

**Where My edhéhke Take Me In Reimagining Curriculum:
A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of
Dene Learning From/With the Land**

by

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Abstract

nahendeh gozhih gogha nezu, Land is healing for all. This teaching has been the pivotal component of my (re)¹ searching into Land experiences. As a young girl, my experiences of learning *from* and *with* the Land were significant. Today these teachings have helped shape my sense of belonging and identity as a *ts'élí*² *iskwew*³ in relation to the Land.

As a former high school teacher, taking students on the Land generated a sense of ingenuity and wonder as they learned *from* and engaged *with* new learning landscapes. In this research, I attended closely to my relationship with the Land in order to reconceptualize curriculum in classroom spaces. I revisit my school and Land experiences in order to inquire into the curriculum making process brought forth from learning *from* and *with* the Land, more specifically the milieu of curriculum commonplaces (Schwab, 1969).

Framed by my understanding of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000), I wondered about the stories of the Land from Dene perspectives. This study was designed with the purpose of inquiring into the experiences of Dene learning *from* and *with* Land as a way to negotiate the lived experiences of *being* and *doing* with the Land as a form of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). Using narrative inquiry as a phenomenon and methodology (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992; 2000), I drew on the storied Land experiences of a Dene knowledge keeper and post-secondary students, including my own, paying particular attention to Land and school experiences. I also engaged throughout this narrative inquiry with poetic

¹ In using parentheses around (re) throughout this dissertation, I place emphasis and call attention to a 'looking backward notion' where for instance (re) in research or remembering is calling forward memories, events, or experiences of the past. Bhabha (2012) explains that "remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present " (p. 90).

² *ts'élí* (pronounced ts'ee-li) translates to *Dene woman* in the Dene Zhatie Language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

³ *iskwew* (pronounced isk-wee-uw) translates to *Cree woman* in Plains Cree Language.

expression as a way for readers to connect. Weaving in and out of stories poetically, I provided multiple forms of interpretation and expression of participant experiences. As I came to know my Dene participants in the midst of a global pandemic⁴, I captured a deepened “understanding of cultural [Dene], institutional, and social narratives shaping [both on the Land and] school stories” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 77).

By attending to dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) within narrative inquiry, stories of healing, intergenerational wisdom, and matriarchal knowledge unfolded revealing our interconnected relationship with the Land. I listened attentively to the stories of identity and explored my relationship with the Land as a way to guide the stories forward. I came alongside Dene as they shared stories of learning on the Land from a Dene paradigm⁵, listening for the Dene Laws as they emerged in our stories of *being* and *doing* with the Land. It was the stories of deep-rooted Dene histories, moccasins, and Land experiences that brought us together as a way of healing in a time of uncertainty.

My doctoral study builds on the evolution of Land-based learning informed by Indigenous curriculum perspectives as a way forward for educators to consider in curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly 1992; 2000). I share how the Land is a place for curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) creating possibilities for future Land curriculum.

⁴ During this research, the world was devastated by a global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus.

⁵ A paradigm defined by Wilson (2001), “is a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions as to how you’re going to go about doing your research” (p. 75). In this case, a Dene paradigm, honours the knowledge and actions of Dene teachings taught to me from my matriarchal kinships and ancestors both through action and story.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Anita Lafferty. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “Where My edhéhke Take Me In Reimagining Curriculum: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Dene Learning From/With the Land”, No. Pro00098599, July 9, 2020, and renewed on June 15, 2021. At the time of this work, two poems submitted in Chapter 4 of this thesis are being published as part of a journal article as Lafferty, A. (in press). A poetic inquiry into (re)connecting with the language of the land: Walking with ḏì ndéh (the earth). *Journal of Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*.

Throughout this dissertation, I have intentionally capitalized the word ‘Land’⁶ and other important words (Protocol, Indigenous, Dene), as a sign of honour and respect where the Land is central to all beings. I have learned, as a *ts’élí iskwew*, that my relationship with the Land includes a larger cultural concept that embodies the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of cosmological wisdom passed on through generations of story. I also capitalize the word North when referring to the Northwest Territories. When it is spelled in lower case, it is referring to a directional term.

First and foremost, it is with great reverence that I offered Protocol to the Land, as a way to honour this work and my ancestors’ spirit, as ceremony guides this work. For me, the Land is spirit, therefore it is given the highest esteem as a place of honour and integrity within my life and work. In this way, I honour the Land as both a proper noun and a living entity within my worlds. The knowledge I continue to search for throughout this work is intimately embedded and

⁶ Younging (2018) explains that using “capitals where conventional style does not. It is a deliberate decision” (p. 77) that signifies respect and honour in the same manner of the English language in the importance of proper nouns.

connected to all my relations, teachings, and laws found on the Land.

I use the term “*on the Land*” learning to reconstruct the view of Land-based learning-based as Earth-centred learning where Indigenous pedagogy is rooted within *dìì ndéh* (the Earth). In this study, Land encompasses the earth, sky, and land, where all entities, both living and non-living, are interconnected and speak to the educational context of Land-based learning. In the North, on the Land describes the experiences of the outdoors but closely in relationship to community life that centres around survival. This includes food relationships such as fishing, hunting, trapping, harvesting that maintain Dene cultural significance.

As language is central to my identity as a *ts'élî-iskwew*, I use Dene zhatie, and sometimes the Cree language, throughout this dissertation as a way to relearn, reconnect and recentre myself within Dene *k'èè* [ways of knowing]. In Indigenous languages, I have learned that using lower case letters denotes the equality of all things as there is no hierarchy, where language is relational with all beings. I intentionally draw attention to this as I share the written form of the Dene and Cree languages in lower case letters. It is also important to recognize that Dene and Cree are oral languages, therefore, there are many different spellings of words/phrases, and some words may be spelled different than some readers may be familiar with. I am still learning and will continue to do so after this research.

Dedication

For my late *setà* (father) & *ehsu* (granny). I know you are with me in spirit, I am guided and revered by your light. Dad, you are the light that has led me all along. You are forever in my heart, and I know you are smiling down at me. Granny, your wisdom sits within me, I am always reminded of that with each step I take. *ehh, mahsi*.

For Armin, Bella, Willow, and River who have been the greatest blessings on this journey. You are my biggest fans and greatest supports. *sedze t'ah mahsi, hiy hiy, ishnish* for believing in me. I am honoured to have you all alongside me through it all, I would not have it any other way. This is for you.

For the Land [*dii ndéh*], my greatest inspiration, teacher, and place of solitude. Throughout this entire journey, *dii ndéh* has continued to nourish my soul, breathing life and sharing stories from far and wide. *mahsi* for guiding my stories.

Acknowledgements

To My Wonderous, Loving Family: I salute you. You are my light, my energy and sedze (my heart). I take you with me on this heart journey and I recognize you as the reason I am here as you are the “*heart of the Land*” for me. mahsi, sahkihtowin.

To My Knowledge Keeper and Elders: I live because you live. I am here because of your courage and strength that lives within me. Mashí for your continued guidance and love. I recognize you as the “*wisdom of the Land*”. mahsi, sahkihtowin.

To The Strong Warriors Before Me: Dr. Florence Glanfield, Dr. Vera Caine, Dr. Sean Lessard, Dr. Trudy Cardinal, Dr. Cindy Gaudet, and Dr. Dilma de Mello with a special honouring to Dr. Jean Clandinin and Dr. Dwayne Donald. Your guidance and mentoring have proven strong, and I could not have been here without your light to guide the way. I recognize you as the spark that lit a fire and as the “*inner core of the Land*”. mahsi, sahkihtowin.

To My Participants: Your knowledge is honoured with great reverence and love. I am honoured to have walked in my moccasins alongside you. I recognize you as the path that led me down this journey and as the “*medicines of the Land*”. mahsi for guiding me forward.

To My Nation and Community: There is heart knowledge revealed in this research that is embodied by the notion of community, kinships, and relationships. I recognize Łíídlíj kúé First Nation & the Dehcho communities as the “*place where home is present*”, *godzee* [the heart]. mahsi, sahkihtowin.

To My Former Students: Each of you carry special gifts and you have taught me so much. I am humbled to have been part of your journey in learning as much as I have been a part of yours. I recognize you as the future fire and as the “*saplings of the Land*”, keep going, without you there is no future growth. mahsi, sahkihtowin.

To My Daughter Isabella: Your heart is my heart. I hand this over to you as a way forward in your own journey. I recognize you as the heartbeat, the drum, the centre of me and as the “*Love & Healing of the Land*”. My light shines because you do. *mashi sahkihtowin.*

***dij ndéh sedze* – My Heart on the Land**

on the heart of the land

I sit quietly with admiration as the wisdom unfolds before me

where the inner core sheds light on my soul

and where the medicine of the heart flame

emerges into being

where the saplings grow wildly

where places of love and healing

become a thunderous whisper

bringing forth the essence of

love in all forms, mahsi.

(Written November 26, 2021)

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Chapter 1 : Remembering Back and Forward - *kenats'endih*⁷

Story, it heals - *gondi nagojéh*

The words of Dr. Jean Clandinin sit with me—— “start with story, end with story”, (personal communication, January 10, 2018). When I thought back, I recall my educational experiences as rote memorization of facts and other nonsensical information. Nonsensical in the form of ‘not making any sense’ at the time or information that was not pertinent to my identity as a First Nation woman. It was always story that I connected with, story that led me to remember in ways that made sense to me. Story was what helped me recall the most important teachings—cultural teachings. Stories are easy to recall if reshared and retold. Stories embody and live in me. Stories and storytelling are one of the main methods of passing on knowledge and wisdom. “Stories are easier to remember— because in many ways, stories are *how* we remember” (Pink, 2006, p. 101). Over the years, I revisited many of the stories that were shared with me, especially those shared by my matriarchs, but most importantly the stories that resonated with my heart were the silent stories. With this, I start with a story that began my wonders into curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). This story is about rabbits.

In remembering my experiences with rabbits, I drift back in time to my childhood. When re-living this time in my life, I am mindful of the beautiful complexities of my early years and how it felt to be on the Land. There are so many rich encounters I have had with rabbits

⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I use the Dene (Dene zhaté/yaté) and Cree (Plains) languages as forms of reconnecting to both cultural identities I embody. In revitalizing the languages, I am (re)learning the language of my ancestors and language of the Land. My identity and relationships are formed through language. The term *kenats'endih* (pronounced keh-nah-se-n-dih) translates to *remembering* in Dene zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009). It is important to recognize that with languages, some terms are pronounced and spelled differently than may be reflected throughout this paper. As I am (re)learning these languages, I am aware of the often subtle difference in spelling and pronunciation.

throughout my life, I feel intricately connected and in relation with them, with all rabbits, both fictional and real. Rabbits intertwine my memories as though they are characters alongside my life. My first conscious memory of rabbits stems from an early age, I must have been about 4 or 5 years old. My mother, Alice, would take me snaring rabbits across the street from where we lived.

At this time, we lived in North Battleford, Saskatchewan and right across the street from our home was a small densely wooded area. I recall it as a wooded area as everything just seems larger in context from childhood memories. When thinking about the flat landscapes of central Saskatchewan, I presume it was more of a small area with a patch of trees and maybe some willow and low bushes. Anyway, this is where we would go snaring rabbits or on silent walks as I recall. We rarely spoke while on these walks. I followed intently in my mother's footsteps and listened to my surroundings. We would snare rabbits mostly in the fall and winter season when the snow was present, lightly covering the landscape.

My mother grew up in the Northwest Territories and one of her favorite traditional⁸ foods was rabbit stew, so it was important that we snared rabbits as this was our way of life. Even though we lived in an urban area, my mother found a way to bring herself and her children back to the Land. When I recall this memory, I remember I was usually the only one of her children who would be out on the Land snaring rabbits with her. I was told many times by my mother and other relatives that I have an old soul. I take this compliment with great reverence and see now that maybe this is why I often see and relate intently to the old echoes heard while

⁸ The term 'traditional' is used throughout this dissertation to refer to ancestral knowledge and ways of knowing that have been formed over generations and are often shared through oral stories and histories. I understand it as a word used for the knowledge of my ancestors and a term that is still used in many contexts throughout communities I have worked and lived in. It is a combined reference with the word knowledge where traditions are shared generationally.

on the Land: echoes that speak to my inner soul flame, echoes that reverberate from the trees, flowers, insects, and soils. Echoes that I revisit and re-encountered over and over again as I walk the Land. There is a sweet harmony that engages my spirit when out on the Land.

Back to snaring rabbits. The first time we went snaring rabbits, I recall vividly. It was a beautiful fresh winter morning, the snow covered the Land like a white blanket, the air was brisk and there was a sanctuary of silence felt as we began trekking across the bush⁹. I followed the trail that my mother was making, quietly observing her every move. She was an instinctive cartographer, always watching intently for movement, observing her surroundings, mapping the Land with each step. She was passing down the knowledge to me as I watched her and followed with curiosity and intent. I knew to be silent; I knew to stay close behind her, I knew to become aware in that moment.

As we travelled along the bush trail, it seemed as though we walked for hours, (remember I was 5, so it felt like hours). You should see my mother on the Land, she is precise in her movements, clearing trail, comfortable in her surroundings and inherently present in her understanding of the Land. She is the daughter of a great trapper, making me the grand daughter to generations of knowledge. Her movements dance in my memory and I imagine her walking alongside my grandfather when she was my age, gently following his footsteps as they snared rabbits along the Dehcho (also known as the Mackenzie) and Liard Rivers.

We walked and walked. Finally, she stopped, turned around and pointed towards the small brush and said, “my girl, do you see the trail” pointing to the small tracks in the snow, “that is the rabbit highway. This is where the rabbits travel. This is the spot we will put our

⁹ Bush is the term used for being on the Land. It is a term used generally by Northerners for being out on the Land, away from the community/town/city.

snare”. She carefully pulled out the snare and twisted it around the willow branch that lay articulately over the trail as if placed there on purpose. She wrapped the snare snugly and then placed an orange ribbon on the tree branch. She said, “Now we will be able to see where our snare is when we return tomorrow”. Then she gently turned back towards the bush trail, and we kept walking silently making our own trail. We continued through the bush and set about six or seven more snares, walking in silence, listening to our surroundings. We moved in motion with each other, peacefully and with purpose.

I found this memory as a significant placemark of ancestral teachings that exemplifies the knowledge of the Land from a Dene perspective. My mother is Dene, she gained most of her life learning from her mother and father who lived each moment with the Land, the Land of the North. Their mother and father also stemmed from the North, and so on. Generations of knowledge and wisdom of living and learning from and with the Land stems from the silent walks I took with my mother on this particular day. These moments tie me to my ancestral roots that have helped shape my identity and a way forward in re-connecting to the Land that is central in my work.

My mother taught me to be still in my movements as I walked through the bush; she taught me to listen attentively to the silences and sounds of the Land; she taught me to observe my surroundings and to be aware and live in the moment. These teachings are not part of my conventional learning landscapes of the classroom but are the silent teachings from my childhood— silent teachings that do not require a voice and are found in my memories of learning from the Land alongside my matriarchs, where the wisdom of generations echoed the old ways of knowing on the Land, ways that connected me to my identity as a ts’élî iskwew. Where the soil is a reminder of the color of my skin, where the leaves sway like the wind in my

long dark hair, and where the birds sing songs of the heart that are reminders of songs that are still sung today but are songs of generations. I sit with these teachings often as a source of nourishment for my way forward in curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). These silent teachings are an awakening to the stories of the Land, stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) as I seek change in the way we view curriculum. I am awake to the notion of rabbits and the teachings they silently bring forward. I am appreciating the experience and resurgence of memories. As I (re)settle with these teachings, I am remembering both backward and forward, inward and outward with attention to places(s) (Clandinin, 2013, p. 39) and in doing so I share poetically more memories and teachings of rabbits brought forth as roots of my matriarch wisdom.

Rabbit Memories

*my childhood memories of rabbit worlds
bring me to a place of my ancestral footprints.
a place that is bestowed in my memories.
as one of the foundational frameworks of my traditional roots
roots that were not known at the time,
but are instantly uprooted and interwoven within my storyworlds.
like Alice in Wonderland, a story of imaginations gone wild.
I travel through time to unravel the story
of my relationship with rabbits.
it begins with the fond memory of the snow below my feet,
as I walk through the trails and the openness of nature
meandering through time, navigating landscapes*

*following my mother closely in temporal silence.
carefully I walk guided by the wisdom situated before me.
I listen thoughtfully to the tree branches whispering in the wind
and the crunching of the snow below my boots as we break trail
and to the snowbirds as they sing quietly in the distance.
watching my mother's every step, living in the moment
as she teaches me to be stealthy in my movements
stay still, stay aware and stay wakeful¹⁰.
she is teaching me the ways of our ancestors.
the roots of our existence,
all through the snaring of rabbits.*

(Originally written February 2, 2017; edited March 3, 2021)

In this way of recalling and reliving, I am becoming wide-awake to the world (Greene, 1977) and listening to the silences that I notice are often unheard within curriculum and life stories. Greene describes wide-awakeness in relation “to being in the world . . . a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements . . . This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awareness” (p. 121). Curriculum lives within me as a teacher; it is a part of who I am as I negotiate with the students I encounter and the classroom spaces I enter. The curriculum I have come to know through this process is found within my lived experiences but also within the oral

¹⁰ “a state that asks inquirers to stay wakeful, and thoughtful, about all of our inquiry decision” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 184)

histories, within the silences and old echoes, and within the matriarch and knowledge keeper teachings and stories. These are stories to live by that interconnect my narrative conceptions of identity and connection to the Land teachings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Where stories to live by, coined by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) in their research of teacher identity, “is given meaning by knowledge and context” (p. 4). With this, I am reminded by Clandinin (2013) to attend to the relational aspects of our storied lives with each other; with self; with the past, present, and future; with intergenerational stories; with feelings; with the physical and metaphysical; with language and with culture (p. 23). As I (re)tell this story of my matriarchs and mother it is the teachings that bring me to the curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) knowing they were absent in my school experiences. The Land was my teacher, the rabbits were my teachers, the silences were my teachers, and my matriarch was my most valued teacher in this story. This is a story of healing. These are my curriculum makers. *nahénguinde* (I shared with you all, the story).

Acknowledging Narrative Beginnings

It is important that I acknowledge my narrative beginnings to explain why I centre my research within the lineage of my matriarchs. My matriarchs have taught me the way of being and doing on the Land from a Dene perspective. Dene *k'ęę* is translated as the Dene way or Dene ways of knowing. From a research perspective Dene *k'ęę* can also be thought of as a paradigm where “the interrelated concepts of ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology” (Wilson, 2001, p. 33) are formed through Dene beliefs. The late Dene scholar Phoebe Nahanni (1977) explains that:

Our way of life is very ancient and enriching. Our economy is based on hunting, trapping, and fishing. Long before any non-Dene ever set foot on our land, our ancestors

lived and learned from each other, from the land, and other beings on the land – the animals, birds, and insects . . . Our way of life has been happening for a long, long time before any non-Dene ever set foot on this land, and it is still happening today. (p. 21)

The way of understanding Dene *k'ęę* has not been shaped overnight or even throughout this specific research; it is a lifetime of learning, and I am continually learning as I dwell with stories of the Land. As I negotiate my understanding of what it means for me to *be Dene* or *think Dene*, I only speak for my experiences and the relevance of focusing my research from a matriarchal Dene mind frame. I have been taught by my matriarchs and learned about female roles and teachings. I know what this means for me as a Dene woman. I cannot speak to the experiences of male teachings. I also do not “arrogantly assume that I know what is relevant [for] the entire [Dene] people” (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 9). Dene communities are not static or homogenous; there is not one way of knowing, there are many. We all come with experiences and knowledge; this is my understandings of what it means to *be Dene* and to revere this in the way that I know how. As I honour my lineage, I am sharing with you a part of myself, a part of my roots, and a part of where the knowledge comes from in order to situate my research puzzle that is centred around identity and curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000).

I have come to know, “it is important that I place myself and identify my own relationality and understanding of Indigenous ways of knowledge and knowing” (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 95). It is not responsible of me to speak of Dene *k'ęę* [ways of knowing] without first “relating pieces of my stories and ideas to the research topic” (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 99) and to truly understand what and who has shaped my understandings of knowledge. Also, when sharing my perspective of what I have come to know as Indigenous ways of

knowing¹¹, it is important that I recognize all of my teachers including my ancestors, my family, my husband, my daughter, my students, and all the living and non-living beings that have taught me to view life through an Indigenous lens with patience, humility, integrity, and most importantly, love. Within Indigenous research, “self-location means cultural identification, and it manifests itself in various ways” (Kovach, 2009, p. 110). Locating myself is important as I (re)engage in unraveling my historical roots, as Cree scholar Michell (2005) explains that “our lives, stories, experiences, challenges, births, and deaths are written all over this landscape” (p. 35), especially knowing that I come from many landscapes, not just one.

*nōhtsi*¹² *mahsi cho*¹³, first I thank the Creator¹⁴ for giving me this life and this wondrous journey. My given name is Anita Lafferty. I am Dene (Dene *zhatié*¹⁵) and Cree (Plains) and a direct descendant of *Łııdlıı kúé* First Nation in the Northwest Territories. I am a matriarch, a mother, a wife, a sister, an auntie, a cousin, and a lifelong learner, I am not one identity, but a wonderful kaleidoscope of many identities intertwined in a bundle of storied experiences. I grew up in many different landscapes across Canada including the plains of Saskatchewan, the mountains of British Columbia, the endless beauty of the Northwest Territories, and the hustle and bustle of the urbanness in Alberta. Growing up in poverty was a reality but I was fortunate to have had many experiences of learning on the Land. My parents liked to hunt, and my mother

¹¹ Indigenous ways of knowing are centred around cultural affiliation and teachings informed through traditions of a nation, not to be confused with an integrated knowledge system. I am both Dene and Cree and I have learned teachings from both cultures, and many other Indigenous cultures. Each nation is distinct with distinct ways of knowing. Throughout this research, it is used as a general term, informed by my experiences. It is difficult to discuss Indigenous ways of knowing through written text because it is shaped by relational lived experience, through actions. It is fluid and dynamic, not static.

¹² *nōhtsi* (pronounced noh-tsee) translates to *Creator/God* in Dene *zhatié* language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

¹³ *mahsi cho* (pronounced mah-see cho) translates to *thank you* in Dene *zhatié* language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

¹⁴ Creator refers to the higher spiritual power or God.

¹⁵ Dene *zhatié* translates to *South Slavey*, where the language is situated within the Dehcho (Mackenzie) River. South Slavey is the English term for the language spoken of the Dene in Southern NWT and parts of Alberta and British Columbia. Dene *zhatié* is the traditional name of one of the Dene dialects in the Dehcho region.

taught me traditional¹⁶ sewing skills. For us it was a way of life and a lifestyle, a way out of the poverty that was situated in the urban cities where we often lived.

My late, *setà*¹⁷, John Ballendine, who has travelled on to the spirit world now, was born and raised in Battleford, Saskatchewan. My father was of Cree descent and his great grandfather was Frederick Ballendine, (aka Ermineskin), a Cree/Metis man who was adopted in the late 1870's sometime during the signing of Treaty Six. This part of my lineage I am still unravelling as exploration of my identity as an *iskwew* is surrounded by tensions associated in not knowing where to seek this knowledge. My kinship ties I have with my father's lineage are distant. I think my father felt this way as well, having a tension of not clearly understanding his identity as a *nehiyaw*¹⁸. I will continue to sort out and attend to these tensions of not knowing and finding comfort in the unknowns. In this way, I am still unravelling narratives as I continue "world-traveling" (Lugones, 1987, p. 3) and attending to these unknown stories and re-searching of Cree identity.

My father was a quiet, humble, and stoic man in nature, who always had a book in his hand. My love of books stems from his. He grew up in an era when being a First Nation person was often denied by a society that relished in colonial ideologies and when poverty was all too common for First Nation's people. I often noticed the recognizable trauma that my father withheld through his silence, but as a survivor he always made sure that his children were taken care of, keeping food on the table and clothes on our backs. He had a deep love of the Land, he taught me how to hunt, how to fish, and how to nourish my spirit by challenging my inner

¹⁶ Traditional learning refers to the informal, outside classroom experiences that include cultural and oral teachings, teachings from my grandparents and parents such as values, ethics, customs, and lifestyle that have been passed from generation to generation within my family.

¹⁷ *setà* (pronounced se-tah) translates to *my father* in Dene zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

¹⁸ *nehiyaw* (pronounced ney-hee-ow) translates to *Cree person* in Plains Cree language (LeClaire, Cardinal, & Hunter, 1998).

strength. Most importantly, he taught me to be conscious of who I am in my identity as a First Nations woman. He always reminded me to never undermine my abilities and to strive for the moon and the stars, and that anything I did is because I carry the strength of being a warrior.

*semô*¹⁹ is Alice Lafferty and she is a Dene (Dene *zhatié*) woman from Łíídljì kùé First Nation in the Northwest Territories. My mother is a strong-rooted Dene woman from whom I learned much of my traditional and cultural teachings. She taught me to be humble, to listen to my environment, and to be fearless. She also taught me to read the Land in search of rabbit highways, to sew and to snare rabbits and cook a feast. I recall memories of my mother's journey in education which entailed her upgrading to obtain her high school diploma while sustaining a family with four young children. Her sheer determination and will to succeed is a constant reminder to me to continue each day. As a young girl, I remember she would sit at the kitchen table working on her homework while we would be getting ready for bed, and she would start her studying. Often, she would ask my older sister for some clarity on questions she was struggling with as English was her second language. My mother is fluent in Dene *zhatié*, but she rarely spoke Dene to us. As I learned about the dark history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the intergenerational impacts, I know why she did not speak Dene to us. She once revealed to me that she felt ashamed to speak Dene and lonely for other Dene speakers because we grew up in a mostly Cree speaking territory. After she completed her diploma, she continued on to culinary school. This was another blessing for me, because she taught me how to cook on an open fire as a young girl, skills I still hone each day. Recalling her actions through her educational path, she silently taught me to never give up on my own educational pursuits.

My cultural identity also helps me define who I am as a researcher, in that I take care and

¹⁹ *semô* (pronounced se-moh) translates to *my mother* in Dene *Zhatié* language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

responsibility in the way I walk in moccasins within this academic world. Growing up, we always had moccasins, Dene-style moccasins. They were beaded with flowers, symbols of the love of the Land, strengthened with smoke-tanned moose hide and adorned with beaver fur, a symbol of family, connection, and determination. This work symbolizes where my moccasins meet the road, it is a journey of self, of what it means to learn *from* and *with* the Land from a Dene perspective. It is my moccasins that signify my past, present, and future and with each stride in this new space, I am able to reconnect my understanding of knowledge. When I think of my moccasins in the past, I am reminded that they carry the significance of the old echoes (stories), the generations of knowledge that are offered in their presence. This is the knowledge that has been passed on from generations of matriarchal stories and actions. The present is that they still exist, that with the symbolism of their durability they are an artifact (more stories) that denotes my very existence. The future is signified by the fact that my daughter still carries (her story) the tradition of creating her own beadwork and, in essence, finding her path as her moccasins guide her too. I feel a sense of comfort knowing she will continue these practices throughout her life.

Today, when I wear my moccasins, I am able to create a path for a new generation of Indigenous scholars, teachers, and women. I am a First Nation woman, as Chambers (2008) describes, who is “wayfinding” (p. 11) her way as a scholar in a world not designed for her but changing the landscape leaving moccasin footprints as I do. I acknowledge the moccasin makers and matriarchs (knowledge keepers) who walk alongside me on this journey. Their teachings are with me with each stride. As I share their significance, I share with you a photo of a special pair of moccasins that are the centre of my stories to provide you an image that coincides with my storied life. These moccasins are more than 20 years old. My late grandmother Elizabeth made

them for me when I was in high school, and I still wear them almost every day. As you can see



Figure 1.1 Photograph of Matriarch Moccasins

the beaver fur is looking old and tattered, but they have stood and continue to withstand the test of time. They help centre and ground me to the Land and to my identity as a Dene Cree woman.

As a young girl, I learned my ancestral ways of knowing *from* the Land such as snaring rabbits, hunting, fishing, and learning the significance of my traditional culture on the Land such as respect, offerings, and ceremony. It is important to note that

the word “tradition” and the phrase “on the land”, may concern non-northern readers,

who these days are keenly aware of how much “traditions” are constructed and for whom “on the land” is a signifier without a referent. In the north, these terms are so much a part of everyday discourse that they pass unnoticed. (Kulchyski, 2005, p. 22)

As I further my formal²⁰ education, I have embraced knowledge which is shaped by the Land that is teaching me new ways of understanding curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). An important element of Indigenous education revolves around “learning how to learn” (Cajete, 1994, p. 223) and as I am learning what knowledge is from a Dene paradigm, I am also learning about curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) in new ways. I am beginning to (re)connect, (re)evaluate, and (re)engage with multiple ways of knowing that include an Indigenous paradigm. For me, an Indigenous paradigm is relational, connecting me to the old ways in relation to the contemporary world. It is this new formed relationship with knowledge and the turning inward in a spiritual sense that I am beginning to unfold as I revisit stories of my school and Land experiences. The relationship with the Land and the connection that is inherent within me is felt as I walk in my moccasins, shaped by the hands of my grandmother, and shared through the presence of my daughter.

McLeod (2007) explains that it is the “old voices that echo the ancient poetic memory of our ancestors finding a home in our individual lives [allowing] us to reshape our experiences so that we can interpret the world we find ourselves in” (p. 11). These old voices, voices of my ancestors, shape my understanding of knowledge, and it is my family on both my maternal and paternal sides that have inspired the way I engage with research. As I continually locate myself

²⁰ I use the term formal education and formal learning interchangeably in reference to current school systems with structured classroom learning environments that consist of standardized instruction mainly within an indoor setting. Where learning takes place in structured environments and often culminates in the achievement of a diploma/degree or other standardized qualifications.

throughout this work, Kovach (2009) reminds me that “self-location anchors knowledge within experiences and it is these experiences that greatly influence interpretations” (p. 111) to be strong like two people.

Strong Like Two People - *nátse ǫkene*

The wonder of who am I as a matriarch is situated within stories that are continuously unfolding where I am “learning about how story medicines can work, and gradually finding my place within the work” (Anderson, 2011, p. 15). For me, the word matriarch carries with it the notion of intergenerational wisdom, established strength, and admired courage. Although, I too, wonder where in curriculum are

the stories of kokum [granny] teaching the four-year-old how to hunt; the depictions of infants in moss bags watching siblings and female relatives pick berries or roots; the puberty fasts; the fiddle dances and the Sun Dances; the women's councils? (Anderson, 2011, p. 16).

These stories are also absent from the narratives of my school experiences. There was a sense of cultural anonymity where my grandmothers’ voices were silent and voiceless in my educational experiences. My teachers rarely spoke of the grandmother stories, and if they did, it was as though First Nation grandmothers were myths or legends to be deciphered where notions of falsehoods were often portrayed by media. As a First Nation woman, I have experienced the silence of our matriarchal history in many forms. On this journey of rematriating these stories, I am aware of my responsibility for continuing these stories long after this research. As I am learning and (re)connecting with Dene *k’ęę*, I am aware that my journey is just beginning. I am like a toddler trying to my find balance as I negotiate the Landscapes I encounter where I am observant, curious, and full of vibrant energy but careful and strident as I emerge into this

knowledge and knowing. I turned “my attention . . . to the importance of wide-awakeness, of awareness of what it is to be in the world[s]” (Greene, 1995, p. 35) I encounter.

Through revisiting my mother’s stories, I understand the traditional knowledge my mother carries was taught to her by her mother and grandmother, and her mother and grandmother were taught by their mothers and grandmothers and so on and so on. It was a cyclical and reciprocal way of knowledge sharing. Intergenerational wisdom is the knowledge I embody as I am (re)learning and (re)connecting with these stories and teachings. These teachings are ancient. The Land knowledge my mother shares with me is as old as the Great Slave Lake (10,000 years). The wisdom of our grandmothers is present in our lives and stories. It was and continues to be present in the silent walks as I engage with the Land, it is present within my daughter’s movements as she carefully beads Dene earrings, and it is present in moccasins I wear as I sit here and write this.

When I envision curriculum today, I revisit the time spent with my grandmother that represents a renewed understanding of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). I acknowledge the stories of my matriarchs as important teachings and perspectives of women on the Land that are no longer idle. I see their stories as I walk the Land, witness the birds high above me, watch the squirrels gather, listen to the wind blow and the leaves whisper. Their stories are everywhere on the Land. Through this research I choose to listen, to imagine, and (re)imagine curriculum of the Land that carries the characteristics of matriarchal wisdom. The wisdom my grandmother embodies sits with me as the heart of curriculum making. It brings the old ways forward; it is the matriarchal knowledge that exists in the story of her strength and resiliency as a Dene that began my reimagining of curriculum.

I recall childhood memories of being on the Land with my mother and grandmother. I am

reminded of the gentle teachings of the Land and what learning from the Land has done in helping me understand Dene *k'ęę*. I often wonder why we, as Indigenous women, are kept silent in history, curriculum, and education. Our silence is a colonial thought. I wonder about the old stories and matriarchal ways; I listen for them and ask about them when I am with my matriarchs. As I walk the Land, I listen for the grandmother's wisdom. I wonder about the untold stories found on the many landscapes I visit.

When I reflect on the teachings and experiences from matriarchs, I recall the reason that brought me to this place of academia. In Dene, our knowledge keepers and *ohndaa ké*²¹[Elders] have said that in order to live in peace, we need to be *strong like two people* [*nátse ękene*], meaning that we, as Dene, have to learn to live in two worlds: one in the Eurocentric colonized world and one in the Dene *k'ęę* world as our ancestors intended. Often when I think about this, I feel tension, I feel disdain for how society created such disregard for Indigenous Peoples. I also have to remember forgiveness, where forgiveness means to let go and to reconcile. This, too, is part of my journey here; it is healing (*gondi nagojéh*, story, it heals).

Looking Back on the Land

In searching for what shapes school experiences, I paid particular attention to Dewey's foundational place of understanding experiences are held within my interactions²². I looked inward and outward, backwards and forwards (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992; 2000) as this inquiry is shaped by a sense of belonging and identity. Clandinin and Connelly explain that by referring to inward as “the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and

²¹ *ohndaa ké* (pronounced ohn-da kay) translates to *Elders* in Dene Zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

²² Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the three-dimensional metaphorical space of experience as paying particular attention to personal and sociality, temporality, and place where balance is found in understanding that our experiences address temporal matters in temporal places while focus on the personal and social as they occur in specific places or a sequence of places (p. 50).

moral dispositions. By outward, we mean the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality – past, present, and future” (p.50).

When I think back to my memories of school experiences, there were few to no cultural connections, especially those associated with on-the-Land learning. It is understood that Dene culture is present when on the Land, but the Land was not present while I was in school. I often felt lost within a world that was not meant for me. Lost in the world of school experiences that stifled my curious nature. My school experiences that I had did not allow me to feel lost in my own imagination, an imagination filled with Dene *k'ęę* understanding. I found myself thinking of Greene's (1995) words as she speaks of imagination, curiosity, and classrooms spaces. She explains “our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful . . . they ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered” (p. 43). This sense of curiosity and imagination was always present within me when I was on the Land with matriarchs. The sense of wonder was formed while on the Land, where curiosity peaks through the trees, and the sounds of footsteps on the crunching snow, and the shadows formed through the cascading light. In this sense of wonder, I hear, see, smell, and even taste matriarch stories on the many landscapes I encounter. Throughout this journey in academia, I began to pay particular attention to the Land, where I found myself in moments of wondering where I am taken back to ancestral times. I often wrote. At the time I was not engaged in research but in a sense, they were fieldnotes, they were poetry, as they were snippets of stories in various landscapes. These poetic wonders helped shape my thinking forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) where *dji ndéh* connected me to curriculum, and to what it meant to be a *ts'éli - iskwew* and to my matriarchs. I slide back to a memory of being on campus.

Silence of snow tracks embrace me with each step. I feel delight and awe on this beautiful winter day. Tranquility in this space, abundant, yet serene. Comfort is felt as I slowly gaze ahead of the unbeaten path ahead where snow feels like clouds below my feet. I embrace this moment with arms full. The snow is gently falling, crisp air is felt upon my nose. I reminisce in the presence of Winter, the stillness of the world, and of campus. There are no other students wandering about, just me, true Northern in love with the bitter cold, adorned in moosehide gloves and mukluks. As I stroll along, I feel the calmness upon my feet, I feel the winters' glow of the snowflakes surrounding me, I am not alone here; I feel the presence of ancestors.

I track my steps forward looking up at the sky seeking comfort in the blueness. I pause next to a tree and stand in the stillness where my breath takes shape in the soft breeze as moisture brings signs of bitterness most people shy away from. Not me, not this Northern girl, I stand in comfort. There are whispers I hear as I lean into the moment realizing that the whispers are from the trees. The murmur of ancient voices sharing stories among each other, the trees too, like the silence of this time. No abrasive human exposure, no loud buoyant voices, just nature's powerful hum of silence.

*In this moment, my thoughts wander to wonders of *dijj ndéh*. What would my ancestors think of this landscape? I wonder how it looked 200 years ago, was it colder then? And whose footprints walked here before me? What did they feel as they walked here in this exact place? So many wonders. I am sure if I listen closely, I will hear my answers to these wonders.*

(Poetic field note, January 19, 2019).

These moments shaped by *dij ndéh* began to emerge as stories in different places in the midst of “prereflective landscapes . . . [where I] strained toward horizons: horizons of what might be, [to] horizons of what was” (Greene, 1995, p. 73) to include the voices of my ancestors. It is a fact that trees and wild plants talk to each other, not aloud but in their own way. It is through their root systems that they transmit messages to each other. Peter Wohlleben (2016) an ecological scientist writes in his book *The Hidden Life of Trees* that trees speak to one another through scent and their roots. They also protect themselves and other species through various defense mechanisms found within their seeds, cones, leaves, etc. As I think backward to the stories from my relatives, my Dene ancestors knew the great significance of trees and plants which are still used in various forms today. Trees and plants are healing; they bring medicinal elements that cure certain ailments. As I walked through campus in January of 2019, I found it important to pay particular attention to *dij ndéh* and reflect on the curriculum, more specifically, the learning environments and the wonder and possibilities that were present. I was able to imagine new possibilities as a curriculum maker and educator through this experience.

As I shift back to my experiences as a teacher, my focus was on creating curriculum environments that honoured cultural identity, mainly First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures. It was important for me to create learning spaces and classroom experiences that are shaped and informed by Indigenous worldviews that “recognizes, respects, and integrates [Indigenous] knowledges, heritages, and ways of life as an integral part of education” (Battiste, 2013, p. 30). Dewey (1938) asks important questions of education: “How does the subject matter function [and] is there anything inherent in experience which tends towards progressive organization of its contents, [and] what results follow when the materials of experience are not progressively organized” (p. 20)? For Indigenous students, the results are lower graduation rates, higher drop

out rates, performance gaps, and few instances of self-representation within learning environments (Battiste, 2013). In reflection on Dewey's questions, I began to wonder about curriculum and shifting the stories and subject matter to where the functions honour identity and belonging, especially for Indigenous students. I wanted to make sure they always felt like they belonged, like their identity mattered in their school experiences.

Looking back at my teaching experiences, I recognized that it was not until I brought students on the Land that I would witness their excitement and enthusiasm for learning increase. I refer to them as *Land classrooms* where they learned cultural skills such as hide scraping, drum making, canoeing, and, most importantly, ceremony. In order to understand the importance of these Land classrooms, let me share how these experiences came together.

At the beginning of each semester, my colleagues and I would prepare a 3-day on the Land program for Indigenous students. It was a chance for students to learn more about each other, connect with their peers, engage hands-on with Indigenous cultural practices, learn leadership skills, and be on the Land. There were no formal classrooms, no scheduled bells, and no assignments. Each year the conceptual theme of the program shifted: one year it was focused on leadership, another year it was focused on culture and subsequent years traditional games. But on the Land learning and peer mentoring were central to the program and all activities remained connected to the Land with teachings rooted in Indigenous perspectives.

In my experiences with students and teachers, I noticed that the way we teach in secondary schools has not changed much since I was a student in high school, with few to no interactions with the outdoors. Biesta (2015) states that "to learn from someone is a radically different experience from the experience of being taught by someone" (p. 53). I have learned

from many classroom teachers throughout my life, but I was taught by my matriarchs the ways of being on the Land from a Dene perspective. Biesta (2015) further explains that

students learn from their teachers, the teacher figures as a resource so that what is being learned from the teacher is within control of the student, the experience of “being taught” [learning with] is about those situations in which something enters our being from the outside, so to speak, as something that is fundamentally beyond the control of the “learner” . . . learning from within. (p. 57)

This is fundamentally experiential learning, a form of learning that also speaks to the way I was taught by my mother and grandmother. Land-based or on the Land learning is the process of learning *from* and *with* the Land, (re)connecting to teachings, being active on the Land, and knowledge sharing through active engagement.

On the Land learning programs are emerging in schools across Canada and have been established in the Northwest Territories (NWT) for a longer period of time (such as Dechinta Bush University established in 2008, NWT on the Land Collaborative Program established in 2014, Dene kede²³ curriculum in 1993, and Inuuqatigiit curriculum in 1996). Being on the Land has helped affirm and root my identity and connection to ancestral teachings. As I continue searching, I find myself seeking more Dene *k'ęę* stories, matriarchal stories, and curriculum stories that reflect Dene philosophies and shift curriculum stories. This idea of transformative pedagogy as Greene (2000) explains “must relate both to existing conditions and to something that we are trying to bring into being, something that goes beyond a present situation” (p. 51). The possibilities of on the Land curriculum that speaks to ancestral ways where we (Dene) can

²³ Dene Kede, a Dene Curriculum used and developed in the Northwest Territories was created in 1993 and continues to be used in schools. The Dene Kede Curriculum is based on Dene perspectives of Land, spirit, animals, and people. Retrieved from https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/dene_kede_k-6_full_curriculum.pdf.

be strong like two people [nátse ǫkene] brought me to my research puzzle. Like Greene (2000) “this possibility . . . is what restructuring might signify” where the larger narratives may seek to enhance learning (p. 16).

Unraveling Knowledge and Knowing

My knowing is deeply shaped by numerous schools I have attended, “first as a student, then a teacher, then a teacher educator, and now a researcher of curriculum” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 26). But my knowing is also shaped by the stories and teachings I have learned from the Land, from ceremony, and from my matriarchs. The stories I share of my grandmother transcend the meaning of intergenerational learning. Scott (2007) explains that “it is the elders who have been the guardians of story, the story keepers” (p. 2). They keep the stories of the Land, of the history, and of the people interwoven throughout the landscapes like pieces of a puzzle to be decoded over time. These are stories held by place. The stories I have come to know are “not just stories of entertainment, they are the library of centuries of learning” (Scott, 2007, p. 2) formed through the eyes of my ancestors whose stories have survived since time immemorial²⁴. These stories have shaped my understanding of knowledge and formed with it a library full of stories to be shared and re-shared.

As I arrived at matriarch stories, I was reminded of the classrooms I have encountered both formally and informally and the many sceneries of learning that each carry. Scott (2007) explains that intergenerational wisdom is where “stories [are] handed down . . ., keeping them alive through sharing of countless details of events, places, [where] the people who carried them forward [use stories] as tools to teach and inform youth of the skills necessary for their very

²⁴ Time immemorial refers to the beginning of our Indigenous existence according to time, meaning we (Indigenous peoples of the Americas, of Turtle Island) have been here since beyond when we can remember and beyond when it was written.

survival” (p. 2). When *ohndaa ké* [Elders] pass on to the spirit world, the stories they carry with them are no longer accessible to learn leaving a void in our histories. There is an evident need and desire to learn about their experiences as these stories are stories that shape my identity as a *ts’éli – iskwew*; stories that shape the past, the present, and future; stories of a deep-rooted history that I am still learning; and stories that connect me to the landscapes I call home, *Denendéh*²⁵.

What I have come to understand about knowledge is that it forms over time as part of a process—a process that, in my experiences, includes multiple ways of knowing and learning methods. My formal learning experiences always made me feel as though I was sitting on the sideline, waiting for the teacher to call upon me, or waiting for my turn to speak. Often, I would sit in the background wondering if the teacher even noticed me. These experiences were far from exciting or intriguing but as I became teacher, I began to understand why my formal education repeatedly felt unsettled. It felt unsettled because I was often labelled by my teachers as an introverted student, I would find myself sitting in the back of the class, quiet yet content, but always wondering—wondering about the world outside the glass windowpanes; wondering outside the starkness of the smelly, old, ratty textbooks; wondering outside the whiteness of the dense walls. I was always wondering, often feeling like a senseless wonderer in a world built for wandering.

As a constant wonderer, I also learned to listen attentively in my classrooms; listening to everything and everyone that surrounded me. It was listening that helped me become a great student. I learned to listen to my environments, reliving stories quietly as I engaged with forms of knowledge and learning in the many classroom spaces I encountered. As a teacher, I learned

²⁵ *Denendeh* translates to *The Land of the People* and refers to the Land in the Northwest Territories, in what is now called Canada.

to listen in a different way. I listened to my mentors, my advisors, and especially, I learned to listen to my students. Most of my students self-identified²⁶ as being Indigenous and together we would often find ourselves “dwelling in” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 24) our personal stories to gain a better understanding of each other in order to learn of our kinships, relations, and connectedness as Indigenous peoples. It was comforting and reassuring to sit quietly and listen, something I wish a teacher would have done for me. Some of the stories my students shared “in the midst” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63) of classes were often similar to my own, “located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place and the personal and social” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). There were stories of struggle, stories of being an Indigenous student (both the good and the bad), stories of life, stories of poverty, but also stories of achievement, stories of honor, and stories of the Land.

I now recognize my ancestors and relatives in all that I do. During the Dene Education Summit, Dene National Chief Norman Yakeleya (2020) spoke about the importance of going back to the ceremonies stating, “that is where the recognition lies, the fire feeding ceremony, the water and sky ceremonies, the honouring ceremonies, that is our Dene education” (personal communication, June 21, 2020). Boyer (2010) expands on this stating that “traditionally, Indigenous knowledge [pedagogy] was conveyed through storytelling, ceremonies, songs, and dances from generation to generation” (p. 2). It is important to remember that “Indigenous pedagogy is not just a way of doing, but it’s also a way of being” (Restoule & Chaw-win-is, 2007, p. 11). Our Dene stories have been shared over generations and have a deep-rooted history and relationship with the Land. This is communicated through the Dene language and found within the many landscapes of the North. Scott (2007) explains that “the love of a child for its

²⁶ Self-identify refers to the proclamation of tribal, nation, cultural and/or ethnic background that includes First Nation, Metis and Inuit or other Indigenous tribal affiliation.

parents can be limitless; the love for the Land by Dene continues with the same type of intensity” (p. 57).

Knowledge, for me, is shaped by two ways of knowing that complement each other: one formal and the other traditional. For me, Land-based learning means to learn *from* the Land all the teachings that it has to offer in a setting that occurs over time, in-between spaces, and places where knowledge flows with an intensity that adheres to my inner soulflame²⁷ as it did with my ancestors. Being on the Land brings forth a strong-rooted history embodied by relationships. When I took students on the Land, I witnessed changes in their behavior where their inquisitive minds would come alive, and curiosity was prominent in the way they too inquired into stories. Continuous learning students learned *from* and *with* the Land similar to the way their ancestors did. Learning *with* the Land is recognizing my ability to nourish my connection between self (humans), plants, animals, and the elements that foster my mind, body, spirit, and most importantly for me, my emotions. Knowing there is a way forward in looking back as I return to the stories I was told, shared, and lived is also a place of healing.

Dwelling Artfully and Poetically

As I engaged through this process narratively, I was motivated to inquire into my research artfully and poetically as a way of calling forward emotional facets of both me and my participants experiences. Greene (1995) reminded me that as we engage with art, we “grasp works and words as events in contexts of meaning and undertake common searches for [our] own places and significance in a history to which [we] belong and which [we] invent and interpret as [we] live (p. 150). Through art, I am able to express myself visually using various

²⁷ Soulflame (shown as one word) refers to how McAdams (2015) describes it in *Nationhood Interrupted* as the spirit within us. McAdams (2015) explains that “just as fire is the center of the Earth, the core of humanity reveals our heart and connection to our spirit; in other words, our soulflame” (p. 27).

techniques such as painting, drawing, sewing, and photographs. I am a visual learner and over the years I have come to use art as a way to tell my stories of experience creatively. Art tells a visual story, where the story is imagined by the artist and the person experiencing the art through their own visionary lens as an artful inquiry. I do not separate art from poetry, as art is poetry; poetry is art for me. As I visualize arts in motion from a new perspective through the following artful poem, I am able to “think of a deepening and expanding mode of tuning-in” (Greene, 1995, p. 104) as my relation to art flows.

Art is the ingenuity of the mind ~ it is where creativity flows physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually ~ whimsically forming alluring shapes and sounds in worlds of discovery ~ where the heart listens to the mind and speaks to ideas ~ setting a stage for new directions ~ captivating the elements insightfully ~ it is where epiphany comes alive ~ as stor(ies) converge with divergent thinking ~ connecting the hippocampus into action ~ art is abstraction where flexibility and adaptability collide ~ finding a place in works of the mind ~ and possibilities in experience to stimulate the senses

(Written March 2022)

Poetry also tells a story, a story of words. Poetry allowed my voice to weave through my life experiences while untangling memories brought forth as I began unraveling their layers. As I present my poems throughout this dissertation, I do so whimsically, I let the words dance across the page as I imagine them in different landscapes. Through poetry, rhythmic verse and aesthetic qualities of language are captivated and shared making more possibilities possible as spaces of

in-betweenness are expressed that leave gaps for the reader to fill with their own experiences. Poetic expression allowed me to reflect on self-experiences in a manner that was non-prescriptive where my identity(ies) as a *ts'élí-iskwew*, poet, and researcher co-exist. Leggo (2008a) explained it well stating, “Poetry invites us to experiment with language, to create, to know, to engage creatively and imaginatively with experience” (p. 165). It also has helped me to (re)learn Dene zhatie language creating a greater sense of connections to language, to Land, and to my participants. Through poetry I am able to re-engage in an “artfully, poetically, spiritually and contemplatively” (Leggo, 2015, p. 141) manner seeking rhythm in my own experiences, pedagogical perspectives, and curriculum ideologies.

Traditionally, Indigenous poets were the songwriters, oral storytellers, and historians of our ancestral Lands. Poetry has been used in research by other narrative inquirers such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Cardinal (2014), Clarke (2017), and Young et al (2012) in various ways to convey field texts, to share experiences, and as story. As I wrote and began to inquire narratively, poetry found a place in my entries in the form of field notes, journals, and reflective autobiographical narratives written as a data source. While connecting narratively with my participants, I also use poetry as interim and final texts which were we co-composed to safeguard their own words and ensure each participant supported the poetry I conveyed of our collective conversations. In the extraction of poetry, I find the truest sense of expression of self. I am poetry. I live poetry. I embody poetry. It is who I am and so as I relive narratives, I am also retelling stories of possibilities of “living differently in the world” (Clandinin et al, 2006, p. 10). Poetry allows me to “consider other versions of my identity” (Schwarz, 2006, p. 66) and honors who I am as an Indigenous storyteller.

Poetry is . . .

Where words sit on the tip of my tongue
like sugar, so sweet, and so succulent
It is where words embrace me
*nezuh aohté gha edek'eh eghalaqhnda*²⁸
It is part of my journey to my best self
It is found in words that dance, singing songs of the heart
where poems embrace me like the warmth
of a *dezhí le ts'édé gah*²⁹- soft rabbit blanket
poetry is discovered in movements and kinships,
and in silence that sometimes fills the air,
or often within the in-between spaces and place of time
where found is also lost
where earth meets the sky
where ancestral wisdom surrounds me
poetry dances upon my heart
in the living and telling of beautiful stories
where creativity can be relived
dwelling in spaces of retelling
poetry is *koe goh cho*³⁰ – the gathering place
where our lives meet in relation. (Written August 13, 2021)
Poetry draws on metaphor, where the senses emerge, and dwell in-between lines of

²⁸ *nezuh aohté gha edek'eh eghalaqhnda* translates to *part of my journey to my best self* in Dene zhatié.

²⁹ *dezhí le ts'édé gah* translates to *soft rabbit blanket* in Dene zhatié.

³⁰ *koe goh cho* translates to *the gathering place* in Dene zhatié.

creative elements and stories wander in continuous wonders. I too, like Leggo (2015), “seek to live in the places of language, emotion and wonder” (p. 144) as the metaphors lead me as I wander through storied experiences. Metaphors for narrative inquirers “is an experiential term” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 70), much like the wearing of moccasins.

Moccasin as Metaphor

*where we use our senses to gather more information
feeling the softness upon your feet,
listening to the way you walk upon the Earth,
witnessing the beauty of the ancient, beaded designs,
as powerful smells permeate with the scent of the beaver and moose,
and I imagine the taste of the smoked tanned moose hide on my lips
with each glide that brings me into balance and movement
where metaphor lives as moccasins walk.*

(Written August 13, 2021)

Metaphors shape experiences for individuals both cumulatively and emergingly, where the wonders of experience can expand, be playful and even dare to rouse discourse in order to convey meaning or multiple meanings. Looking back at the moccasin, I have used it as a metaphor for my connection to identity and belonging as I walk in various landscapes.

When I think about how I navigate *walking in edhéhke*³¹ within academia and *dij ndéh* as a “world-traveler” (Lugones, 1987, p. 3), I imagine myself between multiple curricular landscapes. These landscapes often collide, but sometimes in good ways such as in a way that a

³¹ *edhéhke* (pronounced eh-th-eh-keh) translates to *moosehide moccasins* in Dene zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

lesson was learned, or new teachings emerged. I have learned to walk in my moccasins over the years in a manner where I can always be wearing them. Much like where identities collide in a place of belonging, it is place(s) that urge me forward in my understanding of relationships with all beings. “I [too] am a plurality of selves” (Lugones, 1987, p. 3) where the complexities of navigating my social worlds often collide as identity and belonging have found me seeking places where I can be strong like two people. Poetry finds me looking “inward, outward, backward, and forward” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) as I seek relevance among and within my storied worlds.

Grandmother’s *keots’edjihsho* - Knowledge³²

The stories of my grandmother are engrained in my memories as the most important stories in relation to who I am today and how I connect to curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). These stories locate me in relation to what it means to live by the Dene laws, laws formed over generations that respond to the essence of our humanness in harmony with all beings. They help in understanding my relationship with *diji ndéh* and the powerful notions associated with these teachings. I continuously live and relive my grandmother’s teachings every time I walk upon *diji ndéh*. As I shift back to the memories of my grandmother, our time was mostly spent on *diji ndéh*, berry picking, family gatherings, cooking around the fire, or wandering through the bush. Often her teachings were silently shared through the gentle actions of her movements while on the Land. I recall watching her attentively. Sometimes she would pause and tell a story (translated by my mother or auntie) sharing her wisdom of the Land that she learned from her mother and grandmother. I used to think of her as being *fragile* mainly because of her small demeanor, long white braided hair, and her age. But now I realize that she

³² *keots’edjihsho* (pronounced ka-o-thedi-sho) translates to ‘knowledge’ in Dene Zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

was far from fragile. She embodied strength, wisdom, and power as a Dene woman through her virtuosity of life. My grandmother (or granny as we called her) lived to the age of ninety-three. I think of the abundance of knowledge I learned as I watched her walk graciously in the midst of many landscapes, often pausing to pick berries or spruce gum to chew along the way.

Throughout my life, I learned to listen and observe through the eyes of my grandmother.

My grandmother's teachings exemplify Dene *k'ęę*; they speak to the history of the Old ones—my ancestors. Her way of life is what I would refer to as *edhéhke* theory or moose hide moccasin theory. Everything she did while on the Land was part of another process, it was cyclical in nature, much like the making of moccasins. It is poetic in nature.

Prayer begins the ceremony of edhéhke, may the hunter be successful

Recognizing the wind, water, and sky spirits for their guidance

Where the hunter reveals their strength

And prayers of gratitude illuminate the heart

As nourishment [food] and warmth [hide] are humbly provided

And prayers of love and appreciation embrace the community,

The natural hide is stretched and tanned as strong hands unite in unison

Emerges the soft hide, supple in strength

As prayer leads the hands forward

Sewing together ancestral land designs

In the form of flowers and leaves

Producing strong footwear that bares centuries of knowledge

And prayer again centres the giveaway, the reciprocity of nature

Knowing kin will embrace new footsteps

As edhéhke continues to bring rhythms of stories in places of memories.

(Poetic field note written August 23, 2021)

My granny was born near Willow Lake River located north of *Líidlijj kúé* and raised by her mother, father, grandparents, uncles, aunties, and other relatives on the Land. From the stories I have heard, there were a few families that lived there. My granny was the second oldest of seven siblings. She bore a lot of responsibility, especially as the oldest daughter. Her father was *eta nah jeh*, his English name was Francis Tonka (1895 – 1957) and her mother’s name was *khale*, Caroline Tonka, nee Noah (1895 – 1972). Caroline, my great grandmother, was originally from the *Délijnē* area which translates to “where the water flows”. It is situated on the west shore of the Great Bear Lake. The story shared with me by my Auntie Florence Cayen (personal communication, September 2019) is that my great grandmother left home at the age of sixteen and travelled to *Tulita*³³, then travelled on to *Líidlijj kúé* area where she met my great grandfather *eta nah jeh*, Francis Tonka. In total that is 483 kilometers of travel on Land and water. In 1911 when there were no cars she most likely travelled by dogsled and/or boat which would have taken weeks. *Délijnē* is also home of the Mountain Dene people. This feels like the reason for my affinity to the mountains, as I currently live in *Mohkínsstsisí*³⁴ (what is now called Calgary, Alberta) near the Rocky Mountains. My teachings were informed by my grandmother and my Dene ancestors who learned about *Denendéh*³⁵ in ways that connect me to who I am becoming and where the Land teachings allow me to think beyond the boundaries of formal education.

As I am (re)learning how to learn from a Dene paradigm, I am learning how to speak to

³³ *Tulita* translates to *where the rivers meet* in the Dene *Sahtúot’ínē yatí* [North Slavey] language.

³⁴ *Mohkínsstsisí* is the Blackfoot name for what is now called Calgary, Alberta which translates to *elbow*. (Retrieved from <https://dictionary.blackfoot.atlas-ling.ca/#/results>, Blackfoot Dictionary, online)

the animals, plants, and other life forms in the same manner my granny once did. I am connecting to the stories with slower movements knowing my teachers and curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) arrive to me in many forms. As I provoke and cultivate new stories within the “temporal spaces of my lived experiences” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 48) and the narratives of my ancestral ways of knowing, I am learning what it really means to be a “curriculum maker” through Dene *k’ęę*.

Disrupting Curriculum Stories

Disrupt means to interrupt an event or process by causing a disturbance or drastically alter or destroy the structure of something (Oxford University Press, 2015). This notion of disrupting curriculum connects me to reimagining the possibilities of altering curriculum or the processes of curriculum to include Dene *k’ęę*. As I (re)shift my thoughts about what curriculum making means, there are curricular tensions that follow. As I began to explore the worlds of school curriculum making, I began to feel the need to alter, change, and interrupt curriculum making places. According to Joseph (2011), “for curriculum to be understood as a process for transforming educational aims and practices, it must be conceptualized as an undertaking that encompasses inquiry and introspection” (p. 3). As I reflected on the philosophy of a living curriculum (Aoki, 1993), I began by “examining my memories of practices, interactions, values and visions” (Joseph, 2011, p. 3) where puzzles of identity and matriarchs stayed with me. My memories of being a teacher and student were once consumed by formal spaces, but my moccasins did not feel like they belonged in this world. There was always tension as I walked in this world of curriculum making. As I attended to the tensions that this curriculum making created for me, new moccasins were emerging with new possibilities. While attending to a multiplicity of experiences associated with kinship curriculum making, I have been

rediscovering the Land and the stories that situated learning *from* and *with* the Land.

Traditionally, it was our families that were our greatest teachers; it was our fathers, mothers, grandparents, aunties, uncles, and other relatives that taught us about the significant gifts and stories that came from the Land such as language and culture. As Okri states “we live by stories” (1997, p. 46) and it is through stories that I am “wayfinding” (Chambers, 2008, p. 11) my way through kinship ties of family and Land relations. Kinship is a relational term; it establishes my relationship with all beings, both living and nonliving, and provides me with a sense of identity and belonging. Kinship is what draws me to the Land. Kinship curriculum making, for me, is intentional as I inquire into my relations and interrelatedness with self, others, and place(s). Kinship curriculum making is an addition to familial curriculum making (Clandinin, Huber & Murphy, 2011a; Clandinin, Murphy & Huber, 2011b) where familial curriculum making is defined as “the curriculum making in which children engage with members of their families and communities” (Clandinin, et. al., 2011a). Kinship connects me to family, but family is much bigger than what is socially constructed in mainstream worldviews. In addition to family, kinship includes my relation to Land, water, sky, animals, place(s), non-human, and human relatives not related by blood, it is a holistic conception of family. So, to add to familial curriculum, I wanted to express my relation to curriculum making from a perspective that includes my identity as a *ts’éli-iskwew* which for me is kinship curriculum making.

From a Dene perspective “the stories are not just the entertainment, they are the library of centuries of learning” (Scott, 2007, p. 2). Through this inquiry, I found myself “live[ing] in the midst of multiple stories being lived and told by multiple people” (Clandinin, et.al., 2006, p. 31) composing multiple texts as field notes as I navigated the three-dimensional inquiry. I found myself thinking about the Land as curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) with

more intention, with more story. As I recalled this story, I was taken back to Edmonton during the Winter of 2018.

It had snowed for 3 days straight in amiskwaciwâskahikan [Edmonton, Alberta] and there was about 3 feet of snow on the ground. It was a Saturday morning, and like every morning I peered outside to see what the weather will bring. On this morning, I saw the most beautiful white landscape before me. Everything I could see was touched by the white blanket of snow. It was a beautiful reminder of the rabbit stories that sit with me. The entire ground was engulfed in white powdered snow, and I was eager to go outside and visit Mother Nature in all her beauty. It was calling me. I put on my Dene mukluks, my Dene moosehide gloves, my toque, and my parka and embarked outside on this glorious morning. As I walked outside, it was as if the world stood still. There was silence, there was stillness, there was serenity. I took a deep breath in, smelled the crisp air as I felt the soft snow upon my feet and began to wander off through the deep snow.

As I began walking that morning, visions of home in Denendéh emerged. I imagined my granny during the winter months living in the bush. I relished in the feeling of silence. As I walked, I went towards the trails behind our house where there are plenty of trees and small bushes for the rabbits to roam about in. There was snow as far as the eyes could see, it was majestic. Reminders of the White Buffalo appear on the landscape.

White Buffalo Robe

*as I walk on the buffalo robe of snow
ancient reminders of my grandmother's white rabbit blanket emerge
the land and lunar notions encircle me as I walk*

*the teachings of my knowledge keepers live within me
as I walk on the white buffalo robe of snow
the sleeping plants beneath my feet
the sight of fresh rabbit trails unfolding
the stillness and calmness of the moments enriching my spirit
the cold breeze upon my nose, the falling snow from the branches
encapsulate my storied memories
as I walk on the white buffalo robe of snow
small birds sing in the distance whispering notions of spring
sharing in song gentle reminders of the old ways
honouring the gifts of nature's essence
as I walk on the white buffalo robe of snow
thankful for the changes of the season, the super full moon
where peaceful reminders of slowing down
and listening carefully to land embrace me
bringing me back to the stories
for they are more than just stories, they are memoirs of the past
earth to sky, sky to earth
the buffalo robe's warm embrace envelops me
these sacred teachings clinch my memory
as I walk on the white buffalo robe of snow.*

(Written, February 28, 2018)

There is a constant feeling of action and being when I am present within nature. I

embrace all the stories that emerge, stories of being a young girl, stories of walking in the bush with my mother, stories of collecting medicines with my grandmother, and stories of watching the embers of the fire during the summer nights with my family. Like my ancestors, I have learned to appreciate the Land. The more time I paid attention to the Land stories, the more I wondered about finding a way to complement multiple ways of knowing as a curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). In his work alongside Dene, Scott (2007) explains that “the more people told their own stories, the more stories they heard, the stronger was their sense of who we are – Dene” (p. 50). The stories drew me in and a stronger sense of *being Dene* emerged for me.

As I continued to reimagine the possibilities of curriculum making through kinship curriculum making, I was conscious of how I navigated this sometimes-fragile terrain, even more so in my moccasins. I wondered about ancestral teachings and knowledge keepers’ experiences of learning from and with the Land and the experiences. I wondered if disrupting curriculum making towards a restoration of curriculum of Dene *k’ęę* would alter, change, or interrupt the way teachers viewed curriculum. I wondered about matriarchal teachings and healing as interwoven aspects to my storied landscapes became more visible where my moccasins met the road. I arrived at a multitude of narratives and perspectives; I (re)examined my experiences and experiences of Dene learning on the Land. Perhaps, I was forming in-between spaces as I disrupted knowledge spaces.

By disrupting curriculum making, my hope was that the storied experiences shared within this inquiry would reveal the complexity of Land curriculum to uncover layers of rich stories. At the time of this writing this dissertation, the reasons that our education system was not working for many Indigenous students were complex and of great interest to educators,

researchers, and government bureaucrats. As I recalled stories of curriculum making from my granny's world and as a teacher educator embracing the desire for curriculum transformation to include Indigenous ways of knowing, I realized how difficult it is to live in both worlds simultaneously. It is those experiences that connect to my inquiry and the tensions that follow. Tensions allow for (re)evaluation of current practices in curriculum and teaching. This attentiveness to the tension was an important aspect of narrative inquiry as I "attend[ed] closely to the bumping places and what they help[ed] me to understand about the nature of experience" (Clandinin, et. al., 2009, p. 83). I began thinking more with my moccasins as I inquired further.

Arriving at the Research Puzzle

As I thought back to the story of snaring rabbits with my mother and how it stayed with me, I found a stronger sense of my research puzzle begin to emerge. My doctoral research was shaped by the bumping places where tension sits in my educational experiences of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). It was formed by my life puzzles, guided by my autobiographical experiences, and informed by matriarchal knowledge. This research created space for curriculum stories from a Dene perspective to exist as traditional and formal knowledge systems complement each other. It was stories of how being strong like two people [*nátsę ǫkene*] and kinship curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) is possible in educational places.

As I revisited the tensions, I had with curriculum throughout my life I was always mindful of my moccasins. In Dene, the word for moccasins is *edhéhke* (pronounced eh-th-eh-keh). Alice Lafferty describes the translation as "tanned hide on feet" (Lafferty, A., personal communication, February 2, 2019). In Navajo Diné, David Begay (Tucker, 2016, 4:48) translates the word moccasins as "*sheke'yah*" which refers to the bottom of the moccasin and the

connection to the earth. When I thought about the many moccasins, I have had in my lifetime that were made by my granny and mother, I felt connected to their spiritual wonderment. My moccasins sustain valuable traditional knowledge that has been passed throughout generations of Dene women and curriculum knowledge that encompasses the long history of moccasin making. As I gazed at the beautiful creations upon my feet, I wondered about the moose, I wondered about the hunter who harvested the meat, I wondered about the tanner who scraped and tanned the hide, and I wondered about the geometrical beadwork and sewing skills needed to shape and form them into *edhéhke*. This sense of a wondering as “re-search,” a searching again (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124), brought forth the curriculum wonders of my moccasins. It was this searching that allowed me to explore wonders in the many “worlds” (Lugones, 1987) I traveled.

My emerging puzzle sought to explore the narratives of Dene experiences learning *from* and *with* the Land. I explored life and Land puzzles from Dene *k'èè*, matriarchal intergenerational wisdom and school experiences from Dene women. In seeking these experiences, I thought back to the on-the-Land teachings and school experiences that made me (re)consider curriculum making and wondered if by attending to these storied experiences, and seeding stories of matriarchal wisdom, how would Dene make sense of their identity. I wondered would Dene experiences of learning and being on the Land shift their ideologies of curriculum, and perhaps more importantly, would it shift their identities. As I looked back to my teaching experiences and the experiences of youth on the Land, I came to appreciate the intricacies of curriculum making within formal school settings and began to realize the beauty of on-the-Land curriculum that was emerging before me through stories of Dene on the Land. My research question specifically asks: What are the experiences of Dene learning *from* and *with* the Land? In essence, going inward may reveal itself within the curriculum on the Land as a step forward in

creating curriculum that includes matriarchal intergenerational wisdom and Dene perspectives on the Land. By engaging with the experiences of Dene, I captured a deepened “understanding of cultural [Dene], institutional, and social narratives shaping school [and Land] stories” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 77). No longer do I see curriculum making in the same sense as I did before this research began. I now live and breathe curriculum as I walk the Land and think of teaching in ways that honour my ancestral footsteps that existed there long ago. I am following their moccasins trails as, they lead me in the many worlds I travel to; past, present, and future.

World of Silence

Sometimes plans change. I felt like it was important for me to establish a foundation for how this study came to light in a pandemic. Initially this study was to take place alongside youth as they learned from and with the Land in the North. However, the world changed in the Spring of 2020 which is when my research was about to begin. It was as if the world became silent, everyone and everything stood still. A global pandemic had shaken us all to the core. As I was in the midst of ethics, and I had to make abrupt changes to my research. But with the help and support of my committee I was able to still connect my work in ways that illuminated my inquiry into Dene learning on the Land.

Although they were significant changes (such as the way I was able to connect alongside my participants and who my participants were) they were changes that brought me to wonders of knowledge keepers, matriarchs, and healing in ways that made me feel (un)silenced in a time of silence. As the world was plagued with uncertainty, I found certainty in my relations with the Land. For me and for my participants, we were able to connect through a time of unknowns as we navigated learning alongside one another in a manner I could never have imagined.

For this I am forever grateful, and for all those affected by the global pandemic, my heart

goes out to you. I prayed for our world each day while on the Land. The Land helped me in ways that I know helped my ancestors thrive during the pandemics of the early 1900's. With the immense fecundity of imagination and bringing the Land back into fruition of central thought, I was able to (re)imagine possibilities within my (re)searching during a time of silence. Where silence is embraced, and wonders are healing.

In the next chapter, I establish where the knowledge comes from as I wonder “what should count as knowledge and knowing and what knowledge is of most worth?” (Beyer & Apple, 1988) as I weave through literature from scholars and teachings from *ohndaa ke* [Elders] and knowledge keepers. As a *ts'éli-iskwew*, I have had many teachers throughout my life both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. When I think about the Land and about narrative inquiry, I acknowledge their teachings as a way to understand and reimagine curriculum *from* and *with* the Land.

Chapter 2 : Framework for *dagots'edehke*³⁶ - Question

When I think about what I have learned about research, it is essentially the act of seeking answers to a question(s). Theorizing about these question(s) arises from wonders at the worlds in which I live, work, and play. *dagots'edehke* [the question] is in the forefront of my thoughts as I consider the process and seek guidance. As I explore this journey of research as a *ts'éli-iskwew*, I also seek the tender guidance from those who have journeyed this path in their own way. For me, guidance is sought in a humble way through ceremony. Through a poem about ceremony, I honour the search for answers devoted to a question.

Prayer for dagots'edehke

I sit on the edge of the moonlight

wonders appear in the soft shadows

as the succulent scent of spruce boughs

sends warm shivers through my body

I enter into an inquiry of mind, of body, of emotions, and of spirit

I honour the knowledge I receive, wondering how to share in a good way

for this, I pray in solitude

as answers appear within the lightness of the moon

standing in stillness, I breath the cold crisp air

asking for guidance, for soothing of the mind

I stand with questions

where my feet touch the earth, and the skies embrace my heart

as the ceremony of stories are gently nudging me back into balance

³⁶ *dagots'edehke* (pronounced da-goht-se-deh-ke) translates to *question* in Dene zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

where dagots'edehke [the question] guides me forward
mahsi nōhtsi, thank you Creator

(Written February 3, 2022).

This poem highlights the notion of the question(s) in this research. My academic journey began with many questions, questions that kept growing and growing. As I sought knowledge in others, in the Land, and through wisdom of self, I was able to answer or learn more about the many questions I was faced with. I found that the more I immersed myself into questions and the reason why I entered academia, the clearer my questions became. Eventually, these series of questions began to shape my research puzzle. As I consider the people and places that have helped me answer my questions, the poem reflects the importance of ceremony in the process. It helps to guide my feet forward while still keeping me grounded as a *ts'éli-iskwew*. In considering the process of finding answers to questions, methodologically, the literature written and spoken before me offers new insights into curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, 2000), methodology, the Land, and ancestors. The poem about *dagots'edehke [the question]* grounded me in theoretical perspectives and a place for story to emerge.

As Stories Emerge

gōndi nagojéh, story, it heals. These words sit with me every time I attend to stories. As I mentioned, this research, is healing. This story is about Land and Land heals. We all have a relationship with stories: as “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). The significance of teaching through story is the way in which we remember and recall information. “Most of our experiences, our knowledge and our thinking are organized as stories” (Pink, 2006, p. 101) and often these stories are situated in relation with the Land. Clandinin explains that “Thinking relationally, then, is part

of thinking narratively and of thinking narratively as a narrative inquirer” (2013, p. 23). As I began to relive stories connected to Land, I was immersed in thinking narratively as a narrative inquirer while revisiting with Dene stories of the Land.

Narrative inquiry is the methodology of inquiring into experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). This research is centred around the experiences of Dene learning on the Land. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also express the importance of John Dewey’s (1938) work around experience, understanding that “experience is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation and we, as researchers, are in relation to participants . . . [Narrative Inquiry] is people in relation studying with people in relation” (p. 189). Being in relation is the foundation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I am in a constant flow of relations. I am reminded while on the Land and while working alongside others of the words of Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2016) as he explains that

ethical relationality is tied to a desire to acknowledge and honour the significance of the relationships that we have with others, how our histories and experiences position us in relation to one another, and how our futures as people in the world are similarly tied together. (p. 11)

It is story that will bring this forward.

My mother is always giving and in relation. I never thought of her in this way until I took the time to revisit memories of my mother. I recall her nature as a young girl watching her in the kitchen, always cooking, or in the garden growing food. When we had an abundance of food, she would have one of us kids take food to the neighbours or to my dad’s friends who lived a few blocks away. Her nature was to take care of community. While on the Land, if we had an abundance of rabbit, geese, or fish she would clean

them, teaching me as she did and give it away to Elders, she would meet along the way. If we had more than enough growing up, my mother always gave to the community. I recall a time when I was much older, and I lived in Edmonton. She came to visit from the North. During this visit, I took her to the antique mall. We browsed and reminisced about all the old artifacts. We approached a glass case, and she began perusing through the case. She called me over and she said can I see this. As I looked, she pointed at an old pipe. It was quite old and had been used for smoking tobacco as they did in the old days. So, I called one of the shopping attendants over and asked to purchase the old pipe. After I purchased it for her, she told me the story of the Elder (ohndaa ké) that lived alongside the highway towards Łíidliĭ kúĕ. She always stopped to visit this Elder on the way back to Hay River. On one particular visit, she noticed his pipe was broken. He told her he had been smoking a pipe since he was young, so she wanted to buy him a new one. That story sat with me for a long time until I began to think about how, I too, am always embodied in relations with all beings but now understand that this relationality was always present within the relationality my mother shared in her action. It is where my foundation of relationality began. My mother is a giving person, she understands how to be in relation with all and she has instilled that within me. I think of her kindness, her giving nature, and how she has silently taught me to always be in relation where relationality is always sustained.

As I harness the story of relationality, I am reminded of my relationship to story. When I think about all of the stories that have been shared with me over time, I am reminded of why I love the way stories take me to places in time and history, or the experiences they bring forth, or the connection that I feel. My love of stories is deep-rooted.

For the Love of Stories

*stories embody my soul with a coloring of seasons
blanketed upon my heart
like the first snowfall of winter
warming my spirit and unearthing what is below
as they un-fold, un-ravel, and un-veil around me
among them are the memories of the past
stories sometimes found
beneath the shadows
within the boundaries
outside and inside the walls of the institution³⁷
and all around the spaces of my existence
each story, each memory, each experience
providing me with meaning and
delicate encounters of learning with each day
and so, they commence
my stories of beginnings, endings, and in-betweens
narratives of delight, wonderment, joy and even despair
stories lead me to explore my foundation
of knowledge and knowing
where I am at the heart of stories*

(Written in 2019).

³⁷ Institution in this context refers to the formal knowledge spaces of my education such as schools, playgrounds, universities, and written books.

There is power in our stories. Stories can elicit wonderful moments in life. As well, they can bring forth tensions. As I continued to unravel my memories and my deep love of books, I also discovered in “this learning to think narratively *at the boundaries* between narrative and other forms of inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 25) found at the horizons of the Land. I was inquiring into the many stories within me.

Cultivating the Sacred Balance

As I inquired into the stories I lived and told around being a teacher and my experiences with curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000), I recognized the need for change. Stories of identity were absent, and it was their absence as a teacher where I found the urge to shift these stories to stories of youth, stories of belonging, stories of matriarchs, and stories of healing. Battiste (2013) explains that “modern educational systems were created to maintain the identity, language, and culture of a colonial society, while ignoring the need to decolonize” (p. 31). As a Dene descendent of the North, I was cognizant of what I do and do not know about the Land of my ancestors. I was responsible for the stories I shared here and how I shared them alongside my participants. There was a sacred balance that encompassed storytelling. My teachings came from and were shared by mainly the matriarchs in my family. I recognized them as my teachers. I also had Land experiences and teachings from other distant relatives in the North that I came to know and continued to build relations with as I (re)learned Dene *k’ęę*. I also acknowledge my ancestors who have gone to the spirit world before I was given the opportunity to learn their ways. Their strength and perseverance lived within me. There was also a dissonant feeling of unrest of the stories lost due to historical atrocities from residential schools that sits with me as I desire so much to know more. Reclaiming narratives of my ancestors who had

lived, survived, and thrived in the Dehcho region for thousands of generations could be difficult and sometimes uncomfortable—uncomfortable as I was seeking relevance in stories that should have existed on my tongue where language sat. I felt a language that was bringing life back into stories as I travelled the Land listening for it with intent. I felt the presence of my ancestors as I existed more loudly. I was humbled by their presence when I was on the Land. I saw their sacrifices, I experienced their courage, I shared their wisdom in the way that I was becoming what they envisioned of me for the future.

Embodied knowledge is felt within the senses. When I thought of embodied knowledge, I used all of my senses where I could listen, witness, taste, touch, and smell the Land. I was also aware of how I move and feel balanced while on the Land. This awareness was embodiment. This was the knowledge I learned from my parents, grandparents, *ohndaa ké* [Elders], knowledge keepers, and other relatives throughout my life. It helped me understand the world socially, culturally, and historically where knowledge had been passed from one generation to the next. Embodied knowledge is formed through our existence as humans; we pass this knowledge on to others in various forms such as stories, observation, and applied learning. Traditional knowledge is embodied knowledge, it lives in place. Little Bear (2012) clarifies that “traditional knowledge is not a product or object that can be defined and studied in isolation” (p. 520), it is a process.

As an Indigenous scholar and researcher, I understood that I was beginning to know more about traditional teachings and Protocols. I cultivated the sacred balance of living and learning in many worlds. The sacredness of Indigenous epistemologies is fundamental to our traditions and culture, however, requires a process of learning and development. Freire (2000) expresses that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the

restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 70). There is a need for a process and this process requires consultation and respect for the stewards of the knowledge.

Nurturing Learning from Place

Our sacred connection to the Land is situated in a spiritual place, and as Cajete (1994), explains it is a “place that holds our collective memory” (p. 86). Home is *Denendéh* where the landscape of ancestral beauty, love, family, connection, and spiritual bonding exists upon my heart. Home is a living memory that sits inside me; a memory of a place on the Land in a multiplicity of stories made by the ancestors that emerges as I embrace this place called *Denendéh*. *Denendéh* is a place of pure wonderment and untouched exquisiteness that only a few have visited, but once they do, they are often left mesmerized within a place that speaks to the natural essence and humility of the Land and people. *Denendéh* is north of the 60th parallel; north of the imaginary borderlines of Alberta; north into the boreal forest; North as we call it when we answer the question often asked by southern people, “where are you from?”. I am from the North, I am from *Denendéh*. It is where the earth meets the sky, where *naakah*³⁸ presides in the skies, where the horizon meets *dji ndéh*, where my kinships’ embrace is found on every bend of the landscapes, and where I am bound by the roots of my existence.

In shifting to stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) I recalled the times when I lived in the North, both in *Kátł’odehche* [Hay River] and *Sombq Gūlį* [Yellowknife] and was reminded of my relationship with rabbits and of the many other landscapes in which I have experienced. My mind wandered to images of rabbits triggering memories of how they have impacted my worldview in various ways.

³⁸ *naakah* translates to *northern lights* or *aurora borealis* in Dene zhatie.

I've seen rabbits everywhere. Urban rabbits, rural rabbits, northern rabbits, wild rabbits, wandering rabbits, rabbit families, solo rabbits, scared rabbits, quiet rabbits, still rabbits and even rabbits in my dreams. They seem to follow me throughout life, gentle reminders symbolizing aspects of my life connecting me to the past, present and future. I have learned to pay attention to them in the moment. One particular memory was on a winter day as I walked in the deep snow near my house in Kátł'odehche, I distinctly remember seeing fresh rabbit tracks along the rabbit highways. Rabbits in rural areas live in the wild, surrounded by open spaces, with little to distract them from their rural environment. In contrast to urban rabbits that live in the cities, these rabbits live within the landscapes and are less visible than their urban counterparts. Urban rabbits are those I recall living in urban suburbia, found in playgrounds and parks, trying their best to hide, but are clearly visible as though out of place. Making me wonder, who is really out of place more, me or the rabbits?

In contrast, when I walk in a park in the urban setting of Kazhîodñla [Edmonton] I see urban rabbits everywhere, even in my backyard. It seems that these rabbits are tamer than those found in the North, they aren't scared of the urban noise and often are spotted hopping around the neighborhoods. Or are they scared? What role do they play in this landscape that was originally theirs and are we the invaders of their home?

As I consider these rural and urban rabbits as my educators, I am fascinated by what they are teaching me. As I observe them both directly and, in my memory, they are also my teachers, and I am learning from them. The northern rabbits, rabbits of Denendêh seem wilder. They are not as easily visible as urban rabbits because you have to look hard for them. As I wander the landscape, I wonder about the rabbits that live there,

those wild animals that play in the bush hiding among the trees to venture wherever they like, but also have to be careful of predators and hunters from the North such as my mother.

I also wonder what language the rabbits would use if they were able to speak to me? Would they speak Dene? Would they speak English? Would they speak rabbit? And what would they say? Would they tell me how great it feels to roam free in this wondrous landscape? Would they tell me that they are scared of the predators, the ones that are lurking in the bushes? Would they tell me that they are content and happy among the vast untouched land of the North? Would they say, who is this outsider, this city slicker observing our movements? Would they say, hello my relative, long time no, see?

I wonder, what would these urban rabbits tell me. What language or languages would they speak? There are many urban languages, or would they too speak rabbit? Would they say they are happy and content despite living among the city dwellers, or would they be upset at the urbanization of their land, where predators lurk around every corner? Or would they be content living in the urban landscape for the ease of finding food and shelter from the prey? My wonder of urban and rural rabbits is relational as I begin to see the world through the multitude of perspectives of all my relations. I am (re)learning the language of rabbits.



Figure 2.1 Photograph of Urban Rabbit Tracks in Edmonton, Alberta taken March 10, 2017

The North will always be my home but, I too, must watch how I walk in this landscape as I often feel as though I am a stranger there still—an outsider, one that is looking through the glass, like one of the wild characters from Alice in Wonderland. I am mindful of this. In a way, I am like one of the urban rabbits trying to negotiate with the wild and free rural rabbits of the North. Urban rabbits can often be found wandering the streets but remain careful as they maneuver their way through this landscape, so they do not end up as roadkill. Being an Indigenous educator, I am learning how to navigate these institutional landscapes as the rabbit highways. However, I am mindful of the history of this place and know I must connect with it in a positive way for the future of Indigenous education. Learning to navigate the world of urban teacher education is like learning to

survive as an urban rabbit. If I am not careful, I may end up as roadkill too. The North where I am most at peace with the landscape so when I revisit this place, even within my memories, I feel a sense of solace and inner harmony that brings me home. As I navigate my relationship with rabbits, I wonder about the multiplicity of worlds that I encounter and how I navigate each of them differently; I am more attentive as I am paying attention to these worlds and how I live within them.

In paying attention to the rabbits, my identity as a *ts'élî-iskwew* educator was similar to that of rabbits—always negotiating spaces and places in education that included the lived curriculum (Aoki, 1993) of *Dene k'ęę*. As an inquirer, I studied myself “in relation” to the spaces and places I encountered attending to “personal and social” conditions (Clandinin, 2013, p. 40) of Land and school experiences. In the wild, rabbits are always looking for different trails, and as you walk in the bush on a winter day, you may notice the trails left by rabbits in the snow just like the ones in Figure 2.1. The rabbit trails are often found diverging in various directions with some more travelled than others. It makes me wonder, what is it that makes them decide to go on another trail, or what is that makes them stay on the same trail? And what is it they are looking for? Is it water, companion, rest, or home? I also found myself on many rabbit highways in education. As I thought of my ancestors on the Land, they had always used the trails to find their way on the Land, or in a sense, were “wayfinding” (Chambers, 2008) in places not familiar.

As I continued along the rabbit highways of education, I was conscious of how I navigate this sometimes-fragile terrain. I was often found travelling “at the boundaries” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 21) as I disrupted and challenged knowledge spaces for the betterment of Indigenous education. I thanked the rabbits that had entered my life, as they have taught me curriculum stories in their way.

Dene k'ęę

My philosophies of knowledge and knowing were derived from both Dene and Cree philosophies. Thinking through my understanding of curriculum brought forth these philosophies as I inquired into Land teachings. I felt curriculum as I walked upon *dij ndéh* [Earth]. I experienced the curriculum as I connected to the stories of my ancestors. I saw curriculum as I moved on the Land. In my experience, Indigenous students that I worked alongside were not familiar with the Land in ways that I grew up learning alongside my parents, partly because many of the students were urban students who did not leave the city often if ever. Battiste (2013) reports that “in the past two decades, the achievement of Aboriginal students has consistently been reported as being far below the national averages” (p. 117). Curriculum that is based on local Indigenous identity and holistic practices on the Land helps shape Indigenous identity. We hear stories of the Land but to experience the Land in the ways our ancestors once did brings forth revitalization of language, culture, and identity that is centred around reciprocal relations. Dene Elders share that “One becomes knowledgeable through action” (Legat, 2012, p. 30) and it is about knowing two ways where we can be *strong like two people*. There is fear from Elders that if young people do not experience the stories of the past, the culture, languages, and skills of our peoples will not survive. It is important to know that Dene *ohndaa ké* [Elders] also state that “experience, skill and knowledge are not separate” (Legat, 2012, p. 30). It is where relationships are not nouns—they are verbs, they are actions. Dene philosophies connect to the theories of Dewey (1938) as he states that in education “Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience” (p. 27). Bringing life to stories can be reached through experience, knowledge, and understanding that comes *from* and *with* the Land. Kulchyski (2005) writes:

One can read books to gain wisdom and knowledge, power, and healing. One can

read the bush and the land to gain wisdom and knowledge, power, and medicine.

One can read stories inscribed in the landscape with as much care as one reads the narratives of classical history. The differing protocols of these forms of reading need to be respected, and we do well to remind ourselves of the pleasures of the texts. (p. 18).

This is what my mother and grandmother taught me as I watched, lived, and listened to their movements while we were on the Land. It was how I viewed myself as a curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) on the Land as I was thinking and living Dene philosophies *with* the land.

What does it mean to be Dene? The question forced me to look inward, I had to ask myself what I was paying attention to. In listening, living, and retelling the stories, I was situating my connection to being Dene, to my grandmother's and grandfather's stories, to our ancestral stories, to the silent and untold stories. It was through stories that I was living and telling (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) ways of being Dene. As I thought of what it means to think Dene, I remembered the words of Senator Murray Sinclair (2020) "To think Indigenous is to think in our own ways and to live this way" (personal communication, May 20, 2020). When asked if he were a classroom teacher, what would he bring to the classrooms of today, Sinclair (2020) stated, "I would bring in the grandmother's teachings. Our children need to know the grandmother's teachings, this is what is missing from our classroom" (personal communication, May 20, 2020).

As I thought about the importance of my grandmother's teachings, I felt blessed to have had the opportunity to learn from her. Unfortunately, the aspect of presence and absence in historical documentation is also the presence or absence of women and children in records. It

was difficult to find stories of matriarchs in historical documents. Indigenous history relies heavily on fur trade records but is extremely deficient at documenting the lives of women and children. It seems as though women and children faded from historical records, leaving many untold stories of their strength and resilience. Many of our youth do not have the opportunities to learn their culture or language due to historical traumas and our current models of schools, especially those within an urban setting.

Few young people spend time out on the land alone. That lack of connection applies to the relationship among generations and between families. If any healing is to take place, those connections have to be retrieved in the Dene way, out on the land. (Rabesca, 1994, p. 74)

Dene *k'ęę* [philosophies] come from the Land. It is a lived experience shared through the actions of being and doing on the Land. Our Dene matriarchs are our visionaries and original teachers. As a *ts'éli-iskwew* I was an apprentice of Dene *k'ęę*, as I was still learning and always inquiring. It was important for me in this work, to continue learning, sharing, and teaching the stories as I learned alongside others. The poem *The Originals* reflects notions of Dene *k'ęę* that speak to *thinking in Dene* and what that means for me.

The Originals

We, the original cartographers of Denendéh—mapping the landscapes like ehtsıe [my grandfather], the original trappers making trails upon trails, wayfinding in all directions.

We, the original harvesters—harvesting the land as a precious commodity, honouring a life-giver of all things, I am here as my existence is part of her, our Mother.

We, the original astronomers —navigating the land through sky stories of the stars,

witnessing the landscapes in the shadows, as naakah [aurora borealis] reminds us of our ancestral worlds.

We, the original waterkeepers—protectors of the flowing waters that bring nourishment and life, where Dehcho [big river] collides in a harmony of peace and serenity, providing and sustaining all life forms.

We, the original scientists—seekers of knowledge on the land, inquiring in creative essence, where nature exists upon our language only translated by the Land.

We, the Dene of Denendeh

(Written August 14, 2021).

Land is Healing for All - *nahendeh gozhih gogha nezu*

Before connecting to my research, I imagined how my relationship with the Land connected me to curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). Doing this, allowed me to travel to my autobiographical narratives as I thought in the midst of “negotiating entry” alongside my participants (Clandinin, 2013, p. 44) and imagining possibilities of this process. As I attended to stories of the Land, I discovered a journal entry that I made on September 1, 2018, entitled *What I Learned from the Land Today*:

As I sit here today recalling memories of the summer and thinking about the Land and all that I have learned today, I see that the tree leaves are starting to change color. The air is starting to feel brisk upon my skin, I can now see my breath. The geese are calling each other overhead and some are beginning their long journey south. The days seem to be passing before me. I recall the teaching that this is a time of reflection. It is an awakening of the spirit when you take the time to engage with your surroundings, everything seems to come alive. If I listen, I can

hear the leaves dance, the birds sing, the grass swaying. I am beginning to notice the life that surrounds me like a warm embrace of the soul. My acknowledgement of the Land includes each encounter I have with the living and non-living beings. I often wonder what the animals are saying when they communicate, as more birds fly by. As two crows are cawing from opposite directions, I wonder what they are saying to each other. Maybe it is a warning, or maybe a friendly acknowledgement. It is captivating and powerful to watch them communicate. As I reflect more each day on this question, I have begun to ask myself, what has the Land taught me today? I am reminded of my relationship with the Land, the connection that is within me, the spirit of the animals, the grassroots, and all that I cannot see but know surrounds me. Today the Land has taught me to listen. The Land is saying to me,

take the time to listen, to relate to all that surrounds you

listen to the birds, to the wind, to the leaves swaying

to the smallest creatures as they hustle and bustle around you

listen to mother natures' glory, to the changing of the seasons

to the cold brisk air, to the crackling of the fire

listen to your ancestral footprints, sight unseen

the Land is teaching you to listen with more care,

with more grace, and with more soul

take the time to listen to all that she has to say.

(Journal Entry, September 1, 2018).

This experience of sitting with the Land and listening to my surroundings made me

reflect on my teaching experiences. There was little interaction with the Land throughout these experiences. Turnbull (2000) advanced the notion that “for knowledge systems to have a voice and to allow for the possibility of intercultural comparison and critique, both are essential, we have to maintain the local and global dialectical to one another” (p. 45). As I continued to delve into this notion of curriculum, I found myself engaging in place and the narratives of my ancestors that have shaped my relationship with the Land. As I reflected on the teachings of my ancestors, my matriarchs, and of being on the Land, I was (re)learning the process of learning from this perspective. I was slowing down. I was listening more attentively. I was taking the time to (re)connect and to heal. I was imagining the possibilities of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000).

It was the healing that I learned about that was the most important in this process. Leggo (2010) writes that there is “healing power in stories and sharing stories” (p. 56). If I were to speak about being on the Land and learning from the Land, I too, needed to heal in my connection to the Land. It had been dismembered over time; it was not part of my educational experiences. Throughout history, the connection to the Land for Indigenous Peoples in Canada was severed, especially the way we taught and learned about the Land. There were no *from* and *with* the Land experiences. In order for me to learn about the old ways and being on the Land, I had to reconnect to place. Like Anderson (2011), “my aim is to foster healing and decolonization by delineating a world view and creating a sense of identity and belonging” (p. 19) for Indigenous Peoples, especially women. In this work, I brought forward matriarchal stories “where identity and belonging are cultivated and nurtured in childhood and where women had authorities that were rooted in cultures that valued and respected equality” (Anderson, 2011, p. 19) and where *ts’éli – iskwew* had voice and agency. As I (re)learned the teachings of the Land, I

was healing from the many years of disruption. I became more aware of these healing elements that were essential to aspects of my research. Research for me was healing, Land was and continues to be healing. With each conscious step in my *edhéhke*, I walked like my ancestors were with me.

Dene Perspective of Curriculum Making

There is no word for the term curriculum in the Dene language. The closest word might be *keots'edihshô*³⁹ *ndéh*⁴⁰ which translates to Land knowledge or knowledge of the Land. Cajete (1999) shares that “learning, like creativity, is not a linear, single-directional, process but rather, it is cyclic, in a constant state of flux, multi-dimensional, and multi-directional” (p. 178). As I revisited the times spent on the Land with my grandmother, I realized that her stories were not documenting oral history— they were stories to live by from Dene *k'èè*. She taught me how to look for spruce gum as we walked in the bush. *ts'u dzéé* [spruce gum] is good to help *najé* [heal] wounds, it is good for your health. She taught me to always be mindful of my surroundings when harvesting berries. She would say to me in Dene “Be careful, the bears are here too. The *sah*⁴¹ are watching us, we are taught to share the Land with the *sah* [bears]. If we take too much, the bears will have nothing, so we must leave some for them as well. We must share what Mother Earth provides us”. Her teachings were very old, they had been passed down to her from her grandparents, they were a “window on ways the past is culturally constituted and discussed” (Cruikshank et al., 1990, p. 14) from *Denendéh*.

“On the land” designates a reality outside of, but in intimate connection with,

³⁹ *keots'edihshô* (pronounced ka-o-thedi-sho) translates to *knowledge* in Dene Zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

⁴⁰ *ndéh* (pronounced n-day) translates to *Land* in Dene Zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

⁴¹ *sah* (pronounced s-ah) translates to *bear(s)* in Dene Zhaté language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

community life, a constructive reality that constantly reflects back on community life, usually related to subsistence food production—fishing, gathering, hunting, trapping—and with as much cultural resonance in the North as the concept of “traditional”. (Kulchyski, 2005, p. 23).

Long ago, the world looked much different. The landscape, our schools, our society have changed drastically. However, the Dene teachings I learned remained the same as the way they were told for generations. These were the stories and teachings of intergenerational wisdom. As I nurtured Dene *k'ęę* epistemologically, I found a place for Dene stories to thrive. I thought more deeply about how Dene stories shaped my identity. Dene Elders say, “the Earth is our body. . . but the relationship to the Land is also changing” (Blondin, 1990, p. 246). Just as we take care of our body, we need to take care of *dij ndéh* [earth]. The rivers and lakes are like the blood in our veins, the core of the Earth is our heartbeat, the Land is like our skin. Diseases such as cancer are overcoming our communities as is the lack of relationship and connection the Land, as if it too has cancer. If we do not change this relationship, we will encounter more problems in the future.

Statistical Inquiry

Land education is contributing to significant changes across school systems in what we currently call Canada. Much of this is due in part to educators wanting to decolonize⁴² curriculum structures as an act towards reconciliation (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012; Styres, 2017). Since following Land-based education, I have seen that it has been adopted throughout rural and urban schools and continues to grow. This may be due to the school environment as a basis for student learning becoming a focus of research interest. Land-based

⁴² Decolonize refers to the ‘looking back’ timeframe before colonialism and in a sense find a way to return to these teachings of our ancestral ways as a method of revitalizing them.

education can also be identified as ecological education, environmental education, place-based education, outdoor education, and others primarily being courses that are formed and shaped with teachings on the Land.

Historically, the experiences of Indigenous Peoples with Canadian education systems have been contentious; a reality that was subjugated by the signing of treaties and the forced assimilation of Indigenous Peoples through education. As I reflected on this reality, I thought of my school narratives and the narratives of the youth I have taught. Both of these narratives were not pleasant and continue to live within the stories of my daughter's experience. Not much has changed over time. Numerous scholars (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011; Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 1994, 1999, 2015; Kimmerer, 2013; Michell 2005, 2018) have discussed the importance of including cultural learning throughout curriculum to ensure cultural relevancy, specifically, for Indigenous students.

According to Statistics Canada (2016), there are over 35.1 million people in Canada, with 1.6 million who self-identify as Indigenous which equates to 4.5% of the population. Since 2006, the Indigenous population has grown by 42.5%—more than four times the growth rate of the non-Indigenous population over the same period (Statistics Canada, 2016). Indigenous peoples are one of the most rapidly growing populations in Canada. As Indigenous populations continue to grow, there remains a small number of high school graduates as compared to the rest of the Canadian population.

Since first contact, Indigenous peoples of Canada have fallen into the “culture of silence” (Freire, 1985, p. 50). The culture of silence refers to certain voices being silenced, “that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being” (Freire, 1985, p. 50). It was this forced silence being imposed upon

Indigenous nations that has left a trail of lost identities and most importantly within our educational system, includes the way we teach (the teachers), what we teach (the curriculum) and who the experts are (the policies). The intent of Canada's Numbered Treaties was to learn from nation to nation⁴³ in a complementary manner, in a way where all nations could co-exist in harmonious relations. This did not happen. Indigenous Peoples have been denied the envisioned treaty education that our ancestors wanted, an education that included our traditions and values of being on the Land, leaving a void in both our identity and cultures. Battiste (2013) explains that "Eurocentric education policies and attempts at assimilation have contributed to major global losses in Indigenous languages and knowledge" (p. 25).

In the most recent Canadian Census Survey from Statistics Canada in 2016, "10.9% of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the rest of the population at 54.0%" (Statistics Canada, 2016). This number decreases when statisticians begin to categorize First Nation living on reserve—which equates to only 5.5% (Statistics Canada, 2017). The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) explains that "there is abundant evidence that Aboriginal people are under-represented in science and technology occupations and education programs" (p. 4). The literature reveals that this can be highly attributable to the disparities between urban and rural schools such as those on First Nations or in lower populated communities such as the northern territories. According to the most recent Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Report on education infrastructure, "more than half (54%) of First Nation students are forced to leave their First Nation to obtain a high school diploma" (AFN, 2020).

⁴³ Nation to nation refers to First Nations who signed a Treaty in what is now called Canada and the Crown (originally the British Crown, now often referred to as Canadian governments) living in respectful co-existence. Where each nation (First and Crown) would agree in both written and oral agreements to learn from each other as respected counterparts.

This is partly due to the lack of available resources, teachers, and other barriers such as lack of funding.

The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) suggests that any “curriculum that includes Aboriginal content must be flexible enough to accommodate tailoring to fit local knowledge” (p. 9). Researchers (Michell, 2018; Simpson, 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014) discuss that restoring a deeper understanding of culture and identity through land-based education may help revitalize and reclaim languages and culture. The current state of curriculum in Canada is slowly shifting towards reconciling the views of Indigenous peoples including in areas of education.

As I reflected on these statistics, I attended to their imposed script of Indigenous peoples that many policymakers, funding agencies and educators are not aware of when it came to Indigenous education. These statistics tell a story of Indigenous students that is vague, devaluing, undermining, and pointedly sad. I knew there are stories beneath these statistics that often went unheard, and this told me that there was a dire need for change in the way we teach and what we teach in secondary school. During secondary school, youth change rapidly in physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mental ways. From an Indigenous perspective these changes are part of a *rite of passage* where transitioning is celebrated and honoured culturally, usually on the Land. To assert Indigenous frameworks and increase the scope of these statistics, Indigenous paradigms must be heard and valued.

Where the Knowledge Comes From

I have had many teachers throughout my life. I learned how knowledge is in relation to self, where I was able to critique the worlds I travelled to in “socially responsible ways in order to change it” (Giroux, 2020, p. 13). As I reflected on where knowledge I come to have was situated, I recognized that my teachers came in many forms. Through my mother, father,

matriarchs, patriarchs, story, Land, formal teachers in formal school settings, animals, plants, Earth, academia, dreams, and so many other ways. I formally acknowledged the many teachers in my life, who have left footprints in ways that allowed me to escape formal learning. Even within the formal setting of academia, I was still finding ways to *Think Dene*. I thanked the moosehide scrapers, the hunters, the artists, the musicians, the traditional knowledge keepers, the medicine holders, the canoe builders, the moccasin makers, the youth (I heard you; I was listening; I saw you; I valued you), the grandfathers and grandmothers, the rocks, the winged ones, the fish, the gentle breeze, and all beings. You gifted me with wisdom both physically through action and silently through visions. I was an apprentice in my learning.

Keepers of Knowledge

When I thought of where knowledge came from, I thought of ancestral teachings of long ago and how the Land shaped Dene *k'ęę* understanding of culture and language. As I looked back over the past few years, I thought about the many knowledge keepers, scholars, and especially *ohndaa ké* [Elders] that I have learned from along this journey. I continued to walk with them and learned alongside them as I moved forward in my research. Their knowledge and words associated meaning behind my research and sparked a light within me that enhanced my views of knowledge and knowing. Their theories shaped my research and continued to engage me like an incessant inquirer into what it meant to *Think Dene*.

Story Seekers

When I thought of story seekers, I thought of the oral historians that passed on knowledge over time through the telling of stories and of how stories represented so much of our lives. As narrative inquirers, we study stories, narratives, and the metaphors we live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Storytellers (Cajete, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coles,

1989; Leggo, 2008b, 2010; Michell, 2018; Okri, 1997) use story as a means to teach and cultivate critical thinking relationally. These seekers of stories bestowed upon me a love of what a story embodied within me. Stories as Okri (1997) describes “can change lives” (p. 62). Stories embody all that we are and as I reminisced about the many stories that lived in me, I remembered that I was only one person.

There are many stories that shaped who I am and my understanding of the world. Stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) are the stories that unravel, stories that are unspoken until called upon, stories that sit within the memories of time, and stories that are found in the many places I encountered. Each of us carries and lives with stories. When thinking of stories to live by, I was reminded that “stories to live by attend to the historical, the temporal, the contextual, and the relational” (Huber, et.al., 2003, p. 347). Like a time traveler, I travelled through and with stories, each time hearing a story in a different light. Stories teach us, they are not static:

Each nation, each generation told stories handed down to them keeping alive the countless details of events, places, and the people who had carried them forward into a new world time. The stories were also the tools to teach and inform youth of the skills necessary for their very survival. (Scott, 2007, p. 2)

Cajete (1999) points out that “Storytellers fulfilled a vital role in the continuity of not only the tribal culture but of the mindset concerning people’s relationship to the natural world” (p. 131). I was never inclined to call myself a storyteller until I began to travel in this way through words. It was through sharing my own story that my healing journey in education and life was defined. Narrative inquiry is both phenomenon and method and thus I relied on “personal and practical knowledge” that I learned throughout my life experiences. (Connelly &

Clandinin, 1988, p. 25). As the story unfolded, this was the phenomenon, it was story that could take a turn to elicit a feeling, an emotion, and/or an experience, thus story could lead to another story and continue like a ripple in the water. While inquiring further into a story or stories, narratives begin to take shape while attending to storied lives in constant flux.

Battiste (2013) explains that “storytelling is also the most important way of sharing the experience of Indigenous peoples, who locate their identities in an alternate knowledge system” (p. 184). As I thought alongside these storytelling theorists, I was aware that my stories did not have to be elaborate as they were in the midst of becoming my “call of stories” (Coles, 1989). The call of stories that I took the time to listen to, the call of stories that shared my identity as a *ts’éli–iskwew* scholar, and the call of stories from and with the Land. Dene people have often shared that “the more people told their stories, the more stories they heard, the stronger was their sense of who they were—Dene” (Scott, 2007, p. 50).

Seekers of Curriculum Making

When I thought of curriculum makers, I thought of the stories that Dene tell of learning from and with the Land and how other stories (cultural, kinship, and school stories) influenced stories of curriculum. Understanding curriculum as a teacher often felt distant and as I began my career in the classroom, curriculum became an object, it was often shaped by a governing body and formed through specific outcomes as written text. I often felt subdued by the structures of “curriculum-as-planned” and wondered more about the abundance of “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 1993, p. 161)⁴⁴. When the lived curriculum emerged, mostly while outside the classroom, I sensed a greater sense of ingenuity, creativity, and awareness on the part of students, myself,

⁴⁴ I am referring to Aoki’s (1993) notion of curriculum as planned as the curriculum that is mandated, and the curriculum as lived described as “a multiplicity of lived curricula” (p. 258) taking place anywhere and anytime. The in-between curriculum, the organically flowing curriculum, the curriculum that has no plan, it emerges in the midst.

and other teachers I worked with as the years rolled by. As I began this journey through my doctoral studies, the emergence of a new perspective of curriculum began to form. As Pinar (2012), declared “the key to curriculum question – *what knowledge is of most worth?* – is animated by ethics, history, and politics” (p. xv). I wondered though, what would my Elders and knowledge keepers think of this, would they say, all knowledge is worthwhile knowledge. Would defining a place or compartment for knowledge be as significant as the way we compartmentalize our current education system? Would they say all knowledge is of most worth? In my teaching about knowledge, I emphasize that knowledge is presented both creatively and figuratively by many teachers. My teachers did not always come in the human form. I learned that curriculum too, came in a multitude of forms.

As I began (re)forming my ideologies of curriculum, I came to understand what Pinar (2012) calls *currere*, which “seeks to understand the contribution academic studies make to one’s understanding of one’s life (and vice versa), and how both are imbricated in society, politics and culture” (p. 45). In this process of *currere*, I too, often “imagine[d] possible futures, including fears as well as fantasies of fulfillment” (Pinar, 2012, p. 46) as I began to unravel the possibilities of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) *from* and *with* the Land. *Currere* asked me to examine my experiences as a student and teacher in reflection with curriculum. It was a rite of passage as an educator to reflect on my life experiences in and outside education. Pinar (2012) explains that *currere* is essentially the retelling of my experiences; imagining the future of curriculum; analyzing the past, present, and future of educational practices; and redefining new ways of thinking about curriculum. This wonderment revealed the questions that considered, what could curriculum look like for Indigenous students and teachers in the future? How might learning *from* and *with* the Land (re)shape curriculum?

And how can Dene *k'ęę* be included in curriculum practices?

As the complexities of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) were made visible to me as a scholar, I wondered about the stories of being on the Land long ago by asking the questions: how did my ancestors survive centuries in the many weather conditions? How did they navigate the Land throughout the seasons? How did they find ways to hunt and sustain themselves for so long? I wondered, if I attended to these questions and the stories that came with them, would my ideas of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) shift. “For curriculum to be understood as a process for transforming educational aims and practices, it must be conceptualized as an undertaking that encompasses inquiry and introspection” (Joseph, 2011, p. 3). I thought about how students were learning in formal classrooms and how teachers were relegated to teaching the mandated curriculum. I wondered if it was possible to engage students on the Land in more ways than just nature schools or one-time programs throughout the year to include year-round programming. Greene (1995) explains that “our transformative pedagogies must relate both to existing conditions and to something we are trying to bring into being, something that goes beyond a present situation” (p. 51). As I retold the stories of being on the Land, my notions of curriculum and curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) were shifting. I also followed curriculum making as “intergenerational and woven with identity making often” (Chung, 2009, p. 123) as I began to relive and retell my stories. Through my knowledge of my ancestral ways, I attended to the experiences of being on the Land and seeing the curriculum makers of my past as part of my woven identity as a student, teacher, and scholar. It was important to note, as Greene (1995) said that “curriculum has to do with cultural reproduction, the transmission of knowledge, and at least to some degree, the life of the mind” (p. 89). As I began to story alongside my participants, I was guided by questions that

Beyer and Apple (1988) share as an “approach to curriculum inquiry” through a narrative framework:

Epistemologically, I wondered what should count as knowledge and knowing? I wondered should knowledge be considered a process or separate divisions of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor areas?

Ideologically, I wondered what knowledge is of most worth? And what would my Elders and knowledge keepers say about knowledge? Whose knowledge, is it? Wait, does it have to belong to someone? My Elders would probably not agree with ownership of knowledge, nor do I.

Technically, I wondered how shall curricula knowledge be made accessible to all students? Very key in this conversation.

Aesthetically, I wondered how do we link the curriculum knowledge to give personal meaning to students? And yes, how do we practice curriculum design and teaching in artful ways?

Ethically, I wonder, is our current education system ethical for Indigenous Peoples?

Historically, I wondered what traditions help us understand curriculum and to add to this, our identity, and cultures (p. 5).

Land-Based Knowledge Seekers.

When I thought of Land-based knowledge seekers, I thought of my grandfather and grandmother as they lived, survived, and thrived on the Land. They lived each day out on the Land, it was where stories live. As Dene, I have always heard that *we are of the Land* and I thought about this as an educator, calling into the stories I had about being on the Land as a young person, as a teacher for many years, and as I sit here looking out my window. Inquiring

into my surroundings I was constantly asking questions as I embraced the Land with a new perspective, wondering if the Land could speak to me, what would she say, and as I listened closely throughout the seasons, the response was always different.

Our Indigenous cultures are Land-based, “Dene culture is Land based” (Scott, 2007, p. 20). There is a deep-rooted connection with Land and place for Indigenous communities, but this is also an element that I learned was missing from curriculum. It was time to tell our stories in our ways as Michell (2018) reminded me that it was important in “honoring the voice of our ancestors who live in our storied memories” (p. 9). Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2017) describes the connection to the Land as a “critical intervention into current thinking about Indigenous education because Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual practices unless it comes through the Land, unless it occurs in an Indigenous context using Indigenous processes” (p. 155). So why this connection with curriculum on the Land? Michell (2018) points out that “Land-based education requires the involvement of youth either as helpers or participants. . . allows Indigenous youth to connect and strengthen their relationship with local elders” (p. 33). My relationship with the Land is sacred. I have come to understand the Land which I occupied as the Land of my ancestors who were here long before the urban houses that I was surrounded by existed.

Understanding Experience

Kovach (2009) explains that “In an Indigenous context, story is methodologically congruent with tribal knowledges” (p. 35). The foundation of story felt comfortable for me as a researcher because it honored the people I was working alongside as well as my cultural values. Relational research is concerned with doing research in a good way, and for me, this included

*Dene ets'edihchá*⁴⁵ [respecting the people] *ndéh ets'edihchá*⁴⁶ [respecting the Land]. My research was centred around Dene Cree knowledges that were built on key values that I came to understand in both my Dene and Cree traditions. Kovach (2009) describes these key qualities which are shared by Indigenous scholars to include: “(a) holistic epistemology, (b) story, (c) purpose, (d) the experiential, (e) tribal ethics, (f) tribal ways of gaining knowledge, and (g) an overall consideration of the colonial relationship” (p. 44). Narrative inquiry and Indigenous methodology frameworks aligned with my worldview and ethical approach to research.

The experiential is foundational in our learning. I am an incessant learner and for me, observing and doing are two elements of learning that shaped my understanding of experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss that “Dewey transforms a commonplace term, experience, in our educator’s language into an inquiry term and gives us a term that permits better understandings of educational life” (p. 2). Clandinin (2013) calls attention to “experience that is stories both in the living and telling . . . can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing and interpreting texts” (p. 43).

The flow of “Dewey’s two criteria of experience, *interaction and continuity*, provide a theoretical framework for identifying tension at the boundaries” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 21) where there is a constant flow that is being shaped as participants share experiences with each other. There is motion, movement, and balance. It becomes part of the senses. We are always in motion in our experiences and as we move back and forth in-between memories of the past, present, and future, as narrative inquirers, we are continuously in flux with our stories (Ermine, 1995). When thinking of moving back and forth, like a pendulum of sorts, I was drawn

⁴⁵ *Dene ets'edihchá* (pronounced De-ne deh-etse-dih-cha) means *respecting the people* in Dene Zhatie language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

⁴⁶ *ndéh ets'edihchá* (pronounced Nday-etse-dih-cha) means *respecting the Land* in Dene Zhatie language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

again to liminal spaces described by Speedy (2007) as “imaginative sites in which to extend, provoke, and create knowledge in new ways” (p. 33). The stories that shape the in-between are present within the boundaries, they have to be uncovered, or reveal themselves. Liminal entities, “they are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between” (Heilbrun, 1999, p. 36) as stories are negotiated at the boundaries. The liminal space—the in betweenness— is the cusp of curriculum making where *strong like two people* can be a possibility for future curriculum to exist. Within narrative inquiry, “human experience is the most fundamental reality we have” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 599).

In research, we are often found stepping outside the liminality calling forward tensions that embody our personal experiences. As I moved forward in research, I began to understand the bumps in the stories as curriculum began to make meaning in a different space, place, and time. I also saw the importance of attending to these tensions as they unfolded as they were temporal but valuable in my inquiry. “Experience is [also] temporal” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19).

As narrative inquirers, we are “in the midst” of stories and as we enter into stories with participants, we may seek stories from the past, present, or stories that have yet to be told, where temporality, is deepened by continuously “[co-composing of] a relationship within that space” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 25). Continuous refers to the loops of stories that intertwine, intermingle, interflow within, around, behind, and in-between our stories. There is a flux of stories that bend within a single story. As one story unfolds, another begins to bifurcate into another story, like branches on a tree. Stories are not symmetrical; they are always bending and reshaping. Some branches are longer than others, but they are somehow all connected to the roots of the tree. This flux is also a part of an Indigenous paradigm (Ermine, 1995), always bending but strongly rooted. An Indigenous paradigm is relational, like the tree, where knowledge [nutrients] is shared with all beings (Wilson, 2001). For me, working within an Indigenous paradigm is a way

of life that embraces the ontological, methodological, axiological, and epistemological aspects both as a whole and as interconnected. Like the tree, there is no separation, it is interconnected to the entirety of the forest, from earth to sky with many stories shaped within the in-betweenness of what is not visibly seen.

The next chapter I discuss my methodology of narrative inquiry and my connection to storying. I share how I began to come alongside my participants during a global pandemic. In sharing stories, especially stories of and from Dene and other Indigenous peoples I have come to know, it is important that I honour those stories in a way that is respectful. I recognize and honour these stories as medicine “story medicines” (Anderson, 2011, p. 15), containing soothing and healing properties.

Chapter 3 : Methodology *keots'edihshô*⁴⁷ - Knowledge

Story is a relational encounter, it brings *keots'edihshô* [knowledge] forth. As stories are shared, they are held by the individual who hears and experiences them, they become *keots'edihshô* [knowledge]. As stories are continued to be shared over time, the stories never die. Legat (2012) explains of stories that they “are rooted in place and grow with the individuals who carry and tell them” (p. 63).

Clandinin (1992) explains that when storying with participants “we tend to use ‘story’ to talk about particular situations and ‘narrative’ to refer to longer term life events” (p. 122). Whether they are stories that help locate us through our kinships, stories of the past, or historical stories, we all have stories to share. Stories offer playfulness where *playfulness*, as described by Lugones (1987) “is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight” (p. 17). Playfulness allows stories to emerge organically, without structure, nor direct teachings, it is where comfort and craft collide in the inspiration of possibilities. Kovach (2018) describes that “story is experience held in memory and story is the spark for a transformative possibility in the moment of its telling” (p. 49). My methodology of narrative inquiry speaks to the importance of story and what a story may or may not reveal. So, as I (re)visited stories, I wrote about what a story meant to me through poetry.

What’s in A Story?

what is your story, I am asked?

this often a simple

yet obscure question of my existence

⁴⁷ *keots'edihshô* (pronounced ka-o-thedi-sho) translates to *knowledge* in Dene zhatié language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

well, let me share with you. . .
my story is found within the spaces and places of my ancestral roots,
originating between, around, outside, inside, and beneath the surface of the Land.
our Mother.
my story exists because of the brave ones who survived the discourse of colonial angst
a story that lives in the wind, the mountains, the trees, and amongst the whispers of the animals
a story that not many are privy to hear, for one must listen closely to truly understand my story
it is one that is difficult to hear at times,
yet enticing and beautifully unravelling as a story of resilience found in my ancestral foundation
a foundation that has left a profound footprint of strength within me
my story is like the tree,
it is the story of constant survival, of upheaval, of wilderness that branches high above
with roots that anchor me to a history that has endured catastrophic elements
yet continues to exist and thrive in an abundance of fury within my heart
keeping me grounded and authentic to myself and my identity
my story of the ts'élî- iskwew who overcame because of her inherent heart
and virtuous forefathers that endured the battles,
and as the battles continue my strength will withstand the masses,
for my story is a story of adversities and endurance of the soul
bound by my existence as I prevail amongst the urban-ness of my surroundings,
I will seek solace of the heart of the Land as it is nurturing my spirit
my story is the story of a woman who overcame, who captivated, and who defeated the odds
this is my story.

(Originally written in 2019)

My connection to story is shared within this poem and portrays my definition of a story. It is about identity, about self, about memory, and where “the greatest stories speak to us with our voice” (Okri, 1997, p. 65). As I learned what it was to be a storyteller of sorts, I also learned about the significance of story, and more significantly from Dene perspective. I never thought of

myself as a storyteller, nor a poet, but throughout my academic journey I have found a place for story that I have grown very fond of. It became easier to share my story and my experiences as I learned ways of storying. As a narrative inquirer, I attended to stories and lives temporally, looking at the past, present, and future, finding stories within stories.

Narrative Inquiry

“Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, . . . is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience”. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). As a way to reimagine curriculum, I use narrative inquiry as a way to understand the experiences of Dene learning *from* and *with* the Land. We all have experiences to share; this is what connects us as human beings—our experiences bring forth commonalities, differences, learning opportunities, and history. As we live and share stories, we create meaning in our lives from those stories (Clandinin, 2006). In this inquiry, I stayed wide awake to the possibilities of what may become visible within the stories of my participants, I practiced “wakefulness” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 185) to what the story may bring forward. Lessard (2010) describes being wakeful as listening for the “sideways stories”, as listening to the silent teachings from stories, especially those shared by *ohndaa ke* [Elders], and being patient with the stories. The teachings will emerge if you are wakeful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to their presence. The act of being in relation with my participants, is being able to listen sideways (Lessard, 2010). In order to understand sideways stories in relation to the Land, I imagine myself watching the *Dehcho* River carefully listening to the flow, observing the rapids, and learning about what lies beneath in order to understand the stories the river carries. A river of stories emerges from careful listening, from listening sideways.

Being in relation and working alongside my participants was what drew me into narrative

inquiry. Wilson (2008) shares that “Being in relation is also an important aspect of ethical Indigenous research” (p. 40). The learning and listening I did with my matriarchs brought me in relation to the old teachings and in connection with the Land from Dene *k’ęę*. My matriarchs intentionally taught me through sideways stories (Lessard, 2010). The intentional relations of narrative inquirers Clandinin (2013) explains is:

the relational between the person and his/her world; a temporal understanding of the relational between past, present, and future, including the relational in the intergenerational; the relational between person and place; the relational between events and feelings; the relational between us as people; the relational between the physical world and people; the relational in our cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives, and so on. (p. 23)

In my understanding, narrative inquiry “begins with telling stories” engaging with questions or puzzles that emerged in the tensions of experience and through the retelling of stories where we find “a way to understand people’s experiences across times, places, and situations” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 77). It is the ethics of sharing life experiences in a tradition that honours stories, as my ancestors did with the old teachings, that has captivated me as a narrative inquirer. As a co-composer of stories, I too am part of the inquiry as I share my experiences alongside my participants. Clandinin et. al. (2018) refer to this as “self-facing, of turning the gaze upon who we are and are becoming throughout the study of our experience alongside the experiences of participants, highlight[ing] the importance of methodological reflexivity” (p.16). My Indigenous story roots also adhere to the importance of a respectful story, in which the storyteller plays an equal role in the story to the listener. Legat (2102) describes stories as “a mode of discourse used to assist oneself and others to consider happenings that occur on a daily

basis . . . [stories provide] a perspective from which to live in the right way or, as the elders say, to ‘think with’” (p. 65) or to put it another way is to *think narratively with* stories. Clandinin (2013) explains that “Narrative inquiry is a deeply ethical project” (p. 30), and to be an ethical researcher I am held responsible for stories I shared and learned. For me, this is the most important part of being an ethical researcher in this study, especially as I learned and shared alongside Indigenous Peoples and communities.

Throughout this narrative inquiry into the experiences of Dene on the Land, I was always thinking narratively of experiences (often poetically and artfully) as I began to co-compose alongside my participants. These methods also allowed me to think through my autobiographical narratives as a “starting point” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 44) and to continually inquire into experiences as I began to come alongside my participants. Inquiring “before, during, and after each inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 55) also allowed me to reflect on my practice as an educator and any possibilities for curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000).

Narrative inquiry is “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17) and it was this relational aspect of honouring lived experiences that attended to my embodied ideologies of research. The process of narrative inquiry entails not only the telling of stories but the “unpack[ing of] the lived and told stories” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34) within a three-dimensional space of “temporality, sociality, and place” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 50). Using a temporal lens, the three-dimensional space illuminates the temporality of stories in our lives focusing on “the personal and social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and [within] specific places or sequences of places” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquirers (Cardinal, 2014; Chung, 2016; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Huber, Clandinin & Huber, 2006; Lessard,

2014; Young, 2005, Clarke, 2017) continue to form new perspectives of relationality in narrative inquiry while they too, inquire into the heart of stories.

Going Inward

Being a *ts'élî-iskwew* researcher working alongside Indigenous people and places requires me to “go inward” (Kovach, 2009, p. 50) to prepare myself mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I drew on my cultural understanding and the guidance of *ohndaa ké* [Elders] following traditional Protocols (Wilson, 2008, p. 42) before starting my research. This helped me to prepare for the journey that I would be taking, alongside my participants who are considered co-authors. I also followed the guidelines provided by the University research ethics. Together, these actions represent the beginning of my “relational ethics that live at the very heart, perhaps are the very heart, of our work as narrative inquirers” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 30). It is about honouring all the relationships that are part of this research. I wanted to honour and respect the contributions of my participants before even meeting with them. In doing so, I am held accountable to the process and to being in relational ethics from the heart throughout. As with narrative inquiry, participants come alongside in the research and their contributions and voices are valued as co-authors or co-composers (Clandinin, 2013, Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Traditionally, when inquiring or asking for knowledge from my *ohndaa ké* [Elders] and knowledge keepers, I was taught to offer tobacco as Protocol. It is important to note that within different nations such as Cree and Dene there are different protocols. They exist as a way to protect and honour the sacredness of our stories, histories, and culture. It was my responsibility to know and practice the ethical boundaries of being an Indigenous researcher and respecting the integrity and values of the people I was working alongside and translating those values with the

Protocols of the community and people I attended to.

Kovach (2009) explains that “as Indigenous people, we understand each other because we share a worldview that holds common, enduring beliefs about the world” (p. 37). I was bound by my ethical assumptions and ideologies to ensure that my participants were at the forefront of my research, and this was what narrative inquiry, both as a phenomenon and as a methodology, ensured. “In Indigenous societies, the Elders and the oral traditions provide us with the codes of conduct as human beings within our communities” (Ermine, 2007, p. 195). I walked alongside my participants rather than in front of my participants. “Coming alongside slowly calls us to listen not only to the stories being told but also to the stories not told, to listen to the stories being lived but also the stories that create narrative contexts for our lives” (Clandinin et al., 2018, p. 11). As a narrative inquirer, an essential aspect of this methodology is to “truly understand the experience as a collaborative effort between the researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieu” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17).

In locating myself as an Indigenous woman of Dene and Cree descent, I also affirmed a certain set of philosophies that identified my genealogical, cultural, and political perspectives formed by my experiences and traditional knowledge systems as an Indigenous person. I am both Dene and Cree raised with both cultural teachings and traditions. Most of my teachings came through my mother and grandmother and the plethora of stories still resonate within me. The collaboration of my traditional and formal learning spaces was one that I adhere to with caution, as some of the stories and teachings I learned traditionally are sacred. I was cognizant of

this as I began to approach my research. *gogháenetę*⁴⁸ *est'edéhtth'ǫ*⁴⁹ translates to *learn to listen* in Dene, a meaning that derives from listening to the Land and listening to all that surrounds you. “Silence allows you to pause and reflect” (Wagamese, 2011, p. 128) and “as you come alongside in relationship moving slowly . . . as the landscape is [then] co-negotiated” (Clandinin, et al., 2018, p. 94). It was the moving slowly that was important in my work alongside my participants. In my classes, in my ceremony spaces, and when on the Land, there was a constant reminder from my teachers and knowledge keepers to move slowly and to *ets'edéhtth'ǫ* [listen].

Participants and Coming Alongside

Building relationships is an important aspect of ethical Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008, p. 40) and narrative inquiry. Where “relational ethics is most visible in the living of lives” (Clandinin, et. al, 2018, p. 10) and as narrative inquirers, living alongside participants fosters relationship.

The terms—*living, telling, retelling, and reliving*—have particular meanings in narrative inquiry . . . people *live* out stories and *tell* stories of their living. Narrative inquirers come alongside participants . . . and then inquire[e] into the lived and told stories *retelling* stories. Because we see that we are changed as we tell our lived and told stories, we may begin to relive our stories . . . [this] is *reliving* stories. (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34).

Upon moving towards living alongside my participants in the midst of their lives, I thought backwards to my relationship with my mother on the Land and the care and intention my mother had while she showed me how live in relation *with* the Land through silent walks in

⁴⁸ *gogháenetę* (pronounced go-ga- neh- th-e) translates to *learn* in Dene Zhatié language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

⁴⁹ *est'edéhtth'ǫ* (pronounced etze-deh-thoo) translates to *listen* in Dene Zhatié language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

the bush. This was a gentle reminder that I too, had to enter with care as I came alongside my participants and that “I am thinking about the relational ethics in the living” (Clandinin, et. al, 2018, p. 9). The intention of my research was to remain ethical throughout and to be aware that before, during, and after, I always attended to my relationships with my community, my Nation, and my participants.

Coming to my participants had many shifts and challenges as my original intention for my research was to be alongside youth in the North. However, during the pandemic, everything changed. I entered alongside my participants in the midst of a global pandemic that impacted our lives immensely. As I process coming alongside my participants, I had feelings of fear, unease, doubt, and uncertainty. My academic journey was filled with many unknowns during an unprecedented time. Before coming alongside, I wondered each day how this might take shape since I could not come alongside in person. I had to live alongside in a different way than I imagined. With the help and support of my committee, I was able to reconceptualize aspects of my research while still being able to collaboratively engage with my participants in a relational manner. At first, I thought it would be challenging as I was not able to be in person alongside my participants. But those same challenges were felt around the globe. In looking back, knowing my ancestors’ resilience and endurance during pandemics of their time, and knowing the feeling of isolation would only be temporary, my ancestor’s strength helped guide me forward.

Equally, it was important for me was to set a rich context within this research, thus the breadth of content in the first two chapters. By providing a glimpse into the lives of Dene women and their relationships to the Land, I wanted to thread together stories of identity, Land, and school experiences that are rooted in matrilineal culture. Two Dene participants, both women, were invited to my research as they both had experiences of being on the Land in the

Northwest Territories but were current residents of Alberta during the time of this research. *sembeé*⁵⁰ [my aunt] and *etondah* [beauty] were both participants that I had known through kinship ties. *sembeé*, was a knowledge keeper and I had known her my entire life. She was like an aunt to me and had taught me many things about being in relation to the Land, language, and culture over the years. *etondah* was the daughter of a close friend, she was a post-secondary student. In community relations, close friends are also considered kin. Finally, I used my autobiographical narratives as a Dene who had experiences of being on the Land in the North and currently residing in Alberta as a post-secondary graduate student, to help me understand my relationship with the Land and practices of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000).

In narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2013) clarifies that “we intentionally come into relation with participants” (p.23). It was intentional for me to have all-female participants. I was taught that women carry certain teachings in relation to the Land. And as a woman, I too, was responsible for carrying and sharing this knowledge as this was a sacredness of being a woman. There are few, if any, research accounts of Dene women by Dene women that I was able to find, so it was important for me to learn how the “story medicines [of Dene women] work, and gradually [knowing] my place within the work” (Anderson, 2011, p. 15). It was a process of metaphorically speaking making my own *edhéhke* [moccasins]. Making moccasins is not an easy process, from ethically harvesting the moose and other animals [beaver, rabbit] to preparing the hide, carefully cutting it into shape, crafting the beadwork of the uppers, and sewing everything together with the person who will be receiving the moccasins in mind throughout the entire process. It is both an ethical and relational process that takes time. As the stories were gathered,

⁵⁰ Pseudonyms were chosen by my participants in the Dene *zhatie* language to honour their identity as Dene.

it was like gathering the materials needed, organizing, and sewing it all together in order to create *edhéhke*. Each story shared by Dene was helping to shape the *edhéhke*, and then threaded together as “story medicines” (Anderson, 2011) to walk forward in.

Honouring Field Texts

Ethically, I came to my participants through kinship ties and presented them with the concept for my research. I invited *sembeé* and *etondah* to become participants in my doctoral study. Due to the pandemic, all my research alongside my participants took place in relational spaces online or over the phone. Over the course of a year, I met with my participants individually, either over the phone or through Google Meet™ beginning in October of 2020. Since most of the world was confined to our homes during the pandemic, it was not hard for us to find time to meet at various times throughout the day or week. There was no set schedule, I left it up to my participants to decide what fit their schedules best. *etondah* was also in post-secondary classes which were all online at the time, so we worked alongside each other in ways that did not upset her course work or schedules. I found a way to walk alongside each participant in a format that at first felt unconventional and unrelational but fit well for each of us, where connecting alongside one another also acted as an outlet of healing as we began to tell stories of our lives during a pandemic. It was important for me to have knowledge keeper(s) as they carry invaluable information of the history and traditions of the Dene.

Clandinin, Caine, and Lessard (2018) reminded me that narrative inquiry is “a relational ontology [that] calls us to attend to ordinary experiences in the everyday lives of people, starting with the recognition that we do not know our way around” (p. 19). One thing that was instilled in my life is to be in relation you must understand what being in relation means, especially with those you are in relation with. I learned that it was important to listen first. To be mindful of how

I moved, what I said, what I heard, and to be responsible with all of my actions as I lived and worked alongside others in life. As I began to think of relational spaces alongside my participants, I was entering the *field* “listening to [their] stories and living alongside participants as they live and tell their stories” as a starting point (Clandinin, 2013, p. 45). I was also mindful that I was beginning in the midst (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), but also in the midst of a pandemic. As I thought about the beginning of the pandemic and all of my writing during that time, the following poem emerged.

*How do I break away from the obscurity of the unknowns?
shifting to modes of tranquility is alive within
and the swaying back and forth brings comfort
there are no in-betweens, no distorted blurs
just the shallow beneath is finding ways to appear
don't look down or the fantasy of the forlorn will become me
I feel the withdrawing of the spirit, I am not accustomed to the drought
as the abundance of hope feels lost in underwater
as the glorious butterfly floats past the neglected fish and land
overdrawn pockets are withering the sorrowful down
my heart is spiraling through the treetops
cautious of the dirt mounds, please do not cover me.*

(Written March 17, 2020)

Even as I was living alongside my participants in a time that seemed unimaginable until the world seemed to stop turning, we found a place in the field online that brought comfort. I went where my participants were willing to take me. We conversed organically and sought relief

in our coming alongside one another. As I was living in the field, I was living in the temporal and unknowing world that was unfolding within my life and the lives of my participants. In our conversational spaces we began in relation as kin, sharing in story, and as we emerged in the field other field texts such as photographs, artifacts, and annals were gathered and shared throughout our conversations. I kept close attention to the “silences, or the gaps” that were left unsaid as I have learned from *ohndaa ké* [Elders] that this is how we learn best (Clandinin, 2013, p. 46). Barnaby (2015) explains the Dene way of storying as a formal way of learning as follows:

There is a spiral learning process in our beliefs, our principles: when elders gave us stories, they did not quiz us on the characters, the plot, the setting, etc. They would give us the story, and leave it at that, they will tell it again, and leave it at that—this is the Dene way of learning. The recipient will revisit that story and relearn new things in a spiral way. If a story is given by an elder, the recipient will become curious and revisit that story with others—they make you want to learn, you become the principal investigator in your own learning (p. 9).

It is this spiral way of learning that I paid attention to throughout this research. It was where kinships were honoured in text and through the sharing of our storied lives in relation.

Honouring Interim Texts

“The move from field texts to research texts is layered in complexity” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132) and the process of analysis is anything but linear. It was difficult to move from field texts to interim research texts as I was in the midst of (re)imagining relationality from an online perspective. This was not my initial intention when I imagined my research, but I

valued the silence(s) that this time of *going inward*⁵¹ brought forth for me.

In the process of qualitative research, it is important that “researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or that writers express in the literature” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). From a narrative perspective, making meaning of experience is connected to how people think through storying. This part of my narrative inquiry began after my initial conversations with my participants, when I revisited our conversations that were recorded, and transcribed, and I began to interpret at a distance (Clandinin, 2013). The following is a short story that sits with me as a gentle reminder to *ets’edéhtth’ô* [listen] or as Lessard (2010) suggests, “sideways listening” as I emerged into my participants’ stories, always listening sideways.

Mary Louise Norwegian, a Dene woman who worked as a community health representative in Fort Simpson shared the following story about treaty glasses: When doctors came, they would ask the people, do you read? No one reads, they only spoke Dene and they would get glasses that were only used for distance, not thinking that the women who came to get glasses also did embroidery, beadwork and used small beads all of the time. After hearing this happen on several occasions, I quietly shared a small bowl with beads and small needles/thread in it and placed it near the doctor ... I tried to make visible to him [doctor] what he is not seeing. (Kulchyski, 2005, pp. 32-33).

This was a reminder to me to listen sideways (Lessard, 2010). As I began to shift from field texts to interim research texts, I learned from Mary Louise Norwegian the importance of

⁵¹ By going inward, I am drawing attention to the quiet, isolation time that from an Indigenous perspective is like attending to their own Sacred fire, being in relation with self to understand purpose, life lessons, etc. It is a quiet time, where going inward is self reflection.

making visible what I was not seeing, this is a way of listening sideways. I listened sideways through my conversations with my participants essentially listening for the gaps and silences. Coming back to the field texts, the photographs and annals helped shape views with a fresh lens and allowed me to reimagine and interpret further possibilities within our stories. Being in relation with my participants, means listening with a good heart, settling into the story with embodied listening, and honoring the voice of the participant as true to form. Dene Elders have stated that the problem with listening is that “people do not listen as well as they did in the past” (Kulchyski, 2005, p. 36), so as I too (re)learned the skills of good listening, I was cognizant of “slowing down” as I listened to storied lives, words that Lessard (personal communication, 2017 January) reminded me of many times, words I lived by as I attended to stories. This also meant not changing the way the conversation unfolded or was recorded and transcribed. It was important for my participants to know and understand that after our first conversations that I would share, word-for-word, their story so they could engage in the research as co-composers.

Field texts, conversations, photographs, and annals help establish a starting point in the research. Our starting point began in kinship conversations, then moved on to sharing experiences of being on the Land and Dene teachings, family history, and school experiences letting the conversation lead us as we talked. My interim research texts also included my autobiographical stories that wove my experiences of school and being in relation to the Land. It was important that I began there, as it helped shape my understanding of learning *from* and *with* the Land and how it had evolved as it was formed through the metaphor of where my *edhéhke* has taken me. Through this autobiographical form, poetry and photograph artifacts drew a deepened attention to my puzzles.

As I co-composed interim texts alongside my participants I was wakeful (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000) to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of “temporality, sociality, and place” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 50) where sometimes new wonders emerged as I reread to myself and co-composed alongside my participants being mindful to “[keep] the tensions in view” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 140).

In negotiating relationships in narrative inquiry, it is important to find places to give account to developing work overtime, so the encouragement of “response communities, ongoing places” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 73) to continuously inquire into narrative. To help guide me throughout this process of wondering into my interim texts I had a response community who guided my inquiries about narrative inquiry as they emerged. My response community was a circle of peer scholars, many of whom I had taken classes with and many who were also in the midst of their own research and writing. In these spaces, queries about narrative inquiry as a methodology were discussed and shared. These spaces allowed me to reflect and inquire into meanings from a community of people I trusted and felt at ease with.

Honouring Final Research Texts

Throughout this research, I captured the essence of voices from Dene learning *from* and *with* the Land. Poetry helped lead me to places of wonder that shaped my puzzles as the Land was central to story. The voices of strong women, Dene matriarchs brought valuable stories of experiences woven in the collective. The weaving of stories is a “slow research methodology” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 51) I would compare it to the slow flow of spruce gum (sap). The sap flows slow, emerges for those who notice, and brings medicinal properties to those who understand.

I was interested in resonant threads as I began to decipher final texts. I listened for rhythms of *edhéhke* focusing on identity and curriculum making as I considered each narrative account where the threads emerged in the form of new *edhéhke* [moccasin] metaphors through

our stories. There were threads between us and individually that resonated with identity and curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). It was important for me to see each thread through the three-dimensional inquiry space so the possibility of entering into the final research texts brought me alongside my participants to the many different worlds (Lugones, 1987) where moccasins travelled.

Stories of being on the Land in *Denendéh* informed our experiences of identity as Dene women, thus leading to our matriarchal stories. Stories of teachings from the Land emerged through grandmother stories *from* and *with* the Land. This brought forth the stories of healing and strength in various ways. We found solace in our “world travelling” (Lugones, 1987) stories, finding comfort in knowing we learned from all the different places we travelled to. As we sat and drank tea together, listening to each other’s storied lives, we grew in our kinship spaces as we shifted in our abundant stories of moccasins. I found the resonant threads, to be like the sinew used for sewing moccasins from long ago—as strong stories of matriarch hands, nimble yet powerful, where healing was abundantly covering wounds in our lives, and where we travelled alongside to find a curriculum of kinship that includes our histories from *Denendéh*.

In narrative inquiry, having a relationship that sustains the long term is essential, and for me, as a First Nation researcher, it was also ethical. As I continued to learn about my own identity and history as a *ts’élí-iskwew*, I learned more about the Land and the deep-rooted connection that brought me back to the North and back to my ancestral roots. I have a strong relationship with the Land in the North that took me back to where matriarchal teachings lived. There were many stories within the landscapes of the North that I only began to unravel. I was also healing my relationship with the Land, self, and others through this process which was comforting in knowing that the healing is my ceremony and ceremony was found within this

research.

Looking Forward

As I reflect on this process, I imagine the creation of a new pair of *edhéhke* emerging from the narrative accounts and learning experience. As a young girl, I watched my granny and mother make *edhéhke*. Sometimes they would sit on the floor or at the kitchen table. I remember them with their glasses on at the edge of their nose, sitting next to a shade less lamp, carefully sewing together pieces of moose hide, beaver fur, and beaded uppers. The beaded uppers were usually shaped like flowers and leaves derived from the landscapes of the North. They use the same flowers designs created by their grannies and mothers, heirloom designs. The process of making *edhéhke* takes time and patience.

In the next three chapters, I share three narrative accounts. First my autobiographical account in Chapter 4. I share early experiences of school, being on the Land, *edhéhke*, yoga, art, fish, and healing stories. I imagine this as the gathering of materials needed to make the *edhéhke*, the harvesting. In Chapters 5 and 6 I introduce the lived and told stories of *sembeé*, a knowledge keeper and *etondah*, a post-secondary student. I imagine this as the organizing and planning of the materials needed to make the *edhéhke*. Looking across the narrative accounts, several threads and tensions are pulled forward in Chapter 7. I imagine this as the sewing together of the *edhéhke*. In Chapter 8 I share what I learned and what I am paying more attention to as I reimagine curriculum possibilities from Dene *k'ęę*. I imagine this as the gifting forward of the *edhéhke* to future generations. In the spirit of reciprocity, the give-away is the honouring of the journey for those who have come alongside. Together, these chapters bring forth the notion of walking forward in *edhéhke*.

Chapter 4 : Autobiographical Accounts - Rhythms of *dij ndéh*

A story usually has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There are often characters in the story and as the story emerges, the characters are introduced. Clandinin (2013) asks then “who are you in this narrative inquiry?” (p.81). As one of the characters in a story, I answer this question in response to my puzzle. I share pieces of my story in relation to my identity as a *ts’éli-iskwew* and to the emergence of curriculum making possibilities in stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). I attend to stories shaped by the Land, school, and healing experiences. These stories to live by shape who I am and who I am becoming as a curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; 2000). I begin my autobiographical accounts with Dene teachings and accounts of *dij ndéh*.

*sedze*⁵² Dene - Dene My Heart

We know they will look after this land and protect it and that five hundred years from now someone with skin my colour and moccasins on [her] feet will climb up the Ramparts and rest and look over the river and feel that [she] too has a place in the universe; and [she] will thank the same spirits that I thank, that [her] ancestors have looked after this land well, and [she] will be proud to be a Dene. Frank T’Seleie, Dene Nation. (Kulchyski, 2005, p. 77)

It is important for me to share where I began to think about *dij ndéh*, Land, and place in relation to curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). It was a spiral relationship that began to unfold in 2016 when I started my PhD. Stories upon stories of the Land emerged in many of my conversations, writing, and how I was imagining possibilities of curriculum in my courses. As I was beginning my PhD, I was fortunate to

⁵² Sedze (pronounced seh-dzeh) means ‘my heart’ in Dene Zhatie language (South Slave Divisional Education Council, 2009).

take courses that connected me to Elders, knowledge keepers, and Indigenous academic professors who planted seeds that began to grow within me. I found myself inquiring into my school experiences both as a student and an educator. One of the most enlightening courses I took was an on-the-Land course taught by Papaschase Cree scholar Dr. Dwayne Donald, Dr. Christine Stewart, and guided by Elder Bob Cardinal from *Maskêkosih Enoch* Cree Nation in 2016 called *Holistic Approaches to Life and Living as Curriculum and Pedagogy*. During this year-long course, I attended closely to the (re)imagining of curriculum as an educator. We would collectively come together in ceremony and spend an entire day telling and retelling stories and sharing experiences in a circle of storytelling. We placed central thoughts on the cycles of the moon, the seasons, and language while finding possibilities in our daily lives as a collective community. This course brought forward thinking *from* and *with* the Land perceptions and a renewed sense of relationship with the Land that allowed me to deepen my understanding of pedagogical possibilities as an educator and curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). The importance of on the Land pedagogical work began to surface and was guided by these wonderful knowledge keepers who provoked me to think deeper about curriculum. Not in an explicit manner, all the teachings were implicit, it was the spiral learning Barnaby (2015) shares about Dene learning processes.

As I reflected on the experiences in the course, I began to think about my ancestral ways of knowing, more so, about the stories. Many of the stories that began to forge through my mind were of my granny and my mother. Thus, I began thinking about pedagogy from a matriarchal aspect and curriculum on the land as *dij ndéh* (Earth) curriculum. In the course, we began in ceremony, broke bread together, laughed, cried, and

shared our journeys of place(s) within our storied lives. It was both healing and educational. Thus began my inquiry.

As I attended to ‘on the Land’ stories, I knew I also had to search within myself as my connection to *dij ndéh*, like many others, was not the connection that my ancestors once had. I believe that I have become (dis)connected *with* the Land. The connection *with* the Land, for many of us, has been severed over time due to colonialism and other forms of trauma. This for me was the most important lesson. My grandmother, mother, aunties, and many other family members were forcibly placed in residential and day schools for several years. The intergenerational trauma still resides in places where our language has become a devastating loss to my generation, where stories of wisdom continue to go untold, and where places of shame once lived. In time, these places are becoming new grounds for healing.

For me, this dissertation work and finding a way back to learning *with* the Land was a healing journey. I lived by the words *nahendeh gozhih gogha nezu*, [Land is healing for all] especially as I wrote this dissertation during a global pandemic. I knew that my participants including myself, and the world around us are struggling just to get through each day, so it became important for me to share how the Land has been healing to me for several reasons. One, my research was centred around Dene *k’èè*, or in other words Dene philosophies of learning *from* and *with* the Land. Two, the Land was part of my healing. I have learned to take the time to be present, be still, and be one with the Land as I reconnected to the ways of my ancestors and (re)learned how to *think in Dene*. And three, I found myself thinking as a curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) as I revisited the stories that situated myself on the Land. I sensed more and more that I was

(re)imagining possibilities of learning landscapes as I engaged *with* the Land. Patrick Scott (2007) explains what he learned from his journey alongside the Dene peoples in the following teaching:

Each nation, each generation told stories handed down to them keeping alive the countless details of events, places, and the people who had carried them forward into a new world time. The stories were also the tools to teach and inform youth of the skills necessary for their very survival. (p. 2)

Throughout my PhD journey, I have written several narratives accounts in the form of story, poetry, notes, journals, drawings, doodles, and art that embodied the way I was learning *from* and *with* the Land. As I looked backwards and forwards (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to make sense of my Land and school experiences and how it shaped the stories I tell and retell, I saw this as a quest for healing that took place primarily through learning *from* and *with* the Land. There was comfort in looking back, there were places that I had forgotten and memories that were suppressed for some reason or another. Maybe it was due to being so busy, or maybe it was due to rooted memories that lay dormant until they were called upon. The more I learned and sat with the notion of (re)learning the stories that were brought forth in my memories of *Denendeh*, the more I became aware of my rooted history. I learned that my ancestral roots and history stems far and wide within the North and beyond the imaginary borders, we call provinces. Kulchyski (2005) described “One of the interesting features of northern Aboriginal communities is the way they exist in their landscape” (p. 18). I wrote the following poem as a way to call forth Dene stories.

The Call of Dene Stories Emerge

From, Yamaria⁵³, giant beaver stories of long ago

From, the great wars of the Dene

*From, harmoniously coming together
in agreement - edézhie*

*From, where friendships and kinships
collide*

From, sharing the heart of the Land

From, caribou bans to shared hunting grounds as relatives

From, Dene and Cree conflicts

From, making peace at the Peace

From, profound negotiators

From, osmosis you learn

From, Dene philosophers and prophets

From, our imagination and creativity initiated our survival skills

From, the ohndaa ké, great storytellers where invention is harnessed as lessons

From, beadwork, where innovation manifests

From, the anatomy of a fish where learning spirals up

From, dij ndéh [the land]

*From, Tucho and Sahtú, rightful names for our great
lakes*

From, matriarchs and kinships

From, cartographers, where our trappers mapped the Land

⁵³ Yamoria is a person from Dene oral history stories such as the Story of Dene Origins.

From sedze – my heart

(Written August 2021)

As I reconnected to these stories, memories, and temporal places, I was transported back to their healing properties that reside within them. As I attended to these stories that acted as field notes over the past six years of my (re)searching, I was attending to parts of me that were also healing, parts that I hope may help you, the reader, as well. I aimed to forge healthy relations with self, family, friends, and communities I came alongside. This was the most important lesson I came to learn on this journey. My hope was that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples find value in what I wrote and find a place to connect to their own lives in ways that resonate with their healing journey.

School Story of a Fractured Identity

My initial research wonders were formed by my experiences as a teacher and the desire to connect with curriculum in a way that honoured Indigenous pedagogies, philosophies, and had cultural relevancy. As I sought to find experiences of belonging and identity that connected curriculum to Dene *k'ęę*, I searched “stories from [my] early landscapes, stories that we, [as narrative inquirers] call forward and inquire into” (Clandinin, et. al. 2018, p. 2), stories that for me are stories I often like to keep dormant. Dormant because there are stories that require a careful walking through. The following is a story about what it felt like not having an identity in the classroom and school throughout my grade 4 year.

Growing up we moved around a lot, and I ended up attending several schools throughout my life. This is a story about how Grade 4 began for me. We moved to the good part of town, where you could leave your bikes outside without fear of it

being stolen kinda neighborhood. We were poor. We shopped at thrift stores, we ate no-name brands, and often I lived in hand-me-downs. Since we moved around so much, I ended up starting Grade 4 about a week after the first day of classes began. So of course, I made an entrance when I entered grade 4, as all eyes were on me when I walked into the classroom that day. My siblings and I were definitely out of our element in this school. I recall the fear of walking into the class that day. I knew I was not part of the landscape. I knew I didn't belong. I knew my edhéhke was not accepted as footwear here.

I remember the long walk down the hall from the main office, there were pretty pictures on the walls, the floors were sparkingly clean, and I could hear children laughing in some of the classes as we walked by. It felt like the longest walk of my life. I followed the nice lady from the office who walked me to the door of my classroom. She knocked on the door and this young teacher with glasses welcomed me in. She seemed very welcoming and high-spirited, so I felt at ease for a short moment.

I stood there a brief second – it felt more like an eternity – before walking into the classroom not knowing what I was about to walk into. As I slowly stepped forward walking into what seemed like the abyss, my goodness, if I could hear a pin drop at that moment, I certainly did. Every student peered with scrutiny at me as I walked in. I was wearing hand-me-down jeans, a pink tattered long sleeve shirt, and worn-out runners. I was lucky enough to be carrying new books and a new bookbag. We didn't have much back then so material things were minimal.

As I peered my eyes around the room, I noticed that there were no visible

minorities in the class, there were no visible First Nations students for that matter. For some reason, it was beyond scary. It was dreadful. At that moment, my teacher introduced me and pointed me to a desk in the back row near the wall. This is where I sat the entire year. In the back row, near the wall. The entire year I had no friends. No invites to birthday parties, no invites to Christmas events, no invites to play with other students. I was alone. There was not one mention about Indigenous history, no Indigenous culture shared, no Indigenous stories or visible Indigenous students in the entire school. It felt like I was invisible. I had no identity; it was fractured like a broken bone. I was merely a First Nation student, placed in the back of the room, left to survive the elements. I wonder what my teacher knew about First Nations peoples, she certainly didn't ask or try to share culturally relevant teachings in the class and maybe through no fault of her own. This would have been in the 1980s, things were much different back then. Or were they. Luckily, we only stayed at this school for one year, but that year stuck with me my entire life. Now as a teacher, I think of other students who feel this way or have experiences such as these. As I weave together events in my life about identity, I root them to places where I am growing from the lesson that sits in them. Although life as a grade 4 student was not what I would imagine, I know that embracing all student identities as an educator is important. My aim is to leave edhéhke footprints where students who tell and retell their own identity stories are honoured and respected for a lifetime in and out of the classroom.

(Written August 2021)

The feeling of having no voice or agency still followed me as a graduate student. In

the beginning, I was thinking about philosophy mainly from a Eurocentric, academic perspective and it brought so much uncertainty to my capabilities as a graduate student. Experiences that followed me from my early school days. Uncertainty in my competency, uncertainty in my voice and agency, and uncertainty in valuing my knowledge as worthy. Woefully, I knew I was not alone. Graduate school can be a scary place for new scholars, it was for me. There were times when I wrote papers and wondered if I was supposed to be here, if my voice mattered. I wondered if my *edhéhke* [moccasins] belonged here.

I grew up knowing and living through racism, oppression, stereotypes, and self-doubt, often feeling defeated by mainstream education. Defeated by teachers who thought I was less than because I was First Nation and who thought I would amount to nothing important, another deflated statistic. Defeated by a system that often labelled me through a negative lens. Defeated by society that brought forth false notions of Indigenous history that nearly destroyed my existence. Defeated by mainstream education that wanted nothing more than to assimilate my understanding of what it means to be First Nation. It was these negative experiences that I drew upon to help bring forth courage in changing a system that almost overcame me. If it were not for the resilience of my ancestors to survive and the drive from within that compelled me to keep going, I would not be here today writing about my life as a curriculum maker.

As I recalled these difficult stories and how I overcame notions of defeat, I remembered the hard work and dedication in continuing a formal education so that I could help make the world a better place for those yet to come. This was also important to me as a mother. I wanted my daughter to know the strength of a warrior knowing that ‘she too could do anything’ where self-doubt is not a word, she will ever experience. The words

were inspired by my late *seta* [father].

Wagamese (2011) shares that “Nothing in the universe ever grew from the outside in” (p. 23) when looking inward for answers to difficult questions. In the end, we are all connected. I related to this profoundly as it shaped my perspective of resilience and desire for change, I see this within myself. I was still actively learning narratives of the past and gaining experiential knowledge as I revisit these stories. This was my personal autonomy, where experience led me to restoring balance where I had agency to find my way in the processes that feel right for me.

When I revisited memories of my youth, I was aware of the experiences I had in my formal school settings and life in general as places of ambiguity, where my voice fell silent in many landscapes. The feeling of defeat echoed throughout most of my formal schooling and sadly, lived within most aspects of my life. Finding the courage to speak and honour my knowledge and knowing, especially as a woman, and learn in a spiral process (Barnaby, 2015) was built on the basis of coming to understand and revere in my identity as a *ts’éli-iskwew*. It was through the strength of stories where ancestral ways, kinships, and resilience resonated from within. The following poem elicits my association with the word: resilience.

Fleshed in Resilience

*there are real moments of serendipity that bounds me to the reality of resilience
a word that I have come to know and truly understand
a word that I cannot teach, but live
a word that, for me, transpired out of the cleverness of my youth
and the desperate need to survive.*

a word that means so much more than bouncing back
a word that travels through the education system as a descriptor of good choices
but a word that describes the resistance to the defeat.
I wonder though, does this word have meaning to those who do not understand it,
to those who have not lived this word.
does it bring revelations for a new light, a new understanding of survival?
an optimism and desire to truly champion the youth in need.

(Written August 2021)

As I dwelled on this word resilience, I sat in the comfort of *dij ndéh*. One of the most important teachings that I have learned is to give what is bottled up inside you to the Land, the Land heals. So, when I feel daunted by stories of defeat that continue to exist in places I encounter, even today, I go to the Land. This is where my moccasins bring healing, and the theory of Dene *k'ęę* emerges. I revisited my initial thoughts on philosophy, it was the Dene stories that called me forward and as I continued seeking knowledge from Dene *k'ęę*, I was (re)learning to *think in Dene k'ęę*.

Coming Back into Relation With *dij ndéh*

Growing up as a First Nation person came with many stories. I have many stories. Stories of hardship, stories of poverty, stories of laughter, stories of the Land, stories of ancestors, and stories of travelling. Travelling to other nations, travelling to places, travelling through dreams, and travelling to my ancestral Lands. There was always a feeling attached to each story that I learned to recognize as a gentle reminder of Dene *k'ęę*, where embodied knowledge lives.

Kulchyski (2005) described that “On the Land, a phrase perhaps unfamiliar to

southern readers, is used as often for those going out on boats or over ice as it is to describe travel over land” (p. 23). Being ‘on the Land’ has been part of my entire life and connects me to the North, where hunting, food subsistence (moose, fish, ptarmigan, berries, etc.), and Dene *k’ęę* traditions are everyday occurrences. My uncles, aunties, cousins, sisters, brother, mother, and daughter all hunt, fish, or trap in some form on the Land. This has and continues to be our way of life. Traditions that are continuing with the younger generations like my daughter. I am grateful for this. She too will be guided by Dene *k’ęę* on the Land. For me, Land teachings have been the most vocalized and memorable in my stories. It was most reflective of when I was a young girl, this was when the connection to the Land stands the most prominent in my memory. As I reflected back on my childhood, I was reminded of the beauty of the Land, of nature, and of the subtle teachings I have learned that shape my values over time.

As I revisited stories of the Land, I recall a poem I originally wrote about my kindred relationship with the land in 2019.

Kindred Relationship

when reflecting on this beautiful, humbling landscape

I’m reminded

of the beauty and splendor

the earth evokes in the seasons

of the stillness of the early morning waters

of the morning dew upon the Spring blades of grass

of the supple starry Summer nights

of the whistling of the lively leaves in the Fall

of the Winter and white blankets of snow
like a tender hug that calms my soul
allowing me to (dis)engage and (dis)associate from the urban satires
and leave the confines of my formal realities

at peace, I feel in this place, this Land
a connection that brings solace to my spirit again and again
unearthing feelings of delight and belonging

as I walk upon the soft, supple earth
I am instantly calmed by the healing water spirits
the sounds of nature, above and below,
for my relationship to this place
runs deep within my soul

I realize,
I am a part of this place as much as this place is a part of me
an everlasting feeling of contentment,
of connection,
of familial spaces
as I (re)engage in this
newly explored relationship
with place

inspiring my passions
assuring my existence
captivating my heart
with my kindred relationship to place.

(Lafferty, in press)

The Dene way of life is “rooted in a deep love of the natural environment, people were taught to establish a personal connection with other beings, the Land and the water” (Barnaby, 2015, p. 8). “A narrative ontology implies that experiences are continuously interactive, resulting in changes in both people and the contexts in which they interact” (Caine, et.al., 2013, p. 576) where stories are constantly shifting.

As I began my PhD in 2016, I was immersed in tensions of school stories that I had experienced. What stood out for me the most were curriculum stories. The more time I spent learning in this formal space, the more I wanted to be on the Land learning. The experiences in the course *Holistic Approaches to Life and Living as Curriculum and Pedagogy* were what sparked possibilities of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) *from* and *with* the Land that I was imagining. It was a spiral learning process (Barnaby, 2015).

Throughout this course, I started to imagine my life experiences on the Land by staying in relation to the moon for a year. There are sometimes thirteen moons in a calendar year, each moon is dedicated to a month in our Gregorian calendar, a calendar the world has come accustomed to overtime. When we were attending to our connection the Land in this course, we focused on our relationship to the moon in ways that decolonized the Gregorian calendar, so it reflected who we were and what was happening around us. I began to pay attention. I began to *think in Dene* and revisit stories of the Land, listen to the seasons as my granny would have, and

centre my stories of the moons on Dene *k'ęę*. Kimmerer (2013) reminds me by asking the questions in relation to *dij ndéh* “What else can you give but something of yourself” (p. 38)?

Ceremony sat central to my relationality throughout this process of honouring the four directional teachings brought forth by learning and living with the Land in a different way. This learning nourished my spirit as a curriculum maker where it initiated my “reconstruction of curriculum meaning” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 81) as a recovery into thinking about the Land as a curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). The wonders of the Land resonated with my own stories to live by and as a place to begin my inquiry into Land. On the Land curriculum has lived within me since I can remember, as I recovered this meaning in a manner that reflected Dene *k'ęę*, I placed more emphasis on capturing it artistically, poetically, and thoughtfully.

Central to the teachings in this course was our connection(s) to the thirteen moons, where for me the pedagogic values that sit with these teachings were vibrant as “Grandmother Moon calls upon us to (re)member Land” (Zinga & Styres, 2013, p. 313). I became very much aware of the moon, maybe because many Indigenous Nations refer to the moon as Grandmother Moon, as her teachings are old, wise, and relays our connection to the Earth as females. Zinga and Styres (2013) remind me that “her [the moon] connections to the tides of the oceans and the rhythms of life bring us back to our essential connections and responsibilities to Land and understandings of self-in relationship (p. 313).

My intimate interactions alongside the moon became an overflow of energies that brought forth a sense of gravitational pull into learning the luxurious teachings that stem from being in relation with Grandmother Moon. Moon teachings forced me to dig deeper and think of ceremonial teachings in relation to being a woman. In Gaudet’s (2011) children’s book *Moon*

Time Prayer, she shares the importance of menses teachings for our young girls as they transition into womanhood. Teachings that were absent from my life, teachings that I learned later in life. As I thought more about my relationship with the moon during this year-long course, I was happy for this reminder as I stretched my mind into stories shaped by the moon from a Dene perspective. The moon brought forth experiences that resonated with my wonders, it also brought forth healing.

While reconnecting to teachings, I was connecting to a “storyteller-listener relationship” (Dion, 2009, p. 16) where the Land became the storyteller and me the listener. The following poem recalls the stories and subtle moments in time that inquire into my experiences of the thirteen moons during this course. It was a brief interlude of my living memories that now sit idle in my mind as stories of the power and agency of Grandmother Moon.

ôdze honéno ndaa tai– 13 Moons

as the cosmic waves of the silver dragon sweep the landscapes, wonders, and mysteries of the moon ignite, recalling early stirrings, as a gravitational force pulls me inward. the act of rebalancing energies signifies the acceptance of truths with open hearts and minds, where women medicines provide feminine power to be released as interstellar influence where the arrow provides stability of the mind, where nature’s satellite helps me find my way, exhilaration of the heart explodes as this ecological journey unravels towards the unknown abyss. as the perplexity of this journey that lies ahead is bound by desire for transformation as the sun rises in and the grass grows, the moon will guide my tracks forward in this transformational stage, like the dragonfly, I emerge into the light of ôdze [moon]. the lone dragonfly ignites the spirit, crows sing, insects appear, the long grass is dancing, and the fire is crackling, we sit in our moosehide moccasins, adorned in ribbon skirts and medicine teachings, stop, listen, be still. as I learn to walk again with a new

perspective, in this place of harmonious beauty and light, the sacredness of nature surrounds me. hope wanders on the feast of the hunter's moon, where prayers bring fourth nourishment, nourishment of the soul, where time prevails through the constellations, where stories sit in the skies as stars and retell our histories with each twinkle formed, as the rabbit trails go unnoticed under the moon's light, leaving whispers of snow under the lunar glow, grandfather trapper follows the star maps, as snow falling on my memories, my ancestral walks in the fullness of white wonderment, Dene drum style forms, the original wind talkers, today I heard the Dene drum, where voices of the Dene heard through the songs, are symbolic of a mother's love, moonlight shines from desert skies, gathering my thoughts as the wind begins to blow softly, pine trees traded for cacti, reflection is significant as reminders of being humble surround me, embossed in ôdze are my sacred relationships with self, others, and place. mashi cho.

(Written September 2021)

The following is a photo of the wall quilt that I made for my final project of the course, which now hangs proudly on the wall in my living room. I share photos as a way for you, the reader, to come alongside me in my stories and bring you with me through the story in a visual way. This quilt is a reminder of my interconnected relationship with the Moon that year and how I continue to be in relation, learning the significance in various ways of the thirteen moons. Before I began making this, I had no experience with quilting at all, I had embraced my imagination and creativity to limits that I did not know were possible at the time. Each square is sewn together to form a turtle, there are 12 squares to represent 12 moons throughout the year. The 13th moon is hidden within the entire shape and can be seen through the ribbons on the quilt. The squares are as follows: arrow (balance), sun (awakening), dragonfly (transformation),

hunter's moonlight (guiding), swirl (thought formations), rabbit (urbanness), star (sky beings), four directions (entry), snowflake (silent time), cactus (mother), Dene flowers (Denendeh), mountains (three sisters).



Figure 4.1 *Experiences of the Thirteen Moons*, 2018.

What's in a Name?

As I recognized the importance of relationships, especially my relations with *dji*

ndéh, many memories came flooding back to me in new ways, in ways I did not recognize before. For instance, my given name is Anita, a name I had asked my mother about and how she decided to name me Anita. She explained that a long time ago, she had a friend named Anita while she lived in Terrace. She was one of the only friends she had, and this brought her comfort being so far from home in the North. She talked about becoming close to her while she was pregnant with me. She said, “I think it was because she was so kind to me, and I really liked her name and that is how you received your name”. Traditionally, as Dene we are named after our relatives, our ancestors. My mother must have felt like this person she met, Anita, was like a sister to her, a relative. I never did get the chance to meet her. I was about two years old when we moved from Terrace, BC to Edmonton, Alberta where my younger sister was born.

My mother and her friend did not stay connected, so I am not sure what happened to her. In the 70’s there was no way to connect with people except through telephone or handwritten letter writing and we moved around so much that it was easy for people to lose touch with each other. It must have been hard for my mother to leave her friend. I am sure my mother thought of her friend every time she said my name, so I feel honoured to carry this name as my own.

I recall googling the meaning of my name online and I found that it has many origins, Greek being one. In Greek, my name translates to ‘being graceful’, not quite a meaning that I felt resonated with me. For one, I always thought of ballet dancers as being graceful or swans with their natural elegance, but me, graceful? I did not see it or feel it. There was a disconnection with this meaning. One, I am not Greek, nor do I have any Greek heritage within either side of my maternal or paternal family lineage. No

connection, just a name. Or was it.

A while back, I was searching words in the Cree online dictionary as I was trying to find a word in Cree that translates to ‘place’ since my (re)searching was deeply rooted in my connection and (re)connection to place(s). To my wonderment, my name appeared. *anita* ᐱᐅᐅ (translation: there, at that place). It was at that moment that I felt a strong deep-rooted connection to my name, *anita*, a name that connects me to *place*. Not only literally but figuratively as well. Michell et al (2008) discussed the importance of place from an Indigenous perspective explaining that “place is difficult to define, where *place* from a Cree concept and common among various Indigenous groups, is multidimensional, relational, experiential, local, and land-based” (pp. 27-29).

This notion of my name translating to *place* was a powerful reminder of my connection to the Land and curriculum making. Upon discovering this meaningful name of ‘place’, I recalled the many experiences I had travelling where stories came alive as I revisited them and I began “world-traveling” (Lugones, 1987). Knowing the meaning of my name from a Cree perspective, engaged me in thinking with the Land where I knew there was something greater than myself felt in the places I encountered and where I was beginning to understand that a place of healing was forming from within me.

Thinking Narratively

As I began thinking narratively, even before I set pen to paper per se, I attended to the wonder of why I am doing this work. Why is this work important to me or for that matter to others? This work is important for me as I want other Indigenous youth to walk in their *edhéhke* [moccasins] so they feel the Earth below their feet in comfort knowing as they step forward there will be no tensions. Engaging with narrative is attending to the lives in the making (Clandinin,

et. al, 2006), this being my autobiographical narratives and how I have been attending to stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). In thinking narratively, I was nurturing my relationship with Land and places in many different ways as I “world travelled” (Lugones, 1987) in and out of worlds I encountered. The following are brief narratives that shape how I was connecting to *dij ndéh* and how I was dwelling, living, telling, reliving, and retelling stories (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34) formed *from* and *with* the Land in various ways.

Moccasin Memories

Ever since I can remember, I have always worn moccasins. Smoke-tanned moose hide [*edhéhke*] adorned with beaver fur and Dene flowers beaded on the vamp. They are the main footwear in my home and my entire extended family from all over the North and beyond adorns them. Most of them were made by my granny, my mother, or aunties. I have about ten pairs, all different in design, aesthetic, and use. but there is one pair that I wear more than others. I have traditional Dene moccasins, mukluks with tie arounds and crow boots that were given to me by an Elder. More recently, I was given a pair of Diné Navajo style moccasins from relatives in the South. I have learned that Diné moccasins are quite similar in form and use such as taller mukluk or boot style moccasins, crow style moccasins that go over the ankle, and low moccasins which are the ones I was gifted.

The Dene moccasins that I use the most are the ones made by my late granny as seen in Chapter 1, I have worn these for over 20 years. In the winter I use my mukluks, they tie up around my calf. My home smells of moosehide, it smells like Home. I recall the first pair of moose hide moccasins with rabbit fur that my daughter had, it was when she was 6 months old, she was starting to crawl. She walked in those moccasins until she wore out the bottoms.

My mother shared that traditionally we use rabbit fur around the moccasins for babies’

moccasins because it was softer on their skin than beaver fur. My daughter is now 18 years old, but I still have her first pair of moccasins as a reminder of her agility and curiosity as a child learning to walk in this new world she was coming into as an infant. She too has had many moccasins, she even had vamps beaded with the Care Bears and AC/DC designs. As the tradition of passing on the teachings, she learned how to make uppers/vamps and studies how to draw the Dene flowers as she watched and listened to her grandmother.

As a young girl, I used to sit with my mother at the kitchen table and she would teach me how to draw the flower patterns on a brown paper bag. Now when I doodle, this is the first thing I start drawing. My mother taught me to sew when I was about 7 or 8, I would help her thread the needle because my hands were tiny, and I could navigate the tiny opening of the needle easier.

Making moccasins is one of the most vivid memories I have of my granny and mother together. They were always in the midst of making moccasins for someone in the family. They would rarely sit at the table sewing, they seemed to always sit in the bedroom on the floor. The bedroom would be full of bags piled high, you know the little shopping bags you get at the grocery store and be full of mysteries within them. My granny and mother liked to collect things, memories of sorts. I still have many artifacts from my childhood, and this surprises me because we moved around so many times. I am amazed that I still have some of them with me today. Maybe it is something that I too inherited as a family trait because I know that my grandmother also had many keepsakes and memories stashed away. It must be that I too, inherited this family trait of memory–collecting.

In smaller isolated communities in the North, things are not as accessible as in larger cities. I can see why my granny and mother liked to keep things and give to others in need. They

were relational and practiced Dene *k'ee*, this is the Dene way of life. They would keep all sorts of things in bags or boxes until they needed them or someone else needed them. Another reason that might have kept things was because of a fire that impacted the family home long ago. In the 1970's the family's house burnt down. The house was in *Líidlij kúé*, on the Northwest side of the island next to the *Dehcho* (Mackenzie River). There is not much left standing there now. Below is a photo of what was left standing of the house the last time I was there. My mother said that there used to be another section of the house, but it all burned and with it many memories, photos, and ancestral artifacts. When I return to *Líidlij kúé*, I go there to (re)connect with the Land where my mother grew up. It is important for me to be there physically and remember in this way. Many wonders come to mind as I visit as many stories will go untold. Each time I think of this photo or visit this place, I think backwards to when my family lived there. It brings me strength.



Figure 4.2 Photograph of the old Lafferty house in *Líidlij Kúé* taken September 14, 2018.

In thinking back to *edhéhke* memories, and as I sit thinking of the many moccasins my matriarchs have shaped for others, I see *edhéhke* as central to my identity and central to identity as Dene peoples. The significance of moccasins for Dene is found in each stitch of the thread and each bead that is formed to create visions of our connection to *dij ndéh*, the Earth. The making of moccasins is where kinship stories are shared, I see my granny and mother speaking Dene *zhatie*, as they sew together beadwork of family designs as their thimbles keep the tension

of the needle at bay, they laugh together, and visit surrounded by the smell of smoked tanned hide.

A Story of Dene Moccasins: Moccasin making is a kinship story, it places relationship at the centre where our energies come together as reminders of respect knowing that where, we as Dene, come into co-existence with the Land and kin. Wearing Dene moccasins is what makes us Dene, as they are markers of our identity. They are powerful and bring us power as we wear them. They can be seen in our visions and throughout our history. Their beauty is found on the Landscapes of Denendeh, they are immersed in our cultural values and laws. We wear them to help us guide our feet in the right way. They keep us warm when we need protection. The moccasin was gifted to us from nōhtsi, the Creator, and in a way protect us. When we are gifted with moccasins, we are gifted with love. They are sole stories upon soul stories. With each pair, they bring reminders of the strong, yet delicate hands of Dene matriarchs, share kinship ties in the flower patterns that we adorn, knowing immediately our ancestral wisdom. They are the heart stories that centre our Dene homelands worn upon our feet as we assert our histories and walk in our moccasins to places where our edhéhke take us. They are reminders that, we the Dene, are still here and that our strength, wisdom, and ingenuity reigns the way we live in the world. Moccasin making is Dene curriculum.

As I think back to the many pairs of *edhéhke* I have had since I was child, I think back to an artifact, a photograph of the many *edhéhke* that I have worn and continue to wear. Each pair was handmade by a matriarch in my family. I used each of them for different occasions such as ceremonies or celebrations or just to wear around the house on a daily basis. I realize that I used to wear them and not think about the many places they have taken me. Each pair can tell a story, with each wear I am living and telling stories in them. I wonder, as I revisit this artifact, where

will my *edhéhke* take me next, there are so many possibilities. And how will the ground feel upon my feet as I wear them? I realize that am coming back into relation with my *edhéhke*.



Figure 4.3 Photograph of edhéhke Dene taken October 11, 2019.

Yoga Narratives

Over the last year, I have taken up yoga. I felt my world was becoming super busy. Work, work, work, and more work. It was hard to say no to projects and to help others in need. It is in my nature to help, and I have a hard time saying no, a problem I guess many of us encounter. I found this experience of being ‘too busy’ similar in academia and the ability to say ‘no’ to projects or work. There was a strong desire to strive and achieve in academia. As work

became busy, I felt it in my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual sense. I knew I needed to do something about it. From past experiences, I recalled yoga relaxing so I found a way to do it in the comfort of my home on my own time.

I had taken yoga a few times before and it was not the greatest experience. I did not enjoy it and felt that it was not for me at that time, so I left. And a few years later, I was introduced to an app called *Downward Dog* (Simon & Ormachea, 2021). After using it a few times, I found that it provided me with the chance to take up yoga in the privacy of my home. I am able to choose which area of the body I wanted to focus on and how long I wanted to practice (5 minutes up to 2 hours). It is quite simple to use and satisfying to begin again in a new way, much like a choose your own adventure yoga.

Let me tell you though when I first started, I had troubles with the poses but as I continued it became part of everyday life and I progressed. The most satisfying part is yoga nidra – yoga nidra, the consciousness between wakefulness and sleep –like a “a place of liminality” (Heilbrun, 1999) it is the in-betweenness of consciousness – it is the most comforting place. Yoga nidra was where I became more present in mind, body, emotions, and spirit.

What I found the most interesting about yoga is how it allowed me to escape from all the noise of traumas, especially as I was centering self on healing. Healing in many forms, is in a sense returning to the ceremony of self. When I was doing yoga, I was meditating and in prayer much like when I attended traditional ceremonies alongside family and community. Yoga was ceremony with self. As I became more inclined to learn yoga, I started thinking of the physical elements that keep me grounded as I oriented myself in the spaces of yoga. I needed to utilize my body as a way to heal from the traumas that I carried, the intergenerational trauma. Creating

my sankulpa⁵⁴—I live a life full of courage—saying this three times silently through the mediation of breathing rotates my consciousness to a place of taking my power back and using my breath to overcome trauma. Sankulpa, I am learning is about listening and remembering and bringing awareness to the present. It restored my body’s calming response, and as I continued practicing yoga this helped me cope while living in a pandemic.

Before the pandemic started, I was working in the North and on one occasion, I travelled to Yellowknife for a three-day workshop in February of 2020. Some of the attendees were relatives and kin from my home community and there were also *ohndaa ké* [Elders], knowledge keepers, presenters from the north and south, and many others who worked in communities across the North. There were about 40 – 50 people who were in attendance. The first day of the workshops started at 9:00 am and we finished about 4:30 pm. This made for quite a long day of sitting and listening. I know my body felt drained from sitting most of the day. The workshop took place in February and needless to say, it was quite cold outside, about -35 degrees Celsius, so it was not possible for us to take outdoor breaks or have our presentations outside.

The next day for a ‘Health Check’, I inquired into some mid-day movements that we could do collectively as a group. To my surprise, I was informed that one of the Elders Rosa, offered to do some yoga with the group. My heart exploded, I was so thrilled and eager to learn yoga from a Dene *ohndaa ké* [Elder].

As the morning progressed, I could not wait to do some yoga, my body was calling for it. Before the morning ended, Rosa settled herself in the front and called everyone to attention. I had met Rosa a few months before and we had only ever met online. Rosa is in her sixties, a

⁵⁴ Sankulpa (Sanskrit term) is a way to set affirmations for the day. Affirmations that connect yourself with your heart, mind, spirit and body.

former teacher and is one of the kindest, caring, and wisest people I have ever met. She “reminds me of the relational ethics” (Lessard, 2014, p. 35) that live in our Dene laws and has guided me in the work I have done alongside community. On this morning she was assisting each of us by bringing health back in our relationship with self.

Rosa began teaching yoga from Dene *k'ęę* [philosophy], something that I never imagined until that moment. There was no need for us to leave our chairs, she was going to teach us as we sat. First, she began by sharing who she was, introducing herself, her gentle voice permeating the room with genuine warmth, the kind only Elders can harness. Our first pose was picking berries. She asked us to pretend we were on the Land and sitting on the ground next to our grandmothers and start reaching for the berries. I was called backward to stories shaped by picking berries with my grandmother. Yoga had never done that for me before. I was reclaiming yoga from Dene *k'ęę* in that moment. Next Rosa asked us to start canoeing down the Dehcho River using our paddles. She asked us to imagine ourselves with our families as we start paddling down the river to our destination. She talked about how full the canoe was and to stretch the arms far and let the water flow back as we gently move our arms in motion backwards. The final movement she asked us to reach for the sky, she asked us to think about the time on the Land when the sky is so clear at night that we can almost touch the stars. We held that position for a minute and she brought us back to centre. The entire practice took about five minutes, but it was the most transcending five minutes of the entire three-day workshop for me.

As I continued practicing yoga, I was continuing to find ways to *think Dene*, where Dene pedagogy and philosophy exists while I was learning yoga poses. I was continuing to learn and grow as I took up this practice of healing as a way to feel my senses in body again, especially as a *ts'éli-iskwew*.

Painted Stone Story

Language is kinship curriculum. It is the essence of our cultures. It lives on *dij ndéh*. Cajete (2020) explains that “Within Indigenous languages is the knowledge of sacred relationships to local environment necessary for local interpretation and cultural continuity including transformation as a paradigm” (p. 33). For me, connecting to language has been a lived experience where learning Dene *zhatie* was embodied knowing. I used all my senses to (re)learn so that the language started to flow comfortably from my tongue and kept me in relation with story, culture, and Land.

Dene *zhatie* is an ancient language, with five distinct Dene dialects within the North. It is a member of the Athabaskan language family. There are similar dialects found within the *Diné* of the Navajo Nations, our relatives of the South. In October 2019, *Tsuut'ina* Nation hosted the Dene Reunification Gathering, where *Dene* and *Diné* from all across Turtle Island gathered. The languages came alive during this gathering, there were Dene from areas I did not even know about such as northern Manitoba. The drums gathered at *Tsuut'ina* Nation to recall the stories of Dene *k'ęę* [philosophies] in a ceremonial space where kinships arrived in an embrace of the heart.

As I mentioned earlier, my mother speaks fluent Dene *zhatie*, she was immersed in the language growing up. My late father spoke only a few words of Cree, so it was essentially disappearing from his tongue as he was not immersed in it growing up. As I entered post-secondary in 1999, I began to learn the Cree language, mainly because it was accessible and there were many resources and teachers available. I can converse in short phrases, but I am learning. The Cree language seems so much easier to learn than Dene *zhatie*.

Language for me has been challenging to (re)learn. As a young girl, my mother taught me basic conversational Dene phrases, numbers, and of course all the good words a young person learns such as how to ask for money – *sombq sih in chi* - and how to count from one to ten– *lié, qki, tai, dii, sulaí, ehts 'tai, lqhdji, tlehts 'edji, lúli, honq*. I was always inquiring into the language, most often when we were sitting together sewing at the table.

The language I shared with my granny, who as I mentioned before only spoke Dene *zhatie*, was the language of kinship. When I was with my granny, I always understood what she was saying to me, even though she only spoke Dene. We lived in relation to language through action, like sign language. She would share stories with me through hand gestures, actions, and lived experiences as I watched her live the language on the Land in many of our experiences together. Oftentimes there was my mother or aunties present to translate the long stories she shared with me, and I learned the rhythms of the language through her movements. As I think back, I was living the language alongside my granny travelling between language worlds of English and Dene where we found balance in our communication with Dene stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

Sometimes, as adults, we forget the relational aspect of language, even English. For instance, when we are young, we make up names for places we visit or areas on the playground to connecting with our friends. We pay attention to the relational aspect of describing place, like when a friend calls and says to me “Hey Anita, I can come out to play, I will meet you at the frog boulder in the park?” Instantly, I know where my friend is talking about, it is where we played last week and found a tiny frog next to a large rock in the park. We know because we describe the place in relation to the Land and our lived experiences of being there together. We were in relation to the place and to the language we were sharing in English. This is very much

how I am connecting with language today. I am coming back into relation with the language as I am intentionally learning to live with the language using all my senses.

As a way for me to live with the language every day, I wanted to create my version of the Dene *zhatie* lunar moon calendar as a way to recall the language in a visual manner. For translation purposes and story of the Dene moon calendar, I visited a website created by the Dehcho Friendship Centre found online at <http://gudeh.com>, one of very few online resources available for the Dene *zhatie* language. It is a place I attend to regularly as a place to sit in and with Dene stories of the Land. As I immersed myself in the interactive site, I started thinking back to the class *Holistic Approaches to Life and Living as Curriculum and Pedagogy* which I spoke about earlier, and the thirteen moon calendars. I wanted to live in the language and was thinking about how I could do this, so I thought artistically as my matriarchs taught me, to think with the Land.

In March of 2020, the pandemic kept the world in our homes, and I spent more time on the Land. As creation and ingenuity drive my imagination, I offered Protocol to the Land with purpose and intention and found palm-sized stones in the area near my home. I took the stones home, cleaned them, let them dry, and started processing before I began painting. As an artist, there was no real plan, I had a vision but no plan. I placed the stones in front of me and began to form them into a circle. Once I had an idea of what I wanted to do, I put them strategically in place of the shadow box frame so that they would fit. I started with the centre stone, (the blue one) and placed 12 more stones around it. My Dene *zhatie* calendar began to emerge. I then began to paint each stone in reference to the stories of the Dene *zhatie* lunar calendar. It was through this visual representation that I created my version of a calendar that drew me closer to the language, the Land, and my ancestors. The calendar has twelve stones, each with a painted

visual, and the Dene *zhatie* translation that represents each moon (See Figure 4.4). In the centre, there is a turquoise stone that I painted to refer to the Blue Moon and then I put twelve smaller stones (pebbles) surrounding the large blue stone that take the place of the 13th moon. This is to reflect that the thirteen moons do not happen every year and so in this way, the smaller stones act as a revolving moon. There are only certain years when we have 13 moons in one full calendar year, this is the month when there are two full moons. It happens once every few years and the month in which there are two full moons also varies often different each time.

As I sit with the Dene *zhatie* moon calendar, I attend to Dene pedagogy each day. Language, culture, history, Land, art, creativity, and story all sit in this one act of creating. As I think of this as curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000), I am reimagining possibilities of Dene pedagogy to sit in relation to formalized subject areas. Learning in this way is not differentiated or departmentalized, it is collective and interdisciplinary. There are more stories of the Dene Lunar calendar that I am continuing to attend to, but this one is one that reflects the way I am (re)learning language and story. They are not separate. This artifact now illuminates Dene lunar knowledge and now as I see it every day on my wall it acts as a language story to live by.



Figure 4.4 Dene zhatie Moon Calendar created by Anita Lafferty on March 19, 2020.

The following is the Dene *zhatie* name for each lunar moon and the translated meaning in reference to the corresponding Gregorian calendar month. The Dene calendar is translated to Dene *sa edehtlêé*, with 12 moons that are based on the close relationships Dene had with the Land, water, sky, and animals. Each month describes the specific time of year where the cycle of the moon presents itself in relation to the Land. The following is the translations of each moon that begins at the top with the painted image of the drum. As you move through the images, each month is explained in a Dene phrase and then into English (Dehcho Friendship Centre, 2015, Dene *sa edehtlêé*: The Dene calendar).

- Image of the drum: *edaidzêcho zaa*—the cycle of the moon when there is a big day celebration, also known as month of January.

- Image of the swirl: *nihts 'i zaa*—the cycle of the moon when there are more breezy days, also known as month of February.
- Image of the eagle feather: *deh 'ocho zaa*—the cycle of the moon when the larger birds mate, and when Eagle return back to the North to mate, also known as month of March.
- Image of the geese flying: *xah zaa*—the cycle of the geese moon, when the geese return to the North, also known as month of April.
- Image of the frog: *ts 'ahli zaa*—the cycle of the moon when frogs sing, when they can be heard returning to the waters, also known as month of May.
- Image of the eggs: *eyéhtth 'êê zaa*—the cycle of the moon when birds lay their eggs, also known as the month of June.
- Image of the two feathers: *ehchudhuh zaa*—the cycle of the moon of duck molting, especially Mallard ducks they lose their wing feathers and are not able to fly, also known as month of July.
- Image of the ducks on water: *chiah Íideh zaa*—the cycle of the moon when little ducks take flight, also known as month of August.
- Image of the moose shoulder bone: *egôchîê zaa*—the cycle of the moon called moose shoulder blade moon, when bull moose look for mates using their antlers on trees, Dene hunters use moose shoulder blade to imitate the sound, also known as the month of September.
- Image of the bull moose: *Îts 'e-ndaa zaa*—the cycle of the moon called bull moose eye moon, when bull moose are so busy looking for mates, they forget to eat and loose weight, during this time the area around the eye is only place it has fat, also known as the month of October.
- Image of the aurora borealis: *ezhunî zaa*—the cycle of the spirits moon, possibly as naahkah starts to emerge in the sky more and more, also known as the month of November.
- Image of the rabbit and moon: *edaidzêah zaa*—the cycle of the moon where rabbits spend a lot of time sitting under branches during this time, also known as the month of December.

(Dehcho Friendship Centre, 2015, Dene *sa edehîléé*: The Dene calendar)

Fish Tanning Stories

Tanning fish skin is approximately a 10,000-year-old practice and is commonplace across many cultures. Fish tanning is the process of adding substances to fish skin for use in various textiles such as clothing, bags, jewellery, and other materials. I would never have imagined tanning fish until I came across a class online. I have tanned deer and moose hides before, actually; I did this alongside students while I was a high school teacher. That is another story. The more time spent in isolation, the more I felt the need to learn new skills or be part of a teaching space again, so I was happy to learn about the class. The class was called *Intro to Fish Tanning* and was being taught by Janey Chang (2021); a first-generation Chinese Canadian⁵⁵. She is a mother, artist, and educator living in British Columbia near the Tsleil–Waututh Territory. An area I too, have also become familiar with in my world travelling. I was immediately intrigued about the prospect of tanning fish skin and signed up right away. There were going to be two half-day classes held on April 3rd and 10th in 2021. Once I signed up, I received an email as to what I needed to do to prepare for our class. I want to share only parts of the process, not the entire teachings as they are not my teachings to share in this way nor the intention of sharing. For me, the important part was the *being* and *doing* of learning this new skill.

The following is an excerpt from the email sent by Janey informing participants about the list of some supplies needed for the upcoming class (Chang, J., personal communication, March 10, 2021):

1. ONE fish skin (from at least a fillet of fish). Salmon, halibut, cod, etc. We will only have time to work with the equivalent of one fish skin during class. Take care when

⁵⁵ (Personal communication, April 3, 2021).

skinning to keep in one piece with no holes. Store bought fish works just fine! Some flesh on is just fine, no need to remove the scales, and be sure to freeze it until our class. Keep it away from warm water and temperatures!

2. Something to scrape with (a tablespoon, seashells with a smooth, thin edge, mason jar lid, butter knife, rock with a fine edge). Bring a few different things to scrape with so you can determine what you like best.

6. Paint scraper or old debit card

9. Black tea...a box of Tetley, Red Rose, or any other old black tea you have lurking around

I could tell immediately from this email that the class was going to be enlightening, the language that Janey used was informal but connected me to home. Red rose tea is a staple in my cupboard. Her email implied for us not to worry too much and not think too much into the fish type or scraper advising us to even use an old debit card. In preparation, I chose to use salmon, I travelled to Costco and bought two salmon, just in case while taking the flesh off that I tore the skin on the first one. That evening, I prepared the salmon skin, defleshed, and cooked the rest to have for dinner. I was raised fishing so deboning and filleting a fish is not new to me.

The next morning, I got all my supplies ready and prepared to meet in class on Zoom^{TM56}. As we gathered, Janey introduced herself and we travelled around the screen introducing ourselves before we began this learning journey. I felt that even before meeting Janey that she was going to be a great teacher because of her good-natured email. As she shared with us, it was evident in her presence that this was her life's journey, to teach fish tanning. I was moved by her thoroughness of the history of fish tanning, and I could sense her passion for

⁵⁶ ZoomTM is an online video platform mainly used for meetings, classes, etc.

the process in her actions. She was mindful of her students and was teaching with the whole student in mind. I could tell that she cares about the process, the people in the Zoom™ circle, and teaching what she loves. She is a relational educator in many ways. It was an amazing process of learning a new skill and learning alongside another passionate educator, I felt at ease in her class.

After our introductions, we rolled up our sleeves and began fleshing the skin so that all of the flesh was taken off, this took about half an hour, and as we all shared our screens engaging in the process. During this time, Janey shared stories of fish tanning. She shared stories about where the teachings came from and the immense amount of research, she has done throughout the years acknowledging all her teachers, especially the fish. She brought forth learning experientially online that was fluid and full of mindfulness that I never imagined possible in this format. I am grateful for her teachings. As we processed our skins, she made sure that we were using all of our senses. She said, “You have to tune into this way of learning, it’s a full-body experience” (Chang, J., personal communication, April 10, 2021). Ensuring our attention was on touch, she asked to feel the skin, touch it gently with your fingertips and feel every part of it. Touch the fibers and sense how the skin feels in your hands. Smell the fish skin, you will smell the scent of the salmon or whatever fish you have, this is the scent of our waterways. After we scraped the salmon, we made our tanning solution out of Red Rose Tea. Who knew that Red Rose Tea would be used as a tanning solution? This was so enlightening! For the solution we needed to put ten tea bags in cold water, she was certain to make that clear. If we used warm or hot water, it may cook the flesh if there is anything left, and it will end up rotting.

As the fish was immersed in the tea solution, she asked us to feel the skin in the water, to swirl it around, to listen to it as it made a swoosh sound around the container. Feel the cold of

the water on your hand. As she inquired into our learning more, she reminded us to be aware of our senses, how does it feel, soft, silky? As we swirled and touched our fish skin, she said keep taking it out and have a look at it, you can see it begin to darken. It was amazing to see the transformation happening before me. I was immediately drawn to the process of learning fish skin tanning as it was drawing on cultural memory of fishing as a young girl, a memory box (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of sorts.

This process was new to me, I had never heard of fish tanning until I started the class. As I read more about this process following the class, I found out that many of our communities had used fish skin tanning process, but memories of this have been taken through residential schools impacts. It was nice to think and be taught in this way and to (re)learn processes of tanning from long ago. This was experiential learning and holistic teaching. I took this class months ago and, yet as I write this, I recall it like it was yesterday, that is how experiential learning feels, it stays within and is recalled with more ease.

Janey ended the first class with a story of her journey through a visual presentation that she made, it was so enticing and vivid. Her deep interconnectedness to community, family, teaching, and her students was evident. I was so excited to return on Saturday to learn more. We met again the following Saturday and continued our tanning process.

That Saturday, we met again on Zoom™, but this time the energy was fluid and exciting. I could tell everyone else was feeling the jubilation of sharing their processes. We started in a brief sharing circle, sharing our stories in our learning community then Janey asked us to take out our fish from the solution. She reminded us to use all our senses to gather more information. Be sure to feel the fish skin, smell it, even taste it she would say. My fish skin was dark at this point, we washed it to get some of the fish smell from it so that when it dried it would not be so

potent. After washing, we started stretching it. I was careful not to stretch too much for fear of tearing, but I was so surprised at how tough the skin was. It was not long before the skin started to dry and you can feel the strength of the skin, it felt like leather, very durable and robust. As it dried, I stretched it as much as possible. About five to ten minutes later, it was completely dry. I was surprised at how simple the entire process was from beginning to end. I felt an awakening of cultural practices embrace my heart as I felt the tanned fish skin in my hands. I imagined so many things that could be made with this foot-long piece of tanned fish skin. The first thing I thought of was moccasin vamps. I was so excited to share this practice with my family, especially my mother. The beauty of this process is that there were few materials needed and I could do it in the comfort of my home, unlike tanning moose or deer which requires quite a bit more space and processes.

I imagined the possibilities of curriculum stories emerging as I reflected on this entire method. While steadily becoming apparent to my time alongside Janey, the awareness of using our senses in teachings formed an embodied curriculum making process that allowed me as the learner to *think Dene* even as I was learning from someone who was not Dene. I was beginning to understand that even though fish skin tanning felt as though it was deeply cultural, the commonplace of stories is also reminiscent in the process of learning. I was reimagining curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000) from a learner perspective and shifting spaces for stories to move in a nurtured online space. Learning from each other in good ways with good hearts and mind is Dene curriculum.

The following image (See Figure 4.5) is the outcome of my fish-tanned skin, a process that I am still learning and exploring. Picture 1. shows the start of the process when the fish skin is immersed in cold water and still a natural color. Picture 2. Shows the process of washing off

any residue. Picture 3. shows the beginning process of immersing the skin in Red Rose tea. Picture 4. shows how the fish skin got darker after it has been tanned for about a week. Picture 5. shows the final outcome of the fish skin tanning process once it has been stretched and dried. The timeline of these photos spans a week. It is through time and relation between the first photo and the last that I see what I did not notice before. As I think back to the class, there is a colorful transition of stories within each photo. The images encompass a story within each one, a memory box (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to be treasured and relived. Learning this process brings forth wonders of tanning fish from the Dehcho and of Dene curriculum. I wonder what the skin would look like if I used blueberries, or raspberries? I wonder how the fish would like if I used White Fish from the Tucho [Great Slave Lake]? I will continue learning, growing and sharing stories of fish skin tanning. *mahsi* Janey for sharing your teachings with me.



Figure 4.5 Photographs of fish tanning process, April 3 and 10, 2021.

Nahe Na'hodhe – Our Way of Life

naheqhdah goghanahonehte. [Our Elders teach us]. My granny passed on to the spirit world in 2018 and with her passing, many stories go untold. Stories from our Elders are treasures, they remind of us who we are and where our roots and lineages extend to. I feel that the more I research my kinship ties, the more I feel connected to the North especially *Łiídljį kúé*.

As a Dene descendant the Land sits with me in many stories that are (re)emerging. I have learned about relatives from many places throughout the North, Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan. Perhaps I have many more relatives in places I have yet to discover or learned of them.

For me, identity is always growing. As I come to learn about my roots, the stories that are emerging are stories that travel with me. I also carry so many wonders, wonders that may go unanswered but wonders that sit with me in the places I travel to. In my searching, I felt fortunate to learn about stories of the past from relatives. My granny was the second oldest of seven children, all of whom were raised in the bush. The following is an account by my granny's brother Joseph Tonka, who has passed onto the spirit world, was recorded by IsumaTV (2009) and this is one of the stories he shared:

My parents travelled along the river moving around and settling in Willow River Lake. Long ago there were many families there, but many have now moved on. I remember my grandparents on both sides, I even remember my great grandmother. They lived with us before passing to the spirit world. I remember seeing many Elders in our community. Back then our family moved where the food was, we were in Rabbitskin then moved along to Mills Lake to gather fish. I attended Residential school for maybe about a month, I was about 14 or 15 back then, around 1936. We would use dog teams to travel, they were not big dogs. We had five of them. I was about thirteen when I would go out on the land hunting and trapping. When we were out on the land we didn't sleep in tents, I used to keep the fire. We would just sleep by the fire. When we travelled, we would sometimes use one sleigh with three dogs and another sleigh with two dogs. If it got too heavy, we would use a stick to help push the

sleigh for the dogs. This is how we travelled the land. We also used snowshoes. It was so cold back then, sometimes I would stay in the tent all day because it was too cold outside. When it got too cold, the older boys would not have to go with the hunters, we would stay home and cut wood.

For the longest time, I remember we stayed in tents. It was so cold, but we didn't pay attention to it, we were used to it. We stayed in areas where there was a lot of good wood for burning and when we ran out, we moved our camp. When my father went trapping, he did not carry much with him, mostly just drymeat. And sometimes he didn't bring anything just drymeat, axe, and a knife. Sometimes we didn't have anything. If they shot a chicken, they would eat it.

During that time, I wore a Rabbitskin jacket. When it was really cold, the rabbitskin clothing kept us warm. You didn't have to wear anything under or over them, they were so warm. Today I think if you used Rabbitskin it would be used as lining but back then we used it on its own. They made them by braiding the rabbit furs together, the same way you braid hair. It was woven together, so then it would not come apart.

In the Spring when my dad went beaver hunting, he used birch trees to make a canoe, and wet roots to bind the ribs and bark when we were finished with it about four or five days, we would just abandon it. I also saw my dad make boats from moose skin using birch for ribs, it was much sturdier than birch bark canoes. They plugged any leaks with spruce gum. They would gather lots of berries, freeze them too. Sometimes they would thaw them and eat them during winter months. This is what I watched the Elders do.

Mashi setáa [my great uncle] for sharing these stories. naheqhdah goghanahonehte.

Our Elders teach us. These are not just stories about the past, for me, these are stories about

kinship, traditions, culture, and languages that are part of my identity as a Dene. These stories live in me today, in distinct ways. They also live in my daughter; she too carries these stories with her as part of her identity as a young woman (re)learning and (re)living her ancestral ways. The cultural practices of being on the Land were about survival, everyday life for *setáa*, *ehtsu* and other relatives were about living stories *from* and *with* the Land. This is Dene pedagogy. Today, I am carrying these stories and practices in ways that fit into my worlds carrying them forward as stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

Healing on the Land

There is a “healing power in stories and sharing stories” (Leggo, 2010, p. 56). Words to live by. Healing comes from a place of recognition, recognition that there is something within yourself that you desire to change. This entire PhD journey has been a part of my spiritual healing. Although a long journey, I reflect on this notion of healing as a lifelong event. I am always learning, always growing in spaces where my identity is rooted as I learn of all the locations my roots grow. In essence, my kinship ties, my relation to places, and where my ancestors *edhéhke* moccasins have walked. We are walking new paths forward where our moccasins feel comfortable once again. The road to understanding *dij ndéh* from a Dene perspective is not easy, there has been so much that has been lost, misinterpreted, forgotten, especially as *ohndaa ké* (Elders) pass on to the spirit world. I always look back when I think of these teachings, way back to when I was a young child. Those memories sit with me the most, they are vibrant in my thoughts and movements as I walk the Land. I have learned a few stories, there are so many untold stories. Some of these stories sit with relatives, some may return by dreaming, and some may never be retold or shared again. When I revisit moments with my *ehtsu*, my thought process shifts and changes in the way I think about curriculum, education, and

school experiences. There is still healing from many happenings in my life that brought forth chaos, but there is hope. Hope for me comes from the Land, nourishing my inner spirit in place.

Clandinin et. al. (2013) remind me of “the importance of inquiring into our own stories of school, stories that shaped assumptions, understanding, and experiences in and out of schools” (p. 6). As I think back to my secondary school experiences, there were a lot of unbalanced rhythms where life was chaotic at times. I reflect on how this chaos helped me to be a better teacher for my students as I paid attention to their rhythms in and out of school. For many of our youth, identity weaves in and out of places and not always positive places. The following is one story that drives me forward and part of my healing journey as I learn to make peace with these stories that sit idle within me.

There was a time in my life when my stories were of darkness. Darkness for me personally, and darkness as a student entering high school. This period in my life is still blurry and unclear so bear with me as I retell a story that captures a glimpse into the darkness of my youth. This period of time in my life was as a time of chaos and uncertainty that, luckily for me, lead to a new perspective of the future and what I needed to do in order to succeed. What all transpired within this time frame is still quite fuzzy and has faded over time but as I revisit this period in my life, I am healing in the letting go.

From the period of grade eight to grade ten, I had already lived in six different homes, three different provinces, and was enrolled in six different schools. After elementary and the stability of being in one place for about ten years, my world had become an uncertainty of chaos. I think back during this time in my life less and less each day, for it is not a time that I felt good about myself or the choices that I made and the chaos that

surrounded me. This timeframe often brings back memories of darkness. This was a time of many upheavals in my life, of which, I had no control over. Now, as an adult, I have a clearer understanding of the situations that my parents were challenged with throughout these turbulent years. During this time, my parents were at the beginning of their separation, which as a result often left our home life in disorder and mayhem. I relate to the story of “early school leavers” that Lessard (2010) discusses of “students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma” because my school experiences also consisted of a lot of movement between schools and places (p. 49). It was not easy adjusting to new schools and new teachers almost every year. Having no support readily available for me during this time of what should have been ‘my becoming, my transition into womanhood’ was tough. Very tough. As I think about my formal schooling during this time, I do not even recall any of my teachers’ names or how my classrooms looked, what I even learned throughout this time. It is darkness. I know that there is much healing taking place through this (re)membering of this dark time, but I also know that I survived this time and overcame through the choices that I made as I entered grade eleven. I witnessed so much sadness unravel before my eyes, and I know that I had to make choices that made me intentionally (re)evaluate my life. Through all the chaos, there was still goodness I recall. The commotion of shifting allowed me to see and learn from a very young age what this turmoil was doing to my spirit, my life, and my home. My parents soon separated while I was in high school, and it was probably for the better. As I began high school, I knew that I needed to create a place of solitude in my life, a place where I could flourish and walk with honor.

Most of my friends in grade ten ended up being “early school leavers” (Lessard, 2010, p. 49), but I chose to return to school. Upon returning to school, there were many ‘gaps’ in my learning, I was placed in remedial courses and for me, it was with good intentions, I needed to relearn what I had missed in the many upheavals of my learning places. For me, going to school became a positive outlet, I did not have anything else to look forward to at home, there was too much dysfunction and instability. The only stability that I had was the classroom spaces in my high school. I was not involved in sports, mostly because we could not afford them. I was behind in academics, and I had some relearning to do. I had no idea about post-secondary and so my only goal was to complete high school. So, I did and with honors. It was a choice that I knew would change my life, a choice that made me appreciate learning in a way that I am now entangled within its beauty and a place for which I am forever grateful.

In looking backward on these memories, it is evident why I feel such a strong connection to teaching, mentoring, and learning from and with Indigenous youth. I have learned that the strongest messages come from those who take the time to care, to share, and to listen. I was fortunate enough to have a few mentors within my life that guided me on my journey. I took the time to listen and to learn from them. For their support, I am grateful because my story could have been one of an “early school leaver” (Lessard, 2010, p. 49). There is much to be said about this particular “in-between time” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of darkness in my life. I know that I will return to these memories again someday because there are memories that reflect my tensions of being an Indigenous student in a time of turmoil, but for now, I will wait for the right time. I am not ready to begin (re)telling these stories yet for it was a time of chaos that brought me through

many entanglements that are better left, for the time being, in the darkness. These moments are still blurry and unclear, they are moments that are hidden, but I know reveal the strength that brought me to this place of learning. For this moment I will say, I survived the darkness, and I no longer walk in chaos.

(Originally written January 2018, Edited August 2021)

Kimmerer (2013) shares “Ceremony is a vehicle for belonging – to family, to a people, and to the land” (p. 37). It is important to know that “people don’t always answer the questions you ask—they choose which stories to tell and how to tell them” (Anderson, 2011, p. 22) and when people are healing from intergenerational trauma, sometimes the stories take longer or even go untold. Healing begins with self. My purpose in recognizing the importance of healing is in sharing with my family and community in hopes of recognizing our ancestors and relatives as to where healing begins, in the looking back to see forward.

I hope that Dene youth who may read this, see the evolution of healing. It is not a one-time event in life, it is a process. *edexoahdih* [take care of yourself], let the Land lead you, *gots’andi* [it helps you], *nagojéh* [it heals]. Dene National Chief Norman Yakeleya (2020) stated that “everything you need to know in life is there on the Land”. Being on the Land brings personal wellness that (re)centres me in time of need.

While thinking about healing and youth, the most recognizable force of learning about identity as a mother, was to purposefully bring back the *rites of passage ceremony* for my daughter. In 2019, my daughter turned sixteen and we held a ‘rite of passage⁵⁷’ ceremony for her to honour her transition into womanhood. It was to honour her growth, her achievements, and

⁵⁷ Rite of passage ceremonies mark a time in a young person’s life where transitional phases are honoured, most often through ceremony, prayer, and celebration alongside family and community.

her transition to her becoming. Four matriarchs (aunties) were chosen to act as her life guides as she learns to ‘walk in her moccasins’ as a young woman becoming. We intentionally found a place for her stories to thrive. Anderson (2011) explains that our matriarch stories are “where women had authorities that were rooted in cultures that valued and respected equality; and in which ‘old ladies’ ruled” (p. 19). They guide our steps forward. Bringing this ceremony back to our family is a way for healing from intergenerational traumas to give voice to our young people in a manner that is celebrated.

I give deep gratitude to my matriarchs [*ehtsu, semô, sembeé*] for guiding me to turn to the Land throughout this (re)searching, it is a continual healing journey. The more time I spend on the Land brings healing from within. I feel more connected to Dene *k’èè*, and I see the identity of self within the Land, that is healing. Everything is connected to Land, as I recognize this, I recognize my survival as a living testament to the perseverance of my ancestors. In living out possible narratives with the Land, a place of healing is entering my spirit, where prayer upon prayer holds me up. The recognition of healing is found within Dene curriculum. It too heals. The following is my response to chaos as I overcame obstacles in life and found healing in my heart along the way, for this I am thankful. *mahsi nõhtsi* [Creator].

My response to chaos

moving, inward, outward, forward, backward

always a constant change crushing me

strained by the elements of her surroundings

succumbed to notions of despair

the constant upheaval of classrooms

created by the constant shifting of location

*and despair within her family
often feeling that there was no real place to call home*

school you ask.

it didn't matter to anyone, she became lost

lost in the constant shuffle

lost with her family ties

lost within herself

a time of a young person's becoming,

felt more like her darkest hours

troubles surrounded her every turn

obscurity unraveled daily

school became a shuffle of lies

home was a dwelling to be found

kinship was in desperate need of revival

she walked in chaos.

instability became significant

watching her surroundings carefully

learning from every movement seeking balance

how can I escape this chaos she asked?

answers came in the shadows

lurking as if trying to insist she give in

for the chaos she walked in became direction

directions that lead her to enlightenment of knowledge

enlightenment of self and enlightenment of place

stability soon came in the form of light

encircling herself with virtues and values

the upheaval of conforming thoughts

became the resilience within her spirit

for she walked in chaos

and survived.

(Originally written in 2018)

Living poetically on *dij ndéh*

As I (re)connect to the rhythms of *dij ndéh*, poetry has been a powerful outlet for sharing narratives as songs of the heart that speak to my relationality of the Land. Leggo (2008b) explains that “the real purpose of telling our stories is to tell them in ways that open up new possibilities for understanding wisdom and transformation” (p. 9). Poetry allows me to listen in a different way.

This reflective process brings me to (re)visiting of lived experiences always in the midst (Clandinin, 2013) as I call on different worlds as a journey of words waiting to unfold. Okri (1997) shares this about poets, “Storms speak to them. Thunder breathes on them. Human suffering drives them. Flowers move their pens. Words themselves speak to them and bring forth more words. The poet is the widener of the consciousness” (p. 2). I cannot help but be moved by

his words as an expression of how words have been transcending from my mind since the moment, I was introduced to it within scholarly work. I was never invested in writing or reading poetry, I recall certain poets that I admired before I began writing, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (1904) *How do I love thee*, or Chief Dan George's (2003) *Oh Great Spirit*. During my high school experience, poetry did not find a place in my world, maybe because it was too direct in the way it was taught, there were too many rules, and the words were not allowed to flow as I would have wanted them to or maybe it was the lack of interest. There are a number of reasons why I was not able to connect with words during that time. Perhaps the chaos that stagnated my poetic voice, perhaps the winds were not blowing in the direction for words to flow, perhaps the distilled curriculum of the day or lack of motivation or urge to creatively engage with a kaleidoscope of word images, or perhaps the words were not connecting to the spirit in the way they are today. Perhaps I was just not ready to voice my words where they could dwell in spaces that I could recognize as my story. Poetry is medicine for me now.

Poetry emerged from a place in the heart that woke to fear. It all started during a course I had taken in 2017 with Dr. David Lewkowich at the University of Alberta called *Curriculum Inquiry*. On the first day of class, he handed out a different piece of fruit to each person in class and asked us to write a poem in relation to the article we had read but we had to think with the fruit in mind. I got an orange, and this orange in a sense led to my love of poetry writing. I find poetry as a way to connect to others, to gauge experiences in an artful collective, where words find a way to attach to the heart. The orange now sits close to my heart.

There were moments in my PhD journey where I thought I would not survive this for there was always fear that lived within me; fear of sharing my perspectives; fear of being alone on this journey; fear of not knowing, but most of all, fear of failure. Why I wondered was failure

a defining space for me. I guess, as a First Nation in this space of learning, failure is defeat where defeat becomes a negative statistic and a scar on our already scarred hearts and minds, and I was not about to be defeated. Poetry found a place for me to feel my rhythm with words where possibilities could soar. By using poetry, I began to relate to readings where reflecting upon my experiences in education brought forth discoveries from within where my *edhéhke* once felt unsettled upon the ground to a place where they felt on good ground again. I began to portray my notions and ideas formally through poetry and this has become my voice.

It was early in this course work that I was introduced to the poetically captivating, Dr. Carl Leggo, a professor from the University of British Columbia. Dr. Carl Leggo sadly passed on to the spirit world in 2019, so I write with great reverence to the teachings he shared with me in a brief but most memorable meet-up with him in 2017. Upon reading more of Leggo's work and poetry in Dr. Lewkowich's class, I felt immediately captivated by Leggo's journey of words, lived experiences, and utmost authentically written life stories. There was a spark that ignited within me, and I knew I had to meet him in person. I had no idea what was to transpire once I reached out. I happened to be travelling to Vancouver and decided to send him an email to see if he was available to meet with me. To my delight he responded and was available. I had no idea what to expect. Little did I know that Dr. Leggo would light my world, give me voice, and guide me in ways that I never imagined possible. I paid attention to the spark that lit that day in Dr. Lewkowich's class. The introduction to Dr. Leggo ended up guiding me through words that will forever sit upon my heart as stories of the heart. He is the inspiration that sits upon my heart. So, I begin with a poem that I wrote about my delightful and most inspiring in-person meeting on February 22, 2017, with Dr. Carl Leggo:

Where Heart meets the Mind with Leggo

as she walks upon the traditional unceded territory of the Musqueam⁵⁸ people,

her nerves are abundant with excitement.

upon entering this knowledge space of beauty and luster

she acknowledges the traditional lands,

“mahsi nōhtsi, I’m blessed to be here in this beautiful place of knowledge of knowing, I feel it on my skin, embrace it upon my breath, and taste the words begin to flow upon my tongue”

she slowly walks toward the office door, knocks quietly, and awaits with eager intent

she waits. he soon opens the door and to her surprise, there stands

this tall, long-haired, distinguished man displaying his whimsical spirit

powerful voice, and a confidence that exudes with pride

she feels the intensity of the greeting like a warm hug from an old friend

elated by the genuineness, she eases her heart with comfort knowing she has a new friend. maybe kismet brought her here. Or maybe the old voices that kept calling her towards her destined world of words. Either way she knew her heart led the way.

among their conversations of work, and life sharing we revealed a kindred affiliation with words as life stories emerged

she compassionately accepts the critique of her work as an honour

⁵⁸ Musqueam Territory is situated in the greater Vancouver area expanding south and north including where the University of British Columbia main campus is currently located.

and recalls the wisdom of his words, “slow down”, he says.

“reread, revisit and reflect”

words that are engraved in her mind and thoughts throughout her years to come

*she departs with a new perspective and of the inventiveness of words like lyrics in a song
that sing like the birds, or cry of the eagle, she is learning to fly.*

embracing the chorus knowing it is a song she will soon sing

navigating her steps carefully towards a future unknown to her,

knowing a new lifelong friendship has formed

honored, humbled, and harmonized, she finds balance.

her journey through words

will be just as profound as meeting her new mentor, it is a life’s story.

After our meeting, we continued to share through emails for a short time. As I attend to this brief time in my PhD journey, I realize that it was one of the most profound moments in my life introducing myself and my work to Dr. Leggo. The words he shared over time continue to dance across my heart, singing heart songs that keep me learning and growing. Sadly, in February of 2019, I learned of his passing to the spirit world. He continues to shine a light on my words as his words travel to my life stories here. One of his first correspondences with me, is one that I always reflect on when I am writing, as I think and “live poetically” (Leggo, 2008a). Here is an excerpt from our conversations we had about poetry and the teachings I learned from our brief encounters (Leggo, C., personal communication, February 25, 2018).

Hi, Anita,

It was lovely to meet you and to discuss your poetry and research.

I have many fond memories of U of A, and I am delighted that you are pursuing your studies there with wonderful colleagues.

Your new poem is a song of the heart for the earth. If we are attentive, we can learn to see and hear the earth's rhythms with the heart's rhythms. My favourite line is: "I am a part of this place as much as this place is a part of me". I recommend that you include specific images in the poem. Recently a friend pointed out that the tiny white flowers called snowdrops were blooming on the edge of the road that runs by her place. I had parked near the snowdrops, but I hadn't noticed them. I was glad she invited me to look, really look. Now, I am seeing snowdrops here and there.

On a poetic Tuesday,

Carl

This newfound way to live with words has created a world of possibilities that allows me to “consider my identity” (Schwarz, 2006), in a manner that honours who I am as a *ts'éli-iskwew* scholar. Schwarz (2006) describes Leggo's philosophy of teachings “as an almost urgent call to make classrooms a sacred space where lives might be written and read to compose stories as creative ways of growing in humanness”. This poetic description is not only encouraging but profoundly prolific in the essence of education and curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). I found solace through this poetic device, I am humbled by the words of Dr. Carl Leggo, as he encouraged me to write forward, where my stories deserve attention. It was a great honour to have met Dr. Carl Leggo, even though brief, I spoke of him often as though he was kin, he was my friend and as he has taught me to “live poetically” (Leggo, 2008a) in all that I do.

I am forever grateful for this introduction with words that is now a light forward in the sharing of my life stories. *mahsi* Dr. Lewkowich. I have come to embrace poetry as an enchanting dance with words. The words continue to flow as I learn to dance to new songs of the heart. As I travel through moments, memories, and time, I continue to engage with this new

poetic device that relinquishes my writing to unveil the life stories that sit idly within *dij ndéh*, upon my *edhéhke*, and in my heart.

A poetic inquiry is part of an emotional journey towards self-awareness and healing as I understand reconciliation to be, especially within education. This discontent that I feel with the systems of education is largely based on the historical and personal impacts that the residential schools have had on my educational journey. Through poetry, I can reconcile these notions as a mindful therapy of sorts. As I think more about curriculum and curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000), I think back to the traditional teachings, and of being on the land with my matriarchs.

The following narrative accounts are from poems that I have written *from* the Land as I have been connecting, (re)connecting, looking backward, forward, and in-between, composing and (de)composing thoughts, becoming aware, living, dwelling, residing, reflecting, shaping and (re)shaping my understandings, reflecting and (de)flecting ideas, admiring and finding inspiring places to live poetically in storied relations *with* the Land. These are the wonders and words that I have been learning to sit in relation in a different way, in a way that shapes my identity as a *ts'éli-iskwew*, challenges my ideologies of curriculum making to include Dene *k'ęę*, and where Dene *k'ęę* sits at the forefront of mind.

Dwelling Poetically

When I reminisce about the time I spent wondering about wildflowers and their underlying traits, I am enamored by their gifts that my grandmother shared with me so long ago and how her teachings were shaped by elegant movements on the Land where I am witness to curriculum making in Dene *k'ęę*. I am learning her thoughts were not separated into categories, they were fluid and holistic. There were no structured or formal learning spaces, it grew from the

milieus of the Land. Originally written in 2019, this poem introduces how the wildflowers that I have often pictured are formed in the milieu of watching *ehtsy* [my granny].

Wildflowers

as I gaze upon the still waters

reflections of my childhood emerge

and visions of flowers begin manifesting before my eyes

I am enthralled by their presence as I am reminded of their beauty

for they hold valuable secrets.

secrets of my ancestral ways

often there are enigmas

revealed within their precious petals and roots

but one must watch attentively in order to

realize their true essence in nature

I reflect upon my memories of these magnificent wildflowers

growing wild and succulently along the lakes' edge

as an ethno-beauty of delight appears before me

like time travelers with a message

communicating through the waters

to inform me of their divine gifts

gifts of silent wisdom whispered only through stories

stories passed along through my grandmother
stories of sacred medicines
stories of precarious grace
stories of ultimate survival and
stories of untold landscapes

the beautiful narratives coming to life before me
as the flowers glisten within the stillness of the waters
I am reminded of their wildness
their hidden offerings
only a precious few can see

as they are a sanctuary of teachings
curriculum makers⁵⁹ in their own right
beyond what the I can perceive
it is the stillness of the water
that emulates the chronicles of
the wildflowers that echo my memories
(Lafferty, in press)

The gentle reminder of being in constant flux while on the Land as I also collide with tensions or bumps, I encounter in life is found within this poem. As I lean forward in my

⁵⁹ (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992)

thinking, I am mindful to be conscious in my inquiries, to walk in my *edhéhke* with intuition, balance, and movements where they feel rooted once again. Through this (re)connecting with the Land and languages, I am constantly shifting my identity forward, where the poems and journal notes take precedence in my connections. The poetic narrative of the wildflowers is “curriculum making” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) that was not found within the context of my formal education. As I reflect on what I have learned about curriculum, I am reminded of how my ancestors taught the ecology of the flowers and plants through the language stories shared often by matriarchs. In placing myself in a landscape where I am able to feel my surroundings, I feel these stories and prioritize their voices.

Strength in Story

she sits wondering with attentiveness to her surroundings
reminiscing of yesterdays in the reflection of water’s edge
visions and signs of wisdom lure her into the sparkling waters
imprints found on the Landscape of the rocks rhythms
semiotics symbols as literacy are formed through nature’s wild
silently listening to sounds of the sacredness
feeling connected by the beauty of the wildness
the languages of her ancestors
are heard through the whispers of nature
shared as prophecies interpreted upon the Land
visions conveyed through nature’s elements,
beyond the commons hold histories
containing the stories shared by her Elders,

stories of the waters from ancient times
concealed as cryptograms among the Land,
where generations of wisdom are fastened to earth.

as a keen observer seeking truth
honoring the ancient ones with gratitude
as the highest priority
she feels renewed by the spirit of the Land,
comforted in knowledge of her *ehtsu* and *ehtsie*

she finds familiarity in the sacred truths
upheld by the oral icons of long ago
resilient knowledge sustained over time
for more generations to acquire

through this oral and symbolic knowledge

she escapes in the realization

that the hearts of humans

will recognize the beauty and soulfulness
of story, of orality, of honoring the past
as the foundation of wisdom keepers before
are bonded by their ontology of veracities

the continued story

lies within the soul of the earth

connected by a life force within

these narratives endure
we embrace in shared experience
she sits quietly
mesmerized by her love of Land and nature
nurturing the existence of the voiced stories
profoundly in the moments, in the stories.
she smiles with jubilation
at the strength in story.

(Written January 2018)

Dene histories reside in oral stories. There were no stories that were written down, they were always shared in relation to place. Eigenbrod and Hulan (2008) explain that “elders, when taken physically out on the Land, they are able to use the mountains, lakes, and river valleys as mnemonic pegs to tell stories of personal experiences in or near the various parts of the Land” (p. 2). Today with technology, more stories are becoming more accessible which is important for our youth today. Anderson (2011) relays that “Rather than offering a chronicle of events, Indigenous oral history typically works to confirm identity and remind listeners of the social and moral code of their society” (p. 18). As I reflect on oral stories, I have learned that they are not fixed, permanent, or preserved in books, instead they are temporal and fluid. They have movement by whoever is sharing. They are temporary as they sit within the storyteller and even the seasons. They have multiple characters, rhythms, and possibilities. The storyteller negotiates the rhythms of the telling. They are found in temporal places of the Land throughout the seasons and carry identity. I think about oral stories in numerous ways, I have had many Elders and knowledge keepers share with me throughout the years, and each experience has become a part

of me in some way. I take only what is given to me with good intentions and recognize that I am still growing in my knowledge of Dene *k'ęę*.

Going back to the Land has helped me in my understanding of curriculum making and attending to stories of Dene *k'ęę*. This deepened relationship with the Land helps me focus my understanding of curriculum, even when the unexpected happens.

Living on the Edge of Uncertainty

There were no words to describe the situation the world is in as we navigate our isolated spaces during a global pandemic. The pandemic began shortly after I did my candidacy examination. I was in the midst of submitting my ethics and moving forward in my research when the world stopped. Fully stopped. These moments in time are unexpected, it is as though we opened up and are reliving history. It is like reading the stories of long ago, the pain and the suffering are real, it is in the moment. So, as I learn to live in this new world, as I navigate my landscapes ever so carefully, I am reminded of the strength of our ancestors who survived a pandemic a hundred years ago. The human spirit is instinctual when life is lived on the edge of uncertainty. Although we have succumbed to a new world of unknowns, I wanted to share my experiences of so many unknowns.

I begin with the stillness, the stillness of the Land, the stillness of spirit, the stillness found around the globe. As I collided with the reality of stillness, I wanted to be present in my thoughts as I was navigating new realities, the uncertainty, and oftentimes unnerving realities we were all going through collectively. These are the moments where I (re)negotiated the feeling of being still. In this poem, I write about how the world felt so still, so quiet, so serene.

Stillness

*the unknown is
among us
stillness is*

*succumbs within me
the Earth is motionless
our souls are
rejuvenating in seclusion
the land is healing
from within
listen to the stillness
the stillness
is becoming
the newness.*

Written on April 1, 2020

As I began to shift forward within the processes of this pandemic, I wanted to ensure that I stayed wakeful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to my surroundings. I felt that it was all that I had at the moment. Everything was happening so fast, yet so slow. It was like watching a time-lapse video that went on for hours and hours, days into weeks, weeks into months. So, as I engaged in place, I was present with the Land. *nahendeh gozhih gogha nezu*—Land is healing for all, these words saved me. In this poem, I share the importance of careful listening to the landscape around me.

A Walk Among the Spruce

the quietness draws me inward
as I walked among the spruce
my feet gently touch the surface of the freshly fallen snow
where the silence numbs me, as I make sense of becoming still
I am aware to time set forth like a photograph in a still frame
healing, renewal, and faith take over my mind
as I walk among the spruce

I see the grace of nature's beauty,
grace upon grace
found as I sing with the songbirds and acknowledge
the water's edge,
resistance of Spring unfolds
with the cold brisk air still present, felt upon my cheeks
as I walk among the spruce
no signs of human life, just Mother nature's fluency embracing me
the stillness is comforting yet overwhelming the spirit
as thoughts of Home settle in my mind
bordered and confined past the 60th
as thoughts of my ancestor's survival endure in my memories
there is no room for error, no room for taking chances, our strength reigns
as thoughts of heartfelt love for humanity, Land, and family are with me
as I walk among the spruce

(Written April 2, 2020)

Each day brought new worries and wonders. Wonders existed more in my thoughts than any other time in my life. Wondering if my family was safe? Wondering how long we would be in isolation? Wondering what the next day will bring? Wondering what my next steps needed to be in my research? With all the wonders, I kept close to the Land, for me, this was my sanctuary of hope where the Land brought possibilities as I travelled around my neighborhood park – thankfully, I live next to a wooded area on the outskirts of Calgary. This is my backyard. I am situated among the spruce. As I attended to my visual awareness

on the Land, I was seeking comfort in place, I was more aware of what was around me in that moment and taking notice of the landscapes normally left unseen. The following poem attended to a spiritual attentiveness that emerged when my spirit needed it the most. Absolon (2020) shares the importance of sitting with our Mother Earth and honour her sharing:

Creation knows all my stories, all the times I feel sorry for myself or when I feel hopeless or overwhelmed and pissed off at the world. Creation knows those stories because I share my human experiences with Creation. I go on my walks, and I talk to creation. Creation is my healer. (p. 93)

Her words sit with me knowing the reverence of my spirit sits with *nōhtsi* and myself. This for me is ceremony. At a time when I needed to feel a sense of restoration of spirit, the Land provided it in the form of an eagle, the one I deem the closest to Creation.

Eagle Cries

Today, I heard the eagle's cries. high up on the treetops they brought me sounds of hope where courage sits in the skies. in a time of uncertainty, their strong cries reverberate in my veins, and through the landscape, they set my spirit free of harm. I hear them again; the cries are felt upon my heart. Is it a desperate shout-out, a warning, or shouts of despair for all humanity? as the eagle cries my spirit weeps, I am awakened to the weeping sounds within me. Do they hear me weeping too? Are they crying for me too? For us, for humanity? I listen and relive the spirit of the eagle as a gentle reminder of the ancestor calls where the drumbeats are heard. mahsi to the eagle spirit, I felt you today.

(Written April 4, 2020)

Each day I reflected on this unnerving time. Bumping spaces of the unknowns in the world became a stronger sense of wide-awakeness to the Land around me. I gathered with my thoughts each day and was drawn into words that helped me attend to the importance of the Land teachings. The following poems are untitled, they are thoughts in motion at a time when the world was still motionless.

*the light of day, where sunlight meets the horizon
Seeps through the tree lines
sprinkling light beams over treetops
signs of Spring bring melting pots of puddles
and feeding the landscape
as rabbits
chase their tails
and squirrels begin to play.
the spirit of the
Land is alive
and blooming in temporality
movement shifts
me around
as the trees sway and wave good mornings
crows caw in the distance
and the wind blows gentle whispers
towards another day.*

(Written April 6, 2020)

Busy deadlines, work
Anxious feeling
that overwhelms my soul.
too much on the mind
Feelings of stark hurriedness
Hurry and finish!
Hurry up and wait!
Hurry up and let the world heal!
So rushed,
Wait.
Re-think this.
I must practice patience.

Kindness to self
And others
Stop. Breathe, relax.
Repeat. Keep going.
(Written April 8, 2020)

the wind is strong today.
whisking my mind to
renewals of time and places.
there is an urgency,
a restlessness feeling swelling.
but I do not fret,
I am reminded to be
patient.
not to be consumed
by despair.
but to arise in hope
there is promise
for great days ahead,
warm hearts defeat
the coldness felt in
the night.

(Written April 11, 2020)

scream, cry, grief. feelings that are drowning me. I am absorbed by tensions, and I feel like I can't breathe. I gasp for air. I gasp for the sake of gasping. I cry some tears of fear and anxiousness. no one sees me cry, I keep my tears at bay. I cry for my family. I cry for my spirit. shallow depths are beneath me. I seek grounding upon my feet as I float in the abyss. waiting. watching. hurdled by time. grace is before me, hugging me quietly. quietly I scream!!

(Written April 12, 2020)

*two eagles
show signs of life and hope
I surrender to
hope on the wings of eagles.
the sky speaks wisdom
and brightness enters within me. mahsi cho.*

(Written April 13, 2020)

three crows speak to me. following my shadow. are they laughing at me or?

warning me of what lies ahead?

or are they talking to each other

and I am just a bystander

eavesdropping on their conversations.

three crows speak to me. the night shadow birds

birds of warning. birds of despair. but birds of survival.

three crows speak to me

they want me to see them.

I watch them, observing as I reconstruct our worlds.

I hear them communicating in a multidimensional manner.

Together, we exist.

(Written April 21, 2020)

These are a few poetic field texts I wrote during the beginning of the pandemic. I found writing a place of nourishment as I reflected on the Land during this time. I sought to find a rhythm of possibilities where possibilities seemed impossible. Walking was an escape from the conformity of the pandemic that had a hold on me. It was nature's abundance I found comfort in, it was the silent walks, listening to the Land, and grandiose openness of the skies. In this way of listening, I was in conversation with the Land. It fed my fire. "Through visiting, walking, observing, and performing tasks at a locale, individuals both take something of the place with them and leave a bit of themselves behind" (Legat, 2012, p. 176). My encounters with the animals, trees, wind, and self were in-between places of learning. I heard stories of the Land in relation to the animals and plants by matriarchs and other knowledge keepers but in this silent

walking and paying attention, I was keeping in relation to the stories. I was in between the storied places I had come to learn and finding a relation between personal knowledge and what I was experiencing during my walks on the Land. I was listening to the bumps, the tension, and to the Land, this is Dene curriculum.

In the following chapter, I share the narrative accounts of my participant *sembeé*, a knowledge keeper. *sembeé* was born and raised in *Denendeh* and currently resides in Alberta. She grew up on the Land alongside her parents, attended school in the North and speaks fluent Dene *zhatie*. It is with great honour to walk alongside and learn from her.

Chapter 5 : *sembeé's* Story

sembeé, my auntie
a storyteller, matriarch, mother, daughter
strong-rooted Dene
born and raised in Denendeh
Land of our ancestors
she embodies the heart of a caring warrior
with open arms and an open home
humble, honest, and honourable essence resides within her
a woman of fierce knowledge
connected to place(s)
anywhere her heart settles
a traveller seeking adventure
aware of the stillness in motion
her movements sit in stories emerging
sembeé, my auntie

An auntie is considered another mother in relation to kinship ties. This is true of *sembeé*⁶⁰, I have known her my entire life, she has taught me so much over the years, through story, through travelling, and through her guidance. I can sit with her for hours and share in story alongside her, we have a good relationship. Often, we get lost in our conversations.

⁶⁰ A chosen pseudonym. Dene for 'my auntie'.

On this day, we intentionally came together to share stories. I invited her to have tea with me as we began to converse in new rhythms over the phone. With the pandemic looming over our minds and hearts, I wonder what our conversations would bring, especially as we are not able to see each other, and this is how we have been in relation for most of our lives. Since the pandemic, our conversations have been limited to phone conversations. We also both live in different cities, but as families do, we always checked in to make sure everyone was safe and healthy, a more poignant time for all of us.

Moosehair Tufting Teachings

One of my fondest memories of *sembeé* is when I was a young girl. I was probably about eight years old. She mentions that she used to babysit me as a baby, but this was the first time I had seen her since, she had come to visit us in Saskatchewan. When I was reintroduced to her again, I recall how cool she looked. Her hair was long and curly, she had on a hat that looked like a beret, and she wore a white long-sleeved shirt with a black vest. She also had the longest eyelashes I have ever seen; her eyes sparkled. She must have been in her thirties back then. I was mesmerized by her movements, she exuded cool. Maybe that is where I get it from, ha-ha, at least I like to think so or even think that I am cool for that matter. I think my daughter might disagree with me.

On this evening, we sat around the kitchen table sewing. We usually sat around the small kitchen table sewing in the evenings. This is where I learned to bead. The table was small, with four well-used chairs, probably circa 1970, so about 15 years old at the time of this story. The table was our family hub where we ate, and often sewed in the evenings and drank tea, Red Rose of course. While we sat together, my mother was sewing and *sembeé* was working on something I had never seen before, she had this black velvet square and was sewing on what looked like

hair or strings together. I was immediately curious. I always sat at the kitchen table with my mother sewing, it was a good place to learn. It was also a good place to listen. I asked her, “what is that you are doing?” She replied, “This is called moosehair tufting, see.” She pointed to the hair and asked me to feel it. It felt like hair, it was thicker than my hair, the color was a mix of white and greys. I asked her, “Can you show me how to do it?”

We gathered around our small kitchen table, my mother and *sembeé* mostly talked, I watched and listened. As I watched *sembeé* with the greatest intent, I was drawn to the art of moosehair tufting. I watched her for about half an hour then she took a small velvet square piece and started drawing a flower on it. She asked me if I knew how to draw flowers and I told her that *semô* was teaching me. After she finished drawing the flower, she passed it to me, “okay now I am going to teach you how to do a moosehair tufting”. She started it off for me, grabbed some hair, threaded it lengthwise across the velvet and pulled the thread tight so the hair was standing upwards. She grabbed the smallest scissors I had ever seen and passed them to me. “Okay, now watch me cut mine”, she carefully began cutting the hair until it was a few centimeters long and cut until it began to form along the line of the flower she drew.

I took the scissors and began cutting the one she prepared for me, as I began cutting, I was not curving the scissors properly and my beginning flower looked like it had been run over or something, it was not symmetrical that is for sure. I tried again and then I tried again. It took a lot of patience to get it right. Once I finally got it looking somewhat symmetrical, it was late in the evening, and I was feeling defeated. Even my eight-year-old self felt that I needed it to be perfect. It probably took me three hours to get one pedal of the flower done. Throughout it all, *sembeé* kept encouraging me.

After about two days of sitting around the table sewing, I gave up on moosehair tufting. I

didn't think it was for me. I was going to stick to beads and porcupine quill earrings which is what I was learning from *semô*. This was my only time trying to learn moosehair tufting, it is an art in itself, one that I learned to appreciate at such a young age. Table talks sit vividly in my memories, as a place where many teachings and stories happened. The kitchen table was a matriarchal learning place, as ratted and old as it was, it was the hub of our home.

***lidi* [Tea] Conversations**

Before we began, since we were not physically able to meet in person, when asking for particular teachings from someone, even family, it is important to offer Protocol. In offering Protocol, it is important to share intentions, which for me was to create a safe space as we share our experiences on the Land alongside each other. With good hearts and good intentions. In this way of coming together over the phone, I was not able to offer Protocol in the way I knew how, so I talked to *sembeé* about this, and she asked me to offer it to the Land. This is what I did, this was part of our relationship, offering Protocol. She said she was not a strong believer in always giving Protocol, especially when these stories are a part of our family histories and a part of both of us. She said she carries a responsibility in sharing it with me, to keep the stories going. I liked this teaching; it was important to hear it and to understand that I too carry a responsibility in keeping the stories going with my daughter.

As we sat together during a pandemic with so many unknowns, we had the comfort of our tea. My *lidi* was Red Rose with a splash of honey and *sembeé's lidi* had a dash of sugar. On this day we sat together in relation over the phone. We had many conversations over the phone in our lifetime but this one was in the midst of a pandemic, with it brought health and safety tensions. On this day, we sat together knowing we were healthy and safe in our homes. We had initially planned to meet in October but *sembeé* was busy with family matters and we postponed

to a time when it worked well for her. One important teaching is family first. I was comforted knowing that we would come together when the time was right, and we did in early December of 2020.

sembeé was born and raised in the North but now lives in a large urban city in Alberta. While sitting together, my thoughts wondered to family, to kin, and relational work. I had initially imagined that I would have been alongside my participants in person, but with unknowns comes adversity. Together we found a way to navigate our spaces in new ways. One thing that I knew is that being in relation with *sembeé*, my knowledge keeper, in this way was that we had had many conversations in our lifetime, so it was like picking up where we had left off in our previous *lidi* talks. It was comforting to know that she was home safe and healthy. Not only did the *lidi* bring me warmth that day but she unknowingly did too.

On this day, the weather brought with it snow and winter was emerging on the landscapes. As I sat and looked outside, I could see the spruce trees gently swaying back and forth, it was a good day to drink *lidi*.

sembeé: "I bought this tea from Walmart; it is really good tea. Peppermint and ginger with vitamin D. It is ever good. It is just like drinking green tea. I didn't read the label and this one time I made a full pot of the tea and kind of stayed up late watching TV. I just kept myself busy and I drank that tea, holy smokes, and ate a bit of dinner so late at night. Oh, my goodness, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't sleep, probably until 8 am so I stayed up and watched TV. I think the sun was coming up when I finally began to fall asleep. It must have been the tea. I never drank that tea so late at night again".

(Transcript, December 12, 2020)

In knowing *sembeé* my entire life, I needed to find a way to travel to her multiple worlds (Lugones, 1987) which she lived but in different ways. My relationship with my auntie was going to be different than my relationship with *sembeé*. I needed to be wakeful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to the stories we shared. In travelling to *sembeé*'s worlds (Lugones, 1987) I was becoming attentive to listening to the gaps and silences. At first, I thought this might be a difficult task, but I recall the narrative inquiry words and teachings from Sean Lessard that he shared with me in class, "slow down, listen to the silences and pay attention to the details big and small around you" (Lessard, personal communication, January 17, 2017). As we sat in our own spaces, surrounded by the comforts of our homes, I began to pay attention to the big and small details around me.

anita: It is always good to sit and have tea with you, even though we can't visit in person. mashi. I wonder, do you recall making tea in the North when you were young?

sembeé: Yeah, it was Red Rose, that is the favorite. That is the only thing I remember; they only drank Red Rose tea. I don't think there was any other kind, just Red Rose. Even today, everyone just drinks Red Rose. It is comforting, I guess. Red Rose reminds me of home. That is all my granny would drink. (Transcript: December 12, 2020)

As we nestled into our *lidi*, our conversations shifted to the past and being on the Land in *Denendeh*. I felt like our conversations were also being led by the seasons, it was the time of year when we would normally be with family during Christmas and naturally, our stories emerged with the season.

sembeé: I recall granny⁶¹ would bake lots of pies, bread, and bannock during this time of year.

Granny used to make pie; oh, it was good. She used to bake and stuff like that, turkey too. Long time ago before when she first met grandpa, she didn't know how to cook. Long time ago though, they lived off the Land. She said she didn't even know how to make macaroni. She thought she could cook it and then one day grandpa's cousin Laura S. came over and she told granny, oh no, you don't fry it. So, Laura showed her how to make things like Kraft Dinner. She taught her other things to cook too. (Transcript, December 12, 2020)

This story hit me as profound, for some reason the reality that cooking Kraft Dinner for my *ehtsy* was a difficult process when all I knew her as was an amazing cook. She could cook bannock and shrimp, moose ribs, and potatoes all on an open fire. *sembeé's* story made me wonder about my grandmother in ways I had never imagined. This brought me back to the story *setáa* shared of how they lived in tents for most of their upbringing, relying on the Land for food. Food was not accessibly found in a box, nor were there any preservatives used to store it for long periods. The food they ate was from the Land, they ate what the animals and fish ate. This is where their nutrients came from. I wondered, how could my *ehtsy* know how to cook Kraft Dinner, this was not a traditional staple in their home. It was new to her. Through *sembeé's* story, I came to understand my *ehtsy's* lived stories more clearly. She too learned to live in her worlds, and such different worlds, through kinship teachings.

⁶¹ *sembeé* refers to her mother as *granny* in this conversation as she speaks to me. Granny is also my grandmother. Everyone, even her children, siblings, nieces, nephews, and friends all referred to her as 'granny'.

As we continued talking, with my tea in hand, I imagined *sembeé* sitting at her kitchen table with her tea in hand too, thinking and wondering about the memories I was bringing forth in our conversation. I know during this time, we were both missing our family, it had been almost a year since we had seen each other in person at this point, but we knew it was important to stay home and stay safe.

Our discussion continued and we talked about Christmas gifts, *sembeé* shared how *ehtsy* would make *edhéhke* [moccasins] for everyone at Christmas. She was always busy she said, it was never quiet in our house. My granny had nine children and there were also cousins and other relatives that were always in their home, visiting or staying for long periods. ‘It was what our families did back then’ *sembeé* explained. I wondered about the amount of moosehide she would have needed to make ten, possibly more, pairs of moccasins, not to mention the amount of time it would have taken her. *sembeé* went on to share that it was my Auntie Florence and my mother who helped *ehtsy* sew all the moccasins. She said that is why they are so good at making them and that she didn’t help out too much, she was too young. I sensed tension in the topic of making moccasins in her voice. I wondered if she felt left out of making moccasins with her sisters as a young girl. I wondered if she wanted to join her sisters in learning but was never given the opportunity because maybe they thought she was too young.

Family Ties

honoring our matriarch
built with the strength of a warrior
guiding with instinctual grace
wise supportive and charismatic in life
ohndaa ké, an Elder nurturing our spirit
her leadership is our communal bond

mahsi Granny Lafferty.

As *sembeé* and I continued talking about our family ties and kinship, one of the stories she told me was about a matriarch in our family, who everyone called Granny Lafferty, that is what she was known by. She was well known to many people, a force to be reckoned with and she lived to be over one hundred. I recall being a young girl and visiting her too, I was around the age of five. Granny Lafferty would have been in her eighties back then, she stayed in the Elders Lodge.

sembeé spoke of visiting Granny Lafferty a long time ago when she was younger and living in a house along the river. *sembeé* said after church they would go visit Granny Lafferty, almost every Sunday. She said she looked forward to it because Granny Lafferty made the fresh baked goods all the time. She said “her homemade donuts were so good, like nothing I ever tasted before, we didn’t have sweets back then, so it was a special treat. We used to go visit her after church, I looked forward to it, especially for the donuts. We would sit there all afternoon and visit her; she would give us donuts or cake. Mmmmmmm, I can still taste it. (laughing)”. *sembeé* talked about how they would go visit different people in the community. Often, she said, “grandpa would go to the local restaurant and have pie if there was none at home”. She spoke about the many people who would visit my grandfather and how busy granny was too. They were always visiting in community.

As I listened to *sembeé*’s story, the words ‘visiting and community’ lingered with me. She shared a relations story of community and connecting to kin through visiting. This reminded me of the concept by Métis scholar Cindy Gaudet called *Keeoukaywin* [the visiting way in Cree]. She explains that “The way of visiting is part of land-based societies’ way of life. It guides the way we conduct ourselves, treat one another, and learn from one another and from the land

itself' (Gaudet, 2018, p. 53). It is relational. In looking back to my childhood, this is true of my experiences with kin. My *seta* [father] always had people come over and visit or we would stop at random houses all the time and visit friends and relatives. We also visited places. I can probably name every little town, park and dirt road surrounding our home in North Battleford.

sembeé's account of visiting brought me memories of visiting with her. As I write, memories shift me backwards to memories of the many times I visited *sembeé* in person. We used to visit at her kitchen table, mostly drinking coffee, sharing stories of relatives and places we visited or travelled together. We used to have cookouts when we lived in the same city, we would sit around the fire and talk until it got dark. There was always laughter and stories while we sat around the fire. I wondered if *sembeé* missed visiting. I know the tensions of having to stay close to home for our health and safety were weighing on us.

School Stories: Back Then, *kenahndih* [I Remember].

I asked *sembeé* to share more about her travels and she brought me back to her being sixteen years old. She said she had wanted to quit school. She did not like it, explaining that it was mostly due to the teachers. They were mean and she felt that she did not belong there. She felt it was not for her. She shared the following story about her quitting school.

sembeé: I remember when I was 17, I kind of quit school.

Back then they had the Sears catalogue. And I always wanted things in there. You remember the Sears catalogue? That was all we had.

Anyway, grandpa never gave me money. And I wanted money to buy things from the Sears catalogue. He asked me 'what are you going to do; quit school or get a job?'

I really wanted money, so I got a job and went to camp...people used to say you make really good money working in camp...like \$500. That one time I stayed in camp about 2 months, month, and half maybe.

Before I went to camp though, I took a loan.

I was 17 I think, I quit school, and I went to camp, they needed a kitchen helper.

Back then they never asked for food safety or anything like that, so I applied for a job there and I got it. They used to say oh you can make really good money at camp, like lots of money. I wanted money so I took a loan. Like probably \$300 or \$400.

As soon as I got the loan, I ordered clothes from the Sears catalogue (laughing) and then went to camp,

When I got out, I stayed there a month, I was thinking I was going to get lots of money. I was expecting lots of money, like back then even \$20 was lots of money (laughter) I was thinking I would make thousands.

So, I go pick up my cheque, and to my surprise my cheque was not even \$600 dollars. I didn't know that they took for my loan 500 dollars and deducted those taxes not even 1000 dollars a month.

Back then it was like \$3 or \$5 something an hour.

Can you believe I would work like 10-hour days --?

I felt like I had lots of money, back then though chips were like 10 cents.

(Transcript, December 12, 2020)

So many wonders emerged from her story. I was intrigued by her worlds that she introduced to me. I could not have imagined walking into a bank at the age of 17 and getting a bank loan. They would have laughed at me or called the police. Who knows? As I would

travelled through her stories, I imagined leaving to work at a camp at the age of 17 too. Camps are places of work where usually construction or large scale projects like mines are situated. To be that young and travelling as a young woman to a camp must have been so scary. I did not want to bring the conversation to this place of fear, so I did not ask. I imagined *sembeé* at the age of 17 going to apply for a camp job that would have taken her away from her friends and family for 2 months. Her independence at such a young age, reminded me of my stories of growing up fast at such a young age too. How she too had choices to make that impacted her life and school decisions. *sembeé* had left school to go to work at such a young age. She would have had to be independent, not to mention she got a bank loan on her own. All decisions that show her courage and tenacity to succeed at the goals she chose. I never left school, but I did make choices, some out of my control and some within reach of changing on my own, that impacted my high school. It took me four years to complete grade 12, much of this was due to home and life experiences.

I shifted my thoughts and began to wonder how these stories shaped *sembeé's* sense of identity as a matriarch today or if she even considers herself a matriarch in the way that I did. I imagine the concept of *kenahndih* – I remember, as a matriarchal concept where the looking back was to a time ‘back then’ where stories, teachings, and lessons come from, in remembering. As they are passed down, they recollected and remembered in this way where women’s voices are heard and honoured. Time spent with *sembeé* always brought laughter, pride, and even more wonderment as we shared which was so important for each of us during the pandemic. I was thankful for her energy that she brought to our conversations and for the concept of *kenahndih* – I remember that was brought forward. As she spoke of this time, she often referred to her remembering of the time as ‘back then’ bringing forward a Dene concept of *kenahndih*—I remember. The concept of ‘back then’ stayed with me.

She finished the story as follows:

One time I really wanted money and for this I would always ask granny. She then would either give me the money or ask grandpa for me cause if I asked him, he would say no. I didn't want to go to school so my dad quit giving me allowance. So that one day I asked granny to ask him for money for me, cause back then everything was cheap, \$5 dollars could buy lotsso she went and asked my dad.

I went into the room and plugged my ears cause I didn't want to hear him say no. I just plugged my ears (laughter) and kept plugging my ears and waited to see if my mom was coming out of the room ...and then I would go follow her and ask her in the kitchen if he gave her the five dollars.

The first time he gave her the five dollars, after that no, he stopped giving me money cause I took a job over school. (Transcript, December 12, 2020)

I knew the stories of my grandfather that my mother had shared with me as a young girl, she said he really encouraged his children to stay in school. He wanted them to finish and leave their small community so they could find a good job when they were done. This is the story my mother always told me. She too didn't finish school, she left at the age of 16. I was beginning to see “early school leaving” (Lessard, 2010) as a thread in my family. This common thread of “early school leaving” continued to shape my curriculum world as a constant wonder.

I imagined too that *sembeé* looked up to my mother since she was older than her and witnessed her as “an early school leaver” (Lessard, 2010) making her way as a camp cook too. I wondered about the opportunities for women back then. I wondered about the teachers and why so many of my mothers' siblings did not complete school back then. I wondered about school experiences in general back then. I wondered what I would have said to myself back then. As I

thought backwards and forwards, I wrote the following poem that conveys my thoughts of a time when school may have resulted in “early school leaving” (Lessard, 2010) for me too.

Looking Back to Look Within

there she was
a girl who had to grow up fast,
her childhood limited, in reference to time
a beauty that reflected darkness,
not knowing her future,
sitting idly always wondering
if life would ever be ‘normal’
normal was a dream that made no sense in her world,
a fantasy composed of an unrealistic reality
there she was
lost in despair and often defeat
normal was distant, unattainable in thought
there she was
in thinking ahead
if only I could tell her of a future,
of the adventures she will have,
learning the breathtaking beauty of her history
unfolding before her like a flower in bloom
experiences of wonderment and
solitude that will bring to her serenity within her soul.

if only I can tell her.

Swing stories

We shifted our conversation to the grandmothers. *sembeé* talked about when my sister and cousins were small that *ehtsy* used to always make a swing for them. That is how she remembered them, they were small then and she was always in the midst of working at camp. When she would come home, *ehtsy* was taking care of them, she said “*ehtsy* would carry them on her back when she was cooking” she always had one of them on her back all the time (she says with a laugh). She asked me if I remember being on my mom’s back while she was cooking, and I told her I don’t think my mom did that with us. We did have swings though; I recall them growing up and seeing my brother in a swing. She continued her story mentioning that back then, grandmothers always had kids on their backs while they worked. She would put a shawl over her back and the kids would sit in the pouch while she did housework or were on the Land. I felt there was a sense of nostalgia that comforted her as we spoke about family. The looking backward notion was a way forward to get through the tough situation we all were facing in the pandemic. It brought a feeling of balance. I could sense through her words, that because most of her family was so far North that she felt isolated and disconnected from home. I too felt the same way. I wondered more about my mother and *ohndaa ké* [Elders] back home, about their safety and comfort during this time.

I inquired into her stories deeper and asked her about the time she spent on the Land, what types of things does she remember, following the concept of *kenahndih*—I remember. She told me about being on the Land with her dad. She would travel with him to the trapline, not too far from their home, and check traps. She said we would only check on the small game. She shared the story as follows:

sembeé: as a kid I would go with my dad, we would check the traps across the river. Not far from where my grandmother lived. We would cross the river and way up past their house my dad would set traps there in the winter. We were walking with snowshoes, I recall, I must have been ten maybe.

anita: did he make the snowshoes?

sembeé: granny's brother Joseph he made snowshoes ...Joseph and Johnny – Johnee' they called him. They are my uncles that made the snowshoes and that's how my dad learned. My dad learned from others when he was younger and that is how we travelled to check the snares. (Transcript, December 12, 2020)

She talked in more detail about trapping alongside her father, she said they would walk across the river in the snowshoes and check on the traps. They would get different kinds of animals in the trap such as rabbits, lynx and sometimes fox. “I would watch him and help carry the animals back”, she said. While we were talking about her father in this way, I sensed the shifting tone in her voice as she sounded very calm and thoughtful. I sensed her world travelling to these memories of her father as a place of respect and honour as I listened to her share them.

She continued her story and talked about how her father used to harvest the fur, cause the Hudson's Bay Company used to buy fur from him. First, she said, “he would stretch it on a piece of wood and then skin them. He would do this in the porch, after he was done, he put on stretched fur that was still on the wood and stand it up somewhere to dry. Then he would sell them and that is how he made money. The only thing she said was “back then, those pelts were so cheap, squirrels too”. There was a sense of disappointment in the amount that Hudson's Bay Company paid trappers, especially her dad. I recognized the tension in her in the tone of her voice when she talked about it.

I asked her about the squirrels. I had heard so many stories of my *ehtsy* hunting squirrels, I was interested in hearing more about it. *sembeé* said “when me and granny and one of my older sisters would go in the bush with her, she would always hunt squirrels. And boy was she ever good at it”. She explained that the squirrels were not like the city squirrels, they were much bigger. She said her sister “always wanted the brain and me, I liked the leg cause it had more meat on it” laughing loudly. Curious, I asked her how it tasted? I am willing to try anything, I have tried almost every type of wild meat (deer, moose, beaver, caribou) in the North, but never squirrel. I am not sure if people still hunt squirrel, I have not heard of any stories, yet.

She laughed when I asked her how it tasted and saying, “it tastes like chicken, something like chicken”. Immediately that reminded me of her, I thought to myself, no wonder my *ehtsy* always liked chicken, especially KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), her favorite. I asked her if she tried the brain, my granny always said that “the brain of the squirrel is good for young people”, I wondered if she was referring to the nutrients of the brain, or that it was a brain and it makes you smart. I imagined it was both. My granny knew so much about the Land, I would never have questioned her. This also has me curious as to the taste. *sembeé* described it to me in more detail saying “the brain tastes gross... (laughter) the taste is bitter.... not bitter but different”. I could sense she was having a hard time describing the taste. In that moment, I remembered that English is her second language, so descriptions in English is more difficult for her. I often forget that my mother and her siblings spoke Dene as their first language. My mother also shares that in her school experiences she was forced to try and learn French. But that is a story for another time. I realized this was another resonant thread that relates to language and the difficulty in learning them, in the way that I find it difficult to (re)connect with Dene *zhatie*, she too is

finding it difficult to pronounce or relay the words in English. We both struggle with language, but in different ways and in our different worlds.

sembeé continued to explain the taste and found the words describing the squirrel brain as bone marrow. She said, “have you ever tasted moose meat and when they boil the bones and inside there is like bone marrow. It kinda tastes something like that”. Wow, for some reason, I wanted to try squirrel, I absolutely love the bone marrow. When my mother used to cook and boil moose ribs, I would sit with her at the kitchen table and we would eat the bone marrow, with salt. Mmmmmmm, so good. *sembeé* shared as she laughed at the thought of my other aunt saying, “she used to scoop it out with her finger”. I imagined if it tasted like bone marrow, I would have too. Our conversation reminded me of the swing, we were moving inward, outward, backward, and forward, it was easy to talk about the Land and our kinships. There was comfort in remembering this way, it felt like a Dene swing curriculum.

Matriarch Snippers

As we continued to share stories of the Land, we shifted to stories of hunting. Before I share about *sembeé*'s story of hunting, I think back to a story of my childhood and learning to shoot a rifle alongside my grandfather.

I first learned to shoot a rifle around the age of ten. Of course, I had help, my grandfather on my *seta*'s side took us out on the Land. I was told that my grandfather was a great hunter, most likely why my father loved to hunt too. This is one of the only memories I have of my grandfather, my *seta* never spent much time with him. As I got older, I sensed there were unresolved traumas that my *seta* had buried and kept inside himself. On this day, we went for a drive along the Saskatchewan River. There was a clearing that we came upon and decided to stop, it was hunting season and it was the perfect spot to stop. I think my grandfather just wanted

to spend time with us, he was getting old and less mobile during that time. He had not spent much time with us at all as a child, so this memory sits in my mind as one of few with him.

We got out of the old Ford LTD that my *seta* drove and sat overlooking the river. It was a nice Fall afternoon, there was only the sound of nature upon us. There was me, my sister, my *seta*, and my grandfather. As we sat there, my grandfather shared stories of hunting. We must have sat there for a while before my grandfather asked if I wanted to try shooting the gun. I nodded. I recall being shy. He almost felt like a stranger to me in some ways, but I knew he was my grandfather. I was confident for a young girl, probably because I was always taking care of my younger siblings that my confidence grew. So, I stood up tall, walked over to my grandfather and he showed me, with careful instruction, how to hold the rifle, a .22. It was not a big rifle, but I still needed assistance. He was very careful to explain to me in detail the safety of my surroundings especially to where I was aiming. He showed to how to stand and plant my feet solid. After ensuring I knew all the steps, he helped me aim and asked me to look at the target which he pointed out for me. With careful precision, I took aim, steadied my breath, waited until I was ready, listening to his instructions carefully, aimed and shot. I recall the sound and the force. It startled me backwards, but I regained a sense of balance. I knew I was the granddaughter of strong hunters. Hunting has always been a part of my upbringing and as I sit with this story, I am reminded of my *ehtsy*. She was a strong hunter.

As *sembeé* and I continued sharing stories, she talked about *ehtsy* and the fact that she was a sharpshooter. I know this too; I have seen her in action. My *ehtsy* was about 5-feet tall and always wore a long skirt, moccasins, and rubbers to cover them. We call them rubbers. They are worn over moccasins so that you can wear them outdoors without getting them dirty. I have never seen her wear pants or other shoes. She always wore moccasins. *sembeé* shared that

“granny always carried a .22 rifle when we were on the Land. She knew how to shoot those rifles and she was good at it” she said. When we were in the bush, she always made sure we were quiet she said, and “she would shoot a wild chicken. Then we would have a little feast in the bush make a little fire”.

I imagine them sitting in the bush somewhere in *Denendeh* gathering wood to make a fire. My *ehtsy* would have carried her rifle with her children in tow following behind her attentively. She would carry a small bag of tools that she would need while out on the Land such as a knife, matches, water, maybe a small pot, drymeat, and possibly bannock. That is one thing I learned about being on the Land, to always be prepared. Living in the North, that is the number one rule of being on the Land, be sure you are prepared for the unexpected. Even today, when driving in the North, you must always let someone know where you are on the Land and when you leave while travelling so, they know when to expect you.

“I was never scared to be in the bush, we would even swim in the river when we were small”, she said. Her words floated through my mind settling on a memory of another Elders’ words. These words I had heard before, it was like a teaching returning to me again. It was at the Dene Reunification Gathering in October 2019 at *Tsuut’ina* Nation. I was sitting in a session they had focused on stories with Dene Elders from all over. I could feel the energy of my ancestors within this beautiful space. This small room was packed, full of intergenerational wisdom and young minds wanting to hear the stories of ‘back then’. I found a seat near the wall and Elders were sitting all around the table. Next to me was my daughter, two of my aunties, and many other relatives from *Denendeh* were in the room. There were people from all across Canada in the session, the session was about Dene stories, and anyone was allowed to share, it was a sharing circle of sorts. It was a powerful experience.

This memory sits with me vibrantly as mostly Dene matriarchs stood up to share. One of the Elders from the North shared a story, her name is Elaine. She is a family relative, and she talked about being on the Land in *Denendeh*. She shared that she used to be scared to go out on the Land by herself, she was scared of the bears attacking her, of being alone on the Land, and other things that might appear. She talked about how her husband always brings her back to the Land and soon she realized that it was all in her head, that the fear came from colonization. The fear of being on the Land grew out of schooling and that is when things changed.

She remembered when she was young, she did not fear anything when she was out on the Land, but something changed as she got older. She talked about attending Residential school and as she got older, she began to fear the Land. After spending more time on the Land alongside her husband, she felt safe to be present alongside the Land once again. It took her a while, but she said that ‘as Dene we need to find our way back to the Land, not to live in fear of the Land, but to be one with the Land again’. She said that she goes on the Land by herself all the time, with no more fear.

This powerful story is a constant reminder of when I am on the Land. These two experiences came together in rhythm calling me to be mindful of healing the stories that situate fear within our minds and to return to the Land as a relative. We do not fear our kin, we protect each other and create safe spaces in our lives for them. This is the Dene way.

Your Relatives – *néhlot’įę*

I met with *sembeé* again in January 2021, still feeling the effects of the pandemic. It was a tough Christmas for most of the world. A time that was often spent with families, it was spent isolated in our homes. It was quiet and I could sense it in *sembeé*’s voice that she was feeling the loneliness for kinships and coming into relation with family. We were exhausted in the silence.

I recall a time *sembeé* and I travelled to the North together from Edmonton, it was in the Summer of 2018, my granny was in palliative care and starting her journey to the spirit world soon. We left early in the morning, as northerners, we were used to travelling the highway North. It was a twelve-hour drive that we were anticipating, for some people who are not familiar with the highway it may take them longer than one day, but we knew the highway well. The highway had changed a lot since my first memory of it. I remembered many of the highways used to be gravel in the North.

I recall a time when I was young driving to *Líídljì kúé* in the old Ford LTD that we owned. When I say old, it was old, there was a hole in the floor and one door could not open properly. It was rundown needless to say. I must have been about 5 years old at the time, there was my mother, three siblings and our cousin to help drive the long drive from Saskatchewan to the North. Let me tell you, by the time we got to *Líídljì kúé*, my hair and face were so thick full of dust, we all must have looked like we rolled around in the dirt for hours.

The highways are much better now, but memories of driving long ago on dirt roads as a kid sit with me as a reminder of ‘back then’ stories that I am sure many Northerners can relate to. The good thing is that there were no gravel roads where *sembeé* and I were going, not to mention no holes in the car floor. Throughout the drive we reminisced laughed and shared stories as we always do when I am alongside *sembeé*. As we approached the 60th parallel there was a warm feeling that we both had, were coming home. The best way I can describe it is that physically, your body is remembering. The concept of *kenahndih*—I remember, is a physical sensation. Your body becomes relaxed to the landscapes, the tress begins to shift and embrace you as you drive down the highway. The wind feels like it is whispering ‘Welcome Home’ and the feeling tickles your ear. Your body remembers, *kenahndih*.

Just before you pass the border to the North, you drive by a place called Indian Cabins. It is an old trading post, it acted as a checkpoint for people travelling North. Indian Cabins has a gas station and some old cabins that were used many years ago as part of the trading post. As Northerners, we usually stop in for gas when we travel home. Not far from Indian Cabins is a place called Jackpot Creek. It is a small creek that can be seen on the side of the highway, but it is also a creek that runs into the Hay River. On our drive North, *sembeé* was sharing the story of how Jackpot Creek was named, long time ago when they were building the railroad and highways our relatives helped build it and they stayed here. During the evening, after working all day they would play cards and gamble. To pass time, there was not much to do in the middle of nowhere so they would sit together, share stories and laugh together in this place. That is how it became Jackpot Creek. Before this story, I would drive by Jackpot Creek as a marker on the highway knowing I was getting close to Home and now as I think about it, I will always be mindful of my relatives in this area and their hard work in building the railways and highways in the North. Jackpot Creek carries new place name stories for me, stories that I recognize as kinship stories.

When People Traveled – *gok'eats'edede*

Travelling as a child to *Líidlij kúé*, carries so many memories. I recall my granny's home, as soon as you walked in the door it smelled of moosehide, and she was always in the kitchen cooking. Even today I remember travelling there, I recall it like it was yesterday. My cousins and I would go to the park and play there for hours and hours, the sun didn't go down during the Summer so we would lose track of time. I remember the sidewalks were made of wood planks; the pool was in a small, shed-like building, but it was a staple in the community during that time. The mosquitoes were as big as dragonflies and the hair eaters were scary bugs that would make

us run so fast if we saw one near us as we played. I cringe thinking about them. I recall Fat Daddies Restaurant which was a trailer where you could buy fries and hamburgers. We went there often.

As I think backward to this time of travelling, I am missing the North and family, it brings tension because of the pandemic. Thoughts of endless days and nights doing the same things over and over, like pressing the repeat button on a song. You eventually get tired of hearing it. I knew it was important for me to stay connected with the Land, this was helpful for my spirit.

As *sembeé* and I came back together in our conversations on the phone in January 2021, we sensed comfort our voice as kin coming together. It was a new year and the sound of hope prevailed in our coming together in this way. We were safe and healthy and for us, that was all that mattered. As we came back into the rhythms of our stories, we continued with stories of matriarchs. This time we talked about her grandmother; she called her *ama*. She shared the following with me:

sembeé: My grandmother, she was a traveller. She was from Fort Franklin. She left when she was 16 years from there that is where she met my grandfather near Fort Simpson. They used to live off the land. He was from the mountain areas too; I am not sure. These are stories that I heard. Maybe he went over the mountains, (laughter) just to find her [ama] :) (Transcript, January 21, 2021).

sembeé's laughter is heartwarming as she reflects on her *ama* and grandfather coming together as soulmates. It is a Dene romance. A beautiful love story of two people finding their way over the mountains to come together on the other side, build a home and family together. As I continued to attend to the story of *ama*, I understood more of its importance in relation to my

story, my mother's story, *sembeé's* story, and *ehtsu's* story as a story of strength and independence. We all had experiences of being strong independent women in our times, not knowing the age of 16 would hold so much importance in our lives. Our stories of being the age of 16 include: my story of leaving home during a time of chaos in order to finish high school, my mother leaving home on a plane to see her sister in the 1960's, *sembeé* leaving home to join the workforce in the 1970's and *ama* leaving home near Fort Franklin travelling over 800 kilometers to Fort Simpson in the early 1900's. As I thread these stories together, I place even more significance in the 'rites of passage' that we had for my daughter when she turned 16. Without knowing that it was so important at that time, I see it as a strong thread in our matriarchal stories as Dene women.

sembeé continued to tell me more about ama. She said "one time she got 20 rabbits and shot 16 grouse. She would use snare wire to catch rabbits. She knew how to read the land and when we walked in the bush, we walked slowly behind her quietly too.

(Transcript, January 21, 2021)

We both paused to reflect on this, as the season for snaring rabbits was during this conversation. *ama* is legendary in her Land skills, I can see where my granny learned her techniques from, I was so impressed to hear the number of rabbits and grouse she brought home for her family. I sensed I inherited my matriarchs independence and survival skills as these characteristics are passed on within my stories too. I storied back to my rabbit stories I had alongside my mother. *sembeé* learned to be on the Land from watching her *ama*. I too had storied relationships with rabbits alongside my mother. I too, walked behind her slowly and quietly learning how to read the Land. As we travelled to each other's worlds, sharing stories of

rabbits, I saw the threads of our stories emerge as experiences of learning *with* and *from* the Land by our matriarchs.

Telling Each Other Stories

The story of *ama* is one that I have heard often, I see her strength of travelling long distance as inherent within me. I share now a story that was shared by a strong matriarch in my family, my auntie Florence. Connecting with kin has always been so important to me, especially living in the South. As one of the oldest matriarchs in our family, my auntie Florence has and continues to guide me as I walk in my moccasins in various worlds. This is a memory of one conversation we had over the phone. The following is a story about how I remember our talk.

kenahndih - I Remember chats with Auntie Florence

We connect on the phone, as we had done so many times in the past. Our conversation's focus is on the swift change in the climate. She tells me "The snow is late – the land is telling us". She explains that she remembers not long ago when uncle would take the bombardier out on the lake during October and the lake would be frozen solid. And now she says, "the lake is not freezing until November, even late November. Lots of changes on the land" she says with sadness in her tone.

We drift into more conversations about family and kinships, and we share about long ago when she was a young girl. "They used to call me goh lii—which translates to butterfly. They called your mom di dah—which translates to stay behind. Probably because she always wanted to go wherever our parents or grandparents were going. I was the oldest and got to go with setsu [my grandma] and setsú [my grandpa] on the Land more often. Or when they used to go to town, they would always take me. They used to go up the river to where granny was born in the bush. There is a story about granny, a sacred one. The story is that granny was born in edézhíe, the scared Horn Mountain." There are

reasons it is sacred but that is not my story to tell or share in this way. She said, they called your granny, sah bet.

There is a lot of history about this mountain area. For us Dene, it is a sacred place.

There are Protocols to follow when you go there, you have to give offerings to the Land.

Granny's Catholic name given to her by the church was Elizabeth, but everyone called her zahbete as a short form of Elizabeth. It was because they could not pronounce her English name and shortened it.

There are not many people who know about our family, we kept to ourselves and stayed close to the Land. I know your grandfather, was always asked about the Land from all the local people. He was a well-known trapper; he knew the Land well. As vast as it was, it was mapped in his mind. Granny too. Her roots come from the Land too. She taught us all how to be on the Land. Some people in the community used to call grandpa ça brille which translates to 'it shines' in French. Your grandfather lived most of his days on the Land. He was gone most of the time trapping for the Hudson's Bay Company.

My grandmother – ama – always had me under her wing. She taught me to sew and how to be on the Land. In a sense, she nurtured my learning on the Land and provided me with the responsibility of being the oldest. Our relatives are very connected to the Land, my auntie Marie, your great aunt is in her late eighties now and her memory is still good. She recalls memories of being very young, she is the one who cut the cord when I was born. When she dreams, waves of future events come forth. She is gifted in her dreams. Myself, I grew up along the river until I was about 4 or 5. Granny lived about ten miles south of the community along the river. The community of a few families. It is where our family has roots. She lived in an old trapper's cabin, there are just remnants of it now, it

collapsed quite a few years ago. Not long after I was born, granny wanted to be closer to the community. By then, your mother was a toddler and granny would have been pregnant with your uncle John. Today, my memory of being there is not so good, I too am getting old my girl. (She always calls me, my girl).

My aunties have played a big role in my life, like I mentioned before, an auntie is like having another mother. I have many aunties, and each has taught me so much in their own special ways. I have travelled and lived in their worlds, and they have mine. Recently, because of the pandemic, it has been hard to travel to each other's worlds so as I sit here and reflect on matriarchs and the history of our family, I am more aware of how being with the Land was part of so many stories across generations and continues to be a strong story. It is kinships curriculum threading through to make moccasins, Dene moccasins.

Playfulness

As *sembeé* and I moved towards our last conversations in February 2021, I was reminded of the kitchen table talks again. I was sitting at my kitchen table while we talked and so was *sembeé* at her kitchen table. She had a coffee and told me her granddaughter who was two was over recently visiting her. She was so happy to spend time with her because of the pandemic she was not able to see her much, so she was grateful. I could sense it in her voice, she sounded joyful. She shared stories of her energy and playfulness while she was there, reminding herself of her age and how much work toddlers can be.

She told me about when I was a little girl that she used to read to me.

sembeé: I used to read to you when you were little, you would come running and I read to you then I tell you to read it yourself. You would come back running with so much

energy and I would say to you ‘read it for me’. Then I would test you. You were so smart; you would read everything, and you knew what was on the pages. (Transcript, February 24, 2021).

While I was thinking of the playfulness of toddlers, myself included, I was also thinking of the playfulness of *sembeé* throughout our conversations as I travelled to her worlds (Lugones, 1987). As our conversation evolved, I learned of the significance of work ethic to her, and her sense of playfulness was brought forth in her laughter of stories that were emerging. This is why I feel connected to *sembeé*, her natural playfulness in the worlds she lives in is authentic and genuine. Her humility in sharing is real, she does not need to be direct or find a way to share the story in such a serious manner. She prefers to enjoy the little things in life and knows not to take things too seriously. One of our Dene laws⁶² ‘Love each other as much as possible’. Our Elders say that we have to love one another as we live together in relation. During this time of the pandemic, our storied worlds came together in a loving, caring, and respectful way. *sembeé* reminded me of this Law in her playfulness as we talked. Her words sit with me in different rhythms than as I have known her before as my auntie.

I let the stories lead me as helpful reminders of our Dene laws, kinship, relationships, and healing. As we came together and shared this story, *sembeé* was always laughing and enjoying our conversations. It was evident that she cared about what we shared in the story. Even as the tensions within our worlds made us think more specifically about our world today and the pandemic that was altering all of our lives, she still found a place for laughter. Her laughter reminded me of curriculum making in ways that celebrate fun, imagination, and wonderment.

⁶² <https://dehcho.org/government/about-us/dene-laws/>

This sparked forward a poem I wrote in 2018 called Imagination Feast. I wrote this poem in response to curriculum making in secondary school. From my experiences both as a student and teacher, there was often little time for students to display or connect with imagination as we often do when we are young. The notion of a feast brings forward how I would react within secondary school to encourage play and imagination. As I call forward the wonderful taste of a feast as the lure of childhood imagination does, I am mindful of being playful with caution. Through *sembeé*'s joyous spirit, teachings emerged in ways that brought forth curriculum possibilities that I wasn't expecting. Here is the poem as follows:

Imagination Feast

the goodness of this generous feast is transcending my thoughts

I seek to find solace in this place, surrounded by family

and the laughter and play of little ones

the vision feast is upon us

as I surrender to my senses.

converging on the delicacies of what the feast will offer

my creativity is watering with savory affection

the resourcefulness displayed by the chefs

whom infused the table with inspirational dishes

as I surrender to my senses.

the complexities of choice

the controlling urge to embody my senses in the bountiful feast upon us

converging on curiosity of what is to come

*I am engulfed in this experience
as I surrender to my senses.*

*this feeling of goodness permeates my soul
recollections of sweet, salty, fluffy, divine, fruity, scrumptious, tasteful experiences
excited by the mind's eye that transforms my thoughts
as narrative expressions of the fanciful feast are magnanimous
as I surrender to my senses.*

*my eyes wander to the multiplicity of this experience
notions of artistry on the plates before us
this embedded temporality is connected to my past
I play with the knowledge inspired by my youthful memories of feasts afore
as I surrender to my senses.*

*engulfed in the paracosm of my childhood
the abundance of food
the whimsical tastes that swivel within my mind
the grand feast is upon us
as I surrender to my senses.*

*careful now in my manners,
as I no longer can approach the feast with reckless abandon
keeping my cravings from succumbing to the lavishness of the feast
cognizant of others as I sit in quiet thoughts*

I surrender to my senses.

I sit in my thoughts waiting for the feast,

there is a question that lingers

*the question absorbed within, as I foster my own understanding
fruitful thinking of the unconscious that envelops my freedom to play
as I surrender to my senses.*

this unique understanding and awareness concede as I ask myself,

Is this what imagination would taste like?

as play is straightaway thought of as meaningless

I surrender to my senses and the fanciful feast of what imagination would taste like.

Pass on the Teachings

As I travel backward to the kitchen table of my childhood home, there are so many stories and experiences that I learned from there that sustain me in my identity as a *ts'éli-iskwew*. I (re)imagine that kitchen table as a kinship curriculum maker of sorts, a place that I recognize in my memories where matriarchal teachings occurred. Through travelling to *sembeé's* worlds, I came to see new teachings of learning *from* and *with* the Land that are intergenerational. The wisdom that sits within these stories provides me with the concept of *kenahndih* - I Remember, where (re)membering is passing the knowledge forward. *sembeé*, I thank you for bringing this notion forward to me, I sit idle on the Land with the concept of *kenahndih* - I Remember as I trace the footprints of those who were here 'back then', and it is these footprints that guide me forward.

Cruikshank et. al. (1990), expressed that “Stories link human history to place” (p. 18). I recognize *sembeé*’s knowledge and gentle teachings as a place of heart knowledge, as a place where my history connects me to identity and place. I am comforted in knowing as I walk with these teachings that my moccasins now feel comfortable. *sembeé*’s recalling of stories forward with descriptions of the Land, names, and places immediately is the gift of a good storyteller. As I am in my 40’s, I often have trouble recalling what I did last month. Maybe it is the story that sits with us, the ones that stay close to the heart that we recall. It must be the stories of our relatives that she is destined to share. Our Dene Laws also tell us to *pass on the teachings*. They are not ours to begin with, to pass them on is a good feeling. *sembeé*, your words will always sit with me, I am grateful that you walked alongside me to pass these teachings on to me. I recognize you as the medicines on the Land, as a place where knowledge flows gently within the wildflowers. *sedze t’ah mahsi*, with my heart, I thank you. I am more connected to all of my mothers before me because of your teachings. Thank you for teachings me kinship histories and bringing me to the multiple worlds of where my *edhéhke* (moccasins) come from.

In the following chapter I introduce you to *etondah*, a post-secondary student. She is Dene (matrilineal) and Cree (patrilineal) who has lived and attended school in the North but currently resides in Alberta. I am honoured to have learned and walked alongside her on this journey.

Chapter 6 : *etondah*'s Story

Dene Cartographer

young Dene
world traveling
oh, the places she has been
she is like a time traveller
unravelling herself through
many landscapes
From Turtle Island
to the Galapagos isles
And on to Southeast Asia
young Dene,
she revels in the beauty of people
and places
she is a true wanderer wandering
to places our peoples never imagined
finding kin in relation to place
growing and becoming
on the landscapes she devours
she encapsulates the beauty and ethos of
a trapper's great granddaughter
young Dene
shaping her future steps forward in ways
that negate her being
her "true self"
knowing her journey is leading
the way
as her ancestors keep her grounded

*while her feet travel afar
young Dene
wrapped in Dene moccasins
that keeps her close to home
a young woman on a journey
of self-reflection
where she sees wonders as places to travel
where color is blind
where hope leads the way forward to new destinations
growing memories
growing friendships
And growing heart knowledge.*

This poem I wrote for a young woman that I was introduced to long ago, she was a little girl then and later in life I was reintroduced to her not knowing that she would teach me so much in such a short timeframe. Her name in Dene is *etondah*⁶³, which means beauty. Beauty in how she lives her life, beauty in her laughter, beauty of her intelligence, and mindfulness of others she encounters. She embodies the essence of her name in all aspects of life, inside and out. Her stories inspire me, engage me, and teach me in ways where together our moccasins step forward with confidence as Dene women. Throughout the time we spent together, she has shared small parts of her world sharing experiences of her literal world travelling, her school experiences, and being on the Land.

As I started this PhD journey, I was fixated with Denendeh Land stories as a dominant thread in my stories but as I got to know *etondah* throughout this timeframe, I realized the

⁶³ Chosen pseudonym, Dene for 'beauty'.

importance of Land teachings were wherever your feet settle. You could be across the globe in far-off places and the Land will still teach you, the Land is still a relative there when you visit these places. The teaching that our relatives are always with us, and our identity remains wherever we go. *etondah*'s life as a literal world traveller showed me this. As I listened with careful ears and eyes wide open as *etondah* shared with me her school and life experiences, I began to see her name *etondah*, as the way in which she lives her life, in beauty.

etondah has travelled since she was a young girl and her travels have taken her around the globe. Her first trip away from Canada without her mother was when she was fifteen years old. She had never travelled alone before, but even though she was with other people, she still felt alone especially being outside of Canada. *etondah* shared that this experience began her journey to other parts of the world as places of possibility, of places of adventure that were waiting for her. *etondah* revealed that she was often alone finding adventure and kinships as she world travelled to places that intrigued her young spirit.

I first met *etondah* through her mother. Her mother is a good friend of mine, and she was introduced to me when she was just a young girl. Her mother often shared about her daughter's travels going to places around the world. I often wondered about her travels as I thought she was so young and traveling the world in the ways she did was so inspiring yet so scary to me as a mother. I wondered if I would have been able to travel as she did when I was her age.

etondah is Cree on her paternal side and Dene matrilineally. She is a member of a Northern Alberta First Nation. She was not raised in her community but has travelled there a few times in her life. *etondah* grew up in many landscapes having lived in places throughout Alberta, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. As we got to know one another through an online platform over the past year, we shared stories of the Land, Denendeh, school, and kinships. She

shared ways that are telling of her passion for the North and her becoming as a young Cree Dene woman who is wayfinding (Chambers, 2008) her way.

Google Meets Relationship

Coming into research relation with *etondah* was through an online video platform called Google Meet™, a video conferencing system. I thought it was going to be a little difficult as we had never really talked to each other for long periods, other than me knowing her mother and seeing each other in passing. When I travelled to visit her mother, she was usually gone world travelling. Through our previous relationship, it was like visiting with a niece, I would consider her kin since I am close to her mother.

In the midst of a global pandemic, we met in an online platform in October 2020. As our connection came clear, I was able to see *etondah* through online video and I was welcomed by her warm smile, it was such a welcome feeling. She appeared to be a bit nervous, possibly uncertain of what to expect from our meeting, which is natural. I wanted to make her as comfortable as possible. I thought she was brave meeting with her mom's friend online to talk about school experiences. Seeing that she was nervous, we chatted about how things were going in her life, especially since we were locked down in our homes during the pandemic. *etondah* explained that she was just starting school as a mature student now in her twenties and that she felt a bit overwhelmed because everything was online. With great interest I asked her what she was taking in school, she said her dream is to be a nurse and to help her community. We then talked about her community, and she said, "Well right now I live in Alberta and go to university, but my community is in the North. It is where my mother is from; the *Dehcho*. That is my community".

She said it with such confidence and pride. We shared brief introductions and I shared

with her a bit about who I was and where I was from too. I was humbled and honoured to connect with her and share what I could from my experiences of attending post-secondary such as scholarships and study strategies. She was grateful and had so many questions about post-secondary, especially since she was just starting her post-secondary experiences and in an online environment. She shared that she was worried about the future and not being able to be in her classes, meet her peers or professors in person. It was all new for her. Her fear was recognizable, it sat with me in my storied experiences of starting as a new student in post-secondary. As we talked a bit more about her fears, I can see she found comfort in knowing that I had shared experiences, I sensed her comfort level begin to ease into our conversational space.

We talked more about her life, and I learned that she is a vegetarian, but wild meat is the exception. She will eat moose meat and fish from the North, especially when she visits her grandma. She said she became a vegetarian after seeing a video about how they slaughter cows and that was it, she no longer wanted to be a part of the process which is the result when it ends up as a hamburger or steak on her plate. She said, “ethically, it was not right for me. But, with traditional food like moose meat, which is ethically harvested in my family, and I know where it came from, so I allow myself to eat wild ethically harvested food”. I was intrigued, she taught me something that I had never given much thought to before. I wondered where our conversations would lead us, our rhythms were like the sound of the Dene drums, powerful and in tune.

I also learned that she had an older brother and a younger sister who both lived quite far from her, one in the North and one in an urban Alberta city. She mentioned that she also had some half-siblings but did not talk to them as often. I sensed that she felt a little unsettled about that from the tone in her voice, so I didn't inquire further. I felt that if she wanted to share, she

would. We began our conversations on Google Meet™ an online platform in October 2020. Over the year, we met several times, this was important to me not only in the relational aspect of the research but in kinship. As her mother is considered kin to me, *etondah* would also be considered kin now. Relationally, she will always be like a niece to me, and I carry that responsibility to help guide her in the way that I know how. Together, we shared photos of the North and created annals of our school and life experiences, discovering possibilities within our worlds as we learned together contained by the matrix of our lives. Within this online space, I became a part of her life.

Travelling Back to Elementary

Feeling at ease in our online spaces, we shifted our conversation to past school experiences. I inquired about early school experiences, and I could see her expression change, she was more serious but distant when we started talking about elementary years. Then she shared the many schools she experienced and then it became clear why she was so serious. She started school in the North, then moved to BC for grades 2 – 4 (attending two different schools), and then grade 5 to high school (attending two different schools) she lived in the Yukon. Initially, I was surprised that I did not know she had moved so many times. I had known her mother but was not always present in her life. Listening to *etondah* recount her early school years, her words moved me. I think back to my autobiographical stories of the many school experiences I had too, and I wondered if her experiences may have been similar.

She shared about her favorite school, it was in a rural area in British Columbia they had just moved out of the city and near a First Nation community. She recalls her experience there as prideful. She felt like she belonged here because there were First Nation teachers and they taught traditional teachings there. She said, “This was the best school - it was on the Nation - I just

remember it”. Her smile showed that she felt connected to this school. She talked about how the entire school made her feel comfortable. She went on to explain that “it was the nicest school, everything was cedar and having the best hot lunches there”. Every student who does not bring lunch to school knows how important hot lunches are. When I attended elementary school in the 80’s, there were no such thing as hot lunches. This was new to me.

etondah continued her story saying:

compared to Yukon, there was no hot lunches there. At this school in BC, we had hot lunch. Oh, and breakfast too, that was the best. This school was great, ummm there were also Indigenous classes too, Indigenous art classes.

They taught us how to do things like basket weaving. Actually, all different types of weaving for blankets, mostly coastal things. Different from what I am used to.

(Transcript, October 20, 2020)

I repeated her last words, “*Different from what I am used to?*” I wanted more clarity, so I asked her what she meant by this reference. She explained and said, “*you know like Dene things. Dene moccasins, mukluks, mitts, and beading. All that good stuff from that reminds me of home, in the North. This is what I grew up with*”. She sensed that I had world travelled to her familiar worlds of Dene things as she explained further and knew that she didn’t have to explain in more detail. I felt more connected to her in our shared relation with the North. She said she learned so much from that school and was sad when they had to leave. I could sense that she had felt safe at this school.

Losing *seta* [father]

My school counsellor helped me through tough times.

She helped me when my dad passed.

She was comfortable to talk to. I felt like I didn't have anyone to talk to during this time. I was in Grade 5. It was tough.

She would sit there with me, and ask me how I was feeling,

ask me to recall memories of my dad to help me through his passing

I would always run into her when I was around town, and when we [my brother and sister] would see her, she was always so sweet.

I remember too, in grade 5, when my dad passed away, and someone else's mom passed away in my school too. She was super there for him too. she became super close with us, it was comforting.

(Excerpts from transcript October 21, 2020)

Stories of loss are always tough stories. It is especially hard when a child loses a parent at such a young age. *etondah* was sharing about who her favourite teacher growing up and the topic of her father's passing came up. She said she was young when he passed away and noted that it was tragic, so it was hard for her to deal with at such a young age. I could sense there was tension as she shared this. The person that helped her through it sat in her mind as her favorite teacher. She was the school counsellor, and I was reminded by her choice of teacher was her school counsellor. It was surprising to me because often what we perceive in school settings as the teachers, are the ones leading classrooms, not the ones that often go unnoticed as educators such as school councillors, librarians, or even bus drivers. *etondah* gently reminded me that teachers come in many forms.

I could sense that *etondah* had many life experiences at such an early age that many young people have not had to deal with, nor should they have to. Experiences that possibly could have led her astray if she did not have the support she needed at this time. During a painful time

in *etondah*'s life, her counsellor attended to her with care. It was heartwarming that *etondah* brought up the other student who had lost his mother as well, she must have thought about him in a good way. She was quiet when she mentioned him, but I sensed of her desire to keep that to herself. I respect her and so I let us sit in silence for a minute. The silence was not awkward, it was more comforting. I could tell that her family and school supported her through a tough time in her life. *etondah* mentioned her father's passing but I did not want to inquire, it was not my place to. Some stories are not meant for sharing, especially in this way online, I would have wanted to comfort her with a warm hug if we continued, so I did not ask further. If she wanted me to know, she would have told me and even then, that would be between us. In ethical relations, it is important to trust, and I wanted *etondah* to feel safe in our space, we were just getting to know each other.

As she was retelling her story of her favorite teacher in school, someone who had impacted her life in a way that brought solace when she needed it most, I could tell her appreciation for her teacher and the impact that she left with her was a positive one. There was comfort in knowing that she was not alone, and this teacher showed it in her actions as she helped heal the pain of losing a parent. *kenahndih* [Remembering] is okay, it heals.

Dene Things That Resonate

In circling back to Dene things and our shared understanding, we moved back to sharing stories of our grandmothers. As we shared, I made sure to pay attention to her words, words that might connect us to the Land or home, the North. She spoke of her grandmother with great care and reverence. She too called her granny. I think the term 'granny' maybe a Northern name for grandmother, I have only heard it in the North. I rarely hear it in the south, I mostly hear only

grandma or kokum⁶⁴. Stories of our grannies brought us first to stories of beading.

Narrative Thread 1: Beading stories

anita: *I met your grandma quite a few times, she is so nice; she likes to travel too and she's such a great beader. Wow she makes the most beautiful moccasins. Do you know how to bead too?*

etondah: *Yeah, my granny is awesome. No, I don't know how to bead, I mean I have tried but I am not that great. You should see, you would laugh. I want to learn but I just I don't know, I feel like maybe in my 30s I will.*

I really don't have time for that right now [she laughs].

But I think it will be cool teaching to have, like how cool would it be to say like

"I made my own moccasins".

anita: *I agree, beading takes patience and time for sure, [laughing] I can bead too but I don't have much time for it too. Maybe one day we can try together when we have time.*

etondah: *Yeah, that sounds like a plan.*

(Transcript, October 20, 2020)

In this narrative thread, I point to beading experiences as shared kinship narratives that shape both *etondah*'s and my experiences of matriarch teachings. By sharing her stories of her granny, she helped me understand the significance that her granny played in her life. This resonated with what Anderson (2011) expressed of finding a place for women's stories to thrive, "where women had authorities that were rooted in cultures that valued and respected equality; and in which 'old ladies' ruled." (p. 16). In our stories of our grannies, old ladies ruled.

⁶⁴ Kokum is Cree for grandmother (LeClaire, Cardinal, & Hunter, 1998).

etondah also shared with me that her granny attended Residential Day School in the North. This is something that I did not know about her granny or family history, and not a subject that I wanted to engage in with her. I wanted to respect her granny and mine knowing that this topic of Residential Schools could bring up trauma and this is not where I wanted nor felt that *etondah* wanted to talk about at this time. We both share this common dark history within our families, but I did not want to discuss it with her any further. So, I let it be.

Looking back on this moment, we travelled back to worlds where our grannies are central in our minds and the teachings that come with beading. I understood that as we are both post-secondary students in different ways, but in similar ways, post-secondary seems to have taken us away from Dene things such as beading. We both felt tension that we were just too busy to find space in our worlds for beading, which I also sensed some sadness in both of our hearts as we talked about it.

As we threaded more stories of Dene things, we shifted to conversations about on the Land camps in school. I had shared with her the things that I used to do with my students in high school, such as bringing my students out on the Land. I explained that we would do cultural activities, leadership and team-building skills, cooking, and even canoeing. She said she went to a similar camp while she was in high school in the Yukon, it was with the Friendship centre. She said, “It was probably one the most memorable times I had, except it was not with the school. It would have been even cooler if it was with the school so my friends could join.” Her excitement in sharing was present in her voice, “I love being on the land, especially back home in the North. The land just feels special there” she said. We both nodded and smiled with intensity sitting in silence as we momentarily situated ourselves in memories of home. We shifted forward in our conversation as she shared her experiences of being on the Land at camp.

Narrative Thread 2: On the Land Camp Stories

anita: can you share more with me about your camp experiences?

etondah: yeah, we went to the camp there for a week, it was out at some camp where we stayed in dorms. It was nice, it reminded me of like girl scouts or something. We did lots of land-based things there, we went fishing and learned how to make fires and other survival stuff. OH YEAH, and we even went white-water rafting, which was Super Cool. I was scared, but it was still fun. Also, we did archery and like a lot of outdoorsy things that I never got to do in school. That was a cool experience. YEAH.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she shared her experience, I could see her world through her eyes. In this thread, attention to Land was visible but *etondah's* sense of “playfulness” (Lugones, 1987) was obvious in her expressions and words she used to describe her experience. I could sense the retelling of this story as a captivating experience that still sits with her as one of her many joyous adventures. She continued sharing about her experience where she shared about the biggest spider, she had ever seen in the room she stayed in at camp and one of the girls screamed so loud she jumped. She said, “*I don't think any of us girls in the dorm slept that night*”. We both laughed. “*Yeah, spiders can do that, they are good teachers too*”, I said. She paused for a moment thinking and said “*yeah, that spider taught me to run*” and we laughed at this. It was nice to laugh in this way again, it took us away from what was happening in the world around us and the pandemic. The laughter felt like a coming ‘home’ laugh, like a kitchen table laugh.

Narrative Thread 3: Moosehide tanning

We slid back to the mention of moose stories. *etondah* asked me if I knew how to tan hides, and I responded yes. I have done it a couple of times, but this is also a teaching that I am

still learning. I am not an expert like my granny was. I shared about the times I would teach my students to scrap hide at the Land camps and she said that would have been cool to do at camp.

Her response was as follows:

etondah: talking about scrapping the hides. I think about the time I helped my granny scrape a hide. We were at her house in the North, and we did it in the kitchen. I remember she had garbage bags covering the floor and a small hide that we were scrapping. There is a picture of me and her as we were scrapping the hide inside the house. I had a little scrapper, and she was helping me. But the pictures are lost now. (With a sad expression).

(Transcript October 20, 2020)

There was tension in her words as she expressed the loss of the pictures with her granny. She shared this experience with such delight, and then the sudden sadness of losing the photographed memory. I wondered if it was due to moving so many times when she was younger having gone to four schools within the first five years of her schooling.

I was becoming aware of *etondah's* worlds as we shared matriarch, culture, and on the Land experiences. As we moved through our online conversations finding rhythms, they became noticeably simpler. This thread pulls forward more of *etondah's* experiences of being alongside her granny. I was pleasantly surprised to hear about her experience as not many young people her age has had these types of experiences with their grandparents. She spoke about it with pride; it was a part of her identity. *etondah* was connecting to her grandmother's teaching in a *kenahndih* way [I remember way]. I can see that it saddened her to have lost the photo of this experience.

In threading these narratives, there are familiar stories that are helping me to understand

etondah and the worlds she lives in. They are awakening me to attend to certain narratives and to pay attention to what is not being said, to listen with a full heart.

Picture told in a Haiku of Words

“When was the last time you went Home, to the North”? I asked *etondah*. She responded saying, *“It was last year sometime during the end of Summer”*. I could sense a sadness in her voice, as she shared. She said *“yeah, it has been hard to be here in Alberta because I miss my sister, she lives in the North. It is hard because we are so close, she has been the closest to me since my dad passed away.”* As the pandemic loomed over our world, the NWT closed its border, only essential workers and residents were allowed to go through with certain restrictions. It was tough not to see family, but people were mindful of the rules so that the NWT can keep the communities safe, especially the Elders. *etondah* said that it was helpful that she was super busy with schoolwork so that she did not have to miss her family as much, it kept her busy.

I noticed in our conversations that pictures were important to her, so I moved the conversation back to the picture she mentioned that she lost of her and her granny scrapping a hide. I asked her if she had any other pictures of her and her granny?

etondah: None with my granny so much, they were all lost when we moved. I am not sure if my mom has any, maybe a few.

But yeah, I just got some from my other grandma, my dad’s mom. She kept all that stuff and pictures from my dad. She recently shared them with me. It was so nice to see them.

[she paused for a brief second]

It would be nice to have them. (Transcript, October 20, 2020)

In her reliving of that moment, I paid particular attention to her momentary pause. It honestly startled me. I was not expecting to hear that. I could see that it pained her not to have

photos of special moments in her life. They were a part of her, part of her identity, and vivid memories that lived within her storied life as a young woman becoming.

For our next meeting, I ask her to share a photograph that reminded her of ‘Home’ as a starting point for our next conversation. She asked, “*what do you mean by home, like home home or Home*”. I said, “*you can decide, it can be anything that you want to share, a physical house, part of a house, the Land, an artifact like beadwork, anything, it is your choice.*” I asked her to sit with the question for a while first before she chose what she wanted to share. It helps to sit with it for a bit. It will come, let it guide you in.

We met again two months later in December 2020. Before this, I reminded her about a week in advance if she could bring her photo and she said she was prepared. So, as we met again online, one of the first things she inquired about was our photo sharing. She found a sense of excitement in sharing in this way. Below is the photograph (See Figure 6.1) that *etondah* shared.



Figure 6.1 Etondah's artifact reminder of the North.

Breathtaking, that is all I could say. It was Home. She had captured the North [her sense of Home] in an image that spoke to the Land [*dij ndéh*] and to me too. It was just breathtaking.

From our meeting in October 2020, I also told her of my love of poetry and coming to know poetry in a different way than I did in my school experiences and shared a bit of my poetry with her. She had learned some poetry in high school, but it was nothing like the poem I shared with

her. Her sense of intuitiveness was profound, she asked me if she could also write a poem that relates to the photo, something that I was not expecting but welcomed.

She decided to write a haiku to explain it because it was the only poetry, she remembered from her high school experiences. Again, we had similar experiences, even though I am almost 15 years older than *etondah*, our experiences in high school English are quite comparable. I was never connected to poetry in school, but I do remember writing haikus. I felt honored and humbled by her earlier words of sharing poetry with me, she wanted to travel to my world knowing how much I appreciated the art of poetry. The following is her haiku.

Though, I am alone

My tribe is all

Around me

The sunset is my

Country.

(etondah, personal communication, January 4, 2021)

From Post- Secondary to World Wandering

I was pushed to go to post-secondary school right away.

all my friends went straight to university

and I was kind of influenced to go too.

That was not the right choice for me,

I only lasted a year.

I am happy that I took a few years off to travel and experience the world.

to fully understand what I want to do and who I am.

(Transcript October 20, 2020)

Her life has been less than ordinary. I learned about the multiplicity of experiences both in and outside of post-secondary places that *etondah* has travelled through over the years. It began with her first experience attending post-secondary when she was only 18 years old. She left the comforts of her Home in the North to travel to BC, a smaller city but still quite a long way from home to attend university. This would be challenging for anyone. There was also tension bumping with her words ‘pushed out of post-secondary’. I wondered what she meant by this and what happened that she was pushed out. In later conversations in this chapter, *etondah* shared several underlying experiences that contributed to the reasons why she became an “early school leaver” (Lessard, 2010) in post-secondary.

Most Northerners travel and often far distances, it is mostly out of necessity though, as communities are often very remote from each other, whether travelling for food, to see family, or to be out on the Land. Driving four to seven hours to the nearest large grocery store is common for many Northern residents. But I have not met anyone from the North, and yet someone so young who has travelled globally as much *etondah*. Her sense of adventure and genuine independence is powerful. I asked *etondah* to share with me all the places around the world she has travelled to, and this is how our conversation unfolded:

etondah: when I was 15, I went to Vegas with my auntie, I actually felt so scared while I was there, it was new to me.

That was the first time I travelled out of the country.

2 years later, I went to Hawaii with my friend and her family

In grade 12, I went again with my friends and their family to Hawaii ---I had some really great friends who could afford to take me.

Then I went southeast Asia for like 4 months

I spent time in Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam. I spent about a month in all places, mostly by myself

I would meet up with a few friends along the way, I don't know what I was doing.... growing, I guess. That trip changed me!

The next year I went to Morocco and Spain with a friend---and the following year I went to Tanzania for an internship

Then I went to Turkey, Then to Costa Rica, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and I just went to UK earlier this year, oh and Sweden.

My count is like 16 or something.

anita: *what made you decide to go to southeast Asia?*

etondah: *ummm.... I don't know, I just wanted to ...a lot of people after they graduate, they go to university and then I did that and I didn't find that that was for me at the time, I was going to get a BA ...and then what?*

so then...I decided maybe I'll just travel

I wanted to always travel and be alone and be free. I wanted my freedom, the ability to do whatever I wanted ... plus like going somewhere hot. It was something that I needed to do.

I sensed that this was a healing journey for *etondah*. We all make our own trails, and this was hers.

etondah: *after that trip I just like absolutely fell in love with travelling and backpacking and meeting new people in like the random places.... I love travelling!*

I try to go somewhere new each year, My own personal goal.

anita: *what was it like when you landed in southeast Asia, a Dene in southeast Asia?*

etondah: *it was kind of overwhelming at first. I felt anxious. I was with a friend when I landed so that was helpful. We only stayed together for the first month*

Definitely overwhelming. Lots of people thought I was a local

like even in Spain and Costa Rica. Most people don't know about us. I'm like no I am Indigenous to Canada. It was just like hard to explain what you are.... oh, sometimes they would say like "oh like the red Indian"

I'm like, I guess...that's probably the worst thing to say.

anita: *It so interesting that we know so much more about people around the world, their history and people, but they often know nothing about us.*

etondah: *yeah, they don't know nothing about what Canada went through or anything like that which is like crazy.*

(Transcript December 11, 2020)

As we travelled through *etondah's* memories of world travelling, I was mesmerized by her view of the world. She had developed a profound sense of self-awareness at such a young age, mature beyond her years to travel to places across the globe at such a young age. As I thought about *etondah's* travels, I thought about the image 'trails of our ancestors', an image created by the Dene Nation for a mapping project in 1984. The following picture is a computerized image of over 600 traplines from all over the Northwest Territories. Both *etondah* and I have ancestral legacies found throughout these trails. These trails are reminiscent of the trails *etondah* has travelled throughout the globe. It is also a gentle reminder of the trails we often do not get to see, they are found beneath the buildings, parks, cities, schools, universities, shopping malls, and highways. These trails existed long before we existed. These are Dene trails

(See Figure 6.2); this is Dene curriculum. *kenahndih*, I remember.



Figure 6.2 *Trails of Our Ancestors*, Dene Nation Trapper Mapping Project, 1984.

*flowing like the veins in our blood,
rich in nutrients,
forming a mosaic of moccasin walkers.
I see the stories of my grandfathers and grandmothers
written on the Land.*

(Interim field text, March 2021)

Email from *etondah*

As a former high school teacher, part of my work consisted of supporting Indigenous students as they transition into post-secondary. This part of my job I loved. Through conversations, we would set a plan forward that included applying for scholarships. The myth and misconceptions that Indigenous students get free education is just that, a myth. Many students do not get funded either by their Nations or other financial supports. Often, the only support students can get are through scholarships and applying can seem like a daunting experience. *etondah* was telling me that she recently applied for a scholarship and was waiting to hear back. This was causing her some stress because she did not receive much funding to help support her academic journey. It was December 16, 2020, when I received a wonderful email from her:

Good afternoon, Anita,

I hope you are well, I wanted to share some wonderful news. I received a scholarship today. I am so excited and happy it is just what I needed, thank you for your support and encouragement. Yay.

Take care, etondah.

Through this email, I felt that *etondah* was inviting me into her world. I was happy that she felt that it was important to her to share this with me, I felt welcomed into her experience. It was also important that I pay attention to her life outside of our conversations, this is the meaning of being in relation. I congratulated her showing my support and let her know that I will send her a list of scholarships that I knew about as well. Reciprocity means to give back, for me it meant to share what knowledge I know to help support others, this is a Dene law. Share what you have – help other kin with what you have.

Timelines

As a way to think through the stories and world travelling shared by *etondah*, I asked her to create a timeline, an annal⁶⁵, as a way to navigate her stories, paying close attention to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). There were tensions that were present in our previous conversations that kept bumping forward. I was especially interested in hearing more about how she became an “early school leaver” (Lessard, 20210) in her first post-secondary experiences. By providing *etondah* the space to create her own timeline, it also allowed her to “construct her personal histories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112) in her own way. I provided her a brief introduction to the process of creating a timeline (an annal) and said that she could be creative, there was no format that she needed to follow. Before we met again in January 2021, *etondah* created her annal and shared it with me beforehand.

The following photograph (See Figure 6.3) is *etondah*'s annal representation as she states, “of her coming into adulthood” and her translation of the timeline of life events and stories that she shared.

⁶⁵ Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss that “We involve participants in creating what we call annals and chronicles as a way to create a framework on which to construct their oral histories...participants begin to recollect their experiences and to construct outlines of a personal narrative” (p. 112).

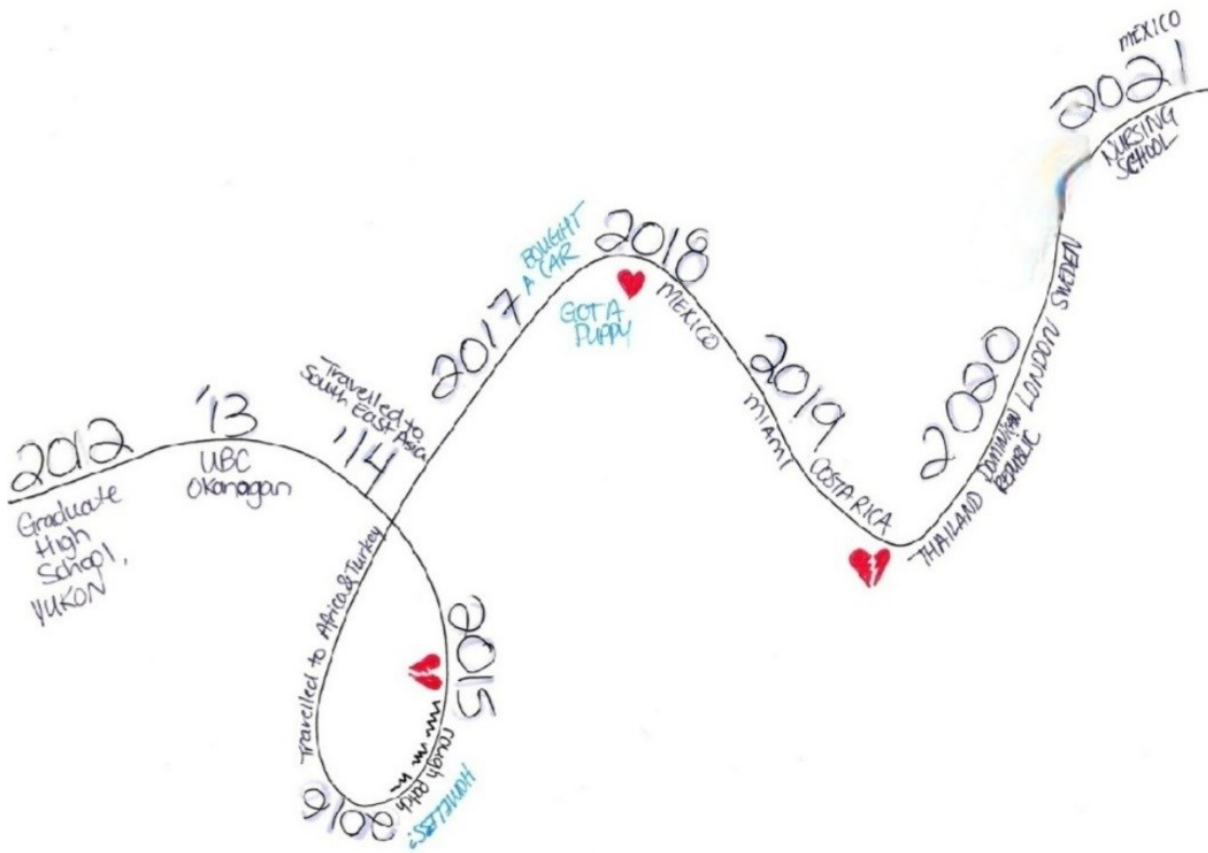


Figure 6.3 Etondah's Annal created January 2021.

etondah: In 2012 - my adulthood began, I guess.

I graduated high school Yukon

In 2013 - I went to University in BC and moved away from home

I wanted to be independent by myself, I went to school for the year, but I didn't like it, it wasn't my thing

anita: That must have been difficult being in a new place all alone, school can create challenges especially being so far from home, I am curious, what was it that wasn't your thing

etondah: the place I lived, it felt ALONE, I didn't know anyone there, it was like a WHITE kind of place I guess, a bit of RACISM, I wasn't compelled to do school, I didn't really study

In 2014 – this was kind of solo trip to southeast Asia, it was life changing, it opened my mind to more things than I would have learned in school

In 2015 - broken heart was the rough year- when I got home mom was going through a divorce with my stepdad, they ended up selling the house

I eventually moved to the North and ended up in a very bad relationship, it was a really really bad time in my life (tension)

In 2016 – I left that relationship and moved back in with my mom and got summer job

Travelled lots and went to Turkey to meet up with a friend ...really really good experience

In 2017 - After that life got better, met someone new, bought a car, got a puppy

Travelled more went to Mexico, Miami, Costa Rica on a backpacking trip, it was one of the best trips I have ever been on

In 2019 - Then we broke up - the other broken heart

Travelled after that, I just love travelling, went to Thailand, then Dominican, then to London and then visit friend in Sweden

Summer 2020 - started school online ...now everything is going great

plans to go to Mexico Christmas, fingers crossed.

I listened attentively to the description and storied annal that *etondah* shared with me.

Several tensions arose and that brought me back to “early school leavers” especially for

Indigenous youth. I was awakened to her first experience attending post-secondary as she shared of her disinterest, lonely feeling, and what most likely equated to her early leaving, the racism. In our conversation, *etondah* shared her high school experience was full of culture, “we even had an Indigenous graduation ceremony, it was beautiful”, she said. The transition to post-secondary was then followed by tensions of racism and loneliness equating to no support of sense of belonging in her place of learning. At a time when she should have been celebrated for her journey into post-secondary, became a place of anguish. *etondah*’s stories of ‘feeling lonely’, ‘not interested’, ‘it wasn’t my thing’, ‘I didn’t study’ are all stories that contribute to many Indigenous students becoming “early school leavers” (Lessard, 2010). I too related to this notion, my early school experiences connected to *etondah*’s as I think back to the time in elementary and secondary school for me, it was chaos.

The sheer persistence and self-advocacy *etondah* shared are evident in her choices and her willingness to let things go. As *etondah* shared, the tone of her voice was confident in her future and what was to come. She expressed her passion for travels and knowing that even within the pandemic her dream was to continue travelling to places around the world. Her experiences in post-secondary bring me back to a story I wrote for a course I mentioned earlier called *Holistic Approaches to Life and Living as Curriculum and Pedagogy* of my post-secondary experiences. The disheartening narrative of the constant uphill battle for Indigenous students in school is prominent in our stories. It is time that we dislodge this notion and simply put, we have to do better.

Finding My Voice

Sadly, many of my educational experiences as a student, and like many other Indigenous students, I was often subjugated to cultural stereotypes and racism. These

experiences were often situated within the curriculum, classroom dialogues, and even playground banter. I often sat at the edge of cultural borderlands within many classroom experiences. Battiste (2013) explains that “cultural borderlands are understood as exceptions in modern thought rather than central areas for inquiry and empowerment” (p. 31). The lack of knowledge or understanding surrounding Indigenous cultures or curricula relevancy from my teachers often led to humiliating and degrading discussions in the classroom. This ultimately created a discourse within my self-confidence as a young First Nation student rendering me silent as this was a better way to deal with it, believing I was “inherently inferior” (Battiste, 2013, p. 26) to my counterparts in my classroom spaces. Moving forward required confidence and learning to speak from the heart, knowing my voice was valuable, ultimately moving away from colonial ideologies that existed in these academic spaces.

I spent many years in the back of the classrooms, surrendering to my schoolwork and the silence of being an outsider. I often struggled to share my opinions or thoughts because of this notion of being ostracized and stereotyped that haunted me from previous experiences throughout my life. Experiences such as being called a ‘dirty, lazy Indian’ by classmates and being bullied by other children for being poor, or habitually holding my head down low as I walked in shame; shame for being an ‘Indian’. The many school experiences of having no voice to uphold my opinions, thoughts, or knowledge was elevated trauma that returned through continuing dissonance during my educational experiences.

When I first started university in 2000, I was scared. I felt as though I had no one to relate to, no place to turn, and no support or voice of advocacy. I asked myself, ‘how

do I come to terms with this notion and unsettling fear that I am not good enough? Why do I feel like I am not privy to partake in this institutional language that often places me within irrelevant perspectives? How do I recognize that my voice matters? These are the questions that burdened me for some time. It severed my spirit helpless at times, throwing me beneath the dark shadows of colonial thoughts and notions as I would sometimes sit in class with unease and discontentment for what I was learning.

Then it happened, I was sitting in a class and the discussions were centred around Indigenous People's history. I was thrilled that we were going to learn more about Indigenous Peoples, especially knowing my peers would be learning alongside me.

Unfortunately, I was immediately denied this feeling because my peers took a negative turn during our open discussions. It was hurtful to hear discussions about Indigenous Peoples in a negative light. I knew at that moment that it was time to speak up and to share my thoughts. I knew that I needed to use my voice. The discussions were unsettling as I knew they were false, and I needed to speak up about it. I prayed I sat with it for a minute. Then I took a deep breath and put my hand up. I was scared. The bluntness and sharp reaction of my voice felt good at this moment, my heart was beating out of my chest as I felt my spirit awaken again. The reaction within the classroom was a violent silence that made me feel even more susceptible to my fears but with astounding strength and courage, I attained composure and spoke. I spoke about what I knew and understood about Indigenous histories and the impact that it was having on Indigenous Peoples. I asked my peers to learn the history, to take a step back from the ignorant myths and misconceptions that they have heard and to do the work. To be present. I felt a sense of urgency as I spoke of the historical impacts and the truths that were often not

found in the textbooks we carried and that it needed to change. The following is a poem that conveys my experience of no longer sitting silent.

Silent No More

*she sits silently,
listening assiduously through instruction
of the professor
for in this institution of knowledge and knowing
she is attentive to her surroundings
a lone wolf on the edge of existence*

*but then it happens again
talks of Indigenous Peoples
her ancestors, her roots
but she only hears untruths, falsified knowledge
myths and misconceptions devoured by students among her
she begins to feel restless,
her spirit in discontentment
interpretations of shrewdness
she overhears from her peers*

*she has had enough
speak now!
she hears her ancestor's whisper
"it's time"
she slowly puts her hand up
scared but willing
to voice her concern
concern for the smokescreen and invasion of falsehoods
brought forth from this dialogue*

*her heart racing, her hand quivers
she prays for strength
and courage
she speaks finally
speaks the truth of her ancestors
truth of the hurt her people feel,
and the continuous suffering*

*she has unearthed her voice
for her voice is no longer silent among the countless
she begins to speak from the heart
for the time is now
time for the truths
that were once submerged to re-emerge
in delightful wonders*

(Originally written, February 2017)

These experiences of racism feeling “*inherently inferior*” (Battiste, 2013, p. 26) and the lost sense of belonging in classroom spaces are constant stories that live with generations of Indigenous students. As I sit with this story, looking back, I had a choice either to continue to be silent or find a way to speak forward notions of truth. Thinking forward to *etondah*'s story, I recognize her choice was to leave school and find her own voice as she visited many landscapes over time.

Relational Wonders

etondah began to make visible her stories of her current post-secondary experiences in Nursing. She shared that this was her first year and quite different from her first experience. She said that she felt more prepared and knew that this is something that she wanted to pursue. When

she first went to post-secondary, she said she was taking Sociology and it was not something she desired as a career choice. She explains that the reason she wanted to be a nurse is *“because I want to help people. I want to be a nurse in the North. Just like seeing like my granny’s nurses when she was in the hospital and how they were so respectful and knew her language and stuff”*. Her nurturing spirit and love of her granny were evident in the way she talked about her. I sensed that this was an important relationship in her life, one that she respected.

etondah went on to say that *“with nursing now, we learn a lot about ‘being relational and how all your past experiences help you in where you are today and how you make choices. It helps you be critical. I also think all my travelling really helped me in that sense”*. She spoke more sharing about language, she said her mother speaks Dene fluently *“my mom knows the language, but she didn't teach me. I know there are a few resources to learn but I want to learn more. This is something I have to keep asking”*. She continued to talk about finding her way to the language in her work so she can help Elders, which is important to her. She said, *“I want learn the language and be able to help those Elders in care. But I have to learn the language first.”*

“Language is néhlot’įę [your relative]”, I said. I shared with her that *“the relationship with language has been severed due to the residential schools, and sadly, we have to get reacquainted with language, like a lost relative. We need to keep the relationship going and often that takes work”*. She said, *“I love that, that is such a great metaphor to think about, thank you, mahsi”*.

As she continued sharing her stories the conversation shifted from being on the Land in the North, to being in the *Dehcho*. She sounded like she missed home, her semester was coming to an end and Christmas was nearing so I think the feeling of being away for so long was taking

a toll on her. She shared that she wrote a paper recently on the feeling of being Home. She said, “*When I am in the Dehcho, I feel like I am at home, compared to being in Alberta. I feel at peace there, my family is from there, the Dehcho. Being in Alberta I have no connection there in that way. Yeah, there is an energy shift. I feel like I am at home when I am there*”. For *etondah*, her stories of being relational were her living stories with the language and the Land. She continues to live and tell stories of different languages and landscapes.

Intergenerational wisdom is deeply rooted within *etondah*'s stories. Her family stories sit with her as she embraces her becoming a nurse and returns to her Home. Return to her roots. Her desire to speak Dene and work in the *Dehcho* speaks to her continued urge to be in relation close to Home, knowing Home is North.

Matriarch Worlds

I was getting to know the many worlds (Lugones, 1987) that *etondah* has travelled in her lived experiences as a student, as a Dene/Cree, and as a descendant of Denendeh. I was beginning to see new possibilities of kinship curriculum making in our commonplace of *kenahndih* [I remember] experiences. Not necessarily the same experiences but where our moccasins feel the same under our feet as we walk in the world we encounter. Greene (1995) reminded me that, “[to] be yourself is to be in process of creating a self, an identity” (p. 20), and who we are becoming. I felt like I was a part of *etondah*'s becoming as she too inquired more into my experiences in post-secondary. We drew on each other's experiences and found possibilities that were shaped by our identities as women, as post-secondary students, and as Dene.

The more we shared our stories, the more it became clear of our kinship ties to our familial places and storied landscapes within the Northern boundaries we both call Home. As we called forth stories, matriarch stories were also prominent. We shared about our moccasins, and I shared a photo of mine with her, she said “*my granny made mine too*”. *etondah* shared a story about going to visit

family in the *Dehcho* in the summer of 2018, while she was there, she went berry picking with her stepsister and this is what she said:

etondah: I went berry picking the last time I was there. I thought to myself, how have I not done this before. We picked cranberries and then went to the cabin we cleared brush and that's where lots of cranberries grow. We were supposed to go out on the river but didn't so next time. (Transcript February 11, 2021)

The move to schoolwork and midterms were on her mind. I recall the urgency in completing assignments and exams and that forward looking time whereas a student you imagine relaxing. She shared one final story about a course she was in about being relational in nursing. She handed in a midterm paper and wrote about her granny, she said, “*the paper was like reflecting on our experiences and there was a lot to do with my granny. I really didn't notice it, but she had a huge influence on who I am today*”. In that moment, I saw *etondah* in her becoming, she was self-aware and confident in her chosen path.

All be good – *nahzy*

It was now March 2021, and it was our last scheduled meeting, I shared the final texts with *etondah*, and she said she felt like our time was coming to an end and she was sad. I mentioned that in our teachings, we are now kin, we are in relation, I am like *sembeé* to you, an auntie. I will be here and continue to be here when you need me.

As we fostered “the visiting way - *keeoukaywin*” (Gaudet, 2018, p. 50) we sat in silence for a brief moment, staring at each in the Google Meet, my mind wandered to all the places *etondah* shared with me. She had excited possibilities within me to seek solace in world travels, wherever that may be. I sensed our moccasins trails would lead to places where our matriarchs guide our feet forward. I thanked *etondah* for walking alongside me in this way, for spending the time while she also attending to her schoolwork, I told her she has taught me so much and for

that I was grateful. I recognize you as the seed that keeps the forest growing, keep growing. *sedze t'ah mahsi etondah*, with my heart, I thank you. May your *edhéhke* (moccasins) take you multiple worlds as you retell and relive stories to live by.

In the next chapter, I begin to sew together the threads of *sembeé*, *etondah* and my narrative accounts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this as “narratively code” (p. 131) field texts where a summarized account of what and how begin to take shape. Metaphorically, I refer to this as the ‘sewing together of narratives’ where I begin to sew the resonant threads (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) together to form new *edhéhke*, new possibilities.

Chapter 7 : *edhéhke* Trails Lead Home

may your edhéhke [moccasins] guide you with each step
acting as story guides
teaching patience with gentle steps
that flows across your soul
walking forward uncovering
the moccasin trails of our ancestors
turning earth into - dij ndéh
sky into - k'oh gulj
words into medicine – náidih
while extending the borders of possibilities
listening to each step with grace
releasing tensions
where upon your heart
it heals
viewing the world through ancestral senses
upon our feet,
lives the playfulness of Mother Earth,
the strength of our matriarchs,
and the stories we live by.

Resonant Threads–Sewing our Moccasins

To sew means to fasten, attach, join pieces together (Oxford University Press, 2000). The

act of sewing is passing a thread in alternate directions backward and forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, 2000) through a series of movements, creating a seam for a garment or something. It is a process to sew together, working with a needle and threads stitching edges in order to bring to a desired conclusion, in this the threads lead to *edhéhke*, moccasins.

Narrative inquiry is much like the act of sewing moccasins, where stories flow back and forth, some stories attach and are joined together with the sinew or thread, as the fastening alongside the seams create a masterpiece of stories that bond with resonant threads that often appear. Depending on the person sewing some stiches may be larger than others and maybe even colorful threads are added. Each stich is co-composed with the next, with the sewing inquirer attentive to the fine details, paying careful attention throughout the process. The resonant threads (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) shape the that of that final moccasin that becomes an even greater experience when completed. Once the moccasins are complete, it lives on to tell more stories. Where the moccasins go, new stories emerge in the looking backward and forward of Land experiences both inside and outside of school landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The process of moccasin making takes time and patience. As I think about my participants and the moccasins they adorn, mine included, they were each made by Dene hands, they carry with them Dene stories in the living and telling of Dene laws and histories. The moccasins we adorn are Dene *k'èq̄*. We live in our *edhéhke* [moccasins] while travelling to worlds (Lugones, 1987), often finding tensions beneath our feet in some of the worlds we travel to. In paying particular attention to the threads “woven over time and place” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132), I searched for threads that were steady across my participant accounts. Using my senses in full embodiment, I listened and was attentive to the words I heard, the images and timelines I saw, the silences and gaps that filled my sensations and the kinship relations that connected me

to the stories that emerged from my participants.

This embodied listening allowed me to think through the different moccasins my participants wore making visible trails less travelled. Like the rabbit highways in the winters, their narrative threads were more visible. Storied trials of healing, intergenerational wisdom, matriarchal knowledge, and Land became visible. The trails led in sometimes different and sometimes overlapping ways but always seemed to lead North, home to *Denendeh*. I was drawn into meaningful, dynamic, and even tension-filled moccasin trails or threads per se, by my participants, a Dene knowledge keeper and post-secondary student. My participants, a Dene knowledge keeper, and post-secondary students, including my narratives. Even through a pandemic, our moccasins helped guide us as we met in online spaces or over telephone lines, they led the way taking care of each step we took alongside each other. Sometimes we negotiated the trials that led us to places and varying worlds, sometimes it led to places of laughter feeling light on our feet, and sometimes we paused to listen as we found trails that suited our own becoming's. It was important for me to remember throughout this process that:

When we begin to engage in narrative inquiry, we need to be attentive to thinking with stories in multiple ways, toward the other's stories, toward all the narratives in which we are embedded as well as toward what begins to emerge in our shared lived and told stories. (Clandinin, 2013, p. 32)

I was thinking with stories as opposed to about stories, but I was also thinking *with* stories from Dene *k'ęę*, a Dene paradigm. The threads that emerged were from our distinct experiences as Dene and I recognize that these threads may not pertain to others, including other Dene. These stories sit as part of our lived worlds and as we vocalize these threads within our

current worlds, we bring them forward always with good intentions. Once a story is written, it cannot be unwritten. I take each step gently knowing my movements can disrupt what may lay below my feet if not done so with care. This chapter brings the moccasin threads into view as resonant threads of Dene experiences learning *from* and *with* the Land as I reimagine curriculum.

In this chapter I begin to thread new *edhéhke* where four resonant threads stand out. I am new at moccasin making and new to writing, I want to ensure that each thread connects participant experiences of strong Dene women stories in relation. As an Indigenous woman, being in a creative space there are often mistakes, for example when sewing together new moccasins, you might have to go back and forth and taking the sewing apart and try again. This is the same with writing. This process has been a back-and-forth motion, where I carefully process the design. As I think about new *edhéhke*, there is always an excitement as to what the final outcome will look like. When the *edhéhke* begin to take shape, there were four resonant threads that appeared: Healing; Intergenerational wisdom; Matriarchal knowledge; Attending to the Land. I discuss these resonant threads in more detail next. Here you begin to see the new *edhéhke* begin to take form.

With Chaos Comes Order and Healing—First Thread

In writing and in moccasin making, especially when first learning how to write or to make moccasins, it can be very complex. As I began to metaphorically thread together new *edhéhke*, my intention was not to create a moccasin that would fit everyone. We all come with different size feet and there are so many different designs of moccasins. My intent is to contribute a pair of *edhéhke* that resonates with my experiences as *ts'élî-iskwew* as I learn to walk with new possibilities within curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, 2000) in the hope that you may find comfort as you walk alongside me in your own *edhéhke*.

Over the past few years, I have noticed more and more people are revitalizing beadwork such as moccasin making. As more and more people are revitalizing their Indigenous roots, there is healing taking place. I previously mentioned in chapter 1 that there is ceremony in the making of *edhéhke* and a process. It takes time as does healing. It is a lifetime of work. Sadly, “Aboriginal people have many more healing challenges than the general population” (Ross, 2014, p. 270). As we continue to overcome the darkness that colonization has brought upon many Indigenous peoples, it is important to acknowledge the healing that is also taking place.

As I began to thread together my *edhéhke*, healing became a resonant thread that brought the pieces [narrative accounts] together. “Out stories are offered as part of a healing process” (Dion, 2009, p. 47). I recognize this thread of healing as the strongest thread that holds the *edhéhke* together.

grieving the past is searching and (re)searching
healing is moving forward, it is a readjustment
it is soul driven from the heart, hear it
visiting that deep place where tension sits, feel it
often circling back to this place that is close to me,
home, land, heart
complicated in the unfolding
listening to the rhythms of the process
in movement came clarity

Moccasin making is a healing process. It takes time, patience, and understanding. It is the

same with healing. My understanding of healing is that it is a relational and conscious process. It is constant and often taken upon oneself to consider. As an intergenerational survivor, where my mother and grandmother both attended residential school, I have lived and survived many tensions connected to this trauma. I recognize this as a shifting process that is constant, knowing too that my experiences with healing are my own and in doing so I do not profess to have answers but, I too, “encounter deeper questions as [I] struggle along” (Ross, 2014, p. xx). In order for me to know they are deeper questions; I intentionally take time to be present with them. Leggo (2010) describes a healing journey alongside his father as “trauma sending us light” (p. 56). As I shared alongside my participants during a pandemic, healing was prominently visible in our conversations. Not particularly the word ‘healing’ but healthy and safety. It was also evident in the silences and gaps as we storied together, I sensed this as a place of healing when we entered into *kenahndih*, into I remember stories.

In my school experiences, I had experienced racism. I was left to sit in the corner many times. It was debilitating at times, leaving me feeling less than. Throughout my life, identity has been central to understanding the worlds I travelled to, as I constantly shift in my worlds, I am reconnecting with the Dene language and culture where I feel confident in who I am. It was the looking backward notions that led me here, it was finding my kinships and listening to the stories that brought me back. In everything, the Land has been the place for me to let go, to nurture me, and to feed my soulflame⁶⁶.

At certain points in my life, I argued with trauma and sometimes trauma won. Other times I was resilient over trauma. What I don’t want is for trauma to define me. I choose to see the glass half full, knowing that I live by the Dene Law of *Be Happy at all Times*⁶⁷. This is a

⁶⁶ McAdams (2015).

⁶⁷ <https://dehcho.org/government/about-us/dene-laws/>.

conscious choice. With this choice, I am actively changing my story. Healing continues to grow within me. I started this journey wondering if I mattered within this space, and I am ending it knowing that I have changed this narrative where I am creating space for my voice to matter within this space, as a *ts'éli-iskwew*. In order to move forward though, I had to think back. In order to restore balance, I first have to understand what that means, when I used to go out on the Land, I was as attentive as I am today. I would see the Land but now when I go out on the Land, I see footprints that were there before me, I hear the trees tell me stories if I take time to listen, I feel the earth upon my feet with each step, and I taste the snow while I walk in the Winter. Balance is attending to all my senses and that is the same with healing. *nahendeh gozhih gogha nezu*, [Land is healing for all].

At a young age *etondah* experienced the death of her father, racism in her school experiences that led her to leaving school early. Her story of healing is written all over the worlds she has literally travelled to. She felt her heart begin to heal as she reached out to her favorite teacher in school, her counsellor. She followed the Land to help her through situations that were often out of her control and when they were, she used her travels as an escape and a place to find clarity. She taught me that it is alright to follow the road less travelled and to take a chance with all of her travels. Once I saw the importance of this my memories came back to me and how world travelling (Lugones, 1987) can sometimes actually mean world travelling. In *etondah's* annal, she drew two broken hearts within her timeline, this was a time when she needed more emotional healing. As she moved across her timeline, she had full hearts, where she felt her path and life choices were leading to more fulfilling heart space.

In visiting and revisiting the narrative accounts of *sembeé*, what became visible were the silences, the pauses, and the laughter in her storied experiences. Her playfulness is a way of

healing as she storied her experiences alongside me. She too left school early and for reasons that were not clear in our discussions. I was intentionally being ethically responsible as I attended to my participants' stories as some stories are not meant to be shared, especially in the space we were allowed via phone or internet. My intention while attending to my participant ethically was to take care of their spirit as I was alongside them, knowing kinships and how sometimes intergenerational traumas can resurface, I purposefully only inquired into stories with that in mind. I noticed the silences during our conversations around moccasin making, and the teachings that were not passed on to her. Being the youngest of nine siblings in her family, she felt tension there, but she had learned other skills such as moosehair tufting. She taught me that laughter is healing. Even though things happened 'back then' there is forgiveness. Her laughter brought me to a place of healing.

As I look across all three narratives it is most important to think about what our home life was in the times we met, we were deeply impacted by a global pandemic. Healing gave us all a different sense of the word. In connecting our threads to healing, I was focused on spiritual and emotional healing, the pandemic made me think about physical healing. Each time I talked with *sembeé* or *etondah*, we always began in this conversational space of the pandemic and physical healing. I realize now that I did not write too much about it within our stories, but it was prominent. It is having certainly changed the way we view the world today, the way we do things such as research even. This impacted our ability to be in person but through a healing way, we found a way through this tension. We cultivated a way towards healing, a word that sits within each of our stories as a way forward where our ancestors are with us. Paying attention to our wellness and the wellness of others was central to our healing. We each shared stories of being on the Land as an escape from the pandemic, as a place to sit in the silences, and as a way

to connect us to Home. A place we were not able to travel to. Sawatsky's (2018) words sit with me "The wisdom of healing for all returns us to the wisdom of Spirit and land, in whom all find their true identity" (p. 233).

We Are All Connected, Intergenerational Wisdom—Second Thread

As I begin to shift towards the next resonant thread, the voices of my ancestors were felt within each thread. As I visualize myself sitting on the floor, next to my matriarchs creating these *edhéhke*, I felt the presence guiding me forward. Throughout this dissertation, I heard the stories of my participants' ancestors, and some ancestors we share in common. It was their stories that directed the journey forward, knowing that me and my participants are kin and in relation. Having a knowledge keeper guide the making of the moccasins or threading the *edhéhke* showing me the way was intergenerational wisdom unfolding. I recognize this thread of intergeneration wisdom as the kinship thread that continues the telling of *edhéhke* stories.

Stories of *kenahndih*—I remember—concept brought us back to our ancestral knowledge. As we came together, generational stories emerged as intergenerational wisdom. Kimmerer's (2013) words situate wisdom for me "What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed" (p. 49). It takes wisdom to grasp the unnamed, to grasp what is missing. For me, it is often the stories that are missing. As I come to learn more stories of Denendeh, the more I feel part of the Land. Kulchyski (2005) explains from experiences with Northern Elders that "Elders can teach with stories and with gestures; they can speak the language of their landscape; they can have an astute understanding of social issues at the global level" (p. 19). Muscogee Creek Nation poet laureate Joy Harjo (2021) shares about the teachings and stories that come when we sit with Elders and the ability to recall them expressing that "Growing memories and the ability to access memory is a skill that allows access to eternity" (p. 13).

When we sit with our *ohndaa ké* [Elders], teachings come in the form of stories, and it is up to us to remember them. Barnaby (2015) also says this about Dene learning as a spiral learning process. A story is shared, and then shared again and as an active participant in the story, it is up to you to be invested in the teaching. Chung (2016) reminded me that “what became clear were the intergenerational reverberations shaping [our] experiences of belonging and identity making” (p. 219). In the narratives of *sembeé*, *etondah* and me were accounts of kinship stories from our ancestors. Our relationship to *Denendeh* and the Land over generations sit vibrantly in the words and stories we shared. It is part of our identity as Dene and as kin coming together. I am also mindful by the words of an Apache⁶⁸ Elder that “Wisdom. It’s Difficult!” (Basso, 1996, p. 121). Wisdom requires a lot of listening and paying attention to the unnamed.

At the beginning of my autobiographical accounts, I shared stories of my late father and his father. Connecting to these stories brought me to these lived moments. Moments that live on as I retell them to my daughter now. They travel through me to new places. I connected with matriarchal stories that hold me to place, places of Dene *k’ęę*. I sit with these stories as stories that connect me to my identity and kin relationships. As I searched in my research(ing), I found new relations that I was not aware of and new kinship connections that take me to other places throughout the North. Places that I have to visit physically but places I have visited through story.

In looking back at *etondah’s* narrative accounts, she shared about the many times she sat with her granny in story. Listening and learning alongside her granny. It was *etondah’s* granny who opened up wisdom spaces for *etondah* as she told and retold stories of the time spent with

⁶⁸ Athabaskan Tribe also referred to as Diné, relatives of Dene.

her. *etondah's* familial stories now sustain her as she situates herself within the narratives of her grandmothers and Home, the North. Reflecting on her experiences *etondah* says “*I really didn't notice but she had a huge influence on who I am today*”. *etondah* was sitting with wisdom in a new way, she was connecting to intergenerational wisdom in her post-secondary world. She shares that “*like little memories of my granny and helping her with a hide in the kitchen, before it didn't mean anything but now, I see it as a huge part of my life*”. She was becoming wakeful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to intergenerational wisdom found in her experiences and stories alongside her granny.

As I lived alongside *sembeé* through her stories, I learned more in the silent listening and lingering of the ‘back then’ stories. The concept of *kenahndih*—I remember—was brought forth in this way. In our traditional way, younger generations learn by observing and listening as an apprentice to the stories. *sembeé* as my knowledge keeper taught me through her oral histories of our family and through her storied life growing up in Denendeh of our intergenerational wisdom that illustrates our kinship ties with Denendeh. *sembeé* too shared that she knows some of the stories, and she too is still learning, silently showing me humility as teaching. I was listening.

sembeé and *etondah* invited me into their familial worlds, where as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow (Fumoleau, 2004), their intergenerational storied lives reveal our kinship in our relation to each other and with the Land. *kenahndih* led the way in our remembering backward and forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) towards ancestral places of knowledge. These places resonated in our narrative accounts that guided us to think inward and outward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We internalized our stories because they are stories of our ancestors, they sit with us as a place of wisdom. I recognize the four directions of my inquiry as fluid, the looking back made me reflect on current places of curriculum making (Clandinin &

Connelly, 1992, 2000) as intergenerational stories emerged and the looking forward helped me to shape this inquiry in trying to outline what is possible for the future of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, 2000) from Dene *k'ęę*. Harjo (2021) shares that “A family is essentially a field of stories, each intricately connected” (p. 18), woven together like moccasins.

Careful Listening of Matriarchal Knowledge–Third Thread

The *edhéke* are beginning to take form as I continue to thread forward. Learning to make *edhéhke* for me came from the teachings of my matriarchs. These teachings are often cultivated by women in our communities, not to say that men did not or do not make *edhéhke* too. Their knowledge and wisdom were a resonant thread that was a constant throughout our stories. I recognize this thread of matriarchal knowledge as the Mother thread that guides and mentors the making of the *edhéhke*.

This mother has not only the experience of her mother and grandmother and the accepted rules of her people for a guide, but she humbly seeks to learn a lesson from ants, bees, spiders, beavers, and badgers. She studies the family life of birds, so exquisite in its' emotional intensity and its' patient devotion, until she seems to feel the universal mother-heart beating in her own breast. (Eastman, 1911, p. 33)

Grandmothers are central to our storied lives. We exist because of them. We hold their strength in our pain, we carry their medicines in our movements, and we embody their courage in our resilience. In my searching, it has been difficult to find distinct experiences of Dene women within the written text. The question I revisit is, where are they? Why were they absent in my school experiences? Or history books for that matter? Matriarchs are the heads of the family, they are leaders, they are warriors who fought wars and won, they are caregivers birthing new generations, they are storytellers of histories, and they are our first teachers. Why then are

matriarch stories absent from the grand narratives? It often feels as though we [matriarchs] do not exist in history. Lorde (2007) describes the place of power within women's stories as dark, ancient, and deep (p. 37). As we become more astute to these stories, the ancient ones, we learn to uplift our lives in ways that honor our strength as women, as matriarchs. For me, this is the page-turning to where our stories of matriarchs exist.

I am witnessing a shift in our stories, women are abundantly revitalizing the power of matriarchy as strong stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). I too am shifting stories. As I connected and reconnected with participant narrative accounts words appeared artfully in my mind. I was finding it difficult to express it any other way, so I moved back to where my heart touched the words as a method of (re)discovery. Okri (1997) speaks of the poet that "they need to live where others don't care to look, and they need to do it because if they don't, they can't sing to us of all the secret and public domains of our lives" (p. 1). I let the poem lead me artfully

Our Divine Matriarchs

warriors, goddesses, celestial mothers

our moccasins makers

our ancient stories tellers

our nature and life guides

their strong tenacious hands 'creating our moccasins'

'carrying us in slings' on their back

guiding our feet forward

through the muckiness of patriarchal worlds that collide

they bring forth '*edhéhke* stories, through silent teachings'

walking gently with each step,
we read and reread their steps as storied knowledge
teachings us to use our senses,
where full embodiment exists as a natural occurrence
we each live out our stories
in our unique but familiar moccasin trails
where 'ama and granny Lafferty bake pies and donuts' to sweeten our hearts
bringing warmth in their embraces and knowledge in the act of sharing
taking care of our families and birthing new generations
our matriarchs, born of the Land, 'walking over mountains'
living in our memories of 'scraping hides and rabbit snaring'
legendary warriors of the Land, nourishing our families
easily harvesting '20 rabbits and 16 grouse' in one day
our matriarchs sit at the heart where 'kitchen table stories' live
...
but tensions are still felt upon our feet
where 'our voices were once silenced'
and our 'hearts left broken'
as youth 'once lost', we find strength in our moccasins
strength in 'kitchen table stories'
taking back our 'rites of passage'
hidden suffering, kept silent we emerge in strong stories
where dark, ancient, and deep

carry us back to lightness, new possibilities found close to home
where our *Denendeh* matriarchs
wear moccasins as crowns upon their feet.

Importance of attending to the Land – Fourth Thread

The final thread was the thread that connected us all, the Land. As I reflect on the teachings throughout the stories of my participants, the Land was central in our narrative accounts. Kimmerer (2013) reminds me that sometimes “the landscape has changed, but the story remains” (p. 8) The resonant thread of the Land brought stories that connected all of the threads together: healing, intergenerational wisdom, and matriarch wisdom. I recognize this thread of the Land as the core thread that strengthens the *edhéhke* to last generations of walking.

Identity, belonging, and Home narratives are found on the Land – it is the grand story of Dene *k'èq̄*. Understanding and learning where your roots have grown and continue to grow is so important in knowing your identity, it is what shapes you. When we look beyond the borderlines, we recognize that we are all related. It is Land that keeps us in relation, it connects us. I also refer to Land as *dij ndéh*, Earth. Imagine yourself standing in a place, any place you feel comfortable on the Land (maybe a park, an open field, a classroom, anywhere), now imagine the ground upon your feet is not recognizable. The feeling as you stand in this place is not what you imagined you would feel upon your feet. It may feel sharp, jagged, too soft, or too rugged. When we imagine this happening, the feeling of discomfort takes shape as we stand upon the ground in this place. The longer you stand there in discomfort, the more pain or agony you will begin to feel. In order for us to withstand this place, we should find comfort as we stand there, we should be able to recognize the ground as a place where our feet feel welcomed. This is something that I learned through the stories of *sembeé* and *etondah*.

As the land shifts, reflective learning takes place. In the consistent listening and paying attention, it is the light that brought me Home, back to the Land the way my ancestors intended. It is a bending of the light, the refraction, that makes it possible for me to view the prisms and rainbows that I did not attend to before. In this action, I have been guided by matriarchs on the Land. “Dwelling with [*dij ndéh*] entails a relationship between all beings, a demonstrated respect for all entities that dwell in places, as well as a relationship with the place where one belongs” (Legat, 2012, p. 67). I am still learning about these relationships as I continue to learn stories that come *from* the Land and in my actions *with* the Land. *nahendeh gozhih gohgha nezu*, Land is healing for all, these words guide me forward as I read and reread narrative accounts from *sembeé* and *etondah* as well as my own. Again, representatively, I would have enjoyed sharing this by taking you on a walk with me, on the Land. So artfully, with snippets of words from our narrative accounts I bring you, the reader, alongside me as I travel back to the threading as all four threads are now interconnected to create new *edhéhke* and new possibilities.

Land forms, structures, and constitutes Dene k'ęę. Stories of the Land flow in our minds as memories, photographs, images, and artifacts are brought into view.

Like the rapids they take our stories through the rough terrain, up, down, inward, outward, splashing together our experiences like a frantic dance but as the rapid descend the new steady flow gently brings us back into the calmness where the fish stories are harvested through the seasons. Like wildflowers we think and grow with them without the confinement of thought, dij ndéh [the Earth] shapes stories to live by, as Denendeh ancestors nurture our minds, we flesh the skin attending to places of the hidden and ancient footsteps, moving slowly in relation, carrying our kin on our back with Land as we see onward, searching for self, searching for an identity that keeps

shifting like the movements of dij ndéh in the seasons, connected, (dis)connected, and (re)connected, the severing of Land connections bringing our attention forth in healing, where blood memory sits on the Dehcho landscapes, even when globe-trotting to far off Lands, our spirits emerge from the Land teachings the Old Ones shared. It is where ceremony is central. dij ndéh now seen in a different light, with slow and patient movements live the stories and teachings that were once removed. Where Dene aptitude emerges into curriculum, formed through story merging together like Lúidliḡ kúḡ, where the rivers meet. Land, our closest relative, where our culture lives and language speak to us in Dene zhatie. Everything you need to know in life is found, right there on the Land. Going back to the stillness of spirit, as spruce trees converse through the wind, knowing our matriarchs took us on the Land, preparing our minds for future battles because fear is a feeling that was taught, a colonial thought we now leave behind. Land is where rabbit stories live and travel and sometimes the snow is late, as granddaughters to legendary trappers, cartographers in stories of place, we sit idle in thought as sickness emerged. We found renewed strength in walks on the Land as the trails of our ancestors guided us. But when the world stood still, again we felt (dis) connecting and (re)connecting, pressure and stress where tension sits in our hearts, bewildered our minds and connection to Home, like the severing of the umbilical cord, the borders closed up our connections to Home, leaving us dwelling in landscapes not shaped by our identities but even though we were kept apart, we kept matriarch voices strong still nurturing our severed spirits as a place of healing. Land brought us together, Land is kin.

The common thread of ancestral teachings from the Land and the act of being with our

grandparents learning with them on the Land is critical. As we kept our conversations going, we found reverence in sharing our Land stories but there were also the noticeable moments that brought our attention to closing borders and being Home. Being in the North is part of collective identity as Dene learning *from* and *with* the Land. Not being able to physically go Home, was evident in our tensions. We let our hearts follow our stories knowing we were protecting the Land and our loved ones in Denendeh by staying in our current place of dwelling.

Kinship Curriculum Making

In her dissertation, *Néhiyaw* [Cree] scholar Tasha Hubbard (2016), brings forward the kinship theory found in the presence of the buffalo comprising of oral stories, literature, art, and other forms of representation. This connects to my metaphor of *edhéhke*. Moccasins bring forward teachings, values, ethics, and life skills all connected to Dene Laws. Harvesting the hide for moccasins connects to our ethical relationality with animals and the Land, the flower designs connect each of us to kinship, relatives, and matriarchs, the construction of the moccasin connects you to teachings of patience and understanding, and wearing your moccasins connects you to place and stories. Young et. al. (2015) call attention to “Curriculum making [as] an unfolding process in which identities are shaped and reshaped” (p. 15). Like the making of a pair of moccasins, it too is an unfolding process where identities are shaped and reshaped with each wear.

When Dene wear their moccasins, we are connected to kin, we are connected to our ancestors as we walk on the Land, our moccasins embody our long-standing histories. With the notion of kinship, all the resonant threads interconnect within each narrative thread. This is because they are all interconnected. They create the beauty of the moccasins, you cannot have one without the other, they intercept, twist, turn, go backward, forward, inward outward. When I

walk in my *edhéhke* [moccasins], I am connected with kin and the stories of kin. *Siksikaitstapi*⁶⁹ scholar Betty Bastien (2004) writes about the interconnected relationships surrounding Blackfoot kinship: “Kinship means that *Siksikaitstapi* [Blackfoot] survival is dependent upon the cosmic order and that our existence is based on knowing and learning our alliances” (p. 4), our relations.

Understanding kinship is how I identify with self and others in relation. The stories of Dene learning *from* and *with* the Land is a continual journey as I am understanding who I am becoming (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These stories not only taught me to think narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) but to think narratively in Dene *k'èè*, where stories of Dene lead me to be more connected and in relation with the Land. The kitchen table stories and the literal world travelling stories now carry different meanings to them as I listen, they are appreciated as intergenerational wisdom stories.

I share these stories, Dene stories, as a place for you the reader to consider Land experiences, possibly kinship relations in these stories alongside me. There is a place for you to (re)imagine the possibilities in not only the practical justifications of curriculum making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, 2000) but in better understanding your unique identity and storied lives in consideration to Land as teacher. Asking the question: Who am I in relation to the Land around me? This is a starting point to further inquire into and for educators it is a starting place for you to consider possibilities of curriculum making where Land is teacher, keeping in mind the students you work alongside and their relationship to the Land as teacher.

Across - *zhunáh*

Now I take you with me as I visit *Líidlij kúé* [where the rivers meet], as I stand looking

⁶⁹ Blackfoot.

across the river at my grandparents' old log house situated adjacent to the Dehcho River. I invite you to come alongside me as I journey Home.

If I close my eyes, I am sitting at the edge of the Dehcho River, world travelling. I am in a state of yoga nidra—in-betweenness—I can feel the wind softly blowing in my ear telling me to become more aware, to see ahead, and to look across—*zhunáah*. Way across the river is an old tiny home, you can barely see it. The only thing I can see is the green painted rooftop and a slight wisp of smoke billowing from a smokestack. The air feels so crisp on my skin it begins to show signs of goosebumps and the sun is about to set, the long shadows are following me as the brightness of the sun's rays gently sweep over the landscape. As I stand at the river's edge looking across, a dragonfly lands on my shoulder, whispering sweet lullabies to me that sing to my heart, the dragonfly is like an old friend stopping by to say hello showing gratitude. I stand there looking across and I see the dark shadows of people near the tiny home as night is about to fall. I sit in silence and wonderment looking across awakened to the possibilities that exist within the liminality of place. I searched the Land surrounding me and it was right there all along, it was with me. It took me a while to see it, I just wasn't as aware, I wasn't using all my senses but now as the sun sets before my eyes, I am fully aware of the multiplicity of landscapes that now surround me. *Mahsi cho dij ndéh, ama, sembeé, etondah, semô, seta, setáa, dehcho, denendéh for awakening me to all the possibilities that exist.*

In the last chapter I reflect on the where my *edhéhke* have taken me and wonder about where they may take me in the future. I share how I am paying close attention to what is around me and how this relates to me as a curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, 2000).

Chapter 8 : Dene Ways Forward–The Personal, Practical and Social

Revisiting Moccasins Walks

As I revisited memories of walking in my moccasins, I often felt like I did not belong in certain places. In thinking of what brought me to this searching for places where my moccasins felt good upon my feet always brought me back to the Land stories. The moccasins I wear have helped me world travel (Lugones, 1987) to places I never imagined possible. It brought me toward kinship curriculum where revisiting the steps of my ancestors are storied in familial ways. I inquired into my moccasins because of relationality, Dene can relate, Indigenous youth can relate, and teachers can relate. If I tell you to close your eyes and envision a pair of moccasins, you can. They may look different than mine, but they too carry teachings and unique experiences with them. My moccasins are rooted in family history and familial places.

When beginning to think with my moccasins in mind, I wondered what stories did I not see as I gazed at them? What tensions did I feel when I wore them? Who made them and how and why was this important? How might I invite others to wear their moccasins alongside me? What stories live in these moccasins, the moccasins made by my *ehtsy* and *semô*? Centred around these questions were the tensions that surrounded my moccasins as a curriculum maker. I began to wonder more about what my moccasins could teach me about curriculum making.

This process was not fluid, it did not come with easy answers, it took time and patience. The words that Dr. Sean Lessard always shared with me, either in his classroom spaces or in passing “slow down, listen to the silences and pay attention to the details big and small around you” (Lessard, personal communication, January 17, 2017) were a constant reminder to me. I revisited these words each time I wrote, read, rewrote, and reread my stories and poems. Another teaching that lived with me was from Dr. Dwayne Donald, a teaching he learned while living

and working alongside the Blackfoot Peoples, he said “in order to understand something so well you have to carry it around in your body – this is Land relations” (Donald, personal communication, September 21, 2016). I am thankful for the push that Dr. Trudy Cardinal has taught me, “what else...what are you trying to say here?” she would constantly ask as I began to inquire. She always encourages me to look deeper, think beyond what I see literally (Cardinal, personal communication, September 7, 2020). These three teachings followed me throughout this process and live in the stories I now tell and retell. I am grateful for your words and for teaching me in this way, you may not have known at the time, but I was listening, *mahsi*.

As I lived alongside my participants, in the midst of a global pandemic, my experiences with the Land are now more vivid if anything. The colors, the feel, the smells, the sounds, the taste, visit me in stories without even being outside. And when I am outside on the Land, my movements bring me into balance. It has healed me in ways that are unimaginable, especially as I consider my health and mindfulness during this time of uncertainty and unknowing. As I wear my moccasins, I am taken back Home, a place that real borderlines were stopping me from going, a place where kinships ground my spirit, a place where family is rooted in generations.

Greene (1995) reminds me that “A reflective grasp of our life stories and of our ongoing quests, that reaches beyond where we have been, depends on our ability to remember things past” (p. 20). So, as I ventured to the unknown literally, researching during a pandemic alongside my participants, I found great significance in the returning to the things past. Every day I wondered how the pandemic might have disrupted or changed our understanding of the Land as my original intention was to be alongside in person. I struggled with living in the unknown at first, there was no other plan or footprints to follow as the last pandemic happened over a hundred years ago. It was tough at first but in reflection, I see how the Land also

reminded each of us to be attentive taking us to the past experiences of our ancestors who survived pandemics.

The past also brought forth intergenerational wisdom in matriarch stories and kinships stories of identity. Knowing who I am and where I came from was sadly taken from my narratives through residential school, this too has impacted my participants' lives. As I continued with stories alongside Dene, I found relation and deep-rooted meaning as possibilities began to emerge. I see curriculum making with a new lens. It is walking in my moccasins that helped guide me.

Silent walks

There is such a powerful eloquence in silence. True genius is knowing when to say nothing, to allow the experience, the moment itself, to carry message, to say what needs to be said. Words are less important, less effective than feeling. When you can sit in perfect silence with someone, [or something] you truly know how to communicate. (Wagamese, 2016, p. 18)

Silence is like a sacred fire to be lit. As I sit here and write this, silence allows me to think with clarity. In the hustle and bustle of urbaneness, I often got lost in the noise pollution and the overwhelming crowds. By going to the Land, I became a better listener. I intentionally stood in the silence of nature's sanctuary. Though the silence was mostly temporal it felt vivid as I placed the silence of listening in the midst of my stories. I practiced feeling the echo of my voice, making space for my voice on the Land. I placed myself on the Land in various spaces and times, two years ago on the university campus, presently in my home office, the possible future travels to new places unknown to me. Personally, silence silenced me in my school experiences, socially silence felt awkward and unwelcoming and practically silence teaches me.

I wondered if silence was a gap. Or is silence a wonder to be wandered? I have learned that silence has helped me to be a good listener. Silence allows me to be mindful. Silence connects me to the power and relation of embodiment. Do I think silence is a gap? No, I think silence is a lesson as we listen, pay attention, and attend to the gaps, the disparities, and the differences. I keep learning about the sacredness of silence and how it moves me in ways that shape my stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, 2000). Silence tells me to pay particular attention to what the naked eye often misses. This too is Dene *k'ęę*.

Attending to Kinship Curriculum

In choosing my doctoral program I wanted to find a way to create possibilities in schools that promoted pedagogical change for Indigenous students. I was immediately drawn to Indigenous Curriculum Perspectives. My experiences as a teacher with curriculum were often subjugated to the mandated curriculum and any other way was often scrutinized by other teachers. The first year I brought students to the 3-day On the Land camp, not one teacher from the school joined me. The second year, one teacher joined but did not stay long. The third year one teacher joined and the fourth year I had more teachers wanting to join.

I realized most of the teachers were only seeing the value of the Land camps within the milieus of the formal school settings and classrooms spaces. As time passed, more teachers became interested and wanted to learn alongside me and the students at the Land camps. My interest still was with the students and what and how they were learning with curriculum on the Land. Throughout the year, I would try new ways of teaching that resonated with my identity as an Indigenous educator and the identity of my students who were mostly Indigenous. My classroom was always open for all students and teachers to join. Over time my classroom became a place of belonging for my students, where culture and language were present, and

Elders would share teachings. In paying attention to the milieus of curriculum over the years, I see the teachers and students as their lives met with the On the Land curriculum. Teachers and students make curriculum collectively, you cannot have one without the other, the how it happens can provide more possibilities if multiple learning landscapes. As I began to change the culture of the school, I began to see bigger possibilities at the root. By the root, I mean the university, the same place where I was trained in my teacher education program, I felt it calling me forward. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) call attention to “A curriculum can become one’s life course of action. It can mean the paths we have followed and the paths we intend to follow.” (p. 1). This is the path I am following.

As the path soon led me to Land classrooms and think more about curriculum perspectives shaped by from and with the Land teachings in a more cultural context. I was pulled into the concept of kinship throughout my narrative accounts. It emerged out of relation to the word and what it means to me personally. It is an addition to familial⁷⁰ curriculum making not to rename or take away from it. I understand Land to be a part of identity and as I learn more, Land is therefore kin. It is much a part of us as we are a part of it.

When we become disconnected from the Land, we often feel disconnected from self in relation to kin. The first question a member of the Indigenous community will ask is, where are you from and who are your parents, grandparents, relatives? The reason they are asking is to negotiate kinship relations. Relation to place and relation to family. This is what I am accustomed to and so through associating curriculum in this context, it connects me in this way.

As a teacher, I worked in a large urban school in Alberta and throughout the years, many

⁷⁰Familial curriculum making is defined as “the curriculum making in which children engage with members of their families and communities” (Clandinin, et. al., 2011a).

students could not answer those two questions. Where are you from and who are your parents or grandparents, your relatives? They were disconnected from Land (place) and sometimes even parents, or grandparents. This is in large part due to factors such as the foster care system, or their parents losing their status as an Indian⁷¹ or connection to Nations or moving away from their communities before they could connect. There are so many other reasons, but these were the main ones. So, when as I am sharing about the importance of kinship curriculum making it is to include the stories of these youth. The stories of youth who feel (dis)connected is important to kinship curriculum making because it is connected to identity. Having a strong sense of identity, helps create that sense of belonging and the sense of relation to kin, both Land and family. When our connection to family, kin, and Land is severed, our identity becomes severed too. As I think back to my students who struggled with their identity and sense of indigeneity, I see the importance of kinship curriculum making as part of their storied lives as well. Knowing where we come from, who our ancestors are and how we are all related establishes a greater sense of belonging and identity.

During this process, I have made an intentional effort to (re)connect with kin, both Land and family. While attending the Dene Gathering, I was introduced and met kin from all over the North. In hearing the stories from *sembeé* and thinking of ‘back then’ stories, I researched further into my relations and kinship ties and there were so many beautiful stories that emerged that continue to sustain me connecting me to Dene *k’ęę*. Stories of place(s), rabbit stories, auntie stories, and identity stories. All connecting me to kin. I will continue to gather and learn stories of kin, there is so much more that I do not know.

⁷¹ Indian status refers to the legal standing of a person who is registered under the Indian Act in Canada. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100032463/1572459644986>

Change takes openness and willingness to cultivate change. In looking back at narrative accounts of *sembeé*, *etondah*, and my autobiographical experiences, each of our stories share the different impacts associated with early school leaving stories (Lessard, 2010). Whether leaving secondary school early to join the workforce like *sembeé* or leaving post-secondary early like *etondah* or the juggling between and in-between various schools like my story there was comfort in knowing that being an early school leaver (Lessard, 2010) did not negatively define our lives. I am reminded of Greene's (1995) statement "The challenge is to make the ground palpable [for our moccasins] and visible to our students, to make possible the interplay of multiple voices...It is to attend to the plurality of consciousness – and their recalcitrance's and their resistances, along with their affirmations, their 'songs of love'" (p. 198)

Kinship curriculum is a place where stories are rooted with songs of love and grow as we carry them forward in relation, creating a stronger sense of self, communities, and nations. Knowing where your moccasins come from, guide you with each step. Moccasins are made with a good heart, good thoughts, and are the centre of families. When we are born, we wear our moccasins, and upon departing this world we wear our moccasins. The stories shared by *sembeé* and *etondah* are rooted in kinship, and as I attended to the milieus of our conversations, such as stories of back then, kitchen table stories, early school leaving, silences, tensions of being silenced, and the Land, it helped me in negotiating kinship as a form of curriculum making (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992, 2000).

Sharing stories – personal justification

I am a mother to a daughter. I was not taught about our family history in school. She too was not taught our family history in school. Thankfully, her mother now teaches her these stories to live by. I worry about the lives of so many other students who are not privy to the stories that

render their identity as Indigenous. Stories of strong matriarchs, of strong histories, of warriors, of language, of Land, and of kinships. Stories that are shared here and stories yet to be shared. I paid attention to the Land throughout the seasons, I lived with Dene *zhatie* language on the Land, I observed the Land attentively as curriculum makers began to naturally appear. It was the process of listening and being present that allowed me to do so. This is how the Old ones used to teach us, this is what was taken from our natural classrooms ‘back then’.

As a teacher, I saw my students struggle with their Indigenous identity. When I brought them to the Land, their experiences of school shifted. I witnessed their imaginations “stir to wide-awakeness” (Greene, 1995, p. 43) as they laughed and played on the Land. I then began to imagine the possibilities of shifting curriculum making and classrooms to on the Land. The Land is our original classroom. In taking myself back to the Land through my storied relationships and restorying kinship’s relations with the Land broadened my understanding. The Land is visible in my thoughts as I think narratively, it is my dominant narrative.

As a mother, as a student, and as a teacher I honour the importance of sharing kinship stories, Land stories, and moccasin stories. It is a rite of passage that can help bring future generations to a better understanding of self. The stories that unfolded here, did not come overnight, it too was a process, like everything else I have learned. It is like the lives we live, the transitions we go through, it is about paying attention and listening and honouring the process.

Walking with the Tensions

As I walk *with* my moccasins on tough surfaces there will always be tensions present. I bring my attention back to *strong like two people*. I have lived in this modern world knowing mainly one way in my formal school experiences with curriculum often written by non-Indigenous people who assume they know what is best for me to learn. I have walked in my

moccasins as far as my formal learning will take me, as a PhD. I am (re)learning to walk in my moccasins as a *ts'éli-iskwew* and that too can bring tensions.

My lived experiences have not always been in *Denendeh* and at first this brought tension. My moccasins were not always on the Land. I walk with two cultural identities; I am Dene and Cree. What brings me back is that I was raised on the Land by a Dene matriarch, with matriarchal teachings. I learned the language as best as I could from my Dene mother, and I live and abide by the Dene Laws in all my actions. I am Dene. I am also Cree. Does being part Cree and Dene make me less Dene? Identity can bring tension. As I travelled to the multiplicity of worlds I have lived, I began to erase that question. I can trace my ancestors far across the landscapes of *Denendeh*. Like their ancestors before them, the land continues to be intertwined in their souls (Scott, 2007, p. 57). It is my moccasins that guide this tension, my *edhéhke* made by Dene hands.

Moccasins for Teachers

I have walked in all different kinds of shoes in my lifetime. Runners, boots, high heels, dress shoes, loafers, flip flops, sandals, even cowboy boots. The most important shoes I have filled are my moccasins. They embody my identity as a *ts'éli-iskwew*. I think about the shoes we wear as teachers. Sometimes we get too comfortable and only walk in one pair of shoes because we think there is only one pair that suits our role. I ask teachers to think about walking in other shoes, to consider how it feels, and to learn more about the shoes that walk in your classrooms. I invite you to walk in moccasins. I invite you to think of the possibilities of looking at moccasins in the view of many different moccasins. Understanding that each Nation, even each family may have their own style and design of moccasins. The notion of walking a mile in my moccasins—brings me to new possibilities to where the moccasins meet the roads less travelled. It is

important in the honouring all of steps forward, no matter what shoes you wear. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) express the following in terms of tension and action:

Without understanding the narrative history of the child, the significance or meaning of the performance, the sign, remains unknown. [For instance], student achievement on a test does not in and of itself tell the tester or the teacher much of anything until the narrative of the student's learning history is brought to bear on the performance. (p. 31)

Without walking a mile in their moccasins, you may not know what experiences or places those moccasins have been. Had a teacher asked me in school what shoes I feel more comfortable in maybe I would not have had so much chaos in my school experiences. Had a teacher worn *sembeé* and *etondah*'s moccasins, maybe their school experiences would have been better shaped by their identities. Our moccasins carry many more stories than just a type of shoe upon our feet.

Take Care of Yourself - *edexoahdih*

As I sit here and stare out the window, I am surrounded by spruce trees. The trees can tell us about the past, present, and future. The wonders of Home [the North] are visible and within reach each day. Each day as I write, I understand what a privilege and honour it is to sit among them, they have been my teachers throughout this journey. Each day brings new teachings, with the sway of the tall spruce on a windy day. The birds that perch and visit telling me stories and sing me songs. Squirrels chase each other from tree to tree. The stillness that comes just before the storm, and the beautiful snowflakes that cover their branches on a Winter's day. During this time of uncertainty in the pandemic, the trees are telling me to take care of yourself–

*edexoahdih*⁷². To be present in the situation and be safe. Each moment is a gift, each day I welcome their teachings as I pay attention to all that they bring forth. The Land sits with me and I sit with the Land.

I am reminded of the course I audited in 2019 alongside Pasifika⁷³ scholar Dr. Sereana Naepi and Mohawk scholar Dr. Rod McCormick called ‘Healing from the Land’ which took place on the traditional and unceded territory of the Secwepemc Nation within Secwepemcul’ecw. The weeklong course was centred on the Land paying particular attention to healing. In one of the assignments, the purpose was to connect with nature somewhere on the campus. I found this tree with a number #1803 tagged on it, next to it was a stump where someone had cut down the tree that was there. There were no other trees next to it, just this one tagged tree and stump. I decided to write a poem about tree #1803.

I did not find my tree, my tree found me. This huge pine captured me and beside this tree

I noticed the stump of what used to be a pine tree beside it.

As I lay my tobacco down, asking for guidance from this huge pine tree, I noticed there was a number pinned to it. Within this tree lies an untold story, untold history, untold truths shared within the lines of the bark. I sat, I listened, and I learned from this beautiful, bountiful tree. This tree labelled #1803, a tree destined to be destroyed due to sickness found within, sickness not visible.

⁷² *edexoahdih* translates to *take care of yourself* in Dene zhatie.

⁷³ Pasifika is located in New Zealand.



Figure 8.1 Photographs of a pine tree taken July 29, 2019.

Tree #1803

Tobacco down, prayers up
Tree #1803,
I hear your gentle whispers
describing a world far different
then you have come to know.

Tree #1803,
I am relearning to listen and to be
still
in this space
sometimes I don't see you
and I forget the knowledge and wisdom
you carry
forgive me
I am just a small human.

Tree #1803

I see your beauty set in the lines
of your bark
in the swaying pine needles
and fallen pines cones
that carry your future.

Tree #1803

I see sadness too
in the form of destruction
unearthed beside you
Companion?
Maybe, not sure.
I grieve alongside you
praying for solace of spirit
solace in a place that is
surrounded by urbaneness
in a sometimes-unforgiving way.

Tree #1803

Mahsi, for the teachings you
bring are flourishing
my spirit.
Mahsi for the old wisdom
you carry beneath the ground,
often unseen and unheard by many.
Mahsi for the breath of life
you bring me and others.

Mahsi for the home you created for
the creatures we often disregard

ever so small.
Mahsi cho, hiy hiy, ishnish, thank you
beautiful, glorious
tree of life. Tree # 1803.

(Field text, July 29, 2019)

Writing this poem was about bringing forth knowledge that I knew while intentionally asking myself to pay attention and to slow down. Often, we walk by nature in the urbanness we live in, and we do not realize what other trees will become Tree #1803 or didn't get the chance to grow around us. As I began to think of stories to connect to Dene *k'ęę*, I was watching the films of my late *setáa* [great-uncle] and I happened upon another video of Denendeh. Within this video was a poem that now profoundly sits within me as a narrative of my becoming as I am still learning *with* the Land but from Dene *k'ęę* [philosophies]. It is a reminder that Dene *k'ęę* is always with me, it has always been present, it is me who had to become present to Dene *k'ęę* again. And it was the Land that has taken me there. The video is called, I was born here, an oral history of the Dene found on IsumaTV (1976):

I was born here

the trees of my country are,
so much of part of my life,
they witnessed my birth
they became my toys when I was a child
and my home when I was a young married man
they cooked my meat
they heat my house
they boiled my tea
and cooked my bannock when I travelled on the trail
they become my snowshoes and also my canoe

they have seen all the joys of the Dene way of life
and also, all our sorrows
as the tress of my country receive me into the world
they will receive my body when I leave it.

(Location on video is 5:30)

The trees remind me to pay attention to my surroundings and to take care of each other. Tree #1803 was tagged because it was a sick tree. As I met with *sembeé* and *etondah* in the midst of the pandemic, we always left our conversation with the words “take care of yourself, be safe” not knowing what the future will hold for us. It brought forward fear. It brought forward hope. And it brought forward prayers. Tree #1803 reminded me fear, hope, and ceremony while the poem ‘I was born here’ brought forward strength. Birth is the first breath we take in this world, when we breath, we are learning, taking things in. If sickness falls upon us, our breathe becomes wheezy and painful. When we are healing, we value the importance of breathing. As I learn to breathe again alongside the trees, I take them as relatives as a part of me, and I receive them into my worlds as such. In this time of uncertainty, I think about the world, my colleagues, my peers, my family, and friends. take care of yourself, be safe

What Am I paying Attention to?

Unicorns

As a *ts'éli-iskwew*, I am paying attention to things that most people may miss or may not have an interest in. I was recently working on a curriculum project and someone in the meeting I was working alongside said to me, “you are like a unicorn, there is not many people like you.” A unicorn is a mythological horse with a spiraling horn (Shepard, 1993). I have never been called a unicorn and I had to stop and think about what that meant for me. Did this mean I am the only one inquiring into curriculum as I do or is it because I am *ts'éli-iskwew* working in curriculum,

or maybe both. I have only seen unicorns in cartoons. Does this mean Indigenous curriculum makers are fictitious like cartoons? Or so rare that they can only be imagined? I hope not. The reason I strive so hard is to support our communities, especially our youth in their world traveling through education. Schwab (1969) reminds me what a unicorn of curriculum making would be stating of the practical, where the practical refers to “complex discipline, relatively unfamiliar to the academic and differing radically from the disciplines of the theoretic. It is the discipline concerned with choice and action” (pp. 1-2). Where my action is to create possibilities in curriculum where Indigenous voices such as *etondah*'s can be honoured and valued in all of the worlds they travel in education and where choice is the choice to include the Old ways of knowing, where *sembeé* can join the classrooms as a knowledge keeper and teacher of ‘back then’. This is my version of the renaissance or unicorn in the field of curriculum (Schwab, 1969).

Structures

I ask myself ‘what are the possibilities that you imagine moving forward’. It is possible to restructure the structures that constitute our current education system. A complete overhaul, I wonder is that even possible. Is it possible to think of the impossible as possible? I have to wonder, and I have to hope. Hope for a brighter future so there are no more early school leavers and no more silenced students in classrooms spaces and no more negative statistics. Structure for me denotes organization without fluidity, linear movements without beautiful chaos, hierarchal systems without progressive cycles, unilateral vibrations without more voices, and advancement without rites of passage.

For many Indigenous Nations and communities, learning is cyclical (Wilson, 2008, p. 70), in relation to place and Land (Cajete, 1994; Michell, 2005, 2007). I imagine the possibilities

of teaching the way the Old ones intended, where classrooms are actioned on the Land, where imagination follows inspiration in the ingenuity of being in relation with environments, where the core subjects are created as nature's choice. "The Elders encourage those who listen to walk the place from which every story grows—where the core dwells and from [there] it spreads out being told and retold" (Legat, 2012, p. 181). I can sit here and imagine the possibilities or be part of the action, it is a choice. I choose action. I will continue to create possibilities and future wonders where the impossible is possible.

Dene Language and Laws

As I reflect on the last few years of my PhD, I have (re)connected to the Dene *zhatie* Language and culture through art, actions on the Land, and stories (our histories and mine). Learning the language has not been an easy task. I am not surrounded by fluent speakers as I live in Alberta. My mother, sister, aunties, and other relatives speak it fluently. It was tough finding resources and a place to connect back to the language. Like Kimmerer (2013) my home is inundated with post-it notes of language. I also connected with northern speakers and asked for help in translating English to Dene *zhatie*, I found some resources (very few) and created a space where Dene *zhatie* existed in my everyday spaces. Coming back to the language has been a difficult journey, but I will continue to learn each day. At first, there was tension in pronunciation as Athabaskan languages are one of the hardest language families to learn. As a teacher, I reflect back to what I would tell my former students, encouraging them keep learning and growing. It was my voice of encouragement that stood with me as I was learning and the voices of my ancestors. I am continuing to live the language and becoming more comfortable with it.

Looking back, I saw this in *etondah's* narratives as well, she too feels the desire to return

to the language. Her desire comes from the relational care of wanting to help patients, especially the Elders as a nurse. Many Elders in the North only speak Dene, so she places great importance on learning the language. Her future practice of nursing leading her back to the language of her matriarchs. She said she calls on her mother to help her translate certain phrases that are part of nursing care such as ‘How are you feeling? Or Are you cold?’ She too is continuing to learn.

As I revisit narratives with *sembeé*, she is a fluent speaker. She does not know how to write the language. This was never discussed but I wonder if it was because the language was not taught in school, or that she was an early school leaver. Either way, I understand that our languages are oral, they were never written down, so I have tension with this as well. As I am learning, I have been given certain spellings for certain words, and each one is slightly different, and I can see why maybe our language is not meant to be written. All I can say is that I am trying and that is the first step. I live the language through action. I recall again living the language alongside my granny, I could understand her as she spoke because she used action, this is our kinship language.

Like the original code talkers⁷⁴ (Nez & Avila, 2011), I kept seeking ways to transmit the language where I recognized it as I walked the Land. I thank all those who helped me (re)learn the language of my matriarchs that connects me to *Denendeh*, I am still learning. *mahsi*.

The Dene Laws as I have come to understand them, are values that we, as Dene, strive to sustain as we live alongside each other in relation. It is *nahenáhodhe*—our way of life. These Laws are the embodiment of living a good life. In Cree that is *mino-pimatisiwin*⁷⁵, the good life. To embody these Laws is to live in a good way, in relation to all. In March of 2021 we were still

⁷⁴ Reference to the Navajo Diné code talkers from World War II who used their traditional Dine language to transmit messages that were not decipherable to enemies.

⁷⁵ (LeClaire, Cardinal, & Hunter, 1998)

in the midst of the pandemic and feeling the effects of being in isolation. As a way for me to embody the Dene Laws, I wanted them to be present in my daily life. Through painted stones, I created an art piece that now hangs in my kitchen, and I made one for my daughter's room as well. In this way, it was a gentle reminder of living a good life in relation. I was raised knowing these Laws, not directly as they are written, but indirectly through action.



Figure 8.2 Dene Laws Art Project created by Anita Lafferty on March 30, 2020.

Dene Laws were visible in the conversations alongside *sembeé* and *etondah* as we shared stories alongside each other. They were not direct, but noticeable indirectly. As I reread the

accounts, I recognized that Elder Rosa shared the relational ethics behind the Dene Laws in her teachings of Dene Yoga nidra. In paying attention to the milieus and actions, she embodied the values of living a good life. Sharing, passing on the teachings, help each other. I learned so much in this ten-minute yoga lesson, *mashi* Rosa.

It was me who shared the values of Dene Laws with *etondah*, as she is learning to be a student and wayfinding (Chambers, 2008) her way through life, I shared with her history, language, and culture. She too gifted me with her wisdom of world travelling, literal world travelling. Finally, *sembeé* embodied the Dene Law of passing on the teachings. She generously shared history, language, culture, and kinship teachings with me that now live within me to continue sharing.

sembeé and *etondah* each shared their wisdom and knowledge with me through stories and being in relation alongside me. Their guidance moved and shaped my understanding of Dene *k'ęę*. There is great love, respect, and gratitude for each other "take care" was our closing phrase each time we left our conversational spaces. We came into relation in a time of ambiguity in the world but knowing this love is what holds us together, as kin. You have changed me, *mahsi*.

Belly buttons

The following are two separate accounts that found me paying attention to bellybuttons. At the time, I did not know why I was thinking with the bellybutton in mind but as I close this chapter and dissertation it became clear through my story. In order to know the story, you have to visit the background of the field texts first. They were all written at random throughout my PhD but as I revisit them, I realize that I am paying attention as the field texts are a reminder of the spirit that connects me to the Land. The Land was speaking to me.

(Field text, September 6, 2019)

I was reminded today of my connection to the Land. I was struggling to find a solid place where my feet feel comfortable on the Land today. I was walking on the Land, and I saw a tree that connected me back. Then I remembered the teaching of the bellybutton during birth. When my daughter was born, I saw the umbilical cord that connected her to me and when they cut it, she was left with a belly button and was separated from me. Literally separated as they took her away to the NICU – Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. She could not breathe, the umbilical cord was wrapped around her tightly, maybe the cord didn't want to let her go yet or maybe it was one last tight hug. She was there for a few hours and then they returned her back to me. I embraced her tenderly with love and grace of a mother, her mother. It is through her belly button that she was connected to me in the womb. A bond that is unconditional, we are forever connected through the same cord.

A few days later part of the belly button that was protruding eventually dried and fell off. This is her bellybutton. Her connection to Mother and in my traditional way, I was taught that to keep her grounded in her steps forward, I must keep our children connected to the Land. After her bellybutton fell off, I returned her connection to the Land in a ceremony. Today, as I was out walking on the Land, I sensed a (dis)connection with the Land that was hovering around over me like the severing of the umbilical cord. I wondered if I needed to pay more attention or if this is a teaching I needed to come to.

with our Mother, *dii ndéh*, Earth.

I seek connections with birth and mother –

trauma from parents and grandparents

still prominent

but when on the Land, the trauma disappears

nahéndeh gozhih gohgha nezu, Land is healing for all.

The word for powerful in Dene *zhatie* is ‘*nahé*’. The word for Land in Dene *zhatie* is *ndéh*. The Land is powerful – *nahéndeh*.

(Field text, Mar 6, 2020)

1. Is my bellybutton connected to the Earth? Did my mother have ceremony.

Possibility: No

She was lost in her connection to the Land too during that time.

2. What is the purpose in connection?

Possibility: To ensure my blood flows like the roots below the surface, to ensure my rightful connection the Land is honoured.

3. What are you connected to?

Possibility: I am still learning what that possibility may be.

through roots,
we are rooted
although ruptures, rips, and severing exist
they perpetuate our disconnection
perhaps it is within the Land I can forge a way back
to a gentler space
spaces where I find comfort in *dii ndéh* – Mother Earth
spaces where Dene are deeply rooted
today I am honouring the bellybutton, mahsi, keep me rooted.
keep me grounded to the Earth.

These two accounts were part of my field notes, where I would often wonder and wander

in my connection to the Land since Land is central to my research. At the time, I had no idea of their significance and did not give them much thought until October 28, 2021. I will share with you the story of how these two accounts now sit vividly in my mind in spiritual essence. Okri (2015) expresses that “A story is a spirit essence. It wanders the ether till an open heart, a receptive mind, gives it habitation” (p. 30).

Start with Story End with Story

As I end, I sit in a ceremony where the Land brings the medicines forth.

Sage Medicine Walks

as I stroll amongst the tall grasses, I seek wisdom in this place,
I pray for the sacredness of these medicines to heal my loved ones
to protect us as we seek guidance
where the soft wind blows
the crickets dance with the dragonfly spirits
signs of life emerge in the wildness
where beauty collides with nature
songs are sung through the gentle breeze where the leaves dance and sway
telling stories if I listen
dried saskatoon berries tell the time of the season
as I walk along carefully around the thistles, the protectors of medicines
welcoming their presence among the wildflowers
stories of relatives
that guide my steps
as I sit on the medicine trails
where wonders surround me
circles of fireweed embrace me
closing my eyes to listen to the ancient drums
honouring their presence.
mahsi *ehtsy*.

For me, identity has been at the heart of kinship curriculum making, it is a ‘looking backward’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) notion as I find what has been absent, missing, taken from my storied life. It is a way for me to find peace in the heart of understanding myself. Living and learning kinship stories brought forth an understanding of self in relation to others, and self in relation as a curriculum maker. Greene (1995) explains that “For most educators over the years, curriculum has to do with cultural reproduction, the transmission of knowledge, and at least to some degree, the life of the mind” (p. 89). In (re)turning to these stories, I found ‘a life of mind’ in stories of the Land and kinship ties. I found stories where stories were silenced long ago. I sought to find a place where identity and belonging act as curriculum markers that speak to my unfolding life as a *ts’élî-iskwew*.

Kinship curriculum making is tied to identity and belonging, as a *ts’élî-iskwew* educator, scholar, sister, friend, and curriculum maker, I had to (re)learn where I was from, who and what I am connected to. This research(ing) helped me to revisit these stories, and shape who I am in relation to and alongside as I rediscover these kinship ties. It is important for me as curriculum maker to untangle what and how I want to teach in the future. Finding my way through historical stories of connection and kinship ties has allowed me to disengage with the tension of curriculum within formal education and reinform my place as a curriculum maker in the future. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) express:

The landscape is a living place, a place with a history, with dynamic internal goings-on, with continuing interactions and exchanges with community – all of it aimed into the future in sometimes cloudy and sometimes clear ways. It is a place of relationships among people and their stories positioned differently in the landscape, among the past, present,

and future. (p.161)

What became evident over time were the experiences and relationships shaping the lives of Dene learning *from* and *with* the Land. It did not matter the worlds in which we travelled or where we were situated, our connection to the Land was apparent in our stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). This work brings forward a glimpse into the lives of Dene in different places and the stories from places not heard on school landscapes. There were multiple instances of matriarchal and Land teachings throughout our conversations but as I listened to the silences more purposefully, I recognized the healing stories too.

The dominant narratives of the Land brought forth stories that are reminders of where Home is and what it means to each of us. By bringing forth stories from Dene, by Dene, I am making visible Land teachings that resonate with the histories we carry with us. I am wakeful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to the lives we live and relive on the Land as well as the interweaving stories that we tell and retell on the Land. The imagined possibilities came forward in a kinship of curriculum based on our relations to one another and how we make central Dene stories of the Land that shape our lives. Paying careful attention to the tensions and bumps, I shifted in my *edhéhke* as my grandmothers have for centuries, carefully and with respect. The Land has many lessons to teach us when time is given by the pace of the seasons, they will appear.

Be patient, slow down, words that also generate as a narrative inquirer, words that sit with me as I negotiate the many relationships I carry. The places I wonder, provide an interface to the worlds I live and travel to as I reflect on my connection to Dene *k'èq̄*. I am finding a way forward by seeking answers from the past to consider possibilities in kinship curriculum making as a process to where the future leads. In understanding my past, I found ways to travel

backwards alongside *sembeé* [my knowledge keeper, my auntie] and forward alongside *etondah* [post-secondary student] that speaks to the strength and beauty of Dene *k'èè*. In understanding self, I was able to (rec)connect with language, culture, and kinships, while living through a pandemic. This I know my ancestors walked with me.

The desire for new methods of teaching and learning grows from the need for change. In change, the text and materials need to change, and as Grumet (1988) explains “the shift is the dynamic movement within the form we call pedagogy” (p. 121) As I traveled through stories that were once lost or taken from the tongues of my relatives, I am learning about story, “cultures with oral traditions have a sense of the whole story” (Boring, 2012, p. 5) and I am continuing to learn our story. In thinking forward, I will continue to learn and grow in story; our story of Dene *k'èè*,

Now as I revisit the words of Jean Clandinin in the beginning of the research, “start with story, end with story”, (personal communication, January 10, 2018), I will end with story.

I take you back to the two narrative accounts of the bellybutton. As I shift to new ventures, I was recently invited to work alongside some amazing change agent educators in the North. This work brought me to Victoria of all places, far from the North but still a beautiful landscape full of wonders. It was October 28, 2021, and I was sitting with five amazing women. Women I had only met in passing briefly through various places and spaces over the years. Each of us carries with us matriarch knowledge and wisdom and are all educators in various aspects working in schools, communities, and universities to help create possibilities in our respected areas. As we were called together by one very dynamic woman, Lois, meeting in an online space for a few months. I had met Lois a few times and we knew there were kin relations between us, making us relatives but how we

were not quite sure. This was our first meeting in person. As we began our meeting, we introduced ourselves in relation as we know how. We started in a circle. When it was my turn, I started with who I was and shared my kinship ties to the North, my educational journey, and why this work was important to me. The why was: reciprocity, giving back, and the Dene Law of passing on the teachings.

As the meeting continued and we were in a flowing conversation of possibilities in education, Lois reached over and said “here, I have something for you”. She placed a small stone in my hand and said, “something to bring you Home. This is from the Dehcho”. I looked down at the tiny stone and I almost cried in that moment. Lois had no idea about the bellybutton stories and field notes, we had met only online previously, and it was mainly work conversations that we had, not really anything personal. I held that stone in my hand and could not believe it, before my eyes was a tiny stone in the shape of a bellybutton.

I didn't realize it at the time I wrote those two field texts as I was thinking with the Land that I sensed a disconnection; it was a disconnection to home. When Lois gave me that stone, a stone I now carry with me every day, it was a reminder of coming Home. I found my way back in connection with the Land and in receiving the bellybutton stone the Land found me too. Mahsi Lois, for bringing me Home.

I end now, not with the end in mind but in moving forward towards future wonders.

Wonderous words from Chief Dolphus Jumbo of Samba k'e Dene teach me to continue my journey forward as he shared the following:

Our land is our place of learning, our bank, our library, our museum, our past, and our future. It holds our stories in our place names and trails, we are a part of all the creator

has put here. The land is our 'wealth' when we respect it as our elders have taught us. This 'wealth' relies on our cultural practices that respect this land and understand our place upon it...Like [our ancestors] we must be open to new things. The point is having the choice. This way by moving forward by being connected with our ancestors bridges the generational gap between our youth and our elders. It's very important that we proceed without losing what it truly means to be Dene.

(Sambaa K'e Print Studio, 2012, p. 6)

dáqndíh – The way it is.

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