

CÉ LEIS THÚ: TO WHOM DO YOU BELONG?

REMEMBERING WHAT GIVES US LIFE

by

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DEDICATION

For the Lands and Waters that have fed me, my family, and my ancestors. Particularly, the Lands and Waters of the Great Lakes region where I grew up - may the ponds be full of frogs and may the oaks grow tall.

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ABSTRACT

All our ancestors, at one time, lived in a world where every crack in the Land was filled with stories - evidence of the intact, Indigenous web of relationship of which they were a part. They built cultures, languages, and ways of life that would help their descendants to live well in their place and to remember to maintain their relationships.

We have all experienced the fragmentation of those cultures to varying degrees through settler-colonial and imperialist processes, at different points in time. In many cases this fragmentation is ongoing. This dissertation, which is a supplement to two additional Land-based community projects, explores ways to heal from this fragmentation and how to put ourselves back together again by honoring our responsibilities to “what gives us life” – the Land, our ancestors, and our communities. I share stories that exemplify an approach to belonging through responsibility that includes adapting to and learning to be a part of the place that feeds us, while also carrying our ancestors and their stories with us if we are no longer living on our ancestral homelands. Emphasis is placed on engagement with ancestral Land-based practices, stories, languages, and foodways, seeking to illuminate a radically Indigenized approach to higher education and a model for this education outside of the academy.

I conclude that our strength is in our coming together - not as a homogenizing melting pot, but as diverse rememberers of our original instructions working to re-enrich our lives with stories, responsibilities, and relationships, while collectively healing from generations of trauma, displacement, and forgetting.

CHAPTER ONE

CÉ LEIS THÚ: TO WHOM DO YOU BELONG

The Song of Amergin

I am a wind in the sea
 I am a sea-wave upon the land
 I am the sound of the sea
 I am a stag of seven combats
 I am a hawk upon a cliff
 I am a tear-drop of the sun
 There is no plant fairer than I
 I am a boar for valour
 I am a salmon in a pool
 I am a lake in a plain
 I am the excellence of arts

I am a spear that wages battle with plunder
 I am a god who forms subjects for a ruler
 Who explains the stones of the mountains?
 Who invokes the ages of the moon?
 Where lies the setting of the sun?
 Who bears cattle from the house of Tethra?
 Who are the cattle of Tethra who laugh?
 What man, what god forms weapons?
 Indeed, then;
 I invoked a satirist...
 a satirist of wind.

- Translation from James Carey's *The Celtic Heroic Age*

*Dia daoibh a chairde. Is mise Jacob Zimmerer. Tá mé i mo chónaí in aice leis an
 Abhainn Gallatin ar Oileán Turtar. Is as Éireann, Bhreatain Bheag, Albain, Ghearmain, agus
 Sasana iad mo shinsear. Tá mé ag foghlaim Gaeilge.*

*Is iad mo sheantuismitheorí Anne Klintworth, Graham Klintworth, Sheila Zimmerer agus
 Walter Zimmerer. Is iad mo thuismitheorí Steve Zimmerer, Jen Zimmerer, and Nancy Klintworth.
 Is iad mo dheirfiúracha Gabe, Kylee, agus Jocelin Zimmerer. Tá grá i mo chroí dóibh. Is as
 Éireann, Bhreatain Bheag, Albain, Ghearmain, agus Sasana iad mo shinsear. Tagaim ó go leor
 scéalta. Rugadh and tógadh mé ina Lochanna Móra. Bhí mé i mo leanbh de na darach, díreach
 mar a bhí go leor de mo shinsir romham. Tá mé freagrach do mo theaghlach agus dár sliocht go
 léir.*

My grandparents are Anne Klintworth, Graham Klintworth, Sheilah Zimmerer, and Walter Zimmerer. My parents are Steve Zimmerer, Jen Zimmerer, and Nancy Klintworth. My siblings are Gabe, Kylee, and Jocelin Zimmerer. I love them all. My recent human ancestors are from what is now called Ireland, Wales, Scotland, England, and Germany. I come from many stories. I was born and raised in the Great Lakes. I was a child of the oaks, just like many of my ancestors before me. I am responsible to my family and to all of our descendants. My name is Jacob Zimmerer.

My ancestors come from several different homelands and distinct Peoples, but all are Indo-Europeans, migrants who found their home places and have been there for varying amounts of time. While all of them had their own cultures - stories, languages, ceremonies, rituals, and ways of life - I come primarily from what could be considered “Celtic” Peoples whose ways were interrelated. The bones of my ancestors, their offerings, prayers, and labour, have fed their homelands for thousands of years. Those places kept my lineages alive, and make up who I am. Those homelands were left by my ancestors in the wake of forced forgetting through waves of colonization, which severed their cultural ways and left them impoverished. As it goes, they carried their trauma with them, and I inherited it in pieces. I am in the process of putting things back together again.

Remembering, which is at the center of this work, is not about waving a flag of national identity, or putting ourselves or others into boxes or categories. It’s about relationships. I remember talking to my friend Marsha about the term “Indigenous,” which I’ve spent years mulling over. Marsha said to me, “Well, I am Indigenous. I am Native. But those are kind of

secondary identities... I am first and foremost, Tsistsistas from Kirby Creek.”¹ Before any of those legal and political terms, before modern (often homogenizing) national identities, it was about introducing who your relations were. Who are your grandparents? What clan are you from? What Land feeds you? Who are the plants and animals that give you life? What language do you speak? What are your cultural ways? What stories guide your life? This expansiveness is implied in older ways of asking who someone is, such as “*Cé leis thú?*” in *Gaeilge*, the Irish language, which means “To whom do you belong?” The more we learn about our Peoples, our ancestors, the more expansive these concepts become, and the more we realize that there is no such thing as “purity.” It’s all actually quite messy, and also beautiful. This is not at all a reason to simply disengage with our stories. Indeed, the opposite. By engaging these stories in all their complexity, we situate ourselves within a much larger context and can see past nationalist or tribalist thinking that seeks to homogenize us and obscure our responsibilities. These stories are the foundation layers of our responsibilities to a diverse web of relations, which we continue to build on throughout our own lifetime.

I am grateful to have layers of responsibility - to the Land that feeds me, to the Peoples of this place, to my family, to my ancestors, and to my homelands - because without responsibility there is no real belonging, and I have always wanted to belong. For you to know who I am, I need to tell you more about who I belong to. As such, that is where we will begin together. After that, we can talk about other things.

¹ Marsha Small (*Tsistsistas*) in discussion with the author, October 2024.

I am only able to write this because I have elk and Arikara squash sitting in my stomach. Thus, when I think about who I belong to, I often think first about this place that feeds me.

I live in the Valley of the Flowers, the Hawthorn Valley, or the Gallatin Valley, depending on who you ask. Mountains surround us on all sides. Three rivers flow into the valley and join together to become one. It is an honor to be here at the source of this river, the Missouri, which pumps life through the heart of Turtle Island. When we sit and pray at the headwaters, that water carries our prayers far.

Everyone here is bound to the seasons. It has always been this way, at least from what I've been told. Each being here has a story, which is spoken back to life every year. Each story is dependent on the other ones, and all these little stories together make up the big story of this place. I've gotten to know some of these stories pretty well, and as winter gives way to spring, I really do feel like a little kid anxiously waiting to hear them all again.

The story of this place that I'm responsible for every year is the human one, which has changed a lot over time, but especially so in the last couple centuries. I don't know the whole story - not many do anymore, after centuries of violence and forced forgetting. But I have a good sense of the plot, and I think the retellings are getting better and better, as more people join in. All the other beings, at least the ones that are still here, know their story by heart. They are less forgetful than us humans who must build and maintain expansive cultures to help us remember.

Those who still know the human story of this place best are the ones whose ancestors have maintained and shaped it for thousands of years and built unique cultures around the story so that their descendants wouldn't forget it. I'm grateful to know some of these people, and for all that they've shared with me, so that I too can be a part of the story. There are 12 tribal nations

in what's now called Montana, where I live. Each with their own distinct languages, cultures, ceremonies, and stories. It seems that what binds them together is their shared responsibility to being human - that is, to eat, drink, make beautiful things, and be grateful. The traditional lifeway of this place is the seasonal round. The seasonal round looks different for each People, but in this region, Buffalo are at the center. Given the vast cultural knowledge of these Peoples, I know very little about the ways and stories of this place. But what has been shared with me has given me a little window into that vastness, and looking through that window has deeply enriched my life. As such, I feel indebted and grateful. The work that follows is my attempt to honor the stories of this place while also carrying my ancestors with me. *Niitsipowahsin* (The real speak, or the Blackfoot language) and *Gaeilge* (the Irish Language) are woven throughout.

Naató'si, an Ghrian, the sun, gets higher in the sky and the story of this place begins again. *Miistákistsi, na sleibhte*, the mountains do not appear to change at first, but down in the valleys, if you listen, you can hear the river begin to recite the opening lines, "The time has come for us all to live again! Come together! Gather your strength! There is work to be done, there is life to be lived!" The river swells, and groundwater begins to tickle the roots of the floodplains, *an talamh*, the land, softens. The bugs in the rivers get swept from their hiding places, swallowed up by waiting trout, hungry and tired of eating winter midges. The first birds come back to the North, staking out their breeding grounds before the competition arrives, waking us all from our slumber with their songs. Us humans wander down to the rivers to harvest basket willows before they bud and to catch a few of those hungry fish. We pull out the first of the salted hides from last fall and begin to dream of velvet soft skins.

This first bit of the story is far from linear. *An cailleach*, the old hag of winter from the old Irish stories, is losing her grip on the world, but not without a fight. Bitter winds and snow return without warning, and all of us storytellers must continue to speak slowly and softly, in order to calm our eager hearts and hungry bellies. By the time our food returns, we will all be hungry... and grateful to see life return again.

We listen closely for that first thunder, the one that shakes the Earth. The first *neantóga*, nettles, emerge, their leaves green with a tinge of purple, protected by last year's grasses. *Na habhneacha*, the rivers go from deep blue to green, beginning to crest their banks, clouds of blue-winged olives and midges fill the air on cloudy days. The male red-winged blackbirds sing from the tops of last year's cattails, as marsh wrens bounce around below. The sandbar willows finally begin to bud. On the rocky bluffs above the river, and low flats beneath the mountains, the foods under our feet emerge and flower. Soon, the cottonwood leaves are the size of mouse ears, and the mushrooms fruit. We are there to greet them all, to celebrate their return, because we know that their return means that we also get to live again. The fertility has returned to the land, the soil is swollen with snowmelt, and the sun climbs higher and higher in the sky. What a gift to be alive, for our feet to meet the green grass again!

Together, we go to the gardens, and dream of tall, tassled corn waving in the warm summer breezes, squash vines climbing the fences, sunflowers bigger than our heads, and bean twiners with hopes of one day reaching the sun Himself. We pray that those dreams may come true, that we may all make it to harvest, and begin to build our mounds, fertilizing them with stories of their ancestors - the giant Arikara squash from a few years ago, the red gummy sweet corn that survived against all odds - and all those who planted them, cared for them before us.

When it seems that the *cailleach* is finally back to rest and the ground is warm, we poke our holes in the soil down to the second knuckle, and place the seeds on their bed of offered tobacco, then tuck them in. We patiently wait for them to come back to us and try not to get too excited yet for hominy soup or roasted maple squash.

Rains fall. Hides sit in their tannin baths, others are being scraped, brained, softened, and smoked. Willows and bow staves are seasoning. Nights require fewer logs on the fire. Wild greens and medicines abound in the valley, and slowly the mountain slopes are freed from their winter slumber. With the high sun, it seems like one day a slope is snow covered, and the next there are carpets of glacier lilies and spring beauties. We all work hard, and revel in all the stories being retold before our eyes.

The skies clear, and the lush green valley hills grow dull. We go to harvest the ripe seeds of the first foods of spring, whose stories have already concluded. We dig their roots and plant their seeds. From the valley to the mountains, berries begin to ripen. Savisberries, gooseberries, currants, wild strawberry, grouse whortleberry, huckleberries - and we are there to greet them all. Up high, meadows abound with every shade of wildflower and the water still runs cold. We sleep on berry covered slopes among the larches and grizzly bears, watch hazy sunrises through wildfire smoke, and swim in cold tarns. Our fingers and lips are stained purple, and when we close our eyes to sleep, all we see are endless berries. Day after day, laughing, sharing stories, filling our bellies and baskets, we slip into a late-summer trance. We wish we could stay in this moment forever. But then we awake to a crisp morning and are shaken from the trance by the faint scent of elk wafting through the air. The rains fall again, and the mushrooms return.

Beneath spruce and lodgepoles, among the mossy forest floor, we look for shrumps and brilliant orange, sniffing the air for apricot-scented chanterelles.

Down in the valleys, the chokecherry branches droop, turning from red to black. Ripe, brown seed heads of food and medicine roots cover the hills, their roots ready to be dug, seeds to be planted. The corn fills out their husks, and we pray that the rain slows before the frost returns. The winter squash darkens and soon our fingernails will no longer pierce their skins. The beans have filled out their pods, now yellow, but still soft. While we wait, we pound chokecherries into patties to dry on sunny days, tan hides, and weave baskets with soaked winter willows.

We move through the mountains, listening carefully as elk sing their courting songs from the meadow edges, their haunting melodies filtered through the timber. The first frosts fall on the Land and our prayers are answered as our feet touch the snow once again. Down in the valley, the corn is dry and braided, safely sheltered from the cold. The beans are shelled, the mature squash are ripening for winter-eating. The last of the firewood is gathered and split, ready for the long darkness ahead. We come together and feast, honoring all the stories that have now concluded, singing our praises to the storytellers. Giving thanks for another time around.

Warm by the fire, snow back on the ground, we sit and sing out the music of what happened, the sweetest music of all.² Before long the old stories of this place, the Coyote ones, the Napi ones, are spoken back to life once again. Winter is upon us. We all come together to remember again.

² Heaney, Marie. *Over nine waves: a book of Irish legends*. 171. New York City: Macmillan, 1995.

As I sit alone on dark winter days, I dream of those distant islands across the Atlantic, trying to remember the stories of my own ancestors. The words Ith spoke to the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the gods and goddesses, when he first arrived in Ireland, echo in my heart, “[The Land] has fertile soil and the waters teem with fish. You have grain and honey and salmon to eat. You don’t suffer from too much heat or too much cold. This lovely island can give you everything you need.”³ This was the old days, before English rule, before the potato, before we were Irish. In those days it was said that a squirrel could travel from one end of Ireland to the other without ever touching the ground. I’ve walked beneath the oak groves of Glendalough and tried to imagine trees covering the rolling hills of the Midlands. I’ve eaten invasive Sika deer from the Wicklow Mountains and prayed for herds of red deer that could feed the People once again. I’ve dug for cockles on the shores of West Clare as friends sang songs in our language, hoping with all my heart that those ancient words would someday emerge from me like water from the Otherworld flows from holy wells.

My story dies without all the other stories. So many stories are becoming whispers, with some barely audible these days. I want them to get louder, because I know that even in their fragmented state, they are still remarkably beautiful. I’ve felt the remaining buffalo move around me here on the Northern Plains, I’ve tasted their flesh, and it makes me desperate to know what it would sound like for 30 million to shake the Earth once again, for our bodies to be built by them. I have wept at the sight of a single bullock’s oriole flashing through the cottonwood canopy, would my heart explode with joy at the sight of hundreds?

³ Heaney, Marie. *Over nine waves: a book of Irish legends*. 51. New York City: Macmillan, 1995.

Our ability to tell the human story, and tell it well, is entirely dependent on all these other beings around us. Our homelands, in their intactness, would be the sweetest, most beautiful songs, the most enlivening of stories. These songs are meant for an orchestra, but right now most of us only have a small band. Even so, the structures of the songs I've heard make me shake with life, full of eagerness to join in and add another layer. I am grateful to hear the songs at all, to get to be a part of them. But it is my responsibility to be in tune, so that my presence adds to the beauty. I pray that my descendants will be able to hear this song too, and play along even better than I.

CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCTION

It isn't all that long ago that my ancestors left their homelands. They worked hard and made beautiful things, which makes me want to work hard and make beautiful things. I'd like our descendants to also have the opportunity to work hard and make beautiful things. Through our responsibilities to what gives us life and our work to honor that life, we can find belonging again.

The following essays are documentation of my work to remember, of trying to live in a way that my intact ancestors could understand and respect, and to answer the question "*Cé leis thú*: To whom do you belong? I know that most dissertations aren't frequently read. If I'm honest, I haven't read many myself. This writing bears this fact in mind. I've tried to limit academic jargon and be concise. I've also chosen to share these ideas through other storytelling mediums - a large community feast of traditional foods at my doctoral defense and a short film. This written work is first and foremost an offering of praise for the Land. However, it is also an offering for those who know in their bones that something very important is missing in this modern life. I do not want the audience of this work to be limited to those in academia. I hope that you may find these tracks that my community and I have left behind worth trailing.

Remembering and Forgetting

We all have unique cultures and ways of life in our ancestral places that helped us remember our indebtedness to what gives us life.^{4,5,6} Remembering these cultural ways is the cure to the sickness that has ravaged our world. We all have beautiful songs, ceremonies, languages, stories, foods, practices - that flow from ways of life that have been fragmented to various degrees, in varying ways, and for differing lengths of time. But we all have them. If you don't think your intact ancestors had those things, then you've just thoroughly forgotten. That's okay, I forgot too. I can understand if you think that only some groups of people have those things (what we now consider "Indigenous Peoples"). Many European-descended Peoples, especially, have forgotten so thoroughly, over periods of time that to us seem "long," that most think they've always been severed from the web of relationships. This assumption of "white people" is fair. Many of us as individuals, and certainly the oppressive power structures we've collectively built, do a very good job reinforcing this assumption. Still, it's untrue, and it wasn't very long ago in the history of humans that Indo-European Peoples had seasonal lifeways and cultural structures that danced within that web of relationship. It's not hard to find evidence of that - the assumption is just so well-cemented in many of us that we don't even bother to look. I'm sure we've all heard "white people" say, dejectedly, that they are just a "European mutt" - believing that their entire ancestral legacy is violent colonization and reductionist thinking, something to forget rather than remember. I've been there, but I don't think we should stay there any longer. We are all capable of remembering.

⁴ Magan, Manchán. *Listen to the Land Speak: A Journey into the Wisdom of What Lies Beneath Us*. Dublin, Ireland: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 2022.

⁵ Bullchild, Percy. *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2005.

⁶ Yeats, W. B. *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*. Redditch, England, UK: Read Books Ltd, 2013.

People around the world have different names for “the sickness,” stories describing it, and ways of dealing with it. All humans are capable of getting the sickness, because we are all capable of *forgetting* what gives us life. There is no “noble savage” - some group of humans past or present that is free from this capacity for forgetting. We can all easily begin to think that it’s all about us, that the rest of Creation is here to serve us - that we are more important than other beings. Our ancestors nurtured Place-based cultures to ensure that we remember that we are in fact, entirely dependent on the rest of Creation for our survival. In order for the sickness to take root in a People, there must be a fragmentation of those cultural ways that were built to keep the sickness at bay, to help us remember. Once the sickness becomes culturally dominant among a group, economic models of extraction and exponential growth propelled by narratives of “human progress” prevail, ravenously consuming their own homelands. All while those who remember, who see the degradation caused by this sickness, and who struggle for their lifeways and homelands, are continually silenced with violence and oppression. The sickness (which is never satisfied) then spreads to the homelands of other Peoples in an attempt to quench the unrelenting hunger for more. This process, colonization, is often driven by an elite class of wealthy and powerful people who leverage the desperation of the poor classes, which they created, to carry out the violence of Land theft, cultural erasure, and at times genocide. Colonization is the violent fragmentation of the Peoples who are being colonized - the severing of their relationships with their homelands and the cultural structures developed over long periods of time to ensure they can live well in their place. All to feed this unrelenting and inherently unsustainable sickness. Many of those colonizing Peoples were already colonized themselves. But when they take this

pathway to “make a better life for themselves” or escape oppression, they become further fragmented and lost through the process.

Many of us forgot that we even forgot anything. We are so far removed from our ancestors living well in their place, fragmented and displaced by layers of colonization, that the threads of those ancestors are not always immediately apparent. Some people, usually more recently colonized or still living on the homelands of their ancestors (usually considered “Indigenous”), remember that there are important things like language, stories, ceremonies, practices that have been forgotten, and are working to remember those things, while also dealing with on-going colonization and the daily survival needs of their community. I imagine this as a broad spectrum of forgetting and remembering - the more we remember, the more intact we are, and the better we are able to live in our places. Martín Prechtel defines intactness as, “...wholeness in the Indigenous sense, the state of a fully developed, organic soul...Intactness means having a vitality and patience that comes from an Indigenous integrity that knows one's death goes on to feed the living.”⁷ This doesn't necessarily imply physical or mental health, but rather a cultural and spiritual health. More intact individuals and communities are able to act as reference points for those who forgot they forgot anything.

Appropriation

When people come across these reference points of intactness and vitality, there is often a feeling of deep longing, which can lead to them further colonizing those who have maintained

⁷ Prechtel, Martín. *The unlikely peace at Cuchumaquic: The parallel lives of people as plants: Keeping the seeds alive*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2012.

intactness, thinking that remembering is something that can be bought, or simply taken, without much work. This, to me, is appropriation, and is much different than legitimate forms of knowledge transfers that happen according to specific tribal protocols. In the context of Turtle Island (North America) this deep longing is often expressed as claiming Native ancestry without any real relationship or responsibility to the People or saying things like “I think I was a Native American in a past life.” Often, individuals adopt, commodify, and oversimplify pieces of other Peoples’ cultural ways, grasping at what *appears* to be the things they are missing. The reality is those impulses usually stem from a longing for the intact lifeways of their *own* ancestors. Not just ways of dressing, ceremonies, sacred items, or appearances, but also responsibilities, and worldviews that provide a sense of belonging and responsibility to the Land and People. Unfortunately, those worldviews and responsibilities are often obscured by our own hunger and desire for a quick solution - they require patience and intentional approach. The longing left behind by centuries of cultural fragmentation and forgetting has propelled appropriation of Native ways - without the worldviews or responsibilities that lead to those ways being actually understood and protected in practice.

Many are rightfully angered by people who appropriate, but it is critical to acknowledge that there are few meaningful educational paths forward for those from culturally fragmented lineages. The continued reinforcement of ideas of certain groups (especially “white people”) being cultureless, inherently destructive, or incapable of living honorably is not going to help. It is not effective to ask people to abandon dominant cultures of forgetfulness, without pointing towards any meaningful alternative, to some opportunity for belonging and a cohesive identity.

Narratives of human progress from an “uncivilized” or “savage” past have been well cemented by the dominant culture to make us believe there are no valid alternatives to our current course of industrialization, globalization, and technological advancement. Yet, the Land and Waters continue to be fragmented in ways and at rates that would be unimaginable to our intact ancestors and there seems to be no shortage of killing and oppressing other humans. Right now, the sickness-fueled dominant culture is absolutely winning, largely because it has been so effective at smothering cultural alternatives. While some people are fully bought into the dominant culture and its narratives, for most of us, it’s just the default we are raised into and the only stories we are told.

In the following essays, I hope to contribute to the painting of this alternative - layered, place-specific, and ancestrally rooted identities that encourage belonging through responsibility. The dominant culture has good marketing - comprehensive and convincing stories for why we should be afraid and how we should seek safety and belonging. Those stories tell us that we are “either the hammer or the nail,” that our security and well-being must be built on the oppression of others. They tell us that if we work hard to accumulate material wealth and power we will belong and be lovable - that dedicating our life to these pursuits leads to safety, comfort, and belonging. But for most of us, it doesn’t.

What meaningful identity and cultural alternatives currently exist in the broader dialogue? Quite few, especially for those in diaspora or from mixed ancestry without one particular People, homeland, or culture to be welcomed back to. Imbalance caused by this crisis of identity and belonging reveals a world hungry for a true sense of community and connection with the Land. Looking back to our intact ancestors and their ways, and walking the path towards

that beauty requires healing, hard work, and a whole lot of courage to wander through self-doubt and the confusion of un-learning. It also offers the opportunity for life to keep on living well after we are gone, which in order to be good ancestors, is critical.

Approach

Last summer, I was sitting below *Ninaiistáko*, Chief Mountain, listening to *Ninna Piiksii* Mike Bruised Head share stories. He spoke about the time when he was considering going back to school to pursue a doctorate at the University of Lethbridge, and said the hardest part of his whole doctoral process was explaining to his mother, in *Niitsipowahsin*, “the real speak”, the Blackfoot language, why he wanted to go back to school. My interpretation of what he said was that if he couldn’t explain it in his language, then it probably wasn’t worth doing, it wasn’t “real,” or accountable to his ways as a Blackfoot person. His dissertation, which he defended in *Niitsipowahsin*, has been a guide for me as I’ve tried to navigate this doctoral process, encouraging me to approach this work with accountability to the Land and my ancestors, rather than to a Western academic institution that has a different worldview and different accountabilities.⁸

Throughout this work, I will include three languages. Gaeilge, the Irish language, which has been a critical tether back to my ancestors, many of whom spoke either Irish, or another Celtic language before being Anglicized. I will also include *Niitsipowahsin*, the Blackfoot language, in this writing, because it is the language of the place that feeds me that I have the

⁸ Bruised Head, Michael. "The colonial impact of the erasure of Blackfoot Miistakists place names in Paahtomahksikimi, Waterton Lakes National Park." PhD diss., University of Lethbridge (Canada), 2022.

strongest relationship to. I am learning, slowly, and dream of a world where on *Amskapi Piikani* (Blackfeet) homelands, we would all be speaking *Niitsipowahsin* and other Indigenous languages of this place to one another. Hearing the *Niitsipowahsin* spoken by elders for the first time awakened a critical, yet forgotten part of me, and prepared me for my return to my own ancestral languages. These essays will mostly be written in English for the sake of accessibility, and because it's the language I have the best skill in wielding, though some would say *Is fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste* - broken Irish is better than clever English. But for now, you'll have to trust me, I'm a little boring *as Gaeilge*, in Irish. The Irish and Blackfoot words and phrases I include within are there because these words have power to me. They remind me of a bigger context than the English words alone - The Land that feeds me, the Land that fed my ancestors, the stories, ceremonies, history, and ways of life.

Prayer and other offerings are at the center of everything I do, including this dissertation. In academic terms, you could say that they are the foundation of my research methodology. I always pray that my work can be of service to the web of life. I have faith in that prayer, and trust that the culmination of my work is the result of those daily prayers. I've learned to pray throughout my life from a variety of ways and teachers. I'd first like to acknowledge my friend Seth Still Smoking, who I pray with every day and who grew up listening to his Blackfeet and Lakota elders pray. He has taught me that prayer is an interwoven, integrated part of life, and is always infused with spirit. It is not something to be done without heart, without presence. My way of praying has also been heavily influenced by being in ceremony with intact people, usually praying in their language. Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge Martín Prechtel, whose writing and lectures speak of prayer as a feeding of the Holy, as an offering first and foremost. He has

taught me that prayer is a courting process with the divine, and not really all that much about getting what *we* want. You will see his influence throughout this dissertation. I am indebted to him for his generosity with culturally orphaned people.

I am hesitant to speak at this point in my education. I am merely a child in my ancestors' intact ways, and the ways of the Peoples of this place. I will try throughout to focus on the *process* of learning I've engaged and will speak very little to the larger teachings I don't think I have the rights to speak to. Please forgive me for any missteps I make. My whole heart is given to the natural ways of life that I am a student of, and I am trying hard to be of service to them in a good way.

I openly recognize the privilege associated with the work of recovering ancestral cultural practices, healing, and building community. These things take time, and in some cases, access to at least somewhat healthy Lands and Waters (which is increasingly difficult). My hope is that as more and more individuals who have these privileges do this work; we can leverage any material privilege we collectively possess towards building opportunities for more and more people to engage in this work who currently are not able to. There are many intact people working diligently to educate broader audiences in hopes of slowing the momentum behind on-going colonial processes. The number one priority for many Indigenous communities at this point is ensuring the survival of their communities and ancestral ways of life. As such, I have long felt that it is the role of those who are slightly buffered from the struggles of everyday survival, who hold some degree of remembering, to do the heavy lifting of creating broader-scale cultural transformation.

CHAPTER THREE

REMEMBERING: A MODEL FOR EDUCATION

My Doctoral Process

I entered in with the first cohort of Montana State University's Indigenous and Rural Health program in the Fall of 2022. I had no previous intentions of continuing with school after completing my master's in Native American Studies - I was entirely committed to furthering my learning in a more immersive, wholistic way outside of an academic institution. However, as I was finishing, and it became clear that the Indigenous and Rural Health program would be starting, my advisor encouraged me to apply and felt that the interdisciplinary nature of the program could allow enough flexibility for me to continue my education with the resources of the university available to me. I was also working for the Buffalo Nations Food Systems Initiative at MSU, and as a student there would be better opportunities to continue that work, which was (and still is) very important to me. Because I was not rigid about the idea of getting a doctoral degree, and had alternative plans, I promised myself from the beginning that I would approach the doctoral process with integrity to the learning that would support me in being of service to my community. I had no interest in being a career academic or a researcher, but absolutely was set on furthering my cultural, Land-based education.

I had read Michael Bruised Head's dissertation from the University of Lethbridge, which he defended entirely in *Niitsipowahsin* (Blackfoot language), and visited with him while I was in my master's program. His work made me believe that it may in fact be possible to do the

learning I needed to do while still in a Western academic institution. Though I was hesitant about doing it within an Indigenous and Rural Health program, which isn't where I would have naturally placed my work. I'm more interested in vitality than "health." Regarding this, Martín Prechtel says in his book *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic*,

... vitality is the old Indigenous definition of health, which has nothing to do with the absence of disease. Vitality is what wild, undomesticated things have as a part of their nature that gives them intactness. Vitality is what causes someone to live strongly and elegantly even if they have been proclaimed hopelessly ill - or even if they die. Vitality is also what causes some wild things to be willing to die in their struggle to stay wild, unwilling to live enslaved or domesticated under any conditions.

The capacity for both people and seeds to demonstrate unprovoked, telltale signs of original Indigenous characteristics all of a sudden after generations of conformative, over-domesticated, civilized existence is caused by the vitality of the original Indigenous Soul. This vitality does not come from learned techniques of living, but directly from the Holy in the Wild through the intactness of our Indigenous Souls.

Vitality comes from still having some internal memory of how to be natural and wild, and at odds with the modern acquired personality.⁹

I absolutely feel that Land-based, cultural work is foundational to vital Indigenous and Rural communities, especially within an understanding of biocultural health frameworks - recognizing the health of Land and people as linked. Though, I still don't have interest in trying to place my work under those academic concepts - from my worldview, Land and people are the same thing and trying to defend that academically isn't a task I wish to pursue. I'm more interested in helping people develop worldviews where that is inherently understood, where seeing wholeness is the default, rather than reductionism and fragmentation. I have always been focused on addressing the cultural foundations of contemporary issues, rather than attempting to solve ever increasing problems from the same way of thinking that creates them. It seems to me that this is

⁹ Prechtel, Martín. *The unlikely peace at Cuchumaquic: The parallel lives of people as plants: Keeping the seeds alive*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2012.

most of what is being done within Western academic institutions. Managing symptoms is important, and I appreciate those in my community who are doing that work, but that is not my particular path within this PhD.

During this doctoral process, my life, work, and studies have been one in the same. There is very little, if any, division between them. My entire life is dedicated to the regeneration of cultural ways and Land-based practices, I never check this at the door, no matter where the door leads to. I do not change who I am, or how I show up in the world. The best way to describe this educational approach is immersion. But even that sounds funny to me. It's not like I am choosing to immerse myself in something foreign - I'm just living, which in a traditional way of life, has always required constant learning and adaptation. The immersion doesn't end when this doctoral program ends, it's just life.

My deliverables reflect this approach. To meet the program requirements, I needed to have three deliverables, which I chose to be a short film "*Cé Leis Thú: To Whom Do You Belong,*" the creation and presentation of seven traditional gifts, and this written representation of my work. That being said, my honoring of my responsibilities to my community over these past three years has been a series of "deliverables." These deliverables aren't something I did just to get something in return, like a doctoral degree, they are just the products of living in this way, with time and foundational responsibilities that guide every single day. As a component of my doctoral defense, there will be time allotted for my community to speak to the ways I've honored those responsibilities during this time. My benchmark for "success" has been for my community to be healthier because I am in it, living in this way.

Over the last few years, I have fed my community with story-rich, culturally significant foods, prepared with prayer and love. I have given many more than seven gifts, made with every bit of my soul and imbued with blessings. I have been available to help out wherever needed, ensuring that my program and deliverables included being able to prioritize my relationships. I have spent time with my family and listened to the stories of my grandparents. I went to Ireland with my grandmother to celebrate her 80th birthday and learned all I could from her while on our homelands. I went from speaking no Irish at all, to speaking conversationally, pouring any bit of excess time and money into that learning through classes, immersions, and other learning resources. This has enabled me to help others in my community begin to learn the language and has added layers to my worldview that I use to help others along the path of cultural knowledge and identity recovery. I did several public presentations of my work, both in Montana, and recently in Dublin, Ireland. I was present for nearly every moment of the seasonal round, planting thousands of seeds of traditional food plants, and teaching others ways to care for them. I've learned old songs and stories of my various ancestors and of the Peoples of Montana, many by heart. I attended Blackfoot language classes, gaining a basic understanding of the language and beginning words and phrases. I've built strong relationships with cultural knowledge holders from Ireland, Australia, and Turtle Island. At my doctoral defense, I will be preparing a large feast for the community to honor all of the foods we have gathered through previous seasonal rounds.

To me, in the context of an intact ancestral education, these are all important deliverables for my doctoral program, as all of this work has increased my capacity to be of service to my community and the Land, and has given me a foundation for life-long learning to continue

building that capacity. But I would like to more thoroughly describe my three formal deliverables.

My short-film project, “Cé Leis Thú”, documents the work of the diverse set of people in our community doing the work of cultural knowledge and identity recovery, with an emphasis on ancestral Land practices. Together with my primary collaborator, cinematographer Olivia Gorham, we interviewed students, professors, broader community members, and elders to discuss culture, Land, identity, and belonging. The result is a film that will be shared widely to contribute to broader understanding of alternative pathways to a deeper sense of belonging to People and Place. The film will be used as a foundational representation of the broad-scale education work that will be carried out through a non-profit organization, *Neantóg*, that I am collaboratively building. This model will be described more thoroughly in a later section.

The seven traditional gifts are the center of this doctoral process and gave me the opportunity to greatly increase my skill and understanding of different ancestral crafts. More importantly, these gifts put me in deep, long-term relationship with people, Land, and Water. The seven gifts include: a brain tanned and painted buffalo robe, a bark tanned sheepskin, a willow foraging basket, a painted traditional hickory hunting bow, an elkskin arrow quiver, painted buckskin turnshoes, and an adorned antler gardening rake. All of these gifts were made using almost entirely natural materials that I harvested and prepared, and represent multiple iterations of learning - I made four traditional bows prior to this final gift, five willow baskets, tanned two additional buffalo hides and countless deer, elk, and sheepskins, and seven pairs of turnshoes. My learning from tanning the buffalo hides is further elaborated upon in a later essay

as a way of exemplifying the way that these gifts brought together our community in shared, embodied learning and relationship building.

My final deliverable is this written dissertation, with hope that it can serve as another way that my learning during this program be of service to others. I have intentionally limited overly academic terminology to make this writing more accessible and emphasize my belief that the cure to the issues facing us is artistic, cultural, and spiritual - just as much as it is intellectual.

I sincerely hope that more students can have a similar opportunity to be supported in their traditional learning and community engagement within existing and future academic programs. We desperately need more pathways for this type of learning in the modern world, and right now, Western academic institutions are where much of the monetary resources for learning are held. There are certainly other avenues to pursue this type of learning, but they usually require a not insignificant degree of monetary and temporal privilege. I particularly hope that Native students can be increasingly supported by academic institutions like Montana State University to be in their communities engaging in traditional cultural education with their elders and their homelands. Each and every thread of remaining Indigenous cultural knowledge is more valuable than all the gold in the world. We should collectively treat it as such.

Educational Programs for Remembering

When I started leading foraging classes five years ago, I found that I simply could not talk about plants, food, or “ecology” without also talking about a much larger cultural context, because from my worldview there is no separation between people and Land. Everyone is in relationship. Yet many of the educational alternatives available are fragmented. There are

opportunities to learn about spirituality, ancestral practices, Land, and history, but not much opportunity to learn about these things as interrelated parts of a storied, place-specific lifeway.

We have fragmented our education into little pieces and parts. Many native languages, like *Gaeilge* (Irish) do not overly fragment the world - they do not separate the unseen from the seen, the physical from the magical. There is an inherent recognition in these languages of all the interrelated layers of life.¹⁰ From an intact perspective, it is unthinkable to teach about plants or ancestral skills for example, without also talking about the whole web of relations and cultural ways.

Buffalo Nations

I've been blessed to work for Buffalo Nations Food Systems Initiative (BNFSI) for the past four years as one of the coordinators of our summer fellowship program. BNFSI is an Indigenous-led education and research initiative. We are building collective, collaborative, and proactive capacity for Indigenous food sovereignty. Our organization is guided by an intertribal advisory council of knowledge holders, who ensure that our programs align with tribal priorities. The summer fellowship program is an opportunity for students to be fully engaged with the seasonal round. They are paid and supported to: grow traditional foods, harvest plants, tan hides, craft, process and cook food, visit with elders, heal, and learn about their distinct cultural ways. The program invests in their paths of remembering, in their maintaining of their ancestral ways of life through time spent as an integrated part of the Land, so that they can return that knowledge to their communities. Together, we have built a program that truly tries to put things back together again - honoring various ways of knowing, cultural practices, and the Land. Our

¹⁰ Magan, Manchán. 32 Words for Field. Dublin, Ireland: Gill Books, 2020.

day-to-day life during the fellowship is entirely dependent on seasonal rhythms, with flexibility to respond to what is happening both within and around us. This opportunity has been life-altering for me and our students. Yet, the reach of this fellowship program is intentionally limited - we are a regional organization serving tribal communities, working with university students.

Relational Foraging Program

Five years ago, I developed the “Relational Foraging” program, which I now co-instruct with my friend Seth Still Smoking, to make this model of education accessible to the broader community of Bozeman. Over the years, I’ve consulted with knowledge keepers and elders from this region on how to invite people into relationship and responsibility to this place, while also protecting Land, People, and Knowledge from further exploitation. The feedback from these advisors has been to emphasize relationship building over skill acquisition. As such, plants become the primary teachers, and we are the facilitators.

While we do talk about plants as food and medicine, we mostly teach about how to learn from and approach them with respect, honor, and acknowledgement of their animacy. We invite participants into additional layers of responsibility to the plants, their ancestors, and the Land by sharing appropriate stories from our different Peoples (Blackfeet, Lakota, and Indo-European). We also integrate both *Niitsipowahsin*, the Blackfoot language, and *Gaeilge*, the Irish language throughout. This gives participants an opportunity to both engage with the stories of Turtle Island and Indo-European stories. Over the years, these classes have evolved and have been welcomed and supported by our community here in Bozeman.

Through my relationships with people across Turtle Island and in Ireland, it's evident there is a growing wave of interest in the revitalization of cultural ways through wholistic, Land-based education. While some intact communities maintain their traditional ways of educating, most of us do not have this access. Opportunities to engage this model of education are still scarce, and where they exist, demand often far exceeds capacity. Given the critical need and interest, a corresponding wave of financial support for this model of education is needed. Neantóg, the collaborative education organization we are now building, is an attempt to meet this need.

Neantóg

Neantóg recognizes that all of us have cultural ways and stories worth remembering, with the mission of helping people live well with the Land that feeds them, while honoring the stories of their ancestors. We are creating an educational pathway for the development of layered, place-specific, and ancestrally rooted identities that encourage belonging through responsibility. The foundation of this organization will be an advisory council of individuals from a variety of places who maintain intact cultural ways and responsibilities. These advisors will guide our work and ensure we are accountable to the Peoples and ways of the particular places where we are working. Our organization will support a web of people doing the work of remembering, providing wholistic, Land-based education to their own communities. Our hope is that we can attract funding to make these educational opportunities more accessible and increasingly provide an economic pathway for those dedicating themselves to keeping alive ancestral stories and lifeways, by actively living them. This is especially important in this precarious time where it is necessary to walk both in the dominant economy and kinship economies.

What follows is a series of four essays, consisting of stories of remembering that are my answer to the question of *Cé leis thú*: to whom do you belong?

CHAPTER FOUR

SPRING: THE STING IS THE MEDICINE

I live along the hedgerows. I sprout through the cracks of Ancestors' homes. I was made for the places that the empires didn't want, the ravaged Lands they left behind. I am the nettles, and I am the plant of ruins, of margins, of the old sacred places. My sting is my medicine.

"Don't touch the nettles!" my mom said as we walked along a gravel trail in the hills of southern Ohio. She pointed to the sides of the path, where plants with serrated edges overflowed into the opening, straining towards the unscattered sunlight. Of course, this piqued my adolescent curiosity - I mean how bad could they be? Probably about seven years old at the time, even then I had a rebellious edge. I slowly drifted behind, out of my mom's sight, and brushed my hand cautiously against the leaves. Though at the time, I vowed to never touch those nasty plants ever again, that jolt of pain and all those red little bumps were my first dose of a sacred medicine, the beginning of my relationship with nettles.

I never would have believed that at 26, I'd be living in Montana in a home of straw and clay, eating a steady diet of roadkill deer, goat's milk, and nettles - yes, nettles - now I harvest those plants my mother warned me of, barehanded and joyful. That first sting must have sent the medicine deep, enticing generations of ancestral memories to boil to the surface, nudging me to remember things long forgotten by my family. But I grew up mostly surrounded by people who have forgotten that they forgot anything, unaware of the Indigenous beauty that was cut away and dismantled through layered, violent colonialism in Europe. I had very few reference points that could help me put myself back together again, to explain that unshakeable longing instilled into me by those nettles. Slowly, as I moved deeper into the work of Indigenous food

sovereignty, spending more and more time on the Land, and more time alongside Indigenous Peoples, it became increasingly clear just how thoroughly my People had been de-Indigenized, how much had been taken away. But no moment has shown me more than that day at the Glacier Peaks Casino, on the Blackfeet Nation.

I was at the casino, eating catered fettuccine alfredo (very traditional), after a day at a Blackfeet-led conference on caring for the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem. We had been invited to have dinner with the Kainai Ecosystem Protection Agency as they did some planning for their upcoming conference. There were multiple conversations going on around the large, circular table, but I was only listening to one. Two Kainai elders, long-time friends who grew up with one another, were laughing and telling stories. But I couldn't comprehend anything that they said. They were speaking to one another in their first language, *Niitsipowahsin*, the Real Speak, the Blackfoot language. With no intention of doing so, they absolutely shattered that tender place in my heart with their beautiful speech. I felt like I had been given a new map layer, exposing the next step on the path back to my own intact ancestors. I couldn't walk any further without my language, without carrying them with me.

I started learning *Gaeilge*, the Irish language, not long after that day. Many of my ancestors spoke a Celtic language before speaking English. Though I am an amalgamation of many different lands, languages, and stories, it is Ireland that first called me back home with its relative cultural intactness compared to other places my ancestors come from. As I started learning *Gaeilge*, I also started spending more time visiting with my grandmother, the keeper of my family's stories - a brilliant genealogist who has gone back to Ireland several times to piece them back together. This spring, I knew it was time for me to go back to Ireland, not having

visited since I was 14. I couldn't bear immersing my life in *Gaeilge* any longer without being with her in her living context. I started to plan a trip to the Gaeltacht, a predominantly Irish speaking area of Ireland, and I knew exactly who I wanted to bring with me.

Before long, I was harvesting nettles from the hedgerows as my grandma and I made our way to the Connemara Gaeltacht, my hands covered in those familiar red bumps. My grandma had just turned 80, and we were celebrating with two weeks together in Ireland. I proceeded cautiously along the narrow rural roads as my grandma told me the stories of her past genealogy trips with her sister and recounted the lives of our ancestors before they emigrated in 1865. The stories were punctuated, of course, with frequent reminders to drive on the left side of the road and stay closer to the center line. We watched the Land swiftly change as we passed through Galway and moved west onto the peninsula. Rich farmland faded into famine walls and blanket bogs, and English faded into *Gaeilge*. We had made it to the margins, one of few places where our ancestral seeds, our language, our culture, could still sprout and be renewed, a place where the nettles abound.

In 1652, the British commonwealth's Act for the Resettlement of Ireland gave Irish-speaking Catholics to the East of the River Shannon two choices - to go to hell or to go to Connacht.¹¹ Thus began a decade-long era of relocation of poor Irish farmers to clear more arable Land for English settlers, pushing them west to places like Connemara, places less desirable to the empire - a blueprint to be used later on Turtle Island. Just as they do up against

¹¹ Cunningham, John. *Conquest and land in Ireland: the transplantation to Connacht, 1649-1680*. Vol. 82. Suffolk, England, UK: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2011.

the rocky mountain front on the Blackfeet Nation, ancestral ways, though fragmented from centuries of colonization, have survived, particularly so in the far west of Ireland.

As the sun set and my grandma retired to her book and a cup of tea for the evening, I went out to the pubs of Connemara, where old men, weathered from years on the sea and a long life on the margins, spoke thick-accented *Gaeilge* well-beyond my comprehension. I began to talk with the man next to me, asking him about his life out on the peninsula and what the Irish language means to him, soon the stories started to flow like pints of stout. At midnight, it was only me, him, his friend, and the bartender, all three of them grew up in this village with *Gaeilge* as their first language. They told me about how when they were young, they were not allowed to speak the language in school, about the punishments they received. They told me about the hemorrhaging of children from the village, seeking work in far off cities as their traditional lifeways continue to be consumed by modern “progress.” They spoke eloquently about their love of their Land, the language, their families, but just as equally they sat in the darkness and the pain. Soon, my own ancestral pains - the sharp sting of displacement, of loss, of forgetting, were sitting right beside theirs at the bar. The pain and the medicine were bundled together as one, a ray of sunlight bursting through the seemingly impenetrable clouds of my ancestral amnesia, leaving a window to see through to that vast blue sky above me. Indigeneity, that love of Land felt deep in the bones, flowers in the words of one’s ancestral language, creating an unmistakable and increasingly rare scent of something real.

Stomachs full of nettles and eggs, my grandma and I drove south to County Cork for the next part of our trip and arrived at the Skibbereen Heritage Center, not entirely sure what to expect. With a smile, the middle-aged man working at the front desk greeted us with a thick

Cork accent and began to tell us a bit about the featured exhibit, which was focused on the famine. He asked where we were from, then upon hearing that we were from overseas, without hesitation he said “well, *welcome home!*” and told us a bit about the heritage center. As we walked through the exhibit, we learned that nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population of Skibbereen died from 1845-1852, making this rural town the epicenter of starvation during the famine. We listened to stories about the mass grave sites scattered across the area, the brutal conditions of the British workhouses where starving people would come for rations (one of which still stood directly across the street), and why we should call this time “The Great Hunger” rather than “the Famine.” From 1845 to 1852, while nearly 1 million Irish people starved to death, 75% of the food being produced in Ireland was being sent to England.¹² Potatoes were not the only food available, but they were the only food that many poor, rural Irish farmers had access to after centuries of the Indigenous food system of Ireland being pillaged by the British settler-colonial economy. The island, once 80% forested, had been inconceivably altered, but along the hedgerows, in the margins, the old foods still flowered, the nettles still grew.¹³

Together, my grandma and I read historical accounts from families who stayed alive by going back to their ancestral foods, digging mussels and harvesting seaweed along the strand, *harvesting nettles from the ruins*. I felt the sting, the pain and the medicine hitting me all at once. I was overcome with that ache in my bones, the genetic memory of my ancestors, the displacement, the generations without our languages, the forgetting of our stories, the

¹² Coogan, Tim Pat. *The famine plot: England's role in Ireland's greatest tragedy*. St. Martin's Press, 2012.

¹³ Devaney, John L., John J. Redmond, Grace M. Cott, and John O'Halloran. "Deforestation in Ireland 2000–2012." *Irish Forestry* 73 (2016): 8-24.

overwhelming gratitude that my ancestors lived, that I get to live, that I get to have nettles in my stomach, to listen to the old men speak *Gaeilge* in the pub, to listen to elders speak *Niitsipowahsin* at the casino. I'm only here because of the nettles. Regardless of where our People are from, our ancestral foods carried our families through hungry times. To me, it seems that these hungry times were likely the fertile ground for the cultivation of a critical understanding of the way that life is *transferred* through the ritual act of eating, at the expense of another's life. A daily accruing of debt to our Mother, debt that we will never fully repay, but a debt that we can strive to lessen by harnessing that precious lifeforce so beautifully that our daily existence becomes an offering back to Her.¹⁴

In a time of wild “foodie” culture, where recipes for blanched nettle pasta doughs and other culinary experiments proliferate and signal a remembrance of this often ignored and maligned plant, we must too remember the ways we have long been physically, culturally, and spiritually interwoven with them. Our ancestral languages, stories, and practices are the greatest medicine for the alienation of settler-colonial modernity, but we have to be willing to face the sting, to confront generations of forgetting with the bold act of remembrance, to grieve the violent de-Indigenization of our ancestors that has left so many of us across the ocean from the bones of our People. Nettles are the medicine desperately needed to revitalize the arthritic joints of our spiritually and culturally impoverished modern world.

¹⁴ Prechtel, M. (2012). *The unlikely peace at Cuchumaquic: The parallel lives of people as plants: Keeping the seeds alive*. North Atlantic Books.

I live along the hedgerows. I sprout through the cracks of Ancestor's homes. I was made for the places that the empires didn't want, the ravaged Lands they left behind. I am the nettles, and I am the plant of ruins, of margins, of the old sacred places. My sting is my medicine.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMER: IN THE WORK, WE WILL REMEMBER

On Work

Then a ploughman said, Speak to us of Work.

And he answered, saying:

You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth.

For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life's procession, that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite.

When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music.

Which of you would be a reed, dumb and silent, when all else sings together in unison?

Always you have been told that work is a curse and labour a misfortune.

But I say to you that when you work you fulfil a part of earth's furthest dream, assigned to you when the dream was born,

And in keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life,

And to love life through labour is to be intimate with life's inmost secret.

But if you in your pain call birth an affliction and the support of the flesh a curse written upon your brow, then I answer that naught but the sweat of your brow shall wash away that which is written.

You have been told also that life is darkness, and in your weariness you echo what was said by the weary.

And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge,

And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge,

And all knowledge is vain save when there is work,

And all work is empty save when there is love;

And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God.

And what is it to work with love?

It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.

It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.

It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit.

It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit,

And to know that all the blessed dead are standing about you and watching.

Often have I heard you say, as if speaking in sleep, "He who works in marble, and finds the shape of his own soul in the stone, is nobler than he who ploughs the soil.

And he who seizes the rainbow to lay it on a cloth in the likeness of man, is more than he who makes the sandals for our feet."

But I say, not in sleep but in the overwakefulness of noontide, that the wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant oaks than to the least of all the blades of grass;

And he alone is great who turns the voice of the wind into a song made sweeter by his own loving.

Work is love made visible.

And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.

For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger.
 And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your grudge distils a poison in the wine.
 And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night.

-from Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet

I emerge from the hawthorn lined path and gaze up at the lines of snow shaped by the frigid north winds covering the green slopes of *Eíre*, of Ireland above me. Trying to keep my footing, I climb upwards, announcing myself and my intentions. An old song comes into my head, and I hum along between breaths. I reach the top of the hill, and walk *diseal*, sunwise, around it. Slowly I approach the entrance of the tomb, where ancient art adorns the rocks lining the passage. I place three candles at the mouth, light them, and begin to feed the ancestors with the sweetest words I can muster, and offerings of what I imagine to be their favorite things from this world... meat, bread, butter - the things I know I will miss the most when I join them. Time begins to slip away as I sit, sheltered from the wind, and pray.

“Cabhrú liom a bheith feirmeoir maith. Cabhrú liom bia maith a fhás do mo mhuintir.”

“Help me to be a good farmer - help me to grow good food for my people.” The words echo through the chamber. They reverberate in me. *Préachán*, a crow flies low above my head, and calls. The sun beams pierce the parting fog.

This is an old prayer, and as such the Land responds. In it lies the knowing that simply to be fed is enough, a blessing given to us as humans, something to be prayed for, to make offerings for, to work for. When we use our bodies to perpetuate life, we remember what gives us life.

Describing Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Karen Roberts says,

“experts (*of TEK*) are people who have lived a traditional life, not the people who collect

traditional knowledge information.” There is plenty of information about “traditional knowledge,” but increasingly few people who have *actually lived* a traditional life. If ancestral ways are going to flourish into the future, in all of our unique places, we desperately need people to keep them alive...*by living them*. In her article, “Coming Full Circle,” Deborah McGregor questions “whether TEK should be ‘studied’ at all in an academic setting.” She writes,

While it is certainly *possible*, doing so *appropriately* from an Aboriginal view would require the use of unconventional methods not necessarily conforming to the standards of research currently held by institutions and granting organizations (although these organizations are gradually becoming more open about such matters).¹⁵

While my traditional learning process has mostly been outside of a culturally-intact community, and largely away from my own homelands, I entered this doctoral program with the intention of exploring what could be possible within a Western academic institution. Could my “research” be centered on engaging ancestral Land practices - learning directly from plants and animals through physical work? Would the embodied learning that happens when my life is entirely dedicated to honoring my relationships, caring for my community, be considered “legitimate” in the eyes of the university? Could I communicate my process and embodied learning largely through the medium of stories?

I came back to Montana after a month in Ireland with very little motivation to write this dissertation. In fact, I would say that my interest in writing has steadily declined during the course of my doctoral program. Perhaps traditional learning doesn’t have a place in a PhD program - it seems that in my attempt to live in a way my intact ancestors might understand, I’ve become less and less interested in talking about things, and more and more interested in actually

¹⁵ McGregor, Deborah. "Coming full circle: Indigenous knowledge, environment, and our future." *American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 3/4 (2004): 385-410.

doing them. I'm not surprised by this as I've often found that the majority of those still living well in their place, living traditionally, are not the ones doing much writing. They are usually too busy doing the work of keeping life living in their community.

My life this past few years has taught me things that don't really have any business being written. It simply wouldn't be helpful, because they aren't "ideas" that can be communicated in a way that the reader is suddenly transferred the same embodied knowing. However, the process of how I've learned those things does feel translational. Most academic research is focused on the collection of information (usually to serve humans). We have plenty of information, and more and more problems. Perhaps a lack of information *is not* the issue. The lessons that humans most desperately need to learn at this moment are not things that can be learned without living them out. As such, my "research" was about the process of traditional learning, of rebuilding the cultural intactness of myself and my community. As it turns out, it seems much of the process is simply to work with our bodies again.

My own capacity to sense and honor sacredness, to be grateful for what I'm given, is well-correlated to the scars and wrinkles on my hands and the skill with which I can use them to transform the life around me into more life. We must build physical places in our bodies again that can hold the shape of the old stories, the languages, the cultural ways. The stories can make us whole, help us remember, if we have a foundation that can carry them. In our physical labor, in our embodied understanding of our indebtedness to the rest of Creation, we can begin to feed life into our cultures and stories again, so that they can feed life back to us and to the world.

I've spent the last three years immersed in ancestral craft and lifeways, which has coalesced into the creation of many gifts for my community and the Land. As the central

component of my dissertation, I have made seven gifts for people who have guided me in my education. Each gift embodies an entire web of relationships between myself, my community, the Land, and the Holy, with traditional protocols of prayer and offerings that have been given to me by my elders and teachers entirely embedded. The gifts will be given to these people during my doctoral defense, as a way to honor our relationship, deepen our mutual indebtedness and belonging to one another, and with the prayer that the gift will bring many blessings to them.

What follows is the story of the buffalo robe I tanned for Jill Falcon Ramaker, the Director of Buffalo Nations Food Systems Initiative and my doctoral advisor. Hopefully this story will provide a glimpse into the ways physical work has helped me and my community remember.

This story is long, beginning when the Sun began to shine upon this Earth, for the Sun feeds the grass, which feeds the buffalo, and these gifts came from the buffalo. But I only entered the story a little more than a year ago.

“Do you think they’ll fit in the back of the Prius?” Steven said, smirking at me.

He had just returned from the Lower Brule Reservation, with two buffalo hides and heads after hunting with his brother. While a truck would’ve been better suited for the task, we went ahead and loaded up the back of my Prius, laughing and wondering if this was indeed the first time in history this particular thing had ever been done.

The leaves had long fallen from the cottonwoods and snow could be seen up above the treeline on the Spanish Peaks to the south the day my community came to visit me in my little shack of clay and straw, responding to my call for help. You see, I simply couldn’t lift the hides

by myself, with their awkward weight slouching in the carpenter bags. Lesson number one - none of this was meant to be done alone!

Together we lifted the hides from the car and carried them down towards the shack where fleshing beams waited. None of us had ever tanned buffalo hides before, and at that point, I was not well prepared for the task. Nonetheless, we needed to remove the flesh from the hides and get them salted before they began to rot and slip their hair. We all took turns on the fleshing beams, slowly peeling off layers of meat and fat, kids included, though they took frequent breaks to warm up beside the wood stove, which kept water for tea and deer meat soup simmering. After a few hours of work, both hides were fleshed and salted, rolled up for safe-keeping through the winter months.

When the cold weather began to give way in early Spring, we went out to harvest standing dead cottonwoods, straight and sturdy but relatively small in diameter. I needed to build a frame large enough to contain an entire mature buffalo hide for scraping and softening, which turns out is a pretty huge frame, about 10'x10'. We peeled the logs together with draw knives, and I began to chisel out double-lapping joints, though not very skillfully. The logs had a decent bit of character and liked to roll around, making it difficult to properly line up the joints and ensure a good friction fit.

I gave thanks for those trees, the same ones that had kept me warm through the frigid Montana winter, my first in my life with only a wood stove for heat. As I was peeling them, I thought about that night when the mercury hit -40 degrees. The door of my shack was made for a closet, and provided very little protection from the cold flowing in. I was quite sick, laid up in bed for days as that cold snap persisted. I had harvested downed cottonwoods from the land

around the shack in the fall months, and kept the wood stove burning as hot as cottonwood would allow. Still, my water jug froze solid on the floor. But up on my bed, a few feet above the ground, I stayed warm. In the middle of that coldest night, with the moon shining, and the wind howling, I remember rolling over in the haze of sickness and watching the logs burning in the stove. I looked out my window and could see the outline of the cottonwoods lining the creek in the moonlight. I was thankful for their warmth.

Soon, the nettles were nearly a foot tall along the creek, and every morning I would wake up and harvest tops for my morning tea. The first warblers had returned, dashing between clumps of willows and cottonwoods. The flock of turkeys that roosted in the trees above my shack were nowhere to be seen, but at daybreak I'd occasionally hear a gobble off in the distance. It seemed like everyone else was getting to work, so I figured I probably should too. I unrolled and desalted the first hide. A mature bull, nearly a half-inch thick in the neck, unfortunately scored in some sections during skinning. He was exceedingly beautiful, with long grizzly-like hairs running along his neck into his spine. What an honor it was to stand there before him, given this opportunity to learn, to be trusted by Steven to work with this buffalo, here, on these homelands.

I gathered up the rope I found in a neighboring dumpster, and began to tie the hide up onto the frame. Anytime I needed to move the frame, I needed at least one other person. Countless friends and visitors to the farm lended me a hand throughout the summer. With the hide on the frame, I began to wash the hair, hauling water from south cottonwood creek in 5-gallon buckets, pouring them over the hide, which was tilted at an angle so that the water could run off. I rubbed my hands through the fur for at least an hour, picking out all the remnants of his

life on the plains - burrs, grass, sticks, and all sorts of debris. As I washed, I sang songs and prayed, until the dirty water began to run clean.

Once his hair had dried a few days later, we moved the frame up against two cottonwoods at a slight angle, ready to be scraped. Except that I didn't have a suitable dry-scraper for the task ahead. My friend Adam started to make one for me - an old rotary saw blade ground down to remove the teeth, with a single bevel curled over, hafted to a willow handle, based on a lunarium, a traditional parchment making tool. Throughout the summer, I went through multiple iterations of this tool, and ended up making one with a halved rotary saw blade (rather than a whole circle) on an adz-like handle.

Scraping that first hide took at least 20 hours of dedicated work, spread out over the course of a few weeks. Many people laid their hands on that work and quickly learned just how incredibly skilled and strong the women of this place, who would traditionally be responsible for tanning hides, were. By the end of the summer, I was as strong as I had ever been, thanks to the buffalo. Eventually, my body tired from weeks of scraping, it was time to soften.

I lit many little fires there beside the creek, warming water to mix with egg yolks or brains, stirring them with my fingers to emulsify, my work-torn hands softened by the fats. Softening that first buffalo hide was nothing like the numerous deerskins I had done before, with the skin much less willing to absorb the warm fat solution.

All the while, I was learning to milk goats without a stanchion, doing work around the farm, tanning several sheep and deer hides, and occasionally supporting the Buffalo Nations student fellows in their Indigenous gardens. Yet, in many ways when I look back on that time, that buffalo was my whole life. Everything else revolved around him. My clothes were all

covered in stains from softening with the fats, my fingers stung from accidental awl stabs made while trying to sew up any holes, and my mind was always wondering if he would ever be fully soft.

I softened that first hide nine times. Each time, I'd rub the fat solution onto the hide in the evening and fold it up to soak in overnight, then I'd retie the hide to the frame, and let it begin to dry in the cool morning air. I'd work the hide, trying to stretch it open in spurts as it slowly dried throughout the day. After the third softening, I smoked the hide, so each softening that followed softenings, I was able to relish in the intoxicating smell of the fat solution mixing with the smell of smoke from the skin. I'll never forget the afternoons I spent in the shade of the cottonwoods, with the buffalo hide and frame propped up flat, a few feet above the ground. I'd climb onto the hide as if it were a trampoline, dancing, bouncing, and laughing while listening to hours of old Irish reels and jigs, slowly softening with the weight of my joyful body as the hide proceeded from damp to dry. I often wondered if there was an old Irish word describing exactly this practice, but for softening cow hides - I wouldn't be surprised. While that hide never became as soft as I had hoped for, every night this winter I have wrapped myself up in those memories of playful summer afternoons, kept warm by his soft fur against my human skin, reminded of how I would perish in that winter cold if it were not for those cottonwoods, not for this buffalo.

I decided to try another approach on the second hide from Lower Brule, knowing that the perfect hide was still waiting for me - a well-skinned female buffalo hide from the Yellowstone herd, harvested outside of the park during a treaty rights hunt by a fellow student. That hide would be my opportunity to apply what I was taught by the previous buffalo, and would be a fitting gift for Jill Falcon Ramaker, the matriarch of our own community. I set out to learn how

to tan buffalo robes for this very reason, to honor the person who has opened the doors to an Indigenous education for myself and many other students as a professor, mentor, and the director of Buffalo Nations Food Systems Initiative. Jill's dissertation, *Chi Bizhiki (Grandfather Buffalo)*, is an Indigenous environmental history documenting the way that her People, the Anishinaabeg "ran with their lives and their ceremonies as they followed the buffalo and resisted colonization of the web of life."¹⁶ Her work is a daily gift back to the buffalo, and no gift other than a buffalo robe would be able to honor her properly. But I wasn't prepared yet for that important work.

With the heat of summer fast approaching, I prepared the second bull hide from Lower Brule to be bark tanned - another traditional tanning method that uses the tannins found in plants to transform the skin. While I had barktanned sheep skins and had the guidance of my friend who is a very skilled tanner, neither of us had ever had the opportunity to barktan a buffalo hide. The hope was that this approach would ease the work of softening, and lead to a more supple hide. After preparing the hide and making the tanning bath, essentially a large stock tank full of "tea" made from bark, I placed the hide into the tank and proceeded to stir it every day. My hope was that it would tan evenly through over the course of the next month or two. The only problem was that this particular hide had already started to rot slightly and slip hair in a couple spots on its way to me from Lower Brule. The tanning was going slowly, and after about a month, the hide began to rot slowly, slipping more hair. In hindsight, I should have thinned the hide, which was very thick, prior to barktanning. Once I noticed the rot, I pulled the hide from the bath and let it dry to stop the rot. With several spots missing hair, a change of course was in order. While the hopes for another robe were fading, the potential for very useful buffalo leather became clear.

¹⁶ Ramaker, Jill Falcon. "Gichi Bizhiki (Grandfather Buffalo): Anishinaabe sovereignty, the seasonal round, and resistance to the colonization of the web of life, 1780-1890." (2021).

With another robe still to tan, I was starting to realize I would be needing even more help from my community than I originally thought. I sat down with Steven, and his wife Merritt, and we started to envision how this hide could give the opportunity for even more students to learn.

But it was now time to unfold that beautiful Yellowstone hide, and begin the long journey once again, this time more prepared, my body was strong and I was carrying all the lessons given to me by those first two hides and the knowledge keepers I spoke to throughout the summer, most of whom told me that this female hide would be much better suited for a robe. I prayed hard before beginning. I prayed that this hide would bring our community together to honor Jill, to honor this buffalo - that our hands would do good work and that our thoughts would be good.

My scraping tool was sharp and well-made, my frame sturdy, and the hide was already thin in the belly. My heart was beating full in those days. Each morning, starting a small fire to boil tea water, harvesting the tops of wild mint and nettles from the shady places where they hadn't yet gone to seed, watching the sun rise and the creek begin to sparkle. The sound of my tool against the hide mixing with birdsong and the bubbling of the creek, beautiful, long flakes of buffalo skin flying with each prayerful stroke. Friends coming by, laying their hands and hearts on the work. Soon, the sun above our heads, sweat on our brows, we'd go down to the river, now crystal clear, but still cool, and jump into the deep eddy against the bank. In that eddy, the water swirls, but just a few feet further out, the mighty river rushes past with the force of the mountains just upstream. Sitting in the river, closing our eyes, feeling that strength, the life moving around us, the Land's blood pulsing towards the ocean heart. Back to scraping, back to the rhythms of our labor reverberating on the skin.

And again, the mixing of warm water and buffalo brains, my skin greasy. Seven days, countless hours, I spent pouring my labor into the fibers of that skin, opening them up so that the warmth of that buffalo's winter coat could be wrapped around our matriarch, so that the memory and teachings of this buffalo could be remembered. Two days of willow smoke penetrating those fibers, preserving all that they hold. Now, the hide was ready to be painted.

The river willows now bright gold, snow returned to the high peaks, I sat in the back of the truck holding tight to the strapped down frame holding that partially barked skin as we made our way to the American Indian Hall on the Montana State University campus. Together, we carried the frame and placed it next to the Indigenous garden, ready for the hands of many students to touch the hide and learn over the coming weeks. The hair slipped, we would be scraping both sides of the hide, removing the rest of the hair and the layer beneath so that the skin could be used as leather for shoes, bags, and other traditional crafts. That night, the learning began with a community feast held at the hall. We cooked pozole with buffalo meat and nixtamalized corn from last year's harvest, and all listened as Steven told the story of the buffalo that waited for us by the garden, of the way buffalo have fed his People since time immemorial. The finished buffalo hides from summer were passed around, so that all the students could feel them and those of us who worked with them told the stories of those summer days tanning on the farm. After a few weeks of scraping alongside students, the hide was thinned and ready to be softened the following summer by students from the Buffalo Nations Summer Fellowship, which I help to coordinate, who will then be able to use the leather to make traditional crafts.

After weeks of brutal cold, with feet of snow covering the valley floor, our community came together beneath the mountains to share food, songs, and stories and to paint the robe for

Jill. The robe was laid out across two tables, and earth pigments of many colors were mixed with binder. Together, we prayed that our hands would do good work, that our paintings on the hide would honor this buffalo, and honor our relationships with Jill. For hours, we all huddled around the hide, adorning her with our memories, with stories of the entire web of relations of these homelands, with the plants, animals, and symbols of the diverse Peoples and languages we all come from: *Manoominm* - wild rice, *iqalluk* - salmon, *pahá* - mountains, *innii* - buffalo, *yá* - corn, *ponokáómitaa* - horse, *crann darach* - oak tree, *kiááyo* - bear, 花 - flowers, *ezpainak kantuan* - lips singing. Food in our stomachs - deer from the mountains above us, squash from our gardens below - we lit a fire beneath the light of the moon, *ko'komiki'somm*, *dibiki-giizis*, *haywí*, *Iraluq*, *ilargia*, *lleuad*, *gealach*, 月. We sat together sharing our old songs and stories with one another, grateful to be fed, grateful to be together, grateful for what our work has taught us.

CHAPTER SIX

FALL: OUR EYES ON THE HOLY, OUR FEET ON THE
EARTH

Up the canyon, where water flows to the valley, the water we drink. Our eyes on the Holy, our feet on the Earth. Step after step, our tracks in the snow, out on the hunt once again. A lodge appears, tucked into the trees. We cough outside the door, but no one answers. Whose lodge is this, so high on the mountain, so far from any trail? Who also takes their rest up here in the home of the one we seek? There's no sign of her, the elk, that fleet footed woman of the mountain, no sign of her people. There is still mountain above us, darkness cloaking us. Up and up, our steps like hers. Our eyes and her eyes, waiting for Sun, for *Naató'si, an ghrian*, hopeful that we may see Him again, feel the warmth of His breath again. That hope guiding our steps, one after the other, over logs, under drooping branches. Snow falls on our heads. Snow that will melt tomorrow - if He has the strength to rise again, to give us all life again. Snow that will leave the canyon. Water that we will drink. Water that she drinks.

Darkness in the valley, pink on the peaks. The canyon below us, nothing above us but sky. Not a sign of her, but she can feel His warmth too. Strength in our bones, strength from our food. Thankful to move like her, to be animals like her, fires burning in our chest like hers. He rises, sparkles fill the sky with a backdrop of blue, we sit and eat our food. *Pakksiníkimaan*, pounded chokecherries, the ones we picked and dried before the little people, the good people, *na daoine maith* could taint them, those sweet ones hanging onto the branches before *Óiche Shamhna*, Halloween.

Down now, back into the forest, climbing over logs again. Our eyes on the Holy, our feet on the earth. Following the same thread as her. That thread that goes forward, that invisible thread, that thread towards life, that thread towards death.

Thousands of feet below, His light hits the bottom of the canyon, warming the air. In the darkness of the forest, going down to the open ridge below, the thermals rise up to tickle our faces. Back into the sagebrush, my eyes are drawn left. On the neighboring ridge, I see a path through the snow. We've gone too far for those steps to be that of another human. The path is too well worn to be that of the deer. Our hearts beating, our eyes on the Holy, our feet on the earth.

We walk slowly, wind in our face, His warmth on our backs. The wind in her face, the warmth on her back. That wondrous one that we seek, the one that moves through the mountains like a ghost.

"Tá sé go hálainn do hadhaigh a fheicail arís, a mo stór," a whisper on my breath to she who is there below me as the bullet flies.

We watch as her body slides through the snow, watch as she comes to her final rest with her back in a trickling creek. Coming to her final rest in that water that she drank, that water that we will drink, that water that will carry her blood, our prayers to the sea, *an fharraige*, our Mother. Her people run out from the steep drainage below, and up onto the ridges, their brown, thick *Samhain* coats glistening in the sun as they stop and stare back at us. We stare at them. All of our eyes on the Holy, all of our feet on the Earth. Her eyes too are open, still reflecting His light. We look through those windows to the Holy, and warm water falls from our eyes, melting the snow below.

Her flesh rests on our backs, our backs built by her kin, our kin. We fall to our knees, slipping on the now wet snow, trying to reach the ridge. We call on the strength of our food, straining under her weight as we try to stand again and again.

Down and down, slipping and sliding, we carry her, our food, down the mountain. Our bones are screaming, legs weary. His light is fading, and darkness cloaks us again. We must return to the mountain. More food is still up there, hanging in the tree. Her skin - our clothes - tied in a bundle waiting for us. We have little strength remaining, but our eyes are still open.

We sit below that tree, our food hanging above us, unsure of our ability to carry the weight, the weight it takes for us and our community to live. The first star beings up in the sky, we breathe in their light, and rest in their stillness. I reach into my bag, and find that last piece of *miiniiyookaakin*, of pemmican, and split it in two. We find strength in that food, in our last drinks of canyon water, and carry our food down the mountain, back to our village, back to our people.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WINTER: I KNEW YOU REMEMBERED FROM
SOMEWHERE

“A moment of suffering for a lifetime of gifts,” that *omahkinaa*, that old Piikani man, whispered to me, as the water hit the grandfather rocks and the steam hissed. I remembered them there in that sweat, that *iitáihtsiyo’p*, that *teach allais* - my old ones, the Indo-European ones, surrounding me in all their elegance as I suffered in the darkness of that womb, sweat pouring from my body. Dressed in their old way, speaking their language, that wild, vital part of my soul reflected in them. I still remember that time there in that sweat, that *iitáihtsiyo’p*, that *teach allais*, when I finally understood where that wild, vital part of me came from, when I finally understood why those old Piikani ways seemed so familiar.

I also remembered them there in that fertile mountain valley, as that crane, that *siikamm*, that *corr* flew overhead and called, just as I stumbled across that puffball mushroom, that *kakató’si*, that *bolgán* in the meadow grass. I remembered them there when those old stories came to my head. Wasn’t it the Crane Woman who gave Morning Star’s human wife those songs, that helped her dig that big, sacred turnip in the Sky World, that left behind the hole where she could see the Piikani People, her People down below? Isn’t that puffball, this one right here in front of me, their son, the one that rose up to fill the hole his mother left in the sky? The fixed star in the sky? Isn’t that the crane I saw danced back to life in that roundhouse? Isn’t that crane up there flying above me the relative of Aoife, that one of the *Tuatha* who was turned into a crane? That one whose skin Manannán mac Lir used to make his magical bag, the bag of many treasures? The treasures that can only be seen when the tide is high? Didn’t someone say that the

bag held within it the old letters, the Ogham, perhaps made from the legs of flying cranes? Didn't they say that we may have worshiped the cranes, lighting ritual fires for them along our coasts to guide them on their path? Crane, *Corr*? The same one whose name appears in hundreds of *logainmneacha*, placenames across the Island of *Éire*, of Ireland? I put down my offering and gave thanks for the reminder.

I also remembered them, my old ones, that time I heard rumours of that cave where the little people, *pookitapi*, *na daoine maithe*, live, the one that is a passageway that takes you to *Éire*. Aren't those the little people the ones who plant the *pisstaahkaan*, the tobacco? The ones with that lovely music that slip into our world on *Oiche Shamna*, on Halloween from beneath the ring forts, the hawthorns, the old tombs, from the otherworld, the ones that taint the berries that still hang from the branches on that night? The ones we leave offerings for?

I also remembered them there in our backyard as we fleshed the skins of those deer, those *issikotoyi*, those *fianna*, that time scores of magpie, *mamiá'tsikimi*, *snag breac*, swarmed around us and feasted. Aren't those deer, those *issikotoyi* the ones that lost their gall to the antelope when they lost the race on the plains? The ones that won their dew claws in the race up in the mountains? *Na fianna*? The ones just like Sadhbh, that beautiful woman who was turned into a deer, the mother of Oisín, the little deer, Fionn Mac Cumhaill's son, the one she raised up in those wild mountains and taught how to live well? The same Oisín who went to *Tír na nÓg*, the Land of the Forever Young, with his bride Niamh to live among the *Tuatha De Danann*? The one who never forgot the old ways even in the face of St. Patrick, the Christianizing missionary? I remembered those stories that day. I still remember those stories as my buckskin turnshoes I

made from those skins hit the green grass, as the wind blows through the bullet holes in my skin pants.

I also remembered them that day I placed those red willow, those *mi'kotsípiiyis*, those *conbhaiscne*, above my doorway right beside my *Cros Bhríde*, my Bridgid's cross, the one woven from rushes, given to us by Bridgid to protect our homes. You know, those *mi'kotsípiiyis*, the greasy ones that Napi cooked his squirrels on, the ones the beaver, the *ksísskstaki*, gave to the People? When I'm in *Éire* and I see those *conbhaiscne* shining red in the sun, I remember those *Piikani* stories and those Lands don't seem so far away. When I'm on *Piikani* lands, harvesting willow, *saileach*, for weaving, I always remember those old traditional Irish baskets, the *ciseoga* and *cléibh*, those baskets we used for gathering, for hauling seaweed and turf, and in those moments *Éire* doesn't seem so far away.

I also remembered them that day back in *Éire*, the brightly-colored clooties adorning the tree above me as I cupped my palms and dipped them into the holy waters running out from beneath the stone, bowing my head for a drink. I was there searching for the old *iitáhtsiyo 'p*, the old *teach allais*, the sweathouse ruin rumored to be nearby. I was there searching for another memory, one held in my bones - not in my head.

I sat beside my friend on his *Piikani* homelands, where he told me his stories, and I began to tell him my stories. I showed him the picture of that old *iitáhtsiyo 'p*, that old *teach allais*, the one I found there beside that holy well in *Éire* and he said to me, "I knew you remembered from somewhere, my brother."

It is only together that we can remember the whole thing back together again. The patterns of Creation repeat themselves across the Earth, and it is these patterns that all of our People, in their places, interpreted to build distinct cultures that would help them and their descendants to live well.¹⁷ Over thousands of years, layers of stories, of animacy, of sacredness began to fill every crack of the Land. As we've forgotten our ways, our ability to interpret the patterns of creation has also waned. That ability still exists in our souls waiting to be nurtured again, so that we can gather up all the pieces left behind by our ancestors, no matter how small, and begin to piece them together again. In order to do that, we need to remember how those pieces may come together in our places, so that we can begin to listen deeply and allow the memories in our bones, the memories in the Land, to jump up in us and fill in the gaps.

There are people who still have their awareness honed, who still have enough intactness to understand the patterns of Creation. What could come from cultural elders being on the Land in a place like Ireland, with Irish people who have gathered as many remaining cultural threads as they can, those who speak the language? What would happen if together, they sat around *Ail na Mireann*, the Stone of Divisions at the sacred center of Ireland, and prayed, and asked for help remembering how things could be pieced together again? Could ceremony return to Ireland - ancestrally-rooted, intact ceremony like the old days? What would the Land whisper to them?

Perhaps those elders, from places like here on Turtle Island, would see all the *logainmneacha*, the placenames, that adorn the Irish landscape, the old language on every sign, and hear the language spoken in its daily, living context in communities like *An Cheathra Rua* in

¹⁷ Yunkaporta, Tyson. *Sand talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Text Publishing, 2019.

the Connemara Gaeltacht. Perhaps those wise Irish language speakers, those *Gaeilgeoirí*, the old story tellers and craftspeople from the Gaeltacht could come to Turtle Island and help the Peoples here fill in the gaps left behind by centuries of violent colonialism and the forced forgetting of the Boarding School Era. Perhaps they could share about how some of their old ways managed to survive more than a thousand years of English colonization.

I've long wondered about what it could look like to bring my old ones with me, to carry them with me in my daily life, while still adapting to and honoring the Land that now feeds me. Today, my intact ancestors, their languages, and their stories sit in a place of honor within my life, right beside the languages and stories of this place where I live, and the old stories of other Peoples from around the world. The patterns of Creation repeat themselves in these stories, transcending our human perception of geographical separation. Our ways are different, given to us by our places, but our foundations are the same. My daily life is alive with all of these stories. I am continually reshaped by them. I belong to those stories now.

We are all human beings, given this gift of life, entirely dependent on the Sun and the rest of Creation to continue living. We are all facing enormous threats to the survival of our unique ancestral ways of life, cultures, and languages. Our strength is in our coming together - not as a homogenizing melting pot, but as diverse rememberers of the original instructions. What a feast for the Holy it would be if we all stood side by side, all of us wearing the unique, adorned clothing of our own Peoples, with our old songs and languages on our lips, with all of our delicious foods, and with our hearts swollen with love for our homelands. If we linked arms and closed in on that original fire burning in that hearth before us, perhaps, together, we could protect

that fire from the storms raging all around us, perhaps we could keep the old memories alive,
perhaps we could all remember again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

So why is this work important?

Because we are here to make beauty that honors the life we are given. While humans have always been forgetful, we are living in especially forgetful times. Maintaining and struggling for cultural ways and stories that help us remember has always been important, and it still is.

Many times, especially during my master's where I did not feel like I was enough to walk forward on this path, that I didn't have what was required to be able to belong. The fear of not enoughness which stops many of us from truly picking up real responsibilities and belonging to place, does no good for the Land. That awkwardness we may feel picking up the traditional ways of our ancestors - their languages, stories, and cultural ways - is the result of intentional, multi-generational efforts to get our Peoples to forget who they were. We have the responsibility to be awkward (though also thoughtful), to walk forward towards our own vitality and capacity for intactness, and to begin the multi-generational effort of remembering.

I'm running towards the beauty, not away from the modern way of life due to fear of its consequences. This is an important distinction, especially for young people feeling the weight of the world on their shoulders. It's not about running away from all the current and future realities we fear, or attacking the things or people we hate, even if it seems like they are the ones killing what we love. None of the work done during this doctoral program was done because I am afraid of what lies ahead, even though I am afraid at times. Everything was done because of how much I love what I love, and for that which I can no longer live without. We should be cautious of our

own visions of “progress.” I’m striving to be of service to something much bigger than myself, *not to get what I want, or what I think is best.*

If you feel vitality pulsing through you, and refuse to live only half-alive, then I would invite you to make a commitment to yourself to live in a way that honors who you are, to be of service, and to pray for help. Follow the threads that feed your vitality. Be present, be patient, and don’t run from the grief and discomfort that arises in the work of remembering. The belonging our intact ancestors felt to their People and homelands was cultivated through many generations of relationship and responsibility - this work can’t be rushed. It’s not a quick technological fix to our problems. It’s another way entirely.

As we track back along our paths, picking up the pieces left behind by our ancestors, we become magnets for others who are seeking that old beauty. While we may not fit into the society that surrounds us right now, over time, our ability to build real relationships with people and Land may just lead to something akin to the belonging our ancestors would have felt. Then, we may be able to answer the question, “*Cé leis thú?*,” with much more than just our names.

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APPENDIX

OTHER LITERATURE

I have intentionally limited overly academic terminology and citations to make this writing more accessible and emphasize my belief that the cure to the issues facing us is artistic, cultural, and spiritual - just as much as it is intellectual. While this dissertation includes limited citations, I want to acknowledge with respect the other thinkers who have influenced my work. This bibliography is included to honor the knowledge they have shared with me. My hope is that the literature that follows can provide insights into the relational web of knowledge I have entered during my studies.

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