

Turning Cancer into Medicine

Storying Healing through Imagery

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Abstract

This Photo Essay explores my experience with cancer and healing using Indigenous traditional medicines. I use Photo First Voice, a form of auto-ethnography, to story my 'living' experience with cancer, which includes getting in touch with and honouring my Indigenous roots (Algonquin/French) attending healing ceremonies, and becoming an Oshkaabewis (a healer's helper) myself. I integrate photographic images into this essay to illustrate my experiences and to enhance the meaning of the words I have committed to these pages. Each image represents a different aspect or level of knowledge and healing. These images and text are followed by a discussion in which I weave fragments of experience together to narrate a living (inter)relationship with the earth, towards a more balanced whole. Indigenous medicines set in motion major changes in my life, which are fundamental to my ongoing healing. In this context, the term 'medicine' refers to Indigenous knowledges that contribute to healing, healing ceremonies, teachings, and plant medicines (mainly Ojibwe).

Keywords

Indigenous medicines, Indigenous healing, Cancer, Storying, Photo First Voice.

I am not ready to write. But I have to. I need to tell this story somehow. I need to create space by placing these images and words on a page as maybe they will resonate with others ... There are certain things I will not say here though ... they are mine (Excerpt from author's Cancer Journals, 2018).

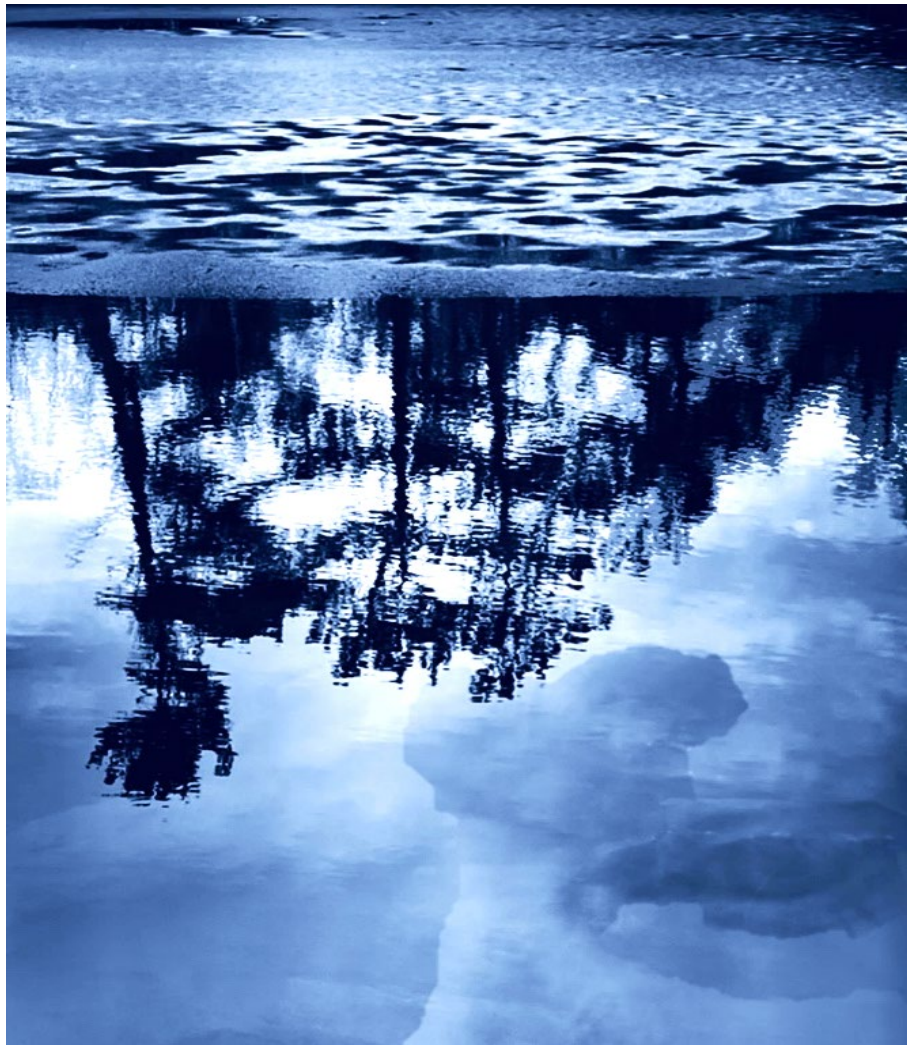


Figure 1. Embodied Vulnerability and Beginnings.

I was diagnosed with colon cancer on a Monday in December 2017 and had major surgery the following day. Part of my healing from cancer involved working with an Ojibwe traditional healer. This care set in motion major changes in my life, which are fundamental to my ongoing healing; turning cancer into medicine. The term 'medicine' in this context includes Indigenous knowledges that contribute to healing, healing ceremonies, teachings, and plant medicines. This process includes getting in touch with and honouring my Indigenous roots, attending

healing ceremonies and becoming an Oshkaabewis (a healer's helper) myself. It also involves storying my experience through words, photography, and art.

On the way to the surgery room I am alone, my family is left to wait in a separate room. Once I get to the operating room everything feels so cold, all shiny metal and more ultra-bright lights, the sounds in the room are echoey, and shrill, exaggerated by the starkness of the room and the sterility of everything in there. I am pricked in the arm to get an IV and a mask is put over my mouth, I can no longer speak, or move ... they tell me to start counting to 10 and the next thing I know I wake up groggy and confused in another room (Excerpt from author's Cancer Journals, 2018).



Figure 2. Where is the Sacred?

At the heart of this Photo Essay is spirit. I use a reflexive Indigenous First Voice (Graveline 1998) narrated through photographs (Margolis and Pauwels 2011) as a form of auto-ethnography (Absolon 2016; Archibald 2008; Atalay 2019; Carson 2015; Iseke 2013; Mattingly and Garro 2000; Mattingly and Lawlor 2001; Narayan 2012; Yardley 2008). It is an auto-ethnography that stories my 'living' experience with cancer. This approach may be referred to as a form of 'Indigenous *métissage*' (Chambers et al. 2008; Donald 2012). Indigenous *métissage* is described as 'a counternarrative to the grand narrative of our times ... a way of merging and blurring genres, texts, and identities; an active literary stance, political strategy,

and pedagogical praxis' (Chambers et al. 2008, 534). The spirit of *métissage* is embedded in this work and in my efforts to braid together a living story using the the relationship between written text and images. '[M]étissage is about relationality and the desire to treat texts—and lives—as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent' (idem, 538). Throughout the telling of this story, I kept coming back to spirit, the sacred circle, and four sacred medicines for guidance.

My story of cancer and healing is entwined with the history of my family, our stories, our history, a history of trauma, poverty, institutionalisation, and incarceration; intergenerational trauma buried deep in my body without me knowing (Excerpt from author's Cancer Journals, 2019).



Figure 3. Sacred Circle, Medicines and *Métissage*

I created the image *Sacred Circle, Medicines and Métissage* (Fig. 3) while thinking of how I approached telling the story presented on these pages. I used my drum and four sacred medicines (tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweetgrass), depicted here as images superimposed on the drum, to keep me centred and connected to spirit in ways that felt meaningful to me. The four medicines and my drumming were an

integral part of my healing work and storying my experience with cancer, as told on these pages.



Figure 4. Earthly Bodies, Embodying Theory.

In the days when I was recovering from surgery, something larger was also cut open—my personal landscape, which includes not only my body, mind, and spirit but that of my ancestors. Ziarkowska reminds us that histories may be erased by the state, or rewritten by family, but they live on in our bodies, our blood, our spirit. In this way broken, scarred bodies communicate ‘the truth about the state of the world; our bodies become as broken as the earth, through extraction and abuses, likewise, the land, the earth becomes as broken as our bodies and so on’ (2014, 2). We are inseparable.

I feel part of the earth, along with all of our imperfections, scars, untold stories, we share a collective pain, sickness, and health in ways that cannot be untangled. Having cancer connects me to a place that is so soft, so vulnerable, yet almost indestructible (Excerpt from *Cancer Journals*, 2018).



Figure 5. I am an extension of the earth.

The image *I am an extension of the earth* (Fig. 5) represents my embodied sense of vulnerability and connection to everything, all life forms. My cancer experience was a form of connecting to the ‘pain of the land’, the continued abuses it endures in the name of profit for the few. As Cree scholar Cash Ahenakew reminds us:

...we need to re-centre the earth in our individual and collective existence in order to re-activate our sense of entangled relationality ... Centring the land is not about centring the concept of the land, but about centring the land as a metabolism. It is not about seeing the land as an extension of ourselves, but the other way around; seeing ourselves as an extension of the land that, through different waves of colonialism, has been objectified, occupied, and violated. (Ahenakew 2019, 15).

The living story told here is entwined with the earth, the water, the history of my family; intergenerational trauma buried deep in my body without me knowing. As Ziarkowska suggests, our ‘bodies become texts onto which different histories are inscribed’ (2014, 4). The earth is inscribed on my body; my body on the earth. My body was cut open, the scars both visible and non-visible are written on/in my skin, my tissues, my blood.

I leave my session with the Healer, feeling like I have transcended time and space. One of the first things they say to me is “welcome to the circle”. The sense of belonging I feel arises partly because of the words, their acceptance

of me, but it feels deeper than that. The Healer called it my blood and body memory (Excerpt from author's Cancer Journals, 2018).



Figure 6. Entering the circle: transcending fear.

My experiences with the Healer helped me transcend the feeling that cancer was a form of punishment; that instead it could be seen as an opportunity for deeper healing. It helped me to reclaim aspects of my ancestry that were stolen, devalued, and stripped away due to colonial processes, including the noxious Indian Act in Canada enacted in 1876.¹ Connecting with my family's Indigenous bloodlines has helped me feel more whole, which is not only fundamental to my own healing but to healing from generations of trauma for my ancestors, past, present, and future. As I am an extension of the land, it also contributes in a small humble way towards healing the earth.

1 The Indian Act in Canada (1876) is a federal law that sought to control and assimilate Indigenous Peoples and communities. The Indian Act gives the government the right to govern over Indigenous lands, and dismantle traditional systems of governance. It continues to govern in matters related to Indian status, bands, and Indian reserves in Canada to this date.

Cash Ahenakew (2019) and Elwood Jimmy et al. (2019) remind us that when we hurt others, when we hurt the land, we hurt our own bodies/minds/spirits. We are all part of the same 'body'. The atrocities inflicted during colonisation have etched their mark on everything, penetrating our skin, into our cells, in ways that may escape our conscious knowing. Like the exploitation and extraction of resources from the earth, our bodies often end up bearing the brunt of the cold brutalities of capitalism, profiting at the expense of people, of land, of spirit, of our cells. These repetitive abuses manifest not only through physical sickness, but also through mental, emotional, and spiritual sickness.

I attended a ceremony tonight that was so powerful, it was transformational. It felt like an embodied experience of cancer turning into medicine. All of my senses were opened wide and I could feel a deep shift. My body, mind, and spirit feel like they have been set in motion towards becoming lighter and filling with a sense of wholeness that I hope continues to evolve for the rest of my life (Excerpt from author's Cancer Journals, 2018).

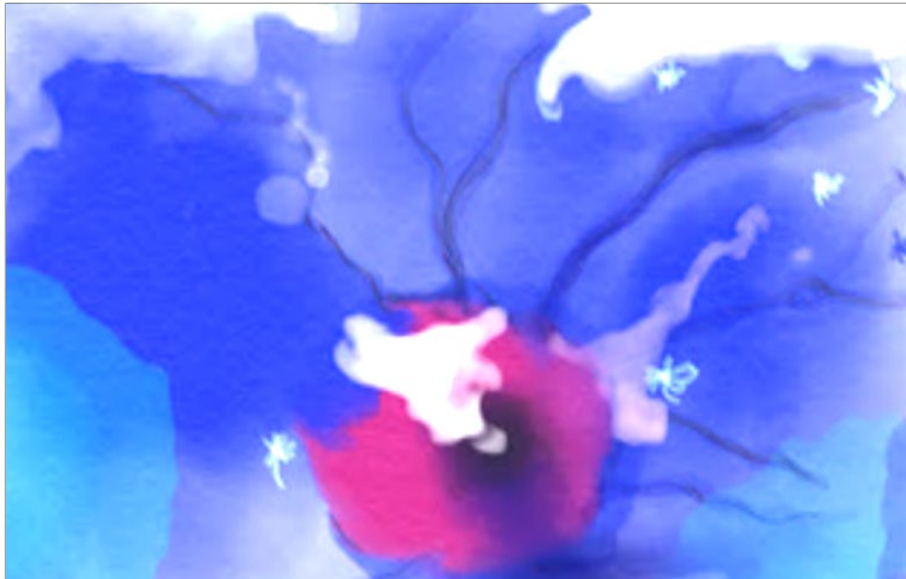


Figure 7. Circling back: Turning Cancer into Medicine.

I painted *Circling back: Turning Cancer into Medicine* (Fig. 7) while meditating on how sacred spaces can be created through art during times of intense fear and turbulence, both inside and outside my body. This image is reflective of healing as a wholistic process² in which spirit is central, turning cancer into 'medicine', morphing sickness into health. Calvin Morrisseau (1998) describes Indigenous healing and wellness as a process of evolving towards harmony on multiple levels,

2 A wholistic process involves the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical elements of being as well as one's connection to others and the natural world (Absolon 2016, 23).

including the individual (mind, body, spirit) and the community, and that our deepest healing occurs on a spiritual level. This process also includes not only the healing of peoples, but land, the water, and the earth as a whole. As Cash Ahenakew (2019) and Elwood Jimmy et al. (2019) remind us, we, the earth, the water, the sky, all living things, are all part of the same 'body' and in order to heal we must address the persisting atrocities of colonisation, and the brutalities of capitalism that have led to mass destruction of land and water in the name of profit for the few (see also Gordon and McCormick 2020).



Figure 8. Lost Voices Live in Blood.

The geography of my body, its ugliness, its beauty, is found in the most unusual places; its scars sometimes make me cry with tenderness and love—at other times with shame and self-loathing. Storying helps me uncover lost voices, alive in my blood memory, and helps me weave fragments of experience together towards a balanced whole (see Garcia 2019). This is an act of resistance against the silences my ancestors and many others have had to endure.

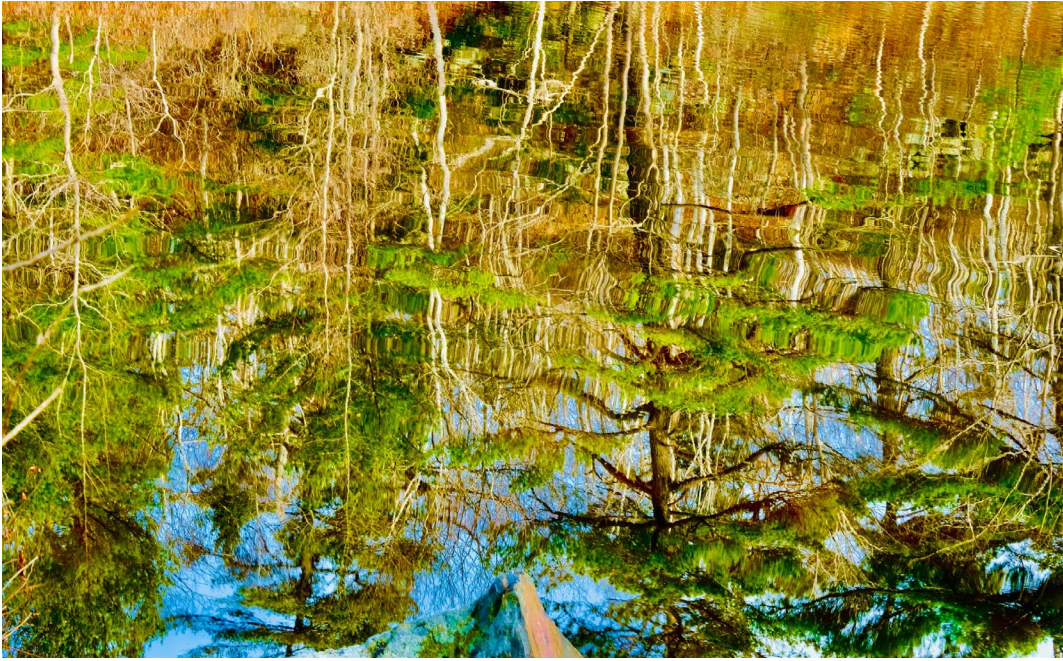


Figure 9. Healing Reflected Back to the Earth and Beyond.

Turning cancer into medicine includes telling stories—through images, through words—in ways that feel meaningful and connected to spirit, ways that reverberate from my ancestors and reflect back towards myself, my body, mind and spirit, my daughter, future generations, and back to the earth. The story told here, through words, through images and inner reflections, is my contribution to working towards finding harmony and healing on multiple levels.

Authorship statement

I am the sole author of this manuscript and the images included in it. This Photo Essay is based on my PhD dissertation “Turning poison into medicine”: Creating space for the sacred and decolonizing healthcare’.

Ethics statement

This research received ethics approval through Dalhousie University where I completed my PhD. Ethics approval was granted through the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics at Board Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada (REB #: 2019-4861).

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About the author

Cathy Fournier has a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies (Medical/Social Anthropology and Indigenous Studies) from Dalhousie University and is currently Senior Scholar in Indigenous Homelessness at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. She recently completed a Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Indigenous research at the University of Toronto. Cathy is also an Oshkaabewis (ceremonial apprentice) at the Native Women's Resource Centre in Toronto. Before pursuing a career in academia, Cathy was a complementary and alternative health practitioner for over 20 years.

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