

Commentary from the Field

# Writing from a *Relational Systems Thinking* Standpoint:

A Commentary

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Humility comes into play here as an important attribute of a storyteller or scholar. I am no more important or knowledgeable than anyone else. All I am doing is sharing some of my relationships, revealing some of the connections that make up this theory. I must recognize that in the larger scale of things, the totality of all the relationships I hold and am beginning to understand are only a miniscule part of the grand scheme of relationships that are out there. As a storyteller I can demonstrate this humility by acknowledging my shortcomings and admitting my own ignorance. I am not a perfect being or perfect researcher. For me to think that I am would be dangerous to us all. For me to force my ideas on anyone else is personally and culturally repulsive (Wilson, 2008, p. 134).

## Locating Myself

*Waabishki Ogichidaakwenz-anang indizhinikaaz. Waaba-anang Ikwe indigo Anishinaabemong idash Melanie Goodchild zhaaganaashiimong.* Those are my spirit names, what am I called in Ojibway and I am called Melanie Goodchild in English. I am Anishinaabe (Ojibway). *Moonz nindoodem.* I am moose clan. *Biigtigong Nishnaabeg izhinikaade ishkonigan wenjiyan gaye Ketegaunseebee nindoonji. Bawating indayendaa noongom.* I am from Ojibways of the Pic River and Garden River First Nations and today I am in Bawating, the place of the rapids, Anishinaabe territory and the traditional lands of the Three Fires Confederacy (Potawatomi, Odawa and Ojibway). I earned a PhD in Social and Ecological Sustainability last year and my academic work focused on decolonizing systems thinking and complexity science. I am a member of the editorial board of the JASC. Locating myself in writing this brief commentary is foundational in Indigenist research paradigms, I locate myself culturally and academically as it centres *relationality* and allows readers to connect to me via my lineage, kinship, and relationship to land (Bishop, 2021). This commentary is now part of my *miinigowiziiwin* (sacred knowledge bundle) as it is a process of creating knowledge, so I am grateful for this gift.

## Dibaajimowin, gakiikwe'inan & gichi gakinoo'imatawin

This is a dibaajimowin (story). I am often asked to review, write or contribute to academic endeavours across a variety of modalities. In honour of what Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) calls an Indigenous discourse pattern, I have responsibilities as both a writer of this general commentary, my *dibaajimowin* (story) and also as a listener to the *dibaajimowin* of the reader. My relational accountability is that pattern, and the underpinning of it is *humility*, one of our Anishinaabe Seven Sacred teachings, also referred to as the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Here are some thoughts for your consideration if you are coming into relationship with Indigenous wisdom traditions and you are not an Indigenous person.

The purpose of an academic journal and its contents are to offer *gakiikwe'inan* (teachings). These teachings come from diverse datasets. Offering a text-based paper in English, gifting those *gakiikwe'inan* to the audience who reads a journal is *gichi gakinoo'imatawin* (the act of great or deep teaching). It is great or deep because so much thought, research, and heart go into the preparation of such offerings. As such, it is important to consider how best to share a story. As I read various materials for publication a couple of things strike me at a more meta-level. First, as a contributor to the editorial board of the JASC I am being asked to fulfill the role of a gatekeeper of what perhaps counts as valid knowledge in the academic world, a position that causes me great distress. Second, I am also being asked to listen to the *gakiikwe'inan* with an open heart and mind. It is with those two acknowledgements that I begin my story.

Some stories are not appropriate for publication not because of the content but because of the form. It is often a significant challenge to respectfully represent Indigenous wisdom traditions in text form and in English. Some stories may not want to come to life as a journal article and I would recommend considering seeking to share those stories *in a revised form*. The goal of storytelling in academic journals is to *connect the dots for readers*, as my brother Julian Norris once told me, and that makes a lot of sense. The published papers offer *gakiikwe'inan* to help the readers—to help them understand how the research findings, and the lived experiences of the writers, connect to the literature and lineages of others in the field. And we must be gentle and generous with those connections, pointing out the nexus of where our worldview comes into relationship with other worldviews. Do they clash, does one worldview dominate the other, or are they in right relations, two vessels sharing the river of life? Sometimes, I find it difficult to make those connections in the conceptual framework of submitted papers, frameworks that use non-Indigenous theories and concepts to represent Indigenous thought patterns. It can work but it's difficult sometimes to find the right balance.

After reading academic texts submitted for publication in this journal and others where I offer peer reviews, I am left craving a deeper engagement with the lineages of the Indigenous scholars, knowledge holders, language speakers and collective song carriers who paved the way for academic journals like the JASC to publish from a standpoint of culture-based, gender-based and place-based subjectivities. And subjectivity is the hallmark of Indigenous wisdom traditions and lineages. I want to know more about the writers' personal relationship with the teachings, which may be citations or personal conversations with Indigenous thinkers. The *gakiikwe'inan* is *that*, the process, not the content—let's explore whatever you are writing about from your unique positionality, or as we would say in *Anishinaabemowin* (our original ways of speaking), from your *miinigowiziiwin* (your sacred knowledge bundle). Once I know who walks, flies, crawls or swims with you in the place where you come from or currently live, together we can connect the dots to the *gakiikwe'inan* of other decolonizing scholars you cite or sing into the story with us, out of respect for their contributions to your learning and to scholarship overall.

I recently read the JASC article on Relational Design by Udoewa and Gress (2023) on *dialogue as methodology*. Those authors connect the dots. As Indigenous peoples our oral cultures are sources of animation for sharing a *dibaaJimowin* and *gakiikwe'inan*. Writing is also a *method of inquiry* as settler scholar Laurel Richardson so aptly shared (see Richardson, 2000). I would invite contributing authors to this journal to consider reframing their work if that is what emerges through the writing process, to explore writing as a method of inquiry, perhaps as a decolonizing praxis. I did so in my first article (see Goodchild, 2021) co-authored with four Mohawk Elders and two systems thinkers. Initially I was writing two separate articles, then brought those voices into dialogue from an Indigenous, Mohawk, two-stream consciousness, represented in a two-row visual code. That is what emerged when I was in

humble relationship with the humans and non-humans who guided me to write that paper. I am deeply in favour of alternative forms of writing and scholarship. The format and literary presentation of papers, such as a dialogue between authors, is organic and emergent. What may be at issue however in terms of ethics, is a lack of engagement with the lineage of scholarship that enables this type of writing to be published in the first place. We stand on the shoulders of giants. For instance, Cree/Saulteaux author Kovach (2010) offers seven distinct characteristics of a conversational method when used in an Indigenous framework (tribal epistemology, relational, purposeful, protocols determined by epistemology and/or place, informality and flexibility, collaborative and dialogic, and reflexive (p. 43). These characteristics are a *relational ontology* that could situate co-authored papers in a respectful and humble way uplifting the multi-voiced description offered in the *dibaaJimowin*.

Perhaps repositioning an article by co-authors, and your co-author may be a river or tree that teaches you, as *an ethnographic study of designing* a generative social field between you and your co-author/s, through an Indigenous-inspired conversational methodology, would introduce a deeper exploration of the “roots” of your understanding (Udoewa & Gress, 2023, p. 110). An unconventional form of a dialogue is not an issue for publishing in this journal, but if dialogue is a decolonizing practice for you, a perceived lack of engagement or understanding of relational ontology is an issue. When I read papers that do not engage with Indigenous scholarship yet attempt to sing that scholarship into the room as mostly nostalgia, it feels disrespectful. To be in deep relationship is not just to cite these authors but also to discuss the gifts they offered you on your wisdom journey—the spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual gifts. That is a story that seeks to be told.

Calling in Indigenous and other authors without articulating a standpoint on those authors’ respective theories/works/teachings doesn’t really indicate to me that *we are part* of a generative social field together. What intellectual/spiritual framing do Indigenous scholars and teachers/guides offer to you? For non-Indigenous peoples framing a paper as ‘decolonizing’ or ‘Indigenizing’, there is an implicit indebtedness to Indigenous, feminist, and systems scholars. I want to understand more about who and why another published author speaks to your heart and mind, so I would suggest that you acknowledge *precisely what each of them taught you*.

If a paper adheres to Indigenous paradigmatic discourse (decolonization) it contextualizes the intellectual analysis in terms of the worldviews and the belief systems used within the research context explicitly (through citations, songs, poems, art) to signify that the methods (for instance dialogue) are congruent with the chosen philosophical orientation to show internal methodological consistency. This would be accomplished if an author shares more with us about their *miinigowiziwin*. This is incongruent with Euro-scientific conventions that uphold objectivity as validity, but from an Anishinaabe validity standpoint, we must share who we are, where we come from, and how we came to be in

relationship with the teachings we write about. Anishinaabe scholars do this when we introduce ourselves, as I did at the start of my *dibaaJimowin* here. In the Turtle Island (North American) context, are you an Indigenous writer, with a direct lineage to the first peoples of this land or are you a baby Turtle Islander, as my friend and colleague Tiokasin Ghosthorse, Lakota, calls settlers. Tiokasin and I have had some powerful yarns, including one we recorded on his radio show *First Voices Radio*.<sup>1</sup> State clearly your positioning in relation to place, to the lands and waters where you are from and where you currently reside.

A *dibaaJimowin* may be better suited to an *autoethnographic* telling and a focus on *storytelling* as a conceptual framework or perhaps a dialogue is best, or a poem or a carving; our humility helps us to listen to what the *manidoog* (spirits) are gently (or rather insistently) guiding us to do. My dear friend and brother Tyson Yunkaporta, an Aboriginal scholar from Australia, in both of his books, *Sand Talk* (2019) and *Right Story, Wrong Story* (2023) carves weapons and other tools encoding into them the stories he hears during yarns. This is congruent with his cultural lifeways. In my own doctoral dissertation, the final chapter is a series of illustrations by young Anishinaabe artist Ocean Kiana based on yarns I had with Anishinaabe Elders and language speakers, my relatives Eleanor Skead and Bert Landon. In fact, the final chapter was the result of working with a design firm in Chicago, Greater Good Studio, that publishes knowledge products for social good and was supported financially by a global philanthropy. The point is, it was a collective effort! I am not a guru or expert, rather, I bring together collective wisdom traditions and knowledge bundles, to be in relationship with each other then share that, hoping I succeed in connecting the dots. Last year I published an essay, on the website for the Wolf Willow Institute for Systems Learning,<sup>2</sup> about some time I spent with Tyson. I shared teachings of our gift exchange. Here is an excerpt:

Tyson offers me gifts he made. The first is a woman's fighting stick (a miniature one). It is a multi-tool, a spear, a club, to throw, dig, fight, dream. It is made of Gidgirr wood (very hard acacia) from copper-rich ground in West New South Wales. Engraved on it is a turtle symbol from Oldman Juma Fejo from the Larrakia People (which is seen in the *Sand Talk* book). The second gift is whalebone (blue whale) burnishing tool, that was used to polish all the carvings made for the *Sand Talk* book. So, all that story and lore is in there. It is roughly carved in eel-shape, a migratory animal that moves between fresh and salt, land, and water. Transformations. There is white owl story in that bone he says,

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://radiokingston.org/en/broadcast/first-voices-radio/episodes/with-guest-melanie-goodchild>

<sup>2</sup> See [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edef2eb3032af28b09b8cc3/t/636c6d31450b0f0bc4b9aaeb/1668050232743/DuckShitTea\\_22-11-09\\_vf.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edef2eb3032af28b09b8cc3/t/636c6d31450b0f0bc4b9aaeb/1668050232743/DuckShitTea_22-11-09_vf.pdf)

brought up from drowned lands by a beaching whale. For each chapter in *Sand Talk* Tyson carved the logic sequences and ideas arising from his yarns into traditional objects before he translated them to into print and his table of contents was visual, on the back of a turtle. This is his method called *umpan*, his people's word for cutting, carving, and making.

The two spirit names I carry in *Anishinaabemowin* are associated with whale and star teachings and my medicine bundle carries turtle medicine. These gifts from Tyson are relationally and spiritually significant. He and I often drink bowls of tea and yarn about whale, owl, turtle and eel medicine. Tyson founded the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab at Deakin University in Australia and I founded the sibling entity, the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab at Makwa Waakaa'igan, Algoma University in Bawating (place of the rapids) in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario on Turtle Island.

Not all of us are illustrators, designers, or carvers, me included. So, I write. Udoewa and Gress (2023) introduce the *meta-methodology* of Radical Participatory Design and Relational Design (RD), an “ancient” idea that can be practiced through *dialogue* (p. 104–105). They offer us insightful relevant context about the Indigenous lineages of this type of inquiry, yarning and talking circles. Dialogue and writing up dialogue can serve as a methodological instrument because of the decolonizing turn in discourse with antecedents in postmodernity and poststructuralism. Writing is also a way of knowing. Richardson's work (2000) is a well-respected introduction to writing as a method of inquiry, enabling us to investigate how we construct the world, and does not take the writing of texts for granted. As an Anishinaabe scholar it pains me to have to write in English and share knowledge via textual artefacts but framing “writing as inquiry” and “research as ceremony” (Wilson, 2008) helps ease my distress. Indigenous authors have explored the decolonization of scholarship through Indigenous autoethnography (Bishop, 2021; Whitinui, 2014) as the art of storytelling, resonant with our oral cultures and grounded in a resistance-based discourse. Indigenous autoethnography offers guidelines and writers who submit ‘decolonizing’ articles for consideration to journals may benefit from exploring more deeply concepts of time, space, place, and identity. How do authors understand these core principles of an Indigenous paradigm and relate them to their teachings? Those sorts of *gakiikwe'inan* would be emancipatory.

## Niigani Miinigowiziiwin (we give these gifts to the future)

My own writing is most often an ethnographic exploration of being in relationship with others (humans and non-humans), a Native Method of Inquiry as Paul Whitinui (2013), a Māori scholar from Aotearoa New Zealand describes it. Crediting Indigenous scholarship is an act of decolonization, and it is an expression of *mana* (integrity) (Whitinui, 2013, p. 474). The unit of analysis in my various co-authored stories is the *interior journey* of me in relationship with my co-authors along with a report on their insights of emergent relationalities.

Perhaps autoethnography and other creative analytic practices (for instance arts-based methodologies) would be much richer for some co-authors as *gichi gakinoo'imatawin*. It would be *niigani miinigowiziiwin* (we give these gifts to the future), which is how Eleanor and Bert described/defined transformative systems change. It is generational and comes from a place of love for those yet to be born. And this became the title of my dissertation, encoded in the evolving illustrations by Ocean Kiana. The final illustration and text were not published in my dissertation however and only published on my website, out of respect for its sentient nature. I didn't want it captured in time, with no context. Which brings up another interesting option for us as scholars, to not publish some stories or publish them in different modalities. Academic journals have matured but still have a long way to go to be in rhythm with oral and artistic cultures, where our datasets may be dreams, visions, and songs.

Understanding an author's social positionality is necessary because "race and gender are *axes* [original emphasis] through which symbolic and actual worlds have been constructed" (Richardson, 2000, p. 938). *Writing as inquiry* or autoethnography opens up relationality and gives more attention to the metaphoric and narrative aspects of our experience, helping readers navigate the meaning of our experiences. Udoewa and Gress (2023) do this quite well, offering specific examples from their lived experience as an Indigenous scholar and a white scholar in relation to systems change theory and praxis.

I am grateful that I learned from Udoewa and Gress, from Ocean, Eleanor and Bert, and from Tyson, what they experienced and how I may encode that into my own scholarship and practice. Relating theory to practice is critical. This commentary is offered with humility, in consideration of the complexities (benefits and dangers) of baby Turtle Islanders being in relation with Indigenous thinking, to avoid appropriation by being in deep rather than shallow or nostalgic relationship with the teachings. Decolonized writing is challenging and the emerging aesthetics (representation of our lived experiences) of Indigenous scholars like me are born while we simultaneously hold accountable academic texts for adherence to cultural protocols of relationality and respect for sources of knowledge, and for *mana*. It has taken me days, weeks in fact, to prepare this particular *dibaajimowin* with due diligence both academically and somatically, sitting with ideas, envisioning in my mind a reader metabolizing these words, as we both sip bowls of tea. I was not offered *asemaa* (tobacco) for this *dibaajimowin* but that is the spirit in which I offer my *gakiikwe'inan*, at the risk of being personally and culturally repulsive. *Miigwech* for the opportunity for *gichi gakinoo'imatawin*.

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