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# Reclaiming Ancestral Territory in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg: Applying Strategies Of Environmental Repossession For Indigenous Decolonization

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# Abstract

Relationships to land are foundational for nurturing knowledge systems, identities, and wellness among Indigenous peoples. As Indigenous peoples resist enduring structures of colonialism and rebuild self-determination, they are pursuing diverse strategies to reclaim and reconnect with their lands and land-based practices. While this movement is growing globally, few empirical studies have explored why particular strategies are developed nor how they are operationalized in place. In partnership with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, this dissertation applies the concept of environmental repossession to document the spatial strategies being implemented to reoccupy, reconnect with, and reassert Biigtigong's rights to its ancestral territory. Drawing from Indigenous and participatory methodologies, this dissertation examines individual and community meanings of environmental repossession and considers the long-term implications of these efforts for decolonization.

Taking a case study approach, this dissertation explored the perceptions of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg community members who participated in the reclamation of Mountain Lake. Thematic analysis of interviews (n=15) with Elders, youth, and band staff suggests that Biigtigong is practicing environmental repossession as a multi-step process. Alongside reoccupation of territory, repossession in Biigtigong involves reintroducing community members to the land and remaking community relationships to reclaimed places. The findings reveal that the reclamation of Mountain Lake created the space for community members to gather and revitalize the roles, values, and relationships that connect them to their Nishnaabeg identity.

In Biigtigong, the everyday work of environmental repossession is supported by the Department of Sustainable Development. Narrative analysis of interviews (n=7) with staff members demonstrates that the department has evolved as a place-based structure to facilitate repossession efforts across multiples scales and over the long-term. The results illustrate how repossession is part of a broader departmental vision to decolonize Biigtigong's economic, political, and social relations with the land and renew Nishnaabeg governance.

Taken together, this research suggests that environmental repossession is a place-based mechanism of decolonization through which Biigtigong is asserting self-determination over its territory, wellness, and future as Nishnaabeg. While Indigenous communities may have shared goals or experiences of dispossession, what land reclamation looks like, how it is practiced and what it means will vary across places, spaces, and scales.

**Keywords:** environmental repossession, decolonization, community-based participatory research, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Indigenous wellness, Indigenous identity, connection to land, Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous health geography

## Summary for Lay Audience

For many Indigenous peoples, land-based practices and knowledge are essential to their cultures, identities, and wellness. While colonial laws and policies have aimed to displace and discriminate against communities, they are resisting and developing their own strategies to assert their rights to land. The concept of environmental repossession aims to describe these different strategies and to document how they are created in response to the needs, strengths, and experiences of specific communities. This study explores what environmental repossession looks like in the community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg in order to understand why and how communities use particular strategies of repossession to reclaim access to and control over their lands. By examining what Biigtigong's strategies mean for the community members involved, this study further considers how decolonization may be understood on the ground in Indigenous communities.

In partnership with Biigtigong, this research documented the community's return to Mountain Lake through the construction of cabins and a week-long camp. The findings show that the reclamation of Mountain Lake took place through a multi-step process to: 1) take back access; 2) encourage community use of this land; and 3) build new community connections to this place. For the Elders, youth, and staff participating, this process had an important impact on their relationships with each other and feelings of belonging. Being together at Mountain Lake strengthened community members' sense of identity and pride as Nishnaabeg.

The findings of this research demonstrate that reclaiming land can be a difficult, time consuming, and expensive process for communities. In Biigtigong, the Department of Sustainable Development was established to support the everyday work of environmental repossession. For the department's staff members, this work is part of a bigger, long-term goal to decolonize how its territory is governed and return to Nishnaabeg values. Overall, this research aims to share lessons for other Indigenous communities pursuing land reclamation.

## Co-Authorship Statement

This dissertation comprises three manuscripts, Chapters 4-6, which have all been published in peer-reviewed journals and are co-authored with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Chantelle Richmond. I was primarily responsible for conceptualizing and conducting the research, including the collaborative methodology, data collection, and data analysis, as well as drafting the manuscripts. Dr. Richmond was responsible for conceptualizing the research, funding acquisition, and supervision, as well as reviewing and editing the manuscripts. The manuscripts are as follows:

**Chapter 4:** Nightingale, E., & Richmond, C. A. (2021). Reclaiming Mountain Lake: Applying Environmental Repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Territory, Canada. *Social Science & Medicine*, *272*, 113706.

**Chapter 5:** Nightingale, E., & Richmond, C. (2022). Reclaiming Land, Identity and Mental Wellness in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Territory. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(12), 7285.

**Chapter 6:** Nightingale, E., & Richmond, C. A. (2022). Building structures of environmental repossession to reclaim land, self-determination, and Indigenous wellness. *Health & Place*, *73*, 102725.

# Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of the Elders and youth from Biigtigong Nishnaabeg that shared their knowledge, stories, and time with me. I am forever grateful for your trust, honesty, and laughter as I navigated this research project. You have taught me how to listen, and I will carry this gift with me always. To Alvina Michano, who has since made her journey to the spirit world, it is an honour to have shared your wisdom and joy at Mountain Lake. Chi-Miigwetch, my PhD would not have been possible without each and every one of you.

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# Chapter 1

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Contextualizing the research problem

Across the globe, Indigenous peoples are pursuing diverse strategies to reclaim their territories and the knowledges, skills, and protocols tied to these places. While these movements may take different forms, names, and scales, they are guided by a common objective to rebuild Indigenous sovereignty by restoring rights and relationships to land (Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014). On Turtle Island, 'Land Back' has become a collective movement to assert jurisdiction over and demand restitution of ancestral territories through reoccupation, legal actions, and cultural practices (Yellowhead Institute, 2019). As colonialism targets Indigenous self-determination through dispossession and displacement, reclamation efforts are a means to resist the enduring oppression of the settler state and create pathways for decolonization (Tobias & Richmond, 2016). For Indigenous communities, decolonization is not a concept, but an urgent and everyday practice of strengthening connections to the land (Corntassel, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Despite unique geographies and ecosystems, relationships to the land form an essential part of the knowledge systems, identities, and cultures of many Indigenous communities (Simpson, 2014; Battiste & Youngblood, 2007). The land is more than a physical landscape, it is a relative, teacher, and provider with whom Indigenous peoples hold multidimensional relationships of responsibility and reciprocity (Styres, 2017; Daigle, 2016). Through these relationships, the land provides the material resources for survival, connections to past and future generations, spiritual teachings and protocols, and the space to foster social relationships and belonging (King et al., 2009; Richmond & Ross, 2009; Wilson, 2003). Indigenous conceptions of health understand the land as a vital determinant of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness, and the center of a relational worldview that connects self, family, community, environment, and all of creation (Kingsley et al., 2013; Friendship & Furgal, 2012; Wexler, 2009; Durie, 2004). By

renewing connections with the land, Indigenous communities are addressing their contemporary health and social needs.

Academic research has focused primarily on documenting Indigenous experiences of dispossession in order to understand the harmful impacts for individual and community livelihoods, relationships, and wellness (Reading, 2018; Durkalec et al., 2015; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Environmental dispossession describes the direct and indirect processes through which Indigenous peoples' access to their ancestral territories is reduced or eliminated (Richmond & Ross, 2009). By displacing or disconnecting Indigenous communities from the source of their food, kinship, governance, and spiritual systems, processes of dispossession have aimed to breakdown Indigenous economies, identities, languages, and knowledge systems (Simpson, 2017; RCAP, 1996). A wide body of literature has emerged around the long-term effects of environmental dispossession and linked it to critical health conditions (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Simpson et al., 2009), such as diabetes, substance issues, and suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008), as well as deep social and economic disadvantage (de Leeuw et al., 2012). While processes of dispossession are implemented by various state, private sector, or individual actors, they are inextricably linked to the system of colonialism that continues to structure Indigenous lives across settler colonial contexts (Coulthard, 2014). As colonialism seeks to control and eliminate Indigenous existence, it employs the spatial practices of dispossession to target Indigenous sovereignty and force assimilation, while providing access to environmental resources for the state and settler society (Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Harris, 2002).

In the past two decades, the field of Indigenous health geographies has emerged in response to increasing calls from Indigenous scholars and communities for academic attention to the ways in which Indigenous peoples are resisting and rebuilding from the impacts of dispossession (Coombes et al., 2014; Larsen & Johnson, 2012; Shaw et al., 2006). This change in focus is part of a broader conceptual and methodological shift towards strength-based approaches that prioritize the concerns and priorities of communities in research (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019; Castleden et al., 2012; Louis, 2007). The concept of environmental repossession describes the specific strategies that

Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations are enacting to restore their connections to the land and healthy ways of living (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Given the global diversity of Indigenous cultures, languages, knowledge systems, and histories, environmental repossession is understood to be a place-based process in which the strategies developed respond directly to local needs, strengths, and experiences (Hatala et al., 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016). Although driven by a similar objective, individuals, families, and communities may develop multiple potential forms and proxies (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019), including legal, political, social, and economic approaches. As an applied concept, repossession seeks to understand the spatial process of land reclamation and reconnection, exploring how Indigenous peoples plan, develop, and implement particular strategies, and why across different contexts.

Despite emphasis on active place-based processes, few studies to date have examined environmental repossession in applied community contexts (Hatala et al., 2019; Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019). Specifically, a gap in the literature exists to consider why certain Indigenous communities are pursuing processes of environmental repossession, how individual processes of repossession are understood and enacted, and what common threads may tie these distinct processes together at the community level. Applied research in this area holds promise to identify and describe local meanings of repossession, and in so doing raises questions around the implications of repossession for decolonization. Decolonization, as it seeks to resist the goals and reverse the impacts of colonialism, suggests the need for processes that respond to dispossession by reclaiming ancestral territory and reconnecting to these lands (Coulthard, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Taking a case study approach, this thesis builds on the concepts of environmental repossession and decolonization to explore their connections in the applied context of collaborative research with the community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg.

### 1.2. Research objectives

The aim of this research is to enhance understanding around place-based processes of land reclamation in Indigenous communities by addressing the research question: how are individual strategies of environmental repossession enacted by Indigenous communities

and what ties these various processes together at the community-level? Drawing from Indigenous health geographies, this research documents ongoing practices by Biigtigong Nishnaabeg to reconnect and reassert its rights to ancestral territory in order to consider what land reclamation looks like, how it is practiced, and what it means in particular Indigenous contexts. By exploring individual and community meanings of land reclamation, this thesis intends to contribute a geographic perspective to how decolonization is understood and expressed in Indigenous community contexts. This research was guided by the following three study objectives:

1. To describe the processes of environmental repossession initiated in Biigtigong to reclaim land;
2. To explore the local meanings of distinct repossession processes at the individual and community levels; and,
3. To understand how the community is conceptualizing and developing a place-based structure of environmental repossession.

### 1.3. The case: Biigtigong Nishnaabeg

To address the research objectives, this thesis presents a case study from ongoing collaborative research with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, an Anishinaabe community located on the north shore of Lake Superior, Ontario. Currently, Biigtigong's population is comprised of approximately 1200 members, of which 500 members live permanently on the community's reserve (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, 2018). While the legal reserve land allocated to Biigtigong is 323.7 hectares, the community's ancestral territory encompasses more than 2 million hectares (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, 2018). Biigtigong is not a signatory of the 1850 Robinson-Superior Treaty and has been actively pursuing a land claim to assert legal title over its entire territory (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Complementary to the legal process, the Chief and Council of Biigtigong have initiated multiple projects that aim to reclaim land, and to physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually reconnect the community's relationship to it. Previous research in collaboration with Biigtigong identified these initiatives as strategies of environmental repossession, and the necessary foundations to rebuilding local Nishnaabeg knowledge systems and cultural identities

against the impacts of historical and contemporary dispossessions (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). This thesis builds on previous work to shift the concept of environmental repossession beyond theoretical framings and examine how it is activated in place by Biigtigong.

Drawing from critical Indigenous and decolonizing approaches, this study is community-led, and the research question, process, and methods were co-developed with Biigtigong's Chief, Band Manager, and Department of Sustainable Development. Academic research, particularly in the field of geography, has long been implicated in the project of colonialism in Indigenous communities globally (Parsons & Taylor, 2020; Louis, 2007; Shaw et al., 2006). Research has been, and in many ways continues to be imposed on Indigenous peoples, and the data collected used to pathologize, oppress, and control communities and nations (Smith, 1999). Building on a growing, interdisciplinary body of critical Indigenous scholarship (McGregor, 2018; Richmond, 2016; Coombes et al., 2014), this thesis aims to uphold Indigenous self-determination both over research, through its iterative, community-led process, and over land, through research activities, findings, and outcomes that meet the community's needs. Ultimately, this thesis is guided by the concept of relationality and three methodological imperatives to: 1) ensure the research is relevant for the community; 2) prioritize and respect Indigenous intelligence; and 3) foster community ownership over the research (Richmond et al., 2020).

To examine the complexities and local specificities of enacting decolonization in Biigtigong, a case study approach was taken to explore ongoing strategies of environmental repossession in the community, specifically: 1) the construction of cabins and hosting of a week-long camp at Mountain Lake; and 2) the development of the band's Department of Sustainable Development. These examples were selected as they are Band Council-initiated, focus on reclaiming land, and may hold multiple meanings at the personal, community, and policy levels. In co-creating this study, a qualitative design was developed to foster community participation, privilege community voices and knowledge, and capture the rich, textural detail of personal experiences and relationships (Rieger et al., 2020; Kovach, 2009). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with band employees,

Elders, and youth (n=17) participating in land reclamation efforts. The data was analyzed thematically and narratively, and co-interpreted with the community to ensure that findings were contextualized, and culturally specific meanings were understood.

### 1.4. Dissertation outline

This dissertation is written as a collection of three manuscripts focused on understanding local conceptualizations and expressions of decolonization through community-led strategies to reclaim land. The dissertation comprises seven chapters, including this introductory chapter, each of which are described below.

Chapter Two presents the research context and situates this dissertation within the literature on Indigenous geographies and Indigenous health geographies. The chapter introduces the theoretical concepts of decolonization and environmental repossession in relation to Indigenous connections to the land and definitions of wellness. This includes a broad discussion of colonialism as an ongoing system with environmental, political, economic, and social impacts in order to contextualize processes of Indigenous land reclamation.

Chapter Three details the methodological approach of this dissertation. The chapter begins with an overview of critical Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies before reflecting on the role of allied scholars in Indigenous research and my own positionality within this study. The chapter then outlines the collaborative process of this research and the development of relationships with the Department of Sustainable Development in Biigtigong, and the Manager of Culture and Heritage in particular. The chapter concludes by describing the methods of data collection, data analysis, and dissemination.

Chapters Four to Six consist of three independent manuscripts which have all been published in relevant peer-reviewed journals. To explore the place-based application and meanings of environmental repossession, the first two manuscripts present an empirical case study of land reclamation and reconnection at Mountain Lake in Biigtigong, while the third manuscript describes how Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development is evolving into a community structure of repossession.

The first manuscript (Chapter 4) explores the development and implementation of an individual strategy of environmental repossession at Mountain Lake in Biigtigong's ancestral territory. While the concept of environmental repossession seeks to describe and understand applied processes to reclaim land, few empirical studies have directly explored how unique processes of repossession unfold in community contexts. This chapter documents the case study of Mountain Lake by describing the actions taken by Biigtigong to both reclaim and reconnect community relationships to this land through the construction of cabins and hosting of a week-long camp. Drawing on thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with Biigtigong Elders, youth, and staff, this chapter examines what is involved in enacting repossession, including land-based practices, community roles, and challenges.

The second manuscript (Chapter 5) builds on the previous chapter to focus on local and intergenerational meanings of environmental repossession processes. This chapter discusses how meanings of environmental repossession extend beyond the physical reclamation of land to support social relationships and the sharing of Indigenous knowledge among those involved. Analysis of the interview data from Mountain Lake provides evidence that participating in this repossession effort impacted community members' Nishnaabeg identity by strengthening their sense of pride and belonging. The chapter indicates that applying environmental repossession can be an important act of collective empowerment for Indigenous communities, and suggests a potential relationship between land reclamation, decolonization, and Indigenous mental wellness.

The third manuscript (Chapter 6) draws from the critical approach of Indigenous geographies to conceptualize the structures through which Indigenous communities are supporting the complex and ongoing work of environmental repossession. This chapter explores the development of Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development as a community-led organization responsible for protecting and strengthening Biigtigong's self-determination over its territory. The chapter presents narrative analysis of seven in-depth interviews with current and former department staff members to examine the goals, values, logistics, and constraints that guide its diverse projects. Sustaining both the every-

day and long-term work of environmental repossession requires reflection on how to build Indigenous, place-based structures capable of addressing the political, economic, cultural, and social needs of this work.

Chapter Seven presents the key findings of this dissertation and discusses its theoretical, methodological, and policy contributions. This chapter brings together the various themes and complexities from across the three manuscripts to consider how Biigtigong is employing and sustaining land-based strategies of environmental repossession towards a local vision of decolonization. The chapter concludes with a summary of the limitations of this study and potential directions for future research.

# Chapter 2

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Introduction

To examine strategies and meanings of land reclamation in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, this thesis draws on the theoretical concepts of decolonization and environmental repossession and explores their interconnections. Framed by the approach of Indigenous health geographies, this thesis builds on the growing literatures of critical Indigenous studies, Indigenous geographies, and health geography to understand the place-based relationship between environment, self-determination, and wellness in Indigenous communities. The following chapter presents the theoretical framework for this research study and discusses the potential for geographical perspectives to advance understanding around the role of land-based strategies for Indigenous decolonization. The chapter begins by reviewing the concept of Indigenous decolonization and the need to explore its practice through spatial and place-based processes. Second, the chapter discusses the development of Indigenous geographies as a distinct subdiscipline that emphasizes Indigenous understandings of and relationships to place, particularly in the context of colonialism. Finally, the chapter introduces the recent concept of environmental repossession before describing the research context in Biigtigong and identifying how this case study aims to address key empirical gaps and contribute to academic scholarship.

### 2.2. Indigenous decolonization: From theory to practice

Over the past few decades, theoretical conceptualizations of decolonization have been significantly expanded from postcolonial perspectives to the context of settler colonial states. Traditionally, understandings of decolonization have been grounded in postcolonial and critical race theory originating from colonial state contexts and the struggle for sovereign nationhood against European imperialist forces (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). Though the postcolonial perspective recognizes that decolonization may occur across multiple scales and mechanisms, it suggests a common process of liberation that involves

the expulsion of colonial powers, dismantling of colonial structures, and establishment of political, economic, and cultural self-determination (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Through this pathway to independence, decolonization remains relatively uncontextualized; colonization and the colonial experience is theorized to operate similarly across contexts and the pursuit of decolonization is expected to follow a comparable path in response. The writing of Fanon (2008; 1968) on the Caribbean and African colonial contexts has been particularly influential in this regard. Embracing the role of activist-scholar, Fanon both theorized and participated in decolonization as a specific process, beginning with self-recognition among the colonized population and leading, through physical struggle, to political liberation and sovereignty.

Despite providing an important theoretical stance from which to critique colonialism, there has been increasing recognition of the limits of postcolonial theory and its relatively linear, uncontextualized understanding of decolonization to describe the diverse range of colonial experiences and struggles globally (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). Specifically, scholars have questioned the relevance of postcolonial perspectives in the context of settler colonialism, the unique geo-political structure in which colonized peoples must negotiate settler occupation of their territories as an ongoing and everyday colonial reality (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For many Indigenous nations around the world, settler colonialism means striving to assert self-determination against a backdrop of increasing settler populations and the implications for environmental resource use in their ancestral territories (Simpson, 2017; Corntassel & Bryce, 2012). The result is a political-economic reality in which the postcolonial understanding of decolonization as an overthrowing of foreign powers requires both expansion and contextualization. To conceptualize decolonization as an Indigenous process means to place it within the contemporary lives and goals of Indigenous peoples actively contesting settler colonialism in their homelands.

As the system of colonialism seeks to displace and destroy Indigenous nations and identities, critical Indigenous scholarship has theorized decolonization as the enactment of responsive processes to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous ways of life. Traditionally, Indigenous ways of living and being involved the complex interconnection of governance,

economic, cultural, and spiritual systems grounded in relationships to land (Borrows, 2016; Richmond, 2015). Intimate and reciprocal relationships between Indigenous peoples and their homeland environments provided the knowledge and resources for food security, economic self-sufficiency, social networks, and cultural practices that fostered self-determining communities (Coulthard, 2014). In contrast, settler colonialism, as both a historic and contemporary system, understands land as a source of environmental resources to support settler habitation, and wealth accumulation by private and public enterprise (Harris, 2002). For example, in Canada, legislation and policies have been put in place by successive imperial and colonial governments to dispossess Indigenous peoples of access to and authority over their territories in order to legitimize the colonial system and foster its economic and political growth (Lawrence, 2012). The impacts of this environmental dispossession have been severe and continue to manifest in many of the present-day social, cultural, economic, and health challenges experienced by Indigenous communities (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Given the central roles of land and spatial processes in the operation of colonialism, critical Indigenous scholars suggest that dismantling colonial power structures and rebuilding Indigenous ways of life must begin with reclaiming traditional territories (Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Coulthard, 2014; Corntassel, 2012; Alfred, 2005). In particular, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonization "specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (21), envisioned as the elimination of all settler property rights and sovereignty across settler colonial contexts. From this perspective, Indigenous decolonization is conceptualized as a transformative spatial practice in which land is reclaimed and environmental relationships are reconnected.

While the implicit conclusion of Tuck and Yang (2012) may be to suggest that meaningful decolonization is impossible, Indigenous legal and political theorists have built on the concept of Indigenous decolonization as the reclamation of Indigenous homelands to explore the mechanisms through which it may be operationalized (Simpson, 2017; Borrows, 2016; Coulthard, 2014; Corntassel, 2012). Within this literature, debates have emerged around three distinct approaches: legal recognition; economic development; and Indigenous resurgence. The first, legal recognition, has risen to prominence in the Canadian and American legal literatures around Indigenous decolonization since the 1970s, and

currently serves as the impetus for processes of modern treaty and land claim negotiations (Borrows, 2016). Also referred to as a rights-based approach, this strategy understands land reclamation from the perspective of constitutional and other legal arguments around land ownership. Thus, Indigenous nations seek formal validation of their rights to and authority over ancestral territory through the legal system or negotiations with the state. In one of the clearest examples of this approach, Inuit of the Eastern Canadian Arctic used the federal land claim negotiation process to secure the separation of their ancestral homeland as a largely self-determining territory in 1999 (Hicks & White, 2000). Legally defined as Inuit-controlled, the creation of Nunavut has facilitated increasing political, economic, educational, and cultural self-determination for the local Inuit population, with the ability to integrate Inuit social norms and values into territorial governance. Pursuing legal recognition is understood as a process of learning and using the colonial state system that has long oppressed Indigenous peoples as a pathway to decolonize relations with it (Borrows, 2016).

Despite academic and community hopes for the legal recognition approach, it presents significant practical challenges in terms of the lengthy procedures, technical legal knowledge, and costs required for ratification, let alone implementation, of agreements (Harris, 2002). For this reason, some Indigenous communities have turned to economic development as a strategy to reclaim land through the direct purchase of ownership over their ancestral territories. In *Wasa'se: Indigenous pathways of action and freedom* (2005), Alfred theorizes that economic development may be a potential pathway to decolonization in that it fosters the ability of Indigenous nations to simultaneously regain control over their land and to reduce or eliminate dependency on the colonial state. To illustrate this argument, the experience of the Oneida Indian Nation in New York State is presented (2005: 271) in which profits from economic investments, particularly in casinos and gambling, have been used to purchase 14,000 acres of territory, as well as to fund cultural and ceremonial land-based programs, health and educational services, and political negotiations with government. In this way, building economic self-sufficiency has supported the Oneida Nation to begin dismantling colonial state power over the community and increasing legal and meaningful authority over its homelands. Alfred suggests that

economic development may be a means of accumulating economic power that can then be used to enact decolonization through processes and programs to reconnect Indigenous peoples to their lands and ways of life.

Recently, critical Indigenous scholars have turned their attention to deconstructing legal recognition and economic development as potential mechanisms of decolonization, suggesting the two approaches are inseparable from the structures and systems of colonialism (Corntassel, 2012). For example, Dene political theorist Glenn Coulthard (2014) has explored the politics of legal recognition in Canada to describe the ways in which this strategy both validates and reproduces colonial state authority over Indigenous communities, rather than resist it. Pursuing recognition of Indigenous rights to land through courts and government negotiations places control over the process with colonial institutions, including the evaluation of evidence, determination of outcome, and implementation of articles. Cases must be advanced by Indigenous nations or communities that are recognized by the state, and the legitimacy of information is judged according to Eurocentric values, norms, and perceptions of history (Lawrence, 2012). As a result, both Alfred (2005) and Corntassel (2012) have argued that legal recognition cannot transform the spatial relations of colonial power, and instead operates as a distraction from meaningful Indigenous decolonization. Similarly, Simpson (2017) critiques economic development as a strategy that serves to further entrench the system of settler colonialism and its emphasis on property rights. Instead of reconnecting Indigenous relationships to land, Simpson argues that the purchase of title or ownership over land by Indigenous communities must be understood as an endorsement of colonial meanings of land that continue to undermine Indigenous cultures and identities.

Building from critiques of legal recognition and economic development, a third mechanism of Indigenous decolonization has emerged in the concept of Indigenous resurgence. As first conceptualized by Alfred (2005), Indigenous resurgence describes the revitalization of Indigenous identities and nationhood through the return to and reconnection with traditional practices, Indigenous knowledge systems, and values. Enacted at both the individual and collective levels, Indigenous resurgence is not intended

as the resurrection of ancestral ways of living, but a re-making of contemporary relationships to community, nation, and land (Alfred, 2005). Through reconnection to land and land-based practices and responsibilities, the foundations of Indigenous worldviews, cultures, and spiritualities are rebuilt (Corntassel, 2012). As Indigenous resurgence seeks to renew the core elements of Indigenous identity and transform the ways in which Indigenous peoples relate to themselves and each other, it aims to operate as a practice of "deep decolonization" (Alfred, 2005: 180). The outcome of this decolonization is theorized by Alfred (2005) to be Indigenous peoples "thinking like Onkwehonwe, seeing the world through indigenous eyes, taking hold of our responsibilities and living them" (200). Unlike legal recognition and economic development, neither this outcome nor the process of resurgence are assumed to be universal. Given the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their environments, cultures, and knowledge systems, the processes involved in reconnecting to land and land-based responsibilities will be context-specific (Simpson, 2017; Borrows, 2016). The methods of Indigenous resurgence are understood to look different in each community and to form a place-based expression of decolonization.

If Indigenous decolonization is conceptualized as a spatial and place-based process that transforms Indigenous relationships to land, how is it put into practice by Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations? Generally, the Canadian literature around decolonization and Indigenous resurgence has emphasized local and micro scale practices as the means by which meaningful and substantive decolonizing change is initiated. From the perspective of Indigenous governance, Corntassel (2012) advocates for decolonization to begin with individual, everyday practices of resurgence. Through everyday acts and commitments, Indigenous peoples seek to reconnect their own personal relationships to their homelands, and renew their individual responsibilities to their families, communities, and environments. This concept of everyday decolonization is presented in the example of Cheryl Bryce, a Lekwengen woman working to restore her ancestral homeland around Victoria, B.C. through the harvesting of kwetlal, a traditional plant for food and trade (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012). Through the maintenance of kwetlal systems, both on private and public property, this place-based act serves to assert the ongoing presence of Lekwengen in their homeland and to make visible their decolonial struggle for land

reclamation. Shifting away from direct action, Hunt and Holmes (2015) further discuss the potential of everyday decolonization as consciously practiced by Indigenous and settler individuals within the intimate and private interactions of families, friendships, and homes. Recently, however, Simpson (2017) has called for consideration of how these place-based local and personal acts may be mobilized into broader networks of struggle towards decolonization. While practices of Indigenous resurgence and Indigenous alternatives to colonialism are localized and place-based, the transformational power of decolonization may be enhanced if these local sites are networked across time and space (Simpson, 2017). The question then becomes how decolonization can take place through simultaneous processes across multiple scales, from the individual, to the place-based local, to the global collective. While decolonization has been broadly theorized in the critical Indigenous literature, few studies have explored empirically how multiple, parallel processes are enacted by and within Indigenous communities towards Indigenous decolonization.

### 2.3. Indigenous geographies: Centering Indigenous understandings of place

Given the emphasis on reclaiming land and land-based practices prevalent in conceptualizations of decolonization, the perspective of Indigenous geographies may contribute to advancing understanding in this area. As a distinct subdiscipline of geography, Indigenous geographies call for theoretical and methodological attention to the relationships between Indigenous peoples and place, recognizing the diversity of cultures, histories, geographies, spiritualities, and experiences that contextualize these relationships (Shaw et al., 2006). In contrast to traditional geographical work and knowledge that have often served to erase and marginalize Indigenous peoples and their environments, this growing project distinguishes itself by seeking to centre Indigenous voices, experiences, and understandings of place (Tobias & Richmond, 2016; Coombes et al., 2014). To do so, Indigenous geographies actively engage with the complex, relational, and place-based ontologies of Indigenous communities and nations globally, and take seriously the resulting epistemological implications (Larson & Johnson, 2012).

The field of geography, as both an academic discipline and research area, has a long and intimate history with the project of colonialism. Geographers actively participated

in European imperialist expansion to the 'new world,' in particular Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, and produced the cartographic work that aimed to erase Indigenous peoples from their environments and justify colonial control (Howitt & Jackson, 1998). In many ways, this colonial perspective towards Indigenous peoples sits at the foundation of geographical knowledge and remained the dominant approach until the late 1960s when geographers began to critically engage with Indigenous peoples in their work (Shaw et al., 2006). According to Shaw et al. (2006), Indigenous geographies emerged from this shift in political awareness as, alongside the development of structuralism, geographical research began to interrogate the political, social, and economic realities of Indigenous communities. Central among these realities was the pervasive power structure of colonialism and the spatial processes through which it operates and reproduces.

The new approach of Indigenous geographies expanded significantly in the 1980s and 1990s following the cultural turn in geography and its accompanying post-structural efforts to "deconstruct power/knowledge, highlight and celebrate marginality, and envision alternative social and cultural worlds" (Larsen & Johnson, 2012: 4). Increasing acceptance of ontological pluralism shifted attention towards the exploration of different meanings of place and environment, and opened theoretical space in the subdiscipline for Indigenous ways of being and knowing (Herman, 2008). Indigenous geographers, having long called for inclusion of and respect for Indigenous knowledges in academia (Louis, 2007), seized the opportunity to advance both theoretical frameworks grounded in diverse Indigenous worldviews and the formalization of Indigenous geographies within the broader discipline (Shaw et al., 2006). While the term Indigenous is politically contested and encompasses a multitude of distinct, complex, and place-based worldviews, an ontological emphasis on the relatedness of all living things is common across many Indigenous cultures (Richmond, 2015). People, animals, and the land are understood to be physically and spiritually related, and thus implicated in deep and layered webs of responsibility. This special and multidimensional relationship between Indigenous peoples and their environments sits at the core of Indigenous geographies and its understanding of the meanings of place (Wilson, 2003).

Drawing from critical, cultural, and Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous geographies has developed into a robust approach and distinct subdiscipline as it explores the dynamic relationships between Indigenous peoples and their environments. Contemporary work in Indigenous geographies begins from these intimate environmental connections to examine how they shape specific, meaningful, and relational understandings of place among Indigenous peoples (Shaw et al., 2006) and, in turn, how these understandings have been impacted by the system of colonialism. Attention is directed to untangling the ways in which colonialism manifests in particular spatial processes that restrict and disconnect Indigenous environmental relationships, and the damaging consequences for systems of Indigenous knowledge, spirituality, governance, food security, economic self-sufficiency, and wellness (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018). Colonialism is thus interrogated as a pervasive and present system that continues to limit the social, cultural, and political self-determination of Indigenous communities and nations (Harris, 2002). A key concept within this recent body of work is environmental dispossession, advanced by Richmond and Ross (2009) to describe the "processes through which Aboriginal people's access to the resources of their traditional environments is reduced" (403). Environmental dispossession allows Indigenous geographies to explore the specific processes that displace Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories and the meanings of these processes as they disrupt the land and water-based practices that nurture environmental relationships. For example, Tobias and Richmond (2014) employed the concept of environmental dispossession to examine health in two Anishinaabe communities in Ontario, demonstrating how historical and contemporary processes of dispossession continue to limit the capacity of the communities to participate in land-based practices. Direct and indirect processes of dispossession rooted in colonial policies, laws, and systems were found to be reshaping the relationships of the communities with their ancestral territories and creating intergenerational impacts on identity, culture, and self-sufficiency (Tobias & Richmond, 2014: 31). Similarly, Brown et al., (2012) have used environmental dispossession to connect the ongoing impacts of colonialism to health inequities in the First Nations context in British Columbia.

Despite the focus of Indigenous geographies on relationships to and experiences of place within the context of colonialism and its ongoing impacts, engagement with the concept of decolonization in place remains limited (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). Since Howitt and Jackson's (1998) call for the decolonization of geography as an academic discipline, conceptualizations of decolonization have tended to focus their attention inwards, towards the theories and methodologies of geography, as well as geographers themselves. Within Indigenous geographies, the uptake of decolonization has primarily emphasized two approaches: decolonization of the discipline and decolonization of geographic research practices (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). The first approach seeks to interrogate and deconstruct the ways in which colonialism continues to operate by theorizing and advocating for the decolonization of academic knowledge production, institutional spaces, and researchers themselves (Johnson et al., 2007; Shaw et al., 2006). Efforts from this perspective centre around encouraging non-Indigenous geographers to make space for Indigenous voices, experiences, and places within academia, as well as to engage seriously with Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies in geographical research (Sundberg, 2013). In contrast, the second approach fixes its attention on the methods and tools of geographic research undertaken with Indigenous communities in order to transform the power relations of knowledge production (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). Decolonization is situated within geographic methodologies and results in increasing calls for participatory research approaches (Castleden et al., 2012) and methods, such as digital storytelling (Sloan Morgan et al., 2014) and counter-mapping (Willow, 2013). While geographers engaging with decolonization as a research practice generally aim to foster change on the ground, the understanding of decolonization remains positioned within the research process and activities of the researcher.

Recently, de Leeuw and Hunt (2018) have argued for a shift in geographical understandings of decolonization that move beyond theoretical and methodological engagements to applied practice. Building on critical Indigenous scholarship, the authors advocate for geographical attention to how Indigenous peoples and communities live decolonization in the context of their cultural, social, political, and economic realities, and what this means for wellness. In other words, there is a need to explore diverse meanings

of decolonization on the ground as Indigenous peoples actively resist the ongoing impacts of colonization and seek to revitalize identities and knowledge systems rooted in relationships to land. In this regard, the work of Daigle (2016) around the concept of Indigenous self-determination presents an interesting example of how geographical work may move forward. Situated in Omushkegowuk Cree ontologies, the author examines how self-determination is expressed in the community of Achikamaw, northern Ontario, through local, place-based laws, and lived through everyday practices of cultural regeneration (Daigle, 2016; 259) As the perspective of Indigenous geographies continues to expand there is a clear role for the subdiscipline to consider how different communities understand decolonization, and practice it through place-based and spatial processes of transformation in their homelands.

### 2.4. Geographies of Indigenous health and wellness: Applying environmental repossession

The geographies of Indigenous health and wellness aim to bring an additional dimension of understanding to Indigenous meanings of and relationships to place. This geographical approach emerged out of growing evidence that increasing investments in biomedical health research, programming, and services were unable to address the persistent inequalities in wellness experienced by Indigenous peoples and communities (Richmond & Ross, 2009; Wilson & Rosenberg, 2002). Instead, this subdiscipline of critical human geography begins from holistic conceptualizations of wellness, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual components, to explore the interconnections between environment and Indigenous peoples' capacity to live well in accordance with their own responsibilities, protocols, and values (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018). Central to interrogating this environment-wellness connection is the deep and multidimensional relationship that many Indigenous communities hold with their homelands, and the recognition that this relationship is practiced differently across the diversity of Indigenous cultures, geographies, and knowledge systems globally (Styres, 2017; Panelli & Tipa, 2007; Parlee & Berkes, 2005). By emphasizing individual and community relationships to land, the geographies of Indigenous health and wellness consider the processes and

structures that shape Indigenous wellness in place and across scales (Richmond & Nightingale, 2021; Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018), with particular attention to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and dispossession (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Brown et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2009).

As geographies of Indigenous health and wellness seek to privilege the experiences of Indigenous peoples and produce research that addresses community needs, attention has shifted to the strategies Indigenous peoples are pursuing to resist and rebuild from processes of environmental dispossession. Recently, Big-Canoe and Richmond (2014) have advanced the concept of environmental repossession to describe the "social, cultural and political processes by which Indigenous peoples and communities are reclaiming their traditional lands and ways of life" (132). Situated within Indigenous worldviews and meanings of place, environmental repossession provides a theoretical framework to understand the connections between land, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural identity as the foundations of Indigenous ways of being and wellness. Land, in this instance, is more than a physical landscape; it is an animate being with agency, and a relative, provider, and teacher with whom Indigenous peoples actively interact (Daigle, 2016: 266). Environmental repossession begins from this relational connection between Indigenous peoples and their homelands to consider how communities are reviving or strengthening their practices, knowledges, and identities as a means to address contemporary health and socio-economic priorities (Tobias & Richmond, 2016).

While strategies to reclaim land are critical to environmental repossession efforts, Big-Canoe and Richmond (2014) suggest that these spatial processes are only one component of revitalizing Indigenous ways of life. Drawing from participatory research with Anishinaabe youth, the Indigenous geographers demonstrate that strong social relationships and bases of Indigenous knowledge must be present alongside access to land in order to foster Indigenous cultural and spiritual identities. In other words, while physical access to culturally significant sites and environmental resources is important, communities also need access to the traditional knowledge and skills related to understanding and using these places. In turn, sustainable Indigenous knowledge systems

rely on intergenerational transmission facilitated by strong social relationships between Elders and youth in communities. Practicing Indigenous knowledge on the land with Elders not only teaches youth technical skills and specific protocols but imbues these practices with meaning by fostering personal relationships, sense of belonging, and pride in identity (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). The three interrelated concepts of land, social relationships, and Indigenous knowledge can therefore be understood as the underlying drivers of environmental repossession. In applied community contexts, environmental repossession calls for attention to the spatial processes employed to reclaim land and land-based knowledge, as well as the meanings of these processes within the local context of social relationships.

On the ground, environmental repossession may be represented by diverse strategies and proxies that reflect the unique histories, cultures, and experiences of colonization of different communities. The specific strategies enacted will respond to individual and community needs in the context of local land-based practices and knowledges, and how they have been impacted by historical and contemporary processes of dispossession (Hatala et al., 2019; Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016). To explore the place-based nature of environmental repossession, Tobias and Richmond (2016) employed community-based participatory action research with Anishinaabe Elders in two Ontario First Nations, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and Batchewana First Nations. The research findings suggest that local strategies of environmental repossession as understood and desired by the Elders fell into four overarching themes: "(1) re-establishing the relationship between Elders and youth, (2) increasing time spent on traditional lands, (3) improving physical health, and (4) fostering community pride" (Tobias & Richmond, 2016: 234). Within each theme, specific strategies of repossession were described to address community challenges, draw on place-based knowledge, and revitalize land-based practices that are central to the local Anishinaabe way of life. For example, a 10-day youth camp at the culturally significant site Dead Horse was designed to bring together Elders and high school students, share traditional teachings, teach bush skills, and strengthen the youths' cultural and spiritual connections with their ancestral territories (Tobias & Richmond, 2016: 234). While a youth camp may be a

relevant strategy of environmental repossession for other Indigenous communities, the knowledge, practices, and cultural meanings shared would look very different in the context of other Indigenous place-based relationships to land.

Similarly, Jolly (2018) explores the concept of repossession in the context of Kanaka Maoli (Indigenous Hawaiian) struggles to reclaim access to and control over their ancestral territories in Hawai'i. In describing three case studies, Jolly demonstrates how each strategy of environmental repossession is place-based, in that it involves distinct spatial processes and land-based practices that respond to each communities' history and experiences with US government and military occupation. In the urban context, Bang et al. (2014) discuss the collaborative development of a land-based education program in Chicago as a means of reconnecting children to their ancestral homeland, local Indigenous knowledge system, and cultural identity. Though grounded in the perspectives of place-based education and Indigenous pedagogies, the community-based program may be conceptualized as an urban strategy of environmental repossession as it pursues processes aimed at reclaiming historic village sites and revitalizing practices of traditional wetland cultivation and medicine harvesting within the metropolitan area (Bang et al., 2014: 46). More recently, Hatala et al. (2019) explore the everyday, personal practices used by Indigenous youth in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan to connect with land, and suggest that these individual processes of environmental repossession become a means of land- or place-making in the urban environment.

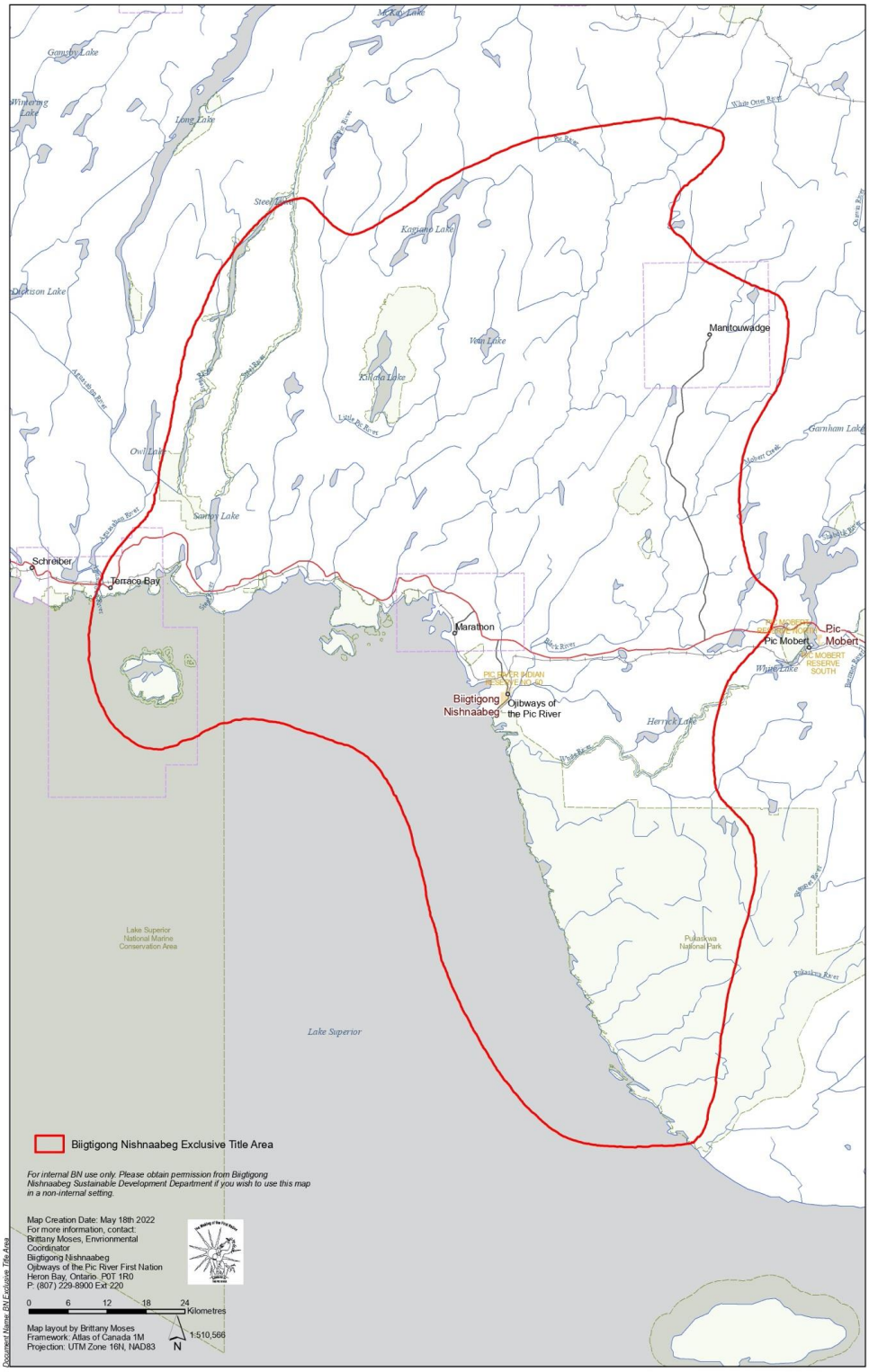
Given both the place-based nature of environmental repossession and the implications for decolonization, the concept is deserving of critical attention from the discipline of geography, and Indigenous geographies in particular. Yet, limited academic research has sought to document and explore strategies of environmental repossession in applied community contexts. Specifically, a gap in the literature exists to consider why certain Indigenous communities are pursuing processes of environmental repossession, how individual processes of repossession are understood and enacted, and what common threads may tie these distinct processes together and sustain them at the community level.

## 2.5. Study context: Connecting repossession and decolonization in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg

This thesis builds on the theoretical concept of environmental repossession by examining it in the applied context of collaborative research with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. By taking a case study approach, this research aims to describe the place-based practice and meanings of environmental repossession in Biigtigong in order to understand why and how distinct land reclamation processes are initiated at the community level. Biigtigong was selected as the appropriate location for this study due to: 1) the community's longstanding research relationship with Dr. Chantelle Richmond, my thesis supervisor; 2) the relevance of the research for the community and its interest in partnering; and 3) the prioritization of land reclamation by the community's leadership over the past 30 years.

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg is an Anishinaabe community located on the northern shore of Lake Superior approximately halfway between Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay. Since time immemorial, the community has lived and travelled throughout its ancestral territory of more than two million hectares (see Figure 1: Biigtigong land claim area) and upheld strong and reciprocal relations with this land. The land of Biigtigong's territory is the foundation of its identity, knowledge system, and wellness. For generations, the land has provided the resources for food security and survival, sacred sites and medicines for ceremony, and transportation routes for clan kinship networks. In return, the Nishnaabeg of Biigtigong have maintained cultural and spiritual protocols of living mino bimaadiziwin, the way of living well in responsibility and relationship to all living things, including the natural and spirit worlds, and future generations (McGuire, 2013).

## Figure 1: Biigtigong land claim area



The close relationship between Biigtigong and its territory has been significantly impacted by settler colonialism and related processes of dispossession. Beginning in the 1800s, there was an influx of missionaries, fur traders, and mining prospectors to the Lake Superior region, and in 1850 the Robinson-Superior Treaty established Crown ownership over the coastline (Hele, 2016; Surtees, 1986). While this Treaty was negotiated with First Nations in the Superior watershed, leadership from Biigtigong was not involved. The community has never signed nor accepted the terms of this agreement (Biigtigong, 2018), meaning that Biigtigong's entire ancestral territory remains unceded. Still, the Treaty has been employed by successive governments to undermine Biigtigong's sovereignty and restrict its land rights. With the passing of the Indian Act in 1876 and subsequent creation of the reserve lands system, Biigtigong was largely displaced from its territory and confined to 323.7 hectares of land (Pic River 50) that is primarily swampland (Biigtigong, 2018). Through this legislation, the government has further restricted the ability of community members to hunt, fish, and travel in the territory, both directly through the imposition of Indian agents and indirectly through the approval of natural resource projects that have contaminated or destroyed the physical environment (Tobias & Richmond, 2014).

Alongside this physical dispossession, colonial laws, policies, and practices have been enacted to disconnect community members culturally and spiritually from the land. Children in Biigtigong were removed from their families and community by the residential school system with the intention of destroying Nishnaabeg identity and forcing assimilation. Similarly, the Indian Act outlawed ceremonies, spiritual practices, and traditional governance systems that were essential to the maintenance of Nishnaabeg knowledge and the Anishinaabemowin language, and their transmission between generations (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). As the Indian Act and other colonial legislation remains in place, the state continues to shape Biigtigong's relationship with its territory in ways that limit the community's self-determination. These historical and contemporary experiences of environmental dispossession have profoundly impacted the ability of community members to live as Nishnaabeg and resulted in health and social inequities that persist today.

To address ongoing processes and impacts of dispossession, Biigtigong has initiated multiple processes that aim to reclaim its ancestral territory and rebuild the community's relationship to this land. For more than thirty years, the Chief and Band Council of Biigtigong have prioritized land reclamation, increasing land use, and the revival of land-based cultural practices, with the understanding that these efforts will foster community healing and wellness. While these strategies are diverse and vary in scale, form, timeframe, and cost, they generally fall into three categories which align closely with the theorized pathways of decolonization from the literature, including legal recognition (Borrows, 2016), economic development (Alfred, 2005), and resurgence (Coulthard, 2014). First, Biigtigong has been negotiating a comprehensive land claim agreement to secure Aboriginal rights and title to its ancestral territory. Second, community leadership has pursued economic self-reliance through investments in hydroelectricity and the negotiation of benefit agreements with mining companies. This band-owned revenue has allowed the community to decrease financial dependency on the federal government, while investing in cultural regeneration and building capacity to purchase back land. Third, Biigtigong has implemented various long- and short-term projects to encourage community members to reconnect with its territory through active land use, the renewal of land-based responsibilities, and the teaching of Nishnaabeg knowledge. For example, in 1985 Biigtigong reintroduced an annual powwow at the Mouth of the Pic, a sacred community gathering site. Fifteen years later, the community established an annual moose hunting and harvesting camp to revitalize these key skills and bring generations of community members together in different places across the territory.

Previous research with Biigtigong has identified these land-based projects as strategies of environmental repossession critical to restoring the community's ways of living (Tobias and Richmond, 2016). However, no empirical study has explored how individual processes of repossession are being developed and operationalized by the community, nor what they mean for the community members directly involved. This thesis aims to provide empirical evidence around the spatial and local strategies being implemented by Biigtigong to reoccupy, reconnect with, and reassert its rights to its ancestral territory. By describing these processes and examining their local meanings, this

thesis aims to consider how individual repossession strategies may come together at the community level to support a place-based expression of decolonization. While the literature suggests that decolonization is conceptually linked to reclaiming land as a means to revitalize Indigenous nationhood and resist the ongoing structures of settler colonialism, current geographical engagement remains predominantly theoretical. This research looks beyond theoretical and discursive understandings to explore how decolonization is enacted in applied contexts and at the community level. Framed by de Leeuw and Hunt's (2018) call to situate decolonization within the lives and struggles of Indigenous peoples on the ground, this thesis examines how Indigenous decolonization is understood and practiced locally by Biigtigong through community-led strategies to reclaim ancestral territory. In focusing attention at the community level, this thesis further considers how decolonization may operate across multiples scales, as community-led processes intersect with both the micro scale of individual experience and broader political and economic structures.

# Chapter 3

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses my methodological approach to designing and undertaking this study in collaboration with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and its Department of Sustainable Development. As a settler scholar exploring decolonization and environmental repossession with Indigenous communities, I take seriously my responsibility to be guided by and to uphold these concepts throughout the research process. My doctoral research is not only about understanding Indigenous meanings and applications of decolonization, but also how community-engaged research can support Indigenous communities towards their own goals of reclaiming and decolonizing relationships to land, knowledge, identity, and wellness. This requires a methodological approach that prioritizes meaningful and ethical collaboration and is community-led, thereby facilitating Indigenous communities themselves to determine the objectives, design, and methods employed. While Chapters 4-6 detail the specific methods used for data collection and analysis within each case study that makes up this thesis, this chapter provides an overview of how I worked with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg over the past six years to develop and implement the broader research project. In this chapter, I detail how my methodology draws on Indigenous and decolonizing research paradigms, and specifically six key principles of Indigenous research to support the co-creation of knowledge relevant to Biigtigong's worldview, priorities, and needs. These six principles build from the work of Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) and Kovach (2009) and include the following: respect, relationship, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and refusal. Further, I situate myself as a settler scholar within this Indigenous community partnership and describe how this shaped my relationships, roles, responsibilities, and limitations throughout the research activities. Finally, I explain the timeline and process of data collection and analysis to qualitatively examine local processes of repossession in Biigtigong.

### 3.2. Decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies

This dissertation research explores local meanings of land reclamation in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg in order to understand how these processes of environmental repossession may form a place-based expression of decolonization. Given the emphasis on land reclamation efforts as a means to resist and rebuild from the ongoing impacts of colonialism, this thesis draws from decolonizing methodologies as advanced by the seminal work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). Decolonizing methodologies seek to situate research within Indigenous experiences of colonization and struggles for self-determination. As a methodological framework it calls upon the researcher to apply a decolonizing lens throughout the research process by critically reflecting on the politics of their own positionality in order to challenge the colonial power relations of traditional academic research, and to privilege the voices of Indigenous peoples and communities (Louis, 2007; Smith, 1999). Indigenous self-determination becomes both a guiding principle and goal of the methodology as the research seeks to facilitate Indigenous ownership over the process and to "enable communities to use research in ways that will help them to be self-determining" (Richmond, 2016: 156). From this perspective, privileging Indigenous voices is not related to any particular choice of method, but represents a broader commitment to engage with and respect Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and axiologies throughout the research process (Smith, 1999).

Framed by decolonizing methodologies, this research prioritized Biigtigong's experiences of colonization and decolonization as a guiding lens in examining the processes and meanings of its community-led land reclamation. Biigtigong's repossession efforts are situated within its unique political and legal context as a reserve-based First Nation that has not ceded land title or rights to the state through any form of agreement. Specifically, Biigtigong is not a signatory of the Robinson-Superior Treaty that governs the state's relationship with neighbouring First Nations along the coast of Lake Superior. For the past four decades, a primary community goal has been to secure Biigtigong's legal rights to its ancestral territory through the negotiation of a comprehensive land claim agreement with the federal and provincial governments. This legal process is time

consuming, expensive, and highly sensitive to information about community history and land use. Although the land claim process is one of Biigtigong's most important strategies of environmental repossession, I have purposefully omitted it from this thesis project in order to uphold the community's self-determination over both land and research. At the inception of this research, Biigtigong's leadership specifically stated that the land claim would not be included in my thesis research. My responsibility to uphold this request has purposefully guided key methodological decision-making throughout the research process. While this dissertation presents two case studies of ongoing environmental repossession in Biigtigong, my application of decolonizing research methodology means that any information, stories, data or findings related to the land claim have not been included here and will not be publicly shared. Rather, any and all related land claim stories and information that was collected during this research has been given to Biigtigong Nishnaabeg so that it can use this data in ways that further its own self-determined purposes. The overarching goal of this research process has been to produce new knowledge and outputs that can be effectively used by the community to further its own goals of political, economic, and cultural self-determination for wellness.

Building on decolonizing methodologies, Indigenous scholars have recently advanced Indigenous methodologies as a distinct and holistic approach to research that aims to decentre the experience of colonialism, and instead emphasize Indigenous knowledge systems as the guiding methodological lens (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Given the diversity of Indigenous knowledge globally, Indigenous methodologies encompass a multitude of local ways of gathering, creating, and sharing knowledge, rather than a single, definable framework (Coombes et al., 2014). What ties these methodologies together is the prioritization of Indigenous ways of understanding the world, and the concept of relationality (Wilson, 2008). Stemming from relational Indigenous ontologies that emphasize the interconnected relationships of all living things, relationality as a methodological principle in Indigenous research becomes a system of accountability, ethics, trust, and knowledge validation (Kovach, 2009). The research is understood *to be* the relationships, and involves practicing the Indigenous knowledge, cultural protocols, knowledge sharing, and reciprocity to maintain and strengthen relationships between the

researcher and the collaborating people or community (Wilson, 2008). Various Indigenous scholars have summarized this relational framework through four common or overarching principles to guide Indigenous research (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021), these 4 Rs (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) include: 1) *respect*, the research process must respect Indigenous knowledge; 2) *relevance*, the research process and its outcomes must be meaningful for Indigenous communities and their goals; 3) *reciprocity*, the researcher must honour the knowledge and gifts shared with them by Indigenous communities and reciprocate equally; and, 4) *responsibility*, the researcher is accountable to the community, participants, and the project itself throughout the research process (Hart, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Archibald, 2008; Rigney, 1999). Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson has further suggested adding the principle of *refusal*, acknowledging that Indigenous self-determination involves the right to determine what will not be included, collected, or shared through research activities (Simpson, 2007). Together, these six Indigenous research principles of respect, relationship, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and refusal have guided the methodological approach of this thesis research.

### 3.3. Respect: Mino bimaadiziwin as methodology

Drawing from Indigenous methodologies allowed this research to explore the concepts of decolonization and environmental repossession through Biigtigong's local ways of gathering, sharing, and validating knowledge, and within the context of the community's social and environmental relationships. As an Anishinaabe community, Biigtigong's local worldview and ways of knowing are specifically framed by Anishinaabe knowledge systems that encompass history, teachings, and spirituality, and emphasize the holistic philosophy of mino bimaadiziwin, or living a good life. In the context of research, Anishinaabe scholars Debassige (2010), Bell (2016), and McGregor (2018) have argued that mino bimaadiziwin can be applied as a methodological approach in which the researcher commits to both living in a good way and supporting Indigenous communities towards their own goals of a good and well life. In practice, this means that the foundation of research is the building of long-term relationships between the researcher and their community partner, as well as their self, past and future generations, the environment,

Indigenous knowledge, and Spirit (McGregor, 2018). These relationships are nurtured and sustained throughout the research process by following the seven original Anishinaabe teachings of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth (Bell, 2016). By coming to the research with good intentions, relationships, and spirit, the researcher can focus on privileging Indigenous voices and experiences, respecting cultural protocols and the sacredness of Indigenous knowledge (Debassige, 2010), and practicing reciprocity (Wilson, 2008) and accountability (Kovach, 2019).

What does it mean for a settler scholar to frame their research within decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies when they do not have the life experiences, worldview, or perspectives foundational to these approaches? If the researcher's positionality shapes what they are capable of seeing, learning, and understanding about the world, is it appropriate or even possible for a non-Indigenous researcher to work from these research paradigms (Aveling, 2013; Smith, 1999)? For instance, employing a decolonizing lens requires a political self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher, and the capacity to understand experiences of colonization (Smith, 1999). Similarly, Indigenous approaches call for a relational positionality grounded in local Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Indigenous researchers employ Indigenous methodologies by reflexively situating themselves within their network of family, clan, and environmental relationships to unveil a web of responsibility, accountability, and validation that upholds the research process (Kovach, 2009). As a result, some researchers have suggested that settler scholars positioned outside Indigenous community experiences and relationships cannot adequately engage with these approaches (Aveling, 2013; Rigney, 1999). Given my positionality as a white Jewish woman and my social, cultural, and geographic distance from the community members of Biigtigong, I take seriously these concerns and the implications for my relational and interpretative capacity.

While I cannot, as a settler scholar, apply Anishinaabe methodology myself, mino bimaadiziwin was identified by the community as a guiding principle throughout this iterative research process. I am not a member of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, nor am I Anishinaabe, or a member of any other Indigenous nation. I will never be able to

understand the intimate relationship between Biigtigong and its ancestral territory, its complex Nishnaabeg knowledge system, or the depth and hurt of colonization and dispossession. I also do not believe that it is my role to try to comprehend or work from Biigtigong's worldview and ways of knowing. This dissertation represents my own learning journey in partnership with Biigtigong, and it is not the community's responsibility to teach me how to do Nishnaabeg research, nor to share Nishnaabeg wisdom, teachings, or practices with me. Yet, decolonizing research means making space for and centering the knowledge systems, values and worldviews of Indigenous community partners (Tsosie et al., 2022). I aimed to facilitate a community-led research design that shifted ownership of the study to Biigtigong and the Department of Sustainable Development in particular (Moodie, 2010). In this way, Biigtigong could guide the research from its Nishnaabeg worldview and determine the objectives, methods, analysis, and dissemination of results based on its vision of and priorities for achieving mino bimaadiziwin.

To be a meaningful ally, I committed to doing this research in a good way, in line with mino bimaadiziwin and Nishnaabeg values. For example, I followed cultural protocols around hosting research participants by always offering food, tea, and gifts when collecting stories or experiences. Similarly, if sacred or sensitive Nishnaabeg knowledge was shared with me, I honoured this knowledge by putting it aside for community use and did not include it in public research outputs. Most importantly, I approached my research partnership with humility, honesty, and love, and prioritized these values above research progress. This meant de-centering my own authority as a researcher and recognizing Indigenous community members as the experts in their own lives. In practice, this meant listening carefully, doing the work that was asked of me, and respecting the boundaries set for me, whether or not it advanced my thesis research or led to publishable results. In so doing, I hoped to avoid the conventional power relations of research, and to highlight the voices of Indigenous communities that have long been silenced, marginalized, and oppressed by academia (Snow, 2018; Taylor & Ochocka, 2017; Moodie, 2010; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Finally, while being a good ally in this research project involved drawing from mino bimaadiziwin, it is crucial to recognize that this approach is not mine to

appropriate or bring with me to future work. Mino bimaadiziwin belongs to Nishnaabeg communities, and any collaborative research with other Indigenous communities must be guided by their own philosophies, core values, and teachings.

### 3.4. Relationality: Building research relationships

Key in applying mino bimaadiziwin as a research approach was the development and maintenance of relationships of trust, respect, and reciprocity between myself and Biigtigong. As I sit outside of Indigenous systems of relational accountability, it is by establishing research relationships that collaboration becomes possible, and the open and reflexive communication necessary for co-learning can occur (Castleden et al., 2012). While relationship building is unique to each community, it is generally understood to involve time spent on-the-ground, demonstrating respect for cultural protocols and knowledge gathering processes, and financial commitments towards community capacity and resources (Woodward & McTaggart, 2016). This process is thus a long-term commitment and can often be challenging for graduate students with fixed timelines and limited budgets. My own relationship with Biigtigong, its leadership and Department of Sustainable Development benefitted immensely from the longstanding family, social, and research ties between my supervisor, Dr. Chantelle Richmond and the community. Given my social, cultural, and geographic distance from the community, building trustworthiness and accountability with the Chief and band staff members was an important challenge. However, I was able to build on Dr. Richmond's relational connections to Biigtigong as a community member, as well as the positive legacy of research conducted through the Indigenous Health Lab at Western University to foster personal relationships with the community.

My relationship with Biigtigong was further strengthened by the nesting of this thesis research within a larger international project led by Dr. Richmond to explore applications of environmental repossession across diverse Indigenous contexts. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the five-year project brought together Indigenous land reclamation movements from Canada, Hawai'i and Aotearoa (New Zealand) to document and share lessons for other Indigenous

communities globally. My role within the project was to lead the case study in Biigtigong and, as the community's Chief and leadership had been previously involved in developing the research proposal, I was able to come into a research structure that was well established. Although I was not directly involved in the Hawai'i and Aotearoa cases, I had the opportunity to connect with and learn from the academic researchers leading these sites, in particular what good research relationships can look like in specific Indigenous cultural contexts. I first met Chief Duncan Michano and the Director of Sustainable Development, Juanita Starr as part of a broader SSHRC team meeting at the American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, held in Boston in March 2017, prior to the start of my PhD. Equally important to research planning, this initial meeting included flexible time for personal introductions and fostering social connections through shared activities such as sight-seeing and eating together. As I undertook my first year of doctoral coursework, I continued this connection through teleconferences and regular email communication.

The following summer, in June 2018 I travelled to Biigtigong with Dr. Richmond and other students who had previously worked with the community, to meet with the Band Manager, JoAnne Michano, and staff from the Department of Sustainable Development. To build trust and create an environment in which everyone could comfortably share their perspectives and feelings, it was important to have this meeting face-to-face, and in Biigtigong's territory. Further, given staff members' capacity constraints and competing priorities, taking two workdays for research planning was a meaningful demonstration of commitment to the project on the part of the community. To respect the time and energy of band staff, it was important to reciprocate through travel time and expenses to meet in Biigtigong. At this meeting I presented myself, my academic skills, and my previous research experience with Inuit communities, and the staff voiced concerns around my capacity as a settler and non-member to document and represent sacred laws and knowledge. This honesty and the setting of boundaries around my role was crucial to upholding Biigtigong's control over the study, as well as their right of refusal to exclude certain activities or data. Travelling to Biigtigong was also essential for me to begin building my own relationship with the community's ancestral territory; to visit and begin understanding this land that community members are intimately connected to.

While the first two years of my PhD research focused on establishing a relationship with Biigtigong, my relationships continued to be a priority throughout this thesis process. Beyond the research relationships and specific obligations of this project, I worked to build personal connections with the staff members of the Department of Sustainable Development and other community members by creating social opportunities to connect. For example, I hosted a lunch for all of the department staff, brought gifts of gratitude for being welcomed into the department's office, and actively participated in community events outside of the research activities. Most importantly, during each trip to Biigtigong, I chose to stay with community members as a means to integrate myself into the community, strengthen personal relationships, and find informal spaces to learn about Biigtigong. During my visit for the Mountain Lake camp in 2019, I stayed in the home of the community researcher, Florinda Christianson and our research relationship developed into a friendship through the daily sharing of informal work and reciprocity. As a result, my biggest learnings about Biigtigong, its history, and social context occurred at the dinner table in Florinda's home.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, the resulting lockdown halted in-person activities and this research process was forced to adapt and move online. The friendships and foundational relationships established in-person with Biigtigong were essential in this flexibility, and allowed the research to maintain momentum through changes in direction and the new reality of Zoom connections. While I have not been able to visit Biigtigong since the pandemic, I have sustained my relationships with the community through regular video calls on the Zoom platform, on-going informal check-ins though social media, and contributing my time and skills to ongoing departmental work.

### 3.5. Relevance: Addressing community needs

My intention throughout this study was to be a meaningful ally to Biigtigong; in as much as I was capable, I supported the community in developing and implementing a research process that would meet its own needs. To facilitate the prioritization of Indigenous voices and worldviews and to challenge my own authority within the research process, I employed a community-based participatory approach (CBPR) (Woodward & McTaggart, 2016;

Sloan Morgan et al., 2014; de Leeuw et al., 2012). Conventionally, research relationships between academics and their research participants have been deeply unequal and extractive; the academic is positioned as the authority on knowledge creation and the participating individuals or communities are viewed as little more than sources of data or subjects for analysis (Louis, 2007). The result of this power-knowledge dynamic has been research processes and outcomes that have often served the interests and career development of researchers, while providing little benefit to the communities being researched (Castleden et al., 2012; Koster et al., 2012). Even worse, academics have historically had the power to present biased and racist research as objective and scientific, and to use this research as a means to justify the exclusion, oppression, and genocide of particular groups (Smith, 1999). As a Jewish person, my own family has experienced the devastating impacts of so-called scientific research as a means of inciting racism and targeted violence. Yet, as a geographer I am also part of this legacy of academic research that has often served to silence Indigenous voices, misappropriate Indigenous knowledges, and misrepresent and oppress communities (Tobias et al., 2013). By engaging in CBPR, I actively sought to position my research partners as equal collaborators throughout the research process, from problem definition to dissemination (Lovell & Rosenberg, 2016; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), to foster community empowerment and capacity building, and to co-create knowledge for mutual benefit and social change (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

### 3.5.1. Study design

By employing a CBPR approach, the research planning and design aimed to establish Biigtigong as the authority in determining the research problem, selecting appropriate methods, interpreting findings, and disseminating outputs (LaVeaux & Christopher, 2009; Tobias et al., 2013). At the initial research meeting in 2017 between myself, Dr. Richmond, Chief Duncan Michano, and the Director of Sustainable Development, we committed two days to discussing Biigtigong's goals for participating in the study and establishing clear expectations around both the community's role as a research partner and the academics' roles as researchers, including my own as a research assistant and doctoral student. Through open dialogue, the Indigenous community partners identified a need for this

research to: 1) document local practices of environmental repossession; 2) explore meanings of repossession within the context of the community's holistic connection to land and the laws, concepts, and responsibilities that govern this connection; and, 3) share learnings with other Indigenous communities globally. This exploration would engage community members of all age groups (i.e., Elders, adults, youth) to understand how relationships to land were changing over time and across generations.

To co-develop a research plan, that would address Biigtigong's objectives, I met with Band Manager, JoAnne Michano and staff from the Department of Sustainable Development over two days in the summer of 2018. Through informal discussions, the Biigtigong staff determined that environmental repossession and land connection should be explored through case studies of the department's work, with particular attention to places from which the community has been disconnected. Specifically, the staff members expressed a desire to document community history, knowledge, and connection to the area of Mountain Lake. Mountain Lake lies along the western boundary of Biigtigong's territory with neighbouring First Nations, about 1.5 hours' drive northwest of the community's reserve. While this area is historically, culturally, and geographically important for fishing, trapping, collecting medicines, and travelling by canoe, processes of dispossession have largely dislocated the community from this place. In particular, the shoreline around the lake is now used predominantly by settler cottagers. Biigtigong staff identified a need for this thesis research to both explore the community's relationship to Mountain Lake and create opportunities to encourage community land use in this place.

Collaboratively, we determined that I would work closely with a community researcher, the Manager of Culture and Heritage, Florinda Christianson, throughout the study to ensure the co-creation of knowledge and appropriate representation of Nishnaabeg experiences. Further, it was agreed that I would not include Nishnaabeg great law, nor Biigtigong's Nishnaabeg constitution in the research project. Through open and candid conversations, we were able to co-develop a detailed research plan that would address Biigtigong's needs in terms of information gaps and the stories, history, and personal experiences that would be helpful to collect for department projects and planning. This

study plan was presented publicly in Biigtigong in October 2018 to allow for feedback from the wider community, as well as to identify potential research participants. Following community acceptance, the research plan was approved by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board at Western University (see Appendix A).

### 3.5.2. Data collection

To describe the local processes of land reclamation ongoing in Biigtigong and explore their individual meanings to community members, 20 qualitative interviews were conducted with 17 Elders, youth, and Sustainable Development staff members. These interviews were complemented by participant observation and informal conversations with attendees at various department activities, as well as ongoing discussions with department staff throughout the study. The use of story-based interviews to collect data was determined collaboratively with the community researcher as an appropriate method to accommodate both the depth and nuance of individual experiences, as well as to make space for local Nishnaabeg knowledge. Particularly for data collection with Elders and knowledge holders, story-based and group methods were identified by the community researcher as suitable for the cultural and social context of the information being shared and documented. By drawing on these methods, we aimed to make space for mino bimaadiziwin and collect data useful to the department's needs.

Within Indigenous methodologies, Wilson (2008), Archibald (2008), and Kovach (2009) have advocated for story-based methods as a means to privilege each participant's lived experience as knowledge, and to place it within the context of their family, community, and culture. Storytelling is a common form of gathering, sharing, and teaching knowledge in Indigenous communities, and reflects Indigenous epistemologies by engaging with "oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledges, and cultural resources to examine current events" (Iseke, 2013: 1). Iseke (2013) further argues that Indigenous storytelling can be understood as a form of resisting colonial narratives and realities, and reclaiming and revaluing Indigenous knowledge, suggesting that story-based methods may foster a decolonizing lens in data collection. Finally, within a CBPR framework story-based methods can provide an important opportunity to shift power from

the academic researcher to Indigenous participants (Coombes et al., 2014). In contrast to structured interviews or surveys, unstructured or semi-structured story methods facilitate the participant's control over the narratives collected (Riessman, 2008). Storytelling has also been suggested as an appropriate means to accommodate the complexity and contingency of place-based data in geographic research (Woodward & McTaggart, 2016; Wright et al., 2012). This research drew on conversational, semi-structured interviews to facilitate community members' control over their narratives, while still guiding them to explore how land reclamation, social relationships, and Indigenous knowledge may underlie meaningful processes of environmental repossession.

#### 3.5.2.1. Reclaiming the western boundary and Mountain Lake

To examine how an individual process of repossession is implemented and the meanings it may hold for community members, the first research phase involved an in-depth case study of Biigtigong's reclamation of Mountain Lake and the western boundary of its ancestral territory. In the summer of 2018, the Department of Sustainable Development constructed two cabins at Mountain Lake, and in July 2019 hosted a week-long camp to bring Elders and youth together in this place for land use, cultural learning, and social relationship building (see Figure 2: Photograph of Mountain Lake camp). I supported the community researcher in the planning, organizing, and hosting of the camp, and funds from the research project were contributed towards the cost of activities, including supplies, food, and transportation. This sharing of time, skills, and resources with the department was essential for sustaining meaningful collaboration and demonstrating respect for staff members' hard work. Important knowledge holders, department staff, youth, and their families were directly invited to attend the camp. Each day, between 30-50 community members attended the camp to be on the land together, share stories and meals, and practice Nishnaabeg skills, such as moccasin and rattle making (See Table 1: Planned daily camp schedule).

**Figure 2: Photograph of Mountain Lake camp**

**Table 1: Planned daily camp schedule**

| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Morning | Group introductions | Making rag moccasins with youth and Elders | Making tie-dye shirts with youth and Elders | Making rattles with youth and Elders | Making medicine pouches with youth and Elders |
| Lunch | Spaghetti and garlic bread | Indian tacos | Moose meat stew and dumplings | Fish fry | Macaroni soup and bannock |
| Afternoon | Community mapping<br>Family tree mapping | Boating<br>Canoeing<br>Shoreline fishing<br>Steamed dumplings | Storytelling<br>Apple snacks (on the fire) | Boating<br>Canoeing<br>Shoreline fishing<br>Rice pudding | Shoreline fishing<br>Making pies |

To document the voices of different social segments and how they may experience the repossession of Mountain Lake differently, I conducted conversational interviews about the camp with Elders and knowledge holders, youth, and department staff members. Purposive sampling was used to identify community members who had attended the entire five-day camp, which included four Elders and knowledge holders, five department staff, and six youth (n=15). All interviews with Elders and knowledge holders were story-based and took place at Mountain Lake in order to situate the data collection within their Nishnaabeg relationships to land (Woodward & McTaggart, 2016), and to enhance understanding of their perceptions and interpretations of the place (Dean, 2016). Youth and staff members were interviewed in the department office or outside in the community, and semi-structured questions were used to guide discussion around personal knowledge of Mountain Lake, experiences at the camp, and connections to land (see Appendix B: Flexible interview guide). The interviews ranged from 30-100 minutes, and were all audio recorded with permission. Given one Elder's particularly in-depth knowledge of the community's cultural, political, social, and economic development in relation to its land reclamation efforts, I conducted one follow-up interview in March 2020. This conversation was 80 minutes, took place in the department's office, and was audio recorded with permission.

#### 3.5.2.2. Developing the Department of Sustainable Development

Based on Biigtigong's data needs, the second research phase was planned to be a case study of the community's fall moose harvesting camp. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued into the fall of 2020, this large annual community gathering was cancelled. Through our regular online meetings, the community researcher and I determined that the best option to continue the research in a useful way for the department was to change direction and focus on the third community research objective: sharing learnings with other Indigenous communities globally. To do so, we decided that the second case study would examine the establishment and evolution of the Department of Sustainable Development in order to document lessons for other communities interested in undertaking land reclamation efforts.

To understand how the Department of Sustainable Development has developed as a structure to implement and sustain environmental repossession, this research phase involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with department staff. All current and former department staff members (n=7) were invited to participate in an interview (see Appendix C: Flexible interview guide) about their professional role in the department and community, as well as their personal relationship with Biigtigong's ancestral territory. Five of these interviews were conducted in Biigtigong in July 2019 in combination with the interview about Mountain Lake, while one of these interviews was conducted by phone and one through the Zoom platform in November 2020 due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Two in-depth follow-up interviews were also conducted with the community researcher through Zoom to reflect on how this study and related activities fit alongside their departmental responsibilities. These interviews ranged from 63-80 minutes and were all audio recorded with permission. To thank the department staff members for their ongoing support throughout this study and their willingness to share their personal and professional experiences with me, gifts were given to each member and celebratory meals were provided to mark different stages of the research project.

### 3.5.3. Data ownership

As a principle of Indigenous research approaches, relevance is not only important for determining study objectives and design, but must remain a guiding value throughout the research process. The goals of the research must align with community needs, but so to must the methods, analysis, and dissemination of findings (Tsosie et al., 2022). This thesis research was specifically driven by an identified gap in information around community history and current use of the Mountain Lake area, and how this data could be used to inform land use planning and management. As a result, the department was interested in the key findings from the research and the full data set of collected stories, experiences, and perceptions. For this research to address Biigtigong's needs, it was critical that the community have access to, archive, and control all of the data gathered. The audio recordings and transcripts from the interviews around Mountain Lake have all been transferred to the Department of Sustainable Development in Biigtigong, and the

department has approved any community quotes, history, and knowledge shared publicly. This process of upholding Biigtigong's ownership over the data collected aligns with the First Nations principles of OCAP®, which asserts Indigenous ownership, control, access and possession of data (FNIGC, 2022; Schnarch, 2004).

### 3.6. Responsibility: Data analysis, interpretation, and representation

This research process was largely motivated by my responsibilities as a settler on this land, and my intention to use my skills, experience, and privilege to support Biigtigong in exploring questions, collecting information, and sharing knowledge to address its own needs. My personal responsibility as a scholar and uninvited guest on Turtle Island is one that I come to with overwhelming gratitude. As a Jewish woman of eastern European origin, I am well aware of what my reality would have been if my family had not been allowed to come to Canada. Every day I am thankful to Indigenous peoples for sharing this land, and for the safety and opportunity this has meant for myself, my family, and my own community. At the same time, I recognize that these personal benefits have come at the expense of the lives, wellness, and freedom of Indigenous peoples and families. This dissertation is an expression of my gratitude to Indigenous communities and this land, and one part of my ongoing commitment to reciprocity and supporting Indigenous self-determination through my scholarship and my life.

Throughout this thesis research, I was guided by my responsibilities to the department and broader community of Biigtigong, both as an academic researcher and as a settler sharing this land. However, it was during the phase of data analysis and interpretation that this sense of accountability to Biigtigong, its goals and worldview became paramount. Drawing from CBPR approaches to co-create knowledge collaboratively with community partners, the qualitative data collected in Biigtigong was co-interpreted with the community researcher, and opportunities for checking and validation by other community members were developed. In CBPR, data analysis is the research stage where community participation tends to lose momentum due to its academic nature and time commitment (Richmond, 2016; Lovell & Rosenberg, 2016). Yet, in CBPR with Indigenous communities, particularly by non-Indigenous researchers, co-

interpretation of data is critical to centering Indigenous experiences, knowledges, and worldviews in the research (Tobias & Richmond, 2016). By prioritizing the co-interpretation of data, this study intended to shift interpretive authority from myself to Biigtigong (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), contextualize the data within mino bimaadiziwin and local Nishnaabeg knowledge, culture, and history (Coombes et al., 2014), and enhance rigour through ongoing evaluation of interpretive credibility (Baxter & Eyles, 1997).

Recognizing that community leadership and department staff members are busy with many projects and priorities, it was determined by the community researcher that I would take the lead on data analysis and that co-interpretation would involve key knowledge holders at different stages. As I became primarily responsible for reviewing the transcripts and undertaking preliminary data coding, constant communication with the community researcher and my supervisor became key mechanisms of accountability. Throughout data collection, the community researcher and I held ongoing debrief sessions to reflect on the interviews, discuss emerging ideas, and share our perspectives of participant observation. Given our different positionalities and life experiences, these sessions allowed us to "talk through" the data as it was gathered, and facilitated the co-development of a preliminary analytical framework drawing on the research objectives and Nishnaabeg knowledge. These debriefs were generally informal and social, as we discussed not only research progress but also our lives, feelings, and challenges, and developed a friendship over the years of this project. Similarly, regular check-ins with Dr. Richmond provided a crucial opportunity for informal reflection on and verification of the emerging findings. As a member of Biigtigong and an academic researcher, Dr. Richmond's supervision provided ongoing member-checking around my interpretative capacity and representation of community narratives and experiences. During the stages of data analysis, we often met daily by phone to reflect on the analytical framework and coding progress.

Following each interview, the recorded audio was transcribed by a professional service, and I reviewed these transcripts in-depth alongside the audio for errors, omissions, and locally or culturally specific language. The interview transcripts from Elders and knowledge holders and youth were then shared with the community researcher to double

check for any inaccuracies. However, the transcripts of staff interviews were only reviewed in their entirety by myself, in order to maintain confidentiality among department colleagues. In small and close-knit communities, where members are familiar with the details and events of each other's lives, anonymized data may still be easy to identify. Once the transcripts were verified, I examined each one in-depth to familiarize myself with the data and begin noting key stories and perceptions based on the respondent's characteristics, in particular their age and community role. QSR NVivo software was then used to conduct computer-assisted qualitative data analysis of the transcripts, as it facilitates the organization and categorization of data sets with rich textural detail. NVivo was particularly useful for this iterative study as it allowed me to apply multiple analytical techniques to the data at different stages based on the research objectives.

### 3.6.1. Research objectives 1 and 2: Processes and meanings of repossession

The first stage of analysis occurred during fall 2019 and involved the data that I had collected around the reclamation of Mountain Lake. The interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, along with reflective notes that I had taken throughout data collection and the debrief sessions with the community researcher. Guided by the first two research objectives to 1) describe, and 2) explore local meanings of repossession strategies in Biigtigong, I decided to thematically analyze the data using a process of inductive coding. Thematic analysis involves initial coding of the raw data and organizing of it into thematic categories to understand patterns of meaning across participants (Clarke et al., 2015). Environmental repossession is a relatively new theoretical concept and this case study sought to understand its application within the unique context of Biigtigong and across the diverse life experiences of community member groups. Employing thematic analysis enabled the identification, organization, and interpretation of themes across the three key participant groups, Elders/knowledge holders, youth, and staff. Specifically, inductive coding allowed the rich textural detail of participants' voices and knowledge to drive the generation of preliminary codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) prior to any theoretical interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). This flexibility was particularly useful for analyzing story-based data in which community members shared perceptions and knowledge based on their

personal values and what they deemed relevant to the research questions. Inductive coding makes space for data not easily categorized into the initial theoretical framework, and thus can facilitate the emergence of unexpected findings.

Following the creation of detailed codes, I began an iterative interpretation process to identify and contextualize the main themes and sub-themes. Preliminary findings were discussed with the community researcher and my thesis supervisor, and then: 1) explored within each interview and community member group; 2) compared across the different community member groups; and 3) situated within Biigtigong's historical, political, and cultural context. To encourage the reliability and contextual validity of the findings, interpretive dialogue was ongoing with the community researcher and the results were presented to and approved by the Department of Sustainable Development in March 2020. This presentation to the staff members of the department was key in ensuring the process of data analysis and interpretation remained accountable to community voices and experiences. The findings from this phase of analysis are presented in Chapters 4 and 5; Chapter 4 describes the process of reclaiming Mountain Lake, and Chapter 5 explores the meanings of this process for the groups of community members involved.

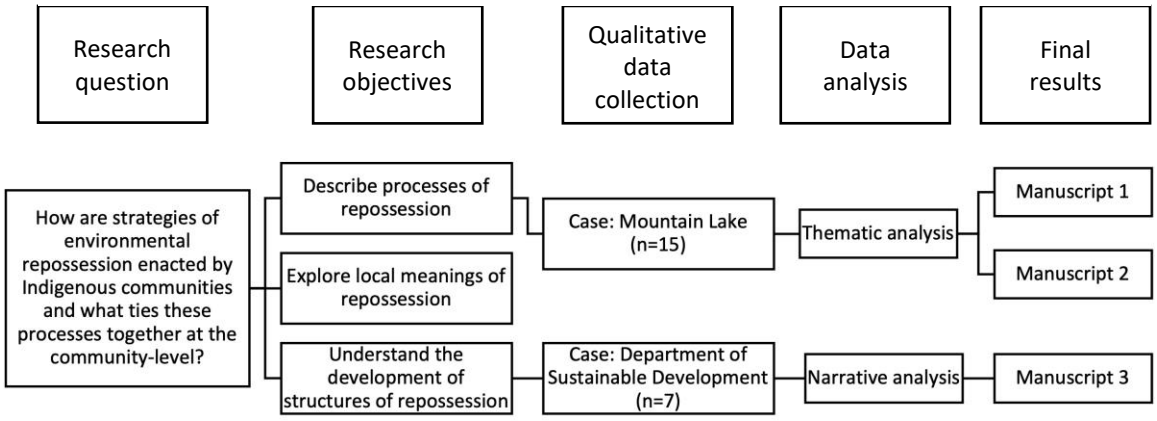
### 3.6.2. Research objective 3: Developing a structure of repossession

The second stage of analysis occurred during fall 2020 and focused on the interviews with staff members of the Department of Sustainable Development. The first stage of thematic analysis demonstrated that the department is primarily responsible for implementing environmental repossession processes in Biigtigong and that sustaining this work requires addressing significant challenges and tensions. Guided by the third research objective to understand how Biigtigong is conceptualizing and developing a place-based structure to support environmental repossession, I narratively analyzed the staff interviews to explore the development and daily work of the department. This analysis drew on the five in-depth staff interviews included in the previous stage, as well as two interviews with staff members central to the department's development, and two follow-up interviews with the community researcher. In Indigenous contexts, narrative analysis can be an important complement to thematic analysis as it maintains the narrative authority of the Indigenous

participant, and facilitates deeper exploration of multi-layered meanings and in-place experiences (Riessman, 2008; Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns, 2005). By emphasizing the contextualization of meanings and knowledge embedded in life stories, narrative analysis was used to preserve both the integrity of staff members' voices, and the textural detail of their perceptions of the department as Nishnaabeg community members.

A multi-step process of inductive and deductive coding was applied to interpret the connections between staff members' personal experiences and broader macro structures. To begin, the raw data was inductively analyzed to generate preliminary codes encompassing the staff's diverse and interconnected forms of Nishnaabeg knowledge. These codes were then organized and analyzed deductively in reference to the research objective and the literature around structural determinants of Indigenous wellness to develop the main themes and explore them across the data. The emerging findings were discussed with the community researcher, department staff, and my thesis supervisor to ensure local meanings were understood. To uphold my responsibility to accurately and appropriately represent the department's work, the final results of this analysis were shared with and approved by the director of the department. These findings are presented in Chapter 6.

**Figure 3: Study design**



### 3.7. Reciprocity: Sharing gifts

Overall, this research methodology has been guided by an ethical commitment to support Indigenous communities in producing research that is relevant and addresses their current needs. At the core of decolonizing, Indigenous, and CBPR research approaches is the goal to give back to Indigenous communities (Kovach, 2009). One important part of giving back is through the dissemination of research findings and production of research outputs for use by the community. Yet, as Kovach (2009) describes, supporting community needs is more than the final stage of dissemination, and giving back must be understood as an ethical imperative throughout the research process. Conducting ethical research with Indigenous communities is about building relationships of trust, responsibility, and reciprocity that begin before the research starts and extend beyond the dissemination of findings. Upholding this relational ethic involves following community protocols (research, cultural, etc.), facilitating community ownership and control over the data, and protecting sacred community knowledge that may be shared during the research process (Castellano, 2004). In other words, ensuring mutual benefits from the research process means respecting what community knowledge and experiences should and should not be investigated, collected, and disseminated (Kovach, 2009). As a settler researcher, acting ethically requires an ongoing obligation to critically self-reflect on how reciprocity is being practiced, control is being shared, and responsibilities to Indigenous peoples, communities, and places are being honoured (Wright et al., 2012).

This research drew on a process of integrated knowledge translation to find ongoing ways to recognize the department and community members as co-researchers, appropriately represent the individual and community knowledge shared, and create useful outputs for community planning and action. Tobias and Richmond (2016) have suggested locally relevant forms of knowledge translation can be an important means to share the gift of knowledge with Indigenous communities, and to demonstrate gratitude and respect for the stories, experiences, and wisdom shared throughout the research process. As the community researcher and department staff have been actively involved in all research activities, knowledge translation has focused on the broader engagement of Biigtigong

community members. For instance, this project was publicly launched in Biigtigong with a community feast in October 2018, in which the research objectives were presented, and community members had the opportunity to provide input and feedback. These public sharing sessions continued through various community events (i.e., BBQs with Elders, fall moose camp, Mountain Lake camp) until COVID-19 related restrictions came into place in March 2020. Given the importance of in-person events, practices, and protocols in Indigenous communities, COVID-19 restrictions significantly challenged these knowledge translation efforts. To adapt, posters were regularly produced for online distribution through social media that shared key findings, invited community feedback, and provided project updates.

Practicing reciprocity in Indigenous research, however, goes beyond any specific research activity and involves sharing the gifts that one has to offer, whether resources, time, privilege, or skills (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021). This understanding of reciprocity recognizes and responds to the depth of sharing by Indigenous communities involved in research projects. The community members involved in this thesis research committed hours of their time to this work and openly shared with me their cultural knowledge, personal challenges, and sometimes painful experiences. But, they also welcomed me into their community; they drove me around town, hosted me for meals, introduced me to their families, and taught me how to make Nishnaabeg rattles. The community's contributions to this thesis extend beyond the research activities and outputs, and have created a transformational learning experience for me.

In gratitude for all that has been gifted to me throughout my research relationship with Biigtigong, I have aimed to reciprocate in every way that I can. First and foremost, financial resources from this research project have been shared with Biigtigong and the Department of Sustainable Development to support ongoing work not directly related to research activities, such as building a new highway sign to mark the boundary of the community's territory. Second, I have contributed my time and skills to other departmental projects, such as designing posters for various department events, developing a workbook for community story collection, and producing a pop-up banner of hunting stories. Finally,

during each visit to Biigtigong I have volunteered to support department and community events, such as supervising a dance for children, grocery shopping, and cleaning up. Key among these acts of reciprocity was the production of a 2021 calendar developed to give back the stories and knowledge shared with me in the interviews at Mountain Lake. While the data from Mountain Lake had been transferred to the department, I wanted to gift this knowledge back to the broader community in an accessible way, particularly for community members who had not been present at the camp. Using data and photographs collected at the camp, I worked with a printing company to design and disseminate a monthly calendar (see Figure 4: Calendar cover) without cost in Biigtigong. Further, I contracted a youth participant from the camp to produce the artwork for the calendar cover. The calendar was well received by community members and increased general interest in accessing and using the Mountain Lake site.

Equally important, this research aims to uphold Biigtigong's authority over the project, including ownership of all data collected and outputs developed. Throughout the process of knowledge translation and dissemination, the Department of Sustainable Development and community researcher have guided activities and approved all public outputs. In terms of the dissemination of findings to academic audiences, the department has reviewed and approved the published journal articles that comprise Chapters 4-6 of this thesis, and staff members have been invited to co-present at conference presentations about this work.

**Figure 4: Calendar cover**


### 3.8. Refusal: Setting and respecting boundaries

The practice of refusal has recently been proposed by Indigenous and allied scholars as a key principle of Indigenous research approaches (Sylvestre et al., 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Simpson, 2007). As a research principle, refusal upholds the self-determination of Indigenous communities over research by recognizing the right of Indigenous individuals, representatives, and collectives to deny researchers access or withhold approval. In the context of sustaining responsible and ethical research relationships, being open to refusal is essential for shifting the conventional power imbalance between Indigenous peoples and

academic researchers and institutions (Sylvestre et al., 2018). Particularly for CBPR approaches, Indigenous communities must have the opportunity to refuse research processes, objectives, and activities that do not meet their own goals (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Against the colonial legacy of oppressive, discriminatory, and victimizing research on Indigenous peoples in Canada, doing research in a good way means setting boundaries with research partners, and then respecting these boundaries throughout the research project. While discussions of refusal often focus on initial research phases involving community ethics and leadership approval of the study, its design, and methods, refusal is a dynamic principle that involves constant negotiation throughout the relationship with the community. For example, acts of refusal may be related to data analysis and interpretation, the representation of community narratives in research outputs, or access to sacred Indigenous knowledge and protocols (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

This thesis was shaped in important ways by acts of refusal as Biigtigong's leadership determined what community priorities and knowledge were appropriate for a settler researcher to work on. Although Biigtigong was open to collaborating with me, a key part of building our relationship was establishing clear boundaries around my role in the community. During our 2018 research planning meeting in Biigtigong, the band manager and department staff members determined that while I would be allowed to document land reclamation processes in the community, I could not include Biigtigong's ongoing land claims negotiation. This meant not discussing the land claim with community members, not recording any data or knowledge related to the claim, and not disseminating any information or findings sensitive to the negotiations. Practically speaking, this meant omitting a significant piece of the community's decolonization process from the research. Yet, given the colonial context and challenges of pursuing land claims with the Crown, I understood this decision and upheld this refusal throughout the research. Similarly, community leadership determined that I could not include or discuss the Aadsookaanan, the sacred Nishnaabeg creation stories, nor Biigtigong's Nishnaabeg constitution in the research project. While I could have interpreted this boundary-setting as due to a lack of trust, I understood it as an honest evaluation of my capacity to understand, interpret, and represent sacred Nishnaabeg knowledge.

The boundaries determined by Biigtigong's leadership have guided the objectives, methods, data collection, and knowledge dissemination of this thesis. Even as my relationship with Biigtigong has developed and the boundaries of my role have evolved, I have continued to exclude all sacred and sensitive information from this thesis. Any stories or knowledge that should be for community only, have been transferred to the department and omitted from this dissertation. For example, interview data coded to themes or topics outside of my responsibilities were not included in data interpretation or the development of findings (see Appendix D: Codebook of Mountain Lake interviews). Specifically, cultural or spiritual stories shared by Elders and knowledge holders at Mountain Lake, as well as significant or difficult personal stories not directly related to the thesis objectives were excluded and returned to the community. As an allied researcher, this process what about accepting that not all stories, experiences, and knowledge are meant for me.

# Chapter 4: Manuscript 1

## Reclaiming Mountain Lake: Applying environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory, Canada

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# 4. Reclaiming Mountain Lake: Applying environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory, Canada


## Abstract

The concept of environmental repossession responds to a global movement led by Indigenous peoples to reclaim their territories and ways of life. As Indigenous wellness is intimately tied to relationships to land, processes of environmental repossession are a means to revitalize knowledge systems, identities and relationships that foster strong and healthy communities. Due to historic and ongoing forces of dispossession, the Anishinaabe community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg has experienced limited access to Mountain Lake, a culturally and historically significant place in their ancestral territory. In the summer of 2018, the Chief and Council of Biigtigong constructed two cabins along the shores of Mountain Lake for community use and, one year later, hosted a week-long camp to bring Elders, youth, and band staff together in this place. Drawing from 15 in-depth interviews with participating community members, this study documented the planning and implementation of the cabins and camp at Mountain Lake and examined the community meanings of this process. The findings suggest that the cabins and camp functioned as a local process of environmental repossession through multiple and interconnected steps to reclaim access to Mountain Lake, reintroduce the community to this place and begin remaking community relationships to this land. As Indigenous communities globally seek to reclaim their territories and rights to land, this article speaks to the tensions of this work and the structures that support its practice locally.



**Keywords:** Environmental repossession, Indigenous Health Geography, Indigenous Health, Indigenous knowledge, Anishinaabe, Land, Community-based research

### 4.1. Introduction

Across the globe, Indigenous communities are pursuing strategies to reclaim their lands and reconnect with the knowledges tied to these places. The concept of environmental repossession seeks to describe these land reclamation processes and situate them within Indigenous worldviews and experiences of health (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). For Indigenous peoples, wellness is inextricably linked to the land of their ancestral territories (King et al., 2009; Richmond & Ross, 2009; Wilson, 2003). The land is considered more than a physical landscape. It is an animate being with agency, a relative, provider and teacher with whom Indigenous peoples hold sacred relationships of responsibility (Styres, 2017; Daigle, 2016). These relationships form the basis of complex knowledge systems and hold the teachings that sustain physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness (Battiste and Youngblood, 2007). By strengthening access to and restoring connections with land, Indigenous communities are addressing their contemporary health and social needs. While the goals of environmental repossession may be similar across communities, the strategies implemented respond to the unique contexts of individual communities (Tobias & Richmond, 2016).

Despite the promise of environmental repossession as a framework to explore active processes to reclaim, reoccupy, and reconnect to land (Hatala et al., 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016), few studies have documented how strategies of repossession are applied by communities, nor what the enactment of these strategies mean for those involved. In partnership with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, this article presents the results of an ongoing study to describe the community's actions to reclaim and reconnect with its ancestral territory. Drawing from interviews and story collection with youth, Elders and staff of Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development, this research documents the development and implementation of a process of environmental repossession at Mountain Lake, Ontario, and explores community meanings of this process. This research draws attention to the significance of environmental repossession as an applied community effort and identifies the tensions and lessons that can arise when repossession is put into practice.

### 4.1.1. Indigenous health, land and dispossession

It is well established that Indigenous meanings of health must be conceptualised within a broader context of wellness, place, and culture, and that these elements are intimately connected to land (Friendship & Furgal, 2012; Durie, 2004). In Anishinaabe communities, the principles of mino bimaadiziwin (living a good life) situate health within the relationality that connects self, family, community, and environment. Indigenous health geography emerged out of this paradigm shift; researchers in this area call for place-based understandings of wellness that are grounded in the unique knowledge systems, cultures, and histories of Indigenous nations (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2017; Panelli & Tipa, 2007). This approach conceptualizes Indigenous health within the multidimensional relationships that exist between Indigenous people and the land. These connections represent a reciprocal relationship of ethical and spiritual responsibilities that Indigenous peoples hold with the land as an animate being, relative, and teacher (Styres, 2017; Daigle, 2016).

Across diverse environments and ecosystems globally, relationships to land form the basis of complex knowledge systems that foster holistic wellness (Biddle & Swee, 2012; Wilson, 2003). The land provides the material resources and activities that support physical health (Parlee & Berkes, 2005), while also facilitating emotional and spiritual connections to families, ancestors, future generations, and all of creation (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007). It is the teacher that supports intergenerational knowledge transfer and makes the space to foster social relationships and belonging for mental health (Lines & Jardine, 2019). By centering the cultural and geographic dimensions of wellness, the land is recognized as a key determinant of Indigenous identities, nationhood, and futures (Yellowhead Institute, 2019). Beginning from this perspective, Indigenous health geography provides a critical approach to consider how the relationship between health and place in Indigenous communities is impacted by the structure of colonialism and processes of environmental dispossession.

A wide body of literature has emerged around the health impacts of environmental dispossession for Indigenous communities (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Brown et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2009). Environmental dispossession describes direct and indirect processes

through which Indigenous peoples' access to their territories is reduced or eliminated (Richmond & Ross, 2009). As dispossession severs the health-sustaining relationship between Indigenous communities and the land, this literature aims to identify historic and contemporary processes of dispossession and measure the place-based outcomes for wellness. For example, in the First Nations context, Canada's 1876 Indian Act and creation of the reserve system systematically displaced communities from their ancestral territories and contained them on small plots of undesirable land (Reading, 2018; Borrows, 2008). By disconnecting communities from the cultural and spiritual resources of the Land (Tobias & Richmond, 2014), and often the material resources of survival (Bradford et al., 2016; Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012), the reserve system has been linked to critical health concerns such as diabetes, substance issues, and suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008), as well as to socio-economic disadvantage (de Leeuw et al., 2012; RCAP 1996), high rates of missing and murdered women (National Inquiry MMIWG, 2019), and genocide. Indirect dispossession has been equally devastating as Canadian policies have alienated Indigenous peoples from their territories though the residential school system (TRC, 2015), Sixties Scoop, child welfare, and resource extraction (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; RCAP, 1996).

As Indigenous communities continue to struggle with the impacts of historic and ongoing forms of dispossession, they are searching for strategies to rebuild their connections to land and promote wellness.

### 4.1.2. Environmental repossession

Environmental repossession is a theoretical concept that describes the processes that Indigenous peoples engage in to reclaim their lands and restore healthy ways of living (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). This concept emerged from community-based research with Anishinaabe youth in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Pic River First Nation) that explored perceptions of health in the context of social relationships and a changing Anishinaabe way of life. The youth expressed serious concerns about community health in relation to ongoing dispossession and described a need to draw on community relationships to reconnect with Indigenous knowledge and the land. Specifically, the youth called for land-based activities with Elders to learn and practice the teachings that sustain Anishinaabe

identity and ways of life. Drawing from these results, Big-Canoe and Richmond theorized that land, social relationships, and Indigenous knowledge may be the underlying drivers of environmental repossession efforts (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

Despite emphasis on active place-based processes, few studies have examined environmental repossession in applied community contexts. Current conceptualizations suggest that repossession is represented in practice by diverse strategies that reflect the histories, cultures, and experiences of colonization of communities (Tobias & Richmond, 2016; Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). For example, Tobias and Richmond engaged in community-based participatory action research with two Ontario First Nations to examine the potential strategies Elders recommend for their communities. Elders proposed four broad goals for repossession efforts: re-establishing relationships between Elders and youth; increasing time spent on traditional lands; improving physical health; and fostering community pride. Building on this study, Mikraszewicz and Richmond (2019) partnered with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg to document a community canoe trip to reclaim, rename, and restore cultural meaning to significant places along the Pic River. Participating youth and knowledge holders indicated that the canoe trip simultaneously created space for the practice of Indigenous knowledge, strengthening of social relationships, and building of connections to land. As the journey reconnected participants to the land as an essential part of Biigtigong's history, culture, and wellness, it took on the role and meaning of a process of environmental repossession (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019).

Hatala et al. (2019) advanced theoretical understanding of the concept by exploring environmental repossession in the urban context, and at the individual level. This research examined how Indigenous youth navigate relationships to land in the city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and the perceived importance of these relationships for wellness. Youth linked access to and connections with land to their sense of identity, and described the everyday and personal practices used to remake these connections in the urban environment. The results reconceptualize environmental repossession as a process of land-making or place-making wherein individuals not only reclaim land or land-based practices,

but actively and continually renegotiate their relationships to land, whether in new environments or through new activities (Hatala et al., 2019).

Building on the theoretical base of literature, the research presented here explores environmental repossession in practice in order to explore how it is applied and measured by Indigenous communities as a means to restoring Anishinaabe lifeways and wellness. To do so, this research documents and examines the case of an individual strategy of repossession implemented by Biigtigong Nishnaabeg at Mountain Lake. By exploring the experiences and perceptions of youth, staff, and Elders on the repossession of Mountain Lake, this study focuses on two central questions: 1) How do Indigenous communities develop and enact distinct processes to reclaim territory? and 2) What do these reclamation processes mean for community members and their connections to land?

### 4.1.3. The need for repossession: Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and Mountain Lake

This study was conducted in partnership with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, an Anishinaabe community located on the north shore of Lake Superior, Canada. Since time immemorial, Biigtigong's ancestors have lived and travelled throughout its territory of more than two million hectares, hunting and trapping off its land, fishing and canoeing through its rivers, and building a complex knowledge system related to its land base. This reciprocal relationship between Biigtigong and its territory has been damaged by colonial laws and policies of environmental dispossession. The coastline of Lake Superior is governed by the 1850 Robinson-Superior Treaty, and although Biigtigong never directly signed the agreement nor agreed to its terms (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, 2018), the Treaty has been used to undermine Biigtigong's sovereignty over its unceded territory. The Treaty, alongside the Indian Act has been used to transfer land to the state, confine the community to a reserve of 323.7 hectares (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, 2018), and impose an Indian Agent to control land-based activities. Federal and provincial governments have implemented further forms of dispossession to disconnect Biigtigong members from their land, such as removing children through residential schools, underfunding community infrastructure, and outlawing spiritual practices (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). More recently, government-

supported natural resource industries have destroyed or contaminated the physical environments of many significant places throughout the territory.

Mountain Lake lies along the western boundary of Biigtigong's territory and is a significant place from which the community has been largely disconnected. The area lies approximately 1.5 hours' drive outside of Biigtigong's reserve and encompasses a large freshwater lake and sandy beach surrounded by forested mountains. Historically, many Biigtigong families lived and hunted around Mountain Lake, and a permanent town was located on nearby Jackfish Lake. Community Elders describe the area as important for food security and physical health as their parents and grandparents would harvest moose, deer and caribou, trap beaver, pick blueberries and medicines, and fish for white fish (interview data). Mountain Lake is also part of the larger waterway system used by Biigtigong members to travel by canoe throughout their territory. These transportation routes were vital for access to traditional foods, spiritual sites, and land-based knowledge to uphold spiritual and mental wellness, as well as maintaining kinship relations with neighbouring communities to promote identity and knowledge sharing across the Anishinaabe nation.

Despite the Treaty-created reserve and oppressive colonial policies, many Biigtigong families continued to access the western boundary of the territory and Mountain Lake until the introduction of registered trap lines by federal and provincial governments in the early 20$^{th}$ century. Originally construed to preserve beaver stocks and prevent over-trapping, the trap line system assigned use of specific areas to individuals registered to an annual trapping license and designated an allowance of animals (Cummins, 1992). Access to trapping in the Mountain Lake area and the ability to sell the trapped fur was allocated to non-Indigenous individuals and other local First Nations, with Biigtigong families dislocated from this place. Disconnection from Mountain Lake has been reinforced by the sale of land to non-Indigenous cottagers by the government, who remains the legal title owner of this land (interview data). As a result, the majority of community members today have never visited Mountain Lake or do not know that it exists. The intergenerational teaching of community history, meaning, and knowledge related to this place is under

threat of being lost (interview data), with implications for individual and community wellness

## 4.2. Methods

### 4.2.1. Methodological approach

The research presented here is part of an international study with Indigenous communities in Canada, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa to document and explore strategies of environmental repossession. The Biigtigong case is grounded in the long-standing research and personal relationship between Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and the second author, an Anishinabek scholar and community member. This research draws from Anishinaabe mino bimaadiziwin (living in a good way) as methodology (Debassige, 2010) and adopts a relational approach, one that emphasizes the interconnected relationships of all living things (Bell, 2016). As a methodological principle, relationality involves not only the researcher and community, but includes relationships with self, the past and future, the environment, Indigenous knowledge, and Spirit (McGregor, 2018; Kovach, 2009). Upholding these relationships is a long-term journey that is supported in research by adhering to the seven original Anishinaabe teachings of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth (Bell, 2016). Specifically, living good relationships through the research process involves privileging Indigenous experiences, respecting cultural protocols and the sacredness of Indigenous knowledge (Debassige, 2010), practicing reciprocity (Wilson, 2008) and accountability (Kovach, 2009), and supporting communities to achieve their own goals of mino bimaadiziwin (McGregor, 2018). This study developed from the understanding that the needs and knowledges of the community would guide the research process, and also builds from powerful calls for research to uphold Indigenous self-determination (Smith, 2013; Louis, 2007).

The first author, a settler graduate student took the lead in conducting this research phase of the case study. A community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was employed to ensure community ownership and prioritize Indigenous voices throughout the research process (Tobias et al., 2013; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). In summer 2018, the

academic authors travelled to Biigtigong to meet with the community's Band Manager and members of the Band's Department of Sustainable Development. In First Nations communities, the band is the local unit of government established by the Indian Act and governed by an elected chief and council members (Minister of Justice, 1985). Through these meetings, relationships were fostered, and a research team established with one academic and one community researcher leading the study. The community representatives identified the need for research to examine Biigtigong members' relationship to the western boundary of its territory and Mountain Lake, an area with little ongoing use by the community. Also, that summer, Biigtigong constructed two cabins along the shores of Mountain Lake to encourage community land use at this place. The band's goal for the research was to support renewed connection to Mountain Lake through the collection of community history and knowledge about the area. Building from this goal, the lead author and community researcher worked collaboratively to develop a research process, guided by a 'two-eyed seeing' framework that makes space for Western and Indigenous knowledge systems to be used alongside one another (Martin, 2012). The research was approved by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of the researchers' home institution and was publicly launched in Biigtigong in October 2019.

### 4.2.2. Data collection

In July 2019, Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development hosted a week-long camp at Mountain Lake financially supported through the research project with the goal to collect history and Indigenous knowledge related to the place and the community's changing relationship to it. Community Elders and knowledge holders were invited to participate, as well as department staff and summer students. The annual summer student program hires youth enrolled in secondary and post-secondary education to build employment skills while learning about the department and its role in the community. The camp was organized as a daily event between 9:30am-4pm, with participants returning home each evening. The community researcher took the lead in planning the camp activities with the intention of facilitating time and space for Elders and youth to be together and to share local Anishinaabe knowledge. Transportation to the camp was

provided for Elders and students, and meals were cooked and shared as a group. The first author worked closely with the community researcher in preparing for the camp and participated in the week-long event. This participation in the planning and preparation were vital for strengthening the relationship with the community researcher and developing rapport and trust with the Elders and broader community. Due to the close-knit and family-oriented nature of Biigtigong, many attendees brought along family members to participate throughout the week. Daily participation fluctuated between 30-50 community members.

To explore individual experiences and meanings of the camp and construction of cabins at Mountain Lake, semi-structured, story-based interviews were conducted with participating Elders, students, and staff. These methods were determined to be appropriate as they encourage participant control over the conversation and make space for local Indigenous knowledge and realities (Rieger et al., 2020; Iseke, 2013). In the context of research with Indigenous communities, Wilson (2008) and Kovach (2009) have suggested that story-based methods provide a means to privilege each participant's lived experience as knowledge, while situating it within the context of their family, community, and culture. A flexible interview guide was co-developed by the research team to encourage conversation through open-ended questions around connections to land, community, and Indigenous knowledge. Purposeful sampling was used to select interview participants based on their complete attendance at the week-long camp. In total, fifteen interviews were conducted with participating community members, including four Elders/knowledge holders, six students, and five staff. Interviews with Elders took place at the Mountain Lake camp, while interviews with staff and students took place the following week in Biigtigong. All interviews were conducted by the first author and audio recorded with permission. Notes and observations were recorded by the first author and community researcher throughout the camp and at debriefing sessions held at the end of each day by the two researchers.

### 4.2.3. Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and shared with all members of the research team. Given time and capacity constraints on the community researcher, a collaborative

determination was made that the lead author would undertake preliminary analysis of the data using an inductive thematic approach. Thematic analysis involves initial coding of the raw data and organizing of it into thematic categories to understand patterns of meaning across participants (Clarke et al., 2015). This analytical approach enabled the research team to identify, organize, and interpret themes across the diverse lived experiences of the three participant groups, Elders/knowledge holders, youth, and staff. Using NVivo software, the first author applied an inductive approach to generate preliminary codes to describe the textural detail and richness of the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). As the methodology aimed to privilege Indigenous experiences and knowledge, an inductive approach allowed the participants' voices to directly drive the development of codes prior to any theoretical interpretation by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998). Inductive coding allows the flexibility required for the analysis of story-based interviews, in which participants may share knowledge and perceptions not easily categorized into the initial theoretical framework and makes space for unexpected findings. Following the creation of detailed codes, an iterative interpretation process took place in which main themes were: 1) identified; 2) explored across and within the interviews; and 3) situated within Biigtigong's local context. Member-checking with the participants and research team was ongoing throughout this process to promote the reliability and contextual validity of emerging findings.

### 4.3. Results

The results of our analysis are presented around three key findings. As a process of environmental repossession, the construction of the cabins and camp at Mountain Lake aimed to: 1) reclaim access to Mountain Lake; 2) reintroduce the community to this land; and 3) remake community relationships to land in this place. These findings are discussed in relation to the three groups of participants at Mountain Lake and the different lived experiences they bring to their roles at the camp. To highlight how understandings of the camp and cabins are reflective of these diverse perspectives, participants are identified below through their age and role (e.g., youth, staff, or Elder/knowledge holder).

### 4.3.1. Reclaiming access to Mountain Lake

For participating Biigtigong staff, the cabins and camp aimed to reclaim access to Mountain Lake for community members. While Biigtigong's territory remains unceded, the community has been largely disconnected from it by colonial policies of environmental dispossession. One Elder described how Mountain Lake was traditionally a significant place for Biigtigong families to camp, hunt, fish, trap, and travel through the area until colonial policies confined the community to their small legal reserve:

> They used to go hunting, and fishing, and trapping, and everything. I remember my uncles doing that... And some of them were complaining, they're really, viciously, that this is – We want to go back there. Because of the complaints that they were getting from the Zhaganash [white men] so they never came back, they worked out from Pic River. (Elder 1)

Another knowledge holder explained how the community's disconnection from Mountain Lake was linked to the creation of the trap ground system that removed the ability of Biigtigong members to trap and sell fur from the area:

> Well, they came up with trap grounds, I think, it was in the late 60s or early 70s. I'm not sure the exact year. Prior to that our community was all over the place. They moved around. But once they set the trap grounds, then we were stuck to one area. So, then we were moved away from here in that regard, too. (Knowledge holder 3)

In response to generations of dispossession, many staff described the construction of the cabins and hosting of the camp as a demonstration of Biigtigong's ongoing jurisdiction over Mountain Lake and its intention to use this place how it wishes. For instance, a staff member described how for the department and community's political leadership, being back out at Mountain Lake was a process of reclaiming the community's rights to this land:

> Whether you're hunting, trapping, fishing, those are your rights to go and use the land in the way that it once was and that it was restricted for a period of time. So, it's almost like we're reclaiming our rights... (Staff 3)

Specifically, the construction of the cabins along the shore of Mountain Lake was seen by all staff as a physical marker of Biigtigong's reclamation of this place. The two wooden, four-season structures are available for free use to the community, and are intended to encourage camping at the lake. But, as described by a staff member, the cabins are also intended as a visible sign of Biigtigong's self-determination over Mountain Lake that is recognizable to government and non-Indigenous people:

> Putting up those cabins it tells government or even just people in general that, 'We're here. We're not going away. We're always gonna be here regardless.' (Staff 4)

This message of self-determination was immediately noticeable to the non-Indigenous cottagers in the area. As the land was being prepared for the cabins, one knowledge holder and staff member stated that tensions rose between Biigtigong staff and cottagers around the lake:

> That's the first time the cottagers realized that we were here. And they said to the guys, 'You should've asked us first'. And the guys just told them, 'We don't have to ask anybody.' We just told them, and they walked away mad. (Knowledge holder 3)

Finally, the camp provided an opportunity for staff to teach the community's self-determination over the land to participating youth. One staff, who works closely with youth, discussed how the camp was a process of teaching the next generation of Biigtigong members about the community's jurisdiction over its territory:

> It's also important to show the younger generation that, 'This is where your ancestors played. This is where your ancestors roamed. This is where they hunted and fished.' And by doing that, you reclaim your space...I don't ever recall having conversations like this growing up where we had a sense of entitlement to the land. I don't ever recall being told, 'Well, this is your land. You shouldn't give it up so easily,' mainly because [the reserve] is everything I knew. (Staff 4)

As this comment reveals, many members' sense of Biigtigong as a community is closely linked to the reserve. The camp at Mountain Lake was intended to show the participating youth that the community's land rights and territory extend far beyond the reserve, and include places which community members have not been able to use in many years.

### 4.3.2. Reintroducing the land at Mountain Lake

While reclaiming access is an important part of repossession efforts, a common theme among staff and Elders/knowledge holders was the need to reintroduce Mountain Lake to the broader community. In planning the cabins and camp at Mountain Lake, a primary goal for department staff and band leadership was to encourage land use at this place. All participating staff described the activities at Mountain Lake as a process of bringing Biigtigong back to this place, with the intention that community members would begin actively and regularly using it. One staff member highlighted the role of the cabins and camp in getting the community back on the land at Mountain Lake: "It is introducing the community members to a place that's outside of our, almost our comfort zone or the areas that we know as a community." (Staff 3)

References to Mountain Lake as a place where Biigtigong members do not feel comfortable, safe, or welcome were common across all participants. Given the community's ongoing dispossession and disconnection from the area, the majority of participants had never been to Mountain Lake. Many expressed feelings of Mountain Lake as unknown, or as belonging to non-Indigenous cottagers. For example, after a tense interaction between cottagers and an Elder on the road leading to the lake, a staff member worried:

> Is she gonna feel comfortable to go home and tell her daughter and son-in-law to bring the kids down there? Because ... if she felt like, 'Oh, my God, I'm doing something wrong out there,' she wouldn't want her children and grandchildren to feel that way. (Staff 2)

By bringing community members to Mountain Lake for the weeklong camp, staff intended to familiarize the community with this place, and reintroduce it as accessible, available, and "something to not be fearful of" (Staff 3). For instance, one staff stated:

> It was pretty special to have everybody out there and not only reconnect the Elders with that area but introducing it to the youth again. Going back to that whole idea of you know saying that 'This place exists, and you can go out there and you can use it anytime.' (Staff 2)

Two young staff described a desire to change their own families' relationships to Mountain Lake which motivated them to bring young family members to the camp.

> I wanted him [my son] to see that you can come out here and not feel like you're trespassing, and I told him, 'You could come out here anytime, say when you're older and if you have kids or a family, you could bring them out here.' (Staff 5)

Reintroducing Mountain Lake through its cultural meaning and community history was described by many Elders as a reason for participating in the camp. Elders/knowledge holders expressed that their role at the camp was to share the history and Indigenous knowledge situated in Mountain Lake as a way to give this place meaning for the younger participants. By sharing teachings and stories about traditional use of the Mountain Lake area, Elders aimed to reconnect the community to this place through their ancestors. Throughout the week, Elders shared stories of ancestors fishing, harvesting, trapping, blueberry picking, canoeing, and camping in the area. Key among these teachings was the story of Mountain Lake's name change and the reintroduction of this place through its traditional name. A knowledge holder explained that many Biigtigong members know of Mountain Lake as Santoy Lake, the name given to this place by settler cartographers. This understanding of Mountain Lake was reflected by many youth, including one who expressed confusion over the existence of the place, stating: "I've only ever heard Santoy. I've never even heard of Mountain Lake before" (Youth 3).

Learning about Biigtigong's history at Mountain Lake changed the youth and young staff members' understandings of this place as Biigtigong's land. Following the camp, many

participants described feeling connected to their ancestors in this place, and a desire to return to "get back with our land and do what our Elders did back then" (Youth 5). For instance, one young staff member described the love for Mountain Lake that came from knowing the community's ancestors had been there:

> To realize that that's your territory, right, and just to have that love of it knowing that the spots that these cabins are were chosen for a reason. And they could reconnect and probably like just feel the spirit of their ancestors that are still there with them. (Staff 2)

All participants expressed an intention to return to Mountain Lake, and to share this place with their families and broader community.

### 4.3.3. Re-making community relationships to Mountain Lake

Indigenous relationships to land are complex, sacred, and upheld through protocols and responsibilities shared through generations. Personal connections to land are situated within ongoing community relationships and framed by one's ancestors and future generations. As Biigtigong has been disconnected from Mountain Lake for generations, few participants had personal connections to the land in this area. For the majority of participants, the camp was the first time they had been at Mountain Lake. Some Elders/knowledge holders described family connections or early childhood experiences that established a personal relationship to the area, but all youth and younger staff experienced Mountain Lake as a new place. Through the activities of the camp, they started to build relationships to Mountain Lake by creating new stories and experiences together in this place. As youth worked with Elders and enjoyed the natural environment, many began to refer to these activities as processes of creating new stories about Mountain Lake for the future:

> I could go out there and make stories for myself and when I'm older, I could tell my grandchildren and the youth in the community what it was like when I was younger. (Youth 4)

As discussed by this youth, the new stories forming at the camp were not only important for the youths' personal futures, but would be told to their children and future generations. The younger participants were making connections to Mountain Lake that they intended to sustain by sharing their experiences of this place with generations of Biigtigong to come. A young staff member explained how this forward thinking extends for seven generations:

> It's not only introducing it for our youth, it's again their children, and their children, and their children. So, it's a small, little almost gesture, but it's gonna have a huge impact on community members for those seven generations. (Staff 3)

The youths' developing personal connections to this land were framed within the community's ongoing history with and relationship to Mountain Lake. A common desire expressed by the youth and younger staff was for these new stories and memories to continue to be shared, and eventually become part of the community's teachings and history as they grew up to be Elders. For instance, one youth described the activities of the camp as an opportunity to "make more stories and, you know, like teachings and memories and stuff. Hopefully those will get carried on through generations," (Youth 4) relating her experiences at Mountain Lake with the community's teachings of the future.

Although the youth and younger staff were making new personal relationships to Mountain Lake that were different from the relationships their ancestors held with this place, all of the staff felt that the connection to and love for the territory that the youth were learning was the same. For instance, one staff member described how her young nephew's new connection to Mountain Lake would foster his broader love for and sense of community in Biigtigong's territory:

> As long as I continue to do what I can to my ability to foster his ability to go out there into the land, to harvest from the land, to play on the land, to just have that love for it, to go down to the mouth of the Pic, to jump into Lake Superior water, to walk to a tree and just do whatever he wants with his imagination then when he becomes my age, he's gonna do anything that he can to ensure that his children will

> have those memories and ability to connect and feel that sense of love and community that he probably feels. (Staff 2)

This staff member explained how renewing members' connections to Mountain Lake is part of the balance that Biigtigong's leadership is working towards in reclaiming its territory in ways that foster a strong and healthy community for the future:

> There's nothing that we can do within our power to go back to where it was traditionally, but there's finding that balance, learning, relearning. Because we have that ability, we have the stories from there to be able to go back and to see, kind of a peek of, what it was like back then. But we also have to balance the life that we live in now. (Staff 2)

For staff, the camp was not about creating a new relationship between the community and Mountain Lake, but represented a process of restoring or re-making the community's relationship to this land in the context of its current realities and needs.

### 4.4. Discussion: Meanings, tensions, and structures of environmental repossession

This paper qualitatively examined how individual processes of environmental repossession are mobilized by Indigenous communities as place-based actions to reclaim and reconnect to land. Specifically, this research documented the development and implementation of a community camp and cabins to repossess Mountain Lake in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory, and explored the community meanings of this process for Biigtigong members. Collaborative thematic analysis suggests three primary findings around the meanings of the camp and cabins as: 1) reclaiming access to Mountain Lake and asserting jurisdiction over this land, 2) reintroducing the community to Mountain Lake and increasing community use of this land; and 3) Re-making relationships to land at Mountain Lake for the community today and future generations.

To begin the process of repossessing Mountain Lake, staff described the need to reclaim community access to this land. For the past 70 years, Biigtigong members have had limited access to Mountain Lake, and staff perceived the first step to be creating space

in this place for community use. By constructing the cabins along the lake, the department established a safe and visible access point for community members into the area. At the same time, by not notifying cottagers or the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the department exercised its Indigenous rights to access this land when and how the community wishes. In so doing, the department asserted its own understanding of Biigtigong's jurisdiction over Mountain Lake as part of its territory.

Following the reclamation of access to Mountain Lake, staff hosted the camp to reintroduce Biigtigong families to this land and encourage them to use the area. Given Biigtigong's disconnection from the Mountain Lake area, many community members do not know that this land is part of their territory, nor that it is available for community use. By hosting a camp with cultural activities, inviting Elders and youth, and providing transportation and meals, staff intended to motivate community turnout and create a social atmosphere that would reframe Mountain Lake as a comfortable and safe place for the community to be together. Elders/knowledge holders expressed that their responsibility in this process was to reintroduce Mountain Lake as Biigtigong's land through its renaming, and the sharing of stories which returned community history and meaning to this place.

For Biigtigong staff and leadership, the final step of repossessing Mountain Lake was to renew the relationship between community members and this land as a means to build love for and a desire to protect it. Framed by dislocation from Mountain Lake and the loss of place-based knowledge, fostering relationships to land does not mean reviving the specific practices and knowledges of ancestors. Instead, it involves a re-making of Biigtigong's relationship to Mountain Lake in which personal connections are expressed in new ways, although the community meanings and value of these connections remain the same. Youth were aware of their role in re-making community relationships to land and positioned themselves as the link between Elders and future generations. The youth and young staff spoke of their learnings and memories at Mountain Lake as the stories, teachings, and Indigenous knowledge for future generations. In this way, they experienced the camp as a process of re-making the community's connection to Mountain Lake in relation to their contemporary realities and understandings of Anishinaabe identity.

Taken together, the perceptions of community members demonstrate that Biigtigong applied environmental repossession at Mountain Lake through a multistep strategy to re-make this place as Anishinaabe land and build a foundation for restoring community wellness. The camp and cabins fulfilled multiple roles for Biigtigong, as a political and legal process to exercise Indigenous rights to its territory, a social process of fostering community identity and belonging through relationships to land and each other, and a cultural process of re-making relationships to land through place-based Indigenous knowledge and history. Collectively, these roles strengthen community members' physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual connections to Mountain Lake and each other, and support individual and community wellness in this place. This mobilization of repossession reflects Big-Canoe and Richmond's (2014) suggestion that reclaiming access to land is not sufficient for repossession efforts, as physical access must be complemented by processes that give meaning to land and foster relationships to it. While the cabins were important for reclaiming access to and demonstrating jurisdiction over Mountain Lake, the department staff understood this as only the first step in bringing the community back and transforming its relationship to this place. To feel connected to Mountain Lake, community members needed to be reintroduced to this place as part of Biigtigong's territory and to build personal relationships to it, which in turn was facilitated by the practice of Indigenous knowledge with Elders and the strength of social relationships between participants.

As a process of re-making Mountain Lake as Anishinaabe land, this case speaks to the recent work of Hatala et al. (2019) to understand environmental repossession as a dynamic practice of land-making, or place-making, outside of reserves or 'traditional' Indigenous environments. While Mountain Lake lies within Biigtigong's ancestral territory, the sad reality is that many community members have never been to this place, nor do they see it as a space where they belong. The colonial definition of Indigenous space as the reserve continues to structure Biigtigong's relationship to the land, it has been enforced and internalized such that the community does not feel comfortable or allowed to access many areas of its territory. The result, as a youth summarized, is that "we all kind of just stay on the res, even though that's what the Indian agent was for, to keep us on the res" (Youth, 4). Mountain Lake is a new place for many Biigtigong members; it has been

redefined as Santoy Lake, a place for settler cottagers, and a space in which Indigenous people do not belong. Biigtigong is not simply returning to Mountain Lake. It is exercising its rights to access this land and actively transforming the community's relationship to it. This new relationship is a re-creation of Mountain Lake as Anishinaabe land, and is developing out of the memories, stories, and knowledge both in existence and being created at the camp. Repossession as land-making points to the broader goals of land reclamation movements internationally, as they look beyond legal mechanisms to seek Indigenous nationhood, sovereignty, and sustainable futures (Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Goeman, 2013; KARI-OCA 2 Declaration, 2012).

As Indigenous communities globally search for new ways to reclaim and reconnect to their lands, our results draw attention to the potential tensions of engaging in strategies of environmental repossession. As a process of place-making through direct action, the practice of repossession can be empowering, but also uncomfortable and difficult. While the camp revolved around social and educational activities, it also forced community members to face the ongoing impacts of Biigtigong's experiences with dispossession and colonialism. During the construction of the cabins, staff encountered cottagers who were confrontational, questioned Biigtigong's right to be at Mountain Lake, and reported the ongoing work by Biigtigong to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. At the same time, activities surrounding the camp often required community members to address feelings of not belonging and fears of trespassing on their own land. In the time that Biigtigong has been disconnected from Mountain Lake, it is clear from the interviews that individuals have internalized feelings of dislocation and not belonging to this place. This is unfortunately not uncommon, as Indigenous communities actively asserting their rights to land must often confront resistance from non-Indigenous peoples and businesses, state institutions, and other Indigenous organizations. For instance, the struggle of Kanaka Maoli (Indigenous Hawaiians) to protect their relative and sacred mountain, Mauna Kea from the potential Thirty-Metre Telescope has been forced to confront state law enforcement and privileged scientific committees (Goodyear-Ka 'ōpua, 2017). Similarly, the efforts of the Wet'suwet'en nation in British Columbia to protect their lands from pipeline development and other environmentally destructive resource projects has been met with violence,

arrests, and tactics of control by the provincial government and police (Diabo, 2020). While these confrontations receive community, public, and media attention, there has been limited research to explore how Indigenous communities experience, navigate, or overcome these tensions of environmental repossession.

Alongside the tensions of repossession, this study raises important methodological considerations for future research around the application and measurement of the concept. Our results demonstrate that community staff, specifically those employed in the Department of Sustainable Development, were the primary drivers of Biigtigong's efforts at Mountain Lake. It was the staff who developed the vision, organized the logistics, and addressed any arising tensions. Their voice and role in this work was critically important to document, as it was they who supported the structural foundation and mobilization of this particular repossession effort. The existing literature has focused primarily on the engagement of Elders (Tobias & Richmond, 2016), youth (Hatala et al., 2019), or Elders and youth together (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019) to explore how these two distinct groups understand and experience processes of repossession. By including staff of Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development alongside Elders and youth, this research has expanded our understanding of the underlying structural needs necessary to carry out strategies of environmental repossession. Our emphasis on the practical considerations, staffing needs, and day-to-day realities of practicing repossession will be helpful for other communities who wish to pursue strategies of their own.

### 4.5. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the application of an individual strategy of environmental repossession in order to understand how Indigenous communities are reclaiming and reconnecting their relationships to land. Framed by the approach of Indigenous health geography, our results demonstrate the complexities and tensions of environmental repossession as communities develop transformative processes to remake the lands that uphold their systems of health and wellness. The example of Mountain Lake presented here suggests a potential multi-step strategy to reclaim access to land, reintroduce land to the community, and begin remaking community relationships to land. In shifting

environmental repossession from a theoretical construct to applied research, this paper raises important conceptual and methodological considerations around the structures that support the practice of environmental repossession by Indigenous communities. The question for future research is not only how communities apply repossession to address the ongoing structures of colonialism and dispossession, but how they build sustainable structures of repossession to foster self-determination over land and wellness.

Across Canada and around the globe, Indigenous communities are more connected than ever and seeking to support each other's goals through the sharing of experiences, challenges, and successes. Although communities live in very different historical, geographic, and cultural contexts, many share the devastating experience of dispossession from their ancestral territories and disconnection from their knowledge systems. As Indigenous communities work to rebuild their livelihoods and identities, many are doing so in new places and on new lands, whether in urban environments, different geographies, or, in the case of Biigtigong, in their own territory. An important opportunity exists for Indigenous and allied scholars to document the stories of Indigenous communities regenerating their land-based practices, skills, and knowledge in urban and rural areas, on and off-reserve, and in ancestral and new territories (Lambert, 2014). By sharing these experiences with other Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations globally seeking strategies to reclaim their relationships to land, researchers can directly support Indigenous self-determination over land, identity, and wellness.

# Chapter 5: Manuscript 2

## Reclaiming land, identity, and mental wellness in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory

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# 5. Reclaiming land, identity, and mental wellness in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory


## Abstract

Indigenous peoples globally are pursuing diverse strategies to foster mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness by reclaiming and restoring relationships to land. For Anishinaabe communities, the land is the source of local knowledge systems that sustain identities and foster mino bimaadiziwin, or living in a good and healthy way. In July 2019, the community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg in Ontario, Canada hosted a week-long land camp to reclaim Mountain Lake and reconnect Elders, youth and band staff to the land, history, and relationships of this place. Framed theoretically by environmental repossession, we explore the perceptions of 15 participating community members and examine local and intergenerational meanings of the camp for mental wellness. The findings show that the Mountain Lake camp strengthened social relationships, supported the sharing and practice of Anishinaabe knowledge, and fostered community pride in ways that reinforced the community's Anishinaabe identity. By exploring the links between land reclamation, identity, and community empowerment, we suggest environmental repossession as a useful concept for understanding how land reconnection and self-determination can support Indigenous mental wellness.



**Keywords:** Indigenous wellness; Indigenous mental health; environmental repossession; Indigenous identity; Anishinaabe; Connection to land; Community-based research

## 5.1. Introduction

Relationships to land are foundational to holistic and collective Indigenous approaches to mental wellness (Redvers, 2020; Ullrich, 2019; Radu et al., 2014; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). According to the Anishinaabe philosophy of mino bimaadiziwin, living in a good and healthy way involves sustaining relationships of reciprocity and responsibility with all living things, including humans, animals, spirit, and future generations (Bell, 2016; McGuire, 2013; Debassige, 2010). Through the individual and communal protocols required to maintain these relationships, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness of communities is strengthened. In return, the land upholds its own responsibilities by providing the gifts necessary for living well. The land is thus more than a physical landscape or the location of material resources for survival (Styres, 2017). It is the source of Indigenous knowledge that guides communities' social, political, ceremonial, and everyday practices, and shapes Anishinaabe culture and identity (McGuire, 2013; Battiste & Youngblood, 2000).

The geographies of Indigenous health emerged out of the understanding that fostering wellness involves restoring and sustaining individual and community connections to land (Richmond & Big-Canoe; Richmond et al., 2005; Wilson, 2003). Drawing from population health and environmental health approaches, the growing discipline has documented the ongoing impacts of colonization and dispossession in which communities have been physically and politically displaced from their ancestral territories (Lewis et al., 2021; Middleton et al., 2020; Durkalec et al., 2015; Richmond & Ross, 2009). Legislation, policy, and development have aimed to limit the ability of families and communities to practice, teach, and learn Indigenous knowledge with implications for social support, identity formation, sense of belonging, and self-sufficiency (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Adelson, 2005; Simpson, 2004). More recently, the field has highlighted the strategies being developed by communities to foster self-determination over both land and wellness by drawing on their own strengths and skills (Nightingale & Richmond, 2021; Hatala et al., 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016). The concept of environmental repossession seeks to describe these particular processes, and to explore how they are being implemented as a

means to reclaim territory and reconnect with the knowledge, relationships, and identities tied to these places (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

This paper presents a case study of environmental repossession in the territory of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg to explore and describe the impacts of these processes for community mental wellness. Building on a growing body of evidence around the role of repossession for supporting personal and collective relationships to land, Indigenous knowledge, and each other, we describe a community-led, land-based camp and the experiences of participating youth, adults, and Elders.

### 5.1.1. Environmental repossession and mental wellness

The concept of environmental repossession emerged in response to a global movement of Indigenous communities seeking to reclaim their lands and ways of living for wellness (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Despite the impacts of colonization and persistent structures of oppression, Indigenous peoples are restoring their deep and multidimensional relationships to the land through diverse social, political, economic, and cultural processes (Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Simpson, 2017). Environmental repossession aims to describe these processes, and to understand how they are being developed and implemented as a means to foster physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. As communities draw on their own histories, protocols, and knowledges to apply repossession, individual efforts will be place-based and adapted to each geographical and cultural context (Tobias & Richmond, 2016). For instance, local processes of repossession can vary from canoe trips in the bush (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019), to tree hugging in urban centres (Hatala et al., 2019), to reoccupation protests (Goodyear-Ka ʻōpua, 2017).

While a wide body of literature has focused on the concept of Indigenous resilience in the face of colonial dispossession and trauma (Hatala et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2013), environmental repossession shifts attention from strategies of Indigenous survivance and adaptation, to the revitalization of self-determination over land. By asserting Indigenous rights to land, communities strengthen their connections to the source of their knowledge systems, identities, and nationhood (Nightingale & Richmond,

2022). Access to land is essential for food security, physical activity, medicines, and environmental resources that support healing and physical wellbeing (Ahmed et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020; Richmond & Ross, 2009; Wilson, 2003). Equally important, however, the land is the place of learning and teaching Indigenous knowledge through intergenerational relationships (Radu et al., 2014). It is where families and communities gather to fulfill their responsibilities, practice their skills, and connect with each other in ways that foster confidence, belonging, pride, and social support (Redvers, 2020; Walsh et al., 2020). Further, being on the lands of one's ancestral territories simultaneously links community members with their ancestors and future generations, and reinforces the spiritual relatedness between humans and all of creation (Johnson-Jennings et al., 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). Reclaiming land is thus not only a physical process, but is multilayered with personal, family, and collective meanings that foster mental wellness.

The promise of environmental repossession lies in its flexibility and responsiveness to local needs and knowledge systems. Strategies of repossession are both developed and implemented by Indigenous communities themselves, based on their own experiences and understandings of mental wellness. As many Indigenous peoples in Canada continue to struggle with access to adequate and culturally appropriate mental health services (Waddell et al., 2021; Restoule et al., 2016; Rowan et al., 2014), repossession holds potential as a community-based alternative. Alongside improving access to Indigenous-led counselling and interventions (Montesanti et al., 2022; Stewart, 2008), these land-based processes may be used to support a holistic and long-term approach to Indigenous healing and wellness.

### 5.1.2. Land, social relationships, and Indigenous knowledge

Current evidence around the application of environmental repossession in community contexts suggests that access to land should be supported by strong social relationships and Indigenous knowledge to strengthen wellness. For example, Big-Canoe and Richmond's (2014) community-based study with Anishinaabe youth demonstrates that social relationships may be critical to restoring environmental connections for mental wellness. Their results emphasize the role of intergenerational relationships in sharing the Anishinaabe knowledge and skills that facilitate land use. The participating youth

described how increasing land-based activities with Elders is necessary to both encouraging healthy behaviours and reinforcing Anishinaabe identity.

Similarly, Tobias and Richmond's (2016) participatory research with Anishinaabe Elders highlights intergenerational community gatherings and programs as important strategies of environmental repossession. While these activities may take different forms (e.g., youth camps, community garden, language workshops), the Elders describe a common focus on strengthening relationships with youth as a means to increase land use, improve health and healing, and foster community pride (p. 235). Experiences of dispossession have targeted not only land access, but also the family relationships through which the community's land-based culture is shared and sustained. Local repossession efforts are therefore aimed at restoring social relationships, and are intended to foster positive identity, social support, and sense of belonging among youth.

More recently, Mikraszewicz and Richmond (2019) partnered with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg to examine how a community canoe trip functions as a strategy of repossession to reclaim significant sites in their ancestral territory. Interviews with trip participants suggest that the sharing of community history and Anishinaabe knowledge supported youths' relationships to the land by creating a sense of place tied to both personal and family connections, and cultural meanings. By being on the land together, space was created for the youth to strengthen their social relationships with Elders and each other, to gain confidence in their land knowledge and skills, and to build a personal relationship to their territory as a source of identity and wellness.

### 5.1.3. Land camps

Land-based or 'bush' camps are becoming a recognized model in Indigenous healing and mental wellness, with increasing scholarly attention to the development, implementation, and evaluation of these programs (Montesanti et al., 2022; Redvers et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020). While land camps differ greatly in content and structure across diverse geographies and cultures, they typically emphasize intergenerational connections and the sharing of Indigenous knowledge for social support, confidence, and belonging (Danto et

al., 2022; Hickey et al., 2020; Redvers, 2020; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019). Through the teaching of land-based skills, such as hunting, food preparation, and ceremony, camps intend to provide the time, space, and relationships for participants to reconnect with their identities and the land (Healey et al., 2016; Radu et al., 2014). Drawing on Indigenous pedagogies, this teaching often takes place through sharing personal experiences, revitalizing language, and learning by doing to build individual self-esteem and independence (Walsh et al., 2020; Lines & Jardine, 2019). By learning on and from the land, camps further aim to ground participants in their spiritual relatedness with the land as a teacher, relative, and source of support (Gaudet, 2021; Takano, 2005). Generally, the intended participants are youth, particularly those who may be experiencing wellness challenges, and camp leaders are Elders or knowledge holders, although some camps may include Western-trained therapists for specific interventions.

Community-led land camps seek to address the impacts of intergenerational trauma and displacement on relationships to self, family, community, and the land (Gaudet, 2021; Dobson & Brazzoni, 2016; Hirsch et al., 2016). In Canada, legislation and policy aimed to physically disconnect Indigenous peoples from their territories through the creation of reserve lands and forced relocation (TRC, 2015; de Leeuw et al., 2012; Tester & Kulchyski, 2011). At the same time, the residential school system targeted the family relationships that sustain communities' land-based knowledge systems and identities (Bombay et al., 2014). The shift to market-based economies and wage labour has furthered this disconnect by limiting the time available for family members to be on the land together (Richmond & Ross, 2009; Ohmagari & Berkes, 1997). As a result, many communities have expressed concerns about younger generations lacking the relationships, skills, and knowledge for land use, with consequences for both cultural continuity and wellness (Tobias & Richmond, 2016; Takano, 2005; Ermine et al., 2005). Land camps have evolved as a mechanism for individual and social healing by returning community members to the land and revitalizing the land-based languages, protocols, and responsibilities that uphold Indigenous identities.

Given the potential for land camps to foster community healing, Radu et al. (2014) argue that they can be understood as processes of local collective empowerment and decolonization. In line with Corntassel's (2012) conceptualization of decolonization as an everyday and land-based practice, land camps allow Indigenous people to reaffirm their personal and collective values, social relations, responsibilities, and identities in the context of contemporary needs and challenges. This framing suggests that land camps may be important strategies of environmental repossession. As community members restore their relationships to land and each other, camps can become sites of political resistance and Indigenous resurgence through which local rights are asserted and processes of wellness are reclaimed (Goodyear-Ka ʻōpua, 2017; Corntassel, 2012).

Building on the scholarly literature around land connections and Indigenous mental wellness, this paper explores community meanings of a land camp to reclaim Mountain Lake in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory. Framed by the concept of environmental repossession, we document the perceptions of youth, adults, and Elders participating in the week-long camp, and examine the implications for community relationships, knowledge, and pride. Specifically, the goal is to describe how strategies of repossession can support land reclamation, Anishinaabe identity, and wellness.

### 5.2. Materials and methods

The research presented here is framed by environmental repossession as both a theoretical concept and applied methodology within the geographies of Indigenous health and wellness (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018). In response to decades of pathologizing and extractive health research, Indigenous scholars and communities have advocated for increasing control over research frameworks and design (Louis, 2007). Environmental repossession developed out of this methodological shift as it centres Indigenous knowledges, experiences, and strengths as a means to support self-determination over land and wellness (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019). Drawing from Indigenous research methods, repossession begins from the principle of relationality to emphasize Indigenous knowledge systems as the guiding methodological lens, and to uphold community ownership over the entire research process, from determining objectives to dissemination

(McGregor, 2018; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This means that study design is geographically specific, and develops out of the values, protocols, relationships, and goals of particular communities or groups. Most importantly, this means that applying repossession is a transformative approach in which research not only seeks to describe processes of land reclamation, but actively contributes to these efforts.

This case in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg is part of an ongoing international study that brings together researchers and community partners in Canada, Aotearoa, and Hawai'i to explore the application of environmental repossession in local contexts. Beginning from Indigenous methodologies allowed this research to explore the concept of environmental repossession through Biigtigong's local ways of gathering, sharing, and validating knowledge, and within the context of the community's social and environmental relationships. As an Anishinaabe community, Biigtigong's local worldview and ways of knowing are specifically framed by Anishinaabe knowledge systems that encompass history, teachings, and spirituality, and emphasize the holistic philosophy of mino bimaadiziwin, living a good life. In the context of research, Anishinaabe scholars Debassige (2010), Bell (2016), and McGregor (2018) have argued that mino bimaadiziwin can be applied as a methodological approach in which the researcher commits to both living in a good way and supporting Indigenous communities towards their own goals of a good and well life. In practice, this means that the foundation of research is the building of long-term relationships between the researcher and their community partner, as well as self, past and future, environment, Indigenous knowledge, and Spirit (McGregor, 2018). This study is part of a long-standing research and personal relationship between the second author, an Anishinaabe scholar, and Biigtigong, their home community.

This study phase was a collaboration between the two academic authors and Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development. In 2018, the community's Band Manager and staff from the Department of Sustainable Development identified a need for research to explore Biigtigong's connection to Mountain Lake and the western boundary of its territory, an area from which community members have been largely disconnected (Nightingale & Richmond, 2021). Through regular meetings with department staff, it was

determined that the first author, a settler graduate student, and a community researcher, the Manager of Culture and Heritage, would lead this research. The research design was approved by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of the researchers' home institution and publicly launched in Biigtigong in October 2018.

With the goal of increasing land use and awareness of history at Mountain Lake, the community researcher selected a land camp as an appropriate and participatory method that would bring community members to this site and facilitate the collection of knowledge from attending Elders and knowledge holders. The first author and community researcher worked closely to plan, organize, and deliver the land camp at Mountain Lake. To facilitate participation among Elders and youth, the camp was scheduled as a daily event for one week in July 2019, with attendees returning home each day. Elders and key knowledge holders were personally invited by the community researcher and transportation was provided. The department's summer students and staff were also directly invited, although the camp was open to all interested community members. As the camp intended to gather Anishinaabe knowledge and history, activities were planned to encourage intergenerational sharing and storytelling through a mix of both structured and flexible time. For instance, each day began with a workshop to learn cultural skills, such as moccasin and rattle making, and afternoons involved sharing stories around a campfire and other social activities, including swimming and canoeing on the lake. All meals were cooked and shared communally to teach food preparation and facilitate relationship building. Camp participation fluctuated daily between 30-50 community members and the final day took place indoors on Biigtigong's reserve due to rain.

Throughout the camp, the stories and experiences of attendees were collected, including four story-based, conversational interviews with Elders and knowledge holders. To further examine community meanings of the camp as a process of environmental repossession, in-depth story-based interviews were conducted with the participating summer students (n=6) and department staff (n=5) the following week. All interviews were conducted by the first author based on a flexible interview guide developed with the community researcher around perceptions of the camp and community connections to land.

The interviews were audio recorded with permission and complimented by notes and observations from the community researcher.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically (Clarke et al., 2015) through a three-stage process that involved: 1) inductive coding by the first author to generate preliminary themes; 2) collaborative interpretation with the community researcher and second author; and 3) deductive analysis by the first author across the three distinct age groups of participants (youth, staff, Elders) and in reference to the research objectives. Through steps 1 and 2, findings began to emerge around the role of the camp for community mental wellness, which were explored in detail in step 3. As the settler graduate student took the lead in data collection and analysis for this paper, it is important to acknowledge how their positionality and social, cultural, and geographical distance from Biigtigong limits both their relational and interpretative capacity. They will never be able to understand the intimate relationship between Biigtigong and its ancestral territory, nor its complex Anishinaabe knowledge system. Over the past five years of collaboration, the first author and community researcher have developed a close research and personal relationship that has facilitated ongoing discussion around roles, interpretation of findings, and appropriate representation of Anishinaabe experiences. Formal and informal member-checking with the second author and broader Department of Sustainable Development has also been ongoing to verify local meanings are understood, and that key and sacred community knowledge is excluded from the research outputs. Given capacity and workload constraints on department staff, it was decided that the first author would be responsible for preparing dissemination outputs for both academic and community audiences, with continuous validation by the community researcher, second author, and various department staff.

### 5.3. Results

The results of our analysis are presented around three key findings in relation to individual experiences and community meanings of the Mountain Lake camp. As a strategy of environmental repossession, the land camp was a process of: 1) strengthening social relationships; 2) sharing and practicing local Anishinaabe knowledge; and, 3) restoring

community pride. The findings below are discussed in relation to the three groups of participants at Mountain Lake (youth, staff, Elders) in order to understand generational perspectives around the role and impact of the camp for community members.

### 5.3.1. Strengthening social relationships

Although Biigtigong is a small community and many members are connected through family ties, participants expressed worry around the disconnection of intergenerational relationships. Elders, staff, and youth described how family and community relationships have been weakened by experiences of colonization, such as the residential and day school system and their related social impacts, as well as by contemporary work schedules and increasing technology use. As a result, youth explained that younger generations have less opportunities both to be out on the land and to connect with Elders and other knowledge keepers:

> Because a lot of people that I know, they're in really broken homes and stuff like that. And that's always been a struggle to those persons. They wanna go out hunting or canoeing, fishing and stuff like that, but they don't have no one to go with. And give the kids opportunities that some kids don't get to have. Because, usually, when we were out at Mountain Lake, I noticed that a lot of people that I work with, a lot of their relatives would be coming out. And I know my grandma came out one day, but since, I don't know, that relationship isn't there, it's just like, oh she's just another person in the crowd or whatever, that kind of thing. And it just hit that man, a lot of these families get to do this type of stuff together and I have to beg my family to do stuff with me. (Youth 2)

At the start of the Mountain Lake camp, the participant groups indicated that they did not have close relationships with each other. In many cases, Elders and younger participants did not know each other, as one youth described:

> Some of [the Elders] didn't even know who I was and they're still talking to me. And then all of a sudden they're like 'Who's your parents?' Then I'm like 'Oh, my

> god.' Then I'll tell them and they're like 'Oh, my gosh! I didn't even recognize you.' (Youth 3)

By bringing different generations together on the land, the camp provided the time and space for community members to begin rebuilding relationships in a relaxed and social environment. Through both structured and flexible activities, Elders, staff, and youth were able to socialize, share food and learn from each other.

> You know when I was at Mountain Lake, there was a few of them that I didn't really talk to before and that I actually got to talk with. And like even [Knowledge Holder], like I've lived across from him for two years now and I barely even talk to him. I talked to him more that day than I did ever. (Staff 5)

As this quote demonstrates, the camp created a special opportunity for community members to step outside of their daily routines and social expectations in order to spend time with the wider community. Another staff highlighted how this opportunity to reconnect with community and family members on the land created an atmosphere of calm, relaxation, and emotional ease at the camp:

> When you come together in these kind of environments – people do have a good time. They have fun. It's like whatever is going on in their lives for that moment, it's gone. Because when you're out there you have an opportunity, it's almost like you're cleansing your body when you're on the land in an environment that you're so familiar with. That's what I noticed down there, people were just, they looked so at ease. They looked like they were relaxed. Was it being in the bush? Probably. Was it being around people that you don't see very often? Probably, yes. But just taking the time and appreciating the environment, but also making those reconnections with family and friends and sharing tea and telling stories or doing activities that are going to make you forget life for a moment. (Staff 4)

In particular, youth explained how activities, such as rattle making, which paired up Elders and youth provided a bridge across what can be an uncomfortable gap between the two generations:

> When you tell a youth to just go find an elder and help an elder, they get anxious. And then they get shy, and they get intimidated, so they won't go and help. So yeah, I think teaming them up with an elder helps a lot. Because they haven't been in that position before. (Youth 1)

At the end of the camp, all participant groups reported that social connections were stronger, both personally and collectively. Elders described a new sense of bond with the youth, that they had "made a new friend," and that each younger participant was "not just a youth, but now has a name." The camp organizer summarized a hopeful sentiment: that these new relationships had created a sense of family and belonging among participants that would continue long after the week at Mountain Lake:

> We came together, and it seemed like we left as a big family. You know what I mean? It felt like there was a lot of – I shouldn't say "broken," but maybe forgotten relationships that were now open, or new ones were made. (Staff 1)

### 5.3.2. Practicing Anishinaabe knowledge

The Mountain Lake camp was planned intentionally to support intergenerational learning and practice of Anishinaabe knowledge, including cultural skills, community history, and traditional responsibilities. The daily schedule involved a structured activity each morning, such as moccasin- and rattle-making, followed by a communal meal to teach food preparation. The participating youth and adults described how this hands-on practice provided an opportunity to learn directly from key knowledge holders with ongoing support from Elders. Although these Elders physically live in Biigtigong, opportunities for visiting cannot be assumed, and concentrated time with them for land-based learning is especially rare:

> But I really enjoyed it. I guess that's something I've always dreamed of doing is just spending time with Elders. I mean like I can go and visit with an Elder, but it's not like we'll make rattles together or make drums together, stuff like that. (Youth 4)

The disconnect between youth and Elders was described as the result of age-related mobility challenges and a lack of confidence among some Elders in their abilities and experiences. Having a group of Elders at the camp was therefore critical for learning Anishinaabe knowledge, as the Elders encouraged each other, shared collectively, and filled in individual gaps in memory. As one staff highlighted, the camp facilitated the practice of Anishinaabe knowledge among the older adults and Elders by bringing them on the land together:

> I don't think [Elders] realize the value that they hold and that information, the stories, they don't … And that's what they don't understand is just that importance. Just for them to be out there experiencing and listening to the language and how that's gonna help them unlock all that knowledge and language that they have within them. (Staff 2)

Supported by each other, the Elders used the time at the camp to share their place-based knowledge of Mountain Lake with the younger participants, including personal, family, and community history in the area. One youth described how this learning was facilitated by being at the site with Elders to listen to their stories:

> Because they'll start telling you stories about "Oh, we used to go swimming here. We used to swim here. Oh, this looks like this place." They'll tell you stories about how they lived in the bush and stuff. Yeah, I think it is. And they – Elders – I don't know, it's kinda weird, they always know trees or leaves and the berries and stuff. Like, "Oh we used to pick these when we were little girls" and stuff. (Youth 3)

Another young adult further explained that the Elders' stories not only teach place-based knowledge, but Anishinaabe values, morals, and broader life lessons:

> You don't know what you're gonna learn from [Elders] today. It's like, "Am I gonna learn some modesty or humility, or are they gonna tell me a funny story or something like that?" You never know what's gonna come out of their mouths sometimes and it's really nice. (Staff 5)

The teachings from Elders and their shared life experiences became a source of social support for this individual to address ongoing emotional stress in their home life:

> You can have a bad day when you come home and then you can go out there and then like, you know, not fully vent, but you get some advice. And, you know, they get you level-headed and stuff like that. And then it kind of takes away from all that stress that was building up at home. (Staff 5)

Finally, participants described how the camp activities facilitated Elders and youth to take up their traditional roles and responsibilities as Anishinaabe community members. As the Elders shared their knowledge and experiences, the youth practiced reciprocity by catering for the Elders' needs, such as preparing their meals, making them tea, and helping them around the camp site. A staff member explained that while these roles used to be expected behaviour, many youth in the community have not grown up with teachings around how to interact with Elders:

> Overall, I was just like so impressed with the way our youth were able to help and assist. It took a lot of pushing, but considering that we haven't really done activities like that with them together. So, we can't just assume that those youth know exactly what to do. (Staff 2)

### 5.3.3. Fostering community pride

As camp participants strengthened their relationships with each other and the land at Mountain Lake, they described a renewed sense of belonging and pride as members of Biigtigong. For many participants, the camp activities reinforced a collective social and cultural identity grounded in the community stories, Anishinaabe teachings, and family histories shared by the Elders. Staff and youth explained how learning about personal and community ties to the Mountain Lake area had increased their understanding of who they are as Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, and their pride in being part of a long and multigenerational living history. One staff member summarized why listening to Elders' stories around the campfire made them prouder to be a part of the community:

> It gives me a sense of identity in where I come from and who – Especially when you get one of those little Elders that you talk with, and they know things about your family you don't know. And it's like wow, it just gives you who you are, a better understanding of where you're grounding from, where you come from, who you are. And it just makes you feel more proud to be a part of the community when you hear all this stuff. I don't know. I just love sitting there and listening to stories. I shouldn't say stories. It's history, right? (Staff 1)

Similarly, all three groups of participants highlighted an activity to tie-dye Biigtigong shirts as meaningful for community pride. While not a cultural activity, the tie-dying was physically easy and accessible to all participants, allowing everyone to be involved. Using community shirts created a feeling of both group connectedness and, as one staff member expressed, that the group was representing the broader community in the reclamation of Mountain Lake:

> And doing it with community shirts too. I think that was the biggest hit for somebody, like for all those people walking away to be like, 'I have a shirt that represents my community and I get to wear that.' So, I think that was really special to them too. I kind of seen a few of them all happy that they had got those shirts. (Staff 3)

Processes of dispossession have largely disconnected Biigtigong from the Mountain Lake area and one of the key goals of the camp was to reassert community jurisdiction over this place. Camp participants explained that being part of this collective effort to reclaim Biigtigong's territory instilled feelings of pride. For Elders, this pride was often related to witnessing how well previous generations had cared for Mountain Lake, and then taking up their own responsibilities to this place:

> See the trees and all that? And that belongs to the Nishnaabeg, which is us guys. This is our land and look how good it's been taken care of, for the last, probably, 40, 50 years. It's so nice. It's so pristine, you know? (Elder 1)

For staff and youth, a renewed community pride came from learning about how large Biigtigong's ancestral territory is, and how much land is available for community members to use and connect with. One staff member explained how decreasing land use and travel among families meant that many camp participants were surprised to know that Mountain Lake belongs to the community's territory:

> I could see a lot of reclaiming going on and people taking pride in that because – when you seen people who came down to Mountain Lake – they were quite surprised like this was theirs, like this was something that you can enjoy. 'This is for you.' (Staff 4)

In particular, the act of reclaiming Mountain Lake reminded younger generations what the community is capable of when it asserts its power and fights for its rights. A youth participant expressed how community pride is related to knowing that Biigtigong is strong, resilient, and taking back its land, despite persistent colonial barriers and attitudes:

> For what our people have been through, we could have been moved or we could have been killed off or you know something like that. But we're still walking on the same land that our ancestors did. To think that we're still here and we're resilient and we're still fighting through all the stuff that the government throws at us. And not even the government, just people who don't think, not highly of us, but they think lowly of us. And to think that like I've – even just going to school – I've seen a lot of people and Indigenous people are such a low thought about person, thing. And just being able to connect on the land and the territory, it's amazing to see what we're fighting for. (Youth 4)

### 5.4. Discussion

This paper qualitatively explored how processes of environmental repossession to reclaim and reconnect to land can foster community mental wellness. As part of a broader study to examine local meanings of repossession efforts, this research documented the experiences of community members participating in a land camp to repossess Mountain Lake in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. Thematic analysis of story-based interviews with Biigtigong

Elders, staff, and youth suggests that the Mountain Lake camp supported Anishinaabe identity and wellness through three important mechanisms: 1) strengthening intergenerational social relationships; 2) providing opportunities to share and practice Anishinaabe knowledge; and, 3) fostering community belonging and pride.

The Mountain Lake camp was planned by the Department of Sustainable Development as a strategy of environmental repossession to assert Biigtigong's Indigenous rights over this area. To reclaim Mountain Lake, the camp brought three generations of Biigtigong members together on the land for one week to reconnect to this place and each other. Through cultural and social activities, the camp facilitated intergenerational partnerships and sharing as a means to renew social relationships between Elders, adults, and youth. Although Biigtigong is a small community of approximately 500 on-reserve members, maintaining strong social relationships has been a challenge against historical and contemporary experiences of dispossession. Outside of daily routines and social constraints, such as technology, the camp provided participants with the time and space to overcome intergenerational tensions and reconnect. Throughout the week-long camp, the land of Mountain Lake supported this relational context as the source of shared connection between participants, their families, and ancestors. As one adult summarized, "We're all connected through the people and the land. The people, the community bring us together, but it's the land that keeps us together" (Staff 5). This strengthening of intergenerational community relationships increased both access to social support and facilitated a sense of belonging among participants.

Critical to the reclamation of Mountain Lake was the sharing of land-based Indigenous knowledge that imbues this site with meaning as an Anishinaabe place. The department staff planned the camp schedule to include both structured activities and flexible time to encourage the transmission of Anishinaabe knowledge between generations of participants. This intergenerational teaching was further encouraged by the growing community relationships and collective nature of learning at the camp, through which participants felt comfortable practicing their cultural roles as Anishinaabe community members. As Elders and youth took up and practiced their responsibilities as

teachers and learners of Anishinaabe knowledge, they became increasingly confident in their skills and identity as Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, as well as their capacity to contribute to the community. In particular, Elders experienced an increased sense of self-worth related to the value and importance that other participants placed on their stories and teachings.

Throughout the week, participants strengthened their connections with Mountain Lake, each other, and their Anishinaabe knowledge system. This led to the development of a shared sense of community pride. While all participants are band members of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, some youth expressed not having strong social or cultural ties to this identity. In fact, as processes of dispossession have historically confined community members to their reserve, this colonial space has come to define many members' senses of identity as Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, rather than their Anishinaabe ways of living. The process of repossession at Mountain Lake reminded staff and youth that their territory extends far beyond the small legal reserve, and demonstrated that the community is exercising its power to reclaim the entire ancestral territory. Participants understood that the collective effort of environmental repossession relied on their individual participation. By showing up each day at the camp to listen to community stories, cook and share food, and canoe on the lake, they were each supporting the reclamation of Mountain Lake on behalf of the broader community. This shared awareness of purpose, strength, and connection fostered deep feelings of pride in the community, its culture, history, and identity. These feelings were reinforced through the production of a 2021 calendar with photographs and stories from the camp to share with all Biigtigong members.

Collective participation in the reclamation of Mountain Lake positively impacted community mental wellness. Framed by mino bimaadiziwin and Anishinaabe relationships to land, the Mountain Lake camp was developed as a strategy of environmental repossession to reclaim Biigtigong's territory and ways of living for a strong, healthy, and self-determining future. Through its various activities, including visiting and sharing stories, knowledge, and food, the Mountain Lake camp supported intergenerational connections to the land, each other, and to Anishinaabe knowledge. These intergenerational activities strengthened participants' sense of social and cultural belonging with their

Anishinaabe identity. All three generations experienced renewed relationships, pride, and community roles, which are important determinants of mental wellness for Indigenous youth, adults, and Elders (Danto et al., 2022; Schill et al., 2019; Snowshoe et al., 2017; Chandler & Lalonde, 2015).

Perhaps most importantly, the reclamation of Mountain Lake fostered a sense of collective empowerment and pride among participants. The act of coming together to assert Biigtigong's rights to its territory was a demonstration of the community's resilience and power, not only to the colonial state, but to the community members themselves. Against ongoing impacts of dispossession, the camp reinforced for participants the continuity of Biigtigong's relationship to its territory, and the ways in which connection to land upholds their Anishinaabe identity and future. While research has drawn on the concepts of environmental dispossession and ecological grief to examine the complex mental health implications of land loss and disconnection (Lewis et al., 2021; Cunsolo et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2009), these results suggest that environmental repossession may be useful for understanding how land reconnection and self-determination can enhance Indigenous mental wellness, individually and collectively. Conceptually, these results advance an expanded understanding of how land camps and activities can support Indigenous mental wellness, as the act of land reclamation may represent an important aspect of healing for communities (Simpson, 2017; TRC, 2015; Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

The outcomes of environmental repossession extend beyond land reoccupation and reclamation. As our results demonstrate, these processes restore the place-based relationships and knowledges that are foundational to Indigenous identities and conceptions of mental wellbeing. In this sense, applying environmental repossession is an inherently political act of resistance and resurgence in which communities assert self-determination not only over their lands, but also their collective wellness and futures. The land camp at Mountain Lake created the space for community members to gather and revitalize the roles, values, and relationships that connect each of them to their shared identity as Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. This practice of environmental repossession compliments Radu et al.'s (2014) definition of healing as "political resistance and as a site

of identity and cultural renegotiation" (p. 99). This is healing based not on biomedical understandings and practices, but those that defy the goals of colonization and encourage the return of Anishinaabe principles and ways of understanding wellness. In the wider context of Indigenous mental health research, there is a growing consensus that greater attention and resources must be allocated to land-based mental health programming and delivery (Redvers et al., 2021; Johnson-Jennings et al., 2020; Snowshoe et al., 2017). For these programs are culturally responsive to the unique traumas endured by Indigenous peoples and communities – especially those related to processes of dispossession – and they offer dignified spaces of healing, with emphasis placed on relational practice, inclusion of traditional knowledge, and spirituality (Gaudet, 2021; Walsh et al., 2020).

By exploring the links between land reclamation, identity, and community empowerment, our results suggest that healing and environmental repossession may be interconnected mechanisms of Indigenous decolonization. If decolonization is an active process of renewing Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems, and ways of living, it requires the restoration of relationships to land and land-based responsibilities (Corntassel, 2012; Tuck & Wang, 2012). In Biigtigong, everyday practices of healing and environmental repossession are supporting this process as the community reclaims its territory and rebuilds its own practices of mental wellness along the pathway to mino bimaadiziwin. At the camp, the everyday action of tie-dying a community shirt or frying bannock in the bush became a demonstration of Anishinaabe nationhood in that it fostered intergenerational belonging to community, culture, and the land (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Adelson, 2000).

### 5.5. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the reclamation of Mountain Lake by Biigtigong Nishnaabeg in order to explore how processes of environmental repossession may foster mental wellness in Indigenous communities. Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development planned a week-long camp at Mountain Lake as a means to reconnect community members to this land, and the history and knowledge tied to this site. Our results demonstrate that for participating youth, staff, and Elders, the land camp

strengthened social relationships, supported the sharing and practice of Anishinaabe knowledge, and fostered community pride in ways that reinforced Anishinaabe identity. In so doing, this study suggests an important link between Indigenous land reclamation, self-determination, and mental wellness, and raises questions for future research around the implications of decolonization for physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. While research has broadly examined the relationship between community land tenure and wellbeing (Fligg & Robinson, 2020), as well as land connections and individual health (Redvers, 2020), there is an opportunity to explore the specific strategies that communities are employing to assert their Indigenous rights to land and wellness.

Indigenous peoples globally are calling for 'land back' as they seek to address the ongoing structures of colonialism and revitalize self-determining nations. Every day, Indigenous communities are living their relationships to land and developing new approaches, actions, and programs to strengthen their land-based identities. While many of these communities are based in their ancestral territories, such as Biigtigong and other reserve-based First Nations in Canada, equally important are the strategies of individuals, families, and groups who have been displaced from their homelands or may not be part of a formal community (Montesanti et al., 2022). As Indigenous health geographers, we have a responsibility to use research processes to support Indigenous self-determination, not only by documenting the experiences of communities, but by actively contributing to their goals through our time, skills, and financial resources.

# Chapter 6: Manuscript 3

## Building structures of environmental repossession to reclaim land, self-determination, and Indigenous wellness

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# 6. Building structures of environmental repossession to reclaim land, self-determination, and Indigenous wellness


## Abstract

In Canada, Indigenous health inequalities are sustained by colonial structures that create social disadvantage and limit Indigenous self-determination to Land. Drawing on the concept of environmental repossession, this study explores how Indigenous communities are building local structures to reclaim their territories and renew the values, responsibilities and knowledges tied to these places for wellness. Specifically, this study examines the meanings of the everyday work of the Department of Sustainable Development in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and shares lessons for other communities seeking to foster self-determination over Land, identity, and wellness. Qualitative analysis of interviews with current and former department staff members supports an advanced understanding of how repossession strategies are sustained by Indigenous communities to foster place-based goals and address structural barriers to wellness.



**Keywords:** Indigenous wellness; environmental repossession; settler colonialism; Indigenous self-determination; Canada; Anishinaabe

## 6.1. Introduction

Indigenous experiences of health and wellness continue to be shaped by colonization and processes of dispossession. Colonization disconnects Indigenous communities from access to and control over their territories, and damages the wellness-sustaining relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Land (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Richmond & Ross, 2009; Kelm, 1998). The Land, with capital L, refers to more than a physical space (Styres, 2017); it is a sentient being, encompasses the principles, philosophies, and ontologies of Indigenous environments (Styres, 2018: 27), and is the core element of holistic and relational Indigenous approaches to wellness (Daigle, 2016; Richmond, 2015). Indigenous communities commonly maintain relationships of reciprocity with their territories; in return, these lands provide the food, physical activity, and material resources to promote physical health (Kermoal & Altamirano-Jiménez, 2016; Parlee & O'Neil, 2007; Wilson, 2003). The Land is also an essential source of spiritual, emotional, and mental wellness and identity formation as it offers spaces of spiritual practice and intergenerational knowledge sharing (Lines & Jardine, 2019; Chandler & Lalonde, 2015; Biddle & Swee, 2012; Fienup-Riordan, 2001). The protocols that uphold relationships to Land form the basis of complex Indigenous knowledge systems that guide communities' social, economic, and political relations, and facilitate living in a good and healthy way (Simpson, 2014; Battiste & Youngblood, 2000).

The growing field of Indigenous health geographies emphasizes this Land-wellness connection (Richmond & Nightingale, 2021; Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018), and explores how its disruption by historic and ongoing colonial processes underlies contemporary disparities (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Brown et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2009). In settler-colonial states, the system of colonialism has structurally removed Indigenous peoples from their lands through legislation, policies, and practices aimed at transferring resources to settler populations (Carson et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2017; Watson, 2007; Harris, 2002). For example, state-approved resource extraction continues to contaminate or destroy Indigenous lands, prioritizing profit and employment over community and environmental wellness (Shandro et al., 2017; Gislason & Andersen, 2016; Booth & Skelton, 2011).

Experiences of dispossession dislocate communities from their food, spiritual, kinship, and governance systems, and create a legacy of disempowerment that continues to structure Indigenous peoples' relationships with the state, Land, and wellness (Castleden et al., 2017; Reading, 2015).

But Indigenous peoples are not powerless to systems of colonialism. Indigenous communities globally are creating and implementing diverse, hopeful strategies to reconnect with the Land to restore wellness (Ryks et al., 2019; Green & Martin, 2017; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2009). The concept of environmental repossession describes the processes implemented by Indigenous communities to reclaim their lands and the knowledges ties to these places (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Recent studies emphasize the place-based needs of individuals, communities, and nations (Hatala et al., 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016; Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014), with less exploration focused on what repossession processes look like in practice, how they are applied, and by whom. The current research takes a case study approach to explore the practice of environmental repossession; in particular how Indigenous communities build local structures to support processes of repossession over the long term. In collaboration with the Anishinaabe community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, this paper documents the development and everyday work of Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development. Drawing from interviews with current and former department staff members, this study examines meanings of the department's everyday work, and its relationship to self-determination over Land, identity, and wellness.

### 6.1.1. Structural determinants of Indigenous wellness

Despite important advances in targeted research and health promotion, significant disparities persist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018; Garner et al., 2010; Adelson, 2005). To understand and address these inequalities, a more critically natured body of research has developed to explore the structural factors that constrain Indigenous wellness (Reading, 2015). This perspective builds on critical population health approaches to examine the social, economic, and political organization of society, and how it differently impacts population

groups (Homan et al., 2021; Labonte et al., 2005). Specifically, this perspective draws attention to historical and contemporary laws, policies, governance, and social values, and how they come together to disempower Indigenous communities and create barriers to wellness (Cohen & Mata-Sánchez, 2021; Yellow Horse et al., 2021; Snyder & Wilson, 2015; Awofeso, 2011; Richmond & Ross, 2009).

Structural barriers to Indigenous equity are shaped and sustained by laws and policies rooted in colonialism, and the racist ideology that Native people are less than, unequal, and in need of civilization (de Leeuw et al., 2010). Across diverse cultures and geographies, colonialism has operated with the goal of eliminating Indigenous claims to land and diverting resources to settler populations through genocide and forced assimilation (Borrows, 2008; Harris, 2002). Laws and policies were created with the intention of removing communities from their territories and destroying land-based knowledge systems and identities, thus undermining Indigenous kinship and its sophisticated economic, social, and political structures (TRC, 2015; Simpson, 2004; LaDuke, 1999) which serve as the wellness-sustaining foundations of Indigenous societies (Lavallee & Poole, 2010).

In Canada, the most important piece of colonial legislation is the Indian Act of 1876; it continues to regulate access to lands and resources in many First Nations communities. In particular, the system of 'reserve lands' was established to confine First Nations to small, remote, and undesirable plots, creating a longstanding structure of economic disadvantage and dependency (Waldram et al., 2006; Kelm, 1998). Similarly, the Indian Act outlawed traditional leadership, languages, and ceremonies on reserves, with profound impacts for emotional, spiritual, and mental wellness (Mitchell & Arseneau, 2019; RCAP, 1996). Today, this structure continues to limit food security, physical activity, access to clean water, and economic development with devastating impacts for infectious and chronic diseases, hygiene, and mental health (Bradford et al., 2016; Reading, 2015; de Leeuw et al., 2012).

Through the imposition of new forms of social, economic, and political organization, colonial governments and state actors structurally disempowered Indigenous

communities and built a legacy of oppression, surveillance, and disadvantage that continues to uphold the racist ideology it was founded on.

### 6.1.2. Environmental repossession

To assert self-determination over Land, identity, and wellness, Indigenous communities are building strategies to reclaim and reconnect with their territories. The theoretical concept of environmental repossession seeks to describe these processes and explore how they develop in response to the unique needs of communities (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Individual processes are understood to be place-based and to operate across multiple scales as individuals, groups, communities, and nations plan diverse actions to foster personal and communal relationships to Land (Peach et al., 2020; Hatala et al., 2019; Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016). By strengthening self-determination over territories, Indigenous peoples are not only reclaiming access to the material resources of these environments, but also the history, knowledge, and responsibilities tied to these places that uphold the foundations of Indigenous societies (Lewis et al., 2021). For this reason, Big-Canoe and Richmond (2014) suggest that processes of repossession are supported by access to Indigenous knowledge and strong social relationships in order to restore meaning and reconnect relationships to significant places. Drawing from participatory research with Anishinaabe youth in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, their results demonstrate how youth understand land-based activities with Elders as central to learning and practicing the Indigenous knowledge that will sustain Anishinaabe ways of life into the future.

Applications of environmental repossession in the existing literature have often examined one-time processes of repossession – on-the-land camps, canoe trips, protests – or everyday practices with focus on local meanings among those involved. For instance, Mikraszewicz and Richmond (2019) documented a week-long, community-led canoe journey in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg along the Biigtig Zibii (Pic River). The journey brought together youth, Elders, and key knowledge holders to support intergenerational sharing of Anishinaabe knowledge and to strengthen understandings of the Land in relation to Biigtigong's history, culture, and wellness. Similarly, Hatala et al. (2019), described the

everyday practices urban Indigenous youth, living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, engage in to maintain connections to Land, such as tree-hugging and gift-giving, and the meanings of these practices for Indigenous identities and wellness.

While these studies have emphasized the place-based implementation and meanings of repossession processes, Nightingale and Richmond (2021) recently raised concerns about the challenges and tensions of sustaining these efforts over the long term. Through the example of reclamation efforts occurring at Mountain Lake, Nightingale and Richmond (2021) draw attention to both the long-term *and* everyday responsibilities and accountabilities required to carry out repossession processes (e.g., logistics, funding, planning), thereby suggesting the importance of local capacity and infrastructure.

Building on the growing empirical literature around the concept of environmental repossession, this research explores how Indigenous communities are building their own local structures of repossession. This study documents the case of the Department of Sustainable Development in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, and draws from interviews with current and former staff members to consider what it means to enact Indigenous structures to reclaim Land, self-determination, and wellness. By exploring the experiences, responsibilities, and everyday work of department staff, this study examines: 1) the development and ongoing role of the Department of Sustainable Development in the community; and 2) the meanings and challenges of the department's everyday work.

### 6.1.3. Study context

The study presented here is part of an ongoing research partnership with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, an Anishinaabe community located on the north shore of Lake Superior in Ontario, Canada. Biigtigong Nishnaabeg is a First Nation community that falls under the assumed jurisdiction of Canada's Indian Act. The Indian Act authorizes the Canadian government to regulate First Nations' daily life by designating communities as Bands, assigning them specific parcels of land, and administering the allocation of services and funding. This power has allowed the government to determine who is legally defined as an Indian, confine communities to reserves, outlaw cultural and spiritual practices, and replace

traditional leadership systems with band councils (Reading, 2015; Kelm, 1998). Along the coastline of Lake Superior, the government attempts to justify this legal administration through the 1850 Robinson-Superior Treaty. Yet, Biigtigong has never signed nor agreed to the Treaty and its territory remains unceded. While Biigtigong's ancestral territory comprises more than 2 million hectares, the reserve system has largely confined the community to a swampy plot of only 323.7 hectares (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, 2018).

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg is governed by an elected Chief and Band Council, who have the mandate to determine local policy and the allocation of resources on the reserve. The priorities and decisions of the Chief and Council are operationalized through band departments that undertake the daily work of providing community services and programming in the areas of education, health, economic development, housing, social services, energy and forestry, and sustainable development, as well as broad administration of the community (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, 2021). Over the past thirty years, the Chief and Council have been engaged in various environmental repossession processes developed to reclaim Biigtigong's ancestral territory and reconnect the community to this land, including a comprehensive land claims process. Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development is primarily responsible for projects relating to the community's land base.

## 6.2. Methods

### 6.2.1. Methodological approach

This study is part of a long-term, community-led research project to document and examine environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. Drawing from both community-based participatory research (CBPR) and Indigenous methodological frameworks, this project explicitly supports Biigtigong's self-determination over research and Land (McGregor, 2018; Louis, 2007), and its desire to share learnings with other Indigenous communities. CBPR emphasizes community involvement and joint decision-making, thus fostering research that privileges Indigenous knowledge and intelligence, and maintains Indigenous sovereignty over research (Tobias et al., 2013; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Upholding these principles in collaboration with Biigtigong involved a research approach

framed by the Anishinaabe philosophy of mino bimaadiziwin, which sees interconnection and responsibility between all living things, including those in the human, physical, and spiritual worlds (McGregor, 2018; Bell, 2016; Debassige, 2010). The research objectives, design, and methods were determined by department staff members and our project continually develops through an iterative process that reflects community needs.

This research was conducted by the first author, a settler graduate student and supported by the broader research team, including department staff and the second author, an Anishinaabe scholar and Biigtigong community member. The research was approved by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board at the researchers' home institution, as well as by the Chief and Band Manager in Biigtigong.

### 6.2.2. Data collection and analysis

This research was conducted via in-depth, conversational interviews with current and former department staff (n=7). To document the department's development and examine staff members' perceptions of its role in the community in relation to mino bimaadiziwin, an open-ended, flexible interview guide was developed. The first author completed interviews between August 2019 and October 2020. Four interviews took place face-to-face in Biigtigong and three took place either online, through the Zoom platform, or by phone due to COVID-19 restrictions. All interviews were audio recorded with permission. The depth and breadth of interview data were complemented by the first author's participation in various departmental projects, such as an on-the-land camp, spring carnival, and history collection activities. Their involvement provided opportunities to build relationships with staff, the community, and the territory based on trust, personal responsibility, and reciprocity, and facilitated informal discussions about the department, its mandate, and daily work.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed narratively using NVivo software by the first author. Narrative analysis preserved the integrity of staff members' voices and the textural detail of their experiences and perceptions as Anishinaabe community members. The raw data was inductively analyzed to generate preliminary codes

that encompass diverse and interconnected forms of Anishinaabe knowledge, which were then organized and analyzed deductively in reference to the research objectives in order to develop the main themes and explore them across the data. The emerging findings were discussed and agreed upon by academic and community members of the research team to ensure local meanings were understood. Biigtigong owns all data collected through this research and this article was approved by the department prior to publication.

### 6.3. Findings

The results are presented across three primary findings as they relate to the purpose and meaning of the Department of Sustainable Development for community wellness: 1) to revitalize Anishinaabe land values; 2) to conduct the everyday work of environmental repossession; and 3) to sustain repossession long-term. Pseudonyms are used to protect staff identities and direct quotes have been anonymized.

#### 6.3.1. Revitalizing Anishinaabe land values

The department was established by the Chief and Council of Biigtigong in 2008 with a single staff member and a vision to build community capacity to manage its ancestral land base. The impetus for the creation of the department was described by all participants in relation to Biigtigong's ongoing land claim process, and monitoring occupancy of the community's lands. Through land claim proceedings, band leadership realized its record of companies operating across its territory was incomplete; this created an urgent need to develop a mechanism for monitoring all ongoing and proposed operations within the territory. As described by one staff member:

> No one was working specifically on all of the things that were involved, like working with the mining companies and the forestry companies and the governments and other First Nations. All these people had interests in our territory...We'd be sitting with our lawyers or the consultants...and they'd be saying, 'Oh, you guys really need to have somebody in the community that's working specifically on the lands file because there's so much activity out there in the territory.' (Staff 6)

Land management was defined as more than monitoring land-based activities and resource development, to include asserting the community's right to determine where, when, and how land use can take place in the territory. A significant piece of this related to engagement with industry and "demanding a seat at the table, and no, you're not gonna be operating in our territory without talking to us'" (Staff 6). Industry consultation is not sufficient; the department must approve developments and benefit fairly from them:

> To be able to sit at those tables across from those big millionaire companies and be able to set their foot down and say 'No,' or 'Yes, with these conditions,' or 'We want to be partners. We don't want to be another consultation checkmark on your book. We want to be partners.' (Staff 7)

Another crucial part of becoming the voice for Biigtigong on land management has been developing processes to evaluate projects and "make sure that it's done in the right way" (Staff 3). In practice, this has required both the creation of new processes to guide decision-making and a change in staff mindset:

> It's changing that mentality as well. Instead of taking – I hate to say – like a colonized perspective on how things are done, and decolonizing it and saying 'No, this is our own process.' (Staff 7)

Developing these new processes has meant returning to the Anishinaabe values, teachings, and responsibilities of the community:

> Now when we approach projects, we look at it from a First Nations' perspective, a First Nations' lens, versus processes already put into place. (Staff 7)

In practice, centering Anishinaabe land values requires a perspective that balances the current needs of the community with the needs of future generations. This philosophy seeks to assert a balance between "economic development and... keeping land safe" (Staff 6), as both are central to the holistic and long-term wellness of the community. Planning for seven generations ahead is essential to ensuring a strong Anishinaabe community:

> The land and community is who we are. It makes us because we give back to the land. We respect the land. All that ties in with us as Anishinaabe people, right? And you're protecting the land not only for now. That's one of the things the Elders will tell you over and over. It's not now that matters. It's always seven generations ahead. (Staff 1)

By revitalizing Anishinaabe land management across the territory, the department is working toward a vision of holistic wellness in which the Land supports economic independence, the renewal of traditional governance, and preservation of Anishinaabe identity:

> We want to see a future where we're self-sustaining. We want to see a future where we're self-governed. We want to see a future where we have sovereignty, I guess in the sense where we control what we need to control in our own areas and that's taking back from where the community started. (Staff 7)

### 6.3.2. Conducting the everyday work of environmental repossession

In Biigtigong, land management occurs across five focus areas: environment, culture and heritage, governance, economic development, and lands and resources. While each area responds to a unique set of responsibilities, the daily work of the department overlaps to support processes of environmental repossession and Anishinaabe wellness.

**Figure 5: Environmental repossession and the everyday work of the department**

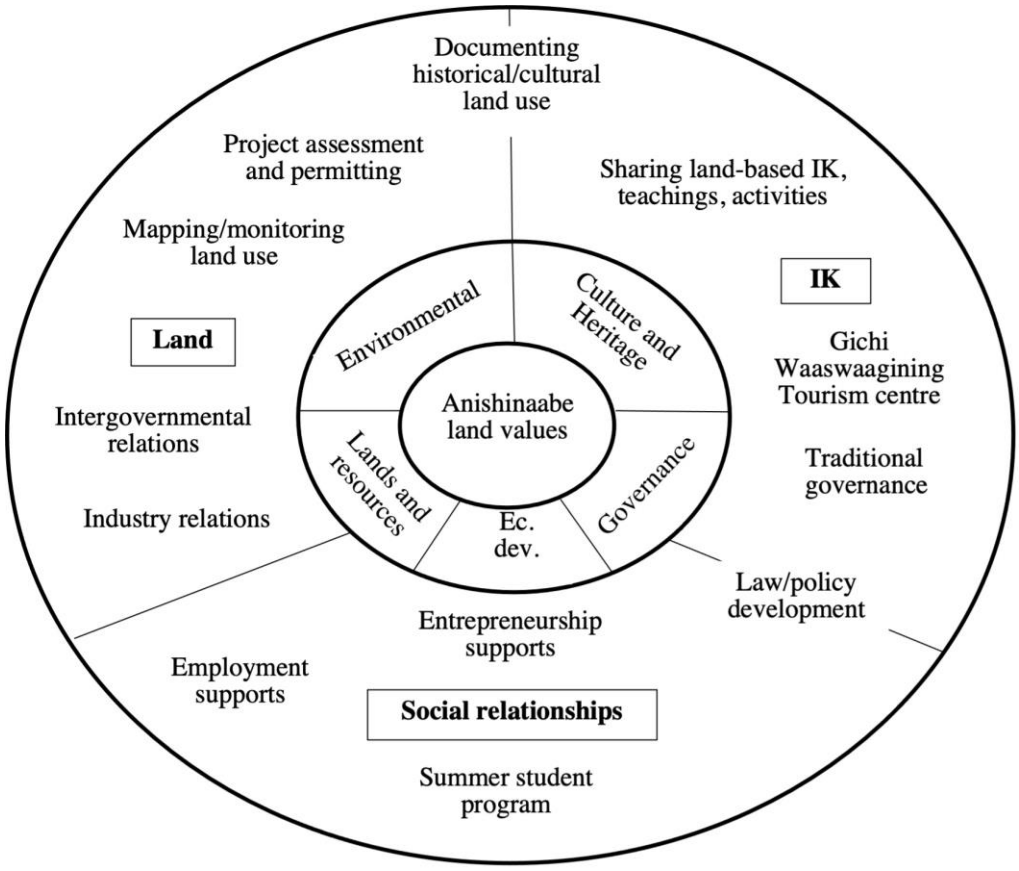



Figure 5 represents staff descriptions of their roles and responsibilities, and demonstrates how the everyday work of the department is broadly aimed at physically reclaiming territory, restoring land-based Anishinaabe knowledge, and strengthening community relationships to Land. Lands and Resources and Environment staff are focused on reclaiming access to and control over Biigtigong's territory through negotiation with government, industry, and neighbouring First Nations, and through assessment and monitoring of commercial land use. Culture and Heritage staff are responsible for documenting historical and contemporary land use and sharing land-based cultural teachings and practices. This knowledge is used to guide land reclamation and preservation efforts, and to restore community knowledge about the territory in ways that encourage land use and foster Anishinaabe identity. The Governance role draws on this knowledge base to renew Biigtigong's traditional governance protocols and develop new community laws and policies. Anishinaabe knowledge is central to renewing community members'

environmental, social, cultural, and political responsibilities for strong community relationships, social support, and sense of belonging. Finally, Economic Development shares employment and entrepreneurship programming and training to support community inclusion in land-based economic opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

By supporting land use, strengthening social relationships, and revitalizing local Indigenous knowledge, the everyday work of the department comes together to foster physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. For instance, moose camp is a department-wide project that unites all staff roles in land reclamation and reconnection for a week-long, on-the-land camp developed around Biigtigong's fall moose hunt. Moose camp serves many functions for wellness, including encouraging land use across the territory for physical activity, supporting hunting skills for food security, sharing intergenerational Anishinaabe knowledge, documenting history, and building community relationships for belonging. These activities engage community members in the work of the department and teach personal responsibilities to the community and the Land:

> You have rights as a community member, but you also have responsibilities, and these are what they are. It comes back to teaching them what it is that they need to do and protect. And the same values that we have in the department, they have personal responsibilities as community members to do the same thing too. It's our responsibility as a department to provide those opportunities for education, awareness, involvement, and engagement. (Staff 7)

Engaging community members is a critical aspect of the department's everyday work that extends beyond land use consultation, project planning and direct participation in programs and activities. Engagement is a complex and ongoing process that involves building relationships of trust such that community members feel their needs are reflected by the department, and are empowered to be self-determining over their own Land and wellness:

> We find that if our people are connected more strongly to the land base, then we have great decision makers when it comes to things like mining projects and water protection and all of that because now, they're out there. They're seeing that. And

> then that's providing us with a different view because now we have people who will fight for that as well. (Staff 7)

### 6.3.3. Sustaining repossession long-term

Since the department's creation in 2008, it has grown quickly in staff, capacity, projects, and responsibilities. But this growth has not occurred without challenges. Revitalizing Anishinaabe land values and undertaking environmental repossession is long-term work that involves significant funding, infrastructure, flexibility, and community support. In Biigtigong, sustaining environmental repossession to restore Anishinaabe wellness has been supported by three critical factors: 1) Consistent leadership; 2) Strengthening financial independence; and 3) Dedicated staff to mitigate capacity constraints.

#### 6.3.3.1. Band leadership

Strong band leadership is a critical factor in the department's growth and capacity. Staff credited Biigtigong's leadership with creating a clear vision while respecting the independence and technical expertise of staff. One staff explained how the behaviour of Biigtigong's leadership creates a model of responsibility for their own work:

> We have great leadership who constantly tell us, "You're doing a good job. Keep up the good work." We're not micromanaged. And that's one of the reasons we're so successful is because of the overall structure too, and people liking their jobs. (Staff 3)

Biigtigong's governance structure supports the independence of technical staff by enforcing the separation of band administration and politics. This structure was described to facilitate more collaborative relationships between leadership and staff, and consistency across election cycles:

> It's always had such a collective approach to everything, where like our chief and council don't walk around acting like they're the bosses of everybody. They're

> walking around asking if they could help you because we have that separation from political and administration. So, we never have to worry. (Staff 2)

This structural distinction appears to be unique in the region and interviewees directly linked it to the department's ability to be innovative and flexible:

> I think really sets us apart as a community as well – and this is just based on conversations I've had with other people from other First Nations and other technical people – is that there's a separation of administration and politics. (Staff 7)

Finally, staff reflected on the role of stable band leadership in the department's development, with key council positions remaining fairly stable over the last decade:

> I think the stability in government – in our own government – had a lot to do with it and there was not a lot of change that way. I see that a lot in other communities where every two years it's like a new chief and council. How can you get anything done when you have to shift gears every two years and change your direction and your vision? (Staff 6)

#### 6.3.3.2. Sustainable funding

Access to sustainable funding is a primary challenge for the department. While the mandate and priorities of the department are expanding, funding limitations prevent the hiring of additional employees and restrict the development of new programs. The department relies on multiple sources for funding, including various government agencies, industry partners, and own-source band revenue. As such, the department is continuously searching and applying for funding, adding time and stress to busy workloads. As one staff member explained:

> So, we kind of just bring it all together – all the different funding agencies and stuff like that – and just we make it work, but it is a huge struggle. (Staff 7)

Another staff member described how the manager needs be a "Wonder Woman" just to financially sustain the department:

> Her job is like crazy busy. So, she's looking for funding and how it could benefit us and benefit not just us as a team, the building, the department. It's like, 'Oh, we can tap into this funding, and we can do this kind of project.' So, she is Wonder Woman of the department, seriously, because she can just find money. (Staff 1)

Funding access is a concern for project development and for the broader logistical administration of the department. Projects are expensive, particularly on-the-land activities, as are the costs of ongoing community engagement and industry consultation, which can include travel, consultant fees, and community education.

To address these funding constraints, the department, and Biigtigong in general, are working to decrease financial dependence on external sources and increase internal revenue. Biigtigong is building financial capacity through band-owned businesses and investments in hydroelectricity and other energy developments. For instance, the department is developing a fee-for-service model to charge companies for the time and expertise put toward permitting and consultation:

> We also do our fee-for-service as well. So, you have a lot of these companies that are coming in that need permitting and consultation and stuff like that, our time is also valuable as well and we realize that. So, a lot of the times, we will charge back for any expertise that they get from us and our time as well. (Staff 7)

Increasing own-source revenue facilitates more projects and department growth, while building towards a long-term goal of a self-sustaining and self-governing community:

> That's the goal: to be self-sustaining. Eventually we'll get to the point where we don't need government funding. We'll have our own departments that are run solely on the community's ability. (Staff 7)

#### 6.3.3.3. Capacity and stress

Financial constraints create capacity and workload challenges. Despite the impressive outcomes achieved by only five full-time positions, all staff discussed the long hours required to complete tasks and maintain timelines:

> Look, we got five in our department right now. We're literally doing the work of 15 people. That's a lot of work that's going on and a lot of projects and a lot of things (Staff 7).

Similarly, another staff described the department as "the first place where I had to sleep over on a work job" (Staff 1). In response to this culture of overworking, staff described feelings of stress, frustration, and being overwhelmed. One staff member summarized the stress and chaos of managing a full calendar of consultation meetings and travel alongside the department's projects:

> All these chiefs are like, 'Wow, how did you guys start this department?' It looked really good. But on the inside...I was just like, 'Oh, my God, it's just so chaotic. It's chaos.' If you just took a look at, like my calendar and my binder and my notes it's like, yeah, it was totally overwhelming. (Staff 6)

Workload issues are exacerbated by the emotional nature of the department's work in which staff members are personally connected to their projects and care deeply about the outcomes for the community. As one staff explained:

> You have such an emotional connection to your community. I remember somebody saying one time like, 'Oh, you can't be emotionally attached to it' and I was like 'How could I not be emotionally attached to it? It's my community. It's my ancestors.' (Staff 2)

It can be difficult to leave the stress and emotions of work in the office at the end of the day. The department's work is also emotional for the broader community, as it relates to managing Biigtigong's territory. Department staff often deal with community tension,

conflict, and critique related to land-use planning and decisions, which can add to the emotional toll of the work. A staff member described frustration at seeing department criticism on social media:

> It gets frustrating sometimes...they'll pick at something that's a negative like, 'Well, why did this happen,' or 'Why did that happen?' And it's just like a lot of the time they won't even come to us to let us know that that's happening and it's a post that we see on Facebook. (Staff 2)

While stress and overworking have led to some staff burnout, all current staff described how love for the community sustains their passion and motivation for the department's work: "I don't think that anybody in our department would be as successful in doing our jobs as we are if we didn't have that drive and that love for our community" (Staff 2). Most staff members described their work in the department as "more than a job" (Staff 7); it is a long-term project of building a better, stronger, and healthier Biigtigong for future generations. Despite financial and capacity challenges, this passion for the community's future unifies staff members and inspires their determination and creativity.

### 6.4. Discussion: Structures of environmental repossession

Colonial laws and policies target Indigenous people's control over their territories as a means to structurally disempower communities and reinforce dependency (Reading, 2015). In Biigtigong, the enforcement of the reserve system and other processes of dispossession continue to dislocate community members from their ancestral territory. Over generations, this disconnection from the source of Biigtigong's kinship, economic, political, and knowledge systems has led to harmful consequences for livelihoods, identity, and wellness. Biigtigong's Chief and Band Council created the Department of Sustainable Development to reclaim the community's entire ancestral territory. Biigtigong's vision of land reclamation extends beyond capitalist property rights or resource ownership to centre the renewal of Anishinaabe values and relationships to Land. Land reclamation and management are understood as a responsibility to protect the Land for the collective betterment and wellness of all living things, including future generations.

To carry out this vision, the department has evolved into five focus areas that apply diverse processes of environmental repossession: environment, culture and heritage, governance, economic development, and lands and resources. This everyday work of repossession reflects dimensions of reconnection to Land, Indigenous knowledge, and people (Tobias & Richmond, 2016; Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014); staff roles emphasize the physical reclamation of territory, restoration of history and Anishinaabe knowledge to this land, and strengthening of community relationships for belonging and identity. Yet, the collective work of the department extends beyond any singular process of repossession; it is a flexible and evolving organization that simultaneously supports multiple repossession processes in response to Biigtigong's complex and ever-changing needs. Framed by Indigenous health geographies and critical health approaches, these results suggest that Biigtigong has developed the department as a land-based structure to revitalize Anishinaabe ways of living and restore wellness.

The study results raise conceptual questions around the scope and scale at which environmental repossession may operate. While previous empirical research has emphasized the personal (Hatala et al., 2019) or local meanings of individual repossession strategies (Nightingale & Richmond, 2021; Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019), these results suggest that processes of repossession also aim to address oppressive macro structures (i.e. federal law and policy, national and international economies) that continue to impede Indigenous ways of living. For example, the Department of Sustainable Development was created to address the ongoing structural inequalities experienced by Biigtigong. The department employs various social, economic, political, and cultural processes to reclaim Land, with the understanding that these processes are mutually reinforcing, and that land reclamation will simultaneously facilitate the revitalization of Anishinaabe governance, economic relations, and cultural and social identities. These processes of repossession occur across scales, from the individuals directly participating to the structural barriers more broadly targeted.

Taken together, the everyday work of the department is building the foundation for community self-determination over Land, life, and wellness. By reclaiming its territory as

a source of economic development, law, and policy, the department is strengthening Biigtigong's capacity to be both self-sustaining and self-governed; it is decolonizing local economic and political structures long managed by the state. Similarly, by renewing land-based history, knowledge, and practices, the department is supporting the resurgence of Anishinaabe culture and identity in Biigtigong. This understanding of self-determination aligns with Corntassel's concept of sustainable self-determination (Corntassel, 2012; Corntassel & Bryce, 2012) as a community-based process of reclaiming homelands, restoring relationships to Land, and revitalizing culture. This practice is place-based and continues to evolve in response to Biigtigong's history, priorities, and experiences of colonization as a reserve-based First Nation. While self-determination may be a common goal across many Indigenous communities, further research is required to explore what it means and how it is enacted across diverse contexts to restore wellness (Daigle, 2019). Biigtigong's application of self-determination emphasizes economic self-reliance, however little research has explored the role of economic strategies in repossession processes or sustainable Indigenous self-determination. The Yellowhead Institute's recent policy papers (2021, 2019) make a clear argument for integrating Indigenous understandings of economic justice, economic livelihoods, and sustainable economies into conversations around self-determination, resurgence, and jurisdiction over lands.

Although the department is seeking to restore Biigtigong's relationship with its territory, it is still operating within the colonial band system. This brings important challenges as the band system continues to be used by the state to destabilize political leadership and change in First Nations communities through significant underfunding, high reporting burdens, and short band council election cycles (Auditor General of Canada, 2011; Palmater, 2011; Abele, 2007). The results of this study demonstrate that these challenges can be important barriers to sustaining environmental repossession for long-term change, as repossession efforts are often expensive and time-consuming to organize, requiring staff logistical help and consistent leadership support. This research suggests that stable band leadership and the separation of political and administrative structures, as well as a broader commitment to building financial independence are critical factors for Indigenous communities seeking to enact and sustain repossession (Hunt et al., 2008;

Jorgensen, 2007; Cornell, 2006). This work requires comprehensive community engagement and agreement that highlights the community-engaged nature of repossession and Indigenous self-determination. Developing a land-based organizational structure is facilitated by ongoing community consultation and participation in its everyday work. The importance of creating a collective of dedicated and experienced staff to support each other through capacity limitations and stress cannot be overstated. Ultimately, this research argues that when structures of repossession are founded from Indigenous knowledge systems and values, the possibilities for dismantling colonial structures and restoring self-determination and community wellness are promising.

### 6.5. Conclusion

Indigenous experiences of wellness are constrained by colonial structures that reinforce inequality and disempowerment. This paper examined how Biigtigong Nishnaabeg addresses persistent structural inequalities by building local structures to practice and sustain environmental repossession. Our results suggest that communities are developing new structures of repossession to foster self-determination over their lands, identities, and wellness by revitalizing their local Indigenous knowledge systems and renewing their values, responsibilities, and relationships. These results demonstrate the place-based role of these structures to implement land values, conduct the everyday work of repossession, and address the challenges of sustaining repossession long-term. This paper shifts attention beyond individual processes of repossession and raises conceptual considerations about the role and potential of Indigenous organizations to address structural barriers to wellness in diverse environments. How these place-based structures are evolving to restore local Indigenous values and principles and foster self-determination over wellness is an important question for future research.

Settler colonialism targets Indigenous lands and knowledge systems as a means to destabilize kinship, economic, and political structures, and oppress communities. This structural disempowerment is sustained through various legal, economic, and political forms, such as the chronic underfunding of education on reserves and ongoing power of the Indian Act. Fostering Indigenous self-determination over Land and identity is critical

to addressing the structural inequalities that constrain individual and community wellness. While self-determination may be enacted differently across diverse geographies, cultures, and experiences of colonization, it prioritizes and strengthens Indigenous knowledge systems, values, and relationships. Indigenous peoples and communities are already taking the lead to break down colonial structures and rebuild their wellness. They are not waiting for colonial governments to act; they are forging their own alliances, building their own economies, and envisioning a new world for Indigenous life.

# Chapter 7

## 7. Thesis summary and conclusions

### 7.1. Introduction

Driven by the experiences, needs, and priorities of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, this thesis aimed to enhance understanding around the place-based processes pursued by Indigenous communities to reclaim and reconnect to their territories. Amid a global movement of Indigenous peoples seeking to restore land-based ways of living and increasing calls for 'Land Back' (Yellowhead Institute, 2019), this thesis was motivated by a need to consider what land reclamation looks like, how it is practiced, and what it means across diverse Indigenous contexts. Research has identified the importance of access to and relationships with land for Indigenous identities (Middleton et al., 2020; Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018), wellness (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Friendship & Furgal, 2012) and decolonization (Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014; Corntassel, 2012). Environmental connections form the basis of Indigenous knowledge systems that facilitate living in a good and self-determining way (Battiste & Youngblood, 2000), and the disruption of these connections by colonization and dispossession has resulted in devastating consequences for Indigenous communities (Lewis et al., 2021; Richmond & Ross, 2009). By taking a case study approach in collaboration with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, this thesis contributed a geographical perspective to understanding how individual strategies of land reclamation are enacted by Indigenous communities, and what ties these various processes together at the community-level. Specifically, this thesis applied the recent concept of environmental repossession to examine the spatial and local strategies being implemented by Biigtigong to reoccupy, reconnect with, and reassert its rights to its ancestral territory.

This final chapter reviews the key findings of this dissertation and identifies the empirical contributions in relation to the three research objectives:

1. To describe the processes of environmental repossession initiated in Biigtigong to reclaim land;

2. To explore the local meanings of distinct repossession processes at the individual and community levels; and,
3. To understand how the community is conceptualizing and developing a place-based structure of environmental repossession.

Second, the chapter outlines the theoretical contributions of this thesis around the concepts of environmental repossession and decolonization, and the methodological contributions around the role of allied scholars in Indigenous research in geography. Finally, the chapter discusses the primary policy implications of this research, both locally in Biigtigong and more broadly, before concluding with a discussion of the limitations of this study and important directions for future research.

## 7.2. Empirical contributions

The following section reviews the primary empirical contributions of the manuscripts presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and discusses how each one addresses one of the research objectives outlined above.

### 7.2.1. Research objective 1

The first research objective of this thesis was to describe the processes of environmental repossession ongoing in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg to reclaim the community's ancestral territory. Environmental repossession is a relatively new concept in the geographies of Indigenous health and wellness, and few empirical studies have documented what these processes look like in applied community contexts (Hatala et al., 2019; Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019). The manuscript presented in Chapter 4, entitled *Reclaiming Mountain Lake: Applying environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory, Canada*, addresses this objective by examining the development and implementation of one individual strategy of repossession in Biigtigong, the construction of cabins and hosting of a week-long camp at Mountain Lake. Through thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 Elders, youth, and community staff participating in the Mountain Lake camp, this manuscript focused on understanding the process of how land reclamation is operationalized in place.

The existing literature around environmental repossession has often focused on identifying local processes or strategies in relation to Indigenous understandings of land and wellness (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019; Hatala et al., 2019; Tobias & Richmond, 2016). This paper contributes depth to the concept of environmental repossession by providing empirical evidence around the spatial *process* of reclaiming land in Biigtigong, shifting beyond *what* repossession may look like to explore *how* it is enacted and by whom in community contexts. The findings from the Mountain Lake camp suggest that this particular strategy of repossession was applied through a multi-step process involving: 1) the physical reoccupation of territory; 2) the reintroduction of community members to this land; and 3) the remaking of community relationships to land in this place. By exploring the perceptions of participating Elders, youth, and band staff members, this paper further provides evidence around the different roles involved in practicing community-led environmental repossession. While staff members emphasized the importance of asserting jurisdiction over and encouraging land use at Mountain Lake, Elders contributed the community history, stories, and Nishnaabeg knowledge to reconnect Biigtigong members to their ancestors in this place. Youth and younger staff, however, described their primary role as building new relationships with Mountain Lake for future generations. In particular, this study is the first to include the voices and roles of Indigenous community staff in applying environmental repossession efforts.

Further, this paper makes a significant empirical contribution around the challenges and complexities of implementing environmental repossession processes in Indigenous communities. While previous case studies have identified the empowering and strength-based aspects of environmental repossession (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019; Hatala et al., 2019), this manuscript presents evidence around the potentially uncomfortable and difficult tensions of reclaiming land through direct action. The case of Mountain Lake suggests that pursuing land reclamation and reconnection can require community members to directly confront the ongoing impacts of colonization and dispossession, including external forces and internalized feelings of dislocation. The findings of this study demonstrate a need for future research to consider how Indigenous communities navigate these local challenges, and the potential role of community staff in addressing the day-to-

day realities of developing, implementing, and sustaining environmental repossession efforts.

### 7.2.2. Research objective 2

The second research objective of this thesis was to explore local meanings of distinct environmental repossession processes at the individual and community levels. The manuscript presented in Chapter 5, entitled *Reclaiming land, identity, and mental wellness in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Territory*, responds to this objective by examining community members' experiences of the reclamation of Mountain Lake, and the collective meanings that this repossession effort took on among the Elders, youth, and band staff members involved.

This paper makes a key empirical contribution around the potential impacts of land-based strategies of environmental repossession for the determinants of Indigenous wellness. Building on the work of both Big-Canoe and Richmond (2014) and Mikraszewicz and Richmond (2019), this manuscript provides new insights around how land reclamation is understood in Biigtigong as a process that extends beyond physical access to or reoccupation of land. The findings demonstrate that for the individual community members at Mountain Lake, participation in the week-long camp supported the strengthening of intergenerational relationships and the sharing of Nishnaabeg knowledge in ways that fostered their sense of belonging and pride. As community members had the time and space to reconnect with Biigtigong's territory and knowledge system, and each other, they understood the Mountain Lake camp as a process of being together as Nishnaabeg and a renewal of their shared identity. This paper provides preliminary evidence that active participation in land reclamation efforts may support community mental wellness through enhanced social connection, support, cohesion, and identity.

Additionally, the findings contribute a place-based understanding to the link between land reclamation, community empowerment, and decolonization in Indigenous communities. While previous research has explored individual acts and perceptions of repossession (Hatala et al., 2019), this paper illustrates how processes of environmental

repossession may take on community meaning as a collective act of resistance and empowerment. In the relational and political context of the Mountain Lake land camp, the uptake of cultural skills, responsibilities, and roles were framed as everyday actions of decolonization (Daigle, 2016; Corntassel, 2012), through which Biigtigong is asserting the strength and continuity of Nishnaabeg nationhood. The paper suggests an opportunity for future research to consider how environmental repossession and healing may be interconnected in applied community contexts as mechanisms of decolonization.

### 7.2.3. Research objective 3

The final research objective of this thesis was to understand how Biigtigong is conceptualizing and developing a local structure to support and sustain environmental repossession in the community. This objective is the focus of Chapter 6, entitled *Building structures of environmental repossession to reclaim land, self-determination, and Indigenous wellness,* which presents a case study of Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development. Drawing on narrative analysis of interviews with current and former department staff members, this manuscript documents the development and ongoing role of the department in the community, and explores the meanings and challenges of its everyday work. In so doing, this manuscript considers the relationship between environmental repossession and Indigenous self-determination over land, identity, and wellness.

This study makes several new contributions to the empirical literature on environmental repossession, and builds in important ways on the findings of the two manuscripts presented in Chapters 4 and 5. First, this paper provides empirical evidence around the key barriers and enabling factors to applying environmental repossession long-term in Biigtigong. The previous two manuscripts suggest that while Biigtigong is developing and implementing various place-based strategies of land reclamation, there are significant challenges to this work. The findings of this manuscript reveal that sustaining multiple land-based processes of repossession in Biigtigong requires stable band leadership, sustainable funding sources, and mitigating capacity and workload stresses among staff members. The experiences of department staff members suggest that these

critical factors are best addressed at the community level through: 1) the separation of political and administrative governance; 2) the strengthening of financial independence and band-owned revenue; and, 3) the hiring of and ongoing investment in staff that are experienced and passionate community members.

Second, the findings confirm the primary role of the Department of Sustainable Development in undertaking the everyday work of applying environmental repossession in Biigtigong. Chapters 4 and 5 point to the involvement of department staff in individual repossession efforts, and this manuscript provides evidence to indicate an alignment between department positions and responsibilities and the underlying components of land reclamation. Specifically, the results demonstrate that the five focus areas of the department broadly aim to physically reclaim territory, restore land-based Nishnaabeg knowledge, and revitalize community relationships to land and each other. This everyday work of repossession is highly community-engaged in Biigtigong, and emphasizes values of trust, consensus, and community empowerment.

Critically, this manuscript identifies the potential for place-based structures to facilitate environmental repossession across multiple scales to support broader community goals of self-determination. The findings reveal that the department's creation and ongoing development in Biigtigong is motivated by more than reclaiming land, it is evolving in response to ongoing colonial structures of oppression, and building the foundation for local self-determination over land, life, and wellness. In particular, the department is seeking to decolonize economic, political, social, and cultural relations to land in Biigtigong by returning to its Nishnaabeg values, teachings, and responsibilities as the vision for community development. The results contribute to discussions around the importance of starting from local Indigenous knowledge systems and core principles to guide land-based economic, community or energy development, governance processes, and wellness across diverse Indigenous contexts (Daigle 2019; Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Coulthard, 2014; Corntassel, 2012; Jorgenson, 2007). Further, they suggest a promising organizational model for other Indigenous communities pursuing place-based goals of self-determination.

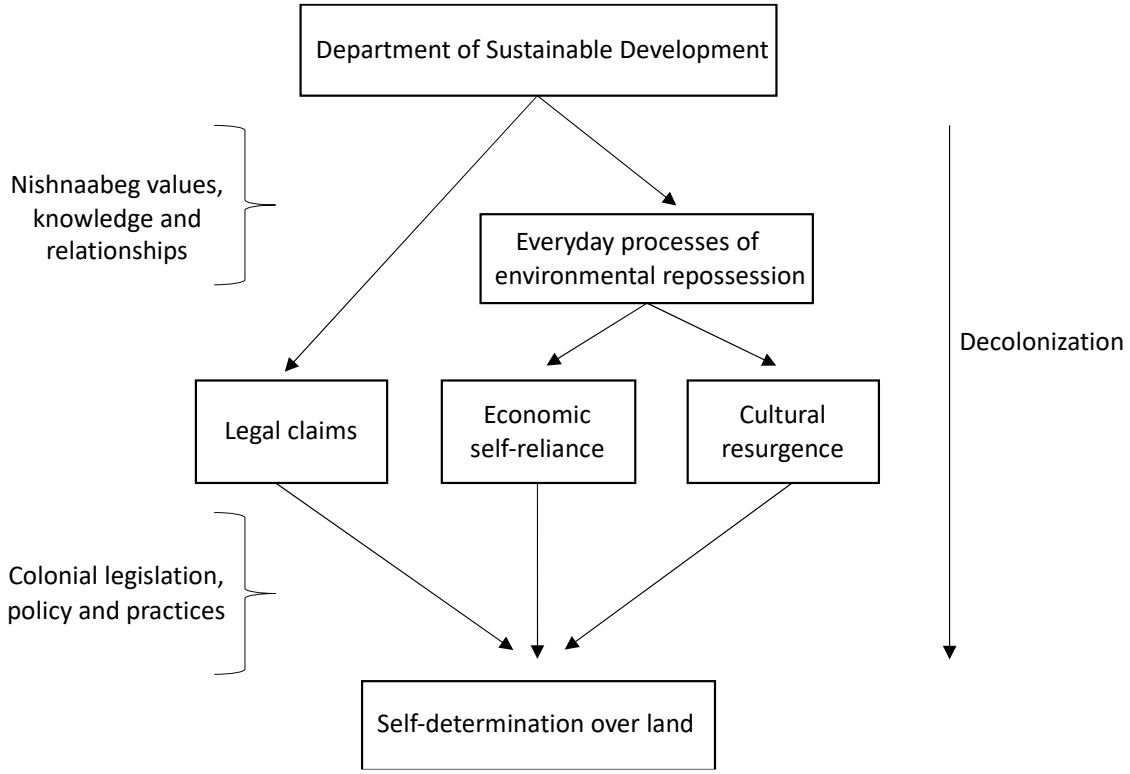
### 7.3. Theoretical contributions

This thesis responds to increasing calls within the discipline of geography for attention to the concept of decolonization and how it is applied by Indigenous communities (Daigle & Ramirez, 2019; de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). While decolonization has been widely theorized across the fields of law (Borrows, 2016), political science (Coulthard, 2014; Corntassel, 2012), and critical Indigenous studies (Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012), few empirical studies have documented how decolonization is understood and practiced in particular environmental contexts. This thesis posits that geography, with its emphasis on spatial processes, environmental relations, and meanings of place, has an important contribution to make to discussions around Indigenous decolonization. Drawing on critical geographical perspectives, this research explored what decolonization may look like *in place* at the local level, and *in practice* through everyday actions.

Theoretical engagements with decolonization emphasize the importance of land, and Indigenous struggles to reclaim land-based responsibilities and ways of living (Coulthard, 2014; Corntassel, 2012). As colonization operates through dispossession to remove Indigenous peoples from their lands, force assimilation, and destroy identities (Harris, 2002), decolonization is proposed as a parallel process of restoring rights to, relationships with, and self-determination over land (Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This thesis expands on understandings of decolonization by employing the concept of environmental repossession to explore processes and meanings of land reclamation in the case of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. As environmental repossession describes the place-based strategies implemented to reconnect with land (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014), it provides a means to untangle these individual processes and to examine why and how they are enacted by particular Indigenous communities. This thesis interrogates the interconnections between decolonization and environmental repossession to examine how distinct, everyday examples of land reclamation come together at the community level to support local goals of decolonization and self-determination. In so doing, this research indicates that environmental repossession may be practiced by

Indigenous communities as a tool for decolonization. The conceptual framework representing this relationship in Biigtigong is depicted in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Conceptual framework illustrating the interconnections between environmental repossession and decolonization**




This case study in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg suggests that multiple land-based strategies of environmental repossession are enacted simultaneously in response to community-level needs. Each individual strategy has a specific role in the context of Biigtigong's history, culture, and Nishnaabeg knowledge system, and may be legal, political, social, cultural, or economic in nature. For instance, Biigtigong's ongoing comprehensive land claim negotiations aim to confirm the community's legal rights to its ancestral territory, while fall moose camp emphasizes the revitalization of Nishnaabeg hunting skills, and the Mountain Lake cabins seek to reoccupy a particular space from which Biigtigong has long been disconnected. Although these processes of repossession have their own objectives and meanings, together they are building towards a community

vision of self-determination over Biigtigong's entire ancestral territory. This vision is about more than reoccupation or the assertion of jurisdiction but requires the decolonization of Biigtigong's relationship with its territory to renew Nishnaabeg values and governance (Daigle, 2016). Through diverse repossession processes, Biigtigong is decolonizing its economic, political, and social relations with its lands, and re-making its territory as Nishnaabeg land. Similar to the recent work of Hatala et al., (2019) on environmental repossession in urban contexts, this thesis reconceptualizes environmental repossession as a means of Indigenous land-making or re-making through decolonization.

In Biigtigong, environmental repossession and decolonization are further connected through the ongoing evolution of the Department of Sustainable Development. The community's leadership has developed the department as an organizational structure to support environmental repossession both across multiple scales, and through the short- and long-terms. At the individual level, the processes of repossession implemented in Biigtigong aim to reconnect personal relationships to the land. At the community-level, these processes seek to restore Biigtigong's history, Nishnaabeg knowledge, and cultural practices to its lands, and to strengthen social relationships and identity. But these processes also operate at the macro scale through the department, as it interacts with and seeks to break down the colonial structures of oppression that continue to limit Biigtigong's self-determination. By examining the department as a structure of repossession, this thesis proposes that Biigtigong is employing environmental repossession to decolonize its relations with the state and related macro systems, including through diplomacy, legal action, and economic self-reliance. In contrast to conceptualizations of decolonization that emphasize personal and everyday practices of resurgence (Daigle, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Corntassel, 2012), this case study suggests that Biigtigong's local understanding of decolonization is multiscalar, and involves ongoing interactions with state actors and processes (Yellowhead Institute, 2019; Borrows, 2016).

### 7.4. Methodological contributions

This thesis makes several methodological contributions around the concept of environmental repossession and the role of allied of scholars in collaborative research with

Indigenous communities. First, this study raises important considerations around the application and measurement of environmental repossession in community contexts. While previous case studies have documented experiences and meanings of repossession strategies among participating groups, the literature has focused on Elders (Tobias & Richmond, 2016), youth (Hatala et al., 2019), or Elders and youth together (Mikraszewicz & Richmond, 2019) with little attention to the individuals or organizations responsible for planning and implementing these processes. This research demonstrates how including the voices and experiences of community staff members and organizers can bring new understanding to the structural needs and potential of designing, supporting, and sustaining environmental repossession in practice.

Second, this thesis expands on environmental repossession as more than a theoretical concept, but an applied methodology within the geographies of Indigenous health and wellness (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018). The intention of this collaborative study with Biigtigong was not only to document and explore the application of environmental repossession, but to actively contribute to these processes. In line with the goals of community-based participatory research and decolonizing research approaches (Tobias et al., 2013; Castleden et al., 2012; Koster et al., 2012; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), this project demonstrates the potential for research methodologies to directly support land reclamation and reconnection in Indigenous communities. The research process was led by Biigtigong, with band staff and leadership determining the objectives, cases, methods of data collection, and outputs to address their own needs and priorities. For instance, Mountain Lake was chosen as the individual strategy to examine in-depth due to identified gaps in community history and knowledge around this place, and a desire to increase community land use at this site. Through the week-long camp at Mountain Lake, this study contributed to both the collection of local stories, memories, and experiences from knowledge holders, and the direct reconnection of youth and future generations to this land.

Similarly, reciprocity through integrated knowledge translation (Tobias & Richmond, 2016) was crucial to providing the Department of Sustainable Development with ongoing learning around the successes and challenges of individual repossession

strategies, as well as dissemination outputs to support broader community engagement in these activities. For example, the 2021 calendar produced with photographs and stories from the Mountain Lake camp was intended to facilitate the dissemination of research findings, increase local awareness of the site, and strengthen community pride. Equally important was the contribution of funds through this study and my own time to support Biigtigong's ongoing work of environmental repossession. Beyond the research activities, resources were shared with the department to assist with various community events, investments, and projects, such as the production of a new highway sign to publicly assert Biigtigong's own name and jurisdiction over its territory.

More broadly, this thesis speaks to the potential for allied scholars in geography to support Indigenous communities' goals of environmental repossession and decolonization through research (Graeme & Mandawe, 2017). As a settler doctoral student, undertaking community-led Indigenous research around land reclamation involved continuous reflection, learning, and openness around my positionality and role in this project. Prior to beginning this study, I had no existing relationship with Biigtigong, and meaningful collaboration required addressing significant geographical, cultural, and social distances between myself and the community. In response, my methodological approach drew heavily on the six R principles of Indigenous research, including respect, relationship, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and refusal (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) to develop and implement a study that would both facilitate Biigtigong's control over the research, and reflect its needs, values, and ways of knowing.

Fostering relationships of trust and honesty between settler researchers and Indigenous communities is a long-term involvement that extends beyond any particular research phase and often takes years of community involvement and commitment (Castleden et al., 2012). As a doctoral student on a fixed timeline, my research was nested within a larger, ongoing project that allowed me to draw on existing relationships between Biigtigong and my supervisor and research lab. My training in Indigenous health geographies and Indigenous research was critically supported by the broader research team of scholars and community partners who generously shared their mentorship, learning, and

relationships with me. My own personal relationships with Biigtigong, the Department of Sustainable Development, and community members were facilitated by participation in community life and social activities outside of formal project events. Most importantly, during my visits to Biigtigong I chose to stay with community members and lived with the community researcher for three weeks at the start of this study. This informal and unscheduled shared time with community members was essential to developing friendships, integrating into community social networks and routines, and receiving honest and ongoing feedback on the project's development. When COVID-19 and related lockdown measures forced study activities online, it was this in-person foundation that allowed collaborative work with the community researcher to continue. Throughout the pandemic, my relationship with Biigtigong has been sustained virtually by regular Zoom calls, email check-ins, and Facebook messages to provide both research and personal updates.

Beyond relationship building, the principles of Indigenous research have been essential guides in the iterative development of this study, including the values of respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and refusal (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Applying these principles means respecting that Biigtigong and its members are the experts over their own lives and knowledges, and consequently prioritizing their needs over my own goals, plans, and timelines. In practice, ensuring the relevance of the research for Biigtigong has involved being flexible with the study activities, such as changing cases and participant groups as requested, and rewriting the project proposal from a focus on land-based education to land reclamation. Upholding respect for Nishnaabeg knowledge has included being a good and grateful listener, abiding protocols and giving gifts in exchange for shared stories and experiences, and following the analytical guidance of the community researcher. Similarly, facilitating space for refusal has meant understanding when I wasn't the appropriate listener, and what sacred knowledge is for the community only. Above all, this study was framed methodologically by my responsibility to support Biigtigong's ongoing environmental repossession efforts, and to use the knowledge, relationships, and time shared with me through this research in ways that would advance Biigtigong's vision of self-determination and decolonization.

While this responsibility has guided the outputs produced and knowledge disseminated throughout the research process, it has also motivated a sense of reciprocity to share my own knowledge, skills, and time with the community. Beyond the study activities, I have tried to contribute whenever I can to the department and community in gratitude for the ways in which they have welcomed me and all that they have shared with me. This reciprocity included creating a calendar, producing pop-up banners of hunting stories, designing posters for various department events, participating in community spirit week, organizing an Elders' BBQ, and volunteering at a children's dance. To give back, I have embraced humility, learnt new skills, and spent countless hours shopping, organizing, and cleaning up.

Finally, this study has taken place among increasing calls for the decolonization and indigenization of academia (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018), and the discipline of geography in particular (Howitt, 2022; Radcliffe, 2022; de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Sundberg, 2013). After centuries of exclusion from and oppression through the production of academic knowledge, Indigenous scholars, researchers, and communities are demanding a role in education, policymaking, and setting research agendas in post-secondary institutions (Richmond et al., 2023; Smith, 2012; Louis, 2007). My doctoral work has coincided with a period of reflection and investment at Canadian universities, as Indigenous strategic plans, hiring processes, and student supports have been widely developed and implemented (UWO, 2016). As a settler trainee, this context has provided a tremendous opportunity for learning about my role in Indigenous research and geography, and for practicing how to be a strong ally. I have been graciously invited into many Indigenous spaces on campus, and I have learnt how to be supportive in the background by staying quiet, listening, and taking direction. Through opportunities to collaborate with my Indigenous colleagues, organize Indigenous research events, and coordinate the Ontario Indigenous Mentorship Network (IMN-Ontario), I have come to understand how to be present and responsible without centering myself and my own needs. This is not easy learning and requires a deep commitment to advancing Indigenous community needs and priorities beyond research projects. But it is this learning that will

guide me in my future career as an academic scholar as I continue to collaborate with Indigenous communities, colleagues, and friends.

## 7.5. Conclusion

This thesis presents a case study of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg as a means to explore local strategies and meanings of environmental repossession, and how they intersect to support community understandings of decolonization. While there may be lessons and learnings for other Indigenous communities, the case approach and place-based nature of environmental repossession mean that the findings of this thesis are specific to Biigtigong and its environmental context. In many ways, Biigtigong is well positioned to take on the difficult work of repossession. To begin with, the community is still based within its ancestral territory. Despite experiences of physical and cultural dispossession, community members have continued to live on, travel through, and use their territory in ways that have sustained multigenerational relationships to this land. To operationalize strategies of environmental repossession, Biigtigong has been able to draw on the land-based Nishnaabeg knowledge and community history that have been preserved through these relationships. Second, Biigtigong's political context as a reserve-based First Nation with an ongoing land claims process has encouraged community leadership to prioritize land reclamation efforts. Demonstrating historical and ongoing land use and occupancy throughout the entire ancestral territory is an important part of these legal processes. Finally, Biigtigong's leadership, including Chief, Band Council, and Band Manager, have been instrumental in pursuing a local policy agenda of land reclamation, to the point of establishing and funding a specific governance structure to undertake this work. The successful strategies of repossession explored here have thus been decades in the making, and are supported by the community's consistent leadership and vision for the reclamation of its ancestral territory.

### 7.5.1. Policy implications

Despite the focused case approach of this research, the findings point to implications for policy research and practice beyond Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. The following section

discusses the implications of this dissertation for local policy in Indigenous communities, such as Biigtigong and other similarly reserve-based First Nations, as well as more broadly at the national level in Canada.

#### 7.5.1.1. Local policy implications

The research presented in this dissertation was driven by the needs and priorities of Biigtigong's leadership and Department of Sustainable Development. One of the key goals of this collaborative project was to collect data around historical and contemporary usage of the western boundary of Biigtigong's territory in order to understand community relationships to this area and how to encourage land use. The findings of this thesis demonstrate the importance of social context and intergenerational relationships for land reclamation and sustained land use in Biigtigong, particularly in places from which the community has been disconnected. The act of gathering at Mountain Lake provided a social environment through which community knowledge and history was shared, new memories created, and tensions collectively addressed in ways that connected community members to this place. This research thus suggests that strategies to reclaim land in Biigtigong should emphasize community gatherings that bring together multiple generations and community roles on the land in significant places (Tobias & Richmond, 2016). While other processes may be important in asserting jurisdiction, such as legal agreements and the construction of physical structures, reconnection to lesser used areas of the territory will be facilitated by regular community gatherings in these places. Specifically, the research suggests the establishment of an annual land camp at Mountain Lake to sustain community use of and relationships to the western boundary of Biigtigong's territory.

A second important goal for this research was to provide learnings and advice to other Indigenous communities seeking to reclaim and reconnect to their lands, particularly other First Nations experiencing similar legal, political, and geographical contexts. The findings from Biigtigong highlight the critical role of community leadership and the band governance structure in developing, funding, and implementing strategies of environmental repossession. Applying environmental repossession is difficult and expensive work that requires sustained commitment of time and resources. In Biigtigong

this has been enabled by the structural separation of band administration and politics, as well as the building of financial capacity through own-source revenue. For other communities interested in pursuing environmental repossession, this research suggests establishing a long-term policy agenda for this work to ensure continuity across election cycles and leadership changes, while introducing policy to reduce political influence over technical staff. Equally important is the prioritization of financial autonomy through the development of band-owned revenue streams to reduce dependence on federal funding sources with conflicting interests (McDonald & Figueiredo, 2022; Hunt et al., 2008; Jorgensen, 2007; Cornell, 2006).

Further, this research shows that community capacity to sustain land reclamation may be enhanced by the development of land-based organizational structures to undertake this work. The Department of Sustainable Development is essential to Biigtigong's repossession efforts and can offer a model of Indigenous land governance for other communities. However, the findings indicate that establishing a similar department or staff roles may not be sufficient, the organizational structure must be embedded in and supported by the broader community. The form of organizational structure may vary, but ongoing community engagement and consultation should be integral to both mission and daily operations.

#### 7.5.1.2. Broad policy implications

Environmental repossession is being enacted directly by Indigenous communities based on their own experiences of dispossession and visions for self-determination. These actions are inherently political as they seek to break down the colonial structures that continue to constrain individual and community wellness for Indigenous peoples in Canada (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018). In many ways, structural barriers to Indigenous equity are sustained by contemporary federal legislation, policies, and practice, particularly in the First Nations reserve context (Reading, 2015). By situating Biigtigong's repossession efforts within the political context of ongoing settler colonialism, this thesis aimed to enhance understanding around how local processes of land reclamation intersect with macro-level policy to impact wellness. The findings implicate that there is an important role for policymakers to enable

Indigenous wellness through the provision of funding and resources for community-led research, programming, and interventions based on local needs and understandings of health (Richmond & Cook, 2016). Policymakers have a further responsibility to improve Indigenous health equity through their own unlearning, and by adopting policies to support Indigenous rights to land.

Specifically, there is a significant opportunity for a policy agenda focused on increasing Indigenous authority over ancestral territories held as crown land, in order words 'Land Back.' The decolonization of Crown-Indigenous relations may require the creation of sovereign Indigenous nations through systemic and transformative legislative change (Borrows, 2016; Abele, 2007; RCAP, 1996). However, policy can still provide an important avenue to support Indigenous land governance through the development of Indigenous land management regimes, negotiation of land co-management agreements, and resolution of outstanding land claims (Yellowhead Institute, 2019). These discussions must happen in a transparent and just way, moving beyond current approaches that use land claim agreements as a mechanism to limit or extinguish Aboriginal land title (Schmidt, 2018; Coulthard, 2014). Alongside this long-term process, there an urgent need to provide funding for sustainable economic development opportunities in Indigenous communities that build financial independence and provide alternatives to resource extraction and other environmentally destructive activities. Finally, decision-making on land use and resource projects in Indigenous territories must shift beyond the duty to consult, to frameworks that uphold both Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and Indigenous authority (Black & McBean, 2016).

### 7.5.2. Study limitations and directions for future research

This thesis contributes a place-based understanding of decolonization as a process of returning to live well as Nishnaabeg in accordance with land-based values, responsibilities, and knowledge. In Biigtigong, decolonization encompasses the resurgence of Nishnaabeg culture and identity, strengthening of economic self-sufficiency, and revitalization of traditional governance and law for a strong and self-determining community into the future. To build towards this vision, Biigtigong's Department of Sustainable Development is

implementing diverse land-based strategies of environmental repossession that reflect its historical, cultural, physical, and social environment, particularly its experience of settler colonialism as a reserve-based First Nation. While there may be shared goals or experiences of dispossession across diverse Indigenous communities, visions for self-determination and the decolonizing pathways to get there will be context-specific. What land reclamation looks like, how it is practiced, and what it means will vary across places, spaces, and scales. This means that the study findings are limited to Biigtigong and similar land-based practices in other First Nations reserve contexts.

This thesis suggests that environmental repossession holds promise as a concept to explore Indigenous practices of decolonization for self-determination. As this study focused on land reclamation processes in remote reserve contexts, there is a need for future research to consider how environmental repossession may be applied and understood in different Indigenous environments. In particular, there is a lack of research examining what strategies of repossession may look like in urban geographies (Hatala et al., 2019), and among Indigenous peoples no longer located on their ancestral territories. Indigenous populations in Canada are increasingly urbanized, both as cities expand into their lands and as inequalities push individuals out of their territories for education, employment, and health care. As urban Indigenous peoples continue to experience social and health inequalities, there is an urgent need for attention to how urban communities may be organizing and operationalizing processes of environmental repossession to support their own place-based visions of self-determination.

Similarly, there is an important opportunity for future research to explore how environmental repossession may function through practices, proxies, and structures that are not land-based. As the goals of repossession emphasize connections to land and knowledge systems for identity and wellness, how might these relationships, values, and responsibilities be supported through other forms, such as health centres (Nelson and Wilson, 2020), educational programming (Bang et al., 2014), urban gardens (Peach et al., 2020), or mainstream hospitals (Ambtman-Smith & Richmond, 2020)? Examining environmental repossession across these diverse spaces and environments will raise further

questions around who is represented by and within Indigenous 'communities.' This collaborative case study with Biigtigong represents a relatively defined community with a set governance structure, shared culture and history, and registered membership list. Even in this context, there are tensions around community exclusion and sense of belonging due to gendered experiences of dispossession among families, particularly women's loss of status through the Indian Act. In other contexts that may include diverse First Nations, Metis, and Inuit experiences, questions of what or who is meant by community will only be more pertinent.

Finally, this thesis did not consider how gender may influence perspectives and understandings of Indigenous decolonization, nor how environmental repossession efforts may be experienced differently across genders. Interestingly, the research results indicate that environmental repossession in Biigtigong is predominantly being implemented and sustained by band staff members who identify as women. All but one of the current staff members of the Department of Sustainable Development are women, and many discussed their roles in reference to broader community responsibilities as mothers, aunties, and grandmothers to future generations. This suggests that gender may be a critical analytical lens for future research around environmental repossession and its interconnections with decolonization.

Environmental repossession emerged out of the growing subdiscipline of Indigenous health geographies and its methodological imperative to actively support the needs and goals of Indigenous communities through transformative research (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018). While this thesis represents a small research project with limited impact, it hopes to provide an example of the potential for geographers to meaningfully collaborate with Indigenous communities. Decolonizing the field of geography goes beyond institutional initiatives, course curriculums, and participatory methods. It requires research that enables community empowerment and upholds Indigenous self-determination, both over research processes and land. All research in Canada with Indigenous communities takes place in an ongoing colonial context of oppression and marginalization. As

researchers, we all have a responsibility to use our skills, resources, time, and networks to support the equality and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board Approval

**Date:** 11 July 2019

**To:** Prof. Chantelle Richmond

**Project ID:** 112693

**Study Title:** Reclaiming ancestral territory in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg

**Short Title:** Reclaiming territory in Biigtigong

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** August 2 2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 11/Jul/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 11/Jul/2020

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Dear Prof. Chantelle Richmond

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

| Document Name | Document Type | Document Date | Document Version |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interview Guide | Interview Guide | | |
| LOI and Consent Form | Written Consent/Assent | 09/Jul/2019 | Clean |
| Poster - Biigtigong - Project 1 | Recruitment Materials | | |
| Research Procedure | Supplementary Tables/Figures | | |
| Verbal Recruitment Script | Oral Script | 09/Jul/2019 | Clean |

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

***Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).***

## Appendix B: Flexible interview guide (Mountain Lake)

### Interview introduction

As you may know, Biigtigong has been developing many projects to help the community reconnect with its ancestral territory. You have been invited to participate in this interview based on your participation in one of these projects to (insert project). Over the next hour or so, I will ask you questions about your experiences participating in this project, as well as your experiences on the land. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. We want to hear your thoughts, stories and knowledge about Biigtigong's ancestral territory and how the community is connecting with it.

Before we begin, I want to thank you for being part of this research and being willing to share your experiences and stories of Biigtigong's ancestral territory. Your thoughts and ideas are important. This information will help Biigtigong to strengthen the relationship of the community to its ancestral territory.

You do not have to answer questions if you do not want to and you can stop the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions before we start?

### Section 1: Background

1. Please tell me your name and age.
2. How long have you been living in Biigtigong?
3. Can you describe how you spend time on the land?
    - What does it mean to you to be able to be out on the land?
4. Do people in Biigtigong spend less time on the land than they used to?
    - Why do you say that?

### Section 2: About the place

5. When was the last time you or your family were in this place?
6. How was this place used before the project started?
7. Why do you think it matters that this project happens in this place?

### Section 3: About the project

8. Can you describe the project and your role in it?
9. Why is this project important to you?
    - Why is it important for Biigtigong?
10. Have you learnt any new knowledge or skills by participating in the project?

- Please tell me about these and how you came to learn them, and from whom.

11. Has your participation in this project impacted your relationships with friends and family who are also participating in the project?
    - Tell me how being out on the land (or other) has impacted your relationships.

**Section 4: Connecting to the territory**

12. As an Anishinabeg, what does the land mean to you?
13. What does community mean to you?
    - What do you think community means for the people of Biigtigong?
14. For the past thirty years, Biigtigong has been engaging in its land claim. In the past two years, it has reclaimed its traditional name. What do you think it means for Biigtigong to reconnect with its territory?
    - What does it mean to you to reconnect with the territory?

**End of Interview**

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Or is there any part of the interview you would like to go back to?

If you think of any information, experiences or stories that you would like to share later, you can contact Florinda or Elana and we will make sure that they are included in the research.

Once all of the interviews are completed, we will send you a copy of this interview transcript for you to review. You will also be invited to a meeting with all of the other interview participants to discuss the early findings and think what the key ideas might be.

Thank you for sharing your time with me to participate in this study and answer these questions. I really appreciate the experiences and stories that you have generously shared with me. Your knowledge is deeply valuable and I have learned a lot.

**Appendix C: Flexible interview guide (department staff)**

**Interview introduction**

You have been invited to participate in this interview based on your role in the Department of Sustainable Development. Over the next hour or so, I will ask you questions about your experiences working for the department, as well as your experiences on the land. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. We want to hear your thoughts, stories and knowledge about Biigtigong's ancestral territory and how the community is connecting with it.

Before we begin, I want to thank you for being part of this research and being willing to share your experiences and stories of Biigtigong's ancestral territory. Your thoughts and ideas are important. This information will help Biigtigong share lessons and learnings with other Indigenous communities.

You do not have to answer questions if you do not want to and you can stop the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions before we start?

**Section 1: Background**

15. Please tell me your name and age.
16. How long have you been living in Biigtigong?
17. Can you describe how you spend time on the land?
    - What does it mean to you to be able to be out on the land?
18. Do people in Biigtigong spend less time on the land than they used to?
    - Why do you say that?

**Section 2: Working for SD**

19. How did you come to work for the SD department?
20. What is/was your role in the department?
21. What does it mean to you so work for the department/for your community?
    - What does the department mean to you?

**Section 3: Building the SD Department**

1. What are the goals/vision of the department?
    a. Focus on land/territory? Why?
2. How was the department changed since you've been working there?
    a. Name change? Vision/goals/work focus?
3. How do you see all of the positions/roles of the department fitting together? Or do they?

**Section 4: Connecting to the territory**

22. As an Anishinabeg, what does the land mean to you?
23. What does community mean to you?
    - What do you think community means for the people of Biigtigong?
24. For the past thirty years, Biigtigong has been engaging in its land claim. In the past two years, it has reclaimed its traditional name. What do you think it means for Biigtigong to reconnect with its territory?
    - What does it mean to you to reconnect with the territory?

**End of Interview**

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Or is there any part of the interview you would like to go back to?

If you think of any information, experiences or stories that you would like to share later, you can contact Florinda or Elana and we will make sure that they are included in the research.

Once all of the interviews are completed, we will send you a copy of this interview transcript for you to review. You will also be invited to a meeting with all of the other interview participants to discuss the early findings and think what the key ideas might be.

Thank you for sharing your time with me to participate in this study and answer these questions. I really appreciate the experiences and stories that you have generously shared with me. Your knowledge is deeply valuable and I have learned a lot.

## Appendix D: Codebook from Mountain Lake interviews

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Building new relationship to land | | 6 | 21 |
| Changing relationship to land | | 10 | 41 |
| Moving away | | 6 | 18 |
| ML as new | | 7 | 20 |
| Cabins | | 6 | 44 |
| Cabin rental | | 5 | 11 |
| Construction of cabins | | 1 | 10 |
| Colonization | | 8 | 45 |
| Residential school | | 3 | 6 |
| Resistance to colonization | | 2 | 2 |
| Continuing ML camp | | 3 | 5 |
| Developing ML | | 2 | 11 |
| Disconnection from ML | | 8 | 16 |
| Encouraging land use | | 8 | 30 |
| Land as safe-comfortable | | 4 | 12 |
| Returning to ML | | 8 | 21 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family connections to ML | | 6 | 26 |
| History of ML | | 5 | 35 |
| Identity | | 5 | 13 |
| Connection to land and identity-confidence | | 3 | 6 |
| Importance of being in place | | 7 | 16 |
| ML as story-history making | | 3 | 7 |
| Physically reclaiming land | | 5 | 10 |
| Reconnection through stories | | 8 | 13 |
| Relationships through time | | 3 | 4 |
| Connection to ancestors | | 5 | 17 |
| Connection to future-7 generations | | 4 | 21 |
| Santoy-name change | | 1 | 8 |
| SD department | | 4 | 71 |
| Self-determination and governance | | 4 | 12 |
| Land claim | | 6 | 20 |
| Self-determination over land | | 9 | 38 |
| Social relationships | | 4 | 4 |
| Community | | 11 | 97 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elders | | 11 | 107 |
| Family | | 12 | 102 |
| Friends | | 5 | 25 |
| Social disconnection | | 1 | 1 |
| Stories | | 3 | 9 |
| Teaching IK | | 11 | 22 |
| Indigenous Knowledge | | 8 | 39 |
| Technology | | 7 | 46 |
| Tensions with cottagers | | 4 | 16 |
| Transportation-Accessibility | | 7 | 19 |
| Travel | | 6 | 15 |
| Wellbeing | | 7 | 28 |

**Appendix E: Curriculum Vitae**

# ELANA NIGHTINGALE

## PROFILE

- Health geographer with academic training in Indigenous wellness, Indigenous methodologies, structural and cultural determinants of health, and economic development
- Experienced in community-led participatory research, including qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (story-based, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys)
- Proficient in preparing ethics applications, grant proposals, and other funding applications
- Academic and professional experience managing research projects with a diverse range of stakeholders, including Anishinaabe communities, Inuit communities, various levels of government, Indigenous organizations, and academics

## EDUCATION

**PhD Candidate, Geography and Environment** Ongoing
Western University, London, ON
- Specialization: Indigenous wellness, environmental repossession, health geography, community-based participatory research, Indigenous methodologies
- Advisor: Dr. Chantelle Richmond

**MSc with Merit, Local Economic Development** 2014
London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK
- Specialization: regional economic development, economic inequality

**BA Honours with High Distinction, Applied Economics** 2012
Carleton University, Ottawa, ON
- Concentration: Development
- Minor: Spanish
- Exchange: Universidad Antonio de Nebrija, Madrid, Spain, 2009-10

## HONORS AND AWARDS

- Distinction, Comprehensive Exams, Western University, Department of Geography and Environment, 2019
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC): Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, Doctoral, 2019-2022 [105,000$ over 3 years]
- Ontario Graduate Scholarship, 2018-19, PhD in Geography [15,000$]
- Western Graduate Research Scholarship, 2017-2021, PhD in Geography [15,200$ over 4 years]
- Senate Medal for Outstanding Academic Achievement, Carleton University, 2012
- Deans' Honour List, Carleton University, 2008-2012

- David Barkway Memorial Scholarship in Economics, Carleton University, 2011 [$3000]
- Professor T.N. Brewis Scholarship in Applied Economics, Carleton University, 2011 [$3000]
- Scholarship in Comparative Economics, Carleton University, 2011 [$2,200]
- Claude Bissell Scholarship, Carleton University, 2009 [$3,000]
- Scotiabank Scholarship in International Business, Carleton University, 2008 [$1,500]
- Carleton University Admission Scholarship, 2008-2011 [$12,000 over 4 years]

## RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

**Dissertation** 2017 to present
Department of Geography and Environment, Western University, London, ON
- Designed, developed, and conducted Ph.D. research on environmental repossession, wellness and self-determination in partnership with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg First Nation, ON
- Collaboratively developed community-led participatory research methodology grounded in Anishinaabe knowledge and values
- Produced diverse research outputs to communicate findings to academic and community audiences

**Research Consulting** 2020 to present
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Ottawa, ON
- *Meeting Survivors' Needs: Gender-Based Violence Against Inuit Women and the Criminal Justice System project*
- Designed, developed, and analyzed online survey to assess Inuit women's experiences with the criminal justice system in Nunavut

**Research Assistant** 2019 to present
Indigenous Health Lab, Western University, London, ON
- *Research as a Site of Transformation: exploring the concept of environmental repossession with Indigenous communities: SSHRC Insight Grant, 2016-2021*
- Responsible for research coordination across international team of academic and community partners
- Supporting development, drafting, and dissemination of academic book (2022): *Because this land is who we are: Indigenous practices of environmental repossession*

**Research Consulting** 2017 to 2019
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Ottawa, ON
- *Engaging Inuit men and boys in ending violence against women and girls project*
- Analyzed survey and produced research report on Inuit men's perspectives on gender-based violence in Nunavut

**Research Coordinator** 2017 to 2018
Indigenous Health Lab, Western University, London, ON
- *Indigenous Mentorship Network Project – Ontario: CIHR, 2017-2022*
- Coordinated Ontario-wide mentorship network for Indigenous graduate students

- Supported development and delivery of student supports (scholarships, webinars, training schools)

**Research Analyst** 2011 to 2012
Lands and Economic Development Sector, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada, Gatineau, QC

- Analyzed determinants and indicators of Aboriginal economic development, including how to introduce heritage group-specific and gender-specific indicators into performance measurement
- Reviewed the performance measurement strategies and processes of the department's economic development programs

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**Teaching Assistant**, Geographies of Health & Health Care (GEOG 3431) Jan. to Apr. 2021
Department of Geography and Environment, Western University, London, ON

- Enhanced student learning through development and delivery of weekly tutorial content on diverse health geography topics
- Developed proficiency in the use of online teaching technologies, both synchronous and asynchronous

**Teaching Assistant**, Geographies of Health & Health Care (GEOG 3431) Jan. to Apr. 2019
Department of Geography and Environment, Western University, London, ON

- Responsible for tutorials, lectures and assessments on health geography, social determinants of health and health research methodologies
- Created a student-centered learning experience through the design and development of active learning activities and assessments

**Teaching Assistant**, Public Health and the Environment (GEOG 2430) Sept. to Dec. 2018
Department of Geography and Environment, Western University, London, ON

- Designed and delivered interactive tutorials to engage students in current environmental health issues and research
- Supported instructor with design and development of course assignments and exams

## PUBLICATIONS

### Peer Reviewed Publications

Richmond, C., **Nightingale, E**., & Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (forthcoming). Practicing environmental repossession through gathering in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. In C. Richmond, R. Pualani Louis & B. Coombes (Eds), *Because this land is who we are: Indigenous practices of environmental repossession.* London, UK: Zed Books.

**Nightingale, E**., & Richmond, C. (2022). Reclaiming Land, Identity and Mental Wellness in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Territory. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(12), 7285.

**Nightingale, E.,** & Richmond, C. A. (2022). Building structures of environmental repossession to reclaim land, self-determination and Indigenous wellness. *Health & Place*, *73*, 102725.

**Nightingale, E**., & Richmond, C. A. (2021). Reclaiming Mountain Lake: Applying environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory, Canada. *Social Science & Medicine*, 272, 113706.

### Other Academic Publications

Richmond, C., & **Nightingale, E**. (2021). Introduction to special section: Geographies of Indigenous health and wellness. The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien, 65(1), 4-7.

**Nightingale, E.**, Czyzewski, K., Tester, F. J., & Aaruaq, N. (2017). The effects of resource extraction on Inuit women and their families: Evidence from Canada. *Gender & Development*, 25(3), 367-385.

### Other Contributions

Nightingale, E. (2018, April). *Engaging Inuit men and boys in ending violence against women and girls: Survey results*. Prepared for Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

Pauktuutit (2017). *Understanding the needs of urban Inuit women: Final report.* Ottawa, ON: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

Pauktuutit (2016). *Angiqatigik: Strategy to engage Inuit women in economic participation*. Ottawa, ON: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

Pauktuutit (2016). *The Impact of Resource Extraction on Inuit Women and Families in Qamani'tuaq, Nunavut Territory – A Quantitative Assessment*. Ottawa, ON: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

Pauktuutit (2014). *The Impact of Resource Extraction on Inuit Women and Families in Qamani'tuaq, Nunavut Territory – A Qualitative Assessment*. Ottawa, ON: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

## PRESENTATIONS

### Conference Presentations

**Nightingale, E.**, & Richmond, C. Reclaiming land, self-determination and Indigenous wellness: A case study of environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Canada. The International Medical Geographers Symposium (IMGS). Edinburgh, UK, June 23rd, 2022.

**Nightingale, E.**, Christianson, F & Richmond, C. Reclaiming Mountain Lake:

Applying environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg territory, Canada. The Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) Annual Meeting. Online, May 28th, 2021.

**Nightingale, E.** Panel Special Session: Training Environments in Indigenous Geographies. The American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting. Online, April 8th, 2021.

**Nightingale, E.** Reclaiming Mountain Lake: Environmental repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Canada. The American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting. Denver, April 6th, 2020. *Event cancelled.*

**Nightingale, E.**, Starr, J. & Richmond, C. Processes and meanings of environmental repossession in the Canadian Indigenous context: Community-led research with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Ontario. The International Medical Geographers Symposium (IMGS). Queenstown, NZ, July 1st, 2019.

**Nightingale, E.** & Starr, J. Connecting with Our Territory by Reclaiming Our Stories. The Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) Annual Meeting. Hamilton, NZ, June 28th, 2019.

**Nightingale, E.** How do you build a relationship?: Fostering relational accountability through research partnerships in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Ontario. The American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting. Washington, April 5th, 2019.

Quintal-Marineau, M., & **Nightingale, E**. Inuit women's experience in Canadian urban centres. The Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) Annual Meeting. Toronto, ON, June 2017.

**Nightingale, E.** Inuit Women's Experience of Resource Extraction. World Social Forum: Gendered Impacts: Indigenous Women and Resource Extraction. Montreal, QC, August 2016.

**Invited Lectures**

**Nightingale, E.** Land, Land Claims and Indigenous Self-Determination. GEOG 3501: Geographies of the Canadian North. Carleton University, Ottawa, ON. April 1, 2022.

**Nightingale, E.** Land, Development and Self-Determination. GEOG 3501: Northern Lands. Carleton University, Ottawa, ON. March 30, 2021.

**Nightingale, E.** Indigenous Health Geographies. GEOG 3431: Geographies of Health & Health Care. Western University, ON. March 28th, 2021.

**Nightingale, E.** Introduction to Indigenous Health. GEOG 2430: Public Health and Environment. Western University, London, ON. October 15th, 2018.

**Other Presentations**

**Nightingale, E.** Building Sustainable Livelihoods for Inuit Women in Canada. Canadian Women's Foundation: Sustainable Livelihoods for Indigenous Women in Canada in the Context of Reconciliation. United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, New York, NY, March 2017.

**Nightingale, E.** The Impacts of Resource Extraction on Inuit Women. Oxfam: Gender Justice & Extractive Industries: Setting the Change Agenda. Washington, DC, March 23, 2017.

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**Manager, Socio-Economic Development** Oct. 2014 to June 2017
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Ottawa, ON

- Planned, implemented and evaluated projects to promote the economic well-being of Inuit women across Canada
- Sought funding and developed project proposals for federal government and private funding sources
- Developed project budgets, monitored expenditures and reported on financial activities to funders and Board of Directors
- Managed human resources in the Socio-Economic Development Department

**Acting Manager, Socio-Economic Development** Feb. to Sept. 2013
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Ottawa, ON,

- Conducted gender-based research on the socio-economic impacts of resource extraction on Inuit women in Baker Lake, Nunavut
- Managed youth engagement project that led to communication strategy for Inuit youth and youth career development workshops
- Delivered economic development projects in the Inuit regions of Arctic Canada

**Coordinator, Socio-Economic Development** Mar. 2012 to Feb. 2013
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Ottawa, ON,

- Created an entrepreneurship network that resulted in over 80 members, a suite of business tools and a support website (www.iwbn.ca)
- Developed and facilitated business skills workshops in remote Northern communities
- Researched and analyzed opportunities for economic development in remote Northern and Arctic communities

## LANGUAGES

**English**: Native level of competence
**French:** Intermediate level of competence
**Spanish**: Novice level of competence