

# **Spirituality as decolonizing: Elders Albert Desjarlais, George McDermott, and Tom McCallum share understandings of life in healing practices**

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## **Abstract**

Indigenous peoples have begun a process of reasserting traditional knowledges and examining how it can be useful to the next generations and to a broader world as part of a decolonizing agenda. Indigenous Elders are the educators, storytellers, historians, language keepers, and healers of our communities. They sustain knowledge, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs held collectively within Indigenous communities and pass it on to the next generations. Through a storytelling methodology in a collaborative dialogue, Elders shared with each other their stories about healers and healing practices, life experiences, and land-based perspectives, as well as history and language issues. Their stories illuminate a process of becoming whole within the ongoing challenges posed by colonization. By discussing the film “How the Spirit Moves with Albert Desjarlais” the Sacred Stone Lodge, or Sweat Lodge, is explored as a place of healing and prayer. Elders’ descriptions of understandings gleaned from their years within their families, communities, languages, and traditions are discussed as transformative and decolonizing in verifying understandings of relationships to land, cosmos, and spiritual traditions embodied in their healing and ceremonial practices. Films referred to in this article can be accessed at [www.ourelderstories.com](http://www.ourelderstories.com).

**Keywords:** *Elders; healers; spirituality; ceremony; decolonization; Indigenous film*

## **Introduction**

Indigenous peoples have begun a process of reasserting traditional knowledge and examining how it can be useful to the next generations and to a broader world as part of a decolonizing agenda. Indigenous Elders are the educators, storytellers, historians, language keepers, and healers of our communities. They sustain knowledge, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs held collectively within Indigenous communities and pass it on to the next generations. Through a storytelling methodology in a collaborative dialogue, Elders shared with each other (Iseke, 2011, 2010; Iseke & Brennus, 2011), their stories about healers and healing practices, life experiences, and land-based perspectives, as well as history and language issues. Their stories illuminate a process of becoming whole within the ongoing challenges posed by colonization. Elders describe, in concrete terms, understandings gleaned from their years within their families, communities, languages, and traditions. While they do not use the language of decolonization to describe their work, their work is decolonizing by verifying understandings of relationships to land, cosmos, and spiritual traditions embodied in their healing and ceremonial practices that are explored here.

From these stories we examine decolonizing processes and practices. Following this introduction is a discussion of decolonization and spirituality – central ideas within this article. The next section of the paper explores ceremony and spirituality in research, acknowledging that we live in Creator's world. Next, the Elders are introduced and then a discussion of healers and healing follows to challenge the narrow conceptions of these practices and processes. I then turn to the Elders discussions that were introduced in film projects based on the work with three Métis Elders-- Albert Desjarlais, George McDermott, and Tom McCallum. In the film projects, the Elders' share their experiences of being healers and challenge our understandings of what it means to be healers, through an Indigenous perspective on healing. Elders' discussions of epistemological, ontological and cosmological relationships to land and spirit compose a section on decolonizing and the spiritual as expressions of relationship to land. Discussion and development of spiritual practices for decolonizing follow.

## **Decolonization, spirituality, and education: An overview**

Decolonizing and spirituality are inextricably linked. Dei (2002), drawing on Castellano (2000) and Ermine (1995) and as a precursor to his discussions of decolonizing, suggests that the outer and inner selves are connected through understandings of spirituality.

The dimension of spirituality in Indigenous knowledges provides the strength and power needed in physical communication. Indigenous knowledge forms are expressive and narrative. They are metaphorical in the use of proverbs, fables and tales. Indigenous knowledges view communalism as a mode of thought, emphasizing the sense of belongingness with a people and the land they share. It is not individualized and disconnected into a universal abstract. It is grounded in a people and a place. (Dei, 2002, p. 5).

Elsewhere I have drawn upon Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) and Deloria (1994) to characterize spiritual resistance. Examples of this are seen through the many stories of Indigenous peoples ignoring being told not to engage in ceremonies, continuing these practices or, in some cases, taking the ceremonies underground or holding them on American or Christian holidays so the gathering would appear as just another celebration (in Iseke-Barnes, 2003, p. 228). I draw upon Beth Brant's (1994) *Writing as Witness* in which she characterizes the need for "interaction with spirits ... in order to find a life-time path to dwell on" (p. 67).

Writing from Japanese spiritual perspectives, Kawano (2011) explains that "the ability to acknowledge, understand and feel wholeness and connection within oneself, as well as interconnectedness with other creatures, nature and the universe, might be one of the abilities that we have forgotten over colonial history" (p. 97). Further, "A re-realization of our cosmic consciousness or spirituality is necessary to regain a 'balanced mind'" (p. 99). Kawano further characterizes "spirituality's strength as a life-force" which aids the "decolonization of the mind in the school system". Additionally, Cajete (1994) suggests a goal of Indigenous education is to create knowledge of innate spirituality.

Shahjahan, Wagner, and Wane (2009) discuss spirituality as central to both the politics and acts of decolonizing in the academy and that not attending to the spirit would make decolonizing work incomplete; through spirituality "you can then be a subject of change rather than an object of change" (p. 69). Shahjahan (2005), drawing on Tisdell (2003), further suggests that in order to educate for social change we must engage the spirit and, in order to do so, we need to decolonize ourselves. Ritskes (2011) provides an overview of methodologies for the classroom that engage Indigenous spirituality for the purpose of decolonization.

Moreover, Wane (2006) traces her research journey as a process of decolonization from colonial experiences and frameworks. Wane (2011) suggests the need to create spaces for spirituality in research and draws upon "the ancient wisdom of the Indigenous peoples of Africa" in order to incorporate spiritual practices into research. She suggests this process is part of her work of decolonizing herself and locating her scholarship within the Indigenous knowledge of her ancestors. Spirituality for Wane is "our way of being, of connecting with the land, the universe, and creation" and not merely a way of doing research (p. 75); in this way, research is seen within a larger framework of Indigenous being and decolonization.

## **Ceremony and spirituality in research**

Shawn Wilson, a Cree scholar, in discussion of his research process states, "research is a ceremony" (2008, p. 89). He further suggests that:

That's the spiritual part of it. If you talk about research as a ceremony, that's the climax of the ceremony, when it all comes together and all those connections are made. Cause that's what ceremony is about, is strengthening those connections. So maybe when research as a ceremony comes together, when the ceremony is

reaching its climax, is when those ideas all come together. Those connections are made (p. 89).

The importance of spirituality and ceremony in everyday life is stressed in the expression “life lived like a ceremony” that is often heard in Indigenous communities. Wilson explains the connection further, “there is a lot of work, dedication and time spent in building up the relationships with the cosmos that allow the visible ceremony to happen” (p. 89-90). Eber Hampton (1995) describes the effect of being in ceremony as “looking with new eyes” and there is this recognition in Gale High Pine’s words: “My children, there is no modern world, there is no Indian world. There is only the Great Spirit’s world and the same Creator who made the beautiful forests traces the cracks in the sidewalks and puts rainbows in the oil slicks on city streets” (Hampton, 1995, p. 22).

In developing a research approach that honored ceremony for this particular project, I acknowledged that we live life in Creator’s world and whether we walk in the forest or on city streets we can live life in ceremony and in relation to the spirit world (Hampton, 1995; Iseke-Barnes, 2002). Working with the Elders, we shared in ceremony at the beginning of our nine days together. Elders were welcomed onto the territory, given gifts, and asked to participate in a respectful way with tobacco. Each day we did a smudge ceremony before our day, and the Elders gave a prayer of thanks for a good day. Before each meal was shared, it was blessed by one of the Elders who had been asked with tobacco to pray on the food. Each day we closed with a prayer of thanks. When particular events or moments happened while filming, we might stop to notice them and give thanks. When a prayer or song was shared, tobacco was given. When a spirit walked into our midst and sat with us, we stopped to notice and gave thanks. We lived this research process in ceremony. The Elders’ presence ensured that the ceremonies invited and included all those present, including the mostly non-Indigenous crew that learned something about how to live in ceremony from these experiences.

To ensure we had a good research time together, Elders held pipe ceremony and they were asked with tobacco to do this ceremony; all present were included in the ceremony. One of the Elders suggested that perhaps we should have a sweat lodge ceremony. A sweat lodge was offered to us by the Anishnaabe Elder who had welcomed all of these Elders to this territory and onto the University campus.

On the 9th day of filming all the Elders were taken to the space where the ongoing work with the film was to continue. Ceremony was held there to help clean this space and prepare for the next phase – the transcribing and editing of the film footage. A closing ceremony was provided by the Elders, giving thanks for this opportunity together. A feast was held at the home of one of the caterers who welcomed the Elders into their home, and invited local Metis and First Nations Elders to participate in the feast. The closing ceremony and feast allowed us all to be a part of a complete cycle of ceremony over these 9 days.

After the Elders departed, their stories were transcribed and entered into data analysis software which allowed the research team to roughly sort their stories into topics/themes they were talking about. From this sorting, student researchers went to the library to gather literature

that was relevant to the themes and topics. Follow up discussions with each Elder were held in their homes or in offices at Lakehead University. These follow up discussions were also sorted through the use of software. Based on the stories told, clarifications in follow up discussions, and ongoing interactions with Elders, a series of films were created, as well as articles and book chapters. Elders were asked to comment on the films and writing, as the process of producing these works unfolded.

## **Introducing the three Elders**

*Albert Desjarlais* was born and raised on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement and later moved to High Prairie, Alberta. Albert learned traditional Indigenous spiritual and healing practices from his grandfather who lived these traditions in the 1800s. Albert has the honor of being the sixth generation healer to receive the teachings passed down in this family. Albert has been married to Alma for over 40 years and shares his healing and spiritual practices with her. Alma Desjarlais also participated in this research process but in this paper I do not draw upon her discussions (see Iseke, 2011 for more of her words).

*Tom McCallum* was born and raised in Ile à la Crosse, Saskatchewan, and is fluent in Cree and Michif (a unique language to the Metis peoples composed of an Indigenous language with French and/or English language words used). Tom has a passion for the Cree language and promotes its use, as he explains the way the language has shaped his way of seeing the world. Tom grew up on the land and has a close relationship with it, particularly because of working with medicines. Tom uses traditional teachings to work with inmates, youth, men's healing circles, and in cross-cultural workshops.

*George "Lonewalker" McDermott* was born in Northern Alberta and lived in Lumby, British Columbia, from which he traveled throughout Canada and the United States in order to share his knowledge of traditional medicines. George learned about life on the land, picking medicines, and healing practices from his grandparents. George shared his knowledge of plant medicines and healing as well as his knowledge of land in healing the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects of people.

## **Elders' discussions of healers**

Each of these Elders has been named an Elder by their communities and each one has been given the role of healer by the Creator. They share their understandings of being healers and challenge some taken-for-granted assumptions of what it is to be a healer. But before exploring their ideas, let us explore the word 'elder'.

The word *elder* in English may be a reductive concept because, in some uses, it may not capture the complex and sacred understandings of the many different ways that Elders, teachers, and gifted peoples use their own gifts to work in our Indigenous communities for the good of the people. However, it is the closest English term to convey the aforementioned multi-faceted role.

The multi-faceted nature of the Elder's role is reflected in Indigenous languages. For example, in Nehiyawak (sometimes referred to as Woodland Cree or the four directions people) the word Kihtheyayak denotes "people who are called the mature ones, in reference to their age" (Metis Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008, p. 21). Mahtawasitwew "are different kinds of talking, like bringing the news, storytelling, telling stories or teachings" (p. 21). Mamahtoew "is a sacred person, one who can do paranormal things" (p. 21). Ohnatawewiwak are the healers. Ohnekanapew "is someone who sits at the head or at the front during a ceremony" (p. 21). Otsapahcikewenow "is a person who sees into the future, someone who performs ceremonies or conjures up spirits" (p. 21). Many of these very distinct ways of working in community may be intended when we use the term Elder (Iseke, 2010, p. 84) or when we use the term healer. In this study, the three Elders - Albert, George, and Tom – when introducing themselves, told stories of their roles as Elders and healers that begin to reveal some of these many facets, describing their own gifts or purposes.

George explains his beginnings, where he learned healing from his grandmother. His apprenticeship to the work of healer began as a young boy: "In this journey through life, I'd say it started many years ago with my grandmother up in the bush on her trap line... she always maintained her trap line, and there we worked". His grandmother prepared him by teaching him about the land and its medicines. He speaks of these experiences as the 'medicine trail'. He describes this trail, saying,

My name is George McDermott, and I am known as Lone Walker. Spirit of the Deer. I was born in the north end of Lesser Slave Lake in a little place called Shash Point. And that's where I had my first years. But my grandmother took me away from the family when I was four. And took me out and into the bush. And started to teach me the things about the bush. Finally for a while there I thought there was no other life but this way, I never realized the civilization was that way. So she learned me how to pick the herbs and the things that mother earth provides for all of us. And she taught me how to speak to them and to pray to them, and to make themselves strong so they may heal others, the things that you do on the medicine trail.

George challenged the conception of healer and the different conceptions of this term that he confronted in his medicine walk.

We can't even call ourselves healers, it doesn't matter if her arm is hanging here and I put it together and mended it, and I say I healed her. I broke the law. I broke the white mans law by saying I healed you. I diagnose sickness so that's where we walk, on that ledge to continue to do the things that we were meant to do by the Great Spirit himself...

George questioned the need for the 'credentialing of healing' as it applied to his work and the many challenges posed to the next generation and those wishing to take up this work, as there are no mechanisms

to certify them by our [ways]... What would I say to somebody if they said, you got to go to school to get a degree in order to do this? I'd have to start at day one. I spent my life doing it, so I didn't have time to get a piece of paper, so its a place where I'm concerned...

George identifies his work as his purpose, given to him by the Great Spirit. His work as healer emerged through a spiritual connection. Albert also characterizes the challenge of talking about the work of healers:

We don't ever say we can help you, we can doctor you to get your health back, get your luck back. We don't ever say that because it's not us. We're only doing this work for our Elders eh, their work to continue with it.

Albert further shared the challenge of doing this work and he came to a point where "three times I tried to quit this on account of people talking so much, [saying things like] he's doing wrong things, he's doing bad things. Well, finally, hurting my feelings." But each time Albert was thinking he might quit he saw one of his Elders and "I didn't even tell him what my thoughts are. He knows already. [He said] The Grandfathers say you've come too far with your work now. You cannot quit; you have to continue." So Albert has continued this work into his 80's despite the struggles and through his own health challenges.

George added, "if we healed 1000 people it doesn't matter to us, but if you lose one then we feel it. Somehow there's nothing in the world that could take this pain away. I don't wanna quit and yet I want to quit." George further added that, "we walk the trail of fire and the trail of tears." He explained that,

I was called someplace and ... there was a man there that was dying. I walked into the door and he said "is that you George?" I said "yeah"...He said "you come to take my pain away" and I said "yup". He came and hugged me, and that's when he died. I went outside and I called him the Great Spirit of a backstabbing son of a b... I didn't want to walk with him anymore if people die that way in pain and that's what I thought, and I was lost. Three days later I came back. I was prepared and put my tobacco out. I put my pipe out. I put everything out and I said "I'm sorry Great Spirit, I was hurting" and I said "Give me a sign if you want me to bury the pipe". But nothing happened and I picked up my stuff and went back away. But there's many times in this journey through life that I have felt these things, and I have shared it with many people that these people come to me as a healer.

Despite the many challenges that all of these healers have faced, they continue in their life work, helping others, performing ceremonies, undertaking healing practices, diagnosing illness, and using medicines to help.

Tom McCallum critiques the narrow image of Indigenous healers that has been perpetuated within the written literature. He states

I really want to emphasize that everyone is a healer: everyone has healing power. We have a very narrow perspective of what a healer is really about, and what has been written about in books is that people who know about medicines, people who have a pipe, people who run a sweat lodge, people who run a Sundance. These are the perceptions of what we call a healer and that's part of it. It's a very narrow perspective of what a healer is about.

Tom understands that the focus on healing - the medicines, pipe carriers, sweat lodge and Sundance ceremonies - is too narrow; healing is about the spiritual practices, which are something we do each and every day with each breath. Tom continues his discussion of healing.

The Creator put us here on this earth as a very powerful human being ... So we carry a very powerful gift each and every one of us. It might not manifest itself in a fashion of having to do with the physical medicines that we get from the earth. It might not have a fashion of running a sweat lodge. But there is much we do not understand about who we are and what we are; that's why it's so very important to find out who we are so that we understand what our gift is. Cause everyone has a gift, that's why we are put on this earth at a certain time with this certain group of people and how we fit with this group of people to fit into that puzzle. We have a very powerful – it's like a link in that chain. It's like, if that link is gone then it leaves an opening there. Once we finish our job, and when we finish our job, then that chain closes. That link is there; the gift is there, that we needed to bring to this earth.

Tom sees how all people have healing gifts and how each of us is responsible to understand those gifts and to learn to work with them, making spiritual connections to the earth, cosmos, and Creator. Each person has the responsibility to learn how to use their own healing and special gifts to fulfill one's purpose on the earth.

## **Outputs from working with healers: Film projects**

When you work with Elders and healers and their work is shared with you, it is with no surprise that some of their sharing goes into the spiritual realm. In Indigenous traditions from the Great Plains and within Nehiyawak (Cree) traditions, medicine wheel teachings are common. These teachings speak to the balance of the four quadrants (spiritual, emotional, physical and mental) and that there should be a balance within these aspects of one's life (Hart, 2002). That the spiritual dimension should be evident in any outputs produced in regard to the work with Elders then seems not only reasonable but necessary.

From the work with these Elders, three film projects emerged – each one documenting some aspect of the Elders' work. The first film, *Grandmothers of the Metis Nation*, includes Alma Desjarlais and two other Metis grandmothers (see discussions in Iseke, 2010, 2011; Iseke-Barnes, 2009; Iseke & Desmoulins, 2012). A second film entitled, *Understanding What Life is*



*About: Storytelling with Tom McCallum* (see discussions in Iseke, 2010; Iseke & Brennus, 2011) shares six stories in which Tom's engaging narratives help us understand the complex uses of storytelling as a community activity that educates, entertains, and increases community bonds. The third film is entitled, *How the Spirit Moves with Albert Desjarlais*<sup>1</sup>.

As an example of how spirituality was integrated into the films, in the film, *How the Spirit Moves with Albert Desjarlais*, the Sacred Stone Lodge, or Sweat Lodge, is explored as a place of healing and prayer. In this animated short film, we see the live action people enter the Sacred Stone Lodge and then the animated rocks (grandfathers and grandmothers) enter the lodge and the people are seen in their spirit form. We then see the animal spirits that help them heal; the bear, eagle, and buffalo spirits share their gifts with the participants in the lodge. A song of thanks can be heard as we see the spirits in the lodge. In the music we hear – in Nehiyawak (Cree language) – thanks for the bear, eagle, buffalo, and children. This film was inspired by Albert Desjarlais who concludes the film, sharing with viewers the need to respect the teachings and the sacred lodge<sup>2</sup>.

A typical film project generates a tremendous amount of film footage with only small amounts being used (often 10 to 15 percent) in the final version. Decisions regarding inclusion are based on what can be worked with visually. Some important stories may be too complex for a typical audience, require that too much contextual information be provided in order to understand the story, or may be excluded because they do not lend themselves to visual presentation (Iseke & Moore, 2011, p. 29).

This was the case for the many culturally rich stories told by Albert Desjarlais. His stories of the Nehiyawak ceremonial life required a deep understanding of Nehiyawak culture and traditions, which was beyond the understandings of most viewers. The only section of his story that I believed we could incorporate was his story of the sweat lodge. But even this story had an enormous amount of knowledge within it and demanded a lot of the listener. Even the initial 16 minute edited documentary was deemed too much for an inexperienced audience of youth. The question emerged, how could we honor the gifts that Albert Desjarlais had shared in a form that could be accessible to a young audience? I attended the ImagineNative Film and Media Festival (ImagineNative.com) in Toronto and viewed many Indigenous film makers' works and was inspired to create an animated film that reflected some of Albert Desjarlais' ideas, but in a way that was accessible for an audience of Indigenous youth that may or may not have knowledge of the sweat lodge. I wrote the script and an editor made a rough mock up with line drawings to show Albert. He saw the mock up and laughed at the crude drawings and made suggestions about how to change the film to better reflect his practices and teachings. The final film is fully

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<sup>1</sup> All of these films are available at [www.ouelderstories.ca](http://www.ouelderstories.ca)

<sup>2</sup> The filmmaker is thankful to Albert Desjarlais for his inspiring stories and for sharing his knowledge with her and also to Sherryl Sepegehamm, singer and songwriter, for sharing her creative talents and song in the film.

animated, except for a final excerpt of Albert explaining how you have to respect the lodge and its teachings.

The sharing of knowledge is a gift, and it is the filmmaker who takes on the responsibility of receiving and formatting that gift in the spirit in which it was intended. In this collaborative work, Elders pass on knowledge to specific people they trust so that the knowledge will be shared. A responsibility comes with this gift. Researchers and digital storytellers have the responsibility to ensure that the Elders are comfortable with the finished project. In this process of editing stories, the Elders were willing to listen and advise if they had specific questions or challenges, so it is the filmmaker's responsibility to check in with the Elders regarding what they are doing during the editing process. Elders do not necessarily have to see the edited clips at every stage of the process, but they need to know about the decision-making and the process. (Iseke & Moore, 2011, p. 31).

Albert and Tom stated many important things about the sweat lodge, healing practices, as well as spiritual journeys. It was not easy to determine what kind of stories to tell about the spiritual practices but it is important to do so to honor these Elders, to honor the traditions of the ancestors and teachers that have gone before, to communicate the practices so that they continue, to acknowledge that the traditions continue despite colonial realities, and because, ultimately, spirit is all we are.

## **Decolonization, the spiritual, and land**

From the Elders' words we can begin to examine the meanings and importance of the spiritual to Indigenous life. But in what way is the spiritual a part of a decolonizing practice and process? Tuck and Yang (2012) challenge us when they write that 'Decolonization is not a metaphor',

Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth (land, for shorthand, in this article)... In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage. (p. 5)

If we are to move beyond the assumption of land as property and to truly acknowledge the rich and complex understandings and relationships to land that have always existed, we need to return to spiritual traditions and to the relationships to land inherent in these spiritual traditions. The words of the Elders help us begin to understand some preliminary aspects of the nature of this relationship to land. When Elder Albert Desjarlais was asked about the rocks used in the Sacred Stone Lodge, he explained first that they are

Grandfather rock, that's the one that runs the lodge. Fire's the same thing, like the others. Strong. They're the ones that are powerful. The rock in the fire – the rock

himself – the story from way back when the Creator had created anything at all. I guess all of them got some kind of work to do. Whatever he creates for the people here eh, in this Canada. The rock was the last one I guess. Because he's not walking, he just sits still and that's, I guess, that's what he choose to do. The Creator didn't tell him, didn't give him no job I guess; I dunno, but that's when he said, since I don't walk, some day maybe I'll speak for people. Then if they want more help off me, they'll use me in the sweat lodge. So that's what he's doing yet. That's the story I know. Maybe some other people will tell you something else.

Albert further elaborates on the Shake Tent ceremony and the role of the one conducting the ceremony, as well as whose ceremony this is.

One of the ceremonies is called a Shake Tent ceremony. They say that's the only justice system that we knew on this earth was the shake tent ceremony. And yet, we as human beings did not define those things. It's the spirits that come through that Shake Tent ceremony and define those things for us when we have an issue. It can be resolved there. We can be given a direction and guidance of how to resolve that. The person running that Shake Tent - the Shake Tent does not belong to that person. That's-- oh yeah he might have went and bought the canvas, he might've went and got the trees and shaped them and everything, but they don't belong to him. It belongs to the earth. It belongs to the spirits. It belongs to the Creator. What he is, is a conductor. He gives. He is given. It's like you're driving a bus. You're the driver. That's all you are, is just a driver. And ah, you drive that and you facilitate the process of calling in the spirits so that they can come in through that fashion to be able to address these people here.

What these Elders are talking about are epistemological, ontological and cosmological relationships to land and spirit. Tom provides another sweat lodge experience that elucidates his experiences.

There's another story that I wanted to share with you. [In] about 1985, we were in a sweat and the grandfathers came in and I was a helper to this medicine women and I had a pail of water. I was splashing water on the grandfathers and then this thing grabbed me, behind me, on my braid. It had three claws and they were furry. ... It twisted like that and I went like this and right away I thought "No. I better not do that. I better just let them do what they want to do". So they just dunked me inside that pail and pulled me up again. Of course that pail is kinda cool 'cause there is water in there but when they brought me up again the heat hit from the sweat. They dunked me back in there again. The third time they dunked me in, they held me in there and I thought I wouldn't be able to breathe again, but it was ok. I don't know how long they held me there but it's like I can breathe. I had no problem breathing at all, so I couldn't understand why they did that to me. What was the significance to that? And that's some 20 years ago and it's starting to unfold now. I'm starting to understand now, and it all has to do with the vibrations – vibrating at a frequency and becoming one with the object, with what we call an

object, which is not really an object at all according to scientist people. Go into physics. There's no such thing as an object. It's all energy. Energy changing. Patterns. Patterns of energy interacting.... Scientists' ... used to think that an atom was a solid... [But] if you get close enough they disappear. There's really nothing. It's just a pattern of energy. ...What keeps 'em from falling apart and keeps them together is energy and that's why we can't go through them cause of that energy. Now if we could find that frequency that they are vibrating at ... then we can go through that energy because we are then one with that energy. ... Medicine people are the ceremonial people that do that. They altar their reality or vibration level so that they walk under water – they can walk through walls – do different things like that. They have an understanding of that and that's the formula ... we need to understand ... The way that its done from the native perspective and the language that is used is not the language of quantum physics but speaking Cree. I don't know how you would say quantum physics in Cree. ... We look at things through the form of a relationship, relationship with families. So we used the words like grandmother and grandfather and they picked those ones that can do more things than us, who can do things that we can't. But they can show us how, once we make that connection which is part of the star lodge that we talked about and inside the sweat lodge also you can experience things like that and in other ceremonies.

Tom further elaborates on the power of the experience of a sweat lodge:

But the only other way that I know of you can understand is if you go to ceremonies. ... It's not so much a thought any more, it's actually a state of being so from that state of being. ... I can sit here to tell you about a sweat lodge. I can tell you what it does, what its done for me, how it affects me and everything. But you will never, ever feel it because it's a thought - transforming one thought to another thought-form and you're taking that data into your thought and trying to equate it to some experience that you possibly might have had in your life, or you can imagine you're imaging something but you don't really experience it. But if you go sit in a sweat lodge then you will experience it. So that transcends language that experiences itself. It's like music transcends language because it's a feeling. Music's a feeling. It's a vibration so that way we have to be able to work somehow with what we call vibrations. That rattle that you shake creates a vibration, changes how you feel. The drum does the same thing.

So these objects, the drum, the rattle, the sweat lodge and even our human bodies are all energy and all vibrations. When we enter the ceremony, when we play or listen to the drum or rattle, or when we are present in ceremony, our vibrations change and our whole being can change. When we develop to a state of awareness of relationships to the cosmos we can become aware of this change of state and can learn to work with these vibrations, our own energy, and begin to be able to change states. Ceremony is a metaphor for change, a spiritual practice, a way of living, reflective of the relationship to cosmos, and a transformational space.

## **Discussion on decolonization and spirituality**

Many teachings I acknowledge were shared in this research process. Leroy Little Bear (2000) explains that Indigenous peoples engage in "renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and re-singing of the songs, [which] are all humans' part in the maintenance of creation" (p. 78). These practices sustain communities and cultures. Tuck and Yang (2012) share Yupiaq scholar, Oscar Kawagley's assertion, "We know that Mother Nature has a culture, and it is a Native culture" (2010, p. xiii), and this directs us to think through land as "more than a site *upon* which humans make history or as a location that accumulates history" (Goeman, 2008, p.24).

When we consider the grandfather rocks in the sweat lodge ceremony and the ongoing role of this and other ceremonies in the lives of community, and their roles in culture and maintaining creation in all its forms, we disrupt the assumptions that land is a possession, land can be owned, and that it is merely a place to make history, when indeed it is a place to live the ongoing history of Indigenous peoples.

In regard to the sweat lodge ceremony, Albert suggests that rocks are spirits that work for the people to tell their story and to heal them within the sweat lodge. Beck and Spielman (2006) share the teachings of the head of the Medewewin lodge from Anishnaabe peoples about the sweat lodge:

Benton-Banai tells of the sweat lodge ceremony, made to re-create the event of re-entering mother earth, whereby entering the lodge to pray and receive a ceremonious cleansing carried out within the steam from the heated 'Grandfather' stones in the centre of the lodge, is used as a time for spiritual renewal. The earth as mother is the nurturer of life and purifies those who enter the lodge for healing. (p. 198)

Pfug (1996) suggests that the role of grandfather rocks is at the centre of the circle of healing in ceremony, encircled by the family, the clans, the community, all Indigenous peoples, the ancestors, the animals and plants, the earth, sun, moon, and all relations. "It's everyone's job to keep these relationships held together, across all the circles, and from their own place as center" (Pfug, p. 490). The words of the Elders suggest the importance of these relationships by even simply using the words grandfather rock in their Indigenous languages. Pfug (1996) suggests that all parts of creation, in all phases, are related and must be honored, including "the sun, shining for many years on the wood which is used in the fire to heat the stones for the sweat lodge, has imparted to that wood much of its power and life" (p. 491). Grinnell (1919) described the heat of the stones and the fire representing the sun as the center of heat and this power is shared with those in the sweat lodge. When one enters into the ceremonies and connects with the power of the land and all relations, it is no longer possible to continue to be in a colonized state. One is freed by the grandfathers, the spirits, and the connections to Creator to live in a decolonized state.

Another teaching is that ceremonies come from Creator, not the conductor of a ceremony, and the spirits who are Creator's helpers do the work for the Creator in the ceremony. Likewise, Pfüg (1996) suggests that in healing practices the Elders are given gifts of tobacco or cloth "to honour the religious expert's position as initiating donor" (p. 493) rather than to acknowledge them as healer. Their role is to work with Creator and to facilitate rather than to cure. As Indigenous notions of decolonization and land disrupt the notion of ownership and possession, so too the ownership and possession of ceremony by its practitioners are disrupted. The ceremonies are from and for Creator and those engaged in the ceremonial process are part of maintaining creation by their interactions in the ceremony. This is a profoundly decolonizing action – to put oneself into the hands of Creator and to allow oneself to engage as spirit.

Tom's story of his incredible experiences, of being dunked in water by something that grasped him, is reminiscent of Martinez (2004) recounting his experiences in the sweat lodge and "something flying around me... I felt feathers or a wing touching my back and head. This feeling was so overwhelming that it was just too much for me. I trembled and my bones turned to ice... I don't know what got into me, but I was no longer myself. I started to cry" (p. 91). Inside ceremony, one is no longer a colonial subject, or even a resistor to colonization. One becomes spirit and one with Creator, and one's understandings of life are shifted. This undoing of the colonial by the act of ceremony is a decolonizing act.

Pfüg (1996) suggests that in the sweat one may be shown that their life is not yet together, that there is more to reconcile, more work to do to live a good life (p. 499). While the specific experiences may be unique, the important aspect of these stories is that the experiences of working with the spirits is transformative and teaches a lesson. Shiff and Moore (2006) suggest the importance of connecting to spirit first and that doing so in the sweat lodge ceremony "creates a positive change in participants' self-reported sense of connection to life" and that "when individuals connect to the love within themselves they will feel connected to all things outside of themselves" (p. 61). Further the sacredness of relationship to all of creation is reflected in ceremony (Brave Heart, 2001; Brown, 1953, 1989; Bucko, 1998; Shiff & Moore, 2006). Hernandez-Avila (1996) suggests that:

The circle within the lodge is the re-creation of the cosmos, so before the entire creation, you say what you have to say, do what you have to do, pray in the manner that you have to pray, cry if you have to, collapse if you have to. No one judges you, or brings anything up to you afterward. It just happens that we might hear another's prayers in the lodge; it just happens that one person or another may be having a particularly hard time, for any number of reasons, and the rest of us support her (or him) with our prayers. Each of us knows that the next time it might be any one of us having the hard time. We know that we do not want the details of our life divulged in public; we are in the sweat lodge because that is our safe space; it is our place of trust. And so I choose not to write about the sweat lodge ceremony, except in a general manner. (p. 332-333).

To write about the ceremony in detail may well disrupt the transformative aspects of ceremony by taking us back to the intellectual realm when we are really talking about the spiritual realm. Remaining in the spiritual realm as much as possible allows one to be free of the colonial impositions and the illusions it creates.

Albert shared the importance of sustaining the ceremonies and keeping them within communities so that they can continue to be used in the future to heal and to help. Blau (1964) talks about a ceremony in which tobacco is placed in the fire and prayers are spoken, such as “listen to the pleas of thy people who beseech thee for beneficial things and for wisdom. Give us the power to maintain your ceremonies faithfully. We thank thee for preserving all things” (p. 100). The powers of ceremonies to ask for guidance and support from Creator are important parts of the ceremonies. “The elders and spiritual leaders do not merely ask people to rid themselves of their problems and show them how through their own behavioral example, they also use the problems constructively as a means of total socio-cosmic renewal (Pfüg, 1996, p. 510). Further, the role of the Elder is as “the keepers of traditional knowledge and the teachers of how to use that power” (Pfüg, 1996, p. 497). The importance of the ceremonies and passing them to the next generation begins in childhood, so that “the child began to realize that wisdom was all about and everywhere and that there were many things to know” (Martinez, 2004, p. 90). The disruption of the colonial in ceremony thus begins in childhood and continues as a lifelong journey.

The Elders warn of the importance of respecting the ceremonies and working in respectful ways within the ceremonies. Pfüg (1996) shares how “misuse of power can become harmful, warned Black Bear, if this closed and circular relationship is not reciprocal in its purpose. He continued: A person’s gift cannot be allowed to become another’s power to do bad things” (p. 493). Colonization has impacted the ceremonies by designating them as ‘magic’ or ‘voodoo’, or affects the mindsets of those who bring it into the ceremony. But going to ceremony amongst those who believe in them and know how to work with them is a decolonizing act that disrupts the colonial interpretation.

Given the reality of colonization and oppressions of ceremonial and spiritual practices, there is reticence in writing about ceremonies and traditions (Hernandez-Avila, 1996). But Hernandez-Avila suggests

I could describe how the lodge is built, and according to what tradition; how many rocks are used and what kind, and how they are heated; how the ceremony is structured; what kind of songs are sung, if any; how the prayers are said and in what language; what the order of speakers is and why; what each one of them says, and so on. But even if I were to write a disclaimer in such an essay, warning people not to imitate this Native American "woman-centered ritual," and even though in the world of academia I might feel I had not done anything improper in describing it, I know that in the Native American community, among the elders, I could not say the same thing. Because I am certain that just as there would be readers who would be truly respectful of the information, there are those who would feel that my description of details gave them permission to appropriate. Worse than that, I would have betrayed the confidence of the women in the sweat

lodge circle that I described, because my intention within the circle of ceremony would have been not to pray, but to record and tell. (p. 332-333)

Acknowledging that we continue to live with colonization and its mindset is acknowledging that we need to ensure our involvement with ceremony is respectful and does not slip into the colonial orientation so prevalent today. If the ceremony is to have power and the participants are to truly experience the transformations possible within it, they must leave their colonial mindsets and allow themselves to engage in this decolonizing act. The fear amongst Indigenous peoples about explaining the ceremonies and sharing them is that appropriation of these traditions, and the objectification that this appropriation relies on (Henderson-Avila, 1996).

Another concern in regard to sweat lodge and other ceremonies is with false ceremonialists who abuse their circumstances to exploit the naive and unknowledgeable (Hernandez-Avila, 1996, p. 347). Deloria (1992) also suggests that, while other peoples in the world (particularly Scandinavians) have used something akin to a sweat, it is important to recognize that the sweat lodge is used as purification before more deeply significant ceremonies. The sweat lodge ceremony has also begun to be used in many institutional and community contexts for purification and healing but there are many questions about whether the kind of transformations Tom spoke of are facilitated within these spaces given the colonizing orientations there (Brady, 1995; Colmant & Merta, 1999; Hall, 1985; Jackson, 2002; Nicholson & Scribe, 2007; Schiff & Moore, 2006; Waldram, 1997; Wilson, 2004).

A final significant teaching shared by Tom is that we are all vibrations and in ceremony we alter our vibrations and the spirits help us to do this. The ceremonial practice of altering vibrations helps us learn to be different and to connect to our understandings of the world at new levels and in new ways. But these understandings are difficult to comprehend if you only take these ideas into your conscious mind and into your intellect. You need to experience these things in order to truly understand even a little of what is being said here. Music is a space where we can connect to the idea of vibrations, how vibrations change, and that by changing vibrations we can alter our realities. Through music we can develop initial understandings of the rudiments of this process perhaps in preparation for the ceremonial understandings yet to come. Music then can be decolonizing in that it allows one to begin to open to the process of transformation.

## **Discussion on decolonization and spirituality**

The context in which Indigenous ceremonies and traditions were attacked, to which each of the Elders alludes, was within the colonial condition set up within a settler society. The ongoing oppression we experience in regard to sharing culture is a continuation of this colonial condition. Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest that

Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently



understood and enacted; that is, *all* of the land, and not just symbolically. This is precisely why decolonization is necessarily unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity. (p. 7)

These Elders are talking about living out, experiencing, and sharing the relationships to land and cosmos that ‘have always already been’. There is an unbroken line from Elders to their fathers and mothers, to grandfathers and grandmothers, and to the spiritual world. Their ongoing work of sustaining these relations is located within the recognition that the changes and realities of the colonial project have impacted all of us. Their work is certainly more challenging today within the ongoing realities of colonialism and its many forms (Tuck and Yang, 2012). In sustaining these spiritual practices, the Elders are not allowing the colonial project to undo the work of their predecessors. They may struggle at times to resist the colonial realities that impose themselves, but the Elders continue this relationship to land, spirit, and cosmos.

Another challenge alluded to within this paper is the challenge in making films with Elders in order to honor the work of the Elders who share their stories, with the full knowledge that videos are being recorded, and that their stories will be shared broadly. The films produced in this research and production program respond to these needs including the production of resources by and with Indigenous peoples for our communities. These productions address the needs for change in communities, reflect and express Indigenous knowledge and community needs and viewpoints, and “safeguard community values and norms” (Iseke & Moore, 2011, p. 21).

Harold Prins (2011) describes the indigenization of visual media as the appropriation and transformation of technologies to meet the cultural and political needs of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous digital storytelling integrates Indigenous stories and sacred places and artifacts in innovative ways, is created by and for Indigenous communities, addresses change, reflects community knowledge and perspectives, and enables negotiation of the community’s social priorities. It creates opportunities to understand political activism and reflects the cultural mandates of communities (Iseke & Moore, 2011). Prins (2011) points out that Indigenous media parallels the focus on writing back and enables the Indigenous activist to “‘shoot back’ reversing the colonial gaze” (in Iseke & Moore, 2011, p. 32). Further, Wilson and Stewart suggest that

Indigenous media are the first line of negotiation of sovereignty issues as well as a discursive locus for issues of control over land and territory, subjugation and dispossession under colonization, cultural distinctiveness and the question of ethnicity and minority status, questions of local and traditional knowledge, self-identification and recognition by others, and notion of Indigeneity and Indigenism themselves (in Iseke & Moore, 2011, p. 33).

The Elders want to share this information with the children and with a broader world to disrupt the colonial mindset that sees their work as black magic and to ensure that these teachings, traditions, ceremonies, and life ways continue. The work of the Elders is decolonizing as it reminds us of who we are, where we have come from, and helps us reestablish the connections to

ourselves, our ancestors, our spiritual practices, our spirits, the ways of our people and the land. This decolonizing is no small task.

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