

Chapter 8

Relational Conscientization Through Indigenous Elder Praxis: Renewing, Restoring, and Re-storying



Amanda Holmes and Sara Tolbert

We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world. We need to restore honor to the way we live, so that when we walk through the world we don't have to avert our eyes with shame, so that we can hold our heads up high and receive the respectful acknowledgment of the rest of the earth's beings — Robin Kimmerer

We must first detail what we value about intelligence to even see there are other interpretations of life, brilliance, and knowing — Manulani Meyer

Elder Praxis: Land, Language, and Relations of Spirit

The land is alive, populated, and storied by spirit—and she is known as a mother to those whose memories are long enough, expansive and flexible enough, to be able to carry this knowledge, this quality of relatedness. Relations of knowledge, of knowing. This way of knowing requires longevity of relational memory and relational experience within places—lands and waters—that birth epistemologies vast enough to hold on to the fundamental, orienting reality that all beings (including human beings, located within the being-ness of the universe, as but one tiny part) are inextricably connected with each other in profound, unknown ways, ways grasped through understandings of spirit, as intricately, intimately relational.

A. Holmes (✉)

Amanda Holmes, Independent Scholar, Tucson, AZ, USA
e-mail: tokalasa@gmail.com

S. Tolbert

Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand
e-mail: sara.tolbert@canterbury.ac.nz

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020

A. S. Gkiolmas, C. D. Skordoulis (eds.), *Towards Critical Environmental Education*, Critical Studies of Education 14,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50609-4_8

113

Lands and her languages recognize, speak, listen to the language of her children, whether those children are rivers or animals, plants, stones, or thunder, each speaking their own language in and to their own places and each other, an undulating, spiraling constellation of sensory-spiritual language and listening. Onkwehon:we, the Real Human Beings, still recognize—and participate in—these ancient, continuing languages of relationship within their lands, and continue to try to uphold these spinning worlds of their ancestral relationships in their homelands, even while these worlds of relations are being strangled, suffocated by those who refuse to wake up.

Indigenous Elders awaken relational memory, enacting, engaging, and embodying knowledge that comes from within the interaction and exchange of the generations with each other, our relations with the rest of Creation, to the land as alive with relatives, with story, with language and ethical protocols of activity, ancient systems of knowledge that understand and perceive how to *be* in the places and with the relations they have been gifted to live with and respect and take care of, a sacred compact with their Creator: intergenerational wisdom practices and knowledge relations. Onkwehon:we Elders hold and carry close to themselves ways passed down to *them*, a generosity of the generations, reaching backward and forward and into the center all at once, spiraling coherently into the past and the future and all permutations of the now, since the beginning of time. Elders embody this intergenerational generosity, a process of ethical reciprocity and a cycling of ways of knowing-being that can be conceptualized in Maori scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira's (2005) articulation of the spiral as,

a hermeneutic framework that locates indigenous cosmologies and ways of being at the centre of an expanding spiral of being... Here the metaphor of the spiral signifies the turning back 'on a wheel of strength,' to 'the place it came from': in other words, to the sacred teachings of the ancestors, to the source of 'the primal energy of potential being', and the returning of these to the forefront in a dynamic process of re-creation and transformation (p. 24).

This Elder Praxis reinvigorates our relationships to and our memory of land as alive, as storied, as spirited, containing and constantly creating and re-creating the essence and lifeblood of form and presence, beingness, remembering and reminding us of our relatedness—and the ways of honoring and giving back to Creation with our very lives and bodies, the ways we choose to walk. Indigenous knowledge and language have become embedded within the land over millennia. Elders remind us of this by *living* their ways of knowing within their landscapes of home; through their process of lived coherence, they invigorate a vast web of interconnected fibers that hold on to the connections between us and our relatives, our collective, synergistic ways of being and knowing. The embodied praxis of Elders awakens, renews, and restores the relationships between human beings and Creation.

Moving Beyond Settler-Colonial Thinking

Theorizing, engaging, and enacting Indigenous intergenerational relationality and reciprocity creates conditions for reimagining resurgence. Intergenerational resurgence is impossible without the reestablishment of intergenerational protocols, practices, and relationships that are deeply contextual, but have been disrupted. As part of the Settler-Colonial project, Elders, Knowledge Holders, medicine people, and children were strategically targeted for eradication and removal from the community so as to disrupt and destroy cultural coherence and intergenerational connections of knowledge, connections that constitute power. In disrupting and destroying roles, relationships, and connections with each other, the colonizers knew they were simultaneously disrupting and destroying Indigenous relationship with and connection to their lands. Reconnecting to these relations of lands, natural world, languages, and each other through awakened intergenerational interaction and exchange lies at the heart of Indigenous resurgence. From Onkwehon:we perspectives and protocols, Elders and their ways of knowing-being are the center of resistance, as resistance means continuing, persisting, maintaining, creating, remembering, visioning, and dreaming *beyond* Settler realities.

Our resistances must evolve, transform, shift, and renew themselves outside of Settler-Colonizing thinking, beyond the limitations of its capacity to conceptualize, beyond its asphyxiating epistemologies of dominion. They must ground and inspire and re-center, creating from within places and spaces that do not inhabit the same conceptual universe—because they are not the same. Settler-Colonialism may be consuming the world as we know it (as it always has, only now in ever more mutating, deadly, and sophisticated shapes and forms), it may be attempting to control and consume all definitions and meanings and knowings, and as much as we may be surrounded by it, we do not have to allow ourselves to become *of* it (Grande, 2018). Free of the numbing cooptation of *homo assimilians* (Wolfe, 2016), our voices and lives and languages have the capacity to engage and participate with all those we *know* to be our relatives.

We need so desperately now to join our resistances—this resistance from a different center, a multitude of centers—to those of our relations, *who are also resisting*, who are also trying to awaken our remembering of older knowledges of our relationships. Ocean and Deer and Mountain and Pine, who know the settler well, who recognize its energy, have never relinquished their Original Instructions to be who they are, because *their knowledge of who they are* has been given to them by the original energy of the universe and of creation. It is, still, their essence and their knowledge and their way of being. And they too are our models of resistance, of how to live surrounded but never give up who we are and what that means.

In scholarship and dominant discourse around environmentalism, education, and environmental education, the Western scientific monopoly on Truth and its relationship to power are implicit, as it is assumed that Western scientific approaches and epistemologies are the singular path to the singular Truth, the only way to knowledge that counts (Battiste, 2000, 2011; Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl II, &

Solyom, 2012; Smith G.H., 2000; Smith L.T., 1999). Indigenous perspectives are marginalized and excluded, not considered relevant by dominant Whiteman educators and academics, unless as an add-on to their paradigm of Truth.

Western scientific method has historically been presented as neutral, objective, and representative of the Truth. Research grounded in these methods has functionally served to vivisect the world, cutting across interconnections, lives, cultural knowledge, and bodies, often with good intentions and *occasionally espousing a critical approach even as it reproduces the status quo* (emphasis added, Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 428–9).

For example, Western methodologies often assume the power to define taxonomically what is human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, living or lifeless, natural or unnatural, rational or irrational. In addition to promoting rigid definitions and labels, Western scientific methodologies may seek to exclude other epistemologies and methodologies that focus on the processes and qualities of relationships between and among humans and the worlds they inhabit (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 432).

Indigenous Elders are thrown even further to the peripheries by Western ways of knowing—while fetishized, their knowledge, their ways of knowing-being, their ways of communicating are made marginal, subverted and undermined (and thus avoided), as less-than, irrelevant, anachronistic. The deep value placed on Elders and their role in Indigenous societies as the heart of understanding, of awakened consciousness, knowledge, and wisdom illuminates an epistemological chasm, and the enormous difficulty in communicating across vastly divergent epistemological universes.

On Elders and Elder Praxis

For non-Indigenous people, there is a certain incomprehension about the meaning of the term “*Elder*,” so it is important to clarify what “*Elder*” means from Indigenous vantage points. In the U.S., “the elderly” are pushed to the margins, having lost their value and usefulness in a society hyperfocused on superficiality, youth, speed, fad, and materialism. The marginalization of Elders is also embodied in critical or progressive education movements that center youth discourses and practices without attending to those of Elders in the community. The United States consumes its elderly; “care” for the elderly is often sterile, medicalized, and underfunded. For Indigenous Peoples, Elders hold the deep respect, reciprocity, and reverence that form the heart center of their People, having lived and survived through a lifetime of experience, gaining the recognition of their community as one of the most esteemed roles and positions in Indigenous societies. Elders possess knowledge gathered out of lifelong experience and participation, their praxis nurtured, guided, and sustained by the praxis of their own Elders in a cycling of intergenerational reciprocity. These are cycles of collective community coherence that are maintained, developed, and transformed through each generation by the careful, deliberate, perceptive ways of knowing-being of Indigenous Elders. Elders do not only carry “the knowledge,” per se, but it is in *the ways* they live their knowings, the ways they

enact and animate Indigenous knowledge systems, that these knowledges come to life from within the spiraling of the generations. Cree Elder Joe Couture refers to this when he says, “True Elders are superb embodiments of highly developed human potential” (Couture, 1991, p. 207–8). As Lakota Elder and Buffalo protector Rosalie Little Thunder always emphasized, “Elders are the center. Because Elders are the mirrors of our Ancestors” (Little Thunder, personal communications). Living, oral ancestral collective knowledge systems are a sustaining power of Indigenous communities, and these are carried and continued by Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

Elder Praxis is a way to think more deeply about Onkwehon:we Elders’ ways of knowing and the intergenerational, inter-relational links of protocol and survivance of the human and other-than-human beings, where Elders hold a vital place in the web of “knowledge production and exchange” (Meyer, 2013, p. 98), situated at the nexus of the generations. Elder Praxis is walked in the everyday by Onkwehon:we Elders, a relationality of thinking and living that is at once individual and collective, ancestral and contemporary and of the future, responsive, diverse, particular, expansive, processual, responsible, reciprocal, generous, ethical, just, self-determining, and transformative.

Growing up in her Lakota oral processes and protocols, Rosalie Little Thunder talked about experiencing the uniquely important social, cultural, spiritual space held by Elders, as closest to Ancestors and keepers of future generations (Little Thunder, personal communications). Onkwehon:we Elders form a genealogy of collective knowing from within their ancient home places on the back of this Great Turtle, a longevity of knowledge relations that engages their grandparents, their grandparents’ grandparents, and on and on, in ongoing interaction with generations of human and other-than-human beings, in their places of homeland and collective narrative memory (McLeod, 2007); that is to say, remembering, from deep within context.

In the everyday, embodied praxis of Elders *living* their ways of knowing-being, their ethical knowledges and worldviews, from within contextual, intricate patterns of relationship between language, knowledge, and land, presences and continuities, traplines of memory and knowing, the awakening of intergenerational consciousness and practice, and the re-imagining of community, is restored and renewed. An intricately woven web links us to each other, to Spirit and the natural world, to Earth, to embodied community, to Ancestors, to teachings and philosophies and ceremony, the re-generation and re-envisioning of ancient memory into the everyday of today within the continuity of intergenerational oral practice. Restoring these relational ways of knowing and being, storying and re-storying these connections, remembering the cyclical nature of their patterns and the particular constellation of beings, energies, elements, and relationships from deep within their context, is the *how* of renewal and resurgence, the practices of wisdom carried within ancient philosophies and teachings, alive today within the praxis of Onkwehon:we Elders, the generations, and our still-living natural world.

Elders’ lived reflection, *reflexion*, of/on their own Ancestors’ ways of knowing and being *are* the teachings, embodied in the walking of their lives, their approaches to living, the choices they make and how they make them—these are the cultural

teachings, the knowing, and the wisdom themselves. Elders both carry and embody wisdom—the collective, lived ethic of their People—as intergenerational praxis. Indigenous common sense. With time, energy, commitment, discernment, and the development of our perception, we learn to attune ourselves to what they choose to share with us; and *what*, in Indigenous knowing, is no noun, it is active, as *ways* of doing-knowing-being (Betty Carr-Braint, personal communications). Going deeper, we align ourselves within this way of active/activated Onkwehon:we orality, older ways of listening, that pay close attention to *how* our Elders are walking their paths through their lives, *why* they choose to do it that way, and what that *means*. Nurturing intergenerational renewal and “maintain[ing] those cycles of continuous creation” (Cook, 2008, p. 165), we learn how this active, activated perception radically, at the roots, comes to shift the way we live our lives in return, the choices we encounter and the coherence of clear-mindedness with which we choose, moment to moment, that make up the heart and spirit of our own walk. Onkwehon:we reciprocities of active, transformative relationship emergent from within ancient, ancestral practices of the generations...unfolding into and through us in the now. And the here.

Be grateful that somebody's looking after that spiritual side of things. That's what's the real world, actually, the spiritual side of it, and you can't see [it], but it's probably the most real of all. So we have to bring the rest of the world into that context. They have to understand the relationship and the responsibilities. — Oren Lyons

Re-imagining Human/Beyond-Human Collectivities and Solidarities of Resistance and Resurgence: Renewing, Restoring, Re-storying

This is what resistance *also* looks like—Indigenous peoples reconnecting within their *own* frameworks of knowledge and the generations, lands, memory, and oral land-based practices, language, relatives, and the praxis of Elders as the heart center of awakened presence-ing to each other, a resurgence of Onkwehon:we original consciousness and coherence, remembering and comprehending collectivity and solidarity with the Beyond-Human Beings, the realm of the “seen and unseen.” Onkwehon:we knowledges understand that human beings and beyond-human beings are embedded within an interlocking relationship of resistance and survivance that the human beings, given our weaknesses and limitations, are only beginning to (re)awaken to. Paying attention now to the intertwining resistances of the human and beyond-human beings will require thinking in a nonlinear, nonpositivistic way. It is time to do what Manulani Meyer suggests, to engage “a different sensory immersion, a heightened sense of context, and a whole different tool belt useful in shaping cultural priorities for different understandings” (Meyer, 2013, p. 99). It is time—no, it is way past time—to hear, to radically listen to, the expansive, dynamic, and dialectical relationality of Indigenous epistemologies and that which Indigenous epistemological thinking allows, the possibilities it envisions.

Beyond-Human-Beings' resistance reflects at once *their own equally critical struggle for survivance*, "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories" (Vizenor, 1999, p. vii) (we envision "native" here as including Indigenous Peoples and the Beyond-Human Beings of this land), while also reflecting an active state of awareness and engagement maintained to awaken their human relatives, recognizing as they do the interlocking fate of our common destinies. Survivance applies equally to the Beyond-Human, as Beings, as alive within consciousness and spirit, from within Indigenous epistemologies. In a conscientization process that asks us to comprehend the ways that the survivance and resistance of Human Beings and Beyond-Human Beings intertwines, and in the responsibility of articulating the existence and integrity of storying that reaches the Beyond-Human universe, *survivance* might become, within this intertwining world, "an active sense of presence, the continuance of [*their own*] stories" (emphasis added, Vizenor, 1999, p. vii).

Resistance of the Beyond-Human Beings can be found in the way Spotted Owls refuse to surrender their offspring to clear-cutters; the way Deer, Elephants, Dolphins mourn their dead, staying by their side in the face of human destruction and indifference; the way Salmon attempt to return to their traditional places of spawning and breeding, maintaining their migratory paths no matter the devastation and interference; the way Grey Whales beach themselves, giving themselves up to sand and air. Through all this, they are steadfast in their persistence and continuance, maintaining their commitment to upholding their compact with their Creator. They refuse to quietly acquiesce to the dismal trajectory of the settler-colonizer-capitalist death march, even as they are forced to encounter and cope with them from within their own ways of knowing, being, and understanding. They persist as well in their efforts to heal and repair—acts of love and care in resistance. We see this with the Grey Whales in the lagoons of Baja California, who come up to play with the pescader@s, tourists and guides, despite long histories of antagonistic encounters of whalers killing their calves, and mother whales destroying fishing boats in acts of vengeful pain and agony. All of this occurred before the "proverbial peace treaty" of the 1970s when Grey Whales reached out to the boating humans, an intervention that strives to fundamentally change the nature of those relationships (Peschak, 2017), enacting a radical conscientization, resistance, and transformative praxis. Grey Whales are our Elders, repairing, rebuilding, re-storying.

Reflecting our Relatives, it is the same with Original Peoples, the Real Peoples. We recognize the fact of being surrounded—but through the ancestral coherence of generations sustained by the praxis of Elders and Knowledge Keepers, we know that our resistance means to continue, to create, to renew, to story and to re-story, in ancient ways made relevant within each generation. This is a critical, deep relationality, a spiritual orientation that is foundational for Indigenous peoples from within their lands and worldviews, an orientation that recognizes a profound connection to the natural world *beyond* what is commonly considered from within Western discourse as "connection," and, fundamentally, looks to these relationships of reciprocity, mutuality, and resilience with these beings and energies as central to knowing *who we are* as Original Human Beings.

The closer we become to the other-than-human world, the closer we approach our own humanity and what it means to be human. This is not paradoxical for Indigenous people—it is part of the natural order of things, the natural law of the universe. Onondaga Faithkeeper Oren Lyons reminds us of this fundamental Haudenosaunee orientation:

Another of the Natural laws is that all life is equal. That's our philosophy. You have to respect life—all life, not just your own. The key word is 'respect.' Unless you respect the earth, you destroy it. Unless you respect all life as much as your own life, you become a destroyer, a murderer....In our way of life, in our government, with every decision we make, we always keep in mind the Seventh Generation to come (Oren Lyons in Wall & Arden, 1990, p. 67–8).

Within such a worldview, reinforced by teachings, stories, language, song, art, ceremony, there is no epistemological challenge or cognitive dissonance to knowing the place of humans in the universe, as learners, and Heron, Cedar, Stone as the greatest of teachers:

To learn, you have to have teachers. And who's your teacher, the teacher is nature, the earth. You learn. You learn. You learn how to get along. You learn how to be respectful....The Indigenous people have about the best understanding of this. And I would say, that's probably the biggest loss that I see in humanity now is its loss of understanding of relationship. *They don't understand the relationship* (Oren Lyons, 2016a, 16 Sept, 1:09).

Relational consciousness and knowing emerge from within Onkwehon:we epistemologies of interconnectedness, engaging responsible, respectful, thankful ways of knowing all of Life and the meanings of being a clear-minded human being, a relative. These responsibilities and commitments to *relational* ethical knowledge and value systems embedded within language, traditional teachings, and worldviews lie at the heart of Indigenous epistemologies, ways of being, pedagogies, and methodologies. They form profoundly relational epistemologies, lived and living, enacted and embodied, that consider and know the “unseen,” Beyond-Human-Being world as inherent within one's self, within Onkwehon:we collectivity.

Sandy Grande asks the question, “What kinds of solidarities can be developed among groups with a shared commitment to working beyond the imperatives of Settler-Colonialism?” (Grande, 2018), while asserting that Settler-Colonial logic is embedded within and constitutive of the nature of place. A deeper knowing suggests, calls us to remember, that Settler-Colonial logics of elimination can never truly be constitutive of the nature of place, and this thinking will require a remembering that is nonmaterialistic, nonmechanistic, nonlinear, noninstrumental, a remembering of the way the relationship between Land and her Original People are alive and of spirit and being, and thus capable of escaping predatory logics, definitions, and imaginations. So then, what kinds of solidarities might be cultivated to work beyond the confines of the Settler-Colonial imaginary? What would these be based within? Where would they unfold, and how? Where do we locate a shared ethic of relationality, from which might emerge our common, collective resistances? Where does an ethic, a “logic,” a consciousness of Earth as Mother, as living relative and lifegiver, reside? Glen Coulthard reminds us that, “Reinstating indigenous

social relations of authority and power over those territories that are being expropriated and devoured by extractivist industries and in relation to settler communities is crucial. It requires a solidarity that's organized around indigenous peoples' relational understandings of land, autonomy, and sovereignty" (Coulthard in Epstein, 2015, par. 59). Onkwewon:we know these ethics as *who they are*, stretching through space and time, in Onkwewon:we directions, the Real People finding and enacting this ethic embedded within Onkwawen:na and deep pools of perception and practice, in ways that are most fundamentally summoned and animated by Elders.

Creating Decolonial Space(s) (Holmes, 2018), of lands and waters, memory, story, relationship, and spirit, where an abundant diversity of different, older conversations unfold, where we remember and reinvigorate different solidarities and alliances than those we have previously imagined, in ways we have yet to envision, our collective relationality as children of our living Earth might emerge. These are the kinds of spaces where we engage in redefining resistance, and solidarity, the rhizoming of an "expansive resistance approach" (Smith G.H., 2000, p. 69), one that challenges all of us to remember who we are by remembering our connection to all that is, all that exists, as our most basic, elemental knowing of ourselves. These practices are *alive* for Indigenous peoples within cultural ways of knowing and being, within languages, in ways that do not need to be explained or validated. For Haudenosaunee, the Thanksgiving Address, as but one example, is the practice of an animating generosity and reciprocity, as relational protocol, that becomes embodied within us as individuals and us as collective when we offer our thanksgiving to all of life, spoken through Onkwawen:na and our clear mind, within a genealogy of intergenerational longevity of relations, to our universe in our places of home.

Indigenous relational epistemologies of deep reciprocity, generosity, humility, respect, and thanksgiving lie at the root of the need to restore and renew Indigenous connections to Indigenous lands that have been ruptured through Settler-Colonial dispossession (Kahsto'sera'a, Karahkwinehtha, Karennanoron, Karonhyaken:re, Katsitsi:io, Tayohseron:tye, and Whitney at Kanatsiohareke summer language program, 2016, personal communications). Indigenous practices of intergenerational, relational consciousness and participation of the human, the seen, and the unseen worlds, require their places of interaction and exchange, wherein co-perception and co-creation become possible. This relational space needs to be held and engaged by the Original Peoples, for the benefit of all life, to keep the World in balance, as so many Indigenous Elders have articulated for so long. Cultivating solidarities with each other and with our living world—the reciprocity of spiritual, relational solidarities giving rise to spiritual activism and spiritual activism giving rise to spiritual, relational solidarities—we are challenged to "reimagine ourselves beyond our skins" (Christian & Wong, 2017, p. 7). To reimagine our very skins as part of the layered, porous, breathing membrane of Land, Water, and Sky, Creation, a fluid world of relations.

Spiritual activism, spiritual solidarities, are acts of love and healing. Remembering "a much longer now, a much wider here" (Christian & Wong, 2017, p. 11), we locate again a presence-ing of the generations to each other that becomes transformative. As Janine McLeod states in Christian and Wong's (2017) *downstream: reimagining*

water, “It seems to me that transformative collective action is unlikely to emerge from our stories of past abundance unless we conceive of our love for the world in multi-generational terms” (p. 11). Kanien’keha:ka scholar Taiaiake Alfred, reflecting McLeod, calls us to remember “who we are and where we are headed,” re-centering “the crucial connections that generate the sense of community—love—that is needed to overcome the disconnection and division and mutual hatreds that reinforce colonialism” (Alfred, 2004, p. 91). Alfred maintains that confronting colonialism at the root means challenging it as “a psychological state and a pattern of thinking and a way of seeing the world and other people ... the absolute destruction of the Indigenous way of thinking and living” (Alfred, 2004, p. 91). Okanagan writer, scholar, and activist Jeannette Armstrong gives voice to these profound relationships, continuing to deepen our coherence around the layering interconnections of ourselves with Creation: “It is how the land communes its spirit to you: it heals people and it does this in an incredibly profound way. We need to think about how we can do more of that” (Armstrong, 2008, p. 74). Always, always making it a living practice, a way of being, a consciousness that *becomes* Indigenous transformative action.

Black critical feminist bell hooks encourages us, “We are born and have our being in a place of memory... We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering” (hooks, 2009, p. 5), and we are called (back) into the circle, to remember and immerse ourselves within our stories of Creation. Or for (un)settlers who may have lost theirs, to locate older stories that ignite new imaginaries where human beings are not removed from gardens, where there is no original split from Creation that then becomes known outside ourselves as “nature,” no civilizing self-righteousness or need for a Truth that would separate us, as individuals, from ourselves and our beings, from our collectivities, humans who have become split off from the natural order of life. Epistemologies of the Real People cannot conceive of being distinct from the universe of life, places where there is no language to describe separation from “nature,” from self and existence. The late beloved Onondaga Clan Mother and Elder, now Ancestor, Audrey Shenandoah speaks to the heart of this Haudenosaunee philosophy when she says,

We have much to learn from the incredible knowledge of our ancestors which was gained long before reading and writing came about. From time immemorial, every bit of their intelligence and senses were used. Humans knew and felt relationship to all that lived and moved. Somehow that relationship must be regained. We are faced with crucial times. Changes need to be made beginning now, for our life-support system is being severely abused and mismanaged. A healthy human mind respects the gifts of life—all nature gives life. There is no word for ‘nature’ in my language. Nature, in English, seems to refer to that which is separate from human beings. It is a distinction we don’t recognize. The closest words to the idea of ‘nature’ translate to refer to things which support life (Audrey Shenandoah in Wall & Arden, 1990, p. 26).

The epistemic violence of Settler-Colonialism is a symptom of a deeply diseased epistemology, one that forms an organizing isolationist logic and a strategy of control through human disconnection from, and dismemberment of, the natural world. Glen Coulthard (2013) powerfully asserts that, “For Indigenous nations to live,

capitalism must die. And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to it” (par. 15). Indigenous alternatives to epistemological violence create and support solidarities of the human and beyond-human worlds, a spiritual activism that comprehends the collective necessity of Indigenous (re)connection with and within lands and practices, languages, philosophies, teachings, ways of knowing and being, restoring and renewing relationalities from deep within places, contexts, histories, and the narrative memories of the Land and her People. Time and again I have heard the generosity of Indigenous Elders when they say that every human being carries the potential of waking up to these original instructions of natural law, because everyone is a child of Earth—it is just a matter of distance from these fundamental teachings, and Indigenous Peoples are closer to this knowledge and have continued to develop this knowledge over the long term (John Mohawk, 1990; Tom Porter, personal communications and 2008; Jake Swamp, personal communications). (Un)settlers access these instructions by radically reorienting themselves to the protocols of Earth, and by profoundly taking responsibility for transforming their relationships with the Original Peoples, seen and unseen.

***The Highest Form of Politics Is Spiritual Consciousness:* Politics as Spiritual Consciousness, Resistance as Remembering, and Radical Humility**

Resistance, then, becomes not merely an organizing *against* something—it is resistance *as remembering*, resistance *as (re)connection*, resistance *as relationship*, “revolutionary,” transformative, at its most basic and most expansive layer, capable of breaking open our stuck places where we have become numb within an epistemology of deep separation. We need to call upon “our own radical remembering of our future” (Meyer, 2003, p. 54), where something that is both far beyond ourselves and deeply within ourselves calls us to wake up to our relational place in the natural order of life. We return to the need for perceiving the callings and connections of spirit that make sense of what John Mohawk means when he says, “The highest form of politics is spiritual consciousness” (Mohawk, 1990, 9:54); to be governed, guided in our everyday, by an internal ethic and engagement of Spirit, an ancient, active, ethical framework of relationality that holds the power to wake us from consumption by a capitalist-settler colonialist mining project that is mining our very spirits (Trudell, 2001, 1:26). An ethic of relational, spirit-centered connectedness, consciousness, and transformative, insurgent/resurgent activity: intergenerational spiritual activism (Rosalie Little Thunder, personal communications) with the rest of life that comprehends your place within creation. Is it no wonder that Westerners have struggled so vociferously with Mohawk’s assertion?

A first step—a giant first step—for (un)settlers must be a fundamental acknowledgment of, and responsibility for, sitting with an older, wiser way of knowing and

being on the land—one that knows this place since time began. Can you hold on to that without immediately having to say something? Can you listen to what that might mean? Can you allow an ancient evolved and evolving, cycling aliveness to pierce a cultural skin that has come to believe it has all the answers? Are you able to sit with this “new” knowledge in silence, and allow that it is not “new,” that a vast depth of knowledges is cycling, now, in these places you have only recently begun to call home, that peoples you have been taught to be savage, pagan, heathen hold collective knowledge that has become profound wisdom—and continue to hold these evolving knowledges and relationships today? We must recognize the stunning, deadening hubris of a worldview that believes humans to be the carrier of superior intelligence, knowledge, communication, higher-level ‘reasoning,’ and morality, while assuming the absolute superiority and singularity of this worldview. Such astounding arrogance emerges from within an epistemology of separation, isolation, and atomization, out of which arises the basic savagery of Western settler-colonial epistemology. For Indigenous peoples, it is a shocking insanity we do not quite know what to do with—still. The magnitude of its error and disconnect, its horror, the implications of its ignorance so colossal, that it is difficult to imagine and relate to how far removed it is from Indigenous epistemologies of relationship, reciprocity, responsibility, respect (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991), accountability, generosity, discernment, perception, gentleness, and reverence (Archibald, 2008), relevance, and resilience (Galla, Kawai‘ae‘a, & Nicholas, 2014), the intricately interwoven relations of intimacy with an interconnected universe.

Kanien’keha:ka Elder Tom Porter reminds us of Rotinohsionni understandings of the context of human beings in Creation.

...We the humans were the last ones to be made of all Creation. We are last. And that’s why Grandma and other elders have suggested...that because we were the last of thousands and thousands of millions of creations, the Creator might have been exhausted and *tired* by the time he came to making us. And so they say, ‘We think that when he put us together, he musta not exactly put one of the wires together right. And so we have a little handicap more than all other living things...’ So we are sorta like the dangerous ones. We are like the baby ones that all other life needs to take care of. And look at everything else in the world. If all we humans died, everything else would keep going! So we are the ones that are the most in need of help (Porter, 2008, p. 22–3).

Coming to accept and internalize the basic reality that this entire land of Turtle Island is still home for her Original Peoples, brimming with epistemologies, philosophies, teachings, and practices of this very Earth, is a first step in the development of Settler-Colonial humility, the necessity of a transformative praxis of radical humility *and* relationship with land and the “unseen,” that might allow a stillness where perhaps the Land will become ready to begin speaking again. Radical humility offers us a place and a space to begin again—to begin to comprehend our relations and connect with a consciousness of the universe as constellations of relatives, a critically needed reawakening to new theories of embodied relativity. This land has been known, and listened to/for, as a Relative, since time began. Creation Stories. Stories that tell not only “the what” and “the how,” but that ask the question, as Vine Deloria, Jr. reminds us, what does it *mean* (Deloria in Deloria, Foehner, &

Scinta, 1999, p. 134). Epistemologies and knowledge systems that search for relationships, recognizing deeply that it is only in relationship that we—all—survive.

What Does It Mean to Be a Good Relative?

Lakota Elder Rosalie Little Thunder always asked the question, “What does it mean to be a good relative?” (Little Thunder, personal communications). The need for different questions...and different answers...from within different epistemologies: good relatives maintaining relationship with the rest of the universe. Fundamental, orienting Onkwehon:we principles, consciousness, ethics, knowledges, and ways of knowing-being. How to go from the emptiness of unrelatedness to a consciousness of fundamental relationality, where all the elements of life are equally significant, the bearers of sophisticated, interwoven intelligence, sentience, communication, language, knowledge, feeling, and reasoning? For Indigenous communities, access to this knowing is direct and accessible through intergenerational knowledge relations and other ways of knowing, through longevity of experience, through interaction and exchange with Elders, who are the living models of these older ways of knowing and being. For those who find themselves living as settler or unsetler on Indigenous homelands, there is a need to pay attention differently, to ask different questions, to begin to listen differently, to perceive differently, *without having all the answers*. Radical humility: to ask for and of Other scholars of knowledges that Settler-Colonialism has intentionally, strategically excluded, made marginal and illegitimate for centuries, targeting the knowledge and the knowledge holders; to not presume the role of expert; to relinquish the stranglehold on knowledge supremacy; to create and hold spaces for Other knowledges and their keepers to come forward. Holding the space with a radical listening that emerges and engages out of radical humility, being willing to be quiet and listen, waiting for what might emerge after many long generations—these are transformations that become possible when different practices, protocols, disciplines, ethics, and intergenerational consciousness and relations are enacted around knowledge.

We know, because our Elders have told us, that there would come a time when Indigenous knowledges would be needed again, knowledge about ways to live in peace and in harmony with one another, *all* of us. That time is now upon us:

And I would say, that’s probably the biggest loss that I see in humanity now is its loss of understanding of relationship. They don’t understand the relationship. How do you keep this relationship, how do you polish it, how do you keep it fresh, how do you keep it shiny, how do you work with it?. You just be grateful that it’s going on. That we’re keeping it up. That’s what’s important, is that it takes place...Be grateful that *somebody’s* looking after that spiritual side of things. That’s what’s the real world, actually—the spiritual side of it, and you can’t see [it], but it’s probably the most real of all. So we have to bring the rest of the world into that context. They have to understand the relationship and the responsibilities (Oren Lyons, 2016b, 9 Nov, 1:48, 4:06).

The statement that's most important there is to understand how closely we're related to the earth. And that we're part of the earth. And we're a part of nature. Nature is us basically. And they always talk about 'environment,' like it's something over there, or it's a category or something. No, we're in the middle of it, we're a part of it, and we affect it. We survive in it. And we *are* part of the earth (Oren Lyons, 2016b, 9 Nov, 3:37).

The issue of Settler-Colonial land theft, territoriality, occupation, exploitation, and desecration must be challenged not only by Indigenous peoples but by (un)settlers as well, as Indigenous peoples must be able to access our spaces and places in order to enact responsibilities of spirit and reinvigorate ethical practices of reciprocity, for the benefit of all life. Violet Caibaiosai, one of the Great Lakes Water Walkers, says that through her walk, she had “the realization that all the teachings of our ancestors—which had been told to me about the spirit of our ancestors being within the Earth upon which we walk, for example—are so very true and very real. This spiritual element is extremely beneficial for the holistic well-being of those willing to speak with and listen to the spirit of all Creation” (Caibaiosai, 2017, p. 111). Another Water Walker, Renee Elizabeth Mzinegiizhibo-kwe Bedard says that, “because women are given these sacred prayers and songs to sing for that sacred medicine, we therefore must speak out on the water's behalf” (Bedard, 2017, p. 95). Onkwehon:we need their lands, free of Settler-Colonial control, presence, and interference—free of Settler-Colonial ways of knowing and being—to be able to restore and renew damaged relations brought about by the practices of Western capitalist-colonialist exploitation and the epistemic violence embedded within its epistemology. Destabilizing and unsettling Settler-Colonialism happens in creative Indigenous reassertion, restoration, renewal, and resurgence of our collective, diverse resiliencies and relationships from within our diverse languages and places, our connections with lands and waters, worlds seen and unseen, mediated by the praxis of Onkwehon:we Elders.

What kinds of solidarities can we cultivate and what kinds of questions do we need to be asking? As Rosalie Little Thunder constantly—and quietly—challenged us to consider deeply from within older philosophies and epistemologies, “What does it mean to be a good relative?” (Rosalie Little Thunder, personal communications), there is a deliberateness with which she did this, from deep within her Lakota language, cultural knowledge, ethics, discipline, spirit, and her positionality as an Elder. *And* she modeled her answer as process—she *lived* her activism, *spiritual activism* she called it (Little Thunder, personal communications), with her life, in her life's walk. Her understanding and highly developed consciousness of the meaning of “solidarities of spirit” with all her relations guided people to consider and reflect on the ways the rest of Creation is calling us now to wake up, to comprehend what is happening, and to act, humbly and generously, perceiving our relatives *as ourselves* (Rosalie Little Thunder, personal communications). Cultivating survivance into seven generations, before and to come, generations interacting in reciprocating relationship with the rest of the living world, is a bit of what Rosalie was showing us in the meaning of spiritual activism as living praxis. She always made a point of remembering and recognizing, in her Lakota way, the Haudenosaunee philosophy of the seventh generation. “Just think,” she would say, “Imagine that. To

think in terms of the seventh generation. To make decisions from that perspective. That is just so awesome” (Rosalie Little Thunder, personal communications). Elder Praxis nurturing and nudging the development of our own perception and knowing, a reciprocity of knowledge and relationship cycling through the generations.... Regeneration.

It takes the instruction of the Peacemaker to be of One Mind.

[The Peacemaker] said, ‘When you’re of One Mind, the power of the Good Mind can change anything.’

So we have to somehow get to that point of unity of thought and direction and effort.

And if we can do that we certainly can mitigate what’s going on now.

And what we’re concerned [about] is for the children and their grandchildren and their children.

Peacemaker said that we’re responsible. And that we should be always watching. — Oren Lyons

References

- Alfred, T. (2004). Warrior scholarship: Seeing the university as a ground of contention. In D. A. Mihesuah & A. C. Wilson (Eds.), *Indigenizing the academy: Transforming scholarship and empowering communities* (pp. 88–99). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Archibald, J. A. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Armstrong, J. C. (2008). An Okanagan worldview of society. In M. Nelson (Ed.), *Original instructions: Indigenous teachings for a sustainable future* (pp. 66–74). Rochester, VT: Bear & Battiste, M. (2000). *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Battiste, M. (2011). Cognitive imperialism and decolonizing research: Modes of transformation. In C. Reilly, V. Russell, L. Chehayl, & M. McDermott (Eds.), *Surveying borders, boundaries, and contested spaces in curriculum and pedagogy* (pp. xv–xxviii). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Bedard, R. E. M. (2017). Keepers of the water. In D. Christian & R. Wong (Eds.), *Downstream: Reimagining water* (pp. 89–106). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
- Brayboy, B. M. J., Gough, H. R., Leonard, B., Roehl II, R. F., & Solyom, J. A. (2012). Reclaiming scholarship: Critical indigenous research methodologies. In S. D. Lapan, M. T. Quartaroli, & F. J. Riemer (Eds.), *Qualitative research: An introduction to methods and designs* (pp. 423–450). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Caibaiosai, V. (2017). Water walk pedagogy. In D. Christian & R. Wong (Eds.), *Downstream: Reimagining water* (pp. 107–112). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
- Christian, D., & Wong, R. (2017). *Downstream: Reimagining water*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
- Cook, K. (2008). Powerful like a river: Reweaving the web of our lives in defense of environmental and reproductive justice. In M. K. Nelson (Ed.), *Original instructions: Indigenous teachings for a sustainable future* (pp. 154–167). Rochester, VT: Bear & Battiste, M. (2000). *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Coulthard, G. (2013). For our nations to live, capitalism must die. *Unsettling America: Decolonization in Theory & Practice*. Retrieved from <https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2013/11/05/for-our-nations-to-live-capitalism-must-die/>
- Couture, J. (1991). The role of native elders: Emergent issues. In J. W. Friesen (Ed.), *The cultural maze: Complex questions on native destiny in western Canada* (pp. 201–217). Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises.

- Deloria, B., Fohner, K., & Scinta, S. (Eds.). (1999). *Spirit & reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., reader*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishers.
- Epstein, A.B. (2015, January 13). The colonialism of the present: An interview with Glen Coulthard. *Jacobin Magazine Online*. Retrieved from <https://jacobinmag.com/2015/01/indigenous-left-glen-coulthard-interview>
- Galla, C. K., Kawai'ae'a, K., & Nicholas, S. E. (2014). Carrying the torch forward: Indigenous academics building capacity through an international collaborative model. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 37(1), 193–217.
- Grande, S. (2018, February). *Keynote address at the University of Arizona, College of Education, Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies Graduate Student Colloquy*.
- Holmes, A. (2018). *Geographies of home, memory, and heart: Mohawk Elder praxis, land, language, and knowledge woven in place* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- hooks, b. (2009). *Belonging: A culture of place*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First nations and higher education: The four Rs—Respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 30(3), 1–15.
- Lyons, O. Sacred Land Film Project. (2016a, September 16). *Indigenous view of the world* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbwSwUMNyPU&list=PLgWo3ZPZn_6637eJnbskwnUyuA9I4Ztm-&index=13&t=1757s
- Lyons, O. Sacred Land Film Project. (2016b, November 9). *Rights and responsibilities* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USwPW29W-aY>
- McLeod, N. (2007). *Cree narrative memory: From treaties to contemporary times*. Saskatoon: Purich.
- Meyer, M. A. (2003). Hawaiian hermeneutics and the triangulation of meaning: Gross, subtle, causal. *Social Justice*, 30(4), 54–63.
- Meyer, M. A. (2013). Holographic epistemology: Native common sense. *China Media Research*, 9(2), 94–101.
- Mohawk, J. (1990, April 18). *Perspective of mother earth*. From WinterCamp chronicles. GENERATIONS native American Radio Archives. Boulder, CO. Retrieved from <http://twoelk2.tripod.com/Generations/WCCJohnMohawk.html>
- Peschak, T. (2017, Aug 25). In this lagoon, the whales come to you. National Geographic. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2017/08/gray-whales-baja-mexico>
- Porter, T. (2008). *And grandma said...Iroquois teachings as passed down through the oral tradition*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris.
- Smith, G. H. (2000). Maori education: Revolution and transformative action. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 24(1), 57–72.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed.
- Smith, L. T. (2000). Kaupapa Maori research. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision* (pp. 225–247). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Stewart-Harawira, M. (2005). *The new imperial order: Indigenous responses to globalization*. London: Zed.
- Trudell, J. (2001). *They're mining us*. In *DNA (descendant now ancestor)*. London: Effective Records.
- Vizenor, G. R. (1999). *Manifest manners: Narratives on postIndian survivance*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Wall, S., & Arden, H. (1990). *Wisdomkeepers: Meetings with Native American spiritual elders*. Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing.
- Wolfe, P. (2016). *Traces of history: Elementary structures of race*. London: Verso.