuits of writing and photography as well bringing to life, Quinten, a Two Spirit character in his story, *Quinten's Great Escape*. A speculative fiction and fantasy piece written in the first-person narrative, Braedyn's story details the life of Quinten, a Two Spirit youth from the Michel First Nation who is forced into a residential school after the 1958 enfranchisement of the nation. With a desire to flee the terrors of the school, the story centers Quinten's eventual escape, surviving on a series of islands where he is guided by a grandmother spirit.

"I ran out of the classroom, the priests and nuns chasing after me…," Braedyn writes. "I ran for my life…" Running away so fast, "like the wind blowing in the sky," Quinten encounters a rushing waterfall and decides to send their feet flying across the slippery rocks at the mouth of the gushing water to be carried by the waterfall far away from the school. The photograph above of the Athabasca Falls as seen in Jasper National Park depicts the waterfalls that transport Quinten away from the school.

Falling through the waterfall, Quinten hits their head on the rocks and only later gains consciousness as they float in the waters toward an island. There, on this island, the pain from the fall is not their only experience of pain from which they must heal; they also must learn to navigate the pain of recovering from memories of trauma endured at the school. On this island, however, Quinten also encounters a grandmother spirit who guides them through the pain—and the new lands and waters of the one of many islands Quinten must traverse to find healing.

Residential/industrial, mission, and boarding schools, as discussed in the Introduction, committed some of the most egregious horrors include physical assault/beatings, sexual abuse/assault, rape, and murder. It is estimated that as many as 40,000 children were killed during the boarding school era in the U.S. alone (McBride, 2020) and more than 6,000 killed or who went missing from the schools in Canada (Miller, 2024) about half of whom are buried in mass, unmarked graves. Most of these buried children's names/identities, lived stories, and more are and will likely remain unknown. Given the brutal enforcement of cis-heteronormative gender/sexual norms at these schools, how many of these children are Two Spirit/Indigiqueer? What might they have *birthed* had then been allowed to live, group up, and become elders? What ideas, stories and characters could they have bought to life? What worlds could they have imagined? What new generations of beautiful, Indigenous kin might any of these children created if only they been able to *survive*?

Braedyn's story takes up Alex Wilson's consideration that buried underground are the teachings of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer ancestors (2018, p.189). Metaphorically digging underground where these beloved kin are buried, Braedyn listens to imagine what they might say Braedyn brings to life the hopes and dreams of youth who desired to—or outright *dared*—resist. *Quinten's Great Escape* imagines one future among many, creating through story a character—a *life* that has otherwise been stolen and rendered a nameless number to colonial historiography and settler stories.

Braedyn becomes a creator through the crafting *Quinten's Great Escape,* birthing a character with courage that embodies Braedyn's own desires as a Two Spirit youth today. The series of islands to which Quinten escapes represent the creation of a world within Braedyn's imagination.

At the first island to which Quinten arrives, they find that the flora and fauna are sick and dying—inhospitable for survival. Escaping then to the next island, Quinten moves through the waters only to realize that they, too, are sick—filled with toxic substances, as well. Each of the islands in the series and all of the waters are as equally harmed—or worse—than the ones before.

Wrought with agony, Quinten does not know what to do. He has escaped to what is again a sick and suffering place—he hurts and he feels for the lands and waters around them that hurt. Each island is depicted in the shape and name of an animal that represents some of the teachings of those animals in Nehiyaw tradition including Oho (*owl*), Paskwâwi Mostos (*buffalo*), Maskwa (*bear*), and finally Amisk (*beaver*) Island. As such, Braedyn is describing the ways in which colonization has harmed all of creation—human and otherwise including lands (and the animals these island lands represent) and waters.

Braedyn's depiction of the waters and island terrain as harmful substances is meant to represent that even as Indigenous people (especially Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people) survive colonization, there are many traumas though which they and we must navigate from a world that continues to wish to see us stamped out. On a constant search for reprieve, safety, and belonging, Quinten finally encounters a grandmother spirit upon reaching the last island, Amisk Island. Amisk, part of the early creation stories of Nehiyawak and one who helped Wesakecahk and wacask make the world for Nehiyawak, is therefore an important ending point for Quinten to find healing. There, the grandmother spirit helps Quinten remember who they are as a Two Spirit—a carrier of many medicines that Quinten must bring back through the waters and the previous islands in order to heal the flora and fauna from the trauma of enduring colonial violence and make the islands once again safe for bodies of Indigenous human and nonhuman animals, lands, and waters.

Braedyn births a new world in *Quinten's Great Escape*, depicted in his illustration of the islands shown in Figure 3. This created world is an imagined that Two Spirit medicine knowledge and Two Spirit sakihiwewin could be one antidote to colonial problems (like addiction). Braedyn's story builds a world, an important tool in creation. Wesakecahk makes the world for Nehiyawak and Braedyn, after birthing Quinten creates a world of islands and then heals them from the sickness imposed on them by colonialism.

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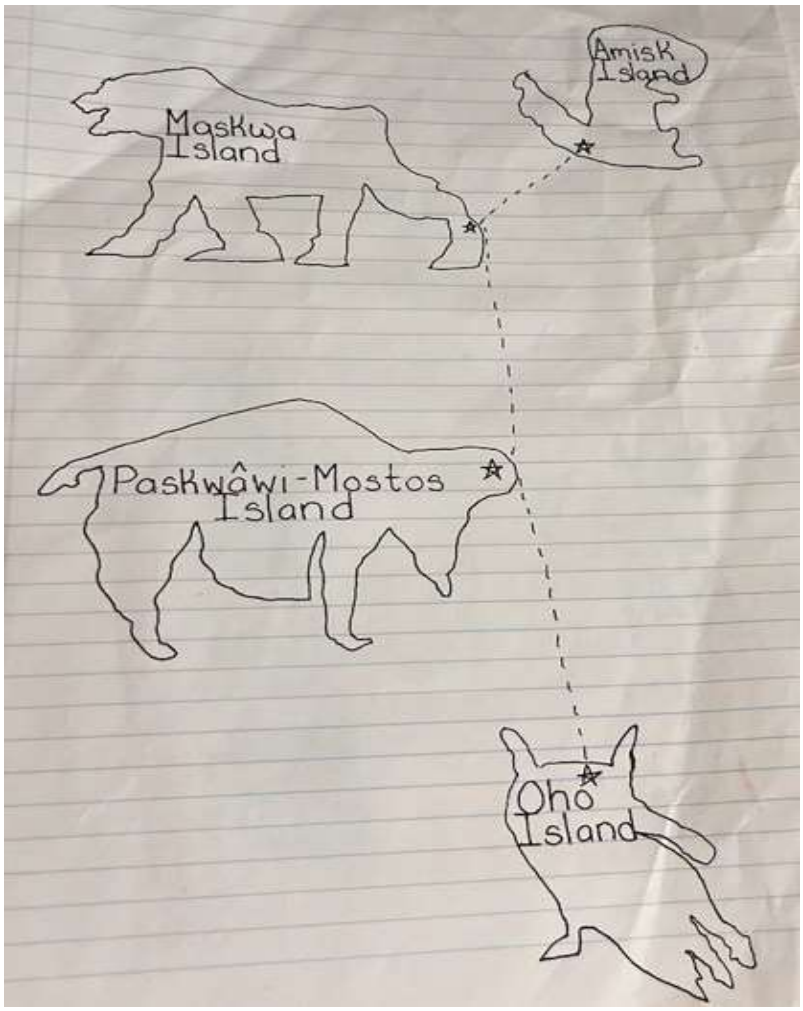

Figure 3: Untitled Illustration of Islands by Braedyn
Image description: a pen drawing on loose-leaf, lined paper of the four islands in the shape of the animals described in Braedyn's story and mapped in the waters they inhabit, represented by dotted lines and stars connecting each animal island. The words/names for the islands are written on each one.

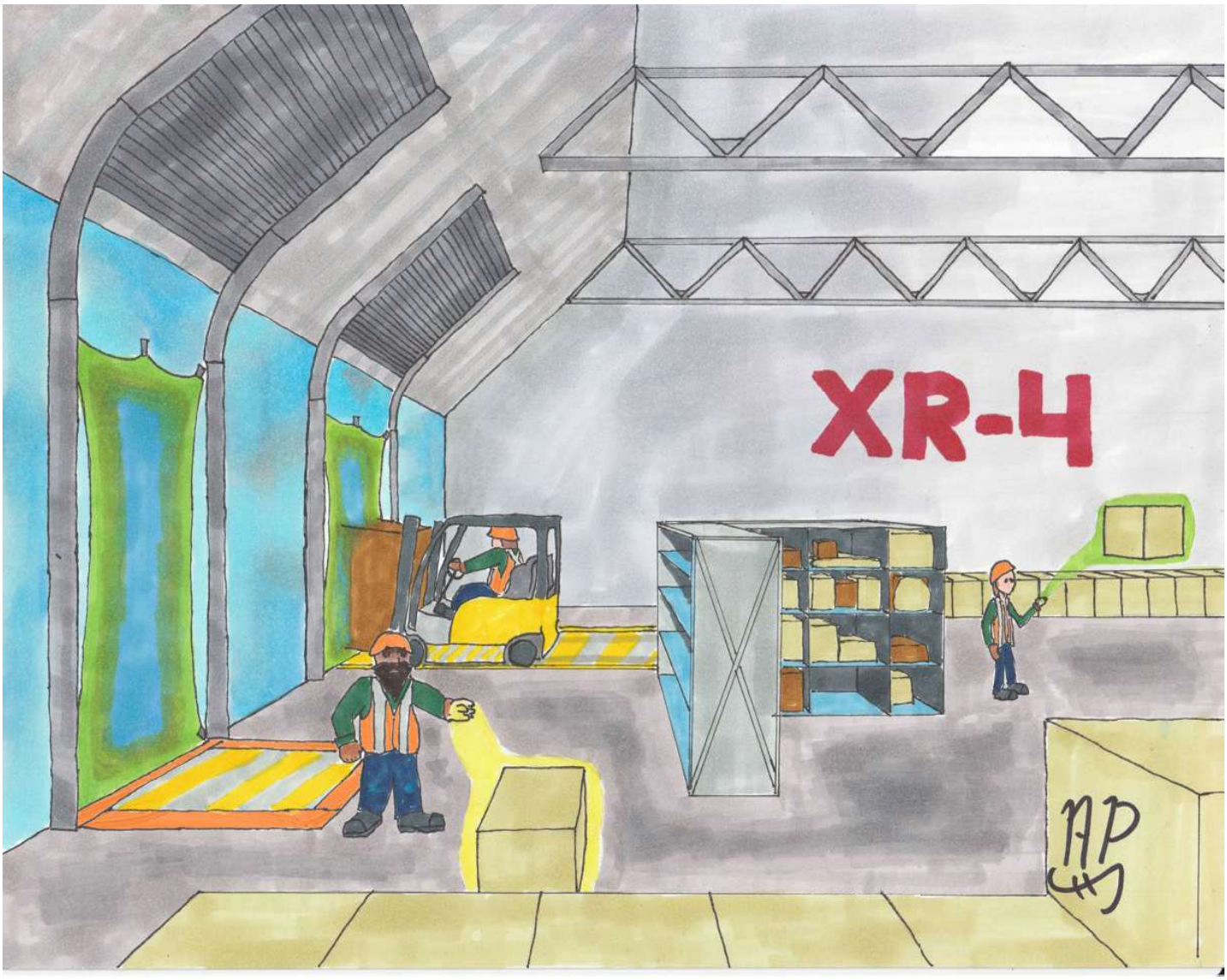

Figure 4: *Magic Warehouse*, Illustration by Cora (Annie Paré)
Image description: an illustration of a magic warehouse in Ienia., There are three people inside, one driving a cart, another beaming magical, yellow light over a box, and another magical, green light around an item on the wall. They are wearing construction gear, including hard hats, and working in a gray warehouse with the lettering “XR-4” printed on the wall in red. Cora’s penname signature in initials, “AP” is on a box on the bottom right corner.

Cora's writing imaginatively depicts Ienia, an entire fantasy world she birthed that has been constructed by magic and serves an escape from a now violent earth. All of Ienia's residents are peoples who had experienced colonial violence, land dispossession, and forceful displacement living on earth. They have arrived as refugees to a barren place—empty and sterile, only a white floor and a clear dome above it—as their new home. Here, the people of Ienia began to build the space into a safe haven and refuge from the horrors of colonization under which they had previously lived.

Using magic, the people constructed every landscape from the trees and mountains to the domed sky sprinkled at random with a dusting of stars. Plywood mountains, shallow rivers, and human-made ravines all serve as the backdrop of this magical world to where dispossessed, colonized peoples were forced to flee and build from scratch with their hands and magical spells.

"I don't want my stories to just say, 'hey this world we live in is okay,'" Cora remarked, discussing the purpose of their writing during one of the Talking Circles. "Like they're fantasy worlds, but ones that pull the shroud off the veil that says this world we live in is okay. It absolutely is not okay at all." It is this imagination that bore Ienia, a world that exists in a series of Cora's self-published novels they author under the pseudonym, Annie Paré.[xx]

In the *current* world of northern Canada and across the globe, old growth forests are being destroyed and, if replaced at all, they are with groves of trees planted in neat rows. Often logged for industry, these younger trees do not have family networks, ancient memory, and centuries of strength in the barks of their exterior to withstand climate change and rampant wildfires. They have not lived long enough to support important undergrowth for mutually beneficial, life-sustaining capabilities nor for important food sources and habitats for animal kin. It is the memory of these old forests—of real land—that once existed before colonization and the need to flee earth

to go to Ienia that is introduced in Cora's piece, *An Ienian Ghost Story*, an excerpt of which can be found on page 96.

In *An Ienian Ghost Story,* the newest in Cora's series of novels and shared during Talking Circle sessions as part of this research, Cora introduces readers to Jackie, the main character who is sometimes called "Tenderfoot" and other nicknames by their sister. Jackie works at a Prospect Park near the more popular Mount Robinson Park. Both of these parks are outdoor adventure spaces for tourists to or new residents in Ienia to have a chance to experience the reconstructed waterways, mountains, flora, fauna, and landscapes comprised of human-made materials and magical incantations. Jackie begrudgingly works at Prospect Park as a means to survive—it is "easy peasy paycheque pleasey," Cora writes.

Written in the second-person point of view, which Cora almost always employs in their writing, immerses the reader into deeply into Jackie's inner world engulfing them—ingulfing *you,* dear reader. You have to therefore move in Jackie's mukluks, walking up the hill to Prospect Park and feel, sense, hear, and smell their surroundings—all scents contrived of the smells of cedar and balsam that one might find in nature. In that way, Cora's writing is very embodied and pulls at the hearts of readers. In that second person narrative, it is no longer Jackie, but *you*, dear reader who is in this world of Ienia. What does it feel like?

Simultaneously wishing for something more Jackie is sensitive to their surroundings. *You* are sensitive to your surroundings, dear reader. Still reeling from the flight from earth, you (as Jackie) long for the natural world before starting your shift at a job helping tourists and youth zip-line over a ravine or hike down to a shallow pool to look for pieces of gold—all artificial. You feel a pit in your stomach as you realize that children born in Ienia will never know *real* land and you wish they could experience what you did before you had to come to Ienia: raging rivers, rockface

not made of plywood, and the smell of sagebrush that cannot be compared to the one cultivated by magic in Ienia.

As *An Ienian Ghost Story* continues, you as Jackie encounter ghosts and spirits—ancestors—that lead you on these journeys through memories of almost-forgotten lands from which Ienians had to flee. These histories emerge in Jackie's memory, reminding that there are still the presence of ancestors—ones who may be able to shape Ienia in the image of their hopes, dreams, and memories. Ancestors with power to maybe return the depth of real rivers, mountains that imposingly stand tall over tree line, and landscapes that breathe with life.

As creators of characters, ancestors brought (back) to life, and worlds, Two Spirit storytellers open up imaginings of what the *inner* worlds of ancestors could have been and what hopes, dreams, and longings might have lingered in those inner worlds. Resurgence—or decolonization—is not a process of simply returning to the past and traditional teachings but rather asking questions of the past. It is about asking what hurt, hope, longing, and desire ancestors had for the future and then bringing them into the present to honor them. Resurgence is about bringing tradition and teachings into context *today* an endemic practice of Indigenous epistemic-ontologies that value thinking of futures generations to ensure one is living, presently, in a way that sustains future life.

****

> Too soon you finish, too soon you have to work… [Y]ou work at Prospect's Par, a cheesy little tourist attraction… There's a nature walk through some trees and berry bushes, a little fake rock face to "climb," a zip line across a "ravine," a rest point with some cheap tents and a fridge of water … and … a river. Completely artificial…
>
> It's a lovely day out, all things considered. A balmy 25 degrees, warmth washing down from the sky without interruption. The group of tourists rolls up, all chittering and excited. You run through your usual spiel, welcoming the so-called prospectors looking to find their fortune here. You can tell the youngest in the group grew up somewhere here in Ienia, as they are marvelling at the novelty of elevation

> change, rocks, and a simulation of wild nature. You love kids, but you don't love fooling them like this. Their genuine joy and wonder is lovely, but you know all too well this is far from the real thing. Hopefully one day they get to experience real rocks, and not heavily painted plywood shapes…
>
> [Y]ou've fallen in the "ravine" thrice. The whole thing is made of safety foam and enchanted to the gills with slowing spells. You couldn't fall and get injured if you tried.
>
> The hike back down to the river goes without incident, bar a kid getting a light scratch from running headlong into a berry bush, looking for more berries. You apply a healing salve you keep in your staff mandated fanny pack, and it's healed in seconds. Nothing you haven't seen a hundred times before.
>
> ~ *An Ienian Ghost Story* (Cora/Annie Paré, 2023, p. 3-5).

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By the second Talking Circle, storytellers brought in drafts of some of stories and/or ideas and outlines they had been contemplating based on journals, dreams, and more. Braedyn shared the introduction to his story centering the grandmother spirit and Quinten at this time. We also workshopped Karin's story of the whale and the wolf. Cora had not yet shared *An Ienian Ghost Story* and first focused on an idea for a story about a jackrabbit and a hawk—both animals that Cora said emerge regularly in her dreams and reflections. I also shared early ideas of a story I wished to craft that emerged from dreams and reflections about a bear and the wind that seemed to coincide also with my curiosities about nikawiy and nicâpân. We all commented on how remarkably interesting it was that most of our stories centered around two characters and, specifically, two characters that were animal or other-than-human kin.

"Well of course," I said jokingly. "I mean how can we be surprised? We are, after all, *Two* Spirit?"

Aimee then shared her story in a powerful oral rendition of it during this session. Crafted in just one week, Aimee wrote about an elder eagle who wished to live the remainder of their life on the land walking as a two-legged rather than flying as a winged-one in the sky. Coming from her heart, Aimee expressed that she crafted this story to share a teaching that one's physiology

does not have to define one's role in life—nor one's desires—using an example presented in nature such as this eagle.

She expressed that she had been struggling, however, with where to take the story, noting she wanted to be respectful of and show reverence for the importance of eagles and their teachings. Noting how so many of our Two Spirit stories centered on *two* main characters—as if to represent our *two* spirits—Aimee considered that perhaps the eagle could have a mentor on the land as the second spirit/main character in her story. This mentor would be a two-legged or four-legged who knew the teachings of the land and could help the eagle learn those ways of walking. In turn, the eagle would share teachings from the sky to ensure those knowledges were honored and passed down.

Aimee returned a couple of weeks later to another Talking Circle session with another new story as well as revisions to her story of the elder eagle who wished to walk on the land.

"So as I was writing this eagle's story, I was thinking about nokum," Aimee remarked. "I had already been working on a story about her and I thought, 'what if nokum was that "second" spirit who guided the eagle on the land?"

Excited for this possibility and connecting teachings across stories, Aimee discussed the story of her grandmother, noting that she had never met her, but that she had always heard stories about her while growing up.

"So this story is about nokum," she said, "but there's a part of me in it, a part of my mother, and of course part of nokum herself." Reaching into the past, Aimee brings her grandmother back to life, highlighting her memory by bringing to the forefront questions she has about her grandmother's identity and inner world.

“I always heard she was a tough one,” Aimee said. “She was living on the old Michel reserve before it was disbanded. She had a husband, but he tried to steal her cattle so she left him,” Aimee remarks, laughing, noting that after that, her grandmother lived on her own and took care of herself—raising those cattle to be able to do so.

Admiring these stories and this spirit of toughness, Aimee describes her grandmother as someone who preferred to wear pants as opposed to the long skirts most women wore in her grandmothers’ day. “She was partial to hunting and trapping as opposed to berry-picking,” Aimee noted. In bringing her grandmother to life in the story, Aimee imagined what might have been her grandmother’s deep desires, the inner world and longings that shaped her.

Aimee envisioned her grandmother might have been sometimes lonely, living alone and trying to navigate a world outside the reserve where Indigenous women were rendered invisible, and a world inside the reserve where whitestream and Christian norms of womanhood and femininity were supplanting Nehiyaw ideas. In Aimee’s story, she writes that her grandmother was out tending to her cattle one day. Alone while the other women were off in the bush berry-picking and the men had snuck out to check their traplines, Aimee’s grandmother comes across an eagle in the story and begins to talk to the majestic bird.

The eagle, whose wing is injured, making flight painful, difficult, and soon to be impossible is at first distrustful and trepidatious of Aimee’s grandmother. *Who is this human, this woman speaking nonsense to me?* Over time, and upon closer listening, the eagle begins to realize that they can understand Aimee’s grandmother—that the human can speak the eagle’s language! This begins the start of a deep bond of love that is nurtured between them as Aimee’s grandmother cares for the injured eagle who, disabled from flight, desires to walk on the land for the rest of their days.

In reciprocity and care, the eagle shares with Aimee's grandmother the teachings and gifts of flight and offers respite from the loneliness.

Aimee's story never outright defines her grandmother Two Spirit or any similar identifier. "No one ever told me if she was but," Aimee remarks. "But I am and maybe she just didn't know it then—or didn't know what word to use to describe herself. Or maybe she did know, but she never told anyone or that just wasn't passed down in the stories I heard."

Aimee focuses her story on the inner worlds, lives, feelings, and possibilities that might have existed for her grandmother, living outside the norms of settler constructs of gender. In writing of her grandmother, she is reaching into her own body and heart to consider the hopes and dreams that were passed down to her through the generations.

"I want our community—anyone who feels like they might be LGBTQ or Two Spirit," Aimee said, "to know that no matter what the names are for how they feel and no matter how they describe themselves, there are stories in our traditions that validate them."

In the inner life of her grandmother, in particular, she display's an ability of her grandmother that is reminiscent of Wesakecahk—the shapeshifting ancestor of Nehiyaw creation. In Nehiyaw stories, it is said that Wesakecahk can talk to all animals and can speak the language of all the beings of the skies, waters, lands, and cosmos. Imbued with special powers, Wesakecahk can shapeshift into the very beings of creation in order to communicate with them in multiple languages. In many versions of these stories, all Nehiyawak had known the land's language but, at one time had lost it. It is usually storied that humans grew selfish, making too many demands of the animals, so this ability to speak with them and all of the land was taken away from them.

Aimee's story invites readers and those witnessing her oral and written narrative to consider, *What if not* all *humans lost that ability*? What if, like Wesakecahk, some people retained

or were gifted back the ability to know the land's language? Was it perhaps Two Spirit people? Might they be able to shapeshift like Wesakecahk as they and we shapeshift gender, making worlds and human and other-than-human beings in their stories? Might Two Spirit shapeshift time as they wander through these worlds and memories of the inner worlds of ancestors?

Shapeshifting Methodology

> The Many Creators made Wesakecahk who in turn, with all the creatures of creation, set about to ready the world for the Nehiyawak. It was wacask who ultimately was successful and built the land on which The Many Creators could place the humans. When the humans came, they loved the animals and the animals loved them. The animals made them gifts and offerings to help the humans live. Wesakecahk helped them communicate and could shapeshift between all the humans and other-than-human beings in all of creation and so it was Wesakecahk who knew all of the language of the land.
>
> One day, a great storm came and it did not let up. Day in and day out the lands turned cooled under great blankets of snow and waters froze to ice. The Many Creators sent Wesakecahk to help all the humans, animals, and other beings in all of creation, but it was too much. A few humans from a village saw Wesakecahk and witnessed the shapeshifting before their eyes and they saw how fast and tiring it made their elder and teacher. Running from the plains to become buffalo, herding them south to grasslands, Wesakecahk ran, out of breath. Into the rivers Wesakecahk went to become a great fire in order to warm the waters and then became salmon to help bring food to Maskwa. Emerging from the deep, dripping wet and freezing cold, Wesakecahk moved into trees to widen their branches, making homes for the winged ones, and down below Wesakecahk came and built lodges for the human ones.
>
> This small group of humans could not bear to watch their beloved Wesakecahk do all the work to save them from this storm. They went to The Many Creators and asked to help Wesakecahk,
>
> "Please let us know the land's language," they asked. "And shapeshift that we may help our elder and give them rest." The Many Creators agreed when they saw in earnest and in their heart the humans to help Wesakecahk, to give them a rest, and to save all the land and all of creation.
>
> "Okay," The Many Creators said. "You will be the Two Spirits—the humans who can become like Wesakecahk sometimes." A sacred responsibility, The Many Creators told them to first watch Wesakecahk and then come back and tell all The Many Creators what they learned. Only then would The Many Creators would grant them the same powers as Wesakecahk.
>
> For four nights and four days, the humans watched Wesakecahk work and on the fifth night, when Wesakecahk went back into the constellation in the sky for

a moment of rest, the humans returned to see The Many Creators and tell them the story of what they learned.

The Many Creators commended them and said, "Go now and help Wesakecahk." The humans did help and, as a result, Wesakecahk was able to stop the storm and save the humans, animals, and all of the land under creation. They humans grew old together, often visiting Wesakecahk and going on adventure with them playing tricks and shapeshifting to continue to spread teachings and help the land. When they knew it was close to their time to journey on to the ancestors, they realized there would be no one to help Wesakecahk if the need arose again. They went to The Many Creators and expressed their concern.

"Yes, yes," The Many Creators said. "You are right. Well just as you observed Wesakecahk, you too must pass on these teachings, each of you to one person only. And tell them the teachings but tell them only when they make up a good story that we want to hear that we will grant them the power." And it is in this way that Two Spirit people speak the land's language and are gifted the power of shapeshifting when they make up beautiful stories to entertain all of creation.

~*How Two Spirits Learned to Shapeshift* (Scully, 2023)

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In our first Talking Circle, we discussed origin stories of Nehiyawak—creation stories that talk about the ancient, early days of our people. In that dialogue, we discussed the superpower abilities of Wesakecahk to shapeshift into not only any, all, and no genders but also into human, nonhuman animal, and all other-than-human beings. Wesakecahk has been reimagined and brought back to life by many Two Spirit/Indigiqueer Cree peoples as one of the first Two Spirit ancestors. As a being made of love and stars, Wesakecahk defies constructs of gender and demonstrates a form of genderqueerness that not only upends the gender binary, but also the human/nonhuman binary. These superpowers of Wesakecahk allow them to know and communicate with all beings because Wesakecahk can *be* all beings. As knowledge is contained only in relationships, we discussed in our Talking Circles if maybe Wesakecahk shapeshifts to be curious—to be and know as much as possible in order to be a better relative and guide to all of creation. They were, after all, sent to earth to help humans and other-than-human beings by being their teacher.

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"[Y]ou arrive before that can take root. You are sitting in the sunshine, sweet water laced with minerals coursing up from the ground, carbon dioxide intermingling your limbs, and warm, brilliant sunlight giving you the energy required to create sugars. The excess oxygen releases from you, a long sigh of relief from a day of making sugars from the basic building blocks of the universe. You turn these tiny imperceptible pieces into more and more of yourself, then offer them up, gifts, to the world. In time, you know these gifts will come back to you, and all who come after you…

You pull sweet water from the earth in long draughts, rich with nutrients, though there is some small, undetectable mote of poison mingled in. The sun beats down hot on you, and you shrink back, tender and hurt. The air itself, rich with carbon dioxide, carries further poison, acid on wounds. You have less to give back, and you worry about the next generations, yours and those who rely on your gifts. You cannot flourish like this, and your community suffers…

The world around you is changed, but it is not irrevocable. Your kin, those who have come before, and those who will come after, they deserve all the gifts you are denied. Every facet of the world around you is against you on a molecular level, but you can say no. You thrash and fight, because you know those gifts are still out there, because your home is still out there, under pavement, far away, boxed up in meadow-traps, rife with poison and homesickness, but it can be healed. You can have it back, and so can everyone after you. Maybe not now, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next generation, or the one after that. But it is out there, it is real, and your body, and the bodies of your kin, the bodies of all your relations, are homesick for it, reaching out for it.

Grasp, grasp with leaf and paw and feather and cilia and hand and anything you can, grasp for a home with a million neighbours, whose names you all know, whose gifts fulfill you, whose descendants will be cared for by you, and in turn care for yours. Grasp out at the feeling of being well, not as just one person, but as every person you have been, every gift that you have give, every gift you received to make yourself with, every gift you will repay in earnest with kindness. Feel well in knowing everything has been so kind as to support your life, and feel well in knowing everything you have done has been so kind as to ensure your neighbours are feeling well too.

You are every single part of the land, and the land is every single part of everything you've been. You have so much to gain. You do not need to feel homesick in every cell of your being. You simply need to go home. You simply need your neighbours. You simply need gifts freely given. You simply need to give gifts.

I love you, my neighbour. I love you without reservations. I will fight for your home. Will you join me?

~ *Land Back* (Cora, 2023)

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Cora's stories in second-person point-of-view are constructed, as she said, to serve as a shapeshifting methodological practice, compelling readers to *become* the very beings about which they write about.

"I try to compel them to *be* the character," Cora noted in a Talking Circle while discussing *Land Back*, a zine they created and excerpted above. "I want them to lose themselves and forget they are human and I find that works well with a second-person perspective. I try to make them shapeshift into the tree or whatever other being I craft in my story."

In the zine, you, as the reader, move through many iterations of beings—you shapeshift from tree (as depicted above) to human walking among the trees to the branches, leaves, and cilia that construct you. When Two Spirit storytellers create worlds and characters, it is a method for Two Spirit people to embody and practice Wesakecahk's superpower of shapeshifting.

"We have a relationship to storytelling," Braedyn said in a Talking Circle. "I mean it makes sense that we are all drawn to this work because that's how we can be our true selves—in our stories."

Karin agreed, noting that it was in learning from stories that she identified with who she was as a Two Spirit person from MFN and related nations/communities, feeling awe and love at this ancestral power. Aimee and Cora remarked that their stories are about being imaginative in order to consider Indigenous solutions from the past and to consider possibilities about the past and solutions for the future. Cora and I both write as a means of education for socio-political change and Aimee has often facilitated activist writing groups.

"To me, this is how I imagine my Two Spiritedness," Cora said. "I am a dreamer and so therefore I am a storyteller and a healer—my two spirits. See when we dream, we sleep, a place

where we heal. But in dreams we are gifted stories and those are stories that teach. Those are my two spirits sometimes."

Comprised of composite characters, stories emerge from each storyteller's experience. Aimee's story of her kokum is a blending of three generations of women to bring back to life her grandmother's imagined hopes. Braedyn's character Quinten emerges from his own courage and desires to return to Michel First Nation traditions. Karin's wolf is indicative of her own curious exploration of the wolves that emerge in her dreams time and time again.

The stories are the methods for building relationships particularly with other-than-human kin, ancestors, and our own selves in order to translate those languages as they come from our bodies and our hearts. Communicating through mycelium networks, root systems, and other sensory experiences, trees like many other-than-human relatives transmit knowledge and love that exists outside an oral/verbal language and spoken word. It is a knowledge and love shared through embodiment and sensory experience—much like heart-knowing. Two Spirit stories are but possible translations or transliterations of these heart-knowings that come from being in relationship with—and shapeshifting into—other-than-human-kin and the .

At the end of almost every Talking Circle, we each go around and shared our wishes for the upcoming week. I would then invite everyone to in turn share how they might ask us, collectively in the space, to help make that wish come true.

"We need rain," Karin said at the end of one session. There had been rampant wildfires in northern Alberta and Yukon that were devastating trees, prairielands, remote Indigenous communities and homes, and animal and plant life. A heavy smoke filled the skies. It filled the Talking Circle space for a time, also, as we reflected on this horror. We could feel the bodies of

animals fleeing the flames or being consumed by them, the air choking, and the birds sightless in flight. We felt hot in the skin as if we were the trees, bark charring off our bodies.

"And so I wish it would rain," Karin added. "I wish it would rain and I wish that all the baby animals would come running toward me and know that I am here to help take care of them and shelter them from the fires."

Shapeshifting is a somber, deeply felt experience that can be devastating and yet it is in that process that we better show love as Two Spirit people. We feel what the land feels. And we do what we can to give the land—and each other—what we need.

"You won't believe it!" Karin exclaimed at the next session. "It rained *right* after we met last week! And then I went outside to enjoy the clear air for a bit, after working on my story. I went for a drive later with my partner and you wouldn't believe it again, but there, by the side of the road was a wolf and her pup!"

Showing us a video she took of the wolf, remarked on our power to shapeshift into the rain, healing the beings of the land for which we feel so deeply their pain. We remarked that, in our stories, we bring to life that which we create—the rain, the wolf on the side of the road, the pup as if a baby animal fleeing the smoke safely.

"We did it," Karin said.

Two Spirit storytellers practice a superpower bestowed upon us since time immemorial to shapeshift—to embody—the beings that we create in hopes of better knowing them, learning their language, and taking care of them in a way that respects their agency. It is a curious practice—not one to master, but rather one that is about consistently seeking who we are. It is one that asks us as Two Spirit people to wander through time and space to be the best storytellers. dreamers, healers, and teachers we can be.

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Quinten Gerald Calahoo was a student at Forest Heights Indian Residential school, just 100 kilometers off the coast of British Columbia. The school opened in 1888 and Quinten had been attending this school from 1958 to 1972. By this time, the school was already falling apart. There were rodents running around, nails shooting out of the wooden floors, black mold all over the walls—and that was just in the classrooms.

After Michel First Nation was fully enfranchised, Quinten was taken away [to the school]… The school threw away everything that was in Quinten's bag including regalia that their grandmother had spent an eternity making and moccasins that Quinten had always worn to family ceremonies….

I would stand there with my eyes closed, feet on the cold wet cement, bringing myself back to a time when life was simple. A time when I could dance freely on the grass without it being a crime. A time when I could speak my language without being shamed. I would play outside, the sun beaming between the leaves of the trees, and barely a single cloud in the sky.

I opened my eyes again, to a cold brick building, with the abundance of dark gray clouds above. Every time I have done this, I would start to cry but today something was different.

I felt a huge gust of resilience blow onto my face like the wind blowing in the sky. For the first time in my 17 years of life, I felt as if I had the courage to do anything, the courage to make a change.

The bell rang, it was time for everyone to go back inside, into this prison they called "school". All the nuns and priests were shouting at the poor children for not getting in sooner, but it wasn't the kids' fault that recess was their only escape from the abuse that lies behind those big wooden doors…

Suddenly, I had 16 years of built up anger crawling up my throat like a hungry bear. I tried pushing it back down as best as I could but it kept crawling back up… I ran out of the classroom, the priests and nuns chasing after me… I ran for my life!

~ (*Quinten's Great Escape* (Braedyn, 2023, p. 1-2)

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Indigenous people have always been curious, traveling to trade, interact with, and get to know other tribal nations as they build loving relationships across communities. This time-honored practice of curiosity and travel has birthed new nations such as the Seminole and Lumbee in the southeastern United States, the Oji-Cree in the eastern Canadian plains, and the Otipemisiwak (Métis) of the northern prairies. The Diné (Navajo) and Indé /Ndee (Apache) are peoples who share a history with the Dene, of which Chief Michel Callihoo was a tribal member. Thousands of

years ago, some Dene traveled from the north to south and became the Diné and Indé/Ndee. It is said that MFN and related peoples—like many Indigenous nations—spoke numerous languages because of this widespread travel. Most of Chief Michel Callihoo's children—nicâpân and her siblings, for example, knew Nehiyawewin, Kanien'kéha, Michif, French, English, and likely others including some Dene languages.

Unlike the stale representations of Indigenous people who remain in one place—in bordered territories, reserves, and timelines that exist only in the past—Indigenous people have always wandered (Medak-Saltzman, 2010). Indigenous wandering is not to be confused with the exploration associated colonial travel that seeks to conquer and supplant Native knowledges, governance, and bodies of lands and humans with their own. Rather Indigenous wandering is one of curiosity, love, and expressions of relationship-building. Michel First, Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw, Aseniwuche Winewak Nations, and Lac Stee Anne Métis were born out of this experience of wandering. Emerging from the travels of Kanien'kehá:ka and other Haudenosaunee fur traders into Dene and Cree territories in the west, the nations and peoples that comprise and made the storytellers in this research were born. I have heard that nicâpân's father, who I used to always understand as (only) Métis, was actually a Kanien'kehá:ka man from out east near present-day Montreal in Quebec. Women came in the canoe journey, too, traveling from the St. Lawrence River and into the Hudson Bay to make their way out west.

"Yeah, I mean we have a lot more Mohawk blood then people realize," many of my family members have said, laughing. "Maybe even more than Cree blood! But we are here and our women are Cree, so that is who we are because that is where we are and who we are from."

As Indigenous wanderers, we become a part of the land; we do not superimpose ourselves on it. We let the land govern us and bring teachings, resources, and only the plant and animal life

than can integrate with the existing ecosystems—not supplant it. It is in this way that we are Nehiyaw in Nehiyaw lands.

It has been written that Kwarakwante followed the path of the sun westward as it set across the horizon and it is written that he never did return again (Macpherson, 1998).

Why did Kwarakwante and all the fur traders—some of them women—travel west away from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy? I would often wonder, myself wandering mountain trails, drawn westward so the rising sun was always warm at my back. Wandering and wondering, I would sometimes get lost in the bush off the trail. In quiet respite for a moment for solitary reflection, I would ask, *why didn't Kwarakwante and the others not go back? Were they escaping encroaching colonization in the east?*

"Oh for sure," relatives have since told me. "Out west was open—hardly any settlers, no missions. It was a chance to really practice Indigenous ways, you know? Live the Indigenous life. Hunt, trap, fish, and harvest medicines. Be free! I mean even better with the Cree. We have always traveled, following the path of game and seasons. Why would anyone want to go back? Plus they were welcomed. Cree especially—we have always been a nation that mixed with other nations."

The Cree have always traveled. Plains Cree/Nehiyaw emerge from centuries of movement westward from eastern Cree nations, eastern plains, and eastern provinces including present-day Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador where—in all these spaces—vibrant, thriving nations still live.

Two Spirit people have the ability to observe things "in two ways," as Two Spirit elder Myra Laramee notes, or two or more *worlds*. To embody this superpower, Two Spirit storytellers of MFN and related nations/communities must necessarily wander—as Indigenous people always have. Aimee's story of the eagle walking on the land demonstrates this practice wherein the eagle

carries teachings of the sky to Aimee's grandmother and, vice versa, their grandmother learns the teachings of the sky. Maybe one day, Aimee's grandmother will learn enough to fly—to not merely see and walk in two worlds, but also to fly among them.

With the magical power of shapeshifting, Two Spirit people wander through, lands, waters, and skies in order to know human and other-than-human kin across time and space. They demonstrate a curiosity in wandering that is embodied through a creative praxis of shapeshifting into the various places, times, and bodies of lands and humans that are brought to life through storytelling.

In Braedyn's story, Quinten wanders out of the similar desire of Michel First Nation ancestors to be free, to escape colonization, and to flee toward traditional ways of life. Quinten spends the entirety of the story running from the school, jumping and falling down a waterfall, and finally wandering islands and waters to not only face the trauma of their experience at the schools, but also to heal from that trauma—and to spread that healing across the lands that have been harmed by the same project of colonization as Quinten was harmed.

Wandering through time, through the hole in the cosmos where Sky Woman fell out, and through the belly of whales, wolves, and finally to Two Spirit human embodiment, Karin's story demonstrates the curiosity of wandering that leads to beautiful creation and the sacrifice of body for new life. This is the history of MFN and related peoples who were born of the wandering, curious spirit of ancestors who fled encroaching colonial violence in the east. Sky Woman, a central figure in Kanien'kehá:ka and stories from other eastern nations like those of the Haudenosaunee, Karin blends these teachings from the eastern world that would otherwise not be representative of Cree or other nations in western Canada. Honoring the blend of Haudenosaunee cultural practices that still inform MFN and related nations/communities today opens up the sky

to find all the wandering beings that have come to make the world for Michel First, Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw, Aseniwuche Winewak Nations, and Lac Ste. Anne Métis in the west.

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Two sisters lived together with the family they loved very much. They would accompany their parents on long hunting trips or through trails to the best berry-picking spots, sometimes meeting peoples and lands from far away helping when trading or following the game. As the sisters grew, they also grew into their beauty with each passing day. Everyone in their community wanted to marry them. Suitors came bringing oils for their hair, intricate beadwork that lay heavy on their necks, and thick cloaks to wrap around them, always promises that the sisters would be kept warm if they married these suitors.

Whenever they went outside to pick berries, there was always someone there, asking them when they would settle down.

“I don’t want to settle down,” the older sister said to the younger one. “I want to be free—like the stars in the sky. I want to marry a star.”

Every day, the older sister prayed to the spirits to let her find a way up to marry the stars. One day, the younger sister woke up and saw that her sister was nowhere to be found. “She must have found a way to the stars,” she thought.

Lonely, everyone in the community said she must find a suitor or she would soon be alone. Like her older sister, she prayed and offered gifts to the spirit every day, trying to find a way to the stars. She did not want a suitor and did not want to marry a star but she missed her older sister and wanted to see her again.

One day, the youngest sister noticed a star in the sky so bright it made all the rest seem invisible. She crept down and sprang up on her feet, jumping so high she was carried away to that bright spot. As she got closer to it, she realized they were actually a series of seven stars clumped together leading to an opening in the sky, Pakone Kisik, where Achakos Iskwew first descended to the earth. Hopeful and eager she was on the right path, she kept it up and flew right through the Hole in the Sky.

There, illuminated by all the stars, she called out for her sister by name. She wandered four days and nights calling her name until finally her sister appeared.

“ “I am so glad you are here. How I missed you,” older sister said, hugging younger sister and showing her all over the sky world and how beautiful it was. She told her little sister many stories of all the stars she met, some just as boring as all the suitors on earth. It was finally far in the north where she met someone and together, they lived and had started a family.

Little sister said she was excited to see the north and all her nieces and nephews and sister’s children and asked her older sister to take. There little sister remained for over a decade, helping to raise the nieces and nephews and children. There the younger sister became Auntie to the children and raised them to be bright stars themselves. One of them—the eldest child—became Kiwitin and the rest of the family Mista Maskwa.

> The sisters started to grow restless and decided to travel the skies again once more. They waved goodbye to their family, but promised they would not be gone forever; they would return again and again. Sometimes, when not all the stars in Mista Maskwa are visible, it is said it is a time that the sisters are traveling. If there is a shooting star in the sky, that is one of the sisters having an adventure. If there are two, they are traveling together and it is a time of great love where all of the beings of the land are to get loved. Kiwitin, the oldest, though, always shines bright in case they get lost and need to come back home.
>
> ~ *The Sisters who Traveled the Stars* (Scully, 2023)

Laughter almost always filled the Talking Circles—at least as much as any other deeply-felt sensory experience or emotion. Humor is a long-standing coping mechanism for Indigenous—and Indigiqueer people and cishet women especially—to navigate trauma while living through the apocalypse that is surviving the ongoing settler colonial project.

At our first session, I shared with my cousins and nephew some examples of traditional stories and invited them to bring in examples they had heard, as well. Discussing these stories, we imagined different iterations and understandings of them as if they were narrated from different perspectives such as those of "secondary" characters, as main characters re-imagined as Two Spirit, and more. I shared with them an example of one I considered: a story from Nehiyaw tradition of two sisters who married the stars.

One night, the air around me so dark that only the pinholes of light from the stars in the sky could illuminate my path, I was coming back to my tent after ceremony and I was utterly exhausted and pleasantly disoriented.

"I'm looking for that hole in the sky," I heard a voice say a few feet away. I recognized it as a friend of mine who had also been in ceremony with me but had headed back to camp earlier than me. "You know the one," he said as I approached and slumped down on the ground to look up. He remained standing on his feet. "It's that one we come from. I am thinking of those two

sisters—the ones who begged to marry the stars and travel back up through that hole in the sky to find their husbands."

We looked up for a minute together, each trying to find the spot—that hole in the sky. Pakone Kisik.

"I can barely see the ground in front of me," I joked. "But maybe it's that one?" I asked, pointing ahead toward a spot in the sky above the river where my tent was pitched.

"Maybe, yeah," he said. "Man that one sister who picked the brightest star in the sky and found out he was *ugly*," he said laughing. "She begged to be able to come back down through that hole but I guess couldn't find it either," he added, referencing both our difficulty in finding Pakone Kisik. "Just goes to show you it's not always the brightest who's the best."

We both laughed and then lowered beside me on the grass. In silence, we sat for some time, listening to the river in the otherwise still night. The stars seemed all of them brighter now, enough to light my path ahead.

"Maybe she didn't," I said after some time. "Maybe she just wanted to get away for a while."

"What?" he asked softly.

"The sister. Maybe she didn't mind the star being so bright and ugly at all. Maybe she just chose the brightest because it lit her path and she just wanted to find a way back home—to the stars, you know? Maybe she chose to stay up there"

I could make out his head nodding next to me, even in the dark night. "Maybe, maybe," he said. "I guess we would have to ask."

I brought this story to my cousins and nephew in the Talking Circle as I had pondered on it many times. What might the sisters have wanted in venturing up to the sky world to marry the

stars? In some versions of the story, they never return—unable to find that hole in the sky, as my friend mentioned. In many versions, they do eventually return but not until they experience a great deal of trials, lowered through the portal and floating in the sky for many days scared and alone.

What if the sisters stayed on purpose? I would often wonder. *What if they wanted to get away from all the prying eyes of men and suitors down below on earth who would never give them a moment's peace?*

To my amusement and pleasant surprise in the Talking Circle, we mulled over many possibilities of what these sisters could have wanted, sharing potential teachings that might have emerged from these alternative endings—most of them leaving us in stitches.

"Maybe they went up to the stars because all the cis men here are so dull and boring," one storyteller remarked, laughing. "And the stars weren't jerks like the boys here, so why not?"

Laughing, another storyteller suggested that upon getting up there, they then found the stat-men to be just as dull as the ones here on earth.

"Yeah, kind of like my entire dating existence thus far," another said. "Just a bunch of jokers they are—eee!"

"Yeah, I mean maybe it's more of a reflection about cishet men than it is about us Two Spirits. Or cis women," we agreed. "Like instead of teaching women not to fall for shiny men, it's telling men they better step.

"Yeah, *be* shinier—eee!" one said and we roared with laughter.

We decided we liked that this story—regardless of how it was shared—would be narrated from our perspectives as a reminder that cishet women and Indigiqueer people often carry the burden of being punch lines of jokes (and worse) in some stories. Instead, we offer that cishet men need to therefore *shine* a little brighter to bear the weight of that burden alongside us.

Laughter—humor—is part of the methodology of coming to craft and learn from stories with curiosity. It is endemic, in fact, to most of the stories of Wesakecahk shared in Nehiyaw tradition. In addition to being a loving shapeshifter, Wesakecahk is also a trickster—not one meant to bring bad omens, but rather one who uses their foibles and mistakes to help teach humans and other-than-human beings how to live in good relation. Fumbling, getting it wrong, and making mistakes—with a sense of humor—are all part of what Wesakecahk demonstrates is crucial to the learning process

These are curiosities we played and rolled around with in the stories generated in our Talking Circle space. Many of the stories invite curiosities, and invitations our audiences to approach them with the same sense of wonder, awe and curiosity—and even laughter—that we infuse into them.

Curiosity, imagination, and creativity are necessary proficiencies in Indigenous research and learning methods. They are useful tools for investigating contentious issues and gaining insights from the heart-knowings. This approach is one that seeks to gain as much knowledge as possible while recognizing that not everything can be known (Kovach, 2006, p. 100). As Two Spirit Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice writes,

> [we] must learn to unlearn, and to be uncomfortable with the unknown… The language of mastery (and, too often, of understanding itself) is etymologically and ideologically the language of domination; it is the language of knowledge as biddable possession, as subjugation, as exploitation. (2016, p. 22)

Seeking to master and/or possess knowledge is a colonial concept rooted in whitestream traditions that value ownership, hierarchies, and the conquering of peoples, lands, and ideas. In a Nehiyaw epistemic-ontology, knowledge can only be understood in the space of relations (S. Wilson, 2008), therefore seeking to master ideas would be as futile—and harmful—as seeking to

master those relations (i.e. peoples and lands). Like approaching a new relationship—a lover or another—Nehiyaw learning is filled with the delightful curiosity associated with *not* knowing.

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Figure 5: *Bee Fae*, Illustration by Cora (Annie Paré)
Image description: an illustration on a green background of a magical Ienian bee fae sitting atop a leafy flower against an orange sphere. The bee fae, with blue and pink iridescent wings, is wearing high heels and a short yellow dress collared in yellow fur. The fae's brown hair is cut short and they are holding a cocktail glass. Cora signed "AP" in the corner.

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From a series of vivid and lucid dreams that Cora has experienced since a child, she recounted the experiences from them as an oral story in one Talking Circle. In the dreams and in reflections, Cora is running. They are running so fast that everything around them is a blur. As her eyes begin to focus, she can tell that she is seeing blades of grass close to her face and brush so tall she imagines she must be close to the ground and leaping through the bush on all fours. *Who am I? What have I shapeshifted into now?*

Their eyes then begin to pan up and, running so fast, they begin to see the sky blanketed in twilight above them. Suddenly, they feel their feet float away off the ground they are now moving upwards and into the sky. Her running slows to a steady float and, in her periphery, she can see wings.

Now who am I? As their eyes once again adjust to this new body and experience—these new surroundings that are not filled with images of blades of grass or brush, they look down from the sky and see below the shape of a jackrabbit leaping over roots and rocks and scurrying between bushes. She wakes up.

In other dreams she *starts* in the sky, coming down to earth with a tumble. Upon gaining their bearings as they take off into sprinting run, they look upward back to the sky and see a hawk in the twilight, soaring and circling above the tree line.

"I don't always know what this means," Cora said discussing this as a story. "I want to understand it more. There is much I still need to understand, But sometimes I think maybe it's the hawk and the jackrabbit that are my two spirits—hunted and hunter, neither is wrong."

In dreams, storytellers emerge curious, seeking to return to understand more.

“Many nights when I was young,” Cora also noted, “spirits or ghosts would come to me mostly in dreams. I had the feeling that they were ancestors of sky beings, coming in the night to teach, but I am open to many possibilities of who they might be.”

Almost all in the Talking Circle expressed similar dreams and experiences, as well. Cora’s depiction of these spirits was that they were at first grotesque and frightening, but upon witnessing them beyond the flash of a mere moment, Cora could tell they were kind, loving spirits. It is this that prompted her to consider the ghosts as ancestors and sky beings, among other signs.

“I still would get scared when they would come to me,” Cora said. “But over time they grew comforting. In that world, the dream world, they were not frightening, but beautiful.”

In one dream, in particular, spirits came to them from the sky. These spirits looked different from the other spirits that had visited Cora. They were almost so beautiful, they were frightening. They said, “my child, you are Two Spirit. You are to live your life from here on out as Two Spirit,” they said to her in her dream.

Cora awoke the next morning with a clear purpose to live their life in that way, moving into their role as Two Spirit and taking guidance from ancestors to guide them on a journey toward loving care. Cora has lived her life everyday as such, embracing a role of caretaking, life-giving, and creativity so often associated with femininity and womanhood as well as fiercely fighting for those most oppressed in the world—a trait often associated with masculinity and manhood. A teacher and storyteller, a healer who studies plant medicines, and one of our community’s many favorite Aunties, Cora still wonders who those beings are that came to them in dream and showed them the path forward.

In the Talking Circle, we all agreed that there could be no other that could guide Cora to her purpose as a Two Spirit than those of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer elders of ancestral past, coming through the sky to guide her desires toward the aims of community.

Rendered an aberration by the colonial project, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer ancestors are in fact among the most beautiful and loving of ancestors. Shapeshifting into all the life of creation so that we may better know how to communicate with, know, and therefore show all of creation love, we too as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people today are also among the most loving and beautiful of future ancestors. In that love, we share our sâkihito maskihkiy—our *love medicine*—a medicine we offer to heal from colonial trauma and one that we desperately seek to bring home to all of our kin.

CHAPTER SIX: Sâkihito Maskihkiy and Two Spirit Survivance

Today, the lavender sun chose to shine extra light, as it was a special day. Here on Michan, the ancestors would perform a ceremony for those who choose to be bonded to each other for eternity.

It wasn't mandatory. In fact, the old ones taught that having more than one lover was always a clever idea. You do not choose your mate lightly. The more experience you have the better, as going into a commitment to one person should also bring immense joy. If neither mate has experience, how would they know if they will be compatible with one another?

Windi loved watching the ceremonies. Her mother chose a soul mate this year. Her father was in her life, but during the choosing years, they decided not to bond.

Community children were raised by everyone, not just the biological parents. Children were seen as precious and childcare roles of community members were shared.

They also celebrated love in all forms. Maybe this is the year that someone enters the choosing phase for the first time. Encouragement through music, dance, storytelling, and theatrical performances were Windi's favorite. Last year, she watched Moon dance. Her movements were perfection in motion. She knew when to float, when to turn, when to rise and when to shadow. The fluidity in her moves made Windy feel flutters in her stomach. Yet she also felt a pull towards Ocean and Star.

She was worried she wouldn't be able to choose.

So, she decided to dance with each of them.

First, she asked Ocean to dance with her. Ocean and Windy moved across the universe in waves and turns. Windi caressed Ocean's cheeks gently as they danced. Ocean reciprocated with a kiss on the back of Windi's hand.

The Grandmothers were a little concerned. They knew this match may not work for long. Thunder was born from a love like this before. Thunder was so handsome, but they could be moody. They had a temper sometimes. Whether this could be passed on, they were unsure. Thunder was usually accompanied by the stunning Lighting as well. She was always nearby, ready to try and scare everyone away. I think she wanted Thunder to herself, but Thunder had not chosen. Thunder came every year right on time and danced with everyone. They had danced mostly with Cloud and Moon.

Windi had decided to dance with Ocean for many reasons. There was an obvious physical attraction. Yet, she also felt deep feelings for Ocean.

Creator had given them all not just agency, but they could also decide what and when to feel.

This was a feeling Windi did not want to shut off. The drums pounded and Crow sang high pitched vocals that made Windi's hair stand up. The drum beat resonated in every fiber of her existence.

Ocean could swallow her whole, and Windi would be happy.

They took a break to catch their breath.

Windy watched her mother, Sky, dancing with Star. They looked beautiful together. Windi's mother had the most gorgeous light blue hair, amber eyes, and pale teal skin.

She looked happy with Star. This was not their first year dancing together either.

Windi glanced around to locate her father, Airon to see if he was all right. He was by the drummers, singing his heart out and smiling.

Airon had a reputation for having one of the most powerful singers in the Universe. He was also known for fathering many, including Thunderbird, Rain and Eagle. Windi's brother Eagle and her were close. They grew up playing together. Rain and Thunderbird, however, chose not to have a friendly relationship with their siblings.

Windi was proud of her brother Eagle. He had not chosen yet. He continued to father more of his own kind. They had an important job to do, which Windi understood. Eagle may never choose. Windi was almost ready to declare her intention to choose. She decided to ask her father what he thought. Her father was also a good listener. When he saw Windi motion to him, he stepped out of the drum circle at the end of the song.

"Nitanis, Windi, you look like you're having fun." He placed his huge arms around her in and pulled her in for a hug. When they hugged, Universe shivered, and the dance floor vibrated for a moment.

"Father. What do you think of Ocean?"

"I thought that you looked happy and peaceful. Are you thinking of choosing? Don't rush in my girl. It's completely up to you, Nitanis. I would like you to be confident in your choice though. I never knew you were Two Spirit, but it never mattered to me. Only your happiness. Just be sure it's what you want."

Windi knew it wouldn't matter if she was Two Spirit. She just needed to hear it from someone she admired, like her father.

Her community respected choice in all areas. Of course, carrying on a lineage was important. That's why families tended to be so big. Windi had six siblings. Three already had children. She had twin nieces, Mars, and Venus. She also had a nephew, Willow. Willow was still young, but the Elders already knew he was Two Spirit. Willow loved learning to hunt, but he was also learning to make clothing. Father said Willow had other gifts not yet learned as well.

Windi spent the most time with Willow. Whoever and whenever she chose, she hoped they had similar attributes as Willow.

Windi was still so unsure. This may not be her year. As much as she likes Ocean, the thrill of choices seems better right now. Besides, there's lots of time left. She may just keep coming back. There are plenty of Ocean's to choose from.

~ *Michan* (Aimee, 2024)

Indigenous people face the highest rates of disability and chronic illness of any demographic in the U.S. and Canada (Hahmann & Kumar, 2022; Umaefulam et al., 2022). These high rates of disability are attributed to the theft of Indigenous lands, food sovereignty and clean

water, access to traditional and quality medicines/healthcare, and from the influx of diseases that have been ongoing since the dawn of the colonial project through the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has been termed another tactic of colonial germ warfare wherein Indigenous nations were devastated and killed by the disease at rates higher than any other demographic (Hahmann & Kumar, 2022; Umaefulam et al., 2022).

To be Two Spirit/Indigiqueer is to *be* disabled to the norms of cis-hetero-hegemony wherein we are rendered abnormal, queer, and even *grotesque* like the spirits who first appeared to Cora. Indeed, our epistemologies are devalued; Indigenous people are diagnosed with learning and/or other cognitive disabilities at higher rates than any other demographic, not necessarily because they/we have aforementioned disabilities, but because our knowledges are unintelligible to colonial ways of knowing (Brayboy, 2005). Disability has been rendered—much like Two Spiritedness/Indigiqueerness—as an invaluable deviation from the norm in whitestream socioeconomic and political structures.

It is important to note that I come to this writing as a disabled Two Spirit with multiple chronic illnesses and mobility impairments. Most if not all of us in the Talking Circle are also disabled, which is not surprising given Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people experience among the highest rates of violence of any racial/ethnic demographic, which in turn disable them/us at higher rates than cis-straight peers.

In the dark and pain of this violence, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people craft stories of deep love with disabled kin—like the lonely eagle, disabled from flight who shares love with Aimee's grandmother, also lonely being disabled as she was queered to the norms of cis-hetero-hegemony. Living her life outside the norms cis-straight roles and values, Aimee's grandmother found comfort in the land such as the cattle she raised and the majestic eagle for whom she could care.

Eagles represent great power in many Indigenous epistemologies because they are known to be the only bird to fly to the greatest height (in Nehiyaw lands and skies) and among the very few across the globe that can soar as close as possible to the cosmos. Honored for such gifts, what happens when one can no longer fly? What can happen when one no longer wishes to fly? Do their gifts no longer matter?

Aimee's story demonstrates that one's power does not come solely from one's physiology, whether that be the physiology born with or acquired physiological changes through shapeshifting—including shapeshifting gender—and disability. Every member of an Indigenous community—disabled, elder, youth, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer, a cis woman who cannot or chooses not to rear children or a trans woman who desires to do so and more—is valuable and carries *medicine.*

A Two Spirit elder I love and cherish dearly years ago asked me what medicine I carry. Integral and important to entire nations and Indigenous communities since time immemorial for their knowledge systems and power (Wilson, 2015, 2015a), Two Spirit people carry the ancestral power like Wesakecahk to shapeshift and, like Wesakecahk, who is comprised of love and stardust, Two Spirit people also carry love and the stardust of ancestral hope. That love and ancestral hope is sâkihito maskihkiy—the love medicine that we have to offer in our stories and teachings.

The eagle, distrustful at first, could receive Aimee's grandmother's gifts when the majestic bird realized that they both—the eagle and the human—spoke the same language. Like Wesakecahk, Two Spirit storytellers of MFN and related nations/communities are able to "walk," to "fly" and to observe things in "two ways" and "two worlds"—the human and other-than-human ways and worlds. Perhaps for these storytellers, they/we never lost this power. Perhaps this power to speak the land's language was never lost or taken from Two Spirit people or perhaps, at some

point during the ongoing violent period of colonization, it was gifted back. This ability to communicate across bodies is part of Two Spirit sâkihito maskihkiy. Love Medicine.

This sâkihito maskihkiy—this love medicine—is so desperately needed right now during this late stage of colonialism wherein systemic violence and climate catastrophes threaten so many living beings, marking them just us as grotesque as we as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have been marked. This sâkihito maskihkiy is carried by Quinten in Braedyn's piece. Now disabled by the harmful substances that comprise the islands and waters of Quinten's Great Escape, the Two Spirit youth must reach within their own traumatized body to find the medicine they have to carry to heal these spaces from the impacts of violence.

Two Spirit sâkihito maskihkiy also is a gift of the body. In Karin's story, it is in gifting one's body (the whale to the wolf, the wolf to the five-fingered ones, etc.) that life continues and love is expressed. Two Spirit sâkihito maskihkiy is powerful because it stems from feeling the beings with whom we have embodied in our stories and centuries of ancestors who have passed on to create who we are today/

"Run to me and I will care for you," Karin said when discussing the baby animals fleeing the horror of raging fires consuming their families and home. "I will be your family. I will care for your burns and sorrows."

Just as Two Spirit humans carry deep affinity for one another and the land, so too does land carry love not just for humans, but for all the beings of creation. This love is not solely maternal, it is sensual, it is the love of friendship, kinship, desire, and sexuality.

Waters, skies, animals, plants, mountains, stars, wind, and rain—all other-than-human beings of the cosmos and part of creation have a sensuality. It is not just human beings. Nehiyawewin tells this in the sensuality embedded in the language. Human and other-than-human

beings have held relations since time immemorial in Nehiyaw community. Sisters marrying stars, men and women coupling with and then shapeshifting into (literally becoming bears) is not unheard of in Nehiyaw storytelling.

Aimee's tender story that starts this chapter, *Michan*, is a wonderous and curious exploration of the possibilities of sensuality and love that can exist *in* and *between* bodies of lands, air, waters, and cosmos. Windi, the main character, is wind, a Two Spirit born from the love between Sky and Air (Airon). What a delightful way to consider wind—as the creation born from the love between the sky and the air around us!

Aimee's story takes place on Michan on a fateful day when all beings would gather to celebrate, dance, and experience love and joy. If desired, some—like Windi—would choose a partner for life, one the ancestors would then honor in a ceremony of their bonding. Windi watches their mother, Sky, dance with her beloved Star. Windi's father, Airon and mother, Sky are bonded, but had not done so until after Windi was born and they had had (and still do) many lovers and children prior. Windi is therefore encouraged by their brother, Eagle and their father, Airon to make whatever choice suits them best—to bond now or later (or not at all) to take their time to pick one who makes their heart flutter.

Aimee's story is a treasure chest of wisdom showcasing that love and *sensuality* exist not only within and between other-than-human kin—a vital life-force to value—but that love is expansive. It is the bonding of Ocean and Wind in the past that has gifted Thunder, albeit in Michan, Thunder can have a temper! It is Airon's deep love that has created Eagle, Thunderbird, and Rain. It is Sky's love with Star that also helps ensure her continued bonding with Airon. Having multiple partners, As Aimee writes in her story, is a valued trait for it is through these multiple relations that all the beings of Michan can come to know how to be better loved ones.

As wanderers who traverse lands and move through ancestral realms and into the bodies of human and other-than-human kin through shapeshifting superpowers, Two Spirit people often carry love that is expansive and shared across multiple sets of relations. Some of those relations are sensual or romantic relations that occur across more than one partner simultaneously while they also care for siblings, children, blood and chosen kin, and more. Sometimes those relations are romantic, sensual couplings with one person or one being at a time while simultaneously expressing other forms of love across different types of relations.

Queer and trans love is often depicted as a depraved deviance from the monogamous, cis-heteronormative coupling that of colonial, whitestream. and Christian hegemony. Wandering—through relationships and carrying more than one relationship of deeply valued importance are acts of *seeking* knowledge. The more relations that one has, after all, the more one comes to know. And, as we are comprised of at least two spirits, there are multiple iterations of ourselves for whom we can express and from whom we can receive sâkihito maskihkiy.

"Wait, what do you mean, 'they/then' pronouns?" one of my young nieces asked me on a call one evening. I began to explain that they/them pronouns were used for many people who do not identify as part of the gender binary, noting that in Nehiyawewin, we use the terms "wiya" as the third person pronoun and it implies no gender at all. I was going to tell her English was imperfect, a language forced upon us, but that we do our best with it.

"Well wait, never mind," she interrupted before I had a chance to share with her what I thought would be helpful teachings. "Obviously 'they/them' makes sense because, well to be Two Spirit means that you're more than one person! *Two* spirit!" she said excitedly.

And it is out of the mouths of little Nehiyaw children that the wisdom of many of the defining aspects of Two Spiritedness is shared in all of its beauty and all of its simplicity.

Every summer, the Four Aunties and Two Spirit One traveled together with the Little Ones to the land, a day when the Aunties would give parents a reprieve from watching the children. There they would hunt, fish, pick medicines, go on walks, and sleep under the stars. Cooking over the fire, they had buttery bannock with every meal one day and sweet chokecherry ice cream every night while sitting by the fire, laughing, and telling stories. Two Spirit One would always bring the Little Ones to the tent to help them get to sleep and then come back to hear the Aunties cackle and laugh.

There was Eagle Auntie, a wise one who told some of the best stories; Hawk Auntie, who could pick out the best game from afar, Wolf Auntie, who always took the Little Ones aside from the other Aunties and spoiled them with treats and jokes. And there was Bear Auntie was always boisterous until the fire came and Bear Auntie would be first to fall asleep by the fire.

One day, Two Spirit One was playing hide and seek with the Little Ones while the Aunties were resting with their feet up, eating warm bannock slathered with melting butter. One of the Little Ones asked Two Spirit One why all the Aunties were animals.

"Eagle and Hawk Auntie can always find us when we play hide and seek," they bemoaned to Two Spirit One. "It's not fair."

"Well yes," Two Spirit One replied. "It is because they have great sight, but it is only so they can look out to protect you and keep you safe."

"Oh," the Little Ones replied. "Well that is good. I feel safe now—I want to hug them."

Two Spirit One went over to the river where the Aunties were seated, cackling, and laughing together. Two Spirit One told the Eagle and Hawk Aunties how the Little Ones wanted to hug them, thanking them for their watchful protection.

"What about Bear Auntie and Wolf Auntie?" the Two Spirit One asked. "Don't they get love?" The Little Ones laughed.

"Yes," they cried. "They can *chase* us to the camp and we can play hide and seek together!"

Bear Auntie, almost already dosing, was roused quickly and took off to a running start through the trees to the open grasslands. Wolf sprinted and caught up.

"Not fair!" the children said laughing, running, and struggling to keep up behind them. "You beat us!

On the grasslands the Aunties played with Two Spirit One and the Little Ones. Crouching inside the tipi, Bear Auntie suggested the children find a better place to hide or they would be caught quick by Wolf Auntie quickly. Eagle and Hawk Auntie came from the river and sat by the fire to watch the playful antics. Two Spirit One returned to sit with them, taking a break from the play.

Suddenly a dark cloud passed overhead and turned the bright sky into twilight. A great storm started to open up, flooding over the lands, leaking into the bottom of the tipi, and putting out the flames of the fire warming the bannock.

Eagle Auntie and Hawk Auntie came soaring over and plucked the children up to bring them away from the rain. Wolf Auntie and Bear Auntie gathered up

Two Spirit and the rest of the Little Ones on their backs, running with them on the ground while their sisters were inflight in the air.

But the rain would not stop. Soon Bear Auntie and Wolf Auntie were almost swimming and the storm grew menacing with thunder and lightning that Hawk Auntie and Eagle Auntie had to dodge.

"Two Spirit One," the Aunties yelled down from the sky and up from where they fled through the lands, "we need your magic—we need your power. Turn us back into the trees!"

Two Spirit One, who had been holding onto Wolf Auntie's tail for dear life let go and fell into the now rising waters around them. After they caught their breath and gained control over their momentum again, they pulled in all the water that they could and sent waves of it to each Auntie. First, they sent a huge wave to Hawk Auntie, and when they did, Hawk turned into a tall Cedar Tree, reaching toward the sky. The Little Ones they had been carrying clung to the branches and stayed safe from the waters below. As Hawk Auntie became Cedar Tree Auntie, she reached for the sky, opening up a space for beautiful sun to come through, calming part of the storm.

Still a strong storm, Two Spirit One then sent another wave of water to Wolf Auntie who grew into a beautiful Balsam Fir Tree in the shade of Cedar Auntie. Balsam Fir Auntie sent down healing salves that started to slow the rising flow of water. This in turn helped Bear Auntie run faster.

With the water that remained, Two Spirit One split it into two more waves—sending them to Eagle Auntie and Bear Auntie just as they reached the point where Cedar Auntie and Balsam Fir Auntie were growing. Eagle Auntie became a tall Pine Tree opposite Cedar Auntie, reaching for the other half of the sky to pull out a beautiful ray of sun, and drying the rest of the land so the Little Ones they were holding could walk on it safely again. Bear Auntie grew, low around the final edge, a small Juniper Tree of fragrant berries. In a round grove, Cedar Auntie, Balsam Auntie, Pine Auntie, and Juniper Auntie let in shade and light—and enough space for future rain. There, the Little Ones gathered as Two Spirit one joined the circle and in the beautiful land, grew into a vibrant, pink flower.

It is there the Little Ones grew up and grew old, protected from harm always by their Aunties and living a life of beauty that bloomed with pink flowers from Two Spirit One every day who would whisper to them before sleep, "You are so strong, Little Ones, you can heal yourself of anything."

~ *Tall Aunties* (Scully, 2024)

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The intimacy of the Two Spirit Talking Circle space allowed for each of us to share our sâkihito maskihkiy with one another. We opened up wounds in our conversations and sealed them with the salve of our words, poetry, story, and mirrored reflections of similar experiences. To be Two Spirit is to be always alone and never alone. Pushed to the margins of the binary world of

settler colonialism, marked as aberrant and grotesque, we are often most ourselves when alone, safe from the violences of colonial aggression. We are also never alone, comprised of and deeply responsible to kin. It can be a conundrum when, sometimes, that kin has also been harmed by colonial violence and re-enacts that on Two Spirit relatives.

I wrote the story I shared above as a composite representation of experience and kin in the Talking Circle and as a brief treatise of the love I have for them. Myself, as I am hiking mountains or navigating terrain on windy cliff edges, they remind me of the comfort I experience when I can smell cedar—the first or mothering medicine, and then balsam fir and juniper—the strongest and often most versatile of medicines, and finally pine—the strong peace-keeper that can withstand almost anything. We all expressed for one another that we missed not seeing each other during Talking Circles if someone had to miss a meeting, I had to cancel a session, or other barriers prevented us from gathering together.

The sâkihito maskihkiy that we carry is born out of self-love rooted in the desire to offer the gifts that we of love that we carry in such abundance, they overflow. give. At the last culture camp I attended before the writing of this research, I was running so fast, some of the elders said they could barely see me. A blur, like the wind, I was, running so fast to help them with the fires, the cooks preparing food, or the teachers helping people with beadwork and sewing.

Relatives in the Talking Circle discussed similar experiences, either at culture camp and/or in other areas of their lives, wherein they too demonstrated love through hard work in service of community. One cousin at the culture camp was similarly running to help people work. They also did a great deal of heavy lifting—literally—so that older adults and children did not injure themselves moving large trays of food, tables that needed to be set up for dinner, and other items.

They also looked after children to help take off that labor from their parents when busy with other tasks.

"I remember growing up and one of the elders said that I worked a lot harder than all the men," one of my relatives in the circle said. "And I remember feeling really good about that—strong—like they could see me for who I was and that I could do something they didn't expect, but that they needed."

When I was at this culture camp, running so fast I looked like the wind, I was helping an elder. An uncle of mine in the Nehiyaw kinship tradition, he was bent the ground clearing a path to bring in the hides and finish working on them. Hacking at wild rose bushes with an axe, I stepped in to help so he could take a rest. He tried to stop me, worried I would cut my hands on the thorns, but I grabbed a small bush and hacked away. I moved through the terrain quickly—so quickly, in fact, he laughed and told me I had cleared away plenty. He looked at the palms of my hands after, wanting to make sure they did not hurt, but I told them I was fine—and I was.

From that point on, he and I spent a great deal of time together. A young cishet men—a visitor to the camp who is not from our community—showed my uncle a drum he had been making. My uncle and I were sitting outside, having coffee, and enjoying the quiet of cool, morning air before the fiery warmth of a busy day got going. My uncle turned the drum over in his hands a few times and then handed it to me. The young man gasped, making clear gestures of distress while looking at me. I handed his drum back to him and, as he caught his breath, he then apologized.

"I just never had a woman touch my drum before," he said.

"Well now you have," I replied directly. "I mean maybe you did. I'm only a woman sometimes anyway, but I hope I put on it the medicine it needs."

Perhaps I left on that drum a little Two Spirit sâkihito maskihkiy—a little love medicine so that he no longer is worried if a woman or anyone who is not a man touches his drum. Perhaps also it will make sure, when he beats it, he never thinks of doing the same to anyone alive.

My uncle laughed and we talked some more before heading toward the bush to work.

"I will make you a drum," he said. "A better one," he added winking. "And I will take you out on the land. We will go hunting together and you will learn to play the drum I make you."

The roles that we carry as Two Spirit people emerge from our desire to bring our wisdom, strength, and love to our community in ways that honor our community's needs as much as our inner worlds. I wish to bring the strength—my desire to wander and float and be the wind, to work hard to help elders because it is there, I am gifted love, teachings, belonging, and so much more than can be shared in writing. I can try to make ribbon clothing, but when I do, the lines never come out straight because neither am I.

Sharing similar anecdotes, other storytellers in the Talking Circle remarked that they too had desires oriented toward community. Some wished to be parents someday and to raise children but because of their particular Two Spirit identities, that kind of love they have to offer is not often valued in colonial, whitestream spaces.

"But at culture camp," one relative said, "I loved that the children ran up to me. I have always wanted to be a mom and this gives me hope that someday, I will." Relatives left children with my relative, asking them to watch the kids for a bit so that they could have some reprieve and rest for a time.

"She's so good with them," they remarked to me. "I'm so thankful she's here to help."

Another relative is also often the one who spends time with and looks after younger children.

"I am so good with kids and always wanted to have my own, even though I can't," this relative remarked in the Talking Circle. "So to be able to be seen in that role, loved and accepted as a caretaker is an honor."

Two Spirit storytellers in the Talking Circles speak to a love they have that they wish to share in service of community, shared responsibility, and labor that extends beyond colonially-defined notions of gender roles. This does not mean that these roles we desire are *always* accepted in community and, when they are not, it is because of the impositions of colonial tradition that supplants Nehiyaw ontology—never because they are traditions endemic to Nehiyaw culture. For many of us, our desires to be in community and the roles carved out for us in community have been diverted toward the aims of the colonial project, often in harmful ways that limit the choices available to Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people.

"In my story, *Michan*," Aimee said, discussing her writing, "I wanted to make it clear that Windi has a choice—to show the next generation that they deserve to have a choice where we were denied."

In Aimee's story, Windi's expression of Two Spiritedness is as normal as it is for those who are not Two Spirit—or *One Spirit*, as we in the Talking Circle would jokingly say. Windi has the choice and freedom to be Two Spirit, to choose her partner—including to not partner with anyone at all, to consider having multiple partners, and of course to partner across the confines of the human.

For Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people, the choice on coupling is often wrought with difficulty (at best) or even violent pain and trauma. Many of us in the Talking Circle are survivors of not just bodily violence, but sexual violence—some from young ages. That choice—to *be* sexual, to have

and express sexuality at all, let alone directed at a particular set of living, consenting beings—has been taken from us through that process.

On Michan, in Aimee's story, she gifts back that one choice. *Michan* is a reclamation of choice—not just of sexual orientation and gender identity, but of sensuality in general—even if that means that who we love is no one, everyone, or all of creation from human to other-than-human beings.

So what is *your sexuality? Like, but what* are *you really? A dyke? Twink? Trans? Nonbinary? Human? Bear? What?*

For the most part, we did not much discuss our sexuality and gender in the Talking Circle space. We did at times, but colonial project is obsessed with sex and gender. It has been using sex and constructing rigid gender roles as tools of violence against Indigenous peoples—especially Indigiqueer people and cishet women—for centuries. Decentering sex and sexuality—at least in academic discourse—is an important reclamation of Two Spirit love and identity that is expansive, transcended human-centrism, and defies absolute definition. This is a refusal to answer the profoundly invasive questions about Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people's deepest intimacies, private moments, and bodies when those same intimacies, private moments, and bodies have been violated, targeted for annihilation, and deemed an aberration by colonial institutions.

For centuries, Indigenous love for and protection of kin—including for and with the land—has been an impediment to colonial conquest and seizure of lands. It is a love that is medicine—sâkihito maskihkiy—that is a poisonous toxin to colonial rule and peoples.

In Braedyn's *Quinten's Great Escape*, after the islands and waters are healed by Quinten's Two Spirit sâkihito maskihkiy, Quinten has to once again wield this powerful, magical weapon to

stop invading forces of new colonizers. Spreading it again on the lands and waters, it becomes a poison to them, a substance fatally toxic to colonizers.

It is perhaps Two Spirit/Indigiqueer love that knows no hierarchy, does not prioritize humans over other-than-human, and that is so deep that it is toxic to the colonial project and makes us so powerfully dangerous to colonizers. It is also therefore what makes us as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer most susceptible to the very violence that threatens our survival.

Two Spirit Survivance

Figure 6: Untitled Photos by Braedyn
Image description A bright, blue sky with only whisps of clouds. On the left is an explosion of flowering, burgundy buds and on the right is a beige, brick, building also jutting out into the sky.

Two Spirit storytellers in the Talking Circle often centered other-than-human kin in the stories as sources for understanding and demonstrating teachings of love, gender identity and expression, and intimacy. The land, like Indigenous people, bears scars of violence from the outright genocide of one thriving species to contaminated waterways to the threat of more loss of life as rampant climate change causes catastrophic disasters impacting ecosystems across the globe.

The land—a living, breathing, animate being, knows Two Spirit people's lives and traumas in ways that perhaps no one else can. It has witnessed centuries of colonial violence, been logged, cut down, burned, flooded or dehydrated, and moved into small urban plots of lands, walled behind fences that limit its natural shapeshifting, wandering, curiosity. Stripped of its life-force, reduced to an object without hope for a future, the colonial project subjugates land in similar ways that it does Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people.

"And yet it is still so beautiful," Braedyn once remarked in the Talking Circle. "And never judges or expects anything from us."

It is no wonder that Two Spirit storytellers' love for the land is so deep, pervasive, and crucial to their/our identities and expressions of identity. It is no wonder when they/we shapeshift, it is often to be in the land or to embody animal or other nonhuman manifestations of the land. It is there that home is expressed—in their/our bodies as well as in a space that defines home: safety, belonging, and being free to live as oneself without fear of reprisal or worse. Land is reprieve from settlers who enact violence on our Two Spirit/Indigiqueer bodies. Land is also a safe haven from cishet Indigenous people, many who adopt or condone these settler logics.

Shapeshifting—whether into human or other-than-human form, is also a safe haven for Two Spirit storytellers of MFN and related nations/communities. When embracing that ancestral

superpower through storytelling, creating characters to embody, living in dream-worlds, and more, Two Spirit people are able to access powerful tool for navigating the violence of the colonial project. They can move or shapeshift into and out of their/our bodies for a time to escape the trauma that lives there, imagining instead they are their grandmother, that they have fled Canada and are being transported down a rushing waterfall to eventual safety, that they are running with their wolf pack, or that they are dancing in Michan with the Ocean and the Moon. Fleeing the body, wandering through different lands away from relations that have been harmed by—and in turn harm us as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people—is freeing.

An ancestral superpower, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have always used it to create, curiously wander, and therefore come to better know and love their/our relations—to offer sâkihito maskihkiy. Wesakecahk, from which this power emerges, always returns home to the stars as the constellation Nehiyaw people see in the north when the skies are clear in winter. For Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people in the living in the present context of colonial violence, we use it to to seek safety, shapeshift so much more often that it can be hard to get home—hard to return to the body.

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are sometimes forced to shapeshift even at times when they/we might *desire* to return to our bodies. In addition to shapeshifting to escape, it can also include, for example, "presenting" a gender or sexuality in ways that are legible and—in some cases—the only legal way to present in colonial nation-states.

It is important to note that not all of us in the Talking Circle carry the same privileges. Indigenous trans women, for example, are targeted when they do not "shapeshift" (or "present") legibly to what the whitestream imagination understands a "woman" to be. Indigiqueer cis people may "present" a gender and/or sexuality that is legible to the whitestream imaginary often with

more ease. I, for example, can move through the world as a cis, straight woman. When I use a public washroom, I am usually not at risk of being arrested for using it (or worse). While I am not neither cis nor I straight, the ways I shapeshift are generally lower risk than that of my trans kin—particularly trans women. Regardless, with each time we are *forced* to hide who we are—to shapeshift to seek safety—pieces of ourselves can get lost.

"I do it so often," many of us in the Talking Circle remarked, "I often forget who I am."

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Figure 7: Amiskwaciywaskahikan c. 1900 and today, Source: Enoch Cree Nation Archives
Image description: two photos, one on top of the other. The top is a black and white image of tipis and horses of a Cree encampment in Rossdale Flats, Edmonton and the bottom one a color image of an unhoused tent encampment in the same location, today.

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Walking through the urban streets of Amiskwaciywaskahikan, Braedyn takes photographs that tell the story of a land that still beats a vital heart of love and desire. The photos are those of bright, pink flowers exploding from city parks, sprouting victoriously in the flat prairielands against the backdrop of a blue sky (Figure 6). They are also of historic, brick buildings constructed by the raw materials of the earth—wood, clay, stone, gravel, and more—perhaps even crafted by kin of Michel First Nation. They loom over the city against a brilliant sky.

"When I see the tall buildings," Braedyn shared when discussing the stories and meaning behind his photography, "I sometimes like to think of them as looking out over our people and lands, keeping the Saskatchewan River safe with its watchful protection. Like many of them are quite old, as well, and have witnessed much of what our ancestors did."

Amiskwaciywaskahikan is a large, urban city and the largest northernmost metropolis in the western hemisphere. It is cut through its center by the Saskatchewan River and along its many streets and sidewalks are parks, ravines, and memories of a thriving community of Nehiyaw and Indigenous peoples of the northern plains coming together to live, trade, and more. Along its shores were once scores of tipis. Now scores of tents—and some tipis—filled with unhoused people line its shows, the vast majority of whom are unhoused Indigenous people (Sohi, 2024). Indigenous people who comprise only six percent of the Edmonton's population are sixty percent of its unhoused population (Sohi, 2024).

Edmonton and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) sweep these encampments, evicting unhoused peoples much like Michel First Nation and countless scores of Nehiyaw and other Indigenous homes were evicted at the turn and middle of the 20th Century.

A walk along Mill Creek Park quiets the hum of the city as the roar of the water flowing from the Saskatchewan River into the ravine drowns out the noise. One of my Two Spirit cousins from the Talking Circle took a walk along its path with me.

"See that tipi there," she said, pointing out to me a clearing a few hundred feet in the distance with a tipi erected in its center We were just approaching a turn in the path to head down to the ravine floor below. "Wow. That's where I used to hang out all the time back when I was homeless," she remarked, shaking her head.

Scooped from her mother ("adopted") when she was young, my cousin bounced around the system, eventually living unhoused on the streets of Edmonton when she was a teen. There on the hill above the park that she pointed out to me, she used to spend time with Indigenous queer elders who were scarcely older than her but who knew the streets and how to keep her safe and protected when she was young. She credits them with saving her life and they still remain a part of her heart today.

Now, there on the hill, is a tipi erected by the city of Edmonton as part of an attempt toward reconciliation of the harm caused on Indigenous peoples by colonization. There is a deep irony of a city erecting a symbolic tipi in which no one is allowed to take shelter while the simultaneously destroying the tents and tipis of unhoused people across the city.

Most storytellers in the Talking Circle have been unhoused and those same relatives—me included—were either taken (adopted) or had a close relative also taken from Michel First Nation. As such, when we experienced houselessness, it was at different points, for different reasons, and in different cities as one another. Only one was unhoused in Amiskwaciywaskahikan—the rest of us scattered across the coasts. In addition to being unhoused, many of us (though again not all) are sober from years or decades of drug and/or alcohol addiction. Some of us have survived not only

sexual violence, but also the precarity of being engaged in sex work—usually while unhoused—as well.

Engaging in sex work can be important and empowering for queer people while also a form of labor that involves a great deal of risk of violence, precarity, and murder and/or that arises from being forced into sex trade through horrifying conditions of trafficking. This is not to disparage sex work nor sex workers. On the contrary, it is to highlight that sex work is often dangerous *first and foremost* to the workers, many of whom are queer and/or cis-straight women. As such and at minimum, settler nation-state labor laws *must* offer worker safety and protections that are at *least* comparable to those offered workers in other fields of labor.

It is also important to note that there is a great deal of stigma associated with addiction in Indigenous and queer communities (Indigenous and otherwise). This stigma emerges from a decontextualized, colonial understanding of drug/alcohol abuse that views addiction as solely an individual problem rather than a systemic problem imposed by settler nation-state violence. Additionally, there are misconceptions that addiction leads to or causes people to become unhoused rather than recognizing that land, resource, wage, and housing theft are to blame for houselessness. Addiction impacts a great number of the population of Canada and the U.S. and a great number still are *not* unhoused.

Those of us in the Talking Circle who once struggled with addiction are now sober and hope that kin who are in the throes of addiction can know reprieve, but that hope comes without contingency. They need not maintain perfect, abstinent sobriety. We hope only for—miyo pimâtisiwin—that they can live as best a life as possible. We hope also that they can be at home in safe housing, on their ancestral lands if they so choose, and always in their bodies.

On the walk through Mill Ravine Park, past the hill with the tipi where my cousin once spent much of her time, we came to a set of stairs that made visible a spot where we could sit and take a break near peaceful scenery along the edge of the creek. As we descended to the ravine, we expressed gratitude for not being unhoused any longer, recognizing that it was only the grace of the land and Indigiqueer and queer community of color that saved us from that life.

"One day, not one of us will be unhoused again," my cousin remarked. "Not on our own lands. Not anywhere."

She shared with me a story of how the lands here—Amiskwaciywaskahikan protected her as no other place could. Taken from her mother and the records sealed, my cousin had been on the streets for some time, desperately trying to find out her birth family. She never knew where she was from or to which First Nation/Indigenous community she belonged. When she eventually found out, many years later after having moved out of Alberta, her memories of being unhoused in Amiskwaciywaskahikan came back to her.

Sitting by the creek, the water drowning the noise of the city, the land lush with green foliage, the sky overcast with comforting clouds, and our jackets each wrapped tight around, my cousin told me this story.

"Yeah, it was like the land saved me," she said, gesturing to the splendor around us. "All these old queens and biker dykes," she continued both of us laughing, "it was like the land sent them to me to help me. Little blessings from our homelands keeping me safe." Little blessings from Michel First Nation homelands kept my cousin safe and guided her home—first to her body and then back to these lands where we sat for a while, just laughing and hugging by the water. And what little blessings indeed that they guided us together, home in the memories and stories we share together.

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The Two Spirit was not a two-legged, well not in a way where their two legs could walk them around anymore. They had climbed too many mountains; the legs would go no further.

You can move in two lands, their tired, immobile legs said to their person. So now it's time to see the rivers, lakes, and ponds more closely that cut through your beloved mountains.

One morning, the Two Spirit woke up in much grave dismay to find they were on a raft made of pine logs, floating in the most beautiful waters they had ever seen. Terrified and at once in awe, above them was an explosion of reds and rusts in the leaves, intermixed with the fragrant green foliage of fir branches, cedar fronds, and bunches of pine. They remembered this spot. They had hiked it many times coming from the mountains, wondering what views might be around the bed from the hill to the side of the pond, blocking the rest of the view.

This morning, they were able to see as the raft moved them slowly through the waters that reflected, like a mirror, the trees and imposing mountain all around. It was peaceful like this for some time when suddenly a flutter came from the side and a small owl—perhaps just a baby—landed on the Two Spirit's shoulders. Still for a moment and in shock, the Two Spirit then watched the owl fly away almost as quickly as it had arrived. Just as it flew away, another landed on their shoulder. Just as small, the one on their shoulder was a brighter white than the one before. The first one had moved close to the surface of the water and looked down its clear depths before taking a dive.

Surprised, worried, the Two Spirit made to go after the owl, but then remembered they could not walk. The owl on their shoulder turned its head about a few times and then started at the water's surface, rippling in concentric circles outward where the owl had dove. The Two Spirit tried to bring the raft closer to where the owl had gone under water, thinking to get into the water and save it, but remembered they were not yet well-versed in the water. They had only just stopped being a two-legged. With the owl on their shoulder, they wondered if maybe the creators had come down to say that they should be a winged one next before one that swims.

Ohoo, ohoo, the owl on their shoulder cooed a little. The Two Spirit stated to ask the owl on their shoulder if they should go down and look for the first owl, but just then, a great noise came from the water and up the first owl emerged from the surface, clutching a fish in each talon and vegetation hanging from its mouth.

Ohoo, ohoo, both owls sang in chorus. Just then, the second owl flew off to meet the first, taking one fish from their talon.

"We'll save some for you when you learn to swim," the second one said to the Two Spirit as they disappeared behind the next bend and into the mountain forest.

~ *The Swimming Oho* (Scully, 2024)

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One of my cousins recounted tales of her life growing up and running away to the bush. In the Talking Circle, she shared that as a youth into her teen years, she would run away from home to live in the bush, learning to forage, hunt, trap, identify medicines, and more. She built shelters, stayed out in the bush regardless of the weather, and spent time searching for, gathering, and purifying water.

"Oh I almost didn't make it, sometimes," she said. "I almost died out there. Ate the wrong thing. Got sick from the water. But it was there I learned what I know now." She knows a great deal about plants and medicines and tends to a Two Spirit community garden where she now lives. "And it's out there where I think I first had the dream I was Two Spirit and followed that path ever since."

Many of us in the Talking Circle recounted similar tales of being out in the lands and waters only to find ourselves staring down death. For many, this involved drowning in waters that almost took our lives. For one cousin it happened in a boat. Another it happened when swimming as a child. Another it was because of contaminated water out on the land. They are all deeply personal stories, not mine to share.

For me, it was after having traversed almost sixty kilometers of mountain terrain and be only eight kilometers from finishing my trek at the trailhead. Exhausted, a little delirious, I miscalculated a jump onto the last rock in the riverbed I had to cross. Leaping to freedom in the air in one moment, my lungs filled with water in the next. I had fallen, submerged fully like a cannonball, into the river.

The force of the river's current sent me back and forth between two boulders. I hit my head on one so hard it knocked me above the surface where I reached for the shore, pulled myself onto the trail, and coughed up water. Cold and soaking wet from my hiking boots to my backpack to

my braided hair dripping water from its ends, I was grateful I had a backpack that kept the contents—including a change of clothes—protected from the elements.

"It is the ancestors. They won't let us die in the land and definitely not in the waters," one cousin said.

Water is and has been an important lifeway for MFN and related nations/communities since time immemorial for fishing, hunting, trapping, and wandering between—and among—Kanien'kehá:ka and Nehiyaw lands. We are and have been a canoe peoples, traversing the rapids of the Smoky, Athabasca, and Sulphur Rivers in the West, the St. Lawrence in the east, and every lake, pond, and tributary passable in between.

"It is like the land held us," another relative in the Talking Circle. "Or I guess the water held. It said, 'Remember who you are. It is not your time.'" We all laughed a little, comforted that we were alive and fascinated by such similarities in our stories.

It was early in the Talking Circle that our dialogic conversations pointed to similarities in thought, experience, and even topics of stories that we all expressed we felt almost as if we had lived the same lives. There were similar characters in our stories, similar encounters of imminent death, and even reminders of similar worlds built through our creation.

When Cora shared about her world of Ienia, I was reminded of when I was a youth and built a land of the Kikwaks where humans had lived in harmony on one half of the land and the other half was the Forbidden Forest. The only labor needed to sustain the world and the people was that necessary to care for and love the lands and peoples. Elders rested and Young Adults shared the labor. To keep harmony, Kikwak people were not allowed to enter the Forbidden Forest if they wanted to return.

I always imagined, when I wrote stories that took place in or dreamed up the land of the Kikwaks, that many people *would* go to the Forbidden Forest. I crafted stories of Kikwak adventurers traveling there and never returning. Their disappearance into the Forbidden Forest was not due to the fact that the land *killed* or *punished* them for their indiscretion, but rather because once there, they just became a part *of* the Forbidden Forest. They went there seeking to be subsumed, shapeshifting into whatever the Forbidden Forest desired and needed.

Our desires as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are curious ones. We seek to love and know the land and to express our desires in ways that honor the land, honor our human relations, and honor ourselves. So often the violence on our body separates us not only from our desires, but the gifts we have to offer to our community—like the gifts we might offer if again we could reclaim the freedom and safety to move to the "Forbidden Forest," to run away to a waterfall in hopes it might be better than running into the violence of a colonial life, to move through the world on the land when the world has made it impossible for us to fly, or to even look down from the hole in the sky to see what lies below.

Those desires are always tethered home. They are not individualized. They are tethered because we are Two Spirits—one desire pulling us to curious new places and the other like a string of a spider's web pulling us back home.

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> "Every corner of you survived, full of sugars simply awaiting the water to let them flow again, to prepare for winter. Soon each part of you will shed chlorophyll, hiding it away for spring again. For now, though, you are simply awash in joyous water."
>
> ~ *Your Afternoon* (Cora, 2023, p. 37)

> "Though you are alone for now, you are surrounded by fragments of yourself felt across your home. You enjoy the company of yourselves, together expressing the act of living across time."
>
> ~ *Your Afternoon* (Cora, 2023, p. 6)

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In all of the shapeshifting that we do as Two Spirit people, it is the stories that also return us back to our bodies (and homes).

"That's another reason why I write in second-person," Cora said, describing her storytelling technique. Not merely a practice to compel *readers* to shapeshift into the characters and worlds she crafts, she also says that this writing style helps her feel back in her body again. "It's like this settling into my body again—I feel my hands first and then the rest of me. Like I am home."

Navigating home is a challenge for a people dispossessed of land, dispossessed even of reserve lands, scattered across the plains and coasts, and for Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people scattered across multiple versions of ourselves.

Coming together as Two Spirit storytellers, to have an audience to our gifts who share who accept them and offer sâkihito maskihkiy in return, to embrace sacred laughter endemic to Indigenous survival amidst colonial trauma, *is* a homecoming for Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people. We are given stories that map those ways to the superpower of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer knowledges and to the sâkihito maskihkiy from our Two Spirit kin that we so desperately need to receive, as well.

In our stories, shared together in the Talking Circle, we find ourselves together once again. Cora writes in the second person to return herself home and to see what knowledge comes from her body as she pours her words through her hands onto paper. In Karin's story, the child can go back home through the hole to the sky world—just like Iskwew Achakos does—having lived that short time on earth and now ready to return to the sky world. Braedyn's story maps the way through violence, healing, and resistance to embody Indigenous respect for land no matter if its homelands

or a land to which one is displaced. Aimee's stories open worlds of possibility for future Two Spirit ancestors to always have choice and safety in the homes of their bodies.

This is how we come to not merely survive but also *thrive* as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people—storying our pain, joy, hopes, and dreams while sharing them as the gifts that they are that overflow from the abundance of sâkihito maskihkiy we have to offer. This is Two Spirit/Indigiqueer survivance. "Survivance" is a sovereign term coined by Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor (1999) that is describes Indigenous survival *and* endurance.

Like the trickster-shapeshifters we are, find ways in our stories, our shapeshifting, and our commitment to one another and our nation at large to escape the colonial project's efforts to keep us wandering, untethered, or leave us for dead. We survive.

We meet regularly still spending spend time to write, dream, commiserate, and keep each other safe.

"It's the highlight of my week," storytellers have said time and time again. Being in the Talking Circle and strengthening relationships with my relatives is the sâkihito maskihkiy that ensures I return time and again to my home and to my body.

"I miss you when I am not with you," some have said. "I need my cousin time!" Others have noted when they have had to miss a Talking Circle session. I have had to cancel sometimes for conflicting obligations and other times I considered canceling and rescheduling because I thought perhaps, I did not have the energy—that I would have to shapeshift when I did not want to in order to be for them someone they needed. Always, however, when I would open up the video conferencing space to meet, I would be always greeted by them in ways that called me back home.

We meet Sundays most often now. We call it "Two Spirit Church" and laugh.

"I feel most myself here," one cousin remarked early on. "Like a *homecoming.*" Others nodded, agreeing, and sharing similar sentiments. It is a space now for us to dedicate to returning to our bodies—our stories—so we do not get too lost doing too much for others while wandering and shapeshifting through time and space.

"I feel like I have known you all my life," another cousin said. "That I never lost you as family."

I had to stop and laugh at the beauty shared by my relatives. Syracuse University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) advised me not to share with my "research participants" much hope that the space would be one of healing, safety, and a slice of reprieve from colonial violence. IRB suggested it might be a false promise on which I could deliver. I did take out that language at their urging but knew that this space would be what we all designed it to be—a healing, return home.

"Our shared experiences and lives—they feel like the many spirits who came through the many paths we took, eventually coming together here to make one," Cora said

Like wandering stars in the sky, shooting stars beloved by all, Two Spirit Survivance is expressed in story, our bodies, the scars of our trauma that when shared together in a sacred, safe circle and accepted for the gifts they are, map the way home. Each of my cousins and nephew from this Talking Circle is a star in the constellation we together comprise. Without other Two Spirits, the constellation is incomplete—the constellation that maps the way home. We are Two Spirits because we are the star and a part of the constellation—a part of the whole. And when we are a lone star, wandering and shapeshifting, the rays of light visible to humans are the sparks of love and joy of various spirits of kin who comprise us. The brightest, that star is the one to follow to come home.

Figure 8: *Our Constellation/Star Ancestor*, Illustration by Cora (Annie Paré)
Image description: an illustration of a K-shaped constellation that, when the stars of the constellation are connected, can also depict a person dancing. It is drawn against a black and starry night sky, but the brilliance of the constellation dances like northern lights in all the colors of the rainbow. It is signed "AP" in the corner for Cora's penname, Annie Paré.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusion

The teachings shared by Two Spirit storytellers in the Talking Circles are shared with intention; with a desire reflected from their and our lives, hearts, and experiences; and a desire that is continuously oriented toward home—both to their and our bodies as well as to the home of Nehiyaw epistemology and, for some of us, lands. Not a desire born of self-aggrandizement as predominates a colonial ontology, it is one that is about ensuring that the experiences, loves, stories, and teachings we share are passed on so that the next generation can have what small gifts we have to offer in this life.

With humility, we present these stories and teachings to Two Spirit/Indigiqueer youth and people who have not had elders and/or teachings to guide them, at least not from their tribally-specific epistemic-ontologies. With nanâskomitin (*gratitude*), we present these to the entirety of our tribally-specific communities and nations from which we are a part—from Michel First, Kelly Lake/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw, Aseniwuche Winewak Nations, and/or Lac Ste. Anne Métis among more. We share them as one small part—*our* role as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people—to call others home to the vastness and beauty of Nehiyaw epistemologies and to the bodies of lands, waters—and humans born from Nehiyaw worlds.

The teachings we present are ones that move through in a circle: Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are creators who give and make new life through building characters, worlds, and bringing back to life ancestors in stories. These creations and stories are representations of wandering and shapeshifting curiously through all of our relations in order to get to know those human and other-than-human beings as deeply as possible, a method we inherit from the superpowers of Wesakecahk. Because Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people know them deeply, embodying these

experiences through shapeshifting and storytelling methods, we carry sâkihito maskihkiy that *all* human and other-than-human kin need and from which they can benefit.

This sâkihito maskihkiy is not one based on gender and does not prioritize love into hierarchies. It decenters sex and sexuality and transcends human-centrism. Not to be confused with polyamory, of which some may practice, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer storytellers in this research do not need to prioritize types of love or the kin with whom we share love. Constantly shapeshifting and spreading sâkihito maskihkiy, our love is endless and we can see the uniqueness of sakihiwewin that is shared *between* other-than-human kin.

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer storytellers move in multiple worlds and shapeshift into multiple beings, so we have powers to bring sâkihito maskihkiy wherever we go—be that in the bellies of whales, wolves, and five-fingered ones or to islands, waters, and humans struggling with addiction. It is shared with ancestors past, disabled eagles and human kin, and in the creation of new worlds under domed skies.

Such boundless sâkihito maskihkiy shared as we shapeshift can threaten to remove us as Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people from home as we wander, seeking escape and reprieve from the colonial violence wrought on our bodies. That wandering splits us into halves if we are not tethered home to Nehiyaw epistemology and our bodies.

As relatives of MFN and related nations/communities gathering together in the Talking Circles, we brought the parts of our many spirits together, grounding us home in our bodies as well as our Nehiyaw teachings. It was not only the opportunity to *craft* stories that bring Two Spirit/Indigiqueer storytellers home, but also to have an *audience* that values the stories and seeks to learn from them, as each of us did in this project together. These stories are our creation—new

life—that we desire to gift and to humbly help ensure all Two Spirit/Indigiqueer and MFN and related peoples have vibrant futures.

Alex Wilson (2018) writes that to claim the role and title of Two Spirit is to "resume [one's] place as [a] valued" part of community, fulfilling their and our roles under our responsibilities as determined by wahkotowin (p. 191). As such, we share the stories not to separate us from our communities, but rather to situate us squarely within our communities. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have always had important roles in communities since time immemorial.

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer stories, teachings, and roles are not necessarily meant to be heralded as superior to or more important than any other Nehiyaw teachings. Rather, the stories are integral parts of the whole. They comprise, for example, one star of many in a constellation, but without which, the constellation no longer exists. They are important, as all teachings are.

Centering them, however, *is* important to return to recalibrate the imbalance in Nehiyaw teachings wherein Two Spirit/Indigiqueer peoples, teachings, and stories have been pushed out due to colonial logics of cis-hetero-hegemony. This forcing out of Two Spiritedness/Indigiqueerness must be remedied because it is part of the colonial project's attempts to dismantle relations to humans and lands (Finley, 2011, p. 39). It is the deep sâkihito maskihkiy Two Spirit/Indigiqueer share—without hierarchy and with a gift that can sometimes be one of self-sacrifice—that is most dangerous to the colonial project and that makes us targets for some of the most egregious forms of colonial violence.

Many of us in the Talking Circle have been at the forefront of movements to defend our people, lands, and waters—sometimes in ways that have also targeted us for state and/or state-sanctioned violence. We are not unique in this experience.

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and cishet Indigenous women are often at the forefront and frontlines of land and water defense projects. From Standing Rock to Wet'suwet'en to Weelaunee Forest, camps have been set up by and for Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people to honor the unique relationships we have to land and people—and the particular precarity we experience when lands are destroyed for colonial and capital projects. Micah Carpenter—also known as Big Wind—is a Northern Arapaho musician and land and water defender from Wind River in Wyoming. They rap about Indigenous sovereignty and climate change, Two Spirit/Indigiqueer rights, and frequently travel internationally to speak at climate summits. A speaker and activist at the frontlines of land and water defense, they have put their body on the line many times to protect all Indigenous lands, waters, and peoples.

With a social media presence on Instagram under the handle @bigwindriver and a website with their music and land/water defense projects (www.campsite.bio/bigwindriver), they have recently been supporting Diné and migrant Two Spirit/Indigiqueer land defenders traveling across the U.S. to demonstrate at the construction of police training areas—often referred to as "cop cities." These training grounds for police are proposed and/or currently being built in nearly seventy cities across the U.S. Most of these spaces are intended to serve as grounds for police to engage in "target practice."

One of the most notorious, the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center or Atlanta Cop City, is being constructed on the border of one of the lowest-income and heavily policed Black neighborhoods in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. This community—low-income because of decades of racist, anti-Black city policy such as redlining, gentrification, and more—is already policed at egregiously high rates. Killed by police at comparably similar rates as Indigenous peoples in the U.S., this cop city will wreak devastation on a predominantly Black community already living

under police violence (Smith, 2019). Black and Indigenous land defenders and abolitionist activists have come together to try to halt this constructing, setting up encampments in Weelaunee Forest.

Weelaunee Forest, an old growth forest on Muscogee territory just outside Atlanta, is the site of Atlanta Cop City. A large encampment of Black and Indigenous land and water are queer people who gathered to defend the both the old growth, Muscogee forest as well as the right of Black residents of the neighboring community to live free from police violence. Rather than build a training playground for police, these activists seek to protect the forest so that the neighboring community of predominantly Black residents can enjoy nature and land rather than state violence and terror.

The movement has been a harrowing and also beautiful gathering of people who share love for one another, other-than-human kin, and desires for a world free from racist, anti-Black, colonial violence. It is in this spirit that Tortuguita Terán (Timoto-Cuica), a 26 year old nonbinary, Indigiqueer land defender from Venezuela and a graduate of Florida State University, joined the Atlanta Stop Cop City movement. Kind, peaceful, and a long-standing defender of lands and waters, Tortuguita, was loved by everyone in their encampment at the Weelaunee Forest.

On January 18, 2023, while in the encampment peacefully defending lands, Tortuguita was shot and killed by Georgia State Troopers in what witnesses describe as "execution style." Not a threat, witnesses and family say Tortuguita was unarmed—a pacifist by nature—and that their hands were up. Autopsy reports revealed that they were wounded by as many as 57 bullet wounds and that exit wounds in their hands validated witness accounts: they were unarmed with their arms raised.

Tortuguita was not the first and will not be the last to defend lands and waters at the risk and expense of their life. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people mourn Tortuguita and explode in rage at

both their execution and the media blackout that all but kills Tortuguita a second time over by silencing of their sacrifice, identity, and power—the love medicine they were gifting that met with state-sanctioned terror at the hands of a colonial, police state.

Activists and organizers continue to fight for Weelaunee Forest and Black liberation, for a world without cop cities, and for justice for Tortuguita. In particular, land and water defenders fundraised to support Tortuguita's mother, a Timoto-Cuica woman who needed assistance travelling from Venezuela to gather her child's remains and, later, to make appropriate arrangements for Tortuguita's journey to the ancestors. Organizers continue to fundraise for her as she now often travels for speaking engagements, speaks out against the violence her child faced and seeking justice for Tortuguita.

In the stories we share, Tortuguita's is nor our story to tell. And instead we honor their love. We listen to their story and do not toss away Tortuguita's love medicine—the gift that emerges from their want for human and other-than-human kin to live safely.

Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people know what it is like to live multiple existences—colonized and Indigenous. Not always able to feel or be welcomed fully in every Indigenous space because the permeation of colonial cis-heteronormativity supplants Indigenous epistemology—we are even more so ostracized from many whitestream queer communities that do not carry our histories nor commitment to Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence. Shapeshifting into and out of multiple beings and spaces, we feel deeply the experiences of those we embody and we love—perhaps more so than our own feelings, themselves.

Cora recounted that while growing up, they were one of the smaller children and as a result, were often targeted and bullied. One summer, she suddenly shot up two feet in height and suddenly shapeshifted from the small, bullied child to someone now taller and bigger than most of her peers.

Shapeshifting, a term Cora uses to describe this change, they recall what it felt like to be in both bodies. With that larger size and power, Cora knew she was gifted the body for a reason—not merely to *not* be bullied anymore, but to know *two* experiences. Being small—forced to be small, marginalized and pushed to the sidelines, Cora discussed that her new power came with a responsibility to be of service to anyone small—not merely small in stature, but those *made* small by the logics of colonialism and other oppressions.

"They are my pack that I run with," Cora notes. "The oppressed. The colonized. That is what living these two experiences gave me."

Two Spirit people are expansive; again it is in the name used to describe of us—*Two* Spirit. We are comprised of *at least* two spirits.

Well why don't you call yourself 'Many Spirit?' some have asked. I use Two Spirit as it honors the genealogies from which the term arises, as noted in Chapter One and for homecoming. I use it also because I honor that for *some* Two Spirit people, they are comprised of two masculine/feminine spirits only and I honor their self-determination. To say I am Two Spirit—as we in the Talking Circle describe—it is because we are *at least* two spirits. Sometimes more, sometimes only two, never one.

With these two or more spirits—the community to whom we are tethered—we are a threat to colonization. Each one of us represents a power greater than an individual and each one of us the capacity to love in ways that defy colonial logics that seek only to exploit, sever relationships, and make peoples and lands into resources for profit.

The stories and teachings shared for this research are shared in the hopes that Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people can remember this power if they do not already remember they possess it. For non-Two Spirit people, or One Spirits as those of us in the Talking Circle say with the love

of Indigenous humor, we also hope you can remember this power and protect it and us from violence as we protect peoples and lands.

These are but some of the *many* teachings that demonstrate what it means for five storytellers from MFN and related nations/communities to map the way home toward our desires, bodies, and power as Two Spirit people and to Nehiyaw epistemic-ontologies. It is not our place to share teachings beyond those that emerge from these terrains. We hope that other Indigenous people—particularly those who are Two Spirit/Indigiqueer—resonate with our methods for crafting stories, learning from them, and recrafting them as well as our expressions of our power. It is this that we hope may also encourage more Indigiqueer people in MFN and related nations/communities as well as across the continent and globe imagine the stories that emerge from their unique bodies—and bodies of lands, waters, and humans. We also share this in the hope that educators use this work and these teachings to demonstrate just some of the vast knowledge, importance, and power of Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people and storytelling practices. We want Two Spirit youth and adults to know that they are *at least* creators of life, powerful shapeshifters who have an overabundance of sâkihito maskihkiy to share, and that they can survive when they have a place to share it with other creators who accept their beautiful gifts.

Because Indigenous research and learning methods are not concerned with mastery over knowledges and ideas, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, this research is similarly not concerned with defining *every* Two Spirit teaching. Some teachings are not for academic learning and are only vital for those of us in the Talking Circle. Some are important only for sharing directly with kin in our respective MFN and related community spaces.

Rather this research shares the expressions of curiosity that emerge from Two Spiritedness. So often issues associated with the global problems caused by colonialism are debated with binary

logics—climate change is often discussed as a problem that can be solved by producing more electric cars or asking consumers to use less waste; whitestream responses to anti-Black and other forms of racist police brutality tend to involve adding cameras to police uniforms or hiring more Black and Brown police officers; and issues of gender and sexual violence tend to be resolved by demanding that cishet women and queer people dull their brilliance so that cis-men are not agitated by their appearance, dress, or way of life.

None of these solutions offer imagination. Curiosity is vital to imagining and building worlds we *need* that do not require the heavy reliance on gas—or individually owned electric vehicles—to navigate the world. How can a world be built where mining of gas and materials to produce more cars or electric car batteries—devastating to Indigenous, Black, and other-than-human kin—is not necessary for people to navigate it? Similarly, instead of adding cameras to police uniforms to record the violence they enact on people or hiring Black and Brown people to abuse Black, Indigenous, and Brown people, what does a world look like without police?

Black and Indigenous imagination has long discussed, theorized about, and proposed solutions for many of these issues, particularly policing. Black speculative fiction from writers such as Octavia Butler and Black Feminist theorizing, for example, from scholars and activists such as the Combahee River Collective, Adrienne Marie Brown, and more—imagine and propose practical solutions for a world without policing—one that is a world of instead *abundance*, not scarcity.

Indigenous people have known worlds without policing and prisons since time immemorial, many as part of restorative justice practices central to a number of nations and communities across the globe. In this case, being curious also invites being attentive to Indigenous epistemology to imagine how to bring restorative justice practices into a present-day context of

ongoing colonial and police or carceral state violence (Speed et. al., 2020). Nehiyaw epistemology rooted in wahkotowin—accountability to kin and restitution when harm is caused—carries with it infinite possible solutions for climate justice, a world without police that embraces accountability over punishment, and that in turn would carry itself with a great deal more capacity for love and respect than violence. Oftentimes Indigenous people have been screaming that we have ideas and blueprints that would save the whole world from most colonial catastrophes. Of course these importantly need to go toward the aim of Indigenous sovereignty and liberation, first and foremost, but as with specifically Two Spirit teachings—the benefit of hearing them is for the benefit of all.

Two Spirit storytellers craft stories of utopia that imagine the world as it once was as well as what it could be or perhaps what it soon will be when the colonial project collapses. These utopias—Ienia, the islands and waters Quinten heals, the hole through which the child follows Sky Woman, Michan, and more—are shared here because they demonstrate other worlds are possible *and necessary*. Two Spirit/Indigiqueer imagination is vast. I do not write this to say we have all the knowledge and solutions to end all forms of colonial violence. As survivors of some of the most egregious forms of that violence—surviving by giving life, shapeshifting to come to know as much as we can and escaping harm when necessary, and in turn offering sâkihito maskihkiy—we do at have some proposals that might be helpful to consider.

As a gift—and repository of teachings, stories that relatives in the Talking Circle wish to include, will be published in a digitized anthology. A digitized anthology allows the anthology to share stories crafted in visual, oral, and or/audio formatted alongside written prose and—importantly—be able to be a living, breathing document where more stories can be included as this work continues.

The anthology serves many purposes: 1) to be a gift for the storytellers of this project to have their stories, teachings, and power made visible in ways that value their knowledge; 2) as a gift to other Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people from MFN to be validated in stories and teachings; 3) as a gift to *all* relatives of MFN and related nations/communities wherein these teachings belong to us all, not just to Two Spirit/Indigiqueer peoples; 4) as a model of re-mapping that might inspire other Indigenous peoples—particularly Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people—to consider continuing the beautiful process of creation through continually reimagining their stories and teachings in present-day contexts; and 5) for educators to draw on Two Spirit/Indigiqueer knowledges and literature to ensure curriculum and resurgence in Indigenous education does not solely or mostly center cis-heteronormativity.

With this anthology, Critical Indigenous Witnessing questions will be included with each story to help those who read, listen to, watch, or otherwise witness the story to consider what they learn from and what responsibilities they have to the protect the stories. Questions for consideration will ask witnesses to consider: 1) their relationship to the stories, time period and context in which the story takes places, the characters in the stories (and *not* in the stories); 2) their subsequent relational responsibility to *protect* the stories; 3) how they might share the teachings based on those responsibilities; and 4) how they, particularly if *Indigenous and/or Two Spirit/Indigiqueer,* might re-map their own story or stories of creation considering these relationships, responsibilities to community, and desires for futures of hope and justice.

In this anthology, my stories will also be included, particularly the one I had been journaling about, outlining, and discussing since the start of the Talking Circles with my relatives.

"When will you finish?" one asked. "I can't wait to read it."

I had had so many iterations of a story and realized as we completed this part of the project that the story I want to write is the story of how I came to know myself, my Two Spiritedness, and my body—my way home—through this dissertation research. The story is not really mine alone—fitting again as I as a Two Spirit am not myself alone. It conveys the teachings my cousins and nephew beautifully displayed in this project. It embodies creation as it brings to life my two spirits as well as the hopes and dreams I imagine to be those of my ancestors'; shapeshifts through human and other-than-human form as well as through time and generation; wanders into forbidden lands without promise of return in the hopes of finding sâkihito maskihkiy for my relations; and then surviving because of the power I have as Two Spirit.

These are the teachings my cousins and nephew *taught me.* My story is a re-mapping of the many versions of stories I had intended to share before. It is re-mapped because what I knew and sought to share at the start of this project changed with each passing Talking Circle and with each new story my relatives shared with me.

All of the research I share now is what I know *now.* It may grow or even change when I am gifted a new story, or perhaps when you, dear reader, craft your own story in response.

Re-mapping does not have an end. Knowledge is an infinite process. It is temporal, fluid, and moves as it passes through bodies of lands, waters, and humans and shifts through time. I hope the stories—the maps—fall into the waters and lands so that they can pick up the hopes buried there. I hope they float to the stars so that the ancestors can hear them. I hope they never end because that will mean Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people are still thriving, creating worlds and peoples, building futures of hope, and passing on teachings for new generations to consider and re-map.

For you, my ancestors, nikawiy, my aunties and uncles, and the land. For you sisters and my cousins, both within and without the Talking Circle. For you, my imaginative Two Spirit nephew. For you my little niece. For you, the new creations I have not yet met. Kisâkihitin.

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Yôtin ekwa Maskwa on Forbidden Waciy

Yôtin was gearing up at the base of the mountain to climb to the top. A wooer of peaks, Yôtin loved to navigate the terrain on forest floors, stirring up leaves and pine needles and playing tricks on people hiking who mistook the sound of Yôtin playing with aspen tree leaves for Maskwa threatening their safety in the woods.

Maskwa and Yôtin were good friends, always giggling at their trickery.

On this day, Yôtin was readying for the ascent up Waciy when Maskwa emerged from the bush, the fur around her nuzzle blowing softly as she approached Yôtin.

"Tan'si Yôtin," Maskwa said.

"Tan'si, Maskwa," Yôtin replied. "A beautiful day for a hike up to the peak, is it not?"

"Oh, I will leave that climb to you," Maskwa answered. "I'll stick to the slopes and shoulders. You get… a bit too intense up at the top—even for me." Maskwa and Yôtin chuckled, a great storm of leaves blowing around them as creaking branches chimed into their chorus of laughter-song as Yôtin grew more intense with joy.

"I suppose you are right… I suppose you are right," Yôtin chortled. Settling into a delicate laughter, Yôtin calmed as forest debris landed on Maskwa's head, forming a shape of a wreath about her ears. "Why I do think I made you look quite beautiful, Maskwa. You look like the Goddess of the Forest. Will you be seeking a mate then today?"

Maskwa laughed again, the debris falling from her head to the ground below where Yôtin gently blew it away, cleaning up the mess from their raucous laughter from before.

"Only if a mate so chooses me," Maskwa answered. "I shall not seek, but will sit on that ledge over there," she said, shifting her nuzzle up and sticking out her mouth—revealing her sharp incisors—to point to a ledge not far from the mountain summit that offered a view of the valley and the activity of the forest and mountain four-leggeds and winged animals. "I'll maybe also go for a swim

and try to catch Fish," Maskwa said. "Then sit on that ledge and enjoy the view. If a mate walks by that suits my fancy, perhaps I will take them into my den for a while. Winter is coming. It would be nice to hibernate with some… extra warmth," Maskwa winked.

Yôtin chuckled, startling Squirrel who scurried up a tree branch, their brown fur blending with the vibrant colors of autumn leaves and browning needles of pine and spruce that were gearing up for a long, dormant winter in the North.

"Didn't you already lay with one this summer?" Yôtin asked.

"Yes and what's it to you? How many mountains have you climbed?" Maskwa replied jovially. "Why didn't you just climb three of them just last month?"

"Ah so you speak the truth, so you speak the truth," Yôtin chuckled again. "But there are just so many to get to know. Each her own story to tell. They are tough to woo; not anyone can get to know them. I wonder sometime if you won't accompany me?" Yôtin asked.

"You know you prefer your solitude," Maskwa replied, shaking her head. "You would make it too cold, anyway, Yôtin. Besides which this Spring I will have cubs to raise. It's time for me to get ready for their arrival for a bit. Perhaps when they're grown and on their own, I will accompany you."

Yôtin nodded.

The patter of two-leggeds was heard on the trail just north from the bush where Yôtin and Maskwa were talking. As the patter grew closer, Yôtin's and Maskwa's perceptive ears could make out a pair of two-leggeds boisterously talking and laughing with one another. Yôtin's attention, having been turned to the trail, fixed back on Maskwa who was starting to shrink away in fear, trying not to let her paws make a sound in the bush. Two-leggeds—these days at least—were not always to be trusted. Not all of them were like the Old Ones from the Clans.

"I don't know what kind of two-leggeds they are," Maskwa whispered. "Maybe you'd better get going then. I don't want any trouble." Her face took a serious tone as her eyes darted about her for signs of any two-leggeds who might try to come into the bush for a private moment to relieve their bladders.

"Don't you worry, nitotem. I will rustle up enough chaos to hide your departure and will check for any dangers ahead. Go, be on your ledge. Find your mate for your winter slumber. Till we see each other again," Yôtin answered, hugging Maskwa with a swirl around her thick neck.

Yôtin started to depart northeast toward the trail, kicking up the fury of sounds in a windy forest to mask Maskwa's departure as she turned and started running west toward Waciy's shoulder.

Yôtin began to pick up speed when they emerged into a small semi-clearing, sunlight streaming through the space from the thinning of old growth trees whose trunks had lost all of their foliage and most of their branches in their aging and dying years. Singing through the space with a rising whistle, Yôtin could make out silhouettes in the early morning past the grove near the trail. The two-leggeds looked like they were Moniyaw and as Yôtin's bellowing in the grove started to really to reach them, they both paused to take off their packs and adjust them, looking around with what Yôtin detected to be a degree of fear in their eyes.

Just a little more density of forest and Yôtin would be right on top of the two-leggeds, bellowing out their tunes and whirling around overhead the hikers also making their way to the top of Waciy.

"Probably just trying to 'bag' this peak," Yôtin snuffed, pausing in the clearing to look back at Maskwa who nodded in thanks and was already nearing a rocky ascent to Waciy's southwestern shoulder—far from Waciy's tall peak. Yôtin winked back and whispered through the trees so only the sound would reach Maskwa's ears on the other side of the grove, "Don't you worry; I got this."

Maskwa laughed, knowing Yôtin would send fear down the two-leggeds' spine as the pair would pause to wonder if the sound they heard was that of a bear and if the wind they felt was an impediment to an otherwise calm-weather day scaling treacherous terrain.

Turning their attention once more to the hikers, Yôtin thought of the trials it took to truly get to know Waciy and if Waciy would be welcoming to these pair of hikers. Most Moniyaw just try to climb the highest and furthest than their own kind and never stop to ask Waciy if that is what she wants, how she might like to be approached, or spend time asking her about her own life and dreams.

Yôtin hissed and made an exerted effort to push through the grove, catapulting up and over the tree line. From that vantage-point, Maskwa was visible now approaching some of the loose rocky slides that marked the final ascent to the shoulder. Below Yôtin, trees creaked and bent nearly horizontal with Yôtin's wind-song as they could make out the peak of Waciy jutting out into a listless blue sky. *I'm coming to meet you,* Yôtin breathed before making one, final push over the tops of trees toward the final clearing of their destination: the trail to Waciy's summit.

As Yôtin swirled angrily overhead of the two-leggeds, now holding onto the contents of their packs and yelling at one another inaudibly, leaves scattered and

branches fell in their break. When Yôtin got this windy, they knew they were capable of destruction.

Play tricks on them, Yôtin could heard in their head Maskwa always reminding them when they got this way. *Just play a trick on* them. Yôtin sighed, the wind-speak coming slowly down in intensity remembering those wise reminders from their most cherished friend, Maskwa. Tree branches came to a creaking sway and the broken twigs of old growth began to fall away slowly as Yôtin came to a halt over the heads of the two-leggeds. As the forest settled, so too did their sounds increase over the quieting of Yôtin's loud wind-song.

"Did you hear that?" one of the two-leggeds asked the other as a branch cracked, probably under the weight of Squirrel trying to scamper as far away from possible for Yôtin's wrath.

"A bear?" the other asked.

Yôtin tried as calmly as possible not to laugh as the two Moniyaw repacked their remaining items quietly—but swiftly—with nerves flashing behind their eyes. They were looking around for Maska who, as Yôtin noted, was already above the tree line and seated at on the shoulder ledge enjoying the viewpoint seeking out a good fishing spot—or fishing for a mate.
Now in the safety far from the trail in a secret viewpoint known well to bears for catching a good mate, Maskwa turned her face back to Yôtin mouthing *kinanâskomitin* with a delighted smile.

Giving a knowing nod back to Maskwa that stirred up the air once more, Yôtin breathed up the trail ahead and let out a big bellow.

Oh, it's just the wind," the second two-legged said, slapping the other on the shoulder and letting out a giant sigh. "To be scared of the wind! As if!"

Yôtin laughed again, but already on a fast, swirling ascent through Waciy's difficult terrain, was no longer worried that their own laughter would stir up any new fears in the two-leggeds.

*****

Ayapinikeskew lived with Nikawiy, her mother, and her uncle and loved them dearly. She was always running around, seeking adventure in the mountains or dashing from family to family to help them—mostly making sure that Nikawiy and Uncle always had days of rest to themselves. Up earliest, she sometimes would never be seen—either because she was running so fast, she was just a blur, or because she had gone to the mountains, returning only after twilight or when everyone was sleeping again.

“Why are you always going running up those mountains by yourself?” Nikawiy asked, as she usually does, when Ayapinikeskew heads on an adventure so summit a rugged, tall peak. “What if you get hurt? What if someone there tries to hurt you?”

But Ayapinikeskew could not be contained. Even at nighttime, hibernating sleep would allude her as her feet and legs would kick wildly, trying to break from the confines of her bed. She’d walk even in her sleep, waking sometimes on a moss patch outdoors when the stars were poking pinholes in the sky.

Nikawiy would often be the one who found her outside, starting to take off at a run. Being the only one able to almost run as fast as Ayapinikeskew, she would also be the only one to finally catch her to keep her daughter’s feet from taking flight and returning in the sky to the ancestors through the pinholes.

“Ay, my daughter,” Nikawiy would say, grabbing her onto her firmly, but gently while lightly jostling her awake. “I would call you *She-Who-Moves-A-Lot*,” she’d say, laughing, bringing Ayapinikeskew back to her sleeping room to safely return to a hibernating slumber. “You go run a mountain today,” Nikawiy says, “then maybe you stop running in your sleep, I suppose, *She-Who-Moves-A-Lot.”*

Ayapinikeskew would laugh and always promise to return so long as every once and a while, she could have a mountain adventure. And when she did return, she always made sure that Nikawiy and her Uncle never had to work. She chopped wood and made food for them, built the fires and gathered the water, and made sure that all their clothes were mended and their lodge safe from too much rain and snow and cold. She even helped tend the hides and dried the meat, but Uncle’s always tasted the best. He would hand her pieces from his pocket that he made special for her.

“Don’t tell anyone,” he said. “Or it’ll be gone before you know it.” He made her moccasins and leggings that never fell apart, no matter how much brush she ran through, how many rocks she climbed, or how many rivers over which she leapt on her summits to mountain peaks.
Uncle told her about Waciy, the tall mountain—not the tallest—but the furthest peak from the rest. He said it was forbidden. Handing her bits of dry meat, he said, “They say no one has gone there in hundreds of years. They say the last person who did never came back and no one since has tried.

Nikawiy was nearby, “A, Uncle, don’t tell her that. She’ll only think it’s a challenge and go and we will never see her again.”

Only six people had ever tried climbing Waciy before, none of them ever to be heard from again. It is the sixth that Ayapinikeskew told her about who was the

last. On Waciy was supposed to be powerful medicine, but it was sometimes so powerful it could consume all who went there.

One day, Ayapinikeskew was returning from a long trip to the mountains, eager to get back home to make sure that the work she had done before she left—the food and water she had prepared and brought to Nikawiy and Uncle—were still plentiful.

Upon returning, her village was nearly empty—most of the families gone. Her Uncle came out from the lodge, his face looking older.

“Ayapinikeskew,” he called to her. “Oh I wish you did not come back,” he said. “Everyone got very sick. Your mother is ill inside. She can barely talk or move.”

“What happened?” Ayapinikeskew asked. Uncle pulled her to a seat next to the door to the lodge and beckoned her to sit.

“Let me braid your hair,” he said, “like your mother does when she tells you stories. You will need it in braid for what you are about to do next.”

Uncle said that a great fire had come the day she had left and it burned up some of the lodges and dried up the rivers so that they became only creeks. Pulling the strands of her hair tight as he talked, he said that what was left of the water rolled over and cleared the charred land, but the damage was done. The next day, a great bellow of cold air settled and froze the land. Many of the families who had been spared by the fire were frozen to death and that is when Nikawiy got sick.

“Your mother and me along with four families are all that is left,” he said. “And we have nowhere to go. We all have a sick one too ill to travel, so we stay and hope that the flowers and game and waters come back,” he said.

Ayapinikeskew was in tears and turned around, unraveling the braid. She said she wanted to go in and see her mother. Nikawiy was lying on her bed breathing raggedly. Her skin was clammy, but she opened her eyes and nodded to draw Ayapinikeskew closer.

Ayapinikeskew offered to get her medicine, but Nikawiy said there is none left.

“What about Waciy?” she asked. Nikawiy and Uncle both looked started and, with what energy she could muster, Nikawiy told Ayapinikeskew she must never speak of that place. “But what else is there? Where else is there to go if the land is all burnt and frozen?” she asked.

Uncle came over and sat behind Ayapinikeskew again and started to pick up her hair. He looked right at his sister, at Nikawiy, and told her that there was no other choice.

“With this braid,” he said, “you have all the strength of your mother, of me, and of you—one in each strand. Go to Waciy. Get the medicine so we can save your mother. All our people. And maybe our land.”

Nikawiy tried to protest, but she was too tired. With tears in her eyes, she said that she did not want Ayapinikeskew to leave just yet—that they both would wander off alone, Ayapinikeskew to Waciy and Nikawiy to the spirit world.

Uncle took Nikawiy’s hands and laid them on Ayapinikeskew’s braid and with that, Nikawiy accepted. “It is at the summit,” Uncle told her. “It is not a hard climb, but you will face many obstacles. But this braid—let it guide you. You will get there.”

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Ayapinikeskew set out quickly, drawing only a few supplies so she could leave the rest for her uncle and mother. It took her two days to make it to the entrance of the base of Waciy. It was not a formidable mountain. It was cheerful, the air around it humid, and the skies blue with fluffy clouds like soft beds waiting for their loved ones to slumber upon them. She heard crickets and the rustle of leaves and even saw a deer, this late in the day, wandering with her two fawn nearby.

With a deep breath, she smoothed her hand over her braid and entered into the forest.

****

Ayapinikeskew wandered through the mountain for seven days and seven nights, following paths to ponds, lakes overlooking the summits of distant mountains she had never seen before from her village, and giant rock ledges that proved perfect spots to sit and take a rest.

There were abundant berries to eat, plentiful roots to harvest, and even small game that she could cook up by fire at night and by morning for nourishment.

It was on the seventh night, tired, that she fell asleep before cleaning her camp. Under the blanket of sky, light stars coming out one at a time to make an appearance, she heard a rustle in the bushes that woke her. Then she felt the sides of her tent close in on her face as she heard an animal take a great sniff against her cheek. Breathless and quiet as possible, she tried to remain still until the large sniffing presence at her face backed away and moved toward the food at her camp.

There she realized her mistake as she heard the clammer of the animal eating her food. She wondered if this was how she would never make it out of Waciy—

never having yet found the medicine for Nikawiy and her people—because Waciy made you careless and you left your food out for animals to take—and in turn, take *you*.

Oh curse me, she thought. Curse me for this. And then the noise stopped and she slowly resumed her breath with ease, wondering if maybe the animal had gone. She waited a long time in that stillness when, after a time of silence, she breathed a sigh of relief that she would live another day in Waciy, possibly still on route to the summit to find the medicines for her family.

Her heart still beating, she opened her tent to go get water to splash on her face and there, just as she opened her tent, was Maskwa's large face staring into the tent at her.

"Tan'si!" Maskwa said. "Kinanâskomitin for the food."

Ayapinikeskew collapsed in fear at Maskwa's feet.

When she woke, it was morning and she was in a den—not her tent. A little Bear cub was curled under her head and another at her feet. Far in the distance was Ayapinikeskew at the entrance to the den looking out over the mountain view.

"Maskwa," Ayapinikeskew said. "You're Maskwa?" The Bear nodded and beckoned her to come over. Maskwa showed Ayapinikeskew the beautiful view. Now several hundred feet higher than before, she was on a rock ledge overlooking a valley. Far in the distance she could even make out the clearing that was just on the edge of her village.

The little Bears came running over and plummeted at her feet, laughing, trying to cuddle Ayapinikeskew, and falling into her lap.

Maskwa got up and left the cave, returning at midday with berries and salmon that she placed before Ayapinikeskew. They ate a great dinner together and Ayapinikeskew fell asleep. When she woke up she was in another cave—still with Maskwa, now asleep next to her—and the Little Bears awake, running around and playing with large rocks and Ayapinikeskew's backpack.

Ayapinikeskew could not remember where she was, but she looked down and her feet and arms were fur and claws and she thought maybe the Little Bears were her children. She awoke Maskwa who gave her a big hug and pulled her to her feet.

"Come, Big Bear," Maskwa said to Ayapinikeskew. Big Bear. Yes, that is my name, Ayapinikeskew thought to herself. She followed Maskwa to the river where they drank water, fished for salmon, and Ayapinikeskew—Big Bear—saw her deeply colored fur and snout in the water.

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Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear's Little Bear cubs had all grown and run off, having litters of their own that visited Ayapinikeskew from time to time. She loved to sleep in winter with Maskwa and run around the shoulder of the mountain's summit with Yôtin. Sometimes at night she would dream, but she could only ever remember the day waking up in the cave with Little Bear at her feet and another Little Bear at her shoulder. She imagined then she was Little Bear.

"I want to climb the summit," she told Maskwa. "I think I can do it."

Maskwa was nervous but said that he wanted her to do whatever was best for you. He said maybe she would come back to the caves and maybe not, but that he would always try to find her.

And so Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear set out on adventure. She met up with Yôtin and they giggled and he helped her find her footing on slippery terrain.

After three days, Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear told Yôtin she didn't think she could make it up the summit.

"I love you dearly," she told Yôtin, "but maybe I will return to the caves." Yôtin laughed and helped bring her back down the steep slopes.

"Won't you go back to Big Bear?" Yôtin asked.

"Maybe not—maybe next year," Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear said. "Winter is coming. Maybe I will hibernate alone this year. Maybe I will hibernate with Big Bear or maybe I'll hibernate with Mistah Maskwa."

They both laughed and Yôtin commented on her ambition, to which Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear said that Yôtin was one to talk. "Why you hibernate with every mountain there is."

Yôtin laughed, agreeing.

****

Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear had a new set of cubs and only once returned back to Big Bear. She loved him dearly but enjoyed her solitude and adventure. It was on such a day of adventure—and otherwise solitude—that the two legged moniyawak approached Waciy and she and Yôtin had a laugh about them daring to adventure into these terrains.

Yôtin knew a great deal about moniyawak and always warned Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear about them, but she had never seen any up close and certainly had never seen any moniyawak. It was Yôtin who had told

Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear what two-leggeds looked like—the Old Ones from the Clans and these new moniyaw.

On this day, from where she sat to watch her view, she saw them climbing, climbing the mountain. They were getting so far so fast, their bodies visible to her in the clearings on the mountain slopes where trees had been felled by ancient landslides.

Yôtin, always climbing to the top, and now these moniyawak, she said to herself, "I can do it, too. I want to know the summit, too."

Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear was strong, and she knew that. She had been living in Waciy all her life—at least as long as she could remember—and she had never been to the top, but she had survived great changes in weather, dangers from larger bears, and the birthing and raising of so many litters of beloved cubs. Why couldn't she too, summit the mountain.

She gathered up some berries and dried salmon she had had with her while relaxing and enjoying the view on the ledge and started up the path toward the summit, keeping a curiously watchful eye on—but safe distance from—the two-legged moniyawak.

****

Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear lost the two-leggeds, but it was just as well. The trek up the mountain was like nothing she could remember feeling before. She felt like her friend, Yôtin, free and effortlessly moving through trees, brush, rockslides, and loose scree.

At one moment, she finally started to get out of breath and noticed a beautiful view. There were lakes and valleys of prairieland barely visible from this outcropping and trees down below the bottom of the mountain slopes that stuck up like little spires—like small, narrow mountains themselves.

She sat for a minute and looked around to see if there were any berries or small creeks in the bush to nourish and hydrate herself. Finding some, she gathered what she could and brought it back to the viewpoint. Approaching it, her legs suddenly grew steady and she spilled all the water and dropped the berries, watching them fall down the edge of the outcropping and disappear into the dense brush below.

She was dizzy and her eyes shifted back in her head. The whole mountain spun. She fell backward, landing on the rock and years flashed in her eyes. All her babies were born and reborn and some died. Maskwa came back and combed and braided her hair. A fire erupted suddenly only to be quelled by the falling of icicles.

And, as soon as it started, it was over. She shook her head and sat for a while, perplexed, memories slowly returning to her of her years living in Waciy.

“I better go get more of those berries,” she said out loud. “And just sit and drink the water. I must be hungry and tired.”

Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear returned to where the berries were by a small creek and—instead of gathering them to eat by the lookout, she replenished herself in the dense of the forest. With a sigh of relief and a rest, she continued on her way, journeying to the top of the mountain and determined to get there.

It was not long—maybe a few hundred feet before the summit, when she stopped to catch her breath and again take in the most breathtaking view. There Yôtin appeared and swept around her, giggling.

“So you decided to summit, after all?” Yôtin asked. Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear laughed and nodded her head. “Race you to the top,” Yôtin yelled, running at full speed to the peak. Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear shook her head and yelled after Yôtin that she was had no desire to race him.

“I’ll enjoy my scenery here,” she cried out, not sure if Yôtin could hear her anymore. Yôtin responded with a giggle and continued on his way.

After a time, Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear decided to start on the path again and as soon as her feet started to take her, they slipped out from under her and she was on her back on the low bearberry growing among the rocks, watching clouds and the tips of trees frame her vision looking up in the sky. They all began to spin until they turned into a blur that looked like the top of a tent.

There she felt she was submersed in the hides of a tall tent, someone sniffing her face and clanging her dishes of food. She remembered. She had been camping. Maskwa had woken her.

She scrambled to get to her feet and began up the mountain path, confused, the world still spinning and blurry. The sky now was just a bright hot sun and she heard laughter—children, two legged ones of the Old Ones with the Clans—around her. She was running, gathering wood for an Old Man and dancing with an older Woman.

Uncle. Nikawiy. Her village. Pieces of dried meat. Nikawiy sleeping in her bed, her face clammy and cold, her body and the whole village in need of medicine.

She felt hands in her hair. The pines brushed against her skin—now bear, not covered in fur. She heard words in a different language, *With this braid*, *you have all the strength of your mother, of me, and of you—one in each strand.* She

reached up and noticed her front legs were arms—the arms of a two legged. She had a long hair—smoothed in a braid down her back. *Go to Waciy*, she heard. *Get the medicine so we can save your mother. All our people. And maybe our land.*

Suddenly, Ayapinikeskew/Big Bear remembered. She was Ayapinikeskew, not Big Bear. *Had she ever been Big Bear,* she wondered and did not know. Her two legs moved so fast, running so swiftly that pine brush blew behind her like birds and butterflies.

Wondering if she had been in Waciy so long that Nikawiy had already died, she almost started to cry. *Or Uncle,* she thought. *My whole village, our land? Is anyone even left?*

"This is why they say no one leaves Waciy," she yelled out into the air, no one around to hear or understand her two-legged voice. "I have been stuck in here for years—centuries!"

She remembered her Uncle had told her that she had to climb to the summit to get the medicine. It could not be found on slopes and shoulders—only on the summit. Faster she climbed, running so fast she became a blur. *She-Who-Moves-A-Lot.* Ayapinikeskew.

Ayapinikeskew ni'siyîkāson (my name is Ayapinikeskew).

If I do not find the medicine, she thought, *I will never leave Waciy. How could I when there is no one left to go to?*

She thought then of her friend Yôtin and took on screamed, oh Yôtin, help me get to the summit—carry me as fast as I can!

Another moment of spinning through time and memory came, but this time Ayapinikeskew did not stop. She remembered all the mountains she had climbed, the bears she had birthed, the songs she sang with Uncle, the dance steps Nikawiy taught her—abut they all blended together as if the songs were sung by the bears and as if she remembered her own mother giving birth to her. She shook her head and kept running until she ran straight away, tripping over a backpack of one of the two moniyaw hikers.

"Well hello there," they said. "Are you all right?" She nodded, laughing, embarrassed and dusted herself off.

"Well you made it," they exclaimed. "You summited!"

Silent she smiled and walked to the clearing at the northeast corner of the mountain's peak. She could feel wind blowing so hard around her, she thought she might fall off. Loud, she could not hear the moniyaw anymore and cooled by

the wind, she wondered if maybe this *was* Yôtin coming to join her at the peak. Her eyes narrowed and she swayed, dancing with Yôtin for a moment, her feet firmly on the mountain as she gazed over hawks and eagles soaring through the valleys, shadows from mountains case into the riverbeds below, and rusting of deer and bears—maybe her children—in the thick brush.

Those noise of the animals in the brush grew louder and, startled back to her body for a moment, she heard the two-leggeds behind her shouting. Turning, she saw them raising their bodies in a great and powerful stance, yelling.

"Hey bear, hey bear," they yelled, flailing their arms. There in the southwest corner she saw again Maskwa and the two Little Bears. "Hey bear" they yelled again, but Maskwa and the cubs kept approaching.

Ayapinikeskew turned from her spot to try to greet them and let the two-legged moniyaw know that the bears were not a threat, but before she had a chance, the two-legged moniyaw were backing to their hiking packs and pulled out a gun. They raised it in the air as Ayapinikeskew gave out a great cry.

Again the world spun around her until she collapsed in the pile of fur of Maskwa and the Little Bears.

*****

Ayapinikeskew awoke to a gentle breeze. There was not much wind blowing anymore and she thought for a moment she was no longer at the summit, but she looked around and could see the viewpoint along the peak's northeast edge.

She scrambled to her feet then, desperate to seek out Maskwa and Little Bears. She called out for Yôtin but received no reply. She couldn't find anyone as she searched the summit—not even the two-legged moniyaw—but she saw signs of a scuffle, tufts of fur, crushed portions of low brush, and broken tree branches. Her heart was pounding, fear that Maskwa and the cubs struggled and ran off, injured by the moniyaw—if not worse—yet there was no blood and no sign of the moniyaw so she took in a deep breath, calming her racing heart in hopes that perhaps they were safe.

Dizzy again, she decided it was best to make her way to the river, splash her face with cool water, get something to drink and maybe eat, and then seek out Yôtin who went everywhere and so perhaps, in that case, would know what had happened.

When Ayapinikeskew got to the river, she threw down the pack and leaned over the river's edge with such gratitude and thirst, she almost fell in. She started to splash her face and then take in deep gulps from the rushing waters, cool and clean as they passed over rocks.

It took her a few moments to finally quench her thirst and catch her ragged breath. She took in some air and let out a sigh, resting for a bit. Calmer now, she considered how to look for Yôtin and find out what happened.

She started to call out for him but realized that all she could hear was wind in her ears. She called again and the same thing happened. Confused, she leaned down again to get water in her pack and head on her away when she noticed something she hadn't before when earlier taking big gulps from the river. She had no reflection. She could not see if she was Maskwa or a two-legged. She was… without reflection.

It frightened her and she opened her mouth as if to scream, but all that came out again was the sound of wind—louder this time. It was loud enough it beckoned over three bears—a large one and two little ones. Ayapinikeskew was trying to make out if they were Maskwa and the Little Bears.

"Ayapinikeskew," the large bear said in the voice of her mother. "You did it, Ayapinikeskew."

Ayapinikeskew looked on at this large bear, perplexed. One of the Little Bears—not so little, as Ayapinikeskew could now tell as they approached closer—almost as large as the one with the voice of her mother, also began to speak.

"Yes, you did, my niece," the bear said in the voice of her uncle. "I told you that you could."

The last bear—this one a Little Bear—came forward. It had a braid in its mouth and it tossed it in the river. It said to Ayapinikeskew, "you brought the medicine back to the people, Ayapinikeskew. The braid helped you and gave you strength and so now it will stay here in this river as thanks to Waciy for giving you the medicine."

Ayapinikeskew didn't understand.

Nikawiy—the largest of bears—came forward. "You are Yôtin, my Ayapinikeskew," Ayapinikeskew's mother said. "You came here and became Yôtin so you could come clean away all the sickness that had come into our village. You pushed all the sickness away. The only sickness that was left were those last two-leggeds who did not heed the warning that they are not to enter Waciy."

"Yes," the Bear of the next biggest size—Ayapinikeskew's uncle—said, stepping forward. "And we came here to find you, to tell you that because you were, Yôtin you could go to Waciy's summit and there you could safely get the medicine."

“But we became bears when we entered,” Nikawiy offered. “And so when we found you, that is how we took you in. As Bears and you had to become Yôtin before you could understand and remember who you are and how to get the medicine.”

Little Bear came forward. “I am your niece, Ayapinikeskew.” She smiled and out her arm around her Auntie. “And you are my best friend, Yôtin, Auntie Ayapinikeskew. We are the medicine.”

Nikawiy Bear, Uncle Bear, Little Niece Bear and Ayapinikeskew lived in Waciy forever. Ayapinikeskew would sometimes be Maskwa and sometimes be Yôtin. This family never did return to their old village—as two-leggeds never can once they enter Waciy—but Waciy and all her creation loved them the way all of the land loves the old village.

Whenever the sickness tried to take over again or a selfish two-legged who dared tried to conquer Waciy and her peak ventured into the terrain, Yôtin would bring up a great storm, screaming in the rage of hundreds of years of living the life of a two-legged and a Bear and the wind, to keep Waciy safe for her family, her village of two-leggeds who admired its beauty from afar, and all of creation. Whenever there was a cool breeze in the village, they knew it was Yôtin and they always danced those days. And the village left berries at the trailhead in case the bears came out to say hello.

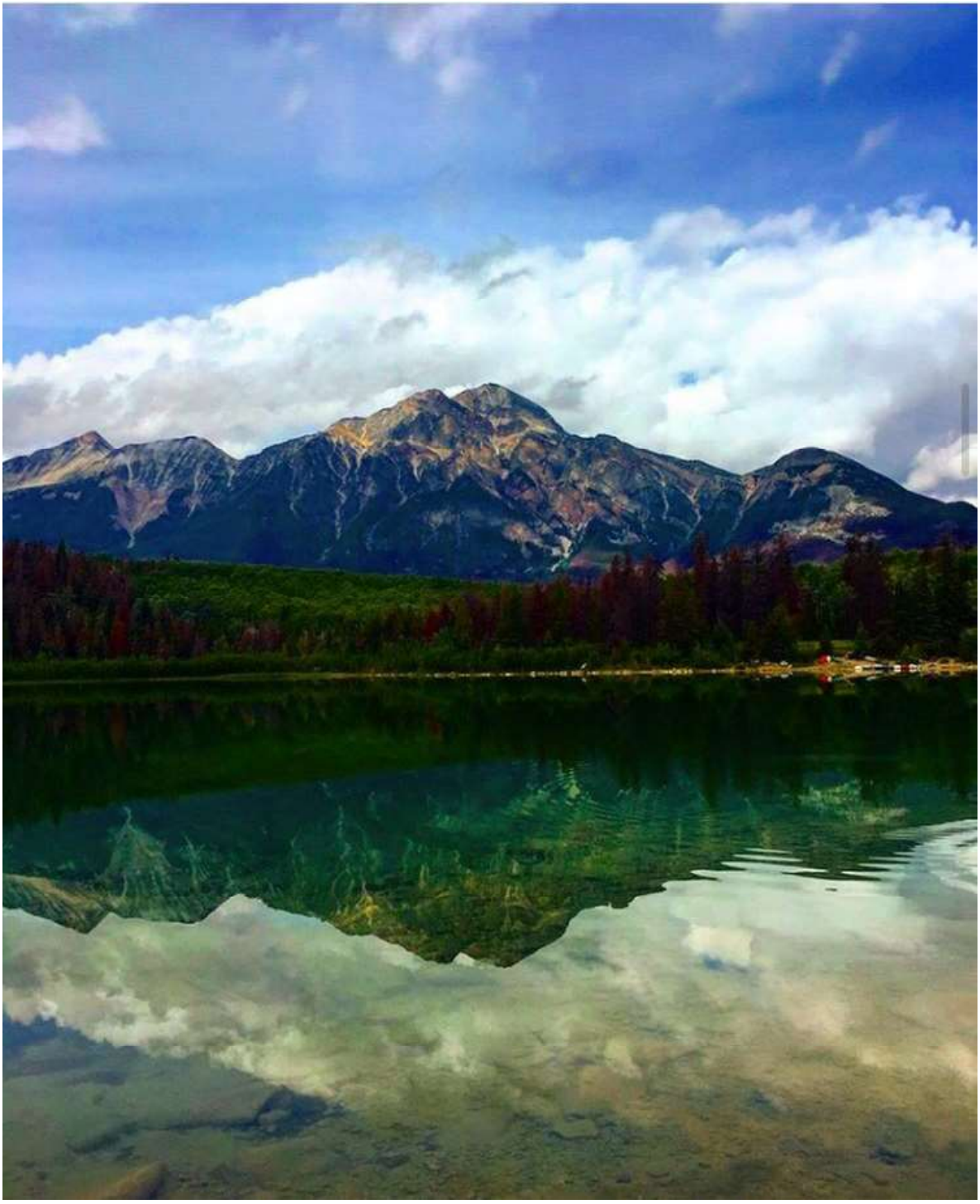

Figure 9: *Through the Looking Glass*, Photography by Braedyn

Image description: a photo of Mihko Waciy (also known as Pyramid Mountain), a burgundy-colored mountain with rugged furrows along its rocky slopes and two shoulders on either side of the pyramid-shaped peak. In towers above the crystal-clear waters of Pyramid Lake where the mountain and clouds in the light blue sky around it are mirrored in green hues in the waters.

APPENDIX A: Glossary*

Acahk: star/soul
Amisk: beaver
Ayahkwew: agender/neither man nor woman
Ekwa: and
Iskwew: the heart, soul, and fire of the Plains Cree people (*woman*)
Iskwew Achakos: star woman
Kisâkihitin: I love you
Maskwa: bear
Miskâsowin: deep inner reflection to self/place/kin to know role/make meaning
Mistah Maskwa: ursa major
Moniyaw/Moniyawak: white settler/white settler people
Nanâskomitin
Nehiyaw: Plains Cree
Nehiyawak: Plains Cree People
Nehiyawewin: Plains Cree (y-dialect) language
Nikawiy: *my* mother
Nikik: otter
Nimosôm: *my* grandfather
Nohkom: *my* grandmother
Kokum: *your* grandmother
Nohtâwiy: *my* father
Nicâpân: *my* great-grandparent/*my* great grand-child
Oho: owl
Pakone Kisik: hole in the sky
Sakihiwewin: love
Sâkihito Maskihkiy: love medicine
Wacask: muskrat
Wahkotowin: natural law of kinship and relational accountability to all kin
Wesakecahk: shapeshifting trickster in Cree creation stories

* These are as transliterations from Nehiyawewin using Standard Roman Orthography (SRO) and therefore may be spelled differently by other Nehiyaw/Cree nations/peoples. These spellings are how I learned/have been told to transliterate them using SRO.

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Post

Two Spirit, Indigequeer, and LGBTQIA+
Michel First Nation (MFN) Relatives!
Make your voice heard!

Tan'si kiya, Ionah Scully ni'siyîkāson and a descendent of Michel Callihoo through the Elise Callihoo (Boudreau) line. Where my cuzzies at?

I'm also a PhD researcher in Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University and starting my dissertation with my community in mind. I am creating a zoom shared space for Two Spirit/Indigequeer/Native 2SLGBTQIA+) members of our community to come together to share our stories of creation. You don't have to be a storyteller – you only have to have the desire to share your story and I will support that end. Your story can even take the shape of music or dance, art or poetry…beading! Whatever you'd like.

Over the course of 6 (or maybe 7 if we need extra time!) talking circles, we will meet virtually for about 2 hours each time to talk about creation stories including who we are in the long, ongoing web of creation. During and in between these talking circles, you will have chances to learn from one another as well as workshop with me so you can craft a story that makes you feel proud of who you are and that shares your important life's teachings with future generations.

Why am I doing this? Because I want our voices heard. Because I'm a storyteller and I think collecting stories of our nation is what connects us, but because I'm Two Spirit, I feel this is where I can best do this work right now. I also want to know more about us as Two Spirit people—for us to come together and not be reduced to the trauma colonization has lumped on us. And for us to be able to share with Indigenous education the important teachings that we have to offer. I will be sharing what I glean from this project in my PhD dissertation/thesis and it's my hope our work will have a large impact! After the project is over, I will also help you share your story publicly if that is something you're interested in, though you are of course not required to do so.

Open to Two Spirit/Indigequeer/Native 2SLGBTQIA+ MFN relatives age 18+. I WANT this for youth & want to ensure that we come together as members of our community to be able to create the foundation to support this in a good way for our youth. Have internet access issues? Let's figure it out – we won't let that be a barrier!

Questions? Interested? Send me a message here or email me at mescully@syr.edu! I know people not on social media who might want to be a part, feel free to send this to them. Ây hay!

APPENDIX C: Welcome Email to Storytellers

Tan'si ekwa tawâw, cousins!

Thank you for being a part of this project and I hope we create beautiful stories together and connect and grow closer through the experience. This email shares info for our first Talking Circle, so forgive for the length of it! I promise I won't always give you this much to read!

WHEN: Talking Circle Tuesday, June 20 at 11am MST (10am PST / 1pm EST)

WHERE: Zoom link below. There's a "waiting room" to protect privacy. If you need to call in, let me know & I'll send that info. If you have any issues logging in, just email me or phone: [redacted phone number and Zoom link.]

WHAT:
Together I want us to re-imagine & re-create creation/origin stories of our people by centering 2S characters/teachings. This may take the shape of highlighting ones and/or reading between the lines of ones that exist already, narrating our own story because creation didn't end. I could say so much about all these options, but will leave it for this prompt below and our first session.

OPT REFLECTION PROMPT (no worries if you don't get to it!! We'll discuss!):

- **Choose** one of our Creation stories that *resonates* with you (examples attached)
- **Reflect** on the story's teachings. Do you identify with any of the characters in the story? Who and why/not? Do you see yourself in the story *as a 2S person?* How so or how not?
- **Consider Context:**
    - Who shared the story? When?
    - Who was the audience? General public? Indigenous people? Nehiyawak only? Michel First Nation and related peoples only? Just you?
    - What important things are/were going on in your life when you first heard the story (presuming this isn't the first time)?

Doing this feels like a homecoming and really that's what this is all about—coming home to our traditions and coming home to ourselves as 2S people—to our bodies that hold immense wisdom from us and our ancestors. Ay hay!

Let me know if you have ANY questions and I will see you Tuesday at June 20 at 11am MST (10am PST / 1pm EST) on Zoom

APPENDIX D: Attachment (Sample Creation Stories) to Welcome Email

Wesakecahk Creation Story Versions:

- The great flood: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RYByws56TQ&t=83s&ab_channel=RABBITHEADCAPTURINGTHENORTH

- And another on the storm: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxOxtvgruKw&t=62s&ab_channel=MFNERC-InclusiveEducation

- How Wesakecahk Made the Moon: http://www.our-story.ca/winners/arts/5092:wisakedjak-and-the-moon

Stories about Marriage and Gender Roles:

- Story about the Nervous Weasel: http://www.indigenouspeople.net/weasal.htm

- Flying Wonder Story: http://calverley.ca/article/06-005-flying-wonder/

- Variations on the Woman who Married a Bear (there are many of these—some that say she pissed off the Bears, some that say she changed into one, some that she had many suitors so ran off to be with a Bear instead, and similar to this latter, where her father was angry so bade her little sister to kill her beloved Bear). Here is another version: https://www.grizzlytimes.org/woman-who-married-a-bear

Misc.

- What are the stories of our fore-parents? Who is most well known? Who is not as well known? What does the book the Sun Traveller talk about? Who is not talked about in that book?

APPENDIX E: Sample Talking Circle Agendas

SESSION 1

Intros: Name, pronouns, lineage to Michel, why joined, what you want to learn AND/OR teach about 2Sedness

Collaborative Agreements

Journal & Break

- General reflections so far (optional)
- What type of story do you want to create—an "autobio" or a "re-creation" of a story rooted in our epistemology (aka "tradition")? Something else/both? (OK if still undecided & ALWAYS OK to change your mind. I'm just curious.)
- Return to 1st email I sent & consider what might you ask of some of the main characters in our teaching/creation stories? Like for ex., what might you ask the woman who married a Bear or wacask (muskrat) who made the world for us all? What are THEIR wants/needs? Do they feel validated & important? What might they say to you, particularly as a 2S descendant.

** You may journal, start or continue on a story or story idea you're working on, or just jot down notes. And let this process take you WHEREVER it leads you
We'll discuss after break!
Ping me if you need help!

Reflect

"Homework"

- journal bringing in ideas you're getting from this space & turn journal into a story (even if short/just part of a story—all good)
- OR continue working on whatever else you have been working on story-wise keeping some of what you got out of this. If helpful, focus on how all of this makes you FEEL. If possible, I would like us to go into that, but also will be asking you all next time for more input, also!

Closing reflections

- Do you think you'll work on the activity for next time?
- Roses, Thorns & Buds: Something good, something not so good, something budding/looking forward to

SESSION 2

Opening Reflections

- How are you & say in a few words what's stuck with you this week from last week's talking circle?
- What do you hope to talk about/do today

Discussion

- What did you ask of your character (yourself or another character) about what they wanted? Did they respond with what they wanted? What/how so?
- If you didn't get a chance to, what ideas are you still mulling over AND what you need to work on one of them to start? Can we share more Cree creation stories? Wesakecahk in particular? Touch base w/ each other and/or me individually?

Quiet Story-time

- If you've been working on the prompt and/or story, write/journal on how you might want to tend to wants/needs/desires of the "main character"—be that you, a traditional character, someone else—i.e. the Two Spirit character in the story. (You may also work on this prompt if you haven't had a chance but want and feel ready to.)
- If you want more time with creation stories, view the list and select from some of the links I shared (I posted a few in particular) asking \what the context of the story is—what details are there/might be left out? Who is the story for and why? When was it and who told it? And what might you ask of the main character in the story (or the "side character if they seem to you to need to BE a main character)

Share, break, reflect

What's something that stands out to you from what others have shared in their stories or reflections so far?

"Homework"

1. Prompt for next week:** Take some time, 15 mins to a whole day or more, and pretend you ARE able to imagine your character's and ancestors' (recent and far past) and former self's WILDEST dreams without shame or limitation. Express that creatively (non-writing) and then in story/journal if you wish. As an example, [redacted examples from characters in their stories] Just LIVE it for 15 mins or so… draw it. Photo it. Dance it. Hike or garden or harvest it. Write it later. Don't think. FEEL. If you need help finding safe space to do this, let me know!
2. *Optional* prompt for next time: Keep working on story and/or reach out to me to schedule time to discuss some story ideas including talking more in depth on our creation stories

Closing

3. How feeling?
4. Ideas for next week's prompts?
5. Bring something in next week to share that's meaningful to you

SESSION 3

Opening/Check-in
Roses/buds/thorns

Two Spiritedness
How do you define it (share first 10 mins of Alex Wilson's 2015 lecture) Activity with break:

Discussion
- Which ancestor in creation are you drawn to the most? It could be someone you resonate with the most/least and/or are just curious about because perhaps they are not well-defined. Select first one that pops into head … why do you think you are drawn to this character the most?
    - BE that character for 5 mins (like your "HW" from this week). Draw/doodle/make art, dance, and/or head outside for a few moments to be that character & come back sharing something creative from that process
    - And share creative activity without naming which character it was.
        - We guess who it was
        - Then, after everyone goes, we share again in the same order with each person speaking in words what they felt physically/sensually in their bodies
- Open discussion: similar ways of addressing past / we as 2S people address our shared & individual pasts … how does this show up in the ancestors we chose / who and how we talked about them, and what we felt? (This is from Co.)

Writing Activity with break
- Journal/write: what do you think your body was trying to tell you from those sensations? What do you think that *ancestor* (character in creation story) was sharing with you?
- If time, start planning how this *message* – this *teaching* – will go into *your* creation story.
- And discuss. What is that sensation? What is its teaching? It can be about 2Sedness and/or about anything important that we as 2S know.

Closing
- "HW:" Identify what you want to teach with your story if you have not already done so. If you have,
    - a) how is it unique to Two Spiritedness? and/or
    - b) can you outline or work on the "next section" of your story?
      Don't worry; we'll have time next week to write, but also want to start sharing the stories & seeing if each of us can identify some teachings we are getting from each other's stories and help each other with next steps ideas
- HW: bring in something meaningful to you next week

SESSION 5

Opening

- What are you throwing out this week—or wanting to throw out, but struggling to throw out? (i.e. relationships, work tasks, memories in your mind, etc.)

Story workshops:

- Cora & Amy
- Individual feedback for each story, specifically identifying something they each teach

Journaling Prompt/Break:

- What are key ideas you are noticing across *each* story? If still thinking on that, instead describe key ideas you have noticed across our dialogues so far (i.e. "two" dualities, wandering, ghosts/spirits [other redacted, personal insights], etc!)

Discuss & embody

- Do some kind of movement or creative activity to embody those teachings. Dance w music or "play pretend" with music. Meditate outdoors or near plants/nonhumans for 5 minutes. Draw it. Sing it. Bead it. Etc.

Discuss the process of embodiment

Closing

- how are things in this space? What you expected? Not what you expected? What do you need to get more out of it?
- PROMPT: work on story & journal as you can, but more importantly, 15 minutes of embodiment or everyday if you can!

SESSION 6

Check in

Journal prompt

- how was it FEELING your character's feelings?
- what do you think those FEELINGS were trying to TELL you and/or TEACH you?
- Based on those feelings, what do you think your character wants? For themselves? AND for YOU?

Discussion

- Respond to each other after each person shares

Quiet Story-writing Time and Break:

- Prompt for writing: infuse those feelings into the story

Story workshop

- Karin & Braedyn

Closing

- Story workshop 1-2 per session going forward? And then in between we have writing time for each of us? Does this seem to be working for people?
- How are you feeling? Show it in a gesture/movement & say it in 3 or fewer words
    - We all then have to *copy* your gesture.
    - Consider our body's feelings & may we consider that our ancestors' bodies are in us & deserve to be heard even if we can't feel that for ourselves/our own bodies sometimes?
- PROMPT this week : journal on each other. What do you love about each person in group? What do they mean to you? How do you see them—perhaps a role even?

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NOTES

[i] For more and documented history on the Michel First Nation, see https://www.michelcallihoonationsociety.com/copy-of-history-1 and Michel First Nation Aboriginal and Treaty Rights Study (2014).

[ii] For more information and history of Kelly Lake Cree/As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw and Aseniwuche Winewak nations, please see https://www.kellylakecreenation.com/ and https://www.aseniwuche.ca/.

[iii] For more history and information on the aftermath of the Northwest Rebellion, see https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/aftermath-of-1885/.

[iv] For more on the Indian Act of 1876 in Canada, see the pdf of the original Act: https://nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1876_Indian_Act_Reduced_Size.pdf.

[v] Michel First Nation is recognized by adjacent First Nation Bands/communities as a sovereign nation/community who has been wronged by colonial projects of the Canadian government. MFN peoples are currently in conversations with federal Canadian officials about restitution of harm and have been involved in legal struggles regarding termination of the Band since at least the 1980s.

[vi] I use the spelling "s*vage" because the term spelled normally can cause harm as it has been codified in the U.S. Declaration of Independence to justify Indigenous genocide.

[vii] I use the term "whitestream" in this research in the way Sandy Grande (2004) deploys it to mean Eurocentric and colonial paradigms of dominant, hegemonic ideology. This is a refusal of the term "western," a term that itself emerges from a colonial paradigm and can erase Indigenous peoples who live in territories deemed "western" (i.e. the U.S. and Canada as well as elsewhere in the "Americas").

[viii] In referencing conflict, it is important to note that the violence Two Spirit/Indigiqueer people have experienced by colonizers does not require Two Spirit people "tend" to those relations. Conflicts occur between parties where there are not histories of dominance, power, and violence.

[ix] "Ayahkwew" is sometimes a contested term, though it is commonly used by many agender/non-binary Nehiyawak at the time of this writing. This—including how I describe myself—may change as the excavation of terms in Nehiyawewin becomes clearer over time and distance away from the colonial project.

[x] In the 2005 Supreme Court case, *City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York*, then Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg cited the Doctrine of Discovery to deny Oneida Nation land rights claims, noting that to restitute land would be too disruptive for settlers.

[xi] Nüümü (Paiute), Miwok, and Mono nations and tribal communities remark that their removal from—and tending to the lands of—Yosemite Valley are the reasons wildfires have grown so catastrophic in the early 21st Century (Monahan, 2018). Controlled burns of brush, an Indigenous practice to *prevent* kindling and brush from turning into wildfires if caught aflame, left the region when Indigenous people were forced from the lands (Spence, 1999). The massive spread of wildfires coincides with Indigenous dispossession.

[xii] For more, see the report findings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls published in 2019 at www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/ (*Reclaiming Power,* 2019). For specific information on man camps, see the *Man Camps Fact Sheet* (2017) at www.honorearth.org/man_camps_fact_sheet.

[xiii] For more information on violence against Indigenous people in the U.S., see the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center (2018) study at www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/VAWA_Data_Brief__FINAL_2_1_2018.pdf.
For more information on violence against Indigenous women in Canada, see Background on the inquiry (2016) at www.rcaanccirnac.gc.ca/eng/1449240606362/1534528865114.

[xiv] For more, see the Canadian Department of Justice Research and Statistics Division 2017 report at www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf-pf/2017/docs/july05.pdf.

[xv] For more, see "Walking in Two Worlds: Supporting the Two Spirit and Native LGBTQ Community" (2018) at https://tribalinformationexchange.org/files/resources/twospiritbrochure.pdf.

[xvi] As cited in Goeman, M. (2017, p. 99). For more, see Hogan (1997).

[xvii] Enfranchisement in Canada is a federal, legal process of assimilation and termination by removing an individual's (or band's) Indian Status as governed by the Indian Act and supplanting it with Canadian citizenship--enfranchisement. This has been a widely used tool to terminate Indigenous people and, in the case of MFN, is the only time it has been applied to an entire Band.

[xviii] Kinship in Cree traditions do not hyper-emphasize the importance of nuclear family structures. Cousins are like siblings and relatedly one's cousins' children are nieces, nephews, and niblings. As such, my cousin's child is my nephew.

[xix] Aimee Chalifoux, in the Talking Circle, had a brilliant poem published for International Women's Day, of which an interview about it can be found at https://thediscourse.ca/cowichan-valley/poet-pens-love-letter-to-women-for-international-womens-day. She is also a respected spoken-word poet, writer, and more across Canada.

[xx] For more of Annie Paré's published works, including to purchase and support their writing, see https://payhip.com/IenianStories and https://ienianstories.wordpress.com/. Cora (also known as Annie Paré) frequently sells merchandise related to Ienia, creates zines, and more.

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EDUCATION

Syracuse University School of Education
PhD with distinction, Cultural Foundations of Education – June 2024

Syracuse University College of Arts & Sciences
Certificate of Advanced Study, Women's & Gender Studies – August 2020

Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
Certificate of Advanced Study, Conflict Resolution – August 2017

Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY
Bachelor of Arts, Labor/Native Women's & Two Spirit History, Creative Writing – December 2003

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

School of Education, Syracuse University

- Instructor of Record, Intergroup Dialogue (2020-2022)
- Invited Guest Lecturer, Native Knowledges/Identity & Learning (2021-2022)
- Instructor of Record, Indigenous Feminism in Education Independent Study (2021)
- Teaching Assistant, The American School (2019-2021)

College of Arts and Sciences, Syracuse University

- Invited Instructor, Women's and Gender Studies Intro to Feminism (2019)

Camosun College, Victoria, BC, Canada

- Invited Guest Lecturer, Indigenous Peoples' Health (2021)

Michel First and Kelly Lake Cree Nations, Alberta, Canada

- Talking Circle Facilitator (2020-Present)
- Youth Education Coordinator (2021-Present)

Head Over Heels Dance Company, Syracuse, NY

- Instructor and Dance Company Director, Performer, and Event Producer (2007-2022)

OTHER EXPERIENCE

- **Restorative Justice Facilitator:** Onondaga Nation School (2023)
- **Native Student Program Mentor, Syracuse University:** Mentor (2018-Present)
- **Descendants of Michel First Nation Association:** Board Member (2019-2022)
- **New York Public Humanities:** Invited Grant Reviewer (2022)
- **School of Education, Syracuse University:** Researcher/Research Assistant (2020-22)
- **University of California Davis:** Graduate Fellowship Co-Director (2021-22)

AWARDS

- National Academy of Education/Spencer Dissertation Fellowship (2023)
- Ford Minority Dissertation Fellowship Honorable Mention (2023)
- Black and Native Futures in Education Grant, Arizona State University (2022)
- Together Outdoors Grant, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (2022)
- Joan Lukes Rothenberg Graduate Service Award, Syracuse University (2020, 2022)
- New York Public Humanities Grant Award Recipient (2021)
- Toni Taverone Graduate Paper Prize, Syracuse University (2021)
- Outstanding Teaching Assistant, Syracuse University (2021)
- Publicly Active Graduate Education Fellow, Imagining America (2019-2020)
- Syracuse University Graduate Fellowship (2018-2022)
- LGBT Resource Center Social Justice Award, Syracuse University (2016)
- Dance Award (1st Place) – International Dance Competition, New York City (2016)

PUBLICATIONS

Scully, I.M.E. (2023). Braided stories of desire: a Nehiyaw Two Spirit methodology of homecoming. *(In review/forthcoming)*

Scully, I.M.E. & D. Romo (2022). Embracing Community, Disrupting Isolation: The Importance of Relationships and Land in Antiracist Teacher Education. In G. Martinez-Alba, J. Ruan & A. Hersi (Eds), *Antiracist teacher education: theory and practice.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Scully, I.M.E. (2021). Shapeshifting Power: Indigenous Teachings of Trickster Consciousness and Relational Accountability for Building Communities of Care. To be published in *Seneca Falls Dialogue Journal,* Vol. 4. *(Invited)*

Scully, I.M.E. (2019). Uncovering What Is Hidden: Colonialism's Violence Against Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit Individuals (#MMIWG2S). *Medium.com*.

PRESENTATIONS

Scully, I.M.E. (2022, Nov). "Two Spirit Teachings to Un-settle Gender, Sexuality, and Occupation." National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

Scully, I.M.E. (2022, Oct). "Indigenous Body-Mind Knowing to Learn from & Build Relationships with Land." Imagining America National Gathering, New Orleans, LA.

Scully, I.M.E. (2022, Jul). "Two Spirit Teachings of Other-than-Human Relationships." Rooted Global Village 1st Annual Tending the Roots Conference [online].

Scully, I.M.E. & Romo, D. (2022, Feb) "History, (In)Equity, and Complicity: Publicly Engaged Scholarship and Our Communities." Imagining America webinar [online]. *(Invited)*

Scully, I.M.E. (2022, Feb). "Queer Intersections, A podcast on supporting LGBTQ+ youth: Indigenous and Native American LGBTQ youth." Invited podcast guest, Western Educational Equity Assistance Center. Denver, CO.

Scully, I.M.E. (2021, Jul). "Love Notes with the Land: Two Spirit Stories of Other-than-Human Relationships." (2021 American Indian Workshop Annual Conference [online].

Scully, I.M.E. (2021, Jun). "Love Notes with the Land: Toward an Indigequeer Land Pedagogy." Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Annual Conference [online].

Scully, I.M.E. (2021, Jun). "Dialogue with the Land: Indigenous Teachings for Healing and Decolonial Futures." Arizona State University's Cultivating Black and Native Futures in Education Conference [online].

Scully, I.M.E. (2021, Mar). "Dialogue with the Land, Dialogue with Each Other Workshop." Syracuse University's Intergroup Dialogue Program [online].

Scully, I.M.E. (2020, Nov). "Indigequeering Land Pedagogy: Wesakecahk (Trickster) Consciousness in Dialogues Across Difference." Seneca Falls Dialogue Conference [online].

Scully, I.M.E. (2020, Jun). “Gender Violence and the Carceral-Settler State: Trickster Teachings in Decolonial and Abolitionist Coalitions.” Sexuality Studies Association Annual Conference, Toronto, ON, Canada [Covid-19 cancellation].

Scully, I.M.E. (2020, Jun). “Gender Violence and the Carceral-Settler State: Wesakecahk Teachings in Decolonial and Abolitionist Coalitions.” Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Annual Conference, Toronto, ON, Canada [Covid-19 cancellation].

Scully, I.M.E. (2020, Apr). “Nehiyaw (Cree) Stories of Queer Kinship in Dialogues Across Difference.” New York Six Spectrum Conference, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY [COVID-19 cancellation]. *(Invited keynote/plenary)*

Scully, I.M.E. (2020, Mar). **“**What’s the ‘I’ in BIPOC Have to do With It?” #NotAgainSU Student Movement, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. *(Invited)*

Scully, I.M.E. (2019, Mar). “Take Up Space: Eating Disorders and Recovery Talking Back to Political-Culture.” Mohawk Valley Community College, Rome, NY. *(Invited)*

Scully, I.M.E. (2019, Oct). “What’s Land Got To Do With It?: (Re)storying Community with Other-Than-Humans.” Imagining America National Gathering, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM.

SERVICE AND PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

- Panel Facilitator (2021). American Indian Workshop Annual Conference [online].
- Certificate of University Teaching (2021). Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University.
- Resilient Indigenous Action Collective Co-Founder (2020). Syracuse, NY.
- N8v Trails & Tales Grant-funded Outdoor Education Co-Founder (2022). Syracuse, NY.
- Member (2021-Present). National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA).
- Member (2019-Present). Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA).
- Member 2023-Present). Canadian Federation of the Humanities & Social Sciences - Women’s & Gender Studies Association.
- Member (2019-2023). Canadian Federation of the Humanities & Social Sciences - Sexuality Studies Association.

RESEARCH

Two Spirit/Indigequeer critique, Indigenous feminisms, Critical Indigenous and ethnic studies, publicly engaged scholarship, storytelling, Indigenous methodologies, community-based participatory action research, land-based and decolonizing pedagogies, history of education, and Intergroup Dialogue and social justice education.

Dissertation titled *Nehiyaw Two Spirit Creation Stories: Re-mapping Home, Desire, and Indigenous Education through the Body* address the nature of Two Spirit (Native LGBTQ+) creation stories in decolonizing and Indigenous pedagogies. Employing Indigenous feminist and Two Spirit (2S) theoretical frameworks, this dissertation argues that 2S storytelling is vital to dismantling colonial imports of cis-heteronormativity as Indigenous nations and pedagogies continue the process of decolonization. Using Nehiyaw (Cree)-specific methodologies of kinship accountability, storytelling, and holistic research practices, this project engages 2S people in Talking Circles to reflect on existing Nehiyaw creation stories and use provided prompts to craft their own stories through the lens of their experience as 2S people. Participants are invited to contribute their stories toward an anthology of 2S teaching stories for use by educators and Indigenous communities.

Dialogue with the Land, Dialogue with Each Other is a course designed from the model of Intergroup Dialogue in higher education that employs land pedagogy, relationality, and similar Indigenous methodologies to navigate power dynamics in building communities of care. Research methods include story-gathering, surveys, and Indigenous methodologies of miskâsowin (Indigenized autoethnography), talking circles, and storytelling. The University of Arizona Veterinary School sought out this project to deploy its research methodology for analyzing the efficacy and impact of new coursework and course design.