

# Establishing Land Relationships Through the Saskatoon Berry

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This paper interrogates human relationships with the natural environment using the saskatoon berry as a “habitat guide,” a concept borrowed from the Indigenous perspectives of the Blackfoot, Papachase Cree and the Métis. As a settler on Treaty Six and Métis territory no. 4 – the traditional lands of various Indigenous Peoples including the Papaschase Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Ojibwe, Métis and others – my research engages with personal experience and specific Indigenous knowledge systems and worldview(s). This paper is divided into three sections: the first examines engagement with the natural environment and makes a case for stewardship and kinship as eco-conscious ethics. The second section, based on an oral interview with Papaschase Cree educator and scholar Dwayne Donald, builds on traditional ecological knowledge to provoke thoughts on multispecies relationality. In the final section, I offer a close reading of poems by two Métis poets to emphasize kinship and ethical relationality through the saskatoon berry.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge, land relationship, nature, saskatoon berry

she considers blue beads as holding a piece of the sky  
reflected in berries  
her same fingers gather saskatoons ...

Marilyn Dumont, *The Pemmican Eaters*

## ENGAGEMENT WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT: HABITAT GUIDE

I like to think that on some level, the saskatoon berry chose me. On another, the experience of reading the captivating poetic lines on berries and Métis beadwork in *The Pemmican Eaters* (2015) by Cree/Métis poet Marilyn Dumont, paired with an early encounter with a saskatoon patch upon my arrival in Edmonton, Alberta, may have contributed to this choice to focus on the berry. This chance meeting occurred on a beautiful windy autumn afternoon during a walk in Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River Valley. On that day, yellow and golden leaves canopied the skyline while some flitted in the air and onto the ground. I was mesmerized by the flamboyant colours (as I continue to be) and persistently looked up in wonderment. This occurred during my first few weeks outside of my native Nigeria, where green is the natural colour of trees year-round. Admiring such an abundance of colour, leaves, and beauty, my companion and I slowly followed the trail until we came upon a berry patch with deep purplish berry clusters, straining the neck of their branches and begging to be consumed. For a brief moment I had thought they were blueberries, but my companion refuted this thought, explaining "it's the saskatoon berry." "Are they edible?" I inquired. "Yes," he offered, slightly hesitant in a way that suggested uncertainty. Confused, I begrudgingly let go of the berry cluster as we continued our walk.

Such is the confusion that animates this research into the saskatoon berry. For the purposes of this project, the saskatoon berry functions as my "habitat guide," becoming a lens through which I mindfully learn about the various Indigenous peoples and the Métis of Treaty Six land. Although a habitat guide can be human, animal, or environmental, plants are especially important not only as one of the most underestimated species but also because, as Potawatomi author Robin Kimmerer notes, "plants were here first on the earth and have had a long time to figure things out" (2013, 210). As a student and a settler, this research presents a learning opportunity to think through diverse inter-relationships and forms of knowledge that are present in and on Treaty Six land. To engage with this land, it bears remembering that the Cree name for Edmonton is *amiskwaciwâskahikan* (Beaver Mountain House), a name that at once disrupts colonial permutations and underscores the layers of living relationships that inform this land. What better way to be guided than by a plant native to Edmonton, combined with select Indigenous land-based philosophies from those with the longest living relationship with *amiskwaciwâskahikan*? It is through such interactions that I can learn of the living histories that constitute the River Valley, and by extension, the University of Alberta which lies above its southern banks.

I view this research as building a relationship with the land that incorporates the University as a citadel of learning, paired with all the gifts of the land which continue to enrich us in diverse ways during our scholarly engagements and otherwise. However,

living and being in a relationship with the land and the vibrant other-than-human and human communities that are of, and on, the land also comes with many responsibilities. The responsibility of a living relationship with place can be established through stewardship and gratitude. What possibilities can emerge if we approach nature from a place of responsibility, mindfulness and gratitude? How can our choices and preferences be mediated by an ethics of care and stewardship? To think through these questions, this research moves beyond the structured paradigm of academic research in its reach towards praxis – learning and practicing good relationships with the land. This idea influences my leaning towards Indigenous perspectives, or what Opaskwayak Cree author Shawn Wilson (2007) calls an “Indigenist paradigm” in relating with the land. According to Wilson, this paradigm can be used by anyone who chooses to follow its tenets. To utilize the approach the author suggests that

researchers and authors need to place themselves and their work firmly in a relational context. We cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separated from ourselves (i.e. we must write in the first person rather than the third). Our own relationships with our environment, families, ancestors, ideas, and the cosmos around us shape who we are and how we will conduct our research. Good Indigenist research begins by describing and building on these relationships. (194)

By this analysis, the principles encoded in an Indigenist research protocol align with the mode of writing taken up by authors and researchers including Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013), Daniel Coleman in *YardWork: A Biography of an Urban Place* (2017), and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and teacher Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (2017). Their contributions have inspired me to contemplate a mode of place-thinking using an ethical, relational manner; or, in the words of Coleman, to have “the awareness that places are alive, have spirit and are providing us with everything we need to live” (2017,10).

Within a relational context, personal reflection offers a path to understanding the local as a microcosm of the global through interconnection. I have become aware that the farming and gathering upbringing I had in Uyo, Nigeria continues to inform and shape my choices in ways I may not fully discern, and also inspires my connection to *amiskwaciwâskahikan* and the various Indigenous nations. I know my interest in a berry shrub in the River Valley connects to the numerous times I had pointed out wild berry patches in my native Nigeria and received nods of approval or disapproval from my mother while on our way to the farm. Although I could not differentiate edible berries from poisonous ones, I looked forward to our walks through the bushes with

anticipation and delightful surprise when the berries were spotted. To a growing child, berries were timely gifts during tiresome return journeys from the farm. Wild berries are not commercialized in the Niger Delta, because they instead remain circulated through a gift economy. One of my clearest childhood memories is that of picking wild berries, eating some on the walk home, and sharing the rest with my aunts and playmates. I recall looking forward to the gift of wild berries from friends returning from the farm. But these days, few farmers remain in the villages, and berry patches are dwindling or disappearing. Maybe saskatoon berries once populated the Edmonton River Valley like wild berries once populated the bushes in the Delta, until development and progress deforested the regions. As I settle in and pay attention to the land through the guidance of berries, I uncover the richness and complexities that animate the place I now call home, aided by and through my embodied memory of my Nigerian home.

During a university seminar on Habitat Guides, a peer shared a childhood memory: "I know the saskatoon berry. Here [in Canada] we go to berry farms, pick berries, pay for them, and take the picked berries home. I know it's a white middle-class thing to do, but I remember doing this with my mom when I was a boy." As a first-time learner of this practice, I became intrigued by the bond such interactions avail, and the unique interspecies connections that occur during such encounters. I realize the bond is not dissimilar to the harvesting of vegetables or food crops from a garden or farm in the Niger Delta with which I am familiar. Encoded in an interspecies association is the mutual dependency and benefit both species offer one another. Apart from the freshness of the picked berries, my colleague recalled the affective textures of this experience as unique and quite different from shopping. I also think of the individual experience and the interaction between the berry picker and the berries. Thereafter, I web-searched berry farms in and around Edmonton, pulled up various websites, made several phone calls, and ended the day a little sadder than I began. Dizzy from listening to a series of pleasant voice messages announcing that berry farms were closed for the season, not to be opened again until the summer of the next year, my initial excitement was now replaced with raw anxiety and apprehension. I questioned the rationale of researching and writing about a plant I had never eaten or personally experienced. As inspiring as it was to live vicariously through other people's encounters with the saskatoon berry, in my ignorance I felt a lacuna, like a fraud. Grocery stores in town were of no help. The River Valley became a place I frequented in the hopes that I could once again encounter my elusive guide. During one such wandering, the land recalled to my mind Indigenous scholar Dwayne Donald and the important work he does to educate people on the connections and relationships that make up the River Valley. I reached out to him and asked for a meeting to discuss the saskatoon berry, a request the scholar quickly obliged. In preparation, I sought a better understanding of the plant.

### THE ECOLOGY OF THE SASKATOON

The saskatoon berry plant is native to many regions of Canada. This deciduous shrub grows from Western Ontario to British Columbia, including Alberta and the Yukon. According to the Saskatoon Berry Institute of North America (2019), the name saskatoon is a shortened form of the Cree name for this plant, *mis-ask-quah-toomina*, which translates as “the fruit of the tree of many branches.” This Cree word is also the name of a city in Saskatchewan, located on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. The saskatoon bush is reputed to be packed with diverse medicinal properties. The leaves and fruit are used to make teas, and the bark is used by Indigenous peoples for the treatment of illness and ailments (Donald, 2019). Saskatoon shrubs typically grow in thickets and provide good wildlife habitat to mammals and birds. The berries are an important resource for wildlife, especially birds who depend on saskatoon berries in the fall and winter for sustenance while nesting (ibid). Moreover, berry patches attract birds and enrich the habitat. Berry seeds are spread in the droppings of birds, and animals such as bears, squirrels and chipmunks feed on berries thereby propagating the plant and extending multispecies interconnections.

When considering a plant that is as pivotal and nutritious as the saskatoon berry in the prairie ecosystem, one may forget that the “oldest prairie ecosystems began to evolve 16,000 years ago when the glaciers began their retreat” (Lyseng 1993, 4). According to Lyseng, the saskatoon, alongside flowers, grass and other shrub species in the prairie region, evolved under a gruelling regime of hot summers and frigid winters, fire and flood; an observation that sheds light on the plant’s resilience and hardiness even in the harshest climates. It is beautiful that the reptiles, worms, mammals, bacteria and all the life forms that characterize the prairie life cycle could share this common root of resilience. The prairie is made when “forest understory grasses slowly speciated outward from eastern and northern fringes on to the new land, honing new mechanisms of survival as they spread” (Lyseng 4). We see the relationships and entanglements between the diverse plants and the animals of this space as they become native to place. The First Peoples practiced a relationship of “living-with-and-together” (Noble 2018, 315) with the more-than-human and the human. The manifold levels of interaction that occurred and continue to occur on the land animate my thoughts as I listen to Indigenous scholar Dwayne Donald, hereafter referred to as my educator and teacher.

### LISTENING AND EMBEDDED KNOWING

“It is important to address the saskatoon before picking the berries off the branches.”  
Dwayne Donald (2019)

The above was the first of many insights my educator proffered during our meeting one afternoon in the middle of Hub Mall, a central building on the University of Alberta campus. He would later say “we need to address the saskatoon” to emphasize the significance of approaching the saskatoon in a particular way, the right way. Curious, I asked “why?”, to which Donald responded: “It is because [the berries] are living beings too.” Most Indigenous peoples of North America share this core belief of the beingness and agency of other species. My tribe in Nigeria, the Ibibio of the Niger Delta region, share this similar ideology. As living beings with agency, certain plants are approached with a specific attitude by our healers and herbalists to obtain the desired efficacy for healing, sustenance, and revival. I was raised within this philosophy by my herbalist grandmother. Aided by that upbringing and experience, I can relate to Donald’s teachings. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer points to the beingness and agency of plants within the observation that “plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water” (10). It is this livingness and beingness of plant relations that elevates them beyond objects that exist on the periphery. My educator affirmed and added that the berry bush is excited to be a good relative to humans and animals when it is shown appreciation through protocols of gratitude and respect. These protocols align with the teachings of the peoples of Treaty Six: humble kindness, sharing, honesty, and determination. These protocols can be seen clearly inscribed on Scottish/Irish/Cree/Anishinaabe/Mohawk artist Stewart Steinhauer’s sculpture *The Sweetgrass Bear*, domiciled in the University of Alberta’s Quad.

What does it then mean to be connected to, or in harmony with, all our relations at a time when we inhabit a world facing the looming threat of species extinction? And how do we ensure we are good relatives living in an ethically responsible way with all our relations? Thinking about this, I realized that an ethical responsibility to the land, water, plants, and animals would entail the practice of land-based education to deepen our understanding of the complex relationships we share with the land. This opens the way into the practicality of kinship, ethics, and obligation where relationships of love and respect are sustained. My educator emphasizes the need to “be on the land, be outside more” as a way of connecting people with the gifts of the various relations that are around us. It is in being around our relations, in being mindful of those we are connected with, that we can adapt ways to protect them. My educator adds that being out on the land trains the mind, the eyes, and the ears to see and acknowledge the network of interconnection that is happening in the shrubs, between trees, plants and animals. Only by being on the land are we able to participate in the complex network of interconnection without interrupting the flow. I learn that forgetting or ignoring the validity and presence of multispecies intermingling is an interruption in itself. Living in the city of Edmonton, the River Valley has become a place I frequent to be reminded of my responsibility to all our relations.

Saskatoon berries are essential to the Indigenous peoples in Alberta, including the Blackfoot, the Métis and the Cree. My educator is Papachase Cree and has spent years with the Blackfoot, and therefore shares knowledge from both communities. According to him, the Blackfoot believe that all berries are connected in a network or constellation. He mentions that cranberries, chokeberries, strawberries, and blueberries (indeed all berries) are intertwined, unique, collective, singular and yet connected. For the Blackfoot, the forest performs her aliveness through all that is within her ecology, all of the vital constituent parts. And although some of those parts or duties are unrecognized by the human species, it does not nullify their importance. Catriona Sandilands refers to this as “the vegetal liveliness of the forest ... the network of mycorrhizal relationships that define and sustain” (2017, 26). If as higher-order plants, trees are able to send and receive signals, who is to say that other plants are not equipped to act this way in varying degrees? The intricate and variegated levels of relationships between plants, leaves, animals, birds, lichen, mud, and fungi speak to the connections that humans are unaware of, but are invited to share. Being in the forest is an invitation to participate in the aliveness and beingness that may be beyond our grasp as we go about our daily, urban, human lives. Sandilands adds that plants “manifest a kind of swarm intelligence that enables them to behave not as an individual but as a multitude” (23). Therefore, different berries ripen at different times, exhibiting a behaviour that is both collective and individual.

During winter on the prairie, the berries hold life and survival. It is little wonder, then, that for the Blackfoot, age is conveyed by how many winters one has survived. Ageing and maturity become intricately tied to surviving winter, and by extension, the dried or fresh food that ensures such survival, like berries, is crucial. We must not forget, also, that the survival of the berries is dependent on cyclical interactions with humans, animals and birds. Kimmerer explains the cycle as “compensatory growth”: a physiological change that occurs when animals interact with some grasses. Nature therefore offers a well-balanced system of reciprocal relationships established in the circle of life, and who is to say this is not replicated when humans, birds and animals relate with the saskatoon? As Kimmerer notes, “humans participate in a symbiosis in which sweetgrass provides its fragrant blades to the people and people, by harvesting, create the conditions for sweetgrass to flourish” (164). The author’s assertion tells us that under-harvesting of some plants, rather than overharvesting, could prove deleterious to plant growth and production. I am stupefied to think that the decline in saskatoon shrubs could be a direct result of under-harvesting or a lack of human interest in the plant. My educator points out that the saskatoon responds favorably to sustainable harvests through increased yield and regeneration, whereas under-harvesting could mean a lack of need by the humans and a breach of interspecies relationship and

ethics. As berries are gifts of the earth, humans must show gratitude for their existence and their availability to us to aid in our health and sustenance.

Although the saskatoon berry is a keystone species to some Indigenous groups in *amiskwaciwāskahikan*, I was unable to acquire it from local stores. After recounting my inability to procure the saskatoon, my teacher smiled and cautioned that plants like the saskatoon berry and sweetgrass are mainly gifts that should not be bought. He teaches me that sacred plants like sweetgrass, sage, and the saskatoon carry within them medicinal and sacred properties that are evoked according to the approach and protocols observed before and during picking. The observation of necessary protocols in the form of expressing gratitude and gift-offering act as catalysts towards the retainment of the fruit's sacredness and vitality. This sacredness and spiritual ethos are enforced and utilized in Indigenous ceremonies. This is central to the Blackfoot Nation's cultural practices and tradition. Communicating with plants can also be viewed as the recognition of their beingness and aliveness that connects the human and the berry in an ethical relationship. By buying the saskatoon berry from the Strathcona Farmers' Market, I had skipped the crucial step of addressing and speaking to the berry before harvesting. My thoughts wandered to who had picked the frozen berries I now possessed, and what thoughts occupied their mind while on the task. What utterances were made? What mood and affect had been imparted onto the berries I was about to consume? I offered my gratitude, nonetheless.

My teacher believes, as do other Indigenous peoples, that acknowledging that which sustains life carries positive energies and enriches our relationship with the land. To foreground this position, my teacher shares an Indigenous teaching with me: "An old lady once said to me, when you approach the saskatoon berry in a sacred way and pick it, you are holding the world in your hand." Although the metaphor of the berry-as-the-world can be understood in diverse ways, I understand the berry to be a vital connection to everything, and to function as a life source for the Blackfoot. For the Cree, this ideology is anchored in the word *Iyinkaysowin'* which translates in English to "you know how to make yourself strong." This concept references the strong relationship between the health and wellbeing of people and the environment, and also calls attention to the knowledge and protocols of healthy living. This gestures towards the importance of observing protocols for self-sustenance, which hinge on participating in the network of respectful relationships and the continuance of multispecies connection without interrupting the flow. I think about how berries, in order to survive, take nutrients from the land in the form of decomposed plants, water, animals and other minerals, and then gift their fruits to humans and animals to continue the circle of life and interconnection. I recognize these connections as I think of the berry as a world, an essential ingredient in the formation of social relationships with place.



According to my teacher, the particular part of the River Valley at the centre of the place now called Edmonton has been a gathering place of social relations for many different Indigenous peoples (not just the Blackfoot and Cree, but also the Dene, Sioux, Iroquois, Ojibwe and later the Métis and probably others) for thousands of years. The peoples gathered at various times throughout the year for diverse reasons: trade, ceremonies, social interactions, and all the things that people around the world do when they come together. It is therefore not difficult to imagine the land-based activities that occurred during such socialization, and I particularly think of the gift economy that thrived within that circle. As humans, our gifts to a berry patch would be attention, time, ethical harvesting and care, while the berry rewards our stewardship with the gift of its fruits to be carefully picked (Kimmerer, 25). Berry picking becomes a vital link that sustains familial relationships and multispecies connections in varying degrees. Therefore, one can understand the value of berry patches in the River Valley, and how the movement of peoples and animals could have contributed to their spread. I think about the various gatherings and the diverse changes evoked on the landscape, changes that contribute to the different layers that exist in the place and the changes in the society. Thinking back to that day when I met my first saskatoon berry patch in the River Valley, I marvel at the history and connections this wild berry bears and continues to witness.

As our interview progresses, my educator points out that “the habitat for the berries has reduced due to various reasons, ranging from habitat loss, relentless industrialization, and the clash between Indigenous resource management and scientific resource management” (Donald 2019). An important aspect of Indigenous land and resource management is the practice of controlled burns of local vegetation. Saskatoon berry patches have historically been managed through such burns which killed the aboveground parts of the plants, while allowing the roots and underground stems to sprout with vigour and achieve an increase in shrub density, new growth, and productivity. The saskatoon is a resilient plant that survives and sprouts irrespective of the intensity of the fire. My educator mentions that berry patches have lost their productivity because of burn suppression, thereby resulting in the production of smaller fruits in overgrown berry patches on public land. On reserve lands, monitored burns still occur at set times that vary between different nations. Bush-burning reinvigorates root crops, seed production, and creates fresh foliage and new growth for animal grazing and human consumption. The interconnectedness between berries and humans spills over into the realm of cultural analysis and production, and in the next section, I offer a close reading of poems about saskatoon berries from two Métis poets: Marilyn Dumont and Gregory Scofield.

### POETIC READING OF THE SASKATOON BERRY

Although there are multiple ways to consume the saskatoon berry, “today, the berries are commonly used much like blueberries in pies, pancakes, puddings, muffins, jams, jellies, sauces, syrups and wine” (Chambers et al 2012, 71). For the Métis, the most popular usage of berries, apart from ceremonial use, is in the preparation of pemmican – an Indigenous cuisine that is prepared with dried berries, dried meat and suet. To make pemmican, dried saskatoons, as the principal berries, are mixed with meat and fat (Chambers, 72). After encountering diverse pemmican recipes in the course of this research, I have found that Marilyn Dumont, in *The Pemmican Eaters* (2015), offers a most enlightening pemmican recipe/poem that does not stray from the traditional preparation. This is the case not only because it is anchored in land-based practices, but because it pays homage to the old ways that reinforce the entwined relationship of the Métis with the buffalo and the berries. Whereas other recipes indicate measurements like “4 cups saskatoons/4 cups beef jerky” (Chambers, 74), Dumont presents another perspective:

Kill one 1800 lb. buffalo  
Gut it / Skin it / Butcher it / Construct drying tripods  
Mix with several pounds of dried berries, picked previously  
Add rendered suet (12)

The poet takes the reader to a practice prior to colonial interruption and proceeds in a way that re-claims Métis-ness and portrays a Métis worldview. In Dumont’s recipe, the oven does not replace “drying tripods and racks,” nor does butter replace “rendered suet.” The recipe for making pemmican is not modernized with new products or modern technologies. Although both recipes are vital, Dumont offers a decolonizing praxis that demonstrates the Métis relationship with the buffalo and the berries. Pemmican prepared in the traditional method by the Métis is a cultural tie that strengthens kinship to the land from generation to generation.

The poet also relies on the flora and fauna of the prairie to describe colours. According to the poet,

the bead’s colour makes no sound  
but it is cranberry, moss, and fireweed  
it is also wolf willow, sap, and sawdust  
as well as Chickadee, Magpie, and Jackrabbit

a bead is not simply dark blue / but Saskatoon blue

it's not merely black / but beaver head black (35)

These poetic lines reflect the collective consciousness of the people through shared language, understanding, and worldview. Naming colours after plants and animals foregrounds the flora and fauna as pivotal and emphasizes the people's knowledge of the land. It is not uncommon in Métis culture to hold the saskatoon berry up in prayer during ceremony or whilst in serious thought. Perhaps this is why blue beads are considered as "holding a piece of the sky reflected in berries" (37). To hold a piece of the sky signifies the berries' sacredness and the hope they give to those who depend on them, just as seeing the prairie sky in the coldest days of winter equals survival. Apart from the physical sustenance that berries offer, Dumont poeticizes the spiritual nourishment too. The saskatoon, because it is recognized by Indigenous knowledge holders as a blood cleanser, utilized to promote healthy living, is "the fruit of feasts" that is scooped from a bowl during purification rituals of the sweat lodge (37). This form of embedded knowing was acknowledged and used years before Western science identified the saskatoon as containing antioxidants, fibre and protein. The saskatoon is "the life-liquid...thirsted for in ceremony," echoing its physical, spiritual and cultural life-sustaining properties (41). This embodied knowledge bespeaks Indigenous peoples' empirical observation and long-standing relationship with the land.

Kinship with the land includes multispecies equality which the poet captures in the following lines:

her sisters, the flowers  
her brothers, the berries  
emerge from her beadwork  
chokecherry red, goldenrod yellow, and juniper berry brown  
sky berry and water berry (39)

By ascribing sisterhood and brotherhood to the berries, the poet debunks human superiority, emphasizes relationality, and tasks the reader with an ethics of stewardship. For the Métis, the worldview that privileges multispecies relatedness is *wahkohtowin*, a concept which reinforces the web of complex relationships between the human, the spiritual world, the dead, the living, nonhumans, and other forms of life. Otipemisiw/Métis scholar Jennifer Adese notes that Métis existence is traditionally conceptualized through the understanding of oneself as a part of creation, though notably however, not the superior creation. From this stems an obligation to an ethics of kinship to all our relations (2014, 53). In her words, "the Great Spirit created living beings, plants and animals, including insects, and all other elements of Mother Earth" (ibid). It is this knowledge and consciousness that engenders relationships with the land and the nonhuman others as relatives.

In his sensual poem “I’ll Teach You Cree,” Gregory Scofield (2009) identifies *nêhiyawêwin* – the Cree language – with the taste of saskatoon as juicy and mouth-filling. In his presentation, the lines are blurred between language and nature, and berry-picking is established as a ceremony, as ritual:

I’ll teach you Cree, *nêhiyawêwin* (*the Cree language*)  
 that is the taste  
 of *pimiy êkwa saskarômina* (*fat and saskatoon berries*)  
 Your mouth will be the branches  
 I am picking clean,  
 a summer heat ceremony  
 that cannot be translated.  
*hâw, pîkiskwê!* (*Now, speak!*) (141)

If the Cree language is informed by the land, and the saskatoon berry derives its name from this, then there is clearly a connection between language and the berry, as both belonging to and making up diverse communities in the ecology of place. From Scofield’s poetics, it is apparent that there is no division between language and plant. The plant informs and embodies language, even as the language of the land is conveyed through the plant in both nomenclature and taste. The ecology of place informs, enriches, and sustains the community and the language. The poet’s interweaving of Cree and English words adds a deeper dimension to the blurring of this divide. This blurring of man-made categories continues in the use of plant systems to describe human activity. I imagine the “mouth” as the “branches” of the saskatoon, straining under/with the weight of ripened berry clusters which are to be picked clean. The description of the human with plant physiognomy is not just smooth but reminds the reader of our plant-like sensibility; a kinship and an invocation of our ability to vegetate.

## CONCLUSION

As I bite into my purchased saskatoon berry, I relish the juicy sweetness as its earthy flavour lingers on my tongue. I am nostalgic as memories of my childhood in the Niger Delta come flooding back. I ponder my responsibility as a good relative to the saskatoon berry. In the course of this research, my habitat guide has taught me that the possibilities are endless when we approach nature from a place of relationship, stewardship, and gratitude. If an ethics of care and accountability mediates our choices, and preferences are mediated by an ethics of care and accountability, we can become ecologically conscious in our daily encounters. I have learned to spend time outside, to listen, and

to commune with nature. I have learned to bring the outside world inside through actions that could preserve the earth. This research offered an opportunity to quietly reflect on the circle of life. To know that it is persistently turning and unfolding around us is to participate in this flow of life seamlessly. We are called to learn and possibly adopt a different approach of living – one that practicalizes kinship. We are called to unfetter our minds from familiar perception and conditioning, to contemplate new possibilities in a time of ecological crisis. We are tasked with mindfulness, an allegiance to respect for all beings, and gratitude through traditional ecological knowledge so as to live in harmony with all our relations. The protocol of gratitude forces us to stop, take a breath, and think about our actions or inactions. In these wintering times, we are asked to emulate the saskatoon, to be resilient in our role as stewards of the earth, and to remain hardy in a time of climate crisis through accountability, stewardship, and an ethics of care.

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