

Moving Pedagogy Outside: Reading a Graduate English Course with the Concepts of Fort Pedagogy, Indigenous Métissage, and the wâhkôhtowin Imagination

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Abstract

Where do we learn? What are our experiences of relationships in those contexts? Could teaching a course outside activate the wâhkôhtowin imagination? Can walking begin to repair relationships? Donald suggests that it can; and yet, another of the concepts Donald discusses, that of fort pedagogy, cautions us to listen and not claim. Is it possible for me, a White descendent of European immigrants, to learn from the wâhkôhtowin imagination without re-enacting fort pedagogy? In this article, I examine possibilities for anti-colonial pedagogy as I reflect on a student's learning experiences—my own—from my dual positionality as PhD student and English literature instructor. Thinking alongside Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2009, 2012), fort pedagogy (Donald, 2009), and the wâhkôhtowin imagination (Donald, 2021), I examine my experiences in an innovative graduate English course taught largely outside and consider ways pedagogy can shift relationships to place and to one another.

Keywords: anti-colonial pedagogy, imagination, Indigenous ways of knowing, place-based learning, reciprocity, wâhkôhtowin

Résumé

Où apprenons-nous ? Quelles sont nos expériences des relations dans ces contextes ? L'enseignement d'un cours à l'extérieur peut-il activer l'imagination des wâhkôhtowin ? La marche peut-elle commencer à réparer les relations ? Donald (2021) suggère que c'est possible ; et pourtant, un autre des concepts abordés par Donald, celui de la « fort pedagogy » (2009), nous encourage à écouter plutôt qu'à demander. Est-il possible pour moi, nouvelle arrivante blanche de cinquième génération, d'apprendre de l'imagination wâhkôhtowin sans participer à des tendances assimilationnistes ni reproduire la « fort pedagogy » ? Dans cet article, j'examine les possibilités de pratiques pédagogiques décoloniales en réfléchissant aux expériences d'apprentissage d'une étudiante — la mienne — à partir de ma double position d'étudiante au doctorat et d'enseignante de littérature anglaise. J'explore les concepts de « Indigenous Métissage » (Donald, 2009), de « fort pedagogy » (Donald, 2009) et d'imagination wâhkôhtowin (Donald, 2021) dans le contexte de mes expériences dans un cours d'anglais enseigné à l'extérieur, dans la nature, et j'examine les façons dont la pédagogie peut transformer les relations au lieu et à l'autre. *Mots-clés* : pédagogie anticoloniale, imagination, façons de savoir autochtones, apprentissage sur le terrain, réciprocité, wâhkôhtowin

Introduction: Framing Relational Ecologies

My name is Deborah Schamuhn Kirk. I am a daughter of Canadian and American parents whose ancestors immigrated from Europe, and as a child I lived on Treaty 13 Territory, the Nuu-chah-nulth region, Treaty 8 territory, the unceded territory of the scōwāθən (Tsawwassen) people, and Treaty 4 Territory. I currently live in Edmonton on Treaty 6 Territory, I am a parent of children who I have seen become immersed in outdoor play, and I am a former junior high school teacher who has hiked alongside my English Language Arts students, tottering together beneath bulky backpacks and growing in relationship. It is here on Treaty 6 Territory, where I have lived and worked since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report, that I have begun to learn about ways my settler colonial inheritance shapes my relationships with people, education, and places. I have begun to reflect on ways of both knowing and learning

outdoors that I experienced as a child playing in geographically diverse outdoor spaces, that I have observed in my own children and students, and that I have felt as an adult walking in Edmonton's River Valley; and on the separation of these ways of knowing and learning from student and teacher experiences within walled classrooms. And I have begun to recognize and name the way settler colonialism, which Eve Tuck (Unangax̂)¹ and her collaborators describe as "a form of colonization in which outsiders come to land inhabited by Indigenous Peoples and claim it as their own new home" (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 6), silences the varied and long histories of Indigenous Peoples in the places through which I have moved. "In all the places I have ever lived," Cynthia Chambers (2008) writes, "and I have lived in many, there were always people who lived there before me" (pp. 115–116). Having experienced personal connections to many places, and understanding that, as Narcisse Blood (Niitsitapi) and his co-authors write, Indigenous wisdom traditions "emphasize connectivity...to the land and stories linked to specific places" (Blood et al., 2012, p. 48), I am beginning to listen for stories linked to the specific place where I now make my home. Chambers (2008) writes about a "curriculum of place" (p. 115) that weaves place-based experiences together with Indigenous wisdom teachings; with the help of Indigenous teachers, I am drawn to learn with *this* curriculum of place. Dwayne Donald (amiskwaciwiyiniwak) is an Indigenous scholar whose teachings include place-stories woven into amiskwaciwiyiniwak² (Beaver Hills), Edmonton; these teachings encourage me to connect settler colonialism's silencing of Indigenous wisdom traditions with my inherited pedagogical practices that sever relationships with outside places and between Canadian and Indigenous Peoples. With his help, I am beginning to reimagine relationships.

I currently inhabit positionalities of both instructor and student, teaching an English literature class to first-year university students while also taking an English literature class as a Secondary Education graduate student; as both instructor and student, I am interested in learning with Donald's teachings as I work toward developing anti-colonial pedagogies and non-extractive reading practices, guided by place. While I am committed to an enactment of truth and reconciliation education that learns from and with

1 In this article I recognize Indigenous authors' community/Nation connections immediately after their name and provide their most recent self-identification.

2 Like Martin (2023), who follows Ahenakew and Wolfart (1998, as cited in Martin, 2023), I do not capitalize nēhiyaw (Plains Cree) words.

land (Madden, 2019), I acknowledge the challenges of resisting what Dylan Robinson (Stólö/Skwah) defines as *hungry listening*—which “consumes” without any regard for relationships (Robinson, 2020, p. 32)—as I engage Indigenous understandings. I began this article by locating myself, recognizing that, as Sandra Styres (Kanien’kehá:ka/English/French) reminds us, this process is a central part of respectful Indigenous practices (Styres, 2019); also, in my introduction, I offer details about my own place-stories in order to make visible ways my experiences shape my interpretations. As Margaret Kovach (Nêhiyaw/Saulteaux) writes, “we can only interpret the world from the place of our experience” (Kovach, 2016, p. 96). What follows is, in a sense, an extended process of locating and positioning myself as educator, through my experiences as student. In this article I process my experiences as a graduate student in Sarah Krotz’s “Canadian Literature: Literary Ecologies,” a class that took place largely outside and was framed to ensure that conversations about land and place as represented in literature were “in dialogue with, and troubled by Indigenous relationships to land” (Krotz, personal communication, April 16, 2025). I am grateful to Dr. Krotz for her support of this paper.³

“Literary Ecologies” worked to make space for Indigenous teachings and also to resist the assimilation of those teachings even as—as Cash Ahenakew (Plains Cree) writes—it *grafted* them onto its place-based curriculum (Ahenakew, 2016). Chambers (2008) writes about memory maps, stories that “re-constitute the interrelatedness of the places traveled, the activities practiced in those places, the relations among the human beings involved and their relationships with the other beings in those places” (p. 124); I offer this autobiographical thinking-through as a reconfigured memory map, a storied processing by which I aim to work with Donald’s writings in order to “engage—listen, learn, dialogue, and debate” (McKegney, 2016, p. 85) with one iteration of truth and reconciliation education that re-envision place-based relationships (Madden, 2019). Although I use my own experiences as the “site of my inquiry” (Chambers, 2004, p. 3), I do not use the term *autobiographical* to signal any obsession over my own experiences (Reder, 2022); rather, following Deanna Reder (Cree-Métis), I use this term intentionally in order to emphasize the situatedness of personal narratives within a nexus of relationality. My narrative of self is, like all narratives, relational, and formed in response to many “diverse influences” (Donald, 2012, p. 544).

3 Krotz has also written about her experiences teaching this course (see Krotz, 2023).

In what follows, I provide an overview of three concepts in Donald's writings with which I process my experiences in "Literary Ecologies": the pedagogy of the fort (Donald, 2009), Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2009, 2012), and the wâhkôhtowin imagination (Donald, 2021). Thinking alongside the concept of Indigenous Métissage, I examine two of the Canadian nature poems we read in this graduate course as instances of place-imaginings; and I consider the way another class text, the film *ôtênaw* (McNally, 2017), prompted me to understand our outside gathering place as an artifact, woven with living stories. I then reflect on ways movement in this graduate course opened our learning to enlivened and relational ways of being; I story an encounter in our outdoor meeting place that helped me attune to place as teacher; I consider walking as a qualitatively differently way of learning that vivifies experience (Donald, 2021); and I attend to the significance of reciprocity as a central aspect of the wâhkôhtowin imagination. I conclude with a reflection on my own praxis as educator and a consideration of how my relationship with place and pedagogy as instructor is beginning to change as a result of my experiences as student in this graduate English course. Often, in this writing, I slide into storied narration in order to express experiential relationships with concepts in participatory, holistic ways. Throughout, movement—between and among the spaces of remembered lived experiences, the storying of those experiences, analyses of coursework, and an account of emerging praxis—helps me attend to my own grounding and to what emerges across ways of being-knowing-doing. This movement, a dwelling-in-motion, invites me to develop a critical subjectivity (Heron & Reason, 1997).

Key Concepts: Pedagogy of the Fort, Indigenous Métissage, the wâhkôhtowin Imagination

The pedagogy of the fort (Donald, 2009), Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2009, 2012), and the wâhkôhtowin imagination (Donald, 2021) are concepts central to Donald's scholarly publications. Donald (2009) draws attention to the way contemporary museum recreations of historic Canadian forts locate Indigenous activity such as singing, dancing, and beadwork solely outside the wooden walls of the fort, and "more industrious" (p. 2) European activity within those walls. He argues that this depiction of severed Indigenous and European interaction is both historically inaccurate and mythologically accurate: although relationships between Indigenous Peoples and European newcomers were and are

intertwined, Canada's narrative of national identity has relied on stories of division, depicting Indigenous experiences and knowledge as "outside the concern of Canadians" (p. 3). The pedagogy of the fort describes a Canadian educational context that continues to enact colonialist ideology and is marked by a mindset that distinguishes and then absorbs into its own logic. Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2009, 2012)⁴ works to resist fort pedagogy. This approach begins with Indigenous perspectives as represented in and entangled with artifacts—defined as those things which "humans conceptualize...as storied aspects of their world" and which are "directly associated with a particular place and the history, culture, language and spirituality of a people" (Donald, 2009, p. 11). It then makes visible the ways that, through interactions with colonizers, perspectives about those material objects shift and are eventually claimed by dominant Canadian society. As an example, Donald describes traditional Indigenous perspectives of rocks as animate and tells the story of papamihaw asiniy, the "flying rock" (2009, p. 14). This story is embedded in the place where the flying rock fell, a historically contested area that, with this rock's arrival, became a spiritually significant place of peace and pilgrimage. Donald shares that in the 1800s, papamihaw asiniy was removed and renamed by a missionary newcomer, who believed that its removal would stop Indigenous Peoples from gathering. This rock eventually came to be housed at the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton and known as "the Manitou Stone" (Donald, 2009, p. 18). However, although the newcomer John McDougall removed this rock from its place, Donald emphasizes that the sacredness of this rock that fell from the sky is inseparable from the earth that received it, a place that continues to be a site of pilgrimage.

In drawing attention to ways perspectives shift and take form, Métissage unsettles rigid singular narratives and brings attention to mutual entanglements and vulnerabilities of both colonizer and colonized peoples. Indigenous Métissage in particular brings focus to specific places in Canada and to Indigenous place-stories that speak to Indigenous memories and experiences of those places, and it encourages conceptualizations that make space for conflicting experiences and interpretations of different groups of people who now live together (Donald, 2012). The wâhkôhtowin imagination is intimately tied to experiences of walking through such places. As Donald (2021) writes, *wâhkôhtowin* refers

4 Donald's use of the phrase "Indigenous Métissage" is distinct from "literary métissage," by which authors "interrogate difference" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 35) through a collective braiding of autobiographical texts.

to wisdom teachings regarding guidelines for how to live “as a good relative” (p. 58) with both human beings and “all other forms of life” (p. 58). Donald (2021) connects wâhkôhtowin to the vitality of the world and explains that when we walk, we weave “strands of movement” (p. 58) into the living stories told by sky, snow, land, fire. Movement in the form of walking offers a way of knowing and of coming into relationship with the world, with one another, and with ourselves, and is in contrast to a colonial, factory model of education wherein learners are divided from holistic ways of knowing, and “sit still and study as directed by the teacher” (Donald, 2021, p. 57). The handshake on the Treaty 6 medal symbolizes the side-by-side friendship of good neighbours; the wâhkôhtowin imagination reminds me that living is an entangled, reciprocal endeavour (Mandel & Teamey, 2015).

Woven Imaginings: Indigenous Métissage and pehonan as Artifact

As English student and teacher, I am immersed in story and imagining. In “Literary Ecologies,” for example, each poem in one of our primary texts, *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (Holmes, 2012), weaves ideas into places and invites me to participate in a particular imagining of Canada. One of the goals of Indigenous Métissage is to draw attention to ways Indigenous Peoples and Canadians, past and present, do not “occupy separate realities” (Donald, 2009, p. 4); this goal invites me to attend to ways authors in this assigned text orient readers toward relationships with places, and with people who exist in those places. Given our entangled realities, I should be able to find traces of cross-cultural newcomer–Indigenous relationships in even the most colonial of Canadian poems. Reading with this intent, I examine one of the early Canadian poems we were assigned, “The Height of Land” by Duncan Campbell Scott (1916/2009). Scott was a civil servant who was key in expanding the Indian Residential School system and overseeing Indigenous dispossession and suffering (McDougall, 2018), and a poet whose imagined geographies also worked to assimilate Indigenous Peoples and to appropriate land (Krotz, 2018). Scott uses references to Anishinaabe spiritual beings to create, out of an experience with trees and mosquitoes in the region now known as Ontario, a landscape that has power to connect the traveller with an experience of the sublime. I examine another assigned poem, “The Last Bison” by Charles Mair (1890/2009), a poet and civil servant who, during the Red River Resistance, was condemned by Louis Riel to be executed

(Holmes, 2012). Mair uses the absence of Indigenous presence for heightened pathos, referring to remnants of Indigenous habitation to build an image of a Plains landscape that has been emptied—thus storying the land as available for colonial expansion—and, also, describing Indigenous interactions with bison to heighten the wantonness of the colonialist decimation of the Plains bison. In these two textual traces of early colonialism, I read orientations toward place in which Indigenous experiences inform Canadian experiences; both of these poems present a more entangled history than does a museum recreation of a fort that places Indigenous and Canadian peoples on different sides of a wall. These place-imaginings help to “complexify” (Donald, 2009, p. 8) my understanding of Indigenous–Canadian inhabitation of places in Canada, depicting connection with Indigenous presence in politically contested places even as they attempt to overwrite that presence in service of settler occupation.

The poems by Scott and Mair depict entangled Canadian–Indigenous interactions, but they are imaginative mappings entangled in narratives of appropriation, not framings articulated by Indigenous Peoples. Thinking with the concept of fort pedagogy and the way Indigenous Métissage disrupts it, I am reminded that Indigenous Métissage begins with Indigenous perspectives (Donald, 2009), and I turn my attention to the sequencing of our assigned readings. On the first day of class, our professor showed the short film *ôtênaw*, produced by Conor McNally (2017), which follows Donald as he leads a group walk in Edmonton’s River Valley. In this way, our class’s first introduction to concepts of place and Canadian landscape was in the context of listening to a prayer spoken in *nêhiyawêwin*, and to stories of Indigenous presence in the place where we gathered to learn. The outdoor site where we would meet for many of our classroom conversations is, we learned, a *pehonan* (natural gathering place), a place where people have gathered for “thousands and thousands of years” (Donald, quoted in McNally, 2017, 11:26).

Donald (2009, 2021) teaches that, according to traditional Indigenous ways of knowing, everything in the natural world is animate. As noted above, he uses the concept of *artifact* to include those things which have accrued storied significance; this use suggests that animate places, which are layered with stories always in motion (Donald, 2021), may also be considered artifacts. Prompted by *ôtênaw* (McNally, 2017), and thinking with Indigenous Métissage, I consider that the *pehonan* where our class regularly met can be understood as an artifact. Donald (2009) highlights the significant role artifacts can play in drawing awareness to the “layeredness” (p. 7) of complex historical

and contemporary relationships between Canadian and Indigenous Peoples. Understanding the site where we gathered as animate artifact orients me to entanglements between place, imagination, poetry, and people. Our assigned texts—textual place-imaginings—and our classroom experiences are layerings of stories into a place already woven with Indigenous storyings and imaginings. This reframing helps me begin to re-story my own experiences with places as entangled with “all beings” (Donald, 2009, p. 12) and to be attentive to teachings that this particular pehonan might offer.

Stories of Movement: Interactions Outside

In a typical classroom, the work of reading together and orienting ourselves to relationships happens while human bodies are seated in desks, severed from movement in and with the world outside. Such separation facilitates sedimented understandings of the more-than-human as distinct from daily living and learning, and makes it difficult to perceive knowledge that the earth has to offer. However, in “Literary Ecologies,” the spatial contexts of our learning were marked by movement. After a brief time inside during our first class, we headed outside; we continued this pattern of moving between indoor walled classroom and outside meeting places throughout the semester. Donald (2009) considers the “social and spatial dichotomy” (Payne & Taylor, 2003, as cited in Donald, 2009, p. 2) of museum spaces that are created within and outside of a fort’s wooden walls; our movements in this course highlighted and perforated the traditional university’s construction of a similar dichotomy. We walked in pairs along sidewalks to the gathering place next to the river beneath the trees; after sitting on benches or grass and talking together, we walked along paths beside the river before heading up the hill and back to the university buildings. A commitment to meeting outdoors also introduced uncertainty. Would it be rainy, or too cold to meet outside, or too icy to walk to our gathering place? This uncertainty called us into conversations outside the purview of a typical English literature classroom: we talked about how our knees felt when we walked down stairs, and whether we would sit in the sun or the shade, and whether someone would bring wood for a fire or whether we even wanted to meet outside if it was cold enough to require a fire for warmth. Learning outside asked us to attend to the embodied nature of learning and invited our physical bodies into conversation.

Like this movement from typical classroom conversations toward conversations that began to acknowledge our whole selves, our spatial movements also invited awareness of movement or fixedness of ways of knowing and being in other contexts. In our first class, we stopped for a short discussion on our way to the river, standing in a circle on a grassy area next to the sidewalk. A curious passerby paused, first to ask directions, and then to listen in. She asked if this was a class, our professor welcomed her in, the circle widened, and this biology student taught us about stoats and weasels. Another time, when we arrived at our usual gathering place, we found a group of young children with accompanying adults roasting marshmallows in the space we'd come to think of as *ours* and, so, needed to move along and sit in another spot. Meeting outside called into question conventions that divide knowledge into separate disciplines: why should a discussion of *wild* spaces in the context of an English classroom not also include a discussion of stoats as understood by a biology student? Our roving meeting spaces also drew attention to overlapping concepts of private land ownership and ownership of knowledge. Becoming absorbed in analysis while sitting on grass heightened the irony of a felt tension: even in open blue-sky spaces where leaves fall into our circle, a passerby looking our way is on the other side of invisible walls of an academic conversation.

And yet, the fact of our walking outside also opened our classroom to interactions that would never have occurred had we stayed inside our small, walled room. Once, when we were walking alongside the river on a narrow dirt path, two people came toward us who recognized someone in our group. After a flurry of hellos, one of the two excitedly asked, "Did you see that loon?" "Loon?" our English professor asked. "Wasn't that a merganser?" A good-natured back-and-forth extended into an email conversation over the next few days between our professor and, as we eventually learned, poet Naomi McIlwraith, who had photographed that contentious bird. It was arranged that in a later class Naomi would lead our group along the river. Passerby became teacher, and during that later class, Naomi began our walk with an invitation to participate in smudging before sharing poems in both English and *nêhiyawêwin*. Her poetry resonated with Donald's conception of human beingness in which "story, memory, ceremony" all come together (Donald, quoted in McNally, 2017, 3:37). It was a testament to centuries of cross-cultural relationships, and another layering of story into this place. Walking with this Indigenous teacher as our guide opened a way to reimagine education as a holistic practice connecting our minds to our hearts, and to learn from Indigenous understandings of place as

imbued with spirit. Movement, enabled in part by the outdoor context of our learning, helped us to perceive walls as “permeable” (Donald, 2009, p. 4) and begin to undo the binary thinking that is an aspect of fort mentality.

Encounters: pehonan as Teacher

During one class, our professor invited us to walk away from our circle under the trees and to find a tree, or a plant, or a rock, or the river, and to greet it as animate being. We were invited to sit with it, to be quiet, to observe. We struggled with the language to describe what we were trying to do: it was an act quieter than thinking, but what was it? We could not claim *knowing*, we were not sure if *engaging* presumed understanding, and *listening* implied a confidence in our ability to hear that we did not have. Indigenous knowledges teach that “wisdom sits in places” (Basso, as cited in Blood et al., 2012, p. 65), and in this class we were invited to take this concept seriously. Our professor stilled her own voice, and we asked: by attending to trees, water, sunlight, might we encounter guides that undo our colonial learnings? Could the river we sat beside and walked along teach us?

I greeted and then sat down beside a tree stump. When I looked closely, I saw lichen, and holes from burrowing insects, and moss, and disintegrating fallen leaves, and roots that tangled into the earth on which I sat, which was damp, and I could not separate *dead tree* from all of these things or even from *living*. I saw *and's*, evidence of ongoing interaction and interdependency. This experience of observed connection and enmeshed relationships brought my awareness to ways authors in Canada define and make use of natural spaces, and ways nature is often set in opposition to places of human habitation—very different from a sensibility that considers place as interwoven with living stories (Donald, 2021) and sacred connections (Donald, 2009; McIlwraith, 2012). With this pehonan as teacher, I encountered an ecology rooted in both difference and interdependencies.

Walking: Experimenting with Ways of Learning

In “Walking and the wâhkôhtowin Imagination,” Donald (2021) continues to emphasize the importance of history and ways stories are woven into places and shape our relationships. In this essay, he narrates a story of walking to the Viking Ribstones, an ancient and continued “site of pilgrimage” where people honour “the spirit of the buffalo” (p. 55),

and where the “story of a Canadian nation” (p. 56) that led to land exploitation is now on display in the form of divisive borders that Donald needed to trespass in order to reach the buffalo stones. In this writing I see an emphasis on *how* content is encountered; specifically, Donald writes about walking as a way of attuning to relationships. He also refers to guided walks he has led beside the North Saskatchewan River and gestures toward something intangible that takes shape on these walks, a difference that opens up, a feeling of being “enmeshed in relationships” (p. 61).

When I consider our practice of walking in this course, I remember walking in pairs on the way to our gathering place. A colleague and I slid from a conversation about Cronon’s (1996) “The Trouble with Wilderness” into a conversation about how peculiar it felt to talk without notes in front of us. I remember the warmth of the sun through my coat sleeves, the tiny green leaves of caragana beside me. Another time, walking in pairs across Edmonton’s High Level Bridge, a colleague and I considered the nature we could not see, the snow that was on its way but not here yet, the unspoken bed bugs in an apartment building ahead of us. During another class, we clustered around a shrub with glossy red berries. “Is that a high bush cranberry?” A hand proffered, a berry ingested. We collectively walked ourselves into relation with this place and with one another, moving through spaces that did not presume or even allow a separation between our bodies and our thoughts. Our professor, demonstrating the stability of her three-legged camp chair, falling sideways onto the grass, generous laughter; our teeth chattering, impeding the flow of words through our mouths, a relocation to a sunnier patch; keeping warm around a fire during seated conversations, shift right to escape the smoke—no, wait, now shift left: even our sitting was marked by movement in this outside space where the world registered its presence on our whole selves. Donald (2021) says that “educators must be willing to experiment with curricular and pedagogical approaches that provoke their students to engage in such topics in qualitatively different ways” (p. 61). In “Literary Ecologies” our outside classroom space necessitated a qualitatively different way of learning, and this way of learning shaped and “vivified” (Donald, 2021, p. 55) my experience of community with my colleagues and with the river valley.

Attending to Relationships: wâhkôhtowin, Reciprocity, and Invasive Species

Our graduate English class was two hours and 50 minutes long each week. Although a generous amount of time, even this time slot was rigidly fixed, and the incongruity of phone alarms and falling leaves highlighted the bounded constructs of our learning environment. I do not remember anymore what my professor was saying, but I do remember watching a leaf fall, a gentle ambulatory drifting down into our circle, and I remember the sound it made when it bumped into my coat. A leaf falls when it is ready to fall, and then, when it is ready to detach itself from the tree, it makes its way according to its own path, its own pacing. Our outdoor conversations often drifted in a similar manner, and alarms instructing us to stop! move on! felt jarring and out of place. Even with the aid of alarms, time pressures weighed heavily and class endings came with the stress of trying to make it to next commitments on time. In a traditional classroom, walls separate our learning from the rest of our living; learning outdoors, time constraints remind us of this separation.

In describing the etymology of the word *wâhkôhtowin*, Donald (2021) draws focus to the image in this word of a person walking bent over, attending to the earth. In this graduate course taught primarily outside, I had many experiences of attending to the earth. And when I watched a leaf drift into our circle, when I walked alongside the river and felt a sense of community with colleagues and place, when I sat with lichen, I felt an intangible something that vivified my perceptions and my perceived relationships. Learning outdoors, boundaries were challenged: passerby, lichen, leaves all became teacher alongside our professor, and conversations engaged affect as well as reason. These experiences wove themselves into the pehonan where we gathered and shifted my relationship with education so that, for me, learning in and with place, classes became a time of holistic learning.

However, the fixed boundaries we encountered in our outdoor learning experiences remind me that divisions affect even these more holistic relationships; at times, gathering outside to carry on the work of the university felt as though we were bringing the invisible walls of a fort with us into not-yet-walled spaces. Fort pedagogy is defined by its taking, by movement that subsumes Indigenous perspectives within the walls of dominant colonial discourses. By tying mostly bounded academic dialogue to this gathering place and by finding a use for this pehonan that served our scholarly purposes, we wondered if we were engaged in a colonialist project of absorbing Indigenous perspectives and artifacts into our own imaginations, overwriting stories of this place with our own developing ideas of land.

Donald (2021) writes about the wâhkôhtowin imagination in the context of considering “the complex task of repairing Indigenous-Canadian relationships and renewing them on more ethical terms” (p. 61). Attending closely to the morphology of the word *wâhkôhtowin*, he brings focus to the process of reciprocity. The wâhkôhtowin imagination is about relationships that develop when someone engages with the world; and with its focus on reciprocity, the wâhkôhtowin imagination draws attention to relationships, not as a unilateral undertaking, but as a giving and nurturing that goes back and forth. Donald (2021) refers to teachings he has received and the way his practice of walking includes a recounting of stories he has been told. He has learned from Indigenous teachers “how to approach...sacred places” (p. 55), and through this gifting of stories, he has learned how to enact what Maria Campbell (Métis) describes as “reciprocal obligations” (Campbell, as cited in Donald, 2021, p. 59). The pehonan where we gathered nurtured me, but I am only beginning to learn what reciprocity should look like.

Our class stepped off the paved path to stand in a clearing hedged by caragana. We had read Alice Major’s (2006) poem “What Is Buried Under the Walls,” which probes settler guilt in the context of conflicting settler and Indigenous claims to land ownership, as well as a scientific paper by Nicholas Reo (Anishinaabe) and Laura Ogden considering Indigenous perspectives on invasive species (Reo & Ogden, 2018). Standing beside caragana, this introduced species that has taken root so definitively in Edmonton, we asked questions of what next. Many of us are part of transplanted populations now weaving our own stories into this ancient place, and our readings incited us to ask questions not only of authors’ framings of land, but of our own orientations to place and peoples who continue to live in reciprocal relationships with this place. We were uncertain how to engage with the tension of our felt guilt in our encounters with place, or to move toward renewed relationships, but we were beginning to trouble the way we “perceive the world and come to story [our] place in it” (Donald, 2021, p. 61). Encounters with caragana helped us do this.

Praxis: Possibilities for Pedagogy

One of the guiding questions I return to throughout a first-year university English literature course I teach to English Language Learner students is, “How does the context in which we live—historical, social, geographical, material—shape our perspective and our practice?” To help us address this question, I build my syllabus from a range of texts from

our in-house anthology of short stories and poetry, texts written across diverse historical periods and by diverse voices. I am intentional about including Indigenous authors and attending to ways texts orient readers to place. To lay groundwork for troubling colonial conceptualizations of land, we begin the semester by considering the use of setting in typical English fare: Stuart McLean's (1998/2012) grey clouds in a Toronto sky, reflecting a character's mood; Kate Chopin's (1894/2021) birdsong, heard through an open window, mirroring a character's newfound hope; Wordsworth's (1807/2021) daffodils, not merely a symbolic backdrop for human life but, rather, a source of joy, enlivening and entangled in human existence. But laying such groundwork in a seated, indoor context, is not enough. Madden (2019) asks, "How does the relationship between land and education shape meaning making, including how I understand myself in relation?" (p. 295); engaging with this question invites English educators to consider *how* readers come to know about relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. The relationships that I am able to imagine are shaped not only by what I read, but where I learn. If relationships with places, one another, and our reading selves are confined to indoor discussions about the use authors make of setting, then clouds and birdsong and daffodils remain objects of human analysis and dependent upon human analysis for meaning. Learning from storywork with Indigenous Elders, Marlene Atleo (2009) emphasizes the importance of tracing the sources of one's metaphors; pedagogy where students are set apart from the relationship with the world they are studying, I recognize, has been a source of many of my metaphors.

As a graduate student learning with Sarah Krotz, I experienced the way moving pedagogy outside shifts meaning-making so that *I* am moved (Donald, personal communication, January 31, 2025), acted upon by a living world and invited into ways of relationality that have potential for unsettling my imagination. As an instructor, prompted by my experiences in "Literary Ecologies," my first-year English students and I have begun the routine of walking outside at the beginning of each class, attentive to ways *this place* might shape our perceived relationships with story and one another. This semester, it was January in Edmonton when we began walking, and icy sidewalks and frigid temperatures kept our walks short. However, it felt to me that the pace of our outdoor conversations began to make each class feel more relationally attuned. Through an anonymous survey, each student indicated to me that they wanted to continue walking outside, despite winter; walking in pairs and threes, we laughed at the audacity of our choosing to walk into driving snow, and we grew in our awareness of one another. Donald teaches the importance

of attending to *how* we approach: wawetinah, he teaches. Attend slowly and carefully to what is sacred (Donald, personal communication, July 10, 2024). In approaching our learning together slowly, taking time to greet one another and the day, as well as ideas, I noticed silences I had not previously heard. In February, my syllabus brought us to Thomas King's (Cherokee/Greek) "Borders" (King, 1993/2021), a story set in the Prairies about family relationships, Indigenous identity, and refusal of divisive Canadian and American borderlines. At the beginning of one class, walking outside prior to our indoor discussion, we tried to call up stories connected to the place where we walked. Beyond dinosaurs and Wayne Gretzky, we found we did not have much to say. But in "Borders," a mother, who is Blackfoot, finds stillness and strength sitting on the ground late at night next to her son, telling him "all sorts of stories" (p. 213) about the stars, stories she had been told by her grandmother. By reading "Borders," we learn that there are place-stories tied to stars—the very stars that we, reading in Edmonton, can see in our night sky—and we learn that these stories are shared in the context of Indigenous relationships. However, King does not share those stories in "Borders." We see the stars, but we do not know how to orient ourselves by their stories.

In his article "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage," near the beginning of the story he recounts about papamihaw asiniy, Donald (2009) writes, "to [Indigenous] peoples of the Prairies, rocks are significant, and deeply spiritual, markers" (p. 12); such rocks helped to orient peoples as they travelled. Stories help to orient us too, like rocks and like stars, and Indigenous teachers can guide us in hearing these stories. If one of my goals as instructor is to enact a relational way of teaching that, aided by walking, seeks to renew imaginations and repair relationships to the earth and between Indigenous and settler peoples in this place, then this relationality needs to be inhabited. Through walking, I am opening my teaching practice to the possibility of responding to what emerges through encounters with place; standing next to the North Saskatchewan River with my students—next to this river along which Treaty 6 was negotiated, in a place where more stories exist than my students and I hear—I recognized that truth and reconciliation education asks me to shift the source of our metaphors (Atleo, 2009) and the ground of our knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997). To do this, I need help. My responsibility as educator includes making space (Johnson, 2024; Ladkin, 2005) for places and Indigenous teachers to guide us in renewing our imaginations.

In March, after receiving teaching from Danielle Powder (Métis) and Kehteya Bob Cardinal (Cree) about how to offer tobacco, I stood in a circle with my students and asked Dwayne Donald for help. Approaching this oskapew with a request that sought to acknowledge the limits of my knowing (Donald, 2009), I asked if he would walk with us and share stories of this place. Would you, I asked, help us hear stories much older than our being here? Stories that might help us reimagine our relationships with one another and the world—and, in so doing, offer possibilities for relationship renewal? He accepted, and we walked together. Dwayne began our walk by speaking to us in nêhiyawêwin (Cree), and with smudging. He shared teachings about stars; about amisk (beaver) and the name of our city, amiskwacîy (Beaver Hills), Edmonton; and about okimawatihk (poplar tree), the *leading tree* whose leaves are the first to open in spring, and who is central to spiritual practices that continue to nourish people today.

Reflections: Kinship Relationality

In her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, Q’um Q’um Xiim, Jo-ann Archibald (Stó:lō), describes a context of Stó:lō storytelling where the learner who hears an Elder’s story engages in “a process [of making meaning] that involves going away to think about [the story’s] meanings in relation to one’s life” (Archibald, 2008, p. 90). Having participated in “Literary Ecologies,” which I perceive as a form of truth and (re)conciliation education (Madden, 2019), and having engaged with Donald’s (2009, 2012, 2021) teachings, I have *gone away to think*. This writing is a practice of thinking-through, an iteration of personal-professional autobiographical writing, a memory map.

Discussing action research, Ladkin (2005) emphasizes the importance of what occurs in the *life-world* as a means of knowing and explains that the way something is used indicates something essential about it. My understanding of the way relationships take shape while learning and walking outside is rooted in my “active engagement with” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 122) those learning processes; for example, only through my engagement in lived relationships can I experience the possibility of repaired relationships. In “Literary Ecologies,” when I attended to the immediacy of sensory experiences—of leaves bumping into my sleeve, of sunlight warming my back—I set analysis and concerns with distinguishing and separating aside and engaged in slowed-down, holistic interactions with

the earth, with classmates, and with education. Sitting on damp earth and looking closely at a tree stump, I observed aspects of that tree stump that exist not only in relation to me and my framing of it, but in relation to lichen, to insects, to soil and rain. Moments such as these made space not only for experiences of my own subjectivity but for encounters with “aspects of the other” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 121), awakening the wâhkôhtowin imagination and bringing my attention to kinship relationality. When I consider my own praxis and the way I have begun to use meanings of relationality co-constructed in my graduate English class, I observe that these meanings are continually unfolding and reliant on both human and more-than-human connections. Walking and learning outside, I become more aware of how what I am able to imagine shapes the way I experience relationships, and I hear colonialism’s silencings and the limits of my knowing. Indigenous teacher-storytellers, including Thomas King, Maria Campbell, and Dwayne Donald, help my students and I begin to reimagine *setting* not as abstract ground for characterization, nor material for romanticization of nature, but as specific places where Indigenous Peoples and stories continue to inhabit the world. Indigenous wisdom traditions continue to recognize the earth as teacher, and Indigenous Peoples “still honour places made meaningful by earlier generations” (Donald, 2009, p. 20). These teachers are helping my students and I, newcomer-readers in Canada, begin to renew our imaginations: in this place where we live and learn, we are co-inhabitants with Indigenous Peoples and more-than-human ecologies. Thinking with Indigenous Métissage to understand our outside learning places as culturally meaningful artifacts reorients my relationship to place and helps to “complexify understandings of the significance of living together” (Donald, 2009, p. 8). I walk in the river valley and smell the sticky sap of okimawatihk buds, and I remember that this place that sustains my living is Indigenous land (Donald, 2012), and I am grateful. okimawatihk reminds me of the need to imagine more ethical and holistic experiences of relationships—between Canadians and Indigenous Peoples, between literature and imagination, between land and education—than I have inherited.

Donald writes that teaching is “an act of kindness viewed as movement toward connectivity and relationality” (2009, p. 19). *Relationality* does not have a definition I can type onto a slide and reuse, year after year; nor can I rush the way it moves. I cannot peel open the as-yet un-grown leaves of poplar buds to peer inside. Instead, I imagine kinship pedagogy as a growing together, with patience, with joy for the openings. We are learning to live together in new ways. Reciprocity is integral to this growing; when I engage in

a practice of greeting the river, and the saskatoon bushes, and the sun, and when I give thanks for the gifts they provide to me, my perspective begins to shift. I begin to perceive living and learning not as a sequence of transactional exchanges—which, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) teaches, involves taking and benefitting and then moving on (Kimmerer, 2024)—but as an inhabiting, where I am enmeshed in relationships and seek to return these gifts. And although I can only engage an understanding of ethical relationality through my own subjective experience of relationships, I can also assess the validity of my understandings by inviting others—colleagues, students, readers—to inquire with me (Heron & Reason, 1997), and I can work to set aside my interpretations and honour students' own experiences. Moving my pedagogy outside and partnering with Indigenous knowledge holders are two ways I can begin to engage a praxis of kinship that both engages what I am learning about ethical relationality and extends beyond the limits of my own experiences and understanding.

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