

Introduction: We Are Our Stories

Lois Edge and Sara Komarnisky

“There is a story I know... The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” (King, 2003)

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Xàgots'eèhk'ò Journal! The journal creates a space for conversation among and by northerners – a space to exchange knowledge and bring together diverse voices from throughout the North. We express deep gratitude to all contributors to and readers of this first issue. We hope northerners will see yourselves reflected within the content and be inspired to join the conversation in future issues.

ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RELATIONS – LOIS EDGE

Tan'si. Wapisk'kahkahkew nehiyaw nitsihkahson. Kiwetinohk ohci niya. I acknowledge the homeland of my ancestors, Dene Métis of Denendeh – people of the land, land of the people. I acknowledge my French Nehiyaw Denésoliné àpihtawikosisân maternal ancestors and Dinjii Zhuh Scots and British paternal ancestors who have lived in relationship to this land for multiple generations.

I am from Thebacha, at the foot of the Rapids of the Drowned on the Slave River, Deh Ndee, at Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. I am a member of the Northwest Territory Metis Nation. I give thanks to earth, air, water and fire. I give thanks to our ancestors and give thanks for the gift of this day and the gift of life.

In the early sixties, my family lived in the Old Town of Hay River on Vale Island. Our house was located on the shoreline of Kátà'odehche where the Hay River enters Tu Nedhe, Great Slave Lake, directly across from St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church at the old village on the northside of the Hay River Reserve¹, home of the Kat'odehche First Nation.

One of my earliest memories as a child is walking to school... I can feel my breath frosting over my nose and mouth against my scarf and hear snow crunching beneath my feet. I ignore the shadows of willows thick along either side of the road quickening my step towards the lights of St. Paul's school shining bright in the early morning darkness...

¹ The Hay River reserve was formed in 1974.

Undertaking the role as co-editor of the inaugural edition of Xàgots'eèhk'ò, with colleague Sara Komarnisky, focused on the theme “Education in the North” was inspired by various factors.

I have strong ancestral relationships throughout the Northwest Territories. My ancestors precede the arrival of early explorers and are inextricably interwoven within the social and cultural landscape of multiple generations shaped by river systems to form a “web of being” as depicted in maps of the Mackenzie River Valley.

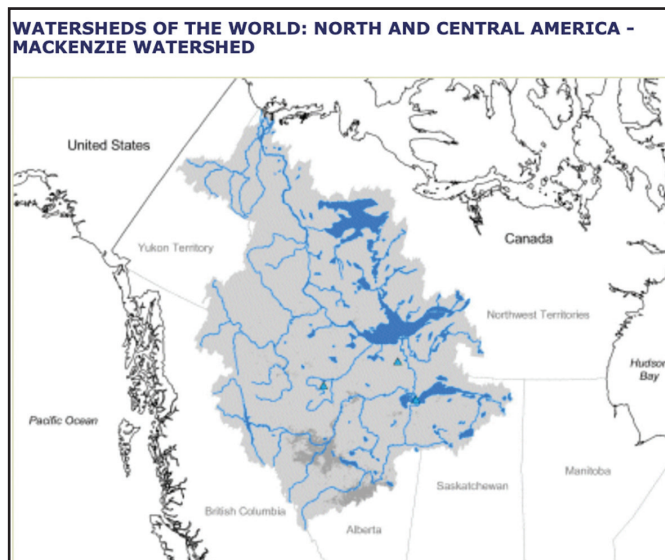


FIGURE 1

Watersheds of the World
(World Resources Institute, 2022)

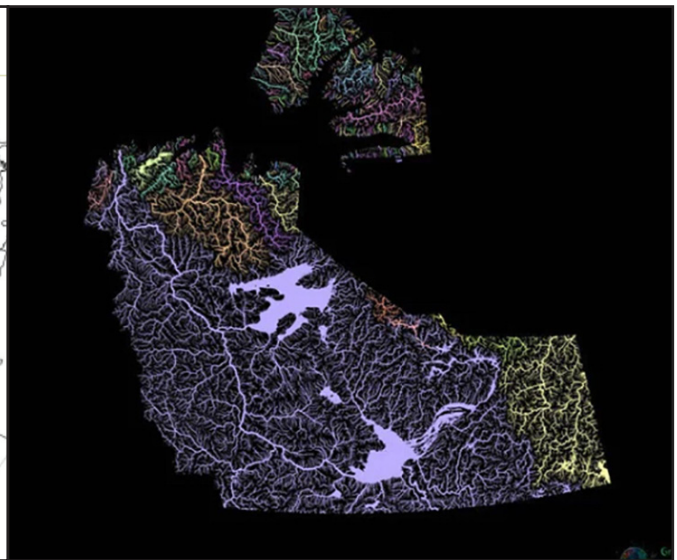


FIGURE 2

Rivers of the Northwest Territories
(Robert Szucs, Grasshopper Geography, 2022)

More recently, following a decades long absence, I returned to my home community of Fort Smith to teach Indigenous Studies at Aurora College for a five-year period, a lived experience held dear within heart and spirit. I remain bereft pining still for the sound of the river and rapids, wind in the trees, my friends, the ravens, and my relations.

Further, I am guided by a sense of obligation to my relations, roles and responsibilities as Dene Metis and as an educator, scholar and researcher from the North for past, current and future generations.

Finally, I remain committed to Indigenous Education as a field of study beyond encouragement by the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015a) and Articles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Specifically, I take constructive action in “supporting Aboriginal peoples’ cultural revitalization and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, laws, protocols, and connections to the land into the reconciliation process” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015b, p. 4) contributing to public education and dialogue on an ongoing basis.

ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RELATIONS – SARA KOMARNISKY

I grew up in rural Alberta, the descendant of Ukrainian settlers to Treaty 6 and Métis lands. I am also the descendant of Irish, French, and Italian settlers to what is now Ontario. I did not grow up thinking of myself that way – and even now, I can say I only partially understand who I am in relationship to the Land I grew up on after years of grad school, experiences in community based research, and some very generous teachings.

I am a newcomer to the North, having moved to Yellowknife with my family in 2018. Like many other newcomers, I came here for work. True to its name, “money place” continues to bring people here, myself included. I also moved here to explore what exactly the roles and responsibilities of a settler researcher on Indigenous land could be. This has been a very slow wake up call for me, beginning with witnessing racism against Indigenous people as a young person, to studying history and culture of Latin America which includes colonization, genocide, and settlement, studying on traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people with colleagues who were actively working to decolonize research, to working to understand the cross-continental lifeways of Mexican migrant-immigrants in Dena’ina territory (Komarnisky, 2018), joining Idle No More protests in 2012 and learning from organizers how settlers should participate, working as a researcher on projects related to Indigenous health and history (Komarnisky et al., 2015; Komarnisky, 2019), to volunteering on community based reconciliation initiatives in Edmonton, and co-authoring a list of acts of reconciliation (Fraser and Komarnisky, 2017). Ultimately, what I have learned through all of the different projects and protests I’ve been fortunate to participate in is that communities know what they need to be well, even within systems that do not facilitate wellness. This shifts my role out of “expert” and my responsibility to peoples and communities not well served by existing systems.

Knowledge systems were imposed on Northern Indigenous Peoples as colonial and capitalist institutions took over power through the fur trade, churches, and federal and territorial governments. Over time, colonial science and government management of research became dominant, privileged, and exclusionary, done only by credentialed experts. But Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit knowledge systems have always been here, developed out of the Land and in community.

I now occupy a research-focused role, and I have been re-thinking through my responsibilities. I draw links between health, community, and research: First, self-determined communities are healthy communities. Next, full recognition and exercise of Indigenous peoples’ collective rights supports health and wellness. For ethical positioning to support health and wellness in the North, then, research has to be grounded in frameworks and laws that centre Indigenous rights and cultural resurgence. For the context I work within this includes United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) (TRC, 2015a), Calls to Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), Treaties 8 and 11, Tłı̨cẖ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement, and Dene Laws. I am learning, slowly. And, I am being taught:

I forgot the tobacco
 Again.
 Half way to our destination.
 I meant to
 Pay the land and water
 In gratitude
 Ask for safe passage
 Once again.

I accepted the role of co-editor in line with my responsibility to support Indigenous rights and resurgence with the intention to prioritize Northern knowledges. I participated alongside Indigenous and non-Indigenous northerners central to developing the journal concept, elaborating a vision for the journal, ensuring the journal is open and welcoming to diverse knowledges, age groups, and levels of experience, and suggesting processes to ensure the journal is relevant, responsible, and rigorous from Northern and Indigenous perspectives, as well as from 'academic' perspectives, which tend to prioritize colonial scholarship norms, but must include scholarship from Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders (among many other knowledge systems).

EDUCATION IN THE NORTH - LOIS EDGE

In 1977, education in the North was described as a system of education intended to assimilate the Dene into a southern way of life:

It is my belief that the Dene are unique, different from the people in other parts of Canada; that education in the North should reflect this uniqueness; that our own uniqueness must be built on the traditional values of the Dene along with the ideas and views we now have from our experience as a colonized people...

The Dene wish to decolonize so education should aim for that goal. By reflecting on our experience as a colonized people, we can strive to understand what it really means to be free, to be able to decide one's own future (Kakfwi in Watkins, 1977, p. 143).

Denendeh: A Dene Celebration (Dene Nation, 1984) describes the Dene system of education as beginning very early in life:

Extended families have been the basic unit of Dene society. Children are easily adopted between families and the sharing of food is strongly emphasized. Through a consensual process, each group recognizes a leader, usually an elder, who has the respect of all. This consensus form of government is the foundation of the Dene Nation. It ensures participation and responsibility in decision-making by everyone. Thus, the real power stays with the people rather than being delegated to one person or group.

Learning encompassed every aspect of daily life from how to get along with family and neighbours to survival skills. Today we still use many of the old ways in teaching our children. Respect and peace are shown to males addressing them as brother, uncle or grandfather; to females by addressing them as sister, aunt or grandmother even if they are not related. Children must learn that everything is shared - all kinds of

foods, any game killed. As the young take more responsibility, parents have the duty to talk to their children to explain the work that must be done and how these tasks must be done safely.

Not only parents are teachers; everyone takes part in the education of children. Leaders in every group are teachers too. At some gatherings good leaders talk late into the night and most parents take their children with them to these meetings and they are encouraged to listen. Grandparents are expected to teach their grandchildren as well, thus old values and traditions are passed on to younger generations. The most important part of a child's education is to learn to show love for his people (p. 11-12).

The Dene way is very democratic because we talk things out until everyone agrees and there must be patience and respect for one another to do this. Under the struggle for consensus is the principle that we are all one and the circle must not break. It is often hard for a non-Dene to understand because the meetings start so slowly. The rules of order depend on good manners and respect. No one challenges anyone. Everyone has a chance to save face (p. 15).

Currently available recommended resources sharing the worldview, system of education and lifeways of Dene and Metis knowledge and perspectives in the North include:

- a. A Brief History of the Dene (CBC North and Dene Nation, 1979)
- b. Dene Laws (Dehcho First Nations, 2020)
- c. Fort Good Hope (Orieux, 1977)
- d. The Beacon Project: Stories Along the Slave River (Rebel Sister Productions, 2022)

Indigenous education in higher education as an emergent and growing field of study is bursting at the seams since earlier inception by Indigenous scholars (see early works by Batistte, 2000; Cajete, 1999 and Little Bear, 2000). Key concepts in contemporary discourse in higher education speak to truth, healing and reconciliation interconnecting processes of Indigenization and decolonization with celebrating Indigeneity in Indigenous arts as catalyst to Indigenous cultural resurgence.

Northern educators are encouraged to adopt a critical perspective to locate oneself in the midst of challenging power relations implicit within the "legacy of educational paradigms within the colonial territories of Canada" (Heppner and Heppner, 2021, p. 28). These authors encourage privileging of multiple perspectives in educational research and privileging Indigenous voices and experiences in Indigenous contexts as evidence of implementation of culturally-responsive education.

Reconciliation in higher education is premised upon concurrent processes of Indigenization and decolonization that together examine and explore taken-for-granted knowledge and experiences sparking uncomfortable and unsettling moments for Settler Canadian colleagues and allies (Mooney, 2021). As a settler scholar, Mooney (2021) asserts, "I need to allow Indigenous stories, knowledges, epistemes, and ontologies to reshape my thinking and understanding of myself and our relationships with one and another" (p. 236).

The experience of decolonizing and Indigenizing teaching and curricular practice, described as an unfamiliar landscape for non-Indigenous settler scholars educated exclusively in colonial educational institutions, calls for a deeply personal vulnerability involving mental, physical, spiritual and emotional dimensions of being. In this context, re-visioning and reshaping postsecondary education understands reconciliation as "a process for

repairing broken relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people” (p. 232).

A survey of 2,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis students in postsecondary education programs in Canada highlights the need to bring Indigenous content, coursework, role models and instructors into the classroom and postsecondary environment. Indigenous cultures, identity and belonging are perceived of as a source of strength and protection to reconciliation in post-secondary education (Indspire, 2018).

When Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies inform teaching practice, a strengthening of positive Indigenous identity and sense of relationality and belonging are created in learning taught by family and community member knowledge and cultural practices and teachings (Peterson, Manitowabi, and Manitowabi, 2021). Elements specific to Indigenous pedagogies include intergenerational learning; experiential learning; spiritual learning involving interconnections with land; and learning about relationality (Ibid).

Indigenous student experiences with Indigenization yield policy recommendations for academic institutions to: a) Ensure authentic Indigenous representation in Indigenization processes, b) acknowledge and mitigate impact of Indigenous student engagement with Indigenization, c) co-create an Indigenous and non-Indigenous community that privileges Indigenous voices, input and meaningful representation to lead Indigenization processes, and d) make Indigenous knowledges and values fundamental in Indigenization processes (Efimoff, 2022).

The Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization of the Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities in Canada considers decolonization as fundamental to the sustainable future of higher education,

a necessary and ongoing process of unlearning, uncovering, and transforming legacies of colonialism, as well as utilizing the educational and knowledge systems available to relearn and rebuild the social, cultural, and linguistic foundations that were lost, or eroded through colonialism. Decolonization also requires making space, balancing, generating, and enabling diverse knowledge systems to thrive in the academy as well as in and through educational and knowledge transmitting places for Indigenous Peoples, the formerly colonized or continuing colonized nations, peoples, and cultural knowledge systems (Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, p. 7).

Today, Indigenous arts function as “a vehicle for the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge, philosophy, and aesthetics through which Indigenous communities can imagine and move toward Indigenous survivance and futurity” (Goeman, 2011; Martineau, 2015; and L.B. Simpson, 2017 in Yoon-Ramirez and Ramirez, 2021, p. 119). An emerging line of inquiry in art education examines connections between contemporary Indigenous art practices and settler colonialism as pedagogical sites where Indigenous aesthetics and creative practice challenge, disrupt and dismantle settler colonial perceptions, narratives and feelings (Yoon-Ramirez and Ramirez, 2021).

Educators and scholars are encouraged to adopt a more rigorous critical reflexivity in the questioning of knowledge construction, reproduction and maintenance in favor of a “pedagogy of refusal” (Tuck and Yang, 2014 in Ibid, p. 126) and “restoration and revitalization of Indigenous knowledges and philosophies” (Martineau and Ritskes, 2014 in Ibid, p. 125) in recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and futurity.

CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY, RELATIONALITY, OPENNESS – SARA KOMARNISKY

Critical reflexivity in questioning knowledge construction has been essential for our work as co-editors. In our conversations, we talked at length about knowledges and representation and voice and positionality. For me, one of the processes that supports a questioning of knowledge construction and authority is the intention for “relational review.” This is intended to be a way to ensure rigour and relevance of publications for scholarship and within a northern context. What is written or produced on a topic should be accountable to, and reviewed by, those with relevant expertise, training, and knowledge – whether that be in scholarship, within a cultural world, from community, or ideally – all three and then some. This means that scholarly peer review is only one facet of assessing the rigour and relevance of a piece. And it leaves the door open for publishing across Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, including global knowledges that have come to the North from all parts of the world.

To that end, editors have worked to implement a relational review process that included scholarly and community reviewers. Instead of an anonymous review process, it is an open and relational process where reviewers are invited to enter into conversation with a work and explore what that could look like. This relational process:

- Acknowledges the interpersonal, where knowledge is produced, shared and co-created through relationships (Tynan 2021);
- Operationalizes accountability, respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility to northern Indigenous peoples, languages, cultures, and ways of life (Kirkness and Barnhardt 2001);
- Brings knowledge systems into dialogue and encourages working within frameworks like Strong Like Two People (Dogrib Divisional Board of Education 1991); Etuaptmumk (Two-Eyed Seeing) (Iwama et al. 2009); and ethical space (Ermine 2007); and,
- Is welcoming, inviting and supportive.

For this issue, all articles and artwork were reviewed by at least two reviewers, some from the journal’s editorial committee, some invited in as external reviewers, or both. All reviewers had scholarly or lived expertise relevant to a work, and oftentimes both. Reviewers and contributors were known to each other, tasked with giving and incorporating feedback to strengthen a given piece. In its fullness, this relational process will be appropriate for a northern context. The process will generate responsibility to scholarship and community, to limit competitive and extractive tendencies in published research.

The practice of relational reviewing aligns with decolonizing or anticolonial innovations in scholarly review and publishing in general. For example, the International Review of Qualitative Research published a special issue on Indigenous knowledges that used a relational peer review process (Fast, Cameron, Helferty, and Lewis, 2016). The process was open, in that reviewers and authors were known to each other, and reviewers were encouraged to suggest ways to strengthen the author’s paper (Ibid). A new section in the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation called “Roots and Relations” is working to develop Indigenous-centered review and submission processes and anticolonial agreements and policies (Bremner and Bowman, 2021). The Turtle Island Journal of Indigenous Health seeks to foster “respectful collaboration and co-creation of knowledge within the field of Indigenous peoples’ health” (TIJH, 2022, p. 2). According to the journal submission guidelines, the editorial team facilitates a review process at regional and community levels, accepts a wide range of work

somehow related to Indigenous health, and encourages Indigenous authorship (TIJH, 2022). Drawing on the experience of co-producing a special issue of *Arctic Science* across Western and Indigenous knowledges, the journal is looking for ways to increase Indigenous representation in scientific publishing, including in advisory, editorial, and peer review processes (Loseto et al., 2020; Sidik, 2022). *New Zealand Journal of Commoning Ethnography* uses a “peer engaged” review process where the reviewers have the option to reveal their names, and turn the review process into mentorship, creating opportunities for open dialogues and peermaking (Commoning Ethnography, 2022; Docot, 2022). The recent volume *Ndè Sii Wet’aḡà: Northern Indigenous Voices on Land, Life & Art* compiles a richness of northern Indigenous perspectives on land, culture, and northern life, with contributors supported and strengthened through the process of writing and publication (Lesage et al., 2022). Finally, Lorisia MacLeod developed templates for citing Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers that allow for appropriate in-text citation and referencing (MacLeod, 2021).

Another way that critical reflexivity comes into editorial practice is in the openness towards genre and form of submissions. *Xàgots’eèhk’ò Journal* publishes work from within multiple knowledge systems in the North, in any NWT language, and intends to be inclusive of and appealing to diverse audiences. This approach is intended to create a welcoming space to connect a wide Northern readership, initiate conversation on important issues, and potentially shift power relations in publishing.

Ensuring rigour and relevance by Northern standards via relational review and allowing for openness in form and genre are all tactics to change existing power dynamics about whose knowledges count, why research matters, and who gets to participate in the conversations. To that end, the 25 submissions published in this first issue range from artwork, research and review articles, interviews and personal experience, program reports, book reviews, and memorializations of Northerners. Although diverse in form and content, each takes up the theme of Education in the North in some way. As editors, we have organized them into overlapping themes, or settings for Northern teaching and learning.

The first section, “Land” contains pieces that centre Land as the foundation for learning and education, from artistic representations of Land (Mountain, Blow), to the meaning of Land-based education in theory and practice (Dragon Smith and Lahey, Cluderay et al.), and personal narratives grounded in experiences with the Land (Andrew, Lafferty et al.).

The next section, “Culture, Language, Way of Life” features art and writing that share elements of culture and language in educational practices. An art work shares experience and teachings about fixing caribou (Mountain), and written works share experiences of and ideas about culture and education in Igloodik and a social work program in Yellowknife (Chau and Arnaaq, Little, et al.). Finally, Early Child Care students share their experience developing home kits for teaching Indigenous languages in the home (Eisazadeh et al.).

“Family and Community” highlights education that happens across generations. In “The Two of Us,” one tree bends towards another, like a teacher to a student or an Elder to a younger person (Cartwright). The image echoes the description of the Wellness Elders Program created by the Tłı̨chǫ Government (Whenham and Hyden). In “Believe it and You’re Half Way There,” Paul Andrew shares a reflection about next generations, and the future (Andrew). An interview features the educational experiences of Joni Tsatchia as a student and now, as an educator, sharing her dreams for northern education grounded in culture and community (Tsatchia and Komarnisky). “Rayuka Sunrise” depicts a mother and child, in the context of a split in the family (Mountain).

Finally, “Institutions and Organizations” concludes with submissions that link to schools, colleges, institutes as places of learning. A poem creatively reflects on the experience of schooling (Patterson), and a literature review gives insight into how higher education institutions could work towards anti-racism, Indigenization, and decolonization (Mychael). Students from Aurora College’s nursing program share their prize winning research posters (Gonzalez et al). “Reaching Out” shares about the activities and impacts of the Aurora Research Institute’s STEM outreach program (Graham). Finally, a youth shares a message of hope about the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation (Bernabe).

Together, these pieces share insight into what Education in the North means from a breadth and multiplicity of perspectives, knowledges, and forms of expression. To echo John B. Zoe, in the preface, the journal extends an invitation to northerners to join together into a shared collective space opening possibilities of growing the conversation in the future.

CLOSING WORDS - LOIS EDGE

The collaborative experience of journal development mirrors contestation entrenched within critically relevant and significant spaces and places encountered and inhabited by individuals subsumed within the ebb and flow of historical and contemporary intergenerational relations and relationships generated as outcome of competing dynamic and diverse systems of knowledge, ways of knowing, teaching, learning, doing, being, and lifeways.

Entering into a contested space generated not unforeseen, yet unanticipated, tensions premised upon entrenched normative discourse and hierarchical power relations emergent within former and present-day intercultural relations. Most relevant is the degree to which one has acquired awareness, knowledge and understanding of respective knowledge systems, either that of the Eurowestern intellectual tradition, and/or of Indigenous systems of knowledges. Stated succinctly, we don’t know what we don’t know. For example, awareness of key terms, definitions and concepts proved challenging.

As increasingly reflected in multiple sectors and/or fields of study, barriers persist in efforts to integrate, incorporate, blend, merge and/or infuse knowledge systems together when compartmentalized within the confines, constraints and limitations of a binary opposition frame of “us vs. them” or vice versa. In such instances, systems of knowledge function to retain respective authenticity and integrity as unique stand-alone yet interconnected relational systems: representations of diverse human social, cultural, political, economic and ecological experience through time in space and place.

Ultimately, willing entry into an ethical space (Ermine, 2007) of shared intentionality premised upon commitment to lifelong learning and activation of love, patience, mutual respect and shared envisioning coalesced as pieces came together to merge into the whole as in this celebratory inaugural edition of Xàgots’eèhk’ò.

Kinanâskomitin, hiy hiy.

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