ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Volume 4/Issue 2/December 2023

Ecocene Arts

Wâhkôhtowin: Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, and Rematriation

Lara Felsing
lfelsing@ecuad.ca
ORCID: 0009-0008-5616-6102

Felsing, Lara. 2023. "Wâhkôhtowin: Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, and Rematriation." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 2 (December): 97–106. https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.102.

Artwork/ Received: 12.11.2023 /Accepted: 12.11.2023

Wâhkôhtowin: Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, and Rematriation

by Lara Felsing

●

About the Artist

Lara Felsing is a Métis interdisciplinary artist from Northern Alberta, Canada. Her practice explores the interconnectedness of all life on Earth and aims to bring awareness to the necessity of caring for the Earth and all living beings. Felsing's material practice and research are approached with 'two-eyed seeing', with one eye looking through a lens of Indigenous teachings and the other through a lens of Western knowledge. Traditional plant harvesting is at the core of her practice, and Felsing collects the likes of roots, leaves, berries, petals, spruce tips and pine needles to create compostable paintings, sculptures and blankets that speak to the necessity to honour and show gratitude for the gifts provided by Mother Earth.

Wâhkôhtowin: Gestures in Kinship, Reciprocity, and Rematriation

Lara Felsing

> *We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world. We need to restore honor to the way we live, so that when we walk through the world we don't have to avert our eyes with shame, so that we can hold our heads up high and receive the respectful acknowledgment of the rest of the earth's beings.*
> —Robin Wall Kimmerer

> *Walk gently on the Earth and do each other no harm.*
> —Richard Wagamese

In my practice, the notion of immersing myself in the natural environment and creating a bond is vital. More than ever, our current world climate motivates me to explore the urgency to prioritize my relationship with the land and its more-than-human species through sustainable and environmentally aligned research and material practice. My practice focuses on creating artwork that benefits the land and more-than-human species where I live.[1] In addition, I feel an urgency for my artistic approach to echo my worldviews and inherent beliefs, to draw attention to beautiful and flawed interactions between humans, the land, and more-than-human species.

My relationship with the world around me, my community and with whom I share kinship is embedded in how I gather research and materials in my practice. I show gratitude to the land and its gifts by carefully adhering to Métis harvesting traditions that require attention, patience, and an awareness of nature's growing seasons. Every year I look forward to harvesting, and the sign of a good harvest is when I run out of the previous year's gatherings right before harvest time, a gentle reminder that I have only gathered what I need. Traditional harvesting protocols emphasize harvesting responsibly, such as not over-picking one plant or area or removing plant roots. Like

most traditional harvesters, I carry a small tobacco tin to offer gratitude to Mother Earth during harvesting for guidance. A small offering of tobacco is placed onto the ground, situating myself in a place of gratitude and reciprocity before gathering gifts from the land.

Figure 1. Felsing, Lara. *Blanket Ceremony for the Forest*, 2023.

After harvesting materials, I source second-hand fabrics and remnants from local thrift shops, friends, and family, which I also weave and stitch into my paintings and sculptures. Second-hand materials destined for the landfill can be given new life, both in my material practice and through mending, repurposing, and recycling. I don't want my work to contribute to the over-excess in society. I want it to be a reminder to respect what the land has given us, and not take these gifts for granted.

In addition to positioning my material practice within Métis culture through traditionally harvested materials, I also draw Métis epistemologies and current scientific findings into my work. Kinship means caring for and showing kindness

toward all living beings. I want my practice to illustrate my relationship with my whole community, including the land and more-than-human beings. As Richard Wagamese expresses in his book *One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet* (2020), I believe that we are all connected, every human, animal, plant, organism, and spirit in the universe. We can benefit from our interactions with all life on Earth, and all other life can benefit from our respectful interactions. Wagamese shares that ceremony is the method to unify us and the world in which we live. He speaks to all citizens of the planet and offers traditional Indigenous knowledge that guides us in living respectfully and in unison with all other beings. Wagamese's explanation of the urgency to connect to the Earth and all other life forms in order to heal the planet and ourselves is crucial to my practice. In our quest for health, happiness, and the planet's well-being, we need to act on the acknowledgment that all life on Earth is interconnected and needs to exist through reciprocity.

Figure 2. Tobacco offering. Ellie Johnson photo.

I am drawn to Two-Eyed Seeing (knowledge gathered with one lens through Indigenous ways of knowing and the other through a Western lens) because it references multiple perspectives and creates a partnership approach to problem-solving and bridging cultures. Current scientific research I have been gathering explains that humans connect to nature on a physiological level and receive benefits molecularly. My

research emphasizes the idea that we have an innate kinship to other species and is explored in my practice through an investigation of the concept of Biophilia, which states that we are innately attracted to nature and other living organisms.

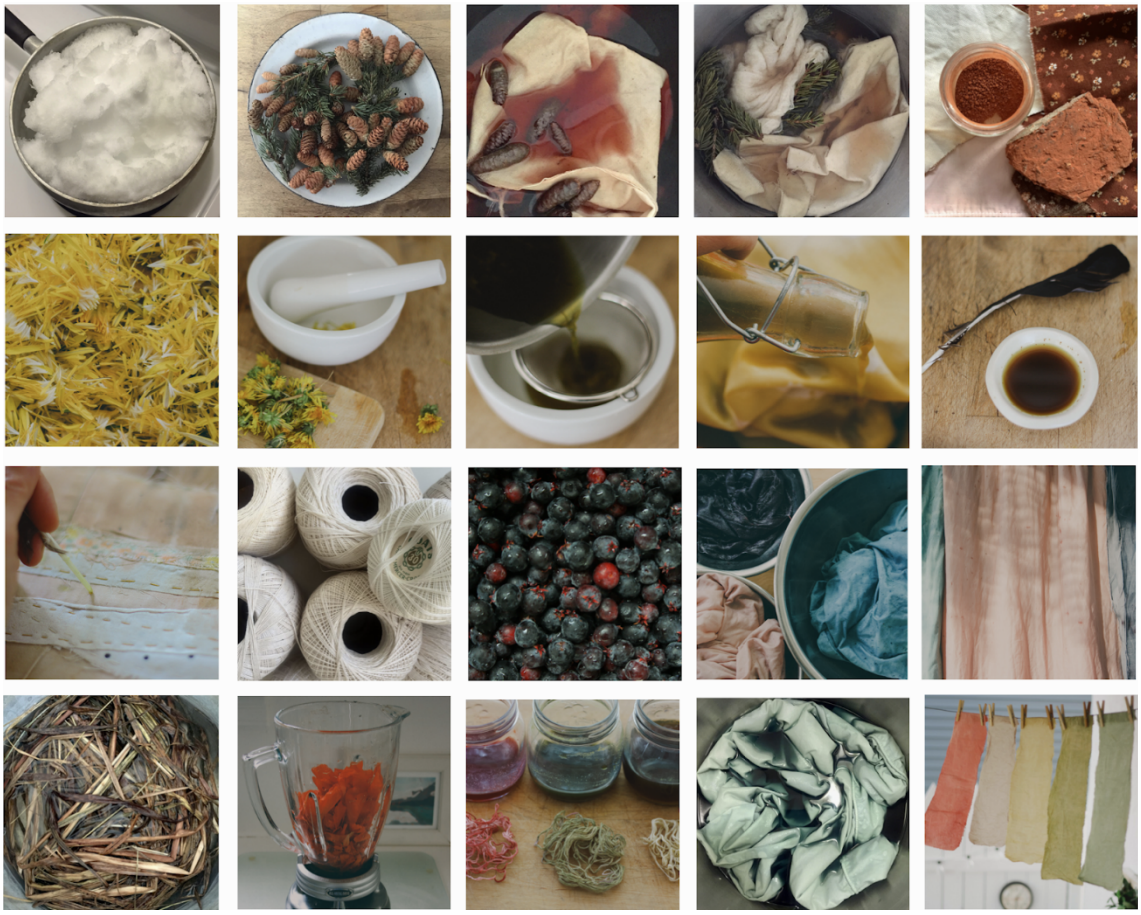

Figure 3. A collection of the processes I use to make harvested plants, rocks, and berries into dyes using collected snow and rainwater.

Reciprocity is essential to my research and material practice as an avenue of creating a symbiosis between humans, the land, and more-than-human species. As a gesture of care, I made blankets for the forest where I live. While making the blankets, I considered how fortunate I am to have a forest of Black Spruce trees as relations. I grew up surrounded by patchwork quilts, with my grandmothers, mother, and aunts making and gifting blankets to friends, family, and community for various celebrations and achievements. We, the Métis, give blankets as a gesture of care, honor, and respect. Given the recent unprecedented Alberta wildfire situation, I wanted to show gratitude and respect for the forest where I live with a blanket ceremony. For this project, I combined second-hand gifted and thrift store fabrics sourced from my community. The

blankets' fronts were made from plant pigments I harvested and hand-dyed and hand-stitched together.

In addition, I purchased three wool blankets from the Galloway Station Museum in my community to line the blankets I made. They are for sale after being unboxed—after being discovered in the basement of the post office, initially stored along with food and medical supplies in the event of a nuclear attack. I wanted to apply the same gesture of safety and protection to the forest that the National Security Strategic Stockpile reserved for the humans in this area back in 1952. I placed the blankets on the trees, similarly to how one would wrap a loved one in a blanket to keep them warm, protected, and cared for during a time of trauma or illness. Next, I wrapped twine in a crisscross pattern, inspired by the lacing on our traditional wraparounds and mukluks, to lightly secure the blankets from sliding. The gesture isn't to be taken literally but to acknowledge the forest as a relation worth dignifying and thanking for the gifts it gives. I wanted to create a gesture that speaks to the respect and love I feel for the forest, and while placing the blankets onto the trees, I thanked them. I hope this gesture also serves as a call to care for all our relations and speaks to the current climate crisis.

Figure 4-5. Felsing, Lara. *A Blanket Ceremony for the Forest*, 2023. Second-hand thread, fabric and floral broadcloth dyed with Spruce cones and needles, Saskatoon berries,

Tobacco, Cedar, Sage, Chaga, Strawberries, and Dandelion sewn to wool National Security Strategic Stockpile blankets, 80" X 65" each.

> The flowers and plants always bring us back to our connection to the land and the medicines and teachings they give us tell us how to live on Mother Earth. (Cristi Belcourt in De Lano 2022, 3).

Rematriation is described as "returning the sacred to the mother."[2] Concepts of reciprocity and kinship are commonly ignored or under-practiced, and the land was colonized without taking the land and more-than-human beings into equal account. But what if the benefits of returning the sacred to the mother were widely known? According to an article by Jim Robbins, published online at the Yale School of Environment, ecopsychology can be summed up simply as studying human relationships with the natural world (2020). Robbins explains what separates ecopsychology from other psychological theories is that it considers the individual's natural environment and recognizes that humans live in relation to the Earth. It is reciprocally beneficial to our mental and physical health that we create awareness to care for the Earth. We come from the Earth and have a deep bond with it, and by not caring for the planet, we are endangering our existence.

Figure 6. Felsing, Lara. *What About Charlotte? Charlotte Small*, 2023. Lara Felsing photo.

The idea of healing in nature is one of the oldest therapeutic dicta. However, ecopsychologists warn that we undermine the basic requirements for optimum cognitive function and physical health. Furthermore, by devastating our natural environment, we endanger other species' existence and reduce our ability to heal

naturally. The Earth continually provides for us from the oxygen we breathe to the plants we eat. Being removed from our innate connection to the natural world harms all.

> Let us pile up our thanks like a heap of flowers on a blanket. We will each take a corner and toss it high into the sky. And so our thanks should be as rich as the gifts of the world that shower down upon us (Mohawk Elder Tom Porter in Kimmerer 2013, 114–15).

Recently I exhibited the three Gratitude Blankets I made for the forest at the Emily Carr University of Art & Design during my thesis exhibition. They relay how I feel being in the forest—the soft and soothing colors, the variety of fabric textures, and the scent of the cedar, tobacco, sweetgrass, and sage sacred plant medicines they are infused with, permeating throughout the installation. I combined the blankets with a table that held a harvesting tray containing plant medicines harvested in the forest near my home, a moose hide medicine bag, tins of plant medicines stored in Dominion-brand tobacco tins (like my Woodland Cree grandmother used to do), medicinal salve I hand-made from poplar buds and juniper, and charred wood from wildfire EWF-031, which caused us to evacuate from our home in Edson, Alberta, in May and June of this year. I aimed to create an ecology of artwork reflecting the power and knowledge embedded in the land where I live and share the teaching of *Wâhkôhtowin* and the need to acknowledge our connection to the natural world for our survival and the health of the land and more-than-human species with whom we co-exist.[3]

Figure 7. Felsing, Lara. *Blanket Ceremony for the Forest*, 2023. Lara Felsing photo.

The highlight of the graduate exhibition for me was engaging with viewers, who generously shared how interacting with the work made them feel relaxed, peaceful, and calm—a beautiful reflection of the healing power of the land. During the exhibition opening, I also heard stories of others' love and attachment to the land and more-than-human species, which beautifully reflected my work's theme of kinship, reciprocity, and rematriation at a time when I was experiencing first-hand the effects of climate change, and the consequence of neglecting our place among, not above, the land and all our relations. Ultimately, I want to my practice to echo what Indigenous teachings have always shared; that we are all connected. Without acknowledging that all life on planet Earth is intertwined, moving forward with healing ourselves and the planet seems unobtainable. Having a Western scientific perspective in alignment with what Indigenous Elders have passed down for generations is promising. By working together, we are more likely to achieve harmony among ourselves, the land, and more-than-human species.

In tandem with expressing the interconnectedness between all life is the power of community and ceremony. I have often felt more connected to the Earth while harvesting with friends and family than when I harvest alone. It is known throughout the Métis people that community makes us stronger, and in sharing ceremony, our message to the spirit world also becomes stronger. Through sharing experiences, we share knowledge, and through sharing knowledge, we build relationships. We are reminded that there is much to share and much to learn. My practice focuses on creating gestures of kinship with the natural world, showing gratitude to Mother Earth for her gifts, and considering what we can offer in return.

Notes

[1] Using the word "benefit" in this document describes my intention to create artwork with medicinal plants and second-hand materials, producing the lowest environmental footprint possible and conveying a message of gratitude and kinship and a call to live in reciprocity with the land and more-than-human relations.

[2] See the Indigenous, women-led group of the same name at Rematriation.com.

[3] "Wâhkôhtowin," Cree—meaning kinship. Referring to the interconnected nature of relationships, communities, and natural systems (Dion 2022).

References

"biophilia noun." (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Accessed December 5, 2022. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biophilia.

De Lano, Sarah, Métis Nation of Alberta Environment Team, and the University of Alberta Sustainability Scholars Program. 2022. "Métis Urban Plant Harvesting Guide" April. Accessed December 18, 2023. https://albertametis.com/app/uploads/2022/04/Urban-Plant-Harvesting-Guide.pdf.

Dion, Shana. 2020. "Wâhkôhtowin: The Value of Relationships Amid Crisis." May 14. *The Quad*. Accessed December 19, 2023. https://www.ualberta.ca/the-quad/2020/05/wahkohtowin-the-value-of-relationships-amid-crisis.html.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions.

Rematriation. (n.d.) Accessed December 5, 2022. https://rematriation.com/.

Robbins, Jim. 2020. "Ecopsychology: How Immersion in Nature Benefits Your Health." *Yale e360*. January 9. Accessed April 2, 2022. https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health.

Smith, Andrea D. 2019. "Wahkohtowin: A Cree Way of Living." The Tyee. February 25. https://thetyee.ca/News/2019/02/25/Cree-Way-of-Living/.

Wagamese, Richard. 2016. *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*. Madeira Park, British Columbia: Douglas & McIntyre.

———.2020. *One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet*. Madeira Park, British Columbia: Douglas & McIntyre.