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Commentary

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Walking With Our Sisters: An Art Installation Centered in Ceremony

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(including excerpts from an interview of Christi Belcourt by Ryan McMahon[1])

It would be more than fair to say that I have been subtly yet irreparably transformed due to my experience with the commemorative art installation, *Walking With Our Sisters*. I feel as though my mind and spirit are now governed by the teachings of ceremonies that were drawn out, expressed, and embodied during this time. In many aspects of my life now, including my research, I think in terms of living and being in ceremony. Ceremony is a lens through which I cannot help but see the world.

This commentary explains how the project *Walking With Our Sisters* acted as a catalyst for this change, and consequently revealed an Indigenous theoretical framework founded in ceremony as a site for re-centering, reprioritizing, and reorganizing my own research from an Indigenous perspective. Specifically, it means that, embedded within this community-based venture, lies a generative wellspring of theoretical elements enabling Indigenous researchers, such as myself, to access tools of theorizing grounded Indigenous worldviews. Kathie Irwin's words reflect the simple reasoning behind my endeavor: "We don't need anyone else developing tools which will help us to come to terms with who we are. We can and will do this work. Real power lies with those who design the tools—it always as. This power is ours" (cited in Tuhuwai Smith 2012, 38).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that it is essential for Indigenous people to ground themselves in theory that is relevant to them and is "grounded in a real sense of, and sensitivity towards, what it means to be an Indigenous person" (2012, 38). In my case, I turn to the elements of ceremony, such as Indigenous ceremonial paradigms founded in elements of accountability, memorialization, protocol, stories, relationships, kinship circles, reciprocity, and responsibility.

To give a little background, *Walking With Our Sisters* is a collaborative art installation that includes handmade moccasin vamps (the tops of moccasins—usually the most decorated part) exhibited together to commemorate and honour the missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada. The innovation of Métis artist Christi Belcourt, the installation made its first stop in Edmonton, Alberta, at the University of Alberta, on 2 October 2013. It was July 2012 when Christi reached out through the vast space of social media and by word of mouth, to call out for help in creating an installation that would honour the 600 or more

1 Interview excerpts provided from an interview with Ryan McMahon on the podcast *Red Man Laughing*, Season 3, Episode 1 (August 2013), with permission from Christi Belcourt and Ryan McMahon.

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Indigenous sisters, mothers, daughters, cousins, and granddaughters in Canada who have gone missing or have been murdered in the last twenty years.

People were asked to create an original pair of vamps and send them to Christi for compilation and organization for the collaborative art installation. However, three months before the vamp submission deadline of July 17, 2013, the ultimate goal of 600 pairs seemed unlikely.

No one needed to worry about the numbers in the end because, in true community spirit, the promises to send in vamps were kept. People finished their vamps and sent them to Christi in Espanola, Ontario. The final tally came to 1726 pairs of moccasin vamps created by over 1300 individual artists. Christi and her assembled team prayed and feasted over the vamps in ceremony before packaging them up carefully and shipping them to the Keeper, Tanya Kappo, in Edmonton.

> ***Christi*** *(describing the space): Before we lay anything down, we smudge the space. And then following that we place sage on the floor. On top of that, the red cloth will go down, and depending on the shape of the space, that will be like a winding pathway. And on top of that sits another thinner path of grey cloth where the moccasin tops will sit.*

At the beginning of the path people have to remove their shoes to walk alongside the moccasin tops. There is a beaded cedar box that holds the tobacco at the entrance and anybody who wants it can take it if they are used to that, if they know what that is, and at the very end of the pathway there will be a place to put that.

Maria Campbell is our national advising Elder, but in each location there will be a local Elder or regional Elder to advise on regional protocol. But she has told us that all 1700 pairs have to be shown. After they are all laid out we smudge them as if the women are standing right there … because they will be.

Our Edmonton team consisted of four members of the National Collective: Tanya Kappo, Tara Kappo, Erin Konsmo, and myself. Christi Belcourt and her partner Alo White came to Edmonton to work with us to install this incredibly unique art installation. Maria Campbell arrived from Saskatchewan and her presence formed a strong sense of community. For me, at least, her very company elicited a sense of calm and well-being. Like you knew that everything was going to work out just fine. Don't get me wrong though, when her sharp blue eyes rested upon you, they told you there was a shitload of work to be done and nothing was going to get done if we just sat around feeling peaceful and calm. We rolled up our sleeves and for three ten-hour days, and with at least a dozen volunteers each day, the installation was complete.

Ceremony

In *Research is Ceremony* (2008), Shawn Wilson states that "[t]he purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves." And that ceremony provides a "[r]aised level of consciousness and insight into our world" (11).

Prior to being involved in *Walking With Our Sisters*, I attended ceremonies. From sun dance to sweat lodge, I've been blessed with compassionate and caring Elders, and my supportive family and friends. The ceremonies were foundational for me in re-establishing my connection with the Creator and opening up my mind and spirit. With every ceremony, I always felt a sense of peace and connectedness, not just to the Creator but with my ancestors as well. The sense of peace and well-being would last for a few days, and if the ceremony were especially powerful, the feeling would stay a week. Eventually, however, the busy realities of life and the everyday responsibilities of work, school, and family would overtake me and the feeling would quietly dissipate like early morning mist in the sunlight.

In the beginning, hosting *Walking With Our Sisters* at the University of Alberta started off as a project that fit well with my portfolio as Special Advisor to the Provost. I had read online about Christi's request for moccasin vamps for this installation and I remember thinking to myself, "That sounds cool." I smile at this word in hindsight, and shake my head at my naiveté. Cool. If I had to describe a project like *Walking With Our Sisters* now, "cool" wouldn't be a likely contender. I much imagine words like "powerful," "innovative," "honouring," and "ceremony" are much more fitting.

Research is Ceremony is a book in which Shawn Wilson shares his ideas through personal experience and interviews into the ways in which we, as Indigenous scholars, could actualize a space for Indigenous Research methods. If Indigenous scholars had a theoretical framework based in ceremony, what would it look like? What would this paradigm include? Here are some recommendations: reciprocity, kinship, relational accountability, responsibility, connection to the spirit world through ceremony, mnemonic devices, humility, spiritual cleansing, memorialization of events, and an understanding of protocols of gift giving, feasting, honorariums, and sacrosanct bindings.

It has been difficult to uncover the moments when I began to conceptualize this seemingly simple art installation as a theoretical framework for Indigenous research methods. I found clarity in ceremony. On the opening day, we had a ceremony at sunrise—7:31 a.m., to be exact. My role was to provide some words after the ceremony to the assembled and welcome them on behalf of the University. The night before I had memorized a quick, but heartfelt welcome. The ceremony changed everything.

Elders Alo White, Maria Campbell, Pauline Paulson, and Christi Belcourt led the ceremony and, as they called in the spirits to watch over the installation, the atrium reverberated with energy and power. I felt humbled as Pauline called to the vamps and Alo drummed and we sang. A powerful energy filled the room. And stayed. In the Cree language, *Nehiyawewin*, nouns are either animate or inanimate; there is no discernment between feminine and masculine. Something is alive or it isn't. After the calling in, the vamps became animate.

Fast forward ahead, and it is time for me to welcome everyone on behalf of the University. The words stuck in my mouth and my throat closed off. This certainly wasn't fear of public speaking. What was it? It was in this moment that a dawning realization came to me: I couldn't address the assembled crowd before me. My accountability at that moment in time

called for me to welcome our sisters. They were here! I told them that we were the ones that were honoured with their presence. I thanked them for being with us, for coming to this place, on Treaty Six territory where the University now sits. I told them that we were there to take care of them and to keep them safe. I promised to do everything I possibly could to protect them. Ceremony opens up a special space for dialogue, our prayers become communication methods. We can converse with the spiritual realm without static, and without walls.

In the context of this special place, I spoke to my sisters. The audience was not addressed, but they watched and listened. Although my words were meant for the sisters, they were also meant for the audience to listen to as well. The outcome would have been vastly different if I had addressed the crowd directly. By listening to me speak with the sisters, the audience learned indirectly. They gained an understanding about the responsibilities of the WWOS National Collective, Edmonton Group. They learned about our role and our sense of duty to the sisters.

Without once addressing the assembled crowd, I finished my welcome.

And ceremony lived. In this one moment, I realized that my address to the sisters, rather than the crowd, was about maintaining accountability to my relationship to them—relational accountability. As I reflected on my experience with WWOS, an idea began to take shape and I realized that for eleven days from the opening, Calling In Ceremony to the closing Calling Out, I was in total ceremony immersion. This wasn't a four-hour sweat lodge; it wasn't a four-day sun dance. It took a total immersion of eleven days in ceremony for me to understand that WWOS was the perfect embodiment of an Indigenous theoretical framework.

> ***Christi****: Everything that we are doing is ceremonial. We have an Elder that I passed tobacco to in the very beginning of the project. That Elder has been advising on traditional protocol and we are carrying through that sense of it being a sacred bundle, all of these vamps. In each location we have a Keeper. The Keeper in Edmonton was Tanya Kappo. Each of the Keepers ensure that things are done in that really respectful way ... The women's lives were valuable and we are honouring the fact that they were alive or are still alive and are missing. That is the first goal of the project.*

Ceremony connects people to each other, to those who have passed and accesses a greater power to help us communicate with each other on the same plane. The intersections of prayer and humility offer a spiritual cleansing offers a connection to the spirit world. We are virtually 'tapping into' a realm of higher consciousness, of 'knowing' that would otherwise remain blackness to us. Again, remembering Wilson's words stating that ceremony is a, "raised level of consciousness and insight into our world" (2008, 11). Similarly, the purpose of any academic research at the very core, is to also raise up a level of consciousness and insight.

Community

Wilson says that, "In healthy Indigenous communities though, the strength of already established bonds between people can be used to help uplift others to bring them into the circle" (2008, 81).

Another aspect of WWOS that nobody expected included the formation of a strong community. For me, this community first began to take shape within the core of the Edmonton group who hosted WWOS, between Tanya Kappo, Tara Kappo, Erin Konsmo, and myself. As the opening day loomed, Christi, Maria, and Alo became a regular part of our meetings, Skype calls, emails, and conferences by phone. The bond grew strong, forged through the tireless dedication to the success of WWOS. This group opened up to include other volunteers as time went on. The volunteers were obviously a huge benefit to WWOS: we depended on many volunteers to help with the installation, the opening day, the conference *Amiqaaq3*, the hundreds of shifts during the eleven days and, finally, the de-installation. But incredibly, we learned that WWOS was a huge benefit to our volunteers. Through conversations, comments in the guest book and on Facebook, through emails and letters, it became clear that the project, WWOS, had fully enriched the lives of our volunteers. Many volunteers requested to repeatedly come back, exceeding their original commitment; many just visited in the debriefing coffee area or in the atrium seating area.

In this context, the definition of community opens to more than just a reserve, a settlement, band, or even a gated community. Anthony P. Cohen's research in the area of belonging and attachment broadens this definition to include the idea that "communities are best approached as communities of meaning. In other words, community plays a crucial symbolic role in generating people's sense of belonging" (1982; 1985). WWOS created a community of meaning that embodied all the concepts of trust, mutuality, accountability, commitment, and solidarity.

> ***Ryan McMahon****: Well you look at those relationships and they are new relationships and it is all revolving around the honouring of these women. You think about the building that is happening from this act, from this artistic act, this community act, it's actually mind-blowing to think about this is going to be impactful not only for the people that participated but for those who come in and support it and see these new bridges being built. I don't know how you guys pulled it off, but it is incredible!*

> ***Christi****: The work that we aren't seeing out front is the camaraderie and community building. We formed a National Collective of twenty people who are advising on how to approach this from a curatorial perspective, the fundraising end, as well as a strong media and communications team. On the community level, the way that we are approaching the exhibit tour is different from what I think it normally happens. For example, people are organizing to bring it to their community. It requires a lot of volunteers.*

Relational Accountability

The Edmonton group, along with Christi Belcourt, Maria Campbell, and Alo White of *Walking With Our Sisters*, took great measures to care for the participants and volunteers. Although we understood that the moccasins were made to honour the missing and murdered Aboriginal women, the painful history and horrendous brutality were still ever present. While many did not know of the word *otcinawin*, they understood the idea of relational accountability. Bringing the art installation to Edmonton, and displaying it for eleven days for all to see wrought heavy responsibility. Therefore, we recruited counselors and Elders as volunteers to be on hand if someone needed to talk. We ensured the entire building was readied to provide 24/7 sage for smudging. We had two rooms dedicated as debriefing rooms. One larger room provided a more intimate setting, giving participants a small amount of privacy to have tea, coffee, or snacks, and to talk about the installation. The second room we kept for those participants who needed private one-on-one counseling.

For eleven days, we remained vigilant for our guests, ready to provide gentle care and/or spiritual sustenance if the grief and sadness of the exhibit became too overwhelming. WWOS displayed relational accountability intuitively, an element of Indigenous research methodologies often discussed by Indigenous scholars Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Shawn Wilson, and Lester Rigney.

Upon the advice of our Elder, one evening, we were asked to organize a pipe ceremony in the atrium space where the vamps were displayed. There were four or five people from the national collective and volunteers who had experienced severe distress and emotion during this time. The pipe in ceremony has special significance, and in this particular case, became a link for us to speak to lingering negative thoughts and spirits and to release them. Neal MacLeod affirms that a pipe stem is "[m]ore than merely a way of sealing political arrangements and treaties; rather, it was a way of making and affirming relationships with the land, of honouring the spiritual powers who dwelt where the people were living" (2007, 27). Although we had provided attention and care to support our volunteers and participants through various avenues, it was just as critical to remain vigilant as new situations arose. As a group we remained open and fluid to the changing environment; by staying grounded in ceremony, solutions always presented themselves.

Elders and others who have lead in ceremonies I've attended exemplify a level of humbleness I have never known before. They do not speak about how much they know or their level of knowledge as compared to anyone else present. Quite the opposite to the Western forms of situating oneself as a leader, many leaders begin each prayer claiming to know nothing. Many of these spiritual guides and Elders have amassed an incredible wealth of cultural experience and traditional knowledge. They have worked in their communities for many decades and yet, despite the deep respect and reverence given to them, they claim to know nothing, that they have only begun to learn, they ask the Creator to take pity on them. Locating oneself in humility challenges the power construct of the current academic research model.

As a part of continued decolonizing, it remains critical for Indigenous scholars to stay vigilant and fight back against the ongoing New Age attempts to commodify and exploit Indigenous spirituality and ceremonies. As a part of a decolonizing methodology, Indigenous researchers must feel encouraged to share the foundational elements of spirituality and ceremony (those that they can share) within their own research. Tuhiwai Smith states that Indigenous ceremonies and spirituality have become an irresistible industry for New Age groups. Not only is it profitable, but non-Indigenous people's attempts to appropriate Indigenous spiritual beliefs come from "… their own uncertainties about their identities, rights, privileges and very existence" (2012, 102). New Age spirituality and their inevitable accompanying 'ceremonies' have relegated sacred traditions of Indigenous people to New Age mysticism. Although the New Ager's lament continues to claim to help and serve others through spirituality, the truth remains that it is a profitable industry and these profits are being amassed primarily through the exoticization or "othering" of our traditional ways of being.

> ***Ryan McMahon****: The fact that you are treating this like ceremony, I think that is really, really important because you are also giving those with that knowledge the responsibility and sort of the acknowledgement that there is Indigenous expertise involved in this as well. This isn't just happenstance, this isn't just an artist kind of thinking about, well, this is the way that I think, Christi Belcourt says it has to go this way. No, this is about bringing the Indigenous worldview and perspective on how we operate ceremonially and how that effects our daily life and I think that is really, really important. And again, another bridge being built, for those that don't understand what tobacco is, they don't understand that our medicines come from the land and that's why we talk about the land. All of these things are intrinsically tied together you don't separate them and I think it is an incredible vision to have all of that inside the exhibit as well. I think it is just spot on.*

Relational accountability is a significant characteristic for ceremonialists. Shawn Wilson states that "in Cree the words that form the basis of that concept are 'otcinawin' (breaking of natural law), which means that if a person deliberately mistreats other creatures, that action will invoke a natural justice. So they will receive a similar treatment either to themselves or their descendants … even to seven generations. And the other word is 'pastahowin,' which means the breaking of sacred law" (2008, 107).

The concept of *otcinawin* describes a type of natural justice that happens to people who abuse or mishandle others. This belief holds Indigenous and non-Indigenous people accountable for their actions in very real ways. In the absence of relational accountability, there is a serious risk of grave mistreatment and abuse.

Although the art installation had been created to honour our sisters, we realized that it had the potential to re-traumatize families and friends of our sisters; we understood that we had a deep responsibility to support and take care of these participants. As WWOS demonstrates, the traditional Cree concept of *otcinawin* is not a discarded remnant of a mythical past but remains a strong element within our contemporary Indigenous domain.

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