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Paddling the Biigtig: A case study of Environmental Repossession through canoeing

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Geography

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Abstract

Indigenous communities globally are initiating inspiring ways to practice self-determination over land and cultural practices. For the past few years, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Pic River First Nation) has undertaken canoe trips through its traditional territory along the *Biigtig* (Pic River). The purpose of the 2017 journey was to rename places (i.e. mountains, rivers, portages) along the route in *Nishnaabemoen* (Ojibway language) as a means of enacting self-determination in their territory. Supported by volunteers, five youth were hired as Traditional Knowledge Gatherers to complete this unique journey. This thesis qualitatively examined perceptions among canoe journey participants (n=9). Building upon the concept of environmental repossession, in-depth interviews explored this journey as a space for: learning and practicing Indigenous Knowledge; relationships; and, connection to land. In addition to articulating these components, participants identified the trip as a space to learn about their ancestors and community's history. The *Biigtig* was the space to assert Indigenous rights to land and express Indigenous identity.

Keywords

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Canoeing, Indigenous Knowledge, Relationships, Land, Environmental Repossession, Self-determination, Youth, Indigenous, Geography

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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

This Master's thesis qualitatively examines the perceptions of nine Indigenous youth and adults from Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Pic River First Nation) as they participated in a week-long canoe journey along the river *Biigtig* in August 2017. A map indicating the general canoe route can be seen in figure 1. *The* river runs through the heart of their traditional territory, before emptying into the majestic Lake Superior. The *Biigtig* has always been a significant landmark in the community. This thesis explores the canoe trip as a case study for exploring the concept of environmental repossession. This chapter will introduce the purpose of the canoe trip for the community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, describe the purpose of this thesis and elaborate on the theoretical concept of environmental repossession from which this thesis is theoretically centered. Then it will summarize the limitations of research on this concept thus far and reveal the objectives of this thesis. This chapter will conclude with an overview of the subsequent chapters.

1.1 Community Goals of Canoe Trip

The community's goals for the canoe journey were to enact self-determination in two ways: 1) rename places along the canoe route in the traditional language of *Nishnaabemoen*; and, 2) share community history that has taken place along the river and surrounding area. Place names along the river (i.e. waterfalls, creeks, beaches) had either been non-existent, forgotten or replaced with English names. The canoe trip was a community-led initiative to hire youth for summer positions to become more familiar with their traditional territory with the help of adult volunteers.

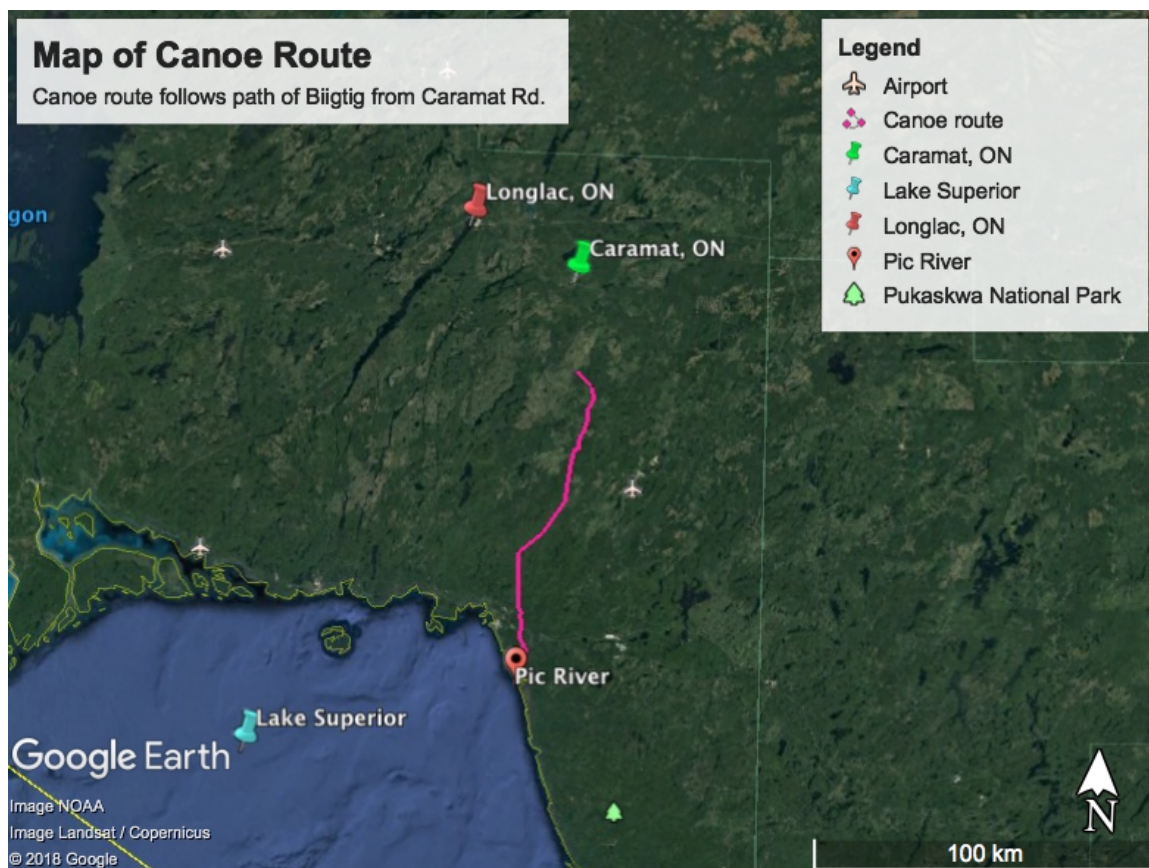


Figure 1: Map of canoe route and surrounding area (Mikraszewicz, 2018).

The *Biigtig* is a significant river to the community of Biigtigong and historically has served as a route to access other First Nation communities, lakes, and resources. The river is the community's namesake and runs behind Biigtigong's reservation where it empties into Lake Superior. Since the early 1980's, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg has been engaged in a comprehensive land claim; Biigtigong was not a signatory of the 1850 Robinson-Superior Treaty and have therefore not ceded their traditional land. This lengthy land claim process has had the effect of encouraging community members to spend more time on their traditional land. The canoe trip provided an opportunity for community members, especially youth, to experience their history, language and traditions, and become familiar with their traditional land.

1.2 Purpose of this Thesis

Globally, Indigenous¹ populations have been historically marginalized from their traditional lands and cultures, and with detrimental consequences for health and well-being (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Richmond & Ross, 2009). Compared with non-Indigenous peoples, Indigenous populations have shorter life expectancies, and suffer greater occurrences of both chronic and infectious disease (Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013). Through complex and varying processes of colonization, marginalization from traditional land has and continues to occur in Indigenous environments, including Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. Environmental dispossession refers to the processes through which Indigenous people's access to the resources of their traditional environments is reduced or eliminated (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Environmental dispossession has significantly disrupted Indigenous peoples' ability to practice and share their Indigenous Knowledge, cultures and languages.

The Biigtigong canoe journey was an exciting opportunity to explore a community's applied initiative to reclaim traditional land and ways of life through methods they believed appropriate: canoeing, language revitalization, renaming. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the canoe journey as a site of environmental repossession.

Environmental repossession refers to the social, cultural and political processes by which Indigenous peoples and communities are practicing their rights to traditional land, and reclaiming their ways of life (Big Canoe and Richmond, 2014). Environmental

¹ The term "Indigenous" is used to refer to the inhabitants of land who predate colonization (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013).

repossession was explored by interviewing participants about their experiences on the canoe trip, focusing on their understandings of Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and land. The results of this thesis have informed a conceptualization of environmental repossession that reflects the case study of Biigitigong. The new conceptualization of this concept also informs the ways other Indigenous peoples and communities might enact their own processes of environmental repossession to assert their Indigenous rights to land and ways of life.

1.3 Concept of Environmental Repossession

As previously mentioned, environmental repossession is the process by which Indigenous people assert rights to their traditional land and ways of life (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Maintaining connections to land are fundamental to the overall health and well-being of Indigenous populations (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). But access to traditional land alone is inadequate for maintaining these connections and practicing Indigenous ways of being (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014); in addition to access to land, Indigenous Knowledge and social relationships are fundamental pieces. Processes of environmental repossession aspire to change current Indigenous health trends to ensure overall well-being of present and future generations.

1.3.1 Indigenous Knowledge

LaDuke (1994) defines Indigenous Knowledge as, “the culturally and spiritually based way in which indigenous peoples relate to their ecosystems (127). Indigenous knowledge systems refer to the collection of experience by individuals, communities and societies on how to live on traditional land and with one another to promote sustainable communities

(Little Bear, 2009; Laduke, 1999). Wildcat (2009) identifies Indigenous Knowledge systems as a ‘nature-culture nexus’, where social systems are influenced by the need to sustain present life and future generations successfully. Knowledge systems are place specific; they result from exploration, and trial and error of previous generations (Herman, 2016). Under normal circumstances, they are practiced, shared and transmitted across generations to support healthy communities and healthy relationships with local ecosystems.

1.3.2 Social Relationships

Social relationships refer to interactions between people. Relationships offer the social spaces wherein Indigenous Knowledge can be communicated through songs, language, stories teachings and other ways (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). Land-based activities, such as hunting and ceremony, are social settings where community members of all ages are able to interact (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). In many contexts, but especially so in the Indigenous context, Elders are critically important figures in community life as they hold knowledge that is passed down to younger generations. Social relationships are also important because they are sources of support, love and strength (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

1.3.3 Land

The land refers to the ecosystem; it encompasses the biotic, the abiotic and all of the day-to-day processes that connect Indigenous people and the physical environments wherein they live, learn and interact. Indigenous people have traditionally been subsistence cultures; this means they have relied on the resources of their ecosystems for all daily resources including food, medicine and shelter (Richmond & Ross, 2009). As a

subsistence culture, Indigenous people are intimately tied to their environment where land is also the basis for spiritual and cultural well-being (Teegee, 2015). The land is a part of culture in ways such as language, creation stories, ceremonies, political systems and more (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Traditional land or territory refers to the ecosystem and space from which a particular Indigenous community's culture, social systems, language and Indigenous Knowledge has been built over generations.

1.4 Limitations of Environmental Repossession

At a global level, the concept of environmental repossession has been described by Richmond and Colleagues as the social, economic and cultural processes by which Indigenous communities are asserting their rights to land and ways of life. The main elements of this process are understood to be three-fold: Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and land. These elements are rooted in understandings of environmental dispossession, and previous scholarship has illustrated the ways Indigenous life has been disrupted since colonialism. The broader concept of environmental repossession remains limited in the academic scholarship, however is the focus of a five-year international SSHRC grant with Indigenous communities in Hawaii, New Zealand, and includes the current study.

1.5 Research Objectives

The Biigtigong canoe journey was a community-led initiative for youth and adult community members to explore their territory via canoe, learn some of their history, rename places in *Nishnaabemoen*, and practice language. The pre-existing relationship between Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and my supervisor, Dr. Chantelle Richmond opened the

opportunity for me to become a part of the canoe journey experience. The community's design of the trip reflected their local knowledge systems and ecological awareness. It also served as an ideal land-based application of environmental re-possession where Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and land could be explored. Finally, this thesis was an opportunity to document youth voices and their perceptions of this experience as important members of their community.

This research explored the concept of environmental re-possession through a community-led canoe trip in the traditional territory of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg during the summer of 2017. This research addressed the following objectives:

- 1) To explore how the trip influenced or provided applied learning and practice of Indigenous Knowledge;
- 2) To examine how the trip fostered spaces for social relationships; and,
- 3) To describe if and how the journey established connection to land.

1.6 Chapter Outline

This section briefly summarizes the following chapter in this thesis.

Community Profile

This chapter gives background information on the community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. It also briefly explains the context to the canoe trip.

Literature Review

This chapter will explore the current theoretical and methodological knowledge related to this thesis. It will begin by exploring Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and the

land as they provide the basis for Indigenous philosophies. Then I will discuss negative impacts of environmental dispossession. The chapter will then review environmental repossession in the context of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and the importance of Indigenous canoeing. Finally, this chapter will describe the importance of Indigenous youth perspective in research and broader Indigenous research methodologies.

Methods

This chapter outlines the ways in this thesis was completed. It was inspired by Indigenous research methodologies that value collaborative and community projects as shared endeavors. Like all research, they have their own benefits and challenges to be navigated. Building my own relationship with community members of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and is integral to the larger story of this thesis. Within this section, I share my positionality and situate myself as a paddler and a researcher on the canoe journey.

Results

This section will present the results of nine qualitative semi-structured interviews. The results are organized according to the three research objectives: 1) learning and practice of Indigenous Knowledge; 2) fostering social relationships; and, 3) connection to land. Data was analyzed using N.Vivo software as a tool to organize and store the nine participant interviews. Coding was completed using a line-by-line technique. Codes were narrowed down and connected to form over-arching themes.

Discussion

The Biigtigong Nishnaabeg canoe journey was a successful applied site of environmental repossession. This research examined environmental repossession as a real-life

application where experiences and stories of participants from the canoe trip informed three new insights: 1) Indigenous Knowledge is understood differently by different generations; 2) relationships go beyond human to human interactions; and 3) land is culture. This chapter will outline the methodological contributions, limitations of this research and policy implication for the future.

Chapter 2

2 Community Profile

The community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg is located on the northern shore of Lake Superior in Ontario, roughly half-way between the cities of Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie. The community has 1200 members just less than half living on reserve (Pic River First Nation, 2017). Biigtigong Nishnaabeg are not signatories of the 1850 Robinson-Superior Treaty and they are in the process of legal ownership over their traditional land through a comprehensive land claim (Pic River First Nation, 2017). The goal of the Robinson-Superior Treaty was Canadian government ownership over land for the purposes of exploration and exploitation such as mining (Government of Canada, 2010). A comprehensive land claim is a modern treaty agreement where there has previously been no treaty or other legal agreements with Canada (Belanger Y. , 2017). Biigtigong's traditional land spans 2 million hectares (roughly 80,000 square kilometres) (Pic River First Nation, 2017).

Biigtigong and more specifically *Zaaging*, meaning mouth of Pic River, was used as a trading post because of its location on Lake Superior shore with river access to James Bay (Biigtigong Language Project, 2013; Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Logging and forestry have been robust industries in the area especially down the Biigtig, along with the Marathon paper mill that ran from 1946 until its closing in 2009 (CBC News, 2009). Many employment opportunities come from progressive community initiatives such as Pic River Development Corporation that has supported employment establishment in areas like energy, forest fire fighting and tourism (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014; Pic River First Nation, 2017). Other employment opportunities come from the neighbouring

town of Marathon, nearby mining operations and Pukaskwa National Park (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Biigtigong is a community with strong leadership and community bonds.

The idea for the canoe trip came from Chief Eddie who is a passionate canoer and believes being familiar with their traditional land is important for the future of the community. The objectives of the canoe trip reflect the community's history and efforts to reclaim their territory. The *Biigtig* continues to be an important river in the community. It served as the highway their ancestors paddled; it connected them to neighboring communities, families and resources. Canoeing has been a longstanding tradition and serves as the best form of transportation to navigate the area's river and lake systems. The community has also made outstanding efforts to re-establish *Nishnaabemoen* (the Ojibway language) through the Biigtigong Language Project (Biigtigong Language Project, 2018). There are but a handful of fluent language speakers left in the community. The trip brought together aspects such as land-based activities, language, tradition and community history to contribute to this continued land reclamation effort.

Chapter 3

3 Literature Review

The focus of this thesis is to understand Biigtigong's canoe journey as an expression of the concept of environmental repossession. The concept is supported by three elements: Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and land. These elements are rooted in knowledge that demonstrates their vital role to healthy and overall positive wellbeing of Indigenous populations. This chapter will begin with Indigenous understandings of these elements as crucial aspects to Nishnaabe philosophy and worldview. The chapter then outlines general negative health trends of Indigenous populations and the deep-rooted colonization processes that are the cause of these trends, including processes of environmental dispossession. This chapter then briefly explains land claims in Canada and their impact in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. It will review environmental repossession is then explored, with emphasis on how this process relates to the context of Biigtigong. The final sections will outline the importance of canoeing in Indigenous communities and the knowledge gap this thesis aims to fill.

3.1 Indigenous Philosophy

Indigenous philosophy is the underlying worldview that guides Indigenous ways of knowing and living. Although Indigenous cultures are different depending on their knowledge systems and ecosystems, they stem from worldviews based in holism. Little Bear (2012) outlines five tenets of Native Philosophy: space/land, constant motion or flux, everything being animate and with spirit, relationship, and renewal. Space/land is everything on the planet, spiritual and physical (Belanger, 2018). Constant motion or flux is the ongoing interactions (Belanger, 2018). Everything in space is transforming,

deforming, restoring and in constant motion (Little Bear, 2012). Everything being animate and with spirit is that everything is sentient and interrelated (Belanger, 2018). Since everything has a spirit, “there are responsibilities to ensure their progress and safety” (Belanger, 2018, p. 13). Relationships can be seen as the spider and fly on a web where everything is connected and make one organism (Belanger, 2018). These relationships are important because everything is interrelated and carries equal importance (Little Bear, 2012). All components of the organism are a part of the overall well-being (Belanger, 2018). Finally, there is renewal that refers to repetitive and continuous processes of the planet (Belanger, 2018). Seasons, migration patterns, plant life cycles are obvious examples of renewal (Little Bear, 2012). All these aspects are mutually dependent and intersect, building a holistic way of knowing and living (Belanger Y. D., 2018). Despite different lands and ecosystems leading to different local bodies of Indigenous Knowledge, holism is the main similarity between Indigenous philosophies. Indigenous Knowledge is unique because it is more than a philosophy that is just a way of knowing. The body of knowledge includes ways of doing and living.

3.1.1 Indigenous Knowledge, Relationships and Land

As Laduke’s (1994) definition of Indigenous Knowledge explains, the ways Indigenous peoples participate in their local environments depends on their ecosystem but there are underlying similarities to their Indigenous Knowledge that come from this philosophy. Indigenous ways of knowing have been practiced and continuously improved for centuries (Cajete, 1994). These ways of knowing translate into lifestyles that are balanced and harmonious with Indigenous peoples’ environments. Indigenous peoples have traditionally been subsistence cultures and have successfully established

complex cultures that withstand the test of time (Richmond & Cook, 2016). Their successful relationships to the land led to knowledge systems and developments of Indigenous societies with political, economic and spiritual systems (Richmond & Cook, 2016). Generally, knowledge is the collection of what is known by an individual, group, culture, community, society, nation, humanity (Little Bear, 2009).

Learning happens by observing and interacting with land, animals, plants and all other things (Herman, 2016). Generations accumulate knowledge and it is passed on through stories, songs and ceremonies (Cajete, 1994; Herman, 2008; Getty, 2010). These oral translations are adaptable and change with new information from lived experiences, experimentation and trial and error (Herman, 2016). Indigenous people develop deep and complex understandings of their local environments because of the long periods of time people have been there (Herman, 2016). They have developed a connection to the environment they are part of and understand that connection as part of a larger process (Herman, 2016). Relationships between people and land are reciprocal; people have the ability to affect places while places also affect people (Cajete, 1994).

Land is an important part of Indigenous Knowledge even though they are all connected. Especially on Turtle Island, Indigenous philosophies indicate that land is the heart of Creation and humans are a part of everything else on land (Belanger, 2018). Land provides everything needed for survival and people act as stewards taking care of land and everything on it (Laduke, 1999). Since Indigenous people have traditionally been subsistence cultures, they rely on their ecosystems for basic resources such as food, medicine and shelter (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Through their connections and understanding of interrelations, renewal, constant flux etc. with everything on the land, it

provides spiritual and cultural well-being (Teegee, 2015). It is through these relationships, connections and understanding of the land that Indigenous peoples thrive with good health and well-being. An Elder from Saik'uz said, "If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you," meaning that with reciprocity and relationships, Indigenous people are healthy (Teegee, 2015, p. 132).

3.2 Health and Colonization

Indigenous peoples face greater health disparities than non-Indigenous peoples. In Canada, Indigenous populations generally have shorter life expectancies, and greater risk of diseases, violence and disabilities (Reading, 2015). These disparities are a result of deep-rooted processes of colonization that have targeted Indigenous populations. Colonization is a large and complex structure where a dominating society establishes control over Indigenous lands and peoples (Reading, 2015). Land is such an important part of health and overall well-being because it is the basis of their way of living.

In Canada, the Indian Act (1876) began controlling Indigenous people and the ways they were able to use their traditional land. The Indian Act was a reaction to the conflicting ways of being and knowing between established Indigenous populations and European settlers (Richmond & Cook, 2016). Under the constitution of Canada, Indigenous populations and their land are a responsibility of the federal government (Richmond & Cook, 2016).

Land was controlled in many ways. During the 1800s, new land was needed for European settlers, so treaties were signed as agreements that Indigenous people would

give up ownership of their land in exchange for other rights (Richmond & Cook, 2016). Indigenous people were often relocated to reserves in which the land was not familiar and access to traditional land was no longer allowed (Richmond & Cook, 2016). Relocations occurred frequently, and groups were moved suddenly for different reasons according to the Crown (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997). Land was often needed for the development of military bases, agriculture, mining and hydro dams (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997).

The Sayisi Dene people from northern Manitoba were relocated near Churchill in the 1950s because the government believed they needed to 'take-care' of the population (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997). The government did not understand their methods of subsistence and believed they were over-hunting and wasting caribou by burying the meat in the snow (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997). Burying the meat in the snow was a method of preserving it until it was needed later (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997). The land the Dene were relocated to was unfamiliar and proved very challenging, especially without the 'care' that was promised by the Canadian government (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997). They did not thrive as they once did in their previous environment. In fact, in the years after the relocation a great number of community members were lost for different reasons including alcoholism, violence and preventable accidents like house fires (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997). The survivors believe it had to do with the forced changes in land that led to less than adequate living conditions (Bussidor & Bilgen-Reinart, 1997).

Some Inuit communities were targets of relocation in the 1950s. Inuit families were relocated farther north, from northern Quebec to islands in Nunavut such as

Ellesmere (Arnaquq-Baril, Konowal, & Walker, 2014). These relocations were promises of better lives in the High Arctic, but families were dropped off by RCMP boats without adequate supplies (Arnaquq-Baril, Konowal, & Walker, 2014). It is believed the Canadian government relocated these people to more isolated areas to inhibit other countries from exploring the harsh ecosystem for resources such as oil and other minerals (Arnaquq-Baril, Konowal, & Walker, 2014). If people of Canada were living on the land, it was not barren and belonged to the country. Land has historically been controlled by the Crown in varying ways and processes. Control in this way disrupts traditional ways of life that come from local systems of Indigenous Knowledge. When land is controlled by a colonial power, it jeopardizes the well-being of Indigenous communities that were once autonomous and self-determining.

3.3 Environmental Dispossession

The forced displacement of people by the Canadian government under policies of the Indian Act are an example of environmental dispossession. Environmental dispossession is the processes through which Indigenous people's access to the resources of their traditional environments is reduced or eliminated (Richmond & Ross, 2009). When access to traditional environments is reduced or eliminated, people's abilities to practice and share Indigenous Knowledge, language and culture are disrupted (Richmond & Ross, 2009).

Environmental dispossession can occur in direct and indirect ways (Richmond & Ross, 2009). A direct form of environmental dispossession is when access to land and its resources are physically severed (Richmond & Ross, 2009). An example of direct

environmental dispossession is contaminants of mercury and PCBs being found in traditional food sources in Circumpolar Regions (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Indirect forms of environmental dispossession occur when policies systematically work to disconnect Indigenous people from their environments, cultural, spiritual, and economic systems (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Residential schools have been strongly identified as a form of disconnecting Indigenous peoples from their environment. The federal government in the 1880s gave Protestant and Catholic missionaries complete control of the education system for Indigenous children (York, 1990). Residential schools kept children from their families for long periods of time and forbade them from speaking in their native language or practicing any of their traditional culture (Hanson, 2009). Children were forced to adopt ways of living that were different from their parents, communities and ancestors (Hanson, 2009). The disconnect that children developed to their homeland, family, community and culture disrupted the translation of Indigenous Knowledge. Residential schools left survivors with broken social, cultural and economic systems because of the traumatic abuse they have suffered (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

3.3.1 Environmental Dispossession in Biigtigong

In previous research, Biigtigong's Elders articulated direct forms of environmental dispossession that can be linked back to local industries such as mining and forestry (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). The logging industry had clogged the *Biigtig* with logs and wood debris, leaving the river inaccessible for canoe use (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). It is only within the last few years that the river has been dredged of the excess logs; the *Biigtig* can be used for canoeing for the first time in 80 years (Michano, 2017). Water contamination has been an issue as tailings have leaked from a

nearby mine's reservoir, leading to loss of safe drinking water in the community (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). An Elder said the risk of tailings ponds leaking made him worry about the safety of the water (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Extraction sites and other industry areas limit physical land Biigtigong can use and spend time on. One Elder spoke about areas now being gated-off and restricted when previously that land had been used for ceremony (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Another Elder indicated that working in these industries are opportunities for economic growth but industries like mining are hurting Mother Earth. He explains that she is in an important part of survival because the Earth provides for them by the ways industries treat the Earth is imbalanced (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). The Elder also identified indirect impacts in the community, including decreased mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, decreased physical health, and higher rates of addictions such as alcoholism (Tobias & Richmond, 2014).

The community experiences indirect forms of environmental dispossession in terms of impacts from residential school systems. Residential schools aimed to eliminate the transfer of *Nishnaabemoen* (the Ojibway language) by forcing children to speak English and even learn Latin (Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Language comes from the land. Elders believe hearing and speaking *Nishnaabemoen* is essential for a strong connection to the land and the Great Spirit *Gtchi-Manitou* (Tobias & Richmond, 2014).

3.4 Treaties and Land Claims

Throughout Canadian history, land has always been coveted. The first European settlers coming to what is now Canada, understood ways of acquiring land according to the framework of a papal bull set out by the Pope and held international legal standing

(Frichner, 2010). This papal bull, called the Doctrine of Discovery, gave European explorers the right to exert dominance and power over the original non-Christian inhabitants of the land (Frichner, 2010).

During this time, Indigenous occupation of land meant Aboriginal Title, and that they legally held claims to the land (Belanger Y. D., 2018). The claims to land are limited by the framework of the Doctrine of Discovery and the legal 'superiority' of European culture which are embedded into legal systems (Akers, 2014). Legal methods of acquiring Indigenous land, according to international law, could happen in three ways: 1) if the land was abandoned, 2) if a just war was waged on non-Christian inhabitants, or 3) if negotiations led to a formalized treaty acknowledging land sale (Belanger Y. D., 2018, pp. 83-84). Formalized treaties indicating a land sale became the most popular form of land ownership transfer. The process acknowledges Indigenous groups as owners of their territories and sovereign people (Belanger Y. D., 2018). Treaties are formed under international law and should be treated as unbreakable and binding negotiations (Belanger, 2018). But there is a sad reality that treaties have a history of not being upheld as international law by Canadian government (Belanger Y. D., 2018).

It was not until the 1970s that Indigenous groups who had not signed treaties realized they still hold Aboriginal title and have legal rights to the land (Belanger Y. D., 2018). Aboriginal title was recognized in the Supreme Court of Canada for the first time when the Nisga'a of British Columbia wanted title to 22 000 square kilometres of land they believed had been previously lost (Belanger, 2018). The Court ruled that the Nisga'a held Aboriginal title over the land based on their traditional use and occupancy (Belanger Y. D., 2018).

The acknowledgment of Aboriginal title in Court has led to the development of a new process for obtaining rights to land. Land claims are modern day treaty agreements between the Crown and Indigenous groups of Canada. There are two types of land claims: specific and comprehensive. Specific land claims look to amend grievances of already withstanding treaties (Belanger, 2018). Comprehensive land claims are negotiations to work through the rights to land and resources of an Indigenous group that does not previously have a treaty (Belanger, 2018). The land claim process is slow, and the outcome is not always in favour of Indigenous communities. The Assembly of First Nations have criticized the land claims process because it lacks equal negotiation and agreement on objectives and content by the Canadian government and Indigenous groups (Belanger, 2018). Although land claims are a tough process, there have been successful cases.

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg are not signatories of the Robinson-Superior treaty of 1850 and continue to live on unceded territory. The Robinson-Superior treaty would give the Canadian government complete control over land for exploration and exploitation, especially in terms of mining and forestry (Government of Canada, 2010). The area is currently home to much industrial activity, most prevalently gold mines, forestry and other mineral extractions (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Many community members Biigtigong who live on-reserve or nearby, work in these industries (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

3.5 Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and Environmental Repossession

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg is in the process of a comprehensive land claim to gain greater sovereignty over their territory. The land claim would allow for greater control in negotiations between the community, the federal government and private companies about how their environment is used. Biigtigong can feel the direct and indirect impacts of environmental dispossession on their community. The comprehensive land claim is the legal process of environmental repossession, where Biigtigong's sovereignty over the land would be acknowledged by the Canadian federal government. Environmental repossession are the social, cultural and political processes by which Indigenous peoples and communities are reclaiming their traditional lands and ways of life (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

The comprehensive land claim is but one process of environmental repossession. They are also reclaiming traditional land and ways of life is their annual Moose Camp. Their 7th annual Moose Camp was held October 2017, where everyone from the community was invited to participate in its activities (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). Schools are closed for the few days so that all children from elementary to high school are able to attend (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). Moose Camp is an initiative to get its community members back out on traditional land and practicing culture to ensure its survival for the coming generations (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). The main activity is moose hunting and the days catch is brought back to camp to be cleaned, prepared and

packaged (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). Having children and youth deconstructing and preparing the moose is important to re-familiarize and re-establish skills related to traditional of food systems (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). Moose hunting and preparing are not the only activities; birch bark basket making, constructing a traditional structure for smoking fish, language programming and visiting with Elders are also on the camp's agenda (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). Biigtigong believes bringing youth and Elders together out on the land strengthens systems of knowledge transmission, which is important to keep their culture alive (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017). With the growing popularity and success of the Moose Camp, they believe their children and youth are developing stronger identities because of their relationship to the land, Elders and Indigenous Knowledge (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Sustainable Development, 2017).

Environmental repossession is a new concept, but processes of such have and continue to take place by a variety of Indigenous people in a variety of ways. These ways or methods of enacting environmental repossession depend on the unique local Indigenous context of philosophy and knowledge of place. Environmental repossession can be enacted through many different processes and reclaiming traditional ways of living on the land are perhaps the most direct and pathway. Access to traditional land is not a uniform reality for all Indigenous Canadians; over half of the Indigenous population of Canada lived in urban areas as of 2006 (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010) and at any one time, greater than half of Biigtigong's membership lives off-reserve. It is for this very reason that applied studies of repossession are so important.

While the best-case scenario will reveal the process by which Indigenous peoples are reconnecting with the lands and resources of their traditional territory, the fact remains that reconnecting with the land can occur through various cultural, social and economic proxies, whereby the cultural connection to land, rights and Indigenous identity may still be fostered.

Connections to land and practicing a traditional way of life can happen off traditional territory. A study done in 2010 qualitatively examined the determinants of food choice among mothers with young children in southern Ontario (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). The study included 25 mother participants, over half of whom lived in the city of London, Ontario while the other half lived on First Nations reserves within 30 km from the urban centre (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Traditional foods come from the local environment Indigenous peoples originate and are acquired by means of harvesting, farming, hunting and fishing (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Traditional food systems are intricately tied to bodies of Indigenous Knowledge through the intimate relationships people have developed with land to nourish themselves (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). A traditional food system is the socio-cultural meanings, acquisition, processing techniques, use, composition and nutritional consequences for Indigenous peoples using the foods (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). These food systems are complex and have been disrupted through processes of environmental dispossession.

Processes of colonialization and assimilation have pushed Indigenous peoples off their traditional land into urban centres (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). These patterns of urbanization disrupt the relationships Indigenous peoples have with

their traditional territory and in this case, the ways people acquire and prepare food (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Through interviews with mothers, it was shown that those living on-reserve generally had greater access to and interaction with traditional foods (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Mothers on-reserve also had more exposure to different methods of preparing food to suit the taste of their family (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Young mothers in London identified traditional foods as less accessible, more expensive, more difficult to prepare and their families preferred other non-traditional foods (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Environmental dispossession of traditional food systems has consequences related to decreased physical health, decreased quality of diet and cultural identity (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Both groups of mothers on and off-reserve experience forms of food insecurity (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Interviews with the young mother expose the spatial and social determinants of food choice (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017).

Although many mothers who lived in the city found it more difficult to integrate traditional food systems into their lives, many did reclaim culture through food sharing (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). This process of environmental repossession occurred when extended families on and off-reserve, shared food with mothers living in the city (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). The participants described sharing food when extended family members, such as mothers or grandmothers, make enough traditional food and for the mothers to take home and share with their families (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). An example a participant gave was when visiting her grandmother, they always gave her lots of corn soup to take home and to feed to her

family for supper (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Another participant shared that it was not necessarily already prepared food that was shared, but her child's father was a hunter so she often had access to traditional meats (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). The process of sharing is a value that comes from Indigenous Knowledge, especially in terms of making sure your own family community has enough to eat (Neufeld, Richmond, & SOAHAC, 2017). Sharing, eating shared traditional food and preparing traditional food in urban areas are all methods of practicing traditional ways of life and reclaiming food systems. Reclaiming food systems in an urban area is an example of environmental repossession that is different than Biigtigong's Moose Camp, which is practiced on their traditional territory. Land is integral to positive Indigenous well-being but reclaiming traditional ways of life can happen in spaces outside of the traditional territory.

This research aims to examine the Biigtigong canoe journey as a process of environmental repossession. The canoe journey as an applied site of environment dispossession is different, but connected to, the comprehensive land claim. Current legal pathways to land rights, treaty agreements and land claims are difficult to navigate because of the colonial underpinnings which have historically displaced Indigenous people from their traditional land (Akers, 2014). Even terms such as "ownership" over land or land as "property" are not concepts that come from Indigenous Knowledge (Akers, 2014). In Creation stories, land is Mother Earth and people are born from her and must take care of her their whole lives (Akers, 2014). Undergoing a comprehensive land claims process is an uphill battle. Canoe journeys as a process of reclaiming land

and ways of living is an approach that comes from within the community itself and embodies Indigenous Knowledge and values.

3.6 Canoeing and Canoe Journeys

Canoeing has been an important tradition among Indigenous peoples across the globe, although canoeing traditions vary according to place, people and culture. Canoeing differs across geographic contexts including water body (i.e., lake, river, ocean), type of canoe (i.e., birch bark, cedar), paddling style or purpose (i.e., transportation, hunting, fishing, war, ceremony, journey, racing sport, recreation) (Ho-Lastimososa, Hwang, & Lastimososa, 2014; Johansen, 2012; Marshall, 2010; Neel, 1995). Although traditions differ, canoeing requires knowledge of land and water, and teamwork for navigation to be safe and effective (Johansen, 2012).

It is believed that the canoe originated from the Great Lakes region where the Three Fires Confederacy: Odawa, Ojibwe and Potawatomi peoples reside (Low, 2015). Their creation stories vary but most include a hero named Nanaboozhoo/Waynabozho/Nanabush who teaches people about the great birch bark canoe after a great flood or the hero uses a canoe during the flood to help himself and animal companions survive (Low, 2015). The birch bark canoe is part of the Three Fires history of transportation and migration west from the Atlantic coast in search of wild rice that was mentioned in prophecies (Low, 2015). The canoe has been an important tool for accessing areas to acquire food by methods like fishing, setting net and harvesting wild rice (Low, 2015). It has been used as transportation to hunting grounds, trap lines and areas with maple sugar bush (Low, 2015). The design of the birch bark canoes made it easy to carry people and things while navigating shallower water, running rapids and

were easy enough to carry in portages (Low, 2015). The design reflects the diversity of water bodies such as lakes, rivers and streams that the Three Fires people used canoes to traverse. Birch bark was used to make the structure of the canoe, while pine pitch sealed the seams from water (Low, 2015). The canoes helped establish relationships between tribes as people journeyed along different the water bodies (Low, 2015). They were important for visiting friend and family in different territories.

The canoe varies in many ways and was invented by cultures all over the world. It varies in shape, building material, style, size, weight, water body use and function (Low, 2015). All these factors depend on the geography of the region where the canoe was used. European settlers in North America also became acquainted with the canoe because it was ideal for navigating the land (Low, 2015). Eventually, the canoe played a role in the conquest of land and exploitation of resources by Europeans (Low, 2015). During the historic fur trade, the size of the canoe was increased to accommodate the transportation of more goods (Low, 2015). Canoes were used by both First Nations and Europeans in battles against each other (Low, 2015). Samuel de Champlain in 1603 recorded that him and his men paddle the St. Lawrence upstream in light birch bark canoes to battle the Iroquois on Lake George (Low, 2015). He wrote that they were able to defeat the Iroquois because their slow elm bark canoes were no match to the Europeans birch bark canoes and French weapons (Low, 2015). Canoes are often seen as a part of Canadian history and culture (Low, 2015). Meanwhile canoes are a romanticized First Nations symbol, representing a “disappearing” tradition of peoples who are very much still present today (Low, 2015).

In the past 30 years, there has been a resurgence in canoe journeys among Indigenous communities in Canada and across the world (Marshall, 2010). These canoe journeys have been described as a re-enactment or revival of culture, mainly because the purpose often comes from a desire for resurgence in traditional values and reconnection with ancestral territories and peoples (Johansen, 2012; Marshall, 2010). These modern journeys differ in important ways from pre-colonial canoe journeys; many canoe journeys use new technologies such as GPS and the support of crews on land, for example, thereby fusing traditional practices with contemporary culture and technology (Johansen, 2012). Large annual canoe journeys such as the *Tribal Canoe Journey*, on the Pacific Northwestern coast, consists of many canoe boats from all over the area that paddle together to the host community (Tribal Journeys Info, 2013). The diversity among the paddlers, starting destinations, communities and purpose is great but they are connected by underlying cultural values, including hospitality and sharing (Johansen, 2012). Some of these canoe journeys, such as *Tribal Canoe Journey*, are initiatives aimed towards youth or youth and their families. These studies have focused on understanding interactions between youth, traditional activities, elders and environments through observation and adult interviews (Marshall, 2010).

War canoe culture has been part of west coast First Nations culture for generations. In coastal Salish Tribes, war canoes were traditionally used in battle because of their large design that fit many men and high gunwales to protect the paddlers (Johansen, 2012). More recently war canoes have been used for the sport of canoe racing (Oreiro, 1995). A program by the Lummi Nation in Washington state was developed called C.E.D.A.R (Community Health, Elders and Education, Drug-Free, Alcohol-Free,

Respect) for young men to participate in canoe racing (Oreiro, 1995). The goal was to encourage strong identity and culture through self-determination (Oreiro, 1995). Canoeing as a way of practicing self-determination represented the community's beliefs in connecting to the land, water and sky as a way of carrying the legacy of their ancestors (Oreiro, 1995). Improving physical health of the community was a large component for gaining partnerships to organize and fund this sport (Oreiro, 1995). A canoe racer from this program speaks of the connection they have built to their surroundings from the work it takes to be a successful canoe racer (Oreiro, 1995). The project has since expanded to include a project for developing Native youth leadership through canoe journeys (Native Youth Leadership, 2017). Youth from the community can participate in the Intertribal Canoe Journey which happens in the area (Native Youth Leadership, 2017).

Canoe journeys are a cultural practice and often go hand-in-hand with traditional language use (Johansen, 2012). Language can be taught and used in ceremonies, as terms for canoeing and the environment, in songs and in other traditions that fit the community's culture (Marshall, 2010). In the 2010 *Tribal Canoe Journey*, for example, many boats used their traditional language when asking to come ashore (at the final destination). This gesture was used as a sign of respect and gratitude for the local Indigenous peoples (Marshall, 2010). In a related example, a canoeing initiative in Hawai'i drew from their traditions to build community strength and teach traditional values (Ho-Lastimoso, Hwang, & Lastimoso, 2014). The values were taught using the Hawaiian language, and imparted values including *Ha'aha'a* which means humility and humbleness (Ho-Lastimoso, Hwang, & Lastimoso, 2014). The canoe journey was a lived

experience where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples worked and paddled together in the spirit of Aloha (Ho-Lastimosa, Hwang, & Lastimosa, 2014).

Ceremonies and celebrations after canoe journeys themselves are a large part of the cultural experience. In the 2010 *Tribal Canoe Journey*, some communities shared stories of canoeing through dance (Marshall, 2010). A tradition in some Hawaiian communities is to tell the story of their ocean voyage using performances of the Hula, which can include songs in their traditional language as well as dancing and acting (Baker, Mazer, & Looser, 2016). These performances are created for an audience to depict and share stories about movement, place, and social interaction.

3.7 Knowledge Gap

Canoe journeys have not been explored as an applied site of environmental repossession in scholarly research or Indigenous communities. Research has not understood the ways Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and land are understood by participants on a canoe trip. This research will focus on the perceptions of youth and adult participants of the *Biigtig* canoe journey. Perceptions of youth are a relatively undocumented voice in the wider Indigenous health and wellbeing literature. Not unlike research pertaining to Indigenous adults, research on Indigenous youth is usually statistics-based highlighting rates of issues such as suicide, substance abuse and diabetes (Kulmann, 2012). There is less research showing participant's perceptions, especially youth's perceptions, that inform links between the elements: Indigenous Knowledge, social relationships and land.

A youth-centered canoe journey, *Tribal Journeys*, focused on the ways the journeys can connect youth to traditions, environment, Elders, and each other to establish a sense of identity (Marshall, 2010). Interviews were conducted during and after the canoe journey but were done with adult participants and further information came from the researcher's observations (Marshall, 2010). Big-Canoe and Richmond (2014) completed a study with Anishinabe youth to understand their perceptions of health and well-being. These youths indicated that health and well-being has changed over time due to a disruption of Indigenous Knowledge transfer (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). The Anishinabe youth suggested that Indigenous Knowledge transfer comes from access to traditional land and also the building of strong social relationships, like relationships with Elders (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). Indigenous Knowledge is transferred from Elders to younger generations through land-based activities where the knowledge is practiced (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014).

Understanding the perceptions of youth from the Biigtigong canoe journey as an applied site of environmental repossession will further the development of reclaiming land and traditional ways of life. Environmental repossession as a process can take many forms, like Biigtigong's comprehensive land claim. While the land claim is an important process, it is a politically challenging and lengthy process. Canoe journeys stem from the community's current and traditional values, and offers different benefits, like being out on the land, and challenges, such as the change of setting. This research seeks to empower youth voices and experiences from this unique expression of environmental repossession. Youth are the future of their communities and it is important to build strong foundations for traditional ways of living. These strong foundations are suspected

to improve the overall health and well-being of present and future communities (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). The canoe trip as an applied site of environmental repossession is land-based in the community's traditional territory. Not all processes of repossession will be land-based but may still assert cultural connection to land and Indigenous ways of life by the varying social, cultural, economic expressions of Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 4

4 Methodology, Research Design and Data Analysis

This chapter will review the Indigenous and community-inspired methodologies that guided this research. It will tell the story of how the Biigtigong canoe trip came to be; this includes explaining my involvement as a paddler and a researcher. I will then explain my positionality as a non-Indigenous researcher working with Indigenous adults and youth in their traditional territory. Finally, this section will describe the data collection processes which was entailed canoe participants completing in-depth interviews. Data analysis was organized using N.Vivo software and interviews were investigated through their themes.

4.1 Methodology

In many Indigenous communities globally, there is a long and painful history of research gone wrong, and particularly so from my home discipline of geography. Research has often been conducted from a colonial or Western framework that rarely coincides with Indigenous philosophies (Louis, 2007). Research conducted from colonial frameworks have been more disruptive and it's "knowledge" creation have rarely made positive contributions to the community (Louis, 2007). This section outlines appropriate Indigenous-based methodologies that justify and support the research design, data collection and analysis of this thesis.

4.1.1 Indigenous Research Paradigm

Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems are inseparable from traditional land and territory, making the discipline of geography a clear place for Indigenous research (Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013). Indigenous research calls for holistic understandings in which humans and the surroundings are interconnected and influence each other (Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013). Land is more than a geographic and physical space but a space that holds history and culture (Richmond & Ross, 2009). Indigenous peoples, their communities and knowledge systems are connected to the land as a physical space and beyond. Indigenous geography research is not successful without communities as key members, as they are a part of the larger system.

Indigenous research methodologies do not have a singular definition; they are flexible, adaptive data collection processes that abide by Indigenous community goals and intentions (Getty, 2010; Louis, 2007). Louis (2007) identifies four main principles for Indigenous research methodology, including: relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation and community ownership (Louis, 2007). These principles describe the importance of having positive relationships between the Indigenous community and researcher, respecting the research and everyone involved, having benefits from the research for both parties and that the community has ownership over their research.

4.1.2 Collaborative Research

Participatory research as a method aligns with Indigenous methodologies because it is a more holistic approach. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a broad

concept where the community is involved in all steps of the research process (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008). Communities have deep understandings of their own local contexts and the solutions to promote change (Castleden, Garvin, & HUU-ay-aht First Nation, 2008). Previous CBPR initiatives with Indigenous communities have indicated a few key objectives: equalizing power differences within the research process; building trust between the researcher and community; and to foster a sense of ownership geared towards social change (Castleden, Garvin, & HUU-ay-aht First Nation, 2008; Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013). This thesis ascribed to a collaborative approach where members of the community involved with the canoe trip were involved with and helped shape the ways this research process occurred.

4.2 Research Design Story

The community of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg has been impacted by various processes of dispossession including mining, forestry and hydrodam exploitation and the intergenerational effects of residential school systems (Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013). They are also in the process of a comprehensive land claim to attain legal ownership of their territory. In the past few years, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg has developed a number of land-based activities that could be described as environmental repossession efforts. They have been purposely developed to link youth and elders on the lands of their traditional territory. The intention of these efforts is to provide spaces of Indigenous Knowledge transfer, but also to physically occupy space within Biigtigong's traditional territory. One of these initiatives is the fall Moose Camp that was previously mentioned which brings the community together to hunt and clean moose along with other activities.

It is a space to share skills and learn new one's while being together as a community, of all generations, on traditional land.

Biigtigong's chief, Eddie, is a passionate canoer and often plans canoe trips for himself and his constituents. In Summer 2016, he and ten others paddled for ten days on the *Biigtig*; this journey resulted in a short documentary (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2-t2Bx2e-c>). The 2016 canoe trip paddled a pathway their Nishnaabeg ancestors navigated through the eastern boundary of their traditional territory (Michano, N'ziibiimnaan - Our River, 2016). During this canoe trip, Chief Eddie noticed that most of the places along the canoe path were identified only in English (Michano, 2017). This observation led support to Chief Eddie's belief that the process of reclaiming traditional place names (i.e., to re-establish these place names in *Nishnaabemoen*) will support community members in the reclamation of their Nishnaabe identities and relationships to land (Michano, 2017). In a blog post written by Chief Eddie, he had asked other members of the community to let him know of any place names that were known in *Nishnaabemoen* and that other forgotten place names were to be renamed as part of a larger language reclamation initiative (Michano, 2017).

This inspired the 2017 canoe journey, which had two key objectives as developed by the community: 1) rename places along the canoe route in the traditional language of *Nishnaabemoen*; and, 2) share community history that has taken place along the river and surrounding area. Six youth between under 18 years old were hired to work for the community as Traditional Knowledge Gatherers (TKG's) for the 2017 canoe journey. The canoe journey would last a week but TKG positions lasted six weeks, where they prepped and planned before the trip and participated in group discussions after the trip.

In total, there were 14 people on the canoe trip (including myself), nine were interviewed: five youth and four adult volunteers. Four canoe participants not interviewed did not fit the research criteria but they were vital to the canoe trip as they were experienced canoers and campers while also being good friends of Chief Eddie.

The TKG's participated in the trip and also supported trip planning (e.g., training, portage clearing, equipment), and were responsible for renaming places. In the month leading up to the trip, the TKG's and myself received appropriate training in wilderness first aid and canoe safety certification. The Canoe Excursion coordinator worked directly with chief and council to oversee the journey and ensured appropriate training and resource needs (Pic River First Nation, 2017). I also worked directly with the Canoe Excursion Coordinator to support the youth in their training and renaming processes.

Dr. Richmond has strong personal and research relationships with Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. Thanks to this relationship, in fall 2016 I was invited by Chief Eddie to be a part of the canoe journey and help document the experience. From then until the spring, I planned that this research would explore the canoe trip as a site of environmental repossession through canoe participant interviews. It would document the experiences of those who paddled the *Biigtig* and what that meant to them. In June 2017, I journeyed to Biigtigong to meet with Chief Eddie and Lilian. Lilian is the Cultural and Tourism Manager and was in charge of creating the youth's position and hiring. These meetings were to get a better understanding of the canoe trip's purpose from the community's perspective, my role as a researcher and how I could support and document the journey. We discussed that I would join the TKG's in planning and completing their safety certificates and paddling the *Biigtig* together. The journey would be documented through

participants interviews. I believed interviews would be the best method for documenting the canoe trip because they are open enough for opinions, reflections, stories and experiences to be shared by participants. Participants also took pictures along the route and, with the help of a Western University GIS student, the pictures, stories from the interviews and renamed places were used to make a digital map of their journey as a thank-you. This map has different layers which show the depth of meaning and places Biigtigong's traditional territory hold and can be further developed as the community feels appropriate. The map is for the community to keep and not part of the research in this thesis. During the short trip in June, I spent a lot of time with Lilian in the tourism and information centre Gchi-Waaswaaganing² (meaning: "very big torch light" (About our Name, 2016)) while she worked to finalize requirements for hiring her summer staff. Spending time with Lilian led to learning about the partnership between Biigtigong and the neighbouring town of Marathon, Pukaskwa National Park and the community of Biigtigong itself.

I returned to the area at the end of July and stayed until the beginning of September. The canoe trip was not until the second week of August. The time prior to the trip was an opportunity to complete the first aid and canoe safety course as well as become more familiar with the youth. Upon meeting the youth at first aid training, I told I was a student who was invited to come on the canoe trip to record and support their

² Gchi-Waaswaaganing is a joint venture between Biigtigong and the township of Marathon. It opened May 2016; the interpretation of Gchi-Waaswaaganing's name refers to the relationship between the town of Marathon and Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (About our Name, 2016).

experiences because this canoe trip was exciting and unique beyond just their community. Recording their experiences would be done through one-on-one interviews after the canoe trip to talk about their experience like their favourite parts and what they learned. I explained to them their participation in the interviews was completely optional and did not affect their summer position as a TKG.

During the canoe trip itself, I acted as a researcher and canoe participant. I had never been on a canoe trip before so paddling and navigating the river was a learning curve. Fortunately, there were other participants who were also beginners and the group would take breaks along the route to talk, snack and rest. These rests were places to tell stories about their ancestors and the geography of the area, and the opportunity to just talk. I feel very fortunate to have been a part of those intimate moments and hearing those stories enriched my understandings of the community and their relationships to the land and to each other. The canoe trip at times was also physically difficult, uncomfortable and tiring but I believe it guided me to be present in the moment and recognize that I was part of group. This group supported me as much as I was there to support them. As a researcher on this journey, there were times I had to step away from the group to journal what happened during the day. I usually did this after paddling to our destination and settling into our campsite. This was a time when other canoers would be cooking or relaxing after the paddle and by stepping away to journal I did not drastically disrupt the group's natural dynamic. Participating in the canoe trip enriched my relationships with the participants and my understanding of the context of the canoe trip. These deeper understandings were able to inform the results of this thesis and inform meaningful contributions to the community itself and beyond.

In the time after the journey, I conducted the interviews with the youth and adults. I was also invited to join the TKG's on two day-trips to the other lakes in the territory to hear stories about ancestors and listen as they discussed the places to rename. These day-trips were not planned until after the canoe journey as Chief Eddie wanted to continue sharing history and renaming places in territory nearby. Finally, in my last week in Biigtigong, I was invited to join a session where the TKG's and other participants finalized the names for the spots along the canoe route and the areas from the day trips. The session included a fluent *Nishnaabemoen* language speaker who participated in the canoe trip. They explained the traditional process for naming places. Names are supposed to tell a story about that area, whether it is a story that happened during trip, a story that was recollected by an adult about their ancestors or a story that comes from traditional teachings (Montano , 2017). Some areas along the canoe trip and day trips had English names, which could be found on maps, but only if the site had an identifiable feature such as a waterfall or mountain. Chief Eddie and other adult participants believed that most of the spots visited during the canoe trip and day-trips had a name at some point in *Nishnaabemoen* but have since been forgotten or renamed in English. Before leaving, I let participants know I would be in contact during the winter to discuss member-checking and that I would be back in the spring to share what I'd learned with them. I plan to return to Biigtigong Nishnaabeg in July 2018 to share my results and present them with the map of their journey. A brief timeline of the fieldwork can be seen in figure 2 and a more detailed outline of the research process can be seen in Appendix C.

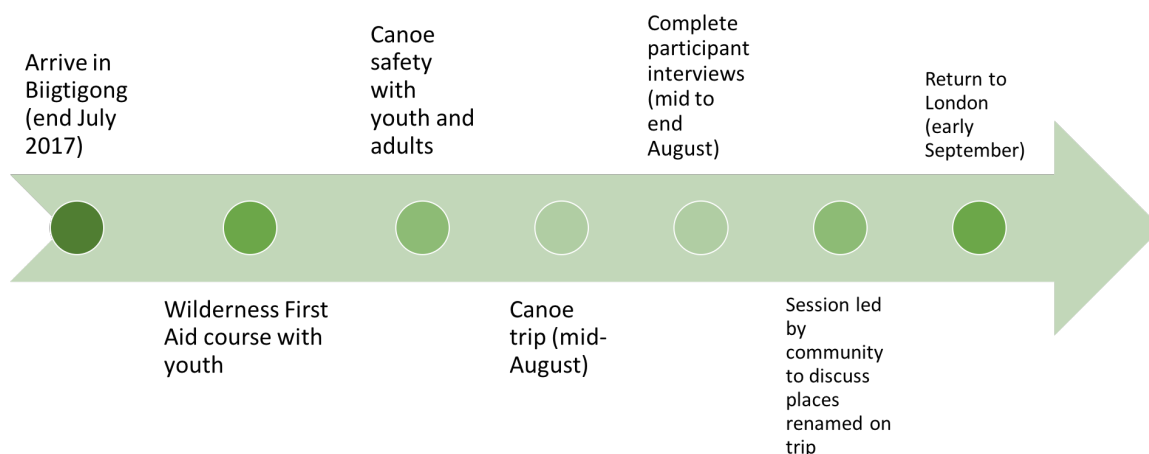


Figure 2: A timeline of my longest stay in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Mikraszewicz, 2018).

4.3 Positionality

Relationships have been an important aspect of this research, especially working with the community of Biigtigong. As the researcher I reflected on myself to understand the best ways to be a part of this project, not just for the purpose of a master's thesis but also as a part of Biigtigong's canoe trip. I am non-Indigenous and grew up in urban southern Ontario. I have always loved being outside and grew up spending summers in a cottage built by my grandfather and his brothers in Barry's Bay, Ontario. Even from a young age, I've felt my own connections to place and land that began with family. This love for the outside led me to pursue an undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa. After completing this degree, I did not feel as though I was done learning and began looking into a graduate research where I could explore the idea of place and how people connect to it. It was in Ottawa where I met with Dr. Richmond after being in contact and she invited me to attend a small conference with her.

It was from here that I wanted to learn as much as I could about Indigenous health and feeling connected to place and to land.

Much of this project has been new experiences. Living in northern Ontario for the summer of 2017 and completing a canoe trip were not experiences I imagined from this degree. Although facing new experiences was intimidating, I was inspired and supported by the heartfelt work of past and present team members of the Indigenous Health Lab at Western University. The relationships and points of contact Dr. Richmond provided were grounding and allowed me to create my own relationships. As someone not from the community, I feel more than lucky to have been able to hear the stories about Biigtigong's ancestors. Listening to others' stories and experiences was something I enjoyed most about my time spent in the community. Being a part of the canoe trip and learning from adult and youth community members alike, allowed me to connect the theoretical work from my graduate training with their experiences on the trip.

4.4 Data Collection

My role in this research was to qualitatively document the canoe trip participants' (TKG and adult volunteers) perceptions of the journey experience. The TKG's were made aware that interviews were an optional part of their position that would happen during their work time after the canoe trip. The first time I met with the youth, about 3 weeks before the interviews began, they were informed about the interviews and given time to think it over with their parents. During the canoe safety course, I met the adult volunteers for the first and asked if they would be interested being interviewed after the canoe trip at a time most convenient for them. After the canoe trip, 10 interviews were conducted and

took about an hour in length. Participants chose where the interviews took place. Youth were interviewed at Gchi-Waaswaaganing or at the cultural building on reserve. Adult interviews took place in the cultural building, the band office or outside.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the TKG's and adult participants to examine their perceptions of the journey, in terms of the ways it: 1) provided a place for learning Indigenous Knowledge; 2) fostered social relationships; and 3) strengthened their connection to land. The objectives were then turned into research questions. Since this research is examining the experiences of the canoe participants, open-ended and flexible questions were used to facilitate a conversation (Fylan, 2005). Semi-structured interviews are a balance between rigid structured interviews and broad, unstructured interviews (Fylan, 2005). The ways that semi-structured interviews are carried out may vary (Fylan, 2005).

I created an interview guide that was based off the three main research objectives. The questions aimed to encourage participants to share experiences and stories about the canoe trip. A flexible interview structure was important, so participants could build on themes that come from the objectives and expose new themes to the area of environmental repossession. With permission, all interviews were audio recorded. Participants were encouraged to keep a journal throughout the trip and were invited to use the notebooks and any images they took during the trip, as an aid (if needed) when recollecting their experiences on the journey for the purposes of the interview. The interview checklist is available in Appendix A.

This research ascribed to follow ethical guidelines as to not contribute to disruptive and painful research. As part of Western University's ethics protocols, this master's thesis obtained approval from Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB). It also obtained permission from Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Band Office and requested that parents or guardians of youth must give permission to participant in recorded interviews. A copy of the Western University's NMREB ethics approval can be seen in Appendix B.

4.5 Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and sent to participants in an effort to member check. This gave participants an opportunity to give clarification or make changes to their transcribed interviews before analysis began (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008). Receiving feedback from participants through member checking adds credibility to the research by ensuring their descriptions are authentic (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Transcriptions were then uploaded to N.Vivo software, an organizational and storage tool that can enable analytical techniques for textual data. I utilized a thematic approach to develop an analysis that would tell the story of the interview data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis focuses on the meaning of what is said and recognizing patterns of themes that are similar or overlap (Smithers Graeme & Mandawe, 2017). The N.Vivo program supported organizing the interviews, from there I addressed my research objectives and revealed new themes and findings (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I read and reviewed the transcripts a number of times before beginning to develop codes in the transcripts, from which I developed a coding framework to apply across the collected interviews. The application of the coding process allowed me to develop themes in the

data and explore linkages between them as well (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To establish rigour in the analyses, I created tables of the themes to demonstrate their frequency between and among participants. This will demonstrate the importance of both unique and commonly occurring ideas.

Chapter 5

5 Results of In-depth Interviews

This chapter outlines the results of interviews with community members of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg who participated in a canoe trip in August 2017 along the *Biigtig*. Nine participants took part in in-depth interviews which lasted about an hour. Five of the participants were youth under 18 years of age. The other four participants were classified as Knowledge-holders and Elders between the ages of 40 and 70 years old. These interviews revolved around three research main objectives: 1) to explore how the trip influenced or provided applied learning and practice of Indigenous Knowledge; 2) to examine how the trip fostered spaces for social relationships; and, 3) to described if and how the journey establishes connection to land. The objectives are the basis for the results' main themes and each theme is further explored through sub-themes.

The privacy of the participants is important and to protect their identity their interview quotes are marked with pseudonyms. To protect the privacy of the youth all exact ages of participants were excluded.

5.1 Indigenous Knowledge (Traditional Knowledge, IK)

Youth on the canoe trip were interviewed in their role as Traditional Knowledge Gatherers and adult participants were interviewed in their role as community Elders or Knowledge-holders. This section outlines participants perceptions of IK on the trip in terms of : 1) where Indigenous Knowledge comes from; 2) the ways that Indigenous Knowledge was shared; and, 3) examples of practiced Indigenous Knowledge as indicated by participants.

5.1.1 Where Indigenous Knowledge comes from

The origins of Indigenous Knowledge were described in three ways; 1) being land-based; 2) coming from Elders (or older generations); and 3) pertaining to the community's history. Land-based IK meant knowledge of the physical layout of the land, what is on the land (i.e. plants, medicine, animals) and activities that are closely tied to land (ie. hunting, fishing, canoeing etc.). Elder-based knowledge is their experience and accumulation of knowledge that has been shared with them. Community history-based knowledge is a community's collective experiences, their philosophies and sacred stories.

Table 1: Where Indigenous Knowledge comes from

Where IK comes from	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Land-based (knowing land)	6	6 (67)
Elder-based	10	5 (56)
Based in Community history	6	3 (33)

Oftentimes IK was described as coming from one or more areas mentioned above.

When asked what IK meant to them, one youth responded:

When I hear it, the first thing that comes to mind is gathering traditional knowledge from elders, and like that it's out on the land, that's all I can think of. (Ben)

Being a part of the canoe trip allowed Elders and Knowledge-holders to share their knowledge of land as an important space that is intricately tied to their culture:

You know, and when these young are able to develop and to connect and to learn how to be on the land, that's knowledge that they're learning and you know we're very fortunate to have good people in the community and we're very fortunate to have our [Elder] that is very knowledgeable of, well, the land. Whenever you talk to our elders that's what they speak about, they define [Indigenous Knowledge] or when they talk about our culture and our traditions as Indigenous people that we are a people of the land. (Daniel)

Land-based learning was identified by participants as important. Knowledge cannot be passed on effectively without being familiar with the land it relates to:

Yeah, I think [the canoe trip] provided a good avenue for someone like [Elder] to pass things on. He's certainly not the type of individual to go in front of a room, pull up flipcharts and start lecturing. That's not the environment for someone like him to utilize transferring though some knowledge. So, I think there was some group knowledge transferring and I think there was some stuff happening at an individual one-on-one type of thing, right? Like, I know I've had conversations with other people on the trip about whatever [they've learned]. (Jessie)

I learned a lot about how our people used the river, like [Elder] said about hunting and fishing. And almost like all of the activities [our ancestors] did involved the river in some way. And like extra little things, like where to know where a beaver is. And just how they lived, it's just a lot more understandable when you can actually see it for yourself and experience it somewhat. (Hallie)

The canoe trip took place on a significant river for the Biigtigong community.

Historically, the *Biigtig* was a transit-way connecting to other First Nations communities, lake systems, food sources and other resources. To Elders, the history of the land and how their ancestors interacted with it stood out as important information to share while

on the river. When this Elder was asked about the most important thing they hoped youth would learn, he responded:

Mostly the history. Mostly the history in the canoe and the importance of the canoe to our people, the importance of that river, that river in particular, to our people. But also, the importance of Steel River and all the rivers within our traditional territory because our people used them. That was their highways. That's how they got around. If it wasn't for those rivers, you know, they'd have to walk. So, I think what I was trying to do was try to impress on them the importance of those rivers and then how our people used them in the past. (Luke)

Stories told during the trip about past ancestors stood out to almost all participants as a significant pathway to pass on knowledge. These stories contained information about the community's history:

Interviewer: So, did you like hearing about [Elder's] stories on the trip?

Andrew: Yeah, that turn off there [talking about a creek along the river], he's like, "I just wanted to stop and make sure you guys didn't think this was some ordinary creek." This is where all your ancestors would meet up and none of us would have been there, not even [Elder], if it wasn't for that. And it was weird; it was like a little creek kind of looking thing, but you wouldn't think that it would take you all the way to Manitouwadge³ or even Mobert⁴.

The stories told during the trip often referred to older and passed family members of participants on the trip. Knowing the history of who paddled the river added a personal

³ Manitouwadge is a neighbouring town near Pic River.

⁴ Pic Mobert First Nation is a nearby community with ties to Biigtigong.

element to the Indigenous Knowledge being shared and learned. One respondent spoke about why this river was important to them:

Ben: I'd say, yes, because like my grandpa, he always canoed it, and now that I did it, I think it was [special], yeah.

Interviewer: So, if we paddled down a different river that was the Biigtig, do you think you would have had a different experience?

Ben: Probably, yeah. I probably said it a couple times, but that's the one that everyone's grandpas and all that canoed, it's like you're paddling the same one, so it means more.

Stories are an important pathway to how Indigenous Knowledge is translated. Some youth showed pride at the thought of being a part of this knowledge system, especially that someday they would be able to share their knowledge and stories:

Yeah! And it's kind of amazing to be a part of, like I think about it all the time. It's like "Wow!", Pic River has so much history and so many stories to be told and someday you get to tell those stories because some day someone's going to listen and they're going to want to know that and like you'll be able to carry on those stories and it's—it's just kind of amazing to like to think about. (Olivia)

5.1.2 Learning Indigenous Knowledge

Learning Indigenous Knowledge occurred on the canoe trip in three ways: 1) learning from another; 2) learning from stories; and, 3) learning from first-hand experience.

Learning from another occurred during the trip by observing, asking questions or being given directions. Stories were a source of information relayed orally. Finally, learning through first-hand experience occurred by interacting with the land on the trip

Table 2: Learning Indigenous Knowledge

Learning IK	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
From other	19	7 (78)
Stories	18	8 (89)
First-hand experience	15	8 (89)

Learning was a process that happened throughout the trip. New IK was said to have been learned by 8 of the 9 participants by the end of the week. Generally, learning Indigenous Knowledge was a social activity which involved a sharer and a learner. Learning from another happened through asking questions, being given advice, observation etc. It also takes time and practice. For Daniel:

And one thing I learned this year because [when] you're constant, the more you're at it, the more you're learning and again I always watch people with the more experienced people and I'm watching [Elder] and he's so graceful in the canoe. No effort, just going by everybody and like I know his paddler, [Youth], [they're] experienced in the canoe, and I'm thinking, "How the heck does he do this?" So, I'm still trying to pick up on that because I'll paddle and I try correct but I over compensate and I make [mistakes] but I kind of still trying to—I'm getting there but I guess you just got to keep at it too. (Daniel)

Most often Indigenous Knowledge is expressed as a translation from an Elder or Knowledge-holder who is sometimes older and wiser (Stiegelbauer, 1996). But the canoe trip provided opportunities for bi-directional learning, where the younger generation was

the teacher. This instance revealed Indigenous Knowledge in the form of morals like patience when challenging situations arose, for example:

Like if you take a look at the canoe trip, [Knowledge-holder] and I are in our 50s. You would think in the traditional world that traditional knowledge goes down [hierarchically] on this canoe trip. That was absolutely not the case. A lot of cases it was flipped or [Youth] was up here and [Knowledge-holder] and I were here (indicating with hands one above and one below) to the point where when our three canoes went [got stuck] and JP and I were like, “Ahh!”. [Youth] turns around, “Don’t panic. Just don’t panic.” So, he was the leader, he was the teacher, he was the individual who was transferring stuff down. You heard, you and [Youth]. You were there, but he was speaking specifically to our canoe, like, “Keep calm, guys.” And so those roles and inside that environment allows that leadership business to move. (Jessie)

Indigenous Knowledge throughout this trip was not just about hearing stories about the community’s history or learning from someone else. Experiencing where stories took place and interact with the knowledge-sharer were meaningful to participants learning:

I like learning like this, doing more hands-on stuff. I’m a visual learner too; I have to see it done so I can understand what to do. [Elder], when he canoed and he talked about stuff, I really understood it because it was not one-on-one, but it was eye-to-eye type of stuff, you know what I mean? So, I enjoy this type of learning. (Melissa)

And the using [Indigenous Knowledge], I would say the same thing. It’s a participation in. And so, my focus is not so much on did they learn CPR, did they learn how to paddle, do they how to do a J-stroke, did they know how to set up a [tent]– all that stuff, that’s important. My focus is on did they experience this like their ancestors? I think that everyone would say yes to that. My gut is probably even you, right? That wasn’t easy. (Jack)

Some youth compared learning Indigenous Knowledge through the canoe trip learning in their high school. Learning in school was often spoke of negatively compared to the

learning of Indigenous Knowledge on the canoe trip. Youth shared that by learning IK through first-hand experience they believed they would remember it:

Interviewer: Yeah, why did you enjoy this way of learning?

Andrew: Well, it was a lot more laidback instead of like in school, you're worried about grades and – out there, you just got to get the work done, you'll get the credit. It's a lot less worrying about getting good grades.

Interviewer: And more about what?

Andrew: Just you learn it, and then you know it, and then you just keep it. It's not like you got to do homework for it. You got to do some, like some paperwork.

Wanting to remember the knowledge and pass it on with time indicated its importance to youth and adults:

I think because I didn't know a lot of the traditional knowledge that we learned, so learning all of that and knowing that it's going to stick with me for a long time, and that I can pass it down through generations. It's a way of protecting it so we don't lose it, all this knowledge. And I think that's really meaningful, because as time goes on things are going to be forgotten, but this is a way of like, I guess postpone it, or at least like pass it down a few more generations. (Hallie)

5.1.3 Examples of Indigenous Knowledge Practiced

Practicing Indigenous Knowledge during the trip for youth meant wilderness or survival skills while adults understood IK as displaying traditional moral. Both youth and adults thought using *Nishnaabemoen* was practicing Indigenous Knowledge during the canoe trip.

Table 3: Examples of Indigenous Knowledge practiced

Examples of IK practiced on trip	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Wilderness Skills	16	8 (89)
Building fire	3	2 (22)
Getting water	5	3 (33)
Canoeing	8	3 (33)
Language	24	7 (78)
Traditional values (love, respect, caring)	12	6 (67)

This youth in particular expressed how much they loved being able to drink clean right from the natural springs and that they wished it was something they could do often.

When asked about an example of what one youth learned from the trip that was important to them, they said:

Melissa: The spring water. Because we can't drink our water [straight from the river]. I mean, you probably can, I bet you kids do when they're swimming in the river, but I like – it's just not the same, you know? I wish I was alive when I could just go down to the river, drink a cup of water and go home. You can't, though; you'll get sick, right? And I've drank that water before.

Interviewer: Like do you mean drink the water right from the river?

Melissa: Yeah, I wish I was able to do that, but the spring water is so

cool. And I wish we had more springs, but you gotta go do that damn canoe trip to find the springs... So those springs are very important, you know? (Melissa)

Knowing how to paddle efficiently and safely was a skill some youth mentioned as a practice of Indigenous Knowledge they learned. Of the five youth, three had no previous experience on canoe trips. Going from having no-experience to being able to paddle long distances was a source of pride and accomplishment:

Well, I learned how to paddle. I learned a lot of stuff. I don't know. Yeah, paddling, I was a little bit sketchy off the start, but then I didn't even know how to paddle in the back, and then I just got shoved in the back by [Youth] on the second day. That was rare. Really turning the first day and then the next half of the day. And I finally started straightening us out. And then the last day, we kept up with [Elder] for the longest time. (Andrew)

Participants indicated canoeing as a form of practiced Traditional Knowledge. It facilitates an important and unique way to experience traditional land:

In regard to canoeing in general, I like to try to advocate to our people that they get out and learn how to canoe and canoe our rivers and our lakes because with the canoe you get to places that you can never, ever get by any other means. So, if you really want to get into the backcountry and get a presence on the land, it has to be by canoe because you can't drive to most of those places. You can't even walk; it'd take too long. So, you canoe there. And it takes you, like I said, places that you can't go by any other means. (Luke)

Many Elders and Knowledge-holders mentioned that canoeing goes beyond being an expert paddler or building physical skills. This canoe trip was a tool to bring people out on the land and practice their culture and traditions. Practicing these traditions on the land and connecting the place to the community's history is reclaiming traditional territory:

Again, learning about their whole history. I think that's the important thing. That's the No. 1 thing. Trying to get a good grasp their history and where they came from. And I think that was the No. 1. The learning to paddle, and learning how to travel safely in a canoe, and learning how to pack clothes and food and things like that are secondary...
 ...And they have no way to learn that because it's not in the book anywhere and sure as hell ain't in any history book. So, I think that's the No. 1 objective, is to learn about that and to define who they are. And again, to have the presence on the land also because if we're going to look at that whole issue in regard to reclamation of our traditional area, they have to be out there. (Luke)

Learning and speaking *Nishnaabemoen* was mentioned by most participants as a practice of Indigenous Knowledge during the trip. Language was recognized as something valuable now more than ever because there are not very many language speakers. To Andrew, language is valuable and because it is being lost, so it's value:

Interviewer: Do you think these learning experiences, like learning how to canoe and stuff like that are important for youth in your community?

Andrew: Yeah, because it's good to keep, because we lost a lot of stuff from like how life used to be, I guess. I don't know. Because language is gone. There are only a couple of people who know that. It's just good to learn some stuff from back in the day.

Language was seen as a connection to culture and tradition. One youth felt that the younger generations should feel more responsible in exposing themselves to culture by means of canoe trips. Practicing knowledge through the canoe trip and learning language has invoked positive feelings:

I feel like kids who don't do that or who are not very into the culture side of life, I feel like they should take that canoe trip and go down and maybe they'll get a feel for what that side feels like. It's such a beautiful way of life, I love being so into my culture and stuff. So, I feel like more people should be into it because our people are dying. I'm not just – they are, our language is dying. We just lost a speaker, [Elder]. So, I just feel like more

kids should go on that canoe trip and learn more about their ancestors.
(Melissa)

While some youth understood language to be an important tradition that is disappearing, many adults described *Nishnaabemoen* as being directly connected to land:

Language comes from a territory. And while I've spent decades with first-speakers, not just of this dialect, but of other Nishnaabe dialects, I haven't spent that kind of intimate time with the source of language and the source of our people, which is the territory. (Jack)

One Knowledge-holder, who specializes in language, found the canoe trip to be an opportunity to deepen his connection to where language comes from. Developing a strong relationship to land means spending time and interacting with it. They believe passing the language to new generations can only be genuine if one also has a relationship to land:

I wanted to introduce myself and to get to know the territory, the river, the Biigtig is a central actor in the drama, from the very beginning of the creation of this place to now. It's the name of this community, the place of that river, that's the name of this community. That was a huge part on a personal level and also for better preparing myself for the next decade or so in which I'm going to end up passing this language off. It can't just be this abstract language. It has to be – it's like me saying that I know you intimately from visiting for three or four times. How would you feel if I represented myself as, "I know [Interviewer] intimately like a sister or something"? You probably wouldn't feel too confident about that and that's what I'm trying to avoid with the language here so that this trip was part of that. (Jack)

Elders and Knowledge-holders saw Indigenous Knowledge during the trip as something that appeared from within a person, often enacted through traditional values:

You know another example was one of the adults, their stove broke you know, blew up or leaked and you know it—it was finished, so they didn't

have a way to prepare their food, but somebody stepped in with their equipment to make sure [they could prepare food]. Again, that teaching where we take care of one another. You know, so there's little things like that that went on all along the trip, you know where these kids were learning. And to me again that's, that's our values and that's the knowledge that we have to teach our young people. (Daniel)

The canoe trip provided a new space where situations became challenging. Making mistakes out in the bush can be frustrating at best and dangerous at worst. One story shared by a Knowledge-holder shows how negative feelings of guilt were redirected with teachings of patience:

[After coming down rapids and not steering correctly] I'm like looking at [Elder] and [Youth] and I'm freaking out because I'm going to hurt them. We're coming in hard. So, now I'm trying to J-stroke and it's like, it's not working this right and we just crashed about 14 inches in where [Elder] was. And I was first of all very ashamed and very embarrassed that I just did this. It's completely my fault... There was no log, there was no – all we had to do is just stay straight and I couldn't even do that. I felt so, like really ashamed. And we crashed hard into his canoe... And this was [Elder], he sat there like this and he goes like this, "What you could have done different was if you reach out to the side –" Like nothing. Like nothing... No panic, absolute total certainty. And it made it a teaching moment. And I was almost crying, I don't know from what. And I said I'm sorry, he's like, "I'm assuming you didn't do it on purpose." And for me, like I'm not like that, right? I'm not like [Elder] or [Youth]. But I sure would like to be. (Jack)

Successfully navigating challenging situations means helping each other in need. One youth recalls her favourite memory to be having to put others before herself when their canoe got stuck in shallow water. The canoe trip encouraged practicing traditional values like selflessness by having to take care of each other:

Hallie: I'm surprised that one of my favorite memories is paddling all the way back up the rapids to go see if [Knowledge-holder] and [Knowledge-

holder] were okay. And then finally getting to the top and then seeing them come around the corner all happy.

Interviewer: Why does that stand out to you?

Hallie: At the time I was kind of mad that we had to paddle all the way up, but now that I look back, it kind of brings me happiness, like seeing that people will be there for you no matter what, even if it was just if they were stuck or not.

The group of canoers on the trip displayed Indigenous Knowledge through virtues when presented with challenges and having to work as a group. Displaying these traditional values were not contained by the actual canoe trip but were also seen through the Biigtigong community support of the trip:

Okay, something that stands out to me? I think the thing [that most] stood out to me is how our community is so together that at the end of the trip like there was like three—four boats [that came] just like to come get our stuff so we can paddle faster because [our gear] was weighing our boats down. (Olivia)

The canoe trip was a place where Indigenous Knowledge was learned from others by experiencing the land. According to the participants, canoeing in the space of their traditional territory was the most suitable environment to learn and practice their Indigenous Knowledge.

5.2 Relationships

Social relationships are suspected to be an important aspect of environmental repossession. On the canoe trip relationships were described as human-to-human connection but there were many circumstances where relationships were human to non-human or human to ancestor. In general, relationships were described in positive ways.

This section will report the types of relationships indicated by participants, how they described these relationships and how the trip influenced these relationships.

5.2.1 Types of Relationships on Trip

The types of relationships on the trip refer to who and what participants indicated having a relationship with throughout the canoe trip. Human relationships were most often between canoers present on the trip. They also extend to community members not on the trip and their past ancestors. Relationships also refer to non-human actors that participants interacted with physically or otherwise.

Table 4: Types of relationships described

Types of Relationships Described	# Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Adult	9	4 (44)
Friends	27	5 (56)
Family	18	7 (78)
Community	14	7 (78)
Canoe Partner	5	3 (33)
Non-human (i.e. land, trees, water)	5	2 (22)
Ancestor	23	9 (100)

The youth on the trip were fairly acquainted with each other, especially since they all attend the same school. Most youth said they knew all adults on the trip but did not have strong relationships with all of them. Some youth did describe the canoe trip as an opportunity to spend time with adults from the community they normally would not:

But at the beginning of the canoe trip I wasn't really close with many of [the youth], but at the end we all were a lot closer than the beginning. And the adults, the same thing, I didn't really know them very well...And like [Knowledge-holder], I had only talked to him a few times before, but at the end of the trip it was a lot more. (Hallie)

Yeah, [Knowledge-holder 1] I just didn't really know. And if I see [them] now, I feel like you could say, "Hi," and, "How are you doing," and stuff. Same with [Knowledge-holder 2]. (Andrew)

Adults supported youth and helped them regroup when times became challenging. Some youth sought-after insight from adults which they believe strengthened relationships:

Olivia: Yeah, it felt a little like I don't know...cause like when me and like my peers were falling out, it was good to go and be with those other people [Adults] to kind of like bring me back. Like you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah. So, in what ways do you mean like bring you back? Like just...

Olivia: Like, like bring me back down to [earth]. I don't know, just like talk to them I guess.

Youth described friends as a main type of relationship they had during the canoe trip.

This youth shared stories about having fun and being silly. Even though canoeing was challenging, friends knew how to improve the situation. They thought the canoe trip was:

Really cool because you're out in the bush for a whole week and you're with your friends, so a lot of fun. And [Youth], every time someone would be mad, [they] would bug you and [they'd] make you laugh. And it'd bring the mood back up. (Andrew)

Family was another important relationship described on the trip. Most participants knew they were related to each other in some way, usually describing the relationship as cousins. Stories told on the trip about ancestors like great grandparents, aunts and uncles using the river illustrated how participants were cousins with each other through common ancestors. The river was the space to connect family and traditional territory:

Well, I think one, it places you in a different kind of environment and I think you get a real sense of communal living and more intimate relationships can be developed in that environment. I think, for example, [Youth]. He knows, maybe perhaps him and I were related somehow. Our other people have those family relations. So, I think it allowed an opportunity to pull that a little tighter and say, "Holy Jeez, we are related." And sixth cousins doesn't really mean anything. You're a cousin, you're family. You're connected to that. So, I think that was a big, important piece is trying to facilitate those relationships inside of a different type of environment. Different relations develop inside [the heart], especially when there are some adverse conditions occurring. (Jessie)

Relationships extended beyond just the people participating in the canoe trip. The Biigtigong community was an important body that provided support and resources for the paddlers. The trip took a lot of planning that included acquiring gear and trailers transport boats. The last day paddling was two legs of the trip done in one day because of unforeseen circumstances. This meant changes to the arrival celebration and the community on land have to arrange for the early arrival. Because of the long day, some paddlers were too exhausted to paddle the last 10km. Community members with boats

came to pick them up. One youth that made it to the finish explains how rewarding it is to see her community come together:

Yeah. I was so proud that when the other boats picked up everyone else and my dad came by, and he's like, "Do you guys need a ride?" And [Elder's] like I think we'll be good. I was like [in my head] "no, I want a ride." And actually, being there and seeing the bridge⁵, I'm like we're almost there, like so proud of myself that I didn't just go home, like that I actually finished. I think it made the whole experience more meaningful to me than just being picked up in the boat at the end. (Hallie)

Paddling in the canoe is a team effort. The relationship between the canoe partners and how they work together is crucial for travelling on the water. Canoe partners must trust in each other because of the small physical space of the canoe and the water surrounding them. Relying on each other creates a very dynamic relationship:

It's really hard. It's really hard. It's hard. And that teamwork thing. We're not allowed to pout. The joke was that me and [Knowledge-holder], we've talked extensively over the last few days was, "I'm mad at you, I'm going to tip your canoe now." Can't do that because your canoe is my canoe and it teaches us that *apenimonodaadiwag*, interdependence, right? So, I learned that I don't understand relationships. Not just romantic relationships, but the network relationships as well as I perhaps like to believe I did. (Jack)

The *Biigtig* is more than a body water but a significant part of Biigtigong's history.

Paddling down the river and learning the history allowed some participants to develop a relationship with the river itself. Some felt spending time on the river developed a connection and contributed to their sense of who they were:

⁵ Some community members were cheering on the paddlers from a bridge over the *Biigtig* just before the Mouth of the Pic.

Yes, because like I said before that river was used so much back then and I feel like it's a very key part of who Biigtigong Nishnaabeg are and I feel like everyone should have the at least the opportunity to travel down that river once because it's like kind of amazing. (Olivia)

Another adult realized that canoeing on this trip was not just about paddling or camping.

To them, canoeing is part of a network of land-based activities where so many relationships are strengthened. These activities are crucial because they force us to think and act beyond our individual self:

So, canoeing, as an isolated unit wasn't something I did before. At the same time, I like to say that canoeing is part of a bigger, I'm going to use the word network, or ecosystem in relationships with other beings, like human beings. Other beings, like supernatural beings and other beings like Mother Earth, loons and then waterways, air, land, etc. So, there's a network...It's important because it fits into something bigger, namely relationships and our awareness, cosmologically speaking and environmentally speaking, like trees and water, how an individual fits in with the bigger [network]. That's all. (Jack)

All participants on the trip discussed developing relationships with their ancestors in their own ways. Learning about and seeing where ancestors travelled on the trip made this youth sense a greater connection to a place beyond the present time. They described feeling ancestor's presence while on the river:

And I always got this vibe, I'm like yo, there's probably some ancestor just chilling right here, canoeing right beside me and I thought that was awesome. I don't know, it's just – I always think about that. Like there's probably someone right there just watching [out for] you. (Melissa)

Elders on the trip indicated that when participants have a greater sense of their history they have a healthier relationship to their own identity. The connections participants drew between place and ancestors made the stories they heard tangible:

I think the important thing is when you're doing these things is to try to learn about your history and where you came from. And that's the thing I think that defines who they are, really. Because you only get a better understanding that when you're that kid that, hey, my grandfather was here. My great-grandfather was here. My great-grandmother was here. Then they know that. (Luke)

One participant felt being on the river brought them closer to their passed grandparents and family. Canoeing was an activity they did together, and the trip reminded her of them and the stories they used to tell. When asked why the trip was meaningful, they said:

Yeah, so that's the big piece. It allowed me to connect to history, connect to language, to connect to future generations. It also allowed me to connect specifically with my grandparents. My grandfather had lots of stories and he was a wonderful storyteller, so there's a personal history there. I wanted to do some grief work also with my aunt, so that was a perfect time because I felt I could connect with my grandparents on doing something that we did together, her and I and my uncle and my grandparents growing up. So, that was a big piece to that too. (Jessie)

The same participant had recently lost a family member. The canoe trip was a space to feel the connection to that member was not lost because they are no longer physically present. It was the space to grieve the loss by enjoying the presence of new generations:

Oh, boy. The one that just brings me a lot of peace and like I said, I was going there after my aunt passed away and part of this was my fast for her or whatever that piece is, my piece of grief or being okay with what occurred. And one of the pieces that when I look back that gives me lots of squishy feelings is going around and hearing this damn, friggin' ghetto blaster [stereo] and I was pissed off that the ghetto blaster existed and then I'm like, "Oh, my God, they're playing 'Fishing in the Dark,'" and that was one of the songs that I had on the shortlist for my aunt's [funeral] video stuff, right?

There was lots of good memories with that and I'm like, I just finished having this big cry and the next day they're playing that and I'm like, "Oh, my God, I don't want to have no big, friggin' meltdown cry because I

already did that.” And I see [Youth] and [Youth] like doing their little shoulder moves, so now when I hear that song, I close my eyes, there isn’t that big sadness or loss. I sit there and see [Youth] and [Youth] and are reminded of new life and youthfulness and so that’s the best part...(Jessie)

5.2.2 Relationships Descriptions

Participants were asked to describe their relationships from the canoe trip; most were positive. They described their relationships as: 1) knowing all other participants previously; 2) new relationships with other participants; 3) reciprocal relationships; and, 4) improved relationships. All participants said the canoe trip made them grow closer to the other participants.

Table 5: Relationships Descriptors

Relationship descriptors	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Previous human-to-human relationship	8	5 (56)
New relationships to non-human or spiritual entities	9	3 (33)
Reciprocal relationships	4	2 (22)
Improved relationships	49	9 (100)

Everyone on the canoe trip felt like they knew each other better when it was finished and five of the participants mentioned that they knew everyone from the trip previously. Even though everyone seemed to know of each other, the tripped encouraged

everyone to grow closer. Some youth that go to school together are better friends because of the canoe trip:

[Youth A], I just talk and joke throughout this semester because I barely knew [them] – Oh, I played hockey with [them] when we were little, but then [they] quit. And that was the first time talking to [them] for a while. [Youth B], I [didn't really] know. [They are] just one of those laid-back people I could just talk to [now]. (Andrew)

Some relationships on the canoe trip were described as being reciprocal, especially relationships to land. Being back on traditional land reminded one Knowledge-holder of the relationship they have with the Earth. There is a responsibility to take care of the land because it takes care of them:

Um, there's a couple words in our language that I've heard people make reference to the land. In our language they say, "nokomis". When you translate that; from my understanding it's "the grandmother". "Mide-aki" is another one I heard, "kind-hearted earth" you know, but that's the way I was taught to view the land. She is our grandmother, that she provides that we need in order to live, um, everything we have comes from her, so we have to honour and respect and take care of that, take care of her. Again, there's—we've been disconnected and how to have that relationship with her and how she works and how we conduct ourselves. (Daniel)

Prior to the canoe trip, the youth completed first aid courses, a canoe safety course, assembled their gear and packed together. The canoe trip itself was full days and nights of being together. When the trip was over, some youth felt different because they were not around the people they had spent so much of the summer with:

Our relationship has grown...[Youth] is my new best friend. Me and her have been together 24/7. She just Snapchatted me the other day when we didn't hang out and I went camping for the week to get away from everyone. And she was like this is the longest we've been together – I mean we've been without each other. And I felt kind of sad. Like dude, I

can't talk to no one else like I talk to [Youth]. I tell [Youth] everything now. (Melissa)

The adults on the trip showed their support and love for the youth learning. Some Knowledge-holders felt they built their own relationships with youth and observed the youth building relationships with the land. Seeing these connections being made intensified faith in the future of their Nishnaabe culture:

Again to me it had everything to do with supporting our young people and giving our young people the opportunity to learn about their history and to give them the opportunity to gain experience and knowledge and develop that relationship with the land...So, if they're able to make those decisions and have that understanding of the sacredness of the land, we'll be okay. And I think I heard [Knowledge-holder] mention that when she watched them, she said, "we're in good hands and we're going to be okay."
(Daniel)

5.2.3 How the Trip Impacted Relationships

Since participants indicated the canoe trip influenced their relationships, they described the ways the canoe trip provided the space for this to happen. The trip was the space for participants to be in situations where they could have fun, be successful or encounter challenges.

Table 6: How Trip Impacted Relationships

How trip impacted relationships	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Close proximity	3	3 (33)
Part of group	7	4 (44)
Working together	59	9 (100)

Successes	9	3 (33)
Challenges	30	5 (56)

The canoe trip made participants to spend a continuous amount of time together in a different environment than they are used to. Relationships were influenced by the physical space of the canoe trip in ways such as being in close proximity to each other. Being close together took place in the canoe, tents and cooking spaces. Andrew shared a favourite memory happened in the tent:

Andrew: Oh yeah, everybody went to bed, and we're still laughing, and yelling, and telling a bunch of stories. We checked the time; it was midnight. We had to wake up at 6 a.m. or 7 a.m the next morning.

Interviewer: Yeah, why was that so fun?

Andrew: I don't know. It was just fun because [Youth] would be yelling. He's like, "Rain, go away," and all of a sudden...right when he [said] that, lightning flashed, and he jumped under his sleeping bag. He's a character; that guy.

Many youth and adult participants expressed the canoe trip as a meaningful experience for them. It was meaningful because it was completed together. The experiences were shared, and time was always spent together. Being part of a group was related to positive feelings:

And just being part of that little group is kind of awesome like I don't know. I like being a part of that and it makes you feel like when you have like a lot of people like that, it makes you feel part of something [special].
(Olivia)

The trip was a process that took a lot of planning and work by all participants. Knowing your group is passionate and interested in creating these bonds with land, history and tradition is reassuring:

I was excited for them [people who have not been on a canoe trip] because I knew their compassion for the Nishnaabe way of life and the young people and as much as this experience was new for them and I don't know if it was...because it was a new experience for them, you know, but they were willing to put themselves out there and to help and support the young people. And it's just...you just develop this special relationship, you know, I think that, it's an experience that we all shared...which, I always enjoy doing. (Daniel)

Many participants described rafting up as an important part of developing these relationships as a group. Rafting up on this trip took place on the river, where you hold the gunwales of each other's canoes and float as a raft. This was an opportunity to take a break and enjoy being together, similar to sitting around a campfire:

I think the rafting up [is my favourite memory] because then everybody gets an opportunity to talk and banter back and forth. I think those rafts you do, I think, are what stand out a lot for others. And it might be incidents that happened along the river, like getting caught in a log jam or something like that [that others remember fondly]. But for me, I think it's rafting up, and basically listening to everybody chat and banter back and forth and tell whatever story you got to tell. I think those are the things that I keep remembering, I guess. (Luke)

All participants mentioned working together as a way the canoe trip fostered a space for social relationships. Canoeing and being out in the wilderness is not always easy. It can be physically demanding and tasks from "normal" life at home are more difficult, such as cooking and shelter. Having other people to around shared the burden. The cooperation skills learned on this trip should be translated to everyday life:

And that's one of the things I like about canoeing, to tell you the truth. In the more difficult trips – this was an easier trip. [But] it makes you understand that you need to cooperate, not only on that trip to help each other through the trip, but you need to cooperate and work together in life in general. You can't go through life isolated from other people, you know? Everybody's on that journey together, and you have to help each other. So, basically, that's what those kinds of trips do. (Luke)

The group stuck together while paddling and looked out for each other by communicating obstacles in the water. If situations became challenging, help was not scarce:

I think that if we hadn't worked together a lot of people would have tipped, for example. People got stuck and then the other canoes helped them, like without even requesting the help. They just canoed back and helped them out. (Hallie)

The successes and challenges that come with a canoe trip were often mentioned when describing relationships and working together. Finishing the trip after the long day on the water was a big success for those who finished. One youth felt really connected and proud of those who finished with them because they had done it together:

Like, the four canoes that finished, everyone was just like so happy. Like, [Youth] was falling asleep. But, I don't know, it's a big part of your life to have such a big success, like paddle so far, and learn so much with your friends. I found it really – a really good experience and I think other people would to. (Hallie)

Successes were shared as more enjoyable after overcoming challenges and difficulties. Two Knowledge-holders discussed how the trip at times put everyone in a position where their shortcomings would show but that did not mean the group would not be there to support you:

And so, that's a pretty dynamic piece of the [canoe trip] is taking a looking at, okay, there was [a group] of us. Yeah, we all kind of know each other a little bit, but I mean you put yourself in a situation like that

[referring to it being difficult] and [Knowledge-holder] used the word warts. We all see our warts. You get to see the raw end, the not so nice end of people in that environment and the ability to endure that and walk through that. And so that connection between individual...and [community] is like so – and connection is so really, really important. (Jessie)

One Knowledge-holder recognized being challenged on the canoe trip as a way to grow personally. The personal growth was possible due to the good relationships he had along the trip. They were able to go outside their comfort zone in a new environment and still knew they had others to support them if the situation became too challenging:

I wanted to be somewhere where I wasn't comfortable, where I was vulnerable, where my warts would be shown. I wanted that. I wanted to hurt, but not get crazy hurt. So, I didn't want to do the trip alone. I wanted an [Elder] and an [Experienced canoer] there. I'm pretty conservative, as I said. I wanted to grow. I wasn't sure if I wanted to change though, but I did want to grow. I did, I did want to grow and I wanted to commune with the *mnidoo*, the supernatural beings. Some people call the [*mnidoo* the] environment in the language. And I wanted to do that in a place where I wasn't comfortable. I wanted to hurt, like a fast. It had to be that way and that's what happened. (Jack)

Challenges of canoeing made the group take care of each other. One Knowledge-holder recalls the way the group came together after paddling the cold rain. Taking care of each other in difficult situations is a traditional value that they believe needs to be brought back to the community:

You know, but when it came down to it, we took care of each other. I saw that when—when it rained, and people got wet and they were cold. You know, we'd gone on shore there and tried to get a fire going and had a heck of a time doing that and you watch those young people and how they gathered and they made a pot of warm porridge, so they're sitting around, you know, making sure everybody's okay, people wanted to change, so you know type of [thing]. We got to bring that back within our communities, you know, where we're able to develop those relationships,

those close relationships to be able to—if you see some body in need within the community, you go and you offer what you have, you know. (Daniel)

The day it poured rain was seen as a bonding experience for some youth:

I think the canoeing itself, like those hard days, where it was pouring rain, and then we all gathered around the little fire. Like, even though no one really talked, it still brought us closer. And then all the good times, like finishing that little portage, like going swimming. (Hallie)

Participants revealed their relationships throughout the trip to be dynamic, growing and changing. The canoe trip provided many opportunities where the group had to work together, even when faced with challenges. Powering through the challenges and having to take care of each other made the trip memorable. Relationships on the trip were not limited to the humans participating but extend to the community, their passed ancestors and family, and even the land itself.

5.3 Land

Land is vital to Indigenous Knowledge. Knowledge is developed through the generations of interactions and relationships built with land, that which provides the basis for life. In the most basic sense, the land is the source of all resources such as food and materials. It is the physical space where the community lives and where their ancestors have lived. For the participants, land refers to interacting with elements like trees, wind, sky and water. It more than just being outside and leaving behind the amenities of a house.

5.3.1 Day-to-day Land of the *Biigtig*

Being out on the land for participants happens in recreational and traditional ways. The group revealed they enjoy spending time on land outside of the canoe trip and it is often done with family and friends.

Table 7: Day-to-day uses of Biigtig

Day-to-day uses	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Recreational	24	9 (100)
Traditional	60	7 (78)

When asked how participants spend time on Biigitgong land in day-to-day uses, seven participants described recreational uses such as swimming, camping and hiking. Swimming at the Mouth of the Pic stood out to some youth as an activity they have grown up doing during the summers:

I do a lot of swimming down the mouth, which is nice because like we have the best beach I think on the north shore. (Olivia)

The Mouth of the Pic is an important spot to this youth because it is an area that brings the community together. This area is diverse; it is used recreationally for children and youth to swim and play while also being the space for Powwows. This youth found it important because the community has been coming together here for so many years:

Swimming at the mouth, it's cause like everyone's been swimming at the mouth of the Pic, you know what I mean? Like you said our title is the 'Traditional Knowledge Gatherers', that's our official title and we got a lot of amazing stories of down the mouth and what they used to do and they're like Pic River [community members have] been swimming down the mouth since like it's been Pic River... And I guess it's kind of important cause that tradition will carry on throughout like forever. (Olivia)

Traditional day-to-day uses included activities such as hunting, fishing and powwows. These activities are considered traditional because they involve learning skills that are taught by older generations, such as skills needed for hunting and fishing. Hunting is part of a lot of people's lifestyle in the area. Using the land for food and resources is just something that many community members have always done:

That's how I grew up. That's how I grew up. And, you know, people from Toronto have a lifestyle that they grew up in, and that's what they do. Well, I grew up in this lifestyle; that's what I do. That's not something that you consciously think of. You grew up like that, so that's what you do. You're bored in the weekend, you grab 4-10 and go and trap partridge, you know? And you take the brackets with you. And it gets you out, gets you out. Gets you away from home. (Luke)

5.3.2 Impacts of Spending Time on Traditional Land

In the context of the canoe trip, land refers to the *Biigtig* and surrounding land this is Biigtigong's traditional territory. Participants referred to land as wilderness or the bush when describing the canoe trip. When participants were asked to talk about what land meant to them on the canoe trip, they all generally described emotions they felt.

Table 8: Impacts of spending time on traditional land

Impacts of spending time on traditional land	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Positive feelings	17	7 (78)
Indescribable feelings	27	7 (78)
Connecting to community history	17	4 (44)

The *Biigtig* was an essential aspect of both the land and the canoe trip and participants felt a deep connection to the river. One youth described that it felt meaningful to paddle that river because they were able to connect to the space as well as connect to their passed ancestors:

Just being on that highway, really, the water. Just being on there just made me feel so awesome because like I said, I could feel that people were there, right? And I got that vibe the whole time we were canoeing. So, I just feel like that was very important and very special to me. (Melissa)

Other participants found spending time on the land was relaxing. They found it had real physical benefits in their life such better sleep:

But on a personal basis, I like getting up in the land because I just like it. I find it relaxing. A lot of times when I get a little bit stressed, I'll go in the bush. I keep telling people, I go in the bush; that's what I do. And I read on Facebook, of all places, unusual, "I can't sleep tonight. Oh jeez, I got one hour of sleep last night." I don't have that issue. If I'm short of sleep, it's because somebody woke me up. I sleep good. And usually it's because if I get stressed out, I'll go for a walk somewhere, you know? Or go in the bush somewhere. And it relaxes you; it calms you down. (Luke)

Being out in the bush was a change from the usual environment. A youth described sometimes being caught in a routine of staying indoors but being out on the land meant a challenge that made them feel excited:

Yeah, if you just sit in the house all day, you're not gonna learn much stuff over that. Out in the bush, you learn stuff. Like if you want to go hunting, you'll know what you're doing or even paddling. It's a lot better for you if you learn [outside because] the land is right there. You could always come back to that TV or your phone. And it's really exhilarating being out in the wilderness. It's just beautiful. (Andrew)

While almost all participants said the of land made them feel something, many found these emotions difficult to articulate:

You know it's hard to really intellectualize... That feeling. You know to me it's almost a like a spiritual experience because that's how you feel. You know, there's a connection there, you know everyone that went on that trip felt it. You know when you're on the land, you can't help but you know, feel what we all felt. (Daniel)

Although the feeling of being on the land and river was indescribable, some participants connected these good feelings to being closer to their ancestors who paddled the Biigtig:

It was kind of amazing to experience, the Biigtig, like you know what I mean? It was just... I don't know how to describe it. When you're paddling down the river you just feel like this big happiness inside of you and you're like, "I love it out here". It's kind of [an] amazing feeling and I feel like it's meaningful to me because that's like the way my ancestors used to travel and it's kind of amazing to see the route they used to take. (Olivia)

The impact of being on the land was indescribable because of the rivers mystery and power. While the canoe trip was fun and exciting, safety was always a priority. One Knowledge-holder said the land is a complex entity because it is the source of life but it can also do harm:

I had a[n] abstract awareness [of land]. I was talking with one of these elders here last night and he was talking about how these elders here used to canoe up before the river froze or even after, come up Lake Superior right to the mouth of where the Biigtig meets Lake Superior and he's talking about this in January and I said, "So, if they tip –" And he said, "It's done." There's nothing else to talk about. [The water is cold] in the summer in Lake Superior. In January, you're done. I don't think I fully appreciated that until this canoe trip. (Jack)

Finally, being on land during the canoe trip often meant becoming familiar with community's history and their ancestors that travelled the river. Canoeing was an opportunity to spend time on land and recognize the different life their ancestors lived:

I don't know. Just background or history of our ancestors. That's what I think of. I don't know, it's just this is what they lived off. There was no civilization. There were no food markets. The animals out there are what they lived off of. And now hunting is people use hunt for sport. Yeah, a lot different than what it used to be, I guess. I don't know what it was back then, but you just know it's lot a different. (Andrew)

Being out on the land meant being home to one youth. In learning about their history and being where the stories happened, they felt closer to their ancestors:

Means home. Anywhere out in the land makes me feel like home because that's how – if I have one wish it'd be go to – back in time to where our ancestors actually lived in long houses and teepees and all that, you know? Like stereotypical type stuff and see actually how that stuff actually worked and how it looked and all of that. Obviously I can't, but –so I just feel closer to home when I'm on the land. So that's what land means to me, it means home. (Melissa)

It was also an opportunity to recognize how deep-rooted colonization has disrupted the traditions and culture of Biigtigong. Spending time on land was identified as the beginning of re-establishing these traditions and culture with generations old and young:

Now when you look at our people today and you look at our history we've been displaced and a lot of that has been put to the side and I don't want to say forgotten because it's there. As far as the older generation [goes], that's part of our responsibility to be able to recognize our history and to go back to “this is what we have to do to reconnect to who we are” and it's a very important part of our culture, it's a very important part of our traditions to be able to be on the land, to know how to conduct ourselves on the land. (Daniel)

Spending time on the land made learning the community's history occur naturally.

Stories were real once participants saw where they happened. The connections to land we said to have become stronger. One Knowledge-holder felt connections to land would make building a stronger community easier:

And so for me, personally, and I believe I do a fairly good job of this in my life: staying connected and knowing that knowledge and carrying that history and its meaning, but it's really important as we move into here, is to experience that land, experience those stories in my head and being able to connect them, "Oh, my God this is where [Ancestor] did this," or, "This is where my grandfather did this," or "This is where people are buried here." Whatever those things are because inside of those stories, whether they're just silly, funny stories or if it's our *aadsookaanen*, our sacred stories, they come off the land. They come from a communal people and so for me, development of our governance models and all of that stuff that I feel it's important that those [connections] are the foundations of which we build on this. (Jessie)

5.3.3 Changes in Meaning of Land

Participants developed a connection to land by way of the canoe trip which changed their understanding of their environment. The canoe trip allowed the space for participants to view and understand land in ways that they had not before. Eight of the nine participants indicated land meant something different to them now that the trip was over. The ninth participant explained that their understanding and view of land had changed a long time ago. Generally, the land where the trip took place was described as: 1) more valuable; 2) as something that has integrity and should be protected; and, 3) as a way to connect to ancestors.

Table 9: Meaning of land changed since trip

Meaning of land changed since trip	# of Mentions	# of Participants Mentioning (n=9) (%)
Importance and value	15	4 (44)
Concern for integrity of land	24	6 (67)
Connection to ancestors	20	6 (67)

To some participants, the meaning of land reflected the teachings they had received about the land prior to the trip by Elders. By spending time on the land, they could recognize why land is described as sacred and valuable:

I think if anything it's strengthened my values and my beliefs and what I've been taught, you know, because I can sit there and I can listen to someone talk about what, "Oh, the land's sacred", what does that mean? You know, but the more I'm able to spend out there, the more I'm really able to truly understand what that means, you know, so that if anything, it's strengthened a lot of what the elders speak about. (Daniel)

Another youth described land as valuable because it connects all aspects of life together. The distractions of everyday life make it easy to overlook the importance of the land they live on:

I think to me land means life. Like, without the land, there would be nothing, like literally. And like it can bring happiness, sadness, every emotion. It's just a huge influence that I don't think a lot of people realize, like they take it for granted. And I think that land means, I know it means a lot to my culture, and it probably means a lot to so many different cultures that I just don't know. And it's just a really important part of life, a part of everything and anything. (Hallie)

Experiencing the land led participants to understand its value and the extent of damage when land is not treated properly. Since land is valuable and holds community history it should be respected:

Well, we have to take care of it, because if you don't take care of it, we'll lose it and lose everything. I think. (Ben)

Spending time on land was perceived by participants as an important way to build a connection with the territory. When processes like climate change are having a negative

impact, land should be taken care of now more than ever. One youth felt more community members should connect to their territory:

Nowadays you don't really see much people out on the land but like when—like I think it's important for everyone to, even the youth, to like get out there because the land, it's slowly—like climate change and stuff like that so you just have to take what you've been taking for granted—like you have to use it, otherwise it's just going to be to waste. (Olivia)

Another negative impact to land mentioned such was the disruption and damage caused by logging and mining industries. These industries were referred to negatively by some participants because they believed they do not respect the land, causing an imbalance.

The negative impacts industries have on land are more devastating when one understands all the layers of value and importance the land and *Biigtig* river hold:

It's almost like there's an arrogance, that [industries] can keep doing what they're doing and everything will be okay but it's not. You know within our...like when you listen to our elders and our knowledge keepers within our lodges, there's a word that they used, it's called, *wayen say a kay*. They say in our language and what that means is the earth is going to change, there's a change, that's what they say. When you say, "well, why?", it's because there's an imbalance, you know, in the world and what's happening in like our view and our beliefs and the earth is a living entity, it's alive and it sustains life. We owe our existence to the land. (Daniel)

Learning the community's history while on the river allowed participants to make connections and build relationships to ancestors. Part of the trip's intentions were to rename places along the canoe route in *Nishnaabemoen*. Naming a place is a process and there are traditional rules to ensure the name is useful and has meaning. Understanding the proper ways to rename a spot connected some youth to the traditions of their ancestors:

Yeah [Elder] says, it's not like they name [places] after people. It's not like Dirty Water or something like that, or something stupid or like Thomas River or Thomas Creek. We named it after what goes down there, like Pike Falls because we caught 20 pike there. (Andrew)

The meaning of land changed when participants, especially youth, heard more stories about that land and their ancestors on the land. Connections to land were built when they realized this land is part of their own direct history:

I think it has. I think I've realized that – like, before the trip I didn't – I don't know, I feel like I would answer the previous question differently. And now after I've seen [and] I've heard the stories of how our ancestors used it so much. It just made me realize a lot more how valuable it is, and how much it's involved in everyone's live, and anything's life. (Hallie)

To the participants spending time on land is important to them and has positive effects such as good feelings and feeling more connected to their community and ancestors. The canoe trip encouraged connection to land that was expressed through the participants explanations of what land means to them. Spending time on land in this way and with this group of people made their understandings and connections to land deeper.

Chapter 6

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter will be to examine the results of this thesis and to illustrate how this case study develops existing knowledge and applications of the concept of environmental repossession. To begin, this chapter will review the purpose and main objectives that guided this thesis. It will connect the purpose of the research to the three main resulting themes: 1) Indigenous Knowledge; 2) Social Relationships; and, 3) Connection to Land. This chapter will then situate the Biigtigong Nishnaabeg case study within the theoretical concept of environmental repossession and explain how the results add to what is known about this concept. In addition to expanding the theoretical framework, I will also discuss what these findings can lead to new land-based education policy, its methodological contributions, discuss the limitations of this research and identify possible areas for future research.

6.1 Research Objectives

This research explored the concept of environmental repossession through a community-led canoe trip in the traditional territory of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg during the summer of 2017. This research addressed the following objectives:

- 1) To explore how the trip influenced or provided applied learning and practice of Indigenous Knowledge;
- 2) To examine how the trip fostered spaces for social relationships; and,
- 3) To describe if and how the journey established connection to land.

6.2 Key Findings

The canoe trip took place along the *Biigtig*, a river that holds tremendous significance to the Biigtigong Nishnaabeg community. The purpose of this research was to examine the ways in which the canoe journey fostered elements key to the concept of environmental repossession. Environmental repossession has been defined as the social, political and cultural processes by which Indigenous peoples are expressing and asserting their rights to land (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014). This concept relies heavily on three main elements: Indigenous Knowledge; social relationships; and, connection to land. The Biigtigong canoe trip was examined as a case study wherein participants were interviewed post-trip about the ways these elements contributed to their experience. Participants revealed that during the trip they learned and practiced Indigenous Knowledge, developed social relationships and connected to traditional land.

6.2.1 Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous Knowledge was described differently by youth and Knowledge-holders in their interviews. For youth, IK meant the wilderness skills needed to be successful on the trip such as being a skilled paddler or being able to build fire. Most Knowledge-holders described it as knowing how to conduct yourself on traditional land and embodying traditional values that come from teachings, sacred stories and language. Indigenous Knowledge was therefore learned from others and from the land. Learning from others on the trip occurred through observation or by verbal directions. It was also learned through shared stories about ancestors and past family; these were most often told by Knowledge-holders. The land was a teacher and the *Biigtig* formed the physical environment for participants to learn through first-hand experiences. Youth and

Knowledge-holders agreed that Indigenous Knowledge was practiced on the trip through wilderness skills (ie. collecting drinkable water, canoeing), learning and speaking the language, and actions such as caring for one another.

6.2.2 Relationships

This canoe trip was completed as a group from the starting point at Caramat to the end at the Mouth of the Pic. Strong social relationships were necessary for the canoe trip to have been completed successfully. Participants described their social relationships on the trip as exchanges they had with each other and with non-human and spiritual entities such as water, trees and ancestors. Participants indicated the relationships to be strengthened over the course of the trip as they became more familiar with one another and non-human and spiritual entities. The nature and space of the canoe trip meant having to work together and, spend great amounts of time with one another. The experience did not come without challenges. Most participants indicated these situations to be frustrating and uncomfortable. Everyone participating played a role to support and ease the challenging times. Relationships with the water and trees were similar to human-to-human relationships because so much time was spent interacting with these non-human entities. Participants felt the presence of their ancestors both when paddling the *Biigtig* and when hearing stories about them. It was often the Knowledge-holders who shared the stories and were able to communicate lineages of ancestors and the places they occurred to other participants present.

6.2.3 Connection to land

Almost all participants expressed that the trip strengthened the meaning and importance of their traditional territory. The canoe trip offered a dedicated space for

participants to become more familiar with the physical land and offered real-time and real-place opportunity to learn stories about their ancestors and history. Sharing stories about their ancestors made participants feel more connected to land because generations of their own ancestors had canoed the Biigtig. These connections to land and to their ancestors occurred simultaneously. The land, and the river in particular, is the place where the stories occurred and was the place where the stories were re-told.

The canoe trip changed the meaning of land to some participants. In some cases, land was perceived to be more meaningful. Some participants spoke about the strong bond between their community and the land; there is concern for future generations and sustainability of this traditional territory. When participants described being out on the land during this experience, they often explained positive or fulfilling emotions. Some Knowledge-holders felt benefits to their well-being including happiness and contentment. Other benefits included improved sleep and one participant described feeling at peace with a family member who had recently passed. Many saw the land as not only a provider, but also a teacher. In the same way the land has provided for the well-being of the Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, there was a sentiment of human responsibility toward protection of the land and its continued healthy sustainability.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions to the Concept of Environmental Repossession

The concept of environmental repossession describes the process by which Indigenous people are asserting rights to their land and the various social, economic and cultural means by which this happens. The dispossession of Indigenous lands by the federal government has been a devastating disruption to Indigenous people and their cultures,

livelihoods and overall health (Richmond & Cook, 2016). But as the results of this thesis illustrate, repossession of land through canoeing is but one expression of Indigenous rights. As a case study of land-based environmental repossession, this thesis contributes to the theoretical development of this concept in three ways: 1) The uptake of Indigenous Knowledge is different between generations; 2) Relationships can be established with past ancestors and with the ecosystem; and, 3) Land is an ecosystem while also being intricately tied to culture and identity. The elements of the concept (Indigenous Knowledge, land and relationships) are connected and overlap, and the application of environmental repossession intensifies the processes of asserting rights to land and Indigenous ways of life. A conceptualization of environmental repossession from this canoe trip can be seen in figure 3.

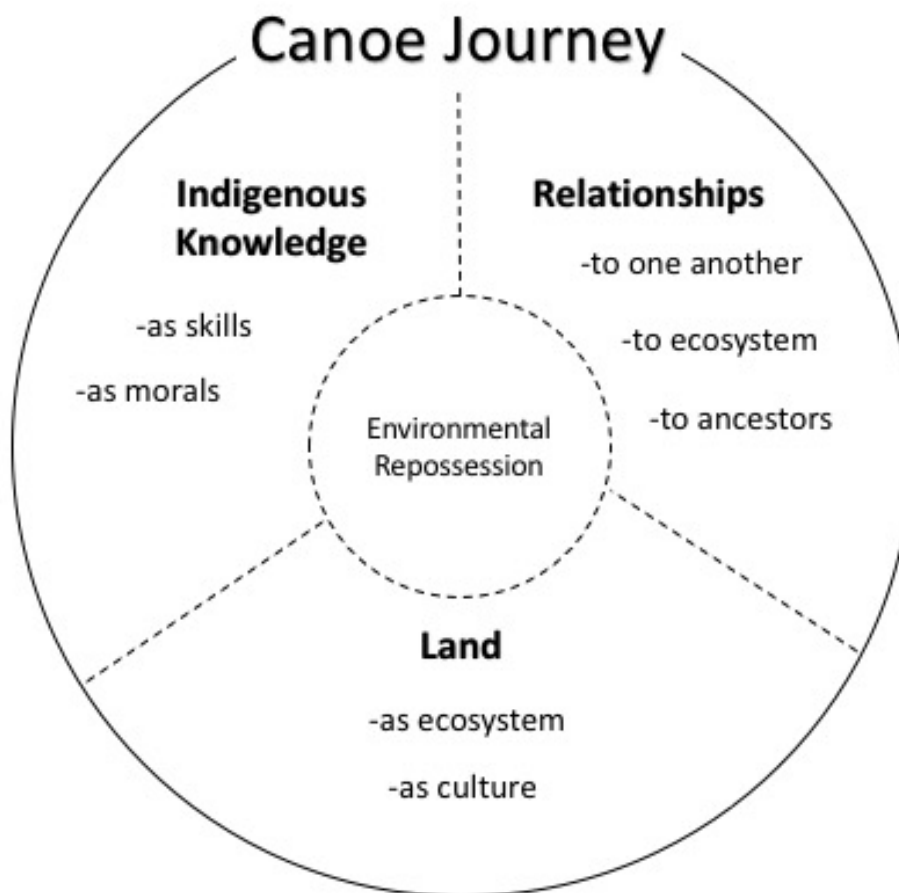


Figure 3: Conceptualization of environmental repossession from canoe journey.

This conceptualization shows Indigenous ways of life as the broader process that guides environmental repossession to stronger Indigenous well-being and culture. Indigenous Knowledge, relationships and land are components of positive Indigenous ways of life and are the elements of environmental repossession. It is seated at the centre of this conceptualization as asserting Indigenous rights to land and ways of life are the purpose of the process of environmental repossession. Indigenous Knowledge, relationships and land are connected to each other and interact in varying ways.

The largest circle represents the space and application of the canoe journey, where processes of learning and applying Indigenous Knowledge, building relationships and connecting to land occurred. From this canoe journey results showed that Indigenous Knowledge was learned and applied through skills and through morals. Relationships were built and strengthened on this trip with other participants, with their traditional territory, the ecosystem and with their ancestors. The results of the canoe journey revealed that land is an ecosystem and that land is equated with culture. These key findings from the canoe journey are labelled within this circle. The findings mentioned above are close to the element they most relate to, for example “skills” is close to Indigenous Knowledge, but are not directly linked to the element. This is because the key findings have been influenced by the other elements. For example, recognizing land as a part of culture occurred while canoeing the *Biigtig*, an important river to the history of Biigtigong. Generations have paddled the river and this journey is part of their local culture and while paddling they also used Indigenous Knowledge to navigate the area and interact with the ecosystem and their ancestors as shown in the diagram. Indigenous Knowledge as practiced skills and morals, connecting to land as an ecosystem and culture, and building relationships with humans, the ecosystem and ancestors transpired because of the canoe trip. As an application of environmental repossession, the canoe trip reinforced practices of asserting rights to land and Indigenous ways of life.

6.3.1 Generational understandings of Indigenous Knowledge

During this canoe trip, Indigenous Knowledge was understood in varying ways. According to LaDuke (1994), “Traditional ecological knowledge is the culturally and spiritually based way in which Indigenous peoples relate to their ecosystem” (127) and in

the case of the canoe trip, the ways participants related to their ecosystem was understood differently depending on age. Youth described Indigenous Knowledge as the wilderness skills needed to successfully navigate and survive the ecosystem, which was the *Biigtig* and surrounding land. These wilderness skills included paddling, searching out drinkable water and preparing food. By contrast, adults described Indigenous Knowledge as the ways you conduct yourself on land which come from traditional morals. This meant understanding how humans relate to each other and how they relate to their ecosystem. For adults on the trip, Indigenous Knowledge was the display of morals such as kindness and patience.

These definitions of IK from the canoe trip are fundamentally rooted within the definition by LaDuke (1994) but differ in the depth of understanding how one relates to their ecosystem. Both meanings of Indigenous Knowledge were practiced during the canoe trip by youth and adults and practicing wilderness skills was equally as important as practicing morals. From the canoe trip it can be seen that the meaning of Indigenous Knowledge changes over time and these youth are beginning to realize the ways they relate to and are a part of their ecosystem. Wilderness skills implies the learning and application of Indigenous Knowledge happened within the ecosystem of the *Biigtig*. Youth learned how to interact with the water, the sky and the animals to make it to the end of the trip safely. While learning the skills, they were also learning the traditional morals that come with the challenges of completing these skills (ie. the patience of starting a fire or the courage to paddle through a rapid). Morals were learned by relating with each other and working as a unit to complete the canoe trip successfully and safely. Although wilderness skills can only be practiced in the ecosystem of traditional land,

traditional morals can be applied in all ecosystems, even if they are not land-based. Knowledge-holders were able to articulate a deeper understanding of Indigenous Knowledge; IK is not only knowing a skill but also knowing how to act. This canoe trip reveals that generations conceptualize Indigenous Knowledge differently and therefore their process towards asserting rights to land might also be different. Together, the understandings illustrate the complexity of Indigenous Knowledge as a system that is based in spirituality, culture and traditional land.

6.3.2 Relationships with ancestors and the ecosystem

The canoe trip was the space to foster relationships between participants themselves, other community members, their ecosystem and their ancestors. Relationships between humans were fostered because the canoe trip made participants work as a group, experience challenges and spend time together over the course of the week. During the trip, an objective was to share stories and history of the community's ancestors. The *Biigtig* is considered a highway that ancestors frequently paddled because it physically connected them to other communities and other resources. The canoe trip was an ideal opportunity to share stories about their ancestors in the space where the stories occurred. As a result, participants identified the canoe trip as a space where they built relationships with their past ancestors.

Relationships on the canoe trip were defined as interactions that could be human-to-human, human to non-human entity or human to spiritual entity. The interactions with non-human and spiritual entities changes the element “social relationships” to “relationships” because they are conducted by different interactions. Participant interactions with ancestors occurred most often through stories. Stories were shared by

Knowledge-holders but the meanings within stories was their ancestors passing on their knowledge. Storytelling in Indigenous contexts has been shown to be a powerful method of bringing together generations, past and present, along with land, culture and Indigenous Knowledge (Datta, 2018). Storytelling has been a longstanding tradition that keeps Indigenous Knowledge systems alive (Datta, 2018; Kovach, 2009).

In addition to stories, interactions with ancestors included participants feeling their ancestors' presence while paddling. Others said the canoe trip made them think about their past family members and being on the land was the space to talk to them. Before participants began canoeing, they laid tobacco in the *Biigtig*. This offering was asking the water and their ancestors to protect and keep everyone on the canoe trip safe, which they did. When they had almost reached the end of the trip, participants laid tobacco in the water again as a thank you to the ancestors. Participants also connected to their ancestors as they became a part of a long-standing canoe tradition that is navigating the *Biigtig*.

The canoe trip was the space for participants to build relationships with their past ancestors, especially while canoeing and hearing stories about them. The concept of environmental repossession is asserting Indigenous rights to land as a process that improves the well-being of present and future generations. But past family members and ancestors are critical to the establishment of Indigenous Knowledge systems, culture and understandings of land and therefore should not be overlooked in terms of relationships. During this canoe trip, participants shared that learning from ancestors was very impactful to their canoe trip experience. It shaped their understandings of who they are because they know where and who they came from.

6.3.3 Reconceptualizing the meaning of land

Connecting to land on this canoe trip was more than knowing the ground where one stands. It was the place where participants interacted with many components of the ecosystem like water, the sky and trees. Paddling and navigating the land took place on the river where participants interacted with water for most of the day. The community had objectives to rename land as a reclamation effort and this included naming ecosystem components such as a waterfall that is not “land” in the physical sense. During the canoe trip, participants identified traditional land as the ecosystem that contained lakes, rivers, dry land, trees, animals, sky, weather etc.

The *Biigtig* is such an important part of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg because it was the “highway” their ancestors paddled which connected them to other communities and resources. Biigtigong in *Nishnaabemoen* translates to “the place where the river erodes”. During the trip, the banks were often sandy or made of clay and landslides were seen along steep shorelines and displayed the meaning of Biigtigong’s name to be as true today as when their ancestors paddled the river. The relationships their ancestors established with the territory as an ecosystem over time is reflected in their name. Canoeing is also a longstanding cultural tradition in Biigtigong because it was the easiest method of navigating their ecosystem. Biigtigong’s culture is closely tied to their traditional territory as LaDuke’s definition of IK suggests (1994). This canoe trip went beyond asserting Indigenous rights to land as environmental repossession suggests because it strengthened participants’ identities as members of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg.

Other Indigenous cultures also have identities that are intricately tied to their environments. In Hawaii, the identities of Kanaka Maoli people are rooted in traditional

songs and chants that tell stories about ocean canoe journeys, fishing and family (Haili'ōpua Baker , Mazer, & Looser, 2016). These stories revolve around their ecosystem and its components, such as the ocean, landmasses and all other organisms they consider living (Haili'ōpua Baker , Mazer, & Looser, 2016). All parts of the ecosystem, like the ocean and plants, are considered Kanaka ancestors because everything in their ecosystem, including people, are connected to each other. (Haili'ōpua Baker , Mazer, & Looser, 2016). Like Biigtigong, Kanaka's cultural expressions and their identity come from their traditional land.

In Indigenous contexts, land refers to the ecosystem related to, as well as part of their cultural identity. For Indigenous peoples, their traditional land is who they are and how they define themselves. Although this canoe trip was traditional land-based land can also be equated with culture, which is important for exploring processes of repossession that are not land-based. Processes of repossession that are not land-based might be expressed in culturally-based ways by Indigenous peoples. Connections to traditional territory could still be established by non-land-based expressions of environmental repossession since culture and ecosystems are so closely tied. The reconceptualization of land provides a gap for further research to examine the processes of environmental repossession in spaces that are not land-based.

6.4 Policy Implications

This research demonstrates how Indigenous communities understand the most appropriate ways to actively translate Indigenous values and philosophies to people within their community and younger generations. The results of this research show the importance of participating in and learning about traditions and community history. It

also included youth in powerful actions, like that of renaming place in *Nishnaabemoen*. The renaming process was strategic to demonstrate reclaiming land as the community continues on their journey to settle their comprehensive land claim. This canoe trip was overall a positive experience for youth and adults who participated. It also introduced or furthered youth learning about their traditions, history and culture while including them in solutions to systemic issues that their community experiences. The design and implementation of this canoe trip has the possibility to influence future policy relating to Indigenous education curriculums that are land-based and determined by the community. Education systems that reflect the values and traditions of the community would ensure consistency between Indigenous philosophies, knowledge systems, values and ways of being.

6.5 Methodological Contributions

The methods for this project were inspired by community-based participatory research as it was a community-led canoe initiative with a research component that aligned with the community's objectives and was able to be explored (Louis, 2007). Meaningful relationships between Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, Western University and the researchers themselves are crucial avenues for there to be reciprocal translations of information and knowledge (Louis, 2007). The balance within research relationships encourages the decolonization of research and for there to be a space that prioritizes methodologies that are not inspired by "Western" methods (Bartlett, et al. 2007). It is important that this research shares the results with participants and the greater community in which the findings are relevant and useful and can further be used by the community in positive ways. To continue the relationship between the researcher and the community, the

findings of this project will be presented in Biigtigong in summer 2018 along with a community gathering to celebrate. We will be creating a map of the journey with the new place names in *Nishnaabemoen* as a thank you for their partnership and to visually display the journey.

Although the participation in this canoe trip was a small number of people, many of them were youth from the community. These youth were part of the repossession process and took part in asserting Indigenous rights to their knowledge and land. Through their community, they participated in a project that taught them about the importance of making decisions and taking action for their territory. This research sought to empower these youth voices and their perceptions of the journey as equal to the adult counterparts on the canoe trip. We often look to Elders as those who are knowledge-holders but these youth revealed mature perceptions which greatly impacted this research. They are important members of their community and might one day become knowledge-holders.

6.5.1 Positionality Contributions

As a non-Indigenous researcher, I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to participate in such meaningful and fun research. There have been many challenges, the biggest of which is my limited understanding of an Indigenous perspective and worldview. This has made it difficult to fully understand and explore Indigenous Knowledge as a concept and a practice. Although coming into this research I was limited, I discovered humility to be a supportive value. I recognized I would be the one doing the most learning as living in northern Ontario and being in the community was outside of what was familiar to me. In these unfamiliar places, I learned what it really

meant to listen to those around me and I loved hearing their stories. I was also supported greatly by the connections Dr. Richmond has with her community. Without these previous relationships, it would be a lot more difficult to build the trust that I know I felt during the canoe trip.

It has been almost a year since I participated in the canoe journey. During this time, I have reflected on the roles I navigated during my time in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg and on the canoe trip. These roles are two-fold: 1) a researcher who also participated in the canoe trip, and 2) someone who is non-Indigenous and not from Northern Ontario who was invited to be part of the journey. Being a part of the canoe journey coincided with the community's goals about having youth experience their traditional territory by means of a canoe. It was important to learn about canoe journeys by experiencing one myself. Going through the same learning processes as the TKG's, such as the first aid course and canoe safety, was a valuable opportunity to enrich my understandings of these people I would canoe alongside. Spending time in the area, building relationships with youth and adults and participating in the trip allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the context of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg that would inform the story this thesis would tell. This thesis was community-based research and being in the discipline of geography, we know our environments to be the intersections of people and space. As a researcher in this circumstance, it was integral see first-hand knowledge how processes of environmental repossession unfold. Sometimes you just have to get in the canoe.

6.6 Limitations of Research

With all research there are limitations and the case of the canoe journey is not an exception. These limitations are important to consider for future research and how the

findings might impact the development of programs or repossession-based expressions like that of the canoe journey. The canoe journey and how it was enacted is very specific within the context of the community in terms of their traditions and goals for reclamation. The participants of this thesis are a small representation of members from the community of Biigtigong, but it is a case study that is a part of a larger, global environmental repossession project. Although the results and how paddling the *Biigtig* acted as a site of land repossession was specific to that particular context, it can be translated to into the larger framework of environmental repossession. This project was the first time environmental repossession was explored as a case study and as such, should be understood as a process that was designed to fit with the setting of a canoe trip in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg.

6.7 Future Research

This canoe journey was the first case study of environmental repossession and by the larger SSHRC which this project is situated, gives opportunity for the potential positive co-learning among Indigenous nations across different ecologies. This case study has theoretically and methodologically contributed to the concept of environmental repossession. Future research can build upon these concepts and methodologies.

Theoretically, there is much more to be explored in how other Indigenous individuals and communities are asserting their rights whether this be to land, knowledge or anything else that is pertinent to their well-being and the well-being of the future. Processes of expressing Indigenous rights will look different depending on the people and space they are situated. This case study of environmental repossession took place along the *Biigtig*, a part of Biigtigong's traditional territory, that made connecting and interacting with land

a direct process. In this case the space of repossession was the same space of their traditional territory. There are communities and nations that no longer have direct access to their traditional land for varying reasons. Future research could understand the pathways and processes that indirectly assert these rights. For example, how the processes look to assert rights to land indirectly from the traditional territory such as in cities or urban spaces. Another possible pathway to explore environmental repossession could be asserting Indigenous Knowledge expressions that do not follow conventional pathways such as through social media or as seen briefly on this trip, youth being the Elders that share knowledge.

As previously mentioned, this canoe trip was a contemporary expression of canoeing and not a replication of “traditional canoeing”, such as using birch bark canoes and excluding modern technology (Low, 2015). This expression was determined by the community as an appropriate pathway to meet their objectives of having youth reclaim land, rename places and share the history. This reflects the autonomy that communities have over determining what it means and how it looks to be Indigenous. It also reflects the resilience of culture as it changes and progresses with time without forgetting its underlying values. Future research of environmental repossession might want to look to the ways that Indigenous people as individuals and groups are redefining what it means to be Indigenous in “non-traditional” ways to improve the well-being and life of the present and future generations.

Methodologically, there are many different ways participants’ perceptions could have been gathered. In this thesis, interviews were conducted after the canoe trip had taken place. In order to gain richer and better contextualized data, multiple stages of

interviews could have been conducted (i.e., before, during and after the trip). This emphasis on the temporal learning might reveal pathways and developments of understanding that occur throughout the process of environmental repossession. Multiple stages of interviewing might also provide a basis for comparing perceptions of this concept before and after it has been applied or for documenting the process as it takes place across space and time.

This thesis could also have used a Photovoice method, where participants take photos to document their journey on the canoe trip. These photos could then be discussed in focus groups and in individual interviews where participants can elaborate and reflect on the meaning of their photos. Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that engages participants to use their photos as catalysts for social change (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008).

Finally, I believe this research could have benefitted from a participant debriefing session or focus group after the completion of the canoe trip and interviews. In this session after the trip, all participants would have been able to reflect on the experience. It would have been an opportunity to share these experiences, including what we had learned. The results showed there were differences in learning, especially that related to Indigenous Knowledge across age groups. A debriefing session could have provided space to discuss and explore these differences. The session would have been helpful to decompress and reflect on the canoe trip experience that had been filled with so many exciting, unique and challenging situations. It would have also been useful to hear community feedback prior to entering the data analysis stage.

6.8 Conclusion

The Biigtigong canoe trip was a community-led expression of environmental repossession in their traditional territory. The canoe trip was the space for youth and adults to learn and practice Indigenous Knowledge, build relationships with each other, the land and their ancestors, and connect to their territory as an ecosystem and as a culture. The canoe journey was a contemporary expression of Indigenous way of life and was the space for participants to affirm their identity as a member of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg. This thesis as a case study of a land-based site of environmental repossession serves as a basis for other processes of this concept. New cases of environmental repossession will reveal alternative and creative pathways to improved well-being of Indigenous peoples and communities everywhere.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Introduction

I want to thank you for being a part of this research, which is about sharing your experiences and stories of the canoe trip. Your thoughts and ideas are important. This information will help Biigtigong to understand the impact of this canoe trip for youth who participate.

Over the next hour or so, I will ask you questions about your experiences on this canoe trip, including what your role as a Traditional Knowledge Gatherer meant. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. We want to hear your thoughts about the trip, about what you have learned and experienced along the way.

You do not have to answer questions if you do not want to.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Ice Breakers

Please tell me your full name.

Just for fun, what are your favourite activities in the summer?

Section 1: Your role as a TKG

Tell me about how you became a traditional knowledge gatherer on this canoe trip?

(OR Tell me about why you wanted to participate in this trip? How did you become involved?)

How would you describe the importance canoe journeys to (within) your community?

Could you describe your views about this canoe journey as a way of collecting or using Traditional Knowledge?

What does it mean **to you** to have Traditional Knowledge?

What kinds of Traditional Knowledge did you learn on this trip? – Fire making, canoeing, stars, weather, medicine, language?

Can you describe the ways you learned these forms of Traditional Knowledge?

How did these learning experiences make you feel as a young person (as a community member)?

Do you think these learning experiences could be important for other youth in your community?

- Why do you say that?
- What do you think can be done to improve youths knowledge on

How would you describe the canoe journey as a learning opportunity for youth in the community?

The canoe trip involved a way of learning that is very different than regular high school curriculum.

- Did you enjoy this way of learning? Why?
- What made the canoe trip (e.g. being out on the land) important for your learning?

What made this experience meaningful to you as an Anishinabe (person) youth?

What there something very important to you about the canoe journey you would like to share?

Section 2: Social Relationships

How would you describe your relationship with the people during the trip?

Did you make any new relationships on the canoe trip?

- With whom?

Explain why you felt it necessary to develop relationships with others on this trip?

- Why? In what ways was it important?

Section 3: Connection to Land

Outside of the canoe trip, how do you spend time on the land?

- Is this important to you?

What kind of activities do you do, and who do you do them with?

What does the land mean to you as an Anishinabe (person) youth?

Knowing this trip would mean being in the bush for a week, why was it important for you to participate in the canoe trip?

Has your perception of what the land means to you as an Anishinabe (person) youth changed at all now that the canoe trip has ended?

- How so?

Do you think it is important for other youth to spend time on the land? Why?

Section 4: General Questions

What is your favourite memory from the canoe trip?

- Can you tell me more about this?
- What was special about this memory?

Was there anything you did not like about the canoe trip?

- Why didn't you like it?

What would you change about the canoe trip? Why?

Have you ever been on a canoe trip before?

- If yes – was it similar or different? In what ways?

End of Interview

Thank you for taking the time to answer some questions for me, your insights are valuable. I really appreciate the effort that you have put into this canoe trip, taking pictures and participating in the 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?

Appendix B: Western NMREB Approval



Research Ethics

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Prof. Chantelle Richmond
Department & Institution: Social Science\Geography, Western University

NMREB File Number: 109622
Study Title: Running Head: Indigenous Canoeing and Environmental Repossession in Biigtigong Nishnaabeg

NMREB Initial Approval Date: August 30, 2017
NMREB Expiry Date: August 30, 2018

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol	Received August 23, 2017	
Letter of Information & Consent	Participant	2017/08/21
Caregiver Letter of Information & Consent		2017/08/21
Instruments	Interview Guide	2017/08/21

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

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.

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

EO: Erika Basile __ Grace Kelly__ Katelyn Harris__ Nicola Morphet __ Karen Gopaul __ Patricia Sargeant __ Kelly Patterson __

Appendix C: Summer 2017 Timeline

Table 10: Timeline of research

Time	Activity
June 10-16	Initial trip to Biigtigong to meet Lilian and Eddie. Get familiar with area
June 17	Back in London, Ontario
July 24	Leave for Biigtigong: main fieldwork trip
July 25-27	Wilderness first aid training at Gchi Waaswaaganing
August 1-3	Complete canoe safety certification course at Pukaskwa National Park
August 5-9	Canoe trip on Biigtig
August 9-13	Rest
August 14-25	Conduct 10 interviews: held at Gchi Waaswaaganing, Band Office and cultural building
August 21	Day trip to Santoy Lake
August 22	Day trip to Jackfish Lake
August 28	Renaming session with group at Band Office
August 31	Return from Biigtigong to London
September	Transcribe interviews

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Kathleen Mikraszewicz

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
2012-2016 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2016-2018 M.A.

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2016-2018

Conferences and Lectures:

American Association of Geographers – Conference Presentation. *Paddling the Biigtig: A case study of Environmental Repossession through canoeing.* New Orleans Marriott – New Orleans, LA
(April 2018)