



Field Report

Field notes from RAIR: Putting relational accountability into practice

The RAIR Collective

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Abstract

In this article we explore our research as a collective of Indigenous and settler academics, food providers, and community-based organizers, including how we came together over several plates of nachos and a shared vision of deepening our relationships to land rooted in (non)(de)(anti)colonial and feminist perspectives. In this commentary, we articulate what research based in

relational accountability looks like for us, including the challenges and practices we have come across as we strive to make our work possible as a collective, and navigate a rather complex relationship with academia. We suggest this work of relational accountability might be considered ‘field work’ or ‘feels work’ as some of our members refer to it.

Keywords: Methods; anti-colonial research; feminist methodology; food sovereignty; relational accountability; Indigenous-settler relationships

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Résumé

Dans cet article, nous explorons notre démarche en tant que collectif de chercheuses autochtones et allochtones, fournisseuses alimentaires et organisatrices communautaires, incluant la manière dont nous avons été rassemblées autour de nombreuses assiettes de nachos et d'une vision partagée quant à l'approfondissement de nos relations à la terre dans une perspective (non)(dé)(anti)coloniale et féministe. Nous exprimons ce que nous paraît être la recherche basée sur

la responsabilité relationnelle, incluant les défis et les pratiques que nous avons rencontrés en luttant pour rendre possible notre travail en tant que collectif et évoluer dans une relation plutôt complexe avec le milieu universitaire. Nous proposons que ce travail de responsabilité relationnelle puisse être envisagé comme un « travail de terrain » ou « travail de senti », selon l'expression de quelques-unes de nos membres.

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, we came together around a plateful of nachos to share our visions for doing research and political work together. We met as a group of Indigenous and settler academics, food providers and community-based organizers wanting to deepen our relationships to land from (non)(de)(anti)colonial and feminist perspectives. This work was and is personal. At this initial gathering we spoke of ways to centre trust and what relational accountability to one another and the communities we seek to support might look like in practice.¹ This initial encounter was the beginning of a long-term collective process of relational work. Our collective is focused on research, but more than that, we strive to practice good relations with one another. This has required trust, friendship, vulnerability, mutual

support, guidance and accountability, and involved several mistakes and missteps along the way.

As a collective of Indigenous and white settler people, we seek to practice and more deeply understand what it looks and feels like to honour our relations. We seek to centre relationality with the land and each other. In doing this work, we hope to better understand what grassroots rematriation and (re)connection to land could look and feel like.² In this piece, we articulate what research based in relational accountability means to us, including the challenges and practices we have come across as we strive to make our work possible, and navigate a complex relationship with academia. We suggest that this work of relational accountability is a form of 'field work'—or 'feels work' as some of our members refer to it. Given the harmful history of

¹ Renee Pualani Louis (2007) explains that relational accountability "implies that all parts of the research process are related, from inspiration to expiration, and that the research is not just responsible for nurturing and maintaining this relationship but is also accountable to 'all your relations'" (p. 133).

² Our focus on rematriation is rooted in our commitment to supporting Indigenous nations in the "reclaiming of ancestral remains, spirituality, culture, knowledge and resources" (Bernedette Muthien in LaDuke & Cowen, 2020, p. 260). This commitment is rooted in the understanding of rematriation as an Indigenous process meaning: "back to Mother Earth, a return to our origins, to life and co-creation, rather than patriarchal destruction and colonization, a reclamation of germination." (ibid).

Western research for Indigenous, non-white, and non-western communities, we consider the ways that relational accountability and ‘feels work’ may take the place of conventional notions and practices of field work (Smith, 2012) and even ‘productive work/labour’ more generally.

Within our research, we strive to contribute to the growing dialogue and action for Indigenous land rematriation and food sovereignty (e.g., Morrison, 2011). Both theoretically and methodologically, we aim to

Putting the vision into practice

While our vision seemed clear in theory, putting these ideas into practice has been messy and uncomfortable. To date, RAIR has held a virtual ‘encounter’ workshop to discuss themes of land rematriation and has created a podcast series that discusses Indigenous rematriation and food sovereignty. The project was originally centred around land-based in-person encounters that use participatory observation, audio/video recordings, and Photovoice to explore the ways that encounter participants (comprised of settler and Indigenous farmers as well as land and food sovereignty activists) relate to one another across Indigenous and settler colonial hierarchies.³

Encounters are rooted in a social movement approach to knowledge creation that build dialogue between equal partners and relationships across difference (Holt- Giménez, 1996). Encounters have two core parts: (i) Collaborative meetings that focus on political topics and encourage participants to understand their power and reclaim it. (ii) Collective work performing daily tasks and movement building (e.g., food preparation, gardening, cleaning).

centre Indigenous women and two-spirit knowledges, experiences and relationships to land as we simultaneously bring interested food provisioners into dialogue and build solidarity between settler and Indigenous peoples.

Encounters are a core part of our critical feminist methodology as doing reproductive work together highlights our goals of equity and mutual care. Rather than assuming a singular reality or model of knowledge creation, feminists show us that all knowledges are situated within unique histories, lived experiences and social positions.

COVID-19 forced us to re-imagine how we practice some of these methodologies, including seeking new ways to care for one another and maintain key components of the encounters. Our group dynamics and responsibilities changed based on shifting capacities and resource constraints, including completing doctoral work, juggling multiple jobs, starting new jobs, taking on caregiving responsibilities, community obligations, as well as the emotional and physical impacts felt by many, especially women and femmes. Tensions and limitations arose from working within academic structures, communicating from a distance over Zoom, as well as the uneven and limited capacity that comes from broader structures of oppression. While we are heartened by our collective vision, in practice the work

³ Encounter participants include RAIR collective, members from our partner the National Farmers Union and invited guests working on Indigenous rematriation and food sovereignty.

has been difficult to hold and manage. This doesn't reduce our vision, rather, it grounds it in community and the beautiful complexity that is life.

While common in discussions about community-based research, we have come to realize how much time, communication, and reflection is required when doing relational research. Much of our work so far has centered on internal processes of accountability and trust-building across our different positionalities (which are not assumed to be commensurate). We often talk about how relational communication makes up much of “the work” itself. While we have experienced some benefits of staying in place, the lack of in-person meetings has made this complex work more difficult, including bringing new people on board and broadening relationships with other collectives.

As Steigman and Castleden (2015) describe in their reflections on institutional ethics, doing research in a good way at times seems to be *despite*, not *because of*, institutional protocols and structures. Within our work we have found that restrictions relating to grant administration as well as differing ethics approval processes have presented some challenges. For example,

the structure of the grant we hold means we are unable to use the grant's funds to pay those listed as collaborators. We are aware of the contradiction of our situation where members who are in more stable academic paid positions are compensated for their time on this project (e.g., through their salaries from their academic institutions) whereas those in non-academic and/or more precarious positions (including graduate students) contribute their labour for free. This disparity reproduces broader inequities related to western academic research that privilege certain types of knowledge (including the labour that is attached to it) and make it difficult to do transformative work that centres those who are marginalized.

These, and other experiences have shown us how impactful research institutions can be in supporting or hindering relational research, as there must be flexibility to change research based on the priorities and interests of those involved. While we are aware that none of these issues are new, we feel it is important to point to the ways that certain institutional processes can discourage relational research.

What does it mean to be part of a collective attempting to practice relational accountability?

Broadly speaking, we seek to carve a path toward transformation that is rooted in dismantling settler colonial, patriarchal and capitalist logics. This starts with attending to our relations and practicing kinship building. Kinship is described by Kyle Whyte (2020, following Kim TallBear, Zoe Todd and Robin Wall Kimmerer) as “qualities of the relationships we have with others—whether others are humans, plants, animals, fishes, insects, rocks, waterways, or forests.” (p.

267). Relational accountability is grounded in the principle that all beings are related, and that, therefore, “we need to critically consider the dynamics of our relationships (established through this work) and who holds responsibility for various project components in these relationships” (Reich et al., 2017, p. 2). In this way, relational accountability may offer a path toward kinship building in research. Reframing the popular argument that the work is not to ‘save’ the earth, but

instead to transform ourselves from a kinship and relational perspective means we have obligations to think, feel and act in radically different ways together. And, further, to reflect on the specificity of our words and behaviours, and to consider how our research is interwoven with everyday relations with one another, other-than-human-beings, and the land.

In our discussions, we speak about solidarity ‘in-the-making’, and how this shapes our understanding of research. We recognize that relational research requires us to deepen our relationships with land and one another. In this sense, we are also part of the research. The work of relational accountability is field work/feels work that includes everyday interactions of building relationships with one another. For example, we have had to embrace the importance of small acts of relationship building as a result of COVID-19 restrictions including laughter and jokes (e.g., zoom filters anyone?), virtual personal check-ins (e.g., creating space for sharing things not usually shared in ‘professional’ settings), and being honest about our capacity and where we’re at (e.g., supporting folx when they need time away from the project). The specificity of our relational work guides us in seeking bigger-picture questions of justice, care and rematriation.

On the other hand, those of us who inhabit white settler positionalities are aware of the ease with which we can slip into focusing on ourselves in ways that re-center whiteness rather than using the idea of ‘our relationships as the field’ to break down entrenched ideas of who we are and what is research. Working together without ignoring how we are different is crucial (Mohanty, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012). For us,

this includes—but is not limited to—our complicity in structures of oppression, made up of the messy knots of everyday interactions with one another and the land. Each of us comes to this collective having engaged in personal learning, including reading, reflection, and discussion with close friends and allies about the power relations that shape our lives.⁴ In working through the specificity of our relationality before entering into this collective, we believe we are better prepared to do the kind of ongoing learning, and action that this work requires.

By reflecting on our internalized racism, sexism, and colonialism we can draw on this language and hold each other to account with care.⁵ For us, accountability and care are necessary components of trust-building. This can look like smaller group check-ins between settler collective members to discuss feelings of discomfort. It can also look like one-on-one check-ins over the phone or via email that make us feel seen and heard—whether as fellow parents, community organizers or long acquainted friends. The internal and relational work that pushes back against racist, colonial, patriarchal, and imperialistic values is a life-long living practice rather than a static event. Accountable researchers and organizers ought to strive to maintain such a practice, because without consistent practice and care, it’s easy to lose sight of our differences.

We offer our perspectives of accountability, responsibility, and transformation below, which have been central to our work.

⁴ The need for self-education—particularly for settlers—has been underlined by many (e.g., Canon, 2012; Cornthassel & Gaudry, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012)

⁵ This practice of critical self-reflexivity includes “the active and ongoing analysis of how positionality and ideology are shaping decisions, relationships, and interpretations, rather than the static formulaic declaration of who we are or what we believe” (Strega & Brown, 2015, p. 9). Feminist and Indigenous scholars have highlighted the importance of going beyond reflexivity to connect to a broader agenda that demands structural change (e.g., Kobayashi, 2003; Nagar, 2002) as well as the necessity of positioning self in relation to and within research (e.g., Absolon & Willet, 2005; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Accountability

We have found that our relationships are best supported through practices of personal, and political responsibility and reflexivity. We strive to remind ourselves and one another to ask: How can we show up for ourselves and each other? How can I learn from this situation and deepen my understanding? How can I respond with integrity, with a good mind, and in the interest of myself and others? We try to show up for one another in everyday ways that matter, for example, by gathering and sending words of care to one another during difficult times.

Responsibility

To be responsible for our actions, we inquire into the ways in which we have been socialized to reproduce hierarchical power relations that cause harm. We work to better understand how we relate to ourselves, our collective, our communities and the land. In many ways we see scholarly ‘field work’ as ‘feels work’ because it requires awareness of—and care for—our emotional landscape, as individuals and a collective. We have

found that this can enhance our relationship in light of our differences, not in spite of them. In practice, this shows up in personal and collective communications—through the questions we pose to inquire about our intentions and priorities, how we are taking responsibility for and/or care of our needs, and what specific barriers arise or supports we may need.

Transformation

We recognize that transformative relationships are guided by ancestral knowledge and fuelled by accountability and acts of love. We use consensus and other tools to move toward mutual understanding. This means that decisions can take more than a quick yes or no. At the same time, we understand that part of our responsibility is to not get stuck in this process but to make decisions that result in action—and in particular the transfer of resources we have within the collective to Indigenous peoples who are doing, teaching, and learning about land rematriation. We believe that transformation necessitates on-the-ground actions that challenge relations of oppression while affirming Indigenous sovereignty and land rematriation.

How might this approach work across academia (or does it)?

We don’t think we can claim to be doing decolonization research if, as Tuck and Yang (2012) describe, decolonization requires the return of land to sovereign Indigenous nations, abolition of contemporary slavery, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole. What, then, can we claim to be doing? For our collective, we’re exploring relational accountability alongside anti—and some may describe it

as de—colonial land relations through concepts such as rematriation. This process helps us learn more deeply about connections between land relations, coloniality, Indigenous worldviews, and (anti)(de)colonial imaginaries—we understand that this is vastly different than *doing* these things. For us, the doing has meant slowing down our scholarship by prioritizing collaborative decision-making, mutual support, and

reflection, all of which take time, resources, and energy. We began by digging deep within ourselves and with one another around our motives, feelings, and behaviours. Once we developed a degree of shared trust, we began slowly reaching out to the many wise women and LGBTQ2S folks that we wanted to build relationships with.

Following Liboiron’s reflections on their research practice in *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021), we believe researchers must make a clear distinction between Indigenous, decolonial, and anticolonial research, and specify which frameworks we can ethically and pragmatically identify with. Indigenous research is “research by and for Indigenous people within Indigenous cosmologies” (p. 27). As a collective that includes settler people, we do not claim to be engaging in Indigenous research (although some Indigenous members do engage in Indigenous research). We also appreciate Liboiron’s articulations of anticolonial research, characterized by how it does not “reproduce settler and colonial entitlement to Land and Indigenous cultures, concepts, knowledges, and lifeworlds...and does not foreground settler and colonial goals” (p. 27).

As we move through this process, we seek to connect anticolonial research approaches to the practice of kinship building (Whyte, 2020). Thus, we understand that relationship building is a central focus of research or research *as relationship* (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). As we reflect upon what it means to practice anticolonial relations in academia, we begin from the presumption that although the academy is deeply entrenched in white supremacy and colonialism,

there is potential to use academic research in ways that challenge broader structures of oppression. Although making this work legible within and to academic institutions can risk co-optation and potentially damage relationships, we seek to navigate this tricky terrain. We continue to ask ourselves: how can we use institutional funding—which is built to reproduce colonial relations, practices, and processes—to do anti-colonial work? How can we practice appropriate forms of care with one another while doing this work?

While academic structures can hinder the work of relational accountability, we are also aware of the spaces we can create to put relational accountability into practice. For example, making space for the personal, whether through intentional conversations, sharing vulnerabilities, silliness, and food (Reo, 2019). In our scholarly work, we aim to respectfully centre, cite, and credit the work of Indigenous scholars, feminists, and community activists. In practice, we aim to carry out research that transfers financial resources to people who are doing the work of land repatriation and use research funds and resources to support relationship-building rooted in solidarity. We also participate in ongoing learning and reflexivity to show up in a good way and better understand our place in the world. Our aim as a collective is to live and work in good relation with one another and share some of what we are learning with others. This means coming together as we began: eating nachos, enjoying one another’s company, learning from one another, and developing a collective vision and strategy for radically different futures.

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Danielle Boissoneau is Anishnaabekwe from the shorelines of the Great Lakes. Born and raised in Garden River, Ontario, Danielle has developed a keen relationship with the land and the water through immersive experiences, like pulling and carrying well water and berry picking on hot, sunny days. Since then, she has transformed into a mother, seedkeeper, writer and responsibility keeper. Danielle

maintains a relationship with the land and water through kinship and defense. She is a multi disciplinary artist, a language learner, and a Water Walker. Danielle is from the Old Turtle Clan.

Dr. Lauren Kepkiewicz is a community-based researcher and Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Manitoba. Her research examines food sovereignty in mountain communities as well as settler colonialism in food movements. She is a settler with Polish, Swiss, English and Irish ancestry. She lives in Chanh Pay Oda with her kids, partner, mom, and two dogs.

Dr. Terran Giacomini completed her PhD at the University of Toronto/OISE. Her community engaged scholarship explores the deeply visionary and transformative politics and practice of differently located women and non-binary activists within grassroots movements fighting to heal our world. Terran is a European settler learning how to live as a relative of the Dish with One Spoon treaty. She is a long-time associate member of the National Farmers Union, and a founding member of La Via Campesina movement for food sovereignty and agroecology.

Ayla Fenton is a first-generation farmer and community organizer. She is currently developing urban agriculture projects for Loving Spoonful, a community food justice organization in Katarokwi/Kingston. Since 2013, Ayla has worked on small-scale diversified farms throughout Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee territories (eastern Ontario), learning how to live in right relations with the land through regenerative and community-oriented food production. Since 2015, Ayla has been a board member of the National Farmers Union, and represents the NFU in the global peasant movement La Via Campesina.

Dr. Adrienne Lickers Xavier lives and works in her community of Six Nations of the Grand River. She completed her undergraduate degree in Anthropology at McMaster and earned both her MA and doctorate from the Royal Roads University. She is now an Assistant Professor in the Indigenous Studies and Anthropology Departments. Dr. Xavier's doctoral work focused on Indigenous food systems. She teaches in the areas of Contemporary Indigenous Issues, Indigenous Food Security and Food Systems, Indigenous Food Sovereignty, Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Methodologies.

Dr. Sarah Rotz is an Assistant Professor at York University and a longtime activist for climate and environmental justice. She is a settler of French, Austrian, and English ancestry. Her research focuses on land and food systems and aims to situate political economic processes – such as agri-food industrialization, financialization, and policy – within a lens of settler colonial patriarchy and racial capitalism. She also explores the consequences of these processes for sovereignty, justice and resistance movements more broadly. Her research is often interdisciplinary and collaborative in nature, and she is interested in exploring the ethics, politics and process of research.

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