

## **Postcolonial healing landscapes and mental health in a remote Indigenous community in subarctic Ontario, Canada**

### **Abstract**

**Background:** Although the concept of therapeutic landscape is concerned with a holistic, socio-ecological model of health, most studies have attempted to explore the link between the land and health from a Western perspective. There is a need for different (non-“Western“) conceptualizations on health and place. We focus on an Indigenous reserve in Northern Ontario, a region of the Canadian subarctic, by exploring the importance of spaces and places to create postcolonial therapeutic landscapes in order to treat the wounds inflicted by colonialism.

**Objectives:** The aim of this research was to gain insight into the views and experiences of First Nations residents living on-reserve that are undergoing a process of regaining traditional spiritual beliefs and teachings to construct therapeutic spaces in order to face mental health problems caused by abusing of legal opioid analgesics.

**Methods:** The current study utilized a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews. Participants were 35 male and female, aged between 19 and 50 years, of Cree and Ojibwe ethnic background. Conventional qualitative content analysis methods, using NVivo 8 software, was used to analyze all semi-structured interviews in a systematic way.

**Results:** Reconnecting with earth, spirituality and traditional animist beliefs is the way to recovery. Taking part in ceremonies and ritual spaces, and seeking knowledge and advice from Elders are adequate practices for personal healing. These practices enable Indigenous people to be physically and mentally healthy, to maintain healthy relationships with others, and to achieve self-respect and a sense of belonging. The Indigenous person needs to construct a self-image as a person whose social role in this world is to protect, respect, care for, and live in harmony with nature.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this research provide important insights into the relationship between space, healing and culture as a determinant of health and well-being and document some of the key factors that contribute to substance abuse recovery.

**Keywords:** mental health, Indigenous identity, self, therapeutic landscape, Canadian subarctic.

## **Introduction**

Although the concept of therapeutic landscape is concerned with a holistic, socio-ecological model of health, most studies have attempted to explore the link between the land and health from a Western perspective (Jiang 2014; Detweiler et al. 2012; Heft 2010; Williams 2007; Milligan et al. 2004; Gesler 2003; Wilson 2003). The term “therapeutic landscape” has traditionally been used to describe landscapes with reputation for achieving physical, mental and spiritual healing, such as, spas, baths, sites of religious pilgrimages, and hospitals. However, non-physical dimensions of therapeutic landscapes has not been explored because of the limitations of Western epistemologies focused on the healing properties of physical places (MacDonald et al. 2015; Willox 2012; Wilson 2003). There is a need for different (non-“Western”) conceptualizations on health and place with respect to the creation of therapeutic landscapes, embedded within the cultural belief and value systems, and the role they play in shaping health and identity (Kirmayer 2011). We focus on an Indigenous reserve in Northern Ontario, a region of the Canadian Subarctic, by exploring the importance of spaces and places to create postcolonial therapeutic landscapes in order to treat the wounds inflicted by colonialism. The present paper is important because it demonstrates that there are Indigenous ways of knowing that may challenge Western perceptions of health, place and identity (Marsh 2015; Rowan 2014; Willox 2012; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Wilson 2003).

## **Post-colonial Healing Spaces**

During the last decades a feeling of spirituality, identity and healing has been alive within many Indigenous reserves in Canada (Marsh 2015; Rowan 2014; Kral et al. 2011; Lavalle & Poole 2009; Kirmayer & Vlaskakis 2008; Brass 2008; Waldram 2004; Adelson 2004). This is the consequence of the creation of a revitalizing neo-animist/neo-traditionalist social movement called *Healing Movement* (Kirmayer et al. 2011; Tanner 2008; Steward 2008; Kirmayer et al. 2000). This pan-Indigenous spiritual revitalization movement has been spread through remote Indigenous communities in subarctic Ontario as a community effort to face the new social epidemic of abusing legal opioid analgesics such as OxyContin® or Percocet® that are destroying the Indigenous reserves. In 2010, the Indigenous organizations (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Mushgowuk Tribal Council, Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians, Grand Council Treaty #3) declared the massive use of opioid analgesics on the reserves as a social epidemic since it was happening in all the reserves in the northern part of Ontario ( Chiefs of Ontario 2010). For example, in the Sioux Lookout regional area, with a population of 25,000 people of Indigenous descent, at least 9000 people were addicted to OxyContin®. In some Indigenous reserves like Fort Hope First Nation or Cat Lake First Nation, around 80% of the population of working age, suffered from problems with the OxyContin® (NAHO 2012). Some research on Indigenous reserves of northern Ontario show that around 50% of the adult population has claimed to take opioid analgesics with recreational purposes and around 40% declared to be taking some other illegal drugs frequently (Kelly et al. 2011). This situation has damaged the community and the family structure, increasing the levels of violence, robberies, divorces and some other social problems (MacDonald et al. 2015; Pearce et al. 2015; Reading & Wein 2014; Srivastava 2012; Sioux Lookout 2009).

On a local level, healing pan-Indigenous movements have emerged as a community effort in order to stop this new social epidemic. This healing movement represents an Indigenous movement towards abstinence that emphasizes cultural and spiritual values for the healing of the broken spirit caused by colonialism. The historic process of colonialism still preserves an important role in the confirmation of the cultural memory of the Indigenous reserves of northern Ontario and, in the collective trauma that should be cured through adequate mental health therapy. Mental health problems in Indigenous reserves are considered the result of the historic trauma caused by colonization (Pearce et al. 2015; Reading & Wein 2014; Skinner et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2012; Martin 2012; Lavalle & Poole 2010; Kirmayer & Vlaskakis 2008). In fact, this means that each Indigenous community should deal with the trauma that has affected their members.

During recent years, a subgroup of the population on reserves is making an effort to deal with these existing symptoms in the Indigenous communities, developing some therapeutic initiatives based on contact with nature and going back to animist roots (Marsh et al. 2015; Rowan 2014; Rojas & Stublely 2014; Robins & Wein 2011; Jiwa et al. 2008; Kirmayer et al. 2008; Stewart 2008). In this regard, some members of the Indigenous communities in subarctic Ontario are mentoring and promoting the healing movement. It revitalizes traditional healing methods and it supports the idea of creating decolonizing spaces: ceremonial healing places aimed at overcoming the social epidemic caused by opioid analgesics.

The healing movement in remote Indigenous reserves searches for the creation of physical and ideological spaces where healing practices and visual cultural symbols can be expressed and can claim social legitimacy. The multi-sensory space that this healing movement seeks to create differs from the conventional biomedical spaces (Papadakis 2008).

The multi-sensory healing space of the healing movement seeks to create a "therapeutic infrastructure" that can be considered as social and institutionally legitimate as a biomedical space. The pan-Indigenous healing movement on the reserve posits that the traditional healing practices are psychologically useful to deal with contemporary mental health problems. However, biomedicine is the operating paradigm that structures the clinical assistance in Canada in which sensory and spiritual health's dimensions are not taken into account. Therefore, the mental health model that the healing movement suggests is a way of psychotherapy that is not yet properly recognized in the mental health politics in Canada (Marsh et al. 2015; Robins & Wein 2011; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Papadakis 2008; Stewart 2008). In this regard, on the reserve, they are trying to create a healing environment as opposed to the biomedical environment, regarding the concept of health, diagnosis and treatment, atmosphere and the physical characteristics of the medical facilities. From the point of view of the healing movement, the process has to occur in less formal environments and outside of a building. In this sense, the main difference between the healing environment in biomedical spaces and the environment of the healing movement is the quality of the place in which the healing occurs. Healing spaces for addictions treatment in the cultural model of the healing movement are much more fluid and porous but are also places for social impugnation and resistance (Marsh et al. 2015; Robins & Wein 2011; Papadakis 2008; Stewart 2008). Natural environments such as , rivers, lakes, trees, specific places in the forest, a

certain moment of the day, designated sacred spaces in the home, etc., bring fluidity to the place which cannot occur in the biomedical system.

The individuals who decide to embrace the cultural ideology proposed by the healing movement will not only get a renewed sense of identity but also, they can build a new way to understand new healing contexts. In this paper we explore how residents living on-reserve who are undergoing a process of regaining traditional spiritual beliefs and teachings, see and interact with the space with healing purposes.

Qualitative studies have documented how self-transformation may occur through the practice of reframing one's personal experience with illness in terms of a turning point in their lives, especially with regard to change in values and issues of spirituality (Seligman 2014; Waldram 2013; Groleau et al. 2010; Stromberg 2008; Csordas 2002). The use of spiritual narratives based on personal experience with mental illness, such as addictions, can be used to offer comments and assessments that are not focused solely on the pathology, but also on historical events, social transformations, self-identity and cultural change. This line of research is extremely promising and a series of studies have merged to explore the intersection between narratives, the struggle for Aboriginal renewal and community healing in various Canadian and American contexts (Wilcox et al. 2012; Tempier et al. 2011; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Brass 2008; Wilson 2005; O'Neil 1998; Adelson 2004; Berman 2003; Fast 2002; Pickering 2000; Warry 1998; Waldram 1997; Fast 2002).

## **Methods**

### ***Study design and setting***

Guided by an epistemology that recognizes that knowledge (including that related to health) is fundamentally a social construction, our research took a qualitative approach that allows the voices and experiences of participants to be heard. As Indigenous researchers have emphasized, natural methods of research such as narrative inquiry and ethnography fit within an Indigenous ethical framework as traditionally, Indigenous societies have been oral societies (Phillips 2010; Lavallée 2009; Kovach 2009; Henderson 2008; Wilson 2008). This study was designed as phenomenological, qualitative research that explores environmental, social and cultural determinants of health from participant's perspectives. Qualitative methods were chosen because they are appropriate for research questions concerned with subjective experiences, meanings, and processes (Denzin & Lincoln 2008). This paper focused specifically on research conducted in an Oji-Cree reserve as representative of the Indigenous reserves in Northern Ontario (Figure 1). The research started in 2008 and lasted until 2012. It was developed within Research Initiative for Population, Environment Health and Culture (RIPEHC) by an interdisciplinary investigation group in different Indigenous reserves in northern Ontario, Canada. The Oji-Cree community is located in Northeastern Ontario, a region of the Canadian Subarctic. The community is approximately 5 hours east of Thunder Bay on Highway 11 and is linked by an all-weather road to the TransCanada (Highway 11). The closest rural community is some 35 kilometres east. At present, the reserve receives a majority of its administrative and financial services from

Thunder Bay and Timmins, some 576 and 294 kilometres away respectively. The reserve was comprised of individuals with Ojibwe and Cree ancestry. Ojibwe people, like many Algonquin people, use the term Anishinaabe or Anishinaabek (plural) to refer to themselves. As such, these terms are used in this research. According to community statistics, the reserve has 1,605 registered band members, 820 of which reside on reserve. The First Nations band is the main employer and a handful of individuals work off-reserve for forestry or logging companies. As with many Canadian reserves, in terms of social status, unemployment is high and many individuals depend on some form of social assistance. Since 2005, the abuse of prescription drugs has become an epidemic. The north of the province is unique because of its large number of Indigenous communities, primarily Cree and Anishnaabe (Ojibway). Today this region is home to 121 of the 145 Indigenous reserves in Ontario,<sup>1</sup> representing 11.5% of Ontario's Indigenous population (Yahn 2009).

**Fig. 1.** A map of the province of Ontario highlighting the location for this research.



## *Participants*

The study sample was comprised of 35 Oji-Cree individuals (21 men/14 women) living on reserve, between the ages of 18 and 50 years, presenting a range of socio-economic backgrounds and levels of education (Table 1). In analytical terms, this amount of interviews is considered adequate in order to deal with the qualitative data (Kienler & Pederson 2007; Kuzel 2007). According to the goals of this investigation, we chose an intentional non-probabilistic sampling to represent the following criteria: 1) prescription drugs abuse; 2) having started a process of regaining traditional spiritual beliefs and teachings; 3) living on reserve; 4) self-defining as an Indigenous person. Participants were recruited from medical facilities on reserve referred to us by clinical personnel. Also, flyers were placed at the medical facilities, and interested participants were requested to make contact with the research team via email. The research protocol and consent form were approved by the clinical staff on the reserve. All participants read an information letter and/or the study was explained orally. Verbal or signed consent was obtained from all participants just before the interview was conducted.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants.**

<b>Personal Characteristics of participants (n=35)</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	21	60
Female	14	40
<b>Age</b>		
25-34	12	42.85
35-44	18	51.42
45-55	5	14.28
<b>Education</b>		
Completed primary school or less	13	37.14
Secondary graduate or some secondary	20	57.14
Post-secondary school or some post-secondary	2	5.71
<b>Main source of income</b>		
Salary/wages from employment	10	28.57
Social assistance or other	25	71.42
<b>Marital status</b>		

Married	3	8.57	<b>Data colle ctio n</b>
Living with a partner	17	48.57	
Separated	11	31.42	
Divorced	2	5.71	
Single	2	5.71	
<b>Household type</b>			The e narratives that constitute the empirical data were collected through an interview protocol in a clinic, in the participant s' houses or in other social
Couple with children	20	57.14	
Couple, no children	3	8.57	
Lone parent	10	28.57	
Other	2	5.71	
<b>Ethnic ancestry</b>			the participant s' houses or in other social
Cree	19	54.28	
Ojibwe (Anishinaabe)	16	45.71	

environments in which we tried to create a comfortable climate. The interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 h and were conducted in English by the first author (AMM).

Although some elders speak their own Native language, the majority speak only English as their first language. Interviews were guided by interview protocol through open-ended questions and the probes were only used to prompt more discussion if the participant needed examples to stimulate the conversation. Based on the proposals of first author (AMM) and a review of the literature, AMM prepared the interview protocol. Interviews were coded for anonymity and to maintain confidentiality of respondents. After preliminary analysis of the transcripts obtained in the first two interviews, the final interview protocol comprised five topics that should be covered: (a) substance abuse history; (b) attitudes, beliefs and motivations related to mental health and illness; (c) response to substance abuse; (d) perception of traditional healing practices; and (e) healing spaces. The protocol was always applied with sufficient flexibility to allow maximum adaptation to the narratives of the participants. As mentioned above, storytelling has been described in Indigenous research as a method that can be familiar and comforting for Indigenous research participants because the oral traditions has a long tradition in Indigenous cultures (Kirmayer et al. 2011; Lavallée 2009; Phillips 2010). In this sense, we think that storytelling as a method incorporates culturally appropriate protocol for research involving Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim, and transferred to a computer program for coding (QSR NVivo®, version 8.0). An analysis of the manifest content and of the underlying meanings was carried out through this research for the codification of the interviews, following Strauss and Corbin's suggestions (1990) and Miles and Huberman (1994). The codification and analysis were developed in 3 different steps: 1) iterative readings and identification of themes 2) identification of the different codes and detection of negative cases 3) fragments selection in order to show the observed patterns. We used a mixed, data-driven approach by using two types of codes: a predetermined list of codes –deductive- corresponding to the contexts of traditional healing practices (i.e. Sweat lodge, smudging, etc.) and thematic codes –inductive- that emerged from the narratives (i.e spirituality, connections to other, ecocentric self, etc.). After the completion of the coding of the 15 interviews, no new themes emerged. Initial content and thematic analysis was conducted by the first author (AMM). To determine the consistency in the coding strategy made by the first author (AMM), inter-coder agreement was established by reviewing and cross-checking the other authors (JV & RR). Any inconsistencies about the categorizations were discussed until final codes and themes was reached between both researchers.

### ***Ethics***

The research was conducted following the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics and Canadian Institutes of Health Guidelines Research Involving Aboriginal People. Our work followed the principles of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality (article 5) since we keep the name of the reserve as a pseudonym and participants remain anonymous throughout this paper. The process of community engagement implied no active engagement in the project, but simply an acknowledgement that it was being carried out and no registered objection to it. At the time of research, the reserve had no research protocols in place or no local research council. In this sense, the proposal was presented to representatives of public health service organizations within the community for their evaluation and approval. In addition to the formal procedures required by representatives of public health service organizations, we also considered the necessity of respecting traditional protocols by presenting tobacco in exchange for information.

### **Results**

Through semi-structured interviews, the participants shared perspectives of their personal experiences of health, wellness and healing spaces. This section identifies and document the implication of therapeutic landscapes for health, spirituality and maintaining sobriety for Indigenous peoples.

### ***Mother Earth as a Therapeutic Environment***

Participants were in agreement that the biomedical health system couldn't offer the mental care services that the Anishinaabe/Cree with addiction problems need. The biomedical system does not take into account the cultural fact that an Indigenous person has to be connected to the nature and the spiritual world. The way to attain mental health is through interaction with the nature. The boreal forest that surrounds the reserve



becomes a clinic or a therapeutic milieu. In this natural environment, the physical and natural space becomes the authentic installation for the treatment of Indigenous addictions.

When I am passing through difficult moments I go to the woods or lakes and I ask them for help so that they give me advice. I tell them my problems and this helps me to focus in my thoughts. So they help me to realize the bad things I am doing. For example, when I do not respect the spiritual world or when I judge people. There are some problems that damage your mental health... It is difficult to explain it with words but, when I am in the land I can feel who I am. I don't feel this when I am in the city, you know. Every time I have a problem or I feel bad or sad I know where I have to go. I do not go to the church, I go to the land and I think about who I am. For me, the land is sacred, it is from where my ancestors and I come from. It is my culture. (Brenda, age group 35-44)

If you are sick, you can participate in healing ceremonies. You can go to a sweat lodge or you can establish connection with Mother Earth. You have the land. You don't need to go to a hospital and wait for a doctor or make an appointment, you know. You can always go to the land. You can go any place in the woods. I can take tobacco or sweet grass and smudge in any place. You can find any place in the woods to contact the Creator. The only thing you need is a quiet place for your offering. It took years for me to feel good with myself until I accepted my tradition. We have always lived in the nature. That is how we are. Sometimes when I am in the city, I feel far from Mother Earth but, when I close my eyes I can be connected to it. I can feel that my place is connected to the land. (Patrick, age group 25-34)

The land is the cultural image of Mother Earth and for the healing movement is an institution, that is, a healing and multi-sensory space. The experience of living in the nature is an important facet of personal identity. In this interpretation, Mother Earth is seen as a place for individual change and it should be experienced as an ancestral and healing space. From the healing movement point of view, Mother Earth is a cultural symbol that helps to understand nature as a therapeutic space. The boreal forest is seen as an ancestral spiritual entity condensed in the rhetorical figure of Mother Earth. It is an important symbolic place for the creation and preservation of the Anishinaabe/Cree identity. The interviews show that the construction of identity in the healing movement needed the spaces such as the boreal forest to develop the purposes of this animist movement. The boreal forest, as spiritual identity, becomes a symbolic place in order to maintain a sense of coherence and continuity during the healing journey.

I have never actually thought about my relationship with the land [...] However, now I realize that I have grown living in contact with the nature. I connected with my people just few years ago, when I was about 30 years old. I live outside my

culture since I was a child because of the residential school [...] Now I feel I have had a reconnection experience, you know. I attend ceremonies, teaching lodges, traditional camps, powwows... and I feel that I am connected to Mother Earth and to my Elders. You have to realize that we were prohibited to practice all our spiritual traditions. They wanted to take from us who we were. Now I do offers to the Creator. I put sacred tobacco every time I go to the woods... (Carol, age group 35-44)

In the healing movement, people think that the land is the base of identity and that there is an inseparable connection since they think that Gitchi-Manitou (Great/Spirit/Creator) gave the land to Indigenous people. This is something that they can preserve with the healing movement. They can maintain the belief that they should live as land caretakers, seeing the land as a spiritual entity. Reaching sobriety requires spending time with Mother Earth, becoming the symbolic place for socialization that this healing movement promotes. In a way, people learn to read the place as mnemonic space, this is to say, as part of the cultural memory needed to remember and maintain his commitment to the principles of the healing movement. One of the principals of the healing movement is to see nature as a sacred energy (Mother Earth) that should be remembered in terms of symbolic and spiritual interconnectivity to the earth.

Mother Earth is like our spiritual grandmother, Nokomis, she taught us to live the good and correct life. Now we should do the same she did. We should respect and listen to our elders. As our spiritual Grandmother, we have the responsibility of taking care of her and not abandon her. We will have to cure ourselves first in order to be able to heal the land... that means reconnect the land with our Mother Earth. Once we heal ourselves, once we manage to be who we are, we will heal the land. Everything on the land is what holds us up. Everything is connected. Every relation includes animals and trees, so we are forever linked to the land. People were healthy when we used to walk in the woods. We no longer live on the land and that is why we have more diseases. Some day the spiritual world will call us to demonstrate our use and contact with the land. (Sarah, age group 25-34)

You know that the wound is there but going back to what you were is the actual healing... and I think that our community needs to remember in order to learn who we are, instead of being something different. To be healed is based on the spiritual. It does not matter if it is emotional, physical or mental, it is all spiritual. Our problem with alcohol and drugs occurs because we have lost the sense of who we are. We were introduced to new things, like drugs and alcohol. Before, these things were used for ceremonies, for a spiritual purpose, for meditation but, not to the point of abusing or depending from them. When we were taken into residential

schools, when they put us on reserves, which was not our lifestyle. The Whiteman stopped our working ways, who we were, who we had to be. As I said, I think that every culture has its own purposes. The Creator created us and created our culture with one only purpose. I think the Creator created the Anishinaabe as the land caretakers. (Taryn, age group 35-44)

The individual behaviour must be guided by conservation. One of the sociocultural topics that should orientate the Anishinaabe-Cree identity is to keep a special relationship with the land. The land is represented as the spiritual ancestral strength that should be experienced as a live and ancestral entity that should be protected. The individual should learn to take only what he needs, through ceremonial protocol. Respect for the land implies much more than being thankful. As protectors they are responsible for preventing the destruction of the land.<sup>2</sup>

We are in a period of time that the Elders call Seventh Fire and I think this is the recover and healing moment after hundreds of years suffering intolerance, racism and oppression... Most of us are going back to this time to get guidance, for being able to live in harmony with the environment and find balance in this life. Now, I know that we are deeply connected to Mother Earth and now I understand that all of us should behave in harmony with Mother Earth. (Jane, age group 25-34)

We have entered the Seventh Fire period. This was a prophecy that announced that it would arrive a time when the Anishinaabe had lost almost everything; they would go back to the sacred way to recover and renew our language and our spiritual lifestyle and transmit this to the following generations. We are the sons of Seven Fire. We have experienced the loss of the sacred things. Now we are fighting to recover all what has being lost and offer it to the future generations. We all should protect the land, its rivers and all the things that depend on Mother Earth. We should make an effort to re-establish the natural balance of the land for the following generations. (Norma, age group 35-44)

The cultural model of personality that the healing movement promotes claims that an Anishinaabe-Cree should have a life based on contact with nature. This activity is a part of a cosmological order in which animals and humans co-exist in the same ontological plan together with their spiritual counterparts. People should maintain this identity spending time in the healing places that the healing movement proposes. They should see it as the ancestors' land and not simply a community in Northern Ontario. The reserve and the life in the woods should be understood as a pure, natural, spiritual space since, it is where their spiritual ancestors (Grandfathers) once lived. The physical place should not be defined as rural and industrial, as it is happening with the rest of the communities that live in Northern Ontario.

I think that most of our problems with alcohol and prescriptive drugs have to do with the loss of our ceremonies. We have reduced our spiritual relationship with the land and that affect us. We need more ceremonies, more Mother Earth, more sweat lodge, more traditional activities like fishing and hunting to get food from the land and not from the supermarket... I enjoy eating the meat of moose we hunted... it is healthier than the food we buy. I think these are the things that we need to heal. We have addiction problems because we don't follow our red road. We don't spend time in the natural world. (Catherine, age group 25-34)

We live in the land. I feel connected when I am outside, close to the land where I was raised. Here is where I belong. I don't like the city. Our ceremonies were created to be developed in nature, outside where Mother Earth is. You have to feel the trees, the sound of the water, the sun, all what Mother Earth offers us. The city is not a place where we can communicate with our spirits. Mother Earth wants us to be by her side and because of this we cannot contaminate our bodies with alcohol and some other drugs. The reserve is polluted with the non-native things. We didn't have those things before like oxys or whatever that is... We are not respecting Mother Earth and the Creator. We are polluting our mother and our body and that is not what we are. I think that we lost because they have taken a part of what we are, a part of our soul, when they took our ceremonies. (David, age group 35-44)

The creation of these places cannot be forgotten. In this sense, the healing movement promotes that the individuals who suffer from alcohol and drugs addictions, should have spiritual relations with the land. They should be engaged in activities that imply the contact with Mother Earth. These are activities such as fishing, hunting, offering tobacco, attending sweat lodges in natural environments and communicating with the spirits. They should go to the bush to keep the connection with Mother Earth and the spirit helpers.

Spending time in the boreal forest has become a way of public reflexivity and a multi-sensory therapeutic environment, where people re-imagine the symbols and values that constitute the Anishinaabe/Cree. They are linked to the land and to a sense of ancestral continuity. A place like the forest builds identity subjectively. Living in this place becomes an act of self-definition act. It places the individual on a scale by guiding his subjectivity inside of this ethnocultural system. The milieus favoured by the healing movement demonstrate an aesthetic subversion of dominant Canadian values. People end up rejecting their previous lifestyle as they embrace more natural ways. The individuals claim to be purified when they quit drugs and alcohol and embrace tobacco, sage and cedar every time they visit Mother Earth. A moral strength emerges from the principles of the healing movement in order to guide the individual to forget the cultural idea of having material goods and bad habits like the use of psychoactive substances.

### *Sweat Lodge: purification ceremony*

Even though the reserve counts on health infrastructures, the healing movement claims the symbolic and therapeutic importance of the cultural healing places that had been previously excluded. Another cultural symbol of these healing places is the ceremony called sweat lodge. The sweat lodge is a ritualized way of purification. At present this ceremony is considered a fundamental cultural symbol in the contemporary pan-Indigenous healing movement in North America and it claims to be the only therapeutic method to heal the Indigenous addictions.<sup>3</sup>

My healing voyage started in a treatment centre for drugs and alcohol. I started in those places that became to be the base of my recuperation. I had also looked for professional help and attended to meeting for personal growing. The most important of those experiences is that I found a connection with a superior power and I have used this connection in my life. I was raised with non-native values. I went to different churches during the first month of my recuperation looking for answers. I felt... I had the feeling of not belonging to that. Something inside me told me that I should do something else. I felt there was something missing in my life. This empty feeling disappeared when they asked me to attend to a sweat lodge ceremony. I knew a person who came back to the traditional healing and I started to feel a great connection between who I was and my spirit. It was then when I started to walk the red road. I started to act as our ancestors did, that is why I looked for an Elder... to walk my red road. I could recover my spirit again and know who I am. (David, age group 35-44)

The multi-sensory experience of ceremonies like the sweat lodge increases the biophysical feelings of the individual. The sweat lodge structure is usually round shape, similar to a cupola, and less than 2 meters in height. The structure is usually composed by long and flexible branches taken from young birches and cedars. The participants of the ceremony call this structure of branches the ribs of Mother Earth. Tobacco is put on the base of the structure as a symbol of respect to Mother Earth. Traditionally, the sweat lodge's structure was covered by deer, buffalo or moose skin. On the inside, there is a hole where they put hot stones (symbolically called Grandfathers and Grandmothers).

The healing movement uses the animist religious belief of the Algonquin hunting communities. They believe diseases are caused by a transgression of the traditional moral order. Alcohol and other drug addictions, non-traditional Anishinaabe/Cree usages of medicines, transgress the moral order and make it necessary for healers to communicate with the Grandfathers and Grandmothers to re-establish wellness. Healers ask them for the healing of broken spirits, re-establishing harmony and balance between the natural and spiritual world. In the healing movement, mental health is seen as a psychopathology of a person disconnected with the spiritual, natural and human world. In this cultural system, the individual is considered to be suffering

from a disconnection of the spiritual world, being alienated from his cultural heritage. The sweat lodge allows a spiritual connection with identity.

The spiritual world sent me, I think, the eagle for my healing. For me to feel strong again when my spirit comes to live inside me. I told them that the eagle appeared and since my soul was suffering, I went to a sweat lodge and the Elders told that what I needed was to spend time on the land and that my spirit has abandoned me because I wasn't taking care of it. I was killing it consuming... oxy. I was sick and the only thing I needed was spending more time with Mother Earth... that is where you belong, you need to be surrounded by Mother Earth, by the land... You are part of Mother Earth, she reinforces who you are, your identity. (Ellen, age group 25-34)

The prescription for healing from this personal trauma requires a ceremonial cycle through therapeutic traditional techniques, like the sweat lodge. The next informant described what the sweat lodge meant for him:

A way to connect with the land is going to a sweat lodge. The lodge represents the womb of Mother Earth. You enter to the sweat to pray and sweat. It is a cleaning and all the time you are inside, you are praying. When you go out crawling, it is like you were born again, like a kid. You feel amazing when you go out of the ceremony. Men need to sweat. When women give birth, they sweat. We arrive to the life inside the water. The spirits that visit us in the sweat lodge remind us of this. (Jeremy, age group 25-34)

The sweat lodge has become an integral part of the healing movement for the development of a positive cultural identity for Indigenous Canadians and the most valued technique for the treatment of addictions. Brady (1995), for example, has talked more than once about the revitalization of this traditional ceremony. The main reason is its role as pan-Indigenous cultural symbol. The participation in sweats usually produces a cathartic experience that lets the individual discover his true personal identity and gain self-understanding. The healing properties of sweat lodge were described by several individuals.

When you come into the sweat lodge, you are looking for the help of the Creator and the spirits. The helping spirits are called to go the lodge through our prayers, songs and drums. The sound of the drum is like Mother Earth's heartbeat. Everyone has the opportunity to talk or pray inside the lodge. At the end of the ceremony the spirits are thankful and they go back home (the spiritual world). When you go out of the sweat your spirit feels new and alive. It is a sacred place because you go back to the womb of Mother Earth and when you leave it's like you

were back to being born, you feel like a completely other person. You can feel the healing energies and you become more conscious of all the things that the Creator offers us to live a harmonic life and the beauty surrounding us. (Henry, age group 25-34)

To find your identity is a learning process. I fought a lot to reunite the parts of myself that the Whiteman took from us... nobody had the right to tell us what things define us as who we are. Our spirituality was our spirituality, this is what I believe we are. To be a Cree again taught me to be different. My connection with the land and the spirits came back to me thanks to the Elders. I had to do sweat lodges many times to get my spirit back again. My Elder told me what I had to do and sent me to do a sweat. Since then each time I enter a sweat to talk to the spirits I put tobacco in the sacred fire and I thank the Creator for giving me this life. (Rob, age group 35-44)

The second reason behind its acceptance and cultural legitimization for the treatment of contemporary addictions is probably its physical properties: the intense physical sensation that one experiences of cleaning and detoxification. As such, the sweat conducts to spiritual and psychological associations of body purification and personal renewing. Third, you can consider it as a tangible act in terms of ritual passage that requires physical and mental strength. To come out of the sweat gives a sense of achievement, of personal overcoming, providing an ideal vehicle for those that desire a ritual demarcation with respect to the personal decision of quitting the problematic consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

When I first started my healing trip, my spiritual helper helped me to understand that at a very young age my spirit was disconnected from me or from my mind because of the oxys. He assured me that he would help me to recover my spirit and make it a part of me again. Knowing that when our spirit is fine we are fine, we make ceremonies inside the sweat lodge and we take the traditional medicine because that would help me to recover my spirit to be fine. For us, it is said that dreams have a very important part in the Anishinaabe life. We believe our ancestors frequently guide us in our dreams and help us to make decisions in our life. I dreamed I was about to be born. I felt it was a sign of rebirth to me and I rediscovered myself as a human being, as an Anishinaabe. (Julie, age group 35-44)

Therefore, the internalization of a new identity requires ceremonial spaces like the sweat lodge to produce a sensory experience for all the five senses: singing, thermal sensation of heating, prayers, scents, etc.

## *Smudging*

Some repetitive therapeutic rituals, like the action of purifying called smudging, evoke the visual rhetoric and the sensory authority that the cultural system of the healing movement seeks. This daily ritual act, with its ritual object, represents a halo of sacredness and tradition, possessing the symbolic effectiveness of opening a passage to experiment the space as Indian time.

Now, when people get older, the traditions come back, to our smudging. Now I take my sweet grass and cedar to burn it and purify the house. Now I follow my traditions, I take tobacco and I leave it anywhere, near my house for example. Now I thank the Creator for everything and if I go fishing I ask forgiveness from the fish. This is normal for us it has always been that way. We always treat with respect everything that nature offers us. The Creator created us to take care of nature, it is Mother Earth and you have to respect it, respect everything that Mother Earth gives to us. Unfortunately, there are people in our community that lost this respect; they are not connected to Mother Earth or to our spirits. I believe that that's why a lot of people is addicted to oxys and percocets, because they don't take care of their spirits, they don't respect who we are. You know, drugs weakened us, but this is changing, now we feel that we are reconnecting, going back to our identity. (Evelyn, age group 25-34)

For those that followed the psychotherapeutic ideology of the healing movement, the sensory dimensions of the smudging act were seen as a semiotic vehicle for the communication with the spiritual and supernatural world. At the interviews, the informants frequently referred to the transformation of the space through the ritual.

When the smoke goes up our prayers go to the spiritual world where the Grandfathers and our Creator live and hear us. Smudging is also used to clean, purify and bless part of our Mother Earth that we use in our ceremonies. (Gilbert, age group 35-44)

When I started to watch the ceremonies, it introduced me to who I was, I found my culture. I started to be authentic while using tobacco to offer to my ancestors, to remember who we are, we are spirit, we are ceremony, this is what I believe we are now. Now my mission is to find a quiet place to go smudging... you know now I feel safe, at peace with my spirit. This is what the Elders tell us, to offer tobacco and to be humble. To learn who one is, requires sacrifice. (Thomas, age group 35-44)



Few years ago I learnt how to be a Cree when I attended a healing circle. I desperately wanted to share our medicines that our elders, spiritual teachers had taught us. I found in the traditional lessons the harmony that my community needed. My community has been dispossessed of what it was, of its spirits, of its cultures and traditions. Now every day I offer a prayer to the Creator and I make smudging to acquire my positive energy and to have a strong spirit. From dawn to dusk I follow the spiritual way of life... (Paul, age group 25-34)

The intent of this ritual act is to create continuity between natural and supernatural space, where the individual should experience the space as interconnected. The sensory dimensions of healing movement's psychotherapy are fundamentally a cultural mechanism to log in (from a phenomenological point of view) to the spiritual world to contact the Creator and the Grandfathers and to this way achieve the cultural ideal of the interconnectivity of the ontological world created by humans, spiritual ancestors, Creator and the spirit of animal and plants. The aroma that dominates the space while burning the dry leaves and sweetgrass in braid shape has as its purpose to guide the mind to the spiritual communication (to go back "home") and to mark the space with sacredness and purification.

I can spread the smoke here and it is wonderful. You know... it is accepted and it is incredible to smell burnt tobacco and salvia floating in the air while my heart can feel and communicate with the Creator and Grandfathers. Smudging helps us every day to be closer to the spiritual world, you know... Smudging heals our spirit if it is made frequently. Now I actually know that I need the sage and tobacco fragrance everyday to keep the traditional culture alive. Smudging also provides opportunities to practice our lessons. Anishinaabe was given the gift of medicine... This includes the knowledge of how to live in harmony and balance with the natural world. There is no shame in our traditional manners, no shame of lighting our sage, of lighting our sweetgrass, of offering tobacco to Mother Earth. This is the way our Creator gave to us to live in balance, harmony and health. (Taryn, age group 35-44)

From the perspective of the healing movement, the health benefits associated with smudging are demonstrated in its capacity to connect the individual with the spiritual world. In this cultural system, the source of health or disease is located in the spiritual world. Smudging is a cultural vehicle in which human essence does not counteract with the desire of not offending the entities of the spiritual world, who the individual wants to contact. In this sense, this daily ritual is one of the normative cultural mechanisms that take people's prayers to the spiritual world, through the smoke of the aromatic burnt plants.

I have come to believe that my prayers are always listened when I put tobacco. That energy heals us because it arrives to the spiritual world. Before, I didn't know what I was looking for. I just knew that there was a big hole inside of me and it seemed like nothing could fill that horrible feeling. I lied to myself believe that drugs would fill that hole. I was so wrong... I couldn't find the meaning of what was happening and, I went to so many parties and took drugs. Then, a traditional Elder teacher came to talk to me about the idea that we have been displaced from our way and emptiness that our body feels. He took me to the sacred fire of Medicine Wheel and our healing trip. I started smudging my body and my house and now I feel the hole is full thanks to the spiritual wheel of positive energy that exists around us. I have learnt to see how to reality is... (Gilbert, age group 35-44)

I was forced to be who they wanted me to be. I was not created to be a Whiteman. I was created to be a man, an Anishnaabe, a human being. I was too young and immature to deal with issues like love and loyalty to the Creator and my culture. I was trapped in drugs. Now I have my ceremonies, you know, I can use the smudging ceremony whenever I feel like it or I can put tobacco and pray to the Creator to thank for all what he gave us. Practising our ceremonies is the most sacred thing because you can live your spirituality all the time. (Jeremy, age group 25-34)

Therefore, the smoke of the smudging and the smoke of the pipe are cultural vehicles to communicate with spirits in order to get the healing. The sacred plants are symbolically called Medicines (tobacco, sage, cedar and sweetgrass). They have healing properties, not because of their nutritional or chemical composition but because they are spiritual entities that facilitate the healing of humans. Smudging is some of the semiotic mechanism that the individual can use to reconnect with the spiritual world and renew the mental health to stop the addictions.

I think that what happen to us is perhaps that we don't spend time on the land and that is what makes me feel sick. You have feel, touch and smell the nature. I think that is the only thing we need to heal. Our spirit is suffering because we don't go to the land. Mother Earth has made me feel good again, on balance with my four directions. Smudging every day is really important for me. If I don't do it I feel that my spirit is sick and my life is not balanced, as if there was no harmony inside of me. Now I know what I need to heal. I need to go to a sweat lodge, I need to feel my spirit as a Cree. I feel myself again when I go to ceremonies, when I go to the land. I feel at home when I put tobacco on a tree, when I pray to the Creator, when I talk to the Elders. I don't know if you understand what I mean. It is spirituality

what I needed in my life. Before starting my red road I was lost. I didn't know why but I was feeling something wrong inside of me. I felt I was in the wrong way, disconnected from my identity, you know... (Chris, age group 35-44)

I can go outside every day and put tobacco on a tree. That keeps me connected to Mother Earth. That makes me connect to who I am as an Anishinaabe, you know, connected to my community. I think that it is not too late to go back, to be who we were. I think it is possible to reconnect with your red road and embrace the Medicine Wheel, even if you were raised disconnected from these traditions. I do as much as I can since I quitted alcohol and oxy's, you know. When you talk to the Elders and you tell them that you really miss the bush, they will tell you go to the river and put tobacco there. I do it and it helps me to heal from my addictions. Now I know that Mother Earth takes care of me and I am responsible of taking care of her and of my body. The Elders have told me that the body is a gift from the Creator and I shouldn't mistreat it [...] I always try to go with my partner to the bush, to a quiet place and thank the Creator and Mother Earth for all they did for us. I feel that my spirit has come back to me. I know it was broken, the Elders told me. Now I need to smudge every day to communicate with the spiritual world and thank for all. I need to have our sacred medicines. My spirit has suffered a lot, you know. (Henry, age group 25-34)

From a phenomenological perspective, we see how people need to learn this rhetorical sensory structure to evaluate sensory elements from this cultural model of mental health and not the biomedical model. Considering the sensory dimensions of health, reveals socially built nature from the cognitive and sensory experience.

## **Conclusions**

This research examined the ways in which a sense of place and place-specific identities determine physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being through the narratives of community members on an Indigenous reserve. In the overall course of the interviews, each participant shared their perspectives on being connected to the land as a 'home base' and carrying out traditional healing practices that acknowledge and honour the natural spirit world. Overcoming adversity was identified as the most significant factor in revitalizing traditional ways of healing. Participants said that healing from the past and reconnecting with their roots was a way of having respect and love for community, being spiritual and in tune with natural surroundings, and ensuring that extended family ties are maintained so that the collective can have a balanced mind, body and spirit. It was said that culture, language and 'living' traditionally could be accomplished through exercising their spirituality and through experiential learning. From Indigenous world view, an individual's health extends to include the health of the plants, animals, and spirit world.

Our research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature that is examining Indigenous healing strategies in a contemporary context (Marsh et al. 2015; Rowan 2014; Rojas & Stublely 2014; Robins & Wein 2011; Jiwa et al. 2008; Papadakis 2008; Kirmayer et al. 2008; Stewart 2008). This research also supports many other studies showing that place, place-attachment, and place-based identities are vital aspects of health and well-being. It proves the importance of understanding alternative realities, cultural relativism, and spirituality that challenge biomedical space as the paradigm that structures clinical assistance in Canada. While many Indigenous peoples no longer accept traditional world views, many are in the process of restoring and revitalizing ancient healing practices that harmonize the body, mind and spirit.

Of particular importance to our study within the research area of therapeutic landscapes is the ways in which Indigenous peoples are experiencing positive mental and emotional responses in order to face mental health problems (Kirmayer et al. 2011; MacDonald 2015; Marsh et al. 2015). Our research proves that Indigenous traditional cultural connection is important for maintaining sobriety for Indigenous peoples. From the findings in this study, then, it is clear that more research is needed to further examine the connections among traditional healing practices, sense of place, place attachment, and health – physical, mental and emotional well being. Sense of place has been identified as an important determinant of health within the field of therapeutic landscapes as integral and essential to physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being (Jiang 2014; Willox 2012; Detweiler et al. 2012; Heft 2010; Williams 2007; Milligan et al. 2004; Gesler 2003; Wilson 2003).

Given such high rates of substance abuse on reserves, it is important to understand the resources of individuals and communities that promote mental health and well-being, thus enhancing the ability of individuals to positively cope with and manage their predicaments. In the last years, a body of research has emerged on the therapeutic effects of nature in indigenous communities in the face drug problems. For instance, Willox et al. (2012) have identified in the Canadian North, direct and indirect linkages between environmental context and mental health and well-being. An approach to health and well-being that seriously considers the importance of place from a multi-faceted perspective within the context of substance abuse recovery, then, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural and geo-physical underpinnings of health, health responses, and adaptation strategies.

In terms of future studies, they could be implemented to explore the role of therapeutic landscapes in shaping health with Indigenous peoples. Understanding the land as a healing space that represents the interconnected physical, symbolic, spiritual and social aspects it might help to highlight the need for different conceptualizations of place by incorporating indigenous perspectives on health and place. Recent systematic reviews (Rowan 2014; Jiwa & Pierre-Hansen 2008) have concluded that the meaning of the land for First Nations peoples and how they relate to it contributes to health in Indigenous populations with substance use disorders. It has been identified that the use of interventions to treat substance use disorders through holistic and spiritual approaches, demonstrated benefits in all areas of wellness, as well as the reduction in substance use in 74% of the studies (Marsh et al. 2015). Another area for future studies, key to healing following the experience of substance abuse, lies in the area of reclaiming identity (Marsh 2015; Kirmayer et al. 2011). Many authors have argued that for Indigenous people in Canada, ideas of place are grounded in cultural values where Indigenous

notions of personhood root identity in a person's connections to the land and environment, which may include recognition of a larger world of human and other-than-human spirits. Efforts to revitalize identity linked to spirituality means thinking about the person as fundamentally connected to the environment and to spiritual forces that provide guidance and healing. Along with the natural environment, recovering Indigenous identity also becomes a source of guidance and healing. Qualitative research has pointed out that narratives of historical identity provide cognitive and rhetorical resources for resilience in Indigenous communities (Willox et al. 2012; Tempier et al. 2011; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Brass 2008; Wilson 2005; O'Neill 1998; Adelson 2004; Berman 2003; Fast 2002; Pickering 2000; Warry 1998; Waldram 1997; Fast 2002). More studies on these topics could shed light on this subject and contribute to a better understanding of effective healing modalities in Indigenous populations.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario has the largest Indigenous population of all Canadian provinces, with 22.7% of the total Canadian Indigenous population (INAC 2010).

2 The First Nations Environmental Network (FNEN), officially established in 1992, is an example of a social movement, whose goal is "protect, defend and heal Mother Earth".

3 Historically, the sweat lodge ceremony is not practised by all the Indigenous communities in North America, even though the practice was spread. However, its purpose and rituals could differ from one region to another. The social function of sweat lodge is multiple, it is used to pray the Creator, preserve health and for social or individual problems. In the contemporary context, sweat lodges are used for many social and health problems.