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## Masters Project: Growing Roots: Unlearning Savior Mentalities and Connecting to Place

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MASTER'S PROJECT: GROWING ROOTS: UNLEARNING SAVIOR  
MENTALITIES AND CONNECTING TO PLACE

A Project Presented

By

Malcolm Gore

To

The Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources  
University of Vermont

In partial fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Science  
Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

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Committee:

Matthew Kolan, Ph.D., Advisor  
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## Abstract

For my capstone project, I designed and lived a journey of unlearning. I had realized that a white savior mentality and disconnection from the natural world were aspects of myself that I no longer accepted. To shed the imprints of individualism and saviorism, I created a system of creative and integrative methods that included poetry, anti-racism workshops, awareness practices, and collaboration. The results of this method set are ongoing and still evolving, but an attempt to describe the mindset change, self-reflection, and actions it induced is included below. This project was created and evaluated in community, and in the process built and integrated an ecosystem of interlocking communities, of which I am now part.

## Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the support of a multitude of persons and beings. A small list of those who creating the conditions for this project to live follows.

Thank you to my mother and father, for their unequivocal support of my journey.

Thank you to Matt Kolan, Vivian Stein, and Corina Pinto for their incredible feedback, encouragements, and illuminations.

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Thank you to all the cryptos, past and present, for graciously sharing their wisdom and learnings with me.

Thank you to all the teachers and affiliates of the MLS program for their well of resources and encouragements to go deep in this work.

Thank you to my ancestors for living their lives so that I may live this one.

Thank you to Fort Greene Park.

Thank you to the New York Bay.

Thank you to the Mulberry Tree that was behind my apartment building. May you rest in peace.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Bildungsromans, defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary as “novel[s] about the moral and psychological growth of the main character,” have long been the stories I gravitate towards. They are also known as coming-of-age stories, and they are about the spiritual education of a person who is changed as a result of their education and who go on to make that change apparent in their actions or societies. I have often thought of my life as a bildungsroman, and I have wondered when the time would come to tell my story. In 2019, I turned 30, and I feel that I have come of age into a man that I am proud to be. However, my story is different from the classic coming-of-age tale because my change resulted largely from unlearning, rather than learning. What did I unlearn? Two things: my ingrained white savior mentality and my belief that I was a solitary actor in this world rather than an individual enmeshed in a web of reciprocal relationships with other beings, human and non-human. Though my story is not over, this project report will discuss the methods and results of that unlearning up to this point, as well as the effects these changes have had on me and my communities.

This unlearning did not happen by accident nor does it have a tidy ending. It is being done through the application of my capstone project and the MLS Leadership for Sustainability program at UVM, and it is in a continual state of emergence. In September of 2018, I moved to Brooklyn, New York, the seventh place I have lived in the decade spanning my 20s. However, this was “the first time that I moved somewhere conscious of the fact that I am an uprooted person without a home community,” and that “whoever is uprooted himself, uproots others.” (Gore, 2018; Weil, 1949). Through the coursework and teachings of the MLS program, I became more and more aware of my status and impact as a cis-gendered white man in the United States, and I examined that positionality in the context of moving to a historically black neighborhood

undergoing gentrification. Through the writings of Derek Rasmussen, influenced by the teachings of the Inuit journalist Zebedee Nungak, I realized that I had approached many of the places I lived with a white savior mentality, especially when I lived and worked in impoverished communities of color in Honduras, Denver, and Ecuador (Rasmussen, 2016). In an attempt to do better, my research question that informed the project was:

How can I serve my communities and nurture relationships with land to create conditions for personal and societal liberation?

My aspiration for this question and project was to root myself in a way that does not disturb the beings that were already there, and to grow in such a way that would serve those beings. The shift from saving to serving is the crux of my unlearning, and it is a continuous shift that I do not expect to ever “achieve.” I have described my project to others as an attempt to decolonize myself, and many of the methods were based on learnings from indigenous scholars and elders, as well as direct experience with land itself. However, I did not assume this work would move me toward “settler innocence,” nor was that my goal; rather, I viewed it as the first step in a lifelong process of decolonization, beginning here with an attempt at settler harm reduction in myself and my communities (Tuck, 2014).

The white savior complex is well known, and very much alive, evidenced by the movie *Green Book* winning the Best Picture at the 2019 Oscars despite its problematic rewriting of history to fit classic Hollywood story structures. In his book *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality*, Jordan Flaherty describes the savior mentality as “the leftist version of Manifest Destiny, where a person acts as if he is destined to lead the struggle of poor people, who implicitly are unqualified to lead their own struggle” (Flaherty, 2018). My project



builds on this definition by focusing on, and attempting to shed, the savior complex within one person, myself. It is one thing to be aware of a white supremacist mentality in society, but it is a different approach to admit to having that mentality, and then actively working to dismantle it from my body, psyche, and relationships.

The idea of restoring personal relationships with land to create a new ecological ethos is also well-known, especially in environmental communities. This idea first gained prominence in Western circles with Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and his urging for people to consider themselves as plain citizens of a biotic community (Leopold, 1949). My project builds on this idea by intentionally cultivating relationship with land in a large urban center, where many people believe that to connect to land or experience the benefits of nature, one must leave the city. By visiting a sit spot every week and practicing relationship protocols with waterways and parks daily, I learned firsthand that it is possible to nurture relationships with non-humans in an urban environment, and that those relationships will have unforeseen effects. One does not need to leave the city to experience the positive results of nature connection that have been publicized in previous and current movements, and opportunities abound to give back to urban ecosystems and foster the reciprocity that is the core of "a healthy web of relationships" (Rosane, 2013).

Additionally, by committing to nature connection practice and personal anti-racism work concurrently, I present an alternative for white folks to the white men led practices of nature connection that dominate in environmental communities which are so often silent on issues of racism and exclusion. Kyle Pows Whyte says, "The conservation movement has been as damaging to Indigenous peoples as extractive industries" and this racist history, as well as the appropriation of Indigenous ethics towards land needs to be acknowledged and confronted by

white people seeking to create relationships to land (Whyte, 2018). Throughout this project I remained cognizant of these issues and relied upon the work of Indigenous and Black women to guide and critique my actions and assumptions.

My project was primarily inspired and influenced by Robin Wall Kimmerer and her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer, 2013). I work as a gardener in a public park, I belong to a community garden in my neighborhood, and I have made connections with people and plants in my community because of the themes and intentions of *Braiding Sweetgrass* to create relationships between people and plants and tell stories that center the non-human world. . Additionally, the novel *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko inspired me to heal myself of white savior imprints through the wisdom of the land and waters that surround me (Silko, 1977). These two offerings from two different indigenous women, who are engaging a modern settler society through their storytelling, were my corner stones and my guides in the implementation of my work.

The works of Ijema Oluo and Layla F. Saad were integral to examining my whiteness and shedding it from my mindsets, practices, and daily interactions. *So You Want to Talk About Race* encouraged me initiate discussions about race, and the *me and white supremacy workbook* uncovered and invited critical examination of the racist aspects of myself (Oluo, 2018; Saad, 2018). These two books gave me the experimental tools to actively shed my savior mindset, and Audre Lorde, through her essays and poetry inspired me to tap into the emotional ocean of myself and produce poetry that would create a “revelatory distillation of experience” (Lorde, 1984).

## Chapter 2: Methods

The methods I created were inspired by the wisdom of nature and the work of women of color. In order to shed myself of the savior mentality I had to integrate the teachings of women such as Audre Lorde and Leslie Marmon Silko with my own mental models and processes. Throughout the project, I remained aware of appropriating or claiming the knowledge and practices of my teachers, and I was cognizant of recognizing and honoring the sources of these practices. These methods were not tangible or scheduled, but rather an emergent map leading to my own liberation from saviorism and human-nature separation. This map is personal and applies to my own specific circumstances, but by documenting it here in words and images, I hope that it can serve as a model for other white folks looking to free themselves and their societies from the oppressive tendencies of white supremacy, silence, and saviorism.

The methods I used fall into four overlapping categories: Nature connection, unlearning saviorism, documentable practices, and ways of being. There was plenty of cross pollination, and the Venn diagram on the following page is a rough approximation of those categories and their overlap. I chose a Venn diagram because the methods were not discrete or contained, and though my project's two main goals were to shed saviorism and connect with nature, the results of my differing approaches were often similar and included experiencing states of flow, connecting with other persons on a deep level, feelings of belonging, and joy. The more I practiced, the less this project felt like work, and as time cycled on, I noticed my perspective changing, and it became easier to be in alignment with my vision to create roots and serve my communities. I will discuss the tangible methods below the diagram, and dive deeper in the ways of being that emerged in the results section.

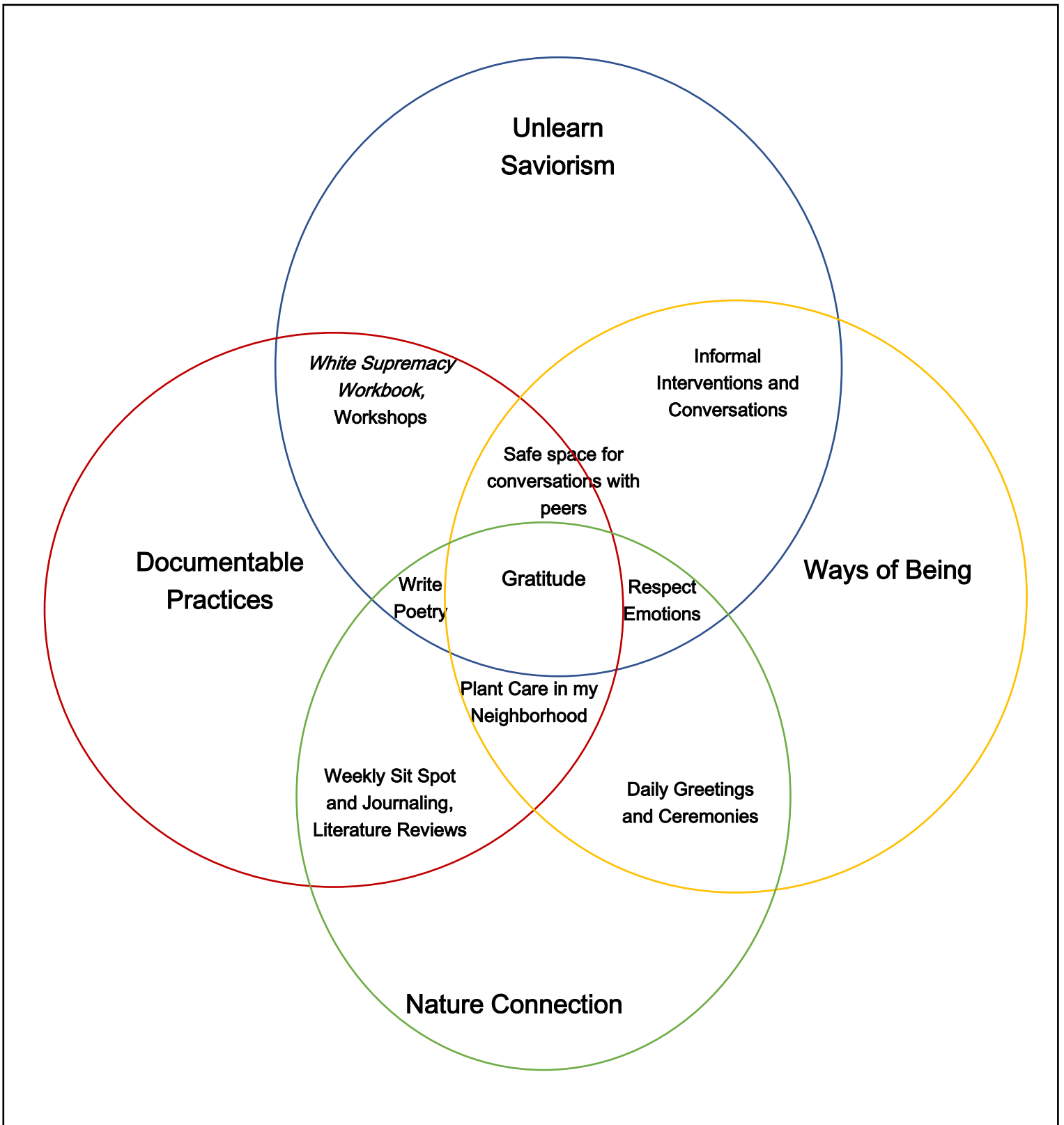


Figure 1: Methods Diagram

To unlearn white saviorism, I participated in the White Awake Course: [Roots Deeper than Whiteness](#), did the White Supremacy workbook by Layla F. Saad, attended a Calling-In workshop and chapter meeting with [Showing up for Racial Justice](#), and wrote poetry that unveiled my innermost thoughts and feelings on being a white man in Brooklyn, some of which can be found in Appendix B. Threaded through these events were conversations and free writing with my MLS peer coaches, Vivian Stein and Corina Pinto, in which we dove into our experiences with white supremacy and patriarchy by asking each other four questions, graciously curated by Vivian and her coach Heather Talley. The four questions created insights and a shared space of community where I felt able and willing to uncover the most racist aspects of myself, such as the fact that it is easy to sustain white supremacy and that it feels like the natural state. By naming these aspects in a loving community, I created accountability to divorce myself from the supremacist and savior parts of my identity. The questions are below.

1. What is your vision in the world? What do you see as your impact in the world? How do your impact and vision align?
2. How does your impact sustain or challenge white supremacy?
3. How are you embodying your impact and vision? How does it feel in your body?
4. Where do you see room for growth? Did anything happen this month where you stepped up or where you wanted to and didn't? How would you do it differently and/or how would you imagine a different result?

To connect to land, I committed to visiting a sit spot in Fort Greene Park every week, practicing relationship protocols with the beings and land there, doing the grounding and running awareness practice taught to me by TwoTrees, and then journaling about my experience

afterward. I visited in rain, snow, howling wind, and on beautiful days. Sometimes I was the only human in the park, and sometimes I was one of 100s. I also tried to practice a short gratitude, in the form of a song I would sing in my head, every time I crossed over or under the East River. I joined a community garden, and I completed the first step of becoming a tree steward with NYC parks in order to officially care for the street trees on my block. I wrote several poems about these budding relationships, which can be found in appendix B.

These methods evolved over time, and a big change happened when I began a full-time gardening job on Governor's Island on March 4th. This job required taking a ferry across the New York Harbor twice a day, and I soon began to make an offering of gratitude and tea to the water each morning. This "homemade ceremony", inspired by the healing journey of Tayo in the novel, *Ceremony*, and the chapter An Offering in *Braiding Sweetgrass* shifted something deep within me so that I became more resilient, reciprocal, and aware in my actions both on and off the island (Kimmerer, 2013).

Another change was in my Decolonization Reading group, in which I hoped to read many works by Indigenous authors and discuss them with other members of my cohort. What actually happened is that the story *Ceremony* drew me in so much, and my conversation with Sophie Bodnar about it was so meaningful, that I instead chose to sit with the lessons in my own life. Additionally, soon after starting my new job, my coworkers and I planned to attend an event with Robin Wall Kimmerer. This inspired me to revisit *Braiding Sweetgrass* and do a focused literature review that would consider how the teachings in that book could be applied to my own life and work.

The methods in my project address the hidden systems of white supremacy and Settler Colonialism. By focusing on my own participation in those systems, both conscious and

unconscious, I was more able to see the way those systems affect other people in my communities. Additionally, I began the process of decolonizing myself, and I remained aware of the pitfalls of achieving settler innocence. The nature connection practices were a reminder that I am a byproduct of natural processes and systems that support the thriving of all manner of life. This shift towards being part of something larger than myself and feeling grateful to be part of it, were an antidote to the loneliness and individualization that support the systems of white supremacy and Settler Colonialism. My focus was on healing, rather than achieving or confronting, and this change, along with the shift from saving to serving, encouraged joy, spontaneity, and confidence to emerge.

### Chapter 3: Results

Articulating the results of this project is challenging, especially in describing how I have changed. To begin, there are the appendices of my poems, and the video installation I made as part of a class on Poetry and Leadership taught by Sayra Pinto and Bahnu Kapil that I took near the end of my capstone. I dove deeply into *Braiding Sweetgrass* in the spring and summer, and I created a literature review that quoted key learnings from each chapter and the potential effects those learnings can have in my life and work. This review can be found in Appendix C.

What seems more important than these documents are the relationships I have created through this project. I consider New York Bay and Fort Greene Hill to be friends. I fall into a meditative state of flow when I project my thoughts outwards towards them, and I am constantly thinking of ways to bring others into that friendship. I have also made new relationships with humans, though these do not quite feel like friendships yet given the reticent nature of people to engage in New York. I have met an arborist and a street artist in my neighborhood, and I am working to get them together to provide care for an ancient elm that is in rough shape.

As mentioned earlier, an unintended outcome was the shift in my way of being that resulted from intentionally engaging with non-humans and with the imprints of white supremacy on myself. I have moved on from shame, about being a white male, about having more opportunities than others, about being depressed, about not writing or achieving or completing my goals. This shame, which has been a consistent sentiment for most of my adult life, has been replaced by acceptance, and the knowledge that I am capable, and I can do better. I do not wallow on my mistakes or the past nearly as much, and I do not overthink my every action. I jump to kindness, I speak up when I hear something that bothers me, I create and encourage



laughter, and most importantly, I move forward because my practices remind and encourage me to greet each day as a gift.

The move from shame to its opposite, which could be considered self-love, was an unexpected byproduct of my methods. There is an assumption in the dominant culture that doing anti-racism work is difficult and challenging and a chore for white people. While this can be true, I found that acknowledging my role in white supremacy, and committing to being better by speaking up, decentering whiteness, listening to people of color, and initiating conversations on race were incredibly liberating and actions that perpetuated self-love. Internalized racism is harmful, to the victims of racism first, but also to the person who holds it in themselves, consciously or unconsciously. A culture of shame and silence about racism prevents white folks from confronting their own complicity in racist systems and making real progress to dismantle those systems. This project set out to uncover and excise my own internalized racism so that I could contribute to societal liberation, and while that process has just begun, the shift towards love and acceptance of self were unexpected yet welcome results of my healing process.

Depressive episodes have been a common occurrence in my life since I was about 23. At their worst, they continued for months and had me considering suicide daily. During the first year of the MLS program when I was in Virginia, I was going to weekly therapy sessions, and sometimes it felt like the only thing keeping me together. Since this capstone began, I have had my fair share of depressive episodes, but none have lasted more than a week, and I have often been called back from them by my friendships with water and land, and by engaging with work on whiteness or writing poems that dive into their causes. While I am not going to say that the methods in this project cured my depression, as there were other factors such as my new job which put me outside everyday doing something I love, I will say that these methods noticeably

lifted my mood and assured me that I was on the right path. I do not expect to ever be “cured” of depression, but I can continue to learn from elders and beings through non-traditional means of communication about the benefits and rewards of resiliency and regeneration, and I feel called, by the beings that have buoyed me, to share my experiences and practices with other people.

## Chapter 4: Evaluation

This project was difficult. There were many moments when I did not want to continue, and ones where I felt inadequate and useless. This desire to flee when the going gets tough is not new to me, and through the White Supremacy workbook, I connected it to my white privilege. By recognizing that the self-criticism and notions of flight were responses to the shedding of my saviorism, I gained new insight into myself and the pervasive nature of white supremacist culture. It lives within me, and it does not want to die. On my own, I would be losing the battle, but I have a network of relationships that pushed me forward on this path that I, and they, know is the right one. The below table is a visual representation of those relationships, the methods I used to assess and evaluate my work, the results of those methods, and feedback.

**Table 1:Accountability Window**

<b>Person(s)</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>Feedback</b>
Matt, Vivian, Corina	Regular calls to discuss questions and issues.	Inspiration, assuaged feelings of loneliness, pushes to go deeper.	This work is inherently unsettling. People, and beings, respond to invitation with more than expected. Reciprocity is essential in whiteness examination.
Bay and Hill	Regular sit spot visits, awareness practices, journaling, poetry, offerings.	Love for self and others, openings to deeper examination of self and feelings.	This is the right path. Gratitude begets gratitude.
Myself	Journaling, poetry, Calling-in of friends and family.	Self-awareness, confidence, pride.	Poetry is reciprocal communication with deepest self. Other people are seeking

			community and accountability, too.
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The results and feedback gathered from these intentional relationships exceeded my expectations and surprised me with their creativity. I set vertical goals for this project, but I received horizontal offerings. From a dawn moment shared with a seal, to the opening line of a poem appearing in my head upon waking, to being invited to see Robin Wall Kimmerer speak, to experiences of synchronicity shared over zoom calls, there were many moments that defied logic by lining up with my thoughts and feelings, positive and negative, about my work in the project. When I opened myself to the universe, it responded in kind.

## Chapter 5: Next Steps

This project will not end, but grow, as integration of these learnings and unlearnings is a continual step in life. There is no end to the practice of reciprocal relationship. As I become established to place, I will seek to inspire others to do the same, and to examine their own impacts and relationships with white supremacy. However, I am not seeking to save white people from white supremacy or force them to create relationships with nature, but rather to serve the immense diversity of life cradled on this planet. This project was about unlearning a savior mentality, and a next step is to learn and integrate a service mentality so that I do not fall back into old patterns and habits. Jordan Flaherty says, “The best way to combat the savior mentality is to act collectively for systemic change in a way that is accountable to communities affected” (Flaherty, 2018). This project was a personal one, and its results were largely individual. The natural next step is to serve my communities, in the way that they would like to be served. To do so requires relationship with these communities, and an articulation of what those communities are and how I plan to serve them, which can be seen in Appendix D. A crucial part of this new service mentality is continuing engagement with my own privilege and position as a white male environmentalist in New York City because “a decolonizing approach to allyship must challenge the resilience of settler privilege, which involves directly facing the very different ecological realities we all dwell in” (Whyte, 2018).

A question that has emerged as I have shifted to a service mindset and developed relationships with the beings in my ecological reality is how that mindset can be reciprocal with those beings. Being accountable to human communities is possible through relationship and solidarity and with honest and open channels of communication. How does one create authentic channels of communication with non-humans? Robin Wall Kimmerer says that, “plants tell their

stories not by what they say, but by what they do,” and my project explored a new way of being that focused on action rather than words (Kimmerer, 2014). I believe that by continuing to practice telling my story by what I do, I can uncover the channels of communication that connect all living beings.

A key learning I have absorbed is that creating new practices, and mindsets, is not easy, and there will be highs and lows in the work. It is important to remember this, so that chasms will not discourage, and peaks will not create false senses of achievement. It is equally important to be open about the process of creating new mindsets with others because old mindsets do not simply disappear, but rather, go dormant. Choosing which path to take or which direction to grow can seem like an impossible undertaking at times. But, if others know of that path, and if I am aware of their patterns, we can grow together in a way that supports the thriving of all. The journey I have embarked upon has no end, and the road I have chosen is “soft and green with new grass,” but I do not want to walk it alone (Kimmerer, 2013). So, I will sing to my family, my friends, my kin and those yet unmet, and I will tell them of the vivacious path that was found, here among the grasses and trees.

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Appendices

## **Appendix A**

Appendix A is my project tracking document, which can be found below.

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1etcyEkAlFoMIeqq1oBva4h0eifE\\_fmGd/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1etcyEkAlFoMIeqq1oBva4h0eifE_fmGd/view?usp=sharing)

## **Appendix B**

The poems below are presented in chronological order.

*To Be*

A tree grows outside a window

In Brooklyn.

It's a wise old tree

A native red mulberry

Hard to find, you see,

Since the spread of white mulberries.

It grows large, 50 feet tall at least,

Filling the lot some call empty.

Its winter branches wave to me

Off-beat with the sirens, wailing distantly.

A famous book about poverty

Featuring an invasive tree.

I should read it because I live here

And want to learn local history.

I prefer to stare at neighbor tree,

Who evokes no shame in me.

I peer into their living-quarters sleeplessly

Thinking of everything we might be.

A tree a tree I'd like to be  
Feeding, sheltering, filtering, producing  
Continuously in service to other beings  
Asking only for visits from birds and bees.

A man grows inside a room  
In Brooklyn.

*Please Stay on the Path*

Wallow wallow in worn trenches

And zip through local trails.

Creatures of habit go back

And forth, singing the same wails.

Hollow hollow are the tubes

And grooves where neurons travel.

Wise brain knows best,

much more than obsolete navel.

Follow follow minds to fluorescent health

insurance, habitat destruction.

It's for the best trumpet the screens

Those beings of one-way interlocution.

Swallow swallow the supreme white pill

Cause and cure of ills worldwide.

Let those habits, trails, networks be mined

After all, there's nothing to hide.

Sorrow sorrow softens neuronic pathways

And urges the taking of new routes

Into the overgrown weeds and bushes  
Past the protecting brain's moronic doubt.

*East River*

Like my blood

You are salty and thick

With the thrown-down detritus

Of individual life.

Like my brain,

You are murky and gray,

A shining surface that obscures

The wreckages of the past.

Like my heart

You are cold and pulsing

With beings who thrive

Despite concrete despair.

Like my skin,

You are soft and infinite,

Reaching out to other bodies

For no discernible reason.

*Ficus lyrata*

Assimilation, says the Fiddle-Leaf Fig

Draped in Christmas lights.

Its great, its awful, it is..

The fig that envelops trees

Accepts its potted lot and

Keeps being true to...

I too, could be true

If I knew what to...

Art? Love? Earth? Family?

Too many options.

Like opening Netflix,

To endlessly scroll through life

Is easier than to choose.

*Sorry Sonnet*

The earth is angry with me  
My empty promises fill up her ears,  
Yet she answers my prayers faithfully  
And bats away my selfish fears.

I plant good seeds upon her breast  
That will grow and nourish those just born  
So, one day they too can leave the nest  
To eat, to fight, to sleep, to yearn.

I love my job, but there's a catch.  
See, I asked great mother to enact  
Her will and make the match  
I would write her stories, was our pact.

They lie dormant and dark inside my brain  
Where their power does naught but wane.



*Staying Still*

Deep black pool in garden's center  
Reflects green leaves  
Whirls sans weather.  
Floating leaves will soon sink down  
Change their state, become undone.

Let the detritus of a summer day  
Wheel, then sink, then turn to matter  
Birdsong, rumbling traffic, children's shouts  
Cause no ripple.  
What can stop this ever-turning circle?  
Of clear distortion and dark reflection.

Some people pause to peer into the pool  
Some stop and play with its surface  
But none dare relent and enter.

An old man whose veins snake down  
From rolled up sleeves  
Pushes his finger into the water  
Pulls a glossy leaf and disturbs the cycle.

He must know best, being so old  
Maybe this leaf will clog the filter?  
Or perhaps its poisonous to what lives beneath  
Probably, he just likes clean surfaces.

He leaves the garden with dripping fingers  
The pool cycles on, it doesn't mind,  
It has its mission, it won't linger.

A young child dressed in floral pink  
Loves the pool for what it provides:  
To throw the maple samaras  
And watch them float into another life.

A seed ungrown for her sweet laughter  
Is it just? Was it enough?

*Not a harbor*

I see you bay

Crashing against this island sea wall

Splashing my tacos and beer

With water some might call dirty.

I welcome your essence

This amalgamation of refuse

And immortal natural processes

Which I now see, at this age of thirty.

We cross over you ceaselessly

Without thinking to say thank you

We rarely enter you, but we are in you

As you are in us, implacably.

I see you Bay

I honor your gun-metal gray surface

I wonder at what lies beneath

The exteriors we wear, unwittingly.

*The Unknowable Ocean*

His open throat stretched forever  
A sound came forth  
From an abyss just beyond  
Quavering tonsils.

Can we really know if there's  
Something tangible down there?  
He was singing his soul out  
Yet my thumping heart still had doubts.

Each pulse a moonlit wave that laps  
At the shores of my body

When the tide is high  
I am unable to contain the crashing spray  
And it splashes out onto others

When the tide is low  
I burrow into myself on the barren dunes  
That have forgotten water.

My superpower would be to cry on demand  
But a giant white sweat-stained pillow  
Smothered my tear ducts into an oblivion  
Which no sound can penetrate.

Concerts and movies and novels

Bring forth plankton emotions

But an octopus, mother of thousands, lives below

And she speaks in touch.

## Appendix C

A personal literature review of *Braiding Sweetgrass* where I re-examine each chapter and gather the lessons here for my own work and life

### *Braiding Sweetgrass*

By Robin Wall Kimmerer

#### PART 1 – PLANTING SWEETGRASS

##### **Skywoman Falling**

*“How can we begin to move toward cultural and ecological sustainability if we cannot even imagine what that path feels like?”*

To me, it feels like picking mulberries and dandelion greens from the earth and eating them. It feels like hearing the birds call at dawn, and calling back to the rising sun. It feels like swimming in the freezing ocean and sleeping in salt-encrusted skin. More than doing these things though is knowing why I am doing them. Not for pleasure, which is a byproduct of action, but for the action itself which breaks down the barriers between myself and Nature. To be constantly reminded that I am a part of the whole, not apart from it.

How can I further imagine that path?

By making stories and sharing them.

*“Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories.”*

“Re-story-ation” is as important as Restoration. I am giving my 40 hours a week to habitat creation and ecological restoration, for which I am paid. While I can learn the songs of those plants and do that work to the best of my ability and their desire, it is only half the work. Telling stories about connection to land is the other part, and this can be done by relating my own experience, sharing poems, or writing stories that center land and its healing power. These stories, which come to me when I am in tune with natural processes and connected to more than humans, are what I can give in return for *“a gift on turtle’s back.”*

## **The Council of Pecans**

*“The trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective...What happens to one happens to all. We can starve together or feast together. All flourishing is mutual.”*

*“The pecan trees and their kin show a capacity for concerted action, for unity of purpose that transcends the individual tree.”*

The Pecan chapter is a reminder of the strength of community in the face of structural oppression. The grove I am responsible for at work is a strong community. My community garden is a strong community, too. I cannot do this work alone. No one can truly do anything alone. Where is my writing community? What can I do to ensure that my communities grow and flourish together, that we produce together for the benefit of all?

## **The Gift of Strawberries**

*“A gift is something for nothing, except that certain obligations are attached. For the plant to be sacred, it cannot be sold.”*

*“The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition, excluded from sharing.”*

The Gift of Strawberries chapter is a stark reminder that our economic model is inherently unjust and antithetical to earth’s economic way. The dominant model is not the only way to exchange in this world, there are many other options, both past and present. How can I practice gift economies on a small scale?

By giving away plants, food, knowledge, and stories. By thanking the earth for the gift of itself, and by being proud to express this gratitude to others and inviting them to share in gratitude. After all, *“it is human perception that makes the world a gift.”*

## **An Offering**

*“The land knows you, even when you are lost.”*

*“Ceremonies large and small have the power to focus attention to a way of living awake in the world.”*

I feel called to offer the earth stories. No, I am called to offer humanity stories, of the earth, and I feel the earth calls me to do this. What of myself can I offer? I must continue to offer tea to the harbor. I must continue to thank the rivers as I pass below and above. I must continue greeting the day when I arrive outside in the morning. Marrying the mundane to the sacred is the key to connecting myself to place. Sure, I won't do it everyday, but I can try, and eventually it may become something that happens without trying. I already feel closer to these waterways, and I feel better about myself, too. It is time to be proud of my ceremonies.

*“What else can you offer the earth, which has everything? What else can you give but something of yourself? A homemade ceremony, a ceremony that makes a home.”*

### **Asters and Goldenrods**

*“Yes, I have learned the names of the bushes, but I have yet to learn their songs.”*

*Metaphoray – walking in the woods as a scientist and a poet.*

*“The vastness and richness of reality cannot be expressed by the overt sense of a statement alone.*

How can I be more rigorous about metaphoraying?

- Take pictures with the film camera
- Write poems in the woods or parks
- Seek metaphors in nature
- Get outside more
- Learn more about plants and ecosystems

If I want to tell earth stories, I have to practice listening. And practicing listening is active. Art, Ceremony, and Science are different ways of paying attention. They all have their benefits and drawbacks. I can draw from each of them, cross-pollinate, and make something new.

### **Learning the Grammar of Animacy**

*“To be native to place we must learn to speak its language.”*



*“A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb wiikwegamaa - to be a bay - releases the water from bondage and lets it live...the living water has decided to shelter itself between the shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers.”*

*THOMAS BERRY – “We must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a relation of objects.”*

The Grammar of Animacy felt like an affirmation of my path. Just this week, I changed from saying New York Harbor to New York Bay. Now, they will be a bay. Trees, too, are beings to be listened to and respected. The elm seeds drifted down into the book as I read, caressing the learning of their grammar and wisdom. I can talk to them in my heart, but how will they respond if I speak to them in Gaelic?

## PART 2 - TENDING SWEETGRASS

### **Maple Sugar Moon**

*“The earth endows us with great gifts, the other half [of Nanabozho’s] teaching is that the gift is not enough. The responsibility does not lie with the maples alone. The other half belongs to us; we participate in its transformation. It is our work, and our gratitude, that distills the sweetness.”*

Maple Sugar Moon is really a gift of two stories, the first glimpse into Robin Wall Kimmerer’s home life, mixed and mingled with the story of Nanabozho watering down sap so that us humans must work, a little, to enjoy Nature’s gift. Thrive from is a better word than enjoy.

What is my work, with nature and trees, that will distill sweetness?

- Children’s stories – Sloth, Ocelot.
- Happy, nature connecting poems
- Growing herbs and fruits and veggies
- Mulberry Event!

### **A Mother’s Work**

*“Ecology is derived from the Greek oikos – home.”*

*“We set ourselves up as arbiters of what is good when often our standards of goodness are driven by narrow interests, by what we want.”*

*“Life adds up. Its eutrophic.”*

*“Balance is not a passive resting place – it takes work, balancing the giving and the taking.”*

What are my mothering instincts, and how can I nurture them?

- Tending for all life, being an ecological steward that respects the loss of life in service to the whole – Try to remember this when I pull or cut “weeds.”
- Caring for my own parents as they enter their final age – Call them, visit them, encourage them to seek joy in the world in their own manner.
- Do not let goodness be decided by my own narrow interests, it is not what I want, but what the great mother wants.

### **Allegiance to Gratitude**

*“Like the maples, leaders are the first to offer their gifts. Leadership is rooted not in power and authority, but in service and wisdom.”*

*“Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship.”*

*“If what we want for our people is patriotism, then let us inspire true love of country by invoking the land herself.”*

How can I be a leader rooted in service and wisdom?

- Follow the example of trees
- Volunteer to do the tasks no one wants to
- Bring gifts of food and medicine and laughter to my friends and coworkers
- Offer to help
- Respect and honor my home

What is the duty of humans = what is our gift?

- Gratitude
- Stewardship
- Love

Tell stories of patriotism that have a deep love of this land embedded in them.

## PART 3 – PICKING SWEETGRASS

### **Epiphany in the Beans**

*“The land loves us back...by a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons. She provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That’s what good mothers do.”*

*“Gardens are simultaneously a material and a spiritual undertaking. That’s hard for scientists, so fully brainwashed by Cartesian dualism, to grasp.”*

*“When you feel the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a two-way bond.”*

Where do I find my greatest sense of place?

- In the woods of suburbia on the bench. In Virginia in my mother’s garden. In my bed in my childhood room, with the dogwood tree waving to me through the pane.
- In New York: at Fort Greene Park. On the ferry crossing the Bay.

Cultivate these senses of place and continue to practice rituals and ceremonies that promote connection and belonging.

### **The Three Sisters**

*“Plants tell their stories not by what they say, but by what they do.”*

*“The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world.”*

*“In ripe ears and swelling fruit, they [the three sisters] counsel us that all gifts are multiplied in relationship.”*

Plant 3 sisters this week – May 20<sup>th</sup>.

What are my unique gifts, and how can I use them in the world?

- Words – write and share poems. Offer to help others with their writing. Continue to read and apply what I read to my actions and life. Write longer stories, of the land, for the land.
- Plants – spread my love and care of plants to others. Be a proud plant enthusiast. Give plants to others. Encourage others to learn about and identify plants.
- Intuition – When I read a room, try to direct the energy towards compassion and constructive action. Learn how to channel anger, mine and others, away from destructive acts or words.

### **Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket**

*“Trees are affected by their sapling days as much as people are by their childhoods.”*

*“The work of being a human is finding balance.” – JOHN PIGEON*

*“It is an honor to be the guardian of another species – an honor within each person’s reach that we often forget.”*

*“Writing is an act of reciprocity with the world; it is what I can give back in return for everything that has been given me.”*

What would it be like, to live with that heightened sensitivity to the lives given for ours?

- It would be hard, says my Western brain, accustomed to taking and using and throwing things away. It all comes back to gratitude, in the end. The more grateful I am, the more I will respect the beings that produced the products I use. Being grateful for this notebook, a gift from a friend, and from a tree, and a cow, is a way to begin that change. Honor this gift.

### **Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass**

*“If we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away. If you don’t give it respect it will leave us.” – LENA’S GRANDMOTHER*

*“Science and traditional knowledge may ask different questions and speak different languages, but they may converge when both truly listen to the plants.”*

*“Reciprocity is a matter of keeping the gift in motion through self-perpetuating cycles of giving and receiving.”*

The relationship between plants and people must be one of balance. How can I be more balanced in my work as a gardener?

- First, I made an offering of my writing. I must fulfill that.
- Second, I can ask the trees in Hammock Grove what they want, and as I design an experiment and mow the grove, I shall leave some parts alone.

What are the songs of mugwort and phragmites?

### **Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide**

*“Trees constitute the environmental quality committee.”*

*“If citizenship is a matter of shared beliefs, then I believe in the democracy of species.”*

*“The Maples, our most generous of benefactors and most responsible of citizens, do not deserve our government. They deserve you and me speaking up on their behalf.”*

What can I do to speak up on the Maples’ behalf?

- Listen. Listen to what they want from me, and be rigorous in this listening and in my documentation of what I hear.
- Speak. Speak to the other people in my life about listening to trees. About their power to be an environmental quality committee. About their healing power.
- Write. Write for the trees, to the people not in my life.

### **The Honorable Harvest**

*“Cautionary stories of the consequences of taking too much are ubiquitous in Native cultures, but its hard recall a single one in English.”*

*“The rules of the Honorable Harvest are based on accountability to both the physical and meta-physical worlds. The taking of another life to support your own is far more significant when you recognize the beings who are harvested as persons.”*

*“Imagination is one of our most powerful tools.”*

*“It is our uniquely human gift to express thanks because we have the awareness and the collective memory to remember that the world could well be otherwise.”*

*“One of our responsibilities as human-people is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world. We can do it through gratitude, through ceremony, through land stewardship, science, art, and in everyday acts of practical reverence.”*

*“A harvest is made honorable when it sustains the giver as well as the taker.”*

*“What’s good for the land is also good for the people.”*

*“The Honorable Harvest is as much about the relationships as about the materials.”*

The Honorable Harvest Chapter is a call to continue on my path. Relationship protocols are imperative, as are stories that build relationships between humans and non-humans. Tending to my own relationship with non-humans has changed my life and given me stories to tell. I must continue to practice, I must deepen this practice by telling stories, I must live the life that is calling to me from the plant world. How?

- Harvest and eat the mulberries behind my apartment
- Greet and introduce myself to Hammock Grove
- Grow more food
- Forage more plants – But practice the Honorable Harvest
- Write the stories I’ve been given
- Write and tell the poems I’ve co-created
- Be proud of my relationships with non-humans
- Show that it works

#### PART 4 – BRAIDING SWEETGRASS

## **In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place**

*“Walk in such a way that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth.”*

*“Our role is not to control or change the world as a human, but to learn from the world how to be human.”*

*“If he can combine the lessons from Nature with the strength of his own good mind, he can discover new things that will be useful for the people to come.”*

*“To become Indigenous is to grow the circle of healing to include all of creation.”*

*“He must walk with humility to balance his twin’s arrogance.”*

*“While they were working on the land, the land was working on them. Teaching them. Plants are our oldest teachers.*

To become Naturalized to Place I must follow the humble plantain, which I see everywhere in New York. To throw off the mindset of the white immigrant, I must do hard, uncomfortable work. To spread the teachings of plants, I must write my story. Invest my gifts on the side of creation.

I am energized and happy and excited! This work does this to me, Remember!

## **The Sound of Silverbells**

*“It wasn’t naming the source of wonder that mattered, it was wonder itself.”*

*“All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention as a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart. The job is just to lead them into the presence and ready them to hear.”*

*“A teacher comes, they say, when you are ready.”*

All I can do is create conditions for wonder to emerge in other folks. I can't force them to change.

Go out into the world with open senses, ready to accept and acknowledge the gifts of the living.

## **Sitting in a Circle**

*“Beyond material considerations, there is cultural meaning to living within the teachings of a circle.”*

*“In some Native languages the term for plants translates to “those who take care of us.”*

*“In the Apache language, the root word for land is the same as the word for mind. Gathering roots holds up a mirror between the map in the earth and the map in our minds.”*

*“The philosophy of reciprocity is beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is harder.”*

*“This is our work, to discover what we can give. Isn’t this the purpose of education, to learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world?”*

*“The circle of ecological compassion we feel is enlarged by direct experience of the living world and shrunken by its lack.”*

*“The exchange of recognition, gratitude, and reciprocity for these gifts is just as important in a Brooklyn flat as under a birch bark roof.”*

How can I enlarge my direct experience of the living world in Brooklyn? How can I encourage others to experience it directly and with the intention of cultivating ecological compassion?

- Daily and weekly rituals of nature awareness. Nature lives in the city as much as it does in the forest. It is simply a matter of shifting perception. Practice gratitude and recognition for the beings here, now, everyday.
- I can create paths for the public in Hammock Grove. I can work to increase the biodiversity and health of the young urban forest for future generations. I can collaborate with other nature-connectors in New York.

## **Burning Cascade Head**

*“They look like they’re trying to remember what it would look like to love the world.”*

*“Ceremony focuses attention so that attention becomes intention. If you stand together and profess a thing before your community, it holds you accountable. Ceremonies transcend the*



*boundaries of the individual and resonate beyond the human realm. These acts of reverence are powerfully pragmatic.”*

*“To have agency in the world, ceremonies should be reciprocal co-creations, organic in nature, in which community creates ceremony and the ceremony creates communities. They should not be cultural appropriations from Native peoples. But generating new ceremony in today’s world is hard to do.”*

*“I want to dance for the renewal of the world.”*

*“Science can be a way of forming intimacy and respect with other species that is rivaled only by the observations of traditional knowledge holders. It can be a path to kinship.”*

Burning Cascade Head is a call to bring my personal ceremonies with nature out of my own personal world and into community. There must be other people in this massive city who have ceremonies with the land and water and non-humans here. How can I find them? To be a leader is to be bold. Make the ceremony, publicize it, and connect to those who come. A good place to start is my community garden. Can I host a ceremony of thanksgiving there at the end of the season?

### **Putting down Roots**

*“The marvel of a basket is in its transformation, its journey from wholeness as a living plant to fragmented strands and back to wholeness again as a basket. A basket knows the dual powers of destruction and creation that shape the world. Strands once separated are rewoven into a new whole. The journey of a basket is also the journey of a people.”*

*“The history of the plants is inextricably tied up with the history of the people, with the forces of destruction and creation.”*

*“Plants mirror changes in culture and ownership of land.”*

*“We are dreaming of a time when the land might give thanks to the people.”*

*“For grief can also be comforted by creation, by rebuilding the homeland that was taken.”*

I have struggled with climate grief this year, and this chapter shows the path to healing that for me and many others. Earth has the answers. Dana’s idea to make baskets out of the cut

phragmites, and this chapter on baskets, is a message to take action rather than wallow. Let the journey of baskets, made in New York by European descendants with European plants, show a way to revitalize the relationship between people and planet.

### **Umbilicaria: The Belly Button of the World**

*“When times are easy and there’s plenty to go around, individual species can go it alone. But when conditions are harsh and life is tenuous, it takes a team sworn to reciprocity to keep life going forward. In a world of scarcity, interconnection and mutual aid become critical for survival. So say the lichens.”*

*“Their success is measure not by consumption and growth, but by graceful longevity and simplicity, by persistence while the world changed around them. It is changing now.”*

*“Our indigenous herbalists say to pay attention when plants come to you; they’re bringing you something you need to learn.”*

Mugwort and Phragmites have come to me. They take up most of my time at work in the summer, as I constantly cut them and worry about their tenacity. What do I need to learn from them?

- Humility. I may think I know nature, but there is always more to learn, and new beings to learn from.
- Perseverance. Their ability to resprout and find the places where they will thrive is impressive.
- Invisible connections. They are both rhizomatous, and their below ground roots are a mat that I cannot know or even begin to understand. Do not judge from appearances alone.

### **Old-Growth Children**

*“When resources begin to run short, as they always will, cooperation and strategies that promote stability – strategies perfected by rainforest ecosystems – will be favored by evolution.”*

*“If we are looking for models of self-sustaining communities, we need look no further than old-growth forest. Or the old-growth cultures they raised in symbiosis with them.”*

*“To love a place is not enough, We must find ways to heal it.” -FRANZ DOLP*

*“Old-growth cultures...are not only a matter of ethnicity or history, but of relationship born out of reciprocity between land and people.”*

Poets as ecologists! It is enervating to see my dream for myself reflected on the pages of Kimmerer’s book. My job as a gardener has largely become one of restoration as I battle the invasive plants that threaten to wipe out the young urban forest. I, too, must care for the young trees of Hammock Grove, as Franz did for the ones in Shotpouch. How can I further tend to a relationship born out of reciprocity in a public park in New York City? By wedding science and respect

- Document the trees there and their health and make maps for the public
- Greet them everyday
- Write poems and stories inspired by their structure, whispers, and songs
- Encourage others to enter into relationship with the grove through trails and signs

### **Witness to the Rain**

*“If there is meaning in the past and in the imagined future, it is captured in the moment. When you have all the time in the world, you can spend it, not on going somewhere, but on being where you are.”*

*“One thing I’ve learned in the woods is that there is no such thing as random. Everything is steeped in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another.”*

*“The forest is textured with different kinds of time, as the surface of the pool is dimpled with different kinds of rain.”*

*“Maybe there is no such thing as time, there are only moments, each with their own story.”*

Witness to the Rain is a lovesong to the healing and teaching power of a forest. To be, simply to be, in a forest in the rain is one of life’s greatest pleasures, one that I know from my time in Virginia when I did a solo hike in the Shenandoah and it rained the whole time. I miss the forests, here in the city. There are forests here, but I do not go. Why not? Time, that enemy of all New Yorkers, prevents me from thinking I can do it. It takes time, an hour at least, to get to the

larger tracts of forest in the city, and more to get to the ones outside it. I do not think it worth it to spend 2 or 3 hours on public transport to spend many moments in a forest? Forget the notion of time as precious, and remember that what is actually precious is what I do with it.

### **Windigo Footprints**

*“Maybe we’ve all been banished to lonely corners by our obsessions with private property. We’ve accepted banishment even from ourselves when we spend our beautiful, utterly singular lives marking more money, to buy more things that feed but never satisfy. It is the Windigo way that tricks us into believing that belongings will fill our hunger, when it is belonging that we crave.”*

What does actually cause me satisfaction? When do I feel satisfied and undesirous of something more?

- After sharing a home-cooked meal with people I love, especially when I participate in the cooking.
- After a good day’s work with plants, caring for them and helping them to grow in their best possible ways. Especially true after pruning trees.
- After an intellectually stimulating book that ends on a satisfying note.
- After writing creatively.
- After dancing for hours at a concert or with a partner.
- After participating in a team sport

None of these things take too much money. I have never really subscribed to the myth of money equals happiness, but I still do not seek these things out in order to attain satisfaction. What it would mean to actively pursue true satisfaction on a weekly basis? On a daily one?

### **The Sacred and the Superfund**

*“For just as water was given certain responsibilities for sustaining the world, so were the people. Chief among their duties was to give thanks for the gifts of the earth and to care for them.”*

*“But water is more faithful to its responsibilities than the United States would ever be.”*

*“The oblivion we manufacture for ourselves to keep us from looking environmental problems straight in the eye.” – JOANNA MACY – “Until we can grieve for our planet we cannot love it.”*

*“Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth...Restoration is a powerful antidote to despair. Restoration offers concrete means by which humans can once again enter into positive, creative relationship with the more-than-human world, meeting responsibilities that simultaneously material and spiritual. Its not enough to grieve. Its not enough to just stop doing bad things.”*

*“It’s time we start doing the dishes in Mother Earth’s kitchen.”*

*“With plants and natural processes in sole command, the role of land as a renewable source of knowledge and ecological insight becomes apparent...Restoration is an opportunity for a partnership, for us to help.”*

*“Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land. Therefore, reconnecting people and the landscape is as essential as reestablishing proper hydrology or cleaning up contaminants. It is medicine for the earth.”*

*“The essential turning of our time [is] the shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining civilization. Action on behalf of life transforms, Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us.” – JOANNA MACY*

This chapter should be read by anyone despairing over ecological collapse. This chapter should be read by me once a month. This chapter is the backbone of the movement that will transform our society into a life sustaining and life celebrating one. It is a reminder that there is great joy in this work. There is much more to be gained than a healthy planet in turning ourselves towards the earth, and becoming healed by her and healing her. To deepen and spread this ethos, I can continue to learn about plants and their healing abilities, but more importantly. I can show that a white man can be restored and loved by the land. Can be proud of his relationship to mother earth. Can do this work and find meaning and satisfaction by aligning himself with values and entities greater than himself.

## **People of Corn, People of Light**

*“Creation, then, is an ongoing process and the story is not history alone – it is also prophecy.”*

*“As the world changes, an immigrant culture must write its own new stories of relationship to place – a new ibal, but tempered by the wisdom of those who were old on this land long before we came.”*

*“The very facts of the world are a poem.”*

*“Language is our gift and our responsibility. I’ve come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land.”*

I have come to this same conclusion many times, and I have been asked by the land to help tell their stories. I have even been gifted stories and poems from the land. I have written some down, and others still live in my head and with the land, perhaps waiting to be given to someone else. How long will they wait? How long can they wait? What are some other ways I can live up to this responsibility?

- Tell my story of shedding white saviorism through land connection, be proud of it!
- Tell others about my healing process, and how the land has guided me in it.
- Write stories and share them. Stories and poems can be shared without having to be published. I can send to friends and family, I can post on Instagram, I can attend open mics, I can read my poems to the land and water

## **Collateral Damage**

*“If grief can be a doorway to love, then let us weep for the world we are breaking apart so we can love it back to wholeness again.”*

The idea of grief as a doorway to love is a great one. It has certainly worked for me, as I find that when I experience climate grief or ecological despair, when I emerge into the daily world once again I am encouraged to keep working and to keep loving the natural world. What about those people, like my brother, who scoff when I say that the future extinction of many species saddens me. How can we get them, the committed human exceptionalists, to find their own doorway to love for the natural world? Through experience is one way. Another is to write so well and so truthfully that they experience the grief I do, or they experience the love I do. Can I do that?

## **Shkitagen: People of the Seventh Fire**

*“Until there is balance and perfect reciprocity between the forces you can try and fail and try and fail again. I know. And yet, despite the need, you must swallow your sense of urgency, calm your breathing so that the energy goes not to frustration, but to fire.”*

*“[The responsibility to care for land] means participating – that the natural world relies on us to do good things. You don’t show your love and care by putting what you love behind a fence.”*

*“At the First Fire, so long ago, the people were told that it is their spiritual lives that will keep them going.”*

*“The people of the Seventh Fire are told to turn around and retrace the steps of the ones who brought us here. Their sacred purpose is to walk back along the red road of our ancestors’ path and to gather up all the fragments that lay scattered along the trail.”*

*“Metaphor is a way of telling truth far greater than scientific data.”*

*“None of us can recognize every piece, let alone carry it all. We need each other, to take a song, a word, a story, a toll, a ceremony and put it in our bundles. Not for ourselves, but for the ones yet to be born, for all our relations. Collectively, we assemble from the wisdom of the past a vision for the future, a worldview shaped by mutual flourishing.”*

How can I be a shkitagen, ones who holds the spark that cannot be extinguished? How can I be a fungus of sacred fire, that will hold the light and heat of indigenous wisdom and plant knowledge and light the fires of others?

- Connect to my indigenous past. Learn about the practices and languages and teachings and stories of Scottish people, specifically those from the Western Hebrides. From Norwegians of the Western Fjords. Of American settlers of the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains. Learn the stories of these people and tell them.
- Acknowledge the duality of fire. I thank the sun for igniting a passion in all beings, but I can help to ignite that passion by passing on the teaching of the creative and destructive forces of fire. Each of us carry sparks within us, literal electricity courses in our veins, but we have not harnessed it. If we did, and if we did it communally, there could a grid of passions lighting our way.

## **Defeating Windigo**

*“In winter, when scarcity is at its zenith, the Windigo rages beyond control, but when abundance reigns the hunger fades away and with it the power of the monster.”*

*“Scarcity and plenty are as much qualities of the mind and spirit as they are of the economy. Gratitude plants the seed for abundance. Each of us comes from people who were once indigenous. We can reclaim our memberships in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth.”*

What can I do to foster and maintain an abundance mindset in my own self?

- Gratitude. Not just for the day, but for the food that I eat everyday. For the friends and family that hold me together every day. Not just for the elements, but for the beings traversing those elements.
- Gift-giving. Harvest the fruits of the earth and give them away, just as plants do. Giving plants to people, or the products of plants, connects them and myself to the larger world.
- Always drink free water. Do not pay for it, and be thankful that it is still free and available to us.
- Humans for Abundance – support this idea. It is no coincidence that as I read and write about all of this, an organization in South America is practicing what I am learning. My job is to articulate the mission and vision to the Western World.
- Encourage others to be abundant with their creativity. Do so myself, and ask others what their creative gifts are, and if they might show them to me.
- Love. Always remember to love the other beings who come into my life. Practice compassion, intentionally, so that it becomes as natural to me as breathing.

## **Epilogue: Returning the Gift**

*“Generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative, especially among people who live close to the land and know its waves of plenty an scarcity.”*

*“Our elders say that ceremony is the way we can remember to remember. In the dance of the giveaway, remember that the earth is a gift that we must pass on, just as it came to us.”*



*“Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spreading our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making.”*

*“Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world.*

*In return for the privilege of breath.”*

Ceremony does help me remember. It is time to bring others into ceremony. It is time to be proud of the gratitude and gifts I give to Mother Earth. It is time to hold out my hand, and invite others to create their own paths of renewal and reciprocity.

## Appendix D

A roadmap of service that seeks to turn from personal to societal liberation by building on the connected threads of service and healing. I chose a cyclical map to represent the ambiguous beginning and ending of this journey, as well as the interconnectedness of these actions.



**Figure 2: Roadmap of Service**