Spiritual, Religious, and Faith-Based Practices in Chronicity

An Exploration of Mental Wellness in Global Context

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First published 2022

ISBN: 978-0-367-48912-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-07756-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-04350-8 (ebk)

Chapter 7

Miyo-wîcêhetowin in the city

Indigenous youth spirituality, good ancestors,
and mental wellness through healing journeys
on the land

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003043508-7

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Introduction

There is a medicine that grows on the sidewalk called plantain. It grows anywhere—in dusty lots, the cracks of sidewalks—and if you pick it up and clean it and put it on a wound, it will take infection out and promote healing. In a lot of ways, the plantain is very similar to the history of Indian people in the city. They may be obscure and they may be sort of growing in the cracks in the sidewalk, but when they are brought back to who they are, then there is an immense amount of power, and there's an immense amount of healing.

(Alan Bobiwash, Anishinaabe teacher and community leader as
quoted in Johnson 2013)

Relationships with the natural world, including stars, mountains, waterways, landscapes, airways, animals, and plants, continue to shape the spiritual worldviews, beliefs, values, institutions, laws, and practices of many Indigenous¹ communities across the globe (see discussions in North America by Deloria 2003; Ermine 1995; Grande 2015; Simpson 2011). From these views, “spirit” is not a static, anthropocentric, or monotheistic category linked to discrete inner workings of souls independent of culture, politics, and geography. Instead, it is *all our relations* that we hold and become a part of. Notwithstanding devastating legacies of colonization across “urban” and “remote” landscapes for many Indigenous nations in Canada and globally, these sacred relationships with the natural world have persevered to provide meaning, resilience, and wellness amidst challenging aspects of contemporary existence (Simpson 2011).

Despite *land* being a fundamental Indigenous determinant of health (Greenwood and Lindsay 2019; Redvers 2018), as well as literature demonstrating how spiritual practices and worldviews can foster pathways to wellness (Clark 2018; Dylan and Smallboy 2016; Kirmayer, et al. 2009; Marquina-Marquez, Alfonso and Ruiz-Callado 2016; Mikraszewicz and Richmond 2019; Wilson 2005), there is limited research illustrating how the sacredness of land is understood and

experienced within urban geographies. This oversight is significant considering that 52% of Indigenous Peoples in Canada reside in cities, with those under 24-years-old comprising approximately half the population (Statistics Canada 2016). Young people are accessing job markets, reclaiming Indigenous lifeways, and identifying cities as “home,” even where strong attachments to “remote” communities and ancestral homelands still exist (Environics Institute 2010).

The research presented here explored Indigenous youth spirituality, human-nature relations, and pathways to mental wellness in a central Canadian city through the framework of chronicity while considering the role of *place*, or land, from anti-colonial and critical Indigenous perspectives (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). Following healing journeys of 36 youth growing up and enduring what we refer to as “settler-colonial chronicities,” Indigenous young people often negotiate a contemporary sense of themselves as healing across urban landscapes that involves creative exchanges of ancestral, contemporary, and adopted spiritual practices (Hatala et al. 2019). We illustrate that, by embodying practices within their daily lives and securing Indigenous futures in cities, youth understand themselves as “good ancestors” and value their bodies and environments positively in aesthetic and spiritual terms of beauty and acceptance. Mobilizing our findings through the Cree Indigenous concept of *miyo-wîcêhetowin*, meaning “to have or possess good relations” (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 2000), we argue that the uptake of land-based wellness interventions, as important as they are in Canada and elsewhere, should not only engage the sacredness of land in “remote” or “traditional” places and spaces outside of cityscapes, but equally strengthen sacred and good relationships with creation in and through urban geographies.

Chronicity theory, settler-colonization, and thriving as context

Chronicity theory problematizes social or structural inequities unevenly distributing chronic illness, mental disorder, and impairment in society (Manderson and Smith-Morris 2010). Places mired with persistent poverty, war, and environmental devastation, as well as precarity, structural violence, or oppression, manifest not as singular events but relentless and stress-inducing conditions of the body politic, or “crisis as context” (Vigh 2008). Limiting agency and wellness, people enduring these contexts struggle against injustices heightened by intersecting health risks and medical conditions (Weaver and Mendenhall 2014). Over time, chronic social conditions fluctuate to shape the functioning and capabilities of people grappling with mortality, morality, meaning, and action as part of daily routines of survival (Vigh 2008). Chronicity theory here moves beyond clinical matters of disease management and health care toward diverse sociocultural manifestations and places of distress and injustice (Heinemann 2015; Read and Geest 2019; Yates-Doerr and Carney 2016).

To date, however, researchers utilizing chronicity theory have not explicitly engaged anti-colonial and Indigenous perspectives of *place* that reframe oppressive histories and geographies of settler-colonization as chronic social conditions and articulating *homeland* as central to its transformation. While focused on resource extraction and land settlement, settler-colonization institutes a slave or migrant workforce to guarantee settler futures and instigate Indigenous erasure that slowly

manifests as persisting illness and mortality across remote and urban lands (Rifkin 2017; Wilson and Peters 2005). Settler-colonization has devastated land-based economies and lifeways for many Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and propagated systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, and poorer mental health, educational, and socio-economic outcomes (Greenwood et al. 2018; Waldram et al. 2006). Canadian settler-colonization has attempted to sever connections to land while at the same time being transformed through land, spiritual knowing, human-nature kinship, and ancestral ties (Hatala et al. 2019).

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada observed, Indigenous youth in Canada bear the brunt of intergenerational effects of collective trauma experienced by previous generations (TRC 2012). Indeed, health research indicates direct links between historical and contemporary impacts of settler-colonization, and higher rates of alcohol and substance use, suicide, and mental illness and disorder among Indigenous youth today (Nelson and Wilson 2017; Waldram 2004; Wilson and Cardwell 2012). When compared to non-Indigenous youth, contemporary Indigenous realities are also characterized by higher rates of child welfare involvement, gang violence and violent victimization, and inadequate living conditions due to poverty (De Leeuw, Greenwood and Cameron 2010). Increasingly relocating to urban centers both voluntarily and unwillingly, youth encounter the “front-lines” of social, economic, and political inequities of a settler-colonial urban welfare state; thus, further exacerbating their precarious health and wellness status (DeVerteuil and Wilson 2010).

With trends moving Indigenous health research and practice toward health promotion, social determinants of health, and Indigenous ways-of-healing, health and wellness are understood as holistic, and encompass an important balance among diverse dimensions, including the spiritual (Allen et al. 2020; Kirmayer and Valaskakis 2009). Recently, mental health interventions and cultural revitalization movements addressing inequities understand land as a site and practice that can improve pathways to holistic wellness for youth enduring settler-colonial chronicities of the body politic and significant health risks (Greenwood and Lindsay 2019). Among Indigenous determinants of health and resilience, *access to* and *stewardship over land* are often understood as central, if not the most important, determinant shaping wellness directly (e.g., Lines et al. 2019) and indirectly (e.g., Ladner 2009; Nesdole et al. 2014). Furthermore, as biomedical reductionism and deficit-based thinking are critiqued for deflecting settler-colonization (see Clark 2016; Hatala et al. 2016), *environmental repossession* frameworks become relevant when referring to processes whereby Indigenous Peoples improve wellness pathways by reclaiming ancestral homelands and revitalizing Indigenous lifeways (Big-Canoe and Richmond 2014; Morton et al. 2020). As such, these frameworks shift land and mental health away from a “crisis *as context*” toward a “thriving *as context*.”

Histories and geographies of Indigenous youth spirituality

Indigenous communities in Canada have had to contend with religious influences and doctrines of Christianity since the 1600s (Friesen and Heinrichs 2017).

Prior to European contact, many communities maintained cultural practices, rituals, and customs through spiritual ways-of-knowing occurring from the inside out, instead of the outside in (Ermine 1995). Through moral and sentient connections to Mother Earth and spiritual beings, spirituality did not exist as a corpus of knowledge akin to dogmatic biblical scripture, but was situated within corporeal and experiential acts of sacred knowing transmitted across generations through oral traditions, connections with nature, and subsistent ways-of-life (Deloria 2003). Continuing into present-day Canada, distinctions between the “sacred and profane,” although diverse among various Indigenous spiritualities, are often less apparent and contribute to all aspects of society unlike the institutional arrangements of Western religion (Collard and Palmer 2015). Counter to dualistic utopian religions of Europe conceiving spirituality as universal, innate, and independent of locality, Indigenous spiritualities generally associate spirit with the particularities of one’s homeland and kinship ties to humans, land, and nature (Collard and Palmer 2015).

Although Indigenous Peoples generally upheld values of non-interference considering it inappropriate to impose one’s views on another people, an openness and inquisitiveness existed to other ways-of-being and ways-of-seeing, therefore allowing Christianity to travel widely (Miller 2017). This openness expedited the syncretization of belief systems while maintaining sovereignty over communities’ spiritual lives and geographic territories (Bradford and Horton 2016). Without successfully replacing Indigenous spiritual values, it was only later that the necessary conditions and attitudes to propel evangelizing missions toward indoctrination became possible. This involved the Confederation of Canada (1867) and Indian Act (1876), which established race-based policies governing those classified as “Indians.” These events consolidated Canadian national unity, bolstered constitutional sovereignty, and secured control over First Nations lives and territories to make space for settler resource extraction and settlement (King 2017). Foremost among strategies of expanding control of an emerging settler-colonial state was an assimilationist agenda supporting Indian Residential Schools (IRS). IRS acted as a state-sponsored and church-administered educational, cultural, and spiritual intervention into the everyday lives of Indigenous communities, where attendance was legally and detrimentally enforced for some hundreds of thousands of children (TRC 2012).

Although state laws at the time restricted mobility, fragmented identity, and demonized spiritual expression, an unrelenting perseverance and resistance to intrusive settler-colonial religious domination occurred in various ways; for instance, communities practicing spiritual ceremonies in secrecy (Haig-Brown 1988; Hatala et al. 2016). Despite the revitalization of Indigenous spiritualities across Canada post-1950s based on legislative changes and cultural movements, Indigenous people continue today to confront and challenge settler-colonial rationalities that act on, bound, and legitimize Indigenous spirituality (Friesen and Heinrichs 2017). While coping with effects of settler-colonization and Christianization in present-day Canada, considering what is traditional, sacred, and “good” within specific local contexts such as cityscapes, biographical histories also

complicate discourses on who counts as being authentically “Indigenous” and “spiritual” and *where* such authenticity manifests and flourishes (Bakht and Collins 2017; Buch 2017; Deersch 2003).

Although important for addressing contemporary health inequities for Indigenous young people in Canada, research has narrowly conceived Indigenous Peoples’ connections to land as being centered on “remote” home communities and ancestral homelands while negating urban landscapes from discussions of land and human-nature connections as being a potential source of healing (Davie 2019). Focusing on geographies of Indigenous youth spirituality, we maintain that despite shifts in research articulating urban landscapes as sources of wellness (e.g., Wilson and Peters 2005), the “where” of contemporary land-based mental wellness interventions must also acknowledge how youth resist and challenge chronicities of settler-colonization and thereby maintain connections with the land, nature, and traditional spirituality within contemporary urban realities, spaces, and places.

Towards spiritual encounters and Miyo-wîcêhetowin in the city

When considering Indigenous youth spirituality, chronicity, land, and mental wellness within cityscapes, Adelson’s (2000) reflections on reimagining Indigeneity for the James Bay Cree in Northern Canada becomes particularly relevant. Although juxtaposing descriptions of cultural “Gatherings” on remote land to restore Indigenous lifeways against a colonized urban space or “village” located nearby, Adelson’s (2000, 28) insights highlight negotiations of contemporary Indigenous identity based on “melding of concepts and practices” and “conscious fusion of old and new.” These hybridized cultural identity transformations offer departures to reimagine, understand, and observe spiritual pathways to mental health and wellness for urban Indigenous youth.

Furthermore, referring to enactments of youth spirituality through sacrilege and encounter, Olson and colleagues (2018) also suggest shifting our analytical repertoire away from spiritual beliefs to more explicit groundings in a *spiritual encounter*. Within settler-colonies, spiritual encounters might express hybrid transformations of spirituality at the intersection of traditional Indigenous cosmology, European religious philosophy, and contemporary spiritual imaginaries (Collard and Palmer 2015). Through a chronicity framework attuned to anti-colonial and Indigenous conceptualizations or practices of place, we therefore interpret Indigenous youth spirituality as a *healing journey* whereby youth become actively entangled in a fusion of “old and new” relations to spirit, time, culture, nature, and land that enhance pathways to mental health, resilience, and wellness within urban contexts.

Following healing journeys in urban lands through youth narratives from two Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) projects in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Canada, two interrelated questions are explored in this chapter, 1) how do urban Indigenous youth encounter spirituality through land and nature within urban contexts? and 2) how are connections to spirit, nature, time, and land contributing to

their perceived mental wellness? In addressing these questions, we illustrate how healing journeys are not merely functional processes of reoccupying physical and objectively constructed spaces (e.g., Woodgate and Skarlato 2015), but invite youth to become “good ancestors,” that is, to positively view themselves in urban landscapes with moral responsibilities flowing from aesthetic and spiritual values. We also interpret youth narratives through *miyo-wîcêhetowin* to demonstrate how settler-colonial chronicity of the urban politic endures and youth reimagine good relationships not only to thrive-in-place but ensure places themselves thrive over generations. When regarding *miyo-wîcêhetowin* through instruction by the “Old Ones” (or “Elders”) we situate it within the overarching principles of *wâkôhtowin*, or Natural Laws, that govern the world and human nature. Relationships and their core values emerge as morally responsible acts of experience that generate power, knowledge, and action. As Settee (2011, 9) notes: “Indigenous Knowledge Systems do not encompass a singular body of knowledge but reflect many layers of being, knowing, and expressing.” Although, socio-ecological systems models of wellness and resilience theoretically reflect holistic unity between humans and nature, they often fail to acknowledge and explore the dynamic interactions and agential capacities of non-human spiritual beings (Morton et al. 2020). Therefore, they resort to spatialized explanations that demand human control and ownership over nature through intervention in contrast with spiritual and moral values of non-interference and reciprocity (Tobias 2015). As such, this chapter does not seek to encapsulate a definition of *miyo-wîcêhetowin*, but employs it as an analytical heuristic to surface processes of repatriating good relationships with spirit and nature in urban lands, by seeking out Elders, listening to community, engaging with tradition, teachings, learning about *wâkôhtowin*, and thereby promoting mental wellness, resilience, and prosperity.

Methods and analysis

The research presented here involved 54 interviews with 36 youth that were drawn from two CBPR projects exploring Indigenous youth wellness within a mid-sized Canadian metropolitan city, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (see Bird-Naytowhow et al. 2017; Hatala and Bird-Naytowhow 2020; Morton et al. 2020). The research projects emerged from several years of conversations, relationship building, and engagement with youth, community organizations, parents, and Elders identifying the need to build on existing community strengths. They were carried out in 2014–15 and 2018–19, involving youth-serving organizations, high schools, and the University of Saskatchewan Community Engagement Centre.

Directed by Elders, the research followed a “Two-Eyed Seeing” approach whereby Indigenous and Western paradigms worked alongside one another (Wright et al. 2019). Applied to our research teams consisting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, academics, community partners, and youth collaborators, this approach created spaces for open discussions regarding roles and responsibilities of both ways-of-seeing and ways-of-doing, enhancing our overall methods and sensibilities when interpreting spiritual encounters and

pathways to mental wellness (Bird-Naytowhow et al. 2017). The projects were approved by the University of Saskatchewan's and University of Manitoba's Behavioural Research Ethics Boards, and local ethical approval and guidance was upheld by youth serving community-based organizations.

Positioning ourselves

Darrien Morton is of Anglo-African descent and originally from Zambia. Living in Winnipeg, Central Canada (Treaty 1 Territory), he works as a health researcher, community helper, and ally alongside Anishinaabe and Cree grassroots youth activists and advocates. His research focuses on topics related to youth participation, social movements, and health services and policy. He not only works in service to the urban Indigenous communities in which he has come to belong, but works from a position that recognizes, confronts, and leverages the "terrible gifts" he must exchange to live on these lands as a soon-to-be Canadian citizen whose citizenship will ultimately be gifted through the scholarly and economic labor of doing research with Indigenous youth as an international student and permanent resident. Darrien primarily draws on critical-interpretive and relational methodological frameworks that center youth voice and posthumanist philosophies from a cross-cultural and localized standpoint with various communities in the prairies.

Kelley Bird-Naytowhow is known in a spiritual or ceremonial context as Black Buffalo Man. He uses Bird-Naytowhow to honor his biological parents who he still yearns to get to know. He was born in Montreal Lake/Sturgeon Lake, Saskatchewan. Kelley is of Cree descent and has learned to keep his mind and heart open to all things while also paying mind to protect what knowledge comes to him. His positionality comes from places and stories that have helped shape his paradigm, the way he perceives the world. Positioning himself in this way speaks to the powerful acts of how principles can be put into practice. Kelley feels that it is only right for him to display his position, for this position comes from the very principles that his community(ies) have taught him. This is also his way to give back in hopes that he has paid attention to and acknowledged his teachers in a good way. Kelley completed his Bachelor of Social Work degree at First Nations University of Canada and has more recently completed his Master's of Social Work. Kelley is passionately committed to working with Indigenous youth and local organizations serving youth in Saskatoon. Kelley also has extensive community-based research experience on diverse projects with Indigenous youth in Canada.

Andrew R. Hatala was born in central Canada with Polish, English, and Finish ancestry. After growing up primarily in Treaty 7 area on Blackfoot lands (outside Calgary Alberta), Andrew is now settled on Treaty 1 Territory (Winnipeg), the lands where First Nation Peoples have been living since time immemorial, and where the Métis have established their Homeland. As part of his work as an Associate Professor at the University of Manitoba, he endeavors to be a good visitor on these lands by doing his part in decolonizing his worldviews and dismantling systemic white supremacy, while building good and respectful relations with Indigenous Peoples. Andrew is forever grateful for the land, the water, and the skies that have

taught him so much and shown him the beauty of this place and its people. His community-based participatory research explores Indigenous youth wellness, health, and resilience within urban Canadian contexts and diverse healing practices for mental illness and chronic conditions in both Canadian and Belizean Indigenous contexts.

Methodological considerations

Situated within a social constructionist epistemological perspective, this qualitative research adapted Indigenous Methodologies (IM) (Kovach 2009) alongside a modified Grounded Theory (GT) approach (Charmaz 2006) for data collection (see Table 7.1), interpretation, and analysis. An IM framework infuses decisions concerning choices of methods, how methods are employed, and how data are analyzed through Indigenous ontological and epistemological perspectives prioritizing relationality (Kovach, 2009). They not only consider knowledge in itself, but together with relationships we share during its creation (Wilson 2008).

Table 7.1 Data collection procedures for CBPR Project 2014–15 and CBPR Project 2017–18

<i>Data Collection Procedures</i>	<i>CBPR Project (2014–15)</i>	<i>CBPR Project (2017–18)</i>
Sampling Methods	Combination of purposeful/snowball sampling was used to recruit youth self-identifying as Indigenous through partnering organizations.	Convenience sampling was used to recruit youth self-identifying as Indigenous through partnering organizations.
Sample Population Demographics	28 participants; ages 15–25 years (16 females, 12 males), and self-identifying as Nêhiyaw Plains Cree (n=21) and Métis (n=7)	8 participants; ages 18–24 (6 females, 2 males), and self-identifying as Nêhiyaw Plains Cree (n = 6) and Métis (n = 2)
Conversational Interviews	Interviews were audio recorded with youth permission and later transcribed. As recommended by our Elders, interviews began by creating safe spaces where Nêhiyaw and Métis cultural lifeways or protocols were followed, including smudging with sacred medicines if desired and offering non-commercial tobacco to youth to respect the sacredness of their stories, experiences, and knowledge. Interviews were conducted with at least two university researchers and/or Indigenous youth research assistants to ensure meaningful conversations, intergenerational mentorship, and diverse perspectives. We allowed time and space for participants to build relationships with researchers outside interview settings.	
Total Interview Transcripts	n=38, including 10 follow-up interviews	n=16, including 8 follow-up interviews

Synthesizing methodological frameworks was achieved by strengthening and honoring relationships among people and landscapes we were working with and on (see discussion on relational validity, Tuck and McKenzie 2015). They included, but were not limited to, collective decision-making processes reflective of urban Indigenous sovereignty; intergenerational mentorship; building cultural, personal, and professional capacities of youth as co-collaborators; ensuring appropriate introductions and preparations were performed with all collaborators to create safety, share sacred stories, and work on one's healing journey; and extending relationships beyond the two projects to involve ongoing research partnerships, ceremonial and community engagement, and sustaining friendships (see Bird-Naytowhow et al. 2017; Hatala and Bird-Naytowhow 2020; Morton et al. 2020).

Data analysis

Utilizing constructivist GT techniques during analysis (Charmaz 2006), the interpretation of interview data allowed for an inductive approach integrating the research team's knowledge as well as inspiration from youth (as co-creators of knowledge). Data summaries, coding, theme generation, and writing memos occurred iteratively as data were collected. Initial themes were coded using Dedoose software Version 8.1 (2018) by the third author and checked for consistency by others. As categories and themes emerged from stories, they were checked with participants and team members (i.e., member checking). The approach generated key concepts and processes discussed by youth participants related to perspectives of land, time, spiritual encounter, and natural environments, and how they engaged wellness pathways.

Results: Mental wellness through healing journeys on the land

Results illustrate *healing journeys* of urban-dwelling Nêhiyaw Plains Cree and Métis youth experiencing settler-colonial chronicities in various ways. Beginning in childhood and described by youth as cyclical and intergenerational (e.g., Indian Residential Schools, Child Welfare Systems), these social chronicities were outlined by youth as "a continuous cycle of this horrible, horrible genocide towards a person's soul, to a person's being." We convey these social challenges and hardships elsewhere as the "normalcy of negativity" propelling youth to renegotiate identity, futures, and health under distressing conditions (Hatala et al. 2017). However, as youth described, such negative "life-cycles" perpetuating settler-colonial chronicities were not permanent and inevitable, but could be "broken" and positively transformed. During their encounters with spirituality, chronicity, and land, three main themes emerged from this analysis involving how youth *perceive*, *enact*, and *value* their cultural and spiritual identities, futures, and pathways to mental wellness, and how breaking negative life-cycles transform youth wellness through *miyo-wicêhetowin* in cityscapes, namely 1) locating geographies of spiritual encounter, 2) growing up on the land as a "good ancestor," and 3) valuing the aesthetics and spirituality of body and land.

Locating geographies of spiritual encounter

The geographies of spiritual encounters among urban-dwelling Indigenous youth occurred in everyday places, such as homes, schools, community centers, organizations, workplaces, streets, churches, and other topographic features of landscapes that were an extension of people and cities. Both naturally occurring or human-made, places of spiritual encounter were not a backdrop for social human activity or an abstracted site possessing supernatural beings and valued for their grandiosity, such as a tourist attraction or shrine. Rather, they became intimately tied to corporeal acts and bodily senses (e.g., smell, touch, hearing, taste, dreams, intuition), and emerged through “sacred” places that were returned to, ritualized, held personal and ancestral significance, and constituted being-in-place that made particular understandings about self and the world possible. As one youth explained:

Even when I realize I’m in an urban setting I try my hardest to find a secret spot where no one will walk [s]o that I can twist up some tobacco [as a sacred medicine] and stuff it there... I’m in Saskatoon. The people who have their reserves, they have their sacred places to go to... But Saskatoon is sacred to me. It’s my home. I dream of this place and protecting it. [I]n a powerful sense Saskatoon is in the middle of everything, it is a real strong place.

Spiritual encounters were not necessarily bound to religious institutional arrangements or cultural community membership. Discussing her spirit name signifying a horse that guides her healing journey, a Nêhiyaw Cree youth explained her name as grafted across tribal, community, family, and personal geographies:

I definitely accepted it [spirit name] and hold it so closely to who I am... It all depends on the Elders and who’s giving the name and your teachings and your understandings. My name is in Dakota. But I’m Nêhiyaw, I’m a Cree person. But I didn’t grow up learning Cree ways, and there are definitely differences, but similarities too. I feel comfortable with learning Lakota and Dakota. Because that’s part of my family, my adopted family that I kind of adopted myself into.

Accordingly, understanding *who I am* and *where I come from* at the intersection of different Indigenous teachings, Christian religious doctrines, and Indigenous spiritual values was also expressed as “confusing” at times. Especially difficult during childhood, processes of “learning from both worlds” occurred in different ways for all youth as they grew up. Over time, a strategy of syncretizing both worlds emerged from shifting relations between family, community, and belief systems ranging from growing up with parents, grandparents, and caregivers raised in a Christian or “traditional” way; carrying an Indigenous language, attending ceremonies, and being connected to (remote) reserves; feelings of not belonging in the church or culture; and meaningfully connecting to other non-fundamentalist sacred ways-of-knowing. As another youth similarly shared:

My dad never went to church but my mom did, very Catholic... Then my dad's side and my mom's dad's side grew up very spiritual, on the reserve. Of the beliefs I definitely got good sides of both, experiencing them and then having the choice to choose a course. Going to church helped in listening to pastors and then listening to Elders.

In various ways, this kind of syncretization limited yet also assisted youth to reimagine *miyo-wîcêhetowin*. However, spiritual encounters with land and nature were unequivocally evoked when describing “culture” and not “religion” to make *miyo-wîcêhetowin* possible in urban environments. Religion was perceived as imposing doctrines separate from the natural world, whereas culture animated relationships with the Creator and all of creation, including the land. As a source of morality, action, and wellness, *miyo-wîcêhetowin* emerged in the city not from scripted rules but ancestral values transmitted over generations.

Another aspect of spiritual encounters in the city came from connections with ceremony. Although in many Canadian Indigenous contexts ceremony can often involve larger events and gatherings outside of the city occurring over multiple days (e.g., Powwows or Sun Dance Ceremonies), many youth also expressed a “personal” ceremony done (or made) with prayer, smudging, or fasting that can subtly punctuate the day-to-day movements and challenges of life within urban spaces. As one youth explained:

I think ceremony is more of a personal thing. You can make anything into a ceremony... And there are times that like, “Oh, I can’t get to a Powwow” or “Oh, I can’t dance today” or “Oh, I don’t have smudge [act of burning sacred medicines like sage or sweetgrass].” Just because I don’t have access to do certain things, you’re automatically like, “Life’s so unfair. I’m just going to go back to my old ways now [harmful coping strategies]. How am I going to cope with this?” So, what I’ve really learned is that you’ve got to kind of make your own ceremony with whatever you’re given in that time. Because you’re not always going to have a Powwow to run to [when difficulties emerge]. You’re not always going to have what you need available to you... So, for me, it’s even just going to sit down somewhere outside to clear my mind that can help me out, like meditate or smudge, and just even that ceremony, just making the best of any situation with a positive mind and a positive heart and you’re asking for help [from Creator, spirit world] and you’re humbling yourself.

Since larger ceremonies or sacred gatherings may not always be the most appropriate or possible for many Indigenous youth in the city, these subtle forms of *ceremony-making* and creative reimaginings of “where” ceremony and spirituality can occur can be supportive of mental wellness, identity, and relationality. Since young people acknowledge that they’re “not always going to have what you need available to you,” this agential use of “making the best of any situation” with “whatever you’re given in that time” becomes an important

spiritual practice and innovative part of one's healing journey involving a fusion of "old and new" within the urban context. In the end, it is a relocating of the spiritual encounter to occur within local urban geographies that becomes a core theme from our interviews with young people.

Growing up on the land as a good ancestor

Without essentializing and romanticizing Indigenous Peoples connections to land as genetic, mythical, or purely performative, we observed them as sources of mental wellness with long-standing ways of being-in-place that denote an "ecocentric self" (Kirmayer et al. 2008). Connecting with land in the city emphasized connections with natural environments including "backyards," "urban parks," "wilderness," "bush," and "Turtle Island" more broadly (North American continent). Land, or "Mother Earth," was conceived as having a female, sentient, and spiritual presence signifying care and interconnectedness. The land emerged through daily routines such as walking, travelling, breathing, eating, menstruating, praying, crying, tree-hugging, storytelling, playing, gift-giving, fasting, and sweating (see Hatala et al. 2019; Hatala et al. 2020).

Accompanying negotiations of place, time, identity, and health, these everyday practices on and connections with the land were often characterized by reciprocity, generosity, spiritual connection, and non-interference to reimagine *miyo-wicêhetowin*, which we interpret through the notion of being and becoming a "good ancestor," and not simply being a good person. Rejecting and disrupting the settler-colonial chronicities pervading unhealthy and negative relationships, becoming a "good ancestor" for youth during their healing journeys often meant nurturing good relationships with themselves, their families, and their communities, thus promoting mental wellness. As Justice (2018, 140) poignantly explains on becoming a "good ancestor":

[I]t's about those who imagined actual futures for us, those who didn't accept the settler colonial "vanishing Indian" as a given... for it's only in the looking backward and forward—and in the imaginings of different possibilities than the one's we've inherited—that a viable future is made possible.

In many instances, the land and nature became a teacher for youth that transmitted personal and cultural teachings. These teachings informed youth how to conduct good relationships with others, as well as inspired them to achieve their aspirations in life. While observing zig-zagging ducks on the city river, a young woman described how ducks teach her about love, gentleness, and slowing down time to reflect, and remind her to be a patient daughter and friend for her mother as she slowly improves her life circumstances, which created much hardship when growing up in the city. As she outlines:

Ducks remind me of my mom when we were younger and would travel. I remember being in the car and we'd see a duck. She believed that when ducks

fall in love, they stay with that love forever... When I was observing two love-bird ducks I noticed they were swimming zig-zaggy. It reminded me of a teaching because I eventually want to dance jingle [a form of powwow dance and prayer]. When you're dancing jingle you're supposed to dance like zig-zag. Every person, there is ups and downs in life and you're never given a straight road. I was looking at these ducks [while walking by the rivers] and thinking of my mom and her passion... She's had so many obstacles in her life. She's always been in an unhealthy relationship, too. I mean my step-dad's an amazing man but their relationship is not that healthy... I think of ducks and of my relationships and how I never had a healthy relationship either and that is kind of the main reason for my ups and down.

Land and nature, however, were not only teachers but also became caregivers for many youth who experienced loneliness, abandonment, and trauma that had been inherited over generations through deep persistent loss and adversity. Through a recurring dream throughout her life about the river running along her grandmother's reserve and the city, another youth explained how the river has shown her love in ways that her family has not. The river, in many ways, further emboldened her to become a good parent for her children who are currently in foster care, which was exemplary of other youth who had children and wanted to raise them better than their parents did. As she expressed:

I would find my children [near the river]... There is petrified wood along where there is trees and condominiums and there's no bridge. It's like showing all these symbols of whatever my life is facing... It brought me comfort and understanding especially in my spirit or in walking in my dreams and it's always constant... It's distorted, like nature showing me unconditional love that wasn't shown to me through my family or my parents... I have been given recommendations that I must heal, uncover my past feelings, that I must comply to these things [loving people] and understand them for the hope of my children returning home. I put too much displacement on them, anxiety on them, like, I love them. I know that I have to heal for them in order to be a good parent. I must heal from all these traumas.

While land and nature served to teach and care for youth, they also acted as direct sources of wellness as healers. Through spiritual practices of smudging with sacred medicines (such as sage, cedar, sweetgrass) and drumming with hand drums (made of animal hide and wood), many youth engaged in these practices as they were seen as portable and self-sufficient when ceremonies or ceremonial spaces were unavailable to them, especially in urban or secular spaces. Smudging accompanied by prayer sought to cleanse negative spiritual energy originating from a person or place. As one youth shared:

So, for me, it's just like when I can't go anywhere, I have nowhere to turn, or I feel kind of hopeless, for me I just—I have my own drum and I just sit there

with my drum and I smudge and just pray and hold my drum and if I need to cry, I cry. I just kind of let myself feel whatever I need to feel in that moment to let it go, and just take deep breathes, and try not to overthink anything, because I know once I'm done the answer will come to me and guide me in what the next step is... So yeah usually when I'm upset or anything, I just smudge. I smudge, and that just makes everything feel better.

Drumming, which is often said to signify the sacred heartbeat of Mother Earth, allowed one to listen to their spirit, use their voice, connect with others through joy or comfort, and pass on oral traditions. For one young man in this research, these practices of smudging and drumming did not simply serve to heal himself given hardships he had faced in life, but allowed him to help "heal the community" and "give back." Recognizing higher rates of crime near a community park that once was considered part of an "Old Indian Village" in Saskatoon, he hosted a recurring event to share drum songs, food, and smudge the city park area to bring about healing:

We started singing at the [park]. And we didn't realize what the group was bringing to [the park]. We didn't realize it at first. We're just jamming, whatever, and where else to jam. We started noticing that the crowds were getting bigger. More and more people started to come. I always remember this one lady she told us boys... she came to the top of that hill [at the park]. She gave us a cigarette [a form of sacred tobacco offering] while her granddaughter said, "You know, my grandmother wants to tell you something." They gave us a tobacco and she said, "Do you guys know what they call this hill?" We're like, "No." She's like, "They call this Gangster Hill... because there's so much fighting, there's so much drinking, there's so much bullying, and just negative stuff happen on this hill at night-time and during the daytime. I'm scared to come out here with my grand-kids." She said, "I'm scared someone is going to come hurt us or rob us or something like that." She said, "But what you boys are doing—you guys are balancing out that feeling. It's not just bad people who are making poor choices... So, you guys are going to change this neighborhood," she said.

The varied ways youth grew up on urban lands whereby land became a source of wellness (a teacher, a caregiver, and a healer) broke, in several ways, the chronic, negative life-cycles interfering with their ability to live a good life and have good relationships. Merely being a good person and having hopes, wishes, and aspirations (something to look forward to in the near future, which many youth discussed and considered important) was not always enough to compensate for deep and persistent biographical and historical losses and trauma in their lives. Common across the young people's healing journeys, therefore, were wellness identity transformations whereby youth assumed personal, cultural, and spiritual responsibilities on becoming "good ancestors" while ceremony-making. Yet, overcoming this loss and trauma while remaining resilient was no easy feat. Becoming "good ancestors" to oneself and others followed with deeper commitments to and negotiations of

miyo-wicêhetowin with past, present, and future generations within their families, communities, and nations. They served to creatively imagine alternative possibilities than the ones they and their families experienced while growing up. These identity transformations on being and becoming a “good ancestor” that emerged from connections with land and nature not only allowed youth to thrive-in-place, but came along with moral responsibilities for youth to act on “urban” places in positive and transformative ways.

Valuing the aesthetics and spirituality of body and land

For many youth, connecting with the land in urban contexts also provided joy, inspiration, companionship, belonging, purpose, healing, and self-preserving; it was life-giving. Providing more than psychological or economic *benefits* that were instrumental and utilitarian (e.g., leisure, pleasure, sustenance, sightseeing), becoming a “good ancestor” meant deriving personal, cultural, and moral value upholding *responsibilities* that acknowledge and positively sustain identity transformations in relation to the Creator and all of creation. From subjectively and positively valuing one’s body and environment in aesthetic (i.e., beauty) and spiritual (i.e., acceptance) terms, responsibilities to be a “good ancestor” and pathways to wellness, or *miyo-wicêhetowin*, also emerged.

The aesthetic qualities of bodies and nature within urban landscapes were subjectively described as “powerful,” “incredible,” “elegant,” “strong,” “resilient,” “still,” and “beautiful.” They did not only suggest youth learn from the land and nature, but that bodies “look like” and “act like” the land and nature. For one youth who stopped attending ceremonies and dancing Powwow for “a long time because [she] wasn’t comfortable in [her] own skin,” she found beauty and cultural pride in looking and dancing like a goose when describing her Powwow regalia. As she expressed:

I wanted black fringe to go on my headband so that my eyes are covered... and only my nose and my mouth are showing. Then I wanted to paint all this black, but you’re not supposed to because that means you’re hiding from God, from something bad, so you shouldn’t. Some guys do it. That’s their own choice and they have a different spiritual meaning. Everyone’s given [regalia] for different reasons. And yeah. I’m going to look like a goose. I’m going to dance like a goose. And people will be like, “Look at that girl, she’s a goose (laughter).”

Although beautiful things often provide function (Cooper et al. 2016), invocations of beauty alone did not necessarily incite embodied moral responsibility, which limits value to matters of aesthetic appreciation and environmental awareness. Rather, an “ugliness” or “nastiness” moved youth to act positively on what appeared “bad” and “wrong” while assuming responsibility over their bodies, communities, and homelands, which encompassed cities. When marked on the body, ugliness related to those negative life-cycles, including the “pain,”

“suffering,” “addiction,” “depression,” “boredom,” “abandonment,” “wasted time,” “shame,” “trauma,” and morally irresponsible actions of the past: “I’d still be this ugly guy.” Alternatively, when marked on the land or nature, ugliness related to things such as polluted waterways, unsafe parks, traffic-generated noise, and grief during winter months due to family loss and loneliness. Many of the youth understood these negative social and natural environments as sites of transformation and reasons to give back to their communities and homelands.

While Indigenous cultures and Christian doctrines both disrupted negative life-cycles and promoted mental wellness, ugliness characterized Christianity for many youth (and to an extent Indigenous cultural practices when commodified, as one youth explained when referring to the competitive and monetary aspects of some cultural activities and ceremonies). It was not that European religious philosophies were inherently “evil” or “incompatible” with Indigenous cultures, but, instead, harsh judgements accompanying everyday fundamentalist expressions of Christianity and failures of adherents to accept difference and live in harmony: “I trusted the Aboriginal perspective of healing because we shouldn’t judge anyone when we go into ceremony.” As another youth explained about Christianity:

It was too judgey. This is the way, or else no way, or else you burn in hell. I think what really affected me was how my grandma told me that. Not all the time, but she told me three times in my life that really stuck with me and hurt. I don’t ever want to hear people say that to anybody because religion is not about that. It’s about connecting spiritually with God and all of creation.

Accordingly, *acceptance* was deemed beautiful, positive to one’s existence, and morally righteous. Acceptance was not sacrilegious, a defiant act against religion or culture. It is historically and culturally rooted in aesthetic, moral, spiritual, affective, and personal commitments on what it means to become a “good ancestor.” Traversing urban landscapes through good relationships with and responsibilities to the natural world and natural law, or *miyo-wicêhetowin*, younger generations reimagined alternative possibilities to settler-colonial chronicities of the urban politic and negative life-cycles experienced in the city. In Saskatoon, a growing resurgence of land-based and culture-based initiatives have sought to sustain such pathways (e.g., Powwows, drumming, Round Dances, Sweat Lodges, gardening, etc.). Nevertheless, land-based interventions Indigenous urban landscapes should progress with caution. They may not bring significant transformations in the absence of strong and trusting Indigenous-settler relationships, respecting Indigenous Peoples rights to self-determination, and ensuring shared responsibilities to care for the natural world and laws governing it (Hatala et al. 2019; Peach et al. 2020).

Discussion

Scholarship locating the “where” of contemporary Indigenous mental wellness interventions has largely failed to examine youth spiritual encounters with land

across urban geographies mired by the chronicities of settler-colonialism. This conceptual oversight is predicated on assumptions that the sacredness of land exists “out there” and “on the land,” and does not occur “here” in the city (Hatala et al. 2019). Such assumptions do not reflect contemporary healing journeys that interrupt cycles of negativity and repatriate land-based spiritual practices within urban geographies and places where Indigenous youth live. This research highlights a few aspects of transformative processes that promote pathways to youth wellness and Indigenous futures in the city. Our considerations for Indigenous mental health and wellness interventions in Canada not only challenge geographies that bound Indigenous young people’s spirituality and wellness to “remote” and “traditional” places, but also consider the anthropocentric divisions that separate culture from nature in settler societies and urban places.

Tuck and McKenzie (2015) have engaged conceptualizations or practices of “place” enduring settler-colonization through “critical place inquiry” (CPI). While taking “place” to be synonymous with “land” and “first teacher,” CPI envisions an intellectual project transgressing place as an objective backdrop for human activity that is bounded or trivialized, notwithstanding globalizing and secularizing identities (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). Rather, it is a “land-we” ontology that is incommensurable with (Western) notions of place (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, 38). Departing from allied theories of place long used in service of Indigenous struggles by researchers and activists, Western notions of place remove Indigenous identities and bodies from the land (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). The removal of “mind from body, body from land” locates nature as separate from the study and social activity of humans, or questions epistemology to the exclusion of ontology, thus accentuating discursive constructions of place in the spiritual and corporeal absence of materials, species, and bodies native to place and holding it together (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). When foregrounding land as cosmologically complex sets of relations among and between humans and nature, these relations interrupt settler presence and domination, and repatriate Indigenous imaginaries and possibilities in “remote” and “urban” lands (Bang et al. 2014; Hunt 2014; Nxumalo and Cedillo 2017; Watts 2013). These insights center urban land and places as sites from which people, nature, other kinds of life, and ancestral ties together produce and transform wellness identities amidst colonial chronicities.

With mental health literature having admirably documented the effects of temporality through cultural psychology and a developmental lens (e.g., Chandler and Lalonde 2008), which infer self-continuity and cultural continuity as forms of future-seeking and self-persistence (Hatala et al. 2017), the ways youth embodied wellness through their healing journeys conceive of land, wellness, and spirituality in subjective, non-linear, and locally situated ways. Based on urban Indigenous youth narratives, “thriving-in-place” and ensuring places themselves thrived, as in the protection of local parks via cultural practices and expressions, occurred through spiritual encounters with nature, becoming a “good ancestor,” and submitting to moral responsibilities to the natural and spiritual world through beauty and acceptance. Connection here was not about re-inhabitation of land or prescribing to dogmatic scripture, but repatriating *miyo-wicêhetowin* by learning

from and relating with the land and nature to reimagine it and alternative pathways to wellness, even in contested “urban” land that is at once debilitating and life-giving (Bang et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, when operationalizing land through health and mental health interventions, and by extension cultural revitalization movements, questions remain about the colonization of spaces offering access to land and nature by neoliberal and settler-colonial logics (Longhurst 2006). The depoliticization and instrumentalization of civilizing discourses have typically constructed greenspace as ordered, domesticated, and separate from or replaceable of natural ecosystems, in turn, producing exclusive kinds of citizenship and inclusion, especially in urban settler-colonial contexts (Bang et al. 2014; Longhurst 2006). Such questions are apparent when considering public and community health transformations that have linked nature to urban health (Sandifer, Sutton-Grier and Ward 2015), and witnessed the proliferation of greenspace and outdoor excursions through the simulated and limited experience of “programs” (Panelli and Tipa 2009; Riley 2020).

These important conceptual moves to critically uncover Indigenous-settler power relations, however, can oversimplify place-making and future-seeking that redirects healing in important ways (Mattingly et al. 2011). Based on healing journeys of urban Indigenous youth we engaged, spirituality became tied to personal, communal, ancestral, and human-nature relations within urban lands that are considered as both homeland and “hostile-land.” As a place-based turn in studying religion and spirituality pursues spiritual encounters, mental wellness, and identity through spatialized mobilities ranging from pilgrimages to virtual reality (e.g., Scriven 2014; Wigley 2018), bounding the sacredness of land to an abstracted greenspace, such as a park or garden, would be irresponsible to and inappropriate for fully exploring such reimaginings and re-directions. For researchers, framing settler-colonial chronicity through histories and geographies of Indigenous youth spirituality, however, must ensure the event of place not only centers and focuses metaphorical abstractions of land, but engages with ontology and human-nature differences from a culturally grounded positioning that reveals localized and subjective ways of knowing-as-being (Morton et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The countless examples of refusal or denunciation of settler-colonial chronicity rendering geographies of Indigenous youth spirituality vulnerable to control and commodification are profound among Indigenous youth as they have reimagined Indigenous futures and sovereignties in Canadian cities by reclaiming traditional cultural lifeways from the past and re-fashioning adopted and new possibilities for the future (Simpson 2017). When describing a series of street Pipe Ceremonies led by two Anishinabek youth and other helpers over the summer of 2015 in Winnipeg, Canada, an Inineew (Cree) community organizer explained:

Doing ceremony doesn’t always entail leaving an urban center and going to an isolated community to visit ceremonial grounds. Sometimes it means

making the land that is before us sacred... The streets are land too. For us who are displaced from our home communities, the inner-city is our land, that's our First Nation, that's our home community... This is a timely and needed conversation, not only for non-Indigenous people to understand, but also for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people that are now urban dwellers. They are now the roses growing through the concrete.

(Wirch et al. 2017)

Based on the healing journeys explored here of Indigenous youth living in a mid-sized Canadian city, these acts of refusal are made visible through the liveliness of human-nature relations, spiritual encounter, and wellness identity transformations that see youth enact *miyo-wicêhetowin* as they grow up and thrive on urban land as “good ancestors.” Reimagining the histories and geographies of previous generations and re-envisioning better possibilities for future generations of their children, families, communities, and nations. In so doing, being and becoming a “good ancestor” not only allows for youth to thrive-in-place but ensure contexts and places themselves confront and outgrow settler-colonialism to thrive. These acts of refusal and reimaginings of better futures did not emerge as pious or humanitarian duties of good, youthful democratic or religious citizens living in urban spaces, but were passed on over generations to fulfil moral and ancestral responsibilities to the natural and spiritual world. As such, when approaching youth mental wellness through programmatic land-based interventions that can be constrained by institutional logics, researchers and health practitioners should consider how such interventions may unintentionally reproduce settler-colonial relations while acknowledging how youth can resist, redirect, and transform their commodification and capacities to act as technologies of social control.

Note

- 1 The term “Indigenous” refers collectively to the heterogeneous groups of status/non-status First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in Canada, unless specific nation-based identities are referred to (e.g., Nêhiyaw Plains Cree). The term “Indian” is enrolled when referring to historical or legal definitions to describe status First Nations (more recently the term includes non-status First Nations and Métis).

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