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## “THE LONG SHADOW OF A JUNIPER BERRY”: THE POETICS OF LAND-BASED RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to focus on one land-based, poetic experience at the Blackfoot cultural site *Aisinai’pi*, Writing on Stone Provincial Park in Alberta, Canada. The focus is on an experience with two participants in the research, the Elder and the artist, who are both working with the school involved on this journey and me, the researcher. To situate the article as part of a research study, I also share the context of the broader qualitative study that works within an Indigenous paradigm to explore the development of kinship between children, the land, and each other. My question in this article is this: How do the poetics of land open new possibilities of how to cultivate a kinship ecology with children? I engage poetic inquiry and life writing to illuminate how this experience on the land gave meaning to and shaped the rest of the research study as it unfolded with children, teachers, an artist, and the Elder who guides the work.

**Keywords:** land-based pedagogies; kinship; Indigenous methodologies; poetic inquiry; lifewriting

## Opening

**Figure 1.**

Canvas on the Milk River at *Aisinai'pi*. (Photo credit: Karen Tamminga-Paton)



*Okī*, hello. My name is Stephanie. Of Scottish, German, and English descent, I grew up on the unceded lands of the Coast Salish peoples. I am an Indigenist researcher, poet, creative being, educator, mother, family member, and friend. I live in Blackfoot territory, home of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Siksikaa, Pikani, Kainai, and Stoney Nakoda First Nations, Métis Nation Region Three and all people who make their home in southern Alberta. I acknowledge that I am a guest on this land and recognize the ancestors of the Blackfoot people who have made their homes here for thousands of years. My purpose in this world is to learn and to guide others to care for one another and learn to love our local place so that we can care for the earth.

As a non-Indigenous researcher, I work within an Indigenist paradigm (Wilson, 2007) and am guided by an Elder. I work within an Indigenous axiology, and I lean into Blackfoot ways of knowing, being, and doing, inviting the research to reveal itself through the teachings of Elder Saa'kokoto, the land, and the relationships that I am building and nourishing as this research unfolds. This means that I behave ethically and relationally as a researcher and honour the teachings of the land and Elder Saa'kokoto.

To clarify the relationship between what it means to *be* an Indigenist researcher working *within* an Indigenous paradigm, I look to Wilson's (2007) explanation of Indigenist. This author stated that an Indigenist is someone who is non-Indigenous and can engage in Indigenous research provided that they behave well and seek to listen and learn about Indigenous ways of knowing with a good heart and good intentions. Within this Indigenist stance, I am on an Indigenous cultural learning journey. I have a deeper level of understanding of this work and what it means to move forward ethically and relationally because of the combination of guidance of Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto, land teachings, poetic narrative, and photography.

In this article, I share some findings from a four-year long study that explores Indigenous resurgence of language and land teachings through time on the land with Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto. I am learning the artistic practice of land art as an act of creative expression in relation to or inspired by land-based teachings. The broader research story has many threads that weave together to form an understanding of how we are cultivating and practicing kinship in a school to reimagine educational experiences for teachers, children, and others. After explaining the context of the research, I will focus on one thread: that of the story of how this bright, sunny yellow canvas became an active, living participant in this research and what this means for all involved. Poetic inquiry and photography shape this story as an attempt to express the human and more-than-human experience more authentically (Prendergast, 2009). Blackfoot words are in italics, with the English equivalent accompanying the word the first time it appears in this article. The nature of this research circles around the topic of learning *through and with land* in a way that is very different from mainstream Western education, as described by Cajete (2015). As such, some moments may seem

repetitive; this is meant with pedagogical intention so that the reader can linger and circle around the learning journey.

This research is guided by Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto, from the Kainai Nation, part of the Blackfoot Confederacy. He works tirelessly to share land teachings, wisdom, and stories with people of all ages and has a particular gift for working with children and youth across diverse contexts and backgrounds. Following Blackfoot cultural protocols, I asked Elder Saa'kokoto in 2017 if he would guide me. He accepted my request, and we began an ongoing circling of lessons that continue to teach me and shape me as a scholar and as a human being.

Elder Saa'kokoto guides me with his teachings and wisdom, and he is encouraging me to listen and be guided by *na'a*, Blackfoot for Mother Earth, and all more-than-human beings, such as plants, animals, rocks, trees, and wind. My role is to listen carefully, notice deeply, and connect the threads as this way of living, being, and doing takes shape. The broader qualitative research design works within an Indigenous research paradigm to disseminate the research. The design of the work of children and teachers in the school, which I will explain in the context section below, depends upon mindsets and behaviours of a creative disposition. Children learned these creative mindsets and dispositions when they engaged with artistic representation as a way of expressing their learning and the practicing of kinship ecologies.

The purpose of this article is to engage with poetic inquiry (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Prendergast et al., 2009) and lifewriting (Leggo, 2019a; Richardson, 1994) as a form of making to create new understandings about my Indigenous learning journey. This article focuses largely on interactions between Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto, Karen Tamminga-Paton, an artist who is a participant in the research and artist in residence at the school where the research unfolds, and me as researcher/learner/designer of this journey. Delving deeply into one small but transformational moment in the research where this yellow canvas interacted with shadows, hoodoos (tall, thin rocks that are carved naturally by erosion and weather), and sunlight on the land, this article seeks to answer the question: *How do the poetics of land open new possibilities of how to cultivate a kinship ecology with children?*



**Figure 2.**

Interplay of Canvas and Sunshine (Photo credit: Karen Tamminga-Paton)

**Context of the Research**

This research and Blackfoot culture and language journey in one school unfolded over four years. In June 2019, children at the school asked the questions: *How do we put a life into words? How do we tell you it matters? How do we help you to understand? How do we speak up for the land?* These serious questions were sung by 380 K-4 children in a Blackfoot /English opera performance, to the beat of a Blackfoot drum and the sound of a guitar in June 2019. The school performance was a culmination of an 18-month journey to learn the language and stories of the land in an act of education for reconciliation. Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto, artists, children, and teachers at a public school in an urban centre in Southern Alberta, located in Blackfoot

territory, collaborated to compose this Blackfoot/English opera. Drawing from the lessons learned on the land, children also wrote and professionally published ten dual language books inspired by Elder Saa'kokoto's teachings in the coulee (valley) adjacent to the school. I collected data at that time in the form of student artwork, the video performance, manuscripts of the books, one teacher talk story<sup>i</sup> and one community partner talk story. Elder Saa'kokoto was present during the community partner conversation. The journey was the school community's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) Calls to Action.

All teachers in Canada are mandated to take up these Calls to Action in their classrooms (Deerchild, 2016). Though well-intentioned, many teachers struggle with how to do this in meaningful ways (Donald & Cardinal, 2020; Kearns et al., 2018; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). Curriculum scholar Cynthia Chambers' (2008) recommended that teachers explore the role of place as the beginning of all learning. Inspired by Chambers' (2008) recommendation, in this research children were invited to learn on the land with an Elder and then to express their learning by creating artistic representations (Cajete, 1994). The original intent of the project was to begin a land-based learning journey with Elder Saa'kokoto and to guide children in creating resources of the language of the land to share with others. This was also an act of resurgence where Elder Saa'kokoto shared Blackfoot language through his land-based teachings over four years so that the community of largely non-Indigenous students from diverse backgrounds could find common ground together by learning to love and care for *na'a* and to express this love through the reciprocal gifts of artistic expression of photography, writing, artmaking, and song. Elder Saa'kokoto's teachings, supported by Tewa scholar Cajete's (1994; 2015) vision for Indigenous education inspired this journey. In his work, he (1994) highlighted seven phases of learning: asking, seeking, making, having, sharing, celebrating, and being.

As a researcher and designer conceptualizing the journey, I did not direct or plan that this work would reflect the emergence of kinship and the practice of how we might pay attention to care for the earth. Instead, we lived out a response to Saa'kokoto's teachings and a response to how we felt, and still feel, when we practiced kinship with the land. In the school's fourth journey around the sun, which is the focus of this article, the children continued to engage with land-based learning from Saa'kokoto. As a way of honouring *ohkakiiosit* (Blackfoot for noticing deeply and being wisely aware) and on the recommendation of Elder Saa'kokoto, I invited Karen into the ethical space of this work to teach the children how to artistically represent the practice of *ohkakiiosit*. In response to Elder Saa'kokoto's teachings, Karen began to teach the children how to create impermanent land art to show their learning and seek a deeper connection to the land. She invited the children to "create something new to show understanding" inspired by Cajete's (1994) stage of making (p. 71). They worked with willow branches, berries, and other natural materials to create pieces of land art. She also taught them to play

with colour, shadows, and pattern in their response to land-based teachings. Art making invited the children to learn and practice artistic expression as a way to represent their understanding of land-based teachings and give a gift of love and reciprocity to the earth.

For the next stage of learning, Karen prepared a canvas and brought it to the children so that each one of them would have a chance to make a mark on it. They would then work to blend these marks with layers of their own as evidence of an intermingled, embodied learning journey involving the children, teachers, school administrators, Elder Saa'kokoto, Karen, and me. Weaving Saa'kokoto's teachings and Karen's artistic vision invited a messy and empowering process, allowing each child to know that they had a mark somewhere in the layers of the canvas. We showcased an art exhibit at the end of the school year, following the rhythm of the traditional school calendar and to bring a convergence point of this work so that the students could practice *ahsokiniksii*, which is Blackfoot for when knowledge branches out. We wanted to share with the broader community as a continued act of reconciliation.

To understand how Elder Saa'kokoto's teachings influence and inspire others, it was important to look towards the children to see what they were *saying* and *doing*. Were they building a relationship with the land? Were they learning to listen and to observe? How might these teachings linger in their hearts and minds? The children noticed different beings and changes in the coulee (valley) through the cycle of the seasons. The practice of *ohkakiyosii* demonstrated that children were developing deep relationships with the more-than-human kin in the coulee where they visited.

Art making is at the root of this research journey as part of Cajete's (1994) vision for Indigenous education. This process of teaching land art as a practice involves children learning to naturally turn to artistic expression to represent their understanding of the Elder's teachings. The genre is non-representational art (Tamminga-Paton, personal communication, January 26, 2022) designed to involve children, teachers, the artist, myself as researcher and learner, and Elder Saa'kokoto in an unfolding series of lived experiences. I designed these experiences to create a shared sense of ethical relationality (Donald, 2016) as we explored the ecology of kinship (Van Horn, 2021) by interacting and engaging with kin on the land.

## Methodology

Similar to how poet and scholar Carl Leggo (2019a) invited readers to listen to the call of their hearts through his poetic meditations, I invite readers to awaken to the rhythm of land, language, and Blackfoot culture through the poetic and pedagogical rhythm of learning from more-than-humans. The Greek word poetry comes from the Greek word *poiein*, to make—so as a poet, I am a maker—I

could be making sense, or making stories, or making lines of connections with others. I am always engaging in something that feels like composing, constructing, and making. (Leggo, 2019b, p. 448)

## The Poetics of Land-Based Research

Here, in the “long shadow of a juniper berry” (Tamminga-Paton, personal communication, January 22, 2022), I explore the poetics of land-based learning, connecting “poetic knowing and research” (Leggo, 2019a, p. 97). It is important to note that the notion of a long shadow emerged as a poetic response to the shadow of berries on canvas. Hence, the long shadow referred to in this article is not connected to the Western cultural understanding of “casting a long shadow” as a long-standing negative force, such as colonialism. As a researcher on this learning journey, I sought to see and notice with my heart (Leggo, 2019a). I noticed that when I looked with my eyes and thought too much with my brain, the research process stalled or felt disjointed. The spiritual energy faded away and my ability to write with poetic flow became elusive. In keeping with my stance as an Indigenist researcher, the work asks me to be a learner with an open heart. Living poetically (Leggo, 2019a) helps me to turn towards beauty and love to maintain the rhythm and heartbeat of my work and the broader learning journey for the school.

This poetic inquiry illuminates the presence and role of the canvas within this research. Crafting this article became part of a continual process of making (Cajete, 1994), which involves the act of creating something new that would inform how the artist, Elder, and I showed up in the school with the canvas a month after this poetic encounter on the land. This article then became a deep poetic rumination that invited me to delve into the unspoken words of that day as I looked to unearth and share the joy and the spiritual energy that we all experienced when the canvas encountered the hoodoos.

Writing about the canvas as a poetic encounter is a way of beckoning others to witness the spiritual energy of this research journey. Throughout this entire journey with Elder Saa'kokoto, the children, the teachers, land, artist and community, there was an almost tangible energy that carried all who were attuned. I perceived this spiritual energy as a tingling on the surface of my skin, a swelling of the heart, and a poetic knowing that everything works out the way it is supposed to and will be beautiful and good.



## Kinship as Living Pedagogy

In Blackfoot culture, *na'a* and *ko'komokisoom kipitaki* (Grandmother Moon), among others, guide and teach humans and all beings. Blackfoot children learn from an early age to respect the gifts of *na'a* and the wisdom and patience of *ko'komokisoom kipitaki* (Saa'kokoto, oral teaching, ca. 2017-2023). When the environment is likened to an ancestor or a parent (Bird David as cited in Ingold, 2000), it then becomes part of the theory of "grounded normativity" (Simpson, 2017) in which Indigenous peoples intimately understand the presence of the earth, cosmos, and more-than-human relatives as ancestors who guide (Cajete, 1994; Turner & Spalding, 2018). Consequently, those who do not share the same worldview, such as settlers, remain on the outside unable to understand (Simpson, 2017). Indeed, "following in the path of an ancestor" (Ingold, 2000, p.146) through story and experiential journeys becomes a way of understanding the environment through lived experience (Ingold, 2000). And so, how do scholars describe kinship as living pedagogy? The short answer is that they do not necessarily do this explicitly, and certainly not by delivering a how-to guide or framework.

The deep effects of colonialism in the Western education system resulted in learning segregated into disciplines and separated into blocks of time (Battiste, 2013; Foucault, 2008; Jardine, 2021; Kovach, 2015). In Indigenous cultures, all beings, regardless of their age, learn continually throughout their lifetime. In the context of this study, I understand both children and teachers to be learners and that learning is a "a lifelong path" (Cajete, 1994, p. 208). Who, then, is the teacher and how do we learn? In a relational worldview, where everything and everyone is interconnected (Wilson, 2008), learning is always present; however, it is not laid out and explicitly taught (Wall Kimmerer, 2003). Learning happens through experience, story, love, compassion, and over time when the individual is ready. In Indigenous cultures, children learn by watching, by listening, and by experience (Cajete, 1994; Simpson, 2014).

When humans and more-than-humans live together in kinship, learning also happens between plants, trees, wind, sky, birds, four-legged creatures, and beings of the water. Sheridan and Longboat (2006) illustrate this idea through the story of new forest growth after the area had been mined: "to the White Pine, the blueberry is a sacred Elder" (p. 373). Though this description is poetic, it also shares a simple, yet complex truth it paints the picture of kinship *between* species, as the blueberries grew first and prepared the land for the White Pine forest that would soon grow. The earth has existed for millennia and stories of kinship amongst humans and the more-than-human world have led to a deep, reciprocal love and caring for *na'a*.

## Ethical Relations

Once invited to offer their perspectives and guidance, Elder Saa'kokoto and Karen both gave their consent to participate in the research study. Following Blackfoot protocols, I offered tobacco to Elder Saa'kokoto and he gave his blessing. Both Elder Saa'kokoto and Karen offered feedback and guidance on the poetic reflections in this article. Data collection in the research study involved two talk stories with teachers, two talk stories with community partners, observations, field notes, artifacts of student work, and photographs.

After I received ethics approval and once I was in the midst of collecting data, I realized that on this land-based journey, although I was careful to follow Blackfoot protocols when I visited *na'a*, I wanted to make this Indigenous axiology visible from a Western perspective too. Wilson (2008) explains that in an Indigenous research paradigm, the concerns of "right or wrong...validity...[and] value judgements" fade away and the axiology becomes built on the notion of relational accountability (p. 77). Wanting to honour my ever-evolving relational accountability with the land, I composed this note for the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board:

This document outlines the ways that I will approach land as method in this study. *Na'a*, Blackfoot for Mother Earth, is at the centre of my research, therefore I feel that it is necessary for me to acknowledge how I will behave when I visit *na'a* and to outline what protocols I will follow. This acknowledgement is in no way intended to Westernize Indigenous protocols that have existed since time immemorial; rather the plan is to explain my land-practice as a method and to create an ethical accountability towards *na'a*. This land-practice with *na'a* guides and informs everything that I do within this research study and in my personal life as part of my commitment to this personal learning journey.

With *na'a* as part of my method, I recognize that this methodology sits in relation to what I am doing as a researcher. As I learn to live ethically with *na'a*, what does this look like? How will I take care to make sure that I am not appropriating any knowledge offered by *na'a*? Each time I engage in a land-practice to learn from *na'a* and to think about Elder Saa'kokoto's teachings, I plan to:

- Ask permission by offering tobacco and smudging.
- Pay attention.
- Practice *ohkakiyosiit*, a Blackfoot concept for listening deeply and noticing my surroundings and being very aware.
- As I live in ethical relationality with *na'a*, I will practice love, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity for her gifts and her teachings.

*Na'a* will teach me how to walk ethically through this study. My ethical and relational accountability to *na'a* will ensure that I hold these teachings and offerings with the utmost respect. As such, this growing relationship with *na'a* as a participant forms my axiology and becomes a living methodology.

The response from the ethics board at the university was one of curiosity and approval. While the ethics board was seeing an increase in ethics applications with Indigenous research paradigms, they shared that they had not reviewed a letter like this acknowledging the land as a participant. Before and during the writing of this ethics revision, I considered the fact that following Blackfoot protocols and offering tobacco *is* ethical behaviour and that writing a letter like this would be to satisfy the Western research paradigms. I also decided that this was a pedagogical moment where I, an Indigenist researcher on a learning journey, could make visible my careful practice and learning of protocols as part of a lived axiology based on relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). I hoped to show that I am not consuming these protocols and using the land for the purpose of my research. I wanted to illuminate how these ethical practices became a way of being for me that enhanced all aspects of my life.

## Embracing Ethical Relationality as Lived

This article describes the events that happened on one day of learning at *Aisinai'pi*. As part of the data collection, these conversations were meant to be audio recorded as a talk story, but they were not. The reason for this represents a significant learning moment as an Indigenist researcher working within an Indigenous research paradigm. I tried to record these conversations and did double-check to make sure that the recording was working. At one point during the day, I had a niggling feeling that the recording perhaps would not work. Aside from the initial panic, I took a deep breath and realized that perhaps I was not meant to have an official audio recording of the day. Instead, I realized that I should honour Indigenous circle teachings and listen deeply with my whole being. Elder Saa'kokoto has shared before that I am not meant to remember everything, but that I will remember all that I need to (Saa'kokoto teachings, ca. 2017-2022). Sure enough, and mysteriously, the conversations were not recorded, save for one. My only recording that I have is when my phone was in my back pocket as we carried the canvas around the hoodoos. When I listen to this, it illuminates the joy and love of this experience. All I can hear is footsteps and laughter, peppered with bits of conversation. I welcome lifewriting and poetic inquiry (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Prendergast et al., 2009) as "ways of living in the world" (Leggo, (2019a or 2019b?, p. 67) to find the words in my heart to reflect upon and express this day of learning. It is with humility that I offer this story to the world.

**Figure 3.**

Karen and Stephanie Carrying the Twelve-Foot Canvas (Photo credit: Elder Saa'kokoto)



## ***Ahksinakii* (They Will Make Their Mark on the Land): A Poetic Rendering of the Canvas in Four Parts**

### **Part 1: Preparing the Canvas**

A visit to Karen's art studio, nestled in the Rocky Mountains, 2 hours southwest of Calgary, in the fall of 2021 inspired the idea of a collaborative canvas as a way for the students to explore *ahksinakii*. Relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) within an Indigenous research paradigm both asks for and depends upon building and nurturing ongoing relationships. Elder Saa'kokoto, the principal, the assistant principal, and I wanted to spend time with Karen in her studio space to build our relationship and explore how the journey might unfold.

As part of Karen's art practice, she layers her work and is unafraid to alter her artwork.<sup>ii</sup> We watched in horrified wonder as she showed us a beautiful painting of hers that she created years ago. As she spoke of her learning journey and her commitment to learn from Saa'kokoto and practice reconciliation, she took chalk to her painting and confidently began to mark changes upon what we all believed to be a finished, therefore untouchable, piece of art. Karen also showed us multiple paintings where she invited the public to make their mark and add to the work. As an aside, Karen is part of this work because Saa'kokoto had worked with her and a group of children once before. He thought that she would be sincere about this journey and would welcome the commitment to join us in exploring how children could engage with an artistic representation of land art to articulate their learning journey.

Our conversations that day in the studio gathered energy as we started to conceptualize a large canvas where each child in the school would make their mark in some way. We didn't yet know how this might work or how it might look, but we could see that Karen understood how to bring this experience to the children and all involved. After visiting the school twice in the fall of 2021 to introduce the children to two different ways to practice non-representational, ephemeral land art, Karen then prepared the canvas so that she could bring it to them for our next visit in the spring of 2022. In her studio, Karen added the first of many layers of paint. She chose a bright sunny yellow to reflect *natoosi*, the sun as the centre of all learning.

In January, Saa'kokoto agreed to meet Karen and me at *Aisinai'pi*, Writing on Stone Provincial Park. The word *Aisinai'pi* is Blackfoot for "they made their mark." *Aisinai'pi* is a sacred Blackfoot cultural site with a large collection of petroglyphs and pictographs dating back as far as 4000 years. This journey down to *Aisinai'pi* brought the canvas alive and imprinted the beings of the land onto it as they made their mark in shadows on the canvas. Elder Saa'kokoto shared with us that the ancestors were



present around us in all living beings and in the living energy of shadows. As such, when we witnessed the shadows of living beings, such as trees, berries, and grass, we also witnessed the presence of the ancestors (Saa'kokoto, teachings, January 22, 2022).

In planning how the day might unfold, I hoped to continue connecting with Saa'kokoto and his teachings and was looking forward to bringing Karen to *Aisinai'pi* for the first time to experience the ancient spiritual energy of this place. Karen originally wanted this experience at *Aisinai'pi* so that we could add a layer of *na'a* from the ancestors onto the canvas, using dirt, mud, snow, juniper berry buds and juice. She hoped that Saa'kokoto would make the first marks on the canvas before inviting the children to make their marks in a few months. Her intention was that he would use bits and pieces from *na'a* to make his mark, whether it be rocks, sticks, dirt, or granules of ice and snow. As a learning team with Elder Saa'kokoto, we planned to share this experience and then take it to the children where they could begin to see that the random act of mark-making could be transformed into a finished painting.

## Part 2: Learning with the Canvas

### **Figure 4.**

Canvas in the Hoodos: Painted Yellow for *Natoosi* (Photo credit: Stephanie Bartlett)



I left Calgary in the darkness of a winter morning and headed south, coffee in hand. At the beginning of the drive, I was lost in thought as I slowly awakened to the day ahead. I was pulsing with energetic anticipation, eager to see how the day would unfold. I thought about how *Aisinai'pi* evokes feelings of peace and deep connections to the land, the ancestors, and my greater purpose for doing this work. Each visit to *Aisinai'pi* affirms that this work is for past and future generations of children and for the earth itself. I am not “doing” data collection as part of a project to complete my PhD research, rather, I am practicing a cultural and spiritual learning journey with the hope of leading others to begin to be more attuned to each other and the earth so that we can create new paths toward reconciliation.

During the summer, there is a constant influx of visitors to *Aisinai'pi*. Arriving here on a winter day in January was a different experience. We were the only visitors in the park, and the silence was both gentle and loud. We could feel the presence of the ancestors and the more-than-human beings who live there. It was sunny, windy, and unseasonably warm when we headed down to the panels of petroglyphs and pictographs with the canvas rolled up under Karen's arm. Saa'kokoto thought that beginning our day amongst the marks of the ancestors would be the right thing to do (Saa'kokoto, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

The lived axiology of this day shone through, gentle and bright as *natoosi*, the sun, and presented itself through the relationships. This lived axiology was also evident in the protocol of offering tobacco to Elder Saa'kokoto and smudging together on the land in front of the pictographs and petroglyphs, and the way we listened to each other and to *na'a*. Rather than a feeling of conducting formal research and collecting data, this was a joyful, thoughtful meeting led by *matapiiks*, the ancestors, and Elder Saa'kokoto—most certainly not by me, the researcher. I was reminded of why I wrote that ethics revision to invite *na'a* as a participant. It would not have felt the same to be there if I had not. And I thought that perhaps this was why our learning extended past good conversation and a beautiful tour towards shadows and mark-making in the afternoon.

Part of building relationships in an ethically relational space is sharing meals together. After a morning in ceremony and teachings out on *na'a*, we set up a round banquet table in the visitor's centre where we gathered around food and conversation. The vast windows brought us expansive views of the river, the hoodoos, the sky, and the prairie. Through this conversation and after our morning time with the rock art, Karen now understood what the canvas needed. We needed to take the canvas into the hoodoos and let it experience the land itself. So, after a long lunch followed by hot tea and more conversation, we hiked down into the hoodoos, canvas in tow. Still thinking that we were simply going to unroll the canvas in the hoodoos and make our marks, Karen unfolded it in its sunny splendour. We stood in reverent silence, looking at the canvas as it lay on the ground.

When Karen invited Saa'kokototo to make his mark on the canvas, rather than doing this immediately, he began to teach us about shadows as living beings (Saa'kokoto, personal communication, January 22, 2022). Saa'kokoto taught us that shadows are living beings with spirits. He shared, "When we recognize that our shadows have spirits, we are never alone. Learning to love our own shadow and learning to live and play with it connects us to ourselves, rather than just a neutral acceptance of knowing our shadow is always there" (Saa'kokoto, teachings, January 22, 2022.). We began to play with the idea of shadows as living beings; rather than having Saa'kokoto make the first mark on the canvas, we began to move around amongst the hoodoos carrying the canvas and capturing the shadows through photographs. The land showed us the shadows and helped us understand how to capture the marks of the ancestors. The following poem was created as a reflection in the car on the way home as I tried to hold onto these memories:

**Ahksinakii**

*Twisted tree trunks*

*Blade of grass*

*Thin layer of ice*

*The*

*long*

*shadow*

*of a*

*juniper*

*berry*

*These spirits*

*cast their shadow*

*on shades of yellow*

*this first layer on canvas*



*where children will  
make  
their mark  
Ahksinakii*

These spirits cast their shadow on the shades of yellow of the canvas and imprinted their marks on that first layer. Saa'kokoto explained that *matapiiks*, the ancestors, made their mark at *Aisinai'pi* thousands of years ago and that we had come to invite the shadows to make their marks before inviting the marks of children (Saa'kokoto, personal communication, January 22, 2022). Completely caught in the moment, we laughed and played as we hiked around with the canvas, capturing these different shadows, beginning with twisted gnarled trunks, the shadow they cast on the ground and the hoodoos behind them.

**Figure 5.**

Shadows on the Canvas (Photo credit: Stephanie Bartlett)



The moment in time with the canvas taught us to listen to the land, and to pay attention to shadows. Through the poetics of the land, we grew a deeper understanding of the role that the canvas would play in this experience with the children and as part of the research study. This experience with the canvas started as a moment for Saa'kokoto to make his mark at the place where the ancestors made their marks. We did not anticipate how the spirit of the land would invite us to learn through play, love, and beauty. To this day, my throat catches, and my heart expands when I think of this experience. We did not do what we planned to do with the canvas; we listened and did what *na'a* asked us to do. We traipsed around, connecting the canvas to the shadows. Captured in photos and this poetic narrative, these shadows live on to teach us yet another layer of the spirit of the land.

### Part 3: Precarious and Generous Moments of Learning

Where did I learn the fear of the blank page? The page is not blank; the page is never blank. Instead, it is scribbled over and over by all the writers who have gone before me, as it continue to be scribbled by all the writers presently writing and all the writers who will write after me. (Leggo, 2019b, p. 442)

The canvas as teacher not only invited the shadow marks of the more-than-human beings at *Aisinai'pi* but also opened a contemplative space to consider the fear that many have about making a mark on a blank canvas. As an artist and educator, Karen recognized that many adults and children carry this fear (Tammings-Paton, personal communication, February 27, 2022). She wanted to add a layer of paint onto the canvas, therefore, before the mark-making began. Two things happened because of adding this layer of paint: (1) this provided Karen with a deep reflective moment in response to her own learning journey with Elder Saa'kokoto as she intentionally chose the colour yellow to represent *natoosi*, the sun, as the centre, or beginning, of this learning journey, and (2) the canvas became a vibrant entity and part of our lived experience. Had the canvas been white and blank, it is quite possible that it would not have carried the same energy and invited us into the playful learning experience that we had.

Karen anticipated that the children might have difficulty knowing what marks to put on the canvas and how to go about doing this. As her expertise mingled with the teachings of Elder Saa'kokoto and *na'a*, it became clear that we would invite the children into a similar playful experience when they made their marks so that they would also be fearless and intentional about the act of *ahksinakii*.

Returning to Leggo's (2019b) quote about the scribbles of writers on a blank page, both past and present, the marks of the shadows are embedded into the canvas and captured in pictures and stories. When the children practiced *ahksinakii* back at the school and in the coulee after Karen, Elder Saa'kokoto, and I shared this time at



*Aisinai'pi* they became part of the story of the canvas. Their mark-making became part of a kinship ecology (Van Horn, 2021) when they first played with the canvas and the shadows of the more-than-human beings in the coulee. After practicing and playing, the children then turned to mud and other natural materials to make their own marks as part of the scribbles and stories that will live on this canvas. This mark-making became evidence of the cultivation of kinship in this ethical space that we developed together over time.

## Part 4: Kinship with the Juniper Berries

**Figure 6.**

Shadows of Four Juniper Berries (Photo credit: Karen Tamminga-Paton)



Once Karen, Elder Saa'kokoto, and I each made our marks with sandstone, ice, rocks, and berries on that January day, we played with the shadows of the juniper berries, as *natoosi* began to set. I had never considered this tiny perspective of a berry's shadow and how it could inform so much. In the company of Elder Saa'kokoto with his wisdom about shadows as the marks of living beings, and Karen's artistic eye, I leaned into this space that came at the end of a day of such joyful, playful, heartfelt learning. At what moment did we begin a "kinship-in-action" (Van Horn, 2021, p. 3) with the juniper berry? Understanding kinship, the juniper berry includes the presence of its low-lying bush that lives in the sand amongst the hoodoos and its playful shadow teachings at the end of the afternoon. What did both berry and bush think of this canvas that scratched its surface on parts of its journey through the hoodoos? This thought most likely would not have occurred to me beforehand, but I realized part way through that afternoon, that the participants in the experience were not just the three humans who were there: *na'a*, the shadows of the more-than-human beings, the juniper berries and bushes, *natoosi*, and the canvas were very much involved with us.

## Looking Forward

The long shadow of the juniper berry invited an unexpected understanding for new possibilities and learning. Each tiny berry casts a long shadow out onto the canvas, extending this space and becoming a response to the question: *How do the poetics of land open new possibilities of how to cultivate a kinship ecology with children?* Following this day and these teachings at *Aisinai'pi*, we later invited children to learn to understand their own shadows as having spirits and to build a relationship with their shadows. Beginning with the self and then extending to the shadows of other beings, does this deepen the cultivation of kinship? I think, perhaps, yes. Looking at their own shadows and the shadows of other beings is a profoundly complex way for children to develop the practice of kinship-in-action and *ohkakiiyosit*. Children became part of a kinship ecology (Van Horn, 2021) through the practice of *ohkakiiyosit*. They expressed this practice artistically through land art. When they made their mark on the canvas, the children made marks alongside their kin, the juniper berry, and other shadows from *Aisinai'pi*, trees, rocks, sage, and *gii'nii* (Blackfoot for rosehips), in the coulee where the children and the canvas played together.

Poetic inquiry as a methodology gave me the space to explore the meaning of this experience. For a long time after this experience, I looked at the pictures of the canvas on the land in all its sunny splendour and remembered the moments but I did not have the words to explain what happened on that day. The process of creating this poetic narrative became part of the research's data analysis and informed the design of the school experience for children. We invited the children to build a relationship with the canvas rather than simply being told to make a mark directly onto the canvas

without understanding the story and the relationships between canvas and kin. Instead, the children moved joyfully around the canvas in the coulee near their school as they sought to find shadows that might imprint themselves into the canvas' memory before making their mark with berries, sticks, mud, snow, and water.

**Figure 7.**

A Child Capturing the Shadows of *gii'nii*, Rosehips

(Photo credit: Stephanie Bartlett)





Looking deeply at the land and kinship through poetic inquiry to explain the artistic expression and involvement in this research as part of Cajete's (1994) vision for Indigenous education helped to bring understanding to the lived axiology and ethical relationality of this research learning journey. As Anishinaabe scholar Vicki Kelly (2018) writes:

I am always aware that just behind me stand the Elders and Ancestors, watching and waiting to see if we will take up our work in the spirit of the ancient ones honouring the teachings of all our relations toward our essential work of being human...just in front of me are the children to come, the next generations, also waiting and watching to see if our vision of our work, as curriculum scholars, is indeed clear and courageous enough to answer the call healing and making whole of what has become dislocated, wounded, and injured through our actions. (p. xvii)

Cultivating kinship between children and the land through artistic representation provides implications for the future of education for reconciliation in Canada by presenting new possibilities of how to live and learn well together on the earth. The children's voices and artistic creations are healing for humans and the earth. By lifting the voices of children and providing an open, generative space for creative expression, these children (and all involved) understood kinship in their hearts. Unmeasurable in quantifiable units, these poetic rhythms that now exist in the bodies of these children and the canvas itself can make whole that which seems broken in the world.

And what of the coulee? Did the children and the canvas influence the coulee in any way? I would never want to project my thoughts onto the coulee, so I turn to Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) who writes:

Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you back in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond (p. 124-25).

How can I know that the coulee might love the children back in return? On the first day that the children made their marks on the canvas in the coulee, *na'a* sent the children gifts in the presence of an owl and ravens flying low over the canvas. Their bodies marked it with their own shadows, and through *natoosi* the sun shone through the clouds to warm the children as they searched for berries, sticks, rocks, and mud to make their marks. The chickadees sang and swooped in and around, visiting the children, the canvas, and their kin in the coulee.

**Figure 8.**

*Ahksinakii*, They Will Make Their Mark (Photo credit: Stephanie Bartlett)





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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) describes a talk story as similar to a talking circle but less formal. A talk story follows the same protocols of listening without interrupting to build on ideas. Rather than waiting for a full round of the circle to speak again, ideas can flow back and forth across the circle.

<sup>2</sup> When we first came together in the spring of 2021 to meet about the following school year, Saa'kokoto named this fourth year of the journey *Ahksinakii*, intending for the children to make their marks to show their learning about Blackfoot land and culture to the community. Imagine our surprise and excitement a few months later in her studio when we saw that mark-making and marking up paintings was already a part of Karen's artistic practice!