

# An Urban Cree Finding Place at xʷčičəsəm

Hailey Bird Matheson\*

University of British Columbia  
haileymatheson10@gmail.com

## Abstract

This article explores my personal journey as an urban Cree and social work student at the University of British Columbia (UBC). From this positionality, I reflect on what it means to Indigenize social work by privileging personal and professional identity, including ceremony and spirituality, as integral to the ways we interact with others, particularly between Indigenous Peoples. I offer my own journey connecting to my identity as an urban Cree person through working with Indigenous plant medicines. In particular, I will highlight my experiences at xʷčičəsəm—a garden on the stolen and ancestral territories of the xʷməθk-wəy̓əm [Musqueam] people. Also known as the Indigenous Health Research and Education Garden at the UBC Farm, xʷčičəsəm means “the place where we grow” in hənqəminəm. xʷčičəsəm embodies a space where Indigenous Peoples can connect with both human and plant relatives to share stories, engage with traditional medicines, and heal in a space by us and for us.

**Keywords:** social work; Indigenization; Indigenous land-based pedagogies; knowledge keepers; urban garden

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Ninanâskomon (I am grateful). Ninanâskomon, xʷčičəsəm, for giving me the opportunity to connect with my ancestral memory of muskeg (Labrador tea), tobacco, sweetgrass, kinnikinnic, and sage. Ninanâskomon, xʷčičəsəm, for providing me with a space to learn about myself and my family alongside other Indigenous Peoples. Ninanâskomon, xʷčičəsəm, for surrounding me with other Indigenous peers and allies. Ninanâskomon, xʷčičəsəm, for allowing me to gift my kookum (grandmother) tobacco that had been grown alongside the medicines I had planted.

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\*Thank you, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, for allowing me to be a guest on your territory and allowing me to walk beside you as caretakers of this land; I humbly stand beside you. It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge all those who work at xʷčičəsəm who have shared time, medicine, art, and knowledge with me, including Alannah Young Leon (Opaskwayak Cree Nation and Peguis First Nation, PhD), Georgia Pappajohn (Greek ancestry), Chrystal Sparrow (Musqueam First Nation, Coast Salish artist and carver), Dave Robinson (Timiskaming First Nation, Indigenous educator, Artist in Residence at UBC farm, and Native American boxing champion) and Uncle Shane Point (proud member of the Point family and equally proud member of the Coast Salish Nation). I would also like to particularly thank Eduardo Jovel (Pipil and Mayan ancestry, associate professor, director of Indigenous research partnerships, Faculty of Land and Food Systems), and Wilson Mendes (Terena ancestry, PhD candidate, garden coordinator, Faculty of Land and Food Systems) for mentoring me during my time at xʷčičəsəm with endless patience and kindness in welcoming me into such unfamiliar scenarios. Thank you also to Marie Nightbird (Saulteaux, Sioux, MSW) for supporting me in this directed study and connecting me with those at xʷčičəsəm. Thank you to my family for giving me lifelong teachings. Ekosi

through the learnings I had during my journey connecting to my identity as an urban Cree person through working with Indigenous plant medicines. *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam) people gifted *xʷčičəsəm* (The Indigenous Health Research and Education Garden at the University of British Columbia) its name in their *hənq̃əmínəm* language (*xʷčičəsəm*, n.d.). The English translation for *xʷčičəsəm* is “the place where we grow,” representing the aim of the garden to “serve educational and research needs related to Indigenous knowledge” (*xʷčičəsəm*, n.d.). Indigenous and non-Indigenous people sharing space at *xʷčičəsəm* can grow and learn alongside their human and plant relatives. Stories can be shared as a medium for traditional knowledge, and interaction with Indigenous medicines and ceremony can evoke blood memory crucial to many Indigenous people’s wellness and educational journeys. The term “blood memory” refers to memories of activities that an individual’s ancestors engaged in, whether or not the individual has directly experienced these activities. In this manner, the garden is informed by *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* protocol to embody a space where participants can access both traditional and non-traditional plant uses in a respectful and reciprocal environment.

I am an uninvited guest on the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam) territory, and, as such, I humbly disclose who I am and where I come from. My given name is Hailey Matheson. On my mother’s side I am Nēhiyaw (Cree) from the Bird family, of Peguis First Nation, Treaty One. On my father’s side, I am of mixed European ancestry, mainly of Scottish and French descent. I was born on Ktunaxa and Sinixt territory in what is now British Columbia’s interior and grew up in Tonkawa territory in what is now central Texas. The lands on which I was raised shaped my passion for interpersonal work with other Indigenous Peoples, particularly through traditional medicines and land-based practices. A mentor and Indigenous professor at the School of Social Work, which I attended at the University of British Columbia (UBC), supported me to connect with *xʷčičəsəm* last year, during my final year of university, to explore alternatives to what social work could look like, by Indigenous Peoples and for Indigenous Peoples.

Interning with *xʷčičəsəm* has been a transformative experience for me as an urban Cree woman who grew up and attended university far from my traditional lands in Manitoba. Since completing my degree, I have continued to live on Unceded Coast Salish territory. In the beginning of this journey, I was apprehensive about interacting with so many Indigenous plants. I had received very few cultural teachings on handling many of these plants and often had no personal experience with them. It was challenging to overcome the shame that accompanies the frustrations of not knowing how to utilize the plants my ancestors relied on for medicine, sustenance, and ceremony. This shame is a direct result of colonization and attempted assimilation that was in part facilitated through social work. To acknowledge and attempt to combat this shame, and in turn to integrate knowledge of the pervasive feeling of shame into a social work practice, is my approach to resisting the colonial state. However, this resistance is often easier said than done, and requires constant personal reflection and interpersonal support. Through the consistent support of Indigenous staff and interns at the garden, I was able to avoid wallowing in guilty feelings; these people were willing and eager to share their knowledge about the medicines in the garden as well as their contacts with Elders and knowledge keepers.

I began this journey at *xʷčičəsəm* with a disconnection from tobacco, though it is one of the most important and frequently used ceremonial plants by my family and the majority of the Cree community. Before coming in contact with the *xʷčičəsəm*, I had never seen tobacco that was not already ground by an industrial (typically colonial) grower. Through my internship, I participated in the processes of transplanting tobacco seedlings, harvesting them, and completing the extensive drying procedure. Elders in Vancouver’s urban Indigenous community taught me that the way we act and the mental state we are in is absorbed and then impacts the medicine we harvest and gift. As I shared the tobacco we grew at the garden in ceremony and through reciprocal exchange with Elders, I became able to feel confident in the emotion that was absorbed by the tobacco during its growth and processing time. I have now placed my feet in the soil and grown with the tobacco. I have felt loss when seedlings did not survive, and I felt joy to see plots of soil turn to birthing grounds for hundreds of tobacco stalks. As a result of this

intimacy between grower and tobacco, tobacco and ceremony, it is highly comforting to know the place in which the tobacco has been grown (Wilson & Restoule, 2010). When I look at the tobacco I use in ceremony, now I see this process, and I remember the phases from seedling to harvesting, and all the learning and patience engrained in the cycle. After my internship, I was able to gift my kookum with ceremonial tobacco from the *xʷčičəsəm* garden. Bringing home this tobacco from my time at university felt representative of the experiences and knowledge I was able to gain during my time in an urban centre, yet all the while with the intention of returning home.

When I am in *xʷčičəsəm*, I find a sense of connection that is challenging to create in the city of Vancouver. Nixon's (2014) study of the influence of social disconnections on residents in Vancouver established that vehicular transport and city infrastructure can create barriers to emotional connection between individuals. Similarly, social work practice often engages with clients in an individualistic manner, often isolating individuals from their connections to community and family systems. This dissonance between individuals is often transferred to the relationships between urban individuals with little access to green spaces and traditional medicines.

This disconnection and rapid pace of life is challenged in the garden. This is particularly tangible while living on campus at a university where the typical collective mood is built upon an overwhelming sense of stress, and the time pressures of being a student. To be in the garden is a compilation of both control of and surrender to the medicines. This comes with the understanding that although medicinal plants are in my hands, they are not mine. I must follow my own protocol, taught to me throughout my life by my family and other Cree Elders, as well as the *xʷməθkwəyəm*, for harvesting and walking alongside these medicines. Being in the garden is offering tobacco to the fire and offering a piece of myself when I harvest or remove plants. It is being conscious that the colonial narrative on the incorrect labelling of certain plants as "weeds" ignores their traditional value and neglects their healing potential. For example, stinging nettles can be viewed as weeds that irritate the skin, but this view ignores their powerful medicinal capabilities as a diuretic and mineral supplement when ingested, and topically as an anti-inflammatory agent when prepared (Moore, 1993). It is humbling to stand in a place where I cannot predict the tasks to come because the medicines have their own will and grow according to their own agendas, changing constantly with the day and the weather. The blackberries are an accurate example of this self-autonomy. Their sweetness and sustenance appeal to many. They are easily accessible for harvesting at the garden, yet their thorny branches prevent most from climbing in their brambles and overharvesting and disrupting the fruit's availability for animals and for nutrient replacement and composting in the soil.

There is also a different kind of community that exists at the garden; again, it is distinct from the impersonal nature of the city. Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors here smile and welcome each other. They are willing to walk alongside other visitors, regardless of their level of knowledge about plants and medicines. I have met friends there who have taught me words in our ancestral Nêhiyawêwin (Cree) language, who have told many jokes, and who have shared many stories and snacks, and I am so grateful for all of them. Connecting with other urban Cree has provided windows into conversations with others who have validated many of my feelings of disconnection and isolation from community, language, and ceremony. In these interactions, we formed our own community, which gave me courage to seek out my relatives separated through foster care and displacement in Vancouver and begin to find ways to learn my language and participate in ceremonies in urban spaces.

I am grateful to the groups of young children who pass through or stop at the garden. They bring honest questions and laughter and are not afraid to say when someone is talking too much. Watching many children, both Indigenous and not, being so receptive to the medicinal and sacred values of plants—not to mention their genuine surprise at the edibility of most—is encouraging. I am hopeful because many of these children and youth have a genuine space in their lives for respecting Indigenous medicines and appreciating places where plants are free to grow and be appreciated for their medicinal and spiritual values.

## Intergenerational Spaces

Many different Indigenous youth-centred groups and programs spend time within *xʷčičəsəm*, which provides a relational gathering space as well as a significant cultural connection for the youth. This approach to supporting Indigenous youth by providing time to interact with an outdoor sacred space, often alongside Elders, is a unique method of land-based social work to support youth in an Indigenous space led by Indigenous values. These events and programs are examples of decolonizing work in integrating the teachings of Coast Salish Elders and protocols of host Nations into the actions of the youth in the garden. Additionally, these programs embrace the value in the spirituality and ceremony of land-based teachings for the holistic wellbeing of youth, as well as the intergenerational benefits of interactions with Elders in addition to peers. These days often begin around the ceremonial fire pit in the garden, where introductions and offerings can be made, and intentions for the day can be set. Witnessing the joy the youth embody while participating in events at the garden has reshaped my imaginings of the possibilities of social work with youth by demonstrating that positive decolonizing programs and opportunities exist and could be welcome, and have observably positive effects in many communities.

Sitting around the fire in ceremony with different groups of youth makes me both nostalgic and delighted. It fills my heart seeing so many youth having access to medicine at a young age, to be smudged by an Indigenous youth and watch them be able to offer medicine to their friends. At the same time, this makes me wish that I would have had access to a program like this, to establish connections with Elders and culture, and to prevent me from having to go on the journey of establishing connection to my Indigenous identity alone in my twenties. Many of these youth find a balance between fun, spirituality, and respect for Elders. They are never serious, always full of jokes, and it fills the garden with a promise of many future caretakers.

## My Personal Identity

*xʷčičəsəm* garden has challenged me to be curious about and critical of my own developing identity: as a nehiyaw iskwew (Cree woman), as a woman of settler ancestry, as a young person, as a student, as a granddaughter, as a sister, and as a caretaker. Through my social work education journey, I have struggled to find my place as an advocate and have thus attempted to find fluidity and confidence in my self-identity. Acknowledging my appearance and white-passing privilege, and thus making space for racialized Indigenous Peoples, has been paramount in this journey. A mixed identity for me often represented not feeling “enough” for either group of people I am a part of. I have identified the need to navigate intergenerational trauma, Indigenous resilience, and connection with culture, alongside coinciding accountability that I must acknowledge the privileges that have been afforded to me because of my light skin and access to post-secondary education. Taking care of my spirit through ceremony, connection to Elders, and caretaking of medicine is essential for me as I grow to feel comfortable in my identity, as well as in navigating the ways I can contribute to supporting other Indigenous Peoples in negotiating their own strengths and autonomy through supportive social work practice.

## Influence on Social Work Practice

Social work with Indigenous Peoples must undergo a revolution. Social work must be made to support Indigenous people and communities, not to punish them by and through further enforcing the ideals of colonialism. We need to look at the ways that we, as social workers, are engaging with Indigenous communities, particularly given that we are adhering to a set of guidelines that were made to compensate for social work’s active role in the contemporary realities of colonialism and the historical attempt of assimilation, rather than the true wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples. Scholars have suggested that using

a non-Indigenous approach to healing with Indigenous clients (including families) is a continued form of colonial oppression, and, instead, that healing approaches should come from Indigenous paradigms of health and wellness, such as Indigenous ways of knowing (Stewart, 2009). A social work scholar of the Mi'kmaq and Celtic Nations, Baskin (2016) explores how anti-oppressive social work and structural social work can be used with Indigenous Peoples. She argues that while these practices are effective in acknowledging the detrimental impacts of colonization on Indigenous Peoples, on their own they lack a discussion of Indigenous worldview(s) that can guide the healing process for Indigenous Peoples. This suggests that an anti-oppressive model must be used in conjunction with Indigenous ways of knowing, for example, "prayer, fasting, dream interpretation, ceremonies, and silence" (Baskin, 2016, p. 90).

In addressing these methods of connection and discovery, it is essential to consider where these activities are possible. These activities and spiritual practices are often not included in most urban spaces for Indigenous Peoples. Urban Indigenous gardens, such as *xʷčičəsəm*, provide a shared and accessible space where prayer, ceremony, and silence, to name a few of these practices, are welcomed and possible in a space where the presence of Indigenous Peoples and worldviews is present and visible. These worldviews allow for an extension beyond critical social work theory to include Indigenous processes of "agency, resistance, and transformation, which are just as important to social work theory and practice as critical perspectives" (Baskin, 2016, p. 95). It is necessary to include traditional methods of healing, such as ceremony, traditional medicines, and food, as equally valid resources for healing the spiritual self, the physical body, and the mental and emotional states of individuals in decolonizing social work practice frameworks. In pursuit of engaging an anti-oppressive and empowering social work practice, Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous methods of healing will guide the following practice framework suggestions.

First, in challenging the dominant colonial discourse on Indigenous Peoples, it is necessary to reframe the misconstrued notion of Indigeneity as a risk factor. In my personal experience within the field of social work, Indigenous identity is often taught to be a risk factor for violence, suicide, and substance abuse, among many other typically negative activities in Canadian society. It is necessary to reframe Indigeneity as a protective factor through which Indigenous Peoples are holders of tradition, culture, ceremony, and ancestral knowledge, which can support them to succeed and to reframe colonialism and settler-colonial society, rather than Indigeneity, as the true risk factor for Indigenous Peoples. In this way, we transition away from seeing Indigeneity as the problem and the settler-colonial government as the solution, and towards seeing the settler-colonial government as the problem and Indigeneity as the solution.

This framework must also include the helper (or service provider) as having a crucial role—connected to their own experiences and ancestry—in the healing journey. Michael Hart (2005), a social work scholar from Fisher River Cree Nation, advocated for the essential intertwined relationship between the wellbeing of the service provider and the wellbeing of the client or service recipient: "Helpers begin the helping process by helping themselves" (p. 105) and by maintaining an awareness of their holistic wellbeing throughout the client's healing journey. The relationship between the two parties in an Indigenous approach, according to Hart (2005), is "especially essential to nurture" (p. 54) in order to best enhance development and growth throughout the helping process. The land-based interactions at *xʷčičəsəm* provide mutual aspects of connection between individuals and plant medicines. This space offered me an area of holistic healing and connection to support my wellbeing as a social worker in helping relationships, and it also strengthened my foundational relationship with land and plant medicine.

My internship with *xʷčičəsəm* has heavily influenced my emerging social work practice. I have met many people who both nurtured and challenged the way that I think about and approach topics relating to my social work practice. I have met many individuals who are critical of the current supports available for Indigenous Peoples in Vancouver, and those who are striving to Indigenize the protocols and policies of the areas in which they work. This has influenced me to be critical, particularly of the fact that, although I am Indigenous, I am not *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam,) *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), or *səlililwətaʔɬ* (Tsleil-

Waututh), and I must ensure that I respect their protocols and ethics as a guest on their lands. Through following the protocol of the Nations whose lands I practice on, I can begin to acknowledge my social location as an uninvited Cree guest on this land, and be cautious of how my behaviour imposes upon the Indigenous Peoples of this land.

These experiences have also taught me to step back: to listen to the knowledge of others without interjecting my own thoughts, and to truly listen to Elders and peers alike. This has been a challenging practice in avoiding seeing myself as the expert, which I previously thought I never did. It has been endlessly humbling to be in the garden and have individuals who had never previously been to *xʷčičəsəm* be generous in teaching me about their vast knowledge in plant medicines. I have begun to learn that I am never the expert, even on plants that I have been handling since childhood and have received ancestral teachings on. I always have more to learn.

## Conclusion

As I progress in my social work education and career, I hold onto the teachings I have received and the ceremony I have borne witness to through connection with *xʷčičəsəm*. I have discovered that a personal sense of self and ceremony in my life is facilitated by the interactions I have with ancestral medicine and spending time with Elders. I have been encouraged to face my self-consciousness during interactions with others and to face the fear that I am perceived as an outsider because I am not a visible minority Indigenous person. This privilege is crucial to acknowledge because I have not been subjected to the physical acts of prejudices and stereotypes that many of my relatives have. However, my appearance is not the barrier I initially perceived it to be in interactions with Elders and other Indigenous Peoples. I have begun to learn that my place in community is a product of my interactions within the community, rather than just my physical appearance as an Indigenous person. As I committed myself to *xʷčičəsəm* and frequented the garden and its ceremonial fire—and had conversations and shared through food—I found a place for myself among many friends. I found many willing to share with me their family knowledge and their stories, and we shared in explaining our ancestry and familial lines. I found friends willing to teach me their artforms and ask me my opinions on the spiritual associations of their pieces. I found many who knew my relatives and where we come from. I now feel comfortable walking into the space at *xʷčičəsəm* without questioning my validity or ability to belong in the garden. I have been welcomed warmly, taught, and valued, and I have found a place within *xʷčičəsəm*. *Ninanâskomon*, I am grateful.

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