Teaching in the Taiga: Learning to Live Where I Am

by

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B.A., University of Waterloo, 2000
B.Ed., Lakehead University, 2001

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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MASTERS OF ARTS

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Abstract

I am a non-Aboriginal teacher from the South, living and teaching in the Canadian North, traditional home to Aboriginal people for thousands of years. The Aboriginal people of the North have come to know the land deeply, their knowing rooted in an intimate understanding of and respect for the natural world. Coming to this land as a foreigner, I believe it is incumbent upon me to live and interact in the community in a way that respects the culture and way of life of the community. In this inquiry, I explore what it is to live respectfully, by relating to place and community from a position of unknowing, locating myself moment to moment as I am involved and implicated teaching and living within the flow of the community and the rhythms of the land. Specifically, I explore what it is to be connected and entangled, yet have no permanent roots. For this purpose, I draw on my experiences teaching and living in a number of northern locations throughout the taiga sub-arctic biome and represent experiences and understanding through mixed genre and multimedia such as poetry, descriptions, stories, photos and journal entries. The aim of my inquiry is to bring forth and theorize my emergent understanding of my self-in-relation to the curricular lifeworld of the school and community in the place where I teach.

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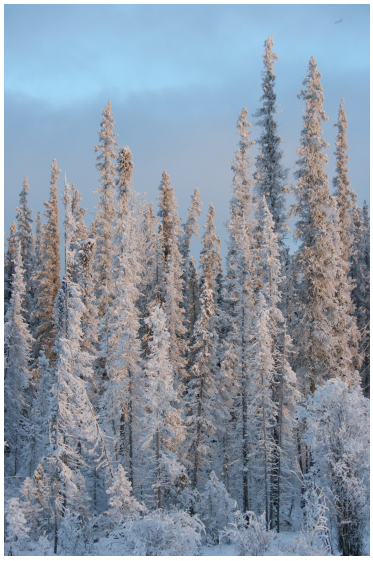
Lastly, I wish to express my deep reverence to the Eagle, bison, ravens, northern lights, willows, spruce, and fireweed, with which I so intimately shared this journey of learning in the taiga. I am continuously humbled by your spirit and the silence you bestow.

Naming the Place Where I Am



Before embarking on this journey into place and teaching in Canada's North, it is with respect that I acknowledge the Aboriginal people and their traditional lands from whom and by which this inquiry situates, and without whose invitation this inquiry would not have been possible. For the past ten years, aside from numerous months engaged in university studies in southern Canada, I have been privileged to have lived and taught in five different Aboriginal communities in Quebec, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories. All of the communities where I have lived are located within the geographical boundary of Canada's subarctic taiga[1].

In naming the place where I am, I will not elicit specific Aboriginal community names. From the conception of this inquiry, it has been my interest to explore the topic of cross-cultural place and teaching from a bioregional perspective. Ethically, this allowed me to respect the confidentiality of specific places and people, and methodologically,

[1] The taiga is a biome. In ecology, a biome describes a large land region that has a number of generally similar life characteristics, such as climate, vegetation, soil, geological and physiographic features (Bastedo, 1994). I use the term bioregion to describe the taiga as a subset of this biome, as I locate the inquiry within the distinct geographical area of Canada's subarctic North.

allowed me to explore the topic of place and teaching structured within a particular geographical and bio-diverse terrain.

Below is a description of three different contexts through which I view the taiga bioregion in this study. In these descriptions I extended the term *taiga* beyond its original geographic and bio-diverse boundaries to also embed and associate the Aboriginal linguistic nomenclature and meaning encased within it. Alternative yet complementary Aboriginal nomenclature helps define the rich and diverse history and heritage of the bioregion. All perspectives and accompanying terminology used in defining the taiga are equally important to this work.

Geographical/Ecological Context

Taiga is a Russian word meaning "land of little sticks" (Bastedo, 1994, p. 1). The word was originally used to refer to a dense, marshy forest in Siberia. The term taiga is now used as an ecological classification to denote the world's largest biome, which covers the entire circumpolar world from Labrador to Alaska and from Siberia to Scandinavia (Bastedo, 1994). In Canada, the taiga bioregion is described geographically as the more barren northern areas south of the arctic tree line. At this northern latitude climatic conditions result in short mild summers and long cold winters that can last up to eight months of the year.

The taiga landscape in northern Canada is most notably characterized by its broad rolling terrain and vast coniferous forests. Needled leaf trees such as spruce, pine, and tamarack are the most dominant plants in this region. This is due to their ability to adapt to the taiga's thin, acidic, and often low-nutrient soils. Broad leaf deciduous trees such as birch and aspen also characterize the vegetative community, along with Labrador tea,

willow, lichen and numerous berry-bearing shrubs.

In this inquiry I will adopt a bioregional perspective of teaching in the taiga through my lived experiences teaching in different northern Aboriginal community locations. However, as noted in the inquiry title *Teaching in the Taiga: Learning to Live Where I Am*, I specifically situate the inquiry in the place where I currently live and teach. This place is the western region of the Northwest Territories. Here, in this vast taiga landscape, nearly 90% of the primal wilderness remains untouched by humans. Vast coniferous forests, rocks, rolling hills, and countless waterways stretch in all directions. Fauna such as caribou, bison, wolf, lynx, ravens, and ptarmigan are a part of everyday existence.

Social-cultural Context

Within a bioregion ecological and traditional land use patterns overlap. Therefore, the taiga bioregion represents both geographical and cultural terrains (Bastedo, 1994). The social-cultural context in which I physically situate and write this inquiry is among the Dene First Nation people of the Northwest Territories. When broken down into two words, De Ne mean "being from the land" (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, 2003, p. 5). In other English translations, Dene means "The People" (The Dene Nation, 1984, p. 7). The Dene people call the western land region of the Northwest Territories the Denendeh, meaning "The Land of the People" (p. 7). In the Denendeh, the Dene consist of five distinct regional groups, each with their own traditional territory and language dialect. Collectively, the Dene share a common language, family, culture, and ancestry (Berger, 1988). In this inquiry, I also occasionally refer to other Aboriginal people and communities where I have lived and taught. These include the Cree First Nation people

of the Eeyou Istchee (James Bay, Quebec), and Ojibway-Cree First Nation people located in northern Ontario.

I will use the terms *Denendeh* and *taiga* as synonyms throughout the study but in slightly different ways. The Dene people have a deep-rooted knowledge of and timeless history with the land. Within the Denendeh, "every hill, creek, lake, bay, and peninsula has a Dene name indicating events that have happened in that particular place" (The Dene Nation, 1984, p. 9). In recognition that English and scientific names given to places rarely elicit such intimate knowledge and history of the land, I use the term Denendeh when aiming to give meaning to the taiga in a way that portrays the intimate history, language, and culture of the region.

Local Community Context

I teach and write this inquiry beside the longest river in Canada — the Deh Cho, also known as the Mackenzie River. This great river runs north through the western land region of the Northwest Territories from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Ocean. On most maps this river is named the Mackenzie River after European explorer Alexander Mackenzie who traveled its waters questing to reach the Pacific Ocean. The Dene call this river the "Deh Cho" which means "Big River" (Dene Cultural Institute, n.d.). The river is a deep part of Dene history, language, and culture: its essence defines the Dene as a people. To respect both names, I refer to this great river simply as *the river*.



Journeys have a way of finding our pathways.
Whether sought or circumstantial, each journey shapes how we walk in the world.

We cannot help but learn by
being
some place
at some time.

Imagination becomes our ally,
connects us with the unknown and the breath of possibility.

Spirit edges us forward,
shaping
shifting
shadowing
what is yet to come.

(Meyer, 2003, p.11)

PREFACE

Journeying Into Place



Stepping through the fallen branches and underbrush, I made my way down to the edge of the river. Gazing out at the rocky limestone ridges and spires of evergreen that splashed along the horizon, I felt something primeval in the spirit of this place I could not describe. It was as if the Earth's bones were exposed through its ancient black spruce forests, and its breath made visible to the human eye. Reaching into my pocket I took out the pinch of tobacco I had brought with me. Then kneeling down, I placed the tobacco in the river, and asked for permission to travel this journey of learning inside the landscape. I asked that I might learn from the land and the river, and asked that the land and the Dene people might teach me. Inhaling a slight breeze off the river, I felt the aliveness of the land inside me, filling my lungs. After watching the tobacco float downstream for a time, I got up and said "Mahsi," then walked away thankful I had taken the time.

There are many ways to embark on a journey and venture forth inside a landscape. One might leap into the river spontaneously and begin to swiftly paddle. Venturing on foot, one might begin stepping forward on the land filled with both excitement and trepidation about the adventure that lies ahead. In my experience traveling in the taiga, I have learned it is wise to not to begin a journey haphazardly. The taiga is a vast wilderness where one is in constant engagement with the wild energies of

the land. The scat of wolves and grunts of roaming bison are reminders of an ever-elusive presence in the surrounding landscape. The touch of an easterly wind can be a profound awakening during long dark winters where temperatures frequently dip below -40° Celsius. And, high densities of mosquitoes and other insects in the taiga's short summer can leave one with little reprieve. It is a land of extremes and constant change. Therefore, it is important to be respectful and mindful of the land and its natural laws.

By living and teaching among the Dene people for the past ten years, I have learned that before embarking on a journey, it is important to take the time to pause, to calm the body and mind, to give attention to where I am, and to consider where I might be going. Because I travel on the land through this journey of learning, it is important to respect the land. In Dene culture giving a gift such as tobacco to the land is an important ritual before embarking on a journey. Offering a gift acknowledges the land as a living entity, and shows humility in the presence of its power. In offering a gift, one might give thanks to the land and river, ask for permission to travel, and request a safe journey. For the Dene, this is part of travelling well and beginning a journey in respectful relationship to the land.

When I returned to the river from graduate school, partaking in this ritual was important for me. As a non-Aboriginal teacher and learner I was about to embark on a journey of inquiry in Dene territory, the ancestral home of the Dene people who have lived here since time immemorial. Dene Elder Frank T'selie (Dene Cultural Institute, n.d.) tells us the land is sacred to the Dene people:

> [The river] has been flowing before any of us can remember. We take our strength and our wisdom and our ways from the flow and direction that has been

> established for us by ancestors we never knew, ancestors of a thousand years ago. Their wisdom flows through us to our children and our grandchildren to generations we will never know. We will live out our lives as we must and we will die in peace because we will know that our people and this river will flow on after us. (p. 44)

As a non-Aboriginal teacher not from this land, it was important for me to embark on this journey in a respectful manner. Going to the river and offering a gift to the river was not only a gesture of respect, it was also symbolic of my opening as an inquirer to learn from the land and the Dene people. Journeying in this way was to approach both method and topic of this thesis from a position of not knowing what I would learn or how the world might disclose itself to me. This form of inquiry is a way of journeying inside the landscape that pays attention to what comes into view and dwells in the mystery of what is not yet known. In journeying (inquiring) from a position of not presuming to know "we are connected to and dependent upon what falls outside the sphere of knowing. Our actions must become delicate and careful and attentive to what crackles beyond the boundaries that our knowledge has set" (Jardine, 1998, p. 119). In this way of journeying into place, it is important to move respectfully: being mindful of actions, giving care to relationships, and attending to what arises in each moment.

Evolving Inside the Landscape



In this thesis I journey inside the landscape through a process of emergent inquiry. To help articulate my evolving knowing as I teach and learn inside the landscape, I draw on the metaphor of the fireweed. Fireweed is a perennial wildflower found throughout the taiga bioregion. It gets its name for being one of the first plants to grow in areas burned by fire. Fireweed has always stood out for me in the North. During the taiga's short subarctic summer months, the fireweed's tall flowering spikes paint the earth's palette of browns and greens with a brilliant magenta. It was these bold, wild brushes of colour that drew my attention to fireweed, and it naturally came to be the central metaphor through which the topic of place and cross-cultural teaching and learning in rural northern Aboriginal communities unfolded.

For the past ten years I have lived and taught as a transient teacher in different Aboriginal communities. Following the phenology[2] of the fireweed, I wander about the

[2] Phenology is a branch of ecological science that studies recurring plant and animal lifecycle events, and how these lifecycles are influenced by seasonal variations in the climate.

taiga like a seed, then take root and grow in a particular Aboriginal community, then return to seed again and move on. Throughout my years of wandering in various rural Aboriginal communities, the terrain has always remained the same, but I have changed. In this inquiry, my own life as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North over the past ten years is the site of my research.

Grounded in a phenomenological-hermeneutic research orientation, I explore the phenomenon of what it is to be connected and entangled without permanent roots. The inquiry recounted in this thesis begins after I return from graduate school to teach in a small Dene First Nation community situated on the banks of the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River). Through the method of autobiographical writing I seek a deeper understanding of the place where I live and teach, particularly the land and the people of the Denendeh, and my self-in-relation as a non-Aboriginal teacher inside this context. Ultimately, I seek to find a deeper understanding of what it is to teach and learn respectfully in a culture that is not my own.

Using the phenology of the fireweed as a metaphor helps to bring my evolving understandings to light. My own journey of learning evolves parallel to the stages of the lifecycle of the fireweed, which begins as a seed then takes root and begins to grow in the land. As I live, teach, and learn by the river, I pay attention, as Luce-Kapler (2004) describes, to the details, rhythms and shapes of my living. I notice the threads as I attend to the "biological and phenomenological", and attune to the changing self as learning contributes to "emerging patterns of experience" (p. 46). Through interpreting events and lived experiences, I seek a deeper understanding of their meanings and how these pieces fit into the "greater picture" (p. 46) of education in Canada's North.

The paradox of the fireweed, however, is that it both roots and moves easily in the land. Fireweed is able to form roots and adapt to soil conditions in which most plants find it difficult to grow. Yet, fireweed is also able to move easily, through the prolific reproduction of wind-dispersed seed. This pattern parallels my own lived experience as a transient teacher, moving easily across the land as if blown on the wind, but also rooting easily as I enter the day-to-day flow and rhythms of the Aboriginal communities where I land. This paradox is experienced through a double ecological consciousness: as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North, I hold both Western and Aboriginal Earth-centered worldviews simultaneously. The story I tell of my journey (inquiry) into place and teaching is a personal reflection of my own evolving epistemological and ontological understandings and the tensions lived in the experience of teaching in the midst of divergent yet converging Western and Aboriginal worldviews[3].

In an emergent inquiry, the topic evolves as the writer lives and writes the journey. Through autobiographical inquiry, my awareness of Western and Aboriginal worldviews broadens. I become more aware of the tensions that arise from holding simultaneously two modes of consciousness, complex and often contradictory perspectives and emotions (Berman, 2000). Berman terms these two modes vertical and horizontal. The vertical worldview can be said to correspond to Western culture's ways of knowing, which are rooted in hierarchical relations, modernism, and sedentary ways of life. In contrast, a horizontal worldview or mode of consciousness can be said to correspond to Aboriginal culture's ways of knowing, which are rooted in egalitarian

[3] Throughout the study I use the terms Western and Aboriginal worldviews or cultural paradigms with the realization that both are constructs and do not have any clear referent in the world. However, they are epistemological paradigms that have affected human and other life forms profoundly. Metaphorically these terms enable me to talk about and deal with what I experience.

relations and ecologically centered human histories.

Autobiographical writing brings these tensions to conscious awareness as they play out in my own life as a non-Aboriginal teacher living, teaching and inquiring in an Aboriginal community. As both a teacher and inquirer, I dwell between rooting and wandering, Western and Aboriginal worldviews, North and South locations and the learning contexts of the river and the university. These parallels generate my quest for a deepened understanding of how these relationships are lived.

This journey into place and teaching is an account of my journey of learning as a non-Aboriginal teacher and inquirer living among the Dene people of the Denendeh. My research method moves beyond traditional modes of inquiry that employ cognitive ways of knowing and aim for certain knowledge, to inquiry that cultivates an appreciative way of knowing and values awareness, attunement and emergence (Irwin, 2003b). In sharing my journey as a teacher and learner in Aboriginal soil, I seek to provide in writing a rich and varied description of teaching in the taiga through an assemblage of lived experiences, as well as photography and poetry to bring forth alternative modes of experience, learning and inquiry. This journey moreover is an account of learning what it is to relate respectfully as a non-Aboriginal teacher and learner in Aboriginal place and culture. Knowing tentatively in the midst of not knowing generates a tension between needing to be as explicit as possible for the sake of academic inquiry, while seeking to be as unimposing and open-ended as possible for the sake of respecting the people and place where I live. This study is an exploration and theorization of what is entailed and what results from living and researching in this manner.

WANDERING IN THE TAIGA

a seed adrift on the wind

moved by currents into

remote

terrains

t
w
i
s
t
i
n
g

and

t
u
r
n
i
n
g

through the trees

this way

and

that way

everywhere to go

Moving About: Searching for a Direction



Wander 1. move aimlessly about
– *Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*

Five years ago while teaching in a small Dene First Nation village along the banks of the Mackenzie River, on a rare impulse I picked up my personal notebook and wrote the following words:

Journal Entry,

I have been itching to write — I am not sure what, or to whom. I am leaving the North soon. I put opera on. I always seem to play opera when I am mixed up. Canada – 'the true north strong and free' — those are powerful words. I have felt them, experienced them, lived them — it was an awesome existence here. Trying at times, very trying. I have cried, laughed, shared, and lived the North. I do not know how long I will be gone for. I hope to be back someday and share what I have lived and always loved.

I remember cold winds, long johns, fresh air, endless trees, flying birds and fireweeds — I love fireweeds. I really love fireweeds. I remember the smiling children at my window, peeking in to see what I was doing, wanting to know if I wanted to come out and play. I did play — we played tag and danced. I gave piggy back rides, enjoyed their energy and curious little faces.

I lived in a shack. The shack smelled. I probably smelled like my shack. I remember the windows would cover with black flies that died, piling up on the windowsill. I went on a caribou hunt, froze my limbs and thanked the warmth of my parka for shielding my face from the wind and cold. I rode on the back of pickups and picked

blueberries under the midnight sun. I dreamt of blueberries. I saw spots of blue in my dreams. . .

A few months later I forgot these words and left the North for graduate school with no intention of ever returning. In the Northwest Territories approximately 85% of teachers living in Aboriginal communities come from outside of the Northwest Territories (Stewart, 2004). Most teachers stay only a few years before permanently returning to the South. I had spent most of my early adulthood years living in rural northern Aboriginal communities. I wondered if it was my time as well to stop moving about and find a more permanent location.

I first entered the taiga in 1998 as a young undergraduate student hired to facilitate a summer camp for youth in a small Cree First Nations community in James Bay, Quebec. It was during this summer that the seed of a love for life in the North was sown. Shortly after returning to the University of Waterloo to complete my undergraduate studies, I found myself longing to return to the community. And so, four months later I flew back to the James Bay, where I was invited to work with community youth for the winter. After nearly a year in the James Bay, the North winds called again, this time landing me further North, where I was invited to facilitate another summer youth program, this time in a small Dene First Nations village in the Northwest Territories' central subarctic.

Through these experiences grew a budding interest to live and teach in rural northern Aboriginal communities. In the fall of 2000, I entered the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University where I was given the privilege to complete my teaching placement in a fly-in Ojibway-Cree community in northern Ontario. Upon completing a

Bachelor of Education, I returned to the central subarctic for a second summer, then began my first teaching position that fall in a nearby Dene First Nation community located within the same region. However, after one year of teaching I decided to move again, this time to another region of the Northwest Territories. The community where I was accepted to teach was a small Dene community located along the banks of the Mackenzie River. I lived and taught in this community for a few years, that is, until the South winds called, and I drifted back to university.

I entered the Graduate Studies Program at the University of Victoria open to the directions this journey of learning might lead. I had no specific research intention in mind, nor did I know where my teaching life would end up after my year of coursework was complete. Midway through my year of graduate studies a topic of inquiry had not blossomed as I anticipated. In fact I was completely uncertain as to a direction I might pursue. Then in a course entitled *Interpretive Inquiry*, taught by my advisor Antoinette Oberg, I was invited to use autobiographical writing as a way to explore my personal research interests.

Not having inquired autobiographically before, I began searching for a topic. I imaged myself akin to a spruce tree, with many branches of interest exploding like spruce needles in all different directions. In the literature I was drawn to theorizations of both Western and Aboriginal worldviews and associated ways of knowing and learning in education. As a non-Aboriginal teacher I had spent all of my teaching years in rural northern Aboriginal communities. In reflecting on my experiences, I found the contrasts in Western and Aboriginal epistemologies fascinating, and grew interested in more deeply understanding their relationships, including ways in which both worldviews

integrated and ultimately related to Aboriginal student learning and cross-cultural pedagogy. I explored these relationships through questions of curriculum, learning styles, culturally responsive classrooms, and effective relationships between Aboriginal schools and communities (to name a few), only to find the more I inquired, the more relationships among all the branches of interest came to interconnect.

In reflecting autobiographically on my experience teaching in closely knit Aboriginal school community settings, I found each topic of interest to be highly contextual and dependent on the interrelationships among non-Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal students, the school, and local community. For example, there are hundreds of kilometers between rural Aboriginal communities in the North, and many are only accessible by plane. Aboriginal life and traditional culture are intimately connected and the land is an integral part of everyday life (Berger, 1988; Kawagley, 2006). As a non-Aboriginal teacher, how I live the curriculum with Aboriginal students is linked to the cultural knowledge and understandings I bring to the teaching/learning situation. This knowledge is shaped not only by my upbringing in Western white culture, but also by my lived experiences with/in the community, such as participating in a drum dance, feast, or winter camp. Cross-cultural experiences, particularly those experienced through participating on the land with the Aboriginal community, have an impact on how I teach and relate to Aboriginal students, enhancing my ability as a non-Aboriginal teacher to work with mainstream curriculum in culturally relevant and meaningful ways. Reciprocally, this pedagogical relationship impacts Aboriginal students' relationship to school and their personal experience of learning.

When looking at the whole, each branch of interest: school and community

relationships, pedagogy, curriculum, worldviews, cross-cultural knowledge and understandings, and Aboriginal learners and learning, all interconnected! Finally, after much frustration, I asked, "Who looks at a tree and only focuses on one branch?" From my perspective, the vitality of a tree is found in the interrelated movement of all its branches and its interactions with its surrounding environment.

Reflecting on the metaphor of a spruce tree as a way to think about and articulate my search for a research topic, I came to realize I did not feel a sense of rootedness to any one particular environment. Prior to graduate school I had spent years moving about from place to place. Similarly, as an inquirer I was discovering my process of inquiry reflected these movements. Only this time I was wandering in the academic context of the university.

What I was not aware of in this early stage of inquiry was that the idea of wandering (moving about without a destination) suggests an epistemology different from the norm in Western white culture. Dominant perceptions fundamental to Western ways of knowing the world are associated with fixedness and a need for certainty. Wandering moves against the settled nature of epistemic thinking (Gough, 2006). Berman (2000) says wandering is not about "finding permanence" (p. 81) but rather is a way of being that opens to the world "as it presents itself" (p. 81). It is a way of being with/in the world that lives in the continuous midst of emergence, movement, and change.

Coming to consciousness of my natural disposition to wander still did not settle the fact that I did not yet have an inquiry topic to pursue. Even though it did not connect with my way of being, I held the assumption that to pursue an inquiry within the university setting I needed to find a direction I could articulate with clarity and establish a

fixed method from which to set my movements.

With great effort I tried to stop wandering, but like the seed that had set me adrift on the winds years ago in the North, I could not stop moving. Wandering in this new and unfamiliar landscape of academia, I continued to wonder, "Which direction do I go?" The tension created through this academic uncertainty mirrored the tension of my professional uncertainty. I was still undecided where to go once my year of course work was complete. The nature of my academic interests faced North, but the North was the very place I had left with no intention of returning!

Finally, after months of inquiring into both Western and Aboriginal ways of knowing in Indigenous teaching/learning contexts, an unforeseen direction began to unfold. In questing to learn how to bridge two radically different cultures in education, I grew curious as to where I fit as a teacher within these epistemological frameworks. Autobiographical writing had created awareness that my way of thinking and being did not fully identify with Western modes of perception. Western cultural thought tends to be linear and sedentary in nature, anchored in conceptions of an individualistic self viewed as separate from the community and the natural world (Berman, 2000). I was more apt to identify with Aboriginal epistemologies whereby "thinking is inquiry into relationships and community" (Fixico, 2003, p. 7) and understandings of community extend beyond human relationships to the natural environment. But I was not Aboriginal, so where was my view located?

I grew curious and decided to look back at how and what I had been writing throughout the previous months of graduate course work. I came to see that the words and perspectives which I had used were congruent with an ecological paradigm or

worldview. An ecological paradigm acknowledges all living beings as "members of ecological communities bound together in a network of interdependencies" (Capra, 1996, p.11). This is an epistemology which parallels Aboriginal perceptions of the world, whereby relationships are viewed as being grounded in ever-changing contexts and the living processes of one's place and community (Cajete, 1994; Fixico, 2003).

Coming to further awareness that how I viewed and related to the world not only was connected to my disposition to wander but also situated me within a defined philosophical framework, I began to wonder how this paradigm connected to the patterns and directions of my life as a teacher in the North. I began to wonder about the repeated push and pull between North and South, and the continual draw to teach in Aboriginal communities. With this newfound awareness, my words suddenly looked strange and unfamiliar. I felt as if I did not know this self. Instead of the inquiry becoming clearer, it was now becoming more complex and convoluted. Who was this self, writing these words? Where had this way of thinking come from? What did this ecological paradigm mean for me as a researcher and as a teacher? How had this paradigm subconsciously been guiding the directions of my life and filtering into the inquiry I was living?

It became pivotal for me to explore this lens of an ecological paradigm. This lens filters how I live, teach, and learn in the place that I am, and thus focuses my relationship with the research topic, and the life world as I come to know and relate to it.

A few short months before the end of my university course work a friend pointed out that I still had not changed my Northwest Territories license plate. It was inevitable. The North winds had returned. Perhaps the winds had been calling me back all along and I had just been resistant to hearing them. I realized then what mattered to me most was

the place I had never stopped wandering — teaching in the taiga. I sent an application North and was accepted to return to the Dene community I had left less than a year before. Whatever it was that genuinely drew me to the land and the life of teaching in northern Aboriginal communities was somehow speaking inside me. Struggling to understand, I titled the inquiry *Teaching in the Taiga: Learning to Live Where I Am*. Shortly after writing these words in my journal an eagle flew past the treetop outside my window. I knew I had found something. Now the question was, "Where do I begin?"

Tangled in Red Willows



red willows entwine by the river,
breathing in a changing landscape
the river speaks, silent and unseen

The inquiry, *Teaching in the Taiga: Learning to Live Where I Am*, began before I knew what it entailed. I had never before explored the site of my own life as a teacher. In naming the taiga, I now had a specific geographical terrain in which to situate the inquiry. Each of the five Aboriginal communities where I had lived and taught during the previous six years was located within this bioregion. Naming the taiga also gave me a

natural boundary within which I could navigate freely through the mindscape of my memories in the North. Although I did not yet have a direction, the landscape was familiar and I could drift naturally in this terrain. I was comfortable writing in its vastness and its wild and open space.

As I began to write situated in the mindscape of the taiga and remembered back, words flowed. I whirled about with ease in and out of each location. Images of bison and caribou danced in my head. Stories and place memories filled my journal with lived experiences with the land and people. I recollected riding on the back of pick-ups and picking blueberries under the midnight sun. Writing teemed with life as I wandered about in my memories and relived each experience. As I wrote, I could still feel the intense gaze of myself and students as we watched a group of bison walk down a narrow dirt road straight towards our spring camp, and the tensing of my body at the sound of an Elder's breaking clap that turned the animals back into the bush. For me, teaching in the taiga was filled with lived experiences on the land. Students, Elders, teachers, and members of the community with whom I shared these experiences were all a part of me. The stories I told of teaching in the taiga flowed out from this life.

However, when I gave attention to the second part of my title, it was as if the seed that had been floating freely inside me suddenly stopped moving. "Learning to Live Where I Am" represented more than an interest to understand more deeply the Aboriginal world where I had been living; it was also an interest to know myself more deeply as a non-Aboriginal teacher in this place. Who was I as a teacher in northern Aboriginal communities? Knowing who I was within where I was mattered, for "knowledge of a

place — where you are and where you come from is intertwined with knowledge of who you are" (Orr, 1992, p. 30).

I read my own memories and stories of the taiga struggling to understand more deeply who and where I was. Connection to the land and Aboriginal people of the North was a theme that repeated throughout my texts. I recognized this theme of connection also repeated throughout my life. As a child I grew up in "wild nature" (Drengson, 1996, p. 184). Dense boreal woods and grasses surrounded my world and what I knew. Since childhood, I have lived for significant periods of time in many different places, and each time I have been distanced from the wild presence of the land, I have always found myself longing to return. Reflecting on this pattern I grew aware that my connection to the land impacted the directions of my life. But there was still something missing – an unnamed feeling I was longing to discover. What was "Learning to Live Where I Am" really about? What was I seeking? What was the experience of "Teaching in the Taiga" that touched me so deeply I could not articulate it?

Some time after conceiving my title, my advisor wrote, suggesting my deep interest was a quest to know what it is to be connected and entangled without permanent roots. I was speechless at the sight of these words. What is it to be connected and entangled without permanent roots? Was this a joke? I repeated the question over and over in my mind. Connected and entangled? No permanent roots? How did this relate to teaching in the taiga? How was I to write from this place?

The following journal entry illustrates my early struggle writing from this position of not knowing:

Journal Entry,

This is not funny anymore! What is it to be connected and entangled without permanent roots? How do I write that? I'll be writing a thesis on an impossible thesis! Maybe it's best not to write right now because I feel like crying. I'm usually a pretty level-headed person. Now one minute I'm crumpling and throwing paper (I'm getting to be a good aim), the next minute my head is buried in a pillow, the minute after that I'm writing again trying to find some humour in it all.

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One would think I was pregnant!

I'm regressing with this thesis. I'm going in all different directions. I keep deleting this week. I don't know if I'm going to figure this out. I was almost certain I had all this figured out yesterday. I tried to articulate my thoughts and I went off again. I still have those same thoughts in my head, however 'vague.'

Maybe I'll forget all of this and start over. I can't start over. Now that I know my epistemology it is going to keep coming back to this. It appears in my writing and ways of thinking and I can't get away from it. I don't notice this paradigm evident in my everyday life. I do notice it in the books and art that I have. I notice it too in my writing, and how I come to reflect on my place memory and experiences in the North. How does this way of knowing dwell within me, how I live and come to teach in the places I do?

In the North I have experienced having few resources and support materials to work with. I am slowly coming to recognize that I am very 'locally orientated' in the way I create, pulling resources and experiences for students from the community, both land and people. Perhaps this is why I see learning from place to be imperative. By bringing learning outside the classroom inside, as a non-Aboriginal teacher I can make school more meaningful for students, and create opportunities for more successful experiences. In the North there is already enough working against them. I sound like I am being critical. In my defense, I am critically reflecting within myself, coming to see how all this works together. The brain buzz is starting — I'm stopping.

To write from a position of not knowing is paradoxically to write to come to know. However, I was not yet aware that through the process of autobiographical writing and repeatedly looking back on where I had been, "Learning to Live Where I Am" was moving forward. Kierkegaard (1983) describes this movement as a project of "repetition"

or “recollection forward” (p. 131). Through on-going inquiry and autobiographical writing practice, “hindsight revises the past and thereby produces a forward movement of new understanding” (Oberg 2002, p. 3). Caputo (1987) further describes this movement as a “creative production which pushes ahead, which produces as it repeats, which produces what it repeats, which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of the flux” (p. 3).

As I neared the end of my graduate course work and the topic of inquiry slowly began to unfold, I came to the realization that the (quest)ion, “what it is to be connected and entangled without permanent roots,” was not only asking how I experienced and thought about teaching in the taiga, but also how I interacted and related to the land and Aboriginal schools and communities as a non-Aboriginal teacher. Heidegger (as cited in Caputo, 1987) claims knowing and being are intimately connected. He states, “We understand as we do because we exist as we do” (p. 61). According to Heidegger, epistemology and ontology cannot be separated.

Shifting my efforts, I began a quest to understand more deeply and make some sense of how I might live and interact as a non-Aboriginal teacher in-relation to the land and Aboriginal school communities. I began to read widely ecological and Earth-centered philosophy and epistemologically related literature. I was curious to read narratives of connection others had to their places, and theories that gave a language from which to derive meaning. I identified with literature on deep ecology (Capra, 1996; Drengson, 1996), ecological postmodernism (Spretnak, 1997), relational knowing (Riley-Taylor, 2002), systems thinking (Capra, 1996), bioregionalism (Sale, 2000), and ecopedagogy (Jardine 1998, 2000). I also identified with Indigenous writers who languaged and

theorized traditional and contemporary Indigenous worlds and epistemologies based on their unique community history and cultural perspectives (Cajete, 1994; Fixico, 2003; Graveline, 1998; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998, 1999; Kawagley, 2006).

Although I found all of these writers deeply informative and influential in shaping ways I thought about myself and others, when I turned to find my place within both Aboriginal (where I am) and non-Aboriginal (who I am) ecological paradigmatic discourses, I suddenly stopped moving. It was if the seed that had stirred and was wandering so freely inside me had suddenly landed in a tangle of red willows. Inside this tangle I did not know which way to look or how to articulate where I was. From my perspective, Indigenous and non-Indigenous strands of ecological and Earth-centered discourse wove and intertwined on parallel but different tracks. Both discourses were grounded in community and ecological processes but from diverse cultural perspectives, including ways of "living out" and "speaking about" human/earth relations. Bioregionalist Kirkpatrick Sale (2000) also acknowledges this interconnection. He describes contemporary ecocentric perspectives such as deep ecology and bioregionalism as "a modern version of ancient tribal understandings that shaped and guided Indian societies for centuries" (p. xvii).

By repeatedly juxtaposing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal earth-centered perspectives I discovered I identified with aspects of both discourses. When I tried to untangle my own epistemological understandings and experiences of the North separate from Aboriginal perspectives, I would repeatedly end up exhausted and confused. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of "living out" and "speaking about" human/earth relations mixed and twisted not only in the texts that bound around me, but also in the

texts inside me. Throughout the years I spent living and teaching in tightly knit rural Aboriginal schools and communities since young adulthood, subtly Aboriginal life and culture had woven into the fabric of my life. Not only had I watched the ways and listened closely to the words of Elders and members of the community in a desire to know and respect local values and culture, but I had also been embodying these values. These values and my experience of Aboriginal culture had become a part of me, of how I thought and related to the world around.

Through this awakening, I came to understand that my frustrations as an inquirer stemmed from the quest to find where I fit epistemologically from a cultural binary of either/or, Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. Not only was this confusing for me, it was also conflictual. Ecological perspectives are a wholistic and elusive matrix of interconnections:

> Ecology… presents us with an image of our lives and the life of the earth as involving a vast, vibrant, generative, ambiguous, multivocal, interweaving network of living interconnections. We are living *in* this web of interrelations and these interrelations are always already at work *before* the task of writing *about* those relations has begun. . . . Ecology tells us that there is no center or foundation to this web of living interconnections, just small, lateral, interrelating relations of this to this to this, splayed in moving patterns of kinship and kind. (Jardine, 2002, p. 6)

Therefore, "Learning to Live Where I Am" also included learning to live with the tangle of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds and words that mixed and twisted inside me.

In recognizing this interweaving between my own and Aboriginal ways of

knowing I found some affirmation through the term *métissage* which "comes from the Latin word mixtus meaning 'mixed,' primarily referring to cloth of two different fibers" (Chambers, C., & Hasebe-Ludt, E., with Donald, D., Hurren, W., Leggo, C., and Oberg, A., 2007, p. 141). This term legitimized a state of being I viewed as an epistemological "borderland" (Irwin, 2004) between North and South, Aboriginal and white dominated worlds, neither of which my being fully integrated.

The term métissage not only helped describe for me a theoretical construct of an in-between space where tensions and understandings of self and others reside, but also described a form of research *praxis* with which I could identify (Chambers, et. al., 2007). As a research *praxis*, métissage "seeks cross-cultural, egalitarian relations of knowing and being" (p. 142). Métissage acknowledges a way of being in research that respects "the historical interrelatedness of traditions, collective contexts and individual circumstances" (p. 142). From the site of my own life as a non-Aboriginal inquirer, it meant engaging in a research process that is mindful of diversities among epistemologies, traditions, histories, and values while simultaneously acknowledging the multiple interrelations that arise from our shared lives. It also meant learning to honour the multiple perspectives found in the space of my own "(in)difference" (Hasebe-Ludt, E., Chambers, C., Oberg, A., & Leggo, C., 2008, p. 57) while retaining a critical perspective on all the perspectives I adopted.

Yet there was something more, something beyond this tangle of willow I found myself stuck in. The more I read on cross-cultural teaching and ecology, the more I experienced a growing sense of disconnect from these lived contexts. The entanglement I was experiencing in the context of the university was similar to the experience Grumet

(1988) described: “We pass texts between us. We touch the text instead of each other and make our marks on it rather than on each other. The text is material, it has texture, it is woven; we pull and tug at it, it winds around us, we are tangled up in it” (p. 144). In contrast, I sought a kind of research that explicated understandings as they derived from lived experience, not speaking about, but speaking knowledge as it arose.

My own stance as an inquirer was oriented toward what Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Mattuck, J. (1997) call connected knowing, an orientation where knowing is not separate from the world but rather moves toward relationship. Although knowledge is contained in a book, it is also contained in the self/world relation. I wanted to learn how others’ expressions of ecological ways of knowing in their own lives and theoretical and philosophical understandings were lived within the primacy of my own experience. And, I wanted to learn from the life and culture of northern Aboriginal peoples whose very way of being evolved from a long-standing relationship to the land and the ecology of the world around them. For years the life of rural northern Aboriginal communities had been at the heart of my movements. As a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North, I felt called to explore my own embeddedness in the land and culture, to know more deeply from the space of my own lived experience and relationship to the community and the world where I was.

I believe the feeling of being tangled in text was a subconscious strain to hear past the willows and write from this place of connectedness, the taiga speaking silently within me, calling me to listen. The following poem, *Away With Words*, was a dramatic break from text I experienced one morning at graduate school. It was a symbolic gesture that let go of words that had drowned out the land so that I could begin to hear it speak.

Away With Words

5: 24 a.m. *"I have to stop this. I have to let them go — all those words, thoughts, insights, philosophies, understandings, knowledge. They lay bound in books all around me, only partly read. I'll never finish reading. I'll never finish knowing. The books are going back. Today is the day, "Away with Words!"*

9:17 a.m. *"I can't believe I am doing this . . . This is going to hurt . . ."*

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9:18:11 *Imagination* *Essays*
Autobiographical *Changing*
Stories *Teachers* *9:18:27* *Theory*
Connection *Experience* *Perspectives*
Curriculum
9:18:33 *Worldviews* *Place*
Consciousness *9:18:45* *Connection*
9:18:52 *Education* *Enacting*
Postmodern *9:19:01* *Literacy* *Ecological*
Paradigms *9:19:13* *Narrative*

9:19:28 "I did it! AWAY with WORDS!!"

Well . . . I kept a few . . .

I can't decide what words describe this experience, either dramatic or traumatic.

I still can't believe I did that. I'm glad I documented it. I'll find humour in it later. As of now I have a bit of mixed emotion. It took me a couple trips back and forth between my vehicle and the library book return chute. I can't believe how hard it was to let them go. I didn't realize what a crutch they had become as I was writing autobiographically and hesitating to trust that I may just be okay to speak on my own. After sending the last book down the chute I walked across campus to treat myself with a coffee. I realized I was now alone with my own words and my own thoughts. I didn't know what to feel. I was scared of what lay ahead, excited to try a fresh start, and proud of myself for letting go and taking a chance, however dramatic/traumatic I made such a silly thing out to be. Now here I sit, just me.

Shifting Winds: Re/turning to the Landscape



> There is a need to return to the sacred to retrieve it. When we leave a place and return to it, it is possible to know it more fully (Drengson, 1996, p. 184).

After a year of graduate course work I prepared for the journey North. The environment of the city and academic context of the university had begun to press on me. More and more I felt confined and closed in and longed to break free toward the wild and open spruce. As an inquirer, I was eager to write the taiga from a position where I could breathe the land, where I could stand under its skies, and walk amongst its rock and willows. I dreamed that once I was back inside the land my words would fill with its life.

As I prepared to return North, I came to notice months of writing autobiographically at the university had cultivated a sense of wakefulness to both my

inner and outer worlds. This attentiveness to self-and-place (self-in-place) was new to my consciousness. Coleman (2006) points out, "most of the time we go through life half asleep, only half awake to ourselves, to our lives, to each other" (p. 6). I did not understand what this awakening was about or what it meant to the inquiry. Nor did I have the words yet to articulate deeper aspects of this self/world relation. All that was important to me was returning to the taiga. The North winds called, and so I returned.

Journal Entry

It is mid August. Most of the teachers have returned to the community from their summer vacations. I returned a few weeks ago from graduate school. After a year away I was longing to return North. There is something about my life in northern villages that keeps me coming back. This return felt different than others. I felt a sense of trueness, of myself within my place. As I crossed the Alberta/Northwest Territories border I felt the land change. I stopped my vehicle along the roadside to admire the fireweed that I had so often written about. Two kilometers back this fireweed had meant nothing to me, now I looked at the purply-pink colour it brushed onto the northern palletes of brown and green and knew this was the place where I would finally stop wandering, at least for a while.

I took some photos and continued North until the land stopped and met the river. It is hard to believe I had left with no plan to ever return. Now here I was, less than a year later, standing at the southern edge of the river, leaping inside as the images and memories I had remembered and reflected on in the South became alive again, the people, the land and river, and communities North of Sixty.

I looked out over the river and felt the wind. It was the same breath of crisp arctic air that I had known before. In this open and natural space I no longer felt confined and enclosed as I had in the South. Isolated by hundreds of kilometers from the nearest community, surrounded in the life of a different culture, my life here has a sense of natural openness within which I can navigate freely. Time is lost here, and I within it. My life walks again to its natural rhythm. Tired.

Returning to the taiga after a year away was not only a physical outward change in landscape but also an intense turn inward. The return was accompanied by a deep inner change that resonated from the very core of my being. Inside I felt inexplicably different. I breathed with ease. My heart relaxed. Life felt natural. For the first time I became

consciously aware how profoundly the external environment affected me. What was it about the North that evoked such a profound change in being? How was it that my life fell so naturally into place and moved rhythmically inside a culture to which I did not belong? I was bewildered by this change in being. I wrestled with what it meant to my life in the North and further what it meant to who I was as a teacher.

Experiencing this deeply felt change in being in relation to the land opened the inquiry to a new realm. Questions of connection and entanglement shifted from a distanced position outside the taiga to living these words from within. I was now dwelling beside the river, teaching and inquiring in the midst of a Dene world. There were questions I had that I could not yet put into words, but I could sense them growing inside me. Curiosities emerged as I walked amongst cawing ravens, sweet-smelling spruce, and even the three-aisled general store. I wandered about paying attention to my thoughts, questing to deeper understand my relation to the land and who I was as a non-Aboriginal teacher in this place. Even without words I was happy to experience the freedom and openness to learn from the land and river and lifeworld of the Dene that surrounded me.

To live an inquiry inside the question is a form of qualitative human science research orientated in phenomenological-hermeneutic traditions. Wattchow (2004) explains, "We are doing phenomenology when we find ourselves being-inside the question . . . we are doing hermeneutic writing when we try to put the essential nature of the being-inside the experience into words" (p. 5). Phenomenological-hermeneutic research begins with everyday life. It "wishes to 'see' what our place, our life, our lived-experience is" (Jardine, 1998, p. 22). Grounded in the subjective and personal (van

Manen, 1997), this orientation best described my interest in reflecting on past experiences of living and teaching in rural northern Aboriginal communities, as well as in coming to a deeper understanding of present experiences in the Dene world where I was now living. As van Manen (1997) further describes from a connected form of knowing in research:

> From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching-questioning-theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. (p. 5)

What was interesting for me as an inquirer was to be conducting this inquiry in an Aboriginal community where I had lived and taught before leaving for graduate school. This opportunity to (re)view and (re)live my experience in everyday rural Aboriginal school and community life established what van Manen (1997) describes as "a renewed contact with original experience" (p. 31). This attempt to articulate my lived experience through understandings made in the midst of on-going reflection and interpretation connected also to a hermeneutical orientation: "Hermeneutics is the recovery of a prior understanding for which we have hitherto lacked words. Hermeneutics uncovers because it recovers, bringing us to stand in the place where we already are, a place of mysterious proximity" (Caputo, 1987, p. 81).

Etymologically, the word recover means "bring back, regain" (Hoad, 1996, p. 393). I cannot help but wonder if perhaps it is no accident my attention has always subtly been drawn to fireweed. In the North, fireweed is often perceived as a symbol of

recovery, being one of the first plants to grow in areas burned by fire. As both a non-Aboriginal teacher and inquirer there are parts of myself that wonder where I fit with/in Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. In both my writing and my teaching, dimensions of my own self perplex me: the Aboriginal culture I live, the teacher I have become, and the epistemological and ontological ground that mixes and stirs inside the soil shaping the life I live and share with others together in this place. Returning to the taiga opened a space to come to know self-and-place (self-in-place) in a deeper way, writing and life each in/forming the other.

Bison Crossing (The Tension)



As I began to inquire by the river, the tension of living an academic inquiry in the midst of two different yet entwined cultural paradigms of learning started to become more apparent. Ecological knowing is a way of viewing the world relationally, an epistemology rooted in embodied and holistic (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual) orientations of learning (Riley-Taylor, 2002). Prior to graduate school much of what I had come to learn about the land and Aboriginal culture derived from direct experience with the land and people, experiences such as traveling to a fish camp, going on a caribou

hunt, or an extended canoe trip on the river. In my life in Aboriginal communities these shared experiences were profound contexts for learning.

When I returned to the river, I wanted to come to deeper understand experiences of teaching and learning in Dene place and culture through direct participation and relationship with the local school and community. Moreover, I wanted to learn what it was to teach and learn through ways of knowing grounded in "holistic/intuitive/depth" (Buhner, 2004, p. 2) modes of cognition fundamental to relational understandings and Indigenous ways of knowing the world (Cajete, 1994; Fixico, 2003; Graveline, 1998). Yet, to explicate deeper insight and theoretical understanding of such experiences, I also sought knowledge that was grounded in "verbal/intellectual/analytical" (Buhner, 2004, p. 1) modes of cognition fundamental to Western traditions of knowing the world.

The complexity of inquiring autobiographically both through and into Western and Aboriginal epistemological and ontological relations in an Indigenous context I have found extremely challenging as an inquirer/learner. This challenge has often led to notable frustrations. One such point of frustration in the early stage of inquiry led to a dialogue I entitled *Bison Crossing*. This dialogue, modeled after a poem by Fumoleau (1997), illustrates the deep tension I have experienced in this inquiry writing in the midst of two very different knowledge systems — the academic traditions of the university and valued ways of knowing by the river.

Bison Crossing

"I was out with the school ski club yesterday afternoon and we stopped to watch some bison crossing over the river. They were near your house. Did you see them crossing?"

"No time. In fact, I was at the school library studying about bison. Do you know the wood bison are predominantly found in the open subarctic taiga biome where there is an abundance of large wet meadows and slight depressions caused by ancient lakes?"

"No, I did not know that."

"In ecology, a biome is a major regional group of distinctive plant and animal communities well adapted to the region's physical environment. The concept of a biome highlights the interaction among soil, water, air, and plant and animal populations."

"I didn't know that either."

"In this bioregion bison are considered a subspecies of the American bison. They can live up to forty years. An adult male measures 3.04 to 3.9 m in length and 1.67 to 1.82 m in height. They can weigh up to 1000 kg!"

"That's interesting. I didn't know that."

"Do you know anything about bison?"

"Oh, yes. On days when it is really cold and the sky is clear it is breathtaking to hear their hooves echo across the land. Yesterday my students and I stood listening together, quiet and still as the bison slowly made their way across the snye. They stopped along the edge to feed on sedge and willow that stuck out from underneath the snow. My students and I know a lot about bison, we have many stories to share!"

Although an ecological stance weds both Western and Aboriginal ways of knowing, it is difficult as an inquirer not to focus on differences. When both knowledge systems are juxtaposed, it is evident that each has distinct languages, traditions, cultures, and values that shape thoughts, belief systems, and views of the world. These differences inarguably impact on the dynamics of teaching and learning in cross-cultural situations. In the following paragraphs, I briefly explore each paradigm as a means of articulating their merging within my own process of inquiry.

In Aboriginal culture, orientations towards teaching and learning are ecologically grounded. Pueblo scholar Gregory Cajete (1994) tells us traditional perspectives of

Indigenous education mirror a "nature-centered philosophy" (p. 21), whereby the natural ways and processes of the land are viewed as an integrated entity along with human knowledge and relationships. A key attribute of this perspective is a view of learning as a life long growth process (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Cajete, 1994; Fixico, 2003). Cajete tells us we are always learning as we participate, interact, make connections, and create meaning with others and the world around. An extension of this view in Aboriginal culture is the communal, embodied, and relational knowledge gained through learning in direct association with the land and the community in which one lives:

> It is the affective elements — the subjective experience and observations, the communal relationships, the artistic and mythical dimensions, the ritual and ceremony, the sacred ecology, the psychological and spiritual dimensions — that have characterized and formed Indigenous education since time immemorial. (Cajete, 1994, p. 20)

These ecologically grounded perspectives of education are evident in the Denendeh where I live and teach. Learning on the land is an integral part of most Dene school community programs. During the school year Dene youth participate in culture camps and seasonal land-based activities such as hunting, trapping, and snaring. Cultural practices such as Sharing Circles rituals and Fire Feeding Ceremonies are also a significant part of their learning experiences, which in most instances are facilitated by Elders, culture teachers, and members of the local community.

Learning attributes valued in Aboriginal culture are experiential, spiritually orientated, communal, and grounded in language and culture. These attributes are much

different than “incremental and componential ways of Western education” (Kawagley, 2006, p. 97) most often experienced in mainstream educational contexts. Ways of knowing valued in Western society mostly, but not exclusively, tend to place emphasis on objective and secular knowledge. According to Battiste and Henderson (2000), in mainstream education there is a seeming commitment to the idea that “we cannot know *anything* truly and well unless we know it from such a distance that the ‘object’ of knowledge remains uncontaminated by our own subjectivity” (p. 93).

Researchers Angayuquq Oscar Kawagley and Ray Barnhardt from the University of Alaska (see Barnhardt, 2008; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998, 1999; Kawagley, 2006) write extensively on the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems in rural Alaskan Native community contexts. Much of their research seeks to extend understandings of Indigenous and Western epistemological and pedagogical foundations and strives to develop a complementary Indigenous/Western education system in rural Aboriginal communities where the “best of both worlds” (Gruenwald, 2003) integrate.

Barnhart and Kawagley’s research in rural Alaska, which has a similar geographical and cultural situation to the Northwest Territories, initially led me to question what it might look beyond theoretical ideals to respectfully support and balance both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. How do I as a non-Dene teacher integrate the “best of both worlds” for Dene students whom I teach? What does it look like to respect and balance both ways?

Noted earlier, efforts to deeper understand curricular and pedagogical intersections evident in Aboriginal and Western ways of knowing through the site of my own life as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North have often been marked by tensions

and feelings of frustration. As an inquirer and writer of this inquiry I feel caught in a paradox of standing separate while standing in relation. One of the criticisms of Western thought is viewing the world in terms of separation (Riley-Taylor, 2002, p. 33). However, from my view, to stand separate from the Aboriginal community is an act of respect. As a non-Aboriginal person I hold reverence for the Dene and other Aboriginal populations as a unique people with a distinct culture, history, language and worldview. It is important for me to be consciously aware of my own difference, accepting that I cannot ever fully know or integrate into an Aboriginal world. In this respect I stand outside the culture treading lightly within the limitations of my own knowledge and understandings.

Paradoxically, at the same time I hold back I also lean forward. As a non-Aboriginal teacher I learn from the river and Dene people by immersing myself in the land and culture. I am interested in coming to know how my own participation as a non-Aboriginal teacher within the cultural community shapes my understandings, ways of knowing, personal values and pedagogical practice. In this respect I stand inside the culture as I question how the culture stands within me.

Therein stands the crossing.

Putting Down (Temporary) Roots

> Now I slide away from the crossing, and sink into the lived space of between . . . Indwelling here is a dwelling in the midst of differences, often trying and difficult. It is a place alive with tension. In dwelling here, the quest is not so much to rid ourselves of the tension . . . but more so to seek appropriately attuned tension, such that the sound of the tensioned string resounds well (Aoki, 2005, p. 382).

Fireweed produce seeds that travel by winds across the land, taking root wherever

the directions of the wind might carry. In coming to this inquiry, I too had been like a seed wandering on the wind, eventually coming to land by the river's edge, not far from the willows. When I landed by the river I did not know how long I would remain in the land, but I considered however long I stayed to be a gift of time to put down roots as deeply as possible so I could hear the river and learn what this place had to teach me.

There was, however, a part of me that hesitated. Settling in the land and putting down roots (however temporarily) meant beginning a process of embedding myself in a soil that is historically, culturally and ethnically not my own. It is a soil that is filled with tensions. In the North, the colonial history of white people coming to settle on Dene lands has left a legacy of disruption and change to the Dene. Assimilative impacts of residential schooling and dominating forces of Western societal institutions and structures have left long-standing discord in Dene language, culture, and way of life. Putting down roots also meant confronting my enfoldedness as a white teacher and member of the colonizing race. And, it meant learning to write in a place of difficulty, dwelling with/in social, cultural, and historical tensions bound inside this implication.

Staying in one place for a time, however, was important. Putting down temporary roots in the land as deeply as possible created the possibility for me as a non-Aboriginal teacher to "move beyond where I have been" (Greene, as cited in Zacharias, 2004) and become more grounded in the place that I am. The groundedness that I speak of Cahalan (1995) describes as:

> a dynamic state of the person that includes the sense of confidence, pleasure, and wonder resulting from progressively deepening contact with the wild and domesticated natural community of the person's neighbourhood and larger land

> region: with unpaved gravel, soil, or landscape; with weather and diversity of plants and animals; and with human family, neighbours and local cultural activities. (p. 217)

For me, this sense of groundedness as a non-Aboriginal teacher living and teaching in Aboriginal communities reaches toward a sense of harmony with place, which Daumal (as cited in Kalamaras, 1994) explains also includes the dissonances: "A living harmony is the result of a simultaneity of rhythms, complex and precise in their interlacings, which mimic, marvelously, the endless multiplicity of life" (p. 167).

By bringing forth new learning and being into existence, it is my hope to deeper come to know the place where I live: the culture of the Dene people, and how I live and interact in-relation to Aboriginal students and the school community in which I dwell. Krall (1988) explains that the movement toward deepened self-understanding is also a movement toward a deepened understanding of others, "The journey inward becomes an ongoing process that leads outward to a more complete understanding of the human condition. Self-understanding is not merely a reflection of what we are but on what we are in relation to the world" (p. 478).

I believe that by coming to understand more deeply how I relate as a non-Aboriginal teacher to the land and the culture of the people where I teach, I can come to respect and reflect local values in education. For this reason, I have taken a personal and professional interest in formal and informal contexts of culture-based education. In the Northwest Territories, culture-based education is described as a form of education that reflects, validates and promotes the values, worldviews, and languages of Dene and other First Peoples (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2008a).

When I enter into an Aboriginal community as a non-Aboriginal teacher I am mindful that the Aboriginal people who live here have roots in this land that go back thousands of generations. Through time they have developed a way of living and being in respectful relationship to both the land and themselves. It is therefore important for me as a non-Aboriginal teacher to respect the world that was there before I arrived. In the North, because my living as a teacher is intimately connected to the community and culture in which the Dene students have their being, how I live, teach, and interact with Dene students, the school, and community impacts on dynamics of community relations. And these relations also impact on my own being as a teacher.

A concept I have found helpful in theorizing the purpose of putting down (temporary) roots is the concept of autopoeisis. Autopoeisis is based on patterns of organization of living systems, which include "ways in which living systems engage and interact in the particular communities in which they function" (Capra, 1996, p. 161). Autopoeisis, which literally means "self-making" (auto-self, poiesis-making), takes up the idea that as organisms interact with/in their environment, they change both the environment and themselves. In other words, they create themselves through living.

Maturana and Varela's Santiago Theory of Cognition links the concept of autopoiesis and cognition, identifying the process of knowing with the process of life (Capra, 1996). How an individual responds to and interacts with elements with/in the living system can signal worldviews, including associated ways of being in-relation to others and the world around. In my own context as a non-Aboriginal teacher in an Aboriginal community, by becoming more aware of my interactions and responses to the world around me, I reciprocally come to understand more deeply the functions and

structures of the Aboriginal school and the community in which I dwell. Moreover, the more I become aware of the functions and structures in which the Aboriginal school and community have their being, the more I am able to change my own personal and professional response patterns to greater reflect and respect their way of life. In this sense, autopoeisis is an ecological framework from which to view myself as continually evolving and changing as I live, teach, and write the inquiry. The inquiry then, becomes part of co-arising and co-evolving community relationships as I both teach and learn in direct relationship with the land and people where I live.



At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea,
to the mountains, the world,
Now I am ready.
Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.
You empty yourself and wait, listening.

(Dillard, 1982, pp. 89-90)

GROUNDING IN PLACE: *CURRERE*-IN-CONTEXT

taking root



landed in stilled autumn winds

the seed burrows into the soil

threading deeper and deeper into the dark gritty earth

winter sets

life teems quietly below

silent under layers of frozen darkness

nothing is still

seasons and cycles

shift and shape

dawning

elements of change

Threading Through the Land of Little Sticks



Authentic knowledge must be grounded in first hand experience (Drengson, 1996, p. 184).

I vividly remember my first Professional Development Day as a teacher in the North. At the time I was living among the Dene in a small fly-in village in the central subarctic. It was nearing the end of February and daylight was slowly returning. The principal and one other teacher I worked with planned to spend the day caribou hunting on the land with a local hunter. I remember awakening that morning to CBC NorthBeat broadcasting temperatures of communities across Nunuvut and the Territories. In the community where I lived temperatures were predicted to reach a high of -42 Celsuis. Thinking that this was absurdly cold even though average for the season I carefully layered socks, long johns, sweaters, ski pants, snow boots, two hats, a goose-down parka, and long moose-hide mitts. As a first-year teacher in the community I was looking forward to going hunting. For me it was an opportunity to view and learn the local geography. It was also an opportunity to learn about being on the land and the process of

harvesting caribou from a local hunter[4].

That morning a thick ice fog hung over the community. I walked in the dark toward the school with the snow crunching loudly underneath my feet, echoing in the cold. By the time I arrived at the school two ski-doos already stood running, each trailing a long wooden sled with a blue tarp roped through the middle. Once everyone was ready, the local hunter turned to the principal and asked with an expression of sincerity, "She going to be warm enough?" The principal turned to look at me. I was bundled in my parka, my face hardly visible beneath the fur. I could not help but notice the principal was wearing cotton mitts and a regular ski coat. I nodded. He then turned back to the hunter and told him, "She will be fine."

In Dene culture women traditionally do not go hunting (Berger, 1988). Prior to the hunt it had not occurred to me to give this consideration. Only when the hunter spoke did I recall this fact and wonder if this was in some part related to his comment. I intentionally did not speak. At the time, my interest to learn about the land outweighed my desire to adhere to gendered cultural traditions. I had few opportunities to be out on the land that year as a teacher. Consequently, there was much about the place and the people of the community that I felt I did not know. I wanted to learn about the place where I was from first-hand experience. Knowledge of caribou was linked to understandings of the cultural context of the community within which the school had its being. Most importantly, to me, going out on the land gave me a way to connect more deeply with the community.

Being on the land and being with the Aboriginal people of the North are two

[4] In many Dene communities in the Northwest Territories, caribou is one of the primary food sources for families. During the summer caribou hides are tanned and used to make drums or clothing items such as moccassins and gloves.

threads of experience that have impacted most profoundly on me as a teacher throughout the years. They are the narratives I naturally recollect as a teacher, situated outside the conventional classroom: teaching and learning experientially from place. The method of educational research that I have found most closely describes my interest to explore lived experience teaching and learning in place is the method of *currere*, a "phenomenologically related form of autobiographical curriculum theory" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 414) that aims to disclose the nature of one's past, present, and future educational experiencing (Pinar, 1994).

In the 1970s William Pinar and Madeline Grumet reconceptualized the field of curriculum by interpreting curriculum etymologically using its Latin infinitive *currere*, meaning 'to run the course' (Pinar, et al., 1995). This view created a fundamental shift from understanding curriculum as a course of study or set of prescribed learning outcomes to understanding curriculum as lived and as experienced by individuals. As a method of autobiographical educational research, *currere* is both phenomenologically and hermeneutically orientated. Pinar et al. (1995) maintain, "the method of *currere* offers the opportunity to study both the individual's lived experience and the impact of the social milieu upon that experience" (p. 416). This two-pronged focus paralleled my interest to see more clearly the context of my lifeworld in rural northern Aboriginal communities and also to understand more deeply how I am implicated as a non-Aboriginal teacher within this way of life.

What did not parallel my own inquiry interests was the context in which the method of *currere* is normally used. In describing *currere*, Pinar and Grumet (1976) view educational life experience as "an existential experience of institutional structures" (p.

vii). This includes "one's past life-in-schools, one's past life-with-schoolteachers and one's past life-with-books and other school-related artifacts" (Pinar, 1994, p. 23). However, the curriculum I quested to understand more deeply was situated in the present rather than the past, and outside on the land in the lived world of the Aboriginal community, rather than inside Western institutional classroom structures. In northern Aboriginal schools and communities schooling takes place out on the land as much as in the classroom. The curriculum I wished to study was an organic curriculum that emerged from what Chambers (2008) calls a "curriculum of place." This was a curriculum that was not of my own making, nor even part of my prior experience. Rather, it was a curriculum that unfolded as I lived and taught by the river, learning from the natural lifeways of the land and traditional contexts of Dene education[5].

Learning from a curriculum of place has much in common with Aboriginal perspectives of education. In the Denendeh for example, Dene ways of teaching and learning historically originate from life lived on the land. In this natural wilderness setting, education derived meaning through daily interaction with one's immediate and surrounding environment. True knowledge was considered personal, experiential knowledge, drawn from patterns and relationships between life and the land such as first-hand experience with local plants and animals, qualities of the surrounding land region, and careful observation of physical elements such as the wind and sky (Goulet, 1998). For the sake of survival, the wisdom, knowledge, and land-based skills attained from living life in this way were passed down each generation through one's Elders, family,

[5] I use the term Dene education to mean Dene approaches to teaching and learning. In the Denendeh, Dene education (also traditional education) is defined as "the teaching of the language and culture of the Dene based upon the foundation of Dene perspectives or worldview" (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993, p.xxi). In current systems of education, Dene education is also known as culture-based education, noted earlier in the inquiry.

and tribe.

Part of my journey of learning to live where I am explores this natural context of education in the North. I particularly aim to look more deeply at how my personal relationship to the land and participation in culture-based education metamorphoses with/in my own pedagogy and the understandings I make as a non-Aboriginal teacher in my work with Aboriginal students. What, for example, is the significance of going on a caribou hunt? What meaning does it have for me as a non-Aboriginal teacher? What meaning does it have for the Aboriginal students I teach? How does experiencing the world from Dene perspectives impact how I relate to wider school and community contexts? In what ways does what I learn and come to know of Dene culture carry forward to reflect more respectful ways of being as a white teacher not from the community?

To differentiate my version of *currere* I have adapted the method of *currere* and called it *currere*-in-context. This adaptation focuses the practice of *currere* in the context of the taiga bioregion and traditional structures of northern Aboriginal education. Using *currere*-in-context I (re)locate perspectives of education in the North in their original context. In doing this I adapt *currere* in two ways. First, I shift the spatial reference of educational experience from brick and mortar "institutional structures" to place and culture-based Indigenous teaching and learning contexts. This includes experiences of teaching and learning in-relation to the land and (in)formal structures of Dene education. Second, I shift from the temporal reference of "past life-in-schools" to my present and on-going experience working and teaching in a rural northern Aboriginal community, including, of course, my past knowledge and the experiences of place I carry within me.

Both adaptations allow autobiographical writing to wander reflectively and reflexively in and out of varying locations. Thus, my process loosely parallels yet modifies Pinar's (1994) suggested movements of *currere*: regression (re-collecting the past), progression (anticipating the future), analysis (exposing connections between past, present, and future), and synthesis (coming together of elements) from a linear to a dynamic and fluid process. This modification thus provides an open space in writing and inquiry to (re)vision the past, present and future at each (re)turn. This adaptation from *currere* to *currere*-in-context established a way for me to interconnect threads of experience of teaching and learning in varying northern Aboriginal community contexts while grounding the inquiry in the present.

Establishing a method through which to take root by the river indicated to me that I had settled in a place where germination was ready to take place. In the lifecycle of fireweed this period is called establishment. It is the process whereby the embryo inside the seed breaks out of the tough outer seed coat and a root emerges from the seed. Establishing *currere*-in-context signaled for me that a relationship between writing and inquiry had formed. A centre root was now ready to unfold inside the soil.

Sharing from the Soil of the Denendeh

Once I settled with *currere*-in-context as a method of inquiry, it seemed my attention subtly shifted from settling the seed to how I would situate in the landscape. The Denendeh is the traditional land of the Dene First Nations people. It is a land and soil where I do not originate. To write from the site of my own life as a non-Aboriginal teacher by the river is to investigate my experience teaching and learning in an unfamiliar

culture, a culture with a distinct history, way of knowing and being in the world I cannot ever fully know or understand. The concern that impacted me both personally and ethically was, How do I respectfully speak, write and inquire in the context of another culture that is not my own?

This question has been my greatest challenge (and hesitation) in my engagement with autobiographical writing and inquiry. This concern affected me most when I shared my thesis drafts with my committee members or attempted to articulate the inquiry to Aboriginal colleagues and friends. Sharing the inquiry, particularly with Aboriginal people, I continually wondered if I was respectful in the words I spoke. From an ethical standpoint I was comfortable with an autobiographical inquiry because it created a space for me to speak from the ground of my own knowledge and experience, not for or about others. However, when speaking from my own ground, it is always the case that stories, experiences, reflections and insights I share are not only my own. Autobiographical writing extends beyond the self as "[words] signify from the 'world' and from the position of one who is looking" (Levinas, 2006, p. 12). Levinas' words I believe to mean that the self is always already in-relation, and therefore, to study the self is to study the self-in-relation.

With this awareness, it was imperative to me as a non-Aboriginal person that how I languaged experiences teaching and learning in the taiga respect those who were part of those experiences. This meant aiming as respectfully as possible to address Aboriginal perspectives, histories, and contemporary (Euro)Western and Aboriginal (inter)relations in northern education. This also meant opening my own life to explore how I situate myself as a teacher in-relation to Aboriginal place and culture mindful of epistemological

and ontological "(in)difference" (Hasebe-Ludt, et. al., 2008, p. 57) .

The primary difficulty I have had researching and writing in an Indigenous context was not knowing if I (dis)respected others I (re)presented through my words. Cross-cultural research from Western paradigmatic discourses have in the past been inextricably linked to colonial and cognitive imperialism. These discourses have had destructive impacts on Indigenous cultures and collective understandings of the other (Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Smith, 1999). Awareness of this potential implication through my own words as a non-Aboriginal person repeatedly led back to the question: How do I respectfully situate myself as inquirer in the context of a culture that is not my own?

To look more deeply at this question I have turned to the Aboriginal tradition of Sharing Circle[6]. Sharing Circle is an important ritual in the school and community where I teach. Through years of daily participation in this cultural tradition I discovered that many of the ontological elements of communication exemplified in Sharing Circle were similar to elements I derived through didactic study of the practice of autobiographic and cross-cultural inquiry. This interweaving and mutual influence of my own and Aboriginal ways of knowing created a means for me to link patterns of communication respected in Aboriginal culture to qualities that I believe support ways of respectfully situating *currere*-in-context in a Dene school community setting.

I have identified three interrelated elements shared between Sharing Circle and my own practice of autobiographical inquiry: 1) respect for silence; 2) listening with openness; and 3) learning through hearing one's own voice. Before describing these elements further, it is important to note that I have intentionally spoken lightly of this

[6] Also known in Aboriginal culture as "Talking Circle" (Graveline, 1998).

ancestral practice. Words I have chosen reflect my own experience and the meaningful contribution participating in Sharing Circle traditions has made toward the enrichment of my own autobiographic understandings of writing with/in an Indigenous context. More thorough descriptions of Sharing Circle processes from Aboriginal perspectives can be found in the work of Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) from whom I also draw insight.

Sharing Circle in the school community where I teach is a daily school-wide ritual. Every day, in each classroom, a particular time is taken for Circle. Students, teachers, school personnel, community members, and visitors are all invited to participate. The Sharing Circle begins when everyone meant to be in the Circle has joined. A designated student dims overhead lights and a candle is lit in the center, creating a calmed and stilled presence in the room. Once a quiet togetherness is reached, a sacred object such as a rock or eagle feather is passed around the Circle to facilitate communication. The person holding the sacred object is the speaker. In Circle, the speaker must only speak of and from themselves, not for or about others. As Graveline (1998) explains from an Aboriginal perspective,

> In Talking Circle . . . in 'circle time'
>
> We open our hearts
>
> Speak what we know to be True
>
> Share what we Care deeply about
>
> As Honestly as we can. . . as Respectfully as we are able.
>
> We are able to enter into another's experience through their Words.
>
> A doorway to self-examination . . . a social context for a 'personal' experience. (p. 136)

Dialogical interaction in a Circle setting differs significantly from conventional

non-Indigenous conversational processes. In a conventional non-Indigenous conversation, expressions of experience and divergent viewpoints often compete for space, and silences are quick to be filled (Stewart, 2004). However, in Circle dialogue, the capacity to be still and mindful of others is cultivated and respected. Participants consciously quiet the self to listen, giving others their silence while each person takes an equal turn to speak. In Circle this is viewed as an act of respectful listening (Graveline, 1998). The speaker is respected in the space of her own silence and the time she takes to think before speaking.

In my own process of inquiry, similar to Circle processes, autobiographical writing "initiates a dialectical (rather than passive) relation to scholarly work, to oneself, and to the world" (Pinar, 1994, p. 108). For me, this dialectical relation in *currere*-in-context often appeared in the form of a silent discourse, or a language without words. Through my interactions with the land and people my own silence was a space of active listening. This was an inner quietness that gave the river world my attention and the land and people gave their being, so I could learn. In this still and silent space, I found myself writing to the winds, taking notice of what I noticed. I watched the trees and walked quietly along roadsides so I could listen to the river and hear the ravens speak. During ceremonies, I hung tightly to moments of significance and attended deeply to words spoken by Elders. In the space of my own silence, images and experiences of the land and people captured my attention and over time began to fill with meaning.

Through this process, what I slowly began to recognize was that the silence I naturally gave to the world I also had to give to myself. This silent waiting was important for me as an inquirer. However, as an inquirer I also needed words. Yet, words that

described inward knowing and understandings were difficult to find. I dwelled in my own silence trying to find words that were easy to feel but hard to articulate. Respecting the space of my own silence allowed me to begin to listen to my own deep self and hear the river world speaking both within and through me.

The second element of the Circle process, listening with openness, is about allowing for the constant movement and keeping open space for the new and different to emerge. One of the concerns that continued to come up as I questioned how I (re)presented Aboriginal epistemology and culture through my words was whether the words that I spoke and the understandings that I formed related truthfully to place. Particularly helpful to this concern was coming to understand "truth" from an Aboriginal perspective. Graveline (1998) tells us in Aboriginal culture "truth" is "embedded in actual experience . . . many 'truths,' multiple interpretations of the same story or experience, are permissible because each storyteller understands the 'facts' from their own location" (p. 66). This view is exemplified in the conventions of the Sharing Circle. In Sharing Circle there are multiple speakers. As each speaker shares from his or her unique lived situation, each person is respected without judgment or interruption, thereby creating an open space where on-going learning and understanding can occur.

Like a germinating seed which must continually respond to what is new and different in its environment, autobiographical writing practice functions as an on-going dialogue between self and place (land, school, and community). This is a process whereby life and writing (in)form each other in the midst of on-going and ever-changing encounters. This form of communicative praxis echoes a research process where "learning and understanding are made (not transmitted) as we dialogue with others and

reflect on what we and they have said — as we ‘negotiate passages’ between ourselves and others, between ourselves and our texts” (Doll, 1993, p. 156). And I would add, we negotiate passages between ourselves and our environments.

Part of my own evolution as an inquirer was the felt need to separate from textual others in the early stages of the inquiry so I could hear my own voice and the voices of those who spoke the river. Listening inside the space of my own silence in autobiographical writing became a tool for learning to listen to the self, to intuit writing, and to grow aware of my own responses (Coleman, 2006). I believe it was only through the cultivation of these practices that I could begin to attend to and learn from others in a deeper and more respectful way. Therefore, the concept of listening with openness is also about opening receptivity to change (Levin, 1989), learning to recognize how the wor(l)ds I receive and experience with others (including textual and not-so-human others) inform and influence my own being, while simultaneously coming to deeper understand a teaching self that is also forever changing.

This brings me to the third element of Circle, learning through hearing one’s own voice. In Sharing Circle words are spoken in First Voice. Graveline (1998) explains that First Voice is “the reliance on the ‘voice of experience,’ our own interpretation of experience to guide our knowledge base” (p. 118). From this position words are both particular and in-context. Lived experience is articulated from the unique worldview of each speaker as he or she interprets the world from his or her personal lived ground:

> How one views the world depends much on one’s own personal lens, the perspective that has been formed through all of the impressions we’ve had and experiences we’ve lived during the course of our lives. And it has been shaped

> through the historical, cultural, and linguistic systems within which we've come into being in particular ways, each person being unique within specific contexts of time and place, the nexus of relations. (Riley-Taylor, 2002, p. 49)

In autobiographical writing practice, speaking in First Voice can be viewed as a method of "conscious-raising" (Graveline, 1998, p. 127), a way of developing heightened awareness towards what and how oneself and others think. For example, when it is my turn to speak in Circle I do not know ahead of time what words I will share. When I receive the sacred object, such as a rock or eagle feather, I speak from an existential position of not knowing. Similar to the practice of autobiographical writing, "I don't know as well what I think until I see what I say" (Flannery, as cited in Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 9). From this position, as Kalamaras (1994) observes, "Language users 'shape,' or create, their world as they struggle at the borders of articulation. They make meaning as they speak, and they begin utterance from the meanings they have already made" (p. 63).

Hearing my own voice and the voices of others as I live, write, and teach by the river creates space to understand more deeply, as O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004) put it, "the 'frames' or mental structures through which we interpret our world, understand ourselves, and find meaning . . . our ontology — our reality" (p. 6). As a non-Aboriginal teacher, this means I pay attention to the array of values, perceptions, and understandings that shape the ground where I am standing, which for me is also the soil of Aboriginal land, school, and community, a place where all things living and nonliving interconnect.

Collectively viewing elements of Sharing Circle as a whole greater than any of its parts has helped me to become more comfortable with what it looks like to respectfully

situate as a non-Aboriginal inquirer in the midst of Dene place and culture. Teaching by the river I have always deeply valued the school's daily commitment to Circle Time. It has been a place in the day where I could pause and take time to listen to and be with my self, students, colleagues, and members of the community in a deep and culturally meaningful way. What I have come to most appreciate about participating in this practice is the relationality of being in an educational community within the structure of this holistic space.

In contrast to traditional Western structures of classroom teaching where relationships between teachers and students typically reflect a vertical relationship focused on the student as learner and teacher as knower, in Sharing Circle physically sitting face to face and dialoguing as equal beings creates instead a horizontal relationship where teaching and learning happen in both directions. Graveline (1998) explains that

> part of the energy of Circle has to do with its physical structure: a Circle has no head and no tail, no beginning and no end. Everyone is equal in a Circle, the point of reference is the middle, which is both empty and full of everything. Everyone is equidistant from the middle so there is no sense of hierarchy. . . . In Circle energy flows from speaker to speaker, creating an opportunity for a different kind of focusing, and a different type of awareness about the relationship to self, to one another and to the whole. (pp. 130-131)

In my experience of participating in Sharing Circle as an on-going classroom practice, the process of learning about self and others spirals cyclically as we listen to and build on what is being said. Heidegger (as cited in Caputo, 1987) also sees this repetitious

movement as "circular" (p. 60). According to Heidegger "understanding follows being" (p. 61), a process whereby new learning arises as it circulates between the lived situation and prior understandings. This view builds on the notion of a hermeneutic circle, a cyclical process of moving between the whole and the parts. It also provides a way to imagine a malleable space where on-going autobiographical writing practice repeatedly generates personal and professional growth as each repetition sees particular situations and contexualities of lived experiences in new and different ways (Aoki, 2005).

This openness toward a continual exchange of learning between myself and the Aboriginal school and community is the means through which I have come to view a respectful way of situating myself as a non-Aboriginal inquirer on Aboriginal soil. Situating in this way respects simultaneously intersecting relations of Western and Aboriginal discourses, philosophies, and valued ways of knowing and being in teaching and learning. From an ecological perspective this intertwining follows the natural ways of the land. In nature, growth occurs both vertically and horizontally, like a fireweed that stems both upward above the soil and outward via root fibers underneath.

In the phenology of the fireweed, once a seed has established and a taproot is formed, the stem begins to emerge on the land by breaking through the surface. Metaphorically, I associate this surfacing with what Pinar's method of *currere* describes as "disclosing experience so that we may see more of it and see more clearly" (Pinar, et al., 1995, p. 518). The following section, *Remembering Back — The Old Poste*[7] exemplifies the regressive movement of *currere*-in-context as I remember back on an experience in the taiga that has come to have a profound impact on how I relate as a non-

[7] I use the French spelling of "Post" to locate geographically *The Old Poste* within the French-speaking province of Quebec.

Aboriginal teacher in the North. Following the regressive movement, I loosely parallel Pinar's (1994) progressive, analytic and synthetic movements to both describe my own engagement with autobiographic writing in the context of the taiga and to share subsequent personal and pedagogical significance of this experience to this study. I have provided a brief historical background to elucidate the context of the story.

Remembering Back — "*The Old Poste*"

During my first summer working with the James Bay Cree of Northern Quebec I was invited by the community to spend a week at the Old Poste, an old Hudson's Bay trading post and traditional gathering place for Cree families of this area. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, James Bay Cree lived semi-nomadically on the land (Salisbury, 1986). In the warm summer months families would gather in the region of what is now called the Old Poste to visit with relatives as well as to fish and hunt. In the early 1900s the Hudson Bay Company set up a fur trading post in this area, which eventually took the form of a permanent settlement. Although some Cree families remained at the post, most families continued with a semi-nomadic way of life, arriving at the settlement in late spring where they would remain with their tents until mid-August before returning to their hunting grounds for the winter.

This semi-nomadic way of life continued until the early 1970s when the Government of Quebec proposed the James Bay Hydro-Electric Development Project (Salisbury, 1986). The plan was to create several large reservoirs in the James Bay territory through a series of dams and dikes. During Phase I of the Hydro-Electric Development Project the land region around the trading post was projected to be flooded.

Consequently, Cree families were forced to abandon the settlement and disperse from surrounding bush camps to find new homes. In an effort to stop the Hydro Development Project, the James Bay Cree became politically organized and filed a court injunction based on the claim that their human rights were being violated. The Supreme Court respected the claim and the James Bay Hydro Development Project came to a halt.

At the time I worked with the James Bay Cree in the late 1990s it had become a tradition for the community to return to the Old Poste each summer to celebrate the past. It was my memory of this experience that stood out most strongly when I first began to remember back on my lived experiences in the taiga. Through the following narrative I share my experience of the Old Poste by returning to the past "to recapture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present" (Pinar, 1994, p. 21).

The Old Poste

It was July. The village teemed with black flies that fancied hanging around the back of my neck. I was heading to the Old Poste for a week. I had heard talk about the Old Poste for many weeks, mostly in Cree, which I did not understand. All I knew was that the Old Poste was the community's traditional summer gathering place before the Quebec government kicked them off the land in 1969 so it could be flooded for the Hydro Quebec Development Project. To me it was just another adventure to be had in my first Aboriginal community.

My boss came for me in the band office's pick-up. I threw my bag in the bed of the truck that was already piled high with canvas bags and supplies. We left the village in a cloud of dust and gravel. I pitied the driver behind, if there was one, but I couldn't see.

The windows were down, the music blasted old country tunes, and we laughed as we banged our heads on the roof each time we hit a pothole. I watched out the window as we drove. It was a very different land from what I had ever seen. The spruce and tamarack trees were thin and stunted. Shrubs of Labrador Tea and dwarf birch covered the layers in between. This bush was great to walk through. Moss and lichen made for a cushioned footbed.

After about an hour's drive, we arrived at a large lake. Tarps, jerry cans, coolers, axes, and foam sleeping pads crowded the shoreline. They were waiting to be taken by motorboat to the Poste. Turn by turn families filled the boats. I sweated under the hot sun helping fill empty spaces with supplies. I eagerly awaited my turn. Finally after what seemed like hours, someone said to me, "Astum[8]." I nodded, climbed on board and once again we were off. I was overcome with a surge of excitement. The roar of the motor, the coolness of the wind on my face, the slaps of the water hitting the boat's underside, the direction into the unknown, and sharing it all with the people of this place encapsulated my entire being.

The feeling of moving into the unknown dissipated when the motor quieted and the log cabins came into view. What might look small and insignificant from the air was land buzzing with life. Young children were by the shore, running and splashing water playfully. Older youth gathered around tents and picnic tables. Some adults were unloading while others were already settled in their family's place, sitting on logs and old fold-up chairs sharing each other's company. Others were out fishing on the lake in their boats. A large canvas teepee stood out from the cabins and narrow sand trails. After helping unload and finding my cabin, I began to feel that it was going to be not only an

[8] "Astum" means "come" in one of the Cree First Nation dialects.

adventure, but more importantly, an honour to be here. It was.

I was lost for the first few days. Most everyone spoke Cree. There were no schedules or daily activities to attend. I was there to lifeguard the kids by the water and that's what I did most days. They would take me for hikes along the village edge. Parents would sometimes join or we'd talk with Elders along the way if they were at the shore cleaning their fish. Moose hips and bear skulls hung from the trees, part of a culture I was not familiar with. The old village graves were sinking into the earth, the small wood fencing around them, some with wood crosses, reminding me of the missionary past. Countless trails headed deep into the bush behind the village, narrowing with loss of use over time. I wondered how different these trails might look had the government not forced abandonment of the village. I supposed one could be thankful that these trails and this land weren't lying unnaturally under water. How could humans in the government just build a dam, evict people from their land and flood it? It is unfathomable what the people of this land had gone through. All these remnants helped me see a history that had gone on for generations and generations. I felt honoured to be able to stand in this place.

A few evenings before I was to leave the Poste and return to the community, a slide show was scheduled to be held in an old cabin. The community gathered, and somehow we all squished in. One of the people who worked at the band office began showing slides of the community past. The photos stood still against the cabin wall, and people started sharing their stories. I was enthralled with the photos of the community's culture, place and history. What I remember most, and perhaps my memory may have dramatized these moments over time, was the pictures of the planes. I had read about this history of taking away children for residential schooling, but there that night I was with

the people who lived these stories and were now reliving them in this little cabin. I remember wanting to shrink in my chair because I noticed some were telling their story in English. Were they talking English for me? I'll never know. But I do know it was important for me to be there or at least hear. There was a lot of emotion in that cabin, mostly laughter, but at the sight of the planes coming to take away the children there was silence. The faces, the stories, the photos, the gathering and sharing together in this sacred place, I will never forget.

Past Carried Forward – *"The Old Poste" Continued . . .*

When I wrote *The Old Poste* I had never fully shared my experience before either orally or in written form. In retrospect it seems it was an experience I was content to carry silently with me. In fact, the narrative of the Old Poste came about by happenstance, written as a response to a question by my advisor after inadvertently mentioning an experience in the James Bay that resonated in my life with a deep sense of respect for its land and people. In an attempt to say more "about" this experience I found it impossible to ascribe meaning to it outside its original lived context. Frustrated, I changed my approach and described the experience from "within." What I did not expect after writing *The Old Poste* was the subsequent sense of discomfort. Having written the narrative solely as a response to my advisor, I felt adamant that it not go beyond a personal level and added the following comment:

Comments After

The experience of sharing life with the community as they celebrated the Old

Poste is what I've carried with me. And too, perhaps a little more understanding than I might have had otherwise. I don't want to have any description or reflection as part of this thesis. I have too much respect for this place and the people there to write about it. The story needs to be left as is, as it was for me.

In the regressive movement of *currere*, "bringing the past to present by printing it . . . words coalesce to form a photograph" (Pinar, 1994, p. 24). When I initially held the narrative of *The Old Poste* in front of me I did not want to share this narrative in the inquiry. I wanted to leave the story as is, and as it was for me. I hoped in some way withholding my own voice as a non-Aboriginal person would protect the James Bay Cree from further outside interference and perhaps contribute space for healing to come forth in its own way and of its own accord.

At the Old Poste I felt the land and its history from the people who had directly experienced it. I stood on the dock where the residential school planes had landed, and on the banks from where children, many now adults I knew and worked with, were taken from their families. I entered into their story as I stood in this sacred place. In some aspect the long ancestral history of the Cree filled inside me. I remember the strength of Cree language and culture being remarkably present. Not invisible to me within this presence was the dark shadow of another past. This other past was marked by dominant white society that imposed on the land and people leaving an unfathomable legacy of disruption and change, including the disavowal of ties to land and kin, dissolution of community, and devastation of a way of life. I wanted to hide from the darkness of this shadow. I wished my own being as a member of the white dominant race did not

associate with the wake of its devastation and the silence that carried forward. But I could not stand separate, not from the events at the Old Poste nor from my own white culture.

Pinar (1994) posits the view in the progressive movement of *currere* as follows: "The future is present in the same sense that the past is present. It influences, in complicated ways, the present; it forms the present" (p. 24). The projection of my intention to not interfere revealed in the *Comments After* was rooted in a desire to preserve the strength of Cree culture and community as I had experienced it. This intention revealed how my experience of the Old Poste situated in the present. I learned that the desire to stand separate as a means to protect Aboriginal culture manifested within the current of my perceptions and guided my intentions for the future. Yet, there was more to this experience I felt I needed to explore. To understand more deeply both the past and future in the present Pinar (1994) suggests an analytical movement in the method of *currere*. This movement aims to describe "the biographic present, exclusive of past and future, but inclusive of responses to them" (p. 25).

Initially invisible to me before surfacing *The Old Poste* in writing was how deeply the experience had subsequently come to influence my view as I lived and taught over the years with/in Aboriginal place and culture. What was most profound to me while sharing in the celebration of the Old Poste was that in some way the experience had given me a glimpse of the past and thus a deeper understanding of where the Cree had come from, the richness and strength of their traditional language and culture, and a sensitization to the intrusive historical impact of white people into their lands.

Since this time, I have lived in very small and isolated northern Aboriginal villages, where similar to the James Bay Cree, there has been a relatively short period of

contact and marginal relations with the dominate (Euro)Western English-speaking society. I have also since lived in Aboriginal communities with longer histories of contact and closer socio-geographical relationships with Western society. Through these cumulative experiences I have observed the health of spoken traditional languages, connectedness to the land, and harmonious social conditions to be far stronger in isolated Aboriginal communities than in communities with more contact with white English-speaking society.

In juxtaposing past, present, and future in the analytical movement of *currere,* Pinar (1994) suggests asking the question: "What are their complex, multi-dimensional interrelations?" (p. 26). This question has prompted me to notice the way in which this pattern of inverse relationship between the health of an Indigenous community and the intensity of contact with the dominant white culture lies beneath the surface in the interior of my subconscious and (un)consciously reverberates outward in how I respond reflexively in relation to the Aboriginal world around me.

How this pattern manifests in my life as a teacher in Aboriginal communities became visible to me when I returned to the river from graduate school and was hired into the position of Program Support Teacher. This position took my role as a teacher beyond the immediate classroom environment with a mandate to support Aboriginal student learning through broader school, community, and regional educational directives. Exploring this new role professionally and academically through autobiographical writing and inquiry, I discovered that I had an intrinsic interest in the complicated interplay between Western societal educational standards, influences, and structures on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Dene language retention and cultural revitalization

initiatives that seek to keep traditional knowledge, practices, and values alive (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2000). In essence, I was coming to reveal a perspective that saw myself in contemporary Aboriginal education, involved in a movement of renewal and regeneration of Indigenous communities of learning.

I realized this perspective stemmed from the distinctiveness of Aboriginal language and culture I had glimpsed and honoured at the Old Poste. Through my own eyes, I had seen Cree semi-nomadic life on that land to be like a healthy and vibrant forest with rich relations between the land and its people. And I saw that since that time the historical intrusion of white people had imposed great damage, like a fire sweeping through the land. However, as in any forest, in the wake of a fire some flora and fauna are resilient and survive. Through time the ecology of the land renews itself, and in so doing a new healthful and vibrant forest is created again.

The synthetic movement of *currere* brings together deepened knowledge and understandings and questions their meaning in the present (Pinar, 1994). For example, what meaning does my experience of the Old Poste have to my life and relationships with others as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North? How does coming to a deeper understanding of the Old Poste within my current perceptions relate to my own evolving as a non-Aboriginal teacher within broader rural Aboriginal educational contexts?

In response, I have realized I view myself as a non-Aboriginal teacher in a time in history where cross-cultural teaching and learning in the North, particularly contemporary movements of Aboriginal education, are actively cultivating space to (re)tell and (re)create a new story. I feel myself to be in the midst of a grander narrative in the wake of devastation that speaks of regeneration and renewal, a story that as

Mironchink (as cited in Irwin, 2003a) describes, "is continuously being revised as one undergoes new sets of experiences" (p. 11). I believe stories that are now being told are ones where Western and Aboriginal governments, schools, and communities work together and learn from one another as old narratives are carried forward in more constructive and innovative ways. I have come to witness myself implicated in these emerging stories both as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North and as the writer of this inquiry.

> Stories are about interconnections--between my life and someone else's; between the past and the present; between the stories of our lives and the stories of our teaching; between the larger narratives of a culture and the smaller narratives that make up a life. These connections make up the stories our lives tell. (Chambers, 1994, p. 40)

Since writing *The Old Poste*, I no longer feel the need to hide from this implicatedness. Autobiographical writing has been a way to re-vision the difficult historical condition of colonization that lies deep in the soil where I am currently situated. Autobiographical writing has enabled me to uncover some of the silences I carry with me, and some of the tacit knowledge and perceptions of place hidden within my thinking; consequently this guides my directions and pedagogy. Most importantly, autobiographical writing has enabled me to see and respond more clearly to situations in everyday life in the North, in short, to live reflectively.

For me, writing within the fluidity of regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic movements of *currere*, which I adapt in *currere*-in-context, mirrors a form of emergent inquiry that is reflective of fireweed growing in the land. Richards (as cited in

Grumet, 1975) describes when a plant grows two parts open, one above and one below the surface soil:

> Below, the root hairs grow out in a dense core . . . the gesture of form radiates from a mid-point outward. Above, the foliage arises out of a hollow, drawn by the sun from the periphery. What is enclosed digging down turns into what is open and lifting up. And vice versa. The two forms are an organic breathing continuum. (p. 5)

From a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective of inquiry, a phenomenon as it is primordially experienced is like root hairs, tending to hide in the dark, away from the conscious, beneath the surface of everyday life. The aim of phenomenological (descriptive) writing is to "let that be seen which primarily tends to hide itself" (Caputo, 1987, p. 63) by bringing the phenomenon "into daylight, to place in brightness" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 73). Analogous to the movement of a shoot stretching upward, hermeneutic (interpretive) writing is the "working out" (Caputo, 1987, p. 81). It is the explication of deepened understandings that makes visible what lies below the surface in the "silence of primary consciousness" (Grumet, 1975, p. 11). It is what I believe Abram (1996) describes as the "subjective, emotional, and intuitive content" of our "spontaneous experience of the world . . . the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity" (p. 34).

Tuning Writing to a Natural Rhythm



> It is believed that the trees are very happy when it is windy. The movement of the tree, caused by the wind, enables the sap to run through the tree and rejuvenate it, therefore bringing it much joy. Wind has its purpose - Dene Elder, Francis Tatti (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993, p. 37).

Understanding more deeply Aboriginal beliefs, philosophies, values, and pedagogy is inseparable from coming to understand more deeply the natural characteristics and ecological process of the land. In the Northwest Territories, traditional knowledge among the Dene is intricately connected to the land, attuned to the natural processes and living entities of the surrounding ecology. Dene Elder George Blondin (1997) tells us that in the days of his ancestors, "My people moved within the seasonal circle of life, hunting moose and caribou, tanning hides, picking berries, and gathering for ceremonies and celebrations" (pp. v-vi). Like the James Bay Cree and many other First Nations tribes in Canada, the Dene lived dependent on plants and animals for their survival. They moved in harmony with their surroundings, hunting, trapping, and gathering what was needed without damaging or altering the environment (Berger, 1988). For thousands of years this relationship sustained Dene ways of life.

Although Dene are no longer dependent on the land to survive, it was not so long ago that many Dene, most now community Elders, experienced life in this way. Born in 1927, Dene Elder Margaret Sabourin Sr. (in Thom & Blondin-Townsend, 1987) shares

her experience of growing up on the land:

> In spring we caught and dried fish and stacked it in our house for the winter. In summer we went hunting. No one ever complained about the mosquitoes. We had nothing to protect us from them . . . we didn't even have a decent blanket. When it rained we sheltered under the branches. . . . When my mother was busy I was the one who cooked, visited the nets and made dry fish. In the winter time I repaired the nets and hauled wood. (p. 9)

For Dene families and students I work with, vestiges of this traditional relationship and the life it supports continue to persist. During spring and summer months many Dene students go to bush camps with their families to harvest fish and birds such as goose and duck. Berries, sweet grass, spruce gum, willow, and other plants are gathered throughout the year for food and medicinal purposes. During the fall and winter it is commonplace for men to be out on the land hunting caribou and moose, checking fish nets, and trapping animals such as muskrat, beaver and rabbit while women tan hides, smoke fish, dry meat, or prepare a variety of natural dishes.

Subtle and often unnoticed, however, are aspects of being that are in one way or another tied to the land. Implicit to most place-based cultures is understanding life to occur in cycles, the constants in nature that form definite patterns in the ecosystem and repeat themselves over time (Fixico, 2003): the rise and fall of the moon and sun; the cycles of seasons that shape lands, waterways, flora, and fauna according to the Earth's movements. In seeking to learn from a curriculum of place, I wondered how the rich history and primal wilderness that surrounds the river culturally and ecologically informed ways in which Dene students know, learn and relate to one another. In what

ways do the subtleties of the land, its rhythms and movements, play into experiences of teaching and learning, patterns of being, and other shared aspects of our lives? As a non-Aboriginal teacher I realized I could not ever answer these questions from the knowledge and depth of Aboriginal culture. To look more closely at my questions about ecological ways of knowing in the context of teaching in a Dene school and community, I had to learn and understand from my own ground, and from the way my own roots exist in the soil.

The tool through which I first began to sense my own rhythmic integration with the land was through the practice of free-writing, a process that lets thoughts wander and lead where they may. Goldberg (1986) states the aim of free-writing is "to burn through to first thoughts . . . to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels" (p. 8). This enables the writer to enter the "natural state" or "wilderness" of the wild mind that "is raw, full of energy, alive and hungry" (Goldberg, 1990, p. xiii). Through this writing practice I began to grow more consciously aware of the movements of my own writing in relation to the dynamics of the river: how the changing winds, the energies of light and dark, the sounds of birds, and quiet stillness of winter impacted on the inquiry, my ways of thinking, how I felt, and what I wrote.

Journal Entry,

I have become exhausted with trying to find 'a way' with writing. I feel like I am waiting for the thick winter clouds and cold to lift. It is spring here, April to be exact. The past two days have reached lows of -25 Celsius. This harsh cold hasn't broken since January. Neither have I. I wonder if I am just waiting for the warmth of the sun to return, and the snow to melt and release me? I wonder if I am reverberating this cold, still solid, that surrounds my life?

The river is frozen. I am frozen. I watch for a crack in the river, in the stiffness I feel in writing. I wait tightly closed for the river ice to break open, my self to break open,

to feel movement, to find a flow. I am waiting for change, for the earth and me to rejuvenate new life together. It is spring and yet it is winter. I am listening for sounds of crystal ice crashing along the riverbanks. This is the spring that stirs underneath.

When I first began to free-write by the river, I was like an emergent shoot rising out of the dark soil through a small crack in the rocks. I was coming to awareness of a new landscape of knowing, not yet tall enough to view the broader horizon, yet emerged enough to sense the land and be stirred by its presence. Although I could not fully view the landscape, my senses were open. I could feel the chill of crisp arctic air gliding over the water, and the growing warmth of spring under an ever-lengthening midnight sun. The land moved over and through me. And, over time I discovered my life moving within its movements.

Formal inquiry writing was another means through which I became more aware of the natural processes and ways of the land. Through time natural patterns within my own process of inquiry began to reveal themselves as they repeated through the seasons. These patterns became visible not only through writing in direct relation to the river, but also from my connection to the university. For example, when I wrote mindful of the inquiry within an academic context, I found myself reaching for a language to articulate teaching in a Dene world that would elucidate insight, deeper meanings, and understandings of experience. I also developed writing goals and aspired toward dates of completion through self-constructed deadlines. Working within this process, I found writing would become technical, and I would begin to feel tight and rigid. This eventually led to resistance and my body and mind became closed. Frustrated and unable to move writing forward, I would let go of writing in the mindscape of the university and (re)turn to write

in the vast and wild space of the river. Again, in this wide-open space, my thoughts would flow freely with the winds without constriction. I relaxed in openness to my own creative energies, and the inquiry moved forward.

As this pattern repeated over time, I realized it was the university that moved me as well. For it was not without constricting that I could let go, or without tightening that I could loosen. Rhythms and patterns of stillness and movement, ease and difficulty, repetition and change, were also the ways of the river. Learning to read my own rhythms and patterns in writing was important to the inquiry. By swaying in these movements, elements of both the river and university environments in/formed me. Instead of trying to change the pattern by opening to one and closing to the other, tuning writing to this natural rhythm meant learning to move in the combination of this flow. By accepting both elements, "personal evolution then becomes like nature; instead of becoming a struggle, our process, uninterrupted and undisturbed, becomes unfolding growth" (Harper, 1995, p. 186).

Learning to flow with the natural rhythms of the river and the university is a continuous process of paying attention and attuning to "where I am," recognizing there are times for nourishment and times of deep transformative growth:

> Writing calls us to pay attention to the details, to the rhythms, and the shape of our living. We learn to notice threads and hear the cadence in attending to the biological and phenomenological. Writing attunes us to our possible selves as we contribute to our emerging pattern of experience. Recognizing the role of rhythm in writing is important for both the creation of texts and for our reading of them. Rhythm reminds us of the embodiment of language, but also results from the

> social and cultural interpretations we bring to that language. (Luce-Kapler, 2004, p. 46)

"Where I am" in the rhythms of life and inquiry is an inner knowing. Max van Manen (1997) states, "We know things through our bodies, through our relations with others, and through interaction with things of our world" (p. xiv). In becoming more aware of the patterns and rhythms of the land as they are experienced and lived within the body, my knowledge of place also deepens. Understanding more deeply the natural processes of the local landscape as it integrates with the process of inquiry creates space to gain deeper insight into Aboriginal ways of knowing and how life and learning between the river (Aboriginal world) and the university (Western world) mix and twist within our lives. This insight opens the potential to gain a greater awareness of tensions Aboriginal learners might experience as they too negotiate life and learning between both Western and Indigenous worlds.

Therefore, to tune writing to a natural rhythm is to attune to my own natural patterns of life and inquiry as they arise. Like fireweed that grows in-relation to the bees, rains, soil conditions, and temperatures in the surrounding environment, I too grow as I attune to the natural rhythms of both the land and Aboriginal school community of which I am a part. Such attunement in autobiographical writing allows the inquiry/self to evolve in its own way and in harmony with all its relations.



A feeling that defies description swept over me as I stood there alone and surveyed the wonders of creation. There stretched out before me from my very feet to the distant blue horizon were rolling hills, lakes, rivers, valleys, trees, open spaces.

– John Tetso, Dene Elder (in The Dene Nation, 1984, p. 47)



We have no word in our language that means wilderness,
as anywhere we go is our home.

– George Barnaby, Dene Elder (in The Dene Nation, 1984, p. 59)

GROWING BY THE RIVER

RELATING TO THE LAND

a shoot emerging



after months of darkness

midnight suns begin to

warm the cold frozen surface

releasing the river to an open and steady flow —

the songs of returning birds carry through

the sounds of crystal ice crashing

waking the land,

wind and sky breathe anew —

quietly by the river a stem slowly rises, growing

out of the damp, dark

earthing/unearthing,

leaves split open like a wing.

Transforming My Experience of Transience



> Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premise of thought, feeling, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world (O'Sullivan, Morrell, & O'Connor, 2002, p. 11).

Conversations of movement naturally emerge when I reflect on my life in the taiga. In the past ten years I have moved over a dozen times, leaving and returning between North and South, or moving from one Aboriginal community to another. I entered this inquiry at a place in my life where I once again stood at a confluence between locations, wondering which direction to go. Professionally, I could not imagine a life in education any place other than in the North. There was something about my work teaching in Aboriginal communities I could not remove myself from. Yet, inside this life I kept moving, searching for the next place to settle, always uncertain how long I would stay or where I would go next. But I could not possibly wander about forever! I longed to find a location where I might finally stop drifting, to find a place to call home, to simply, *find my place*.

I struggled to understand this pattern of transience in my teaching life. I would leave the North with the eventual desire to return, then return North with the eventual desire to leave again. I was repeatedly leaving the very places I desired to return to! As I

inquired by the river I noticed a shift. The desire to stop and settle away from this perpetuating pattern changed to an aspiration to grow more familiar with this experience of transience as it manifested itself in my teaching life. This shift began to happen when I started to recognize the push-pull tension I experienced each year when deciding to leave or deciding to stay in the community.

This tension appeared in early autumn, at the onset of each school year. Although I felt genuinely content where I was, I also felt a deep sense of impermanence. During the fall and winter months I would dream of different places to live, while simultaneously weighing professional reasons to stay in the community. Early spring transfer and resignation dates fueled this push-pull battle inside me. Should I return to teach in the fall? Should I prepare to transfer to another northern community? Should I leave the North? Where might I want to go? For months I would twist and turn, not knowing whether to leave or stay, or where to go. I would become emotionally drained and physically burnt out.

The intensity of this cyclical tension did not dissipate over the years as I thought it eventually would. Each year I taught by the river, the tension persisted. Through conscious effort, I tried to accept rather than resist this tension. But in order to accept my experience of transience, I also needed to more deeply understand it. What were the roots from which this experience stemmed? The following is a snapshot of a brief encounter I had with two youth the day I returned to the river from graduate school. This encounter helped me begin to shed light on the nature of my roots, including inherited traits that impact how I view and relate to the landscape.

taiga, curricular lifeworld, 2005

Two girls I had coached in soccer the year before were picking Saskatoon berries in the bushes. To me it was a beautiful simple image, two Dene children picking berries. They showed me which ones were the good berries to pick. I decided not to stay long. Before I left I suggested they make me a nice big berry pie for desert. Life in the village was as it had been before I left. It felt good to be back.

At first this experience conjured such a simple image of life by the river that I did not initially understand its significance. Again and again I returned to the image to try to find meaning. I wondered why this experience stood out for me. What was its significance? Looking outward to the landscape, my initial view eventually gave way and I turned inward to how I was standing inside the landscape. Witnessing myself, standing in-relation to the two Dene youth picking berries, I discovered that what struck me about the image was its cultural historicity. For me, this image was symbolic of a deep-rooted ancestral connection to the land, a connection that stood in distinct contrast to my own.

In the Denendeh, most Dene are born into the traditional territory their ancestors have called home for thousands of generations. Linked to this deep familial connection is a profound sense of being "of a place" (Cajete, 2000, p. 208). Indigenous scholar Viola Cordova (2007) uses the term "bounded space" (p. 186) to describe this sense of place for Aboriginal people:

> Most known North American indigenous groups have a very definite sense of place. The 'sense of place' is distinguished by the fact that there are very explicit boundaries to which the people can point in order to describe their 'home' or 'place'. . . . Each group recites the history of their group within a certain bounded area that has been 'home' for hundreds of generations, or, as many say, 'forever.' (pp. 186, 189)

Unlike the Dene youth I teach, I have never been connected to the land through an ancestral history or familial tie. Both my parents emigrated to Canada during their youth and early adulthood. My immediate and extended family members live great distances apart, scattered across Canada, the United States, and Europe.

Midway through the inquiry, I became compelled to explore my own ancestral roots and decided to travel overseas to the Netherlands, my family's country of origin. What I found interesting when I landed in this country was the feeling that I was no longer floating on a surface landscape with nothing to hold me down. For the first time in my life I had entered a geographical and cultural space filled with long-standing remnants and stories of personal family heritage. Here was a place where wisps of an ancestral language spoken by my parents and relatives came alive and memories of a past land shared in tiny fragments throughout my life pieced together inside me. Although the Netherlands was no longer a homeland, physically standing in this country I sensed what it might be to have roots that stemmed long and deep connected to the centuries inside it.

Visiting the land of my ancestral origin was never a dream I consciously planned to pursue. I believe somewhere in the movement of my own soul I needed to discover my own (un)boundedness to the taiga. And, I needed to understand this connection somatically, through emotional and physical bodily knowing. Only through my own internal sensing of "bounded space" could I recognize how the ancestral threads of my own roots impacted how I related to the taiga. And only through somatic knowing could I move beyond an intellectual understanding of Aboriginal people's connection to the land, and better value the sacredness that "being of a place" holds for those who live here.

When I returned to the river, I recognized that as a first generation born onto

Canadian soil, my roots are historically shallow, no matter where I go. Living in different places in my life without a familial history in the land to ground my being had created a sense of self that dwells "in the land", but never truly is "of the land." In one respect, I resided in freedom, open to follow my own inner winds and settle in the places they took me. But these understandings also helped me realize that in my experience of transience, I had been living adrift, exhausting myself in search of a community where I might find home inside it.

With this new-found awareness, I was simultaneously coming to a greater respect of the profound depth of connection Dene and other Aboriginal peoples have to the land. As a teacher, I viewed the Dene youth I worked with as privileged to be "born of the earth of their place" (Cajete, 2000, p. 186). I considered them fortunate to live in a land filled with a rich cultural heritage with traditional languages and stories of their ancestors, grandparents, and extended relations, who were present and alive in the world around them. But I was also aware of the imperative of their time in history: the changing of ties to the land and the erosion of these very special and longstanding connections, particularly with the impacts of colonization and the homogenizing force of modern day technology and consumerism.

The most prominent impact on Aboriginal communities I witness as a teacher is the health of traditional languages. In the Northwest Territories, approximately 40% of the present Aboriginal population is reported to speak an Aboriginal Language (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2000). Nearly 35% of this traditional language-speaking population is over the age of 45. This means in many Dene communities today Elders still speak their traditional language but their grandchildren do not. Dene culture,

like many Aboriginal cultures, is an oral culture. Legends, stories and accounts of history are contained in the unique words of the traditional language and passed down through generations in oral form. The decline in the number of children speaking Dene is indicative of a serious "language shift" (NWT Literacy Council, 1999, p. 3) that impacts not only the relationships between generations but the continuance of Dene culture as a whole. Dene Elder Margaret Sabourin Sr. (in Thom & Blondin-Townsend, 1987) shares this impact in her own words, "If only the children understood Slavey. I long to say to them, come sit beside me and I'll tell you stories about my father and grandfather. But they do not come for they no longer need to know" (p. 9).

When I first read Margaret's words, I thought about the ancestral language my parents and grandparents spoke fluently but I never learned. I thought about the stories lost between generations, and the similar erosion happening among Dene youth today. However, what is different from my own experiences is that the Dene youth I work with still live in the homeplace of their ancestors, a land protected and passed down by their forebears. They inhabit a place where the language and the historical and cultural strength of its stories remain alive, just waiting to be heard, even if "today's story tellers have a hard time passing these stories on to their children, who have so many other things on their minds" (Ted Blondin, in Blondin, 1997, p. i).

These stories speak most strongly on the land. I remember one morning down by the river listening to three men share a powerful Drum Song. I do not remember the meaning of the song they sang. In Dene culture Drum Songs can be for fun, dancing, praying, healing, or giving thanks to the Creator (The Dene Nation, 1984). When the drumming ended, one of the men began to share a story. He told us we were in a special

place, “An old lady, she lived here year round in a small stick lean-too. . . . Our people used to visit her as they moved along the river from their traplines.” I looked past the crackling wood fire toward the bush and could almost sense the old lady’s presence. Learning the history of this place reminded me that I was not only teaching inside a beautiful landscape filled with spruce, willow, and a river full of fish, but more importantly, also living inside the land through the history of its people. Donald (2003) shares that “to live a meaningful life, in an Aboriginal sense, requires knowledge of and connections to origins, relations, and the place(s) the ancestors have called home” (p. 133).

Until I began to unearth my experience of transience, I did not truly understand the significance of knowing one’s roots, the stories of one’s people, and the places where one comes from. As a teacher in Aboriginal communities, I never thought my own roots mattered. What mattered to me was learning the land and lifeways of the community I was living in order to position myself harmoniously inside the social and cultural ecology of everyday life. Unknowingly, I was standing inside the stories of others, yet not fully knowing my own stories. Therefore, when I stood in-relation to the two Dene youth picking berries and looked inward for the first time, I saw myself delicately poised, like fireweed emerging among ancient spruce, without a sense of who I was or where I came from. Unearthing my experience of transience and grounding deeper into my own ancestral (familial) history, I have gained a greater sense of the shallow roots from which I ground.

The very nature of being a non-Aboriginal teacher in a rural northern Aboriginal community one is not from is to experience a sense of transience. This experience stems

from living without a sense of meaningful, ancestral or "multigenerational abiding" within the "locale" (Rasmussen, as cited in Bai, 2001, p. 94). From my own experience, without a sense of rootedness in any particular place, it is easy to become adrift; wandering about in a search outside one's self for a place to find home in. In seeking to deeper understand my own relationship to the land and Aboriginal place and culture, I not only came to gain a greater respect for the depth of Aboriginal people's roots in their home territories, but grew deeper aware of the imperative for maintaining these ancestral connections. In many Aboriginal communities today, loss of traditional languages, changing ties to the land, and relationships to Elders, create the potential of youth becoming adrift within their own communities and ancestral lands.

It is ironic that as an outsider I have become so eager to protect and preserve what Dene youth, such as the two girls picking berries, take for granted and are likely to neglect. Having shallow roots predisposes me to greater appreciation of the depth of Dene roots, of the tragedy of youth ignoring and thereby loosing their roots. These understandings have allowed me, as a non-Aboriginal teacher, to greatly appreciate the importance of Dene youth to know their roots. At this critical time in history, Elders have an important role to share the stories of their people and the place in which they live. It is the imperative for rural Dene school communities to support the traditional languages, wisdom, knowledge, beliefs and values that have sustained the land and survival of the Dene people for countless generations.

Home in the Bioregion

> The shape of the individual mind is affected by the land as it is by its genes (Lopez, 1989, p. 65).

I have long wondered what lures me to the North. I have left and returned many times. I cannot remember an arrival when the crisp arctic air, the dirt and rock underneath my feet, and the endless spruce and willow have not immediately filled my entire being. That deep feeling that says "Yes, this is my soul place." Sometimes I do not understand why the Earth calls me here, yet I know there is no place in the world I would rather be. The first time I arrived in the Northwest Territories, I landed in Yellowknife for a brief evening stop-over before flying to a small Dene village further north for the summer. Under the late midnight sun, I went for a walk along Yellowknife's Frame Lake Trail. I remember the chill off the lake along this trail, the scent of spruce, and magnificent hills of bare Precambrian rock filling my lungs and releasing a profound contentment. Although I temporarily noticed this feeling, it was as yet an unknown part of myself. It slipped away as I breathed in other things.

There is a solace I experience in the taiga that I cannot find elsewhere. When I returned to the taiga from graduate school for the first time the profound impact the land had on the winds inside me did not escape my consciousness. I turned to literature on relationships between human and wilderness environments, trying to elucidate a deeper understanding. In the literature, I found countless sentiments of human-earth (im)balance and (re)connection to wilderness places intensified by modernism and estrangement wrought by city environments (Drengson & Inoue, 1995; Orr, 2004; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Sale, 2000; Spretnak, 1997). Drengson (1996) eloquently describes this human-earth (dis)connection:

It is difficult to realize our wild nature and larger ecological Self in urban settings.

> This is why many of us journey to the wilderness to rediscover the wild in outside places. Wild places help us reconnect with our own deep self. . . . The wild energies found are sensed as being the same as those found within ourselves. (p. 183)

I identify with Drengson's words and the psychic pull towards wilderness settings when I am living in urban environments. While at university I discovered an innate daily need to walk in wilderness areas to keep my body and mind at ease. But the draw to live and teach in the taiga was more to me than a sojourn into the wild or a temporary adventure into Canada's "Great White North." My connection to the taiga was somehow different than my connection to other wilderness places.

The more I read on human-earth relations the more I realized I was reading from polarized outside/inside and urban/wilderness perspectives. Through this polarization, I discovered my relationship to the taiga did not fit inside this way of thinking. My relationship to the land had a different depth. I have found no other word to describe this depth than Sale's (2000) definition of the Spanish word "querencia" (p. ix). Sale, an early pioneer of bioregionalism, tells us "querencia" defined by dictionaries means a "love of home" (p. ix). However, Sale believes this word moreover implies,

> a deep, quiet sense of inner well-being that comes from knowing a particular place of the earth, its diurnal and seasonal patterns, its fruits and scents, its history and its part in your history . . . where, whenever you return to it, your soul releases an inner sigh of recognition and relaxation. (pp. ix-x)

Reading Sale's description of "querencia," I suddenly made a connection to the deep familiarity of the shapes, colours, and textures of the taiga wilderness that

surrounded me. It was if I were the stem of fireweed suddenly emerging above the rocks, coming to view the winding contours of the river, the spires of evergreen that splashed the horizon, and countless patches of gnarled willow sprawled along the shoreline. Sale's description of querencia was revealing to me the touchstones of my youth, the wildness of the Canadian Shield I grew into as a child at the edge of a deep boreal forest. This was the land where my child self was formed. This was where I learned to walk on dirt and rock and climb on ancient limestone ridges, paddle through twisting waterways, and whistle to the songs of sparrows. Like Butala (2004), I was coming to discover the wilderness of my youth marked deeply inside me:

> what I could remember . . . a combination of smells, the feel of the air, a sense of the presence of Nature as a living entity all around me. All of that had been deeply imprinted in me, but more in the blood and bone and muscle — an instinctive memory. (pp. 8-9)

Through Sale (2000) and Butala (2004), I learned that I identified with the taiga through an inherent sense of homeplace. The following journal entry written when I returned to the river illustrates this relationship.

Journal Entry,

I drifted in silence, the water and my canoe. I dragged my hand in the water, touching on and through it. It is the water I am to be with. I have a home, not the Aboriginal community per say, but the taiga North of 60, the plains and the shield. It is the place I'm to be. I found it. Mahsi.

This perception of home is analogous to what Davy (2003) describes as a "home territory" (p. 9). According to Davy, to know home as a territory is to have a "sense of

belonging to the land of a specific place" (p. 9). The land where one lives is perceived "not as a place to call one's own, but where one belongs" (p. 9). This perception is similar to an Aboriginal view, which sees the land not as something they own but instead something they belong to (Cordova, 2007). I found this perception of home territory liberating. It acknowledged the sense of belonging I felt as a non-Aboriginal teacher teaching "in" northern Aboriginal communities, and the inner conflict that I was not "of" Aboriginal place and culture.

Through the concept of a home territory, I further discovered that although I did not share the depth of historical and cultural embeddedness Aboriginal people experience in the land, I did share a sense of depth connection to the wider environment of the bioregion. In other words, although my roots in the land were shallow from a historical view, from an epistemological view my roots held a deep ecological orientation.

In contemporary Western environmental thought, deep ecological orientations are known through the philosophies of deep ecology. This is a term founded by Arne Naess in the 1970s to describe a mode of consciousness that recognizes an intrinsic sense of belonging through one's embeddedness in the natural environment (Capra, 1996; Drengson, 1996; Drengson & Inoue, 1995; Sale, 2000). This orientation has critical implications to ways in which one lives in the land, including how one thinks, speaks, interacts, and carries the self-in-relation to others and the world around them. Orr (1992) gets at this notion by making a distinction between residing and inhabiting in place:

> A resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little . . . . The inhabitant, in contrast, 'dwells' . . . in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with place . . . . Good inhabitance is

> an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness. (p. 130)

As a non-Aboriginal teacher in rural northern Aboriginal communities I perceive myself as a temporary occupant that inhabits. Although I reside in communities temporarily, the land is part of my consciousness. Erupting from this place-consciousness is an ethic of care for the land and its people that "flows naturally of the self" (Naess, as cited in Capra, 1996, p. 12). This ethic stems from knowing my life as a teacher is inextricably bound with the life of those around me, and from a desire to learn from the land and people so I can live well here. In my relationship to the Dene people, this way of being with/in the community is reflective of shared understandings rooted in "earth-centered values" (Capra, 1996, p. 11), an ecologically grounded way of thinking and being in relation.

The following section discusses this interrelation further as it applies to being a teacher in the North.

Ts'u/Black Spruce



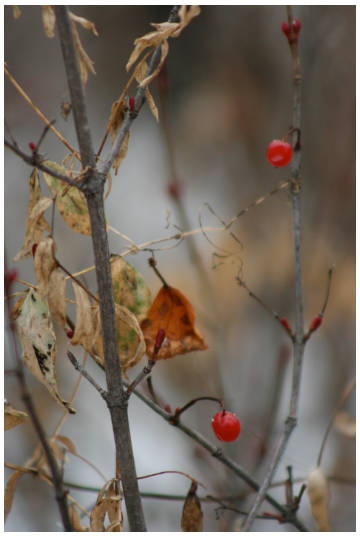
In coming to deeper understand how my roots as a non-Aboriginal teacher embed in Aboriginal place and soil, I have also come to recognize that part of what draws me to teach in Aboriginal communities is the continual deepening of my relationship to the land as I teach and live in a place-based culture. As a non-Aboriginal teacher, living and teaching in an Aboriginal community I am not from, I dwell in the midst of two cultures, my own and that of the world around me. I created the metaphor of "ts'u/black spruce" to symbolize the continual transaction of learning that occurs in this cross-cultural context: teaching in the midst of familiar and unfamiliar cultural worlds.

These two cultural contexts can be seen in the two names for a dymamic in the biosphere. Ts'u is the traditional word for black spruce in one of the Dene dialects. For me, ts'u symbolizes at times, unfamiliar ways of knowing, speaking, and relating to the land unique to the culture of the Dene people. This knowing of the land is shared by the Dene through common language, cultural values, wisdoms, and traditions that are complexly interwoven into extensive ecological knowledge, stories, ceremonies, dances and songs. Black spruce on the other hand, viewed through the English language, metaphorically represents my own familiar knowing of the living landscape — the contours and textures of the bioregion, its plants, animals, waterways, and skies. As I listen to, observe, and participate in Dene ways, this knowing is ever broadening, extending beyond the boundaries of what I previously knew. While Ts'u and Spruce are never exactly the same thing, I begin to see through the lens and cultural context of Ts'u.

Among the Dene people, spending time on the land is valued. Many adults and Elders spend extended periods time on the land – hunting, trapping and living at their bush camps throughout various parts of the year. Families who live year-round in the

community take every opportunity to spend time on the land skidooing, or on the river boating, or simply building fires, picking berries, and being together outdoors. School community culture-based education programs reflect these values through day or weeklong excursions such as a moose hunt or spring camp. As a teacher not from the community, I am always learning from the people as I observe, listen, and participate in this way of life. The following snapshot of day-to-day life in the taiga illustrates this transaction.

taiga, curricular lifeworld, 2005



I picked berries all weekend. I have bags and bags of low bush cranberries, enough to last me through the winter. I gave some to a student and some to a teacher that moved to Yellowknife. A lot of people were out picking berries this weekend. The berries were getting hard to find. I found them mostly in shady areas under the larger spruce trees. I still have to pick some rosehips. I was taught how to dry them to make tea. Apparently they have lots of Vitamin C. Fall is here, the trees have turned gold. Winter will be here soon. Brrr.

In the Denendeh, the Dene have been sustained by the land since time immemorial. Knowing the intricacies of the land such as properties of local plants, habits

of animals, and routes of streams and rivers that wind through the landscape was essential to survival. This knowledge included practical skills, such as gathering roots and birch bark, creating shelter, harvesting fish, hunting and trapping animals, as well as knowing earth medicines such as spruce gum to cure a sore throat or beaver hide to stop the flow of bleeding (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993). To be sustained by the land meant the Dene lived in harmony with the world around them. Use of resources had to be practiced in sustainable ways to ensure not only one's own current survival, but also the survival of people in the future. This ecologically grounded knowledge has been passed through the generations, and in its own way, very much continues and remains alive today.

The snapshot of picking berries symbolized my coming to recognize as a teacher how I dwell in the land and with the community in a way that flows into the culture and perpetuates this way of life. One way of looking at this two-way transactional relationship between my self and the Dene community is through the term *ecoliteracy* (Orr, 2004). Based on western ecological discourse, Orr describes the term ecoliteracy as both the understanding of basic principles of ecology and the embodiment of these principles in daily community life. This means not only a practical comprehension of the local ecology, but in light of ecological knowledge gained through lived experience, how one comes to approach the land, and therefore, live and relate to it.

For example, in the Denendeh, ecological knowing is inclusive of symbolic and spiritual associations (Cajete, 1994; Basso, 1996; Fixico, 2003) such as giving an offering to the land. This way of relating to the land was absent and unfamiliar in my own upbringing in Euro-Canadian culture. I grew more familiar with this practice when I

worked in a small Dene community in the central subarctic. In this community I used to go fishing late every evening. One evening while drifting in the canoe, casting my line and enjoying the quiet hours of the midnight sun, a motorboat pulled up. In the boat were two men, one an Elder. After an exchange of greetings, the Elder gestured for me to make an offering to the water when I fished. Fishing in a territory that was not my own, I respected this suggestion. Over the course of the next few weeks each evening I fished, I took a small pinch of tobacco with me and made an offering to the water. Soon I noticed my relationship to fishing changed. Because I had made an offering, when I caught a fish I found myself thankful to the water and the fish for giving its life. Through this new sense of gratitude I began to sense an aliveness of the land around me and grew to respect the water as a living presence in a way I had not previously known.

This relationship between my self, the land, and the people of the Denendeh is as important to me as it is to the Dene. Even though I do not know how I influence students and the community, I want them to see in me a genuine interest to participate and learn. Engaging with the community in a way that flows into the culture allows me to enter into a collective sentiment that honours expressions of reverence towards the land and embodies a way of being that fosters connectedness, responsibility, and care for the place in which we live. As a non-Aboriginal teacher, I have come to see that my ways of living out this interplay between ts'u and black spruce has cultural impacts, particularly through my relationship with Dene students as we cultivate together place and culture-based interests that carry forward respectful ways of being in relation to the land.

A Lesson from the Breath of Bison



> The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn (Abram, 1996, p. 33).

I like to write in the early quiet of the morning, in "those wee hours when the rest of the world lies still enough so I can hear my heart speaking" (Chambers, 2004, p. 9). As seasons unfolded by the river, I wrote quietly in the dark, watching and listening to the land speak silently outside my window. Through the school year I watched snows fall and suns rise, but mostly I watched the constancy of the ravens coasting among houses, listening to their scratchy nails landing on my rooftop, and conversing into the morning air over pieces of animal bone or other carnage on which they were feasting. The land was always changing, inscribing my being, entering my thoughts and feelings, and influencing my words as I wrote.

taiga, curricular lifeworld, 2005

It's hard to think at the moment, there is a bison down the road and the dogs are barking like mad. A husky is howling; it sounds like a wolf.

Each morning when I sat to write, I began by writing freely in my journal. Free writing was a way for me to find "where I am" in life and inquiry by giving attention to personal thoughts and feelings before attending more fully to their directions. One particular morning when I sat to write a whispering fog hung over the community. Gazing out the window into the dark, my attention was pulled past the fog to a family of bison lying in the grasses, breathing in the cold.

Journal Entry,

It is early in the morning and very dark outside. As I write I cannot see anything but the warm breath of bison lying shadowed in the grasses just outside my window. The bison remind me of writing in the dark, of not knowing where I am, but having a sense that I am somewhere. The possibility that there is something out there for me to grasp hold of, something real I can touch. Is what I am looking for really something I can touch? Bison I cannot ever touch, only know they are there, a shadow or a breath to hold onto somewhere deep inside.

I look at my words and want desperately to write deeper, to discover new insights and write from a place that will take me to this depth, but where is this place? Where is the base of this depth? Is there an end I am to reach writing life beside the river?

Sometimes I look out to the middle of the river where the water is deep and the strength of its current scares me. Still, I want to go there. I once imagined I lay floating in the center of the river, just to be with the water. I wondered if a deeper self was somewhere down below, hiding in the dark, frightened, hesitating wanting to surface. Each morning I write searching for insights, sounds, fleeting thoughts to surface this depth. When I look to the center of the river now, I don't know that I am any different. Only I have been with the water.

The shadows of bison are still outside my window, breathing in the cold river air. Perhaps they have just showed me what I needed to know.

As I was watching the breath of bison I reflected on my experience of writing autobiographically inside the taiga: the elusiveness of inquiring into lived experience and the difficulty of finding words to articulate the river world from a depth that writes the

land that speaks so fully inside me. Max van Manen (1997) explains in phenomenological-hermeneutic research "the basic things about our lifeworld (such as the experience of lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived human relation) are preverbal and therefore hard to describe" (p. 18). Yet, it is difficult to inquire in the dark, to write from a position of not knowing inside a world that is always moving, a world where lived meanings are always growing, and a world that finds "where I am" is forever changing. I longed to hold the self still, at least long enough so I could articulate with clarity.

Watching the breath of bison also prompted me to reflect on the wild presence of the land that was always outside my window, the world that influenced and was absorbed into my thoughts as I lived by the river and wrote. Thinking about bison I realized I cherished these animals as a part of our everyday lives. But I had never asked myself why. What meaning do bison have to my life as a teacher? I remember during my first year teaching by the river I read an article in the regional newspaper debating whether a wildlife fence should be put up to keep bison out of the community. After reading the article, I said to myself, "If bison leave, I leave." Then I cut out the article and placed it in my journal.

What I did not realize then was how important the bison were to my relationship with the students and the community. Bison were a commonality in our daily lives that allowed me access to a deeper sense of shared ground: the joy of waking to the sounds of bison grazing outside my home, the excitement shared with students as we watched large lumbering bodies walk past our classroom window, and the empathy I could give to parents when they telephoned to say that their child would be late because bison were in

front of their home and the children could not yet walk to school. Bison, to me, were a "presence of the earth" (Abram, 1996, p. 226) that was subtly (and at times not so subtly!) deeply embedded in our lives.

Looking further, I came to understand that the breath of bison was symbolic of a land that breathes, an "invisible medium that moves between us" (Abram, 1996, p. 227). As a community living by the river we are surrounded and immersed in the breath of the land. Breathing is a silent exchange between the self and the world that seeps into the skin and bone. This rhythmic breath of the land becomes part of our own breath. This is a rhythm by which individuals and the Earth reverberate time which follows a rhythm of the land inhabited by bison rather than rhythms of the clock.

I often heard teachers complaining about the lack of motivation Dene students have for classroom learning. "They aren't listening; they don't want to learn." When I heard this complaint, I used to think first about the myriad of epistemological and cultural differences Dene students bring with them to the classroom. I now think of the breath of bison and wonder about the connection between the rhythms of the land and classroom learning. How does this breath lie silently interwoven into our lives?

In a study on issues of cross-cultural teaching and learning in rural Alaska, Barnhart (1982) writes about the topic of "tuning in," which she describes as "an ability of the teacher to adapt to the world of the students" (p. 149). She found that in Aboriginal communities, to be "tuned in" to the world of Aboriginal students is to also be tuned in to the different rhythmic patterns evident in day-to-day community life. Rhythmic patterns include tempo and duration of speech, body movements, and spaces of silence and listening. Citing Capra, Barnhart emphasizes the importance of rhythm in cross-cultural

teacher/student interactions, viewing the synchronization of rhythms between teacher and students as a form of rhythmic integration:

> Rhythmic patterns are a universal phenomenon, but at the same time they allow individuals to express their distinctive personalities. . . . As in the process of perception, rhythm plays an important role in the many ways living organisms interact and communicate with one another. Human communication, for example, takes place to a significant extent through the synchronization and interlocking of individual rhythms . . . opposition, antipathy, and disharmony will arise when the rhythms of two individuals are out of synchrony. (p. 150)

Barnhart's study made me think of a powerful echo of the land reverberating in the deep interior of Aboriginal education. In Aboriginal communities we are so encompassed by the land it is difficult not to be aware of its breath, even if awareness of its inner workings lies below the conscious level. As a teacher, I now consider this exchange between the world and ourselves.

Ecological World Within Self

Through the eyes of a child I drifted
Gazed on the deepening water and enclosing bog
Slowly it began to surround my entire world
Where the blue sky had been moments before
Was now a blurred canopy of green.
I gripped tightly to the gunwale of the canoe as it rocked
I surrendered to the water's darkness
To the green that reached towards me
Filled with wonder, excitement, and fear.

My childhood home was at the edge of a wood filled with cedar, maple, and long boreal grasses not far from the Ottawa River. On summer nights I fell asleep to the

sounds of crickets chirping, and woke to songbirds at my window. In the quiet of the day, I would explore the woods, capturing toads and caterpillars that became my closest companions. When I look at the river today, I hear this familiar song of my youth and wonder if it is no coincidence that I am here, growing beside another great river, seeking to understand this ecological world within myself that continually returns me. My heart as a teacher has found deep contentment with the land and people of the North. I have come to recognize that I identify this contentment in part through an inherent sense of homeplace with the bioregion. Yet, I still cannot help but wonder at times what I am doing here, teaching in such a distanced and isolated place.

I agree with Roszak (et al. 1995), who suggest there is an "ecological subconscious" that "lies at the core of the psyche" (p. 14). There is a deep-rooted and intensely intimate connection humans have to the Earth, a biosphere that speaks deeply inside us. I am learning to hear mine speak. Roszak believes that for many this connection is an invisible presence, and we are unaware of the impact this presence has on our lives. I resonate with Roszak's sentiments and believe that there are wild influences at work in my life. Each time I move away from the North, there is a mysterious power of the land that pulls me back. On the other side of this pull is the push from the relentless unease I experience when I reside in the South. Over time my body becomes tight and physically anxious, my mind confined and closed-in, and emotionally I experience being separate and alone, yet indifferent to finding a community of (human) others to which I might belong.

I know this is the inner working of an ecological world inside me. This is a self imprinted with the wildness of the land of my youth, an "undeniable ecological memory,

stored too deep, it seems to switch" (Jardine, 1998, p. 146). Part of me wishes I could adapt to life in the South, not feel so disconnected by concrete, enter a cultivated landscape without feeling fragmented, or move within an urban bustle without feeling lost. Why can I not live in this world? I acknowledge that herein lies a deeper personal longing for connection with my own culture.

The literature I read on ecology and education emphasizes the importance of connecting to the Earth, and cultivating in youth and within ourselves as educators a relational awareness to our surroundings and the larger biosphere of which we are a part (Cajete, 1994; Jardine, 1998, 2000; Orr, 1992; Riley-Taylor, 2002). Yet, living in rural Aboriginal communities surrounded by wilderness, I feel at times too connected and want to push this connectedness away. Maybe I need to stop and listen and remember the joy of the Earth songs I knew in my youth. Maybe I need to reconnect with that child to find beauty inside this relation. Or maybe I need to reconcile with the woods and grasses that left this imprint on my body and soul, a connection I could not have recognized without separation or without knowing other ways of life.

I am cautious of romantic or sentimental notions of an ecological self. Yet, I know through my own experience and in my work in Aboriginal communities what being deeply connected to the land can mean to one's psychological, physical, and emotional wellbeing, in essence, one's spirit. Cajete (2000) speaks of this from an Indigenous perspective:

> Inner kinship with the Earth is an ancient and natural extension of the human psyche. Its severance can lead to a deep split in the consciousness of the individual and the group, in addition to social and psychological problems that

> can ultimately be healed only through re-establishing meaningful ties. Re-connection with nature and its inherent meaning is an essential healing and transformational process for Indian people. (p. 188)

I believe, to varying degrees, the same is true for non-Aboriginal people as well. Raffan (as cited in Wattchow, 2004) explains the "scape" in landscape "is a projection of human consciousness" (p. 3), a meeting ground between the physicality of the land and the interpretive presence of the observer. From deep ecological and eco-spiritual perspectives, to know an ecological self is to know the land as an extension of self, a "continuity of existence" that recognizes the connectedness of "the earth with oneself" (Gough, 1990, p. 14). Fox (as cited in Gough, 1990) believes this connectedness to be the cultivation of a state of being "that sustains the widest (and deepest) possible *identification* of oneself with one's environment" (p. 14).

There is a common ground between Western and Aboriginal cultures that recognizes the intricate bond that exists between humans and the Earth. When I look out to the river world I wonder if the separation from the land I experience in the South is similar to the separation Dene Elders and adults who grew up on the land experience in the contemporary context, where children sit in front of televisions and Elders sit idle without their traditional tasks. I wonder how much imprinting of the land is happening for Dene youth today who stand in the middle of two worlds — the world of their ancestors and Elders and the world of modernization. Many Dene youth continue to spend a great deal of time out on the land, hunting, fishing, camping, and being with their families at their cabins and bush camps. Others, however, stay mostly in the community, visiting with friends, watching television or playing computer and video games.

I am aware as a non-Aboriginal teacher not from the community that there is a lot I do not know of the inner ecological world within Dene youth today. In the experience of preparing a menu for a school excursion I remember realizing how much I did not know when a grandparent of a student I taught told me her grandson was not allowed to eat bison meat because bison was his sacred animal. Among the Dene people, "animals and human beings continue to entertain very intimate relationships" (Goulet, 1998, p. 62). To maintain the health of this relationship "one is prohibited from killing or eating animals representative of one's animal helper under threat of certain illness or even death" (p. 70). I remember leaving this conversation reminded of the complexity and richness of the cultural world in which students were immersed, a world students carried with them into the classroom, a knowing of the land often invisible to my eyes.

It is obvious the river is still teaching me and I am still learning; I sense there is much more for me to come to know. I have not yet found beauty inside my transience, nor inside my own dwellings in the land as a teacher in this place. I wonder now that I have grounded more deeply in Aboriginal soil, whether I am at a place where I can begin to look beyond an individual self-unfolding to a place where I can begin to see though an integrated awareness how I am connected not only to the land, but as well to the Aboriginal community through this relation. I wonder now whether I am at a place where I can come to (re)experience through this continued growth what it is to live inside the land, and to know again its wonder, excitement and fear.

As a child I used to dream I could fly. I would start my takeoff in front of my house, facing the direction of the woods. I ran really hard and fast, took a leap right before the edge of the trees and my feet would lift off the ground. As if swimming the breaststroke, I kicked my legs and pulled my arms against the air with all my might and soon I was flying. When I reached a height just above the treetops I would slow my stroke and glide with the birds. Sometimes if I was really brave I would fly higher. I was always careful not to go too high, fearful I would lose sight of the birds and trees, and feel alone in the clouds.

INTERACTING IN THE CURRICULAR WORLD OF THE DENENDEH

buds bursting on a flowering spike



swaying

in the shadows of trees

pods of magenta

e
s
i
r

toward the light

nurtured in

a dynamic

network

of

interdependent

relationships

Being-in-Community



Ecology — from the Greek oikos ("house"), the study of the relations between plant and animals within their habitat.
— *Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*

Aboriginal communities in the North are small and intimately connected, bound not only through isolated geographical and social circumstance, but also through familial relations, common language and history, and a deeply rooted way of life. To teach among Aboriginal people who have lived in the land since time immemorial implies that as a non-Aboriginal teacher, I am an outsider to the community. Kawagley (2006) believes for non-Aboriginal teachers to maintain respect for this relationship means constantly paying attention and becoming knowledgeable about the community's thinking and way of doing things. This includes the ability to work in "close coordination and consultation among the various people within and outside the school system" (p. 98) and arrive with the local community at a place Fienup-Riordan (as cited in Kawagley, 2006) calls "one-mind" (p. 97).

When I first began teaching in northern Aboriginal communities I remember experiencing a sense of separateness as a teacher. I wondered if this was part of the historical impact of white people in the North: dark shadows associated with abuse from

the domination of government and church education structures; the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal lands and culture; and the continued short-term turnover of transient white teachers coming into communities to teach. To have a stigma attached to being a non-Aboriginal teacher would seem only natural. Although my sense of this separateness was largely subconscious at the time, I remember this feeling caused me to question my place in the community, and in turn to actively seek ways to integrate inside its flow.

In my experience teaching in different Aboriginal communities I have found teacher orientation and induction programs to be most valuable in creating space for building relationships with/in the school and community. In the communities where I have taught, I have had very different orientation experiences. These experiences have played a significant role in how I come to live and relate with/in the community each school year.

My first year as a teacher, I lived in a small fly-in community in the central subarctic. That year, there were very few experiences that connected the school to the community. Only a few school community gatherings were held, and aside from the culture and language teacher there were no Aboriginal teachers working at the school. The teaching staff included an upper elementary teacher, the principal, and myself, none of us originally from the North. From my own perspective, the school seemed detached from the life of the community, and as a teacher I knew little of the world of the Dene students I taught. My sense of isolation grew as the school year progressed. Consequently, with the privilege of transience, I contributed to the high statistics of teacher turnover in rural Aboriginal communities, and left after one school year.

When I moved to teach in a different regional Dene community, my induction into this community was much different. The first day I walked into the school, the staff gathered together in a Sharing Circle facilitated by a local Elder. A few days later, the school year opened with a community-wide Fire Feeding Ceremony followed by a barbeque supported by the local District Educational Authority. As a new teacher to the community, this initial induction by mostly Aboriginal leadership created an important space from which to build relationships with students, families, and members of the community.

I have returned to this community for many years now. Staff orientation and induction programs in subsequent years have had a profound impact on creating a sense of place inside the community, so when I returned to the river from graduate school I wanted to look at this experience more deeply. As an inquirer, I was interested in learning more about how the dynamics of this school's orientation and induction program played such a significant role in building a sense of being-in-community. Although the nature of staff orientation and induction programming changes from year to year, the structure and intentions have remained the same. The following *Staff Orientation Camp* is a reflection on one such orientation experience written when I returned to the river from graduate school.

Staff Orientation Camp

It is the first day of the school year. This morning all school staff, the principal, secretary, counselor, janitors, teachers, and assistants, went out to a local camp by the river. When we got to camp we made a fire, set up chairs, and put our food and

beverages in the arbor. For most of the morning we talked, drinking tea and coffee around the fire. Some staff members went for walks along the trail by the banks of the river.

This time together was open. There was no fixed schedule. It was relaxing and real to spent time together in the midst of bush and bugs. An Elder came to me. She gave me a hug and said, "Welcome home." I said "Mahsi," not just casually but with true sincerity. It felt good to be here.

Later in the day, we gathered formally around the fire. An Elder from the community led us in a Sharing Circle. I listened to her speak about the importance of the river for the Dene. She shared her experiences as a learner, and her own way of knowing from the land. Then she passed a feather around the Circle. I had an opportunity to listen to each person on our school staff share something of themselves. I, too, shared in the Circle. I spoke of my time away from the river at the University of Victoria, and how I was thankful to be back with the school and community. It was nice to be part of this experience. I felt connected to the staff and more appreciative of my place here.

Aside from Circle, there was little else planned throughout the day. We spent most of our time talking and listening by the fire. I noticed there was a moment in the afternoon when I suddenly felt uncomfortable, as if we were doing 'nothing' on paid time. When I reflected on this feeling, I imagined what it might have been like to have this experience with the school community my first year of teaching. What difference it might have made, if I had stayed longer and felt a greater sense of community. I realized then what I initially perceived as 'doing nothing' was really 'doing something' very significant.

When I began to look more closely at this experience, I realized that the context and structure of staff orientation camp reflected the values of the Dene people. In Aboriginal culture land-human and human-human relationships are fundamentally interconnected. This structure is in contrast to hierarchical social structures and more formal individuated methods of organization typical in Western/white community norms.

> Indigenous community is about living a symbiotic life in the context of a symbolic culture that includes the natural world as a necessary and vital participant and co-creator of community. The life of the Indigenous community is mutually reciprocal with the living communities in the surrounding environment. (Cajete, 1994, p. 169)

This collective emphasis provides a significant affective context for developing a sense of community among all people. At camp, relationships among staff were more horizontal (communal) rather than vertical (hierarchal) in nature. The janitors, secretary, teachers, and support staff alike were respected as equally contributing members of the school community. Thus, non-dominating power relationships were valued. Cajete (1994) says that this way of relating to others in Aboriginal culture is based on equality and mutual reciprocity. This way of learning, communicating, and working in relationship "mirrors those ways found in Nature" (p. 220).

As I reflected on *Staff Orientation Camp*, I began to see how an intentional space had been created by school administration for relationships among staff to build organically, and for dynamics among members of the school community to naturally evolve. Sharing this experience outdoors by the river also helped to deepen the sense of

connection to the land and appreciation for the cultural context of the local community. The intention sought by school administration to build land, culture, and community relationships among school staff opened space, particularly for non-Aboriginal teachers, to better integrate into the local culture by entering into the community as mutually participating members. This relationship is important for a non-aboriginal teacher. It opens space to co-create with the community as both a teacher and a learner inside the cultural community. Thus, the teacher learns to interact in ways that respects Dene culture and pedagogical values, and to relate to Aboriginal students in ways that better balance Aboriginal and Western educational orientations.

(Re)searching the Dene Kede

An avenue through which I have come to more deeply understand Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning in education is through my lived experience of a curriculum in the Northwest Territories called the Dene Kede. The Dene Kede is currently an official curriculum supported by the Government of the Northwest Territories and the foundation of culture-based education in the Denendeh. Dene Elders and educators from each of the five Dene regions developed the Dene Kede in the early 1990s. The intent was to create space in mainstream schooling to integrate language learning and to give Dene children knowledge of Dene culture based on Dene perspectives of education. The foundation purpose of this curriculum is to guide Dene youth in establishing respectful relationships with the land, the spiritual world, other people, and themselves (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993). Dene Elders hoped

that through the creation of this curriculum, not only would Dene identity be maintained, but that all humankind would benefit: "We would all be closer to survival" (p. xiv).

I first became interested in learning more about the Dene Kede during graduate school in a course entitled *Aboriginal Ways of Knowing*, taught by my committee member, Lorna Williams. In my first year teaching in the North, I had heard little about this curriculum. For me, the Dene Kede was a document with beautiful photographs of the Denendeh that sat on a shelf in my classroom. In my second year of teaching I was formally introduced to the Dene Kede and participated in discussions about its content; however, I still had little understanding of what this curriculum was about.

As noted earlier, the Dene Kede is organized around four basic themes: "The Spiritual World," "The Land," "Other People," and "The Self" (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993). Student learning expectations include, for example, learning how to make dry fish, becoming familiar with Dene legends, learning to name and pick local plants used for medicine, and showing respect for living forces. What is my role as a non-Aboriginal teacher in supporting these outcomes? How do I work respectfully with a curriculum based on a culture with which I am unfamiliar? I was uncertain how to integrate the Dene Kede themes and expectations with/in the mainstream curriculum. Nor did I fully understand my role as a non-Aboriginal teacher in their implementation. Consequently, for the next couple years the Dene Kede continued to remain untouched on a shelf in my classroom.

When I began to look more closely at the Dene Kede in graduate school, I discovered that in order for me to understand more deeply the grounding premise of this curriculum, I needed to give attention to how it is lived. Moreover, I needed to

understand the Dene Kede from my own lived experience as a teacher participating in its teachings. While (re)searching the Dene Kede, I began to question aspects of the curriculum that were unfamiliar. What do the Dene mean by the 'Spiritual World'? What does this way of thinking mean to Dene perspectives of teaching and learning? And again, how do I situate myself as a non-Aboriginal teacher inside this curriculum?

The following pieces, *Awakening to the Spiritual World*, *Speaking Berries*, and *Paddle Songs* explore questions I put to the Dene Kede through my own lived experience participating in the curriculum. Delineating key aspects of my experience of the curriculum have helped me to understand more deeply Dene education from a land-based context.

Awakening to the "Spiritual World"

When I first began looking more closely at Aboriginal epistemology in graduate school, I understood the "Spiritual World" in the Dene Kede to be a meaningful and integrated part of Dene education and culture, but I had given little attention to this concept as a teacher. In Western secular systems of education, spirituality in learning is a component of life and teaching often ignored (Doige, 2003). Yet for the Dene, spirituality is a taken-for-granted part of life. Every part of life has spiritual meaning.

Having lived in different Aboriginal communities for many years I have taken part in numerous cultural rituals and ceremonies to honour and give thanks and respect to others, ourselves, and Creation (Mother Earth). While I did not always understand the deeper significance and meaning of various rituals and ceremonies, as a teacher I wondered what it was to connect with the land and relate to others through this way of

knowing and being. In learning to respect the Spiritual World, one of the aims of the Dene Kede is for Dene youth to "appreciate and respect the spiritual forces . . . [and] recognize powers greater than themselves" (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993, p. xxxi). What do the Dene mean by appreciating and respecting the spiritual forces? Furthermore, how were such outcomes to be taught? How was this curriculum to be lived?

The Dene Kede also states: "The Dene Elders have said that the land, Mother Earth, is life itself" (Education, Culture, and Employment 1993, p. 27). And so in an attempt to come to a greater lived understanding of the Spiritual World in the context of Dene education, I began to question my own relationship with the culture and the Dene people. I began to pay closer attention to the land to deepen my understanding. I observed the birds, the winds through the trees, and the ever-changing dynamics of the sky and river. I also began to pay greater attention to how the Dene people interacted with the land, particularly those experienced in various culture-based education contexts.

taiga, curricular lifeworld, 2005

There is a strong warm wind outside today. After school I went for a long walk beside the river. The ravens were playing in the wind,

Gliding

SwOOOOOping

Coasting on a r

i



It was smooth and placid. An eagle came and flew around the group of ravens. I have never seen so many eagles as I have the last month here. Every fall we begin our school year with a Fire Feeding Ceremony to honour our ancestors and give thanks to the Creator. This year an Elder held the Feeding of the Fire beside the river near a big rock. High school students watched two eagles fly by during the ceremony this afternoon. At our own staff camp an eagle flew by shortly after Circle. We all stopped and watched. Eagles are powerful birds.

One of the values of Dene culture I have embodied and discovered within myself is an appreciation and respect for the power of animals and other living entities of nature. Through observing eagles flying at significant times and witnessing our shared reaction to stop and watch these powerful birds, I have discovered I share a perception with the Dene that is attuned to and aware of the power of living entities of nature. Aboriginal worldviews are guided by the understanding that "the land [is] full of spirit, full of life energy. Each entity — a rock, a tree, a plant, a mountain, an animal, a bird, an insect — [has] its own expression of life and way of the Spirit" (Cajete, 2000, p. 180). Jean-Guy Goulet (1998), a cultural anthropologist who has spent years living with the Dene Tha in northern Alberta, reports the same sentiment among the Dene people and their relationship to their environment:

> When Dene speak of a power, they think of a powerfulness in plants, animals, or other substances, which can affect humans knowingly or unknowingly. . . . Respectful behaviour towards all life forms maintains the continuous flow of the gift of life to human beings. . . . Dene extend their respect to animals because they are seen not only as game but as powerful sentient beings. (pp. 60-62)

Dene Elder George Blondin (1997) speaks further to cultural notions of power and the importance of respectful behaviour towards all life forms.

> When Dene or other nations pray to an eagle or bear or some other animal, we are not praying to that animal. Rather, we are addressing the spirit of that animal — trusting that the energy of the special gift that animal owns (such as the bear's power to heal wounds or the eagle's keen eye sight, or foresight to see ahead and prepare accordingly) will help us. (p. 50)

This interrelation among life forms is defined in the *Dene Creation Story*, the basic philosophic principle that guides the Dene Kede: "The creation story tells us that because we were created last of all beings, our continued survival requires us to be in respectful relationship with the land and all of its animals, the spiritual world, other people and ourselves" (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993, p. xv). What stands out for me in the *Dene Creation Story* is the view that humans were created last of all beings. This philosophical orientation is different from the Christian perspective in which I was raised, where in the center or Circle of Life, "man is above all things" (Fixico, 2003, p. 46). Berman (2000) describes this structure of religion, particularly in Western civilization, as "a vertical one, with the mundane world regarded as being down here, below, and heaven up above" (p. 12).

Viewing human/Earth relations through the philosophical foundations of the Dene Kede allowed me to gain a greater sense of humility toward the land. This humility reminds me that I am dependent on the land for my survival, and that the land is giving. Through this newfound awareness I have come to appreciate more deeply as a non-Aboriginal teacher the importance of developing respectful relationships to the land, other, the spiritual world and ourselves. This is a view that calls us to see the sacredness and aliveness in everything around us. Looking more deeply at the Spiritual World I have

also gained a better understanding that the glue of a functional Indigenous community is spirituality. To live in harmonious relationship to others is to be guided by the ideal of reciprocity, and the quality of such connections is maintained through cultural values, ethics, and spiritual practice (Cajete, 2000). Fixico (2003) speaks of this direct relationship between land and living in community.

> Kinship is the bonding element that holds together the entities of the Indian world. This type of spiritual energy is essential for the maintenance of indigenous peoples who depend on collectivism. Thus, relationships are imperative to communal continuity as well as to the understanding of relationships with non-humans and with the metaphysical entities of life. (p. 75)

In order to understand more deeply the Dene sense of community I had to learn about Aboriginal spirituality. I had to respect and even subscribe to the tenets of that spirituality in order to be part of the Aboriginal communities, and ultimately I had to respect deeply Dene cultural values in education.

Speaking Berries

Throughout the school year students are exposed to key cultural experiences outlined in the Dene Kede such as fall, winter and spring camps, moose and/or caribou hunting, ice fishing and small game trapping. Such culture camps and land-based activities are led by a culture teacher, Aboriginal school staff, Elders, and/or supporting members of the local community. Through these experiences Dene youth learn cultural and land-based skills such as how to make dry fish, set snares, collect spruce boughs, scrape hides, set up camp, collect berries and prepare jams or other wild dishes. As a non-

Dene teacher participating in culture-based educational programs I am situated in the role of both teacher and learner. I relate to the students and the school community as a teacher with supervisory authority, and also as a learner who respects the directions, teachings, and knowledge of the Dene people. Thus, I learn from Dene youth by watching, listening, and participating experientially in their world as they share stories, knowledge and skills in relation to the land around them.

When reading the Dene Kede, however, I often have questions regarding teaching and learning in this context. From my own observations, culture-based educational experiences are often informally structured. At times learning seems without direction. Students are doing different tasks, some collecting wood, others checking nets, picking berries, tending to the fire, making shelters in the bush, or cleaning tents or cabins. In my experience specific learning outcomes found in thematic curriculum units such as "Plants," "Ravens," and "Moons and Stars" are not directly addressed. Yet, it is evident knowledge is being transferred as we live and interact with one another.

The following narrative entitled *Speaking Berries* addresses the holistic nature of the Dene Kede as I grew more aware of myself as a learner learning through interacting with Dene students and teachers in a land-based context. Evident through my reflection of this experience are concepts of communicative praxis in cross-cultural teaching/learning contexts as well as learning from the whole being.

Speaking Berries





I was sitting in the arbour with the cultural teacher and some parents who were preparing lunch. A student came in and said, "Teacher, I go pick berries?" I knew what this meant, "Teacher, can we go pick berries?" Before I had a chance to speak, the cultural teacher looked up from the fire and said to me: "You can have the bucket up there," and turned to look at the bucket high on the shelf. I got up, grabbed the bucket, and said, "Mahsi." I must have looked confused heading out the door. When I taught in this community before graduate school, I used to go out after the first frost and pick cranberries by the bush camps along the winter road. I had never picked berries in this area and hesitated before leaving, not knowing where to go. Before I had a chance to ask, the culture teacher got up and said, "They're not far," grabbed her bucket, and began walking.

The first frost hit the community a few days ago. This means the cranberries are ripe to pick. More students joined us and we made our way to the berry patch. The culture teacher led us to a patch of berries that hung high in the bushes. The students began picking the red berries, and again I hesitated. I only knew cranberries that grew in low bushes. I asked in a typical northern statement/question that my student had used earlier, "These are cranberries?" I got the reply, "High bush cranberries. They're good

for jam. I'm going go pick low bush cranberries this afternoon." I wondered if this was an invitation. I had a feeling it was, so I didn't ask further.



In the afternoon I went out in the boat to pick low bush cranberries with the culture teacher, her husband and a few students. When we got out of the boat, we walked into the bush for a way. Once we reached a large spruce bog, we slowly separated and found our own patches. The bush was thick, so most of the time I couldn't see anyone. It was just the bush, the berries, and myself. I wondered about my connection to the land as I picked and I could think of nothing. "I'm picking berries. I know it is important to be out here, but what is this importance? Why is it so important for these students to be out here on the land picking berries?" I picked and thought. A while later one of the students came over and showed me her bucket that was nearly full. I looked at mine. I was barely halfway. She said, "I pick berries with my grandma." I suddenly realized this was part of her relationship to the land, her family, and her community. It was part of her knowing of the land, a part of who she was as a Dene.

After about an hour, I heard the voice of the culture teacher from somewhere in the bush, "Ready to go?" Walking back to the boat with our bags and buckets full of cranberries, everyone seemed happy. On the boat ride back to camp I thought again about picking berries, about how I loved the bright berry pinks and reds of high bush cranberry leaves, but I enjoyed picking low bush berries more, where I could just sit or

lie in the bush and pick. I could literally be close to the land.

What first stood out for me when I looked back on this narrative was my negotiation as a non-Aboriginal teacher with a communicative praxis different from my own. In Aboriginal culture, Fixico (2003) explains, communication through spoken language is not always explicit or even necessary.

> It is a notable characteristic of tribal elders (traditionalists) who frequently have a tendency to generalize rather than supply a direct answer or detail. This indirectness means that they communicate in a more abstract way so as not to decrease the opportunity for further information that might cause confrontation or rejection of what they said, for example, suggestions or advice. (p. 14)

As a non-Aboriginal teacher immersed in Aboriginal teaching/learning contexts, I find I am often left with the evidence at hand to make assumptions. This requires me to be attuned to the actions of others, and to listen closely to words that are said. *Speaking Berries* is therefore also a metaphor for the experience of living in uncertainty, drawing on the tacit knowledge I carry of Aboriginal culture, and acting in moment-to-moment interactions in ways that are, for the most part, intuitive and largely subconscious.

With the responsibility to listen consciously and pay attention as I communicate with others, I have come to further witness an opening for new learning to continuously unfold. Without direct teaching and through my own informal questioning as an inquirer I came to see berry picking and other land-based activities not only as a traditional healthful practice for sustenance, but also as pivotal to the development and experience of heart and mind connections to the Earth. I also came to witness the openness of this

learning space as an important place for personal learning and discovery. Berry picking is an authentic way to connect to and relate with natural energies, where knowledge and skills naturally unfold in the act of being present to the experience, as I was also beginning to witness within myself.

Paddle Songs

taiga, curricular lifeworld, 2005



Paddling the narrow river-ways surrounding camp, I listened to students beat their drums from the shoreline. Their rhythms sounded over the water. My paddle entered within it, every once in a while finding a song, two beats with every stroke.

As I played with paddle songs, students in my canoeing group navigated their own canoes back and forth across the river-way, paddling in and out of the weedy shorelines. Most students were just beginning to learn the art of paddling, and I felt pulled as a teacher between offering formal instruction and letting students experience their own paddles and create their own journeys on the water. I decided to resist shouting instructions over the water, or canoeing over to assist with predicaments. Through their own experiencing, they would sooner or later get a feel for the paddle and the canoe.

I watched students get stuck in weeds, go in circles on the water, or turn right when they were attempting to go left. They laughed at their predicaments, shouted at each other in frustration, and rejoiced in their successes. All the while drums continued to sound from the shoreline, I imagined each student creating their own song within it.

It is no accident that Aboriginal pedagogy originates in the time before schools and classrooms. When youngsters are in a non-institutional context, all the elements are in place for them to interact with and to receive feedback. The feedback is the natural

consequence of their actions. Feedback comes from the context itself, not from a teacher. And the feedback tells them directly, without any judgmental overtones, whether their actions worked or not to move them in the direction they were trying to go.

This open context for learning in-relation to the world has always been important for youth in traditional educational settings. In these settings, the Dene Kede states, Dene children learned by experiencing life in a spiraling fashion: "Children would be repeatedly exposed to similar kinds of experience over a period of time, but each time they would learn at a more complex or advanced level" (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993, p. 21). Children learned by "being observant while experiencing, making an individual decision as to when to try to do something on their own, and taking responsibility for what to learn and when" (p. 21).

The key to being a teacher in this natural educational environment is to keep a watchful but soft eye on youngsters to keep them safe from harm, to be a model of what students are trying for, and to give hints by doing or saying something when appropriate. This requires a broad awareness of the learner and of the learning process. The teacher must be able to facilitate an open context for learning and self-discovery that "engages and develops all aspects of the individual (emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual)" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 10). The teacher must be able to encourage students to explore learning for themselves and to follow their own path as learners. This also means knowing where students are situated when the moment for teaching calls. The teacher must always respect who and where the students are as learners in the process.

Transferring this pedagogy into the classroom presents a host of difficulties and is

likely why I find myself always involving students in activities that relate to their out-of-school lives. In traditional Western classroom structures the learning environment tends to be more narrow. Classroom lessons are often taught through prescribed instructional techniques, such as direct instruction or shared, guided, or individual learning approaches. And these lessons tend to focus on one or several targeted specific curriculum outcomes most often learned apart from their context. In the seesaw of two very different modalities of education, it is difficult to create space to guide learners to follow their own paths and to learn through direct experience and personal exploration with the outside world.

Through my own process of inquiry, I have come to appreciate the possibility of incorporating Aboriginal modes of teaching and learning within the Western educational context. Cajete (1994) describes a number of "foundational characteristics" (p. 29) of Aboriginal education I realize I have become more mindful of in my work with Aboriginal students. Four of these characteristics that particularly stand out for me are:

- True learning occurs through participation and honoring relationship in both the human and natural communities;
- It [learning] unfolds within an authentic context of community and Nature;
- It [Aboriginal education] honours the ebb and flow of learning as it moves through individuals, community, Nature, and the cosmos;
- It [Aboriginal education] recognizes that we learn by watching and doing, reflecting on what we are doing, then doing again. (pp. 30-31)

Through my own process of inquiry, like youngsters learning to canoe, I have been caught in the weeds and struggled to discover a way through predicaments so I can

navigate more freely. The struggles I have experienced in my own process of inquiry have enabled me as a teacher to have greater patience and awareness of the learning process. I now understand that emergent learning, like emergent inquiry, unfolds as life unfolds, depending on the readiness of the learner. This way of thinking about learning reminds me of fireweed growing in the natural context of the land. According to natural laws, a fireweed cannot be pushed to grow faster than it is meant to. Similarly, it can be said that the learner is always exactly where he or she is meant to be.

Through Paddle Songs I remember again the joy of exploratory learning. I remember what it is to wander in the freedom of an open learning space and step between excitement and not knowing. I remember repetition as a path to self-discovery and growth. And I remember that accomplishment gained through personal expressions of learning is ultimately the joy of discovering knowledge drawn from within the self.

A Lesson from Chamerion angustifolium



Goh

Sometimes as I write between two cultural worlds I feel as though I am trying to find a safe middle space between Aboriginal and white Western culture. I step carefully,

taking care in the words I choose and the way I share them. I am cautious not to disrespect Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies through the projection of my own personal experience and cross-cultural interpretations. Simultaneously, I try not to be too critical of Western worldviews and the implications these views have for northern Aboriginal communities. Ironically, by continually being mindful to respect both worlds, I have disrespected by not having fully trusted myself as I write.

Autobiographical writing is a self-revealing process. It is frightening at times to stand open not fully understanding what is being revealed. Learning to find a way with writing as an inquirer in essence has been learning to find a way with/in my self. To me, this self-revealing process feels like the experience of fireweed standing exposed under open skies in an on-coming summer storm. Winds between North and South gust fiercely, piercing at my skin. As I come to understand more deeply how closely I identify with the land in the North, the desire to run builds inside me. Like standing under dark, thundering clouds, I write in the dark not knowing what is being revealed. I am dripping in heavy rains, trembling. No one knows I am scared of lightening.

Journal Entry,

What is it that I so strongly feel but can't express? What would I say if I could write anything? What swirls in my head? What makes me dance on the inside and leap on the outside? Today it is the feel of rough lichen on white weathered northern rock, the crunch underneath my feet, prickly spruce needles rubbing against my arm, looking up from the campfire at northern lights dancing in the sky, listening to the stories of the sky's dance from voices around the fire. What brings my world to silence? An eagle flying. What do I desire most in this now? To navigate a canoe by the reflection of moonlight on still water. To hear a loon. What holds me back? Myself.

I have feared writing in an Aboriginal world. I have feared not knowing where I

am between Western and Aboriginal worlds. I have feared going too far in an Aboriginal world that is not my own. I have feared I would rather be in this world. I have feared what others would say if I exposed myself completely.

In the early stages of the inquiry, I referred to the fireweed by its scientific classification: *Chamerion angustifolium*. During a committee meeting, I was asked by one of my committee members, "Why the scientific term for fireweed? Why not the traditional Dene name from the area?" I was stunned at not having thought of that myself, and I could not find words to answer. I muttered something about "*Chamerion angustifolium*" having both visual and intellectual appeal, but inside I wondered why I had not thought to use the traditional name for fireweed in the North. And, why did this question feel so strange, like I was being asked to do something I did not think I was allowed to do?

The more I thought about this question, the more perplexed I became. I tried free-writing my way to an answer, hoping the words would flow onto the page from my subconscious. But as I tried to sift and probe deeper, I repeatedly came up empty-handed. The only thing I could conjure was an image of a striking patch of fireweed that lined a narrow dirt path I walked with village youth to the beach during my summers in the central subarctic. This was the place where fireweed had stood out most for me, and this was the image that recurred in my thoughts as I wrote.

As time passed, the image of the fireweed spoke more and more powerfully to me. Finally, on a spontaneous whim I found paints and canvas and decided to paint. I had no idea what this was about. I had never painted for myself outside an instructional context. All I knew was to act on the urge that called me. As I began to paint I found

myself moving freely inside the flow I had found so many times in writing. I let the image of fireweed and its splashes of colour move through me; I listened to my heart and the fireweed speaking. A short time later I stepped back to look at what I had created. I decided to call the painting *Goh*, the Dene word for fireweed in the place where it had spoken to me so deeply.

Painting *Goh* was unexpected. I realized through painting *Goh* that *Chamerion angustifolium* had represented to me a safe place I had chosen in writing, demarcated by a line I had created by virtue of my own self-judgments. Who draws this line between worlds? Where is it crossed? The line is a judgment. Through *Chamerion angustifolium* I took shelter. Perhaps this is the same shelter I took when I entitled this inquiry with the scientific term *taiga*. This term was a safe way for me to keep a foot in the Western world as I explored my life as a teacher in an Aboriginal world.

My fears have slowly dissipated as I write. Nothing has happened, only I am aware of my fears. Sometimes I wish I could push the university and river away, write quietly, and find my own way. But Levin (1985) reminds me I do not stand "individuated" (p. 289). Levin describes the "earth, the elemental…is the source of our individuation, since it lets us stand becoming ourselves" (p. 289).

The act of opening to *Goh* pulled me closer to the land and Aboriginal people of the North. *Goh* showed me to trust by allowing myself to enter more fully into a Dene world. This is a place I had wanted to go in writing, emanating from a desire buried deep within myself that I needed to let surface, however convoluted or muddy I might appear. I have come to respect the difficulty of finding words in this place; it takes courage to stand exposed in the rain and remain open to what I do not know. The tension of dwelling

between two worlds as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North will always be a part of where I am: I cannot remove myself from these tensions. But as I write I can feel myself growing more confident standing in-between both places. So far I have not been struck by lightening.

Practice of Resistance



> The northern teacher's responsibility is heavy because often he must reach across a cultural gulf — a gulf he may not always perceive. Whether he understands it or not (few teachers from outside can do so completely), he must respect it and teach his pupils to respect what he himself can only imperfectly comprehend. He must, in short, not take away more than he can give (Phillips, as cited in Chambers, 1995, p. 2).

Although I have found myself leaning forward into Aboriginal culture to come to know, respect and understand Dene ways more deeply from the ground of my own being, paradoxically I have also found myself intentionally pulling back as an ethic of practice in cross-cultural teaching. Pulling back is a conscious act of standing separate from the culture, so I can relate to, interact with, and respond to Aboriginal students and the school community in a manner that is cognizant of Aboriginal ways. This also includes resisting dominant Western cultural practices which are too inscribed in my being as a white non-Aboriginal teacher.

I came to witness this resistance within myself during a game of Dene Hand Games that I played with a group of students and teachers while at camp. When the

drums started and we began to play, I noticed the white teacher beside me kept asking questions. In the middle of the drumming, she would ask what different hand signals meant, how the sticks were being counted, or how to make a call. I found myself growing more and more annoyed. I wanted to tell this teacher to "be quiet, play, and experience the game: you will learn this way." Instead, I found myself refusing to answer her questions, even if I knew the answers. I nodded at the sticks or the player to look at, trying not to talk and disrupt the experience of others.

I see now that part of my response was related to how I have come to value Aboriginal pedagogy: creating space for learners to watch, listen, pay attention, and learn by doing. In Western culture there is a continual need to know that leads to questions which demand an immediate and direct answer. My experience playing Dene Hand Games demonstrates the resistance to Western ways within myself. Resisting my inbred tendency to supply an answer to this teacher opened space for learning to happen grounded in her own authority rather than reliant on mine.

In my work with Dene youth I feel responsible as a non-Aboriginal teacher to respond and relate in ways that respect the Dene world as deeply as I am able. It is ontological work, at times calling for a practice of resistance inside the self to familiar cultural norms. For me as a non-Aboriginal teacher this work means always negotiating a slippery state between two different cultural paradigms of teaching and learning. I must give careful attention to the cross-cultural situation and overcome the constant desire to know. As Philipps (as cited in Chambers, 1995) states, this practice calls one as a non-Aboriginal teacher to "reach across a cultural gulf — a gulf he might not always perceive" (p. 2).

This complexity within cross-cultural education in the North, teaching between both cultures, requires a stance Dene Elder Elizabeth Mackenzie describes as "Strong Like Two People" (in Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, 1991, p. iii). In the Tlicho region of the NWT "Strong Like Two People" is the mission statement and guiding educational philosophy of the Tlicho people. On the occasion of the official opening of the primary and secondary school in Behchoko, Northwest Territories in 1972, Chief Jimmy Bruneau (in Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, 1991) shared the following words:

> I have listed to my Elders, Elders such as Monfwi. I have listened to the way they talked. I have listened to their ways and now I am speaking according to their ways. I have asked for a school to be built on my land, and that school will be run by my people, and my people will work at that school and our children will learn both ways, our way and the white men's way. (p. 109)

Twenty years later, Elder Elizabeth Mackenzie (in Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, 1991) reflected on Chief Jimmy Bruneau's words:

> So if children are taught in both cultures equally, they will be strong like two people. . . . What the Old Chief talked about is for some good time in the future. Today he didn't talk about everything, but it is good to reflect upon what he did say. He spoke as though we are only one person, we can be two persons. He looked far ahead for us, and we gain from it. (p. iii)

I believe the same can be true for non-Aboriginal people. We can become knowledgeable about Western and Aboriginal ways as we learn from one another, working and living alongside each other, sharing different ways of knowing, and being in-relationship with

each other.

The idea is not to submerge one culture or another, but rather to allow both cultures to co-exist and interact. In order for this to happen, the dominant non-Aboriginal culture must resist its own tendency to supersede Aboriginal culture and instead make space for both cultures to flourish. While it is difficult for Aboriginal people to become strong from a position of subordination, it is perhaps even more difficult for me and other members of non-Aboriginal culture to allow the peaceful co-existence of two cultures from a position of domination.



Lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal.

(van Manen, 1997, p. 18)

LIVING AS A MEMBER OF THE COLONIZING RACE IN A COLONIZED PLACE

opening magenta



buds flower

under midnight suns

reaching the tip

standing vibrant against a blue horizon

unseen inside the earth

roots grow

rhizomatically below the surface soil

resiliently spreading

through permafrost soils

silently

regenerating

thriving

flourishing

new life

Re-viewing the Historical Condition



I do not accept. . . history as determinism.
I embrace history as possibility (Freiere, 2007, p. 26).

When I first began writing this inquiry, the historical condition of Western and Aboriginal (inter)relations in the North was not a place of educational study I imagined ending up. It is a difficult part of the terrain to view. The long history of non-Aboriginal people, predominantly of Euro-Canadian decent, coming to settle in the North has left a legacy of forced assimilation and change on the Dene people. In much of the literature and in my own lived experience in northern Aboriginal communities, cross-cultural relations are filled with stories of difficulty, tension, and conflict that arise when divergent Western and Aboriginal epistemologies intersect.

Historically, colonization in the North and the consequent imposition of dominant Western educational institutions and practices have led to "complex social, economic, linguistic, and cultural relations" (Bell, 2004, p. 14) that have affected the social fabric of Aboriginal community and culture. Many individuals, families, and communities continue to struggle to overcome issues residual from their experience of residential schooling, which has left further legacies of abuse, language loss, disruptions to familial

structures, and disrupted relationships with the land in practical and spiritual ways (Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Kawagley, 2006). In many communities "poverty, learned helplessness, despair and high levels of abuse, addictions, and violence" (Bell, 2004, p. 12) are a norm, a result of historical social and cultural relationships that continue to impact deeply the lives of Aboriginal students and the teachers who live here.

Journal Entry,

It's 11 a.m. I was just outside with my dog and inadvertently walked by the party that woke me up at 5 a.m. It's dispersing now. On the way I met a few stumblers on the road. "All them your dogs?" "No, just the white one." "Oh." Men were inside the house gambling. One woman was outside on the steps, clearly drunk, sobbing. "But I love him." I hear the woman beside her, also visibly drunk, say, "You don't see me but I see you. Fuck you! Fuck you! What you doing here anyway? Fuck you!" She wasn't looking at me, but I had to wonder if she was talking to me.

The adversities I witness and directly experience inside the life of Aboriginal communities are often difficult to face. Mistrust and animosity from the historical past are certainly part of the contextual challenges of being a white teacher in Northern Aboriginal communities. As an English-speaking teacher of white Euro-Canadian descent, I am a member of the colonizing race. This is a context in which I am unwillingly and unintentionally implicated. I am also aware that the current reality is a mix of both cultural worlds, as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have now lived along side each other in the North for hundreds of years, telling our intimate stories as we learn with, through, and from one another.

Being open and listening among varied cultures is important so that stories can be

shared and cultures can positively influence each other. In Eastern philosophy, Kalamaras (1994) states, "concepts of opposition and distinction are conditions not of conflict but of reciprocity" (p. 7). What if the stories we told in northern Aboriginal education viewed cross-cultural difference not as conditions of conflict, but rather of reciprocity? When this happens it is an example of Kalamaras' idea of difference as an opportunity for reciprocity and the result is the creation of Bhaba's "third space" (in Rutherford, 1990). Bhabha views "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (p. 212). From this in-between space forms a "new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" which "gives rise to something different, something new" (p. 211). Important to this process is the opening: to dialogue, listen, and share our experiences with one another.

I still go to sleep some nights remembering my teaching placement in a fly-in Ojibway-Cree community in northern Ontario. I was there for six weeks and went to three funerals — two murders and a suicide. I was on my way back to school from lunch when I walked by the home of the man who had killed himself. His child had been taken by Social Services a few days before. I will never forget the wailing of family and friends in front of the house. Nor will I ever forget the feeling that it was best if I kept walking. Our stories are interwoven in the North. Respectfully weaving the stories that arise from our shared ground can be a generative relation. Located not as an outsider, nor insider, but in a third space. This is a space that calls us to learn to live "(in)difference" (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2008, p. 57). Perhaps it was this third space that I wanted to enter when I was walking by the house where people were wailing. In this case I was overhearing, witnessing, and becoming privy to stories that were extremely difficult to hear. Holding

these stories without infringing and without judging, as respectfully as possible under extremely disturbing circumstances. This non-judgment is what is sometimes called for in the third space.

Destruction wrought by colonization, unconscionable as it is, can in come cases clear the way for something new to appear. Take the analogy of fireweed for example. In temperate climates throughout the world fireweed is one of the first plants to grow in areas burned by fire, reproducing by seed and vegetatively through rhizomes. For growth to take place, chances of seed germination are best in areas where there is a high degree of sunlight and bare mineral soil has been exposed (Bastedo, 1994). This ability to grow in conditions where the topsoil had been disturbed or damaged makes fireweed an example of what can take root and spread after the devastation caused by fire (or colonization).

The interaction between Eurocentric and Aboriginal cultures is perhaps best accomplished by allowing natural processes of interconnection to take place. Just as the fireweed spreads rhizomatically beneath the surface of the soil, sending up vertical shoots in places where the soil is thin, so do diverse cultural roots intertwine and come together in invisible and subtle ways, and eventually something new appears above the surface. Like fireweed and the succession of a diversity of species inside the forest after the wake of destruction, rhizomatic growth is a metaphor of the collective growth that can arise in northern education through a process of regeneration (repopulation).

Deleuze & Guattari (as cited in Gough, 2006) describe rhizomes as “anomalous becomings produced by the formation of transversal alliances between different and coexisting terms within an open system” (p. 625). In an open system both cultures are

open to each other, make space, and allow difference. This creates a respectful space for new circumstances, histories, and interactions to form organically in a continuous process of (re)creation. As Western and Aboriginal cultures and histories interconnect and weave together, build on the past, acknowledge diversity, and form something new, difference and sameness can weave together in meaningful and constructive ways, like in a forest or root system beneath the soil, "each being a part of the other" (Kalamaras, 1994, p. 55). It is a matter of being open and listening.

Listening to the Language



Worldviews grow out of the structures of language
(Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 73).

One way to live respectfully as a member of the colonizing race in a colonized place is to listen to the words of Elders and members of the community who speak their traditional language so as to catch the values that are embedded in it. Listening to language and acting thoughtfully to what is heard, ties to the appropriateness of being subtle and indirect in Aboriginal culture, like the rhizomatic spread of the fireweed. A few years ago while I was out on the land with a group of students, an Elder from the community guided us through the process of making a personal willow (warrior) stick. The Elder had us begin by going for a walk along the riverbank in search of a willow that

called out to us. Along the riverbank, I wandered among the thickets of tangled willow, searching for the perfect one. Finally, a large willow caught my attention. Walking over to the willow, I admired its thick stem, then took out my hatchet and attempted to split it from the base. The willow, however, was healthy and moist, and I could not seem to cut through it. The more I hacked at the willow, the more splintering and damage I caused. Worried I would cause too much damage and the willow would be spoiled, I called the Elder over and asked her to help me. I handed her the hatchet and she told me I was to talk to the willow. Then she gave the hatchet a single swing and placed the willow in my hands. After she walked away, I took out the sacred bundle we were instructed to carry; I gave what was left of the willow a pinch of tobacco and extended my thanks.

Through centuries of living in direct relation to the plants, animals, and the topography of the land Aboriginal languages were birthed (Abram, 1996). Among the Yupiaq people of Alaska, for example, the land is the very soul of the traditional language. As Kawagley (2003) says,

> My Yupiaq language is nature-mediated, and thus it is wholesome and healing. . . Nature contains the creatures, plants, and elements of Nature that had names and defined themselves to my ancestors and are naming and defining themselves to me. My ancestors made my language from Nature. When I speak Yupiaq, I am thrust into the thought world of my ancestors. (p. vii)

Imbued in language are values, knowledge and beliefs about the world: “Language defines the world and experience in cultural terms, it literally shapes our way of perceiving — our worldview” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996, p. 22). In my experience as a non-Aborigianal teacher, I have listened to Aboriginal people, such as

Elders, who have retained their traditional language. Embedded in their words, inflections, and gestures are values that show respect for all elements of the Earth, including courtesy toward the land, the spiritual world, other life forms, and ourselves.

The primary value learned from listening to the language is respect for place. This respect for place is typically absent from colonizer cultures and must be attended to very carefully if it is to be appreciated in all its breadth and subtlety, not just as a way of speaking but also as a way of living-in-relation.

Taiga, Curricular Lifeworld, 2005



I watched two students throw a massive pile of spruce boughs on top of an already huge bonfire at camp. I noticed they gleefully anticipated how the sparks would reach and catch the adjacent tree on fire. I reminded them of the words one of their Elders had said earlier that day about respecting the land. I suggested they find a way to show more respect for the place they were standing.

Elders who speak their Aboriginal language, even when they speak in English, always emphasize learning to relate respectfully to place. As Kawagley (2003) states, Aboriginal languages are "given to health and healing . . . as we loose our Native

languages more and more of us begin to take part in the misuse and abuse of nature" (p. viii). The Dene language contains the unique words that describe Dene ways of life, such as names for parts of the land where ancestors traveled, seasonal activities, kin relations, and rules that govern and keep balance in-relation to the Earth and everyday community life (NWT Literacy Council, 1999). Dene youth who do not speak the traditional language can still learn by listening to Elders and to other speakers of the language.

> Each language is, in itself, an entire ecosystem of ideas and intuitions, a watershed of thought, an old growth forest of the mind. Each is a window into a world, a monument to the culture that gave it birth, and whose spirit it expresses. (Davis, 2007, p. 9)

In rural northern Aboriginal communities we are still privileged to live in a land where sounds of the world around are sounds from the land itself. There is little traffic, infrastructure, or human busyness to drown out the land such as happens in larger community and city environments. Sounds of ravens cawing, winds flapping through the leaves of trembling aspens, or ptarmigan ruffling in the snow are an intimate part of the lifeworld we inhabit. Listening to stories, or to words shared in rituals and ceremonies, or words used interacting on the land with those who speak the traditional language offers a window into cultural values and traditions that are deeply grounded in relationship, respect, and reciprocity with the world that surrounds us. Traditional language relates respectfully to each plant and animal as a living entity, each with a spirit.

Taiga, Curricular Lifeworld, 2005

[Listen!]



The village is quiet this morning. I don't know why I write that – it is always quiet. Besides the odd truck or people out walking in the afternoons and evenings, we live here with no noise. When I walk to school the only sounds I hear are the river and the ravens. Not far from shore there is a rock that the river must go around. I like listening to the river pushing around and against it.

Teaching in Aboriginal communities, I live inside the silent presence of the land. This silence draws me to pay attention and listen. "Silence is our listening openness: in order to hear something we must first give it our silence" (Levin, 1989, p. 232). It is through silence that "we find ourselves in an expressive, gestured landscape, in a world that speaks" (Abram, 1997, p. 81). Listening to the sound of snow at different temperatures, watching the directions of winds from the clouds in the sky, or sighting the markings of bear claws in the mud allows me to listen to a language that stems from the Earth, in other words, the language that grows out of the land itself. As Abram (1997) tells us, "the coherence of human language is inseparable from the coherence of the surrounding ecology, from the expressive vitality of the more-than-human terrain" (p. 179). I do not pretend to understand fully or in the same way as others, particularly as one from another culture. I can only understand from the ground of my own experience. However, by listening to the language of the land and to the language of Elders and those that speak their Aboriginal language, I learn to extend my perceptions of "how the physical environment can be known" (Basso, 1996, p. 72). This extension of knowing is an example of my own evolution into a "third space" (Bhabha, in Rutherford, 1990).

Dwelling in-between my own culture and Aboriginal culture creates new ways of coming to know the world in which I live.

One thing that I have come to know is the significance of what is being lost as the number of Dene youth who speak their traditional language declines, and the importance of re-enlivening and revitalizing traditional language for youth. Even though ecological and relational understandings can still be known, to be able to speak the traditional language is imperative to Dene youth understanding as well as living out of the 'thought world of their ancestors.' This thought world is essential to cultural identity and it is the key to understanding and appreciating the history, knowledge, beliefs and values of the ancestors that evolved from a deep and sacred relationship to their place (NWT Literacy Council, 1999).

Through this understanding, I have come to re-cognize the importance of working from the ground of Dene ways of knowing and being in education. In relation to language and ways of knowing the world, Kawagley (2006) reminds us we are always in the active process of making sense of the world we live, a state of knowing that is in a continued state of flux. Like the healthy succession of a forest, new growth is dependent on the ever-changing composition of the soil. Through this ever-changing composition, fireweed and a diversity of species can draw nourishment and grow out of the land. What is important for me as a non-Aboriginal teacher is turning to the land to help foster ways of knowing and being that allow Dene culture to perpetuate itself.

Place in Mind: Rethinking Program Support



Repetition says that actuality must be continually produced, brought forth anew, again and again (Caputo, 1987, p.17).

One of the ways I became more aware of how I situate myself as a non-Aboriginal teacher in alliance with Aboriginal communities was through the position of Program Support Teacher I was hired to do when I returned to the river from graduate school. The role of the Program Support Teachers in Northwest Territories schools is to provide central in-school support for teachers and for student educational programming (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2008b). More specifically, this role, along with that of the school principal, is to act "as an instructional leader and provide support to teachers as they plan, deliver and assess/evaluate the education program for each of their students" (p. 14). The position of Program Support Teacher across the Northwest Territories was created in response to the Ministerial Directive on Inclusive Schooling (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2006). As the first teacher at the school hired specifically to train and work with teachers under this Directive, I entered into the position with an empty canvas. When I returned from graduate school I walked into an empty classroom, both excited about the opportunity to create and slightly overwhelmed with the question of where to begin.

The first thing I did was to create a culturally welcoming environment. I found

three sets of round tables to establish a non-dominating and non-threatening space in which to share and learn. I also purchased plants and displayed student artwork around the room. Creating an open and down-to-earth environment was important to developing a more equitable relationship to teachers, students, and family members with whom I would be working in a position of educational leadership and influence.

Once a working environment was established, I began collaborating with teachers on classroom-based assessments to help identify the functional curricular grade level for each individual student. In previous years, I had taught and/or worked with many of these students at the school in various learning capacities. I was privileged in this position to have built relationships and to know each student on a personal level. Data was collected by the teachers and myself in conjunction with 'best practice' instructional and assessment techniques implemented by the School Board. This data was then synthesized to create Student Support Plans. These plans identified appropriate modifications and/or accommodations to help support students with more specific learning needs.

As this process ensued, I noticed myself grappling with perceptions of student assessment and learning success. I knew from my earlier years as a classroom teacher in the North that there was an exceptionally high number of students designated as working below grade level. In most cases the students requiring academic support represented nearly the entire classroom, and some of these students were two, three, and four plus grade levels behind their age-mates. In addition to requiring assistance with general literacy and math skills, many students also struggled with emotional and behavioural issues that required additional in-class support. Looking at the school as a whole, it was

evident that classroom needs were overwhelming for everyone: families, teachers, students, and administration alike. However, as Program Support Teacher I could not help but question whether there was another way to view how we perceived Aboriginal student achievement, particularly in light of the realities we were up against.

Most students come to school impacted by the high incidence of substance abuse and violence they experience within the community on a daily basis. These realities, in addition to complex cross-cultural differences hidden in the lived curriculum and teaching/learning relations between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal teachers, together understandably affect and impede student motivations and behaviours toward learning. As a result of student engagement I witnessed in culture-based programs, and the understanding of Aboriginal pedagogy I was gaining through my inquiry, I struggled to connect Aboriginal pedagogical values and holistic learning processes within the academic learning environment.

As Program Support Teacher, I felt pushed in different directions. On the one hand, I was trying to follow government mandates that supported student learning by identifying academic and behavioural needs, setting learning goals, and creating modifications and/or accommodations to meet curriculum standards and outcomes. This approach was rooted in a conventional view that was 'responsive to learning deficits' (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). On the other hand I was trying to honour the role of culture for Aboriginal learners by acknowledging the whole learner, by including ways of knowing students enact and by honouring the knowledge students possess. My role as Program Support Teacher was thus grounded in a set of values that were in direct conflict with Aboriginal pedagogical values and practice (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

The question then became this: How do I balance both sets of values when assessing Aboriginal student learning and achievement?

Although I had not yet found an answer, by happenstance I became involved in two different student assessment committees that allowed me to explore this question further. The first committee was called an Initiatives Impact Committee. This committee was developed by the local School Board to measure the impact of educational initiatives on improving student learning. The second was a short-term participation on an Alberta Achievement Test Committee. This task involved flying to Edmonton to participate in achievement test development and to offer Northern cultural materials that could be incorporated into the test.

On the Initiatives Impact Committee, we acknowledged that the task of developing a framework of criteria for measuring student success at a school-wide level was a complex challenge. Discussions ensued around various empirical measures and models for data collection. Measures such as thinking levels, instructional strategies, and lesson objectives aligned to grade level standards evident in classrooms were the predominate strategies proposed. Although these were sound and viable measures, I was concerned about the lack of language centered in Aboriginal learning models and values of student success. How could we create a measurement tool that reflected more holistic approaches to measuring educational initiatives and student success? “Aboriginal learning is a fully integrated and potentially all-encompassing process that permeates all aspects of the learner’s life and their community” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 11). From my perspective it did not seem that this voice was being acknowledged in our reporting. Over time, I naturally resisted the committee’s directions and eventually

backed out of supporting its implementation.

Later, during my participation on the Alberta Achievement Test Committee, I once again I found myself resistant to committee directions. The aim of this committee was to make Alberta achievement standardized tests more culturally inclusive to Northwest Territories students. In my search for northern materials, I spoke informally with teachers and members of the School Board, and repeatedly questioned the purpose for the test. Not only was there a conflict in cultural values in measuring Aboriginal student learning through standardized achievement testing, but a large number of students designated to take the test were currently not working at grade level. Fewer than five students in grades three, six, and nine who were mandated to take the test were working at grade level and exposed to the language and math curriculum level of the test. For the majority of students, particularly those with difficulty reading, the test would result in a negative and potentially harmful experience for them. Results would only further perpetuate stereotypes of learning deficits and cross-cultural learning challenges among First Nations students and communities in the North.

What was all of this for? To me the process seemed criminal. Suddenly I found myself participating on a committee whose goals I was against. Alberta has a large population and does not compare student scores with the Northwest Territories. The Alberta Achievement Tests are a business and cost the Northwest Territories millions each year. What a waste of money! This money could be allocated to schools for additional support staff, cross-cultural teacher induction and training, and alternate grassroot school community educational programming, all of which reflect government initiatives to revitalize and retain Northwest Territories Aboriginal languages and culture

(see Education, Culture and Employment, 1993, 2000, 2002).

Through my participation in these committees I came to no resolve with the questions I had about measuring student success in Aboriginal community schools; however, I was thankful for the opportunity to re-think my role as Program Support Teacher and to engage in dialogues that opened more questions about the advisability of assessing the progress of Aboriginal students within the frame of Western educational standards. I recognized how this way of perceiving Aboriginal student progress can severely and unfairly disadvantage students. These opportunities also allowed me to see as a Program Support Teacher how I negotiate, resist, and flow with or against teaching/learning directions depending on how I perceive these directions and acknowledge the unique world(s) in which Aboriginal students live. Riley-Taylor (2002) echoes a similar sentiment, "When decisions for responsible action arise, actions will come down to a question of values" (p. 120).

Seeking to balance both Aboriginal and Western educational orientations is an on-going job that is never complete. As Program Support Teacher I have come to recognize I am most comfortable when directions reflect Aboriginal teaching and learning values. I believe teaching with place in mind is another way of drawing on what Riley-Taylor (2002) describes as "integrative ways of knowing . . . bringing 'intentionality' into day to day life as part of a personal praxis . . . drawing on heart, spirit, *and* reason, our capacities for action based on informed judgment" (p. 114). For me, this means honouring both Aboriginal and Western ways, but in a manner that works in partnership with the local community. Aligning with the cultural community co-creates forms of education and balances efforts to sustain the health and distinctiveness of Dene identity

and culture, while simultaneously engaging in ways of teaching and learning that allow Dene youth to be successful in the Western education system.

A Lesson from the Land and River

> The river seems to be holding itself up before you like a page opened to be read . . . . The current in all its various motions and speeds flows along, and that flowing may be stirred again at the surface by the wind in all its various motions (Berry, 2000, p. 325).

Few people paddle against the River. On average the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River) has a mean discharge of 9700 cubic meters per second (Natural Resources Canada, n.d.). When traveling upstream there is significant resistance and it is difficult to move against its flow. One fall I traveled by canoe with a small group of students to a school-wide camp down river. At the end of our time at camp an opportunity was offered for another teacher and me to return the canoes to the community by paddling them back upstream. Normally we returned by motorboat, so we were excited by this new challenge. That evening we sat down and chose six students we felt had shown leadership and were positive role models to others while at camp. We then offered each of these students the opportunity to paddle the canoes upriver with us. The next day after lunch our canoe group met at the shoreline.

Journal Entry,

I sat in the canoe on the edge of the river with my dog in front of me, eager to get out into the flowing water and begin to paddle against the river. Before disengaging from the shore, I looked up to the top of the riverbank and noticed a large group of staff and students gathered to watch our group set off. As the last canoe to leave, I pushed my paddle into the ground and freed the canoe from shore. Suddenly, with all the attention at the top of the bank I experienced a sense of momentary nervousness and forgot which

way to steer. I lost my coordination and our canoe went straight into the weeds, stuck before we even had a chance to paddle! My canoe partner and I laughed as we struggled to get out of the weeds, happy to have provided some form of entertainment.

Once we were out of our predicament we began to paddle hard, deep, fast strokes. We were moving – but barely. After about an hour of hard paddling, my canoe partner told me she was beginning to feel sick. I happened to look at the riverbank and I could see why. The canoe was going one way, the river another, and the bank stood still. Motion sickness. To the left was the riverbank, to the right the river. Paddling with the land in view it looked like we were going backwards. Paddling with the river in view it looked like we were slowly creeping forward. I told her to paddle and keep her focus on the river. Once in a while we would look at the riverbank for fun and paddle with all our might, only to feel like we were going backwards. We laughed and paddled, not moving. It was all about our perception.

We were the last canoe to get to town. What took an hour and a half to paddle in one direction from the community to our camp, took us over double the time to return. The students got a lot of positive attention for taking the challenge to paddle against the current. I was happy for them. I hoped they were proud of themselves.

On this trip, an interesting conversation was sparked between me and the other teacher. We noticed that sometimes teaching here feels like paddling against the river. We paddle and paddle trying to gain ground and feel like we are going nowhere, but really we are going somewhere.

Dene education today honours learning both Western and Aboriginal ways, to be "Strong Like Two People," as Chief Jimmy Bruneau advocated. I do not view moving with the river as one way and against the river as another. What I see are the challenges that we face in Northern education when attempting to balance and harmonize both perceptions. At times it seems like we are moving forward, at other times it seems like we are going backwards, and at other times it seems like we are holding still.

Dene youth in the Northwest Territories today are no longer part of a separate cultural world, nor are their lifeways dominated by forced conditions of displacement and assimilation as were their predecessors. Instead their lives, although geographically

remote, are very much connected to and affected by technology, popular culture and the conveniences of the modern world. Castelanno (2000) states that the stage in which Aboriginal people now find themselves is one of "negotiation and renewal" (p. 263). Although this can be viewed from numerous economic, political, and social standpoints, when viewed in relation to practical understandings in Northern education contexts, this is a quest to honour Earth-centered values to (re)establish, (re)learn, and (re)vitalize intimate connections to the land and culture while simultaneously seeking to meet the need for Dene youth today to adapt and live well in a radically changing, interconnected, and globalized world (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993).

The challenge I have had, particularly as a Program Support Teacher working alongside Aboriginal communities to support this quest, is negotiating both educational directions in a way that values Western curriculum and educational processes but ultimately follows the directions of the Dene people as a guiding authority. Sometimes, being in a place where there is a long history of colonization, finding equilibrium means moving against the current. I must resist, oppose, or push against competing elements that conflict with the collective vision. Such is the vision of the Dene Kede — to open a space in Northern education where Dene pedagogical practices and curricula are an equal part of the school curriculum, where the values of both cultures equitably flow.

In my experience working at a school-wide level to support student learning and achievement, I have found dominant Western orientations persist in various modalities, restricting space for alternative methods and discourse. From my own experience, this is the challenge of teaching in a colonized place. Sometimes it feels like we are going nowhere. We are at a time in history where language and culture revitalization is an

imperative (see Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993, 2000, 2002). In Dene schools and communities this imperative needs space to grow and blossom. This is part of regenerating and healing from the historical condition. Barnhart (2008) asserts, "a form of education grounded in the heritage and language and culture indigenous to a particular place is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally-healthy students and communities" (p. 11).

Traveling against the river metaphorically came to represent to me the difficulty of living and teaching in a third space — dwelling between two curricular and cultural worlds. When we are travelling on the river, because the land is stationary, watching the shoreline can show us where we have been, where we are, and where we need to go. Sometimes orienting to this solidity gives the impression we have not come very far since the colonizers arrived. Nor are we moving very quickly toward being present in a third space where the equalization of two curricular and cultural worlds is realized. However, the river is fluid and it is always moving. Because moving against the flow is met at times with varying degrees of resistance, if we push too hard and fast without thoughtful discourse and action we tire and burn out. This causes a need for rest. As we rest the movement of the river sweeps us backwards.

This realization awakened me to the notion that if we look ahead at where we are going and take the time to plan together to build strength and develop the skills to travel well, we will move forward. We must negotiate slowly and steadily through the flow and constraints of the river as it presents itself at different widths and with various resistances or momentums. It is all about perception. Instead of focusing on the difference between Aboriginal and Western cultures as discrepancies to be removed, it is possible to see

these two realities as adding reciprocally (Kalamaras, 1994) to the richness of the social fabric. This shared vision presents opportunities for collaborative and innovative meeting grounds in cross-cultural education where greater harmony and balance can be realized.

In order for this to happen, I am compelled as a non-Aboriginal teacher to set aside cultural predispositions in order to travel with the Aboriginal school community at its own pace and in directions that have been set on its own terms. Like Barnhart (1997), I believe "the baseline for the curriculum should be the local cultural community, with everything else being built upon and grounded in that reality" (p. 4). In the Denendeh, directions toward sustaining language and culture have been set by the Dene through the Dene Kede. To work from this founding premise means integrating both the Aboriginal and Western curriculums with Dene students. This creates space, as Barnhart further describes, whereby students can "know as much as possible about their own immediate world as well as the larger world where they are situated, and the interrelationships between the two" (p. 4).

The language of ecology provides access for Westerners into ways of knowing, being, and relating that are congruent with Aboriginal epistemologies. So too does the language of poetry, for example, as it accesses the intuitive, emotional and spiritual dimensions of human beings that are typically excluded from the rational discourse so highly valued in Western ways of thinking but are a crucial part of Aboriginal epistemologies. In light of such understandings, I share the following poem written after my experience of paddling against the river. For me, the poem speaks of being in a third space, dwelling in the midst of multiple ways to perceive and orient to the landscape. It also speaks to me of a way of dwelling with/in the world that repeatedly calls me to pay

attention to where I am, and how I am moving through the landscape.

Paddling on the river, I hug the shore
I am located in-between the current.

I divert my eyes to the left along the riverbank and I am nothing to the river.
It sweeps me into its flow.

drawkcaB moving.
Forward to the river.

I divert my eyes to the right, open space of water. I am against the river.
I conquer its flow.

Forward moving.
drawkcaB to the river.

To begin again.
I direct my eyes ahead, shifting my view. I am the same with the river.

Forward/drawkcaB

Paddling in the in-between.
Anew.

Reclaiming Their Own



It is said that the drum is the Dene culture. The drum represents unity of self, others, the spiritual world and land (Education, Culture and Employment, 1993, p. xvii).

What would it look like if the curriculum foundations in the classroom were those premised in the Dene Kede? What would it look like if we integrated Western curriculum into the Dene Kede instead of the other way around? What would it look like if we supported learning, leadership, and educational commitment through foundations of identity, culture, and community? And, what if we built on the knowledge and gifts each student carries from their own ground and through the richness of their lifeworld? In the communities where I have worked, culture-based education programs are often viewed within the mainstream school system as add-on programs or, as Dubbs (1982) describes, "as curriculum appendages rather than as curriculum foundations" (p. 11). What would it look like if we followed Barnhardt's (1997) admonition that "the baseline for the curriculum should be the local cultural community, with everything else being built upon and grounded in that reality" (p. 4)?

These questions began to blossom when I was offered the opportunity to coordinate a grade six culture-based experiential learning project called the *Education Through Commitment Project*. Funded by the Northwest Territories' Department of Education, Culture, and Employment as part of their Student Success Initiative, this project focused on the Dene Kede with the aim to provide alternative pathways to success for youth transitioning into their teens and junior high school portion of their education. For two years the project ran at a regional level shared between two community schools in the form of monthly gatherings. Each gathering was based on Dene values such as sharing and self-respect, and involved experiential learning and leadership experiences facilitated by Elders, community leaders and local organizations. Gatherings included, for example, a Puberty Rites of Passage Camp, Respect Gathering, Science Exploration,

Drum Making, Winter Camp, and a Heritage Canoe Trip along the Deh Cho.

Fundamental to this project was the aim that students learn though traditional Dene pedagogy and valued ways of knowing. To make this happen, my role as coordinator was to ensure that the background logistics and organization of the program and between gathering schools were in place. I also ensured Elders and personnel from the community were the primary teachers. In the Drum Making workshop, for example, Elders and teachers from the community guided Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students according to Dene ways of teaching and learning. Elders and community teachers shared stories and drum songs, formal teachings about the drum, as well as led daily Circle Sharing rituals and ceremonies. Working together in a community of people of all different ages and skill levels, participants learned patience, confidence, and the importance of helping one another. They learned to care for their drum as if it were their own heartbeat, taking away the knowledge that each individual has a song and if they played and cared for their drum, their song would someday come. Students also took pride in their culture as they practiced singing, drumming, participating in spiritual ceremonies, and sharing their drums and drum songs with family and peers in a final Honour Ceremony held at each school.

Another fundamental part of the program was for students to come to know about past ways. This was important to strengthening a sense of identity by grounding in deeper understanding of who they are and where they come from. Historically, for youth of this age cohort, Dene tribes practiced rites of passage.

> In times past, the Dene believed that young people gained spiritual powers as they become adolescents. The purpose of the rites of passage was to make it known to

> the girl and to the community that the girl had come into the age of womanhood. Adolescence was a time of intense training for adulthood. (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2002, p. 3)

For this portion of the project, entitled *Puberty Rites of Passage*, boys (who where becoming men) went on a week-long moose hunt, while female students participated in a camp set away from the community. In the past, females coming of age were set out in a shelter to live alone in the bush, away from their families (Education, Culture and Employment, 2002). During this time, girls were given challenges such as hunting and snaring small game, and preparing food and hides. Girls would receive counseling and training from mothers, female family members, and Elders. The girls created shelters, gathered berries, and learned about different medicinal plants like their grandparents and ancestors did in the past. They also developed sewing skills by making medicine pouches and sewing kits, and practiced preparing food from the land such as drying fish and cutting moose meat.

In these gatherings, Western and Aboriginal orientations wove together in meaningful ways. As part of the health curriculum, for example, a nurse from the community travelled to the camp to give a presentation on the physical and emotional changes of puberty. She provided anatomical illustrations, and introduced students to various feminine hygiene products. Alongside these Western-orientated teachings, students also listened to their Elders share teachings about their connection as females to the moon and important cultural protocols related to this time of change in their life.

What I strongly advocated for in coordinating this program was the opportunity not only to integrate these experiences into classroom curriculum and activities, but to

have each of these key cultural experiences and monthly Dene values act as a guiding premise for classroom learning. Although difficult at times, it was interesting how experiences teachers and youth shared together became the touchstones from which wonderful learning projects manifested and grew. Throughout the school year students kept on-going visual and written journal logs, created stories, developed Power Point presentations, experimented with the creative arts, and entered historical fairs using the cultural knowledge they had gained.

As a school staff, we found that by repeatedly combining culture-based experiences with Western classroom learning activities and structures, the students grew in their confidence and interest toward classroom learning, while simultaneously developing integrity, leadership, responsibility, and respectful relations with themselves and the world around them. An unanticipated part of this growth was the reclamation of Dene teachings and pedagogical practice that was brought forth from the community. Students were taught by their Elders, as well as by hunters, cooks, drum makers and storytellers who were also uncles, aunts, mothers and fathers. Through each gathering the whole community in different ways played a part in student learning.

This form of learning from being in community is imperative to teaching and learning Dene culture. Such experiences create space for contextualized, authentic and culturally relevant learning where learners and learning grows from the lived ground of community and place. When integrating these real-world experiences with subject matter, students become more engaged in learning, drawing understandings from the whole self and touching the "learning spirit" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), the place where

each person travels to arrive comfortably at their own awareness of their gifts, capacities, and strengths within the learning process.

Through my work with the *Education Through Commitment Project*, I witnessed that when openness to the new and different exists in mainstream education, space for new growth is created.

> Freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are. Freedom now reveals itself as letting beings be. . . . To let be – that is, to let being be as the beings which they are – means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself. (Heidegger, 1993, p. 125)

Through this alternative pathway many positive results ensued: learning was enriched through discovery; environmental and stewardship issues were brought to life; traditional knowledge was extended; and classroom teachers and local community worked together to harmonize Eurocentric knowledge with Indigenous knowledge. This was achieved by working together to integrate authentic lived experiences and well-remembered contexts both inside and outside the classroom.

At this juncture, I am reminded again of my childhood dream of flying. But it is no longer the flying or being in community that I remember now, instead it is more the community of beings I saw when I looked down at the treetops: the birds flying, each going their own way harmoniously amongst each other, the woods vibrant, healthy, and green. Simultaneously I am dwelling inside the community, gliding peacefully inside the land with the birds and the trees and outside in the vastness of the sky looking on with the gaze of an observer. I am also reminded of the fireweed which dwells amidst a diversity

of species, each separate yet interconnected with a role to play in the composition and health of the forest. As plants and animals live and die, new growth continuously emerges. And, in the midst of this cycle, ever-changing realities of the bio-diverse community are sustained and nourished.

BROADENING VISION BEYOND

seeds drifting on the wind



reaching maturation

seed pods dry and split open

releasing

hundreds of soft downy seeds

a c r o s s

the land

carried by

cool

autumn

b e z
r e s
e

filling the sky

with new life

Going to Seed



> The sun will rise and descend each day; the earth will continue to revolve around the sun; the spruce seeds will germinate. . . . These recurring phenomena will continue to occur in a given way (Kawagley, 1999, p. 46).

The fireweed is by nomenclature a perennial. Each spring and summer fireweed grows and blooms, then dies back for the fall and winter. This cyclical process recurs for more than two growing seasons, reproducing each spring by underground rootstock (rhizomes) that remain protected underneath the soil throughout the winter. The fireweed reproduces vegetatively through rhizomes, yet the fireweed also reproduces through seed. The latter takes place in the seasonal shift between summer and fall when the temperatures in the environment cool and the sunlight lessens. During this time, the fireweed's leaves begin to change colour and the fireweed starts to wither. As it dies to the land, it simultaneously begins to go to seed. Long fruit capsules produced by the fireweed's flowers begin to dry and split open, releasing hundreds of plumed seeds that ride on the winds to take root in a new location.

The paradox of this perennial phenomenon is that while (re)growth can persist in a particular place for many years, the period of time that fireweed stays in a particular spot in the land is finite. The length of time fireweed is present in a particular location

depends on the effects of competing vegetation (Pavek, 1992). Because fireweed is intolerant to shade and requires a large amount of sunlight, progressive changes in the ecosystem from open to closed canopy due to the (re)generation of a shrub or tree can shade out the fireweed in a particular spot in the space of two or three years. When this happens the fireweed dies and its rhizomes no longer generate new growth. Instead, the fireweed decomposes in the land, leaving nutrients in the environment for other life forms.

Teaching by the river, I found myself moving within a similar cycle. My life teaching by the river started to wither and it lost prospects for regeneration in that place. As Program Support Teacher, I began to loose energy, and I sought change.

Journal Entry,

I have come to a place in my relationship to the school and community where I have rooted as far as it is healthy for my self and the community to go. I cannot root any deeper. It almost feels as if staying longer in the land would be unhealthy. I have begun naturally, without consciously deciding, to pull back both professionally and personally.

The above writing signaled the end of the cycle. Like fireweed reaching maturity in the land, I could not grow higher or root deeper in the soil. Professionally, as a Program Support Teacher I felt there was nothing left for me to do. I had begun with the seed of an idea and nurtured this idea until it matured as far as was possible. The vision for programming and supports I had been innately working toward with students, the school, and community, had been established. The structures were in place for the program's continuing regeneration and my work felt complete. It seemed time for me to move on.

Yet coming to this place of maturity was difficult. I had been so focused on the joyousness of blooming alongside others that I had forgotten about the darkness that follows summer as fall approaches. While the sounds of moving on were heard overhead in the flapping of annual migrations, I myself I had neglected to remember the necessity of releasing. This was the cycle I lived as a transient teacher in the North: rooting in a place temporarily and then eventually moving on. As an inquirer, however, there was a part of me that wanted to remain in the joyousness of blooming. And as a teacher, there was a part of me that wanted to experience what it might be to have permanent roots that belonged to one particular place.

I knew, however, that to stay rooted in the land was not my calling. The winds had returned. I could hear them in the flutter of my heart and feel them in the restlessness of my blood and bones. The winds were telling me it was time to leave and move on to some place new. Still, for some time I was resistant. I did not want to follow the pattern of the fireweed and let go from my life teaching by the river, for while going to seed is a period of (trans)forming new life, it is also a period of dying to the land.

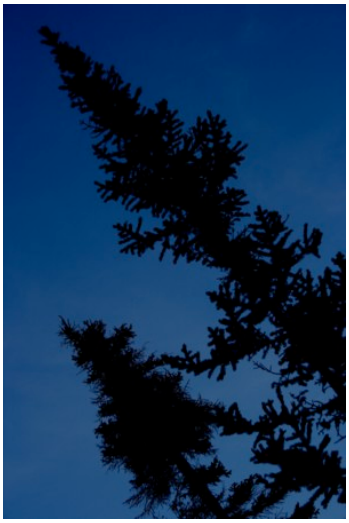
> The organic aspect teaches us about natural cycles, about growth and decay, repeated over and over again. It teaches us about rhythmic seasonal waxing and wanings, nourishment and patience. We learn there is a time for all things and all things have their time. . . . We come to know that natural patterns are our own patterns. (Lipsett, 2002, p. 223)

Leaving the river was a dying of both the inquiry and the self. Ironically, through the inquiry my relation to the land and people had deepened. I had built relations and lived experiences with the Dene school and community that were not easy to remove

myself from. Although I had begun to see more clearly how I was connected and entangled with the land and lifeways of rural Aboriginal communities, what I was not prepared for was the difficulty of detaching.

Yet, I had to separate. Professionally my work was complete, and both personally and academically I needed to disentangle. Moving on had its purpose, and it was this: It is possible to have a broader vision only after gaining some distance from what we have been embedded in. We are never disconnected because all things are always connected regardless of how far apart they are; however, with distance it is possible to gain a different perspective. Greene (as cited in Zacharias, 2004) describes this movement as "moving beyond what has already been" (p. 3). Separating from the school and community would allow me to stand beyond the river. I needed to reflect from a distance on my journey into place and teaching in the North, and what the land and people had taught me.

Learning in Living/Living in Learning



. . . simply from the sense that life does change. Nothing stands still. If we once

> accept that we have arrived, we rest and fall asleep. As long as we are aware, alert, constantly open to all our new beginnings, we will continue to become more than we are (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 2003, p. 71-72).

When the winds became too strong to resist I released from my life by the river. I gave notice of leave to the school board and decided to return to the university. Now, no longer immersed in a Dene world and distanced from my life of inquiry by the river, I began to look back on where I had been. I began to reflect on the questions I had as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North about relationships between the land and ecological modes of consciousness. I thought about how epistemologies grounded in place and ecology impacted on teaching and learning, on views of the world, and our relationships to one another. I also began to reflect on the directions I had chosen as an inquirer and experiences I had lived as a learner, learning from a curriculum of place and teaching in a place-based culture.

In retrospect the journey seemed almost surreal. For nearly four years the inquiry had stirred the very core of my being, drawing me into a deep desire to learn: to make connections, to find meaning, and to deepen my understandings. It had been hard to stop questing. Although the process of inquiry had been filled with great difficulty and challenge, it had also been filled with discovery, profound learning and deep transformative growth.

When I returned to the university I realized I had changed. I had been awakened to the land. I had come to see and feel anew my relationship to the taiga: the sighs of contentment at the scent of spruce, the imprint in my being of the rhythmic breath of bison, and the sense of home place found in the sound of ravens cawing into the morning

air. The land and river had been teaching me, showing me its patterns and rhythms and inscribing them on our lives, on our ways of knowing and being, and living together in this place. Through this awareness, I had begun to think about the river and relationships between teaching and learning in rural northern Aboriginal communities in ways I had not previously known.

Most profound to this awareness was a deepened appreciation towards Aboriginal learning and pedagogy. As an inquirer I had found myself intensely engaged in the inquiry process. I wondered what had drawn me so powerfully to learn. What was it about learning from the land and river that led me to watch and listen so attentively? What was it about learning from Dene place and culture that led me to quest so deeply for understanding?

Difficult for me to see while immersed in a Dene world was how my own inquiry process mirrored a form of Indigenous education. Cajete (2004) describes Indigenous education as wholisic and grounded in community and culture. Indigenous education reflects the ways of the land and teaches us what it is to be human. It allows learners to be(come) who they are in an organic process where life and learning naturally evolve:

> In the Tewa language we often refer to the process of gaining an education in the same way as we refer to breathing in life or to 'be with life'. . . . When Indigenous elders today speak about education they speak little about courses, curricular grades, and degrees. Rather, they refer to the wholeness of the process of coming to know who you are, where you have been and where you may go in the future. (pp. 103, 111)

Something else I had failed to see as I inquired by the river was that the

university, whose structures and requirements I had always viewed as opposite to life by the river, had created the space to make such learning possible. As a researcher, I had been given an open space to explore teaching in the taiga and the questions I had of relationships to the land and aspects of cross-cultural teaching and learning. I had been given the freedom to explore questions of traditional Aboriginal education, particularly the structures and values of teaching and learning exemplified in my experience among the Dene people. In essence, I had been given what Heidegger (1993) describes as an "open region" to learn from Indigenous ways of teaching and learning within a Western academic system of education.

This open space to wander and engage in my own journey of learning allowed me to situate inside the natural complexities of living, teaching, and learning in another culture. As an inquirer, the open space allowed me to struggle with the uncertainties I had as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North, the questions I had of my own relationship to the land, and the insights I gained living and teaching respectfully in this place. Crucial to my own learning as a non-Aboriginal teacher in this context was a broadened awareness of the teachings that can arise from the land and our relationships to each other simply by watching, listening, and paying attention. I discovered how personal curiosities and quests for deeper meanings in an open context can bring forth a curriculum that grows out from life itself, for example, how an experience such as picking berries can lead to insights on spirituality and identity, and an opportunity to canoe upstream can call attention to the interrelations between a river's flow and the experience of teaching across cultures. It is through this form of learning that knowledge is embodied: seeing, feeling, touching, and be touched, by what we learn.

For me, to have my own lived experiences as a non-Aboriginal teacher at the core of the research, learning became deeply personal. The unveiling of tensions and complexities of being a non-Aboriginal person teaching, learning, living, and inquiring in the midst of Aboriginal place and culture was a difficult part of the learning process. However, in the openness of trying to make meaning and articulate understandings in the confluences of both Western and Indigenous cultures and worldviews, I discovered a deeper sense of self as expressions of photography, painting, and poetry emerged. Each expression was tied to my own "learning spirit" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), guided by deep personal interest and an authentic quest to learn. These different forms of expression allowed me as a learner to communicate understandings more fully, and to provide a more wholistic representation of what I had learned.

I found that as I grew more aware of myself as a learner, I also grew more sensitive to Aboriginal students' learning and their experience as learners. In the confluence of Western and Aboriginal ways of knowing in northern education, teaching, became for me a more "mindful practice" (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004, p. 3). As a non-Aboriginal teacher, I found myself more consciously attuned to the dynamics of the cross-cultural learning situation, more wakeful to Earth-centered values embodied in traditional Aboriginal education such as connection, relationship, emergence, community, openness, and growth. I also became more conscious of the power of place that resonates in Aboriginal students' learning styles and expressions of learning.

At the confluence of Western and Aboriginal values in teaching and learning, I have grown excited at the possibilities for education in the North. One of the most valuable experiences from the *Education Through Commitment Project* was witnessing

the importance of Aboriginal youth drawing on other domains of knowledge, such as family, Elders, community, land, traditions, and culture (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). I witnessed the power of the Dene Kede to engage youth in the process of learning from their own histories, geographies, and communities. And I witnessed the possibility for extending that engagement by bringing lived experience into the classroom to make contexts for learning more meaningful.

When Cajete (2004) refers to Indigenous education as "breathing in life or to be with life," he is not referring to education in a way that is romantic or nostalgic. Learning from a curriculum of place is wholistic: it affects the body, mind, and spirit. Wholistic learning endures because it is connected to life. I wonder what more can grow out of Aboriginal education in the future, if school communities in the North continue to tap into this source? For me, as a teacher in the North, the opportunities to revitalize and co-create experiences of learning from a community-based context are exciting. Cultural and language revitalization not only contributes to community well being, but it is a cyclical and regenerative power that affects our very existence in the North, motivating more respectful ways of being in relation to our ourselves, our community, the land, and our Earth.

Standing Under the Eagle



What brings my world to silence?

An Eagle flying.

This journey has in great part been a spiritual one. Plotkin (2003) describes a spiritual journey as "a journey into the unknown, deep into the darkness of ourselves" (p. 10). Perhaps it can be described as a path that wanders deep into the wilderness of the soul and takes us back to the place where we are. In beginning a genuine spiritual journey, Kornfield (1993) states, "we have to stay much closer to home, to focus directly on what is right here in front of us, to make sure that our path is connected to our deepest love" (p. 13). Looking back on the journal entry I wrote just a few short weeks before I left the North for graduate school, it seemed the quest to know the life of the North that stirred so deeply inside me had already come to seed: "I hope to be back someday and share what I have lived and always loved." I left the North with no intention of returning to teach, yet it seems deep inside I knew all along, the struggle was learning to listen and it would take place in the North.

As I have wandered in the taiga, moving about from place to place living and teaching in different Aboriginal communities, I have come to know a life that follows the

heart and hears the soft whisper of the winds. The difficulty of my transience has been allowing myself to drift with the winds without resistance. To hear the wind's soft whispers and surrender to its breezes, instead of waiting for the winds (life) to become so turbulent I could no longer hold on. Always in letting go, the darkness begins to clear and I find myself standing under open skies, in harmony with the Earth. And at some mystical level, there seems always to be an Eagle, flying across the horizon, circling high in the air, or crossing through the trees, showing me I am on the right path, that I have listened to my heart and heeded the call of the winds, acknowledging that I am about to leave one journey and embark on another, reminding me to trust the Earth, that I am in the place where I am meant to be.

Caputo (1987) says that to "stand under" also means "to understand . . . to expose one's self to, to awaken to" (p. 205). As a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North I have journeyed into place, seeking to understand myself more deeply in-relation to the land and in-relation to the Dene people, to know who I am as a non-Aboriginal teacher within where I am, and to find words inside this life that stirs my soul so deeply: the wonder of watching northern lights dancing in a dark night sky, the joy of picking blueberries under a midnight sun, or the deep sense of place in gathering to watch a brilliant moon illuminate the water as it rises above the horizon. Yet, what I had not planned for as the unknown became known and the invisible became visible was to awaken to an even deeper mystery.

Five years ago I walked down to the river's edge and gave an offering to the river, asking to travel this journey of learning in this place, and to receive the teachings that the land and the Dene people might give me. As the inquiry took root by the river under open

skies, I was not sure what I would learn or how the world would present itself to me. All I knew to do was to trust the land and walk along the precipice of not knowing. In doing so, I have awakened to the world as a world endowed with spirit, a land that speaks. And I have come to appreciate the importance of living in respectful relationship to all life.

One spring I was on a boat trip on the Deh Cho with a group of students involved in the *Education Through Commitment Project*. On this trip we had hoped that many of our meals would be traditional foods that we caught and gathered on the land as we travelled. Under this premise, almost all of the students had brought along a fishing rod. We were fortunate on this trip. On most days students were able to catch a large number of fish, much more than we, as a group, were able to prepare and eat. However, on our last day before returning to the community, the weather became dark and windy, and our group was forced to pull our boats out of the water. While the winds prevented us from traveling, students continued to fish in a small creek. Again, the fish were plentiful. The next day the winds still did not subside. We were forced to camp for another night. Late that evening an Elder gathered students and staff in a circle around the fire. She told us the inclement weather was a sign that too many fish were being taken from the river. More fish had been taken than were needed, and we had not offered a gift to the river before we fished. Each student and staff was then given a pinch of tobacco. Turn by turn each of member of the group fed the fire and with gratitude said “mahsi” to the land. The next morning the winds subsided, and the water became calm enough to pass. This experience was an important lesson for me, of respecting the land and river as a living force that can give but that can also take away.

As I grew by the river, watching, listening, and inquiring under open skies, as a

non-Aboriginal teacher not from the community, I grew more aware of the ways of the land and the ways of the Dene people. I found myself in communion, giving silence to the land and to the Dene people so I could listen. Jardine (1998) writes, "In the midst of silence, a word, a gesture, a cry, can finally mean something, because we can finally hear, finally listen. . . perhaps silence is our most articulate response" (pp. 31-30). Years ago, I attended a Pipe Giving Ceremony for a local Elder. During the ceremony, moments before the Elder was offered the pipe, an Eagle flew over the open-air tipi. We watched the Eagle in silence as it soared overhead. Then to my amazement, I watched people hold their hands up to the Eagle, offering a gesture of thankfulness and gratitude for its presence.

Afterward, I sat in awe, filled with an immediate sense that the Eagle had come as a blessing. Heidegger (as cited in Jardine, 2000) says, "It is one thing to just use the earth, another to receive the blessing of the earth and to become at home in the law of this reception in order to shepherd the mystery and watch over the inviolability of the possible" (p. 211). I have struggled between Western and Aboriginal ecological discourses in finding my place writing and living between cultures. Standing under the Eagle, watching in silence the wonder of the Earth, sensing the deep sacredness of the land calls me to reach beyond, perhaps into what Drengson (1983) describes as a non-conceptual or "transcultural" knowing, a knowing that "transcends the limit of knowledge that is at our disposal" after comparing, contrasting, and shifting between worldviews, "reaching through them to see the world beyond all mental forms" (p. 9).

Berman (2000) calls this "a paradigm of no paradigm" (p. 239), where in the midst of philosophies, discourses, conceptualizations, and labels that place wor(l)dviews

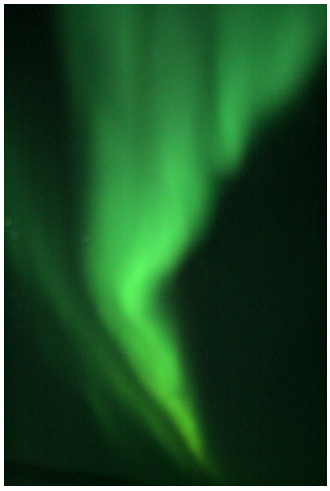
on things, there is a place for silence, where instead of distorting vision to fit one paradigm or another, silence allows an opening to see the world without word or thought, empty and humble to receive the land and know the land from the inside.

As a non-Aboriginal teacher living in the North, I am thankful to be in the midst of a culture that embodies openness and receptivity to the land as a natural part of everyday life. To me this openness and receptivity is exemplified in an event that took place a few years ago while traveling with a group of high school students on a ten-day canoe trip north along the Deh Cho. Two days before the end of our journey, I lost our map that guided us through the countless islands and river bends. Without the map, we had no way to tell how much farther we had to go, or around how many more bends we had to go to reach our destination. On the tenth day we were expected to arrive at a community up river around noon. That day we paddled and paddled, at each river bend wondering if the community was around the next corner. Noon came and went. We continued to paddle on the river, surrounded by endless bush. Rescue boats had come looking for us, but we were too far down river to be reached. As midnight neared, we had been paddling for nearly fifteen hours.

Exhausted, and with still no idea how much farther we had to go, we rafted up our canoes to rest and drift. Watching the midnight sun set to its lowest point on the horizon, we began to discuss whether or not to set camp. As we were conversing a student noticed two Eagles flying playfully in the trees. Suddenly, all our attention was on the Eagles. They surprised us by flying slowly back and forth over both sides of the river. No words were said, but I think each of us innately knew the Eagles were telling us we were close.

We began to paddle. We were indeed quite near our destination and the end of our journey.

Dancing With the Northern Lights



> The groundlessness of mortals means that we live in the sweep of the epochs . . . which tell a story which could have been otherwise. . . . We learn the play of their movement, the movement of their play, the giving and withdrawal at play in them. We learn above all else that we are part of a movement that we did not initiate, that we depend upon forces which we do not dominate, that we draw our life from powers we do not fathom. We learn openness — which means at once graciousness, for one knows that has always to do with gifts and giving — and we learn a sense of transiency, for one knows the powers of withdrawal. Someone, something, the Lord or not, giveth and taketh away (Caputo, 1987, p. 206).

On clear winter nights in the North, dark skies come alive with spectacular displays of northern lights. Hues of red, violet, yellow, and green ripple across the skies, dancing on celestial breezes, stirring the earth below with an energetic performance of light. Northern lights are also known as aurora borealis, meaning north wind of the dawn, named after Aurora, the Roman goddess of dawn, and the Greek name for north wind, Boreas. The Cree First Nations people call this phenomenon the dance of the spirits.

Similar to the Cree, the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic believe that the lights are a display of their ancestors' souls dancing in the sky. In the Denendeh, some Dene tribes say that clapping or whistling can make the lights dance (Education, Culture, and Employment, 2003).

On some dark winter nights when the northern lights are dancing overhead, the lights stir my own soul to dance. Surrounded only by bush, I am touched by the vastness of the dark night sky and the beauty of the northern lights rippling through the stars with ever-changing waves of movement and colour. I dance with the reds and the greens, twisting and turning in harmony. An incredible sense of aliveness overcomes me, as if I am moving in perpetual rhythm, connected to the past, our ancient human history, and the future of generations not yet lived.

I am thankful to stand in these ancient taiga forests, to dance under the dark night skies, connected to my human history, connected to life. I am thankful to the Dene people of the Denendeh who have cared for this land, and who have protected it from human development, so that I, and others growing in the land today, can know and experience the world in this authentic and primeval way.

I was surprised to learn a short time after writing *The Old Poste* that in 2002, the James Bay Cree and Quebec Government signed a deal that would allow massive hydroelectric development and other resource extraction in Northern Quebec lands to continue. Sadly, one of the impacts of this mega-project was that the water and land region surrounding the Old Poste would be affected by flooding. The diversion of the Rupert River would result in the submersion of millions of trees and thousands of acres

of land, inevitably affecting fish, animals, migratory birds, and ancestral territories the Cree have travelled since time immemorial.

It is unfathomable for me to think of the Old Poste affected today by flooding. I appreciate the importance of economic development and moving forward with the dymanics of our time — but at what cost? At the cost of destroying the very forests and waters that sustain us? Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) people speak of the imperative of retaining and revitalizing Aboriginal languages and cultures, and the importance of culture-based education having an equitable place in the education of youth today. As George Erasmus, past head of the Indian Brotherhood, points out:

> It's not as some people keep referring to us as looking back. We are not looking back. We do not want to remain static. We do not want to stop the clock of time. Our old people, when they talk about how the Dene ways should be kept by young people, they are not looking back, they are looking forward. They are looking as far ahead into the future as they possibly can. So are we all. (as cited in The Dene Nation, 1984, p. 65)

In the Denendeh, today's generation is fortunate to grow up in a land that is still very much untouched by human development. Although impending development projects such as the Mackenzie Valley Gas Project, Deh Cho Bridge Construction, and mining and mineral expansion increase the vulnerability of Dene land, languages, and culture, the Earth-centered values and ways of living out and being in respectful relation to "self, others, land, and spiritual world" (Education, Culture, and Employment, 1993) continue to be very much a living part of Dene community and culture. Continuing to open spaces in mainstream education for youth and school communities to learn experientially on the

land and to listen to the knowledge and wisdom of their Elders who still speak the language and grew up on the land in a traditional way can deepen ecological consciousness and awareness of the sacredness of the land. Blending traditional ways with contemporary ways can help to foster respect and appreciation toward the bioregion through a relationship with the Earth — the trees, bogs, creeks, and waterways, and all the creatures dwelling within them. This respect creates possibilities for generations today to make wise choices when faced with decisions that impact the future of the land and the life of future generations.

"The great news of our time is the evolutionary story in which we all come to realize that we humans are all embedded in a living, developing universe, and that we are therefore cousins to everything in the universe" (Swimme, 1996, p. 77). When I look up at the northern lights and gaze out at the stars in the dark night sky, I look beyond to something larger, reminded that I am one small part within a great universe, that I have a place here, and a role in this dance. Witnessing myself in this creative unfolding, as a teacher I see myself inside a bigger picture. I see myself as part of a shared human project that has a role to play in the life of this planet.

Like the curtains of northern lights rippling through the sky, life is not static but in constant motion. Schools and communities in the North are always adapting and changing, and as a teacher, I am always adapting and changing both inwardly and alongside these movements. In contemporary community life in the North, where we are faced with homogenizing socio-cultural challenges and exploitative environmental practices in the name of global, social and economic "progress," I find myself in a greater narrative of living and teaching not only in the midst of "(in)difference" (Hasebe-Ludt, et

al., 2008, p. 57), of Western and Aboriginal worldviews, but in the midst of modern day advancements and Earth-centered values in education, and ways of living out these relations.

For me, dancing with the northern lights is a wonderful metaphor that captures the complexity of learning to live in the paradox of an illuminated darkness: finding a place in relation to both harmonious and disharmonious elements of life and learning to live in the challenges and freedoms that are part of being at one with everything. This includes learning to be open in and through difficulty, and in and through difference (Hasebe-Ludt, et al. 2008; Jardine, 1998), dancing in this great dance that is life, with all its perplexities.

To "harmonize with these natural forces" (Drengson, 1983, p. 94) requires that I, as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North working with Aboriginal students, support values that maintain the integrity of traditional ways of knowing and being, while remembering that teaching and learning in rural northern Aboriginal communities is a collective and community process, a process of co-creating spaces in education that nurture the local community and culture. This pedagogical relationship I find myself striving for with the community is what Jardine (2000) describes as an "ecopedagogy: an attempt to find ways in which ecologically rich images of ancestry, sustainability, interrelatedness, interdependency, kinship, and topography can help revitalize our understandings of all living disciplines in our care" (p. 3).

From this perspective, the task of education becomes one of renewal and (re)generation, not only of Aboriginal language and culture, but of living in respectful relationship with all our relations. Education becomes a responsive, evolving education

of living relationships that work with the collective actions, knowledge, and wisdom of many people. This sowing of seeds through an authentic place-orientated curriculum creates space for youth to take root, grow, and flourish each in their own way, and in their own relationship to the land, their culture, and the community where they live.

As a non-Aboriginal teacher, I have but only glimpsed the deep reverence and vast knowledge and wisdom of the Aboriginal peoples of the North. Yet, through this glimpse, I am filled with humility and gratitude. I am thankful to the Aboriginal schools and communities across the taiga, notably the Elders and people of the Denendeh, who have shown me through their everyday lives what it is to live in true reverence and appreciation for all living elements in their care. As a teacher, wherever I am, it is my hope to reciprocate the gifts I have been offered. It is my hope that the primacy of these ancient taiga forests and the vast knowledge and wisdom of the culture that has sustained them remain strong and healthy for futures immemorial.

REFLECTING IN A NIGHT SKY

Returning Full Circle: Finding a Direction



> . . . at the same time that you don't know where you are going — you're there (Berman, 2000, p. 234).

It has been nearly a year and a half since I left the river. I have come full circle, to a place in my life where once again I am traveling on the winds, uncertain where I may land next on my teaching journey. As I wander, I am no longer adrift on the winds, twisting and turning, wondering which direction to go. The turbulence of my transience as a non-Aboriginal teacher in the North has subsided. I have come to a deeper awareness of the perennial nature of my movements, which has allowed me to live more harmoniously inside the landscape: I allow myself to drift on the winds, trusting I will eventually land somewhere where I will put down roots, if only temporarily.

In the quest to understand more deeply what it is to be connected and entangled without permanent roots, I find myself returning to where I began, seeking to reconnect with what I have lived and always loved: teaching in the taiga in close-knit northern Aboriginal communities where the wild energies of the land integrate deeply into the heart of community life — where experiences of teaching and learning are grounded in Earth-centered values, experiential knowing, and relationships with the land lived in a

respectful and sacred way. I am at home living in this close relationship to the land. I am home in the midst of frozen stillness and the waking sounds of crystal ice crashing. And, I am at home in the energy and spirit of the land and its people.

Following the rhythms of the land and the winds that call me, yet without attachment to any one particular Aboriginal community, grants me a deep sense of freedom, and the gift of staying true to the authentic nature of my own being that follows wherever the heart leads. Freedom, Berman (2000) writes, is "underwritten by movement" (p. 165), and following the call to move is an "instinctive migratory urge" (p. 81), part of our human "biological baseline . . . a rhizomatic consciousness deeply rooted in our brain structure and evolutionary history" (pp. 81, 212). In my own life, there is a quality to wandering that makes me feel alive, awake to the spirit of the land in the North. This inexplicable need to move on stems from a deep desire to retain a wakefulness to the places where I live, but also to sustain harmony and balance in-relation to the Aboriginal world where I teach.

Moving about requires a fluid and shifting nature of being. It seems at precisely the point when my roots become strong and deep within a community, I become uncomfortable and seek to disrupt this relationship. I die to the land and return to wandering, perhaps reestablishing what Chatwin (as cited in Berman, 2000) describes as "an original harmony that existed between humans and the universe" (p. 81). Not growing too high or too deeply into the soil in any one place allows growth to occur in the biosphere in a way that does not exhaust or deplete the soils, but allows the land to be inhabited without strain. Wandering allows me to walk lightly on the Earth, contributing as a non-Aboriginal teacher to Aboriginal community and culture, mindful not to take

away, and then gracefully moving on.

Like Berman (2000), I spent a great deal of time wishing that the transient nature of my life would go away (p. 244). I had not yet found a home inside myself, in the context of wherever I am. I was preoccupied with the image of a lone seed blowing about the taiga, searching for a place to belong. Having returned to wandering, I imagine myself again drifting like a seed on the winds under a dark night sky; however, now I witness myself reflecting the light of the moon with countless others who are part of the story I share of place and cross-cultural teaching and learning in Canada's North. In finding a sense of not belonging to any one community, but to the land and to the Earth as a whole, I am excited to continue this journey with many others who are also journeying this path of teaching and learning: balancing inner callings and collective dreams for the future of the land and the ability of its children and communities to carry forward the wisdom of Aboriginal knowledge, culture, and values.

As I write these words, I again look forward to putting down temporary roots and growing with others in the land. I have grown more comfortable with the dichotomies between North and South, Aboriginal and Western worlds which once represented an endless battle that mixed and twisted inside of me. Rather than fighting these dualities, I am coming to be able to negotiate a way to live in another culture that is not my own. I am coming to understand more deeply what it is to stand with strength in the midst of two different worlds — connected and entangled, but without permanent roots. Most importantly, I am coming to be more aware what it is to respect the mix of seemingly incompatible cultures in the North, while honoring the Dene relation to the land and all its inhabitants.

I found the taiga, a wilderness space.
I directed myself under open skies,
open to what might unfold, and the places I may end up.

After a time I rested, wondering, "which direction do I go?"
I stood and looked around
spinning in circles in my place, trying to decide on a direction.

Finally I stopped, waiting, listening…
I am the direction, the place were I am always standing.

I move again with the wind,
maybe to the high arctic or to the shores of the river.
I have no permanent roots.

I am open to be, to go where I am meant to go,
now coming to be more at home where I am.

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