



We Need a New Story: Walking and the wâhkôhtowin Imagination

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Abstract:

Inspired and guided by the *nêhiyaw* (Cree) wisdom concept of *wâhkôhtowin*, this paper frames walking as a life practice that can teach kinship relationality and help reconceptualize Indigenous-Canadian relations on more ethical terms. I argue that Indigenous-Canadian relations today continue to be heavily influenced by colonial teachings that emphasize relationship denial. A significant curricular and pedagogical challenge faced by educators in Canada today is how to facilitate the emergence of a new story that can repair inherited colonial divides and give good guidance on how Indigenous peoples and Canadians can live together differently. In my experience, the emergence of a new story can be facilitated through the life practice of walking.

Keywords: story; walking; *wâhkôhtowin*; kinship relationality

Nous avons besoin d'un nouveau récit : marcher et l'imagination *wâhkôhtowin*

Résumé :

Inspiré et guidé par le concept de sagesse *nêhiyaw* (Cree) du *wâhkôhtowin*, cet article présente la marche comme une pratique de la vie qui peut enseigner la relation de parenté et aider à reconceptualiser les relations entre les Autochtones et le Canada sur des termes plus éthiques. Je soutiens qu'aujourd'hui, les relations entre les Autochtones et les Canadiens continuent d'être fortement influencées par les enseignements coloniaux qui mettent l'accent sur le déni des relations. Un défi scolaire et pédagogique important auquel font face les éducatrices(teurs) au Canada aujourd'hui est de savoir comment faciliter l'émergence d'un nouveau récit qui peut réparer les fractures coloniales héritées et donner de bonnes indications sur la façon dont les Peuples Autochtones et les Canadiens peuvent vivre ensemble différemment. D'après mon expérience, l'émergence d'une nouvelle histoire peut être facilitée par la pratique de la vie en marchant.

Mots clés : l'histoire; marcher; *wâhkôhtowin*; la relation de parenté

In this paper, I frame *story* as a foundational way through which human beings express their understandings of the world and their place in it. I think that the stories that are typically told in schools continue to perpetuate the damaging and divisive colonial legacies that result from relationship denial. I uphold walking as a life practice that has the potential to enable relational renewal. Significant inspiration comes from the ancient *nêhiyaw* (Cree) wisdom concept of *wâhkôhtowin*, which refers to enmeshment within kinship relations that connect all forms of life. When human beings undertake walking as a life practice, the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination can be activated, wherein the networks of human and more than human relations that enmesh us become vivified and apparent. From this confluence of walking and the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination emerges the possibility of a new story that can give good guidance on how to live life in accordance with kinship relationality.

I went on a walk in search of kinship relationality the day before the summer solstice of 2008. It was a personal pilgrimage, really—one that I had been imagining for several years. This walk felt like a pilgrimage to me because the walking was the enactment of multiple wisdom teachings shared with me over many years. These teachings came mostly in the form of stories that tell of places as living relatives, who offer wisdom on how to live a good life. I had learned how to approach such sacred places with reverence and to honour the presences that reside there. I participated in ceremonial practices that fed the presences at these sites and noticed how people were, in return, given sustenance back. Through such practices, I came to understand how *real people*¹ understand their own identities as intimately interconnected with these sacred places. The stories of such places slowly became a part of my own story.

I recounted some of these stories that day, while walking alone toward my destination, the Viking Ribstones. These buffalo stones were part of an extensive network of sacred sites on the prairie landscape dedicated to the spirit of the buffalo and in honour of all that they provide for the people. I was told that the Ribstones site was originally comprised of a bull, a cow and a calf laying side by side on top of a prominent hill. Those buffalo became stones and the people began the practice of visiting the site to leave offerings and honour the spirit of the buffalo present at that place. Then, newcomers arrived, and the buffalo were removed from the landscape through systematic eradication. As a new way of living was imposed, the newcomers did not allow the people to visit this, and other, sacred sites anymore. Instead, the buffalo stones were neglected, vandalized and even removed by those who did not consider them sacred. The Viking Ribstones is one of the very few sites remaining on the prairies today that still has some buffalo stones in their original

¹ In many of the different Indigenous languages of North America, including the Cree and Blackfoot languages—which I am most familiar with, the people consistently refer to themselves as the “real people” or the “true human beings”. While this could easily be interpreted as a sign that such people have a high opinion of themselves, I have been taught to understand this naming as declarative of the people’s intentions to live humbly and in accordance with the laws of creation. In the languages and the cultural sensibilities connected to them, this is how *real*/human beings are meant to live. For more on this see Gatschet (1899) and Praet (2013).

location. Although some of the stones were removed, and although those that remain at the site have been disturbed, the place continues to be visited as a site of pilgrimage for those who follow the wisdom teachings of the ancestors.

This particular walk, then, was an intentional act of relational renewal. I walked to honour the spirit of the buffalo. I walked to step in the footprints of my ancestors and approach the site as they once did. However, attempting to renew these relations when so much has changed proved to be difficult. Instead of natural prairie, I walked on a gravel road. Instead of free-ranging herds of buffalo, I saw cattle behind barbed wire fences. Instead of the rich diversity of flora and fauna my ancestors knew, I saw monocrops, dugout sloughs and the occasional bird. As I walked along, I kept my eyes on the horizon in hope that I would recognize the prominent hill that the buffalo stones rest upon. However, buildings and trees, which were not part of the prairie landscape when my ancestors walked the land, often obscured my sightline. After about five hours of walking, I finally discerned the Ribstones' hill. I squeezed through the barbed wire and trespassed on private land to cross a meadow before climbing the hill where the buffalo stones rest. After making an offering, I stood up, slowly turned a full circle and surveyed the surrounding topography. I had visited this site several times before, but the act of walking to the site deepened my relationship to the place. I felt like the stones recognized me as a long-lost relative who had finally returned home.

While standing on the crest of that hill and surveying the landscape, I noticed that the relational psychosis² that troubles Indigenous-Canadian relations was on display all around me. Those buffalo stones are the tangible remnants of an ancient story of kinship relationality. Over thousands of years, the people lived in accordance with that ancient story and were gifted with ways to remind themselves of its teachings. These gifted practices, and their related wisdom teachings, are enmeshed within a kinship connectivity of original treaties between human beings and all other forms of life. The Viking Ribstones are an expression of these original treaty commitments to honour the generosity of the buffalo. When newcomers arrived, the story of ancient kinship relationality was gradually replaced by the emerging story of a Canadian nation and nationality. The growth and development of the Canadian nation and nationality soon overtook other priorities, and newcomers began exploiting land and resources to build the economy. This narrative taught that the needs of human beings, in the form of the growth and development of the Canadian nation and nationality,

² For many generations, Canadians have been taught—inside and outside of schools—to deny relationships with Indigenous peoples. The habitual disregard of Indigenous peoples stems from the colonial experience and is perpetuated in the present educational context as a curricular and pedagogical logic of naturalized separation based on the assumption of stark, and ultimately irreconcilable, differences. I use the term “psychosis” to draw attention to the ways in which the institutional and socio-cultural perpetuation of colonial logics has trained Canadians to disregard Indigenous peoples as fellow human beings. This disregard maintains unethical relationships and manifests as cognitive blockages (psychoses) that undermine the possibility for improved relations.

must always supersede the needs of all other forms of life. This story of growth and development is commonly referred to as Progress.³

At the Ribstones site, there is a provocative juxtaposition of these two stories. The buffalo stones rest on a prominent hill surrounded by cultivated fields. You would not notice the stones there unless you went looking for them, as I did on that day. This tensioned juxtaposition poignantly characterizes the pressing challenge faced by educators today. Most people now realize that the story of the Canadian nation and nationality that has been told in schools for many generations has brought benefits, but also has associated costs and consequences. Educational jurisdictions across Canada have slowly come to realize that the stories that have been told in Canadian schools have left out critical considerations, including the memories, experiences and foundational knowledges of Indigenous peoples. A pressing curricular and pedagogical challenge faced by educators in Canada today is how to facilitate the emergence of a new story that can repair inherited colonial divides and give good guidance on how to proceed differently. In my experience, the emergence of a new story can be facilitated through the life practice of walking.

Walking as Attuning to Life

I have been contemplating the intimate relationship between movement and thought for several decades now. My curiosity with this relationship arose from a self-study realization that I have to move in order to think creatively. Now, when I am stuck on an idea or thought, or struggle with an important decision, I habitually go for a walk. When I am on the move, I find that the rhythmic sway puts me in a meditative flow that attunes me to the diverse life energies that surround me. My mind becomes animated with a dynamic flux of thoughts and ideas. It is common for me to burst in the door after returning home and rush to write down the thoughts and ideas that have come to me while I was on the move. I have learned that the clarity provided while walking will leave me once I settle into my office chair again.

Even though I have spent almost all of my life in schools, as either a student or an educator, the connections between knowing and moving have not been supported in my formal educational experience at any level. As Darling-Hammond (2010) notes, the culture of formal schooling is founded on a factory model designed to restrict the imagination of the students to predetermined and standardized educational objectives.⁴ In this model, the *citizen*—the intended target of curriculum initiatives and programs of study—is expected to sit still and study as directed by the

³ I choose to capitalize this term to denote its mythological prominence within settler colonial societies such as Canada. This notion of Progress has grown out of the colonial experience and is predicated on the pursuit of unfettered economic growth and material prosperity, stemming from faith in market capitalism. For more on this see Donald (2019) and Nisbet (1980).

⁴ Kincheloe (2000) also provides a provocative explanation of Fordist production procedures with special emphasis on standardization, compartmentalization of tasks and static assembly lines. These Fordist innovations were conceptualized to modernize and optimize industrial production, and have had tremendous influence on industry around the world. In astonishing parallel, these industrial innovations have also had deep influence over the assumptions guiding teaching, teacher education and curriculum.

teacher. "At school, the chair is one of the most common objects in the classroom and among the first words that a child learns to read and write" (Tenner, 1997, p. 64). From this educational experience has emerged a cultural assumption that serious thinking can only take place when the thinker is seated and imbued with a "sedentary perception of the world . . . unimpeded by any haptic or kinaesthetic sensation through the feet" (Ingold, 2004, p. 323). This certainty that sitting is the habit of the educated and civilized has become so normalized that the word *pedestrian* can now be used to refer to something considered dull, tedious and commonplace (Ingold, 2004, p. 321). Because walking, after the more primal needs, is one of the most fundamental drives of humans, it is strange to deny its role in our perception of the world.

Walking is an intrinsically relational activity that carefully attunes mind, body and spirit to surrounding life energies. "Through our ambling bodies, we can discover an elemental relationship to the earth, a robust, even when culturally mediated, processual field of phenomena flowing beneath—but not only beneath—our fleeting feet" (Macauley, 2001, p. 15). Attunement to these elemental relationships occurs when walking is enacted as a life practice through which the walker repeatedly recognizes the self as intricately interwoven with the surroundings. By doing so, the walker "does not so much add another figurative layer to the ground surface as weave another strand of movement *into* it" (Ingold, 2010, p. S128, emphasis in original). Conceptualizing walking as "dwelling-in-motion" supports the perception that strands of movement are interwoven with the living layers of growth, experience, memory and story that comprise the surface of the earth (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 214). Ingold (2004) asserts that "locomotion, not cognition, must be the starting point for the study of perceptual activity" and that walking is "a form of circumambulatory knowing" (p. 331). By habitually walking around, humans are roused to perceive the world and know it in its fullness:

Indeed, it could be said that walking is a highly intelligent activity. This intelligence, however, is not located exclusively in the head but is distributed throughout the entire field of relations comprised by the presence of the human being in the inhabited world. (Ingold, 2004, p. 332)

As we walk, we simultaneously step into the organic flow of knowledge and knowing that generates attunement to relationality.

Walking and *wâhkôhtowin*

Forms of knowledge and knowing that are perceived as in motion and carefully attuned to relationality exist within many different Indigenous wisdom traditions. In *nêhiyawêwin* (the Cree language), a foundational wisdom concept that is central to *nêhiyaw* (Cree) worldview is *wâhkôhtowin*. Translated into English, *wâhkôhtowin* is generally understood to refer to kinship and relationality. In a practical way, *wâhkôhtowin* describes ethical guidelines regarding how you are related to your kin and how to conduct yourself as a good relative. The guidelines teach how to relate to human relatives and address them in accordance with traditional kinship teachings. However, *wâhkôhtowin* also refers to more-than-human kinship relations. The *nêhiyaw* worldview emphasizes honouring the ancient kinship and relationships that humans have with all other forms of life that comprise their traditional territories. This emphasis teaches human beings to understand

themselves as fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable their life and living. Métis elder Maria Campbell (2007) eloquently addresses *wâhkôhtowin* inter-relationality:

And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and inter-connected to all things within it.

Wahkotowin meant honouring and respecting those relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us. (p. 5)

Thus, following the relational kinship wisdom of *wâhkôhtowin*, human beings are called to repeatedly acknowledge and honour the sun, the moon, the land, the wind, the water, the animals and the trees (just to name a few animate entities) as, quite literally, our kinship relations, because we carry parts of each of them inside our own bodies. Humans are fully reliant on these entities for survival, and so a wise person works to ensure that those more-than-human relatives are healthy and consistently honoured.

While I am truly inspired by this wisdom concept and its connections to the sacred teachings of my ancestors, I am absolutely stunned by the beautiful insights conveyed within the etymological roots of *wâhkôhtowin*. These etymologies were shared by *nêhiyaw* educator and *nêhiyawêwin* expert Rueben Quinn, and documented by Van Essen (2018, p. 86). To summarize their findings, the word *wâhkôhtowin* is comprised of multiple morphemes brought together. The first one is “wâki”, which refers to something that is bent or curved. The second is “pimohtê”, which means to walk, but can be broken down to “pim” (movement) and “ohtê” (over land). Put together, then, “pim” and “ohtê” literally expresses walking as movement over land. Also included in *wâhkôhtowin* is “ito”, which connotes reciprocity. The ending “win” is a nominalizer, which I understand to mean that a verb (movement) is converted into a concept (noun). So, when the original morphemes are placed side by side—wâki + pimohtê + ito + win—what is expressed literally is a “bent-walking-over-the-land-reciprocity-movement-concept”. Van Essen (2018) further shares the etymological insight on this concept of reciprocal bent-over walking by quoting *nêhiyaw* poet Louise Halfe: “wâhkôhtowin is our crooked good and in essence we walk this path in a crooked bent over manner holding hands with every stranger that we meet” (as cited on p. 86). Van Essen (2018) notes that

Halfe’s imagery here brings to mind the way bodies bend when we pick medicines from the earth, the way bodies bend when praying and braiding sweetgrass, or the way bodies bend when entering a sweat lodge, and how these ceremonies remind participants of (and help them to honour and understand) their relationships—wâhkôhtowin. (p. 86)

It is important to recall that this imagery of crooked bending to honour life occurs while walking upon the earth. The act of walking activates the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination.

The Generation of a New Story

As an educator, curriculum scholar and human being, I derive much inspiration and meaning from the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination. However, I well understand that the field of education continues to be dominated by cultural assumptions that block meaningful and deep engagement with Indigenous understandings of knowledge and knowing. I understand these blockages as symptomatic of the perpetuation of colonial logics founded upon relationship denial. Such logics have grown out of the tremendous upheaval that occurred in Europe as a result of colonial processes. The flood of information about new people in new lands required new ways of making sense. Growing out of this colonial impetus was an educational imperative to “construct an encyclopedic mastery of the globe”, a model that would encompass European speculations on perceived new worlds, new peoples, new species and unfamiliar ways of knowing (Willinsky, 1994, p. 613). Notions of citizenship and the purposes of formal education were unified by the goal of coming to know the world according to this colonizer’s model (Blaut, 1993).

Wynter (1992) has argued that the Columbian landfall on Turtle Island instigated a centuries-long hegemonic process wherein a universalized model of the human being was imposed on people around the world. Citing Foucault’s “figure of Man”, and noting the epistemological complexes resulting from Enlightenment-based arrangements of knowledge and knowing, Wynter asserts that this particular advancement has served to “absolutize the behavioural norms encoded in our present culture-specific conception of being human, allowing it to be posited as *if* it were the universal of the human species” (Wynter, 1992, pp. 42-43, emphasis in original). Eventually, formal schooling became a primary means by which those with power could discipline the citizenry to conform to this model of the human being. As I see it, this has resulted in the predominance of curricular and pedagogical approaches that perpetuate these universalized behavioural norms by persistently presenting knowledge and knowing in written, objectified, desacralized, deplacialized⁵ and sedentary forms. As Lowe (2015) observes, the current moment is so replete with these universalized assumptions of human knowing and being that it has become very difficult to imagine other knowledge systems or ways of being (p. 175).

This struggle to imagine other knowledge systems, or ways of being human, is implicated in the deepest difficulties faced today in trying to live in less damaging, divisive and destructive ways. Over the years, I have learned that it is difficult to imagine other ways of doing things while sitting stationary at a desk. Even in formal educational settings, in which I have an opportunity to lead others to consider key insights from Indigenous wisdom traditions, there seems to be something very important missing when such engagements are required to conform to the colonial curricular and pedagogical approaches noted above. If we wish to take seriously the task of addressing the most troubling issues we face today, we must be willing to consider insights from knowledge systems that express alternative ways of being in the world.

⁵ Here, I am playing with a term introduced by Casey (1997): “deplacialization” (p. xii).

An example of this dynamic comes from my experiences walking in the North Saskatchewan River Valley in Edmonton. Walking as an intentional life practice began for me after I listened to Blackfoot scholar Dr. Leroy Little Bear state that a human being experiences an identity problem when the land does not recognize them as a relative (Chambers, 2008, p. 123). It became a personal life goal for me to be recognized as a relative of the place where my ancestral roots are quite deep. I began regularly walking alongside the North Saskatchewan River to facilitate this. As I walked, I began weaving together wisdom teachings, oral histories and written accounts until a unified story emerged that expressed how I understood myself in relation to the place I call home. Over many years of walking in this way as an intentional life practice, I noticed a shift in how I perceived the life around me. Now, I understand this personal transformational process as being gradually enlivened by the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination. As I walk, bent-over-holding-hands-in-reciprocity-with-all-my-relations, I am simultaneously imagining a new story to live by.

Since 2006, I have led students, teachers, university colleagues and other interested groups of people on walks beside the North Saskatchewan River, during which I share stories and insights that express the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination.⁶ These walks have become very popular. This popularity is undoubtedly the result of heightened Canadian public interest and curiosity in Indigenous worldviews and ways. However, there is also an intangible explanation for its popularity. In terms of teaching and learning, these walks wake up something important inside of people that was put to sleep as they became educated. By walking and listening, people begin to perceive the life around themselves differently. They feel enmeshed in relationships. This change in perception is not the result of anything special I do as their guide, rather, it arises from their willingness to be put in the flow of the traditional wisdom insight of the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination. They walk themselves into kinship relationality.

I have come to see this river valley walk as the most important contribution that I can make to the complex task of repairing Indigenous-Canadian relations and renewing them on more ethical terms. Indigenous-Canadian relations will not be repaired and renewed by an educational commitment to provide students with more information *about* Indigenous peoples. The holistic complexity of human perception is disregarded when teaching and learning is reduced to a simple telling of information *about* certain selected topics of interest. To make progress on these divisive issues, educators must be willing to experiment with curricular and pedagogical approaches that provoke their students to engage in such topics in qualitatively different ways. I am not suggesting that all our problems will be solved if everyone walks beside a river and allows themselves to be inspired by the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination. However, I do believe that walking is a fundamental way that human beings perceive the world and come to story their place in it. Wisdom teachings around the world make this connection consistently clear.⁷ As I see it, teaching and learning theories that dominate formal education have left out this important insight. The intimate connections between movement and knowing need to be taken seriously if we wish to reconceptualize human life and

⁶ A documentary film on this river valley walk titled *otenaw* can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/203909985>.

⁷ For some examples of this, see Solnit (2001), Ingold & Vergunst (2008) and Somerville et al. (2019).

living. Walking and the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination can help us re-story ourselves—individually and collectively—as real human beings bent-over-holding-hands-in-reciprocity-with-all-our-relations.

About the Author

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