



INTERVIEW



INDIGENOUS INTERNATIONALISMS

SPECIAL SECTION



An Interview with Loreisa Lepine: čísélqən tθə sǰənəšəns ə tθə ilək^wsiləŋ tθə (Following the Footprints of Our Ancestors)

Hannah Gentes *

On November 6th, 2023, Hannah Gentes spoke with čésəlítəšən (Loreisa Lepine). Loreisa is the first officially recognized and “ongoing” Indigenous Land Steward at the University of Victoria. Loreisa’s work involves the creation and prioritization of reconnection to land for Indigenous students in their homelands (lək^wəŋən territory). Loreisa leads the A Place of Medicine restoration project in the courtyard of the David Turpin building at UVic. Their conversation covered being in relationship to the land, navigating colonial education spaces, and plant revitalization. ¹

Hannah: What does land and water defence and protection look like for you?

Loreisa: I think the importance of defence and healing is recognizing where it’s safe for us currently and where can we make safer spaces to use our voices, harvest medicine in order for us to maintain relationship to land. A lot of people don’t have spaces to connect to the land which means they don’t have consistent opportunities to connect back to their spirit. It’s important to recognize that I have a place to call home, and so: what is my role in defending that safety and security?

Hannah: You say defending that security and safety for Indigenous people to be able to connect to the land, and it makes me think about the deep human need

for belonging. How does belonging feel to you? How does it feel to belong to the land, and what does that look like?

Loreisa: For me, having a sense of belonging is suicide prevention. There’s a fear around saying those words and the detriment it has done to our people in not knowing where we belong. It’s important to know where you belong and to know what you give to the land, and what the land gives you. This connection doesn’t allow you to ever question your place or your purpose—your purpose is to care for the land and the land’s purpose is to care for you. To have it be that simple but that deep is something that needs to be re-introduced. Belonging is a huge part of being in relationship with the land.

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Hannah: And do you feel like it needs to start at the land to feel like you can belong anywhere that you are?

Loreisa: I feel like starting at the land is the easiest place to safely be in your own mind because when you place yourself somewhere, you need to be aware of your mindset and what you're giving to the land in reciprocity. You can also feel at ease in how you carry yourself or who you feel like you have to be. All the land is asking of you, is for you to remember that it's your relative. This allows you to feel that ease to not have to be anything but yourself. That's a start—that's a really important and gentle introduction to who you can be.



Hannah: You are talking about finding your purpose through this work—what did it feel like, or what has your experience been like finding your path and purpose in this work?



Loreisa: It may seem dramatic, but it felt like a death and a rebirth—it felt like a death to the expectations of who I felt I needed to be to fit into a colonial system and then a rebirth with understanding that I come from very powerful magic. I come from a matriarchal lineage, and so it took a lot to dismantle what it felt like to be in a system that wasn't built for me. But at the same time, it felt empowering to not put aside the beliefs that got me here, and the beliefs that got the women I come from here. The more I spoke up for myself and the more that I really solidified what my core beliefs needed to mean in this space for me to feel safe, really allowed the opportunity for me to understand that I'll never just speak for myself, I can't. The weight of me navigating my way to where I am now and, in the position I'm in now, allowed me to recognize that anything I have gone through that felt difficult, will always make it easier for the next people coming after me. That's something that really allowed me to hold some compassion for myself in moments I felt I wasn't ready, or felt I wasn't enough, and really allowed me to sit in little wins and little joys and in the process. There's a lot of check marks we need to check to feel like we're accomplished in something without really recognizing that the journey is a very important part of it. Especially, the healing that comes with recognizing and finding your chosen family, especially in the workforce.



Hannah: This dichotomy is really amplified doing this work on campus, which is such a highly colonized area. I wonder what it's been like for you to try and balance teaching folks who aren't from this land how to interact with the land, as well as the people who grew up on this the land, but also not exhausting yourself and having to always be that teacher?



Loreisa: I think for me at the beginning, I did feel pressure to be that teacher. What has helped me through that is not allowing the people who I have chosen to be

a support system in this work, assume I can be their teacher as well. Sometimes, I need them to be the teachers. I can't always speak for myself—sometimes I need to speak through someone who's voice and experience holds more weight and who knows how this system works, and how long it actually takes to make change.

A lot of Indigenous people navigate imposter syndrome coming into colonial education spaces. We need to be aware of who we feel we need to be to feel safe in these spaces. It's been a really important learning experience to recognize that I have a position that's built for me to show up as myself. Not a lot of systems are built for that, especially for Indigenous people and Indigenous women. I'm very, very grateful even to have had difficult opportunities to learn from that have allowed me to ask for help unapologetically, and sometimes in grief. Grief has to have a place everywhere—because everything can't always be in fear, and everything can't always be in joy.

Hannah: What are some important protocols and practices that visitors to ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ lands and waters should honor?

Loreisa: So, each territory, each nation, and each revitalization project has their own protocols, and has their own safety practices solidified around previous interactions of joy and previous interactions of harm. So, it's important to recognize that the project I co-lead—A Place of Medicine—has its own protocols, PEPÁKEN HÁUTW̱—an Indigenous non-profit based out of W̱SÁNEĆ territory—has their own protocols, so there is a basis around how to be a good guest and how to support. It's also important to consider what your relationship is with allyship and what your education is around the territories you're on.

There are basic protocols and, especially as Indigenous people, there are teachings we inherit, and we know how to show up for each other. There is a lot of learning around different family practices for people who are just beginning their journey in how to show up for Indigenous people, so I feel like it's very individual to who needs support and how they ask to be supported.

Hannah: You have to take the time to build those relationships, first with yourself. I feel like a lot of folks don't know how to do that work first in order to learn how to build relationships with others and with the land. What do you think is crucial for ensuring our future generations thrive?

Loreisa: Having safe spaces to harvest, safe spaces to practice medicine, safe spaces to revitalize our language, safe spaces to collaborate and opportunity

to interact with other Indigenous knowledge holders and Indigenous women. As well as safe spaces for our people to come into and rediscover self-care practices for Two-Spirit relatives and all our relatives who don't align with the usual narrow-minded acceptance of who we get to be. This starts with listening the wants and needs of Indigenous people.

It's very crucial to recognize how we're showing up for our relatives now, and how we interact with other nations in the work that we're doing to heal together. Systems built around supporting our mental health are not consistent—and so, how do we implement wellness practices to support mental health, depression, anxiety, ADHD, and our disabled relatives. We need to understand who isn't supported, and then move forward and know how we can better support each other.

Hannah: Did you feel like growing up you had those safe spaces?

Loreisa: No. I was speaking about it the other day on a panel and recognizing that I'm the person I needed when I was a kid. To be a completely out, gay, Two-Spirit woman leading a revitalization project that is now doubled the plant species to almost 100 and to be someone who can be of witness to 12-year-olds planting their first plant and this being maybe their first connection to land is amazing. With every person I have interacted with throughout my job and throughout my career, I've seen my little self in all those experiences.

I can speak to what I didn't have but instead I choose to [feel] a humble gratitude in recognizing that every single opportunity over the last year in this project has allowed me to heal the grief around what I didn't have. And honor that in the same breath, I'm giving a beautiful opportunity for someone to never question what it's like not to have it.

Hannah: This highlights all the different generations of healing that need to happen at the same time. Like our elders and all the healing that that needs to happen from when they were children, we also need to heal our inner children. What are some ways that we share Indigenous knowledges and practices around land and water relationships with future generations?

Loreisa: Storytelling. That includes telling our own story and feeling safe in our truth—that not all our journeys have been big, bright, and beautiful. And being honest about how we grieve and how we cope, so we can better show up as our full selves, now and wherever we are in our healing journey.

How we take care of ourselves and how we take care of our spirit is so important. It can look like finding chosen family—finding adopted elders that can be

your grandparents, who can teach you if your blood family doesn't have the roots necessary for you to learn what you feel you need to feel connected to land, connected to teachings or connected to language.

Part of our journey will be dealing with that grief that we're not going learn how we thought we were going to learn, and we're not going to learn from who we thought we were going to learn from. A really important lesson for me in grief that I had while starting A Place of Medicine project was me speaking to a colleague about how I wasn't going learn from our ancestors about our medicines. My colleague—in the same breath—said, "Of course you're going to be learning from the ancestors—you're learning from the plants—it doesn't look the way you thought it would, it doesn't look the way you wanted it to, but you're still learning from our ancestors, it's just the plants. They are the same."

In that moment, that's exactly what I needed to hear, that we're not always going to learn from a physical being, instead we're going to learn from our relatives that aren't human. There's magic that comes from being able to honor that every single breathing being on Earth can give us a teaching and it's our role to choose how we'd like to accept those teachings and choose how to honor them.

Hannah: I think we often talk about our connection to land, and I feel like a lot of us know that water is part of that, but I think it's sometimes overlooked in conversations around this—the importance of water and how healing it is, and women's connection to water too. What are some everyday ways that you protect and honour a relationship to both lands and waters?

Loreisa: For me, the first thing that comes to mind is recognizing what capacity I have to be in reciprocal relationship with the land and water. My relationship can look different and has to look different every day, depending on what I have to give to the land in reciprocity. As well, it's really humbling to recognize how much you need to be there for yourself and in your breath when you're connecting to the ocean, and when you're connecting to water. It's really important to recognize how you protect yourself and how you protect your spirit when being in relationship to the land and the water because you have to be fully present—you can't leave.

If you're going to the ocean or being in relationship to the land, you need to be there for yourself at the same time. This includes having to take deep breaths to calm yourself, because the ocean is freezing cold in the fall and winter. Also, there's very little that compares to how it feels to have your hands in beautiful rich soil that's in an area—a really beautiful



Garry oak ecosystem—that’s been protected and taken care of by ləkʷəŋən people for thousands of years, and having opportunity to take in the magic that comes from that experience.

These are very important, big practices, but they’re also simple. Even just dipping your toes in the water—you have to be very present with yourself. It doesn’t allow you to run. We need to be aware of how we are protecting ourselves, and how that weaves into how we protect the land and water so that we can come home and at the same time come home to ourselves fully.

Note

- 1 This interview is part of the Special Section: Honouring Indigenous Land and Water Defenders, edited by Jeff Ganohalidoh Cornassel, in *Borders in Globalization Review* 5(1): 7-53.

