

“lil rasaad, kiiyaamaashtew, pi niiya (Beads, silence, and me)”: An auto-ethnographic journey in
circularity, quietude, and belonging

By

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ABSTRACT

This work is a story. It could similarly be classified as a narrative exploration of beading as an Indigenous vessel for auto-ethnography, as it explores spiritual craft as an arts-based, Indigenized method of reflecting and storying. The words shared throughout this work reflect the countless beads stitched to complete four individual beaded panels, a project that formed the basis for a reflexive auto-ethnography that moved fluidly through thought, feeling, and writing to explore the personal, the historical, the supernatural, and the theoretical. In so doing, space was created to respond to the four questions that every Indigenous person must answer in order to understand who they are, as presented by Anishinaabe visionary and lawyer Murray Sinclair: *Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I?* The personal reflections which guided my responses explore what it means to exist in settler-driven academic spaces, and illustrate how beading and story-telling assist in locating one's self within Creation, thus in place.

ABSTRAIT

Cette thèse est une histoire. On pourrait également la classer comme une exploration narrative du perlage en tant que véhicule Indigène de l'auto-ethnographie, car elle explore l'artisanat spirituel en tant que méthode Indigène basée sur les arts pour réfléchir et raconter des histoires. Les mots partagés tout au long de cette thèse reflètent les innombrables perles cousues pour compléter quatre panneaux perlés individuels, un projet qui a formé la base d'une auto-ethnographie réflexive qui s'est déplacée avec fluidité à travers la pensée, le sentiment et l'écriture pour explorer le personnel, l'historique, le surnaturel et la théorique. Ce faisant, un espace a été créé pour répondre aux quatre questions auxquelles toute personne Autochtone doit répondre pour

comprendre qui iel est, telles que présentées par le visionnaire et avocat Anishinaabe Murray Sinclair: *D'où est-ce que je viens? Où vais-je? Pourquoi suis-je ici? Qui suis-je?* Les réflexions personnelles qui ont guidé mes réponses explorent ce que cela signifie d'exister dans des espaces académiques coloniaux, et illustrent comment le perlage et la narration d'histoires aident à se situer dans la Création, donc en place.

CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHOR

The author confirms sole responsibility for the research conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation.

MAARSII

Thank you

This work would not have been possible without the guidance and support of many people. I would first like to thank my life-givers, Colin Ottenbreit and Denise Préfontaine, without whom I could not have come close to completing this work. Whether it was deliveries of tasty home-cooked meals, offering insightful suggestions, or indulging my endless talk, they were a constant support throughout my studies.

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My kin and many other folks were essential to the creation of this work. I acknowledge and thank Brad Finch-Field, Em Peters, Min Kaur, Gin Marshall, and Jordyn Bonfonti, all of whom generously gifted their love, brilliance, and solidarity as I trudged the sacred road of wisdom-seeking. I dedicate this work to the kin who shared in my story and to my ancestors, who wrote it into existence.

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NI MIYEUHTAYN AEN NAKISHKATAAN

It's nice to meet you.

Taanishi, boonzhoor. Noé Préfontaine pi mikisiw dishinihkaashoon, aen deu-zisprii Michif niya. Winnipeg, Manitoba d'ooshchiin pi la paarantii kaayash ooshchi kii wiikiw oota poor mishtahi naan. Ni miyeuhtayn aen nakishkataan didaan ooma otay tayhkay pi maarsii poor li prayzaan di toon taan, zaray, pi keur. (Greetings, my names are Noé Préfontaine and Golden Eagle and I am a Two-Spirit Métis person. I am from Winnipeg, Manitoba and my ancestors have lived here for many generations. It's nice to meet you in this way and I thank you for the gift of your time, ears, and heart.)

Learning my ancestors' language of Michif —piecing it together one syllable at a time— allows me to introduce myself to you in a way that honours all my relations. I introduce myself in this way so that the words I share here situate me on the land and within a broader relational context.

LANGUAGE INDEX

In an effort to centre Indigenous language reclamation and present this work in as anti-colonial a manner as possible, in-text translations of Indigenous words are not included with the exception of longer sections of writing. This index provides an opportunity for thoughtful discovery and the honouring of languages courageously and resiliently preserved by generations of ancestors. I owe a special *maarsii* to the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, whose Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture has profoundly shaped this work and enriched my learning beyond measure.

<i>word</i>	<i>English translation</i>	<i>Indigenous language</i>
<i>aen mirrway</i>	mirror	Michif
<i>aen pchi shmayn</i>	path	Michif
<i>avik</i>	with	Michif
<i>daahtamoo</i>	borrow	Michif
<i>deu-zisprii</i>	two-spirit	Michif
<i>epangishmok</i>	western direction	Anishinaabemowin
<i>faamii</i>	family	Michif
<i>frayz</i>	strawberry	Michif
<i>inawendiwin</i>	relating	Anishinaabemowin
<i>keur</i>	heart	Michif
<i>kiiyaamaashtew</i>	silence	Michif

<i>kintohtpatatin</i>	‘you’ve been listened to’	Cree
<i>koonteur</i>	storyteller	Michif
<i>konnonrónhkwa</i>	‘I show you I care’	Kanyen'kéha
<i>la paarantii kaayash ooshchi</i>	ancestors	Michif
<i>l'aarbr a saent</i>	sage	Michif
<i>li miljeu</i>	the middle	Michif
<i>lii moo</i>	words	Michif
<i>lii nipwahkow di frayz</i>	‘the wisdoms of strawberries’	Michif
<i>naamii</i>	friend	Michif
<i>nashkopichikun</i>	great-grandma	Michif
<i>nibiish-waawaasagone</i>	‘the star that fell’ / lily	Anishinaabemowin
<i>nigwii</i>	needle	Michif
<i>niiyaa</i>	me / I / I am	Michif
<i>nipaapaa</i>	father	Michif
<i>noohkoom</i>	grandma	Michif
<i>maamaan</i>	mother	Michif
<i>maarsii</i>	thank you	Michif
<i>Michif</i>	Métis	Michif
<i>Mnimcelx</i>	non-binary	Nsyilxcən
<i>miina kawapamitin</i>	goodbye / farewell	Michif
<i>mino-pimatisiwin</i>	‘the good life’	Cree
<i>pchi biibii</i>	baby	Michif

rasaad

beads

Michif

waypinikew

abandon

Michif

wiikiw

to live

Michif

WIIKIWI AVIK LI RASAAD: THE BEGINNING

To live with beads

I shall begin telling a story that is woven together with countless beads. Guided by the dance between thinking about feeling and feeling about thinking, this work explores personal reflections within a context of spiritual craft and illustrates how this dance assists in locating one's self on the land and within Creation, thus in place.

Beads are tiny enigmatic spirits that have shared in some of my most precious memories and inspired a range of reactions: healing, a sense of freedom and balance, frustration, joy, anxiety, tears and laughter. My beadwork practice has facilitated moments of reflection, ancestral connection, cultural knowledge transmission, kinship-building, and gifting. In an effort to capture my respect for beads and complicated love of the traditional Métis two-needle beading method, I share the following excerpt from one of my journals (2019):

I sit, hunched over my beadwork. The beads are mischievously rolling around the mat and happily dancing away from the needles while a space heater warms my feet. The sun shines through a frosted window, casting a hazy light on my work surface. It's been a pleasant afternoon and the beading further quiets the hours that seem to pass without much notice. All of a sudden (or so it seems), threads begin to tangle and tear; the leather inexplicably thickens and my needles become mysteriously dull. The beads are telling me that it's time to put them away for the day, and so I do.

My abiding love for and ties to beading can be contextualized within my family's long history of hand-stitchers (embroiderers and beadworkers) (Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 5) as well as

within recent scholarship that links the spiritual Indigenous art practice to our ever-evolving understandings of Indigenous knowledge frameworks and wisdom-seeking (Gray, 2017; Prete, 2019; Ray, 2016). These works have considered the ways in which beading is rooted in and reflects the common epistemologies and ontologies of Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island as well as beadwork's role in promoting resistance, resilience and resurgence (Huard, 2019; Prete, 2019).

In thinking about beadwork outside of rigid academic constructs I want to highlight how beading is, at its core, storytelling: beads, leathers, needles, and threads acting as the vessel through which narratives are shared. According to Anishinaabe scholar Lana Ray (2016), a fluidity exists between beadwork practices and storytelling as evidenced by the indistinguishability of beading patterns and stories. This intimate relationship between craft and narrative operates as a mechanism wherein knowledge production reflects the traditional, relational, and intergenerational nature of Indigenous world views (Ray, 2016). The idea of living within, and not only by, stories is expressed by Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri who proposes that, “One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly— in ourselves” (2014, p. 43). Beading is both a symbolic and physical act of living our stories; A person cannot help but be living, reflecting, and storying while working alongside beads.

The words I share with you today reflect the many beads stitched to complete four individual beaded panels, a project that formed the basis for a reflexive auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) that moved fluidly through thought, feeling, and writing to explore the personal, the historical, the supernatural, and the theoretical. In so doing I created space to

respond to the four questions that every Indigenous person must answer in order to understand who they are, as presented by Anishinaabe visionary and lawyer Murray Sinclair: “*Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I?*” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 158).

Figure 1. *Noohkoom* Rose-Marie Trudel’s gifted embroidery (1999)



These four questions served as natural prompts for seemingly endless reflection while also providing a structure through which the beads could work their magic upon me. Even in the beginning —needle and thread waiting patiently for their next big adventure— I felt confident that the methods I would devise, develop, and employ, would emerge organically and likely through an iterative process. Yet, even with this confidence, I could not have predicted the extent to which circularity would characterize my research; Ideas and inspirations entering into consciousness to visit for a while before fading into the realm of the unknown, only to return

some days later for their second, third, or hundredth visit; Memory, story, and emotion firmly intertwined and spiralling circuitously across the breadth of my reflection-gathering, every note taken a curve on their quested path. In his discussion of relationality, Opaskwayak Cree knowledge keeper and scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) offers me greater insight into the circularity that characterizes an Indigenous research paradigm, sharing that:

It is clear that the nature of the research that we do as Indigenous people must carry over into the rest of our lives. It is not possible for us to compartmentalize the relationships that we are building apart from the other relationships that make us who we are. This brings us back to the concept of the elements of an Indigenous research paradigm being seen as a circle. They too are not easily compartmentalized nor separate from our existence as Indigenous people (p. 91).

By internalizing the circle and in thinking about methods —the tools I accessed in order to express my narrative— I now see that this thesis could not have culminated into any other knowledge product; It was destined to be a story. While the gift of clarity has reached me now, I wasn't always so certain about the direction of my work. Treading in the deep pool of auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), I encountered recurring fear and doubt that muddied waters and pushed the shoreline a little further away with every stroke. In these moments I reminded myself that the task-at-hand was, in essence, quite straightforward: Reflect intentionally, document these reflections, organize that which was documented into a cohesive narrative, and, with the beads' help, tell that very story. Simply put, I danced my way between thinking, beading, and writing until this thesis' final punctuation mark had been typed.

The particulars of my research were, as I'd predicted early on, generated through an iterative process. It began with a quartet of "four's". During the research design phase, I observed that Sinclair's four questions would serve as fitting companions to four individual beaded panels, that these four panels would be crafted with four recipients in mind, and that the entirety of this work would be informed by four words: Reflection, Repetition, Respect, and Relations. Having settled into this method of "four's", I began jotting down my initial responses to the four questions, posing my own queries as the reflecting unfolded: *What do I feel when I read this question? Where does the feeling live? Of the people I know, love, and respect, who does this question belong to? If I distill this question to its purest form, how does it speak to me? What images accompany its speech? What images accompany both the thoughts and feelings elicited by this question as well as the person to whom I intend to gift the final beaded product? And, now that I have roughly approximated my responses to this question, identified the person who inspires me within this set of reflections, and developed the artistic concept for their beaded gift, what's next?* Needless to say, coming up with questions was no hardship.

While I adhered strictly to my original structure of "four's", the iterations of reflection which ensued emerged in a more fluid, transient, and repetitive manner. Thread and needle would be loaded with a series of beads, a thought would be noted; Fingers would tire and ache necessitating a brief pause, a thought would be noted; That same thought would inspire a memory that required some more digging, another thought would be noted; An article, poem, story, artwork, or song would remind me of one of Sinclair's four questions, or of the thought I had the other day, or of that time I felt that way when that event took place, or of the fear I had never allowed myself to realize I harboured, or of the bead colour I admired earlier that

morning... another thought would be noted. This methodological approach carried a tendency towards loneliness and hosted the fear that all of this “feeling” I was undertaking was futile, and so I was comforted by the words of Chickasaw scholar Eber Hampton (1995) who told us:

When I say memory comes before knowledge, I know I have been to many places and have not always had the luxury of feeling. I had to survive, and thank God I did. But if I want the full value of all those experiences I have lived through, then I have to unwrap the bundle. And I have to pick up the memory and feel what I really felt (p. 54).

The gathering of my own bundle —the beginnings of re-feeling— started with “THESIS NOTES”, the document which housed the raw data (reflections) of my research. Soon this document became filled with thoughts, memories, and stories, organized into sections which corresponded with the four questions guiding this work. For the most part, I responded to each question individually and always in connection with the beadwork which accompanied it; That is to say, when I reflected upon the first question, “*Where do I come from?*”, I ensured my notes were limited to this single question as I stitched my way through the first panel. This approach enabled the completion of this writing by creating an organized set of auto-ethnographic notes which would later be converted into the tidied responses which form the basis of this thesis.

Many steps along the research process mirrored those taken within my beadwork practice. The development of the research concept can easily be likened to sketching a beadwork pattern, revising said pattern as opportunities for improvement present themselves, and selecting the beads used to populate the work. Just as bead-follows-bead, thought-followed-thought; My beading was just as essential to the completion of this work as are the writings which accompany it, for the wisdoms I accessed over the course of many months of reflecting could only have

surfaced amidst this Indigenized arts-based endeavour. Moreover and in thinking about beading as research, I quickly observed that the gifting of the four individual beaded panels could be interpreted as a method for knowledge dissemination —the sharing of internal wisdoms with others through the practice of gifting. Envisioning the moment in which the recipient opened their parcel, unwrapping it to find beadwork designed with them in mind, I imagined how the spirit of the work would reach them. *Would the care I stitched into the leather reach them? Would they sense the amount of times I visited and revisited good thoughts of them as I worked on? Would they know that their mere presence in the thought-scape of my beading studio helped me trudge onwards, even when I'd lost the thread of my own purpose?* Above all, I hoped that in receiving their gift they would realize that I was sharing with them a part of me, just as they'd shared of themselves so generously. In discussing the practice of giving and gifting, I consider the words of Blackfoot scholar Tiffany Dionne Prete (2019) who shared that:

Growing up, my parents always stressed to me the importance of giving service to others. Service could be the giving of your time or the giving of your talents. Through my beadwork I have learned the joy of giving. I have used my bead talent to gift to others custom made beaded art. Gifting allows me to show respect to others who have shared their talents with me. In kindness and generosity I give these gifts, which also allows me to engage in reciprocity. (p. 37)

The gifts I created as part of my research enabled me to participate in the reciprocity described by Prete and offered many valuable teachings along the path to their completion; I have sought to express these teachings through my storytelling so that the wisdoms I cultivated through the beads could find their way onto these pages. While my thesis-writing spanned a

period of just over two years —notes beginning as early as September 2020 and my final submission taking place in December 2022— the stories I share in responding to Sinclair’s four questions take place as early as my sixth birthday in 1998 and as recently as the dark days I experienced throughout the bitter winter of 2022. In an effort to share my responses to the four questions and tell these stories in a good way, I suggest you read this work as though we were two friends sat in my living room, with me storytelling over a few shared pots of your favourite tea. To all who read this work through, I wonder what my story sounds like in your voice.

FOURWORD

Following in the foot steps of Anishinaabe scholar John Borrows, I begin this work by sharing four words ('fourword') (Borrows, 2002) that shall bind sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into ideas, and ideas into story. A convenient alliterative pattern connects my four words: reflection, repetition, respect and relations.

'Reflection', a seemingly straightforward choice given the auto-ethnographic nature of this work, encapsulates how, with two needles and many beads in hand, I participated in the 'looking inward' process described by Ellis & Bochner (2000): "[auto-ethnographers] look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations and simultaneously focus outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience" (p. 739). Contemplative hours-turned-to-months of beading created the space to unpack, what seemed at certain times, as many ideas as there were beads rolling atop my mat.

Just as stories are embedded in place and on the land itself, my needles repeatedly and firmly stitched sparkling glass cylinders onto fabrics and leathers, telling and retelling me stories as I worked on: 'Repetition'. Stitch after stitch, a meditative trance unfolded wherein looking inward began to follow a cyclical, rather than linear, path. Bead after bead, ideas were generated from within as opposed to the often extractive, empirical "outside, looking in" approach so common in western settler research (Cook-Lynn, 1996). My narrative is filled with repeating, interconnecting themes by necessity; It would be difficult, let alone impossible, to convey my reflections along a path whose Point A and Point B are connected by a straight line. Instead, a circular thinking/feeling pattern better captures my experiences and this requires the acceptance

that ideas rarely have a true beginning or end and that recurring thoughts are simply a reminder that there's more to be learned.

Figure 2. Detail of *nashkopichikun* Marguerite Gingras's hand-stitched embroidery



My third word is 'Respect'. As I moved through graduate school, gathered data, completed assignments, and engaged with academia in other ways, I abided by the required institutional principles in a manner consistent with Michele Suina's description of research as a pebble in her shoe (2017). This type of respect-under-rule is distinct from 'Respect' which I

understand to encompass all the ways of knowing, being, and sharing that exist within Creation. This third word communicates a deep appreciation for the rich unknown that produces spiritual connections between every element of existence. The needles held by my fingers, the largely one-sided talk with my cat Mimi, the love I feel for my kin, the sensation that my ancestors are smiling upon me; these I hold in highest regard. With this kind of respect I could safely and comfortably observe my thoughts in order to develop the reflections that produced this work.

My final word, ‘Relations’, has been captured by Anishinaabe author Richard Wagamese in such a good way that I daren’t look to paraphrase:

“All my relations” means *all*... It’s to proclaim in one sentence that this experience of living is a process of coming together and that it was always meant to be... When a speaker makes this statement, it’s meant as recognition of the principles of harmony, unity and equality. It’s a way of saying that you recognize your place in the universe and that you recognize the place of others and of other things in the realm of the real and the living. In that it is a powerful evocation of truth (Wagamese, 2015, paragraph 5).

This fourword must lastly express how my story —like a single bead in a piece of beadwork— is a humble offering to the inspiring generation-spanning conversations already taking place both within and outside of academia.

The Auto-Ethnographic Rhythm Section, poem (2022)

How do I know

where to start?

Time ticks
towards me

Unrelenting metronome,
it never slows.

Tick tock

Where do I come from?

Tick tock

Where am I going?

Tick tock

Why am I here?

Tick tock

Who am I?

How can

a quiet room

be so loud?

NIIYA FAAMII: WHERE DO I COME FROM?

My family

Academia has witnessed a significant shift towards “Indigenizing” research that, more often than not, looks to neatly fit “Indigenous thematic elements” into existing settler-driven academic structures. I believe this new “Indigenized” process often fails to capture the spiritual essence of wisdom-seeking and relation-based knowledge systems whose core consists of the concept and practice of self-location.

The building blocks of identity and location are our individual and communal bloodlines —*where we come from*— and so, with our bloodlines in mind, storytelling emerges as a dynamic container in which ancestral and cultural histories are preserved and shared. Storytelling, as explained by Tewa scholar Tessie Naranjo, “helps us move from one generation to the next, carrying the stories of our past with us... Through stories, there is always the hope that the young ones will become responsible for and carry on the cultural knowledge of the elders” (2017, p. 28). It is by honouring my bloodlines that I might begin to trace my history, from where I came from to who I am today, in order to begin to locate myself and my work within an informed relational context.

Storytelling is an important creative art form that has existed amongst Indigenous Peoples and communities since time immemorial. Aniyvwiya?i author Thomas King’s (2010) statement, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2), resonates with my belief that I am an eclectic collection of the people I’ve known and the experiences we have shared with one another. Just as the tree cannot walk away from the roots that ground it into rich soil, it is impossible for me to separate the stories I’ve lived from the person I am today; Nor can I make

sense of the everyday, the exceptional, or the great unknown, without stories. Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor (1991) told us “You can’t understand the world without telling a story... There isn’t any centre to the world but a story” (as cited in Blaeser, 2012, p. 3). Vizenor’s statement reminds me that the power of narratives lies not only in the words, tone, or mannerisms selected to express a story, but also in the mere fact that it *is* being told. However trivial, however mundane a story might appear to be, it is special and sacred by virtue of its articulation.

The beads are underfoot; Here I stumble across an opportunity to further conceptualize beadwork as a channel for and source of information about our stories, identities, and locations. In their review of the art exhibit ‘Beads, they’re sewn so tight’, Two-Spirit Anishinaabe curator Adrienne Huard (2019) frames beadwork as a “social and political statement on the resilience of [Indigenous] culture” that serves “as a guide for the territories we navigated, a map for our bloodlines, a coded knowledge for prayers and good thoughts embedded in the clothing of our loved ones” (p. 281). To receive gifted beadwork is to be presented with a labour of spirit, love, and time. Throughout my life, *ma maamaan* and earliest mentor Denise has embedded goodness into many such gifts for me; Special treasures made of fabrics, paper, even glass. These memories —*niiya faamii*— are where my storytelling begins.

Living and studying amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has been equal parts unpredictable and devastating. Throughout this time I have experienced numerous losses and endured periods of profound spiritual and mental suffering that challenged multiple core personal beliefs and tested my ability to stay afloat. My family’s demonstrations of love and support undoubtedly carried me through these difficult times and reminded me that I am a person that comes from somewhere and is in community with others. The “pandemic isolation phenomenon” I

experienced was not limited to years-long quarantining alone at home nor to the severe restriction in social contact, but also included the more elusive and abstract experience of becoming distanced from my true self by way of separation from kin and community. In an effort to combat these various forms of isolation I launched myself into beading and reflecting. Part of these creative works included the development and exploration of the idea of a collaborative ‘Family Jewels’ project to be undertaken by *ma maamaan* Denise and I. At its core, ‘Family Jewels’ is a family’s voyage into their past and the honouring of bloodlines so precious that they’re recorded within sparkling handmade creations. This feeling sits at the core of the first beaded panel I share with you as well as at the centre of the reflections which accompanied its completion.

It was sometime during the winter months of 2021 that Denise shared her studio space with me; Her, working on one of her many brilliant art projects and me, plugging away at the week’s beadwork. The cold yet pleasant prairie afternoon passed quietly and before heading home I came across one of our family heirlooms: an antique piece of embroidery belonging to my *nashkopichikun* Marguerite Gingras that featured a simple yet striking floral design (Figure 3). Inspired immediately, I recalled that this particular piece was admired by my *maamaan*. Thus the idea was born that I would breathe new life into a classic jewel by beading it as the first instalment of ‘Family Jewels’ and my first thesis panel, thereafter gifting it to Denise. Throughout the course of my beading, I visited and revisited memories of her, my childhood, and our bloodlines. My beading began to reflect the kindness and love contained within our sacred history and, as needles wove through bead and fabric, memories of loved ones who came before

flooded the soft powder blue felt mat. My mind treaded the waters of wave-after-wave of rumination and questioning:

I can sense the love of my ancestors, do they feel the love I share with them? How can I learn to embrace the mistakes I make, spilt bead vials and poorly-placed stitches, along with the good?

Where do I come from?

Figure 3. Antique embroidered flower on leather from belonging to *nashkopichikun* Marguerite

Gingras



I do come from somewhere. My being arises from a long history of brilliance, resilience, and strength with ancestors who wrote into existence a story so important that its chapters are as

relevant today as they were at its inception. The more I learn and digest about my bloodlines, the more I become actualized as a person who comes from somewhere and is thus heading somewhere. Tewa author and teacher Gregory Cajete (2015) reminds me that:

Indigenous people have demonstrated a way of knowing and relating that must be regained and adapted to a contemporary setting — not only for the benefits of those cultures themselves, but for all human kind. Learning and becoming whole are, at every level of expression, intimately intertwined (p. 150).

In thinking about “becoming whole”, I reflect that the integration of wholeness into my life requires not only the knowledge of and appreciation for the family jewels that are my stories, but also an enactment of the wisdoms contained therein. As years pass and I become increasingly aware of the community of inspiring people that have storied my life into being, as I learn and move through wisdom-seeking and academic journeying, my appreciation for Cajete’s statement grows: “Learning and becoming whole are, at every level of expression, intimately intertwined”. These jewels —my stories— make me who I am; They are layered into a fine weave of identity that enables me to claim others and, in turn, allows them to claim me as their own. Here it is essential that I share my responses to the question: Who claims me?

In an early section of this thesis I shared that *ni miyeuhtayn aen nakishkataan* —it’s nice to meet you— before introducing myself in my ancestral language of Michif, a hybrid language whose linguistic structures draw mostly from Cree and French with some English influences. When I say *taanishi* and *boonzhoor*, I am invoking inter-generational wisdoms in order to offer greetings in a grounded and relational manner —in a good way. When I say *Noé Préfontaine pi*

mikisiw dishinihkaashoon, I am telling others what I'm called so that they know who I am and to whom I belong.

I am one of the two children of Colin Ottenbreit and Denise Préfontaine. My father's ancestral line can be traced across the prairies where my paternal Grandparents Arnie (Arnold) Ottenbreit and Charlene Ottenbreit (née Fellner) were both born and later met, eventually settling in Winnipeg, Manitoba in the 1960's. Both Arnie and Charlene were first-generation Austrian settlers to Turtle Island, their roots extending back to the village areas surrounding Czernowitz, now recognized as the Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi, and Szeged in Hungary. *Nipaapaa* Colin Ottenbreit, a second-generation settler, was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan and moved to Winnipeg with his family when he was six years old. Nine years later, Colin met *ma maamaan* Denise Préfontaine, a fellow senior in grade ten at Dakota Collegiate. Denise, a Métis woman of French, Cree, and English descent whose long ancestral history carries deep roots in the Red River Valley, had resettled in Winnipeg one year earlier, having moved frequently across the prairies after the tragic and untimely death of her father Hubert Préfontaine. My maternal Grandfather Hubert, whose French settler ancestors first arrived to Turtle Island in the 1680's, was born in the City of Saint Boniface, now recognized as Winnipeg. Though he joined the Spirit world decades before my birth, I know most deeply that he witnesses and protects me from the realm beyond. While I never met Hubert, I was blessed to know and love my maternal Grandmother, Rose-Marie Trudel who, too, now rests with Creator. Rose-Marie was a Winnipeg-born Métis woman of French, Cree, and English descent and a most cherished matriarch. She died in 2015 and is buried in the cemetery of the Saint Boniface Cathedral, about 25 steps away from the Red River, alongside her Métis mother Rita Trudel (née Chevrier), sister Louise Trudel,

and daughter Yvonne Préfontaine. The seeds sown by my Cree and Métis ancestors, the course they charted across the Red River Valley from generation-to-generation, inform the person I am today. As a child, I devoured the stories *ma maamaan* Denise would share with me about these inspiring and resilient people, quietly harbouring a secret hope that one day I might have just as exciting of a story to share with my kin.

In many ways this thesis is a story of belonging. I belong to the Métis nation as well as to a blend of settlers from various European countries, including the French, Austrian, and English nations. Earlier, when I shared that *aen deu-zisprii Michifniya*, I told you that I am a Two-Spirit Métis person; Thus I am also claimed by Two-Spirits, Indigiqueers, and other sexual and gender diverse peoples. A couple of chapters on and a few more imagined cups of tea later, I look forward to telling you a bit more about my 2SQT* (Two-Spirit, Queer, Trans) and trans*temporal kin and how there, too, I belong.

While I am claimed by many, I might belong most to *ma maamaan* Denise Préfontaine. Gifting the beaded, jewelled panel to Denise (Figure 4) led to a sincere sense of fulfilment. No, its design is not the most complex imagery captured through my art practice; No, its size is not the most ambitious project I've attempted; No, it is not loud, boastful, nor flashy. Yet this piece stands out as one of the greatest expressions of appreciation for where I come from that I could possibly share with *ma maamaan*. It is a living amend that I make to her, an honouring of our past, present, and future, as well as the demonstration of a commitment to preserving our stories for as long as I live. Upon gifting Denise her beadwork, I asked if there were words or images that she would be interested in contributing to this work. As I record this moment, writing the sentence you just read, my cheeks are dampened with happy tears. These stem from the

knowledge that I survived periods of heavy despair to emerge into a space of serenity within which I am capable of doing this work alongside my family. The significance of the ancestral work I am undertaking alongside Denise is not lost on me and I know, most deeply, that I will cherish it forever. Métis artist and mother Denise Préfontaine (2022) retold me a story I've treasured since my young years, starting at the beginning:

I come from the Red River Valley in Manitoba, and from generations of Métis and French-Canadian people who made this place their home. My family was always proud of our rich history, and passed that on to me and my siblings. Like Noé, I too remember feeling proud of my family heritage as a young person. Later in life, when I began working on a family history project of my own, I noticed that the story which had been celebrated was mostly the story of the male ancestors. The archives were full of newspaper articles about the business dealings and political offices held by the Gingras and Chevrier men. The proud stories were of the fortunes they'd earned, the public offices they'd held, and the prestige they'd gained.

I realized that this was only part of the picture, and saw how the contributions made by the women were largely invisible and unrecognized. The more I looked, the more I saw the huge role the women had played in the family's cultural heritage, through their work as mothers, homemakers, teachers, caregivers, and historians.

I began to notice all the ways my mother and ancestors had contributed to the family's cultural heritage, which has been a richer inheritance than money could offer.

Figure 4. Beaded panel gifted to Denise (2022)



Figure 5. Detail of beaded pendants belonging to *nashkopichikun* Marguerite Gingras



Denise stories on,

I noticed how almost all of my histories had come to me because of my grandmother Rita: it was she who'd saved the letters, documents and artifacts; It was she who'd shared the stories with journalists so that articles were published; It was she who donated artifacts to museums and archives, and she who would then take us as grandchildren to visit those museums and gain a sense of the value of material culture and of preserving history; It was she who conveyed a love of the family heritage to her children and grandchildren. To me she seems the greatest hero of the family story, and

because of her I have a deep appreciation for the matrilineal line, and for the inestimable value of what may be passed from a caring mother to her child.

If I could speak to Rita today, I would tell her that she is indeed one my heroes. I would tell her that I've thought she was brilliant, fearless, and impossibly cool since I was old enough to remember stories. I would tell her that her efforts to honour, preserve, and convey our family's history have led to many generations of her kin knowing and cherishing this rich chronicle. But deep down I know she hears this; She witnesses my expressions of love and gratitude from the realm of the Great Spirit as though she were reading these words alongside you. Denise continues,

When I look more deeply I see another level of 'invisible' gifts from my mother, grandmother, and fore-mothers. They're the subtle qualities of patience, of modesty, of humility, of faith, and of grace. No need to rush, no need to speak loudly or harshly. No need to over-plan, to push, to direct, to control. The ability to be still and be present, without need to chase power, wealth, or fame.

My *nookhoom* Rose-Marie Trudel was patient in a quiet, humble, and unassuming way that set all those around her at ease. Her steps along *mino-pimatisiwin* have served as powerful messages of guidance during some of the most difficult moments of my history and continue to serve as direction within my own journeys towards becoming an honest, loving, and humble person of integrity. Calmness radiated from Rose-Marie and this effect was in full view on one chilly prairie winter evening that saw my family and I decorating gingerbread houses. The sticky-sweet icing had been piped into bags, confectionary treats arranged atop well-loved plates,

and hot tea prepared to soothe focused minds. The typical holiday sprinkle mix consisting of green, red, and white sprinkles was not to my liking and I'm told I made a bit of a fuss about wanting them separated. Without hesitation and with an exceptional degree of patience, Rose-Marie quietly began to separate the individual sprinkles—one by one—into their respective colour groupings. She continued until the hundreds of sprinkles had all been sorted into tidy piles, piles that, upon reflection, greatly resemble mounds of glittering beads. It is a simple story of a gentle memory and one of my most treasured teachings. I return to Denise's words:

In having children I became a mother, and it became my turn to serve as a link in the long line of mothers transmitting family values and culture and language to the new generation. Some of this happens through osmosis, some of it through the telling of our stories, and some of it through active engagement in preserving the cultural practices and history. As we age and mature we're able to see the stories and culture in a new way. As time passes, we also move along the arc, and our roles evolve; I can now envision a time not so far off, when I'll be passing the treasured objects and archives on to Noé, and they in turn will become the keeper of the family's heritage.

When Noé recently gave me the beautiful beaded flower artwork they'd created for this auto-ethnographic project, I wasn't surprised by their skill or generosity, as I've been blessed to receive many, many beautiful notes, drawings and artworks from them since they were a child. What did surprise me though was how well the piece seemed to carry my mother Rose-Marie's spirit. It felt like Noé was giving my Mother's spirit to me, and also giving me the love they'd had for Rose-Marie as their grandmother. In the same way,

it felt like Noé was giving me their respect and love for our ancestral family, and for the mothers and grandmothers going back. Here was a warm and sparkling symbol which had captured the essence of the bond of shared history and love of hand-stitch and beading which has been passed from mother to child for generations. I know our ancestors would all be proud of the person Noé has become.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Denise's story harmonizes with my own. Still, I was overwhelmed with emotion when reading the words she chose to express her very tender narrative. I reflect that I come from people who truly care about their history not simply for the sake of record-keeping, but because they sincerely value each other and the tales weaving together the fabric of our lives. Denise embodied this caring in her story while also regularly encasing it within her art practice. I've included an image of a recent hand-stitched and beaded contemporary Métis textile work of hers, titled 'A Mending Map' (Figure 6). She shared with me that this work sought to honour the legacy of hand-stitchers in our family by showcasing the simple elegance contained within needlework practices; Pride wells up within me as I recognize that I am on my way to continuing this tradition and contributing to this multi-generational legacy.

Earlier on in this chapter I shared Tewa scholar Tessie Naranjo's writing on stories; She told us that storytelling:

helps us move from one generation to the next, carrying the stories of our past with us...

Through stories, there is always the hope that the young ones will become responsible for and carry on the cultural knowledge of the elders (2017, p. 28).

I am the grateful young one that is becoming responsible for the stories, wisdoms, and teachings of the people I come from. As I near the “end” of chronicling the reflections which emerged while considering “*Where do I come from?*”, I feel ready to embark on the next chapter of rediscovering and digesting important chunks of truth about myself. For now, I say *miina kawapamitin* to the memories I explored, the people I honoured, and the stories I told, all of which inform *where I’m going* next.

Figure 6. Detail of ‘A Mending Map’, handstitched and beaded contemporary Métis art textile, Denise Préfontaine (2020)



AEN PCHI SHMAYN DI FRAYZ: WHERE AM I GOING?

A path of strawberries

My fascination with berries can be traced back to childhood when juice-soaked chins, stained red, were an essential component of a complete summer day. However it is only as an adult that I learned some of the histories and heart medicine teachings of strawberries.

In the spring of 2015, following a period of intense mental suffering during which I struggled with substance use, self-harm, and suicidal ideation for months, I found myself on Dakota land in Mni Sota Makoce (Minnesota). Denise had strongly encouraged me to join her on the trip which included a book reading event at which Potawatomi scientist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer shared passages from her work, ‘Braiding Sweetgrass’ (2013). As I quieted my mind Kimmerer’s messages of humility, reciprocity, and tenderness spoke to an inner spirit that had been shrouded with doubt, resentment, and trauma for nearly a decade.

My experiences in Mni Sota Makoce marked the dawn of a new and hopeful era. I began to see the interwoven paths that my healing journeys would follow, how my rediscovering of spiritual ways of being would be inextricably bound to the study of my ancestors’ traditional language, and how both of these would require me to demonstrate courage, humility, honesty and love in the face of fear and uncertainty. An insistent yearning grew within me, a deep-rooted need to learn about who I was, where I came from, the land my feet rested upon, and the beautiful, wild things that surrounded me. The more I learned, the greater my need for strong roots became. As years passed and I continued to navigate what I now know to be a lifelong cycle of learning, unlearning and relearning, I was gifted strawberry medicine along with some of its teachings. Late Potawatomi Elder Lillian Pitawanakwat located the Strawberry Teaching in

epangishmok: the Western direction that contains the berry stage in which summer's growth comes to ripen. The Strawberry Teaching provides lessons as to developing forgiveness, even for one's self, and finding peace that comes from the heart and not only the head (Pitawanakwat, 2012). Throughout the years I have beaded countless strawberries; I always seem to return their medicine when my heart feels heavy and my head is too full (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Photograph of sun shining onto beadwork, photograph (2020)



Both the teachings and taste of strawberry medicine remind me of the sensation of hope I felt when listening to Robin read years ago. It felt important to return to her text and rediscover its messages. In 'Braiding Sweetgrass', Kimmerer (2013) shares a history of the strawberry:

In our Creation stories the origin of strawberries is important. Skywoman's beautiful daughter, whom she carried in her womb from Skyworld, grew on the good green earth, loving and loved by all the other beings. But tragedy befell her when she died giving birth to her twins, Flint and Sapling. Heartbroken, Skywoman buried her beloved daughter in the earth. Her final gifts, our most revered plants, grew from her body. The strawberry arose from her heart. In Potawatomi, the strawberry is *ode min*, the heart berry (p. 23).

Long before I received the stories and teachings of the heart berry, heart-shapes appeared throughout my memories in warm, glowing pockets. A pleasant sun streaming through the eating nook window witnesses a young Noé impatiently, and with an increasingly furrowed brow, attempt to draw a perfectly symmetrical heart. The right-hand curve is smoothly executed— but then!— the left-hand line veers wonkily and completely misses the mark. Other attempts follow a similar pattern and as the pile of crumpled papers on the floor continues to grow, Denise appears. Assessing the budding tantrum, she presents the idea that a true artist is not someone who never makes mistakes but rather someone that can create something beautiful out of their mistakes. Recounting this memory here transports me back to that eating nook, the pine dining table with the loose joint that made the top wobble and the diamond-patterned linoleum flooring that peeled up a bit near the doorway. I see it once more: her, leaning over my shoulder to draw scallops around my wonky line, showing me that all 'mistakes' hold the potential for beauty. I feel it again, my awe at her ability to turn my scribbles into artwork, and relief stemming from the realization that I didn't need to be *perfect* to be *good*.

Heart-shapes emerged once more in designing the second beaded panel that accompanies this text (Figure 8); I could not think of a better way to honour the love and respect I hold for my mentor and thesis supervisor, Zack, than to share beaded strawberry heart medicine with him. The project design phase flowed effortlessly with little resistance in the way of hesitation or endless reworking to achieve the ‘perfect’ template. Yet as I began the reflection gathering process—stringing beads and stitching them tightly in place—doubt crept in and I not only began questioning my design but also the intimate tone of this entire work: *Is this too emotional, too sensitive, too soft? Is it not rigorously-academic enough?* While initially stymied by this uncertainty I concluded that it is precisely this kind of work that the Academy needs; Projects and writings that explore the deeply personal in order to better contextualize and respond to the tensions which surface between honouring our identities and operating within formal colonial systems of knowing, learning, and sharing.

It has become increasingly clear to me that if I am to embody *mino-pimatisiwin* I must ground my work in critical self-reflection and the understanding that all Indigenous knowledge(s) are part of relation-based systems. As I consider where I’m going, my understanding of “all my relations” becomes more nuanced, extending beyond an expression of interconnection to include a sense of responsibility to the collective community of all that exists within the realms of the real and the unknown.

Developing a practice of humility is rooted in the understanding that my thoughts, speech, and deeds are medicines I access while seeking the betterment of my steps along the good path. These medicines are, in a sense, borrowed. I do not own them just as I cannot possess the air that fuels the breaths I take, the earth that supports my steps, nor the sunlight that

illuminates the day and enables sight. I am reminded of the wisdoms of late Seneca historian and activist John Mohawk who told us:

An individual is not smart, according to our culture. An individual is merely lucky to be a part of a system that has intelligence that happens to reside in them. In other words, be humble about this always. The real intelligence isn't the property of an individual corporation — the real intelligence is the property of the universe itself (2008, p. 277).

The destruction of harmful, individualistic ego promotes relational accountability and this belief that intelligence, among other gifts, belongs to the universe. Bead-upon-bead, I began to conceptualize both tangible beadwork and intangible reflections as teachers that show me how to become a channel for wisdoms I couldn't otherwise access; Wisdoms that are firmly situated within the web of Creation that contains all relations. Moving in the direction of berries and endeavouring to channel their teachings as these relate to the path ahead of me, I beaded my way into a series of musings that centred around glass-based imagery.

I reflected that existing within academia, along with the other institutional systems within which I operate, can often feel like standing on a thin glass floor; Every micro-aggression, harm and barrier acting as a persistent hammer chipping away at the fragile surface keeping me steady. When existing in such a precarious setting, it is difficult to support others struggling in this risky environment and it is especially tough to discern where I'm going. When I am uncertain and afraid, my gaze isn't fixed on the horizon where promising futures lie but rather downwards onto my feet, anxiously checking that I'm taking the proper steps, wearing the right shoes, or standing to attention when told. The imagery accompanying the unsafe glass floor feels frightening,

Figure 8. Beaded panel gifted to Zack (2022)



brittle, and sharp. Meanwhile, my reflective process bore fruit to another glassy metaphor that offers a more hopeful feeling: Mirrors. Most of the mirrors in my life exist within community, with my kin reflecting goodness, strength, and brilliance back to me on a regular basis. Not only do I see myself in them, I also witness the potential “me” that I can become by continuing to walk the good path, made possible by nurturing my roots in community. This kind of *aen mirrway* feels smooth, cooling, and informative. In this way mirrors serve as a faithful antidote to the fear generated through the unstable glass floor of institutions. I began to ask myself:

Who would I be without mirrors? Is it possible to exist in a windowless, doorless room without someone there to keep me company? If the mirror doesn't exist, why is it so difficult to see myself? To remember who I am? How do I know where to go if the mirror disappears?

My thesis supervisor, Zack, is an important *miirway* in my story. Momentarily returning to the wisdoms of berries, I am reminded of the teachings of Kanien'kehá:ka Elder Jan Longboat, in which the strawberry represents *konnonrónhkwa*. While commonly translated as “I love you”, *konnonrónhkwa* can be more accurately understood to mean “I show you I care”. In these ways the strawberry reminds us that love is the demonstration of an active experience which involves commitment, compassion, and care (Pitawanakwat, 2020, p.1).

What does it feel like to be seen and heard by others in the Academy?

It feels like *konnonrónhkwa* in the sense that it is an active experience of receiving compassionate and caring validation and support. The mirror and mentor that I have in Zack personifies this heart-berry teaching by consistently displaying a commitment to, and practice of, supporting the empowerment of others. It is especially important for 2SLGBTQQIA+ (Two

Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and other sexual and gender diverse people) individuals existing within academic spaces to see their experiences, identities, and knowledges reflected back to them. This validates their presence in a space historically designed for, and dominated by, the colonial (cis)heteropatriarchy and encourages them to trudge onwards. I draw upon on my own lived experience to confirm that 2SLGBTQQIA+ peoples tend to live tokenized and exploited existences within academia. Sexually and gender diverse individuals operating within the academic industrial complex also experience an insidious erasure of their intersecting identities, an erasure compounded by belonging to other communities targeted by white supremacy, racism, colonialism, whorephobia, ableism, saneism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, sizeism, and classism (Cederwall et al., 2019, p. 10). The messages of *konnonrónhkwa* and *lii nipwahkow di frayz* lovingly confront this erasure and serve as gleaming shields offering protection within the often harsh and hostile spaces of western knowledge-seeking, ever a reminder that love is an active demonstration of care.

Existing within the academic industrial complex is a murky experience, cloudy and acrid like a forgotten cup of black tea steeped until the brew settles into a filmy chill. While falling in love with learning came easily —helped along by soft nudges from many generous teachers—deciphering and navigating my way through colonial education systems has been trickier. I have learned to conform to the Academy in order to succeed in the manner outlined by the system, however this adaptation frequently wrests me away from my ethics, principles, and truest self. Even with the mustering of convictions that carry with them a deep rootedness in community, I can still only hope to exist in a ‘middle space’; A space split in two —the “me” that exists within community and the “me” that exists within institutions— wherein I am the overlap in a Venn

diagram that unsettles as much as it puzzles. This space is charged with controversy and self-questioning:

Whose directive am I following? Are my steps towards institutional acclaim taking me further and further away from my communities? Am I capable of straddling these two worlds — incongruous at the best of times— without succumbing to the glamour and privilege of academic validation? Why do my steps weary when I am a conscious observer of my surroundings and how am I already exhausted when the journey has just begun?

This auto-ethnographic work can speak to some of my concerns, but it can only clear the ground a little; I realize that my answers, if any, will emerge from others who, too, live in this ‘middle space’. When self-locating at the outset of her PhD dissertation, Gitxsan activist, lawyer, and educator Cindy Blackstock (2009) chose to “bathe in the differences” (p. 3) between western and Indigenous thinking, a phrase I see as succinctly capturing an acceptance of, and sense of responsibility within, the middle. She raises a question I have feared since beginning this work and shares a response that enlightens and bolsters:

So how does one write a dissertation that lies at the shorelines of western and First Nations thought when the institutions who judge the merit of the work lie firmly in western territory? When I write in the western style, I fence in the emotion, spirit and passion fueling my thinking and beguile any natural wisdom. My mind dims and the computer keys are harder to press. Perhaps that is why I can only write western for a little while and then I need to un-cage my mind and think—and be. I can only hope that this dissertation reads like a journey through two distinct Nations—the crossing of cultural

borders should be obvious, uncomfortable but not totally unfamiliar. For all who read it, I wonder if the words are harder to read when the keys are harder to press (p. 3).

When I write from the heart, the words flow effortlessly; I don't question my selection for its academic rigour but instead look to its authenticity and integrity in an effort to ensure that I am telling the story in a good way. When I write from the heart, clacking keys become the rhythmic sound backdrop to the slow sunrise of my storytelling, every punctuation mark typed a breath in my narrative. When I write from the heart, the unknown is not so disquieting. Staying true to a reflective process that has felt more like thought suspended in space than a grounded chronicling of certain conclusions, I close this chapter with questions rather than answers:

How can I keep from forgetting how it feels to write from the heart? How do I bring love and strawberries with me as I head onwards? What is love's place in the Academy?

Lii rasaad di keur, poem (2021)

Heart beads

tiny

red

friends

gather to say

remember,

love,

happy

green

confidants

sharing in unison

there's no shame

in not knowing

sparkling

pink

companions

whispering

who you are

or

where you're going

my sweetest

golden

farewell

to

Heart beads

AVIK SHAKIHI PI AEN HONAYT WIKIWI, TAPITOW: WHY AM I HERE?

Live with love and honesty, always.

Academia remains a site where systemic violence against Indigenous Peoples occurs and a space wherein the personal is obscured by the institutional. In stitching my way through the third beaded panel, I reflected that the thoughts emerging from this auto-ethnographic process were destined to be controversial, in large part due to the political nature of beadwork. Algonquin artist Nadia Myre (2017) calls attention to the idea that “Beading is political, whether it’s simply the personal contribution to an age-old continuum or consciously reworking loaded imagery” (p. 115). It has been my experience that beading is intensely personal, and so it follows that this spiritual craft would reflect the political aspects of my person.

Recognizing that the personal cannot be divorced from the professional nor the academic, I am reminded of Lenape artist and activist Krysta Williams and queer Métis visual artist Erin Koonsmo’s (2011) conversation surrounding the academic industrial complex and its tendency to tokenize Indigeneity and the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples. Their exchanges explored how labelling —the designation of a person’s identit(y/ies)— is “no longer a liberating political act but a necessity to gain entrance into the academic industrial complex and other discussions and spaces” (p. 30). I am keenly aware that the intersecting identities upon which I am actively targeted are also a kind of social currency that grants me privileged access to exclusive spaces within academia. And, while benefitting from this access, I have only just begun to appreciate how the academic industrial complex affects not only my work, but also how it targets, restricts, and displaces my experiences as a white, queer, disabled, Two-Spirit Métis person with lived

experiences of sex work and substance use. I can exist within my multiply-layered identities but feel compelled to communicate these in a diluted and palatable manner that requires the tokenization of those very identities. So I have learned to talk the “right” talk, which includes using the familiar buzz words: “anti-oppression”, “decolonization”, “equity”, “diversity”, “inclusion”, and more recently “anti-racism”; Words that have evolved into signifiers often functioning as virtue signals employed to demonstrate political correctness and moral goodness. Hazy thoughts have often questioned why talking the “right” talk seems to come more naturally than the “good” or “honest” talk.

This phenomenon can perhaps be attributed, in part, to my living in the middle. In the previous chapter I discussed the ‘middle space’ —a space split in two wherein each of my feet is firmly planted in one half— however my experience of the middle isn’t limited to that analogy. The call of “*Why am I here?*” has elicited many responses taking shape through metaphors of “middleness”, reflections revealing that my identities are shot through with paradoxes and bridges:

As a white Métis person I encompass the bloodlines of the oppressor and the oppressed;

The wounds of my people were inflicted by the hands of my people.

Living at the crossroads of gender —unpredictably swaying in each direction, blown

by the winds of expression— Two-Spiritedness gifts me fluidity, a gift regularly

desecrated by misgendering’s drought.

My privileges spare me the oppressions my kin suffer while my heart helplessly witnesses;

I walk through oppression’s fire with clothes unscathed but insides blazing.

I sit between the colossus and the compact; Neither larger than life nor flattened into insignificance.

With a mind like a teacup either full with brilliance and health or brimming with anguish and illness, it's hard to know when to stop pouring the kettle. Either way, it's hard to fill a cup that is already full.

Figure 9. *li miljeu*, self-portrait (2022)



A freedom exists within the middle space; A permission to waver and a leave to explore. Honouring my roots (where I come from) and faithfully observing my steps as I journey onwards (where I am going) and draw from the strengths of the middle while simultaneously struggling

under its magnitude; A paradox in clearest view when considering my response to Murray Sinclair's third question nudging me towards the exploration of my life's purpose. This noble endeavour has my hands tentatively hovering above the computer keys, unsure of how to press onwards and cautious in trying to avoid making grandiose and sweeping statements that are rootless in their expression. My uncertainty is buoyed by the great teachers in my life who, leading by example, show me that journeying towards purpose is a sacred call to an inclusive communal consciousness that is a way of life rather than a fleeting state of being; A call that requires ongoing commitment, patience, and fortitude. Thus I proceed onwards, heartened by the knowledge that any reflections I share here are but a brief glimmer in the arc of a lifelong striding towards purpose.

Earlier on in this work I shared of *niiya faamii* in expressing where I come from, exclusively tracing my story along biological bloodlines. I knew then that my narrative was unfinished since the tale of my beginnings is woefully incomplete if my 2SQT* (Two-Spirit, Queer, Trans) family is excluded from its conveyance. The reasoning behind my choice to instead explore the following reflections in this purpose-oriented chapter is two-fold: First, there was a clear delineation between the thoughts surrounding my biological ancestors and those linked to my 2SQT* kin and this necessitated some kind of separation for readability's sake, and second, I cannot conceive of a way to explore *why I am here* without including my experiences of, what Two-Spirit Métis and Nishinaabe scholar Kai Pyle termed, trans*temporal kinship. Pyle (2018) developed the term to "refer to the ability of transgender and Two-Spirit Indigenous people to establish kin relations across time, with both ancestors and descendants." (p. 575), and

I gratefully borrow it to describe the weave of past, present, and future relations within which I am entwined, lovingly laced between generations of sexually and gender diverse peoples.

Finding western words rich enough to convey the depth of my admiration for, and devotion to, my trans*temporal kin, feels like an exercise of yelling into an ever-loudening void whose quickening cacophony requires me to keep raising my voice in order to be heard. In trying to express these reflections, I am like a young child relentlessly reaching down into a pouch of confetti at their birthday celebration, feverishly throwing the colourful delights over the party guests in an attempt to capture the attention of the adults in attendance: *Listen! No, I promise, I really do have something good to say — I promise!* Upon review, it seems I might be trying to find the *best* words to communicate the depth of my experience and therein lies my struggle; In my frantic search for the “best words”, I lose the thread of a story whose essence can be succinctly summarized by Two-Spirit Cree scholar and educator Alex Wilson’s statement: “We come-in.” (2008, p. 198). Wilson (2015) tells us that:

Coming in does not centre on the declaration of independence that characterizes ‘coming out’ in mainstream depictions of the lives of LGBTQI people. Rather, coming in is an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations (p. 3).

When I come-in, I gain an immediate purpose: To fulfill the responsibility intrinsic to my belonging within community, a purpose urgent in its call.

I want to tell you about Syilx *mnimcelx* scholar, activist, and mentor Dr. Percy Lezard. Gregory Cajete (2015) told us that “Leaders are those who feel the pulse of the journey at work both in ourselves and in our communities” (p. 152), words that unmistakably capture my

experiences of Percy. When I first met them in the deep prairie freeze of 2018, I was lost; Trapped in a Sisyphean task of looking outside to find that which, I now know, can only be found within. This was years before I'd allow myself to embrace the middle space and years before I'd muster the necessary courage to claim myself as a gender-diverse, Two-Spirited person. Since claiming myself in this way, I've often reflected that Percy was one of the few people who really *saw* the me I've only just begun seeing. They kindly observed as I circled my way back to belonging, like water ferociously swirling a draining basin flowing onwards to an unknown, mystical destination. To be seen, to be listened to, to belong to others in kinship; These are among the greatest kindnesses shared between people. I'm reminded of Cree author and educator Edmund Metatawabin's description of *kintohpatatin*, a Cree word I learned in the same winter of my meeting Percy that loosely translates to 'you've been listened to' (Metatawabin, 2014). When I lose my place within Creation, straying from the path as a sense of purpose evades me, it is those who listen that guide me home.

What do I mean when I say "the path"? Is the path a place? A feeling? A direction? If the path is synonymous with purpose, does it follow that I am aimless if not moving "on"? I can shine my shoes until the leather wears thin and endlessly plot my course on a pristine, creaseless map, but what does it matter if I never move?

"The path" is a term generously sprinkled throughout my story and invariably accompanied by a sense of movement, a call to action, and an inherent sacredness. In preparing this work, it was essential for me to conceptualize 'purpose' within an Indigenous epistemological framework, one that emphasizes communal knowledge and interconnection

while rejecting the colonial idea of purpose as a solitary quest for self-actualization. When I say “the path” I mean the myriad journeys I undertake shoulder-to-shoulder with all other beings within Creation; It seldom matters how quickly I journey. No one is urging me to race to a mythical finish line only to discover that I’ve left myself and everyone that I’m comprised of, behind. What matters most is that I take my steps with humility, intention, care, and above all, an active commitment to “do the work”. Xiiem et al. (2019) remind me that my storytelling is part of “the path” and “doing the work”, and that, as much I yearn to understand myself through Murray Sinclair’s four questions, I should also endeavour to tell a story that can be understood. Xiiem et al. (2019) share that “No matter how much knowledge (or qualification) a person accumulates, if the knowledge, research, or stories do not reach the collective consciousness of the wider group, then the person is failing to act in an Indigenous manner” (Xiiem et al., p. 20). Therefore the aim of this work is not to tell my story in a way that credits individual intellect or secures academic capital, it should be told authentically, accessibly, and intentionally: in an Indigenous manner.

Nestled within Percy’s email signature exists a quote germane to a discussion of purpose, community care, and reciprocity. Since our earliest communication in 2018, their name has been signed alongside Black author and activist Toni Morrison’s words:

I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game' (2003, n.p.).

Not only do I see Morrison's words as reflective of Percy's pedagogical and ethical framework, I also know that, beyond the realm of the philosophical, their steps within *mino-pimatisiwin* are in faithful alignment with Morrison's message; They truly live it. I could list the many ways in which Percy has supported my empowerment, tell you of their unwavering belief in my potential, recount the multiple life-altering opportunities they've provided me, and outline how they've enabled me to achieve dreams I only hoped would one day materialize; But, instead, I will present them with the third beaded panel (Figure 10) and simply say: *Maarsii poor lii prayzaan. Ka niiya toota li paray avik paahkaan awiiyuk, si tenn promess pi ashootum.* (Thank you for the gifts. I will do the same with others, it is a promise and an oath.)

This promise requires that I remain courageous, resilient, and loving in the face of the certain fear that will reveal itself as the path unfolds. I return to narratives to assist me in exploring how the journeying towards purpose, though intermittently clouded by fear, is essential to my trudging the good path. I am reminded of the spring of 2022, when the snow still lay thick upon the earth and the sun was only just beginning to rise earlier —shyly nudging the moon closer towards midnight— when *nipaapaa* Colin and I travelled to the Anishinaabe lands of the Whiteshell in early March (Figure 11). We've always been good talkers, Colin and I, and so it was time, rather than conversation, that existed in short supply. The long, largely unbending highway travel took our talk in many directions; We discussed humility and how it can lead to the abolition of the self-imposed quest for grandiosity, how tearing down our fears of inadequacy paradoxically enables growth and success, and how learning to accept ourselves —just as we are — is, as *nipaapaa* said on the drive home, “a get-out-of-jail-free card for a prison you made by and for yourself.” How timely it was that our spring retreat took place while I was tidying my

Figure 10. Beaded panel gifted to Percy (2022)



Figure 11. Spring sunset in the Whiteshell, photograph (2022)



scribbled reflections to begin writing the first draft of this chapter, and how true it is that the fiercest fears caging my spirit are usually of my own design.

Accepting myself — just as I am — has proven to be a Herculean task in light of the vast and gripping fear I experience on a perennial basis. At first glance, “I am afraid” might appear as a sad concession or a surrender to despair, however I have learned and now believe that it actually marks the soft beginnings of courage. For what is courage but a brave whisper into the void when all else seems to fail? When the road-less-travelled is as treacherous as the road-more-travelled is convenient? On the brave days, it is courage rather than fearlessness that I endeavour to enact. On the braver days, I recognize that fear is as much a part of me than anything else and that it is neither inherently good nor evil since it matters only what I do with the fear once I name

it. On the bravest days, an inner voice utters an inconceivably petrifying thought I would otherwise scramble to evade:

I am going to sit here quietly and let the fear come.

So, as I wound my way through reflecting, I let it come. I tidied my living room, fluffed the couch cushions, prepared a kettle for the two of us, and allowed Fear to knock at the door. In so doing I learned that my deepest fears are not typically visible in their most simplified form, instead taking shape in considerable self-questioning and it is up to me to muster the necessary faith, courage, and love to search for the root of fear that lies within the “question” or “statement”.

Why do I keep letting everyone down? (I always let everyone down.)

I am afraid that I am failing to honour the people in my life —their experiences, support, wisdoms, and sacrifices—in a way that reflects my love and respect for them.

Am I allowed to be who I am? (I am not allowed to be who I am.)

I am afraid that, in being who I really am, I negatively impact the people in my life in a distressing or burdensome way thus betraying our bond.

Why do I hurt myself like this? (I always have, and always will, hurt myself.)

I am afraid that this moment in which self-love is entirely absent, the moment I am incapable of getting out of, will last forever.

When will I become who I should be? (I am not yet who I should be.)

I am afraid of the prospect of never knowing, seeing, or loving myself correctly. I am afraid that whoever I am meant to be, I am not that person now.

In the final months of my thesis-writing I engaged in a different, though not entirely separate, thought-project: A laborious and fussy film restoration of my family's video archives undertaken by Colin and I. The vintage VHS-C tapes were troublesome, their antiquated technology a seemingly endless source of glitches and problem-solving opportunities, and it took many frustrated attempts to begin properly digitizing the film. The conversion process required watching the film in real-time and paying careful attention so that we might catch and attend to the sound of old tape beginning to misbehave inside the cassette, and so we watched. I saw my brother, Luc, in the first year of his life, and watched as I lifted him up in his crib so that his gentle fingers could feel the soft plushies dangling from his mobile. I saw my *nookhoom* Rose-Marie, before the onset of dementia, bright and calm as I remembered her to be. I saw my parents, inspired by and excited about life's next big mystery, and was fascinated by the sight of them —so young, so hopeful, so open. And, in a tape from my sixth birthday in 1998, I saw me.

The living room looked smaller than my memory told, and the couches hadn't been re-covered yet, but it still felt just right. It was an intimate gathering; The fading evening light streams through the street-facing windows into the cozy room, and Colin pans the camera to Rose-Marie reclined on one sofa, casually talking about the trip she took to the Bay store downtown earlier in the week. It is a commonplace conversation that feels infinitely precious. Slowly swinging towards the other sofa, the camera captures *pchi biibii* Luc climbing over *ma maamaan* Denise, his eyes as big as saucers and happy arms waving wildly. The lens settles on me sat at the glass-top coffee table of my childhood —the one I used to pinch my fingers in by wriggling my hand between the glass sheet and the metal frame— and I am completely engrossed in observing my newly-gifted Barbie friend. For the first few seconds of viewing, the image is charming; I am calmly petting the doll's hair and slowly rotating her beneath the floor

lamp's bulb in what appears to be an attempt to see her more clearly. As seconds pass, the camera zooms closer, young Noé continues to examine the plastic creature, and the video begins to feel increasingly intimate. Transfixed by the memory I was reliving, I noticed how carefully I'm examining the doll, how the position of my grip looks intentional like I'm holding the toy just close enough, and how my lips are mouthing words so quiet that the microphone can't catch them. In witnessing this scene, I felt like a time-travelling intruder dropping in on a deeply private moment, in so doing finding a piece to the puzzle of "*Why am I here?*".

Watching young Noé so absorbed in the study of a doll, I can't help but look ahead to all the scenes of my life that followed; The beautiful, the tragic, the grand, and the everyday moments that have brought me to this writing. I yearn to magically convey to the young person in the video that they don't need to look like Barbie to be worthy, that their future disordered eating is not a requirement, that it is wonderful to want to play the groom's role in dress-up weddings, that they can become the person they truly are without punishment, and that it is always the right time to begin loving themselves. I know these things because others have shown me so, and thus I find an important purpose: To show others that I see them, that I hear them, and that they are worthy—just as they are.

I near the end of this chapter with some misgiving and discomfort; For I did not define purpose, I did not clearly outline what living in a purposeful manner resembles, and I did not provide explicit details as to how I would ensure I adhered to such manner of living. Then again... didn't I? I did not define purpose as this lied outside of Sinclair's third question but I did explain how *I am here* by virtue of the offerings of strength, grace, and empowerment from others and how *I am here* to offer those same gifts to those that come after me. And while it might initially appear that I did not clearly outline what purposeful living looks like, I did

explore my intersecting identities within the ‘middle space’ and how, in accepting the fears and responsibilities existing therein with courage, I can begin to enact my purpose as someone who taps into an inclusive communal consciousness to see, listen to, honour, and be in kinship with others; That seems to be as close a definition of purposeful living that I will arrive at for the time-being. As for my final misgiving, I reflect that the first step in living purposefully begins with being an authentically present and engaged participant of the journey as it unfolds. It is as Colin suggested during our road-trip tête-à-tête: “If you treat life as a dress rehearsal, it’s like living life in the second person. This is it. Searching for meaning is to take one more step, one more breath. This is not the dress rehearsal, it’s the main show.” So while I don’t fully know what the next act brings, I do know that I am not the lone actor playing to an audience of none in a play written for one; I belong to others just as they belong to me and, in that, I have great purpose.

waypinikew, poem (2022)

Abandon the idea of me
to Fasten myself to
the good path

It is not enough to

Walk it alone

when

my steps were charted by

travellers

whose souls and soles

trudged as one

when

my steps soften the road

others will soon follow

Abandon the idea of me

to find out

who I am

DIDAAN AYAATAAK: WHO AM I?

Let's stay inside.

As I pondered my way through the fourth and final beaded panel, my thoughts swirled circuitously and somewhat cloudily. I began to wonder if this cloudiness —the distance that forms between consciousness and thought, the unbidden idea that emerges mysteriously and disappears with even less predictability— was an indicator of enlightenment or deterioration? Thought, much less a reflection of the ‘self’ than a shapeless, directionless voice with origins unknown, felt ephemeral. I am reminded of the metaphor of trying to catch smoke with your bare hands, wherein smoke can be likened to the idea that comes in a burst of fire and goes like thinning vapour, and reflect that this metaphor quite aptly describes the sensation of trying to document my reflections. “*Who am I?*” is likely one of the most ambitious questions I will ever attempt to answer—I know I will keep answering it for a lifetime. Once again narratives and storytelling emerge as a vessel through which I can tentatively approach exploring such an important and exacting question.

Through my involvement in substance use recovery communities, I have borne witness to hundreds of narratives; Tales of catastrophic loss, fierce determination, and powerful healing journeys. Beyond developing a deep appreciation for and kinship with these storytellers, listening to them has offered a valuable teaching: The importance of a story certainly lies in what is being said and that it is being said, but also how it is being said.

What words do I select when telling my story? Does my selection embody goodness or am I making myself small with this narrative?

It is important to highlight that a good story can be told in a harmful way, even if the harm only affects oneself. For example, in trying to clearly outline my identities when introducing myself —*Who am I?*— I can feel pressured to tell a story that is not wholly representative of how I view myself but rather what I believe the listener wants to hear. Despite having spoken publicly about my lived experiences on countless occasions, I can still find myself overwhelmed by the task of storytelling, of honouring my identities in a good way, and of sharing myself in a safe and affirming manner. Self-editing interruptions emerge: *Why am I telling this this way? Am I coming off well right now? Does what I'm saying make sense? Am I trivializing my past in order to seem light-hearted and palatable?* Such questions have arisen throughout my writing and clearcut answers rarely emerged and so I tread cautiously, selecting the words telling my story with great care. In thinking about the risks inherent to storytelling, I reflect on Métis artist and storyteller Fyre Jean Graveline's (2004, p. 12) poem:

“Stories contain Incoherencies. are Trickster tales.

Wisakecahk is with me. side by side. as Witness.

when I land flat on my Face.

Be Aware.

Falling Down is a very efficient way to learn”

It is through bitter experience that I have learned that falling down is indeed an efficient way to learn. Sometimes these lessons are uncomplicated by existential dilemmas —learning that placing my hand on the element of a hot stove isn't wise— but they can also assume more abstract proportions as I experienced during the course of this storytelling.

In her dissertation, Métis scholar and educator Lois Edge (2011) gracefully weaves together beadwork and writing in applying a reflective social analytic auto-ethnographic approach to a strategy of decolonization and social wellbeing. Upon reading her dissertation, I was struck with a great sense of sheepishness as I “fell down” and moved through a humbling coming-to-terms with the fact that the work *I* share with you here is indeed a mere contribution to existing storytelling and wisdom-seeking. My initial dismay at the fact that another Indigenous person had explored beading and auto-ethnography was soothed by humility’s gentle teachings.

Humility, as I’ve been taught, is not a condition of humiliation or relative insignificance, nor does it require making one’s self small for virtue’s sake. The teachings that I have received explore humility as an honest assessment of the self vis-à-vis all relations and so, really, humility proves to be a great relief: I am not as grand, perfect, and outstanding as I feel I need to be, nor am I as small, pathetic, and hopeless as I fear I am. In this way humility teaches me to rightsize myself so that I might shed the feelings of inferiority and intimidation I initially experience when engaging with others’ compelling creations. Thus I return to Edge’s words with a rightsized self and humbled reverence. She states that “This study is premised upon a conceptual metaphor of beadwork and writing wherein each is mutually dependent and reciprocal of the other. I could not write this work without beadwork and without beadwork this work would not be written” (p. 297). My beading and writing exist within the same reciprocity described by Edge and I presently reflect that this relationship can also be viewed within other facets of my being:

I cannot conceptualize myself without Métisness and without Métisness I would not exist.

I cannot conceptualize myself without whiteness and without whiteness I would not exist.

I could not engage in these reflections without my lived experiences of trauma and without my lived experiences of trauma these reflections could not emerge.

I am compelled to write this work as I am alive and I can only write this work if I am alive.

The last statement is infused with solemn memory and feeling. Earlier in this work I shared of my previous struggles with mental health and how these have included self-harm, substance use, and suicidal ideation and attempts. While I know and believe that mental wellness cannot be charted along a linear path—the fallacy of consistently moving towards “better” and “positive” mental health—I have also learned that the vacillations between stability and crisis are as unpredictable as they are jarring. Born out of painful and dangerous experience, this knowledge has come at a great cost that has required the near-surrender to waves of illness that I neither had understanding of nor seeming control over.

The past two years and the events they’ve hosted have irrevocably changed me as a person, community member, wisdom-seeker, and healer. In many ways my mental health has never been more challenged than it has been during these years and I am certain that my emergence from hopelessness can largely be attributed to spiritual supports. As I consider the next few pages of writing, I visualize wrapping a thick, warm blanket around my shoulders in a softened act of steeling myself for the difficult reflections to come. There were many moments throughout the drafting of this work when I felt I could get away with omitting these pieces of me and the people who make me who I am. However I now believe that failing to include the following words would be akin to leaving the curtains drawn on a dazzling summer’s day: Tolerable but diminished in its brightness and clarity. If only a single kernel of wisdom has

emerged from my auto-ethnographic process it is that wherever I go, there I am (Kabatt-Zinn, 2005); There's no hiding from myself in the quiet, insulated thought-space that is my beading studio.

Tragic news reached me in June 2021 when I found out that my very good friend, Mark, had died suddenly and under sorrowful circumstances while living overseas. When I opened the text message from another friend—a grim messenger of devastating news—my heart broke. In the week that followed his death I reached out to my family with a humble request to help us bring Mark's ashes home. I share the following excerpt from that message:

Mark and I became friends in 2015. He was 25 at the time and a walking contradiction; On the outside, a hip, youthful man who favoured 5-panel caps and mid-2000's punk bands' t-shirts, and on the inside, one of the wisest, most thoughtful, and best-read people I've ever known. We forged a friendship through our common suffering but it grew beyond this as we discovered our shared love of cynicism, music, books, animated discussions, coffee, and many more things. Mark existed as a living example that by doing the right thing (in our case, healing ourselves in order to help others), a person can lead a full, beautiful, and useful life. Alongside others, he showed me how to transform the most dire moments of my history into the foundation of a good, honest, and purposeful life: a life worth living. In short, he was a truly good friend.

What I can't seem to be able to capture in writing is Mark's near-magical ability to move through task-after-task, achieve goal-after-goal, and the stylish, graceful way in which he did it. Above all, Mark was a generous and gifted person, a great mind, and a

trusted friend. I won't drone on at greater length about his accomplishments and the spectacular person he was because the most important piece I want to share is this: To know Mark was to receive a gift of incalculable value and I will miss him forever.

A good friend, Brad, took me on a drive the day I learned of Mark's death and we silently travelled across the prairies towards the lush Whiteshell where trees, waters, and moss abound (Figure 12). As a child I spent my summers on that land and I'm reminded of how the frigid waters of the meteor-created West Hawk Lake could chill to the bone even on the most scorching-hot days. We took the long way to the lake that day, charting my grief along the largely overgrown Historic Number One route that feels cozy compared to the asphalt bustle of the newer four-lane highway some kilometres away. I wept as eagles soared above the vehicle carrying us forward and began mourning the loss of someone whose funeral I'd never imagined attending. The lake would have been cold as it always has been —115 meters deep of cold— yet as I waded into the water I did not detect the familiar freeze, instead feeling empty and void of sensation. Reaching down into the shallow, I plucked a stone from the lake and grasped the wet rock tightly in my hand as a reminder that I can feel because I am alive. That stone has become sacred to me and it is kept safe in one of *la paarantii kaayash ooshchi*'s medicine pouches which I beaded, along with a sprig of *l'arbr a saent* I harvested that same summer (Figure 13).

During the course of our drive to the lake that day in June, we stopped at a lily pond to stretch our legs and breathe some fresh air into tired lungs. There I admired and learned of *nibiish-waawaasagone*, the star that fell from Skyworld that settled upon water to bloom into a

Figure 12. Historic Number One Highway in June 2021, photograph



beautiful white lily. Brad kindly shared a photo he took of *nibiish-waawaasagone* (Figure 14), whose glistening blossom I beaded for my fourth and final panel (Figure 16). In recognition of the bond Brad has forged with me—caring for and loving me when I could not do so for myself—I gift this beadwork to him knowing that in so doing I honour him as an essential piece of me; Someone who makes me who I am.

After spending some time watching the tranquil pond, I turned to face the enormous granite rocks reaching towards the sky that hugged the opposite side of the road. It wasn't long before I spotted a patch of wild prairie roses bordering the rocks (Figure 15) and was filled with

Figure 13. Beaded medicine pouch with sage and stone, photograph (2022)



an immediate and powerful sense of protection; Protection from my *noohkoom* Rose-Marie. Her love echoed across realms and reached me when I most needed it; When mortality seemed to be a tenuous thread I was destined to sever prematurely, when the prospect of living out the grief demanding to be felt was as frightening as it was inaccessible, and when the idea of existence made as much sense as a spoonful of salt in a cup of tea. Emerging from an impressive personal history of cynicism and nihilism, no one is more surprised than I about my 180-degree rotation towards sensitivity, optimism, and belief. At the same time, I reflect that the wisdoms of tenderness and care are littered throughout my memories as heartwarming beacons, so perhaps

the inner narrative of apathy and skepticism I've defined myself by since teenage-hood is more fabrication than truth.

Figure 14. *nibiish-waawaasagone* in the Whiteshell, photograph (2021)



June 2021 would mark the beginning of one of the aforementioned waves of illness, the genesis of a nine-month descent into madness, anguish, and what oftentimes felt like “The End”. “The End” is an expression of finality and that is precisely the feeling which has imbued many months of my adult life. Mental illness’s tragic theatre performances can be spotted along the arc

of my life, some of which have played during the course of my graduate studies and thesis writing. One day in the bitterly cold November of 2021, when I'd ceased opening my email inboxes, was incapable of returning text messages or phone calls, showered three to four times a day to "get clean", hadn't written a single sentence towards my thesis in months, and couldn't muster the will to rid my home of a disturbing fruit fly infestation, I rediscovered an unsent 'farewell note' I'd written with the intent of sending it to my loved ones in 2014. Struck by sadness, it dawned upon me that I was once again a hair's breadth away from death, just as I had been when penciling my 'final goodbye' seven years earlier. As I recount this bit, I tread carefully as to avoid defaulting to sardonic humour in my narrative, humour I would only employ to distract from and dilute the intensity of my struggles. Having lost count of how many times I've employed this empty tactic in the past, I am now certain that it is only through vulnerability, courage, and kindness that I might authentically honour my experiences and that derisive, morose commentary should be avoided altogether. And so, in the spirit of straightforwardness, I will allow myself to reflect that while the blame cannot be laid at the feet of my writing, it has witnessed the nearest experience to suicide possible.

Careful have been my mind's movements in responding to "*Who am I?*". In light of my fluctuating mental health, I do not want to tell a story of 'me' that endeavours to impress more than it seeks to express, nor do I wish to describe myself in such a way that triggers a cataclysmic cycle of self-examination that tears away at the health I've mindfully nurtured within. I *do* want to tell a story that emphasizes love, courage, and resilience. So, here I am, typing the words amounting to the sentences laid before you; Thus you act as a witness to the fact that my illness did not consume absolutely and hope, love, and life prevailed. For this work

springs up from a rootedness in kin and community powerful enough to save a life, a painstaking refusal to offer the final surrender to despair, and repeated acts of self-love deeply bound to the realm of the Spirit.

Figure 15. Wild prairie roses in the Whiteshell, photograph (2021)



I listen to and sit with the words of my teachers who share that Indigenous knowledge(s) surrounding purpose, healing, the ‘self’, time, and other mysteries of life, emphasize a continuum rather than linear interpretations of existence. Many of these knowledges encourage me to continue learning as it is a higher purpose to which I am called; A call issued by Creator at the time of my birth when I was provided gifts for the spirit. In this way, learning is essential to

becoming and discovering who I am amidst the worldly clamours that distract and detract from my steps within *mino-pimatisiwin*. Mi'kmaq author and educator Marie Battiste (2010) tells us that learning is a holistic, lifelong, purposeful, experiential, communal, and spiritual process that is learned within one's language and culture (p. 2). She further shares that "What guides our learning (beyond family, community, and Elders) is spirit, our own learning spirits who travel with us and guide us along our earth walk, offering guidance, inspiration, and quiet unrealized potential to be who we are" (2010, p. 2). I consider Battiste's teaching alongside others I've received that direct me towards an understanding that my life's purpose is to continually journey towards myself, ever becoming closer while never "arriving at" or "achieving" complete self-knowledge. The journeying to self is precisely what this auto-ethnographic work is attempting to capture; An expedition fraught with questions and doubt that is nonetheless *good* in its execution since it does not matter how haltingly I travel. Within this framework of learning and living, answering "*Who am I?*" ceases to feel like a daunting one-time exercise in navel-gazing, instead becoming a lasting friend that shall accompany me on a lifelong journey to finding myself, thereby finding my place within Creation.

Who am I?

I am a person who comes from somewhere and is headed onwards.

Who am I?

I am a spirit hosted within a human frame, bound to Creation for an eternity I won't ever fully comprehend.

Who am I?

I am a traveller following in the footsteps of those that came before and I am one that came before for those who will follow.

Who am I?

I am a person simultaneously standing at the beginning and end of storytelling.

This chapter has offered a relatively small window into the seemingly bottomless pool of reflections surrounding who I am. Throughout the course of my writing —the unabating stare into ‘self’ in the mirror of auto-ethnography— I have tried to remember that disregarding the mutual dependence contained within existence enables the satiation of individualism and a colonized process of self-actualization —*What can I get?*— all the while ignoring the impacts of a singular being on the whole, as though a thrown stone doesn’t unequivocally result in ripples blooming outwards across the water. Though I might have initially predicted that a great sense of peace would emerge from my knowledge-gathering process, I currently feel more responsible than serene. Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete (2015) offers me insight into this feeling, sharing how:

In Indigenous approaches, inner peace is not directly sought since the traditional view is that to overtly seek inner peace is, paradoxically, to ensure that one would never find it.

Rather, inner peace and wholeness are experienced through ceremony, ritual, and living everyday life in community (p. 152).

I am the splashing stone in others’ journeys just as they cast waves in my own, ever reminding me that the medicines —thoughts, speech, and deeds— I employ have an impact, no matter my perception of their inconsequence. I am responsible and bound to a journey of discovery that cannot be separated from all that exists within the realms of Creation, and so my narrative carries

on, enmeshed with all the other stories that have come before, those lived out alongside me, and those who've yet to come to pass. As for *who I am*, that story's ending has yet to be written.

Figure 16. Beaded panel gifted to Brad (2022)



niiya, poem (2022)

I am

a part of
shadow and light,
the unknown and
that which might

I am

a sum of
all things,
broken and mended,
gilded and
good

I am

a teacup
half-full with
me
half-full with
you

I am

a train journeying back
towards
me
to the station
of beginnings

LI RASAAD KAA KOOSHINAHAMAWEW: REFLECTING ON REFLECTION

What the beads taught me.

Earlier in my story I observed that settler spaces within academia have witnessed a significant shift towards “Indigenizing” research that appears to be trying to conveniently fit “Indigenous thematic elements” into existing academic structures. Instead of decolonizing academic inquiry, this process stymies research being done in a good way since, at its core, it fails to recognize that the researcher and their work cannot be fully understood outside of the relational context from which they emerge. Conversely, when a researcher grounds themselves in their identities, teachings, and communities—tending to their steps along the good path—they embody a relational ethic that transforms as much as it enlightens. The honouring of my roots enables me to approach “the work” with humility, care, and love, thereby fostering the growth of a contemporary practice of Indigenous research that reflects my ancestral wisdoms and inspires a vision of a truly Indigenized academy.

Given academia’s more recent emphasis on Indigenizing research and society’s purported overarching goals of decolonization and reconciliation, the notion of claiming myself through my work seems especially relevant. I cause less harm this way. An informed researcher that engages their thoughts, speech, and deeds in an honest manner is less likely to act in disharmony with research being done in a good way, thus more likely to offer a positive contribution to the intergenerational chronicling of wisdoms. And, while a step in the right direction, a token self-locating statement typed at the outset of a publication does not necessarily decolonize the writing that follows. If the ideas put forth prioritize Western values and shirk relational accountability, the quality of the work’s participation in the Indigenization of academic systems is questionable.

As a seeker and caretaker of knowledge, I share in a sacred duty to tend to the path that others have trudged before us, and that others still will join; I am one of countless travellers following in the footsteps of those that came before and we are the ones that came before for those who will follow. Yet how can I enact relationality in my work? How can I “do” good research when deadlines, funding limitations, and time constraints seem to block every opportunity? Through my experiences in reflecting and storying —tending the garden of discovery alongside others who don’t mind muddying their hands— I have begun to develop some answers for myself.

As vital as the bright green stem is to the ripe berry brimming with juice red enough to stain a chin, an answer requires a question. If I planted a strawberry bush with each new question, every intuitive contemplation, I would tend to that lush garden until my return to the place of beginnings, which is another way of saying: In thinking about about how to do research in a good way, I have a lot of questions.

What does “becoming part of” wisdom-seeking look like? Feel like?

Can I discover “new” wisdoms? Or, am I simply asked to be an observer, patient and diligent enough to bear witness to truths and wisdoms that have existed, are existing, and will continue to exist with or without observation?

How do I remain an active participant in community whilst trudging forwards along institutional pathways? How do I stay part of?

Am I capable of doing this work? Living between worlds while leveraging my privileges in order to serve my communities?

When will I know that I’m doing it “right”?

Beading has been one of my greatest teachers. While I may never receive all the “answers” I desire, I always get the questions and teachings I need most. When I am lonely, the beads remind me that I am part of that rich tapestry that contains all Creation, that loneliness can simply be an alienating yet temporary state of solitude, that connection is the antidote to fear, and that I do belong. When I am impatient, thread spools remind me that while hastiness can improve the quantity of productivity, it does not guarantee its quality; How frustrating it can be when knots form, threads tangle and tear, and I realize that I haven’t been paying attention to my hands for some time. How wonderful it is when the reverse of my beadwork —the side that exposes the consistency and accuracy of my stitching— reveals hundreds of intentionally-placed stitches, methodical fruits of the “take your time” labour. When I am overwhelmed, the soft felt mat reminds me that containing multitudes leads to brilliance, that beauty is born out of chaos, and that I am not being asked to make sense of every bead on the mat, rather I am asked to attend to them one by one.

I used two needles to bead all four panels. It would have been just one if it were not for the fact that, as I stitched the final loops of edging on the third panel, I bent the first needle which had dutifully accompanied me from the beginning. At the sight of its sad bend a curious sensation of guilt and bereavement overtook me: Here was a shiny metal friend that had faithfully assisted me in my task for months and bringing about its premature retirement felt like a betrayal of its service. I reflected that a bent needle feels like turning the final page on a book that doesn’t seem quite “finished” yet, or a summer stroll under constant cloud cover on an otherwise sunny day, or the feeling in my chest when I wave goodbye to a friend. Atop the desk in my studio I display the two needles that assisted me in completing the four beaded panels

accompanying this text (Figure 17); The modest frame sits quietly beside a wild and spindly aloe vera plant, the two needles ever a reminder of the labours of spirit, love, and time I undertook in order to complete this thesis.

Figure 17. *lii naamii nigwii* (2022)



Neighbouring my two needle friends and the plant is a handwritten note I penned in solitary desperation one winter evening in 2022; These four sentences have since operated as a vital paper talisman of encouragement, bravely steering my steps while thinking about feeling and feeling about thinking. The note reads:

Dig deeper, as though your next breath lies on the other side of this feeling.

Risk more, as though comfort is a spile quietly bleeding you dry.

Seek fearlessly, as though your heart beats on courage alone.

You can do it.

In moving through this work, the beads have witnessed a great deal of thinking and a hazardous amount of feeling, for chronicling my reflections has indeed felt like a lot of things. Sometimes it felt like my mind, heart, and the computer's keys were connected by an abstract kinetic energy, charged with electric passion and fierce concentration. Many times it felt like readying myself to complete some dishwashing at the kitchen sink only to look down and see a plate in each hand, a full sink, and no cloth or soap in sight. Other times it felt like treading a river of sticky-thick mud that rises with every leg kick and every arm stroke sucks me closer to a final bottom. Most of the time it felt like coming home to the box where love lives.

I have more unanswered questions now than I did at the outset of my reflecting. Strangely enough and despite all I can say, the search for answers-that-may-never-come has filled a lacuna within me that only became known through the reflexive spiritual practice of beading. It is as if the beads acted as a mirror for observation that could only reflect back goodness and grace, as a persistent friend to the rhythm of needles weaving in and out of leather urging me onwards, and as an ideal channel for reflexive auto-ethnography. In a way I owe my life to the beads. When I struggled under the weight of helplessness and oblivion, they reminded me of all those people whom I've loved that have returned to Creator and gently suggested that all of them are cheering me on from the spiritual plane. When I felt like giving up, they politely demanded: *Just one more string of beads! Just a few more stitches! Just until this thought passes.* And when life seemed to be falling apart and tears could not be stopped from wetting the soft felt mat, they sat with me in loving silence.

Maarsii to the beads for making this work possible.

LII KOONTEUR MAAKA

But what about the storytellers?

Words are important and so are the people who the words belong to. The source of a story—the spirit hosting the mind that molded thought and feeling to produce the distinctive lens through which the idea passes to reach its audience—is in many ways just as influential as the words themselves. Within an academic system that promotes empiricism and advocates for the reduction of bias, the acceptance of such a proposition is somewhat inconvenient; It disturbs the goal and practice of bias-reduction by suggesting that, no matter the efforts undertaken to shrink the impacts of the individual on that which is being observed, an often undetectable trace of lived experience is immutably embedded in the observer's eye. Western knowledge-seeking institutions already know this as evidenced by their general call for bias reduction, however I view their integration of knowledge-into-praxis as somewhat incomplete.

My storytelling has relied on borrowing the ideas of others in order to share in a timeless conversation about origins, direction, purpose, and being. Receiving their words as loans has felt like my earliest childhood expeditions to the local public library whose stacks were as filled with treasures as its carpet was lovingly worn: Magical, in that all of these stories, mindfully composed, are neatly arranged and patiently waiting to be discovered; Inspiring, in that all these stories were crafted by people who took the time to reflect upon and document their ideas; and Humbling, in that I have all of these writings to explore yet I can only read one story at a time. Citations are not unlike beads in the sense that I must consider writing excerpts respectively, just as I can only string sparkling cylinders onto thread in the manner described by Two-Spirit Lakota Elder Beverly Little Thunder (2016): one bead a time. When I attempt to include multiple stories

in rapid succession without considering whose voice is doing the telling, I watch them collide on the page like beads tumbling atop a felt mat —chaotic as they roll away from their original piles towards other beads’ homes, and confused as they look around to find unfamiliar and, sometimes, discordant sights (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Chaotic meeting on the beading mat, photograph (2022)



Trying to bead with a messy mat can be likened to citing authors without paying attention to where the words come from; Not impossible, but severely hindered in the ability to produce a cohesive and meaningful work. In conceptualizing every citation included in my writing as a small snippet of someone’s story —special words arranged in such a way to assist an original voice in expressing thought— the choices I make as I cite become increasingly significant and with every decision I must ask myself:

Whose words am I borrowing?

Is the voice whose words I'm borrowing qualified to speak to the topic at hand? That is, does this person carry the lived experience and wisdoms necessary to honour the topic in an ethical, knowledgeable, and authentic way?

Am I taking the time to investigate where the words come from, or am I lazily assuming that I've done "enough" if their ideas fit alongside my own?

If I were asked to write a paper on nuclear science and the role of X-ray diffraction instruments in the characterization of disordered proteins, I would instinctively seek to borrow words from people whose wisdom and expertise qualified them to speak on the topic. Quite similarly, if I were asked to write a paper on Afro-Indigeneity and the layered impacts of white supremacy, racism, colonization, and classism on their intersecting lived experiences, I would borrow the words of Afro-Indigenous Peoples, as no other voice is better positioned to provide accurate, nuanced, and relevant views on that topic. In this work I have endeavoured to do likewise; To highlight Indigenous voices in telling a story which, at its core, is implicated in Indigeneity. At the time of its submission, my thesis contains 46 references; Of these, 41 include one or more Indigenous lead contributor(s), and within the 41, at least 9 contributors identify as Two-Spirit, Indigiqueer, or as another expression of sexual and/or gender diversity. Of the remaining 5 references, 2 sources are attributed to Black voices and the remaining 3 are from European or settler contributors. My intent in sharing these figures is not to impress with a performance of equity nor to request praise for doing what is simply logical; I'm sharing this

information because I want to re-emphasize that the source of words is just as important as the message itself.

I've titled my reference list "*toon moo daahtamoo niiya*" whose English translation reads as "I borrow your words". This title reflects an intentional choice to centre the voices of storytellers whose ideas are interwoven with my own narrative, and a deliberate attempt to highlight the personal by shifting away from "citations" and "references" towards "borrowed words". Upon reflection, it seemed important to ask myself:

Why did I borrow words? Did I feel the need to include others' words in order to meet a standard of western academia?

It did not take much pondering for other questions to burst forth and thus began a match of volleying remarks between two selves: The self-of-emotion whose feet dance sweetly upon the earth and whose heart brims with reflexive sensitivity, exchanged with the self-of-reason whose gaze is firmly fixed on the horizon of logic, forever winding itself through institutional mazes and leaping through hoops it did not create nor hang. In the chamber of reflection these two selves swapped ideas and questions, seeking to place my auto-ethnographic work along the broad highway of knowledge that hosts all other research that has come before and searching, too, for a way to simultaneously ground this thesis in community *and* meet the requirements of the Western institution whose approval it seeks. The echoes of their talk is shared here in an effort to illustrate how, through their differences, the contradictions which emerged allowed me to place this work right where it belongs: in kinship with all of Creation.

I suppose it makes sense to begin with the most pressing

question: Why did I borrow words?

That doesn't feel like the place we should start.

If I am to really contextualize this writing amidst

other wisdom-seeking and its questers, soaring

above the work in order to observe its relationship

to all it touches, we should begin by asking:

Why did I write this?

A question that needn't an answer. The institution wants to know

how this work connects to other scholarship, not how I *feel* about

my motivations for this work. A comprehensive and nuanced

literature review that connects this writing to other research works

and frameworks should be inserted here in order to provide the

macro-level perspective expected of such a thesis.

I'm not so sure about that. Perhaps we should

question the appropriateness of a westernized

literature review in these pages. I am not fond

of the notion of an academic performance that shirks

relational accountability and compromises on its

most basic principles in order to dot I's and cross T's.

I'm sensing a rejection of western-influenced theory and systems, yet these are the altar at which you will lay your thesis for evaluation and approval. What about Cree scholar Onowa McIvors's (2010) talk of "blending" foundational Indigenous research paradigms with western methods? Auto-ethnography, after all, is a narrative approach that facilitates such a blend.

You're correct that this thesis incorporates both Indigenous and western perspectives, but just as McIvor stated, it is first grounded in foundational Indigenous research paradigms. As for auto-ethnography, the more my stories unfolded, the more the storytelling began to carry greater meaning and purpose than I'd initially expected from westernized narrative inquiry. In some way, auto-ethnography —on its own—didn't fully capture the spiritual essence of storytelling and wisdom-seeking.

So where do we place this work? Is it an auto-ethnography?

Is it a story? Is this thesis an example of arts-based research?

Is it an example of Indigenous Research Methods in action?

*In some way, this work is all of the above. It is a story
that makes use of the auto-ethnographic format to convey
the wisdoms that emerged from arts-based research
grounded in Indigenous methods.*

Fairly observed but how, then, do we place this work
alongside others'? What strands of wisdom-seeking might
this work be related to? I am not keen on vagueness.

*I see this thesis as related to all wisdom-seeking
that has come before it. In a practical way, I drew
upon the words of many seekers and storytellers in
sharing my own narrative. In order to borrow these
words, their stories had to be written first.*

This does seem exceptionally vague.

*I can offer specifics. This thesis is related to the
works of other auto-ethnographers (Bainbridge,
2007; Bishop, 2021; Houston, 2007), and further aims
to place itself amidst the rich and growing collection*

of Indigenous writings looking to transform the Academy through wisdom-seeking. It is related to the works of artists, healers, craftspeople, and thus aligns itself with the process of employing arts-based methods to tell a story that is forged through creativity. Above all it is in relationship with storytellers, hoping that in offering up a piece of my narrative I might join the sacred circle of their sharing.

Ok, but how do you place this thesis within your own journey? How do you situate it in relation to academia as you know it? Why did this work have to be so personal?

Given that I embarked upon this reflective quest and discovered what I did about myself, I cannot conceive of how I could operate within the Academy without completing this undertaking. The deeply personal tone of this this work was unavoidable if I was to locate myself—as a researcher, as a learner, as a seeker, and as a spiritual being—in an honest, genuine, and fearless

way: *in a good way.*

So what you're saying is that this thesis, your story,
needed to be vulnerably undertaken and expressed
in order for you to move forward as an academic?

*Exactly. If I am to do "good research" that honours
my place and responsibility within Creation, I must
first know, honour, and love myself. What better way
is there to accomplish these than by investigating my
location through story-telling? I do not know of one.*

So you wrote this work —told this story— because
you needed to in order to move forward?

*That's how I see it. Yet I'm still curious as to the roots
of my narrative, the "why" behind the storytelling.*

Please, I cannot continue debating this point - there
are some requirements you simply cannot postpone or
evade any longer. Don't you want to complete this
work? Don't you see that stalled steps only decrease
your usefulness to others —to your communities?

*Your questions are steeped in fear, impatience and
self-doubt. Why did I write this? Why endeavour the
journey back towards self?*

Because it made sense, and because others have walked
the path before you, too. Remember Lois Edge? She who,
as you wrote, “gracefully wove together beadwork and writing
in applying a reflective social analytic auto-ethnographic
approach to a strategy of decolonization and social wellbeing”?

*I remember. I also remember, before beginning this work,
being driven by an insistent need to know of myself,
the beat of a drum that demands to be heard, and the
feeling that if I could only get on the other side of Sinclair’s
four questions, that the path ahead would be revealed.*

You responded to the four questions. You accomplished
what you set out to do. Why this insistence on returning to
the “start”? How does ruminating on initial intentions help
contextualize and rationalize this thesis?

*Perhaps the “beginning” is the birthplace of both context
and rationale. If I am to seek knowledge outside of me, I*

*must first know myself. If I am to journey onwards and
outwards, I must first find the early steps within. If I am
to do research in a good way, I must see and treat myself
with goodness.*

Perhaps. This does remind me of Māori scholar Paul Whitunui's
description of the deeply necessary journey of "rediscovering
and recentring our culture from 'within' as opposed to relying
solely on 'externally codified' forms of knowledge" (2014,
p. 460) and his assertion that this journey is a gift of Indigeneity.

*That is precisely the journey and gift I am looking to
explore. I have spent many months searching "within"
in order to tell my story in as-Indigenous-a-manner-as-
possible; Rushing to its finish line in an attempt to divest
myself of its narration would be rash and short-sighted.
Let's take the time.*

I suppose you're right. This thesis witnessed a genuine
transformation alongside real learning about how our story
connects to the cultural, social, political, and spiritual. I'm
reminded again of Onowa McIvor who shared: "If I am

to truly have a transformative experience, how can I detach
the various parts of myself? Simply put, I cannot.” (2010, p. 143)

*I know I could not. I suppose I know “why” I wrote
this story. I wrote it because, once the opportunity of this
story-telling emerged, it was inconceivable to delay or avoid it.*

Why “inconceivable”? Could you not find other ways
to explore yourself as an academic that didn’t require
such intimate self-exploration?

*I needed to find where I belonged. There was
and remains a great sense of responsibility inherent
to occupying exclusive space within academic
institutions (Minthorn & Shotton, 2018); I am keenly
aware that this privilege is not granted to most peoples
including many of my kin. In finding belonging, I
become responsible for my own journey.*

So, at its core, the “why” driving this work has
much to do with relational accountability.

In a way, it has everything to do with relational

*accountability. This thesis only exists because my
life was storied into being by my ancestors, because
I have been shown and continue to be shown the
right direction in which to steer my steps, because
others have seen, honoured, and believed in me, and
because I survived to tell the tale.*

If I'm putting together the pieces properly, you
borrowed words not only out of necessity or an
obligation to a standard of western academia,
but also because, in the borrowing, you became
accountable to all your relations?

*Yes, that's correct. I borrowed words because others'
stories matter to me, because my story is all the richer
for their wisdoms, and because I must be reminded of
my role and responsibility within all of Creation. Most
of all, I borrowed words because I belong.*

Therefore I did not cite for the Academy. I consciously borrowed words to honour the
wisdoms of others' voices, to sing my narrative song alongside their nuanced harmonies, and to
illustrate that my story is incomplete if not in conversation with other ideas. In making my

selections, I sought to draw upon the brilliance of conversations that have already begun, placing special emphasis on 2SQT* voices to honour my kin: “Nothing about us, without us, is for us!” (OFIFC, 2021, p. 6). The beads taught me that a single bead is as important to the final work than a string of twenty beads and, paradoxically, they also taught me that a single bead is neither more nor less special than its neighbour. Informed by these teachings, my auto-ethnographic story is presented as an offering to all those conversations already taking place and those yet to emerge into being.

I’ve loftily entertained many goals for myself and this thesis as I moved through reflecting, beading, and writing: *I could expand the writing at a later date and tell the “full” story in greater detail. I could bead bigger, more elaborate panels and draft a grander story. I could include more personal stories, borrow more words, search more, feel more.* Shedding unhelpful ego allows me to settle into a simpler, softer goal: My sincere and humble hope is that this intimate work, forged through vulnerability, brings goodness to your screen.

Maarsii to the storytellers. I do not exist without you.

The Auto-Ethnographic Rhythm Section: Reprise, poem (2022)

How do I know

when to stop?

Time ticks
towards me

Unrelenting metronome,
it never slows.

Tick tock

I survived it all

Tick tock

To tell you

Tick tock

The journey;

Tick tock

It's worth it.

now I bid

goodbye to you

and

hello

to me.

MIINA KAWAPAMITIN: TYING UP LOOSE THREADS

Farewell.

When I first began stringing beads onto thread and zealously compiling notes for this work, an unspoken fear began to simmer within: that my responses to Murray Sinclair's four questions would culminate in a disappointing or inconclusive manner. As this chapter of my story turns its final pages and I look back on my meandering narrative with an eye to emend its expression, I find that I have indeed written a success story. Chuckling to myself, I'm reminded of the final page of English author Somerset Maugham's 'Razor's Edge' (1994), a book I once borrowed from *nipaapaa*'s library that fundamentally transformed my understanding of the impact of words and, more specifically, conclusions. As Maugham's story draws to what initially feels like a dissatisfying close, the narrator concludes:

But as I was finishing this book, uneasily conscious that I must leave my reader in the air and seeing no way to avoid it, I looked back with my mind's eye on my long narrative to see if there was any way in which I could devise a more satisfactory ending; and to my intense surprise it dawned upon me that without in the least intending to I had written nothing more nor less than a success story... And however superciliously the highbrows carp, we the public in our heart of hearts all like a success story; so perhaps my ending is not so unsatisfactory after all (p. 361).

Given my love of preserving histories and my demonstrated tendency towards sentimentalism, it will likely come as no surprise when I tell you that I'm one of those people that has multiple large bins filled with decades of writings; Storage brimming with precious

paper keepsakes as familiar as many-hued cards inscribed with the kind words and signatures of loved ones, and as niche as my earliest literary experiments at 8 years old. After considering Maugham's approach to conclusions and in nearing the end of this work, trying to conceive of the most appropriate closing statement, I was visited by an old memory of the first day of my grade 12 creative writing class.

Having transferred to a new school that autumn, I was surprised to quickly feel at home with my new peers. The school seemed to attract transfer students like me, charming oddballs that didn't quite fit in at their previous schools, and Creative Writing 40S's cast of characters was no exception—each of us as endearingly peculiar as the other. My peers and I chose our seats in a real show of independence, displaying a mixture of social anxiety, burgeoning self-assuredness, and yearning for connection that only teenagers are capable of truly perfecting. That day in the unfamiliar beige-hued schoolroom, our teacher, Bonnie Talbot, left a lifelong mark on my writing when she assigned us a simple reading exercise due the following class: to select a book we enjoyed and document only its first and last sentence. If my memory serves rightly, the intent of this assignment was to observe the ways in which authors approached bookending stories in order to shape our own compositions. I recall feeling inspired and excited to see if my favourite book at the time lived up to the task, and presently hoped that somewhere in those paper-filled bins I might find my September 2009 notebook from this pivotal class.

I did find it and, what's more, I discovered that the words shared at the beginning of this auto-ethnography, detailing how my story would be articulated through a circular process whose reflections could not be conveyed along a path whose Point A and Point B were connected by a straight line, were prophetic. Searching my tidy notes I found, to my great delight, that the

sentences I'd selected for the homework assignment were none other than those opening and closing 'The Razor's Edge', a novel that ends its narrative with, "And however superciliously the highbrows carp, we the public in our heart of hearts all like a success story; so perhaps my ending is not so unsatisfactory after all" (p. 361).

Some moments ago I typed out the book's final phrases unaware that a worn high school notebook, stowed away for "safekeeping" over a decade ago, contained a secret quietly waiting to be discovered. How wonderful it is to witness the circularity of my being, to behold a 15-year love for the same two sentences, and to observe the mark that stories can leave behind. Journeying back towards myself has not been easy, but if my abiding fondness for Maugham's words offers any lesson, it is that storying has the power to shape a life.

I started this work by telling you: "I shall begin telling a story that is woven together with countless beads". Ending this work—an important volume in my life's story— gives rise to the fearful refrain that I've written something too sensitive, too soft, or simply "too much". Yet it would appear that, in the face of colossal stumbling blocks, illness, and self-doubt, my thesis has accomplished what I set out to do but only hoped to achieve: to (re)discover my story in order to better understand who I am amidst Creation. As the beads were my witness, I've told a story that I am proud of, a story of quietude that wound its way back towards the place of beginnings, a story of prevailing goodness and enduring hope; A story of me.

Figure 19. Sun-shadow of *miina kawapamitin* wave, photograph (2021)



TOON MOO DAAHTAMOO NIIYA

I borrow your words.

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