

# Envisioning SoTL Through a Lens of Indigenous Cultural Continuity

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a rendition of a closing keynote presentation I delivered at the 2022 Symposium for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning—A Decade of Imagining SoTL: Looking Back, Looking Ahead— hosted by the Mokakiks Centre for SoTL with Mount Royal University. As SoTL researchers and educators, we are engaged in a deep relationship with knowledge—with our own knowledge and that of our students. These characteristics of SoTL hold parallels with Indigenous pedagogies, ways of knowing, and the embodiment of knowing. This keynote brought possibilities to the fore through an Indigenous lens that sees knowledge generation as a site of continuous transformation. Through a critical discussion of key principles of an Indigenous paradigm and illuminating that which is not taught, we might construct a praxis-based vision of SoTL that centres equity and relational accountability.

Keywords: Indigenous paradigm, approaches to SoTL, critical SoTL, identity, dialogue

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#### INTRODUCTION

The fundamental essence of this reflective paper is concerned with knowledge. Specifically, it is concerned with advancing concepts and understandings that are central to not only what we know, but also how we know, which is the epistemological foundation of any culture. It is at the conceptual site of thought that Indigenous peoples continue to be misunderstood. Native Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer (2003) positions epistemology—the nature and process of generating knowledge—as fundamental to Native Hawaiian identity. To add to Meyer's perspective, how we know is shaped by our cultural contexts, so we also need to understand that culture matters. How we experience our culture matters. How others perceive our culture matters, and whether others care about culture, that matters too. Culture, knowledge, and relationships shape our understandings of what it means to be a human being and in turn construct how we pass along knowledge—how we practice our pedagogy. This paper further emphasizes calls to attend to the cultural contexts of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and highlights relational alignments. The relational orientation of SoTL is found in the classroom in our relationships with students, relationships between the students and curriculum, and relationships between the curriculum and teaching strategies. It is also found in how we, as teachers/instructors, relate to all these components. Embedded within SoTL is power, and because of the inherent hierarchies of power embedded within academic institutions (Fedoruk & Lindstrom, 2022), we must pay attention to ethics. Cree scholar Willie Ermine (2007) reminds us that ethics, simply put, is the capacity to know what helps or harms sentient beings. Ethical thinking allows us to explore our relationship to power and how we manage it. Our teaching philosophy and approaches do not evolve in a vacuum, and our teaching is heavily influenced by our socio-cultural context. Indeed, our education system often upholds socially acceptable ways of knowing, social norms, and social values and beliefs (Kreber, 2013). Ethics then is a way of examining not only how you will manage power, but also how society manages power.

In this paper, I first discuss identity, learning, and the need to unlearn, and then move to highlight the connections between knowledge, curriculum, and paradigms. I unpack transformative education from a Western standpoint and then share findings from a recent research project around Blackfoot resilience to demonstrate other ways of understanding transformational learning. I conclude with reflective considerations that are aimed at offering readers a pathway forward. Before I proceed any further in my reflections, I locate my identity within the educational landscape of SoTL, power, and ethics as a way to make transparent my own cultural orientation and how it shapes my relationship to knowledge and power.

#### SELF LOCATION

Oki, nistoo Nitanikoo Tsa'piinaki. Greetings, my name is Slanted-Eye Woman.

My English name is Gabrielle Weasel Head-Lindstrom. I am from the Kainai First Nation, part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, also known as Siksikaitsitapi, the Blackfoot-speaking people. I am genealogically connected to the sacred waters that flow through the lands of my people, the waters of the Old Man and Belly Rivers. I belong to the backbone of the world, the sacred Rocky Mountains. Ninastako, Chief Mountain, is a visual reminder of my responsibilities to always carry the teachings and knowledges of my people forward. The many dialogues I have with my students are shaped by my identity as an Indigenous woman, which in turn constructs an image of what it means to be a human being because Indigenous people have such deep knowledge of what it means to have our humanness defined for us. Indeed, Māori scholar Linda Smith (2012) has suggested that Indigenous people care about advancing an understanding of our humanity because too often we have been stripped of it.

## **IDENTITY, LEARNING, AND UNLEARNING**

As an Indigenous scholar, my approach to SoTL is based on how I experience Canadian society, understand Eurocentric knowledge, and engage in Western education, as well as how I enact my professional practice as an Indigenous educator. One facet of my career aspirations emerges from a desire to shed light on the absence of Indigenous peoples, places, knowledges, and perspectives in the curriculum planning process, which illuminates the deeper purpose and aims of education. In order to understand the fundamental aims of education, we need to be curious, and we need to ask questions about our educational practice. We need to gain a deeper and more diverse understanding of not only what students should learn, but also how they learn, because this impacts who they become. These are important determinants in shaping our world. We need to ask ourselves and our students what kind of world we are settling to maintain and what kind of future we are aspiring to create.

To mark out a future, we need to understand where we have been. Now, more than ever, we need our education to foster innovation in order to correct the imbalance of human existence and recentre our relationship with the natural world. We need our teaching and learning to contribute to growth and transformation. Writing from a Blackfoot perspective, innovation and transformation are about being adaptive to the flux and striving to work towards the maintenance of balance. Innovation is not about humanity taking up more space by building bigger and better or making life any easier for people (Little Bear, 2000). Thus, for the Blackfoot people, innovation is about the continuity of Blackfoot culture within a web of relational alliances.

To understand innovative thinking from a Blackfoot perspective one must engage in a process of unlearning. According to Kainai knowledge keeper Wilton Goodstriker, in order to know a society, a culture, one must learn the history of its people (Treaty 7 Elders et al., 1996). This history must be learned within the context

of how the people understand their history because this knowledge will provide critical insight into the collective reality they have created. Within the settler state of Canada, our current reality has been constructed from the settler narrative of pioneer nation-building, which has both deliberately and indirectly led to the near erasure of Indigenous ways of knowing and being from these lands. Settler colonial nation-building is derived from, and deeply rooted within, a much broader imperial context. European imperialism is expressed and upheld systemically through the process of settler colonialism, which goes largely unacknowledged and unexamined in today's education systems, yet it is responsible for ongoing violence, racism, and discrimination towards Indigenous peoples. These processes are also responsible for the "get over it" attitude held by many non-Indigenous peoples when it comes to the injustices endured by Indigenous peoples today. Because the effects of history are still being felt, there must be a resistance to rushing the process of reconciliation. What is required is a sustained exploration of the widespread attitude that demands Indigenous peoples "get over" centuries of genocidal policies and practices because this will lead to both acknowledgement and validation of colonial violence, which are necessary for collective healing. Undoing this well-established pattern of erasure calls for a paradigm shift that begins with unlearning settler colonial "truths" about the purpose and nature of knowledge. When thought leaders within our education systems and beyond accept the call to unlearn, then the nature of Indigenous knowledges can be grasped for what it is—the embodiment of past remembrances, perseverance, and continuity. Looking at SoTL through an Indigenous lens of cultural continuity means revealing the role of culture in shaping our knowledge systems, which in turn shape our teaching and learning research practice and praxis. We can then begin to engage in meaningful dialogue about what kinds of changes we want to envision and facilitate through SoTL.

## KNOWLEDGE, CURRICULUM, AND PARADIGMS

As a critical Indigenous educator, I seek to better understand my relationship to knowledge by asking questions such as What is the purpose of knowledge? What is important to know, to learn, or to forget? And how are we to understand an absence of knowledge? The notion of an absence of knowledge within our educational curriculum is referred to by Milner (2017) as the null curriculum—that which is not taught:

Students are learning something based on the absence of certain experiences, interactions, and discourses in the classroom. For example, if students are not taught and expected to question, critically examine, and call out sexist language in books, they are learning something—that it may not be essential for them to engage in this work of critique and exposure. In other words, what is absent or not included in the curriculum can actually be immensely present in what students are learning. (para. 4)

The absence of Indigenous lifeways and histories in mainstream knowledge systems can be partly explained through a null curriculum lens, which reveals a deep disregard of Indigeneity in educational curricula. To this end, my work in curriculum development is deliberately positioned in ways that address the null curriculum (Lindstrom, 2023c) or the absence of Indigenous perspectives and experiences in curricula. I argue here that this absence can be connected to a culture of settler colonial forgetfulness. According to Australian historian Anna Haebich (2011),

Forgetting and ignorance are never benign conditions: they do things. Ignorance breeds in a forgetful climate of not knowing by bestowing value on misinformation and failing to question its veracity or authority. In a world of separation and suspicion of the other, hearsay and imaginings can take on the appearance of fact. Repeated by government and the media, misinformation assumes an aura of authority and authenticity. Specific groups are defined and stereotyped on the basis of these attributes, which are then used to rationalise and normalise their discriminatory treatment. There is an easy slippage between a mind-set that promotes the distancing and dehumanising of racial groups and the acceptance and normalising of their unequal treatment. In the process discriminatory practices become normalised to the extent that they are rendered unremarkable and virtually invisible to the wider society, even as they may assume increasingly harsh forms. (pp. 1035–1036)

Forgetting Indigenous histories has a similar impact to that of the null curriculum in not only reinforcing the absence of Indigenous perspectives but further contributing to the racism and discrimination meted out to Indigenous peoples by many (not all, of course) mainstream Canadians. Because of these issues, I think we always need to be clear about what we mean by curriculum development, which typically involves planning a course or program, including developing learning outcomes and objectives, instructional strategies and materials, and assessments. However, curriculum development can also be a blueprint for societal change and transformation, or it can be a template for maintaining the status quo when it comes to knowledge engagement, acquisition, and educational research. Engaging with the Indigenous paradigm can offer a blueprint to engineer transformative shifts in knowledge, yet the way Indigeneity is thought about, talked about, and taught about in Western education systems simplifies the complex structure of Indigenous thought systems. Understanding the complexities will lead to authentic engagement.

Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing are shaped through a relational paradigm (Bastien, 2004, 2016). The relational worldview of Indigenous people is expressed through the familiar axiom of "all my relations" (Deloria et al., 1999), at the core of which rests the notion that, as human beings, we are all related to each other, to the natural environment, and to the spiritual world, and these relationships bring about a set of interdependencies (Makokis, 2009; Ross, 1996). Cree scholar

Shawn Wilson (2008) highlights how an Indigenous research paradigm consists of an ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Indigenous pedagogy is shaped by its paradigm—indeed, all pedagogies are shaped by paradigms. For First Nations, our ontology, or nature of existence, is contextualized within our relational and sacred (that which is beyond the physical) responsibilities. A First Nations ontology reinforces a view of abundance, meaning that the universe is kind, the land is compassionate, and there are adequate resources for everyone and everything to live sustainably, so long as we govern human relationships accordingly. An Indigenous epistemology encompasses a "theory of knowledge that is based on Indigenous perspectives, such as relationality, the interconnection of sacred and secular, and holism. ... The emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical dimensions of knowledge are common in Indigenous epistemologies" (Antoine et al., 2018, n. p.). Smith (2012) furthers, "We have a different epistemological tradition that frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions we seek" (p. 230). Undoubtedly, epistemological differences underlie conflicts between Indigenous peoples and settler governments, yet there is little known about the Indigenous knowledge systems on the part of settler society.

The ethics, or axiology, of Indigenous peoples are contextualized within a need to maintain our identity as Indigenous people. Speaking from a Blackfoot perspective, our ethics are connected to our spirituality and the ability to practice our ceremonies, which keeps us in a state of harmony and balance. Indigenous ethics are further understood as our responsibilities to our relational alliances and our vow to the natural world to act as guardians and protectors because we are all unequivocally dependent on the land, plants, and other living energies for our very survival. This dependency requires respect and reciprocity. Ethics are also about our behaviours and actions, which are understood as the embodiment of our spiritual responsibility to our relationships and a commitment to the continuity of Blackfoot culture. The Blackfoot language also connects the people to our ethical responsibilities as the language itself is the embodiment of our axiology.

The above components generate knowledge and call to the fore an examination of personal truths. Exploring how we know what we know helps to identify personal limitations, gaps in knowledge, and possibilities for growth. Like other Indigenous scholars (Battiste, 2005, 2013; Wilson et al., 2019), my research and teaching propel me to ask, What is knowledge? Is it separate from me? What is my relationship to my knowledge? And what is my relationship to collective knowledge? Exploring these questions has enabled me to see that the value of knowledge is in my relationship to knowledge not as an objectified reality, idea, concept, or outcome that I am separate from. Meyer (2003) says that "If we wish to understand what is unique and special about who we are as cultural people, we will see that our building blocks of understanding, our epistemology, and thus our empirical relationship to experience is fundamentally different" (p. 125). The distinctions between Indigenous and Western paradigms must be thoroughly understood and explored, which is best done through authentic, intercultural dialogue. But we must also question what it means to be authentic. Generally, it means to be metacognitively and critically aware of the personal values and beliefs that shape one's interactions in relationships—to be driven by these. I understand authenticity as being a fundamental component of building critical self-competencies.

Indeed, teaching and learning, both in the planning and delivery, demand authentic dialogue. As educational researchers, faculty developers, and curriculum specialists, we might sometimes confuse consultation with dialogue, yet it is dialogue that transforms our practices and relationships and requires specific skill sets such as humility and deep listening. Open dialogue is what creates an ethical space (Ermine, 2007) and enables non-Indigenous people to realize the possibilities of (re)building relationships with Indigenous peoples and their knowledges. Once the process of understanding through dialogical relationship-building has begun, then the nature of Indigenous pedagogy can be experienced.

According to Antoine et al. (2018), Indigenous pedagogies refer to "the method and practice of teaching that focus on the development of a human being as a whole person," learning through experience, and recognizing that Elders have an important role in transferring knowledge (n. p.). Because knowledge is understood as sacred (Bastien, 2004), creating knowledge through learning also has spiritual elements. The notion of the learning spirit has been advanced by Indigenous scholars (see Battiste, 2013; Ningwakwe, 2008) who acknowledge the multiple wellsprings of knowledge that guide and shape human beings' learning beyond physical, interpersonal manifestations of family, Elders, community, and nation. The learning spirit connects us to our universal relational alliances and instills relational responsibility and accountability in ways that allow us to connect our identity beyond the human realm, so we identify with the relational energies that are all around us. We begin to learn that our thoughts are imbued with energies, so we realize that we must think of others and our relations in kind and good ways. Blackfoot scholar Little Bear (2000) emphasizes that Indigenous languages are the conduit that enables Indigenous peoples to transcend physical boundaries and connect with the spiritual energies of the natural and supernatural worlds. Learning is both sacred and relational because our connection to all of our relatives is sacred. Indigenous pedagogy is relational, but it is also transformative. Transformation occurs through the direct experiences gained in participating in relational alliances, which are sacred because of their aliveness. Relational alliances are sourced from energy and imbued with consciousness (Bastien, 2016). These relationships are also holistic and are not seen as separate from Indigenous peoples (Bastien, 2004; Little Bear, 2000). The knowledge and pedagogies that emerge through the participation within these relationships comprise Indigenous knowledge systems (Bastien, 2004, 2016; Battiste, 2013; Ermine, 1995; Little Bear, 2000). The understanding of transformational learning, the role of knowledge, and the centrality of relationships comprise a very different transformative pedagogy in comparison to transformative

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learning from a Western perspective. Indeed, from a Western perspective, transformative learning in the context of Indigenous education is often used to refer to transformational educational approaches that are aimed at addressing the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Concepts such as the learning spirit might be difficult to grasp within Western, objective educational structures that underpin SoTL inquiry—structures that are largely shaped through empiricism. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, non-Indigenous educators such as Kreber (2013) articulate the potential of SoTL, specifically, and university teaching, more generally, (Brookfield, 1990) as a praxis-based model of inquiry imbued with elements of holism.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION**

Paulo Freire (2003) challenges us to "name" our existence in this world in order to transform it. Naming our existence also means having critical clarity about the components that structure our knowledge, which is why the above discussion around knowledge positions us to embody transformative pedagogy. Transformation within an unstable present and uncertain future must begin with critical self-reflection on both teaching and research in order to cultivate selfawareness and the agency to act on identified areas for change. Brookfield (1990) sees university teachers as change agents who are helping students to "shape the world they inhabit" (p. 17), which denotes agency. Kreber (2013) envisions SoTL researchers as being motivated by three primary impulses:

1) a duty and commitment to serve the important interests of students; 2) understanding that the important interests of students are their own growth towards greater authenticity; and 3) promoting students' authenticity has implications not just for students' academic learning and personal flourishing but also for creating greater social justice in the world. (pp. 7–9)

Kreber's perspectives and others like her help us to see beyond not only our discipline but to envision ourselves as change agents. There's an underlying assumption that research should lead to a more equitable society, to a recognition that pedagogy and generating new knowledge through SoTL research are ways to "power up" our social capacity through authentic relationships. From a research standpoint, authenticity is about being self-aware of how one's cultural paradigm shapes and influences how one conducts oneself in community and in relationships—how one is genuine and shows concern for the communities that they are researching with, not about, such as the learning communities that are part of SoTL research sites. We should then be asking, How am I expressing who I am through my research? This question is an entry point to developing critical self-competencies, which is a significant deviation from the well-accepted cultural

competency professional development model that seems to be the norm whenever non-Indigenous people seek to learn more about Indigenous lifeways.

In terms of Indigenous people's experiences in academia, there is a great deal of concern by universities and government to address the education gap between mainstream Canadians and Indigenous people, and rightly so. Yet the conceptual chasm representing this education gap cannot be bridged by non-Indigenous educators simply including Indigenous content. The focus should be on bringing a critical perspective into SoTL in ways that inform the relationship between education/curriculum development and Indigenous people, both historically and today. This means fulfilling a demand for unlearning on the part of settler scholars from myself and other Indigenous scholars and educators who are too often tasked with teaching non-Indigenous people a more critical, accurate, and holistic account of colonial history and race relations.

## AN INDIGENOUS PEDAGOGY OF RESILIENCE

My research around Blackfoot resilience (Lindstrom, 2023b; Lindstrom, Baptiste, & Shade, 2021; Lindstrom, Shade, & Baptiste, 2023a) highlights the perspectives of Blackfoot Elders as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It was found that curriculum needs to be an authentic reflection of Indigenous identity. Non-Indigenous people need to learn-directly from Indigenous people—about Indigenous people's experiences in Canada and hear a true representation of who Indigenous people are as we understand ourselves (Lindstrom, 2023b). In general, today's teacher education programs are ineffective in preparing Indigenous teachers to teach from an Indigenous perspective. One Elder in my study suggested that Indigenous students were encouraged to teach like non-Indigenous educators. Instead, the focus must be more on learning from precolonial Indigenous stories, histories, and values, and less on learning from a Western frame of reference. One Elder shared, "There's a lot of these young people now lost. They don't know where to turn, what to do, who they are, or even have a basic understanding of Blackfoot" (Lindstrom, 2023b, n. p.). Hence, our educational institutions must be sites not just for Western cultural continuity, but inclusive of Indigenous culture as well.

Indigenous pedagogy is the foundation towards transformative education because it elevates conscientization in students through an emphasis on holistic learning. Indigenous pedagogy has a transformational impact on students because it promotes inner-development, inward-looking practices, and self-reflection, which enable students to identify values, beliefs, and knowledge—to dig deep and to challenge themselves in order to persevere in life. Nurturing perseverance resilience—is about offering reflexive space to be able to analyze yourself and where you come from, which is especially important for Western/settler students because our mainstream education systems are more about pursuing objectivity and personal distance from sources of knowledge. Indigenous pedagogy is about cultivating students' abilities to connect with knowledge, with each other, and with

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themselves, which fosters relationships and collective resilience. As understood from a Blackfoot perspective, resilience is about connection and existing in balance—to be in pursuit of balance means being complete (Lindstrom, 2023b).

Elders emphasize that we cannot learn through anger. Indigenous pedagogy teaches us to let go of anger and learn through compassion and empathy. While we are learning collectively, there is also an interplay between the individual and the collective. A sense of self-empowerment is gained by connecting to the learning spirit. My research has shown that the learning spirit and the spirit of resilience are one and the same and enable students to "come home" to their knowledge and find personal strength to seek balance in their existence. The field of Indigenous Studies is the foundation upon which Indigenous pedagogies and knowledges rest in the academy, but it is one that requires institutional support to ensure that Indigenous educators are able to embody Indigenous pedagogy from the distinct perspective of their nation and that non-Indigenous educators can be supported to experience Indigenous ways of teaching and learning through authentic and self-empowering pathways. These pathways must be guided by appropriate critical theories to ensure that colonial oppression is not simply reproduced. In the section below, I conclude this paper by offering reflections on what this pathway forward could look like.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN INDIGENOUS PRAXIS IN SOTL**

Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) remind us that "the relevance of a theory should be seen in how it allows us to understand the complexity of human society and to offer a social and political corrective—that is, the power of theories and ideas to bring about change and transformation in social life" (p. 298). Anticolonial theory is situated within the terrain of the transformative. It is a conceptual lens through which we might engage with historically positioned events of Canadian nationbuilding, such as the reserve-system and Indian residential schools, which are typically taught as "Indigenous issues" as opposed to an orchestrated sequence of events meant to bring about the annihilation of Indigenous nationhood. Anticolonial theory makes space for decolonizing Western education and educational research by creating a conceptual framework within which students are actively engaged in the illumination of colonial forces in the creation of Canada in ways that restore balance in perspectives. The results of an anticolonial SoTL lens encompass "what is possible with what exists" (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 298). What exists is the local embodied knowledges of Indigenous peoples as the frame of reference. Research, curriculum, and classroom pedagogy can be sites where the power of colonial thought is deconstructed via the elevation of Indigenous values and teaching modalities. Critical self-reflection from an Indigenous perspective is one such modality.

Ermine (1995) states that "[Indigenous] languages suggest inwardness, where real power lies. It is this space within the individual that, for the Aboriginal, has become the last great frontier and the most challenging of all" (p. 108). Criticality

is embedded in the relationships learned in childhood through which Indigenous children learn the importance of balance in relationships. We learn that we are autonomous beings and that other living entities have their own autonomy. Inward reflection is understood as a responsibility towards self, each other, and our environment and enables us to restore our sovereign imaginations within a web of relational responsibilities (Bastien, 2003). According to Bastien (2003), knowing begins with an understanding that life can be understood through the teachings of all of our relations. Because SoTL is driven by relationships, we can begin to see complementary concepts and practices with regard to the Indigenous paradigm. Kreber's (2013) perspectives remind us that through engaging in SoTL, we have a duty to serve the interests of our students to create optimal learning conditions.

As SoTL researchers, we also have a duty to go inward to better understand our motivations and uncover our assumptions in order meet our relational responsibilities to our students and the knowledges that we are imparting. This is about relational accountability through which we develop a compassionate lens. As Kreber (2013) states,

Our capacity for compassion for those in need is based on three judgments we make: firstly, we understand the situation of these others as serious (which involves being able to imagine a situation from the perspective of someone else); secondly, we infer that they are not to blame for the situation they are in; and, thirdly, and significantly, we recognise their vulnerability as a distinct possibility for ourselves. This last judgment implies that we see others as our fellow human beings who are important to our own flourishing or authenticity. (p. 10)

The above statements hold deep parallels with Indigenous perspectives on relationality. Kreber (2013) beautifully captures the need to move beyond an objectified stance in SoTL practice and embrace an ethic of compassion. The following guiding questions can be entry points for cultivating a compassionate lens and centring relationships in SoTL:

- Where does your knowledge, either personal or disciplinary, come from? How do you know what you know?
- How do your values and beliefs shape your understandings about knowledge? How do you make these values explicit through your philosophy (teaching, professional, disciplinary, etc.)?
- What assumptions do you have about yourself that may be different from the assumptions you have about Indigenous people, culture, ways of knowing?

It is important for non-Indigenous educators and researchers to understand that we, as Indigenous peoples, are still embodying the laws and principles of our ancestors. These principles carry the learning spirit of resilience forward in ways that are often unseen but nevertheless become manifestations of mutually empowering relationships. It is these relationships and the duty to be relationally accountable that inspire Indigenous people to share a perspective on reality wherein a vision of ongoing transformation and growth are made possible through the

maintenance of balance, the commitment to kindness and compassion, and the inherent right to ensure that Indigenous lifeways endure. As Indigenous people, we will continue to look back on the knowledges that have sustained our people in order to move forward and create a future where all our relations are acknowledged and valued.

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