Men Don’t Dance Fabric: An Autoethnographic Account of an “Academic NDN”’s Trip Home

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Whenever someone refers to me as an 'expert' on Indigenous geographies, I have to stifle the urge to laugh. Not because I think that they're foolish for calling me such—that would be rude. More accurately, I laugh because how could I ever become an expert on relationships and obligations to the land that predate me and will endure long after I have left this earth? Too often, in academic circles, we are positioned as people who are all-knowing and almost larger than life.

I am Ojibwe, from the Leech Lake nation in Minnesota. Although I am what they call an 'urban Native', meaning I grew up in the city (Minneapolis, to be specific), I do my best to maintain connections to home, meaning Leech Lake, and lately, Minnesota, more generally, as I now happen to live nearly 2000 miles away, in Victoria, B.C., Canada. I make sure to maintain these links through various ways that have academic currency, such as maintaining research relationships with nations back home, and through service such as being a trustee on the board of trustees of my tribe's college.

I am supported in these efforts—my department chair told me in a meeting that they hoped that I would "maintain" relationships back home—another moment where I had to stifle a chuckle—how could I not keep links to my homelands? I made sure, and continue to make sure that I maintain these links continuously. But, it can be isolating being far away from home. It can be easy to lose a bit of that connection when one is busy running the academic rat race in a different geography. That's why I take advantage of any opportunity I get to return home—it provides a different sort of 'educational' structure than the one that I am constantly surrounded with.

With that being said, I want to share a story of one such 'educational' lesson that I received, one that reminds me why I do the work that I do.

On one of the last times that my academic travels brought me home to Minnesota, I went 'up North' and attended a ceremony in an Indigenous community. The ceremony was in honour of a community member who was fighting cancer, and I felt that it was important for me to attend. Any misgivings that I briefly had about the long drive up north, or missing the chance to watch my beloved Ohio State Buckeyes play football on television were quickly swept away when I saw migizi, an eagle, fly overhead as I cruised on the interstate. To me, it was Creator telling me, "You're making the right choice coming to this." I arrived at the centre where the ceremony was being held, and stepped inside. It was packed inside, so I awkwardly stood next to the door until I saw a friend of mine, a local elder, who waved me over to sit next to him.

“Did you bring tobacco?” he asked me, reminding me I needed to make an offering.

Shit, I thought to myself. My tobacco pouch was 100 miles away in my hotel room, left there in my dithering over whether or not I was going to come to the ceremony. I told him such, and he handed me a package of tobacco he’d brought. I went up to put some in, but the drummers were getting ready to play another song, and so in a brief panic, I left the entire package of tobacco in the offering bowl. I then proceeded to almost go the wrong way around the drum circle trying to get back to my seat. The elder reminded me of the correct way with a simple gesture and I returned to my seat, my face slightly red with embarrassment over forgetting protocol. There isn’t yet a university class out there called “How to act correct during ceremony”!

My embarrassment soon passed though, and I spent the next few hours at the ceremony alternating between dancing and reconnecting with a number of my friends who happened to be there. Before I knew it, evening had fallen, and we were getting ready to do a giveaway dance. I once again cursed myself, forgetting to bring items for the giveaway. Some Ojibwe I was, I thought to myself. Luckily, a friend of mine had brought many items, including several bolts of fabric. She told me, “Feel free to take some if you need to give something away”. So, I did—at the beginning of one of the dances, I picked up a bolt of fabric, and brought it over to one of my friends, only for him to gently say, “Men don’t dance fabric, Deondre.” An elder and knowledge holder sitting nearby also reminded me and teased me a bit. If my face was slightly red earlier with my small faux pas, it had to be redder than the bolt of fabric I was holding at this point. I beat a hasty retreat back over to my friend (going the correct way), and we had a good laugh about it. Any embarrassment I had quickly melted away, as I reminded myself that we all learn at our own pace and time, and that I now knew what not to do during a giveaway dance at ceremony.

Where am I going with all of this (no pun intended)? To me, I had ceased to be in the comfortable environs of the Western academy, where my skills and training are valorized with praise and deference (much to my discomfort)—I was now back home, in spaces that were more unfamiliar to me. My PhD, my years of training in Indigenous geographies weren’t going to do me any good here. This wasn’t a fieldwork exercise or a graduate seminar. I can’t theorize my way out of presenting the wrong sort of item to a potential dance partner, or going the wrong way around the drum circle.

However, I became very attuned to a different sort of geography—that of connection, and kinship, and of letting

go. Even if I did the wrong thing, someone was always there to teach me something different–something you don't often see in the Western academy. Rather than being isolated in a department where I am often the only Indigenous person in a given space, I was surrounded by friends and fellow community members. Rather than feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed for too long, I felt encouraged in the space to let go of my hubris and pride, which are not Ojibwe qualities at any rate. In that space, I ceased to be Dr. Deondre Smiles, PhD, and became just Deondre, or Niiyokamigaabaw, if someone was inspired to speak my Ojibwe name. That space of ceremony became a very generative space, where I felt supported, where I felt a sense of spiritual renewal.

I took a brief breather with my friend to get outside and get some fresh air. As I looked up at the clear night sky and the stars, I felt at home again. I felt connected with my ancestors who came before me, and felt connections and obligations to the future generations of Ojibwe that will come after me. I felt the reminder that when someone calls me an 'expert', my first inclination is to gently remind them that I am no expert. All I am is a person who is carrying knowledge handed down from my ancestors before me, so I can pass it along to the next generation, so they can do even greater things than I have been able to accomplish.

It was a reminder to me that no matter how separated I might be from my homelands, when I have a chance to return, I can immerse myself in spaces that remind me of the embodied ways that I move through spaces—something that is more educational than any amount of research or schooling can ever provide to me.