

teachings of takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte: language and land

nahannee schuitemaker

Affiliation: university of british columbia

Email: nahannee.s@alumni.ubc.ca

Abstract

a conversation between ohkwá:ri and takwa'ahson explores the importance of language when speaking about and with the land the conversation follows the ceremony of the building of the takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte a metaphor for traditional knowledges the stories shared reflect on our relationship with land and how language – both the language spoken and the words chosen to describe – influences that relationship the conversation finishes leaving the reader to ponder the ending

Keywords: *youth; place-based learning; land; language; indigenous; storytelling*

i wonder if much that ails our society stems from the fact that we have allowed ourselves to be cut off from that love of, and from, the land. it is medicine for broken land and empty hearts.

(kimmerer, *braiding sweetgrass*, 2013)



speech between relations

takwa'ahson¹ considers the movement of air one leg raised slightly eyes attentive gathering all the knowledge land has to offer her at that moment ohkwá:ri² sits in the shade of a tree dust floating on the sunbeam past her nose she watches as takwa'ahson casts the first delicate line of silk into the breeze trusting she watches the gathering of knowledge as the takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte³ is created once more and once more *takwa'ahson why do you bother to rebuild when you know your web will only be destroyed have you not learned new ways would you not prefer to learn something new maybe retire your silk weaving for a new skill that you can learn by reading writing regurgitating information over four years or more*

takwa'ahson pauses fixes all eight of her dark orb eyes on ohkwá:ri

both burst into laughter

so you think you're funny ohkwá:ri tell me what is really on your mind

ohkwá:ri pauses now considers her words her questions rubs her back against the tree while pondering takwa'ahson has felt the vibration on the silk strand change she knows contact has been made and so she carefully crosses the space of the present moment reinforcing the foundation from past to future and back to present here is where she will gather the story

i walk in two worlds takwa'ahson out here on the land i have a place i understand my relations know me they know my name they know me and i know them in the classroom in the institution my voice is confined to certain spaces

i refer to the collective "my/i" i mean those who walk like me balancing worlds searching for myself reflected in the glare of the tower i am sometimes permitted to enter in there i am missing my voice and that of the land it becomes lost in the echoes of others those which are louder amplified preferred i am troubled by it all

i sit here watch you weave it reminds me of how creative our voices are how our indigenous ways of knowing are intimately tied to the land you creating once again and once again reminds me of a new cycle a new generation our youth so many

young ones at least a third of all our communities are children (styres, haig-brown & blimkie, 2013) but you know those statistics are convoluted so many politics who wants to be further tracked by these systems but we do know our communities are young many attending school will they see themselves will their voices be heard valued and what of the land so many don't understand that we are the land

¹ Spider (in kanien'kéha)

² Bear (in kanien'kéha)

³ spider web (in kanien'kéha)

takwa'ahson listens works weaves from the original strand she forms a y-shape peace shape skén:nen⁴ but not really she measures carefully using her body to track a different kind of tracking not mla apa chicago new york england new france or congo but turtle island style original indigenous onkwehonwe⁵ ohkwá:ri watches still considers the legs of takwa'ahson gently pulling wrapping collecting four directions four winds eight teachings everything with intention that is how nature is ohkwá:ri continues

i hear the story they tell in academia and i see how that translates into real life it is disturbing to think that the earth is seen as something inanimate to see how the gifts that are so readily given are not respected (kimmerer, 2013) how has this understanding been lost how does this world view which is considered more advanced fail to see how we are so intimately connected i don't like the word progress because that word equates to the violence we see (or maybe don't see) inflicted upon mother earth inflicted upon the communities and bodies still closely connected to or the colour of the land

progress this word has been used to justify violence for many centuries progressprogressprogress (no stopping for reflection just a steam engine of education assimilation and christianity) as if the way indigenous beings have been living thriving for thousands of years needed to be progressed progressified no it doesn't make sense and now the teachings of taking care for the next seven generations to come are not being upheld instead everything left for the next generation to deal with all the messes to be cleaned up no vision for the future or past or even the greater present an immersed fixation on global yet profoundly disconnected from local as seen in the education system right from the start (chambers, 2012) and global too though rather it is a limiting to one's own bubble one's own individual interests one's own corporation if you will an awareness of takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte has been lost an arachnophobia of knowledge in a sense(lessness) as i walk this world i see the desperate need to bring back the voice of the land so that the young ones' ears can hear it again and understand it that is what is important and not just the ears of our young ones but of all those who will hold the responsibility of care-giver or care-taker

creation language

takwa'ahson connects a new strand careful where she steps careful not to become tangled in her own sticky silk this is something she has done since her first weaving first

⁴ peace (in kanién'kéha)

⁵ original people (how the haudenosaunee refer to themselves)



dreaming but she is still attentive to her motions assiduous in her task it is ceremony something sacred to gather and hold together these pieces of knowledge “like bodies of survival” (schuitemaker, 2016) she has begun to weave several largely spaced non sticky threads to use as her map as her foundation ohkwá:ri watches how she patiently moves in a circular motion reminiscent of time and space takwa’ahson a keeper of knowledge she connects strand to strand as she creates her web and she speaks

ohkwá:ri do you remember how you came to know the world how you came to know our plant relations our winged relations our mother earth and all the rest do you remember the stories the teachings that come from each place this is how we begin to remember for those who have forgotten remember the words that once tied together the past and future to the present the foundation of our way of seeing the world the foundation of our knowledge the naming of place and all things (kimmerer 2013; ritskes 2012; styres et al., 2013; kulnieks, longboat & young 2013) this is how we remember

ohkwa:ri sits ears twitching at mosquitos but attentive she ponders these words from takwa’ahson as she continues around and around in a consistent motion steady like a drumbeat vibrating across silk waves steady and consistent steady and true after some time ohkwá:ri responds

yes i remember in each place that we know and visit there exists an important story in fact there exist many stories for each place especially the old ones the land is an ancient teacher and the original storyteller (kimmerer 2013; styres et al., 2013) these places have names and words that we use to refer to them understanding these names where they come from helps us understand the relationship (kulnieks et al., 2013) and this is also how we learn to be in the world with others some places have names that tell their story that tie to the local people and other relations even in places that have been occupied by others for a long time such as cities sitting heavy with cement on the land or as brief as the existence of your web strung between birch or brush the story of each tree it borrows space from still remains before after and during

takwa’ahson contemplates ohkwá:ri’s words while she continues to weave thin silk glinting in the sunshine like fine slivers of smoke delicate but powerful like prayers passed upwards on a breeze she thinks about the importance of knowing these names how they connect us to the land the language we use can empower a relationship but also mute it which is often the case for many especially those living within urban places (kulnieks et al., 2013) but it is only muted not severed and although a space may be occupied by something else language can help us (re)focus our attention tune our ears if

you will to the voices of stories that form that place takwa'ahson continues to think indeed takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte occupies space for a while but never interrupting or silencing the song of the trees it floats between takwa'ahson knows their story she hears it respects it and the trees know her name too

connecting four quadrants

one year while at sundance ceremony takwa'ahson little sparrow came across the field to me excited to share we were high in semi-arid mountains the summer sun beating hot on the tops of our heads cedar smoke hovering in the air across the land she was running her fingertips across the tall grasses while she talked she paused then told me to be careful where i stepped not to pull out the grasses as some of the children were doing she told me that all plants had a gift that they were all medicines to be used in a certain way some are to be eaten some are to be carried for different reasons and not to take any of them for granted she finished her teaching as suddenly as she offered it took off across the field to the arbour skipping happily towards the singing and dancing arbour swaying to heartbeats

ohkwá:ri pauses changes her position after taking note that she had been flattening some small flowers and plants takwa'ahson is nearing the midpoint of her web sun gleaming rainbows on the silk

i was pleasantly surprised young wisdom her medicine wheel was balanced spiritual mental physical and emotional it made me reflect on the many ways land impacts us most importantly food as medicine one special thing that all relations share about food is the stories we carry about food no matter where we come from there is a significance to the food we eat how it is gathered or prepared why it is eaten and when traditions and ceremony for me the spring is my great awakening and my body has fasted for several moons before my great sleep and immediately after are two very special times for me regarding food changes in the land make big impacts on these special ceremonies for me if berries are late or the salmon don't return i may suffer greatly even die this is why i honour the foods that are most important to me many do not know these things anymore food has been disconnected from land ceremony disconnected from land bringing back this knowledge and awareness is the first very important step of many steps to be taken but a good first one like casting that first strand of silk and trusting it will make contact but we must make an effort to begin building the takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte a relationship cannot be truly formed by learning through a computer screen or even a book our young ones must feel the earth beneath their feet and under their nails "transformation is not accomplished by tentative wading at the edge" (kimmerer, 2013, p. 89) young ones need to learn to relate the land



to themselves to begin to form an identity that includes being connected to the earth once again learning gardens and nature walks are good places to start teacher programs can be a powerful opportunity to bring a new spring to these ways by infusing land-based knowledge throughout multiple subjects (kulnieks et al., 2013; styres et al., 2013; cornelius, 1999) to move away from isolating the idea of land or environment within a bubble instead seeing how our relationship with land is connected in all four quadrants of the medicine wheel this helps shift the view to see community and land through an indigenous lens (ritskes, 2012) i see this helping to also break down preconceived notions about indigenous people both romanticized and stereotypical it will strengthen the confidence of indigenous students as well

community collaboration commitment

takwa'ahson doesn't build the takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte alone she knows she needs something to support one side and something else on the other side she must rely on what and who already exists in nature and so by gently releasing her silk into the wind she is asking if she may have permission to build and stay for awhile asking if she can borrow support from her relations the tree or bush or giant rock she doesn't tear open the ground doesn't manipulate mother earth's gifts to create toxic products to help support her web she doesn't try to change the earth to suit her needs rather lives in harmony as a part of a larger community of creation she shares a story with ohkwá:ri while she continues her work

a young speaker from the skwxwú7mesh and kwakwaka'wakw nations traveled to speak to the people he traveled to speak about the words of his ancestors his language he spoke to the urgency for the younger generations to pick up the responsibility to learn before the language was forgotten his call to action is unfortunately not uncommon the languages of original peoples are being lost globally on a daily basis he started simply by asking us to learn the greetings of the local language of where we live or where we are born (rivers, 2014) how powerful a concept because for those living unaware of the traditional territory below their feet it awakens them to the reality of the history and stories of that land and language he continued to explain how knowing another language allows us to see the world in a different way in a different light or perspective language reveals how we organize structure and live within our perceived worlds this young speaker so passionate for the language that his ancestors lived suggested that all people residing on traditional territory learn some of the language (rivers, 2014) perhaps this is an unrealistic goal in the eyes of most but such a possibility would drastically change relations can you imagine ohkwá:ri both

indigenous and non indigenous could begin to relate to one another it would force all to dig deeper past surface ideas and understandings every narrative is another layer of existence no one story is more important than the other sharing in these stories through language can build relations students learning to see how their worlds are shaped by their own stories is a form of cross cultural consciousness and an awareness of the validity and richness of indigenous perspectives (ritskes, 2012)

the day has begun to draw to a close as the sun dips low through the trees sky ablaze with clouds painted red and pink ohkwá:ri is preparing to move onwards her mind full of thoughts to carry into the night into dreamworld takwa'ahson has completed takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte and sits in a shadow awaiting a reward for her work her ceremony has come to an end for now ohkwá:ri offers some last words as she stands in the long shadows

kanien'kehá:ka scholar taiaiake alfred (2008) speaks to how we must learn to love the earth in ways that are new and i understand this as looking critically at my own ways of loving the land how my children will love the land how others love it and how others indigenous and non indigenous can learn to love the land in new ways what is my responsibility in this as difficult as it is i am privileged to navigate two worlds how can i offer my knowledge in a good way that will help these necessary relationships blossom between indigenous and non indigenous between us and the land this i carry with me in ceremony in dreamland and ask my ancestors walking with me for guidance

as ohkwá:ri begins to walk away a loud noise comes crashing through the trees a buzzing a terrible splintering ohkwá:ri flees frightened blood pounding in her ears looking back quickly she sees the trees toppled where she just sat the few remaining strands of takwa'ahson tehota'a:ronte dangling uselessly takwa'ahson is nowhere to be seen the fruits of her labour of her ceremony destroyed



References

- Alfred, T. (2008). Opening words. In L. Simpson (Ed.), *Lighting the eighth fire: The liberation, resurgence, and protection of Indigenous nations* (pp. 9–11). Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring.
- Chambers, C. (2012). A Topography for Canadian Curriculum Theory. In S.E. Gibson (Ed.), *Canadian Curriculum Studies: Trends, Issues, and Influences* (pp. 194-208). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- Cornelius, C. (1999). *Iroquois corn in a culture-based curriculum: a framework for respectfully teaching about cultures*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teaching of plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.
- Kulnieks, A., Longboat, D., & Young, K. (2013). Engaging literacies through ecologically minded curriculum: Educating teachers about indigenous knowledges through an ecojustice education framework. *in education*, 19(2), 138-152.
- Ritskes, E. (2012). A great tree has fallen: Community, spiritual ecology and African Education. *African Journal of Teacher Education*, 2 (1). 1-21.
- Rivers, K. (2014). RedxTalks – Khelsilem Rivers: What I know now [video presentation] retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/150453829>
- Schuitmaker, N. (2016, February 22). dreamer [blog post] retrieved from <https://tendayjourney.wordpress.com/2016/02/22/dreamer/>
- Styres, S., Haig-Brown, C., & Blimkie, M. (2013). Towards a pedagogy of land: The urban context. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(2), 34-67.

Author:

nahannee-fé schuitemaker is a graduate student on the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm at the university of british columbia she is of kanien'kehá:ka, french-canadian and dutch heritage she is completing a masters of arts in curriculum studies her current work focuses on how mixed-indigenous women navigate identity and how they connect to place in urban centres when they may not have connection to their own ancestral lands she also holds a double major in psychology and spanish with an emphasis on human rights and genocide studies in a global indigenous focus