

Peer Review Article

Walking Toward Relationality:

An Autoethnographic Inquiry of Inner Work for Personal and Systemic Change

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Abstract

In this essay, I share an autoethnographic walking experience that is part of my *inner work* as an early-career sustainability scholar seeking to relate differently with land, people, and knowledge. This research began after I learned about the Exodus: the 1875 forced removal of Yavapai (Yavapé) and Apache (Dilzhé'é) peoples from their ancestral lands in today's Arizona, USA—the region where I, a white settler, was born and raised—which provoked in me intense shame. To unpack my relationships with settler colonialism and begin a process of becoming *naturalized to place*, I walked a section of the Arizona Trail that is part of the Exodus route. Employing a critical, relational walking methodology, as well as arts-based methods, I propose an autoethnography to illustrate six personal (un)learnings that aim to be insightful for the emerging relational paradigm in sustainability science. This includes drawing attention to the ways in which settler colonialism, intertwined with religions and science, may unconsciously orient relationships to land (ontology), people (axiology), and knowledge (epistemology) that are anti-relational. My walking experience underscores the importance of relational ethics as embedded in Indigenous relationality, which taught me that learning to relate differently with land in a more-than-human

sense necessitates healing relationships with the First Peoples. This situates the turn toward relationality as far more than an intellectual endeavor that includes embodied experience, embracing difficult emotions, and acknowledging inner work as important for systems change.

Keywords

relationality, awareness-based systems change, settler colonialism, decolonization, inner–outer transformations, walking methodologies, autoethnography

Introduction

Can settlers be trusted to follow Nanabozho, to walk so that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth?

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

The emerging paradigm shift in sustainability science toward relationality is an invitation for sustainability scholars to bring our full selves into our work (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2021). This seems to be a *next step* in unlearning positivist paradigms that assume Western ontologies as universally true and objectivity as the sole path to scientific knowledge. Scholars still hesitate to integrate personal experiences into our work because we are uncertain of how these are relevant to social change, and doing so may be dismissed as irrelevant to scientific research (Adams et al., 2015; Wall, 2008). Yet, relationality can be insightful because it “places sustainability scientists fundamentally in the complex issues they seek to address” (West et al., 2021, p.112). This perspective reframes our assumed detachedness from the systems we study and work within as symptomatic of particular mindsets rather than characteristic of reality. Hence, turning toward relationality means recognizing conventional Western ontologies as abstract constructs of reality, not objective truths.

Unlearning the hierarchical structure of conventional Western ontologies is an important inner process for relearning relationality. Discussing Indigenous-led conservation efforts, Campion et al. (2023) highlight how non-Indigenous partners can undermine self-determination by failing to recognize the differences between Indigenous and Western ontologies and prioritizing conventional methods over traditional knowledge. This concern is echoed in sustainability literature that weaves Indigenous knowledges with Western science (Berkes, 2008; Johnson et al., 2016; Zanotti & Palomino-Schalscha, 2016). Relationality creates space for letting go of *universal* assumptions toward *pluriversal* perspectives. This “letting go” invokes unlearning processes discussed by decolonial scholars (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Mayuzumi, 2006; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012) that revolve around changing our ways of thinking, or

“decolonizing the mind” (Mbembe, 2016; wa Thiong’o, 1994). For non-Indigenous, Western-trained academics like myself, this necessitates serious engagement with our “inner worlds” (Datta, 2018; Goodchild, 2021; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

Scholars are increasingly studying inner dimensions of human experience, or inner worlds, as vital components of sustainability transformations and systems change (Bristow et al., 2024; Goodchild, 2021; Ives et al., 2023; Scharmer, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021). Unlearning dominant paradigms and ontologies as objective truths seems to be an important inner–outer transformative process for non-Indigenous, Western scholars interested in relationality and awareness-based systems change (Goodchild, 2021; Gould et al., 2023; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). Considering how deeply these epistemological and ontological assumptions are *concretized* in our being, shaking them loose and creating space for pluriversality may require significant inner work (Datta, 2018; Goodchild, 2021; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). From a systems perspective, we could consider this an engaging process with our own deep leverage points (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 1999) to become relational systems thinkers (Goodchild, 2021).

The following autoethnographic research illustrates the beginning of my unlearning process, which may resonate with other scholars—especially white settlers like me. This research was sparked by my learning about *the Exodus*: a forced removal that severed the Yavapai (Yavapé) and Apache (Dilzhé’é) Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands in what is now Arizona, USA—my homeland. This awakening disrupted my sense of place and prompted a critical interrogation of my identity as an *Arizona native*. This unsettling inner experience provoked by the Exodus resonates with the concept of *settler shame*.

Kizuk defines settler shame as:

A personal experience related to the recognition of our identity as complicit in a racist and colonial world (being *bad*), as well as the concomitant realization that we might lose control over our identity and become defined solely as this bad self both by ourselves... [and as participants in] our social world at large.
(Kizuk, 2020, p. 164)

The Exodus awakened this sense of settler shame in me, and my decision to walk a section of the Exodus route, now part of the Arizona Trail (AZT), was motivated by this deep emotional reckoning. I utilized a critical autoethnographic methodology termed “walking-with place” (Springgay & Truman, 2017), designed to promote critical reflexivity and connections with land as a more-than-human agent and co-participant. With the Exodus in mind, I walked-with the land as colonized land to embrace my vulnerability and “affective experiences” (Adams et al., 2015). Inspired by Kimmerer’s urgent call for settlers to “set aside the ways of the colonist and become indigenous to place” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 207), I intended for this walk to be a step toward cultivating an authentic relationship with my homeland.

Despite approaching this walk with vulnerability and an awareness of the land in a more-than-human sense, I was unprepared for what emerged during this two-day walking experience. The land—particularly certain places along the trail—enacted a series of disruptions upon me, which initially provoked difficult emotions and intense insecurity. Despite the initial discomfort, these disruptions catalyzed a process of inner transformations. I have since come to understand that these disruptions were key to my personal unlearning process (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012), because they derived from new embodied experiences with the land.

Prior to walking, my unlearning process had been primarily cognitive, which limited my capacity for inner transformations toward experiencing relationality (Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024; Polheim et al., 2024) and becoming naturalized to place. Thus, this autoethnographic research marks the beginning of an ongoing personal journey to cultivate relational awareness within sustainability research (Datta, 2018).

This transformative research experience was deep and multi-layered, offering numerous insights and (un)learnings for the field of sustainability—some of which I am not fully aware of yet. To put it succinctly, the following personal (un)learnings represent important accounts of inner awareness that contribute to systems change (Alexiuk, 2022):

- *Unlearning land as topography*: Despite intellectually understanding more-than-human agency, I found myself walking *on* land instead of *with* it. It took several disruptions from the land to open space for an embodied, relational experience of land in a more-than-human sense.
- *Learning settler colonialism as an ongoing process of disconnection*: Reflecting with the land revealed that the colonization of Indigenous peoples is inseparable from the ecological destruction and exploitation of their lands. The people who are ancestral to the land cannot be separated from it, and the more-than-human agency of the land is interconnected with them.
- *Becoming aware of Christianity’s impact on my embodied experience*: Being raised within a Christian worldview that situates land as a commodity shaped how I make sense of the world, even years after renouncing my faith—namely, taking for granted that humans are separate from nature, can study and completely *know* it, as well as control it.
- *Becoming aware of non-human relations*: Even if I am ignorant about it or not fully aware, I am always in relation with non-human beings.
- *Healing settler shame necessitates relational accountability*: My settler’s shame, triggered after learning about the Exodus, was

instrumental in this walking experience. Yet, while I consider this a first step toward processing this shame, it became clear that healing it requires being in relation with the Indigenous communities who have been impacted by my ancestors' actions.

These personal (un)learnings provide insights into the emerging relational turn in sustainability research (Walsh et al., 2021; West et al., 2020), especially in relation to inner–outer transformations (Ives et al., 2023; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024; West et al., 2024). First, they emphasize that advancing relationality requires *taking settler colonialism seriously* (Escobar et al., 2024; Gallegos-Riofrio et al., 2022; Gould et al., 2023). For settler scholars like me and for institutions created and maintained through settler colonialism, unpacking this phenomenon and healing our relationships with First Peoples on whose land we live is key for our relationality (Giovale, 2024). This dual process situates scholars' inner work, like healing our settler shame, as an important step towards building relational approaches to sustainability.

Second, these (un)learnings illustrate the importance of *embodied experience* in advancing relationality (Escobar et al., 2024; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024; Polheim et al., 2024). While an intellectual understanding of relationality is important for systems thinking (Raymond et al., 2021), relationality entails overcoming abstract concepts and making space for embodied experiences nurtured by sensations of interconnectedness that enhance relational thinking (Goodchild, 2021) and inner–outer transformations (Ives et al., 2023; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024).

Lastly, they demonstrate how *weaving inner work into research* promotes relationality (Escobar et al., 2024; Wilson, 2008). Methodologies that incorporate personal experiences and researchers' inner dimensions are important for cultivating our relational awareness (Alexiuk, 2022; Datta, 2018). Autoethnography (Alexiuk, 2022; Wall, 2008), relational walking (Springgay & Truman, 2017), and arts-based methods (de Araujo Goes et al., 2023; Leavy, 2020) can be rich modes of inquiry that facilitate inner–outer connections in sustainability scholarship.

Context and Positionality

Despite living my entire life in Arizona and taking pride in my knowledge and relationship with its lands, I did not know the names of Arizona's ancestral peoples until I began performing land acknowledgements. I had never been taught that I reside on the ancestral lands of the Piipaash and Akimel O'odham peoples (Martínez, 2023). The fact that there is very little acknowledgement of these peoples—now part of the sovereign Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community—as the ancestral stewards of this land is consistent with the settler mindset of land as ontologically separate from humans. Recreating on undeveloped “public lands” often gives me a feeling of “freedom” that resonates

with the notion of *terra nullius*, or “no man’s land,” which settler colonialism operationalizes to occupy land (Wolfe, 2006)¹.

However, when I learned about the Yavapai–Apache Exodus of 1875, it shook me to my core and disrupted my “settler ignorance” (Cook, 2018; Kizuk, 2020). This forced removal of Yavapai (Yavapé) and Apache (Dilzhé’é) First Peoples was pivotal in colonizing the Verde Valley in Arizona (Whittlesey et al., 1997), which paved the way for the construction of my home in metropolitan Phoenix, AZ USA (Herman, 2012). Arizona history is full of horrific acts perpetrated against the ancestral peoples of these lands, which settlers justified under the illusions of “manifest destiny” that still reverberate today (Stephanson, 1996). The majority of this shameful history is either sparsely detailed and situated in the context of settlers as noble conquerors (see Jackson, 1908), or is deliberately erased (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023).

My knowledge of the Exodus began with a newsletter from the Arizona Trail Association, an organization that maintains the 800-mile Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZT). They had recently been made aware that a passage of the AZT is part of the route forcibly walked by 1,500 Yavapé and Dilzhé’é peoples during the Exodus (Arizona Trail Association, Personal Communication, October 12, 2020). Reading this struck me as both someone who recreates along the AZT and considers themselves an *Arizona native*. It disrupted my illusions of the AZT as a place *away from it all*, a place of *terra nullius* unaffected by colonization. It unsettled my “sense of place” (Springgay & Truman, 2017; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) and pushed me to think critically about my relationships with these lands and the First Nations.

My initial response was to read all I could find about the Exodus. Historical literature detailing the Exodus is extremely sparse and mostly written by settlers (Braatz, 2003; Corbusier, 1969; Herman, 2012; McGivney, 2020; Thrapp, 1995; Whittlesey et al., 1997). This is consistent with settler colonialism’s efforts to erase such history in order to avoid guilt and shame (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023). Most historical publications draw from the documentation of an Army surgeon who witnessed the Exodus and worked with the Yavapé and Dilzhé’é peoples held on the Rio Verde Reservation (Corbusier, 1969).

Taking seriously the atrocities described provoked intense remorse (Braatz, 2003; Herman, 2012). The few histories published by Yavapé survivors underscore the level of dehumanization enacted during the Exodus (Burns, 2012; Harrison & Williams, 2022), yet they also emphasize their peoples’ resistance. Their story did not end with the Exodus; 25 years later, they returned to their ancestral lands and formed the Yavapai-Apache Nation that continues to strengthen today (Yavapai-Apache Nation, 2024). Through the Yavapai-Apache

¹ The concept of *terra nullius* is symptomatic of the “doctrine of discovery” and “manifest destiny” that grew from particular interpretations of Christianity that gave European colonial powers the “divine right to conquest” (Deloria, 2003, p. 111).

Nation, I learned that they honor their ancestors and commemorate their return to their ancestral lands in an annual Exodus Day event (Utacia Krol, 2011). This gathering includes acts of resistance that reclaim this history through a commemorative walk and relay run covering the entire 180-mile route of the Exodus.

Learning about the Yavapai-Apache Nation and Exodus Day compelled me to attend the yearly event to show solidarity and perhaps process some of the deep remorse stirring in me. Amid COVID-19 lockdowns and with First Nations' increased vulnerability to outbreaks, Exodus Day was postponed and the Yavapai-Apache Nation closed to visitors. The more I reflected with the Exodus, though, the more I felt compelled to do something beyond reading historical texts.² It felt important to deepen my relationship with this erased history that is fundamental to my privileges and existence here in this settler state. Theoretically, it made sense to walk the passage of the AZT that had been uncovered as part of the Exodus route. This would mean approaching the trail not as a place of outdoor recreation aiming at connecting with nature, but as a place of colonial violence perpetrated by my ancestors.³ I began putting together a research itinerary (Figure 1) to conceptualize this autoethnographic experience, which would be guided by the following self-inquiries:

How will walking-with the AZT, situated within the Exodus, teach me about my relationship to settler colonization, research, and land? How might a critical, relational walking methodology create space for more-than-human agency and engaging with land as a teacher? How will this experience inform my perspective of relationality? What will this experience teach me about becoming a relational sustainability researcher?

² Through such reading I learned of numerous other tragic acts of colonial violence similarly hidden from Arizona history—see the Navajo Long Walk, Skeleton Cave Massacre, Bloody Basin Massacre, and Camp Grant Massacre.

³ Little has been shared with me about my ancestral history in general, let alone in the context of colonization and slavery. From a DNA test, I seem to be of majority English ancestry, as well as German and Norwegian ancestry. My relatives on my father's side seemed to have settled in Minnesota, while my mother's family settled in New York and California. I am not certain whether I have any relatives directly involved in the colonization of Arizona. Regardless, my societal connection with the collective history of European colonization, slavery, and ongoing settler colonialism is beyond question.

Walking-with Place as Methodology

Research Itinerary (Intentions)			
Research Inquiries: How will walking-with the AZT, situated within the Exodus, teach me about my relationships to settler colonialism, research, and land? How might a critical, relational walking methodology create space for more-than-human agency and engaging with land as a teacher? How will this experience inform my perspective of relationality? What will this experience teach me about becoming a relational sustainability researcher?			
Place	Beginning and Ending location	Duration	Distance (approx.)
Arizona Trail Passage 25 - White Rock Mesa (part of the Exodus route)	Hardscrabble Mesa Trailhead	2 days	24 miles (38.6 km)
Walking Methodology: Walking-with place (Springgay and Truman, 2018) which is a relational methodology developed from the Zapatista's (1994) concept "walking-with"; It situates place critically, is accountable to settler colonialism, and can be performed alone.			
Arts-Based Methods: 35mm B/W film photography (Leavy, 2020), inefficient mapping (Knight, 2021).			
Autoethnographic Methods: Voice memos recorded via phone, reflective journaling (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004).			
Data Analysis: Autoethnographic writing through poetry and narrative (Adams et al., 2015).			

Table 1: The research itinerary that guided my experience walking-with the AZT.

Walking as a form of critical inquiry was brought to my awareness through the concept of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2010) because it oriented the AZT pedagogically, as a place for (un)learning my relationships with land, knowledge, and research. The Journal of Public Pedagogy's special issue "Walking in/as Publics" (Springgay & Truman, 2019) introduced walking methodologies as ways to engage in this critical (un)learning. Such walking methodologies are compelling for relational research because they are inherently active, embodied, and in relation with particular environments or places. Springgay and Truman describe walking as "an accomplishment of the whole body in motion...itself a way of thinking and feeling" (Springgay & Truman, 2017, p. 2). Walking is well-suited for relational research because it is an embodied form of "thinking in motion" that is inherently place-based (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008) with the potential for reconnecting humans and nature, mind and body, or thinking and feeling. Walking can also carry spiritual significance because it can cultivate contemplation, reflexivity, and "inner experiences" (Kabat-Zinn, 2017; Slavin, 2003). Walking methodologies may be useful for sustainability researchers interested in epistemological openings to affective and embodied ways of knowing that are inherently place-based.

The specific walking methodology I explored in this context is Springgay and Truman's "walking-with place," as presented in their book "Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab" (Springgay & Truman, 2017, pp. 16-33). The concept "walking-with" was coined by the

Zapatistas to describe their practice of walking toward “a world in which many worlds fit,” or a “Pluriverse” (Sundberg, 2014; Zapatista Army of National Liberation, 1996). Springgay and Truman expand on walking-with through a variety of theoretical frameworks, each of which maintains walking as political, ethical, and resisting universal claims to knowledge: “Walking-with is accountable... a form of solidarity, unlearning, and critical engagement with situated knowledges” (Springgay & Truman, 2017, p. 11). Walking-with place specifically disrupts dominant representations of place that exclude Indigenous peoples and ignore traumatic histories of settler colonial violence (Springgay & Truman, 2019; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), such as the Exodus. Taking seriously such historical traumas and deconstructing settler colonial narratives creates possibilities for meaningful engagement with Indigenous, relational concepts of *Land* that have long been dismissed by Western science (Simpson, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wildcat et al., 2014). Thus, walking-with place opens space for challenging settler colonialism (Gallegos-Riofrio et al., 2022) and for being accountable to Indigenous relationality (Gould et al., 2023). While walking-with place has been carried out within group-based walking tours (Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015; Truman & Springgay, 2019; WalkingLab, 2017), it can be carried out individually (Springgay & Truman, 2017). The emphasis on sensory perception and affective experience makes walking-with place especially potent for autoethnographic inquiry.

This research was carried out amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited collective walking and invited self-inquiry. Walking has a long history as self-inquiry through contemplative (Kabat-Zinn, 2017) and spiritual practices (Slavin, 2003), illustrating the deep connection between the embodied act of walking and inner dimensions of human experience. At its end, autoethnography’s explicit focus of inquiry within the self inherently promotes increased awareness of these inner dimensions, along with deep reflexivity (Adams et al., 2015). Thus, walking and autoethnography form a natural synergy conducive to critical self-inquiry that is attuned to, and entangled between, internal and external layers of experience. Ingold and Vergunst (2008) highlight this entanglement by illustrating how emotional experiences, created through walking in a particular place, raise the question of “*where*, in experiential terms, is the emotion?” (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 120). Locating the emotion solely in the human denies the relational nature of the experience (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). In this way, walking-with place as autoethnographic inquiry bridges the human-nature divide through a relational emphasis on inner experiences as co-creations with external places.

The relational context of both walking-with place and autoethnographic inquiry similarly bridges the personal–collective divide that is vital for awareness-based systems change (Koenig et al., 2021). Adams et al (2015) discuss the real risk of autoethnographic work being dismissed as irrelevant or not “scholarly,” and their response to this rests on the perspective that personal experience is invaluable for social change. This perspective maintains that the self is always in relation to larger social and cultural structures or systems. By

embracing our vulnerability and sharing our inner experiences and processes, we create spaces of “resonance, possibility, and activation” beyond the self (Calafell, 2013 as cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 34). The emerging focus on inner–outer transformations for sustainability underscores this perspective and situates autoethnographic inquiry as important for systems change (Alexiuk, 2022). Autoethnographic research may be especially useful for early career scholars in sustainability and systems science, as this inner work promotes a holistic awareness of ourselves in relation to the communities and places (in) which we aim to study (Alexiuk, 2022). As someone just beginning my academic career in sustainability, I situate this walking experience as a personal orientation toward relational research inspired by Kimmerer’s (2013) call to settlers to “become naturalized to place.”

My intention to walk-with the AZT as a place inseparable from the Exodus forced removal obliged critical reflexivity and an openness to more-than-human agency. While both walking-with place and autoethnographic inquiry defined the methodology for this inner–outer experience, I felt compelled to also incorporate arts-based methods to foster deeper affective expression and critical consciousness (Leavy, 2020). Arts-based methods are particularly valuable for critical, relational research because the arts can unsettle dominant paradigms, challenge dualistic thinking, evoke emotion, and invite reflexivity (Leavy, 2020). The use of arts-based methods in qualitative research emerged from art therapy to tap into the inner dimensions of human experience (Malchiodi, 2011).

My personal experience with photography speaks to the arts’ healing and therapeutic potential. Prior to graduate school, I explored black and white, 35mm film photography and found that it evoked a quite distinct experience from conventional digital photography. Specifically, the tones and shadows of black and white photography communicate a deeper affective quality. I employed this style of photography during this walking research to activate the emotionality of the land and provoke affective, sensuous, and embodied reflections with specific places along the trail. The process of developing the film was important as the delay between taking the photographs and seeing the images several weeks after the walk prompted intense reflection through memory (Kuhn, 2007).

Cartography also emerged as an arts-based method for this research. In addition to using a conventional topographical map for wayfinding, I practiced an affective form of artistic cartography called “inefficient mapping” (Knight, 2021). Shortly before I began walking, Linda Knight presented inefficient mapping to a qualitative data analysis course I was taking. As she articulated this subjective approach to cartography that creatively *maps* affective experiences with places as entangled, unfolding processes (Knight, 2021), instead of static environments, the synchronicity with this research was clear. Inefficient mapping emerged as a way to create personal maps of specific places that express an affective relationship between animate, entangled subjects (Knight, 2021).

Traditional autoethnographic methods were also used to document inner experiences during the walk (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004). Voice memos

served to record my thoughts and feelings *in motion*. Reflective journaling during stops along the trail promoted self-awareness and emotional expression (Adams et al., 2015; Wall, 2008). Bringing traditional and arts-based methods together created a rich and holistic dataset of my inner experiences that reflected the unfolding transformative process. The data analysis furthered this inner transformative process around multiple layers of consciousness and relational awareness. For example, overlaying inefficient maps (Figures 8-10) with photographs (see Disruption 1) and reflecting with them while listening to a voice memo of the same place made space for deep insights into my inner experience. Moreover, I synthesized the data through an autoethnographic writing process that included poetry and narrative-style writing (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004).

The narrative and poetic writing of this walking experience promoted deeper reflection and allowed me to begin relating my experience with conceptual frameworks from decolonization literature. While this walking experience is itself not an act of decolonization (Springgay & Truman, 2017)—which should revolve around Indigenous sovereignty and repatriation of ancestral lands (Tuck & Yang, 2012)—concepts from decolonial scholarship clarify the disruptions I experienced in important ways. Specifically, decolonization relates to my inner processes of *learning to unlearn* (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, *italics mine*). In this pedagogical context, decolonization is happening internally, or “in the mind” (wa Thiong’o, 1994). Importantly, this inner perspective of decolonization is connected with the external goals of decolonization to repatriate Indigenous lands and promote self-determination. Gram-Hanssen et al (2022) illustrate this inner–outer perspective of decolonization through the Indigenous concept of “right relations”:

Decolonization is not a metaphor for systems change more broadly but is tied to specific peoples and histories (Tuck and Yang 2012). Yet the concept and practice of “right relations” not only holds insights for how to generate respectful relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but can help inform a broader notion of how we might relate to all living beings, to the Earth and to ourselves. (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022, p. 683)

This approach to decolonization invokes “learning to unlearn” toward pluriversality (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012) and provides valuable insight into how settlers can seriously engage with Kimmerer’s (2013) call to “become naturalized to place.” Specifically, they identify four interconnected practices toward cultivating right relations: listening deeply, creating space, self-reflexivity, and being in action (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022), which resonate with my walking experience. Thus, my analysis is guided by these practices to illustrate my process of relating differently with land, knowledge, and research.

Disruptions Toward Relating Differently

What people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth, and while the two activities may be separable in principle, they are deeply joined in practice.

—Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*

In many ways, my walk began long before setting foot on the trail and continued long after leaving it. The weeks leading up to the walk, I read over and over again the sparse literature on the Exodus (Braatz, 2003; Burns, 2012; Corbusier, 1969; Harrison & Williams, 2022; Herman, 2012; Whittlesey et al., 1997). I took note of specific events and the places described, and I reviewed the topography map of the area to see if any of these places were part of the AZT passage I would be walking. Importantly, the names I read are the names given to these places by settlers. They are not their ancestral names in the languages connected with this land (Basso, 1996; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). It seemed important to be familiar with the specific places and events I might be walking through so I could stop and acknowledge them (Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015; WalkingLab, 2017). While examining the topography map in detail (Figure 1), the limited representation of the map became clear. Typically, I consider topography maps to be quite literal representations of land; however, taking seriously the Exodus challenged this preconception. The topography map, though useful for navigation, illustrates the land as static, inert, and outside of historical context. This reinterpretation of land as much more than topography prefaced the disruptions to come.

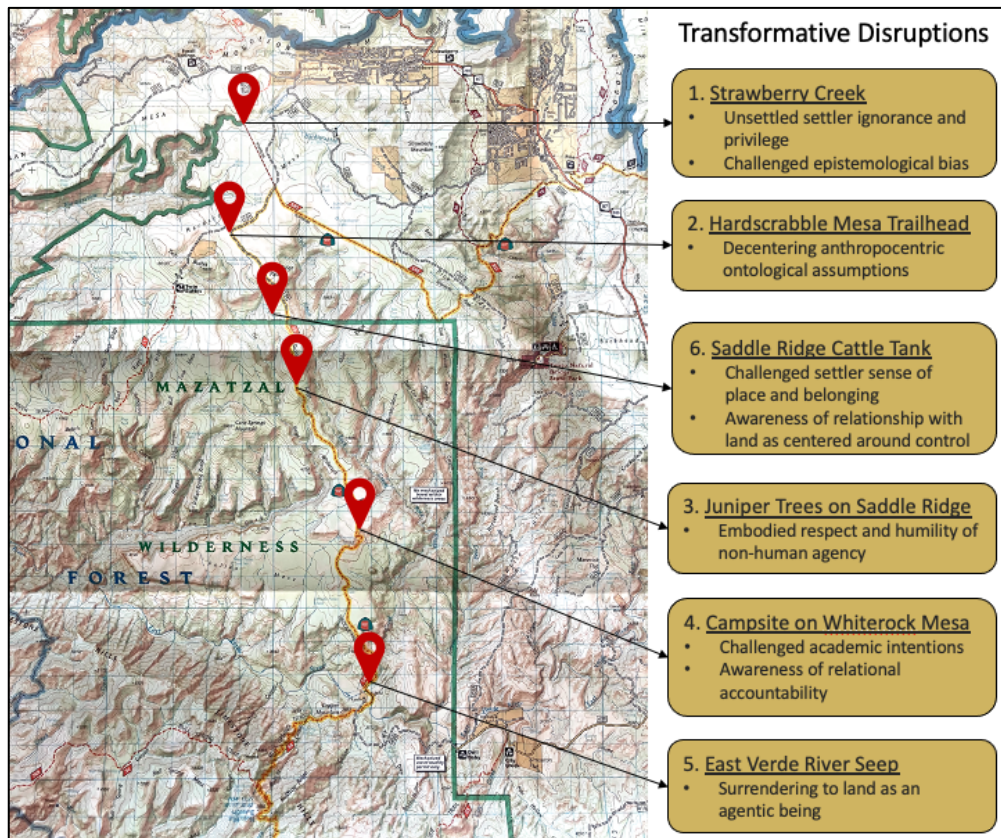


Figure 1: Places along the trail that enacted disruptive experiences toward personal transformation. Photographs and descriptions of each place are detailed below in Disruptions 1-6 (Figures 2-7).

The trailhead for this passage of the AZT is about three miles outside of a small settler town called Pine, AZ. I drove down a network of rugged dirt roads that are primarily used by hunters and off-road enthusiasts to reach the trailhead. Just before reaching the trailhead, I drove beneath an immense stand of powerlines that cut across the dirt road. Intrigued, I checked the topography map, which showed these powerlines crossing Strawberry Creek about a mile from this road. I recalled Strawberry Creek in Corbusier's (1969) account of the Exodus, and though this place is not part of the AZT passage, I felt compelled to witness it.

Disruption 1: Strawberry Creek

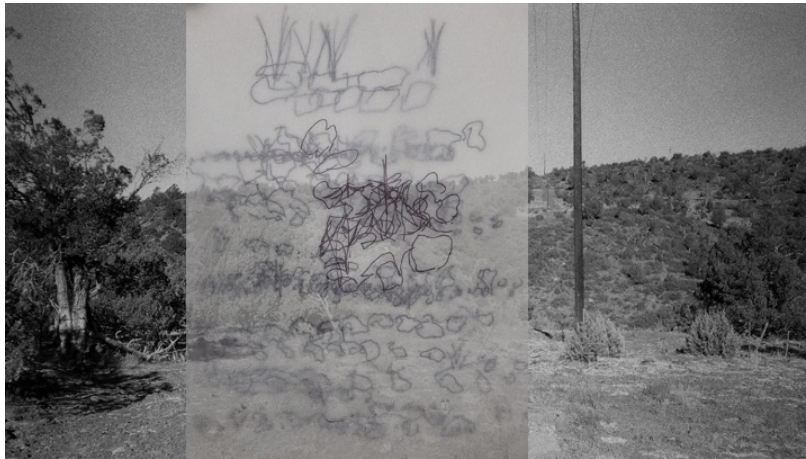


Figure 2: Disruption 1: Strawberry Creek with Inefficient Maps 1 and 2 (Figures 8 and 9) digitally superimposed to illustrate the physical landscape's role as co-creator of the affective landscape I experienced there.

As I walked beneath massive wires buzzing with electric current toward Strawberry Creek (Figure 2), I wondered whether this trail of powerlines was, like the Arizona Trail, originally part of the Exodus. The thought of a trail created by forced removal and later used to bring electricity to settler communities sparked critical reflection within me. It was already clear to me that forced removals like the Exodus were fundamental to the creation of settler communities; however, walking among the powerlines carrying energy generated from fossil fuels and extractive mining, the relationship between the colonization of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of Indigenous lands for natural resources became even clearer. Settler colonialism is not an external event of the past or separate from contemporary life (Wolfe, 2006); rather, it is embedded in the fabric of the city in which I live, as well as the small towns like Pine, AZ that I consider vacation destinations. My lack of awareness of these relationships reflects the ways settler privilege often defines Indigenous-settler relationships (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014).

Reaching the edge of Strawberry Creek, I sat on a boulder overlooking the creek and listened deeply. There was no sound of rushing water as described by Corbusier (1969). Small streams such as this typically only have water after abundant precipitation, and the Exodus took place during an exceptionally wet winter making this a place of treacherous crossing. Reflecting on this context made me confront the otherwise peaceful scene I was witnessing. Then, the sounds of birds chirping and wind whistling through pine needles were disrupted by loud booms of distant rifle fire. This wilderness is popular for hunting, and the way the birds continued to sing made it clear that the gunfire was nothing new. My ears re-attuned to the buzzing powerlines hanging effortlessly over Strawberry Creek. Another shot echoed across the land, resonating with the

atrocities of forced removal. Familiar feelings of shame and anxiety welled up inside my chest.

My response to this was to map my affective experience with inefficient mapping, which “works closely with immanent and speculative theories, attuning to non-representational affects and energies of place, space, and event” (Knight, 2011, p. 225). I didn’t want to push these feelings away because they were crucial for me to visually map the sensuous, affective, and embodied experiences with this particular place (Knight, 2021). Still, as I began this affective mapping, my settler shame turned into harsh internal criticism and judgment. I criticized my lack of artistic ability and struggled to find the usefulness of this practice. This cartographic practice challenged my conditioned assumptions of what constitutes data and helped me come to terms with data as “messy, unsteady, and shifting” (Knight, 2011, p. 188). Reflecting now on my inefficient maps of Strawberry Creek (Figures 8-10), I recognize the affective attunements to non-human, inhuman, and more-than-human entities that guided these co-creations with place (Knight, 2021). The strong emotions I experienced were not *mine*—rather, echoing Ingold and Verngunst (2008), these emotions are entangled with Strawberry Creek in a relational sense. Even though my cognitive awareness was not necessarily attuned to the land during my inefficient mapping, this practice still produced qualitative data about this place.

Disruption 2: Hardscrabble Mesa



Figure 3: Disruption 2: The ominous tree stump marks the entrance to the trailhead at Hardscrabble Mesa.

The critical reflexivity that began at Strawberry Creek continued as I arrived at the Hardscrabble Mesa trailhead (Figure 3), where I would begin and end my walking experience. Powdery, degraded soils covered in tire tracks and the severed, decaying stump of an invasive tamarisk tree marked this place. Three diesel trucks, two with livestock trailers, sat parked. Adjacent to them was a dry stock tank for livestock to drink from. After I parked my vehicle, prepared my pack, and began walking, I noticed an ironic sticker displayed on one of the

livestock trailers. It read: “AND TO PROTECT AND CARE FOR ALL HIS CREATIONS GOD MADE RANCHERS, MINERS, AND LOGGERS.” This aphorism made me reflect critically about my own Christian upbringing and how it influenced my assumptions about the human–nature relationship, as well as its entanglement with the logics of settler colonialism (Mignolo, 2007; Wolfe, 2006).

On my father’s side, my grandmother and grandfather Grant were both raised in large, low-income families that worked farms in rural Minnesota. They were devoutly Christian. This side of my family remains deeply rooted in Christian faith today, and though I no longer share their religious beliefs, part of me nodded to the words on the sticker (I wouldn’t be surprised if my great aunt and uncle, still cattle ranchers, have the very same sticker). Yet, I also reflected on the notion of “dominion” and how it can be implicated in fostering the unsustainable relationships with nature that characterize much of Western culture (Deloria, 2003; White, 1967), as well as how Christian mythology is entangled with the colonization of Indigenous lands (Deloria, 2018; Mignolo, 2003; V. Watts, 2013). Reflecting on the scene at the trailhead—degraded soil trampled by automobiles, large trucks with trailers to transport livestock, and the ominous tamarisk trunk—the words on the sticker seemed to blissfully ignore such criticisms. As I thought about my ontological assumptions and mindset toward human–nature relationships, it became clear that the Christian religious beliefs I was raised with are entangled with the modern, substantialist ontology I continue to embody.

Disruption 3: Juniper Trees on Saddle Ridge



Figure 4: The juniper trees along the top of Saddle Ridge become denser shortly after descending the ridge from where this picture was taken, which is where the black bear encounters occurred.

It didn’t take long for the land to disrupt the anthropocentric ignorance I embodied as I walked the trail. I had intended to walk somewhat contemplatively with a slow pace and in relative silence as a way of acknowledging and bearing witness (Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015; Springgay & Truman, 2017) to the trail as

embedded in the Exodus. However, this intention ignored the presence of non-human beings who live here and walk this same trail. Walking through the juniper trees on Saddle Ridge (Figure 5), I began noticing broken twigs and scattered juniper berries just off the trail, and I recalled that this place is home to black bears.

The thoughts that previously captivated my attention quickly disintegrated into feelings of fear and vulnerability. I had no bear spray or other deterrents, so I started clapping my hands intermittently. Upon smelling and almost stepping in one of two very fresh piles of bear scat, I sang loudly: “This land is your land, this land is my land, this land was made for you and me!” In the moment, this song seemed to burst out of me intuitively; however, with critical reflection and deep listening, I’m compelled to consider the lyrics as part of an unconscious response to feelings of settler shame I was walking with. Along with many American children, I learned this song as a child in school, but I cannot recollect the last time I heard it, let alone sang it. That this song unfolded in my awareness in this moment seems more than simple irony.

This close encounter with black bears was deeply unsettling because it reminded me that, despite my inclination towards relationality, my actions and behaviors are still largely conditioned by the settler colonial structure in which I’m embedded. Prior to the bear encounter, I was walking largely disconnected from this place because I was caught in my head. The inherent accountability to non-humans that comes with walking in shared places was outside of my awareness. This lack of relationship with non-humans seems a privilege of settler colonialism—one that has severely impacted many endemic animal species who have disrupted settler colonial endeavors.⁴ Interestingly, in the weeks after walking, I probed into potential extinct megafauna in the mountain range where I walked and found compelling evidence that, prior to the 19th century, the black bears I encountered may have lived alongside grizzly bears and wolves, both of which were eliminated by settlers to protect livestock (Bednarz, 1988; Brown, 1996).

Again, this reminded me of my ancestors who still farm cattle. My great aunt told me a story about a particular cow that “had a lot of personality” and would greet her every morning. She broke an important rule and gave the cow a name, symbolizing an emotional connection that was forbidden with livestock. When it was time for her to go to slaughter, my aunt cried and grieved her death. Like her, I have been taught to ignore relationships with non-human beings except for the extent to which they serve my needs and desires. However, the black bear encounter provided an embodied clarity that I am always in relation to non-humans even if I am unaware.

⁴ The near-extirmination of the American bison by settlers in the 19th century is perhaps the best-documented example.

Disruption 4: Campsite on White Rock Mesa



Figure 5: This haunting rock formation protruded from the soil just behind the fire ring within the campsite. It seems like a type of omen for the difficult night that awaited me after taking this photograph.

My unplanned visit to Strawberry Creek, coupled with a slow pace, meant that I would not reach the East Verde River, where I intended to camp, before dark. I was relieved to encounter an unknown campsite three miles from the river on the edge of Whiterock Mesa (Figure 5). After setting up my tent and building a small fire, I felt inner peace. Feelings of gratitude came over me as I sat amidst the silhouettes of juniper trees. This was a place of comfort, security, and connection with nature that resonated with previous experiences in wilderness areas of Arizona. The land warmed my spirit as the fire warmed my body. When the fire began to burn low, the inner peace started to fade. The cool silence of the night became loud as I sat alone in the wilderness, immersed in the utter darkness of a new moon.

I thought I was beyond the intense fear of the dark I experienced as a child. However, alone in the cold darkness, this place reawakened that fear. I thought that quickly crawling into my tent would ease the fear, yet as I lay wide awake in my tent, I experienced intense anxiety and a sense of alienation. Embracing the vulnerability of this experience proved too difficult at that moment as I quaked with anxiety and longed to be back home. I felt utterly out of place. Frightened, I interrogated myself aloud: “Why am I here? Why am I alone? What is the point of this?”

Before I began walking, I interpreted this experience as a personal process with social implications because I was acknowledging the Exodus, which made me feel solidarity with the Yavapai-Apache Nation. I thought about this walk as an extension of the land acknowledgment practices that take place in settler institutions like Arizona State University. The primary reason these practices are important is because they acknowledge the largely suppressed traumatic

histories that have enabled the development of settler society and institutions (Stewart-Ambo & Wayne Yang, 2021). As I learned about the history of the Exodus, I felt a need to go beyond an oral performance and embrace an embodied form of acknowledgment of this history and my relationship with it. Walking-with the AZT alone seemed appropriate in this regard, partly because of the ongoing pandemic and social distancing practices, and partly because I needed to do this exercise by myself. I was unsure how to perform this walk to genuinely acknowledge the Exodus while seeking reconciliation and healing. A few months earlier, I had reached out to the Yavapai-Apache Nation's Cultural Research Center to share my intentions and inquire about any historical documents I could review to deepen my understanding of the Exodus. I received no response and assumed this was due to the ongoing pandemic and lockdowns. Still, I carried on without hesitation.

This place disrupted my sense of isolated agency and revealed my lack of relationship with the First Peoples on whose ancestral land I lay and whose history I intended to walk-with. This is why I was there alone and afraid. Critiques of land acknowledgments speak to my experience here. Devised and performed within conventional Western thinking, land acknowledgments risk perpetuating colonial relationships with Indigenous communities rather than healing them. Tuck & Yang (2012) describe land acknowledgments as part of “settler moves to innocence” because they can function as “perfunctory and rote gestures that serve as excuses and alibis for settler institutions” (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021, p. 42). Stewart-Ambo & Yang (2021) make it clear that if the intent of land acknowledgments is to cultivate authentic relationships between settler institutions and Indigenous communities, then they should be ethically grounded in Indigenous relationality and cultivate accountability to land and people. At the time, I was unfamiliar with Indigenous relationality and relational accountability and in the cold darkness, the land made this clear to me. I was walking to process settler shame and (un)learn colonial relationships, yet I had not considered ethical questions regarding relational research and relational accountability articulated by Indigenous scholars (Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). I thought about how autoethnographies situate the self in relation to social and cultural systems (Adams et al., 2015), and the land was deepening my self-awareness of the ways in which my intentions and actions reflected a “self-out-of-relation” with land and people (Giovale, 2024; Kimmerer, 2013).

Disruption 5: East Verde River



Figure 6: Disruption 5: Amidst a dry winter, the waters of the East Verde River were slow and shallow. This is a tributary to the larger Verde River that is a major water source for the Yavapai-Apache Nation, as well as the Phoenix Metropolitan Area.

Slivers of sunlight awoke me from a cold, restless sleep, and without hesitation, I packed my things and began walking toward the East Verde River (Figure 6). My mind was exhausted from the intense emotional experience of the night and negative thoughts still hung in the air. I kept thinking, “Is this really even research? I feel like I’m just out here.” The day prior, I had theories and academic concepts floating around in my head as I walked. Today, having *been worked-with* by the land for almost 24 hours, I no longer mused with theories and intellectual thoughts. The feelings of loneliness and anxiety, now becoming frustration and indifference, opened space for a deeper sensuous experience, because my mind had quieted somewhat. I noticed and listened more deeply to the land, and as I approached the river, I noticed a massive, dried epiphytic mushroom sitting on the riverbank. I sat down beside it and imagined mycelial networks, fungal intelligence, and “The Mushroom at the End of the World” (Tsing, 2015). I wondered whether this ancestral decomposer would share their relational wisdom regarding the shame, frustration, and general inner confusion I was sensing.

Wolfe describes the underlying logic of settler colonialism as a “logic of elimination” that is symptomatic of an incessant desire for land: “The primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). The forced removal of the Yavapé and Dilzhé’é

peoples was an executive order, issued by President Ulysses S. Grant⁵ in response to pressure from federal contractors who wanted the fertile land on which the Rio Verde Reservation had been established (Corbusier, 1969; Yavapai-Apache Nation, 2024). The Rio Verde Reservation was established in 1871 and consisted of 900 square miles of land in the fertile Verde Valley ancestral to the Yavapé and Dilzhé'é (Yavapai-Apache Nation, 2024). These wealthy settlers had heard that the Yavapé and Dilzhé'é people held on this reservation were growing sufficient crops to support themselves and sell excess to the Army (Braatz, 2003; Corbusier, 1969). These settler contractors also sold crops to the Army, so they pressured the federal government to remove the Yavapé and Dilzhé'é from this reservation and make the land available to settlers for private ownership (Braatz, 2003; Corbusier, 1969). The ontological orientation toward land as “an object to be owned and controlled” is clear here, and it speaks to the staunch “anti-relational” nature of settler colonialism (Whyte, 2018; Wolfe, 2006).

As I left the mushroom and riverbank to start the long walk back, I was back in my head fixated on thoughts and conceptual thinking. I recalled a quote attributed to Native American Elders describing the problem with settlers: “they act as though they have no relatives” (Morrison, 2013). I wondered whether it was even possible for settlers like me to cultivate “deep reciprocity” and become naturalized to place (Kimmerer, 2013). Feeling ashamed and frustrated at the pain, destruction, and death inflicted by settler societies—still today—such a sentiment seemed hopeless. I walked with these thoughts and emotions as I approached a groundwater seepage of thick, wet mud. A log lay across, and I carelessly hopped onto it. The log immediately collapsed under my weight, and I went crashing wildly into the mud. Furious, I trudged out of the seep and sat with my head in my hands. My shoes and socks were engulfed in mud, and I still had to walk ten miles before dark. All the shame, fear, anxiety, and anger I had felt up to this point seemed to stir together. I experienced a moment of utter defeat. Then, I quickly got up, because it was clear that I could only keep walking, and a strange calm came over me.

⁵ While, as far as I know, I have no direct relation with Ulysses S. Grant, our shared surname speaks to my ancestral connection with colonization.

Disruption 6: Saddle Ridge Tank



Figure 7: Disruption 6: Saddle Ridge tank sits dry with an ominous invasive tamarisk tree.

Before I stepped into the mud, my attention and awareness largely revolved around conceptual thinking. I was stuck in my head for much of the walk, in a general state of anxiety. From Strawberry Creek to the East Verde River, I had been anxious, which minimized the potential for embodied experiences with the land. The place-based disruptions provoked small openings of relational awareness that quickly settled back into this general state of anxiety. Strangely, like the lonely dark night on White Rock Mesa, collapsing into the mud would slowly clear my mind and further activate my embodied relationality.

After walking a few miles, the mud on my shoes peeled away, along with the anxiety. My feet and my head felt light, and I noticed a calmness that I had not felt in a long time. I saw paw prints, smelled the cleansing aroma of pine trees, and embraced the stillness of the land. The sensation of sore, wet feet did not feel good, but it felt okay because I was in a relationship with the land. And as I reached the juniper trees on Saddle Ridge, I sang to the black bears. This time, I sang “Freedom” by Richie Havens. Now I felt fear, but also respect and humility. To my surprise, during a brief pause, a bear “sang” back. I had never heard the growl of a black bear before, but as soon as it hit my ears, there was no mistaking from whom this had come. The message was simple: keep walking. And so I did.

I walked confidently amidst the setting sun. When I thought about checking the topography map to ensure I was on the right trail, I dismissed that thought quickly—I did not need the map. Soon after, I approached a dry cattle tank with a large, ominous tamarisk tree (Figure 7).⁶ Struck by this place, I stopped and

⁶ The tamarisk, or salt cedar, is a highly invasive species due to its voracious thirst. It often takes root near water sources, which it rapidly consumes.

tried to recall whether I had walked by here yesterday. I could not recall it, and I knew I would have remembered this place. Finally checking the map, my anxiety returned as I realized I was not on the right trail and was walking in the wrong direction. Though it was only a half mile to reconnect with the AZT, it would be close to nightfall. I reached for my headlamp in preparation for walking at night, and then my anxiety shot up. Rifling through my pack, the headlamp was not there.⁷ Remembering I could use my phone's flashlight, I calmed down slightly and kept walking.

My phone battery depleted about a mile before I reached the trailhead, and I was again alone in utter darkness. I tried to maintain my composure by assuring myself that the trail would be easy enough to follow and encouraging myself to just keep walking. Yet, I quickly lost my way. The trail seemed to disappear, and I stumbled around, frantically trying to find the trailhead where I had begun walking. Overwhelmed, I sat down in defeat. Tremendous fear and anxiety gripped me. I experienced a brief panic attack. After some focused breathing, I calmed myself enough to remember that the road I had driven in on had to be somewhere nearby. If I could find it, I could find the trailhead. After what felt like hours of wandering aimlessly alone in the dark, I finally came upon the faint shadow of my vehicle. The relief I felt was indescribable. My car symbolized comfort, security, and home—I was grateful for this machine that I normally only associate with the guilt of contributing to climate change.

Just as I began to experience a level of embodied relationality with the land, I was reminded that I was still out there alone. I was still in the dark. And I still had a lot to (un)learn to cultivate relationality and further becoming naturalized to place (Kimmerer, 2013). Though I would not begin processing and integrating this walking experience until later, while sitting safely in my car, I felt grateful for all of the disruptions the land had enacted upon me. They had been tremendously challenging, yet I was okay, and I knew this was the beginning of an ongoing inner process for (un)learning to relate differently with land, knowledge, and research.

Discussion: Unlearning to Relearn Relationality

It has been four years since I walked-with this trail. This experience established a foundational experience in my approach to sustainability research and scholarship. Back in 2020, when I first learned about the Exodus, I had a vague sense that this history would become important for my intended career in sustainability, but I could only imagine how profoundly it would shape my nascent scholarship. Perhaps most significantly, this walking experience has guided my interest in and understanding of relationality and its importance for sustainability transformations and systems change (Goodchild, 2021; Gram-

⁷ Comically, I found it about two years later in a small, seldom seen pocket.

Hanssen et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2023; O'Brien, 2021; West et al., 2024). At the same time, learning about relationality, specifically from Indigenous scholars (Gould et al., 2023; Kovach, 2021; TallBear, 2019; Waters, 2004; Wildcat & Voth, 2023; Wilson, 2008), has deepened my own (un)learning process, which began by walking-with the trail. Taking seriously the ontological dimension of relationality—that “we are relationships”—entails (re)connecting with our ancestry and meaningfully considering how it influences our relationships with land, people, and research (Wilson, 2008).

Learning about the Exodus forced removal catalyzed my own relationality as an ongoing inner process vis-à-vis the world. Walking the trail was a first step toward unpacking my ancestral relationships with Christianity, settler colonialism, and Western science—all important for my relational awareness. As I have continued to integrate and deepen these teachings, I have come to reinterpret relational awareness as interconnected with “becoming naturalized to place” (Kimmer 2013) while engaging with systems change. I have understood that I am not separate from the systemic changes toward sustainability that I aim for. As O'Brien (2021) says regarding social and ecological systems, “*we* are the leverage points” (p. 4), and our personal relationships with the land, people, and knowledge matter significantly. To cultivate relational awareness requires inner work to peel back the layers of our relationships with land (ontological), people (axiological), and knowledge (epistemological).

Personally, this inner work involves acknowledging and accepting the conflicting emotions and thoughts that often arise as a necessary part of our inner-outer healing. Embracing the profound settler shame I feel about ancestral harms, such as the Exodus, as well as ongoing injustices of settler colonialism, is crucial for learning relational accountability (Curnow & Helferty, 2018). While controversial, national initiatives by settler states to reconcile Indigenous-settler relationships offer insight into potential systemic changes related to healing settler shame. For example, Indigenous protected and conserved areas are becoming more formally acknowledged and supported in settler states that have national reconciliation initiatives and have ratified the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Tran et al., 2020). Yet, these reconciliation efforts are criticized because instead of dismantling power structures that perpetuate colonial relationships, they prioritize the need to absolve settlers of their shame (Kizuk, 2020; Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012). Indigenous-led conservation efforts often prioritize settler outcomes (Campion et al., 2023). My walk can also be critiqued in this way because it prioritized my personal inner work without any connection with the citizens of the Yavapai-Apache Nation. This is a valuable lesson about relational accountability, because if our research and policies ultimately serve our interests and do not build stronger reciprocal relationships with the First Peoples of the land we are working within, then we are not maintaining relational ethics and thus are not really conducting relational research (Gould et al., 2023; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

I now know that I should not have walked alone. The land pushed me to understand that to truly *walk-with the land* requires walking in relationship with the ancestral stewards and knowledge keepers of the land. Historical knowledge and intellectual understandings of relationality are no substitute for real relationships. Cultivating relationships with land in a more-than-human sense calls for cultivating relationships with the ancestral peoples who are inseparable from their land (Basso, 1996; Simpson, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wildcat et al., 2014). Critically reflecting on my walk suggests that it was almost an intellectual bypass to absolve my settler shame and to “hurry toward reprieve...without giving up land or power or privilege,” (Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012, pp. 9-10). I say “almost” because, though this walking experience was not aligned with relational ethics, I do recognize it as an important (mis)step in my ongoing relational awareness process. Moreover, I share this autoethnographic experience “out loud” (West et al., 2024) as a contribution to awareness-based systems change and the related relational paradigm shift in sustainability science because it provides a practical example of an embodied experience of (un)learning relationality (Datta, 2018; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

Turning toward relationality is an invitation for settler scholars to “become naturalized to place” by unlearning settler colonial relationships with land, people, and knowledge (Whyte, 2018) and relearning to relate differently with them from an inner–outer relational awareness. This inner work is difficult and necessitates blurring the lines between personal growth and academic research to advance an entangled inner–outer perspective of scholarship where autoethnographic inquiry is important for researchers working toward collective change (Alexiuk, 2022). Acknowledging and working with difficult emotional responses, such as settler shame, for inner–outer healing requires intense vulnerability, consistent humility, and ancestral acceptance. Ultimately, embracing the need for such inner work means accepting our responsibility as deeply relational beings.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author reports no competing interests to declare.

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