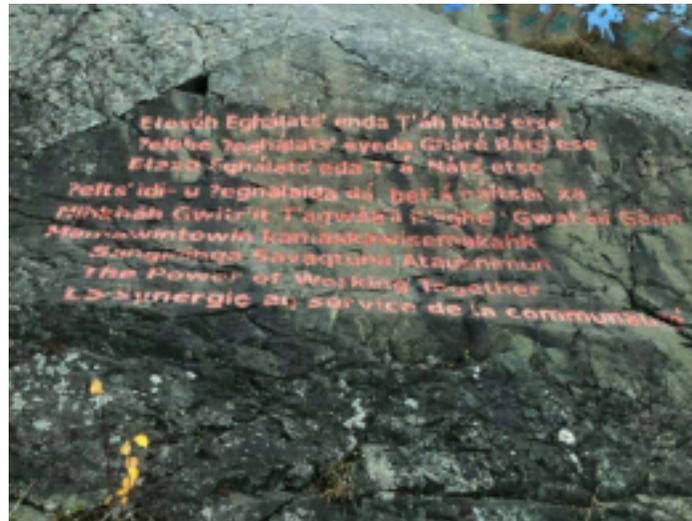


## Reflective Writings from Fourth Visit

The McAvoy rock is located on Chief Drygeese Territory, the traditional home of the Yellowknives Dene. Being of Metis and Chipweyan descent, I am deeply connected to this land through my Dene ancestors. I also, however, have ancestors who were settlers, which generates a strong internal conflict within, as I uncover feelings of detestation toward my European ancestry. Knowing about the atrocities that were inflicted on my family as well as how it continues to impact us, and how our people continue to be treated today, creates an uncomfortable sentiment that I find challenging to deal with. As I interact with this artwork, I am prompted to appreciate the beauty in our interrelations with the land and all its entities, but also with each other as human beings. The chapter *Refiguring Presences* has enlightened me on the small but significant ways we can engage with place by politicizing our relationships with place and resisting colonial resonances by bringing them to light (Nxumalo, 2019).

Looking at this piece of art and its many facets, I am drawn to the idea of how Eurocentric humans view themselves in relation to place. Settlers observe the natural environment as another entity separate from them, as opposed to Indigenous people who see themselves intertwined with their natural world. As per Nxumalo (2019), “for many Indigenous knowledges, the more than human is an active, vital force that is entangled in complex non-hierarchical relationalities with the human” (p.46). This piece illustrates to me that we live in a world where we must reclaim our culture not only for our health and well-being, but for the health and well-being of the land. It highlights the Indigenous knowledge of the relationalities humans should have with Mother Earth. As I look at the art piece’s surroundings, I see the disconnect we have with our environments. However, the piece itself, the teepee specifically, is an invitation to reconnect with our traditional ways. Gray Smith (2017) states, “[i]t is important for their mental and emotional health that young people get out on the land. When we are on the land, the hierarchical structures become nonsensical, non-functional, meaning everyone and everything is equal” (p.108).



The painting on the rock façade is a perfect representation of the concept of refiguring presences. The childlike symbols encircling the raven demonstrate the entanglement of non-human and human beings in a natural and fluid way. One is not above the other; they are simply coexisting. As we reconsider place and our encounters with place, we begin to engage with place and all its entities in a simpler, yet complex way, with the intent of interrupting settler colonialism. It is simple in the sense that we acknowledge our existence in the natural world as an entanglement with more than human presences. It is also complex, so that we must actively engage with all the constituent parts of place to interrupt settler colonialisms and anthropocentrism in our everyday encounters (Nxumalo, 2019).

The handprints are painted in different sizes and colours, which symbolizes people of all ages and backgrounds. Etched in the rock face on the left side of the art piece, there is a quote: "The power of walking together." It is written in nine languages; English, French as well as seven Indigenous languages.

Walking together through the land alongside the more than human in this circle of life is what Styres (2011) explains:

Circularity represents wholeness and connectedness that brings all of creation together in a circle of interdependent relationships grounded in land and under the Great Mystery. The Great Mystery is generally seen as a creative life force that finds expression through land in all of its abstractedness, concrete connection to place, fluidity and interrelatedness. (p.3)

Reflecting upon this artwork, I find myself concerned about my child's future within the public school system. I currently work in an environment where I have witnessed first-hand how these colonial institutions set our Indigenous children up for failure. It

is common knowledge that our children are not thriving in these institutions. However, westernized solutions are continuously being imposed upon them. The British Columbia Early Learning Framework states: "Reconciliation acknowledges that there is value for all students when Indigenous content and worldviews are shared in early learning settings and classrooms in a meaningful and authentic way"(p.13). This statement further demonstrates the importance of engaging with Indigenous knowledges and how it would not only be beneficial for the Indigenous students, but for non-Indigenous students as well. To comprehend Indigenous peoples and their needs, we must look into their ways of knowing. The article 'Land as First Teacher' emphasizes the circular and fluid relationality with the land and how it is fundamental to ground and relate everything back to the land. Styres (2011) states the following:

We engage land in a reciprocal and respectful relationship that acknowledges the primacy of land as first teacher. The goal is to be holistically in balance with land. When we learn the lessons taught us through Trickster and embody land as pedagogy, we develop an understanding that all things exist in complex interconnected relationships. (p. 722)



On the McAvoy Rock, the soaring raven in the middle of the circle can take the form of the "Trickster" character, teaching us life lessons and keeping the balance of the natural world. The trickster narrative is an example of education through Indigenous storytelling and knowledge sharing.



The teepee at the top of the mountain is made of steel. It symbolizes the resilience of the Indigenous population and how they were and will always be here. It represents their ability to withstand cultural genocide through the 1876 Indian Act, the Indian residential school system, and the foundation of colonial practices that persist today in Indigenous communities. The use of steel, a material introduced by the settlers, reveals how colonizers influenced Indigenous populations and reformed their way of living. The way the teepee poles are intertwined makes me think of the entanglement between different nations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. I think of my child interacting with the teepee and its surroundings. He is seemingly unaware of how disconnected modern society is from nature. Rather, he is connected to his surroundings in a natural and fluid way. If provided with the right knowledge, there is an opportunity for him to remain connected in this way and diverge from the colonialism that Canadian society will want to force upon him.

To conclude, the whole art piece has pushed me to reflect upon myself, my identity and all my relationships. It has connected me to myself as a mother, an educator, and as a woman. It makes me feel the importance of our Indigenous women to our culture and our children, and so I am left to contemplate the invisibility we have in this world as Indigenous women. Anderson (2019) states: "Voices are calling for every woman to be treated with dignity." If only we can perceive our land as our primary caregiver and live by the following notion by Styres (2011): "...that land, as a source of life giving energy, contains within herself a heartbeat and that all of creation is connected through that heartbeat represented in the drum. In this context land and earth are seen as a female entity having the ability to birth, nurture and sustain life." (p.722)

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