An open letter to the Universe: A reflection on conducting "good" research

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Abstract

Purpose: The goal of this letter to the Universe was to reveal a qualitative researcher’s journey into finding her sense of self during a trial she faced while conducting her dissertation research.

Methodology: Indigenous research methodologies (IRM) mixed with an autoethnography were used. A critical reflexivity position, with respect to being in the field, was adopted, melding in the Universe, the Sun, and the Earth as objects that the author can talk and interact with. This reflexivity was captured within the letter to the Universe.

Findings: Three outcomes are discussed. Notably, the implications of this work with respect to power-relations and gender. The issue of being in the field is then discussed. Finally, untangling the practical implications of using IRM/autoethnography as a combined method is presented.

Social/Practical Implications: The letter to the Universe offers a guide of sorts to other qualitative researchers, via one person’s experience in the field. The letter is, in the end, a cautionary story for others, acknowledging that we can respond to a trial in a gendered fashion, that one needs to be humble along with being persistent, flexible and resourceful towards achieving “good” research.

Originality/Value: As a Western, White woman scholar, who circles Indigenous influences, this letter demonstrated one possible way of embracing, and acknowledging, IRM without appropriating it.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Experience in the Field.
Prologue

I have found, in the past few years of academic writing and presenting my work, that engaging others in my work comes from talking about me and my experiences in Space. The output of my research to date has, however, not been about me and my experiences; I am present in everything I write, clearly, but ‘who I am’, and what I have gone through emotionally in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-professional sphere are not necessarily present. I acknowledge that ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’ are complex constructions of my varied identities (Ruel, 2017a). In addition, my varied emotions - exhilaration, happiness, frustration, sadness, rage, etc. – are intertwined in this gendered individual that I am and am becoming. By putting my very complexity down on paper, in my letter to the Universe, you will hopefully learn a little more about ‘who I am’.

I am often asked how I came to work in space – THE Space as in the Heavens and Stars. I, to this day, remember sitting in a movie theater, with my sister, anxiously waiting for Star Wars to come up on the screen. This was 1977, when things like Star Destroyers, Princess Leia, and Wookies, did not exist within the realm of imagination, let alone in our discourses. When this aforementioned Star Destroyer came onto the screen, I knew, at that very moment, that I wanted to be on that ship. I did not have a sense, on that fateful day, that my fluid identities would be an issue with respect to working in the Space industry.

While extensive research has been conducted in gender and diversity circles focused on engineering and science (e.g. Chu, 2006; Faulkner, 2007; Hanappi-Egger, 2013; Jorgenson, 2002; Maier, 1997; Messerschmidt, 1996), many of these studies were centred on the most vulnerable individuals; that is, women students of various ethnic/raced/cultural backgrounds. The epistemological vacuum created by focusing on the most vulnerable implies that STEM-professional women, in their late-career, are just fine, thank-you-very-much. I am not sure that in 1977, or in my early career as a STEM-professional, I would have sought out academic literature to know what it’s like for a woman to work in the Space industry. All I knew, in 1977, was that the science of Space was a draw for me, and that I had the support of my father, an avowed male-chauvinist (Ruel, 2018a).
Today, I am not (yet) asked why I stopped working in the Canadian space industry. I expect that this question may be framed within feelings of incredulity on the part of the person asking the question (i.e. ‘How could you quit?! You had to have the coolest job ever!’). This work brings to light some of the industrial social reality of working in Space, in the form of a letter I wrote to the Universe. The letter showcases my complex self, both as a STEM-professional woman and as an academic, and the social interactions with my community of support, which included my husband, who is also a STEM-professional, and my circle of mentors and friends/colleagues.

I navigated, in this letter, my subjective experiences framed within Foucault’s (1980) notion of power-relations, within the context of larger meanings. This drove me to search for an understanding of the web of fluid social interactions that I was a part of. This is an important point because I did not want to perpetuate a contrast between woman-versus-man binary representations within Power (with a capital P) entities (Habermas, 1984). In other words, the binary treatment of genders does not figure in this work; what stands out is that, yes, as a complex individual, I can embrace some feminine-ideals, just as my husband can embrace masculine-ideals. However, each of us can also transcend these ideals as we move through the social.

The context of larger meanings were gleaned from the Indigenous research methodologies (IRM), influenced by Jeff Baker’s (2017) Plains Cree epistemological framing of IRM³. IRM is recognized as a relational method, where the knowledge that is generated belongs to the community (Baker, 2017). The community that I refer to in this work is extensive, and includes the academic community with which I practice, my community of mentors, my family, and my Indigenous friends that surround me. Indigenous-based epistemologies are multifaceted, and are difficult to define: they are based on nonreductionist, emotional, physical and spiritual existences, and are linked to the relationship with the Earth and the living, and to “the philosophies, beliefs, values and educational processes of entire communities” (Brayboy and Maughan, 2009, p. 3). Indigenous-based knowledge can be “expressed in diverse languages that portray an active, animate cosmos” (Baker, 2017, p. 180). These active, animated lived experiences – which are embodied in my letter by capitalizing the Universe, Earth, Stars, Knowledge, etc. - translate
into epistemological questions which are not based on an individual who is independent from others but reflects these relationships.

Part of relational IRM involves recognizing that I have many advantages, including being a White woman. I am also a scholar who lived both in the quantitative (life sciences) and qualitative (Foucauldian-framed understandings of the social) world of research. With respect to my state of being, my acts of reflexivity, mirrored in my letter, included acknowledging that I am not ‘just’ an amalgam of my self- and social-identities (Ruel, 2017a). I am, and I am becoming, as an outcome of my emotions, social interactions, and relations with others and with the Earth, the Universe, the Sun, etc. (Baker, 2017; Van Maanen et al., 1993; Whiteman, 2010). This relational approach was inspired by my journey of discovery while reading Jeff Baker’s (2017) nitâcimowinis, and Patricia Monture’s (1986) Ka-Nin-Geh-Heh-Gah-E-Sa-Nonh-Yah-Gah. I also came to realize, via my field work and the subsequent analysis of collected data focused on other STEM-professional women in the Canadian space industry, that we shared similar challenges and experiences. Notably, the STEM-professional women in my dissertation research had their own stories to tell of the systemic discrimination they faced in this industry (Ruel, 2017). Vigrine, a late-career STEM-professional, stood out for me personally as an example of how discrimination can undo an individual (Ruel, 2018b). The utter destruction of who she was and who she was becoming, embodied within her attributed ‘You’re Like a Dog’ identity (Ruel, 2018b), emboldened me to find my courage and to stand up for her, and for other STEM-professional women in this industry. I chose to consciously embrace the ‘we-ness’ of this journey, and to reflect it within my own cry to the Universe.

With this letter, I do not wish to appropriate the “sacred from its traditional context” (Baker, 2017, p. 186). I cannot, however, ignore the influence that Inuit, Aboriginal peoples, and First Nations interests have had on my life. My father, in the 1970's into the 1980's, worked in what was known, at the time, as the Canadian Indian and Northern Affairs department. He would often go up North, calling us on shortwave radio, regaling us with stories about taking a dog team to meet Elders in various communities, or fishing for Arctic Char with the community he was visiting. He made friends that, simply said, had a
lifetime impact on him (and I might add, that he had a lifetime impact on them). I was fortunate to spend a summer with some of his friends, learning stories and various communities’ protocols. I grew up surrounded by Inuit Art and symbols throughout my house, seeking teenage comfort in Indigenous storytelling that my friend Hannah would share with me when we would write to each other. I also walked side by side with several Métis children, Hannah in particular, being adopted into White families. I continue, to this day, to interrelate with a number of friends that either identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis, or who are married into, and parents of, Aboriginals/First Nations individuals, or who are active members within band councils. I chose to reflect this relational social reality by naming this as circling Indigenous worldviews.

This leaves the question of why I chose to use IRM, melded with an autoethnography, to write a letter to the Universe. The special editors for this issue drew me into their question of “what is good research?” (Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management, special issue call for papers, 2016), while I was in the haze of organizational and personal turmoil. I pondered with one of the special editors, at a conference, what voice I could add to their important deliberations surrounding the positivist assumptions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981) as the measuring stick for what is “good”. Similarly, the eternal question of ‘what is interesting?’ (Barley, 2006; Davis, 1971) drew me into this question of “good” research. I knew I wanted to share with others, both academics and STEM-professionals, my personal, relational experiences in order to help grow an understanding of what can happen while conducting research and while working in the Canadian Space industry. The goal for this work was to share this experience in such a way to inform the reader so that they would not be caught unaware, as I had been. I also knew that I wanted to stay ‘true’ to ‘who I am’ and to ‘who I am becoming’, as I moved into a community of academics. I knew that I wanted to foster, and advocate for, a relational qualitative approach. This relational approach was a way to address what Whiteman (2010) called out as the removal of person-hood and the “sanitized version of management reality” (p. 330) that are so prevalent in academic writing. I felt strongly that the person, as imperfect as she may be, needs to
be acknowledged in management research beyond say a theory building exercise that ignores the interlaced relations of two women interacting together (Özkazanç-Pan, 2012).

I do hope by sharing this prologue with you, the reader, at this time, that you will see ‘me’ in the letter to the Universe. I also hope that you will see, via my shared experiences, the other STEM-professional women that I left behind, who continue to work in this industry, and who face various systemic discrimination experiences daily (Ruel, 2017a). You may also see yourself, my academic colleagues, in this experience I share with you. I am provoking the reader into thinking about their field experiences, and then having their thinking shift, in an act of retrospection. Once you have read the letter to the Universe, I will guide you back to the methodology framework used, and to a discussion on the implications of this work.
Dear Universe,

The Sun, the Moon, and the “Earth [that] is my mother” (Monture, 1986, p. 160), they all work together to make Life possible. I embrace this Life that you, dear Universe, provide to me. My embrace is reflected in my efforts to make a difference, as you probably know. Just in case you missed me - because I know how busy you are - I’ll introduce myself before I get to the point of my letter.

My White French ancestor was a simple fisherman, who arrived in 1672 onto Quebec’s shores. He understood the Water, watching the tide ebb and flow, only catching what he needed to survive, and what his master told him he needed to provide to him. Since that time, my ancestors have navigated many different types of occupations and relationships with the Earth. As for me specifically, I am a mother who tries to nurture her relationship with the Earth. I work hard to do life science research in Space, trying to make a difference not only for those who are in orbit but also for individuals who are on Earth.

I also conduct organizational research, analyzing and reflecting on how we on Earth marginalize. I have to tell you that individuals are, in certain circumstances, frustrated by these limits (e.g. Monture, 1986). Some believe they have to fight, or go to war, against these limits (e.g. Shin et al., 2016; Yousafzai, 2013). Others believe that they can’t change these limits, giving up the fight along the way (e.g. Bates Harris, 1991; Ruel, 2018b). Can you imagine, Universe, being identified as ‘The Bitch’, ‘Girl Engineer’, ‘You’re like a dog’, ‘How can we count on you? You’re a woman, you have kids’, Uppity Black Female (Ruel, 2017b, 2018b; Ruel et al., 2018)? I like others before me find that, at times, we are at a crossroad with respect to these attempts to categorize us: should I continue to work to surface these limits that marginalize? Or should I just walk away? I find navigating these questions, and my actions, difficult, a trial of sorts. This letter is to give you an idea of what one of these trial looks like, and to ask you to align the Stars next time I encounter such a trial.
I begin then at the beginning. Well, ok, not your beginning, but the beginning with respect to my organizational research – what I passionately want to address, and the community that supports me. I then move to describing this trial that I mentioned earlier. I also share the backstage dramas and deceptions (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016) of this trial. I close with my plea to you.

The Beginning

As I said, I work in Space, your backyard really, in the hope of making a difference. The thing is, I’ve noticed that I am the only woman doing the job that I do. Oh, yes, there are women working in Space, but they seem to be held down in lower occupational positions. I was fortunate when I first noticed these boundaries. Did you have a hand in that? I am referring to having someone by my side, that I’ll refer to as Obi-Wan[iv], who taught me much about courage. Obi-Wan underlined that I would need to ask difficult questions, to read (a lot), and to seek out those individuals who would elevate me. He gently helped me to open my eyes, to see that I could be an instigator for change in the face of systemic discrimination in the Space industry.

I took my first tentative, awkward steps into questioning these limits, believing at the time that you again, dear Universe, had a hand in this. I embarked on a grueling schedule of work and study, gaining Knowledge from those who had come before me: Acker, Baker, Burrell, Butler, Hekman, Helms Mills, Kanter, Mills, Monture, Morgan, etc. Then I ‘met’ Foucault. I felt like the Sky had opened up in front of me! I was blown away! I realized I could look at the self in such a way to expose limits in a non-binary (that is, man-versus-woman) fashion.

You then guided me to the discovery of a beautiful place by the Atlantic Ocean. I would meet my next mentor there, who would inspire and guide me, ground me in Knowledge and self-care. My courage, I freely admit, was missing upon this first meeting with Yoda, as I will call him here. I was so tongue-tied, that I was unable to string words together to form a sentence. How embarrassing! Thankfully, he saw me for ‘who I am’, and my possibilities. He embraced me that evening with Knowledge, compassion, and
confidence. I believe you also sent me another mentor – two in one place, how lucky I felt! Ahsoka’s vibrancy, brilliance and excitement at what I was proposing to study were palpable. We talked for hours, hardly noticing people that milled around us. Finally, my wonderful trifecta of passionate mentors was complete with the arrival of Stass. What a gift she was! Her compassion and spirit infused me with peace and confidence.

With my Knowledge and my community of mentors, I felt this courage well up in me. The question of the lack of women in STEM management positions in the Canadian Space industry was mine to answer! I naively believed that everything would be all right, that I could undo systemic discrimination in an industry.

The Trial

I successfully defended my dissertation proposal focused on the lack of women in management positions in the Space industry. I applied for ethics approval, which was granted rather efficiently I must say. I was ready! I had my theoretical framework, I had my methodology, and I had my ethics approval. Ahsoka asked me, during my defense, if I saw what I was about to do. Retrospectively, I can say that I did not ‘see’. Is it because I believed you would protect me? Is it because I didn’t understand what ‘career suicide’, as Ahsoka called it, would be like? These questions keep going through my mind, as I go over my notes from the defence, and try to remember what I was thinking at that time.

I was approached to do a series of interviews on my research, and on my experiences as the only woman doing the job, Life Sciences Mission Manager, that I did. I agreed to these interviews, inviting the interviewers and the photographers into ‘my’ world of Space. I made sure that one particular individual, whom I will call the Watcher-on-the-Wall, was involved in all aspects of this process. Remember, I wanted to break down barriers; so, I broke down these boundaries, unburdening myself of secrets I had held inside for so long. Why did I talk?! Why did I let everything out?! Why didn’t you stop me, Universe?!
The outcome of this interview came back to me for final approval. I was surprised to see myself and my research portrayed in words. Frankly, I was a bit overwhelmed by what I was reading. I thanked all those involved, and gave the go-ahead to print. You must have been shaking your head at me, Universe.

The Watcher-on-the-Wall was not happy with the final product, and she called me into her office. A friend, a colleague, a woman working in Space did not like what I had revealed of this social reality; that is, that men remain in management and women are positioned in supporting roles. “Could you change what you said?” she asked. Specifically, she did not like that I had said ‘it is unacceptable’ that I am the only woman working the particular management position I held. The Watcher-on-the-Wall felt that I had portrayed the organization in a negative light. “How could I say the things I had said?!” she asked, with a tinge of anger and surprise in her voice. She urged me again to change what I had said, as she tried to convince me to buy into the idea that “We really needed to keep a ‘good’ message coming out from the organization”. “After all, we are an inspiring story maker, aren’t we?”, she asked rhetorically.

I declined her offer to change my words. I believed, at the time, that if I grounded my arguments in ‘truth’, there could only be one outcome: the revelation of boundaries that would lead towards the improvement of Life for everyone in the Space industry. I also believed that if I trusted in this ‘truth’, all – Life, Space, Mother Earth, and Knowledge - would see what I was trying to do and see it for what it was. What I did not see was that my friend, my colleague, my Space sister would do her job. She would do her job so well, that she would attempt to reconstruct ‘truth’ to meet the organization’s own needs. She also threatened to implicate ‘The North’, a city where those with Power reside. She would create her own narratives to refute everything I had said, to ensure that the ‘good news’ message of Space would be maintained. There was also a veiled threat of losing my job, if ‘The North’ found out about what I had said.

**Backstage Dramas and Deceptions: What do I do now?!**

I couldn’t believe, like Goodall (2005), that I was going to be “betrayed by the truth” (p. 495). You had to see me shaking with fear, with incredulity, as I walked out of her office, Universe. I don’t
remember how I made it out of that office, down the hall to my office, to collect my personal belongings, and then to make my way home. I could barely string enough words together to tell my husband, in our kitchen, what had just happened. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach, all the air gone from me. Fear for my own future, when I had only altruistic goals in mind, as an academic and as a practicing STEM-professional in the Space industry, left a bad taste of adrenaline in my mouth; nothing I could say or do was alleviating this adrenaline-fueled flight response. I wanted to run, as fast as possible, away from this threat. ‘Career suicide’ had begun much faster than I had anticipated, from a direction I had not foreseen.

I had thought briefly, a fleeting idea really, that the men in this industry would rise up, and protect their boundaries. Never did I think for one moment that a woman, who I considered my friend, would rise up to protect the boundary Wall that separated women from management positions. Universe, you tricked me into believing that a sister would walk beside me, not against me, in revealing these ‘truths’. Why would you trick me this way? Why would you do such a thing?

Isn’t it ironic, you are probably saying to yourself, that I turned to a man to help navigate this deception. My husband did not shake with fear, but with fury. He was able to see how important this research was not only to me, but also how important this was for other women in this industry. Some may see my need to turn to my husband as representing the usual division along gender lines; my husband, the savior, rides in on his horse while I, the princess, filled with fear, needs saving. The reality, as I see it, is very different that this: my husband and I were, and continue to be, in a partnership. When one is down, the other is there to pick up the pieces, regardless of feminine/masculine Ideals.

My husband, who also works in the Space industry, and I immediately began brainstorming how we could save my precious research. We both acknowledged certain ‘facts’: (1) I had to work fast to secure the data before the media interview, and the rebuttal from ‘The North’, came out; (2) I had to pull on my
community of mentors and supporters; (3) I had to stay ‘true’ to myself. I break these ‘facts’ out below, Universe, so that you and I can embrace this experience and, hopefully, move past it.

*Work fast!*

My research ethics board-approved methodology was premised on snowball sampling. I chose this approach, after consulting with my dissertation supervisory committee and the literature, as I was working directly in the organization context I was about to study. This rather instrumental perspective (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016) to selecting, and then gaining access to my research participants, in light of my conversation with the Watcher-on-the-Wall, had to be maintained I believed. I now needed someone to refer possible participants to me, and I needed those referrals fast as the media interview would be coming out shortly. My husband started thinking about anyone who might fit my sampling criteria. He started listing names off as quickly as I could write them down. I then began contacting these possible participants, scheduling their interviews to start the very next day, and to run every day thereafter.

I conducted the interviews after, and away, from work. Sometimes these interviews would run over two hours, where the participant would share their desolation as the ‘Only Girl’ or as ‘You’re like a Dog... You Need to be Kept on a Leash’ (Ruel, 2017a, 2018b). Much to my surprise, during this hurried collection of data, the interviewee felt ‘safe’ with me, often referring to ‘*well, you know about this*’, drawing me into her painful tales within her particular social situation (Van Maanen, 2011). In contrast, internally and hidden from the interviewee’s perception of what was happening, I was very concerned with protecting their privacy. I did not, at any time, indicate to these study participants that my media interview was coming out. I was also very careful not to acknowledge these research participants in the hallways at work or in other industrial contexts, as I was an ‘insider’ (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016). I was filled with fear that these participants would be targeted by The North and by the Watcher-on-the-Wall. I felt guilty that I couldn’t share with them my own pain, to tell them what I had done.
**Pull on my community**

I contacted my community of mentors, after the brainstorming session in my kitchen. I told them everything that had happened. A variety of emotions from my mentors ensued; I will simply characterize these feelings as being strong, Universe. My community was unanimous: I had to write everything down; I had to keep everything (emails, messages, etc.); and, I had to fight to keep the integrity of my research clear from this influence from the Watcher-on-the-Wall and from The North.

My community of mentors reached out to their own colleagues and friends who had encountered similar pushback to their respective research. As a result, my community of support grew to include other scholars who shared with me their own backstage dramas. Their realities reflected that research does have important challenges that very few write about or share. Some of these scholars urged me to write down what I was experiencing, mirroring my mentors’ recommendations, and then publishing it as a warning to others. Some other scholars told me not to reveal my emotions or what I was doing to ‘save’ my research. The risks were just too high, they felt.

I went deeper into the academic literature (e.g. Karjalainen et al., 2015) to see what others had done or not done. I was surprised to see that some did indeed share their emotional experiences in conducting research or that doing research could involve dramas and deceptions (e.g. Niemi, 2010). One thing that struck me, while reading, is that there was an aspect of linearity to them; a researcher would take one step, or take a door (Feldman et al., 2003), and then another, until they had a finished product. I started to ask myself: what is wrong with me? Why couldn’t I just go through a door, and then another door, and get this done? This niggling feeling of not being ‘linear’ stayed, pushing me forward to finish as quickly as possible, while also making me wonder indeed if I was cut out for academic research.

**Stay ‘true’ to myself**

I admit I did not do as well with this ‘fact’ as I should have. I felt betrayed, in the face of your game-playing, Universe. I became terrified to state clearly and succinctly that “I am the only Canadian woman
who is a Mission Manager”. I forced myself to embrace this part of my professional identity, tentatively stating this ‘truth’ here and there in my academic life. In my day-to-day work, of studying the human body in Space, however, I remained hidden behind a veneer of towing the party line and of fitting in with masculine ideals. I believe, as I write to you now, that I hid because this idea of ‘fitting in’ within the context I found myself in would protect me. I hadn’t yet reconciled how to navigate the interactions with the Watcher-on-the-Wall; the initial fear I felt walking out of her office was replaced with a feeling of a lack of trust, wondering when she would pull the rug from underneath me. I also raged inside: how was it that I had ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ on my side, but the North and the Watcher-on-the-Wall could use deceptive practices to counteract these ‘truths’? All I wanted was for the ‘truth’ to come out and for change to take hold.

My acquired Knowledge with respect to collecting data for my research, thus far, had guided me to believe that “the interview becomes both the tool and the object, the art of sociological sociability, an encounter in which ‘both parties behave as though they are of equal status for its duration, whether or not this is actually so’ (Benney & Hughes, 1956, p. 142)” (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 361). I nodded and made a lot of affirmative noises during the research interviews - ‘Uh uh… Oh yes… I understand’. Internally, though, I was in a tug of war with the anxiety monster (The Career Psychologist, 2012). I kept asking myself “How could we all be equal, if deception defined our relationship and our interactions?” and “How can I not tell my research participants that something is about to explode in the press?”. Kvale (1996) told me to listen attentively during the research interviews, as the “first few minutes of an interview are decisive” (p. 128), and that I was to be “at ease and clear about what he or she wants to know” (p. 128). I was also told that I am allowed to let my personal feelings influence the direction of the interview (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Whiteman, 2010). Could I really let my anxiety, my rage, and my lack of trust in a colleague influence the interviews? I decided that this was just too dangerous a route to go down, and ultimately it was better for me to keep hiding.
You were suspiciously quiet during this time, Universe. I was immersed in the day-to-day Space industry, and I was also studying the systemic discriminatory realities in this context, while trying to win this internal tug of war. I did not want to limit my “field of inquiry” (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 366) by the fact that I was an insider; I acknowledged that I wanted to let my participants set out what the field was (Pratt, 2009; Van Maanen, 2011). Was this just an excuse to perpetuate my hidden existence? One particular research interview stands out for me, in the blur of my feelings of rage and anxiety, while trying to let interview participants set the field. Vigrine’s interview lasted over three hours, and I only asked her three questions: (1) tell me about yourself; (2) what do you see yourself doing in 5 years; and, (3) is there anything I forgot to ask you, that you would like to tell me now (Ruel, 2018b). I was nowhere in that interview; my participant was clearly ‘there’, crying and railing against Life and Work. I, on the other hand, was nowhere to be found in that taped interview or in the resulting transcript.

The unfortunate outcomes of hiding were twofold: I wasn’t present, except for a hollow voice of “Uh um’s”; and, it was draining not only emotionally but physically. I staggered back home after the series of non-stop daily interviews, unable to talk with anyone, let alone move. From both a physical and mental perspective, I could see that the hiding was taking too much out of me. I slowly started to realize that I had to take a break from running these non-stop participant interviews. This realization came to a breaking point when I was taken completely by surprise by memories during another particular intense participant interview, with Bramun, a STEM-professional man. I remembered, during this interview, certain events at work that I called ‘Porn Nights’: the men I worked with (years ago) would set up the screen, in a room with large windows on three sides, to watch porn while waiting for the next Space activity to occur (Ruel, 2018b). I was overcome by shock and disgust: how could I have forgotten about that?! I managed to finish the interview, and then on my way home, I asked: what does this say about me, that I had completely forgotten about these porn nights? What did it say about me that I had put up with this activity all those years ago? How could I be part of this industry that condoned this type of behavior?
I postponed the two remaining interviews, after talking with my community of mentors. I retreated into myself. I exercised; I reached out to fellow scholars, and found an escape back to the Sun, and the warmth of the Earth, while the fall turned into winter. I jumped on a plane and flew to the Pacific Ocean. I remember, as I write this letter, getting off the plane and driving to my rental to discover that I had a beautiful patio, with lounge chairs, where I could commune with the Sun. I literally felt the strength of the Sun seep back into my core. I spent days walking by the Water, listening to the waves break against the shore. I threw myself into Pilates, Yoga, Barre and Circuit training, striving for balance and awareness of ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’. With the Sun, the Water, and the endorphins flowing, I flushed all the toxic memories and experiences out of my system. I started teaching several hundred undergraduate students. Their questions brought me back to my early fascination with Space, and the excitement and possibilities of being on a Star Destroyer.

I am not sure, Universe, if you were responsible for this retreat; perhaps you saw that I was suffering? The need to run away left me, and I found myself in those classrooms. I realized, as I talked and walked and breathed in the Sun, that I needed to focus on re-establishing a relationship with myself.

**Where do we go from here, Universe?**

So, what is this letter all about? I'll frame the answer to this question with a question for you: did I really need to go through these backstage dramas and deceptions? Did this experience make me a better scholar, a better person, a better STEM-professional? What I know, as I write to you, is that I started out believing you were my friend, protecting me, walking ahead of me, making sure the road ahead was clear. I then moved to raging against you, Universe, losing trust in a friend, and having to navigate anxiety that drained me physically and emotionally.

You wanted me to learn something, clearly. As the Sun and the Earth rallied around me while I was close to the Pacific Ocean, I found my center again. However, you almost made me walk away from revealing and breaking down boundaries that block STEM-professional women. I now know that I want to continue to work to eliminate marginalization, so that Life is just a bit easier. However, I am scared by
this path, not knowing at times exactly what to say or how to act. My self-confidence was affected by this experience; at times, I find myself reaching out to friends, to my community of mentors and to scholars, to make sure I am doing the right thing or saying the right thing. I don’t trust myself as a result of this trial. So, I am asking you, in this letter, to go easy on me next time. In other words, can you maybe make things just a bit easier for me, and align the Stars?!

ototemihbowinik (Plains Cree for In friendship. Sincerely.)

Postscript

As I wrote this letter to you, Universe, I think you must have been laughing; talk about the Stars aligning! The media interview I gave finally came out, in two rather prominent business publications. Two people in particular – both women – contacted me almost immediately to tell me they had seen it. The first was a young engineer who had recently left the study of Space, to pursue her own academic studies. She told me emphatically ‘You ROCK!’ The second person was another woman who worked in Space, who told me ‘Looking Good!’ She had ignored my revolutionary message and chose to focus on my looks… really?!?

Data for my research were all collected at the time of writing this postscript. I completed two participant interviews after my trip to the Pacific Ocean, and after the media interview came out. These two last participants requested that they be pulled from the study. I agreed with their request, and realized that I had done the right thing in getting as much data as possible before the media interview came out. Do I have enough data? I believe, as many academics do, that I could always use more data. However, part of the challenge of doing research is, at times, accepting that what I have is ‘good enough’. My ever-expanding community of support, made up of my mentors, scholars, and some of the participants in my research, all still believe in me and in my research. I think this, in and of itself, means more to me than any more data I can collect.
I continue to walk Mother Earth, feeling the Sun on my face, smelling the cool breeze of spring coming. I do, at times, rail against you, for what I went through. The revolution started so fast, maybe too fast. I wasn’t prepared for it; I don’t know if I ever would have been ready. My anxiety mounts every time I think about this experience. I have learned, with the passage of time, that it’s okay to be scared and anxious, to feel a sense of rage when it comes to my research. I believe I will make it to the other side of this experience, with your help Universe, and with the help of my community. My journey to *miskasowin* (Plains Cree for finding one’s true sense of self) continues, with you walking beside me, in plain view.
As promised in the prologue, I now guide you from my letter to the methodological framework. Recall that I approached this work, in this way, in order to showcase a shift in understanding of “what is good research?”. The process of self-change and acts of acknowledging emotions while conducting research are central to this shift. These notions cannot be navigated only at the boundaries of being, however. Personal change and emotions involve sharing, just as we share the Earth, the Stars, etc. This sharing necessitates embracing and weaving in acts of reflexivity that are attainable to the audience (Donnelly et al., 2013), and that are, in my case, grounded in Indigenous-based epistemologies. These three ideas – “good” research, reflexivity, and circling Indigenous worldviews - all fed into my journey toward miskasowin.

**Methodological Framework**

Discourses, represented by stories, are one possible medium that showcase the context of larger meanings (Saleebey, 1994). Story-telling is a practice that goes back to childhood, and is more easily accepted by individuals as a way to learn, providing a “sense of fulfillment and of completion” (Goodall, 2005, p. 497). Stories are loosely organized, and they typically focus on a single event with a goal of entertaining, inspiring, and educating (Gabriel, 1998). They may instruct on “how to survive or how to accept – even how to overcome – difficult situations” (Saleebey, 1994, p. 354) conveying values and beliefs. The meanings of a story are “ostensibly true” (Martin, 2002, p. 73).

Stories are, by their very nature, pulling on historical events, and introduce elements of memory and nostalgia. The oral tradition of stories is also recognized as being relational, tying the past to the future, and is both method and meaning (Kovach, 2018). Within Indigenous oral traditions, they can be categorized along two types of story making: mythical; and, personal narratives (Baker, 2017; Kovach, 2018). Focusing on the personal narratives, these are centred on place and/or experiences, and on one particular aspect of an individual’s place/happening/experience (Kovach, 2009). They can be passed, in re-storying, from one generation to another, sharing consequences of and practices in making life choices (Kovach, 2018). Kovach (2009) clearly identified that the researcher has a responsibility to treat the story
and its telling with respect. Finally, in Indigenous-based storytelling, the epistemology underlying these stories captures both the presence of a trickster and a tragic element. These vehicles underscore “the irony of living in an uncertain world” (Kovach, 2009 Kindle locations 1727-1729).

The letter to the Universe embraced these oral traditions, conveying the larger meanings of being within the World/Universe, where the trickster was embodied in the Universe. The letter also embraced the relational aspects of honesty, or ‘truth’, between two women working within specific social power-relations. While one woman was presented along her beliefs of doing her job, the other woman (me) was revealed for all to see. My “hidden self” (Goodall, 2005, p. 504) was shown to all, passing along awareness for ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’, along with a cautionary tale for others. To achieve this revelation, I embraced two frameworks, namely IRM and autoethnography. I present each in turn below.

**Indigenous Research Methodologies**

IRM can be used in either quantitative (e.g. Walter and Andersen, 2013) or qualitative (e.g. Baker, 2017; Monture, 1986) research. IRM are characterized as distinct methodologies from other approaches, such as discourse analysis (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Indigenous epistemologies, that ground IRM, are at the centre of IRM approaches which, according to Kovach (2018, 2009), nurtures a notion of distinction from Western approaches.

Indigenous-based knowledge is multifaceted and is rooted in the relational ideas of community and family. IRM are constituted, in part, via protocols that are to be respected and practiced consciously, given these roots. These protocols, presented below, must not be thought of as a checklist but as a conscious journey:

1. **Introducing one’s self** (Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003): this theme is centered on offering the cultural location of the individual in such a way that connections to political, cultural and social relations are understood, and acknowledged from the outset. This requires the individual to
demonstrate their limitations and strengths, engendering a respect and accountability to the community that is affected by the research.

(2) Centralising on Indigenous ontology (Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003): centralising the state of Indigenous being develops an awareness, and sense of self that is necessary to IRM. The researcher is responsible for their ‘knowing’, and their ways of relating to their self and to others. They are also responsible for acknowledging that they fulfill a role in the system; however, they do not know all. They are part of a larger system of being and knowing.

(3) Use of collaborative, community-based processes (Baker, 2017; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003): embracing relational processes reflects a ‘belonging’ to the community, to the family, and to the web of life, and to the responsibility of maintaining these relations. The researcher is responsible for reflecting, respectfully, the centuries of Indigenous communities, ancestors, Elders, and cultures that influence and guide them. The relational nature of Indigenous-based knowledge is then not oppositional; it is inclusive. This approach then acknowledges the Earth, the Universe, the Sun, the Wind, Stars, etc.

The essence of IRM is the interconnectedness of all living things, and the need to embrace a diversity of worldviews. With this foundational idea driving IRM, the question of who can conduct IRM must be addressed. I admit that I struggled with whether I could use IRM, or not, given I am a White, Western woman. I spoke with many individuals, reaching out to my community of First Nations/Inuit/Aboriginal friends, and to scholars who are recognized as Western academics who practice IRM. I also reached to the academic literature, notably Weber-Pillwax (1999), to investigate my anxiety surrounding this question. What I came away with was the message that some might object to my use of IRM, while others may honour my journey towards miskasowin through this transformative process. In either case, I learned that I had to reflect the sacredness of the Indigenous community to ensure not only the integrity of this research effort but, more importantly, the integrity of the communities I may touch.
Given the complexity of IRM, I followed Jeff Baker’s (2017) lead and intertwined an autoethnography methodology with IRM. This was done in such a way to showcase the possible rich descriptions of my relational journey towards miskasowin. I turn now to this approach.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a methodological genre that shares the personal experiences and stories of the writer, highlighting the multiplicity of lived experiences in their relationships with the social world (Boje and Tyler, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Sparkes, 2000). As Yarborough and Lowe (2007) pointed out, autoethnography uses personal experiences “to reflect on self-other interactions and the greater cultural meaning” (p. 239). This genre has many possible branches including personal narratives, ethnographic memoir, narrative ethnography, emotionalism, ethnographic short story, etc. The type of autoethnography I used, in my letter to the Universe, is referred to as a personal narrative “where social scientists view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative stories specifically focused on their academic as well as their personal lives” (Ellis, 2004, p. 45). The letter is focused on me as I relate to the Earth, the Universe, etc. It also showcases my emotions and my personal conversation with the Universe.

While a degree of fictionalisation can be used in autoethnographic writing (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009), I chose not to use this approach. In other words, the ‘truths’, ‘facts’ and the emotions as I saw and experienced them, are reproduced in my letter to the Universe from my journal entries, emails, and recall of various conversations. Only participant names were changed. There is a risk in taking such an approach; that is, of revealing too much. However, I felt strongly that I needed to take responsibility for ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’, and I could not do this by fictionalizing my tale.

This method’s protocols, gathered mostly from Ellis’ (2004) autoethnographic treatise on the subject, included writing in the first-person while looking at the ‘big picture’. It involved looking outwardly to the cultural, and social, realities that influence the writer, and their experience of a particular event. The writer then looks at the ‘smaller picture’, focusing their lens on themselves, revealing one possible self. The final protocol involves jumping between the big picture and small picture, blurring the lines and
boundaries of both these pictures, meshing them together into a personal narrative that teaches, empowers, embodies, and grows both the writer and the reader (Ellis, 2004). This idea of personal growth, for the reader, involves a responsibility on the part of the author to encourage their reader’s own self-development, to invite the reader to be an active participant in their own lives, and in their own experiences (Ellis, 2004). The author of the original autoethnography then becomes a sort of co-author to the reader’s future storytelling efforts, bridging knowledge generation from one to the other, and to other future readers.

There exist Indigenous ethnographic methodologies, as a sub-category to the broader autoethnographic experience. Indigenous ethnographic methodologies are constructed by writers “who share a history of colonialism or economic subordination, including subjugation by ethnographers who have made them subjects of their work” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). Denzin’s (2006) work is one example of this approach. As I am not Indigenous and I have not been subjugated by ethnographers, this particular work cannot be categorized as an Indigenous ethnographic method.

With respect to the notion of circling Indigenous culture, I constructed my relational story as a way to depict one possible approach to an experience in the organizational and academic world that does not necessarily have to rely on positivist, objective discourses in order to transfer a message. I consciously integrated Indigenous-based knowledge, such as the Universe as the trickster, and my trial as a tragic element, into this letter. I did this in order to recreate outward and inward connections with a community. This is a different approach than say the one used by Learmonth and Humphries (2012) approach to identity theory and autoethnography. They constructed their autoethnography on their “own sense of doubleness” (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012, p. 101). My sense of ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’ is not grounded in only my becoming an academic; my sense of self is relational, to my community, to my social world, to my interaction with the Earth, the Stars, etc.

I turn now to untangling some of the key ideas presented in the letter, in order to empower the reader and the author.
Discussion: Implications of this Work

This section turns to three particular outcomes as a result of writing the letter, and then having it reviewed as part of the process towards publication. The first outcome is focused on the implications of this work. The second is focused on being in the field. The third is centered on untangling the practical implications of using IRM/autoethnography.

Implications of this work: Power-relations and gender

The framing of my gender as a performance in the field (Boje, 1989; Donnelly et al., 2013) could be misunderstood by some to mean that I see a binary difference between gendered men and women. The initial reviews of this paper suggested that I was embracing the feminine ideal in my letter. The reviews highlighted that because I was emotionally undone, and that I had to rely on a man, my husband, who embodied the masculine ideal in his response to the trial, I might be perpetuating a message that women are weaker in the face of such trials. The masculine/feminine ideals, that are represented in the letter to the Universe, transcend several important points with respect to performing gender in a binary fashion. These gendered expressions of emotions and the possible misunderstanding of what they ‘mean’ highlighted for me that I needed to untangle the problematization of power-relations.

Delving into the academic literature on women working in male-dominated STEM professions, the performance of a woman’s gender has been the subject of positivist and postpositivist streams of research as I introduced earlier. Etzkowitz et al. (2000), for example, found women who did not experience a sense of belonging, in male-dominated fields, experiencing low self-confidence, and questioning repeatedly why they were there, and what they were doing. Miller (2004) suggested, in her study of women engineers in the Canadian oil industry, that occupational/masculine/organizational values specific to engineering reinforced gender divisions. She found that women in her study “conformed to the dominant culture in order to survive and, over time, incorporated the values of the industry...walk(ing) a very fine line between being ‘like’ the valued-masculine prototype and avoiding any implication that they were not ‘real women’” (Miller, 2004, p. 68). Similarly, Powell et al. (2009) found that within engineering
professions, women would perform their gender – or ‘undo’ their gender – acting like ‘one of the boys’, accepting the gendered jokes, looking at the advantages over the disadvantages, thereby adopting an ‘anti-woman’ approach. Finally, as I explained in the prologue, I surfaced the exclusionary experiences of STEM-professional women in the Canadian Space industry, by focusing on narratives and stories that present a spectrum of productive and oppressive power-relations that cannot be broken down into binary ‘men versus women’ exclusionary experiences (Ruel, 2017a).

I recognized while considering this literature and writing my letter, that I had been embracing masculine ideals, on a daily basis, within the social realities of the Canadian Space industry. Notably, acting like ‘one of the boys’, who stereotypically do not share or, for that matter, acknowledge having emotions was ‘normal’ for me; I hid, constantly, ‘who I am’. While I did not experience low self-confidence in my daily interactions at work, I did question repeatedly why I continued to work in an environment that did not appear to value ‘who I am’. I did conform to the dominant culture, to ensure my sense of fit in order to survive. One story I often tell to showcase this sense of fit is one centered on my presence in a contentious meeting. I was the only woman present at the table, arguing a key operational point with a male-colleague. Neither of us would back down from our respective stance. My colleague challenged me to an arm wrestle, to resolve this contentious issue. The point here is that I was accepted as an honorary ‘man’, who could perform the masculine-ideal of brute force in order to win a contentious debate.

As the letter to the Universe clearly shows, however, I do indeed have emotions (i.e. shock, anxiety, etc.). More importantly, within the safety of the power-relations of my marriage, I felt ‘safe’ enough to share those emotions with someone. I could, in other words, perform my interpretation of the feminine in that interaction. These emotions that I shared in the letter were also classified by the reviewers of this paper as following a feminine ideal. Classification or categorization of emotions in this way does not delve into the power-relations of these social interactions. The problematization of power-relations resides on the following question: why could I not have emotions in my Space industry context but I
could in my marriage? Such a question showcases the following important point: I ‘saw’ that my ability to share these emotions, not only with my husband but with you the reader, is representative of my newfound ability to navigate a spectrum of doing and undoing the performance of my gender. This spectrum extends across the masculine-ideal and the feminine-ideal, and no longer must be one or the other.

With respect to my husband’s and my gendered responses to this trial, they reflect a particular web of power-relations within the context of social interactions. We each, respectively, embraced the feminine and/or masculine-ideals performance. The point is not to say one is bad, and the other is good; the point is to show that we can respond in a gendered fashion, and ultimately that’s ok. Our marriage is not an either/or type of relationship; it is a complex interaction between two individuals. In this event, we took on different emotional responses that some may classify as feminine and masculine. I classify them as being one (my husband) was there to support the other (me), when the other was down.

As for the typical engineering-reinforced gender divisions, I did not reproduce these in my letter to the Universe. The trial occurred between two women, not a man versus a woman. One woman (me) believed in the ‘truth’ of her scholarly pursuits, and her wish to institute change to improve working conditions. The other woman (‘The Watcher-on-the-Wall’) was ‘just’ doing her job, protecting the brand of the organization she worked for. The web of power-relations does not boil down to a ‘simple’ performance of the feminine gender, or, for that matter, the binary man-versus-woman differences of social interactions. They are complex, reflecting a spectrum of gendered power-relations that we individually enacted in our own way.

In the field

My various experiences of emotionally hiding, of shock, of rage, highlight several important aspects of conducting academic research. I was completely unprepared for not only these emotions but the need to re-strategize, in light of the media interview I gave. Pettica-Harris et al.’s (2016) hopscotch metaphor for navigating the research process focuses on some of the emotions that a scholar can encounter, and this
constant need to re-strategize, moving us away from a linear understanding of conducting research. They also talked to the need to be persistent, flexible, and resourceful throughout the hopscotch.

My story, as an insider and a manager, adds important knowledge to Pettica-Harris et al.’s (2016) work, and to others including Donnelly et al. (2013), and the dismantling of the linear conceptualization of conducting research and of being in the field. Having led many life science missions into Space, I knew the importance of identifying risks, and solutions, before the actual work began to collect data. I was a trained and seasoned project manager with field experience. I had been through the institutional issues involved in conducting and funding research, what Peticca-Harris et al. (2016) call the study formulation with plans to move forward; I had been part of informed consent briefings of astronauts, what Peticca-Harris et al. (2016) call identifying and contacting potential informants. I had also trained numerous cohorts of astronauts in our research protocols, collected baseline data, and been on console, listening to multiple voice loops in my ear, navigating in-flight problems lasting, in some instances, forty-eight hours (with no sleep), what Peticca-Harris et al. (2016) call interacting with informants during data collection. Never did I falter or stagger back home, in shock, wondering what had just happened. I believe, perhaps, as a project manager working in Space for many years, I had all the angles covered, and this dissertation research study would be a ‘cake-walk’.

While I agree with Peticca-Harris et al.’s (2016) call for scholars to be persistent, flexible, and resourceful, throughout the hopscotch, I also believe one needs to be humble. Knowledge and experience can take you far in your respective research initiatives; persistence, flexibility, and resourcefulness are also important ingredients. Being humble, showing or practicing modesty with respect to one’s importance, however, is rarely put forth as a needed attribute of a researcher. I truly believed, at the time of the media interview, that ‘truth’ would set women free; that if only I told the ‘truth’, then everyone would rally around this ‘truth’ and change. Making sense of this event retrospectively (Weick et al., 2005), I should not have given that media interview. Not because it jeopardized my field work and gaining access to participants; but because I was not ready for the repercussions of the interview and
fundamentally, I wasn’t being humble. This eagerness to change an industry, that has been operating in a masculine-based fashion since the Cold War (Ruel et al., 2017), ignored these states.

*Practical implications of using IRM/autoethnography*

I embraced this methodological approach with the goal of achieving miskasowin. Part of the responsibility of using IRM and generating Indigenous-based knowledge is that there must be a benefit to Indigenous peoples (Baker, 2017). As Brayboy and Maughan (2009) state, “Indigenous communities have long been aware of the ways that they know, come to know, and produce knowledges, because in many instances knowledge is essential for cultural survival and well-being” (p. 3). Indigenous peoples and Indigenous-based knowledge is represented in frustrating low numbers within STEM environments (Baker, 2017). I am hoping that my circling of Indigenous knowledge in my every-day, reflected in this work, will open doors for using IRM to achieve intercultural collaboration.

The challenge remains however that I am not Indigenous; my ancestor, as I presented in my letter, was a simple fisherman who arrived in Quebec in 1672. He could be viewed by Indigenous peoples as a representative of the colonizers. I was careful in this work to acknowledge that this was my journey of self-discovery, within larger meanings, and that this was not a study on Indigenous peoples.

As Parker (2012) pointed out “stories certainly have politics, but not all stories have the same politics because we can never tell it like it is. Ever.” (p. 28). I specifically adopted a critical reflexivity position in my letter, melding the Universe, the Sun, Mother Earth, and Life as objects that the researcher can talk, and interact, with. I also shared my emotions when faced with my trial. By adopting this approach, I put the neutral, or emotion-less, way of conducting research into question. This is not novel, in and of itself; many scholars embrace the heart-wrenching political story to get their message across, such as Monture (1986) or Özkazanç-Pan (2012) did. What stands out, in this letter, is that there is no ready-made plan, as hard as we might try to design our research that way, that will protect a researcher, or her participants, from Life happening. Ultimately, the moral is that not only can I be and becoming – with emotions, gender(s), and all - but I can also be open to the journey towards miskasowin.
Conclusion: “What is good research?”

…it’s up to us to decide just which stories we like to tell, and to listen to, and not claim that one particular method always generates the best ones. (Parker, 2012, p. 28)

This letter to the Universe, and the accompanying untangling of this letter, helped me on my journey. Hopefully, it also guided the reader to a better understanding of what an IRM/autoethnography can do with respect to knowledge generation. The question of “what is good research?”, without falling into measuring validity and reliability, rests on the idea put forth above by Martin Parker. That Martin can spin a yarn, I have no doubt, having met him in Nova Scotia, Canada, at a conference last year. He provokes, and then withdraws, and then comes back again, all in the name of, I believe, helping us to decide what is important, what a story can tell us, if we will ‘just’ listen and participate in that story. If I moved you to come and talk to me, if I made you stop and think about your own social interactions, if I made you aware that you have an interaction with the World around you, if I made you stop and think about your gender and how you embrace it /express it/undo it, have I not conducted “good” research?

kinana'skomitina'wa'w (Plains Cree for I thank you all people).
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i The poststructuralist perspective I embraced in this work was founded on the notion of difference. Difference is a difficult term to control given the misappropriation in meaning that has historically occurred with this concept. The reader is cautioned to not confuse poststructural difference with implying that the opposite of difference is sameness. Difference is used here in the sense that we reproduce uncertainties, and a range of beliefs/meanings, that we don’t necessarily aim to resolve (Belsey, 2002). To this end, I have used scare quotes around such concepts as ‘who I am’ and ‘truth’ to signal to the reader that I am reproducing uncertainties.

ii Discourse is used here in the larger sense of the word, embracing “everyday attitudes and behaviour, along with our perceptions of what we believe to be reality” (Grant et al., 1998, p. 2).

iii This usage of IRM embraces the notions of Indigenous epistemologies. Most importantly, this embrace implies that I am moving away from colonial discourses of identifying Indigenous peoples as either being North American or Canadian.

iv Names have been changed to protect my community of support.