

A Decolonial Love Story:  
Matriarchs Living In Kinship With Mother Earth

by

APRIL KURAMOTO

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

Royal Roads University  
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Supervisor: HILARY LEIGHTON, Ph.D.  
MARCH, 2022



APRIL KURAMOTO, 2022  
Bachelor of Arts, Major in First Nations Studies and Minor in Psychology 2021

COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of April Kuramoto's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled  
A Decolonial Love Story: Matriarchs Living In Kinship With Mother Earth and recommend that  
it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

CAMIE AUGUSTUS, [signature on file]

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of  
the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and  
recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

HILARY LEIGHTON, [signature on file]

## Creative Commons Statement



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 Canada License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/ca/>.

Some material in this work is not being made available under the terms of this licence:

- Third-Party material that is being used under fair dealing or with permission.
- Any photographs where individuals are easily identifiable.

### **Abstract**

This research is both partial autoethnography and ethnography. It is the telling of a decolonial love story intended to challenge the more dominant, patriarchal narrative through storytelling. Wisdom shared from matriarchs in leadership roles in their families or communities was gathered using open-ended interviews intended to add a greater presence of matriarchal insights within environmental education. Sharing a variety of stories in this way, celebrates both convergences and divergences on the path of life from those whose voices are not necessarily heard in the mainstream literature. These interviews were carefully braided by the researcher into a fourth story, while staying true to the women's voices who found that matriarchal stories can provide deep nourishment with implications for a regenerative, rematriated relationship with Mother Earth. Researching the women's lived experiences with land through deep listening, ceremony, and relationships provided the guidance to share a love letter for the researcher's young daughter, found at the end of this thesis.

*Keywords:* Autoethnography, ethnography, women, storytelling, story listening, matriarch, ceremony, decolonial love, environmental education

### **Dedication**

This work is for my Dad, Harvey Kuramoto for being a friend, supporter, sounding board and steady voice of reason throughout the journey. Thank you for always reminding me of who I am and where I come from, and believing in my ambition, and that I can and will do it. Thank you for making me laugh often. Most of all, for being a safe shelter for your granddaughter and the most loving Grandpa to spend time with while I write, I thank you. You make this work possible in many ways.

I am grateful to be the mother to Luna Rose. Luna, your generous spirit and fiercely loving light inspire all my good work. My greatest prayer is to contribute to a lighter, more loving life and planet for you. You are already, the living gift I can offer this Earth. I love you.

**Table of Contents**

**Abstract**..... 4

**Dedication** ..... 5

Chapter 1: Introducing My Self.....8

**Introducing the Research**..... 8

**Family Roots**..... 9

**Gratitude & Blessings**..... 14

**Author’s Note:**..... 17

**Research Themes** ..... 17

**Lifegivers** ..... 18

Chapter 2: Literature Review.....24

**Storytelling**..... 24

**Story and Self-identity**..... 26

**The Power of Story** ..... 26

**Story as Decolonial Love** ..... 28

**Story as Context** ..... 28

**Story as Self Governance**..... 29

**Story as Healer** ..... 30

**Identity Formation**..... 31

**Ecological Identity** ..... 32

**Relationality**..... 33

**Relationships Within Nature** ..... 34

**Land/Place** ..... 37

**Multicultural Perspectives** ..... 41

**Ecofeminism & Indigenous Feminism** ..... 44

**Rematriation of Stories**..... 46

Chapter 3: Research Methods & Methodology.....48

**Intentions** ..... 48

**Ethnography** ..... 48

**Research as Ceremony by Design**..... 50

**The Interviews**..... 53

**Story Collection & Care** ..... 54

**Rematriation of Research**..... 59

**A Letter to Conclude the Ceremony** ..... 59

Chapter 4: The Matriarchs' Braided Stories .....	61
<b>My Name</b> .....	62
<b>Threads to Weave a Story With: Lifecycles, Life Affirming, Lifegivers</b> .....	63
<b>Lifecycles</b> .....	64
<b>Childhood</b> .....	65
<b>Transformative Life Experiences</b> .....	67
<b>Death</b> .....	70
<b>Supernatural</b> .....	72
<b>Life Affirming</b> .....	74
<b>Colonization</b> .....	75
<b>Trauma</b> .....	76
<b>Loss</b> .....	77
<b>Forgiveness</b> .....	78
<b>Lived Experience/Life Story</b> .....	79
<b>Lifegivers</b> .....	84
<b>Inheritance</b> .....	85
<b>Nourishment</b> .....	86
<b>Gratitude</b> .....	87
<b>Ceremony</b> .....	88
<b>Concluding The Ceremony</b> .....	90
Chapter 5: Reflections, Responsibilities, Prayers and a Letter to my Daughter .....	93
<b>Story Listening</b> .....	93
<b>The Return</b> .....	94
<b>Living with the Stories</b> .....	95
<b>Voice</b> .....	96
<b>Small Acts of Decolonization</b> .....	97
<b>Carrying Forth Intentions</b> .....	98
<b>Healing</b> .....	99
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	100
<b>Future Prayers/Responsibilities</b> .....	101
<b>Speaking Truth to Power and Systems of Power</b> .....	103
<b>Mothering</b> .....	105
<b>A Letter for Luna, Age Six</b> .....	106
<b>References</b> .....	108

## Chapter 1: Introducing My Self

I am grateful to be writing this thesis as a guest on the traditional and unceded territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. To acknowledge the territory I am on, and who stewards this land, acknowledges first and foremost my gratitude for the relationships I am a part of and my responsibility to them, whilst disrupting the colonial narrative of land entitlement. As I write about relationships with place, it is important for me to tell you where I am, sitting in the home I've lived in for more than a decade on Vancouver Island. The birds are singing, my garden is started, and the hope and potential of springtime is all around me.

In the book, *Kaandossiwin; How We Come To Know*, Anishinaabe scholar Kathleen Absolon (2011) explains, "I begin by locating myself because positionality, storying and re-storying ourselves comes first" (p. 13). This may seem in contrast to dominant research attitudes, that often position the researcher as the impossibly objective subject, invisibly guiding the work, all the while influencing every aspect of it. From Absolon's (2011) positionality, I learned how to introduce oneself in a more storied way to set a tone for the reading ahead. Acknowledging the land that has acted as a space holder and guide for this research, my relationships and responsibilities to this place and the people that surround me, and how my professional and academic background has led me to this research, will place this research within the greater context and story of myself as the researcher.

### Introducing the Research

The story this research tells is about storytelling, story listening and the relationship between them. Primarily a search into relationships, both with the women I interviewed and the lands we come from and reside within, this story is one of a quest to make meaning of who we

are and a sense of our belonging. In exploring the relationship to the land at this time of climate emergency, as an environmental educator and mother, I am seeking to share insights of how to cultivate relationships of reciprocity and kinship with Mother Earth. This narrative is offered in counter-balance to prevailing colonial patriarchy – the ‘his’-story of ‘resource’ extraction, and instead embodies a praxis of decolonial love. In an interview with the Boston Review (2012) Dominican-American author, Junot Diaz defines the concept of decolonial love as, “the only kind of love that could liberate (them) from that horrible legacy of colonial violence” (p.7). Furthermore, Diaz (2012) expands that to say that the liberating power of decolonial love emerges through intimacy, vulnerability, forgiveness and acceptance. These values also deeply inform this research as it is positioned as an ethical act of caring, aligned with decolonial love.

In keeping with research as a ceremonial practice, introductions and important work starts from a place of recognizing our relationships to each other and our shared history. It is in this spirit of respect, transparency, and ceremony, that I begin by sharing some of my own story. I introduce myself in this partial autoethnography to place myself at the center of this research with transparency around some of the story I have lived.

### **Family Roots**

In this research, I will be speaking from my own lived experience as a cis-gendered woman, steeped in a strong matrilineal lineage. I am the daughter of Linda Renee Horton and Harvey Minoru Kuramoto. The maternal granddaughter of Donna and Don Horton. The paternal granddaughter of Maiko and Tomiyuki Kuramoto. I am the mother of Luna Rose Maartman. I am a sister, aunty, and niece. I am a friend to many. I am a Moondancer<sup>1</sup>, and my *Madrina*<sup>2</sup> is

---

<sup>1</sup> Moondance is a women’s ceremony where knowledge passed down orally, and not to be discussed in detail in public spaces. I chose to include mentioning it, as a key part of who I am as a person, yet respectfully cannot share more in this context.

<sup>2</sup> *Madrina* is Spanish for Godmother and acknowledges an important relation within the Moondance community.

Tina Walker. These are the people I am rooted to. They give me a sense of connection. I seek to belong to myself and Mother Earth. Gwendolyn Benaway, who identifies as a trans woman, author of Anishnaabe and Metis descent, describes decolonial love as recognizing our own bodies as sovereign and whole whilst being fully rooted with the land (2018). With this research approach, I intend to hold a dynamic tension between my own agency, my ancestry and my communion with the land.

My late mother was a landed immigrant, who fled to Canada accompanying her first husband Martin Moose who sought refuge as a 'draft dodger' during the Vietnam War. Originally, her roots are from the desert of Arizona, in the United States of America. My mother's first husband was conscripted, which they were strongly against, politically and morally. This peaceful yet political stance separated my mother, geographically, from her family ties. This is how my mother came to be in British Columbia, so that I could be born here in Nanaimo. I am a blend of ancestry: Japanese, English, and Scottish. From my mother, I inherited some light skinned privilege<sup>3</sup>, and from both parents the complexity of being a mixed-race person. Perhaps this has contributed to my interest in cultural studies, and intercultural learning spaces. I grew up only meeting my American relatives every couple of years, therefore, my Japanese Canadian family gave me the roots I needed to feel grounded in who I am, and from whom I came from.

I am my paternal Grandma's namesake – her name, Maiko, is my middle name. My grandmother affirmed in me, a comfort with solitude and a love of making. Grandma once told me she liked spending time with me, because I knew how to be quiet. She worked hard, cooked

---

<sup>3</sup> Light skinned privilege refers to colorism, a form of racism. Activist Franchesca Ramsey discusses this issue in the video: Light Skinned Privilege Decoded (2019). Ramsey, F. (2019, January 25). *MTV Impact*. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE4Lo4Tic8Y>

and served our family, showing her caring in this way of nurturing. We ate *onigiri*, *ochasuke* and *mochi*<sup>4</sup> together, and she loved chocolate, in moderation. I learned the comfort available in a warm bowl of rice from her. She spent much of her spare time knitting, making origami, sewing, pottery, dancing, making crafts – she was creative and talented. To me she was like the ocean – cool, calm, and soothing with a fierce inner force. I remember her caring for me when I was a child, sick in her home, administering medicine and remedies in a special way. I lived with her for a time when I was twelve. She knew how to hold pain, and how not to discuss what was too hard to say. My Grandma never said, “I love you”, and as a young adult I would defy this by telling her at every goodbye – “I love you”, and she would kindly say, “Okay dear. Thank you”. Through my adult years many healers<sup>5</sup> have acknowledged a bright presence with me, and I know it is her loving guidance and protection. I draw on her perseverance and, in this way, I feel a strength beyond my own. This work is largely inspired by the relationship I had and continue to have with my paternal Grandmother, our family matriarch<sup>6</sup>, Maiko Kuramoto.

My late paternal Grandpa was a fisherman. Story imparts that he knew the ocean and could determine direction without the need for tools or technology. He survived government theft, relocation, internment, and the return and rebuilding of a life for his family. My Grandpa was hardworking, and resilient. The only memory I have of special interactions with my Grandpa, is him circling the dinner table, repeatedly saying, “Eat lots, eat lots” at the many dinners my grandparents held in their home. My Grandpa’s special dishes were *kamoboko*, and *sukiyaki beef*<sup>7</sup>, and this is the way he nourished us. I have since learned to make both his dishes

---

<sup>4</sup> I have used italics for all Japanese words to acknowledge that they may not be familiar to all readers, and yet challenging the assumption of writing for the dominant culture.

<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge many healing practices. Here I am referring to several spiritual healers from various Sweat Lodge ceremonies.

<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this research, matriarch is defined as a women in leadership within her family or community.

<sup>7</sup> Specialty Japanese foods were and are a luxury to my family, both for the time and cost of preparing the dish.

to honour him. I thank him for his legacy, which is this large family.

I grew up moving around, staying the longest in the Fraser Valley. I continued to travel and move through adulthood, until I married, and we landed back in Nanaimo, back where I was born. My daughter was also born here in the same hospital, and she and I still live in this home. I appreciate Tyler Maartman, her father, as a friend and co-parent. This is the longest I have ever lived in one place with a strong circle of community around us, and roots here. I feel most grounded when I live near the ocean, and I have always been drawn to islands. I love when I can hear the foghorns from this home.

I have three siblings: Shalom, Shawndra, and Matthew, my first friends in this world. I also have two half-brothers, Justin and Marcel. And my sister of choice, Kerri. I cherish the beautiful siblings who have married into (and sometimes out of) the family, and my many nieces and nephews. Our relationships are complex and ever evolving. I honour our enduring love and the way we have influenced each other.

#### Education

My elementary school experience was unremarkable. I remember those times through the friendships I was connected to at the time. My first memories of resistance, rebellion, and taking issue with unjust systems, are from elementary school. I remember how my mother stood with me, encouraging me to speak my truth to power.

This experience continued through high school, which time marked with close friendships and romantic relationships. There were small surges of academic effort, where I could easily and quickly excel, but these phases would never last long before I would lose interest and be back in rebellion to the dominance of an unnamed, systemic power that felt suffocating to me.

Throughout my life, I have always been an avid reader. I prefer the whole book over an article or abstract. I went immediately to college, lost interest and felt overwhelmed within the first semester, and dropped out. I partied, altered my consciousness and travelled. I completed a counselling certificate, and then studied marketing. I nannied to earn a living and was always looking towards my next adventure. I became a yoga teacher where I did eventually travel to teach internationally. My specialization in prenatal yoga led me to witnessing my first birth, and later serving hundreds of families as a doula. While serving as a doula, my mother transitioned to the spirit world. Four days after my mother left, I witnessed a birth. I became interested in the similarity and connection in these spaces / cycles. I returned to birth work after my daughter was born, but the on-call lifestyle was becoming increasingly difficult to navigate and was hard on my own family.

I returned to Vancouver Island University with the idea that I would become an art therapist. At that time, I worked in addictions counselling. Along the way, I met Professor Collette Jones, who welcomed me and my daughter into her family. My interest in Collette's teachings led to a shift in my major to Indigenous Studies. The relationship and connection with Collette truly changed my life. A member of Snuneymuxw First Nation, whose unceded territory I reside on, Collette has survived attending Residential School and gone all the way to attaining her PhD. Throughout this research, I turn to her when I am unsure, and she is always encouraging me – "Do your work". Collette is a matriarch who is resilient, tough, generous, and she laughs easily and leads with love.

During my bachelor's degree, I enjoyed studies in gender, psychology, and poetry. Studying again as a mature student, with a three-year-old daughter at home, ignited a passion towards discovering who I am, and sparked my social activism to use my voice where I can, as

my deepest wish is for my daughter to live in a more equitable and just world. My educational background in Indigenous studies informs my commitment to decolonizing methodologies in academia. I identify as a feminist, guided by intersectionality. Scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1990) introduced intersectional theory which addresses the problem that feminism historically and “frequently con-flates or ignores intragroup difference” (p. 1242). Intersectional feminism is a theory in support of equity for all people, whilst acknowledging and taking differences seriously as well. Intersectionality is, as Nigerian-American author Ijeoma Oluo (2019) states in the book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, to “consider all of the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective” (p. 74). Therefore, I acknowledge and respect differences as well as similarities of lived experiences and identity-politics.

In the last class of my undergraduate degree, I heard my future thesis supervisor give a lecture, and I intuitively followed Dr. Hilary Leighton to Royal Roads University to begin my Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication degree. Once again, matriarchs were opening doors for me to follow through, it felt destined. I hoped that through the topics of environment, land, and place relations I could support decolonizing systems, especially within education. I am grateful for Hilary Leighton’s guidance, insight and genuine interest and support of this research.

### **Gratitude & Blessings**

Through this research period, I worked in maternal health, for Snaw-naw-as First Nation, an opportunity I have appreciated deeply. Being a part of a team, where we relate to and care for each other and our clients, where lifestyle and family is valued, and where I can offer support in

a variety of ways to families, fills my heart with gratitude and joy. For the matriarchs on my team who have mentored me, demonstrating every day how to lead with love, Donna and Xwexwalkte 'at (Mitzi), I raise my hands to each of you – huychq'a siem syeyu.

I thank my many aunties who have poured love into me my whole life.

Thank you, to our elders - Judy and Chuck, who adopted us, fed us, had endless philosophical conversations, and shared poetry with me.

I have always been blessed with the gift of making friends easily, connecting with people everywhere I go. I still have many lifelong friends from my early years. Though I love to travel and move, they keep me rooted and are my sense of home and place. I want to thank my women friends who have cared for my heart and fed my body and spirit through this tumultuous journey: Kerri, Crystal, Jessa, Tanya, Jessie, Alisha, Jessica, and Falon.

I thank my mentors for the kindness and support they offered, taking my meetings when I was in despair: Hilary Leighton, Camie Augustus, Laurie Meyer-Drees, Les Melbourne, Tina Walker and Kwin'wah'tala'Galis (Fred Speck). Connection, laughter, walks in the forest and speaking freely with you saved my heart and fed my spirit to continue this research.

I thank Camie Augustus for being a committee member on this work, an inspiring professor, and someone I have continuously looked to for thoughtful feedback and guidance to better my academic work.

I thank the many elders and teachers who have influenced me.

I want my daughter to understand the work I was doing, when I missed times with her, hunched over my laptop. My motivation was always to provide for us, to give her a stable and good life. I want to honour my ancestors, in sharing the part of our story that is mine to tell.

These relationships, help to root me to who I am as a woman: mother, feminist, activist, person

of colour, person of mixed race<sup>8</sup>, who has located myself primarily by relationships. I find personal healing in spiritual practice, nature and plants.

I preference citations and sources from authors that identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, as well as female, Queer, Trans voices and groups that are often underrepresented in academia and other forums because as Phaedra Pezzullo and Robert Cox (2018) state, this can “enable under-heard, more diverse voices to have greater opportunities to be heard” (p. 24).

Acknowledging voices from diverse backgrounds challenges dominant Eurocentric values that have been systemically privileged in academia and celebrates the voices and work of brilliant writers from many disciplines and positions.

I have preferred the following writing conventions:

- Wherever possible I use the titles and nationhood to introduce someone that the mentioned person uses in their work. This is intended to give context, relationality and respect the way a person introduces themselves.
- I utilize the term lifegiver<sup>9</sup> not life giver or life-giver, after discussing with a few trusted Indigenous women from different Nations who allowed me to cite their teachings below.

---

<sup>8</sup> “The children of mixed families bear the brunt of the attitudes of each family of origin, and may carry the scars of division for countless generations or find strength and resilience through the combined wealth of nations that make up their heritage” (Bowers, 2010, P. 211).

<sup>9</sup> “Lifegivers because it's a practice of traditional teaching. There are unspoken rules that are being followed during prenatal care, and it's the lifegivers we honor, hold up and look after. We do this so that new life can grow calmly, safely, holistically and in a non-stressed environment to make sure both life's are cherished and showered with love, as well as fed, comforted. Certain beliefs, values and practices differ nation to nation however the teaching is universal” (personal communication, Cindy Pete-Naziel from the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, 2021.)

“I am struck by the power of the words and their connections and the possessiveness and objectification of the English language. Does anyone 'give' life? Perhaps we assist in its creation, rather than giving it. The gift of life seems an alchemy, rather than a point of transference. This gets me to wondering about the words used by other cultures. What might different cultures offer to understanding the phenomena of life arriving. Translations into English often, while never quite translating, can offer profound insights. All that rambling aside, the two words together softens 'giver' by attaching it to life, which remains a mystery” (personal communication, Yvette Ringham Cowan, 2021. Yvette identifies as Kwakwaka'wakw and a member of Da'naxda'xw First Nation).

**Author's Note:** Any error or omission is my mistake, and mine alone. This work does not attempt to speak for any other perspective, person or group. I take full responsibility for the weight of my own voice, whilst honouring that I am constantly learning and growing, and this view is a glimpse of my understanding at this moment in time.

### **Research Themes**

Approaching the research themes of life cycles, life affirming worldviews and lifegivers with a co-evolutionary and partnered relationship with all the participants, including the land, rather than a hierarchal power dynamic, is an important aspect to decolonial love. A more desired state of increasing the possibility for life offers a hope for addressing and reversing the current state of health decline in nature's systems. In, *As We Have Always Done; Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, Anishinaabe academic Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) confirms this thinking in stating, "The alternative to extractivism is deep reciprocity. It's respect, its relationship, its responsibility, and it's local" (p. 74). Reciprocity and regenerative relations are a revolutionary act, as well as a completely natural way to relate to one's surrounding environments. Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel (2018) says, "it is through these reconnections to people, place and practices that spiritual revolutions are born" (p. 36). This means that while exploring social and environmental regeneration, there is a depth and spiritual shift embedded in or even generating the larger transformation process.

The environmental crisis we are facing globally will take more than environmental policy and more than personal actions for real change to occur. Perhaps this climate emergency, will require, as Corntassel says, a spiritual revolution. Or, as Hereditary Chief and Nuu-chah-nulth author Richard Atleo (2011) writes, "metaphorically, the current global crisis is the darkness that

---

precedes the light". Furthermore, Atleo adds, "light is the final destination of life" (p. 169).

These are examples of framing the climate crisis as an opportunity for healing, an opportunity for transformation. This revolution towards light, a shift of heart and mind, and even as Cornassel (2018) states, a revolution of spirit. Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt (2020) calls for this transformation in, *A History of My Brief Body; A Memoir*, when he requests that we, "speak against the coloniality of the world, against the rote of despair it causes, in an always-loudening chant. Please keep loving" (p. 140). This plea for love, offered to Mother Earth, echoes Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014) in *Returning the Gift*, who writes, "be partners in renewal; we can be medicine for the Earth" (p. 24), just as Mother Earth offers and is medicine for us.

Collectively acknowledging, that more than environmental stewardship, the forementioned authors are calling for spiritual revolution, total transformation, a consistent refusal of colonial oppression and a devotion to a greater light. To shed light on the importance of this storied research seeks to make connections between the cycles of life, how we share and affirm our lived experiences with lifegivers, grandmothers and women in self defined leadership roles.

### **Lifegivers**

As this research is focused on the lived experiences of women, I gathered the stories of mothers and grandmothers and their life giving relationships to Mother Earth through different phases in their lives. In using the term lifegiver, I acknowledge the sacred nature of all who carry water in their wombs, whether they mother in this lifetime or not. I mean to say, this is about much more than gender, or reproductive status, but about a sacred role. As Michell et al. (2021) state,

In the Cree culture, the earth is viewed as a lifegiver. Women are the first teachers of the natural world. We hear the rhythm of life inside our mothers for nine months. Women teach us to walk gently on the land. They have knowledge of plants, medicines, healing practices, and animals we depend on for our existence. For the first five years of our lives, they teach us values of respect, sharing, caring, and honesty (p. 29).

To recognize the power of the feminine aspect is to acknowledge that mothers and Mother Earth play sacred roles in the lives of the children who will become future leaders. In “Learning From the Land; Indigenous Land Based Pedagogy and Decolonization”, Wildcat et al. (2014) states, there is a “need for more thoughtful consideration towards gender” (p. 10). Lifegiver is a thoughtful and respectful term outside of patriarchal philosophy that is rooted in a creative and fertile (natural, not systemic) power. Just as women can be lifegivers, rivers for example, can be seen in this way by their flowing relationships and regeneration. However, we are living at a time where patriarchal systems still hold much authority and power, have oppressive impacts, and as May (2020) acknowledges, “Women’s voices are contested in a way that men’s never are” (p. 226). Though often contested, that is not stopping the voices of matriarchs from claiming their roles in leadership. As Sherri Mitchell (2019) says,

There’s no question in the mind of any thinking person that the role of women is critically important at this time. If we think about the role that women have traditionally held within our societies as the givers of life, the nurturers of life, the sustainers of life, and the way that women have been suppressed, oppressed, subjugated, killed, removed from any type of central position within the patriarchy, it’s easy to see how the value of life has been diminished over time under that structure. And so, bringing back the voice of the women into these social dialogues that are contemplating our ability to live is immeasurable (27:25).

Mitchell connects the patriarchal dominance of women to extractionist degradation and maligned dominance of Mother Earth. Furthermore, she urges lifegivers to reclaim their sacred role at the centre, within the web of life. The treatment of human mothers parallels the way we have treated Mother Earth, just when feminine power is needed to meet this existential threat by nurturing life back to health at this critical time in our history. Neidhardt (2019) aligns with this regenerative thinking when writing about climate change and the role of feminine power, when he offers that we must, “share more, support generosity, develop gratitude, and celebrate our differences” (p. 188). This perspective is not about gender, not about excluding people who identify as male or otherwise, rather it offers an uplifting of nurturing qualities and the feminine aspect within *every* person. Mary Hasbah Roessel (2018) echoes this statement, and goes further to say that the feminine is a home place,

Women will heal by using the wisdom of returning to the *hogan* or the ‘home place’. We literally have to return to our home. The *hogan* is where life is created, and represents the womb, which is life-sustaining. Our Indigenous women leaders will lead with love and nurturing of all peoples and our Mother Earth to heal the trauma and restore through love and everlasting beauty. They will do it with wisdom and guidance from the Elders and children (p. 120).

Acknowledging the sacredness of the womb and its connection to Mother Earth can help restore wisdom, love and care. Also, Roessel highlights how lifegivers allow guidance and collaborative leadership from Knowledge Keepers and future generations to inform their leadership, to uphold their responsibilities within the community. This relational pedagogy is a stark contrast to the patriarchal system of dominance, individualism and control. Mitchell (2019) builds upon that feminist approach to leadership,

We don't need women who can prove that they are the same as men, we need women who are willing to stand up for the protection of all life on this planet. We need women who are willing to stand up for the continuation of the species, for our future generations. We need women who are willing to say no, your behavior is out of control and we're going to stop you. We need women to rise up right now, and to rise up wild. When we start talking about these aspects within climate change or social justice that voice of the woman has been missing, and it's desperately needed (32:45).

Mitchell embodies that needed leader, a woman who is a strong protector, wise, and wild; using her voice to share this message broadly. Grandmother Isabelle (2015) acknowledges, that the laws of women have been oppressed by patriarchal systems that interfere with women's ways of being. The losses she mentions relate specifically to women's "own way of producing knowledge" and to their power over their own bodies (as cited by Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais, 2015, p. 173).

Lifegivers have always played a central role within families and society. As Diné grandmother, activist, writer, and ceremonial leader Pat McCabe, says on the podcast, "This Mythic Life", "The women tend to be the ones that oversee life entering and life exiting this world" (45:50). Mothers are the first teachers in the nurturing of future generations, beginning in the homeplace of the womb. Women are essential to human survivance, as Stó:lō orator and prolific writer Lee Maracle (2017) writes in *Daughters Are Forever*, when they say, "women, the keepers of cultural survival, passed on stillness as the ultimate in being so they could protect their daughters. Daughters are forever. Daughters never leave" (pp. 9-10).

Women are often seen as the keepers of culture because they predominantly carry and raise up children, passing on teachings to them. The story of the mother is a component of

human existence that connects all human beings and animals as we all come from our mothers and we all come from our stories of the mother. As Cree/Saulteaux Professor Dr. Gina Starblanket (2018) writes,

The relational nature of processes of learning and transformation is particularly evident to me when I reflect upon how my relationship with my daughter has driven me to live in a more balanced and sustainable way. By sustainable, I am referring to the maintenance of a healthy physical environment for her and her future generations to live in, but also the act of living in a healthy way so that I can be a positive presence in her life for as long as possible (p. 30).

Starblanket makes important remarks, about how sustainability starts at an individual level and can then expand outwardly, as well as how the relationship with her child motivates her. The relationship between lifegivers and their children flows reciprocally, both greatly influencing the other. Though as Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais (2015) state in, "It's In Our Blood; Indigenous Women's Knowledge as a Critical Path to Women's Well-being", "European colonization of other cultures around the globe resulted in re-shaping these cultures away from traditions of women-healers, women-shamans, and women-leaders toward male dominance of these fields" (p. 18). Though patriarchal systems may have attempted to limit women's presence, energy and authority, mothering energy has always been a powerful primordial creative force in the world.

*Research Themes [photograph].*



Note: This diagram illustrates the three research themes: life cycles, life-affirming attitudes and lifegivers. The images purposefully overlap and connect to allow themes to intersect and relate in unique ways. All photos are my own. Design layout, Chris Short.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Storytelling

Storytelling as a research method is a potent tool for understanding narrative, both of the stories we have lived and stories of another's lived experience, an ancient and an instinctive way to communicate that is foundational to many cultures. I chose storytelling as the primary method for this research, both in the way I write the research story and the way I asked the matriarchs I sat with to share a story with me. This open approach respected their sovereignty to tell their own stories when and how they chose to do so without pressure or expectations from myself as the researcher. Storytelling can affect the listener by creating greater understanding and by humanizing a topic. Legal writer, filmmaker and Indigenous rights advocate, Larissa Behrendt (2019) says, "Storytelling humanizes. It gives voice to people" (p. 180). Behrendt is an Aboriginal Australian woman of the Eualeyai/Kamillaroi peoples, which is important, as this quote is not only her speaking for herself, but on behalf of others as an advocate as well. For me, it is 'giving voice', paired with listening, where new understanding can emerge.

Many contributing voices added to a diverse and broad representation in the knowledge found in academic research. The diverse presence of many perspectives is important for inclusive representation in what constitutes important knowledge, and it is critically revealing of systems of power regarding which voices are considered more valid. In *Indigenous Storywork; Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*, Stó:lō Professor Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) writes, storytelling is "our most instinctive and human form of communication, of teaching, of persuasion, of validation, of healing" (p. 176). It is the instinctive connection that stories offer which can assist greater understanding and enhance diverse ways of knowing. In this space, many truths can be held simultaneously.

In the book, *Indigenous Methodologies; Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts* (2009) Professor Margaret Kovach of Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux ancestry says,

Stories remind us of who we are and our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations (p. 94).

Storytelling is a powerful Indigenous methodology and pedagogy which is needed even more now in education for greater understanding of the nature of a relational world. This relation between humans and Mother Earth contributes to attitudes of environmental care. This re-connect can happen through the sharing of stories. As Kimmerer (2013) says, "Stories are among our most potent tools for restoring the land as well as our relationship to the land" (p. 341). Relationships to land, and building a regenerative kinship are deeply relevant to the field of environmental education, and to the learning journey in general. The transformative qualities of both storytelling and listening are also relevant to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation aims regarding changes to the current education system.

### Story and Education

Part of the Canadian government's assimilation strategy has been the colonizing of Indigenous peoples through the Residential School system. Cree author Gregory Younging (2017) offers that this systemic extraction of children from their families and communities parallels the colonialism of aggressive resource extraction. After interviewing thousands of Residential School survivors, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) (2015)

publicly released the recommendations toward reconciliation and calls to action. The TRC's 10th call to action, is the request the development of "culturally appropriate curricula" (p. 2). Bringing more storytelling into the classroom can help fulfill that aim to meet culturally sensitive and inclusive ways of learning. Kovach (2009) teaches that, "the interrelationship between story and knowing" have been bound since time immemorial (p. 95). Therefore, story is also a way of knowing, and learning about the world and oneself.

### **Story and Self-identity**

Storytelling is a conduit that can connect people from diverse walks of life, creating opportunities for knowledge sharing, enhancing understanding and fortifying a sense of self-identity. As Archibald (2008) says, "There is the self-determining role that storytelling can play - it takes our voices from the margins and puts them in the centre" (p. 183). From this center, there are opportunities for more holistic environmental education where learners from all walks of life see themselves represented and included as a part of the collective circle. In *Women Who Run With The Wolves; Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, mythologist, Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1972) writes, "Story is medicine" (p. 15). Story *is* medicine and can bring transformation for the storyteller, story listeners and broader communities.

### **The Power of Story**

In *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, author Thomas King (2003) of German, Greek and Cherokee descent, repeats many times, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). Stories are a part of human nature, or in other words, they are part of the nature of our very humanity. Not only conduits for healing, but King (2003) also acknowledges how narratives can keep us bound when he writes, "Stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories

for as long as I live” (p. 9). Where many would assume we are the keepers of our own stories, King’s quote implies that some stories may in fact *keep us*. In that way, we may wish or strive to be free of them. Explaining that further, King (2003) says, “Stories are wondrous things. And they're dangerous” (p. 9). The danger he is speaking of is in an acknowledgement of their power. Power can always be wielded for the classic themes of good or evil, light or darkness and all the complex and nuanced dynamics in between. King (2003) warns the reader,

Once its story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told (p. 10).

This cautionary tale advises the storyteller towards a discernment of words, taking a considered approach to what is said and how it is delivered. However, this extends to story listening as well. As the listener, the narratives we internalize become a part of who we are and can have a powerful influence on our lives too. Therefore, the final and repeated warning, King (2003) reiterates is, “Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now” (p. 29). This reminder places a responsibility on a listener, that once told, we are responsible for that knowledge. The carrying that responsibility is then left with the story listener.

Much of qualitative research could be framed as a way of telling a story. In *Research Is Ceremony; Indigenous Research Methods*, Opaskwayak Cree professor Shawn Wilson (2008) claims that it is more culturally appropriate to, “take the role of storyteller rather than researcher/author” (p. 32). This presents a new way of seeing research for many academics. This idea is supported by King (2003), who explains,

The magic of native literature - as with other literatures - is not in the themes of the stories

identity, isolation, loss, ceremony, community, maturation, home - it is in the way meaning is refracted by cosmology, the way understanding is shaped by cultural paradigms (p. 112).

Story can help us to understand ourselves, but furthermore, story is both informed by and informs the cultural context it exists within.

### Story as Decolonial Love

A way of making meaning from relationships, decolonial love faces the historical legacy of violence, whilst “piecing together a way to return to love” (Benaway, 2018, p. 1). The story of colonization is built on the falsity that European explorers found a ‘New World’, mostly uninhabited and in need of European rule. Upon arrival,

European imperial explorers not only refused to speak to any women who held power in indigenous native communities, literally granting power exclusively to males, but they also interpreted cultural practices, symbols, and stories through their patriarchal Western perspectives (Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais, 2015, p. 22).

This is how the colonial patriarchy changed the narrative of power, community and culture. Much of the violence and devastation that arrived at first contact remains today, systemically. What if the narratives shift, so that story transformed to one of decolonizing praxis and decolonial love?

### Story as Context

Story lives in and is context. Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2015) opens her book, *The Right To Be Cold; One Woman's Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet* by quoting American poet Louise Bogan, “In a time lacking in truth and certainty and filled with anguish and despair, no woman should be shamefaced in attempting to give back to

the world through her work, a portion of its lost heart” (p. 1). Furthermore, Watt-Cloutier embodies this by saying, “I decided that I would never give up, that I would continue to lead with love and not fear. Love for children affected, love for my culture, love for our planet” (p. 235). This gives great meaning and context to the story she lived and wrote.

Manulani Meyer (2013) examined the importance of context stating that, “knowledge through experience, individual or collective, and a way of being via site-specific familiarity through years, generations, and life-times” (p. 98) affirming the knowledge that comes from lived experiences, and even intergenerational experiential knowledge. This highlights that knowledge is rooted in place and personhood, therefore the meaning of a story and the storyteller themselves cannot be extracted from the whole without negatively impacting the meaning. Listening to the story is how the listener can empathize with another, and through their responses can understand both their own positionality and that of others more thoroughly.

### **Story as Self Governance**

The representation of Indigenous people and content in *storywork* (Archibald, 2008) is both a method of expressing one’s current self-determination, and a praxis to encourage a greater overall sense of self-determination. As Behrendt (2019) says,

Reasserting our stories on our land is a way of reasserting our ownership. This is an important role within the academy, in spaces that have been unwelcoming and alienating for Indigenous people and in disciplines that have privileged colonial perspectives over Indigenous ones (p. 177).

I understand this quote to portray a thinking that honors story as a form of land acknowledgement, and in offering such, acknowledges the rights of Indigenous peoples and the place for respectful guests on their territories. Working towards decolonizing systemic

dominance and a predominant patriarchal structure, a more storied approach to research can play a critical role in the dismantling of patriarchal colonial oppression. Stories, as a part of the knowledge creation that broadly represent a variety of perspectives, effectively contribute to the decolonization of research through equity and diversity of representation. It is in part through the sharing of lived experience and other systems of knowledge that research can contribute to decolonizing research and moving towards authentic conciliation.

### **Story as Healer**

Stories have the power to connect. Richard Van Camp (2021) in the book, *Gather: On the Joy of Storytelling*, shares what is so compelling about stories,

Its connection, community, and purpose, plain and simple. It's giving someone the same goosebumps I receive after I retell an incredible story that gives me a soul sigh. It's seeing someone tear up with a story I've retold that moves my heart, as well. It's being human; it's the gentle reminder that we're all children of the great mystery of life. I am a storyteller, and I'm a good storyteller because I'm a good listener (p. 16).

Van Camp (2021) explains the links between: stories, connection, community, the human experience, and healthy well-being. This is highlighted further by Dr. Michelle Auerbach (2020) in *Resilience; The Life Saving Skill of Story*, who impassioned that a story, “transforms us and our lives and can save the world” (p. 2). Here, story is acknowledged as a skill, a resiliency, a healing modality that we can access to heal ourselves individually, and in turn, explore a greater understanding of the collective. Stories impact who we are, how we see ourselves and who we may become. Stories communicate what needs to be expressed. As Meyer (2013) affirms “we communicate through our world view shaped within knowledge systems prioritized by the needs of people and the lessons of place” (p. 94). Again, personhood and place are intertwined and

inseparable. To understand life, the context of place/land, affects the relationship between self and place and becomes the story we not only tell but live out in the world.

### **Identity Formation**

The stories we take in can ask us to adapt and adjust our perception of self, our actions and our relationships to the ecological world and kin around us. Understanding one's identity is part of a lifelong journey. However, a person's sense of identity is shaped by many contributing factors. In "The Complexity of Identity: Who am I?" Psychologist, Beverly Daniel Tatum (2000) says some of those factors are:

Individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents and peers say I am? What message is reflected to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether? (p. 5).

What Tatum writes is important because identity and meaning are not formed solely as an internal process, but rather also shaped by our relationships and externalities as well. The climate we exist within reflects messages back to us about our identity and place, or lack of representation. In "Identity, Prejudice and Healing in Aboriginal Circles: Models of Identity, Embodiment and Ecology of Place as Traditional Medicine for Education and Counselling" Mi'kmaq Two Spirit educator and counsellor, Kisiku Sa'qawei Paq'tism Randolph Bowers (2010) states, "History lends us a time to pause and reflect on where we have been and who we are today. This is an ever-changing landscape of identity" (p. 204). Therefore the journey to exploring self-identity is ever shifting and not constant or fixed in time. In "Speaking of Nature",

Kimmerer (2017) adds, “it is healing to allow our identities to be shaped by the relationships around us, in an inclusive world view of personhood for all beings” (p. 14) in which we are all interconnected. This inclusive worldview is foundational to this research in its respect for both an individual sense of self, and a relationship with the intrinsic greater whole.

### **Ecological Identity**

Ecological identity is how a person understands their own nature and the nature of the surrounding world and its inhabitants. Joanna Macy (2007) writes that the *greening of the self* means a wider sense of oneself or identity construct, that calls upon the ecological self. The ecological self then, develops and co-exists with all other beings on the planet.

A personal sense of ideas about the world is one’s worldview, where identity politics is the political stance where people of a certain identifying factor (e.g., religion, race, social background, sexual or gender orientation, economic status, etc.) develop political agendas based on the systems of power and oppression that affect their lives. Tatum (2002) writes, “integrating one’s past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime...” (p. 6). As the journey of discovering one’s sense of self-identity is ongoing and life long, so is the path of self-determination. Kimmerer (2017) writes, “language, personhood and politics have always been linked to human rights” (p. 14). Personal politics and expression as such are an important aspect of telling one’s stories and in the collective sense of story – as the stories hold implications for critical awareness, social change, leadership and a more holistic approach to research and knowledge creation that can uphold or challenge dominant narratives.

In *Native Science; Natural Laws of Interdependence*, Tewa professor Gregory Cajete (2000) states, “the connection of Indian people to their land was a symbol of their connection to

the spirit of life itself" (p. 188). This is crucial in understanding that matters of self-identity and place attachment cannot be separated without damaging psychological and spiritual implications. In that spirit of deep ecology (Naess, Macy), the philosophy is not that people and land are connected, but rather people are a part of the land itself.

### **Relationality**

In academic research, the researcher is asked to admit their biases, or any pre-existing relationships that could be viewed as an ethical concern or a potential shortcoming. Relational theory tends toward relationships with a view that this is instead a powerful way to challenge the male-dominated Eurocentric attitudes that remain prevalent in most social sciences theory (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 1994) and uphold separations. My research does not aim for an objective stance, but instead honours a relational and connected approach with stories about relationships as the primary method. As Gerald Taiaiake Alfred (2019) says "What we need is a fundamental shift away from a conquest mentality to a frame of mind that places human beings in real and lasting relationships with each other and the natural environment" (p. 127). Real and lasting relationships indicate a mutual patience, perseverance, and accountability. According to Burnette et al. (2011), relationships can be assessed by strengths such as: "respect and commitment, mutual trust, affirmation, harmony among multiple worldviews, responsibility, and spiritual/personal growth" (p. 280). These relational qualities can determine and enhance the depth of relationship and are essential to offering a safe space for stories to emerge in. As Bouvier (cited in Moffat, 2016) says, "we are all a part of something greater than our differences" (p. 767).

Beyond research, it is also our ability to empathize that can transform our relationships, not only within the human world but also with the land itself and all its inhabitants. Gilpin (2018) writes,

Love teaches us to not only acknowledge interconnected relationships, but also how to enact a practice of accountability and respect to these relations. Love is a softness and patience with the other. Love demands truth and freedom from fear; but must come first from a place within and to ourselves. In this way, decolonial love in the enactment of conscious relationship to the self, others, spirit and the Land and furthermore accountability to these relationships through patience, reciprocity and respect. We know that this process must first come from the land (p. 50).

A great love is needed at this time of great difficulty. As protectors and stewards of Mother Earth, to view ourselves as respectful guests focused not on a right to take, but a responsibility to (care) give instead. In “Ways of Knowing; Heritage, Living Communities and Indigenous Understandings of Place”, Professor of anthropology and sociology, Rachel Breunlin (2020) connects relationality beyond humans stating, “the importance of connecting kinship to place. In many Indigenous cultures, it is important to trace descent beyond human connections to the natural and built environment” (p. 14). This kinship and connection that binds people to place is an important relationship to explore for further understanding the notion of place attachment in terms of lived experience and ecological identity.

### **Relationships Within Nature**

Currently, there are leading ecologists proving with science what many cultures have always known, that plants, trees, and fungi have relationships too (Sheldrake, 2020; Simard, 2021). Furthermore, it's relational species that are at the roots of all nature as we know it. As

ethnobotanist Merlin Sheldrake (2020) writes, “Fungi are everywhere but they are easy to miss. They are inside you and around you. They sustain you and all that you depend on” (p. 3).

Sheldrake continues throughout, *Entangled Life; How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Share Our Futures* to explain and explore how the fungal world is the foundation and literal flooring for the ecosystems we live in. As forest scientist, Suzanne Simard describes these relationships in *Finding the Mother Tree; Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, “There is a necessary wisdom in the give-and-take of nature – its’ quiet agreements and search for balance. There is an extraordinary generosity” (p. 3). Both Simard and Sheldrake write about the natural world with a wise curiosity and enthusiasm, seeking deep ecological meaning and encouraging readers to be open to the ‘loosening of certainties and an increased understanding” (Sheldrake, 2021, p. 23). Science is now proving the relationality of the natural world; this research explores human relationality to and within Mother Nature.

The experience of life and its cycles shape a sense of self-identity. That self exists in the context of culture, place and kinship. The dangers of climate crisis are upon us, it is a painful time to be a sensitive person, and that takes fierce courage. Meyer (2013) offers, “it is the quality of our relationships that will help us evolve” (p. 99). Therefore, a relational approach that embodies the notion that the sum is greater than the whole of its parts is called for and necessary. Merle Lefkoff (2018) says, “In order to change the existing rules that keep us in bondage to greed and corruption, we must build deep and mutually supportive collaborative relationships among a diverse community of allies” (p. 110). The strength that comes from diversity is embodied in the natural world. Diversity supports resilience. It’s that resilient spirit that is needed for real change to happen. Mitchell (2019) says “we have to step into our role as co-creators and step into active creation to be able to change those things” (42:42). And creating

change is a must. For the survivance of our future ancestors, and all our relations, we must rebalance our relations with Mother Earth.

Winona LaDuke (1999) shares the Haudenosaunee teaching, “We are a part of everything that is beneath us, above us, and around us. Our past is our present, our present is our future, and our future is seven generations past and present” (p. 1). In this teaching, we are all created equal, we all have a sacred place. This place is between the ancestors who made it possible to be here, and the ancestors yet to come. Furthermore, those ancestors extend to nature as well, and as Lil’wat grandmother Loretta Pascal says.

This is my reason for standing up. To protect all around us, to continue our way of life, our culture. I ask them, “Where did you get a right to destroy these forests? How does your right supersede my rights?” These are our forests, these are our ancestors (as cited in LaDuke, 1999, p. 5).

We are all related. The land is not just a place to inhabit, but also a relative, with gifts and teachings to share. Wildcat et al. (2014) questions, “What does it mean to think of land as a source of knowledge and understanding?” (p. II). It could mean that we look directly to place for teachings, guidance and insight to bring into life by witnessing the natural world and observing lifecycles that may inform life and lend insight to life. As Yunkaporta et al. (2020) explain, “your culture is not what your hands touch – it is what moves your hands. Your hands must not be guided by someone else’s rationality, but by your own relationality” (p. 3). Therefore, if we rely on our culture, our lived experiences, what we know, the teachings from the land to re-story a life affirming and regenerative relationship with Mother Earth and all our relatives, then what are the implications for our shared future?

### Land/Place

The discussion of land and place inform every aspect of life itself, as Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez and Nathalie Kermoal (2016) editors of *Living on the Land; Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place* write that, “As a system, indigenous knowledge is interrelated with territory, kinship, identity, governance, economy and education” (p. 3). Hence, personal relationships, sense of self, home, relationships, family, power and knowledge are all affected by the state of the place. For the purposes of this research, I will use the words land and place interchangeably, and include water, air, spirit and all the present elements, not just the aspect of Earth.

In *Learning the Grammar of Animacy*, Kimmerer (2017) writes of how she learned a “grammar of animacy” by studying her family’s language. One example of how the language is significant is “just as we would recoil in English from someone who refers to a person as ‘it’, so would a fluent Potawatomi speaker if they heard someone objectifying plants or animals” (p. 56). In this way, language used to describe a place also starts revealing one’s relationship with that land. In *Honoring Place Through Home Languages In the Mid-twentieth Century*, W.E.H. Stanner (1979) wrote to Anglo audiences about what can be learned from Indigenous languages in Australia:

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word ‘home’, warm and suggestive though it may be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean ‘camp’, ‘hearth’, ‘country’, ‘everlasting home’, ‘totem place’, ‘life source’, ‘spirit centre’, and much else all in one. Our word ‘land’ is too spare and meagre (p. 8).

Here, Stanner acknowledges rich and diverse meanings embedded in Indigenous languages, and the way home and land are interchangeable and can reveal significance to spirituality. Stanner also highlights how the depth of meaning contained in words often gets lost in the translation to another language which can impede true understanding.

In *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Canada*, settler scholars Emma Lowman and Adam Barker (2015) write of the colonial desire to conquer land where the only requirements for that 'New World' acquisition were that, "lands were empty and therefore free to be claimed" (p. 5). This 'empty' falsity is a foundation colonial governance is built upon. Furthermore, Lowman and Barker assert that it is important to remember about land and land conflicts, "events and moments when indigenous peoples have insisted on protecting their lands, cultures, histories, and bodies against incursion, elimination, or theft..." (p. 9) as a response *not* the cause of the conflict. Their book emphasizes the importance of placing responsibility for the land conflicts onto settlers/people of settler ancestry, so that the responsibilities for reconciliation are also framed as a settler responsibility. Furthermore, Lowman and Barker (2015) urge the reclaiming of the title 'settler' to break the stigma and shame associated to being a non-Indigenous person occupying unceded Indigenous territory.

Colonial conquest has been driven by a greed for land, therefore healing the relationship with land will need to be a part of a decolonizing praxis. Looking at Indigenous land relations, in "Re-envisioning Resurgence; Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination" Corntassel (2012) says that the dominate culture sees rights as appointed by state-centric forums, while Indigenous responsibilities to the natural world are rooted in the "long-standing relationships with their homelands – relationships that have existed long before the development of the state system. Rights, on the other hand, are re-gifted rhetoric from

artificial states. As Indigenous peoples we act on our enduring, inherent responsibilities” (p. 92). This highlights a key issue in how land is viewed and the right to own the land vs. the responsibility to care for a place. This is addressed by Alfred (2019) where he writes of the current Land Back movement,

The basic problem is settler society’s dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the continual illegitimate occupation of our lands, the separation of our people from our sacred places and the entirety of our homelands, the denial of the fundamental essence of who we are as nations. Ignoring this problem, we have a massive engine generating social, cultural and psychic discord. And not only among the perceived victims but among the imagined beneficiaries of this contemporary colonialism too. The engine is hot and running fast and producing a toxic smoke of social discord, health harms, and environmental destruction at a never seen before pace (p. 127).

‘Land Back’ is not only about reconciliation and reparations, but also about the return of respecting culture, values and the relationships that may shift the social discord and destruction of Mother Earth.

Identity and healing are connected, as Bowers (2010) writes, “diversity in creation that allows us to respect each other’s story, because our story is our ‘medicine’. Like the thousands of spirits who inhabit the local environment, so too identity is multifaceted and ought to be respected” (p. 204). Bowers goes further to examine how embodiment and land are connected, writing that identity grows out of place and cannot be separated from it. “One cannot grow unless planted in the ground. Mother Earth and her places are the environments in which we have our being, discover our blessing and come to live our quest or to waste our chances” (p.

217). Environmental practices offer the opportunity to shift from objectifying the natural world as 'resources' for extractive capitalism, towards a regenerative relationship.

One's personal experiences, stories, and approach to life are all rooted in place. Anthropologist Keith Basso affirms that, "historical tales have the power to change people's ideas about themselves" (1996, p. 60). Where the dominant Eurocentric narrative has been historically oppressive, it is becoming increasingly decolonised and multi-faceted.

It is important that women be placed at the center of this transformational process, as Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez (2009) writes in *First Voices; An Aboriginal Women's Reader*, "Indigenous traditions portrayed by women generally place women at the centre of communities, families, and political and cultural practices including the participation of the collective in achieving balance and consensus" (p. 146). Therefore, the need to restore greater balance to Mother Earth, must not only include women but rather women will be central to making it so. However, this is not to put the burden solely on any gender, race or specific group of people. In *Sacred Places; How the Living Earth Seeks Our Friendship*, Professor James Swan (1990) writes,

Wise minds say that the power of sacred places lies in more than visible beauty. They acknowledge that history is important, but have much greater importance, they insist is spirit. This spirit can work with people of all races, but only if one's mind is clear and one's heart is pure (p. 82).

Swan's research is rooted in the belief that simply being in nature, in sacred places, is a way to open oneself to the power of the place bringing forth what is needed. Simpson (2014) writes about the importance of being out in nature and on the land as well, in "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation" which encourages the land to,

Propel us to rebel against the permanence of settler colonial reality and not just “dream alternative realities” but to create them, on the ground in the physical world, in spite of being occupied. If we accept colonial permanence, then our rebellion can only take place within settler colonial thought and reality (p. 8).

This is significant, as Simpson asks that we turn dreams into manifest reality, to take theory into the world and rebel from a rooted place that exists outside of colonial thoughts and systems.

### **Multicultural Perspectives**

Now is an important time for humans to seek to repair some of the ecological crisis that Stephan Harding (2006) describes as, “4,000 years of abuse” (p. 208). Or at least we can attempt to individually and collectively diminish as much of the harmful impacts that we can.

Furthermore, the Earth’s response to the environmental abuse inflicted by humans will “almost certainly be abrupt, catastrophic climate change” (p. 209). Climate catastrophe is already upon us. The United Nation’s “Report on Climate Change” (2021) states that we are facing unprecedented rapid warming from human activities. At this crucial time, continuance of the human species may depend upon that return to a kinship with Mother Earth.

Diné leader, Pat McCabe describes herself as a mother, grandmother, activist, artist, writer, ceremonial leader, and international speaker. On *This Mythic Life* podcast hosted by mythologist-writer, Sharon Blackie, McCabe says,

...to live in a new way with one another, to live in a more harmonious way with the water, the land, with all living beings within creation as well, healing our relationships with one another and healing the relationship that human beings have with the rest of life. We are the only species that’s out of step with creation (58:15).

We must find the harmonious way of living that restores a regenerative relationship with Mother Earth. As Euro-Canadian ethnobotanist, Nancy Turner (2005) who maintains strong relationships with Indigenous communities on the West Coast says in her book, *Earth's Blanket: Traditional Teachings for Sustainable Living*, "I believe there are many ideas and approaches we can look to (in the Indigenous world) to help us in our search for better, less harmful ways to live, while maintaining healthy, fulfilling and satisfying lives" (pp. 1-2). Turner is amongst the environmentalists who recommend respectful multicultural approaches to our environmental response.

Multicultural approaches are complex systems that require space for both the individual and the collective, sovereignty and collaboration. In Métis scholar, Dr. Gregory Lowan-Trudeau's (2015) book, *From Bricolage to Métissage Rethinking Intercultural Approaches to Indigenous Environmental Education and Research*, in the chapter, In Search of Common Ground: To Blend or Not to Blend?, Lowan-Trudeau dives into the complex intersections of race and culture, acknowledging the colonial context, where relationships have not always been mutually respectful and reciprocal towards Indigenous peoples. Gregory Cajete says that, "the collective survival of our society will require the combined wisdom of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures" (cited in Lowan-Trudeau, 2015, p. 55). This curation of stories seeks to 'look to' and collaborate, as Turner (2005) does with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachings. It is in the gathering of strength and diversity that keeps systems healthy, strong and adaptive.

This research aims to provide a space for matriarchs, as Macy (2014) says, to "speak the truth of what they see and feel and know is happening to their world" (p. 25). Where sharing the truth is important, Corntassel (2012), reminds not to tokenize Indigenous people or over-simplify

the complexity of 'what to do' in the face of environmental crisis, and instead, to focus on collaboration and working together. This is reflected by Erin Freeland Ballantyne (2014), who self-identifies as a settler, and calls for settler people to take responsibility for settler colonialism, which importantly places the call to action on non-Indigenous people in support of decolonizing efforts. Freeland Ballantyne (2014) "articulates a site of multi-cultural decolonizing praxis where all students learn from the land in a shared space in which Indigenous epistemologies are central" (p. 76). Ballantyne further suggests,

Building strong relationships of reciprocity with the land results in the crumbling of settler capitalism because it fundamentally shifts the relationships people experience and what they believe about who they are, how they are in relation to and with land, and what they believe to be true (cited in Wildcat et al., 2014, p. 77).

This is a type of re-imagining and re-storying that shifts the colonial narrative of *land as resource*, to *land as relative*. An allied approach addresses both a shift in the narrative that is required to change the climate crisis, and a shift in the colonial capitalist dominance that underpins that story.

As an example of working together, many Elders lead the way. Sliammon Elder Elsie Paul Chi-chia (2014) writes in her autoethnography, *Written As I Remember It; Teachings From The Life of a Sliammon Elder* (the story of her life and the history of her people),

We should be proud of our history. We *all* should have that. To be who we are period, to be proud of our ancestors period, of where they came from, our history, our rich history. We each bring something to this world of ours. (p. 17)

Again, this highlights the importance of how a story is framed and how owning our position, origin and ancestry can create a path to being able to experience belonging and pride,

collectively. As Cajete (2000) states, the Lakota saying 'mitakuye oyasin' (translation: We are all related) is a value shared by many Indigenous people. Furthermore, the meaning extends beyond people to all of nature to include "plants, animals, stones, trees, mountains, rivers, lakes and a host of other living entities-embodied relationships that must be honoured" (p. 178). This honouring includes respect and a mutually sustainable relationship with Mother Earth that could aid the human way of life as we know it now, diminishing further crises. We are all connected, and this whole systems view is crucial to shifting the impact human choices are having on the lands, which we need to survive.

### **Ecofeminism & Indigenous Feminism**

This exploration of stories finds alignment with many values within the philosophy of ecofeminism. As researcher, I identify as an ecofeminist, therefore this research will be filtered through that subjective lens. As self-described 'street philosopher', Dr. Karen J. Warren (1997) writes in the book, *Ecofeminism; Women, Culture & Nature*, "Important connections exist between the treatment of women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and the treatment of nonhuman nature on the other" (p. 3.) By asserting the stories of matriarchs in terms of environmental education research, I hope to elevate the shared voice and wisdom of women committed to nurturing the animate world we live in.

Acknowledging Indigenous feminists as bringing unique influences on feminist discourse prevents this research from the error of assuming all women or all feminists have had the same lived experiences, whilst avoiding perceived differences coming between us. In the book, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, Professor Joyce Green (2017) writes, "Indigenous feminism draws on core elements of indigenous cultures - in particular, the nearly universal connection to land, to territory, through relationships framed as sacred responsibility predicated

on reciprocity and definitive of culture and identity” (p. 4.) As this research is very much about land, relationships and responsibilities, it intends to be a work of allied research. Many important written collaborations of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and allied works are emerging now (Corntassel, 2018; Dobell, 2018; Joyce, 2017). This method of a shared written space inspired the multi-cultural way I intended to curate and hold space for the stories shared with me.

There is much common ground between Ecofeminists and Indigenous Feminists, and yet as Verna St. Denis (2017) says, “I find it problematic that feminism is interpreted as a desire by women to be treated like men, and equality is interpreted as advocating ‘sameness’ in treatment” (p. 53.) I intend in this research, to be in support of and in allyship to Indigenous Feminists. Rather than treating stories with the dichotomy in thinking of ‘same’ or ‘othered’, I will tend to each story as a sacred sharing, full of unique wisdom, lived experience and inherent value. As co-author of, *Ecofeminism* (2021), world-renowned environmental leader and 2010 Alternative Nobel Peace Prize winner, Vandana Shiva writes, “the patriarchal worldview sees man as the measure of all value, with no space for diversity, only hierarchy” (p. 164.) I seek to challenge that patriarchal narrative by valuing connection and collaboration over unnecessary, hierarchal power structures by design using story as method and as a conduit for connection and relationship well suited to a more relational pedagogy for environmental education.

As black, queer, feminist, scholar and poet Audre Lorde (1984) writes in *Sister Outsider*, For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world (p. 111).

This re-storying oneself rebuilds the connection to that redemptive power and truly gives the patriarchal systems a reason to fear the loss of oppressive power.

### **Rematriation of Stories**

Relationships to oneself, culture and the land are essential to wellbeing throughout the cycles of life. McCabe shares, “women tend to be the ones that oversee life entering and life exiting this world” (45:50). Women are the first teachers, their heartbeats the first sound the child hears in utero and often the final witnesses to life as well. Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais (2015) write, “communities and individuals ensured the survival of their traditions through passing down the wisdom related to medicinal plants, healing rituals, and transformative storytelling” (p. 24).

I wondered, as mothers and grandmothers who balance their love for their many relations, and many needs and wants, can this ability to balance re-balance the environment in which we live? Kimmerer (2020) addresses balance when she writes about economies of abundance and how having a reciprocal relationship with the natural world will enhance life,

Regenerative economies which cherish and reciprocate the gift are the only path forward.

To replenish the possibility of mutual flourishing, for birds and berries and people, we need an economy that shares the gifts of the Earth, following the lead of our oldest teachers, the plants (n.p.).

Kimmerer is a woman in balancing her work both academic and community leadership who embodies that consideration for kin in her body of writing. Mitchell (2019) aligns to this thought by offering sacred instruction on how to claim this for ourselves first, by extending empowered and thoughtful leadership out into the world when she says, “We need to take back our own agency. We need to take back our moral autonomy. And take responsibility for creating

the type of world we want to inhabit” (37:22). It is this taking or taking back that is required because patriarchal systems have taken from women and have historically oppressed them. As Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais (2015) state, “Centuries of European colonization of other cultures around the globe resulted in re-shaping these cultures away from traditions of women-healers, women-shamans, and women-leaders toward male dominance of these fields” (p. 18). It is important to acknowledge the many people who actively resist patriarchal and colonial attempted oppression to continue to both lead and contribute to these fields.

Mothers, grandmothers, lifegivers, matriarchs, carry life forward. The first Native American Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo (1994) says in the book, *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky*, “I believe love is the strongest force in this world, though it doesn’t often appear to be so at the ragged end of this century.” (p. 30). We are relying on this fierce and loving strength to bring the courage required to make such drastic changes to the way we are impacting the Earth. As psychotherapist, ritualist, activist and author, Francis Weller (2015) writes, “This idea of outrageous courage touched me. I could feel this was the invitation nested inside of this despair. I, or rather, *we* are being asked to cultivate outrageous courage in the face of outrageous loss” (p. 139). The outrageous loss, change, and death upon us now, may take us back to the beginning, as systems do, towards a rebirth a new life cycle that emerges with greater resilience, diversity and enduring adaptability through the rematriation of stories and the restoring or remaking of a new collective story.

### Chapter 3: Research Methods & Methodology

#### Intentions

I conducted this ethnographic research to explore the wisdom of matriarchs through their narratives, to understand how their stories, their wisdom might contribute to academia and the field of environmental education. This research explores relationships and place attachment, as Wagamese (2011) describes, “the magic I've found in being a member of this human family. Kin. A part of the one story, the one song we all create together” (p. 4). I was curious about how a relational approach to the environment could add to the dialogue of life affirming and regenerative relationships with Mother Earth, *the one song*, the one collective story that we are living together.

#### Ethnography

The word ethnography is of Greek origin. ἔθνος or *ethnos* meaning ‘people or nation’ and *graphy* meaning ‘writing’. Ethnography is a research method that combines both academic research and the narratives of a particular identified group to describe a phenomenon in greater detail. As qualitative researcher Laurel Richardson (1999) acknowledges, ethnographies “are in and of themselves valid and desirable representations of the social” (p. 661). Subversive in its nature as a method, ethnography attempts to “disrupt the binary of science and art”, writes ethnographers Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011, p. 11). To approach narrative research with the aim of balancing artistic expression and sound research methods, is a challenge worth undertaking. It is in this space that challenges a dichotomy between art and research where rich and fertile shared ground can be unearthed.

When researchers perform ethnographies, they study a culture’s relationships, values, beliefs, and experiences. According to Tatum (2002), “dominant groups by definition, set the

parameters within which the subordinates operate” (p. 7). Systemically, the dominant group holds authority in society over the subordinate minority and has greater power over how that dominance is used. As a method, ethnography is both a process and product that challenges the way research has typically been done, by whom, and with which method. As Richardson (1999) states, the more ethnography is used, the more space there is in academic research for greater diversity. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) suggest that this type of research is a “political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (p.2). This was deeply important as I sought to be entrusted with hearing and caring for the stories of the women I interviewed. Part of the caring for stories is in individualized care and nourishment of each participant, to nurture relationships that are regenerative and rooted in reciprocity. This relationality challenges extractivist attitudes in research regarding knowledge creation and ownership.

Ethnography is an approach that acknowledges subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher’s influence on research, as well as the research’s influence on the writer. There is potential, and even hope, for the writing process to bring an increase of knowledge and understanding, both personally as well as collectively. Ethnography is a shift from denying the subjectivity issue or pretending biases don’t exist or can be fully moderated. In ethnographic writing, lived experiences are then placed within the context of a greater cultural understanding. As Jennifer Katz and Kevin Lamoureaux (2018) state in *Ensouling Our Schools; A Universally Designed Framework for Mental Health, Well-Being, and Reconciliation*, “If prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism can be learned, so too can peace, acceptance, and respect for diversity” (p. 19). Therefore, one could say ethnography is a form of storytelling that can help both unlearn and learn, utilizing academic research and qualitative techniques for personal

growth. Ethnography can contribute to broadening the scope of academic research, and be an individual's expression of self-determination, with broad cultural relevance.

Erve Chambers says, "The most immediate measure of the significance of applied research is its contribution to decision making" (2000, p. 851). Therefore, ethnography was an excellent method for a project hoping to inspire social change.

### **Research as Ceremony by Design**

Early in this research journey, I was inspired by Shawn Wilson's (2008) approach in *Research as Ceremony*. I was moved by his intention of situating research in relation to his children, and inspired by the deep purpose that this relationality lent to the work. Bringing his family into the work provided me with an example of how to reframe my time spent in academia. Instead of taking me *away* from my daughter, the work became an affirming of her presence *in* my life.

Another key influence was Wilson (2008) establishing, "research is a ceremony. And so is life. Everything that we do shares in the ongoing creation of our universe" (p. 138). Wilson is a storyteller and a researcher who views life in a sacred and ceremonial way. Oftentimes, academics separate these two aspects of their lives, whereas Wilson finds a way to bring them together. Furthermore, the final sentence of his book is a powerful statement that affirms the spirit within the research when he says, "I have faith in the ceremony" (p. 138). Imbuing the research with faith ends the book in beauty and points back to the previous statement of life and approaching living in a faith-filled way.

### **Ritual of Recruitment**

I approached each interviewee one at a time and described my research to them within the context of a personal visit. I asked for an interview and left the potential interviewee to think on

it and decide as I had been advised to ask 'in a good way' (personal communication, Jones 2020). This meant calling to ask for the visit, asking for the interview in person, and investing the time in communicating as much in person as possible.

I selected women over the age of 52, who self-identified as matriarchs and who were women in leadership within their families or communities. In the Moondance tradition, there are thirteen moons within a year, and thirteen years in a cycle of life. Once a woman has completed four of these cycles of thirteen, at age fifty-two, she is seen to have a grandmother's wisdom from her lived experiences (Abuela Anna, personal communication, 2021). Therefore, grandmother acknowledges a woman over age fifty-two, not necessarily a biological grandparent. In this context, lifegivers are women, mothers, grandmothers. Originally, I intended to recruit two Indigenous interviewees, and two non-Indigenous interviewees, but ran into limitations in the scale of this paper and the quantity of data, so I stopped the interviews at three participants. Two interviewees identify as being from non-Indigenous ancestry, and one is of Indigenous descent. I believe there must be room made for all of us to share stories together; in fact, I believe we must cultivate greater understanding in this way.

After the first recruitment of one individual, I interviewed, transcribed and highlighted the first story into draft form before approaching the next interviewee (I will describe more about that care of the stories below). This one-on-one, one-at-a-time approach intended to show my care for each matriarch and their story, as well as to allow the space and time to document how listening to the story affected me and not least of all, it allowed me the time I might need to prepare for the next story. I stayed open to how each new story shifted my perception of who I may interview next as I let my intuition guide me in terms of the next recruitment. I narrowed

my selection criteria by focusing on women who live on Vancouver Island, where the research took place.

The conversations I recorded were congruent to oral traditions and story as methodology. As Kovach (2009) says, “stories remind us of who we are and our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledge while simultaneously signifying relationships” (p. 94). It was important to take respectful time and care with interviewees, to recognize the importance of both the stories shared and the relationships between us. In *Decolonizing Research Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* particularly, when working with Elders, Secwepemc scholar Georgina Martin (2019) writes, “elders must be recognized for their storytelling wisdom, or the intent and content of the stories change” (p. 70). Keeping an open timeframe with each interview showed the respect for each interviewee and the pace of the process itself.

#### Convening Ceremony

Prior to the beginning of each interview, I prepared myself by cleansing my personal space. I showered prior to each interview, dressed and prepared myself as I would for ceremony. I took a short time to check in with interviewees before and after our interviews, to ensure their well-being. At each interaction, I brought food to leave as a gift, reciprocating nourishment for the matriarchs in a practical way as they had each nourished my research and spirit.

#### Place

I interviewed participants in a place of their choosing, to invite ‘place’ to act as a third presence in the dialogue. All interviewees chose their homes or backyards, which I believe added

a familiar comfort to the conversations. Often, there were visitors such as birds or butterflies and other more than human relatives.<sup>10</sup>

Here you ought to consider inserting the Interview Questions you asked as part of Methods section – simply put to just show what you did or after the next section perhaps?

### **The Interviews**

With informed consent from the participants, I used a voice recorder to capture the interviews. I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured manner, which Zina O'Leary (2017) states, “starts with a defined questioning plan, but will shift to follow the natural flow of the conversation” (p. 240). This was useful in that the interviewees required little prompting and guidance and were happy to share in their unique ways. This relational method respected and allowed the interviewees to guide their pacing. Congruent to Indigenous storytelling pedagogy, each story organically flowed in circles and loops, allowing the interviewees to share rich details rather than me prompting for information. With each interview my confidence grew in allowing space for the storyteller to find their own way, and often what was said after a moment of silence was a very impactful statement. This truly emergent and feminist approach added value to the stories, where the interviewees gave more time and attention to what they felt was most important to reveal that day.

The process of deeply listening to and reflecting on stories, is described by Archibald (2008), as *storywork*. *Storywork* requires the reader/listener to engage actively, more than being just a passive witness. As Archibald, Lee-Morgan & De Santolo (2019) write decolonized research means that relationships are established through protocol, visiting, listening and “being there” (p.

---

<sup>10</sup> A term borrowed from ecologist and philosopher David Abrams' book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1996). As Abrams stated, “The narratives respond directly to the land, as the land responds directly to the spoken or sung stories” (p. 177).

76). I prioritized these ways of being to take care of those relationships, expressing my appreciation and respect. I made every conscious effort to hold space in a deep, collaborative and consensual way at every interaction.

As a design challenge, O'Leary (2017) offered that semi-structured interviews will face dilemmas due to the researcher's inability to generalize the data or findings as each interview will be unique in some way to the nature of storytelling. Nevertheless, it was essential that my design stay emergent, setting out to *discover* in the research, rather than to *prove* a predetermined hypothesis. Therefore, flexibility in the research method was intentional and necessary.

### **Story Collection & Care**

I used a voice recording device and the dictate function in Microsoft Word to create transcripts from the interviews. From there, I listened to the interviews, adding in the speaker's initials, hand gestures and laughter, etc. in order to capture everything that was communicated. I transcribed the interviews and began to organize the stories shared with me. Resisting over-analyzing, I removed my dialogue from the conversations to share each matriarch's story purely from her own voice.

I reviewed my dialogue separately and wrote parts of what I had said during interviews into sections of the research. As a standards check, I utilized the ethnographic lens of Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) for guidance, which Richardson (1999) created to ensure more validity in ethnographic research. Richardson and St. Pierre (2017) write about the CAP ethnographic lens, which includes five criteria for validity and reliability of research, and that asks these questions:

1. Does this writing add to our understanding of social life?

2. Does this piece have aesthetic value? Does the use of CAP invite exploratory responses from readers?
3. Is it reflexive? How did the author go about writing this text? Are there any ethical issues to consider?
4. Does the writing have an impact, emotionally and/or intellectually?
5. Is this text authentic? Is it “true” to a lived experience of culture, society, community or an individual? (p. 964).

Once the research had reached a place where I could answer yes to all of Richardson & St. Pierre's (2017) CAP ethnographic criteria, I concluded the process. After transcription was completed, I offered the interviewee a copy of their story to edit. I asked the interviewee to read, review and suggest any changes or adjustments to their words to ensure increased integrity and accuracy of their stories. I strongly encouraged all participants to read the interview document in order to make any adjustments necessary. This method of checking for accuracy, clarity and certainty is a way to double-check for accurate representation and ethically address any inaccuracies as well as identify any potential misunderstanding or interviewer bias. Participants had time to change or withdraw their stories and I was willing to extend beyond the first deadline to accommodate everyone's needs and negotiate a version that was satisfactory for all.

#### Themes and Threads

First, I transcribed stories as accurately as possible without changing or adding meaning to the knowledge shared with me. I took care with my words to never represent the matriarchs or their stories as objects, but instead respected mentors, collaborators, and guides of this subjective process. These were the first iterations of the three stories.

Next, I read the full transcriptions, highlighting what I found impactful, and omitting socializing remarks or comments not connected to the three research themes. I assigned five colours to highlight each theme represented: life cycles (green), life-affirming attitudes (blue) lifegivers (pink) as well as 'other interesting' shares (orange) and lastly, when I was speaking (yellow). I acknowledge that I curated, as often one quote could have fit in more than one section, and I made the choice of where to place it in the compiled story (see Chapter 4). This became the second version of each individual story, now significantly shortened.

Lastly, I took these five coloured themes, and wove them thematically. I curated all of the stories into Chapter Four, organizing the three main research themes onto a page in a concept map, a visual framework that can help to plan ideas (Trochim, 1989). On each of the three themes, I listed the titles of the quotes, which I then numbered to create a flow for the curated story. There were similarities and contrasts. This curation is how my voice found its way into the research, and I acknowledge that this sifting and sorting of storylines could have been seen/done in many ways. I respect that each of the three stories that were shared with me are whole and powerful individually. I have referred to this as a braid, as the 'fourth story' to acknowledge that changing the context, and order that each quote was used in, changes the story itself. Yet, like a braid of five colours, I chose not to blend the verbatim quotes, yet to weave them together as full strands. I chose to honour the matriarchs I interviewed, and their ability and right to speak for themselves by leaving the quotes intact and with minimal descriptive context. The three stories originally shared with me, emerged into a fourth story narrated *through* me.

#### Story Edits

I began by situating myself in the first chapter, where I then emailed every person, I mention by name (who had not read the thesis yet), to ask permission to acknowledge them in this

research. Some offered their traditional Indigenous names to mention, and everyone gave their enthusiastic consent and expressed gratitude to be acknowledged.

With regard to the relationship with the matriarchs I interviewed, I again turned to them for their approval before sharing their words with anyone else. As De Santolo (2019) says, Elders are “both collaborators and mentors in this story research process” (p. 242). The matriarchs acted as both collaborators and teachers, more than the sole role of being interviewed.

Further examples of this honouring included when I sought the interviewees approval for the collective story in Chapter Four, where one interviewee responded that she wasn't feeling well and would not be able to read the draft, but to go forward as she trusted me implicitly. I responded to ask if I could deliver anything needed and brought her a care package. In this way, the research continued in reciprocity to nourish us both. Similarly, another interviewee read what I had written and asked to strike certain statements from the fourth story. I sat with her, and cooked for her, an additional three times to bring the chapter to where we were both satisfied with it. The third participant made significant edits to her story to clarify her meaning.

Oluo (2019) advises, “I speak quite often about how important it is to be open to those who are generous enough to tell you that you fucked up - especially around issues of race” (sic)(p. 14). Whereas this was an issue of perspective informed by cultural values, not race, Oluo's advice is crucial here. We all invested more time and energy than anticipated to find a version of the story we could live with, and compromises were made. Too often, historically, an academic perspective has colonized research by dominating other perspectives, with researchers viewing the final research as *theirs* and/or have made final decisions without the necessary labour of finding a common ground with contributors. As anthropology professor Helene Demers (2021) writes in, *What Was Said to Me; The Life of Sti'tum'atul'wut, a Cowichan Woman*, academic

notes can provide context, yet contradict decolonizing methodology by influencing the way that the story is read, “reinforcing a stance of outside expertise that I find particularly problematic in documenting oral narratives” (p. 14). Demers explicates that life stories and teachings can ‘stand on their own’. I have also experienced the conflict and tough lesson that Demers describes around methods, “a tendency to attempt to shape oral life accounts into conversational autobiographic texts” but these are different methods and Demers says the methods, “should not be conflated” (p. 12). Applying this to my research, if I were to do this again, I would now consider staying true to oral tradition with a final “text” as podcast, and/or restructuring my questions so that the themes were clearer. Where the emergent nature was interesting to me, it left a lot of room for misunderstanding and different perspectives of how it should be processed and written up.

Throughout my research, I was told about several of these negative research experiences in Indigenous communities which have made many Indigenous people understandably mistrust ‘researchers’ (personal communication, Edwards and Schooner, 2021). This required great commitment and listening from me to amend, despite my looming deadlines and high stress levels. It tested my ethics to prioritize the relationships within this research, remembering that the two could not be separated. I learned from this process that the way we hear ourselves can be more critical than how others hear us, and that compassion and the time that it takes, is needed to process and to find common ground. I prioritized lifting the matriarchs voices and respected the ways they framed their stories. This was an example of decolonizing, feminist, and relational praxis. However, I do regret not being able to accommodate more of one matriarch’s views, learning through this process that if I left the story ‘untouched’ or ‘standing on its own’, this research may not have displayed the level of academic analysis a thesis is required to show. I

agreed with her perspective fully, that the stories on their own (not braided) would have been a beautiful sharing. I am grateful for the compassion and lenience from the matriarchs, as their compromise in support of my success came from understanding I was pulled in multiple directions: my heart, my desire to respect their lead, and the requirements of the academic system and my place within it as a non-Indigenous scholar.

### Responsibilities

I found immense value in each story, as I hope other readers do as well on the pages that follow. As Archibald (2008) shares the teachings of elders, “it is important to listen with three ears: two on the side of our head and the one that is in our heart” (p. 8). I hope that my attempts to do that with each participant’s story translate to the research, and the fourth story shares their hearts and mine.

### **Rematriation of Research**

I have gathered stories that contribute to the presence of matriarchal perspectives and wisdom for environmental education. There are benefits and value to holding space for life-stories and lived experiences as narrative research. The research was uplifting to the interviewees, and all mentioned that it was empowering to share their stories with me. The matriarchs felt respected by my interest in their lives and the research questions, and their voices have contributed to a broader representation in academia and environmental education.

### **A Letter to Conclude the Ceremony**

Concluding my research in a letter to my daughter is a reflective writing technique that helped with a deeper integration of the meaning of the stories shared with me to connect the research to my young daughter and future generations. When used with family ties, Richardson (1999) says, reflexive writing practices can “evoke deep parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance

or even alter one's sense of identity" (p. 665). I wrote the final chapter in letter form to my daughter as my way of sharing what I have learned with her. Inspired by Wilson (2008) when he says, "Indigenous epistemology and ontology are based upon relationality. Our axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining relational accountability" (p. 11). The letter respects my relational responsibility as an educator and communicator for a more kin-focused world, but more importantly to me, my responsibility as a mother. As Moffat (2016) says, "to retreat, reflect, dialogue and share understanding means to collaboratively create a shared future" (p. 767). The sharing of this research is intended to give back to my community, in thanks for what has been shared with me, and as a prayer to close the ceremony of this research experience.

#### Chapter 4: The Matriarchs' Braided Stories

As a qualitative researcher and story weaver, my insights and way of seeing is connected to the entire story, which could have been braided together and told in many ways. The matriarchs have introduced themselves, and in Chapter One I share my positionality at length. So now, there are four voices present, but some readers may also hear the voices of the ancestors and the land whispering in as well. With a friendly invitation, I invite the reader to be an additional voice that the story is perceived through. We are all connected, and stories need to be both shared and heard. As Atleo (2011) writes, a “struggle towards wholeness meant a deliberate exclusion of any form of reductionism. In fact, any emphasis upon reducing the interconnected nature of reality was considered as a step towards weakness (p. 140). It is my hope that in keeping the stories true to their telling, yet braiding them together here, fortifies the strength of this shared story.

This chapter begins with introductions of the interview participants and are offered in sequence in the order that I sat with the three matriarchs as they shared stories of their lived experiences with me for this research. These are verbatim from each matriarch, in her own voice, after they made edits or preferred changes. It was a top priority to the research methods to honour and amplify the voices of the matriarchs by leaving them as whole as possible, respecting their unique way of expressing their self and experiences within the inter-connected world we live in. My unseen voice, the narration and curation of this research, weaves together unique themes, celebrates convergences and honours the divergences of lived experience. My intention was to celebrate life, diversity, and connection and to allow the three stories to sit in a circle of wise women, rest together, and emerge into this chapter that became the telling of another, fourth story. Furthermore, environmentalist Paul Hawkin said, “one person’s knowledge can only

represent a fragment of the totality of what is known, wisdom can be achieved when people combine what they have learned... the defense of the world can truly be accomplished only by cooperation” (cited in Macy & Brown, 2014, p. 73). The cooperative fourth story is braided together from the matriarchs’ descriptions of their lived experiences. Story weaving can add a collective view, where many people relate and see themselves in it. This story braiding, as Professor Hilary Leighton (2022, in press) states may, “weave new and significant patterns of thought and provide leeway for imagining what could not have been possible through just the telling of one story alone” (n.p). I looked to three matriarchs for insight on how to be more supportive kin to our Mother Earth, and through the method of storytelling, the women answered this question: *Will you tell me a story about a time in your life where your relationship to the land/place was important?*

### **My Name**

Lillian: My name is Lillian Sly. I am a mother, a grandmother, a retired midwife, a gardener, a photographer. I am sixty-six years. I'm female! (Laughter) You know if there's a spectrum, I'm at this end of the female spectrum (gestures an extreme side). Absolutely fully female. Yes. (Laughter) I don't wear pants! I always wear skirts! Pants are uncomfortable. I don't know why anybody wears them. I think guys should wear skirts all the time too! I'm a white Anglo Saxon Protestant. I was born in the Ottawa Valley. My ancestry is: English, Scottish, German, and French Canadian. I am now the oldest woman in my family, after my mom died. I'm now the matriarch, which seems weird (laughs).

Charlene: Yaw smadumxc, (greetings) I am from our Nuxalk territories, born in the Nuxalkmc (Bella Coola) Valley. I am the great granddaughter of Bux'wa'lox-wa, I am the great granddaughter of Ga'Nelth-gus. I am the granddaughter of Sx'imanna and the daughter of Na'tupsta. I'm presently living here within the territories of the Snuneymuxw. I am Tla-lia-outs, my English name is Charlene Schooner. My great Grandfather was

Captain Schooner, and that's the first English name we have within our family. I'm thankful to our mountains, they shielded us from the colonial history here in what they call 'Canada'. The explorers couldn't make it to the coast, because they couldn't make it through the mountains. That's why I really treasure our mountains, oceans and rivers.

Rachel: My name is Rachel Cooper. I acknowledge the land which I live on now, which is the land of the Stz'uminus Peoples. I was born in the Midlands in England. I grew up in a brewing town in Staffordshire, Burton-on-Trent. My father, now in the spirit world, was David Cooper. The name Cooper originates from the barrel makers and recently I've had some visions and insights to being connected to a long line of ancestors that brewed beers with herbal plants: mugwort, sage and other things. My mother is Audrey Lindsey whose heritage I believe is from the North of England. I know I have some Nordic ancestry as well as Anglo-Saxon, and some Celtic. I left the Midlands and moved to the South Coast, Plymouth and did a degree there in psychology which led into a PhD in developmental psychology. From there, I taught developmental psychology at Brandon University in Manitoba for three years. I met my husband there. He is a farmer and very connected to the land. Then we moved to BC in 1990 where I taught at Vancouver Island University. I retired in 2019. Now I am working on the organic vegetable farm, doing markets which I enjoy. I've done some trainings, for psychedelic psychotherapy and have been working with some people in that field, which I find very interesting. I have two children, both grown.

### **Threads to Weave a Story With: Lifecycles, Life Affirming, Lifegivers**

Through this research, I seek to amplify connections between and around the themes of life cycles, life affirming narratives, and lifegivers. Life cycles acknowledge all that is. This refers to not only what we see: plants, Earth, birth, living, dying, but everything 'unseen' and all around us. As Abram (2017) writes, "nonhuman animals, plants and even 'inanimate' rivers once spoke to our tribal ancestors" (p. 131). Perhaps, they still do speak to those who are listening?

Throughout this re-search process, I have wondered, “*Does celebrating the cycles of our lives through story, create a life affirming attitude?*” “*Could we be stronger stewards of the land and place if guided by the insights of women leaders and matriarchs?*” These questions are rooted in the belief that humans will usually protect what we love. Lifegivers may have unique insight and wisdom to share that hasn't always been welcome in academia or other forums valued for change.

Given the state of our planet, I also believe that now is the time to dismantle illusionary silos that tend to keep people bound and separate and instead, come together in equitable and collaborative ways, for an intercultural and intergenerational experience.

### **Lifecycles**

A complete life cycle contains a series of changes that return to the starting state in the end. In my garden, I begin with fortifying the soil, planting the seeds, culminating in full fruition and then back to seed again. As Shiva said, “Growing your own food is the ultimate act of rebellion... the most empowering thing we can do, is plant one single seed, and care for one single plant” (cited in Brillon, 2019, p. 70). This is to affirm that small acts of tending, and caring can be accumulative, and add to larger scale change over time. Such was the compiling of these stories, transcribing, theming, and braiding into something bigger. Each matriarch intuitively discussed certain aspects of their lives within their stories. They shared stories of early childhood, times of growth and transformation, rites of passage, and even looking ahead to death and dying. The stories didn't end there, but further explored the supernatural world and consciousness, which perhaps *is* the returning state. Contrary to some thinking, Atleo (2011) states, “non-physical reality is the source of physical reality” (p. 144). Not the other way around.

These are the great life questions that cannot be answered with scientific knowledge, only explored with faith, respect and reverence. In this section, I do not attempt to assert my worldviews or expand them to apply to other people or situations, only to narrate enough to explain the reasoning that led to this order in the story.

### **Childhood**

Lillian: I was born in the Ottawa Valley, and we lived rurally, and then when I was 10, we moved to Montreal. That was quite the shock to my system, I think. I used to (voice cracks, tears) put myself to sleep at night, walking through the garden we used to have. I'd go through the garden in my mind: 10 rows of green beans, 10 rows of yellow beans, 5 rows of corn, and the raspberries were over there, I knew the garden and that was my that was my comfort place. To 'walk through the garden' as I went to sleep, and this is at 10 years old. It was about a connection with the soil.

Charlene: My name is Tla-lia-outs. I say that's our responsibility to remember our relationship to where we're from, our ties or connections to the land. There's a connection to my name, that I was given as a baby in our language. A knowledge keeper tells me this beautiful story of our Smy-usta, our family story. It's how we originated from the earth. From the beginning of time. When Skymaker stepped on to the Earth. It was deep within the heart of the Earth. Skymaker (Mana-kays) was riding in the canoe with Raven and stepped out on the Earth and it became day. It was in the land of copper which was very shiny and bright. The chief of the land of Copper was really excited, and brought wealth and feasted. He brought a whole bunch of gifts and gave Skymaker one of his daughters. They all feasted for a long time in the land of Copper but then it's time to get back into the canoe to continue the journey. There were other stops along the way, like in the land of abalone, but when they come out, they came through the shell of a seastar. That's where they landed on the earth as the first people. The daughter's name of that chief of the land of Copper was Tla-lia-outs, that's my name. I'm the first woman within our territories, the beginning of our time here on Earth.

Presently, our English names aren't like the longstanding English names of Europeans. A lot of these names were just a first name, that might have turned into a last name, and some people had just one name - they didn't get a first and last name. You got a name from the Indian agent and that is what was recorded. Sometimes, brothers and sisters are of the same family, and they'd have different last names. Some surnames are the same- but it's not the same family. It's just the Indian Agent handing out names.

Rachel: Oh, my goodness, my relationship with land. The seeds were set for this by my parents. My dad grew a big garden, and we always went for walks by the river, identified birds and plants and we talked about the importance of water. I am so grateful for that part of my upbringing. Mum and Dad always used to take my brother and I down to a little fishing village in Dorset, called Lyme Regis. It is famous for its fossil beach, and I found many ammonites which are estimated to be close 290 million years old. It always raised a question of awe and wonder about what this planet is, its history and how we all came to be? These huge questions of wonder, of cycles, life and death, and what was this world like when these things were living at that time? Fascinating, I always had this awe and wonder about these things.

The women all spoke of their families, the importance of names, their experiences of being a mothers/grandmothers, and their ancestors that helped shape them into the people they are today. For each woman, their stories included formative childhood memories of connection to land and place. The experiences they had in their early years enhanced their life affirming attitudes towards land/place. Memories of a garden, traditional territory, and places of family vacation and memory making were all described vividly, decades later.

There were also difficult lived experiences shared. The importance of mountains, rivers and land are acknowledged even within introductions to say, "This is who I am". As Vernon Masayesva said of the waters of the Hopi and Navajo territory, "We'd violated a religious covenant: treating water like a commodity-selling something sacred" (cited in LaDuke, 2005, p.

38). Women are said to be the protectresses of water, and already in the interviews water flows through us in our tears inspired by memories.

The strands of childhood experiences from the land influenced a life affirming outlook when sharing these memories and stories. As feminist professor bell hooks (2001) writes in, *All About Love; New Visions*, “like every wounded child I just wanted to turn back time and be in that paradise again, in that moment of remembered rapture where I felt loved, where I felt a sense belonging” (p. 10). hooks describes the safety of being held by the mother.

The themes of lifegivers, lifecycles and a life affirming worldview were already blending into the story, perhaps alchemizing the tone, or colours that changed when mixed together in one bowl. It became impossible for me to change them back to the state they were in before they were blended.

Each matriarch also shared stories of growth and transformation, that included facing challenges, and the journey of finding their way home. King (2012) writes in, *The Inconvenient Indian*, “land contains languages, the stories, and the histories of the people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home” (p. 218). For the matriarchs, finding their way home did have to do with the land. That home is also a metaphor for being at home within themselves, rooting into who they are. As Weller (2015) says, “There is some strange intimacy between grief and aliveness, some sacred exchange between what seems unbearable and what is most exquisitely alive” (p. 12). To live fully is to allow this sacred exchange of life and all of its experiences to transform us.

### **Transformative Life Experiences**

Lillian: I went to James Bay in a program that made summer jobs for young people. The place was called Fort George at that point, but now it's (renamed) Chisasiby. It was the last Cree village on James Bay, and the next village up the coast was Inuit. There were a

fair number of Inuit in town as well as Cree people. I was 300 miles from asphalt, there were only two roads in town, the airstrip was sand. I was eighteen, and that was a very profound summer for me. The term 'white privilege' wasn't around at the time, but that's what I learned. That I was very much a product of my culture, and that the world was way, way, bigger than my culture. I could make choices! That I didn't have to live within the structures of the way I was brought up. That was super profound for me. It was also just so wonderful to get away from cities. I hadn't realized, how important that was. I just felt like I was a sponge all summer. It wasn't about like 'Oh well imagined anybody doing things like that!' It would just be like, okay yes that works, doesn't it? Yes, course it does! I went out for goose hunting trips, I went out with the women to pick berries, at the very edge of the tree line, so there were trees there, they only grew on the North side of bodies of water, and you know they didn't get any bigger than about this. Tree that big (gestures) would be 1000 years old, maybe six feet tall. I learned how to make fish gut pancakes and cook on a wood stove. I was staying with a Cree family. The interconnectedness of the families, and the community, and how cohesive they were.

Also, hearing stories about the disruptions, about being sent away to residential schools. The teenagers at that point, they had a primary school in town, but the teenagers went away in the wintertime to go to high school. The disruptions in language, like uncle only speaks Inuktitut, but because I went away to school, I really don't remember that much of it anymore... That kind of disruption that was happening to their culture, but despite that, how cohesive they still were as a community. Still very much living off the land. Hunting was a very large part of what they did, hunting and fishing. Berry picking, Spruce bough tea, stuff like that! It was the most profound two months of my life ever. There have been many other profound moments in my life, but for a whole lot, crammed into a small amount of time, it was a profound experience. I feel very lucky to have had that opportunity.

Charlene: Colonial systems try to dictate, steal, and crush our stories. I was talking of the harm of what I've seen through institutions, academia, researchers and what they're doing, that they're not listening. I said they support stealing stories and not giving back, thinking

they have the right to own it now. One elder said, "That's what they've always done". That's just a common theme, nothing's changed.

Something I was allowed to go through, to witness colonial oppression and violence that sometimes goes sideways. Another story, I found myself in a motel, in my last month of school for my undergrad in *Aotearoa*, New Zealand. Either I give up and leave, 'cause things unraveled with the homestay family as it wasn't a healthy, safe place. So, I had to leave the home. A counselor at my school, supported my daughter and I in a temporary placement. I had to decide, are we going to stay or go back to Canada? My daughter's school found us a new homestay family, it was safe, comfortable, and warm. I realized, you got to make it through some tough things. I have fought many times in my life and faced some challenges to keep going, to keep living.

Our life story is bigger than we know. Sometimes we must rise above our circumstance and it's much more than we can fathom in our minds. We might look at our calling, the work that we're doing, is SO much greater. And there's been loved ones who have been helping to guide or teach you to get ready for the work you're doing. That's why I say, I really love and respect you. That's why I said I'm okay to share some stories or some time with you. My door is open. Don't give up with these little things, keep going.

Rachel: Our teachings on plant spirit medicine throughout this year, culminated in what my teacher refers to as a rite of passage, and this involved four days alone in the woods with only tea from the plant, which had chosen us, to work with. I was led to Angelica which isn't native to this land. She's a member of the carrot family from Europe and the middle east and she's quite magical. My grandma used to use Angelica to decorate cupcakes. It was sugared, and she used to say to me, "come on lovie, let's put angels' wings on the cupcakes", and this was from Angelica, there was a lovely connection from the homeland. I grew Angelica here to take a plant to journey with. It was a transformative time. I was in a wooded area with a beautiful stream running through it. My space was a little hollow, and it felt like I was going back to the womb. It was a precious, sacred space.

Since my retirement, I've really been struggling with the question of what to do. What is it that I have? There is a deep inner calling. I've had several readings; everyone says you're going to be teaching again and doing this and doing that! I'm thinking, okay but what do I have to offer now, what does it look like now?! Where is that teaching? What is it? So that's what I got from the rite of passage from my power centre, "You will move forward step into your power."

Each matriarch spoke of facing challenges and finding the inner resources to persevere. As Macy (2007) explains, "this time of great challenge demands more commitment, endurance and courage than any one of us can dredge up out of our own individual supply" (p. 29). In this way, each story was about transforming, growing, and becoming stronger in some way, and compiling the stories together is about increasing that collective supply of enduring courage. This is the lived experience of confronting what is known and then journeying into the unknown. Each person was able to look back with a sense of gratitude for the experiences in their lives that facilitated growth and fortified them. As Blackfeet scholar, Leroy Little Bear (2005), states, "our stories need to be re-told and acted upon as part of our process of remembering and maintaining balance within our communities. It is the stories that sustain us and ensure our continuity as peoples" (cited in Cornassel, 2012, p. 89). Remembering their stories offered sustenance to the matriarchs and to me. The continuity of this knowledge is now bolstered by the sharing, as the readers and I bear witness, and the stories live on documented here as well.

### **Death**

Physically, death is the cessation of life. It is often surrounded by mystery and for many, shrouded in secrecy and fear. Here, personal beliefs inform whether or not death is the end of the lifecycle for each participant, or if death is simply another beginning. As hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley (1992) write in, *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness*,

*Needs and Communications of the Dying*, “We have come to recognize the parallels between being born and dying-between entries swirling bold and leaving it” (p. 28). Both being born and dying are described as transitions, a parts of the lifecycle, a common truth of being human.

Lillian: If it ever gets to the point where I am incapacitated enough that I need to be institutionalized, I'd rather just swim out to sea. I can't imagine myself having to live with ‘oh we'll take you to the park today, or maybe tomorrow!’ (laughter). I feel more fragile than I used to. I feel my mortality, that is not just my age, but specifically falling on my head which could have killed me and certainly has changed my life. So, I'm much more aware of the fact that I might not have very much longer. I've lost two of my siblings already. I do think about it I want my last days to be able to look out the window and see nothing but green. I hope that will be here, I hope so. Mike died at home. I'm very glad that that happened, that he didn't have to be hospitalized at the end. That we just stayed here. Which is also one of the reasons of course I'm really attached to this place because Mike and I were happy here.

Rachel: I spent so much time in Hambury, in England where my grandma used to live. It's a tiny little village, with this incredible church with a beautiful huge stained-glass window in it. I have ancestors on my mother's side buried there, and there's a huge Yew Tree there. There are so many Yew trees in cemeteries in Britain. They were important to the Pagans and the Christians took over many of those sites. The Yew tree is the tree of death. All parts are poisonous. I'm so drawn to that land when I go home to visit my mom. We always go to Hambury, we walk over the crater, we go into the church, we spend time in the churchyard, and we go to the pub for lunch. There's something that changes in me, physically in that place. I feel that so, so deeply. It's made me think a lot about where I'd want my ashes to be. There's a connection there which is really, deep. It's interesting through the lifecycle how aspects of land have become important in different ways, at different times.

I mean the flowers come into bloom and then they die, and then new flowers come, and this is life. I think the ancestral piece is such a beautiful part of that too, because we can see ourselves as the ancestors.

Again, here, themes of land and death merge. Stories involving the supernatural may stretch some minds and ways of thinking about the world. Supernatural is a word used by the matriarchs themselves. An energy or force beyond what can be scientifically proven, the supernatural is a belief one may or may not hold. If it is a stretch for you, I invite you to just listen. No need to compare or contrast to your beliefs, just 'stay open' to listen to the story. As Weller (2015) writes,

The gift of grief is the affirmation of life and of our intimacy with the world. It is risky to say open and vulnerable in a culture increasingly dedicated to death, but without our willingness to stand witness through the power of our grief, we will not be able to stem the hemorrhaging of our communities, the senseless destruction of ecologies, or the tyranny of monotonous existence (p. 113).

Sharing these stories of grief and death openly embodies Weller's 'willingness to stand witness' and live with all the messiness of a full and complex emotional life, talking back to that 'monotonous existence'. To resist and deny what is difficult also blocks the power of not just the grief, but the love that drives it as well.

### **Supernatural**

Messages from the spirit world, through our dreams, the voices of our ancestors, plants, animals, land and the supernatural can deepen intelligence into deep wisdom and intuition. The ability and wisdom to hear the messages, warnings, and guidance from the great mystery is a way of deep listening beyond the manifest world. Abram (2019) says "atmosphere is that *through which* we see everything else-much as consciousness, which we cannot see or grasp, is that *through which* we encounter all other phenomena" (p. 151) (italics added). The matriarch

explored consciousness and phenomena as a presence in their stories that cannot be seen but instead must be felt or sensed.

Charlene: I find a lot of my life is not just in this world, my lived experiences come in the supernatural. In the physical realm, sometimes I can't tell if I am awake or asleep, in a vision or dream. I see what I will be doing, sometimes it takes a long time to come into being and sometimes it happens so fast.

Rachel: I felt some dark spirits in the rite of passage. The birds were amazing. I had a Barred Owl which visited every night and a Red Tailed Hawk which is a wonderful guide. I've had several journeys with the Red Tailed Hawk guiding me. This dark energy, I felt came from birds. I sensed them only in the fringes of experience. I had a very strong feeling that I didn't want them to come into my space. I felt that they were shadow birds, there to remind me to work on my shadow, and to be aware of dark entities. To be careful and to tread carefully and to protect myself. To deepen my ritual practice for self-protection.

I believe consciousness of who we truly are, can be so expanded through connecting with plant medicines in many ways... The plants can all help us with this work, psychedelic or not, for those open to this way of healing. The connection with the Universe and the grief, and who truly we are, it's been a magical journey for me.

To affirm all the experiences a full life offers, is to include not just what can be seen and proven but also the subtle realms. This wholeness is what connects lifecycles to a truly life affirming vision. To acknowledge the darkness in ourselves, as an energetic presence and in the world allows us to face what we need to with protection. To be authentic, as May (2020) says,

Sometimes the best response to our howls of anguish is the honest one. We need friends who wince along with our pain, who tolerate our gloom, and who allow us to be weak for a while when we're finding our feet again. We need people to acknowledge that we can't always hang on. That sometimes everything breaks. Short of that, we need to perform

those functions for ourselves: to give ourselves a break when we need it and to be kind.

To find our own grit, in our own time (p. 237).

It's so important, as recognized in the quote above, to have friends on this path. The acceptance described above is a safe space to allow all of life to unfold, even the parts that are commonly hidden. In *Split Tooth*, Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq writes, "There is nothing more beautiful than someone being real" (2018, p. 52). This state of being real is what I mean by a life affirming reality, the accepting of all of life's messy, beautiful complexity.

### **Life Affirming**

To affirm is to support, validate and encourage. Regarding the care of Mother Earth, we must move beyond sustaining the current destructive status quo and return to a life affirming and regenerative relationship. The matriarchs shared that there is a place for every one of us here at this time. Each of us has a purpose and a place within the circle of life. That to affirm life, is not to deny our experiences of grief and loss, but to embrace them. To keep living, beyond the pain and suffering that is part of the human experience, and to let those experiences strengthen us to be able to give back, to help others by sharing the wisdom gathered from our lived experiences.

Next, I asked about gender orientation, as I set out to interview women. This is a way to check my assumptions, that just because the interviewees present as female, that may not be the way they self-identify?

Charlene: That's a good question, I am a breadmaker, I don't know how important it is sometimes to have to say that. You know I love going against the normal society, what society accepts or what has been accepted. A binary like this or that. In our families or in our languages there has been up to eight or more genders identified. You're not shamed, for your role, you're honoured and lifted up, it's part of your vision, as to what role you want to walk in.

I'm going to share part of a song with you, cause this is what is stirring in my heart. To help us cause this is a big conversation, you're going to have to figure your way through, how you're writing, how you're presenting it... I appreciate that you ask.

*This teaching was shared in song and dance:*

Maybe Aunties, maybe Grandmothers, Sisters will come and stand with the young one to direct or teach her. In the outer circle, are those who are hunters/warriors. Those who are going to fight and protect. Cause it takes all of us to teach and help grow our young. Our responsibility. We invited guests to come and stand where you see yourself. We don't want to say it's just men or women, this or that. So, whatever it is, it's in our names. We have warriors within my family, like my mom. Strong leaders. Discipline, in activism and how you move, how we move in our community.

### **Colonization**

The systemic colonial patriarchy that pervades most of authority currently, has infected power dynamics within communities. Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais (2015) describe this power shift,

Only with the arrival of patriarchal religions and patriarchal social orders (through military, cultural, and religious invasions) did these societies experience a shift in regard to the role of women as inferior and subordinate, occurring approximately 4000 to 5000 years ago.

However, women's healing practices appear to have persisted (p. 20).

Patriarchal norms have discounted female knowledge, whereas knowledge or values produced and reinforced by males are represented as "true" information. The matriarchs also shared their lived experiences with me, of harassment, sexual abuse and violence. I chose to leave the most tender of personal harm out of the paper, to honour and protect those stories. To hear them and hold them gently. To acknowledge that outside of gender, we have all been harmed by colonial patriarchy and systemic oppressive dominance. Yet, we are not fully defined just as victims. My intention was never to compare the experiences of the matriarchs. As each interviewee shared

just one story from their lives with me, I recognize this is a small glimpse into their stories. It is a tender contrast to share how one woman discovered white privilege and the traditional way of life as a teenager, and another lived through multi-generational impacts of residential schools and colonial systems as an Indigenous matriarch. At the time of our story sharing, the news was full of reports of the found remains of Indigenous children, which brought grief into this research ceremony, and discussion of conciliation and how to share stories or even move forward together. Two matriarchs discussed forgiveness as being key in releasing the internalized pain they had been carrying.

In *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*, Chris Anderson (2013) expands the definition of identity as not just the decolonizing of who a person *is*, but also who they may *become*. Furthermore, Anderson states, “identity as *being*, essence, or sameness offers a sense of community and a point of solidarity” (p. 49). Whereas Anderson describes *becoming* as it relates to those parts of the self that are still fragmented from interruption and in need of integration. I witnessed that this *storywork* both recorded the matriarch’s presence and identity and turned the wheel of becoming. Where the listening was powerful for me, the storytelling was powerful for the matriarchs

### **Trauma**

Each woman spoke of a sexual trauma. In the book, *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis (1983) she acknowledges that, “after ages of silence, suffering and misplaced guilt, sexual assault is explosively emerging as one of the telling dysfunctions of present-day capitalist society” (p. 172). It is important to acknowledge the violence against women is connected to the violence against Mother Earth. Davis (1983) describes that the oppression of women is a crutch

for capitalism. As the grandmothers share their stories, together we weaken that crutch, and contribute to the necessary dismantling of colonial patriarchy.

The matriarchs shared stories of sexual harassment from a professor at university, remembered child sexual abuse, two experiences of disclosure and not being believed, abortion and remorse from sexual encounters. These stories were difficult to re-story. In the end, I decided to hold them privately and tenderly, as an open and unknown audience did not feel safe enough to share for both the safety of the matriarchs and the readers. Although these traumas shape and impact women in lasting ways, they do not define them as victims or survivors or label in any way as to who they are. As Anderson (2000) quotes Gloria Bird, “writing offers both a means to resist and an opportunity to reinvent” (p. 140). We reinvent our own story together, re-storying and restoring. I found that other topics of race, culture and colonization were also complex to narrate and navigate.

### **Loss**

Charlene: I have these beautiful things to think about, this old woman who had eleven children. Only one, my grandmother survived. They all were residential school babies, children, all taken. No explanation, not even given a choice. I only know one story of one of my great uncles. He was hit in the solar plexus, and he died. That's all I know. He was my Grandma's favorite brother.

I can't imagine being a mom and losing ten children. Whatever it was, it was not talked about in our Canadian history. My Grandmother was the only one to survive. I come from that line. That's why I think it's so important. She was born a Schooner. I really hold that up, because that was my lifeline of who I am and what I held onto.

I weave here, into the story, a pause. A place to hold loss tenderly. To allow silence and emotion to flow. To not attempt to rush past the immensity of lives 'lost'/taken. Here, complex values dance. Is life always as it is meant to be? I choose to believe that Creator will call each of

us home at our time, and I honour that return. Yet also, we are in a time of collectively grieving the horrors of Canada's genocidal residential school history and the inter-generational trauma from that is still alive within us individually and systemically. Collectively, we are all grieving. Grief can be described as a *rough initiation*. "It is a time of shedding and endings. The familiar world is left behind, and we exist at the edge of something without shape. It is a place of radical change" (Weller, 2015, p. 28). To not rush past the grief and be hurried allows grief to do its work of transformation.

Rachel: I sat under that Cedar and the tears flowed. That cedar tree absorbed so much grief and was so cleansing, comforting. She spoke to me and said, "I'm here for you - stand strong." The Cedar is the guide for so many of the trees, and what we are learning now about their communications through the mycelium networks...It is incredible. The longevity of the trees, they have been here for hundreds of years. What have they seen and witnessed? They are knowledge holders. The plants and the land hold all the teachings and all the knowledge that we need.

It was so beautiful. I heard, "That's enough - you don't need to live your life in grief.

There's work to be done right now. Don't let the grief prevent you from stepping into that connection with your higher self, your fullest potential. Let it go. You have the ability to do that."

Angelica said, "Forgive. Forgive yourself, forgive others."

Here, a teaching shared by Ruby Peter (2021) on grief comes to mind, "If you cry for a person all the time, you are keeping them in this world and not letting them go to the next World, you are holding them back and not letting them rest" (p. 37). This teaching affirms what Rachel said, grieve wholeheartedly, and then let go.

### **Forgiveness**

Two of the matriarchs' stories involved in depth experiences of hearing messages for the need to forgive themselves and others and to grieve into a space where it felt authentic for them

to let go. Both stories included *outrageous courage* and facilitation from guides, healers and ancestors. Both matriarchs shared how they felt lighter and freer from a heavy energy after finding forgiveness within themselves. This speaks to the necessary inner processing and healing as an essential part of the collective healing journey.

I hope that this transition is not callous. That readers can find within themselves the depth and complexity, to hold both grief and hope together, in both hands. With the reverence and tenderness, we cradle our newborns, or our elders' hands when they are frail, held with love.

### **Lived Experience/Life Story**

The stories the matriarchs told me of what they have lived through have been rearranged into topics that overlapped. There were several intersections and a way the experiences seemed to merge into a more circular narrative. I honoured the beauty and sovereignty of each story individually, yet the task I took on in this research was to find a way to share all three stories together. The responsibility was immense and beautiful. I believe there is great wisdom here. I trust you, reader, to hear what you need. As Atleo (2011) states,

...if this story reflects a credible truth about existence, then this truth is independent of time: it is timeless. Each listener is touched deep within her slash his psyche by the timeless truth of the story. Each listener knows by experience the necessity of failure, which is then linked to personal development and eventual success. Each listener recognizes and accepts the mystery and partial knowledge assumed in the story.

Ultimately, the story, like a parable is about life and its truths (p. 148).

This describes well the vast impact the stories had on me with the timeless truths shared. The human experiences that we all go through - grief, loss, family, forgiveness and love.

Charlene: I was allowed to go through these experiences, it's not like we're cursed. It's not a bad thing. Sometimes we're allowed to go through these hard things, we're allowed to

see, witnessing, because we might not have that knowledge or understanding unless we've gone through it. Sometimes it's going to be part of our lived experience. It's going to help you to move, and it's going to help you to reach others too. For those changes that are needed, you're the one who's eyes have been allowed to see it! Now you've got a responsibility, you can share it, that's what you're going to do. I have learned, you're never given more than what you can handle, without also giving you a way to stand underneath it. Sometimes I've said, "This is more than I can handle", but I didn't have the full picture. That means if you see something, experienced or witnessed it - it's because you're going to have the strength to get through it. You'll be given the strength. It's not going to be forced on you, but you're going to have what you need, it'll come. That supernatural strength in our stories of our lived experiences, where we are and what we're going to do. You are going to have the strength, and the knowledge, and the understanding to get through that. Maybe you're going to be able to share that with others to help them.

Rachel: In the culmination of this journey, what came was how to move forward. One piece is to encourage people to participate in these practices and to be in a place on the land. To be in a place that's special for them and simply be present there, bear witness and honour to what's going on in this place. Observing the smells and experiences in all sensory domains including the intuitive. Being in touch so deeply, open to all it has to offer.

Another piece came from the fire, we had a central fire going throughout for five days. The fire held us in connection and created the portal for movement into other worlds. The fire in the direction of the South, the energy moving forward, transmuting. When I think of the fire, I think of people coming together and sitting in circle. I've been envisioning, since the tragic, discovery of the children's remains (tears)... circles of self-reconciliation and how it might be valuable, just to open a space for settlers, and ancestors of settlers to share stories of what it means to live on this land. This is why your work is so, so precious because it's all it's all we can do – to share our stories, because that's the teaching.

This came up in an Indigenous studies course. We were encouraged to share, with traditional protocol, who we were. I think at that time, I was in a room, and everyone was Indigenous. I was sitting there, hearing people, and the pain in their stories, observing the tears that flowed. In that moment an overwhelming sense of grief arose for who I was and for my people. My ancestors and all their stories, the brutality, it was overwhelming. I sat there, this privileged white, faculty member, even with an English accent the voice of the oppressor! It was one of the most profound moments of my life. I started to wonder; OK how do we heal? How do we open and heal our grief? I'm hoping that this one of the things these circles may offer the beginning for our healing.

I said earlier that we must let go of grief, that there isn't time you know to dwell in it. It's an important part, it needs to be there, to be recognized but getting stuck there, prevents us from fulfilling our potential. To transform it, to allow it to flow, to move up into the higher chakras if you will, and to release from there. The Earth can swallow all our tears and is more than willing to do so - relish in our tears.

It's a beautiful story. It's not just one story, but many stories. Many intertwined stories, of three matriarchs. The grand love stories of their lives. From those first places, the land they love. The love turned into grief where there was loss. Even the grief held potential beauty too, as “we are stripped of excess and revealed as human in our times of grief. Grief ripens us, pulls up from the depths of our souls what is most authentic in our beings” (Weller, 2015, p. 8). The challenges faced fortified the resolve to live fully, driven by the love for their children, partners, families, ancestors, the love for this place, for Mother Earth, love for the plants. What I'm hearing is a beautiful love story. Each story is circular. Each story is a lifecycle, winding and returning, a feedback loop. As Lefkoff (2018) says feedback loops are “a tool to keep us resilient, adaptive, and optimistic” (p. 108). The matriarch, like any enduring system, responded to the shift with adaptive resilience.

Together, the collective story is circular, spiralling. Deep listening requires a letting go of a linear, dichotomized way of thinking to embrace the journey the speaker takes us on. The matriarchs have shared wisdom through their lived stories. There was rich silence, juicy laughter, tender tears, and emotions flowing between myself and the matriarch storytellers.

Welcoming our sorrow eases the heart and places within ask, allowing them to open and freeing us to once more feel our kinship with the living presence around us this is deep activism, soul activism that actually encourages us to connect with the tears of the world (Weller, 2015, p. 75).

Lillian: I think the biggest thing if I wanted to give a message to other people, looking for love in their lives, is - don't shut the doors. If I had been going through the personal ads or you know nowadays that you know doing Internet dating, I wouldn't even have finished reading his profile (her late and beloved husband). Right, because you know he was he was too old, he was into cars and country music, (laughter) he was religious, Christian religious - and I left Christianity behind when I was thirteen. He read the Bible every day, said grace at every meal, type Christian, serious. I never, ever would have thought that we could have been so happy together but early in our relationship after this magnetism, is just like it's never going to work. It's never going to work, so we should stop now before anybody gets hurt. So, we kept splitting up, and then accidentally/on purpose, running into each other. The first couple of months, it was (push-pull hand gesture). We went on our first camping trip together, and we stayed up all night talking. We decided, we can't know if it's going to work if we don't try it. Obviously, the chemistry is working! (Laughter) We made an agreement that he would not try to convert me and make me a Christian, and that I would not roll my eyes and make denigrating comments about things I find foolish in Christianity. We did that for twenty years; we kept that pact. It was a partnership, there was respect on both sides. What more can you ask for? And of course, love!

Rachel: There's so many gates of grief and I suggest we connect and to honour them; to transform. This pain, into great things together. Just simply sharing of stories and finding rituals too. Ritualize life and ritualize community. Another part of this and it comes back and maybe the final piece really is something that you mentioned at the beginning and that is the life cycle. Life and death. Of course, death creates so much grief. We live in denial of death. This is another piece I think that is so important to embrace, because when you're in the forest and you're on the land and you see it everywhere. Everything we're doing can be sacred. Everything is completely sacred! Isn't it?!

Charlene: That healing, that wholeness, it's here – don't give up because things do get better. I never laughed as much as I have laughed in my lifetime. I've never had that freedom to be able to just feel that fullness. The first twenty years, I was quiet, the second twenty years I began talking, from forty years onward I started learning to write. That was during my university days. Different stages, different times, the power of our experience or our knowledge of where we are for this place or the work we're going to do. What are we called to do? I know you walk in the same realms. Not just in a place of head knowledge, but you walk with what you carry deep within you. That's important. That's important for ALL of us because some people have pushed down their spiritual or emotional connections. Not being able to bring it all together, because we can't separate one from the other. Some focus on certain areas, we see the physical, but there are other parts of us that need to come together, that's healing. Part of that joy, part of the peace, and that love. I've never felt so loved and so important! I didn't know how valuable I was; it comes in pieces. A little bit further, it just takes the next step, you've just got to keep going. I made it through my dark years. I talked to my Great Grandmother the most through that time to help me, and I prayed with my Mom.

Through their stories, the interviewees encourage us to stay open to love, life, the hurts and the wholeness and to carry our purpose and calling, not as a human 'doing', but as spiritual beings here on Earth. To witness life, death and the supernatural is where we can listen to the wisdom being shown in these moments. To keep sharing our stories is to live on in sacred ritual

and love. I cannot tease apart the connection to the land, to lifegivers, and the ancestor matriarchs and communities who have raised up the matriarchs I had the honour to sit and listen to because it is all part of their beings and their stories. The themes merged and were all present and interconnected.

The matriarchs guided me to the wonderful dance of storyteller and story listener. I came to feel and understand the beauty of listening. To not just focus on the wielding of the pen, but to become a willing and blank page was to allow their stories to be written on my heart and with my whole being. To allow the cutting of tremendous pain and abuses to open me was to let my tears purify those wounds to make space for healing. To laugh with my whole body, and let their joy move through me, and live on in me as it is now shared between us was to welcome their love into my heart and magnify the love that is already alive there. For me, there is no doubt that the stories of matriarchs are needed now, to guide our lives with nurturance. I know this need, as it is/was mine.

### **Lifegivers**

Honouring lifegivers and matriarchs is not the reverse dynamic of colonial patriarchy. To honour lifegivers is to refuse internalising attempts of colonial erasure, to speak in our mother tongue, to raise up our relations, daughters, sisters, aunties, grandmothers and Mother Earth. In *Holy Wild; Poems Anishinaabe* trans poet Gwen Beneway (2018) writes “We are apane kwe (woman) we are Aki (the land/earth) nothing takes her from us and this is what makes us holy” (p. 19). Beneway describes the sacredness of women, not from socialized gender constructs, but from her lived experience. Neidhardt (2019) also states “We need balance with the feminine” (p. 183). We are unified through our Mothers heartbeats, the first primordial sound that is our inheritance and responsibility. Dr. Christiane Northrup describes this bond in *Mothers-Daughter*

*Wisdom; Understanding the Crucial Link Between Mothers, Daughters and Health* as us being, “formed in the soil of our mothers’ emotions, beliefs, and behaviors. Even before birth, our mother provides us with our first experience of nurturing” (2005, p. 3). To honour lifegivers is to affirm life and live fully.

### **Inheritance**

Charlene: When I introduce myself, I love being able to say the names of my grandmothers, my mothers, the women. And this all started because I was wanting to find the name of my great grandmother, who was one of Captain Schooner’s wives. All I knew, it was Mrs Captain Schooner – you know European history has a way of doing that, they erase women's identity. They erase the role and the importance of our moms, our grandmothers, our sisters, our daughters.

I wanted to say my grandmother's names because there was a time within European history that men had the rights. Men would have the right to beat their wife with a stick the size of their finger, whether it was ever enforced, do you think anyone ever measured what women were beaten with? Men held that right. You became as though you didn't matter or who you were anymore. Now you are just the property of your husband. European or English law. For me, I just love being able to resist, when I came to school, I thought the best thing I could do is lift up their names.

My great grandmother, Ga’Nelth-gus they called her the Old Lady. Not in a Western way, it's not a negative or derogatory. The Old Woman, the Old Lady, they also called her Mum. In the village they all called her Mum. Leaders and chiefs, they would come to our house, and they would discuss with her, what needs to be done, consult.

I grew up in a city. We left the village when I was a baby, when my great grandmother passed away, as I said she was the one, that leaders, high-up leaders would come and sit with her, and they would consult. They would come to our house, that was the type of respect in our community. The women carried the rights. The women are the rightful holders of names, of songs and dances. The rights go through the women in my family. I'm not saying it's like that everywhere, but I want to say that in our family, within our nation, that is the proper way.

McCabe (2018) urges that people listen directly to Mother Earth for guidance,

We all have access to this Mother Earth. The goal for me is to just keep saying to people, that's your birth right. That's your inheritance. This mother Earth's heart can tell you how to be here. That is how it's always been (20:24).

Many scholars are encouraging this return to feminine inheritance, honouring that it is a traditional way and yet that return in leadership will also be a new phase for Mother Earth. As Roessel (2018) states that is why (Indigenous) women should be leading,

We have a spiritual connection to the land, recognition of how to restore balance to achieve harmony and adapt to a changing climate. We can teach Western society about how to sustain and heal Mother Earth (p. 114).

This affirms many of the research themes here: connection, land, and matriarchs in leadership.

Furthermore, Roessel links spirituality to a harmonious climate, both environmentally and socially. As Cree/Métis professor Kim Anderson (2000) builds on this vision in *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* when she cites educator Myra Laramee, who says "Your grandmothers are standing there waiting for you to ask the question" (p. 30). Our grandmothers are guiding us and want for us to listen.

### **Nourishment**

Charlene: I've even shared stories at the university of being a breadmaker. Bread can tell your identity and where you are from. It's like a fingerprint, as to how you make your bread or your bannock. Making bread shows the resiliency of our people. Our strength. Processed wheat wasn't a food that was natural or grew Indigenous to our lands and people. It's something we've taken, and made it become something embraced within community. Fresh bread helps you remember home. It makes you think of your mom, or your auntie, or your grandma. Or the best breadmaker! It's a memory that brings life. It's a safe memory. It's a happy memory. These are passed down, within the kitchen, around the kitchen table.

Feasting or feeding the people is a big thing in our communities. Some people might not think very highly of a cook. Someone who's preparing food is sharing a big honor. A gift. It is respected, it's not shunned. I loved that I heard one brother share in a paper he was working on of ceremony. His master's thesis says, "In ceremonies, there isn't any one person higher or greater than the other". That's something that he pulled out as part of his healing journey through research. So "whether you're doing the work - whether you cut the wood for the fire, or if you've cooked something, maybe you've said a prayer or few words, all are important. Not one is above the other". I think within Western society, there's SO much more, that never gets recognized in a good way. You know, this was my goal, I wanted to be a Mum. I wanted 12 children! Now, it's like I've graduated to the next level. Wow! So beautiful to be a grandmother! It's fun! Yeah, I can have fun!

### **Gratitude**

Lillian: Thank you for thinking I was a worthy interviewee! And giving me a chance to just talk and talk. It was one of the things I loved about midwifery. I always loved telling stories about how different families dealt with issues, and what babies are like... I love telling stories!

Rachel: The lessons, they were from the plants from the land - they hold the knowledge. If we if we can just find the time, to just sit still, in a place. Oh, my goodness, in holding a rock there's a connection. What we can connect and what we can know by holding a stone, or any object astounds me. The unity of all things - that there is no separation. We think about the land, the sky, the water, it all just is. Benjamin Lee Whorf said "the segmentation of nature is an aspect of grammar" - as soon as we name something, it's not that, it's this. It isolates things which I know has value, but what we've really lost is the ultimate unity of everything (laughs) our experience is lost, or at least missing something. that came through so, so powerfully. I'm not just me, I'm all the people. I started to visualize people that are been on that land, Indigenous peoples what had happened there, and I started to think I'm no different from any of them. I have the same emotions, the same hopes, the same dreams, the same love for my children. As one of the elders used to say, "We're all Indigenous from somewhere". We are, my goodness, we are.

We can live on this land together. For the most part, many people have not chosen to walk that path. We're all healing. I think that the split from the land is drives the divisions in the world. It's being separated from our connection with the land. I think part of the way we can connect with the land, is just to be on it, for a period, with nothing, or very little. Indigenous cultures have known this forever, walkabouts, vision quests. It's a connection with the land. It's getting that guidance, receiving that message, the teaching from the land. It's not just from the land, it's from within, it's from everything but the land is the portal. So, this was so profound for me. It brought into clarity for me my connection with the land.

Rachel's story highlights the complexity and circular nature of lived experiences. Instead of emotional dichotomies, poet Naomi Shahib Nye writes,

Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside you must know sorrow is the other deepest thing you must wake up with sorrow. You must speak it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth (cited in Weller, 2015, pp. 13-14).

Nye's poem acknowledges that we cannot shy away from the power and magnitude of the emotional landscape. The 'size of the cloth' is vast, yet so is human's capacity to feel and transform. As Weller writes, "Grief dares us to love once more" (2015, p. 14). The courage to feel deeply is a necessary part of this transformation, in the landscape of each of our bodies and the greater collective ecosystem. Releasing the power of our grief, may emerge in the loving power required for radical (re)emergence.

### **Ceremony**

All the matriarchs discussed experiences that held deep personal meaning. Examples that were shared with me were cultural ceremony, rites of passage, and travel. As Joseph Campbell's (2008) *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the Hero's Journey demonstrates a map for personal growth and transformation, the grandmothers lived experiences spoke to the sacredness of living through many transformations. As Campbell discussed, the journey included initiations,

challenges, guides, and a return/rebirth with new capacity or gifts to share. I found it interesting that two women calmly spoke of their own deaths as an upcoming transformation.

I honour every woman who steps forward to lead, whether that is in her family, community or in the world. Somehow, it felt fitting, to end, with the beginning. Despite the dominant norm of patriarchy, the lifegivers who shared their stories have held onto their own lives by honouring their lived experiences, uplifting others and remembering the responsibility to give back, to help where they can. The inheritance of wisdom, nurturance and gratitude in the stories we tell and share together are beautiful. As Starblanket (2018) writes, “the intent is for these efforts to contribute to the restoration of our ability to practice the relationships with people, places and practices that were disrupted through colonialism” (p. 29). This resurgence is not aimed at revenge or retribution, but rather a return to right relationships with self, community and the land. LaDuke (2005) says this resurgence is for all humanity, as we are more alike than different,

...it is said that we are 99.9% the same, at least in terms of our DNA. What accounts for the amazing difference between peoples, colors, cultures and worldviews is one aspect of the wonder of being human. The way one comes to understand this diversity is neither through measuring a person's head nor through crushing that skull with a rock; understanding can only come through the nuance of relationships (p. 67).

This is where these conversations with matriarchs are so important, beyond ‘difference’ the seeking to relate and understand one another so we can truly hear and learn from each other as a powerful form of collective resurgence. As Starblanket (2018) says this relational resurgence “subverts the individualism that characterizes contemporary liberal society, while honoring and carrying forward the way of life of those who came before us” (p. 31). This quote explains how

change starts with the individual, yet has the potential to expand to a shift on a much larger forum. This resurgence, rooted as much in all that came before us, as it is inspired by our future is a necessary re-turn towards connected community. As Larry Emerson (2018) says,

Let's light a sacred fire and smoke tobacco together and put down some cedar and be mindful with each other and with the *diyin dinée* again and learn how to be in kinship and in relationship again ... in a sacred way. What you need to know is not in a book (p. 65).

The matriarchs offered me more than I can put to page in this sacred re-search ceremony, and yet the commitment is to try.

### **Concluding The Ceremony**

The matriarchs all had valuable lived experiences and stories to share, Simpson (2020) writes, "some stories are stories and some are just facts, facts so important that story can't mess with them" (p. 267). This statement is a way to resist the negative connotation that certain voices are 'just' stories, and to assert instead a self-determination and prevailing truth to a person's lived experiences that won't be undermined or deterred by opposing or even dominant critical narrative. The matriarchs were all thankful to share and be listened to. In each interview, we shared laughter, tears and moments of insight. The connection formed through sharing and listening was nourishing for me as the listener, and each story felt perfectly timed, to carry the exact wisdom I needed in that moment. Certainly, matriarchs have wisdom to share on how humans can live in kinship and contribute to a care-centered relationship with the land we live on and with. As Neidhardt (2019) says "As we move forward we would do well to find commonality in each other's beliefs, while appreciating our own" (p. 180). Each matriarch

expressed not just the ability to find this commonality, but a willingness and enthusiasm towards that undertaking.

I was deeply touched that every interview concluded with the matriarch asking if we could share more time together. With many of the matriarchs of my family in the spirit world, my longing for women's wisdom led me on this re-search quest, and in return, my longing was mirrored by the matriarchs. My need to hear stories felt aligned with their need to share their stories. In this way, I saw listening as both a gift and a way to be of service. It is time to re-story our lives. As poet and activist Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) encourages in, *The Body is Not an Apology; The Power of Radical Self-Love*, "some of the stories have helped us understand this wild ride through humanity, whereas others have kept us cut off from radical self-love" (p. 72). As storytellers we can chose to re-story with the life-affirming narratives of matriarchs and lifegivers who nurture, sustain and regenerate us throughout the cycles of life. For story listeners, the stories that acknowledge the depth and complexity of our experiences, authentically may acknowledge and affirm our lived experiences. Stated by Yunkaporta et al. (2020), "Narrative is one of the most powerful ways of using metaphor to influence creation, these new disconnected stories have had a devastating impact on existence" (p. 8), to harness their creative power to influence, re-connect, teach, and heal both the devastating impacts and re-story the future of our collective existence.

Every story was life-affirming and uplifting, with moments of beauty that encouraged a regenerative attitude towards our human survivance. This included challenges and traumas that the matriarchs had faced, and how they found healing and fortified their spirits. Every story was filtered through the lens of a lifegiver, and I felt that aspect of their mothering could not be

teased out and reduced from the core of who the matriarchs are in the world. Certainly, their life giving had affected and changed them and offered unique insights. As Blackie (2018) says,

Living in balance with the land, is at the heart of all Irish mythology... It's very woman centered. Woman as a representative of the land. Our stories, our oldest stories, tell us very clearly that if we don't respect the land, if we don't listen to it, if we don't live in balance and harmony with it, if we don't respect the feminine, who in some way represents it, then that channel is blocked. The flow of positive healing energy is blocked and the land becomes a wasteland (22:22).

Many would say we are living this prophecy now. Where it is impossible to return to an imagined matriarchal utopia of the past, it may be possible to unblock these feminine channels and bring healing for Mother Earth and our future ancestors. For the sake of our children and theirs, I would say – we must do this work and be this change.

## Chapter 5: Reflections, Responsibilities, Prayers and a Letter to my Daughter

### Story Listening

What is a story without a reader, or a listener? A story being told without anyone to hear is an internal narrative, a meditation, a monologue, a reflection. Systems of power can be a platform for amplifying a person's voice or a barrier to being heard. As Breunlin (2020) writes, we resist those barriers by remembering, "If the purpose of violence is to extinguish certain people, knowledges and perspectives, then memory continues to resist that violence" (p. 2). Furthermore, in sharing stories we resist "against the comfort of monologue" (Bird Rose cited in Breunlin, p. 2). This is important because Bird Rose and Breunlin are acknowledging that the dominant narrative often becomes comfortable, or at least familiar. That is why it is necessary for diverse representation that includes a greater variety of stories and lived experiences, so that the dominant narrative does not become so comfortable that it cannot evolve. As Anderson (2000) writes, "the listener has as much a part in the creation of the story as the teller. In this way, the listener also carries responsibility for the knowledge that is transmitted" (p. 49). This is to say that sharing stories is a way to share knowledge, and with the gift of hearing stories comes a responsibility to carry, protect and share that knowledge in the appropriate context.

While my responsibility was to research the story-telling of the matriarchs, I realize now in hindsight that the work I was doing was *story-listening*. I was as much part of this research as Anderson says because I now carry the responsibility of these stories in me. As Leighton (2021) calls a 'listening in' which is, "having the ability to set aside any preconceptions and just listen" (p. 1). 'Just' listening is more important than I initially understood and guided this emergent research journey.

### The Return

This story-listening has been a yearlong ceremony. Like other ceremonies in my life, for example a Sweat Lodge or Moon Dance, it took me to places of difficulty and despair where I wanted to give up. It challenged me to quit. Every cell in my body said, “Run, don't walk, away”. Those experiences took me to the edges of myself, standing at the threshold, the place where my capacity has ended. I thought, I cried, I endured. And in that endurance came a growth where my capacity grew a little more. And it's this ‘little more’, this doing of a hard thing, that can lead to feeling a greater sense of strength and even triumph. It is this resiliency thinking and triumph in the bliss that calls me back to ceremony, again and again. Like all ceremony, the prayer lives on beyond the ritual. My prayer for this work is that my voice is balanced by the strength of my story-listening. As May (2020) writes, “I start to retell my own story again, if only to myself. That’s what humans do, we make and remake our stories, abandoning the ones that no longer fit and trying on new ones for size” (p. 22). This research has given me a space to engage with women in leadership, ready to remake our collective stories. It’s this new emerging story that fuels my hopefulness for the future, for my nieces and my daughter, and Mother Earth.

I sought the value in holding space for another person to share what they’ve lived through. “I think the wisest thing is being humble and listening. We live in a very arrogant society. Listening has to do not only with listening to myself, but listening to nature and listening to very simple people” (Harman, 1999, p. 99). I listened in a welcoming way to a story, mostly to just welcome it in and that includes stories not just from scholars or people in positions of power, but people with other ways of knowing too. This is the wise humility Harman speaks to.

Towards the end of this research ceremony, I supported my daughter (age six) in a ceremonial initiation<sup>11</sup>. She did many hard things to meet her responsibilities. When I asked her, was it worth it? She shared with me that she had always wanted to see a bat. And each night we watched the bats perched on top of a teepee, witnessing us pray. She slept on the earth, beside the big drum, while we danced to the sound of the owls. The next morning, she woke up and told me her new name is Fierce Owl. I learned from this, that we can learn and heal in our sleep in ways that are mysterious. Most importantly, her ceremony showed her that shooting stars are real. It was a great challenge to meet my ceremonial responsibilities whilst supporting my young daughter in her ceremony, and we found our way together emerging more connected and resilient. In this way the research I offer carries the same intention, to open doors for new opportunities and understanding where possible. The beauty of witnessing someone discover the real magic of a shooting star, helps me to endure and walk alongside them through the fear and darkness a person must face to grow. I conclude with a large sense of gratitude in my heart, for everyone who held my hand and held me up through the dark nights of this research.

### **Living with the Stories**

There were late nights and early mornings where I would awaken with stories in my mind. Thoughts of the stories shared with me; thoughts of the stories that were going to be shared with me pulled me from dreamworld back to the work. I would get up to jot down thoughts and notes. The stories were often lying beside me in my bed taking up space, keeping me company, calling me to awaken. I also experienced many days of not being able to bear the interruption of the stories I was living into by people in my life. The need for solitude and to dive deeply into the

---

<sup>11</sup> Respectfully, I cannot offer further context here, as aspects of ceremony are not for the public gaze. As a minor, I chose not to divulge details of my daughter's ceremonial life to the public, as she cannot consent. I mention the experience, as it held many important realizations for me regarding the research ceremony, which were layering simultaneously at this time.

process revealed to me what it means to have a deep responsibility for the care of another person's story.

### Voice

University doesn't have to be a difficult place for sensitive people, yet for me, it was. It was easy to confuse the need for the constant defense of my thoughts, ideas and heart with actually being under attack. This has been very stressful and oftentimes painful. Belcourt (2020) described it as I experienced it, "Grad school was the wrong place for someone like me with an appetite for the utopian. But I was an idea in love with an idea-where else was I supposed to shelter this form of love?" (p. 93). I survived how I always have – I made a dear friend, Chris Short. That friendship sheltered me in moments I felt lost and adrift, encouraged me to persevere and continuously reignited the spark of enthusiasm towards the research.

This research has given me the gift of hearing three strong leaders tell parts of their stories. From their sharing, I've been able to laugh, cry, and relate to them and their lived experiences. I've come to know each of them more than when we began this work together. Story-listening has shown me how to prepare for a story, welcome a story, be threshed and affected by a story and to be willing to listen for the sake of witnessing. By welcoming stories inside me, this research has invited the lived experience of each matriarch to change me. It has taken a willingness in me to be transformed by their stories and to be willing to shift my point of view, and is to my mind, a valuable skill. The willingness to change one's mind is necessary for the commitment of decolonizing works as well. As Alfred (2019) says, "the country's roots as a colonizing enterprise have created a pattern and a structure to the relationships between all people and between people and the land in this country that is ultimately destructive to everyone and everything involved" (p. 127). To shift destructive relationships of power and oppression, is

to change our minds about the dominant patriarchal and colonial narrative and (once more) become *storymakers*.

### **Small Acts of Decolonization**

I've come to a deeper understanding, on the work of allied decolonizing research within the academic arena. As an idea, an agreement, an invitation, better yet, an act of decolonial love. Working and learning alongside a friend and teacher has shown me how pedagogy becomes praxis. I raise my hands to Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation member, Fred Speck and his family. After a day of collaboration and teaching a group of VIU students about plants with Fred, I wrote this reflection...

The work of decolonizing must also happen off the page, on the land and in community.

Those of us with European ancestry with revolution in our hearts who are willing to do our work and be guided by Indigenous leadership, we must show up now.

As I have heard Fred and many others say, "When community calls, you answer". Throughout our work we laugh often, filling each other's cups and lifting each other up. We share work and care that's from the heart. Decolonizing happens in relationships by breaking oppressive power structures and work guided by reciprocity and respect. Decolonizing happens when we work inter-culturally from a place of mutual honouring and care towards helping heal historical rifts of *other* and instead embrace one another. Dismantling colonial power systems isn't for credit, a grade, program requirements, or to fulfill the necessary expectations to graduate or to publish. The work of intercultural connection is knowing what nation a friend is from, acknowledging them, perhaps even in their language, greeting in a lasting embrace heart-to-heart. I believe much of this work won't be kept inside the classroom but when we step outside the university onto sacred ground. I witnessed this happening for students during Nature Therapy Walks with Dr.

Camie Augustus. I witnessed this with Laurie Meyer Dress during the course, Land Is Life. I was barefoot, we were standing in a circle, singing, drumming, and praying together. Here we were able to come together in a ceremonial way and recognize this as the highest place of learning. We gave gifts to each other and shared our mutual wealth. My daughter was there witnessing, as were Fred's wife and son. In this way, our work flows to, and from, our families. In that circle, there is a place for feelings, tears, lived experience, and everyone is truly welcome in the circle. The learning then, *is* ceremony. This is the space of decolonial love.

### **Carrying Forth Intentions**

From this research, I hope to share these stories to add to the presence of matriarchal perspectives and why that is important for environmental education. I hope that this research might help other environmental educators and communicators find value in utilizing decolonizing methods that welcome diverse voices and to see the benefits and validity of gathering women's lived stories as research to illustrate the importance of our connection with the Earth. This study increased my abilities and understanding as I work with women's stories in my work in First Nation's maternal health research and programming. I look at the implications of the research as a responsibility I now carry, to bring out into the world and share with others. Macy (2003) expresses my feeling when she writes,

I am inspired by the growth of our field; my hope is that, in the decades to come we will experience a continued increase in critically informed intercultural and inter-Indigenous sharing and collaboration in the spirit of mutual respect, reconciliation and a common love for the Land (p. 131).

This common love for the land is what connects and drives all who contributed to this research ceremony. Or perhaps, it's the land's way of loving us as well?

### Healing

As Moondance grandmother, Abuela Anna shared in ceremonial teachings, “if we do the work, things can change. We can heal the world” (personal communication, July 2021). I don’t believe there’s a simple solution for what that work is, yet I do believe it is that mother bear’s fierce love that is needed now. I do believe deep listening is key in becoming more life-centered, kin to Mother Earth and all her inhabitants and may be a part of hearing the guidance required for those next steps in the work.

In *Pleasure Activism; The Politics of Feeling Good*, Adrian Marie Brown (2019) writes this poem, which she calls a *Radical Gratitude Spell*

you are a miracle walking  
i greet you with wonder  
in a world which seeks to own  
your joy and your imagination  
you have chosen to be free,  
every day, as a practice.  
i can never know  
the struggles you went through to get here,  
but i know you have swum upstream  
and at times it has been lonely  
i want you to know  
i honor the choices you made in solitude  
and i honor the work you have done to  
belong

i honor your commitment to that which is  
larger than yourself  
and your journey  
to love the particular container of life  
that is you  
    you are enough  
your work is enough  
you are needed  
your work is sacred  
you are here  
and i am grateful (p. 401-2).

I am grateful reader, that you are here. This work is sacred, and I hope, enough. For now.

### **Recommendations**

Moving forward, if this research ceremony was continuing for another round, I would delve more deeply into researching decolonial love and a relationship with story listening. The focus on listening can challenge colonial messages of dominance for both people and the environment through the will to be guided, and can challenge a linear top-down power structure. Story listening can be a way of saying, I can learn from other people, birds, plants and all of the natural world because there is no aspect of creation that is unimportant or 'less than'. Some will read this work and find the study of three matriarchs too small to be powerful. I would argue that a return to local communities and smaller tightly knit circles can bolster a regenerative relationship with the environment. I would encourage every single voice to be considered worthy of having an important story to share, and one worth listening to. I passionately want to take this

work forward and continue listening to grandmothers and helping with the work of sharing their wisdom and stories. I hope this research contributes to the critical participation in leadership of mothers and grandmothers and to recognize them in the scholarly arena as experts with wisdom rooted in lived experience. I hope this research has adequately documented the legacy of the stories the matriarchs shared with me, for their families and anyone willing to learn from their lived experiences. Unfortunately, the confines of having to analyze and work with the 'data' instead created a fourth story. Each matriarch will need to decide if there is another vehicle that I can assist with in communicating the story that was shared with me such as: a podcast, journal article, or a compilation of a book. For now, I offer their unique stories edited into a written gift for themselves and their families. The future aspect of this work is yet to unfold.

### **Future Prayers/Responsibilities**

When discussing privilege and positionality, I've come to realize that education should be named as such. The opportunity, time, and costs of education is made possible by other socio-economic factors, and yet having an education is an important privilege that carries inherent responsibilities. As Oluo (2019) writes, "Leverage your privilege to make real, measurable change toward a better world" (p. 69). When education is acknowledged in this way, the research and knowledge created by scholars can aim towards 'real change'. According to Oluo, part of how this can be done is by acknowledging the comforts in your life and asking yourself who does not have this "freedom and opportunity" I have now (p. 69). It is recognizing this space for potential opening and acting in alignment that expands opportunities from the individual towards the collective. This is working together this is collaborative decolonial love.

Research can be a tool to uphold or dismantle oppressive systems. Research can be a forum to silence or uplift voices. I hope this research contributes to an academic space for an

embodied circle of more care-centered and relational pedagogy, where relationships are honoured as a life-sustaining resource, and not an ethical liability.

My personal experience in this work highlights the importance of mentors and inter-generational knowledge sharing, for the prosperity of both the storyteller and the listener. As more matriarchs share their insights, listening will be a crucial early stage of moving towards a more collaborative and harmonious future together. Having the matriarchs I interviewed and the professors on my committee as well as the mentors, friends and ceremonial sisters who contributed to this re-search ceremony, changed my way of looking at the world. Each matriarch offered guidance and wisdom that helped me on my journey. I heard their encouragement to challenge my thoughts and assumptions, to open my mind, and all the while maintain strong, protective boundaries. I witnessed their ways of working with people and how to be a fierce, loving force in the world. Those gifts will stay with me, they have given me so much. I am humbled by the magnitude of their caring and generosity. I was shown how to resolve conflict by staying connected and working together. I feel honoured and blessed to have had the opportunities to sit with each of them, and to do this re-search. I am inspired by all that a teacher can be to a person.

This shift in perspective may serve as an example of a research journey that contributes to dismantling the capitalist colonial patriarchy *within myself*. As Sherri Mitchell (2019) says, The profound impact of changing your own structure, the profound impact of changing your own heart and mind, of decolonizing your own mind, of removing all of the blocks that exist between your heart and mind, of reconnecting your umbilical cord to the Earth, being able to take responsibility for your own being, not just in a physical sense, not just in the walk of your life sense, (though that's important) but really to change the

vibrational frequency of your own being, to elevate that to the highest vibration that you can, to do that radically changes the world. (27:30)

I see this as a lifelong journey and commitment to decolonial love. The willingness to change heart and mind, to stop dominating and attempting to control the environment we live in, and allow all of life, is to bring forth those changes for us all.

From there, collectively, perhaps we can create a shift towards greater life affirming kinship in regenerative and loving relationship with Mother Earth. In “The Serviceberry; An Economy of Abundance”, Kimmerer (2013) describes regenerative reciprocity where “wealth is understood as to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships” (p. 377). This generosity of spirit has the potential to guide us away from the exhaustive hungry ghost of constant capitalist expansion and extractivism.

I hope that this re-search has expressed that land and place are not just an important aspect of research, but are in fact everything: the guide, the container for the work, the listener and the storyteller. Wall-Kimmerer (2013) confirms, “land as teacher, land as healer” (p. 333). This kind of shift of perspective, to seeing land as a source of knowledge and insight, may support a greater responsibility towards the sustenance and protection of the land. The place that the interviews were held had an additional presence, the birds, the weather of that day, the trees and plants, all bore witness too. Throughout my time re-searching I was also deepening my work with the medicinal plants around us, and even more importantly, listening to their teachings too.

### **Speaking Truth to Power and Systems of Power**

Macy and Brown (2014) suggest,

Speak the truth of your experience of this world. If you have persistent responses to present conditions, assume that they are shared by others. Willing to drop old answers

and old roles, give voice to the questions that arise in you (p. 60).

I have also done this, I have followed questions, I have listened to the answers in deep ways. I have been willing to be inconvenienced and uncomfortable and in turn, offered what I can towards change.

As ethnographer Richardson (2003) reflects, "I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to know something that I did not know before I wrote it" (p. 924). This knowledge creation happens through both the *writing process* and *writing product*. Like Richardson, I hoped I would learn and grow through this process, and I have.

Our futures are in the hands of our children and their children. The matriarchs shared this life-centered outlook and care towards our future ancestors' generations. As Meyer (2013) writes,

*Be of service to that.* Respond with your life to the questions of your heart. Don't make it only about cognitive accumulation of information. We do not have the luxury of time. Discover what interdependence *really* means by listening to others, by watching how those who have more experience do things, and by sharing ideas when asked. Then go out and watch the moon rise and swim in waters freshly seasoned with Spring rains (p. 99).

I have responded and conversed with the questions in my heart. I have lived this ceremony and been faith full to it. I have *really* listened. I have felt *really* listened to. I have been guided by the matriarchs, and the experience of my committee/guides. I danced and prayed under the moon, swam in every river and lake along the way, and I am ready to plant myself to gestate into the next life cycle of unfolding.

### **Mothering**

It is within this life-affirming stance, as a lifegiver myself, that I conclude this research with a letter to my daughter. It has been the greatest gift of my life, to be a lifegiver. To give my daughter life, has given my life greater meaning. I believe the next generation are the living seeds/heartbeat/intersection where life cycles, life affirming, and lifegivers connect.

As I wrote about relationships with place, it is important to say where I am, still sitting in the home I've lived in for more than a decade on Vancouver Island. The leaves are falling, my garden is sleeping, and the rest and dreamtime of Winter is approaching.

Therefore, this research is offered as a prayer, that we hear Mother Earth calling us. In the same way that my mother whistled for me at suppertime, warning us that darkness is coming, I pray that we all hear this call. I pray we hear and respond in time, in a good and loving way. As Kimmerer (2013) urges, I have explored and experienced the potency of stories, hoping to re-story my relationship to the land, and to share that gift with others. I have become a storyteller, making "new ones woven from the threads of the old" (p. 341). I have left threads and prayers for those who come next to weave and make beautiful stories with.

In the end, I asked each matriarch for a message to my young daughter, Luna. Luna was only three years old at that time when I went back to school at Vancouver Island University. I felt she was young for me to be away doing school. I've been on my own journey of reconciling the grief and honouring in my work because I am writing about lifegivers and mothering. I'm exploring the dance between the time and energy I gave up being with her, to do this academic work. That feeling of loss is difficult to reconcile. I have been with her, but also away. I have been trying to learn something, so that I can share it with her, and in many ways, we've gone on this learning path together. The ending of my thesis is a letter to her and so my last concluding

question for each matriarch was: If you had a piece of advice or something to say to Luna or a 6-year-old girl, what would you want to say?

### **A Letter for Luna, Age Six**

Dear Luna,

Lillian: Always know that you deserve respect. That's something that I didn't grow up knowing. I think there are still too many people in the world, especially women and girls, who don't know that about themselves. We all deserve love and respect.

Charlene: I can see the strength in your eyes. You're beautiful, lovely, and powerful. You carry a strength and gifts. It's a great responsibility you have, that you come from a strong line of women. It's a great responsibility, because it's in you, it's in your blood. Luna, the things you see, how you see the world- it's so valid, so important. With each generation the strength is stronger, because of what it's built on.

Rachel: Advice to Luna, to find the time just to sit and be in nature with a plant. I would encourage you to engage in dialogues with trees. But really, it's for you to pursue whatever you want in life and never to be in doubt about your own passions and following your own heart. That's really the biggest piece, isn't it? And that may not be plants! It may be something else. So really be. Listen deeply to that inner voice within you and follow your own heart. Pursue what it is that you are to pursue. It's the quest, isn't it?! It's not always going to be easy Luna, trust. Trust in your life journey and really go within at times when there's decisions to be made. Take some time to just sit in nature somewhere and just listen. You're so beautiful Luna. A special soul. A special, special soul.

Luna,

From the wise women who contributed to this work, the one commonality I have witnessed is the way they opened every door for me that they could or told me the way to open it for myself and lifted my spirit with their kind words. The road rarely leads where I thought it would, or looks the way I imagined. My Mamma always said to me, "Wherever you go, there you are". When your heart and spirit call to you daughter – let yourself be shown where you are meant to go. Open every door, illuminate the path and use your voice to uplift others along the way. I know you will, this is already your way. You Luna, are the moon that my love orbits

around. You are my life's greatest joy, gift and 'creation'. You are a brilliant light with the power to illumine the darkness. Long after I am gone, my arms will still be embracing you, wrapped around you, and protecting you. You are from a long line of strong women, and we all walk with and within you. And always, always, my daughter-surround yourself with a circle of wise women.

Love,

Your Mom

## References

- Abrams, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous; Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage Books.
- Absolon, K. (2011). *Kaandossiwin: How we come to know*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Alfred, T. (2019). *Wasáse; Indigenous pathways of action and freedom*. University of Toronto Press.
- Anderson, C. (2013). *Indigenous in the city; Contemporary identities and cultural innovation*. University of British Columbia Press.
- Anderson, K. (2000). *A recognition of being; Reconstructing native womanhood*. Sumach Press.
- Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. University of British Columbia Press.
- Archibald, J. A., Lee-Morgan, J., & De Santolo, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Decolonizing research: Indigenous storywork as methodology*. ZED Books Limited.
- Armstrong, J. (2006). "Sharing One Skin". *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 30(4), 16.
- Altamirano-Jimenez & Kermoal, N. (2016). *Living on the land; Indigenous women's understanding of place*. Athabasca University Press.
- Atleo, R. (2011). Principles of Tsawalk: an Indigenous approach to global crisis, UBC Press.
- Auerback, M. (2020). *Resilience: The life-saving skill of story*. Changemakers Books.
- Aydin, C. (2007). Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power: Toward an "Organization—Struggle" Model. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 25-48.  
<https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/40715/40715.pdf>
- Basso, K. (1996). *Wisdom sits in places; Landscape and language among the western Apache*. University of New Mexico press.
- Behrendt, L. (2019). "Indigenous Storytelling; Decolonizing institutions and assertive self-determination: Implications for Legal Practice" in J. Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem, J. Lee-Morgan, and J. De Santolo, (Eds.), *Decolonizing Research Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*. Zed Books Ltd.(pp. 175-186).
- Belcourt, B. (2020). *A history of my brief body: A memoir*. Penguin Random House.
- Benaway, G. (2018). *Holy wild; Poems*. Book\*hug.

- Benaway, G. (2018). *Decolonial love: A how-to guide*. Working it Out Together. <http://workingitouttogether.com/content/decolonial-love-a-how-to-guide/>
- Blackie, S (Host), This Mythic Life Episode [Audio podcast episode], Interview with Pat McCabe. (2018).  
[https://soundcloud.com/thismythiclifepat-mccabe?utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_campaign=wtshare&utm\\_medium=widget&utm\\_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fthismythiclife%252Fpat-mccabe](https://soundcloud.com/thismythiclifepat-mccabe?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fthismythiclife%252Fpat-mccabe)
- Bowers, K. S. P. R. (2010). Identity, Prejudice and Healing in Aboriginal Circles: Models of Identity, Embodiment and Ecology of Place as Traditional Medicine for Education and Counselling: A Mi'kmaq First Nation perspective. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 6(3), 203–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011000600302>
- Breunlin, R. (2020) Decolonizing Ways of Knowing: Heritage, Living Communities, and Indigenous Understandings of Place. *Genealogy*, 4, 95.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy4030095>
- Brown, A. (2019). *Pleasure activism: The politics of feeling good*. AK Press.
- Burnette, C. E., Sanders, S., Butcher, H. K., & Salois, E. M. (2011). Illuminating the Lived Experiences of Research with Indigenous Communities. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 20(4).
- Cajete, G. (2000). *Native science: Natural laws of interdependence*. Clear Light Publishers.
- Callanan, M. and Kelley, P. (1992). *Final gifts; Understanding the special awareness, needs, and communications of the dying*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (Vol. 17). New World Library.
- Capra, F., & Luisi, P. L. (2014). *The systems view of life: A unifying vision*. Cambridge University Press.
- Caputi, J. (2020). *Call your 'mutha'; A deliberately dirty-minded manifesto for the Earth Mother in the Anthropocene*. Oxford University Press.
- Chambers, E. (2000). "Applied ethnography". *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2. In Denzin NK and Lincoln YS. (pp. 851-869).
- Cole, R. J. (2012). Transitioning from Green to Regenerative Design. *Building Research & Information*, 40(1), 39-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09613218.2011.610608>
- Corntassel, J. (2012). Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and

- sustainable self-determination. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1). (pp. 86-101).
- Corntassel, Jeff, (2018). *Everyday acts of resurgence; People, places, practices*. Daykeeper Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241.
- Dapice, A. N. (2006). "The Medicine Wheel", *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 17(3), 251-260.
- Dey, K. (2019). *Climate change snapshots*. In J. Neidhardt, & N. Neidhardt (Eds.), *Groundswell: Indigenous knowledge and a call to action for climate change*. (pp. 22-29). Strong Nations Publishing Inc.
- Dobell, R. (2019). *Sharing the wealth: Bending toward justice*. In J. Neidhardt, & N. Neidhardt (Eds.), *Groundswell; Indigenous knowledge and a call to action for climate change*. (pp. 132-145). Strong Nations Publishing Inc.
- Drengson, A. (2008). The Life and Work of Arne Naess: An Appreciative Overview. In A. Drengson and B. Devall (Eds.) *Ecology of wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*. (pp. 3-44). Counterpoint.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T., and Bochner, A. (2011). "Autoethnography: An Overview", *Forum : Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1.
- Emerson, L. (2019). *What you need to know is not in a book: Indigenous education*. In J. Neidhardt, & N. Neidhardt (Eds.), *Groundswell; Indigenous knowledge and a call to action for climate change*. (pp. 50-65). Strong Nations Publishing Inc.
- Estes, C. P. (1992). *Women who run with the wolves: Myths and stories of the wild woman archetype*. Ballantine.
- Gaudet, J. C., & Caron-Bourbonnais, D. (2015). It's in Our Blood: Indigenous Women's Knowledge as a Critical Path to Women's Well-being. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 11(2), 164-176.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011501100206>
- George, D. (2004). *The best of Chief Dan George*. Hancock House Publishers Ltd.
- Gilpin, E. (2018). From a place of love. In J. Corntassel (Ed.), *Everyday acts of resurgence; People, places, practices*. (pp. 49-52). Daykeeper Press.
- Green, J. (Ed.), (2017). *Making space for Indigenous feminism*. Fernwood Publishing.

- Harding, S. (2016). *Animate earth: Science, intuition and Gaia*. Green Books Ltd.
- Harjo, J. (1994). *The woman who fell from the sky*. WW Norton.
- Harman, W. (1977) Lecture at Institute of Noetic sciences. Retrieved from [http://twm.co.nz/Harm\\_bio.html](http://twm.co.nz/Harm_bio.html).
- Hyde, L. (1983) *The gift: How the creative spirit transforms the world*. Vintage Books.
- hooks, b. (2001). *All about love: New visions*. Harper Collins Books.
- Katz, J. and Lamoureaux, K. (2018). *Ensouling our schools; A universally designed framework for mental health, well-being, and reconciliation*. Portage and Main Press.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2017). Speaking of nature. *Orion Magazine*.  
<https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2017). Learning the grammar of animacy 1. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 28(2), 128-134.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2014). Returning the gift. *Minding Nature*, 7(2), 18-24.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2020). The Serviceberry; An Economy of abundance. *Emergence Magazine*.  
<https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry/>
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Lane P.J., Bopp, J., Bopp, M., Brown, L. and elders. (2012). *The sacred tree*. Lotus Press.
- LaDuke, W. (1999). *All our relations: Native struggles for land and life*. South End Press.
- LaDuke, W. (2005). *Recovering the sacred*. South End Press.
- Leighton, H. (2022, in press). Listening In: Tracking and Teaching Methods Through Supervision. In R. Kool, D. Dandar, E. Childs & D. Hamilton (Eds.). *Active learning for real world inquiry*. (n.p.) Royal Roads University.
- Leighton, H. (2022, in press). A Pedagogy of Relatedness: Braiding Re(story)ative Co-inquiry through Métissage. In E. Lyle (Ed.). *Re/centring lives and lived experience in education*. (n.p.). Brill/Sense.
- Lefkoff, M. (2019). *How we can work together*. In J. Neidhardt, & N. Neidhardt

- (Eds.), *Groundswell: Indigenous knowledge and a call to action for climate change*. (pp. 100-111). Strong Nations Publishing Inc.
- Lorde, A. (2012). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- Lowan-Trudeau, G. (2015). *From bricolage to métissage: Rethinking intercultural approaches to Indigenous environmental education and research*. Peter Lang Inc.
- Lowman, E. and Barker, A. (2015). *Settler; Identity and colonialism in 21st century Canada*. Fernwood publishing.
- Macy, J. and Brown, M. (2014). *Coming back to life*. New Society Publishers.
- Macy, J. (2003). *World as lover, world as self: A guide to living fully in turbulent times*. Parallax Press.
- May, K. (2020). *Wintering: The power of rest and retreat in difficult times*. Riverhead Books.
- Maracle, L. (1996). *I am woman; A native perspective on sociology and feminism*. Press Gang Publishers.
- Maracle, L. (2015). *Memory serves: Oratories*. NeWest Press.
- Maracle, L. (2017). *Daughters are forever*. Theytus Books.
- Meadows, D. (2008). *Thinking in systems: A primer*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Meyer, M. A. (2013). Holographic epistemology: Native common sense. *China Media Research*, 9(2), 94-101.
- Michell, H., Hardlotte, B., & McLeod, R. (2021). Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of the Woodlands Cree and Denesuline Peoples of northern Saskatchewan, Canada: The Land as Teacher and Healer. *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing*, 6(1), 26-36.
- Mitchell, S. (2019) No Place Like Home Podcast, Episode Indigenous Wisdom and the Seed of Life. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/indigenous-wisdom-the-seed-of-life-with-sherri-mitchell/id1158028749?i=1000475203177>
- Moffat, M. (2016). Exploring Positionality in an Aboriginal Research Paradigm: A Unique Perspective, *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education* 5,1.
- Monture, P. & Mcguire, P. (2009). Nunavut; Whose homeland? Whose voices? In (Editors needed) *First voices; An Aboriginal women's reader*. (pp. 143-153). Inanna Publications and Education Inc.
- Moya, P. (2012). The Search for Decolonial Love: An Interview with Junot Diaz.

Boston Review. <https://bostonreview.net/articles/paula-ml-moya-decolonial-love-interview-junot-diaz/>

Naess, A. (1973) The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. A Summary. *Inquiry*, 16:1-4, 95-100, doi: [10.1080/00201747308601682](https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682)

Neidhardt, J. (2019). *The moral revolution, weaving all the parts*. In J. Neidhardt, & N. Neidhardt (Eds.), *Groundswell; Indigenous knowledge and a call to action for climate change*. (pp. 174-193). Strong Nations Publishing Inc.

Northrup, C. (2005). *Mother-daughter wisdom; Understanding the crucial link between mothers, daughters and health*. Bantam Books.

O'Leary, Z. (2017). *The essential guide to doing your research project*. Sage.

Oluo, I. (2019). *So you want to talk about race*. Seal Press.

Owusu-Bempah, J., & Howitt, D. (1994). The racism of psychology. *Harvester Wheatsheaf*.

Paul, E. (2014). *Written as I remember it; Teachings from the life of a Sliammon elder*. University of British Columbia Press.

Peters, E. & Anderson, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Indigenous in the city: Contemporary identities and cultural innovation*. University of British Columbia Press.

Peters, R. and Demers, H. (2021). *What was said to me; The life of Sti'tum'atul'wut, a Cowichan woman*. Royal BC Museum.

Pezzullo, P. and Cox, R. (2018). *Environmental communication and the public sphere*. Sage Publishers.

Ramsey, F. (2019, January 25). Light Skinned Privilege Decoded [Video]. *MTV Impact*. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE4Lo4Tic8Y>

Richardson, L. (1999). Feathers in Our CAP. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(6), 660–668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124199129023767>

Richardson, L., & St Pierre, E. (2008). A method of inquiry. *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*, 3(4), 473-500.

Richardson, L. and St. Pierre, E. (2017). *Writing; A method of inquiry*. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. (pp. 923-948). Sage Publications.

Robinson, J., & Cole, R. J. (2015). Theoretical Underpinnings of Regenerative Sustainability. *Building Research & Information*, 43(2), 133-143.

- Roessel, M. (2019). *Essential elements of change*. In J. Neidhardt, & N. Neidhardt (Eds.), *Groundswell; Indigenous knowledge and a call to action for climate change*. (pp. 112-123). Strong Nations Publishing Inc.
- Royal Roads University (2020) Master of Arts of Environmental Education and Communication program. *Thesis Handbook*.
- Sheldrake, M. (2020). *Entangled life; How fungi make our worlds, change our minds and shape our futures*. Random House.
- Shiva, V., & Mies, M. (2014). *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books Ltd.
- Simard, S. (2021). *Finding the mother tree; Discovering the wisdom of the forest*. Penguin Canada.
- Simpson, L. B. (2014). Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3).
- Simpson, L. B. (2015). *Islands of decolonial love; stories and songs*. Arbeiter Ring Publishing.
- Simpson, L. (2017). *As we have always done. Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Simpson, L. (2020). *Noopiming; The cure for white ladies*. House of Anansi Press Inc.
- Stanner, W. (1979). *Honoring place through home languages in the mid-twentieth century*.
- Starblanket, G. (2018). Resurgence as relationality. In J. Cornassel (Eds.), *Everyday acts of resurgence; People, places, practices* (pp. 28-32). Daykeeper Press.
- Swan, J. (1990) *Sacred places; How the living earth seeks our friendship*. Bear and Company Inc.
- Tagaq, T. (2018). *Split tooth*. Penguin Canada.
- Tatum, B. D. (2000). The complexity of identity: Who am I?, *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 2.
- Taylor, S. (2018). *The body is not an apology. The power of radical self-love*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Trochim, W. M. (1989). An Introduction to Concept Mapping for Planning and Evaluation. *Evaluation and program planning*, 12(1), 1-16.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation*

- Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
- Turner, N. (2005). *The earth's blanket: Traditional teachings for sustainable living*. Douglas & McIntyre.
- United Nations Report, AR6: Climate Change (2021). <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>
- Vancamp, R. (2021). *Gather: On the joy of storytelling*. University of Regina Press.
- Younging, G. (2018). *Elements of Indigenous style: A guide for writing and about Indigenous peoples*. Brush Education Inc.
- Yunkaporta, T. and Shillingsworth, D. (2020). Relationally Responsive Standpoint, *Journal of Indigenous Research: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2020 , Article 4*.  
<https://doi.org/10.26077/ky71-qt27>
- Yunkaporta, T. (2021). *Sand talk. How Indigenous thinking can save the world*. HarperOne.
- Wagamese, R. (2011). *One story, one song*. Douglas & McIntyre.
- Warren, K. (1994). *Ecofeminism; Women, culture, nature*. Indiana University Press.
- Watt-Cloutier, S. (2015). *The right to be cold; One woman's story of protecting her culture, the arctic, and the whole planet*. Penguin Canada.
- Weller, F. (2015). *The wild edge of sorrow: Rituals of renewal and the sacred work of grief*. North Atlantic Books.
- Wildcat, M., McDonald, M., Irlbacher-Fox, S. & Coulthard, G. (2014). Learning from the Land: Indigenous Land Based Pedagogy and Decolonization. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society*, 3(3), I-XV.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.