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Lii Michinn: Gathering Medicine as Research Methodology
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As an Indigenous student in a colonial institution, I often feel like an alien. The ways in which I was raised to understand the world around me do not always align with the expectations I contend with in my studies. I recently had the privilege of participating in an Indigenous graduate student seminar, affording me an opportunity to explore important themes and issues related to Indigenous research methods and community engagement. This deep dive into Indigenous resurgence within the academy has included important topics such as developing Indigenous research designs, decolonizing the academy, doing research “at home,” and connecting research to projects of self-determination. Gaining further appreciation for the important work being done by Indigenous scholars, traditional knowledge keepers and grass roots organizers has allowed me to identify key components of Indigenous research frameworks and relate them to my own projects in my studies and professional work, locate my research projects within the context of Indigenous research methodologies, identify meaningful connections between my research projects and Indigenous communities and/or organizations, and identify current and potential impacts of my work, with a focus on ethics and working within my own Metis, urban Indigenous, campus, geographic communities and beyond.

All of this exploration of self within the process of research has culminated in the development of a unique research framework, rooted in Metis harvesting traditions that integrates my self-location as a Metis woman within my chosen field of study, leadership in adult education and community engagement. This paper will reflect on my development process and present a methodology that uses traditional Metis values to guide the cultivation, meaning-making, and dissemination of knowledge, amplifying Metis women’s voices.

Niiya Piihkishkwayshtamaako

“*Niiya piihkishkwayshtamaako*” is Michif, and translates literally to mean “my representation”. It may not be a perfect translation but using Michif (even imperfectly) feels appropriate when locating oneself as a Metis learner, researcher, and educator. *Lauren nishinihkaashoon, Langley gii nihtaawakinn. Ni lii Michif.* My name is Lauren, I am Red River Metis, with Maternal roots stemming from the Gagne, Ducharme, Gladue, Hughes and Ross families from Treaty 1 territory, in what we now call Winnipeg, MB. My grandfathers were French and much later, Scottish, settlers who came to trade furs, and would eventually marry my Assiniboine, Cree, Crow, Sarcee and Saulteaux grandmothers. My mother is an indomitable force. She is intelligent, loving, and as courageous as a granddaughter of voyaging frontier folk ought to be. My father was Danish, and a lover of nature, hockey and science fiction. He was much quieter, but just as bright and incredibly kind. My parents brought each other balance and built a loving home. My brother and I were born and raised in Langley, a short distance from the site of the Hudson’s Bay trading post in Fort Langley, BC. It is often presented to tourists as the birthplace of British Columbia, which has never sat comfortably with me. Since time immemorial, the Kwantlen and Katzie First Nations acted as stewards of this magical place. It was there that, over a century before my birth, my kinsfolk had a hand in modifying the geopolitical and economic landscapes of someone else’s homelands. It is sometimes difficult for me to reconcile that with how in those same lands an *iskwesisisak* I was blessed to be raised to be proud of and aware of the impacts of her roots. I was introduced to my indigeneity early on, and my spirit and curiosity have continued to be nurtured by the grace of my family, Metis community, Langley’s large Urban Indigenous community, and the Kwantlen and Katzie First Nations, who have always welcomed and cared for me. All that I am, and all that I know comes

to me because of these complex and cherished relationships. I work hard every day to honour them.

As an adult, I have been afforded the privilege of living, learning and growing in the lands of the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSANEC First Nations. I am very grateful for the community that uplifts me, and for the relationships I have been able to build with other Indigenous peoples as a guest on unsundered lands. It's hard to know whether or not I would have been as successful in my studies without a community behind me that I am accountable to. I am in my first year of my Masters of Education in Leadership, Adult Education and Community Engagement. In all of my core courses, I have been the only Indigenous person. All Indigenous course discussions have focused on First Nations culture, and First Nations issues. I do my best to speak from my unique location as a Metis learner, who is also a member of a larger Urban Indigenous community. Sometimes the expectations of my peers weigh heavy on me; I don't always feel like I am Indigenous enough in how I respond. At times, I do feel as if I am expected to be an expert on all things First Nations due to my proximity or relationships, or due to a wide-spread misunderstanding that the word Indigenous is synonymous with First Nations. I do find the lack of awareness around Metis-ness to be frustrating. I realize, though, that I have a responsibility to represent my family and my nation well. I also have a responsibility to the First Nations and Urban Indigenous people who share space with me. Locating myself at the onset of any community-based research project or initiative is a must, as "location ensures that individual realities are not misrepresented as generalizable collectives" (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 123). I have to choose my words carefully and stay in my proverbial lane, even if it feels like a lane that is more like crossing a suspension bridge during a

windstorm. My Metis-ness places me between two very different sets of values and expectations, but striking a healthy balance is my responsibility alone.

I also must remember that as an educator in a position of authority, how I bring what I learn in and out of the classroom forward into my workplace matters. Whether I am comfortable with this responsibility or not, confident with my own abilities or not, I occupy a space where I am a visible representation of Indigenous perspectives. I hope that the work that I do both in my studies and professional life help to create more opportunities for other Indigenous learners. My intentions in employing gathering medicines as a research methodology are simply to enter these institutional and traditional spaces with a good heart and open mind, to uplift and fairly represent traditional Metis knowledge systems with transparency. Ultimately what drives me is a desire to make my culture accessible, without compromising it or doing harm to others. My purpose, as with all things, is to honour those who came before me and hold space for those who will follow, and hopefully surpass me.

Niiya Natoonikayhk

To me, research is as much of an act of resistance as it is an act of inquiry. When I reflect on who I am, and where I come from, I can't help but think about Indigenous women before me who were denied a voice or access to these institutions. I am the first in my Metis family to have completed a degree. As it stands, Metis traditional knowledge remains largely undervalued when it comes to areas of research, and "an even bigger gap exists when it comes to Metis women's knowledge ... Women's traditional knowledge and responsibilities have often been neglected and overlooked entirely" (Hodgson-Smith & Kermoal, 2016, p.139). As Carly Jones et al (2020) eloquently remind us, "the fact that Metis matrilineal knowledges have survived today in spite of significant forces of silencing and assimilation is a testament to the ingenuity of Metis women

and girls and our ongoing roles as ... knowledge keepers and researchers in our modern and urban communities”(127). I have a responsibility to contribute to cultural continuity, and my privileged position within this institution affords me a unique space in which to do that. When tasked with developing my own research methodology, I needed to carefully consider my own location within the process. I had to consider my location in relation not only to my own Metis-ness, but also to the community in which I am currently studying. As Michelle Pigeon (2018) points out, Indigenous research paradigms serve as “acts of decolonization moving towards a self-determination and empowerment in which the relationality of [myself as researcher] to rightsholders and broader Indigenous communities is central” (420). My work must intentionally move beyond metaphors and become action, “centrally locat[ing Metis] ways of knowing and being within the research”(420).

As a Metis researcher, I find myself at a strange crossroads where I have been raised to embrace a unique blend of western and Indigenous knowledge systems. Within academic institutions, “western epistemologies continue to dominate and define the boundaries of legitimate knowledge”(Kermoal, 2020, p.110). Where western knowledge is upheld as “quantitative, analytical, reductionist, and literate”, traditional knowledges are often framed as “qualitative, intuitive, holistic, and oral” (Nadasdy, 1999 in Kermoal, 2020, p.110). Through my more formal schooling, I have been conditioned to prioritize Western epistemologies and methodologies within my practice, a fact that makes me feel guilty at times as if I am somehow complicit in my own epistemic oppression. Outside of academic spaces, I have at times taken for granted the holistic ways in which traditional Metis knowledge has been shared with me – from family stories, to learning to jig and pow wow dance, to harvesting plants for sustenance or

medicines, to beading, to preparing and sharing meals. In a way, I have been researching Metis culture since the moment I entered this world.

In *Indigenous Methodologies*, Margaret Kovach argues that within the process of conducting research, “the explicitness of our choices and the beliefs that influence them sends a purposeful message about who we are as researchers”(p.42) and that we bring this “intentionality to our research from day one”(p.42). The data does not appear by some miracle at the conclusion of our research, but throughout the entire process and can be recognized in our motivations, critical reflection, and engagement, with others and over all research choices. I have come to understand that what I bring into my research projects going forward is just as valid as the data that comes out of it. The impact of my engagement within the process will be determined by how well I locate myself within my work, how clear my intentions are to others, and how well I understand what is expected of me .

For centuries Indigenous peoples and our sacred knowledge systems have been misreported and misrepresented. By entering this process through an Indigenous research framework, I can emphasize my responsibilities to Indigenous knowledge systems and peoples by allowing Indigenous stories to be told autonomously. In this way, research to me is a path forward for Indigenous people to occupy spaces and platforms they have been denied for too long. It is also a way for me to honour my family, my community, and my ancestors.

Lii Manyayr

It has been incredibly empowering for me to understand that I am not alone in feeling out of place when it comes to contextualizing Indigenous teachings within Western frameworks. Over the past year, I have come to understand that even the most prolific of Indigenous scholars have shared their frustrations in their work, and this helps me to feel less lost or inept. I have

come to realize that in those moments that something has felt out of context, or inappropriate to me, the odds are that somewhere another Indigenous academic is cursing the same barrier.

When it happens, I am comforted that I can reach out and I will be met with love and understanding. I do my best to reciprocate in kind. Where Western epistemologies are focused on what can be proven as “fact”. Indigenous epistemologies differ in that they are rooted in ways of being, seeing, feeling, understanding and knowing. They are holistic, reflexive and fluid by nature.

I feel more confident today speaking to what I know, Metis teachings and traditions have sprung up from the earth and developed around our relationship to the land and the water, as well as the plants, the animals who sustain us, and of course each other. It is important to note that, just like the biodiversity of the land we situate ourselves on, our leadership and customs differ region to region. For families like mine, they were traditionally organized around seasonal activities such as the buffalo hunt, the historic fur trade, fishing, trapping, or the harvesting of medicines and plants. We are not a homogenous people – despite the myopic narrative that is often presented to the general public. However, within each and every Metis community it is clear that kinship and reciprocity are central to all things. In particular, Metis women’s relationship with the land, all by extension all things connected to the land, “is bound up with values that are integral to the well-being not only of their families and communities but also of the environment” (Kermoal, 2016, p. 116). To understand Metis identity, then, is to recognize that our identity is “capacious rather than restrictive; negotiated rather than dictated; contemporary as well as historical” (Green, 2004, p.31). I have created space within my conceptual framework intentionally so that these differences will allow other Metis researchers to take up the principles in their own way if they so wish. The medicine they gather can be

medicinal plants, or they could look like something else. The steps they take to gather should reflect their own location.

In my family, much like in other Metis households, we learned by listening first and then by doing. My parents taught their children how important it is to listen, watch, and ask permission before engaging. Respect and accountability are at the heart of all things. My mother has always encouraged me to learn from and connect with other Michif people. When my insecurities around not being smart enough or getting things right would bubble to the surface, she would tell me not to worry and to learn for myself first and foremost. It didn't matter because I was doing my best, and that reflected well on who I am as a person. My father taught me how to garden, and care for little tomato plants and berry bushes. My mother taught me to cook, to show care for others through preparing teas and meals. This has helped me to understand the work that goes into harvesting and preparing food and accept it from others with gratitude. Through the aunties in my community I have learned to identify and gather medicines from the earth for ceremony. Through my father and my uncle John, I learned to fish sustainably for sustenance. Through knowledge keepers, friends, and even the children I have been privileged to teach and support, I have learned new songs, dances, beading techniques and stories. All of these teachings are gifts that I have come to recognize as medicine for my body, mind, and spirit.

Being able to build relationships with other Metis and First Nations families and draw connections to my own upbringing has reinforced a sense of self-worth and allowed me to recognize myself in the broader narrative of my nation. It is a tiring and emotional process, but it is incredibly healing. I draw on these memories when I am low. Appreciating the care that has gone into teaching me thousands of years of knowledge, I am able to better understand how

precious protocols can be when I enter someone else's space. It reminds me that I have responsibilities to these sacred relationships to be humble, empathetic, and patient. It also motivates me to find ways to represent them well.

It has required a great deal of reflection to decide on a framework through which to conduct my research. I knew I wanted my framework to be conceptual, and fluid. I explored many different aspects of culture, but it was when I was hiking at PKOLS surrounded by trees that I was reminded how all of the teachings I have lead me back to the land. Letting go of western methodologies has presented many challenges, but I am reminded that “other real choices exist” (Absolon, 2009). Nothing is more real to me than the time I spend immersed in culture, surrounded by my medicines. As Metis knowledge keeper Brenda Holder says, “The answer is always in the bush, no matter what, always ask the *maskihkiy* [for the answers you are seeking]”(Mushumanski, 2020). Through engaging with the community that creator has blessed me with, I am gathering knowledges. These teachings will be passed forward in kind, and I see that as a way for me to heal wounds caused by the epistemic, racial, and lateral violence that linger and maintain institutional barriers. When we acknowledge these medicines as gifts, we lift them up above the ontological limits of what western scholarship deems to be legible or valid (Hunt, 2014). Therefore, I present Gathering Medicine as an Indigenous Research Methodology through which I intend to engage community to inform future project development within post secondary institutions.

Lii Michinn

Figure 1

Gathering Medicine Methodology



Gathering Medicine as a methodology begins with *aen nidi*- formulating an idea, or a question. Identifying which *michinn* do I wish to gather? This is followed by *niiya piihkishkwayshtamaako*, locating oneself within the process – for me this looks like reflecting on my intentions on asking this question, as well as the potential implications of the work to be done. Then, putting both into words so that can be brought forward to the individuals or community I seek to engage with. It is here where I need to really consider whether it is my

place to ask, and sit with the fact that people might not want to participate. I have to humble myself, and be reminded that “no” might be a reality, and that’s okay. Transparency and informed consent are paramount when working across cultures, or even within my own, in order to earn trust and establish reciprocity and *rispay*.

Ethical considerations when conducting research within Indigenous contexts are complicated. They are not a singular step, they are embedded in every aspect of the process itself. I think of them as mouse tracks in traditional Metis floral beadwork; they serve to remind us of the relationship between all living things. We need these reminders in our research. As Margaret Kovach (2009) elucidates, “Indigenous epistemic research conducted under Western funding or academic parameters holds a unique ethical complexity that is less about liability and is more relational” (147). I have to begin this process understanding that there will be tension when working with other Indigenous peoples, that I’ll even find it within my own community. There is a strong historical precedent of Indigenous culture being harmed by Western research. Indigenous people “have been misrepresented and exploited for countless generations as the subjects of academic, ‘scientific’ studies conducted [within Western contexts]” (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p.106). Just because I am Indigenous doesn’t necessarily mean I am entitled to an all-access pass to traditional knowledge, especially those held by other Indigenous peoples. However, establishing trusting relationships is not an impossible task. It just takes time, and a genuine willingness to do the work and be comfortable with boundaries. I recognize this as a connection to my harvesting of medicines. When I go to pick plants I speak to them. I make an offering of *li tabaa*, and I am mindful not to take too much. Just as I establish relationships with the places I harvest from, and the plants that gift me medicines, my framework endeavours to do the same with people and treat their knowledge as medicines in their own right. Before I can

gather knowledge, I must “[follow] protocols, [show] guardianship over sacred knowledges, [stand] by cultural validity of knowledge, [and finally find an appropriate way] to give back” (Kovach, 2009, p.147). What you give back depends on the environment you are in and the needs of the community that has welcomed you.

The gathering of knowledge should be a gift in itself. It should not be extractive. Within this framework, it is my way of uplifting the subaltern, of exposing truths and raising voices that have been too often silenced. It is my way of connecting to my family, of doing the listening I was raised to do. When I am researching in this context, I am both harvester and witness. I am actively immersed in teachings that are more ancient and precious than what can be seen, to some they may be ancestors themselves and I am at once in “a spiritual world that is ever present but not visible” (Belcourt, 2002).

When handling what is sacred, it’s important to be mindful of where you place it next. My methodology is rooted in informed consent, and for me that looks like co-creation. It is having deep conversations with participants while harvesting, or beading, or doing yard work, or preparing a meal. It is discerning what is appropriate to publish, or not. Or how, it is important to consider that so “much of the work accomplished by Indigenous people is communal and cooperative in nature. We could not, culturally speaking, analyze the data without the input of the participants” (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 168). It is the responsibility of the researcher to stand up to academic gatekeepers and challenge the “intolerance and antagonism [experienced] by Indigenous researchers trying to write” (Absolon, 2009, p.157) in ways that honour the stewards of the knowledge being brought forward. Reducing knowledge can ultimately cause more harm than good. We must not pick too much or out of season. We must honour our relationships to all things, or risk the result being bad medicine.

Ka Payhyamakuhk

By allowing myself to explore research methodologies on a deeper, more personal level I have come to a place where I feel more confident in my ability to challenge the academy. I am proud of my methodology, and love that it has taken root in Metis harvesting traditions. Once apprehensive of integrating my culture intimately, I do feel better equipped to locate myself and approach the unique challenges that Indigenous researchers must confront. The development process was deeply emotional, it allowed me to connect with traditional Metis values on a very personal level, leaving them free to guide the cultivation, meaning making, and dissemination of knowledge, amplifying Metis women's voices. It does feel like an inception of sorts, I had to do research of my own self in order to develop a means to carry out further research.

"Ka payhyamakuhk", what's next? I am not entirely sure, if I am being honest. At this stage in my program, I have a bit of time before I am required to propose and engage in my capstone project. I feel humbled in that I have been offered multiple opportunities to engage in research and program development. In each opportunity I can see unique ways in which I can give back to community. My gathering medicines methodology would be appropriate in many contexts, but I am grateful to have the time to reflect and decide which one I choose to do. The one thing that is for certain is that having an Indigenous way of conducting this work meaningfully, one that represents my own personal values and uplifts Metis epistemologies, makes it a less arduous task. Perhaps stepping outside of the academy and just doing the thing is what my spirit needs? I will have to take a walk in the forest and ask the *maskihkiy*.

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