Canadian Food Studies La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation

Narrative

Who are the Cattails? Stories of Algonquin Anishinaabe Food Systems

S. Kaitlyn Patterson*

Queen's University

Abstract

This narrative illustrates my evolving ontological and epistemological relations with food systems on Algonquin territory as an Algonquin woman and a registered dietitian. As dietitians, we study the function of food within our human bodies, but we are not often taught to think about the *who* behind our more-than-human food sources. Who are the living, diverse beings whom we consume (plants and animals included)? How do we take care of one another? Colonial and capitalist ways of relating to food have led humans to objectify and devalue the beings we consume; can we embody relational and reciprocal ways of being to heal our damaged food systems? This narrative explores these questions using two stories and reflective work based on my own experiences on a medicine walk and spending time with my relations.

Keywords: Algonquin; Indigenous; ontology; epistemology; food systems

*Corresponding author: 17skp5@queensu.ca
DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i1.474
ISSN: 2292-3071

Boozhoo. Kaitlyn nindizhinikaaz. Mattawa nindonjibaa. Portland endaayaan. My name is Kaitlyn and I am a mixed Mattawa/North Bay Algonquin First Nation woman with Algonquin and European ancestry currently living in Portland, Ontario on unceded Algonquin territory.[1] For this article about food systems on Algonquin land, I thought I would tell you a few stories. Storytelling is a critical methodology in many Indigenous cultures, through which knowledge, tradition, relationship, responsibility, and identity are transported across generations (Archibald, Lee-Morgan, & De Santolo, 2019; Thomas, 2015). Stories are told in a variety of ways including through song, dreams, oratory, and the land directly (Gehl, 2017; Kovach, 2009). Stories can also be memories of past relationships (with land, humans, and more-than-humans) and provide guidance for our future relations (Hampton, 1995; Kovach, 2010).

Storytelling is fundamentally relational and meaning is co-produced within the interconnections of storyteller, story, and listener/reader (Davidson, 2019). The process of sharing stories is not necessarily a linear event. Often, the significance of a story is left open for the reader to distinguish for themselves. Readers may take what they need and what they are prepared for at the time. In this way, storytelling is an empowering methodology because all stakeholders are engaged in the meaning-making process (Archibald, 2008). In this article, the stories I tell and the questions I pose are left open for each reader to consider for themselves.

My storytelling approach also incorporates the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing. Two-Eyed Seeing as a methodology involves weaving together Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing with Western knowledge systems (Marsh, Cote-Meek, Toulouse, Najavits, & Young, 2015; Peltier, 2018). Two-Eyed Seeing acknowledges Indigenous knowledge as an autonomous entity and also recognizes the importance of bringing Indigenous and Western ways of knowing together for the benefit of all (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012). As I reflect on my life experiences, I attempt to reconcile Anishinaabe ontologies and epistemologies with my academic training as a registered dietitian in Canada (where these knowledge systems are not popularly incorporated or accepted). While I attempt to do this, I acknowledge that I am not a knowledge keeper, and therefore my qualifications for this task are limited. With that said, these processes of reflection have helped me question fundamental systems of knowledge within dietetics, as well as my role as an Anishinaabe-kwe dietitian going forward. As I critically reflect on my own motives and methods, others who are entangled in food systems may do so as well.

[1] You will notice that I use Ojibwe spelling (rather than Algonquin spelling) throughout this article. I do this because I did not learn Algonquin growing up and most of my Indigenous language instruction as an adult has been in Ojibwe

First, I want to begin by telling you about the medicine walk I went on this spring with my brother and my mother.

***

I fill my pack with medicines and secure it on my waist. My brother and mom are waiting for me. I place some cedar on my cast iron pan and light the smudge. The smoke rises and we wash ourselves. We had decided to go on a walk at my parents' house to see the marsh and to find some food and medicines along the way. My mom knows the land better than my brother and I—she has known the land longer and more intimately. As we walk over the stone bridge and into the first field, she calls out members of Tree Nation and identifies animal tracks and scat.

How long has she known how to do this? Where did she learn?

"I used to go out hunting with your Pépère when I was a kid. We would walk through the bush together and name trees and look at animal tracks. And your uncle and I would go out and check all the snares and we'd give whatever we got to our grandmother. And when I got older, I used to make meals for the whole family," my mother explains.

My brother brings a book along with him to help identify plants, but he rarely opens it along the walk. He touches the trees at the edge of the field, sees vines wrapped around them, and is happy to know that there will be grapes here in the fall. "We need to come back," my brother determines.

Why can't I find grapes on my own too?

"Kaitlyn, remember how I would spend summers with Pépère and our uncle?" My brother explains.

I put some tobacco down, and I say *thanks* and *see you soon* to the vines and we keep walking. My mom is trailing behind a bit, lingering on the treeline and looking down at the creek.

"The deer love it here," my mom says. There are raspberry bushes (sorry, raspberry *canes* as my mother lovingly corrects me) over by the bridge, and water from the creek runs gently towards the farm house next door. She points to the deer tracks and recognizes, "They've got a great place to live."

The ground goes soft under our boots as we approach the marsh. The marsh used to be a small lake where my brother once toured around on his fishing boat, but the beavers had clearly been at work upstream. As we arrive, I think about the last time we were all here together. I was just a kid—I don't even know how old. So much has happened since then and so much has changed—for me and for the land.

We weave through the cattails that surround the edge of the pond and head towards a few large rocks that line the water. We climb up and share some space on the rocks and look out over the marsh. The wind is calm today and the water lays still.

Do you know that big breath you take when you find yourself face-to-face with the land?

I stood and inhaled, felt my lungs fill, and my mind swell with memories. It was like sitting in a comfortable chair with a cozy blanket. It was slipping into a warm bath filled to the brim to cover your whole body. I felt completely full, whole, and finally home.

***

Suddenly my mom CLAPS her hands and breaks my gaze. She has been doing that throughout the entire walk. "Sorry… It's for the Bears. You have to let them know you're coming," she had explained the first time.

"Oh, *Makwa,"* I think to myself.

When we are ready to leave, we get down off the rocks and start back through the cattails. As we move, I say, "You know, I read this book—*Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer—that said you can eat cattails, and that they also have a gel substance inside similar to aloe vera that can help with bug bites and scratches."

My brother sighs, "Yeah, Kaitlyn, I know. I had some on my camping trip a few weeks ago."

I am behind the ball again. I don't bother telling him that I also looked up the nutrients in a cattail on the Canadian Nutrient File website—I have a feeling he will not be impressed by my knowing how many grams of carbohydrate are in a 100g portion of cattail root.

We reach the edge of the cattails and walk into the field. But I turn back. "Want to try harvesting one? I'd like to see how I can cook them in different ways. And if we like it, we can come back in the fall to harvest more." I lay some tobacco down again and my brother and I dig up a cattail.

As the three of us walk back toward the house—my mom clapping intermittently along the way—I wonder out loud, "How is it that I am a dietitian with a master's in nutrition, and yet I don't know how to identify grapes by looking at their vines? Shouldn't I know that it is called a raspberry *cane* and not a raspberry *bush?* Why can't I feel the trees and know their names? Why do I know the smoke point of *avocado oil* and not know how to cook a cattail from the land I've lived on my whole life?"

We walk back to my parents' house and part ways. On my drive home, I wrestle with these thoughts some more. It was a great trip to the marsh and I was fortunate to have the land and my family as teachers. However, I am also unpleasantly confronted by the fact that—surprise, surprise—I barely know anything about our food systems on Algonquin territory at all.

***

In my education as a dietitian, I understand why I needed to learn about the composition and "utility" of food—how to use it and how it helps our bodies. However, I failed to learn about the *who* behind our food sources. *Who* are the cattails? Who makes up their relations? Why are these relations crucial to their wellbeing? Instead of constantly asking myself (situated within my

position in dietetics), what can this "food" do for me/my body, I needed to shift to: what can I do for this being to ensure that our reciprocal relationship with one another is maintained? How do we take care of one another? I needed to go back to the beginning, and in my mind, the core of an Algonquin food system is fundamentally structured by the relations that comprise the system. So, let's start there.

As an Algonquin Anishinaabe-kwe, I am moving forward on the basis that our realities are produced through our relations with all that surround us; we have a relationship with every human and more-than-human body that exists, and these relationships produce a cosmos that is shared with all of Creation (Wilson, 2008). All of Creation is equal and dependent on one another, though Anishinaabeg acknowledge that humans were created last and have a lot to learn from our environment (Gehl, 2017; Kovach, 2009; Sherman, 2008). Ultimately, the purpose of gaining knowledge is to shape us as individuals within a larger collective in order to live in harmony with all of Creation (Sherman, 2008).

Though I understand food systems as more complex than sharp binaries (e.g., good vs. bad; entirely local vs. fully industrialized), it is clear that we have moved away from the foundations of Algonquin relationality and reciprocity within our food systems today. Colonial and capitalist principles have shaped modern food systems so that food is unsustainably extracted, commodified, exploited, and subjected to inequitable distribution within the free market (Suschnigg, 2012). Food (which I understand to be the living beings whom we eat—animals and plants included) is morphed into an object to dominate and control for the purpose of incurring power and wealth for elite groups. Even popularly referring to these beings as "food" supports this objectification. Food becomes "it" rather than "they," thereby ignoring their living, diverse, multiple bodies. In this process, the animation of those whom we eat—their spirit and interdependent life—is diminished along with our love and respect for them. I think we once knew the cattails. I think we once loved the cattails. But I think we have forgotten.

Let me tell you one more story.

***

I grab my lawn chair, book, and a thermos of coffee and start my walk towards the lake. I live a few blocks from the park in town that overlooks the water. The park is deserted this morning (as it is every morning I come). I untuck my book from under my arm and I set my things down under the old maple tree that offers some company by the lake. The maple's grey, reaching limbs extend over me and shade me from the sun and heat (which are already making me uncomfortable at nine o'clock this morning). Earlier in the season, I used to sit on the grassy bank and slip my feet in the cool, refreshing water below. Now the water level has dropped, revealing a line of rocks and sand along the shoreline; my toes can't quite reach anymore.

I unfold my chair and place my thermos beside me. I feel the soft ground give a little as the pegs of my chair push into the grass when I sit down. I crack open my book. After our

medicine walk, I have been working my way through book after book about Indigenous methodologies, histories, ceremonies, storywork, plants, and more. I am desperate to answer one fundamental question: *How do I remember?* How do I come to know my relations once more? How do I learn about the ontologies and epistemologies that I have forgotten? How do these become my new ways of seeing the world and the food systems in which I am embedded? Is it possible to reconcile my knowledge of 'food' within dietetics with Algonquin understandings of land and our more-than-human relations? By weaving together complementary (and often contradictory) knowledges, experiences, and views, perhaps I can fulfill my responsibilities as an Indigenous dietitian within the profession and within our complex food systems (Peltier, 2018). Ultimately, the question becomes: how do I, as a dietitian and an Anishinaabe-kwe, embody relationality and reciprocity in everyday life, professional practice, and with all my relations? *How do I remember?*

I sip my coffee and exhale. Taking a break from the page, I look up at the water. There are no boats yet this morning, I have come down too early for that. The only exception I see is a man who is kneeling in an overpacked canoe. Its sides are only inches from the surface of the lake, at risk of taking on water and submerging the whole vehicle. I release my grip on the arms of my folding chair as the man and his canoe finally reach safety on a dock nearby. I exhale again.

The water is fairly calm today—pretty good for the Big Rideau. But as I take in the beauty of the lake, with its complex curves, clarity, juts, and weeds, I feel the wind pick up and sweep over my shoulders and face. I hear something shuffle in the wind beside me. I turn and notice a familiar friend. Cattails sway in the breeze, waving hello as they defend the shoreline.

"Boozhoo *Apakweshkwayag* (Cattails). Kaitlyn nindizhinikaaz. It's nice to meet you."

References

Archibald, J.-A. (2008). *Indigenous storywork : educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Archibald, J.-a., Lee-Morgan, J. B. J., & De Santolo, J. (2019). Introduction. In J.-a. Archibald, J. B. J. Lee-Morgan, & J. De Santolo (Eds.), *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (pp. 1-15). London, UK: Zed Books Ltd.

Bartlett, C., Marshall, M., & Marshall, A. (2012). Two-Eyed Seeing and other lessons learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing. *Journal of environmental studies and sciences, 2*(4), 331-340. doi:10.1007/s13412-012-0086-8

Davidson, S. F. (2019). Following the song of k'aad 'aww: Using Indigenous storywork principles to guide ethical practices in research. In J.-a. Archibald, J. B. J. Lee-Morgan, & J. De Santolo (Eds.), *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (pp. 23-39). London, UK: Zedd Books Ltd.

Gehl, L. (2017). *Claiming Anishinaabe: Decolonizing the Human Spirit*. Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: University of Regina Press.

Hampton, E. (1995). Memory comes before knowledge: research may improve if researchers remember their motives. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 21*, 46-54.

Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Kovach, M. (2010). Conversational method in Indigenous research. *First Peoples Child & Family Review, 5*(1), 40-48.

Marsh, T. N., Cote-Meek, S., Toulouse, P., Najavits, L. M., & Young, N. L. (2015). The Application of Two-Eyed Seeing Decolonizing Methodology in Qualitative and Quantitative Research for the Treatment of Intergenerational Trauma and Substance Use Disorders. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 14*(5), 160940691561804. doi:10.1177/1609406915618046

Peltier, C. (2018). An Application of Two-Eyed Seeing: Indigenous Research Methods With Participatory Action Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*(1). doi:10.1177/1609406918812346

Sherman, P. (2008). *Dishonour of the Crown: The Ontario resource regime in the valley of the Kiji Sibi*. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

Suschnigg, C. (2012). Food Security? Some Contradictions Associated with Corporate Donations to Canada's Food Banks. In M. Koç, J. Sumner, & A. Winson (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* (2nd ed ed., pp. 223-242). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, R. A. (2015). Honouring the Oral Traditions of the Ta't Mustimuxw (Ancestors) through Storytelling. In S. Strega & L. Brown (Eds.), *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (pp. 177-198). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Nova Scotia and Manitoba, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.