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Longing to Belong: Reconnecting to my Cree ancestors (*âniskôtapânak)* and our Ancestral Homeland in Lesser Slave Lake, Canada

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Introduction

I am a North American Indigenous woman with ancestral roots in the Lesser Slave Lake area of northern Alberta, Canada. I use the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal interchangeably in referring to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people in Canada. My people, *nehiyawak, (*Cree people), from Treaty 8 territory are referred to as *sakâw* (Northern/Bush/Woodland) Cree which is the ancestral language of the Indigenous people in the area. My parents, born and raised in the Lesser Slave Lake area, were Cree speakers. However, English, the language of the dominant culture was used at home with their six children. There were seven in our mom's family and eleven in our dad's family.

Our ancestors lived off the land in that area for five or more generations from the early to mid-1800s. First Nations, Metis and non-Indigenous people inhabit small communities mainly on the southern, western and eastern shores of the lake. Traditionally, knowledge of Indigenous presence was transmitted through the oral histories of Indigenous people, but this was profoundly disrupted by colonization. Local history books, penned mostly by settlers, do include Indigenous families in the area; however, the focus is largely on the settlers and their contributions to the communities.

Permanent historical structures did not exist for Indigenous people who primarily lived off the land within relationships of reciprocity, caring for

the land and the land, in turn, providing for the people. Knowledge of burial sites was traditionally carried in oral history, but this has been lost. Archival records for some of my ancestors refer to burial sites but, in some cases, these are no longer visible, or their locations are unknown, unlike historical burial sites for settlers with visible permanent markers in local cemeteries. Further, some ancestral burial sites are now enclosed within designated parkland around the lake, again invisible to the public eye. Without extensive oral history, physical burial sites, or many archival records, understanding our ancestral history is challenging. This marginalization of our people and our history motivates me to strive for the recognition and acknowledgement of our people. In seeking to reclaim our oral histories and our stories on the land, we can create another level of understanding of experiences in the local area and deepen community knowledge.

This article primarily draws on my qualitative doctoral research (Sinclair 2013) and is driven by my view that as we deepen the understanding of our own histories, Indigenous knowledge, and Indigenous ways of knowing and being, it serves to strengthen our identities, individually and collectively, including familial and ancestral kinship ties. Our Elders instill in us the importance of knowing our history, knowing our language and culture, knowing our relatives; in other words, knowing who we are (Sinclair 2013). The Elders are our teachers in many ways. The late Metis scholar Elder Joseph Couture (2000) describes Elders as "the oral historians, guardians of the Secrets, as interpreters of the Life of the People, as unusual teachers and way-showers to the People" (32).

Yet, how do Indigenous people in Canada learn about our own histories when the pedagogical foundations of our oral traditions have been so profoundly disrupted, damaged or destroyed by deliberate colonial strategies that have resulted in a variety of challenges, barriers, and losses? Knowledge transmission does not happen organically when intergenerational language barriers exist. Traditional knowledge transmission in many of our families and communities has been seriously damaged and, in some cases, broken by the legacy of colonization and the subjugation of our knowledge and our people in Canada. Whether it was deliberate or inadvertent that our local histories

were marginally evident, the result is the same; our ancestors' stories become invisible over time in the landscape of Canada's past.

To address this dilemma, archival and genealogical data was collected for the study which was supplemented with narratives of Indigenous voices from my community. The purpose was to bring the ancestors out of the shadows and create a bridge of reconnection with the 're-searcher' and the 're-searched'. This work addresses the legacy of pain that Indigenous people carry because of colonization and oppression, and the marginalization, and silencing of our people. Further, it speaks to the need for validation and mobilization of Indigenous knowledge systems to support the efforts to make visible hidden yet essential Indigenous vitality. Throughout, the research was grounded in ceremony to honour our ancestors and our traditional ways, as well as to guide the work in a good way.

Context: Multiple Indigenous Identities

In many Indigenous communities, including my own family, there is a mix of Indigenous identities. Metis scholar, Joyce Green (2022) discusses this mix of identities: "The colonial and racialized history of Canada has led to many Aboriginal identities, and thus, of histories and communities. Not all of us fit a formula, and not many of us fit only one formula" (169). In my immediate family prior to 1985, we were considered Metis, although in earlier years the Cree term *âpihtâw'kosisân* and "Halfbreed" were also used. In 1990, our family acquired First Nation status, because of the 1985 Amendment to the Indian Act commonly known as "Bill C-31". It allowed the reinstatement of Indian women who had previously "lost" their Indian status through marriage to a "white' man or "non-Indian" man, as was the case with my maternal Cree grandmother. She lost her status when she married a white man from the United States. Ironically, when Indian men married white or non-Indian women, those women and their descendants automatically became status Indians. In 1987, our mother was the first in our family to acquire Indian status along with her siblings based on the genealogical research conducted by my eldest brother, Gordon to support her application. He continued with archival research of our paternal lineage

and then applied for status for our father, my siblings and I, and our children. In 1990, this resulted in our family acquiring "Indian" status.

Although the 1985 Amendment to the Indian Act was meant to eliminate sex-based discrimination, it created other forms of discrimination such as giving First Nations the authority to determine their own band membership codes. They determined who could regain band membership, who could live on reserve, and who could receive other provisions such as the benefits granted to non-member spouses and children of on-reserve band members. Prior to that amendment, Indian status and band membership were not separated.

Even though our family obtained First Nation status in 1990, we were excluded from 'band' membership in our home territory. Without band membership, families like ours became disconnected from their original Indigenous communities. Prior to obtaining First Nations status in 1990, our political representation was structured through local, provincial and national Metis organizations in Canada. Without band membership, it gives us even less political influence than before we gained 'Indian' status. The result is that we do not have a collective land base where our First Nation identities can be strengthened, and where our Indigenous language and culture are supported. The Assembly of First Nations is a strong collective political voice for over 600 First Nations bands in Canada represented by their chiefs. Yet, without connection and membership in a First Nation's band, without land, and without chief and council leadership, we lack strong political representation which is an act of disempowerment and contributes to a lack of agency for our families and communities.

Although the 1985 Indian Act amendment was implemented to rectify gender and racial discrimination, the late Harold Cardinal (1999), Cree leader, lawyer, as well as Indigenous rights activist, asserted it "has created its own host of new identities, and with them new problems" (xiii). Cardinal asserted this new class of Indians "who meet the legal requirements to be recognized as 'status Indians' but do not meet the requirements to be legally considered members of an existing band or reserve" has ultimately resulted in "a legal hocus pocus in which recovering 'status' has little or no meaning" (xiii). Our family, not unlike

many Indigenous families in Canada live in that disempowering 'in between' space that can have negative and even detrimental effects on our collective identity, on our connection to ancestral land, culture and community, on our social and political infrastructures, and on our sense of belonging.

A few short years after receiving Indian status in 1990, various family members including myself were served official notice from the Registrar of what was then the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs that our status would be revoked. The arbitrary nature of assigning identity in northern Alberta stems from 1899 when Indigenous people of the area could choose to accept Metis scrip in the form of land (240 acres) or money (240 dollars), or alternatively, they could take Treaty and be defined as Indian under the Indian Act. The Registrar stated that because the parents of our father's maternal grandmother took scrip, we were considered ineligible for Indian status. It did not matter that our great grandmother had died in 1898 before the signing of Treaty 8 and the allocation of "Halfbreed" scrip in 1899. Even though various ancestors from our maternal and paternal lineage were band members from Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 areas in Sawridge, Driftpile, Swan River, Sucker Cree, Michel bands and others, it resulted in many of our nuclear and extended family members having their First Nation status revoked. The challenge that our family faced in trying to retain our Indian status was like being caught in what Cardinal (1991) called 'legal limbo' (xiii).

For almost a decade, our family fought to prove our collective rights to be "Indian" since the passing of Bill C-31 in 1985. Two of our brothers and our dad had their status revoked, while the rest of our family's status remained intact. After years of archival research, expending personal resources on legal expertise, and eventually receiving legal services from a national Indigenous organization, our legal battle was lost. Sadly, a few years later our dad lost his battle with cancer, passing away at the age of 79 without any status. Over twenty years later, my brothers were able to regain their First Nation status following a subsequent amendment to the Indian Act. What we have learned from this experience is that the Indian registration process is deeply flawed - we share the same parents, grandparents and ancestral lineage but only certain family members were able to retain their First Nation status. It raises questions about the

deep injustices of state-imposed identities which, in turn, have substantive potential for family conflicts and community divisions.

My family is not unlike many Indigenous families in Canada who experienced the impact of confusing and immoral national policies. No matter which decisions our ancestors chose in signing treaty or accepting scrip, the government's colonial strategy was the extinguishment of Aboriginal entitlement to land and in many cases, the erasure of identity. Speaking from an international Indigenous perspective, Maori scholar and educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asserts that differential subjugation practices within a specific Indigenous context can demonstrate the unevenness of imperialism, within a single Indigenous society. She addresses the colonizers' self-serving interests of state-controlled identities, impacting Indigenous peoples' efforts of recovery:

> legislated identities which regulated who was an Indian and who was not, who was a *metis*, who had lost all status as an indigenous person, who had the correct fraction of blood quantum, who lived in the regulated spaces of reserves and communities, were all worked out arbitrarily (but systematically), to serve the interests of the colonizing society. The specificities of imperialism help to explain the different ways in which indigenous peoples have struggled to recover histories, lands, languages and basic human dignity. (22)

Metis scholar Heather Devine (2004) indicates that in the Treaty 8 region, 1,195 money scrips of $240 were distributed and forty-eight 240-acre land scrips were issued (195). She asserts that making the land scrip transferable allowed scrip speculators who followed the 1899 Half-Breed Commission to persuade and buy the land at a fraction of its value, leaving most of the Metis in northern Alberta to subsist as squatters (195). Devine goes on to say that the Crown land on which the Northern Metis relied for their livelihood to hunt, fish, and gather was "about to be opened up for homesteading after the federal government transferred responsibility for the management of natural resources to provincial governments in 1930" (195). Some of our ancestors were on First Nation Band lists while others, even within the same family, took Metis land scrip which ended up back in the hands of the Crown. Retired lawyer

and author of Metis descent, Jean Teillet (2019) states that the "Métis scrip process was a rotten deal. And everybody knew it" (381).

Our family's story (Sinclair 2013) and others yet to be told, would not be considered unique among Indigenous families across Canada. Thousands of families and communities have experienced disconnection from their traditional lands, languages, histories, and traditional cultures through the imposition of colonial policies. Many of our people, perhaps more among the Metis and non-status populations, "will have experienced state-imposed labels/identities which impact the sociocultural, political, and in many cases, economic aspects of their lives (8). Devine (2004) indicates that ethnic labels arbitrarily assigned by outsiders can be quite different from personal and family understandings of identity as she discovered in her comprehensive family history research (xviii). As stated in my research (Sinclair 2013), labels that are assigned to us by outsiders, "can change with the swipe of a bureaucrat's pen" (88).

Cree writer, lawyer and poet, Michelle Good (2023) describes what she refers to as the "colonial toolkit" used to activate the goals of colonialism to "remove us from our lands, disempower us in decisions about our land and resources, dismantle our highly effective social institutions, and dismember our families and communities" (3-4). She goes on to say that we need to embrace history as it truly unfolded in the way Indigenous people experienced it and further reminds us that "history is also contemporary" (4-5). In my research, I consider that re-searching our hiStories/re-claiming and re-searching our stories is a way of "giving voice to the land and to our relatives who have gone before us". Moreover, it resists the "primacy of the historical discourse of the dominant culture" (Sinclair 2013, 98). Good (2023) also noted that Canada is primarily Crown land where the government claims the land as their own and which is held by the federal and provincial governments. "Less than 11 per cent of Canada's land is in private hands; 41 per cent is federal Crown land and 48 per cent is provincial Crown land" (204).

Research Intentions: Identity, Land, Belonging

There is a complexity of internal and external factors which contribute to an individual or collective sense of identity. Although the focus of my research was not exclusively on Indigenous identity, it formed an integral aspect of the study. As described by Metis scholar Weber-Pillwax (2003), "identity formation is [also] connected with and affected by such additional environmental elements as physical geography including land, knowledge and education systems, economic and governing systems, languages, values and spirituality" (18-19). She also addresses the impact on legislative identity on our people which extends beyond theories on paper: "the effects of this 'outside naming' has been and continues to be a destructive element in the development of Indigenous peoples and their communities in general, and to the normal processes of individual identity formation in particular (58-59). In my experience, the challenges of ascribed identity on our family are unnecessary barriers and hurdles that we face in addition to the legacy of the subjugation and colonization of our people.

I believe we need to be cognizant that government-imposed identity can serve to divide us in ways that are long lasting and destructive to our individual and collective wellbeing as Indigenous people. Families such as ours experiencing different entitlements associated with the respective labels assigned by the state are in a precarious situation with the potential to create resentments and divisions among family members. Inconsistent state-imposed identities could pit us against one another if we are not applying a critical lens to the consequences of externally applied labels that privilege or limit the rights of individual family or community members over others. Anishinaabe writer of mixed ancestry, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (1993) says that we will not reach consensus on the question of politically imposed identities. Instead, we must assert our own definitions of who we are and reject colonizers' systems of imposing definitions which would:

> reduce us to nothingness with misrepresentative, overly-broad or trivializing labels of identification. … By freeing ourselves of the constricting bounds of stereotypes and imposed labels of identity, we empower ourselves and our

> communities and break free of the yoke of colonial power that has not only controlled what we do and where we live but who we are. (24)

Colonizing governments can attack our languages and reduce our cultures through their restrictive policies, but no one can take away our inherent blood connections. Further, we as Indigenous peoples are becomingly increasingly educated and able to do our own research which can reconnect us to our own knowledges, our ancestral land, our own histories, and our own ways of being. Smith (2005) says that research was used as an oppressive tool, like schooling, but it is "gradually coming to be seen as a potential means to reclaim languages, histories, and knowledge to find solutions to the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to an alternative way of knowing and being" (91). Through this research, I am working to reconnect and strengthen our own individual and collective identity through knowing our histories, who our ancestors are, where they lived, and honouring our own ways of knowing.

Indigenous Research Framework: Honouring Our Own Ways of Knowing

To explore the complexity of multiple identities and reconnect with land and ancestry, I engaged the principles of Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) as identified by Cree Metis scholar and Professor Emeritus, Cora Weber-Pillwax (1999, 31-32) who is also from northern Alberta. This study drew on multiple IRM principles, including that it must serve the community, it must follow Traditional protocols, and it should privilege "lived Indigenous experience" as the foundation of Indigenous research (Sinclair 2013, 8).

Through prayer and ceremony on the land, which follows traditional practices and protocol, I began my search to make visible the history of my ancestors and their stories. Throughout the research process, I drew on our own ways of knowing, in addition to ceremony, by smudging my research and writing space and providing food offerings for my ancestors as I worked. I engaged with my research as a sacred ceremony. As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) maintains, research is ceremony,

and we need to begin our work in the right way. It seemed even more imperative to engage with the research as a sacred process, out of respect for our ancestors and their lived experiences.

The challenge to find a methodology that fit the study was like trying to force a square peg into a round hole. I used my family history as the foundation of my research, as a "case study". This included an autoethnography of ancestral lived Indigenous experience as a northern Alberta Cree family. Social scientist Robert Yin (2009) discusses that case study is used in many situations "to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" and further, is used as a common research method in "psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, social work, business, education, nursing and community planning" (4). Yin asserts that the case study method "allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (4). I acknowledge that the dynamic nature of my research may not fully fit within qualitative case study research parameters, however, I suggest that the stories and ancestral history of my immediate family could be considered a microcosm of other Indigenous families in Canada. Our family story, including my own perspective, stood as a 'voice from the inside', providing an Indigenous perspective which largely was absent in the literature; although today, is becoming increasingly evident.

I also gathered archival data including archival documents from colonial institutions, including land searches to identify reserve land, scrip land, and burial sites, supplemented by qualitative interviews of family members and knowledge holders from the community of Lesser Slave Lake. This included several audio recordings of my late father given the breadth of his experience as an Indigenous leader at a community, provincial and national level. The interviews addressed other real-life events of our family and others from the Lesser Slave Lake area. I maintained reflexive research journey notes throughout the process. Documenting knowledge of our familial roots served as the foundation for a deepened awareness of our Indigenous ancestry; one that permits our family's current generations and subsequent generations to reconnect to our ancestors and to their ancestral land at some level. It

also sought to create another, deeper, level of understanding of community knowledge.

In terms of writing, I was inspired by the work of Cree/Saulteaux scholar, Margaret Kovach (2009), who described her writing style as first-person narrative woven with expository writing and analysis as a research story: "It is situated in a time, place, and context. … Although the narrative style is present, the writing often shape-shifts to other forms. Like sweetgrass, it has three braids, comprising three writing styles: expository, analytical, and narrative" (21).

Similar to Kovach, I use first person voice to incorporate narrative which also has the additional benefit of "keeping me grounded" (Sinclair 2013, 21). Using first person narrative in this study reveals my own subjectivity, while drawing on the stories of others, mostly family members, some of whom are no longer with us. My intention was to present the research with honesty, integrity, and accuracy as best as I could, being respectful of individual and collective voices, while meeting the academic requirements of the research (9-10).

Autoethnography: The First Steps, Finding My Voice, Finding my History

Among Indigenous cultures where oral transmission is the norm, with the passing of Elders, grandparents and parents, the oral history goes with them. This work was an attempt to capture some of those stories, some previously recorded and some from my own lived experience, as well as the collective memory of others in the family and community. In my family, Cree language fluency in my generation no longer seems within reach especially since the passing of our parents. Thus, it has been imperative to document our stories, our ancestral land and bloodline connections, weaving together the fragments of ancestral lived experience as a bridge for our descendants to know themselves and have a strong sense of identity and hopefully belonging. This autoethnographic journey (Sinclair 2013) was to find voice, my own and those of my ancestors who are no longer visible, so together we emerge from the shadows into the light. It is like "re-Cree-ating" our past (29).

I realized on this research journey, that my own lived experience was vital, beginning with my home birth which left an imprint on me that I have carried all my life. It was my eldest sister Linda who encouraged me to include the story of my home birth in my research. She remembers it though she was only 3 ½ years old at the time. I use it here to provide context about the issue of invisibility as I see it.

> I was born in the mid-1950s in a small two room house in northern Alberta with no indoor plumbing or telephone. There was no hospital or doctor in the town. The nurse who provided medical services for the community wasn't available the night I was born so Dad rushed to find the midwife who had delivered many babies over the years, mostly of my parents' generation. In my family, I was the only one of my siblings born at home even though our parents' generation and those before were delivered by midwives. My home birth may have set the tone for my life path as there were no medical records for my delivery, no birth weight, no height, no time of delivery. Invisible.
>
> The feeling of being left out, of not being important enough to write about, of being invisible was reinforced in school, right at the outset from first grade. We never saw ourselves in school textbooks. There was no written history about our people, it was like we did not matter. We weren't important enough in Slave Lake for the townspeople to keep accurate records, even of the burial sites and cemeteries where our ancestors lie. All of this sets the tone of this "re-search" for the restoration of evidence and the stories of our people, my ancestors in the Slave Lake area, seeking to be visible, no longer invisible.
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> I often introduce myself as a landless, bandless, mixed-blood northern Cree—with Indian status. I am grateful for having Indian status since 1990 which provided some much-needed support for my university education. I am deeply grateful for my eldest brother's genealogy research identifying our ancestors. Yet for me it raised other questions about identity and belonging. What does it mean to be a Treaty Indian from the Treaty 8 territory? Where is our land? Which is our band? Where is our community? Who are our leaders, our chief, our councillors? Where do I exercise my political right to vote at the local level? Who represents our views at the national level? Why does it feel

like we have become even more invisible in the 'great Canadian landscape' than we already were? I feel as an Indigenous person in Canada, in our own homeland, that we don't matter. It's like being cast aside. Invisible.

Not having land is about others not recognizing the land base where your ancestors traditionally lived off the land, where they worked, where they fished, hunted and trapped, where they had their children and raised their families, their homeland. It's about not having communal land for your family—for your parents, your brothers and sisters, their children, their children's children and those not yet born. It's about feeling disconnected from our community which should be rooted in the history of our ancestors. Invisible.

There are essentially no historical traces of where our ancestors lived. No inheritances of family homes on cement foundations, no precious jewellery, no coveted objects of value passed on to subsequent generations like many non-Indigenous families. We heard stories and memories shared in Cree by our parents and grandparents' generations in in our home but did not understand them. With the loss of our ancestral language, the oral traditions seem to fade away like the ancestors of our past. Invisible.

What is worse, being invisible or being silenced? Either one is damaging and disempowering to our people, to our psyches, to our spirits. What is even more damaging is being silenced and invisible. (24-29)

Perhaps invisibility was the seed that was planted in my adult search for official records, as physical evidence to validate our history. After the passing of my parents, I wondered if their generation did not have issues with the lack of access to official documents because it was a common occurrence for them, or because of their reliance on the tradition of oral transmission of our stories. Our parents, grandparents and great grandparents had the ancestral language and the stories of our people. I had neither the records, the stories, nor the language.

I was schooled in mainstream Canadian culture that privileges written records over oral knowledge. Luckily, I was able to I draw on previously recorded interviews of my parents and others of their generation that I recorded during my undergraduate years and for my master's research. Our paternal grandparents, our *kohkom* and *moshom,* who we spent the most time with as we were growing up did not speak English or have any formal education. Born in the late 1880s and early 1900s, they were educated in the Cree way of life. Our maternal Cree grandmother passed away when our mom was a child, so we never had the opportunity to meet her. For me, the longing to see a photograph of her never leaves me. I treasure our grandparents' stories captured in our collective memory and the recordings of our parents sharing their stories from my previous research.

Metis scholar, Bonita Lawrence (2011) says that telling our histories for Indigenous peoples, "involves recovering our own stories of the past and asserting the epistemological foundations that inform our stories of the past. It also involves documenting processes of colonization from the perspectives of those who experienced it" (69-70). I concur with the late Choctaw and Ukrainian scholar, Carolyn Kenny's (2012) assertion about the use of narrative as a theme in Indigenous scholarship: "Stories are bridges that connect our histories, our legends, our senses, our practices, our values and, in essence, our sustainability as people" (7). It was reassuring to me those Indigenous scholars and others reinforced for me the significance of stories to inform our past and to document our own realities.

It also resonated with me that we use story as a means of colonial resistance—in a sense taking back our own power, our agency, using our own voices. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) discusses 'researching back', 'writing back', or 'talking back' in post/anti-colonial literature which has involved "a 'knowingness of the colonizer' and a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination" (7). Metis scholar, Emma LaRocque (2010) discusses the use of voice as 'resistance scholarship' and states: "The important thing is that we all have the right to speak, the right to be represented fairly, and the right to express ourselves true to our lives, experiences, and research" (32).

Indigenous people consider telling our stories to be imperative, as "integral to our identity, to our culture, to our survival" (Sinclair, 99).

Reweaving Land and Language Reconnection

There are many complex factors that affect personal and collective identity, especially land and language. The land facet of the research is currently ongoing, and language is minimally addressed in this article. What is central to this study has been the healing aspect of land reconnection and the reclamation of our family history and Indigenous ways of knowing. Identifying burial sites, locating habitation sites, and collecting local stories may have positive effects that ripple out beyond the scope of our family by bringing to visibility our ancestral presence on the land. Time will tell. Chickasaw Elder and scholar, Eber Hampton (1995) says that the "identity of Indian people is that which links our history and our future to this day, now" (22).

For me, the deep connection between identity and place lies in the reconnection with our own histories, including the land where our ancestors' bones are buried—in our case, the Lesser Slave Lake area. The fact that some of our ancestors were not buried in the town cemetery with their names etched in granite headstones does not mean that they have no history there. The history of a people does not get eliminated because there are no remaining visible landmarks, including historical buildings, gravesites, or ceremonial sites. Our people had a connection to the land based on reciprocity—respecting the land and the water so that it could sustain the people and the natural environment of plants, trees, animals, fish, all wildlife. Our dad remembered his grandmother, saying, "if you look after the land, it will look after you". This Indigenous perspective on land translates into leaving gentle, or no, footprints on the land.

The path that I follow is not a visible path but an inherent calling to connect with our ancestors and their land and our language, while to a lesser extent drawing on the culture that is embedded in the language. Kovach discusses the connection of place and identity and the connection through the generations:

> Place gives us identity. … Place links present with past and our personal self with kinship groups. What we know flows through us from the 'echo of generations,' and our knowledges cannot be universalized because they arise from our experience with our places. This is why name-place stories matter: they are repositories of science, they tell of relationships, they reveal history, and they hold our identity. (61)

In a conversation between guest editors of an educational research journal (Shultz, Kelly, and Weber-Pillwax, 2009), Weber-Pillwax describes the deep connection between place and identity, drawing on her Cree language to discuss the practice of our people burying umbilical cords after childbirth:

> I am reminded of a Cree word, *nitisiy,* meaning my navel. When I say *nitisiyihkason*, I am saying "my name is …" so the connection between my name (or what I call myself) and my navel is clear. …The umbilical cord is buried in that place where you are supposed to be and where you belong. Place, then, is a part of who you are, a part of your identity. (338-339)

The ancestral practice of burying umbilical cords in our home territory was not a continued practice by my parents but may have been practiced by other Indigenous people in the area. Whether or not my umbilical cord was intentionally buried in the Lesser Slave Lake area, I believe that it is in the land since I was born at home. The likeliness of this reality may explain the deep calling I have for reconnecting with ancestral land and our ancestral stories and sharing them so that their presence on our homeland is known and valued.

Reweaving Ancestral Reconnection using Indigenous Ways of Knowing

I was in search of guidance to find out how we strengthen our identity as Indigenous people in Canada in light of the colonial disconnections and barriers resulting from the allocation of scrip and the signing of Treaty 8 in Alberta over 125 years ago. There was not an obvious path

that I could see. I drew on our own Indigenous ways of knowing in my research journey. Kenny (2012) discusses how the ancestors guide us with a reverence for what they have left behind: "They communicate with us through dreams, through the teachings that have come down through the generations, through spirit" (3). Throughout the research for my study (2013), I was asking myself how we make the reconnection to our histories and to our ancestors.

We carry the history—as some claim—in 'blood memory'. Weber-Pillwax (2009) discusses the theory of blood memory among a people: "The theory is if you have the blood of Cree ancestors, you have the Cree memories connected to those ancestors. But it's really your choice as to whether you use that or let it go" (339). I choose to honour that connection or what may be viewed more appropriately as re-connection. In an article on honoring spiritual knowledge, Cree Elder/scholar Stan Wilson (1995) discussed the late Miniconjou Sioux traditional knowledge holder/scholar, Elder Lionel Kinunwa's wisdom about cellular memory:

> Our ancestral memories are in your blood, they're in your muscles, they're in your bones, they're in your hair, and those memories are there. …That is why when we hear the drum, our spirit is moved. This is because the vibrations of the drum stir old memories—our ancestral memories. These memories come out of our molecular structure of our being. This is also why when you hear someone speaking your own language, your molecular structure picks up those vibrations, because each language has its own peculiar patterns, and you feel good that somebody is speaking your language (65).

My reconnection process was strengthened through learning from traditional knowledge holders, ceremony, and dreams. I was inspired by Indigenous research mentors and the work of other Indigenous scholars, especially those who would be considered trailblazers among Indigenous scholars. Indigenous education scholar and Professor Emeritus, Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), and others, assert that dreams can be "a source of Indigenous knowledge and that they can provide guidance for Indigenous research methodology" (3). It was late in my research

journey that I decided to include one of my bear dreams in my work (Sinclair 2013), as it had a significant impact on me:

The bear was massive with a thick collar around its neck chained next to a house in the bush that was not like any of the Native people's old log houses in that area. But intuitively, I sensed that the land was nearby where kohkom and moshom lived. I came upon the bear and was startled by it. It was terrifying because of its size and further, it was agitated. I did not know what to do. Then my eldest brother appeared and came over to me and told me that I had to feed it. It was like he was given the responsibility to feed it, but he was passing it on to me. He had to go somewhere else. He handed me a huge pail of raw fish. I did not object although I was afraid. One by one, I pulled out a fish and threw it to the bear until the pail was empty. I was relieved that it calmed it. My fear subsided. But I was puzzled that whoever lived in that house would be so cruel as to chain an animal that should have been allowed to be free in the wild. (130)

I cannot remember exactly when it was that I realized that I was going to have to be more diligent in feeding our relative, the bear, but that dream has stayed with me. Bear dreams and dreams of a spiritual nature seemed to become more frequent after I began participating in ceremonies in the early 1990s. My first bear dream was when I was approximately four years old. It was terrifying, like most of them since then. In that initial dream, I was the one who was tied up. I was tied up in a chair on a covered bridge with a rope around my arms and legs. I could not escape, but the bear did not harm me. In other dreams, I was being chased or was surrounded by them, bears of all colours and sizes. After I started to provide food offerings on the land for my ancestors whenever I had the opportunity, my bear dreams subsided. I felt that it was our ancestors coming to me in my dreams as a reminder to feed them.

In 2005, I attended a ceremony in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to find out about our clan from a traditional Elder who had the gift of knowing Indigenous people's clans. Following protocol, I approached him near the end of the ceremony as instructed. He informed me in Cree, that our clan is *maskwa* (sounds like muskwa) which is Bear Clan. It was an affirmation of what my late sister Lorraine who was a cultural teacher, told me about our family belonging to the bear clan prior to her

passing in 2005. The ceremony was something that I needed to experience first-hand.

Over the years I have come to know that other family members also have bear dreams, which is not surprising to me. As I reengaged with my research after a decade had passed, the bear dreams came back. I am being reminded to provide ceremonial food offerings on the land and to acknowledge and show gratitude and respect for them in my prayers. I consider *maskwa* to be my relatives and spiritual helpers.

Finding Your Own Belonging

For this research I explore some of the interrelated factors that affect our identities and sense of belonging as exemplified in the lived experiences of our family, including our ancestors and their stories. It was timely that I came upon a Cree word, *miskâsowin* "that means going to the centre of yourself to find your own belonging" (Kovach 2009, 49) as I was working on the analysis and conclusion of my study. I could relate to Kovach's assertion that from a *nehiyaw* (Cree) epistemology, "attention to inner knowing is not optional" and that "seeking out Elders, attending to holistic epistemologies, and participating in cultural catalyst activities (dream, ceremony, prayer) are all means for accessing inward knowledge" from a Cree perspective (49-50). Her words reflected my own understanding that teachings come different places and that we need to be open to those teachings and allow ourselves time to integrate them to be of use to the community and that research is a personal process that requires inner and outer work (50). All of this resonated with me on my research journey that has spanned many years beyond.

In sum, my stories, and the stories of my family, revealed themselves through dreams, ceremonies, personal reflections and shared family stories. Going through this research process I felt deep sadness and grief for what our ancestors had to endure. The colonization of our peoples was unfair, unjust treatment of our people at the hands of the colonizers. It was especially painful for me as I learned more about various family members, mostly our grandmothers, and the incredible sacrifices they made for their families and the hardships they endured for their families' survival. Although such stories are not included in this article, I will keep

working towards correcting the injustices our ancestors faced, in whatever way that I can.

I continue to research ancestral birth places and burial sites, some of which are unmarked gravesites, including crown land, parkland and other spaces yet to be revealed. For me, this is a journey of reconnection to our ancestors, to our ancestral lands, and to their stories. It is like a reweaving or braiding of ancestral stories, land reconnection, and strengthened identity. A braid of sweetgrass is much stronger than individual sweetgrass strands on their own. We can proactively reconstruct our own identities and historical relationships to land through our research by honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous pedagogies, and by not giving up, *ahkameyimoh* (try harder).

Belonging is reconnecting with *âniskôtapânak* (my ancestors) and our ancestral homeland. This research is not just about the academic journey—it's about my life's work. It has also been an ongoing journey of decolonization that requires me to find courage to keep going, so that we can move forward as proud and connected peoples with a deepened sense of belonging here on our homeland. My belief is that my sense of belonging, our family's collective sense of belonging, and the belonging of the young people in our communities will be strengthened as we continue to move in the direction of reconnecting with our ancestors, their stories, our ancestral homeland, and our ancestral language.

I wrote a poem for our people, and for myself, that serves to guide me on this journey. It began when I was with our precious late mother who was in her mid-nineties at the time and was reliant on our family for her care. It was at a time when the shocking news of the discovery of 215 children buried in unmarked graves on Indian Residential School grounds in Kamloops, was revealed. I needed a place to express my anger and overwhelming pain that I was feeling after hearing the tragic news, knowing that it was the tip of the colonial iceberg that represents the rampant oppression and genocide of our people. I quietly wrote as time allowed. Over time, the poem morphed into a song that I share here. It serves to remind me of the work I am committed to undertake and that it is through the restoration and revitalization of our voices, through our research work, that our ancestors' voices can be heard. Our stories

matter; our ancestors matter; our healing matters. As Indigenous people in our homeland, we matter.

We Will Rise *waniska* *(arise, wake up and rise)*
© Jeannette Sinclair Jan 1, 2022

We will rise like the phoenix, from the ashes of pain, make
time for the elders' teachings, once again
We'll hear the stories of our people silenced far too long, our
families are healing, our nations will be strong

We will rise, *waniska, waniska*, we will rise, we will rise,
***waniska, waniska*, we will rise**

We'll grieve for the babies, who died without a name, be the
voice of our people, subjected to shame
We'll listen to our *kohkoms,* speaking from the heart, united
we will stand, together, not apart

We will rise, *waniska, waniska*, we will rise, we will rise,
***waniska, waniska*, we will rise**

We'll respect all our women, and the wounded overlooked,
our stories we will write, we'll publish our own books
We'll pick up the pen, mightier than the sword, guided by
truth, will be our reward

We will rise, *waniska, waniska*, we will rise, we will rise,
***waniska, waniska*, we will rise**

We'll honour the departed, gravesites unmarked, reclaim
stolen land, rename provincial parks
We'll not retreat nor forsake, future generations, a better life
we'll make, for all tribal nations

We will rise, *waniska, waniska*, we will rise, we will rise,
***waniska, waniska*, we will rise**

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Longing to Belong: Reconnecting to my Cree ancestors (*âniskôtapânak)* and our Ancestral Homeland in Lesser Slave Lake, Canada

Jeanette Sinclair

Abstract This research study explored the lived experience and oral stories of Indigenous people, specifically First Nations and Metis from the Lesser Slave Lake area in Canada, whose presence has been marginalized both in historical literature and on the land. The intention was to reclaim and validate our Indigenous history and complex descendant identities, strengthening our sense of belonging. This article specifically elaborates on the relationships that connect Indigenous Cree identity to a sense of belonging, while addressing the legacy of political identities imposed by government which continues to impact Indigenous people in Canada. This work engaged an Indigenous Research Framework and used mixed methods, including archival research and Indigenous autoethnography which utilized knowledge of the researcher's family as foundational to a 'case' study, weaving together narrative, expository and analytical writing. Ancestral reconnections including ancestral stories, relationships with the land, with language, and with Indigenous ways of knowing are all essential to belonging. Exploring ancestry in these multiple ways can edify Indigenous communities by contextualizing the lived experiences of Indigenous ancestors for contemporary times and positively impact existing and future generations.

Keywords ancestral land, Traditional knowledge, *nehiyawak*/Cree people, Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous identity, Indigenous culture, Indigenous voice, Indigenous invisibility, Indigenous poetry, Indigenous autoethnography

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Anhelo de pertenencia. Reconectando con mis ancestros cree (ânisk ôtapânak) y nuestra tierra ancestral en el Lago Menor de los Esclavos, Canadá

Jeanette Sinclair

Resumen Este estudio investigó la experiencia vivida y los relatos orales de los pueblos indígenas, específicamente de las Primeras Naciones y los Métis de la región del Lago Menor de los Esclavos en Canadá, cuya presencia ha sido marginada tanto en la literatura histórica como en el territorio. El objetivo era reivindicar y validar nuestra historia indígena y nuestras complejas identidades como descendientes, fortaleciendo nuestro sentido de pertenencia. Este artículo examina en detalle las relaciones que conectan la identidad indígena cree con el sentido de

pertenencia, al mismo tiempo que aborda el legado de las identidades políticas impuestas por el gobierno, que continúan afectando a los pueblos indígenas de Canadá. Este trabajo utilizó un marco de investigación indígena y métodos mixtos, incluyendo la investigación archivística y la autoetnografía indígena, utilizando el conocimiento familiar de la investigadora como base para un estudio de «caso», entrelazando escritura narrativa, expositiva y analítica. Las reconexiones ancestrales, como los relatos ancestrales, las relaciones con la tierra, la lengua y las formas indígenas de conocimiento, son esenciales para la pertenencia. Explorar la ancestralidad de estas múltiples maneras puede fortalecer a las comunidades indígenas al contextualizar las experiencias vividas de los antepasados indígenas en la época contemporánea y tener un impacto positivo en las generaciones presentes y futuras.

Palabras clave tierra ancestral, conocimiento tradicional, pueblo nehiyawak/cree, formas indígenas de conocimiento, identidad indígena, cultura indígena, voz indígena, invisibilidad indígena, poesía indígena, autoetnografía indígena.

La nostalgie de l'appartenance :Se reconnecter à mes ancêtres cris (âniskôtapânak) et à notre terre ancestrale du Petit lac des Esclaves, Canada

Jeanette Sinclair

Résumé Cette étude explore l'expérience vécue et les récits oraux des peuples autochtones, en particulier des Premières Nations et des Métis de la région du Petit lac des Esclaves, au Canada, dont la présence a été marginalisée tant dans la littérature historique que sur la terre. L'objectif est de revendiquer et de valider notre histoire autochtone ainsi que les identités complexes de nos descendants, renforçant ainsi notre sentiment d'appartenance. Cet article met en lumière les relations qui lient l'identité crie à un sentiment d'appartenance, tout en abordant l'héritage des identités politiques imposées par le gouvernement, qui continue d'affecter les peuples autochtones du Canada. Ce travail s'appuie sur un cadre de recherche autochtone et utilise des méthodes mixtes, incluant la recherche archivistique et l'autoethnographie autochtone, qui s'appuie sur les connaissances familiales de la chercheuse comme base d'une étude de « cas », mêlant écriture narrative, expositive et analytique. Les reconnexions ancestrales, notamment les récits ancestraux, les relations

avec la terre, la langue et les modes de connaissance autochtones, sont essentielles à l'appartenance. L'exploration de l'ascendance sous ces multiples aspects peut renforcer les communautés autochtones en contextualisant les expériences vécues des ancêtres autochtones dans le présent et avoir un impact positif sur les générations actuelles et futures.

Mots clés terre ancestrale, savoirs traditionnels, peuple nehiyawak/cri, modes de connaissance autochtones, identité autochtone, culture autochtone, voix autochtone, invisibilité autochtone, poésie autochtone, autoethnographie autochtone.