Primary Research

Restoring Our Roots: Land-Based Community by and for Indigenous Youth

Elizabeth Fast, Melanie Lefebvre, Christopher Reid, Brooke Wahsontiostha Deer, Dakota Swiftwolfe, Moe Clark, Vicky Boldo, Juliet Mackie, Rupert Mackie, Karen Tutanuak

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge gathered about the impacts of land-based teachings on Indigenous youth is limited. Many Indigenous people and government commissions have pointed to targeted assimilation and land theft as central to historical and ongoing collective dissociation of Indigenous Peoples from their ways of being in relation with the land. It is thus paramount that Indigenous youth be given the opportunities to (re)connect with their cultures in safe, accessible spaces/places. Demonstrating the many ways learning from the land is beneficial for Indigenous youth, the Restoring Our Roots participatory action research project contributes to the knowledge base in this area to centre Indigeneity and reclaim our cultures by enacting Indigenous methodologies and pedagogies. An Indigenous youth advisory committee developed a four-day land-based retreat, held in July 2018, that focused on (re)connecting Indigenous youth to land-based teachings and ceremony. In interviews following the retreat, youth participants spoke about positive changes related to identity, belonging, well-being, and feeling free from violence in this space that engaged land-based teachings led by Elders, Knowledge Holders, and youth themselves. Some Indigenous youth who identify as Two-Spirit, non-binary, and/or LGBTQIA+ attended the retreat and shared how important it is to have safe spaces that are inclusive of diverse gender roles and identities. Restoring Our Roots created an inclusive community of support, sharing, and learning for Indigenous youth, extending into participants' everyday lives in the city. This project has since grown into Land As Our Teacher, a five-year research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, that explores benefits of land-based pedagogies for Indigenous youth.

AUTHOR INFO

Elizabeth Fast, Métis, Associate Professor, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Email: Elizabeth.fast@concordia.ca

Melanie Lefebvre, Métis, graduate student, Concordia University

Christopher Reid, graduate student, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, advisor to Restoring our Roots project

Brooke Wahsontiostha Deer, Kahnien'kahá:ka, youth advisory committee, Restoring our Roots

Dakota Swiftwolfe, Cree, research assistant and youth advisory committee, Restoring our Roots

Moe Clark, Métis, Restoring our Roots project collaborator and interdisciplinary artist

Vicky Boldo, Métis, cultural advisor, Concordia University, and Restoring our Roots cultural advisor

Juliet Mackie, Métis, youth advisory committee, Restoring our Roots

Rupert Mackie, Métis, youth advisory committee, Restoring our Roots

Karen Tutanuak, Inuk, youth advisory committee, Restoring our Roots

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Introduction

Our Indigenous traditions ask that we locate ourselves in our research, and as authors of this chapter we would like to begin by acknowledging that this project's preparatory work took place on the ancestral, unceded territories of the Kanien'kehá:ka, people of the flint and keepers of the eastern door (so-called Eastern Canada), and that the retreat itself took place on the uncended lands of the Abenaki. Our collaborators are Inuit, First Nations, and Métis, some identifying as members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.

Many urban Indigenous youth are living experiences of disconnection from their communities due to colonialism and the barriers it presents to reconnection. For them, and for those who are open to sharing their own experiences of connection with other youth, the benefits of land-based learning range from centring Indigeneity and confronting settler colonial forms of education to regenerating intergenerational teachings and increasing the spiritual and cultural well-being of participants (Fast, 2014; Radu et al., 2014; Tuck et al., 2014). Emerging scholarship has shown that urban and rural Indigenous youth who may have been distanced from their cultures and communities due to displacement, family separation, and colonial constructions of identity, among other reasons, are looking for ways to reconnect to their cultures and have few opportunities to do so in ways that are connected to the land (Carriere, 2015; Fast, 2014).

Conceptions of "land" and "authentic" Indigenous experience are often relegated to imaginings of tundra, bodies of water, and acres of woodland (Peters and Andersen, 2013), and yet, with over 40% of the Indigenous population in Canada living in urban centres (Anderson, 2019), a broadening of how we interact with and understand land would be beneficial. While taking safety into account, reimagining and interacting with cities as sites of cultural connection and spiritual practice, where we seek out and honour those pockets of visible "land" and also remember and revitalize what lies under the asphalt, can bring healing and (re)connection for many (Simpson, 2014; Peters & Lafond, 2013). Too often, urban Indigenous youth in particular, and those in the margins especially, feel that teachings and ceremony are out of their reach (Fast,

2014; Wexler, 2009), when in fact, as urban Indigenous Peoples, we are surrounded by those things, albeit sometimes hidden, that inspired and informed our ancestors to manifest the ceremonies and teachings we experience today.

In much of the current literature on land-based education, the definition of land is broad and inclusive of urban spaces (Tuck et al., 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014). In a special issue on “land education,” Tuck et al. (2014) frame land education as including Indigenous cosmologies. They explain that land education acknowledges land not only in its materiality but also in its spiritual, emotional, and intellectual dimensions, and that it holds interconnected and interdependent relationships (Styres et al., 2013; Tuck et al., 2014). Manulani Meyer (2008) writes that “one does not simply learn about land, we learn best *from* land” (p. 219).

There has been little knowledge gathered to date about the impacts of land-based teaching and learning on Indigenous youth, their families, Elders, and Indigenous students, especially in urban contexts. Despite this lack of formal research, our research team recognizes that Indigenous land-based experiential living and learning is happening, and that it is being done outside a research-based context that documents experiences and disseminates findings. Indigenous youth, Elders, community members, artists, researchers, and government commissions have all pointed to targeted assimilation and land theft as central to the historical and ongoing collective dissociation of Indigenous Peoples from their governance structures, economies, communities, languages, ceremonies, and subsistence practices—their ways of being in relation with the land. This is why it is paramount that Indigenous youth be given opportunities to (re)connect with their cultures.

The overarching goal of the Restoring our Roots research project is to better understand and formally document the benefits of land-based teachings for Indigenous youth and their families, particularly those who may not have access to these teachings as a result of colonial disruptions of identities and relationships, and through calculated assimilation, urbanization, and displacement. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) reminds us that “Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual traditions unless it comes through the land, unless it occurs in an Indigenous context using Indigenous processes” (p. 9). Through conversational interviews with youth participants, this article focuses on how the youth experienced the different aspects of the land-based programming in relation to their sense of identity, well-being, and belonging to community.

Educational research integrating land education should emphasize “acute analyses of settler colonialism as a structure, a set of relations and conditions” (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 13). Tuck et al. (2014) explain that land education “puts Indigenous epistemological and ontological accounts of land at the center, including Indigenous understandings of land, Indigenous language in relation to land, and Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism,” and that it “attends to constructions and storying of land and repatriation by Indigenous Peoples, documenting and advancing Indigenous agency and land rights” (p. 13). A main finding from one review of the literature on land-based education concluded that decolonization must involve forms of education that reconnect Indigenous Peoples to land and to the social

relations, knowledges, and languages that arise from the land (Wildcat et al., 2014). Additionally, there needs to be greater space given to reflections on the intersections between gender, spirituality, and decolonizing approaches to land-based learning, as well as to identifying and creating sources of funding for such initiatives (Wildcat et al., 2014).

Land-based education also provides a platform for more holistic understandings of physical and mental health. The World Health Organization (WHO) reflects a more holistic understanding of health and “extends beyond the traditional Western biomedical paradigm and defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2007).

In *An Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People*, Hunt (2016) notes that Indigenous people’s “social determinants of health are rooted in colonialism which has disrupted [Indigenous] cultures, languages, land rights, and self-determination” (p. 11). With this in mind, Indigenous youth have identified relationships to land, culture, and community as key social determinants of their own health (Lines et al., 2019). Furthermore, relationship to land as a determinant of health and well-being is not restricted to rural- or reserve-based Indigenous youth. Urban Indigenous youth have also identified relationship to land, even in the context of a city, as a source of resilience, strength, and well-being (Hatala et al., 2020). Land-based education and research grounded in Indigenous ethics provide an opportunity to directly challenge the root causes of health inequities—namely, the historical and ongoing violence of colonialism—which has been identified as a necessary component of any effective approach to health promotion (McPhail-Bell et al., 2015; Mundel & Chapman, 2010; Stanley et al., 2020). This highlights land-based education and methods as an important avenue to be investigated within health research and beyond.

There are distinct needs in terms of reconnecting and finding safe spaces for Two-Spirit, non-binary, and LGBTQIA+ Indigenous youth, urban Indigenous youth, and Indigenous youth who have been disconnected from their families and communities through processes of assimilation and separation, such as the child welfare system, often experienced over multiple generations (Fast, 2014; Fast et al., 2019; Hunt, 2016). 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people specifically are at a much higher risk of facing violence and trauma throughout their lives, and they also experience more negative health outcomes than non-2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people (Balsam et al., 2004; Chae & Walters, 2009; Fraser Health Authority, 2015). The suicide rate of 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous youth is not decreasing, and there is a need to create safer spaces, especially with the shift to conservatism in many Indigenous communities, including tendencies to make traditional teachings and ceremonies binary rather than inclusive (Wilson & Laing, 2018).

While “oral histories reflect widespread respect and honour for Two-Spirit people,” the present situation is one where Two-Spirit people are often met with “targeted violence in their communities” (Hunt, 2016, pp. 7, 9), as well as exclusion from ceremony and community as a whole (Hunt, 2016; Meyercook & Labelle, 2004). Two-Spirit youth in particular might feel the need to move to cities because of hostile heteronormativity imposed

by colonial influences. As a result, they require spaces of belonging that understand their cultural and other identities (Fast, 2014). However, Two-Spirit youth who relocate to cities still face violence and discrimination, highlighting the need for urban Indigenous programming that is created in partnership with Two-Spirit youth (Depelteau & Giroux, 2015). The importance of Two-Spirit inclusive and specific programming has been highlighted in Meyercook & Labelle's (2004) interviews with Two-Spirit youth:

Part of the importance of [Two-Spirit inclusive and specific programming] is to reverse isolation. By sharing and meeting more people, we are able to gain strength in our individual lives. These gatherings also provide us with an opportunity to come together and mirror the kind of balance keeping and inclusive values we are calling on our communities to demonstrate. If we can't begin within ourselves, how can we expect any other outside entity to "get it together"? (p. 46)

In interviews with Two-Spirit people, Brotman et al. (2002) found that people exploring their Two-Spirit identity created the positive effect of an "understand[ing] [that they] have roles within [their] community" (p. 76). Having a strong sense of identity and history has been shown to be "an important factor in supporting resilience and well-being" in Indigenous youth (Wexler, 2009, p. 272). Chae and Walters (2009) have shown that among 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people, high levels of positive identity actualization serve as a protective factor against the negative health outcomes exacerbated by discrimination. Land-based education could offer an important resource to these youth, who may struggle the most to find places of belonging and cultural connection grounded in decolonized notions of gender and sexual identity. Furthermore, by bringing together queer and Indigenous scholarship, research can move into actions that challenge ways of knowing and being that are entrenched in colonial social relations. The praxis of decolonization and queering is "active, interconnected, critical, and everyday practices that take place within and across diverse spaces and times" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 156), such as land-based, experiential learning.

Methods

This study is grounded in Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; S. Wilson, 2008). Briefly, Indigenous methodologies and pedagogies are located within Indigenous worldviews and community ethics, where researchers are guided by core values of respect, reciprocity, and relationality (S. Wilson, 2008). These frameworks ensure that research is done responsibly in partnership with community, and that it results in relevant and concrete benefits for the community in question (Kovach, 2015; S. Wilson, 2008). Principal investigator Elizabeth Fast was awarded a SSHRC Insight Development Grant in 2016. An Indigenous youth and community advisory committee was recruited to oversee the grant and worked for two years to conceive and implement the inaugural Restoring Our Roots: Land-Based Retreat for Indigenous Youth, held in July 2018. Ethics approval was received from Concordia University.

Youth on the advisory committee not only participated in programming, but also played an integral role in collaboratively shaping pedagogical content; examining intentions and actions surrounding research; creating ethical best practices for inclusivity and safe spaces, solidarity, and safety; overseeing grants; and leading projects based on the needs of their communities. Youth committee involvement in the research process embodies the required community ethics in Indigenous and decolonizing pedagogies and methodologies (Simpson, 2014; S. Wilson, 2008).

Over the course of four days, the retreat provided urban Indigenous youth the opportunity to connect, learn, and grow on the land in a culturally supportive and empowering environment. Participants were selected to participate through an open call to urban Indigenous not-for-profit organizations, college and university Indigenous student centres, and our kinship networks. They were asked to write a short description of where they were from, including their relationship to their communities of origin, and why they felt they could benefit from the retreat.

The research aspect of the gathering was meant to assess the impact of teaching histories of colonialism to Indigenous youth in a way that supported them in responding with their own stories of resilience, ultimately leading to a strengthening of cultural identity(ies). The goal of this portion of the project was to better understand how taking part in land-based teachings with other Indigenous youth impacts those involved, and particularly to see if it helped them feel more comfortable continuing on their personal journeys of cultural reconnection.

The advisory committee wanted the research component to feel connected to the retreat and devised several methods for gathering data on how the participants were experiencing the teachings and activities. During the course of the gathering, a video camera (i.e., a speaker's corner) was set up on site, and youth were invited to answer open-ended questions that were on display near the camera. On day two of the retreat there was an arts-based session where youth participants were invited to make a mixed-media collage in response to their experiences with the "blanket exercise," and to speak about their collage on camera if they wished.

Post-retreat, youth were invited to take part in a longer discussion, through a conversational method using a semi-structured interview guide, about how they experienced the teachings. These conversations were audiotaped, and youth were compensated \$50 each for their participation. We also held a sharing circle with members of the youth advisory committee to hear their experiences as collaborators in the co-creation of the programming and research design, as well as how they experienced the programming as participants with dual roles.

Led by Elders and in collaboration with artists, community leaders, storytellers, and other youth, the retreat involved several components, including cultural workshops, ceremony, and arts-based activities. Some of these activities were teachings about fire and the four sacred medicines, Sweat Lodge teachings and building with two separate ceremonies, a Sunrise ceremony each day, a fancy-shawl (powwow) dancing workshop, storytelling with Elders, a medicine walk, and the blanket exercise followed by sharing circles. These activities were meant to inspire the celebration and continuum of cultural transmission, land-based teachings, creative exchange, and ceremony. One Elder came from the local Abenaki territory, and there

were a number of other participating Elders who were connected to the primary researcher and collaborators (mainly Plains Cree and Métis). Many of the teachings were from a Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) perspective.

While the retreat had an overall structure and agenda, participants could pick and choose which workshops they wanted to attend, while taking their own capabilities into account, and could spend their free time however they saw fit (e.g., swimming, mingling with the other youth, hiking, or spending time on their own). Over and above this, many invited Elders chose to spend more time with the participants/group and were invited to participate in whatever activities they wanted, supporting youth to learn from and connect with the Elders in a genuine and natural way. Throughout the retreat, tobacco and cloth were always available to the youth as a way to give thanks to Creator; as a mode of honouring and exchange when asking something from the land, such as harvesting logs for the Sweat Lodge or cedar boughs; and as an item they could use to make offerings to the Elders whenever they wanted to ask for guidance or knowledge.

At the core of the retreat were cultural teachings and the acknowledgement that colonialism tried/tries to strip that away; however, instead of focusing on that colonial history, the retreat focused on cultural awareness and interconnected relationships (not only between people and experiences, but also between people and land). This shifted the conversation of Canadian colonialism from one of victimization to one that highlighted the resilience and strength of Indigenous youth and Indigenous Peoples and cultures.

Results

Prior to the retreat, youth expressed pre-existing shame, a desire to feel belonging, and a sense of exclusion from ceremony due to various barriers, such as gender identity, lack of access to transportation and funding, school commitments, absence of relationships with Elders, and a general fear of not knowing how to participate. In contrast, many of the youth spoke about how they felt safe and listened to during the land-based retreat. Being in a safe space and on the land helped the youth manage pre-existing shame and fear of judgment by inviting them into a place of empowerment. The youth spoke about having always wanted opportunities to spend time learning from Elders, participating in ceremonies, and sharing with other Indigenous youth. The themes resulting from the gathering were the following:

- inclusion
- accessibility
- disconnection
- reconnection
- teachings
- transformation

Inclusion

Youth shared that in their lives before the retreat, they often felt excluded from ceremony; they felt they did not belong and had to hide themselves or pretend to be something other than who they were. Upon arrival at the retreat, youth felt welcomed and accepted.

Participant “M” spoke about navigating ceremony as an Indigenous trans non-binary youth, how simply being welcomed as he is during ceremony was a positive experience, and that his inclusion and participation led him to become comfortable identifying as Two-Spirit:

I find in any situation when I’m met with somebody who’s transphobic ... at the worst I’m super uncomfortable and want to leave, don’t want to be there. ... I don’t feel like I can share everything about me and I sort of have to dull myself down a lot. And I felt like especially with ceremony and [the retreat] being very healing oriented, that would have taken away from it for me. ... I didn’t feel like I had to pretend to be something I’m not in order to participate fully. ... I’m very comfortable with identifying with being non-binary and trans and at that point I really wasn’t sure if the word Two-Spirit was good for me, and coming out of it I was like: I think that’s okay for me.

Participant “C” felt welcomed and included, even though she lacked knowledge of teachings and ceremony, which in the past had led to feelings of shame and judgment:

As soon as I arrived, I was ... warmly welcomed ... everything was very familiar with everyone. It felt like family. Even the people that I’ve seen for the first time ... it was very calm. It was very familiar. And comforting. ... Sunrise ceremonies I had never done. ... I never felt judged about not knowing when something was happening. That was a big thing. ... I don’t feel very knowledgeable or culturally skilled in most of these kinds of things. ... Seeing it happen and experiencing it was very much a learning experience and it was a very comfortable one.

“J” described the community that formed at the retreat as accepting her without judgment, and the like-minded peers were grappling with the same issues:

I think that’s why the retreat was so special to me. ... I was just totally absorbed by everybody ... it was like I’ve always been there ... the community aspect of it was a big pull for me. And I knew that I would meet people who wouldn’t make me doubt myself or my fears or anxieties, like everybody made me, kind of validated everything that I was feeling already. Made me feel a little bit more solid.

Cultivating spaces of inclusion and safety, where gender-fluid youth are not only welcomed but cherished as holding unique and important perspectives, will move them beyond colonial thinking toward critical stewardship and governance roles in their communities as they claim their positions at the forefront of imagining alternative futures that hold social and ecological justice.

Accessibility

Many urban Indigenous youth search for opportunities to participate in ceremony (some for the first time), connect with the land, and gather with other Indigenous youth. Although the desire to learn and experience traditional teachings exists, accessibility to opportunities in the urban setting, as well as on their remote home reserves/communities, pose a challenge for such reasons as funding, transportation, scheduling, commitments at school and work that do not allow for seasonal ceremony breaks, an absence of relationships to Elders, shame, and fear.

Feelings about access to community, access to peer support, and belonging were expressed by “M,” as well as the desire to take that experience back to his life in the city, post retreat:

I think definitely being around a bunch of other Indigenous youth who are in similar situations so I'm not the odd one out [was great]. I'm not the only one who's like shit out of luck on connecting with family ... that was really nice ... having access to ceremony and having that experience under my belt and then ... bonding with other Indigenous youth and feeling acceptance from them. It's kind of like some external validation which is really really nice so I don't feel like I'm just making shit up ... and then making me able to not feel weird about participating in Restoring Our Roots retreat ... that feedback loop is very affirming.

“D” expressed some of the logistical factors that have kept him from ceremony in the past on his home reserve, as well as his appreciation of having access to ceremony and teachings at the retreat:

If we look at it from a practical way, like getting there can be sometimes an issue because it costs money. ... Then there is the matter of scheduling. ... I can't schedule a ceremony but, like, I have to work with when that ceremony is. ... [At the retreat] the education that I got first from our teachers, our Elders, and then it was being out there in that space. Being able to be a fire keeper for the first time in my life, I thought that was very special. ... I felt like I was part of something you know, part of the collective.

“N” described the retreat as access to an opportunity of reclamation and discovery:

This retreat really greatly helped me in discovering and reclaiming who I am, but I'm a twenty-four-year-old Anishinaabe Two-Spirited medicine person in training. And kind of behind the motivation in applying: When I was younger, my family and I, like, everyone knew we were a native, but it was rarely talked about. If at all. So, motivation came from the not only, like, the desire but also the need to learn what was taken from us. And also, to honor our ancestors. ... I found everything was magic. And I felt a feeling of hope like I've never felt before. And I also experienced a light ignite in people's eyes that seemed buried. And I think the most beautiful thing was experiencing strangers become community.

Teachings offered at the retreat were from nehiyawewin Elders' perspectives. Youth expressed their extreme gratitude for having time with the Elders who were present and the teachings they provided, and commented that the fundamentals of many Indigenous teachings are similar across nations. Feedback from participants has led the research team to recognize the desire in the future to include representation from the various nations represented among participants, while also understanding that this research started with the relationships and resources that were available for this first gathering.

Disconnection

A common theme was how youth felt disconnected from their own communities and cultures. "S" spoke about the impacts of urbanization on her family and how that influenced feelings of belonging:

My extended family live on a reserve, but my grandparents' generation had to go to residential school, so they were removed from the community and then they had to live with a Caucasian family off reserve if they wanted to pursue higher education like college or university. I'm the oldest of six, my grandfather's the oldest of 14, so some of the kids got raised with white families as they went to school off reserve and then the other side of the family stayed on the reserve. So, I have cousins who grew up on the reserve and then I have cousins who live off reserve in the city. As adults they didn't go back and stayed in the city because at that time kids on reserve were still forced into residential school. So that's where the divide is for me.

"S" is speaking of the impact for many of her family members of growing up outside their cultures and communities, and the disconnection this creates with their cultural identity(ies) and sense of belonging.

Similarly, "C," who is Inuk on her mother's side and French Canadian on her father's side, said, "With not being accepted within the Inuit community, in the urban space I've been feeling very. ... It's been very heavy." "C" was born in her mother's community but was mostly raised by her father in southern Quebec and feels excluded or disconnected from her Inuit side as a result of both the cultural divide and distance from her Inuit family. She was also speaking of both the real and perceived rejection that many youth of mixed backgrounds experience in relation to their Indigenous families and communities.

Disconnection was expressed as grief, absence, something missing and lost by "D," who never had the chance to learn his culture even though he grew up on his reserve:

Being able to take part [in the retreat] helps me to grasp a little more of the things I've lost and things that I did not have passed down to me. ... I grew up all my life practically on my reserve and you would think that such a background would entail having the cultural things to go along with that. But ... I have none of those things. I have no songs that I can sing, not really familiar with any dances or I have a little bit of my language. ... There's a lot of absence in my life about the things that I ought to have ...

an undercurrent of something missing in me that I couldn't quite put my finger on, that I don't think I really realized until I started to get older just what it actually was ... the absence of my culture. ... Grief of a life I never lived. Not something that I lost. That I never had.

Reconnecting youth to land and culture fosters feelings of groundedness, belonging, and self-sovereignty. Indigenous well-being, cultural vitality, and networks of community are essential dimensions of the movement toward a future beyond mere survival.

Reconnection

Despite these experiences of disconnection, several of the youth participants shared that the retreat helped them feel reconnected. For example, when referring to some of the organizers and facilitators, “K” explained she felt inspired because there were people older than her who were still learning how to reconnect with their cultures, and it took some of the pressure off for her and let her feel that she still had time to learn her language:

So I found that very inspiring ... that wasn't an issue for them, if they wanted to learn about their culture they were going to learn about it, and now they're teaching and they're educating others about it. Sometimes I feel like I'm running out of time to learn my culture and the language, so seeing how they're still able to embrace it is really assuring because it relieves some of the pressure I feel.

“S” explained that she thought she was going to the retreat to participate in cultural activities, but the teachings allowed her a greater capacity to become self-aware and to get in touch with her spirituality:

I wasn't expecting that whole level of more awareness and more self-knowledge, self-awareness and positive messages. The more I am taught about my culture the more I learn about, like, not only myself but my family. And the more understanding and patience and forgiveness I have which allows me to see the strength and beauty, in not only in my family but, like, my extended family, my people and the land and its inhabitants.

“D” at one point described his reconnection experience in terms of his relationship with the land, as the land being a part of himself, albeit outside of his present understanding:

Abenaki territory, as I understand it they're related to the Anishinaabe through kinship. So for me it's still woodland, it's still bush. It's still a territory I'm familiar with. And when you think about it's also Anishinaabe that's where my people were,, wherever they are now they were there before. So the territory of this region is familiar to me I think on a level I'm not even able to understand yet. So for me part of being there was good, because I was already home.

The act of finding a sense of belonging and identity, piece by piece, and nurturing this is a (re)connection to culture and community. These acts of reclamation have given youth a chance to create a wider web of knowledge and resistance to the colonial paradigm, creating deeper relations within the Indigenous community, speaking more openly with new knowledge, and becoming more of who they have always been.

Teachings

Land-based activities and oral narratives explored at the retreat provided teachings on relationships to the land, including fire, ceremonies, medicines, and more to help the youth experience how a relationship with land preserves cultural heritage, strengthens cultural pride, centres Indigenous pedagogies, and supports the well-being of Indigenous youth.

Participant “N” conveyed her sense of gratitude for the teachings that were shared by the Elders and for the restorative nature of the experience:

And also having spent the time with the Abenaki Elder and her grandchildren I think allowed me to have a connection with, like, the spirit of the land that we are visiting. ... I feel that connection. I’ve never felt it that strong. ... And building the Sweat Lodge and participating in the sweat. It’s like one of the most healing things I’ve ever done. I’ll always be very very grateful for ... learning all of the teachings that were shared, will forever hold that close to my heart.

“J” spoke about how her mother’s own journey demonstrated to her traditional knowledge used in daily life to support others, and she expressed her fascination with the juxtaposition of Indigenous ways of knowing versus Western knowledge systems:

And it’s knowledge that I’ve watched my mother take and integrate and use to help. And nobody’s ever made her, or me for that matter, feel stupid for asking the questions or for not knowing which way to pick up the pipe or which way to turn it when you’re passing it, like the little things that you didn’t grow up with, that’s knowledge that’s really important but there’s no aggressiveness to the teaching of it. I do look at it as sharing in the very literal sense of the word.

The intimate journey of being a pipe carrier, and the struggles to adhere to traditional protocols surrounding that journey, as well as the experience of being mentored by an Elder on the pipe teachings were voiced by “T”:

Just understanding my responsibility with being a pipe carrier and knowing what it means to carry a pipe. Because that was the first time I used it with an Elder, and I was very scared of it for seven years, I was very scared of it. I always kept it up high ... when I had been sober enough to touch it, I would put the pieces together. I’d often apologize to it for not being respectful to myself. ... I think now I am ready and these past seven months I’ve been sober have been the best I have ever had in my whole entire life. ... J’s

words resonated with me: by honouring myself with sobriety, I'm honouring the creator. And those really really stuck in my head and I realize that me being sober isn't just about myself. It's honouring the creator and the pipe and the culture.

The teachings provided participants with a newfound sense of purpose and possibility, healing and gratitude, and a distinct realization of responsibility one has to these stories as they carry them through their lives.

Transformation

Retreat participants described how positively affected they were over the course of the retreat as they took the experience back to the city, describing the processes of integrating what they learned into their day-to-day lives. They expressed gratitude, strengthened identity and confidence, an excitement to share teachings and knowledge, a personal balance and groundedness, humility, and hope.

Participant "M":

So that was like a really nice way of bringing healing home because you can get your medicine plants and do it for yourself at home, and that's something you could take with you anywhere, which I like. That's been really helpful to me for chronic health issues, and I've been hanging out at Native Montreal a lot more lately, and I ended up giving a medicine plant workshop. So that was super nice to be able to share what I learned.

Participant "S":

It's been about two years since I've been to Mount Currie Mountains. It's clear pristine. It's like my eyes aren't even closed. I saw it. I was surrounded by these mountains at night and the sky was full of stars and there was the moon like biggest ever, a full moon, and moonlight and I just felt like I was home. And I just felt like I was like completely grounded. ... And what I was able to do is realize at any given time I can tap into home. I am home wherever I am. And my roots may be from there but I can carry the lessons and teachings from where I've come from and use them anywhere I go. ... But what I realize is that I'm here, I am taking care of myself, and I'm doing what I have to do for myself. And home is where I am ... this retreat has helped me on so many levels just to stay grounded, to remember where I came from and respect where I came from and then just try to be a good role model. ... I'm so grateful for this ... experience.

Participant "T":

Coming back from [the retreat] there's a lot of things I realize I don't know. Like there's a lot of songs that I wish I could do and I know that will come in time. ... I think that will come with me wanting to learn the language. ... J— gave me some pointers on some protocols. Funny enough I already have everything there with the red cloth, the tobacco

and to tie a feather to it and I was like, how perfect is it to have a goose feather to go down south with me, to take it with me.

Participant “C”:

But going to the retreat it was very positive feeling not healing but I just feel very ... more relieved. ... I started volunteering at La PAQ [an organization providing shelter and services to homeless and precariously housed Indigenous people]. It's the first time that I am working with people not in an academic sphere ... and I'm with the community and it feels good to have the human contact.

Participant “N”:

Just that I have so much more hope, like I knew decolonizing was possible but to experience it is something totally different. And it's thanks to the retreat that I know that change is possible and the more I am taught about my culture the more I learn about, like, not only myself but my family. And the more understanding and patience and forgiveness I have, which allows me to see the strength and beauty, in not only in my family but, like, my extended family, my people and the land and its inhabitants. ... My words can't describe how thankful I am for the opportunity.

Once back in the city, participants were able to maintain connections made during the retreat, remembering relationships and teachings, and bringing ceremony into a broader life context. Decolonizing and Indigenizing became concrete actions instead of mere concepts spoken about in academic institutions and spaces, and participants were then able to take these actions and share their new knowledge with the community.

Discussion/Conclusion

This participatory research brings the voices of youth to the fore as they describe their experiences being taught *from* the land (Meyer, 2008), what they have learned, how it changed them, and how they are applying it to their daily lives. By bringing traditional ideas of land as *landscape* together with contemporary ideas of land as *urban space*, and both as sites of accessibility to Indigenous teachings, Indigenous youth are offered more opportunities to engage with their cultures after leaving the retreat space. The project intentionally held time and space for self-reflection by youth on their own lives within the context of land-based education, which enabled participants to decolonize, collectively and personally, as a return “to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a re-emergence, an unfolding from the inside out” (Simpson, 2017, p. 17). The self was held as a driving force for collective change with knowledge of how Indigenous Peoples lived and thrived, brought into today to (re)establish a status quo beyond settler colonialism.

In November 2019, participants' artwork and photos from the retreat were exhibited in a week-long showing titled *Gathering Place* at Concordia University's 4th Space. Retreat

participants were invited to a reunion event to open the exhibit, reconnect, and celebrate the launch of Land As Our Teacher, the continuation of the Restoring Our Roots work through a separate multi-year grant. During the week, attendees took part in storytelling sessions, drumming, singing, workshops (such as medicine bag making and screen printing), and the option to receive traditional tattooing.

The participants shared the lasting positive change their experiences at the retreat have created in their lives regarding their connection to cultural heritage and identity. Positive cultural identity and connection are known to buffer the negative health effects of discrimination, so it would be beneficial for future research to investigate the specific positive health benefits and their underlying processes for Indigenous youth who participate in land-based education programs (Wexler, 2009). It should be noted that working in partnership with Indigenous communities creates health interventions that are “of high priority, sustainable, and a better fit with cultural values,” as well as “[providing] increased community capacity, local ownership, and important safeguards on the potential cultural expropriation of Indigenous knowledge and traditional healing techniques in [health] intervention[s]” (Stanley et al., 2020, p. S18).

Future research, created in partnership with Indigenous youth and focusing on the relationship between land-based programming and specific health outcomes, would create an opportunity to inform culturally relevant future programming and policy wherein actual benefit is given to Indigenous youth. Examples of effective research processes and programming have been shown by Indigenous-led projects such as Vancouver’s Urban Aboriginal Community Kitchen Garden Project (Mundel & Chapman, 2010), the On-the-Land Health Leadership Program of Yellowknife’s Dene First Nation (Lines et al., 2019), and the Promoting Community Conversations About Research to End Suicide (PC CARES) programming developed by and implemented in some Alaska Native communities (Wexler et al., 2016).

Decolonizing, queering, and creating non-binary inclusive spaces for land-based teachings where Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ youth feel safer are all essential to the youths’ overall self-esteem, a sense of much-needed relief, and a greater understanding of themselves as they relate to their Indigenous cultures. Alex Wilson (2018) has explained “coming in” as “an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations” (p. 171). This is in contrast to the western notion of “coming out” to families, friends and the public at large. Wilson (2018) addresses how norms that reinforce heteropatriarchy and gender binaries—concerned with the regulation of “the bodies of women and Two-Spirit and trans people” (p. 164)—have come to shape the social relations of communities, including their ceremonial contexts. Wilson identifies “skirt shaming” and the gendered regulation of dress during Sweat Lodge ceremonies as exclusionary expressions of protocol that betray Indigenous traditions of valuing gender and sexual diversity. In contrast to the negative experiences many queer Indigenous youth face in queer-exclusionary cultural spaces, non-binary transmasculine participant “M” articulated a direct connection between his proactive inclusion in ceremony during the retreat and his

subsequent self-identification as a Two-Spirit person, both of which contributed to his sense of being accepted within a community of Indigenous peers.

Indigenous queer scholar Sarah Hunt and queer scholar Cindy Holmes (2015) discuss how “queer” is not merely a term referring to gender and sexuality, but extends beyond to action where we challenge ways of knowing and being that are entrenched in society by the settler state. The praxis of decolonization and queering involves “active, interconnected, critical, and everyday practices that take place within and across diverse spaces and times” (p. 156). This research seeks to provide time and space for Indigenous youth to develop these everyday practices of decolonization. With this scholarship and youth expertise in mind, this research moves forward with Two-Spirit representation on the Indigenous youth advisory board and the broader Indigenous community advisory board to ensure inclusion and accessibility to safe spaces offering land-based teachings. The strong positive impacts of cultural programming that is accessible to and inclusive of 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous youth are further demonstrated by the robust positive feedback and widely expressed excitement from queer Indigenous youth when they learned that this programming will be continued.

As the Restoring our Roots project continues and expands into the longer-term SSHRC-funded Land As Our Teacher, queer Indigenous youth are consistently engaging with the planning process and are actively guiding the ways in which it can move toward centring, rather than simply including, queer Indigenous experiences and needs. 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people experience higher rates of violence, discrimination, and negative health outcomes than non-2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people—it is imperative that future research into the benefits of land-based learning, decolonial approaches, and the protective effects of positive cultural identity considers the unique needs and experiences of queer Indigenous people (Balsam et al., 2004; Chae & Walters, 2009; Fraser Health Authority, 2015; Wexler, 2009).

With renewed funding from SSHRC for the next five years, seasonal gatherings are being planned that will deepen and broaden the relationships created during our inaugural gathering. Queer Indigenous youth participants and community members are looking forward to the planned retreat dedicated to queer Indigenous youth in the summer of 2021, and are enthusiastically guiding the preliminary processes. The youth advisory committee and collaborators will focus on integrating what we have learned in terms of continuing to give space to Indigenous youth to connect and explore diverse aspects of identity and belonging in ceremony with the land and one another, as well as potentially acquiring land for a dedicated space/place for youth and community to gather.

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