i wouldn't sacrifice my life for the earth, i hardly know her.

The Ojibway story of the creation of Turtle Island was written-up and published by Edward Benton-Banai, Ojibway of the Fish Clan and a spiritual teacher of the Lac Court Orielles Band of the Ojibway Tribe. The book describes how the creator, Kitchi-Manitou, made the sun, the earth, and the moon to create a family (Benton-Banai, 1988). The earth was a woman which nourished all living things with the water that flowed through her. She perpetuated her physical and spiritual wellbeing through four sacred directions: north, east, south, and west. The creator sent birds to fly these sacred directions and spread the seeds of life to all creatures and plants of the earth. The book then details the journey of four brothers, among the first men of the human species, who each traveled one of these directions, built relationships, and populated the earth. From this population growth came fights over resources and goods. The creator saw that teachings of harmonious living were lost and sent a flood that killed most human and non-human life. Only one human named *Waynaboozhoo* and a few birds and animals managed to survive the flood. To create new life, *Waynaboozhoo* dived to the bottom of the flood water to grab a handful of earth from which to grow new land. However, *Waynaboozhoo*, along with most of the other animals, was unable to swim deep enough to reach the earth. *Wa-zhushk* the muskrat, a seemingly weak creature, told the others he would try and dived down. He was gone for much longer than the others and emerged from the water dead as he had gone too long without air. The others mourned and praised muskrat as his spirit passed on to the spirit world before realizing with joy that he had a small ball of earth clutched in his hand. Muskrat had sacrificed his life for the earth.

After reading this story, I reflected deeply on the actions of muskrat. I opened my journal and wrote the sentence that began this essay. The ball of earth in the story was placed on the back of a turtle and grew to be a huge island, North America. I have lived on North America my whole life, nourishing myself and building community with its resources. And yet, I do not know her. Bringing the actions of muskrat into contemporary issues faced by our earth today, I try to conceptualize what it would feel like to be asked to give up my life so the earth can live on. I would sacrifice my life for my family, my friends, in fights of injustice against other humans; these things I know for sure. I know these things because I feel a deep connection and understanding between myself and other humans. When I think about North America as a land, a place, I do not feel the same. I would not sacrifice my life for the earth, I hardly know her. In this essay, I map my journey to reconnect with Turtle Island.

This alienation from land is not only harmful to my own connection with the place to which I owe my life, but also to broader projects of decolonialization and future building. Anishinaabeg scholar and activist Leanne Simpson (2013) considers relationality with land as essential to promoting more life. In conversation with Naomi Klein, Simpson denotes non-relational land use as extraction, of which all colonial and capitalist systems are predicated upon and rely on. To pursue decolonization while remaining alienated to land is contradicting as the "act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is taking" (Simpson, 2013, para 11). Within this interview, Simpson draws upon the concept of *mino bimaadiziwin*, a fundamental concept to Anishinaabeg life translated for the sake of this interview as "continuous rebirth". Consequentially, the meaning of existence in Anishinaabeg society is the perpetuation of life. Simpson looks to this as the alternative of extraction, a deep reciprocity, respect, relationship, and responsibility that extends to human and

more-than-human interactions alike, seeking to perpetuate the life and happiness of entire communities.

I feel this worldview is one that has been intentionally kept from me for the purposes of preserving and perpetuating capitalism under colonial rule. In school, we were taught year after year about mining for gold. This example exists as an almost perfect metaphor for capitalistic forms of extraction. We were given this education from elementary through to secondary school with elaborate lesson plans concerning the processes and systems of mining in Canada. In grade six, we took a school field trip to Britannia mines in Britannia Bay, B.C. to learn how to steal from a land that we were never introduced to. From a very early age, we were taught in every way that land is the potential to extract. These lessons produced a generation of young people with no concept of relationship to land, ushered into the workforce, often in different places and lands, existing in complete alienation to entire nations of life. While this was ideal, necessary even, for continuing practices of extraction with the newest wave of wage-earners, it remains detrimental for the health of our earth, those displaced through colonialism, and ourselves.

Moving toward decolonization as a settler in the relational way that Simpson illustrates requires a holistic reintroduction to land that takes place in opposition to capital-building projects. It is also important to remain mindful that due to the exploitive nature of my existence on the land as a settler, deep understandings of place are often unattainable. As such, I look for ways to spend time with land that are meaningful but still hold space to recognize the inherent shortcomings and possible exploitation contained within my location. I look to writing and poetry about and with the land as a way to approach this. Considering land within my writing is to converse and build with it and talking to land like this mimics my approach to building the meaningful relationships with people that I already know how to hold.

I am inspired by, learning from, and celebrating many artists who continue to invent decolonial pieces that talk to land. Cree poet and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt is a powerful example of this creative movement. Belcourt creates worlds through his poetry, he says a "poem can be an uproarious reminder of the impossibility of settlement, of total conquest. As such, it is a love song to the land." (Belcourt, 2022, para. 5). Belcourt's poetry exemplifies what my words fall flat to describe; poetry as the ability to create a relationship with land that preserves and creates life. I see within his work connections to future and simultaneously a constant reference to history. In an unpublished poem, Belcourt writes "The lake is my ancestor, even if it will outlast me.". He positions land as family, through which he was given life and community. In this, Belcourt is showcasing what Simpson defines as the opposition to extraction and the foundation for life preservation: deep reciprocity, respect, relationship, and responsibility.

Connecting this to course concepts, I am reminded of the BUSH Gallery manifesto, and the work showcased within the gallery. The BUSH Gallery makes land primary in their directives and creations. This is witnessed throughout their manifesto:

> The Gallery is out on the land, it is outside of or at the margins of monetary systems and away from the colonized space of art institutions. This gallery is a gallery of the land, of Indigenous culture(s) and language(s); this gallery can show new media with basketry, beading with installation art, performance art and storytelling." (Morin & Willard , 2017, para. 2)

The artwork created through the BUSH gallery is inseparable from the land on which it is made. Just as the personal experiences Belcourt outlines in his poetry are inseparable from the land on which they took place. It is through this consideration of land that the gallery builds the future and sustains itself. Without the land, the gallery knows it does not exist. Again, one

can witness the powerful reciprocity and relationship within these creations that foster their capacity to reject extraction and thus resist colonial imposition.

I turn to this work to illustrate my lines of thought when considering land-based poetry. Importantly, however, I also turn to the work of Indigenous artists to emphasize that learning this relationality must come from Indigenous sources and knowledge basis. There needs to be a continuous appreciation for the work while recognizing it cannot, and does not want to be, replicated by settler narratives. As such, part of my journey with decolonization through poetry means platforming work by other authors.

In looking at these creations, and more broadly these worldviews, I am left to consider a possibility that alluded me when writing the pessimistic opening line of this piece: I may hardly know the earth, but maybe the earth knows me. I dance on the back of the turtle and kiss the leaves that grow from her lifeblood. I grow from the food she bears and feed my friendships with the same stuff. I inhale the sweet aroma left behind by her sustaining rainfall. I hold her when my mother and I link hands as our feet pat against the concrete, dirt, and rocks of my hometown. She has been in me and of me since birth and she knows me cell from cell. I slouch under the guilt of turning my back on the earth that so badly wanted to be my ancestor. I will come back to her. I will re-meet her. I will know her. Eternally.

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