

Reflective Writings from Second Visit

When I arrived again at the McAvoy Rock site, the sky was blue, and the air was chilly. It had been briefly snowing the past few days.

Studying the different aspects of the whole, I discovered its many meanings and how I can personally relate to it. Three years ago, I had a strong pull to move back to my hometown Yellowknife after living in the city of Montreal and travelling the world. I remember saying to myself I would never come back to this small town. As I stand here today, my heart is full and open to discovering the beautiful parts of my culture that had been shadowed by such negativity and trauma.

Looking at this piece of art, I am reminded of all the distinctive features that make up the North and all its wonders. Shortly after I moved back, my first cousin was born, and several months later, I became his foster mother. This intense urge to come back to the North was not a coincidence at this time of my life. I feel deeply connected to this land, and I am only now discovering certain parts of my identity. Grounding myself here, with my baby, I am aware of the importance of our culture and traditions, and it is something I wish for him to experience as I explore it myself. The British Columbia Early Learning Framework (2018) proposes that

[a] positive personal and cultural identity is the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of all the facets that contribute to a healthy sense of oneself. It includes awareness and understanding of one's family background, culture, heritage, language, values, beliefs, and perspectives in a pluralistic society.(p.84)

As I look at the circle with all the different symbols surrounding it, I ponder the cycle of life and how we are all interconnected. As a caregiver and an educator, I hope to demonstrate a deep respect for all living and non-living things in our environment and our responsibility to take care of each other and the land.

Examining the bronze sculpture and its significance, I notice that the three animals are entangled together as if they are dancing, and the drum is the music. Drumming, in my culture, brings people together. Leela Gilday (2020) explains this beautifully:

A common thread in Dene music is that the stories woven into the songs, sung in the language or vocables are the distilled knowledge of place, people, events, skills and spiritual values. Dene history is embedded in the songs. Dene ways of life and Dene laws are encoded in the songs. Dene worldview is subtly pervasive throughout the whole repertoire of Dene music (p.17).

The drum in the sculpture seems to be bringing the animals together, and each animal

represents a different Indigenous group. The position of the drum appears to imitate the sun. The water element, home to the fish that live in lakes and rivers, embodies the Metis people. The Earth element is represented by the bear and signifies the Inuit people. The element of Air in which an eagle soars represents the Dene people. This sculpture's location with all the different coloured handprints and symbols in the background, highlights the unity and solidarity of the people and their interconnectedness with the land.



In the picture above, it feels as though the raven is about to soar in the blue sky, which, for me, creates an emotional connection to the land and Creator. Larson and Johnson (2017) reference this connection: "We must learn to listen to what grass, the oak, and fox have to teach us about being-in-the-world, because we are enmeshed in relationships with them through our mutual relationship with place"(p.18).

My culture shares a lot of knowledge with the natural world; we take our cues from the environment in which we live. The land and the people are intricately connected, and we must remember this as Indigenous people in the modern world in which we exist to overcome our barriers.



Reaching the rock's summit, I took this photo of the teepee with houses and buildings behind it. It is a small reminder that our people are still here today, and it demonstrates the solidarity of the local communities in a different and contemporary world. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2004) explain this concept:

Because social location is where all the aspects of one's identity meet, our experience of our own complex identities is sometimes contradictory, conflictual, and paradoxical. We live with multiple identities that can be both enriching and contradictory, and that push us to confront questions of loyalty to individuals and groups." (p.15)

Being from two different worlds, I recognize the conflicting feeling of identifying with one group over another and accepting the privilege of having two different perspectives. From the summit, I feel the strong breeze of the wind, I have views of the Great Slave Lake, and my feet are grounded on the rock. The connection of the three elements, air, water and earth, and the contrast of the traditional culture of first peoples against the modern world has a powerful meaning and makes me think of the small impact I have in shaping my child's future in an ambiguous world.



As I look up directly above me in the teepee, I think about the importance of extended family in my culture and its role in shaping our identities as individuals. In the past, family was essential to survive on the land. Understanding my own role as a family member and community helps me with my identity, recognizing my place in this world. Carlina Rinaldi (2004) articulates in this quote that "[i]t is also essential to listen to ourselves, to who we are and what we want. Sometimes we move so quickly through our lives, we lose the courage of meeting ourselves. What are you doing? Where are you going?" (p.3) This quote resonates with me deeply. It is easy to fill our lives with things that we think will make us happy, but sometimes we must take a step away from all the noise and listen to our inner voice.

I drove by a couple days later and took this photo of the snow covering the art piece.



My first encounter with this assignment, I was in awe of the complexity and the significance this had on me. The art piece as a whole is lovely to look at; however, when you notice the details, it takes you on another journey. I sat on the bench facing the rock and examined the painted details such as handprints, footprints, mountains, water, arrows, animal prints, animals, and so much more. It made me think of all the different elements that make up the north and its magnificence.

The symbols around the circle show the connectedness between living and non-living beings. Gray Smith (2017) states the following:

Relationships are central to the Indigenous world view. Everything revolves around relationships. This is one of the reasons you may hear Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers and speakers say "all my relations" at the end of their sharing. It is a way of acknowledging that we are connected to all living things- not just to human beings, but to the land, the water and the animals, including those that swim, fly and crawl. (p. 22)

The collection of human and animal signs and symbols are directed in the same path; it makes me think of the migration of the animals and of all the trappers and traders that

made their way to the north and how the fur trade was a central part of life in the NWT. It conveys cultural diversity and the intercultural collaboration embedded in history when French Canadian voyageurs in the fur trades, the first whites, settled in the north. Johnson & Larsen (2017) explain this notion candidly:

Place is forcing these coexistents to acknowledge one another, however reluctantly or awkwardly, often in dialogue and relationship born of conflict, protest, and activism, calling humans and nonhumans to their inevitable, ongoing entanglement in these lands and making their struggle for coexistence at once a political and a spiritual issue. (p.2)

The circle has a few meanings to me. It represents the cycle of life of all beings. It shows our collaboration with one another and the relationship we have with nature. According to the BC Early Learning Framework (2018), "[t]he notion of all world relations is embedded in a common worlds framework and suggests that all beings and non-living entities are entangled and dependent on one another" (p.15). I also feel that the circle can embody the sun and the moon. During summer, there are days when the sun does not go down and, in the winter, there are days when we will not see the sun at all. The raven in the circle reminds me of the traditional legend "How Raven Returned the Sun." In this story, the raven is depicted as a very wise trickster and helps the humans retrieve the sun from the bear. I am especially intrigued by ravens and I admire their tenacity. They are incredibly prominent in the north and can withstand freezing temperatures up to -50. Ravens are intelligent birds, and they are resilient, just like the people of the north. The raven flying in the circle also represents a sense of belonging to the North.

The climb to the rock's summit is steep, but once at the top, the landscapes are breathtaking with views of the lake that engulf the town, houseboats, vast rock terrains, inhabited lands, cars, houses, buildings, and so much more. Even though this area is considered part of Old Town, you feel connected to the whole city and its surroundings from the summit. In this area, we have several different Indigenous groups and people from all over Canada and other parts of the world. This piece resonates deeply with me since my ancestors on my mother's side are from different communities in the north, and on my father's side, they are French and of Irish descent. Both my grandparents are residential school survivors and have suffered a great deal from their time there. I understand the deep and lasting impact this has had on my family and many other families in Canada. Like the raven, our people are resilient, resourceful, and communal.