

Wisdom in Place: Learning through Relationships

Katrina Srigley

The snow is falling on Nbisiing Anishinaabeg territory now. We have just eased into Little Spirit Moon, a time for reflection and storytelling. It has been three months since my visit to Mnidoo Mnising (Manitoulin Island) and I am finally finishing this blog. It is my first.¹



Outside University of Nipissing

At times like these, Elder John Sawyer often reminds me that things get done when they are supposed to be done — not before and not after— I take some comfort from this direction as the frenetic pace of the semester eases. Despite the time that has passed and the icy temperatures outside, it is not difficult to imagine the beautiful August day when Nicole L. and I pulled away from North Bay, heading toward Mnidoo Mnising along the northern shore of Lake Nipissing. Craggy outcroppings of granite, stands of pine, spruce and birch, the expanse of Lake Nipissing, framed the first part of our journey. This place

is now home for lots of reasons: my family and friends, of course, but also Nbisiing Anishinaabeg, because, as I will explore here, learning through wisdom in place —land, animals, spirit, people, water—makes resurgent relationships possible.²

Context shapes the intricacies of listening well to wisdom in place—where, what, why, when, with whom—but relationships of trust and reciprocity, rooted in humility, are the foundation. Over the years, the Elders and Knowledge Keepers of this place have tirelessly reminded me and others to listen carefully to all of the storytellers here —land, animals, plants, humans, water, spirits—and acknowledge their gifts of knowledge. Most recently, Elder Dan Commanda, speaking at a Challenge Canada 150 symposium at Nipissing University, reminded the historians, geographers, and anthropologists gathered there to listen to the fish.³ In Lake Nipissing their numbers are declining, more and more of them have unhealthy levels of chemicals in their bodies, which is disfiguring them and hurting the rest of us. As an historian, I have long been preoccupied with listening well to stories of the past. For years as a graduate student in Toronto, I listened and learned in one-on-one interviews, across a table, with a recorder and list of questions. I was self-reflexive. I considered context and intersubjectivity. I did this work to restory the past, to shift the wisdom of a time and place, but stories about a place and stories of a place are not the same thing. The latter requires relationships of a different degree: it requires putting some history lessons down to pick others up; it requires a level of listening and epistemological consciousness I did not learn in school.⁴

As Nicole L. and I headed towards MISHI and the beautiful territories of Aundek Omni Kaning, M'Chigeeng, Sheguiandah, Sheshegwaning, Whitefish River, Wikwemikong, and Zhiibaahaasing First Nations, I carried this understanding of

relationships to wisdom in place with me. In the Anishinaabeg way, the brilliant white quartzite outcroppings and the waters of the north channel welcomed us to Mnidoo Mnising. While the gauntlet of warning signs, fencing, and search lights to avoid the animals was alarming, we happily zipped across the swing bridge at Little Current without incident or delay. From here we travelled over rolling hills, alongside trees, lakes, and farm land, until we found ourselves at the Providence Bay Tent and Trailer Park. I won't claim to have stayed. Nicole L was the intrepid one.

On day one of MISHI we visited the Kagawong River, which flows from its inland lake over Kagawong Falls (Bridal Veil Falls) into Mudge Bay and the waters of Lake Huron. The Kagawong was lively (in a late summer way), as we gathered at its mouth to learn some of its stories. The first sculpture in *Replenishment*, Michael Belmore's tryptic, greeted us from the river, waters embracing and cleansing it as they passed. While we stood here, Sophie Edwards, artist, writer and executive director of 4elements Living Arts, shared the story of the "Billings Connection Trail: Nature. Arts. Heritage." This trail, along with *Replenishment*, restories Kagawong through 32 historical interpretive plaques that center Anishinaabeg histories.⁵



Katrina Srigley with Michael Belmore's Replenishment.

Resistance stories. True stories. The plaques are in place now, but initially they were held up by The Council of the Corporation of the Township of Billings—What did the words in Anishinaabemowin mean? What does it mean to acknowledge Anishinaabeg histories and baldly face the vexing and inaccurate versions of settler history written on this land? It means acknowledging the colonial webs that still entangle our relationships. It means building relationships of reciprocity and trust with humility, as learners. Gratefully, such stories are a feeble challenge to the resilience, replenishment, and resurgence of Anishinaabeg wisdom in this place.

I was excited to visit Wikwemikong First Nation on our third day. There are lots of ways that my relationship to Wiki, as I've come to know the community, has grown: through colleagues, students, and, the Nipissing Warriors hockey team, for whom Wiki is both a competitor and source of teammates, past and present. As the school bus bumped along, I was reminded of the ways that stories root you in place and travel with you, keeping you connected to home, guiding you, and acting as a foundation for learning in other places.

The wisdom that links Wikiwemikong and Nipissing Anishinaabeg also includes stories of Spanish Residential School. We pause for lunch in the harbor. Standing on the water's edge I gaze out across the expanse of northern Georgian Bay and imagine the boat arriving that stole children from this territory. I think of the stories Elder June Commanda has shared with me about the horrors of that place, of Spanish, but also the relationships forged there through the wisdom of home places. I travel in my mind across the water to my family's cottage, a place full of stories and the deep emotional connections of home. I let the discomfort of this privilege born from colonialism, sit,

messy and difficult, in these relationships to wisdom, to people and place. I turn to walk up to the church and the ruins of the initial residential school that tower above me.



Katrina Srigley at ruins of rectory, near residential school ruins in Wikwemikong.

As Anishinaabeg, Ininiw, Sto:lo, Dene (and many more) intellectuals have long taught us, stories are gifts given through relationships of trust. They come with obligations of different degrees and forms. When I learned we would visit Dreamer's Rock at Whitefish River First Nation, I thought about these teachings. I was honoured. I felt wonder at the generosity and trust of the community and the relationships that gave us this opportunity. I felt privileged to listen to and learn from Deb and Marion McGregor in their home territory. I also felt the weight of responsibility. What were my intentions here? To draw on Basil Johnston's 1974 poem, would my visit allow me "To give increase to being/Lend purpose to existence Bestowing the gift of living but/Not disclosing the mystery of life..." or would my visit cast this place as "...a public place

Open, in its solitude/ To incurious and indifferent/ And other passers-by/Who come their transient ways, and as they/ pass through life/Seeing, rather than seeking Hearing but not listening....⁶ Was I just another tourist? A twenty-first century version of the anthropologist who named this place? What is the proper name for Dreamer's Rock? May I know her name? When we set off into the trees – birch, pine, spruce – to climb along the well-worn path to Dreamer's Rock, I thought about others who have walked this way before. As Elder Lorraine Whiteduck Liberty has taught me, I tried to “get out of my mind” and learn to listen differently. It was hard. I did not really succeed. I climbed up. I was thankful, but I did not stay long. Three months later I'm still working through the uneasiness brought by some of the absences in my relationship to this place.

When you listen well and learn deeply to wisdom in place it makes resurgent relationships possible: Relationships of learning. Relationships of trust. Relationships built on reciprocity. At the end of our week, I was ready to be home, to travel back to Nbisiing Anishinaabeg territory. I was thankful to cross Mnidoo Mnising with light, the long shadows of a beautiful sunset at my back, giving me the chance to see the territory again. When I turned right at Espanola darkness fell; it started to rain. This time I had different stories and relationships as my travelling companions across Anishinaabeg territory. Gchi-miigwech.

¹ I know blogs do not typically have lengthy notes. I have chosen to include more than usual to ensure that I give myself context. I was born and raised on Mississauga Anishinaabeg/Wendat/Haudenosaunee territory in the Greater Toronto Area. My family are settlers in this territory, arriving from the United States in the 1780s. In 2005, I moved to Nbisiing Anishinaabeg territory for work at Nipissing University and am grateful to live here with my partner and our daughters.

It is also important to acknowledge my teachers. For their patience and wisdom, I say gchi-miigwech to John Sawyer, Glenna Beaucage, Peter Beaucage, Lorraine Whiteduck

Liberty, and Virginia Goulais. For her patience and wisdom, and for organizing and inviting me to MISHI, thank you to my friend and colleague Carolyn Podruchny.

I regularly read and am grateful for the blogs of Erica Violet Lee, Eve Tuck, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Zoe Todd. Before writing this blog I did some rereading of work on *Active History.ca* and *Unwritten Histories.com*, in particular. With thanks to Andrea Eidinger for bringing my attention to: Tina Adcock, Keith Grant, Stacey Nation-Knapper, Beth Robertson, and Cory Slumkoski, “Canadian History Blogging: Reflections at the Intersection of Digital Storytelling, Academic Research, and Public Outreach,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 27, 2 (2016): 1-39.

² I intentionally refuse the word reconciliation here. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Highwater Press, 2011); Jeff Corntassel, “Living in a Longer Now: Moving Beyond the State-Centric System,” in *For Indigenous Minds Only: A Decolonization Handbook*, eds. Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird (Sante Fe, C.A.: SAR Press, 2012), 85-98.

³ Elder Dan Commanda regularly shares stories about Nibisiing Anishinaabeg territory; however, I recently heard Dan share stories about the fish during “Water is Life,” Josephine Mandamin, Nibisiing Secondary School, 9 December, 2016 and “Challenge Canada 150 Symposium,” Nipissing University, 10 October, 2017. The Ministry of Natural Resources also provides information about the health of the fish online: <https://www.ontario.ca/environment-and-energy/sport-fish-consumption-advisory?id=46178000>, last accessed 21 December, 2017.

⁴ This is not to say that Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and scholars—Josephine Mandamin, Lorraine Whiteduck Liberty, Basil Johnston, Louis Bird, Peter Beaucage, John Sawyer, Edna Manitowabi, Luther Standing Bear, Marie Campbell, Kim Anderson, Aroha Harris, Leroy Little Bear, Lee Maracle, Mary Jane Logan McCallum, Sue Hill, Lianne Leddy, Audra Simpson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Winona Wheeler, Winona Laduke, for just a small sample— have not said this again and again. I just did not listen to or learn from their wisdom in these years.

⁵ On 4 July, 2017 the Billings Township Council moved to have the plaques reviewed by a lawyer. The decision to accept the existing wording on the plaques came about two weeks later, 17 July, 2017, but the potential of this moment for resurgent relationships through collective restorying had been lost. You will find council minutes here: <http://billingstwp.ca/council-meetings/council-minutes/>, last accessed 21 December, 2017. See also: <http://www.manitoulin.ca/2017/07/07/council-sends-historical-plaque-text-legal-review/>, last accessed 21 December, 2017.

The ongoing erasure of Anishinaabeg and their stories from settler spaces on Mnídoo Mnísing (and other Indigenous territories) is troubling. There are numerous examples from tourist websites —www.northeasternontario.com/bridal-veil-falls-kagawong/—to historical plaques. Establishing respectful relationships through wisdom does not mean erasing settlers, it means acknowledging and engaging with Anishinaabeg wisdom and all of its carriers. On the connection trail see:

<http://4elementslivingarts.org/programs/festival/>. On efforts to restory and decolonize historical plaques in B.C. by Joanne Hammond, see:

<http://republicofarchaeology.ca/blog/2017/1/4/another-roadside-attraction-that-erases-indigenous-people-and-reinforces-colonial-righteousness>, last accessed 22 December, 2017.

⁶ I reread this poem here: <https://laratracehantz.wordpress.com/tag/basil-h-johnston/>, last accessed 22 December, 2017.