

The Ethics of Zaagidwin: Relational Storytelling and Story Listening on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg Territory

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Yo-wah Yuuingan, aanin boozhoo, greetings to readers. This paper was first delivered as a keynote address for the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference in Yugarra Country at the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane. I remain grateful to Gaja Kerry Charlton for the bi-balka Yuggera djarra-na (welcome to Yugarra Country) and acknowledge and express my gratitude to the Elders, knowledge keepers, language stewards, and the youth of that country, for the land and water, the animals, plants, and for the many conference participants who meaningfully responded to the knowledge I shared during those lovely days in Brisbane.¹

1 I want to thank the conference organisers, particularly Elisabeth Gondwe, Joan Kelly, and Alistair Thomson, for inviting me to speak at this conference. It was an honour and privilege to travel to Australia. Seven months have passed since that lovely and warm (for a Canadian) October day in Brisbane and much has changed. Now I acknowledge the fires that had a devastating impact on Country and the global COVID 19 pandemic that has indelibly shifted our contexts of knowledge exchange and the relationships we are able to establish.

I begin with a word about my use of Nishnaabemwin (the Ojibway language). My use of the language follows the conventions of the Nbisiing Nishnaabeg dialect. I am not a language speaker; I work closely with language stewards and language learners. I intentionally refuse italicisation of Indigenous languages because this convention is deployed in publications to indicate foreign languages. Indigenous languages are



Katrina Srigley delivering keynote address at the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference. Photograph courtesy Judy Hughes.

THE ETHICS OF ZAAGIDWIN

This article explores the ethics of zaagidwin (love), an approach to story listening and storytelling that I assert is a meaningful way to practice decolonial and indigenized feminist oral history, particularly when working with histories that have been shared with but do not belong to you. Here I consider zaagidwin as a Nishnaabeg principle that shapes being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and doing (methodology) within historical research.²

As one of the Seven Grandfather Teachings, zaagidwin is a core principle shaping the ability to live a good life, defined as mino bimaadiziwin in Nishnaabeg thought. It

not foreign to their territories and reasserting the normalcy of their relationships to territories and histories is an act of decolonisation. This is different from the position taken by Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* (Toronto: Brush Education, 2018), who asserts that italicisation emphasises the importance of Indigenous languages. Gchi-miigwech/thank you to those who reviewed the article for publication, including Glenna Beaucage, Joan McLeod, Elder John Sawyer, Deputy Chief Muriel Sawyer, Skye Krichauff, and Carla Pascoe Leahy, for their generous and helpful feedback. All omissions and errors are my own.

- 2 While a discussion of the definitions and action of love in the Hebrew/Greek/Christian tradition or the overuse and oversimplification of love in some of our contemporary contexts is beyond the scope of this article, I want to thank my colleague and friend the Reverend Dr Derek Neal for encouraging me to think about the complexities of love as eros, agape, or philia and, in the spirit of this article, their divergences and synergies with the ethics of zaagidwin.

embodies a love for and acceptance of self and all of your relations, which encompasses kin in the natural and spiritual world in a non-hierarchical way: human, animal, and plant, as well as the land and waterways. To understand zaagidwin is to consider its relationship with the other Seven Grandfather teachings — debwewin (truth), dbaadendiziwin (humility), gwekwaadziwin (honesty), mnaadendmowin (respect) and aakwa' ode'ewin (bravery) — and we find mino bimaadiziwin (the good life) when we recognize, understand, and practice these interrelationships to the best of our abilities.³

As such, zaagidwin and other Seven Grandfather teachings also guide good action, including an unconditional giving and accepting of zaagidwin. As an ethical research framework, this process is deeply relational. It requires practitioners to position themselves in relation to spirit, territory, knowledges and people in order to meaningfully learn from stories of the past. It is non-hierarchical and circular, requiring humility (even as you reflect on your own ways of knowing and your learning journey) and, as Nishnaabeg thinkers explain, an open heart. It is dynamic, as relationships are established and re-established as contexts change. It involves the present, including readers or listeners, the past, and the future in its engagement with the histories of, in this case, Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory.⁴

3 Gchi-miigwech to Glenna Beaucage, Peter Beaucage, Terry Dokis, and John Sawyers for teaching me about the Seven Grandfather Teachings. See: Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). For circular and visual representations of the Seven Grandfather Teachings I encourage readers to explore the many beautiful versions available online from Indigenous organizations worldwide and artists such as Chief Lady Bird and Monique Aura. For more on the impact of love in action related to, for example, the self, community, research, knowledge, land and law see: John Borrows, 'Indigenous Love, Law and Land in Canada's Constitution', in Arthur Schfar and Steven Lecce (eds), *Fragile Freedoms: Human Rights in Global Context* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Islands of Decolonial Love Stories and Songs (Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books, 2015); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and New Emergence* (Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2012).

4 As a result of the ways in which this framework shifts through time, I do not use a consistent tense in this article. While an exploration of the connection between Nishnaabeg ethics and extensive discussions about ethics within the field of oral history is beyond the scope of this article, there are certainly meaningful synergies and divergences to be explored with the other Seven Grandfather teachings.

What does it mean to do feminist oral history research with zaagidwin? It means practicing careful, critical, and deeply contextual historical research. Zaagidwin cannot be disentangled from debwewin (truth), gwekwaadziwin (honesty), mnaadendmowin (respect), and aakwa' ode'ewin (bravery). It informs historical practice by determining how you go about research and why you do it in the first place. To complete oral history research with zaagidwin is to enact dbaadendiziwin (humility), to acknowledge your relationship to what you are learning and sharing, and to conduct research that will contribute to the community and the well-being of the next seven generations.

Establishing a relationship between love and feminist oral history methodologies requires us to return (perhaps wearily) to discussions about objectivity and subjectivity. Oral historians have long grappled with these debates and convincingly argued that all sources, whether they be written or oral, are created in particular contexts and shaped by the time, place and person working with them. Further to this, all sources have strengths and limitations, depending on the historical questions you are seeking to answer. While we spend far less time addressing these questions than we used to, at least some of the response of oral historians has been to find ways to keep the objective in the subjective, to manage and control our biases and the limitations of our sources by applying scientific methods to what we are learning.⁵

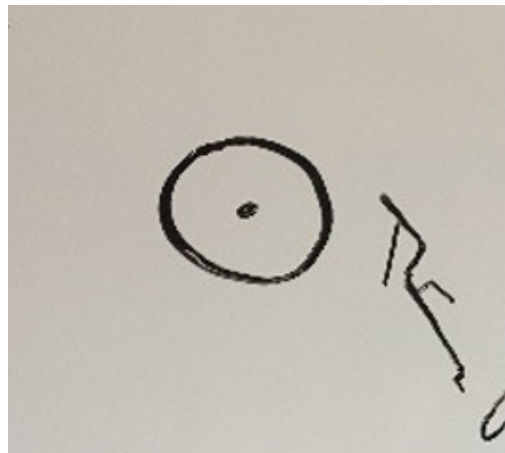
This approach does not work if you want to practice the ethics of zaagidwin as a feminist oral historian working with Nishnaabeg histories. To do so requires another framework, another way of thinking about the purpose of storytelling and story listening; and zaagidwin is a meaningful entry point to research with Nishnaabeg histories that is ethical and has historical purpose. To complete historical research with zaagidwin is to work from your heart, as well as your mind, and to be brave, honest, humble, respectful, and wise in your exploration of what you learn. It is to think carefully about how what you are doing matters and for whom. And, there

5 Valerie Yow makes this argument in her oft-cited and important article, 'Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (Summer, 1997): 55–79.

is no way to do it without placing yourself intimately in relation to self, territory, people, and to knowledge, no matter who you are.⁶

SELF IN RELATION

This process of establishing self in relation is a fundamental part of storytelling and story listening and it has its origins in aadsokaanag (foundational sacred stories), including a version of the Nbisiing Nishnaabeg Creation Story carried by Terry Dokis (Dokis First Nation), a friend and now-retired colleague.⁷ Here I focus on one aspect of the Creation Story, the circle within a circle, to establish the research framework centred here. This image appears across Nishnaabeg territory in pictographs and carries several teachings. As Terry has taught me, the circle within a circle is a symbol of the Creator. It also illustrates the beginning of time in the Nishnaabeg Creation Story, but this temporal description should not simply be understood as the beginning of linear time. The circle within a circle simultaneously represents the past, present and the future, an understanding of time essential to Nishnaabeg historical practice. Third, this circle within a circle is a framework for thinking about self in relation. As Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Elder Edna



Circle within a circle, drawing courtesy of Terry Dokis

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- 6 For teaching me about these connections, I say gchi-miigwech to Elder Peter Beaucage, Elder John Sawyer, and Deborah and Marion McGregor, 'Ethics and Relationships', Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute (MISHI), 20 August 2020. See also Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book*.
- 7 While I share teachings embedded in an aspect of this story, including the circle within a circle that starts the Creation Story and is represented here, I do not have permission (in fact I did not even ask) to print the full pictorial telling of this story that I shared during my talk. There are several reasons for this. Creation Stories are sacred stories understood to have spirit. They are stewarded, cared for, and shared intergenerationally by Nishnaabeg Elders. As a non-Nishnaabeg oral historian, I do not have the necessary authority for, relationships to, or knowledge of this aadsokaanag to share it in a permanent way in print, even when the story already exists in this form. To do so would signal my lack of respect for these protocols and would re-establish an extractive colonial relationship to these histories.

Manitowabi explain, it reminds us of the importance of seeing ourselves in Creation and reflecting on our positions, responsibilities, and roles within that space.⁸ In the context I am focused on here, this means reflecting on what relationships, knowledge, and experiences I bring to this circle. It means remembering that I speak from my own learning journey and for myself. I do not speak for anyone else.

It is important then to introduce myself. I was born and raised on Dish with One Spoon territory now stewarded by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, in Tkaronto (Toronto), Ontario.⁹ This land of my upbringing and early adulthood has a diverse stewardship history, having been cared for by the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Nishnaabeg Nations. My ancestors were settlers there, starting in the late-eighteenth century. My parents and most of my family still live on this territory and I am grateful that has been possible. In 2005, I moved to Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory (about four hours north of Tkaronto on the shores of Lake Nipissing) to take a job as a historian at Nipissing University. I am equally grateful to live as a partner, mother, and historian on this land.

This process of placing myself in relation makes it essential for me as a historian to think about the divergences and synergies between the knowledge and skills I carry from my academic training and those that are rooted in my learning on Nishnaabeg territory over the last fifteen years. This is essential relational work that challenges binaries and hierarchies, particularly those separating epistemologies (ways of

8 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson with Edna Manitowabi, 'Theorizing Resurgence from within Nishnaabeg Thought', in Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (eds), *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 279–296. Many Elders have shared these teachings in print and orally, including Jim Dumont and Basil Johnston.

9 The Dish with One Spoon treaty was established by Nishnaabeg and Haudenosaunee Nations in the Great Lakes region to outline principles for sharing the land amongst the people living there, to eat well with one spoon from one dish (or kettle) in ways that protect the environment. It is accompanied by a wampum belt. It is first mentioned in European documents in the mid-seventeenth century. For more information see: John Borrows and Michael Coyle (eds), *The Right Relationship: Reimagining the Implementation of Historical Treaties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'Looking after Gdoo-naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships', *Wicazo Sa Review* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 29–42. To view Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory in relation to Indigenous territories more broadly please visit Native-land.ca and locate Anishinabewaki and Lake Nipissing, which is northeast of Lake Huron.

knowing), ontologies (ways of being), and methodologies (ways of examining) the world.¹⁰ To do this, I will briefly circle back to my academic training to point to some things that I had to ‘unlearn to learn’ to bring me into this relational framework. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith, K. Wayne Yang, Eve Tuck and others assert, the act of decolonization always requires action.¹¹ In this case, action involved putting some ways of knowing down, while I picked others up, and then reimagining their relationships as my work with Nishnaabeg histories moved forward.

As I have written about elsewhere, my graduate training at the University of Toronto focused on women’s and gender history, Canadian history, and feminist oral history. I carried that training, as well as a just-defended PhD, with me when I arrived on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory in 2005. I had just completed a feminist oral history project on working women during the Great Depression that involved listening to and analysing the stories of more than 100 women.¹² For this research, I engaged with feminist oral history methodology to complete interviews, marshalled black

10 The importance of acknowledging this methodological and theoretical relationality, and placing yourself in relation in this regard, is something Indigenous Elders, scholars, and writers have said for a long time. Certainly, I learned this from my work with Elder John Sawyer since 2010. It is worth noting here that I intentionally do not provide a date or location for this or other teachings. Unlike a one-on-one interview that occurs in a particular time and place, learning from Elders is often ongoing, built from one conversation to the next and shaped by the teachings that are needed or to be gifted at that time. Here I also want to point to the work of award-winning author Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) who describes diverse methodologies and theories as ‘rafters’ used to build ‘our houses’ in ‘Dancing My Way to Orality’, in Smaro Kamboureli (ed.), *Memory Serves: Oratories* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 2015), 227; Chris Andersen (Michif) and Jean M. O’Brien (White Earth Ojibway) appeal for ‘methodological promiscuity’ in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–11; Robert Alexander Innes (Cowessess First Nation) made this argument about Native Studies in, ‘Introduction: Native Studies and Native Cultural Preservation, Revitalization, and Persistence’, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (2010): 1–9; Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013). This approach is essential in all disciplines committed to decolonization. This framework is at the heart of Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta (eds), *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).

11 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (eds), *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, *Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

12 Katrina Srigley and Autumn Varley, ‘Learning to Unlearn: Building Relationships on Anishnaabeg Territory’, in Deborah McGregor, Jean-Paul Restoule, and Rochelle Johnston (eds), *Indigenous Research: Theories, Practices, and Relationships* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 2018), 46–64; Katrina Srigley and Lorraine Sutherland, ‘Decolonizing, Indigenizing, and Learning Biskaaybiyang in the Field: Our Oral History Journey’, *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2018): 7–28; Katrina Srigley,

feminist and anti-racist scholarship to reflect on power in the past and the present (inside and outside the interview context), and, I hoped, shared a different history of the Great Depression (long understood through the histories of men) by focusing on the stories of women. With my feet firmly planted on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory, as well as a tenure-track faculty position to fill and research program to develop, I was well positioned to complete another feminist oral history project that would reflect on practice, consider power dynamics, and contribute to the recuperative work necessary to challenge a historiography that had long ignored Nishnaabeg kwewak (women's) histories. Right? Wrong. Time was required to build trust, establish intentions, and set a research direction. I also had more learning to do. As part of that process, there were several aspects of my graduate school training in history that I had to unlearn, and new things I had to learn, among them: humility is more important than performing expertise; listening is often more important than talking; and a PhD is not everywhere an asset – in fact, you might want to keep your PhD a secret! It would take another five years before I sat down for a one-on-one interview and a further nine before I travelled with stories that do not belong to me, but have been entrusted to me.¹³

This process of unlearning to learn eventually brought me back to my disciplinary training and a clearer understanding of how various ways of thinking about the past can work together. There are important synergies (or relationships) between

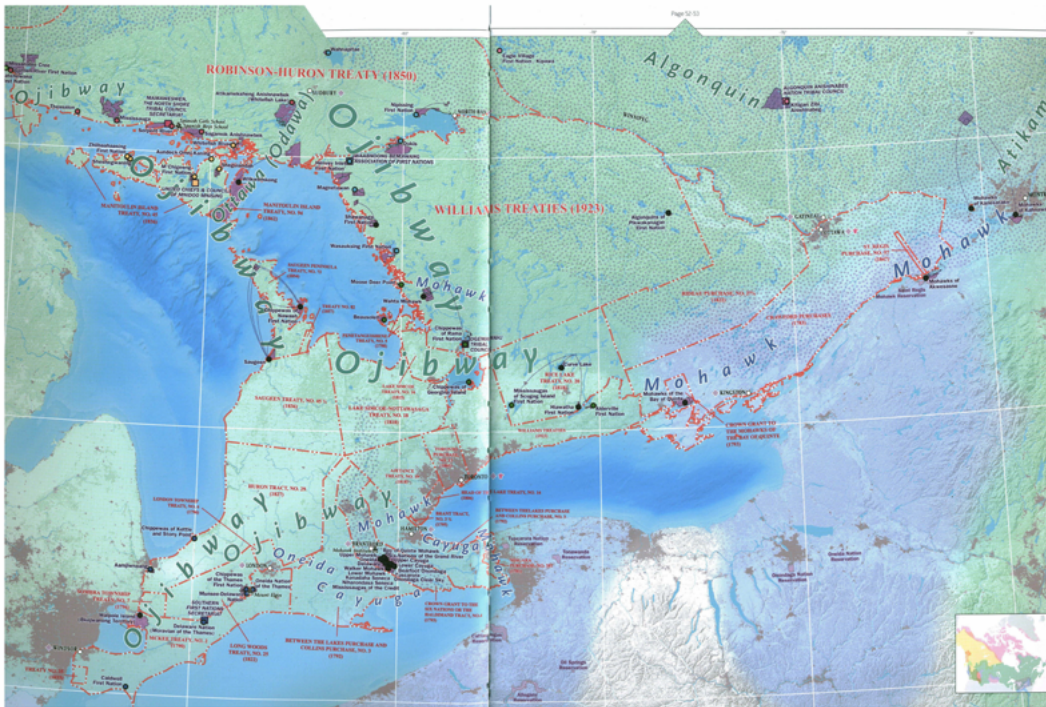
Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-era City, 1929–1939 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

13 While I have spoken on my own at conferences about ethics and relationship building, as well as storytelling and story listening, between 2013 and 2020 I did not share Nbisiing Nishnaabeg histories without a Nbisiing Elder or knowledge keeper or Nbisiing research partner present. It is essential to maintain relationships between stories, community, and territory (and not replicate extractive forms of research practice) in this way. I stopped attending professional conferences that did not have sufficient funds to support travel and conference fees for Nbisiing community members. In 2020, I received two invitations to travel and share histories and because of distance and the time involved I needed to travel alone. At this stage, my teachers who have taught me so much about how to do this historical work in a good way provided me with this direction: it was time for these particular stories to travel off the territory; they had the potential to do good work (build knowledge and understanding, and establish relationships) elsewhere. Glenna Beaucage, who is co-authoring *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Ma Nbisiing* and most often travels with me, worked with me to establish what we wanted to share. Elder John Sawyer sat with me in ceremony to talk about travelling with and sharing stories that are not my own. Placing myself in relation and being clear about who I am and the knowledge I do or do not carry is one step. Maintaining the connections between stories, spirit, land, and people in my sharing is another.

the work of feminist historians central to my academic community, my unlearning journey, and the relational approach of Nishnaabeg historians. Identifying these relationships is also an important act of decolonisation. It destabilises binaries, hierarchies, and structures of othering that sustain the colonial project. I intend for readers to see connections between what I share here and Luisa Passerini's call for historians to challenge Eurocentric methodological, theoretical, and epistemological frameworks; Gwendolyn Etter Lewis's focus on 'reclaiming the self'; Linda Shopes' and Penny Summerfield's reminders about the power of recuperative work; Sherna Berger Gluck's insistence that we listen well within different cultural frameworks; and Natalie Zemon Davis' long-made reminders about important connections between local and global stories.¹⁴ When mobilized, these synergies create space for all oral historians to listen and learn beyond binaries, such as those that divide Indigenous and non-Indigenous methodological approaches, and in ways that perhaps we have not been doing as powerfully as we might have before.

Finally, as should already be clear, this circle within a circle involves readers establishing relationships to my story, to the lands where these stories unfold, and in the next part of this article, the histories that have been shared with me. Doing this allows you to place me and my learning journey, giving you a sense of the knowledge and training I bring to this conversation and who my teachers are, in order to better

14 Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy 1968*, trans. Lisa Erdberg (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (eds), *Borders, Conflict Zones, and Memory: Scholarly Engagements with Luisa Passerini* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Gwendolyn Etter Lewis, 'Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts', in Daphne Patai and Sherna Berger Gluck (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 43–58; Linda Shopes, 'Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities', *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 20 (September 2002): 588–598; Penny Summerfield, 'Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice', *Miranda* 12 (2016): 1–15; Sherna Berger Gluck, *An American Feminist in Palestine: The Intifada Years* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994); Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Iroquois Women, European Women', in Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell (eds), *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500–1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 96–118; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World', *History and Theory* 50 (May 2011): 188–202. There is an extensive scholarship in Indigenous Feminisms, including an exciting new collection edited by Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr, *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), which is essential to any larger conversation about the connection between feminisms and story listening or storytelling. Here I point to scholarship that was part of my training and the relationships that became clearer to me when I was listening and learning in different ways.



Map of Nishnaabeg (Ojibway) Territories in Southern Ontario, copyright Chris Brackley/Canadian Geographic, Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada, pp. 54-55

analyse (accept, reject, challenge) what I share with you. This is a process of what Nishnaabeg Elder Onaubinisay Jim Dumont calls oral footnoting.¹⁵ In the discipline of history, we call it citation. This article focuses us on lands, peoples, and histories located at great distance from Yugarra Country, Nbisiiing Nishnaabeg territory on Turtle Island (North America). When reading the stories shared here I intend readers to think about these lands — the granite of the Canadian Shield, its fresh water lakes and rivers, the maples, elms, spruce and pine of the bush — and the people and animals who call the territory home. Establishing relationships between land and story, or animating land with stories, is a critical act of decolonisation. It reinscribes a Nishnaabeg presence in the past and the present, and for the future. It makes erasure, that powerful colonial weapon, far more difficult to sustain.¹⁶

15 Onaubinisay Jim Dumont, 'Seven Fires of Creation', teaching, Garden Village, Nipissing First Nation, 9 May, 2014.

16 This is why I always acknowledge the land when I speak, to bring the territory into the room and the minds of those listening. The practice of land acknowledgement has been the subject of discussion, particularly in contexts where it appears pro forma and disconnected from action. For more on this debate:

The stories shared here emerge from the historical work I have been doing with Glenna Beaucage and many Elders, knowledge keepers, language stewards, and community members from Nipissing First Nation to listen to and record stories for *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing/Stories of Nbisiing Nishnaabeg*. Translated literally from Nbisiing Nishnaabemwin (the dialect of Anishnaabemowin spoken by Nbisiing Nishnaabeg) to English, *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing* means ‘the stories they told at Nipissing’.¹⁷ We translate the title in the present tense to acknowledge that these stories are about the past, but they are also doing good work in the present and for the future. *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing* is, I argue here, an example of decolonised feminist oral history on the territory on which I live and work, that is rooted in relationality, in Nishnaabeg ways of documenting, understanding, and sharing knowledge of the past through stories (of which there are different types) in an effort to understand the present and set direction for the future.¹⁸ Here, I will highlight this with a focus on two projects centred on oral histories. They consider dibaajimowinan (everyday stories) of the Nbisiing Warriors ice hockey team and the leadership of Nbisiing kwewak. These historical projects practice the ethics of zaagidwin to engage in recuperative historical work, challenge disciplinary hierarchies, binaries and frameworks, animate the land I have oriented you towards, and, finally, create space for the teachings about identity, belonging, and community that are at the heart of these stories.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/redrawing-the-lines-1.4973363/i-regret-it-hayden-king-on-writing-ryerson-university-s-territorial-acknowledgement-1.4973371>, last accessed 19 June 2020.

17 Gchi-miigwech to Elder and language steward Peter Beaucage for this translation.

18 While I do not have time to explore the different forms stories take in Nishnaabeg histories, it is important to point out there are many forms with different purposes and it is not always possible to divide them neatly. The Creation Story is one example of a story that holds within it both the sacred and the everyday. Indigenous nations define stories and/or histories in unique ways, but the division between aadsokaanag (sacred) and dibaajimowinan (everyday) have strong consistencies. See Margaret M. Bruchac, *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 7; Doerfler, et al., *Centering Anishnaabeg Studies*; Niigonweddom James Sinclair, ‘Nindoodemag Bagijiganan: A History of Anishnaabeg Narrative’ (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2013); Srigley and Sutherland, ‘Decolonizing, Indigenizing’; Keith Thor Carlson, ‘Reflections on Indigenous History and Memory: Reconstructing and Reconsidering Contact’, in John S. Lutz (ed.), *Myth and Memory Stories of Indigenous European Contact* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 50–51.

THE NIPISSING WARRIORS

The first oral history based research that I completed on Nbisiing territory was a history of the Nipissing Warriors ice hockey team. This project started in 2010 when Chief Marianna Couchie asked Glenna Beaucage (then the Nipissing First Nation (NFN) librarian and now the Culture and Heritage Manager at NFN) and I to focus on this historical theme. We were at this stage because, over the previous five years, I had learned that my research questions had to be driven by and foster the needs, interests and skills of Nbisiing Nishnaabeg. When we started working together I had no major research questions, no ten-point plan (though I will admit that I still really wanted one), or money from a large granting agency. What I did not realise at the time was that the dibaajimowinan (everyday stories) that were shared with us enacted the ethics and relational work of love.

The Nipissing Warriors were an all-Nishnaabeg ice hockey team that grew from the players (young men and women) playing on the ponds, lakes, and rivers of the territory when hockey started being played there in the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ Organised local hockey leagues were well established by the 1950s, and by 1965 a Nishnaabeg team of Nipissing First Nation, Dokis First Nation, status and non-status Indigenous peoples, as well as one or two non-Nishnaabeg players, were playing in the area Industrial Hockey League. The Nishnaabeg members of the team also travelled across the province to play in all-Indigenous inter-reserve hockey. By the early 1970s, they were known as the Nipissing Warriors and were a remarkably successful team, winning often and with very high scores – 36–3 or 19–2 were not uncommon victories. As one committed fan remembered, ‘The other team got on the ice basically knowing they were going to lose. That was how good that team was’.²⁰ The 1972 team won everything it was possible to win in that season. In this sense, it was no surprise that Chief Couchie wanted us to document their history. Yet, as we conducted interviews with former players and fans, we came to realise that what was being emphasised was not hockey. We actually learned more about that from the

19 Bruce Alan Craig and Kenneth Ross Craig, *Blades on the Bay: One Hundred Years of Hockey in North Bay and Area* (Sudbury, ON: Journal Printing, 1997).

20 Charlie Hebert, *The Nipissing Warriors*, documentary, Regan Pictures, 2015, nipissingu.ca/warriors, last accessed 4 March 2020.

documentary record. Rather, we were listening to dibaajimowinan (everyday stories) that highlighted the importance of this hockey team to identity and belonging for former players and fans across the territory.

There are a variety of reasons why this became clear as we listened to dibaajimowinan. First, through their stories, Nbisiing Nishnaabeg emphasised that the Nipissing Warriors brought people together. This included Nishnaabeg kin who otherwise found themselves divided on reserves by the spatial violence of colonialism. The reserve system is land set aside by the Canadian government, through treaty and the Indian Act (1876), for the exclusive use of Indigenous peoples. Reserve land was often the worst land and, when not, it has been continuously and often illegally encroached on for settlement, infrastructure (railways and roads) and resource extraction (timber, fishing, mining). In Nbisiing Nishnaabemwin the word for reserve is shkongon or that which is left over. The same Indian Act defined (and continues to define in amended form) who has status and, therefore, permission to live on reserve and in community. This highly invasive and colonial federal law separates people who in the past were family and community members, and in the process erodes identity and belonging.²¹

Irrespective of the legacies and realities of these colonial frameworks, the Nipissing Warriors hockey team included everyone: players who were status and non-status, those from Dokis and Nipissing First Nations, as well as the occasional non-Indigenous player connected with the Nipissing community. Community members laughingly share that EVEN the Catholic priest Father Van Hee took

21 This is a complicated history that requires far more time and space than I can give it here. The reserve system is one example among many of the ways in which the Indian Act and colonialism divided communities and impacted identity and belonging. Gchi-miigwech to Elder Peter Beaucage, Language Steward and Deputy Chief Muriel Sawyer, and Elder John Sawyer for teachings on this history. See: Karl Hele, (ed.) *This is Indian Land: the 1850s Robinson Treaties* (Winnipeg, MB: Aboriginal Issues Press, 2016); Bob Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act: Helping Canadians Make Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples a Reality* (Port Coquitlam, B.C.: Indigenous Relations Press, 2018); Bonita Lawrence, *'Real' Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Katrina Strigley, "I am a proud Anishinaabekwe": Issues of Identity and Status in Northern Ontario after Bill C-31', in Robin Jarvis Brownlie and Valerie J. Korinek (eds), *Finding a Way to the Heart: Feminist Writings on Aboriginal and Women's History in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 241–266; Alex Williams (director), *The Pass System*, documentary, Tamarack Productions, 2015.

to the ice for the occasional local game.²² He was welcomed, though during those games players felt more compelled to apologise for their swearing. For non-status Nishnaabeg players on the team, it was particularly important to emphasise that when Chief Fred McLeod Jr. ignored colonial status designations and enacted kinship ties to put players on the Warriors roster, his actions had a lasting impact on their sense of identity and belonging. This experience of relationship to community continued in the arena, which was always packed to the rafters when the Warriors played. According to the fans, on game night house lights were always out across the territory because everyone was at the arena. In this space, Elders, aunties, uncles and youth cheered the team on. They felt pride and the players realised that. It made them play harder. Nishnaabemwin could also be heard in the stands, particularly when the Elders discussed the events of the week or gave directions to be taken to the players on the bench or in the penalty box. As a player, Elder John Sawyer remembers being told, ‘You can’t score from the penalty box!’²³ The use of Nishnaabemwin was important. As Muriel Sawyer (language steward and Deputy Chief, NFN) explained, ‘[we were] in a public facility in a non-Native facility and using our language freely and not really looking around to see if it was okay. It was very empowering!’²⁴ That team brought people together and, in the process, created a sense of belonging and strengthened identity for everyone involved.

Enacting the ethics of zaagidwin in our work meant amplifying these teachings in our mobilisation of these histories. As such, we did not start with an academic article or book, rather we created a historical exhibit to be shared on the territory and worked with teachers Ashley Porter and Lorraine Sutherland to develop lesson plans to be taught at Nbisiing Secondary School, Nipissing First Nation’s high school.²⁵

22 John Sawyer, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, North Bay, ON, 22 November 2010. All recordings and transcripts of interviews referred to in this article were conducted by Katrina Srigley. They are held by Katrina Srigley and the Culture and Heritage Department, NFN.

23 Elder John Sawyer, conversation with Katrina Srigley, 5 March 2015.

24 Muriel Sawyer, *The Nipissing Warriors*, documentary, Regan Productions, 2015, nipissingu.ca/warriors, last accessed 27 February 2020.

25 The documentary can be found at this link: nipissingu.ca/warriors. Within the documentary you will see the exhibit and classroom spaces at Nbisiing Secondary School, as well as teacher Ashley Porter who worked with us on these units. The documentary in the language will be available at this link by January 2021.

We produced a short documentary recorded first in English and most recently in Nishnaabemwin for language learners in the present and future. Language revitalisation is of highest priority for Nipissing First Nation. The Nishnaabemwin version of the documentary was recorded with four Nishnaabekwewak (women) language stewards, who are warriors in their own right. During my talk in Brisbane, I shared a one-minute clip of this version of the documentary to sound the language because it matters. It is alive. It belongs with the stories and, as anthropologist Keith Basso has noted, sharing the language honours the ancestors. It speaks to the past, present, and future. When we share Indigenous languages like Nishnaabemwin we bring listeners into relationship with them, meeting them at their own level of understanding and planting the seeds of language growth.²⁶

CENTERING NISHNAABEKWEWAK STORIES OF LEADERSHIP

Another important aspect of our work in *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing* has been to centre, listen to, and share the stories of Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak (women). Centring the stories of women is deeply entwined with the goals of feminist oral history and, in this context, the ethics of zaagidwin in the ways that we listened to the stories shared with us. These stories carry, in particular, teachings about the importance of contributions to the community.

The Nipissing Homemakers Club (which I learned about while working on the history of the Warriors) was my entry point for exploring the leadership histories of Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak. ‘Indian Homemakers Clubs’ were officially created by the government of Canada in 1937. As other scholars have shown, the clubs were designed to enlist Indigenous women in the colonial project.²⁷ Based on assumptions

26 Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

27 Lianne C. Leddy, “‘Mostly Just as a Social Gathering’: Anishinaabe Kwewag and the Indian Homemakers’ Club, 1945-1960”, in Kristin Burnett and Geoff Read (eds), *Aboriginal History: A Reader* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2016); Aroha Harris and Logan McCallum, “Assaulting the Ears of the Government”: The Work of the Maori Women’s Welfare League and the Indian Homemakers’ Clubs in the 1850s and 60s’, in Carol Williams (ed.), *Indigenous Women and Work: From Labor to Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 243–257; Sarah A. Nickel, *Assembling Unity: Indigenous Politics, Gender and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019); Heather Howard also finds that Indigenous women’s organizations are central to community in urban centres, see ‘Women’s Class Strategies as Activism in Native Community Building in Toronto, 1950–1975’, in Susan Applegate Krouse

about women and their roles, including the idea that women were not already doing this work in their communities, organisers hoped the clubs would contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous communities and the Canadian nation by putting women to work developing good citizens and good homes.

What I realized after working with this organisational history of the Homemakers, particularly the history drawn from archival records, was that it was interfering with my listening. Whose stories was I listening to, through whose epistemological, ontological, and methodological frameworks, and for whom? In fact, I realised I needed to set aside the Homemakers Club and focus on Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak histories from their own perspectives. Once I did that, I more fully understood that the Homemakers Club was a leadership vehicle at a particular time and place, but it was not a starting or ending point for understanding Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak histories. Rather, they need to be thought about through teachings around contribution to community.²⁸

When I ask Joan McLeod, daughter of Nbisiing leader Leda McLeod, about the women involved in the Homemakers Club, she reminded me that the women who would become part of the club were already working together. ‘In fact,’ she explained, ‘the Nipissing people have always placed great emphasis on caring for one another, it did not mean we all agreed, but there is plenty of historical documentation to make our care for one another clear’.²⁹ Similarly, when asked what kinds of activities the Homemakers were involved in, former Chief Phil Goulais, who is the son of prominent Homemaker Susan Goulais, posed a rhetorical question — ‘What weren’t they

and Heather Howard Bobiwash (eds), *Keeping the Campfires Going: Native Women’s Activism in Urban Centers* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska, 2009), 105–124.

28 Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucauge, “‘Everything from our Hearts to our Hockey Sticks’: Nipissing Homemakers Club”, NFN newsletter, 2019, nfn.ca, last accessed 4 March 2020. On the importance of contributions to community see: Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Toronto, ON: Women’s Press, 2016); Leah Schneider, ‘Complementary Relationships: A Review of Indigenous Gender Studies’, in Robert Innes and Kim Anderson (eds), *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 62–79.

29 Joan McLeod, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucauge, Garden Village, NFN, 12 August 2019.

involved in really? They were the band council before there was a band council'.³⁰ Elder, language steward, and long-time NFN counsellor June Commanda emphasised that one of the principal roles of the Nbisiing kwewak in this organisation was to contribute to community.³¹

Well before 1950 when the first Homemakers Club was established, Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak supported growth and learning among youth, and they concerned themselves with the well-being of their community and nation. There are several ways this happened inside and outside the Homemakers organization. The Homemakers hosted a range of social events to raise money, but the fish fries or community picnics were among the most popular events, drawing hundreds of people from across the territory. The picnics required three or more days of preparation, explained June Commanda. There was shopping to do. Coleslaw to make. Fries to prepare. In fact, they peeled so many potatoes that they ended up with blisters on their hands!³² Fishing families donated fish and if you were a child or husband of one of the leaders you helped out. Joan McLeod remembers her nine-year-old self standing on a crate washing dishes, all the while longingly watching other children play on the beach. There was no question where she had to be.³³ The husbands fried the fish for hours on end, as the women dealt with the lines of people that seemed to go on all day.

All of these funds were turned back to the community in a variety of ways. The Homemakers organised one of the first Native Diabetes Associations in Canada. They provided donations to families in need, including diapers for new babies. They covered health care costs, particularly costly travel to Toronto for hospital visits. They provided funds for the Catholic church, including purchasing a new organ, paying for the priest's food, and the cleaning and furnishing of his apartment. When the priest tried to exert control over the funds generated from the picnic, the

30 Phil Goulais, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, Garden Village, NFN, 19 October 2017.

31 June Commanda, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, Garden Village, NFN, 4 May 2017.

32 Commanda interview, 4 May 2017.

33 McLeod interview, 12 August 2019.

Homemakers refused, though most of them were deeply committed to the church. Funds from these activities went to support youth clubs and sports teams. These women purchased the Nipissing Warriors' first sweaters and their hockey sticks. They hosted celebratory dinners to acknowledge their successes. They built the first community hall. To this day, Nibisiing Nishnaabekwewak provide a Christmas meal for seniors and food for bereaved families. As Phil Goulais said, what weren't they involved in?!³⁴

These contributions extended into the political sphere. When Phil Goulais was Chief he knew that nothing went forward in community without the support of the Homemakers. 'They showed up at the polls and voted, you know. IT mattered...If they decided you were out, you were out'. He remembered one community member coming to him and saying,

You know, Phillip you gotta get out from behind the desk and go talk to the Elders. You're getting close to the election here. If you wanna get re-elected you gotta get out... it doesn't matter what they talk about but get out there and listen'. I asked who he needed to get out to see. It was the women, he replied, the women were clear: 'This is what we want' and they'd talk amongst themselves. What do we want? Then they would say — That is our Chief — and they were right.³⁵

Leda McLeod, who raised twenty children, was the President of Nipissing Homemakers Club for many years – this included acting as leader of the provincial Homemakers organisation during this time. She is remembered for her strong (even tenacious) leadership inside and outside community, particularly in the area of education. She was described as a feminist by family members for the ways in which she sounded her voice to make change, even when it was exceptionally tricky. As her daughter, Joan McLeod, explained:

34 Commanda interview, 12 August 2019; Goulais interview, 19 October 2017; Jeanette Goulais, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, Garden Village, NFN, 29 June 2017; McLeod interview, 12 August 2019.

35 Goulais interview, 29 June 2017.

She was a dynamo. She was very strong... She was a woman born at the wrong time... but at the same time it was because of my mother and women like her that our community is as stable as it is today. They went through the most difficult years.³⁶

There are several stories I can share about the changes that occurred at Nipissing as a result of Leda's leadership but I will focus on one that reflects her commitment to education and to children.

Leda led a successful four-year (1971–1975) campaign to get a trustee from Nipissing First Nation (NFN) on the Catholic District School Board. Both then and now, most children from NFN attended schools within this school board and, unsurprisingly, leaders in the community thought that Nipissing should have a voice on the school board. When a motion to create a trustee position for NFN was defeated in 1971, Leda led a campaign that involved letter writing, building relationships across the territory, gathering information, and organising protests. In 1971, Muriel Sawyer (then Commanda), wrote a letter to an area newspaper arguing that democracy was seriously compromised by this decision:

Occasionally it is forgotten that we live in a democratic society, in which every group should be represented to voice its opinions and ideas... Has it ever occurred to some people that we, the Indian people, also live in this country. That we, the Indian people, also must compete and survive in this 'great white culture'. We must educate ourselves to your ideas to make any sort of headway.³⁷

When motions were defeated at subsequent board meetings, the protest momentum picked up among Nishnaabeg and non-Nishnaabeg community members. In 1973, Parent Teacher Associations from area schools wrote a letter in support. In 1974, the Minister of Education investigated the matter and noted that 107 NFN children

³⁶ McLeod interview, 12 August 2019.

³⁷ Muriel Commanda, 'Indians and Democracy,' *North Bay Nugget*, 1971, Compact Disc 1, Newspaper Clippings, 1960–1979, File 45, Nipissing First Nation Heritage Collection at Nipissing First Nation (NHC).

attended separate schools in the area, making board representation mandatory under the Schools Administration Act. He stated that Indian Affairs would cut off funding from boards that did not allow for Indigenous representation. The school board disputed the number, saying six of the 107 had been incorrectly counted. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court of Ontario. By early 1975, things were getting heated. At the inaugural meeting of the year, Reverend Jim Hutton refused to bless the new school board, stating that the vote defeating representation for NFN indicated that ‘in his humble opinion the board needs more than a blessing it needs an exorcism’.³⁸ In the same week, 75 per cent of Our Lady of Sorrows students, which amounted to 265 pupils, walked out in a show of support. Walkouts occurred at sister schools in the nearby City of North Bay.³⁹ As the next vote approached, Leda McLeod asserted that NFN would be removing its students from the schools in the board as early as the following week.⁴⁰ At the February 1975 meeting over a 100 people appeared for the board vote. NFN community member Isadore Beaucage was sworn in as a trustee on 4 March 1975, a position that remains in place to this day.

Clearly, Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak made a wide range of contributions to community. Many community members lament the community’s loss of these teachings about contributions to community and perceive this loss as one of the most significant consequences of the last thirty years, which is why they think these histories need to be shared. One community member said:

When I think about all of those things [that the Homemakers did] it’s kind of emotional for me because you don’t see that anymore. How many things can those women do? You know, have a dozen kids and do all of those things?

Another agreed, ‘It is emotional for me too because the kids are looking for that... they know they are missing something’ when there are not abundant possibilities

38 *North Bay Nugget*, 9 & 15 January 1975, CD 1, Newspaper Clippings, 1960–1979, File 103, NHC.

39 *North Bay Nugget*, 21 January 1975, CD 1, Newspaper Clippings, 1960–1979, File 106, NHC.

40 ‘Delegation to Press Bid for Indian Representation’, *Nugget*, 12 February 1975.

for their aunties and mothers and grandmothers to look after everything from their hearts to their hockey sticks.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

I will end by returning to the ethics of zaagidwin and what it has taught me about practicing decolonised and indigenised feminist oral history. First and foremost, it is a deeply relational process that enriches the discipline of oral history by requiring practitioners to acknowledge, reflect on and, in some cases, unlearn the ways their ideas about listening to and sharing stories are rooted in particular ways of being, doing and knowing. It involves thinking about what it means to listen with your ears, heart, spirit and mind and to be responsive to context, to live and work in the framework that is a circle within a circle. To practice feminist oral history with the ethics of zaagidwin is to also acknowledge different forms of stories and ways of remembering them. As Winona Wheeler (Cree/Assiniboine/ Saulteaux) reminds us, when you are working in deeply relational ways you have to figure out what is being shared with you and why, and this will definitely not always happen with a cup of tea and a tape recorder.⁴² It might happen driving to an event, crafting, eating food, or pulling carrots. Finally, for a story listener without kinship ties to these stories, this approach opens up space for learning that is not extractive or self-interested, but guided by love, honesty, wisdom, bravery, humility, respect, and truth.

In application, the ethics of zaagidwin deepens what we can learn from histories shared with us in this way. In this case, dibaajimowinan of an all-Nishnaabeg ice hockey team and the leadership of Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak centres histories that have not been widely shared, uncovers the who, what, when and where of the past related to these stories, and shares the teachings the stories carry for the present and the future about identity, belonging, and the importance of contributions to community. We enact zaagidwin when we reanimate the land with these histories and teachings, bringing learners into relationship with them, so when they think about the histories of Nbisiing

41 I have been asked not to attribute these quotes to any one person.

42 Winona Wheeler, 'Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral Histories', in David McNab and Ute Lischke (eds), *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and their Representations* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2005), 189–214.

Nishnaabeg territory they think about the young men who skated and the community who cheered for the Warriors in the stands of that packed arena and Nishnaabekwewak whose leadership on and beyond community indelibly shaped the history of education in this region. This kind of historical work contributes to all of our communities, families and nations, making space for the teachings embodied in them to be enacted so we can see ourselves in relation to the stories of the lands on which we live and support the wellbeing of the next seven generations.