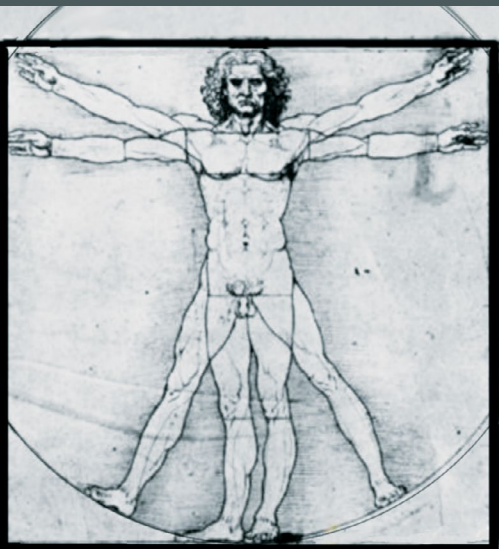


TOWARDS SCARRING

OUR COLLECTIVE SOUL WOUND



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Cash Ahenakew

Foreword by
Elwood Jimmy
Vanessa Andreotti
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Front cover: Collage by Cash Ahenakew, Benicio Pitaguary, and Vanessa Andreotti

Back cover: Benicio Pitaguary

Note from the artists: This image was created as a collage comparing on the one hand the Vitruvian Man of Leonardo Da Vinci (above), centring the human male figure within a square alongside the technology of alphabetic literacy, and on the other hand a Sun Dance ceremony in Alberta (below), centring a tree alongside a metabolic intelligence manifested through the literacies of the buffalo, the bear, the coyote, the eagle, the sacred mountains, the sacred plants, and the healing technologies of the tepee, the sweat lodge, and the four directions, accessed through the practice of smudging, sweating, fasting, praying, singing, dancing, and offerings. The image also represents the difference between the desire to index the world into categories of fixed meaning and the desire to move beyond meaning to reintegrate with an unknowable reality.

Design: Gareth Lind, Lind Design

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Foreword



Towards *Scarring our Collective Soul Wound* is the second book of the *Towards Braiding* series. This series is part of an ongoing collaborative process hosted by Musagetes that addresses the difficulties and challenges of decolonization

and Indigenization through the following questions:

- What are the conditions that make possible ethical and rigorous engagement across communities in historical dissonance that can help us move together towards improved relationships and yet-unimaginable, wiser futures as we face unprecedented global challenges?
- What are the common challenges and circularities that tend to arise in efforts to remake these relationships, and how can we be taught by these challenges and circularities so that we do not keep making the same mistakes and wasting time, energy, and resources?

- What are the guidelines and practices for ethical and respectful engagement with Indigenous senses and sensibilities (being, knowing, relationships, affects, place, space, and time) that can help us to work together in holding space for the possibility of “braiding” work between communities?
- How do we learn together to enliven these guidelines with (self-)compassion, generosity, humility, flexibility, depth, and rigour, without turning our back to (or burning out with) the complexities, paradoxes, difficulties, and pain of this work?

In the first book of the series, *Towards Braiding*, we proposed a distinction between “brick” and “thread” sensibilities. That is, we distinguished between sensibilities resonant with the textures and movements of brick layering and sensibilities resonant with the textures and movements of thread weaving. The idea of brick layering evokes working toward a preconceived outcome using rigid building blocks with the intention of arriving at a state of completion that is higher and stronger than the original state, is able to withstand considerable pressures without moving, and can stand the test of time (e.g. a magnificent building). The notion of thread weaving, on the other hand, evokes the repurposing and bringing together of flexible strands of fibre for different practical purposes that emerge through relational processes within a particular context and have a strategic purpose and a limited temporality (e.g. a basket). We also suggested that a politics based on brick layering is often based on entitlements, visibility, and exceptionality (e.g. heroic protagonistism); whereas a politics based on thread weaving is based on relational accountability, non-visible affective service, and

non-exceptionality (e.g. work in the background, often centring non-human relations).

We define braiding as a practice yet-to-come, located in a space in-between and at the edges of bricks and threads, which aims to calibrate each sensibility towards a generative orientation and inter-weave their strands to create something new and contextually relevant. The intention is for people to carry out this work without erasing the differences and historical and systemic violences between the two sensibilities, or glossing over the uncertainty, conflict, paradoxes, and contradictions involved in braiding work.

Since the publication of *Towards Braiding*, we have noticed that the term braiding, like other terms in this book such as the “soul wound,” has become more popular—and with this popularity, the term has become saturated with many competing interpretations. We have observed that braiding often gets confused with different forms of inclusion, with offering a platform for someone’s work to be disseminated, and with providing funding for a specific event or activity. We wondered how we could highlight that while inclusion, platforming, and funding are important, the kind of braiding we are proposing requires an interruption of the currencies and economies that sustain business as usual—and an engagement with very different forms of affective, intellectual, and relational orientations, commitments, and practices.

Many people have also asked us for checklists of what to do in the work towards braiding. This suggests to us that while there is often a genuine desire to develop different kinds of relationships between brick and thread sensibilities, this is often accompanied by impatience for the long-term, non-linear,

process-oriented work that is actually required if we want to learn to live together differently. We recognize that people socialized with brick sensibilities, in particular, are often not used to embodying this approach. Thus, while we find the desire for checklists problematic, we have also tried to come up with a checklist that gestures towards the commitments that braiding entails. Unlike most checklists, however, we emphasize not one-time actions or procedures, but rather a set of difficult-to-develop dispositions that can help people cultivate a sustained orientation to braiding work. As a pedagogical strategy, our list contrasts the work of braiding with normalized desires to “feel good, look good, do good, predict, control, and move forward” that we have often encountered in mainstream circles and institutions.

Normalized desires for those socialized with brick sensibilities	Dispositions necessary on the journey towards braiding
Feel good	Un- numb to the collective pain of the historical and systemic violence that subsidizes your comforts; sensitize yourself to your complicity and responsibilities in relation to collective pain.
Look good	Interrupt your narcissism and “grow up;” take responsibility for composting your own shit— your insecurities, projections, fragilities, harmful entitlements, aspirations, and desires for certainty, innocence, authority, protagonism, and validation.
Do good	Show up differently to the collective work: do what is needed and what you can do, rather than what you <i>want</i> to do; develop stamina for the mess, the frustrations, and the storms ahead.

Predict, control	Be comfortable with the unknowable and with the discomfort of uncertainties, complexities, paradoxes, and not-knowing; focus on the integrity of relationships; trust a more-than-human intelligence to guide the process.
Move forward	Dig deeper and relate wider: learn to sense and stay at the edge, learn from failure and from mistakes, map the ditches; emphasize the integrity of the process and the maintenance of ethical relationships rather than the pace or the destination.

Towards Scarring our Collective Soul Wound speaks directly to these dispositions by showing that it is possible to experience health and well-being grounded in a different way of being that has a different relationship with pain. Through reflections on his own experiences wrestling with the coloniality of Western knowledge, institutions, and dominant biomedical approaches to pain, Ahenakew draws attention to their limits while gesturing towards other possibilities for relating to pain and other ways of understanding healing. To experience these other possibilities requires that we first come to see our sense of separation from the land, non-human beings and each other as a harmful illusion that has led us to: 1) deny our responsibilities and relations to one another; 2) forget our intrinsic worth as part of a wider metabolism; and 3) invest in forms of belonging and meaning that tend to only intensify the illusion of separation, further harming others and ourselves. In other words, these possibilities require that we interrupt our normalized desires for long enough to denaturalize them and see their negative impacts on others and ourselves.

Only once we interrupt these normalized desires can we learn to sense our entanglement with each other and with ourselves as an extension of the Earth itself—and thus, be

open to encountering different possibilities without the usual patterns of extraction, consumption, projection, and appropriation. Perhaps so as to avoid these patterns, Ahenakew does not put forth a singular alternative model for health and well-being that can be extracted, abstracted, and imported elsewhere. In fact, he explicitly cautions against the colonial tendency to graft Indigenous possibilities from their particular contexts onto other contexts in ways that betray their gifts. This is just one of many “ditches” that can arise in the process of unlearning colonial habits of being and encountering other possibilities for (co)existence, partly because of how deeply those colonial habits of being have seeped into our bones, making them difficult to extricate. Therefore, much like the process of braiding, this unlearning is not something that can happen all at once. We need to do some of this work internally, on both sides of the brick/thread divide, before braiding work between communities can truly begin. In the first *Towards Braiding* book, we called this the process of “getting to zero”—that is, the process of creating the conditions for different kinds of relationships to become possible (even as they are never guaranteed).

One of the biggest challenges involved in “getting to zero” with regard to both remaking our relationship to pain, and remaking relationships between bricks and threads, has to do with selective engagements with entanglement. First, there is a tendency for folks to engage entanglement as a concept to be intellectually examined, absorbed, and deployed—rather than as something to be sensed and experienced in everyday life. There is a false fantasy also implicit in this tendency to intellectualize, where we imagine that by *saying we are doing it, that means we are actually doing it*. The concept of entanglement can even be

weaponized to shut down decolonial critiques, as when efforts to point out manifestations of colonial violence are understood as introducing separations, rather than as naming the product of (fantasies of) separations that are already there. In these cases, the person (often Indigenous) that points out the problem tends to be seen as the problem.

Another challenge is the tendency to selectively and conditionally un-numb to entanglement—for instance, in a desire to feel entangled with the trees, the stars, and the squirrels, but not with pain, war, and guns (i.e. the denial of entanglement with violence and complicity in harm). This response belies a continued investment in unrestricted autonomy and innocence. With regard to braiding, this translates into a desire to have improved relationships without doing the work of learning how and why these relationships are fractured in the first place, and without being willing to give anything up in order to create the possibility of changing them. There are no shortcuts to braiding, and while it does not require that the brick or the thread side become something different than what they are, it does require that they open themselves up to being changed by the process of braiding in ways that we cannot predict or foresee in advance.

In “getting to zero” we will have to develop radars for the hidden harmful patterns we embody, as well as a compass for the vitality that resides in the entanglement within us. Without tapping this vitality, we cannot hold the pain or complexity of the different layers of violence and unsustainability in which we are embedded. With the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective, we have been working on pedagogical strategies that can hold space for this process. We have also been working on agreements that invite people into these spaces with a greater

awareness of what they are getting into and what they need to let go in order to decentre, disarm, de-clutter, discern, and create the space for another form of existence to emerge. This series reports on these experiments—and Ahenakew's invitation for us to shift our relationship with pain is an essential part of this process.

— Elwood, Vanessa, and Sharon

Introduction



I start this text with a contextualization that points to the difficulties of translating Indigenous perspectives into non-Indigenous languages and literacies by acknowledging two paradoxes. The first paradox is related to political and existential choices

available within modernity for Indigenous people. The second is about the conditional inclusion of Indigenous people in non-Indigenous institutions.

The first paradox reflects different aspirations within and between Indigenous communities. On the one hand, there is the political and material necessity for Indigenous communities to survive and thrive in modern-colonial societies that are built on violence and are inherently unsustainable. On the other hand, and at the same time, there is the need for these communities to insist on existential alternatives to this violence and unsustainability. This paradox is replayed in many Indigenous peoples' struggles within formal schooling, as well as in modern medical,

legal, and governance institutions. Modern-colonial institutions promote exponential economic growth and consumption as the direction of progress and development, and metropolitan consumerist individualism as the purpose of human existence. This imposed way forward denies the limits of the planet, invisibilizing the violence that sustains these institutions and concealing the hidden sources and costs of this system. Many Indigenous people see the objectification of the land and our sense of separation from it as the source of the problem, and work (differently) towards different possibilities of (co)existence that re-centre the land. Many Indigenous people also choose to strive for success within the modern-colonial system, prioritizing the expansion of access and opportunities for social mobility for their families and/or communities. Some Indigenous people try to combine access to economic and institutional power with the defense and protection of their territories, languages, and communities.

The second paradox is related to the inclusion of Indigenous people in non-Indigenous institutions (including Indigenous people who want alternatives, those who want success, and those who want to use institutions to protect their cultures). On the part of institutions, this type of inclusion is often conditional, expecting business to go on as usual for non-Indigenous people and expecting Indigenous people to work in service of non-Indigenous perceived goals and needs. Indigenous people are often expected to offer non-threatening content, relief from colonial guilt, and/or institutional immunity to critique (see also Ahmed, 2012; Ahenakew & Naepi, 2015; Jimmy, Andreotti, & Stein 2019). Like being invited to eat at someone else's table, there is no "free lunch;" you are supposed to exhibit proper table

manners, praise the cook, enjoy the meal, pose for the photograph—all while being kind, entertaining, and thankful to the people who invited you. The costs of playing (or refusing to play) the role of a grateful guest are often invisibilized.

My experience navigating these paradoxes and invisibilizations informs the direction of my work in Indigenous education and well-being. This text is my attempt to insist that we need to re-centre the earth in our individual and collective existence in order to re-activate our sense of entangled relationality that will show us that we are interwoven in (rather than with) each other through the metabolism of the land. This re-centring of the land is a precondition for us to start the journey towards scarring the collective soul wound, a wound caused by the imposition of a sense of separation between “man and nature” and between each other. Centring the land is not about centring the *concept* of the land, but about centring the land as a *metabolism*. It is not about seeing the land as an extension of ourselves, but the other way around; seeing ourselves as an extension of the land that, through different waves of colonialism, has been objectified, occupied, and violated. This involves un-numbing ourselves to the pain of the land.

However, in modern societies we have developed a very negative relationship with pain—we are terrified of being overwhelmed by it, and we are particularly scared of collective pain because we do not know what to do with it apart from wishing for anaesthetic relief. Therefore, in order to re-centre the land and become sensitized to its pain, we need to first change the ways we have been socialized to think about health and well-being in relation to pain itself. Many Indigenous groups have practices that can change our relationship with pain and trauma

release. In this text, I focus on sacred pain as one way to transform both individual and collective traumas. Sacred pain can support the work of scarring our collective soul wound, a wound caused by the illusion of separability that has been instituted through the violence of colonialism. This violence involves the fracturing of our sense of entanglement with the cosmos, the earth, other species, and with each other.

The first chapter starts with a distinction between Indigenous and biomedical models of health. The comparison between the two models is used to explore how pain is perceived and processed differently. In the second chapter, I highlight important lessons from my journey of learning to relate differently to my own chronic pain during my initiation in the practice of sacred pain through the Sun Dance ceremony with Keith Chiefmoon's and Karen Russel's Otasi Okhan society in the Kainai reservation, in what is currently known as Canada. I focus on the practice of sacred pain as an example of how our relationship with pain and suffering can be transformed. The third chapter presents the Sun Dance as a site for experiential learning, offering the reader a glimpse into how this Indigenous practice issues an invitation for intellectual, affective, and relational rehabilitation that is different from the rehabilitation promoted in Western health and education.

The following chapters examine some of the challenges of— and the potential for—individual and collective trauma transformation through engagements with Indigenous practices. I conclude with an invitation for more accountable and ethical forms of engagement with Indigenous ways of knowing and being—engagements that take notice of historical processes of instrumentalization and appropriation while remaining receptive

to the gifts of Indigenous practices that can support the process of neuro-decolonization—in the context of the possibility of human extinction. I have tried to make connections with parallel discussions happening in other contexts in the endnote section. I also include creative devices in the text, including images and poems, as a way of insisting on a different sensibility that remains largely inaccessible to those over-socialized into modern ways of knowing, feeling, hoping, relating, and being.

Chapter 1

Indigenous and Biomedical Models of Health



The distinction I propose here between Indigenous and biomedical models of health is pedagogical and strategic.

It highlights differences that are often glossed over when there is a strong desire to “move forward,” that is, when people

engage with Indigenous knowledge systems with the intent to focus on similarities rather than on differences. In a colonial context where the desire for so-called progress has resulted in Indigenous dispossession, destitution, and genocide, it is important to find the time and the stamina to sit with incommensurabilities, dissonances, and tensions before we create a generative space of encounter that does not easily reproduce colonial desires, entitlements, and relations (Jimmy et al., 2019).

The dominant ways of knowing and being (often called *Western or modern*), see *being* as grounded in knowing, thinking, mastering, and engineering. As a result, health practices are mainly associated with rationalizing, regulating, controlling,

replacing, and fixing the body. Accordingly, wellness is conceptualized as the elimination of disease and pain and is often related to self-regulation and social- and self-control, which improve functionality within modern-colonial capitalist societies premised on individual accumulation of capital and status. For example, practices of meditation, yoga, and mindfulness are now used in schools as techniques for stress relief, self-regulation, and self-actualization. In this context, these practices have been removed from the ways of being and experiencing reality that produced them. They have been grafted onto dominant ways of knowing and being (see Ahenakew, 2016), and instrumentalized for consumption in ways that promote functionality within the dominant system. The capacity of these practices to offer an alternative relationship with reality that can engender a substantially distinct form of (co)existence is lost in a supermarket of packaged, accessible, and easily consumable decontextualized cultural experiences.

Table 1: Critical Indigenous Paradigm

	Biomedical Paradigm (dominant ways of knowing and being)	Indigenous Paradigm
Being	Knowing , thinking, mastering, engineering	Relating through intellect, emotions, body, and spirit
Health	Rationalizing, regulating, controlling, replacing, fixing	Anchoring oneself to balance relations holistically
Wellness	Elimination of disease and pain; self-regulation and social control for functionality within modern-colonial capitalist societies	Balance, steadiness, resilience, and smoothness of physical and spiritual relations in order to enable reciprocal flows and the integration of human and non-human relations within a larger land-metabolism

(revised from Ahenakew, 2011)

Indigenous ways of being and experiencing reality, which are not based on the human versus nature separation, sense *being* as grounded in relationality, a form of woven entanglement that involves intellect, emotion, body, and spirit. It is important to remember that this is not a concept or a cognitive construct (knowledge) that commands our bodies to feel connected with the land. In these Indigenous ways of being, it is the land that commands the body, because the body is part of the land. Language, thoughts, songs, and dreams also come from the land. The unconscious is located in the land. My body is the land, the other-than-humans are the land, the plants are the land, the earth is the land, the wider cosmos is also the land. Although we can have useful stories about the land and be intimate with it, it is ultimately unknowable, not just unknown. We are an extension of the land and part of its different temporalities.

I argue that this form of existence relies on a different neurobiological configuration with a different neuropsychology, and possibly a different neurochemistry and different neurofunctionality than what is generally configured through processes of socialization within modern Western societies. Through this distinct configuration the relationship with the world is not mediated by meaning or self-regulation. Existing as an extension of a living land relies on other activated senses, which may or may not “make sense” in knowledge that can be expressed in words, Western expectations for concepts, or Western scientific literature. The Cartesian maxim “I think, therefore I am” becomes “I land (i.e. come from the land), therefore I land (i.e. return to the land).”

In this neurobiological configuration, health is about balance and anchoring and integrating oneself in order to contribute

to holistic and collective well-being. Hence, well-being is about steadiness, resilience, and smoothness of physical and spiritual relations in order to enable reciprocity, generosity, compassion, and gratitude within an environment where everything is interwoven. In this context, accumulation is analogous to a blockage of the flow of nutrients within the land-metabolism. Through this form of existence, the purpose of life could be to contribute towards the well-being of the whole and to deepen our knowledge about how to support all relations. For example, in a recent research project about Indigenous perspectives on the purpose of education (in its broader sense), we had conversation circles on sacred sites with a number of Elders who practiced ceremonies associated with the “Red Road” (i.e. Indigenous spiritual practices). None of the Elders we worked with said that education was about credentials, employability, or social mobility. The overarching theme was that education is meant to prepare people to become good Elders—for all relations.

The impact of consumerist, metropolitan, and individualistic education on people's well-being cannot be underestimated. I wonder what it does to our cognition, neurobiology, emotional states, and relational possibilities and accountabilities. Unfortunately, science in general—and neuro-science in particular—although both potentially useful and dangerous, have a very strong bias towards linear time, linear ideas of progress and history, and a specific take on species development that sees the modern subject and their pre-frontal cortex capacity for self-regulation as the apex of human development and/or evolution. I wonder what would become possible if these assumptions were questioned; if we could see our modern-colonial subjectivities as one of many possible neurobiological configurations.

In this sense, instead of universalizing this subject's neurochemical, neurofunctional, and neurophysiological traits as the measure of so-called success for the rest of humanity, we would see it as only one among many states of a changing organism—arguably a state that is proving itself to be unsustainable if we consider its capacity to eliminate other species and to destroy the possibility for its own survival on the planet.

The same can be said for other areas of health; I also wonder what psychoanalysis would look like from the perspective of land-based relational entanglement. Western psychoanalysis takes the individuated human body and psyche as the starting point of theorizations, restricting its focus to meaning and consciousness. What would be possible if instead the land was the starting point? What would be possible if the starting point was something that manifests the land in its organic form (the force that makes matter possible), something that is beyond linear time, space, and form (Mika, 2012; 2019)? What if we could *sensorially* perceive ourselves to be connected with everything, beyond conceptualizations?

There is a useful distinction in the work of Suely Rolnik that can help to shed light on the re-activation of our sense of entangled relationality (see Rolnik, Polanco & Pradel, 2016; Rolnik, 2018). Inspired by the Guarani *cosmo-vision* of Teko Porã, Rolnik distinguishes between an internal *symbolic-categorical compass* (that works through indexing reality in language) and a *vital compass* that helps us be part of and affected by the forces of the world in an unmediated way. Modern schooling and modern society in general have reinforced the symbolic-categorical compass to the point where we want to have total control of the world (by codifying it) and total control of our relationships

with/in the world. In other words, we want the world to fit into our boxes in order for us to feel secure. This over-codification is a form of consumption that ends up objectifying and killing the world (Biesta, 2016; Biesta and Noguera-Ramírez, 2019). From this perspective, if we can't get the world to fit our expectations, the alternative is to (symbolically) withdraw from it. The symbolic-categorical compass that drives these desires for the totalization of knowledge and the control of relationships takes up all the space and energy and it does not leave room for the vital compass to be developed and used. If, within modernity, we derive satisfaction from certainty, coherence, control, authority, and (perceived) unrestricted autonomy, we also miss out on the vitality that is gained from encountering the world (and ourselves in it) in its plurality and indeterminacy. Modernity-coloniality makes us feel insecure when we face uncertainty and when our codifications of the world and the stability they represent are challenged.

This insecurity has the potential to become a major threat as we face unprecedented global challenges, given how it can be mobilized toward violent ends that seek the restoration of that security at any cost. Thus, it is important to consider what other responses to our contemporary context might be possible. The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, a group of educators, researchers, artists, and activists that I am part of, works to articulate the relationships that exist between the different challenges we face as modernity shows signs of instability. We start from the assumption that these challenges are not related to an informational problem (that requires more data or academic papers in order to be solved). These challenges are grounded in a harmful habit of being which we learn from

our socialization in modern institutions like schools and universities. The reproduction of this habit of being is driven by four denials: the denial of systemic violence of modernity-coloniality; the denial of unsustainability; the denial of entanglement; and the denial of the difficulties of addressing the magnitude of the problems we are facing, which relates to a desire for simplistic solutions (see decolonialfutures.net). The problems of exploitation, expropriation, and ecological destruction are related to hopes and dreams of unending exponential economic growth and consumption, dreams that are only realistically available for one seventh of the population. As we approach the biophysical limits of the planet and the economy becomes increasingly unstable, the desires for continuity or even expansion of this futile dream are prompting dangerous responses: intolerance, volatility, social polarization, fragmentation, and the rise of populism fuelled by the mobilization of hate. This nervous “pressure cooker” situation has taken a huge toll on our global mental health.

Indigenous practices of entanglement with the land can offer a different possibility of relationship with reality. However, non-Indigenous people have often instrumentalized these practices for consumption, stress relief, personal development, and self-actualization. In addition, many people engage with Indigenous communities looking for convenient answers and resonances to suit their own agendas. This often happens without consideration of issues of historical violence or cultural translation, which can further entrench harmful colonial relations. For example, many people approach Indigenous communities for an alternative (conceptual) ideology that could replace the existing dominant one. This is problematic because the relationship between knowledge, reality, and being is often very

different for cultures grounded in orality. In these cultures, knowledge is not linear—it requires the readiness of the listener, and stories shift as the conscience is interpolated by non-human forces. The teachings you receive in these circumstances are not to be written in a thesis or encyclopedia for collective consumption—instead, they are tailored to the person who received them, in a specific context, and they should be respectfully held and wrestled with. Sometimes the epiphany will only come many years later. It is of paramount importance to understand the difference between looking for alternative ways of being (which is a hope grounded in modern-colonial ways of knowing and being) and an actual practice of *being differently* when both compasses described by Rolnik’s are working in balance.

In the next sections I offer some thoughts about how Indigenous practices related to sacred pain could illuminate what we need to do to make space and develop our vital compass while we recalibrate our symbolic-categorical one. What I present is based on my own journey of living in between worlds and encountering dis-ease *as a teacher*. I share these insights in the spirit of shifting health practices towards the realization that we are part of a collective metabolism involving the land/earth and beyond. I acknowledge that writing in the English language and using alphabetic literacy forces me to plant an Indigenous theory of knowledge onto a non-Indigenous way of being—one that privileges thinking over experiencing and that (arrogantly) perceives itself as all-encompassing. Therefore, I kindly ask you to take what I describe as just a glimpse of something that needs to be experienced in an ethical way rather than appropriated and consumed (conceptually or otherwise). Please read the previous sentence again.

Chapter 2

Being Taught by Sacred Pain



I suffer from acute chronic pain. When I started the journey of relating to pain-as-teacher, I was particularly interested in how pain is understood in Western ways of knowing in contrast to how pain is conceptualized in certain Indigenous ceremonies. Initially, I desired to know if, by conceptualizing pain differently, I would be able to have a different relationship with pain—especially chronic pain, but also the pain of colonialism—in order to be able to find other ways of learning from, living with, or healing it.

I focused my work on practices associated with the Sun Dance ceremony and soon realized this was not about thinking differently or reconceptualizing pain, but fundamentally about changing my whole being. The Sun Dance is a ceremony associated with Indigenous cultures of the Plains in North America, where the community gathers to renew their relationships with the land through specific rituals that are carried out towards

a tree placed at the centre of a huge medicine wheel that we call “the arbour”. For initiates who have pledged to dance, a Sun Dance involves abstaining from food and water for four days, prayers, offerings of tobacco, drumming, singing, sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies and, sometimes, piercing rituals.¹ The piercing Sun Dance ceremonies use the tearing of flesh as an act of surrender of one’s body and life-force to a non-human authority—the land-metabolism represented by the tree. In the anthropological literature, the piercings have been described as a practice of self-sacrifice and the embodiment of pain and suffering for the dismantling of egos, the initiation of visions, the acquisition of medicine, and the renewal of relationships (Shrubsole, 2011). This literature also highlights that the Sun Dance has usually been associated with community renewal and well-being, but it has also been mobilized as a form of political resistance, such as in 1884, when Big Bear and Poundmaker called a Sun Dance “in response to reserve conditions, famines, and treaty abuses” (Shrubsole, 2011, p. 4).

However, interpretations about the meaning of the Sun Dance differ according to the visions and symbolic referents of different communities. Keith Chiefmoon and Karen Russell, who initiated the Natosi Okhan Sun Dance society at the Kainai reservation in Alberta do not agree with the anthropological interpretation of the Sun Dance as a form of self-sacrifice. They state that:

First and foremost, the Sun Dance is a sacred ceremony that was bestowed upon the Niitsitapii (real people, truth speaking people) through the teachings of the sacred messenger Aapbii. This ceremony is a way of life, not a religion. Originally the ceremony itself encompassed effort and commitment in a time in

our oral history when there was no sickness. But when sickness started to occur, people knew they had to travel to the sun to request healing. The preparation for this journey to the sun is not easy, the instruments and ingredients you need are not easy to obtain. Many people struggle with the preparation and interpret it as pain and frustration. Once Europeans saw the ceremony, they interpreted it as self-torture, and this interpretation continues to be disseminated. When the Canadian government outlawed this practice in our Reserve it prevented those who practiced it from receiving government assistance, which, at the time was a \$5 annual payment. (Written personal communication received on 15 October 2019)

In 2010 I pledged to dance with the Natosi Okahn Sun Dance society. Those who have pledged to dance with this society are told that the Sun Dance ceremony lasts the whole year, 365 days, 24/7. Through fasts, sweat lodges, and intense inner work, we prepare for the main part of the ceremony, which happens in the summer during four intense days of dancing barefoot from sun up to sun down and moving to the rhythm of the earth, the drumming and singing, the four directions, and the centre tree. Sun Dancers take vows of sacrifice for their families, communities, and the earth.² Male initiates like myself are pierced on the chest and connected to the ceremonial tree. On the third day we are also pierced on the back and we pull buffalo skulls that are attached to the piercings until the piercings break. The piercing ritual is voluntary for women. They happen on the arms and wrists.

The Sun Dance (and other ceremonies) could be understood through the logic of a circular reciprocity that is not

human-centred, which is markedly different from transactions of capital or reciprocity understood as calculated gift exchanges between humans. Circular reciprocity involves a form of gift giving that does not expect anything in return as the idea is for the gift to be passed forward. This form of radical sharing is the basis of community well-being (Kuokkanen, 2007) and encourages people “to act responsibly toward other forms of life” (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 39). In this sense, poverty is defined as not being willing to share what you have (Andreotti & Souza, 2008), which amounts to unnecessary and wasteful accumulation. In this way, you can have a lot but still be existentially poor.

I remember the Elders asking me as I arrived at the Sun Dance grounds on my first year, “Have you been preparing?” I replied, “Have I prepared for what?” The preparation they were referring to was not *conceptual*. I only understood many years later that this preparation involved balance, steadiness, and resilience. They were asking if I had prepared my entire being (including the so-called mind) for the renunciations that would be necessary for the ceremonial reconciliation with the land and the sun, including a renunciation of food, of water, of fears, of traumas, of anger, of safety blankets, of attachments, of entitlements, of human-centred authority, and of my own flesh. To borrow a phrase from the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, they were asking if I was doing my part as an intentional movement of “composting my own shit” and of deepening connections through gratitude, compassion, and kindness towards the land and the sun (which includes all other bodies around me). In the beginning of my initiation in this ceremonial practice, the questions I had were about my own individual physical and affective states, but as I engaged deeper,

larger questions started to emerge; questions about relational entanglement started to become more important. How can ceremonial practices change our relationship to the inter-generational pain of colonialism? How can these practices change our relationship to the elements and to non-human beings like the air, the heat, the water, and the trees? How is the act of offering (of flesh, of sensorial deprivation, of vulnerability) a way of reconciling and renewing relationships with everything around us? And how can the experiences of reconciliation and renewal be expanded to our political and existential everyday experiences, our everyday lives? These questions have driven my inquiries into sacred pain.

When I mention *the sacredness* of pain, I am locating this argument at the interface of our rational and metaphorical minds (Cajete, 2000), which can be mapped onto the distinction between the symbolic-categorical and vital compasses mentioned before. Therefore, my argument is not completely linear and draws on symbolic devices like stories and metaphors as ways to invite readers to look at pain differently, beyond what we have been over-socialized into through over-exposure to Western philosophies, ways of knowing and being, methodologies, institutions, and perspectives. These ways of knowing are now part of all of us, and decolonization does not necessarily mean banishing these knowledges from our being, but instead it may involve learning the lessons they came to teach, both good and bad, and integrating their medicines with other medicines. If we look at this colonial over-socialization and over-exposure *as a teacher*, we can shift our position from being victims of a tragedy, to that of being observers of a painful poisonous phenomenon happening around and *within* us. Decolonization,

in this sense, is not an event but a continuous, life-long process of turning deadly poison into good medicine available to all, based on the teachings of the trickster poison itself.

The first metaphor I invoke is that of the shine and the shadow of modernity (Ahenakew et al., 2014; Andreotti, 2012; Mignolo, 2000; 2011). Mignolo defines modernity as a local (European) imaginary (the container that determines what counts as normal, natural, real, valuable and ideal) that turned into a global design, which started in Europe with the incorporation of the “Americas” into the trans-Atlantic trade circuit (Mignolo, 2000). This imaginary is driven by the desire for a linear, seamless and teleological notion of progress, as well as human agency, and all-encompassing (objective and totalizing) knowledge (Andreotti, 2014) used to engineer and control an effective society through rationality, science, and technology. Mignolo talks about the fact that for us to believe that modernity is good and “shiny,” we have to deny that it depends on violence, exploitation, and expropriation (its “darker” side) to exist. In other words, violence is the condition of possibility of modernity. In this sense modernity is both grounded on violence as well as on the fantasy that we can objectify and control reality through rationality in order to engineer a perfect society.

Mignolo says that the effects of the darker side of modernity, such as war, poverty, hunger, and environmental destruction, are perceived by those who champion modernity's shine as a lack of modernity that needs more modernity to be fixed. For example, globally we believe that more capitalism, Western schooling, and modern development are necessary to fix the problems of the so-called “Third World.” However, these problems were created and are maintained precisely through the exploitation of modern

capitalism and the expropriation of colonialism, and through modern development (neo-colonialism). In addition, these problems are exacerbated by the universalization of Western schooling as a form of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998). Similarly, here in Canada, we believe that more money, more credentials, and more positions of power for Indigenous people in Western institutions and corporations will create a more just society. We forget that what is called inclusion in an inherently harmful system requires the expansion of violence towards the land, other species, and people somewhere else.

We are led to believe that we can think (or research) our way out of local and global problems through the same frames of thinking and modes of existence that created the problems themselves. This is evidence of our attachment to the shine of modernity, which necessarily requires the denial of its shadows; the fact that for us to have the shiny things we want, we have to export violence somewhere else. We forget that someone else pays the costs of our comforts and enjoyments (now perceived as entitlements). The Indigenous communities in Guatemala affected by Canadian mining companies are a good example (Imai et al., 2007; Nolin and Stephens, 2011; Pedersen, 2014). The violence committed against these communities generates profits that flow back to Canada, fund our welfare system, subsidize our universities, and sponsor scholarships for students—in addition to the pain and suffering that mining inflicts on the land itself. Even the act of writing this article is complicit in the suffering of Indigenous people in Guatemala. Why do we insist on ignoring the violence we (systemically) inflict on each other and on the land? Why do we continue to want things that harm others? How is the pain that we are causing accounted for *differently* in

Western ways onto-epistemology (ways of knowing and being) of individuality and in the Indigenous onto-epistemology of entangled relationality? And how can we experience these Indigenous ways of knowing/being of inter-being-relationality if we have been colonized by the ways of knowing/being that numb our senses to it?

We can imagine this numbing as a process of clogging. In an attempt to keep us feeling individualized and separate from the land-metabolism, modernity takes away our sense of the unquestionable value of life and instead creates a fundamental void that we associate with worthlessness. To feel a temporary sense of self-worth, we are made to produce stuff that modernity recognizes as valuable. To feel a sense of completion, we are made to accumulate stuff that we believe can fill the void. This stuff becomes an embodied prison, clogging our pores, our air, our blood, and our drain pipes, damaging our heart pump and blocking possibilities for us to sense and relate differently. We become addicted to feeling only what modernity wants us to feel and to imagining only what modernity wants us to imagine. And we start thinking that it is all there is to life.

The acknowledgement of our complicity in harm is really important. The socialization we receive within modernity is based on cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998), a form of knowing and knowledge that universalizes itself as the most advanced way of controlling reality—and that eliminates other possibilities, especially Indigenous forms of conscience and Indigenous languages. We all suffer from cognitive imperialism in different ways. For example, although I would like to think I am engaged in the lifelong and life-wide process of decolonization, I often fail. This failure humbles me and reminds me that this process

of figuring out an entangled relationality is not just cognitive, conscious, or intentional; it is not something we can do without humility, generosity, patience, humour or (self) compassion. Neither is this an excuse for indulgence or complacency, which, by the way, I am very often also guilty of. This is not something that will be led by a courageous heroic righteous authority either. What I mean is that decolonization is not something that can be done with arrogance, anger, or moral weapons pointing to the errors of others in denial of how others are part of us as well. As we harm others, we are harming ourselves and we will not be able to figure our way out of this individually or by focusing only on our communities. We need to consider our responsibilities to everyone and everything, because we are not separate. In this sense, there is no purity and *way out* (there is no outside). The only way towards somewhere else is through it, like a buffalo in a storm; with our heads down, but with eyes, hearts, flesh, and dreams wide open, without fear of looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeing what has been maimed, what calls for or offers compassion, what shouts for revenge, what has been turned into a weapon, and what yearns for wholeness, for reconnection.

I have used an image to animate this idea. From the perspective of entangled relationality, we are all part of the same body: humans, non-humans, the elements, the land, the ancestors (those who have been and those who will come again). Colonialism has worked like the (ongoing) severing of an arm; one hand of this body has tried (unsuccessfully) to cut off the arm on the other side, only maiming it. The arm is still hanging in there, all cells of that arm occupied in dealing with the situation of extreme pain. Some cells try to re-attach to the body, other cells try to numb the pain, still other cells are in necrosis trying to cut

themselves off, and others reproducing the cutting against brother-cells in self-hate. You can imagine the scale of the problem. However, the other side of the body is in intense pain too, but it is also in denial, and therefore it numbs very differently, mostly in ways that defend the original severing of the arm. This numbing is based on strategies that justify the severing through the affirmation of self-importance, merit, superiority, benevolence, and exceptionalism, which validates a perceived entitlement to ownership, individualism, security, judgment, authority, and control.

Likewise, authors Duran, Duran, and Yellow Horse-Davis (1998) use the *soul wound* as a metaphor for the historical trauma I am referring to (see also Duran and Duran, 1995). They say that this wound involves the colonized, the colonizers, and the land itself, and that it can only be healed through a renewal of relationships, through a recognition that the wounding and the pain affects us all, and through an acknowledgement that *numbing* is not *healing*. However, there is a major challenge here for the healing process, because a modern onto-epistemology of individuality and an Indigenous onto-epistemology of entangled relationality have different conceptualizations of pain, healing, well-being, and death (Ahenakew, 2011). Dominant modern ways of knowing have conceptualized pain as an individual problem equated with suffering; healing as the elimination of pain; well-being as the absence of pain; and death as the end of life. Not surprisingly, people socialized into this way of thinking/feeling are afraid of pain as they try to enjoy a pain-free life and avoid death.³ Meanwhile, many Indigenous ways of knowing conceptualize pain as something that is not individualized and that can have many functions; for example, it can be an important messenger, a visitor, a teacher, an offering, or a test. From

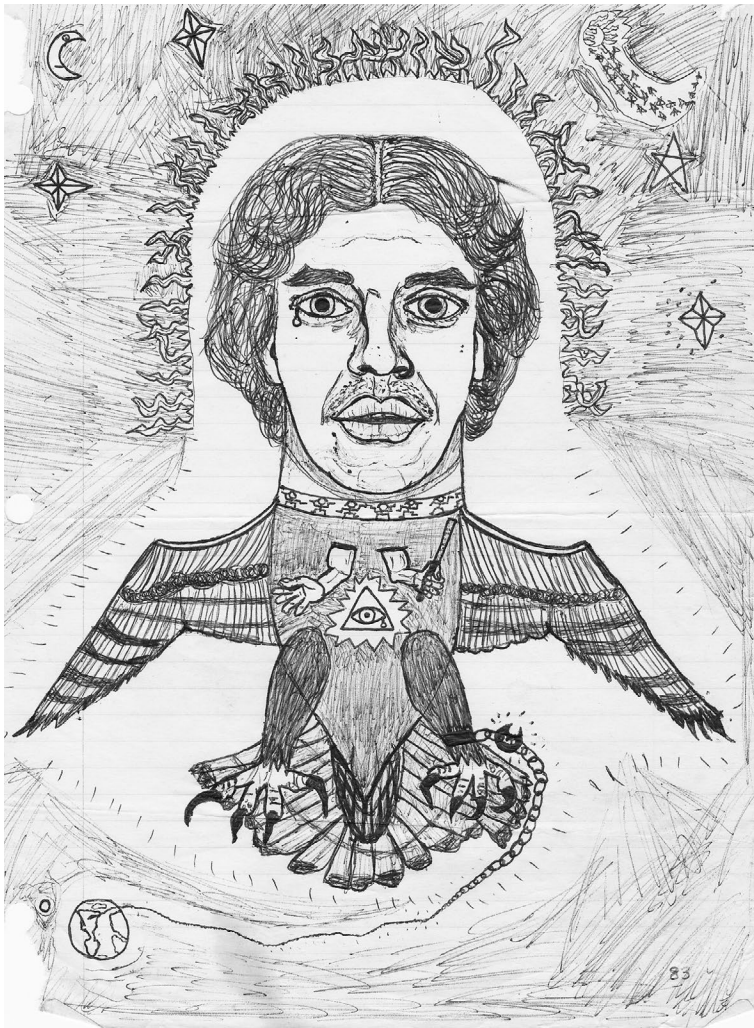


Image 1:
I have had enough, illustration by Cash Ahenakew, age 17

this perspective, well-being does not require the elimination of pain.⁴ Most importantly, suffering is related to turning one's back to the message of the pain (of one's body, of the land, of others) and, therefore, healing requires *un-numbing* and facing the messenger, facing the inevitability of pain, and developing the courage and resilience to have a relationship with it. This does not mean that people enacting this relationship with pain will not accept pain killers—they do—what it means is that they are not haunted by the fear of pain.

I often observe my modern self, the modern part of me, overtaken by cognitive imperialism when it is experiencing chronic pain. This part of me firmly believes in numbing precisely because it sees itself as small, weak, tired, and incapable of withstanding (more) pain. It feels it is going to be overcome by pain. And, if we can sense that we are really inter-related, this part inhabits all of us. But we have other parts too, and what I try to do is listen deeply to those as well. Another side of me wants to stop the pain, to exit this body, to go somewhere else, to return “home” (to leave the body), where there is no pain. The picture I drew at 17 years old, with my braid cut off (see Image 1), when I had experienced a series of traumas and had had some important dreams shattered, represents that part of me in a constant exit narrative: “Let me out of this freaking suffering body and violent colonial place. I have had enough.”

Adversity comes to Indigenous people from the moment we are born into settler colonial societies. Continuous macro- and micro-aggressions from settlers, stereotypes that either romanticize or see Indigenous peoples as deficient, performative expectations, exclusion and promises of inclusion, and recognition created to make settlers feel good about themselves are some

of the things that become normalized for Indigenous people very early in their lives. The pressures most Indigenous people in North America face within communities marked by residential schools and intergenerational trauma make the task of healing practically impossible. Add to the mix the national exceptionalist imaginary of a multicultural, welcoming, and awesome Canada (*How could Canada possibly be racist? We are not like the United States!*) My letter to Canada below entitled “Canada, I’m not that Indian” speaks to the difficulties of navigating layers and layers of complex and violent projections.

Canada, I’m not that Indian

Colonial knowledges, books, and media have created legends out of settlers’ massacres of Indigenous populations. How must it feel to the subjugated, with the death of your heart and the capture of your spirit? From the day Indigenous people are born, we are in pain, as we come into a world of spiritual poverty where the land becomes property to be owned, where the value of one’s life is measured according to one’s racial category and capacity to accumulate, where social institutions celebrate progress, excellence and achievement, as illustrations of merit and moral authority that justify the past and present violence towards all our relations. The same institutions are proud to offer promises of hope and inclusion for Indigenous people through the possibility of jobs, of privilege, of social mobility, of whitening up, of acquiring the intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities that will move you up the ladder. We are offered diversity-focused excellence and achievement awards to celebrate our “success,” and even the possibility of expressing a sharp critique

towards the system, as long as this critique can be packaged for settler consumption and (self)celebration.

From a young age, colonial “Legends” capture our consciousness and we mold ourselves into their white roles. As a child, I wanted to be one of the good guys, who were obviously the cowboys. I half-heartedly cheered as heroic “good” settlers killed “bad” Indians. But there came a point during my teenage years when I realized that every face of authority I had seen was white and I started to question. The next time I saw my face in the mirror I realized that I was the Indian that was being killed in the movies and that I hated that Indian. It felt like being disemboweled, dismembered, and stitched back together as something less-than-human or non-human, and soulless—an illusionary shell created to absorb the forces of colonialism or as collateral damage. I saw in the mirror what I was expected to be to justify the “progress” of colonial violence: a moral monster, a windigo, a cannibal, a drug addict, a homeless bump, an “included” (but undeserving) professor, a failure.

Canada, I'm not that Indian. I won't accept it this time. I will expose the game of your moralist majority that thrives by trying to extinguish the fire of Indigenous being. I will dig deep in the earth to find the embers that will reignite a flame so bright that your people will notice and remove the blindfolds you have placed onto their eyes. They will then be able to face modernity's shadows as well as their own violence, and will see how our wounds are everyone's wounds, so that holistic healing can happen on the land's terms again.

The call that emanates from the land for healing and well-being, if picked up by even a barely functioning vital compass, can be very powerful. In my childhood this compass was kept alive by my loving mother, my sisters, my brothers, and by an extended family that reminded me through words and actions that the land wanted me to exist and that the world, despite all the pain, the cruelty, and the difficulties was still “home”. Therefore, my childhood and youth traumas and wounds, even though they involved poverty and violence, were not as devastating as those many other Indigenous people have experienced. This functioning vital compass set parts of my being in search of ancestral wisdom and traditional practices. These parts yearned for Indigenous ways of being and experiencing reality—experiences of non-linear being, for a steadiness of mind, for an expanding and collectivizing of the heart through ceremony. These parts of me wanted to surrender to the land and to welcome and hold sacred pain. I started using these practices as a form of neuro-decolonization. Voluntary pain is often necessary to remind us that, when connected, our (human and non-human) hearts are much larger than the pain we feel or have inflicted on others. This is represented in the second illustration (see Image 2, page 46), “Entangled Relatedness”, which reveals the sense of entangled being that is possible when one is immersed in a vision. I received this image as a vision in a ceremony during the fourth year of my initiation.

Indigenous pain and trauma impact not only the biological, physical, mental, social, or emotional domains of our being but also the spiritual one. The consideration of the spiritual domain is what is distinctive about Indigenous world views and experiences of sacred pain, healing, and well-being. However, I would

like to argue here that what I call the spiritual is also reflected in our neurobiology—it is not an abstract concept. Despite its colonial origins and biases, neuroscientific research shows, for example, that people who meditate for long periods of time and achieve different states of consciousness present physical changes in their neurochemistry, neuro-functionality, and even in their neuroplasticity.⁵ In this sense, when we are talking about ways of being and experiencing reality, ourselves in/as the world, we are not talking about an intellectual choice of relationship, but about a different neurobiological configuration that opens up different possibilities of being affected and interpolated by everything around us—not just in abstract ways, but physically (and also spiritually). We are also talking about neurobiological capacities that are enabled or shut down by these affectabilities. In addition, if we are indeed entangled, and if this entanglement means we are a collective body, this neurobiological capacity extends beyond individual bodies. This is the perspective many traditional healers work from when they are scanning and transforming dis-ease; they access the layer/field where we work as a collective neurobiology, a collective metabolism. In this sense, we are *in* each other. From this layer/field we can strive for balance in order to offer more balance back to the metabolism we are part of. However, we cannot achieve so-called purity (see also Shotwell, 2016); we cannot separate ourselves completely from the “bad” side, we need to treat the body as whole, including the good and the bad, the ugly and the broken. There is no good team versus bad team—there is one team, one body that is sick and self-harming.

Chapter 3

The Sun Dance as a Space for Experiential Learning



The Sun Dance ceremony and the sacred arbour space create a context that can take dancers, supporters, and visitors beyond the usual sensing and sense-making that modernity offers, based on the normalization of linear time and rational thought. During ceremony, human and non-human relations as well as living relatives and ancestors (who are those who have come before and are still to come) remind everyone to focus all attention and energy on recalibrating our vital compass (in prayer). Those who are dancing in the arbour space offer the only thing they really own; their time in the body they inhabit, the body's flesh, and sacred pain for the healing of their being and the healing and well-being of all relations. Through the fulfillment of their vows and pledges (i.e. abstinence of food and water, and flesh offerings), dancers engage in the renewal of what some would call the soul. A Sun Dance elder shared a useful distinction with me once that really spoke and gave

direction to my vital compass. However, before I tell the story it is important to say something about Indigenous story-ing: Since the land includes the cosmos, the earth, our bodies, our songs, and our words, all living entities that are unknowable in their essence, the relationship between language and knowledge—and our relationship to language and knowledge—is different from the relationships we are used to within modernity.

Within modernity (but not exclusively) we have the desire to index reality in and through language by creating unequivocal (objective), totalizing (all-encompassing) and cumulative knowledge that will enable us to advance in linear time towards a specific idea of linear progress. However, if time is multi-layered and non-linear and reality is (ultimately) unfathomable, knowledge is useful but always equivocal (see Andreotti, Ahenakew, Cooper, 2012). Here, knowledge becomes another entangled entity that has the power to move things (including us) but that is ultimately both (at the same time) a human construct and a non-human entity. If people approach Elders with the desire for a kind of knowledge that replaces the knowledge they have rejected within modernity, they will be either very disappointed or they will have to project and idealize a lot in order to put what they receive into the boxes they came with. Elders play with you, they test you, they ramble, they throw in inappropriate jokes, they make fun of you, they make fun of themselves—and you often will not get the joke. And sometimes they will give you something that may serve as a magnet for your compass and, if you let it happen, it will guide you towards deeper learning, often accompanied by trickster-teacher traps.

This is what happened with the Elder story I was mentioning before. This elder told me about humans carrying two souls,

one from the Creator and another from Mother Earth. This really sparked many questions in me since I was already thinking about “the soul wound” (of Duran & Duran, 1995); now I had two souls to think about. I wondered if the souls could get hurt. I wondered what happened to the souls if they both got wounded. I wondered if the souls could heal each other. The distinction between the two souls opened up different directions for my spiritual practice. I started to call upon the two souls and to ask for them to jointly heal the wounds in the multi-layered land. Using these constructs/entities I realized that healing happened in the entanglement of both. I started to see the earth/land as (bounded/enfleshed) breath and the Sun/Creator/land as (free/immaterial) spirit. I felt that the sacred ceremonial pain facilitated this reunion and brought a spark of healing force that emanated beyond individual bodies.

This also resonates with Jefferson (2009), who states that the breath soul (material realm) manifests in this way: “[it is] the force that keeps the body alive. The term is associated with the concept of ‘soul loss.’ Soul loss generally presupposes a belief in at least two independent soul systems: the body soul and the free soul. The *body soul* animates the breath while the *free soul* travels to the spirit worlds, land of the dead, or other supernatural realms” (Jefferson, 2009, p. 84). *Soul loss* represents the breath or earth soul becoming polluted or contaminated through consumption patterns or pollutants, clogging pores and pipes in a way that makes it impossible for the free/Creator soul to enter. Through ceremony, the *free soul* is called back to help unclog the pipes and pores and heal the wounds of the breath soul. Image 2 (on page 46) speaks to the simultaneous unclogging of several pores and pipes for the reunion of breath and fire and the

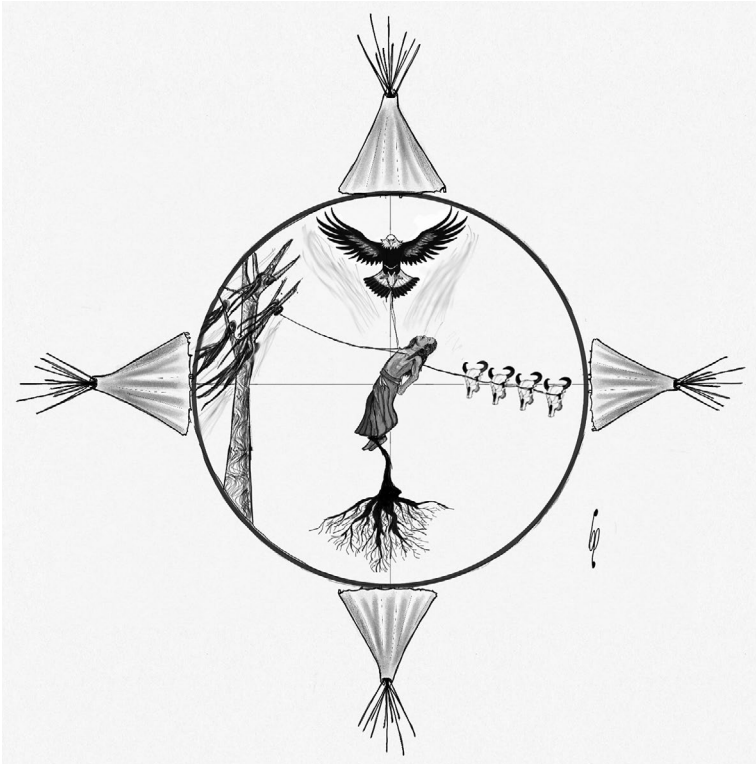


Image 2:
***Entangled Relatedness*, illustration by Benicio Pitaguary and
Cash Ahenakew, 2019**

encounter of the medicines of the four directions during the Sun Dance.

For this reunion to take place, we need to do our part—and here is where most people struggle because the sense of individuality and separation (which depends on having our pores and pipes clogged) gives us a sense of autonomy, authority, certainty,

safety, control, and entitlement. It makes us feel separate, secure, and magnanimous on top of a huge pile of un-composted individual and collective “shit”. We are compelled to do anything to prevent people from seeing this hidden mountain of waste. However, the smell emanating from it compels us to spend energy seeking validation and affirmation from other people: “please, tell me you cannot see any pile of shit.” We use up a lot of energy (of our own and others’) to hide the shit, when this energy could be used for the long, slow process of composting, of breaking down dead matter and transforming it into fertile soil from which new life can emerge. This is not something that you do by thinking or talking about it—and actually when you think you are doing it, especially when you are convinced or try to convince others that you are, this is a sign that, most probably, you are not.

At the Natosi Okhan Sun Dance we are told that the process itself (which I call composting) is extremely difficult as it involves the renunciation of many things including alcohol, drugs, and sometimes sexual activity. The most difficult renunciation, however, is the renunciation of emotional addictions, grudges, and attachments, as well as the release of trauma, of anger, of unhelpful narratives, of perceived entitlements and trauma compensations, of self-deceiving self-images, and the dissolution of “egos”. We are also told that the process is between ourselves and the Great Spirit or Creator, not between us and the community. If the process is too much and someone quits, there is no shame involved because the accountability in that space is not between human beings. We all know the dance can be extremely hard—we have all been there on the edge of quitting, or over the edge, and have discovered that the failure to complete the

task was part of a process of humbling that is very different from humiliation.

Surrendering existentially to the unfathomable metabolism of the land without collapsing involves learning to be at peace with cycles of life and death, with light and shadow, with unknowability, and with the integrity and sacredness of collective and individual bodies and life forces that are beyond our control. Reaching this point manifests as release, and as availability and readiness for service to the land without projections. The moment you cross that threshold, even if it is only for a second, you find the emptiness you were afraid of, the emptiness that you thought would confirm that you are worthless and that everything is pointless and meaningless. And it is precisely in that emptiness that you find your intrinsic worth. There you were, thinking that if you found your self-worth it would be something tangible and articulable about the purpose of your life and about how special you are. Instead, you are surprised by the revelation of *being nothing*—at the same time as *being everything*, just like that. The second surprise is often a type of freedom-as-responsibility that makes you accountable for everything, infinitely. From there, you are recruited to be *in-service* for life; no weekends, no holidays, no working on your own terms. It is unwaged labour; you only get exactly what you need to perform your job—no luxurious privileges. The only perk is a really comprehensive spiritual health package, which includes regular access to purging spas.

Natosi Okhan is the only Sun Dance society in the region that accepts pledges from non-Indigenous people who do not have long-standing connections with the community and this is highly controversial within the community itself and beyond. This Sun

Dance started around 20 years ago when Keith Chiefmoon, who was a Sun Dancer with another community, decided to give life to a sacred dream where people from the four directions arrived on his family land to dance. In the dream the dancers were very clueless, even to the point of asking inappropriate questions. Keith was told to treat them with utmost respect because their spirits had been called by the land and by all our ancestors to be there to dance in order to heal all relations. Keith was told, and tells us often, that the sun shines the same on everyone—from the tallest mountain to the thistle on the Sun Dance grounds (which are abundant); the sun does not differentiate, and neither should he/we.

Keith is often questioned by members of his community about his choice to allow non-Indigenous people to dance. He is reminded that non-Indigenous people will arrive, and in five minutes they will be telling Indigenous people how to run the ceremony (I have seen this pattern often, by the way). Keith's reply is that he understands the political need to protect Indigenous knowledge and culture from appropriation and instrumentalization, but that on those sacred grounds, during that ceremony, spirituality trumps politics. This is a powerful lesson that I carry with me. On the other hand, outside those grounds it is difficult not to be triggered by people consuming Indigenous knowledge or using it as a currency. Many non-Indigenous people abuse the generosity that is found in Keith's statement (and in many Indigenous communities) as a license to feel entitled to take and use whatever they want regardless of the consequences it may have for Indigenous peoples and for the integrity of the knowledges and medicines they receive. This has been described to me by an elder as a paradox that happens

between communities used to a culture of *giving* meeting those coming from cultures of *taking*.

Non-Indigenous people often ask me what the right thing to do is in this situation. Some people feel entitled to consume Indigenous cultures as a birthright and want me to validate that right. Other people want me to tell them that it is wrong to engage with any Indigenous knowledges so that they can say, "I am not a person that does that kind of thing," and feel virtuous and righteous. Both positions are obviously looking for a formula that is impossible. I reply that the "right thing" is to be open to being criticized for any choice you make because you are on moving ground, and different Indigenous people will have different understandings of "the right thing to do." Looking for a position of so-called purity from which you will not be criticized is futile. At the Sun Dance, we are taught that non-Indigenous people need healing as well, and if they cannot find the medicine in their own culture (which is existentially poor), they need help, otherwise their dis-ease spreads and continues to cause destruction. Taking this into account, I tell people that if they have been offered access to ceremonies, stories, or medicines by Indigenous knowledge-holders, they should do five not-so-easy things:

1. Receive the gifts with humility and gratitude and without a sense of entitlement. Stop yourself from trying to "get the most out of the experience", which is an extractive disposition. Instead, honour the gifts and the gift givers with acts of reciprocity that are appropriate to the context of the community. Learn what is appropriate by investing time in the relationship.

2. Do not use what you have received for self-promotion or personal “capital” gain in terms of status, virtue, morality, righteousness, legitimacy, credibility, or social mobility. Do not instrumentalize these gifts or add them to your personal brand. Learn what is appropriate to do with what you have received by investing even more time in the relationship. Do your homework. Remember that it takes a lifetime for Indigenous people to learn and practice Indigenous sensibilities and that Indigenous Elders, after several decades of study and practice, say they do not know a lot. If you are starting now, even if you have Indigenous heritage and have started to reconnect with it, you are just at the beginning of a long journey. You are most likely coming to this with colonial desires for ownership and mastery (learned from modernity) that need to be problematized and interrupted as you learn to engage ethically with the gifts you are being offered.

3. Be open, with self-compassion and humour, to the difficulties ahead on the long path of losing the arrogance inherited from modernity that is lodged in every cell of the body. Pay attention to how, even though you may say you are open, humble, and “cool”, the arrogance keeps coming back when Indigenous people refuse to cooperate and/or when you do not have your desires and expectations met. Learn not to centre yourself and not to assume that Indigenous people are there to serve your needs; Indigenous people have a lot to do and they were not born to serve you or to teach you—seeing oneself as cute and pathetic helps a lot here.⁶

4. Learn how you are reading and how you are being read. It is your responsibility to be informed about the different forms of violence that colonialism deployed to occupy Indigenous lands and subjugate Indigenous people, including different practices of extraction: of children, of dignity, of sacred objects, of medicines, of knowledge, of songs, of artistic insight, etc. This historical trauma creates many layers of complexity. For example, on the one hand, many Indigenous people still do not have access to their own stolen practices and they may feel legitimately resentful that a non-Indigenous person has the opportunity to access it first. Many who have been made to feel ashamed of these practices may not want you or others to keep them alive. Some may be concerned that, having only glimpsed the practices (even after decades of engagement), you will think you know a lot and deploy them in ways that are inappropriate, disrespectful, or even dangerous to yourself and to others. On the other hand, many other Indigenous people could be very happy to share and even feel offended if you refuse to participate or to take this knowledge back into your own context. It is complex and complicated. Develop the stamina to sit with paradoxes and complexities and to respond with kindness and humility every time you encounter any of these layers and when you receive a push back.

5. Learn not to weaponize the gifts you receive. At some point, you may be told that *we are all one*. And maybe on the same day, you will be told by the same people or by different people that we are divided by our experiences of history, trauma, and privilege. Each statement speaks to one of many different

layers that need to be addressed in respectful engagements. For example, at our Sun Dance we are asked to prioritize the access of Indigenous people, especially Indigenous people from the hosting community, to learning opportunities about sacred practices. This is extremely important in order to keep the practices alive and held by the communities themselves. When non-Indigenous people are asked to give up their place (at the drum circle with limited seats, for example) for an Indigenous person, unfortunately we still hear, "Aren't we all one?" as a response. This is an example of the community's own generosity being weaponized against itself.

If at this point you are saying, "This is too much!" try observing where this frustration comes from and examine how your desires may be connected with colonial entitlements that often cause further harm to Indigenous communities. Respectful engagement requires us all, but particularly non-Indigenous people who are not used to this, to put our perceived entitlements aside and to do what is needed rather than what we want to do.

When we bring students and volunteers to witness and support the Sun Dance, we explain that the pedagogy on the Sun Dance grounds involves presence, resonance, release, and balance.⁷ Presence is about interrupting our training in intellectualizations, especially the intellectualization of the land itself. This involves observing our minds, mechanically obsessed with analyzing everything, and letting that go to make space for relationships mediated by other senses. Resonance is about moving with the drum beat of the micro-metabolism created around and through the ceremony. We are often told, *when it gets hard*,

dance harder. This means that we should all participate in any activity related to the ceremony, including sage picking, cooking, or cleaning toilets, with full attention, intention, and rhythm. Release is about the unclogging process. We share techniques where people are trained to release stress, anxiety, insecurities,

- **Observe how you are reading and being read.**
- **Do what is needed rather than what you want to do.**
- **Practice reverence without idealization/romanticization.**
- **Believe with, rather than believe in.**
- **Interrupt patterns of self-infantilization.**

and trauma without wrapping the catharsis with a blanket of interpretation—without creating a story about our emotions. Balance is about learning to surrender without collapse, to be compassionate without paternalism, to experience humility without humiliation, to practice generosity without a sense of martyrdom, to show up in service without righteousness or expectations of gratitude or reward, and to learn to integrate this learning in all aspects of life during and after the ceremony.

We also instruct people to practice “reverence without idealization” and to “believe with” rather than “believe in” so that they can access a form of relationality that does not require codifications or romanticizations as a social glue. At the end of the day, the purpose is for us all to step up and grow up, together.

Chapter 4

The Challenges of Individual and Collective Trauma Transformation



It is easier to continue to justify the necessity of cutting ties and the denial of relationships. It is much easier to be responsible only for my individuated self. Forgiveness from the land is, for the modern self, a humbling, decentring, disarming, and

demanding experience that reignites the numbed senses and calls for an infinite responsibility for everything past, present, and future. This visceral responsibility collapses the modern self's entitlement to individuality, identity, ownership, knowledge, and unrestricted autonomy. In this responsibility, freedom is (existential) responsibility itself, not individual, collective, or intellectual choice. Political commitments rooted in this kind of responsibility cannot be based on substantial claims to citizenship, economic prosperity, representation, recognition, redistribution—or even sovereignty. On the other hand, this existential responsibility does not preclude the use of these concepts strategically, when they are necessary to alleviate the effects of the shadow that

has fallen upon all of us, unevenly (disproportionately affecting Indigenous peoples). However, ultimately, strategies that increase the shine cannot address the cause of the shadow; the more we walk towards the “shine,” the bigger our shadow is. Therefore, when we use the shine of modernity strategically, the existential responsibility that we viscerally feel may prevent us from investing in (or enjoying) the shine as “the endgame,” which can be frustrating for the modern self within us.

The imposed desire for the shine of modernity has happened through enforced separations: residential schools, displacements, dispossessions, forced family separations, segregations, reservations, setting one community against the other, dividing communities internally. The result is that we are placed against the wall; we either become useful to the capitalist system by agreeing to walk towards the shine of modernity, or we are left in the shadow paying the costs of modernity’s allure, being ruled and watched by an authoritarian government and, to top it off, being perceived as the problem, as an obstacle to progress and development, an obstacle that needs to be “helped” or eliminated altogether (Walter & Andersen, 2013). In this paradigm, the worth of life is defined by market exchange-value. We become “human capital;” our culture becomes capital, our relations become capital, and even our struggles are fought according to moral *capital* (e.g., a competition about who has been wronged the most). This choice of existence is extremely limited and cruel. No wonder our kids are opting out.

The metaphysics of separability turns (all of) us into objects. It is important to remember how this trauma works through history, first by turning the land and other non-human beings into property, then by turning certain people into property, and

then by turning everyone into “human capital” or *homo-economicus* for exchange-value markets, as Dwayne Donald asserts. This is important insofar as this language has increasingly dominated discussions about Indigenous studies and struggles recently. There will come a time very soon when Western institutions will only remain open to Indigenous people who buy into the game of affluence within capitalist societies. Before universities were affected by state-driven neoliberal agendas, the university’s civic mandate (although not necessarily benevolent) allowed for Indigenous people to assert their claims for identity and sovereignty based on recognition and human rights, which in turn allowed more room for alternative ways of knowing/being and resistances to be expressed. Nowadays, the discussion is dominated by a neoliberal framework where the slogan of “access and partnership” implies the market as a consensual “forward.” In this context, the claims of Indigenous peoples are only heard through the language of (territorial) property, (business) development, and prosperity (as social mobility) (Ahenakew et al., 2014). On the other hand, Indigenous knowledges and practices are also packaged for non-Indigenous consumption in different niche markets according to what is palatable and what people are willing to pay for. In both cases, if you are not capital, *you are not*.

The recent efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada are also often translated into neoliberal and liberal institutional spaces as efforts of inclusion into colonial landscapes that can, at best, accommodate (non-threatening) “diversity,” but are definitely not interested in interrupting business as usual. From this perspective healing and pain are to be managed by “reckoning over past wrongs, targeted therapeutic interventions, and financial reparations” (Maxwell, 2017,

p. 978). This perspective frames pain—and trauma in particular—as an individualized problem with biological and behavioural manifestations, distracting attention away from the systemic and prevailing injustices that continue to enforce it. In this context, for settlers, reconciliation becomes a risk-management exercise, making reconciliation an impossible task for Indigenous people, as the poem “Reconciling with/in Colonialism: Five-Step Checklist” collectively-authored by the *Towards Decolonial Futures Collective* illustrates.⁸

Reconciling with/in Colonialism: Five-Step Checklist

Usual expectations of non-Indigenous people (what they are celebrated for doing)

1. Be outraged when you realize that you have not been told the whole story
2. Feel sorry for the communities affected and for yourself
3. Invite survivors into your space to tell their stories so that you can feel better
4. Cry and hug a survivor, expect them to hug back and become your friend, say you are sorry and give the survivors an apology gift, promise that their stories won't be forgotten
5. Move on towards a “better world together:” keep doing what you were doing before the apology, after all you are a good person, you have Indigenous friends, and you were not the one who committed the atrocities. You cannot be punished for what other people did.

Practical reality of what Indigenous people are expected to do (what they are punished for not doing):

Before the reconciliation event:

1. Survive expropriation, destitution, dispossession, and genocide
2. Survive the effects of intergenerational trauma
3. Survive ongoing discrimination and racism in the media, schools, and all other modern institutions
4. Survive internalized colonialism
5. Survive the pressure to be deeply ashamed of where you came from
6. Create filters: learn to navigate the expectations of a system created on the broken back of your people
7. Create filters: learn to speak, dress, eat, read, write, and behave like the dominant population in order to be accepted in the mainstream system
8. Create filters: learn to show that you can meet the expectations of those who “helped” or “included” you, including the need not to bite the hand that fed you
9. Create filters: learn to show that you can protect people in the dominant culture from feeling bad, otherwise you will be replaced by someone who can
10. Create filters: learn to protect yourself—never show yourself as you are in public: don’t roll your eyes, hide when you are angry, don’t be noisy, don’t occupy much space and find and memorize a fixed version of your story that is intelligible and palatable for the mainstream system.

During the reconciliation event:

1. Recount personal stories about the colonial trauma in your family in ways that are palatable (not too angry or too sad),

and that induce empathy in non-Indigenous people, but never guilt, shame, or discomfort

2. Ensure that you aren't seen to be exaggerating or speaking too emotionally or too critically about the racism and colonial violence that you endure on a daily basis
3. Offer to share (and translate) Indigenous wisdom in ways that it feels accessible to all
4. Listen to non-Indigenous people recount/confess their surprise, their disgust, their guilt
5. Hold space for non-Indigenous peoples' tears graciously, receive their apologies gratefully, and accept their hugs willingly
6. Ignore insensitive and just plain racist comments by non-Indigenous peoples
7. Assume that everyone there has good intentions, that they mean what they say, and that they will follow through on stated commitments
8. Assure people that you know there are lots of "good" non-Indigenous people, that you don't hate them all
9. State that you are willing to forgive and that your primary desire is for restoring good relations, rather than revenge, redress, or the return of stolen lands
10. Demonstrate that you are concerned about the injustices suffered by all marginalized peoples, i.e. that you are not "too narrowly focused" on Indigenous issues.

After the reconciliation event:

1. Agree that justice has been served, and that it is time to “move on”
2. Do not dwell on the past, demand further action, or follow up with people on their stated commitments.

Today's historical trauma is added to historical, intergenerationally transmitted trauma, both reproducing dismemberment. This pain of dismemberment manifests on the Indigenous side as embodied practices of self-hate, disconnection, numbing, and “checking out.” On the settler side, it also manifests through different forms of numbing, including overconsumption. Both sides, however, are trying to respond in ineffective ways to the original pain of the soul wound. Jacqui Alexander (2005) offers useful insights related to our yearning for wholeness. She states:

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, there is a yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert, and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment. (p. 281)

This yearning for wholeness is not about individual wholeness, but about collective wholeness (including the land). Alexander explains that when this yearning is mobilized through modern categories of belonging that over-code identities and promote further separations, it again reproduces dismemberment, creating more pain and emptiness and leading eventually to self-harming practices as a form of withdrawal from the world.

In this context, healing becomes complicated because this wholeness simply cannot be achieved through ways of knowing and being based on separability. Separability is what grounds biomedical science and practice today. This separability often prescribes more trauma as a treatment for trauma.

Chapter 5

The Potential for Individual and Collective Trauma Transformation



A psychiatrist asked a teenage girl why she was engaging in the “irrational” behaviour of hurting herself. She told the doctor that the pain she felt was like a phantom-limb pain; it was happening, but she could not identify why or how. The

doctor could not understand her because what she was saying did not fit his medical and cognitive frameworks. She had all her limbs, she had a home, she was smart, she had a bright future ahead of her—she could not possibly suffer from phantom-limb pain. His job was to make the pain disappear quickly and cost-effectively so that she could again be functional at school, eventually find a job, make money, pay her taxes, and not be a burden on society. Numbing her, by making her brain dependent on the drug industry to forget this pain, was the only possible treatment.

Her mum took a different approach. She immersed the girl in contexts of entangled relationality and supported her to develop

the language to talk about the pain as real and important, as a call for profound changes in the world. Drawing on ancestral knowledge, she offered the girl ways of healing that, rather than affirming the boundaries of her individuality, expanded her sense of being through ego-dissolution, showing her that relationality indeed involves pain and responsibility (which might be perceived as scary), but it also involves sources of joy and connection much more existentially satisfying than what is achieved by the false promises of happiness through consumption, status, so-called achievement, and competition that the mainstream society has on offer.

Can a different relationship with pain offer us a different horizon for the transformation of trauma? I will use another story to address this question. A number of years ago I had a feeling of emptiness inside of me. It was like a feeling of hunger located in my chest, between my heart and my stomach. I could not recognize who this visitor was—its presence had not been felt for many years. How could this be? I have walked with the spirit of depression, who is a good teacher (sometimes he is just depressing), and this is the place where this spirit usually resided, but this was different.⁹ In depression the feeling was the feeling of emptiness—but this time it was anger. Someone I loved had done something to me that made me really angry and jealous. The anger and the jealousy occupied that space in my chest. And I tried to walk it off. I walked miles and miles, fuming, but I could not get it out of me. It reminded me of my youth, when once in a while the spirit of jealousy would visit me and I would become angry. Then I went home, smudged to purify myself and smoked the pipe, and I realized what a powerful medicine the pipe and the smoke were. The smoke filled that space and shrunk those

entities inside of me. I could acknowledge they were still there, but they did not have as much influence over me as we formed a renewed relationship.

If you are overcome by these entities, it becomes a power struggle; you either try to repress them (and they come back stronger whenever they can) or you allow them to rule your behaviour (and let them wreak havoc in your life and the lives of your loved ones). Our ancestral knowledge shows we cannot deal with them on our own because we are not separated—we are insufficient, not self-sufficient or autonomous. We need the help of the elements, of the spirits, of the land, of the ancestors, of the Elders, of the animals, of the trees, to reconcile with these different energies within us.

The ceremonies, like smoking the pipe, invoke the sacredness of pain, the sacredness of life, and the sacredness of relations. This is a visceral sense that cannot be reproduced by thinking alone. It does not require thinking. It does not demand any belief or convictions; therefore, it does not fit the modern self's cognitive frameworks. And as you temporarily (intellectually) surrender your intellect in order to invite the elements to mediate the relationships between you and the entities visiting you, you revitalize your relationship with all relations. This revitalization is an entry-point into the long and winding road of collective healing of the soul wound. On this road, we start relating differently to all life by recognizing the world, the whole spectrum of emotions, relations, entities, and possibilities for healing and for violence, right here, within ourselves; wounded and self-harming, but undivided. That is where decolonization starts—and it never finishes.

Reading about sacred pain has helped me to continue on this road. The idea of the sacred pain has been around for time

immemorial and has been rearticulated at different times, in many different cultures, including pockets of the Western cultures. Glucklich's (2001) work explores sacred pain from a psychological-neurological perspective in order to understand the place of suffering in contemporary religious and sacred practices like the Sun Dance. Glucklich states that suffering is not a physical sensation, but an emotional and evaluative reaction to any number of causes, some entirely absent of physical pain, such as grief (i.e. grief can involve the absence of physical pain). He asserts that "pain can be the solution to suffering, a psychological analgesic [pain killer] that removes anxiety, guilt, and even depression" (p.11). He argues that there is a difference between "the unwanted pain of a cancer patient or victim of a car crash, and the voluntary self-hurting [which produces] cognitive-emotional changes, that affect the identity of the individual subject and her sense of belonging to a larger community or to a more fundamental state of being" (p. 6).

Additionally, according to Glucklich the goal of sacred pain is "to transform the pain that causes suffering into a pain that leads to insight, meaning, and even salvation" to which I would add self-empowerment. The participant emerges feeling stronger, lifted out of a sense of isolation and alienation to a closer relationship with the community (as cited in Owen, 2013, p. 132) and, I would add, the land itself, the ancestors, and the spirits. Although Glucklich describes the Sun Dance as "a sacrificial performance, for the good of others, for the purification of one's own community, and for the improvement of the world" (p. 140), he does not take sufficient account of the Indigenous relationship of circular reciprocity between human and non-human realms. In this sense, pain is offered as a gift for healing for

the community, not as an exchange, but as part of the circular reciprocity cycle (the gift does not come individually, but through communal means). The de-linking of pain from suffering that happens in the ceremony through the practice of voluntary pain already changes one's cognitive and emotional relationship with it. Offering pain as a gift to the community is about renewal of the whole cycle of life.

When I reflect on my own experience of renunciation of food and water, of the sacred pain of thirst and hunger, of fasting for four days, of the process of ego-logical physical cravings met with deprivation, and of the flesh offerings gifted to Spirit, I wonder why I feel compelled to describe it as agony when, in reality, during the ceremony these processes are experienced differently. At the best of times they are experienced as joyful release (a very happy place), sometimes as sacrifice, other times, when ego is on overdrive, as plain suffering or childish whining. We have little control over these spiritual/neurochemical responses from our nervous system and, when things get hard, we are told to keep trying, not to quit, and to dance harder. One purpose of the ceremony is to allow you to release your heaviness. If you are holding on to your heaviness (e.g., if you are using it to define your identity), you may find it difficult to release. If you are denying your heaviness (e.g. convincing yourself you are OK when there is work to be done—and there always is work to be done), you will be asked to face what you are repressing or negating, to feel it fully, and then to release it.

There is no easy way, and pain and breakdown are inevitable and necessary for us to realize we are not what we have pictured as our self-images, we are not the boundaries of our individualized selves, we are not human capital to be accumu-

lated by a Nation state, neither are we the individual heroes who will depose capitalism or modernity or avenge the people who have been oppressed. We are land and this comes with immense responsibilities, but not heroic glamour (the real work to be done looks more like unclogging stinky public toilets). Once the responsibility is re-activated, our connection with Spirit and with human and non-human relatives and ancestors is renewed and we access a collective metabolic intelligence, a collective vitality and a “bio-internet” (see decolonialfutures.net). This neuro-genesis is a form of neuro-decolonization. I acknowledge that this term has been used before with a different meaning by Yellow Bird (2012).¹⁰ We have become attached to a very small idea of who we are as separate beings, which breeds insecurities and a fear of the unpredictable responsibility of re-sensing our connections and re-activating a visceral sense of accountability—and this is, perhaps, our greatest challenge for the future of the planet.

What if we could practice sacred pain as a form of reconciliation on the land's terms and as a way of scarring the soul wound? How could sacred pain transform our experiences of physical pain, mental suffering, spiritual wounding and collective self-harm? How could these experiences help us to unclog pipes and pores and reignite cycles of reciprocity? What if we could realize the healing power lodged in our entangled relatedness? Finally, how might the above remind us of our responsibility within cycles of renewal and continuity, of life and death?¹¹

We do believe in the life after death. The many deities and spirits come from that belief. We return in the form of animals, trees, birds, spirits, and other forms. We are part of the whole.

We are the whole. We are a part of the spirit world now. We will be a part of it in the future. We have always been a part of it ... all things are one, and all life is one in one circle of time. (Paiute Medicine Man; Toombs 1991, as cited in Mills & Slobodin, 2013, p. 3)

Conclusion

Ethical and Responsible Engagements



A few months ago, we received a Quechua research collaborator as a visitor at my university and her words were very similar to the final quote in the previous chapter. After she left the meeting room a settler colleague was heard ridiculing her and passing his judgment in response to what she shared, calling it “new age bullshit.” I thought a lot about that response, which, I am sure, in the context of my university, could also be shared by many other people, even by people who identify as Indigenous, but not by everyone. Part of me regretted not being there to defend my friend. Another colleague felt like saying, “if it’s a choice between new age bullshit and colonial bullshit, give me new age bullshit anytime.” Part of me wanted to reach out to him to explain that this is not “new” age; it is very old, much older than his way of being based on separability, and that even *his science* was *proving* that it was most likely accurate (see for example Barad 2003; 2006). Part of me was really

exhausted by the emotional labour involved in always having to explain everything to people who cannot listen.

Another part of me insisted that I needed to at least clarify that the new age movement actually created a huge problem when people coming from privileged backgrounds instrumentalized, re-packaged and popularized a version of “oneness” that was translated/grafted onto a way of knowing and being based on separability. This was a version of oneness that fit non-Indigenous people’s convenience and desires for beauty, wonder, grandiosity, and individual self-expression without paying any attention to the accountabilities stemming from the fact that we are also entangled and complicit in violence and harm. This is the difference between the oneness proposed by Indigenous Elders coming from ways of being and experiencing reality that express a lived entanglement and those who consume the concept of oneness for comfort, innocence, convenience, and validation, and/or for “spiritual bypassing” of social-political responsibilities. These Indigenous Elders know that oneness shows us that indeed we can exist differently in and as part of an entangled universe, but that first and foremost we need to hear the call and do the difficult work of responsibility and accountability issued by the land/universe itself (already within us).

Practices that uphold oneness require us to look in the mirror, see what is not beautiful, and *not* turn away. They require us to interrupt our satisfaction with hopes and desires that are harmful, even when they look benevolent. They require renunciations of habits that are extremely pleasurable and that make us look and feel good (as we perform for others). They require us to constantly compost our shit and develop the stamina to compost collective shit together. We cannot run away from these

extremely difficult realizations and conversations that we need to have with each other in order to see whether this collective disease and soul wound can be healed and scarred—and whether we can heal and scar together. It is going to be messy, uncertain, complicated, uncomfortable, infuriating sometimes, and we will need to grow up to do it, which is often painful, terrifying and sometimes really boring, but at the same time is also full of unimaginable possibilities for joy, togetherness, and wisdom.

If the task proves to be impossible, and separability condemns the human species to extinction, as it has already done with so many other species, this is still useful. It could help us to learn how to face our collective demise in more generative and less violent ways. This is not about “saving the Earth.” If we go extinct, the Earth will heal and be fine without us. We are the ones preventing the healing because our pores and pipes are blocked. By hurting the land we are hurting ourselves—shutting down our life support system by harming the living entity whose labour is the most invisibilized but who gives us everything that we need to survive for free.

I have been told to remind people that we should not say that we need to reconnect with the land and with each other. We have always been and will always be connected, because we are part of each other, not as separate entities joined together, but “in each other” as we are land (part of the same larger and multi-layered metabolism). What has been severed by modernity is our sense (in a sensorial/ neurobiological way) of entangled relationality, and if we cannot feel it, we cannot viscerally sense our accountability towards everything either. This is my definition of neuro-colonization: the imposed sense of separability that leads us to neglect our fundamental responsibilities. In

modernity, responsibility is always conceptualized as a moral and intellectual choice. It is a choice only made in transactional ways—if it is affectively or materially convenient. Even when people sacrifice themselves for others, they often do it out of an affective investment in the virtues of martyrdom; to be remembered, to leave a legacy, or to stand out. Neuro-colonialism depletes us of intrinsic worth and compels us to seek worth in being *more than* others. It is an economy of worth where you are either +1 or -1.¹² Neuro-decolonization can show us that it is possible and more generative to be zero—neither less nor more than anyone. Life is much bigger than any of us or the temporality of our bodies; instead of aiming to leave an enduring legacy, the point is to leave no footprints (see Jimmy et al., 2019).

Ceremonies of neuro-decolonization that are meant to re-activate the sense of entangled relationality (and interrupt the absolute sense of individuality) work primarily to re-ignite our sense of visceral responsibility for ourselves-in-each-other: for the earth we walk on, for the human and other-than-human relatives, and for the ancestors that have passed and are to come of all relations. This does not mean you *divest* from modernity (by turning your back to it, attempting to destroy it, or trying to exit), but you *dis-invest*; that is, you do not invest in its continuity as you continue to live within it and to open “the possibility of possibilities” for different forms of existence (see also Andreotti et al. 2015).¹³ The “unclogging” (of pipes and pores) that happens in these ceremonies often requires sacred voluntary pain (intellectual, physical, emotional, existential, and/or otherwise). I hope this text, limited as it is, can convey the importance of the process of recalibrating our relationship with pain so that we can develop the stamina to face the difficulties of scarring the soul wound *together*.

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Endnotes

- 1 This is an accurate description of the piercing rituals by Glucklich (2001): “The dancers are pierced in the skin above the pectoral muscles or scapulae where wooden skewers are inserted. These are attached to the thongs leading to the Sun Dance pole. Other skewers may be attached at the back or upper arms and tied to buffalo skulls. The dancers move toward the pole, then run backwards with great force, tearing themselves free” (p. 146).
- 2 The cosmological non-tangible relationships with lands and ancestors are sometimes a challenge to explain, but there are tangible cultural links that make this relationship more present as seen and heard through cultural markers, such as ceremonial processes and relational interactions, rituals, movements, offerings, pipes, sweats, songs, body markings, or scarring. These symbolic features do not require fixed narratives to have a tangible effect on the community.
- 3 It can be argued that the Western onto-metaphysics (ways of being and experiencing reality) has the aim of knowing the world in order to control it and to defeat death. This is based on a deep fear of death that also associates death with pain. George and Jung (2016) describe this as “an inescapable, terrorizing but invaluable instructive pain [that] is the possibility of my absolute impossibility, the impending entry of my existence into nothingness with my death. Unlike most other pains that come and go in a sudden upsurge, death is with us throughout as the definite termination of existence, although indefinite as to when” (p. 8).

- 4 This also resonates with George and Jung's (2016) description of pain as conceptualized through different cultures. They state that "although there is a distinctively personal element and pathos to pain, it is [...] also deeply entrenched with cultural, historical, political, social and symbolic meaning that both situates it in a specific time and place and at the same time removes it from being confined within the boundaries of individual experience" (p. 5).
- 5 For a critical review on the research on mindfulness and meditation see Van Dam et. al. (2018). Conversely, Fenton (2018) examines how trauma also changes the neurobiology of the traumatized subject potentially creating a form of neuroplasticity and a lens that relate to the world only through the experiences/neurochemistry of the traumatic event.
- 6 This is a phrase used often in the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective.
- 7 This pedagogy was developed over the years through a collaboration between Keith Chiefmoon, his partner Karen Russell, Vanessa Andreotti (who is also a Sun Dancer), and myself.
- 8 This poem was written collaboratively with members of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective
- 9 This resonates with Eduardo Duran's description of illness and emotions as living entities who visit your body. He states: "some of our traditions believe that most illnesses, emotions, and such have a spirit to them. Somehow, our spirits attracts these energies when there are things in our life that aren't in harmony ... I think that the spirit of sadness attached itself to our ancestors, and no one has attempted to heal this energy.

Then there's your own personal stuff that attracts this energy, and no wonder you're so sad. The sadness attracts the spirit of fear because you become afraid" (Duran 2006, pp. 84–85).

- 10 Indigenous health scholar Michael Yellow Bird (2012) talks about neuro-decolonization through mindful practices that promote brain plasticity, which is necessary for the healing of colonial trauma. He explains: "Neurodecolonization involves combining mindfulness meditation with traditional and contemporary secular and sacred contemporary practices to replace negative patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour with healthy, productive ones" (p. 298). Pyles (2018) complements Yellow Bird's insights saying that we can "train the mind and change the brain's capacity to heal from the trauma of colonization" (p. 50).
- 11 Jefferson (2009) describes the cycles based on a similar story of two souls: "The free-soul stays with the person throughout his or her lifetime and at death leaves the body either through the mouth or fontanel and begins its journey to the realm of the dead. The deceased retains his consciousness, or ego, in the realm of the dead but loses all carnal desire. In most groups, it is usually the free-soul that is reborn... At death, the life-soul [breath or earth] can wander for a time in the land of the living as a malevolent ghost, but eventually the disincarnate life-soul dissipates and merges with the wind, the clouds, and sometimes the Great Spirit, or it just disappears and is gone forever. Some believe the soul goes to live in the Milky Way. While a person is alive, if the life-soul leaves the body and cannot return the person dies" (p. 55).
- 12 I attribute this insight to Caboclo Sete Flechas and Paje Barbosa.

- 13 In the article “Mapping decolonization in the context of higher education” the authors (myself included) talk about divestment and dis-investment in the context of hospicing modernity and modern institutions.

