



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG TO THE LAND?

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Why do my people point with their lips? Because it is cold in our traditional territory, and if you get kicked out of the shelter in winter, you're dead. So, the Swampy Cree are a gentle people who take pains not to point out individuals and make them feel in the spotlight. Both the good and bad of that. We do not point other souls out with our fingers as that is too aggressive and direct. We point with our lips because it is winter almost six months of the year and we were forced to live in close quarters where manners matter. The relationship with the land stretches from defining comfort food and clothing styles to etiquette and law.

In the long past, my ancestors were called what translates into "the Sturgeon People" by their neighbours. Our community is where a long river empties into a huge lake, so fishing the great dinosaur fish was a source of nourishment for body and pride.

I am a member of the Misipawistik Cree Nation. In English, it is called Grand Rapids and, because of its location, it was very important to the fur trade. During my mother's childhood, a power dam was erected over the cascade of waters. Their voice is now silent. Today, my



Elders speak about missing the conversation of our ancestors that they had always heard within those falling waters. My people belong to that land. To many of my Elders, the word Indigenous means to belong to the land.

When explaining the “how” of this relationship, they say, “You are the land you live on.”

As a people pull a living out of a landscape, fulfilling their needs for food, water, shelter and protecting themselves from the elements and their enemies, over time, this becomes a way of life. The day-to-day work and chores of meeting human needs in different landscapes creates different lifestyles. That results in sea people being different from plains people and plains people being different from mountain people and mountain people being different from lake people.

Even the constellations are experienced differently across the globe. This means everywhere a people reach up for the stars, and as those stars reach down, different creation stories, spiritualities and worldviews are inspired. Over generations, living a lifestyle defined by the land, under the stars above, and having interactions within your group and with neighbouring peoples, creates a culture and history. It is all very location-specific to Mother Earth and her many varied landscapes.

When we are born, we are what our mother ate, food that came from the land(s) she lives on. And she will go on to teach her children the invisible songs and lessons and values of her people that also arose from the land(s) she lived on.

In my opinion, the Cree, or Ininew, spread from James Bay to the Rockies because they are super adapters. The Cree peoples have five different dialects (variations





in their language), mostly because of how we spread across differing landscapes and changed as we did. In many cases, if an Indigenous people moved to a new area, within a few generations, their language and lifestyle would start to change, based on the relationship with the new lands they lived on.

Often, after speaking on these ideas, I am asked if Canadian culture will ever be “Indigenous.” I point out that Canada’s culture largely revolves around cities. Even its rural areas and towns and its remote landscapes are bent to feed and supply its many concrete environments.

Only five places across the planet were able to support a growing population of humans to the point that those people developed cities. It was local Indigenous Peoples in those five places that altered food sources, genetically modifying local plants through breeding, like the ancestors of wheat and corn. They harvested crops on a large scale and often tamed animals for agricultural use. However, once the cities were started in those five places, through trade, conquest and capture with other groups of humans these different packages of altered plants and animals allowed cities to move out onto different landscapes. Like anthills live to create more anthills, no matter where they started, it began to seem like cities only lived to create more cities.

Canada’s urban-centric culture comes from a chain of history that started on the landscape of the Fertile Crescent in western Asia and northern Africa, was pushed through Eurasia and then into Europe. This means the food foundations of Canadian culture are cattle and wheat, a calorie package that was invented in the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. For Canadian culture to be “Indigenous” to my people’s area,

its foundations would have to be moose meat and wild rice. In the western part of Canada, maybe bison and corn.

Something very terrible would have to happen to break Canadians' cultural links to the roast beef sandwich! Cows and wheat have always been the foundations of Canada's concrete environments. That's a moo point, for sure.

The lesson, "You are the land you live on" also applies to concrete lands.

The city environment constantly interacts with its people and has a day-to-day impact on their beliefs, culture, instincts and politics. This explains why there can be voters lobbying for supermarkets, while not caring about the needs of the farmers who grow the chickens to put on the shelves. Cities can make some people feel there is little space for growth, even though Canada is enormous but has only 40 million people living in it.

For some, it is closer to home. They are aware of what is going on next door, and they are sort of aware of what is going on two or three doors down, but they know little of what is going on in the closed-off spaces farther down their street. The city landscape ensures the unknown lives just a few doors down. This may have an emotional impact, which could lead to, for example, decisions on who they chose to represent them as a political or community leader. Given the relative newness of concrete lands, I'm not sure we understand all the ways they are affecting us.

In closing, no matter where you live, I encourage you to ask yourself: How do the land(s) you live on contribute to your body, heart, mind and spirit?

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