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Teachings of the Blue Heron: Reflecting on Indigenous Research Methodologies, Land-based Pedagogies & Indigenous Beauty

As I write this reflection I have recently come back to my home community of Kahnawake. I sit, think, and write in humility, as I have come full circle and find myself sitting in the space of transformation once again. I am reminded of the teachings of the blue heron and the importance of evolution and progress in relation to the self. The spiritual meaning of this beautiful creature instills in us our innate ability to meditate and transcend consciousness while maintaining integrity to the inner self. As a growing Indigenous researcher, I embrace the teachings of the blue heron as I self-reflect and embark deeper into Indigenous research methodologies, theories and practices. This reflection paper is threefold, first, to examine, analyze, and respond to different Indigenous approaches of conducting research with and for Indigenous communities. I will reflect on how and why these particular Indigenous researchers have deepened my understanding of inclusivity of marginalized voices within Indigenous research. Second, I will reflect on the readings of land-based pedagogies for the purpose of further developing an understanding of how land and education intersect with Indigenous research methodologies. And, lastly what happens when we begin our Indigenous research starting from the positionality of beauty, resiliency, and strength?

Indigenous Research, Inclusivity & Diversity: Making the invisible visible

Keeping with the teachings of the blue heron and the power of self-reflection and personal growth I am becoming more acutely aware of how I have unintentionally excluded certain populations in relation to my past community-based work with Indigenous women. I invited participants to the photographic series InDefiance (2016) who identified as being woman/female, and in doing so, I have unintentionally excluded people who expand and highlight nuanced definitions of what “Indigenous women” can mean. What about the importance of inviting participants who challenge conventional definitions of “Indigenous women” and sit critically within counternarratives such as the two-spirit and LGBTQIA community? As I read the article “What Do We Mean by #QueerIndigenousEthics?” by Billy-Ray Belcourt and Lindsay Nixon my eyes opened to the importance of applying queer theory concepts that challenge Indigenous resurgence and feminism which can exclude concepts of queer indigeneity. Belcourt and Nixon state “The Indigenous creators and thinkers one or two generations ahead of us, if they were thinking about queer indigeneity at all, were probably more influenced by resurgence theory, a way of thinking which also bled into how they framed Indigenous decolonization movements and refusal” (Belcourt, Nixon). I never considered how I was excluding the two-spirit, and LGBTQIA community from my artistic practice. I will be considering queer theory within my

strategic planning in the future to ensure I am creating a larger platform for the purpose of amplifying silenced and marginalized voices.

Honoring marginalized voices within the context of the academy while preventing exploitation of the communities being researched is a journey of constant self-reflexivity. Sarah Hunt, an Indigenous scholar critically positions herself within a framework of accountability. Hunt writes about the violence upon marginalized women and the stories of sex workers. She must continually ask herself, who will be the voice of the silenced? And how can research create visibility for the unseen which can be hidden underneath marginalization and stereotypes? Hunt balances institutional demands by de-centering her voice as the researcher and uplifts the stories of the unheard and unseen. Hunt's Kwa'Kwaka'wakw worldview and cultural teachings of witnessing at a potlatch becomes part of her research methodology. Witnessing as research instills embodied relational system of knowledge which uphold intimacy, oral tradition, and the sacred. When witnessing is applied within her research paradigm with participants, the entrenched positions of power that are held within the institutional demands of research dismantles and begins to uphold communities as sites of knowledge that need to be protected, validated, and self-determined.

As an emerging Kanienkehaka researcher, how does witnessing from a potlatch worldview intersect, parallel and expand with a Kanienkehaka understanding of witnessing in a longhouse? The Haudenosaunee people translates to People of the Longhouse. We gather for our seasonal festivals which honor the natural world that has sustained our livelihood for thousands of years. Women have their own door of entry and men also have their own door to enter and exit out of the longhouse. Families sit together and are organized by a clan system, thereby, affirming their positionality within the greater Haudenosaunee collective. Making your clan visible is part of witnessing, welcoming, and belonging. Belonging not used as a possessive connotation but rather affirming your clan contributes to identifying family relations. Our Kanienkehaka names are traditionally given to us through ceremony and serve as a purpose of identification that is still held strong as a custom today. Identifying your name and clan instills a sense of belonging and connection to the land, people, and community you are from. Kanienkehaka concepts of witnessing can uphold traditional values of welcoming, belonging, and inclusion for communities when applied with my future community-based projects.

But who gets to define what community means? And, how does Indigenous research methodologies uphold or oppose inclusivity and belonging when it comes to research objectives, methods, and analytic foundations? This question is critically unpacked in the article *Complex Accountabilities: Deconstructing 'The Community' and Engaging Indigenous Feminist Research Methods* by Indigenous scholar Gina Starblanket. Starblanket cautions using the term community to generalize and perpetuate cis-heteronormativity that can erase difference within that same community and silence marginalized voices. Starblanket claims "Indigenous communities are not homogenous groups with the same thoughts and experiences" (. Indigenous research must then address powers of positionality, in particular to patriarchy and misogyny. It is not enough to address, dismantle and hold accountable the epistemic violence done unto Indigenous women,

two-spirit, and LGBTQIA's bodies, minds, and spirits by colonizers. For Indigenous researchers to matter in community, patriarchy needs to be addressed as well. Indigenous researchers need to create paradigms that are transparent and guided by epistemologies and protocols of inclusion. Starblanket uses Indigenous feminist theory and methodologies in the same light Hunt uses Kwa'Kwaka'wakw worldview of witnessing as research to address patriarchy. Indigenous feminist research methodologies consider gender and sexuality which can expand Indigenous concepts of accountability to diverse voices, especially Indigenous two-spirit, LGBTQIA, and Indigenous women.

Indigenous feminist research methodologies uphold creation stories and cosmologies as a source of identity formation and orientation of the world. They encompass the original instructions, conduct, ethics, and protocols. Protocols guide the building of reciprocal respectful relationships to ensure appropriate ways of engaging with Indigenous cultural material and interaction with Indigenous peoples and communities. Kahente Horn-Miller, a Kanienkehaka scholar uses the term "Indigenous womanism" in her article *Distortion and Healing: Finding Balance and a "Good Mind" Through the Rearticulation of Sky Woman's Journey* to centralize the importance of exploring women's knowledge systems, protocols, which shape the survival needs of the collective, highlighting women as active agents of generating knowledge, and broader social and power relations. Horn-Miller uses the Sky Woman origin story as a way to articulate a theory and way of life and being in the world that reflects and affirms we already have knowledge within us when our spirits come to mother earth. She states "In the words of [Sky Woman's] story, however, we glimpse her inner identity: we see her as she sees herself because we are her and she is us" (30). Origin stories as Indigenous research methods then become the closest articulation of truth and thereby, reflect divergent world views and the varied elements interwoven into people's lives. One key aspect of Indigenous research methods is that it is multi-dimensional to include the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual body and the deep connection to land.

Indigenous Research, Land-based Pedagogies & Listening to the Land

Indigenous peoples have had a historic and ongoing relationship to the land continuing to this day. Reciprocity is at the core of Indigenous understanding as to how this relationship to the land sustains the ability to live a holistic and purposeful life. Indigenous philosophical understandings are embedded in the language and topography of the lands that we occupy, creating a circular understanding of life, the universe and, most importantly, ourselves. Land-based pedagogies create a pathway of learning that is deeply grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and recognize that cultural identity is interwoven with and always been connected to 'land.'

This connection to land holds Indigenous knowledge systems which has become a growing field of study and can be crucial for managing natural resources, mitigating climate change, and revitalizing communities. There is an immediacy for Indigenous peoples to reconnect to land-based teachings, community knowledge holders, and elder's wisdom as we face these drastic

earth-centered changes. Indigenous scholar Robin Kimmerer articulates the process of planting and growing sweetgrass as her methodological approach and intersects western science and Indigenous land-based and plant-based knowledge in her beautifully written text *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer counteracts colonial attitudes of exploitation, profit, and demands of the land and offers the concept of the “gift economy” inspired by Lewis Hyde. She writes how gifts from the earth can reestablish a relation of giving, taking and reciprocating and states “a gift creates an ongoing relationship” (Kimmerer 26) rather than a transaction.

This precious relationship with the land that Indigenous peoples has had since time immemorial becomes central in teaching, education, and research. Indigenous research methodologies when aligned with land-based pedagogies shifts colonial paradigms of education to create balance and accountability to the land as a “bundle of responsibilities” (Kimmerer 28). This responsibility begins with relearning how to listen to oneself and the environment. Kimmerer uses the language of the land to unravel her concepts of deep listening as research. Dylan Robinson, an Indigenous writer, scholar, and activist also makes references to the importance of decolonizing listening in his text *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Robinson criticizes the whiteness of sound studies, and is concerned primarily with the performance of art music that includes Indigenous collaborators. *Hungry Listening* responds and takes a reflection at the cross-cultural performances between Eurocentric performance and Indigenous song through an examination of normative forms of listening and privilege that ultimately perpetuates epistemic violence (Robinson). Indigenous people have been colonized and in the process of decolonizing and healing through resurgent listening which “engage a listening that does not reduce what is heard to the knowable, that resists a multicultural categorization of one cultural sound among many, that understands sound in its irreducible alterity, and that moves beyond our recognition of normative musical or performance protocols” (Robinson 64). Indigenous peoples’ survivance prior to settler-colonialism was learning to be in rhythm, tone, and tempo with the natural world—our lives depended on it. When we learn how to re-listen to the land, we then can make right actions towards manifesting new realities and uphold our own Indigenous research paradigms that embrace our intrinsic beauty, resiliency and strength.

Indigenous Research as Indigenous Beauty, Resiliency & Strength

It cannot be ignored that Indigenous peoples have always been invested and engaged in knowledge, research and critical thinking. Indigenous brilliance, intellect, and complex worldviews were passed on orally through story-telling, ceremony, rituals and Indigenous ways of life and living. Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Margaret Kovach, and Sean Wilson to name a few knew the importance of self-governing research paradigms with Indigenous communities because of the historical imperialist attitudes embedded within western research paradigms. Western researchers ultimately perpetuated violence, knowledge extraction, exploitation, and misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge systems, culture, history, and

peoples and continues to this day (Smith). These Indigenous scholars are the pioneers in creating discourse and shifting paradigms of research to implement community-care, healing, identity formation, and protocols to help Indigenous people maintain intellectual rights, self-determination and sovereignty, while ultimately embracing the beauty of Indigenous peoples stories.

The beauty, resiliency, and strength of Indigenous knowledge systems is sometimes hidden under our shared narratives of colonization. The hurt, trauma, and discrimination felt by our Indigenous bodies only tell one side of the story. We cannot forget that Indigenous peoples share rich histories, vibrant cultures, traditional ways of life, sustainable hunting, and health practices, richness of ceremonies, rites of passage and spirituality with life and death, and most importantly balanced relationships with mother nature (Henry, Lavalle, Styvendale, Innes). When we view Indigenous research methodologies through the lens of beauty we can amplify our Indigenous resilience and pass down the wisdom learnt through our traumatic histories of colonization unto the next generation of Indigenous researchers. Intersecting queer theory, Indigenous feminism, land-based pedagogies and deep listening as a research into paradigms with Indigenous communities, amplifies Indigenous perspectives of inclusion, accountability, and responsibility and re-centers Indigenous knowledge systems as critical in contributing to all aspects of research with and for Indigenous communities. We can never forget how powerful, beautiful and resilient Indigenous peoples are and have always been.