

GATHERING BERRIES IN NORTHERN CONTEXTS; A WOODLANDS CREE METAPHOR FOR COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores community-based research in Aboriginal contexts using the northern Woodlands Cree metaphor of gathering berries. The author's Cree cultural heritage, worldview, experiences, and values are used as a guiding backdrop to frame the process of doing research from a *position of place* when working with and for Aboriginal people.

Research in Aboriginal¹ communities can be defined and thought of in many different ways depending on the way in which we see the world and our place in it. In this paper, community-based research in northern contexts is viewed and represented using the Woodlands Cree metaphor of *gathering berries*. The use of metaphors is a particular lens that helps people gain clarity about notions and concepts that are too complex to understand within the confines of academic discourse (St. Clair, 2000). Metaphors are also commonly used in the storytelling methodologies of many Indigenous peoples around the world (Kroeber, 2004).

As a person of Woodlands Cree heritage, gathering berries is an inseparable part of *Nihîhawâtisîwin*² (Cree way of life) (Michell, 2005; 2007). I have fond memories of berry-picking excursions around Reindeer Lake in northern Saskatchewan. I grew up knowing I was a part of the land and the land was a part of me. Amongst *Nihîhawâk Ithîniwak* (Cree people), gathering berries is about more than survival. Gathering berries brings family together. Any sense of alienation and isolation quickly dissipates as people actively engage in simple talk. Getting in touch with the earth fosters an overall sense of *interconnectedness*. The fresh air, the sun, the wind, and the sounds and smells of nature refresh the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions of our being. Gathering berries helps people communicate with that *quiet stillness* where peace and wisdom dwell. It is through berry picking and prolonged periods of time *out on the land* that we bond with the natural world.

Different types of berries can be seen as the diverse knowledge systems that exist in Aboriginal communities across the country (Aikenhead, 2006; Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Michell et al., 2008). My research in Aboriginal education and health is about how these knowledge systems can be accessed, gathered, and used to improve the quality of life in both native and nonnative communities. We may never go back to living in the bush like it was thousands of years of ago, but we have a beauti-

1. I use the term *Aboriginal* in this paper to refer to *First Nations*, *Metis*, and *Inuit People* who are recognized under the Canadian Constitution. I use the term *First Nations* to refer to reserve communities and people who are recognized under the Indian Act. I use the term *Indigenous* to refer to the original peoples worldwide with a long-standing relationship to a particular geographical land base. More specifically, I use the term *Woodlands Cree* and *Nihîhawâk Ithîniwak* to refer to people who live in the northern parts of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

2. The symbol above the letter is used in this paper to express the sounds of Cree words in Standard Roman Orthography. According to Wolvengrey (2001), each symbol usually represents a single vowel or a combination of single consonant and vowel. For example, the circumflex above the letter 'i' would be a short vowel sound.

ful philosophy of life and cultural teachings that are important for all humans to consider given the state of our planet today. While the educational system needs structural changes, I have come to understand that incorporating cultural and linguistic content in curriculum requires community-based research and Elder involvement (Battiste, 2000). *Place-based* materials and resources for schools and universities need to be developed within local communities to have an effective impact on students (Michell et al., 2008).

Certain berries grow in certain places and they are normally gathered when the conditions are right. Aboriginal knowledge systems are tied to long-term interactions within a particular place and territory. It is imperative that researchers have basic background information on the history, culture, people, and context where the research is to take place. There are protocols and careful planning to be observed within the traditional research methodologies of Indigenous people (Smith, 1999). In Woodlands Cree communities, tobacco is offered to feed *the power and spirit that flows through all life* (Michell, 2005). When I reflect back, it was my mother who knew exactly when and where to gather berries every summer. Like research, discovering the right time to gather berries usually begins by consulting and visiting with knowledgeable people in the community. It is important to know the language because stories lose their essence when they are translated into English. Potential participants include *Khîtiyâk* (*The old ones*), the hunters, the traditional land users, the women, and other community members who have scouted out places of interest or who know by reading the complex patterns and signs in the modern and natural worlds. In our Cree belief system, *there is a time and a place for everything and there is also a right way of doing things*. The duty to consult, obtain permission, request access to certain sites, participant selection, intellectual property rights, and the co-sharing of benefits from the results are paramount aspects of community-based research that need to be negotiated and agreed upon in Aboriginal contexts (Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Israel et al., 1998; St. Dennis, 1992).

Once a site is selected, researchers need to prepare to go through the boreal forest, up and down the hills, valleys, and rocky terrain with their berry pails. Research in many ways can be thought of as a journey through a certain *Place* (Michell et al., 2008). Cree trappers use caution and skill when navigating through uncharted territories. Patience and learning to embrace the ambivalence, the unexpected, the flux, and change are important for survival. Community-based research is a dynamic process in which anything can happen and *nothing is ever predetermined* (St. Dennis, 1992).

The geographical distance and travel between northern communities can be a *culturally grounding experience*. It can also be exhausting, time-consuming, costly, and sometimes treacherous to travel on gravel roads, all of which needs to be factored in when carrying out research in this context. There are many potential distractions within the research process that can slow the berry picking momentum. Swarms of mosquitoes, sand flies, and horse flies can drive a moose insane in the summer let alone a researcher who has never experienced the bush in all of its facets.

It is not uncommon to come across black bears in berry picking sites. St. Dennis (1992, p. 59) encourages researchers to *maintain openness to expression and confrontation* as all communities have a diversity of perspectives including opposing views. In traditional times, dissenting perspectives were *important and allowed* in decision-making gatherings because it made people think about the parameters and limitations of their collective thought. Observation, keeping an open mind, and being alert are three important aspects of survival in the north. Bears are considered great teachers and healers. They teach us to confront danger head on or we can simply walk around it to avoid problems and conflict. Gathering berries is a participatory activity that reinforces a strong group orientation. We learn traditional values from the stories that are shared. We in turn use these values to guide our thinking, our relationships, and our decision making in relation to the research project. For a healthy yield of berries, it is important to foster the values of cooperation and respect for the good of the whole. How will this research and berry picking activity benefit and *empower the community* at the end of the day?

Berry-picking sites are as diverse as Aboriginal community contexts. We are not all alike, but we share a common history and worldview, with diverse definitions of what it means to be healthy. Adelson (2000) who has done health research among the northern Cree in Ontario states:

A sense of health — or of *being Cree*, for that matter — cannot be understood outside the context of colonial and neo-colonial relations in Canada. Indigenous Canadians — Indian, Inuit, or Metis — continue to live with the effects of displacement, discrimination legislation, failed attempts at assimilation, forced religious conversion, and pervasive racism. (p. 9)

From a Woodlands Cree perspective, health and wellbeing is more than just *the absence of disease and the physical*, it is about an entire philosophy of life, a way of being, a way of knowing, and way of becoming whole and complete as we move through the different stages of life (Michell, 2005).

According to Cree scholar, Michael Hart (2002), taking responsibility for our own personal healing and growth allows us to attain *Mino-Pimatisiwin* which is a Cree term for the “overall goal of healing, learning, and life in general” (p. 44).

As the berries are gathered, stories are shared and knowledge is passed on to younger generations. Building relationships with *Khîtiyâk* (*the old ones*) is the first step when gathering local knowledge. Cree people are gifted in diverse ways. We possess different forms of traditional knowledge and skills. We have snowshoe makers, birch bark canoe builders, sled dog experts, and hunters who know how to read the stars, predict weather, and who can navigate through rivers, lakes, and land at the darkest of nights. We have both collective and private knowledge. Some knowledge is so sacred it cannot be openly shared. Several visits of a conversational nature with Elders and other Traditional Knowledge Keepers are necessary before asking them questions. Chopping wood, hauling water, and being of service helps built trust. Praying together and engaging in ceremony is also a common preparatory practice, especially before going out on the land. Traditional values of compassion and respect are reinforced. Some berries are consumed on the spot, nourishing the spirit, and revitalizing much needed energies. Knowledge is given to a person when they are prepared to receive it. This may happen in unexpected moments and sometimes at much later stages in life.

The *process of engaging* in community-based research is educational and empowering for grassroots people whose voices and participation have historically been excluded (St. Dennis, 1992). Community-based research depends on *working with* and accessing multiple stories and perspectives that are sometimes hidden in hard to reach places. Some berries require extra effort and sensitivities. Sharing our innermost thoughts to strangers is still something that is uncomfortable for many of my people who are not sure how their words will be interpreted and used. Sharing circles and one-on-one discussions are safe avenues to use. However, not all participants are open to being interrogated in a group situation. Sometimes researchers *just need to listen* without writing anything down. In other situations we must wade into the ponds and step into the bogs and muskeg in our efforts to gather those pieces of information that will enhance the clarity of our understanding and move us towards *action, change, and transformation*. We must remember this was how our grandmothers picked and used medicines to heal our nations.

Berries are selected based on ripeness, while others are left to go back to the earth in a continuous cycle of renewal. There are times of complete

quiet and deep contemplation. The yellow bees can be heard buzzing and the tiny sound of insects engaged in their own conversations. Stories are told and retold among the Woodlands Cree (Brightman, 1989, 2002). We study the different types of data that emerge. We look at patches of berries from a global perspective and search for common patterns and distinctions. We study the data that is discarded and we must remember that even these seemingly senseless pieces of information also *tell a story of something*.

There are times when researchers have to wander alone into the deep dark crevices of rock and cliff that cover and hide the berries of time and history. These stories remind us that no matter how diverse Aboriginal people are, we have shared experiences with colonization, family and community turmoil, and, most importantly, we share a sense of survival and hope for the future. We are resilient like the red willow, with cultural roots strongly cloaked and wrapped around rock and earth, and yet flexible enough to withstand the social forces and elements that threaten existence. We are reminded of past research that focused on our deficiencies and deficits. We must find a new language and new ways of writing scholarly discourse that builds on the strengths, positives, and accomplishments in Aboriginal communities.

Serious contemplation and *berry picking consciousness* is interrupted by sudden bursts of laughter and teasing as the clouds roll in and loud thunder can be heard in the distance. Laughter breaks the monotony of the research process. No matter how serious our life circumstances are, we still laugh, and we laugh at anything and everything. As a researcher, I have come across concepts and notions in academic discourse which seem bizarre when examined from my Cree worldview. I have been known to experience fits of laughter within the great silence of libraries when doing literature reviews. The idea is to identify the gaps and show how your study adds to the existing discourse. Respect and seriousness prevail when critiquing the work of others. The nuances and call of the loon, the whispers of wind brushing against the leaves, and flashes of lightening across the sky help to prepare us for impending rain. There are times when we need to seek refuge from sudden storms. We need to take time to relax, eat some berries, smell and breathe in that refreshing smell of earth and soil mixed in with vapors and mists of rain. Visiting and talking with *Khîtiyâk (The old ones)* can bring a researcher back to sanity, clarity, and balance. A sense of peace and tranquility renews the focus and energies of the *researcher spirit*. Relevant literature and stories are gathered feverishly, critiqued, challenged, interrogated, and replaced to support the research project.

Sharing stories is a central aspect of berry picking. Stories that emerge enrich the knowledge base of the entire family. The interpretation of stories is deeply personal and collective all at once. We take what we need and leave the rest. Researchers weave in and out of the bush seeking shelter from bouts of rain and light showers. There are times throughout the research writing phase when nothing comes forth anymore and there is a feeling of *saturation* that signals a time to stop and rest. *Wisahkîchâk*, our trickster/transformer being in our Cree stories teaches that nothing is ever perfect and everything is always evolving. There are times in the research process where we need to *take a break, build a fire, drink tea, and share berries and bannock*. We allow our thinking to digest what we have learned. We experience the *ethical space of spirit becoming physical*. The berries that nourish our thinking become a part of our *living/talking/experiencing/being*. It is in the midst of these moments that we see rays of sunlight striking through clouds reminding us that *spirit flows through all things*. The berries are further cleaned, by weeding out any remaining twigs and leaves, which are given back to the earth to help nourish the soil so that others can live. Water is used to cleanse, purify, and prepare the berries for consumption. In the same way that water is used to cleanse the berries, the analysis phase of research must involve Aboriginal people to ensure accurate representation of the final results. The research report is written for a particular audience. When written for the general public, there is a need to balance the use layman's language with academic discourse in the interpretation of the results. The use of native languages, symbolic representations, nontextual methods, and other cultural expressions are also important when communicating and passing on Aboriginal knowledge systems.

Finally, the clouds recede, and an eagle can be seen circling high against a backdrop of a huge rainbow arching across a bright blue sky. A blessing has been given. A feast of thanksgiving and a sharing of the final research report bring everything together. A fire is built and there is a smell of campfire smoke in the air. Relatives arrive in canoes from all directions. There is excitement, lots of talk, and laughter. In the research dissemination phase, the berries are shared, exchanged, and consumed in whatever final form they become. The berries will nourish just as much as they will cause many different reactions. The *black wolf spirit* will quietly dance around and sniff before taking a bite. Scholars, researchers, and readers will quietly trek back and forth across worldviews like the great barren ground caribou taking what they need and leaving the rest for further thought and decay. The

white weasels, black minks, red squirrels, and yellow-bellied birds will come in and out of their disciplinary sanctuaries and nests taking tiny bits back to their peers. Many will interpret, critique, and aggressively oppose the results based on their fields of expertise. One must remember, even these relatives, along with the most feared skeptics like the *wolverine* become food for someone else. Still others will take action, initiate dialogue and talk, build on the research, reconstruct the knowledge base leading to further research, in a never-ending cycle of truth refinement and change. *Wisahkîchiâk* teaches us about transformation and the importance of *walking-in-between-worlds* in order to gain life lessons. *Ekosi!*

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