

an/other north: considering the role of tacit knowledge in the North¹

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*The arctic circle
is a threshold
in the mind,
not its circumference.*

*North is
where all parallels
converge
to open out²*

We are confronted with fallacies of the north as a binary opposition. There are the media representations of the imaginary north as an uninhabited beauty. An idea that this is land is a well of untapped riches to be exploited and emptied. I see extreme adventure travelers arrive each summer and winter outfitted in the finest Northface and Canada Goose gear to tackle the “final frontier”, and researchers from the south here for short periods of time whose feet touch the ground just long enough to conduct random research projects that often have little importance or use here. Visitors take what they need and then leave, filled up with stories and images of the strange idiosyncrasy here in the North, smug for having participated in a temporal ‘charting’ of their own piece of the North. Depictions of an idealized free space, seen as blank as the sheaths of snow and ice found in the landscape has spurred the idea that this place is misguided, lacking in creativity and knowledge, it incites being written upon.³

¹ It is well understood that the North is vast international region and is referenced in a variety of interpretations and contexts, although for the purposes of this paper, my practice, and developing methods, “North” and “Northern” are used to pertain to the geographical locale of Northern Canada, in particular focusing upon regions and communities I have experience with, in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

² Henry Biessel, *Cantos North*, Seventh Canto

³ This can be likened to Paulo Freire’s notion of the traditional western education system, in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he refers to the term “banking model”, deemed as such due to the scope of the student’s potential being likened to an empty vessel to be filled with prescribed deposits of knowledge, rather than as self-determined individuals already in possession and holding the capacity to discover knowledge., 79.

I recognize my home differently. Being raised in Canada's Eastern and Western Arctic was a gift that I didn't understand at the time, desperate to leave to the south where I thought the real learning and action was happening. I wouldn't comprehend until later the importance of teachings animated within the beliefs and lived structures of everyday life for Indigenous Northerners, which exist through the performing of self-determination in everyday seemingly mundane practices integrated with the land.

Curiosity was driven by tangible knowledge early on, nurturing corporeal ways of demonstrating intangible knowledge. Walking along the tundra and stopping to join local carvers in Baker Lake, Nunavut who worked for hours shaping the hard black stone as if it were soft butter.⁴ Sit quiet and still to listen stories and learn from the knowledge they chose to share, taught to watch hands revealing shapes beneath, remember how to make that stone glisten when polished with animal fat or Crisco. Learning how to listen is sometimes more important than speaking. One comes to know that quickly up here.⁵ Incorporating the body in art making was introduced to me at the young age of four or five. This manifested in the traditional use of manipulating animal sinew and hide with teeth and saliva, and throat singing games where breath from your partner's mouth was intimately shared. Finding beauty in the abject. Seeing the viscera of animal bodies used for sustenance was an ordinary occurrence. Coming across large opened caribou bodies—exposed ribs peering out from matted and bloodied fur. Common encounters when you lived in isolation, with an abundance of restaurants and grocery stores being hundred of miles away. The North taught a different type of abundance, hidden within its permafrost layers: an early introduction in the importance of interiority, of process, and of connection.

It is very important to consider these moral codes embedded within the environment. You do not take more than you need or can use; you share, exchange; you give back (to the land). Rooted from as early as I could remember,

⁴ Baker Lake is a small hamlet, with a population of approximately 1,000 people, in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut, in Canada's Eastern Arctic; located about 300km inland of Hudson Bay. Nunavut's only inland community.

⁵ Anthropologist, Julie Cruikshank talks about this type of knowing in her book, *"Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, & Social Imagination"*, when discussing the perspectives of a group of scholars on the subject of orally narrated histories, saying "Coming from very different traditions- excelling in formal scholarship as compared to excelling in listening, watching, participating, and remembering experiences on the land- they all reached similar conclusions...", 81.

the tradition of giving an offering to the land when harvesting was law.⁶ As Thomas King mentions:

"...here I am not talking about the romantic and spiritual clichés that have become so popular with advertisers, land developers, and well-meaning people with backpacks. While the relationship that Native people have with the land certainly has a spiritual aspect to it, it is also a practical matter than balances respect with survival. It is an ethic that can be seen in the decisions and the actions of a community and that is contained in the songs that Native people sing and the stories that they tell about the nature of the world and their place in it, about the webs of responsibilities that bind all things. Or, as Mohawk writer Beth Brander put it, "We do not worship nature. We are part of it." ⁷

In "*The Perception of the Environment, Essays on livelihood, dwelling, and skill*", Tim Ingold refers to this as 'dwelling perspective': the relational context of human beings in engagement with their surroundings. I recognize this not from Ingold's books, not as a theory, nor cerebrally, but I know it. This knowledge was not acquired through studying theoretical leanings, but through receptivity. Although this itself seems to evade the western convention of labeling, compartmentalizing, justifying importance and clout by assigning a theoretical concept or coining a 'new' phrase that somehow then denotes value and meaning within the academy, rather than embodying those principles in our work, values, and relationships. Conversely, I have come to understand this from growing up in the Northern landscape. Embodiment. Thinking formed from an early age being introduced to Indigenous ways of knowing credited to Inuit, Gwich'in, Tli'cho, and Metis relations.

The philosopher Michael Polanyi coined this as *tacit knowledge*, which involves knowing more than we can tell, or knowing how to do something without thinking about it.⁸ Whereas explicit knowledge is technical or requires understanding gained through formal education, tacit forms of knowing draw upon intuition, praxis, and more intimate person-to-person teaching. It encompasses values, beliefs, and perceptions. I never defined this knowledge as tacit at the time; it was simply how you approached life in the North.

⁶ When collecting lowbush cranberries, aqpiqs, wild blueberries, animals, fish; you can offer tobacco, pieces of thread, say thanks and express your gratitude; you can also feed the fire when being out on the land—if you light a fire anywhere in Denendeh, you are making a direct prayer to Yamozia.

⁷ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative, CBC Massey Lecture Series*. (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 113-14.

⁸ Michael Polanyi .*The Tacit Dimension*, (New York: Doubleday & Company,1967).

I also recognize this same interrelationship that takes place within the creation of art as an important preliminary process—a part of the making starts before hands are laid upon materials. An exchange in knowledge and teaching transpires in process, where one learns of the previous lives of these substances and a curiosity of what is intended of these materials and why particular ideas are being made tangible, is often revealed. The materials perform this practice through this social interaction—an experience of connecting. Relying on process, artistic practice has the potential to shift conceptions, and to some degree, a transformation occurs. This practice of allowing opens up essential spaces for thought, conversation, and understanding as these materials enact composites of shared knowledge.

Early on I learned to put myself into what I do.

Handle your materials. For without this contact, they have no soul.

A researcher, in-turn needs to be aware of their behavior, how their actions are impactful, and strive for sensitivity towards the context in which they are working. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith has articulated in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*: “the word ‘research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary”.⁹ There is still a lingering distrust for knowledge of the academy that needs to be subverted.

*“The relationship begins with decolonizing one’s mind and heart. Non-Indigenous academics who have successful relationships with Indigenous communities understand this. This means exploring one’s own beliefs and values about knowledge and how it shapes practices. It is about examining power. It is ongoing. It is only after carrying out this personal and institutional examination that scholars and disciplines can be in the positions to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and what it means in changing organizational culture”.*¹⁰

Northern ways of knowing are often derived from sharing and storytelling, as conveyed through metaphor and analogy. There is a tendency towards so-called ‘local’ knowledge, which is simply referring to more intimate and rooted ways of knowing. In my experience, I see relationships as shared key components of

⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*. (London: Zed Books, 1999), 1.

¹⁰ Margaret Kovach. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characters, Conversations, and Contexts*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 169.

being in the North, and practicing as an artist. Art and design practice relies on tacit knowledge in conceptualization, process, material engagement, aesthetics, and the conveyance of ideas. Knowledge acquired through this pragmatic engagement, which is largely based upon direct and integrated experience. It is a shift in research from displaced theories, towards direct information derived from relationships with place, people, and materials, through acts of 'doing' or participating.

Circumventing traditional research methods that involve hierarchy of knowledge, these proposed actions function within a constellation system to trace a general continuum, rather than operate as an oppressive and divisive force at odds with the very concepts sought through exploration. Data becomes stories, memories, cultural teachings, and land based knowledge. Data collection turns into conversations, suspension of disbelief, sharing, and first hand artistic explorations. Data analysis functions in-between disciplines and sources-inherently interdisciplinary, liminal, and plural in nature. It is a curation of ephemera, seeking to make the intangible, tangible and relatable, through the merging of multiple subjectivities.

Alleged 'alternative' ways of perceiving and knowing are plentiful within Indigenous Northern culture, although challenge arises from forming appropriate methods and guiding frameworks of uncovering and articulating this epistemology. How can this be considered in a meaningful way when working in and with the North? How might we encourage of new contexts under which these may be applied in an interdisciplinary manner in order to transgress the bounds of western-based silo knowledge. Such a practice-focused approach is at home within the context of the North; it is perhaps one of the most defining interdisciplinary subjects. As a studied space of development and process, the North needs to participate within it's own perpetual making. Contemporary realities face traditional culture head first in a meeting of extremes, rather than mitigating one and other by their coming together. This encounter of boundaries permeates atmospherically, reminding one of emerging cycles of transformation on a constant basis – in a land of dark winter days, and midnight sun summer nights.

How might we endeavor to encourage directing our experience through practice and incorporating increasingly intimate ways of knowing within the research process? More importantly, the potential lies within the inherent knowledge that is held within place, people, and environment, and how it can direct this process

in an evolutionary way. How can we do so in a manner that responds to the developmental and responsive cultures of the North and its landscape? How can we convert tacit knowledge or include it to leveraging design-based solutions in the North?

Although nebulous, it seems to suggest the need to raise consciousness, while operating in direct action at the very same time, when looking at the potential role of an artist, or designer-researcher as a non-invasive, albeit meaningful practitioner. Rather than creating ideal research models of the world, there needs to be attempts for community members to direct and implement their own activities in the North. How might we encourage and work to support and articulate this 'invisible' knowledge? Keep in mind that there is an idea that tacit knowledge doesn't become part of a person's knowledge until it is articulated and internalized through ones own practice.

I struggle with how tacit Northern knowledge can be understood by someone who has not spent time living, listening and receiving the teachings embedded here. It is not something that is instantly attained. This knowledge is not always so explicit, its complexities cannot be known through reading, or gained through intellectual scholarship. Gestures cannot simply be re-performed, but rather can be practiced until they are understood. Although it is important to consider how the implications for this work emphasize the role of place in generating knowledge, and expose potential for how other researchers and artists might endeavor to self-direct their experience through practice and intimate ways of knowing, while encouraging more systems awareness and interconnectivity in discourse.

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