

Respectful Methodology: Methodological and Ethical Issues in the Study of Aboriginal Religious Traditions

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Based upon twenty years of experience researching Aboriginal culture and oral history, I employ an autobiographical narrative style in this article in order to address some of the challenges and issues (ethical, methodological, pedagogical, political) faced by those who are involved in research related to Aboriginal oral history and tradition.

Aboriginal Religious Traditions as an area of study is at its infancy in Religious Studies. Given the fact that Canada is located in the homeland of First Nations people, one might expect that every religious studies department would have programs related to Aboriginal religious traditions. An examination of the online catalogues of Canadian Universities¹ has revealed that currently, other than an undergraduate and masters degree in Aboriginal Religious Traditions with me at the University of Winnipeg, the only Religious Studies Department in Canada that offers undergraduate and graduate degrees, including a Ph.D., specializing in "Amerindian Religions" is the University of Ottawa, with Marie François Guédon and George Sioui." I found the occasional introductory course offered at a few other Canadian Universities (Brandon University, Wilfred Laurier, and St. Thomas University for example) but no specialized area of study. I suspect that the reasons for this are several: a) Aboriginal Religious Traditions is an emerging area of study, therefore, there are few religious studies scholars trained in this area; b) Religious Studies departments prefer to leave this subject in Native Studies; c) departmental budgets are limited; or, d) this area is so politicized that (to borrow Ronald Grimes's assessment) no one but fools dare tread here.

In 1993 Grimes conducted an online investigation into the question of teaching Native American religions. Grimes submitted three questions to three online discussion groups.² The questions posted were: "Should or

¹ The list can be found in the department directory on the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion website (www.ccsr.ca).

² The discussion groups were Religion (religion@harvard.harvard.edu), Anthro-L (listserv@ubvm.cc.buffalo.edu), and Native-L (natchat@tamvm1.bitnet).

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should not European Americans be teaching courses on Native American religions? If we should not, why not, and what would be the results of our deferral? If we should, how best can we proceed?" (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/>). As Grimes notes:

...some are rushing in the other direction: out. I know of several instances in which White male colleagues are giving up longstanding research and teaching commitments to Native American, Black, or feminist religion. For a few, their exiting is an ethical matter: make room for the oppressed, don't speak about what you are not, and so on. For most, it is a matter of feeling embattled or unappreciated. Exiting White guys feel they will never get respect or credit for attending to such matters" (<http://www.hartford-wp.com/>).

As a naive undergraduate I was blissfully unaware of the politics associated with my chosen area of study. I had never given much thought to any of these questions posed by Grimes and, like a fool, rushed in. Following a few anecdotes outlining my experience in this area of study, I will briefly consider the implications raised by these anecdotes, Grimes' questions and the responses to his questions.

I began to be aware of the contentiousness of this area of study while in graduate school. My earliest recollection is an incident that occurred at Professor Guédon's first public presentation at the University of Ottawa, Religious Studies Department. Her presentation was on Dené shamanism. During her lecture an Aboriginal student confronted Professor Guédon in a very aggressive manner. He asked her, "Who gave you the right to talk about these things?" She noted the Dené women with whom she collaborated, bringing to Professor Guédon's mind the memory of her late friends. The same student confronted a Ph.D. candidate during the presentation of her dissertation related to Aboriginal burial mounds and chastised an audience member for sounding "new age-ish," in her explication of Aboriginal tradition. The audience member fought back declaring that she was Cherokee and "that is the way that we speak." The majority of the members of the Aboriginal Students Association did not share their fellow student's confrontational approach and, in fact, dissociated themselves from him. Nevertheless, he did express an approach that other Aboriginal people

have utilized in defending their rights and fighting against cultural appropriation and exploitation.³ The problem, in the context of Guedon's and the Ph.D. candidate's presentation is that the student's objections were misguided.

Later, as a student teacher I was met with opposition over the title of a course that I had proposed to call "Native American Shamanism." My intention was to set the study of Native American shamanism in the context of the study of shamanism worldwide and in doing so introduce the students to the shortcomings of the word shaman and the shamanic typology, replacing the word shaman with the specific words in the languages of First Nations people for those individuals otherwise lumped together under the name shaman. At the time, I did not realize that the word shaman has a negative meaning for some First Nations people. I changed the title of the course to "Native American Spiritual Persons" and later "Aboriginal Prophets, Priests, and Healers" and more recently "Aboriginal Healers."

Another lesson occurred while teaching a Religious Studies course titled "Native American Religions" on the reserve at White Bear, Saskatchewan. During one of my introductory lectures a student asked me if it was possible not to use the word "religion." I was surprised by her request. She explained that when she hears the word "religion" it makes her think of residential schools and the hurt and trauma associated with her residential school experience. This discussion prefaced my usual lecture on the different definitions of the word "religion" (and the following lecture on the terminology used to refer to "Aboriginal" people). After introducing Wilfred Cantwell Smith's ideas on the subject, the student found the expression Aboriginal "religious traditions" acceptable.⁴

³ For examples of this approach, read anything written by Ward Churchill or the "Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality" (found in Churchill, 273-7 and online at <http://www.native-net.org>) and Arvol Looking Horse's "Protection of Ceremonies" statement (found online at <http://www.dlncoalition.org/>).

⁴ Briefly stated, Wilfred Cantwell Smith traces the history of the word "religion," what it has meant, what it has come to mean, and what it should mean. He maintains that what has been called "religion" is composed of two things: faith and cumulative tradition. Smith defines faith as "man's response to the transcendent" and cumulative tradition as Consisting of the expressions of faith. Smith asserts that while faith is inner and hidden the historian of religion can glimpse it through its expression in the

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Another challenge came when I proposed a third year course on Aboriginal traditional teachings. One of the course requirements was that students attend a particular sundance ceremony. The Department Curriculum Committee was concerned about academic rigour and an Aboriginal spokesperson did not agree with incorporating such a sacred ceremony into the curriculum. The Department Curriculum Committee was satisfied with the academic rigour, in the context of field research methodology, but the course did not go forward due to the opposition from the Aboriginal spokesperson. The Sundance Chief, who sponsored the sundance ceremony in question, and with whom I had collaborated in the design of the course, felt that it is disrespectful for someone to presume to dictate what happens at a ceremony that he was in charge of sponsoring.

Perhaps my most difficult challenge occurred teaching the "Red Road" program to Aboriginal inmates at Stony Mountain. I admit that I was nervous and intimidated as a non-Aboriginal man of average build facing a group of burly, tattooed Aboriginal men, many of whom still had unresolved anger towards "white people" due to the constant racism that they have encountered throughout their lives. Nevertheless, I continued to deliver the program as planned. I take great personal satisfaction recalling how the individual who gave me the hardest time at the start of the program was the one who, by the end of the course, would be first to come and shake my hand, thanking me for sharing what I had taught him about his culture and history and for bringing in Aboriginal Elders and traditional people. Another student said that if he would have had a program like this when he was young, he would not have ended up in jail. His was a common experience of most Aboriginal people experiencing the debilitating effects of the intergenerational impact of residential schools in the form of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse: taught to be ashamed of oneself, ashamed of being Aboriginal; not knowing the positive side of Aboriginal culture and history; not even knowing the negative colonial history of Canada.

cumulative tradition. He proposes that instead of referring to "religions" we refer to "religious traditions" to connote the "in process" nature of religious traditions (The Meaning and End).

I get similar feedback from Aboriginal students at the University. Aboriginal students generally acknowledge the respect that I have for and value the understanding that I have of their traditions. In course evaluations Aboriginal students also indicate that it is important to them that my understanding comes not only from books but from personal experience through participation in ceremonies and collaboration with Elders and traditional people. Many of my students know or have heard about my adopted father, Donald Daniels, a renowned and well-respected Anishinaabe traditional healer from Long Plain First Nation who is teaching me “the real thing,” as he puts it, in order to “bridge the gap” between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds (www.thesharingcircle.com).

One of the main ethical issues faced by those, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, who teach and research in the area of Aboriginal spirituality, concerns the nature of the subject matter. Many Aboriginal people question whether it is appropriate to discuss Aboriginal spirituality in an academic setting, or to conduct research that involves recording sacred songs, stories, or teachings; some unequivocally state that it is absolutely inappropriate.⁵ They see it as disrespectful and sacrilegious, doubly so if the teacher or researcher is non-Aboriginal because the highly politicized issues of cultural appropriation and exploitation also become factors. Meanwhile, others see nothing wrong with teaching and researching in this area, or with recording sacred songs and stories. There is consensus, however, that videotaping ceremonies, especially the sundance, ought not to be done. Also, there are cultural laws against naming certain spirits because by naming them one invokes them. Similarly, certain sacred narratives are not to be told in the summertime. I recall that as a graduate student at a regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I had mentioned the name of the horned underwater being mishipizhu (giant lynx). A member of the audience (who was actually non-Aboriginal) chastised me for naming that spirit in the spring while the ice was breaking up. She said that I risked offending that spirit. I recall thinking at the time, “what an inappropriate thing to say at an academic conference.” I now realize that it is important to communicate Aboriginal ethics to academic researchers and educators.

⁵ For example, see Allen “Special Problems.”

Those who are against recording sacred songs and stories or who are against teaching Aboriginal spirituality at the university caution that those who violate cultural laws risk onjine. Onjine is an Anishinaabe word that is often translated as “what goes around comes around;” there is a type of cosmic retribution or cosmic justice, as it were. Some liken it to the Buddhist idea of karma but it is perhaps closer to the Christian idea of sin. Words, thoughts, or deeds that contravene cultural values related to respectful behaviour are punishable. Children, for example, are cautioned not to make fun of people with disabilities or be cruel to animals because they might onjine; they will have bad luck or be punished by the spirits in some way.⁶

Respect is the most basic, fundamental cultural value found in Dakota, Anishinaabe, and, no doubt, all First Nation's religious traditions. It would seem, therefore, that effective teaching and research in the area of Aboriginal spirituality requires the development of a methodological approach grounded in respect. While working with the White Buffalo Spiritual Society on their cultural ezine project, in addition to following the University of Winnipeg's ethics guidelines and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC) position paper “Opportunities in Aboriginal Research” (McNaughton), we developed the following statement of guiding principles for conducting oral history/traditional knowledge research: “Research related to the White Buffalo Cultural E-zine will be conducted in a manner consistent with traditional sacred values and principles. The Dakota concept Mitakuye Owasin (Mitakowas) and the Anishinaabe phrase Gagige Inakonige encapsulate our guiding principles.”

The phrase “Mitakowas” is the most profound expression of Dakota religiousness. Arthur Amiotte identifies this expression as a single prayer by itself, but one that is also uttered at the end of most prayers (“Giveaway” 49). The meaning of this expression points directly to what it means to be religious, to be fully human. It reflects a fundamental cosmological orientation that forms the basis of how human beings should think, act, and interact with the cosmos. All aspects of religious life reflect the relational perspective; ceremonies are directed towards actualizing the principles inherent in a relational orientation. The basic social unit in

⁶ Although little is written about onjine, an excellent source can be found in Matthews and Roulette.

Dakota society--the tiyospaye--is grounded in this orientation and economic relations are guided by it.⁷ As Lakota anthropologist Ella Deloria explains, the word tiyospaye "is essential in describing tribal life. It denotes a group of families, bound together by blood and marriage ties that lived side by side in the camp-circle" (40). In the section "Tiospaye" in the mimeographed material from the James Walker collection,⁸ the editor, T.E. Symms, begins by quoting Deloria. Deloria provides an emic understanding of the importance of kinship:

Kinship was the all-important matter. Its demands and dictates for all phases of social life were relentless and exact...By kinship all Dakota people were held together in a great **relationship** that was theoretically **all-inclusive**...I can safely say that the **ultimate aim of Dakota life**, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; **one must be a good relative**. No Dakota who has participated in that life will dispute that. **In the last analysis every other consideration was secondary--property, personal ambition, glory, good times, life itself. Without that aim and the constant struggle to attain it, the people would no longer be Dakotas in truth. They would no longer even be human.** To be a good Dakota, then, was to be humanized, civilized. And to be civilized was to keep the rules imposed by kinship for achieving civility,

⁷ For an elaboration of these concepts see my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation "The Relationship Between the Tree-Dweller Dreamers and the Little People: Shamans, Power, and Spirit Helpers in Canadian Dakota Religious History," 1997. Available online at <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/thesescanada/index-e.html>.

⁸In Lakota Myth, Elaine Jahner notes that mimeographed copies of material from the James Walker collection were prepared by staff members at the Oglala Sioux Culture Center of the Red Cloud Indian School for use as curriculum materials to teach Lakota literature and mythology (p.x). Jahner notes that the wide circulation of these materials among various colleges and universities have "had a profound influence on the way people view Lakota literature, and many of Walker's stories have become part of contemporary Lakota oral tradition" (p. xi). This mimeographed material supplies an extremely insightful articulation of Lakota religious thought. Throughout this chapter, this material will be referred to as the Symms material, from its editor T.E. Symms.

good manners, and a sense of responsibility toward each individual dealt with.⁹

Deloria states the matter succinctly and in no uncertain terms. To be human is to live in accord with the kinship rules--"one must be a good relative"; "the ultimate aim of Dakota life," the very nature of what it means to be human, to be religious. The formal rules of correct kinship behaviour requires that specific forms of address be used when speaking to different members in the kinship system.¹⁰ For example, the men who are addressed as "father" are those who are addressed as brother or cousin by a person's father. These forms of address are accompanied by appropriate attitudes and behaviours towards each kin. According to Deloria:

The core of the matter was that a proper mental attitude and a proper conventional behavior prescribed by kinship must accompany the speaking of each term. As you said 'Uncle'--or 'Father' or 'Brother'--in either address or reference, you must immediately control your thinking of him; you must assume the correct mental attitude due the particular relative addressed, and you must express that attitude in its fitting outward behaviour and mien, according to the accepted convention (29-30).

There is more to being a good relative than respectfully using appropriate forms of address; one must even control ones thoughts or mental attitude. Using the correct form of address and controlling ones thoughts and mental attitude are ways of showing respect. As Luther Standing Bear says, "The rules of polite behavior that formed Lakota etiquette were called woyuonihan, meaning 'full of respect'; those failing to practice these rules were waohola sni, that is, 'without respect,' therefore rude and ill-bred" (148). Mutual respect (ohokicilapi) and reciprocity are the underlying principles to be adhered to in order to be a good relative, to be human, to be religious. In Dakota or Lakota society, the individual who fails to follow the rules of polite behaviour is disrespectful, neglects proper kinship behaviour, is less than Dakota, less than human.

⁹Taken from mimeographed material edited by T.E. Symms who has quoted from: Deloria 24-25, (emphasis added).

¹⁰For an elaboration, see Landes 95-160.

Respect is also the underlying value in the Anishinaabe concept Gagige Inakonige. Gagige Inakonige means “eternal, natural law.” The seven sacred laws are part of the eternal natural law. The seven sacred laws are cultural values important for living mino-biimaadiziiwin, the good-life. The seven sacred laws are respect, love, truth, kindness, courage, wisdom, and humility.¹¹ Based on a cursory examination of the ethnographic literature related to many different Aboriginal traditions, I expect that systematic research would reveal that these values, although expressed in different ways, are found in all of the indigenous traditions in the Americas. An individual interested in conducting oral history or traditional knowledge research will quickly discover that their academic training is not enough to properly conduct research related to Aboriginal traditions; they will need to learn “proper etiquette” and “polite behaviour.” If an individual hopes to conduct successful research they will need to learn what is considered to be respectful behaviour. Respectful behaviour must be built into one’s methodology and ethical and procedural guidelines. A very basic “respectful methodology” that must be employed with Dakota and Anishinaabe people begins with the offering of tobacco as a form of introduction, a necessary step to initiate research. I have articulated the importance of the concept of Mitakowas elsewhere. My current research goal involves interviewing Elders and traditional people to more deeply understand Mitakowas and Gagige Inakonige in order to develop an appropriate methodology consistent with these concepts and academic standards of research and knowledge.

One might justifiably question whether a methodology consistent with sacred values has any place in academic inquiry. Yet, the development of such a methodology is required if we are to follow the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), the ethical and methodological guidelines being developed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (McNaughton), and the policies of other research agencies, including the Canadian Institute of Health Research. Conversely, one might question whether a methodology consistent with

¹¹ Although I had heard of the seven sacred teaching previously, I credit Bebahmoytung (Dennis Morrison) and Gigwaygigaabo (Richard Morrison) from Niciousemenicaning for introducing me to the phrase “gagige inakonige” and for enlarging my understanding of this concept and the seven sacred teachings. Some people identify the seven laws as respect, love, truth, honesty, bravery, wisdom, and humility. See, for example, (Benton-Banai 64). See also www.thesharingcircle.com.

academic inquiry has any place in Aboriginal worldviews. Although an elaboration of this point is impossible within the limits of this article, I direct the reader to the work of Marlene Brant Castaellano. In her article "Ethics of Aboriginal Research" Castellano "places the discussion of research ethics in the context of cultural world view and the struggle for self-determination as peoples and nations" (98). She notes that "Aboriginal perceptions of reality and right behaviours clash with norms prevailing in western research" (98).

The "bottom line" is that if non-Aboriginal people are going to teach and research in this area, they must be aware of the context in which they carry out their activities. Regarding research, Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulates the colonial context succinctly in the following quote:

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity (1).

Colonisation, residential schools, attempted genocide,¹² the fact that non-Aboriginal people are relatively recent arrivals who are teaching and researching in a country with unresolved land claims and social justice issues, is the context in which non-Aboriginal scholars carry out their work. From an Aboriginal perspective, it might be argued that Aboriginal scholars, activists, and community members are keeping in check the structures of a colonial regime currently occupying their

¹² See the controversial document by Rev. Kevin Annett "Hidden from history: The Canadian holocaust," <http://canadiangenocide.nativeweb.org/>.

homeland. Non-Aboriginal academics should expect to encounter opposition and challenges. Non-Aboriginal scholars who persevere and continue to study and research in this area must accept the fact that due to necessary employment equity policies, so-called “political correctness,” and recognition of the fact that Aboriginal people, especially those trained in traditional knowledge and fluent in their own language, bring a unique perspective to their teaching and research, an equally qualified Aboriginal scholar has a better chance of being hired to teach in this area and is more likely to be sought after as a research collaborator or spokesperson.¹³

Looking at Grimes’ summary of responses to his online survey, those who exit this area of study for ethical reasons recognize the colonial context and should be applauded for their conviction; I believe in social justice and the liberation of the oppressed, as well. Regarding “exiting white guys” who feel unappreciated, who can blame them for leaving? They are overwhelmed by the opposition and challenges they face and consequently leave this area of study as a strategy for psychological, emotional, and career survival. In my case, however, I choose to continue to teach and research in this area. Not only for personal reasons and because I support the quest for knowledge but because refusing to step aside may be a much more effective way to liberate the oppressed.

Does this mean that one must be “an insider” if one is to teach and research in this subject area? Certainly not. Academic “outsiders” provide necessary scholarship and make a significant contribution to our understanding of Aboriginal religious traditions. It does, however, mean that “ivory tower” scholarship conducted by “outsiders” will be challenged and scrutinized. Do insiders bring different sets of interpretive skills and unique perspectives to this area of study, enlarging our understanding of Aboriginal religious traditions? Absolutely. There are many Aboriginal traditional teachers who are fluent in their own language, have a profound understanding of their tradition, and are extremely articulate with the ability to communicate an understanding of their tradition in an effective manner; storytellers employing sophisticated literary and pedagogical techniques; Elders orally

¹³ The ongoing struggle of Aboriginal scholars makes the challenges faced by non-Aboriginal scholars seem trite and trivial. Articulating the struggle of Aboriginal scholars is impossible in this short article; see Smith (Decolonizing) and Rice (The Whitewashing) for an entry into this discourse.

expressing a profound understanding of the symbolic meaning of ceremonies, an understanding not found in the written literature. From the perspective of their own tradition, they have knowledge equivalent to a Ph.D. or higher. However, they cannot hold a tenured or tenure-track position at a University because of different epistemological and pedagogical paradigms. Whether or not epistemological change is currently in process, the value of indigenous knowledge and traditional teachers is undeniable. Through “studying” under the tutelage of Elders and traditional teachers, my understanding of Dakota and Anishinaabe religious traditions has been enriched significantly beyond that gained solely through studying the written literature. On the other hand, my study of the written literature has yielded an understanding not available in the oral record.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s methodological approach to the study of religion values both scholarship and perspectives of those belonging to the tradition that one is seeking to understand (Towards). For Smith, Religious Studies is an endeavour in what he has termed the “humane sciences,” knowledge of man by man (Towards 57). Articulating a position which subsumes objectivity and subjectivity, he posits the goal, “the intellectual pursuit,” in the humane sciences as “corporate critical self-consciousness” (Towards 59). As Smith explains,

By ‘corporate critical self-consciousness’ I mean that critical, rational, inductive self-consciousness by which a community of persons—constituted at a minimum by two persons, the one being studied and the one studying, but ideally by the whole human race—is aware of any given particular human condition or action as a condition or action of itself as a community, yet of one part but not of the whole of itself; and is aware of it as it is experienced and understood simultaneously both subjectively (personally, existentially) and objectively (externally, critically, analytically; as one used to say, scientifically) (Towards 59-60).

In corporate critical self-consciousness, the results of our study are verified by other scholars and by people from the tradition. As Smith explains, regarding this “decisive new principle of verification:”

In corporate critical self-consciousness, that justice has been done to the matter being studied is testable by the experience of other observers but also by that of the subject or subjects...No statement involving persons is valid, I propose, unless theoretically its validity can be verified both by the persons involved and by critical observers not involved (Towards 60).

Rehashing the discourse related to the pros and cons of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's ideas is well outside the range and intent of this article. My intention here is to identify a valid methodological approach that I have found useful and appropriate to the study of Aboriginal religious traditions.

The White Buffalo Spiritual Society Cultural E-zine project was a collaborative effort that combined academic and Aboriginal traditional ethical and methodological approaches. We endeavoured to carry out our interviews in a respectful manner, beginning with offering tobacco and providing honoraria to those people that we interviewed. In addition, we had regular administrative meetings (following academic protocols) as well as sweatlodge "meetings" (following Aboriginal protocols). At the sweatlodge ceremonies, offerings were made (in the form of blueberries, strawberries, other food items, and tobacco), prayers were said, and songs were sung. Efforts were directed to focus the intent of the researchers and project members so that the project would be carried out in "a good way," in a respectful way. In addition, when working with Aboriginal Elders or conducting research on Aboriginal traditions I have always tried to do so utilizing what I have termed "respectful methodology." Respectful methodology begins with offering tobacco and treating Elders in a respectful way by following basic cultural protocols; for example, not interrupting, not arguing with Elders, not speaking or thinking ill of Elders, and taking care of Elders as one would a loved family member. I have also incorporated respectful methodology by consulting Elder and traditional healer Donald Daniels for advice and guidance. For the Omushkego Oral History Project we did not formally incorporate Aboriginal ethical and methodological protocols and procedures, yet through our collaboration with Omushkego Elder Louis Bird the project was successful. Perhaps if we had formally incorporated Aboriginal protocols and procedures, our project would have achieved even more success and longevity.

To be successful in the study of Aboriginal religious traditions in Canada, other than having a thick skin, one must approach the study of religion objectively and with respect for the beliefs of others. As a non-Aboriginal academic who has been adopted into an Anishinaabe family, is married to a Dakota woman, tries to live his life consistent with the teachings found in Dakota and Anishinaabe traditions, respects the Aboriginal ceremonies, traditional teachings, traditional teachers and the knowledge they carry, I continually struggle with the issues addressed in this article and other issues as I seek the best of both worlds, maintaining academic integrity while incorporating Aboriginal ethical and methodological protocols and procedures.

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