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RELATIONSHIPS AS RESISTANCE:  
TRANSFORMATIVE ADULT LEARNING  
FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CLIMATE/  
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

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# RELATIONSHIPS AS RESISTANCE: TRANSFORMATIVE ADULT LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CLIMATE/ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

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## Abstract

*At the core of the climate calamity is a clash in beliefs, values, knowledge, and actions affecting relationships between humans and the natural world. Although there is an urgent need for systems change, there is also a need to radically re-imagine white settler knowledge systems and relationships that are responsible for the climate crisis. This article aims to move the conversation about sustainability and adult learning toward shifts in white settler paradigms and relationships. By sharing findings about transformative adult learning from a qualitative research study that focuses on collaborations between Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqewiyik, and white settler participants in the climate/environmental justice movement in what is colonially known as New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, this article argues that real climate action hinges on confronting the worldviews of white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. This article highlights the transformative adult learning that has happened through relationships from these movement struggles, and that has affected how participants have shifted their understanding of and actions toward sustainability for climate/environmental justice.*

## Résumé

*Le désastre climatique cache un conflit au niveau des croyances, des valeurs, des connaissances et des actions ayant des effets sur les relations entre les humains et le monde naturel. Il faut immédiatement effectuer des changements systémiques; cependant, nous devons réimaginer les systèmes de connaissances et les relations du colonialisme blanc qui sont responsables pour la crise climatique. L'article veut faire avancer la conversation sur la durabilité et l'éducation des adultes pour provoquer des changements dans les paradigmes et les relations du colonialisme blanc. Il fait part de conclusions sur l'éducation transformatif des adultes tirées d'une étude des collaborations entre des participants au mouvement pour la justice climatique et environnementale. L'article maintient que les actions concrètes doivent confronter les conceptions de la suprématie blanche, du colonialisme et du capitalisme. Il présente l'effet transformatif de l'éducation des adultes qui se produit grâce aux relations établies dans ces mouvements et montre les changements au*

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*niveau de la compréhension et des actions des participants dans les domaines de la durabilité et de la justice climatique et environnementale.*

### Keywords

*transformative adult learning, climate/environmental justice movement learning, sustainability, white settler colonial paradigm shifts, Indigenous-settler relations*

### Mots clés

*apprentissage transformatif des adultes, mouvement pour l'apprentissage sur la justice climatique et environnementale, changements des paradigmes du colonialisme blanc, relations entre autochtones et colons*

The climate crisis is the most important issue of this century, with potential to have devastating impacts on the future of humankind and the planet (Dhillon, 2021; IPCC, 2021; Pulido, 2017). With the increase in extreme weather, floods, forest fires, and droughts, it is glaringly clear that climate change is upon us. Mi'kmaw scholar, lawyer, and activist Pam Palmater (2020) explained, "Climate change is the greatest threat to life on Earth—humans, plants and animals" (p. 250). Each Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report also reminds us that the climate crisis is caused by human activities and urges governments, industry, and people to act and treat this situation as the emergency that it is. At the core of this calamity is a clash in epistemological, ontological, and axiological beliefs, values, knowledge, and subsequent actions affecting relationships between humans and the natural world. Although there is an urgent need for systems change, there is also a need to radically reimagine white settler knowledge systems and relationships that are responsible for the climate crisis. This article aims to move the conversation about sustainability and adult learning toward shifts in white settler paradigms and relationships. By sharing findings about transformative adult learning from a qualitative research study, I argue that real climate action hinges on confronting the worldviews of white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. The research study, *Stories of Relation and Resistance: Transformative Adult Learning in the Climate/Environmental Justice Movement in the Wabanaki Homelands*, focused on collaborations between Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqewiyik, and white settler participants in the climate justice movement in what is colonially known as New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. This article highlights the transformative adult learning that happened through relationships from these movement struggles, which has affected how participants have shifted their understanding of and actions toward sustainability. Real sustainability within Turtle Island lies in a paradigm shift of white settlers toward a relational nature-based epistemology, ontology, and axiology. This research demonstrates that some of these changes happen when relationships are built through movement struggle between white settler activists, Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqewiyik land defenders and water protectors, and with the land. These changes also occur through experiential learning, individual critical self-reflexivity, and collective learning that leads to transformative adult learning for relational sustainability.

### Positionality

This research is underscored by the belief that "the researcher is not a neutral instrument of the research process" (Kovach, 2009, p. 32). Positionality, identity, life experiences,

and personal characteristics shape our research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Koopman et al., 2020). By situating ourselves within our socio-economic system, based on our identities, power, and privilege, we are better positioned to increase our self-awareness and to understand our roles and responsibilities in the work to fight climate change (Arnold et al., 1991). I am a white settler woman who grew up in what is colonially known as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. I currently reside in Napu'saqnuq along the St. Mary's River in the district of Eskikewa'kik of Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Mi'kmaq. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reminded researchers that their worldview is often implicitly shaped by imperial and colonial ideologies (as cited in Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 5). I recognize that my lens has been conditioned by my white settler upbringing, and I continue to challenge my complicity within settler colonialism every day. I also believe in righting relations, accept the responsibility of confronting settler colonialism, and support Indigenous sovereignty. Nonetheless, writing about this topic as a white settler woman brings challenges and questions, particularly regarding the historical and ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, and the resulting tensions and distrust in Indigenous/settler relations.

As gkisedtanamoogk (2010a), a Wampanoag Elder from Mashpee, in the Wabanaki Confederacy, explained, "These are not 'Indian issues,' . . . The nature of such struggles is seen and felt everywhere in the world and is of everyone's concern *and* responsibility" (p. 82). To this end, I feel that white settlers have a crucial role in taking up this political and personal work. I continue to learn that this work is difficult and messy and requires critical self-reflexivity, vulnerability, courage, and an openness to change. It requires vigilance in accepting and righting ancestral wrongs, recognizing how I benefit from ongoing colonialism, and reflecting on my flawed attempts to address my complicity. At the same time, I hold a belief in reconnecting with the natural world in the ways of my distant ancestors, Celtic Gaelic people from what is known as Scotland. As I work to reclaim this part of my identity, which was also colonized and lost, I remain diligent to avoid the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and practice.

Furthermore, I approach this research as a learner, accepting the partialness and incompleteness of knowledge, and recognizing that there are aspects of knowledge we can never understand (Cariou, 2020). For me, this project is a lifelong learning/unlearning process and a lifelong relationship building with Indigenous Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqewiyik neighbours, other settlers, and the land, which is required for our collective survival. I am not claiming to have answers. Rather, this is an invitation for us all, particularly white settlers, to look within ourselves to reflect on our identities, ancestries, and traditional belief systems that existed before the dominance of white Eurocentric worldviews. Perhaps then we can find solutions to the climate crisis. This is an important lesson that participants in this research have taught me.

### **Transformative Adult Learning**

This research is grounded on theories of transformative adult learning as delineated by Jack Mezirow (as critical reflection) and Paulo Freire (as consciousness-raising), outlined in Dirkx (1998). Transformative adult learning is the process through which the core beliefs, values, and assumptions held by adults about the ways they understand themselves and the world are altered or transformed. This shift, through critical reflection,

experiential learning, and critical consciousness, drastically changes the perspectives, meanings, and sense making of the individual.

Central to this approach to transformative adult learning for Mezirow (1991) is the focus on critical reflection and critical self-reflection as a process of making meaning from experience (Dirkx, 1998). This framework outlines how life experiences develop the perspectives that help us make sense of our worldview; however, this lens can also distort or limit what we are able to perceive and understand (Dirkx, 1998). At the core of the learning process is the critical reflection on one's assumptions and beliefs resulting in a possible transformation of perspective and understanding (Dirkx, 1998).

Furthermore, Freire's (1968/1970) strand of transformative adult learning emphasizes fostering critical consciousness among adult learners with the ultimate goals of political liberation and freedom from oppression, developing critical analysis, problem-posing abilities, and dialogic approaches (Dirkx, 1998). The object is to develop awareness of and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape our lives (Dirkx, 1998, p. 3). For Freire, transformative adult learning was "emancipatory and liberating at both a personal and social level," providing us with the capacity to construct our own meaning of the world (Dirkx, 1998, p. 3). Using the process of action, reflection, and praxis, Freire argued that education enables learners to reflect on their work and then change it (Dirkx, 1998).

In transformative adult learning, relationships are both an important part of the method and an outcome. Freire (1968/1970) and Mezirow (1991) understood reflection and dialogue are essential for the transformative adult learning process and view knowledge as constructed in relation with others (Dirkx, 1998). Additionally, transformative adult learning creates individuals who are "more inclusive in their perceptions of their world, able to differentiate increasingly its various aspects, [and] open to other points of view" (Mezirow, 1991, in Dirkx, 1998, p. 4). This creates more meaningful and holistic relationships through integration of differing dimensions of their experiences (Mezirow, 1991, in Dirkx, 1998).

For this article, the layered effect of individual critical self-reflection and critical consciousness, combined with learning in relation with others, results in the transformative adult learning of white settlers within this social movement context. Social movement spaces have long been documented as pedagogical spaces of adult teaching and learning as well as relationship building (Arribas Lozano, 2024; Hall, 2004; Langdon et al., 2014; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017a, 2017b). Social movement spaces act as microcosms of macro social dynamics and become spaces of contention and protest, bringing together people from different backgrounds, worldviews, and intentions for transformative adult learning as critical consciousness, reflection, and action (Mathieu, 2021). These movements open spaces for transformative adult learning and invite reflexivity on our assumptions and relationship with each other and the Earth as one part of the climate dilemma.

### Overview of Research

This article is a snapshot of the findings from research that investigates the transformative adult learning occurring within movements that combine Indigenous land rights and climate/environmental justice in parts of Mi'kma'ki and Wolastokuk, the ancestral homelands of the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqewiyik Nations (colonially known as Nova

Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) that make up part of the Wabanaki Confederacy. Providing an overview of the terrain of climate/environmental movements involved in this work is beyond the scope of this article. The focus of this research is grassroots social movement organizing that includes individuals and communities coming together in less formal ways. My research overall specifically looks at the relationships and transformative co-learning journeys that form within these movement spaces between Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqewiyik, and white settler peoples, as well as the natural world. This article will highlight aspects of the research concerning transformative adult learning that has occurred through relationships that have affected how participants have shifted their understanding of and actions toward sustainability for climate/environmental justice. This research is not about reconciliation; instead it is about the ongoing and necessary work of white settlers to reflect on their ways of seeing the world, how this impacts their relationships with each other and with the Earth, and how it contributes to the climate crisis. The potential for transformative change in these spaces is demonstrated and achieved through knowledge sharing, relationship building, and grassroots organizing for a model that advances adult learning and sustainability and serves as the backdrop for the emergent learnings described below.

### **Literature Review**

This research joins a community of study on the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the environmental and climate justice movement—specifically the impact of colonialism, relationships, and alliances between environmentalists and Indigenous Peoples (Agyeman, et al., 2010, 2016; Curnow & Helferty, 2018; Davis, 2010; Pickerill, 2009; Whyte, 2018). Many scholars have written specifically about pedagogical adult learning within alliances or social movements made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Kapoor, 2003; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017a, 2017b; Walter, 2007). Locally, the work of Hager and Mawopiyane (2021) provided reflections from Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in the Wabanaki Confederacy from gatherings over 30 years ago in a process of truth and healing that resulted in alliances and friendships that continue today, impacting individual, social, and systemic change. There have been others who identify ways for settlers to support Indigenous sovereignty and land rights (Carlson-Manathara & Rowe, 2021; Land, 2015; Pickerill, 2009) or to understand how non-Indigenous people can work in anti-colonial solidarity with Indigenous Peoples (Carlson-Manathara & Rowe, 2021; Curnow & Helferty, 2018; Davis, 2010; Gobby, 2020). Building on the work of these scholars, this research contributes to the field of study by demonstrating how true sustainability can occur through transformations in settler colonial and capitalist ideologies and relationships with self, others, and Mother Earth.

### **Participants**

This research was conducted between May 2022 and June 2023. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and lasted on average two hours each with a total of eight (8) participants: five (5) white settler participants, two (2) Wolastoqewiyik participants, and one (1) Mi'kmaw participant. There were 11 interviews in total; eight (8) individual semi-structured interviews and three (3) group interviews between white settler and Indigenous participants. There were seven (7) participants who identified as women,

one (1) participant who identified as a man, and three (3) participants who identified as part of the 2SLGBTQIA community. Participants ranged from their late 20s into their 70s.

Participants were approached through targeted selection based on their involvement in the climate/environmental movement, prior relationships, or suggestions from contacts or other participants. All participants had been involved in climate/environment-related work and movement-based activities in the last 10 to 25+ years in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Interviews were conducted in-person or by Zoom, due to COVID restrictions and geographic location. All participants gave their permission to use their first name and affiliation and have reviewed and approved the publication of this article. Of the white settler participants, Robin lives in Kjiptuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia) and works with the Council of Canadians. Joanna lives in Punamu'kwati'jk (Dartmouth, Nova Scotia) and works with the Ecology Action Centre. Tracy lives in Sitansisk (Fredericton, New Brunswick) and is a professor of environmental studies at St. Thomas University. Laura lives in Kwipew (Sackville, New Brunswick) and works with the United Church Social Justice Committee. Sue is a retired librarian and lives in Nalikitquniejik (Antigonish, Nova Scotia). Alma is a Wolastoqewi grandmother on the Grand Council and a member of Sitansisk Wolastoqewiyik from Eqpahak. Ron *Spasaqsit Possesom* (Morningstar Burning) is the Wolastoqewi Grand Chief from Neqotkuk First Nation from the Crow and Wolf Clan. Eliza *Starchild* is a Mi'kmaw two-spirit woman and documentary filmmaker from Epekwitk (Prince Edward Island).

### Methodology/Methods

This research uses the methodology of grounded theory, as described by Charmaz (2006, 2016), in order "to learn about the worlds we study," to develop theories to understand them, and to generate and construct a more collective theory of change (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Guided by a transformative approach, this research draws from its commitments to explicitly engage with issues of power, social justice, and social emancipation, using a collective, reciprocal, participatory, and dialogical process (Grande, 2015; Held, 2019).

The method used for this research was semi-structured, open-ended interviews as delineated by Kvale (2007). Situating participants as experts in interpreting and understanding their own lived experiences, the interview conversations were a "construction site for knowledge," illustrating meanings of their lived everyday world (p. 7). Participants were asked to describe the meanings and themes of their lives from their own perspective, in a critically reflexive and analytic manner, with follow-up questions for further clarification or description (Kvale, 2007). Using the ethic of refusal, participants were given the option to refuse questions or stories that they felt should not be shared (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Additionally, I conducted group interviews with three (3) sets of white settler and Indigenous participants, who had pre-existing relationships with each other from past or ongoing movement activities. In group interviews I asked participants to reflect on stories and learnings that described their relationships together, producing meaningful and multilayered knowledge and a strong co-constructed account and analysis (Kvale, 1996). Following the interviews, data was transcribed using Sonix and analyzed using NVIVO.

## Analytical Framework

### *Narrative and Discourse Analysis*

To analyze the data, I was guided by Kvale's (1996) methods of "meaning structuring" and "ad hoc meaning generation" (p. 199). Codes and categories were created from the patterns, themes, concepts, idea comparisons, stories, and situations that participants offered to create a condensed and meaningful pattern (Kvale, 1996). The emergent themes and topics were connected by relationships through an inductive approach and directed the analysis that follows. Data gathered from the interviews was additionally analyzed using narrative and discursive analysis to make meaning from stories, learnings, ideologies, and interactions (Kvale, 2007). The narrative analysis focused on participant stories about developing relationships to place and people, shaping identities and ideologies, making meaning, and learnings (Hampton & DeMartini, 2017; Price, 2020). The critical discourse analysis focused on the power relations of discourses and ideologies within the interactions and narratives provided as the construction and reinforcement of social meaning and practice (Fairclough, 2002).

### *Conceptual Framework: Critical Place Inquiry and Relational Validity*

A conceptual thread woven throughout this analysis is the importance of attending to relationality with land and place through a critical place inquiry and relational validity as delineated by Aleut scholar Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2015). Critical place inquiry and relational validity emphasize a foregrounding and centring of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies to land and place, and problematize white settler logics that permeate ways of seeing the world and relations to land (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Navajo scholar Andrew Curley (2019) explained that relationship to place and the struggles for sovereignty, self-determination, and land are at the heart of Indigenous understandings of environmentalism and cannot be separated out. Furthermore, place and space are never neutral. Therefore, land and the struggles for the land are infused with power relations and structures of oppression that foreground the relationships between settler colonialism, nature, and environmental devastation/protection (Dhillon, 2018). However, critical place inquiry and relational validity understand places as dynamic, "shifting over time and space and through interactions with flows of people, other species, [and] social practices" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, pp. 3–4). This research showcases the ways that participants are (re)shaping understandings and relations of land/place through movements as transformative adult learning for relational sustainability.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Relationships Are the Resistance: Transformative Adult Learning Through Relationships*

Konsmo asked how we "build good relations through ongoing colonialism and environmental destruction" (Konsmo, 2017, as cited in Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019, p. 3). This question presents our current climate dilemma, yet it also declares the climate solution. The development and maintenance of relationships as resistance to climate, environmental,

and social injustice, through mutuality and respect for each other and the Earth, push back on the isolation, division, and dispossession that colonialism and capitalism demand.

Indigenous epistemologies of relationality with land/place and kinship with the natural world inform this research. In particular, the concept of settler colonialism as ecological violence, as delineated by Potawatomi philosopher and scholar Kyle Powys Whyte (2018), who described how white settler colonial and capitalist relations to land are at the heart of the climate crisis. Many other scholars have linked our ecological crisis to colonial and capitalist logics of domination, accumulation by dispossession, and commodification of nature for extraction (Dhillon, 2019, 2021; McGregor, 2018; Palmater, 2020). White settler colonial and capitalist epistemology, ontology, and cosmology understand land and the natural world as separate, a resource, and property. This logic severs our connection with the natural world, resulting in relationships of domination, objectification, and superiority.

Colonialism and capitalism do not honour relationships to land as spiritual and sacred. However, the relationships with, epistemologies of, and ontologies of land of Indigenous Peoples "seek to revitalize and maintain relationships of mutual obligation among humans and the other-than-human" (Burow et al., 2018, p. 57). A relationship with Mother Earth pushes back on the disconnection from the natural world that capitalism and colonialism demand. Integral to the changes that this paper proposes is altering our relationship with the Earth to align with supporting Indigenous worldviews that understand the Earth as Mother. To this end, this paper deliberately refers both to the Earth and to Mother Earth to reiterate this distinctive relationship in the context of Indigenous knowledge. Therefore, averting the climate crisis requires a radical shift that centres Indigenous knowledge, epistemology, and sovereignty to create true and lasting relationships with each other and the Earth (Dhillon, 2018, 2021; Laboucan-Massimo et al., 2023; Whyte, 2018; Wildcat, 2009).

Unfortunately, due to the divergent and contradictory epistemological conceptions of settlers and Indigenous Peoples, these relationships do not come easily (Carlson-Manathara & Rowe, 2021; Davis, 2010; Gobby, 2020; Hager & Mawopiyane, 2021; Land, 2015). In recognizing that we have all been deeply impacted by capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy, we must first decolonize ourselves by challenging the combined Eurocentric ideas of "racial" social classification, capitalist colonialism, and modernity that form a belief system of superiority by dominance called "coloniality" (Quijano, 2007). Confronting our own coloniality as white settlers requires ongoing critical consciousness and collective learning and unlearning to establish a new relationship with ourselves and others. "The efforts to resist and transform these ways of knowing and being have also always been relational, witnessed in the practices and analyses of groups struggling for their liberation to find others whose freedom is linked to theirs" (Martinez HoSang & Molina, 2019, p. 3; Molina, 2019, p. xi). Within climate/environmental movement spaces, the boundaries that divide people can be bridged and rearticulated through relationships with Mother Earth, ourselves, and each other, forged in defiance of the structures that are supposed to keep people feeling disconnected and isolated (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016). To this end, the relationships are the resistance: complicated, conflicted, contested, and contradictory. Yet they are also the solution to the climate dilemma through reciprocity, interconnection, and mutuality.

Davis (2010) reminded us "that models and principles of respectful coexistence were already well established in the Americas when the European visitors arrived . . . Such

models and principles are grounded in the ontologies and epistemologies of the peoples of Turtle Island” (p. 13). *Netukulimk* is a Mi'kmaw cultural concept, recognized and practised for over 12,000 years, that emphasizes living sustainably, responsibly, and in harmony with the land, embracing a deep respect for the interconnectedness of the human and natural world (Asitu'lisk, n.d.; L'nuey, n.d.; Prosper et al., 2011; UINR, n.d.). Models of peaceful co-existence extend beyond the relationship with the natural world to relations between different peoples. The territories discussed in this article are bound by the Peace and Friendship Treaties that were signed, beginning in 1725, between the First Nations of the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqewiyik, and Passamaquoddy peoples as well as the British Crown and focused on peacefully sharing the land, without surrendering the inherent rights of Wabanaki peoples.

The transformative adult learnings that have emerged for white settler participants in this research through relationships with the natural world, relationships with self, and relationships with each other shift white settler understandings to be more aligned with *Netukulimk*, creating new pathways of knowledge that bring us closer to sustainability and relationality. Some of the relationships forged through grassroots social movement spaces in these homelands are also moving toward the frameworks of the Peace and Friendship Treaties of co-existence in this place. The discussion that follows outlines the transformative adult learning that has transpired through, and resulted in, relationships with this place and Mother Earth, relationships with self, and relationships with each other. This learning has shifted participant understanding and actions of sustainability.

### ***Relationship to/with Land/Mother Earth***

The Earth is a living being. It's a spiritual being. It has spirit. And so, every living thing is our relative . . . It's not just a resource. It's not just a commodity. Something to make money . . . so this whole colonization was to exploit and get rid of that, those connections, to take people away from the land so they could exploit it. And look what they have done. Because the same powers, the very same powers that destroyed us as a people and a way of life is now destroying life on this planet. (Alma, Wolastoqewi Elder, 2023)

How we relate to land and the natural world is tied to how we relate to ourselves and to each other. The epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies of a person or group of peoples have great impact on our relationships, how we understand and engage in the world, and our beliefs about “human”/“nature” dualism. These learnings were voiced by participants. Sue (2023) said, “I think it's complicated to be a settler in Turtle Island and to want to help protect the land because so much of it has to do with actually unlearning worldviews and learning different worldviews.”

Participant awareness of divergent relationships with land increased through movement work. Yet many realized that being raised as a white settler created limitations to fully understanding the complexity of Indigenous ontologies to land. Robin (2022) said, “My involvement in this movement has affected my relationship to the land. I think before I didn't really think about myself as part of the land that I live on. And now, I'm trying to cultivate that more. It still kind of evades me, because it's so far outside the type of thinking that I was raised in.” Nonetheless, white settler participants said that their relationship

to Mother Earth had changed, evolved, and deepened through their involvement with Indigenous land rights and climate/environmental justice movements and through their relationships with Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqewiyik land defenders and water protectors.

In changing our relationship with the natural world, we change the understanding of our place within it, and our actions of sustainability. These more profound relationships to/with place, land, and more-than-humans impacted participant beliefs, attitudes, learnings, and actions related to sustainability. Tracy (2022) explained, "I think once you learn more about the land, and the life that's there, I think it's really hard to then support projects that destroy it, and you want to be part of the solutions." As Tracy added, when we have a relationship with Mother Earth, there is a move away from projects, actions, and policies that destroy or commodify the natural world, instead shifting understandings, connection, and participation in sustainable solutions.

Laura (2023), when referring to her work on the Observer Project in Esgenoopetitj in 2000, explained "A really significant piece is the learning to understand the land as a partner in this and even a leader for us all in this." Discussing the first light ceremonies at 3:30 a.m., she reflected, "You showed up to the sacred fire, stumbling out of the house in the dark and making your way, to ground that work, that activism, in starting the day outside, often in the cold or wet and just being reminded of the first relationships to the water, to the other than human beings." The continued mindfulness of the sacredness and reciprocity in relationships with the natural world that participants learned changed how they understood and related to land and place and how they approached environmental work.

Returning to Whyte's (2018) concept of settler colonialism as ecological violence, transformative learning of participants indicated that unlearning settler colonial ontologies to land and re-establishing a connection moves us closer to sustainability. To this end, changes to settler ontologies to land of participants were interwoven with learnings about Indigenous knowledge systems and ontologies, relationship building, and an evaluation of self and relationality with Mother Earth. Robin (2022) described how her involvement with the Stop Alton Gas struggle over eight years "was the place where [she] really learned a lot about Mi'kmaw culture and orientation to the world and really developed [her] understanding of [her] relationship to living on stolen land with an existing incredible Indigenous culture." It was through participating in these Indigenous-led movements that she gained an "understanding that Indigenous knowledge is an extremely sophisticated way of relating to the earth." Although many white settler participants believed they had a strong connection to the land growing up, they recognized that it was rooted in a white settler ontology to land that was very challenging to unlearn (Robin, 2022; Sue, 2023; Tracy, 2022). However, being involved with Indigenous land rights and climate/environmental justice movements, alongside Indigenous counterparts, they learned new ways of relating to the land.

White settler participants also learned about the land from Indigenous activists within the movement by working on shared issues and with the shared love of land and desire to protect it (Joanna, 2023; Laura, 2023; Robin, 2022; Sue, 2023; Tracy, 2022). By learning through struggle from Indigenous counterparts, many realized their own transformation in their relationship to land and that our collective survival is bound up with the survival of each other and nature. Joanna (2023) said, "I think that's actually a healing journey. It's about healing. I think I'm healing my relationship with the land and understanding, you know, working to understand, What is my place in this place?" Part of this healing journey

for white settlers is deepening their understanding of their identities and ancestries and reflecting on belonging and connection to this place.

Through this process, the concept of *Netukulimk*, the interconnectedness with each other, the land, and non-humans, was more clearly grasped. Joanna (2023) explained, “Meeting people and understanding and learning from them about the importance of our connection with water or our connection with land and, and feeling that it really is . . . about re-embodiment of our humanity. It’s about becoming properly human again on Mother Earth and realizing that we’re actually part of a larger system of reciprocity in life.”

Despite the ongoing limits of white settler embodiment or actualizing of these concepts, white settler participants are trying to live out these values, actions, and relations, albeit, on their own admission, imperfectly.

### ***Rooted in Spirituality***

It was significant to me to be coming to social justice work from a faith perspective because before I was a minister, I was also involved in environmental work but without that spiritual grounding, I burnt out at least twice before I was 40 . . . The gift of bringing a spiritual root to the work has been the longevity, having a tradition that has gone long before and will continue long after, that it’s not all in our hands. We’re a part and a piece of the journey, but we don’t need to get attached to what the outcome is going to be. Pushing and doing everything we can in this with the power that we’ve got in this moment in time. But to give trust over to something bigger. (Laura, 2023)

A common theme expressed by participants was that a relationship to Mother Earth must be rooted in spirituality, the sacred, and ceremony. Frequently, white settlers were invited and reminded by Indigenous counterparts in the movement that they must ground their relationships and bring themselves to the work with their own spiritual connections. Laura (2023) was consistently reminded by her Wolastoqewi activist counterpart, Alma, that “You can’t do this without connecting your spirituality.” Laura also recalled a powerful invitation and reminder by a Mi’kmaw Elder who said, “Come with your sacred items and hold your ceremonies. I don’t want you taking over ours, but you need to be rooted in the spiritual and the sacred here on the land too.” These teachings from Wolastoqewiyik and Mi’kmaw Elders remind us to come to environmental work with distinct paths and knowledge, while also emphasizing the importance of the spiritual connection that we all have the capacity to hold with nature.

Furthermore, as Laura (2023) noted in the opening quote to this section, she had been involved in the environmental movement for many years before working with Indigenous-led struggles and had burnt out many times because her work had not been grounded in the spiritual connection with Mother Earth. Additionally, Joanna (2023) said, “I’ve had a spiritual life my whole life . . . And I think that has allowed me to connect with ceremony when I’ve had an opportunity to be in ceremony and to sort of understand how to be in that space and experience it. And, it’s been incredibly powerful and transformative for me every time that I’ve had that opportunity.” Although the ways that participants related to the land, and their deepened connection over their time within movement work, were different, they all recognized that their relationship with the land was essential and

key to grounding and connecting to the work. They were always coming back to their relationship with Mother Earth, gaining perspective, and listening to the spiritual and embodied—not only focusing on the analysis or intellectual (Laura, 2023; Joanna, 2023).

### ***Relationship with Self: Decolonizing Settler Colonialism Within***

That connection, that relationship has been severed for thousands and thousands of years for settler populations . . . They've been through this trauma for thousands and thousands of years before my people . . . we have a lot to offer because we [as Mi'kmaw] have not been colonized for as long as our settler brothers and sisters. (Eliza Starchild, Mi'kmaw Knowledge Keeper, 2022)

An important reminder that continued to emerge from Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqewiyik, and white settler participants was that, for white settlers, reconnecting with Mother Earth must not be undertaken as a form of appropriation of Indigenous traditions, practices, and beliefs. Laura (2023) explained, "We're taught over and over the Two Row Wampum that goes with the Peace and Friendship Treaties, . . . talking about our spiritual journeys . . . they don't need to interlace but to be respectful journeying alongside." This means doing the deep spiritual work to develop our own relationships with Mother Earth grounded in our own spiritual connection that must be reawakened after hundreds of years of being colonized, a belief strongly reiterated by many of the participants in this study.

Wolastoqewi Elder Alma (2023) explained,

[Colonization] was very well crafted by the time it got to the shores here in North America, because it started in Europe . . . in our teachings it tells us that in the beginning of time, when the Earth was young and it, and people were placed here, there were four sacred colors of man: red, yellow, black, and white. And each one was given a path to walk on. And they were given instructions, a bundle by which to live a good and happy life right here on this Earth. And every one of those traditions were connected to the Earth. They were Earth-based cultures.

Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqewiyik participants said that white settlers have been colonized and disconnected from the natural world longer than Indigenous Peoples, so are also carrying the trauma of colonialism. However, they reminded us that prior to colonialism, we were all deeply connected to the natural world and must find our ways back to it (Eliza Starchild, Mi'kmaw Knowledge Keeper, 2022).

Joanna (2023), a white settler participant, recalled a turning point for her own learning while engaged in a workshop called "Singing the Bones." She realized "our ancestors at some point also had an Indigenous connection to place and an understanding that everything was alive," but we have been colonized so long that we don't remember. However, Joanna also said that reconnecting required embodied practices of letting go of white supremacy and healing from intergenerational trauma of long-term colonialism. White settler participants recognized they needed to do this unsettling decolonizing work on themselves.

A key learning that participants identified as essential in decolonizing settlers' ideologies and relationships was the Treaty Education that occurred within movement spaces.

Speaking about the anti-fracking struggle in Elsipogtog in 2013–2014, Ron *Spasaqsit Possesom* (Morningstar Burning) (2023), Wolastoqewi Grand Chief, explained, “We started to educate a lot of our allies about the Peace and Friendship Treaties . . . This open dialogue with them to explain to them that there was no surrender of land or resources in these Peace and Friendship Treaties, that they were actually exactly what they said. We agreed to live in peace and friendship.”

For many settlers, this was their first time learning about the Peace and Friendship Treaties. Laura (2023) said, “I didn’t know a thing about Peace and Friendship Treaties, what the Indigenous treaties of this area were, but kids on the street, in Esgenoopetitj, they knew about treaties, ten year olds could tell me the essence of what was in the Peace and Friendship Treaties or their rights in relation to the Crown, in Canada. And I was embarrassed that I didn’t know.” For white settler participants, learning about the Peace and Friendship Treaties created a major shift in their understandings of settler colonialism and how they understood and related to Indigenous Peoples and this land. By decolonizing taken-for-granted notions of settler belonging and the settler colonial institutions and actions that continue to break Treaty commitments at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous-settler relations, and sustainability of the natural world, white settler participants learned about a pre-existing covenant for a peaceful co-existence between Indigenous and settler peoples and with the natural world. This realization for white settlers, and their ability to reflect on their own decolonizing and on the importance of re-establishing a connection and relationship with the natural world, is essential to moving toward true sustainability.

### ***Confronting Coloniality***

There’s lots of white people like me who are like, “I want to help Indigenous people,” and they try to do that without necessarily deeply investigating what their motivations are or what their worldview is or what they’re hoping to get out of that kind of relationship . . . I think white people have a collective responsibility to learn and help each other learn about the systems of oppression that we’ve been steeped in and that we are actively carrying out. (Robin, 2022)

White settler logics and settler colonialism show up within movements, even for settlers who feel they are progressive, critically reflexive, and committed to social or environmental justice (Curnow & Helferty, 2018; Davis, 2010; Simpson, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Until white settler activists confront their own coloniality to unlearn these ideologies of oppression, and to develop a transformed relationship with self, sustainability will always be a superficial endeavour. The climate/environmental justice movement is a setting ripe with opportunity for white settler activists to engage in their unlearning by confronting coloniality, learning individually and collectively. Wampanoag Elder gkisedtanamoogk (2010b) believed, “If this work does not transform you, you are not paying attention” (p. 53).

Growing up in settler colonial social conditioning, white settlers rarely see their taken-for-granted hegemonic ideologies of settler colonialism and capitalism and their own power and privilege. As white settlers engaged in the movements for Indigenous rights or climate/environmental justice, their understandings of their own coloniality and their

positions of power and privilege deepened. There was no turning back; they could not unsee the injustices, oppressions, violence, and hypocrisies they had witnessed perpetrated by the settler colonial state or the state apparatus (i.e., the RCMP, Department of Fisheries and Oceans). Laura (2023) explained how her white settler imaginary and comfort were challenged, stating, "Every day I was learning how wrong we as white folks and white society perceived what we were seeing."

Participants also realized this is a lifelong commitment to learning, an ongoing incomplete journey. It also led to a questioning of their role within the movements as white settlers and learning how to use their privilege and power (Laura, 2023). It became clear that these learnings were life-changing, yet also required a deep and continued commitment, and the ability to evolve involvement over time. Laura (2023) shared,

The biggest learning that I had is that there is lifelong learning to do in figuring out when to stand in front of, when to stand beside, and when to stand behind, in the movement of supporting folks on the margins. When do you use your whiteness, or privilege, to protect, to interrupt the systems? When do you stand beside for courage or protection or encouragement or solidarity, and when do you step back and make space?

For this transformation and learning to occur means a process of being unsettled (Lowman & Barker, 2015). As Mi'kmaw scholar, lawyer, and activist Pam Palmater (2020) explained, "It requires speaking the truth about our collective history but, more importantly, with a focus on how that history continues to impact our current reality" (p. 253). Confronting dominant power and knowledge structures, such as coloniality and other systems of oppression, must be central to efforts of sustainability. Unless white settlers are committed to this process, their involvement will be shallow and will reinforce white settler colonial logics that contribute to the climate crisis and negatively impact relationships.

Approaching this unlearning of white supremacy, coloniality, and capitalist-centric ways of knowing and being in the world requires a surrendering of whiteness. It also requires white settlers to be vulnerable and brave, to unlearn core beliefs and behaviours, to be open to making mistakes, unlearning perfectionism, and being okay with being wrong. This requires humility to let go of ego, white fragility, defensiveness, and apathy (DiAngelo, 2018; Saad, 2020). It also requires not letting shame and guilt paralyze you from doing the difficult and uncomfortable work. Robin (2022) explained, "I think people when they start to see how bad things are and what these systems are and what the impacts of them are and that they're part of it, they just feel a deep shame that makes them shut down and stop." Laura (2023) said, "I have to, despite my hurt feelings or my bruised ego, to keep showing up . . . My body wants to run away, my body wants to leave, but I just keep telling myself, you have to just keep showing up." We will not get this right, we will make mistakes, but it requires accepting this is a lifelong and life-changing learning journey, replete with inevitable errors along the way, yet not shying away because it will not ever be complete or perfect. Laura admitted, "I blow it all the time. Even with the best of intentions, I step on toes. I speak in ways that convey something that I can't even see because, you know, I'm so, so white."

Nonetheless, committing to decoloniality, and building our relationship with ourselves and others in decolonial ways to address the climate crisis, requires sitting with

this discomfort and working through it without the promise of reconciling these issues in what Whetung (2017) called “remaining unreconciled” (as cited in Curnow & Helferty, 2018, p.156). White settlers need to do the individual work while also doing the collective work if we are going to change the perspectives and relationships that are required to address the climate crisis for a sustainable life. Joanna (2023) explained, “The root of the crisis is the worldview . . . Until that worldview shifts, and we understand ourselves as part of a web of life, we’re going to continue to create the same crisis.”

### ***Relationships with each other***

It’s not just intellectual. And understanding that, it takes a certain amount of vulnerability and openness to be able to be open to an actual relationship with another person and the risks and obligations that come with that. Like you’re going to screw up and do something shitty and you’re going to hurt somebody accidentally. And how are you going to respond to that and how are you going to work through that? Are you committed to staying in relationship with that person and learning, having the humility to understand that a lot of our instincts come from white supremacy? (Joanna, 2023)

Moving from the ecological violence of settler colonialism toward a sustainability that prioritizes relationality with ourselves and the natural world also requires healing relationships between people, particularly Indigenous-settler relations. Gobby (2020) explained that the “converging climate and inequality crisis speak to deeply troubled *human-Earth* and *human-human* relationships. Both of these sets of relationships are in urgent need of healing and transformation” (p. 8). Furthermore, this transformation must be both self-reflexive and collective (Walsh, 2012).

Many participants emphasized the learnings they had gained from each other working together. Robin (2022) said, “Learning is collective and action is collective.” To this end, these social movements provided important spaces for collective learning, between settlers and between Indigenous and settler peoples. This transformative adult learning built critical consciousness about coloniality, relationality, sustainability, and climate action.

Lowman and Barker (2015) have written that settlers need relationships of responsibility and accountability in order to unsettle and destabilize, grappling with things we do not and cannot understand to challenge “taken-for-granted colonial ‘truths’” (p. 20). Tracy (2022) explained, “I think it’s finding the time to have the really meaningful conversations around the work that we do and having those honest conversations about how to better work together.” Intentional places and spaces of political learning, such as study groups and study circles, as well as the informal, incidental learning within social movements become important places for challenging the coloniality of power and for holding white settlers accountable, while learning together to transform knowledge regarding sustainability (Choudry, 2016; Curnow & Helferty, 2018; Foley, 1999; Quijano, 2007; Walsh, 2012). When movements create spaces for critical consciousness and building relationships, there is a deeper and longer-lasting impact.

The practice of decolonizing as a settler must be a collective process, with a need to link struggles and movements through decolonizing relationship building as direct action (Lowman & Barker, 2015). When referring to the group of settlers that came together to

hold each other accountable for individual and collective learning, and to work toward decolonizing within movements, Robin (2022) confessed, "It's shifted my thinking about how to live out my personal responsibility, and how to address the discomfort that comes with the learning about decolonizing and confronting whiteness, and it has also helped to free me from some of the shame that I think is a huge barrier to people doing this work." Robin went on to say, "I still have negative feelings, I still feel shitty when I do things, it's still hard, it's still challenging and difficult, but I don't feel trapped in shame the same way because there's this supportive group of people that's like, yeah, we are all in this together." It was in these spaces of learning that Robin realized the collective responsibility of white settlers to help each other do the deep learning together, with compassion and not shame.

Furthermore, "any struggle within the settler colonial context will always be tied by the logics of settler colonialism unless activists work to build decolonial relationships with Indigenous peoples" (Fortier, 2017, p. 49). Participants shared examples of Indigenous-led spaces of learning, listening, and healing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These intentional spaces create circles for dialogue for hard but necessary conversations and relationship building. When speaking about the annual Peace and Friendship Gatherings at Tatamagouche Centre, Laura (2023) reflected that "people were willing to be so vulnerable in their sharing about their experiences. And . . . [took] the time to really listen and for people to share stories and pain and to have fun together too. Like those were really important." Laura shared her insight about the significance of these spaces for being together for brave conversations, but added that they required a willingness to be open to hear hard truths, while also building connections and relationships on a personal level.

Furthermore, Joanna (2023) described a gathering at Asitu'lisk: Indigenous Learning Centre with settler staff from the Ecology Action Centre and Mi'kmaw collaborators, explaining, "It felt like a mutual space of belonging and that was really powerful . . . and it happens through relationship." Hager and Mawopiyane (2021) explained that by sharing space and place, engaging in ceremony, and participating in talking circles, honest, authentic, and mutual relationships were developed to reimagine Indigenous-settler relations. To be meaningful, these must be Indigenous-driven processes with the commitment of white settlers to humility in confronting settler colonialism.

The emerging relationships between settlers and Indigenous Peoples within this movement create transformative adult learning and shifts in perspectives, actions, and relations. When there are decolonizing approaches built into relationships and social movements spaces, the learnings that come out of these processes are profound, life-changing, and transformative. As Joanna (2023) explained,

There's work we have to do on our own, and then there's work that really can only happen together. And just committing to that and understanding that it's not a distraction from our mission. It's not a distraction from the change we're trying to make in the world. It's actually vitally intertwined and foundational to the change we're trying to make in the world.

The act of building relations pushes back on settler colonialism as ecological violence and re-grounds climate action in the Peace and Friendship Treaties. By accepting that we have distinct yet interdependent pathways in this place, and by working to heal and build relationships, a new vision of sustainability is created that is more aligned with the

Mi'kmaw concept of *Netukulimk*, thereby honouring the traditional knowledge and relationships of this place.

### Conclusion

As we grapple with the climate crisis, and the underlying systemic causes, this research is grounded in a belief in the transformative power of knowledge and relationships to create a radical reimagining of the world. This article illustrates how relationships and learnings that emerge shift the foundations to address the climate crisis. Through participation in struggles for Indigenous land rights and environmental justice, participants expressed the deep and revolutionary learning that occurred within the spaces and interactions of social movements, and which revealed that relationships are the resistance. Integral to this are relationships to land/Mother Earth, a need to confront coloniality for a renewed relationship with self, and the transformative adult learning through struggle that led to lifelong and life-changing relationships to others. This research also demonstrates how social movement spaces build relationships, critical self-reflexivity, and critical consciousness through struggle and altered learning journeys. The possibility for transformative adult learnings in our relationships with Mother Earth, with self, and with others makes this an important model of resistance that addresses settler colonialism and the climate crisis. Social movement spaces provide possibilities for change to overcome the immense challenges that we face as human and more-than-human species. This is a process of lifelong learning and unlearning, and lifelong relationship building with Indigenous neighbours, other settlers, and more-than-human relations required for our collective survival. This research provides a glimpse into a social movement where settler colonial, white supremacist, and capitalist ideologies can be confronted and a new way of being in right relation for climate justice and sustainability is reimagined.

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