Wâhkôhtowin:

Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, & Rematriation Towards Healing the Land and Ourselves

Image 1: Lara Felsing, *Blanket Ceremony for the Forest,* 2023

*W*âhkôhtowin, Cree, meaning kinship. Referring to the interconnected nature of relationships, communities, and natural systems.

Dion, S. (2020, May 14). *Wâhkôhtowin: The Value of Relationships Amid Crisis.* The Quad. https://www.ualberta.ca/the-quad/2020/05/wahkohtowin-the-value-of-relationships

Abstract

My thesis focuses on creating artwork to benefit the land and more than-human species where I live and beyond. I aim to bring awareness to the needs of the land and all living beings with whom we share Mother Earth. My practice advocates living in unison with all our relations and my research combines traditional Indigenous teachings and Western knowledge to explore the benefits to all life on Earth when we live thoughtfully and harmoniously with all living things.

> *We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world. We need to restore honor to the way we live, so that when we walk through the world we don't have to avert our eyes with shame, so that we can hold our heads up high and receive the respectful acknowledgment of the rest of the earth's beings.* (195)
>
> — Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*

Acknowledgments

My practice takes place on the unceded land of Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples, including the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway/ Saulteaux/Anishinaabe and Inuit. This land is rich in history and holds a promise to live side by side in peace and friendship "for as long as the sun shines, grass grows and river flows," as written in Treaty 6, signed in Fort Pitt in 1876.[1]

I am grateful for the privilege of learning and creating during the ECUAD MFA-LR 2023 program and residencies as a visitor on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh nations.

To Julie Andreyev, for your generosity, guidance and wisdom

To Magnolia Pauker, Daphne Plessner and prOphecy sun, for your conversation and support

To my family, Stefan, Elle and Berg, for your endless encouragement and love

To my father, for showing me how to live gently on the land

To my mother for teaching me who we are

To the forest, for its gifts and friendship

[1] YEG, T. R. (2018, January 9). *As long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the river flows*. Blog. https://ualbertalaw.typepad.com/faculty/2018/01/as-long-as-the-sun-shines-the-grass-grows-and-the-river-flows.html#:~:text=To%20further%20strengthen%20the%20nature,the%20"spiritual%20aspects%20of%20the

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Sacred Lands

Walk gently on the Earth and do each other no harm. (34)

- Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*

In my practice, the notion of immersing myself in the natural environment and creating a bond is vital. More than ever, our current world climate motivates me to explore the urgency to prioritize my relationship with the land and its more-than-human species through a sustainable and environmentally aligned research and material practice. My practice focuses on creating artwork that benefits[2] the land and more than-human species where I live. In addition, I feel an urgency for my artistic approach to echo my worldviews and inherent beliefs to draw attention to beautiful and flawed interactions between humans, the land and more-than-human species.

My research asks:

How can my material practice express beneficial relations between humans, more-than-human beings, and the land and speak to the necessity of living in unison with Mother Earth?

To begin, explaining my thoughts on how I perceive the words *land* and l*andscape* regarding my research and position is essential. I define *landscape* as the natural and modifiable physical features on the surface of the Earth. For example, a landscape could be a downtown area in a city, a park, a farmer's field or a forest. On the other hand, *land* is a specific location on Earth connected to spirit and memory. It is the land that is alive and cannot be changed. It contains valuable knowledge and connects us to our ancestors.

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[2] Using the word 'benefit' in this document describes my intention to create artwork with medicinal plants and second-hand materials, producing the lowest environmental footprint possible and conveying a message of gratitude and kinship and a call to live in reciprocity with the land and more-than-human relations.

Indigenous Canadian academic and writer Lee Maracle of the Sto:lo nation has composed numerous valuable writings regarding the lives of Canada's Indigenous Peoples. While reading Maracle's *Goodbye, Snauq*, I was moved by Maracle's deep connection to her ancestral place and its history. Maracle beautifully describes Snauq, the land of her ancestors, who lived in unison with the Earth until they were forced out during colonization (117).

Raven has never left this place. Sometimes it feels like she has been negligent, perhaps she fell asleep and maybe never woke up. But Raven has not left this place. (28)

– Lee Maracle, *Goodbye Snauq*

Snauq is now known as False Creek, a highly urbanized district of Vancouver. Although the landscape has been altered beyond recognition, Maracle still feels the spirit of her ancestors is embedded in the land. The original Emily Carr University campus was situated on the traditional territory of Snauq, and the current campus sits 4km to the East. I echo Maracle's attachment to the land of those who came before me, as I was raised on the traditional lands of my Woodland Cree ancestors. Although landscape features have significantly shifted over the years, the spirit of my ancestors lives on.

All My Relations

Me: Why am I alive?

Old Woman: Because everything else is.

Me: No. I mean the purpose.

Old Woman: That is the purpose. To learn about your relatives.

Me: My family?

Old Woman: Yes. The moon, stars, rocks, trees, plants, water, insects, birds, mammals. Your whole family. Learn about that relationship. How you're moving through time and space together. That's why you're alive. (41)

– Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*

The primary belief I carry about the world around me is known as All my Relations.[3] All my Relations speaks to the interconnectedness of all things, how everything is worthy of being cared for and respected, and that all life has a purpose. We are all related, from the smallest single-cell organism to the tallest mountain. Creating artwork in alignment with this theory is the basis of my practice. I feel the responsibility to tread lightly, not speak for others, but to express my position from my own experiences thoughtfully.

When I think back to my childhood, my favourite memories took place outdoors. My siblings and I would run through the hills near our home on sunny spring days after school, and the first sign of the warmer weather to come would be the soft, fuzzy crocus flowers that would start to push through the snow in the Peace River valley of Northern Alberta, my childhood home. Many of these early experiences have formed my relationship with the land and more-than-human species.

Image 2: One of my favourite photographs of the beautiful town of Peace River.

[3] Whiteway, A. (n.d.). *All My Relations*. Autumn Whiteway. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from https://www.autumn.ca/cpt_exhibitions/all-my-relations/

I have a deep connection to the land where I grew up, and a big part of my love for medicinal plants and kinship toward animals stems from my Métis (Woodland Cree and settler) upbringing. I am honoured to be a descendant of the Goulet, Lamouche, Gladu, Noskiye, Carifell, Brilliant, Venne and Beauchamp families. I have also realized that I am a storyteller like my mother and grandmother, and my practice feels guided by the hands of the women who came before me, thoughtfully and lovingly crafted by their connection to the world around them.

Image 3: *Keeper of the Fire*, Vegetable ink photo on paper, embroidery thread, floral broadcloth, charcoal, cotton stitching, clay, Saskatoon berries, Birch bark, Chaga tea and dried plants on unbleached cotton, 16′ X 24″, 2022

In my painting *Keeper of the Fire*, there is a photograph of my mother as a child. She is at her Granny's house, cutting out paper valentines. My mother's house burned down when she was young, and this is one of the few photos of her remaining. I have stitched the print on unbleached cotton with embroidery thread and added layers of Chaga tea, Saskatoon berry juice, clay, soil, dried plants and squares of floral broadcloth, a traditional fabric used

to make ribbon skirts and shirts in Métis culture. The name *Keeper of the Fire* represents "fire" as being Indigenous culture, and the "keeper" is the person or people facilitating its legacy. I consider my mother the Keeper of the Fire in our family. Her connection to her Indigenous roots and determination to pass on traditions to the next generations have kept our family connected to our Métis heritage. My mother's strength and resiliency to pass on our culture is admirable; she is the last of three generations of residential school survivors in our family.

Harvesting & Material Practice

If you are picking for yourself, please do so with the utmost respect for Mother Earth and the plant itself. Thank them both for their healing powers and their wisdom. Ensure you are gentle when you pick; do not take more than you need; and do not pull them out by the roots. If you can simply take a few leaves, then please do so. Our medicines and foods are so miraculous. I believe that when we pick our own medicines , we are more connected to our healing. You can also lay tobacco on the grounds as a means of giving thanks to Mother Earth. (14)

— Carrie Armstrong, Métis Medicine Woman and Author of *Mother Earth Plants for Health & Beauty: Indigenous Plants, Traditions & Recipes*

My relationship with the world around me, my community and with whom I share kinship is embedded in how I gather research and materials in my practice. I show gratitude to the land and its gifts by carefully adhering to Métis harvesting traditions, as explained in the quote above by Carrie Armstrong. My material practice begins with harvesting medicinal plants and gathering twigs, bark, berries, pine cones, pine needles, leaves, grasses, feathers, petals and other natural materials in my yard, garden, and the forest near my home. I source second-hand fabrics and remnants from local thrift shops, friends, and family, which I also weave and stitch into my paintings and sculptures. Second-hand materials destined for the landfill can be given new life, both in my material practice and through mending, repurposing and recycling. I do not want my work to contribute to the over-excess in society. I want it to be a reminder to respect what the land has given us and not take these gifts for granted.

Image 4: A collection of miscellaneous berries, pine needles, moss, rose hips, yarrow and other medicinal plants I harvested near my home.

Natural materials require time, energy and care to source and prepare before being utilized. From growing and harvesting to processing, each step requires patience, and most importantly, gratitude to Mother Earth. I make pigments from dried and crushed Saskatoon berries, strawberries and rose hips and experimenting with the colours I can achieve from Chaga and other medicinal teas. I create saturated tones and hues by applying thin layers and drying in between. By crushing rocks, sifting soil, and pulling clay from the earth in my garden, I have made thick, colourful pastes that can be thinned with water and applied to the fabric or wood I am working on. Having material processes with the lightest environmental footprint possible helps me create compostable artwork that expresses my gratitude toward Mother Earth and her gifts.

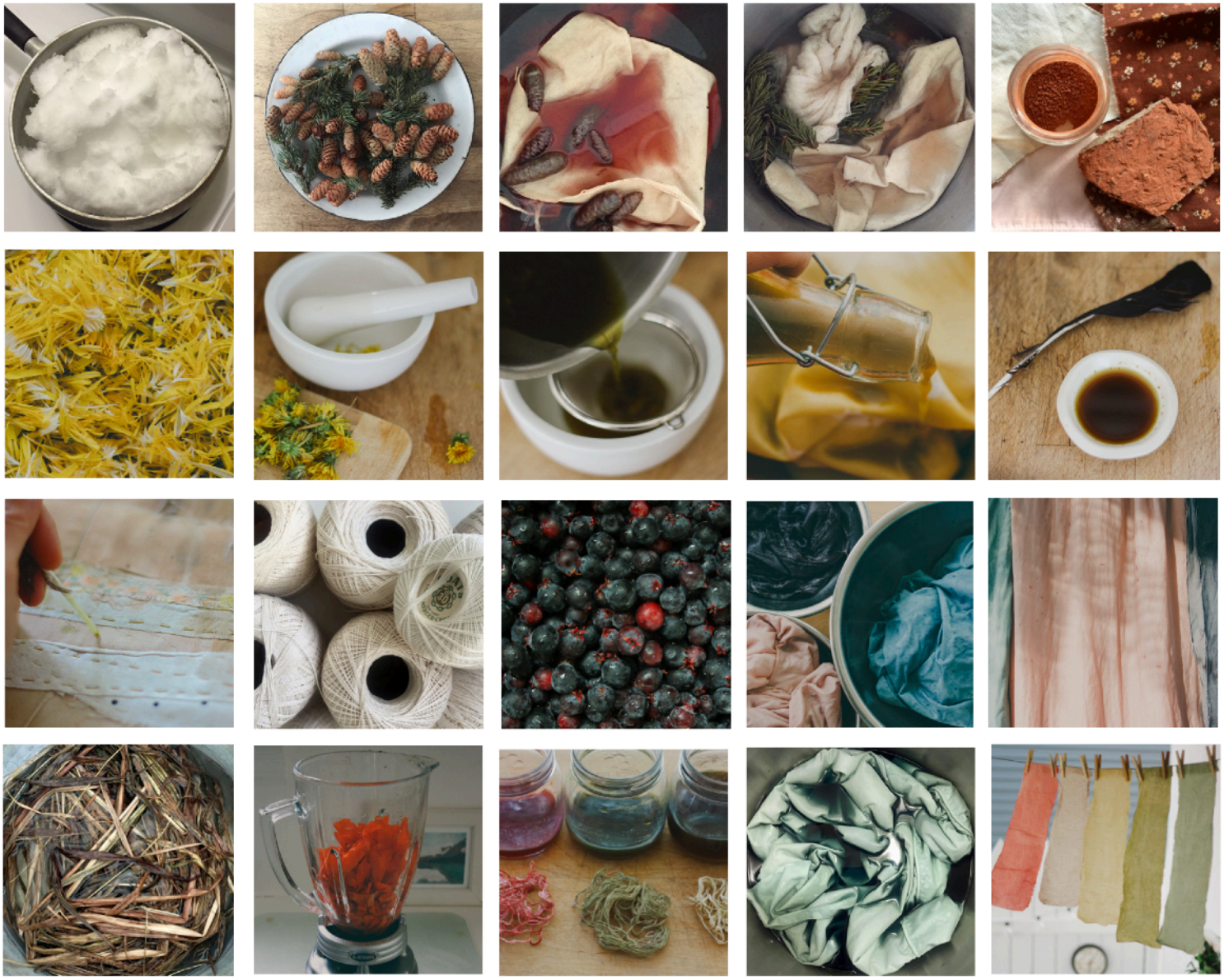

Image 5: A collection of the processes I use to make harvested plants, rocks and berries into dyes using collected snow and rainwater.

Harvesting requires patience and an awareness of nature's growing seasons. Every year, I look forward to harvesting, and the sign of a good harvest is when I run out of the previous year's gatherings right before harvest time, a gentle reminder that I have only gathered what I need. Traditional harvesting protocols emphasize harvesting responsibly, such as not over-picking one plant or area or removing plant roots. Like most traditional harvesters, I carry a small tobacco tin to offer gratitude to Mother Earth during harvesting for guidance.

Image 6: Offering tobacco as a gesture of gratitude to Mother Earth before harvesting.

Although based in reciprocity, it is impossible to match the life-giving and sustaining gifts provided by the land. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer's response to the act of offering tobacco to Mother Earth is summed up quite simply. " The philosophy of reciprocity is beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is harder." (238)

My pieces are themed on dignifying and showing gratitude for the land and all life, but they also often portray harmful interactions between humans and more-than-human species in Treaty 6 Territory, specifically in the community where I live. Being in nature is humbling and amplifies awareness of the importance of treading lightly in natural spaces. The following photograph is of an exhibition of my work installed in the forest where I harvest plant medicines. I wanted to draw the audience into a space requiring them to observe the surrounding natural area. The forest floor contained impressions of rabbit, dog, deer and human tracks in the snow, bringing awareness to the overlapping species that visit and call the forest home.

Image 7: Lara Felsing, *Nohcimihk (*Cree*,* meaning *In the Forest),* photograph, 2021. An art installation of my weavings, sculptures and paintings in the forest near my home where I harvest.

In my practice, I am continually thinking about ways to invite both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to engage with my work through artist talks, workshops and exhibitions. I want my practice to share that the Earth holds indescribable knowledge to those who approach it humbly with open eyes, minds and hearts. Associate Professor and Métis artist David Garneau of the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, has ideas on Indigenous methods of situating a practice which resonates with how I approach my work. Garneau states, "Rather than centre our lives on anti-racist and anti-colonial work, expand our creative energies reacting to dominate others, first peoples are turning to positive production to what I call non-colonial activities. To reviving aboriginal epistemologies, ontologies, metaphysical and material practices and adapting to contemporary lived lives. If this work is not to be an indigenous, separatist project alone, but also to entangle and untangle colonial institutions for a mutual benefit, we need to map the moment and develop terms of engagement that produce the [I]ndigenous without losing our Aboriginal selves."

Two-Eyed Seeing

I recognize the need to strive for my creative practice to clearly and concisely reflect that humans have a place among, not above, the land and all living things. To do this, I approach my practice with two-eyed seeing, one lens through Indigenous ways of knowing and the other through a Western lens. I explore these connections through books, online interviews, readings and conversations with artists, Knowledge Keepers, writers, Elders and researchers about how being in the landscape positively affects our minds and bodies and creates a kinship with the land and more-than-human species.[4] I am drawn to two-eyed seeing because it references multiple perspectives and creates a partnership approach to problem-solving and bridging cultures.

As a Métis person, I draw heritage from my Indigenous and settler families and identify with both and neither at times, for the Métis people have formed their own distinct culture.[5] The Métis culture draws on Indigenous storytelling, language, knowledge of the land and its teachings, and a strong kinship with more-than-human relations. I feel the concept of two-eyed seeing is an inclusive approach inviting people from all different walks of life to inform and engage with my practice.

Two-eyed seeing also poses the opportunity to learn and expand my practice. For example, after reading an article in the *Jasper Fitzhugh* newspaper, I created the following painting. The article described a depleting caribou herd population due to human recreational hiking and ski tracks that were making the perfect trail for wolves to travel deeper into previously unentered habitat.

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[4] Conversation, Sylvia Johnson, Métis Knowledge Keeper, May 11, 2022. Conversation, Lorne Gladu, Rupertsland Institute CAO, January 6, 2021. Natalie Pepin, Métis Nation of Alberta: *Wasakam Food Security Engagement*, February 15, 2023. Conversation, Daphne Plessner, Author and ECU professor, November 16, 2022. Film interview, Frieda Maynard, Elder, *The Resilience Project* Gala, Edson, AB, July 4, 2023. Talk, Robert Yelkatte Clifford, W̱SÁNEĆ Knowledge Keeper, *Indigenous Law presentation and engagement*, November 17, 2022. Conversation, Doreen Bergum, Elder, July 25, 2023. Métis Nation of Alberta, Ali Greenslade and Holly Sun Torgerson (facilitators) and harvester participants, *Climate & Health Engagement,* January 25, 2022. Conversation, Billy-Jo Grant and Lisa Cruikshank, Métis Knowledge Keepers, November 18, 2021.

[5] *Métis identity*. Métis Nation of Alberta. (2022, August 25). Retrieved December 5, 2022, from https://albertametis.com/metis-rights/metis-identification/

Image 8: Lara Felsing, *Wolves in the Tonquin Valley,* Chaga tea, handmade charcoal stick, dried berries and plants, clay and Saskatoon berry juice on organic unbleached cotton. 16″ X 24″, 2022

Three conservation organizations, the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS: Northern Alberta Chapter) and Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative stated, "A history of poor management decisions in the Park and compromises to competing recreational interests have contributed to the near-extirpated state of the herds. In recent years, it seems the tides have turned, as Parks Canada continues to make evidence-based decisions for the benefit of caribou in Tonquin Valley."[6] In an attempt to build up the dangerously low caribou population, Parks Canada has recently refused human entrance to these critical habitats.

[6] Hayes, S. (2023b, January 11). Https://www.fitzhugh.ca/eco-groups-support-difficult-decision-to-buy-out-tonquin-valley-leases/. Scott Hayes. Retrieved May 2, 2023,.

In this painting, I felt it was essential to portray a wolf pack on the ski tracks while having an absence of caribou. I combined plant pigments, charcoal and floral broadcloth on secondhand cotton for this piece, as natural materials allow me to express my connection to the land.

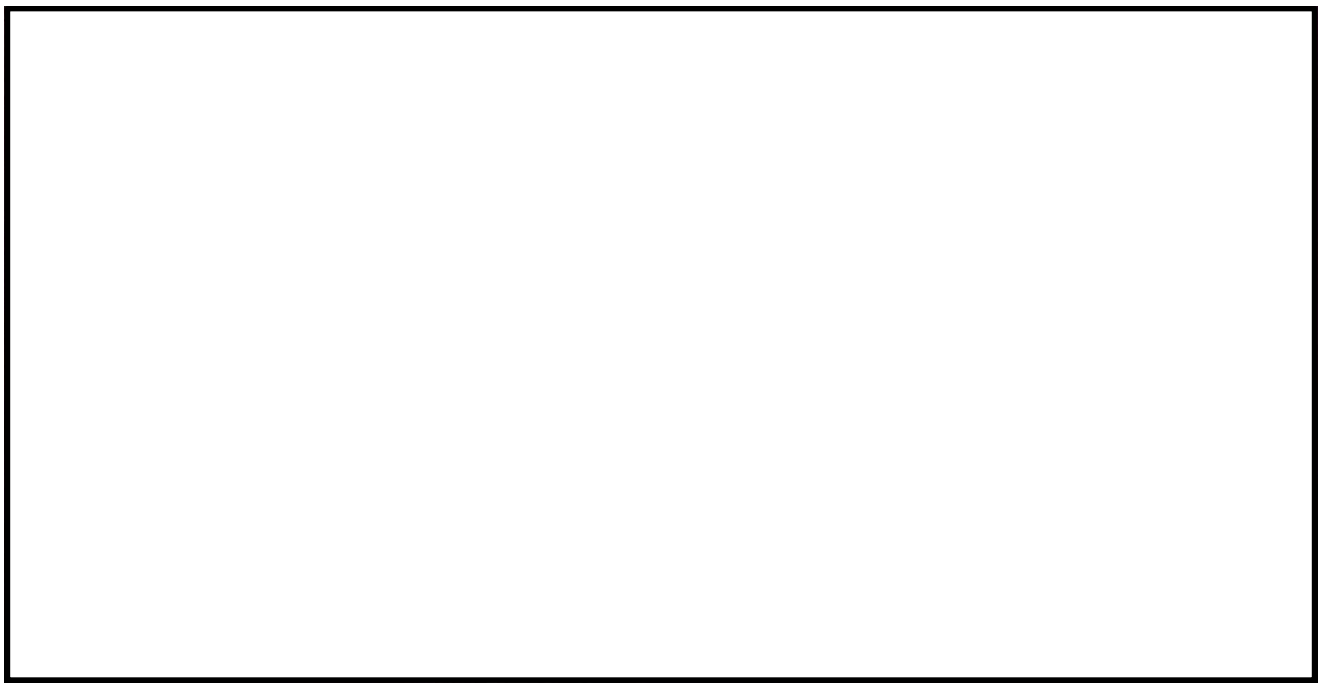

Image 9: Christi Belcourt, *Water Song*, 2010-2011 acrylic on canvas, 79" x 153" (purchased 2011, National Gallery Of Canada, Ottawa.) View: https://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/christi-belcourt/

Métis Artist Christi Belcourt approaches her practice in a similar light. Belcourt describes her work as an exploration and celebration of "the natural world and traditional Indigenous world-views on spirituality and natural medicines while exploring nature's symbolic properties."[7] She explains that her work follows in the tradition of the Metis' floral motif beadwork, and Belcourt "uses the subject matter as metaphors for human existence to relay a variety of meanings that include concerns for the environment, biodiversity, spirituality and awareness of Métis culture. "[8] In her thriving practice, Belcourt paints medicinal plants and flowers comprised of small painted dots to represent Metis beading

[7] "The Rewilding Arts Prize." David Suzuki Foundation, 2 May 2023, davidsuzuki.org/take-action/act-locally/rewilding-arts-prize/.

[8] Belcourt, C. (n.d.). Christi Belcourt. Retrieved December 1, 2022, from http://christibelcourt.com/bio/

which traditionally decorates coats, moccasins, mukluks, mittens, vests, leggings, belts and bags. Although the process in which Belcourt works is very different from mine, I share her interest in creating work that relays a necessity to advocate for the environment through Métis cultural motifs and reciprocity to the land.

Image 10: Lara Felsing, Digital photograph collage of select recent work, 2023
Top left: *Interwoven,* Embroidery thread, deer hide, sweetgrass and flagging cord on found birch, 10" X 8", 2021
Top middle: *Interwoven*, Sweetgrass, floral broadcloth, deer hide, flagging cord, twine, wood and moss. 6" X 6", 2021
Top right: *Redressing*, birch log, sinew, embroidery thread, ribbon, Sweetgrass and deer hide, 13" X 4", 2022
Middle: *Sakahk (*Cree, meaning *forest), s*econd-hand felt, Sweetgrass, dried dandelions, pine needles, moss and floral broadcloth, 2021
Bottom left: *Studio Material Collection*, plant-dyed embroidery thread, seeds, dried plants, feathers and pressed flowers on second-hand fabric, 2022
Bottom middle: *Talking Stick (Land Negotiations)*, 15' X 1", wood, floral broadcloth, dried dandelions, deer hide, beads, feathers, wool and flagging cord, 2022

In order to portray relations of reciprocity, I have been wondering how I can express my appreciation for the gifts the land provides. What can I offer in return? I have begun creating paintings containing living materials and can be composted to benefit other living organisms. I am drawn to artists using materials of a natural origin. I feel their connection to the land and other living beings.

Image 11: Maggie Groat, arrangements for rotations - rotations for collections – collections for sounds - sounds for light - light for transformations - transformations for arrangements - using only found materials of significance create an /object - collection - tool/ to / mark > absorb > reflect > refract > witness > carry > light + sound of your surroundings - between the shortest day and the longest night + the day that is equal to the night - between the day that is equal to the night + the longest day and the shortest night – between the longest day and the shortest night + the day that is equal to the night - between the day that is equal to the night + the shortest day and the longest night, 2020, second-hand IKEA curtains (from artist's house dyed using kitchen compost materials, avocado pits + onion skins), copper, found colour gradient paper, found metal cylinders, thread, cord salvaged institutional shelf, modified found plastic, metal, glass, fabric, paper objects salvaged, collected, modified, found metal, glass, brass, copper and crystal, materials collected from my living spaces, from second-hand economic sources, found by the artist's children on walks around the city, glass from light fixtures of previous occupants of the artist's home, as part of Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Maggie Groat is a Métis artist whose practice incorporates salvaged materials such as second-hand fabric and found items she and her children find on the street during walks in their neighbourhood. Her practice is informed by her Indigenous and settler mixed background, anthropogenic effects on the environment and her role as a mother. Groat describes her current research practice as an exploration of decolonizing ways of being, shifting territories, slowness, gardens, site responsiveness of materials and the potential for found and ritual materials to transform.[9] In her piece *arrangements for rotations...*, Groat hangs up IKEA curtains that were hand-dyed with composted materials. The curtains, tinted a warm pink with avocado and onion peels, were hung in a gallery in a similar manner as they were previously displayed in Groat's home. In contrast, I rework the fabrics I hand-dye, as most of the fabrics become backgrounds for paintings or the fabric is torn into strips woven with dried plants, hide, sinew and flagging tape.

Groat's work achieves a similar pale colouring, and our work shares a recycled aesthetic. Plant dyes are light in colour, and maintaining saturation is challenging because plant materials are photosensitive and susceptible to fading. However, her work conveys that even lightly dying, assembling or altering found and repurposed materials can yield powerful results. In my practice, the delicate colours achieved with natural plant dyes echo the light environmental footprint I use to create my work. In addition to being made from repurposed materials, my artwork is also biodegradable.

The following painting, titled *Return of the Buffalo*, celebrates last year's introduction of a small Buffalo herd to traditional land at Métis Crossing, located at Smoky Lake, Alberta. Métis Crossing is a cultural land-based interpretive centre created as "A place for Métis people to share Métis stories."[10] The image of the buffalo is culturally significant to the Métis people, as buffalo sustained our community for generations, and it continues to represent Métis resilience. The painting was made with plants and berries harvested from my garden and in the forest near my home and reflects the delicate yet powerful qualities of Indigenous food and medicines.

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[9] Maggie Groat. Kamloops Art Gallery. Retrieved September 22, 2022, from https://kag.bc.ca/soundings/maggiegroat

[10] Métis crossing cultural heritage gathering centre in Smoky Lake, AB. Metis Crossing. (2023, April 27). https://metiscrossing.com/

Image 12: *Return of the Buffalo,* Chaga and strawberry-dyed salvaged cotton, charcoal, dried dandelion dyed embroidery thread, Saskatoon berries, floral broadcloth and cotton remnants, soil and dried grass, 20″ X 32″, 2022

In contrast to the soft and soothing colours created from plants, roots and berries gathered from the land, synthetic flagging tape represents an artificial, non-biodegradable, unnaturally coloured human-made element within natural spaces on the land. Although flagging tape's purpose is used by forestry and logging companies to track, map, and create boundaries within the natural landscape, it is only identifiable as such to humans. Flagging tape makes its way into my work as a commentary on the multiple ways land is altered for human benefit. As a harvester, I encounter flagging tape in the forest quite often, and it always leaves me with questions about what is being marked, who it will impact, and for what purpose. I created the following sculpture addressing how harvesting in such precarious areas can feel.

I created three magpies in the sculpture to represent my children and me. I am the largest magpie, teaching my children how to carefully gather medicine from the land. I secured the clay birds to a split log to represent stressed land. The flagging tape superficially holds

the structure's base together and represents the area provincially designated for Indigenous harvesting. The sculpture also speaks to marking and removing trees in forest habitats home to various species of birds and mammals.

Image 13: Lara Felsing, *Magpie Three (Gathering Ancestral Knowledge Within a Colonized Landscape)*, charcoal, Saskatoon berries, pine needles, paint, flagging tape, Yarrow and air-dry clay on wood from the firewood stack in my yard, 13" X 8", 2022

Image 14: Lara Felsing, Medicine, Sweetgrass and flagging tape, 20" X 1.25", 2022
Image 15: Lara Felsing, *Medicine*, Sweetgrass and flagging tape, 2022. Detail

Another piece I have made in response to harvesting is a braid of sweetgrass braided with two parts sweetgrass and one part flagging tape. I made this sculpture in response to a conversation about concerns over the health of the land with other Métis harvesters.[11] We have designated areas to harvest in Alberta, and as fortunate as that is, the areas sometimes contain sick fish or polluted berries and plants. In my sculpture, the addition of flagging tape alters the braid's traditional use as medicine. If burned, this sweetgrass braid would smell of toxic plastic. I was fortunate to have a studio visit with artist/instructor Peter Morin who commented that the contaminated braid becomes a new medicine that speaks to advocating for healing the land.

[11] Conversation, Métis Nation of Alberta *Climate & Health Engagement*, Ali Greenslade and engagement participants, January 25, 2023.

Image 16: Meagan Musseau, *Material Harvesting,* fabric, leather, and ribbon. Installed at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, July - August, 2018.

Mi'kmaw artist Meagan Musseau strategically combines fluorescent ribbons and flagging tape in juxtaposition with hides and floral broadcloth, and the contrast is striking. Musseau's *Material Harvesting* is described as an installation of textile materials, fabric, leather, and ribbon and was created during the Emerging Atlantic Artist residency at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, July - August 2018. The powerful combination of traditional materials and fluorescent ribbon speaks loudly of a colonized existence that has attempted to separate Indigenous people from the land.

Kinship

In addition to positioning my material practice within Métis culture through traditionally harvested materials, I also draw Métis epistemologies into my work. Kinship means caring for and showing kindness toward all living beings. I want my practice to illustrate my

relationship with my whole community, including the land and more-than-human beings. As Richard Wagamese expresses in his book *One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet*, I share the ideology that we are all connected, every human, animal, plant, organism and spirit in the universe. We can benefit from our interactions with all life on Earth and all other life can benefit from our respectful interactions.

Wagamese's *One Drum* explores ceremony, medicinal plants, and the Seven Grandfathers' teachings. Wagamese shares that we are all connected, and ceremony is the method to unify us and the world in which we live. In this book, Wagamese speaks to all citizens of the planet and offers traditional Indigenous knowledge that guides living respectfully and in unison with all other beings. Wagmese's explanation of the urgency to connect to the Earth and all other life forms to heal the planet and ourselves is crucial to my practice. In our quest for health, happiness and the planet's well-being, we need to act on the acknowledgment that all life on Earth is interconnected and needs to exist through reciprocity.

The scientific research I have been gathering explains that humans connect to nature on a physiological level and receive benefits molecularly. Biophilia describes in scientific words how I feel while being in nature with more-than-human species and what has been passed down to me through Indigenous teachings. In the stories I was taught as a child, all of the animals on Turtle Island [12] are our brothers and sisters. My research emphasizes the idea that we have an innate kinship to other species and is explored in my practice through an investigation of the concept of Biophilia, which states that we are innately attracted to nature and other living organisms.[13] More than ever, kinship has taken a backseat to assumptions about 'progress' that drive the practice of extraction and the exploitation of land as the foundation for the capitalist economy.

In Emily Carr University instructor and artist Julie Andreyev's book *Lessons From a Multispecies Studio: Uncovering Ecological Understanding and Biophilia Through Creative*

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[12] An Indigenous name for North America

[13] Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Biophilia definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster. Retrieved December 5, 2022, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biophilia

Reciprocity, Andreyev shares accounts of interspecies kinship in her practice through the creation of projects, workshops and performances in unison with nature, where the audience can experience the positive physical effects of connecting to the Earth and more-than-human species (Andreyev, 2021). Andreyev's practice contains a wonder and feeling of kinship towards more-than-humans in our immediate and extended environments and communities she calls biophilic attention. "Because biophilic attention involves sensing and feeling, it can lead to wonder and reverence for the ecologies we share," (Andreyev, 2021). I find this compelling, as my connection to the land and more-than-human species is a combination of inherited, learned and what I feel when I am in nature.

I have assisting Andreyev with her immersive art project, *Branching Songs*, for the past year. Andreyev describes *Branching Songs* as "an art project that draws attention to trees and forests in the Westcoast region. The *Branching Songs* team is experimenting with sound and new media technologies combined with land-based practices to create compelling artwork and workshops to build awareness about the crucial role trees and forests play in ecosystem health." This meaningful project relays that "The British Columbia (BC) coastal region has long been known for its unique, biodiverse forests, which include old-growth trees that play a crucial part in the province's natural health and contribute to the health of the planet. However, deforestation from logging and development has diminished this habitat for wildlife and accelerated extreme environmental conditions, such as heat events, mudslides and flooding. Even urban forests are at risk, such as the trees currently being cleared for the Transmountain Pipeline expansion project, despite knowledge about the need to eliminate fossil fuels and expand the urban forests."[14]

My contribution to *Branching Songs* is helping create bows and mallets we call 'tree feelers' made from cast-offs and harvested plants. The tree feelers are used to create sound when interacting with trees, and small contact microphones that pick up the sound are attached with fabric ribbons, in the tradition of ribbon trees from the area where I live. The ribbons are created from strips of second-hand fabric that is plant-dyed. They are embedded with the intention of care and honour for the forest. I created a Medicine Wheel blanket and harvesting tray for *Branching Songs*, and they were recently displayed at a live

[14] Andreyev, J. (2021). About. Branchingsongs. https://www.branchingsongs.org/about

performance in the Tuwanek Springs Forest, which is home to old-growth cedar and fir, salal, mosses and diverse wildlife.[15]

Image 17: (left) Miscellaneous mallets and bows for *Branching Songs*, forest cast-offs, found feathers with Saskatoon berry-dyed second-hand fabric, 2022
Image 18: (right) *Branching Songs Tuwanek Springs Forest Performance*, 2023. Wood Resonators by Georgio Magnanensi, Ribbons and Medicine Wheel blanket by Lara Felsing, 2023. Second-hand cotton fabric, canvas, floral broadcloth, burlap dyed with Sweetgrass, Tobacco, Cedar, Sage, Chaga, moss, spruce cones and needles, Saskatoon berries, strawberries, dandelion, yarrow, wild mint, bee pollen, shale, charcoal, 80″ X 65″, 2023

The Medicine Wheel blanket is made from second-hand fabrics and plant dyes and follows the colours and elements of the Medicine Wheel to bring healing and honour to the Tuwanek Springs Forest. The Harvesting Tray was woven from the remnants of the Medicine Wheel blanket.

[15] Andreyev, J. (2023). *Recital With a forest*. Branchingsongs. https://www.branchingsongs.org/recital-with-a-forest

Image 19: *Harvesting Tray* (For *Branching Songs*), second-hand cotton fabric, canvas, floral broadcloth, burlap and cotton thread dyed with Sweetgrass, Tobacco, Cedar, Sage, Chaga, moss, spruce cones and needles, Saskatoon berries, strawberries, dandelion, yarrow, wild mint, bee pollen, shale and charcoal, buffalo wool, wood hoops. 12" across X 1.5" deep, 2023. Displayed with a white deerskin Medicine Bag and medicine from the forest.

The essay, "Being Known by a Birch Tree" by Pricilla Stuckey, was recommended to me by Julie Andreyev. It tells of Stuckey's relationship with a cut-leaf weeping birch tree outside her childhood house. Stucky's writing describes our ability to bond with more-than-human species and form a relationship that surpasses explainability. What resonates with me in this writing is Stucky's examination of the common epistemology that would doubt and question her relationship with her beloved birch tree. Her account of being known back by the birch tree reinforces her message that humans have the ability to connect and live in harmony with the natural world.

To begin, I ask a simple question: What might it mean to be known by a tree? The implications of a simple question, however, may be far-reaching. In examining how relationship with a tree shapes awareness and knowledge, we might find ourselves reassessing what it means to know, what counts as knowledge, and who can be recognized as a knower. We might entertain a view of Earth and of epistemology in which humans are but one extension of Earth's many-faceted ability to know. (187)

– Pricilla Stuckey, *Being Known by a Birch Tree: Animist Refigurings of Western Epistemology*

I share Stuckey's ability to connect with more-than-human beings. Her idea that both she and the birch tree are persons acknowledges the respect and dignity that Indigenous communities also regard more-than-human species. In my practice, it is important to acknowledge the trees, plants and animals as viable and equal parts of the community in which I live. The materials I gather to make my studio work are treated with respect and gratitude, for they are living entities. I aim to carefully and thoughtfully combine harvested materials with second-hand fabric and wood remnants to create meaningful work, speaking to the need to acknowledge our place amongst more-than-human species in nature's delicate balance.

Reciprocity

The Honorable Harvest asks us to give back, in reciprocity, for what we have been given. Reciprocity helps resolve the moral tension of taking a life by giving in return something of value that sustains the ones who sustain us. One of our responsibilities as human people is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world. We can do it through gratitude, through ceremony, through land stewardship, science, art, and in everyday acts of practical reverence. (190)

— Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*

Reciprocity is essential to my research and material practice as an avenue of creating a symbiosis between humans, the land and more-than-human species. What might happen

if all humanity adopted an Indigenous worldview of reciprocity and developed mutually beneficial relations with the natural world? In Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony, Indigenous Research Methods*, Wilson describes language and position as integral to the way he approaches research and how it differs from a Western approach. Wilson, who is of Opaskwayak decent writes,

> That the English language requires but one word to describe something (a noun or pronoun), but many words to describe its use, reveals that the underlying importance is placed on the singular object or reality, rather than on multiple realities or upon one's relationship. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the foundational belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, not just the research subjects I may be working with, but it is the relationship with all creation. It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. Who cares about those ontologies? It is not the realities of in and of themselves that are important; it is the relationship that I share with reality. (73, 74)

My practice shares the ideology of being in relation to the world around me. The forest is where I harvest rose hips, spruce tips, poplar buds and other medicine, and I am continually thankful to the forest for its gifts. My mother says that our Woodland Cree ancestors' footprints are in these forests, and the forests are our relations.

Where There's Smoke, There's Fire

Trying to harness nature is a foolhardy business. As a species, we've resisted learning that, and the earth is rebelling. (33)

– Richard Wagamese, *One Story, One Song*

May 5 – 8, 2023,[16] we were evacuated from our home. At the time, there were over 100 active wildfires in Alberta, and seven burned out of control in the county where I live. Over

[16] June 9 –15, 2023, we were evacuated again.

the past decade, we have been seeing abnormally dry Spring weather, and combined with the damage caused by Mountain Pine Beetle infestations, the forests are highly susceptible to burning. The fires continue to burn, and we keep our bags by the back door, ready to leave again if the wind carries the fires back in our direction.

Image 20: *Evacuating,* 2023. Photograph taken by my son, Berg Felsing, as we drove away from the wildfires.

Wildfires are becoming extremely prevalent, and changing weather and unseasonal temperatures all point to the cause being climate change. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer expresses that we currently stand at a crossroads. "Scientific evidence tells us we are close to the tipping point of climate change, the end of fossil fuels, the beginning of resource depletion. Ecologists estimate that we would need seven planets to sustain the lifeways we have created. And yet those lifeways, lacking balance, justice

and peace, have not brought us contentment. They have brought us the loss of our relatives in a great wave of extinction. Whether or not we want to admit it, we have a choice ahead, a crossroads." (368)

As a gesture of care, I made blankets for the forest where I live. While making the blankets, I thought about how fortunate I am to have a forest of Black Spruce trees as relations and wanted to show gratitude during the wildfires. I grew up surrounded by patchwork quilts, with my grandmothers, mother and aunts making and gifting blankets to friends, family and community for various celebrations and achievements. The Métis, give blankets as a gesture of care, honour and respect. Given the unprecedented Alberta wildfire situation, I wanted to show gratitude and respect for the forest where I live with a blanket ceremony. I combined second-hand gifted and thrift store fabrics sourced from my community for this project. The blankets fronts' were made from plant pigments I harvested ,hand-dyed, and hand-stitched together.

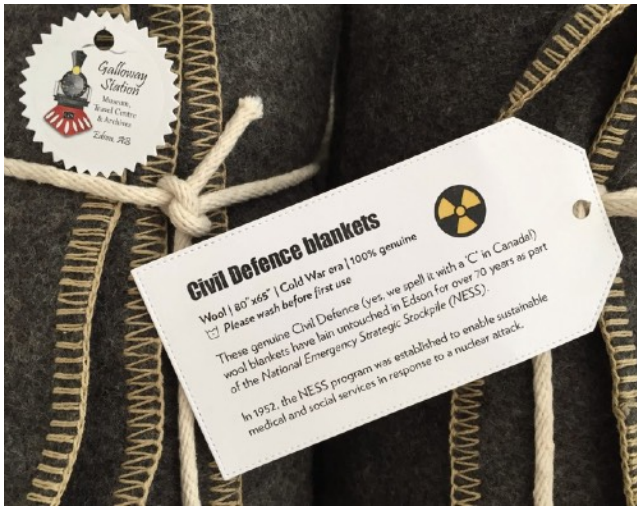

Image 21: *Civil Defence Blanket tags at the Galloway Station Museum, Edson, Alberta*. Digital photograph, 2022
Image 22: *Civil Defence Blankets at the Galloway Station Museum, Edson, Alberta*. Digital photograph, 2022

In addition, I purchased three wool blankets from the Galloway Station Museum in my community to line the blankets I made. They are for sale after being unboxed after being discovered in the basement of the post office – initially stored along with food and medical supplies in the event of a nuclear attack. I wanted to apply the same gesture of safety and protection to the forest that the National Security Strategic Stockpile reserved for the

humans in this area back in 1952. I placed the blankets on the trees, similar to how one would wrap a loved one in a blanket to keep them warm, protected and cared for during a time of trauma or illness. Next, I wrapped twine in a criss-cross pattern, inspired by the lacing on our traditional wraparounds and mukluks, to lightly secure the blankets from sliding. The gesture is not to be taken literally but to acknowledge the forest as a relation worth dignifying and thanking for the gifts it gives. I wanted to create a gesture that speaks to the respect and love I feel for the forest, and while placing the blankets onto the trees, I thanked them. This gesture also serves as a call to care for all our relations and speaks to the current climate crisis.

Image 23 (left): Lara Felsing, *A Blanket Ceremony for the Forest,* Second-hand thread, fabric and floral broadcloth dyed with Spruce cones and needles, Saskatoon berries, Tobacco, Cedar, Sage, Chaga, Strawberries and Dandelion sewn to wool National Security Strategic Stockpile blankets, 80" X 65" each, 2023
Image 24(right): Lara Felsing, *A Blanket Ceremony for the Forest*, Detail, 2023

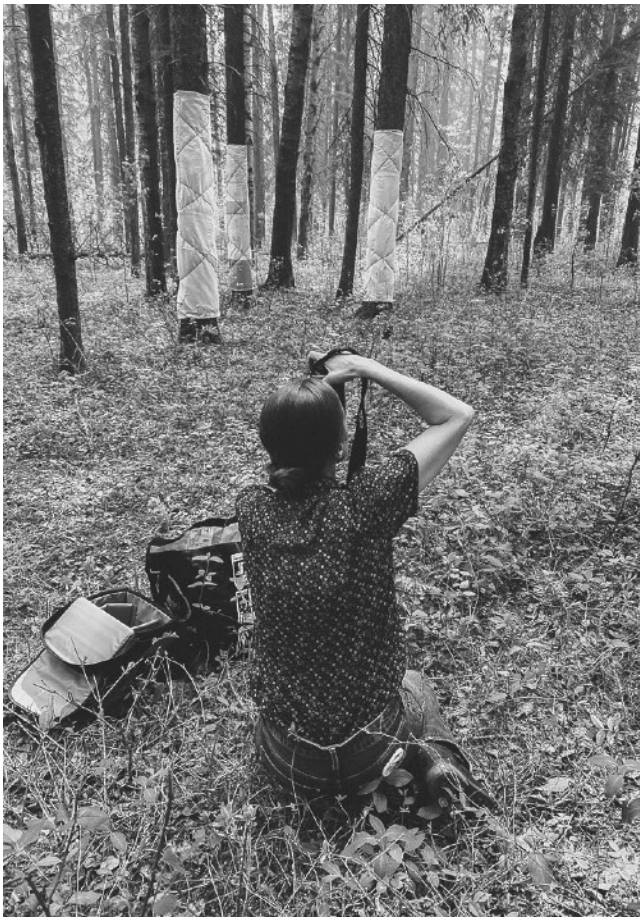

Image: 25 (left): *Wildfire Smoke in the Forest,* Digital photograph*, 2023.*
Image: 26 (right): *Documenting A Blanket Ceremony for the Forest*, Digital photograph, 2023

I incorporate photography into my practice to document my connection to the landscape and the gestures of care and gratitude I have been making. Can I successfully share these gestures beyond seeing them in person? Can the intention be transmitted through a photographic medium to reach an audience who cannot view my work in the forest? These are questions I am getting closer to being able to answer. My first choice will always be to situate my work in nature.

Rematriation

The flowers and plants always bring us back to our connection to the land and the medicines and teachings they give us tell us how to live on Mother Earth. [17]

– Christi Belcourt

[17] https://albertametis.com/app/uploads/2022/04/Urban-Plant-Harvesting-Guide.pdf

Rematriation is described by as "returning the sacred to the mother"[18] Concepts of reciprocity and kinship are commonly ignored or under-practiced, and the land was colonized without taking the land and more-than-human beings into equal account. But what if the benefits of returning the sacred to the mother were widely known?

Image 27 (left): *Tree Ring Timelines,* Birch and apple branches, sinew, hide, salvaged cotton, hand-dyed Chaga and Saskatoon berry cotton, second-hand cotton ribbon and thread, twine, sweetgrass, yarrow, poppies, strawberry runners, chive blossoms and strips of a civil defence wool blanket, *2022*
Image 28: (right): *Tree Ring Timelines*, Detail. 2022

Humans have often overlooked Mother Earth's needs, and to truly rematriate the land, we need to listen. The land and more-than-human species need to catch their breath, and humans need to understand that healing happens when we respect and have a mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world. According to an article by Jim Robbins, published online at the Yale School of Environment, ecopsychology can be summed up

[18] *Home*. Rematriation. (2022, October 14). Retrieved December 5, 2022, from https://rematriation.com/

simply as studying human relationships to the natural world. (Robbins, 2020) Robbins explains what separates ecopsychology from other psychological theories is that it considers the individual's natural environment, and recognizes that humans live in relation to the Earth. It is reciprocally beneficial to our mental and physical health that we create awareness to care for the Earth. We come from the Earth and have a deep bond with it, and by not caring for the planet, we are endangering our existence.

The idea of healing in nature is one of the oldest therapeutic dicta. However, ecopsychologists warn that we undermine the basic requirements for optimum cognitive function and physical health. Furthermore, by devastating our natural environment, we are endangering the existence of other species and are reducing our ability to heal naturally. From the oxygen we breathe to the plants we eat, the Earth continually provides for us. Being removed from our innate connection to the natural world is harmful for all.

Cultivating Gratitude

Let us pile up our thanks like a heap of flowers on a blanket. We will each take a corner and toss it high into the sky. And so our thanks should be as rich as the gifts of the world that shower down upon us. [19]

– Mohawk Elder Tom Porter

The second evacuation from our home took place just over a week before coming to Vancouver for the thesis exhibition and summer residency at ECUAD. I had spent over a year harvesting plant medicines and collecting second-hand fabric and remnants from my community to make the three hand-stitched blankets to be the focus of my thesis exhibition work. As we packed the car with emergency supplies, our three cats and our sled dog, Lola, it became apparent that there was no room for the blankets I had spent over a year carefully crafting. All I had were the photographs from the Blanket Ceremony from a week earlier, and that would potentially have to be enough. I had made a loose plan to exhibit photos if the blankets burned with our house, but fortunately, we returned to our home and all its contents intact.

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[19] Quoted in Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 114-115.

My first choice was always to exhibit the three Gratitude Blankets together on campus. They relay how I feel being in the forest - the soft and soothing colours, the variety of fabric textures, and the scent of the cedar, tobacco, sweetgrass and sage sacred plant medicines they are infused with, permeating throughout the installation. I combined the blankets with a table that held a harvesting tray containing plant medicines harvested in the forest near my home, a moose hide medicine bag, tins of plant medicines stored in Dominion-brand tobacco tins (like my granny used to do), medicinal salve I hand-made from poplar buds and juniper, and charred wood from wildfire EWF-031, which caused both of the evacuations from our home.

Image 29: *Wâhkôhtowin: Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, & Rematriation Towards Healing the Land and Ourselves,* Thesis Exhibition at Emily Carr University of Art & Design, July 8-19, 2023.

I aimed to create an ecology of artwork reflecting the power and knowledge embedded in the land where I live and share the message of Wâhkôhtowin and the need to acknowledge our connection to the natural world for our survival and the health of the land and more-than-human species with whom we co-exist. The highlight of the graduate exhibition for me was engaging with viewers, who generously shared how interacting with the work made them feel relaxed, peaceful and calm - a beautiful reflection of the healing power of the land. During the exhibition opening, I also heard stories of others' love and attachment to the land and more-than-human species, which beautifully reflected my work's theme of kinship, reciprocity and rematriation at a time when I was experiencing first-hand the effects of climate change, and the consequence of neglecting our place among, not above, the land and all our relations.

I want to conclude by reiterating why my work explores and portrays researched disconnections from the land, where humans claim dominion over non-human species. I question why colonialism has claimed ownership over other living entities and why more-than-human species are controlled and manipulated for human benefit. This thought process goes against the Indigenous Knowledge I have been passed down and doesn't align with current scientific research citing the benefits of being in nature. Therefore, I want to express in my practice what Indigenous teachings have always shared; that we are all connected. Without acknowledging that all life on Earth is intertwined, moving forward with healing ourselves and the planet seems unobtainable. Having a Western scientific perspective in alignment with what Indigenous Elders have passed down for generations is promising. By working together, we are more likely to achieve harmony among ourselves, the land and more-than-human species.

In tandem with expressing the interconnectedness between all life is the power of community and ceremony. I have often felt more connected to the Earth while harvesting with my daughter, son and mother than when I harvest alone. It is known throughout the Métis people believe that community makes us stronger, and in sharing ceremony, our message to the spirit world also becomes stronger. Through sharing experiences, we share knowledge, and through sharing knowledge, we build relationships. We are reminded that there is much to share and much to learn. To achieve reciprocity with the natural world, we must thank Mother Earth for her gifts and consider what we can offer in return.

Image 30: *Ribbon Trees (For Branching Songs).* Second-hand fabric dyed with harvested plants, 2022. Photograph by my daughter, Ellie Johnson.

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